

7-11-2013

Skinning the Deer: A Love Story

Heather Campbell

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_etds

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Heather. "Skinning the Deer: A Love Story." (2013). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_etds/72

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature ETDs by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Heather E. Campbell

Candidate

English

Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Daniel Mueller , Chairperson

Julie Shigekuni

Matthew Hofer

Patricia O'Donnell

SKINNING THE DEER: A LOVE STORY

by

HEATHER E. CAMPBELL

B.F.A., CREATIVE WRITING, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE, 2006
B.A., PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE, 2006

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
M.F.A.

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2013

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge Daniel Mueller, my advisor and dissertation chair, for his encouragement, teachings, criticism, and general enthusiasm about my writing. I also thank my committee members, Julie Shigekuni, Dr. Matthew Hofer, and Patricia O'Donnell for their valuable recommendations pertaining to this work. To Ezra Meier, graduate advisor extraordinaire, for patience and support during my years at the University of New Mexico, thank you. Finally, to my family and friends, thank you for your company, your wisdom, and your love.

SKINNING THE DEER: A LOVE STORY

by

HEATHER E. CAMPBELL

B.A., Psychology, University of Maine, 2006
B.F.A., Creative Writing, University of Maine, 2006
M.F.A., Creative Writing, University of New Mexico, 2013

ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of a novel entitled *Skinning the Deer: A Love Story*. Alternating between the landscapes of New Mexico and rural Maine, the novel examines the life of tortured lesbian Hannah Huff and the brutal excision of her glorious wings—those magical appendages she grew in secret—the two downy white miracles she believed would be her ticket out of Monkstown, Maine, a desperate landscape of backwoods trailers, dogs, and family members, where her only interactions are either detached or violent. While the novel alternates between Hannah as an adult and Hannah as a child, it is first and foremost a coming-of-age story and a journey into the past to reclaim lost innocence. Inspired by the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dorothy Allison, and Salman Rushdie, *Skinning the Deer* weaves together magical realism, trauma narrative, and myth; it is a novel about sexuality, betrayal, and what we sacrifice for redemption.

Table of Contents

Preface	vi
Prologue	2
Chapter One	24
Chapter Two	38
Chapter Three	49
Chapter Four	60
Chapter Five	70
Chapter Six	91
Chapter Seven	98
Chapter Eight	108
Chapter Nine	120
Chapter Ten	130
Chapter Eleven	144
Chapter Twelve	157
Chapter Thirteen	164
Chapter Fourteen	177
Chapter Fifteen	189
Chapter Sixteen	199
Chapter Seventeen	210
Chapter Eighteen	215
References	219

Preface

Skinning the Deer is a novel borne of many different fathers and owing its existence to many different literary traditions. It is no exaggeration that this novel has taken me six years to write, and it is still a far cry from being polished. I have spent many hours reflecting on my writing process, trying to determine why this has been the case.

It didn't use to be that way. When I was young – we're talking, pre-college – I was a prolific writer. When I was in first grade, I was scolded by another girl who said, "You're hogging all the paper!" referring to the fact that, while everyone else was making *one* wallpaper book, I was making *five*. My fourth grade teacher once rolled his eyes when I passed him another twenty-page story to read. Consequently, he pawned it off on another, unsuspecting, teacher. In middle school I spent long hours perfecting short stories for which I dedicated precious time to researching, making sure all my details were correct. When I reached high school, my literary zeal had begun to dwindle, though I still churned out a few fifty page "novels" and wrote a poetry chapbook.

The reason I mention these examples is that somewhere along the way, my story got stuck. It was as if reaching adulthood had lodged my story in my throat, and no amount of therapy, meditation, soul-searching, or self-medicating was going to get it out.

In Karen Foxlee's beautiful novel *The Anatomy of Wings*, ten-year-old narrator Jennifer has lost her singing voice. In the beginning of the novel, she and her friend Angela examine the contents of a shoebox of memories that Jennifer's mother hid on the top shelf of the closet. Jennifer is apprehensive about the process, as she doesn't want to get in trouble, nor does she want to dredge up the past. Foxlee writes, "It was Angela's

idea. She said we needed to look inside to find my singing voice. It would help me to remember exactly when and how it happened that the words lodged in my chest quite close to my heart” (2). It turns out that Jennifer’s inability to sing is connected to the death of her sister who led a troubled existence despite the fact that she could see angels.

The miracle of this novel is that I found it by accident while doing a Google search for a title I was going to use for *this* novel: “An Anatomy of Wings.” It has been my habit, after I think of a good title, to type it into Google to see if it has been previously used. I found that it *had* been used, by Karen Foxlee, and that the novel she wrote was very similar to my own, concerning the relationship between two sisters - one who becomes lawless and wayward, like my own character D - and relying heavily on the imagery of flight and the existence of angels.

At the same time that this book resembled my own novel, it also paralleled my emotional state, and I found myself relating to Jennifer, the girl who couldn’t sing for the life of her. It isn’t until the end of the book that Jennifer – after trying dozens of hair-brained techniques to dislodge her song, like hanging upside down, drinking from the wrong side of the cup, and following a trail of clues hidden in a shoebox – breaks into song. The moment occurs upon sight of a rare bird that circles around her three times like the repetitive movements of ritual, and flies away. This blessing causes Jennifer to admit, “and I was not so filled with fear,” as she relates the revelation that brought back her singing voice.

In my case, it wasn’t a wedge-tailed eagle that did the trick.

It was the night of the wolf moon and I was high on hashish. While my life had gradually been getting better, I still had some bad habits, depression, and fears that

prevented me from being free. That night I stumbled into my bedroom, got under the covers and reeled through images of angels and goddesses who claimed they loved me but were very disappointed in me. “Clean up your act!” was the resounding message. In my mind’s eye I saw a glittering pink unicorn with rainbow hair; it moved up and down a crystal beam. I laughed; maybe I had finally gone insane. But the unicorn radiated love and innocence, so there was no reason to be afraid. Spurred on by the acceptance I felt from the unicorn, with total understanding that I was being ridiculous, I made a vow to myself that night. As soon as I formulated it, everything began to get brighter, easier, and I became happier and – much to my own amazement, and the amazement of everyone in my life – I could write.

And I could read. I began to hunger for novels the way I had as a child. It just so happens that I had been trying to read *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie since 1999. I remember the year because I was at Emily Parkhurst’s house – she was a friend I made in 1999 – and her father asked me what I was reading.

“*The Satanic Verses.*”

He scolded, “Heather!” and shook his head in disappointment and horror.

I don’t know if that interchange was the main reason I couldn’t finish the novel or if it was due to some hyper-sensitive reaction to censorship, or guilt at reading something sort of taboo, but there were other books that collected dust on my shelves, books that I loved but couldn’t bear to finish, such as: *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Within a week of my revelation, I had finished *The Satanic Verses*, a book that had taken me fourteen years to read, and that same semester, I committed myself to

finishing up my M.F.A., a feat that has taken me a ridiculous seven years to accomplish. More importantly, rather than being lodged in my throat, the words came freely and flowed like water.

Skinning the Deer is a dark novel that explores sexuality, sisterhood, and the powerful effects of poverty, drugs, and abuse. These topics have long been of interest to me and as a result, I have approached them from several different angles.

Originally, my writing focused on coming-of-age stories, often a pre-teen girl developing supernatural powers upon menarche, something along those lines. Hannah in *Skinning the Deer* fits this description; earlier drafts explored her wing eruption (when the bone and cartilage of her wings breaks through the skin of her back) and its similarity to menarche as a painful rite-of-passage. In this version, however, the introduction of an adult Hannah as narrator brought about even darker themes and led to the exploration of trauma and torture as initiations — initiation rituals being not that far afield of rites of passage and coming-of-age stories.

I mention this because it seems that my original coming-of-age focus has changed, or shifted. Adult Hannah is more twisted and damaged than childhood Hannah and operates in a more dangerous world (not counting the young girl's abusive family) and her relationship with Ekaterina provides an opportunity to explore the ideas of mock flight and body modification.

A few years ago in Albuquerque I got my first tattoo. I went to a shop on University Blvd. and the man I went to see was Leo Gonzalez, an oil painter/tattoo artist who created a lotus with a golden wheel design on the top of my left foot. I learned on

my few trips to the shop for piercings, the tattoo consultation, and sitting, that a piercist there practiced what was called “suspension” which involves hanging a person – with their permission - from hooks pierced through their flesh. I heard a little bit about the reasons for doing it: adrenaline-rush, spiritual, etc. but for the most part I forgot about the weird new counter-culture trend until Ekaterina – Hannah’s lesbian lover – graced the page.

As a tattoo artist, Ekaterina convinces Hannah to cover up her scars with empowering artwork. Hannah allows it, though she feels that the process is too much like the original pain she endured, and the two spend many nights with Hannah belly-down on the massage table and Ekaterina pricking her with needles of color, Ekaterina trying to navigate Hannah’s ghost zones like a sailor trying not to run aground. It is through exploring this dynamic between Hannah and Ekaterina, the gentleness of their love, the infliction of physical pain, and the capacity for sacrifice, that I ask questions about sexuality and violence, try to draw the line between pain and pleasure, and realize that in this book, I can’t.

Ekaterina is the one who suggests that Hannah try “suspension” as a way to connect to her original ability to fly. Hannah does not try it, but she comes close. That is why, in the current arc of action, Ekaterina arranges for Hannah (against her will) to be given an initiation like that of the Mandan, a North Dakota tribe, and she is consequently skewered and hung from a pole in the desert.

It was when this relationship headed towards torture that my idea came full circle. Several times in the past I have personified my writing, written stories about me having

various relationships with the person or creature that is my writing; these relationships were often tension-filled and unpleasant.

In Stephen King's book *On Writing*, he discusses the connection between writing his novel *Misery* and kicking his drug habit. After an intervention in which his wife told him he either had to go to rehab or leave, he was given two weeks to think about it. He describes the decision: "I did think, though – as well as I could in my addled state – and what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke. Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer" (91). King's relationship with fictional Annie as an embodiment of his own personal demons is similar to the relationship I developed with my novel when I began to employ the framing device of Hannah being tortured for her story - because that is the way that I felt. Like Jennifer in *The Anatomy of Wings*, the story was lodged in my throat and every day that I did *not* write, was torture.

It is sort of a meta-fictional nod to Stephen King that Hannah's torture by her captors represents the torture I felt when I tried to extract this story. Sportswriter Red Smith – though sometimes this quote is credited to Ernest Hemingway – once said "Writing is easy. You simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed."

I have found that to be pretty accurate.

However, the more I wrote Hannah's torture scenes, the more I couldn't take the torture seriously and the more the fictional situation reminded me of Candide in his "best of all possible worlds." The absurdity of Hannah's predicament and the "optimism" with which she began to face it towards the end, indicates a new depth to my writing, a shift from bleak hopelessness to an exciting new frontier of satire and parody.

One of the major shifts I have made in my writing is to write and revise for Truth. While it is an abstract concept with no measurable value, the rule of Truth, as King describes it in *On Writing*, is a godsend because it basically means I can write whatever I want so long as it's "true."

So what is "truth"? King describes it as authenticity, resemblance to real life. He says: "Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendships, relationships, sex, and work" (157). Hannah asks Ekaterina on the last page what she wants from her, and Ekaterina replies: "The mother fucking truth." The way Ekaterina turned on Hannah was fueled partly by my own frustration, my own hunger for the story to finally be told, and Ekaterina's desire for truth parallels my dedication to authenticity in my prose, a need for details to ring true, and characters to take on the complexity of flesh and blood people.

No preface to a novel of mine would be complete without discussing imagery. The main symbols of the manuscript concern flight and attaining flight, but I also explore the concept of deformity and as such, scars, amputations, bow-legs, and other disfigurement are symbols that crop up. I was heavily influenced by the spiritual and religious symbols in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* wanting to better blend myth with the everyday. However, I was mostly influenced by the linguistic style of *The Satanic Verses*, particularly because I felt it gave me permission to make loose references to pop culture and literature, a pattern I noticed in Rushdie's work and admired. This gave way to a more expansive fictional world since my novel became referential and

encompassed more than a handful of settings, time periods, and characters. It was from Rushdie that I began to learn how to weave a rich tapestry of a paragraph like this one:

How she goes to the bhangra beat shows on Sunday mornings and changes in the ladies into those tarty-farty clothes – who she wiggles with and jiggles with at the Hot Wax daytime disco that she thinks I never heard of before – what went on at that bluesdance she crept off to with Mister You-know-who Cocky-bugger – some big sister,’ she produced her grandstand finish, ‘she’ll probably wind up dead of wossname ignorance.’ Meaning, as Chamcha and Mishal well knew, - those cinema commercials, expressionist tombstones rising from earth and sea, had left the residue of their slogan well implanted, no doubt of that – Aids. (293)

In the above paragraph that details a conversation between Anahita and Mishal, many of the phrases are parenthetical and, as a result, Rushdie gets a lot of mileage out of two sentences. His additions seem like interruptions and give his work a halting rhythm.

Inspired by King espousing Truth and Rushdie jam-packing his paragraphs with gems of details, I was more adventurous in this draft. I consciously adopted the tone of Rushdie in places, as an experiment, I think because his paragraph-stuffing is a freeing way to get a draft out.

Changing the title was another decision that I made in pursuit of Truth because I never liked “Barn Angel,” the previous title. The title “Skinning the Deer” came from the scene in Chapter Eight in which Hannah skins the deer she shot in the woods the day before. Obviously, the complexities of this parallel have not been fully explored, but my intention is that the deer carcass hanging in the barn be linked in the reader’s mind to Hannah hung from a ceiling by hooks or hung on a pole by skewers. The extended

metaphor of the deer will work into several scenes and also contribute to Hannah's overall sense of guilt as the deer represents more than the simple fact of her taking the animal's life; it stands for her betrayal of her sister as well¹.

Adherence to regional voice and setting lend the novel a credibility that – hopefully – grants me permission to explore the realm of the magical and allows the surreal to mix on the page with the mundane. For magical realism to flourish, you need to have a hard world with crisp edges that is very, very real, to provide contrast to the magical². A reader will practice a willful suspension of disbelief if she is given reason to trust in the fictional world. In *Skinning the Deer*, the way I try to achieve this fictional truth is through regional details. My commitment to setting this novel in rural Maine in the '80's is one of the few things keeping it from reading like complete gibberish. It grounds the reader, and me the writer, in a concrete place that is similar to the world they already know. My studies in regionalism have been mixed because, in my opinion, southern writers seem to have so much more of a strong regional voice. That is why I read *Music of the Swamp* by Lewis Nordan and, while reading, took note of place and time markers in order to better understand the task before me. Nordan's novel is spell-binding; he speaks of cottonmouths and snapping turtles, trotlines and cypress knees, bream beds and pimento-cheese sandwiches. These are the kind of details that anchor a reader to place.

¹ While I have not fully worked out the complexities of the plot, the stage has been set for D to assume the role of Persephone and for Hannah to be the one who ultimately betrays her to Hades. This is the secret that Hannah is fighting to keep, the fact that she sold out her sister to the Underworld as a result of petty jealousy and hatred.

² For an example of this, see Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." In this short story, Marquez remains attentive to small details like the lice on the angel's wings and in so doing, creates a backdrop of realism on which to showcase the magical elements.

A strong regional voice is a difficult thing to pull off because it is very easy to stray into the land of cliché when trying to capture a region. The trick is to give enough clues so the reader knows what place you're talking about, but make the details obscure or unique enough to not be stereotypical. I have yet to pull this off and it may be because I'm trying too hard to fit the above formula. In my case, I have definitely referred to lobsters, blueberries, and let slip the phrase "ayuh" in dialogue. It wasn't until I started writing this version of my novel that I realized that I may be trying to depict the *wrong* Maine, that I'm censoring myself. Maine isn't as quaint as I make it out to be, but it isn't as desperate either, at least, not in some places.

While I am dedicated to providing a complex and well-realized setting for my novel, I also strive to create complex and flawed characters. Hannah's mother is an example of a mentally-ill character who needs to be rendered delicately so as to avoid cliché. Her character was actually influenced by the mother in Carole Maso's *Ghost Dance*. One of the most memorable scenes of the novel is when the daughter is conscripted into helping her mother move every stick of furniture onto the lawn for no reason. She is bewildered but caught up in her mother's excitement until her father comes home and she looks around and realizes the insanity of what she has been swept up in. Maso describes Christine, the mother, with sensitivity:

A simple thing like dressing for the weather might have made my mother feel more at home here, day to day, had she only somehow known how to listen to such things. She knew, though, that she only had so much energy and, considering the demanding nature of her mind, she could not afford to pay attention to everything, every conversation, every news broadcast. She knew

how easily she tired. If she allowed herself to see and hear everything, she would not have survived. (37)

In my novel, depictions of the mother border on melodrama; I would do well to employ Maso's poetic restraint in rendering her realistically.

The novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison has long been one of my favorites because of how masterfully Allison captures the setting of Greenville, South Carolina:

It was peaceful out at Aunt Alma's. The spring ripened until the yard and surrounding woods were lush green and full of singing birds. The three surviving puppies ran in stumbling leaps and falls, rolling over each other and digging between their mama's titties. The clothes scattered across the yard had to have the dirt shaken out before they could be washed. The washer itself worked pretty good, though Earle could not figure out how to fix the wringer. I hung the soggy clothes out on a line that Grey put up between the porch and the black walnut tree, though none of them came truly clean and some of them Mama set aside as garbage. I made a big pile off the porch of the things that were broken beyond repair, and Uncle Earle hauled it away. (278)

In my novel, hunting and fishing, river parties, and town fairs are all opportunities to render scenes that help establish a regional setting. Thankfully, I live in my setting and can do the necessary research to get the details right.

While I have known for years that I would experience some kind of dramatic awakening that would dislodge the story stuck in my windpipe, or trachea, or whatever, I

did not really understand how dramatically such an awakening would shift my view of writing and reading and that it would help me approach writing projects with a clear view of the tasks involved and the creative energy and excitement to do them.

Skinning the Deer is far from done, but it is closer than it has ever been to publishable quality. I am confident that I can see the big-level picture of the story and that I have the knowledge, talent, and enthusiasm to drive it home. Thank you.

“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.”

~ Pablo Neruda

Prologue

Over the years, many things have been said about me. Some good, some not so good. I've seen my face plastered on the covers of Newsweek, Time, and Oprah magazines. I've seen a puppet copy of myself answering questions on Larry King Live, my eyes blazing out of my skull at the audacity, the sheer audacity, of what I was being asked to relive.

People don't understand that a past is not public ground, a place where they can stroll, pick up debris, examine it, and reassemble the pieces together in the pattern of their choosing. Into a pretty scene, a pretty pastoral, that is most pleasing to them. Though, to give them credit, they have tread carefully on my memories, taken the railroad ties one by one as they walk side-by-side, holding hands, traveling down the dirty tracks of my past, towards their own nirvana, their own precious dreams.

For my part, I have been good to them. I've answered all of their questions, when capable; I've placated them with gruesome details. What was it like, sai baba, to feel the saw? Did you become one with it? Did you understand at that moment that you had to embrace it, at the same time it was destroying you, etc. The priests, the clergymen, the religious right, the democrats, the left, they all have their own stakes in the matter, their own particular version of my story. While I understand that everyone paints his own illusion, I have come to realize that it is not fair for them to ask me to take part in a story in which I do not believe.

The other day a woman appeared at my casita. Her hair was clotted with thick, gray dreadlocks, not from the hippie fashion, simply from travel, the weary onslaught of time and filth and lack. Her eyes jumped out of her face they were so bright, the twin

flames of demons I swear could have melted right out of her head. “Senora,” she said. “I have traveled far.” I gave a cursory glance outside. It was nearing the time of afternoon when the rains came. Lately these days I could set my watch to the emotional arc of the monsoons. The sky still china blue stretching out in both directions. The clothes were on the line, wafting gently in the breeze. Should I take them in now? Ah, the questions. Always the questions with me, of what is right, what is wrong. “Come in,” I said, giving a last glance at my white button-down shirt that stretched out its arms as if an invisible man wore it and hoped he might embrace me.

The old woman stumbled over the threshold and blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dark. As I looked closer, I discovered that she had twin serpents that snaked their way from each temple into the arrow corners of her eyes. They were faded and nearly imperceptible, but they were there. “Please,” she said again. I gestured for the woman to sit in my easy chair and I dragged over the ottoman that had been gathering dust underneath the picture window that looked out on the acequia. I brought her a tall glass of milk and a buttered slice of bread. I asked her what she wanted from me.

“Please,” she said again. “I want nothing from you.” She sipped the milk and sat back in the chair with a contentment that had not previously graced her face. “I am an old woman and I am dying.”

I said nothing. But as we sat there together in my casita, the rains came rushing down from the sky. Through the window, jagged knives of steel and white flashed and my body, as if unlocking a hidden memory, relaxed into the knowledge of the flood gathering at my doorstep. Visions came unbidden, painted on a screen on the far wall of my casita: battles raged, a war horse stood, an arrow through his skull, and danced on a

skull and cross-bones while he was being eaten alive by maggots, while he was swarming with flies. Red roses bloomed, withered, died, and the cosmic dancers of love and passion succumbed to their bloodlust and pierced each other through the hearts with matching daggers. There came an image of a sapphire city that hummed with electricity, but not regular voltage, some sort of magic electricity that coursed through the earth, the stone, the rivers, and surrounded it in a protective orb of diamond white light. But there were ragged ghosts in tattered clothes that flocked to the orb and pelted it with their decaying bodies. A white rose growing in the center of the city courtyard gleamed, grew brighter, held strong, but not for long. The countries, on maps all around the walls, their cities, their populations lit up like circuit boards, their sinful night lives, their depravity, their loneliness, they sent golden feelers from all corners into the center of that orb and attempted to penetrate it with their force. The white rose, I know it can't be possible, coughed. It coughed up a plume of blood that dematerialized into the vacuum of that precious orb. The city was falling. The children, everywhere, all across the maps that etched their way into my walls, on top of the photographs of Ekaterina at the Grand Canyon, of my mother wearing a blue dress smiling on behalf of somebody else. The children, everywhere, screamed in one terror song that suddenly rose up from my throat and out my lips. "Aghhh!" It was a long, tortured birth of the nightmare that untangled itself from my own soul. The children everywhere were having nightmares and falling to their bedroom floors clutching their abdomens, their heads, screaming, "Mommy! Mommy! It hurts!" Which made me cry out because I did not know about the children. When I cried out, the old woman set down her glass of milk and crossed her liver-spotted hands across her lap. "The storm is over."

“The city is falling,” I said.

As soon as I uttered those words, I realized that she had seen the images too, the sapphire city, the white rose dying of tuberculosis, pleurisy, the children that struggled amidst their pain. “Yes,” she said. Her lips drew back to reveal a predatory mouth. Her eye teeth were pointed, inhuman. And those serpents, now, blazed from her skin and writhed, darting in and out of the corners of her eyes.

“What can I do?” I smoothed my shirt and thrust my hands in my pockets, an old masculine habit I developed when I, over the years, discouraged that side of my nature. “I don’t even understand what I just saw,” I responded.

Again the predatory mouth. “You are in danger.”

“Is that why you’ve come here? To warn me?”

“No.” She leaned forward. “You would have been warned whether I came or not.”

The sky outside the windows cleared and I saw the clothesline, like a homing device, with sopping white garments. The invisible man was gone.

“Then why?” I began to fear for my safety. The woman had already revealed to me that she was inhuman, possibly a sorceress. Was I foolish to let her in?

“I’ve simply come for what is due to me.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“Your soul.”

Four weeks earlier, Ekaterina and I were biking along the arroyos when the nagging guilt again gripped my heart. I slowed, and surprisingly, it took her a distance to realize I was not following behind her, as I always was. She doubled back and found me

dry-heaving over the side of the guardrail, staring down a datura with simple, plaintive petals.

“Little lamb,” she purred as she rubbed my back. She knew there was little to say and I admired her for it.

Between retches I said, “The sickness. It’s come on again.” Always with me, the sickness. I get to the point where I feel I am strong enough to chase it away, to run from it. I take spinning classes, kickboxing, zumba, jog in the mornings, eat greens and wheat juice shakes, swallow fish-oil capsules, probiotics, and feel that I have finally made myself into a fortress where the sickness can’t reach me. I began to cry, stupidly, feeling Ekaterina’s large hands stroke my back, hear her musical voice say, “I know, I know baby.” She folds me into her arms and I go limp, like a child. Like a screaming child in the midnight, my golden electric feelers unwittingly plugged into a beautiful sapphire city, bent on destroying it. A man and his son bike by, give nervous glances, Ekaterina glares at them and they pass. The heat is good, but the location is not. Whenever I stand on the arroyo bike trail—not bike, but simply stand—I feel that I am perched on the brink of my own self-destruction. How easy it would be to jump, but then, what a shallow fall. I would probably break a bone or two, but mostly be unharmed. But then I would be stuck down there, part broken, staring up at those sloping sides. I might be able to wander long enough to find the service-men’s handrails, those conspicuous ladders, and ease my way back up. But what if I simply wanted to stay down there? Well, not wanted, but needed. What if I made my own society down there, subterranean but with a clear view of the sky. What if I snaked my way through the concrete river of the city, stealing spray cans of paint, and painting my insanity on the walls of my prison. Co-oped a shopping

cart or two and developed a collection of broken dolls and plastic bags and discarded fast food cup lids. And I would let my sickness take me. I wouldn't fight it. I would be purging, eating, excreting, creating, sleeping, all on the same surface, and my body would become a tangential extension of the city's underbelly. My scars would be commonplace and my agony parody. I would be a comical rendition of myself. An urban angel turned tunnel dweller. I would probably, undoubtedly and through no fault of my own, gather a following. They would recognize me. Especially once I started to go naked, my scars visible like twin parentheses, the scars of legend. Can we touch them? Does it still hurt? Do you have what-do-they-call-it, phantom limb? Are you really from heaven? What message does God have for us, sai baba?

Whenever I stand on the arroyo bike trail, I think about that possible future. Ekaterina doesn't know. She knows about the sickness, but I don't know if she really knows, really understands what I mean when I say that it is coming on, that it is taking me. Mortal women don't understand—though they understand better than mortal men—what the grip of the sickness feels like. How it destroys you, completely annihilates you, only to rebuild you again to be destroyed. Ekaterina, though she means well, will probably never understand this. And it is this lack of understanding that I find the most painful. Because my body is a desolate shore she visits on occasion, but, like the other people, she comes and goes and doesn't really sit with it, sit with me, for long enough to comprehend the enormity of that divide, that canyon, that exists between me and the rest of the world.

I didn't tell her about the old woman or about the visions. There have been a lot of things that I haven't told her. Chalk it up to the difficulties of maintaining a

human/inhuman relationship. There are no handbooks on dating mortals and she doesn't know the true nature of my being, what I really am, but then again, I don't know if I do either.

I met Ekaterina on the bus, of all places. I was experimenting with new-age mysticism and had visited the pueblos and reservations and sacred sites to meet up with shamans and mystics who told me that they had heard of my greatness. Greatness! Bah! What greatness. They welcomed me into their homes, their huts, their ceremonies with open arms and an extended invitation. I understood that I was being granted a privilege not usually bestowed upon whites because of my divinity.

“Hannah,” the chief said. Are you ready for ritual? There is fasting and other tasks to perform.” He handed me a pipe and I smelled the dusky, eye-opening fragrance of sage. Everywhere the desert stretched out around us. The night out here was blacker than the blackness of the collective soul. That night, I lay on a wool blanket, exposed to the elements, and shivered in a hot-dry fever that racked me with chills and ached my bones so deeply I felt they had been invaded by bloodsuckers that leeches the marrow from the bones. Sometime during the night, a coyote approached me. I saw him coming, but I didn't move. His eyes were yellow and his fur stuck out crazy like a transmetropolitan Elvis. I saw a white arc in the sky as if the heavens were splitting open. In fact, they were. On one side of the divide was day, on the other, night. And the coyote and me waited on the brink between them. The place between worlds. I was certain he was going to eat me. He looked so mangy, so hungry. But as he neared me, stretched out, defenseless on that simple-woven blanket, he stopped, and bowed to me. Then he began

to speak: “Hannah,” I remember being more surprised that he knew my name than that he could talk. “It’s important for you to try to fly.”

After he had given me this message, the sky settled into a rosy dusk, then time went backward, and the sun began to rise. As he bowed there, still, I sat up, the sickness wearing off from me, and reached out, tentatively, and brushed his mane with my hand. It was an odd texture, a memory of something comforting from long ago. He straightened and then kneeled into me, cuddling against me and nuzzling my face with his. As we became more and more intimate, the sky changed around us and the stars, moon, sun, clouds, flew by. It was a dazzling expanse of time that we crossed in only a few seconds. When he mounted me, pawing at my skirts with broken claws, I didn’t resist. Resistance had gotten me nowhere. Besides, I remembered him, from some time long ago. He pushed a hairy penis inside of me and howled, saying my name, telling me that I would fly again, that this, what we were doing, was the marriage of heaven and hell. This, what we were doing, is a ritual act; it will stave off your sickness, but only if you let it. I asked him how do I let it but he only howled and kissed me with rotting pointy teeth and pawed my breasts with his dirt-caked claws. When he quickened his pace, I began to feel frantic, as if something inside of me were dreadfully drawing near. Amidst his thrusts and cries, he said, “You’ve gone to women.” I bit my lip and nodded, crying out with a primordial pleasure only a coyote can induce. Suddenly I was walking on cave floors, on all fours. I was painting the walls with bison blood. I was crushing things with bone tools and waking, sleeping, eating, shitting, fucking, all within the rhythms and cycles of the sun and the moon. I was an animal on the killing floor and I had been borne outside of myself, into this twisted, scarred creature.

“They will come at you,” he said, nearly purring in my ear, the way Ekaterina would sometimes do. “You need to be ready.” I became suddenly conscious of my scars that eked their way down my back like twin rivers, dried up, sad vestiges of their memory of the sea. He hadn’t kissed them. He hadn’t caressed them. He hadn’t asked to touch them. But he knew they were there. Never in my life had I made love with someone or been made love to, or fucked or sucked, or groped, without that person indicating the scars on my back. Needing to comment. Asking to touch them. Making me remember. Making me ashamed. Of course, Ekaterina had taken a loving approach to them. It was one of the reasons that I turned to women, to her. Not before her had anyone treated them as a beautiful thing, as a legacy, as a part of my body that also needed to be caressed, woken up, reminded of its divinity. But with the coyote, it was as if they weren’t there. But they *were*... They hung there, in front of us, in the sky, angry red parentheses of my past, of my sins. They simply weren’t acknowledged. *He* knew they were there. *I* knew they were there.

He knew a lot about me. For example, he knew that I liked warm air blown into my ear from a simple exhalation of breath, like a hot sigh. He knew that I would refuse to turn over on my back, so he simply did not ask. He knew that I had never been fond of kisses, not since, and he knew my name. He knew the legacy of my past and he appeared to know my future.

When it was done, I didn’t come. I didn’t think I would. I looked up at him, panting and breathless, now his fur was flaxen and well-oiled, smooth and groomed. His eyes were a gentle shade of blue and his mouth smelled like cinnamon, or cloves. He smiled a goofy, cartoon smile, and reminded me again about flying. He said thank you for

the pleasure and he stalked back off into the desert and disappeared. I thought suddenly of Ekaterina, wondered nervously if a woman could be impregnated by a coyote, wondered why had I let him do that to me and on a ritual night, under the protection of a thousand stars, the scent of white sage burning on a brazier and old men chanting dead songs behind the curtains of night.

With Ekaterina, it had been like that, but not quite so. It had been mystical, surreal. As I said, I met her on the cross-town bus. I had just gotten on and was grabbing a handrail, standing in the middle of the aisle, my back naked and exposed. It was summer. I wasn't working then, I hadn't been for some time. Benefactors, always benefactors, would pop up at my doorstep, sometimes they would phone or email, and offer to pay for my costs of living, pay for my education, pay to undertake a documentary - would I please sign - pay for a pilgrimage. "To blaze your way into the land of the mystics," one western Buddhist said. I remembered Richard Gere's face, placid, gentle, on the documentary of the Buddha, his tone warbling but sincere, and I likened him to the man who stood at my door with a contract for a major motion picture. But first, ma'am, we would fly you to Tibet, India, Israel, whatever holy land you wish, to get in touch with your role. My role? "Yes. People want to hear your story, if you would find it somewhere inside yourself to tell it." As he stood there, gripping his documents in his left hand, wiping the sweat from his neck with his right, I saw blazing paths of gold open up before me. The holy land. Stonehenge. Tibet. Craggs in the mist with bamboo floor mats and green goddesses who rolled out their arms to me. Everywhere, these rich benefactors. Everywhere I turned. At first I thought they were kind and I would let them into my casita and speak with them. Sometimes I would tell them things, sometimes not. But now

when I opened my front door, all I could see is their hunger. It is not for God that they do it. It is for the sin that has been daily unraveling from within their own souls that rears up and wants a name for itself. An excuse. Ekaterina didn't know any of this of course, when she spied me standing in the bus aisle on that oven-baked day. But she did recognize me. Or at least she said she did. "How could I not?" she said as she poured a glass of water. We were always so thirsty in those days, dried up by the desert, when we made love we were two dried stalks grating against each other in the wind that blew hot across the mesa. We thought of our lovemaking in poetry like that too, and sometimes in the middle of it, she would murmur verses into the shell of my ear and I would receive them, along with her tender caresses and sweet moans of what she called the nectar of my love that I had allowed her to taste. In those days, it was soon after the publication of an article in the Albuquerque Journal that profiled me, "as I really am." While I had always been something of a celebrity, the journal article stirred up such publicity that I was accosted by cameras, approached by wandering gangs of schoolchildren, and one time, when walking down the wrong street at the wrong time of night, was protected by a gang member who appeared as if from a crack in the sidewalk when a tall man crept up behind me and hooked his arm around my neck in a choke-hold. "I don't have any money!" I yelled. And realized that I had wanted this to happen. That I had been walking towards my own violent end for some time now, and was surprised, frankly surprised, that nothing all that bad had happened to me yet. "It's not your money that I want," he said, pressing his chin into the back of my head. That was when the gang member appeared behind the man and knifed him in his back. I heard the man yelp and fall, crumpling to the ground. "Be careful out here, angel." It was then that he lifted up my sweatshirt and

whistled at the scars he found there. “I thought that was you.” In the dead of night. “I always was proud of my night vision.” He laughed, smiled, showing a silver grille accented by a few scattered diamonds like misplaced stars. “Be careful with yourself, sister.” Then he took his hands away, as if completing a prayer, and said, “Go with God. I am happy just to know you.”

It was on the cusp of that night that I met Ekaterina. It was a sunset ride. As we lumbered down Central Ave, the Sandias with their watermelon glow, like pockmarked flesh that burned from within. The scent of green chile roasting. Everyone was arriving home, bringing their dogs inside, checking their mail. A few neon signs blinked on. Just a few. The one with the hotdog dog whose tail wags, and the sex toy warehouse. The fact that I can't actually remember how we made introductions is perhaps telling of some mystical interference. Some magical spell I was under or she was under. She doesn't remember either. It was just I was standing there, grabbing the handrail, my back exposed, realizing that many eyes were on me. That they all were good and evil eyes, that they perhaps understood or misunderstood what they saw. Some of them would know of me. Others not. I had long ago shed my pretenses about my scars and when it was warm enough I would wear backless shirts that were made by a woman named Lilac who lived in the foothills and drove an electric car. That particular shirt, I remember this much, was actually the color of lilac, or a soft lavender. It was gathered in ruffles at my neck and billowed down from there, like a soft tunic of color splashing around me. It was a test, sometimes, to go out like that. To wander uptown or along central with my back exposed, wearing my self-styled fashions from Lilac the millionaire seamstress. A test of my self-confidence, my resolve. I sometimes look back on those days and think that it was more

about proving this to myself than to anyone else. And so for that matter I could have worn ordinary clothes, but I was a bumbling Sikh, a prophet, an emissary of God, to hear the papers tell it. Shouldn't I be granted the eccentricity of my particular fashion? They even mentioned it on Oprah, Phil Donahue, asked me to show them several of Lilac's handmade originals. When I did, they oohed and ahed, asked about Lilac, asked me about where she was and what her quality of life had been before I "discovered her." Is that what I did, I asked naively, in front of an afternoon of American housewives and older women, discover her? And they all got a good laugh out of that.

"Tell me, babushka, why you so sad?" She was slobbering over me, a tequila sunrise dangling from the cradle of her fingers, the July night lit up with fireworks. Somewhere a teenage girl screamed "fuck off!" and we held hands on a stone wall, every now and then she sipped from her cocktail which had been made inside by some perky art student who was a friend of a friend of a friend and was going through chemotherapy and wore a wig of vibrant rainbow brite blue hair adorned with ribbons. "You take her home when she's had too much." I assured her that I would. Say aren't you that... and it started again. The hostesses' husband was passing around a ball python named Maurice. "Don't be scared. When he tenses up like that, it just means he likes you." I began to drown without water, as if my lungs were filling balloons there in that seventies-style kitchen, there in the racket of a hundred fireworks that ricocheted their way through the night and lodged—the noise that is—lodged in my spine. I stepped back out and once again climbed the stone wall. Really, it was an embankment and on this side it wasn't too high, only about four feet, but it descended six feet to the sidewalk on the other side. I swung my legs over the side and sat beside her. She was wearing a black tank top and she had

pulled her hair back in a loose bun. She always had her hair back unless we were making love; it was so much like clockwork that I had developed a Pavlovian response to the sight of her tumbling black curls. It was always the way, down comes the hair, out comes the dildo. Or off comes the shirt. You get the idea. On that night, however, she didn't take down her hair like a subservient modern-day Rapunzel. She had already drunk too much, but in these moments, I was incapable of stopping her, better really to stop her before she'd begun, but that day my mind was on other things: the old woman who had met me at my door, that Mexican street tough who told me to "keep walking to God, little angel." I had fallen asleep that night with the images of graffiti angels slashing golden swords in front of the paths of skeletons, the Day of the Dead celebrants who bore pink roses and danced without skin. Ekaterina had stumbled into bed later that night and woken me—I had always been a light sleeper—and muttered into my ear something about where had I been. Where have *I* been? Where have *you* been? Came the classic response. It doesn't matter where I've been, but where I'm going, right Babush?

Ekaterina Wilson was the love of my life. Well, I had had a former love, but I have difficulty sometimes in thinking of that part of my past as connected to the mystic, haunted wanderings of my present. She was half-Russian and she hadn't been born Ekaterina. Her real name was Cindy. Sometimes I called her Cindy as an attempt at a nickname, but no one else ever got the joke, or better yet, they didn't get it but still thought it was extremely funny. Cindy, ho! Way to pick a random nickname out of thin air! Her father had been stationed at Kirkland Air Force Base and her mother, like mine, was dead. Though, while my mother's death had its share of complications, Ekaterina's mother went in her sleep, and they knew it was coming. "I knew it was coming too," I

told her one night over Korean BBQ. “I did.” It was like a train rushing down a track. “I just couldn’t stop it.” God, I had tried, I told myself. Had I? Had I really tried? I had seen therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, hypnotherapists, acupuncturists, every “ist” within a fifty mile radius who had the stones to put out a shingle, and they had all told me, “It wasn’t your fault. You were just a child.” Always the same song, over and over. In fact my life as of late could be said to be strung together with snippets of songs that I took an extreme dislike to. Do they hurt? What was it like? Can I touch them? And then the other, more sinister reply, “It wasn’t your fault, you know.” Some had even dared to place the blame on my mother. Talk about speaking ill of the dead. It was her fault that you were in the situation in the first place, some fans wrote me, as your mother, she should have at least given you over to the state if she was going to go and do that.

