

MODERN ARCANA

by

KAITLIN KOLHOFF
B.S. Northern Michigan University, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2017

© 2017 Kaitlin Kolhoff

ABSTRACT

Modern Arcana is a collection of eleven short stories, totaling 124 pages, and was written in pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. This collection was written through multiple stages of planning and revising work in response to the feedback of peers and instructors. Through writing this thesis, I explored my own relationship to the craft of creative writing and composition, as well as the familiarized myself with the current work being published in my field and genre. This collection is made unique through the sharing magical elements between pieces and the themes of agency in relation to destiny explored throughout the collection that are also inherent in the practice of interpreting the tarot. The many narrators of this collection navigate issues of family, friendship, responsibility, isolation, and the level agency with which they move forward in their multitude of possible futures.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ON READING THE CARDS.....	1
THE MERMAID	3
THE SIN EATER	6
HARLEQUINADE.....	12
THE JINNI.....	31
760-733-9969.....	38
SECURITY.....	47
THE MAGICIAN'S ASSISSTANT	58
THE COMPANION.....	66
VISTA.....	81
CHANGE.....	96
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	122

ON READING THE CARDS

Their rigid stock will push against you, resist your attempts to be bridge shuffled, and cut grooves into the soft skin where your fingers joint. The cards will still smell like the Barnes and Noble spirituality section after you bring them home, like the slow decay of paper and of burnt franchise coffee. Your thumbs will smear against the laminate gloss as you force them to cascade into an overlapping stack of possible outcomes. Do not beat the cards into submission because you find them unwieldy. Tap them gently into a stack and try to have some empathy. Eventually they will smell like your kitchen, like lemon scented cleaner and sweet onion and garbage that you should have taken out yesterday. Eventually they will loosen and bend under your thumbs and will not slip as you shuffle, the edges having gone pulpy with use. Eventually you will know all the faces that stare out from the cards.

According to the interpretation booklet that came in the box, you are rearranging an entire parade of futures with every shuffle. You will spend hours scrolling Pinterest to find tarot spreads. You will click through the posts, all of them linking to lilac colored websites from 2006, trying to memorize diagrams—heart, blocked tower, Celtic cross, zodiac, handcuff, branch and root. You will use these once, laptop warm against your elbow, fingers sandwiched between pages of booklet, until one day you are tired and the three-card spread is the only one you remember. There at least 76,000 ways to pull a three-card spread, as many as 456,000 if you care about the order in which they are pulled. More futures than you know what to do with.

You know that none of it is real. That, in the best-case scenario, these vague prophecies answer your questions on accident. That they are stagnant remains of Victorian superstition

dripped onto eastern playing cards, and all their portents are alchemy of belief. You will still look at the cards and wonder what to make of them, spread them on carpets and coffee tables, pull them out at parties. You will lose the booklet of true meaning. You will remember enough to suck air through your teeth when the tower is turned, to call your mother when the empress peeks out at you from her field of nodding wheat, to go to sleep early when you see the nine of swords. You will come to see each card for what it is, a moment of a larger story you can wedge into your own.

THE MERMAID

With every breath Polly took she could still taste the lingering salt of the ocean, sticking to her teeth and coating her tongue. She left the seaside, hoping distance was the answer to scrubbing the taste out of her mouth. The burning tinge of city air did not burn the taste from her mouth so she flavored it with hookah and cigarettes, cherishing the novelty of something as coarse as smoke chaffing the back of her throat.

She kept making her way inland in inches and feet. Moving herself a few blocks, then a few towns, then a few states away. Despite the distance she still felt the tug of tides around her ankles, pulling her back. She started wearing her hair in braids to keep the smell of brine away from her face and it took all her concentration to move one unscaled leg after another up the stairs to her room. Every move further from the ocean came with a period of adjustment, a time where all she felt was the cold sting of receding water sucking away the ground beneath her feet.

Polly ignore it as long as she could. The ocean was cold, she reminded herself. It was always night and the only time there was anything warm between her teeth was when she pulled it, thrashing, through the choppy surface. She learned to live with the tidal pull at her ankles, but sometimes at night she would dream of slithering through those dark waters. After wiping the crusted sleep away from her eyes, Polly would feel sad without remembering why.

The sadness compounded over time. It pushed its way into her waking mind and hardened like a crust, lifting memories towards the surface. The breach came as Polly carried dishes from her room downstairs to the kitchen. She was holding a week's worth of crummy

plates and cups with juice dried to the bottom when she remembered rolling in the liquid warmth that collected above the volcanic sea vents. The memory of its sulfuric tang made her eyes sting, and the steady tug so had grown accustomed to seemed to pull the ground out from under her. Polly heard the crash of plates around her, but when she reached toward the floor to stop her fall, her hands connected with nothing. She felt the pounds of pressure building above her, like the universe breaking overhead and squeezing the air from her lungs.

Her roommate found her in a wet heap at the bottom of the stairs, legs gone and tail fin spread out on the ruined carpet. She hid her face behind webbed fingers and tried to stifle her short, hiccupped breaths. Raina, though, had had a really long day, and did not quite feel like going through the theatrics of this transformation. She picked the crying mermaid up by her armpits and half dragged, half carried her to the bathroom, tail flapping against the steps like a downed banner.

Raina dumped her into the tub and left a container of aquarium salt on the ledge. “I’ve got an early shift tomorrow, Polly. We’re gonna have to deal with this later.”

The next morning, she watched Raina wash their hair in the sink. The air filled with steam and salt and suave coconut shampoo. She flipped her hair over their shoulder and Polly pointed out the suds that she hadn’t quite rinsed from her crown. After coming home from work, Raina left a pack of cigarettes on the little cabinet by the sink, the one where they kept all the toilet paper.

The two of them began to talk more than they had before, when she still had legs. Sometimes Raina would sit on the toilet tank and eat their breakfast as Polly sprawled in the tub, tail spilling over the side, fin curling against the tile. Sometimes she sat on the edge of the tub

and ranted about her coworkers while Polly worked her hair into braids with pruning fingers. Polly could still speak above the water in short, fishy gasps, but it was easier while submerged, with just her lips and nose breaking the surface. Sometimes the two of them asked each other questions they had not thought to before, when she still had legs.

How exactly do you pronounce your last name? Do your parents still live where you grew up? Are you scales orange because it matches your hair, or was that just coincidence?

“Do you have the weekend off?” she would sometimes ask. “You could drive me to the coast, if that works for you. Finally get your bathtub back.”

She always laughed at the end of the question, hemming her impatience in humor.

“Delia’s birthday is this weekend. We’re going to Cedar Point,” Raina once told her. Or, “I just worked a double yesterday. I’m in no shape to drive anywhere.” More often, the excuse was, “How would I even move you? Wouldn’t you dry out?”

“Can you at least leave your Gameboy in here while you’re at work?” Polly felt for the ash tray balanced on the soap dish at the head of the tub, not wanting to lift her head too far out of the water.

“Can’t. The batteries are dead,” she said before leaving for work.

Polly lowered the cigarette to the surface of the water and the stale bathroom air smelled like salt and smoke. The paper stuck to her lip as she exhaled with a “fuck” so soft and quiet it did not even leave a ripple.

THE SIN EATER

It was an awkward conversation for any girl to have with her mother. Outside, the sun was still shining despite the lateness of the day, one of those summer suns that hovered at the edge of the horizon right up until bed time. Through the screen door, Emma heard the shouts and laughter of the neighborhood kids bouncing between yards. They were going to bike to the quarry. Someone had left a mattress soaking in the chalky water and the potential for hijinks was endless. Emma had been ready to go with them, had already gotten her bike out of the garage, when her mother called her inside.

Her mother was in the kitchen, sitting at the breakfast table with a bag of Twizzlers at her elbow. The room was hazy with weak twilight, and muggy. The ceiling fan beat out a steady rhythm, swaying slightly, but the air remained stagnant. Emma pulled a can of pop from the fridge and slid into the seat across from her mother. In the shadowy kitchen, the sweat of the summer afternoon dried on her skin and curled the fine hairs at the base of neck. She held the chilly can against her collarbone.

“What’s up?”

Her mother cleared her throat and crossed her arms in front of her. Then she uncrossed them and crossed them again. She looked down at the Formica surface of the table, unsure of how to start, until the silence was punctured by Emma popping the tab of the can.

“Look,” she finally began, staring at a space in the air somewhere to the left of Emma’s ear, “You’re going to notice things about yourself changing soon. Maybe they already have. I just don’t want you to be confused or scared when they do.”

The carbonation swirled around Emma’s mouth and sizzled down her throat. “Mom, they showed us all a video in school last year. I know about periods and stuff.”

“There’s going to be more to it than that.” Her mother laid her forearms on the table and folded her hands in front of her. Her elbow bumped the back of Twizzlers and crinkled the packaging. She always kept them on hand. In the kitchen and by the TV, the glove box of the car and even in zip-lock bags tucked into her purse. In a grocery store last Christmas, she took a bag off the shelf and opened it right there after a man yelled at a crying baby further down the aisle. She dipped her hand in several times during the shopping trip, taking small, quick bites after seeing someone put a gallon of milk back on the shelves in the chip aisle, or when a teenager nabbed a bottle of hair dye from the pharmacy and slid it up her sleeve. Her mother had paid for the bag at the register, but by then it was mostly empty. Emma had never thought of it as odd.

“People do bad things all the time,” her mother continued. “All the time. And if they had to carry it around with them, they would keel over from the weight of it all and it would kill them.”

Emma clacked her mood ring against the can, watching the band to turn black and yellow from the cold where it pressed against the condensation. Her mother met her eyes and cleared her throat again. “Could you stop that?”

Emma set the can on the table and pushed it to the side.

“We don’t eat the big stuff. Those are the decisions they have to lug around with them until their end of days. Just the little things. White lies, small moments of selfishness, things like that. It helps to lighten the load. You’re going to start feeling it soon, so keep something handy. Something you don’t mind eating a lot of.”

“What if I don’t feel hungry?” Emma twirled the ring around her index finger.

“You won’t have a choice. I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

Emma thought back to the school year and the constant growl she’d had in her stomach. When a teacher quizzed a student until their eyes teared, or when a classmate grabbed a swing after another kid had called dibs, she would sometimes feel her guts expand inside of her, pushing at the soft pink tissues holding them all together. At lunch she was always ravenous, and during snack break, too. The lunch lady sometimes slid an extra scoop of fruit or another cookie onto her tray with a knowing look and called her a ‘growing girl.’

On the table, the pop in the can bubbled with soft metallic *plinks* against the aluminum.

“Can I go?”

Her mother stood from the table. “Yeah, you can go.”

Emma grabbed the pop can and swung the screen door open. Long purple streaks were creeping over the eastern horizon, but there was still a fist’s width of space between the sun and the earth. The neighborhood was quieter now. All the other kids and all their noise had moved on. Emma threw her leg over her bike and began to peddle, steering with one hand to keep hold of the can. If she was fast, she could get to the quarry before she missed anything fun.

She heard her mom’s voice from inside the house. “Be back before dark!”

Emma raised the pop can in acknowledgement as she slalomed out of the drive way.

She took the path through the woods to the quarry, almost tumbling from her bike when the tires bounced over tree roots. Under the canopy of leaves the air was damp and chill against her skin after panting down the suburban streets, the black asphalt releasing all the heat it had absorbed during the day. Emma broke through the last stand of trees and saw a cluster of kids across the field, strung along the lip of the quarry. She parked her bike with the others. Its kickstand sunk in the freshly tilled soil. She walked a few steps before she heard it topple into the grass and just decided to leave it.

“What’s happening?” Emma asked one of the Robertson sisters. They had lived across the street since Emma was five, but all three of them wore matching clothes. She could never be quite sure which one she was speaking to.

“There’s a trash bag on the mattress. Mason thinks it might be a head or something, but he was too chicken to climb down and see.” The Robertson sister scooped to the side to give Emma a view into the quarry. A dozen feet below them, a boy carefully picked his way down the crumbling white walls. “Ethan lost at Nose Goes, so he has to go see what it is.”

Ethan had been in Emma’s third grade class. She drained the last sips of pop from the can and watched as he spider-monkeyed his way to the murky water that had collected at the bottom of the quarry. He had left his shoes and socks at the top, his shirt folded on top of them, and his pale skin almost looked tan against the stark chalk. His chest was so skinny Emma could see his sternum through the flesh.

She looked around the group at the top of the quarry. Mason was on the far edge of the huddle, standing guard over Ethan’s shoes and shirt. She saw another one of the Robertson sisters and Delaney, the girl who had first brought the mattress in the quarry to the attention of

the neighborhood. There were even some of the older kids standing in the crowd. Dreaded middle-schoolers with loud, cracking voices and the authority that comes with having your own locker at school. Some of them had peddled their bikes right up to the edge and stood straddling them with their hands resting loosely on the handlebars.

One of the boys on a bike leaned forward and yelled. "Pick up the pace, fucktard!"

The words slopped out of his mouth, like his tongue was too big and there was no room for any sounds in there. They echoed around the chasm, battering their target repeatedly and from all sides. Ethan looked towards the top of the quarry and his foot slipped. His skinny chest smacked against the rock, and Emma felt hunger.

In her chest, Emma's heart beat in triple time. The urge to eat made her jaw ache, and she pressed her hands against her abdomen. The pop can fell to the ground and rolled off the ledge, clinking against the stone and landing in the pool below. Her skin went clammy and the ache spread to her gritted teeth. She spun the mood ring around her knuckle to distract herself.

Ethan resumed his climb down, reaching the wide ledges that tapered towards the water. He waded into the silty water and grabbed the mattress by the corner. Pulling it to the edge of the pool, he gave the trash bag an experimental shove with his fingertips. The contents of the bag lurched and settled on their side on the chalky shore. Ethan pulled at the ties holding it closed, snapping the thick plastic to get at what was inside.

"You guys, this just looks like a bunch blankets and stuff."

A rock, almost the size of a fist, whizzed past Ethan's head, bouncing off the mattress and splashing into the water. Ethan's startled face was covered in chalk when he looked up at the children on the cliff.

The thick tongued boy on the bike was laughing with another middle-schooler. “Sorry!” he called down, giggling between his words. “We were aiming for the bag!”

Emma slipped the ring from her finger and into her mouth. She swallowed before she realized what she had done.

HARLEQUINADE

If I could, I would rip that stupid domino mask off the Harlequin. Maybe I would eat it, just to see the look on his face. His cartoon grin has been in place too long. I could grind the leather between my teeth like jerky. Pull until the eye holes stretch and snap, my mouth filling with the taste of sweat, and then slurp the ribbons down like pasta. It would only be fair. He ate my heart.

He's called for the troupe to assemble. He waits for us in the woods, or what is left of it after the IHOP and the new movie theater and the exit ramp were built. I kill time in the parking lot, my hands dipping into my apron pockets and pulling out nails. They are all shiny new under the glowing blue of the IHOP sign, but they are barely longer than my pinky and hide nicely in the shadows under wheel wells. I nestle them carefully between the rubber and asphalt, balanced upright on their flatheads, pointed ends ready to slip between the treads and pierce. People leaving the IHOP do not see me. Most people do not— we are like spirits to them. They get in their cars, still licking the last tastes of syrup from the cracks of chapped lips, and drive off with the slow whine of deflation trailing them.

The harlequin is waiting in the clearing beyond the trees, his diamond checked pants flashing garishly between the gray trunks, and I know he can see me. His face is hidden behind his mask, just another dark spot in a darkening sky. The number of cars dwindle and I am running out of reasons to put off our meeting. At the edge of the IHOP parking lot, I stop to straighten my bonnet, pulling it forward to cover my ears, and smooth my skirt. Grease and

syrup mix in the air with soil and car fumes, both diesel and sweet. The tall beech trees have all gone ash-colored from exhaust and the bleak winter light. I keep my arms to my sides as I step into the tree line, flattening the full skirt against my thighs to keep the eyelets of lace from snagging on the branches that reach up from the cold soil. The delicate loops have already been mended several times.

We are not the only ones that use the clearing as a meeting place. Young people are sometimes there, and the remnants of their halfhearted rebellion litter the edges. Crumbled cans of Pabst, a half-buried bottle of Arbor Mist, a confetti of stamped out cigarettes. Shards of glass cover the ground like hundreds of shiny brown beetles, and I navigate my slippered feet carefully through it all. He does not look up as I stagger through the last of the nettles. He keeps his attention on the makeshift stage he paces, a fallen tree, squishy with moss and crumbling with damp. The baton he carries bounces against his muscled leg. He's too dramatic to face us before his monologue.

Pierrot has arrived before me, and at the dry rustle of dead branches. he turns. His skin falls in droopy jowls, but they lift slightly as his white painted face splits into a smile of yellow teeth. He sits in the dirt, a Styrofoam container of hash browns in his lap, and his baggy sleeves tied at the elbow. Little black pom poms dot the front like faux buttons and droop sadly against his stomach. Thin soled shoes peek out from his wide pant legs and even though he is a large man, this makes him look small. Like a boy that has left the house in part of his father's suit.

"I've saved the stump for you, Columbine." The stump beside Pierrot is covered delicately by a stained handkerchief. He produces a handful of ketchup packets from somewhere

inside his oversized trousers, ripping the tops off three at once. After emptying them onto the hash, he tosses them to the trees with the other garbage.

I untie the apron strings around my waist. I nod a silent acknowledgement as my gloved fingers flick the handkerchief to the dirt. I spread my apron over the mossy wood and sit.

On the log, the Harlequin turns on his heel, his thin leather shoes making a divot in the soft wood. He raises his baton, leveling it at Pierrot's skull-capped head. "It's rude to speak before a performance starts."

Pierrot's smile droops. His wide flounced collar seems to droop with it. The black triangles that frame his eyes are wrinkled in the furrows of his forehead as he turns away. He piles a bite of ketchup and potatoes onto a fork. Even though he keeps one hand under the fork as he brings it to his lips, a glob falls through his fingers and lands on the pom-pom buttons. At one time, his awkward advances stirred the sister emotions of pity and sympathy in me. I accepted his sprigs of flowers and notes of affection, pocketing them in my apron before dumping them onto the asphalt later, blossoms dried and words unread. Sympathy can only stretch so far and a century of living will make pity an inconvenience.

I use my toes to push the handkerchief toward him, its edges catching on the bits of crushed leaves.

He picks it from the dirt and dabs at the pom-pom, but in wiping up the mess only makes it larger. I sigh and look towards the trees. The grey evening is being quickly replaced by inky night. The flickering halogens of the IHOP sign cuts through spindly branches, blanching Pierrot a lighter shade of pale. Shadows fall in stripes over my goose-fleshed arms and still the Harlequin paces. My fingers itch where the nettles have opened tiny scratches. I could close the

space between us in four long strides and push him to the ground, grab the baton from his hand, and grind his tricorne hat under my heel.

“Friends and admirers, I am in love.”

The Harlequin stares down at us, his eyes bright behind his domino mask. Pierrot shakes his jowled face, another bite of hash browns balanced in front of his slack mouth.

“That’s great, sir,” he says to the Harlequin.

I watch the Harlequin leap from his stage, landing in a graceful lunge before my peer. Pierrot startles so easily that he jumps and drops his fork. He moves to wipe the new stain, but the Harlequin catches Pierrot by the chin with the baton. “It is also rude to speak during a performance.”

“So, you have a new love?” I ask. I do not want to sit in the woods and watch the Harlequin pantomime his way to the point. If I still had a heart, I would feel it pulse at his words. Instead, whatever sympathetic organ has crawled into the cavity my heart once occupied winces.

“No need to be jealous, tender Columbine, there is no one that could replace you.” He stands and puts his hand on my shoulder. One finger strays, running up my neck. The movement stirs the fine hairs at the base of my skull. I shrug his hand away from me.

He tells us her name is Mia, a hand to his heart and eyes fixed at some point on the horizon. He gathers us often for these soliloquys, but it is most often to tell us of perceived slights before he impresses us into service. Pierrot believes his performance every time, shouting his support like a groundling while the Harlequin dramatizes the injustice of being inconvenienced by a crowd or having someone cut in front of him in line. Sometimes, there is no slight, imagined or otherwise. He just finds a person dislikable, and we are sent out into the

world to make them miserable. After he takes his bow, we take small revenges against his new enemy. In my time with the troupe, I have never heard the Harlequin speak of love. Pierrot has told me the last time he did, it was of his love of me before I became his Columbine. Pierrot nods empathetically, his hand bunched in a fist around his plastic fork.

