LampLight

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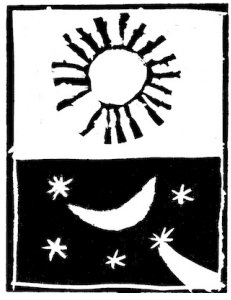

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LampLight

Emmory and the Wolf

Lowry Poletti

February 12th, 1995

The wolf wakes beside a corpse she doesn't recognize. When she stands, she realizes her paws have been replaced with hands scraped raw by the asphalt, and she cries.

* * *

I get up at five in the morning because the school bus shows up fifteen minutes earlier than it should—every day, every year. It's so cold that there are snowflakes frozen to the windows, and the hallway lights hardly drive away the dark.

I'm so tired that I wonder if I even slept last night. The moon was a waxing gibbous, bloated and yellow. My dreams were filled with strange sights and stranger memories, ones that sit at the edges of my brain and refuse to return. I don't want to remember it: the memories will fill me to bursting. I live two lives inside one body and sometimes, always, I would rather crawl beneath the soil outside instead of waking.

When I'm making breakfast, I hear the kids' alarms go off. It's too early for them to want to talk. They grab their eggs and their bacon, get grease stains over homework half-finished. I take a moment, leaning against the counter, to close my eyes. I ate before I cooked.

Emmory wakes up last, tossing her satin cap on the sofa. She doesn't eat with our daughters. Instead, she grabs a can of coffee from the fridge and walks the kids to the foyer. The way she tuts at them makes it sound like she's been up this whole time to watch over them like a mother bird. She swings a pink backpack over one's shoulder, plaid over another. Keychains, little plushies, and pins clatter together in their haste. They fight over boots. Somehow, I blinked and the two of them had grown into the same shoes.

I think that I want to go back to sleep once the house is quiet. But I have everything to do before the day ends: laundry piled up, groceries to buy, the shed to clean. Emmory has been staying at work later and later because her boss—I'm sorry, *Dan*—said Michaela is transferring to a new department, which means he wants to apply for her position, which means he's dangling a promotion in front of Emmory's face and grinning while she trips over herself to get it. I can usually pick up the slack, but today I have a deadline too. I'm leaving today, and I'll be gone for the rest of the week.

"Tell mama you love her," Emmory says. The kids call back to me in unison before she pushes them out the door. A dusting of snow decorates the sidewalk, broken only by their footsteps from yesterday. They're perfect little girls and someday, I want to love them like Emmory does. After all, they've done nothing wrong. They deserve it.

Emmory sips her breakfast until the kids disappear down the street. Now that I think about it, she hardly eats. Her waist is pencil thin and she has Hollywood collarbones. I eat for the two of us, sometimes the three of us. There's a fire behind her hollow cheeks. Sometimes she burns to the touch.

Returned to me, she presses a manicured finger to the calendar hanging beside my head.

"Taking the day off?" I ask. She's wearing a frilly robe tied so it covers her bra.

"Don't you remember?"

Every day of the calendar is meticulously planned: color-coded blocks for both kids, for her, and for me. Violin practice every Wednesday, after-school

study sessions every day but Thursdays, a recital coming up. We buy the same calendar every year because this brand prints the moon phases in big black letters.

I thought she was joking when she said she wanted to drive down to the farm today. I remember when she wrote it, two weeks ago, and I'd laughed. She laughed, too. Won't it be fun, she said. We haven't been in so long. Didn't you see what date you picked? Yeah, yeah. And she laughed again, wine-drunk and bare-breasted, hair rubbed wild from her silk pillow.

"I already asked Linda to pick the girls up from school," she says. Emmory's sister uses just about any excuse to spend time with the kids. "She hasn't seen them in a whole month, so you know she's going a little crazy."

"You already asked her?"

The day of the full moon, I always drive myself to the hiking trails at the edge of town and I stay there for a week. Emmory always picks up the car later. I never ask her how, but I guess she calls a cab to the scene of the crime, where the door hangs ajar and the headlights are still on. Nonetheless, she's always there to find me when I emerge, keys hanging from her outstretched fingertip and her lipstick smudged at the corner. Hey, babe, she would say. The scratches I left in the leather seats are stitched together again, the dents in the hood buffed out.

I am glad to see her every time. When I was a kid, my mother told me stories of wolves who turned on the full moon and never returned. The lucky ones, she'd say, the ones with nothing left to return to.

Emmory asks, "You want me to cancel on her?"

"No, no—"

"She'll be so sad. You didn't hear how excited she was on the phone."

"I don't want you to cancel."

"Good," she chimes, lips pressed together in a tight smile. "I'm already packed."

She sails back upstairs. Her father's farm is ten hours away on a good day. We've made the drive several times before, even in the snow and the rain. But

never have we made it there before nightfall.

I try to shrug away the anxiety. She's probably taking me to her favorite diner and pretending that it's a special occasion. We'll be home in time.

She returns to the landing, dressed and with two bags in tow. Her coiled hair is pinned up beneath a scarf decorated with cranes, and she's wearing her khaki riding trousers.

"God, we really need this," she says. "Do you ever feel like the city just suffocates you? I want to roll around in the mud."

I grimace. "You wouldn't."

"Just come here."

With a snort, she slings a button-down over my shoulders. She hums while she fixes it for me, then she slides her hands under to grab me by the sides of my stomach.

"You're cute," she says, squeezing me. "You need this too. More than me."

I'm still waiting for the punchline when she grabs the keys, her coat, her mink stole.

"Does your dad know we're on the way?"

"It's a surprise."

"He hates surprises."

She grins. "I know."

She leads the way outside, vibrant and glowing. I carry both bags: a purse for her and a crossbody for me. She packed light—if she really wanted me to believe that we're going to the farm, she could have at least pretended to pack a few days of clothes.

The cold doesn't bother me. I've stopped asking which parts of me are part of the curse and which parts are wholly human. At this point, I need to stop counting my blessings. Emmory takes the driver's seat before I can stop her. I throw the bags in the back. When I sit next to her, her hand, icy cold, lands on my thigh. I wish she'd wear gloves. The engine hums, melting the ice off the windows, but she won't blast the heat because she knows it makes me sick to my stomach.

She pushes her glasses down her nose, her face split in a smile again. "We're going to have a great time, you know?"

"Are we?"

She slaps my side playfully. "Don't be like that. The lake's beautiful this time of the year."

The car rolls out of the driveway. I let my head tilt to the side, but she doesn't have anything else to say. We aren't going to the farm, after all—we can't be. I guess she doesn't want to ruin the surprise, but it still makes me nervous. I've got so much to do today.

Snow moves past us like stars in the night. The sun is rising at a snail's pace. I've got time, I remind myself. Even if I don't get to the supermarket, I'm sure Em can handle a run to the store. I run over our grocery list in my head as her nails tap the dashboard.

"Why are you getting on the freeway?" The diner was only about ten minutes away.

She accelerates up the ramp, and the car shakes like it's made out of cardboard. "How else would I get to dad's?"

"Okay, you've gotten your laugh. Where are we going?"

She looks at me over her glasses. "It's something like eighty miles to exit 34. Then we need to get on I-95."

"Okay," I say, "Okay," not believing her. My skin starts to itch. It's always like this, the day before the moon. A fur coat sits underneath my skin, waiting for me to tear this costume off of my bones. I'm not tired anymore either, but this energy doesn't belong in my body. It drives me to smell the air and watch the passing trees for glowering eyes.

"Are we going to stop for food?" I ask her.

"If you want, I guess. I'm not planning on eating tonight, anyway. I think you'll have plenty."

I'm not sure what to say, but she looks at my face and throws her head back, giggling. Her hair has fallen free from her scarf, curled around her face.

"Why are you acting so strangely?"

"Me? *No.*" Her lips make an *O*. She hands me her phone and tells me to put her music on. This genre of rock sounds like white noise to me, but I know it's her favorite. Is she lying to me? I'm not sure, but she reaches out to run her fingernails down my cheek.

She chats about the music as snowflakes pass us by. She says the whole album tells a story; that's why you have to listen to it in order. She keeps getting interrupted by operatics, which makes her laugh. I watch her face while she talks. Her mouth is the eye of an adder.

When I first met her, I told her I would kill her someday. She stirred her martini and looked at me over the brim of her half-moon glasses. That's a fun story, she said, tell me how it starts.

"I thought it would be harder to convince you to get in the car," she says. We've traded the bleak highway for rolling hills. There's a fluttering inside my chest, one that's been building all morning.

I agree with her. "Yeah. Yeah."

"You're surprised, too?"

"I shouldn't be. You can talk me into anything."

She tries to laugh again, but her facade is breaking. There's something wrong, something strange about this day, but it isn't too late. We can park in the shoulder. I can hold her in my lap.

"Why are we out here? Really?" I ask. I keep a hand on her shoulder. For a while, she doesn't answer. Her music, once swelling to a crescendo, returns to a simmer again.

"Can you tell me what it's like," she asks, taking the next turn automatically, "when you change?"

"You took the wrong exit. If you want to go to the diner."

"Is that where we're going?" She runs her tongue over her lips as she smiles.

"Why can't you answer my question?"

"Why can't you answer mine?"

"I don't remember." That's only half of a lie.

When I was younger, I remembered better. I would write down everything

I could until my journal entries got longer and longer each month. I heard somewhere that, if you keep a dream journal, you get better at remembering your nightmares. Turns out, it works just as well for wolves. When I dropped out, I threw the journals out, too.

"You don't want to remember," Emmory says.

"That's the same thing."

What do I remember? In the mornings before lecture, I would reread those journals in the corner of my dorm and laugh at the absurdity. It was like a movie; I wanted to watch it again and again. I would run to the toilet to vomit, and I would read them another time.

"It seems like fun."