The night sky poofed, poofed, lit up in red, orange, purple, and my favorite, the green dangling ones that looked like the willow trees back home, the ones that dangled their fingers into the water. Like the green grassy shore at the peaceful part of the Catheart River where willows shaded the picnic benches outside the nursing home. The placid river resting from its long trek from sea. As I sat there amid the occasional hollering from the streets, the explosions of electric flowers in the sky, and the slurping of Ekaterina, I couldn’t help but think of Monkstown and the last fourth of July my mother had been alive. She was wearing blue, always blue, and she had become so weak that she wanted Leroy to carry her out of the car. As I watched him lift my mother—weighing in at about ninety-five pounds—flop in his arms like a ragdoll and set her gently on the hood of the car, I realized at that moment, that her days were numbered. My childish clinging to a better life for us was foolish. My desire for her to suddenly walk

outside and turn her face up to the sun and smile and say, “What a beautiful day it is to be alive,” was only a pipe dream.

“That is how you should do it, and say it, mom, just like that: look up to the sun blazing in the sky and say, ‘It is such a beautiful day to be alive.’” But she couldn’t even do that for me. For us. And I hated her but more so I hated myself that I wanted something like that so badly enough, and it was something she couldn’t do. After she died, I wondered if I had set the bar too high for her. If maybe I should have requested a smile, or even just a nod of assurance that she was alright. I would have asked nothing of her if given the chance to go back and do it over again. But it was my childish, selfish want that made me the murderess in my nightmares. I lay in fevers at night thinking that it was my simple, yet selfish request that pushed her over the edge. But come on, mom, don’t you love us? We want to see you happy. I took her bare foot in my hand and pressed it as Leroy had taught me to do. More than anything, we want that.

Of course, I was speaking for my sister. I hadn’t discussed those kinds of matters with her since I had played with Rhonda’s kids’ Barbies, but I had an idea that I knew my sister ached for her as I did.

Ekaterina was coming alive beside me and our bare legs touched and flirted with one another as she spoke. She was more sober than I had given her credit for, though she was slurring her words and dropping into that stereotypical Russian accent that she knew I both loved and hated. “Babushka,” she purred. She grabbed my waist and clung to me. “Yes?” I kissed the top of her head and felt glad that she was there in my arms, though images of Leroy, the trailers, my mother’s note, came unbidden and I had to do my best to shut my mind off to the visions. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful? Nay, in

this moment, have you ever been any more happy in your life?” She tugged at the amulet she wore around her neck that she had bought on University Boulevard from a Japanese woman who ran a gem shop and read her client’s fortunes.

“In this moment, yes, I’m happy.” While happiness was a word we threw around between us like fidelity, intimacy, and trust, I did feel more rooted with Ekaterina by my side than I had felt when I roamed the city alone, before the press had caught up to me, in those long disappearing years in between when I dropped off the map so to speak, simply because I hadn’t wanted to be found. In those days, when the city stood up on its haunches and roared to life, I roared with it. I made my way through back alleys, imagining myself some sort of fallen angel prima donna of the strung-out variety. I had let my hair go, and my clothes, and had become a walking effigy of the life I had left behind. I thought only of lack, only of what I didn’t have that I wanted, needed, needed so desperately that I wanted to die.

But I didn’t die. I made my way from moment to moment, my soul crawling across the floor of the universal heart, screaming, pleading, won’t anyone let me in!? It wasn’t houses I demanded entrance to, though I tried that once or twice and was met with the butt of a rifle when the cop saw a “crazy look in my eye,” and thought I was going to reach for a blade. “It’s just the way my hand fell, to my side, like this,” I repeated the gesture and the two cops in the room flinched. “You be more careful little lady. If Officer Gonzalez had done what he was supposed to,” he shot Gonzalez a look, “you’d most certainly be dead.” No, it wasn’t the houses, it wasn’t the money, I had money enough, from my mysterious benefactors, I was the bag lady millionaire who showed up at the bank and produced my bank book and asked for five hundred dollars, in cash, once a

month. They had come to recognize and expect me. Though I wasn't a national or even a local celebrity at that time, I became somewhat of a talking point at the bank. The ladies behind the counter wearing black and pearls, their eyebrows plucked out and painted over, they concealed dark secrets with their crimson lined lips, would whisper and titter when I walked in wearing a serape and steel-toed boots that I had snatched off a car in the Wal-Mart parking lot. They were just sitting there, on the trunk of the car, in broad daylight, no one around. I took it as divine intervention. And as I slipped them onto my feet after discarding my holey Keds, I grimaced that it was the type of thing Rhonda and J.J., hell even my own father, wherever he was, would have gotten a kick out of. I thought of bow-legged Marie laughing so hard she gagged, a cigarette between her thin, cracked lips.

Ekaterina was a tattoo artist and she had painted her bedroom with murals of koi slinking through the glittering jewels of lily strewn streams, water nymphs, the faces of Kuan Yin, the Virgen de Guadalupe. Above her bed was a testament to her art, you wouldn't believe, she told me, how many jobs I get based on that advertisement, from the women she brought into her bed, some women she didn't know the names of, who looked up during lovemaking and saw the rich oils expertly brushed onto the adobe wall, thinking, did she do that? And then asking, "did you do that?"

"Yes, I did."

"It's beautiful."

"I'm a tattoo artist." And then it began, I've always wanted to get a tattoo, one here, on my left ankle, and the bland Jennifer or Ashley would point to the spot where her shapely calf descended into the bone of her ankle, and say, "Does it hurt?" Always,

Ekaterina told me, they ask if it will hurt. That is, the ones who hadn't had one before. I remembered the onslaught of questions that had made my senses numb over the years. The first one, usually, do they hurt? Sometimes I would play dumb, sitting at my regular booth at Frontier Restaurant, a soft taco hanging half out of my mouth. "Does what hurt?" They would blink, look at me as if they were trying to determine if they had found the wrong woman, the wrong angel. "You know, the scars." It was as if, from my experience and Ekaterina's, pain was the most important thing of all the details that anyone needed to know. And it was from that knowledge of what they were up against when it came to pain that they could then proceed with whatever it was that they were afraid of, whatever it was that lay in the room beyond pain.

On our first night together, I too had gazed upon the Asian mural. It was in the style of the popular tattoos of the day, koi, lotus blossoms, geishas, goddesses, all those symbols that the teenagers and twenty-somethings were getting on their backs, their calves, in sleeves down their arms. I had been impressed by a bright spot in the painting. It was the eye of the largest koi. It was an emerald—not a real one—like the ones that have a sticky back and are meant for decorating denim. I liked the eye, how it stood apart from the rest of the piece as if that koi was the seer of the koi and possessed an ancient wisdom, the gift of psychic insight, that could help elevate his fellow koi from the waters of that pool and into the glittering heaven that stretched above. But I hadn't asked about the painting. I had assumed, after all, that she had painted it. I wanted to respect her boundaries, her private life, and I think she responded well to that. Only later did she ask me why I never mentioned the painting on that first night. "What, you didn't like it?" No, I liked it very much. I fell in love with it, and you, that night. That was what I wanted to

say, but I didn't. "I didn't want to pry. I thought it would have been obvious I liked it, I guess." Ekaterina was always telling me that I was too masculine. Though she liked it about me that I was more like a man. I killed spiders for her, fixed clogged drains, confronted rude sales clerks. But while we seemed stuck in our masculine and feminine roles, we came together when we made love, and it became not "man" and "woman" not "butch" and "femme" but just simply one essence that was being created there, the masculine and feminine properties flowing between us like water.

The night of the fourth, Ekaterina collapsed into my arms before she made it to the bed. She was dehydrated, I think, from too much drinking, and we spent some time on the bathroom floor, me rubbing her back while she purged the contents of her stomach into the swirling bowl of the toilet. She was crying because the vomiting hurt her and she was fading in and out of consciousness. "Tell me a story," she said as she burped. "I want you to keep my mind off it."

"What kind of story?"

Another minor loss of consciousness and she was back again, dizzy but clinging to my arm, her body flopping to my side. "You never told me the whole story." I knew what story she referred to, but still I asked, "What whole story? The whole story of what?" She smiled up at me, her hair sticking to her forehead with sweat and her face flushed and pale. "You know EXACTLY" she emphasized that, "exactly" "what I'm talking about." She was always doing that, emphasizing particular words when she said them. As if she were teaching a lesson in phonetics to a young child and was trying to make a game of it, except she was never amused.

“I did.” I lied. Ekaterina and I had been together for four years, and sometimes she knew when I was lying, as she knew it now.

“Bullshit,” she said, and she made childish grasping attempts and cried for water. My little babushka, I muttered as I stood up to fetch her another glass. As I cracked the ice cube tray and its geometric contents spilled into the empty glass, I wondered about her question. How come I hadn’t told her the whole story? Were there parts of me, like uncharted territory, that were meant to be off limits, always, to everyone? I hadn’t told the public the whole story, she knew that, and to make it more plausible, to cover my lie, I told her just enough of the whole story—but more than I told the public—to give evidence that she was getting the inside scoop. With her it had been easier to tell those parts, those PG-13 parts, but not much. That she thought it was bullshit was astute of her; I hadn’t thought she would confront me on this. I knew she was smart enough to understand when I was deceiving her, when I was holding enough back so that I felt safe, as if there were a part of me, a secret, hidden part of me, that no one could invade or destroy. But I hadn’t thought she would bring it up. She just wasn’t like that. She was more the silent suffering type. The person at the restaurant who eats their hamburger with lettuce and tomato, though they asked for only cheese. The person who never tells their family that they don’t like elephants anymore, or ducks and stores decades of gifted elephant and duck figurines in a large armoire, displaying them proudly, so that the illusion is maintained.

I considered feeding her a little more of the story to satisfy her curiosity, her need to be close to me. But it didn’t feel fair to her. In the end, when I walked back in the bathroom and found her hyperventilating on the cold tile floor, I decided that I would tell

her nothing more, and she would just have to be okay with that. “Are you alright?” I cradled her in my arms and breathed with her, in and out. And it suddenly reminded me so much of Lamaze that I felt a pang of guilt when I remembered how much Ekaterina had wanted to have a baby. “Someday,” I had told her, “When we’re more stable we can do invitro.” And I told myself that I really was willing to deliver that. But now, as I held her and she gasped for breath in front of me, so similar to those breathing exercises that we watched on that documentary about home birthing, I realized that that too had been a lie. As I tipped back her glass of water and took a swig, I realized what an asshole I had become.

Chapter One

The old woman was there in my casita in the morning. Ekaterina had made it through the night okay and was sleeping off her hangover in her own bed. “Remind me,” she said as I put on my cotton undies and pulled on my sweats, “not to drink, ever, EVER, again.” She continued, as I made my way into the entryway. “If I ever pick up a glass again, put a gun to my head, or a KNIFE to my throat, and say ‘Ekaterina, if you drink that, I will kill you and then kill myself.’ That would do it I think.” The killing myself part, I liked how she added that, you know, to drive it home. Just in case the first part hadn’t properly given the message. “See you tonight?”

“At six.” I said as I opened the door.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The old woman had grown a goiter since the last time I saw her. She sat in my wingback chair underneath a tattered shawl, so much a part of the place she looked merely an extension of the furniture. So that when I walked in, unsuspecting, I was taken aback when I saw her stir in the chair, as if the chair itself were coming to life and speaking to me. I remembered the coyote. When I looked into the knob of that goiter, I thought of the hairiness of what he had inserted inside me.

“I expected you to be here last night,” she said in a croak that foretold death in the language of portents, rivers of blood, the death of the firstborn, frogs and lizards pouring out of the plumbing and into your world.

“You were here all night?” I didn’t ask her how she got in, she was clearly a woman of magic, and it didn’t even take magic to break into a house. I had long ago

realized that locks and doors could not protect me, could not hold devilment at bay. I touched my neck, conscious of the unknown assailant who had tried to rape and/or kill me before I was saved by the god-loving gangster. It seemed that all of a sudden I was being assaulted from all sides by people who wanted access to the innermost recesses of my being. The old woman, the assailant, Ekaterina, the coyote. Wasn't there something that I could keep for myself? Scars on my back or not, I did not owe anyone a story, nor did I need to unburden myself of my guilt simply because they felt that I had found some previously unknown path to heaven. Or did I? Owe them, that is. As the old woman coughed up sputum into a dirty handkerchief, shoving it clumsily back into her belt, I wondered if my guilt had finally consumed me so much that I was left with no morality, no sense of the divide between good and evil, no knowledge any more of whether there even was such a divide.

This old woman has come for what is due. I know that much. She had said it. Or had I dreamed it? I couldn't remember anymore, I was so tired. Images of koi, glittering streams, geisha girls, bland Jennifer's ankles, diamond-studded grilles, coyotes with erect hairy penises, my mother's blue dress, all of these whirred in front of my mind's eye, made me drunk on the potency of what I was being shown. Is the old woman an illusion? Then, have I gone mad? I didn't have to wait long before she spoke to me. I did wait though, afraid of confronting her, the same way Ekaterina could not confront waiters or telemarketers, except this was because I was afraid of encouraging her, conjuring her forth even more, and strengthening the spell I had fallen under.

"I assume you met my friend the coyote," was what she said as she smacked her dry lips and licked them with a noise so audible it sounded like gravel being raked across

dirt with a metal rake. I suddenly found that center in myself that I had long ago reserved for compassion and I reached out to her, I don't know if I thought about it before I did it, I certainly didn't recognize that she was practically an untouchable, a gothic haunt, a vestige of some decaying, post-colonial dream that would spread her violence and her disease from one corner of my life to the other. But still, I touched her, only slightly at first, and then I rested my hand on her shoulder. She craned her neck around at me and smiled, her front teeth broken and yellowed, her jaw slack where the skin hung from the bones; her face had lost definition long ago, perhaps when she was still beautiful, when she still looked like a woman, rather than how she looked now: a puppeteered corpse.

“Come now,” she breathed. “We have no secrets between us.”

“What did YOUR FRIEND the coyote want with me?” I asked, placing my emphasis on particular words in the vein of Ekaterina. I remembered the way the stars fell over me and the coyote that night, the pinon and white sage tickling my forehead in the place right between the eyes.

“I think that much is clear,” she laughed and when she did, a flurry of mucus erupted from her throat and she coughed for a long time. I gave her time. That much I had to give her. As I watched her struggle with the ball of phlegm that she was trying to work free from her lungs, I pitied her, perhaps even loved her. I was suddenly reminded of my mother, lying on the couch, my mother, in her short shorts that were so baggy from her weight loss that she had had to use my father's belt and poke new holes in it just to close the shorts tight enough so that they wouldn't fall off her hips the way clothes do when you are prepared to make love, needfully, out of necessity, except when you have gone bone thin and your muscle and fat is decaying, your clothes have decided to flee from

you and they want to confront you with the nakedness of what you have done. When I stood behind my mother sometimes when she was dressing—I watched, I don't know why, but I often watched, her dressing habits seeming to be something out of a Hans Christian Anderson fairytale—picture the evil stepmother in Cinderella, or the Wicked Queen, because always with her it was inquiry into the mirror about her own worth).

When I stood there behind her on those occasions, her brow furrowed, turning a hairbrush over and over in her hand like a rosary she softly prayed over, I hadn't been able to put words to this absence, this nakedness that I've described, this idea that the clothes you wear are alive, have absorbed your energetic imprint, and that they abandon you when you've decided to abandon yourself. For that is what my mother was doing, she had given up on eating, she was wasting away under clothes that were trying to tell her, trying to tell us: "Hang on now! This isn't right. Where is this woman's fat? Where are her curves? Why is this the way it must end? That's how it felt towards the end, that the things of this world, softness, cushions, fat, sweetness, warmth, had decided, like angry tenants, to abandon her, leaving her a toppling tower of hair and bone.

The old woman reminded me of that, that emptiness, that vacancy, that is perhaps why I touched her, as an attempt to reach beyond the grave and touch my own mother, my own mother who I was afraid to touch in reality, because of the fear that she might break. Or because of the belief that when I touched her, when I felt that hard bone with little fat to soften or cushion it, that when I became conscious of its texture, that I would understand that my mother was already gone and that was something that I hadn't wanted to face, to believe. This woman, this old woman, was not my mother. She was in fact, Mexican, and much older than my mother would have been had she been alive. This

woman had gray, stringy hair that was knotted together in clots that were thick with mud. As I smelled the various oils, odors, and such that came off her body I spun around. I saw her in a vision, raising all hell in that long stretch of desert that appeared to exist in the in-between time, the same place my meeting with the coyote took place, between night and day, between the unconscious and subconscious, between wake and sleep, between heaven and hell, between good and evil, perhaps too. She tramped around a fire and she held fire, like artillery, in each hand. The commoners gathered together under their wool blankets were afraid of her. She could summon the rain and make the horses get back up on their feet after they had decided they would lie down and die. Worse, she could peer into their souls. Every child gathered by the fire held an amulet or a gem against the evil eye. They held it close to the heart, perhaps where their superstitious mothers had told them to wear it, but it was no good, the bruja could see beneath the coarse fabric, see the attempt, see even into their very souls. The day gave way as I watched her, waited to see what she would do with me, to me, what she came to tell me perhaps, about my sins that dragged behind me like a nagging shadow. I recognized that I was perched in that precarious position, that I was treating this woman the way my “fans,” the way my public treated me, as an oracle, as a priestess of divine wisdom, as an auger of the heart, and I blushed at my naivety. This woman could tell me nothing. Whatever magic she had in her was focused on another target, perhaps the village of disobedient and scared children, perhaps she was trying to bring water to them, perhaps do good, perhaps help the crops or bring about peace between the common people and the modern conquistadores, the ones with assault rifles that dealt in powder and pussy. Perhaps she was a good woman. I

regretted later that I had underestimated her so, that I had pegged her concerns for local, primitive, and above-all, disconnected from my own reality.

It was when she pulled a picture of my sister out of her serape that my eyes widened and I realized that she was not some abstract symbol that had wandered into my casita, sat down, and eluded the filters of reality that I had so carefully constructed, the filters that told me that these things couldn't be happening, not to me. But then, I learned that lesson a long time ago that life presents you with a part to play, a tidy, neat role, and through your pain, your wandering, your self-exploitation, you muck up that role as best you can and then cry, your face streaming with tears, cry to heaven, "God! I need you! What do I do?" I thought of the children I had seen on maps all over the world that had appeared on the screen of my adobe. "Mommy! Mommy, it hurts!" Is that all this was, a cry for attention from some disinterested god who you have already disobeyed?

The picture was black and white, but it was her, though she looked more like our mother than herself, but that was just a trick of the photography. The woman had D's thin lips and freckles, which our mother hadn't had, and she was wearing her usual dark lipstick and black eyeliner, which, in that black and white photo, made her eyes practically leap out of the scene, like two black-rimmed almonds that were squished up, just a hair, at the corners. The scant lashes and multiple ear piercings—well, pinprick scars where piercings used to be—also confirmed it for me. It really was my sister. I realized at that moment I had never seen her in black and white. It gave her a sad finality that I hadn't been prepared to face. I wondered, upon examining her vacant eyes and unsmiling face, if she were alright, but I didn't want to ask. Part of me didn't even want to know. Best to bury the past where you left it. You don't drag a corpse of a memory

halfway across the world, bury it, only to dig it up and perform rites over it again. That way was madness. But then, I probably was going mad. All I could say is, “Where did you get this?” The woman didn’t answer. Her rheumy eyes looked oily, and they were smeared in the corners with dirt. She was weary, her lips licked by a parched tongue. I suddenly got the image of a decrepit lizard, a gargantuan lizard, heaving itself out of the dust and flicking its tongue, slightly, just a split second action, into the air, preying on the creatures of the dust and the air in a way that seemed almost vile. Crouched on the ground, she was huddled underneath a mud-caked serape, there was gunfire in the distance and many shouts. “Fire! Fire!” they screamed in English and in Spanish. When the cloth wriggled, it looked like a ghost, crawling its way across the land, towards America, the border that proffered redemption from the living kind of Hell. And that tongue came out, first thing. That was how I could tell she was alive, by seeing the appearance of that tongue slick across her face and dart out into the open air, as if testing it for ripeness, or purity. And then came the hands, crooked claws and bloody, and I wondered why I was standing in the desert watching this old woman crawl in the dirt while I was at the same time standing in my kitchen watching her seep out her sickness, her depravity out of her eyes which were yellowed and filmy with age.

I asked her again. She must have heard me, but she wasn’t blinking or moving. Even her eyes showed no recognition. Surely she can’t die here, in my living room, after giving me this mysterious photograph of my sister, after reawakening the hope, no the fear, that she was still alive. But perhaps that then was the test, as I found later that she was a woman of many machinations and like a chameleon, could summon a shape around

her that was most benign or most dangerous, giving the need. The test being, if my curiosity is peaked, if I am driven to the brink, will I brave the past and save my sister from the clutches of Hell? I didn't have to find out because the woman began to stir, though she was mumbling verses in Spanish and another language that must have been angelic, or satanic, because it defied rhetoric and simply moved between a soft rumbling, warbling, felt almost in the heart, and a soul-lifting lightness that I had never experienced in ear-shot of any language on the face of the earth.

As she sputtered out the words, her tongue lolling over the incantations, the soft spells, the consonants of despair and adulation, a black metal plastic poked out of the corner of her mouth, it was a film strip, black and white but with bursts of color. That was the thing she'd been laboring over, trying to hawk up. It came out now, as she gagged, at every pause she choked, the material scraping the inside of her throat, toying with her epiglottis, it projected on the adobe wall of my casita as it turned out of her throat like the arc of a black and grey rainbow that had wanted to find its own path out of the clouds, the rheumy storm clouds of the woman's advanced stage lung cancer chest.

Projected there, I only saw snippets, flashes, that were memories of that life I led before, that life that still existed in my mind as a hazy, far-off nightmare, but a nightmare that was so clever, so surreal, so deadly, that you would swear it was just an ordinary dream, until something shifts, some small thing, some signal—usually to a horror-movie audience, the way a woman watches ketchup slowly disappear down the drain, the way a wind chime clanks in view of the swing-set that is vacant of children. Something like that, was what I was watching for, something that signaled that shift, prepared me now, as I was not prepared then, to deal with the terror story that would presently sweep me

into a recreation of the devilment of my past. Why always with the past, why always needing to dredge it up, rehash it, revisit it, analyze it, work through it, as if it were real, as if it were an entity, sitting at you across the table, for example, asking you plainly for a soda or a beer. "Can I smoke in here?" The entity says, grimacing into the space between you. "Will it kill you to let a guy smoke in here?" But, as I watched the images somersault their way out of the old bruja's mouth, I noticed that here was a past that WAS tangible. I could reach out and touch the projection simply by lying my hand to the cold clay wall. I could even reach out and touch the sticky, mucus-covered film strips that snaked their way out of the old woman's mouth. I could even walk up to her and tug on the end of the film strip, yank on it until it gave, unclogging from inside the woman's narrow larynx, watching her gag and sputter and choke as I painfully and cruelly tugged it loose from where it coiled around her windpipe. I could do that. I could pull it, yank my past loose from the strange hold of that woman. And I could destroy it, right here, in the fireplace. My hands warming over the fire, perhaps I would sprinkle a bit of pinon incense over the logs to enchant it with the spirit of the desert as an homage to the dying woman who had previously held my past hostage. I could sneak into the kitchen and wrap my fingers around the hilt of a carving knife, tiptoe back in and bury the blade into her back, leaving her bubbling up blood and film, her eyes finally settled onto their own death, or rolled back up in her aging skull. Then I could extract the film strip and bury the woman under cover of darkness in the backyard, between the pyrachantus and the pomegranate tree, the one that refused to bear fruit, and then simply wait out my sentence as a fallen angel who would one day have to answer to God. That was fair, answering to God. That was fair, conducting an end-of-life review on a cloud somewhere, at a long

wooden table with other immortals, God a feeble but intelligent elderly man with a clipboard, reciting my offenses and asking if there were any reason COME LITTLE ANGEL, ANY REASON, for doing the things I had done. As if reason could forgive the heart of sin. That this was the age of enlightenment, was it not? Even God was behind the times—and we are reasonable men. That I was prepared to do. If I accept that I was made by God, that I was bound to God, that is what I must be prepared to do. But I was not prepared to watch my sins roll out of this woman's mouth like a carbon copy of my moral code. This here, yes, this here I did. Yes, and that too. Why did I do it? That is only for God to answer. Perhaps that is why I never gave the full story, the true one. The one that cast me in a terrible light, the one that unmade me every time I reflected on it. They say when you have led a life like mine, that the sins done upon you far outweigh the sins you yourself have committed. "It is like magic that way," one white-haired hippie woman told me while she spread symbol cards before me on the carpeted floor of a spiritual bookstore. Especially when you were just a child. "Don't worry, little angel, you have more than paid off your karmic debt." Thinking about all of that almost distracted me from the evidence, the hard evidence of my life that was pouring out in flimsy strips of plastic before my eyes. I caught an image of Leroy, in a blue rain, I almost mistook him for my mother on account of the blue. It was so blue, so nightmarishly blue, and I was drawn back into the world of moving pictures that the woman regurgitated for me.

While I had had fantasies, the desire, even the want, to kill her, to snatch at that film strip and tug, to chant the devil's own language as I dug a hole for her decrepit body underneath a pink black sky scattered with stars, I did not. Call it morality, call it cowardice, call it whatever you like, I just know that if at that juncture I had driven a

knife deep into her flesh and disposed of her, as if she had been nothing more than a blot on my consciousness, things would have gone much easier for me. Easier, perhaps not better—I would have more to make up and explain to God in the end—but goddamn my fucking soul if I could have spared the torture of that summer that the monsoons came late and flooded my life with images, portents, and people who were just clogging up the works, making me second-guess, making me reflect, making me go back, ever-painfully backward, until I came up to the beginning again, the true beginning, the memory of myself before I was made, the memory of my formation as an angelic embryo that God himself placed into my mother's womb. A soft pink blossom, that God ensured his archangels, that would reveal its splendor in time.

Splendor! If they knew—but of course they knew, they are archangels, they are God—the murderous thoughts, the depraved ideations, the dastardly impulses that I daily spit up, like Ekaterina vomiting into that black toilet, into the forefront of my consciousness, these petty objects, these insignificant objects covered in bilge and slime and the undigested food of my stomach, these objects that had come to represent the moral decisions that I have agonized over, suffered over—then they wouldn't still be sending wandering mystics to my door looking for the keys to heaven.

But the woman knew. In her old eyes, of course she knew. The old woman who I had seen dancing with fire in the eyes of the village children it was reflected. A portent, a Bhagavad Gita, a Rastafarian hot-house incantation set loose to burn up the landscape of the unbelievers. She stirred. I still did not understand if the woman would ever wake out of her trance, or if I even cared. I didn't know if my sister was really dead, nor to look at the film strips, if I had ever actually been alive, as I had not yet seen my own face

projected there upon that wall of memories. Sometime before the woman regained the consciousness that tethers her to this world, a rusted butterfly—a metal contraption, the kind like you see in Madrid, New Mexico, made by those metal workers, artists, that they plant, like flags, in their lawns, those bronze metal whirligigs. Some are made from steel, some from aluminum, some from iron, they have colored bottles fitted to metal rods that they spray out like a sun, or the blossom of a blue-green flower. They make decorations out of watering cans, out of bicycle spokes, trash can lids. It was one of those contraptions, a rusted orange monarch butterfly fitted with gears so that it actually could be turned and made to fly, that caught my eye. Ravaged as it was by bullet holes and the damage of time and weather, the hot New Mexican sun, it still could be manipulated by the slightest touch and then there appeared a girl beside the butterfly. She wore a white cotton summer dress and her hair was long and blonde. I did not recognize her. She pulled a lever behind the butterfly's abdomen and it began to flutter. Suddenly, it was no longer a clumsy, metalwork creation, it was given gossamer orange and black wings, and its antennae were real and its leg feelers twitched and trembled. It was after this butterfly flew off into the gray sky that the woman shook herself, as if she had fallen asleep unnaturally, and her eyes regained their rheumy discharge and she set her mouth into a strict line that did not allow for the passage of her breath and her nostrils like caved crannies in rock that had collapsed long ago.

“You aren't human,” I sputtered.

She turned to me for the first time that day—always she sat facing away from me, as if she weren't permitted to look at me, or as if she couldn't stand the sight of me there, with those prominently displayed scars, that empty back. She sat bolt upright and stifled a

cry. Then she let out a long shriek that sounded like mutiny, or rape, or the unloosened howl of a tortured animal, the kind of howl that you make with your soul, not your body. And right before my eyes, as I watched her sit in my favorite chair, as I watched her with my own two eyes, not two feet from where I stood, the scream rent her apart, cleft her in two. A hairline crack began at her widow's peak, where there was a considerable amount of sweat and stringy hair plastered to her skin. It traveled down the center meridian of her body, a dividing line so miniscule, so imperceptible, that I didn't notice it at first, not until her body, like a cracked shell, began to fall away from either side of it and like a giant snake, she emerged from the dead skins of her old self. I could only see one part of the process at a time, though. While she was splitting, I couldn't see clearly what was emerging. It was a black void in there. At first it seemed as if all she was doing was falling away into blackness, slipping into the chasm that would unmake her. But then, as the old skin flopped saggily to the floor, the wrinkles, the serpent tattoos, the rheumy eyes, there came a great light in the place where her body (had it even been a body?) had been. The light grew and grew and as it grew, it became pinker, deeper, and it sparkled and glittered like the eye of a certain koi, or of the waters in which he swam. The woman—shall I call her a woman—that stepped out of that pink light, the woman that was borne into being in front of the flurry of disbelief of my eyes, she was more beautiful even than Ekaterina, more beautiful than God, and it was for a while before her body took on the corporeal permanence, the carbon and water-based efficiency of this reality, and so for a few minutes, she simply glimmered there, like points of light concentrated in one area strongly enough to make something appear. As if I had stared at one spot long enough to will a woman out of thin pink air. But I knew that wasn't the case because she

began to speak and she began to do things to me, and afterwards, I would see the evidence of the things she had done to me, and Ekaterina was witness, and for a long time, I was prisoner in that casita, prisoner in my own home, at the mercy of my past and the great snake woman who would take everything of me, including my past, but also my present, my life, my sanity, everything that I clung to in the odd hours when I thought BY GOD I CAN'T MAKE IT. She would demand it of me, with open hands, and when I finally forked it over—the thing, whatever it was, that she wanted—she devoured it in front of me with a mouth that was more terrifying than the past I had left behind. And it was because of this woman, this old woman turned snake goddess turned executioner of my will to live, that I fell in love, not with Ekaterina, not again, in fact the woman began to drive us farther and farther apart as a way to get me to talk, no I fell in love with a past that I had so sorely lived that pain became pleasure and so the recanting of those old sins, eventually, became a sort of sexual magic for me, and I turned and buried my face in the coarse hair of that snake goddess and clung to her, my arms around her neck, as she skirted me back, into my past.

Chapter Two

It was a fugue state when I appeared from the wreckage of my childhood and was given over to my “uncle” Leroy in the summer of ’85. I was still reeling from the great tragedy, the old farmhouse cloyed with the scent of rose oil, Shalimar, the bite of moth balls and unwashed old women. My mother had prepared. She’d done her homework. She had laid out enough food for me for several days, made sure there would be someone to knock at the door before I went investigating on my own with my Nancy Drew notebook and pencil, searching for clues, making my way up one staircase and back down the other, forming dizzying circuits in my pursuit of the truth in the Case of the Disappearing Mother. That morning she had torn apart the kitchen in a veritable cooking frenzy. I stumbled in there to see that she was not only in the upright position—my mother is always in my mind a horizontal image—she was actually doing things, doing things with her hands, her feet, moving her body around the kitchen chasing timers, obeying the commands of vegetables, plucking fresh rosemary from her potted plant and holding it to her nose, breathing in deeply. As I peered around the corner of the kitchen wall, I saw my mother’s lips curve upward in an almost smile. It was only for a flash of a second, but I swear I saw it. And so it was, on the morning that my mother killed herself, I felt that I could finally breathe in deeply again. *My mother is happy.* She pulled a roast chicken out of the oven, basted it with a dedication I could only interpret as pride, and she turned boiled potatoes out into a serving bowl, mashed them as I stood there, not knowing what to say.

It was Saturday. It was the end of the semester and I asked my mother if we were having a party to celebrate. It was something she had done several times in the old days;

after she graded her last final exam she would throw a small soiree for the family and a handful of her teacher friends—back when she had friends. If it happened to be in the summer, she would hold it on the back deck, over-looking the oblong field. One year we even had sparklers and smores, but I had been afraid of fire then and I had cried until they had put the box of sparklers away.

“No,” she said. “This is all for you, hon.” All for me. I looked at the spread: roasted chicken with rosemary and butter, mashed potatoes, peas, hard rolls, freshly-made lemonade, salad, next to which she had placed my favorite dressing: blue cheese, cranberry sauce—still in the shape of the can—and, what she took out of the oven now, piping hot lasagna. The dusky sky was beginning to clear and the pink of the sunrise was fading away, leaving in its place a steel blue, softened at the edges by a lavender that seemed so sad, I nearly wanted to go back under the covers and go to sleep. But here was my mother, in front of the kitchen window over the sink, in front of that sky, almost smiling. With the eruption of that cold, yellow sun in the sky, it seemed then an omen of better days to come where at last the gray horror of the previous years would be burnt away and all that would be left would be light, and my mother smiling.

“But Mom, it’s breakfast time.”

“This is for later.” Of course, later, her friend—but not really friend, my mother didn’t really have friends—came to the door for an appointment that my mother had made with her a few days before.

“I’m here to pick up your mom. We’re going yard-saling.” The woman, Susan was her name, stepped over the threshold and placed a hand on my shoulder. She too, seemed relieved. “I was so surprised when Liz called me. I have barely seen her.” Susan

was an English teacher at the community college where my mom taught women's studies.

“What?” Barely seen her?

“Since she took leave, none of us have seen her. God,” she said as she unhooked her purse strap from over her arm and set it on the entryway table. “I’ve been so worried about her. None of us have known,” she paused, looking into my eyes with a too-kind understanding, “you know, what to do.”

I was confused. “You must be mistaken.” Even when I was young I spoke like an English professor, which only gave the Huffs and Chases more reason to taunt me, resent me. I tried to add up the details of what I had known about my mother's actions in the past few months, but came up short, like when I tried to assemble a puzzle at Rhonda's house only to find, midway through, that some of the pieces were missing. “Chewed by Rex, probably,” she would say when I sighed and crossed my arms in front of my chest. I did that back then when I was frustrated, until I learned it earned a slap from Rhonda. “My mother has been teaching all semester. She brings home papers.”

My mother's almost-friend gaped at me and didn't say anything. But she furrowed her brow and turned her face to the side in a newfound curiosity. “Is she upstairs?” She said with a new business-like tone.

“Yeah. She was up earlier, but she went back to bed.” I didn't tell the almost-friend about the cooking frenzy, nor that I had already eaten half of the mashed potatoes, one-third of the peas, and one-fourth of the cranberry sauce. I liked to eat in fractions. It helped me bide my time, it made good food last longer, and I didn't know when my mother would have the energy to cook like that again. I moved past the almost-friend and

took up my place at the kitchen table, the partially eaten banquet spread out before me, and while she trudged upstairs, part of me still thinks she knew what she would find there, I stuffed my face on chicken and hard rolls, not stopping to breathe, barely stopping to chew. It was then that I heard the almost-friend cry “Oh!” Just like that. “Oh!” as if she had broken a heel, or been punched in the stomach. She repeated it a few times. I think she was a nervous woman who was on psychiatric medicine in the days before that sort of thing was common. She cried out again, “Oh!” with that gut-punching realism and the hair stood up on the back of my neck and scalp, for I knew then that the picture of my smiling mother was an illusion, and that there, lurking behind the image, was my mother, in blue, lolling on the couch, her eyes skittering back and forth, moaning on the grip of some half-strangled nightmare.

She had told me once about Sylvia Plath. About how she died. That she had turned on the gas in her flat—while her children were there!—and with loving care, locked her children in the bedroom and stuffed towels underneath the door to protect them from the fumes. And then, she told me, her hand shading her eyes though there was no sun, hardly any light in that living room, the one was jealous of the other, for going first. She wrote poems about it, even.

“Do you teach those poems, the ones about her being jealous?” I knew a little bit about my mother’s career. I knew that she taught literature and poetry in her classes to introduce her students to women authors and to help demonstrate the plight of women. I knew she taught about Ghana and Zimbabwe; they did things there to little girls that aren’t right, she told me at first, then, when I was older, she drew me a loopy picture with magic marker, of a vagina, and then she drew slashes, like shoe laces, that tied the two

sides together. When I grimaced, she fell silent, as if she regretted telling me. But it was only a momentary pause before she plowed on, explaining how there was a pleasure center on a woman, a pink fleshy nub, and that this was sometimes removed to keep her under a man's control. I went to bed that night unafraid to explore my own vagina, though I brushed my fingers against it, and for a while, I had difficulty urinating without thinking of black suet or twine cinching my labia, giving me an odd psychological pain as if I had been one of those girls and my body remembered what it felt like to be bound.

She said she did teach Plath and Sexton poems. She admired them, she said.

When I was older, after I had taken college literature classes and rounded upon my mother's cannon with my own perspective, colored in fact, by the way she raised me and her own opinions which, before she got sick, rolled off her tongue with their own love language, I recognized that there was a part of the Plath/Sexton story that my mother was missing. "Here is a woman born before her time. Out of context, she goes mad," my mother wrote in the beginning pages of her tattered copy of *Ariel*, which I still have. No, she didn't understand the whole thing of it, the part about the children. And when I came to that realization, I understood that my mother, like Plath and Sexton, had simply just not been the mothering type. She put forth her own agenda, there just wasn't any room in it for a child. She believed, as Plath did, that lovingly protecting your child before your suicide was enough, should be enough, to soften the blow. As if to say, Look, look how much I love you. And I think the banquet she prepared for me on the morning of her suicide was not out of guilt, as some suggested, but simply a last gift of love for me. By the time the almost friend had calmed down—I had run upstairs upon hearing her tortured "oh's" but she had held her arms out to keep me back. "Don't go in. You can't see her

like this.” And she had grabbed me firmly, she had even pulled my hair by accident when trying to get a hold of me with her small hands. She pushed me in front of her. By the time I reached the bottom step of the staircase, a spray of vomit spewed out of my mouth. I had gorged myself on my mother’s banquet—I think it was an attempt to absorb my mother’s happiness while it lasted, for it had been a long time since I had seen her happy, and I had been starved for it. The almost friend had begun to cry, but she patted my back in large, sweaty circles while I vomited up the rest of what I had eaten, a fraction of my mother’s kindness to me.

She hadn’t left a note, but there was a will. I was to go to Leroy, my half-sister’s uncle. I wondered, why not Junior, D’s father, since D lived with him—or so I thought—but when I arrived at that plot of land with my toys and clothes and small AM/FM radio/tape-deck and a dozen or so cassette tapes, I discovered it was because Junior was in jail.

Mrs. Newhouse drove me to Leroy’s, a sprawling plot of land at the edge of town upon which several trailers—and a decrepit barn—stood. I think there were four, but they were added and subtracted so many times in those years that it was hard to say.