“Please, friends and admirers, help me win the love of Mia,” the Harlequin finishes, wringing his baton in his hands. It is not as though we can say no.

“Of course, sir,” Pierrot stammers, “It would be an honor, sir.”

The Harlequin turns his gaze at me. It has always seemed unfair to me, that his is the only faced that is masked while the rest of the troupe is barefaced. I have nothing to hide behind. I can feel his eyes upon me, but under the blue wash of the IHOP sign all I can make out is a dark bar across his face.

I stand and grab my apron off the stump. “Fine.”

“Wonderful.” The Harlequin steps towards me, taking my hand. The organ that is not my heart curdles. “My dear, you will be her mistress, her lady’s maid, her friend. You will help guide her heart to me.”

I feel a cold sweat bead along my spine, but, for the first time since joining the troupe, hope builds under my skin like a fever.

#

There was a Columbine before me. I think of her when I catch my reflection, only because we have grown to look so alike. If the two of us stood beside one another now, we would be like sisters, both so pale, so long limbed, so soft featured. I think it is the stage makeup that does it, the opaque paint rounding out every harsh line on a face, but I do not recall what I

look like without it, and the only face I can compare it to is my memory of hers. I cannot remember where I met her, whether it was in a park or a parlor, if she was my superior or if I was hers. I remember the scar along her collarbone. It was so white and thin that it disappeared into the lace at her neck. Now I have one to match.

#

In the morning, I meet the Harlequin near a gas station. It is bright out despite the season, letting people ignore the approaching winter though cold wind still cuts through their clothing. The gas station shares a lot with two short strip malls that face each other like children across a playground. Most of the store fronts are empty with brightly colored ‘for rent’ signs pressed against the tinted glass. He is holding an icy drink in his hand, the same horrifying blue as the diamonds on his trousers and vest. The tricorn on his head is tipped back, showing his curls.

“Come now, Columbine.” He hooks me with the baton, pushing gently against the small of my back and guiding me along one of the opposing strip malls. We stop in front of a copy and shipping store. “There she is.”

The sign above the door reads PRINT ‘N GO, an arrow running through the last letter. Behind the glass everything is beige and gray. Off-white walls, industrial charcoal carpet, cream colored counters, and walls of flat brown cardboard to be folded into boxes. Behind one of the counters, a girl sits and scratches out something on the paper in front of her. I step closer, pressing one hand against the glass, to see more clearly. Her hair falls in heavy ropes to the middle of her back and a metal stud pierces her left eyebrow. Even though she is sitting, I can tell that she is tall and her arms are thick.

The Harlequin taps my shoulder with the ice drink, the sudden cold touch startling me.
“Hold this a moment.”

I take the chilly plastic cup as the Harlequin raises his baton, pointing through the glass at the girl. He begins to speak, but not to me and not to her. He speaks to the world as if it is a backdrop he does not like and makes amendments to the script.

“This is Columbine’s place of business. She was recently hired, and Mia will train her.”

There is no change in the air, Mia does not stir behind the counter or look about hopefully for new employee, but her world is different now. The harlequinade is now a part of it. The Harlequin takes his drink back and nudges me towards the door. It is time for me to play my part.

A chime plays when I pull the door open, a two-tone *bum bum* that signals Mia to stand and shuffle her papers off to the side. Without the glare from the sun, I can make out strands of color that wind through her locks, threads of blue and green that are bright against the sterile walls and flat brown boxes. The Harlequin watches from outside, and when he smiles, he flashes blue stained teeth. Mia looks me up and down.

“You must be the new person,” she says, walking out from around the counter and offering a hand. “I’m Mia. It looks like you’ve already got your uniform.”

I take her hand, glancing down at the frilled bodice and puffed skirt. I have played many parts in the Harlequin’s plots, and his baton can bend the scenery and the players towards his audience, though from on his world’s stage, nothing seems to change. Most often, his fits of vengeance are petty and accomplished quickly. We slink along the edges of his enemies’ lives, causing small mischiefs until he is bored. People look right through me, and even when they

notice, I am not sure what they see. It seems to be different each time. I wonder what I look like to her.

#

The first time I met the Harlequin, I did not see his mask. It was there, just under the glamour, but I did not notice. He looked like any other man. It was exciting to be pursued and the Columbine was always at my elbow, pushing me gently into his arms. I did not realize what he was until he raised his baton, and I told him my heart was his. After she was gone, I hated the Columbine. At first for her betrayal, then for her weakness. How could she shuffle so meekly to her own demise? Standing across from Mia, I think I understand. The dread that I have long associated with nonexistence is being replaced with a longing for it. I do not care if I am dead, so long as I am no longer Columbine.

#

Customers visiting the PRINT 'N GO do not talk to me. Mia has not noticed this. They plug flash drives into the courtesy computer, tutting over the price per page for color versus black and white. The laser printers make the small store too warm, and customers shrug out of their winter coats. I trail behind Mia as she shows me how to update tracking information and unfold all the trays on the industrial copier. I change so many printer cartridges that a permanent crescent of black ink darkens each of my nails. The air smells like damp paper and hot ink, but Mia just smells like laundry.

We take lunches together, and though I do not eat, I sit across from Mia at the folding table in the break room. She is animated as she speaks, waving around carrot sticks as she conducts her thoughts into logical order. I run the hem of my skirt through my fingers, the lace

eyelets making a textured rhythm as they slip between my thumb and forefinger. Mia has not noticed my lack of eating, either.

Everything I learn of her, I relate later to the Harlequin. She came here to go to school, but stopped after three semesters. She has not finished the last four books she started. She has always wanted to move south, where there is still sprawl and traffic and all the other things she hates about the north, but at least it is warm even though she hates the sound of cicadas. We are standing outside the PRINT 'N GO when I tell him she likes games and his posture suddenly changes.

“What kind of games?” His baton twitches at his side and his eyes widen behind his mask.

I shrug. “Something with dice and cards. A *Gathering*, or some such.”

He smiles like petroleum gel coats his teeth.

#

One morning as we open we wipe the shelves with terrycloth mitts and shake dust from the shipping supplies that have been on display since before my arrival. Mia wipes the edges of a padded envelope with her mitt before putting it at the front of the stack. I kneel on the ground sorting separate types of pens into their appropriate bins.

The door opens with a sudden *bum bum*. Mia hands her mitt to me and walks behind the counter. Now that snow has started falling, there has been a steady stream of customers, wandering into the PRINT 'N GO to make return labels or copy family photos with “Season’s Greetings” onto glossy five by sevens.

“What can I help you with?”

I look to the doorway and see Pierrot. His white sleeves fall past his knuckles the hem of his trousers puddle over his shoes. He looks at me, opens his mouth, and closes it again. His eyes dart about like an actor that has forgotten his lines. Outside, the Harlequin is waiting, a hand on his hip and the baton thrown over one shoulder.

“Yes, hello ma’am,” is all he is able to stammer out before he loses his nerve. He turns to look at the Harlequin through the window, his penciled eyebrows creeping up his forehead in confusion.

Mia catches my eye, mouthing ‘ma’am?’ at me with a slight smile, like it was a joke we’ve shared all this time.

The Harlequin wields the baton on the other side of the glass and Pierrot snaps back around to face the both of us. As the Harlequin’s mouth moves, Pierrot follows along, parroting his words in a frantic rush.

“Yes, hello ma’am, my name is Peter and I work at the game and hobby store across the lot.” He stops for a breath and swings an arm of loose white fabric in the direction of the store. “We often hold events and my manager has asked me to invite other members of our wonderful business park to these events, to foster community. I have also been instructed to make photocopies of our event schedule to distribute.”

The flood of words trickle to a stop and Pierrot dabs his yellowed handkerchief at the sweat on his brow. I roll my eyes as he stands there quivering and look to Mia. Only when I feel a twinge of disappointment do I realize that Pierrot and I are waiting for the same thing— for Mia to laugh. But she does not.

“Alright, have you ever used the Xerox here before?”

Mia guides him to the copier, rattling off paper grades and color options. There is no edge of disdain in her voice as she walks him through the settings menu. She does not chide him as he slides the originals into the tray upside down, then drops them on the floor. I continue tidying and try to convince myself that at one point, I was as kind.

#

We in the troupe are all terrible, but who am I to say that I am better. I have tricked as many people as Pierrot. I have hidden behind the Harlequin's power as I tripped people down flights of stairs or wound down the time of parking meters for no other reason than because I was asked to or because I was bored. I have stolen watches and rings and pets only to bury them in the dirt and watch the panic their absence caused.

#

The event flyer hangs there between the PRINT 'N GO Family Rules of Conduct and the shift schedule, the Harlequin's face staring down from it. He has made himself his own mascot. The shop sits directly across the lot from the PRINT 'N GO, in one of the dark windowed fronts. From my point of view, it does not look any different than when I first saw it. A yellow sign with red letters spells out basic rental information, a phone number, and the square footage. Beyond the sign, folding chairs abandoned by the previous business leaned against the wall, a few long tables propped on their sides next to them. One day, before I start my shift, I spot the Harlequin and Pierrot behind the glass, their white costumes yellowed by the window tint.

When the Harlequin dips back into some further part of the store, I push the door open with my hip and fold my arms. The piled carpet curls under the gap at the bottom of the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not really sure,” Pierrot responds. “He asked me to move around some tables. Make it more like a shop. He wants actual people to come, not just the ones he can make up.”

I remember then that the first event on the flyer is just a day away. A small card tournament. He will want Mia to be here.

The Harlequin emerges from the back rooms and pokes my ribs when he sees me, interrogating me. Has Mia asked about him? Does she look across the slab of concrete at odd times and sigh? What do I say when I speak of him?

When I inform him he does not often come up in conversation, he becomes petulant, and I am forced to console him.

“If I spoke of nothing but your attributes, do you not think she would find it strange?”

“If I were another man, perhaps,” he says. He brings his fists to his chest in stylized agony. His mouth beneath the domino mask pouts, but his showman’s vanity guards his face from having to show any real emotion. “I have so many attributes. It makes sense they would dominate any conversation.”

I swat him away from me. “She has not even met you.”

“It is still an injustice.”

Despite centuries in his audience, I am uncertain if he is sincere. “Then you’ll have to make an impression on her with whatever this is” I say, gesturing to the small corral of tables that Pierrot is has dragged away from the walls.

Nothing about the store is pleasant. Much like the PRINT ‘N GO, one shade of beige fades into another, but this place has the disadvantage of dissolving through disuse. Moisture

makes blooming circles on the drop ceiling tiles and on the carpet, which peels away near the front entrance. The air has a taste like bitter tea and metal.

The Harlequin still looks hurt, but his ego will rise to any challenge. “She told you she’s coming?”

“No,” I tell him, “Not yet.” I flatten the carpet with my heel to pull the door shut. Mia hung the event poster that Pierrot had handed her as a polite courtesy, but the only one that looked at it was me. “I doubt she knows it is happening, but I will make sure she is here.”

#

It is strange to walk through the Harlequin’s illusions when you can also see the bones holding them up. Like sitting in the audience of a production where the set is turned the wrong way. The silhouettes of castles and towers are visible, but instead of the painted façade that gives them dimension, all you see are the hastily hammered struts and sand bags used to prop them into position. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that it is like seeing both sides at the same time, stacked on top of one another. Inside the Harlequin’s shop, I can see the promotional posters, the shelves of merchandise, but I can still see the blank walls with flaking paint that truly surround us. I can see the dirt stained carpet, worn ragged in places, and the veneer that hides it.

“How long has this place been here?” Mia asks.

I glance around the room, where real people and illusionary ones glide through one another without realizing. Pierrot must have actually hung the fliers around town. “I guess it just opened.”

Mia wanders towards the circle of tables, where most of the other humans were already getting ready to play. They ease themselves into the folding chairs, pulling playmats and dice

and tall decks of cards out of backpacks. She chats with them as they shuffle, the cards sliding awkwardly over one another in their vinyl protectors. I try to spot the Harlequin, but am distracted once I hear the *swish* of Pierrot's loose silk sleeves behind me.

“She seems nice.” He fiddles absently with the pompom buttons. “She barely laughed at me at all, earlier.”

If I still had a heart, it might break for Pierrot. I turn to look at him over my shoulder. His pants puddle against the floor, his small black shoes just peeking out past the hem.

“Wasn't I at some point? Weren't you in whatever life you had before this one?” I ask. The Harlequin was a corrupting force on both of us. He took humanity from us— what chance did we have?

Pierrot frowns. “Oh no, no I was never very nice. Though I used to be much fun. I was a drunkard that got in too many fights. That's why I was made the Clown.”

My breath hitches and I turn, pretending to look for the Harlequin as I hide the flush creeping up my paint caked face. Our troupe had not had a Clown in years. Not since once tripped the Harlequin and made at grab at the baton in jest. The Harlequin had been so mad that the Clown was cut without an understudy. He just blinked out of existence.

“You were not a Clown.”

“Yes, I was,” Pierrot makes exaggerated nods that make his jowls flap against themselves. “When I first joined. The Harlequin kept a little dog he would set on us, though. It bit me and I lost my nerve. They recast me.”

My hands tremor as if they still have a pulse to shake them. Pierrot may be a fool, but he has been in the troupe longer than I. I have no way to know if he is lying other than the fact that I do not think he could. Not about this.

I spot the Harlequin at near the tables, making brackets on a large pad of paper. In his illusion, his skin is clear and tan and his hair is long enough to be tied back in a knot. He stands close to Mia and when he catches her eyes he offers his hand. I do not hear what he says, but when she laughs in response I see his mask flicker across his cheek bones.

After the tournament, he starts coming to the store more frequently, inventing small reasons to photocopy whatever papers he finds lying around. After each visit, Mia grows more bashful, and I feel a curl of dread where my heart once was. She should not have to take my place, and if we can be recast, then why not him?

#

“You’ve seriously never seen it? The show’s about all these kids, and one of them is, like, psychic, I guess,” she says as she examines the industrial printer in the back room for jams. I stand nearby with a clipboard, checking off items on the maintenance sheet as she calls them off. “Front tray two is all good.”

“I don’t watch much television,” I reply, ticking the box on the sheet.

“No, it’s a Netflix show.” Mia sees my blank expression and sighs. She pushes the tray closed and uses two of her locks to tie the rest at the base of her neck. “Never mind. What are you doing tonight?”

I am doing nothing, and she tells me there is a party in the woods, the woods by the IHOP.

“I haven’t been back there since high school. It was where all the cool kids coming home from college would drink on the weekends. Before they were old enough to get into the bars, you know?” I do not, but she continues regardless. “That guy that keeps coming here? He told me about it. Do you think you can come with me?”

Mia has already started to get her coat and bag from her locker. I do not think she has ever noticed that I never put anything in mine.

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’ The woods are pretty sketch. You don’t want to show up by yourself in case it’s just full of weirdos.” She zips the coat to her chin. “It it’s shady we can bail and go get pancakes.”

#

When we get to the woods, there is no one else there that I can see. Even the Harlequin is so far back among the dense gray trunks I cannot make him out, though I know he must be here. There is a dusting of snow. I can feel the cold seep up from the ground through my slippers and the smell of grease is so thick in the air it settles on me like a film. I tell her Mia we should leave, but she points to the gaps between the trees and tells me she sees a small crowd between the trees.

“I think that girl was in my mythology class in college,” she says, pointing at a thicket of dried saplings where no person is standing. I want to break the baton over my knee and throw the splinters into a fire. I try to see what Mia sees, let my mind slip into whatever image the Harlequin has constructed. The trees remain unaltered, gray as graves, but the head lights of a passing car glint off wide, silky sleeves. Pierrot slinks behind the brush.

I convince Mia to go into the restaurant, buy a coffee to warm herself before going out into the trees. She asks me if I am cold. I lie and say no. When she disappears behind the swinging doors, I make for the woods.

Pierrot hides like a small child, with his hands curled around his eyes and his head between his knees. He yelps as I pinch his ear and pull him up from the dirt. The white powder on his face piles in the furrows along his forehead and jowls. He looks too young and too old in the same moment and there is a moment where I remember what it is like to feel sorry for Pierrot.

“Go distract her. Keep her out of the woods.”

He nods, the pom poms on his front bobbing along with his chin.

I walk quickly through the underbrush. I do not stop when my cap is snapped off my head by a low branch or when my ankle rolls on a bundle of roots. Twigs snap under my feet and when the lace edging my skirt catches, I let it tear, leaving a trail of scraps hanging from the nettles and waving like white flags. I find the Harlequin in the clearing, sitting on his makeshift stage. He stands as I burst through the trees and looks me up and down, appraising the damage I have done to myself.

“You are nowhere near performance ready.” He shakes his head in disappointment.

“Where is my love?”

“She decided not to come.”

“That is a lie.” He walks toward me, the baton gripped in his left hand. I watch the end of it trace a line through the air, ending level with my face. It is close enough to reach out and snatch it from his hand.

“I could not stand to see her take my place in the troupe.” It is as close to the truth as I can manage.

I feel the ragged pacing of my breath hitch in surprise as the Harlequin’s face turns tender. The baton drops to his side and he closes the distance between us. He puts a hand on my shoulder, the heat from his palm burning my cold skin. I wince.

“Tender Columbine, you have been with us for so long. Perhaps there is another role for you.”

Fear slithers up my throat like a fat slug. The only thing worse than knowing Mia would have every kindness beaten out of her is being an audience to it. Watching her quietly bitter until he was tired of her as well and went out to find yet another Columbine. Would she then join me in a minor role? And the Columbine after that, until we form a chorus of spinsters, looking at each new heroine with anger and fear?

A crunch of branches breaking echoes from somewhere beyond the clearing. “Hey, where is everyone?”

The Harlequin looks the branches for Mia’s approach. The baton is still loose in his hand. Before I can question what will happen, I close my fist around it and try to rip it from him. He holds tight, but the shock in his eyes from behind his domino mask drives me forward. I feel his kick against my stomach, his thumbs trying to unpeel my fingers from the baton. Before it is wrenched away from me, I yank the baton towards the forest floor. I have never seen the Harlequin afraid, but his shouts of panic feel at home in my ears. The Harlequin loses his balance mid-kick and pulls us both toppling into the leaves. Years of dead foliage crackle underneath us.

My knee connects with his diaphragm. With a shuddering gasp, the Harlequin's grip loosens and I pull the baton to my chest.

He instantly pales, bleached as white as the snow around us. His motely diamonds bleed away to nothing and he is left standing with his mouth agape. A fool in a white suit. He makes a lunge for the baton, but I strike him in the ear and the metal rings against his skull. He backs away, cupping the side of his head, until he stumbles and prat falls over the log that was his stage. As he gets to his feet I point the baton at his heart.

“Leave.”

His mask has come loose in his fall, his tricorn laying in the snow. For the first time in our acquaintance, I can read his face. It is surprisingly boyish, with nothing but rage and hurt playing across it. He slinks off into the woods as I stand from the forest floor.

Mia breaks into the clearing, holding to Styrofoam cups spilling steam. “I brought you one, too. Where did everyone go?”

I tuck the baton under my arm, taking the coffee with both hands. “I do not know. I suppose it was a lacking social engagement.”

Mia rolls her eyes and knocks her elbow against mine. “Well, that sucks.” She takes a long sip of coffee. “Are you hungry?”

We start picking our way back towards the IHOP. I try to gather my skirt in one hand to prevent any more damage and notice pale diamonds, saturating with every step.

THE JINNI

Isra ate dinner on the hood of her car in the library parking lot, the local yellow pages flopped open on her knees. The flimsy paper smudged as she moved her finger along the lines of close-packed text. She moved through the table of contents and dipped another fry into siracha. There were listings for Wedding Planners, Welders, Window and Glass Repair, Woodworking, Women's Clothing. No entry for Witch. She unfolded her legs, letting the full length of them press against the dark green metal, still sizzingly hot from a day's worth of driving and sun. The heat loosened her tense joints, a pleasant feeling of relief she had only recently become aware of. Wildlife Removal and Conservation. That seemed like the closest to witchcraft she was going to find. Isra licked a drop of hot sauce from her nail before pressing it into the paper, scoring it for a clean tear. The page joined the others, pinned against the hood with a Styrofoam cup. Pages for Acupuncture, Alternative Medicines, Psychics and Mediums, and Spirituality/New Age Supply. After consideration, she threw in Garden and Horticulture Services.

