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## What the Water Brought Me: A Composite of Two Short Stories and a Novel Portion

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What the Water Brought Me:

A Composite of Two Short Stories and a Novel Portion

By

Shannon Nicole Strawhun

B.A. in Creative Writing- Undergraduate, Seton Hall University, 2015

A Thesis

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In

Creative Writing

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Advisory Committee

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## Abstract

This thesis is a collection of two short stories and three chapters from my novel, *Shore Walkers*. The short stories, “Lights Against Your Back” and “Thunder and Dust” are a part of a larger collection I have been working on. Each story is based on a different being or place from *Gulliver’s Travels*. Though the stories can be read separately, there are characters and settings which eventually link all the works in the collection. The stories follow characters in different places and time in the United States. “Thunder and Dust” centers around the dismantling of the Hearst Castle in the early 1950s and some of the lingering political strain from World War II. “Lights Against Your Back”, though, focuses more on personal connections between a family in 1990s Maine, struggling after a difficult event. *Shore Walkers* is a speculative fiction/fantasy novel that explores the connection between sirens and sea witches. The book focuses on a shore walker (a sea witch), Dot, as she goes on a cross-country journey to find the answers to her past. It also focuses on Lucy, a siren, whose life and morals lead her to fall out of favor with her peers and eventually connect to Dot’s backstory. Many of the themes connecting these works were those of family, acceptance, outsiders, femininity, memory, control, and travel.

## Lights Against Your Back

“Are you having fun?” Mikael asks.

Marta Anker slides her spoon around in the pink soup that used to be her strawberry ice cream. She can’t help but feel disappointed. It was half-melted already when her older brother brought it to her, and it really is her own fault for not acting sooner.

“Yeah! Of course,” she says, instead, smiling.

“You sure?” Mikael asks. He sits down on the boardwalk bench and peers into her plastic cup.

“Tch-Yeah!” Marta nods, “You’re being much less jerk-ish today than usual.”

Mikael bumps his shoulder against her, and Marta flings her arms out to push him back, letting her ice cream slide out of her lap and onto the floor.

“Oops.”

Mikael kneels down and tries to mop the liquid up with napkins back into the cup, but most has already seeped into the wood floor.

“Hey,” Marta says, “Don’t worry about it. You got most of it.”

“Sorry,” he says.

Mikael sighs and throws the dripping mess into a nearby trashcan. He sits down on the bench and runs his sticky hands through his blond hair.

“It wasn’t that good anyways,” she says, “Besides, shouldn’t we be getting corn dogs or something *you* want to eat?”

Today is September 3rd, Mikael's eighteenth birthday. For the last few years, he has only celebrated the day with his friends, but this morning, when Marta was watching reruns of Scooby Doo, Mikael asked if she wanted to go to *Honderson's* with him. *Honderson's Whale Watching Tours* is a big attraction in Bloom Bay, Maine, and though Marta's favorite animals are whales, Mikael always refuses to take her on one of their boat rides because of the summer crowds.

She was suspicious at first, but decided to not let her opportunity slip away. She didn't object when he suggested they go to the arcade on Main Street (which he always claimed had "baby games"). Nor did she complain after, when he went across the street to buy them ice cream. Even now, with ants crawling over the pink ice cream before them, Marta thinks that she cannot remember ever having such a good day with her brother. She's not even sure how long it's been since last spent this much time together.

"What do you want to eat?" she asks.

"I'm not really hungry."

"Ok, whatever," she rolls her eyes, "There has to be *something* you want to do or someplace you want to go. So, let's go there and do it."

Mikael snorts and tries to rub his sticky hands off on his jeans.

"You wouldn't want to go there," he says.

"It's *your* birthday," she says with a shrug.

The sign on the door reads *J&G's Oddities*, which sounds kind of nice to Marta, like a nursery rhyme. The store, the smallest on the Maine Street strip, makes the place

look cozy and cute. As they get closer, though, she can begin to make out the window display of antlers and deer bones mixed with pieces of broken porcelain dolls. Marta knows the place is weird (only tourists go inside), but she's not quite prepared to stare at Bambi's skull sockets all afternoon.

She looks back at Mikael. He's got a wide grin on his face and his hand digging deep into jean pockets. He looks smug, and Marta begins to wonder if he just wants to see her squirm.

"Are you sure this is where you want to go?" she asks.

Mikael nods. "Sure I'm sure," he says, "Me and Clark go here a lot. It's fun."

Marta grimaces and stares back at the skull's empty eyes again. They remind her of holes in the dry sand a little kid might make, trying to dig to china. They want to pull her into the window with them, down deep. The dolls' faces are the opposite; the glass eyes reflect back at her, keeping her at a distance. Don't look too close, they seem to say to her. Don't see the cracks and smudges.

"You're sure," she asks again.

Mikael rolls his eyes and pulls her through the doors. As Marta looks around the shop's interior, the one word that comes to mind is "gross". She sees jars with eyes and brains and all sorts of other body parts, weird statues of people screaming or frowning, and a whole cabinet of stuff with a big orange sticker on it, reading "CURSED".

"You and Clark are weird," she whispers to Mikael.

He leans over and whispers back, "We know."

There's a woman at the counter, surrounded by stacks of papers. She punches her fingers on a large calculator and nibbles at the ends of her auburn ponytail. She takes off her thick-rimmed glasses, setting them to the side, blinks. She notices them and smiles.

"Oh hey, Mike!" she says with a wave, "You and your friend wouldn't happen to be CPAs, would you?"

They shake their heads.

"Judy, this is my sister, Marta," Mikael says, "Marta, Judy runs the place with her husband, Gary."

Judy smiles dreamily. "Oh, a first-timer! I wish I could help show you the fun stuff, but I am swamped!"

Mikael nods. "Where's Gary?"

"In the showroom. Setting up the display."

"What is it this month?"

Judy smiles "*Who Done It?: The Lizzie Borden Case*. We actually have some of the Borden family's personal items!"

Mikael smiles. "Any chance of us getting a preview? I know first-timers get free entrance."

He reaches down and ruffles Marta's hair. Marta slaps his hands away, smoothing down her blond locks.

Judy nods. "That's right, but no freebees for you anymore, mister."

"Even on his birthday?" Marta asks.

Judy raises an eyebrow. "It's your birthday?" she asks leaning forward, "Really? You're not fooling me?"

Mikael nods. "I could show you my driver's license?"

Judy shakes her head and squeals. She goes around the counter and hugs him. He's taller than her, but somehow the way she wraps her arms around Mikael makes him seem like the smaller one.

"Ooooooh! Not necessary, birthday boy!"

She lets him go, reaches up, and pats his head.

"Now you're a senior, right?"

He nods.

"No! But, that means you're eighteen! So grown up! I remember when you and your friends first came in here. You couldn't even drive yet!"

Mikael smiles, letting the woman fret over him for a moment. Marta rolls her eyes. People are always fussing over Mikael. *You're so smart Mikael! Please be the captain of our debate team! Or Do you still play soccer, Mikael? You were so good in middle school!* Mikael is really good at a lot of stuff. Marta is only sort of good at one thing: drawing, but even then she has trouble with noses and hands.

Judy smiles. "Well, maybe we'll make one more exception. But, this is the last one! We don't run a charity, here."

Mikael's smile droops, and his face turns serious. He looks down at his shoes.

"Yeah, of course," he says, shifting his weight.

Marta raises an eyebrow at her brother. He can be so weird sometimes, and Marta never knows what's going on his head to make him act that way.

Judy leads the siblings to a door in the back of the shop and pulls out a small, bronze key with a daisy keychain. She unlocks the door and ushers Mikael and Marta

inside. The room is dimly lit with spotlights beaming at displays and mannequins wearing old timey clothes. There's a man in the corner with a picture frame in his hand. He's wearing a frayed, brown vest and yellow-tinted glasses that make his eyes look like a bug. He turns, making his shell necklace click and sway, and stares at the small group.

“Jude?” he asks, “What are doing? I told you I didn't finish.”

“We're making an exception, Gary,” she says.

“Again?”

Judy ignores him and introduces her husband and Marta.

“First-timer and a birthday, huh?” he says, scratching his beard, “Yeah, I guess that could count. Uh...just so you know, you're not quite getting the whole experience. Half of it is still in boxes.”

Mikael shrugs. “You get what you pay for.”

Gary laughs and claps his hands. “That's right. I guess that fits pretty well.”

Gary leads the siblings around the room, explaining who the Bordens were and the details of the murders. He becomes especially excited when Marta explains that she's never heard the story before. He shows her layouts of the house and papers from the Fall Rivers case file and a piece of framed cloth, supposedly a part of Lizzie's dress that day.

“Sorry about him,” Judy says, “Gary thinks himself an amateur historian.”

Gary places the cloth back on the wall. “It's just...who knows what really happened, you know? So much of the past is just based on what people told each other, but these items can help us see all the possibilities.”

Marta smiles and nods. She isn't entirely sure what Gary is talking about and she's a little grossed out with the story of people getting cut up, but his eyes get wide and

excited as he continues to talk. He reminds Marta a little of a poodle jumping around, and she tries not to laugh at his eagerness.

It's a few hours later when Gary finishes his story, and Marta and Mikael thank the couple as they head out the door. The wind is picking up. It feels nice in the late summer heat. Marta can smell the mix of lemonade salt air and funnel cakes as they walk down the boardwalk to collect their bikes.

“What did you think?” Mikael asks, “I know you didn't want to go, but...”

Marta shrugs. She actually liked the shop more than she thought she would. The body parts in jars are still pretty weird, but she also remembers some prettier things like crystals and dream catchers. Plus Judy and Gary seem like the most relaxed adults on the planet.

“It was okay,” she says, “I guess I wouldn't mind going back, if you *had* to drag me with you.”

Mikael rolls his eyes and pushes her lightly. “Sure”

The two of them ride back home at top speed, but are still late for dinner. Their mother yells at them for a while, but mostly at Mikael. For not letting their parents know where they were. For not calling when he knew they would be late. For acting childish when he's supposed to be a legal adult. Then, when their mother is done, she rushes them to the dinner table to eat before the meal can get cold. There is birthday cake too. Their mother has placed the full eighteen candles onto the cake, so it takes more than one try for Mikael to blow them all out. By the time he succeeds, he's red-faced and has bits of tears in his eyes. Their father pats the boy on the back and smiles. The two siblings take

after their thin, blonde mother, but Marta thinks their father's round face with the bushy, brown beard is the more comforting. The softer of the two.

“That’s okay,” he tells Mikael, “I’m sure you’ll get the wish anyways.”

Mikael takes deep breaths and nods, though he doesn’t seem to be listening. He seems to be staring at something in the window behind Marta. She turns around, but there’s nothing there. Just the light purple from the last part of sunset turning indigo. Their mother cuts a large slice of the cake and places in front of Mikael. She wipes a finger down the knife, pulling up a dab of royal blue icing. She plops the icing into her mouth, grinning a bit. The rest of the cake is cut and distributed. Marta notices her cut is much smaller than her brother’s, but doesn’t say anything. If her mother knew she had ice cream earlier, Marta might not get any cake at all. Mikael takes a few bites, then places his fork back on the plate. He asks to be excused.

Their mother furrows her brow and looks from Mikael to their father. The older man simply cocks his head, as if to say “your call”. She purses her lips and lays the back of her hand on his forehead, saying that he does seem a little warm. Mikael stands up and thanks them for the cake. Their mother looks up at the tall boy and pecks a goodnight kiss on his cheek. Marta sees a bit of blue stain on his face as he turns away from the table.

The next morning Marta hears her parents arguing. She gets up and walks across the hall to see if Mikael knows why, but he’s not in his room. Marta goes downstairs, but Mikael is not watching TV. Mikael is not in the kitchen as her parents argue. She checks the bathroom, the front yard, the backyard, the garage, and the tree house their father built for him before Marta was born. There is no Mikael.

Time passes. It's quicker than Marta thinks should be possible. She's always been an impatient person, but now she feels like she's on one of those carnival rides that spins you until your center of gravity changes and suddenly you're just stuck against the wall. The first few months are the hardest. There's a letter, but neither of Marta's parents will let her read it. Her father explains that Mikael has left home and doesn't plan to come back; that's all she needs to know, he says. Which is bullshit, really. Her parents keep reading it and re-reading it and crying in front of her, and it feels like torture that Marta can't just know why. She tries to steal a glance at it a few times until, finally, her parents stop leaving it around.

Her mother locks herself in the bedroom for about a week, leaving Marta's father to fall asleep on his recliner, curled up with an old afghan each night. He brings her food a few times, but she refuses to face him, waiting instead for him to leave the plate on the floor and walk away. She leaves the empty plate outside the door at night while he sleeps. Then, Marta's school calls to ask why she hasn't shown up. And, this wouldn't be so bad except Marta's parents have a phone in their bedroom, and it's her mother who takes the call.

Marta feels the floor shake as her mother storms up the stairs. Her mother enters the room, shaking and red-faced. She's thinner than usual and the white strands that used to hide in her mother's light blond hair seem to have taken over. She's wearing a college t-shirt and sweatpants which Marta didn't even know her mother owned.

"Absolutely not!" her mother screeches, "You do not miss school. Ever. This is inexcusable! You will be in class tomorrow, do you understand me?"

Marta nods, stunned. She hadn't meant to miss so many days, but her father hadn't noticed when the first day of school came around, and she hadn't felt like pointing this out at the time.

"Skipping school!" her mother continues, as if Marta had protested, "Ridiculous! I have never heard of anything so stupid! I will not let you throw your potential away."

Marta furrows her brow. "Okay," she says, hoping her mother will stop.

She doesn't.

Marta begins to tune the woman out, waiting until she pauses and looks at her daughter intently.

"Okay, I won't do it again."

Her mother nods, and it's like a flip has switched. Both parents go back to work, and Marta's mother tenses at every move her child makes. She has Marta do her homework at the dinner table, in front of her. Marta must go to be early; she can't go into town on her own. The three of them begin to work side by side in the garden on the weekends. Marta's mother begins to come earlier and cooks more instead of picking up take-out, like she used to. The only time Marta knows for sure she's out of her mother's view is when she's at school, though that place doesn't make her feel any better.

Some of Marta's schoolmates have brothers and sisters in Mikael's grade. They all want to know what happened and where he went. Marta tries to be as vague as possible because she can't imagine the embarrassment if she told the truth: that she has no idea what is going on.

