



**WE CHALLENGED CONTESTANTS TO WRITE A
CREATIVE, COMPELLING, WELL-CRAFTED STORY
BETWEEN 1,000 AND 5,000 WORDS LONG IN
WHICH ODOR, OR THE SENSE OF SMELL ITSELF,
PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE...**

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FIRST PLACE

After multiple degrees in computer science and a successful career in the health care industry, Jeff Jaskot choose to return to one of his first loves—writing fiction. A lifelong resident of the Detroit area, he lives with his wife (also a first love), boomeranging children and their associated pets.

Jesus Doe

by Jeff Jaskot

“And how’s my sweet Jesus doing today?”

It was Daffodil again. Come to empty me out and fill me up. Another day must have spun around, maybe a whole weekend gone. I was past trying to scream, past trying to cuss her out, because the truth was, even though I was in a coma, things were looking up. *Believe it or not, Daffy, this ain’t the worst trip I’ve been on.* All of which came out as “Ahhhhhh, um.”

I could hear her breathing over me, listening intently, waiting for more. “Nothing else, baby? No? OK, verbal about the same as yesterday.” There was scribbling on a clipboard, the puckering of rubber-soled shoes around the solid floor, and then the faintest squeak of plastic tubes twisting together. Always one of my better senses, now that I couldn’t see, couldn’t talk, I had grown the ears of an elephant.

She smashed my fingertip between clipboard and pen and I flinched. “Good, good. Now that’s real progress. You’re getting close to double digits, baby.” I sniffed a laugh—which she didn’t notice—at the thought that feeling pain was a *good* thing.

It had started innocent enough, horseplay and a fall out of tall maple at thirteen that broke my arm in three places. The surgery went smoothly, a Vicodin recovery

was heavenly, followed by the craving. There were leftovers in my parent's medicine cabinet from some dental work and a vasectomy (as an only child that hurt in other ways). And then I found friends to share my escapes.

Beads entered as Daffy was flipping me about. "Do you need any help?" she asked in her husky tone.

"I've got it, Sister. JD here is quite cooperative as always."

There was an uncomfortable silence, the only sound being Beads's annoying habit of scrunching her rosary in her hand. It had been early on, maybe the second or third day, that I figured out that I was in a Catholic hospital. There were an awful lot of prayers being said for me. And, of course, I never had a sister. Not even a father or mother anymore.

"Has anyone asked about him, finally? Anything from the police?"

"No, sister," Daffy answered. "But he's made some progress. Hopefully, he'll be able to tell us all about himself soon."

Sister Beads's voice went higher. "So, he's becoming more aware then?"

"Sure is."

I snuffled loudly and heard them both turn my way. What was hilarious was that Beads should be worried about me coming to (turns out even Sisters have their secrets). Quite a few others too. Just after my arrival here, after they had cleaned the grime and streets off me, I had been given a new persona. Ten years of painkillers had already left me slight of frame and gaunt of face. I couldn't remember the last time I had cut my thin, brown hair. I'm guessing some jokester had left my long hair but trimmed my whiskers into a short beard. Laying me back down onto bleached white sheets, they all commented on the coma-induced serenity that radiated from my face. Almost immediately, John Doe became Jesus Doe. JD for those who didn't wish to be publicly blasphemous. Having never been religious, it sort of pissed me off a first. But it turned truly entertaining the next night.

Nighttime was easy to sense. I knew I was on the south side of the hospital because the winter sun would fall across my bed. Like a sundial, I probably could predict the time within an hour or two. When the chill of darkness took over, that's when Vegas would visit. I knew he was in housekeeping because he smelled of disinfectant and cigarettes. It became a nightly ritual (at least every night he worked). Vegas would come to my bedside, lean over and confess his day's sins. I didn't get it at first. I honestly thought he was bragging until he asked for my forgiveness. While fascinating, often shocking, even depraved, what I hated was how he would always kiss my hand in repentance as he finished. Knowing all the things he had done and all the places that mouth had been, I'd be scrubbing that hand raw as soon as I could drag myself to a sink.

And it wasn't just him. Others were soon visiting me. Not always to confess—one nurse simply poked her head in often, saying for all to hear, "Give me strength, Jesus!" before trudging off to her next task. Just one time, a doctor came in, sneaky as the proverbial church mouse. He sounded really young. "I'm not Catholic but please forgive me for cheating on my exams. I'll try to do no harm." At least, he wasn't one of my docs.

"Did you hear there was another one overnight?" asked Daffy, my main source of gossip.

"Dear Lord, no!"

"Up on the 3rd floor, a dementia patient recovering from pneumonia somehow got down the back stairwell and out into that freezing cold courtyard with only his gown on. They found him in the morning curled up behind the shrubs."

"But don't they keep—"

"Yep, they keep all those doors locked tight over in that wing, just for that possibility. These ain't no accidents. Such a shame, too. From what I heard he'd almost recovered."

That was a shame. Swinging between survival and self-destruction for the last couple of years, I hadn't had much time for other people's problems. But I could sympathize with the guy—having been out in the cold, half out of your mind.

Funny how laying practically dead for a couple of weeks had raised my body and my mind back up to human level.

By my count, this was the third “accident”. The first one seemed natural enough. Over in the hospice unit on another floor, a 93-year-old woman passing away. To be expected, right? But it turned out to be a morphine overdose. I figuratively perked up on hearing that, as I was riding out my own coma from a bad cocktail of Oxy, Percs and morph. Mine was self-inflicted, hers sounded like a mistake or maybe a mercy killing. Then a second event just a few days later. Down in the emergency department, right below me. By then, my elephonic ears were dialed in. A homeless guy had come in that night, a regular wanting to warm up. Loud and drunk, they got him a gurney and tucked him off in a side hallway. They found him a couple hours later, dead from suffocation. Choked on his own vomit... except it wasn't his. Turned out the vomit had globs of caviar in it, an unlikely course for a bridge camper. And just an hour earlier they had pumped the stomach of some high-priced call girl. I had to agree with Daffy. These were more than accidents. These were murders.

*

A few days later, I scored a perfect 10. Well, not perfect on their coma scale—that would be 15. But I was up to double digits. It happened as Daffodil was squeezing my shoulder blade. Something they did every day like some form of invalid torture. Today, I finally fought back and retaliated. It wasn't anything more than a swat across her forearm, but she backed off.

“Hallelujah, Jesus! You are on the mend, baby. I think we've turned the corner.”

I felt like I was smiling. Daffy began humming a gospel groove, not stopping until three others entered my sanctuary. One was Sergeant Totter. Even though he was only hospital security, he stopped in every couple of days like a cop walking a beat. He worked the evenings, pacing the hallways with his distinctive click-clunk slow stride. I'm pretty sure one leg was a good couple inches shorter than the other.

“How's he doing today?”

“Getting better every day, Sarge. I think he's gonna make it.”

“So, this is the one?” asked an unfamiliar phantom.

“Yeah. Came in 15 days ago as a John Doe. Someone found him in the 5th Street library, slumped over in a bathroom stall. Opioid overdose.”

“No R&I?”

“Nope. Nothing at all on him and no one has come to claim him.”

“And he’s out of it most of the time?”

“This is about all he ever does.” I tried to lift my middle finger.

“Great,” said the other phantom. “He’ll do.” With that the two detectives left. At least “detectives” was my educated guess. One, they were with hospital security; two, I could smell gun oil; and three, R&I was cop jargon for “records and identification.”

“Hey, Sarge. Is it true about Nick U?” Daffy asked, just between the three of us.

“Fraid so. Someone sabotaged a ventilator.”

Though she was silent for a long moment, I could feel Daffy’s fury fill the room. I’d find out later that “Nick U” was really N-I-C-U for Neonatal ICU. “What kind of monster kills a 4-month-old preemie? The poor thing was barely hanging on to life to begin with.” Maybe there was a shrug of shoulders, but I didn’t catch it. Just like changing channels, I had tuned out my room and tuned into the conversation happening out in the hallway between the two detectives.

“This guy fits the profile perfectly. Completely helpless, near death but making a comeback.”

“Think hospital security can handle it?”

“Not sure, but if we get uniforms or even an unmarked in here whoever it is is going to notice them and back off.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I heard a step back towards my door. “What do you think of him?”

“What? The John Doe?”

“Didn’t he remind you of anyone?” This time I did hear the shrug of suited shoulders. “Aw, forget it. Let’s go talk with the security exec.”

As their footsteps faded, everything suddenly became more real now. This whole comatosed-time I’d felt like I was watching a movie playing all around me. Suddenly I was in it. No lines or motive, more of a prop. JD as The Bait.

Trouble was there wasn’t much I could do about it. Every muscle in my body had gone involuntary; I couldn’t even defend myself. That poor preemie had top-notch security around it. The old hospice lady had a loving family to watch over her. I wasn’t going to get any of that. My one hope—figure out this whodunit before it came to whodidme.

Let’s see ... opportunity. I could rule myself out. Making progress already. Done against well-chosen, hapless patients meant it had to be someone who had access to just about anywhere in this hospital, even into heavily secured and monitored areas. Hospice was easily infiltrated, but the psych ward had locked doors requiring keys and badges. That ruled out other patients and volunteers who wouldn’t be able to get into restricted areas. And there would be cameras and monitors keeping an eye on all the precious premature babies. I wondered how anyone could get by all that. But there was housekeeping who had wide access, maintenance people too, and security, of course. As far as recordings, well those could be altered or deleted after the fact—if you had the right access and knowledge.

Then there’s motive. Some abused altar boy now grown up and going after helpless Catholic patients? An underpaid nurse trying to lighten the load? Ghoulish mortuary assistants crawling up from the basement seeking their quota? Maybe a merciful priest or nun releasing trapped souls from failing bodies.

And, of course, means. The hospice lady had been injected with a lethal dose of morphine. Any qualified medical personnel, unqualified medical drama junkie, or

real junkie like myself could pull that off. The drunk, probably choked and then stuffed with someone else's puke, required someone with strong hands and a stronger stomach. The dementia patient willingly led down multiple flights and out into the cold must have trusted his angel of death. Finally, the knowledge to tamper with a preemie's ventilator without setting off its alarm. All this added up to someone with some medical knowledge, someone seasoned and someone who choose their targets and times with great thought.

Wow, I'd surprised myself. Not so much on putting my mind to a task but that I even cared enough to save my own butt. Prior to my OD, I would have welcomed a merciful end. Now with Death lurking nearby, I suddenly found the determination to fight. But how? Paralyzed and babbling at best, how could I fight back?

"You okay, JD?" asked Daffodil, patting all around my face. "You got a fever?"

"Justell ah ache." *No, just one hell of a headache.*

*

Days passed into nights. To anyone outside my skull I was helpless, immobile, little more than a vegetable with a pulse. Inside, my remaining senses had gone superhuman. Able to hear through concrete and steel, I could easily pick out conversations in the emergency department below. Just by smell, I knew what every one of my lucky, chew-capable fellow patients had eaten for dinner. I knew it was nighttime as vibrations of Vegas—doing it to some nurse in the upstairs maintenance closet—throbbed down through the walls. Things had just settled in when the posse of voices and footsteps started thundering down my hallway.

There were a lot of them, making it hard to count them and pick out individuals. I made out Sister Beads and her husky voice. Also Sergeant Totter's click-clunking, though at a much faster pace than usual. And there was the shrill nurse manager I only knew from her distant yapping of orders. There were a few others, too. I'm guessing my protectors, based on the abnormal amount of man scent: musky sweat, spicy deodorant, and nasty cologne. Multiple conversations made it hard to figure out what exactly was going on.

"You saw what?"

“—cover the back stairs.”

“We got the sonovabitch!”

“Dear Lord, let this be—”

“Sorry, Father.”

“Split up!”

And they did just that—until I couldn’t track them anymore. But I did pick out one set of footfalls that just stopped dead, still as me, waiting... until turning back. Quick, soft steps that didn’t want to be heard. I mentally froze as a musky scent wafted in through my door. I guess I had played my role well. Death had taken the bait.

I felt him glide around to the far side of my bed and then slide in close. Death reeked of garlic and onion. My mind was racing but the heart monitor in the corner kept its steady beat. Fight or flight, neither option was available to me. “So, Jesus, we finally meet.” He was right beside me, speaking in a low voice. “The likeness is remarkable. Perhaps there is some truth to what they’ve been saying.” He went silent for several breaths and then in the softest of whispers spoke directly into my right ear. “Bless me, Jesus, for I have sinned. It has been too many years since my last confession. Since we haven’t much time, I’ll simply ask your forgiveness for all those who came before you. Eleven would be too many to name.” He sighed deeply. “It is getting harder, everyone watching all the time. Yours needs to be different, less obvious. A dose of methotrexate slipped into your IV. If you had cancer it might save you. But, being in a coma... well, a slow death from pneumonia seems much more likely. It’ll be days, maybe a week. Leaving us one less patient to treat.”

