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The Lotus Flower

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The Lotus Flower

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Morning

The morning Robbie left, the sky was a faded black and the promise of the first snowfall hung in the air like our breath. We sat on the top of the hill that overlooked the canyon, sharing a cigarette. Robbie curled his lips all funny and blew smoke rings. They floated out over the edge of the hill and settled like a fog over the tombstones that dotted the ridge.

“I hate that I’m named after some dead guy.”

Robbie grinned at me the way he did when I said something stupid.

“We’re all named after dead guys, if we’re lucky.”

I laughed. Robbie was named after our father, who was named after his father.

“It’s just that I hate seeing my last name on a fuckin’ stone. Fuck if anybody puts my body in the side of this hill. I’m not gonna die in Ogden.” I waited to see if Robbie would correct me for saying fuck twice. He just nodded and looked out over the valley.

“Dying here wouldn’t be so bad, Jack. Living here is another story. No, I don’t reckon I’d mind dying here. I could sit up on this here hill and watch the sun come up over the ridge out there. I mean, if that were how the good Lord wanted it. Yeah. I’m not gonna *live* in Ogden, though.”

“You can let ‘em put you in the side of this hill, but I ain’t gonna end up in the same earth as that man.”

“You gonna end up in the earth no matter, why not here?”

“I’m not ending up in the ground at all, Robbie. I’ll swim out into the ocean and just sink into the water.”

Robbie laughed real hard.

“And what ocean, pray tell, you gonna sink into?”

“The Pacific.” I blew out a straight shot of smoke and shook my head for emphasis, the way cowboys did in the movies.

“Well, good luck, Jackie, good luck. You gonna be a sailor, a navy man? You can enlist like me in what, four, five years? You could see the world.”

“I don’t know, Robbie. I don’t really like people telling me what to do, an all.”

“You’re just saying that on a cause of him. They can’t go beating on you in the army, not like he does. I reckon it’ll be a walk in the park after living with him. Those Commies ain’t got shit on our old man.”

“They got nukes.”

He grinned and reached into his pocket.

“Look at this, you’ll like it.” He pulled a crumpled postcard from his pocket. It said “ALOHA” in sad, bright letters. On the corners, the paper was separating and curling upwards and away from itself. He pointed at a palm tree and a clear, perfect ocean. “This is where I’m gonna end up.”

“Hawaii?”

“Paradise.” He pointed at the word “paradise” and smiled. “I got shore leave, you know?” He pushed the postcard back into his pocket and patted it against his chest.

“Yeah, I know.” I stabbed out my cigarette and turned my head. The sun was just beginning to rise over the far side of the canyon, casting a gray light around Mr. Watson’s ranch house. His kitchen window gave off an inviting yellow glow.

“We’re going to have to work twice as hard now that you’re leaving.” I didn’t turn to face Robbie. Instead, I let the wind catch my words.

“Mr. Watson will hire some more help, the shanty near the southwest property line been empty near a year.”

“It’ll be just me and Pa for a while, though.”

“I’m sorry I’m leaving. Look, I was hoping Ma would stick it out and not head east or wherever she went. I guess she was sick of it. She means well, Jack, Lord knows, she ain’t trying to abandon us. Just like he ain’t.”

“Don’t tell me he ain’t trying to cause harm, ‘cause you know he is.”

Robbie stared at me. His brown eyes grew real wide.

“He can’t help that he’s always drinking and a gambling. You gotta remember he’s a quarter Taiute, where you and me is only an eighth. He can’t handle that firewater.”

I nodded, but my scowl let him know what I thought about his “Indian” theory. I couldn’t imagine that our father’s blood was any redder than our own.

“Don’t let him get to you, Jackie. Just shake it off. You can’t go around pissing him off and provoking him like you do, not with me and Ma both gone.”

“Provoking him? What the hell are you talking about?” I felt my fists tense up and my cheeks flush.

“You know what I mean. Don’t go stealing his cigarettes or bringing that dawg in the house.” He gestured at Violet, who was asleep at our feet. “I didn’t get ya that dawg so you could piss him off more than usual. What you ‘spect him to do when he finds that

wolf dawg in the house at night? Keep it on the chain and don't let it bother the working dawgs either. It ain't s'posed to be out by the corral."

Violet lifted her head and looked up at Robbie. She held his gaze, her gold eye and her blue one staring at him until he reached out and rubbed her head with his rough palms.

"See that? Typical bitch, she wants the world 'cause she gives ya one look. That's all it takes though, Jackie, one look and then you're done. Marlene's got this look, this thing she does. When she goes down on me she stares straight into my eyes the whole time. That's love. She ain't ashamed or nothing."

"Did you see her when you was in town earlier?"

"Damn straight, I got quite the send off."

"I bet there's all kind of girls in California. You ain't even gonna miss her soon."

Robbie looked out over the hill and across the valley. He fumbled with the last of his cigarette butt and flicked the ash into the dawn.

"I asked her to marry me."

"You got her pregnant! Didn't ya, Rob?!"

He sat up real straight and looked me dead in the eye.

"No. Just because I wanna marry her don't mean I knocked her up."

"It's just that -"

"Just what? Just because he knocked Ma up right before he shipped out don't mean I'm gonna do the same. I'm not him."

I nodded and scanned the horizon for the pink hues of morning, but the sky was still a bluish black.

“We better head on back. Jimmy D is gonna give me a ride into town so I can catch the bus.”

“You reckon Pa will be home?”

“He’ll be home.”

I struggled to keep our feet in unison as we went down the path. We had spent years memorizing the hill; where the cold rock turned to powdery pebbles, and then to ragged, sharp brush. Robbie always walked a step ahead in the summer for rattlers, and two steps ahead in the winter for snowdrifts.

My teeth chattered. I could feel the cold seeping through my skin. The temperature was dropping. Robbie glanced back at me.

“You cold, Jackie?”

“No.”

He took his coat off and tossed it at me. “You need to get a coat that fits Jackie-Boy. You grew this summer.” I pulled his coat over me. The sleeves went down over my knuckles. We had reached the undergrowth.

“You think it’s gonna snow today, Robbie?”

“We’re about due for a snow. Last year by this time there was already a blizzard. The ground ain’t even frozen yet.”

“You gonna be able to leave if it snows?”

Robbie shook his head the way he always did when I said something he thought was stupid.

We walked past the corral. The house was only a few yards away now. It was made from the same dark brown wood as the corral, only with less care. There were gaps in the wood in some places and no amount of caulking could keep the heat in.

“I’m gonna run in and grab my bags.”

I stroked Violet’s fur. Her ears perked up. The shuffling of footsteps was approaching.

“Where you been, you little shit?” Pa coughed and cleared his throat. He was leaning against the side of the house, holding his flask, his boots covered in manure.

“With Robbie.”

“Eh, well you better be ready to work hard, real soon.”

“I do work hard.”

He shot back and then doubled over, roaring with laughter.

Violet straightened, her fur rose and she moved closer.

“You better take that shifty-eyed wolf dawg out my sight. Don’t let it near the Watson’s sheep dogs. They don’t seem to like the look of it, neither.”

“You’re up early Pa.” I turned to see Robbie standing behind me. He had his new coat on. All his bags were set at his feet.

“You leaving today?” Pa gestured at the bags around Robbie’s feet.

“I don’t wanna get snowed in. Jimmy D said it might snow a bit. He’s coming any minute now.” Robbie looked like a cowboy or a soldier from a movie with his hair all slicked back, his brown cowboy hat bent in his hands.

Pa nodded. “You would be helping us out if ya’ waited ‘til tomorrow. You could take Watson’s blue pick-up with the good tires.”

“How would the truck get back?”

The sound of Jimmy D’s tires came roaring down the gravel driveway.

Robbie stared at Pa and nodded. Jimmy D’s horn blew. I wanted Robbie to stay for one more night, too.

“I could take you in to town tomorrow morning.”

“I seen you drive, Jackie, and I ain’t trying to die here.” Robbie laughed.

Pa chuckled and grunted. “Yeah, I don’t need you wrecking nothing of Watson’s. I’ll bring you tomorrow.”

“No, no, I’m gonna head to town.” Robbie picked up his bags and began to walk down the driveway.

“Let me ride to town with you.” I knew Robbie wasn’t coming back. So I started to follow him, but Pa grabbed my arm.

“You ain’t got no business going to town when you got work to do here. Always doodling and and running off to town. Robbie, you’re leaving me with a worthless twelve year old who don’t pull his weight.”

I jerked away.

“Fourteen. I’m fourteen.”

Pa slapped me across the temple with the back of his hand. My teeth smacked together. The horn blew again. I tried to catch Robbie’s eye, but he looked down at his boots.

“I gotta go. So long, I’ll see you later.” Robbie gripped his bag and ran into the glow of Jimmy D’s headlights. A few flecks of snow were caught suspended in the light

around him. I stood frozen watching the lights back away, feeling the snow falling on the tops of my shoulders.

“Don’t look so stunned.” Pa looked at his hand and then reached it out to toss the hair in the spot where he hit me. “I didn’t hit you too hard, nothing like my daddy did to me. You shouldn’t talk back.” He shuffled around in his pocket and grunted; as he watched the red taillights slip into the darkness. I pulled his cigarettes from my back pocket and tossed them behind him.

“There, by your boot, they must a fell out your pocket.”

He continued fumbling in his pockets, pulling out a pack of matches. He scooped the cigarettes up and struck a match. “I bought this pack on the reservation yesterday and this is the last goddamn cigarette. You’re nothing but a worthless thief. I’m goin’ to town.”