Isra peeled the book off her sweating legs, the cheap ink leaving a black film on her thighs, and swung her feet down onto the asphalt. Her knees and ankles popped as they took her weight, and though it didn't hurt, Isra winced at the sound. The melting tar blackened her soles as she walked up to the library and dropped the yellow pages into the book drop. Technically, the yellow pages weren't supposed to leave the building. It was part of the Reference Collection, along with an outdated Kelly Blue Book and enough dust for her to trace her name in it with her

fingertip. It's not like anyone used them, though. She was giving some tired librarian the excuse they needed to throw it away. It was a favor.

The inside of the car was sweltering, the black interior and tinted windows trapping whatever heat it could. Climbing into the driver's seat felt like moving into a different atmosphere, a heavier one where sunlight had weight, but Isra didn't reach for the air conditioning. One hand draped across the steering wheel, a silver bangle around her wrist glinting in the dull light. The other hand balanced the Styrofoam cup on her knee. The cup's contents had melted some time ago into a slurry of syrup and soda water, but she drank it anyway, pulling fast gulps through the straw until it was drained. She flipped down the vanity mirror behind the visor and pulled the skin around her mouth taut. Were there new lines there? Did pursing your lips around a straw even cause them? What about her eyes? Had she spent too much time squinting at the road, calling crow's feet into existence that had not been there this morning? In the passenger seat, her collected yellow pages had already gone limp with humidity.

A week ago, Isra had found her first gray hair. She'd almost missed it, but it gleamed in the caught sunlight as she tossed the hairbrush back into the glove box. She had pulled it from the bristles to examine it, wrapping it tight around her finger until her dark skin went purple then pale. The sight of it made her go cold, truly cold, for the first time in years no matter how much she cranked the heat or sunned herself on the roof of the car.

Isra flipped the visor up and closed her eyes. The sun hit her square in the face and she felt the weight of it on her lids. She remembered a time when the sun would have passed through her completely and shone on the unshadowed ground beneath her. When she did not have sudden aches and pains when she rolled off the futon mattress she kept in the trunk, or sore muscles

from being hunched over a steering wheel. The need to travel was still in her, buried under bone and sinew and vibrating like a plucked string, but it was more taxing on her body than she realized. She missed soaring above it all as a flurry of wind and fire.

She pressed her fingers against her eyes then opened them, blinking away the stars that hung in her vision. Isra had asked for a witch to make her human and that had worked. A witch should be able make her jinn again. She grabbed the first page she could reach from the passenger seat, the listing of greenhouse and nursery sitting at the top of the page. Isra typed the address into her phone's GPS.

#

The witch stored her spells in Tupperware containers and dyed the ends of her blonde hair with Kool-Aid. Her apartment was small, a corner of a basement that had been divided in half and then half again. The space was filled by whatever she could drag down the narrow stairwell. A sagging futon, a round wicker chair, a pewter caldron that teetered on the edge of a hotplate. Soft music twirled on the record player as the witch took Isra by the elbow and sat her at the kitchen table, cluttered with receipts and unopened mail.

The witch slipped into the seat across from Isra, folding one leg underneath her. "So, let's see what we've got."

Isra held out her arm. A thin bangle circled her wrist. Loose enough to be comfortable but tight enough to keep it from slipping off. A small clasp held it shut, fastened with a small pin. The witch tested the metal, hooking her finger between the iron and Isra's skin. The band was heavier than its size betrayed and cool to the touch, but the skin beneath was feverish. The witch's knuckles brushed against the valley of blue tinged veins and she felt a heat rise and warm

the back of her hand. She slipped her nails under the head of the pin and tried to pry it out, but could not even get it to wiggle in its clasp.

“How long has this been causing you trouble?” the witch asked, standing from the table.

“It’s been keeping me in this form for almost a century.”

“And you don’t remember how it happened?”

Isra remembered the desert stretched around her, the dunes like folds of velvet as evening approached. She remembered the sun hazing into a thin blurred line along the horizon as she flew over the valleys and peaks, small tornadoes of sand kicking up behind her. She remembered it all narrowing to a pin point as other jinn screamed in a language her human voice could not pronounce. She remembered the last time she heard her name out loud, her real name.

“No.”

The witch hummed as she walked across the small space and unstuck the fridge door. She dug through its contents, shoving aside take out containers and jars of sun tea. After moving a carton eggs to the door, the witch pulled out two quart sized tubs and set them on the table in front of Isra. One was full of liquid galaxy, a soupy mess of constellations. The other appeared to be potato salad.

She cracked the lid on the vat of stars and a smell of ripe peaches and compost leaked into the room. Isra watched with skepticism as the witch swirled the contents with a fork. Witches worked with earth and water to make their magic, but it was not part of them. It was suspended in tinctures and salves. It was in the pulp of leaves and granules of stone they crushed in their mortars and then let simmer on the stove. To them, magic was knowledge recorded in scribbles. Isra had been trapped in a human body for nearly a century, but everything inside her

was still fire and sand and wind. She could remember magic living inside her, not something to be pulled, molecule by molecule, out of the world.

The witch guided Isra's hand into the tub, submerging it until the dull iron bangle disappeared under the swirling blacks and greens and purples. The surface was putty like, slightly resistant to whatever pushed against it. The container was already filled to the brim, but her hand slid in without a ripple. Not a single drop displaced.

The witch wiped the fork on the hem of her t-shirt before opening the potato salad and plunging the utensil in.

"We'll just let that soak for a few minutes and see what we get." She lifted a scoop to her mouth and set a timer on her phone. She leaned against the counter as she ate.

Isra's hand went to pins and needles inside the vat. The sensation spread up her arm and into her chest. The peach smell caught in her mouth, tinged with something sickening under the saccharine of ripe fruit.

"Do you ever get the containers mixed up?" Isra felt the taste seeping into her gums as she spoke, filling the spaces between her teeth.

The witch held up a finger as she hurriedly chewed through her bite.

"Once," she said, already spooning up another. "Someone needed a mixture to keep their dog from barking at night. I stored the extra in a plastic bottle and it kind of looked like Sprite."

Inside the Tupperware container, Isra felt something slither against her fingertips.

"It had been so long since I made it, I just sort of forgot. That kind of thing happens when you're only into witchery part-time." Between mouthfuls of potato and mayonnaise she babbled on. "You should see my sister's set up. Buys all these cute, tiny little bottles at Hobby Lobby and

pours in, like, a ton of glitter. Sells them to people as necklaces on Etsy. All very bland spells, of course. Minor draughts of luck or confidence. It's hard to make anything specific if you don't know who it's going to."

Whatever had brushed against Isra's hand was working its way up, worming between her knuckles and then inching along her palm. The cloying taste in her mouth was covered by the that of bile. The thing in the container prodded at her wrist, nudging the bangle with whatever sensory organs Isra tried not to picture. She wanted to wrench her arm away, but was more terrified of whatever was inside spilling out. Isra sat as calmly as she could manage while the thing slugged around her wrist with the same texture as a cat's tongue, pushing at the iron bangle.

When the timer chirped, the witch licked her spoon clean and tossed it into the sink. She returned to the table with a bowl of clear water. Gently, she lifted Isra's hand from one to the other. The space flecked grime floated away from her skin in curling strips. The witch quickly snapped the lid back on and returned the tub to the fridge.

She returned to her seat as the last ribbon of viscus spiraled away. Isra was disappointed to see the bangle still whole, the pin unmoved. Still shackling her to her current shape. She had grown so tired of being human. The only difference was a line of scour marks that ringed the bottom edge. Rows and rows of bite marks from some many toothed mouth that faded into the metal the more closely Isra looked.

The witch also seemed to be at a loss. She tilted her head, looking back towards the fridge as if the tub would crawl out and offer an answer. She hummed again as she pulled a receipt from the corner of the table and scribbled an email on the back.

“If you remember anything,” she said, sliding the receipt toward Isra, “send it to me. The more I know about how it happened, the easier it will be to pop the thing off.”

Isra ran her thumb over the scratches as the last of them faded into the iron. She picked up the receipt and slipped it into her pocket. She fished out a couple of bills, wrinkled and slightly damp from being wadded in her pocket, but the witch held up a hand.

“I do payment upon completion,” she explained. “We’ll count this as a consultation. You can pay me once we’ve sorted you out.”

Isra left the apartment. As she walked, the feeling returned to her arm and she cringed as the cold metal chafed her. An edge of winter was creeping into the night air. Soon the seasons would change and she would move on again, chasing the kind of warmth she remembered from clutching handfuls of desert sand, the granules biting her palms until she relaxed her fist and watched them fall through her fingers.

A man sits in a beach chair, sweating under the shade of the umbrella screwed into the ground beside him. There is no water for miles, other than the bottles stacked in the cooler in the car, which are also sweating. There is not much of anything for miles. Even the closest paved road is on the other side of fifteen miles of puckered earth and brush. There is not much out here except for him and a phone booth, a line of utility poles staggering away in the direction of civilization.

The man reapplies sun screen to the tops of his thighs and his balding head, rubbing the extra lotion on his ears. Sure, he has the umbrella, but it never hurts to be careful. He still has the scars on his shoulder from his last sun burn. Nearly forty years past, now. The one he got at Michael Sheehan's tenth birthday, when they'd spent an overcast day swimming and came home pink and raw despite all the clouds. The man sucks his teeth at the memory of sticky sun blisters and sleeping on his stomach for the rest of the summer, and he squeezes out another dollop of sun screen. He rubs the lotion thoroughly onto his hairless shins, rolling down his socks to get all the way to the ankle. Can't be too careful.

In the booth behind him, the phone rings and the man is so startled that he jumps. He struggles out of his chair, grunting to the edge of the seat. It's too god damn low for someone his age, but it was already in the trunk of the car when he headed out. No sense in buying another one. The man feels something pop in his knee as he tips himself out of the chair and onto the desert grit, but the phone is still ringing, so he tells himself he didn't feel anything at all.

He has never liked small spaces, but the booth is missing so many panels of glass that the desert has moved inside it. Weeds sprout in the cracks of the concrete slab and dust sticks to everything. The man folds himself into the sliver of shade by the phone box and reaches for the spiral bound notebook he keeps by the receiver.

Hello? Oh my god, Hello! Hi! Yeah, I don't know why I called. I heard about this number from a guy at work. I didn't expect anyone to answer. It's like calling the edge of the universe. Well, bye, I guess.

The man finishes writing after the call cuts out. The day, the time, the gist of it. He keeps the receiver nestled against his shoulder as he writes, the tinny monotone of a live line pushing the desert's silence away. He starts to write out the name of the caller and gets as far as A-L-E before he realizes he never asked for a name. The letters are scratched out and he settles on *unknown caller*.

Before he caps the pen, the phone rings again.

Sergeant Xeno, Pentagon clearance code November. Echo. Sierra. Seven—

The man's shoulders go slack, and he presses the capped pen against his cheek as he sighs. There is almost enough of Sergeant Xeno to fill its own notebook.

—abduction investigations are proceeding. All craft inspections are proceeding. All analysis of non-terrestrial auditory phenomena are proceeding.

That's great, sir, but are you calling for anyone, the man wants to know. Why here, who do you expect to answer when you the line connects?

The call cuts out before the voice can answer.

#

He used to keep the notebook on him all the time. He'd set it on the ground under his chair, toss it onto the passenger seat of the car, fall asleep beside it on creaking motel beds or in the wide floor of the trunk after leafing through the wrinkled pages. A record of every call he ever answered at a phone booth that no one had any reason to call.

He'd kept it on him until one morning when he was driving back to the booth. The sun was still so low that everything along the horizon blurred into a thick orange line. He drove toward it sitting as straight as he could manage in the damned bucket seat, squinting into the sunrise. A shadow grew out of the glare and pulled itself into the shape of a truck. The man had been going to the phone booth almost every day for three weeks, at that point. Camping there when he could and shuffling into motels when he felt like the desert had gotten under his eyelids and between his teeth. He'd never seen anyone else there. The closer the man got, the more dark shapes pulled themselves out of the light. Pin points of dark spread into spindly-legged creatures then into full bodied men.

Their own camping gear had been broken down already and one of the boys still had his knees in the dirt, rolling the tent up around the stakes. The nylon *shwick shwick shwick*-ed as he rolled and the two others turned cold embers with their toes, stomping any live ones with ashy plumes. They turned towards him as the car rolled to a stop, light bleeding around the edges of their faces.

The man was calm— he felt fine, had gotten a good night's rest— but his hands shook as he pulled the door handle. They were cold even as he pressed them against the warm metal to close the door behind him. He assured himself he was still calm as he walked to the trunk to get his

umbrella and chair and told them all good morning, even though the words felt like they were forcing themselves through the cogs of rusting gears.

“Morning,” one of the ember-stompers said. The other nodded. They both had hair long enough to skirt their shoulders, longer than anything he’d allowed Alex to wear. Just seeing the two of them tuck strands behind their ears reminded the man of the night that he and his son argued over haircuts, screamed so loud that the authorities had knocked on the door.

The man had to remind himself how fine he was, how good a night’s sleep he gotten, as he wondered if Alex’s hair would be as long the ember-stompers. If maybe they knew his boy or at least ran in the same circles. The man asked them if they were heading out of L.A.

“Yeah, road trip to Roswell. We heard about this on a Usenet forum, and it looked like it wasn’t too far out of the way.” The young man had finished rolling the tent and shouldered it into the truck. “It’s so weird, right? Didn’t get any calls while we were out here, though.”

The umbrella slipped from his hand and the gears in the man’s throat felt like they started spinning all at once. Were they expecting a call, came all the way out here waiting for one? He fished the notebook out of the back seat and the three boys stood around patiently but awkwardly as he flipped through the pages of call details, asking if any of the names stood out.

“No, man, we weren’t, like, looking for anyone specific to call. Just to see if anyone would and take some pictures.” The ember-stomper’s white *X-files* t-shirt was already going transparent with sweat. The sun had still not quite risen. “But this is cool, though,” he added, gesturing at the notebook, “like an analog answering machine.”

The man asked if they knew anyone named Alex from their forums as they finished packing. They shrugged at each other and asked if he knew Alex's web handle. The man didn't know what they were asking, so they shrugged at each other again before driving away.

He finished his own set up, twisting the umbrella into the dry soil and grabbing a water bottle from his restocked cooler. Sometime after his second application of sunscreen paying special attention to covering the back of his neck just above his collar, after recording the third phone call of the day, he looked to where the truck had eventually disappeared. There was nothing to suggest that it or the three young men had even been there, the billowing dust the tires kicked up settling over the tread marks, covering their own tracks. Even with no reminders, he kept thinking of them.

Sure, none of them had been looking for anyone, but they could have been. None of them had been Alex, or even know his boy, but they could have. And the man might have missed them entirely. Had he missed others? Other greasy young men, or maybe even young women like the ones he saw in shops with rings in their faces and dark brown lipstick?

The man struggled out of his chair, knees biting into the grit. He poked in the dirt, looking for a stone larger than the stray desert pebbles. A squarish corner poked out of the ground near one of the low shrubs, and he wiggled it out until he had uncovered a stone the size of his hand. He set it and the notebook on top of the phone box. Give people a chance to check the messages if he wasn't around.

Then the man was called by Sergeant Xeno for the first time.

November. Echo. Sierra. Seven.

The voice was male, but vastly distorted, like two voices reciting the same words a few seconds apart. Listening to it gave the man the same sensation of tripping, a flip in his stomach and sudden losing of the horizon.

All subjects selected from the greater metropolitan area. All tests proceeding.

The man asked what subjects. He asked what metropolitan area. He pictured his son, with too-long hair and nailed coated in chipped polish, leaning close to a computer screen and having no concern for who was on the other side.

#

The man replaces the notebook back in the stack. There's three of them balanced on top of the phone box now, their spiral spines in nesting coils. The pages have all yellowed from sun and the edges gone ruffled from being turned with sweaty fingers, only lying flat where the stone presses them down. Even then, the wrinkled edges lay awkwardly on top of each other like layers of sediment pressed together by time.

The man hangs the receiver back on the cradle but keeps his hand balanced on the ear piece. Most of the calls to the booth are short, people making the long-distance call from wherever they are to where he is from an office line, or whispering into the mouthpiece as TVs play in the background, hoping their parents don't yell at them for dialing before the rates go down, or people that the man can't even make guesses about because they hang up right as he says hello. If he gets a chance— if they sound like they could be him— he says his son's name, hooked at the end by a question mark, and lets it echo over the lines. If the other person even answers at all, it is only to say *no* or *I'm sorry?*

He picks the receiver up again and slots a coin into the box. The touch tone pad chirps as he dials Alex's number. There is silence as the call connects. The man does not understand how it all works, but he imagines it like the old cartoons, a little Wile E Coyote of electricity going through the lines, over the desert, into Los Angeles until it gets to Alex's building and down the walls to his apartment. The man waits for a ring to break the silence, but instead there are angry tones and a robotic voice that tells him the number is inactive. The coyote smacks against the blue sky painted onto the cliffside.

#

The last time the man had spoken to his son, it had been over the phone. He'd left messages on his son's machine that would go unanswered for weeks until, eventually, Alex called him back. The man had not raised his son to make excuses, and normally Alex didn't give any. On the occasion that he did, it was always work. He'd been too busy with work. The man would remind Alex that he worked at a gas station and asked how busy could that even get.

I've been picking up extra shifts to save up for top surgery. You know that, Dad.

This would be met with silence, but it had been so long since the man had had a call with Alex that wasn't mostly silence, he didn't realize normal conversations between father and son had more words. He'd tried his damndest, through Alex's whole life. Even when Alex refused to meet him halfway, he tried, and he kept calling. Sometimes they exchanged whole sentences with only a few seconds of quiet between each one, a polite kind of silence just to make sure the other was done talking. They'd managed this during their last call, when Alex told his father about a phone booth that was miles and miles away from anything.

The man asked his son where he found out about these kinds of things.

On the net.

The man did not like the internet. Alex had shown it to him on a campus visit, back when Alex was just starting school UCSF. The internet had been loud and screeching, and the man had not known what to make of it. All those lit up numbers and letters against a black screen was like looking at the night sky, absolutely unfathomable and with a dread that something unknown might look back. It would probably mean something to someone, some might even like looking at it, but all those spaces in between the lights made the man's teeth hurt with worry. It was better to be concerned with what was right in front of you, not out someplace you can't even touch.

A guy just saw it on a map. Alex had told him. He made a whole website with pictures and directions. Some of my friends want to go out there and see it. It's like something from The Twilight Zone, out there on the edge of the everything.

After agreeing the man had said *goodbye, son*, which brought back the long, impolite silence. Alex hung up without saying anything.

The man sighed. UCSF was the beginning of the end for their relationship. They'd always shouted, and Alex had always tried to squirm out from under the man's rules, but being on campus gave him an unearned sense of freedom that the man had been wary of from the start. His son would still answer to Alex, but not to boy. Wouldn't even meet him halfway.

#

Looking out at it from the chair, the entire desert is equally unreachable. The Joshua tree with its prickling fists a hundred feet off is just as distant to the man as the mountains hanging over the dusty horizon. Before this, he had never had to deal with the sour nickel taste of heat

and the thought of it rolling around in his mouth as he walks through the brush makes him wilt under his umbrella. He is as likely to brush against one of the tree's bayonet leaves as shake the hand of anyone that calls.

The man is used to quiet. He is not comfortable with it, but he understands that it is the way things are sometimes. The desert is entirely comfortable with its silence, and the man is trying to learn from that, but he is still startled when the phone booth rings. The desert seems to flinch, too. The man shuffles into the booth and reaches for a pen.

November. Echo. Sierra. Seven.

The man exhales slowly, an unvoiced *sonofabitch* shaping his breath. He presses a thumb against the bridge of his nose, and the sweat makes it slide up to his forehead. What do you even want, he asks.

The doubled voice keeps going, doesn't even stop as the man speaks into the receiver.

New subjects requested. Current tests suspended.

You have him, don't you? The man pushes words through his teeth and down the phone lines. Can you even hear me?

All current data invalid.

The man tries to remember what his son sounded like, tries to isolate Xeno's discordant voices and match one to his recollection. He thinks back to that last call, but the only sound he pulls out of the memory is the line going dead.

SECURITY

Mary Pomeroy pressed her blue fingers against the toaster oven's glass door. The coils of wire glowed gently under her warming bagel and the prickling cold in her fingertips receded. Winter had only recently settled into the island and already the wheezing heating system was struggling to keep frost off the inside of the windows. Mary's toes curled against the laminate and her teeth knocked against one another.

