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The Trickster Heart and Other Tales

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“The Trickster Heart”
and Other Tales

Julia Manolukas

HONORS PROJECT

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> - - - - -	3
The Trickster Heart - - - - -	6
<i>Afterward: The Trickster Heart</i> - - - - -	23
The Crow and the Clay Doll - - - - -	25
<i>Afterward: The Crow and the Clay Doll</i> - - - - -	38
The Queen's Only Daughter - - - - -	40
<i>Afterward: The Queen's Only Daughter</i> - - - - -	60
The Dark Man's Kiss - - - - -	63
<i>Afterward: The Dark Man's Kiss</i> - - - - -	91
The Mother's Contract - - - - -	94
<i>Afterward: The Mother's Contract</i> - - - - -	118

Introduction

When people think of fairy tales, they probably think of Disney and “happily ever after.” To many people, then, my collection of tales may seem strange, as all five of them feature rather unhappy and tragic endings. And, yet, these endings might not be so abnormal after all. There is a precedent for violence, trauma and unhappy endings in the fairy tale form. Think, for example, of Hans Christian Anderson’s tale, “The Little Mermaid,” which ends with the prince marrying a different woman (Anderson 60) and the mermaid, who has spent the story experiencing knives on her feet whenever she walks (Anderson 56), throws herself into the ocean and dissolves into sea foam (Anderson 64). In the Grimm’s “Snow White” the story ends with the evil queen being forced to dance to death in red hot shoes (Grimm 354) and though this may seem like justice, it is still cruel and, really, not very happy.

Unhappy endings do have a precedent in fairy tales—not everything is happily ever after. And yet, it was that idea of “happily ever after” that most people associate with fairy tales that made me want to write tales that flip that notion on its head. I wanted to break with the supposed norm and so created fairy tales that did not end “happily ever after” for anyone. It was an interesting way to stretch both myself as a writer and, in some ways, this genre.

Most, if not all, of my tales feature characters who are of puberty age. This is a trend seen in many fairy tales. In my personal opinion, this probably comes from the idea that many fairy tales can be seen, in some way or another, as “coming of age” tales. Often the tales end with young women married off, transitioning from child-like singleness to adulthood and marriage. Look, for example, at “Red Riding Hood.” Many consider this tale to be about puberty, dealing with menstruation (Dundes 211), a form of coming of age, and entering womanhood. This

transition found in many fairy tales was a major theme in my work. I wanted to specifically look at the move from child to adult but with trauma or violence as a catalyst for that transition.

This desire to show such a transition also explains, again, why my fairy tales have unhappy endings. I was so interested, when writing my tales, in creating coming of age stories where the transition is forced on the characters. This resulted in violent and sad stories, with puberty age protagonists, which are still in keeping with the rich tradition of fairy tales.

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The Trickster Heart

Once upon a time, there lived a queen who hated her king. She was the most beautiful woman in the land and her father, a poor man with a failing farm, sold her to the king in exchange for wealth and riches. For the king had fallen in love with her the moment he saw her, standing in a crowd in one of the peasant villages he paraded through. When he left the village a few hours later, it was with his new queen in tow.

The queen hated her father for selling her to a cruel and careless man. But as time went on memory of her father faded and that hatred faded with it, replaced with the overwhelming hatred she felt for the man who shared her bed. She hated him for taking her from her home. She hated him from robbing her of her happiness. As the years wore on, the queen grew to hate her husband more and more.

When she discovered she was pregnant, she feared for her child. She knew she would have a daughter and she knew her husband, who prized beautiful things, would keep the girl locked away from the world just as he kept his wife. He would regard her as a possession to admire not as a real girl who longed to run and laugh and scrape her knees. In her desperation and fear, the queen summoned a witch.

Fern was a wise woman with a wrinkled face and a green tint to her gray hair. She arrived as a nurse maid to care for the queen during her pregnancy. When the two were alone, they discussed magic. “You must protect her,” the queen told Fern. “In case I am not able.”

Fern sang magic over the unborn girl. “She will be strong,” said Fern to the weakening queen, “but I am afraid she will be beautiful too. Her beauty is a magic too powerful for the likes of me.”

When the princess was born, the queen named her Isadora. She held her young daughter for just a moment, the length of three breaths, before she died. Fern took the child from her dead mother's arms and cared for her. She limited the king's time with the child and sang the infant lullabies as she grew. The magic in her words made Isadora's hair, a vibrant crimson, grow and grow and grow. By the time Isadora turned nine, her long hair trailed so far behind her it was braided each morning to prevent it from catching on chairs and door handles.

Around this time the king, who had long been a widower, began to notice his young daughter's beauty. He admired the fair color of her skin, the deep red of her lips, the pale gray of her eyes. He admired the way she laughed, the way she spoke, the way she sang. He admired her thin figure and delicate painter's fingers. He admired her because she reminded him of his late wife. Her face held him in rapture. So the king decided he would marry his only child.

This had been Fern's greatest fear. But she had prepared since Isadora's infancy to rescue the princess from her treacherous father. She had waved magic into the girl's hair to make it strong and make it long so that, in Isadora's new home, the princess would be quite safe. In the still of a moonless night, the witch stole the young princess away. They traveled for miles through a dark and twisted wood, eventually arriving at a tall stone tower with one window at the top. A thin wooden ladder leaned against the tower's side. Fern urged the girl to the top, following behind.

"This," said Fern to the young princess, "is your new home. When I leave, I take the ladder with me. You will be alone here. No way in or out but the hair growing from the top of your head. I will visit as often as I can, child, but I bid you remember: let no man inside your tower. Let no man see your face."

"My face?" said the small Isadora. "What's wrong with my face?"

“Your face is beautiful, my dear, and it is magic. Your face is enticing for a man. So you must not trust him with it. Men are like wolves, my love, and you would not trust a wolf to treat you right, would you?”

Isadora shook her head, though she did not truly understand Fern’s words

“I will return as often as I can.”

And, for the first year or so, this was true. Fern visited Isadora and each time bid her to let her crimson hair down from the window. Fern climbed to the top, causing the young princess no pain at all, and together they would eat and paint and sing songs. Then one afternoon, Fern told Isadora that she would not see her for quite some time.

“But why?” Isadora asked.

“Another woman requires my aid. I will go to her and stay as long as necessary. When I am done, I will return to you.”

“How long will you be away?”

“A few months, I’d think. It pains me to leave you, child, for I am very fond of you but I am a witch. I must use my magic to help as many as I can.” Fern gave the young girl a firm hug. “We will be together again soon, my dear.”

This, however, was not so. Fern traveled to the foreign land where she worked for a queen whose unborn child was cursed. The magic wrapped around the child caused his mother great pain and Fern, despite all her powers and remedies, found she could not break the curse. When the boy was born, both prince and queen died together. The bereaved king, outraged, had Fern beheaded. The wise witch died with a young girl’s name on her lips. Miles away, Isadora sat in her tower and waited. But Fern did not come again.

*

Isadora sat singing, braiding her long, wet hair. She was newly sixteen and very lovely, much like her dead mother. She sat on the ledge of the tiny window, breathing in the fresh summer air and singing half remembered lullabies. Her hair curled around the table and chairs, around half-finished canvases and open boxes of paint littering the tower floor. This tower replenished itself. Isadora never ran out of food or water or entertainment. As she braided, Isadora watched the forest spread below her, the line of trees stretching on forever toward the horizon. She often dreamed about leaving her tower behind and adventuring through those trees, discovering the world beyond. But she had no way to leave the tower. And, besides, Fern's warning always lingered in her mind.

Her fingers ached when she reached the end of her hair. The braid sat coiled and heavy in her lap. She fiddled with the ends, humming under her breath, when she heard a shout from down below.

Surprised, Isadora leaned forward to see down to the forest floor. A young man stood there, waving his arms. She could see his torn tunic and mud in his pale hair. He called up, "Please, will you let me in? I am running from wolves. I will be eaten alive."

Isadora's heart moved at the young man's plight. But she was wary. Fern's warning was her clearest memory from life before she came to the tower. And Fern had told her to let no man inside and to trust no man with her face. But Isadora had not seen another human in nearly six years. And the delicate heart within her could not let his man die. So she climbed from the window sill and tossed her braid over the ledge for the young man to scramble up. As he climbed, Isadora eyed the dragonfly changing screen positioned by the stairs. She determined to hide there. Even if she helped the young man to escape the wolves, she would not let him look upon her face. She would not trust him with that.

The young man reached the ledge and lifted himself up and in, grunting as he collided with the stone floor. Before he could look up at her, Isadora disappeared behind the screen.

A voice said, “Thank you. I... Miss?”

Isadora bit her lip, mind racing.

“Why are you hiding?” She heard him rise, heard him stumble forward across the floor, could see his outline through the dragonfly changing screen. A hand curled around the edge of the screen. On his middle finger was a golden ring, the large sapphire speckled with mud. It winked at her.

Without thinking, she cried out, “Stop! Take a step further and I’ll turn you into a toad!”

The man stopped. “A toad?”

“Yes, um, a great, big, ugly, nasty toad. With lots of warts!”

The fingers flexed against the changing screen. “Are you a witch, then?”

“Oh, yes.” Isadora grabbed hold of the lie with both hands. “A very *powerful* witch.”

“I see. I... I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

His remorse made her stomach prickle with shame. “Are you hungry?”

The fingers disappeared. “Hungry?”

“Surely after all of your running.”

“Yes,” said the man. “I’m hungry.”

“I will feed you,” she said. “And then you will go.”

She should send him away now. Isadora knew that was what Fern would have done. But Fern was not here. Had not been here for years. Most likely would never be here again. Isadora was lonely. Here was another person with which to talk. She would let him rest, she would feed him, then he would be gone and she would be alone again. Out of danger, but alone once more.

“This tower is enchanted,” Isadora said, as his footsteps moved away, “if you tell the pots what you want, it’ll make it for you.”

He said nothing.

“Go on, try it.”

“Stew.”

Isadora laughed. “What kind of stew?”

“Rabbit and potato stew.”

There was a pause, a clattering of pots, and then a warm aroma filled the air.

The man laughed. “That’s amazing.”

“It’s magic.”

He moved closer. Isadora listened to the scraping of one of the wooden chairs at the table.

She said, “Why were you in the forest?”

“Hunting. But the doe got away from me, the wolves came upon us, I lost my horse and my men and I had to run. I thought they would kill me until I saw your tower. A blessing from the heavens.”

Isadora blushed, though he was only complimenting her tower on its convenient location.

“Have you been out of the forest?”

“Of course I’ve been out of the forest. I’m a *prince*. I’ve been all over the world.”

“What’s it like?”

“What is what like?”

“The world outside the forest. All I can see from my window is the trees, the trees stretching on forever.”

“The world is large outside the forest,” the young man said after a pause. “There are towns and castles and rivers and oceans.”

“Oceans,” said Isadora wistfully.

“Great bodies of water that stretch on for miles and miles, like your trees out there.”

“Have you seen the ocean?”

“Yes. And I’ve sailed it many of times.”

“Tell me about it.”

The young man said nothing. Then, “Why don’t you leave your tower?”

Isadora hesitated, pulling at her bare toes. “Tell me about the ocean.”

The young man did not question her again. He began to talk. His deep voice washed over her like the ocean he described and Isadora found herself enraptured by the images he created. She could taste the salty sea air on her teeth, could feel the spray from the water as it crashed the boat’s side, could feel the deck swaying beneath her feet. He moved from the ocean to corridors of a castle, carrying her deep inside to the kitchen, where strange spices teased her nose. He had started to describe rolling green hills when he interrupted himself.

“The pot’s boiling over. Does that mean the stew’s...?”

“Done. Yes.” Isadora shook her head, as if dispelling cobwebs from her hair. “It’s done. There are bowls in the cupboard to its left.”

She listened to him move around the kitchen, listened as he crossed back to the chair and moved it again as he sat. He ate noisily, slurping and slobbering, making Isadora wrinkle her nose. She imagined the brown stew dripping down his front, dirtying his already messy tunic.

“Is it good?” she asked, poking her bare feet.

“Oh, yes,” said the prince, the words mush in his mouth. “Very good.”

She listened to him eat, her stomach rolling, and then listened some more as he rose and ladled another bowl. He ate for what may have been hours, not speaking, only slobbering and Isadora wished he would stop. She wished he would tell her more stories. She wanted to ask him to stay longer, to tell her more but this had gone on long enough. His staying any longer would be dangerous, she told herself. Fern would not have liked it. So as he set his bowl down, she said, "I think you had better go now."

"Go?" repeated the young man. "Now?"

"Yes," said Isadora, rising on the stairs. "I've fed you. It's been long enough now, the wolves chasing you are no doubt gone. You should leave too."

The chair scraped the floor as the prince stood. He said, "Very well."

She didn't want him to leave, not really. He would take his stories with him and she would be left behind to paint and daydream.

"How should I climb down?"

Isadora furrowed her brow, teeth sinking into her bottom lip. "You'll climb down my hair. Walk to the window and stand facing it. If you turn to look at me, I'll turn you into a toad."

She heard him moving. "Why?"

"I don't like men to look at me."

"Are you very ugly?" The laughter in his voice underscored each word.

It irritated her, that smug laughter. She said, "No, it's because I'm terribly, horribly beautiful."

"Ah," he said.

Isadora leaned around the screen. The young man stood with his back to her, arms crossed over his chest, staring out the window. "I'm going to approach you," Isadora said, "and

I'm going to throw my hair over the ledge. I'll turn away while you climb down but if you play any sort of trick on me--"

"You'll turn me into a toad?"

Isadora said nothing as she carried her hair across the room to the window. Keeping herself a few steps behind the prince, she threw the mass of hair in her arms out the window, listening to the thick braid smack against the tower side. Then she turned to the wall to hide her face. "You can go now."

"Thank you, kind lady," said the young man. Isadora turned her head just enough to steal a glimpse at him. He was looking down, his face half hidden by the angle, but she could see a smile playing on his mouth. He started to lift his head and Isadora turned again, cheeks heating.

He said, "I'm Percy, by the way."

Isadora didn't answer, didn't know what to say.

"Does the powerful, lovely witch have no name?" He laughed as he said it and she did not know if she liked his laugh at all.

She held her breath, as if waiting for the answer, as if she did not know it. Then she heard her own voice say, "Isadora."

"Ah," said Percy, "that's a beautiful name."

"Thank you."

"Goodbye, then, Isadora."

"Goodbye, Percy."

"*Prince* Percy." His voice smiled.

"Prince Percy," Isadora repeated, softly, after he had gone.

He returned in nine days, beckoning her from the forest floor: “Isadora, Isadora, let down your hair.”

She did, hiding herself behind the screen as he climbed inside.

“What are you doing here?” She made her voice as demanding as possible.

The shadow of Percy moved through the room toward the stove. “I came for some of that stew. The best I’ve ever had.”

He spoke the desired food aloud and Isadora listened to the movement in the kitchen as the enchanted pots began preparing his meal.

“I thought, too, that because you enjoyed my stories so much perhaps I could entertain you with a few more?”

Isadora’s chest felt very warm and she smiled into her lap. He had come all this way to tell her more stories. He must have understood how lonely she truly was. “Yes,” she said. “I would like that.”

And so it went. Percy visited her often. Each time he greeted her the same way: “Isadora, Isadora, let down your hair!” And each time he climbed inside, prepared some stew or bread with cheese and cold meats and sat at the table telling her stories. He seemed so gentle in these moments and Isadora, hungry for human companionship and glimpses at the world outside her trees, found herself longing for the sound of his voice after he went away. She sat up some nights on her window ledge and sang songs to the wind, thinking of Percy and missing him.

One afternoon, Isadora lay stretched out on the floor, painting dragonflies on bits of papers, throwing the sheets aside and starting anew, in a different color. She stuck out her

tongue, brows drawing together, as she examined a rather vague yellow painting. From down below, outside her window, came his voice:

“Isadora, Isadora, let down your hair!”

Isadora shot upward, the paintbrush falling from her hand to roll across the floor, leaving a yellow streak in its wake. She wasted no time in throwing her braid out of the window, peering out long enough to see that Percy had dressed himself rather grandly today. He wore a red tunic, gold sparking as he moved in the orange sunlight. His black boots shined and the sapphire ring, even from so far away, flashed.

As soon as she could, Isadora fled to her changing screen, hiding herself behind it as Percy climbed into the room. She feared that a glimpse at Prince Percy in all his finery would cause her to linger and then, of course, he would see her face.

Percy crossed the room and sat down in a chair, clearing his throat. Then he began to speak. Isadora listened, in silence, as he told her enchanting tales from his childhood, as he recited love poetry, as he described, in vivid detail, his mother’s favorite tapestry. His voice, deep and smooth and rich, held Isadora in place. She tugged on her bare toes, studying the uneven stone floor, her mind far away. Percy’s words lifted her up and took her elsewhere, out of the tower, free from captivity and loneliness and the weight of all that red hair. Isadora heard herself sighing, moaning softly, exclaiming in surprise at twists and turns in his many tales.

He paused a handful of times, to pour himself water or request more stew. In those moments, Isadora didn’t speak. The silence, disrupted only by his movements in the kitchen, held a hideous bulk and Isadora found herself drowning in it, like the ocean he had described so vividly on more than one occasion. Without his words, she was stuck in the tower that had been

her prison her entire life. She would never go anywhere, unless he put down his soup and took her some place.

When Percy rose for another cup of soup, pausing yet again, Isadora couldn't help herself from crying out, "Please, sir, if you would only tell me more stories."

He stopped walking. His shadow, vague and blurry through the screen, turned toward her. Her eyes traced the outline of the bowl held in both large hands. "You like my stories?"

"Yes," said Isadora, who had loved them the first time he came and longed for them in all the days since. "You know I like them very much."

"I'll tell you more," he said, "if you'll come out from behind your screen."

Isadora's throat constricted. "No."

"I would like to look at you."

"You can't," Isadora said after a moment. "You can't look at me. Men aren't allowed to look at me."

He stepped closer. "And why not?"

"Fern told me I shouldn't let any man look at me."

"Who is Fern?"

"The witch who raised me. She left me long ago." Isadora lowered her head and pinched the skin of her feet.

"I see." Percy paused. "Was she a wise witch?"

"The wisest."

"And why did she tell you to hide your face?"

“When I was a young girl, my father became enchanted by my beauty and sought to marry me. Fern took me away, to this tower, to protect me. She warned me not to trust a man lest he harm me as my father tried.”