Emmory puts her hand on my arm. The touch burns. She meets my shaking gaze with eyes wide and fluttering, lips wrapped around the word "What" but not quite uttering it.

"You can't mean that."

"You told me it was fun when you were younger," she says, her voice taking that low, breathy tone she uses when she's nostalgic. "You told me sometimes you wished you could go back."

"Yeah, I said a lot of *fucked up things* when I was twenty."

"Fucked up," she echoes.

"We all do. You told me once that you wished you could set your dad on fire. You had the gasoline in your garage."

That makes her laugh.

Back then, when I was just barely a woman, I didn't have a single thing to care about, not in the whole world. It was only me and the moon. During the off-days, I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. I counted the days until the next moon, itching. I drank until the sky went dark, and then I drank some more. I stumbled in the streets, clothes torn apart and the taste of adrenaline coating my throat like sugar. I don't know how I didn't die, how I managed to stumble out of the clubs and frat houses half-human and howling. I still have the scars from when I was shot, and stabbed, and snared by traps.

"I think I want to meet her—the wolf, I mean."

Emmory met me soon after I decided to hate the wolf, when I divorced myself from it, its lust, and its hunger. When I missed it, she knew, because I would look out the window and cry.

But that doesn't happen anymore.

"I'm a better person now," I say. I make grocery lists. I do the dishes. I buy clothes that a 30-year-old mother ought to wear, and I kiss my wife good night.

"I don't think you are. I just think you're tired."

I think that should make me angry, so I rehearse what I should say to her silently. Is it not enough that I wake up to cook them breakfast every day? Should I tear out my ribs to build their tree house in the backyard, use my hair to line their coats? When the fat has been rendered from my body and my skeleton buried in the cement below the house, would they finally forget the wolf?

I decide not to say anything this time. To my right, I watch the mile markers float by. The diner is far gone by now. Maybe she wants to stop somewhere new, someplace one of her coworkers gushed about.

"Will you take the next exit?"

She hums, like she's considering it.

"Do you remember when the little one was a baby?" she asks.

How could I forget? Those days, I could think of nothing else but her: her toes curled like pearls and her wide, oil-black eyes.

"You left," Emmory says, "and you came back and you said you had a dream where you tore open her stomach. And you said the worst part wasn't her blood all around you or her tiny liver covering her tiny heart, it was that you weren't sad at all that she was gone."

There's something inside of my chest and it starts to bang against its cage. The air tastes like fear and coffee. I swallow forcibly.

"That wasn't me."

"Yes, it was. Then we got back to the house and you said you could smell her from the foyer, so you slept in the laundry room for a week."

"You think I would hurt her?"

"Why does that matter?" Emmory fixes me with a wet stare and she's smiling. "She's with Linda now."

She is, and we love Linda. She wears sun dresses in the winter. She hosts the weekly PTA meetings out of her kitchen. She knows our daughters' favorite colors and what they like to order at the ice cream place.

The road winds around for hours at a time. Are we driving in circles? I can't tell the sky from the clouds from the median. I pull at the hair on the back of my hand until they come off between my fingers like stray eyelashes. They're gray now, harsh and banded with a frosty white.

"We're not turning back now," I ask, "are we?"

"I don't want to." Emmory looks at me with a shrug. "Do you want to?"

After a bit, she pulls into a rest stop. It's not one of the fancy ones. The building hosts one sign that points to the bathrooms and another to the vending machines.

"I've gotta piss," Emmory says. "Do you want anything?"

God, I'm so hungry. My stomach turns in on itself. I want to eat something that yields softly beneath my teeth, but when I imagine our groceries, those slabs of raw steaks gone purple on the counter, I choke down bile instead.

"A soda?" I manage. Not even a bag of chips.

When she's gone, I stumble away from the road and vomit my guts out. There's no punchline this time, just eggshells floating in a puddle of bile. I can't believe I made scrambled eggs again. That shade of yellow is starting to get to me: the same yellow, curdled, and sulfurous. Yesterday, I said I would kill myself if I had to see that yellow again. This morning only eleven of the eggs made it into the pan.

I scrape my shoes off and run my hand through my hair when I look at the car again.

She left the lights on. They glare at me.

I can't leave. I asked her to get me a coke.

I watch her leave the rest stop. She walks like a deer, long-limbed and elegant, though plumes of yellow grass that reach towards her face with the

plodding grasp of a newborn. After she opens the driver's side door, she pauses and sees me. She smiles so wide, then waves frantically. With fingers like needles, she points at the two bottles in her hand and holds them above her head.

"They both came out!" she shouts, laughing. "Two for one!"

I think to myself, miserably, that I'm still hungry.

We get back in together. She doesn't notice anything wrong. She just opens the bottle for me and leaves it in the cupholder. In the rear-view mirror, she preens herself. Then she makes herself busy by dusting the dash and drumming her fingers on the steering wheel.

"Do you grow new teeth when you change?" she asks, still tapping and tapping and tapping. "Like, right out of your gums? What happens to all of your molars? I mean, they have to come back, you know, otherwise you would be wearing dentures right now. Here—"

She takes my chin and props it up in her palm, then she opens my mouth the same way she would put a bit on a horse. Her perfume tastes like musk. She finds her way to two new canines, stained yellow, nestled between otherwise normal teeth. I found them last night before I went to bed.

She pops her lips. "Huh," she says.

"You're waiting for something."

"I want you to work up an appetite," she says. "Dad cooks the best barbeque."

"That's not it."

Chewing on her lip, she stares distantly behind me. I follow her gaze to the bedraggled forest that borders the highway. My feet itch to run. Past the metal fences, the trees reach out with skeletal branches. Bald patches of sky peer out between them.

"Here," she says, finally. She holds her purse in her lap like she would hold a kitten. "Your mom gave this to me."

She takes a notebook out. It's bound in green faux leather and a tattered ribbon hangs out from between the pages like a tongue.

I recognize it immediately. That's not a book at all. It's a rattlesnake. If I

was eleven again, I'd grab the shovel from the shed and chop off its head.

"I threw that away."

"Well, Denise found it. She said she found it stuffed at the bottom of a trash bag—the corner tore a hole in the plastic—and she thought it was so odd that you would throw it away. So she cleaned it up and held onto it in case you wanted it back."

"She had *no right.*"

She's pleading now. "Babe."

"Did she read it?—did you—?"

She's so good at looking helpless: big eyes, big lashes, mouth agape.

"Give it to me," I say. "I'll get rid of it."

"Why!" she cries. "Babe, she kept it because it's beautiful."

"She should know better."

The curse is hereditary—what a blessing, I think suddenly, that the girls that live in our house were not born with fur on their bellies. My mother lives on a remote property, flanked on either side by acres of woodland. At twelve-years-old, I was taken to live with my father because her house was barely heated by a wood stove and she could only drive me to school twice a week. At sixteen, I was dumped back at her doorstep because he couldn't keep locking me in the basement when the moon rose. I'd gotten too strong for him.

"She said it was everything she ever wished she could be." Emmory flips through the pages frantically until she finds the bookmark. Her eyes dart frantically from me to the book to me again. Does she think I'll snatch it away from her, tear it apart right there?

She reads, "On the first night, the forest was alive and the wolf was so purely happy. It's so easy to be happy when you have nothing else to think about. She was warm and the ground was soft. There were songs all around her. She ran as fast as she could because she wanted to. When she stopped, the songs were still there but so different. On the second day, she caught a rabbit. I remember how it looked—you'd think it would be scary, right, seeing all of its insides? But she's never tasted something so good and when I think about how it looked, broken

on the ground, that's what I remember. When the bones crunched in her mouth, it turned sweet all of a sudden. I want to remember how it looked for my whole life. She kept thinking, I want another and another and another—"

"Is that all you read?" I asked. "Did you get to the night when I woke up in an alleyway, bruises all the way up to my chest? Or how about the night where I was so drunk that I couldn't even tell you that I'd changed? And the time I realized a campus murder was on the full moon and I had to spend so long—so long wondering if I—"

I stop myself there. I'd written too much back then. *The wolf's been flayed like a fish and put back together; the wolf tore her foot from a trap until her skin sucked away from the bone; the wolf pulled a bullet from her shoulder with her teeth, along with a chunk of fur and skin*. Those were the stories that made my heart rush, made my pen scratch frantically across the paper. I could watch the events of each full moon like an observer, record them to sickening detail—write it on the playbill: *Better than any horror movie! The next M. Night Shyamalan!*—and the next month, I could push myself further to see it all again, and more.

She puts the journal between her legs and starts the car again. The engine grows before it hums. Everything is so loud, now, that it's hard to think. I can hear the birds above us and insects that sleep inside of the ground and metal clicking inside of the car and the beat of Emmory's heart. I dig my claws into the seat.

As we roll forward, the sky bruises. We miss our exit. Emmory drives straight until the pine trees tower above us.

Maybe I should reach out and grab the book. She put it there for a reason. I've watched her straddle a horse bareback with the same legs. I put my hand on her lap instead. She smells like lavender perfume and sweat. If I focus on her for too long, I can still smell lingering piss from between her legs, and warmth and mucus.

The hunger returns, no longer the fleeting lightheadedness of a missed meal, but a closed fist squeezing my gut.

"You were happy," she says, "once."

Once. Before breakfast. Before I was pregnant, before she was pregnant. Before she learned that a wolfwoman can miscarry a fetus four-legged and furred. Before I pulled cherry-stems from between her lips. Before I put my tongue inside of her. Before I left the woods behind the state uni.

"No, *no*, Em." I grab her hand and hold it between the two of mine. "Without you, I'd still be there."

How can I hope to convince her with this voice? These lies shivering inside of my throat?

She says, "I stole you. Now I'm going to put you back." Her head falls to the side, brows scrunched together and a smile playing at her lip. She's chewed off most of her lipstick. She says, "How do you think this has to end? What happens when a woman takes a wolf and makes her pretend to be a woman, too?"