He glared and pushed past me toward the rusty, red pickup.

The house was cold and quiet. I crawled back into bed, Violet jumped up next to me. I lay still, stroking her fur until I was sure she had fallen asleep. Her body smelled like outside, not like here, which smelled of cigarettes and whiskey. I didn’t want to worry about cleaning the corral or feeding the ewes. As my eyes grew heavier, I looked out my window toward Harper Canyon. My mind was filled with thoughts of Robbie. He let Pa hit me. Even Ma would’ve stepped in, her small frame like a cellar door between me and the harsh, gusts of wind beating down outside.

“Jack, you awake? I know you got that bitch in there with ya.” My father’s hoarse voice stirred me awake. The broad outline of his figure slumped in the frame of

the doorway holding a bottle, which was wrapped in a red handkerchief. He reeked of whiskey and dip. I reached down to where Violet was sleeping across my feet and covered her snout with my hand. She woke up and licked at my palms.

“Wake up, you little shit.”

He coughed and his body lurched. I watched as he staggered forward, his large hands pawing in the darkness. He tripped and his head cracked against the wooden door frame. Violet’s ears pointed up as she lifted her head. The low raspy buzz of his snore signaled that he was alive. I crawled to the foot of the bed, toward Violet’s silhouette. She licked the side of my shoulder as I buried my head into her warmth.

“Don’t worry. He didn’t see you in here. He’s too drunk to hit anything but the floor.” I pressed my face into hers and fell back asleep.

I woke up to beams of sun shoving in from under the window shade. Cold air was seeping in through the gaps in the caulking along the edge of the window. In a hopeless struggle for warmth, I pulled at the blankets, twisting them around me. The spot where Violet had been was still warm and the door was open in the same haphazard fashion as it had been. Pa was on the floor, his brown mess of hair blending with the dark wood. I imagined him sinking into the wood head first, followed by his arms and legs until he was gone. Stepping over him, I was careful not to hit the squeaky floor board near his left ear. An icy breeze rushed over me, causing my hair to stand on end. The front room was still dark and almost no light came in through the frosted windows except a crack that led all the way to the front door, which was wide open.

“Stupid, drunk asshole left the door open.” I skidded across the ice cold floor and jumped to the tattered, roll of carpet that lay just inside the doorway. The infinite white

outside the door left me breathless. Another draft of wind sent fresh, cold air streaming through the stale house. The blinding whiteness of the light reflecting off the snow made the world beyond the door look like pure, flat light. I was drawn away from the dreadful wheeze that droned behind me toward the emptiness outside.

“Violet! Violet!” My voice echoed and a spiral of smoke spun out into the air. I waited for the jingle of her chain collar. I lowered my voice.

“Violet, please come before he wakes up. Otherwise you gonna have to eat outside. I can’t feed ya’ inside if he’s up.”

There was no sound.

“Stupid dog probably fell down a snowdrift or something.”

I took Robbie’s old coat off the rack and slipped it on. It still smelled like him. I wrapped my scarf tight under my nose, and pulled a pair of oversized, worn leather gloves over my hands. The first step into the frigid air gave my stomach a cold, empty feeling. My legs were freezing in my long johns.

“Violet!”

I whistled, but there was nothing, but a mournful echo. The lump in my chest was distracting me from the numbness in my legs. Robbie was gone. All he had said was “so long.”

It was overcast, but I could still tell that it was late. The sunlight refracted off the snow, causing me to squint. I rubbed my eyes. The tracks ahead disappeared into streaks of red. I opened my eyes, but the stains emerged again before me; a red trail of entrails led all the way to the corral door. I began to walk faster, past the corral, over the

bloodied clumps of grey, which were tossed about, down the scarlet carpet that cut through the snow and twisted around the barn.

“Violet!”

Again, nothing but my own voice answered me. I turned, bracing myself against the side of the barn. There was Violet, hunched over the shredded corpse of a ewe. She was tearing into it, ripping the diaphragm from the ribcage.

“Violet.” I was almost whispering. “Violet, get away from that.”

She tilted her head in my direction, her one yellow eye drilling into me. The skin around her mouth was pulled tight, revealing her blood stained teeth. Scraps of meat and ice hung from her snout. Her front paws, like her face, were stained and bloodied. She bent down, and continued to watch me.

I backed away toward the corral, which sent the remaining sheep to the other side in one huddled, heaving mass. Their braying, crying noises caused my hair to stand on end. Just outside the corral, I noticed the hindquarters of a lamb scattered about. I bent down, wrapping my fingers around the base of the exposed femur bone. Pulling tight, I twisted it, ripping through, detaching the tendon and ligament from the bone.

“Violet, come here. Eat this.” I swung the bone, trying to tantalize her. She paused.

“If you don’t drop that fucking sheep, Pa’s gonna kill you!” I walked toward her with the sheep leg raised above my head. Violet ducked behind the carcass, trembling and whimpering.

“It’s OK, Violet. I’m not him, I’m not gonna hit you. Here, come on take this.” I pressed the bone to her snout. “This will be easier on your teeth. Come on take it.” I nudged her with the end of the bone. “Take it.”

She bit down on the bone and began to gnaw it, scraping her teeth across the marrow. While she was occupied I grabbed the hindquarters of the ewe and began to drag it to the corral. Warmth radiated out from its open belly. The blood seeping from the tear in the sheep’s throat left a crimson trail on the snow. “I’ll just leave this near the other one. He’ll think it was a coyotes or wolves that came through. He’ll reckon this one died protecting the little one. He won’t know you did a thing. Not a thing. We gotta get you cleaned up.”

I grabbed one of the feed buckets off the fence post and headed back toward the house.

“Stay here. I’m gonna fill this with water inside.”

My pace slowed as I neared the front door. A light was on in the kitchen. I couldn’t remember if it had been on when I left. As I climbed the stairs to the front door, the smell of coffee flooded my nose. Taking off the boots, I began to practice what I would say. “Coyotes, coyotes got in the pen.”

I opened the door and scanned the front room. The sound of running water sent a wave of relief over me. He was in the shower. I tiptoed into the kitchen and pushed the bucket under the faucet, between grease-crusts pots and grimy pans. One frying pan fell and clattered against a pot, before crashing to the bottom of the heap. My heartbeat sped up and I jerked the half-full bucket, sending a splash of water to the ground. The pipes groaned, and creaked when I shut the faucet off. I set the bucket on the ground and ran to

my room. Searching through a pile of old shirts I found a pair of slacks and yanked them over my numb legs. Then I grabbed one of Robbie's baseball shirts to wipe Violet's mouth with. The shower cut off and the pipes howled. I grabbed the bucket and rushed out the door.

As I walked I tore Robbie's shirt into strips. Of course he ran away. He took off without a care for how we were going to manage. There was a lot of work to do on the ranch and now Mr. Watson was short a hand and a couple of sheep. Pa's pay was going to get docked for that lamb and who knew how much for a breeding ewe.

"What the fuck are you doing, Violet? Get away from there!"

I grabbed her chain and pulling her away from the carcass. Then I grasped her face and began to scrub. She winced and pulled away, but I held tight, smothering her face with the shirt, dousing the pieces in the water.

"Did you make this mess? Was it you, Violet? You know I'm all alone out here. I'm gonna have to clean it up, fucking dog." She whimpered as I pounded the cloth against her fur, gripping the chain, twisting my fingers in the metal. When I was done I shoved her back, releasing my hand from the chain. My fingers were covered in warm blood and fur. Her throat was bleeding where the chain had dug into her. She was shivering from the cold water.

"Violet, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you." I reached out toward her, tossing the fur on her head, but she cowered and backed away.

"I just got mad."

From behind me I heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow.

“You got my damn boots on, Jack? I’ve been looking all over for ‘em on the porch and here you are with ‘em. I ought a knock you upside the head. What in God’s name is this fucking mess?” His eyes narrowed as he scanned the carnage.

“Wolves or coyotes, a bunch of ‘em must’ve gotten in and killed the sheep. Violet was trying to stop ‘em and one got her in the throat.”

He stared at the blood, which was dripping down Violet’s neck onto the snow and then at the bucket next to me.

“Why in God’s name did you come in and turn the water on when I was in the shower, you moron? You sent a straight shot of hell’s ice right into me. Just to clean a lousy dog! Well, get this shit cleaned up. I gotta call Watson. Drag the carcasses round back.”

“Yes, sir.” I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn’t as angry as I had expected, and he didn’t suspect a thing.

He began to walk back toward the house, but then he froze.

“Robbie tell you goodbye, Jack? I mean properly so?” He stared at me. His eyes were the same color blue as mine, but they stood out against his rough, tan skin.

“No, sir.”

He nodded and scanned the snow at his feet.

“Jack?” I thought I heard his voice quiver. He turned to face me again.

“Yes, sir?”

“How many coyotes you reckon got in and killed the ewe and that-what is that, a lamb?” He squinted at a pile of flesh and wool.

“Oh, I dunno, a whole pack, or at least three or four.”

“Violet scared ‘em all off, eh? A pack of ‘em?”

A lump was forming in my throat. I couldn’t speak.

“Jack?”

“Uh, yes sir, well it could have been less, maybe two or three, but it was at least that many, I’m sure of it.”

He walked toward me and swung his fist into the side of my head. The force sent me tumbling to the ground. He crouched over me and brought his lips to my ear, which was bleeding.

“Liar.”

I covered my head and rolled away. He grabbed Robbie’s coat and peeled it off me.

“I didn’t lie, I swear.”

He hit me again, this time with the back of his hand. The blow burst against my chin and sent my head slamming back against the ice.