“But surely your father was a brute.” Isadora looked up as his voice drew closer. Percy’s shadow through the screen was darker, more defined. The bowl was no longer in his hands. “And surely we’ve spent enough time together for you to be assured that I am *not*.”

“Not a brute,” Isadora said softly, thinking of his kind words and his delightful stories. “Not a brute at all.”

“You can be assured, dear Isadora, that I will not harm you like your father did all those years ago. I care about your wellbeing, about your safety, about your heart. For, you see, it is your heart that I am after.”

That organ gave a rather loud lurch. Isadora pressed her hands to her chest. “My... my heart?”

“Yes, that elusive mystery, that trickster, that object of my utmost desires. I humbly ask, lovely Isadora, if you shall let me possess it.” His fingers curled around the edge of the screen; the sapphire ring grinned at her.

Fern had said never to show her face to a man. “We sang magic over you as a child,” Fern had said, “and men are a dangerous, greedy lot. Do not trust a man with your face, child. They are treacherous and villainous like wolves.”

But Percy was not after her face. He had never seen her face, had only heard her voice, and yet he loved her. For that was what this meant, Isadora knew now. He was in love with her. And she felt a curious stirring in her gut whenever he spoke. Percy did not want her face; he wanted her heart. Isadora stood, willing to give him what he desired. He spoke so kindly to her,

was so patient, told her such elegant, glorious tales. A man like this would not hurt her. A man like this could not hurt her. So Isadora covered his fingers with her own and pushed the screen aside.

She noticed first the smile on Percy's face. She had never managed to see him straight on before this moment. He had tanned skin, smooth and unmarked, as well as blond hair that lounged across his forehead with carefully practiced indifference. He had blue eyes, like the ring beneath her hands, and dimples around his mouth. He dressed fine today, in a red tunic with golden embroidery and a gold chain around his neck. She would notice the clothing did not fit him quite right and the curious coldness in his eyes later but for now her attention was drawn to the smile curving his thin, pale lips.

It was a smile which showcased all of his teeth. They were long and white and slightly pointed. As she stared at his mouth, he licked the lips, his tongue thin and strange and slightly gray. He pulled his tongue across the long white teeth, slowly, and Isadora felt her stomach twisted, repulsed by the movement. He shifted and she saw the excess fabric at his shoulders, how it bunched from being too large. She looked into his eyes, saw coldness in their depths, saw them winking at her gleefully.

He said, "You really are *lovely*. The king told me it was so but I, well, I never believed him as to *how* beautiful."

"The king?" she repeated. "What king?"

"Your father, darling love, of course. What other king would be so interested in getting you back?"

He reached for her but Isadora, overcome with nausea, ducked away. She tripped over her hair as she moved around the screen, toward the other end, pushing it aside. Percy came at

her, arms extended, and she stepped away from him, backwards, bare feet knocking into one another.

“What are you talking about?” Her voice came out high pitched, strained. “You know my father?”

“Of course I know your father.” He followed her around the room with a gleeful smile, as if their chase was a lover’s game. “He’s the one who hired me.”

Isadora spun, putting the table and several chairs between them. “*Hired* you?”

Percy stopped walking and gave her a casual, nonchalant shrug. “Yes, paid me good gold too. It took him a very long time to find the tower and even then neither he nor any from his kingdom could approach it. That’s why he hired me, a foreigner, to play the part of a prince and take you home again. He gave me the clothes, told me to act a prince, all to seduce you into leaving with me, get you to come willingly and when we returned to your father it would be too late for you to escape. But I didn’t expect...” Percy laughed, covering his mouth with his fingers in some strange show of modesty. The blue ring on his finger laughed too. “You are so beautiful, Isadora. That face of yours is enough to drive a man insane.” He started around the table and Isadora backed away from him, stepping on her hair, tripping over it.

“Come here, love,” said Percy as he followed her, never hurrying but always so close behind. “Come here.”

She was backing away, trying to keep her eyes on him, her gaze returning again and again to those cold eyes, to that feral mouth. She ran into the wooden table, sending a cutting board with bread and cheese tumbling to the floor. Before she could move away again, Percy grabbed hold of her hair, jerking her back. He pressed her to the table, putting his arms on either side of her, and lowered his leering face to hers.

“Be still now,” he said, “so I may love you.”

He kissed her with his mouth open, with her mouth open to scream, and their teeth ran into one another. He angled his head, trying to fit his mouth cleanly to hers, but Isadora fought him, jerking her head away. He smelled wrong, like burnt flesh and unwashed skin, the smell overwhelming her, choking her. One hand clasped the back of her head, pushing it forward, while the other grabbed at her skirts, pulling them up and up and up. When his hand touched her bare thigh, she began to cry.

Her mouth had opened too wide for him to kiss so Percy drew his face back, pressing it instead to her neck. His fingers crawled inward along her skin, like the spiders she sometimes found while in the bath. Blood vibrated in her ears and Isadora turned her face away, pulled herself back, fingers scraping the table, nails digging into the impressionable wooden surface. She cried, loud angry sobs that made her chest hurt. His breath made her neck feel hot and moist. His fingers crawled and danced on her skin; her fingers crawled and wept along the table’s surface.

Then her right hand brushed the handle of the breadknife.

She did not think. Her fingers curled around it. With her other arm, she pressed against his shoulder, leaning all of her weight forward. She shoved him and Percy, surprised at this sudden show of force, took a step back. Not much of step but enough. Enough space for Isadora to bring her arm up and throw her arm down and press the knife through fabric and skin to imbed it in the blue eyed imposter’s chest. Percy looked down, white mouth open, and Isadora, grunting, jerked the knife out again. Blood like ink bubbled up, like water in a pot, and spilled down the front of his tunic, trailing down and down and down, like poisoned tears. Blood slipped

from the corner of his mouth, curving along his chin. The blue eyes winked at her. The false prince crumpled at her feet.

Tears tasted like salt and rabbit stew. Isadora dropped the knife on the table and stepped over the body. She stared down at the false prince, at the ring on his finger, at the blood spreading over her floor. Isadora bent down and grabbed his arms. She dragged him across the floor, over her dragonfly paintings, to the window. It was a struggle to lift Percy up onto the ledge and push him out of the window. As he fell, Isadora watched, wiping a hand across her mouth, smearing blood on her lips. When she licked them, they tasted metallic.

Percy's body made no sound when it hit the ground. Or, if it made a sound, she could not hear. Isadora left the window and returned to the table, picking up the knife. She studied the blood soaked blade thinking of Fern's words about men and wolves and the face of her father, a cruel and frightening shadow. She thought of Fern who had gone never to return and her father who sought her still and would do anything to possess her. She thought of Percy who promised her protection and tried to break her instead.

She teased the tip of her pointer finger with the tip of the blade before raising it to her throat. Then patiently, carefully, Isadora sawed off her crimson colored hair.

Afterward: “The Trickster Heart”

When writing “The Trickster Heart,” I drew heavily from the classic Grimm’s fairy tale “Rapunzel.” From this story, I drew the ideas of a beautiful princess locked in a tower, with only her magical, long hair to let people in or out (Grimm 92). I was also inspired by the tale “The Princess in Disguise,” that in its beginning tells the story of a king who, after the death of his beautiful wife, decides to marry his daughter (Grimm 71). I used this detail—which I found both shocking and interesting when I read the original tale—as the catalyst for the events in my story.

In the telling of my story, I departed greatly from the original “Rapunzel” tale. The woman who shuts the main character in the tower is a good witch, in my story, as opposed to a villainous sorceress like in the original tale (Grimm 90). Instead, it is the prince who is the villain. In the original Grimm’s fairy tale he’s the hero (Grimm 92), but in my story, I chose to make him a predator as well as the antagonist. I was interested in exploring the idea of the loss of a sort of mental virginity, the idea of losing one’s innocence. That aggression from a male was a way to create this change in the main character. I was also aware of the idea of “rape culture,” where songs like Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” support the idea of men taking what they want without really asking. It’s an attitude our culture seems to be supporting and so I decided to draw upon those ideas when crafting my tale, and chose to make the prince a liar, a cheater and brute, as opposed to a romantic hero.

The ending of “The Trickster Heart,” may be the happiest in my short collection of tales. Though Isadora commits murder at the tale’s close, she does it in self-defense and chooses, of her own free will, to separate herself from a world that has revealed itself to be predatory and dangerous.

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The Crow and the Clay Doll

There once lived a widower with one daughter and one son. His daughter was on the verge of sixteen, his son nearly ten. After his wife died, and he knew he would have no more children, the widower, a potter by trade, set about making a companion for his young son. The small family lived in a secluded village filled with the old and those becoming old, with very few children for the young boy to play with. His sister had begun to take on more responsibilities in the household and had less hours in the day to devote to her younger brother. The widower, heart heavy at the sight of his son downcast amongst his soldiers and blocks, decided to build for his little boy a magnificent clay doll.

He kept the creation of this doll a secret from his son, wanting to surprise him. Each night, after the boy was tucked into bed, the widower crept down to his workshop and worked by candlelight, creating the arms, legs, torso and head of the doll while his daughter kept him company with a book by the fire. The widower focused first on the feet. Crafting the tiny toes gave him much trouble, and often he would have to crush his clay and start again. The arms proved equally difficult. He wanted to form fingers posed in such a way that his son could hold hands with his new doll, but the fingers would slouch or turn in the wrong direction or come out too fat or too thin. The torso he created as simply as possible, sure to take measurements for the clothing his daughter would create for the doll. Then he arrived at the head, and here the widower faced his most difficult problem: He did not know what gender to make his son's doll.

It seemed obvious, at first, to make the doll into a boy, for what little boy did not want a companion just like himself? But his daughter suggested making a female companion for her brother.

“It will remind him of me,” she said, “and of Mother.”

The widower spent the most time on the head of his son's clay doll. He carefully formed her eyes, her nose, her lips, the dimples around her mouth and eyes, the smooth curves of her cheeks. When she was perfect, he fired her, limbs and torso and head. His daughter sewed a little yellow dress for the doll. He decided, as he readied paints for her face, that he would paint black curls upon her head. The painting of the pale eyes, the red lips, the eyebrows and hair took the widower almost as long as crafting the head out of clay. After the doll was properly painted, the widower assembled her and dressed her in the yellow dress. His daughter named her Victoria, after her dead mother.

They presented the doll to the boy, who was overjoyed at the present. The widower loved to watch his son playing with Victoria in his workshop, holding her hands and making her hold toy soldiers or wooden animals. He loved the sound of the boy's laughter and the joy that often colored his face. The boy adored Victoria so much he insisted on sleeping with her. The widower loved to kiss them both goodnight, while his daughter read aloud to the pair. When his son was occupied elsewhere, not playing with Victoria, the widower liked to sit the doll on a stool nearby as he worked, speaking to her as if she were real. If the boy noticed his father's growing affection for the doll, he said nothing. If the daughter noticed her father's growing affection for the doll, she kept her worries to herself. It had been so long since her father had seemed so happy that she could not bear to take any of that happiness from him. As for the boy, he comforted himself with the knowledge that Victoria was made out of clay and could not move unless he became her arms and could not speak unless he became her voice. His father could never love a silent clay doll as much as he loved his flesh and blood son.

Then the boy met the crow.

Sitting in the front yard with wooden soldiers and Victoria, the boy was in the midst of conducting an extravagant battle of good and evil when a crow dropped out of the sky and settled in the grass a few feet from him. The boy eyed the crow, who eyed him back but did not stop his playing. The crow did not move, aside from the shuffle of a feather or two, as it watched the boy playing with his toys. When the boy leaned forward to put a toy soldier in Victoria's waiting hand, the crow opened its mouth and said, "What a lovely doll."

Wary, the boy glanced at the bird. The boy knew of the magic of crows. Crows could be tricky if they wanted. His father had taught him never to believe a crow, if he could help it. And his sister said he shouldn't talk to strangers anyway.

"Thank you," said the boy as politely as he knew how.

"Wherever did you get it?"

"My father made it," said the boy.

The crow cocked its head to the side. "All by himself?"

"Yes."

"Your father is very talented."

The boy's chest inflated.

"He must have loved that doll very much to make her so lovely."

"No," said the boy. "It's me he loves. He made the doll as a gift for me because he loves me more than anything in the whole world. Except maybe my sister." The boy seemed uncertain about this last thought.

The crow's black eyes glittered. "Do you love your doll?"

"Oh yes." The boy shifted forward in his eagerness. "I love her very much."

"What is her name?"

“Victoria,” said the boy. “After my mother. She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said the crow. “Death is an inevitable, though painful, circumstance.”

The boy said nothing, knocking one toy soldier on the head with another.

“It is a shame your doll does not move on her own.”

“Yes,” the boy agreed. “She can’t speak either.”

“A shame,” said the crow again, hopping closer.

Again the boy was silent, watching the crow through his lashes as the inky bird examined the doll with black eyes.

“I wonder, would you like it if she could speak? If she could move?”

The boy glanced at Victoria. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, come now,” said the crow. “Would it not be delightful to have a companion just your size, to play and run and laugh with?”

The boy bit his lip. “That does sound nice. I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Yes,” said the crow, clicking his beak. “Yes, I imagine you wouldn’t.”

“But it’s impossible,” the boy said with a sigh. “There’s no way to make her walk and talk all on her own. I have to do that for her.”

The crow turned its thin head on the boy, the black eyes twinkling. “What about magic?”

“I don’t know magic,” said the boy.

“You don’t.” The crow clicked his beak again. “But I do.”

“You can use magic like that?” The young boy had thought the magic of crows was limited to their ability to speak.

“Of course,” said the crow and winked one beady black eye. “Crows have long possessed magic that comes from the sun and the moon, the trees and the winds and the clouds overhead. I can bring your doll to life very easily. But first we have some things to discuss. We must make a bargain, an agreement of sorts.”

The boy narrowed his eyes, his fingers tightening around the wooden soldier. “What do you want from me?”

“From you?” The crow gave a great, powerful caw, as if it were laughing at him. “Nothing. No, I will give you this gift free of charge.”

“My father says crows are tricky,” said the boy. “And my sister says I shouldn’t talk to strangers.”

“Your sister seems very wise,” said the crow. “But your father is both honest and a little unjust. Crows are not tricky; we’re just very fond of words. Sometimes people misunderstand us, though we’re certain we’ve been nothing but straightforward.”

“Then why should I trust you?”

“Because you have nothing to lose, boy.” The crow hopped forward. “And much to gain.”

The boy watched the crow and waited.

“My only request is this: once I turn your doll to life, you must promise you will not harm her.”

The boy gaped at him. “Harm her? Why would I do that? I love Victoria!”

“Yes,” said the crow, hopping still closer. “You love her now, but how will you feel about her when she walks and talks?”

“I’ll like her even more,” the boy declared. “We’ll be better friends than before.”

“Well, then, I imagine it will not be difficult for you to resist harming her.”

“It won’t be hard at all!”

“You promise me you won’t do her any harm?”

“I promise.”

“Do you *swear*?” The crow was quite close now, one hand span from the boy’s lap, watching with its beady black eyes, the little head tilted to one side.

“Yes,” said the boy with the eagerness of youth. “I swear.”

“I can see you are a brave and clever boy.”

“Yes,” the boy agreed, his head turned toward his doll.

“I must, of course, add the final part of the bargain, mustn’t I?”

The boy said nothing. He did not appear to be listening.

“If you do harm your doll, then you owe me something in return. For all my wasted magic you see. If you harm the life within your doll, I shall take some life from you, as a fair trade. Do you agree?”

The boy’s eyes were now fixed greedily on Victoria, as if hunting for some show of movement. He was so distracted by the thought of his doll coming to life that he paid hardly any attention to what the crow said. So, without a second thought, he said, “I agree. I swear on it all. I do! Now will you make her come to life?”

“Oh, yes,” said the crow and had the boy bothered to look he would have seen that the crow was smiling in that strange way crows do. “Yes, I will.”

Later, when questioned by his father and sister, the boy was not able to explain exactly how the crow brought the doll to life. He remembered no words or incantation, no white glow. The crow

did not touch his doll. One moment Victoria stared sightlessly ahead and the next she blinked her blue eyes. She moved her little arms; the boy watched her fingers twitch, her toes wiggle. With a delighted cry, he lurched forward and threw his arms around her. To his surprise, she was still made of clay. She could move now, yes, but the arms that curled around his back were still stiff and rough. The boy drew back, turning to speak to the crow, but found no one. The bird had disappeared. He could find no evidence of it in the sky. His brow furrowed, he stood, helped Victoria to her feet, and led her inside to see their family.

The widower was very startled when he saw Victoria talking and moving on her own. Then he became very afraid, fearing witchcraft, and then very angry when his son explained the encounter with the talking crow.

“Foolish boy,” the widower cried, taking his son by the arms, “you know better than to make deals with a crow.”

“He didn’t want anything in exchange,” the boy said. “Just my promise that I wouldn’t hurt Victoria.”

The widower studied his son’s face with narrowed eyes. It did not sit right in his stomach, a crow performing such magic without taking any form of payment.

His daughter touched his arm. “Look at this as a gift, father. Let us consider it a blessing.”

Finding no trace of falsehood in the boy’s face, the widower released his son and turned his eyes upon the doll. She smiled at him. Very soon, he stood marveling at Victoria’s blinking eyes and moving arms and the sweet trill of her surprising voice.

It took the widower and his family some time to adjust to the talking and walking clay doll. When the widower tucked his son and Victoria in for the night, he was taken by surprise

time and again when a higher voice echoed his son's in saying "I love you, Daddy." Though Victoria didn't eat, the daughter made her meals to playact with from potato skins and other old or rotten vegetables, and the boy guided Victoria's stiff clay fingers to push the food around on her plate. The widower liked to sit at his potter's wheel and peer out the window, watching Victoria and his son chase each other around the yard, play with toy soldiers and wood blocks. It made his heart grow warm, seeing his son and his new daughter playing together like lifelong friends. It lessened the weight of sorrow and loneliness in their house. His daughter, at the sink washing dishes, would on occasion cross to him where he worked and kiss his graying temple.

"It is such a joy," she said, looking at her brother, "to hear him laughing like that again."

Around this time, the boy met the crow again. One afternoon, he swept the small path leading from the road to their door, humming under his breath. Victoria sat beside the door on a stool, watching the sky. The boy turned his back on his doll to find the crow seated in the dirt, right in his way. The boy waved his broom at the crow, but it did not fly away.

"Move," he said. "Go on. Get out of here."

The crow cocked its head and clicked its beak. "That's no way to treat someone who gave you such a special gift."

"Oh," said the boy, lowering his broom. "It's you."