"Where did Mike go?" Amy Richardson asks.

"Anywhere," Marta says, "He just wanted to leave. It didn't matter where."

“Why did he leave?” Taylor Petersen asks.

“He had his reasons.”

Rumors start to fly. Something really bad has happened- like her dad killing Mikael and covering it up. Marta begins to keep her face down, never looking people in the eye. She curls her books close to her chest when she walks down the hall, trying to make herself unnoticeable; invisible. She just ends up feeling small, though. Her classmates start keeping their distance. As much as they want to know more, Marta gets moody whenever anyone tries to talk about it. Nobody likes to be around a moody thirteen-year-old, especially other moody thirteen-year-olds.

A second letter comes in the mail from Mikael. Marta’s mother reads it once and rips it up before stomping back into her room. Marta’s father just scoops up the pieces and tosses them into the trash. He hardly speaks to Marta anymore. Most nights, they just end up on opposite sides of the couch, watching episodes of Supermarket Sweep until her father falls asleep. The living room is lifeless; the cream-colored walls have pale, window-like silhouettes from where her parents have removed the family photos of Mikael. Marta misses the pictures. She can remember one of the four of them at the tree farm they visit every Christmas. Mikael is holding the tree steady as their father kneels beside it with the bow saw. She and their mother are standing to the side, blowing on their cups of hot chocolate. Mikael is the only one smiling in the photo, everyone else either unable to see the photographer or too cold to muster the cheer. Marta remembers her own face looks red and tired next to the snow-covered firs. She used to hate seeing it on the wall; she catches herself, now, glancing at the space it occupied.

Marta thinks maybe her parents are beginning to crack apart. They cry and fight in front of her a lot. Sometimes just about stupid stuff. Why did Marta's mother throw the paper away? Doesn't she think he's going to finish it? He does NOT leave everything unfinished. Why didn't Marta's father call the exterminator? Yes, she's sure it was a gopher hole. The ground has NOT always been like that and why do people always think she doesn't know what she's talking about? Marta doesn't blame them, but she does feel a weird and embarrassed. It's like now they're naked, but she's the only one who sees. She wonders if they've always been like this, just a couple of scared and tired people. Or if maybe once they really were confident and then they had to second guess themselves. Either way they just don't feel like the Mom and Dad she used to know. She's begun thinking of them more as Peter and Evelyn. Like maybe, if she doesn't think of them as "Mom" or "Dad", then its not really those people who are making her feel so bad.

Except, it's not even capital "B"- Bad. It's not like with Liza Torres and her family, who have a restraining order against their dad. Every once and a while, Liza shows up tired to school, and everybody knows it's because her father came back drunk the night before to shout, throw beer bottles, or take a baseball bat to the family car until the cops show up. Marta knows, if she tried to tell anyone at school, it would seem like she really doesn't have anything to complain about. She might try to say how even though nothing's really wrong at home, nothing really feels good either. But, it might come out wrong or stupid, so she just keeps her mouth closed.

It's been six months when another letter comes, and this time, it's addressed to Marta. It's the beginning of spring; one of those days when there's morning frost on the grass, but by midday, you're taking off your jacket. After much pestering, her parents have finally allowed Marta to stay home by herself for the two hours after school before her father gets home from work. It's a privilege Marta is grateful for when she checks the mailbox and finds the letter. She rushes inside, dropping her backpack and jacket in the living room as she bounds for the stairs. Though she knows she's alone, Marta can't help but seek a safe space to read the letter.

There's a lot Marta can't really understand. Stuff referenced in his earlier letters and just general words and names Marta doesn't know about. What she is able to understand is that Mikael is okay. He writes about being scared to leave, but ultimately thinking it was the right move. He says he was afraid to try and live up to their parents expectations. That he didn't really want to go to college, but thinks Marta should still definitely go. That he really didn't feel like he was doing anything with his life. That when the army recruiter had come his school, he had kept the brochure. That he had looked at it every night, and in the end, it was the only thing he could even remotely see himself do. How, he had snuck out early that morning for basic training. How he hopes she isn't mad at him. She is. How he hopes she isn't mad at their parents. She is. How, sometimes, stuff just happens.

Marta reads the rest of the letter in anger. Joined with Graves Registration, where he helped identify and retrieve soldiers' bodies. Great, so Mikael got to hang out with dead bodies all day. He must be having the time of his life. In Albania right now.

Albania? Marta studies the postage on the letter in confirmation before trying to imagine Mikael with a tan. It would suit him, the jerk.

Marta stops watching sitcoms. There's something about the bright lights and laugh tracks that seem overly harsh to her. All the jokes seem mean, now, too. The main characters seem almost like bullies every time they rip into the one dislikable character. And, one night, as she's just lounging on the couch, Mark-Paul Gosselaar opens his mouth to deliver the punch, and Marta turns off the television and goes up to her room. Goodbye Mark-Paul. She takes down her posters of bands and teen actors. Takes down the glow-in-the-dark stars and the polaroids of the girls who no longer talk to her. She digs through her desk and book bag, finding some tape. She hangs up her drawings, overlapping them and filling her walls with shades of black sharpie, grey pencil, and cream paper.

Marta starts to draw more at school. She's often alone. At least this way, it looks like she's looking for a quiet place to draw instead of pushed aside into the quiet. The only girl who hasn't totally stopped talking to her is Liza Torres, but Liza's a reader-someone who actually wants to be in silence. Sometimes Marta gets mad when Liza brings a book with her, like Marta's just automatically going to be quiet with her. Like Marta wants to be this way. Like Marta's like Liza. But, it's nice to have at least one

person who wants to be near her, even if they don't talk. At least this way, it looks like they're alone together.

Liza shows Marta her favorite books, fantasy stories about talking animals and elves and witches. Sometimes Marta will draw the characters for Liza. She's still bad at hands and feet, so drawing creatures who aren't totally human, like satyrs and mermaids, seem a little easier. She gives Liza the drawings (because why would Marta want them). The first time she does this, it's a copied picture of Mr. Tumnus, balancing his packages and umbrella. Liza bites her bottom lip and slowly picks up the sketch, like Marta might change her mind. She finally takes it and holds it close to her chest, her dark braids swinging before the blue-striped paper. She starts to keep the drawings flat in a green folder she carries everywhere. She always mutters a soft "thanks", but doesn't elaborate. Marta doesn't expect her to. Though sometimes, after, Liza will lower her book slightly below her freckled cheeks and read aloud the lines from the books. Things she thinks will make Marta laugh or smile. Words she hasn't found herself.

Liza's mother sends her children to summer camp that year, so Marta is alone again. Not that Liza and her would have hung out that summer; they never see each other outside of school. It would have just been nice to know the option existed. But alone is okay too...it's fine. Her parents encourage her to ride her bike around the block or garden. Anything but watch the TV for hours. Marta wants to tell them she hasn't enjoyed watching television in a long time, but decides against it. She's starting to think it's better for them to think Marta is someone other than who she is. By now, Marta is

used to lying to her parents so they think everything is the same as it used to be. She's afraid if she doesn't they'll be constantly checking in with her teachers or setting up play dates. She lies about having more friends, about when she went to bed, about studying or doing homework, about needing new tennis shoes. She lies about small things- stupid things. Evelyn once asked Marta what she had for lunch, and she said pizza even though it was corndog day. It feels easy to make up things she's done around the house or neighborhood. She talks about going to the park, about finding a hidden trail behind the house, about phone calls to people who haven't talked to her in months.

In reality, she spends most of her time in her room. She sketches flowers in the garden, the designs on Evelyn's china, the remaining pictures in the living room. When she gets bored of this, she reads. She goes through all of her books, but soon grows tired of reading about the lives of the Baby-Sitter's Club members. So, she goes downstairs and finds a stack of Peter's *National Geographic* magazines. She reads about people all over the world, finding names of places she had never heard of before. She traces the names on the glossy paper with her finger, sounding them out as best as possible. She bends closer to the photographs, hoping to take in every detail. She pokes the birds along the horizon as if, by counting the number, she might know something more about that area.

Marta is just getting used to summer when she passes the kitchen calendar and sees it has been flipped to September. Marta feels her face heat up at her forgetfulness. It didn't feel like a year. Marta had only heard of time flying when you were having fun, and Marta hadn't been having a lot of fun. Mostly, she thought days flew because of how boring they were. Nothing seemed to stand out. Except that wasn't true. Mikael's last day

had stood out to her. It was the most fun she could remember having, and Marta couldn't help but want that feeling back again. She starts to make a list: *Honderson's*, *Main Street Arcade*, *Jimmy's Ice Cream*, and *J&Gs*. She thinks, maybe she doesn't have to have to Mikael to feel that way again.

On Saturday, Marta wakes up early and counts her piggy bank money. She should have enough for everything, though she'll have to settle for only one game of skee ball. She packs her camera and sketch pad in case she sees anything she wants to draw, and runs down the stairs to the kitchen. Evelyn and Peter are awake, drinking coffee and eating cereal. They look up at her, and Evelyn smiles.

"You're awake!" she says, "Great. I was hoping to do some back-to-school shopping with you. I noticed you're starting to grow out of some of your clothes. There'll be some good deals today."

Marta freezes. "Uh...does it have to be today?"

Evelyn furrows her brow. "Did you have plans?"

"Well, I was thinking about maybe going to see the whales..."

"You can see the whales any day."

"Well, can't we go shopping any day?" Marta counters.

"There won't be sales like this every day."

"So? The migration won't be around forever either."

Evelyn sighs and rubs her temples. "I have things I would like to do as well," she says, "important things-"

“My things are important too!”

Peter starts to scrape his chair back and stands up to wash his coffee cup out.

Evelyn narrows her eyes at him.

“Look,” she says, “You’re making your father uncomfortable.”

Peter put his hands up. “Do not make me a part of this.”

He places his coffee cup in the sink and shoots Marta a sympathetic look. She glares back at him. She’s gotten too tired of him never standing up to Evelyn. Marta was just another person he was leaving out to dry.

Evelyn taps her fingers on the countertop and looks back at Marta.

“Look,” she says, softening her voice, “I’ve got a presentation to management soon. That job helps pay for this house and puts food on the table. I could be working on that now, but I’m not because I’ve carved away a little time for you- to help *you* get something you actually *need*.”

Marta lifts a finger. “But, you didn’t even-”

“Ah!” Evelyn objects, “Just meet me halfway here. It’s not even going to take all day. You can do your little whale watching thing after.”

Marta rolls her eyes. “Fine.”

It’s not that Marta likes to fight with Evelyn, but it just really ticks her off whenever her mother tries to act like Marta’s the insensible one. Like Marta should just follow whatever Evelyn says, without question. Like Marta should act like she’s happy when she feels like that part of her has been walled off and there’s only *so* good she can ever feel again.

Marta thinks about leaving before Evelyn notices. Hopping on her bike and just going. Her list is so short- it couldn't take more than a couple hours or so to do everything. Would it be so bad if she disappeared for so little a time?

The mall is just another big fight. Evelyn spends hours arguing with Marta over everything she wanted to buy. The jean jacket isn't warm enough, the sweatshirt is tacky, and then there is the skirt. Evelyn insists a young lady needed to have "a nice skirt for special occasions", even if she is just thirteen. Marta picks out one in a sophisticated black, but then Evelyn sees one in bubblegum pink.

"Come on," she says, "Just try it on, for my sake. You don't have to get it."

But, of course, the minute Marta puts it on Evelyn claims its the cutest thing Marta's put on so far and adds it to the small pile of jeans and tops. Marta squeezes her eyes tight and clenches her jaw so she doesn't scream. She's starting to think maybe the reason Evelyn keeps trying to make her into someone else, the reason she's so quick to believe Marta's lies, is that it's easier- that it makes her feel like she doesn't have to work as hard to know and love Marta the way she is now. Evelyn's version of Marta is like her, is smart and social at school, is happy, and isn't like Mikael. Marta wants about to storm out, but she remembers Evelyn is her ride back home.

Marta locks her bike at the rack and slips a bit on the wet pier as she hurries to the Honderson's ticket booth. She can see the last ferry leaving, but the lights are still on by

the ticket booth. A big sign “closed” sign is hanging outside, but she can see the long, dark hair and goatee of Clark Henderson. She knocks on the window and waves. Clark shakes his head. He points to the sign and mouths “sorry”. Marta tries to talk to him. Tries to get him to just turn around again. Marta slams her hand against the plexiglass of the booth, making him jump.

“Asshole!” she yells.

She turns away before he can reply, feeling a little guilty. It’s not Clark’s fault his family closed the booth at a certain time. He wasn’t the one who made her late, and he probably had a ton of tourists trying to get themselves a late ride. Marta hurries up the dock. She thinks about stopping by the arcade, but she’s pretty sure they’re closed too. In the end, she doesn’t have to dig too deep to know where she really wants to be right now.

Judy is turning off the lights when Marta runs up to the door. She waves to Marta, motioning to come inside. Marta sighs in relief. Judy moves a large milk crate full of books onto the counter and smiles.

“Hey!” she says, “You’re just in time. My husband left earlier. I was just about to close up and join him. How can I help you?”

Marta pauses, feeling a bit embarrassed now.

“What is it?” Judy repeats, “I mean, you practically ran in here. You out of breath?”

“No,” Marta says, “I..uh..I was wondering if I could go into the showroom?”

Judy peers closer at Marta, cocking her head.

“I can..um..I can buy my ticket and everything,” Marta says.

Judy shifts her weight. “You’re Mikael’s sister, aren’t you? Martha?”

“Marta, and yeah, that’s me.”

“You guys were in here together right before...”

Marta nods.

“I was surprised when you didn’t come back,” Judy says, “You looked like your brother when he first came in. I thought you might’ve gotten bitten by the same bug.”

Marta looks away for a moment at a taxidermy fox.

“I wanted to,” she says, “I’ve just been busy.”

Judy nods, though Marta’s pretty sure she can see through the lie. Marta takes off her backpack and rustles through her pockets, offering Judy a five dollar bill.

“Oh,” Judy says, looking back at the milk crate.

She steps away from the counter and takes the money, which Marta’s a little surprised about. Must have been a slow week.

“It’s going to have to be quick,” Judy says, “That okay?”

Marta nods.

They walk to the back and Judy unlocks the doors.

“You sure you don’t want to wait a month? We’ve got *Taxidermy Animals of the Silver Screen* coming up!”