“There’s a problem with your story. Explain to me how a pack a coyotes only left one pair uh tracks in the snow? See, right now, I see your tracks back and forth, and I see another pair, but that’s it.”

“The snow’s fresh. Maybe they came before the snow.

“No, see we were up when the snow started coming down. I checked the sheep. No coyotes.”

“Maybe some fresh snow fell after, and the tracks got covered.” My voice was shaking.

“See, I just don’t think that’s what happened. This blood would be covered then, too, wouldn’t it?”

He leaned over and looked at Violet’s throat.

“The blood on this dawg is real fresh, as fresh as the blood under yer nose.”

“She didn’t mean to.”

He squeezed Violet’s throat and then tossed her at my feet. I lunged toward him, but he knocked me aside. Violet yelped as he lifted her by her fur. He pulled her chin back and twisted her neck. I heard a snap. She twitched as he threw her to the ground.

“I’m sick of all yer lying.” He reached into his coat pocket and fumbled for his cigarettes. My heart was beating hard in my chest. I started to crawl toward her. The tears were burning in my eyes.

Violet lay motionless, slumped in a heap, and her throat was still bleeding. I looked at my bloodied hands and then at his. Rushing forward, I lunged at him, my fist raised.

He lit a cigarette.

“Come on, Jack, hit me. Be a man for once, instead of being a sissy like your mama. You spent too much time in the house, like a girl, when you was a kid. Always drawing or fiddling with that broken guitar. Robbie was raised right. He took after me. Your sissy ass is practically dead weight around here, just like that bitch of a mother of yours.”

I turned my back to him. Violet’s blood was trickling onto the snow.

“She don’t even want you. I got news for ya,’ Jack, that slut don’t give a shit about you now that she’s all cozy with her new cop husband.” He pulled at the ripped

collar of his jacket and tossed his head back. “She’d just as soon see ya’ dead before she wants to see ya’ in Louisiana.” He leaned in close to my face again, peering into my eyes. “You got her pitiful eyes and my smile, ya’ poor bastard.”

I lowered my bloody hand, and turned, lifting my head until my eyes pierced into his.

“Robbie has her eyes. He ain’t you any more than I’m Mama.”

“How you reckon that?” He was close to me now. The shadow of his weight was bearing down on me.

“You fucking blind idiot. You can’t even see yourself when you’re looking in a mirror.”

He bristled and stepped back. I thought he was going to hit me, but he just shook his head and took a slow drag.

“I could say the same, Jack. I could say the same.”

I bent down and cradled Violet in my arms. She was still warm. I scooped her up in Robbie’s coat and brushed past him.

“Where the hell do you think you’re goin’? You’re twelve years old. How far you gonna get?”

I didn’t correct him this time.

“Follow Robbie’s tracks, if you can still see ‘em. You can all leave as far as I’m concerned, all of ya. You just go and be your mama. That’s who you wanna be, huh?”

“No, I don’t want to be anybody.”

“Fine, Jack, that’s just fine- you go be nobody. That’s all you’re gonna ever be is a coward and a nobody.”

His words echoed behind me as I trudged through the snow. I wanted to carry Violet far away from the property, so she wouldn't have to be in the same cold, frozen ground as him. After a ways, I had to stop, she was too heavy.

The wind pushed past as I bent to the ground, setting Violet beside me. From out of Robbie's coat pocket, I pulled some Marlboro's and a pack of matches. The folded, crumpled picture of paradise fell to the ground. I pictured Robbie and Ma on a beach like this one, with me still here, shivering and bloodied. Match after match flickered and died, until one lit just enough for me to light a cigarette. Picking up the postcard, I examined paradise up close, before pressing the cherry right into its center. The middle burned, sending tiny ashes fluttering toward the stream of blood that trailed behind us. Up ahead, the snow was white like a girl's skin, open and unfolded to me. Beneath the snow, the same dirt was settled, scarred with footprints and tire treads. All the paths were already there, leading in any direction I might pick to go. Fixing my eyes on the black, charcoal hole in the center of the postcard, I imagined dissolving into the picture, right into the ocean, where I wouldn't have to become anyone. I took a deep breath and decided to follow in their footsteps if it meant escaping him, but I shuddered as I stepped forward, realizing that the bloody filth from Pa's boot was seeping into the fresh snow.

The Christmas Oranges

Greta made her way to the kitchen, pausing to look at the fireplace where the Christmas tree once stood. The manger looked empty without the glow of the tree beside it. Greta had been too tired to put up and decorate a tree all by herself. The year before, when she had tried, her arthritis had caused her to break more bulbs than she had hung. Rather than risk breaking the rest this year, she decided it was best to not even bother. Her first Christmas in America had been so very different. Joseph had picked out the biggest tree on the lot. It didn't even fit in their tiny apartment on the base. When Karen and Elaine were children, the trees they got almost always touched the ceiling.

Greta had spent the better part of the day preparing her traditional roast, as well as the Sauerkraut and the candied yams. As six o'clock drew near, she hurried about the kitchen making last minute adjustments. The girls would come with the grandchildren at any moment. She hurried about, fussing over the smorgasbord of cheeses and fruits that lined the countertop. Then she took the Cranberry-Orange bread from the oven and placed it between the Marzipan Cake and the Black Forest Ham. She scanned the food on the table. Greta knew it would be far more than enough for nine people. Last year, Karen and Elaine had both been on diets and they had scolded her for making so much. Greta shuddered as she remembered Elaine scraping half the apple cobbler into the trash.

The potatoes sat perfect and untouched, waiting for her hands. She cradled them in her arms before placing them in her large pot. Next she added the bacon that she had torn into strips. Then she poured in the white vinegar and bacon grease. This was a recipe her mother had taught her during the war. They had always used everything

available, especially grease. When things got really bad, they had nothing but bread and cabbage for weeks at a time. Greta listened to the familiar sizzle and inhaled the aroma, which rose from the bubbling pot. She had never forgotten what it was like to be hungry, just as she would never forget her last Christmas in Augsburg, before the American occupation.

It was December of 1943 and the worst was still to come. The Americans had bombed for three nights straight and the English had been bombing intermittently, during the day, for about two weeks. Yet, despite numerous misfortunes, the families in Greta's building were preparing for Christmas Eve. Many of the houses along the street hung scraps of red and green ribbon. What Greta longed to see was a Taunenbaum with lights. In the years before the war, there had been a grand tree in the center of the town square and all the school children made ornaments for it. She had made a colorful yellow canary, like the real one her father kept in his study. The Burgermeister himself had lit the tree. During the war, however, there could be no lights after dark. If the Americans saw any they would bomb the city. Even the windows had to be covered with thick black curtains. After curfew there was nothing but darkness.

In the winter the ration laws were strict. It was during one of the particularly hard winters, that Greta's mother, a nurse, fell ill. Most of the family's rations went toward medicine and coal for the fire, and they spent what little was left over on cabbage and bread. One night, just before Christmas, Greta heard her parent's in a hushed whisper about the war - that was all anyone spoke of anymore.

“You cannot send her so far on her own.”

Her mother's voice was weak and hollow.

“She's an athlete and strong.”

Greta knew he was speaking of her before she even heard her name.

“Greta’s a child - a girl.”

“She’s a young woman, Maria. Fritz is expecting her tomorrow. We have gone over this already.”

The sound of her father’s cane against the wooden floor sent Greta dashing down the hall to the parlor. She scurried on her toes, trying not to make a sound. From behind the large grandfather clock in the dim parlor, Greta watched her father, as he inched down the hall and went into his study. He looked so old; Greta wondered if he had ever been young. Her mother had looked young once, and she used to smile often, but since Albert left and the war got worse she had not. The day St. Joseph’s school was bombed, and so many were killed, she came home from the hospital and went to bed with a fever. She had been there since.

Greta tiptoed down the hall and opened the door to her mother’s bedroom. The room was pitch black, except for the thin crack of light that trickled in from her father’s study. She listened for the sound of her mother’s breath. It was one of her only comforts.

“Henry?”

Her mother’s raspy voice startled Greta. She shut the door. The sound echoed throughout the house.

“Greta? Are you in the hall? Do not disturb your mother. Come in the study.”

Greta entered the study, which was always in perfect order. The room smelled of mint tobacco, and it had for as long as Greta could remember. It was her father’s only frivolity, but now tobacco was too expensive, so the scent just hung in the air, another reminder of life before the war. The walls were adorned with long, mahogany shelves that held volumes of law books. Her father sat behind the oak desk. A large, black book lay open illuminated by a small lamp. Greta waited for him to speak; she never spoke until he addressed her. He looked up; his green

eyes peering over the edge of his wire framed reading glasses.

"Shut the door softly this time. I don't want you to wake your mother."

Greta turned and shut the door; a vibration ran through the stillness of the room. The building was old and the slightest movement would shake almost every board in the house. Greta shuddered at the noise.

"I'm sorry, Father."

"Sit, Greta."

She did so, taking her seat on the hard wooden chair in front of his desk. When she was a child, this had been the punishment chair. Her brother Albert had been in trouble many times, but she had only been in trouble once, for daydreaming during practice at the gymnasium. After that, she was careful not to let her imagination carry her too far away.

"Do you remember Herr Meier? You met him years ago."

"No, father, I don't."

"I fought with him during the war. He was a brave soul, not always practical." As he spoke Greta studied the deep scar that ran across his right cheek. During the first war he had been a member of the cavalry and a Russian had cut him with a real saber. He had also been shot in the knee and as a result he walked with a heavy, wooden cane that their neighbor, Herr Abner, had made for him.