Working winter security was an easier job than she had expected. All summer she had pulled carts of luggage behind her bike, zipping through the traffic that packed the streets between the ferry docks and the Carousel Inn. She did lunges on her rounds and took the narrow stairs up the Inn's seven stories two at a time, but she could feel the corded muscles in her legs jellifying. Each day, she felt a little weaker when she reached the top floor. Her legs still shook from yesterday, and the cold braided itself into the stiffening muscles.

She'd put in a call with Cloverfield Heating last week for the heat to be fixed, but their offices were on the mainland. Outside, the sun leaked yellow and green over the thickening water. The mainland was just a hazy lump across the Lake Huron, but the weak light shone off the ice slowly filling the space between the sister shores. If Cloverfield didn't come soon, there wouldn't be a ferry to get them here. She bit down on her tongue to keep her teeth from clattering.

#

The State Historic Parks' guide books were the only ones with maps of the island- hiking paths. During the summer, they sold the books for three dollars, tax included, at the Visitor Center. The maps folded out of a thick guide book, one too big to fit in a pocket or fold into a fanny pack, that milked every piece of island history for all it was worth. Maybe they would have been nice to have open on a lap in the passenger's seat of a car, so that the copilot could call out places of interest as they cruised by, but there were no cars permitted on the island. It was too small, only nine miles all the way around. All the transportation was horses and bicycles and feet. Mary never bought a map, but she did pull a guide book off the counter to study one whenever she stopped at the Visitor Center on her off days, which was often. They had the only public toilets that were consistently clean and one of those fancy bubblers that had an extra spigot for filling up water bottles.

"Doing the trip along the coast again?" one of the cashiers asked. They all recognized Mary at this point in the summer, which only made Mary feel guilty for not being able to tell them apart. They were all young, all women, and almost all had hair in midwestern shades of mosey brown that communicated wordlessly that they were still in school to be teachers or physical therapists or were thinking about becoming a Young Living representative. Three of them were named Katy, Mary knew, but the others never wore their name tags. They all blended into the soft, professionally helpful entity.

Mary let the guidebook fall closed on the map.

"I don't think so." Mary slid the book back onto the display rack. This one wasn't wearing a name tag. Her name might have been Heather. Mary had been trying to learn all their names for the entire season, and try to pair up those names with heights or haircuts or if they had

dimples. Later she would open facebook and not remember any of it. “If all I have to look at for three hours are the same two shades of blue, I think I’ll lose my mind.”

The girl who was maybe called Heather tapped her fingernails on the counter. Despite the weather, one of those late summer broilers that was only made bearable by the steady breeze peeling of Lake Huron, the Visitor Center was nearly empty. It was a temporary state. Soon the next ferry would pull in and a horde of middle aged history buffs, waspy young couples, and children already bored at the prospect of a day wandering around an island stuck in the 1890s would flood the counter with questions, but right now there was time to kill.

“I’m running out of things to do. Any suggestions?” Mary asked.

Flyers and pictures of sights around the island were taped to the counter and covered with a thin sheet of plastic. Maybe-Heather leaned over them, pursing her lips as she looked over their faded colors. Was it too late in the summer to ask her name without sounding rude?

“Well, let’s see.” Her finger lingered over publicity shots of one of the hotels that lined the cliffs above town. “Apparently, this place has the largest front porch in the world. They charge a cover to go in, but you can sneak around pretty easy. There’s Arch Rock, or the butterfly house, but I’m guessing you’ve seen those.”

They were all standard town tourist fare. Mary had knocked them all out her first week. Town was small, a two mile stretch of hotels, fudge shoppes, and t-shirt huts, with the majority of it taken up by a decommissioned military fort. The mixing smells were confusing for the senses— a concoction of heavy chocolate, horse urine, and sweat that made her feel sick as she shuttled guest’s luggage between the docks and the Carousel Inn. On her days off, she headed to the woods.

“Well, if you want something away from the fudgies, you could go up behind the Devil’s Kitchen.” The cashier tapped on the photo of a large rock formation three miles out along the coast. The limestone had been eaten away by the waves, leaving shallow caves that looked like a lopsided attempt at drawing Mickey Mouse.

“Behind it?”

“It’s more like on top of it,” she explained, clicking her fingernail on a small jut of rock that flattened out for a couple yards before meeting the cliff-face that ran along the water.

“There’s a stream that collects there. One of the carriage drivers told me it’s cursed.”

Mary rolled her eyes. Most of the carriage drivers she knew were true islanders, boys that drank too much around the bonfire and lived in the same house that they and the last four generations of their family had been born in. They confused living on the island with being an expert on its history. Tourists ate up the drivers’ misremembered versions of misheard stories and handed over more generous tips than Mary ever got for hauling luggage.

Maybe-Heather seemed to puff up at Mary’s disbelief, flicking her mousey ponytail over her shoulder. “Look, it’s what he said. It was in some native myth about putting all the evil in the world into the caves, it’s just that some of it leaks out. That’s why bad things happen.”

“And this stream is the evil?”

The cashier nodded. “If you touch it, you’re cursed forever.”

Mary pulled one of the guide books off the rack and slid three dollars out of her wallet.

“Mark it on the map.”

#

Mary ate her breakfast on the sofa, a quilt tucked around her legs. Everything in the hotel was decorated with horses— even the bedding sported candy colored foals picked out in tiny stitches with ribbons in their manes. The sleeves of her sweatshirt were pulled down to her knuckles and she tucked her hand radio into the folds beside her.

Waiting for the morning radio check from the one of the five island police officers had become one of the most exciting parts of her day. Once the snow started sticking to the ground, making any trip down the cliffs and into town slick and potentially dangerous. Sometimes the radio was the only voice she'd hear in a day besides her own. Mary tuned the signal to the police channel when the call was meant to begin and heard only static. It was a Tuesday. Kevin was probably the officer on duty. He always nodded off before the relief officer showed up for the morning shift.

“Kev?” she said, thumbing the call button down. “Kevin, this is Pomeroy at the Carousel. You doing a call today?” She took another bite of bagel and waited for a response, but heard only the crinkle of a live channel.

After eating, Mary paced around the room between the kitchenette and the sitting area. The arches of her feet had stiffened in the cold and she tried to stretch the prickling numbness from her muscles. Her steps left foot prints in the thick pink carpet. She kept the quilt wrapped around her shoulders like a cape and knelt at each of the heating vents tucked along the base board, checking for any stir of warm air.

#

The caves were easy enough to find, though it was getting on top of them that was tricky. A few families were there already, reading over the informational placard installed by the road. They straddled their bikes, toeing themselves inch by awkward inch closer to the caves.

Mary kept wide of them, walking into a stand of trees off to the side. She did not want to be asked to take a picture for someone or what brought her out here. Once tourists discovered she worked on the island, she became another attraction and what question led to a thousand others. Do you live here all the time? Where were all the cars, really? What's the best place for fudge? What time did that big bridge across the water swing over to let her walk home? They meant well, but reciting her canned answers left the same tangy unpleasantness of holding a penny under her tongue.

Mary surveyed the ridge above her, searching for the flat bit along the caves the cashier had pointed at in the photo. The same image was on the Devil's Kitchen page of the guidebook, and Mary held the photo up for comparison. The tree line had become denser in the years since the photo was taken, scraggly trees blocking her view of where the rock leveled off. "No climbing" signs had been installed since then as well, right alongside the information placard, but the climb looked fairly easy from below. The trees grew on the gradual inclines before the white, chalky cliffs rose above them and their tangled roots formed a kind of natural ladder in the limestone. Plenty of hand holds to pull herself up with.

She flapped the guidebook against her thigh, unsure of what to do with it. She considered dropping it in the undergrowth, but instead tucked it in her waist band at the small of her back. The book felt strange there, the glossy cover cold against her spine. Mary waited until she heard

the crunch of bike tires and the pop of gravel under tennis shoes before wrapping her hand around the lowest root.

The branches squeaked under her weight, rubbing against each other and the cliff face. Small showers of limestone crumbles and dead leaves shook themselves free as she moved slowly upwards. It was not a particularly high climb. The largest caves was only twice her own height, but every creak of the roots beneath her made Mary pause. The smell of earth was too close her face and the bark left splinters in her palms. She could feel the slivers of wood burrowing beneath her skin as shifted her balance from one hand to the other.

The shouts of another family bounced off the stone as they approached and Mary started to climb quickly. She threw an elbow over the edge of the ridge, pulling herself over the lip as their bikes slowed to a stop. Her shirt bunched as she swiveled on her stomach to get a glimpse of what was below her, the fabric bundling against the underwire of her bra. The rock at the top of the formation was porous and rough. Even though she couldn't see them, she could feel the pock marks forming on her hips and navel. Mary scooched further back, pine needles and pebbles digging into her forearms and chest.

The family of tourists dismounted from their bikes and left them on their sides, tires still spinning. Mary lost sight of them as they walked into the caves, but she heard the kids' shouting, felt their voices bounce off the rock beneath her. A fatherly voice, droning and slightly tired, listed facts about the cave. "The formation is one of the youngest on this island, most likely appearing in its current state around 1,000 AD." Uninterested in geology, the kids pretended to be pirates, and Mary heard the branches knock against each other in pretend sword play. The

fatherly voice kept going, flatly voice words that didn't sound like his own. Maybe they had the same guide book.

Mary pushed herself up, lake breeze drying the sweat darkened patches on her shirt. She put her hands to the small of her back, expecting to find the damp pages of the book curled against her spine, but only felt the warm of her own skin. The ledge was wider than it looked from the ground, but it was not large enough for anything to hide from view. She twisted, checking the ground where she'd shimmied herself backwards and taking careful steps back. It was all dried leaves and shed pine needles, a few beer cans from someone else's climb up the cliffside.

Mary took another step towards the cliff face, plunging her foot into a clear pool of water. It was not much of a stream, if this was what maybe-Heather had been trying to describe, just a long crack in the limestone. The water seeped through her tennis shoes immediately, so cold that it numbed her toes and made her jump nearly off the ledge. She squatted near the pool, the chill still moving up her leg in pulses. Toe, ankle, shin, knee until the muscles felt weak. Her guidebook was there, just beneath the surface of the water.

Mary laughed quietly. For being the source of bad luck in the world, it wasn't very much to look at. She almost opened her mouth to say this out loud, to maybe-Heather, to the carriage driver, to the family shouting in the caves beneath her, but remembered she was alone.

She reached into the water for her guidebook. Maybe it was because the day was so hot, but the stream felt like it could freeze over at any moment. The cold soothed her splintered palms, and she flattened them both against the bottom of the stream. Her arms tickled with static

numbness and she kept her hands in the water until her fingers went purple and then blue against the limestone.

#

Mary began her patrol of the inn on the fourth floor, lifting her edges of the horse quilt as she climbed the stairs. The radio was clipped to her waistband. She passed by the Percheron and Mustang suites, by Clydesdale and Friesian and Criollo and all the rest. At each door she peaked around the corner, noting the undisturbed dust covers before walking into the bathrooms and switching each of the taps on and off again. Halfway through the second floor, Mary heard a break in the static, the stuttered beginnings of a salutation over the rushing of the showerhead. She fumbled for the radio under her quilt as the steam dampened her hair. Mary waited for a voice to come from out of the static, but there was nothing.

She twirled the radio by the antenna and set it on the edge of the sink. When was the last day there was a radio check? Yesterday or the day before? How long ago had she called Cloverfield Heating on the phone, or spoken to anyone when she walked into town? Mary reached forward to draw a smile on the mirror, but her finger caught and skidded across the mirror. The smile was flattened into a swoop shape, one end extending off at an odd angle. Mary frowned and wiped the fog away with the flat of her hand.

How long would it take for someone to forget about her up here?

Working out the answer made her feel heavy, like the days and hours and minutes were already gathering, clinging to her skin. She didn't leave the inn often and hadn't in days. There was nowhere to go if she did, and she was still new enough to the small group of year round residents for them to be wary of her. As the weather got worse, people would their homes less,

radio checks would become less frequent. The power lines might ice over. With everyone in town and on the forest roads wrapped up in their own isolations, it would not take them very long at all to forget her.

On the edge of the sink, the radio's quiet crackle was broken by a metallic voice. "Hello? Sorry about that guys, looks like we're getting off to a late start over here."

Mary thought she recognized the voice, one of the older officers whose name she never remembered. Richard, maybe or Rupert, she was pretty sure. She switched off the water as the officer started the radio check, moving through the inns and resorts in alphabetical order.

"Abbot Estates?"

"This is Jackson at Abbot"

"Clear. Albatross Hotel?"

"Ferris over here at the Albatross."

Mary waited for the call and response of each hotel and waited for her turn to reply. The list moved from Algonquin to Barr's to Bay View, but when the officer came to the Carousel Hotel, Mary stayed silent.

She had opened her mouth to speak and pushed in the button to talk, but after a moment she released it. There was a pause from the officer before the steady rhythm of the radio check resumed. There were thirty-two hotels, inns, and bed and breakfasts on the island, plus the ranger station at the state park, and Mary listened to each of them sound off in turn.

"Alright folks," said the officer, the faint rustle of paper transmitting along with his voice. "That is everyone, thank you for being patient with us down here."

Mary switched the radio to an open channel and took in a lung full of the still steamed air before stepping out into the hallway. The cold crept under her nails and wound around the damped roots of her hair. Cloverfield better show up today.

THE MAGICIAN'S ASSISTANT

Francine hated the theatre the moment she stepped on the stage. It was old, much older than the venues where they usually performed. The foot lights that ringed the front of the stage were still slick with grease marks from the days before electric lighting. The boards were warped and uneven in places where the resin had cracked and been painted over dozens of times. Somewhere in the shadows above the catwalk a draft was blowing into the wings. She pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt down over her hands and held them balled up in her fist. Hopefully, with the house packed and the warm yellow light of incandescents hitting her face, it wouldn't be so fucking cold.

The glittering toes of her show heels peeked out from underneath her sweatpants as she paced. Enter from stage right, hit the mark near center, downstage for audience participation. She walked slowly through the blocking, memorizing the feel of the boards. Where her stilettos snagged against the finish, where the flimsy cover of the pit orchestra bowed beneath her. The last venue had a hydraulic pit. Whole thing moved up and down with a control panel in the lighting and sound booth. Francine skirted the edge of the pit as she walked along the clam shaped footlights and looked out over the house.

Since becoming the headliner, Miracle Marco had started pushing the production crew into booking theatres based on 'charm.' Not capacity or amenities. He might have taken those two factors into consideration if he had been the one planning the show. As the tour bus slogged between stops on the southwest tour, he tried to sell Francine on the places he booked. They weren't small, they were intimate. They weren't outdated, they were nostalgic. They definitely

complicated the most basic of large scale magic tricks, but they provided opportunities for innovation. How would that not make us better magicians?

“You’re not a magician,” Francine would say, only half joking. “You’re a lazy shit that doesn’t even design his own tricks.”

“We do illusions, Francesca. We make feats of the imagination real.”

When he called her Francesca, the conversation was over. She would hunch over her notebook, drawing x’s through diagrams of tricks that would never work in so small a space. If it had been a long day, a tear stain might ripple the paper. More often, the only thing marking the page was a felt pen as she drew out the new dimensions she had to work with. She would close her eyes and try to imagine the layout, the lighting, the venue as the audience would see it. It was never Marco in her mind, performing the shows she planned. It was still her, when she was still able to be Francesca the Fantastic.

#

With the house lights on and the gels coloring the stage, the theatre almost looked respectable. Francine patted her head, feeling for any loose hairs that had sprung out from the hot rollers. The other hand trailed along the backs of chairs as she walked the rows of house seats. She still wore the sweat pants and sequined show heels, but the thick carpet muffled her steps. The seats weren’t original to the building, according to the venue’s website, but they were nearly exact replicas of the ones originally installed in 1916. Just another layer charm.

Francine was more pessimistic. The upholstery was scratchy and had pilled badly with overuse. The majority of the seats swung sadly downward at a touch, their springs creaking and rusted beyond usefulness. They looked as old as the murals flanking the sides of the house, life

size portraits of theatre goers in painted opera boxes. Their clothes were a stylized Victorian fashion, but the ladies all had the same hair style as Farrah Fawcett and some of the men sported shaggy mullets.

On the stage, Marco was already decked out in trousers and tail coat. A top hat was pinned under his arm. Francine looked over her shoulder as he barked orders at the stage hands, gesturing between the set pieces they carried and a sketch drawn in felt pen. The Aztec tomb, saw box, the trick guillotine were all lined up against the back. Light weight tables were being set in the wings with the mechanisms for smaller tricks laid out on them so that Francine could carry them out to Marco throughout the show.

Francine reached the last row of seats before the light and sound booth as the stage hands began wheeling in the glass box for the finale, the aquatic escape trick. When she had her own act, Francine's livelihood had been her escapes. Luckily, Marco was terrible with tight spaces. They were the only trick that Francine still got to do on her own. He occasionally tried to stop her. To convince her the last act should be his. But Marco couldn't do what Francine could.

She stood beneath the booth, watching them wrestle the cube of plexiglass down the narrow aisle for a moment before closing her eyes. She tried to ignore the carpet under her feet and imagined the uneven warp of the stage boards. She erased her view of the back of the house in increments, rubbing out lines of seats row by row and replacing it with what she saw from the stage. In her mind the footlights ringed the stage like brass teeth of a great mouth, the painted theatre goers leaning out of their two-dimensional box seats to gaze into the maw and see her being chewed.

Francine felt a pressing sensation on her torso, like a hug intended to be comforting that instead squeezed out all her breath. A chill settled on her like mist as she passed through whatever folded dimension took her from one place to another. When the sensation passed, she felt the hot shine of stage lights on her nose and cheeks. She took a step forward and heard the clack of her heels against wood, felt the uneasy give of the pit orchestra cover beneath her. Her teleportation went unnoticed. The men in the aisle continued to struggle with the prop, but when Francine turned toward the wings she saw Marco glowering between the curtain and the grand drape. He was billed as the magician, but she was the only one in their show that lived up to the title.

#

The costume's rough sequins scratched Francine's soft underarms. Already an itching rash was blooming on her skin. She turned to the side and placed her hands on her hips, keeping one knee popped in a slight contrapposto, and hoped the audience could not make out the reddening flesh under the make-up and stage lights.

Upstage, Miracle Marco continued his patter, building towards the next trick. *Towards the next illusion* she corrected herself automatically, cringing at the word even in her own mind. In interviews and rehearsals, on TV spots and during after-show drinks, Marco tended to draw out the *l*'s and narrow his eyes thoughtfully at the word's appearance. To sometimes tilt his head and deliver it like the last word before a kiss. When she had performed in the circuit with her own magic act, she had not been nearly as pretentious.

He showed the crowd his wrists, and even his ankles, before pulling a dove out of thin air. The audience clapped politely, but this was something they had all seen before. They needed

to be impressed. She glided forward and took hold of the bird while Marco began the next string of one sided banter. That was another thing Francesca the Fantastic had never done— waste time talking between tricks. His prattle ruined the pacing.

“We’ll need a volunteer for this next illusion, but for those among you with a touch of stage fright, put your anxieties aside, you won’t even have to leave your seat.” The spot light followed the path of his gesturing hands, swinging out over the audience as the sequined assistant descended into the front rows of the audience. “But to show there’s no treachery afoot, I’ll leave the selecting of our volunteer to the lovely Francine.”

The house lights brightened slightly and every audience member swiveled their heads towards her. Hundreds of unspoken *pick me*’s filled the space between her and them. Hundreds more *please no*’s muddled the air. She made her steps slow and deliberate, keeping the dove pinned against her chest with one hand while the other hand rose thoughtfully to her chin. Her stage smile morphed into a caricature of deliberation, brow furrowing and lips moving into a superficial pout. It was all for the sake of dramatics. She had already chosen her volunteer.

She’d seen him in the line leading into the theatre after she’d popped out through the stage door to the convenience store next door. When she came back through, swinging a plastic bag holding a roll of packaging tape, she was almost positive it was her old manager. The one who’d signed her on her twenty-first birthday and then dropped her on her twenty-third. But his hair was a tough darker than she remembered, and his cheekbones could have just been the shadows from the marquee lights. She spotted him again in the audience while Miracle Marco pretended to saw her in half. He was sitting at one of the cocktail booths in the second tier of

seats. When the boxes separated and Cindy, the other assistant, kicked her satin heeled feet, he didn't applaud. It had to be him.