Marta smirks. “Whatever you have now, is perfect.”

“Okay, you’re the customer.”

Judy unlocks the door, and they walk through.

The room is softly lit with spotlights over display cases and dioramas. A hanging banner proclaims the name of the exhibit: *The Giants of Our Pasts*. On the walls, hang letters and photos of skeletons (and one mummy) roughly twice the size of the diggers

unearthing them. A small diorama in one corner shows a hill as a giant burial site. Then, in the center of the room, there's a big glass case. It reminds Marta of *Snow White*, except inside the glass box are the bones of a giant's leg.

The foot and toes rest against the short end of the case, while the bones above and below the knee fill out the length of the container. They don't look like Halloween decorations. The bones aren't shiny or pure white. They also don't look like a light plastic. Something about the color and size makes Marta think they must be weighty and strong. There's a velvet, green cloth beneath the bones making it seem like they're lying on top of a shiny patch of grass. Or the leaf of a giant beanstalk, Marta thinks with a laugh.

"Pretty nuts, right?" Judy says, "Gary's got this guy who swears giants used to roam among us. Apparently, it's all a government cover up now."

Marta smiles. She can practically hear Gary babbling about it. Only, when she pictures Gary, she can't help but think of Mikael right next to him too. Judy begins to herd her through the displays, giving curt descriptions almost exactly the same as the tags beneath the artifacts.

When they go through it all, Judy walks back out the door, glancing behind her to motion for Marta to follow. Marta looks around for one more time and walks out, closing the door behind her.

Judy picks up the milk crate and struggles to pick up her keys and purse. It's then that Marta feels the beginning of what is probably a very bad plan.

"You want me to...?" Marta offers, pointing to the keys.

"Oh, thanks!" Judy says, and Marta gathers the keyring and purse.

They go out the side door by the alley, where Judy has her station wagon parked.

“Thanks for that,” Judy says, “We promised the library we’d donate these for the collection, but they’re pretty old. I’m constantly worried they’ll just fall apart.”

Marta nods and opens the car trunk. She sets the purse inside and jingles the keys.

“I can get the door, if you’ve got everything?” she offers.

“Sure! Just make sure it’s closed tight!” Judy says as she lowers the books inside the car.

Marta goes back to the door and pulls it shut. She watches Judy, sure the older woman can’t see her properly as she mimes locking the door and hands them back.

“Do you need a ride home?” Judy asks.

“No,” Marta says, “I have my bike by the docks.”

Marta feels her way in the dark to get back to the showroom doorway. She stands in the dim light for a moment, before being drawn towards the leg. She reads the tag: *Female bones, found in San Jose, CA.* It’s probably a fake, she thinks. Just some plaster and paint. It just wasn’t possible for a five-foot long leg to exist. Still, something about the soft brown and yellow shades draw her in. Something turning her to the jagged edges on the spaces by the knee as if they had rubbed each other raw during their time in life. The surfaces look like it’s covered in little bumps and hills. It’s rough, imperfect, and totally uncovered. There’s nothing hidden in bones. All the stains and chips are just displayed, because who cares now?

Marta kneels on the floor and takes off her backpack. She needs to draw this. She needs a reminder of this feeling now. The day isn't over yet. She has the right privacy between her and her subject. She feels like she's one of the archaeologists, scraping away the surface of her paper to reveal the bones.

There are still mistakes, but Marta knows she has time on her side, and moves with a patient mind. She erases, she breathes, she continues. Then, as she puts another line of shading on the heel's base, her eyes refocus and zoom out. She looks from the page to the bones and back again. It's done. There's nothing more Marta can put on the page. It's not exact, but it's as exact as Marta knows she can be.

The pencils click through the room as she returns them to their box. The room, which once seemed so full of shadows and mystery, just looks empty. Marta checks her watch. Not, even seven yet. Her mother will be worried she missed dinner. There will be more yelling and crying, but Marta is expecting that tonight anyways.

The bones lay inside the case, bare atop the green cloth-unhidden. They almost feel lonely, if bones can be lonely. Marta walks closer and, with nobody left to stop her, places a flat palm on the glass. She imagines the giantess in her prime. Crossing acres in steps, going through life too big for restraints, never fearing anything. Yes, Marta imagines the giantess free. She lives before David beat Goliath or man took down the mastodon. She may have a family, but they are not tied to any one place or another. They move together, eat together, exist together. Maybe they come to Maine in the summer. Maybe the giantess runs along what will be Main Street one day. The giantess lays her children down by the chestnut trees that stand outside Marta's bedroom window. But they leave for other places to run and sleep, because they can. They leave together, and they

move across the country, through the Great Lakes and mountains and deserts over and over until the giantess can move no more. They are in the sun by the ocean. Marta remembers hearing in school how all people started as fish. Maybe the giantess knows this too. Maybe, she just wants to come home again. So, she stops- she and her family. The giantess rests her body where she can look at the water before becoming part of the earth.

Marta inhales deeply and climbs atop of the glass box. She lays on her back, sliding her hips down the glass cover until they are aligned with the beginning of the leg. Carefully, she curls her own leg behind her and closes her eyes. She thinks about the giantess nurturing the earth and the earth nurturing Marta. Vitamins, fruits, vegetables, water, and spices traveling from California to Marta to be back together, alone, with these bones.

In that moment, the leg is her leg, and she stands with it over all of Bloom Bay. Marta steps carefully through the town, tiptoeing around the houses and cars. She sees Liza's house, no lights shining inside. She sits on the front lawn, the yellow dandelions tickling her legs. She sees bits of broken glass mixed with the grass and the gravel driveway. She combs her fingers through the lawn, collecting the broken bits like scattered grains of sand. She holds them tight, her skin too thick for them to hurt. She clenches her fist until she begins to feel them break down under the pressure.

In the distance, she can see her own house. Marta spies her mother through the dining room window, setting the table for dinner. Marta approaches, slowly and softly as she can, creeping along the side of the house. She hears the clatter as Evelyn harshly

drops each plate onto the tablecloth. Marta looks closer and sees Evelyn sit down and sink her face into her hands.

Marta's throat is dry and heavy, but she knows this doesn't change her decision. He brushes the back of her finger against the glass, feeling the cool air through her nail. Goodbye house. Goodbye Evelyn. Goodbye Peter.

Marta stands up, holds her arms out over the rain-filled clouds, and begins to walk to the water. The city and its lights are behind her, but everything new is in the darkness. She doesn't really know what to do. She doesn't have a plan. She doesn't know where to go. Back to California? No. To Albania with Mikael? No, she doesn't want to go to someone who left her behind. Marta chooses the water. She can see tiny whales, migrating along the waves she makes. They nudge at her ankles. Then, before she goes much further, she hears it. A voice catching on the wind. *Follow us! Follow us to a new home!* In the distance, Marta sees shadows in the night sky. She sees the green outline of trees in the distance of the ocean, and sees an island floating towards her. Marta feels herself sinking into the cool, dark water as she wades towards it. She sees giants on the shore. Marta-sized people calling out again. *Follow us!* She catches the edge of the floating land and hoists her leg up and onto the shore. She feels hands around her, guiding her, helping her up. They wrap around her, warming her cold, dripping skin. Marta closes her eyes, fighting back the tears as she feels the island move under her feet, carrying her away.

## Thunder and Dust

The patriot in me could understand why Barkley beat the tar out of Fridman, but the worker in me only saw one less pair of hands to load the monkeys.

We all knew it was coming- even Fridman, I think. What else could he expect? Every morning he greeted us with a bounce in his step and a smile, acting like nothing had happened at all. His combed blond hair and polished boots, shining every day like he was still ready for troop inspection. You could tell from a mile away he was a Jerry. He thought he was better than the rest, pure and simple, as if his sweat wasn't seeping into the same ground as ours.

I thought of the other men. Flat-foot had saved me from the draft in '42, but I knew three of the six drivers, including Barkley, had been marching around France just eight years ago. Everything was still fresh for them, and they were keen to educate the rest of us during the cold nights sharing a bottle of Old Taylor around the campfire.

"You have no idea," Barkley would slur, "If I had known one of these bastards would've been knockin' on my front door one day...if I had known *that*..."

Bits of his whiskey-spit would fall into the fires, and as the embers burst towards him, the light reflected little lines and silver hairs I had missed in the sun. What little patience Barkley had was getting shorter like a candlewick burning up every day. And though we were all on edge around Fridman, Barkley was losing it. I could see he was the type of man who just needed to fight out his problems. Until he did, the rest of us had to just be patient.

The monkeys crowed when Barkley landed the first punch. A sweet kiss to Fridman's jaw. Another headshot, sending him home to the ground. A kick. Backed up. Another kick. One more. Fridman curled around himself like a hermit crab. The dust was rising, obscuring the view for us on the sidelines. I wiped the sweat from my eyes to try to see better. Barkley reached down, probably to pick the Jerry up and start over. Fridman bolted up, his head ramming into Barkley's gut. Fridman twisted down and picked up a plank by one of the trucks. It was then that Martin, one of the better drivers on my team, stepped between the two and glared in my direction.

I sighed and cleared my throat, wiped my face down again.

"Alright!" I joined Martin in the middle, "Alright! That's it! Cool it!"

Barkley straightened himself up, coughing and pointing at Fridman. I turned to the other man.

"Put it down," I said.

He just glared past me, and gripped the wood harder. I drew closer, until I was only a foot away. His eyes shifted to meet mine.

"Hey. Down," I said, "Or we're going to use that to board up the box we send you home in."

Fridman bared his bloody teeth at me, but let the plank fall to the ground and stalked off into the Hearst Menagerie.

I had never wanted to leave my family in Los Angeles, but the money was too good to pass up. My Jeanie had the patience of a saint, but we were always going to be just scraping by with the pennies I got as a taxi driver. Our son, Gary, would be starting school soon too; he would need new shoes, books, pencils. And I wanted him to have everything. When I was twelve, my father punched me in the face for wanting to go to class when I could have gotten a job. I promised myself then that my kids would never have to worry about pulling their weight. They would go to school as long as they wanted- college even.

When I heard about this job, getting paid three times as much just to load some animals in a truck and drive them a few miles from the zoo to the docks, I had to take the chance. Jeanie protested. It wasn't the lifestyle for a married man. I would be gone most of the year, only allowed a few weeks off to visit for the holidays. She offered to go back to work. She could clean houses or see if her sister, Milly, knew of any openings at the switchboards. I was against it. San Simeon might have been far away, but it was the simplest solution.

When I first started, it was only a few months after old man Hearst died, and the zoo was still pretty populated. Concrete walls divided dry yards, which were almost identical, regardless of the animal. Bears, chimpanzees, storks; they all got the same bit to call home. The cages and enclosures varied in sizes depending on the animal, but they were all bare. Though trees branches extended over the walls sometimes, inside it was a

colorless life of dust, straw, and the occasional bucket of food. Life was certainly better by the castle where antelope and zebras continued to graze in shade of the white building.

My first few days were spent keeping quiet and watching. In part, I was still getting used to seeing all the animals. There were about as many as they had back in Griffith Park, but the types were of a sort I'd only seen in pictures before. Jaguars, big Grizzlies from up north, and a pig-like thing called a "tapir" all had me lagging behind from excitement. Another part of me was trying to get a feel of the crew around me. Who were they? Who was going to stay an extra few minutes to get the job done, and who were going to leave early? What sort of jokes did they tell? When were they fooling around, and when were they really pissed at me? I had chances to learn all of this when the days slowed down. For every day when things ran smoothly, there were another five when we would be delayed. Paperwork was misfiled. Castle staff quit when the pay trickled down. Telephone calls would go on for hours to make sure the right animals was going to the right place. Me and the other drivers spent most of the time waiting by playing cards atop an old crate, reading through every section of the paper, and talking about the homes we had left.

After about a year, I caught on to the order of it all. Come in before dawn when it's still cool outside. Let the zookeepers drug the animals, but help them carry the big ones to the cages. Load cages up. Drive to docks in San Simeon. Load cages out. Beers at *Mamie's* on Friday nights, otherwise it was back to the ranch to set up camp for the next morning. It was simple enough to follow, and I fell into the rhythm of the repetition. So much so, starting my second year, my supervisor took me aside to ask if I would take over when he went back to Portland for good. It was a pay raise for the same job I was

basically doing already. Nothing wrong with that. Jeanie had written about the boiler being on the fritz, and Gary had always wanted a bicycle. Still, there were days when I would watch the ship loaded with animals on its way to Los Angeles, and I thought maybe, somehow, a bit of me would get packaged with the cages back to them. That Gary would maybe see a zebra at Griffith Park Zoo or maybe Jeanie would walk by the water on the way home from shopping, and for some reason a little memory of me making coffee in the morning or reading a bedtime story would pop into their head, making them remember to miss me.

I really should have questioned the pay. My father always warned me against that sort of work.

“Remember Gilroy, if they’re paying you too much for the work, they’re paying you for something else,” he would say.

He had worked as a cementer on the aqueduct years ago, before the Great War. It was the reason he moved to California, and he regretted the decision ever since. Not only was the work itself dangerous, but my father never liked the idea of draining water from one place to another.

I thought of him, pointing at his scars along his arms and legs, as I helped move the great beasts from one cage to another. We could feel their deep breathes under our hands and hear their soft grunts and squeaks, but I was sure from a distance, it looked like we were moving corpses. I felt the dirt matted in their hair and skin, as it was in mine. If they woke before we reached the pier, it was all noise and anger. Screeches and roars, the

hollow little sound the young elephant made as they pulled her away. I wondered what I would point to when I told these stories to Gary.

I didn't look for Fridman right way. I had a schedule to keep and animals to load. Of course, I also had six trucks and only five drivers. The hot day was setting a weight of sweat and exhaustion down on me and the others. The smells of our own labor and the thick-haired monkeys brewed together into the air, filling and spreading everywhere around us. When we were almost finished, I looked at Martin. I pointed to my watch, and he nodded. There was no need for words. We had reached a state in which, when it came to work, we understood the other's needs and intentions. A look. A nod. A brow raised.

I entered the cages, trying to remember the turns I took along the way. Even after two years, most of the hallways and cages still looked the same to me. I figured Fridman would be on the opposite end where the veterinarians used to be stationed. I heard back before Hearst lost all his money, there used to be a regular doctor on staff with a team of assistants to check in on all the animals. Now, it was just Dr. Criss, a local doctor who helped out with neighboring farmers' livestock. He stopped by once a month to restock medication and tranquilizers for the zookeepers; otherwise, the menagerie office was usually empty.