"This winter, since he only has two mouths to feed, Fritz has a surplus of potatoes. Only his oldest boy's wife lives on the farm with him. It's about twelve kilometers away, just before Freiberg. Herr Abner is going to lend you his big wagon so that you can bring back enough food for the whole building."

Herr Abner was the church carpenter and one of the oldest men Greta knew. He had a

kind smile, and he always shared his extra rations with them if he had any. She would often go and listen to his stories and admire his craft.

"You'll have to leave early so that you make it home before dusk."

His words fell around her as she stared into the darkness beyond the lamplight, where a glimmer of light reflected off the bottom of the gold birdcage. Like the windows, the cage was covered with thick, black cloth. Greta often wondered why he kept the little bird at all.

"Fritz said he could afford to give over three bushels. I told him you would do fine. You were an athlete."

This was an awful lot of potatoes, Greta thought, especially since the farm was outside Freiberg, nearly twelve kilometers away. She had run many long distances at sporting meets, but that was before the war.

"They'll be expecting you by noon. You must go tomorrow. I arranged it all when Fritz was in town last month."

Greta had never been so far by herself, but this would be her chance to show how brave and grown up she had become. This would be the greatest gift she could give to her family and neighbors. They wouldn't have to be hungry at Christmas.

The next morning, on his way to work, Greta's father walked with her along the path, which led to the main road. She walked slowly, so he could keep up. It was hard for him to walk in the winter because his cane would slide on the slickness of the ice. Greta studied him as they walked; his hair was as white as the fresh powdery snow. Once at Herr Abner's, she had seen a picture of her father, before the scar was set on his cheek. She saw nothing of herself in him, but she thought she could see her brother Albert's face there.

"This is far as I'm going to go. Move quickly and be careful of the SS. They don't take

kindly to people who break the ration laws even if they are only fifteen-year-old girls. Now be on your way, don't dawdle. I'll see you for supper. Bleib Ubrig, Greta!"

A chill ran through Greta's body as her father's words echoed in her head. She had heard "Bleib Ubrig!" every day since the war had begun, but the words still caused a great unsettling within her. "Remain alive!" What a thing to have to worry about.

As Greta crossed the street to where the bombed ruins of St. Ulrich's Church stood, a car filled with SS turned the corner. She darted into what was left of the church rectory. Many of the statues, which had stood for centuries, lay in disrepair. Greta looked at the Blessed Virgin, which lay on the ground. Bending down, she traced her gloved fingers over the fractured Madonna. The broken gaze of the statuette captured her attention so fully that she did not even hear the SS pass.

After waiting a few moments she ventured out. The wrought iron fence around the churchyard, which had once been adorned with beautiful fleurs-de-lis, was nothing but a mangled mess of iron and tar. The heat of the incendiary bombs had molded the fence and the once smooth pavement into unidentifiable shapes. Where the Catholic school once stood, there was now nothing but rubble. Even the ground around the building was contorted and bent. Greta couldn't bear to look at the re-solidified tar because she knew what lay beneath it. If she looked too long she feared she might see someone looking back at her.

She glanced up at the large clock tower; it was just after eight. Her detour had cost her nearly half an hour, but it was better to be late than caught. As Greta neared the heavy, wooden gate she worried about the new dangers that lay outside the protection of the city walls. Although she was free from the ration laws and the watchful eye of the SS, the back roads were even more dangerous, especially for a young girl. If she was lucky, she wouldn't see another

soul until the Meier's farm.

When Greta left the gates of the city, she began to descend down a steep, icy hill. She braced herself against the weight of the wagon. If the wagon gained momentum she might fall close to ten meters before hitting the frozen river below. The Christmas before Albert had been drafted, Herr Abner had made them a beautiful sled. They had taken turns going down the snow-covered hill. Greta had been terrified that they might crash through the ice and freeze in the river, but Albert had always been fearless. This was how she consoled herself while he was gone. If anyone could survive the war it would be Albert.

The frozen ground was hard beneath the thin soles of Greta's makeshift shoes, which were now too small. She could feel her feet grow heavier with each step as the cold wetness seeped through her shoes and into the first layer of her socks. Looking out into the trees, she tried to distract herself. She listened for signs of wildlife, hoping to see a little songbird in one of the spruce trees. As she gazed out farther into the twisting branches of the forest she was reminded of her brother's stories. Albert had told her many tall tales that had frightened her when she was a child. One was of a witch that lived in the woods outside of town. The witch would come in the form of a raven or a beautiful woman and lead children to her house, where she would feed them delicious breads and fruits until they were so fat that they couldn't run away. Then she would cook them in her big oven and eat them all up. Greta was too old now to believe in such ridiculous stories. When Albert had left she had been so naive. Of course, she had been only eleven then, but years of death and hunger had made her grow up quickly. She wasn't the scrawny kid she had been when he had left. Her mother's old dresses clung to her curves, and soldiers whistled at her when she passed them on the street. Still, as she walked, she kept a watchful eye for the raven and was careful not to leave the path.

The familiar hunger pains echoed in her stomach. Greta felt around in her pocket for the loaf of bread her father had given to her before she left. The bread had no taste at all, and the texture in her mouth felt like sawdust. Her parents made her carry a small loaf in her coat pocket in case of an air raid. They warned Greta that she could be trapped beneath rubble for days without food or water. After almost six weeks of nothing but stale bread and bitter cabbage from the cellar, the potatoes from the farm would be a nice change. Greta couldn't help but long for something to make Christmas feel more like it had, like the fresh oranges her mother used to give her.

As Greta crossed the Lech River, the smell of the old, damp wood filled her nose, and the sound of the rushing river almost drowned out the creak of the bridge beneath her feet. As the wheels rolled on the wood, the wagon made a rumbling noise like thunder and bombs. The noise was unsettling to Greta so she began to walk faster, causing the noise to grow louder until it filled her ears and it was all she heard.

Once Greta crossed the bridge, she could see nothing but flat land. Fields of frosted white extended as far as she could see. The sky above was an ominous slate gray and the sun barely shone through the dense clouds. Bitter gusts of wind came from all sides, but Greta welcomed them. She hadn't been out in open land like this in a long time and it reminded her of being out on the field practicing for a tournament. Greta took a deep breath, enjoying the cleanness of the air. She had grown accustomed to the smells of the city- burnt chemicals and melted tar. Yet, here less than ten kilometers out of town was an unspoiled paradise.

The road twisted and turned through what seemed like endless farmland. Many of the farms had been abandoned. When the soldiers came through, they often stole from their own people. Some farms didn't even have anyone left to work the land, since most of the men were

away. If they could afford to, many of the farmers hired Russian and Polish migrants to turn the earth and harvest the crops. Her father didn't like the Russians and he had spent many work days helping farmers avoid foreclosure. Greta did not hate the Russians, but she did fear them. The bands of displaced men roamed the countryside, speaking in foreign tongues. The girls at school spoke of these men as they would have monsters and witches only years before. Greta believed it was one of these men who taken Sophie.

Sophie was from Hochzell-Nord, which was west of Augsburg, but she ran on the city team. She was two years older than Greta and the very best long distance runner, but one day she stopped coming to practice. At first, Greta thought she had moved, like so many others, but then word came that she was missing. No one had seen her since she had left the gates of Augsburg; she had never made it home. Greta hated to think of such things, especially when she was alone on the road.

Greta could see the farmhouse, which was set back from the road on a hill. The house was painted the color of the sky on a clear summer day. There was a large gate that stood at the end of the path that led to the farmhouse. She pushed open the gate and began to make her way up the hill. The wheels sunk into the ice as she walked. Greta pulled hard on the wagon causing a crack to form in the handle.

A man and woman appeared on the little white porch that wrapped around the house. They began to walk toward her, slowly at first and then faster.

"Greta Von Galler?"

"Ja."

She felt her reply had been abrupt, having answered an elder so informally, but his deep voice had caught her off guard.

"I'm Greta Von Galler, Heinrich Von Galler's daughter."

"We've been expecting you. Haven't we Charlotte?"

Charlotte Meier nodded. Greta couldn't see much of her face, only her two eyes, which were as dark as black cherries. She had never seen such large, dark eyes.

Herr Meier's baritone boomed again.

"When did you leave, Greta? We half expected to see you here two hours ago. Your father told us you're a runner. Two hundred meters is it?"

Greta was glad that her cheeks were covered because she felt them flush. Her father had bragged about her to strangers. It was so unlike him to do so.

"Ja, Herr Meier. I left this morning, before eight, but the patrol was out."

"We're glad you got here in one piece."

Frau Meier was still watching her. Greta could feel her black eyes on her before she spoke.

"Come inside and warm yourself by the fire," she said, taking Greta's hand. "Herr Meier will get the wagon out of this ice."

"Dankeschön," Greta said, handing Herr Meier the fractured wagon handle.

"I'll fill the wagon in the root cellar and see if I can't patch up this handle."

Greta turned and followed Frau Meier to the farmhouse. As they neared the porch, the house didn't look as inviting as it had from the road. The paint wasn't as blue as the sky, and the shutters were old and in need of repair. Thick black cloth covered the windows, allowing no light to come through.

The inside of the house, however, was glowing with warmth and light. There was even a Taunenbaum, which made the entire parlor smell of spruce. Aromas from the kitchen flowed

into the room as well. Greta could smell coffee and real pumpernickel bread. She almost felt at ease as she took off her large, green overcoat and hung in it on the hook near the fireplace. The mantel above the fireplace was a dark wood grain. On top sat a large bronze coat of arms and above that were two crossed sabers. Below the glistening swords hung six colorful knit stockings intertwined with a garland of spruce branches.