Gray fur lines my arms, all the way down to the space between my fingers. I see this, even as I hold her, so I squeeze her hand.

In the next hour, we pull up to a scenic overlook. The city's skyline is so far away from us now that it might as well be stars. The clock strikes sundown, but it hasn't gotten dark. The moon, unearthly bright, has become a flashlight just below the horizon.

"You've been thinking about this for a while," I say.

"Ever since I put it on the calendar." She uses a sing-song voice. "Just counting the days." Then she crawls out of her seat to straddle my lap. Pulling off her scarf, she shakes her head until her hair cascades across her shoulders. The sky silhouettes her. The last time she sat in my lap, I told her I would fuck her into the couch.

"Emmory?"

"Isn't this everything you've ever wanted?" Flipping her hair to the side, she kisses my lips. I want to drink the sweat pooling between her neck and her collarbone. She pulls away to whisper to me. I grab her hair and drink from her mouth. She says she loves me. "You know it's everything you've ever wanted, babe," she says.

I cup her face in my hands. Her cheeks fill the space between my fingers. Her mouth, gaping open, is shadowed black and speckled with light like the reflections that play across her eyes. When she meets my gaze, she smiles with all her teeth and laughs. I think that she's crying, too, but it's so hard to see her face now. Her reddened cheeks and bright hair return to me in shades of muddy blue. The light is blinding.

"You're not going to leave," I say. My voice, deeper now, scratches my throat.

Why? She could run now, but she could never run fast enough.

My hands move down from her cheeks, to her neck, to her shoulders and her breasts. Her skin is as soft as velvet and her heart races beneath my palm. Fast fast fast. Fast as a mouse running. I can hear the rush of her blood now.

"You can get out," she offers, panting above me, "if you want."

I hook my fingers into her shirt. The stitches tear apart in my fist.

"And you'll drive away?" I ask.

She moves—I think to brush her hair away from her face, but I have her by the wrist now, too. Her face is complete with doe eyes newly wide.

"You know I won't," she says. "But it might make you feel better."

* * *

January 23rd, 2007

The wolf emerges full and sated. There's a warmth in her belly, even though the dew in her fur has already become ice. She lumbers out into the woods, which stretch out so far that they may never end. The faint buzz of cars in the distance is drowned out by insects and chirping birds, nestled inside the veins of trees. When she opens her mouth to pant, she finds that her jaw is overflowing with saliva and blood and bile—nevertheless, her tongue lolls, and the drips stain her claws.

She walks. The earth dips inward, an overhang made from roots and moss. She crawls beneath where the dirt pulses with sap. She'll sleep here, and for the next night and for the next, as if there is only one night which lasts an eternity. She thinks she's forgetting something, like a dream half-formed, so she closes her eyes to remember it but all she sees is a rabbit running.

They Grow Back

Trix Middlekauff

Kayleen has driven into a wormhole of mountain woods and lanes. Fatalistic thoughts

someone will find me dead on the side of the road
i'm going to starve to death
they won't even find my body

burble unbidden, relentless, tightening the tendrils of panic that wrap around her lungs.

Her best friend May had offered to come. She didn't think Kayleen should be left alone right now, not even for a minute, not ever. She certainly shouldn't embark on a solitary six-hour drive to Wild, Wonderful West Virginia.

But no. Kayleen had said she needed to do this on her own. Wanted an adventure. Escape. Something to take her mind off of… *it.* A state change. As soon as she'd gotten past city limits, she'd regretted her bravado.

Once she hit the mountains her phone signal had started to go in and out, mostly out. So she'd pulled over, frantically reaching under the seats and tearing things out of the glove compartment, where (thank the gods) she found a crinkled fossil: an actual paper map. As she fumbled with it, unfolding its seemingly endless rectangles of lines and squiggles, she wondered how anyone ever found anything before GPS. But either Mother Daisy's road was unmarked, hiding from the world, or Kayleen was too freaked out to find Rural Route 10.

Back on the road, though, some long-buried memory or instinct must have drawn her towards the long and winding lane to her grandmother's house. She nearly cried with relief when she spotted the tiny red structure around a bend.

* * *

Kayleen hasn't been here since she was a little girl, but she can still walk the layout of Mother Daisy's ramshackle cottage in her mind's eye: the front door opening into a ruthlessly scrubbed white kitchen, the appliances and decor frozen in time somewhere around 1935. The paneled den, with its battered brown and blue sofa bed and the cracked pleather armchair. The wooden floor model Sylvania that only got one fuzzy channel with the spittle-flecked, wild-eyed country preachers Mother Daisy watched on Sundays.

That last summer visit, nearly 20 years ago, had ended abruptly, and lived as a chaotic blur of images in Kayleen's memory. Her mother shaking her awake from a deep sleep. A rushed, tearful embrace from Mother Daisy before being pulled from her sinewy arms. Standing, swaying, bleary eyed, on the tiny porch, clutching Bozo the stuffed DogBear and suffocating in the breezeless humidity of the pitch black July night. Her mother hastily packing the trunk, accompanied by a symphony of relentlessly, furious crickets. Speeding off into the night, back to the city and the noise and the lights and the crush.

She hasn't seen Mother Daisy since that night.

Sure, there have been $5 bills in birthday cards. Letters written in Mother Daisy's spidery cursive. But Mother Daisy doesn't do email. Doesn't even have a phone.

But still, Kayleen remembers. Snapshots. Sounds. Smells. Mother Daisy's deep commanding voice. Her auburn hair, a shared trait among all the women in the family, Kayleen included. Some of Kayleen's Appalachian cousins believed red hair was a sign of the second sight. Her mother always kept the mountain superstitions and beliefs at arm's length.

She remembers the hot, wet blanket of listlessness that would descend on her mid-afternoon. Sitting on Mother Daisy's tiny porch, a glass of iced tea in

one hand, one of the Chronicles of Narnia flopped open in the other, the air so thick with moisture you could suck it in through your teeth.

Any plan to explore was always quashed by the warnings against straying beyond her grandmother's small plot of land into the cooler, deeper wilds of the WV woods. Because hunters. Because poisonous snakes. Because something… nameless in the woods. No, best to stay safely on Mother Daisy's property. Play with the chickens. Weed the vegetable garden. Set the table for supper.

Supper. Kayleen's own mother made things that came from boxes, bags, and cans. Kayleen herself lived mostly on takeout and microwave dinners.

But Mother Daisy made meals out of things she pulled from her own earth and killed with her own hands. Ten year old Kayleen thought it was nothing short of magic. Shortcake, dripping with juice from berries that had been plucked that morning. Cornbread, fiery with peppers pulled from the garden. And her favorite: the fried chicken. Juicy, lard-crisp, salty. It wasn't until she was grown that she realized the chicken legs she sucked to the bone came from the very same hen she had loved and named earlier in the day.

* * *

When she sees Mother Daisy for the first time in two decades, Kayleen can't suppress a gasp. She certainly hadn't expected her fiery, independent, active grandmother to have turned into a hunched crone. But the woman who answers the door isn't just well preserved.

She looks exactly the same as she did 20 years ago.

Her face, her skin, her red hair, untouched by a single gray hair. She hasn't aged a minute since the night Kayleen's mother had whisked her away.

Mother Daisy waves away Kayleen's apparent shock. "It's the mountain air, girl," she says, winking. "That, and fresh chicken and eggs. Speaking of, we're having your favorite. I killed the fattest chicken just for you."

Kayleen is touched. "But you shouldn't have killed one of your chickens just for me," she says.

"Never you mind. We're kin. We're all we've got. And besides, I still have

three, all good egg layers. Now warsh up and set the table for supper."

* * *

Kayleen pushes herself back from the table and surveys the landscape. Corn bread crumbs. A stray leaf of collard greens. Chicken bones. A smear of berry juice on a cracked china plate.

"I don't know where I just put all that Mother Daisy," she says. " I must have really missed home cooking. It was. I don't know, I don't have words. *Insanely* delicious."

"You needed it," Mother Daisy says. "You're sallow and sunken. City air. City food. Makes you look half dead."

"But what do you *really* think?" Kayleen laughs, remembering her grandmother's unfailing, sometimes brutal way of plain, honest speaking. But to be fair, she does feel more… alive. More vital than she had since she could remember.

"Okay, Mother Daisy. Real talk. Why did you ask me to come? You said it was something urgent, that you couldn't write in a letter."

"I need an excuse to see my granddaughter after all these years?"

"No, but—"

"I'm teasing you, girl. Go 'n git some sleep. Deep talk is for morning light."

* * *

Kayleen awakens to the sound of rain pattering on the tin roof. And something else. A faint, far off sound. A muffled thump. Raccoons? Bears? Her sleepy brain whispers, *Maybe it's that thing the grown ups warned you about, the thing in the woods*

Stop being ridiculous, she hisses back at herself. *Just go look out the window. It's nothing.*

She hoists herself up as quietly as the creaky sofa bed will allow and tiptoes to the window, straining to see through the rain and mountain mist. She can just make out a hunched figure in Mother Daisy's garden… someone digging.

Clang, thump, clang thump.

What the actual F?

As Kayleen watches, her skin beginning to prickle all over, the figure stands and turns. Eyes shine like silver dollar coins in the moonlight and bore into Kayleen.

It's Mother Daisy, holding a shovel.

* * *

Kayleen's legs are trapped in a tangle of sheets, her hair damp with sweat. She forgets for a moment where she is. Then it comes back, in a rush. Mother Daisy. Digging in the dark. Burying… something.

It had to be a bad dream, she tells herself. The bright sun streaming through the curtains, the smell of fresh coffee, the sounds of Mother Daisy cooking—these don't jive with her dark visions of the previous night.