"Yes," said the crow. "It's me. I've come to see how your doll is doing. Do you like her?"

"Yes," said the boy. "Very much."

"No problems?" The crow hopped to the left, to peer past him.

The boy followed the bird's gaze. Victoria still stared up at the sky. "She's very nice," he said. "I like her."

"And your sister? Your father?" asked the crow. "Does they like her too?"

"Yes, but not as much as me."

"Indeed? Are you sure?"

"Yes," said the boy, turning back to the crow with a glare. "She's just clay after all. I'm the real son and the real brother."

"Of course." The crow hopped again and clicked its beak. "I've only come to remind you of your promise. You are not to harm your doll."

"I know. I remember."

"You are not to harm her even if your father does love her more."

The boy scowled at the bird. "My father doesn't love Victoria more than me."

"No," said the crow. "Of course not." It flew away, leaving the boy standing there with his broom, the clay doll behind him watching the clouds.

It did not take long for the son to notice the change in his father. The widower took over bedtime story duties from his daughter. As he read, he often angled the book in such a way that his son barely saw the pictures while Victoria's large blue eyes took in every detail. When the daughter served them breakfast, the son noticed that his father always added extra to Victoria's bowl of oatmeal while his oatmeal barely brushed the rim. The old man was always stroking Victoria's clay head, always spinning her around so she giggled, always chiseling her new dolls from blocks of wood. His sister seemed to always be sewing Victoria new dresses and making her fresh hair ribbons. Meanwhile, the son noticed his toy soldiers were chipped, their paint fading.

His brown trousers had a hole in them that his sister never had time to repair. And not once, since Victoria came to life, had the widower really hugged his son.

The young boy's heart began to grow cold.

One chilly evening, several months since Victoria came to life, the son sat in the yard once more, bashing soldiers into one another, knocking his train from its tracks, throwing wooden blocks at the tree. He could hear his father and sister and Victoria inside the warm house, laughing as his sister prepared stew for dinner. The son felt cold all over and, with a grunt, dropped his soldiers and wrapped his arms around himself. He sat there, shivering.

Around this time, the crow arrived. Just as before, it appeared from nowhere, dropped onto the lawn in front of him. The boy stared at it, too irritated to be wary. The crow stared back, clicking its beak and ruffling its feathers.

"Well," said the crow at last, "how are you liking your doll now?"

"I don't like her at all," said the boy.

"Indeed?" The crow tilted its tiny slick head. "Why is that?"

"She takes all of my father's attention," said the boy. "He has no time for me anymore."

"Ah," said the crow, hopping forward. "That must be very difficult for you."

"I *hate* her."

"Well!" squawked the crow. The firelight from inside the widower's house flickered in its bottomless black eyes. "I'm sure you must be miserable. Hating someone takes a lot of one's spirit."

"I am miserable," said the boy. "I'm so miserable I could cry." Tears shivered on his dark lashes.

The crow moved closer. "Why don't you cry? Perhaps you will feel better."

The boy's lower lip trembled. Then, with a great wail, he began to sob. The crow sat in silence, watching, as tears and snot rushed down the boy's face, slipping into his open mouth, curving along his chin and down his bare throat. The frail frame shook with the weight of his misery and anger, his tiny fingers curled into fists. With an exhausted cry, the boy fell backward, his arms spread like angel wings, his small chest heaving. The wailing stopped. His breath came out in white puffs and the tear tracks on his face began to freeze.

The crow hopped around the boy's body to perch beside his head. The bird cocked its head left, then right, black eyes glittering. "Do you feel better now?"

"No," said the boy in a thick voice.

"And why not?"

"Because she's still in there." He pointed at the orange window of the widower's house. "When I go inside, she'll be there. When I go to bed and I wake up, she'll be there. She's always there, everywhere I look, everywhere I go."

"Mm," said the crow and clicked his beak. "It seems as though you really want her gone, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," said the boy, turning his head to look at the crow. In the darkening afternoon, the boy's eyes looked black. "I want that very much."

"Well," the crow said, "why don't you get rid of her?"

The boy's brows came together. "Get rid of her? How do I do that?"

The crow clicked his beak again. "She's made of clay, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"How does one break clay?"

"By smashing it?"

“Yes,” said the crow as the boy turned to look at his father’s house. The crow smiled, in that way crows do. “By smashing it.”

That night, the widower tucked his son and his clay daughter into bed. He read them a bedtime story, kissed them each good night, and went downstairs to his workshop. Selecting a pot he’d been working on for a client down the road, the widower set about painting, humming under his breath.

Upstairs his daughter sat on her bed tending to a tear in her brother’s trousers. She chided herself for letting the hole grow so large; time seemed to slip away from her as the days grew shorter. She let the pants rest in her lap as she stretched her arms above her head, pushing hair out of her face. She thought of her brother’s face at dinner, the way his narrowed eyes would not leave the doll seated across from him. It made her uncomfortable. She would have to talk with him in the morning.

As she moved to pick up her sewing again, the daughter heard a crash. It came from the room beside her own, where her brother and Victoria slept. She turned her head toward the noise. When another crash sounded, she set aside her sewing and stood. A third came as she opened her bedroom door. As she covered the small space between her door and her brother’s, there was a fourth crash and a fifth. Then all was silent.

The girl opened the door slowly, unsure what she would find beyond.

Pieces of clay littered the floor, a torn silk nightdress amongst the debris. She stepped into the room and knelt, picking up one crooked piece of clay, part of a blue eye staring sightlessly up at her. Her heart pounded in her throat. The daughter lifted her head toward the

bed. One hand rose to her mouth to cover a gasp. Her brother's body lay strewn across the bed, facing up, his mouth agape, his big eyes black and empty.

Sitting on the bed beside him was a crow. Its long, dark beak rustled around in her brother's left eye, the small, round head jerking this way and that. It drew its beak out and threw a shadow up into the air, catching it and swallowing it with jerky, uneven motions. It lifted its head toward the daughter, blackness dripping from the tip of its beak.

"I told him not to harm her," the crow said. The black eyes glowed. "He promised me the life inside of him should any harm befall the life contained inside that very lovely doll. I'm afraid he did not listen. So he is mine. Forever."

The clay eye slipped from the daughter's fingers. It shattered.

"No," she said, her voice a strained whisper. "No, that can't be. There must be some way that you can—that we can—he's my *brother*."

"Ah, yes," said the crow. "I'm sure you loved him very much."

"Yes," said the daughter. "Very much."

"Well," said the crow, hopping toward the edge of the bed. It tilted its head to regard her, black eyes glittering. "Perhaps together we can arrange some sort of bargain."

Afterward: “The Crow and the Clay Doll”

“The Crow and the Clay Doll” is my shortest tale. Its influences are not as concrete or specific as the other tales in my collection. My main inspiration, I suppose, would be the idea of Pinocchio, the wooden puppet brought to life (*Pinocchio*). I was interested in a doll created to fulfill the role of child when a child already exists in that family. I wanted this doll to receive life through a tricky bargain, often seen in fairy tales. From there, I went with it.

I wanted the crow to seem wise and all knowing—I wanted the reader to get the feeling that the crow knew, from the beginning, exactly how the story would end. For contrast, I wrote the boy to be easily persuaded and influenced—he allows the crow to exacerbate his unhappiness with his father’s preference for the clay doll, Victoria, and caves to the suggestion he destroy her, despite the bargain hinging on no harm coming to the doll.

This is my only story to feature a male as the main character and yet, through the sister, I was able to continue the theme of women dealing with trauma and sorrow. I wanted the sister to be kind and loving but also aware of her brother’s jealousy so that, in the end, she will feel the loss of her brother perhaps more strongly than she would have otherwise.

The sad ending of this story lies with the folly of youth. I wanted to hint that tragedy never truly ends, that it continues to crop up in different ways throughout life. To show this, I wanted the daughter to confront the crow and seem inclined to make a bargain, implying that the whole disastrous business would soon repeat itself.

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The Queen's Only Daughter

Rowena was born a triplet, the youngest of three. In the chaos of childbirth, one brother, then the other, both born before her, died. When only one baby, red faced and screaming, was shoved into the exhausted queen's arms, she narrowed her eyes in confusion.

"Where are the others," she said, for she had heard the midwife announce one boy and then the next moments before. "Where are my sons?"

The king entered from the outer room. He stood with his hands on his wife's shoulder as she held the screaming infant girl. They listened as the midwife explained how the boys did not have enough air in the womb, how their sister crowded them, how they were born with no life. The king bowed his head and wept. The queen's grip on her daughter tightened, her face twisted, rage overcame her. The midwife, as if sensing the escalating emotions, took the girl from her mother with the excuse of cleaning her.

When the door swung closed behind the midwife, the king fell to his knees and pressed his face to his wife's tiny hands. As he wept, she stared straight ahead, her jaw tight, her beautiful face a terrible frown.

The key turning in the lock made Rowena lift her head. Her fingers on the paper stilled; her grip on the pencil relaxed. She shuffled the papers spread on the desk, placing a half-finished bird and part of a tree overtop the face she'd been working on. The key left the lock, the doorknob turned and her mother, dressed in black silk and rubies, stepped through the door. The queen's dark curls were twisted into an elegant knot on the top of her head, pinned in place, her diamond tiara stark and dramatic. She stood in the doorway with her head tilted up, the green eyes bearing down on her young teenage daughter.

“The cook told me you did not eat all of your breakfast today.”

Rowena pressed her tongue against the backs of her teeth.

“Is this true?”

“Yes,” Rowena said. After a deep breath, she pressed onward, “I had already eaten the eggs and the bacon, Mother, and so I could not finish the oatmeal, Mother, it was just too much and I--”

“I did not bid you speak, child,” the queen said, her icy voice arresting the words in Rowena’s mouth. “I do not care to hear your excuses. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You did not eat all of your breakfast.”

It wasn’t a question, but the way her mother stared at her, with that narrow-eyed intensity, told Rowena an answer was expected. She said, “No I did not, ma’am.”

“Then you will be punished.” The queen clapped her hands, the large rings on them flashing. A grizzled man bowed inside, a whip coiled in one hand. Rowena knew what would happen next. She had experienced a countless number of thrashing in her fifteen years. She rose without waiting for her mother’s command. The queen’s mouth tightened, as if she was unsure whether to be irritated that her daughter moved without an order or pleased that Rowena knew what to do.

She was whipped ten times. She refused to cry out. When her mother had her fill, she ordered the man away and sent for Madeline to treat the fresh wounds. Rowena lay face down her bed as the man’s footsteps retreated down the hall. Her mother lingered in the doorway, pulling at the jewels around her neck.

“You will eat every bit of your breakfast tomorrow. You will eat no lunch and no dinner today.”

Madeline appeared in the doorway, and the queen, after another look at her daughter, left. When the footsteps faded, Rowena allowed herself to cry. Madeline sat beside her on the bed, making a soft noise under her breath. The princess’s back was littered with scars, and as Madeline began treating the new wounds, she could not keep silent.

“If your father were alive,” she said, “he would not stand for this.”

Rowena pressed her face to the blankets and said nothing. Her father had died when she was six years old. She barely remembered him. She knew only her mother, her restrictions and her cruelty, the heat of her gaze and the demands of her presence. Rowena was carted out for her mother’s fancy dinners, for affairs of state, when visitors asked too many questions about the princess’s absence. Most days, though, Rowena spent in her room drawing or reading or sitting in the window dreaming.

Madeline bandaged her back, brushed at Rowena’s curly red hair, and left the princess, locking the door behind her. Alone now, Rowena lifted her head toward the window, the mid-morning sun warming the dark room. She longed to see the world outside her window, to experience a life different from her own, a free life without her mother’s harsh words and harsher punishments, where she could laugh and run and draw whatever she wanted without fear of discovery or persecution.

Rowena fell asleep dreaming of a better life. Tears continued to trickle down her cheeks.

The next day, the pain in Rowena’s back had fallen asleep, lying in wait to strike her at random and inopportune moments. Rowena spent the morning on the window sill. Leaning her back

against the wall as she sat on the sill was her favorite way to watch the clouds move in the sky. As she sat, staring at the sky, tears began to leak down her cheeks. She was unaware of them at first, distracted more by a blue jay that skirted past than the pool of water growing on her hands.

A rustling in the tree beside her window drew her attention. The great oak grew on the other side of the low wall of the castle garden, several of the branches hanging just slightly into the yard. She lifted her head as a face emerged in the leaves, a handsome man's smiling face. The chin and cheekbones were sculpted, the eyes big and blue, the dark hair swept up and back from the grand forehead. It was the face half-finished on her desk, a sketch she hid from her mother because the love in her heart had a tendency to overflow onto the page. Love was not allowed in this castle. Love was dangerous.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Rowena offered a little nod and a weak smile and said, "Your Highness."

The prince's face split in a slow, bright smile. "Your Highness." He swept out one hand, using the other to keep a firm grip on the tree. The smile faded, though, when he noticed the tear tracks on her cheeks. "Rowena," he said, "what happened?"

"My mother and I had a disagreement today."

"A disagreement?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

She smiled at her fingers. "Oatmeal."

He smiled only because she smiled. "What about oatmeal?"

"She wanted me to eat it, but I was too full. It would have made me sick."

"A silly thing to argue over."

Rowena sighed, leaning her head against the window sill. She stretched her legs out in front of her, tugging her dress to cover her knees. The prince watched the movement of her tiny feet.

“My mother is very particular.”

“I’m sure she’ll make a very great in-law.”

Rowena blushed. Since they met five months ago, the prince had made it clear that he wanted to marry her. But Rowena insisted on waiting. Waiting for what, she was not sure. But she knew that they had to wait.

“You don’t like strawberries,” said the prince. “What fruits do you like?”

“Apples,” Rowena said. “Apples are my favorite. Red ones.”

“Sweet, not tart.”

“No, never tart.”

“I love peaches,” the prince said, “and strawberries.” He said this last with laughter, grinning so wide it made Rowena blush again. “Am I ever going to be able to touch you?” he asked when the laughter subsided. “Even just to hold your hand?”

The tree limbs closest to Rowena would not hold his weight: they were thin and flimsy. He had to stay closer to the trunk and farther from her. She longed to take his hand in hers, to feel his breath on her face, to run her fingers through his hair. They’d talk about meeting in the garden, about his scaling the low wall. But Rowena was not often from her room, and should her mother discover him...

It was impossible. So Rowena lowered her eyes to disguise her sadness. “One day.”

“Soon?”

“If my father were alive...”

“Why will your mother refuse to be persuaded about your marrying? Surely if you fight so often, she would welcome the chance to be rid of you.” He smiled at the end, as a comfort to her.

“She is difficult sometimes, my mother. She’s hard to understand.”

The prince said nothing, only watched her through the leaves with a pained expression.

“I’ve something to show you,” Rowena said when she thought she might begin to cry again. “Don’t move.” She left the sill for her low drawing table and shuffled through the papers until she found the half-finished drawing of his face. She had just reappeared in the window, holding the picture out for him to see, when the key started to turn in her lock. “Hide,” she hissed, turning her back to the window. “*Now.*” She didn’t linger to see if he obeyed for the door swung and her mother in all her finery stepped through.

The queen stood still for a moment, eyes narrowed on her daughter. “Why are you by the window?”

“No reason,” Rowena said but she said it too quickly, and her voice cracked.

Her mother raised a dark eyebrow and crossed to the window, pushing her daughter aside to peer out. Rowena closed her eyes, holding her breath coiled beneath her collarbone, waiting for an exclamation of rage or surprise or both. But her mother said nothing, leaned out of the window for the length of five heartbeats, before leaning back in again.

“Madeline told me she’s taken care of you,” the queen said, stepping around her daughter, away from the window and toward the door.

“Yes,” said Rowena.

“Then you will be prepared for the dinner this evening.”

Rowena’s eyes shot up in surprise. She hadn’t known any special dinner was planned.

With a smirk, the queen said, “A lesser duke is coming to dine, with his son. An interesting prospect for us, wouldn’t you say?”

Rowena’s heart sunk. The moment had come at last. Her mother planned to marry her off.

The queen’s hand grasped her chin, the red nails digging into Rowena’s cheeks as the woman lifted her daughter’s face so that their eyes met. “You are excited at the idea of such a marriage, are you not?”

“Yes,” Rowena said. The words came out a little distorted from her mother’s grip. “Yes, Mother.”

“Very good.” The queen released Rowena’s face. “Madeline will be in at half-past three to prepare you for dinner. You will behave yourself this evening, won’t you, child?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do not embarrass me. The sooner I can marry you off, the better.”

When her mother’s back was turned, tears started unbidden down her cheeks. She watched the blurred version of her mother disappear through the door and listened to the turning of the key in the lock. She dropped the drawing of the prince on the table and wiped at her cheeks as she returned to the sill.

His face appeared in the leaves, concerned, his brow creased. “Tears again.”

“I cry too much,” Rowena said and tried to laugh. She wished she didn’t cry. She hated herself for crying so much. But there were moments, more often now than before, when the weight of her misery settled too heavily upon her shoulders. She pressed a hand against the wall, bracing herself as the sobs reared up, threatening to trample her.

“What happened?” asked the prince.

The sound of his voice was a comfort. She focused on it, on the way it sounded when he laughed, or spoke sweetly to her. She wrestled her unruly emotions under control and kept swallowing until the mucus that had threatened to choke her disappeared down her throat. Then she lifted her head and offered a weak, watery smile.

“My mother has plans for me to marry.”

His face remained very still, as if he did not know how to react to this news.

Rowena pressed on, “The son of a lesser duke dines with us tonight. My mother considers it a profitable marriage, only what I deserve.”

“A *son of a lesser duke*?” The prince’s voice cracked, his mouth hanging open. “That’s an insult!”

Rowena shrugged, trying to hold her misery at bay. “It’s my fate, I suppose.”

“And what about me?” He was growing red in the face, his knuckles whitening on the branches. “What am I supposed to do?”

Rowena leaned forward to study the ground below, where a few wayward leaves had fallen on the grass of the garden. “Marry a princess more suited for you.”

“There is no princess more suited for me than you.” He took a deep breath, leaning forward. “No one but you, Rowena.”

Rowena’s face turned scarlet. He had never called her by her Christian name before. “Your Highness.”

“My name is Benedict,” he said. “Please.”

Rowena swallowed. “Benedict.”

He smiled so wide that her heart broke. She began to cry again.

“Hush now,” Benedict said, “we must plan.”

“Plan?” Rowena wiped her cheeks against her sleeve. “For what?”

“Your escape.” Benedict raised his dark eyebrows. “When will your mother force you to marry this son of a lesser duke? Tonight?”