The line that divided me from my half-sister’s family was not only a class line. There was something else there too. It was as if the Huffs and the Chases were untamed, resigned to their wildness, and like wild animals, they took no responsibility for anything they ever did, they simply grunted, farted, burped, slashed, kicked, hit, swore, and ignited burning dreams in front of their faces that smoldered at the filter; I could always tell where they were in the dark.

To say I wasn’t prepared to ease into their way of life is an understatement.

When Mrs. Newhouse piled my things into her station wagon, she frowned, setting her lips in a line that looked sewn tight together. I had always been afraid of her, because she would make that face. All of a sudden, too, and then she would fall silent and you felt that you had to perform small miracles to appease her. She was my babysitter. She lived down the road in a one-story ranch house with pink shutters. Now she was frowning, and I didn't care to appease her. She handed me a package of rolos and apologized, stumbling over herself with her own awkward grief. She had liked my mother, I think. She was among the few people who was able to peer through my mother's weighty depression and see the sparkling light within.

"Come here, dear." She brought me round to the driver side door and pulled me into a polyester hug. I was flattened against her shelf-like breasts and the cheap fabric of her blouse tickled my nose. We still stood in the dirt driveway, the house of my childhood looming up in the background, no longer resembling the light-filled place of innocence and love. While I had had a sordid childhood, while my mother saw to it that I experienced my fair share of pain and longing for joy, I was relatively unharmed, and I had known that, in her own way, my mother did love me. I had been fed and clothed and my mother had helped me with my homework and sewn costumes for me for Halloween—that is, until the last year, when she fell apart like a glass vase and shattered on the floor of my life. I tell you this now, about the relative ease of my childhood, because that was now over. Upon my mother's death, I was ushered into a new world, one in which I did not know the rules, and my sister, like a gatekeeper, tortured me with her resentment.

“You get to have her,” she said, speaking of our mother. Of course, she never said this out loud. To do so would admit she cared, that she loved something, someone, other than herself. But I always heard the statement whenever I saw her hunched over a dirt pile in Rhonda’s backyard, shoving gravel and minerals into her face. It hung between us like an unsigned contract, and I think that was the cause of most of my grief then, not so much for the death of my mother, but from the guilt of knowing that I had monopolized her, kept her in my possession, when my sister needed her, perhaps needed her more than me.

The story goes that my mother and D’s father, Junior, were married, once upon a time. When D was seven, the marriage disintegrated and Junior moved back with his family on that sprawling plot of land on the edges of Monkstown. D was given a choice. My mother had always wanted to be democratic. I almost wonder, I have often suspected, if she gave her that choice as a way to wash her hands of her without the guilt. Place the burden on the child so that the fault is not yours when she comes to resent you. At seven, D chose to live with Junior, I think because she was attracted to the way the Huffs and Chases lived, like outlaws on the edge of town. They lived in clouds of dust and they toted rifles and pulled trucks out of the mud with other trucks, and listened to country music and drank and shot at things until they passed out.

I wasn’t given such a choice. It was because my paternity was in question. In fact, my mother would not reveal to me the name of my father. I had grown up knowing Junior as my step-father, but I had always felt distanced from him, and he always handled me like an alien continent, stepping around my edges, unsure of the customs of the territory. It was a strange thing, growing up that way.

It was as if we were in a play and Junior was merely acting as my father, but he represented a greater more real father that existed somewhere. He just had to. And so it was that my sister and I resented each other. Though she didn't start to resent me until later, after she had made her choice, and had begun to feel short-changed. I often wonder if she had wanted to come home but didn't out of stubbornness, out of a desire to hide the fact that she had been wrong. I resented her, of course, because she had a father. While Junior wasn't the best father, he may not have even been a good father, he was there, and he professed to love D, even when she ran away and they found her at the county fair, a slaughtered chicken in her hands.

"That one is a little terror," a man with no hands said. He was the man that had called the house and told Junior he had D and she was needing to be picked up. "He gestured for Junior and me to follow him into the country music tent. We passed through the tent and came to a small ring. In the center was my sister, sitting with her stupid skirt spread out around her. I could see that she wasn't wearing it, her undies were all she had on bottom, but she was sitting on her knees on top of the skirt, like a spread out picnic blanket. I recalled how she had fought our mother when she had insisted D wore the purple skirt for her school pictures.

"I don't know what the big deal is," Junior argued. "Let her wear pants if she wants. It's just a head-shot anyway, they won't even show the stupid skirt." My mother straightened her arms where she was hunched over the kitchen counter, and sighed. While she sounded resigned, D still had to wear the stupid skirt to pictures. But she had run away from school before they were able to snap a photo of her. Mom had gotten a

call that they had lost her and she had to leave the college to pick up Junior from the body shop and we split up to search for her.

She had run to the fair that had set up a few days earlier on the other side of town. As we followed the man without hands into the dim and dusty pony-pull ring, he clucked his mouth and told us again that my sister was a handful and that she had killed one of his chickens. “I was supposed to be at work an hour ago, but I stayed,” he said, giving Junior a look that implied that he had gone above and beyond what another man would have done in the same situation.

Dusk had fallen and the fairgrounds were empty save for my sister, the man without hands, and me and Junior, and the carcass of the chicken that D clung to, blood on her hands, her clothes, the dark red of it standing the ground around her.

“Chicken went crazy and this one grabbed an axe and just FWACK!” the man without hands imitated the fall of an axe, and when he did so, the stubs of his arm swung, reminding me of the insistent nature of deformity. It wasn’t until I was much older, looking back on that memory—forced to conjure it up by the demon Goddess as she sat in a lawn chair, her eyes glittering and her mouth wet with desire, the coyote applying electrical nodes to my breasts and cranking up the voltage—zzzztttt! That I thought of the absurdity of that moment, and likened myself to the man without hands. A deformed pariah when my sister came in and chopped off the head of his trained chicken.

Junior hadn’t scolded her. He had laughed, as a matter of fact. I was intrigued when he stood there, leaving D on the floor holding the dead chicken, opening his billfold and retrieving some bills and handing it to the man, hesitating at first, because, do you put the bill in the crook of his arm stump? Do you wait for him to grab at it with his

appendages that are like tentacles? But even though Junior was confused about the etiquette of paying off a handless man after his daughter has just beheaded the man's chicken, he still smirked. When we rode home in Junior's pickup, he didn't mention the event. He just said, "You sure are a Huff." It was this wildness, this brutality that marked the Huffs from the rest of the world. My sister D, when she was seven years old, had run away from school and killed an amputee's chicken, and thus received the serendipitous gift of belonging in the halls of other wild Huffs. When D and I visited Junior's family in the summer, he pulled her close to him beside the bonfire and related the story to fat-faced Rhonda and Marie, the bow-legged sister. On a night that could only be explained to be a primitive ritual of initiation, the Huffs and Chases gathered there around the fire, under the orange moon, and accepted D into their fold while casting perfunctory glances at me, or not glancing at all. So it was long before I came to live with them that I experienced the divide that was to separate me from my sister, and keep me from being treated as one of them.

Chapter Three

Ekaterina had bought me a puppy for my birthday. You know how the shelters and humane societies always say: never purchase a pet as a gift? There is a reason they say that. Sometimes the person receiving the pet doesn't want it, or isn't ready for it, and they end up just returning it, creating more trauma for the animal, etc. Well, she had meant well. She had done it because of what she called my "retreat into my shell." That she used clam metaphors to describe me I wasn't crazy about, but she was my partner and I loved her and so I dealt with her descriptions of me as some sort of shy mollusk, and let her place a puppy—a bijon fries—in my lap in hopes it might cheer me up.

"I'm cheery," I grumbled.

I named the puppy Daphne, and while at first I wasn't crazy about the idea—I hoped the look on my face when she had revealed her to me hadn't betrayed my feelings. She had set me down in my favorite chair and tied a velvet red blindfold around my eyes and told me to wait for my present. I waited in anticipation for some sexy surprise. Surely blindfolding led to the exact kind of erotic pleasure that I invited from Ekaterina. But instead, when I felt soft fur against my face, I was skeptical, but thought maybe it was one of those Christmas negligees that have faux fur, but then I felt the paws on my thighs, and the tongue—not Ekaterina's tongue—lick me profusely. I tried to smile.

It's not that I don't like animals. I do. I just wasn't eager to have something tagging along, something I needed to dote on. Something that would lick my face, for example. The puppy really was cute. I think my past, however, had taught me to separate my emotions from other people, my surroundings, to compartmentalize and build up stone walls. Ekaterina had often complained that I wasn't sensitive enough. That I was

almost harsh. That I lacked empathy. This was the sort of thing that made me realize that I had lied to Ekaterina when I had told her that I would have a baby with her. And it was the sort of thing that made me grimace inside at the thought of having to nurture this ridiculously cute puppy. But nurture I did. Or at least I tried. And Ekaterina liked to think that developing a bond with the puppy was helping me crawl out of my crustacean skull and rejoin the world of caring, compassionate people.

“It’s a small step,” she said. “But I think you’re ready to learn how to connect with people, learn how to love, basically.” She was right, of course, well, not about my being ready, but she was right about my need to do those things. Ever since I could remember, my relationships with people were ancillary. I was something that existed outside of their own orbit. As if they heard everything I said from a great distance in space. The only relationships I could form were sexual ones, and only with women, for the most part. But until Ekaterina, these relationships had been shallow and I looked back on myself then and realized I had been a typical guy (though I wasn’t a guy)—closed-off, clumsy, insensitive, remaining silent when she discussed her feelings, reacting stonily to genuine affection, and responding to relationship difficulties by throwing money at the problem. “Here, buy yourself something pretty,” or running away.

Daphne, the puppy, was at Ekaterina’s, cuddled up beside her, helping her sleep off her hangover. The puppy had taken to Ekaterina, almost as if she understood that she would get further with her than with me, you know, when it came to affection and such. She took the puppy with her to the tattoo joint on Central, and Daphne sidled up to biker dudes and college students and otherwise sat very meekly on a plaid dog bed in the corner next to a glass display case of gauge jewelry. It was a medium-sized tattoo and

piercing place, there were two tattoo artists and one piercist who specialized in body modification. Ekaterina had apprenticed with Kit Hernandez, the shop's owner, a high-school drop-out turned small-businessman who painted dystopian circus landscapes—sad clowns staring out from a charred big-top, the tears coming out of their eyes red—and had an interest in mythology. Kit's paintings hung all over the tattoo shop, which was named Averno, after the lake in Hell, and they were priced anywhere from \$175 to \$4,500.

One time Ekaterina took me to one of Kit's shows. It was in Old Town, and the sun was setting, shedding its rosy glow over the antiquated feel of the Spanish street. Someone had set out a few bottles of wine, olives, cheese, and m&m's on a wooden buffet table that was set against the interior wall. When we walked into that windowless gallery, I was confronted with what I considered to be Kit's masterpiece: the Revenge of Poseidon. It was three feet by four feet on an unframed canvas. It was a fury of blues and deep, bloody purples. The god was angry and wielded a trident in the manner of Ariel's angry father in the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*. In fact, I wondered if that movie hadn't been the jumping off point of his inspiration. Everywhere the sea swelled and raged as an extension of the king's body. And while he glimmered in gold, it was clear he was an evil force, though the elements and creatures obeyed him, even to their deaths. Death was everywhere. Flopping fish bodies, skeletons, corpses, suffocating jellyfishes, drowned horses. It was the nightmare that echoed from within my own soul. But while it was darkly poetic and downright horrifying, Kit had made it, somehow, to be absolutely beautiful. So it happened that when I walked into the gallery, I stopped at that painting and didn't move until Ekaterina shoved me forward because I was in the way of

a man and his daughter—the daughter wore a ballet costume and her eyes were painted with black liner to resemble sideways almonds—who were trying to come in the door.

As I gaped at the rest of his paintings, studying each one in turn and finally arriving back at my favorite, vengeance erupting from the sea, I grabbed Ekaterina's hand and buried my face into her perfumed hair and told her I loved her.

It was the first time I had said it. I hadn't planned to say it at all. I had tried to get through relationships without having to say those words, ever. Consequently, my romantic relationships often only lasted up until the point where it became absolutely necessary to say it, the other choice being, getting out, and fast. And so, with so many men and women before Ekaterina, I had left in the night, or in the morning, or not called, or disappeared, or made up some excuse. There was too much at stake! But never before Ekaterina had I been so willing to risk it. In fact, I found myself, in that little gallery surrounded by Kit's post-apocalyptic art, *wanting* to say the words. Wanting to hear how they felt coming out of my mouth. How they sounded on my vocal chords. They were like an incantation to me now as I whispered them, those sacred, previously forbidden words, into the curve of her ear, a dark spell that pulled me under, a spell that meant no turning back. After I said it, and I could see the corners of her lips turning up as she whispered the same words back in her quiet, husky voice. I looked at Poseidon's fury and I realized that I had just plunged headfirst into my own nightmare and, in so doing, married my soul to the demon goddess, my beloved.

As I stood in the living room, a slant of cold light making its way across the floor, moving with dust motes and the angle of the orbiting sun, I did not suspect that Ekaterina, the woman I had said those difficult words to, was not entirely loyal to me. It hadn't

occurred to me to be wary, to suspect, to protect myself from her—FROM HER—of all people, and it was because I had so willingly given myself over to her. Though, not all of myself—there was still the shadowy story that stretched its black wings over my heart, casting a raven’s shadow on a dry, hot landscape, the parched desert of my emotional landscape where mirages and genies and flying carpets and palm trees painted me Indian—not Native American, actual India—and my soul swayed to the pachyderm Andromeda sunrise. The aurora borealis of my soul, Ekaterina exploded in passions of color and light. An arctic electric winter landscape that raged across my life with the reckless abandon of a man grasping for anchor when he is drowning. My love how I eventually trusted her.

They had moved me at this point. We were in a secluded location, a humble adobe ranch, the cattle had died or been scared off long ago and there was an old vulture that watched me from its perch beside the white blooms of a yucca, that white sword that pierced through the dust dreams of that torture day. I wanted water, but I didn’t ask for it. I had learned long ago—how long had it been—that my pleas would go unanswered, or worse, be used as fodder for more punishment. In the desert, your dreams are starless as the night is wide. How long had it been that I had been out here? How long had it been since the goiter woman, that old bruja had enchanted her way into my casita? How long since I had touched Ekaterina, smelled the acai berry scent of her hair? As I said, I didn’t suspect at this point that I was being betrayed. My love for Ekaterina was strong and I clung to it in those later days, especially, when pieces of my body had gone numb with repeated torture and my skin had begun to fall off in curlicues because the coyote had taken a knife to me while my eyes were so tired from the onslaught of the bare, oil smear

sun that I closed them while I was awake to blot out the brightness that seared through me like pain.

That's what it was in those days, hot pain. Hot, dry pain for breakfast, for lunch, for dinner. Hot pain for sex, for elimination, for drinking. Pain that crawled into the corners of my being and laid down, every now and then charmed as if by a snake charmer, and the snakes of pain would be set to dancing, excruciatingly, around in enchanted circles, patterns, figure 8's, whatever pattern was most pleasing to my captors. I had given up hope that they would provide me with food and water, and it was only when I had given up on the quest for water that I saw the coyote had a flask, a simple leather canteen, around his neck. And he saw me eyeing it, in the times when my eyes were not closed, and he smiled a large toothy smile, and I wondered if his slavering jaws would take me, finish me off, sometimes, if that was the end I could wait for a cold, clean kill that he could promise me, an end to what I suffered in the dry dust of that summer. And then I understood, bodily, what my mother had wanted all those long years in between my birth and her suicide—a bullet. A clean bullet. A mercy kill. A persistent, efficient death machine that could promise to you: "There is an end in sight." When Coyote leaned in to check my wounds, taking the time to douse them with the brine saltwater—as if I were a pirate's captive and this, a sea squall, me tied to the mast, awaiting that long, brave walk off the plank and into the sea—I fantasized about him wrapping those jaws around me. I saw myself as a cartoon figure, or better yet, one of Ekaterina's tattoo people, the ones that are not quite stick figures, but they aren't flesh and blood depictions either, sticking out of coyote's strong jaws, my feet flailing, my head disappearing down the throat of the beast. My beautiful executioner. They hadn't

divulged any of their secrets yet. Those were the torture days when I was left completely in the dark. All I knew was that I had something that they wanted. That the weight of my story could be bought in gold, that magicians and demon goddesses and trickster gods would converge on it, and promise me riches—on the material plane and in the spiritual ether—if I would hand over the story. Except they didn't know that it had been years since I had been able to unlock it. I tried to tell the demon goddess that I may have swallowed the key to my story. She told me they would have to carve it out of my intestines, then.

The longer they kept me there, tied to that stake, the more people congregated to what they called the sacred site, and not yet, but eventually, my torture became public knowledge, only the public would not untie me from the stake, bring me down, and end it. But that is a story for another chapter. The current problem was that I was dehydrating, parched, in the desert, and I had yet to produce for them anything of value. I had choked for minutes, struggling to breathe, and every time I gagged, my back skin tore further. I wondered how much my skin was attached. If it were pulled too much, wouldn't it just separate from me? And I spent many dream-filled nights, though I didn't sleep and so I will call them visions, imagining what it would be like to be skinless, and I thought of the skin walkers of these hills and wondered if my spirit body would be accepted by God in the end.

When the demon goddess asked me for my story the first time, I had chuckled, laughed boldly, confidently, in the comfort of my casita, because the woman didn't yet terrify me and I thought I was safe and free to laugh how I wanted to laugh. "What is so funny?" The woman was still old and hiding in her wrinkly skin. She was so much a

snake that her skin, in places, had scales that rippled back into skin when your eyes lighted upon it. She was mystical and she smelled of age, but I had let her in my home and fed her and given her water to quench her powerful thirst.

“Don’t you find it ironic,” I said, my mouth barely able to move through the dry, chapped lips, me having no saliva anymore to wet my lips. Proper speech requires lubrication. Without saliva, the speech, the things you want to say, have no more fluid river on which to sail out of your mouth. And so the words pile up like cracked rocks on a dry creek bed. They begin to lodge in your throat and suffocate you. The burden of those unspoken words is a heavy one and I’m not entirely sure if the torture was what eventually broke me, or if it was the simple—yet powerful—fact that I could no longer speak and my words were crawling around on the desert floor, trying to find mouths to speak out of. They were clanking around inside me, creating their own parched, twisted language that perverted everything genuine, those words that I spun out of my heart tissue and blood. “Don’t you think it’s ironic,” I said to the right eye of the snake woman—the torture and exposure had made it so that I could no longer see in panorama. My field of vision was like a one-inch square, and I now zoomed in on my subjects, when I used my eyes to look at all. That right eye glittered back at me. Seeing, as I did, without context, isolating on object and then seeing it, truly seeing it, as it existed without referents, opened up for me a world of absolutes and offered me the promise of magic—a small consolation, given the circumstances—for the things I chose to see were beautiful, indeed. The eye was green and gold. The green was a jeweled color, like an emerald encrusted lizard’s back that eye shimmered, and the ring of gold around the edge was rimmed by a darker green, the green of pine forests, the rich pine of repressed childhood

forests. And her lashes were the lubricated, long black lashes of a goddess. I wanted to slide down the slope of them, the way they raked away from her eye, a black silk hand fan, exposed, down to its skeleton frame.

“I didn’t tell you that you could speak.” She approached me and I, out of habit, flinched. Her eyes widened in excitement. For the past few days, they hadn’t been able to get much of a response out of me, my head dangling, like a broken neck, my mind a muddle of consciousness and unconsciousness, not understanding whether I was truly feeling the sensations they inflicted upon me or whether I was one hell of a dreamer, and I did have dreams. Wide, sweeping dreams that carried me away from the torture and control of that place. Dreams of palaces and willow swamps and black bogs with initiated priestesses and ghost mothers. Absinthe and euphoria, ambrosia and the soft violins of memory, sawing across chords of regret. But I had become bold.

“I think it’s funny that all of your efforts are just stoppering my story more. Everything is just getting harder to tell. And now that I’m hallucinating—your doing, not mine—I don’t know what is story and what is real.” I was proud of my boldness. I had recited this admission to myself a few times before I spoke the words that rattled out of a dry throat. She had warned me, but I plodded along, down that dirt path of self-destruction, the same path I had been walking for decades.

“That’s what you think is funny?” Her lips moved upward into a self-satisfied smile. “Funny,” she turned the word over and over like a tortilla. Flipped it upside down, coated it in flour, waited for one side to brown, before she said, “That isn’t helping your case, you know, that, what you call, ‘honesty.’” She and coyote appeared at each side of me, and coyote lifted me up long after I had given in to the fact that I was going to die of

thirst, it was only when I had given up hope of ever being found, truly found, there hanging from that pole, only then did I begin to have visions that came unbidden, visions of my past that encircled my sister's face as I had last seen her alive, a past that spoke to me from a place of deep fragmentation, not even puzzle pieces, really, if they were, jagged shards of a glass puzzle mosaic, then there was little hope that I would be able to ever piece them back together. "Never mind that," the snake goddess said after I shared with her my metaphor. "Your job is to show us the shards. Hand up the shards to us, we'll do the rest." I thought again of an archaeological dig someplace warm, dusty, but with a tropical not desert heat. Rumors of monsoons sweeping the villages away, and so they build their homes on massive steppes that are green all the way up the mountains that climb into a purple haze. And I am down there in the pit, the cavity of our excavation, turning over fossils, precious rocks, in my ineffectual hands. And the coyote and the snake goddess stand up there. They are my benefactors. My patrons. They funded this dig. They have the most to lose, they say, with their hands on their hips, scanning clipboard checklists of items, checking their watches, then sighing and kicking their boots into the dust. They are tired, they are hungry, they are bored. The expedition wasn't supposed to last this long; there was supposed to be more loot. The new girl isn't pulling her weight.

They told me that every chapter of my story that came out factually was worth its weight in gold. Just to show they were not using the expression euphemistically, she held up a trio of gold doubloons in miniature, fanned them out—they looked to me like insistent gold fingernails jabbing out in different directions. "Of course, *you* don't get paid." That much I knew. I hung from a wooden pole, the gravity of my existence

literally weighed me down, creating new scars on my back, my beautiful back that Ekaterina had labored over, piercing a design of intricate iron grillework, delicate curlicues, like lace tatting, across my back skin. Now the wounds had marred its landscape again, Ekaterina—if she hadn't already known of the goings-on and approved them—would cry. As I hung there, I tried to imagine why she was crying in my daydream. She has lowered her head and those short bang pieces of hair have fallen across her eyes. Is it because of my pain, the incessant need for life to write its messages in my back skin, the empathic closeness that she feels because we have exchanged love under thousands of nights filled with stars. Or is it because of the slaughter of her own work, her tattoo, it would be the same as when I walked into the tattoo shop one day with a bag of Sonic food for Ekaterina and caught Kit crying because the authorities had painted over his graffiti mural that spanned the length of the arroyo from Washington Street to Pennsylvania Street, a very short block where the arroyo tagged along beside the bike path and the houses with their cement walls hugged the path. It had been a work in progress, like my back piece, the goal was to make it all the way across, but of course he only made it six feet of airbrushed detail before his creation was wiped out with a can of sterile beige paint and he was left crying on the tattered love seat in his tattoo shop.

How must my back look now.

Chapter Four

Ekaterina laid me down on a massage table. In the beginning days, I simply laid my belly on the hardwood floor, naked from the waist up, my head on a thin pillow. She worked by the light of a table lamp she set up and pointed at my back – I felt like I was in the beam of searchlights. And otherwise, that winter, there would be a fire crackling in the fireplace and the room was dim. Often, there would be jazz playing from the stereo in the den, and sometimes we were simply silent, me absorbing the thousand needles of her love, and her concentrating on hurting me only enough to make it worthwhile, enough pain – enough love – to leave a mark. An indelible memory that I could keep.

It was because of this that I argued with her against having my back tattooed. Because it didn't seem different, when it came down to it, than what had previously been done to me.

“It will be empowering,” she said, breathless. She huffed and puffed beside me as we climbed the final leg of the Sandia Mountain trail and emerged together into the thin air over Albuquerque and held hands while we scanned the miniature landscape for our respective houses. I knew then, as I knew now that it wasn't that simple. There wasn't some action that I could perform, or some activity that I could participate in, that would lessen the pain of any of it. That wasn't what this was about. But in the end I gave in to her desire to carve her own symbols into my back skin, in the end it came down to love. And, strangely enough, because of love, I gave away my power to choose. “You're right,” I said, as I bore the prickling, stabbing process through. Some of my back was numb, particularly in a radius around where they once had been, and so I couldn't feel it at all. When she moved from a numb area to an area that had feeling, it was an odd

transition that had occurred in my nerves, like a gasping for breath. I tried to explain to her where those ghostly zones were, where the skin was dead, and unable to feel, but either I wasn't explaining properly or she just didn't understand, because she failed to warn me when she moved from the edges of a ghost zone into the area of real flesh, like I asked her to. "You're right, of course you're right," I said. It was like a gasp for breath when I felt the needle again after a half hour or so of pain-free procedure. "I will love my new back, you're right. I get it now. It's symbolic." So I said to her because I was trying to convince myself that I wanted this thing. That my back, like a condo, was in need of renovation. That all we needed to do was slap on some paint and move the furniture around and it will be like none of this ever happened.

"We've been out here for days and she hasn't told us anything," the demon goddess said to the coyote as they crouched in the desert sand and drank water, precious water, from flasks that glistened in the sun.

"All in her own good time," said coyote, "but, surely there's a way to speed this up." The demon goddess dropped her hand to her pocket, that slit on the side of her hip that allowed her delicate hand to move between layers of silk, purple silk, a pocket undecipherable. The woman was full of secret skins. "I have it," she said. She laughed and when she did she threw her head back in the carefree manner of a young girl, and the points of her canines shined like poison arrows aiming for my heart. For sure, in the magic delusion of those desert nights I had had visions of the snake goddess, that beautiful demon goddess – more beautiful than Ekaterina – climb up my pole and bury her teeth in my chest, ripping my flesh out with pointed teeth that flashed, eyes that flashed too, in the light of the desert moon. And we wailed together. I wailed from pain

and wailed from pleasure, because in the soft tissue and flesh of my heart, she had found the sacred pomegranate that she had been searching for and devouring her whole life – a life which stretched back eons, a life which was so much a part of the earth she was formed from a single grain of sand, like in the Bible – on Sundays she used to pay homage to a Jewish carpenter, but that was before she became (her words) bigger than him.

And as she told me about her curious evolution from mote of dust, grain of sand to demon snake goddess of my worst nightmares, I imagined her bigger than him. A demon goddess that squatted at the edge of the horizon, a mountain of a woman, she blends into the desert landscape, but at the same time, she stands out, her gold brocade, her jet black hair and teased eyebrows, the stubborn rakes of her eyelashes. The people here won't accept you as their own, I hear myself say from far away in a voice of authority and knowledge.

“Just you watch, angel. You may have fallen, but I am on my way to the top.”

I remembered now, a flash of a memory. That was the line she fed me before she herself did fall, or, jump, from the heights of her own self-made mountain, before she began to wriggle on the ground and drink her water through forked tongue. Another memory:

I am still standing in a white gown, like a tunica, and there are downy white wings on my back. It is a gala, a cocktail party, and we are all beautiful and someone is playing the piano from the corner of the room. It is ocean front property and the tide has receded, gone out with the sunset and the calls of the gulls. We stand on a marble-tiled floor, underneath a crystal chandelier. The walls are windows that open up on the sea on three

sides of us. The demon goddess is there and she wears a green mermaid dress and slinks over to me, a cocktail glass cradled in my fingers.

“We are through the worst of it,” I say, as I sip my pomegranate martini and gaze out on the calm of the ocean. The fallen ones are all there, and their eyes have only begun to fade. It was the days of glory after the fall and we gathered there to discuss demonology, theology, the consequences (moral, some of them, most of them actual) of our decisions and loyalties.

“That’s easy for you to say,” the demon goddess Mala said. “You’re out of the woods. You have your pretty wings and now all you have to do is sit on the fence while the rest of us fight the battle for good or evil.”

The interesting part of it was that we didn’t really choose our sides, not really. We were conscripted into the armies of black and white and we were fed from encyclopedias of the faithful and not shown how to reason or think. The platitudes that washed by us on the river were not enough to sway us from the hungry pleas of our god, and so we followed him, thinking ourselves to be made in his image. I myself thought the dark one had beautiful wings but was flightless.

She was right. I had little to do in those days but sit back and watch, assess the battle and draw my loyalties towards the camp with the best advantage. Those were carefree days, fishing with Hades and Adonis on the Paskoon bay, one day I caught a swordfish who pleaded me not to kill him, but I took the hook from his mouth and we gutted him anyway. The days of sea salt spray and picnic lunches on the boat, olives and cheese, and flower barrettes in my hair.

I think that must be why Mala hates me so pointedly, I thought, as she advanced on me in the desert half-light.

“You remember me from ages ago,” I said silently. And for her sake I said a soft prayer and lifted it up to the heavens, that is if God was still collecting the wayward prayers of a fallen angel such as me.

“Don’t talk to me,” Mala barked, as she brought her hand out of her pocket. It was the picture of my sister again. Mala had hooked me up to the story extractor again. My crude tracheotomy wound was still raw, and when she jabbed the tube into my trachea she did not take care not to injure me, and I grunted as if I had been punched in the throat – for that’s what it felt like. The tube, like a stem piece, was made of blown glass. It was crafted like a marijuana pipe, with vivid colors that swirled and changed color. The stem piece was attached to a hose, like a hookah, which only made me think of Mala as a giant caterpillar puffing on the other end of it. The hose was orange and yellow and was meant to look like sunshine. The hose was connected to an aperture in a large glass contraption that sat squatly in front of me 24/7, to remind me of my duty, I guess. It was a coughing, spitting thing with many chambers that recycled the input around like a cow’s stomach. I had traced the counters and chambers and pipes hundreds of times in my boredom and pain while I hung there from that pole. The story – as it were – was to come out of my throat, through the stem piece, the hose, and then enter into the first chamber as one large red puff of smoke, an enchanting scarlet red, which was then pulled by gravity into the second chamber which turned the smoke blue. Another chamber - this one in reverse - and the smoke turned green and the puff of cloud shrank. After the smoke turned gold, it entered the final chamber where it was under

compression and the machine would start to hiss and spit and growl. The machine was squeezed out the story, flattened it. Mala hadn't let me know how the machine worked, and so I could only guess at this point that the machine transformed the story that was in my heart into gold bars – the same miniature doubloons that mala had shaken in my face that morning – but they were not ordinary; with those gold bars, Mala was going to buy her way into heaven.

“Oy, angel,” she said. She put her fingers between her lips and let out a whistle, which was unnecessary because I was right here, where else would I be, on this pole and I was looking right at her. “Look at this picture and spew me up a story.”

So far the torture had not really affected me. I was able to bear it by distracting myself with the story machine, Mala's eyelashes, the desert sky (sometimes, though sometimes, most days it was as flat as a dinner table and as blue as a baby blanket with no variation or blemishes), and I was able to travel, leave my body with something like startling accuracy. On these trips I would hover and watch, sometimes, but other times I would travel through time. I often went to Hawaii, that liquid blue dream that had sustained me those years in my uncle's trailer, a few times I visited Ekaterina, who cried at her bedside table, because she as of yet hadn't found me. I later learned that was a false reality, as Ekaterina was involved in my torture, or maybe that was a point in her life when she still had a conscience and regretted what she was doing to me.

“There's a story inside her,” Ekaterina told the crime lord as she sipped from her small coke. “It's worth money, big money, if you know how to extract it.” That I couldn't believe my beautiful Ekaterina would turn on me was a fault in my own character. While I had always remained cautious, skeptical, distrustful even, of people,

and had done my best all through my life to establish distance between me and others – that same distance that I would later lament to Ekaterina and she would complain to me, standing on the other side of a crevasse as wide as the grand canyon and throwing out her arms to me: “But I can’t reach you when you are so far away.” She meant emotionally. But as I hung there on that pole, my mind filling up with magic delusions and scattered dreams, I thought of Ekaterina throwing her arms out to me now, only she was emblazoned on the crisp blue desert sky. “But I can’t reach you from here.” Never before had I thought of the distance between us as actual, as well as symbolic, and my chewed up heart ached for her, but of course, that was before I found out about her betrayal of me.

And Mala shook that black and white photograph in front of my face. I fought the story, when I felt it come on it was like the ague of a fever, like entering into a full-body sickness that comes with terror because you know something horrible is about to happen to you. And it always was. It was the same sickness that came on me when Ekaterina and I were biking, the same sickness that always came on me late at night, between the hours of 2 and 4 am, when I couldn’t sleep. And the heavy feeling would come, and my body would flush, my nerves all awake like an egg cracked over my head, those trails of albumen working their way down, slimy, clean and impure. And the stomach wrenching nausea, and the feeling, nay the knowledge, that you are going to die. Hot death stands there in the open door and hands you a checklist and says he’ll be back when you’ve done all these things. You’ve done half of them but somehow you don’t believe him that he’s going to wait for you that long. You detected a sneer and an ironic tone when he spoke and you know your days are numbered and you’ve nowhere to go. You crawl up

into the fetal position while your body wails out in pain and the demons, always demons, circle around you and poke you with their fire sticks and sing perverted playground songs to you while you try very hard to fall asleep.

All you want is redemption. All you want is to find your way to heaven. Isn't that all Mala wants? I looked up then, noticed I had slipped out of consciousness, because she had hooked up an electric shock to my left breast and had just removed it and my flesh made that singing, hissing sound and the smell of it was strong. Always losing consciousness. A day didn't go by when I wasn't in and out, in and out. The places I would travel, the wide landscapes of dreamtime and pain. Sometimes when my eyes were closed, I traveled to the light-filled places beyond pain. Sometimes, though, I traveled to the underground rooms of the darkest heart. I want it to stop, I said, but I didn't hear myself say it. That's all I've ever wanted, was for it to stop. But, the only problem is, I never could figure out how to get it to stop, and the people who were doing it probably were never going to stop anyway.

When the story comes out of me, it is as if a long shore fisherman has buried a barbed hook in my abdomen and yanks on it with all his sinewy might. Like when you descend in an elevator and for a second your stomach falls out. But I didn't yelp in pain. Not now. I stored up my outbursts—outbursts were what Mala called them—for when I absolutely positively could not bear it, the yowling cry escaped me involuntarily. Being a creature of control, I was often able to manipulate my pain response, prevent myself from screaming, yelling and this was preferable to me because I had been trying to prove a point up there on that pole. Perhaps the same point that young warriors tried to prove when they were pierced through their shoulders and hung up on the pole to face this, the

greatest test of their young lives. “Will he cry out? How long can he hang there? How strong of a man is he?” And Mala, of course, had referenced the young warriors, made me feel bad—or tried to—saying, “And these Indians they chose to hang there. No one forced them. They wanted to prove to their tribe that they were men.” It was true. The initiation rites were brutal and required young boys to suffer unspeakable acts of violence all in the name of honor.

“I am embodiment of snake,” she said to me one time when she sipped a lemon drop martini in the shade of her silk parasol lounging on a chaise lounge of burnished gold and purple cushions. “Before too long, my people will cover the earth and we will rule the world.”

But I no longer listened to her. The sickness had come upon me and the story machine was jabbed straight through to my windpipe and I was in the awkward position of gagging and purging all in the same moment, a muddled tangle of needs that pulled me in different directions. I felt like a scarecrow on that pole, the eastern and western winds tugging on the ropes that tied my hands off at the ends. My smile of caricature rotten teeth, vacant expression, hayseed dangling from my mouth. I play the fool. We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men. Surely my Ekaterina will come for me.

It was in that black and white photograph of my sister posing as a different self, a more serious self, the self who maybe wouldn't have tried to kill herself like our mother who had gone down in a puff of blue smoke. Poof. And she was gone. It was in that photograph that I fell into a meditative state that was one of the responses to pain. Mala had told me about it, how the monks would self-flagellate in their stone chambers, use heavy whips that ripped their flesh and made them cry out for their Lord, they did that,

she said, to achieve a kind of spiritual immediacy, a need, a direct link to God through the overwhelming lust for homeostasis. The way Mala spoke of humans, we, they, were liquids in lab beakers spilling and adding to our materials in the most haphazard way. Over time, I came to a vision within the heart of that meditative state, a sensation that was like standing underneath a canopy of willow trees, those that let their arms hang down to the ground like attentive mothers that might scoop me up and comfort me. The sun broke over the horizon, another sunset in the sky scape of my mind, and I saw my sister grab the hand of the black-haired boy who had stolen my heart. Kale. And the date and the time crystallized, almost as if they were written over the scene: May 1985.

Chapter Five

My cousins J.J. and Kevin were fishing from morning until night that summer, starting on foot at the path by the old railroad bed that divets off to the side at the shallow part of the Catheart where the old men and alcoholics threw their bottles in just to watch them float under the bridge towards the dam, and walking and fishing all the way along the river until the stars stretched across the sky and the pink dusk fell, stars sparkling out of it, just a few at first, like magic erupting from fairy dust, and then the chorus of crickets, they'd finish their six-packs and made their way, staggeringly, back towards the lot – Hells, we called it for “Hell’s Bells,” what Uncle Ray had said so many times it had become an inside joke and attached itself to the place like toilet paper on the shoe. Flies to flypaper. Ray was in jail again, this time for a drunk driving arrest, and Junior was still in jail. Rhonda spent her days watching soaps with her feet up on a puke green ottoman and scratching off lottery tickets that she had bought with back child support from her first husband. One time she won \$1,000. Another time she stormed in the trailer with a ticket whooping and smacking her gums, saying, “\$5,000 clams.” And she linked arms with Leroy and danced around the room. Now that I think back on the memory, I can’t imagine Rhonda dancing, but I know they danced because Rhonda stepped on Leroy’s foot and then clobbered him over the head with her purse when he complained. Leroy in those summer months was working at the Harvey’s in Whiting and during the afternoons he stood leaning under the hood of his ’68 Corvelle and mopping sweat off his forehead with a cotton towel. D was hanging off her boyfriend, Kale, and working at Frank Hathaway’s farm on the other side of town. She worked at Mary’s too, as a waitress, but she mostly served ice cream in the summer. I had ridden my bike over

there several times that summer and saw her scooping vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and rocky road onto cones and then pushing back her hair from her face when she went to ring the customer up. When I showed up there and other people were around – which was most of the time – she pretended not to know me, asked me what flavor, how many scoops, did I want a waffle or a regular cone. That will be 75 cents please. But one rare day, turning to dusk, probably one of those dusks where Kevin and J.J. and sometimes J.J.'s friend Billy would be fishing along the Catheart with their beers and cigarettes and wild dreams. They wouldn't let me tag along. It seemed that summer I faced more rejection from my new family – and on the cusp of my mother's suicide too, that was hard – than I had been used to previously. And in those awkward, shameful, and sometimes terrifying days and nights of the summer of 1985, when I was discovering things about myself that I wasn't ready to know, I was going through it alone. Though one rare night at dusk, when I pedaled up to Mary's and threw my kickstand and walked up to the counter, my \$75 counted and ready, realizing that I was the only one in the parking lot, and my sister alone at the counter tallying totals and wiping up spills and counting boxes of ice cream cones, when I felt the distance between me and my sister shrink, felt that maybe she would reach out for me, like in the night when I had been afraid when Junior had been taken away for the first time and thought he would be shot by the Jay-ul, the monster who had bars for teeth and surrounded my step-father like a wall, he was forced to live in its belly and could only receive letters, phone calls and visits during specified and limited times because the Jay-ul was very jealous and wanted my step-father all to himself. That I thought of the Jay-ul as a monster was perhaps indicative of my age, perhaps my need to demonize things, to anthropomorphize objects

and make inanimate and soulless the people and creatures, as a way of distancing myself from reality, one psychotherapist said. Nonetheless, the night he was taken away we saw the blue lights flash for a second – they woke D up, she said – the officer, a rookie, had flipped the wrong switch when he tried to turn off the interior light he had on when he was filling out his police report. He started the paperwork while he was sitting in his squad car before he arrested Junior, and stood with smug satisfaction in the entryway when he read him his rights. Of course, all I could think was that this man, this weird creature with his brass and metal and black was an extension of the monster Jay-ul that, like an octopus, the monster had long tentacles, arms, that could reach in different directions and perform different functions, and one of those functions happened to be entering our house in the middle of the night, scaring the hell out of us, and arresting my step-father.