The spotlight tailed her steps towards his booth. She couldn't make out his face in the dim theatre, but she could tell he was watching her approach. She could tell that his shoulders had stiffened in resignation, that he accepted his fate as volunteer. In her hands, the dove ruffled its neck feathers.

"It looks like we've found our lucky audience member!" Marco said as the spotlight swung itself to center on the table and Francine realized she had been mistaken. The man smiled sheepishly and shaded his eyes from the sudden illumination, but it wasn't him. "It is one thing to make a dove appear, but it is quite another to make it vanish."

The itching had climbed from her arms to her collarbone, where the dress's high neckline cut across her clavicle. A flushing heat of both irritation and embarrassment crept even further up her neck. She kept the dove's wings pinned with her finger as she passed it to the stranger in the booth and her arms close her sides.

On the stage, Marco addressed the man directly. Some strange spiel about establishing a connection so his magic will be able to move through this stranger's hands. He asks for quiet and touches three fingers to his temple, his other hand reaching across the audience towards the dove. Francine stood just outside the halo of the spotlight. Ready to do all the real work.

When she had her own show, before losing representation and being down-graded to a girl in a chafing dress, the big finish was always a disappearing trick. She started with the classics. Decks of cards. A rabbit and a hat. Bouquets of flowers. The she started working her way up. The largest thing she had ever disappeared was a luxury cruise liner in the middle of a

crowded harbor as part of a promotion. In the space of a single blink, it was gone. Reporters and even other magicians bribed those on the production crew to try to figure how she did it, but they were all equally stumped. Unfortunately, a crewman in charge of clearing the ship of personnel had, ironically, not exited the in time. The ship was eventually found. The crewman was not. When she signed on as Marco's assistant and agreed to lend him her talents, they made an agreement. Other than herself, nothing bigger than a bird.

The dove let out a *coo*, and then blipped out of existence. The audience gasped and then leaned their heads close to one another to exchange murmurs as they applauded. Marco pulled out a handkerchief and blotted his forehead from feigned exertion. He balled the damp fabric in his fists, and when he opened them, a white dove blinked its inky eyes up at him. Then man in the audience opened and closed his hands around the empty air where the dove had been, looking for evidence he'd ever held it at all.

Cindy carried the bird off stage.

"Thank you, thank you, but a dove is nothing special. I can see it across all your faces. How are we meant to tell one dove from another?" Marco made an exaggerated shrug. "How can we be sure they're the same dove at all? Well, the lovely Francine is one in a million and there's no possible way to fit another one of her up my sleeve."

There was a polite ripple of laughter. The spotlight refocused itself on Francine, and she gathered the trailing hem of her dress in one gloved fist. She could hear the remarks of the audience members around her, saying that he couldn't possibly, or prodding each other to examine the floor around her and try to find the seam of some hidden trap door.

Marco resumed his stance of faux stance of concentration. To Francine, it looked like he was overcompensating. That if he strained his neck and reddened his face with effort, the audience would believe it was actually magic and that it was actually him performing it. Her trademark had been a natural confidence that made every trick look like a cinch, to look over her shoulder at the audience with one eyebrow raised while they stared at her with awe.

She closed her eyes and pictured the dressing room backstage, gathering her concentration while keeping her stage smile screwed to her face. She felt the air press against her from all sides until the pressure released with a quiet *pop*. She felt the heat from the spotlight fade from her cheeks and knew she had made it.

Cindy was already sitting at the dressing table, her dress unzipped the small of her back and hanging loosely from the waist up. She picked at the packing tape she used to make her arms look thinner. The dove she'd carried off stage flapped in its wire cage. Francine grabbed a bag of pretzel rods from the service table and noticed the white fringe of feathers poking out of the trash can. The dove she had disappeared.

“The bird didn’t make it through?”

Cindy peeled a strip of tape away from her skin, examining the pale, sagging flesh in the mirror. “Afraid not.”

THE COMPANION

I lifted Eliza gently from bed, cradling her like a child. Her head rolled against my shoulder and her lips parted slightly. She was never an early riser. Against my bare chest her skin was smooth and cool, any of our shared heat having dissipated overnight. I carried her over to her stand in the corner of the room, a metal tripod nearly as tall as myself with a sturdy hook at the top. I felt for the metal loop at the base of Eliza's neck and lifted her onto the stand.

Eliza was roughly a hundred pounds altogether, from her skeleton of plastic bones and metal joints to the silicone skin that stretched over it. Her pointed toes brushed against the carpet. Eliza's eyes were still closed, hair still scrunched in the back from resting against a pillow. I held her chin with my thumb and forefinger, admiring the fan of eyelashes resting on her cheeks. I was always careful to keep her on her back when we slept together so the lashes would not rub off against the bedding. The eyes were the easiest way to tell who cared about their dolls and who just fucked them. Owners would still call those abused dolls their girlfriends and share pictures of them on web forums, but I could tell. One look at their life-like but vacant faces, eyebrows peeling and matted lashes and it was clear. Those poor dolls spent their lives face down on someone's mattress.

"Good morning, sweetheart." I slid my fingers along her jaw and behind her ears, lifting the wig off her head. It was long, honey colored, and crumpled in places. Scrunched from long, unmoving hours against a pillow. When she slept alone, her wigs stood in a line on her vanity so as to not have to brush them daily. Eliza was a sensible kind of woman and did put her

appearance before practicality. It was only when sleeping beside me that she allowed the indulgence.

I left her on the stand as I walked the wig down the hall to her room and switched out the wig for one of the others. Eliza was originally a redhead before she had a wider selection to choose from. When we were still a new couple, I'd tried to curl her hair for our weekly date night and the synthetic red strands melted around the curling iron. Eliza was livid for weeks afterwards, though she never showed it. She was a lady. After that, it was only the best. I bought her human hair wigs in several shades, but we agreed that she looked best in blonde.

I picked a rose gold bob for today and pulled a sundress and some fresh underthings from her closet. Eliza's room was much better appointed than mine, with windows framed by lacy curtains and soft blue walls that gave it a tranquil feeling. I was saving up to replace her carpet, or maybe put in hard wood. It wasn't odd that we sometimes slept in different rooms. Even in a committed relationship, people needed their space.

We were going to the park. I had already packed a picnic. Our anniversary was only weeks away, and it made me feel like spoiling her. She had never been out of the house with me before, on a real date. We sometimes sat on the small patio at the back of the house, looking out over the lawn that was mostly crabgrass. It was a measly view.

The park idea formed when we watched "Somewhere in Time" together, her head leaning against my shoulder. Eliza would have looked like a duchess in turn of the century costume, parading up and down the lake shore streets as carriages passed. I couldn't give her that, but there was a Victorian gazebo in the park. We could find a quiet space under the shade trees nearby. I imagined my fingers on her sun-warmed shoulders. She would like that.

In my own room Eliza was waiting for me. I laid the selections carefully on the rumpled covers. A seam ran along the top of her forehead, cutting down behind her ears and disappearing under her jaw. I took a moment to compose myself before slipping my fingernails into the seam and peeling back her sleeping face. Little silicone nubs popped out of place with a gentle tug, exposing the hard plastic underneath. Doll manufacturers were artists, to be sure, but their realism only went so far. Without the layer of silicone stretched over her plastic skull, Eliza looked like a monster. Her teeth were bared and her eyes bulged, both nestled unpleasantly between hard planes that formed her cheekbones and jaw. My heart ached to see her this way, knowing how much she cared for her appearance. It made me wish for the days of my sister's baby dolls and their augmented eyes that rolled freely in their sockets. Opening and closing on their own as you rocked the dolls.

I set the flab of now shapeless features in a cabinet by the bed, alongside a handful of other parts. Extra eyes ranging from crystalline purple to a honey-warm brown, different tongues to nestle between her set of orderly teeth, applique patches of pubic hair for when her own periodically rubbed off. Her other face, the one with holes for blue eyes to look out of and her makeup that I painted on myself. I lined her waking face up over her features, snapping it into place along her scalp before sliding the wig overtop.

“You look beautiful today.”

Even on her stand, Eliza was a head shorter than myself. I stooped to plant a kiss on her forehead. Her skin was still cool from lying in the cabinet overnight. My hand wandered to her small of her back and I pressed her body against mine.

I slid last night's lingerie to the floor, carefully navigating the straps of the brassiere down her arms and around her elbows. I ran my thumb along the silicon curve under her breast, still amazed after all these years of the details the manufacturers were able to produce. The hand painted blushes that bloomed on her skin. The artfully placed freckles that dotted her chest. The faint outline of ribs peaking along her sides. Eliza's body was original to her, entirely her own. It was also mine, all five thousand dollars of it.

Our embrace and I dressed her quickly, economically. Another reason Eliza had her own room. With her in my arms, it was difficult to focus on anything else. There was work I needed to finish this morning before we left for the park. There would be time for distractions this afternoon. The dress was modest enough, a light floral print with a wide skirt. It would be perfect for dancing, if the two of us could dance together.

I lifted Eliza off her stand and made her comfortable in the living room before completing my own morning routine. Her favorite chair was the wingback by the window. An antique inherited from my grandmother, it's early-century charm and endeared her to it, I could tell. She was an old soul. It was one of the things that first attracted me to her. I had been scanning website catalogs for months before feeling ready to make a commitment, but the moment I saw her, I knew.

She had been specially made, according to the web store, for a short-lived publication called *Real Doll, Real Love*. This was before everything went to digital. She was their Miss November. In her profile, the seller had uploaded scans of the magazine. Pictures of Eliza were captioned with the name "Bette" and showed her in a vintage kitchen, all trussed up in a wide

skirted dress and apron that lost layers as the publication went on. With the gently sloping nose and cherry lips of a Rockwell painting, she was perfect, even in a grainy jpeg.

I left her current novel open on her lap, *Jane Eyre*. She only had taste for the classics.

I moved my office into the kitchen two years ago to make a room for Eliza. In the space between the garden door and the humming fridge, I fired up the desktop. I accessed the company website and watched as the survey information compiled into neat stacks of data. Click counts for advertising banners, amount of minutes spent per individual page, the levels of involvement in community forums. I combed through all of it, compressing numbers and adding rainbow colored graphs to make it understandable for marketing teams.

Minutes wore on and my work pace slowed. As noon approached, my cursor wandered and opened a new tab. I typed in the address of a doll community site. It was so often visited that the URL completed on its own and I scrolled through pages of updates. Most were photos of dolls that the owners had taken.

I was constantly surprised by the amount of shots with multiple dolls posed together, hands on each other's thighs, heads tilted towards one another. These owners built their perfect partners and then got greedy for more. The thought of Eliza sharing her room with another doll, of her swapping wigs and sharing dental sets, of her sitting quietly in the dark while I enjoyed another's frame, disgusted me.

These were the people that made us freaks. I would tell them so, in the comments under the photos. I told them that they were the kind of people that made it hard for society to be accepting of synthetic relationships. That they should be ashamed of themselves for their lack of fidelity.

I left the computer and joined Eliza in the living room. Her book had slid off her knee and was tucked between her leg and the arm of the chair. I leaned over her and scooped it up by the spine.

“You’ve lost your place,” I told her, her glassy eyes still focused on her lap. “I hope you remember your page number.”

I paused for an answer that I knew would never be spoken. Her tasseled book mark sat by her elbow. I picked it up and slid it into a random spot nearer the end of the book.

“At least I know you’ll stay with me if I’m ever blinded in a fire. We could even get you a nurse outfit.”

Outside the window, the neighborhood was quiet. Driveways were empty and the traffic from the main road was a distant rumble. Across the street a sprinkler system rotated with slow mechanical clicks and splashed the sidewalk. The other windows stood empty or blocked my inquiry with closed curtains. If anyone happened to pass by and see the pair of us inside our own frame, they would see the perfect picture of domesticity. A well-appointed living room, a husband with his hand on his wife’s shoulder. That was my hope.

If they lingered on the sidewalk and stared for more than a moment, they might notice the differences between the two of us. They might see me carry her from room to room. They might realize that Eliza’s chest doesn’t rise or fall or that she never moved to brush away the hair that fell in front of her face. Someone could look at her from the sidewalk as she sits quietly and reads, suddenly reminded of department store mannequins without quite being sure why. My hand tightened on her shoulder, my thumb running over the thin strap of her dress, and I was glad we had planned the picnic for a week day. With any hope, we would be the only ones there.

I used the rolling chair from the desk to get her to the car. The spindly wheels rumbled against the concrete, jolting at every crack. The sunglasses Eliza had put on before going out slid down her nose and dropped into her lap when we came to a stop. Loading Eliza into the car was an awkward process. Her joints had loosened since she first arrived and would catch on the doorway, or fold under her bottom and prevent me from setting her down. I settled her skirts around her and shut the door gently.

I shuffled into the driver's seat, twisting to set the picnic in the back. "Just one errand to run, dearest, and then we'll be on our way."

Eliza did not get to leave the house often. Neither, for that matter, did I. One of the setbacks of working from home. I held her hand as we drove and listened to NPR. It was a fascinating program, something to do with phone booth repairmen in the United Kingdom. We pulled into the market and found a spot near the front. With most people still at work it was nearly deserted. I left the radio on.

"You'll have to fill me in on what I miss," I told her before locking the door. I had put her sunglasses back on for her. Behind the lenses, her eyes gazed upwards towards the clear sky, but I wouldn't be gone long. No one would notice.

The automatic doors parted, accompanied by a small gust of air conditioning. An employee with a smock two sized too large and a receding hair line nodded at me as he replaced shopping carts. "Welcome."

I tried to say "thank you," in response, but words came out as mumbling noises. Instead, I nodded in return. The man had already returned to work, pushing the carts into clattering stacks.

I did my business quickly. Eliza would be getting lonely in the car, and maybe impatient. I selected a dessert from the bakery and picked up a bottle of sparkling water on the way to the registers.

“Did you find everything okay?” The cashier was tall, but clearly still in high school. Her face still had the round, high features of someone who had not lived through much of life. The fresh look of someone whose forehead has not yet creased or cheeks not yet sunken in. “Ooooh, crème cake and fizzy stuff! Must be doing something fun, right?”

I fumbled with my wallet, my fingers slipping as I tried to pull my debit card out of its slot. “It’s for my girlfriend and I.”

“What was that?” she asked, leaning slightly over the scanner. I was mumbling again and the red light of the barcode reader followed the curve of her cheek.

“My girlfriend and I,” I said again, to loudly judging by the way she flinched. “It’s almost our anniversary.”

“Well, how about that.” There was a lilt in her voice. Her eyes scanned me up and down, a smooth elevator of judgement. I did not understand why, but it made my neck burn red in an embarrassment that crept upwards to my face. She took the card, swiped it, and handed back.

“Are plastic bags okay?”

A change had happened in her face that I could not quite place, only that it looked closed somehow. She still looked young and friendly, but the line of her mouth seemed harder. Or some minute muscle in her eyelids had changed their shape almost imperceptibly. She was making herself impenetrable, but against what threat? I did not know what to say, so I nodded.

In the car, Eliza was still staring, unfocused, at the sky. The car battery had shut off, and I joined her in the silence. I placed my hand on Eliza's, her cool touch a comfort that helped the color to recede from my face and neck. "Looks like neither one of us will know the fate of those phone repairmen. Such a shame."

The balding man wandered past, herding the carts that customers had been too lazy to return to the corrals throughout the parking lot. He glanced at the car as I turned the key. This time I was ready and gave him a curt nod. Instead of returning it, the man looked from me to Eliza, back and forth as a breeze bloused his overlarge smock around him. Eliza's eyes were still hidden behind tinted lenses, her long lashes almost stroking the glass. I put my hand on her shoulder to steady her as we pulled out of the parking spot.

#

At the park, the pair of us drew similar stares. Unlike the street or the market, there were small clusters of people scattered all about. A couple walked laps around the perimeter, going in and out of view as they followed the path behind groves of threes or around playground equipment where toddlers waddled about under their parents' watch. A dog almost bigger than myself pulled around a man by its leash. Every few yards the dog lunged forward, making a retching noise as the collar pressed against its throat. A handful of truants sat in the gazebo.

"I'll get everything set up for us," I told Eliza. "You just wait here."

The park was a large egg-shaped space of manicured grass with one of the long sides edged by some woods. I walked along the tree line, looking for gaps in undergrowth that fought for light between the maples. The more adventurous adolescents and nocturnal perverts both wore footpaths into the forest floor and created their own systems of twisting paths and small

clearings, intertwined with one another but made separately. There was a small patch of grass I knew of not too far back, close enough to the park to be regularly cleaned out by the grounds crew and in sight of the gazebo. I spread an old bedsheet, the closest thing I owned to a picnic blanket, over the dried leaves and sticks and set the provisions down at the edge.

The group of teenagers began a game of catch as I walked back to the car. A yellow Frisbee flew between their hands, at first tossing it from inside the gazebo then around it. When I opened the Eliza's door, the group's game was taking them down to the fat end of the egg and away from our picnic spot. The dog pulled its owner after the teens, most likely excited about the possibility of a fetch. I grabbed Eliza more hastily than I should have, eager to begin our date without any prying questions.

The strolling couple looked over at us as I gathered her in my arms. They changed their route, listing away from the sidewalk and cutting their loop short. I was touched by their courtesy, but who better to understand the need for privacy more than another pair in love?

It was awkward to navigate the paths holding Eliza. I could hold her no other way than to cradle her like a bride going over the threshold, and the space between the trees was suddenly much narrower. Her shoes scuffed against tree trunks and branches raked through her hair, almost snatching it off her head. In the clearing, I placed her carefully on bent knees and helped arrange her skirts around her.

I had grown so used to seeing her only inside the house, in photos that had been carefully staged, that her beauty seemed strange surrounded by nature. It felt as though the dappled light struck her skin at the wrong angle. A different one than the soft incandescent bulbs that lit her

room. The slight stirring of the leaves augmented her stillness. Against the organic shapes of nature, even her freckles appeared to be too intentional.

In the distance, the dog barked and the teens shouted taunts to one another.

I sat down beside her, trying to find a comfortable space on the sheet. An autumn's worth of dead leaves crinkled under my weight and tiny sticks barbed through the thin fabric. I would have to remember a quilt for next time, something sturdier. I unzipped the soft cooler bag that held lunch and added a real picnic basket to the list. Something similar to the baskets the women carried in "Somewhere in Time," wicker with gingham lining. If Eliza looked out of place it was my fault for not having the right supplies.

The wind was picking up again, ruffling the front of our blanket and making it fold back towards us. I scooted forward and held down the corners with the cooler and one of the corners of sparkling water. I looked over my shoulder at Eliza, careful not to tug the sheet and topple her over. The wind lifted the hair away from her cheeks, blowing it back behind her ears. For a moment, the rustling of the leaves overhead sounded like one soft exhale until a yellow disc careened through them and struck Eliza in the head.

She fell to her right side, left leg swinging straight from the momentum of the fall. I shuffled towards her on my knees and swept the hair away from her face. A small divot marked the silicone above her left eyebrow.

I felt a heat rising through my chest, a hint of bile in my throat. My hands shook as I grabbed the Frisbee. I turned on my knees toward the park where the teenagers jogging towards our little clearing. I felt my anger pulse in my neck, a series of angry shouts battering at my teeth. Before I had the chance to stand, I was knocked to the ground by a mass of fur.

The dog pranced around me like a puppy, unaware of the claws that it stabbed into my side. I rolled onto my stomach, and it pushed its oversized head into my shoulder trying to get the disc. It snapped and snarled at Eliza and I, upending our food and ruining everything. I covered the back of my head with my hands and tried to worm my way towards Eliza. A hand grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me away.

There was a yip as the dog was jerked back. The owner had hooked his fingers around its collar with one hand while the other wound the leash into a fist. "I'm sorry, dude, I'm so fucking sorry. We've been trying obedience schools-"

"Hey, is your girlfr-" The teenager that yanked me back let go of my shirt. "Man, what is that thing?"

My head whipped towards Eliza. In the fracas, she had been rolled onto her back off the edge of the sheet. The mongrel had caved in the plastic ribs that shaped her torso, leaving her looking like a crushed milk jug on the forest floor. Its nails left crescents of perforation in the silicone where it had trod on her, and on her face small gashes showed the white ridge of her synthetic skull. Eyelashes had been ripped from their follicles and rested on her cheekbones like crooked spider legs.