“No, not tonight. I’m only meeting him tonight.”

“Excellent. Then you’ll leave tonight, after the dinner. We can’t risk waiting any longer.” Benedict leaned forward, glancing at the ground, at the branches of the tree, at the low garden wall. “The branches are thin close to you but you weigh much less than me. I wonder... would you be able to jump into the tree?”

Rowena eyed the gap with her lip caught in her teeth. “I don’t... I could try.”

“If you fail, you’ll die.” He did not say it unkindly, just bluntly.

Rowena pitched herself forward, eyeing the trees and the garden below. “I can do it,” she decided, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “There are a lot of them. The branches themselves are just thinner.”

“You must be careful. I’d rather you not die.” He smiled on this last, as comfort to her, and Rowena’s nerves calmed somewhat. “You’ll come to meet me in the forest. I know of a little house where one of my father’s old guardsmen lives. He practically raised me. He’ll watch over you if I have not arrived. He can marry us there, in the house, right away. Then we’ll ride to my home, where you be welcomed as the princess you are, where you will no longer be afraid or in pain. And I will have what my heart most ardently desires.”

Rowena lowered her face, embarrassed at his bold declarations.

“Sweet, fair, lovely Rowena. Will you meet there? It’s along the tiny river that flows into the forest from this very garden. Follow it until you come upon the house. Will you be there before the sun rises and marry yourself to me, as my heart longs but dares not dream?”

“Yes,” Rowena said, giving him an almost childish curtsy. “I will marry you, Benedict.”

The prince’s face was broken open in joy. “Excellent. Marvelous. I will leave you to prepare yourself. I have my own preparations to make. Soon, soon, we will be together. Together and never parted. My fair Rowena, my lovely Rowena, remember that I love you so. I have only loved you and I will, for the rest of my days, love you.”

Madeline found the young princess staring out her window, the memory of Benedict’s words in her head.

“Come along then,” the older woman said, “let’s bathe you quick.”

Her head still full of Benedict, Rowena followed the maid out of her small bed chamber.

The queen waved a hand in front of her mirror, clearing the image of her daughter’s bedroom. She pressed a fist to her chin, arms crossed, lips pursed.

“Mirror,” she said, the magic in her voice strengthening her command, “tell me again, who is the most beautiful in all the land?”

The mirror’s surface shimmered, a silver face emerging just beneath the glass. Without gender or defining feature, the lips of the face did not move as it spoke, “It is one who stole a king’s heart, my lady, one who stole a prince’s life and even now claims the love of another.”

“Say her name.”

“The most beautiful in the land is your daughter, my lady. The princess Rowena.”

“Yes,” said the queen. Her dark eyes narrowed. “It has always been Rowena, since her birth, since she robbed me of my sons and then of my husband. Had she not wanted the return of a lost hunting dog, he would not have been felled by wolves. It was her selfishness that killed him. I locked her away for it. Had she not been so beautiful, he would not have fallen privy to

her foolish demands.” The queen studied her reflection overtop of the mirror’s face. “She is a beauty, of course, a trait I unwillingly gave to her. But she will be gone soon, married to that duke’s son, and I will never have to see her again.”

“Permission to speak, highness?”

“Go ahead, then.”

“You have overheard her plans for escape, tonight, with the Prince Benedict.”

“Another idiot caught in her web.”

“Will you allow her to leave?”

“Of course not, you fool. I’ll seal off her window. She’ll be cut off from that boy forever, until she’s married and out of my sight. Only then will I have pea--” She stopped.

“My lady?”

A slow, wicked smile spread across the queen’s face. She turned to the mirror with her grin, waving a jewel-laden finger at the mirror. “Mirror, show me the boy.”

The silver faced disappeared. The mirror’s surface rippled, and a scene replaced it. Prince Benedict pulled a white stallion to a stop before a small stone cottage, tying his horse to a tree before pulling open the door and disappearing inside.

“Mirror, watch him. Do not lose him. I have preparations to undergo.” The queen left her dressing chamber, where the magic mirror hung on the wall, and rang a bell on the table beside her grand bed. A moment later a servant boy appeared.

“Bring me a basket of apples,” said the queen. “Red ones.”

Benedict leaned low over his horse, his heartbeat a thunder in his ears so loud it overcame the hoof beats of his stallion. He wanted to sing, his stomach bubbled with joy, his head was filled

up with pictures of Rowena. Rowena, who would be his wife before the night was over. Benedict let out a whoop, digging his heels into his horse.

Up ahead, a woman stepped suddenly into the road. Benedict, reacting more from instinct than thought, yanked on his reins. The stallion, having lived under his master's direction his entire life, reared up in an attempt to stop. The white horse came to a halt just shy of the woman, who stood with her back facing them, in a long black cloak, hood up.

Benedict patted his horse's neck. "We almost ran you down, fair maiden."

The woman turned, a wicker basket over her arm.

Benedict's swallowed. Before him stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her skin was the color of freshly fallen snow, smooth and unmarked. Her hair, what he could see beneath her hood, was all gold and copper, formed in elegant, breathtaking ringlets that curved along her forehead and neck. A large red ruby, trimmed in gold, lay cradled in the hollow of her collarbone.

"A prince," she said, and her voice made him think of honey and a warm embrace. "Are you a prince? Oh, please, tell me you're a prince."

"Yes, fair lady," Benedict said, scrambling off his horse. He paid the beast no mind as it pawed at the ground, eyes rolling at the woman. "I am a prince, of the kingdom just through the woods. How can I be of assistance to you?"

"I'm lost," said the woman, coming closer. "I need someone to guide me home. And I have heard talk of the princes here, how they are kind and gentle. I did not know," she added with a sly smile, "that they were so very handsome."

Benedict's chest swelled. "Kind and gentle we are, ma'am. But fearsome too, should any forest beasts attempt to harm you."

“Oh, yes.” The woman’s eyes, a lovely shade of green, widened. “Oh, yes, I was chased by a hideous bear only earlier this afternoon. I tore my dress, see?” She undid the clasp of her cloak and held it open. “See, the hem there, at the bottom.”

But Benedict was not staring at the hem of the dress. Instead he gaze open mouthed at the slim form of the woman, dressed in shocking candy apple red. He drank in her curves, his stomach growling. The woman moved closer, still talking about the hem of her dress, seeming unaware of the prince’s growing appetite.

“My mother gave me this dress,” the woman said. “A present in which to flee my father’s castle.”

“Castle?” Benedict swallowed.

“I’m a princess,” the woman said with a demure smile, lowering her head. “At least, I was. Until my stepfather decided he would marry me in addition to my mother.”

“No!” Benedict shook his head to clear it, trying to muster appropriate horror at the young woman’s situation.

“My mother was as horrified as you, kind prince, and she sent me off to your kingdom for protection. She suggested that I might find more than protection here. But I became lost on the road. I am low on food. I have only this one apple left.” She uncovered her basket. A gleaming red apple winked up at them.

The sight of the apple brought a face to Benedict’s mind. He took a sudden step backward, shame rushing forward to overwhelm him. “I can lead you home, your highness. But more than that I cannot--”

“I do not ask much more,” said the young woman. She stepped closer, tilting her face back to meet his gaze. “Protection is more than enough. Unless...”

Benedict cleared his throat. “Unless?”

“Unless there is a prince available to marry?” She was very close now. The scent of her invaded his nostrils; she smelled like summer wind. “I am no one now that my stepfather has stripped me of my title, my home, my land. But I am a princess by birth, bred from the cradle to make a prince very, *very* happy.”

“I am sure we can find you a prince to marry, Your Highness. I am, unfortunately, not that prince.”

“No,” frowned the young woman. Her lips gleamed an impossible red. “Are you promised to another?”

“Yes,” said Benedict, glad to put forth the excuse. “A young princess who lives not far from here. I plan to marry her this evening.”

“Congratulations to you,” said the young woman.

Benedict accepted her congratulations with a relieved smile.

“A kiss for good luck?” She raised a thin, pale eyebrow. The curve of her lips, in that small smile, made his stomach grumble.

“On the cheek, then,” said the prince, unable to resist.

“Of course. You’re nearly a married man.”

She did not kiss him on the cheek. As Benedict lowered his face to make his cheek available for the kiss, the young woman curled her fingers in his collar to pull him close. She reached for his cheek but, at the last minute, pressed her lips to his mouth. The kiss began slow at first until a fire erupted in Benedict’s head, eradicating all thoughts of another, and he grasped at the woman, kissing her eagerly.

She pulled away with a slick smile, grinning as the prince gasped. His fingers twisted in the cloak at her back. She touched his cheek with cool fingers.

“You love only me, do you not, dear Benedict?”

“Yes,” said the prince. His dark eyes were half lidded and glazed. He was still hungry.

“And I will love you passionately and often if you do for me one great task.”

“Anything,” said Benedict, who wanted nothing but to kiss her again.

“Take this apple as gift to the girl who will appear in the forest cottage tonight. You do not remember her, do you?”

“Who?”

“That’s a lovely boy.” She teased his mouth with her thumb. “Offer this to her as a going-away present. Make sure she bites it. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Take this basket, return to the cottage, and wait.”

“A kiss?” He dared not let himself be so hopeful.

With a cruel smile playing on her lips, she pulled the prince’s face to her own and kissed him for a very long time.

The queen appeared in Rowena’s room to escort her to the dinner. Her mother looked breathtaking in a dress of green silk and large ruby, trimmed in gold, resting in the hollow of her collarbone. She led Rowena through the halls of the castle without a word, speaking to her daughter just as they reached the grand dining hall.

“Smile,” she ordered, “and be polite.”

The queen stepped forward first with a curtsy and an outpouring of applause. Rowena followed a few moments later, her breath feeling stoppered in her throat. She felt silly in her fine evening dress, a pale yellow one, the only fine dress her mother allowed her to wear. The applause that greeted her as she stepped inside was very loud, overwhelming, more than her mother had received.

Rowena felt like a rare, exotic bird, greeted with long stares and eager smiles by the individuals she was introduced to as she made her way down the table to her seat. The lesser duke's son rose to greet her with a sweet sort of grin. He was handsome, Rowena decided as he approached, with pale hair and skin and solemn blue eyes. He looked very nice in his navy blue finery.

The prince was introduced as Warren. He pulled her chair back for her with an elegant sort of bow. After a blessing was said over the meal, Warren engaged her attention and did not relinquish it the whole of the night. Rowena found him to be intelligent, kind and thoughtful. He did not tease her if she flubbed her words and selected the wrong fork for the salad course. He gave her every opportunity to speak and listened intently to each of her answers or questions. His responses were thoughtful and composed, always respectful. She saw how a girl could fall in love with a man like Warren, whether a lesser duke's son or the heir to a throne. But she kept Benedict always in the front of her mind, waiting on the back of her tongue, a reminder that her heart belonged elsewhere with a man just as loyal and true, if not more so, than Warren.

The evening ended as wonderfully as it began. Warren escorted Rowena to her bedroom, the pair trailed by their respective parents. He kissed her hand and bowed her goodnight.

"I look forward to seeing you again," Warren said.

“Good night,” Rowena said with a smile. She glanced at her mother, who gave a slight nod of approval.

Rowena disappeared into her bedroom, leaning her back against the door to gather herself. Warren was a charming young man, and she really was quite fond of him. But she had a prince of her own to meet. Without another thought for the kind duke’s son, Rowena set about preparing for her journey.

She decided against bringing any clothing or supplies with her. The walk to the forest cottage would not be a long one, and when she and Benedict were married, she would have dresses and pencils and pages for days. She would carry only herself and her nervous, fluttering heart to her wedding night.

It took Rowena longer than she expected to undo her fancy dress by herself. Madeline never came to undress her. Though strange, she counted it an unexpected blessing. When she finally had the dress off, she dug through her small wardrobe for a pair of old riding pants that had belonged to a messenger boy. One summer her mother had ordered her to pull weeds from the garden and given her the garment to wear. It had been a brutal summer but one of the best of Rowena’s life. She spent so many days outside in the breeze, under the sun. Choosing the pants now, Rowena thought it would make navigating the tree much easier than if she wore a dress. So she pulled on the pants and an old tunic, tucking the tunic inside. She found her sturdiest pair of boots, pulled them on and then surveyed herself in the mirror. After much debate she decided to twist her red hair into a bun at the base of her neck to keep it out of her face. She looked nothing like a princess. But she was ready.

As she swung her legs over the sill, Rowena felt no pang at leaving her childhood home. Her father was long dead; she hardly remembered him. Any kindness he might have shown her

was a memory smudged and blurred, a faint shadow impossible to discern. She thought only of her mother's cruelty, of her isolation, of the despair and misery and hopelessness that had been her constant companions since childhood. That was behind her. Ahead of her waited a prince who would love and cherish her all the days of her life.

Rowena surveyed the tree branches with apprehension. The shadows made them look thicker, sturdier, and she clung to the illusion as reality. Standing on the sill, she glanced only once at the garden below before taking a deep breath and launching herself into the tree.

The branches seemed to catch her, cushioning her fall and holding securely. Rowena did not pause to catch her breath. Grabbing whatever branches she could find, she scrambled through the tree to the trunk. She clung to it a moment in disbelief, her heart a symphony in her ears. Then she climbed down the trunk. A thrill went up her when her feet collided with solid ground. She had never set foot outside the castle grounds before. Rowena cast the dark castle one final glance before she turned toward the forest and began to run.

From high inside her tower, the queen watched her daughter go, toying with the large ruby on her collarbone.

Rowena had no trouble following the river to the tiny house. The moon was high in the sky, and it shone down through the trees, bathing the forest in light bright enough to see. She approached the house with a thundering heart, with short breath, with a mixture of excitement and nausea boiling together in her stomach. Taking a deep breath, Rowena knocked once on the door of the tiny cottage.

To her surprise, Benedict stood there, behind the open door. He looked at her with a strange, distant expression, his blue eyes green and foggy. He said nothing, and Rowena,

confused but overcome with joy at seeing him, flung herself into his arms. Benedict touched her back but did not return the embrace. Brow furrowed, Rowena pulled back.

“Benedict,” she said, “is everything all right?”

“Yes,” said the prince. He thrust an arm between them, a shining red apple balanced on his palm. “I brought this present for you. I know how you love apples.”

“Yes,” Rowena said with a smile, taking the fruit from him. She cradled it in both hands, fingers brushing the gleaming red skin. “It’s lovely. It’s almost too beautiful to eat.”

“Eat it,” Benedict said without much feeling. “It’s delicious.”

“If it tastes half as good as it looks...” Tears welled in Rowena’s eyes. “Oh, Benedict,” she said, “I’m so happy.”

“And I,” said the prince. And he smiled.

Beaming at him, Rowena lifted the red fruit to her lips, grazing the apple’s surface with her teeth, before piercing the thin skin. She took a large bite, startled by the apple’s sugary sweetness. She’d never tasted an apple so sweet. It was crisp and yet soft, and she paused a moment with it on her tongue, luxuriating in the taste. Then she swallowed. With the movement of her throat came a feeling of opening. Almost instantly Rowena gagged, struggling to breathe. She dropped the apple, hands rising to her throat. They came away bright red, as if some of the apple’s color had rubbed off on her fingers. She looked up at Benedict, watched him smiling still, the expression cruel and immobile on his face. Rowena’s knees weakened. She fell to the ground, bracing her apple-red hands on the ground. She heard gagging. Her head filled with white noise. She focused on the wooden floor before her, focused on Benedict’s muddy boots, focused on the red dripping into a pool below her. She thought of her father, a shadow in a

dream, of Warren with his gentleman's bow, of Benedict and the way he used to smile at her,
and of the apple which had tasted so good.

Far away, the queen chewed her own apple and smiled.

Afterward: “The Queen’s Only Daughter”

“The Queen’s Only Daughter” borrows some, but not much, from the classic fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.” I borrowed mainly the idea of a cruel mother figure who regarded her daughter with jealousy and hatred (Grimm 346), and used a poison apple to kill her (Grimm 352). I left out the huntsman (Grimm 346) and seven kind little men (Grimm 347). Instead, I increased the importance of the prince, in my tale named Benedict. The plot hinges on Benedict and the princess’ relationship and the decision to escape her mother and elope.

A major change I made in the story was to make the villain the princess’ mother as opposed to her step-mother. When I first made the decision, I didn’t put much thought into it. I was interested, I suppose, in the great lengths a parent will go to against a child they do not like (here, I think, I was influenced a bit by the novel *Flowers in the Attic*). I also had the great importance of a male heir in mind—one of the reasons the queen is so angry is that, of her three unborn infants, the two boys die and only a girl, who grows to rival her in beauty, remains. The Queen’s hatred only escalates when her husband dies in pursuit of pleasing their daughter. The Queen views her daughter as a rival for attention and affection as well as the cause of the loss of the men in her life. I don’t believe the change has such a large impact on the story, aside from making the cruelty the princess receives all the more shocking as it comes from her mother and not a step-parent.

I also wanted the poison apple to come from the prince as opposed to the mother in disguise. Here, we arrive upon the tale’s sad ending. Rowen, the princess, lets her childish daydreams run away with her. She trusts a prince who, at first, seems as wonderful and heroic as any fairy tale prince. But Benedict is easily swayed by his lust and allows himself to be used to bring about Rowen’s demise. Men harming young women is a theme in all of my stories and,

even though this pain is instigated by the evil stepmother, a man is still used to carry it out. This betrayal increases the tragedy of the story. There is something terrible and poetic about this ending that, when I wrote it, I couldn't help but love.

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The Dark Man's Kiss

Grandma Alice's face looked like a crumpled map. Wrinkled, nearly beyond recognition, with purple birthmarks on her cheek and forehead, plum-colored continents of a far-off land Delia always wanted to visit. Her grandma never talked about the birthmarks, but Delia had imagined them to be a gift from a fairy, or, in her more cynical moments, evidence of a curse from a wicked witch. Grandma Alice always ignored the few questions Delia was brave enough to ask as a bold young girl years ago.

But tonight was different. Tonight, Delia turned sixteen, a magical number for young girls. She'd been waiting her entire life for this one evening, the night when she would, in the world of teen movies and romance novels and popular culture, be a *woman*.

Surprising for a night of such importance, but Delia had no extravagant birthday plans. Birthdays had never been her favorite part of the year. Seeing as her parents were killed in a car crash the night she turned seven, Delia chose not to dwell on her birthday. Grandma Alice baked a cake, gave her granddaughter a few small gifts, but always on the day after Delia's birthday, when she was one day older than the year before.