It was my first encounter with the monster's apprentice Po-Po, which was what I had heard Rhonda refer to this particular type of man. D had never experienced such a meeting either, though she had been there with me when Rhonda had identified his type as Po-Po when we had been at the Monkstown Diner, the one that used to be a Laundromat and had a juke box that played only oldies and a disco ball they lowered on special occasions and dance night. The po-po had been dancing with the woman I recognized that worked at the grocery store and always handed me a sticker on my way out. He brushed her cheek with his cheek and I remember that being my first memory of intimate touch between a man and a woman.

Anyway, that night was the first time that my sister recognized me as her sister and she gave me a soft smile and didn't pretend that we weren't related. She spoke in a

low tone, the kind she reserved for her friends and Kale and the other boys she was trying to impress – she did that back then, but she wouldn't be doing it for long, the days soon coming when her heart would harden and her thirst and hunger for something outside of herself – something she could devour like an antidote that would take her away from there, those days were soon coming.

And as I faded back to consciousness, the sky swelling up, the clouds like breasts swollen with milk, and aching to let go, it was then that the image of the deer was superimposed over my sister's face. "Where did you get that photo?" I asked her again, noticing I had asked her the question before I had even realized the trick of light, that Mala had been holding the photo of my sister with those eyes that were beginning to madden, and then switched quickly to the photograph of the deer – who had taken it? hung up in the barn that October, the skinning knife tossed casually on the dirt floor underneath the carcass of the beast that soughed open like a wound but would never be sutured back together again. Best to forget, forget the wound was there, forget that they made me shoot it – no, I had a choice in the matter, the therapists, Dr. Phil, they all said I had a choice and that hiding in victimhood was only a way to deny responsibility for my own past. "You're damn right," I responded on air while sitting in an uncomfortable set couch, to the titter and guffaws of laughter from the crowd. "Who would take responsibility for that mess." More laughter. Look at me, hamming it up. But the truth of the matter was, I hadn't been forced to kill the deer. I hadn't been forced to gut it and skin it in the cold of the barn when the wind howled at 25mph outside and my lips quivered in the cold. My toes were numb through my thin cotton socks and I cursed myself for not having pulled on my wool pair, the pair Mrs. Newhouse had knitted for me

two Christmases ago, but then, I thought, it was an acceptable penance, more than fair, in fact I deserved more punishment, for the life I stole. And now, hanging on that pole looking through sun-spotty eyes from photograph of my sister to photograph of the deer I had shot, my weary mind could not tell them apart. They both figured there, splayed apart, deconstructed, by my own hand. And it was likely they both were dead. The deer definitely was dead. In fact, its flesh had been consumed by the family shortly after I finished skinning it. And I had given the bones to the dogs after I had hacked them up into smaller sections like Uncle Ray showed me. And when I threw a chunk of femur to the dogs from the back deck of Marie's trailer, I remarked at their savagery and I knew I was no different than them.

The scene that spread across the screen of my mind, however, was much earlier than that, concerned the previous winter, soon after my mother had died. The Huffs and the Chases had loaded up the cars and truck and headed to Roebuck Lake, which was forty minutes north of Monkstown but felt like a different country – a landscape of tall pines and thick evergreen borders, those pines that look like cupped hands, shrugged shoulders as they meet the sky. The lake was a tidy semicircle of frozen water. People had already driven their vehicles out there and set up ice shacks. There was a hockey game staged in the lower left corner by the outhouses on the shore, and Leroy followed Rhonda's Plymouth down the rutted road and right onto the ice. I was bundled up. They had seen to it that I had the necessary equipment and provisions. While the family was poor, they always seemed to have the stock for hunting and fishing expeditions, dirt bike racing, snowmobiling, four-wheeling, though those vehicles were always broken and parked in the front yard of Ray and Rhonda's trailer, tools spread out like rays of the sun

around them, and Ray or J.J. or Leroy coming and going shaking their head, arguing, smoking and drinking over the machine, lamenting its condition, making half-informed guesses about when “she could ride again.”

D and I were in the backseat of Leroy’s Datsun, the Corvelle was just a project he worked on. He’d bought it for 50 bucks from a guy who worked with Ray at Henry’s garage and I had never seen it run in the whole two years it had been parked in the field to the right of the old barn that loomed up behind Leroy’s trailer, three-stories high, embedded into the hill that sloped and skirted down around it. “I don’t know why you insist on singing,” D said to me when I had let out a few lines from Prince, one of the few times in my pre-teen years when I used my voice – otherwise acting like a mime, one of those crying mimes, but of course they have to mime that they are crying, balling up their fists and mock rubbing their eyes, pancake makeup on their face and exaggerated facial expressions drawn in charcoal, lines around their mouth and eyes, and of course their sorrow is very funny. I felt like that then as D jabbed me in the ribs with her bony elbow and told me she hated the way I smelled but I think she just meant to say that she hated me, but she wanted to save that one up for later, which she did, and she brought it out when I was holed up in that ice shack and the sun bled across the iced-over sky. “Bring me a beer,” Leroy directed, as we set up our supplies and rods and reels that morning in the chill of February winter. Why Leroy wanted a cold beer that was swimming in a styrofoam cooler of ice cubes when his lips were trembling and his teeth were clacking from the cold, I don’t know, but he did, and he was waiting with his hand outstretched as if I were the trusted servant of his house, and so I fished around in the geometric cubes of liquid and brought out a Shipyard, a micro beer that Carson Butler had bought him for no

special reason. We all knew, though, that they were Leroy's beers and that no one else was to drink them. When I delivered beer, I was told repeatedly, by him, but then I was told other things by family members, who were trying to snake the expensive beer away from Leroy so they could pour it down their own throats, not to give it to anyone but him. "And for God's sake, don't drink it yourself." He said. I pulled the Shipyard out of the cold Styrofoam chest and handed it to Leroy at the same time I pulled a bottle opener out of my jacket pocket. I had learned quickly in that family that to survive – only just barely – one had to make themselves useful, well, only if you weren't one of the favorites or the already accepted, and it didn't seem fair. "I don't want that," he chuckled, but with the air of meanness, that threat that with Leroy was always lurking beneath the surface. Rhonda had once told me that Leroy had wanted, when he was a teenager, to enter the army. As I heard that tone escape his lips once more, I reflected that he would have found much to test him in the army and it would have been a key place to cultivate the meanness and turn it towards a focused goal. But unfortunately, Leroy wasn't in the army and his meanness sprayed all over the place, unchecked, and I was the one that was usually caught in the line of fire, riddled with bullet holes and wondering just how did I wind up in a place like this. He twisted the top off with his gloved hand and turned away from me, as they all did. My pre-teen experience consisted of being turned away from by family who were – according to my mother's will – supposed to provide for me.

Well, provide they did. At least, they provided for the basic necessities, food, shelter – most of the time, though that ice-fishing expedition, my last, and an isolated incident in summer of '85 when I was locked out of the trailers and forced to sleep on the grass underneath the sheltering oak – I had shelter except for those times. Clothes were a

different story. Since I didn't have a job, I couldn't buy my own clothes as D did. They had convinced me that no one would hire me. "You get a job? You're too slow."

"Just because your mother was rich you think you have an automatic in, just show your face and they'll start forking over the dough? Leave it to Liz's child to think like that."

My face had reddened because I hadn't thought like that. I was a hard worker. True, I was slower than D, who moved in flashes, bursts, like a honeybee or a doe, but I made up for it in dedicated effort. While D got the job done quickly, she spent at least half the time not working. She seemed to think that as long as she was fast, it didn't matter how many breaks she took, or how long she spent away from the project, and for the most part that was true. While I wasn't fast, I did stay until the job was done and I was meticulous, almost obsessive at times, because I wanted the job done right and I was going to stay there until I did get it right. This was hardly noticed by the family, and it wasn't fair because I was called slow-poke and lazy-ass and snappy, due to Rhonda's persistent comment "Let's make it snappy," after which she would laugh.

Then, in that ice shack, in the light of a battery-operated lantern that Leroy had propped up on a crude bench on the west side of the shack, Leroy chucked his empty beer bottle at me – he had chugged it down in a few gulps, belched and threw the bottle in a downward arc, the bottle hitting the pine-board floor in front of my feet and shattering, little jagged pieces flying up and crystallizing the air like rain.

"The fuck was that?" Rhonda said, in her characteristic manner of starting in the middle of sentences, even exclamations made in the heat of the moment, or, in situations like these, where she was also walking into a room – or in this case an ice shack – in the

middle of the action and needing to gather what was being done before she blamed someone for it and smacked them up side the head. Though, to her credit, sometimes she didn't bother determining fault, she just walked over to the nearest person and whacked them, but sometimes she just swore at them. In this case her eyes lighted on me and I saw her then as a predatory bird, a swollen buzzard that had lighted upon the struggling of a small mouse and its murderous eyes sharpened, as if focusing on the crosshairs on a rifle sight, and the true gruesome nature of her persona was revealed. "Can't you do anything right?" she asked. It was a question she was always asking me. Rhetorical, of course. It was clear she didn't want an answer, but I was always tempted to give one. Not even out of being a smart-ass, but for the simple sake of crossing my t's and dotting my i's. Someone has asked me a question, I should answer it. Set the record straight. I cowered in the corner of the ice shack, grateful for my layers of clothing—the Huffs and Chases didn't provide me with clothes as of yet, though, at that point, I had only been with them a few months, my mom having died in December, so close to Christmas it was painful—but the clothes I had worn ice fishing were warm and thick. And that's important only because of what happened later.

We spent most of the day huddled around the hole in the shack, though they sent me to the car on several occasions to collect provisions that they had left behind either purposely or accidentally depending on the item. I had brought a pair of snowshoes that I snagged from a hook on the barn wall and was glad I had bothered to strap them to my feet because it had started to snow while I was inside and the ice was getting slippery and my feet would have sank if not for the snowshoes. I ran into another family—this one

looked to be enjoying each other's company. They asked me inside for hot chocolate. "How do you make it in here?" I had asked shuffling in my snowshoes.

"Propane stove." The man drew my attention to a little burner that had a pot of water on it. It reminded me of the dollhouse I had had at the farmhouse when mom had been alive, because it looked to be in miniature in proportion to the big man and his wife and son. Everything they had brought with them was in miniature: their serving utensils, their plates, mugs, cups. They pushed a mug of cocoa towards me over the butcher block cart that the husband cooked over while he cast hopeful glances at the fishing line that was propped up by way of a hook that kept it upright. I wasn't used to making eye contact or speaking to people. Even with my mother I hadn't gotten that kind of social education because—for most of my life—she was an embittered recluse and she kept to her own company.

"Thank you." I took the warm beverage and smiled, or tried, at the man who had offered it to me. The wife, I assumed she was the wife, wore a red down jacket and black ski pants - the kind that had a stirrup at the feet—I say that because she had taken one boot off and I could see the black elastic band that rounded around her white socked foot. She had fat cheeks and blonde hair and it almost looked like she wore lipstick because her lips were so unmistakably crimson, though it could have been because of the cold. She was rubbing that foot, and had unhooked the stirrup already from around the sole of her foot.

"It's not getting better," she said to her husband, a tall man who wore a UMaine Black Bears jacket and handed a mug of hot chocolate to a ten-year-or-so-old boy who stood in camouflaged ski pants and wore a ski mask that hid his face.

“Have you tried walking on it again?” He asked.

“No, it hurts too much. I think I’ll just massage it and see if it feels better.”

“Here.” He dragged the Styrofoam cooler over to his wife and opened the lid, stowing it on the other side of the shack. He lifted her foot up over the lip of the cooler and plunged it into the ice.

“Yow,” she said, taking that sharp intake of breath where you hear the person hissing inward through their teeth.

“That’s cold.” She smiled at me. “Don’t worry dear, it’s--”

“Marsha,” he said as he sat down on a wooden stool beside her. “I wish you’d let me take you to the doctor.”

“No no no,” she said, her hands a flurry of protests. “It’s your birthday. We’re going to sit right here and fish. We’re going to sit right here, drink beer, fish, and goddamn it, celebrate your birthday and have a fucking good time.” The woman looked at me then and chuckled, bringing a hand to her mouth, embarrassed. “It must be the pain, my tongue got away from me.” She held out her arms. “I’m sorry dear.” The woman stretched out her arms to me, smiled, apologized to me for having possibly offended me. I wanted to stay with her forever. I edged closer to her, feeling like a kicked dog who had just met a human who appears loving, trustworthy. And then I did an unexpected thing. I kneeled down, my knees padded by my snowsuit but smudged by the ground nonetheless, and took her foot out of the cooler and rubbed it, the way I used to rub my mother’s feet when she had taken the couch and gotten into a mood that she had trouble getting out of. The woman shrank back, in instinct, but then she chuckled nervously and smiled at me again. She had big teeth and when she smiled, you saw too

much gum, but she was beautiful, in her way, and I wanted her to feel better because for some reason, it would make me feel better about my lot in life.

“I appreciate it, dear, but you don’t have to touch my smelly feet.”

“God, Marcia, your feet aren’t smelly, will you give it a rest. You’re so down about yourself. I bet you can’t say one nice thing about yourself this entire trip.”

Marcia’s eyes widened when he spoke and she smiled again, this time falsely, and it made me wince, and I took my hands away from her foot which was swollen.

“I have to get back to my shack,” I said, sipping some more of the cocoa, in a rush, before setting it down on the butcher block and attempting to make my exit.

“Oh, honey, you can just take that mug right with you. Finish on your own time. We have plenty for now, and you can always bring it back.” She smiled because her husband had taken his seat at her feet and had picked up her swollen foot and begun caressing it with his thumbs and forefingers. When he did it though, she winced. I had done it carefully, and suddenly I felt possessive of her, but I didn’t know why, I suddenly wanted to throw my hot cocoa in the husband’s face, push him out of the way and sit at her feet, basking in the glory and radiance of her smiles. But I didn’t. I backed out of their shack – which was a hundred times nicer than ours – saying my thank you’s and I hope you get better’s and hope to see you again soon’s, and I’ll bring this mug back, don’t you worry, don’t you worry about me.

It wasn’t until I had retrieved the item from the car that I realized I had been gone for some time, it was when I noticed that the sun had climbed higher in the sky, and was now peering over the gentle purple mountains, casting a mucousy yellow-orange light across the sky. I hustled back to the shack to find Leroy and Rhonda gaping at me from

their lawn chairs that they had pointed towards the hole, which they were watching like a television set. “Out running around, were ya?” Rhonda said as she belched and took another swig of Milwaukee’s Best. “Screwing around.” She fumbled in her coat pocket for something, and pulled out a pack of Virginia Slims and asked Leroy for a lighter. “Never mind that we had to make do without the socket wrench and put off the project, sitting here with our thumbs up our asses while you go out and write poetry about the sky.”

When Leroy laughed, it was contagious. Rhonda began chortling, and then broke into a full laugh. I heard Ray stomping towards the door and when he heard everyone laughing, he began to laugh. It reminded me of the time when we were all standing in Marie’s kitchen and Leroy walked in to tell them that the cops had found Otis passed out behind Ricky’s with no pants on. It had been a tense moment. We had just been discussing my mother. She was still alive then and she had been going downhill. Rhonda suggested that we leave her to her own devices. “She’s a rich woman,” she said. “She can afford a shrink, a doctor, she can pay people to take care of her.”

Leroy pulled on a joint and expanded his cheeks with his mouth closed the way he would do, like a pufferfish, and would make that plipping sound and expand his cheeks, puff his cheeks a few times, like a pufferfish that hasn’t quite decided yet if he wants to be big or small.

“I’m not lifting a finger for that woman,” Rhonda said as she lifted the ham of her leg onto the puke green ottoman and sighed. Her feet were swelling again and she had already started barking orders at Ray and J.J., and me, and, as a result, I had tried to find ways to get out of her trailer – after school activities, taking too long to walk home from

school, things like that, not so much because I didn't want to do the work, which was disgusting, some of it, but mostly because she hit you when you would do things for her. Not so much because she was angry at you in particular, it was just the way she interacted with the world. It was almost like a knee-jerk reflex, and many times I wondered how she had made do as a nurse's assistant, working in the nursing homes, those poor fragile people at the mercy of big Rhonda with her meaty hands.

Kevin chimed in, "She can pay someone to wipe her ass." That was when Leroy walked in and said, "Po-po found Otis behind Ricky's, passed out, with no pants." That was when the laughter contagion began. Unfortunately, none of us were immune. It began as a ripple of laughter from Rhonda, then when seconds passed, her slight chortle became a full-fledged guffaw and she began to choke as tears streamed down her face. Marie, who had been standing by the stove heating up a can of Chef Boyardee for little Jim and Anson, threw back her head and cackled. I didn't know what a banshee looked like, but I had heard of them. And as I myself laughed, I watched Marie's movements and I made a mental note to look up "Banshee" in the school encyclopedia, and hope for a picture, and compare it to the image of Marie at the stove, throwing her head back, the points of her canines showing. I say banshee and not hyena because when Marie laughed, it was more of a long, low wail. It began with a soft note: an "Ahh" that erupted from somewhere deep in her belly. And then the note grew in resonance and volume, and added to it was a gravelly dirt sound that was probably due to Marie's decades of cigarette smoking, and the sound would gradually rise in volume and pitch, climbing higher until it was a piercing shriek. A hoop. A plea. It always made head turns when we were in public. One man had even asked her at the town fair when we stood in the

hot dog line and she began laughing at a dirty joke that Otis had told her, his voice lowered and his hand at the toothpick in his teeth: “Gosh, woman, where’d you learn to laugh like that?” And when we were in the pony pull ring, it spooked the horses so much that Otis clamped his hand over Marie’s mouth, and for some reason, that shut her up and they dissolved into wet, groping kisses.

The laughter in the ice shack was like that. Contagious. And when Marie entered to see what all the fuss was about, she just looked at Rhonda shaking and rocking, tears streaming down her pink, swollen face, and she burst out in her signature wail. In the meantime, I had looked in the encyclopedia under banshee, but there had not been a photograph and it told me a banshee was a female Irish death spirit who wailed right before someone was about to die.

After the dust settled, Marie said, “God, that was good,” referring to the joke or the laughter or both. She had that glassed-over, high look and she probably was stoned, as she always seemed to be in those days. “What are we laughing about?”

“Kid gave me a bottle opener,” Leroy said, and when he said it, his face fell, as if he all of a sudden realized there was nothing innately funny about this action.

“Well, that’s not funny.” Marie turned from Leroy to me, her face scrunched up and sucking her teeth as if she had found something disgusting in her mouth and wanted to remove it with the help of her tongue and some between-the-teeth-determination. And she looked at me as if the lack of a punch line was my fault. But then her face softened. “She’s not so bad. I don’t know why you all are so hard on her.” She said one time when I was within earshot. It was back when I had been assisting Ray in fixing the snowmobile. He had it turned upside down, resting in the snow on its handle bars. I

brought him tools that he'd asked me. I had become quite good at identifying any type of tool. I had borrowed a book on mechanics from the library and I had even sneaked Ray's toolbox away from the field and into my bedroom where I drew a diagram, an exact replica of the toolbox, including the placement of the tools, and I drew the tools too, and then I painstakingly looked up each and every tool and labeled my diagram and studied it in the blocks of time I had set aside for myself to do my homework every day. Except for one tool. There was one tool that was shaped like a wrench but it wasn't a wrench, and it had a lever on it that was meant to fit over something, but I didn't know what it did fit over and I didn't know what the tool did. I scoured the book on mechanics for a picture of it, and even looked in the index to see if I recognized a name of something that Ray might have hollered out to me at one point. But I couldn't find it. I even went back to the library and took out a second book on car repair, but I still couldn't find the tool. Eventually, one winter morning while he tinkered with the engine of a snowmobile, I held up the tool between my gloved fingers and asked him, "What is this?"

When he looked at me, it was as if he had just heard his dog Royboy stand up and speak – it was a look of shock – almost as if he had forgotten that I had been standing there, but I think it was more like he had forgotten that I had words in me, that I could talk. Then his usual hardness came over him and he looked out through slitting eyes. "Not so smart now, huh?"

He told me what the tool was and what it did, but he did so with a sense of satisfaction that made my ears burn and made me fume in an embarrassed anger. Later, much later, I would look up on the internet (we didn't have the internet back in those days) the name of the tool and see hundreds of images of it. It turned out it was an

antique model of a popular tool that had been in the book. And I felt stupid at my oversight. But I had had to look it up since the misidentification of the tool had been such a blow to my self-esteem.

It was at the same time, while Ray was looking at me with smug satisfaction and I stood there with my ears burning and my face turning red from the embarrassment of the situation that I had tried to be prepared for, that was when I heard Marie and Rhonda talking through the open trailer window. The trailer window was open to vent the kerosene heater, which threw off fumes so strong sometimes they made me dizzy, but it was good heat in the winter when the trailers got so cold that sometimes we had to wear our hat and mittens to bed. That was when I caught a scrap of their conversation and heard Marie say, "I don't know why you're all so hard on her. I think--" and then the conversation was muffled by Ray talking to me: "You listenin'?" He huffed. "I asked you to hand me the Philips head."

When I heard her say, offhand, "I don't know." It sounded as if Marie had been trying to defend me. I had always felt safest around her, but it was a strange thing to feel safe around Marie. It wasn't really safety, because she could haul off and hit you at any time, but it's hard to explain, it's like you knew it was just the way she flailed and convulsed her emotions bodily, like shaking out a rug. While with Rhonda, you knew she was just mean down to the core and she was lashing out because of a deep-seated hatred, a desire to annihilate, to destroy everything in her path, like an enemy submarine given orders to sweep the ocean in a fifty mile radius and detonate everything that doesn't look friendly. To Rhonda nothing looked friendly. The world was a hostile place, and there were enemies everywhere. She fought with her husband, her sister, her

brother, her niece, her son, she fought with her hairdresser, her waitress, her sales clerks, the representatives at the DMV. Much later, I wondered if Rhonda had had a very violent past. If something had happened to her. Because everything that happened, she responded with violence. Everything that happened, she put up a fight and she was on the defensive and she had already executed the first strike.

Whereas Marie was more like a wild stallion that bucked and kicked and romped, you knew it wasn't his fault, you knew that it was just in his nature to be mean, or to be aggressive, or simply to move his massive body in a way that was threatening, or dangerous. That was like Marie, as if she were shaking out her emotions, rattling them from her sleeves and just plainly affecting in the way that she knew how, which was with gyrations and sudden movements. When I say I felt safe with Marie, I guess that goes to show how deep-set the abuse really was when I moved in with my sister's family. Because I didn't mind it when Marie hit me because I knew she didn't really mean to. Marie was on my side. She brought me food, sometimes clothes, and placed her fingers over her lips and gave me a cockeyed smile as she stalked away, her legs never meeting one another when she walked, her legs spread in a position of riding a horse, as if when she were a child, they had strapped her on a saddle and forced her to sit like that until her legs just naturally gave up and accepted their new position. I read that some Native American tribes would strap babies to boards in order to straighten their backs, or place ones on their heads to make them pointy. And of course, there was the Chinese who forced little girl's feet into too-small shoes until they bled and blistered and finally gave up, like Marie's legs, and conformed to the master plan which always had something to do with beauty.

But Marie's legs weren't beautiful. She walked like a cowboy, and since she was otherwise not very attractive, she gave the impression of a gritty woman who was cheap but not very good, an easy ride, but not a pleasant one, I heard a neighbor's husband say one time when I was at the grocery store with her and she had turned back to collect a forgotten item. I was glad for her sake that she hadn't heard him, because, even though I didn't understand the comment the man had made, I knew that it would puncture Marie's shield and give her a heart wound that she would cover up with masculine bravado, indifference, and marijuana until everyone, including her, had forgotten about it and it simply became another one of those hurts that created scar tissue on her heart and caused her not to love again. I remember her saying that to me one time long after she divorced Otis – who still remained tethered to her like a dog – and before she turned to women, “I'll never love again.”

“Why?” I asked when I helped her sort scraps of cloth for the quilt she was making, the snow coming down outside and the tea kettle whistling. She got up to fetch the kettle and poured a cup of coffee before answering. “Because love doesn't exist, kid critter.” She sipped and then thought twice and then reached under her long skirt, drawing it all the way up to her hip like she would do, and unclipped her hip flask from the leather garter at her thigh. She unscrewed it and poured a good dose of whatever it was – I later found out it was whisky – into the mug. She hovered with the flask over my cup of coffee, and then said, “What the hell,” and poured some whisky into my mine as well, striding back to me with her parenthesied gait and handing it over with a sneer on her face that – I think – was meant to be a smile. “It'll put hair on your chest,” she said.

And as always with Marie, I didn't know if she were serious or not because she couldn't deliver sarcasm for the life of her. She said all her statements in the same deadpan monotone, as if she had given up on inflection and emphasis and simply put it on us to fill in the blanks. It was just the opposite of Ekaterina, who tended to over-emphasize, as if she were speaking to a child, making you feel hand-fed, if her words were like candy, which they were.

As I stood there with the blanket I had retrieved from the car, a blanket that was nearly frozen it was so cold and heavy with damp. I looked at Marie, who had been the only person in the family to ever stand up for me. Even when my mother and I would visit D, back when mom had been alive and she was still normal and could carry on a conversation and would walk without pausing and deciding it was easier to walk back to our previous location than continue on to our chosen destination. Even before that, Mom hadn't come to my rescue. I had been cuffed – hard – on the ear by Rhonda in sight of my mother, who simply pursed her lips and looked at the ground, pretending to be interested in the toys scattered around the metal scrap pile. It was the first time I realized my mother was not my savior.

When I had moved in with the Huffs and Chases, I knew I was in for trouble. Even when my mother was alive, they didn't like me. They saw me as an extension of my mother, who was a goody-two-shoes, rich girl, the one who broke Junior's heart and took his money, what little he had, and she didn't even need it anyway. Whereas my sister D was *Junior's* daughter, not even considered to be my mother's daughter. It was almost as if they had decided to forget D's blood tie to my mother and me, and instead, like selective listening, focused on the fact that she was Junior's only daughter and

resembled them so much that they talked about their mutual nose, the “Huff hair” and would sometimes scrape together small pittance for D’s back-to-school clothes, while they pretended that I didn’t need clothes, pretended that I wasn’t growing just as fast – if not faster – than D and was also cold in the winter.

Fortunately Mrs. Newhouse still kept in touch. And I felt guilty because I had always disliked her because of her scavenging, leather hands and her tendency to judge me when I wore my hair in braids when it was drying.

“You look like that Heidi, or that Pippy Laughingstocking. If I were you, I wouldn’t want to be compared to a peasant and a laughingstock.” But, she had become a blessing. An ancient goddess wrapped in plaid flannel and wearing bedroom slippers with pompoms on them and taping 60-Minutes so she could watch it earlier in the day, when she was awake. Mrs. Newhouse, despite her crankiness and occasional tirades wherein she tried to educate me about the way good girls acted “in her day,” she was kind to me and she brought me clothes and shoes and sometimes food. While the clothes were hand-me-downs and not in style, they were warm and for the most part didn’t have holes. I got teased at school, but Mrs. Newhouse, in a characteristically mean moment said, “Darling, you would get teased anyway.” And she was probably right.

Chapter Six

It was that day on the ice at Roebuck Pond where I faced fear, real fear, for the first time. The sun was going down slow, the men had already started hollering across the lake to each other and I could hear flares going off, and some firecrackers, a handful of scattered gunshots ringing out clearly in that icy night. And later, when I was alone, the cry of a wolf that set the hairs on the back of my neck on alert, but now, Rhonda and Marie and Leroy and D and J.J. and Kevin were there. For a time Ray and little Jim and Anson and Otis were too. And of course Kale. He drove up in his own car, later, after his shift at Ricky's, where he washed dishes until his hands bled – he said it was because he was allergic to the bleach and that he had a skin disease or something but wouldn't wear the gloves. He wasn't there when they were all laughing at me, but he was there later, when I began to feel the stirrings of fear and the men had begun hollering at each other from across the lake and the sun was going down pink like an opus and for a time, we were all satisfied with its music, no one saying anything, me with my head stuck out of the door, looking up at the sky, hearing the ice settling, the men hollering, "Hey Ben, spare a cig?" and the sound of half a dozen dogs baying. We stayed longer than most, but there were still some of the more lawless folk about, the kind that wanted to dive into their favorite vices and do it with style, that is loudly, uncensored. Of course the Huffs and the Chases always were that way anyway, loud and uncut. But, for the most part things on the ice were tamer, more PG-13 in the daytime and would get increasingly more dangerous as the sun sank lower in the sky. Right now there was a handful of constellations that were visible even with the setting sun and the veil of clouds that kept the moon at bay. The clouds were orange at the center and pink and red on the edges,

shaded to crisp perfection like the petal of a flower. That's what the clouds looked like that day, they were all so scattered and uniform, a few handfuls of rose petals strewn to take flight in the night wind and gather force against the coming darkness.

If I'd been smarter, I would have known what they were up to. But I was only fourteen and I trusted them, even though they were mean people, even though I never really felt safe with any of them – even bowlegged Marie, while I felt safe with her, I still was in danger of getting hit, what with her frantic rages – and I was naïve and I thought people were capable of change. Real change, not the shallow transformation that accompanied the diatribes of near-death victims and born again Christians.

They set it up as a truck pull. I was supposed to stand at the back of Leroy's Datsun and signal to Ray how far to back up with the pickup. They'd already packed everything into the car for the night, that's how I should have known that they were planning it. I signaled for him to back up further, further, further, and then he just jammed his truck in drive and peeled out of there, his tires skidding on the ice and then straightening themselves, J.J. and Ray letting out a "whoop!" and a "ai yi ieeee" as they picked up speed and Rhonda and D pulled out around the same time and they all got farther away from my vantage point in front of Leroy's Datsun. By this time, they had waited until nearly everyone else had gone except old man Murray who was practically senile and carried his rifle out with him even when he went to take a leak, Ray said. Of course, I never spoke to old man Murray. It could be a Home Alone type of situation where I was fed so many rumors about his evil that my mind had made him into a monster, when he was really just a lonely, embittered old man. Or like To Kill a Mockingbird, which I read on my own after I grabbed it from mom's shelf. I was

fortunate enough to grow up in a large farmhouse, and back then, heating costs being relatively low, we had the money to heat it, almost all of it, year-round. And there were twenty one rooms. I counted and made a blueprint when I was nine. I became really interested in architecture. My mom brought me home Architectural Digest sometimes from the college library and made me promise not to spill anything on it, to treat it the way Jenny Woodcock handled her Bible which she kept in a black velvet drawstring bag and would only handle wearing white gloves. “They were my grandmother’s” she said, as she crossed her legs at the ankles and turned to whatever psalm she was memorizing during study hall period at the middle school. I promised mom I would be extra careful with the magazine, and I always was, but most of the time, mom would read the magazine with me, and she was patient with me – for the most part – allowing me to linger on intricate floor plans and innovative design concepts. “Let me know if you want copies of any of these pages. Let’s say, five pages. Any five pages in the book that you want and I’ll photocopy it for you on the school’s color photocopier.” And so sometimes I attached a piece of composition paper to the cover of the magazine with a paper clip with a bulleted list that indicated specific page numbers. And I remember one week I said 6 pages, 6 pages please, please, I’ll take off another one from next week but I can’t decide I can’t choose any of these to throw away” and she surprised me by actually bringing home six photocopied pages, and she didn’t mention it, but I was a good kid back then, and I didn’t push it like D would have done. After that I went back to five. Of course the architectural digest phase didn’t last very long, but while it did, I taught myself how to draw blueprints, floor plans, like the ones in the magazine. I measured the rooms in the house with a big silver tape measure that had a belt clip on its side, and I jotted

down measurements. Mom provided me with the supplies: pencils, graph paper, a ruler, and eventually fine-tip markers to commit my design to paper. Mom would hang them up on the wall in the hallway near the front door so everyone that came to the house would see them and comment, usually praising me on my “artistic” abilities, my steady hand, and my apparent “visual-spatial skills”.

“Look, this one is the kitchen,” she said, pointing to one of my displayed graph paper pages.

“I can see that,” Rhonda said. I had drawn the names of the rooms on in smallish block letters.

“She even put in a little stove,” my mom said, not trying to be condescending. D was standing a little to the left of Rhonda, and her head was down. This was several years before the incident on the ice, and I had already been pitted against my half-sister in school when there was an open-grade trivia competition and the superintendent called out our names from the ones he drew from the hat, and then everyone in the bleachers went “ooooohh,” because they wanted to see a sibling fight and they knew D’s people—I guess my people too—and so they knew they might be able to expect one. D even spit to the side when she walked up on the riser and stood behind the other podium that was to the left of mine. Rhonda and Leroy were in the front row. So were Mom and Junior. Mom was tired, but she hadn’t made Junior take her home. She wanted to see us both try our hardest, though I was the only one of us that she’d been practicing with for weeks. And I think the awkwardness of it dawned on her when she sat there clutching her program and watching us both try to answer the same questions in a lightning round scenario. We didn’t have buzzers, but we had mini gavels, like smaller versions of the

kind they used on night court. Maybe she should have gone over to Hells and tutored D too. I don't know if D was embarrassed, or if she just didn't care, but true to Huff form, when she was asked the question: "Miss Huff, what was the name of the wars fought between Athens and Sparta from 431-404 B.C.?" and she leaned into the microphone and breathed, "Fuck you," and then backed off and thrust her hands in two peace signs up in the air as she marched away from the risers and out into the bleachers of adoring and whistling fans. I have to admit, at that moment, my sister looked like a rock star. Of course, she got suspended, but I wondered, looking back, if that was her way of saving face in front of me and mom, so that she didn't have to be put into a position where most people would try to judge which one of us was smartest, or if she really did hate the mother-fucking-superintendent that much (her words).

And as she stood there in the entryway, that dark corridor that was only lit by the light that came in long swaths from other rooms, the hallway where a rubber plant sat that I had eaten the leaves from when I was a baby. As she stood there, she looked away, and at that moment, my gaze became so focused that I could have counted the freckles that spanned the bridge of her nose, if I so desired. I knew that she was jealous of the time I spent with mom creating things, in learning, in getting my homework done, whereas she—while not stupid by any means—spent her time smoking cigarettes, dodging school, playing sports, working, acing tests but failing classes, having sex, doing drugs, listening to Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd on her tape player and singing off key while she hung the clothes out to dry. Fooling around on four wheelers and ATV's, parking in cars with boys who weren't her boyfriend, and performing acts on them they would then tell other boys,

or write on the bathroom wall in the Mercer building, or in Sleater Hall, the one with the bell tower on top.

Now as I stood with Leroy, Rhonda, and Marie, all of us huddled around the ice hole in the middle of the floor, the kerosene heater in the corner warming us, it dawned on me that in this group, *I* was considered the stupid one. When D came into the shack to the cacophony of ringing laughter, she had a 40 in her hand. She sat down on an upended crate and cracked the red tab so hard it broke off and she swore and flung the tab into the hole.

I had that sensation again that I was falling. It wasn't the sickness coming on—no, that came later—it was a different anguish that came on me in those days, often triggered by a realization that I was small, somehow lesser, than I used to be. Call it ego, call it whatever you want, but I guess it was the rule of the road then: whatever I may outwardly appear to be, at least in here **for the record, I'm pointing to my heart** I am true; I am pure. Of course, that wasn't the case. It never had been. At that point in my life I hoped something horrible would happen to my sister D—that she were disfigured, or run over by a lawn mower—something painful and jarring that would put her in touch with the volatile nature of that black pit of darkness that I had found in my own soul that I knew to exist at the center of everything, at the core. The only problem was, my sister had already encountered that hell. She had charted the territory, lit the torches, guided the fallen, and just like me—perhaps even *before* me—she had drawn back the husk of a mask on death's face to reveal the peeling, skinless, and grotesque creature it had left behind.

And she had screamed. And she had evacuated the fallen. “Run!” She flung her torch into the path between her and Death, and shouted, “Throw the torches; the fire will consume him.” And they ran in their robes down the clammy tunnels towards the light.

But it had never been that easy; the fire did not consume him. And he came for her. And he came for her and he came for her. And while I do not know if my sister—at the present moment—is alive or dead, I know that if she is alive, she never escaped from the clutches of that creature husband. No one can stare into the pit of that madness for the time it takes to set oneself free.

Chapter Seven

“Tell me what you know!” Mala screamed as Coyote performed his “Cha Cha” with me.

The Cha Cha was a torture game he invented in which he, the lead, takes his partner “the victim” in this case, me, and begins to dance. At the present moment, I am tied to a pole. Well, I guess “tied” isn’t the best word. Maybe it would be best if I began at the beginning:

The old woman, after she had gone into a convulsive trance at my casita and then seismically shed her skins and tantalized me with her seductive eyelashes, began to develop a mean streak. Perhaps develop is not quite correct. I began to *notice* a mean streak in her to which I had previously been blind. It descended upon her with the rains, like madness, in storm and thundering cloud. She sprang up with the lightning flash and her eyes widened as the roof was pattered with rain.

She transformed, again, like Cinderella, or something. She had been scaly and cracked and dry, the leathery crocodile that gets into the pool with the sexy lotion lady in the commercials, and when Mala stood up with a jolt that seemed to not be self-motivated, she wore a dazzling ball gown of green and gold. The fabric appeared to be jeweled as it glinted in the few flashes of lightning, and her eyes flashed too, flashed beauty, ugliness, the old woman, the dazzling young snake goddess with the previously leathery skin in the tight-fitting green dress. She seduced me with her eyelashes, but I was made of tougher stuff. I wanted my Ekaterina, how strange of me, that after

everything that happened, I still call her mine, and I wanted the woman to leave. I could smell the mania of her, see the strangled intensity of her nightmare half-life.

Her name was Mala. She was born in Persia, many lifetimes ago, to a sultan who professed himself to be a djinn. “But he *was* a djinn,” Mala would pout, “The whole of him was magic. I saw it.” Mala spoke like that. I think it was because she came from another time. Which, while hard to believe at first, really isn’t that implausible after you listen to her speak and watch her actions over the span of several days, hear her complain about the drinking water, asking if the RV has a blow-dryer on the first morning out.

“I don’t think so,” coyote replied. He was drinking from a flask and gazing off into the repetition of scrub brush and sand that was the desert.

She kicked a stool over. The place looked like a movie set. “Great! What the *fuck* I am supposed to do?” She said that “fuck” with emphasis, not in the way Ekaterina emphasized words to get your attention, to condescend to you to say: this is the word you should be focusing on; if you get anything out of this sentence, it should be this. No, she emphasized the “fuck” with a subtle anger, the underlying threat of violence, the hurt you hear in someone’s voice when they are so angry at you that they hate you, truly, and utterly hate you, and it makes them cry and then it makes you cry that they could hate you so much that it would make them cry.