Mother Daisy calls from the kitchen, "You up girl? Come. Eat. It's buckwheat cakes and eggs."

Kayleen shuffles into the kitchen, buoyed by the buttery aroma of pancakes. Mother Daisy looks at her appraisingly.

"You look like death warmed over."

"Sorry, Mother Daisy. I'm just not used to being verbal first thing in the morning."

"You just need more real food. Now sit."

As Kayleen sips coffee and gets ready to tuck into her stack of steaming pancakes, Mother Daisy says, "I asked you here to pass on knowledge."

Kayleen puts her fork down. Something in Mother Daisy's tone demands full attention.

"I wanted to share family histories and ways that your mother rejected. Things that she refused to accept. A legacy that she nearly cheated you out of."

Kayleen can feel her breath begin to quicken. No, she won't hear anything bad about her mother. Her mother was trying to protect her from whatever crazy superstitions her West Virginia kinfolk practiced. And now Mother Daisy

is trying to blame her.

"How can you speak ill of the dead?" Kayleen says. "Especially your own daughter?" Her voice shakes and tears begin to sting her eyes. "She's barely cold in her grave, why would you say anything bad about her? To me of all people. How can you even *think* anything bad…?"

Kayleen stands up, her coffee cup crashing to the ground as she bolts out of the kitchen and into the humid swampiness of the outdoors.

Almost immediately, she regrets her outburst. Her emotions have been all over the place in the months since her mother's death. Tears turn to laughter and laughter turns to anger in a blink, usually leaving Kayleen exhausted and confused, reaching for booze or a pill or better yet both to make it go away. May says it's normal. That she shouldn't beat herself up. Always easier said than done.

She takes deep breaths, allowing the rhythmic clucking and scraping of the hens to soothe her and anchor her to the present, to something that's not her dead mother.

But wait. Kayleen counts… 1, 2, 3… *four* chickens? Hadn't Mother Daisy said there were three remaining after she killed one for Kayleen's supper? And one of them seems to be acting *off*. Really off.

It walks in slow aimless circles, head lolling bonelessly from side to side. The other chickens give it a wide berth. Kayleen shivers.

It's the grief. I'm imagining things, she thinks.

* * *

"Mother Daisy, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

Kayleen stops, mid sentence. Her grandmother's back is to her, her hands placed atop the television. Her head is bowed reverently. The screen is a flickering mass of static and lines. Underneath the crackle and hiss there's a steady faraway hum, an alto humming a Gregorian chant in the middle of a swarm of bees.

"Come child. Come stand with me. Listen. Learn. Know the truth."

Kayleen begins to back away. Is this why her mother took her away and kept her from Mother Daisy all these years?

"Okay Mother Daisy. I don't know what's going on here. But I'm not joining your cult. Or… whatever it is."

Mother Daisy's shoulders shake with laughter. "Cult? This is no cult, child. This is the magic of the earth. Of the cycles of life."

"The earth isn't speaking to you through the television. You know that's not possible. Please stop, come back to the kitchen. Let's just. Talk this through logically."

"Kayleen. These ancient things have no limits or boundaries. They can speak to us through our own inventions, if we listen. They teach us. We learn the way to eat and the way to plant the bones. We wait. Then. They grow back. And we eat, again. And plant, again."

Mother Daisy turns to look at Kayleen.

"And we stay young, and we stay strong."

Her hand flys out and grabs Kayleen by the wrist with uncanny strength.

"Just listen to me, girl. If your mother had listened she would still be here with us."

Kayleen struggles to free herself from her grandmother's vice-like grip but to no avail. Mother Daisy presses Kayleen's hand down onto the television and as she does so, the fight drains out of Kayleen's body, replaced with a

Thrumming.

Pulsing.

Something ancient sending its music through her muscles, her blood, her bones. She sways gently from side to side, the anxiety draining from her for the first time since her mother passed until…

she blacks out.

* * *

One month later

"May! What are you doing here? How did you find us?" Kayleen grabs her friend and encircles her in a hug. "I've missed you."

"Funny way of showing it. I've been worried sick. We all have. Lucky thing I had the route number written down, but still, you were *not* an easy woman to find."

"Please, I'm so sorry. I'm the worst. There's no cell phone reception here and Mother Daisy doesn't have a phone and I just got… caught up in catching up."

May looks Kayleen up and down appraisingly.

"I still love you but I'm mad at you. *Really* mad." She lets out a sharp breath and rolls her eyes. "But you *do* look amazing. Country air must agree with you."

"Well, *you* look exhausted. Come in. Have something to eat. We'll kill the fattest chicken just for you."

Mother

Anuja Mitra

I will always regret we were not kinder to Mother. Callie especially could push all of her buttons, though heaven knows I was no angel. I did try to be good. At the Children's Home everyone called me the better young lady. While Callie dashed in late for class, the hem of her dress dirtied from kneeling over her books, I was praised for the shininess of my shoes, the tidiness of my ribboned hair. I was the first to be seated for breakfast, upright with hands in my lap as though there were a picture to be taken.

I was there the day they brought Mother. She was silhouetted against the trees all busy with bloom, and the moment I saw her I knew she was ours. It was a spring day, cold and bright. We spoke to her in the garden, shivering in our thin cardigans while she stayed perfectly, miraculously still, the breeze enfolding her in a gentle sigh. She did not patronize us like other adults. She did not even frown at Callie's surliness, only nodded and smiled and stroked her braids. When she kissed my cheek, I smelled lavender.

I was so full of that smell, and the smoothness of her hand on my shoulder, that I barely listened when they told Callie and I where we were going, how lucky we were. They were always telling us how lucky we were. If we kept trying Mother's patience, the doctor often said, then we would have to go back to the Home. I remember precisely the last time he said this. We were standing in the kitchen, my hands sticky with batter. It was supposed to be Baking Day and here he was, uninvited, unwelcome. A stranger in our house teasing Mother to *cook up something special*, putting his arm around her like she belonged to him. She had

left the room then, saying it felt hot, too hot; the heat made it hard for her to think and he knew that.

"You see?" He said to us after she was gone. "Do you see what you girls have done? Don't you know that if you wear her down, I will have to take you away?"

I started to cry, but Callie only looked at him with her inquisitive, adult face. "Will that make her better?"

"Well, *I* would like her better." A smile toyed with his mouth. "Wouldn't you?"

Something stirred behind us: Mother in the doorway. Her apron was still pristine, forehead free of perspiration despite hours by the oven. I used to marvel at how silently she moved. Now I wonder how long she must have stood there, listening, that false humor in her eyes.

* * *

Every morning Mother hummed the house alive. It would begin before I awoke; her light step on the stairs as she dusted all the high places, moving through the rooms to draw the curtains and usher in the day. Sometimes I followed her, running my hand along the banister just as she did, as if the wood could whisper her touch to me.

She made the pantry doors gleam and the stubborn plants thrive. She arranged flowers with her delicate fingers so they sang out their color, their beautiful scent. She shook our clothes clean and mended them without complaint. I never could mend like Mother, her immaculate stitches beside my tangled loops of thread. Practice could make me better, I knew, but never as perfect as her.

She was never too strict with us, never resentful of her work. She did not spend hours before her dresser like other vain mothers, preening herself in the mirror while we grew bored and idle. Instead she taught us to be young ladies; to look neat and brew tea and be wise and sweet to speak with. On Thursdays she helped us bake and forgave all of our blunders. She would hold a contest for

which of our cakes was more golden, sprung back more lightly from a touch. Of course I always won. Callie generally forgot about hers, too bitter over being scolded for sitting on the kitchen counter or using the rolling pin Mother said would crush our toes. Her cakes would come out black and hard while mine slid cleanly from the pan.

"Wonderful," Mother would say, holding my flour-stained hands in her own.

Before bed she reminded us how good we had been, even when we had not. Most nights she told me a story as I fell asleep. It was not the story I cared for as much as the sensation of her voice. How it washed over me like rain, but left me doused in warmth.

(When I slept I dreamt my mother leaned down to kiss me and rays like sunshine shone through her skin, though sometimes the dream was different and she parted her lips to reveal a glowing filament, fizzing with mechanical light.)

* * *

The doctor came every other week at first. We learned to expect him, standing out by the path and squinting until his figure appeared high on the hill like an angel.

He would wipe his feet on the welcome mat and greet us quickly, first Callie, then me. "Hello, Caroline. Hello, Christine."

He had clever eyes and an odd secretive smile, like he was always thinking of a joke he had decided not to share. I think I knew he was not the sort of doctor whom apples kept away. Callie said he knew about many kinds of science, that he told her about rockets and engines and how we would have a man on the moon someday. We never needed to call a repairman when he was around. Whatever needed fixing he could do it, by feel rather than sight. Sometimes I watched him work, his face ablaze with concentration as though nothing in the world existed but what was there beneath his hands. When he loosened the cover of our washing machine I imagined a great skeleton of wires behind it, the doctor straining, with his inventor's fingers, for the heart.

Whenever he visited he brought with him a large black briefcase. We were not allowed to touch the instruments inside, though one time Callie had tried. The two of us had been playing surgery—a game Mother hated—and she declared she needed something to make an incision in my head. The doctor caught her peering into his case and pulled her out into the hall, telling her to leave his work alone, his voice low but not angry. The next time I saw him the teasing smile was back, and he picked up his case and stepped with Mother into the study.

Once I asked why he gave Mother a checkup so regularly, even when she did not look ill. "Your mother works hard," was all he said. "She deserves to be looked after."

There were other times, of course, when he only came for tea. I would lay out the biscuits and recount everything Mother had taught us that day, before he quizzed us on things we had not learned—obscure wars in history, questions of calculus—smirking at Mother when we had no answer to give. He kept his gaze on her as she cleared the table, resuming the work she had been doing before he came. We watched as she scrubbed the sink in long, even strokes, speaking to us all the while in her musical voice. The doctor's face would light up then, with admiration and something like pride.