But tonight would be different. Because tonight she turned sixteen and Delia was committed to celebrating. She had made a special dinner for Grandma Alice and herself to share. Chicken and potatoes, green vegetables and yellow vegetables and sour cream. All of Delia's favorite things. After dinner would be cake and gift-giving. But Grandma Alice had another present, a real surprise that she unveiled to her granddaughter as Delia began the washing up.

Delia dropped some dirty utensils into a big pot of hot, soapy water as her Alice filled a mug to the brim with black tea. The old woman's wrinkled fingers grasped the string and lifted the tea bag in and out of the water, her gray eyes focused intently on this solitary task. Then she

set the tea bag aside, in the small saucer beneath her cup, and curled all ten fingers round the warm mug. She lifted her pale eyes from the smoky liquid to her granddaughter, a white apron tied around her waist, blond hair pulled into a messy knot at the base of her neck.

“Delia,” Grandma Alice said, her voice whispering like the turned pages of an old, yellowed book. “I have something to tell you.”

Delia twisted the water knob, so the water gently streamed out instead of gushed. She brushed at her face with her wrist, smearing soap bubbles on her cheek.

“Yes, Grandma?”

“I know you’ve wondered for many years how I came to have these purple marks on my face.”

Delia felt herself blushing. They never talked about the marks on her Grandma Alice’s face. It was like a scar. You never acknowledged its existence even though everyone in the room was staring at it.

“Well, um, yeah, I have, but you really don’t have to--”

“Tonight,” said Grandma Alice, “I am going to tell you the story.”

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, a thunderous parade of horses in Delia’s head. She swallowed the copious amount of saliva pooling on the back of her tongue and focused her gaze on her washing up.

“All right, Grandma,” she said. “If you, um, you’d like.”

“It’s a story set long ago, before television and radios and cell phones, when the world felt quite young. I was a girl, then, living on a farm with my mother and three brothers. I was about your age. About to turn sixteen, in fact...”

Alice lay stretched on her stomach, her arms folded in front of her, pointed chin digging into one forearm. She watched the movement of the fall breeze on the surface of the pond behind their farm house. It was late afternoon, and the air smelled different, spicier. Alice wore a black dress that fell to her knees when she stood and no shoes, her pale hair braided down her back. Her eyes looked more blue than gray. There were no purple bruises on her unlined face.

There the wind blew warm enough in fall to lay without a sweater, and the sunset took one hundred years to set. It was in such a moment, in such weather, that Alice met the toad.

She lay with her arms beneath her chin, staring at the water and dreaming of life elsewhere. Her skin smelled like mud and animal fur, despite the hours she'd spent in the bath scrubbing with hard soap. The hair that fell in her eyes reminded her of hay. She knocked her ankles together, knowing that the bottoms of her bare feet were black with dirt. She had grown up on this farm, and on days such as these, she found herself sick of the whole thing. On days like these, she wanted to go somewhere else, wanted to be someone else. Into this longing came the toad.

The toad came upon her so suddenly that Alice wondered if she'd fallen asleep with her eyes open. It seemed to take only the span of one blink to the next for the toad to appear in front of her, a few inches from her crossed arms. It was not a frog, though most stories like this contain frogs. This was a toad. A great, big, ugly brown toad, about the size of Alice's spread palm, with big black eyes blinking lazily in the fading sunlight. The toad had a series of darker brown, swirling patterns on its back. Its stubby arms and stubby fingers twitched, and as it sat in the grass, staring, Alice counted and recounted the stubby fingers, eight in all.

She said to the toad, "You surprised me."

The toad blinked its black eyes and said, “I’ve been here all along. You’re just not very good at looking.”

Alice leaned her head back to yawn, her jaw popping. “I suppose that’s true,” she said as she settled on her arms once more. “My mother’s always asking me to stop spending so much time inside my head.”

“I had a mother once,” sighed the toad.

Alice raised her pale eyebrows. “What happened to her?”

“She died long ago.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alice, because that was the polite thing to say. “How did she die?”

“Terribly,” said the toad and sighed again. “Yes, horribly, terribly, so horribly terribly my mother died.”

“Really.” Alice found herself growing bored with this conversation. She’d never spoken to a toad before, but if all of them were so vague and so repetitive she didn’t know if she’d speak to another again.

“She was murdered.” The toad shuffled a bit closer.

Alice’s blue eyes brightened. “Murdered? How? By who?”

“It was terrible,” said the toad. “Terribly, horribly terrible. My mother was murdered, brutally, horribly murdered... by a *witch*.”

The toad said this with great drama, hushing his voice and shuffling closer to Alice. Amused, but to appease the toad, Alice let out a shocked gasp, which turned quickly into a yawn. A gentle fall breeze brushed past, pulling loose bits of hair from her braid.

“Yes,” said the toad, “a witch. A witch that came to our castle disguised as an old beggar woman, seeking shelter for the night. My father let her in, but the old beggar woman sought an

audience with my mother. My mother was beautiful, you know,” the toad gave a wistful sigh, “the most beautiful woman in the land. With hair like sunbeams. She was very delicate, my mother, and could not stand the sight of anything ugly, dirty or altogether unpleasant. And this beggar woman was all three of these. My mother refused the audience, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Alice.

“And the witch was very angry. So she transformed into her true form, a beautiful but terrible witch, and murdered my mother in cold blood. She wanted to marry my father, you understand, for he was the most powerful and, more importantly, the most handsome king in all the land. She planned to return to the castle a few days after my mother’s death, presenting herself as a Queen, and marry my father. But, you see, she encountered a thorn she had not suspected.”

“Really? What?”

“Me. That is, I *saw* her murder my mother.”

A slow, lazy sort of smile stretched across Alice’s face. “You saw her kill your own mother?”

“Yes. That’s what I said isn’t it?” The toad gave an impatient huff.

Alice’s eyes were bright, unperturbed by the toad’s mounting impatience. “How did she do it?”

“How did who do what?”

“How did the witch kill your mother?”

The toad’s mouth stretched in an attempt to look scandalized. “What a thing for a young lady to ask!”

“Well?” Alice leaned forward, her chin digging farther into her arm. Around them the wind whispered and the sun continued its achingly slow descent beneath the earth. “How’d she do it?”

The toad’s eyes blinked slowly once before he shuffled closer and said in a hushed voice, “Cut her into tiny pieces and burned the bits in the fireplace! Her head went off first, then her arms and legs and then the witch minced the rest of her torso and her limbs into little bits and fed them piece by piece into the fire.”

Alice suppressed a giggle. This was the most gruesome death she’d ever heard. “What did it smell like? The burning bits of your mother?”

“Like spoiled meat,” said the toad in his conspiratorial whisper, “and also like rotten apples. It was an unpleasant smell. It was the smell that gave me away. I couldn’t handle it, and so I retched, rather loudly, and the witch discovered me beneath my mother’s bed.”

Alice lifted an eyebrow, a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. “And what were you doing under your mother’s bed?”

The toad shuffled to the left, then to the right, then he made a sound like a grunt. “The witch discovered me beneath my mother’s bed and pulled me out. ‘You’ve discovered my secret,’ she said,” here the toad pitched his voice very high, making the words sound strange and gargled, “and I was sure she would kill me, cut me into pieces like she did my mother. But then the witch said, ‘I hate to kill a handsome young man like you. So I’ll curse you instead. You’ll spend your life as a toad until a beautiful princess kisses you.’ Then she waved her hand and here I am, a miserable toad.”

“That really is an unfortunate story,” said Alice, yawning again. She lifted her head to glance over her shoulder, back to the farmhouse. She could see the silhouettes of her brothers

moving in the dining room, setting the table for dinner. Her mother would be calling her in any moment. Alice turned back to the toad to tell him this and found him very close to her, as close as possible with touching her crossed arms.

The toad stared very intently at her face with his black eyes blinking in that slow, measured way. He said, "There's only way to break my curse."

Alice leaned her head back, putting some distance between her and the toad, who smelled thick, like a spoonful of cinnamon. "What's that?"

"I need a kiss from a princess."

"Oh," said Alice, "of course."

The toad studied her for a silent moment. "Are you a princess?"

"I live on a farm," Alice said. "Do I look like a princess?"

"You're beautiful enough to be a princess."

Alice's face colored, despite herself. "Well, I'm not. Not a princess."

The toad sighed, the sound rushed and angry. "I'm running out of time."

"Time?"

"I need to kiss a princess before the end of the eighteenth hour of the eighteenth day of the one hundred and eightieth year since I became a frog. The hour is almost up."

Alice glanced around the empty yard, back up to her brightly lit house, and at the sun setting patiently. "I don't know where to find you a princess."

"You're my only hope."

"Except I'm not a princess."

"Could you perhaps be the princess of the, erm, pond over here?"

Alice studied the toad's reflection in the water. She shrugged. "What have you got to lose, right?"

"You'll do it?"

"Sure."

The toad may have been smiling. "Do it, please, before it's too late."

Alice unfolded her arms and picked the frog up, holding him like one holds a cheeseburger just before taking the first bite. The toad's skin was curiously hot, not at all clammy and wet like Alice expected. She'd caught a few toads with her brothers around this very pond. *Those* toads felt like strange, squishy clods of mud, slick and wet and sticky too. But the toad in her hands had an intense sort of body heat, and having it so close to her face, the cinnamon smell she'd noticed before increased, forcing its way up her nose until she was choking on it.

"Go on, then," said the toad, squirming in her fingers. "Kiss me already."

"All right, all right." Alice squinted at the toad, moving him this way and that to pick the best spot. To be honest, she had no real desire to kiss a toad. But she'd already promised her help. She couldn't just take it back. "You don't need to rush me."

"We're running out of time!"

Alice looked at the sun. It hadn't moved even an inch in the sky. "Here goes nothing, I suppose. A kiss from a 'princess.'" Closing her eyes tight, she brought the toad to her lips and kissed him once, quickly.

She barely had time to open her eyes before the wind rushed at them, imbued with sudden strength and violence. It pulled at Alice, dragging her dress across the backs of her legs and yanking strands of blond hair from the meticulous braid. Dust swirled everywhere, obscuring

her voice and filling her mouth with grime. Then, just as quickly as it came, the wind disappeared and the dirt settled down and Alice realized, in the chaos, that she had dropped the toad.

She examined the patch of grass right before her, but when she found no trace of him, her gaze moved toward the pond. Then she saw the feet.

It would be more accurate to say that she saw the *boots*. Black boots shining in the forever fading sun; the tops of the boots stopped just below the knee. Said knees were clad in tight, dark pants, a black belt hung loose and useless round a surprisingly narrow waist and a shirt of clinging, dark material covered a thin chest and bony arms. Long fingers drummed impatiently against the hips, wearing black gloves. The body looked like a minimalist pirate.

Then Alice worked her way up to the man's face. For, despite the feminine shape to the hips and waist, this was the body of a man. Only the face was hard for Alice to look at. She could make out a long, sloping nose, crooked like it had been broken, a wide mouth with thin, curling lips and two large, black eyes. It was the eyes that made her realize that she was still looking at the toad. They had the same bulging, penetrating, endless darkness. The man's black hair swayed on the top of his head, as if he were submerged underwater.

He was a strange man because his skin seemed to be colored in various shades of dark, like smears of ink at different stages of drying. He was a *dark* man. Alice had no other word for him.

The Dark Man let out a gleeful laugh, like a child, and stretched his arms above his head. His form fitting clothing moved with him.

“What bliss, what bliss,” he said in a high pitched voice that startled the hairs on Alice's arms. “What bliss to be free again, free at long last!”

“Sorry,” said Alice, broken from her surprise by the sound of this strange voice. “I thought only a princess could break your spell.”

“It wasn’t a spell, darling girl.” The Dark Man ran a hand through his moving hair. “It was a *curse*. A nasty, nasty, ugly, smelly old curse put on me but a stupid smelly old witch. And it did *not* agree with my digestion.” He burped. Then giggled.

Alice wrinkled her nose. The wind carried the belch to her – it smelled like cinnamon and rotten meat. “I thought only a princess could break your curse.”

“Not quite, not quite.” The Dark Man squatted, resting his forearms on his knees. “You see, it all comes down to belief. Every girl’s a princess inside – she just has to realize it in here.” He ducked down and kissed Alice’s forehead, sending a tantalizing chill echoing down her neck. The Dark Man giggled again. He looked very much like a child when he laughed with his mouth opened so wide.

“You had to believe you might be able to break the curse,” said the Dark Man when Alice did not speak but instead lay shivering. “You had to believe you might be a princess after all. Because you’ve always wanted to be one, haven’t you?” He cast a look at Alice’s house, at the top of the hill behind her, where her brothers moved like shadows from another world. “What girl growing up with smelly boys and pigs and mud doesn’t wish she was a princess sometime? I knew you were my girl when I saw you. You carry your heart in your eyes.”

Alice’s eyes moved to his mouth as he spoke, captivated by the sneering curl of his lips. “I’m not sure I understand you.”

“No, I imagine you wouldn’t. Girls your age aren’t the cleverest. They’re not quite women yet, despite what they might tell themselves.”

Alice’s face flushed, and she narrowed her blue eyes. “I *am* a woman. I’m sixteen today.”

“Almost sixteen.” The Dark Man lifted his bulging eyes to the immovable sun. “That places you on the crux of womanhood. You have the desires of a woman, but your smell isn’t quite right. Yet.”

At this, Alice wondered what the “right” smell might be. She hoped it wasn’t cinnamon. The Dark Man’s smell had intensified when he transformed from toad to man. She didn’t want to smell so strong the rest of her life.

“Girls just before they are women possess the most magic. You’re on the edge of something truly life-changing, my darling, darling girl. And contained within your lips,” here he pressed his gloved thumb to her slightly parted mouth, “is enough to break the strongest, most powerful curses.”

Alice could hear her blood moving in her veins, a small hurricane burrowing into her ears. But in the rush of all that sound she realized, for the first time, how faint her own heartbeat sounded. She could barely hear it. And with his thumb pressed so forcefully against her mouth, she struggled to breathe too.

“So then,” she said, her own breathless voice grating her nerves, “I *am* a princess?”

The Dark Man laughed, clicking his tongue at her gently. Alice could not take her eyes from the pursing and relaxing of those thin, dark lips.

“Let me explain because, though you’re almost a woman, you still think like a girl. And girls are not known for their intelligence.”

As easily as the spell had dropped over her, it broke. Alice pulled her face back, away from his touch, and sat up all the way, tucking her legs beneath her. “Excuse me,” she said, “but I hardly think that’s true. We--”

“You were able to break my curse for two reasons.” The Dark Man spoke as if Alice had said nothing, holding up two fingers. He curled one down. “First, you have the heart of a princess. That is, you believe it fully possible that you are, in reality, a princess. A girl in a family of boys, you grew up in dirt and mud and mess. You never had enough to eat. Your heart, knowing much better than you, always longed for something more. So when you heard that only a princess could break my curse, you let your heart believe, if just for a moment, that you might be princess enough to undo the magic. That, in turn, turned you into a princess. So when you kissed me, the magic of your belief set me free.

“Second,” he let the other finger drop, “you are a girl on the verge of womanhood. Women are not likely to think themselves to be princesses, but the maturity you seek to obtain with the dawning of your birthday blends with the magic of childhood you cling to. You sit between two worlds, a girl in transition. And there is magic in transition. That magic also allowed you to break my curse.

“So there you have it! You believed yourself a princess and, as a girl in transition to womanhood, you had magic enough to set me free. And I,” he spread a wide hand on his thin chest, “am very grateful.”

Alice’s mind struggled to knit all of this information together. The Dark Man spoke very quickly, without pausing much for breath, and she often had to replay whole sentences just to absorb what he was saying. When he finished, he let silence hang in the air between them. The fall breeze shuffled by and Alice could feel it changing.

She said, “Now what?”

The Dark Man lifted one dark eyebrow. “What do you mean, ‘now what’?”

“I mean, what do we do now?”

His smile grew very wide. “We?”

Alice refused to be cowed by the condescension in his face. She reminded herself that this impossible man was the same toad who, moments ago, she had spoken to in very much the same way he spoke to her now. So she drew herself up, lifting her chin as she responded. “In all of the stories, after the princess releases the prince from his curse, they get married.”

The Dark Man’s eyes grew very wide. His lips, pressed together, began to tremble. His cheeks bulged. He rose up on his heels, his Adam’s apple bobbing, before he let out a great loud guffaw and fell backwards on his butt. He laughed and he laughed, his jaws widening and popping, his long fingers digging into the black fabric covering his frail stomach. Alice watched as tears, like dirty well water, trickled down his face. She felt herself growing more embarrassed and tried to make herself more annoyed, to cover the embarrassment.

When at last the Dark Man calmed himself, he leaned back on one hand, using the others to wipe the tears from his face. “Oh my,” he said, still gasping a little, “that was really very funny. You’re a very funny girl, you know that?”

“No,” said Alice, reaching up to scratch an itch on her forehead. It made her skin burn a little, to dig into it with her fingernails, using more force than she intended. But at least the itching went away. “No, I don’t know that.”

“We’re not going to get married, my darling girl. Of course we’re not. And do you know why?”

“No.” Alice knew she was blushing again. It made her angry. Her blue eyes narrowed, and her fingers dug into the fabric bunched around her thighs.

“Because though I am a prince, I can’t say I’m a good one.” He laughed again, his whole body shaking. “In fact, if we were to cast roles in this story of ours, I would be the villain.” He

wiggled his fingers at her, snorting. “You see, the witch that turned me into a toad all those years ago wasn’t an evil witch at all. She was a good witch, a kind old woman who had served as caretaker for a king’s orphaned daughter. I managed to get that daughter to fall in love with me, see, and I was about to, ah, steal her heart when I was discovered and transformed into a frog. I’ve been roaming the land for ages, but it wasn’t until you that I found a heart pure enough and sweet enough and eager enough to break my curse.”

“Oh,” said Alice as her forehead began to itch again.

“So I must say, I am very grateful for you, my darling girl.”

Alice looked above them at the sun still suspended in the sky, then at her brothers, still shadows setting the table for her birthday dinner. She longed suddenly, violently, to be back with him. This Dark Man confused her and scared her, and he smelled too strongly of cinnamon. And her forehead itched so terribly. She turned back around to tell the Dark Man that she had to hurry along to wash up for dinner. But as she faced him she found him very close, his nose inches from her own.

The black eyes seemed to expand, and Alice stared at her reflection in the empty black orbs. She knew he was smiling, though she could not see his mouth, knew it from the lines framing the dark eyes. The folds in his inky skin were so charming she almost began to cry.