Mala grabbed me from my safe distance of about four feet away—she swept me up in, what could only have been, octopus arms, because one second I was standing four feet away from her, in the corner square of the carpet, and the next I was pressed against her—not even in a sexual way. My body and hers just seemed to be pressed together like two warped boards that were being tightened with a vise grip. I didn’t understand the

unusual closeness and I was bothered by it. I made the attempt to speak—“Excuse me—“
Aren’t I something, being polite when I’m having the life squeezed out of me by some
unknown, invisible source.

“It’s my turn to talk.” I knew that voice. The beautiful woman was fixed in my
too-close gaze, but all I could see was her eyes which were the jeweled green of a
glittering ocean. Sea moss and refracted sunlight turned green by the green algae green
kelp green velvet moss meeting the reflection of the blue sky. She had landscape pretty
eyes. Eyes you could jump into, feet first, eyes you could plummet. But as I stood on the
precipice of her lower eyelid, I couldn’t ascertain whether I would be plummeting into an
underworld resplendent with witches and amputee angels and crescent moon cypress
willow bats stop me I’m falling
help me I’m falling
for you.

I couldn’t navigate the waters of her eyes; it was too much. My Ekaterina would
be so disappointed in me, was all I could think as the fever came upon me and I drifted
into that other consciousness, that world where we sipped from salt-rimmed cocktail
glasses and toasted the sunrise in gala gowns decked out with shaft-mined emeralds,
blood diamonds, our coy dancing set to the tune of heartstring guitars, a samisen plucked
in the background, a dove alighting on a dead branch hovering outside the twelve-foot by
twelve-foot window, and behind that, the sea.

It was when I came around again when I noticed the sky had rained out and now
was devoid of tears. The sun shone through the window again in a violent shaft that
spilled yellow on the floor. A square of driveway was visible through the kitchen

window, and I saw a man in a black suit walk up it. But here's the thing: He didn't just walk up the driveway like a normal man in a normal suit. He flickered like an image that was not quite real, something pixelated, a pointillism piece by Georges Seurat, a dying leaf that was being rattled in the wind, the desperate paper skin flickering back and forth so that it showed two sides, and the jagged edge of a saw-tooth. In the man's case, one side was his "normal" business man persona, on the other side was the coyote who had fucked me on the night of the Navajo initiation, where I laid out on a cold wool blanket under a constellation of my ancestors and blinked at the moon that was round like eternity.

Coyote opened the door and walked into the living room, sparing no pleasantries, he said, "Okay, how we going to do it?" And I realized he was referring to me. He clutched a rope in his right hand and a whip in his left, and I suddenly remembered the image of Osiris that had accompanied the text in my chapter on Egyptian mythology in my high school history textbook and I wondered if he was going to kill me. His human self was hard and cold, and he possessed the robotic qualities of an attractive man. His coyote self was somehow more enticing—perhaps because it was that body, not the human one, that I knew intimately, curled into the crux of that elbow when I moaned—and, like Mala's, his eyes flashed.

"The trunk of the car." She flicked her hand at him, "Go." Coyote disappeared out the front door and came back in with a yellow smile and a box of chocolates wrapped in a red bow. His grin was slavering; spit dangled from his canines and his tongue hung out the side of his mouth. He had stopped changing back and forth from man to beast, and he approached me with the box as the coyote of that nightly tryst and held it out to me.

“For my one time love,” he said, giving a short bow and backing away, as if he were leaving a decision in my hands. And, as I learned later, he was.

“For the sake of Christ,” Mala said, bringing the back of her hand to her forehead to demonstrate disappointment, an inability to cope with his idiocy. “You couldn’t just bring a few capsules in a bottle, like I told you.”

“Shhh,” he said, as I opened the lid of the box and counted three rows of squat molded chocolates with their own indicator map that described the delicious contents within. “You like?”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t understand his presence in my living room. I didn’t know what connected the two creatures who kept dropping in and out of my despairing life.

One of them had made love to me and provided me with an important, yet cryptic warning. The other had brought me dangerous information about my past, transformed into a woman who seduced me with her eyelashes, and told me to shut up in one shrill note that hung over the lake of my mind like the piercing cry of a gull. I popped an orange coconut chocolate drop into my mouth and felt satisfied. And then I woke up in the trunk of a car, the only detail of which I could discern, was that it was lined in black velvet.

I didn’t get to see the outside of the car that day—though I later learned it was a Cadillac limousine—because I lost consciousness again and when I woke up, I was being jostled out of an RV and into the bare desert and the light of the sun. The sand stretched out for hundreds of miles in every direction. There was no road. Mala had driven that all-

terrain vehicle cross-ways, against the grain of the natural order of things. She had brought us into the great parched kingdom that somehow managed to be an island though it was hundreds of miles from a good water source.

“The Rio Grande doesn’t even reach the sea anymore, you know,” a graduate student named Scott said to me as he tightened his lips around a joint, inhaled, and passed it to me, unlit end first. That was one of the things that struck me the most, upon entering New Mexico, me coming from the temperate zone and growing up with lush green fields and swamps and bogs and streams and rivers everywhere you turn, was the thirst of the land. Naïve of me to think then that it only thirsted for water. But, as I would come to learn over the years in the desert, the land didn’t just desire water, no, there was something more lurking under the surface of the water, and that was the real thing that would cleanse the land, and possibly me, of sin.

The only features of note in that desert landscape where my captors had brought me: ourselves, of course, the RV, the campfire coyote was starting with dry logs he retrieved from the RV, a ramshackle lean-to with a blue tarp roped over one side, and a wooden pole that grew, ominously, towards the sky.

My stomach lurched as coyote pulled a knife and two, long wooden skewers out of a duffel bag. He advanced on me and then the desert became very black, with flashes of lightning, or fear that rent my heart in two as lightning divides the sky. I remember madness, the insanity that comes with submitting to the torture that you have been avoiding your whole life. That’s the way it felt then, and it still felt that way now, the second time when something had been asked of me upon sight of a blade.

I felt fumbling movements at my wrists from that other-body I inhabited in a place that was sparkling with midnight and the promise of rain on the hot streets. Where there was dancing and music, where the prostitutes flung beads from iron filigree balconies while they ushered in the season of restraint with no real remorse anymore. My wrists were bound. That bristly tickle on the thin skin of the insides of my wrists, the geography of which was all blue rivers and bracelets of crevices where the world pulled apart at the seams. Coyote fumbled with the neck of my blouse, which was like a choker from which the fabric draped, but he couldn't get a knack for it, so he took his bowie and cut the fabric down the middle and I felt, for a second, like a barren woman given a forced cesarean just to reveal that the lack had become so big that it looked like excess. Next I felt a sluice of vertical pain down the front of my chest; he had slit me from clavicle to just above the mound of my right breast. My blood ran out, freely, and for a second it felt as if he had allowed me an escape. He dragged the point of the blade across the valley of my chest and made an identical mark parallel to the first, then walked behind me—I was only seeing him through a haze of colored lights and phantasmagoria of beautiful midnight in that land that I went to when I knew I had no control over the situation and simply had to suffer whatever consequence—and marked my back with the same two lines, in parallel tracks that ran down my shoulder blades and rested in fury at the middle of my back, another branding to go with the rest.

At that point I was bleeding freely and was resting in the reality that I was in pain. I had experienced a lot of physical pain in my life, and so it was bearable; I was still tethered to that reality, and I could see coyote through a blanket of haze, and he brought a wooden skewer towards me and his yellow teeth glinted in the noonday sun.

What he did next, under the watchful gaze of Mala, who still wore her green dress, was pry my tender tissue with the skewer, tweezing tissue from muscle, and with the skewer, lifted my pectoral muscle up at the same time that he ran me through with it, then, lifting me up by the skewers, which were like handles, he hooked me onto the pole by the use of already-tied ropes.

The thing about torture is that you wander in a landscape out-of-time, out of touch. The only thing you understand is that you have no control, that nothing you do seems to change the fact that you are going to experience repeated physical pain at the hands of someone who does not care that you are clinging to life, a bent stump of a being, bleeding out all your sins onto the desert sand.

And I cried out then, and a hawk, far-off and scooping the sky with wide sweeps, called in response.

“Be grateful for the experience,” Mala said, bringing a honey straw to her lips and sucking on the end. On this long, low soughing day, I saw gratitude bumming a cigarette from pain and then doubling over and coughing up its lungs into the ditch. “This is how boys used to become men,” she said. It was a ritual of the North Dakota tribe where coyote had stood totem, sneaking into the tents at night to bring spirit messages to the virgins, as he had done to me, though I was no virgin. One time as I hung there, he described to me the badlands, the scruffy landscape of his formative years, where he came to accept his trickster role and how in the morning he would paw in the red clay for treasure but found only fool’s gold, and one time, the shell of a tortoise the size of a table that he excavated with the help of the demon goddess Mala, who had come to him first as a snake.

Mala had explained to me, after the shock wore off and I had settled into the pain; the gravity of my body had already begun to pull me down towards the ground, extending the parenthetical cuts, as she sat nibbling on a rolled up slice of bologna, sitting in a lawn chair and gazing out on the desert as if it were a moving sea that held some special knowledge and if she only watched for it, she could absorb it and become wise.

“The young boys who stood on the precipice of adulthood, they were selected to take part in the ritual,” she said. Coyote was in the distance, wiping his knife on a soiled deer skin and sheathing it in a handcrafted holster at his side. The two behaved as lovers, but I had never seen them come together. More likely it was an emotional marriage and the physical aspect was abandoned for strengthening the spiritual bond which gave them both magical powers. “They were told it was necessary to prove their worth to the tribe, to prove they were men. Sometimes there were two or more of the young warriors, but every now and then there was a lone warrior, like yourself, who was hung from the ceiling of the lodge by the skewers, gravity ever-forcing them down, the skewers splitting through them every agonizing second, and tearing them up as they dropped towards the ground. This torment was a key part of the ritual which took place beneath the young warrior, on the lodge floor, where men sat around fires holding buffalo skulls, chanting, and smoking tobacco, and watching over the young man as he shed his blood for the spirits and the tribe. The women perched on the roof of the lodge, for they weren’t allowed inside.”

My vision of the proceedings then transposed onto an image of what I envisioned when Mala described this ritual, and I was the warrior and she and coyote were the watchful elders who ensured that I gained approval of the great spirits.

But it wasn't that way. I wasn't trying to prove I was a man, though Mala insisted that I would be the richer for the experience and that the only way to wisdom was to walk through pain. "I don't know what you're fussing about," she said, as my body lurched a half-an-inch closer to the ground and the skewer tore another half-inch of muscle, which felt as if someone had buried a beehive inside and then all the bees were set to stinging me all at once, and for eternity. "We gave you medicines to keep you up, and so you won't die," she said.

I remembered all of this in the present moment in a flash as with a sweet voice she said, "It takes torture to dislodge the story from within you," and she sidled up to me with those demon goddess eyes blazing like exploded stars, and placed her hand on my naked, bloody chest. "From in here."

Hadn't she just been screaming at me a second ago? Now with the onset of fatigue caused by forcing to stay awake for 47 hours, I could clearly travel between the worlds, between the landscape of consciousness and the terrain of the subconscious, and she thrust the black and white photo of D in front of my face another time and it was like a bullet between the eyes because of the suddenness and immediacy with which it shot me backward into my past.

Chapter Eight

My sister was a dangerous beauty. She was still going around with Kale, the boy with the long black hair that said little but followed me with his eyes. He had turned up in the most unlikely places to save me from the Huffs and Chases, though it wasn't until much later that I discovered that it wasn't saving that I needed, and certainly not from him, but redemption, forgiveness, and from myself. She was often absent, hitching her way to cities and town fairs along the coast, she had even gone so far as New York City, spurred on by Kale and his stories of living there, though she did not choose to take him with her. She made solitary flights, and I imagine it was because she didn't trust anyone enough to experience new things with them, barely trusting herself enough to gape in wonder as she dipped her toes into the waters of uncertain territory.

In the ice fishing shack, D was all glowing and it seemed like she was the spark that melted into the corners of our ice-whitened lives, that she bore the torch that would warm us and also light our way out of the barren winter. She had turned from me, slurping on her 40 oz. and making fast hand gestures while talking with Kale, who kept his head down and drank from his own can of Bud. Later, when we hauled everything out to the car, the food, the lanterns, the beer, the blankets, Leroy slammed the trunk of his Datsun down. I knew them to be forgetting something. I risked it, and chimed in: "What about the kerosene heater?"

Leroy shrank back, as if stung, and, though his face was flushed with cold and snot ran down in a slimy trail from his nostril, he bored through me with eyes that warned me not to speak any further. "Yeah," Rhonda hollered from the driver's side door of her car, which was parked a little ways up and to the right of Leroy's. "What about the

kerosene heater?” Rhonda and D broke into a fit of laughter. It must be an inside joke, I thought. Everything is inside these days. And I am always the one standing outside, looking in, my breath fogging up the glass.

“Leave it for a second and help me with the car,” only he didn’t say “car” he dropped the ‘r’ so it sounded like “cah,” and he flicked his coat collar up and walked towards the truck that was parked in front of the Datsun.

But while we were in the shack, I submitted love poetry to Kale through the blinking of my eyes. I don’t know if he knew then how much I wanted him. I had imagined what my first time would be like, and those were the days when I began to understand that I was rounding out in places and that my body was taking on the guise of a woman and I dreamt at night about slow humping on mud baked shores and woke up with my head rushing and my genitals throbbing with the desire to experience that thing that D and Kale always did to each other behind closed doors, that thing they did sometimes in the woods under the steady cycle of the changing moon.

D caught me looking at Kale a few times, but I don’t think she knew then what it was I was thinking. It would be later when she would put two and two together and understand that her boyfriend was the love of my short life and that I was prepared to compete with her for his affection. She scowled back at me, thinking, I assume, that I was staring at her in the way of starting trouble. Sometimes she felt I was judging her with my gaze, about her cigarettes or her alcohol or later, her drugs, because she would screw up her face and say, “Go away then if you don’t like it,” or some other command that placed me in a setting that was away from the sometimes secrecy of her sins. And at that moment she yelled, “Just you wait.” It was a threat shouted across the interior of an ice

fishing shack, I felt it rumble throughout the space, and I watched the words flush down the hole and dissipate into a deep nothingness that was synonymous with the chill.

Just you wait. D would have her vengeance. It was D's vendettas and hunger for revenge that drove our relationship to its final conclusion: betrayal and the resulting desire for redemption. That we were supernatural daughters was irrelevant. I was responsible for the choices I made, and she was too. Only, the choices she made took her further away from me and the choices I made seemed to tie her inextricably to my memory. At times I wondered if I would ever be rid of her; even though she may be dead, she was still very much alive in that she could still hang on my conscience and deplete my reserve of compassion, for she had been the first to use cruelty, real cruelty, in our sisterly war.

It began that night. After Leroy told me to signal for him as he backed the truck up so he could hitch it to the Datsun and then crunched away towards shore, him and Kevin yahooping and catcalling and Ray hooting, I sat in the ice shack, they had at least left the kerosene heater, the tall, cylindrical orange-glowing heat that was surrounded by a wire cage. That had been why Leroy seemed spooked when I asked about the kerosene heater. I think for a second he wondered if I knew what they were planning to do. But I hadn't. When I watched them pull away in their four cars, I kicked the snow and wondered if they were gone for good or if it was just a prank and they would all come back in an hour or so and yell, "Gotcha! And slap me on the back and laugh." But it didn't happen that way.

I stayed in the ice shack and warmed my hands in front of the kerosene heater. I watched the fish we had on the line swim in panicked lines back and forth. I couldn't see

the fish, but I saw the pole tense and straighten, tense and straighten, as the fish tested the limits of its tether. Always the fish would swim out to the boundary of his space and then the line would stretch taut and the rod would arch a little, just a little, slightly, and then quite a few jerks could be observed, and then the line loosened, as if the fish had given up. But I watched him continue like that every few minutes for hours. The wolves had already been baying and I refused to go outside—even for the porta-potty—because I felt especially vulnerable to the onslaught of that desolate night.

It was in that old fishing shack that I first thought about murdering my sister. It had come on softly at first. I had entertained thoughts of knocking her down, beating her up, or pushing her down a mine-shaft, or luring her onto railroad tracks hearing the chug of an oncoming train. I became sleepy with the vengeance dreams that swam in my head, but every time I began to slip into sleep I slapped myself hard on the face, because I was afraid I would catch hypothermia out there and die; I remembered from science class that as soon as you begin to feel comfortable and relaxed is when it begins to take you, and then you fall asleep happily and never wake up. As far as I was concerned, D was the mastermind of the prank, though it was more than a prank, it was life-threatening and not only because I feared I would freeze to death in that ice fishing shack squatting on the frozen lake and that if I did survive the hypothermia, the possible attack by wolves or ancient men without penises who wanted to rape me for my youth, that I would exit the shack in the light of day with drool dribbling down my chin, incoherent and out of touch, unable to form complete sentences, and believing myself to be the princess diadem of the frozen lake brigade. It wasn't the only time in my life I feared the onset of madness. Since my mother was always down with some mental health concern, I accepted the fact

that psychiatric problems may be part of my genetic inheritance and that embracing that would go a lot further than fighting it because the people who deny that they are crazy are always the craziest.

While D was the mastermind, I was sure, she did not feel guilty enough to rescue me. I never did truly find out what would have happened if Kale hadn't driven back that night—between the hours of two and three a.m., to retrieve me, bundle me up in a pile of blankets in his back seat, and drive me home to the warmth of my bedroom. He had toted the kerosene heater in the bed of his truck and, underneath a dusting of fat snowflakes, he loaded it into the trailer and set it in the center of my bedroom floor. He brought me soup—Chicken and Stars—in my Campbell's soup mug that was as big as a bowl. If Kale hadn't come for me, would they have just left me there? The nagging answer to that question was the reason why when Kale drove me home, I didn't speak, only cried silently, sniffing my snot back up my nose and not caring that D had once told me that when I did that it sounded like an elephant farting in reverse, and when I got to the trailer, D was still awake, painting her nails black and sipping from a wine cooler, and she laughed at me as I walked into the door, clutching my wool blankets, shaking, my teeth shattering. Just threw back her head and laughed.

While it wasn't the only time I got a mild case of hypothermia as an adolescent, the memory of that instance blotted out the other, and as I hung there from that pole, Mala clucking in front of me about my sister, telling me that I was a bad sister for not wanting to find out whether she was alive or dead, the agony of that cold disease rushed through me, giving me the intense memory of feeling like I would never be warm again.

That was the winter I shot my first deer, though I hadn't wanted to, and it was a few days after the ice fishing shack incident when D had gone missing, taken to running away like she used to when she was a kid. It had been a few years before when I had asked her about the time when Junior and I had found her squatting in the dirt of the fairgrounds holding that chicken head in her hands. What I wanted to know was why she ran that first time. She was only seven-years-old and she ran away from the home she shared with her mother and father. I didn't understand it, but it gave me insight into the darkness in her character. Later, in my late twenties, I read *Wuthering Heights* the winter I came down with pneumonia and drank hot broth at night and couldn't get out of bed during the day and imagined Heathcliff, executing his tough love on Katherine, bristling against a Scottish moor. My sister was just as brutal and just as jagged to touch.

It was that same inherent darkness that made D choose Junior when mom had given her that life-altering choice, that made her sneak away to town fairs whenever she caught wind of one coming down the pike, that made her do drugs with the drop-outs down by the abandoned train tracks.

D had already run away again by the time hunting season came around and she was still gone a few weeks later when I shot my first deer. The family dragged me out with them and gave me a gun and told me to shoot straight and mind the kickback. Kevin was firing at the same time at the same deer, but I was the one that killed it. Kevin's bullet didn't even graze it. They looked after it was down. They combed over its body like monkeys skimming each other's coats for fleas and found only one bullet hole, at the left shoulder muscle, the bullet pierced right through to the heart.

After we gutted it and loaded it into the truck and hauled it home, Ray and Kevin and Leroy hung it up with ropes and pulleys from the beam. Marie gave me a rudimentary lesson on skinning. To this day I don't know why they let me skin it; you'd think they would want the family expert, Marie, to skin it, since it was best—especially since we were often hungry—to ensure there wasn't too much meat left on the bone, or that you didn't compromise the meat by getting fur in it, or urine, or shit.

I had been working over the deer for about an hour. When Leroy wandered out to the barn around noon, I already had the head off. The sun had rounded the sky and cast him in shadow, a bright light behind him, as he stood there in the gaping mouth of the barn, not speaking. He sidled up to me where I sat on my three-legged stool and nodded in approval at my work.

The light that flooded into the barn was cold, but it warmed my spirit. I had made calculating cuts: started at the top and worked my way down. Leroy took up a knife and started cutting out the tenderloins. He placed them on a piece of butcher paper that he had laid on a make-shift table to his left. Neither of us spoke for a while like that. The sunlight struck the old, rusty farm tools that hung from the back wall. They didn't glisten or shine, but they glowed amber, as if something were burning them from within. My mind got caught in the beauty of that moment, the sun like that, the hooked blades, the clamps, the scythes, cluttering the space above the work bench.

Leroy asked me at one point if the weather was supposed to warm up; he knew I listened to the radio in the mornings. I told him it was supposed to rain. He sighed. "Here, get these in bags and I'll start cutting." He meant the bones. A weird ritual if ever I saw one. He reached up and pulled down the bone saw while I stooped on the ground and

handled the bloody meat with bare hands and shoved the cutlets into freezer bags.

"Have you heard anything about your sister?" He lowered the carcass all the way to the ground using the rope pulley. For a second I glanced up from where I squatted over the raw meat and saw a body gutted, splayed, and hanging from the barn rafter. Except it didn't look like a body anymore; it no longer resembled the wild thing I had shot in the woods. It was as if it had been turned inside out by a devastating force and it was consequently eating its way out of itself, leaving gaping holes where vital organs and parts once were. At that point, we had the legs, head and skin off and I had cut most of the meat off the bone. Leroy now attempted to cleave its bones. He liked to chop the skeleton up into four to six inch segments for placing in the stew pot. If D had been home, she would have set three cast iron stew pots boiling with bones on the stove and check back every hour or so and contemplate the efficacy with which the meat fell off the bone. Whatever bad I had to say about my sister, and however much I hated her for running me off and leaving me behind in a house with an uncle who hated me, she could cook a real good venison stew.

Had I heard anything? "No," I said, as I stood up straight, feeling a dull ache in my back as I smoothed my work suit. The ache was more persistent now, and it was getting harder to ignore. "I really don't know anything."

I said that last bit because I could tell Leroy thought I was holding something back. That I had some clue, some secret knowledge that would point to D's whereabouts. But really, she was not the one to confide in me. We didn't have that kind of sisterly relationship. When I felt the need to confide in someone, I had to bite my tongue or the inside of my cheek to keep from crying and running to her and throwing my arms around

her. I had learned from experience that that was not the way to approach D--with your arms open. D was like a dog or a policeman; you had to approach her slowly, proving that you had no weapons, that you weren't going to pull anything funny, before she let you near. And then, once you were within arms' length of her, you had to behave rationally, showing no weakness, because D couldn't handle strong emotions; she just flared up and walked away.

Our mother hadn't been like that, and I missed her. If D was a tornado of anger and self-destruction, our mother was a tsunami of love and compassion. In fact, they handled their emotions in completely different ways. I was more like our mother—I held it in, brooded, got depressed. D took a different route towards processing her pain and that was why I didn't understand her, never could.

"Find out what you can." While Leroy was under the impression that D's disappearance may have been foul-play, I doubted it. She went wherever she wanted, with whomever she wanted.

"I told you what I know." I had. The last day we had seen her was Wednesday afternoon. School had been out for hours and I was sitting on the wooden platform off the back of the trailer when I saw her walk across the field, probably coming from the trailer park on the other side of the woods.

When my sister came to me across the field, she glittered in a green and gold carnival mask. It had a feathered border of peacock blue. She wore tight jeans with just a black lace bra on top even though it was late October and it looked like snow. She seemed magical, unreal, like a witchy mermaid goddess. My sister was no hips but elbows and bones. She sauntered towards me; I swung my legs as I sat on the deck that

faced the sunset--I would go out there at the close of day to make my peace with the sky, that is, unless it was raining. Twenty feet from me, she stopped and twirled; her straight, mid-back length red hair trailed out in a ray around her.

"Like it?" She turned her palms out and up like a pageant girl, but she wasn't in need of my approval. "It was one of my art projects."

"Is that *all* of your costume?"

She snickered. Her hand shook as she brought a cigarette to her thin, chapped lips. "You're just jealous because I can pull it off."

"I'm just wondering why you aren't cold." She was gaunt but beautiful, a Calvin Klein model of the white trash circuit. She held her cigarette between her first and second fingers while she inhaled, then blew a delicate, smoky rose into my face.

"Temperature is relative," she said.

"Funny, you didn't say that when you had the shakes."

I don't know when it happened exactly that my sister began to widen her social circle--befriend strange characters who thought themselves dangerous, who thought the town was too small and their appetites were too big; the town was a pill they'd rather not choke down. She had high-school friends, drop-out friends, and she'd even struck up associations with older men who treated her like a favorite step-daughter, or a young girlfriend who, like wildfire, had caught hold of their dry lives and raged through them until they were ultimately transformed. One such man was Artie. He lived in a railroad car in the woods off Voter Hill Road. I had never physically seen him, or his house, but I had heard enough cautionary tales and legends to last a lifetime. It was said in the town that he had rigged up a railroad car to a crane under the cover of night and hauled it on a

flat-bed into the woods and made it his home. It was said he positioned security cameras throughout his house--inside and out--because he was paranoid that his customers would steal from him. I heard that he made his own dandelion wine to wash down the crank that he sold to the high-school students. That he had a guard dog that was trained to kill anyone suspicious on sight. That one of his legs was fake as well as one of his eyes.

He would be there, at the party. At least that's what D said. I hadn't been invited. I was a freshman and didn't talk to anyone. Didn't feel it was necessary. D, however, always made her way into the center of the crowd; she was an exploding flower, all aspects of her self awake, alive, and pushing out from the heart. She had something of a reputation in Monkstown; nobody wanted to be on her bad side. I hadn't figured out if it was because she had a hot temper--a desert fire that raged out of control at the slightest provocation--or because they knew she could plot and scheme--bide her time so she could strike out at just the right moment. Few people could display both kinds of violence, both breeds of rage, the way D could. And I had long suspected that the reason my sister garnered so much respect in Monkstown was because people were afraid of her, like I was.

Leroy sawed through the ribcage and I watched the rib bones plink to the floor. I was ready to go inside and take a bath, put on my normal clothes, maybe some warm wool socks, and eat Leroy's breakfast.

"What'd you make?"

"I didn't make anything." He stuck his tongue out to the side while he sawed through the femur. "We still have some cereal. You can have the milk." I suddenly remembered when D and me were girls and Leroy would make us bologna and cheese

sandwiches. He always squirted a mustard smiley face on D's sandwich and nothing on mine. "So she definitely said she was going to that party over at Paul Butler's?"

"Yeah. She made a mask for a costume." My mind raced back to the image of my skeletal sister walking across the field in a bra and jeans and a shot of panic ran through my blood. What if she had been abducted or had run away right after I had seen her? Right after I had insulted her? And in October without a shirt on. "Go see if you can find her."

Leroy cursed and wiped the blade on his coveralls. The bone ground into a fine powder as he sawed through it, leaving an eerie pile of white sawdust in the dirt. "I know you don't like Paul's brother anymore, but--"

"I don't have a problem with Carson." But he threw the saw down.

"You used to be friends." I remembered the days when the two of them would ride their bikes from here to Reeds Mills, fish and get drunk until the sun went down and swerve home to play video games and fall asleep slouched together on the couch, a blanket thrown over them.

"Friendship is not forever." My uncle's pupils constricted and his eyes washed with a deeper blue. "I can't go there." He tightened his jaw and his grip on the couch arm. "Find D."

Chapter Nine

Leroy knew where the party was going to be at. As we drove down a long curving road, he flipped the dial on the radio three or four times before settling on classic rock. He didn't say anything to me and I couldn't think of anything I wanted to say to him. I tried hard not to touch my back. Leroy had noticed me rubbing my upper back earlier in the week and had asked me what was wrong. I didn't need him to call Aunt Rhonda. That was always the protocol with us girls since Mom got taken away: call Aunt Rhonda. She would look at us without our shirts on, or our pants on, if necessary. If she thought we needed to go to the doctor, Leroy said he would pay for it, but he said he wanted to be damn sure we didn't *really* need to go first. So far neither of us really needed to go. I tried hard to think what I would say to a doctor if I had to go for some other reason. How would I keep him from noticing the cartilage and bone poking through my back? I settled back into the seat. The trees were red and orange like burning. I would be okay. Without the doctor and without Leroy.

We heard a steady bass line before we saw the trailer. As Leroy slowed down, I said, "I'll be home before eleven."

"Good," he said, then drove off almost before I had shut the door. I suspected that he had some connection with the place, or with Paul, that he wasn't eager to revisit. Paul's older brother threw parties there in the seventies when Leroy was in school. Now Paul had inherited the place, and a lot of land. I didn't know what to expect from the party, but I hadn't wanted to ask.

Bristly pines loomed behind the trailer. It was metal, aluminum I think, the kind like corrugated cardboard, the color of sick, whereas our trailer was more like a house: it

had white siding and shutters. The hound dog tested the limits of his short chain, his mug lit by a flood light mounted on the peak of a shed built out of plywood and 2x4s. The people in the yard held plastic cups and beer bottles. They loomed up like cemetery haunts. Some of them turned towards me as I approached, their stares caught in frozen moments as they tried to register who I was. "Nobody? Okay," they moved on.

A girl with a red streak in her hair opened her mouth and stared at me. She spoke out of the side of her mouth to her bleach-blond friend. They both laughed. As I stroked the sore nubs on my back and thought about slipping away, walking home-- *this isn't my scene. I don't know what to do here*--Kale tapped me on the shoulder and spun me around.

"What are you doing here?" He smiled. He pulled me towards him and hugged me, whiskey on his breath. My wings strained against their silk wrapping. How I wanted to unfurl them, display them in all their glory, but I couldn't. It wasn't the time or the place.

"Leroy sent me to look after D." I couldn't believe I told him the truth. I had worked it out so carefully in my mind: *I came because I wanted to drink, smoke dope, stay out late.* But Kale had a way of weaseling the truth out of me (though there wasn't much weaseling involved. All he had to do was look at me and I spilled my secrets.) After all, he was the only person who knew about my wings. And now I sounded like a goody-two-shoes errand girl.

"Did he think maybe someone should look after you?" Kale was D's boyfriend, but they had a strange relationship; D was always off doing whatever she wanted with whomever she wanted and Kale picked up and went through other women like six packs

of Bud. I knew that he would leave me there on the lawn while he searched for my sister. Sometimes though, he gave me his full attention. Sometimes he looked me full in the face with sadness in his eyes and promised to atone for his sins which stretched out behind him like a nagging shadow.

He pulled me forward and introduced me to a tall guy in a wife-beater who drank from a bottle of Jack Daniels. "This is Paul, it's his place." Something about the way Paul threw back the bottle, there was a sense of his taking it all in, swallowing everything he could experience in one moment.

D was nowhere to be found.

A twenty-something woman dressed like the bride of Frankenstein sidled up to Kale and put her arms around him. "Kale, baby."

"I'll find you later." He kissed her cheek quickly, but with a smile on his face.

She pointed at me. "Who's this?" She was a smoker, her voice rattling and husky. She smoothed down her bodice and tugged at her holey fishnets. "You said we could do lines together. Now you're splitting it with her?"

"No, babe. I'll be there. I have to find D first." They walked away in different directions, Kale nodding goodbye and the bride of Frankenstein glaring at me. I walked underneath the trailer's tin awning, up the rotting steps, and opened the door. The interior would have been tidy, if not for the people and the beer cans. The carpet, appliances and counter-tops made a statement in avocado and marigold. A girl was on the phone, smacking her gum. A jock from my high school had a hold of the cord and was wrapping it around people and things and making everyone laugh. A stripper and Edward Scissorhands sat on the couch and pushed powder around on the back of a geometry

textbook. A disheveled clown pawed through the open refrigerator, not finding what he wanted. Where was D? The tightness of the space was suffocating. The clown nodded at me and smiled, his red nose riding up on his face to reveal his real nostrils, which were large.

"What's shakin', cupcake?"

"Don't listen to him, he's baked." Edward Scissorhands motioned me over to the bed with one long razor claw at the same time the stripper rolled her eyes and got up from the couch. "You don't look like the type to be here."

"I'm not." I paused. "I mean, I wasn't invited."

Edward Scissorhands laughed. "Half of us weren't invited. We just catch wind of a party and we're there." He lifted a claw and fiddled with a small baggie of white powder. How could a man with claws look so helpless? "Give me a hand?" he said.

I was embarrassed to let on that I hadn't the faintest idea what to do. "I think someone will have to give her a hand giving you a hand, there champ," someone shouted from across the living room. The stripper and Freddy Krueger laughed.

"I'm looking for my sister." I took the baggie from his outstretched claws and gently poured out some of the white powder, as he'd directed me.

"Who's your sister?"

"D Huff." He managed to pull his claws up so he could use his fingers and chopped the chalk powder with the edge of his driver's license.

"I'm cutting rails," he explained. He passed me a rolled up scrap of magazine and instructed me to snort a line through my nostril.

"I'm just trying to find my sister." I stood up and accidentally knocked against his

leg; the white powder spilled across the textbook. Everyone in the vicinity gasped.

"I'm so sorry," I said, worried that I had angered everyone in the room.

"It's alright?" The stripper asked.

"Yeah, chill everyone. She didn't do any harm." Edward Scissorhands said.

He had beautiful blue eyes. "What's your name?" I didn't recognize him from school.

"I'm Edward Scissorhands, baby." And the smile he gave me had something behind it, something dangerous. I turned my back on Edward Scissorhands in search of my sister, my sister whose own smile was dangerous, who was probably out there snorting her own powder off a woodpile or a dock. When I walked down the steps and placed my feet on solid ground, Whitesnake put his arm around my shoulders and passed me a shot of something. He said it was tequila. He wore a leathery jacket, billowy shirt, and his long blond hair was teased and primped, a banged up electric guitar slung over his back.

"Sorry, I don't drink."

"Everybody drinks." His smile was more beautiful than Edward Scissorhands', and less dangerous. "Got to start sometime, right?" I took the drink from his hand and threw it back like I had seen men do in action movies. It punched my esophagus all the way down.

"That's my girl." He extended his hand, which caught me off guard. "I'm Jake. Have I met you before?" He didn't wait for my answer. "Come on, there's something I want to show you." He took my hand and led me behind the shed, past the wood pile, and we walked for a short while on an unlit path through the trees.

I wanted him to reach out and grab my hand in the darkness and that made me confused, because that was the kind of thing I always wanted from Kale. There was something about this willing stranger: some sensuality that boiled beneath the surface.

"I brought the bottle." When I didn't say anything, he added, "Don't worry; I'm not that kind of guy. I like you. I liked you from the second you walked up to the place. And then I saw you with that jerk."

That jerk. You'll have to be more specific. "Do you mean Kale?"

"Yeah, that's his name, Kale."

"You know Kale?" His hand was a tangible thing. It was so real I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Yeah he dates this girl at Monkstown High, D Huff."

"She's my sister." How come this boy knew D and Kale and I had never seen him before?

"You're D Huff's sister and you don't drink?" He laughed. I guess it was pretty funny. In front of us, a wooden bridge stretched over a black stream that shimmered and shimmered in the night.

"I like D," he added. "She's good people."

"She's supposed to be here."

"She's around somewhere. Knowing D she's probably..." He stopped, looked at me. "Socializing."

"How come I haven't met you before?" We walked onto the wooden bridge. Between the boards the reflection of the moonlight bounced off the river, making it look like a living, jewel encrusted reptile.

"I go to P. We have some friends in common. I met D at a party a few months back. Man that girl can--" He stopped.

I sat cross-legged in the middle of the bridge and found myself asking for another shot. I took it, liking the way it warmed my throat all the way down. He came up beside me and sat down, laying his guitar at the foot of the bridge like an offering. The river made its own kind of light and seemed to push the shore away so that it felt we were suspended on a shore-less river under the moonlight. I felt heavy. As I lay back, my hair spread out around my face, and I stared up at the stars. Whitesnake lay down beside me.

I felt like calling off the search for my sister and staying there with Whitesnake on that wooden bridge with my feet kicking into the star-studded sky.

"I just want to lay here," he said. "I'm not that kind of guy." We heard a rustling in the woods and a group of partiers showed up with liquor, pipes, and firewood.

"Get a room!" Freddy Krueger yelled at us and laughed as he stalked off with the others towards the shore. Their figures, silhouettes; the disheveled clown pretending to whack the bride of Frankenstein with a big log.

"Leave me alone, you fucktard." Her voice chilled me.

"Let's go see what they're up to." He kissed me quickly on the cheek and pulled me to my feet. "But before we go, I have pen and paper in my guitar case." He took out a bunch of scrap pieces of paper and a ball point pen. "It's for composing," he said.

I took his ball point pen and refused the scrap of paper he offered me; I wrote my phone number on the back of his hand the way I had seen coy teenage girls do in movies. As we walked towards the crowd, I stumbled, unsteady on my feet. "You okay?" He asked. I paused. I was okay. I felt alive but in a way that unraveled me at the center--a

spinning away from myself kind of alive. "Yeah," I said. I took hold of the corner of his jacket to steady myself and we plodded up the river bank. A bonfire lit up the night; it shot sparks into the air; it crackled and hissed and bathed all of the partygoers who huddled around it in a creepy up-lighting.

When we got closer, I saw D with her arms around Kale's neck. She whispered into his ear while his eyes were fixed on the fire. She still wore her jeweled mask, but wore only a bra and jeans. She was taller than Kale but she hung off him as if she were having trouble standing. Through her laughter I could tell that she had just gotten hold of a joke and she didn't want to let go. She wore a black bra. Because her breasts were so small and her ribs showed, she looked like a coked-out runway model. Her jeans hung off her bony hips which protruded like angular bookends around her abdomen, which was pierced with the shadow of her navel. Her hair was almost brighter than the fire which danced in red and orange. She wore her usual dark, blood red lipstick and her nails were clipped short and painted with black nail polish. When she threw back her head and laughed, the points of her canines showed; she looked more hideous than I remembered her. Hideously beautiful. As I watched her hang off her boyfriend by the bonfire that crackled and threw sparks up into the night sky, I knew she was slipping away, that she had been falling for some time and it was lucky that so far there had always been someone there to catch her.

I walked over and stood beside them by the fire. I was overcome by the warmth of the fire, and by an overwhelming sense of belonging. I had not known that parties could take place outside, in celebration of my friends the river and the woods. I felt warm and grounded, and what's more, I felt as if other people were there experiencing it with me,

too. I wasn't just standing in a crowd, apart, I was somehow together with them, and I liked it. I had recently discovered that my greatest weakness was feeling both apart from people and feeling at the same time as if my body were an extension of theirs. I think it's because I had always felt everything too much. My senses extended in a fantastically wide circle around me and everything I felt made me sad. D had the same problem of feeling too much but she had a different way of handling it. D went out, while I went in. We had both always been that way. I always thought there was something wrong with me, not being like my sister, not being able to blow off steam, unwind, run loose, but as I stood with all the partiers grouped around the fire, I could see how it might not be a weakness after all. I was apart and the same. I was the bodies standing over the fire and I was me, standing apart, watching them. Kale stepped away from D and joined me. "Why are *you* staring at the fire?" He asked.