The menagerie was full of shadows from the large walls, cooling me down from the mid-afternoon heat, but the smells only got worse the closer to the animals you got. The staff had slacked on cleaning in the last year, removing the animal waste but no

longer scrubbing down the areas. Not that I blamed them, what was the use of cleaning something that might be empty tomorrow- especially when you weren't being paid for the extra work. The whole property felt like a fatherless household. The animals were like his orphans, sent out to other families, but at least they had someplace to go. I wondered what would happen to the zookeepers when all the beasts were gone. Did they have a place to go? Or would they just wander somewhere that seemed promising, hoping for the best?

I turned another corner and found Fridman, not by the doctor's station, but standing in front of a large enclosure. His usual, tidy shirt was stained and ripped at the bottom. I saw his knuckles bandaged, speckled with red and figured he must have used what he had to stop the bleeding. His arms came up and down, banging a large rock over the door's lock.

"Hey!" I yelled, "What in the Sam Hill do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, good," said a voice from my right, "Let you talk some sense into him"

I looked over and saw Carol, the monkeys' handler, backed straight against the wall, a cigarette pursed tight in her chapped lips. Carol was a short, bookish girl with dark curly hair pinned tight behind her head and large circle frames making her eyes look large and owlish. She wore large overalls and work boots covered in mud that looked two sizes too big. She clenched tighter on the cigarette, as if trying to bite her lip through it.

"I was trying to eat lunch out of the heat," she said rolling her eyes, "Your buddy dragged me over here without even seeing if I had the keys."

"The keys?" I asked.

She gestured to the cage door and Fridman.

“I only have the keys for the monkeys and other primates. You need the master keys for this one. Only Davis has those.”

“And why would he need the keys to something he doesn’t need to open?” I asked raising my voice and stepping closer.

Fridman paused and turned, lowering his rock. He didn’t seem surprised to see me, but his eyes were wide and panicked, and his breath was short. I tilted my head. Even when Barkley was going at him, Fridman didn’t look afraid. It was nice to see the Jerry finally coming a little undone like the rest of us.

“Look,” he said, drawing closer to the cage.

I sighed, but then I heard something shuffling, and my eyes squinted to adjust to the dark. There was a deep huffing, as if whatever it was had been running. Then bits of shapes started to move and separate into a picture.

There were horses. Maybe a dozen. Tall thoroughbreds shuffling side by side in the hay as far back into the wall as they could get. Their manes were matted and clumped. They were a dark brown color all over, caked in mud and dirt. Scabbed cuts ran up and down their legs, cracking through the mud, and though I knew the employees still followed a strict feeding plan, many of the horses’ ribs were showing. Their heads bowed down, not the straight sort of way they would if grazing, but limp and droopy as if too heavy to hold. These must have been some god damn beautiful creatures once, but now only broken and left behind.

“What the hell...” I whispered, furrowing my brow.

I felt eyes on me and turned to Fridman, looking expectantly at me. I looked at Carol and he followed; the girl shrugged and tossed the rest of her cigarette to the ground. I had to agree. There was a sort of exhaustion in working at this place where bad things kept coming out like water from a leaky roof, and we were all just trying not to drown. Nobody had the energy to help anyone else or think about patching up the hole. On my first week, I saw one of the baby chimpanzees crying for its mother, but none of the females moved forward to claim the little one. Just watched it from the other corner as its squeaked echoed around us all. None of the workers stopped either. Nothing was right in this place, and you just got used to that.

Except Fridman, it seemed.

I turned back to him and raised an eyebrow, and he looked down at his rock.

“I’ll admit this doesn’t exactly sit right with me either,” I said, “But your little prison break idea isn’t going to work. I don’t see what you want us to do.”

Fridman rubbed the back of his neck and started pulling at his hair like he did when he was trying to remember a word.

“It’s not...” he started, “It’s...they *cannot* be in a cage.”

I licked my lips. “Well they are. So they can.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “They belong outside with the...zebras?”

“Zebras,” Carol nodded with a small smile.

Fridman nodded and pointed at her. “Yes! They belong outside with the zebras.”

I eyed Carol, who shrugged again, and I nodded to Fridman.

“They all belong outside,” I told him, “But some are here instead.”

“But...they’re horses.”

“I know what they are.”

“They can’t be here.”

“They can,” I said, “Now, you have a truck to drive.”

He hesitated. “Davis has the keys?” he asked Carol, “I will tell him. Then, we can go.”

I shook my head. “If these things are living here, Davis probably knows already. Come on!”

Carol stepped forward and placed a hand on his arm.

“I can talk to Davis,” she said, “And get this whole thing figured out. Don’t worry, honey.”

He looked at her for a moment. I rolled my eyes.

“Do your damn job and drive the damn truck or I’ll find someone who will.”

I grabbed Fridman by his collar and threw him back into the hallway towards our exit. He glanced back at the horses again, so I gave him a stiff shove forward. I didn’t look back, thinking if I did, a horse might actually lift its head to return the stare. I imagined glossy, black eyes filled with some sort of judgement. It was enough just to

hear the echo of their tails thwack, thwack, thwacking at the walls as we headed back into the sunlight.

Once we got back to the trucks, the day fell into the old rhythm. It was still hours until sunset, but we'd been up since four o'clock in the morning and we liked to end our days early. It was a Friday afternoon, so we all bounded a few blocks over to *Mamie's* for a drink or three. Except for Fridman. I had never really noticed before, but he never would join us for a night out. Even at camp, he usually just served himself a ladle of whatever canned soup we had in the pot and ate in his tent.

At the docks, I couldn't help but follow him back to his truck as he walked away from the group.

"I'll meet you there!" I called after Martin, and he nodded.

Fridman opened the truck door and paused as I jogged up.

"You're...uh....not coming?" I cocked my head to the bar.

Fridman shook his head. "I don't drink alcohol."

"You don't *drink*?"

"No," he said, raising an eyebrow.

I shifted my weight. "Oh, uh...well they might have a pop or something?"

I was afraid, if I let him, he would go back to banging his rock at the horses' cage for the rest of the night.

"No, thank you."

“You gonna just spend the night alone at camp?”

Fridman leaned back. “I don’t want to drink anything with the man who beat me earlier today,” he said sternly and repeated himself, “No thank you.”

I nodded and let him climb into the truck. I hadn’t exactly forgotten what happened. It was hard to with Fridman’s face starting to swell. I hadn’t thought my invitation through. Still, Barkley and the others certainly wouldn’t be all hunky-dory over Fridman joining us, so maybe it was better in the long run.

*Mamie’s* was a small shack built next to the bait and tackle stand. Besides the bar, there was not much seating, or standing room for that matter, but there was large dock with lawn chairs out the back door. That’s where most people ended up anyways, breathing in the fresh air and watching the packs of elephant seals lay on the beach, soaking up the last of the day’s sun.

I walked in and waved at Jack, the bartender. He was young, maybe sixteen, with long, noodle limbs and a dark tan. He was clumsy on land, always breaking glasses and bumping into people, but I once saw him and his brothers out on a canoe where he rowed as steady and smooth as I could write my name.

I stood by the counter and smiled as Jack opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a bottle of ACME and a glass for me. *Mamie’s* didn’t have any taps, but Jack and his brothers would go out and get you anything you wanted from the local liquor store. It

really wasn't about the booze to us. It was just needing a place to go. Jack's mother, Nancy, stopping by at dinner to sell plates of pot roast and mashed potatoes didn't hurt either.

"Anything for me?" I asked Jack, sliding some coins over for the beer.

He shook his head. "Anything for me?" he asked.

I pulled a letter out of my back pocket and handed it to him. I wasn't the only driver with a family out of town, and Jack was a good kid for passing our letters along. Martin tried to throw an extra nickel his way every now and then, but most of us relied on his good nature to do us the favor. Jack pocketed the letter and nodded with a smile.

I was a little disappointed there wasn't a letter waiting for me. It had been about a month since Jeanie's last posting, though I had sent some word along every week so far. I had tried calling a few times in the last year, too, but the timing never worked out. I would call when she was gone to bridge club or to the laundromat or when the neighbor, who we shared the line with, was talking to her boyfriend.

I poured the beer in the glass and walked out the door to the dock. I sat with the other drivers for about an hour, talking and drinking and, after Nancy stopped by, eating our fill. The five of us had been working together almost a year and had heard most of the stories we would tell over a drink, but after that third beer loosened us up, we ended up repeating the stories anyways. Sometimes someone let a new detail slip. Most of the time, though, it was just the repetition of a familiar voice that made you want to listen again to how Martin's brother left him out naked in the desert on his wedding night or how Riggs had snuck into the dressing room of a cabaret his last night in Paris.

I had just gotten another beer at the bar when I saw Carol walk through the door. She was wiping her glasses down, and when she set them back on her head, she sighed.

“You talk to Davis?” I asked.

“Couldn’t find him,” she said, “I halfway expected him to be here, but...”

She tilted her head in questioning way. I shook my head.

“It wouldn’t surprise me though,” I said.

I had only meet Davis a handful of times, but he always reminded me of a squirrel- not quite a rat, but still a rodent. He was just another zookeeper when I first met him, but when they booted his boss off to save money, he had swiped the master keys and offered to take over the responsibilities. Nobody was paying him anymore than before, but for Davis, telling people what do was more than enough.

“Maybe tomorrow...” she offered, “He’s usually in during the mornings at least.”

Jack brought Carol a glass and poured some scotch into it. She smiled at him and slid a few quarters across the counter, her hand lingering over his as he picked them up. He poured her a little more. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Jack placed a small bowl of peanuts before her, and she reached inside her overalls, but he turned around and started to wipe down the ice box before should could get her money out.

Carol picked up the bowl and glass and headed out the door to the back. I followed her. She found a couple of empty chairs, and we sat down.

“So why is there a herd of horses down in the dungeon?” I asked.

She snorted. “Hell if I know. Primates are my business. All I know is they came in one day in a cage marked with all sorts of warnings. ‘Danger’ ‘Do NOT release’ and such. Now they’re...well you know.”

“If they’re so dangerous...”

“Why keep them?” she asked.

I nodded.

“It was all Mr. Hearst,” she said with a smile, “He was a bit of a romantic like that. Kept visiting their area, talking to trainers, talking to the doctors. He didn’t know much about how to care for animals, but he wanted to. I think he thought if he just gave them a space where they didn’t have to worry about being hungry or being hunted, they would want to stay forever. Probably thought the devil would want to stay, if he built a nice enough room.”

She paused, and her fingers traced along the edge of the bowl in her lap.

“You liked him, didn’t you?” I asked.

Carol laughed. “You’re dreaming,” she said.

I laughed too and took a drink. “No really, was it the money? I saw his picture in the paper, and it couldn’t have been his looks.”

She sipped her drink. “Hmm...older than my grandfather, too...I mean he *was*, before Hearst died.”

“So it *was* the money? You don’t seem the type.”

Carol rolled her eyes. “Oh, I’m exactly the type. Give me diamond earrings and a mink, and I’m yours, but-”

I laughed.

“But, if I were to choose something attractive in the man-”

“Oh- *if!* Of course!”

“*If* there was anything attractive about that man, I would say it was that...he was...quiet.”

I smiled and took a sip of my beer. “Oh sure. The money just talks for him.”

“No! I mean, yes, he did use it like that, but I meant he was...calm...patient.”

“Calm?” I raised an eyebrow.

She looked down and pursed her lips. “Yes, calm. You know, after the war all the boys came back like a whirlwind, amazed they weren’t dead, going off to marry someone or drive a motorcycle- or they were drinking themselves under the table because of what they saw. So, yes, he was calm and quiet in way that he would just sit with you or...”

Carol paused and flicked her cigarette butt into the water.

“...or he would sit with the animals and let things exist around him...at least that’s the way he seemed. He never actually talked to me directly. He liked the monkeys though...”

Carol looked down at the bowl in her lap, set her drink down on the dock, and began shelling the nuts. I looked out at the water, saw the sky darkening around the

sunset. Jack and one of his brothers came out and started lighting lanterns. People were laughing around us, but the air around Carol and I was only filled with sound of cracking peanuts. I wanted to change that. I leaned closer to Carol.

“What about Jack,” I whispered, “Is he...quiet? Or...is he too young for you?”

Carol smiled, the lantern lights reflected off her glasses.

“Jack’s too young for everyone,” she said softly.

She picked her drink back up carefully and took a long sip.

“So, why was Fridman all beat up today?”

“Barkley got to him,” I said.

“Why does he hate that poor man so much?”

I shrugged. “Barkley was in the war, and Fridman’s always smiling at him like it’s some big joke that they work together.”

“Does Fridman know Barkley was in the war?”

I paused. “Not sure.”

“Does Barkley know that Fridman is Austrian? Not German?”

“No,” I said puzzled, “How did you know?”

Carol shrugged. “We talk. He likes the chimpanzees.”

She took out a new cigarette and lit it. “When I was young, one of the neighbors were a German couple. I mentioned this to Fridman and that I thought his accent sounded different than theirs. So...he explained why.”

“He never said anything to us...”

Carol hummed and tossed some peanuts into her mouth.

“Maybe he didn’t think it would matter. Or maybe he just didn’t feel like talking much to a bunch of people who scowled at him every time he tried to say ‘good morning’.”

I took a long drink to finish my glass and stood up.

“Thanks for the conversation,” I said, “but, I’d better head back before I can’t drive.”

Carol laughed. “What are you going to hit?” she asked, “There’s nothing from here back to the ranch.”

I shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe I’d drive the truck the wrong way and run over some poor seal on the way to the ocean.”

Carol smiled. “Well, if you’re thinking of going that way, I’d have to join you. It’s been a long time since I’ve sailed.”

In the morning, I got up early out of my tent and started the campfire to brew some coffee. It was still a few hours from sunrise when Fridman crawled out of his tent. I held up a mug and pointed at in question. He shook his head and poured some water from a jug into a cup.

“Good morning,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow and nodded his head, but didn’t return the greeting.

“We can go to Davis first thing,” I said, “Martin and the rest can handle the shipment until then.”

He nodded again and rubbed his eyes.

“Did you do this sort of thing back home?” I asked him, “Get up early? Drive trucks of animals to boats?”

He snorted. “No. I worked at a hotel before the war.”

“A hotel...with girls in it?”