“You freed me with a kiss,” the Dark Man whispered, his voice almost lost on the wind that rushed between them. The breeze lifted pale hair from Alice’s face. She noticed the black eyes were not framed by eyelashes. “I suppose I shall return the favor.”

He leaned forward and her eyes fluttered closed, her lips parting in expectation of her first real kiss. She’d kissed her father, before he died, and her brother after his confirmation, but she had never been kissed on the mouth. She had never been kissed by a man, a man kissing her

like she was a woman. But the lips did not touch to her mouth. Instead she felt the warmth of them on her cheek, where they lingered for so long her skin began to burn. When the pain became unbearable Alice jerked her head away, eyes opening as one trembling hand reached up to cover the stinging spot.

The Dark Man was laughing, only she couldn't hear him. She knew he was laughing because of the grin splitting the dark face, revealing a mouth like a dark hole, with teeth that blended into the nothingness. He covered his mouth with one hand, shaking silently, as he watched her with the large, never blinking eyes.

"Just once more," he said when he dropped his hand. "Three times the charm, yes?"

"Third time's the charm," Alice said. Speaking meant moving her mouth and moving her mouth made the cheek twitch painfully. "The saying is 'the third time's the charm.'"

"Ah, my mistake." His thin mouth laughed at her. "Just once more," he said again, "let me kiss you once more."

"Why?" Alice wanted to go home, to her mother and her brothers and her bedroom. She was sick of this place where the sun never set and strange men made out of ink laughed at her and teased her and tried to kiss her.

"Just once more, on your mouth." The black eyes shifted, and she knew they were focused on her lips, covered partly by her thumb as she cradled her cheek.

"But why?"

"Most magic works in threes," said the Dark Man.

Alice tried to take a deep breath, but the air, very cold now despite the shining sun, skittered around in her throat.

"Magic," she said. "You're doing magic on me?"

“Of course,” said the Dark Man, still watching her mouth. “I’m a magical sort of man.”

“I want to run away from you,” Alice said. “But I find I have trouble making my legs work.”

“Yes,” said the Dark Man. “I imagine you would.”

Alice said nothing. She watched him, her face throbbing in time with her fading heartbeat, her forehead itching terribly. She did not have the energy to reach up and scratch it.

“My magic is like a web,” said the Dark Man. “And I find that even after all those years as a toad, I am still very good at weaving.”

“What is it you want?”

“Something I admire very much.” He smiled again and this time teeth shown in the folds of shadow, tombstones looking stark and white. “Your heart, my dear, my darling girl.”

To hear him say the word aloud only drew to Alice’s attention how quiet her heartbeat had become.

“My heart?” The words were breathless, almost soundless.

“Oh yes.” The Dark Man leaned forward, the tip of his dark, crooked nose brushing her own. “There is something about hearts I love. And there is something about hearts with just a touch of magic in them,” he tapped her lips with one finger, “that I simply adore. And your heart, my dear, has everything I crave. Innocence corrupted by desire, by temptation. Magic that is growing old. Magic that is about to expire. I would love a bite of that.” The tombstones in his mouth seemed to grow in size. He leaned closer, bulging black eyes fixated on her mouth and Alice knew, she knew, that if this man were to kiss her she would fall down a dark hole, unable to ever find her way out.

“Excuse me,” she said, though she barely had the breath to speak. “I don’t want to kiss you.”

The Dark Man giggled, still leaning closer. “That’s never stopped me before.”

“I don’t want to kiss you,” Alice said again, working her jaw, trying to make the words louder, stronger. “And so I don’t think I will.”

“And what, exactly, will you do?”

Alice thought of her brothers in the house up the hill, setting the table for her birthday. She thought of her mother bent over the oven, skin drying in the heat. She thought of how much she wanted to be kissed but not by a man swirled from ink and shadow. She’d rather be kissed by the boy down the road, the boy with the gum constantly in his teeth, who told stupid jokes that made her laugh. She thought of that boy and her heart flared, a thunderous drumbeat in her head. She thought about his mouth moving around that gum, his lips smacking, his cheeks bulging and his tongue lolling around behind his teeth, a distraction when he spoke. She thought about this boy she had never thought of before because he was colored like the fields at dusk, in browns and golds and tans. Because he was the opposite of the monster bearing down on her now, Alice thought about the boy and clung to him like she’d never thought to do before.

Just like that, her legs lit on fire. Needles dug into every inch of her, the sudden pain overwhelming her senses and tearing whatever webs that Dark Man had weaved to hold her in place. She leapt upward, the motion of her legs catching the Dark Man’s face in her knee. He drew back, pressing a hand to his nose, letting out a string of old words that burned like bee stings on Alice’s ears. She clamped her hands over her ears and stepped backward. Each collision of bare foot with the soft, solid earth sent a shock of electricity up her legs and through

her body. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation so much as a primal one. Alice knew that if she'd been conscious and aware during her birth, being born would have felt something like this.

She kept moving backward, watching the Dark Man kneeling by the pond, ink dribbling out past his fingers and down his long chin. He looked so strange, so out of time and place. The air grew cold, the light leaked from the sky as the sun, as if to make up for lost time, sped toward the horizon. The Dark Man disappeared in the shadows, and Alice, when her eyes could no longer discern him from the pool of darkness surrounding the pond, turned on her heel and sprinted for the house.

She burst into the warm yellow kitchen with a nightmare on her heels. Alice slammed the door and locked it, pressing her back to the firm wood. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her forehead and cheek throbbing. Her mother's head appeared from the dining room, the pale blue eyes widening at the sight of her oldest child.

"Dear," she said, "what's happened to your face? You look as though someone's burned you."

Alice's aching feet carried her to the mirror on the wall. An unfamiliar face stared back. The gray eyes looked hooded and wild, too old for the young face that held them. Her lips were chapped, parted as breath ripped in and out of her mouth. On her forehead and on her cheek were two bright red marks, red like raw meat or like blood. When she touched them, the sensitive skin twitched.

Those marks would eventually fade to purple.

"I married that boy," Grandma Alice said as Delia dried the last of the dinner dishes. "That boy with the gum – that was your grandfather."

Delia set the plate on the stack in the cupboard, wiping her fingers on the cloth in her hands.

Grandma said, “My heart experienced a woman’s love. And that allowed me to break away from the Dark Man’s spell and run free.”

“It’s true?” Delia asked, though she knew the answer. This truth vibrated in her bones, made them click together like the chattering of a skeleton in one of those old black and white movies.

Her grandma nodded.

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because you’re a girl on the edge of sixteen, about become a woman.”

Delia said nothing, just leaned against the kitchen sink. Her fingers worried the rag, twisting and untwisting it.

Grandma Alice watched her. “He might not appear. I haven’t seen him or heard of him in years. He’s no doubt somewhere far away, harvesting hearts from other girls.”

“That’s what he does? He steals hearts?”

Grandma Alice pursed her wrinkled lips. “I’ve guessed at that. He never told me outright, of course, but he alluded to it. And he’ll want your heart. I’m sure of it.”

“But why?”

“You’ve been an orphan your whole life. You’ve spent so much time living inside your head. If ever there was a girl aching for magic, it’s you.”

“What do I do?”

“Don’t go wishing tonight. Don’t yearn for anything or long for anything or hope for anything. It’s the wishing that draws him, the desire to be something other than what you are.

Don't wish, and let him pass you by. Can you promise me you won't waste your time doing that?"

Delia nodded. She swallowed. "But... what if he *does* appear?"

Grandma Alice rose from the table, her wrinkled fingers flexing against the worn wooden surface. "Well, then, I suppose you'll need to grow up." She left her granddaughter in the kitchen with the tangled the dish rag.

Delia had spent her whole life wishing. To suddenly stop now, on the eve of her transition to womanhood, seemed impossible. She sat on her bed in the glow of the full moon and tried to think about neutral things, topics that wouldn't start her heart wishing.

On the nightstand beside the clock was a photograph of Delia's parents. The only photograph she had. Alice said there weren't any others. In her darkest moments, Delia became convinced that her Alice lied to her, hoarding memories of people Delia knew only as shades in the farthest corners of her dreams.

In the photo, her father stood with his arm around her mother's waist, grinning at the camera, while Delia's mother turned into his shoulder, glancing at the camera through her hair, her face split wide open in a candid, breathtaking smile. They were young, barely out of high school, but already so comfortable with each other. An engagement ring glistened on her mother's hand. Looking at the photo, Delia wanted desperately to be friends with her parents.

She could sit for hours and stare at that picture. She would try to imagine what her mother's laughter sounded like. Was it deep and hoarse, like her Alice's on the rare occasion the old woman laughed? Or was it like Delia's own: high pitched and loud and filled with snorting? What did her father smell like? She figured he probably smelled like every man ever – like

cologne that clung to his clothes long after he washed them. Her father wore glasses, and she wondered how well he could see without them. She wondered what his voice sounded like when he yelled, if it cracked with his rising emotions or if it dropped an octave and came out deadly slow. She would often imagine conversations between her parents – his proposal, her pregnancy announcement, their wedding vows. Her favorite, though, was how they cooked. She invented a memory that felt so real Delia was half convinced it was a scene from her impossible-to-remember infancy.

Her mother stood cooking, stirring something in a pot on the stove. Her father turned on the radio, cranked it loud, and her mother turned, laughing, her eyes the same stormy gray as Alice's. Delia's father strode across the kitchen, bowed, and held out a hand. Her mother took it, and together they waltzed around the kitchen, her mother laughing uncontrollably, her father with his face buried in her mother's blond hair. On the stove the pot smoked, but they ignored it and kept dancing.

Delia, lying in bed on the night of her sixteenth birthday, stared at that picture and laughed, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her heart ached with desperate, fierce desire. And that's when she felt his hand on her cheek.

Delia shrieked, jerking upward and backward, falling off her bed. She lay panting on the floor, her feet still propped up on the unmade bed. Her heart hammered in her throat. She imagined it, Delia told herself, it was figment of her imagination, simple as that, her head getting the better of her after that horrible story her grandma told her. It probably wasn't even a true story, anyway, just some weird grandmotherly warning about sex before marriage or something.

The Dark Man leaned over the bed and said, "Hi." He smiled with his black hole mouth.

The tears on Delia's cheeks felt cold. Her heart pumped incessantly in her throat. Blood rushed in her ears. She couldn't move her gaze from his eyes, the big black bulging orbs so dense, she could see herself reflected in them. The expression on her face, mouth open, colored in ink by his eyes, looked stretched, elongated, like a scream that went on for years.

The Dark Man watched her watch him with a delighted smile on his face. His licked his lips, and her eyes leapt downward, captivated as he leaned closer and whispered, "I hear congratulations are in order."

Delia swallowed. Her fingers scraped at the beige carpet. "For what?"

The Dark Man stroked his pointed, dark chin. Then he dropped his hand and grinned very wide, impossibly wide, so wide Delia worried she might be swallowed whole.

"Why, for your birthday, of course. Sixteen. A *very* exciting number."

"Yes." The mention of her birthday brought her Alice's face to mind, scowling around her large purple bruises. The color drained from Delia's face.

When she looked at the Dark Man she lurched backward. His face was inches from hers, frowning so intensely lines appeared in his paper smooth face. Delia tried to shuffle backward to put more distance between them, but he had his long fingers curled around her ankles, holding her in place.

"You look familiar," the Dark Man said, pressing his black lips into a thin line. "Have we met before? Did I take your sister's heart perhaps? And you walked in, happened to see? Terribly awkward for me but, well, what are you going to do? Occupational hazard."

"No," Delia said, swallowing several times in an attempt to force her heart back down her throat. "I don't think we have."

"You haven't got a sister, then?"

“No, no sister.”

“A cousin perhaps?”

“Not really.”

“Are you sure? Because I am quite confident I’ve seen your face before.”

“Um--”

“Where, where, where?” The Dark Man pulled his face back to glance around her room.

With his eyes directed elsewhere, Delia felt a weight in her chest disappear. “Where, where, where? Where are you, where are we, where am I? Hm, hm, hm, what’s... this?”

He released one of her ankles to lean toward the bedside table. He pushed aside the photo of her parents, pausing for a just a moment to study it, before plucking another frame from behind the lamp. He held the frame between two fingers, bringing it very close to his nose. Delia knew what photo he was staring at. It was a picture of her grandma, in white, on her wedding day.

“Ah, yes,” said the Dark Man with no measure of his former glee. “I remember *her*.” He jerked his head back toward Delia, turning the picture to her. “How do you know this woman?”

“She’s my grandma.” Thinking of the old woman sent a rush of heat through her arms and Delia pushed herself up straighter, lifting her chin as she stared into the Dark Man’s face.

“Your grandmother.” He looked at the picture again. “And I swear I met her ages ago. She’s a favorite of mine,” he said with a wistful sigh. “The girl that got away. Still,” he shrugged and tossed the picture over his shoulder, “I’ve moved past it. No need to worry myself over one stubborn girl. She’s old now, I imagine, being your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“And is she wrinkly and brown, like an old leather boot?”

Delia made a face but nodded.

The Dark Man let out a whoop. “I knew she’d age terribly. She spent too much time lolling in the sun. She was beautiful once, your grandmother.”

Delia’s hackles rose, and she snapped, “She’s beautiful now.”

The Dark Man widened his eyes, letting out an amused, startled giggle. “You look just like her, you know. Well, how she used to look. Only your face isn’t quite as sharp. You’re not made of as many edges.” He leaned forward and tapped her chin once. “She had strength, your grandmother. There was steel in that woman’s blood.”

Delia tried not to flinch when he touched her. She tried to think of her grandma and of her strength and of her survival. But the Dark Man’s smell wafted over to her, the rush of cinnamon so strong that it distracted her almost completely.

“She didn’t want to give in. Most girls fall apart straight away. The game is over before it’s begun. The conquest takes no time at all. And that,” the Dark Man sighed, “is so boring. But your grandmother. She put up a fight. She refused to give in. She was a rare creature, that one.”

Delia took shallow, weak breathes, inhaling as little of the Dark Man’s scent as possible. She turned her mind toward her Alice, trying but failing to remember how her grandma had broken free from the Dark Man.

“She’s the only one I’ve ever fallen in love with, you know.”

This comment took Delia by such surprise that she forgot about her Alice’s story. She lifted her gaze to the Dark Man’s face to find him watching her with his large eyes. They were so black and shiny they reminded her more of a giant bug than a toad. They stared at each other in silence. Then the Dark Man leaned forward, spreading his hands on her thighs as he lowered his face to be level with her own.

“For a moment there, at the end, I didn’t want to eat her heart.”

She couldn’t breathe for the smell of him. Delia swallowed. “Why not?”

“It beat so violently, that heart of hers. It was too beautiful a sound to silence. I haven’t heard one half as lovely since.”

“Oh?”

He smiled slow and sly. “Shall I give yours a listen?” In a quick, fluid movement the Dark Man ducked down and pressed his inky ear to Delia’s chest. She focused on keeping her breathing even, goose pimples rising on her left arm as his breath, warm, wet, touched her skin and then retreated only to touch her again, like ocean waves caressing the shore. Then the Dark Man made a sound with his tongue and lifted his head. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to the corner of Delia’s left eye, taking her by surprise.

Heat spread over her face, making her eye throb. The ache became unbearable, and she drew backward. The Dark Man hung his head, staring down at her lap and laughing under his breath.

Delia said, “I won’t let you kiss me three times. I know what happens after the third kiss, and I won’t let you do it.”

Without looking up, the Dark Man said, “Who said you have a choice?”

“My Alice told me the story. She broke free before you could--”

The dark head jerked upward, the large eyes bulbous. They bore down on her with such rabid intensity that Delia feared she might start crying. The terror behind her teeth was almost too great.

“I gave your heart a listen, my pet, and I’m sorry to tell you its song isn’t half as lovely as your old grandmamma. Your heart will be mine before the night has even begun.”

Delia's eyes shot around the room, looking for an escape, some way to break free, to avoid a third kiss.

The Dark Man mumbled something, and she turned her head back to him only for him to swoop forward and kiss the corner of her mouth. Delia was overcome. This was the closest she'd ever been to kissing a boy. The cinnamon smell overpowered her; it smelled so sweet, it made her dizzy. Only when her face began to burn did she lurch backward. The Dark Man watched her with unmasked delight, and Delia realized her hand was on the back of his neck, her fingers wrapped tight in the thick dark hair that swayed above his head.

"Not so bad," the Dark Man murmured. "Now is it?"

Her breathing came in rushed, shallow gasps. She tried to remember her grandma's story, the way she had escaped this very moment, when the third kiss was inevitable.

"I won't let you. I'm not a girl anymore. I'm a woman."

"Really?" The Dark Man smiled. "Prove it."

Delia's mouth opened and closed. She tried to think of an escape, of a way to break herself from his spell. But her mind moved slow, crawled along, and she couldn't think of anything. She couldn't even remember how her grandma escaped him.

"Love," said the Dark Man, reaching up to brush Delia's mouth with his gloved thumb. She shivered under his touch. "Your grandmother awakened to a woman's love. Her heart stopped yearning for little girl dreams. Tell me, my pet, are you in love?"

Delia cast her mind back, hunting, searching for someone, anyone she could fall in love with and rescue herself. But each casting of the net caught no fish.

The Dark Man pressed harder with his thumb, pressing her lips against her teeth. “If you have to search for someone, it’s unlikely you’re in love. But, still, I’ll give you a moment. Anything?”

Delia’s breath fell out of her in a weak rush. Her grandmother had told her that, to save herself, she had to grow up. But she had no one to love. Her eyes left the Dark Man’s leering face for the photo of her parents on the table. They lingered there.

The Dark Man brushed her lips with the pad of his thumb. “Ah, yes, there we go. Yearn, wish, desire, dream. It’ll make your heart so much sweeter.”

A tear slid down Delia’s cheek. Her bones felt heavy. The hand in the Dark Man’s hair relaxed its grip, but her arm draped across his neck stayed in place. His breath filled her mouth with the taste of cinnamon gum; she could sense his lips inches from her own. When she looked at him, the big black eyes took up her whole vision. They were off-putting so close. It made her stomach roll. She sighed again.

“You’re a lovely girl,” said the Dark Man. “Really, a very lovely girl.”

The Dark Man pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her to death.