He had to be a doctor or a nurse. Silent again, the air stirred as he rose up. *Was he dealing the lethal dose?* The screams in my head had no voice; only his whispers could be heard. “I accept your silence as my absolution so... in the name of the Father, and of you, and of the Holy Spirit.” I felt something press against my forehead. In my terror-filled mind, it registered as searing pain. With Mayweather reflexes, my left arm shot across empty space and connected hard with something hard. Death was thrown backwards, pulling down and out my IV, crashing into

monitors that began to squeal out alarms. They raged like a police siren in the quiet hospital wing. Death fled; and I did the only thing I could—nothing—my arm falling motionless onto my chest.

*

“Well, well, look who is up!” Having arrived for her shift, it was Daffy, hands on hips. I was up—at least propped up by a half dozen pillows. “Finally, we can meet for real.”

She told me her actual name. But I lifted a finger her way and said pretty darn clearly, “Da-fee”.

“What?”

“Daf-fee,” I repeated, something I would be doing a lot of for a while. She got it—didn’t really understand it—but in her always caring, easygoing way, accepted it. It would be several days before I could explain why I called her that, how she had the scent of daffodils.

Not long after my resurrection, someone asked me my name. I had had lots of time to think about how to hit the reset button if and when I woke up. Having liked being a John Doe, I went with “Louis (call me Lou) Buck.” I don’t think anyone believed me, but they played along. A few still called me JD out of habit or affection, but no one called me Jesus anymore.

I started my rehab right away. Despite the Hollywood cliché, one does not snap out of a coma and immediately tell all. It doesn’t work that way. My eyes had first opened that night I beat Death. One of the night nurses came rushing in and flipped on the lights. It was the most beautiful blinding light since birth. Yet my words still formed like my tongue and lips were paralyzed. I tried to tell them what happened but only baby babble came out. A team of them checked the equipment out, reset the alarms, and got me a fresh IV. They quickly assumed, even Sergeant Totter, that I had somehow managed to do the damage myself.

They did not realize that it had been the kiss of the killer that had shattered my coma. I was kind of glad I couldn’t talk well. The more I thought about it, the

better it seemed to stay silent on my attack. Death was still out there. And I was still weak, an easy target.

During those first few days of wakefulness, nearly all my regulars stopped by to congratulate me. It was funny to put faces to my ghosts. Funnier still to see their reaction to my wide-eyed gaze and grin. Even before they spoke, I often knew by their expression if they had visited me. Vegas never came back and would remain forever faceless, though I could still hear him sinning about the hospital at night. The hallway buzz was that I had retained some of what I had heard during my coma, during their confessions. I never let on that I had. It seemed dangerous to reveal that fact, although I didn't really suspect any of my caregivers. None of them fit the profile I had built in my head.

But there were a lot of new faces now that I was in recovery. I smiled at everyone, while in the back of mind I sized them up as potential serial killers. I had only a few things to go on. I was positive it was a man—fond of garlic and onion. From the rhythm and fall of his steps, he was shorter and probably slight of frame. Probably an older but wavering Catholic given his familiarity with the confessional and his disdain for it. Of course, there was some medical knowledge but this was a hospital so that didn't rule out many. One phrase he had said stuck with me: *one less patient to treat*. Given his victims, it made a lot of sense. An old woman slowing dying in hospice, overdue for death. A homeless regular who treated the ER like a free hotel room. The dementia patient who was physically strong but needed to be cared for like a toddler. The preemie in neonatal ICU whose every day must cost thousands of dollars and whose care may last a lifetime. And me, the comatose addict who took up a valuable bed and probably didn't deserve to live in the first place. Someone had taken it upon themselves to play the Grim Reaper. Not based on mercy but practicality.

Sister Beads popped in often, always with others, saying next to nothing. She was much larger than I had imagined, very much fitting her baritone voice. I could tell that she came to listen, checking out my recall, seeing if her secret confession was still safe. As always, I never let on. Still, late one night, she came to visit me all by herself. I tensed a bit. There was no reason to believe she was involved (and certainly not a killer). But I couldn't be sure.

“Good evening, Louis. How are you doing?”

“Jit fine, sis’er.”

Sitting on the edge of my bed, she continued. “I was hoping to chat with you. I’ve always been fascinated by near-death experiences,” she lied. “Can you tell me what it was like? What you saw, what you *heard*?”

There it was. I could see a flicker of anxious terror in her eyes. *Yes, I know your secret. You had to settle for being a nun. Trapped in a woman’s body, it was the next best thing to becoming your secret desire—a priest. But it isn’t enough. So much so, now you’re considering an operation. What would your Lord think? Would he accept you?*

Having played the part, I gave her my answer. “It was grrreat. Take way sight... sound... what left... is you. Jit what real. I learn... what in here”—I pointed to my heart—“is what is real. What up here”—I pointed to my head—“not so much. Jit confusion. Learn that it much better to feel than tink.”

She sat unblinking for a long moment and then leaned back, a relieved smile slowly brightening her face. I’m not sure how she read my revelation, but she thanked me, blessed me, and asked me if I needed anything.

“Maybe ches burger. Wit fries.” Might as well get something out of this.

*

“Well, it’s time, Louis.” It had been the nicest farewell party I’d ever had. Parting for most of my adult life usually meant being put out, dragged out, or tossed out. Pretty much all my regulars had come, including the rehab folks. Sacks of cheeseburgers and fries passed all around though they still made me drink my fortified milkshake.

“Thank you all... for everything,” I said slowly but clearly. Several weeks of physical and speech therapy needed just for that simple goodbye. My case manager and social worker had found me a spot in a recovery shelter to continue building my strength and keep me clean. Swimming in my new clothes (purposely

baggy, my nutritionist certain I'd fill it out), I picked up my new duffel bag, stuffed with enough toiletries and extra clothes to get me off to a respectable start. First time in forever, I felt good, I was thinking straight. But different is always scary.

As I made my way to the elevator, people all along the route shook my hand, slapped me on the back, hugged me. Daffy tagged along, proud as a doctor's mother. As we descended, she told me all the things I should do at the recovery center. I nodded but deeply doubted I'd be doing any of it. She made me show her that I still had the card with the rehab center's address on it.

"Now, most important," she said, as the elevator dinged, "don't let us down, JD. Nothing tears us apart more than to see all our work for nothing. Stay clean and learn to sparkle." She gave me a big hug just as the doors opened.

Stepping out, I turned around to wave goodbye to Daffy as she pushed the button to return to her angel duties. Her I would miss. As the doors closed, I turned and bumped into a suit. A smallish, wiry man who looked me in the eyes and instantly recognized me. "Mr. Buck! I'm Joseph Dunkel, the hospital administrator. I followed your case with great interest." Shaking my hand, he pulled me in closer to speak more privately. "You certainly had a touch-and-go moment there. Good to see you made it through. I'm glad I had the chance to wish you well."

I said nothing, only nodded and smiled. He released my hand and hurried off through the doors that led to the emergency department. The scent of garlic and onion still hung in the air. As I headed for the exit, I replayed the words he'd said. The tone and tempo of the voice was right. The words almost mocking. Outside, the fresh air stirred me as I twisted the address card in my pocket. Freed, I spotted a bar down the street where I knew the backroom dealers well. They would have anything I wanted. I took a couple deep breaths, cinched up my jacket and turned around.

Once back inside, I casually made my way through the emergency department door Dunkel had entered. It was chaotic so no one paid much attention to me except for some rambling bum who noted my resemblance. I had kept the long hair and well-trimmed beard. With a touch to his forehead, I moved on.

The ED was laid out much like I had built it in my mind. At this time of day, the toughest cases would be back under my old room at the far end. I made my way down the corridors, stopping briefly at an unattended computer monitor. While rehabbing, I had looked over shoulders for many weeks. With sober eyes, I could make out the tiny font. A hand injury in Blue 2 (no), an asthmatic in Blue 3 (nope), a possible poisoning (perhaps). Blue 9 (yes!), at the far end and with the perfect victim.

As I walked down the hallway, a security guard looked my way but became more interested in my adoring bum who was now chanting “Jesus done touched me. I am healed!” A nurse, outside of 5, was about to stop me, but a group of frantic relatives came at her. I reached the door to Blue 9, dropped my duffle bag to the floor and strode in. Dunkel was at her bedside. Behind the gauze and machinery was a girl no more than five years old, severe head trauma due to an unbuckled car accident.

“What? You! No, not again.”

With hands held out, I lunged toward him. Dunkel tried to slip away but his fancy shoes thwarted him. He tilted backwards against the shifting bed, his hands going up as if to block my blows. But I was still weak, only wanting to hold him. After all, I could scream now if needed. But I didn’t. We stood there, grunting, locked in place, my hands on his wrists. I was taller and had the high ground. He couldn’t push me off.

I noticed that he had a syringe in his right hand, his thumb on the plunger. I had no idea what it was, but he was trying to turn it my way. I’m not sure where I found the strength, but I managed to turn it away. Though my grip was strong, my gaze was even stronger. His eyeballs flickered between the needle and me, until finally his eyes locked onto mine. He began to tire. Something in his face softened. His left hand reached out to touch my face. But it was his right hand that did the damage. “Forgive me, Jesus.” With a snap of his wrist, a quick stab, the thumb plunged. We both gasped. We both went weak. He stiffened as paralysis began to set in. His eyes stayed wide open, his garlicky breaths grew short and sharp. In that moment, I suddenly pitied him as much as I did the old dying woman, the drunk, the dementia patient, the preemie, or the girl beneath us clinging to life.

I folded his stiff arms across his chest, leaving the syringe lodged in his neck. Planting a soft kiss on his forehead, I said, "I forgive you." A half-dozen small gasps later, he was dead. I turned him so he laid across the girl's legs. Sergeant Totter, liking the easy path, would deduce Dunkel as the killer who slipped and fell on his own weapon. An administrator driven by the bottom line and thrill of the kill.

I exited the ED even easier than I had entered. Outside, the world had changed. Having arrived nearly dead from opiates, I had risen, clean and sober. A hundred paths suddenly appeared to me. Among them, I could be a healer, a protector, a hunter, even a savior. It didn't take long to decide.

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SECOND PLACE

Maya Levine has placed in the Leyla Beban Short Story Contest four times, been a runner-up in the Palo Alto Short Story Contest twice, and placed several times in Microcosms online contest. She has had work featured in Palo Alto Roots Magazine, Enchanted Conversation, Zoetic Press, FurPlanet, MoonPark Review, A Flash of Silver-Green, Weirdbook, and The Eating Disorders Project. She has had a short play performed during Palo Alto Play Palooza.

Beasts of the Woods

by Maya Levine

“Forever?” the witch repeated, squatting so she could look the little girl directly in the eye.

“Forever and ever,” the girl Sima repeated, “and even longer again. You’ll give the voice back and leave forever.”

The girl’s silhouette was filled with the rich red of rage; the air around her hung thick with the scent of old blood. Despite herself, the witch was impressed by how much of the heavy emotion filled the girl. She had enough rage to defy the village men who told her to stay home, enough rage to hunt down the witch haunting the woods, enough rage to trade away her life if she lost their game. *Little beast*, the witch thought, *you little beastly fool. You win and I leave, I win and you stay... but how can I lose?*

The witch should have cursed the girl like she’d cursed all the others—this girl of all people could have used the curse of silence. But the girl’s rage was so deeply scarlet and smelled of bonfires and black pepper and blood, and it enticed the

witch. She should never have let herself get caught up in the girl's clenched fists and bright eyes. She should have known better.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" the witch asked.

"How do *I* know you'll keep *yours*? You know my name. You have more power than I do."

The witch breathed deeply. Determination. Skepticism. Anger. The scent of fear, rank, mixed in with the other emotions. Not as disgusting as the terror that had consumed the other children. "You play at being wise when it comes to my power, but here you are, trying to gamble with me."

The little girl just smirked and held out a hand. Maybe she didn't truly believe in the witch's power. Maybe she just wanted a few moments of excitement in a life filled with drudgery and confinement. Or maybe she just thought she was sure of winning.

She lost.

*

The men of the village did nothing to get the girl back, but some of the women went out armed with torches and worry fear to trawl the woods. Some of the stronger ones smelled of anger and hope, but all carried fear: afraid when they woke up in their hovels and afraid when they tended their fields, afraid when they walked in the woods and lay with their husbands and carried children. The witch could not see features any longer, but she could see the silhouettes filled by the colors and scents of emotion. And she could hear the voices, she could always hear the womanly voices. Calling, pleading, shouting, entreating: "Sima! Sima!"

The girl, for her part, smelled of anger. She was a brave little beast, the witch would give her that. She seemed angry, not afraid, to have lost to the witch. She seemed angry, not afraid, that none of the village fathers cared to find her. Her name meant obedience but she didn't live up to it, and the village fathers hated her for it. At the witch's table, the little girl sat with a back ramrod-straight, and ate the soup the witch put in front of her with a certain pride.

“I’m a good cook,” the witch said. “You didn’t expect that, did you?”