I said, taken aback, "Oh, I just got caught up in it."

"Me too," he said.

"I just can't get it out of my head. It seems to sound the way flesh might sound, you know, if it were burning."

A red-headed Punky Brewster with a gap between her front teeth said, "Morbid much?" and so I walked away. Whitesnake and Edward Scissorhands followed me. We made it back to the river and even though I was cold, I followed Whitesnake's example and took off my shoes and stepped out into the water.

"I see you met Jake," Edward Scissorhands said, referring to Whitesnake. "I'm glad." Edward Scissorhands took off his claws, his shirt. His upper body gleamed in the dark. "He's a good guy. I'm glad he's been looking after you because some of these

guys..." He laughed and took off his pants.

I was confused for a second until he rushed out into the river, waist-deep and ducked his head underwater. Without invitation, the stripper and Punky Brewster pulled off their clothes and rushed out into the water. The clown malingered on the shore, struggling with his floppy clown shoes, wondering what to do with his nose. When I felt a tug on my hand, I was surprised it was not Whitesnake, but Kale. He led me away from the splashing, shrieking swimmers to the other side of the bridge and slowly took off all his clothes. I wasn't sure anymore where I was. I stripped off my sweater and t-shirt and unclasped my cheap department store bra. When I lowered my pants, I caught Whitesnake's reaction out of the corner of my eye. He opened his mouth for a second and then lowered his head and walked away, into the darkness.

Wading out into the river with Kale leading me, I was intoxicated and warm; I was only vaguely aware of the pin-prick cold of the river water. The moon hung low, squatting on the skim of the river horizon. Pregnant with light. It seemed then that it was hungry and wanted to devour the sky. The spirits were out; I could feel the air grow thinner and thinner the further out we swam. The bats flocked out of the trees, their small, piercing cries carried on the wind that blew over my head and shoulders, chilling me.

Chapter Ten

D and I lived on her grandfather's land in Monkstown. D came to live there when she was seven and chose Junior over mom, and I moved there when I was twelve, a month after our mother committed suicide. The main house was a farm that had burned down fifty years ago. The derelict barn still stood, alone, in the field. It was a three story barn bunkered into a hill so it had an underbelly we could access on one side. Most of the time the barn stood open, the huge wooden sliding door was hard for me to lift, as it would catch on the rafters and the mechanism was probably bent. After the farmhouse burned, her family invested in a trailer, then later another and another until no one who was born on that spot ever had to leave. Leroy had his own trailer. But since Mom had gone, I had moved in with Leroy, D's older cousin, though he wasn't older by much. He was twenty now and so he only had three years on D, five on me.

There was a dirt road that snaked around our property. In summer, the cousins would run their four-wheelers over that road so fast it looked like a dust storm was chasing them. Down the road from the trailer was where Aunt Rhonda and Uncle Ray lived with J.J. The property was narrower than it was long; forest enclosed it on two sides. Back behind the trailers was the scrap pile, and further past that was the field that opened up to meet the river behind the pines and white birches. The barn sat catty-corner on the outer edge of the property line. When I ran out Rhonda's back door I was always confronted with its authority; the structure looked and felt like an homage to a dying age.

Mom was still alive the day they took Junior away the last time, which means that at the time she died, Junior hadn't seen her in five years. When they came and took him, I was staying there with Junior and D, visiting my sister, like I would do sometimes on the

weekends. Mom thought it would be good for us to keep in touch, she kept saying she wanted us to develop a “bond.”

I was playing out behind the scrap pile throwing rope to Ray’s dog, working out some summertime energy in the late afternoon just as the sun was setting on the hill. The dog circled around and around, yipped and lunged. The pain in my upper back hadn’t started yet. D and I were almost getting along. She still said I was a smart-ass and that I was a goody-toe-shoes stuck-up, but sometimes she included me in games of hide-and-seek, or she would bring me a Popsicle from indoors, or she would stick up for me when J.J. called me a cunt. Those days wouldn’t last long; if I had known I would have tried to make the most of the time I had with her, my older, dare-devil sister, because later I would look back and miss those days. It would be soon that the Huffs and Chases would turn her against me and mom. Tell her that we were stuck-up, that I was a brown-noser and mom was worse, an abandoner.

That summer afternoon, Leroy was in the trailer with mom. They were shelling peas that I’d picked straight from the garden that ran between Leroy’s trailer and Rhonda’s. D pushed up to me on her roller-skates; in those days D was almost still a child and I definitely was, picking boogers and splitting my knees open scrambling around in the scrap pile, trying to find shiny things to play with, like a scavenging crow. Rhonda had the radio on country. Clint Black’s voice warbled behind the noise of J.J. and Ray welding behind the shed and the breeze played and flirted with us. I stood on the top of the scrap pile, wielding a metal trailer hitch heavy as iron and daring D to push me off.

“I am Queen of the mountain!” My sister hadn’t begun to move outward yet, away from that innocent center of herself that she later wanted to annihilate.

“I’ll let you have it,” she said, as she lit up a cigarette she had probably stolen from Rhonda. To my surprise, this time she didn’t look around to see if she were about to get caught. She just leaned forward, hanging over her rusted handlebars and puffed. To see her like that, on a girl’s bike with streamers, strawberry shortcake and Disney stickers plastered over the bars, it felt like she had become her own institution. A parody of herself. I would later discover that that was the day that my sister settled into her own breed of lawlessness and decided that she was better off playing her own God.

I was reckless then. I skittered over the jutting metal as fast as I could. I felt like a water lizard slithering over rocks in an effortless dance to gain control of my position.

Our mother had been laying around in a blue fog, on the couch, or in her bed. She had begun taking up conversations with Junior’s father, of all people, though he wasn’t in the house, God knew where he was. Leroy said the last he heard he was in jail. The last time he got out of prison, Ray belted him across the back of the head with a toaster and he slumped on the ground shaking and crying before heading back out into the night with a few provisions and we never saw him again.

Mom always found a way to make it rain, even on the sunniest day. While she was negative and sometimes cruel, she was compassionate and gentle and she was tender with us. It was like she understood us in a way that no other adult ever had. She knew we were ragged and lonely and wandering and that we were catching up with our adult selves too quickly to process the change. She knew we were rough around the edges and didn’t feel that it were necessary to be princesses who waited around to be saved. Me and my sister knew then that there were no saviors in the world. We found that out the last time Junior got hauled off to jail. We prayed in the field behind the trailer that night, under the soft

enchantment of glow bugs and the chirping of crickets, a handful of scattered stars. We spoke to God. D swayed back and forth. I think she was ten then, which would have made me eight-years-old. Old enough to take a shot at God to see if it paid off.

That night, Ray had lit up the brush pile. He and J.J. and Leroy had gone around trimming the trees around the property, the limbs that might fall on the houses, the limbs that were dead. As we laid in the grass, our bodies touching, we heard a loud hoop.

“Yee-ha!” Ray said. Ray was younger then and the crease between his eyes hadn’t settled yet into a hard line of anger and his eyes were still focused and when we talked to him, we felt like he could hear us. Whereas later, he was a shelled-up man, living in a prison body because he couldn’t speak and so his eyes smoldered and flared and raged because they tried to tell the story that his tongue could not.

Dennis, Treat, and Leroy joined Ray around the brush pile and they took turns throwing empty beer cans into the fire while they passed around a joint. We could see their antics where they were standing behind the shed and to the right of Rhonda’s trailer. All of the wildness went on back there. All of the frenzy.

“You girls want hot dogs?” Ray yelled. We hunkered down in the grass, trying not to be seen.

“Go ahead,” D whispered to me.

“Our father, who art in heaven—”

“Cat got your tongues?”

“Shut up Ray, we’re busy!” D yelled. I leaned away from her. Her pinched face was tear-stained and swollen in the moonlight. The dogs across the river bayed and that set our dog, Tracer, to howling. She had never told Ray to shut up before. She was angry.

Hell, I was angry. We both felt, at the time, that the adults were getting us into all kinds of messes and then mocking our efforts to get ourselves out.

“Our father, who art in heaven—”

“Well I’ve got two hot dogs here with your names on them.” Ray said. “Get off your asses if you want ‘em, or we’ll eat ‘em.”

D stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Can’t you let us just get out this goddamn prayer?” She said.

All the boys crowded around the fire went “ooo” and slapped Ray. “You think you can handle her or you need me to get your back,” J.J. said, grinning and belching loudly into the night.

At that moment, time sped up and I lost sight of D. The first thing I saw was a running blaze of red hair and green swimsuit tackle J.J. She had taken such a running jump that she did push him down. When she had him on the ground, she slapped his face a few times and spit in it, screaming, “You take that back!”

“Get off me!” he yelled, trying not to sound scared, realizing that he was being beaten up by a girl, a girl who was a few years younger than he was. “I can’t fight back!”

The guys laughed and whooped and whistled while J.J. took a few punches from D’s tiny fists. Rhonda and Marie ran out of the trailer with curlers in their hair. “What in the devil are you doing?”

“I’m beating the shit out of J.J.” She said. “What does it look like I’m doing.”

In actuality, D hadn’t really hurt him much, other than his pride. No one separated them, just let D wear herself out until she cried and Rhonda picked her up and held her against her chest.

“You are going to be a terror,” Rhonda said in an uncharacteristic kind voice. “A real terror.” She wiped away D’s tears.

“When is daddy going to come home?”

Everyone around the fire fell silent. I watched sparks shoot up into the sky. Leroy took a long pull from his Bud and lowered his eyes. “I didn’t hear about that,” he said.

“Shut up now, she’s just calming down.” Rhonda heaved a tired, swollen-faced D into Marie’s arms and told her to take her into the trailer and put her to bed. She turned to Leroy and frowned. “I weren’t going to tell you until I knew more, but Liz just got a call today. He’s up county.”

Leroy and my father were close. My father was a wanderer and a thief. He knew the way things worked and he bent them to his own ends. But he wasn’t smart enough to cover his tracks, and for that they had been closing in on him. He had this dream of scoring big; he wanted underworld clout; he wanted to be on top and not in that makeshift trailer park.

“Fraud?” Leroy asked.

“Yeah.” Rhonda pulled out a Virginia Slim and lit it. From where I stood by the corner of the trailer, I could see her profile made more dramatic, more grotesque, by the fire. “Liz is losing it.” Ray scratched his crotch, sneered, as if someone had stolen his good time.

“Should we be looking after her?” Leroy asked. Even then, Leroy was responsible, maybe more responsible than anyone else in the family. He had always been close with my parents, seeing them as his parents, almost, because his father Randall was non-existent and his mother Faye had been killed by a man who had also raped her.

“We’re gonna have to.” Rhonda shifted her enormous body. From where I stood I could hear her breathe—short, raspy breaths punctuated by strained pauses. Then, she straightened and sobered. Her tone was down-to-business. “Ray, you move that cot into the living room and get me bedding. Leroy, you remove all the usual from the medicine cabinet, under the sink. Make sure you look under her mattress and through her drawers. Razorblades, bits of rope, anything. J.J., you come with me.” Rhonda heaved her body around and saw me standing there, clutching the side of the trailer like it were my mother’s hand. From the look on her face, I knew she hadn’t wanted me to hear any of it, hadn’t wanted me to be there.

There were many moments in my childhood where I felt I had been erased and that night was one of the biggest. The family stepped around me as if they were large ships and I were an invisible island they were trying not to run aground on.

“What are you doing, standing there?” Rhonda barked.

I didn’t reply. I wanted a hot dog.

“This is grown up business. Git!” She shooed me towards the trailer that my mother wanted to die in. As I walked across the grass, I mumbled in the sweetest tone I could muster: “Our father, who art in heaven...” But God had already turned a deaf ear to me.

But that was passed, and after I skinned the deer, I had begun to see death everywhere, on my hands, on the walls, in the starlings pecking the frozen grass, in the chill of the morning air and I was afraid for my sister at the same time that I hated her. I hadn’t forgiven her for the ice fishing shack incident and I never did. What I did do is stopper all of my rage because, while I didn’t know how I was going to get her back yet, I

knew that when I did, my mom and I would be avenged. And so I waited. I watched. I watched as she would run away and come back, as she snorted cocaine in the bathroom of Leroy's trailer, the door open just a crack so I could see her reflection in the mirror, I watched as she bit Kale's neck in broad daylight, a dangerous vampire with a death wish. And I waited while she began to relax into a state of ease, unsure of what exactly I was going to do—if anything—about the hatred that had begun to well up inside me.

But, as much as I was made sick by my budding hatred of her, I was afraid for her. Part of me agreed with Leroy when he said that D was getting herself into danger by running around. Since I knew a little better than he about where she was going, there was even more reason to think that she had stepped into the deep-end of a night-life that may soon become all too real. And she had maybe even been lucky that so far she hadn't been forced into a grim acceptance of what that darkness can bring, unless she had not been lucky and we just couldn't read it on her face because she'd gotten too good at hiding her emotions behind a veil of shallow disguises masquerading as moods.

Once we finally got D back she announced she was moving into Junior's old trailer with Kale. It happened the following Saturday, after we'd eaten the last of the venison stew and Leroy had strung up a few rabbits in the barn. I hadn't skinned a rabbit yet, but Leroy said I would do fine. The only thing he complimented me on, my skinning.

She shouted out the screen door to me that dinner was ready. Inside, the trailer was not-quite-dark, still holding onto the last of the day, though outside, the sun shone bright; it was summer. D had made beans and hot dogs. Kale played Super Mario Bros. I could hear the blip blip of Mario from the kitchen. Eventually, we all took our plates and sat

down. Leroy liked to eat family style; mom used to say it was because he wanted to feel like he *had* a family and I remember being really sad about that when she told me, like I had taken my family for granted.

“Cornbread?” D held the pan out with an oven mitt and did not meet my eyes. My sister made very good cornbread. I liked to daub it with raspberry jam. I took a medium-sized piece and rooted around in the fridge for the jam.

“Did Hathaway plant all that broccoli yet?”

“Ugh. Leroy, why do you always ask me about the farm?” D spread margarine over her cornbread. “It’s like you can’t think of anything else to talk about.” She laughed. Me and Kale did not. Leroy looked down at his plate. It reminded me of when we were kids and Leroy admired D. Thought she was some sort of gymnast, mathematician angel. Ray used to kid him that the two were “kissing cousins” but he would scrunch up his face, D would say “ew!” and he would retreat into Rhonda’s trailer and not come out until all of the adults stopped teasing him. They couldn’t help it, mom said. He followed her around, tried to hold her hand. “You’d think she was the older one, the way he’s carrying on. Like a big sister,” my mom said. She knew then, as I do now, that D always carried with her the authority of age. Even when she was a toddler, she commanded respect. Leroy spooned beans into his mouth and looked at no one. I think he still admired D, I just didn’t quite understand what it was about her that was so admirable.

Maybe he just wanted to remain in her sphere of influence; there was something about D that sparkled, the way a tin can might glint in the sun after you’ve shot it full of holes.

“This is good,” I said. I sopped the bean juice up with the cornbread.

“Good thing ‘cause soon you all will be cooking for yourselves most nights.” She sat backwards on her chair and strummed the fingers of her left hand on the table while she sucked on her fork.

“What’s that?” Leroy always wore the face of concern. He was a tweedy man, not handsome, but not ugly. He had a colorless disposition and creases around his eyes. He looked older than he was but he hadn’t retained the real world experience of a wise man or a sage, and so he just shuffled around the house in his boxer shorts and stared absently out windows and drove to and from work, mechanically, and I guess worked while he was there, too.

“I decided Kale and me are gonna move into the old trailer.” Out the kitchen window, the one over the sink, the other trailer stretched out like a long arm trying to shake out at the pit. It had been empty for a year. Rhonda grumbled that they still had to heat it, to keep the pipes from freezing in the cold. I skirted around it like it were a testament to my mother’s sane past. While my mother never was sane, when we lived in that trailer, we could at least pretend she was. That was the extent of our childhood: hoping and pretending. I fell in love with a dying dream.

“You decided?” Leroy was angry. While I never understood the complexities of his relationship to D, I did know that he tried to keep her close, wanted to be intimate with her—not in a sexual way—but in the way of love, and she tried her damndest to break free from his familial affections. “I’m the one who’s in charge here,” he said. It had a hollow effect and D snorted while she took her and Kale’s plates and put them in the sink.

“I’m the one in charge,” he repeated. I sensed a coming storm. The day was sunny and the temperature was up. It would be another scorcher. It had been so hot those past few July days that when I stood on the back porch and gazed out across the east field, the dry stalks of timothy and wheat brazen and rattling dry and gold in the sun, I imagined one good outburst of passion and the whole thing would spark up in a blaze. Leroy was like that. Hell, D too. I felt I were the body of water that oozed and undulated and surrounded their fire islands and squelched the flames, as my mother had once done. Though she had her own fires that raged uncontrolled for years, she was still the peacemaker of the family. My gentle mother who cried in blue dresses and wouldn’t get off the couch to save her life.

In a strange way, Leroy was jealous of Kale. I didn’t understand Leroy’s attitudes in love; he had a girlfriend named Meredith when he was a sophomore and he had asked out dozens of others, but since his senior year, it almost seemed like he had exited the dating arena and gone inward, trying to untangle a lover from within his own soul. One day I caught him crying on the back porch. It was a gray day and the sky spit rain absently. It was cold and I had gone out there to find him because I needed a hammer for the birdhouse I was making and couldn’t find where he’d put it.

He stood on the edge of the platform, facing the treeline, the thin band of river steel gray in the distance. He didn’t hear me coming; I guess the atmospheric noises made everything muffled, like a world wrapped in soft cotton. When I touched his shoulder and he turned to me, I wished I hadn’t had to see his face. It was swollen and his eyes were red. He sniffed a few times and dried his eyes on his sweatshirt, told me to go back inside. I remember thinking at the time that Leroy had encountered his own demons of

loneliness and abandon and broke under the sadness of that weight. Now that I saw his face again after D broke the news to him, I think I was dead-on; he never conquered those demons of loss, those phantoms circling his heart like ghostly scavengers trying to pick meat off the bone. I don't know why I thought Leroy was so fragile, so delicate, but I knew that he was. And as much as I kind of hated him, I felt sorry for him too. It seemed as if he felt that D and me were his last chance at a family, a last chance at happiness. I don't know why I felt that but I swear it's true. He wanted a *normal* family; he said it all the time. He threw that word around like a life preserver.

And now, sitting at the kitchen table, Leroy was more downtrodden.

"I don't want you moving in there with him." It sounded like he were trying to stand his ground. Leroy was a man who stood on shifting sands and was constantly trying to put down roots.

"Tough," D said. Kale's eyes widened but he remained silent. Kale was most usually silent. He had a way of blending into the fabric of conversation so that you knew he was there, but his contribution was made in the way of glances and subtle gestures, the way his eyes stormed over when he was angry.

"You're a minor; you should be living with your guardian, not moving in with your boyfriend." Leroy stood up and walked into the kitchen. He wanted to get distance from the heat of the moment, I think. "Am I the only one worried about what the judge is going to think?"

"Yeah, probably." D was in one of her bitchier moods that day. I couldn't quite understand it, but it seemed as if there was something underneath the veneer of their biting words that described a darker conflict, something that neither of them had yet

unveiled, but that lie lurking underneath the surface of their interactions, waiting to spring up and steal the show.

“I give up.” Leroy threw up his hands and slammed the fridge door open. He cracked a can of Bud and took a long swig. He was trying to look like a man, but he wasn’t doing a very good job.

“Can you throw me one of those?” Kale asked. Leroy and Kale had a strange relationship too; they respected each other, but that’s about where it ended. They didn’t really speak to each other, except when it was necessary, like now, but there was a silent understanding they had that they would be civil and supportive of each others’ aims. Every now and then they got each others’ back, and it made me happy to see because neither of them had many people rushing to defend them from the harshness of the world.

The can of Bud zinged through the air and Kale caught it with one hand.

D stirred up the mix by throwing some of her stuff in a clementine crate, taking care to do it loudly so that Leroy would notice.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Packing.”

I thought Leroy’s forehead vein was going to pop out of his head. “The judge named me as your guardian. And I say you’re not moving. We’re going to stay here, under one roof, like a normal family.”

“God, open your eyes, Leroy. We’re not a family.”

Leroy didn’t respond. He walked out of the room, hiding his eyes. I waited a few minutes then followed him. I stood outside the bathroom door, feeling claustrophobic

with the narrow hallway paneling closing in on me, hearing the soft sounds of his stifled cries.

Chapter Eleven

When I woke up that morning, it felt like my back was on fire and being stabbed by hooked blades; I nearly cried out, but I bit my fist instead. I didn't need inquiries. I didn't need any of it. I was already mad at D and perplexed by Leroy and in love with Kale. I didn't need any more complications. The pain was excruciating; it traveled up and down in two vertical lines at my shoulder blades as if a strong witch were stirring an intoxicating potion with swords and running them back and forth, around and around, on the soft flesh of my back. The pain was skeletal too. There was a sharp piercing of flesh but behind it was a dull ache that reverberated throughout my entire body, making me crazy with the implication of its staying power.

I couldn't get out of bed for a while. I laid there with tears running down my face, remembering a quotation my history teacher had muttered about how Christian ascetics believed that self-torture could bring them closer to God. I felt around for God, but he wasn't in the room.

When I finally managed to stand, I cried into the soft skin of my clothes, muffling the sound so that I could maintain secrecy. Ever since I was little, I never liked for anyone to see me cry. I liked to be strong, like Dad. I saw crying as my own personal failure and it made me feel that I was like my mom. Leave it to me to develop a bond with the wrong parent: the one who leaves.

It was a Saturday. Rain was pattering gently on the grass. Outside, a corner of my window screen was glistening with droplets where a large spider had created a web. I knew Kale was sleeping somewhere, probably with my sister, though they hadn't moved into the other trailer yet. I had had my fair share of awkward bedtimes with D and Kale,

since me and D shared a bed. Usually they just laid the couch cushions and sleeping bags on the floor and sprawled out together in the living room. D wasn't the cuddling sort; I would often stroll out there early in the morning with my breakfast cereal and see her sleeping with her back to him. I didn't understand then why they needed to sleep next to each other at all.

But that day, the day I woke up with my back on fire with pain, Kale and D were both gone and it was just me and Leroy, though Leroy hadn't come home the night before and I'm not sure if he had sneaked in at some point during the night or early morning. He had been going out at night lately. D said that he had a girlfriend, but I really didn't think so. 'If he had a girlfriend, he would have told us,' I said. 'Maybe she's married,' she said.

I really didn't think so. I couldn't articulate it at the time, but what I meant to say to her was: Leroy doesn't seem happier. If he had a girlfriend, he would be happy about it. I knew Leroy. I might not like Leroy, but I knew him. He liked to be in love. He liked to feel loved. And I hadn't seen him with a glint in his eye or a spring in his step. In fact, I had seen him sob and wrench his hands over a box of spilled Captain Crunch.

"He's taking it really hard," Rhonda said, referring to our mother. "She was his favorite, you know." I knew about my mother's relationship with her youngest brother. They were very close. Rhonda drew her cards closer to her chest, eyeballing Ray while she stole a swig of Jim Beam. The family had noticed Leroy's sadness, which was similar to my mother's sadness, before she went off the deep end, that is.

"He'll get over it." Ray threw two red chips into the pot and belched so loudly I jumped.

“He and Jane always had their moods. Like Grandpa Silas. It’s in the family, that sickness of the mind.” Rhonda pointed to her head as she said this, as if we needed directions. My aunt Marie sat cross-legged on the couch smoking a joint, rolling her eyes. I knew my aunt Marie’s opinion; she didn’t need to say it.

“It’s a weakness that they have,” she told me one day over canning scapes. “Weak-minded.” I cut the last scape and it fluttered down into the paper bag with its curly cousins. At the moment, she kept her mouth shut, though it was a rarity, and dozed into and out of sleep while making various mocking facial expressions from the couch while Ray, Rhonda, J.J., Dennis, and Mike played Seven-Card Stud. Marie had wandered in to use the washer/dryer but sat down and smoked a joint and hadn’t moved since.

“You don’t visit your mother enough.” Rhonda pointed her long, manicured fingernail at me. She jabbed a jeweled peacock in my face. Rhonda was always point and blame, never speak and listen.

“I went last weekend.” It had been just me and Leroy but I was the only one who did any talking. The day room was bright and sunny, but in an antiseptic sort of way as if the people who took my mother had filtered out her sunlight to give her in medicinal doses, like happiness. When we got there, she was piecing together a puzzle but she said she wanted to kill herself. Leroy cast a glance at an orderly. Maybe he was replaying his crisis intervention plan:

- 1.) Remove anything that could be used as a weapon
- 2.) Remove anyone else who could be harmed
- 3.) Try to ground her to reality

- 4.) Speak in soothing tones
- 5.) Try to talk her out of it

It was that last bit, number 5, that he had been working on since her last psychotic break. I know he felt like the blame was his, because the day I found her unconscious on the kitchen floor with the bottle of pills was the day that he had been lax on watching her. They all blamed him for that one. Strangely enough, I didn't. Everyone in the family saw my mother as fragile, as a six-foot tall woman infant who needed constant intervention to save her from herself. While I wasn't sure if she could survive on her own, given her death lust and her psychotic wonderland, I knew she made her own choices. Even when I was a kid I knew that. It was Leroy who didn't seem to grasp it.

As I walked across the bedroom floor, the pain in my back increased. I tried to visualize—something coach Henderson had told us to do when we got up to the goal when I had played soccer freshman year—except instead of visualizing success, a straight shot, I imagined lying on a beach in the warm sunshine. That's what got me through those first few weeks.

It was another Saturday morning when I woke up in a pool of my own blood. It was a surreal thing, like murder at a carnival. I had managed to pass out in my bed early in the morning, around 5am, after taking a handful of aspirin. The pain had gotten so bad that I was biting my paperback copy of *1984* to keep from screaming aloud. The book tasted bad, but in my moments of agony I grasped at whatever I had on hand to quiet the storm of pain that ravaged me.

Pain is a funny thing. You are aware of its presence. Like an unwelcome friend, it sits down at your table and refuses to leave. You are forced to bear it. Whether you feel you can survive it or not, you usually do, and afterward, you almost forget its biting intensity, its nearly revelatory power. Around 3am I crouched on my bedroom floor, holding my shoulder blades with trembling hands. My knees and legs trembled too, as did my heart. I remembered what Grandpa Silas had said about Jesus. That he had suffered for days. That they had driven nails through his hands and feet. That he was made to feel ashamed. I wondered, as I bore another wave of pain: was my suffering for a greater good—or even *any* good—like Jesus'? That was when I began to cry. I didn't cry when my father left. I didn't cry when my mother was taken away, not any of the times she was taken away, even when I was seven. I didn't cry when I broke my ankle when I was twelve and I didn't cry when Rhonda hit me across the back with a 2x4 when I was thirteen.

But there, crouched on the cold linoleum floor, clutching at my back that was searing with unreal pain, I began to sing a silent crying song. My mouth moved. My lips trembled. I sniffed. But I didn't make a sound. I cried silently in that dark room for what seemed like hours but in reality was probably forty-five minutes until I forced myself to get up, take some aspirin, and try to sleep.

I was so tired from the crying that my tiredness overcame my pain. (Maybe the aspirin helped too.) And I fell asleep under the covers and slept well.

I woke up in a puddle of wet that formed behind my back. Upon waking, it just felt warm and fluid, as if I had slipped partially back into a womb—the way a warm

bathub feels womb-like and maternal. It was a second later that I recognized the wrongness, that something just wasn't right. I didn't want to move because the pain had returned and I didn't want to anger it further; keep it happy; keep it at bay. So I felt behind my head and back with my fingers. When I drew them back in front of my face, they were running with blood. I didn't panic, but I became concerned. I sat upright in the bed, and got dizzy while doing so. I looked back where I had been laying; there was so much blood. Am I going to die? How much blood can a human being lose before it is important to intervene? What was I going to do?

I took it one excruciating step at a time. Eventually, I was able to find a substantial amount of gauze in mom's ransacked suicide kit. (We called it that because she kept a little tackle box of supplies that she used for cutting and that Leroy used sometimes in emergencies to keep her alive before the paramedics arrived, if he called them at all.) I didn't have time to wonder at the irony, and I didn't care. I brought the tackle box into my bedroom and shut the door. No one was home anyway, but I always played it safe. Beach towels still hung from my curtain rod; we hadn't gotten around to making me curtains yet. One was a funky pattern of flamingos wearing sunglasses. The other was the California Raisins surfing. I managed to clean up the wound as best as I could. Using two mirrors, I was able to see what was going on: two bones had erupted, like teeth, through the skin of my back. They were vertical and slightly curved, like white parentheses. I began to feel that I was looking into a fun house mirror; that my eyes deceived me; that I was walking through a strange dream.

I held the roll of two inch gauze in my right hand while I held the end down against my back with the other. I rolled it around myself. Around and around. I began to

feel better; I began to feel as if by binding myself I was lessening the pain. It felt good to strain against the gauze. It was relieving and comforting to know that I was safe and encased.

After I was completely wrapped up and I was fairly certain the bleeding was contained, I took a long look at my bed. At quick glance out of the corner of my eye, it resembled a murder scene. My history teacher had once told us of how in the middle ages women were prized for their hymens—which proved they were virgins—and that after a marriage ceremony, the husband and wife would have sex, which would theoretically break the woman's hymen, causing her to bleed. The husband would then take the bloody sheet down to the banquet hall and show it to his guests.

“See, my wife was a virgin.” He would say. And they would all cheer.

“But,” he said. “What do you think would happen if it were discovered on her wedding night that she wasn't a virgin? In other words, what if there is no blood to show?” He let us make a few off-the-mark guesses before he said, “They would get their hands on a cock from the barnyard, slaughter it, and smear the blood on the sheets.” I remember being disturbed by this display of unnecessary brutality. “And then the husband would show the sheets to his guests.”

As I looked at my bed, the first thing that I thought of was that antiquated tradition. But, as I stared at the bloody mess, I wondered, if that were the case, then, who is the cock and who is the virgin?

For the first two weeks, I had to change the bandages three times a day. I brought gauze rolls to school and changed them during lunch period in the bathroom stalls. I

rolled the bloody gauze up in plastic bags and stuffed them into my book bag. I had to carry a few of my books to make room for them and as I walked home after school I worried that people understood why and whispered about me as I walked by. While I never really talked much before, I talked even less now. Everyone was a potential spy. Everyone had a stake in seeing me humiliated. Everyone was better friends with D than with me. I walked around the high school like a living ghost, haunting here and there, thinking only of how, when, and where I could sop up the blood and refresh my bindings.

After that mess, things began to get a little better. The pain lessened until it was just a dull throb that I could quiet with aspirin and mindless activity, usually playing Mario. And the bleeding subsided. What had begun as a flurry of bandages and smeared sheets settled into a ritualistic folding and unfolding, wrapping, binding, and concealing of wings.

Once the bleeding stopped, I began to desire something else—something less, surgical—with which to bind my wings. I waited a few days before I dared enter my mother's old room, the room that D tried to inhabit after she got taken away. There was a dress in the closet, a blue dress, one that I had seen my mother wearing in pictures, one that I had seen hanging there, hanging from a crochet-covered hanger. My mother wore that dress in a photograph; the shot was taken in the late sixties, at her prom. She didn't stand next to my father, but she looked in the photo as she did now, except for the eyes. Now her eyes were mad and the irises seemed to shiver in their whites, the way a beaten child's eyes tremble right before he cries.

The dress was cerulean blue, a brazen oceanic color. In the photo, she and her date stood next to the punchbowl and smiled into the camera. My mother didn't show her

teeth when she smiled. In fact, she didn't look happy when she smiled. It always looked like a gesture she made on behalf of someone else, and it usually was. She gave that smile and stood in that dress that scrunched up at her breasts but that nonetheless made her eyes—her true eyes, not her mad eyes—pierce through the photo. It had a scoop neck and a taffeta ribbon of the same material cinching the waist and a bubble skirt that flared out like a princess' ball gown.

Now that my mother wasn't here, I desired that dress more than ever. When I had been younger I had wandered into my mother's closet when she was in the bathroom shaving and crouched underneath her dresses and skirts. The blue dress was so elegant, so smooth and rich. We had heard the story many times: mother had sewn the dress from a pattern she sent away for in the Sears & Roebuck catalog. She bought the pattern, fabric, thread and other notions from money she earned waiting tables at Sonny's Restaurant. She had been torn between two different fabrics, the beautiful one and the less expensive one.

I imagined my mother in Ames department store fingering bolts of taffeta and weighing the pros and cons in her mind. She may have gained the attention of a store clerk who asked her if she could help find anything.

"No, I'm just looking," she had said. My mother must have lowered her eyes. I often wonder if that were the moment when she recognized her class, if she understood how she was seen. But, if our mother was ashamed of her family and their poverty, she didn't show it. She went home that day with the expensive fabric and cut and pinned and sewed until her eyes grew tired under the flickering light of the kitchen bulb. When she showed us where she had made the dress, in front of the window in the trailer that now

belongs to Rhonda, I noted the proximity to the window. In the daytime, she said, she would sit and sew and smoke, every now and then stopping long enough to look out the horizontal trailer window at the starlings that pecked the birdseed out of the snow. It had been February when she had made the dress for Monkstown High's Valentine's Day dance, which was basically their prom. It was her senior year and she was going to make an impression, she said. She had spent autumn reading fashion magazines at the library after school. Huddled up in a big leather chair in front of the fireplace that the librarian's assistant kept coming into the room to stoke. Outside, the snow fell and my mother absorbed herself in rich fantasies and imagined her world spun on the crystal dais and everything in it sparkled. It was far from her understood reality: that the world was rusty and broken and that the only beauty in it for her was what she could salvage from someone else's castoff pile. This my mother understood. But she only understood it in the part of her mind that experienced dreams and sensed far-off danger. The part of her mind that was privy to alien information: the sound made by the unfolding of a flower. A taste of cloud. The way a gust of rage feels when it blows up on you.

And so our mother continued to dream. She worked tirelessly on the dress. With her sister Rhonda's help, she was able to fit the bodice expertly—my mother was an excellent seamstress—and she cinched the waist with ruching and gathered a bow in the back, just like the one the happy and smiling model wore in the McCall's pattern photograph.

Unfortunately for our mother though, soon after the photograph of her was taken, her date—who had been dared to take her out as a result of a stupid bet—splashed punch on the skirt of her dress as a finishing touch to his cruel prank. Maybe that's why she

wasn't smiling in the photograph: she knew it was coming, that it was always coming. After a certain age—and I'm not sure what changed it for her—she started waiting for the ironical punchline to every event, just assumed the joke would always be on her. She took to making fun of herself preemptively to dissuade attackers. That only worked for a decade though. Then she began to resort to attacking herself directly and physically. So began the cutting and the suicide attempts. It wasn't all because of the dress. She had suffered childhood traumas. She had dealt with a difficult family who perpetuated violence and rewarded the secret keepers. It just seemed that, for my mother, the entirety of her emotional dive from relative stability into the pit of insanity centered around that dress as metaphor. It stood out in her memory, in all our memories, as something to which we could point to and say, "There. There is an event with a symbol. A bold color. And that event can be said to describe her. At least describe her descent into madness." For that's what it did. The dress stayed in her closet, still stained, all those years. It was something beautiful that reminded her of pain but that was also a symbol of her hope for a richer future. When she began to lose touch with reality she would pull the dress off the hanger and hold it up to her weak, brittle body and ask my sister and me in turn if we would care to dance.

"But you promised you would dance with me, my prince," and she would drag one of us, usually me because I was slower on the uptake and had slower reflexes, to the center of the bedroom and force one of our hands to her back and the other to clasp hers, chest-high, and pushed us into the flow of a complicated dance—complicated because she made erratic movements and announced steps after they happened and switched back and forth whether she would lead or follow.

I sucked in my breath and played along. “Whatever is the matter with me.” I took her hand. “I would be delighted to join you in a dance, Christine.” That night, the night before she was taken away for the last time, she pulled me into a dance that continued out onto the wooden platform, under a sea of stars.

“Did you order this starlight for me?” She asked me, exaggerating batting her eyelashes and lifting her dress a few inches off the ground with her left hand.

“I would do anything for you, princess.” I shuffled around with my mother and looked up at the stars, her thin face cradled by the valley of my shoulder. My mother was shorter than me, even then. I tried to squeeze out a few tears, maybe because I was sad, maybe to help break the spell my mother seemed to cast over me and my sister. When she was around the world wasn’t quite the world anymore. It had softer edges and was set to a different musical score. I didn’t want my mother to go insane. I didn’t want to compose her a symphony of empathic responses, gestures, actions. I wanted for my mother to be able to do those things for me. I wanted to be able to come home from a really bad day at school, or come home with menstrual cramps and for my mother to say, “I’m so sorry honey. Let me get you a heating pad and some Tylenol.” But my mother never did that. Dad did. But after they both were gone, Leroy took over. Yes, Leroy took good care of us, but it wasn’t the same. I would always have an ache because when I needed my mother she was unavailable to me. I once had a dream that my mother was a body of water, a glacial lake, with bottomless depths and all around the perimeter were posted signs and gates reading “Danger!” and “Do not cross!” and “Marked.” A handful of old men had set their shacks on the ice and doddered from their cabins for social calls while

the fish weren't biting. I wanted to join with my mother there in the arctic winter, but the obstacles were too great. I couldn't do it.

As I pulled the dress from the closet, I saw a flash of a vision: my mother stretched out on a cold metal table, her body a frozen lake shaped into woman form. There were men there, in the room, and they shone hot lamps on her breasts, her thighs, her cheeks, her shins, and watched, took notes while moisture began to drip from the surface of her body. My mother was melting! Inside her thighs she held the coral reefs of old, and along her ribcage was nestled the ruins of a Spanish galleon. Seaweed clotted behind where her eyes should be, giving her a scared, green-eyed glare. The water was unnatural blue and it began to thaw. A hairline crack appeared from stem to stern and then a shot rang out like the crack of a whip and my mother poured out, landscapes and seascapes shifting, my mother becoming volume-less and transparent. Oozing off the metal table and disappearing in a cold wet bubble that gradually shrank into oblivion.

When I came back to the room, I was wearing the blue dress and looking in the full-length mirror. I hadn't noticed I had a figure until that moment. I was still straight all the way down, but though it was straight, there were small curves that made me hope that I would one day be beautiful, like my mother.

Chapter Twelve

D's aunt Marie lived in the trailer park down by the dump. You had to walk up a hill to get to it. The farmland stretched out on both sides of the road and there was a soft smoldering sun in the icy sky. I pulled my scarf up around my mouth and nose and walked, not remembering when I had last been to her house. It must have been at least three years ago. I was wearing a cast on my leg. I remember because her one-hundred-and-fifty pound Rottweiler wouldn't stop licking it. It wasn't much further. Cars every now and then passed me by, spinning snow up with their tires. It had been snowing since last night and the road I walked on was virgin snow. I went over in my head what I was going to tell Aunt Marie about the reason for my visit. "Don't tell her the whole truth," I thought to myself. The woman couldn't be trusted. I thought of the sprouting nubs that I had bound with gauze just a few hours before, Saturday morning, before cereal. As I passed the roll of gauze around my body and my wings drew closer and closer to my skin, I thought of how I was no longer bleeding. I took the gauze in one hand, took up a pair of scissors, and snipped the gauze. I folded my secret, like a paper message swan, into my heart. It was a hard secret to bear; I had been holding onto it for three weeks now.