“No,” he rolled his eyes, “Just a hotel. It was a pretty town, and there were many people on holiday. I carried their bags.”

I nodded, remembering the long nights driving home after some tourist wanted to see the Chinese Theatre or Venice Beach last minute.

“Like vultures, weren’t they? The tourists?”

He raised an eyebrow, and I tried to mime the animal. He laughed and shook his head.

“Not all,” he said.

“You miss your family?” I asked.

He nodded, and I nodded with him. We sat in silence for a moment until Fridman started talk.

“The first time I came to this country, I was a prisoner,” he said, “It was one of the best moments of my life.”

He paused and looked at me, but I stayed quiet and patient.

“I didn’t want to fight...but my mother...and the neighbors...I knew it didn’t matter what I wanted. It was cold on the ship when we were captured. My hand almost froze to one of the walls. There were too many of us in one place, and we started to get ill. Compared to that...Arizona was paradise.”

Fridman looked to the zoo and shook his head.

“We had a cage too, but it was nothing like that. I could run outside in the light. I had books. I could leave the prison and work. I truly enjoyed myself. I learned English, so I could stay.”

“So, you just been here ever since?” I asked.

“No,” he sighed, “They wouldn’t let me. I went home, but...it was not right. People were angry, shocked, and hungry. My sister’s husband had died, and she was angry I had lived. I left for Spain within a week, and came back here after a few years. I know now that I was lucky. I know what I had was not a real cage...nothing like these.”

After Martin woke, I poured him a cup of coffee and explained where Fridman I would be.

“Shouldn’t take too long,” I assured him, “Then, we’ll be right back with the rest.”

Martin nodded, but kept rubbing circles on his forehead.

Fridman and I found Carol sitting under a tree by the entrance to the menagerie. I joined her, feeling the hard bark as I slid down. Fridman joined soon after. We sat in silence, listening to the sounds of the animals and the leaves rustling above us. Finally, we saw a car pull up. Carol stood and straightened her overalls. She walked towards the driver’s door and waited for Davis to exit. When the man finally came out, he was wearing a white tee shirt and blue jeans instead of the usual coveralls and work boots. He didn’t even have gloves with him. Carol quickly explained the situation, adjusting her glasses as she walked with him to the entrance.

“So, we don’t even really need you to be there,” she said, “Just the keys.”

Davis smirked. “This 38-B?” he asked.

Carol rolled her eyes. “You know it is.”

The man laughed. “Oh no, I’m going to want to be there when you see this.”

“See what?” Fridman asked.

Davis only walked past him and into the dark menagerie. Fridman and I shared a look and turned to Carol, who shrugged. We walked behind him. The sky was beginning

to lighten, so we could see the pathways, but the walls and cages were still dark. My eyes tried to focus on the cages as we passed them, getting used to the shadows. Davis took another quick turn leading us back to the large horse enclosure. He took out a large keyring and pawed through the pieces until he found the right one. He inserted it and turned back to us.

“This one never fails,” he said with a twisted grin as he opened the cage.

Fridman, Carol and I stepped out of the way as the door swung free, but there was no rush, no dash to freedom. Rather, the horses closest to the door crept back. Some of the others protested, high whinnies as they backed against the bars on the sides. They chomped on each other’s manes, pulling deeper into the shadowed corners of the prison. The three of us stepped back in wait, eyeing Davis who was still grinning behind the gate. One minute. Two. The horses stayed where they were, heads finally pulled back showing wide-eyed fear and tense legs pressed against one another.

Davis nodded. “There. Amazing, isn’t it? Couldn’t get them to graze if I wanted to.”

Fridman stepped closer. “Couldn’t you make them leave?” he asked.

Davis eyed the man up and down. “I could,” he said, “But it would be a lot more trouble than it’s worth. Besides, they’re all nice and neat where I want them.”

Davis turned around and began to turn the key back. I could see Fridman clenching his fists, but Carol came up next to him and placed a hand on his arm, sliding it down to his fist. Fridman opened it, and Carol slid her hand in.

I cleared my throat. “Do you really need to lock it?” I asked, “I mean, like you said, they’re right where you want them, and they’re not leaving anytime soon.”

Davis glanced back at the cages and over to me.

“Well, it is against regulations, but I suppose that rule could be bent, provided the circumstances.”

He pulled the key out and pocketed the large ring. I could feel Fridman easing more at the sight.

“Right, prefect.” I said, clamping a heavy hand on Davis’ shoulder and turning him back to the hallway.

I craned my head and saw Carol and Fridman getting closer to the gate. There was a slight squeak as they opened the gate again before I heard their steps behind ours. I felt my heart start to lighten at this little victory. But then, there was another rusty squeak and a *click* that had me pause. I let Fridman and Carol pass me with confused glances; they must not have heard. I smiled back and waved for them to continue. I turned to the cage to see the door firmly closed and a mud-covered stallion pulling its bent head back through the iron bars’ gap.

I didn’t tell Fridman or Carol what I saw. They seemed hopeful and happy at giving the horses a chance. As the day went on, I noticed Fridman would pause and cock his head towards the entrance as if waiting for the sound of hoof beats coming closer.

There were no echoing stampedes that day or the next. Or the next. When the days were slow, I would sometimes look over our makeshift card table, and notice Fridman was missing. I would find him back by the horses, sitting against the wall with the door wide open. He left treats outside to try and lure them out: apples, carrots, and one day he even convinced Carol to place their daily food helping outside the cage. The horses went hungry that day.

After a while, Carol and I tried to get Fridman to stop. We pointed out how the horses were more bothered every time he opened the gate.

“They are only like that when you two enter. They know me now,” he protested.

I found this to be true, later, when it was decided the horses would be sent off as well, their large diet digging into funds. With little time left, Fridman began spending every spare minute trying to bring the horses out. I found myself looking for the man in the hallways of the menagerie again, but I was tired and more quiet this time as I came around the stone corner. I saw Fridman, apple in an outstretched hand as the horse closest to the gate leaned its head for a bite. It was the brown stallion I noticed always guarding the herd from the gateway. The others backed away per usual, but it leaned forward, hoofs still inside, for the juicy treat. Fridman was within the horse’s reach, which surprised me. It seemed he was changing his tactic. Fridman let the apple go as the stallion settled its teeth into the fruit. The horse drew its neck back into the cage, chopped one bite out, and let the apple roll for another to pick it up.

Fridman lifted his hand back up and took a step closer to the horses. The others retreated, but the stallion remained at the opening. It lifted its neck to Fridman and let

him place his hand on its nose. Fridman inched closer again until he had each hand on the large animal's head. He leaned in and set his own head against the stallions. I saw his face, creased and aged in the recent days, relax for a moment in their shared touch. I think he understood this small moment would be as close to a stampede as he would ever get from these creatures. He was enjoying the achievement while he could.

When the time came, Carol suggested drugging the herd's water, since they obviously wouldn't come willingly. The horses remained standing, but didn't seem to notice when the gate opened. The zookeepers lead the drowsy horses from the cage to trailers we hooked to the back the trucks. It took two trips to load them on the boat, but they all made it. When the ship's cage closed, there was a moment when Fridman and I were left unattended with the thoroughbreds. He placed a hand on one of the bars, but either the animals were still drowsy or none of them cared to get close to Fridman again. He slowly pulled his hand away and tucked it into his pants pocket.

I nodded and the two of us left the ship. The others were already off to *Mamie's*, loud and happy. Though I still felt myself sharing in Fridman's sadness, I also couldn't help but smile at the sounds and the view of the ripples in the water as the ship peeled off back to Los Angeles, my thoughts in tow.

# **Shore Walkers**

## Inherited Grievances

### *Chancellor, Iowa- 1990*

For the second time that day, Buster Gorns considered burning his father's motel to the ground. As he helped the final couple check out, he tried to think of other methods for getting rid of the dump his father had saddled him with, but every time he just came back to the idea of purity by fire. He wasn't a pyromaniac. At least, he was pretty sure he wasn't. Sometimes Buster tried to look at his childhood memories for some kind of clue as to how he had gotten...where he was; something to tell him why his dad had sent him away. Things were still jumbled, though.

His sister, Pola, wasn't exactly helpful when he asked her.

"Nothing was wrong with you," she paused, "Well...nothing more than any other kid. You acted out a little, but nobody really knew...until they called Dad and told him. We probably still wouldn't have known if he wasn't such an asshole."

Still, Buster couldn't help but feel Pola was leaving something out. There must have been something more. Some kind of break in Buster he just couldn't remember. Something that made Darrell Gorns nod his head at the hundreds of shady drug dealers and late-night hook ups, but turn to his own son with watchful, weary eyes.

Buster eyed the thin, blonde woman in front of him. She looked tired, but a soft smile arched the dimples up on her dark skin. She pushed the key and leather tag forward on the desk. Buster picked it up and inspected the room number on the tag. 103. The motel didn't have that many rooms, but his father had thought large-numbered rooms

made the place seem more fancy. He checked the log and made a note, turning back to the till to ring her out.

“How was everything?” he asked out of habit.

The woman smiled, pulling at the end of her too-big motorcycle jacket.

“Oh just fine,” she said, “Does anyone ever say differently? *Everything was terrible or I just had the worst time?*”

Buster punched some numbers on the cash register and paused.

“Some,” he admitted, though he was pretty sure most of them were just making a bad joke.

Buster told the woman her total, and she dug in her jacket pocket, pulling out a few crumpled up twenties. He picked them up and straightened the little wads of money. They bounced up a bit in the drawer, as if trying to pull away from the other bills. There was a soft, scratching noise behind him that made his hand hover. *Jack needs to be let out*, he told himself. He pulled out the woman’s change and pushed over the counter.

“Where you headed?” he asked as he pulled out the receipt pad.

“San Diego.”

Buster whistled. “That’s gotta be what? Another three days straight driving?”

The woman snorted. “Probably four or five. We want to spend a night in Vegas, and it’ll probably rain sometime between now and then.”

“Still. That’s quite a way.”

She shrugged. “We started in Boston, made our way to New York, then Chicago.”

“And now Chancellor?” Buster asked.

“Chicago was too expensive,” she said. “This is where we landed when nightfall hit.”

Buster nodded. “Landed” was a good term for what most of Chancellor’s people did. It wasn’t necessarily the place you aimed for, but it was the place you landed. Buster thought he definitely didn’t like the town when he was younger. He was sure of that. He remembers always feeling bored and frustrated like the town was purposefully trying to make sure he never had any fun. Then, when he came back, it was nice. Anything was better than Crystal Lake, but more so, it was nice to be able to make his own decisions again. He didn’t have to follow any particular schedule, went out wherever he wanted, ate as much processed junk as he could find. And, people he didn’t even know seemed real happy he was back and feeling better. Now, he felt a similar itch from when he was a kid. Like the town didn’t fit him anymore. Except, instead of wanting to go to some city like Des Moines or Cedar Rapids, Buster felt like going into the mountains somewhere nobody could find him.

Buster opened the door to the back room. It was a small, windowless place that used to be his father’s office. There was a couch against one wall and a desk against the other, with just enough room for the desk chair to pull out between them. The sole light source was an old desk lamp Darrell had bought in 1966. So far, it had been bright and reliable, but Buster wasn’t sure what he would do when it needed a new light bulb. There was a file cabinet too, but after Darrell’s death, Buster had bought a computer and started to convert the files to digital records. It was too hard to take the cabinet out, so he left it in the corner and used it as a dresser.

Buster found Jack asleep on the couch. Jack was a Jack Russell Terrier. Not a very original name, but that was the point. Buster and Pola's mother, Mallory, had been a fan of silent films, and named her children after the eccentric actors. Even in a town where all the children grew up together, their names never seemed to stop being a hot topic for teasing. It didn't help that both children took after Darrell, who was tall and broad. The girls used to call Pola something mean. Roley-Pola? Porky-Pola? Buster couldn't remember exactly, but he knew it was the reason she had signed up for volleyball in the sixth grade. By high school, she was still taller and wider than most of the girls in her class, but it was muscle instead of baby fat. Pola had two children now: Mary and Christopher. Buster had Jack.

The terrier was on his back, legs up against the back of the couch, face rubbing into one of the blankets. Jack sneezed and flipped over as Buster walked in. Buster walked to his father's filing cabinet and opened the top drawer. He wiggled his arm into the back where he knew his father had kept a box of cigarettes after he had supposedly quit. He pulled them out, knocking some dust off the pack. They had been buried back there for the last year, but he figured they would still do the trick.

He looked around the room. After their mom died, Buster and Pola spent most of their childhood hopping from empty room to empty room for the night. Darrell made it so their items had to fit inside an old duffle bag they shared. Their father would join them sometimes, rolling out an old sleeping bag at the end of the queen-sized bed. Most nights, though, he spent alone in his office. When Darrell died, Buster had moved into the office, enjoying the distance from the guests in their rooms. It wasn't so much the thumps and

cursing that disturbed him as much as not being completely sure where the noises were coming from. At least if he heard something now, he knew he needed new medication.

He eyed his duffle by the desk. If all his belonging survived the fire, it would be suspicious, but he could make sure the important items, at least, weren't too damaged. He found his father's medal from Korea and a family photo album his mom put together. He could put them in his car, and tie Jack to the main building's porch. He'd come back once the flames got started, and take Jack for a walk in town. By the time he'd return, hopefully it'd be all over. He would tell people there was a couple who hadn't checked out yet. All the files would be lost, so they would have to take his word for it. Yes, this could work.

Buster clipped Jack's leash on his collar. The dog began to pull and jump as Buster led him outside the building and tied him to a rail by the front door. Buster dropped the photo album and medal at his car and booked it back to the office. He traveled down the hallway, hands brushing the worn, cornflower wallpaper. They had been warned about its flammable nature. Buster grabbed a bottle of whiskey and a box of matches from the desk in the back room and gathered them up along with the cigarettes. He grabbed one of the room keys on his way out.

Room 228 was the last in a row of rooms along the flat, one-story main building that snaked around the hill. Buster looked out towards the highway. Though the flat plains spread out like a quiet ocean, it was still pretty isolated. If it weren't the only motel close to town, there's a good chance nobody would come up there. Buster unlocked the room and turned the lights on. He kept the curtains closed and placed the whiskey,

matches, and cigarettes on the dresser by the television. He walked over to the bed and turned over the green, quilt-like bedspread, exposing the cotton underbelly. He walked over to the nightstand and picked up the yellow notepad by the phone. He started to rip up the pages and cardboard backing, sprinkling the remains over the white bedcover. He tried to pile the items close to the wall for the flames to catch the wallpaper and spread to the other rooms. He saw an ashtray by the lamp and picked that up too. Buster emptied all of the cigarettes into the little black bowl, fanning them out. Then he heard something.