The girl didn’t respond. She stared past the witch at the far wall with a haughty look, even though she was some little girl from some nowhere village, only the merest step above the pigs that she tended. She kept the minty pride on the surface. Under that was anger, and something gleaming...

The witch scoffed. “Stop thinking about the woods.”

“I’m not.”

“I can see it,” the witch reminded her. “I can see every bit of you. Or didn’t I prove that?”

The little beast didn’t say anything.

“That life was no better, anyway,” said the witch.

“What do you *mean*?” the girl demanded. “Those were *my* people. That was the life I was supposed to live! And you stole me from that!”

“I didn’t steal. You bargained. You lost.”

The girl burned with humiliation. The golden tone still glowed around her heart. She still smelled of hope.

“Remember,” the witch told her.

“Remember what?”

“Remember our deal.”

The filmy golden wish blinked away.

*

The witch had the girl help her mash herbs for poultices. She tried to teach the girl to recognize letters and words. The girl shied away from the witch and went into the woods, and the witch let her roam. At first Sima felt no gratitude towards the

witch, but a few weeks later she carried some of those feelings: gratitude, and happiness, and surprise. A bit of jealousy. “You set them free.”

The witch raised an eyebrow.

“I heard them,” the little girl continued. Scents: pepper, honey. Crimson fingers tapped a skirt. “They were in the market. Haggling. Old Wyman called for a town meeting and they all went to the square.”

She spoke of voice as if it was something miraculous. The witch, meanwhile, thought silence to be a miracle. “You went close to the village.”

“Why did you release them?”

It hadn’t seemed necessary to keep the voices of the village fathers. They played this game every few years: the old men governing the village grew sure of their own power, the witch took their voices, the witch gave them back, and the men used them to discuss hunting her down. The witch hated the men, who ripped into the woods like a snake shedding its skin, without any of the beauty or logic. But now the witch had the little beast. Suddenly Sima was the only one that mattered. The witch said none of this. “Did you speak with them?”

The girl smelled of horseradish, the scent expanding to fill the entire room. The witch was impressed by the power of it. She wondered if the little beast had any understanding of her own power.

“I didn’t talk with them,” the girl said. “I never do.”

“Good.”

“Can I?”

The witch snorted.

“Why not?” the little beast demanded. “Who is it hurting if I talk with Jana or Maeve?”

It would hurt the beastly little girl. It would steal her freedom and keep her submerged in the lie that the village was where true life led. The beast would forget how to speak her mind and talk out of turn and turn back into Sima, the village girl whose name meant *obedience* and who followed the village fathers blindly.

“You can watch them,” the witch said. “I don’t see any harm in that.”

“But what’s the harm in *talking* with them?”

“If you can’t see that, then you’re clearly not ready.”

“How can I *ever* be ready! When you get to decide what *ready* means.”

“Look at you. You’d gore me, if you could.”

The girl didn’t respond.

“Little Boar,” said the witch. “With your little tusks, and little hooves.”

“I’m not a *boar*! I’m a woman! From the village! I’m a villager, and you can’t keep me away from them!”

Abruptly, the witch could no longer see the humor in the situation. “You’re not a woman. You’re just a girl. And you’re not from the village anymore.”

The boar-girl stormed off, but didn’t fight. The witch considered the discussion closed and thought the little boar would keep herself to the shadows and watch her old friends, but a few days later the girl went into the woods and returned after a few hours with unfamiliar scents clinging to her.

“I know what you did,” the witch said, not playing any games.

The girl went to her knees, bracing herself for a blow. The witch hissed with displeasure. “Get up. I’m never going to lay a hand on you. I’m not like your father.”

“But, I... I disobeyed you.”

“And can I stop you? Can anyone stop you from doing what you wish? Your foolish actions hurt *you*, Little Boar. The more you talk with them, the more you belong to them.”

“I don’t belong to them,” the girl said. “But they’re my friends. I love them.”

How to explain? How did the witch explain that every time, it went the same way? These little girls, unbreakable for a time, slowly convinced that their lives only had meaning when they lived for the husbands and fathers. “You’ll feel your friends changing,” the witch warned. “They’ll try to change you, too. Don’t let them.” The girl didn’t understand; the witch could tell. But sooner or later, she would. She’d understand that the witch was saving her.

Saving? Who do I think I am? Some fairie? Some angel? Something not a witch?

*

The girl cleaned the cauldrons, drew water from the well, ran her little hands over the witch’s few leather-bound tomes as if she hadn’t dreamed of reading her father’s few books when she still lived in the village. The witch watched the receding edge of the woods, gathered mushrooms and moss, read the books, experimented with potions. Sometimes the witch offered to teach the little boar to read, but Sima didn’t want the witch’s help. When she noticed the witch watching her, she slammed the books down and acted as if she’d never eavesdropped on the boys learning in the village green, though she’d been beaten several times after getting caught. The witch didn’t push to be the little boar’s teacher. She gave the girl independence and waited for any sign of magical ability to show itself. Years passed and there was nothing. It was disappointing. It made the witch feel strangely lonely. *I have been alone for decades*, she reminded herself. *I do not need another witch to keep me company.*

They spent supper together every night, slapping mosquitoes and shivering against the cold, wet hair in spring and windblown hair in autumn. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they were silent. The witch did not grow any older. The girl’s silhouette did not grow any larger. Her voice did not lose its youthful pipe.

One night: “Jana’s gone.”

“She’s dead, then?” the witch replied. “It always takes less time than you’d think.” Better if the old friends were dead—then the girl would stop wasting her time thinking about the village.

“Not *dead*. Married. Maeve said that she’s married. It’s so strange to think of Jana being *married*—she’s younger than me.”

“And now she’s a wife. And then she’ll die.”

“You’re so cruel,” the little boar burst out. “You keep acting as if I’m not one of them! But I was supposed to be! Before you took me away!”

Took? How had the girl gone this long without realizing all that she had been rescued from? Jana, that nothing, she would live and die in the muck of the village, never learning to read, to write, to speak her mind on anything! How was the girl still convinced that the village life was something she had left behind? “You’re a fool, Little Boar,” the witch said with a voice of ice.

“What’s so foolish about wanting a family? Children? Friends?”

“If you don’t understand that yet—”

“I wish you’d stop saying things like that!”

“I wish you’d start understanding.”

“When can I leave?” the little girl finally blurted out, gold flowing from her fingers and eyes. She smelled like a fresh beehive in summer, sweet and dripping with honey and buzzing with life. The wish filled her pores and expanded through the room and the witch thought, *maybe, maybe this wish is what will make her magical like me*.

“You know what you said,” the witch answered. “You said, forever. So wait a forever.”

The green of envy for the other village children. The rainy smell of questions. Peppery anger, wood-smoke grief. The silver secret. The golden wish.

“How long have you lived?” the little girl asked.

She didn’t seem so angry anymore. She’d dried up like a creek in summer.

“Longer than the oldest village father,” the witch said. “Longer than the village.”

“Than the *village*? What was it like back then?”

“Forest. And forest. As wide as the sea. Have you ever seen the sea?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Jana never will. Maeve never will. You could, if you wanted.”

The girl shrugged. “It’s beautiful,” the witch tempted. “Endless blue, rolling slowly. Fish like gems. And the sand between your toes.”

It took a few moments for the witch to realize that the girl was crying. Tears, sadness, were ocean blue. The sound of her sobbing was wrenching, disturbing. The witch hadn’t cried since she became a witch herself. What possible reason could she have? She’d given up all the filthy parts of life and ascended to something else. And then the forest had been disturbed. Then the humans had moved in. Then the forest had receded.

“I can’t remember how old I am!” the girl wept.

The witch was silent. Somewhere in her stomach, she felt a tug.

“I don’t remember, either,” she finally said. Matter-of-fact. It *was* a matter of fact, nothing more. But now it felt like more. Now it felt like a loss. How long since the witch had thought of her age? How long since she had thought of her family?

The little girl began to hiccup, trying to force out her ultramarine questions. “H-how...”

The witch waited.

“...*why* are you here?”

The witch gave a half-smile.

“I met a witch.”

*

Now they were logging in the woods. They were turning their little shacks into houses, with wood floors and second stories. They ripped up the grass on the village green to build a schoolhouse for the boys, though they still banned the girls from reading. The witch watched with pride as Sima slowly taught herself letters and words. How could she not be grateful to be in a place where that was allowed? All the village fathers could do was demand and steal.

“It feels like forever,” the little beast said as they bound herbs in the small kitchen.

It had been nowhere near forever. It had been barely a generation. But perhaps the girl was ready to go out on her own. Maybe she had learned that she was better than the village. “What will you do when this forever is over?”

“Maybe I’ll go to the sea,” said the girl.

“You’ll love the sea.”

“And then I’ll go back home.”

“*Home?*”

“To the village.”

The witch gripped her twine so tightly that it snapped, letting the thyme scatter over the table and ground. She still thought of her village as home? The witch knew that her face was still human, but she was shocked that her form was not filled with the scarlet, peppery anger. How could she still hold onto that idea? How was it that after years and years she remembered the village fondly? When her friends died in childbed, and of sickness, and starvation? Of drinking dirty water? When her friends died after doing nothing with their lives and never going further than a mile from where they were born?

“It won’t be soon,” the witch said.

“I never thought that it would!”

“You forget, Little Boar—I can see what you feel. What you wish. Every bit of it, it’s written all over your skin. I can smell it. It’s *rank*.”

Instead of fear, disgust colored the girl’s forehead. A feeling of violation, betrayal. It was almost enough to make the witch concede. That village would have violated this girl and the witch had sworn long ago that she’d never be like that.

But then the girl’s disgust was subsumed by anger. “It’s not *fair*!”

“I won our game, Little Boar.”

“But you *didn’t*! Even *I* didn’t know what I wanted!”

“That’s not how it works,” the witch said. “We made a deal. We played a game. If I could guess your deepest desire, then you lose.” *You win*. “You stay.” *You escape*. “And I guessed.”

“I didn’t know! When I looked into the scrying bowl I thought I’d see me! And Jana! And Maeve! And our children, living together in the village, and growing old, and—”

“Dying?”

“Someday.”

“And never learning to read?”

“I—”

“But that’s what your desire *was*,” the witch hissed. “You looked into the scrying bowl and you yourself as the teacher. Not just learning like your brothers, no—a *teacher*! Like one of the village fathers! No, your desire was to learn, and to be powerful! And I guessed it. And I was right, and you were wrong.”

“But *I! Didn’t! Know!*”

The girl slammed her hands against the table. The movement was that of a small, whiny child, and as the witch saw the little boar's tiny, girlish form, trapped in the body that she'd first come to the witch in, the witch wondered for the first time if her mind hadn't stayed stunted along with her body. If, perhaps, she hadn't grown old in her body because she'd refused to grow old in her mind. If rescuing her from the village, and offering her her greatest desire, hadn't been a curse after all.

But it was too late now! They had made their bargain, and the girl had pledged to stay here forever! The witch had taken her for a reason, and she'd be damned if she didn't see the girl move past her obsession with the village and become the great, learned woman that she desired to be those years ago. The witch was from a village just like Sima's. The witch had been told she would never amount to anything more than a womb to carry the next sons, a link from one generation of men to the next. She'd had the curiosity beaten from her, again and again. She'd had the intelligence beaten out of her. She'd had the will beaten out of her. Except for the merest bit, the tiniest fossil, the tiniest crystal of power somewhere deep inside. And the witch had run away with that power, and met a woman more powerful and beautiful than she ever could have imagined, and the witch had learned how to grow into her own power and immortality and do whatever she wanted.

And now she was being slowly battered into submission once more by a tiny little girl! Why couldn't Sima just acquiesce? Why wouldn't the little boar just admit that they were the same, and let herself follow their shared dream?

"You said forever, and I agreed, Little Boar!"

"You didn't tell me what it meant! Forever isn't what I thought it was!"

"Isn't that *your* fault, little beast? Forever is one of the only words that means exactly what it says! *For ever*. Don't blame me because you didn't think."

Something in the girl's eyes shattered.

"I hate you."

The girl stalked off.

*

Sima made herself scarce around the old cottage for the next several weeks. The witch didn't try to approach her. When they finally spoke it was the girl that broke the silence. "You always call me a beast. Well, beasts don't know things the same way that you do. So it wasn't fair. It was a false pretense."

"Listen to you, quoting books. You'd never have been able to—"

"Jana's granddaughter died," the girl interrupted. "I saw them bury her a few... months, I think, ago, but I don't know. And that's *not fair*."

"You are not Jana's granddaughter—"

"I should be. I was born one of them. I'm *from* them. And I should have died like them. Like Jana, and Maeve, a long time ago."

"But you didn't. Here you are, still a little girl."

"I'm a woman. I had my courses, before all of this. I'm not a little girl of air and water, I am a woman of earth and fire, and I would have been a wonderful mother and wife."