Grandma Alice shivered, rubbing her weathered hands together. She glanced at the clock beside her bed and brushed her fingers over her face. She rose from the rocking chair, drew her old bathrobe tighter around her nightgown and started down the hall to her granddaughter’s bedroom. Waiting had been agony, but waiting was her only option. When she lived through this the first time, with Delia’s mother, giving her daughter the knowledge had been enough. Ruth sat up all night doing math problems, keeping her mind occupied so it had no time to wish or yearn. Ruth had also been in love with the man she would eventually marry, the man she would die

alongside in a car crash. That love had kept her doubly safe, and they received no visit from a man made of ink. So, when Delia's birthday dawned gloomy and frowning, Alice had no idea what else she could do but give her granddaughter the warning. And hope.

The walk down the hall was long. Alice felt a decade older when she reached Delia's door. Fingers on the knob, she hesitated to take a deep breath and steel herself. She opened the door.

Delia lay on her back on the floor, her arms spread wide as if expecting a hug, her legs splayed crookedly, half underneath her bed. Her mouth was open, curved in the faintest of smiles. Her eyes stared up at the ceiling, but they were no longer the stormy gray she'd inherited from her mother. They were black pools of unmoving ink. Her chest did not move.

The Dark Man sat cross-legged on the bed, licking his fingers with relish. He looked up when Grandma Alice opened the door. At the sight of her he grinned very wide with all of his luminous teeth.

Grandma Alice's old heart gave a tired wheeze.

The Dark Man spread his hands on his knees, leaning toward her. His black eyes gleamed.

"My darling girl," he said, "have you missed me?"

Afterward: “The Dark Man’s Kiss”

“The Dark Man’s Kiss” is a story that has been boiling in my head since I was seventeen. It was this age I first created the idea of a “dark man,” a villain made of shades of ink, with a disturbing sort of a charm and a dangerous sort of seduction. I wanted to use him in a fairy tale, if only because he’d been asking to be used in some capacity for so long. It wasn’t until I read the Grimm’s fairy tale, “The Frog Prince,” that I figured out the story with which to give the Dark Man life at last.

“The Frog Prince” involves a princess, a talking frog, and a curse. The frog needs the princess to let him eat from her plate and sleep on her pillow to break his curse and turn him back into a prince (Grimm 2). In my story, I wanted to draw on that idea often seen in pop culture of kissing the frog and turning him into a prince. I liked the idea of encountering the frog, like in the story, and listening to his tale of woe. I wanted my girl to kiss the frog and break the curse—to disastrous results. Fairy tales so often have characters taking the magical and fantastic at face value and turning out to be correct. I wanted to write a story where that trust is misplaced, to turn that common trend on its head. So the man that emerges from the frog is not a prince, but a villain.

In this story, I also wanted to toy with the idea of the power of the imagination, the idea that magic can be created totally within ourselves. Hence the fact that Alice can convince herself she can break the spell, and thus she does—because she believed she could. It’s the same reason why the Dark Man is drawn by desires and yearning—he’s attracted to girls wishing to be somewhere or someone else. I often felt this way as a child—and sometimes still do—so I was interested in using this in my story.

“The Dark Man’s Kiss” has, again, a sad ending. With this story, I wanted to show the danger of wishing too much, of living too much within one’s own head. Alice escapes because she finds the will to stop wishing and grow up. Delia is not so lucky because, in the end, the wishes of her heart are too great to overcome. There’s a danger in living inside one’s head and I wanted to illustrate that danger, to some capacity, in this story.

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The Mother's Contract

Once upon a time, at a midnight wedding under a red moon, my mother murdered my father with a steak knife. No one knew why. For all accounts, my married parents had been almost delirious with their happiness. My mother, round with her pregnancy, spent most of the night petting my father's hair, teasing the black curls that rested against his neck. He had his hand on her knee whenever they sat and on her hip whenever they stood. They parted only a few times throughout the whole evening.

Then, at three after twelve, my mother stiffened at the head table. My father turned toward her, touching her shoulder, leaning his head close as he spoke. A few bridesmaids and groomsmen looked toward them. Then my mother's hand curled into a tight fist around her steak knife. She lifted it. But the steak, nearly raw, remained untouched. Instead, my mother lifted the knife above her head and stabbed my father repeatedly in the back.

From there the story unravels into chaos. I've heard several different accounts from different people over the years, but almost everyone agrees that while guests ran and screamed, my mother sat there, still. My father's body slumped forward, his face in his plate of meat and potatoes, the steak knife protruding upward from his back, blood oozing thick and slow from his body like molasses. The police came, my mother was arrested, and I was born four months later in a prison.

Something flicked the bottom of my feet, and I groaned, burying my head farther into my pillows. I knew it was Saturday. And on Saturdays my grandmother allowed me to sleep as late as I wanted. I refused to be awakened by anyone's will but my own. But the flicking persisted, like the constant buzzing of a fly, and I lifted my head long enough to croak, "Leave off."

There was a smattering of laughter. I opened my eyes, squinting against the sunlight streaming in through my bedroom window. I turned on my bed, glaring through narrowed eyes at my two grandparents crouched at the end of my bed. “What?”

“Scarlett, wake up,” my grandfather said.

I raised an eyebrow, surprised. My grandfather never joined in my grandmother’s daily battle to wake me up at a reasonable hour. I turned my head to stare down the bed at the pair of them.

“What’s going on?”

“Do you know what today is, dear?” asked my grandmother, and I noticed her twisting her wrinkled hands. “It’s Mother’s Day.”

“Oh.” I twisted fully to face them and sat up in bed, drawing my knees to my chest.

They exchanged another look. My grandparents had been married for a long time, almost fifty years. They had this way of communicating with looks and slight touches. Sometimes, at dinner, when one or both of them was angry with me, we’d eat the whole meal in silence, me shoving food into my mouth as they looked back and forth. It drove me mad. Normally I’d try to interrupt the silent conversation, but today I stayed silent, waiting, my stomach a constant throbbing.

My grandmother forged ahead. “You said you wanted to visit your mother this year. And we figured,” my grandparents exchanged another hooded glance, “we thought you might want to go early, so you’d have the rest of the day to spend with your friends, just hang out, relax.”

“You don’t have to go,” my grandfather said. “This is about you, Scarlett. You’re old enough. You get to make this decision.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It had been a long time since I last saw my mother, nearly a year. Since my birth, she'd been moved into a psychiatric prison. And at our last visit, she had to wear a straitjacket because she kept attacking the orderlies. She sat across from me at a plastic table, a large male nurse hovering just behind, and didn't speak much. In her silence she stared with light brown eyes wide and focused on my face. In her moments of noise she spoke gibberish I didn't understand.

That visit had scared me so much and made me so uncomfortable that I hadn't been back to see her since, even though my birthday and her birthday and Christmas all passed in the space between. But now I was almost eighteen, less a month from my birthday. And I had promised myself that this year I'd be brave enough to face her. I just didn't know if I'd really be able to go through with it.

I sighed, leaning forward and spreading my fingers on the wrinkled green sheets. "I don't know," I said at last. "Do you think I should?"

Another silent look. My grandmother inclined her head slightly to the right.

My grandfather said, "We think it could be very healing for you. The doctors say your mother is more coherent than she's been in months, maybe years. If you have anything to say to her, this may be a good time to talk."

I nodded, tucking some blond hair behind my ear. "Then I want to go alone."

They didn't even bother to glance at each other. At the same time they burst out with negative exclamations, rising from their crouches to stand. My grandmother put her hands on her hips, and my grandfather crossed his arms over his chest.

When the chaos of jumbled words died down, my grandmother said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

“I’ll be supervised by a nurse,” I said, swallowing. I had to do this. I had to prove to myself that I didn’t have to live in the shadow of what she had done. I had to face her. And I had to do it alone. “I’ll be safe. I just... This is something I have to do on my own.”

“Scarlett--”

“No.”

“We just don’t think you should--”

“I can handle this.”

“But--”

“Come on, Grandpa. I’m not a kid anymore.”

Lips pursed, they studied me in silence. Then my grandfather bumped my grandmother with his shoulder, and she dropped her hands with an exasperated sigh.

“You are so horribly stubborn, Scarlett Annemarie Palmer. Honestly!”

My grandfather nodded in straight-faced agreement. “You get it from your grandmother.”

She couldn’t help but laugh as she smacked his shoulder.

The morning air, warmer than I expected, allowed me to roll the windows of my car down. After breakfast, my grandparents kissed me fifty times between them and told me to be careful and not get my hopes up and remember that my mother wasn’t well, so I shouldn’t trust what she says. They stood on the porch and watched me drive away. Every time I glanced back, I could see worry etched like nausea in their faces.

The drive to my mother’s prison wasn’t a long one, maybe fifteen minutes. I played the radio loud to distract myself. My stomach threatened to implode.

I didn't have a good relationship with my mother, for obvious reasons. My father's family never spoke to us, so besides my grandparents, she was the only family I had. When I was younger, I used to want a relationship with her. I would go every Saturday and have a visit, and sometimes they would be great. Other times my mother wouldn't be in her right mind. The latter type of visit became more frequent, and she was eventually moved to a psychiatric prison.

I used to see her four times a year, like clockwork, and during the visits I'd tell her about school and bring her pictures and papers and crafts I made in class. For the first few years after the move to the psychiatric prison, she was too drugged to really understand what was happening. She would drool and nod and take the gifts at the prompting of her nurse. But as I grew older, she grew more animated. It all accumulated in our last disastrous, uncomfortable visit. I hadn't spoken to her, or really heard anything about her, until this morning.

My stomach threatened to reproduce my breakfast, so I pulled into an empty gas station for some gum and a pop. When I entered the small store, the only other people was a man standing at the front counter and the cashier he spoke to. I made a beeline for the coolers and grabbed something fizzy, then returned to the counter, where I mulled over the gum.

I was close enough to hear the conversation between the customer and the cashier. They were discussing the cashier's wife who was pregnant but really struggling. The customer seemed very concerned as he leaned across the counter. He wore dark cowboy boots, the toe of which he tapped against the floor, as well as dark jeans and a black t-shirt, a black cowboy hat pushed back on his head of black hair.

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Willie," the man said.

Willie the cashier made an awkward ducking motion with his head. “She needs help, of course, but I can’t afford to get her any. And Shelia’s not working, obviously, and we already got little Mindy.”

“Mindy,” the man repeated slowly, as if he were tasting the word. “Pretty name.”

“It’s Shelia’s sister’s name.”

“What about the one on the way? Boy or girl?”

“We don’t know for sure, because we’re only two months in and all, but Shelia thinks another girl.”

The man made a strange purring sound. “Another girl. How lovely.”

“Yes,” said Willie. He noticed me then, standing with my pop and my pack of Big Red. He made no move to acknowledge me.

The man in the cowboy hat turned toward me, enough for me to see his face. I was surprised to see him look so young, surely not any older than me, with a square jaw and large, pale eyes. He gave me an appraising once-over and turned back to Willie.

“Listen, Will,” he said, lowering his voice. “I can help your wife out.”

Willie raised his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“I know a guy who can help you on the cheap with the morning sickness and stuff. You want me to talk to my guy?”

“Oh, yeah, thank you, that would be great, Styles, thank you.”

Styles tipped his hat. “Anything for a friend. Just remember you owe me,” he made a gun with his fingers, smiling, and pointed it at Willie. “I may come collecting.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Willie, jerking his head up and down. “Of course, of course.”

Styles glanced at me again and left the counter. I watched him clomp across the store and push open the doors, reaching into his back pocket for his sunglasses as he went. Then I stepped up to the counter and set down my pop and gum, pulling some dollars out of my pocket.

“Find everything all right, ma’am?”

I nodded, glancing toward the doors, where Styles had gone. “Yes, sir, I did. Thank you.”

When I went outside, Styles was leaning against the pump next to my car smoking a cigarette. His sunglasses perched on the edge of his nose, he watched me from beneath the rim of his cowboy hat as I walked to my car and unlocked it, pulling the door open.

I leaned down to put the pop and gum in a cup holder and was about to climb inside when he said, “Do I know you?”

I looked back at him, keeping the door between us. “No,” I said, after a minute studying his eyes above the glowing cigarette. They were large and black, seemingly bottomless. “I don’t think so.”

“Huh,” he said. “I could have sworn that I... ah, well.” He took a long, heavy drag on his cigarette.

Not liking the feel of his eyes on me, I said, “Right,” and shifted my weight toward my car, preparing to climb in.

But Styles stopped with me another word. “So,” he said blowing smoke at me. “Where ya headed?”

I fiddled with my key ring. I knew I should get in my car and drive, but something about this voice, about the sweet smell of his cigarette, the casual tilt of his hat, all of it kept me standing there, holding my keys.

I said, "I'm going to see my mother."

Styles nodded, as if this was expected. "You don't see her often?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I hesitated. "She's not very well."

"She's sick?"

I nodded.

"Well, damn," said Styles. "That's too bad." He flicked ash from his cigarette. "Hope she gets better."

"Thanks," I said and figured that was the end of the conversation. It needed to be the end of the conversation. If I didn't leave now, who knew if I ever would? The cloud of smoke seemed to be growing, expanding, swallowing us. Any longer and I wouldn't be able to find my way out.

I climbed into my car and, just before I shut the door, Styles said, "What's your name?"

"Scarlett," I said, after three heavy heartbeats.

"Scarlett," he repeated in that same strange purr he'd used in the convenience store.

"Pretty name." He smiled behind his cigarette.

"Thanks," I said and slammed the door closed.

I had to wait for my mother. Seated at a plastic table with a visitor ID badge clipped to my sweater, I tried not to look at any of the other patients because if I looked I'd end up staring, and my grandmother had taught me that staring was rude. So I fiddled, picked my nails and waited, and chewed on the inside of my cheek and waited, and checked my watch and waited.

A door to my left opened, and I glanced up to see my mother, wearing a long white hospital gown and a worn robe, shuffle out, a male nurse holding her elbow. She held a box tight against her chest, both hands bent around it, and kept her eyes on the ground as she walked. Her long blond hair was stringy and greasy, and healing scabs littered her arms. The nurse prodded her to where I sat and helped her lower into the chair.

Then he bent down and said softly, in her ear, “Your daughter is here, Melody. Why don’t you show her what you brought?” Then he smiled at me and took a seat at the table behind my mother.

My mother sat in silence. She lifted the lid of her box, chewing violently on her lips, and then slammed the lid closed. Then she started picking at the table.

I said, softly, “Hey, Mom. Happy Mother’s Day.”

She jerked her head upward, dark eyes widening. She looked over her shoulder at the nurse, who gave her a small nod. Turning back to me, she leaned across the table. When she spoke, her breath smelled of mint and something rotten underneath.

“The devil made me do it, Scarlett.”

I couldn’t help it; I recoiled, pulling my hands from the table. Her eyes, so wide and bright, made my skin itch. It was like she was staring through me into some dark place I didn’t like to go.

Without waiting for a reply, or appearing bothered by my withdrawal, my mother nodded her head several times and pulled the lid from her box. She took out a small ball of red yarn, an origami crane and several pictures in faded black and white. She shifted through the pictures until she found the one she wanted. She set it on the table between us and nodded again. When I made no move to take it, she pushed it toward me.

“The devil made me do it,” she said again. “There he is, right there, beside your father.”

Mention of my father piqued my interest. My grandparents didn’t have many pictures of him. Just a few of my parents together before their wedding and a smattering of wedding photos. They didn’t like to display those.

I shifted forward to study the picture. It was black and white like the others. Three people grinned up at me, seated beneath a tree. My mother, on the far left, wearing a pretty sundress with flowers, my father beside her in a buttoned-up shirt halfway undone and swim trunks, his dark hair sticking to his forehead, and a man beside him, wearing swim trunks and no shirt. The sun and tree cast his face in shadow, and I squinted, trying to make out the features.

My mother said, “We met him the summer before we got married. Your father knew him, vaguely, from law school, and he became a good friend. I didn’t like him, not really, never ever did I like him. He was always too charming, too sleek, slick, wet, like oil and grease. He used to say things, whisper things, and once he made me promise a terrible, terrible thing.”

I glanced at her, expecting to see her hands pulling at her hair. Instead she sat very still, her hands twisted together beside the box, her shoulders back and head up. She seemed to be staring past me. I looked at the photograph.

“He told me we’d be rich and safe and happy and I was so nervous, with the baby on the way and your father struggling to find work, and I did *not* want to go back and live with my parents, and he’d shown me he could do wonderful things, magical things, things that bent my mind all around and confused me. So I promised him, I promised him the horrible, terrible thing in exchange for wonderful, glamorous things.

“But the wedding came, it dawned, and the moon was red, and we were so happy your father and I, so lovely and so happy, and I couldn’t go through with it. I had time, still, before the

terrible, horrible thing was due but I told him, I told him that night, I said, 'no. No,' I said, 'no I will not give you the thing you want in exchange for the things I want because the thing you want is too much and the things I want are not enough.' I told him no, and he was very angry, and he threatened me, but I didn't care because I was marrying your father, and he'd gotten a job at a firm, and we were going to be safe and happy.

"But he was mad. He was so mad. And so he made me do it that night, the night of our wedding, he made me do the thing I did. The devil made me do it, Scarlett."

She let out a long breath and sat gasping, as if she'd run a marathon.

I looked up at her through my bangs. "You're telling me that 'the devil,' this man," I tapped his shadowy face with a finger, "made you kill my father?"

My mother looked at me, then away, chewing her cheek. She nodded.

I leaned around her to catch the nurse's eye. He nodded too, a small, gentle smile on his face. I sighed, straightening, fingering the picture.

"Well," I said at last, "I'm sorry that happened to you, Mom."

She studied my face for a moment frozen in time, then she let out a cry and picked up the origami crane, folded with sun-faded red paper, and slid it across the table to me.

"Happy Mother's Day," she said with the sort of wide smile that made her eyes expand and showed all of her yellowing teeth.

"Thank you," I said and took the crane.

The nurse stood up. "I think it's time we said goodbye to your daughter, Melody."

My mother busied herself with packing up her box. She didn't look at me again. I watched her fingers reach for the picture and hover before she drew them back. She placed the

lid on her box and left the picture on the table between us. She stood without another word and floated a few feet away, then waited, as if on command.

The nurse looked down at me with that understanding smile of his. He said, “I know it doesn’t make any sense, but she’s been wanting to tell you for weeks. She wanted to explain. I felt it would help her in the healing process. Thank you, Scarlett. Your visit was the best present she could’ve asked for.”

He took my mother by the elbow and guided her away.

I brushed the corner of the picture with my thumb. I shouldn’t just leave it here, on this table, for some other crazy person to take. Besides, it had my father in it, and we had precious few pictures of him. So, as I stood, I picked up the picture as well as the red paper crane.

My mother stopped at the doorway and looked over her shoulder at me, her eyes rolling and wild like a startled horse.