Not the scratching he was used to or thumps or sirens. This was more of a “plop-plip”. Something softer than normal; something he wouldn’t usually be agitated with. But, he was already feeling anxious. He felt his center of gravity switch, as it did when he got too nervous. Side effect of the meds. The flowers on the wall seemed to tip slightly, and his legs moved uneasily as he tried to find steady footing on his way to the bathroom. He had hired a plumber to look at the pipes and assess any damage after winter ended, so he knew it probably wasn’t a leaky faucet. Buster saw a shadow move by the mirror. He closed his eyes. Out of sight; out of mind. He reached into his back pocket and tightened his fingers around his pill bottle. He shook the bottle by his ear. Rattle-rattle. Only rattle-rattle.

Buster lowered the bottle. Plop-pba-plip.

He bit the inside of his cheek and felt his hand on the tile wall for the light switch. He shook the pills by his ears again. Only rattle-rattle. He would turn on the light and everything would be okay.

Buster flipped the switch and opened his eyes. There was a pool of black gunk in the sink like the pipes had started flooding oil instead of water. What the fuck did these people do to the room?

He peered closer, and a small, wave of the black moved up. Plop.

It was...a little hand?

He got closer and made out a small head and body shadowed in the liquid, curled into the basin. It was a baby.

Shit.

Buster shut his eyes again. Counted to three. Opened. Still a baby. Shit shit. He curled his fingers around his face, and pulled, as if he could remove himself from the whole situation. He wasn't sure what to do. Call the police? Move the baby? Keep the baby where it was? Weren't you supposed to keep a crime scene the way it was? He turned back to the bedroom and ran to start picking up the bits of notebook and cigarettes. He brushed everything into the wastebasket. He could take care of that later. Buster stripped one of the pillows of its case and went back to the bathroom. The baby was moving more at the increased noise.

Buster saw towels left on the floor stained with inky splotches. He kicked them over beneath the sink, and reached for the "hot" water handle. The water trickled out in small, cold streams, overflowing the black liquid. Buster felt the flow begin to heat up, and the water started to pull back the gunk over the baby. The mix made little bubbles that popped back at Buster. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, the skin coming back speckled and smudged. Then he looked down at the baby.

He thought maybe the light was creating weird shadows again or reflecting off the shiny black pool, but as he peered closer the baby's skin remained a light, silver hue. The form squirmed, splashing water back onto Buster's shirt and the towels. He didn't look away. He stayed, fixed on the way the dark swirls in the water ran down the baby, outlining the silver ridges covering its...their body. The baby had shiny scales, like a fish. They reflected in the light green or yellow, as the water moved over them.

Buster closed his eyes again, but didn't reach for the pill bottle. He opened his eyes and stared back at the baby.

"Stay," he mumbled, pointing.

Buster turned around and lifted his head to the ceiling lights. He clenched his fists. Unclenched them. Clenched again. Felt his pulse, quick and steady. Buster left the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He sat on the bed by the phone, biting the skin by his nails on one hand; the other hand pulling at the curls on his head.

He stood up and pulled the flyswatter from the nail by the door. Buster opened the bathroom door again. The baby was still splashing in the smoke colored water, fists curled close to their chest. Buster leaned forward, hand still on the knob, and brushed the edge of the flyswatter over the baby's skin. It felt rigged as scales might. He dropped the swatter on the towels, took a step, and outstretched his hand.

Buster had problems hearing and sometimes seeing stuff, but had never had a problem with his touch. The baby was soft, wet, and still a little gooey. It wasn't a grounding touch to keep him centered like when Jack would nip at him if he thrashed in his sleep. Still, he held on to the moment. It looked like any other baby, besides its skin. Buster was reminded of visiting Pola in the hospital after each of her children were born,

holding his tiny family in his arms. The baby in the basin stirred under his touch, face nudged towards his palm. They opened their eyes. The pupils were wide and black like a fish or someone scared for their life. He thought back to the drugged looks he saw back at Crystal Lake. Buster had tried not to look at himself in the mirror when he was there, but he thought he might look the same way.

The eyes caught the light, and for a moment they seemed to glow a soft yellow color. They reminded Buster of something from his childhood. A baseball game with friends or rolling down a grassy hill. He suddenly felt calm and at ease.

Pola was on her lunch break at the hospital, and it sound as if she appreciated her brother calling. Still, she had paused her biting remarks, when Buster explained to her that he thought he had seen something weird, and just wanted to have her confirm it before he had to call his doctor.

“I just- I want to be sure,” Buster said, “But, you’re working and-”

“I’ll be right over,” Pola said.

“You sure?”

Pola made a soft noise like she was trying to swallow something quick.

“Mm. Yeah, one of the other nurses owes me. Give me fifteen, and I’ll be up there.”

Pola still had on her scrubs when she pulled into the parking lot. She looked like an overripe banana in the dark yellow cloth patterned with pictures of Curious George. Her black curls were tied back in a low ponytail behind her shoulders, the clung to the fabric as she moved.

“So what was it?” she asked, looking around at the motel’s yellowing grass, “A deer again?”

Buster furrowed his brow. “The deer could have been real.”

Pola shrugged. “Sure, sorry. So, what was it?”

Buster let her into the room and quickly, shut the door. He pushed the latch in place. His sister raised an eyebrow at him. She eyed the bottle of whiskey on the table and scraps of paper still remaining on the bed.

Buster sighed. “Just look in the bathroom, please.”

Pola rolled her eyes, but nodded, and walked to the bathroom door. He closed his eyes, heard the door squeak and the towels being pushed back.

“Buster,” Pola called.

He walked up the other room, still covering himself a bit with the doorway.

“What am I looking at?”

Buster's heart sank, he reached his hand to his back pocket. His eyes hit the cruddy vinyl tiles.

“I..uh...I thought I saw a baby.”

Pola nodded. “I uh see one too,” she said, “Buster, did you...uh...take this baby from somewhere?”

Buster snapped his head up. “I didn’t steal a baby! They were there when I came in this afternoon.”

Pola bit her lip. “Okay. okay. I had to ask.”

She picked up a towel and started to pull the baby out of the sink.

“Why didn’t you call the police?” she sighed, “And what the hell is all over it?”

Buster followed his sister back to the bedroom. He eyed her as she carefully moved the baby from wet towel to the wrinkled sheets.

“I don’t know? Molasses?” Buster guessed

Pola turned around and shook her head.

“I meant under that, Einstein.” she said, “Makeup? I don’t know how they’re going to get it off. It’s probably toxic.”

She walked towards the phone. Buster hurried over and pulled her arm back.

“Hey!”

Buster let go of her arm. “Sorry, but no...just...no..I mean look!”

He pulled on her scrubs this time, closer to the baby.

“Look. I don’t think it’s make up. Look closer. Touch. I don’t know.”

Pola raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think it’s makeup...”

Buster shook his head.

Pola nodded. “Okay...then what do you think it is?”

“I don’t know. An alien?”

“An alien? Like what? E.T. had a baby in your sink? Now the Terminator’s going to come after you? And makeup’s the cra- the bad idea?”

“The Terminator doesn’t fight aliens,” Buster mumbled.

He lifted his head and pointed. “Just touch the skin, and tell me that’s makeup.”

Pola looked at Buster for a moment and back to the phone, but she lifted her hand anyways and brushed her fingers over the baby’s skin. Her fingers came back with trails of the black water, and she paused. She placed both hands on the child, gently pushing as if to find some sort of seam or some other explanation.

“Is this a joke?” she asked, “Is this payback for me not stopping what Dad did? Cause-”

“No!” Buster rubbed his eyes, “God! No! I just came in and found him...her? It? Them?”

Pola looked down and moved one of the baby’s legs. “Her.”

“You sure?”

“Well if it looks like a vagina, and talks like a vagina...”

Buster cringed. “Whatever. I just found...her...and cleaned the tar pit off her, and called you cause I didn’t know what to do!”

“I’m a human nurse. If you thought it was an alien, why did think I’d be able to help?”

“I didn’t call you cause you’re a nurse! I called you cause I thought you’d at least listen to me!”

Pola frowned. “Sorry, I just...I don’t know...we should still probably call the police.”

“Pola.”

“What?! That is what normal people do when they find a baby, Buster! Even if it does have...a skin condition.”

“A skin condition?!” Buster asked, throwing his hands up.

The baby mewled and turned, clutching the sheet tighter.

Buster looked at his sister, spreading his hands in a “let’s calm down” gesture.

“Okay,” he said, “ignoring the skin thing. What would you do?”

“I would still call the cops.”

“Besides that! I mean, is she healthy? Sick? Cold blooded?”

Pola raised an eyebrow and cocked her hip. Buster walked to the dresser, and took the whiskey bottle, handing it to her.

“Humor me.”

Pola grabbed the bottle, but didn’t make any move to drink.

“Well, it’s obviously not a newborn. Too big and healthy looking.”

“You sure?”

“I did go to school for this sort of thing, you know.”

Buster shrugged. “Sorry. Just, the people who checked in did not have a baby with them.”

“You sure?”

“Pretty sure. The woman wasn’t pregnant or anything either. They just checked in and checked out. Normal.”

Pola nodded. “Sorry, just, you’re not exactly the best eye-witness, and- look, I’m not stupid, Buster. I saw what was in the trash, and I can figure what you were setting up. I just have to make sure this isn’t some weird way of getting my attention.”

“This isn’t a cry for help, Pols!” Buster said, “This isn’t about me, or my brain...or really even you, but I thought you could help. Cause, as you’ve already pointed out, I can’t exactly rely on myself most days.”

Buster looked down and fingered the bedspread. He looked at the little lump in the blankets. She had her fist over her face as if she were trying to block out the world and the light.

“If we call the police, can you tell me for sure they won’t take her away or lock her up or even just shoot her cause they’re freaked out?”

He felt Pola’s eyes on him.

“B, you can’t just take her like she’s some stray,” Pola said, gently, “This isn’t like Superman...I mean she’s *really* not like Superman...but, even if you want to protect her, raising her would be something totally different.”

“It doesn’t have to be me. I mean, I know I’m not really responsible...Jack doesn’t always get dinner on time, even...but, she needs someone.”

“Oh, come one, B! It’s not as if she’s going to be experimented on. These *are* the good guys.”

“Really? Cause in my personal experience, people who are different, aren’t helped. They’re changed. They’re *fixed*- whatever *fixed* means. Or they’re killed.”

Pola looked down.

“You had an idea once of what that was like,” Buster said, “Just a small glimpse, but if you would remember that...”

Buster ran a hand through his hair.

“It doesn’t have to be me...” he repeated.

Pola sighed and tried to fix a wrinkle in the sheet. The baby squirmed again, and opened its eyes again. They caught the light again and shined the same warm yellow as before. This time, Buster remembered his mother tickling his arms with dandelions, telling him to make a wish. Pola stopped for a moment, and ran a finger down the side of the baby’s face.

“No,” Pola said slowly, “Maybe you’re right.”

She opened the whiskey and took a small drink.

“I’m not saying you’ll be Mr. Mom,” she said, “But, she’s going to need someone who doesn’t jump to conclusions or judgements if she isn’t like other children. And, maybe she’ll be incentive for you to be more careful.”

She gestured back to the bed.

“I’ll be checking in on you,” Pola added, “I’m trusting you with a child’s life, and I take that seriously.”

“So do I,” Buster said, meeting her eyes.

“I’m checking in every day.”

“I’m not screwing this up”

“I’m not saying you would intentionally...”

“I’m *not* screwing this up.”

“Okay,” Pola said slowly, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t help you. I have books you should read. Clothes. If you do this, I’m not just letting you do what you think is best. You seriously have no idea.”

“You’ve made that pretty clear,” Buster said.

“She may need mittens,” she said.

“Mittens?”

“For her fingernails. Babies scratch their faces a lot. She might be okay with the-” she gestured to her face, “but, mittens might help.”

“Noted.”

Pola took Buster's hand and looked him in the eye. He felt like she was trying to stare him down or see if he was bluffing or maybe just figure out what she was supposed to do.

"Please," she said, "think about this."

Buster nodded, though he really wasn't sure "thinking" was the sensible thing to do in this sort of situation. Rationally, he knew there weren't any "good" options; just "bad" and "worse". Still, there was something beyond rationality that made him want to care for this child. Something that was a mix of fear and hope.

He bent down, picking the baby up and brushed a hand across her forehead. Her eyes were scrunched tight, lips puckered, seeming already unhappy with her surroundings. As he pulled his hand back, the baby's hand moved forward, little nails and scales brushing his palm.

*Scrit-shhhh.*

## Looking for Pain

### *Boston, Massachusetts-1989*

Lucy liked being a pigeon, when time allowed it. When she was younger, she hadn't cared for this form. Pigeons were common and a bit ugly. But, as she aged, she learned to appreciate being a pigeon, and decided against changing her bird-shape as some sirens did over time.

There was something nice about the anonymous aspect of the pigeon. Nobody ever went bird-watching for pigeons. If you happened to fly nearby, nobody pointed you out as they might a hawk or eagle. It was especially nice if you had to leave a place, or say a crime scene, in a hurry. People remembered pretty birds. Nobody remembered a pigeon.

Lucy flew back to apartment, her wings toned enough to flap effortlessly in the harsh wind. It was easier, in this weather, to fly up to her apartment than expect that she could land down safely on her fire escape, so she dived down into an alley and onto a dumpster. The bakery next door had spread stale bread onto the lid of the dumpster, and it took her a second to steer her mind from eating. She reminded herself that she had plenty of bread and other good foods back at her apartment. But, there was something about being a bird that required an urgency in eating, so she picked up a nearby crust and flew past the ladder to her floor.

She began to change her form. It was a bit painful when out of practice, as Lucy was. She felt her bones realign, her air sacs diffusing, her talons turning soft and tender. Once she had hands, she pushed the window open with some effort. Her bones were still

fairly thin, but Lucy didn't want to be found naked on the fire escape...again. Once inside, she hid behind a curtain and let the rest of her feathers fall away comfortably. Maybe she would have enough for another pillow. She had a robe hanging on the wall, and she put it on her. She breathed in the lingering scents of last night's rose-scented candles, and walked towards the bed where Max was still asleep.