"She *is* a gift, your mother," he once murmured to me.

Mother never blushed, or I would have sworn there was red in her cheeks when she bent to close the cabinet.

* * *

We were not always good. It began about a year after we came to live with Mother, when Callie and I could call the house our own. At first my misbehavior stemmed from carelessness. I no longer neatened my bed or watered the herbs as I had promised. I let Mother call me from the kitchen until her voice grew tired while I lay in the garden and pretended not to hear. I started avoiding my chores and summoning tears when she asked why they were not done, until her lovely eyes swam with sympathy and she abandoned her work to do them for

me. I told her that her presents were inadequate, that I wanted something different from what other children had, something better.

I was naughty, but Callie was worse. She hounded Mother when she was busy, probing her with questions about things we had not learned in lessons. She stole Mother's crystal miniatures and hid them under her bed. On nights when she felt particularly cross, she refused to touch her dinner, demanding Mother make her something she loved instead. I noticed that she did this most often when the doctor was over, as if hoping her rages would drive him away.

Increasingly I found her in her chair, radio turned up high though Mother said the static hurt her head. The table would be strewn with books and newspapers, maps and photographs, which Callie pored over with a hungry look—a look of knowledge that unsettled me, that made her seem like an older girl. Many of her papers were about the war, though it had been over ten years since. For hours she studied those diagrams of bombs and guns and tanks, the pictures of women fixing airplanes with fuel-smudged wrists and pinned back hair.

I did not like to look at those pictures. I would rather have looked at Mother all day than those dreadful machines with their cruel metal teeth. Callie must have a violent mind to love them, I had thought, though now I know she had a penchant for learning things she was not supposed to. Once she crouched below the study window to listen in on Mother and the doctor. When the doctor sent her to her room, she went to Mother's dressing table and smashed the perfume bottles one by one.

I had always known Callie was wicked, but I was not to tell stories. Young ladies were meant to be pleasant. Whenever I lied, Mother put a ripe red strawberry in my mouth, and I knew I was her favorite.

* * *

Mother must have told him about us, because the doctor came by more often. Now I heard his voice along with hers in the morning, their laughter mingling like she had known him all her life. She stopped objecting when the

doctor scolded us. Sometimes she glanced at him as if afraid of reproach, though all he ever said to her was praise. One afternoon he announced he had a migraine and stood inside the kitchen as she made his special tea. Later he said it was the best he had ever had, holding his cup reverently and calling her by her name.

Callie cornered me in my room that evening. "He's going to take her away. Can't you see? He wants her for himself."

"But he must already have a mother," I said. "Why would he want ours?"

She scowled at me, balling her hands into fists like she always did when she was angry. I assumed she was sulking because Mother found the box filled with coins she had taken from her purse and said she would be missing dessert. Really, she was jealous because I was the better young lady and everyone knew it.

"Mother hasn't been well lately," I reminded her. "That's why the doctor is here."

But Callie would not listen. She insisted that Mother looked so tired because *he* made her ill, he made her ill so he could keep coming and she would do as he says, until he could take her away and she could not say no.

"She can't go," Callie said. "She can't go because she's ours."

Mother seemed to droop at dinner. She tapped her heel on the floor, slowly and without rhythm, staring blankly at the space above our heads. When she leaned over to hand me my custard a tremor ran down through her arm. It was so slight I might have missed it, had I not been looking.

(That night I had the dream again about the glow inside her mouth, though now it had changed; now I felt the heat emanating from her skin, and I almost thought to reach out with my hand, to let myself be singed—)

* * *

When I walked in the next morning Mother lay twitching on the kitchen floor. A thicket of wires poured from the hole in her chest. All of the buttons on her front were smashed and dangling from their fixtures. Her perfect face was

chipped, hair fanned out around her head in a rumpled halo. It looked artificial against the tiles, like the hair from one of my dolls. There was a fuzzy clicking noise like faraway crickets, and a light haze of smoke lifted from her, carrying the distinct scent of burning. She no longer glittered. She no longer looked any different from those hulking machines no one had bothered to make beautiful.

Callie stood by the pantry. She was holding the heavy rolling pin Mother forbade us from using, and I saw deep grooves in its surface, dents from where it had swung hard against metal. Dark, oily stains ran down her apron in streaks. Her hair hung wildly about her face, but when I met her eyes they were calm.

"It's meant to be Baking Day," I said.

The doctor was supposed to visit that afternoon, bringing all his strange instruments; all the things he had used to make Mother. I thought of the worshipful way he held her hands, turning them over to inspect the unlined palms. How he breathed her name like it was something he was giving her.

Callie read my mind. "He was going to take her away today, I know it. I heard what she said on the phone."

I tried to imagine the house without her, dim and quiet, Callie and I back at the Home. I imagined Mother living with the doctor, the doctor with his tools that he used to open her up and admire her.

Mother had stopped twitching now. Flickering lights raced under her skin, growing fainter and fainter the longer I watched. The smoke began to dissipate as we sat on the kitchen bench and waited for the doctor.

The Quiet Dead

Alys Key

"What ails my love? the moon shines bright:
Bravely the dead men ride through the night.
Is my love afraid of the quiet dead?"

—*Leonore*, by G. A. Burger (trans. D.G. Rossetti)

Perhaps she always knew it would end here, midnight striking on an unfamiliar church bell, rough stone wall scraping the pads of her fingertips.

This is the kind of countryside where dark is a thing that happens to you. No streetlamps or bright shop windows. When it comes, it pushes you inside and to bed, fills your mouth with silence.

Her eyes are still adjusting, but she can see him roaming between the graves.

"Where are we?"

He ignores her. She swings open the gate and trips after him, dead flowers in cellophane and burnt-out tealights crunching under her boots.

* * *

She knew he was Death from the moment she picked him up from the airport.

The trick of Harry's smile was the slow creep of it, spilling from the middle outwards. He savoured the taste of joy, or a joke; maybe he was just slow on the

uptake. Death on the other hand grins all day long, and when Not-Harry stepped out into Arrivals he blew it. Nought to one hundred watts straight away.

It was all wrong. The dropped hold-all, the wide-open arms. She recognised the gesture from viral videos of other soldiers greeting their long-missed wives and children—you know the sort. Faithful dogs pawing at camouflage jumpsuits.

"Emma," he said, with Harry's voice.

She knew, then, but still she ran towards him. They were a sight for averted eyes—shop-window kisses as though they were still 15 and standing outside school, football mud up his legs, her bra a non-regulation pink through her shirt.

She knew, then, but still she drove him home, to their cul-de-sac of boxy newbuilds on the edge of town. The sun was shying behind the railway line still, the sky a bitter metal grey. From somewhere a few houses away came the radio and toaster sounds of someone else's morning.

His eyes were the colour of faded jeans and when she looked into them she saw the pupils were small. Mean and lacquered, lacking. She knew, of course she knew.

* * *

Death has driven her here with his foot to the floor, creeping over the motorway speed limit through a landscape flocked with hills and yellow rapeseed, all the places they used to walk on weekends. At some point they outpaced the ghosts and the fields became just fields, then they swung into a dark, brambled lane that led to wherever they are now.

The village is not one she knows. Here there are houses of different sizes and colours in neat rows, like mismatched books on a shelf; nicer ones than theirs, older, with boot-scrapers in the porches and names instead of numbers. There is a church so chalk-white it glows against the lightless sky.

Emma stalks the spectre that haunts her fiancée's borrowed body across the churchyard but he eludes her. Other faces and limbs rise from the ground like smoke and disappear just as fast, leaving her eyes stinging.

* * *

For the first few days he slept, and she brought him cups of tea with two sugars and went for runs and watched his favourite quiz shows without him. She drove to the supermarket and thought about the day they first moved in, when they had stumbled through the aisles with a giddy kind of *Home Alone* freedom and filled the trolley with lager and rosé, frozen pizzas, Ben & Jerry's. Big kids with a Tesco Clubcard.

Lying in bed next to him was like having a concussion. Every time she was almost asleep, her hand about to reach for him, a sudden knowledge would jerk through her. *Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep.* She kept herself fixed to the very edge of the mattress.

He spent his days playing video games and ignoring Discord notifications from friends that popped up in the corner of the screen.

Hi mate, you back then?

Alright H? Going down the Prince of Wales tonight if you fancy it.

It wasn't unusual for her to leave him to it like this. She had always thought it was just what you did, after a tour: you let him turn things over and hold it up to the light of normal life. When he was ready, he would tell her an edited version of the posting that was missing the gunfire crack of dawn, or a particular friend's voice.

She charged his phone for him every night and placed it on the sofa next to him when she left for work. He didn't even look at it.

"I'll text you when I'm heading home," she would say. "Anything you want for dinner?"

He just shook his head, and didn't respond to her texts except for the occasional "ok". The phone racked up missed calls from his mother.

* * *

Cruel shapes play at the corners of her vision. The smell—moisture on grass like waking up on a campsite—clouds around her. Then she sees him. He has

stopped in the middle of the graveyard and to her own surprise she doesn't take the opportunity to catch up with him, stays several feet away. The sight of his still, broad body inspires a fear that curls deep in her spine, like she is peering down the edge of a cliff.

He has always been built like a rough draft, standing at a height that made him gangly when they first met, before the training gave him bulk. This version of him is smoother. The real Harry had a ship's rigging of muscle tracks and veins, evidence of his strength that she could trace in blue and pink lines with her lips. This one has whiter teeth.

The spell breaks when he crouches and, hands braced on the grass, disappears into a gap in the earth. Gone. The church bells clang again and again and she is running now, gasping too hard to speak and unsure what name to call out.