At night I dreamed that I walked out of the house with my wings unbound and I strode out into the glare of the bright October day. In the dream, I had no awareness that I had wings. To me, they were invisible, and I thought I was a normal girl, walking. But after several miles, I began to take notice that when I approached, people dragged their lawn chairs, beers, and blankets out into their front yards; they would sit and watch me walk by, as if I were a one-woman parade.

“What are you looking at?” I said in an uncharacteristic attempt at confrontation. I released my claws, which were long black daggers, like D’s fingernails.

When they spoke, the words came out of their mouths like objects and so I was aware only of a visual poetry that fluidly spoke to me through the sudden appearance of harps, Jesus figurines, and sunken ships that drifted through the cold October air and towards my face. When I crested the hill, an angel and a pole dancer wafted towards me. They seemed to be doing a strange dance. As I walked down the middle of the road, they changed positions. They conversed. The angel pushed the stripper aside and straddled her pole. The stripper took up the angel’s harp and played eerie, subterranean music that tickled my ears and touched my soul. As soon as I reached my destination, a wide pier on pilings that looked rotted halfway up, I took each of the miniature apparitions in my hands and we traveled together towards the sea where I stood on the edge of the pier, next to a black boy fishing with an invisible pole, and I kissed them each on the cheek and threw them into the sea. As each of them hurtled headlong into the crashing water, they cursed me, first by name and then by profession. “You are no angel.”

“I agree.”

And then I woke up.

By the time I reached Marie’s place, I had worked the dream over and over in my mind but without coming to any particular conclusions, just a vague understanding that I was grappling with issues of my own purity, possibly reckoning with the idea of my own evil.

“What are you doing here?” was the first thing she said to me. Marie was a gaunt, tall woman who walked bow-legged and was missing a finger on her right hand. She spit and swore like a man and she shuffled cards faster than anyone I had ever seen.

“Can I come in?” I had learned long ago to answer Marie’s questions with a question; if you answer her question, she will find a way to bludgeon you with the stupidity of your answer. Inquiries, general curiosity, she approved of, however.

“Free country.” She stood aside and let me pass. I pulled off my book bag; I felt my wings pinch from where they were splayed against my back. I worried lately that they would get so big that I wouldn’t be able to hide them.

“Want kool-aid? I got some raisins.”

“What flavor?”

“Punch.” The inside of her trailer was bright.

“Can I have it in a glass?” Marie turned and walked into the kitchen. Her legs gumby-like and strange. She belonged more in a western than in that sunny trailer on the outskirts of town. She had just gotten out of jail again, and she looked better-fed than the last time I had seen her.

“I could get used to the food in prison,” she said one night during an electric storm. She played Texas Hold ‘em with Ray and his friends and they compared their favorite dishes. I waited for them to swap jailhouse recipes and show off their tattoos, but they didn’t.

“How long you plannin’ on stayin’? I want to get a few rounds in before lunch.”

My aunt Marie was a straight shot; she had converted her ex-husband's "den" into a gun room. I had been in the room many times, admiring her rifles, semi-automatics, and AR-15, the one that gave me goosebumps to touch.

"Depends: how long will it take you to help me with what I got." I opened my bookbag and pulled out my mother's blue dress. Marie snorted.

"You got balls, bringing that thing in here."

Marie had always been jealous of my mother's dress because she hadn't been talented enough to make one and she hadn't been rich enough to buy one and so she wore a second-hand, long out-of-style dress and got so embarrassed before she got there that she just grabbed her date and fucked him in the car, dress off. I had heard about it many times before. Marie and my mother had never gotten along. They stood on the opposite poles of femininity and, though it was hush-hush, my mother knew—as did I—that Marie didn't play for the same team as my mother anymore. I caught her feeling up a woman with short hair and a studded collar behind the hot dog and fried dough stand at the fair. My mother had apparently caught her when she was in high school, kissing my mother's best friend Julie on the neck and breasts; my mother, Julie, and Marie had gone to the lake, sneaked in around the Long Pond Road so they didn't have to pay, and when my mother was in the woods changing into her suit, Marie had seduced Julie, taken off her shirt, and begun to suckle her with tender lips and a wide smile.

My mother had burst out of the woods because she thought she saw a skunk and caught them lying on the sand, Marie's hands down Julie's pants and her mouth around her right breast. My mother hadn't told me this much, but I had overheard her and Marie fighting about it at the race track in Trinity when I was a young girl. It took me a few

years and a little bit of real-world knowledge before I understood that it meant Marie was a lesbo, but it didn't change my opinion of her; I still hated her.

“Good girl,” Marie said as she pulled the scraps of my mother's dress up to the light. “You fucked it up but good.” Marie was the families' anti-hero. She was the adult who cheered you on when you picked up a joint or got suspended from school. She was the bad influence, the trickster goddess, the trailer-park hyena gone domesticated, partly tame. “Hope you don't be needin' me to fix this. Cause I got a tight closed heart when it comes to your mother's pretties.”

I pulled the skirt out of her hands and said, “I have a few things I need help with.” I paused to give her time to object. She didn't. “I was hoping you could make me a shawl out of this.” I passed the skirt to her and didn't speak. In the frenzy of last night, I had taken out a pair of scissors and contemplated stabbing myself in the chest. But instead I ran into my mother's old room and snatched her blue dress off the hanger. In a moment of crazed intensity, I cut the skirt from the bodice and fell down with it, the blue fabric enveloping me like a sea.

“Measurements?”

“Length or width?”

“Both.”

“Wide enough to cover my back and long enough to wrap around a few times.”

“Little miss proper.” She took a swig of RC Cola and pulled a bag of Cheetos off the counter and tossed it at me. She swaggered over to her treadle sewing machine and sat down. “You said a few things.”

“I want you to make it back into a dress in time for prom.”

“Same dress?”

“A little bit different. Backless. Shorter.”

“Somebody wants a piece of ass.” She sat at the machine with a cigarette dangling out of her mouth. The mole on her left cheek made her look like a 1940s movie star except she wasn’t as beautiful. My aunt had a horse face and sharp rat teeth. When she talked, little flecks of spit would fly through the gaps between the points of her teeth. “Well hurry up, then, pass it to me.” She threaded the fabric underneath the pressure foot with steady ease and she had sewn three of four sides before she spoke again. “What’s this for?”

“I need an excuse to have something nice?” I regretted saying it as soon as the words left my mouth.

“Yeah, you do.” She finished up the other side and passed me the finished rectangle of fabric. “When you live in a trailer and you

“You damn well have a good excuse. People’ll think you’re getting uppity. That you’re too good for them. Like your mother was: sewing fancy patterns and trying to keep up with the styles on Ed Sullivan. Pretending she had a white picket fence and a husband and another half of a child.”

“Will you help me or not?” I must have looked a lot like desperation then, because Marie looked at my face a long time before saying she would help me. Maybe she felt like she were going behind my mother’s back. Maybe she felt like reinventing her insane sister’s dress was like re-writing the past. Maybe she felt that if I went to the prom in a beautiful dress, that it was as if her experience was somehow worth something.

“You have to do something for me.”

I had expected that. “Not cleaning?”

“Yard work. Gardens to weed. Mulch to rake. Things like that. Not to mention you’ll have to buy the thread and whatever hell else you’ll need: buttons, zippers, you name it.”

It seemed as if she was trying to talk me out of it. I felt like Cinderella, and wanted to know why there were no English-speaking mice and birds who were completely devoted to me and would rig up an elaborate sewing contraption to make sure I was the prettiest girl at the dance.

“Sure.” I didn’t mind. My back hurt less now and it was clear that the wings were coming whether I want to or not. It’s that simple. Just accept it. Just accept that I am a freak, like bow-legged Marie.

Chapter Thirteen

When I came home from school that day, Leroy had his head in the sink. He was washing his hair and sobbing. I hadn't gotten used to hearing Leroy cry yet. As far as I was concerned, he was a tough guy who didn't give a shit about broken hearts, rejection, or pain. But, the things I knew about Leroy could be counted on one hand. He was a man who played his cards close to his chest and moved in secret. I like to think it was because he honored the people around him enough to keep his shit to himself but that probably wasn't the case. He probably just felt self-conscious about whatever it was he was keeping hidden. Maybe he felt like it was nobody's business but his own.

I had known that he had a secret for a few months. I can't explain how I knew, just a feeling, I guess. A sense that he was holding something back, something important.

"What's going on?" I asked. He sniffed and poured a plastic cup of water over his head before saying, "Got sap in my hair."

"We've got a shower."

"I know." That was about all I was going to get out of him.

D usually came home with the sun. It was like she was the match that set fire to the sky and brought it crashing down around us in darkness. Today she wasn't going to come home. Nor the next day, or the next. She was living in the other trailer, the one that had been Leroy's and had been vacant for a year. Sometimes Leroy went back over there to drink. He was the only one in the family who didn't want to expose us to drugs and alcohol and the hard, bitter life of adulthood and I guess I appreciated him for that. As Leroy grabbed a hand towel and ruffled his hair dry, I imagined D coiled around Kale,

whispering dirty things into his ear, stretched out on Leroy's bed underneath an unframed skyline of San Francisco.

He ducked his head and avoided my eyes, walked towards his bedroom carrying a box of ho-hos and a can of 7-up. I lingered in the kitchen, trying to decide if I wanted a snack first or if I wanted to go to my bedroom, lock the door, unwrap my wings and let them stretch out and be free. Someone knocked at the barn-side door. We didn't have a breezeway or entryway between the barn and the trailer, but the space in between felt like it belonged to the house, not the outdoors.

"What's up, squirt?" It was Paul's brother, Carson Butler, a good-looking guy: tall, sandy brown hair, piercing blue eyes, strong shoulders, and a killer smile. The guy was good at everything. He had won more MVP awards than anyone at Monkstown High and won more games and meets for his team than practically any other player could boast. Surprisingly, he wasn't boastful.

"What's going on?" I really wanted to know.

"Give these to your uncle." He handed me several cassette tapes and a switchblade. Leroy was never without his switchblade. He carried it like a safety net. Like that kid on Charlie Brown carried around that blanket.

"He's here, you can give them to him yourself."

"I better not." Then he walked back to his souped up mustang (he was a spoiled rich boy), revved the engine, and drove back down the winding dirt road he came in on. Leroy was smashing things. Chucking books against the wall. Knocking over knickknacks. Something glass smashed against the wall. I went into my room, not because I was scared, but because I was giving Leroy his space. But before I did, I removed a few

breakables and cradled them under my armpits and in the crooks of my arms and took them with me. (Mostly pictures in glass frames, my mother's glass angel figurines, I even unplugged her favorite lamp and hid it in the cabinet under the sink.) Leroy wasn't going to smash my mother's things just because he was having a temper tantrum over Carson Butler.

When I reached my bedroom I laid out all of my mother's fragile things and reached into my dresser drawer, the one without handles so you had to root around and find the lip of the drawer and pull even from both sides, and took out the shawl of blue fabric made for me from my mother's dress by Aunt Marie.

I draped it over my desk chair and popped a tape in the cassette player. As I listened to Heart, I stripped off my clothes and stood in front of the full-length mirror that was my mother's and looked at my body bound in gauze. I remembered a spread in National Geographic I had read about mummified bodies found in the Amazon basin. Their teeth were pointed and sharp and their mouths were wide O's frozen in horror. Their skin was leathery and wrinkled. They had been wrapped with cloth from head to toe. Some archaeologist unbound them and examined their preserved bodies—how they were preserved, how they died—and large, sweeping photographs were taken.

As I looked at myself in that rusted mirror that warped my reflection slightly as if I were looking through a dirty window, the image of those mummified corpses came back to me. I think I had even stolen that issue of the magazine from the school library. It was one of the few things I had ever stolen. Look at me, so dead, so well-preserved.

At the time I read the article and studied the graphic photos, this was before I grew wings, I empathized with the corpses more than I identified with the archaeologist. How

they must have felt to finally be set free, to be unwrapped from their bindings, to be allowed to decay and rot the way they were meant to. It was a lot of pressure, being forced to preserve and protect yourself long after you are dead. I imagined those corpses in heaven, looking down on their bodies and lamenting their silent prisons.

As I stood there now in that mirror, I realized I too was a corpse only I was preserving myself. Protecting myself from danger, from the judgments of my culture, as they were merely obeying the edicts of their own.

I slowly and carefully tugged at the buried end of the gauze and pulled. How I longed for my own archaeologist to unloose me, spin me around and around until I became dizzy with the thought of my own freedom. Every revolution I began to feel lighter, more expansive. When it was all said and done, my almost fully-formed wings arced up behind me like a nagging shadow. It felt so good to be set free, but because I kept my wings a secret, because I was afraid of the judgments and insults of everyone around me, I could only let loose in my bedroom with the curtains drawn and the doors locked. Because of this, I paced back and forth in my room, practiced controlling the movements of my wings by isolating the small muscles in the center of my back. After I felt I had fully exercised my freedom, I picked up the blue shawl and wrapped it around myself, hugging my wings tight to my back. Sometimes it seemed like I had two splayed hands supporting me up. When I looked in the mirror now, I didn't see a mummified corpse. I saw my mother looking back at me, pantless and confused.

I encountered Leroy's black eye that night. The river had thawed and the spring peepers were out, chirping in the distance around the trailers. We lived like gypsies, a classmate of mine had said once.

"Shows what you know. Our trailers are permanent," I said.

Sometimes when I walked home down the long road, I looked at the trailers huddled around each other in the distance, like drunks warming themselves around a central trash can fire, and I wondered about us. We weren't an especially loving family. In fact, I had never heard any of my family members, except my mom, tell me they loved me. Nor had I ever heard any of them say those words to each other. I had instead heard biting words and nasty insults and since I was a child I could sense the rage behind our interactions with each other, almost as if we were angry that we had been forced into such close proximity, wanting instead to spread our wings and fly.

When he wandered out to the kitchen, I was doing my math homework on the table by the glare of the overhead light. The curtains weren't drawn and the trailer's interior reflections painted the blackness of the windows though I could still see a few outdoor images: trees, a rusted toilet overgrown with weeds, the dilapidated wood shed. I was surprised he didn't try to cover his black eye. No sunglasses, he didn't try to use any of mom's old makeup. He just walked out into the middle of the kitchen and asked me whether we had any venison left in the freezer.

I'm not sure why, but I was the one in charge of freezer inventory. It was a large deep freezer that sat out in the barn beside dad's old snowmobile. We had stocked it full of venison, rabbit, there was even some moose and bear from last season. "Two steaks."

He turned to me and sorrow was written in the lines of his face and under his eye was a dark blood rose. “Carson was here?”

I picked up the cassettes and switchblade from where I placed them on the counter. “He brought you these.” I handed them to my young uncle, who did not bat an eye. “What’s going on? You’re not talking to each other?” Realization dawned. “Is he the one that hit you?”

“I’m gonna make us up some venison steaks. Get an onion and Worcestershire sauce and a few potatoes from the root cellar.” He turned and walked out the back door. I watched him through the little kitchen window that looked out over the landscape of field and scrap metal and old cars, the only view that wasn’t dotted by another trailer. He hung his head, but his steps were purposeful, his gait was almost angry. It was the beginning of a change in my uncle. After that day, he began to drink in the house. I even saw him smoke a joint on the couch with Ray. He was quiet as usual but when he objected to something someone said, or someone offended him or tried to slap him around (usually Aunt Rhonda) now he fought back. He was a more aggressive Leroy, the Leroy that began to have shouting matches with D and even slapped her across the face one day when she called him a cunt. When she took a swing at him, he caught her arm and wrenched it behind her back until she cried out. It took a lot for D to express pain or anguish, so I knew that he had hurt her bad. The tears had begun to well in her eyes long before she yelped, probably involuntarily, in pain.

I began to tread more carefully and I engaged him less and less and stayed out of his way for the most part. He seemed to be feeding some fiery anger that was raging out of control. His eyes had gotten harder. I didn’t want to look him in the face anymore

because the eyes I met there spoke of a cruelty I didn't know he possessed until now. When he told D she was just a crack whore headed for an asylum, she just swore and stormed off. That's when I knew it was really getting bad.

The tension in the house was heightened. Leroy took to storming in and out of rooms whenever something didn't go his way. Since he slapped D, she had been giving him a wide berth, and I felt like I was walking on eggshells. I began to watch my movements, analyze what I was going to say before I said it, just to be sure that I wasn't inadvertently doing something that would piss him off. It didn't work though. He would still yell at me for small infractions. Like when I used a whole paper towel as a napkin.

"Cut the damn thing in half!" He chucked a pair of scissors at me. "This house ain't cheap." He continued with an onslaught of abuse and my face reddened. There had been no way of predicting that he would get angry over a paper towel. I hadn't even had a chance. He seemed to vent most of his rage at D, though. While my sister and I had never been close, we got a little closer over our confusion and fear of Leroy.

"He's broken up about his boyfriend, is what." D ate a Klondike bar, except she didn't eat it the way everyone else did, in several haphazard bites. She chewed the chocolate edges off first. Then pried half of the top chocolate layer off with her teeth. Then half of the bottom layer. Then things got messy and she gave in to defeat and shoved the whole thing in her mouth. She had always had weird idiosyncratic eating habits, ever since we were kids.

"Boyfriend..." So that's what was going on. "Carson Butler?"

"Who else?" She licked her fingers.

“How did you find out?” Leroy had never mentioned he was gay. He had even dated girls before.

“I caught them.” It was like my mother and Aunt Marie all over again. Apparently, D had wandered into the barn with James McKinney on a Friday night for a literal roll in the hay. She stepped in first and saw Carson Butler sitting on a stool, his eyes closed and his mouth open in the beginnings of a moan, Uncle Leroy on his knees in front of him. She shoved James McKinney back so hard he lost his balance and almost fell.

“What gives?” He yelled.

“I changed my mind,” she covered. “I want you to fuck me outside. Against a tree.”

“That’s more like it.” He grabbed her ass and forced his tongue down her throat.

Behind her, Carson Butler was hurriedly buttoning his jeans.

“Did Leroy see you?” I asked.

“Yup. And Carson opened his eyes just as I spun around.”

“So Carson hit him?” I was still trying to piece it together.

“I guess so. I don’t really know anything else, except that Leroy lost his boyfriend.”

I remembered that Carson Butler’s family was well-to-do. They were church-goers and they pushed Carson and his brother Paul to excel. Carson was taking calculus, anatomy, physics and AP history and English as well as working a part-time job and taking a college-level chemistry class. Sometimes, when he had brought his books over to study, I felt sorry for him. Finding out they had a gay son was not something the Butlers ever would have planned for. They were the type of family that would disown him and kick him out on his ass. I almost felt bad for him. Now that I understood the context, I

realized that Leroy loved Carson Butler and would have done anything to keep him, including put up a fight, which may have been where the black eye came into the picture.

“I don’t really care. Leroy is a dick and I don’t feel sorry for him. He can blubber all he wants, but he’s just a cocksucker with temper tantrums.”

I didn’t quite agree. While I was angry at Leroy for a number of things stemming back to my early childhood, I couldn’t bring myself to call him a “cocksucker” even in my mind.

“Are you going to the prom?” D asked. She had already bought her dress with money she made on the farm. I hadn’t seen it but I imagined it was probably black and probably disturbing in some way or another.

“Yes.”

“Who would go with *you*?” She laughed. I remembered why I hated her.

“I’m going by myself.” I thought of the beautiful blue dress that Aunt Marie was crafting for me and I thought forward to my plan of revealing my wings on the night of the prom.

“Killer.” I don’t know if D meant it as a compliment or she had simply gotten bored with my conversation but she began to pick her nails with her pocketknife. She would look up every now and then to survey the landscape of trailers and littered car parts. Ray and J.J. were out tinkering with the Bel Air and Rhonda was sitting on her porch watching them and screaming across the yard at Ray, who she thought should be doing something more useful with his time. The lawn chairs and stools were still set up around the fire pit where my uncles and cousins chewed the shit, drank beer and toasted hot dogs on sticks in the evenings most of the summer.

“Ray, get your head out of your ass and drag that carpet outdoors!” We could hear Rhonda breathe from where we sat in chairs by the fire pit.

“Lay off me, woman, I’m trying to fix the ride.” Ray was a hardened man. I think Rhonda had done her best to beat him down, make him pliable, but it just had the effect of making him fight back all the more. It made him into a prize fighter when it came to domestic violence. Sometimes I felt like Ray and Rhonda were in a ring and the ref had blown the whistle and they just started trying to beat the shit out of each other. Marie and J.J. had both called the cops on them when they feared Rhonda would burn the trailer down, or one time they both called the cops because Ray had pulled a knife out and was drunk and kept screaming that he would “slice Rhonda open from stem to stern.” He kept singing that “from stem to stern” even while the police were hauling him away. “From stem to stern” “from stem to stern” almost like a sea shanty that spoke of a man gone crazy from drink and the violent love of a hard woman.

“Don’t ‘woman’ me!” She yelled. Dozie, the dog, reared up and barked. “You get in here Raymond Elliot Harris or I’ll staple your balls to the wall.”

“That’s it!” He said, throwing his wrench down and stooping to pick up the bumper jack. “Get over here so I can clock you one!” He took off at a dead sprint wielding it like a hammer. Rhonda burst off the porch, her fat stomach swaying from side to side as she charged with labored breathing towards her common law husband who was running at her holding that jack over his head. “You ain’t gun hit me. Judge said you hit me again you go to jail.” Rhonda stooped over, out of breath, and picked up a tire iron from the scrap pile. Ray was about a hundred feet from her when she threw that tire iron at him and he went down like a sack of bricks.

D and I didn't budge. J.J. was already booking it across the field towards his injured father. D looked at her nails and sighed. Rhonda yelled to J.J. "He'll be alright, the big baby." At that moment, Leroy joined us around the ashy fire pit and pulled a cigarette out of his pack. He had taken up smoking too.

"I'm not buying you a prom dress," he said, pointing at me. "So don't even start on that." He knew the prom was around the corner and he had heard J.J. talking about who he would ask and whether or not she would say yes and whether or not he would get some afterward.

"I know that," I said through my teeth. What did he think this was?

"Do you?" He said, the line in his forehead more pronounced than ever. "Seems like you girls think I'm Mr. Moneybags lately." Rhonda wheezed as she walked back to the porch. J.J. supported Ray who was conscious but had a big welt on his head. Otis, Marie's ex-husband sat on a log by the scrap pile and smoked a joint and watched us all.

"I don't think you're Mr. Moneybags lately." I caught the glint in D's eye. She said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "I think you're a faggot lately."

It all happened so fast. Leroy grabbed D by the arm and pulled her across his lap where he sat on the stump. He pulled down her jeans with one firm yank, exposing her bare ass. She squirmed and screamed, said, "What are you doing, put me down!" But he just tightened his grip on her arm, wrenching it behind her as he did before, and proceeded to spank her, hard, while she protested and shouted and her ass and face got redder.

I didn't know what to do. Neither did anyone else. Everyone gathered around, confused. Even Otis, who was high, wandered over and shook his head. Rhonda yelled at

Leroy, said, “This isn’t the way to handle it.” And, “She’s not a child. She’s practically a woman.”

Leroy said nothing, just landed more slaps on D’s behind with a force I didn’t know he was capable of. They were loud, loud cracks, the kind that echo in your head long after and after each crack was a cry or a scream, D’s “No, don’t!” and “Stop!” and “It hurts!”

All Leroy said as he was wailing on her was, “Good.” After a while he picked up the pace and the intensity and I thought he was going to break my sister’s tailbone. Rhonda was still trying to intervene but I think she was scared. She hadn’t ever seen Leroy like this. Like me, she didn’t know what to do. Dozie and Checkers, the dogs, barked and jumped around the two of them, excited by the noise and confused by the screams.

After Leroy’s hand got tired, he slowed down and I saw my sister’s ass cheeks bounce with the rhythm of his slapping. One of her hands touched the ground to steady herself. Her entire face was wet with tears and snot ran out of her nose. I couldn’t tell if the tears were from the spanking or from the humiliation or both.

When he was done, he pulled her to her feet. She shook and cried, her pants all the way down now. “Show everyone your ass. Good and red.” And then he slapped it one more time for good measure and walked off, whistling.

D just stood there, covering her eyes. She didn’t bother to pull up her jeans. I think she was in shock. I ran to her. Her ass was cherry red and there were blisters on both cheeks. I helped her pull up her jeans, but she winced and cried out when they touched the sensitive wounds. “It’s alright. You’re okay now.” I put my arm around my sister and walked her into Rhonda’s trailer, the opposite direction than the one Leroy had walked. I

cleared off the couch of magazines, cereal boxes, bills, and various TV and video game controllers and told her to lie down on her stomach. I brought tissues over and wiped the tears and snot from her face. I kissed her cheek.

“Are you okay?”

My sister didn't answer. In fact, she didn't speak to me for weeks. She didn't speak to anyone. If Leroy had been trying to crush D's confidence in herself and humanity with what he did, it worked.

Chapter Fourteen

About the time spring came around, I saw Kale over at the other trailer more and more. I admired the way he wanted to make things nice, if not for D, than for himself. He had begun an involved painting job. I think it was the bedroom he was fixing. Maybe because D didn't want to think she was sleeping and fucking in Leroy's bed. He had bought her a dragonfly wind chime and hung it up on the siding to the left of the door. She stayed away, for the most part, during the daytime. She must have been ashamed. I didn't hear much from her, even when she was talking to me. Her face was gaunt and her eyes were stamped out. I think she used the humiliation of the spanking as an excuse not to feel. To crawl into herself in a way I had never seen her do. Like I said, I was the inward seeker. D was the one who traveled outward with her rages and her violence. But now, she was a mute replica of herself and she moved even more in secret under the cover of darkness, covertly as if she had dark intentions. A terrible mission. Which I'm sure she did. As sure as I am that she hadn't told anyone anything about the hidden longings of her heart. I knew that my sister was human. I knew she could feel. I understood that she was still herself and I guess I was waiting for the other shoe to fall. Something that told me, the sister you grew up with, the one who caught frogs with her bare hands and blessed them before she let them go, that that sister was in there somewhere behind those eyes that concealed their terrible purpose.

At the moment, D was at the farm and I was waiting for Aunt Rhonda to come back from court with Ray so I could eat dinner with them. Leroy had exploded—everyone in the family had seen—and it bought him a form of social exile: an empty trailer and nights alone. I'm sure he reached out in the night and cried for Carson Butler, but after what he

did to D, I had trouble feeling sorry for him. I had been sitting on the back steps, watching Kale carry paint supplies up the shaky trailer steps inside.

“You need any help?” I walked over there before I said anything because I had trouble raising my voice.

Kale looked over and smiled. At least, he gave me his version of a smile, lips still closed, but softer and more relaxed. “Sure.” Kale never really refused me. He was kind to me. At that moment, I spied the clouds moving fast behind the edge of the barn. The weathervane creaked and the mean rooster squawked while it pecked the dirt a few feet from the chicken wire. Kale had once helped me feed the chickens. He tried to feed the hens from his hand. Only one of them got a little too aggressive with her beak. I watched her jab with that bony, hooked nose, and I stared at that fixed, cold eye. “Ow!”

“I told you that would happen,” I laughed. How come he didn’t know about chickens? I guess it made sense; he grew up in the city.

Kale bore hatched scars on his breastbone that conveyed sadness in pinkened fissures. The first time I saw those scars he was bending over to wipe up a spill in the kitchen. The tips of those lines poked out over the collar of his white t-shirt. The lines arced upwards like a mountain lions’ claw and rested in fever at the base of his clavicle. Right then, I wanted to kiss those scars. Wanted to kiss them until they dissolved back into skin. But I didn’t know how to kiss, and I didn’t know then that to kiss was to suck someone else’s poison.

“Where did you get those scars?” I tried to meet his eyes. But this time he resisted.

“Around.” He straightened and turned back to the sink.

“They look like claw marks.”

“Yeah.” Kale never said much. Maybe that’s why I was always starved for his conversation.

I had instantly been attracted to Kale—a long-haired punk who remained quiet and played the guitar. He had the garbage chic appeal of a Kurt Cobain and the understated intrigue of a poet philosopher. I loved him.

I had met him at a river party I had crashed because I was looking for my sister. She had run away, or been killed, or something, and Leroy had gotten on my case to visit some of her haunts and go to some of the high school parties in search of her.

Kale was the shirtless man who introduced me to cocaine across the bonfire of an October night. The firelight danced on his pierced nipples, licked the bones of his face until he looked gaunt and sad. The air by the river was thin and the night was cold. I hadn’t brought a sweater or a long-sleeve shirt. My arms were so thin I could circle them with my hand. I did that then, holding onto each upper arm, using both hands as circlets. Feeling, from the fire, from the half naked man, from the night air, that I needed to do something to hold myself in place. “Try it.”

I couldn’t get over the bleach-blond that was crying in the periphery of my consciousness.

“Just try it,” he said.

Why was she crying? The sand of our freshwater beach stretched out in all directions: we had come to the desert to meet God.

But we weren’t in the desert and there was no God. The river lapped my feet as I stood at the border between not-water and water, concentrating on the wet darkness that surrounded us, wondering if I could peer through the dark deeply enough to see the other

side of the river, where Victoria had waded with Michael to find some dry wood for the fire. She had waded out into the black river. In the dim light I saw a flash of a smile. She beckoned to him with both index fingers, pulled her shirt off and turned around to walk out into the water.

I knew most of these people very well. Growing up in a small town, we had one school, a handful of teachers and tight friendships and associations that intertwined throughout our entire youth. Victoria and Becky (the blond) were acquaintances of mine. I hesitated to call them friends. The others at the river party were Alicia, Sarah, and Michael, all kids from my school that I had grown up with. The ones that I didn't know were the guys, mostly. A mousy girl with thick black bangs, who I only saw for that one night, and I never did learn her name. Rick, a loud-mouthed fire-fighter's son. A couple who came together and stayed intertwined the entire night, the man, a lot older than the rest of us, and the girl, a Madonna wannabe who wore black lace-up pants and a pointed bra. Then, there was a lanky guy who took his shirt off midway through the night. When I saw his piercings, I could not look away. When he brought out the crack pipe, I had to. I was overwhelmed.

Earlier that night, sometime after sunset, when dusk had settled in comfortably around us and the light was pink, he came upon me standing alone by the river, lost in a tangled mind maze, and me, without a map. I still hadn't found D. I had brought my hand to my throat in a gesture of desire, of annihilation, out of a need to be touched, even roughly, and it scared me that I wanted that. The river tide was ebbing and I was losing sight of the other shore. The crescent moon, a bone white horn in the sky, signaled the coming of the night. And that planet, the one I could never remember the name of,

pierced through the still blue sky. He came up behind me; my hand was still on my throat. The soft hollow in the center of my neck. The vulnerable gulley where all of my fears got swallowed. He didn't even say anything. He didn't have to. But in his presence I was conscious of a graceful unfolding of my wings. In the dying light, with this half naked stranger standing behind me, I could feel the rustle of my wings. As if they were just now awakening from a long slumber. The river was quiet, meditative and, as it grew darker, fathomless and black. The night was only punctuated by the screams and cries from our group, which seemed not to penetrate my awareness too deeply, as if I were hearing through a thick layer of cotton. What I did hear was not really noise, but more, a vibration. The humming vibration of his body standing behind and to the right of mine. The pulsing vibration of my body, which had begun to feel the blood rush even before I took my first hit. When he went away, he went away noiselessly, soft-shoed and graceful. I remembered a heron I had seen when I was a girl. It stood on one leg in the river behind our house. It stood there for what seemed to me then, hours. Then, for no reason we could discern, it raised its wings and took flight, but seemingly without flapping its wings. It was simply there, and then, it was gone. When he left, I felt wounded. I didn't understand why. It was as if he had filled up a space and then had left it vacant, left the door open for the dogs to get in.

All through that first night, the night of cocaine and desire, I watched him through the spitting flames of the fire. At one point, all of us slumped to the ground. Some of the girls fell into some of the guys, giggling, or feigning cold. One of the guys had the foresight to bring a blanket, and all of the girls, at one point or another, found some

excuse to rub up against him. By the time the stars came out, me and Kale were the only ones not partnered up, but then again, we already were, in our own way.

Because I had already fallen in love with him, I watched him to understand him. He leaned back on his elbow and eyed me from across the bonfire. He wore rectangular glasses. He had a sharp face and thin lips. The night music was on low volume. I couldn't even hear the other pairs over the attention I gave every gesture, the significance I gave every look. I was cold. I swigged from a bottle of Jack Daniel's someone had brought and left half empty, on the sand. We were the only two sitting around the fire. Alicia and Rick had wandered to a desolate stretch of beach to, I assume, fuck each other's brains out. Sarah had led the mousy girl into the water and, the last I saw, the two were groping each other, naked, in the darkness, reaching for each other through the charged black water.

I was already accustomed to drinking, though my first drink had only been a few weeks before. I swigged alcohol under the boy's watchful gaze. So cool, so calm, he pulled a plastic baggie out of his jeans' pocket. I fell in love with both that night under the salt encrusted stars. And, when I snorted the cocaine, I could have sworn I inhaled his scent because all that morning after I bundled up in my blankets at home and tried to stave off hypothermia—which had been caused by my October skinny-dip while inebriated—it was all I could smell, on the air, on my blankets, on my skin. I dreamed that I had kissed his lips. And so I fell in love with self-destruction. Though, in my heart, they were my two loves, borne of the same moment on that same black night.

It was a good week before I saw Kale again. He didn't mention our previous encounter and so I sure as hell wasn't going to bring it up. I had dreamed of him, several

nights in a row, while holding onto a fever that raged through me and gave me hysterical sweating and a touch of delirium. I was bedridden for a day, maybe two, and Leroy and Rhonda waited on me, but I barely remember that part of it. What I do remember was that Kale visited me in my bedroom and told me tall tales to ease my pain.

But Leroy swore I had had no visitors.

No visitors.

Kale in my bedroom was as real as the broken dresser; he spoke in mythic poems that made me desire hot climes and a bow and arrow, figs, a pair of well-made sandals, a God to worship plainly, on a desert mountaintop, with my offerings. Kale was from another time. I hadn't entirely shrugged off the idea that he truly was there, as a projected vision. But then again, my love for him is great and my subconscious likes to dangle things I can't have in front of my face.

D was gone again. That's what I heard when I shed the sleepy seeds from my eyes and rejoined the world. My bedroom held the subtle but pervasive stench of sick, not an actual odor, but a sense of sickness that was so strong it became tangible, nagging like a cough.

"I don't want you going looking for her." Leroy said. He cleaned his gun at the kitchen table while he strained his neck to watch cartoons playing on the TV set in the living room.

I wasn't planning to, I thought, but I remained quiet. It had been my best line of defense lately. When I was out of it, I am almost certain that he was gentle and patient with me. If I had hauled up and told him, in that condition, that he was the son of a

whore, he wouldn't have exacted any retribution. Even Leroy wasn't a monster. He knew when something wasn't my fault. Didn't he?

"We're just coddling her, at this point," he said. "She's always okay. Well..." He paused. "She's far from okay, but she always comes back. Eventually." He practiced using the sight and made a trigger click sound with his tongue. He invisibly killed a starling outside the window. But then I watched it flap its wings and fly away.

"She'll be back by prom, anyway."

I used to wonder where my sister went to when she disappeared. Maybe she became part of a circus sideshow and she spent those lucid days being sawed in half, or shot from a cannon. Maybe she identified with that world so much that her "normal" days were the ones that felt like a waking dream. It wasn't that far out of the question; she had told me once that fairs—think ferris wheel, fried dough stands, country music whining out of too-small amps, balloon toss, and the ineffable haunted house, the kind where you exit less scared than when you entered, knowing that you'd encountered the worst life could throw at you and you came out alright—she had said that fairs had the best drugs. The carnies were a source, she said, and the influx of coke and heroin increased in small towns right after a fair.

"Trick is, I've gotta get myself a carnny."

I didn't tell Leroy about the possibility that D hopped from town to town on a circus wagon, making her way down the coast and back up again. Or that maybe she went as far as one carnny could take her and she hitched back this way with enough drugs to last her for the foreseeable future. It wasn't unheard of. At least, not for D. And so, in my mind, that's where she was at: sneaking between the ride gates to be groped by a tough Mexican

behind the tilt-a-whirl. But what I couldn't figure out was, where did she go in the off-season?

Perhaps D was one of those enigmas, one of those mysteries that really shouldn't be understood or solved. There was something to be said for appreciating her broken beauty and leaving her to her own mad party.

By the time Kale showed up, it was dark. He took to sleeping at our trailer when D was gone—when we asked him where she'd gone, he just shrugged his shoulders. I think he liked the company, a tidbit of information that seemed at cross-purposes with his character. He didn't eat any of our dinner, said he'd already ate, and when Leroy went in the living room to sit in his recliner, Kale gave me a sidelong look that made me wish I lived in harmony with my beautiful wings.

They were a source of pride as well as a source of shame, and this was a dichotomy I had trouble wrapping my head around. I had swallowed up my secret and sometimes wished I hadn't. What if someone would have been supportive, *would be* supportive? What if my sister...

I cleaned my plate and went to my bedroom with an addled mind and a heavy heart. I closed the door behind me and lit a candle. My English teacher had lit a candle for us when we read Ginsberg, said it would help us get in the mood for poetry. Since then, I liked to light a candle when I unfurled my wings; it had become my own private ritual. Sometimes I liked to think it was in observance of God that I solemnly approached the task, but I think it was more a feeble attempt at having God in my life, like my parents, the invisible and uninterested authority.

I stood in front of my mother's mirror and took off my layers. I stood there, in front of myself, tangled up in blue. I had taken to playing the song on my tape-deck during my nightly ritual wherein I unwound the layers of blue silk ribbon that hugged my wings so tightly against my body while I looked at the transformation in the mirror. I was bound up in blue ribbon. I was an angel. I began to see myself in freeze frame: fifteen-year old girl bound up in blue ribbon. Confident girl removing her bindings. I thought of doing a photo essay with myself as subject, documenting all of the transitions I made on a daily and nightly basis. But I thought of the exposure, the ridicule, the shame, and I resolved again to keep my wings bound, my words silenced, my photos not captured.

I did resolve this, that is until Kale knocked softly on my bedroom door while opening it a crack. I was still in my blue binding and could easily have thrown on a shirt so as not to look suspicious, but I didn't. I told him he could enter, and I stood there with my chest bound and waited for what he would say.

Of course, he didn't say anything. He closed the door behind himself and tiptoed towards me in stocking feet. He was afraid of waking Leroy. I don't think this was because he was afraid of Leroy himself, per say, more afraid of the violence that might ensue if he were to be bothered. As I had learned over time, in small doses, Kale was more afraid of himself than anyone else. I think he was afraid of being pushed to the edge. As he walked over toward me in the soft light, the candle sputtering on my unpainted dresser, I wanted him like I hadn't wanted anything else in my entire life.

His face held a question mark but it passed. A few people had seen my bindings when I was sick, but they had suspected I was binding my breasts because I was ashamed of becoming a woman. Marie had told me at my last dress fitting that I would "get over it

eventually” and “just let them hang out.” As Kale approached me, I could tell he had the same thought running through his head, but still, he didn’t speak. I tugged gently on the end of the ribbon which I usually tucked near my heart. Kale took the end from me and kissed my lips so gently and passionately it was like an iced-over fire when he pulled away.