It was a tiny apartment. A small, pay-by-the-month sort of studio with the bare essentials. There was a bed, a few books and notebooks scattered on the floor, some clothes in piles by their bags, and paper towels. There wasn't need for much more. They almost never cooked, preferring to order in or go out. And in a few months' time, they would leave again.

Lucy heard Max before she saw him. It was a year ago, and she had just returned to New York for the summer. She went to a small bar in West Village that had a kitchen she knew would still be tossing out pizzas after midnight. They had added a piano in the last few years, though. Her ears had perked up that night as the music switched over to a softer number from the thirties; one that she couldn't remember the name of, but she was sure she heard before. His voice was clear and easy once he had slowed the chords down. Lucy spun around slowly on her barstool to get a look and had to laugh a little, because who had ever heard of a siren being drawn to her mark by a song.

She craned her neck to see his face bent over the keys. He was attractive, which was always a bonus in these sorts of situations. When you were spending days on end with each other, it was nice to at least be able to stand the sight of them. He was on the short side, but still taller than Lucy, with shoulder-length black hair and a small goatee.

When the song was finished, he stood up and a different player took up his place. Lucy was about to follow him, but she saw him coming towards the bar anyway. The bartender set a glass of lemon water down for him, and the pianist nodded in thanks.

Lucy breathed in his scent slowly. He was straight, which was nice. Sex wasn't required for siren encounters (they weren't succubi or incubi, thank you), but it gave you something to pass the time. If you were a "laster", like Lucy, you had nothing but time. Some sirens only used their marks for a day or a night or a few hours. "Lasters" took their time, bringing the mark with them to draw out whatever pain they could.

Lucy closed her eyes and started to pull apart the smells. A woman's perfume and a fruity soap. Girlfriend? Wife? Or maybe he just liked those scents? Lucy had spent time with a few men like that. There was the scent of crayons and peanut butter. Children, most likely, but again, sometimes she was wrong. A dog too. One they didn't bathe too often. It formed the finishing touches of a picture of a typical family in Lucy's mind. But, there was some other things too. Lucy could smell loneliness. Well, not that precisely, but something that added up to it. The family scents were fainter than the dog's, and not just because of powerful odor. There were the smells of the bar, drinks stronger than lemon water, and copy toner. Busy at work, but not too busy. He had definitely not had sex in the last month. That was a distinctive smell, not unusual for lots of males, but still. Lucy knew there was a good chance he would be willing.

Lucy began to drum her fingers on the bar top. The thing about a siren's song was a bit of a simplification. Some sirens still sang or used music, but most preferred to blend in. People were more willing to let down their guard if they thought you were just a bystander like them. Performers got attention and quick-beating hearts. Bystanders got

even pulses and the illusion of equal footing. It helped that sirens weren't especially beautiful. Lucy felt pretty average looking. Medium height and weight, dark hair and eyes, no distinctive facial features. She never knew an ugly siren, but they never seemed to make it to movie-star glam. Seduction wasn't the tactic. Charisma and comradery was. It was a bit like a powerful hypnosis. There were humans more susceptible to the process than others, and some just totally immune. You (even just a little bit of you) had to *want* to lose control. The right combination of relaxation, the rhythm in the speaker's words, and some natural hormones sirens secreted; it took concentration, but most of their kind picked it up easily in the first few decades. Lucy had collected three hundred years' worth of practice.

"That was quite a show," she told him, "Loved the last number."

The man finished his water and turned. Lucy saw his pupils slightly dilate. There we go.

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Thanks," he said, "the owner likes jazz, but it gets exhausting after a while."

"I can believe that," she said, "What's your name?"

"Max"

"I'm Lucy, Max."

"Hi, Lucy."

His voice was soft, and he held out his hand. Lucy shook it, feeling the calluses on his worn hands.

"You're not from New York, are you?" she asked.

Max shook his head. "Philly. Do I have a tell?"

“No, not really,” Lucy smiled, “I’m just good at placing accents.”

“I have an accent?”

“Everybody does.”

Lucy stopped the finger drumming and picked up her empty glass.

“Would you buy me another drink, Max?”

Max nodded and dug into his pockets for his tip money. Lucy could have gotten them both free drinks. She had already influenced the bartender to pay for the first one. She wanted to see, though, if the pianist was fully under. She had him pay for two rounds- red wine for her and beer for him. After, she asked if he wanted to go home with her. He accepted.

The sex was not entirely pleasant, but she had had worse under her coercion. As much as she could make someone’s mind in tune to her voice and commands, their bodies would always be strangers at first. Max was used to rushing and urgency. Sex was something to squeeze into a busy schedule. Lucy let herself be rushed, though. There would be more nights, and Max would soon get used to the luxury of time.

In the morning, Lucy got up first and made herself a cup of coffee. She did not make enough for Max. It was best not to encourage comfort or a relationship with marks. It was the first lessons all sirens learned. Compassion lead way to love, and love (no matter how unsustainable or unhealthy) was bad for sirens. Abuse could be harmful as well, but there was always some level of hurt towards the marks. That was the point. Still, some humans were...fragile. So, social indifference was the best action. Treat the human like a stranger- polite, but ultimately uncaring.

Lucy watched Max wake up, and she hummed a little under her breath. This was her favorite part. His eyes hinged half-open, and slowly widened.

“Good morning,” Lucy said.

Max paused, but answered, “Good morning,” back.

His face was blank, but pale. He was still under her influence, but Lucy knew a part of him understood. Max had done something horribly stupid last night, and he was likely to continue to do things he usually wouldn't do as long as Lucy wanted it. Was she a sadist for loving that moment? The realization that the mouse had sprung a trap? Maybe. But, that was also a part of her nature in a way.

Max's fingers tapped on the blankets as if playing along to her tune. She thought her next place would have to have a piano. She would want to hear that song again.

As the oldest siren in America, Helewise had acquired plenty of money to afford one of the most beautiful waterfront homes in Boston. It was more of a waterfront mansion, actually. The building was as large as a football field with three large balconies for every wing. The lawn was an unnatural green and perfectly trim. Lucy hesitated to step on it on her way to the back yard for Sunday brunch.

She had Max offer his arm to lead her incase her pump got caught in the ground. As they neared the back patio, Lucy saw the beauty of the ocean spread out in front of her. It was like a jewel against the powder blue of the sky. She took in a deep breath of salt air. It felt like a strong espresso in the morning. She could understand why Helewise would choose this house. The blue and white tiled pool, though, confused Lucy. She saw Dulac on the patio, a sangria in hand, wave at them lazily.

“Why build a pool when you have the ocean right here?” Lucy asked.

Dulac shrugged. “Because she can?” he paused, “Plus the pool has a hot tub too.”

Lucy shook her head. Dulac was still young. Only in his 70s. He was still enjoying his gifts and place in life. He wore a flashy, purple sequins jacket and motorcycle gloves with matching purple rhinestones. His hair was a light green, the dye fading into a honey blood. Last she had seen, his bird was still a Rainbow Lorikeet. Every time he transformed, he looked like the unholy offspring of Jimmy Buffett and Elton John.

“The hot tub can’t offer us a place of worship for our practices,” Lucy countered.

“It can, if I fill it with the ocean’s water,” a voice said.

Lucy cringed. It was Helewise walking towards them with a large, red pitcher. She had on pink-tinted sunglasses and floppy beach hat, but her long, white silk dress showed this was anything but a casual visit.

“The best of both worlds,” she said, smiling at Lucy.

Helewise lead the group back to a large, gazebo with a glass table lined with breakfast food. The guests sat down as Helewise began to fill Lucy’s glass. She paused at Max.

“Oh my,” she said, “This isn’t the same pet you brought with you last month, is it? I haven’t known you to have a type, but he looks quite a bit like him.”

Lucy took a sip of the sangria. Helewise and Dulac were not “lasters”. They specialized in accidents for the humans. Dulac caused car crashes while Helewise had perfected natural disasters like storms and hurricanes. The pain they siphoned was quick, but small compared to Lucy’s. She had tried other methods, but she knew this was the

surest way to long-lasting disruption. That was the purpose of sirens; at least, that was what Helewise said. They were a way to balance out the humans' power in the world. Lucy never knew, then, why Helewise disapproved of her methods so much.

“It’s the same one,” Lucy admitted.

“Aren’t you done with it yet?” Dulac asked with a sigh, “You’ve gone across the country with it twice now.”

Max looked at Dulac as if he was going to say something, but simply cocked his head. Lucy realized he was looking at the blossoms on the tree behind Dulac.

“Those are pretty, aren’t they?” she said, touching his hand.

“Yes.”

“Would you get a few for me?”

Max stood up and left the gazebo. He began to jump to try and reach the yellow flowers.

Dulac sighed. “You and I both know you could bring on the screams quick. Come on. You. Me. Downtown. Rush-hour? That’s where it’s really at. Not these stupid games.”

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “I could. But real power is about not having to prove you have power. You’re still too young to realize that, I guess. A Chihuahua yaps because it has to make people weary before they approach it. People are already wary around a Doberman.”

Helewise nodded. “She’s right, Dulac,” she paused, “Still, there’s a difference between using one’s power for proper use and abusing it for the sake of one’s own personal feelings.”

“Personal feelings?” Lucy drew out the words, syllable by syllable as if she didn’t understand.

Helewise cocked her head. “You must admit, you’ve kept it longer than any of the others.”

“Is that what this is then?” Lucy asked, “An intervention to bring the lost sheep back into the flock?”

The older siren snorted. “Hardly. You’re a big girl. Old enough to take care of your own problems. This is just a courtesy warning for old times’ sake.”

Lucy nodded, and took a sip of her drink. She could feel the sweet juices beginning to stain her teeth. She watched as Max began to climb the tree, getting muddy scratches on his suit. Helewise began to pick up a crepe from one of the plates. It flaked a bit off.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Helewise said, “That’s how the whole ordeal got stuck in my head. I saw a shore walker the other evening. I was making a storm, and it just looked at me with its gapping eyes. Such a disgusting creature. It was lucky it left before I could fry it.”

Lucy could tell what Helewise was getting at. Shore walkers were a result of sirens showing compassion- a reminder of their sins. They were covered in scales with glowing fish-like eyes that stared at you in a pitiful way. Lucy had seen one in 1905. She had lived in Brighton at the time, and was taking an evening walk when she saw it come out of the sewer. Lucy had hidden herself and covered her nose with a handkerchief. The smell was horrid. Luckily, it had only been interested in some garbage from a nearby

restaurant and had hurried back to the sewer. Lucy had boarded a train to London the next day. She was unnerved by the idea she might see it again.

Dulac grinned. “Shore Walkers? The sea witches? I’ve never seen one. Are they really so butt-ugly?”

Lucy and Helewise snorted. Old attitudes were still ingrained in their nature.

“That is not an apt name,” Helewise said spearing a piece of kiwi on her fork, “Witch- fa!”

Dulac raised an eyebrow.

Lucy huffed. “*Witch* would imply the creature obtained power through learning, talent, or using some totem as a conduit of natural energy...”

“These bitches are just thieves, stealing the natural power of others,” Helewise continued.

The old siren leaned towards the grass and spit on it. “Unnatural.”

Max fell out of the tree, pulling a thin branch down with him. Dulac smiled and hissed as Max held his arm.

“Aw! You’re little toy looks broken, Luce.”

Helewise looked up from her plate for a moment, then went back to eating.

“That is a valuable tree,” she said, “I will expect recompense.”

## Explanations Founded on Rock

### *Scarborough, Maine- 2005*

Esther opened her eyes to the feeling of pins pricking her skin. It was a fuzzy sort of trill through her body, as if someone had held down her legs and arms and suddenly released the pressure. Jennifer stirred next to her on the bed, but Esther placed a hand atop the shifting comforter to stop her.

“It’s okay, hun,” Esther whispered, “I got this one.”

She saw the comforter lower and a slight flash as Jennifer’s eyes reflected the orange neon glow from outside the window. The glow traveled up the scales of Jennifer’s bare arms, inching towards Esther, but not quite reaching her splayed fingers. She could feel her girlfriends’ tired doubt in the dark.

“No, really,” Esther said, “I got it.”

Jennifer rolled over, silently, but Esther could almost hear her mocking, *whatever you say, Essie.*

Esther swung her legs around, toes curling at the late summer air. There was an emptiness whenever it got colder. A sort of lifelessness without any smells- no flowers nor smoky barbeques nor that mix of sweat and sunblock that always lingered around the coast.

Esther dressed quickly, finding a pair of discarded sweat-pants and a hoodie on the floor. She pulled the hood up, relaxing as the soft cotton lining hugged her bare head. She found some gloves in one of the pockets and slipped them on. Her sneakers were still muddy from the camping trip they had gone on last week, but Esther squeezed her bare

feet into them, preferring them to her sandals. There was something reassuring about being covered in the dark.

Jennifer and Esther's house on the bluff was only minutes away from the shoreline, but they rarely visited. Jennifer compared it to an alcoholic living next-door to a bar. Sometimes, you just wanted to know the possibility existed if you ever gave into temptation. You just wanted to know you had the choice. Esther could do without the choice, if she was honest, but Jennifer had bought the place with Magda back when she thought her old teacher had only months left. In the end, the old girl had almost a decade left in her while Jennifer played nursemaid. There were too many powerful memories tied into the house for her, so while Jennifer had talked about moving farther inland a few times, Esther knew not to take these fantasies too seriously. Still, there were some nights when Esther and Jennifer would dig out two lawn chairs from the coat closet and cover themselves in layers of clothes and blankets. "Just in case," Jennifer would say, though they never strayed far from the house's backyard. They would sit, two bundles of cloth with peepholes, listening to the sound of the waves in the dark. Jennifer sometimes fell asleep in the chair, peaceful, but it took everything Esther had not to stand up and run to the water. It was killing her to travel nearer to the water that night, but there was something comforting in her awareness of this fear. As if by knowing she could go off at any moment, she felt somewhat more prepared than Jennifer.