“Be careful, Scarlett,” she shrieked. The male nurse pulled harder on her arm but she wouldn’t move. “He’ll want the terrible, horrible thing I promised him. He’ll come to see you, Scarlett, he’ll come to see you, and don’t let him have what he wants.”

I sat for a long time in my car in the parking lot of the hospital. I held the photograph against the steering wheel, staring at it, my eyes drawn almost unwillingly from my father to the man in shadow beside him. The man with his face mostly obscured, save for the large, white toothed smile falling halfway below the shadow. He had one hand on his cocked hip, the other thrown around my father’s shoulders. I followed the movement of his arm to see that his hand rested firmly on my mother’s shoulder, fingers pressed into her skin.

I let out a breath and reached up to slide the photograph into the visor above my head. Then I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and called my grandmother. She answered before the second ring.

“Scarlett,” she said, sounding breathless. “How did it go? Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling miserable. It felt like my stomach kept trying to eat itself, and my throat constricted. I was close to crying. But I didn’t want to cry on the phone to my grandmother. I didn’t want my grandparents to worry about me any more than they already did. I took a deep breath.

“It was hard,” I said after a moment, “seeing her. But she was really coherent. I could actually understand her. We talked.”

“About what?” My grandmother sounded eager and a little relieved.

I bit my lip. After a moment, I said, “The weather. You believe that? She kept telling me about this cloud she saw, but she wouldn’t stop changing the shape. It started out as a snake, then a rabbit. It ended up as a zebra.” I laughed, hoping it didn’t sound strained. “Strips and all.”

My grandmother laughed too.

“She gave me a present,” I added. “For Mother’s Day, I guess. A red paper crane.”

“How lovely,” said my grandmother. Her voice was slow and thick, weighed down by tears. “Are you glad you went, Scarlett?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “Really glad. I’m going to call Al, go grab some food, force him to treat me. We’ll come by the house after, all right?”

“Of course,” said my grandmother, outright crying now. “We can play some games.”

“Not *Clue*,” I said, trying not to cry either. “Al and Grandpa always use those terrible British accents.”

“Not *Clue*, then. Whatever you want.”

I smiled. “We’ll see you soon.”

“Have fun. I love you very much, Scarlett.”

“I love you too, Grandma.” I hung up, took five slow breaths, and called my boyfriend.

Al’s voice was thick when he answered. “Scar?”

I picked at the steering wheel. “Still sleeping?”

“No.” His breathing slowed, then he cleared his throat and added, “I was waiting for you to call.”

“I just visited my mom,” I said.

There was a pause then he spoke and his voice was louder, closer, “How’d it go?”

“Miserable.” I sighed. “You want to meet me at Roadie’s? Buy me a misery burger?”

“Sure,” he said and I heard rustling. “Let me shower and brush my teeth and I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes?”

Al took longer than twenty minutes. Not that I was surprised. My boyfriend had a tendency to make me wait. He took longer getting ready than I did, and I had three times as much hair. Most girls probably would have found it annoying. Who wants to be kept waiting all the time? But my grandfather taught me that there are things in life worth waiting a long time for, and Al was one of those things.

So I sat alone in a booth in Roadie’s and sipped lemonade and waited, staring out the window and trying not to think about my mother. The picture of my parents and the “devil” sat on the sticky table in front of me. I kept tapping my finger on the man beside my parents.

Someone slid into the booth across from me and I turned, expecting to see Al. Instead the man from the gas station, Styles, sat with his elbows on the table, grinning at me. He had his cowboy hat pushed back, giving me a good view of his rugged face with a few scars. His smile, so wide and luminous, took up half his face.

“Scarlett!” He said the name like a caress, as if we shared some intimate secret.

I shivered. “Can I help you?” I tried to make my voice sound hard, unwelcoming. I didn’t have patience, or time, to spend on this weird stranger. I was tired, I was upset and I just wanted a burger smothered in Roadie’s secret recipe barbeque sauce.

“You waiting for someone?” Styles smelled like cigarettes and something else, something thick and heavy and pungent that I recognized but couldn’t name.

“Yes,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “My *boyfriend*. He should be here any minute.” I glanced toward the front counter, where Luanne, the only waitress, stood folding napkins. She glanced up at us and raised an eyebrow. I shook my head and she nodded, going back to her work but keeping one eye turned toward us.

It was probably Luanne’s presence, and the knowledge of Calvin, the huge cook, back in the kitchen, that prevented me from being afraid of Styles. Besides, he didn’t exactly give off a threatening vibe. Not a skinny guy like him. The man was a charmer, it practically oozed out of his pores.

“Boyfriend, huh?” He rubbed at his square chin, a scar like a dimple in the center.

“Makes sense a pretty girl like you’d have a boyfriend, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t know quite how to answer that. “I guess,” I said at last.

Styles nodded. I watched his eyes as they moved over my face slowly, leisurely, then flickered down to my neck, then down farther to the photograph on the table. He reached out

and, before I could stop him, turned it toward him and dragged it across the table. I opened my mouth to say something, but the look that crossed his face, a look of pure and uncensored joy, gave me pause. He let out a little whoop and clapped his big, leathery hands together.

“Oh my,” he said in a strange little hiss, “that is really very excellent indeed.” When he looked back up at me, his eyes looked hungry, and his wide mouth leered.

I felt like throwing up. I reached out and snatched the photo from him. I pulled out my wallet and opened it on the table, sliding the photo inside.

Styles leaned forward to study my license and said under his breath, “Only seventeen? Excellent.”

I closed the wallet and shoved it back into my pocket, skin crawling.

Styles said, “And how was your visit with your mother?” His voice sounded different, the heavy southern accent fallen away from his syllables. He steepled his fingers in front of him, elbows on the table. Even his face looked different, less rugged, and the cowboy hat didn’t really seem to fit him anymore.

“Fine,” I said, more uncomfortable and confused than before.

“And did she, uh, say anything very interesting?”

“No,” I said, trying to lie with a straight face, hoping my ears weren’t turning red.

“Nothing of note.”

Styles leaned closer. I could smell him, the cigarettes and the other smell, the heavy one that reminded me of sweet things, like a cake baking in the oven.

“How did your mother look, Scarlett? Just the same?”

“No,” I said, brows drawing together, shifting back in my seat. “Not at all. She’s--”

“Scar?”

I looked up to see Al standing there, his blond hair still wet, wearing his letterman jacket and a green t-shirt. He looked like the best thing I'd ever seen. With his arrival, Styles lost whatever strange power he'd held over me. The man in the cowboy hat sat back, surveying Al with a curious expression, a mixture between dislike and disinterest.

"Who's this?" Al said. He drew his hands out of his pockets, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"An old family friend," said Styles with a slick grin. He slid out of the booth. When he stood, he was as tall, if not taller, than Al. But he was thin and willowy, like a branch on a dying tree within moments of being broken off by the wind. Styles gave Al another strange, dismissive look than turned back to me. He smiled his cowboy smile and tipped his hat.

"Pleasure seeing you again, Miss Scarlett." His southern accent was back. "Next time you see your mother, you tell her how much I miss her. Tell her I haven't forgotten her or what she promised me. You'll tell her that, Scarlett, won't you?" He tipped his hat again and left, hands in his pockets, whistling.

Al slid into the seat Styles had just vacated. He looked after the man, his face twisted. "Who the hell was that guy?"

"Some weirdo I met at that old gas station, off Dixie Highway? I was on my way to the hospital to see my mother."

Al turned his head to watch Styles cross the parking lot and circle the building, out of sight. "He followed you here?"

"I don't know." The thought had never occurred to me. I just assumed he'd also happened to be in Roadie's. But it did seem like a strange coincidence. "I doubt it though."

“What a weirdo.” Al shook his head, facing me. “You know he smelled really gross. Like cigarettes. You could tell he smoked them just by looking at his teeth. Some people need to take better care of themselves.” He glanced down at the plastic menu on the table then up at me.

“How are you, Scar?”

“Better, now that you’re here.” I leaned across the table and kissed him on his full pink mouth.

My grandmother had created a spread of food for our “game party,” with chips and guac and various other dips and finger foods spread across the table. When we entered the kitchen, I stopped in the doorway, mouth agape. Al stepped around me and made a beeline for the chips.

I shook my head, staring at the overloaded kitchen table. “Grandma,” I said, “there are only four of us!”

“I know how our boys like to eat,” she said. Her face shined, and she moved with a quickness to her step that I hadn’t seen in a long time. “They count for three men at least.”

“True,” said Al, with some chips and buffalo chicken dip in his mouth.

“Hey, watch it,” I said and poked his stomach. “You keep it up, and you’re going to the size of a refrigerator.”

“All the better to block with, my dear.”

I rolled my eyes. “Life isn’t all about football, Al. The bigger you are, the more single you will find yourself.”

My grandparents had gotten out literally every game we owned. We played *Twister* and charades and *Clue* and *Monopoly* and *Pictionary*. We played some games more than once. We laughed a lot. It felt good, after such a strange and trying day, to be goofing off and having fun.

The three people in that room with me were the three people I loved more than anyone else in the world. I felt safe and warm and really, truly happy.

And yet the shadow of my mother's words, of her strange warning, clung to me. I could still see her face as she spoke, with her eyes splayed open wide, bulging unnaturally, the darkness of her irises threatening to swallow me, like Styles' smoke at the gas station. The thought of him made me sick to my stomach, thinking of the way his voice changed and how he smelled and the way he watched me, like he was memorizing something.

After a heated game of *Pictionary*, in which Grandpa and I owned Al and my grandmother, I escaped to the porch. Al wouldn't admit his loss, and he and my grandfather had started arguing, albeit playfully. My grandmother and I rolled our eyes. The men in our lives were way too competitive.

I sat with my bare feet resting on the second step, my hands wedged between my knees. I stared out at the darkening yard. Above, stars were beginning to wink and shiver and dance, and the moon, so orange it almost looked red, began to rise from behind the trees.

I shifted my weight and felt my wallet dig into my butt. I pulled it out and flipped it open, reaching inside to find the picture my mother had given me. I studied it under the yellow porch light, looking first at my mother, then my father, then the third man, her supposed devil, with his shadowy face and his large smile. The wind teased at the ends of my brown hair, carrying with it the faint scent of smoke, and I pushed hair out of my eyes to get a better look at the picture. The unknown man was so familiar. His face looked more visible beneath the shadow and something about his smile picked at my memory, like *déjà vu*, inches out of the reach of my grabbing fingers.

Where? Where had I seen this man?

The smell of smoke grew stronger, smoke and something sweeter, and I thought maybe our neighbors were barbequing. It was a cool night but still warm enough for grilling. I tapped the photograph with my finger, chewing my cheek. The wind rushed past, the smell of smoke overwhelmed me and I realized, I remembered, I said aloud, “Styles.”

“At your service, madam,” said a voice from the darkness.

My head shot up. I could see him standing in the grass, just out of the ring of the porch’s light. His hat sat far back on his head and his smile looked exactly like the one in the photograph. Seeing him now, again, in person, so soon after making the connection, I noticed he hadn’t aged a day since the photograph was taken.

“When you went to see your mother,” he said in the same cool voice he used at Roadie’s, all trace of a southern accent gone, “she gave you that photograph, didn’t she?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“And she told you about me, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“And what did she say?” I watched as the toe of his boot teased the edge of the circle of light.

“She told me you were the devil,” I said. I felt safe in the warmth of the yellow light.

Styles laughed. “Is that all? You mother never had much of imagination. She wasn’t a very bright girl, you understand.”

I stiffened. I thought of the paper crane on my desk upstairs, folded so meticulously. I thought of her urgency as she told me her story, a story that didn’t seem so crazy now with the man from her photograph standing a few feet from me, looking the same. I felt offended for her. I set my mouth.

“She said she made a deal with you, a good life in exchange for something else. When she changed her mind and tried to go back on the deal, you made her kill my father.”

Styles rubbed his chin, watching me. “What your mother didn’t seem to realize was that I had already begun to fill my end of the bargain. Her husband-to-be had just landed a job at a very successful firm. Didn’t she wonder how a man who barely graduated law school and almost failed the bar exam managed to find work at a top firm? Because of me, of course.”

I studied him as he hovered just out of the light. “What did she promise you?”

“You must understand, Scarlett, that I am a business man. I do things for people and they, in turn, owe me payment for what I do. What kind of entrepreneur would I be if I just did things for free?”

I said nothing.

“I am a dealer in miracles, Scarlett. I offer people change. I provide them with renewed lives, better lives, *happier* lives. And, in return, I only ask for one small thing.”

My hands curled around the photograph, bending it. “What?”

“Their first-born child.” He said it so simply, as if he had just mentioned that it might rain tonight. “Or, if they are unable to have children of their own, a child they adopt or foster.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. Styles watched me with his face blurred by the encroaching darkness. “Are you serious?”

“As death,” the man said, his voice like a hiss. “I take my payment very, very seriously.”

“What do you do with the children?”

He smiled at this, a slow burning smile that made my stomach twist. “You don’t need to worry about that, Scarlett. You’ll know soon enough.”

I stiffened, laughter slipping back down my throat. “What?”

“I told you I only accept the payment of a first-born child. Your mother had agreed to pay me in exchange for a better life. She was forced to murder her husband because she refused to pay up. I could not have her renegeing on our contract. Bad for business. So I took care of her. Now she’s locked away for the rest of her life, driven insane by a story that no one will believe despite its complete and utter truth. All of this happened because she wouldn’t pay me with--”

“Her first-born child,” I interrupted, my horror mounting. “Me.”

“Oh, yes,” said Styles with his eel’s smile. “Oh, yes, indeed.”

I rose to my feet. “She told me to stay away from you.”

“Yes,” said Styles. “A mother trying to protect her daughter.”

I wanted to climb up the stairs and disappear into the house where my grandparents and friends waited with cake and birthday songs. But I couldn’t.

“I can’t move my feet.”

“No,” said Styles. “I’m taking what I’m owed, Scarlett. And that’s you.”

“I won’t come with you.”

“I’m afraid you have no choice.”

My feet took a step forward, down onto the cement walkway. The traitors moved me closer and closer to him.

“What’s happening?” I looked over my shoulder, wanting to cry out, but my voice was too weak. My words came out in a rushed, nearly silent whisper.

“I always get what I’m promised,” said Styles, hands in his pockets. “My clients sign contracts, you understand, so I can be sure of my payment. There’s a magic in that, the signing of contracts. A binding, unbreakable magic.”

“No,” I said, “please. I don’t want to go with you. I--”

“Scar?”

My feet stopped. I stood less than a foot from Styles in his cloak of darkness. I turned to see Al on the porch, squinting at me.

“Scar,” he said, “what are you doing?”

“Al,” I tried to say, but my voice betrayed me, too.

“A witness,” said Styles with a heavy sigh. “I try not to leave those around.”

I looked at him, eyes widening.

“Bad for business,” he said, shrugging. “How am I supposed to make my deals if I have the police after me because I’ve ‘kidnapped’ some children?” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t do witnesses. They must be gotten rid of, you understand. Locked away, like your mother, or disposed of in simpler ways.”

“No,” I said as he reached into his pocket and drew out a long, silver knife. It caught the glare of the blood moon. “No.”

Al took a step forward. “Scarlett? What’s going on? What’s he--”

“Hush now,” Styles said. I didn’t know if he was talking to me or to Al. He turned the knife in his fingers, presenting me with the handle. “Go on.”

Tears dripped down my cheeks. My eyes stung. Yet my trembling fingers reached out and took the blade. Inside I screamed and shrieked and kicked and fought, but my body would not listen to me. I had no control over it. It no longer belonged to me. All the while Styles watched me with his dark eyes, his mouth spread wide in that glowing smile. His teeth, beneath the moonlight, shone red.

I curled my fingers around the knife handle and turned toward Al. He went down the last of the steps and started toward me. His handsome face was set, his light eyes narrowed.

“Is this guy bothering you, Scar?” It was like he didn’t see the knife. He didn’t look at me, instead glaring past me at Styles. “You want me to take care of it?”

“No,” I said or tried to say but found I could not. I wanted, desperately, to cast the knife aside, to run for the house and take Al with me, to press myself into the warmth of my grandmother and cry. I wanted to go back to bed and wake up again, before any of this ever happened.

“I don’t have all night,” said Styles.

Al was within reach. I raised my arm. He still did not look at me.

“Scarlett,” he started to say.

With a terrible weight, I brought the knife down. Then up, then down, then up, then down again. Over and over until I was dripping with warmth and my tears ran red.

“Like mother, like daughter,” said Styles.

The knife slipped from my fingers to clatter onto the walkway beside the still silhouette at my feet. I stepped backward, from the light into the darkness. Cool hands curled around my shoulders, nails digging into my skin. I bent my head back, resting against Styles’ firm chest, gasping up at the inflamed night sky. The air smelled like smoke and sugar.

“That’s my girl,” Styles said. His fingers stroked my throat. “That’s my lovely girl.”

Above us, the red moon shone.

Afterward: “The Mother’s Contract”

“The Mother’s Contract” was the last tale I wrote and for it, I drew from the classic Grimm’s fairy tale “Rumpelstiltskin.” In that story, a woman makes a deal with a little dwarf of a man to spin straw into gold for her and, in return, she makes him promises (Grimm 238-239). The last thing she promises the dwarf is her first born child (Grimm 239). When the time comes, the woman refuses to pay up and, in the end, bests the little dwarf by discovering his true name (Grimm 242). When writing “The Mother’s Contract” I was very interested in the child that would be promised to a wicked little man in exchange for her mother’s desires. I wondered about that child all grown up, unaware that one day this man would come calling for her.

Though I deviated wildly from the original tale—the mother in my story does not wish to spin straw into gold and there is no talk of guessing the man’s name to rescue the baby—I wanted to update the character of Rumpelstiltskin. In the Grimm’s story, he’s small and unattractive and made a fool of at the end (Grimm 239). In my story, a more modern retelling, I wrote “Styles” as charming and persuasive because I didn’t intend him to do any obvious magic for the mother (such as turn straw into gold). He had to have some way to convince people to enter into foolish gambles with him.

Like the others in this collection, the ending of this story is tragic. Scarlett loses as Styles gains her: the tragic act of killing her boyfriend mirrors her mother’s murder of her father at the beginning of the story, a sort of bookend effect for the story as a whole. It also signals a severing of the innocent life she had before this moment. The Scarlett that ends the story is very different than the Scarlett from the beginning. Once again, I wanted to show the power of a violent trauma to shift our view of the world and, in turn, change our lives.

Works Cited:

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009. Print.