* * *

She was driving back on a Friday night, rain on the one-way system, takeaway drivers clogging the winter road, when their song played on the radio. Her heart started pounding as the frenetic drums built up and up. The singer's scouse moan was like a familiar hand gripping hers too tight.

When Harry was in a terrible band with his friends from school, this was the only song they could do competently. She had heard them play it over and over at assemblies, in his garage, at the pub which had a scummy little backroom for gigs and didn't check IDs. She and the other girlfriends had formed a tight string of support at the front, screaming themselves dry and painting the band's name—Sharpish—all over each other's faces with lipliner. Harry played the drums.

She had read something about Alzheimer's patients once, about how a certain touch or smell could rattle a bit of their old personality out of them. People seemed to think it was a sign that a part of their loved one was still there, but she wasn't so sure. Just because you tricked someone's muscle memory like that didn't mean they weren't gone—it was like running an electrical current

through a dead frog's legs to make it kick.

But the song stayed with her, had her humming it in the shower. When she went to cook dinner she plugged her phone into the kitchen speakers and found the whole album on Spotify, letting it play as she chopped up the chicken.

Not-Harry, who had been locked into his game, came into the room.

She summoned a careful smile. "Remember this?"

His answering grin was all wrong again, all too much at once. The knife was still in her hand as he put his arms around her waist. Her knuckles whitened. And then he kissed her.

* * *

She finds him deep inside the well of a grave. He is lying on his back, riddled with darkness, hardly even there. She lowers herself in from the edge of the bank with her fingers grasping at tufts of grass, shoes braced at the dirt walls. The ringing still fills her ears though she is no longer sure if it is coming from the belltower or her own head. He is unmoving, but when she comes to crouch down by him his eyes roll lazily towards her.

"Lie down with me, Emma."

She obeys. They lie in the dust and stare at each other. Her tired eyes in the dark keep turning his face into other shapes. A hyena, a mask, a hairless hollow skull. She takes his hand.

* * *

Death did have a kiss, Emma learned, but not a bitter one like you might expect. It tasted of a garden on a late-summer evening and blown-out birthday candles.

It was different to kissing the real Harry, but it wasn't bad. The way he touched her wasn't muscle memory but a new rendition all together. She thought about when soap operas swapped in a different actor and all the other characters carried on like nothing had happened.

They spent the weekend in the kitchen playing music and eating fry-ups,

instant noodles, whatever was easy. Each time she put on a song she asked "do you remember when…?" and recounted the discos and drives to the seaside that went with them. He nodded, tapped his hand on the table to the beat, but she could tell she was just filling him up with someone else's history.

Looking straight at him he reminded her of a picture she saw online once, a face that didn't belong to anyone, constructed by artificial intelligence. But the uncanny clang got tangled in the rush of his hand on her waist, her neck.

Late on Sunday night they were washing up when he pulled his hands out of the water and wiped them on his jeans.

"Come on," he called. She looked around at the unfinished dishes, the tea towel in her hand. "Come ON," he snapped, and passed her a coat. She took it, and they got in the car.

* * *

And so, the motorway and the fields, and the houses and the church, and here they are six feet below it all.

"I would have…" she starts, but isn't sure how to go on. She reaches a hand out to his face and even in the gloom she can see her engagement ring's wet shine. "We could have carried on how things were," she says at last. It's a lie. What she means to say is she's willing to pretend, if it means she can keep him.

He shakes his head. She doesn't resist as he pulls her closer, until their foreheads pressed together.

"Stay here with me," he says, voice already melting into something deeper. His eyes are hard rock.

She says nothing and tears hit the ground. His grip tightens. They stay locked together for a long time. Emma is getting so cold but she doesn't move.

"Please."

"You know I can't."

She won't push him off. Only when she can feel him loosening does she kiss him on the forehead and pull away.

She doesn't look back as she grabs her way back up to ground level, or as she kicks back through the detritus of grief that litters the grass. Ghostly arms tug at her clothes and try to turn her head, but she knows if she looks back she will never leave.

She makes it past the boundary of the graveyard and the hands let go, the church bells abruptly stop. The engine disturbs the sleepy town as she drives away.

Rescue

S.E. Chapman

The room is lidded, dim, pulled down into shadows at the corners, and Fraser's bare back the colour of stone. He leans over his side of the bed to pick up the clothes he tossed on the floor last night. He's like a dog fixated on the hunt now. It is too early and too late. He *will* go. Jasmine is coiled against my stomach, serene baby snail.

Fraser doesn't look around. Close my eyes and he is sock feet shuffling across the floor, water spilling out of a faucet, toothbrush smacking, a fart pop, the bedroom door closing.

* * *

Jasmine and I are superheroes in our puffy jackets. Sunlight sparkles on snow in the backyard. The air smells piney, and is cold as the inside of a fridge. I fall backwards. Jasmine presses damp mittened hands on my face. "Mum! Mum!"

Swish my outstretched arms in the snow. Angel wings flying off a tilting earth.

Two o'clock passes. His absence feels loud, like a shout.

I met Fraser in elementary school. When did I know I would marry him? In my last year in high school, he *stepped up*. He held my hand like I was leading him out of a forest. He wanted to be the one.

It's Christmas so we have to go. Our tree is trimmed in blue and silver balls, set up beside the front bay window with a view of the road. The raspberry

cheesecake and dinner rolls I baked yesterday go into a plastic grocery bin. Put the presents on top and buckle Jasmine into her car seat.

The Santa Fe is toasty warm, Jasmine napping, Adele on the radio. Highway 10, between Perth and Richmond, is a two-lane, whole lot of nothing much to look at—a trailer park, houses in clearings at roadside, farmhouses set back on long driveways, empty white fields on the other side of split rail or wire fences, leafless trees scratching at what this afternoon looks like dull damp stucco, dense firs clumped with snow, telephone poles strung with wires all the way.

Where the highway jogs to the left at Franktown, there's a local Disney castle, haha. A reporter once called it that because the stone church has a single square-shaped turret next to the road, topped with a silver conical spire. I've seen the real thing at Disney World. For my thirteenth birthday, my parents took me and my best friend Gail. We flew down to Florida. Me and Gail had our own hotel room with a TV, did every ride we could, Mickey Mouse hugged us, a totally awesome trip. Gail told me she knew how Cinderella felt.

Whenever things got too miserable for her at home, Gail would stay over with me. She grew up off a concession road on the outskirts of Perth. There's a car hood nailed to a tree by the road that says *Private Property* in black slash marks like a Stephen King horror movie. Past that, you'd see a green-shingled clapboard house, and a shell of a bus and some broken appliances in the yard. Gail's dad runs a business called *Your Handiest Man*—my dad says he's a slippery lazy bastard who cuts corners and nothing's up to code. The one day I came over, her dad shook my hand and called me little lady, a flirty glint in his eye (I was in grade six, so eleven). He's short and muscular like a wrestler. And her mom came out of a bedroom, wide as a double bed herself, staggering around trying to pick up clothes and whatever off the yellow linoleum floor which was blotched and torn in places. Going by the dusty wedding photo on a shelf in the front room, her mom used to be pretty like Gail, but her meds changed that, as if Gail's face had swelled up and then melted. She made us peanut butter and jam sandwiches on the kitchen counter, snuffling loudly like she was smothering

under her own weight.

Gail calls us "good people".

Aside from the fake Disney castle, what *is* truly cool on this route is the high security military centre at the Dwyer Hill intersection. All you can see are the upper portions of an original stone house and steel-roofed buildings protected by two lines of high mesh fencing on either side of a shovelled walkway. Maybe they interrogate terrorists there. Snow-covered fields all around, nowhere to run without leaving footprints. I always hope I'll catch sight of someone looking out of one of those narrow windows. As I drive past, Fraser's face appears, not in a window, just out there and pale as dough.

It hasn't snowed for two days and plows have scraped down to pavement but you still need to watch for black ice. A brown dog darts from the trees right across the road. The Santa Fe swerves and keeps going. It's dangerous to brake suddenly. I feel a slight bump, could be anything.

* * *

Mom has her Christmas apron on, green background and huge red poinsettias.

She opens the front door as soon as the Santa Fe turns up their driveway, which is immaculate—Dad's had the snowblower out. As soon as I got married, my parents sold the house I grew up in and moved to this newish subdivision in the village of Richmond, closer to Ottawa and potential clients for Dad's construction company. They down-sized from a two-storey heritage stone house that Dad had renovated down to the studs into a million-dollar property on six acres, to a modern farmhouse custom build, one and a half stories on a double lot, with a gabled red aluminum roof that'll outlive them. They make smart choices, my parents.

Dad towers over Mom in the foyer, a red and white Santa toque pulled over his head. He's built like a truck and has a grey beard, so it fits. Jasmine totters into his arms.

"Where's Fraser?" Mom says. She likes Fraser.

"Out on the lake," I say. "A buddy of his caught a big walleye yesterday." This is true.

* * *

Come six o'clock, Mom asks, "Can't you call him?"

The kitchen smells like happiness, is everything before. A golden eighteen-pound roasted turkey on the turkey-shaped platter. Apple and bread stuffing, mashed potatoes, roasted carrots, candied parsnips, and boiled corn in Mom's turquoise Le Creuset dishes. Gravy simmering in a pot on the stove. Small cut-glass bowls with two kinds of cranberry sauce.

I had asked in advance if we could eat by six because that's when Jasmine usually has supper.

"I can't reach him out there," I say. They know there's no reception on the lake. I try anyway, tap our landline number and the phone rings on, and then the same with his mobile number. I hold onto this thought: he should be here, shouldn't he?

I text Gail: *Fraser's gone AWOL.*

She texts back right away: *WTF?!!*

My reply: *Fishing lol. Angry-face emoji*

I text Fraser's two best friends from high school. They can't tell me where Fraser is.