"Let's get your wet shoes off and some warm food in your belly. Your feet must be frozen."

Greta turned to face Frau Meier. With each layer that was peeled away, years seemed to come off. It became clear to Greta that Frau Meier wasn't a day over twenty-five. Her hair was even done in the same style as Greta's, only it was much darker and thicker. Frau Meier's dress fit her figure perfectly and Greta couldn't help but stare at the beautiful scarlet color. She tried to look away before Frau Meier's eyes met her stare.

"Is the color too bright? I had to make it out of the tree skirt."

"I like it very much, Frau Meier."

"My name is Charlotte, but please, Greta, call me Lottie. That's what Erich calls me."

"Erich?"

"My husband, he's in Poland right now, with his brother. At least that's what his last letter said, but that was several months ago."

As Charlotte spoke, her lip trembled. Greta watched as her gaze drifted toward the knit stockings above the fireplace. The tears in the corners of Charlotte's eyes made Greta want to cry. It was just another reminder that Albert was far away. She hated to picture him in Russia, cold and alone on Christmas. For a moment, they both stood in silence. Greta tried to avoid saying more than she had too. She had always been quiet and polite, like her mother.

"Herr Meier and I live here alone, since Frau Meier passed away in October.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lottie."

Greta nodded unsure what else to say. Loss had become so common since the war began, but she liked Charlotte and wanted to show her sympathy.

"You better get your socks and shoes off, and those wet gloves. Let them dry by the fire."

Greta took her brown leather gloves off first. Underneath, her hands were white and wrinkled and in some places her palms were beginning to form large blisters. Like her hands, her feet hadn't fared well either. Her shoes, which her mother had made, were hardly suitable for a ten-kilometer walk through icy slush. Both pairs of socks were wet straight through. She placed her socks next to her gloves in front of the fire. Looking down at her feet she almost didn't recognize them. They were swollen and calloused and looked like the feet of an old woman. She tried to wiggle her toes to get the circulation moving again but it didn't help, so she stretched her feet towards the warmth of the fire, allowing the flames to tickle them.

Charlotte came back into the parlor with a tray of coffee and pumpernickel bread. Greta could hardly contain her excitement at the sight of real bread and butter. She hadn't eaten butter in almost a year and there it was on a silver tray in front of her. Greta wanted to tear into the bread with both her hands and eat everything in front of her, but her upbringing had taught her better. So she watched as Charlotte poured two cups of hot coffee, with sugar and cream. Charlotte handed her the warm mug and the steam rose out and swirled beneath Greta's nose. She blew on the coffee trying to cool it before placing it to her lips.

"I like your dress, Greta. The olive color matches your eyes perfectly."

"Dankeschön."

Greta didn't think her dress was much to look at compared to Charlotte's, but she wanted to be polite. She was about to ask Charlotte where she learned to sew so well, but Charlotte continued to talk as she sliced the bread.

"Before I met Erich I wanted to be a seamstress. I've always had a knack for picking out the right fabrics and colors. It's hard for me to wear many colors with my complexion."

Greta looked at Charlotte. Her eyes and hair were black as coals. She didn't look German, at least not like anyone Greta had seen in Augsburg. Greta was sure it was her turn to say something, but nothing came. So she just took another slow sip of coffee. Her whole body felt warm inside and out.

"The coffee is very good."

Greta felt better having said something, even if it was only about the coffee. Her mouth was watering now as she watched Charlotte spread orange marmalade and butter over the slices of bread she had cut.

"Here you go. I'm not half the cook that Frau Meier was, but no one goes hungry under my watch."

The first bite was heaven. It tasted like real bread from a bakery, not like sawdust and ash. For the first time in months, Greta chewed without fear of breaking a tooth on hard, stale bread. The creamy richness of the butter and the exotic marmalade made her toes curl. She closed her eyes for a second, allowing the warmth and satisfaction to engulf her.

"This orange marmalade is wonderful. Where do you get it? My mother used to leave oranges under the Christmas tree for me and my brother. So, for me, oranges always taste like Christmas."

"My mother lives in Amsterdam and she sends me packages when she can. She sends

such lovely things - fabrics, fruits and jams. Not like the things we have here. The packages don't come as often anymore. The only thing I look forward to more is a letter from Erich. Do you have a beau yet?"

"No, my father thinks I'm still too young."

"I don't think I had a beau when I was your age either. I met Erich when I was seventeen. We met in town. He was getting supplies for the farm and I was visiting my Oma for the summer. I'm originally from the city, from Munich. It gets so lonely out here, in the winter, with these horrible black curtains. I've been working on some pretty yellow curtains and as soon as Erich comes home, when this awful war ends, I'm going to hang them up. It's nice to finally have someone to talk to, someone young. I'm so sick of this snow and this house and the country. It just isn't what I planned for. Sometimes I wish I could just fly away from here."

Charlotte's cheeks turned a pink after she finished speaking, and Greta could tell she was embarrassed.

"I'm sorry Greta. I always say too much."

Greta saw nothing wrong with what Charlotte had said. She thought the war was awful and pointless too, but her mother always told her "der Feind hort mit," the enemy listens. Sometimes Greta thought it was just her mother's way of avoiding the subject. Greta was sick of the war and sometimes she too wished she could escape and fly away.

"If you could be a bird, what kind of bird would you be, Charlotte?"

At first Greta thought Charlotte looked taken aback, but then she seemed to pause as if giving the question thought. Greta felt silly for asking such a strange question, but she had often wondered what it would be like to fly. When she ran, sometimes, when the breeze was just

right, she felt as if she were flying.

"My father has a yellow canary in his study, but it just sits all day in a golden cage alone. I think that would be too lonely. I would be a stork. My brother flies planes over Russia and he says they're the only birds that fly higher than the planes and all the bombs."

"I'd imagine it could get lonely up so high as well, but it's a nice thought, Greta."

Greta thought about her mother sick and alone back home, waiting for her. She was probably hungry and Greta felt guilty for having eaten two whole slices of bread and even guiltier for having spent so much time at the farm.

"You have been so kind and I don't know what we've done to deserve it. I've been so hungry."

The words had just rushed out. Greta had never said she was hungry out loud before. She wanted to be brave like her parents and like Albert. Charlotte hugged Greta before going into the kitchen, just as Herr Meier came in from the cold.

"Well, we've got you all set. I trust Charlotte's been good to you?"

"Ja, Herr Meier, very much so."

Despite his gruff exterior, Herr Meier had kind eyes and a full beard. She wondered if he had a scar on his cheek from the first war like her father.

"We better get you going before it's too late. I don't want you traveling alone at night, even if you're half as brave as your father. That road is no place for a young woman after dark."

Greta nodded. She knew it would take almost twice as long to get home, now that she would be pulling fifty kilograms of potatoes. Charlotte came back in the room with the bread, which was wrapped in the same red cloth as her dress.

"Greta, put this in your coat pocket.

"I will, Charlotte, Dankeschön."

"Charlotte, do we have any old snow boots Greta can have? It has started to come down since she's been here."

Charlotte went up the stairs in search of boots, leaving Greta alone with Herr Meier.

"Your father and I were in the cavalry together, you know that?"

"Ja, he told me. You fought together in the battle at Crimea."

"I had yellow fever, a terrible case; he took care of me 'till I was well enough to make it home. All the while he had a bullet in his own knee and never said a word. The crazy fool even carried me sometimes. He saved me again last summer, with the contract he set up for us, kept the Russians off my farm. I tell you the potatoes are the least I can do, Greta. I hope your mother is doing better. Tell your parents that I send them my best for this year and the next."

"I will. This helps us so much, Dankeschön."

Charlotte entered the parlor with a pair of worn snow boots in hand.

"These are Erich's, they're big, but you can wear them over your shoes so your feet stay dry."

Greta put the boots on over her own worn shoes. They were a little big, but it was better to have shoes that were too big than to have wet feet. Herr Meier put the butter in the wagon, while Charlotte helped her into her coat and brown leather gloves. The gloves, like her socks, had dried nicely. Greta folded her hands, bending the gloves back and forth as she tried to remold the leather to her hands.

"Bleib Ubrig, Greta! Try to get home before dark."

Greta smiled as she nodded at Charlotte, but the familiar phrase haunted her. She felt the same uneasiness grow within. The sun hung low in the sky, and she knew she had spent too

long inside the house.

Herr Meier gestured for her to follow him down the porch steps toward the gravel path, which was now covered with a fresh blanket of white. It was much colder outside and the sight of the falling snow made Greta shiver as she envisioned the long road ahead. He walked ahead packing in the snow as he pulled the full wagon down the hill. Greta tried to step where his footprints had already been, but his gait was too wide. The squeak of her boots and the groan of the overloaded wagon echoed during the otherwise silent walk. As they approached the end of the path, Herr Meier handed her the wagon handle and opened the gate.

"Don't go too fast or the handle will split more and you'll lose at least a bushel of potatoes, but don't dawdle either. It's late already and dusk will come while you're still on the road. I don't want the night to catch you."

"What time is it, Herr Meier?"

"It's almost two. Since the solstice was day before yesterday, it'll get dark as early as three-thirty."

Greta couldn't believe it was so late. How had she spent so long in the farmhouse without realizing it? She hoped her parents weren't worrying already.

"Frolich Weihnachten, Greta. May your feet be swift and the road ahead kind."

Herr Meier laughed as he sent her on her way. Yet, Greta couldn't shake the feeling that despite his good humor, he, too, was uneasy about her late departure.