"Having your courses doesn't stop you from being a child. Have you spent the last decades dreaming of a chevalier, who would sing you songs in the moonlight and ride for you on a white horse? Did you think your husband would be a handsome prince, and not some pig-keeper from your village twenty years older than you who you would have to learn to lie under? Did you think that having children would not hurt? Would not kill you? It always kills you, somehow. You always die."

"I wouldn't mind."

"I can smell you lying. It terrifies you. Dying without ever doing anything! Dying like Jana, and like her daughter, and granddaughter."

"I'd rather die than live this kind of life!"

"But I can smell how uncertain you are."

“You just understand everything, don’t you? You just know all the secrets of the world!”

“I don’t claim to know everything. But I know enough. And I know more than you.”

“Because you’re old—”

“Because I *tried* to learn. When I saw the opportunity, I took it.” For the first time the witch reached out her hands and grasped the girl’s face. She ran her fingers over the features, trying to map out a face. “Just like you. Like *you*. I listened, and they beat me. I learned, and they beat me. So I left, and I taught myself, and I grew into the person I was meant to be. And I gained *so much*.” The little boar’s sharp nose and thick eyebrows, her plump chapped lips and the slightest bit of baby fat still hanging to her cheeks. Her ears, her lashes, her hairline. Sima exploded again, with the scents of anger, of offense, of a certain kind of violation. The witch dropped her hands as soon as she smelled it. “Maybe I was wrong,” she said. “Maybe you and I were never the same.”

“I don’t understand why you thought we were. You’re a witch. You’re evil. You’re barely human! Do you remember what it meant to love? Do you remember what it meant to feel? You can’t see me! All of the colors you talk about—could you even understand what I mean when I tell you my eyes are brown?”

Browns of hopelessness, melancholy, renewal. Browns of curiosity and wistfulness. Each color with its scent. “You played the game,” the witch said. “You came to me. You were brave, then. That’s how I knew.”

“I didn’t understand,” the girl said, “that I would watch people die and never age with them. That I’ll watch the stars die, and still be alive, and it’ll just be me and you alone in the world.” She spat on the ground.

The witch thought of her predecessor, the house she had lived in for innumerable years. A light. She recalled the colors of the world, before all she could see was starbursts of emotion. She remembered an age. A name. “Then leave.”

The girl’s eyes widened. The metallic tang of shock hit the room like vomit. “Leave,” the witch repeated. “I tried—”

To what? To help her? To love her? If she'd tried, she'd failed. The feeling of care, of hope, had been so novel that the witch had thrown herself into this girl for decades. And the feeling of grief and rage and shame at her failure was new, too. She hated it. She hated every bit of it. She never wanted to feel the emotions again. She never wanted to smell the emotions again or see their colors filling up a silhouette. She wanted to be blind. She wanted to be human. But, no—she would never be a human woman in this world. The witch knew that the rest of the world saw her as a vessel. Sima thought otherwise. She was probably wrong. She was usually wrong.

And now the witch would just send her out into the world? On her own? To be torn apart, and beaten down?

"I'm going to visit Jana's grave," Sima snarled. "And I'm never, *ever* coming back."

*

The witch set fire to the cottage.

Some oil. A fire spell. The cottage crackled and burned. Timbers came down. As explosions started, the witch imagined her potions shattering into the fire. She was empty-handed. She felt clean.

She didn't know why she hadn't burned everything earlier. There were too many intrusions, too many humans, too much noise, too little space. She should have taken Sima and left a long time ago.

She chose not to focus on the missing colors.

What had Sima really looked like?

The witch took one last look at the woods, closed her eyes, and let herself fly.

*

One day a little girl smirked at the witch. Fear was completely absent from her colors. The witch could appreciate that.

There were mountains. A new house. New rivers to dip her hands into, and new plants to study. There were no more potions. There was no more flying. There were still no people, only colors and smells, but they were less oppressive than they had been. The witch was not clean, and she never would be, but she was trying. And now a new little girl, who had climbed the mountains to the little house to make a little bargain.

“You want to stay here?” the witch asked in disbelief.

“I want you to teach me.”

Indigo. Garnet. The smell of rain, of crisp apples in fall. Flashes of gold. A world of color and smell that the witch hadn’t been close to for... a long time.

“Why?” the witch asked.

Now the fear shot through the girl in front of her, along with anger and bitterness. The witch had been like that too, once upon a time. “I want to be strong,” the girl answered.

“What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?”

“Don’t play games with me,” the witch said. “No type of game. You don’t want this.” Her throat felt swollen. She hadn’t cried for so long. She didn’t think she could remember how. But this new little girl reminded the witch of someone.

“I know what I want,” the little girl said. “I need to know what you know.”

“You don’t know *anything*,” the witch said again, cutting her off. “But. Maybe I can teach you a little of what I know. Not everything. But maybe I can teach you until we both know enough.”

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THIRD PLACE

Azure Alexander spent many years balancing the oversized hat of an artist atop her head. Rather recently, she realized how ill-fitting it was, and timidly removed it. Looking in the mirror, she saw a tiny forgotten tendril nested in her tangle of hat hair, seeming to wave as she stared. She watered and cared for it, feeding it multivitamins and Scrabble tiles, until it matured into a writer's hat that she finds really quite cozy.

The New Smell

by Azure Alexander

On a hot afternoon, with the sun glaring down, Marigold experienced something she had thought impossible: a new smell. How could this be? She had spent her entire life cataloguing and filing away smell after smell until she felt confident the world had been exhausted of its possibilities. Yet, here it was, making her nose tingle with its exciting newness. It wafted up her nostrils and filled her head until she could think of little else.

She sprinted as far as the leash around her neck allowed, trying to chase after it, but Jim anticipated any jerking on the leash and kept his grip. Marigold turned back to him and spoke with plaintive barks and yips. Unfortunately, he had always been too dumb to understand when Marigold spoke. She grew more insistent, doing her best to impart the urgency of this mission. An unfamiliar smell *must* be pursued. Her blood cried out for it and would not be denied!

But he only made shushing noises before he ignored her again to stare down at the little flat object that glowed back up at him. She thought it was called a "phone," but it was one of those things she hadn't had much need to remember the word for. It wasn't useful to her. It wasn't even pleasant to chew on.

She tucked the smell to the back of her mind to allow herself to think clearly, to allow patience. She sat by the bench he slouched on, showing undeniable obedience and trustworthiness. Muscles twitched to get on with the hunt, but she could hide that. Her tail was harder to control, but with great effort, she stilled its eager wag. With a placid gaze fixed on some geese flying overhead, it was easy to believe she hadn't a care in the world.

Watching Jim from the edges of her vision finally brought its reward; he shifted the leash to the hand that held the glowing thing, freeing a hand to scratch his nose. Marigold lunged forward and the leash flew from his loosened grip, sending the phone with it, skidding and clattering across the pavement. He used some special words saved for occasions like these and scrambled after the phone. It gave her enough time to get all the distance she needed.

She leapt and bounded, feeling a thrill ripple through her at the success of her escape. She had never run this fast, this free. Other dogs watched her with jealousy. Air rushed into her panting mouth, ruffled her golden fur like a petting hand. It carried the smells of everything she darted past: the stubbornly lingering scents of shampoos flung out from heads whipping around to watch her; the fear of the squirrels dashing away from her barreling form; a hot dog stand, which was terribly tempting to stop at; and on it went. The sights became a blur, but the smells remained distinct.

Jim yelled after her, far enough behind that it was already difficult to make out the words. He would never catch up. Marigold's tongue lolled triumphantly out of her mouth. She took a few turns and cut through some alleys to make sure she had lost him before she dared to stop moving. Lifting her head up high, she closed her eyes. The scent swam up her flared nostrils, stronger now, but still far away. She set off after it, her tail now free to wag with all her excitement.

*

Time passed. The sun had sunk lower in the sky and glared less, calming as it neared the end of its day. The wonderful scent was so strong now that she felt a little dizzy. She slowed and then crept towards a bush. Something small lay beneath it, unmoving. Marigold sniffed it. Yes, this was the source of the smell. She

nudged it with her nose and startled backward when it moved. It weakly turned to her and nearly fell as it recoiled at the sight of the much larger dog. Marigold found herself recoiling as well, shocked at what she saw. She had never seen such a creature. It looked just like a human woman, but smaller even than their babies, while not thick-limbed and clumsy like them. She wore clothing that looked like the leaves and petals of flowers sewn together, yet as fresh as though they'd just been picked.

The woman held out a hand as though to keep her at bay and said words in a lilting language unlike any Marigold had heard before.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Marigold assured her, hoping the meaning would be conveyed even if they spoke different languages. The miniature woman only eyed her suspiciously, cowering further away. "I promise," she said and laid down to show how unthreatening she was. She even laid her head down, mouth closed to hide her teeth, looking up at the woman with guileless, friendly eyes. The woman finally relaxed.

"What *are* you?" she asked. She didn't expect a response, but to her surprise, the woman switched to Marigold's language.

"I am me," she said. "I am Lirasel."

Marigold wasn't certain this answered her question, but she was distracted by blood dripping down Lirasel's leg from a wound gashed into her side.

"You're hurt," she pointed out, though the tiny woman surely already knew this.

"I was attacked by monsters. The—", and she said their name, which sounded like a growling, hissing clattering of teeth instead of a word.

"I've never heard of those," Marigold admitted. Though the name was unfamiliar, the sound of it made her tremble.

"I wish you'd never had to." Lirasel shuddered. "They are covered in myriad mouths and each of those mouths is filled with myriad teeth, all ready to bite and pierce and tear. That's all they know how to do."

Marigold jumped up nervously, tucked her tail between her legs and ducked her head, peering around. “Are they here?”

“Maybe. I think one followed me,” she fretted. “It’s all my fault! I got lost in the woods and crossed the border into their world. I didn’t even know where I was until I stumbled onto one and it attacked me. It wouldn’t have been able to follow me if I could’ve just gotten home—we have a barrier of protection laid on the border that they can’t cross—but I ended up here instead.”

“And they can get into my world?”

“Yes.” She nodded gravely. “You have no such barrier. They rarely bother, though. They think the things here taste nasty. Not even a bit of the magic they find so delicious.”

Marigold felt a touch of shame at lacking something, even if it protected her from the monsters with too many mouths.

It must have shown on her face because Lirasel smiled and reached out to lay a gentle hand on Marigold’s cheek. “Oh no. Feel no shame. I forgive you your lack of magic. You are what you are. You’re lucky to not be of interest to them. You have little to fear in this world; a predator, safe among other predators. What’s your name?”

“Marigold.”

“Well, Marigold, I’ve had my rest. It’ll soon grow used to all the new smells here and find my trail again. I need to go.”

“I’ll give you a ride. You won’t get anywhere with the state you’re in.”

“It could be dangerous.”

“I know,” Marigold said simply and crouched to the ground. Lirasel clambered onto her back. The tiny being’s blood soaked through Marigold’s fur until it touched her skin, but she didn’t worry about getting dirty; that was Jim’s job. He would force a bath on her the minute she got home. She might as well have a good roll in the mud later, if that was her fate.

“Why didn’t other dogs smell you?” Marigold asked, looking back over her shoulder. “Why am I the only one that showed up?”

Lirasel shrugged her delicate shoulders. “Maybe my smell could tell you were the one who would help me best. My smell must be as magical as I am.” Her smile seemed magical too—at least, it made Marigold feel warm to see it.

Her smile faded. “I’m sure *it* can still smell me though. No hiding magic from them.”

“We will outrun it,” Marigold said with convincing bravery.

Lirasel said nothing, as though somehow not convinced. “Towards the sun,” she finally said once securely tangled in Marigold’s fur.

*

They had traveled only a short time when Marigold spotted a familiar white van with red letters.

“Dog catchers!” she growled. She knew about those. They dragged away dogs and locked them up.

She turned to veer around it, but found herself facing one of the dog-catching humans. He was tall and thin, with long limbs designed for stretching out to snatch up dogs. A pole in his hand gave him even more reach, with a loop at the end of it, ready to slip around a dog’s neck and trap it. He had already spotted her, noted her dangling leash.

He held out an inviting hand and spoke warmly, like they were friends. “Hey there. You look lost. Let’s get you back to your owner. C’mon, girl.”

Marigold knew it was pointless to explain her mission; he would be as useless as Jim at understanding her. She turned and bolted away from him. His feet pounded the pavement as he gave chase. Lirasel murmured a few words in her beautiful language. Vines punched up through the sidewalk beneath the dog catcher, cracking the concrete and ensnaring his feet. He tripped and crashed to the ground with some of the same special words Jim had used earlier.

“Did you do that?” she called back to Lirasel with surprise.

“Of course!” Lirasel laughed. “I’m a gardener. I can make plants grow anywhere. It may not be that useful in a fight, but I’ll do what I can.”

The dog catcher was already untangling his ankles and struggling to a stand to resume his chase. Tearing around a corner into an alley, she could hear his slapping footsteps relentlessly pursuing. Another alley and another until she turned into the wrong one. A fence walled off the other side, creating a dead end. She turned back, but he had already reached them. His lanky form slowed as he approached, knowing he had them trapped.