#

Driving home, the passenger seat beside me was empty. I had laid Eliza across the back seat. I couldn't bear to see her as she was so I wrapped the sheet around her like a shroud. The threadbare fabric swaddled her, dried leaves and smudges of dirt from the forest still clinging to its edges. I pressed down on the accelerator, anxious to do something even if I had not decided what. Or if there was anything to be done at all. There was no saving her face, not with the

silicone falling in thick peels. Her body was crumpled and her joints, already loose from several years of bending and posing, had snapped in at least one of her elbows. Maybe a shoulder, as well. Wind leaked in through the window and fluttered the sheet, rising over Eliza's chest as though she had taken a gulp of air.

The neighborhood was still empty when I arrived home, but I left Eliza in the back seat until nightfall. After the horizon dimmed and the buzzing incandescent bulbs of the street lights kicked on, I took my office chair from the kitchen and wheeled it down the driveway. Eliza's legs protruded from under the sheet and when I opened the car door I realized for the first time that she was shoeless. They must have fallen in our dash from the woods. I grabbed her by the ankles and pulled, her skin squeaking against the fake leather seats. I slid her onto the desk chair, straightening the sheet where it had come loose. Gathering the extra fabric under my arm like a train, I wheeled her to the house.

Eliza flopped onto the sofa with a fleshy thud. Turning her with one hand onto her back, I used the other to wrestle the sheet away from her upper body. My skin went clammy and I tasted the anxious tang of copper and fear in the back of my throat. I wound the sheet around my fist and pulled.

Her wig had gotten caught up in the folds and came away with the fabric, leaving her bald and punctured and resembling a cadaver. One arm flopped uselessly at her side, the elbow bent at a sickening angle. I prodded the joint with my thumb and felt the dislocated ball bearing, round and hard beneath the surface. There would be no way to fix it without cutting open her skin. I thought of the seam it would leave on the silicone and I shuddered. She would never be the same.

I started to edge my fingernails under the seam running along her jaw. Her face, where it had not been ripped to shreds, was covered in quintets of puncture marks. They ran down her neck and her now concave chest. Maybe there was a sealant, some sort of skin graft that could be applied. I removed her face as delicately as I could but the rips in the thin silicone grew with every tug of a newly freed plug.

I held Eliza's face in my hands, easing away from the couch and sitting myself on the coffee table. It creaked under my weight. I bowed my head, putting my forehead to Eliza's shapeless one. Her cheeks sagged into my palms and through her eyes all I could make out were my own calluses, blurry with proximity. On the couch, Eliza's faceless body stared me down. One of her eyes were scratched, but it was fine. I had others. I could switch them out that night.

I went upstairs to my room and rummaged through the nightstand. Eliza's factory default eyes had been a venomous green to compliment her auburn hair. I found them in a drawer alongside her replacement tongues and eyebrows and pocketed them. My fingers lingered over an alternate set of soft, pliable teeth, ones with slightly larger canines that made them look like fangs, when I felt a pang of fear. All the extra parts I had were standard stock, nothing particularly special, but Eliza was one of a kind. Joints could be fixed, eyelashes reapplied, even large sections of skin could be lifted out and replaced, but what if there was no one that could mend the scars on her face. She was a custom design bought second hand from a third party. If it could not be fixed, it also could not be replaced.

I fought the fear down, tamping it into submission with reassuring thoughts. Someone on the forums would be able to do it. Or they would know someone who could. Surely. Even if I had spoken ill of most of the regular contributors, they would come to my aid. This was an

emergency. A small hope budded inside me, but it was weak and aware of how easily it could be stamped out.

I walked back into the living room, but found Eliza was not on the couch. She instead sat in her favorite chair, broken arm dangling over the arm rest. The glossy, white plastic planes of her face caught the yellow glow of the street lights and *Jane Eyre* sat balanced on her knee. She did not look down towards the book. Instead her gaze was focused outward. Her lidless eyes, wide and emotionless without the soft fringe of lashes, looked up over the rooftops of the quiet neighborhood houses, above any point that could have been the horizon.

VISTA

Sid smoothed a limp display sticker back into place, its starburst declaration of 2 for 1 Pepsi Co products sliding over the window as it reattached itself with static cling. The glass was still hot from the long summer day, and the warm plastic caught against the fleshy side of his thumb. Sid didn't mind the night shift as much in the summer. The lingering curls of light hanging over the ocean made him want to take a wet wipe to the congealed strings of nacho cheese, gave him the photosynthetic energy to hose off those mats under the Slurpee machine that sucked at the soles of his work shoes when he checked the syrup levels. He shaded his eyes with his flattened palm and squinted out at the row of gas pumps, checking that the last straggle of beach goers didn't drive off without paying, their bodies like black burn marks against the red sun squatting on the horizon behind them.

Vista Convenience sat at the end of its own little corridor to the ocean. A badly paved road to the beach, covered with miss-colored patches of quick-pour asphalt like algae blooms, dead-ended in the parking lot, and the sun-bleached motels lining both sides framed a thin slice of water and sea-grass. On one side of Vista, a shop sold taffy and mailboxes covered in shells, touristy in the same way as the surf shops and airbrush t-shirt booths that crowded between the resorts on the main stretch, but without the day-glow colors that made Sid flinch.

He stepped away from the window, blinking the sun-spots out of his eyes, as the front doors slid open and a muggy belch of sea air followed Alex into the store. Even in her street clothes, it was easy to tell she wasn't a day tripper. No one wears Doc Martins to the beach, even

with shorts. Tourists don't stomp around by themselves with portable CD players clipped to their belt, making a weird bulge under the light flannel they wore to keep the sun off their shoulders. She pulled one of the foam padded earpiece away from her head and thumbed the STOP button on her Walkman.

“Time?”

Sid blinked at her, blue ghost suns still filling the space between them. “Almost 7:30, I think?”

Alex nodded and let the earpiece snap back against her head as she headed for the back office. She was early. Normally, she was not. Sid tried not– did not– take it personally when she slid through the door minutes before her shift started, pulled comics out from the slit between the cash drawer and the counter when they were both at register, or skirted out early, just before sunrise. Alex only took night shifts.

A few people filtered in and out of the store, but most of the beach traffic was gone. The stragglers picked out their cans of sun tea and wrapped light sweaters or ratty button downs over their pink shoulders. Sid shuffled away from the door, waiting behind the register for them to swipe their cards for the full tank of gas that would take them inland. The upholstery in their cars would smell like tanning lotion and tide for days afterward.

When Alex reemerged from the back office, she was in her work polo with the ratty flannel knotted around her waist. She followed in the thick soled scuff marks from previous nights' shifts and fished a trade volume of *Uncanny X-men* from under the register. Whenever he and Alex worked register at the same time, Sid studied the station like he was still a trainee, so he did not have to feel like he was staring at her across the aisle. There was still a training guide

tacked against the wall. He followed along with his finger through printed screen shots of transaction options, refamiliarizing the already familiar paths to different item types and payment methods. Entering Skoal sales manually? Find the item type under “brand type,” under “smokeless,” under “tobacco products,” under “photo I.D. required purchase.” He flipped to the back, where Vera, the day manager, had written a standing to-do list in her un-varying block capitals. Sid looked up at the gray panels of the drop ceiling, taking a slow breath before letting gravity pick a distraction.

RESTOCK DISPLAY CANDY

There were messages from Vera all over the place. “NO READING ON THE CLOCK -VERA,” was on a post-it next to the register. “THIS PHONE IS NOT FOR PERSONAL CALLS -VERA,” was sharpied directly onto the receiver’s dull beige casing. “BATHROOM KEY CAN BE LOANED FOR NO MORE THAN FIVE MINUTES -VERA,” was taped to the wall right behind the hanging key, Sid’s knuckles scuffing the paper whenever he handed the key to a customer.

Sid would have felt bad about ignoring all the memos if he had ever met Vera, but he hadn’t. He was hired by the previous day manager last summer, after he graduated high school but before the scholarship had been rescinded and his shifts at Vista became his only real motivation for showering. He thought of Vera as a woman with collar bones like a wire hanger, her uniform navy polo hanging off her the same way it would hang in a closet, scrolling through surveillance video from the night shift and making notes in thick block capitals that look like they were rolled out by a lithograph. When he told this to Bobby, the night manager, he’d laughed.

“Sounds about right,” Bobby had said, “Salt of the earth, that woman.”

Alex had never met Vera either, but ignored the memos she left with the petty determination of a middle schooler getting in trouble. Sid was bad at guessing ages, and, though he was sure Alex was older than him, he was never sure by how much. Sometimes, she seemed mom-old, or like the real-life age of actresses who played co-eds on TV. When he saw her glance at Vera's newest countertop note before purposely filing it into the void she'd carved out in her memory for anything she thought she was above, her eyes narrowed in the same way as the thirteen-year-olds that pouted at the register when their parents wouldn't buy them an iced coffee.

Sid pulled a full box of snickers and walked to the front of the counter. Light was fading. He wanted to finish before the last of it slipped away and the energy siphoning hum of florescence was the only light he had left. That was when everything would feel slow, like the subtle strobe of the industrial lighting made the whole world move in bullet time. He knelt on the gritty linoleum and started shuffling the candy bars into neat stacks.

"Where's Bobby?" Sid asked. If he had some help he would finish with enough time to take the internal temperature of the hot dogs spinning peacefully on their heated rollers.

"Back office." Alex let the pages of her comic flutter closed. She slid it back under the cash drawer, and Sid caught a glance of her face as she turned. From that angle and with the slow victory of the overhead lights and the bruising sky, she looked old. "There's an inspection tonight. I'd stay out of his way. He gets jumpy when his girlfriend pops up."

She passed Sid a new box of Reese's Cups, and he started adding them to the stacks. Inspections on the gasoline tanks happened every quarter, but one had never happened during a

night he was scheduled. He'd never seen the woman who lived in the tanks crawl out of the ground, nails carving divots into the concrete and hips grinding against the spill bucket.

“Is she actually real?” he asked.

“Really his girlfriend? Or really real?” The sun was low enough to cut right into Alex's eyes. The light seemed to obliterate her irises. Sid squirmed on his knees, unsettled by the blank eyes that squinted down at him and suddenly aware of the gravel and sand that bit into his shins through his work slacks.

“Either?”

Alex leaned down, and Sid let out a subconscious breath as the brown ring of her irises reappeared in the shadows. She crossed her arms over the counter, a fleshy X over a collection of Vera's notes, and started picking at the tape that held one down.

“I think his feelings are unrequited.” She laughed, like it was a joke but one that Sid didn't get. “I work every inspection night, and I'm never sure she's real. Not until the fill cover is lifted off, and she's on the tile in front of me.”

In one smooth motion, Alex peeled away a strip of tape with her nail and rolled it into a ball against the counter. The memo it held down curled slightly in its new freedom.

#

Bobby wore his dress blues on inspection nights. Navy slacks, pressed as best he could manage, and a clean polo. His hand wandered to his name tag every now and then, checking that it was still centered and level over the company logo. An orange semicircle resting on a light blue bar. A sun rising over the water, or maybe it was setting. Bobby decided it was about perspective.

He leaned over the desk, fixing the part of his hair in the small mirror stuck to the edge of the computer monitor. There was less of it on his head with every quarter, and what was left was dry and floaty, nimbusing away from his scalp. He didn't sit in the office chair at the risk of creasing his pants.

Even though Bobby had been working nights at Vista long enough to read time by the height of the moon, he did not think about it as his chair or his office. The desk was in the back corner of the break room, artificially partitioned from the rest of it by a felt wall. When Bobby was sitting, its top edge was perfectly level with his eyes. There was nothing personal pinned to the wall, and there was no room between corporate posters about work safety. The only decoration on the desk was a peach fuzz-textured plastic beagle. It was Vera's, and the head bobbed up and down when Bobby flicked it. No, the desk was hers, and so was the chair. When he did sit, he felt himself spilling over the harsh impressions that her boney hips left in the memory foam.

Bobby licked his thumb and flattened the hairs along his temple and patted the thinning fly aways around the crown of his head. Then, the door opened, he shot up, and the straw like strands fluttered back into messiness. Sid stood in the doorway to the break room.

“There's a girl in the corner eating pretzels?”

The question mark tugged on Bobby's nerves. Sid seemed to speak in nothing but questions, like one had hooked into his vocal chords, pulling the end of every sentence upward with an unnecessary lilt. Bobby waited, but Sid did not continue.

“Well, did she pay for them?”

Sid fiddled with the door handle, twisting it upwards and downwards. “I don't think so?”

Bobby slid into the office chair. His arm brushed one of Vera's memos, ("DON'T ADJUST THE LUMBAR, PLEASE! -VERA") and out of reflex he traced the square of paper and tape with his pointer finger. He stared at his wall. It had been Bobby's job to chase out the teens and the vagrants when he started his employment as a pump attendant. That was when he was still young and the logo was embroidered on the polo instead of pressed on with hot irons and his hair was as thick as a god damn shag carpet. He was respectful as he shuffled them out, would always usher them towards the door with the customary "sir" or "miss." He added it out of civility— they would know he didn't mean it. Putting barriers between them and himself was the reason he applied to jobs further and further up that management line. That was almost twenty-five years and five promotions ago. How the fuck was this still his job?

He looked back at Sid, twisting awkwardly in the doorway.

"I'll be out in a minute."

Sid nodded, but his mouth crumpled into an uncertain line. God, even his face was a question mark.

#

Alex knew she was bad at her job, but it was a shitty job to have. It was a shift that no one wanted in a place that was made to drive away from, not that she could drive. She would quit, but tourist season was almost over. Nowhere else was hiring, and besides, she'd miss inspection nights.

One of the only parts of her job that Alex did enjoy was the Slurpee machine. There was just a stupidly large amount of options, and all of them so bright. Creamy pina colada, too-sweet watermelon kiwi, sour lemonade that caused her mouth to pucker through thought alone. There

had been a cotton candy flavor for a while, a peaceful shine of pink at the end of the color spectrum, but it hadn't sold well. She loved the slight Freon tinge to the air in the break room where the walls ran along the unit casing and the little swirling portals above every spigot. When Alex made her rounds with the dust mop, around the edge of the store and up and down the aisles, she sometimes paused near the bank of churning Slurpee flavors and looked at them like portholes to worlds with cheerier colored skies than the dark one that pressed against the front windows.

The night of the night of the inspection, she walked along the counter under the Slurpee machine, pulling crumpled straw wrappers from the cracks between the different flavors. The troughs under the Slurpee spigots were full of slush, little bergs of colorful ice in an ocean of melted runoff. Alex's nose scrunched at the soupy mess. Guess the day shift was too slammed to take care of it.

She returned the dust mop to the maintenance closet and exchanged it for one of the industrial yellow buckets. The closet was Alex's second favorite part of her job. It was full to bursting but everything fit, spray bottles, stacks of folded rags, and tubs of powders and salt for when the parking lot got slick all tetrised against each other on the shelves. The air in the closet had a weight she could feel on her tongue when she breathed it in. It was a small change, like the difference between the thin pages of comics and the pulpy heaviness of card stock resting on her fingertips, but something about it reminded her of being small when almost everything felt much heavier. Despite all the clutter, there was not a single memo from Vera for Alex to pretend she didn't see. Maybe she never went in here.

She took the bucket to the wall of Slurpee machines, hooking her finger around the drainage tubes and gently tugging, guiding them out from under the machines without removing their flimsy caps. Once in the bucket, she popped them all off with her thumbnail and then let her head rest against the casing of the machines. With the steady thrum of the machine against her ear, Alex was able to tell herself she stayed because she liked it. Because it paid well enough and because Bobby was pretty chill and didn't chew her out for dumb things like reading in an empty store at 4 am, but she knew these were not the things that stopped her from quitting.

Inspection days always peeked out from the edges of the calendar, never more than three page flips away. The first time she saw that woman shimmy her way out of the petrol tank, the shrieking, indefinable words had hit Alex hard. Shredded through her ear drums and bounced around malleus, incus, and stapes before having a good swish in the cochlea, shooting on electric impulses into her brain. She had mainlined a solid dose of truth and felt it in the back of her mind for weeks until it dissipated. It carried through the rest of her body, a small serge of validation on each pulse. There was no wrong decision she could make, no shaking in her confidence. The scream of the universe echoed inside of her, but it had a rapid half-life and eventually the discomfort of uncertainty returned. Since then, Alex always scheduled herself on inspection nights. If she could get to the next inspection and then the next and then the next, everything would be fine again.

Alex watched the colorful sludge drain, tilting the trays whenever a gob got stuck in the corner. All that was left of the sun were a few curling fingers of yellow light scratching along the horizon. She squatted beside the bucket and started pulling the tubes out, knocking their corrugated mouths against the sides to shake out the last drops and sealing the tubes off again.

She could hear Bobby in the front of the store, ma'am-ing and miss-ing some girl towards the door. A truck rattled outside, and she heard him stop. Her grip loosened as she stood, the rubber hose slinking through her hand and burying its nose in the slush. She could make out Bobby and his thinning hair over the tops of the racks of trail mix and pork rinds, standing just outside, his hand shielding his eyes from the oncoming headlights. From over by the hot food station, Alex saw Sid's head gopher up over the sneeze guard. The truck wheezed past the pumps, rolling to a stop near all the lids and covers that guarded access to the tanks.

Alex dropped the length of hose, a hollow *thunk* against the tile, and walked towards the exit. Sid followed her, but froze in the doorway, his hands in latex gloves and still carrying a meat thermometer.

Two men in coveralls had climbed out of the truck, hard hats tucked under their arms as they shook Bobby's hand and pointed to the ports on the ground. One tossed his hat back into the truck, traded it for a clip board and moseyed alongside Bobby to the side of the gas station, where the propane tanks sat in their cage. Alex strode toward the truck.

#

In the tank, the woman waited. She felt their footsteps, their anxious conversations, through the vibrations of the pipes that dipped down like humming bird beaks into the petrol. Her pruned fingers brushed them, and the physical remainder of the sounds above traveled through her veins. She had known an inspection was coming. She did not measure time, but she was aware of it passing as she rose and fell with the fuel level. It had gotten so low that her heels dragged long the floor of the tank, even when floating on her back.

The hatch screeched open.

She had spent months in the close blackness of the tank. The weight of her own damp lashes on her cheek told her if her eyes were open or closed, but the darkness was the same either way. The tank was dimensionless when sealed. She knew the walls were there, that if she reached out she would touch them eventually. She knew everything, but some things she lost sight of. The oculus created by the open hatch gave perspective that she had missed. The night sky above her was like a tarnished penny, polluted with light compared to the complete darkness of the tank. A hand reached down to her.

After the chemical warmth of the tank, all those heavy vapors wrapped around her like a blanket. The late summer night was cold. The woman felt it first on her hand as a man in coveralls guided her upwards. Her gasoline soaked fingers squelched against his, and she pulled herself through the opening, hooking her elbow over the metal lip of the hatch. The ocean breeze rolled off the water and chilled her shoulders.

“Hello, ma’am, good to see you again,” said the man in coveralls. “Got to check the tank. Shouldn’t take too long.”

The air around her rippled with ethanol fumes. Her only response was to scream. It was not out of fear or pain or anger. It wasn’t even made up of words. She could not control it any more than the pipes she floated among could control the gasoline that pumped through them. It was what they were made to carry. The sound left her throat like a length of knotted silk was being pulled from her.

The woman ran a hand through her oil slicked hair, then resumed her climb with both hands pressed into the asphalt. She wriggled her way out of the tank, her hips grinding against the spill bucket, nails carving little divots into the concrete. The employees waited patiently as

she crawled her way out, their eyes watering as they watched from either the vaporous fumes leeching from her skin or the words they made out of her screaming.

Bobby offered her his arm as she tumbled out on the asphalt. The grains of loose gravel and drifts of sand embedded themselves in her forearms and hip bones, in the soft white planes of her stomach and breasts, and clung there as the man in his pressed slacks helped her to her feet. In the tank, the woman knew time passed as the level of gasoline changed, but out in the world she gauged time by the night manager's face. Bobby's wasn't the first that she used in this way, ticking off the approximate number of years in the new folds and wrinkles that covered his face over time. He would not be the last, either. The young curiosity she had seen on his face decades ago was papered onto Alex's now, and the woman wondered how long it would be until it was replaced with the creased adoration that Bobby greeted her with now. He led the woman towards the convenience store to wait. Her arm left a dark, oily smear where it touched Bobby's polo.