The sun was nearly set when Greta heard the river and saw the first clusters of birch trees. She had grown weary of the endless countryside and the bitter wind. The snow had flown at her from all directions for several kilometers and the wind had left her eyes so watery that she could scarcely see when she looked strait ahead. Now that she was almost out of the flat land she

might still make it home before dark. The extra weight of the potatoes made it much harder to pull the wagon, and the ground beneath the wheels was loose, which caused the wagon to sink into the snow. Her arms burned as she struggled with the extra weight. Remembering how Herr Meier pressed down with his feet before pulling the wagon over the loose snow, Greta began to use her large boot to pack in the trail ahead. This kept the wheels from sinking in. It took extra time, but she was glad to save some strength for the long journey ahead.

As she entered the woods the snow stopped falling and there was no wind at all. The eerie still made Greta worry. She knew that when there was no wind and snow, there was fog. The woods grew colder and darker with each step. As she walked, the wagon hit roots beneath the ice, causing the potatoes to shift from side to side. The snow-covered boughs of the spruce trees formed a canopy, making it impossible for Greta to even see the sky. The only sound came from an owl high up in one of the trees. Up ahead, Greta could see tracks, which had to be recent because the snow had just stopped falling. They must be from the deer that often came out in the evening, she thought. Something told her they were not deer tracks. A chill ran down her spine as she leaned in to get a closer look. They were large footprints and they looked as if they belonged to a man, several men in fact. She hadn't seen anyone since she left the farm and she prayed that she wouldn't until she reached her own doorstep.

Fog had begun to hover around the bases of the trees, and Greta could no longer see her feet. The wagon seemed far away, as if it were in a cloud, floating below her. She moved quickly, afraid for what would happen when she was engulfed in the mist. The front wheel caught a large root, sending a violent jolt that through the wagon. Greta pulled to keep the wagon upright, but the wood gave way and sent the handle flying. Several splinters cut through her gloves and straight into her hand. She fumbled around the ground, but she could not find the

broken handle. The fog had almost overtaken her and darkness had fallen. For the first time Greta truly felt helpless. Now she would have to pull the wagon another three kilometers without a handle. Greta took off her glove and examined her hand. Pieces of wood were embedded in her skin and in some places blood was trickling out. Greta tried to pick out the splinters one by one, but it was too dark to see, so she wrapped her kerchief around her wound and grabbed the side of the wagon with her free hand, pushing forward into the darkness.

The fog was so thick and the night so black that Greta could only see a meter ahead of her. Every now and then a branch would scrape across her back and up her neck causing her hair to stand on end. Greta listened for any change in the feel of the terrain below her feet. As long as she heard the familiar crunch of the ice and the squeak of the over-sized boots she knew she was all right. The groan of the wagon seemed to echo with the turn of the wheels. Greta wondered if she should remove some of the potatoes and lighten the load. She could come back for them at dawn, but then she remembered something her father had once told her. Sound always carries farther in the fog. The creak of the wagon just seemed louder because of the thick air that hung around her, trapping in every sound. Greta considered what to do. Her parents were planning on sharing the food with the other people in the flat and if she threw any potatoes out they might not have enough to share with the other families. She had to keep all the potatoes because she had been sent to get food for everyone and she had come too far to do otherwise.

The walk felt much longer in the dark. She worried that she had somehow gone off the trail, but she reminded herself that there were too many trees on either side of the road for that to be the case. Augsburg had to be close, maybe even less than a kilometer. Then she heard it. On any other night Greta might not have noticed the slight crackling sound, but tonight, in the

heavy, cold air, she heard it clearly. She froze, not sure where it was coming from. The fog was so thick that she could see nothing. For a second there was silence and Greta was sure that she had imagined the noise, but then she heard it again, only closer. It was coming from the woods. Her heart beat faster and faster and she felt her skin crawl. Greta remembered all the stories of her childhood, tales of witches and trolls. She stood, silent and not moving. At times the noise sounded as if it were on her left, and moments later she heard it on the right. Greta began to wonder if it was witchcraft, but then a horrifying realization came upon her. These weren't just echoes of one person or a lone wolf in the darkness; whatever was out there was on either side of her. Greta tried to clear her head and drown out the beating of her heart. If she stood there, waiting, she would be caught. She needed to keep going, but the sound of the wagon and the squeak of her boots would give her away. Even the slightest noise would travel through the fog.

Greta bent down and slid off the boots. Next, she unbuckled her shoes. They could stay on until the last moment, but she knew that neither the snow boots nor her ratty shoes were suitable for running. Greta looked at the wagon. No matter what she did, it was going to make noise, but she wasn't about to leave all that food for whatever was in the woods. She made up her mind to move quickly, disregarding any noise that the wagon might make. Even though she had decided to go, Greta could not bring herself to move; she was frozen. Then out of the darkness, came another noise, a whisper. The words floated out towards her, foreign and unidentifiable. Soon another voice spoke, this one was closer and even deeper than the first. Greta thought of all the English and the little French that she knew. This language was something different; the men were Russians.

Their eyes penetrated her through the blackness, seeping through her heavy coat and her

dress beneath that, all the way to her bare chest. Her skin grew warm from their gazes and she knew; they could see her. Until then she had assumed that they were thieves, only after her wagon, but now she was not so sure. For a moment there was no audible sound aside from the wagon and the sputter of her breath, but Greta was sure the men heard every thought in her head like a scream. The silence was broken by the sound of footsteps coming from behind. Greta hoped that she was within three hundred meters of the city. If I am, she thought, I will make it, maybe even with the wagon. Without pausing another moment, she tore off her shoes and began to run. The ice cut into the bottoms of her feet and her knees felt as if they would give at any moment. She heard some of the potatoes topple out of the wagon. Good, she thought, maybe they will take the potatoes and let me be, but the footsteps continued louder and closer. The men were running now. So Greta began to run at full gait, faster and faster, still pulling the wagon. Her foot smashed into a wall of ice. She fell forward and ice crushed into her cheek. Bringing her hand to the cut on her face she felt warm blood. Greta was in shock until she realized she had reached the hill at the edge of town. She searched around among the piles of potatoes as she struggled to find the wagon in the dark. As she reached out in the darkness she heard the breath of one of the men only centimeters from her. Looking up she could almost make out the outline of his face and the whites of his eyes. She felt him grab her wrist, twisting it. As he did so, he called out to the others. She could hear three maybe even four men approaching.

Greta struggled, digging her nails into the man's icy wrists and thrashing about until his grip loosened. Taking the moment to pull away, she made her way up the hill half crawling and half running. The others were now gaining on her. She could feel the warmth of the first man's breath on her neck. The thought of his mouth being so near her shot adrenaline through her

tired, battered body. Pushing herself up with every ounce of energy, she ran up the hill through the gates of the city and all the way down the main street of town. She wanted to fly, high above Augsburg, above Germany, away from all the problems and the terrible war that held her down. Greta didn't look back and she didn't stop running when she turned on her street. The men had stopped at the city gates, but she just kept going until she saw her flat up ahead. Her whole body ached inside and out, and all she could do was sink to the ground. She was certain that, like the pain in her knees, the throbbing in her heart would never go away. It wasn't fair that she had gotten to eat and those that she loved would have nothing. She had wasted time in the false comfort of the Meier's home only to come home with nothing. Greta reached into her pocket and pulled out a red bundle of cloth, which was the same color as Charlotte Meier's dress. In it were four slices of pumpernickel bread that had been smashed to pieces. Then Greta reached farther in the cloth and found two of the most perfect oranges she had ever seen.

In the distance, Greta heard her father's slow, deliberate steps and the sound of his cane on the ice. She tried to call out to him but a lump had risen in her throat, and tears were now gathering in the corners of her eyes. Greta picked up the oranges in her bloody hands and held them up to her father, who now stood in the shadows looking down at her.

"These are all that are left. All the potatoes are gone, all of them, even the wagon. They chased me and I ran, like a coward. I tried my best, but I still failed."

Her father stood, unmoving, but Greta could feel his eyes, he could see inside her. She felt that he knew all her secrets, how she had wanted Christmas oranges more than anything and how she hadn't wanted to ever leave the warmth of the Meier's farm. The words began to flow out until she had told him all that had happened; the broken handle, the fog, and the voices in the dark. She wanted to tell him how she had fought to get away, but she could no longer hold back

her sobs. Tears streamed down, burning the cuts on her cheeks.

"Get up Greta. I'm not about to tell your mother I left you sitting on the ice cold ground."

His voice was forceful, but restrained. She knew he was angry at her for losing all the potatoes, for not being practical. Greta tried to get up, but her legs felt weak and her body ached. Her father set his cane aside and bent down as much as his age would allow to wipe her tears with the corner of his sleeve. Reaching around her with both his arms, he lifted her up. Greta clutched him as he pressed her against the warmth of his chest. She burrowed into his jacket, which smelled of mint- tobacco. Greta wasn't sure he had ever held her so tight.

"You did a very brave thing tonight going so far on your own. Let's go inside and clean you up before your mother sees you."

Greta stared up at him in disbelief. She had expected a scolding; at least a stern reprimand about his disappointment. After all it was all her fault; she had lost everything, everything of substance. Instead, as she looked into his eyes she felt warmth and understanding. In the safety of his arms she was finally free to fly above the problems that held her down, away from the terrible deceptions, and the harsh realities that kept her from the real comfort of home.