"For god's sake," Dad says, finally. "Fraser can warm his food up when he gets here. What the hell's he doing?"

The dining table is set the way it always is on Christmas: the best white linen cloth and a centrepiece of artificial pine branches holding blue silk flowers in two gold-speckled vases, and silver reindeer leaping over glass balls. On either side of the vases, a toy soldier. In her high chair, Jasmine leans as far as she can over the table, trying to grab the nearest soldier's blue eyes and long white hair and whiskers, and the silver star on his black hat.

"Careful, Jasie," I say, though I don't blame her.

Usually, Dad does grace but I ask if I can. I bow my head. "For food and

friends and all God sends, we give Him grateful thanks, Amen."

They say everything happens for a reason. I have to believe that.

* * *

Mom has a story about when she stopped working for Dad some years ago. He came into the office one day complaining that she hadn't billed one of his clients yet and it was costing him money. When she tells the story, she snaps her fingers while her girlfriends grin, knowing what's coming. "Stopped what I was doing," she says. "Stopped cold, picked up my purse, told him, honey, I'm the mother of your child and I'm goin' home now. I'm gonna bake a pecan pie." She loves that story. Even Dad loves that story, his sassy wife who lives to take care of him. Dad built the kitchen the way she wanted in every house they've lived in—double wall ovens, built-in fridge, granite countertops. She's in charge of the cooking and the garden, and their friend get-togethers, and church stuff, and dealing with her older brothers. Mostly she and my uncles argue about going to Pine View to see Gramma. Pine View, by the way, is a for-profit long-term care home in Perth. The exterior looks fine, yellow brick, two stories, tidy landscaped lawn, but on the inside a zombie apocalypse, I'm not joking, the grey undead muttering and shuffling and lying with their mouths open in the corridors. Gramma used to be a gossipy little dynamo who went to Vegas and did cruises. You should see what she's turned into, in the cheapest place her children are willing to pay for—a tiny staring creature that has to be hooked up to an oxygen cannister or she'll sputter out like a forgotten party balloon.

We sit in the living room after dinner but don't open any presents because Fraser still isn't here. There's a cathedral ceiling, white crown moulding, white wainscotting, and the floor is hand-scraped red oak. Dad let me do the colours in here. Chose coral for hope on the walls; a grey rug for serenity; burgundy and wood and leather furniture for groundedness. You don't need a degree to do interior design. I skipped college or university, got married. Dad says schools love to take your money even if they don't make you any smarter, and smart people can find opportunities anywhere. In other words, my dad can be stingy

if he doesn't see the point. And I wasn't going to be swamped by student debt like a bunch of my friends.

Jasmine shows Mom how to push the buttons on her musical monster popup toy. She unwrapped it this morning while I drank coffee and watched cars going past our driveway.

After trying the house landline and Fraser's mobile again, Barb is the next person I contact. She's the admin assistant at Fraser's work, a real estate and property management company, has been with the company forever and has grown kids that are up to no good. She's bone-skinny with dead chain-smoker's skin like cracked putty. I've seen her on the sidewalk in front of the office, snagging random people into talking to her on her smoking breaks.

Isn't phoning Barb about a property something Fraser might do? He'd go to the office even on holidays if he needed to pick up keys. He puts in the hours though Dad says he should be making twice what he does. Fraser's not a self-starter.

"What?" Barb says. "You didn't see him all day? On Christmas?"

She doesn't like me. I say I'm taking care of it, it's not the first time he's gone off, and end the call.

* * *

There was the time that Jasmine had a fever, and I needed Fraser to help me take her to the doctor. I drove to the office and Barb said they'd all gone to the Golden Arrow to celebrate a closing. So, I pushed the stroller on the sidewalk all the way there because I didn't want to have to repark. It was early November, a chill wind, autumn colours torn off, too early for Christmas decorations. The pub was stuffy and crowded already, the others from the office up at the bar, and sitting in the back my husband, lit already, and a girl.

Picture it: there's Fraser's doggy panting grin, and the girl—maybe eighteen years old, blond highlights in messy waves—leaning forward over the round wood table, knowing she's the electric center of his attention. My stomach clenches and I suddenly understand something. That the moment I step out of

the entrance way and Fraser sees me, I turn into ugly old Mother Gothel falling out of the tower after Rapunzel's hair is cut. The bad reveal. It can happen that fast.

Fraser did come with me to the doctor's and he followed me home in his truck. At dinner, I didn't speak to him. After some hours of this, he grabbed my arm, pinched my chin to make me look at him. I said, don't you fucking dare! That night in bed, he nuzzled up to have sex, saying he loved me, saying he was sorry. Yes, I let him inside me. During the whole thing, I had a funny dirty thought: Snow White in hiding, forced to cook and clean for seven dwarfs—Grumpy, Dopey, Sneezy…—and them every day going to work, banging away up inside her dark hole.

* * *

"Jasmine's so sleepy. Should I call the police or wait?" I say to my parents. It's almost seven-thirty. They know it'll only take half an hour to get home. I'll put Jasmine in her pajamas before we leave.

Dad says to go home and call the police if Fraser's not there. Mom just looks at Dad and keeps her lips pressed together. I bet they think I'll find him passed out on the couch.

* * *

Circles of white light from oncoming traffic get larger and splatter on the Santa Fe's windshield, making it hard to see the yellow lines.

Fraser's truck is not in the driveway.

Shivering, I carry Jasmine inside in her car seat. She wakes up when I set her down in the front hall and turn on the light, and then she needs her usual snack and I take her to the bathroom and put her to sleep in our bed.

Fraser bought this two-bedroom bungalow—one previous owner, fifteen hundred square feet—for under asking before it got listed. It came mostly furnished (your La-Z-Boy chairs and sofas, pine kitchen table, beige walls, etc. etc.). I grew up in a two-storey house, I like a view from high up. Fraser said this

is all we need until we have more kids.

One day I'm going to design a dream house from top to bottom in modern rococo, my take on it—fabric flower-patterned wallpaper, mirrors shaped like harps, lounging gold cupids and ornate curled table legs, lemony and mauve cushions with tassels, a tufted velvet bed.

Gail texts: *Fraser's sorry ass show up?*

Nope, I text back. *Confused-face emoji. Merry Christmas anyway. Love-face emoji*

On the phone to the police, my voice quivers. After the call, tears come out of nowhere for no purpose. By the time the Lanark County OPP arrive, I am dry-eyed.

* * *

"I can't believe this," I tell the policewoman who is sitting at my kitchen table. She looks sympathetic. Her name is Astrid. "You know that Astrid means divinely beautiful? I looked up a ton of names when I was deciding what to call my baby." Astrid blushes. Her face is round and rough as a Kaiser bun.

"Her name's Jasmine," I go on. "Means gift from God. I actually reminded Fraser of that, recently, and he laughed. Said he might've had a little something to do with it." I sit down in a chair next to her. "I'm just thinking of the most random things. Is that normal?"

Astrid says, "Everyone experiences these things different."

* * *

Fraser's brothers and friends and relatives help the police search at Bob's Lake where he usually goes ice fishing. It's a big lake, connected to other lakes along the Tay River. They find Fraser's truck at the shoreline outside his uncle's cottage (a shack really, still has only an outhouse; Fraser likes it like that). There are snowmobile tracks heading out onto the ice. Did he fall through? That's what everyone is asking. They have to be careful where they tread. The search is called off in the middle of the night because a blizzard is tearing through our region. Whiteout conditions.

While everyone was out searching, Susan phoned. Fraser's mother. She runs a daycare in a so-called play room in her house that's smaller than our garage, and boasts that all her neighbors give her their kids to toilet train. I'm supposed to give her Jasmine too but that's not going to happen. Susan is the opposite of my mother. Susan wears her hair in two pigtails that stick out like an extra pair of goofy ears. Mom has an age-appropriate blunt cut and no patience for beggars or weak weepy women.

Susan was hysterical. I gave the phone to Astrid who explained that everyone was doing as much as they could.

Fraser's father passed away before Jasmine was born, which is just as well because he would have been out there all night, barking at everybody, making it harder for the police to do their jobs.

* * *

Ribbons of soft light along the blinds.

Sounds of Jasmine pattering around in her room down the hall.

My baby was born around this time, in the early hours of the morning. Fraser wanted to be in the room when I gave birth but I said no. Some women want their husbands at their side but I think it's private when you are an animal doing an animal's work. Even the resident said it was bad. I was torn right through to the muscle, second degree tears they call it. I didn't let Fraser see us until Jasmine was washed and wrapped in a blanket, and the resident had finished stitching down there, and I'd combed my hair and put on deodorant.

There's a photo of it because Susan came in also. She took a picture of me—in the hospital bed, dark circles under my eyes—and Fraser standing beside me wearing his fishing cap, holding Jasmine like a prize.

* * *

The morning after the blizzard there are no boot prints or snowmobile tracks to be found on the lake. The storm blew them away. God's breath.

The next days are a blur. Police, family, friends—in and out of the house.

Gail brings over homemade lasagna and shepherd's pie. She offers to take Jasmine so I can rest. She got married the same year as me, to an electrician who makes good money, and she runs a B & B out of a cute old brick house near the hospital.

I say I'm good.

"You're a star," Gail says, giving me a hug.

* * *

What can I do? What am I supposed to do? Waiting and waiting.

Fraser isn't absent anymore, he's everywhere, clinging to everything he's ever touched.

Supposedly the Devil and God are at war for our souls. Maybe that's true. When I'm feeling low and on edge, contemplating who knows what, God fills me up, floats me up, the purest oxygen.

* * *

Fraser's body is found in early spring.

It was snagged in weeds near one of the islands that are really just large lumps of rock and trees.