Esther flexed her fingers, feeling her scales pinch the cloth of her gloves around the steering wheel of her old pick-up. It technically wasn't Esther's car, but something she took with her when she left the Delmew family in Baltimore. They had never reported it stolen, that she knew of, but Esther figured it would be hard if they were

truthful. *Why yes, officer, we do believe we know the girl who took it! A description? About five-eight, hairless, with scales for skin. Oh, and blue eyes.*

Esther parked outside the gate and pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment. She outstretched her arms, concentrating on the pain and deeper, stronger prickles. It was hard to move along the rocky ground even with the flashlight. Esther felt too loose, almost weightless.. She followed the feeling to some tide pools off from the main stretch of the beach. They smelled like mildew and mud. Her light flashed on a pair of stark-white shoes perched at the edge of a pool. Esther waved the flashlight around, catching a figure in the pool, water splashing around their calves.

It was girl. Of course it was. Just a tiny little thing barely thirteen, if Esther had to guess. She wore a pair of stringy cut-offs and a sky blue tank-top with a picture of a cat wearing a party hat on it. The light caught at the girl's silver-scaled skin. The child lifted her head, her eyes were not the usual yellow, but a mix of orange and blue. Well, now that was new. The girl bit her lip and clenched her fists at her sides every time the water flexed against her. When she released her fists, Esther saw cuts down the girls palms. They weren't deep, but Esther knew from experience every drop of blood only made the water more painful. What was truly remarkable was the calm face the girl wore. Not a single tear; just thin, pinched lips and the drip-drop from her wounded hands.

"C'mon now," Esther said, "That can't be pleasant."

The girl exhaled with a hitch, seeming dazed for a moment as she focused on Esther. She moved slowly against the sea, staggering over to the rocky shore. As she pulled herself out, her scales grew darker from the pain. A bit of red water spilled around her feet, catching in the creases of her skin. Esther wondered how long the kid had been

out there; if she had planned to be in pain that long- if she would have waited longer had Esther and Jennifer ignored her.

“You’re here!” the girl squeaked. She shook water off a leg and slipped on her shoes.

“That’s generally what a calling will do,” Esther said, “But, I’m guessing you didn’t know that?”

The girl coughed into her towel and shook her head. “I just I wanted to talk, and it was like when I saw the water I just knew what I had to do!”

Esther nodded. “For...uh...future reference? Algae filled inside a coiled shell will do the trick too. It’s not as strong, but you...uh...don’t have to lose any DNA in the process either. Also, you know...no seawater?”

The kid’s eyes dropped. “Oh...sure. Noted.”

“You’ve got good instincts, though. It took me years to learn that trick, and I haven’t met many your age who could’ve done what you can. Well, I haven’t met many your age, but you get it, right?”

“S-so there are others?” the girl smiled, “I mean I know we’re... I was just trying to find-”

“You’re mother?” Esther asked.

The girl nodded, eyes widening.

Esther shuffled her feet. “Yeah...I’m not.....sorry.”

The girl bit her lip into a thin smile. “Yeah...uh, okay...I mean I should have figured.”

“Still,” the girl said, “you’re here. You’re really here...and you’re like me.

Her eyes widened and she tucked her lips into her mouth as if to stop her from talking more.

Esther looked down, as if she just noticed the same.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” she said.

“I just knew- or I guess I hoped- there were other...like me?”

“Oh,” Esther said.

There was a lot of pressure in seeing another like them for the first time. Esther would be seen as an example for the girl. Esther was lucky to have met Jennifer, and then Magda, as her firsts. Jennifer was friendly and open and never too stubborn. It's what made it easy for her to live with Magda. Esther would later learn it was unusual for their kind to live together, and she was fortunate to encounter the two of them. The others she met, through Magda's contacts, were scared, abused, and often traumatized by their “families” or “neighbors”. Those that had mastered the courage to escape on their own tended to be unable to trust others. Esther often thought she would have turned out the same if Jennifer hadn't shown her another way to live.

“I'm Esther,” she told the girl.

“Dorothy...uh...Dot.”

Esther nodded and offered her hand. Dot's mouth ticked up and she raised her hand to meet Esther's. Dot's arm felt limp and tired, but their skins scraped against each other, it was a comforting feel of like-ness.

“C'mon,” Esther said, “Let's get away from the water a sec and talk more. I've got a first-aid in my truck”

Dot nodded, picked up her stuff, and followed Esther up the shore. Esther stopped at flat rock by the foot of the hill and cocked her head at the girl.

“You know in normal circumstances, going to an adult’s truck is a big no-no, right?”

Dot raised an eyebrow. “I know.”

Esther raised her palms. “Just checking.”

They walked carefully back up the shore, Esther stopping every few minutes to look back at the little girl, holding her arm in back, in case Dot would need something to keep her balance. But, she didn’t. She placed her feet carefully and steadily like a hiker.

“I think it’s my destiny- finding my mom,” she said.

Esther had to stop herself from slipping.

“Your...destiny?”

“Yeah,” Dot looked at the older woman with curiosity, “You don’t believe in destiny?”

Esther tried not to laugh. “Maybe when I was younger. It’s kind of an old concept to believe in. Fate...destiny...that stuff.”

Dot nodded. “So, you’re a ‘we make our own destiny’ sort?”

This time Esther did laugh. “Uh...no. I think destiny’s just one of those things people invent to make meaning out of their lives- to make them feel like they’re not just experimenting with their lives, trying to see what works. Plus, it makes the pain seem worth it. It’s okay if you lose your arm to the fire cause slaying the dragon was your destiny.”

“It’s in all the books and movies,” Dot said softly.

“That’s like art, though,” Esther said, “They’re supposed to lie to make you feel better. To make the world more beautiful.”

Esther looked at Dot. “But, if you want to believe you have a destiny- go ahead!”

Dot looked down. “Sure, thanks.”

They made it back to the blacktop, and Esther dug into her hoodie for the keys.

“You’re lucky, you know?” Esther said, “Your name, I mean. Sure you get all the Wizard of Oz jokes, but it could be worse. I was found by a Jesus-crazy Baptist couple. Probably thought I was a test or something. Esther was obedient and trusted God in the story. I guess that’s what they wanted...”

“Why not just change your name?” Dot asked.

Esther hummed. “I wanted to at first, but as I got older, I think I grew into it. The Esther in the story? She was Jewish, but had to hide the fact. I thought we were kind of alike in that way. We were both different, trying to hide and survive a bad situation.”

“So we *all* have to hide?” Dot asked, “I mean have you ever met anyone who didn’t? Does that ever work?”

Esther shook her head. She led the girl to the passenger side of the truck and opened the door. Inside, the truck smelled musty. No, Esther had to correct herself, it just smelled less like the salt water below. It grounded her again, waking her from a drowsiness that she hadn’t realized was settling in.

“To be honest,” Esther said, pulling out the first aid kit, “I’ve only met five of us, counting you. All of them hid. One was pretty old. Her name was Magda. She said hiding was the only reason there have been more of us surviving. Apparently, in the old days,

we were easier to find- less people willing to adopt someone different. They called us demons, or changelings, and killed us.”

Dot sat down on a yellow parking block and hugged her knees. Her hands spread blood on her knees in a way that looked a bit like bird’s wings.

“Doesn’t seem that different than how things are now,” she said.

Esther hummed in agreement and sat down next to her. They stayed the silence for a while as Esther cleaned and bandaged Dot’s hands and burned legs. She felt Dot’s muscles begin to firm up as the air around them filled with the scent of rubbing alcohol. She must be sobering up, Esther thought.

Finally, Dot piped up. “I miss the stars.”

Esther looked up at the sky. They were far enough from the city to see stars. She turned to the girl, cocking her head.

“You can see so many more back home...back where I came from...they’re all over like it’s more star than sky. Here, there’s just a few like little holes in a big blanket.”

“So, where’s...uh...back where you come from?”

“Chancellor, Iowa...there’s only river water there.”

“Sounds smart of your mom,” Esther said, “Maybe she was trying to keep you safe.”

Dot shrugged and bit her lip.

“It still calls to me. No matter how far I’m from it, you know?”

Esther did know.

“How does that work?” Dot asked, “I mean how can we want something so painful?”

Esther inched closer to the girl without touching.

“Magda said it was cause we’re a curse.”

“Don’t you mean we are cursed?”

Esther shook her head. “No, she always said it wasn’t anything personal against us. That we were more like a warning, a symbol.”

“For who?”

“The same people we’re trying to find. Our parents. Our mothers. Magda was raised by her mother. She had these old photos of the two of them. Her mom was beautiful.”

Dot made a face, but Esther stopped her.

“Their version of beautiful. Long dark hair, olive skin, the works. Did a real piece of work on Magda, though. Went through life thinking she was god’s personal punishment for her mother. Called herself ‘a stain’”

“So, our mom’s don’t look like us? I mean my mom may be normal?”

“Depends on what you call normal, I guess,” Esther said with a shrug, “And who knows? Maybe they’re the same. Maybe it’s like a recessive gene- like it skips a generation. Maybe it’s from eating too many carrots or sitting too close to the TV. Who knows? Who cares? All I know is I haven’t ever had anyone looking for me but you...and you weren’t even looking for *me*.”

Dot looked down. “I just...I have a lot of questions and...”

Esther shrugged. “I can help.”

“I know...I just....”

“Or I know a couple others who could help, if you’re done with me? You could come back with me.”

“Back where?” Dot asked.

“I’ve got a house not far from here,” Esther said, “Well, it’s not *my* house per say, but...you get the idea. It’s a place to go.”

“And I appreciate that.”

“But?” Esther asked.

The girl nodded and rubbed her eyes.

Dot sighed. “But, I had an idea of what I wanted to do when I left home. And, no offence, but I feel like if I go with you, I’m just going to end up hiding or go from safe house to safe house, I’ve already done that.”

Esther opened her mouth, but Dot held up a finger.

“Not that I want to go walking down Times Square or anything, but I’m done hiding and being scared of people and people being scared of me. I used to watch people on TV getting to go all sorts of places and meeting people, and I’ve never gotten to do any of that. Before last year, I never left my house.”

“No offence, kid,” Esther said, “But that’s the kind of stupidity that gets people like us killed. People make horror films where the bad guy looks a lot like us.”

Dot shrugged. “Maybe it is stupid. But, maybe there’s a way to, I don’t know, change us. Maybe I’m not supposed to look like this, and my Mom can help me.”

Esther winced. “Is that why you’re looking for her?”

“One of them, yeah.”

Esther looked back at the sky. Leave it to her to find the kid looking to break her own heart.

“And what if this is just the way you are?”

Dot looked her in the eyes. “Then I’m still not hiding. I’ll go around the world if I have to. I just want to find a group of people willing to be with me and protect me. I don’t want to worry about others hurting me anymore. I have enough to worry about with just myself.”

Esther rocked her head back and forth. It was probably true. It certainly was for her at that age. She had been so angry. There had been days when she had just wanted to rip and punch and maybe even kill something just to stop feeling so good damn stuck.

“You got a place to stay tonight?” Esther asked.

Dot nodded. “I’ve got camp set up not far from here.”

“You sure you wouldn’t prefer a bed? We’ve got the space.”

“I’m sure. I’d probably just be tempted to stay.”

“I was.”

Esther brushed her hands off on her legs and stood up. She walked over to the truck, opened the door, and dug inside one of the cup holders. She pulled back out and handed a card to Dot.

“My number,” she said, “Just in case. It might be hard to find a phone, but-”

“I have a cell,” Dot interrupted, rolling her eyes.

Esther rolled her eyes harder back at the girl.

“Ex-cu-use me. Give it a call, then, if you need help or have a question or-”

“I get it.”

Dot nodded and pocketed the number. She smiled and turned away. As she got closer to the woods, she turned around and waved at Esther. Esther waved back and hopped into her truck to head back. Was it possible to feel both lighter and heavier after something happened? That was the way Esther felt. As if she had done something right, but something wrong too. What these things were, she couldn't be sure, but it felt like she was back where she started only now she was dizzier.

When she returned to the house, the lights were on. Esther took a moment, collecting her bearings at the distance between her and the water. Her chest felt tight like it was harder to breathe so high up. She looked up at the house and remembered the one Sunday Mrs. Delmew climbed down the basement steps and told her the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders. The Wise Builder made a house on rock where it was secure and safe from the elements. The Foolish Builder built on sand where rain flooded it.

“It fell- and great was it's fall,” Mrs. Delmew said, leaning on her checkered lawn chair.

At that time, Esther had never seen the beach in person, but she remembered what it looked like from TV. It almost never rained in her shows, and even when it did, it was a soft rain. The kissing actors it fell on never seemed to mind. But, the Delmews lived close enough to the water, that Esther would sometimes see the flooding houses and parks outside the dining room window during their occasional family dinners. She imagined the Delmews living in the Foolish Builder's house, falling and carried away by

the water. Esther could see her own body, weightless and deaf as it was during childhood baths.

Esther walked inside the house to see Jennifer in one of the living room armchairs, reading a book. She stood up as Esther came in and smiled.

“Hey.”

Esther kicked off her shoes and smiled back.

“Hey.”

Jennifer’s eyes were a golden color, looking warm and inviting in the lamplight. She walked up to Esther and embraced her. Esther’s fingers dug into Jennifer’s soft sweater. She could feel Jennifer’s cold hands reaching up to stroke the back of her head. She leaned down and dipped her face into the crook of Jennifer’s neck. She snuggled further in, breathing in the scent of their lavender detergent, and breathed out. She pushed her lips up from the fuzzy shoulder.

“I think I messed up,” Esther said.

Jennifer leaned back and cupped Esther’s face. They pressed their lips together. It wasn’t a deep, kiss they might share on nights when they drank a little too much Pinot and danced to Magda’s old Lena Horne records. It was stable and soft like condensed cotton. It was an “I’m here” kiss. An “I don’t care to be anywhere, but here” kiss. Esther pulled away first, but smiled back at her girlfriend and placed a hand atop of hers. Jennifer didn’t try to tell Esther she was wrong or that she did her best or any other automatic response. Jennifer never said something just to make someone feel better, and

she wouldn't try to comment on anything when she didn't have the full story. Esther loved that about her.

“Thanks,” Esther said.

Jennifer squeezed her hand and squinted at Esther's face, as if waiting for something else. Some explanation. Esther looked away, too tired to clarify. Why were stories always such a nighttime activity when you need so much energy to tell it properly? This story could wait til morning. She walked over to the lamp and turned it off. She could still see Jennifer's shadowy form in the dark, and she held out her arm until it felt the fuzzy sweater fabric. Esther slid her hand down and cupped Jennifer's palm, pulling her through the dark back up to bed.