He readied the pole while his free hand made a beckoning motion in an attempt to distract her from it.

“There now, pup. Everything’s all right,” he said in soothing tones, but Marigold would not be soothed. She spun to retreat further into the dead end, not knowing what she would do from there, only knowing she had to get away. He whipped the pole around to slip the trapping loop over her head—but it missed, smacking down on her back instead. She heard the cry of a small voice as she felt Lirasel knocked away, and then an even smaller thump as she hit the ground.

The dog catcher gasped. “What is *that*?”

With a sense of dread, Marigold turned to see him bending down. A look of wonder had transformed his face as he stretched a hand down to carefully scoop up the strange, tiny being.

She released a flurry of sharp barks, but the dog catcher didn’t seem to hear them with all of his attention focused on understanding what he held. He cupped his hands around Lirasel so she couldn’t escape, peeking through his fingers to get a better look at what he’d caught.

Marigold performed the only action left to her, though every tame instinct in her resisted doing it. She charged forward and sank her teeth into the dog catcher’s leg. He let out a sound much like the yelp of the dogs he hunted. His hands flew open and Lirasel tumbled from them, sent sprawling across the ground. The dog

catcher clutched at his bleeding leg, jerking away and creating an opening back out of the alley. Miragold swept Lirasel up into her mouth and slipped through the opening as lithely and as pleased as a cat before speeding away.

*

Once she felt they had left the dog catcher behind, she delicately set Lirasel on the ground, opening her jaws. Lirasel looked a little wet and bedraggled, and the blood still flowed from her wound.

“Are you all right?”

“You saved me!” Lirasel wrapped her short arms as far as they would go around Marigold’s neck to give her the greatest hug she could.

Though Marigold panted happily in response, secretly her heart was heavy. Her pleasure with a job well done had faded as she contemplated what it had taken to do so; biting a human meant getting put to sleep. She’d known dogs—old dogs, sick dogs, strays caught in the streets—and whenever the humans murmured about putting them to sleep, they always disappeared after. If it wasn’t death, it was close to it, because they were never seen again.

It was possible the dog catcher wouldn’t be able to tell her apart from another dog of the same breed, but she felt little hope for such luck; she’d never seen another with the same shade of gold. She kept her doom to herself though, not wanting Lirasel to feel guilty. Marigold didn’t regret saving her.

Gazing around her, she took in the world. The tree branches danced towards her with the delicate drumming song of wood while the large red sun sank toward the horizon, coloring the clouds with its departure. The breeze was laden with the many familiar smells and the one new. It was all beautiful and she loved these things with the pure, immense passion that dogs are blessed with. She could hardly bear the thought of being put to sleep, of being taken away from all these things. Yet she still had no regret.

“Towards the sun,” was all Marigold said, relieved when her voice didn’t betray her inner thoughts.

*

“We’re drawing near,” Lirasel spoke into Marigold’s ear from where she rode high on her neck so she could peer over the golden fur of her head. If Marigold stared hard enough, she could detect the hint of an iridescent shimmer cutting through the city streets. Cars and people moved through it while firmly staying on Earth, and she suspected Lirasel alone could cross into her world.

A strange sound spread across the land, making the ground tremble. It was like cracking glass, roaring wind, a rumbling earthquake, and things that Marigold couldn’t describe, all at once.

“It’s here,” Lirasel said, fear strangling her voice.

A second new smell reached Marigold. It crept through the air like rotting sludge. Where Lirasel’s scent was sweet and vibrant, this newer stench was acrid and repugnant, burning her nose. Most of Marigold didn’t want to see what was approaching, yet she couldn’t stop herself from turning to look. It was as Lirasel had described: covered in countless mouths that snapped hungrily at the air, all shining with impossibly sharp teeth jutting in all directions, like clusters of broken glass. The dark expanse of it loomed over them and then began hulking forward, drooling with anticipation, the saliva making its teeth glitter and shine all the more.

Flowers burst from its mouths. The creature chewed and explosively spat flurries of colorful petals, but with each flower destroyed, ten more sprang up to replace it until the creature was choking and growling. Then several of its mouths began vomiting.

“Poisonous flowers,” Lirasel said with satisfaction. “I don’t think any poison can kill it though, so—”

The creature was already straightening up. “Run!” she shouted.

Marigold obeyed, but it followed them more swiftly than seemed possible for its massive form. It caught up with them, snapping at her ankles. There was a tug at

her tail and then a sharp pain as the monster bit through it, severing the tip. A piece of herself disappeared forever down one of those cavernous gullets.

She wished she was a greyhound and tried to imagine being one to trick another burst of speed out of herself. It worked. Muscles straining, tail dripping blood, she barreled down the sidewalk, getting closer and closer to the barely visible barrier that marked the entrance to Lirasel's world.

Only a few more galloping steps away, the light in the yellow box above changed color and cars grew thick before them, blocking their way. Marigold skidded and nearly fell as she changed direction, thinking now only of keeping distance from the monster that was so close behind. She sprinted towards the outskirts of the city as she heard the horrified screams of people behind her.

An unfinished footbridge came into view, arching over a valley.

"Can you grow something slippery?" Marigold asked Lirasel.

"Yes! Just tell me when."

The bridge didn't yet have the safety of rails, but Marigold forced herself onto the narrow planks and avoided looking the long distance down.

She looked back to watch the monster as it approached. The streetlights and cars seemed like twigs and toys as they were brushed aside. The towering mass of mouths was unstoppable, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. People scattered and ran, desperate to escape, though it paid no attention to them.

The monster joined them on the bridge, its bulk spilling over each side. The bridge creaked alarmingly.

"Now!" Marigold cried out.

Lirasel said three short words in her mysterious language. Slime mold emerged beneath the monster, and it stumbled, slid, and then teetered on the edge of the bridge for what seemed like an eternity before it tipped and plummeted to the ground far below. The entire earth seemed to shudder at its impact with the ground, accompanied by the awful sound of shattering teeth. Marigold dared to

peek over the edge of the bridge, though the height made her dizzy. The monster didn't move.

She turned and ran off the bridge, eager to leave it behind. A crowd of people had already gathered to stare down at the monster below, all murmuring and giving soft cries of disbelief. Their attention was so focused that they forgot to look at the dog that had caused the monster's fall and never noticed the undersized woman clinging to her fur. She slipped through the crowd, unimpeded, and loped away.

*

Marigold came to a stop at the barrier's edge. Lirasel slipped from her back with a small sound of pain. The blood had mostly slowed, but it still dripped fresh if she moved wrong. She steadied herself for a moment with a hand on Marigold's foreleg, and when she took her hand away, the iridescent wall blinked out of existence. As far as Marigold's eyes could see, at least. She wondered if she could only see it when Lirasel was touching her.

"I can take you across with me," Lirasel said, "if you want to go."

Lost in thoughts about her adventure, her relief over the monster's death, and her own impending doom, Marigold couldn't comprehend Lirasel's words at first. Then she looked down at her new, tiny friend. "Really?"

"Really. I know it's an awfully big thing, to leave a world behind—but you have repeatedly saved me today, and I know my people would welcome you with open arms. You would fit right in, magic or no." She gave a small shrug and smiled. "I just wanted to make the offer, in case the adventure of it calls to you. It's the only thing I can offer you in exchange for all you've done. But I have to warn you—it's very *different*. It can be dangerous, without a proper guide like me." The last was said with a wink, the smile widening.

There was a chance the dog catchers wouldn't recognize her. Staying here did not guarantee death—but was it worth the risk? Would she simply be trading one danger for another?

Marigold thought about Jim, but she didn't think he would miss her all that much, with his phone to keep him company. For all his faults, she loved him, had spent all the life she could remember at his side. The idea of never seeing him again was strange.

She looked again at the world around her, with its trees and flowers and sunlight. To leave it for another world felt the same as leaving it through death; she knew from the final way that Lirasel said "leave a world behind" that it meant she could never return. It caused an ache to blossom deep in her chest and she wished dogs could cry. Humans always seemed to feel better after they cried.

One thought grew larger than all the rest: an entire world of new smells to learn. It was the greatest adventure she could imagine. The ache lessened as excitement stirred in her.

"Let's go," Marigold said, with the panting, tongue bouncing smile that dogs excel at.

Lirasel put her hand back on Marigold's foreleg, and the barrier shimmered back to life.

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HONORABLE MENTION #1

Derek says, "I have previously published with Owl Hollow Press and *Vulture Bones* magazine, and pseudonymously with *New Smut Project* and Less Than Three Press; future publications are coming from *Calyx* (AUS), and Feral Cat Publishers. I write in a wide variety of genres."

Weed

by Derek Des Anges

"I think you should go and clear out the shed," Maggie said from the hallway outside of Alice's room.

"Oh, you think *I* should go and clear out the shed?" Alice asked, not looking up from her thesis. "What's brought this on?"

"It smells like two foxes were in the throes of passion, got hit by lightning, and have spent the last century festering in their charred skeletons to produce the single worst stench in the known universe," Maggie said, with all her habitual grandeur and melodrama. "And I can smell it from my bedroom window."

"And I have to do it because?" Alice asked, still half-lost in footnotes. She looked like she'd been thrust into her clothes without her consent and like the laptop was causing her serious physical pain, which was about normal for Alice in an editing session.

"Lowell said he's going to puke if he does it."

"Ah, masculine ineptitude arises at the most convenient of times for him," Alice muttered, closing her laptop. "Why not make this a team effort?"

*

The shed stood behind the house like a lone tooth in a once-populated smile, with a good six feet of space either side of it before the tall creosoted fences closed in. Ordinarily it looked like it was trying to save seats for two late-arriving shed friends, but now, with the funk emanating through the old stained wood, it seemed more like the fences were trying to lean away from the source of the stink.

“Right,” said Lowell, from behind Alice and Maggie, “I’m warning you, my gag reflex is powerful and not to be trifled with.”

“That is *not* what you tell your Grindr dates,” Alice muttered, but she took a few hesitant steps towards the shed all the same, barefoot and grim-faced under the gray sky.

“My eyes are watering,” Maggie commented, to the world or at least back garden at large. “People are going to think we’ve murdered someone. Or incinerated a skunk colony.”

“I thought it smelled more like we were trying to hybridize garlic and weed,” Lowell said, indistinctly, as he tried to bury his face in his own armpit. “Either way, they’re going to call the feds if we don’t do something about this. Alice?”

Alice had almost reached the shed door. She raised her hand in front of her, as if trying to ward off the smell, and turned her face away. “Who was in here last?”

Maggie and Lowell looked at each other and shrugged.

Alice’s fingers brushed the latched handle, but it was no good—the reek from inside the shed permeating the wood itself hit her like a wave: she staggered back, gagging explosively.

“That,” Maggie said, squinting at the shed through tears, “is one hell of a thing.”

“I’d rather be tear-gassed,” Alice wheezed, doubled over, “than deal with this again.”

*

Back in the kitchen with the windows firmly closed, all three housemates stared out across the expanse of garden—all twenty feet of it—to the shed, as they reviewed their options. Alice, who had more-or-less shoved her entire face in a cup of black coffee in an attempt to chase away the memory of the smell, gave the occasional shudder.

“We could,” Lowell said, thoughtfully. “Now, don’t all shout at once, because this might sound a bit mad, but we could just... ignore it and hope that it goes away?”

“I’m not sure we *can* ignore it,” Maggie pointed out. “Much more of this and the neighbors are going to complain.”

“They’re on holiday in Tenerife,” Lowell said, by way of consolation.

Maggie waved a frustrated hand at the shed. “They’ll be able to smell it from there pretty soon!”

“Burn it,” Alice suggested, in a tone of voice that said she wasn’t entirely joking. “Just tip petrol over it, burn the bloody thing to the ground, claim it on the insurance. Whatever it takes. Get it over with.”

“Um,” said Maggie, clearly unhappy to be the designated voice of reason when she’d far rather be declaiming more florid melodrama. “No.”

*

Three hours later, after dinner and when the light was falling over the lone tooth of the shed and making it look almost as ominous as it smelled, Lowell said: “I suppose we *can’t* burn it. There might be something alive in there.”

“If it smells like that, all the more reason to burn it,” Alice muttered, from in front of the TV. “It might be some kind of interdimensional monstrosity.”

“I think you need a break from your thesis,” said Lowell, offering her a crisp. “It sounds like it’s getting to you.”

“I think you should mind your own business,” Alice said sulkily, rejecting the crisp. “And go burn the shed.”

“Alice,” Maggie sighed. “If there’s something alive in there that’s animal cruelty. What if it’s injured? Septic. Maybe that’s the problem, maybe there’s an animal that’s got some sort of horrible rotting disease like, uh, necrosis. Or gangrene. Or death farts. What if it’s someone’s dog?”

“If my dog smelled like that I’d chuck it off a cliff,” Alice complained. “I don’t think animals *can* smell like that while they’re still alive.”