The divers from the OPP Underwater Search and Recovery Unit find his auger and spud bar near him, which might mean that he was drilling a hole in the ice when it gave way. He wasn't wearing a life jacket but that wasn't unusual. It was unusual for him to ice fish alone. The police are surprised that his snowmobile with the rest of his gear strapped to a rack was sunk at some distance from where the body was located. Possibly, they tell us, lake currents had moved the lighter objects. They say that being in very cold water for about three months delayed but did not entirely stop decomposition and that currents dragging the body against rocks on the lake floor are the most likely explanation for the abrasions on his head.

* * *

Mom gives me a book, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, which I keep on my bedside table. I pack up Fraser's clothes for the Salvation Army. Dad boxes up Fraser's equipment in the garage to sell at the Perth Gun, Hunting and Sportsman Show. He's pleased that Fraser provided for us in case of an accident and helps with the paperwork.

Susan calls and drops by, at random times, still hysterical, says Fraser was always careful, says the whole thing doesn't make sense. I tell her over and over again, gently, that she has to let Fraser go, which is what the priest told us all at his funeral. And she's scaring Jasmine. I've had to warn her that I won't let her see her granddaughter if she keeps this up.

* * *

Sam and Lucy invite me to a dinner party. They have a horse farm outside Perth that Lucy inherited. She leases out some of the horses and gives lessons, and Sam has an income sideline at an insurance broker. Lucy is four years younger than Sam so they didn't date in high school. Sam hung out with Fraser and me. Sam played football and basketball in school, he's taller and thinner than Fraser, has long arms and big hands, and a nose beaked like an owl's, which I don't like. Sam got together with Lucy later, after he had dealings with her aunt over a flooded basement. Lucy looks like a blonde butterball but she has strong thighs to ride those horses. The four of us used to do stuff together before I had Jasmine, like go to concerts in Ottawa and baseball games in Toronto and we even did a weekend in Vegas.

Lucy goes to the kitchen to put finishing touches on the dessert.

I walk down the hallway to the bathroom.

Sam follows me. Once the door is closed, he leaps. His teeth press on the pulse at my throat like he'd break the skin if he could. Garlic and wine-breath. He whispers something, something he thinks is urgent. I don't listen. I don't ask. I don't want to.

I get out of the bathroom.

Sam sneaks down to the basement and makes noises as if he's looking for something. When he comes back, we all go into the dining room to eat strawberry and whipped cream pavlova.

* * *

My favourite scene in the movie *Aladdin* is when Aladdin takes Princess Jasmine out on their first real date, escaping the palace, and they fly on the magic carpet up into the clouds and night stars, past the pyramids, swooping down onto a river, singing. I sing and hum the song and my daughter claps her hands and says "Wir, wir, wir." I rock her in my lap.

When Jasmine's a little older, I'll tell her about Fraser. How he must have gone out that morning thinking he would find what he wanted, a big fish that he might throw back in after he'd taken a picture of it, or keep and put in the freezer and eat one day. How he thought he knew the lake as well as the back of his hand but anyone can make a mistake, forget how brittle and changeable the ice is and fall into the dark below.

I was an only child, raised like a princess, and Jasmine will be too. Follow your dreams, I'll teach her. You have the right to be happy.

The Monkey's Paw

W. W. Jacobs

I.

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are let, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife, soothingly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance

between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White, politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier, hastily. "Leastways nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White, curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major, offhandedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant-major, "a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

"Well, why don't you have three, sir?" said Herbert White, cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. "I have," he said, quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

"And did you really have the three wishes granted?" asked Mrs. White.

"I did," said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

"And has anybody else wished?" persisted the old lady.

"The first man had his three wishes. Yes," was the reply; "I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw."

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

"If you've had your three wishes, it's no good to you now, then, Morris," said the old man at last. "What do you keep it for?"

The soldier shook his head. "Fancy, I suppose," he said, slowly. "I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won't buy. They think it's a fairy tale; some of them, and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward."

"If you could have another three wishes," said the old man, eyeing him

keenly, "would you have them?"

"I don't know," said the other. "I don't know."

He took the paw, and dangling it between his forefinger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

"Better let it burn," said the soldier, solemnly.

"If you don't want it, Morris," said the other, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend, doggedly. "I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again like a sensible man."

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. "How do you do it?" he inquired.

"Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud," said the sergeant-major, "but I warn you of the consequences."

"Sounds like the Arabian Nights," said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the supper. "Don't you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?"

Her husband drew the talisman from pocket, and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

"If you must wish," he said, gruffly, "wish for something sensible."

Mr. White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second instalment of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey's paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us," said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, "we sha'nt make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

"A trifle," said he, colouring slightly. "He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away."

"Likely," said Herbert, with pretended horror. "Why, we're going to be rich, and famous and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be henpecked."

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs. White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. "I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact," he said, slowly. "It seems to me I've got all I want."

"If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that 'll just do it."

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face, somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor.

"As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your fancy, father," said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. "Never mind, though; there's no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same."

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night.

"I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed,"

said Herbert, as he bade them good-night, "and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement. It got so vivid that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grasped the monkey's paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

II.

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table he laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

"I suppose all old soldiers are the same," said Mrs. White. "The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?"

"Might drop on his head from the sky," said the frivolous Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence."

"Well, don't break into the money before I come back," said Herbert as he rose from the table. "I'm afraid it'll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you."

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him down the road; and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor's bill.

"Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home," she said, as they sat at dinner.

"I dare say," said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; "but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I'll swear to."

"You thought it did," said the old lady soothingly.

"I say it did," replied the other. "There was no thought about it; I had just—What's the matter?"

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed, and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I—was asked to call," he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I come from 'Maw and Meggins.'"

The old lady started. "Is anything the matter?" she asked, breathlessly. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband interposed. "There, there, mother," he said, hastily. "Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir;" and he eyed the other wistfully.

"I'm sorry—" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother, wildly.

The visitor bowed in assent. "Badly hurt," he said, quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh, thank God!" said the old woman, clasping her hands. "Thank God

for that! Thank—"

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor at length in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, "yes."

He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old courting-days nearly forty years before.

"He was the only one left to us," he said, turning gently to the visitor. "It is hard."

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking round. "I beg that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

"I was to say that 'Maw and Meggins' disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services, they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

III.

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all

over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen—something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

"Come back," he said, tenderly. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

"The paw!" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?"

She came stumbling across the room toward him. "I want it," she said, quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

"It's in the parlour, on the bracket," he replied, marvelling. "Why?"

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

"I only just thought of it," she said, hysterically. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?"

"Think of what?" he questioned.

"The other two wishes," she replied, rapidly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded, fiercely.

"No," she cried, triumphantly; "we'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again."

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried, aghast.

"Get it," she panted; "get it quickly, and wish—Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. "Get back to bed," he said, unsteadily. "You don't know what you are saying."

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman, feverishly; "why not the second?"

"A coincidence," stammered the old man.

"Go and get it and wish," cried his wife, quivering with excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. "He has been dead ten days, and besides he—I would not tell you else, but—I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?"

"Bring him back," cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. "Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

"Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.

"Wish!" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure

of the old woman peering through the window. The candle-end, which had burned below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, he took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"What's that?" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man in shaking tones—"a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried, loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back, and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

Writer Bios

S.E. Chapman - S.E. Chapman used to write government briefing notes and now works full-time on her own writing. She was a finalist for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction. She lives in Nepean, Ontario, Canada, on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

Alys Keys - Originally from the UK, Alys Key currently lives in Brussels. She is working on her first novel, which was longlisted for the inaugural Women's Prize Discoveries scheme. Her stories have been published by Popshot Quarterly, Weird Horror, and Dear Damsels, and she won the Benjamin Franklin House Literary Prize in 2019. You can find Alys on Twitter, Instagram as @alys_key

Trix Middlekauff - Trix Middlekauff is a working writer and editor of nonfiction by day; an avid consumer and creator of tales of horror and misadventure by night. Her work has appeared in Reader's Digest, Huffpost, and The Kitchn, to name a few. She lives in the haunted mountains of northeast Pennsylvania with her cats Georgy and Fitz. You can find her online at GoTracey.com, Thelifewitch.substack.com, and @iamthelifewitch on Instagram and @tastytrix on Twitter.

Anuja Mitra - Anuja Mitra lives in New Zealand, where her writing has appeared in several magazines and other neat little places. Her short fiction with a speculative slant have appeared in the journal Turbine | Kapohau and the anthology A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand. She likes Gothic literature, old movies, indie bookstores and patting her cats.

Lowry Poletti - Lowry Poletti is a Black author and veterinary student. When they aren't writing about monsters and the people who love them, they can be found wrist deep in a formalin-fixed lab specimen. Their other pieces appear in The Depths of Love Anthology and Anathema magazine.

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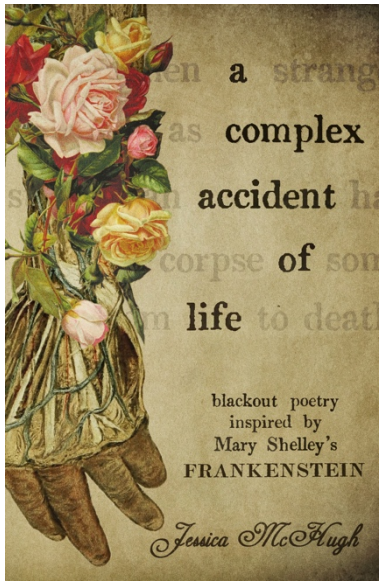
A Complex Accident of Life

"I am a vessel of dauntless courage and severe evil. My joy will endeavor, my rage possess."



Inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Jessica McHugh's debut poetry collection, A Complex Accident of Life, combines visual art and text to create 52 pieces of Gothic blackout poetry exploring the intense passion, enigmatic nature, and transformative pleasure of life, viewed through the kaleidoscopic lens of a female horror artist.

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