She kept her head bent as she passed through the automatic doors. The unsteady light of the fluorescent bulbs bleached everything in the store, and it was strange to have her spatial limitations so harshly defined. She stayed near the windows, gasoline drips eking from her hair and making puddles on the linoleum. Outside, the men in coveralls uncapped pens and pulled instruments out of their truck. Whatever they heard in her screams, it did not unbalance them the way it did the Vista employees. People made of the truth what they wanted. Maybe the men in the coveralls had less to make.

The light inside the store made the windows into mirrors. Between promotional posters and the Vista logo, the woman could see her own shadowy reflection and those of Alex and

Bobby, hovering in wait to see if she would scream again. She had gone into the tank to avoid this, people that do not hear the truth in its entirety, that pick at the edges and take the pieces that mollify themselves. The woman looked beyond the glass, at the hovering glow of the streetlights and the churning ocean that she knew they led to. She could still feel the two of them moving behind her. They did whatever busy work would keep them close by, interrupting the stream of cold air from the conditioner and giving the woman a fresh chill as they moved.

Elsewhere in the store, a door fell shut. The woman looked away from the ocean as she heard squeaking wheels moving through the aisles. A Vista employee wheeled a mop bucket from around the hot food station. She had not seen him before.

He stopped once he saw her staring, leaning the handle of the mop against the rack of different sized lids and straws. “For once, you leave,” he said, pointing at her feet, “to clean up all the drips.”

Outside, the men in coveralls were coiling hose and making notes on their clip boards. They were almost finished. The woman stepped away from the window, each footstep creating another pool of gasoline on the floor of Vista Convenience. Sid watched her approach, and the woman appreciated the slight fear as she did so.

He flinched as she screamed to him. The sound filled the store, flowing around and over displays of potato chips and energy bars, pushing against the cooler doors where rows of coke bottles and six packs of beer waited in phalanx. Alex and Bobby leaned into the scream. Their hands stopped tidying already organized displays of jerky and cigarette lighters and moved towards the woman like sleepwalkers, their jaws slack as if they could breathe the sound into

their own lungs. Sid looked like he might cry. She swung her jaw closed, and the rest of the scream died on the air.

She did not know what he heard, what caused him to turn away and stumble into the back office. The mop slid from the food station and clattered in the silence. She hoped that whatever he heard, he did not like it, that it made him feel like a part of his life had curdled somehow without him realizing, or that what he heard at least gave him the same feeling as walking down stairs in the darkness and missing the last step. It would mean he heard more than the others.

The automatic doors sighed opened, and a man in coveralls stepped inside.

“Alright ma’am, we’re ready out here.”

The woman left the store. Bobby hurried ahead of her, kneeling at the hatch to help lower her down. She did not stop for him. The woman walked past the opening of the tank, past the inspectors’ truck, leaving a trail of gasoline behind her.

“Hey!” Bobby reached for her as she walked by. He brushed a strand of her hair before losing his balance, swearing as his knee twisted under him. Bobby struggled to his feet and staggered after the woman. “Where are you going?”

He limped to the edge of the parking lot. She came in and out of sight with each streetlight she passed, but walked unwaveringly toward the ocean. She could not see the ocean beyond the wall of darkness, but she could smell it, and she felt the patchy asphalt turn to sand underfoot.

The water rushed around her as she breached the waves, colder and more abrasive than the heady warmth ethanol fumes in the tank, but she kept moving forward. She dug her toes into the sand as she walked, fighting the currents that tried to lift her back to the surface. Salt flooded

her mouth and her and her nose. It filled her sinuses until she felt the pressure build behind her eyes.

She walked so deep that the light would never reach her and started to swallow. The woman took in sea water through her nose and into her lungs. She filled her stomach with it, straining each gulp of water through her teeth. She leaned back into the sand and opened her eyes toward the surface, the weight of the ocean anchoring her there. The brine stung her eyes, but when she opened her mouth to scream there was nothing but water.

CHANGE

Libraries were way louder than Isra remembered. There were children's sections now, and little ones toddled between low shelves, babbling and clapping storybook covers together. DVDs and books on CD cases clicked as patrons flipped through shelves looking for a title. Most of the floor space was dedicated to computers now, and their sticky keys made every command punched a noisy clatter. Isra looked for the computer station furthest away from other users and ended up in the back corner of the library, next to a table of tweens all huddled around one girl holding a paperback open.

Isra had always liked books. They were one of the first things that interested her about humans. Jinn lived long lives and their memories mingled in the air, traded between travelers as warm currents passed through each other. There was no record of jinn entanglement, no place to migrate to and find all their shared history. Books and the humans that made them were always decaying, slowly and almost imperceptibly, but they were a charming solution to a problem Isra hadn't known existed. It was books that had made her curious about humans, drew her into pretending to be one. Even though the shine was off the apple, she still liked books.

She wiggled the mouse, waiting for the computer to rise out of hibernation. The heavy bangle around her wrist scraped against the wood tabletop. Isra pushed it further up her arm, as high as it would go and twisted it around the soft flesh there to keep it in place. She too was decaying since putting it on. Slowly and imperceptibly at first, but now all she could think about

were the ways her back stiffened against the un-cushioned plastic chair, or how straightening her left knee sounded like crunching an empty water bottle.

The tweens at the next table whispered, pressing hands against mouths, and Isra pulled her sleeve down over the bangle. Self-consciousness was a learned response she had picked up over the last few decades. It had taken years as a human to realize that they sometimes laughed at each other for no reason, then another few years to learn there were reasons, but they were petty and spiteful, and teenagers were exceptionally good at finding them. In a way of defense, she had tried to find them all first. That was when she noticed the veins on the back of her hand forming blue mountain ranges towards her fingers, the way the corners of her mouth dragged downwards, and how the skin around her elbows suddenly seemed less elastic than she remembered. For a while, she convinced herself that she had been this way since putting on the bangle, but years kept passing, and she noticed more. She had started cataloging, every morning running her hands over her stomach and down her legs, pinching her skin, twisting her arms in front of her to see what else had changed while she slept. Isra leaned her elbows against the table, keeping her head low and looking at the tweens through the gap between the monitor and the CPU.

They hadn't noticed her at all. There were five of them there, scrunched so close together they looked like a many headed hydra. Isra leaned further down, looking for the title of the book they held in front of them. *Some Like it Scot* curled across the cover over the image of a muscled man in a kilt, and they flipped from one scandalous page to the next. Isra's shoulders loosened, and she shifted her focus back to the computer's start-up screen. At their table, the tweens stifled another bout of laughter. Her jaw clenched. Even if they weren't laughing at her, the sound made her remember every reason they might. They should have been more considerate.

The start-up screen faded to black and was replaced by a gray-blue desktop. Isra shifted her weight onto one hip. Her ankle pressed uncomfortably into the edge of the chair, but she ignored it. She had called in to knock off Miss Cleo psychic phone lines, had been to New Age massage parlors and acupuncturists, had tried to find witches in every Home Depot gardening section, farmer's market, and *Vampire: The Masquerade* gathering she passed. None of them had known how to get the bangle off her, but a curse was a curse. She put it on herself, so there had to be a way to take it off, to turn this body of dirt and flesh and aching parts back into a gust of fire and wind. Good deeds were a place to start. Isra double-clicked the internet explorer icon and keyed in the address for Craigslist. Some poor fool out there needed something, she was sure.

#

Polly waited until she heard the front door slam, then waited a little longer just to be safe. Over the last three weeks, she had learned to track her roommate's movements through sound—the rubber soled *thunk* of Raina kicking off her shoes into the wall, the way the pipes ran loud while the dishwasher ran, the annoying Top 40 radio and hyena laughs of company that Raina had invited over without running it by Polly, even though Raina also did that before Polly had grown a fishtail and confined to the tub.

Polly waited, low in the water. It was a clawfoot bath, thankfully large but still small enough to chafe. There was no comfortable place to put her arms, no way to lie flat against the bottom without some part of her lopping over the side. She sank in as far as she could, water lapping at her earlobes and her lips, but her fins breached the surface and were cold where they made contact with the air. She did not hear Raina come back in.

Granules of undissolved salt swished against the bottom of the tub in small currents as she pulled herself to the edge. The salt had built up over the last few weeks, making the water milky and abrasive no matter how frequently she changed it. She let it all run down the drain just the other day, even turning on the showerhead to rinse herself and the porcelain as well as she could, but when she filled the tub again it was as if the salt had leached out of her and back into the water. Polly swept her tail side to side, clearing a space in the collected salt where she could kneel.

The rounded lip of the tub pressed against her ribs as she reached over the side. Polly dried her hands best as she was able on the lavender bath mat. She pressed her hands into the synthetic fleece and watched the prints she left spread into wide, bruised colored blobs before reaching under the tub to the bundle of towels she had hidden there.

Raina was not the worst roommate Polly had lived with in the five years that her humanity lasted. She had gotten a lot better, actually, much more helpful in some ways, since Polly had grown a fish tail. Raina had helped her into the tub and searched through the stair closet, through all the junk old tenants had left behind, to find some aquarium salt. They had started to talk more, but Raina didn't listen very well.

"It's just a temporary thing, right?" Raina put forward while getting ready for work the morning after Polly's legs turned into fins. "I mean it probably is. Soak for a few days and then towel off. Then, bam, good as new."

Raina was a wait and see kind of person. Polly had explained, in the short, gasping voice she had left, that this was what she was supposed to be, but she attempted Raina's solution anyway. She had put a washcloth over the open drain and let the tub slowly empty as she slept.

The next morning, the water evaporating off her skin and scales felt like sand paper rubbing against her, and even the skin under her eyelids was chapped. She'd clawed the faucet, head bowed underneath it as water flowed back into the tub. When Raina came in to wash her hair in the sink, she suggested they wait a few days and try again. Next time it would probably take.

Carefully, Polly set the bundle of towels on the small cabinet they used to hold toilet paper. The terrycloth was stripped away layer by layer, exposing the silver clamshell casing of Raina's laptop. She'd left it balanced on the edge of the sink after using it to look up hair tutorials. Polly was not a wait and see kind of person. She needed her legs back, and if Raina wouldn't help her, she would find someone else. Every day she spent in the tub, Polly felt herself getting weaker. In the oceans she'd swum miles a day, cold water streaming through her gills. With no space to move, she was starting to atrophy. If she stayed like this much longer, she wouldn't even have the strength to life her tail, let alone walk if she ever got her legs back.

She opened the laptop slowly, afraid that Raina might somehow hear the creaking hinges or the whirring fan from miles away. Her wrists and arms bent at odd angles over the keyboard as she tried to avoid any errant drips of salt tinged water seeping between the cracks and fizzling circuits. The battery life on the laptop was already dwindling by time she got online. She pulled up community forums and good Samaritan threads, typing hurried postings as the power percentage in the corner of the screen wound down. Her damp fingers left ghost thin prints of salt on the keys.

#

Francine bounced her wallet against her thigh as she waited for the cashier to finish ringing through her items. The next performance wasn't for hours, but her face was already

heavy with show makeup, her hair looped around soda can sized curlers. The young man at the register looked up from scanning drinks and bags of chips and candy bars every so often, each time looking confused by her presence. She could have sent a gofer, and maybe she should have. The act was doing well, and DVDs of *Miracle Marco: Up Close and Magical* had moved more units than she could have expected. Marco had employed a small entourage in response to the high sales— hair and makeup, dedicated videographers, and a personal assistant that the two of them shared, though Francine still did all these things herself— but she had woken up with the air feeling so close in her coffin like bunk that it felt like it was trying to crawl down her throat.

Francine looked down at the credit card reader and watched the transaction total grow, her false lashes glancing against her cheekbones. Walking to the market had helped clear her head, but it hadn't woken her up. Show nights felt like they were getting longer. After some performances, she barely had the energy to shrug out of her heavy, sequined costume before collapsing into sleep. That morning, when she looked at her reflection in the small mirror she kept in her bunk, she hadn't bothered to wipe off last night's makeup before sponging on another layer of foundation, trapping her exhaustion right up against her skin with sticky beige paint. She'd wiped the smudged eyeliner back into shape with her knuckles, peeled false eyelashes off her pillow and added another layer of glue. Her eyes watered under the fringe of lashes, as much chemical irritation as exhaustion.

“That's ten sixty-eight, ma'am.”

Francine let her eyes fall closed, feeling a light sway in her momentary darkness.

“Ma'am?”

“Oh, right.” She rolled her shoulders back, like exhaustion was a bird that had roosted on her collarbones to be shooed away. “Duh.”

She slotted her card through and avoided looking the cashier in the eyes as he handed her the bag.

The sky outside was misleadingly bright and almost cloudless, bleached so thoroughly by the sun that the horizon faded to white. It teased the closeness of spring, but one foot out the door and Francine was immediately reminded that it was still winter. Pockets of dirty snow hid in shadowy corners or piled high on grass medians, leaking dozens of tributaries down the sidewalk and into gutters.

Francine twisted the handles of the plastic bag around her knuckles and folded her arms against her chest as she walked back towards the theater. The sun was warm, but every gust of wind blew the heat away from her skin and left a raw coldness on her cheeks and nose. There was a list of chores to be done before curtain call. Small things, like steaming costumes and stocking merchandise, she could pass on to Marco’s entourage, but other small tasks were still too big to entrust to others, like equipment checks, prepping for each magic trick, and handling Marco himself.

He’d always been childish, but since the last leg of the tour, it had gotten worse. He fought Francine on every aspect of the show from trick order to lighting changes, like he could do any of it without her there. She carved off the merch table as a place for him to have free reign, leave him with the headache of picking t-shirt printers and tracking inventory, but it ended with his assistant bringing everything to her.

Francine walked the along the downtown streets, the buildings on either side blocking the meager heat from the sun and forming channels of wind that somehow blew up under her sweatshirt. Her steps got slower despite the cold, and her path meandered. She snaked around the city blocks, always technically moving towards the theater but in whatever way was the most indirect. The more she walked, the more space opened between the buildings she passed. Downtown gave way to a neighborhood of small houses and office buildings set away from the road. There was room for parking lots and trees and for the sun's rays to slant down over the rooftops and reach the street. Francine kept her arms folded, bare hands pressed into her armpits, but she drifted sun patch to sun patch and felt the prickling return of sensation to her ears and nose.

She rounded a corner of an apartment complex, putting her back on course for the theater, and slowed to a stop. A woman sat in a window frame on the second floor, leaning out of the casement. For a moment, Francine thought she was naked under a loose satin robe, but as she edged closer she saw it was yards of hair. A coppery orange color in the light, the hair rolled over the woman's shoulders and drifted against the building, catching on the stucco finish. Francine took slow steps forward as the woman bent towards the ground, pointing at something below her.

On the porch, another woman squatted. Despite the weather signaling every sign of an early spring, she was wearing thick soled boots and a thickly quilted jacket. Under a sagging gray beanie, her hair was in a long black braid that cut down her back like a second spine. She flipped the door mat over and then stood, lifting the mat towards the window like she was selling a pelt.

“Key’s not here,” she shouted up to the woman in the window, shaking the mat as evidence. Her skin was dark, and the remains of an accent pulled out the ‘s’ sound, blurring it into the next word.

“Maybe try the stones?” The woman in the window started anxiously twirling a lock of hair around her finger, but it was so long it striped her forearm down to her elbow.

The other woman dropped the mat in a heap and stepped down from the porch to where decorative rocks the size of Francine’s head lined the sidewalk. She pushed them with her toes, exposing the black dirt underneath that was damp with the spring thaw, but kept her hands in her pockets.

“I’m not seeing one.”

Francine’s slow pace had put her within speaking distance of them, but neither of them paid any noticeable attention to her.

“Shit,” said the woman above her as she leaned back against the casing, hair falling against the sill. “My roommate might have moved the spare.”

Francine stepped the edge of the sidewalk, one foot dipping down into the snow filled gutter. Her grip around the shopping bag tightened, a pale red line forming where plastic pressed against her skin. This was weird. She could just walk by.

“Do ya’ll need help with anything?” She felt the words climb in her throat like helpful beetles skittering towards the light. She’d been raised to be polite, but she didn’t have to like it.

“Well, she needs ride,” the woman with the braid told her. “But I can’t get in, and she can’t come down.”

“Why not?”

The two women looked at each other, then back to Francine.

“Don’t worry about it.” The one with the braid took a step towards Francine, who backed up into the street, both feet in the crumbling gutter snow that had gone black with exhaust fumes.

“I can get in there, if you need some help.”

The woman looked her top to bottom with elevator eyes.

“No, really, I can,” Francine continued, raising her voice so the other one could hear, “I just need to know what it looks like.”

In the window, the woman slid her arm out of the coil of hair she had been toying with.

“It’s a bathroom,” she said, “green walls, black floor.”

Francine stepped out of the slush and back onto the curb, setting her bag between two of the large stones. The wind had blown some of the curlers loose, and she took a moment to tuck the freed springs of hair back away from her face. She could feel the eyes of the other women on her, the wind cutting through her sweatshirt, and the cold teeth of the metal zipper running down across her stomach. She closed her own eyes and built green walls around her. Pressure built in her sinuses, making her aware of all the cavities of space behind her nose and eyes. She imagined dark tiles under her damp feet and her eyes strained like they were going to spring out of their sockets. The pressure built until for a heartbeat she could feel nothing around her, not the pavement she had been standing on or the wind that had chilled her. She had never tried to breath in this liminal space, afraid that she would lose all the air inside her to the emptiness and find nothing to replace it.

Then, something was under her again. She felt air on her face and it smelled like coconut and the fish section of a pet store. She opened her eyes and the woman in the window was now

an arm's length away from her, hair falling like a sheet around her and a long golden tail where her legs should have been. Francine felt a small lurch of sadness. She reminded Francine of the sunfish she'd caught as a kid. Mouths gaping as they floated in five-gallon buckets, already finished with their thrashing and now just lying in peaceful inevitability.

"I'm Polly," she said, extending a hand.

Francine offered her own name and took the mermaid's hand in hers. It felt clammy and too soft, like whatever bones gave it structure would bend without snapping.

She went downstairs and unlatched the door, where the other woman introduced herself as Isra. Francine followed Isra back up the stairs to the bathroom, where the three of them tried to figure out how to get Polly down the stairs. They decided on a modified piggy-back maneuver, where Polly threw her arms around Isra's neck and Francine hoisted the slippery tail under her arm and tried not to think of how the sunfish had squirmed in her hand when she snapped the hook out of their jaw. Isra lead them down the street parking, where a Ford explorer with an open trunk waited for them. A tarp was spread over the folded down seats and an inflatable kiddie pool was scrunched between the wheel wells.

"Where are you going?" Francine asked as they tipped Polly sideways into the pool.

"There's a witch in the next state south," Polly said. She ran her webbed fingers down the length of her tail, gathering herself into the small pool. Francine noticed that she did not have any fingernails. "Isra is taking me. It's not like I can go to work like this."

"There's still an open seat if you want to come, too." Isra ran elevator eyes over her again, but in a way less intimidating than before.

"I can't just leave."

Isra shrugged and closed the trunk door. She went back to the stoop to retrieve her bag, the question of *why not* sloshing around in her mind with each step. The Ford was pulling away from the curb, and a shriek of anxiety grew inside Francine as its engine got quieter with distance. Then, with head snapping pressure, there was suddenly nothing around her. The teleportation came onto her, went through her like a sneeze, and when she opened her eyes, she was in the passenger seat of a car.

“What the fuck!” Isra yelled, jerking the car into the wrong lane. Water slapped against the rear windows.

The heat was cranked up, and the air from the blowers lifted the corners of Francine’s false lashes. She peeled them away, the glue pulling at her eyelids as she blinked. “I guess I changed my mind.”

#

Francine heard the slop of water against the tarp, and her head jolted forward as the Ford bounced over a speed bump. They’d been driving for hours. The road map was still open in her lap, but instead of the steady strobe of city street lights, the car was filled with an incandescent glow.

Isra backed the Ford into a parking space. The lot was little more than a small patch of dirt along the road. A string of trailers lined the lot, lit by porch lights and the harsh glow of a strip mall across the street. Metal gates shuddered most of the shops, but a few store fronts punctuated the darkness with their flickering halogen signs, small, sleepy scenes playing out behind their tall windows. Silhouettes sweeping floors in the grocery, teens slumped against the counter of the late-night sandwich stop, the stiff muscled movements of people moving loads to

the dryer in the 24-hour laundromat. To Francine, it looked no different than any other town she had driven through on the show circuits.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked Isra.