“Alice!” Lowell said, apparently shocked enough to drop his crisps. “Don’t joke about stuff like that.”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you think something that stinks that badly has any chance of survival,” Alice said steadfastly, glaring at the TV. Unfortunately for them all, the TV chose that exact moment to advertise a room freshener plug-in. Alice swore at it with feeling and picked up the box of tissues from the arm of the sofa.

“Whatever,” Maggie said, hastening to prevent the argument before it could start. “We can’t burn the thing down *now*, and without checking what’s inside. It’s nearly dark. Someone’ll see the flames and call the police, and Lowell will go to prison forever and you won’t finish your thesis. Let’s just... wait until morning and go in. Together.”

*

After a fretful night’s sleep, the contents of the house at the end of the terrace wrapped their mouths and noses up in whatever they had to hand—scarves, bandannas, and in Lowell’s case, a t-shirt that advertised a band tour that had happened before he was born—and crept down to the shed before breakfast.

As all three were students, this was still after their neighbors had left for work but, as Maggie explained, it was the thought that counted.

“We can do this,” she said, as they stood at the far end of the garden like soldiers awaiting the order to go over the top and face certain death. “It’s just a shed.”

“That’s a very convincing speech,” said Alice, who hadn’t combed her hair yet and looked like an angry cockatoo. “I will remember it as I die of asphyxiation.”

“I can’t smell anything,” Lowell said, cautiously, as they edged closer.

“Your t-shirt is probably carrying far worse stench around in it. It’s all... mottled. It looks like someone died wearing it,” Maggie pointed out. The shirt in question was extremely faded and a little torn.

“Well, yeah...” Lowell blinked, touching the hem of the shirt as it dangled below his chin. “It’s vintage. That’s why I bought it.”

“He’s not actually wrong though,” said Alice, from behind her bandanna. “We’ve nailed this. I can’t smell anything from behind this. Or we’ve just become anosmic from the trauma of yesterday.”

“An-what?” Lowell whispered to Maggie. “Is this like the thing where she doesn’t have sex?”

“It means not able to smell anything,” said Alice, coolly, without turning around. “You’ll be happy to learn that I’m not *deaf*.”

They shuffled closer, as if they were approaching a deadly animal. The blameless suburban shed with its blanketing of old spiderwebs, dents from incautious footballs, and the odd patch of roof moss from the ever-present Welsh rain, stood before them and loomed in the most ominous manner a shed could loom.

“I can smell something,” said Lowell with a deep, troubled frown.

“Yes,” Alice said, patiently, “that’s why we’re going to burn this—shed—to the ground.”

“No,” Lowell said, lifting this t-shirt. He gave a short, experimental sniff.

“Lowell, don’t—” Maggie blurted from behind him. “Oh my god. You’ll die. You’ll actually physically die.”

“No,” he repeated, and sniffed again. “It smells... nice... actually?”

“Have you lost your bloody mind?” Alice hissed.

“Smell it for yourself,” Lowell insisted, removing the t-shirt from his face and leaning towards the shed, perplexed. He sniffed harder. “It... wow. That’s... really nice?”

“Oh, you’re trying to trick me into taking off the scarf? So I can have my lungs fumigated with the Pong That Perfume Forgot?” Maggie grumbled, giving him a shove. “Not funny.”

“No,” Alice said, lowering her bandanna. “He can’t act this well.”

“Hey,” said Lowell, offended, “but also thank you. But *hey*, again, anyway.”

Alice also sniffed, raising her head like an animal. “Well,” she concluded, after a long, almost giddy minute. “Now I *definitely* have to know what’s in there. That smells like ripe peaches and summer afternoons.”

“I thought it smelled like lavender and sex,” Lowell said, but she’d already put her hand on the door handle and rattled it twice.

“It smells like evenings at the beach and coconut oil,” Maggie interjected a little wistfully, “Like a really good wrap party but in, oh, Barbados or something. Rum. Ozone.”

The door stuck. Alice kicked it a couple of times.

“It opens outwards,” Maggie sighed, throwing out a useless hand to stop her, “like a cupboard. Alice—Do not—Alice don’t kick the bloody door in.”

She was all too used to Alice, who instead of drama usually got a little *too* into lateral thinking; the security deposit was probably already all gone.

Alice reluctantly released the shed door for Maggie to open, which she did after a little more rattling, by counterintuitively leaning on the thing until she heard the latch click, and *then* pulling on it.

“Alright, smartar—” Alice began, but the retort died on her lips.

“Whoa,” said Lowell, which was actually a pertinent observation.

A waft of overpowering near-saccharine scent *boiled* out of the shed and engulfed them like a crashing wave. All three closed their eyes, and when they opened them again the contents of the hitherto-unopened and windowless shed presented themselves like the will-reading of a dead hoarder.

“Yikes,” Maggie said, releasing the door handle. “That’s a lot of crap.”

It was however mostly the usual crap: a dead bicycle, minus most of the paint, the handlebars, and any kind of functional tires; a disembowelled lawn mower of a model which had stopped being made before they were born; three different kinds of storm lamp; garden shears so rusty they looked like an art installation; string; a nail-and-screw organizer unit which didn’t deserve the name “organizer”; flowerpots, mostly broken; some bird egg shells, spider corpses, the skeleton of some small mammal, some extremely alive woodlice; more string; *Mr Juke’s Miracle Grow Formula* in a bottle the size of home brewing kit; a home brewing kit; even more string.

The obvious exception, as far as anyone could make out, was the enormous tangle of etiolated vines which branched out from bonelike tendrils into fine white filaments, botanical hairs, that seemed to tie the entire mess together via the open neck of *Mr Juke’s Miracle Grow Formula*, and the sodding enormous pale purple bloom like an unfurling tea rose slap bang in the center of it all.

Each petal had the same mesmeric iridescence of a tropical butterfly’s wing, and it smelled *heavenly*.

“I think that’s... probably our culprit,” Lowell suggested, pointing at the bloom. It was larger than his head.

“So what was the stench beforehand?” Maggie asked. The flower was also bigger than *her* head, hair included.

“Who gives a shit,” Alice grumbled, pushing past them to stare at the flower. “It’s gone now.”

She extended her hand over the junk to touch one of the hypnotically beautiful petals, then another.

The massive flower swayed slightly at her touch.

“I think we should just like... lock the shed back up and leave it alone,” Maggie said, after a long, contemplative minute. “And you should stop... doing that to it. It’s obscene. You look like you’re. Uh.”

“Mmm,” Alice agreed, ruffling the remainder of the petals.

“Alice,” Lowell said. “Breakfast?”

*

Four hours later Alice burst into Maggie’s room with her hood over her head and without knocking.

“Hey,” Maggie objected, looking up from her phone. “We talked about this.”

“Lowell!” Alice called, over her shoulder. She had her hands behind her back.

“No, this is *my* room—” Maggie complained, and stopped. She sniffed experimentally. “You smell really nice? Is this a new perfume? Do you even *wear* perfume?”

Lowell poked his head out of the third bedroom. “I was—”

“Guys,” Alice said, ignoring both Maggie’s passing annoyance and Lowell’s sleepy bewilderment, “we have a problem.”

It was a sentence guaranteed to strike fear into the heart of any house-sharer. It was a sentence that preceded blocked toilets, collapsed ceilings, or detonated refrigerators. It was a landlord-calling kind of sentence.

“Hey,” Lowell said, from the corridor, “why have you got your plates up here with you? I thought you had breakfast in the kitchen for once?”

With a flourish like a magician yanking a bunch of dyed-feather flowers from a battered hat, Alice produced from behind her back a piece of crockery and waved the breakfast bowl into Maggie's room and her mug into Lowell's face—one piece of crockery either side of the door frame, like the answer to some riddle no one had asked.

Both the cup and the bowl were covered in white filaments. The filaments were budding.

"Oh," said Lowell.

Alice dropped both pieces of crockery—to a yell from Maggie—and they bounced, rather than smashing, already too swaddled in filaments to mind the fall. With a second, wilder flourish, she produced her bandanna from her back pocket and whipped it inside and outside of the room like a distress signal.

A small iridescent purple flower head bobbed wildly on it.

"I see," said Maggie, boggling at it. She pointed at the flower, then at the plates, then back at Alice again, uncharacteristically lost for words. "That's..."

"They're everywhere," Alice said, with considerable patience. "They're in my room. They're up the stairs. They're on the toilet seat. They're—" she pulled down her hood, "in my bloody hair."

A large, beautiful, glorious-smelling blossom curled out of her hair like the world's most expensive and perfect hair clip. The effect was lessened somewhat by the long white ghostly filaments which were beginning to reach down the side of her face.

"Shit," said Maggie.

*

When Harri Thomas gave in after a week of confusing phone calls from various letting agencies representing neighboring properties to his, and went to view one of the student houses he owned, he stopped in his tracks at the end of the street almost as soon as he'd got out of his car.

A heavy smoker for twenty years before the doctors got onto him and pointed out this was the stuff that heart attacks were made of, Harri had only recently begun regaining his sense of smell, and now all that seemed worth it: the most incredible waft of perfume came to him on the stiff western breeze and filled his lungs with something that reminded him of the sweet shops he'd lurked in during his youth. He remembered sticking a couple of licorice sweets in his pocket on the way out, once. His mum had left a slipper-shaped imprint on his arse for half a day when she found out.

"Bugger me," he said, aloud. "That can't have been what all the fuss was for, now."

He passed the neighboring properties, gray with old grime and the muting effect of the ever-present hanging rain, and as he reached the front of his own property the scent grew stronger.

"Oh," he said, when he reached the gate, "I see."

The front of the house was a mass of beautiful but *definitely* against-contract flowers. They ranged in size from mere pennies to hub-caps to bin-lids. They spanned colors from pale lavender through to deep imperial purple and that weird goth sort of color his youngest daughter had insisted on dying her hair and half the bloody bathroom towels. The colors shifted as he stepped inside, like the sheen of oil on a puddle.

The aroma was overwhelming. He found that, nice as it was, he wanted to pull the collar of his fleece up around his nose and mouth like he was passing that Lush shop in town. It was just *too much*.

But Harri had tenants who were causing a bother to their neighbors and a job to do, so he unlocked the front door and stepped into a jungle.

Tangles of white filaments and pale, sickly-looking leaves spilled along the hallway, and up the bannisters. They burst through the kitchen door, climbed the lintels, engulfed the light fittings.

"Oh, this is going to be a nightmare to have cleaned," he sighed, already mentally withholding the security deposit. "What the bloody hell are they playing at?"

The only people who could answer that, he knew, were the students themselves. He set about finding them.

No one in the hall: just rotting, unopened mail.

No one in the kitchen, just the hum of the still-running fridge.

No one in the sitting-room. The TV was on, showing *Rownd A Rownd*. No one in their right mind watched that on purpose.

No one in the lad's room. The bathroom door stood open: the room empty, shampoo bottles scattered.

Harri hesitated and knocked on the door of the other lass's rooms.

He waited to the count of twenty, so's if there was anyone in there getting up to the old whatsit, they had a chance to get decent or tell him to bugger off away and wait downstairs.

There was no answer.

Perhaps they were asleep, he thought. Probably stoned or drunk or on bath salts or whatever it was students did that made them wreck his properties every term, now. High on, oh, some sort of video thing. A TikTok. Still, he had to have a word, didn't he?

Having reasoned this out, Harri put his not inconsiderable weight forward and leaned on the door.

It resisted, but gave when he rattled the handle.

He put his hand to his mouth and said, very quietly in the back of his throat, "Oh... shit."

In the bedroom, which scarcely resembled a bedroom at all—huge fat white creepers lining it like bones in an ossuary, all stacked up over each other—three completely bare skeletons sat at the center of a tangle of roots, tethered to the festering carpet.

A single, beautiful, fragrant purple flower grew in the eye socket of the nearest skull, and Harri had the overwhelming urge, just to see if it was real, to touch it.

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HONORABLE MENTION #2

Hannah Whiteoak's stories have appeared in *Escape Pod*, *Banshee*, and *Ellipsis Zine*, as well as various anthologies. Find her online at www.hannahwhiteoak.me or on Twitter @hannahwhiteoak.

Scentology

by Hannah Whiteoak

While waiting for the customer to finish his flashback, Kira and I reviewed the recipe for our next order: #509421, Sunny View Nursing Home.

“What is a nursing home, anyway?” asked Kira.

“It’s where Earth people go to die.” I hadn’t read much beyond the introduction on EarthWiki, but, compared to Kira, that made me an expert.

She rolled her eyes. “Dying is so primitive.”

Most of the ingredients for #509421 were pretty standard, but there were a few that were less common. I made a list and sent it to our supervisor, Karim, for authorisation. “Life is meaningful because it’s finite.”

“But it’s not finite for us,” Kira wriggled her finger in the corner of the tablet screen, making it flicker, an amplified nervous tick. “Only for technophobes who insist on living like cave people.”

I took the tablet from her. “Well, I think there’s something in it.”

“You would.”