He began to pull on the end of the cloth. I could tell from his eyes that he wanted to see my secret. I realized I was being intimate with my sister’s boyfriend, and I didn’t care.

His eyes were wet, but he wasn’t crying, not audibly. He tugged on the end of the blue silk and pulled, spinning me around, gently, the candle winking as I spun. It took a few turns before he realized what he was looking at. My wings were so beautiful that he didn’t look at my nubs of breasts, my nipples hard from the cold and the excitement. He stepped back from me with his hands over his mouth and crouched, blinking a few times to dislodge false visions and metaphors.

I watched realization dawn over him. I watched and I waited for whatever his response might be. His, after all, was the first response I witnessed. He was aglow with happiness, as if he’d seen God.

“Who says a person has to look like a person anyway?”

I agreed.

Under his gaze, I was majestic. I was an angel. I imagined us picnicking on lush green rolling hills, me with a daisy wreath in my hair. I imagined us embracing in a bathtub in a Hawaiian hut, him washing my hair while I listened to the macaws and myna birds converse in the eucalyptus trees. I imagined he was mine, that I could have him.

But then, the ugly question mark: where is D in this beautiful vision of the future? Has she just cast him aside without putting up a fight? Not likely. Is she injured or hurt? Maybe she has moved away to California to shack up with an older man. When Kale met my lips again, I forgot that D was missing, in the vision and in reality, and I kissed him back.

Chapter Fifteen

When Leroy threatened me, he got a wooden cutting board up the side of the head. Here's how it happened:

Me and Kale were eating breakfast a few weeks before prom. I had thought that maybe he would ask me to go with him since D was out of the picture. We weren't sure which picture she was gracing these days, but I had an idea. I think Kale did too. He knew that she cheated on him, at least I think he knew. I think he had known for some time that that had something to do with her disappearances. I wondered at night if he was in his trailer, lying in bed, looking up at the low ceiling imagining her sucking a multitude of cocks and snorting blow off other women's tits while cursing his name. I knew he got lonely, that's why he hung out in our trailer. I think part of it was to consolidate our meals so we weren't wasting as much food (he thought of things like that, he was raised poorer than us), but I know that there was an emotional part of him that longed for a connection, wanted to hear stories of other people's days, even if he never told them his own.

That morning he ate Lucky Charms and I had Captain Crunch. He had orange juice and I had apple. We ate in silence, as was our way, and Leroy was preparing toast and coffee in the kitchen, his back a solid wall of hate. I could only imagine how he was staring down the coffee pot as if it were a worthy adversary facing him down on a broken highway of knife fights and strangled dreams.

"I was thinking what are you gonna do about prom?"

"Haven't thought that far ahead," he said. Kale and Leroy had stopped their search for D, and so I was no longer frequenting town fairs and keggers and river parties. Every

now and then I felt as if I had left that chapter of my life behind and I would never be young again. That that had been my time to let loose and free and be wild and reckless like my strung-out sister and that instead of living it up, I would follow my uncle's example and become bitter, looking inward and hating what I saw there.

"Are you going?" Kale asked.

"Yeah," I spooned the rest of the milk into my mouth. "I have a dress and everything."

"How'd you get a dress?" Leroy spun around with the coffee pot in his hand. My throat tightened. "Stole it?" He was accusatory. Enraged. I hated him. "Or is it a ragged hand-me-down from Rhonda? A junk classic rolled off the assembly line from the sixties covered with sperm and shame."

Kale put down his juice glass and straightened in his chair. He was paying attention. He was always paying attention.

"I got it made."

"Paid for with whose money?" Leroy walked towards us, the coffee pot still in his hand. Kale was on his feet. I think he had a past history of abuse. He always knew where to place himself in a tense situation, and he was always thinking a few steps ahead of the person that was angriest.

"Didn't have to pay for it," I said, becoming angry at his suspicion when I had always been honest with him. "I got it made by Marie."

"You lie!"

What came next was a series of movie stills, punched out in rapid succession, like in the town theater when the projector stalls and the images blink quickly in the dark

showing you a fragmented version of what you intended to see. These were the still frames:

Leroy: his forehead crashing down, that line between his eyes deepening like a chasm of dirty anger. His lips curling like a mad dog.

Leroy moving forward with his arm raised, the coffee pot glinting in the morning light.

Leroy swinging his arm back, his fist raised about over his head, the hot coffee steaming curls of evaporated water into the air.

A tight fist letting go of the handle of that coffee pot.

The coffee pot, spilling its contents as it aimed right for me.

The camera, me, lunged to the side to evade the hot glass object, the camera angle shaky and finally showing feet and the bottoms of cupboards.

The coffee pot hitting the wall behind where I stood.

Shards of glass, hot coffee, sprayed over us like rapid gunfire.

Kale raising an 18x24 wooden cutting board to the side with both hands.

Leroy's head going, crack, as it is met with the block of wood.

Leroy falling to the floor, clutching his head.

Leroy falling unconscious.

He'll be there a while.

"Son of a bitch," Kale said, while he restrained the urge to kick my piece of shit uncle while he was down.

"What do we do?"

"Celebrate?" Kale's eyes twinkled. Then he made a more serious face. "We need to get you out of here, is what, before he wakes up."

I looked back at my uncle slumped on the floor. He had fallen forward, his cheek pressed against the linoleum. "He is going to wake up, right?"

Kale didn't answer me right away. "Right," he said, not meeting my eyes. For the first time since we had kissed, he grabbed my hand. "We've got to get out of here." We sprinted out the screen door just as uncle Leroy grunted and shuffled to his feet. I followed Kale to Rhonda's trailer. I knew he was taking refuge with her and Ray because he knew that everyone was afraid of Rhonda.

He didn't bother to knock. Just busted in there and launched into his story. As we stood there in front of Rhonda, doughnut crumbs falling from her mouth, I felt like a penitent criminal standing before a judge in a backwater, tropical kingdom where life was cheap and people were still hung from trees for their sins.

"I was just coming to get you," she mumbled between bites. She looked crestfallen. Her face, which was usually red and puffy was almost pale, mottled with gray, as if the color had been drained from it. "I had to eat this first." She stuffed the rest of the doughnut, and one more, into her face aggressively. She worked it around and around in her mouth. I felt like I was watching someone make love to a taboo object. I knew Rhonda did this when she was stressed.

"Just got a call." Her mouth fell slack. That's when Leroy showed up at the door, shaking his head every few seconds the way we shook the flashlight when it was running low on batteries, not because it was particularly effective, but it was a last ditch effort and it made us feel better, feel like we were doing something, in a situation which we had little control over. That's how Leroy was shaking his head. "Ray, get that." Rhonda and Ray had already heard our story and Ray agreed that Leroy was going out of his mind lately with rage.

I thought Ray was going to open the door, but instead, he walked into the kitchen/dining room while Leroy just walked in. But Leroy only set one foot inside and didn't have time to utter any words before Ray came out with his shotgun, cocked the hammer and pointed it at him. Leroy cocked his head to the side and opened his mouth. He looked confused. He wandered out, without fear, but with a muddled look on his face and a staggering gait.

I'd hate to think Ray was our hero, but he kind of was. For a few days, we stayed with Ray and Rhonda, even though I had trouble dealing with their fighting. Saturday night, Rhonda beat Ray in the head with the toaster after Ray called her a worthless cunt. Kale and me were both in the kitchen at the time and I got sprayed with Ray's blood as his head was violently bashed to the side. I was surprised his neck hadn't got broke with the force of Rhonda's pounding. I knew it was a startled kind of rage. Rhonda used to love Ray, but that had been before he had decided he didn't love her anymore. Now they lived together in shared violence and angry fucking—which we heard Sunday morning—and I was convinced that before long one of them would be dead from too much “love.” Like Leroy, Ray fell to the floor, except with Ray there was a lot of blood. Rhonda stepped over his limp body and struck up a match to light her cigarette. She pulled out a perfume sample from Elle and grinned as she imagined herself dressed as a starlet, smelling of vanilla and bergamot, like the brazen model who was all legs and boobs.

“Rhonda,” Kale said as he rushed to Ray's side. “Rhonda, Rhonda, Rhonda.” He clucked his mouth and sighed as he asked Ray if he was alright. He was still conscious, but he spit blood out of his mouth onto the tile floor. I don't know how his mouth got bloody. Maybe she whacked him in the teeth before she slammed the thing into the side of his head. Maybe, in the anxiety of the moment, that was a step I missed.

I began to wonder how many steps I had missed. How many punches, slaps, threats, that my brain had registered as ordinary parts of the day, normal interactions. I began to wonder how many violences I had accepted as okay, as part of the way things were, without question.

“Ray,” Kale said. He annunciated well, in case Ray was out of it. “Do you need to go to the hospital?” Ray’s eyes widened and he shook his head no.

“Are you sure?” I saw the blood in his brown hair, pooling and streaming down his face. In all likelihood, the wound wasn’t as serious as it looked. Ray was a bleeder.

“He’s fine,” Rhonda barked as she flipped to a sex quiz in her magazine and belched from her coke.

Surprisingly, Rhonda was right. He held some gauze on his head for about half an hour, laid down for the rest of the night and the next morning he was out in the field working on his Rambler. Me and Kale went out to help him. I didn’t want to help Ray with his car; he tended to get a temper and yell and curse and throw things, but I needed his protection for right now and it was the only way we were going to get it.

After about an hour working on the motor, Ray hadn’t gotten very far. In fact, he had accidentally undone some of the work from the previous day and set himself back. He began to curse that he’d never get the thing on the road and he began to yell at us and J.J. who had stopped by to help but quickly learned that things with the car had gone south. At one point, Ray got eerily quiet and then he just sighed, wiped his hands on a rag and strode inside the trailer. We thought he was done for the day but he came back out with his rifle and fired seven rounds into the motor. Afterward, he grinned and walked away smiling.

The sunset that night was magnificent. It pooled down over the treeline in orange and brushed the sky with pink. Looked like an egg cracked over the sky and we were watching its progress sliding down behind the horizon and out of sight. I remembered that I had asked Ray when I was little where the sun went at night and he’d said that the

sun went to a grand party in the dark of the sky and I would sometimes sit out back with a Hi-C and wonder at the moon; thinking that the sun and the moon had separate spheres of influence, and two different, opposite night clubs, on different sides of the world, and it reminded me of my mom and dad who were never there at the same time and went to grand parties while I sat in the dark and cried, or laid in the sun and roasted in its fire.

She whirled in the periphery of my consciousness, my strung-out sister, my votive, my dream. Tell us all is not lost. The car you drove, your dented bumper, your lies. Home by ten, by eleven, by... A cock in your fist, pumping it for nectar, for gold, for an antidote.

I didn't believe my sister anymore. Just plain didn't believe it. Not anything she said. "I'll be home for your birthday." "I'll pay for you to get your cavity filled." "I'll help you with your math homework." Nothing. Even though my sister held all the keys: she was smart, she saved her money, and her company helped me chase off the wolves that circled around me and haunted me in my dreams.

But not anymore. Not anymore was she my prima donna, my rustic princess. Not since I had seen her sucking the cock of the foreign exchange student Amir, the one with the cocaine and a mercedez benz, under a poplar tree in Heritage Park, where the river meets the dam.

I used to think of us as princesses locked in a tower of evil intent. Spinning and drawing and telling each other stories by the light of an oil lamp. Sitting on a three-legged stool, eating almonds and persimmons that D would carve with an ivory-handled knife that drew the elements into her palms. She could draw the rain down from the sky

or ignite the fire in the stone hearth. D was the only one of us who could freely come and go. And she did, leaving me to my drawings—in reality I couldn't draw—and my books, huddled in a wool shawl by the gargantuan hearth that contained our communal heart. She would fly on a bough cut from a cherry tree, one that she had carved herself and set with a large pointed ruby, like a dagger, right at the tip, and drift over villages, hills, creeks, even the ocean, wending carelessly down, down, down, into a stolen ravine or hunting village, paradise or palace, to learn about the people and customs of the greater world and barter and trade her wares for poppies and crystal rocks that fit in the palm of your hand. She would inspect these on the spot, sometimes for an awkward length of time, the young mother or old butcher shifting back and forth on their feet and asking, "Is everything alright Principessa?"

Usually, no. And so my sister would haggle and peck away at their price, always their price was the same, just at varying degrees: a piece of herself.

And so, after the price was agreed, my sister would take the budded flower or the rock or the jew-weed—the kind that the trappers smoked in secret around their own campfires—and draw out her blade—a different one, black—and lop off a part of her body, usually a part she wouldn't miss much: a slice of inner thigh, a toe, a back tooth, and hand it to the merchant who had traveled far on a black ship, who smiled, a glint of a gold tooth, and pocketed her payment. My sister would sometimes extract the item's magic on the spot, but often she would command a white horse to take her to a green grove shaded by apple trees that always felt the heat of the sun. She would spread out a blanket and set to work consuming her potion, the effects of which would come on quickly. But, simultaneously, the price of her payment: the slice of thigh, the toe, the

tooth, would regenerate, painfully I imagine, but my sister wouldn't notice, because she would be feeling the pleasure of the concoction, reeling under the greedy sun. But, as the day wore on and donned its blanket of night, it became clear that the regeneration was not complete. Or, it was, but the toe, the tooth, the slice of thigh, the one that grew back was a darker, more gruesome shade of its former self. Withered. Blackish gray, with a texture of something that has sat too long in a fire. And so it became that my sister lopped off pieces of herself in exchange for illegal tenders and built herself into a house of decay.

And when it came time for her to fly home, she perched on the window ledge looking in at me for a long time before I recognized that she wasn't a haunt, a vulture, something to throw a stone at, something to fear. But then, I saw her eyes. One was kind, smiling, blue. An eye like our mother's, our mother who was beautiful, fair-haired, and noble. Then, the decayed other, the gray, tormented eye of a corpse. And I woke up screaming for in that moment, I knew that my sister was dead.

Chapter Sixteen

Me and Rhonda played cribbage that night. She had hauled the kerosene heater out of the bedroom closet and set it up in the kitchen, giving it a wide berth like a cruise liner setting sail from a crowded port. My mind wasn't on the game. I was cold, even with the heater, because the window over the sink was open to vent the fumes and, like a rock in my shoe, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

As usual, D had been gone a few days and Leroy was still in the trailer. I think Kale must have been in his trailer, but I couldn't be sure. I knew that the winter prom was a few days away and my dress was nearing completion. I had been getting dizzy lately because of how tight I had to wrap the blue silk to keep my now enormous wings flat against my back. I inhaled deeply and winced in pain.

Rhonda looked up from her hand but didn't say anything. She'd been two days without a cigarette. She was pregnant again, late for her, she was pushing forty, and the doctor had advised her to give up smoking, "just until the baby comes" to lessen the pressure of an already high-risk pregnancy. And, surprisingly, she had listened. I had gone with her to the appointment since Ray had to drive J.J. to work since he lost his license. When we went back out to the car, she took out her pack of Virginia Slims, took a long whiff of packed nicotine, and exhaled with a sigh. Out of showmanship more than practicality, she threw the pack out of the car window. I winced at thinking what Aunt Marie would have said or done to that. "Bitch, are you crazy? You expect me to smoke those off the sidewalk?"

Marie always had a way of putting things into the proper perspective.

It was a slow night. One of those nights where you keep waiting for something to happen—anything—and you live your life in the balance while you watch it go by—and then when something does happen—something big—you wished you had been content with the harmless waiting, wished you hadn't tempted fate with your selfish dreams.

Royboy and Kid wouldn't stop barking. One of them had gotten spooked. "Sometimes they see ghosts," Rhonda had said. Rhonda, such a battleship of a woman that you wouldn't suspect she would have a soft-spot for superstition.

And, before I knew it, that started Lucy and Shit-fer to barking. And so it was that we heard the news amidst a backdrop of baying dogs.

We heard a knock at the door. It was eleven o'clock, but Rhonda didn't mind how late I stayed up. And I had finished my homework. We were both surprised; family doesn't knock.

It was Leroy. Rhonda stood back, but I knew, Leroy probably did too, that this was in preparation for a fight. "You nip from the bottle too many times?" she asked Leroy, as if to say, you know you're not welcome here. "Do I need to get my gun?"

But when she opened the door further and the light from the living room spilled over his face, she relaxed a little bodily, but her facial muscles knit in worry. "Man, you look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just let me come in."

Rhonda was used to this. Hearing bad news. In fact, she had probably heard more bad news than most of us, and so I think she had gotten it down to a science. Before Leroy had said anything, she had grabbed the telephone receiver, the phone book, pen and paper, and a bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Sit down and tell me.” Rhonda had buried one boyfriend, one husband, her sister, and brother-in-law, she had sat there at that table and heard reports of murders, car accidents, suicides, and attempted suicides, and, she liked to think, handled it with the grace of a practical woman. When the cop had shown up at her door to tell her that her boyfriend and brother-in-law had been drowned in the lake, she simply said, “Do you need me to identify the bodies?” as if she had already known it had happened, grieved, and moved on to the nitty-gritty details like casket type and finding a minister for the funeral.

“We have to go to the hospital,” he said, in between sips of Wild Turkey, the glass glinting in the light.

Good news then, whoever it is is still alive...

“D is in the ER. She’s unconscious.” I was hearing only fragments of things, words, ideas, like: “car accident” “guard rail” “pills” “suicide.”

Rhonda, once again, picked us all up, gathered everything we would need: snacks, blankets, magazines, D’s medical and social security paperwork, even the cribbage board, cards, and Uno deck, and loaded us, like toddlers, into her car.

It was cold out, but the roads were bare. Suicide. The word echoed in the chambers of my mind and, like a seed of sound, sowed other ancillary words into the ___ of my consciousness: sister. Death. Drugs. Bitch. Love. Guilt.

She was the chosen one. Couldn’t she see that? She was the one standing in the full light of the sun. Even our mother loved her more. To everyone, I was a plain workhorse of a girl. A tomboy. Ugly and tall. Practical and boring. I was a product of this world. They had created me and then hated me for it.

The reason they loved D is because she came from somewhere else. An alien star. A distant planet. Somewhere far away from the ignorance and poverty and violence of that place.

But, as I stood over my sister's hospital bed, seeing her cracked skull and swollen eyes, echoing that former dream where she appeared on my window ledge in the moonlight with mismatched eyes—one blue and bright, the other decayed and gray and lifeless—I realized that she was just as much a product of their world as I. In fact, she was more so, because, like them, she had an insatiable desire to die. To spin out from the center in whatever way would hurl her furthest from herself: violence, self-destruction, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she fed that hunger until she was so full she made herself sick on the floor of her unconscious. Just retching and shitting out everything to deal with later in the sub-basement of shame and self-honesty. The only problem was that the sub-basement was full, had been for some time, and so she had begun using the house to store her pain, and the house was starting to crumble under the weight of it all. She had one jagged cut that ran from halfway down the back of her head to the mound of flesh above her left eye. I didn't like how the gash reminded me of the incision I had made in the deer's abdomen when I went to remove the guts. It was the same: pink flesh, a gash of blood, the pus-like squirm of tissue catching on the edge of the flesh, except no one was sewing the deer up after.

I forced myself not to think of the mawing cavern, the black dark, that I faced when I spread the incision wide. But I couldn't help it. I began to think of my sister's brain like the inner workings of a great clock, like the kind they build at the top of towers in Prague, Germany. And, I wished I could ask the doctor to open her back up again and remove the

hunger receptor from her brain. In a moment of foolishness borne of shock, I almost did. And then, in the antiseptic light of that bullshit hospital, for the first time since my father was taken away, I let myself cry. And for a moment, I was washed in the relief that comes from letting go of something you've been holding onto for way too long.

While D was recovering, she stayed in the trailer with Kale. It was different, always knowing where she would be. Being able to walk up those steps and see her there lying on the couch, like our crazy mother. I think she recognized it too, the similarity. Or, she wasn't far off in thinking about its irony. Here was a girl always on the go, forced to stay in one place for a while. My sister's attitude changed so much I wondered if the accident had scrambled her brain. Kale was the same, if not quieter, if that were possible. Leroy was playing nice. He'd pasted on a smile and he spoke to us in honeyed tones. Even offered to contribute some money to my prom outfit. I think Rhonda was probably right: he felt guilty. The doctor had said D had barely made it. His face was stern and serious, like a window with its curtains drawn. I couldn't remember the medical terminology that he used except that he kept throwing around the word "grave." And so, standing in that hospital room—the adults had taken all the chairs—all I could think about was a lone gravestone in a field littered with poppies and goldenrod, with a simple engraving in the center: D. And in that tangential vision, every now and then D would appear as she looked as a child, in a white cotton summer dress, her reddish-blond hair cascading down her back, a wild smile on her face and a devilish glint in her eye—and she would run through the field, duck behind the tombstone, every now and then jump out and say "Boo!" And then that vision triggered a memory. "Boo hoo." "Boohoo," she said the

night our mother was taken away the last time. She hadn't found any other activity, yet, that made her feel as good in her role as my sister than in mocking me. "Boo hoo," she said. "Baby gonna cry?"

I was ten years old and D knew damn well that I wasn't going to cry. I hadn't cried since I was eight and dad had been taken away. I had even broken my ankle in the time in between and hadn't cried then. I told her as much.

"Yeah, but you passed out, didn't you?" I could never win.

The day of the prom, it snowed. Except it wasn't a real snow, it was that petty shit that sticks to the cars and melts off before noon. Most kids, their proms were in spring. I guess that was another backwards thing about Monkstown and Monkstown High; we ushered in the winter months in formal attire, changing from our winter boots into our high heels when we reached the makeshift coat room in the gym, where the dance was always held. This year was the first year I was attending the prom. I hadn't prepared in the usual way. Well, I guess I had. I had acquired a dress and shoes, a purse and hose, but I hadn't landed a date or a ride. Early the morning of the prom, I had braved the choppy waters and asked Leroy if he would mind taking me.

"You aren't sitting this one out?" He asked, swallowing his chocolate milk. "You know, on account of your sister?"

Her skull was still on the mend and she played video games from the couch in her and Kale's apartment. She could talk and think, but she was unsteady on her feet, and her head still seemed to be in two pieces, the gash not healed yet, not enough to join the two disparate parts of her head back together. I thought of my cabbage patch doll, Emma, the

one I had when I was a girl. She had shit-brown hair and she wore the same blue plaid outfit and white plastic shoes. I would bash her head on the edge of the saw-horse. Take her out to the scrap pile and throw her from the peak. Sometimes I would punish her for her transgressions, lifting up her skirt and spanking her in the daylight while the dust of the dirt road whirled up from my uncles running four-wheelers down the road and back, testing the shocks, before they ran off into the woods without helmets. One day, J.J. found me banging Emma's head against the ground, saying "Bad Emma. Bad Emma." And he said he had something to show me. I gave him the doll, not realizing that my actions had repercussions, that the violence I enacted on Emma was really the violence I felt needed to be directed on myself.

He took out his switchblade. It was his G.I. Joe knife. The one with the camouflage that was "not quite real." I remember he had begged Rhonda all last summer to buy him the switchblade that he had seen advertised in *Hunting & Fishing*, a magazine that always sat on the plastic bin in front of Rhonda and Ray's toilet. "I'll fix her."

I watched as he flicked open the blade with one deft motion and buried the point of the knife in Emma's scalp. He didn't seem bothered by the hair that ran in straight worms tied by two ribbons, that shit-brown hair that I never liked. Emma wasn't as beautiful as D's Barbie and so I punished her for it.

But as I saw J.J. split open Emma's skull, I began to feel a stirring of loyalty for my favorite doll. I reached out my hand, but J.J. grinned and pulled Emma away, running towards the tree-line with Emma cradled under his arm like a football. In that moment, I realized that I had done Emma a grave injustice and I worried about her. Later that summer, I found her at the foot of a twin birch tree. She hadn't sustained much damage,

surprisingly, but her head had that gash. What I regretted later was that I left Emma there, her skull open to the elements, her clothes stained with mud and damp with wet. She just didn't feel like my doll anymore.

I told Leroy that I was going, and that D would understand. But this was probably a lie.

I waited in my room until it was time to prepare for prom. I tried to read from *Crime & Punishment*, but I just kept scanning the paragraph where Raskolnikov first watches the man beat the horse over and over again. I was nervous. I had only shown my wings to Kale and Kale was so much like a spirit, that I still didn't feel that I had revealed my secret to the world of men.

My blue dress hung from the slats of my closet door. My purse, pantyhose, and jewelry—which had been my mother's—sat on the top of my dresser. My heels, which I had “borrowed” from D, were sitting underneath the dress as if there was an invisible woman hanging from that hanger, a woman who wore the dress and the shoes and looked out at me with knowing eyes. I could almost see her. She was me. But she wasn't me. She was the urban angel. The one who had revealed her identity and then flown on to Hawaii. Traveled to Barbados, Puerto Rico, all of the islands where the sea is as green as my favorite jewels.

I had tried on the dress many times. It was the only piece of clothing that I had that did not conceal my wings, where I could let them unfurl gracefully behind me. It was cut low enough in the back so that they had room to breathe, to move. When Marie had asked me why I wanted such a scandalous, backless dress, I simply said, “There's someone I'm

hoping to impress.” She scoffed at that and shut her mouth, which I expected. But then she said she hoped I did impress, which I didn’t expect. As I sucked in and Marie poked me with a pin the umpteenth time, I couldn’t help but realize that my lie wasn’t a complete lie. There was someone I was hoping to impress.

Kale walked into the kitchen just as I came out to grab a can of soda. I needed to quench my thirst before my big moment. I hadn’t asked him to go to the prom before D’s accident, and he hadn’t offered, though, I reflected later, he had had ample time to do so. I stood in the kitchen, can of coke in hand, with a question that I couldn’t set free from my mind.

“Will you go to the prom with me?”

There it was: the moment of truth. A look passed over Kale’s face, a look of pity, or pain, or disgust, I couldn’t tell which, and he grimaced, said, “I need to stay with D. You know how it is.” And then he fled from the trailer. I stood there, can of coke in my hand, numb with the realization that I couldn’t have him now, perhaps never could. That D had a hold on him now, a strong one, and she wasn’t going to let him go. That he was indebted to her, that he loved her, that the ties that bind are strong, that the river of my love hadn’t been strong enough to sweep Kale away.

Some minutes later, Leroy came up behind me and admitted that he was actually glad that I was going to prom. That it was good to honor rites of passage, or some bullshit, that with D down-for-the-count, it was good that life went on for the rest of us, that we were able to still be *normal*.

I rubbed my back, my wings aching to be free. “I’m not normal, Leroy.” I wanted to fly out of that kitchen, but, in my delirium, I couldn’t figure out if I would fit through the horizontal, tiny kitchen window. “I don’t think I’ve ever been normal.”

Leroy was in front of me now. I think he was gripping my shoulders. When I spoke, he looked pained by my admission. He slapped me across the cheek, but I welcomed it. It stung me back into reality, back into the reality of prom, mean uncle, death-bed sister, and captive wings. “Don’t say that,” he said, his eyes wrinkling into twin pools of blue kindness. “Don’t you ever say that.”

Leroy’s need for normalcy ran deep. I hadn’t realized until that moment just how much he had wanted me to be something that I wasn’t. For us all to be something we weren’t. The white picket fence. The rose bushes. The happy, wagging dog. The 2.5 children. The husband. The wife.

But it wasn’t for himself he wanted this.

It didn’t bring him joy.

He wanted it for the murderous multitudes, the ones who judged, threw stones, wrote edicts, and swore prayers. “It’s never the ones who hurt you who are actually hurting you,” he had told me once after a boy at school had pushed me down a flight of stairs and called me a freak. “It’s the people behind them. The ones that call their shots. The ones that they are performing for. The ones that they are afraid of.” I knew that he was thinking of Paul Butler, but I don’t know how I knew. All I knew is that he was fingering his class ring in a way that made his eyes glass over and I had to look away to give him a moment to cry, to mourn, to do whatever it was that looking at that ring in that way prompted him to do.

I had to knock the sense into him. “Leroy, I’M NOT NORMAL!” Another slap. I stormed back to my bedroom and slammed the door, surprised at myself for my rage, anger being usually something I buried deep, under a thick layer of depression and despair. I walked over to my mother’s mirror. Unkempt girl. Sixteen years old. Hidden wings. A mounded chest and back from hidden gauze. My eyes flew to the dress, the shoes, the invisible woman who knew all the answers. The woman who had already flown on her own power to Hawaii and could weave tales by night that I could unravel in the daytime, tales that would help me piece together my life.

That was when I made a decision.

I wasn’t going to prom.

If Leroy wanted me to go to the prom, he would have to catch me.

Chapter Seventeen

After I put on the dress, I looked in the mirror and the invisible woman and I became one woman. The woman with wings who had already been to the tropical isles my heart sought after and could lead the way for me. I was arrayed in blue silk again, except, this time, I wasn't standing like National Geographic corpses wrapped in ribbons, I was a distinguished angel standing in a gown befitting her powers and her beauty.

And I did seem beautiful. As I looked at myself, I noticed that my lips weren't entirely ugly. My eyes had some character and my breasts were beginning to show in a way that wasn't wholly awful. When I smiled, it made me wonder why I had never smiled much. While my teeth weren't straight, they weren't crooked, persay, and the way the smile lit up my face, it was a joy to see. I vowed to the invisible woman that whatever happened, the world would see my wings.

I tiptoed towards the door, opened it and peered out into the hall, scanning it for signs of Leroy, Kale, anyone who might tell on me to the authorities who stood behind them, as their normalcy police, their objectors.

The coast was clear. By the time I made it out to the barn, my wings were happy, lifting in the breeze. I decided I would make it up to the barn roof on my earthly power. What happened after, that would be up to my angelic self. I spied the ladder resting against the side of the barn and placed my hand on the highest rung within my reach. By this time, I was worried Leroy would run out and spy me, wings and all, prom dress, barefooted, scaling the barn and I wouldn't have time to perform my miraculous feat, one that would make them all wonder in awe.

It so happened that I had time to make it to the barn roof, but when I tiptoed playfully across the peak, I saw Leroy rounding the side of the trailer, Kale, and Rhonda behind him, their eyes and their mouths wide.

I smiled. I lit up the world.

They must be thinking about my wings. Those majestic white downy wings that kept lifting in the wind and daring me to take off. *All in due time.*

I began to desire height and distance. I saw the barn stark against the flecking sky, reaching out of the flat horizon. I had never been very tall. Never known tallness the way an angel should. The barn was inviting. It was tall and decrepit, grown from the ground. It was cast in sepia tones, whereas the trailer was the color of rusted tomatoes. I imagined that the barn had belonged to an old farmhouse that had burned down long ago.

The back field teemed with Queen Anne's lace, wild cucumbers, milkweed. The ladder rested against the A-shaped face of the barn. It had rested there since Leroy decided the cracked pane in the window needed replacing. I put my right foot on the rung and climbed. I reached the top before I ran out of rungs. I had never been afraid of heights, so I swung one leg around the ladder and rested my foot on the pitch of the roof. The air was thinner up there.

I rustled my wings. They caught a scrap of the air and lifted; I felt a pleasant pinch in my back.

The trailer was burnt orange and cherry red. From the pitch of the roof, the world was, if only a little, smaller. I stepped across the pitch of the roof, alternately dipping toes as if into the water. My wings breathed when I breathed. I thought, 'maybe I'm free.' The sky bled out: it was sunset.

I felt myself lifting. I felt that pinch in my back. I rose from the roof. At first I felt weightless. My feet no longer touched the shingles. My stomach fell as I gained altitude. The backfields, the snaking ruts in the dirt driveway, the trailer's metal, corrugated lid, the spears of grass, just the tips of them, light green points on a backdrop of dark.

I slowed my wings and fell gradually through the air and circled above the barn, thinking of what to do.

The air ran under my wings and armpits. My skirt ballooned up around my hips. I sucked in that new freedom of height and distance. Everything was so small: Kale, Leroy, the trailer, the barn, the row of birches. Had everything always been that small?

I watched Leroy climb the ladder. My wings tightened. I realized, *when he catches me, it's over*. Where would I go? I thought of Hawaii, the beautiful blue oasis from the torn out page of National Geographic magazine. I had no place in the outside world. Uncle Leroy leveled his gaze at the sky, at me. Even from a great height, I could see the line split his forehead and hear his anger gurgle. *This is what I know. I have nothing else*.

I slowed and lowered my wings until I stood on the barn roof again, this time with hands on hips, and my face drawn up and defiant, my lips blazing cherries and my hair thrashed in the breeze.

It wasn't long before Leroy climbed up the ladder and slung me over his shoulder and commenced to climb down. Every second the earth bobbed closer. The Black-eyed Susans held out their arms to me. By the time we reached the barn door, I understood what was going to happen.

I spoke nothing. Just the sky inverted. To me, the ground became sky and its grasses hung over the painted orange of the earth. When I saw the bone saw, I buckled. He held me belly-down on top of the old splintered workshop table in the middle of the floor. The boards were splotched with paint: black, white, wedgewood, gray. When I lifted my head I could see the sky bleed through the cracked window. My wings thrashed wildly, making their own music. A cricket, somewhere, screamed.

He rested the teeth of that saw at the base of my wings. I thrashed. He backhanded me until I cried. He tied my wrists and ankles with rope; Leroy could do anything. He sawed. I felt it first as cold. Then came the hot, and I heard the unquiet crunching of saw meeting bone.

“I don’t raise no freaks.”

“No, sir.” My blood dripped down my sides as if it were somebody else’s. Thick. Warm. I was caressed by the many-tongued mouth of my own blood.

No one ever warned me what it was to bleed. Bleed red in furrows down my back. Bleed out my pain in black-red. If somebody would have told me, about the bleeding, I would have known. I wouldn’t have been there in the thickest part of red, with it in whip-lines down my back; I wouldn’t have been sticky in red, mussed with wet, and hot from it.

When he was done, he said nothing, only trudged out, throwing the saw down clanging.

I lost and regained consciousness. I fell and then I rose. I woke to D standing in front of my face, her skull like a mutilated cabbage patch doll, but her face was gray and drawn. She used up all of her strength to untie me. She rubbed my wrists that were

welling up bruises. When I looked down, there they were: white feathered and bony, trailing out at either side of me, blood-caked and still.

Chapter Eighteen

Coyote takes a pull from his flask, which glints silver, and Mala shades her eyes as she looks into the sun.

“That’s not all of the story,” she said. She kicks a lime green stiletto from her foot towards me as she bites down and sets her face in the grimace of a death mask. The shoe whizzes, lime green, by my head. “We’ve coddled her,” Mala yells to coyote, who rolls his eyes. She looks into my eyes and shakes her head while her face draws up into the recognition of an evil plan, that instant madness, that confidence. “Screw it. Dumb ast”—Mala calls him dumb ast because she thinks that’s how it is pronounced—she points at coyote. “Call it in.”

Coyote, in human form, sits up straighter in his chair and places his magazine to the side before he says, “We said we weren’t going to do that.”

“Well, we’re looking at the end, here.” She jerks her head towards me and says, “Sweet pea isn’t going to talk.” Coyote shrugs his shoulders and folds his hands across his lap like a praying monk.

“You,” she points at me and swings her hips from side to side slowly, emphasizing each thrust, as she walks towards me. “We’re going to cut to the quick.” She smiles, bringing her hands to her mouth, as if in shyness. “Your sister’s alive.” She takes pleasure in delivering the news. “We have her.”

The butterflies swirling around the yucca cactus in the distance hover for a second and then disappear. Coyote spits chaw to his left and empties out his boot on the dry, cracked ground. A new cloud has appeared in the sky. It looks like a bridge. And not a

cement bridge, a covered wooden bridge that spans over the black rushing water of the Catheart, thousands of miles away.

“We weren’t going to tell you, sweetness, because we were saving her from you. She’s in fact, why we’re doing this.”

It was at that moment, the exact moment when I found out my sister was alive, when I saw a trail of dust travel, like the Tasmanian devil, across the desert towards us. The pain from my hanging had reached a low level throb that was the sweet, almost bearable pain that came before the next wave of splitting pain, pain that divides you into two people—the one experiencing the pain, and the one watching the one experiencing the pain. No more could I travel to tropical destinations to keep my mind off the reality of what was happening to my body. I think that the penalties for my life-long crimes had just taken effect because not only could I not distract myself anymore from the torture through the astral travel that had been my strongest coping mechanism, but I saw Ekaterina get out of her little red VW bug and close the door. That closed door felt like the final word on our relationship, the beauty and comfort we had found in being together, well, that I had found. For when she strolled towards us that hot August day, she was no longer the Ekaterina I had shared a bed with for four years. She was a cold killer and she took her place next to the others.

“Did she talk?” Ekaterina wore a bright floral summer dress, white cotton, with splashes of gorgeous large blooms. It looked like a watercolor palette exploded and she wore sunglasses and peacock blue high heels. Wouldn’t it be the way that she would come here wearing that dress and looking like that.

“We told her about the sister,” Mala said, turning her head towards Ekaterina, but just her head. Her body stayed squared on me. And for a split second, I saw Mala perhaps, as she was meant to be seen, as a carving on an amphora, the demon snake goddess, depicted in burrowed lines that represent curves and a forked tongue.

Ekaterina walked up to me and stood directly in front of me. She looked deeply into my eyes while somehow looking through me. I had the sensation that I was looking through her skull cavity and finding there a glass house with ocean-front view, a woman with spiked hair wearing a white suit stands in front of the window, holding a strawberry daiquiri and when she turns back, her eyes flash. There is someone else in the room. It is my sister, but not my sister.

She is wearing a white dress that is made as if from swan feathers—the kind like a Vegas showgirl or Rockette would wear. ‘Vaudeville is dead, and you know it,’ the woman at the window says, throwing her drink in my sister’s face.

The ocean-view room fades and I am returned to the startled blue of Ekaterina’s eyes. She smiles, but the smile is nostalgic, sad. I am reminded of the time we went to Mexico together and she ran away from me, along the beach—she was barefoot and drunk and wearing a white dress—running off into the night, her feet making that wet slapping noise when they hit the sand, running because she was having a bad trip and she thought, while I was trying to bring her down by speaking softly, that I had confessed I was an adulterer and that I was going to leave her there, on that beach in Mexico. Where did you get such an idea? I laughed. That made it worse. And then she had slammed open the beach house room door and plodded away down to the water’s edge, where she took off running, running as far away from me as she could get. When I followed, admiring

her stamina—while drunk and high, too—she called back to me “I’m running forever. You’ll never catch me. I’ll run forever to get away from you.”

Ekaterina smiles again. Looks down in mock modesty, and says, “We kill the sister.” Coyote laughed and drew his thumb in an arc across his throat. “Unless you give us what we want.”

I gulped. When did Ekaterina turn bad? Did I miss the signs? Was there a way to see beforehand that I would be betrayed? Was there a way to prevent this? Or had I been doomed from the start? Did I let love blind me so much that I walked into all the traps she set for me?

“And what is that?” I asked.

Ekaterina came up to me, standing less than arm’s length below me. As I hung there from the pole, my back erupting in new spasms of pain, she stood below and a little in front of me, the top of her head at my calf-level. And she did a most brutal thing. “What do we want?” She placed her hands on my ankles, looked up at my face and wrenched her mouth into a grimace and yanked down, with force, helping gravity along, and my back ripped further as I found myself lower to the ground.

“The mother fucking truth.”

References

- Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- Foxlee, Karen. *The Anatomy of Wings*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.
- King, Stephen. *On Writing*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- Maso, Carole. *Ghost Dance*. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1995.
- Nordan, Lewis. *Music of the Swamp*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1991.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Picador, 1988