The Waiter

When I arrived at Hesperidia's, Anna was alone at our table, drumming her fingers against the red-checkered table cloth. As I weaved through the sea of wine-drunk conversations, I could see a stream of candlelight filtering through Anna's glass of Chianti, casting a rosy shadow across her collarbones.

Anna cocked her head to the side, shooting me her trademark smile. Her perfect teeth were stained a deep maroon. As she sipped her wine, a stray hair fell in her face. She shoved it behind her ear, revealing delicate shell earrings.

"Did you make those?" I settled into my normal seat against the wall.

"Yeah." She leaned across the table and brushed my hair to the side.

"You really should let me cut your hair, Mere, or at least let me put some color in it."

She was always suggesting ways for me to look better, or at least more like her. Anna had one of those great choppy asymmetrical cuts that she did herself. She made a lot of her clothes, and all of her jewelry. It always looked like she was wearing expensive things. When Anna couldn't make something she wanted, she found someone to buy it for her. That was her trick.

"John's working." Anna was attempting a tone of faux indifference.

"Yeah, I know. I saw his truck in the parking lot." I always noticed John's blue pick-up. Even if it meant driving a couple blocks out of my way, I made a point to see if he was working. Anna would never admit to it, but last week, I had seen her glance in

the rearview mirror as we passed the restaurant. When she saw me watching, she pretended to fix her hair.

As I scanned the room for John, I noticed that we were surrounded by mismatched couples, older men with younger women who were dripping in jewelry. At the table next to us, a man with ashy gray hair drew a long sip of wine, as his date waved her pale arms, gesturing in broad sweeping movements. Even in the dim glow of the candlelight her make-up looked caked on. Their table was covered with empty bottles of wine.

I gestured toward them. “Look how much wine they drank.”

“Who?” Anna swung around. “Oh, that’s Linda Hollis and her husband, I don’t remember his name. They’re the owners.”

I nodded. The families and gaggles of women were absent tonight, and the Chianti bottle centerpieces had been replaced with small crystal vases holding red roses and baby’s breath.

“How did you get a table? The wait must have been insane on Valentine’s. They don’t take reservations, do they?”

“I have connections.” She flashed a shit-eating grin at me. The deep purple stains between her teeth settled the wave of resentment that had flared up in me. At least she didn’t look perfect tonight.

“John’s waiting on us.”

“Oh?” I tried to sound surprised.

Anna picked up her menu and pretended to scan it. I did the same with mine, even though we both knew I always ordered eggplant parmesan. Peering from behind my

menu, I watched Anna's eyes search for John. The kitchen door swung open and John emerged, flashing Anna a sheepish grin.

"How are my two favorite ladies?" He looked at me. "I haven't seen you in a while. I was beginning to think you might have quit eating, or even worse, quit drinking. But Anna said you were just busy with school. How about some more wine?"

Anna interjected before I could speak, "Yeah, John, the usual." She polished off the last of her glass, I nodded in agreement.

"I see you like the sample I brought."

"I like anything free." Anna opened her eyes wide and looked up at John. A few pieces of hair fell across her face.

"John, we have an emergency." A cackling voice rose up over the crowd, shattering their moment. Linda Hollis was waving her empty wine glass.

"You'll have to excuse me ladies, that's my boss. Mrs. Hollis loves her Pinot."

"Please, Mere, if I'm ever that drunk, make me leave. I know we've been bad off here, but we're never that loud, are we? I mean we don't make a scene, right? That's pathetic."

"At least she's with someone on Valentine's."

We turned and looked at Mr. Hollis. He was a large, red faced man with narrow set eyes. As Mrs. Hollis' voice grew louder, the fervor with which he dabbed his brow increased.

I laughed and Anna snickered and returned to her menu.

It hadn't been our initial intention to drink all the time at the restaurant. It was depressing drinking wine out of plastic cups with microwave dinners. So we ventured

out to Hesperedia's. We got to drink out of real stem glasses and pretend we were in another country, somewhere exotic on the Mediterranean. It reminded me of a little café I had been to in Naples; the same cluttered walls and flickering candlelight. The atmosphere was the initial draw, until John entered the picture.

I watched as John poured wine into Mrs. Hollis's glass. Her hand was wrapped tight, squeezing the stem. John was telling a story about going fishing in Alaska. It was the same one he had told us our first time in the restaurant. I'd smiled and giggled. Anna didn't even force a laugh, she had just sighed and ordered an appetizer. This was where my flirtation with John began. Anna had teased me relentlessly about him. "He's just a waiter" she would say, or, "It's so typical of you to like a guy like John." I always dated hard luck cases, usually guys my age, struggling musicians and the like- the kind that could pull your heart into your guts.

Anna had any number of men at her disposal, mostly guys in their thirties with money. She gave just enough to keep them around. Since I met Anna, in freshman History, there had never been anyone long term for either of us. The last few months, since we had been coming into the restaurant, were the most stable ones I had experienced; at least I had thought they were. John had become some amalgam of our two ideals and our pitfalls, the every man, with the every man's name. He was a talented artist well into his thirties who still peddled lasagna for a living.

Mrs. Hollis bellowed with laughter and slapped John on the back.

"Her flirting is sad." Anna's face was full of contempt. "I mean she could be John's mother."

“No, there’s no way. She’s not even fifty and John is thirty-five. She’s probably closer to his age than we are.”

“Well, her make-up is awful.” Anna sneered.

Mrs. Hollis clutched John’s hand and held it to her chest. Mr. Hollis coughed and put his napkin on the table.

“He’s ignoring us.” Anna clanged her spoon against her empty glass. It echoed for a moment, but the sound was lost beneath the shrill texture of the woman’s voice.

“Oh, John, you’re so funny. Isn’t he just a doll, Mike? Isn’t he just great? He’s house manager tonight and on the floor. I love this guy.”

John turned to face us. Anna scowled at him.

“I’m sorry Anna; Mrs. Hollis loves to talk, especially after a bottle or so.” He leaned in closer to the table and lowered his voice. “She’s a lush and a “tush” grabber.” He made a grabbing gesture. “I’ll get away and grab your bottle.”

“Thanks, and some bread please?” Her voice was too high, almost desperate.

John appeared back at our table with a glass and a basket of warm rolls and butter.

“After work I’m gonna buy some shitty beer and sit with my dog, in my truck. I should quit working here and write country music. I’ve got all the material I need.”

I laughed.

John looked right through me and waited for Anna’s approval.

“You sound like such a hick.” Anna didn’t hide her disappointment. She liked to portray herself as a sophisticated world traveler. It took me a couple of semesters to realize that she didn’t spend summers abroad like me or our other friends, or eat expensive dinners in the city, unless of course a man took her. In fact, Hesperidia’s

hodge-podge European aesthetic was as close as Anna got to world travel. Most of Anna's past was a mystery, too. She was from some shrimping town along the gulf. Her dad had left. Now she was on a scholarship. That was all I knew and that was more than most people.

"Right, well, I'll get the wine. I'll be back."

I watched Anna's eyes follow him as he hurried off to the bar. She turned toward me and sighed.

"Mere, I thought we had a deal. You said you didn't like him." I clenched my teeth. How was she going to turn this around on me?

"What?"

"You were flirting with him. You laughed at his dumb joke, just like you always do."

"I laugh at everyone's jokes."

"You said you didn't like him. It's okay if you do, just tell me." She reached her arm across the table and she was about to put her hand on mine, but I pulled it away.

"I don't." The words came out louder than I expected. I looked around to see if anyone had heard me, but no one noticed me.

"You know he hears everything we're saying, Mere. All of it."

"No, he doesn't. He would be acting weird. We would be able to tell."

She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, twisting it.

"I hope you're right," she said. "If not, this is such an ego boost for him, having him thinking that the two of us are pawing over him when neither of us even likes him."

John came back from the bar with a bottle of wine that I had never seen before.
Anna and I exchanged puzzled looks.

“That’s not what we ordered.”

“Compliments of the house: I wanted to get you a bottle of good wine, not the other crap you order.”

“He’s trying to get us drunk again, Mere.” Anna studied the label.

“Well this week you’re going to get started in style. Then you can dwindle down to that cheap, sweet stuff that causes headaches. You’ve been coming in here for what, six months? I think the two of you and your outrageous tips are what allowed me to upgrade from Ramen noodles to EZ-Mac. Do you know what you want yet, Anna? It’s only been half an hour since you got here. You couldn’t possibly have decided yet.”

Anna shot him one of her trademark glares. “You know, John, it’s probably not the best idea to antagonize your customers.”

“I just brought you free wine!” He threw his arms up in the air and pretended to be shocked. “Women, you all want everything.”

“And not one penny less.” Mrs. Hollis interjected and raised her glass to us.
“When a good looking man buys you a drink, you always take it. One day there might not be anyone to buy.”

I smiled and Anna rolled her eyes.

“Besides, you guys aren’t just customers anymore. You’re regulars, so I get to act like an asshole and you still come back. That’s how it works with women, right Mr. Hollis?”

Mr. Hollis grunted. Mrs. Hollis shoved him and clucked.

“Yep, if we treat you bad, you make us breakfast in the morning. Then, if we treat you nice, you cheat or leave!”

“I don’t think that’s fair. Not all women are like that.” I waited for Anna to agree with me, but she said nothing. “Well, I know what I want. I’ll have the eggplant parmesan.”

“Of course, Meredith, I’m so surprised.”

Anna looked at me and then at John.

“Why do you do that? You rag on me for taking too long and then you make fun of her for ordering the same thing over and over. What would you have us do, speed order something different each time we come in?”

“I’m just used to how you both operate now.”

“Oh, really?” Anna twisted around to face him.