Deprived of a device to fiddle with, she tapped her foot. Ignoring her, I checked the timer for the brainwave promoter. The customer had been in there seventeen minutes. The flashbacks usually took around half an hour, so no need to check on him yet. I wondered where he was on Earth. He was using scent #19549, freshly laid asphalt. Perhaps the city street on which he grew up? A long, lazy summer day, playing kickball in the road, watching workmen in their bright jackets spread tarmac like cake icing, singing the old work songs Earthers had used to motivate themselves. *Hi ho, hi ho...*

Kira's voice pulled me back. She sounded angry. "Why do you want to go there, anyway?"

"Earth?"

"Duh."

I closed the door of the store cupboard. "We've been through this. It just feels... right."

"You don't even know what it's like!"

"I've watched all the archive clips. I've read everything there is—"

She rolled her eyes. "You're an idiot, Rosa. Wanting to go and live with savages, all because it *smells* pretty."

I didn't want to get into an argument. Not with a customer in the brainwave promoter. "I wonder what Sunny View will smell like. The recipe calls for—"

"So you're applying for Earth transfer?"

"After finals."

"That's next month."

"Well," I said. "We'd better get on and produce this scent. Sara's our best customer: her review will have a big impact on our final grade. You can afford to coast, but I can't."

Before Kira could argue further, the light came on above the door of the brainwave promoter, letting us know the customer's flashback was complete.

"How was that?" I asked, as I held the door open to allow the man to exit.

He looked a little dazed. They often do. "Wonderful," he said, a smile breaking over his face. "Truly wonderful. You ladies are geniuses."

"We're still training," I said. "But I'm glad you think so."

As Kira escorted him out of the shop, I inhaled deeply, trying to catch the last hint of bitumen. Where had he been on his flashback? I wished I could have gone with him.

*

Kira's grades would have let her choose any career on *Utopia*. She told me she picked the scentology placement because—unlike exterior maintenance—it didn't pose any risk of her eyeballs being sucked out into vacuum.

Scentology was my whole world. Since my first whiff of petrichor (#8327) I was hooked. I loved the smell of freshly cut grass (#937) and the sweet scent of strawberries (#46). New car smell (#9375). Old book smell (#272). The fermenting aroma of overripe banana (#1000a). I'd never tasted a banana, but I could imagine what it was like. I was even partial to wet dog (#85798) which made Kira screw up her nose and say that maybe asphyxiation in deep space would be preferable, after all.

Utopia smelled of nothing. Literally nothing. The same nanobots that patrolled our blood to keep us healthy dwelt on our skin, our clothes, the surfaces we touched, sucking aromatic particles from the air and breaking them down. TopiWiki said it would be unbearable without this technology, the stink of bodies and their waste gradually filling the space. Even our food—a gel nutritionally optimised for our individual needs—smelled of barely anything, with a taste to match.

Sitting on Kira's bunk, we sucked our gel packets while quizzing each other on organic compounds.

“What are the three functional groups in vanillin?”

“Ether, aldehyde, and hydroperoxide.”

Kira made a face. “No.”

“Oh, comets! I meant hydroxyl.”

“That’s better.” She crumpled her empty gel packet. “Shall we take a break?”

“I need to know this stuff,” I groaned.

“Why? You’re buzzing off to Earth, aren’t you?”

“Only if I get the grades,” I said.

Kira snorted. “Irony. You only get to go to Earth if you first learn a bunch of science no one uses there.”

“Tell me about it.” I lay back on her bunk, staring up at the grey ceiling.

“I think it’s sad, Rosa. All the Earth-gens who come into the shop wanting to relive experiences from hundreds of years ago. Can’t they move on?”

“I guess not.” I closed my eyes, imagining clouds in a blue sky.

“It’s even sadder with you,” she said. “You were born here, on *Utopia*.”

“But I’m *from* Earth. We all are.”

“I’m not,” said Kira. “And neither are you.”

I sat up. “Why are you even studying scentology if you think it’s so lame? Why not pick another career?”

I shouldn’t have shouted. But she claimed to be my friend, while every day tearing down my dreams. Was I supposed to be OK with that?

She grabbed her tablet and scooted into the corner of the bunk with it, her knees drawn up. “No more studying today. I’m tired.”

“Oh, Kira, look, I’m sorry. Don’t be mad. I need you to test me on—”

“No, Rosa.” She lowered her eyes to the tablet, which started to play the music from her favorite game.

I picked up my tablet. “Want me to play too?”

She shook her head. Her eyes glistened.

I retreated to my own bunk and plugged my earphones in. Against a backdrop of ambient Earth sounds, I tried to study, but kept losing focus. What *did* an Earth forest smell like? Was #1078, ancient oak woodland, an accurate representation? Was the mossy floor warm or cool under the sole of the foot? No, wait. Earthers wore shoes. That would be another thing to get used to, after the transfer.

If I got the transfer.

Kira’s game sounds faded. I glanced over. She was crying, but I was too angry to go to her.

*

I came out of final exams with no idea whether I’d passed or failed. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now. Part of our grades came from the work placements we did in final year, so I needed to knuckle down and impress Karim.

He’d been pleased with us so far. At the beginning, he’d hovered around, grabbing for my hand every time I pipetted a valuable compound, but he’d come to trust me. Most days, we ran the shop with no supervision other than the customer reports.

When Kira and I prepared #509421, even I had to admit that Sunny View Nursing Home smelled pretty bad.

“I hope she can afford it,” Kira said, wrinkling her nose as she stuffed the stopper into the vial. “We’ll never offload this onto anyone else.”

“She wants the flashback experience,” I said.

“What? Sara? Little Miss oh-no-I-don’t-have-enough-creds?”

I shrugged. “Maybe she’s been saving up.”

“Well, you can’t give her a free go on the promoter. We have to log every use. It’s not like slipping her the end of a bottle we weren’t going to use anyway.”

“I know.”

“Why’s she want a flashback on *this*? Smelling it is bad enough.”

“She says it’s the last time she saw her mother.”

Kira scoffed. “*Earthers*.”

I pressed my lips together. I’d always liked the idea of having a family. Sara said I was like the granddaughter she never had, which was nice, but I didn’t really know what that meant. Kira said Sara only pretended to like me because I gave her samples of scents we’d made up in lessons, or dregs left over from other customers. I said I didn’t care as long as she kept telling me stories about Earth. But it wasn’t the same as family, was it? They shared your DNA, which meant they had to love you. They weren’t random picks from a bank of frozen embryos selected for their diversity. *Blood is thicker than water*. Isn’t that what Earthers said?

I had Kira, who had been my best friend since nursery, but she’d forget about me when she figured out what she wanted to do with her life. All I had was Earth. The pictures that appeared in my head when I mixed up those old scents. Smiling people clipping grass with shiny silver scissors. Pausing to pluck lemons from the trees. Juice dribbling down their chins as they bit through the fragrant rind.

Sara arrived wearing her funny old clothes. Those tough blue trousers Earth-gens called jeans. Studs in her ears and eyebrows. A strappy pink top that showed off the muscles she worked hard for in the gym. White trainers. She always wore shoes, even though there was no need for them in *Utopia*’s bot-cleaned environment.

When she pressed her thumb against the tablet to validate the purchase, an error flashed up.

“Insufficient creds,” Kira said, shooting an I-told-you-so glance at me. “We can sell you the scent, but no flashback.”

Tears appeared in the corners of Sara’s eyes. I was surprised she could still cry; tear ducts tended to dry up after the fourth or fifth bot repair. She wiped them away with her tattooed forearm. How old was she anyway? Four hundred years? Four-fifty?

“I’d hoped to see my mother again.” She stared at me, chewing her lip.

“I can’t help,” I said. “I need to save creds. I need supplies for Earth transfer.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re going ahead with that?”

“Yes.” I’d told her about it plenty of times. Did *no one* believe I really wanted to go?

“Well...” She drummed her purple-painted nails on the counter. “Wouldn’t it be helpful to see Earth? Before you commit?”

“How?” I frowned. “I’ve never been to Earth. Even if I went in the promoter, I wouldn’t have any memories to—”

“I have memories,” said Sara. “You could come with me.”

Kira and I exchanged a glance.

“Does that work?” I asked. Until recently, we’d just sold fragrances; the brainwave promoter was new tech, and we’d never tried putting more than one person in there.

Kira frowned. “There’s no reason why not... the field is created and projected... but Rosa...”

I’d already pressed my thumb against the tablet to confirm the purchase. Screw the cost. I could economize on supplies for the journey.

Sara smiled. Kira, shaking her head, started up the machine and ushered us both inside.

I sat on the padded bench beside Sara, so close I could feel the rough fabric of her pants against my bare shin. I folded my skirt between my knees and pressed them together.

“Ready?” Kira asked, via the intercom.

“Yes,” said Sara, in a wavery voice.

I heard Kira load the scent into the machine. Sometimes, the bottles are fiddly to get into the slot, but this one clunked home. Soon, a fusty, bitter smell became overpowering. Ew. Did we mess up the synthesis? But I barely had time to wrinkle my nose before the machine melted away and Sara’s flashback took over.

A dingy room materialized around us, the walls a colour somewhere between beige and peach. In the bed lay a figure so shrunken that at first I didn’t notice her. When she groaned, I jumped.

Sara dashed to the bedside. But wait, Sara was still sitting beside me. She leaned forward, her hands gripping her knees. The woman at the bedside must be a part of the memory. She was plumper than the Sara next to me, and her tanned face looked genuinely youthful, rather than regenerated.

“It’s me, Mum. It’s Sara.” Young Sara smoothed the sheets. Finally, my eyes adjusted and I made out a face on the pillow. I recoiled. I’d seen pictures of old humans on EarthWiki, and thought it lovely how their smiles crinkled their whole faces. But this face wasn’t just lined; it seemed to have sunk in on itself.

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. “I don’t know a Sara.”

Had I messed up the synthesis? Had we somehow given Sara the wrong flashback? But the young woman smoothed the hair of the old one and said calmly, “I’m your daughter.”

“Sara,” said the woman. “Yes. I remember.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“Hurts.” The old woman grimaced. “Pain... all the time.”

Young Sara fetched water for the old woman. "Sit up," she said. "Just a little. So you can drink."

She rearranged the pillows and hoisted the woman a little higher up the bed. I covered my nose with my hand. The smell was nauseating. It resembled the odor that briefly appeared when using the toilet, before the bowl sucked it away. This was nothing like the Earth our fragrances hinted at.

I looked out of the window. Rain, lashing. Grey buildings. Grey sky.

Young Sara tried to hold a glass of water to her mother's cracked lips. The old woman pushed it away, whimpering.

"Mum!" said Sara. "It's me. Relax."

The old woman flailed her bony fist into her daughter's face, sending her staggering backwards. With no nanobots to stem the flow, there was an appalling amount of blood. Beside me, Sara touched her nose and winced.

"Leave me alone!" the woman screeched. "I hate you!"

It's a person, I tried to tell myself. Like you, or Sara, or Kira.

That only made it worse.

Like forcing myself awake from a nightmare, I defocused my eyes from the grey room, imagining the bright interior of the brainwave promoter until it shimmered back into view.

The stink hung around, but it was faint now. I inhaled deeply, glad of the nanobots cleaning my lungs.

Sara woke a few moments later. She dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of tissue from her pocket and then turned to me.

"Are you OK?" she asked. "I'm sorry if that wasn't what you expected."

"What was that place?" I said.

“The nursing home where my mother died.”

“But why was she in pain? And confused? Why did no one help her?”

She smiled, like she was a visitor to the nursery encountering a particularly cute child. “Rosa, they did what they could.”

“But she could have had treatments?” I said. “Nanobots. Regeneration.”

“Banned on Earth. Overpopulation.”

“Couldn’t you have brought her with you? To *Utopia*?”

“I tried. She said she was born an Earther, and she’d die one.”

“Is Earth worth dying for?”

“You tell me.”

I looked at my hands, imagining the cannula that would filter out the nanobots before I was permitted to board the transfer vessel. I pictured the skin wrinkling over the years, becoming dry and papery.

Shaking away the image, I pressed the button by the door. Kira opened it.

“Are you done?” She looked worried, but just seeing her made me feel better.

Sara patted my shoulder. “Good luck.” Then she made her way out of the store.

Kira opened her mouth, clearly full of questions.

“Don’t,” I said.

*

I took the rest of the day off. When I came back the next day, Kira didn’t ask me about the flashback. Instead, she helped me mix the scents, gently correcting my mistakes. When customers arrived, she dealt with them, allowing me to hide away

in the back of the shop, with all the comforts I could find there. Roses. Cut grass. Toffee.

The fragrances didn't bring me the joy they usually did. I was searching for the lie in every one.

We didn't see Sara again. For weeks, I thought about sending her a message, or even looking her up in our customer records and going to see her. But I didn't. Earth-gens are funny about privacy. If she complained that I'd misused the records to intrude on her private life, I could fail my apprenticeship.