In the driver’s seat, Isra hummed in acknowledgement but swiped to unlock her phone without answering.

Another slosh of water and a flash of iridescent scales in the rearview mirror caught her attention. Francine leaned around the headrest and saw Polly’s webbed hand pressed against the window of the trunk hatch. The mermaid had flipped herself onto her stomach and edged toward the rim of the inflatable pool. Her ribs pressed against the sides, wet skin squeaking against the plastic, and a puddle formed where the water dripped from her bent elbow. Her eyes skipped between the lit windows, taking in the details of each self-contained world. It hadn’t occurred to Francine how starved Polly must have been for the sight of something beyond those bathroom walls. She had never thought to ask exactly how long Polly had been sitting in that tub or how she kept from going insane.

Francine settled back in her seat and let her head slump against the upholstery. She could taste the hours of travel on her teeth. It had collected in the creases on her skin and on the edges of her eyes. Beside her, Isra’s nails tapped a small frenzy on her phone. Francine supposed that even Jinn tired at some point. Isra’s face was alert as ever, but there was a sag to her shoulders that had not been there that morning, a small lilt in how she held her head while staring down at the screen. Her tapping stopped as the phone chirped in response. Isra let out a small sigh and slipped the phone into her pocket.

“Okay, troops,” she said, unbuckling her seat belt. “Let’s get moving.”

Isra threw open her door and climbed out of the car, her heavy boots connecting with the asphalt with a thump. She did not wait for a response from the mermaid or Francine as she let the door fall shut behind her.

Polly twisted in her pool to look towards Francine. “Move to where? What’s she going to do, set me up in a washer?”

As if in response, the screen door of a nearby trailer opened and a small, round woman stepped onto the patio. A slice of light from somewhere inside the trailer caught the curve of the woman’s cheek and cut through the fabric of her night gown where it fluttered away from her body. There was nothing overly unusual looking about her. Nothing that marked her as anything more supernatural than her surroundings would suggest. No black cat prowling at her feet or raven perched on her shoulder. No warts on her face or hunch in her back. Her face was a bit stern, but that was likely the result of it being well after midnight.

Isra rolled her shoulders back and stretched her arms behind her back, loosening the muscles that had tightened during the hours of driving. In her inflatable pool, Polly lowered more of herself into the water the way a child would wrap a blanket around their shoulders. The woman’s face was terse, but Isra smiled and waved before walking to the back of the Ford.

Swinging the trunk door open, Isra informed Francine and Polly that they had arrived at their destination. “Dinah’s the one we came to see.”

“Really?” Polly’s face crinkled at the dingy area surrounding them. Francine could not blame her. It was hard to believe that any kind of salvation could be found in a trailer park, but there was a catch of hope in her voice.

Francine looked again at the woman in the doorway. “How do you even know this witch?”

“Technically, I’ve had her on retainer for years. She was supposed to be figuring out how to get rid of this garbage.” Isra held up an arm and a tarnished bangle caught a curve of light before sliding down under her jacket sleeve. She pulled the tarp lining the trunk, scooching the inflatable pool closer to the door. “Help me get Polly inside.”

Francine was surprised at the small squeeze of jealousy she felt in her chest. The picture of Dinah she had built in her head, a gray-haired witch with twisted hands and filmy eyes clashed against this new information. The witch didn’t look much older than Francine and was able to transform one creature into another. Blipping between points of space was the only thing Francine could do, and she couldn’t even use it to help people.

Francine climbed out of the passenger’s seat and joined Isra at the trunk of the car. The two of them formed a cradle with their arms as Polly shuffled out of the pool and backed her scaled behind into their waiting arms. Isra looked over her shoulder at the windows of the laundromat. There were only a few drowsy patrons, moving loads or plopping coins into the machines. Isra nodded, and the pair of them made for the trailer.

They crab-walked awkwardly along the front walk as they tried to avoid Polly’s limp fins trailing in the dirt. Francine cringed at the sticky-slick feel of Polly’s scales, focusing instead on her own short, quick steps and the fever warmth of Isra’s hands, like fistfuls of sand that had been baked in the sun. Then Polly shuddered and Francine felt the needling fish bones in the mermaid’s tail flex against her forearms and made her steps faster.

Dinah slid the stopper on the screen door to hold it open and disappeared inside. Francine and Isra followed, carefully stepping around the potted plants that crowded the small patio. Polly slid her clammy arms around their necks as they maneuvered her up the stairs. Francine laced her fingers through Isra's, and they carried the mermaid over the threshold, their grip slipping on her scales.

Inside, the trailer was lit by crisscrossing strands of Christmas lights and a weak overhead light above the kitchen sink. A large plastic tub, the kind used to store holiday decorations or camping supplies, sat in the living room and was filled halfway with water.

"Yeah," Dinah said, running a hand through her hair. She looked from the tub to Polly. "I only have a standing shower. This is the largest container I could put you in."

Dinah settled onto the sofa as they lowered Polly in, the sides bowing where her hips sat. Polly's tail flopped over the edge and the fins were already curling in the dry air. "This is not going to work," Polly said.

Isra got the kiddie pool from the back of the car. Francine took the mermaid by the elbows and pulled her out of the storage tub, sending her belly flopping into the pool. The small body of water took up most of the living room's limited space. Its inflated ring edges pushed against the legs of the coffee table and the rough upholstery of the couch and blocked a concertina door. Dinah invited Francine to sit as Isra stalked into the kitchen.

"So who's the one that needs a spell?" A ring of candles stood in the center of the coffee table around a small mirror. Dinah passed an open hand over them, and tiny flames budded on the wicks.

Isra returned to the living room, lowering herself into an easy chair with a mug of something strong smelling. “The one in the kiddie pool.”

“You sure?” Dinah lit the last candle and turned to Francine, folding her feet underneath her. “There’s something not quite right with you, either.”

Francine felt the prickling announcement of tears forming, but she wasn’t sure if it was out of embarrassment or relief that someone else had noticed. For a moment, she considered setting her suddenly heavy-feeling head on the witch’s shoulder and telling her everything. About Marco, and the show, and about the guilt of all those dead doves burying the larger, person-sized mound of guilt she tried to ignore. Instead she smiled awkwardly. “Mine is one I can fix myself.”

“If you say so.” She did not seem convinced.

Dinah settled behind the coffee table, folding one leg underneath her as she leaned against the sofa. “So, what’s up with you, Goldie?”

Polly curled on her side in the tub, the water bisecting her face. Tiny disks of candlelight reflected in her scales, but where her hip and tail protruded from the water the light glinted dully. Francine thought it might be the shadows that hung at the edge of their little circle, but Polly was going ragged, small tears in her fins where they poked from the edge of the tub.

“I have no legs.”

“Are you supposed to?”

Polly raised her head indignantly, water sloshing and long gold hair unspooling in the wake.

“Okay, fine,” Dinah said, raising her hands in mock defense. “I’ll need some of your hair.”

She snapped her fingers and pointed to an end table near Francine’s elbow. Francine waited for the scissors to fly off the table and into Dinah’s hand, but felt embarrassment creep up her throat when she realized she was meant to hand them to her.

Dinah reached forward to take them and then shuffled forward on her knees towards Polly. She twirled a lank of wet hair around her finger, cutting it near the base. She let the hair plop onto the mirror and moved it into a rough circle. Placing her hands on either side, the witch leaned forward, looking down into the mirror through the ring of hair. Beads of black sprung up in the candle flames, dancing above the wicks. The air changed, though Francine could not say exactly how. It was sharper, each breath knifing through her airways, and the taste of ash filled her mouth. On the mirror, the hair looked like it was writhing. Small bubbles of air pushed up through the strands and Francine realized it was boiling, a small caldera of hair and salt water.

Dinah leaned away from the mirror, and the licks of flame shrunk. Francine’s hands unclenched though she didn’t remember balling them into fists at all.

“There’s not anything to do. This is what she’s supposed to be.”

Isra looked back and forth between the mermaid and the witch.

“What?”

“I can give you a few days of legs, but that’s it really,” Dinah said to Polly. She cupped the briny tangle of hair and carried it to the kitchen trash. To Isra, she added, “She doesn’t belong on land. Her heart’s not even in it. Any spell is going to be temporary.”

Polly slunk down in the water, hair spreading under the surface like pale ink.

Isra rapped her knuckles on the back of her phone. Clicked the home button without looking at the time and then set it face down in her lap.

“Why does it always seem like you are so very shitty at what you do?”

Dinah did not look at Isra as she wet a dishrag and walked back to the coffee table, but she did not answer.

“No, I’m serious. Aren’t witches supposed to be the masters of this stupid dirt magic? But every problem I bring to you, you say it’s too hard. I ask you to get this shackle of me,” Isra said, waving her bangled arm, “and your response is ‘Sorry, not going to happen.’ I bring you a whole new customer despite your failing, and what do you know– can’t do that either.”

The rag hit the wood laminate with a slap. Francine looked at the candle flames as the witch started to scrub the salt off the mirror and table. Across from her, Polly slowly moved her hands over the water. She kept her eyes focused on the ripples.

“Hey!” Isra gave the table a hard kick. Melted wax sloshed over the rims of candles, extinguishing flames and creating translucent geography across the coffee table. “I’m serious, what fucking gives. For Jinn, changing forms is nothing.”

The witch knelt at the table, cooling wax collecting around her clenched fists and seeping into the wash rag. She met Isra’s glare with her own.

“You’re not a jinni anymore.”

Isra opened her mouth to argue, but Dinah plowed over her.

“No. You’re not. You’re stuck in a body made of dirt, just like the rest of us.” Dinah pulled her hands from the wax, leaving angry canyons of space. “And dirt doesn’t change as easy as fire does.”

#

Dinah had let Francine sleep on the couch. Polly stayed in her kiddie pool, waking every so often to rotate which part of her was left exposed to the air. Isra dozed lightly for a few hours, but jinn did not sleep, and even if she was a human now, she did not need much. She watched Polly churn unconsciously, the mermaid's cracked skin dipping in and out of the water as she tried to find a way to submerge herself completely.

They were already driving south, so they just kept going. It was early, the warm gray of dawn just beginning in the eastern sky. They could be in the panhandle in eight hours if they drove straight through, only stopping for gas. Francine kept the atlas open in her lap and Polly tried to sleep in the back, water rippling as the car thrummed down the highway. It was too early for anything other than morning commute talk radio, so they rode in silence.

Isra fought a yawn down as Francine traced their route to the coast through all the red and blue veins of traffic. The sun rose and warmed the inside of the car, and salty water condensed on the inside of the window, dampening the roof of the cab. Isra rolled down the windows and her left hand drifted up and down in the currents of air, the metal bangle clacking against the door once or twice. The witch had not been able to change Polly, but Isra was pretty sure driving her to the ocean counted as a good deed. The bracelet was still locked around her wrist, but maybe taking Polly to the ocean meant that a good deed was becoming a better one. A larger favor and a more impressive demonstration of selflessness. Only a few hours of driving and she maybe she would be herself again. She toyed with the bangle as she drove, certain it was growing looser, that she could push it further up her arm than she could before. The excitement fluttered behind her breast bone.

Isra cleared her throat, and Francine looked up from the map.

“I have a question.”

“Shoot,” Francine said, looking back to the map as her thumb ran a line towards Panama City.

“Why couldn’t we– or you– just,” in the stream of air outside the window, Isra made a *pop* motion with her hand, a fist and then flicking her fingers out, “to the ocean.”

It would save so much time, Isra thought. Have her good deed count sooner, and get this curse off her wrist.

“I don’t think it would be safe.” Francine fell back against the seat, her gaze uncentered through the windshield.

“But you do it.”

“It wouldn’t be safe for you. Or for Polly.” Francine sighed. “I’m not sure where I go in the time between disappearing one place and showing up in another. I’ve always been too afraid to open my eyes and find out, but I’ve only ever sent one other person through there. Part of a trick that didn’t go right.”

“And they were hurt in the in between?” Isra suddenly felt like listening to the radio and leaned over to fiddle with the knobs.

“He never came back out of it,” Francine said quietly over the static. “I don’t know where he is.”

They made their way south and once getting to the coast, they drove on whatever roads kept them close to the water, past busy storefronts and resorts to the quieter beach front residential areas, looking for a spot where no one would bother them. They were well outside of

town by the time they found a place, and the sun had drowned itself in the waves hours ago. A few cottages lined the thin strip of beach, clapboard boxes with crooked doors and dark windows. If anyone was inside, they didn't seem to notice a Ford Explorer turning off the road over the low dunes. The tires slipped through the sand, kicking up spray as Isra rolled slowly over sea grass and sent a few gulls squawking into the sky.

“Ready?” Isra asked, turning over her shoulder.

Polly nodded. She had watched the gulf waters with interest during the drive, but now that they had stopped, she was more alert than she had been since leaving the tub. Isra figured that the near infinite stretch of ocean in front of them had touched some dead memory in the mermaid of what her body was meant to do, like Isra when heat spread through her body. Polly barely even waited for Isra to open the trunk and tried to throw herself onto the sand as soon as she could. Francine caught her around her waist and the three of them made their way to the surf.

Between the darkness and the loose sand, their steps were clumsy. Isra carried Polly like a battering ram, and Francine, looking confused about how to help, grabbed the mermaid's tail as though it was a bridal train. They walked in path lit by the high-beams, their shadow spreading over the ground in front of them as a contorted, manticores creature. The light obliterated everything outside its beam, at first. The darkness clotted into a solid wall of black that swallowed the lesser shine of stars. As they climbed the last dune, Isra saw glints in the darkness, pockets of moonlight between cresting waves, and the pinhead stars swelled.

Once they neared the foaming tide's lacy edge, Isra struggled out of her boots. She tried to move carefully and avoid kneeing Polly in the face as she stepped on her own heels. Polly

tried to help, reaching down towards the knotted laces, but her pale arms just got tangled in Isra's legs and toppled them both into the damp sand.

Francine laughed as Polly's tail slid out of her hands. She turned back to glance at the cabins, checking that no lights had blinked on, before walking out of her own shoes and pulling her socks off by the toes. Isra picked herself up, small pools of water seeping up through the sand where her palms pushed against the earth. Francine reached towards Isra's cheek to wipe wet grains away as Isra brushed grit from her hands.

Polly slinked forward on the sand, elbows making wet divots as she inched into the surge. Her movements were slow, and Isra and Francine followed her into the blood-warm water. Their heavy steps churned up silty plumes under the surface that were sucked out with the waves. Every inch Polly gained was contested by the incoming tide. Isra dipped her hands into the water, trying to catch Polly by the arm and help her to deeper water.

"You're going to tire yourself out," Isra said.

The mermaid shrugged away from Isra's grasp. The briny water surged towards her again, and Polly sputtered as it washed over her. Isra used the mermaid's moment of disorientation to slide a hand under each armpit, but Polly twisted and thrashed in her grip, her mouth too full of salt to speak.

Isra felt a hand on her shoulder and let go.

"If this is where wants to be, let her get there herself," Francine said. "You've done enough."

Salt stung Isra's eyes. "But what if the good deed doesn't count?"

Francine's features were hard to make out in the darkness, but where the curve of her lip caught the headlights Isra thought she saw it pull into a frown.

"What are you talking about?"

"All spells are broken by something. Polly's was broken by her heart." Isra scanned the water around her feet looking for a glint of the mermaid's scales. Somewhere in the dark water ahead of her, Isra heard a wave break and a wet cough. "I've consulted every witch I could find, tried everything to break mine, expect a good deed. It's a process of elimination, but I don't know what counts as good enough."

Isra waded forward in the water, and Francine splashed after her. Water lapped at their shins and weighed their legs as they pushed out. Polly's tail glinted gold through the dark water. Her movements were jerky, arms locking against her sides to keep the surge from pushing her back before clawing forward with the receding waves.

"I don't think good deeds work that way," Francine shouted over the breaking water that slapped her chest. Isra did not turn around. "You can't expect things from doing them."

Polly's head poked out of the water, periscoping across the surface for the two other women, before submerging again, smiling. She dove forward, the rest of her body following in an arc into the ocean. Isra had not realized how far they had waded. Polly must have streaked ahead once she could pull herself fully under the waves, or had found a rip tide to carry her out. Isra waited for a splash to break the surface of the water, to see Polly thrown back, rejected by the currents, but there was only the hiss and clap of waves along the coast.

"Is that her?" Francine pointed to a pale smudge out in the deep, either a waving hand or bobbing flotsam.

Isra raised her own hand in response, just in case it was her, the bangle still locked around her wrist. She stood in the waves and watched until the pale shape disappeared, falling behind a fold in the dark water.

When she returned to the shore, Isra found Francine shivering on the side of a sand dune. The high-beams still shone over the dune's crest, but Francine was huddled in the shadows. Her clothes were crusty with drying salt, except for her socks, which were wrapped around her hands like mittens. Isra picked up her boots from where she had kicked them off and sank into the ground beside her.

"Didn't work?" Francine asked, burying her bare toes in a mound of sand.

"No." Isra stuck her arm out, moonlight reflecting off the metal bangle. "I think you were right."

Francine nodded, patting the sand around her feet down with her sock-mittens.

"I did want to help her, though. Not just to get the spell off."

Francine leaned back, her elbows propped against the slope of the dune. Isra waited for her response, but Francine said nothing. Isra wanted Francine to believe her. Up the beach, gulls honked at each other as they picked through algae piles, and even their nasal calls sounded like they were only humoring her. Behind them, the battery in car shut off, and the headlights faded, leaving them in darkness.

"What will you do if you don't get this off?" Francine asked, sliding a finger around the cold bangle.

Isra shrugged. "Die, eventually."

"And you wouldn't die as a jinni?"

“Jinn lived long lives. One jinni born at the right time could have seen mankind just learning how to speak and still be blowing around right now.” Isra could still hear the gulls, even if she could see them, the soft patter of their webbed toes on packed sand, the throaty bickering as they searched for food. “Someone my age might live to see when you all finally shut up. Wouldn’t that be something.”

Francine tuned toward Isra, chin resting on her fist. “I can get the bangle off you.”

It may have been a trick of the light curling around the horizon, but Isra though she saw the first gray strands of dawn.

“It could also kill you, though. Fair warning.”

Isra took Francine’s hand when she offered it, anyway. Francine laced her fingers through Isra’s, their warmth traveling up her arm and under her damp, stiffened clothes. Isra squeezed the magician’s hand as the air seemed to grow heavier around her. Even in the air in her lungs sank and pressed the down on her organs. The weight grew until it felt unbearable, and the gulls squawked in response to a threat they couldn’t process, and then the beach was empty. Two dents on the bank of a dune marked where a pair had been sitting, silver circle of metal jutting out of the sand between them.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Atwood, Margret. *The Blind Assassin*
- Atwood, Margret. *The Handmaid's Tale*
- Bender, Aimee. *The Color Master*
- Block, Francesca Lea *Missing Angel Juan*
- Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*
- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*
- Calvino, Italo. *The Baron in the Trees*
- Carter, Angela. *The Magic Toyshop*
- Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, editors. *The Faery Reel*
- Diaz, Juno. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
- Dick, Phillip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*
- Eugenides, Jeffery. *Middlesex*
- Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*
- Gaiman, Neil. *Neverwhere*
- Gaiman, Neil. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*
- Gaiman, Neil, editor. *Unnatural Creatures*
- Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera*
- Gonzales, Manuel. *The Regional Office is Under Attack!*
- Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*
- Hoffman, Alice. *Green Angel*

Hoffman, Dustin M. *One-Hundred-Knuckled Fists: Stories*

Johnson, Kij. *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*

Jones, Dianna Wynne. *Fire and Hemlock*

Jones, Stephen Graham. *Growing Up Dead in Texas: A Novel*

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*

Link, Kelly. *Get in Trouble*

Link, Kelly. *Magic for Beginners*

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*

Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being*

Russel, Karen. *Sleep Donation*

Russel, Karen. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*

Strahan, Jonathan, editor. *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year: Volume 6*

Stephenson, Neil. *The Diamond Age*

Sukrungruang, Ira. *Southside Buddhist: Essays*

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*

VanderMeer, Ann, and Jeff VanderMeer, editors. *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*

Wecker, Helene. *The Golem & the Jinni*

Willow Wilson, G. *Alif the Unseen*

Wong, David. *John Dies at the End*

Wooding, Chris. *The Fade*

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*