When our exam results came back, my grades were far better than I expected. Easily enough to apply for transfer. I filled in the form, trying not to think about the flashback experience. So some aspects of Earth life weren't perfect. So what? That was no reason to give up on it. No reason to reject it in favor of a restricted, sterile life on *Utopia*.

Tapping Submit still felt like signing my own death warrant.

I kept myself busy. I tried not to think about Earth, but it crept in. I grieved the image of the place that I had cultivated in my mind: the rose gardens and wild strawberries, the salty sea and the fresh mountain air.

*

"Have you heard about the transfer?" Kira asked, wiping the pristine workbench.

I pretended my pipette was blocked. The message had arrived early that morning. I'd closed it and put the tablet aside, then gone to the bathroom. I didn't want Kira, playing video games on her bunk, to know. As the toilet sucked my waste away, I'd caught a very faint scent of ammonia. The old woman, trapped in her broken body, flashed through my mind, making me shiver.

Kira came over and took the pipette from me. "Rosa? Are you OK?"

The message had said I had to respond within three days, or the offer would be retracted. All day I'd been turning it over in my mind. This was what I'd always wanted. And yet...

“Yes,” I said. “I’m fine. I—”

“I’m going to apply too,” blurted Kira. “So I can come with you.”

She bit her lower lip, but it still quivered. Her eyes burned into mine. My heart raced as I thought back over the months she’d spent trying to talk me out of leaving. All the times she’d called me an idiot. Since Kira had come top of the class in first grade, I’d been afraid of losing her. I never realized she felt the same.

“You’d hate it,” I said.

“It wouldn’t be so bad. Like you said, there’s romance to hardship.” She squeezed my hand. “And I’d be with you.”

Until now, the decision over the transfer had seemed impossible. I couldn’t give up the dream of a lifetime, but nor could I leave everything and go off into the unknown. With Kira’s hand warm on mine, I knew what to do.

“They rejected my application,” I said. “My grades aren’t good enough.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I got the message this morning.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. It sounded genuine. “Are you going to reapply next year?”

I shook my head. “No. I talked to Karim. He says I can stay on in the shop.”

“Still living with your nose in a bottle, huh?” She was smiling, that jokey smile, although her eyes were wet.

“I like scentology—”

She laughed. “I’m kidding,” she said. “I’m staying at the shop too. At least until I figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“Why? You don’t care about scentology.”

“I’m coming around to it.”

“But you—” I didn’t get to finish before her lips pressed against mine.

*

Before that kiss, I’d never been close enough to another person to notice it, but it turns out that despite the nanobots’ best efforts, we aren’t completely odorless. Kira smells a little like #937, a little like #272, and maybe just a tiny bit like wet dog, not that I’d ever tell her.

In our double bunk onboard the *Utopia*, I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in, never wanting to let go. Earth can keep its fragrances. This is where I belong.

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HONORABLE MENTION #3

Bret has made shows with The Jim Henson Company and games with Disney. This story is Bret's first publishing credit.

Fur

by Bret Nelson

Serrean's legs were starting to cramp and her tail was getting numb. The sun was hanging low in the sky. She guessed she'd been in the tree for at least four hours, but how much longer could she support herself on these branches?

From below, one of the creatures struck at her mind again, jabbing scratchy words into her thoughts: "...one goes for hunt... we will eat small things... while wait for you."

She peered down to the leafy, wet ground. Yes, there were only two now, with their eyestalks focused on her branch. The third must have gone after an easy kill to sustain them. She clutched her small blade tightly, though she knew it wouldn't help.

She remembered Master Chalmer's words from school, long ago. "Unlike the kerghs we learned about last week, the ferrotauns do not chitter or bark. They have no need of auditory signs as they signal each other telepathically."

Once a week, a cart stacked with cold, clay jars would be wheeled and rattled into the room for her *Knowing Your Predators* class and Master Chalmer would guide them through a scenting. "Everyone—open your jars and breathe deep. Pull the scent down your snout all the way past your eyes, deep. Hold it there, keep it there

forever. When the ferrotaun nears prey, it gets excited, starts to sweat. They can't help it. So this scent, this sharp-edged cinnamon smell, is the only warning you will have."

If it hadn't been for that class, she'd be dead already. Thinking back to four hours ago, she recalled a stillness all around, even in the canopy of the trees above. No buzzing or rustles, the white noise of the forest. The quiet should have told her something was wrong. Then the cinnamon scent hit, and the quiet gave way to chaos. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would break a rib. She darted in a tight circle until the scent was at her back then dropped into a sprint, her ears stretching all the way up as she ran. She heard claws behind, hitting the leaves in long strides, getting closer.

But they weren't in striking distance yet, she knew because they weren't in her head. Master Chalmer had told them, "Ferrotaun telepathy reaches past their hunting parties. If they get close, they will project thoughts. They cast ideas that we hear as words. It only works one way; they can't read your mind. It's a trick. Do not listen."

The sprint carried her to a burlian tree. Using all of her arms, she climbed almost as fast as she ran. In a few heartbeats she landed on a branch out of their reach.

But they kept trying. For an hour the three ferrotauns clawed and leapt at the tree where she held tight, panting. They couldn't get high enough.

So they started the mind strikes.

The voice in her head was static, and the words unclear. But the meaning came through. "Tree... your home now? You live there?" She threw a stick at them. It bounced off the big one, who took no notice.

"You live there... we live here... until you do not live." With that, they curled up most of their legs and rested, looking up at her with their eyestalks unblinking.

Since then she'd been looking for a way to escape. But there were no other trees in reach. There was no way she could drop and run. She wasn't due back until

breakfast, so no one would come looking for her until well into tomorrow morning. She was already dizzy and tired and hungry—she couldn't stay up here all night.

The hunger made it all worse. She could smell the sweet popper-berries that grew along the path. They were going to be her meal, but that was impossible now. This tree was covered in large, young burl-fruits. Even if they were ripe, she couldn't eat them. They would only make her ill. Nasty grutworms were the only things that ate burl-fruits.

They started tugging in her mind again. "See... see your ending." The smaller male had returned with a tremplen. They tore it apart, eating everything. Bones, feathers, scales, everything. She felt sick. Her blade was too small to kill one of these creatures, let alone three.

Useless blade. Useless fruit.

Then she had a thought, and she was glad the ferrotauns couldn't hear it.

The beasts were distracted, licking the ground, getting the last bits of blood and bone from their meal. With her blade, she freed one of the big burl-fruits and cut it open. The scent was awful even though it wasn't ripe. With new hope she ignored the bitter, sour odor and dropped the sticky mess on her captors. There were dozens of fruits on this branch. She kept tossing them down, covering the ferrotauns' fur with smelly pulp and juice.

"We do not eat this... you do not gift us." Heaps of awful fruit kept falling on them. "Stop."

Her ears stretched and she heard scraping under the forest floor. She kept working. The only thing that ate burl-fruits were grutworms, but not this time of year. None of the fruit was ripe or tree-fallen, so they couldn't get at their favorite treat. But her blade had created a juicy feast. The scent drove them mad.

The swarm of grutworms roared up from the ground. There were at least three dozen of them, each bigger than her leg. She watched them tear into the fruit, and everything that it touched. Chewing. Burrowing. Frantic.

She was thankful that the ferrotans were not in her head as they kicked and twisted. She dropped her gloves and blade and checked carefully for any signs of burr-fruit on her fur and clothes.

Then she moved to another branch and waited. The grutworms would be gone soon enough and she could be on her way. She hoped that tomorrow morning her friends would save her some eggs.

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HONORABLE MENTION #4

Tiffany lives in rural New Zealand. She has been published in *takahe* magazine and was highly commended in the Sunday Star Times Short Story Competition.

Garden Parties

by Tiffany Allan

William stood by the bonfire breathing in the plastic smoke and telling himself that even if Darla was pregnant, they'd take the test on Monday so they could enjoy the weekend. He nodded at Jemma on the other side of the flames who already had a seven year old and was probably glad to be out of the house, spending time with the friends that had stopped visiting her after her first year of motherhood. If she was anything like William she'd be considering just getting in her car when the night was over and driving into a different life.

There was metal music playing in the shed. The boys had hooked up the guitars and amps and an old guy with a red face was screaming a string of swear words into the microphone while his mate sat on an amp and laughed. The screeching whined in William's teeth.

Eve was lolled over in an old car seat in front of the fire with her sunglasses on and William couldn't tell if she was asleep or watching the flames. She'd spent the first half of the night throwing up into an ice cream container in the house because she'd gotten too drunk too early. A guy—William thought his name might be Jared—was standing hopefully beside her.

On top of the fire was a sewing machine, dripping plastic and stinking out the yard. Someone had thrown a box of fireworks into the fire earlier and they were still randomly going off. Jemma with the seven year old suddenly copped one, squealing and lifting her knees while the sparking gunpowder pattered against her jeans. She ran and folded over into the tray of a truck with her legs kicking in the air. That made William smile. Then he remembered Darla at her parents' house, sitting around and worrying about the not-yet-confirmed baby. He looked around his bare dirt yard and imagined it covered in plastic toys, trikes and play sets. It was easy with the smell of melting plastic everywhere. Fuck it. He strolled over and put his shoulder to the back of an engineless car he was going to sell. They didn't know about the baby yet for sure, didn't need to start saving money until Monday. The boys ran to help him and they slowly rolled the car onto the fire. The tyres caught first, melting and sagging into the embers while black smoke billowed up. Then the paint started to crack and the seats whipped into flames. The smoke curled hot and stinking towards Eve in her chair but she just kept watching or sleeping through her sunglasses with the flames in her lenses leaping up—

They slept together of course, after the fire died down and everyone trickled away and even Jared gave up hanging around. William touched Eve on the shoulder and she stirred and he still didn't know if she'd been asleep or awake but they did it anyway, didn't even move from the car seat by the fire.

William knew that if Eve went home late or not at all her mum wouldn't care, wouldn't call the police or teach her a lesson. She was bony, noodle-eating thin, not rich thin. She wore soft T-Shirts. Jandals. Never asked for rides anywhere. It hadn't occurred to any of them to date her.

*

Years later at his son's birthday in the same yard someone was cleaning the sputtering barbeque with chemicals and the air was rich with the smell of toxic smoke. Eve was in front of William again, but Eve was different. She held her face in a still, small smile and she drank soda water with slices of the lime she had brought with her. She stood silently beside her husband and ignored her children who were shouting in the swimming pool. She looked proud and ugly. Darla was next to William; they'd gotten married. He could hear his son crying, being bullied

by the girls in the pool. The smell lingered. He stared intently at Eve and when she looked at him he raised an eyebrow like, look at us now, right? But her eyes slid right off him and rested somewhere on the back fence. He raised his beer high and threw back the last mouthful and cracked another almost in the same breath, loudly, so that—he didn't know—maybe she'd realize she was being a bitch. But she just smiled at Darla and sipped her water.

The boys had all smiled behind their hands when Eve eloped because they knew why, she'd have been embarrassed to stand in front of them all and say look at me now. Marriage material. But William now watched closely to see if she was. She touched her husband's elbow to warn him that he was probably talking too loudly and she loaded plates with food for her kids serenely as if she didn't care if they ate it or not. She didn't say anything that wasn't measured or safe.

William was only thirty-three and in the mornings some nerve in his shoulders burned all the way down into his hands, making them tingle miserably. He listened carefully to a specialist who showed him replicas of backs and nerves and knees and got him bending down, squatting to pick something off the floor, tucking his head to get back up. He opened another beer. There were plastic toys all over the lawn. His wife hated him for the clothes he left on the couch, for pretending he couldn't hear his son crying, for the thousand other things. And even Eve had all but disappeared. He stared at her more intently. His grip on Darla's hand grew tighter and she pulled it away from him.

Eve was passing, perhaps even as someone more than the rest of them. She had travelled down to the barbeque in a nice car while her tall husband wrangled the kids in the back seat as a break from his good job. She had on a linen dress. A gold bracelet. She had slick kids that were bullying William's own. A clear voice. Did it mean they had to treat her differently? Remember the past differently?

Eve went into the house.

William followed her.

“We took out this wall,” he said in the kitchen, pointing. He was expecting her to come closer to look but she just glanced at it and then looked at him. Stupid Eve, he remembered. She always had to be directed. “Do you like it?” he asked.

Darla was at the door. “What are you looking for?” she asked. “Because I’ve already brought everything out.” She stared at William and her eyes said I hate you. Eve looked at them both and her eyes said nothing at all. Eve went down the hallway to the bathroom.

“The vodka,” said William, staring back at Darla. “That’s what.” He took the bottle outside and stood next to Eve’s tall husband, offering him drinks in a plastic cup.

*

Darla put him in the shower after the sun had set and the kids had gone to bed. She shouted about how rude he was to be badgering that slut after all this time and he wondered if she was still calling her that because she was afraid of Eve’s gold bracelet as well. In the morning William woke up in his bed with the smell of smoke in his clothes and he didn’t know how he got there.

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