“Yeah, like this is case in point. You feel like you have to get all riled up about everything because you’re the Alpha female. That’s the role you play. Notice how she didn’t care that I made fun of her eggplant ritual? Did you care?”

I shook my head no, but I wished I hadn’t when Anna mouthed “traitor.”

“Veal Parm.” Anna shoved the menu towards him and poured herself another glass of wine. John and I exchanged looks of faux puzzlement at her sudden shift in mood.

“I’ll put that in. We all know how fast the kitchen moves, and they’re even slower on holidays.”

John took our menus and began to walk away, but then he stopped and spun around.

“You ladies couldn’t find somewhere better to be on Valentine’s? I have a hard time believing that.”

“We’re lesbians.” Anna put her arm around me and choked me a little.

“No, no, I can spot them a mile away. At least usually, but I did have this one ex-girlfriend back in Oregon. I’m hoping I get a call one day and she tells me she’s marrying her lesbian lover. I swear it would make me feel a thousand times better about our whole relationship. Was that an over-share?”

Anna narrowed her eyes like a cat. “Do you ponder the sexual orientation of your exes with all your customers?”

“I told you, you aren’t customers anymore. You’re regulars.”

I pretended to laugh and jerked loose from Anna’s grip.

John winked at her and walked to the kitchen.

“He likes you, Anna.”

“He talks to you more.”

“No, I just talk more and I laugh at his jokes. He asked why we were here on Valentine’s because he wanted to know why you were here. Did you not see that he winked at you?”

“John doesn’t like me.” Her eyes were far away, gazing off behind me. “I just mess with him, that’s all. We poke at each other. I don’t like him.” The last few words were almost lost in her wine glass.

“Well, regardless if you like him or not, he likes you. He likes the challenge.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Nope, I’m too easy. I’m eggplant parmesan.”

“What?”

“Anna, you know what I’m talking about. I’m vanilla, the consolation prize.”

“That’s ridiculous, guys like you all the time. You’re gorgeous.”

“Thanks, but it has nothing to do with that.”

“What does it have to do with then? What do I supposedly have that you don’t?”

“You’re a bitch.” I took a sip of my wine. “Men like that because it’s mysterious. Like, if there was a game show and you put any guy on it, anyone for that matter, man or woman, and you offer them each two choices, either what’s behind the magic door or a boat-”

“A boat? Why a boat?”

“It doesn’t matter, it could be a golf club set. The point is that some people will always pick what’s right there and others will always pick what’s behind the door.”

“Well, what is behind the door?”

“It’s a secret. It could be everything or it could be nothing.”

“So you’re saying that you’re a boat.”

“I guess I am.”

“And that makes me-”

“The magic door.”

Anna sipped her wine and tilted her head toward me. I could tell she was amused by our conversation based on how long it had lasted, but she was trying to pretend otherwise.

“Well, what would you pick, Mere, the boat-”

“What boat? Do you have a boat?” John’s voice startled us both. “Where do you take a boat out around here anyway?”

“It’s a hypothetical. If you were on a game show and they offered you a boat or whatever was behind some door, what would you choose?”

John raised his eyebrow at me. “Are you asking me a trick question? Is there money behind the door, a blender?”

“You don’t ever know. It could be anything.” Anna sounded excited, almost playful.

“Or nothing,” I added.

“Well, I guess I’d take what’s there. I’d take the boat, and then sell it and buy art supplies with the money. Is this like a reality show you saw?” John picked up the half full wine bottle and examined it. “You don’t like it, do you? Normally you would have downed this entire bottle by now. How about some of your normal rot-gut? You know, the real good stuff?”

“No, we like it, really.” I preferred white wine anyway, but Anna always ordered red. “It’s good.”

I looked at the wine list. The bottle cost thirty-five dollars. “John, you didn’t have to do that. This is too much.”

“You tip too much every time. Drink up-”

John started to walk away, but Anna grabbed him. Her long slender fingers with their well-manicured nails coiled around his wrists. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“No, you’re right. I didn’t have to, but I wanted to.” John walked back toward the kitchen.

I glanced at the bottle and then at Anna.

“Well, Mere, maybe all your flirting finally got you somewhere.”

I imagined pouring my wine on her, but there wasn't enough satisfaction in that. Anna had no concept of what it was like to be humiliated, un-admired, or betrayed. In high-school there were lots of girls like her, girls like my best friend Shelly. Shelly skipped the braces and nobody remembered that she wore glasses in fifth grade. My awkward stage, on the other hand, was well documented in every yearbook from second to tenth grade. My fate was sealed, it didn't matter how pretty I was. In the high school caste system I was an un-dateable, also known as “one of the guys.” Whenever I got a date to any dance it was someone Shelly coaxed into going with me. The boys I actually liked, like Brandon Walter, were hers, or for other girls like her. At graduation, I was voted best personality, which Shelly pointed out to me was usually a position reserved for fat girls. I had come to college to start over, and it had worked for a little while, at least I think it did. Somehow I had become the third wheel again, or even worse, an accessory Anna matched with her outfits. Tonight ‘loyal doormat’ must have gone with her red cashmere sweater.

Anna looked over her shoulder at John, who was talking to Mrs. Hollis.

She turned back to face me and leaned forward, whispering.

“She's jealous.”

“What? Who?”

“Mrs. Hollis.”

“Why would she be jealous? We drop way too much money here for her to care about us.”

“I don’t know, Mere, maybe she has a crush on your boyfriend.”

I hated Anna, she was awful. I poured her glass to the brim and then put a little in mine.

“What is this, my fourth glass of wine?”

I ripped apart a lukewarm roll.

She took a swig. Her cheeks were flushed.

Mrs. Hollis was still talking to John, gesturing and throwing her head back.

When she laughed, her peacock feather earrings danced on her bare shoulders. Every now and then, she traced her fingers back and forth over his hand. Anna gulped her wine and slapped the glass against the table. It cracked, causing the bottom to shatter into several pieces.

“Fuck.” She shook her napkin sending glass splinters showering over floor.

Anna waived the twisted stem with one hand and cupped her face in the other.

The fractured glass refracted light from the candle and sent prisms dancing across the left side of her face. She pushed her hand through her hair. Her cheeks were even redder now.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on.” She got up, and stumbled toward the kitchen. John put his hand on Mrs. Hollis’s shoulder and followed Anna to the bar.

“Where are you going, John? We were talking.” Mrs. Hollis called out after him.

Mr. Hollis shoved himself up. His broad figure blocked Anna and John from our view.

“Mikey, sit down, please. It’s Valentine’s. Please sit, please. Let’s get dessert.”

Mrs. Hollis was holding Mr. Hollis's wrists. Her body was stretched over the table, her chest dragging in her leftover cannelloni.

"You're drunk, Linda. I'm ready to go."

"You hear that? He wants us to go without even having any tira-me-sue." Then in a lower voice she whispered to me. "It's an aphrodisiac." The syllables dragged out as she fumbled for her purse. Mr. Hollis picked it up and showed it to her.

"Linda, come on."

"I'm having a nice talk with- what's your name?"

"Meredith."

"With Meredith."

Mr. Hollis sighed.

"Meredith, why are you all alone on Valentine's day?"

I felt the blood rushing from my head. The cheesy Italian music that had been playing got louder. I wanted to escape, but I couldn't get up, my feet were too heavy.

Mr. Hollis pulled Mrs. Hollis from her seat.

"Nooooo." Her voice was pitiful. "I just wanted us to have a good time on Valentine's."

"Well we have, so come on, and get up. You're covered in sauce. This foolishness has to stop, come on."

"I just want dessert, please."

"Fine." Mr. Hollis sat back down.

Anna and John came back into my view. Her hand was on his hip. My stomach tightened as I watched his hand slide up the small of her back. I glanced over at Mrs.

Hollis, who was watching them as well. John noticed us and slipped into the kitchen.

Anna shuffled back to the table, with a deliberate, exaggerated swagger.

“I’m becoming a light-weight like you. The food should be out any minute.”

I drank the last of my wine and stared at her.

“That’s what we were talking about, when the food would be out.”

John came to the table with our usual house Chianti and began to pour me a glass.

“Let’s see what you think of this now, Mere, now that you’ve had the good stuff.”

Anna laughed and I didn’t even bother to smile. I ran my tongue over my teeth, searching for feeling. My mouth was numb and I couldn’t taste a thing.

“I’ll be right back with the food.”

I grasped John’s arm. “You keep rushing off tonight.”

He moved to shrug me off.

“I have a lot on my plate.” He gestured at the empty tray under his arm and smiled.

I didn’t laugh this time.

“It’s not busy now.” Mrs. Hollis was watching me.

I loosened my grip and ran my hand down his arm.

“Tell Mrs. Hollis that I’m not the one she has to worry about. I’m just a boat.”

I pushed my chair out and squeezed past them. The hall to the ladies room was dark, so I ran my fingers along the walls for support, allowing the textures of the bottles to glide across my palm. The room was growing a little dimmer and the last sounds of music and conversation blended into one steady noise. The wine taste was overwhelming.

The fluorescent lights in the bathroom beat down on my face. My eyeliner was smeared and my face was red. I hadn't wanted to drink so much. If only I could sober up. I splashed some water on my face and smoothed my skirt. Taking a deep breath I walked back into the dim light of the restaurant. I paused, allowing my eyes to adjust to the faint flickers of the candlelight. The music had died down. I looked at our table, John was sitting next to Anna, his palms were pressed on her knees and they were speaking in a hushed, intimate way. The food sat on the ledge by the kitchen waiting and untouched. My heart began to race as anger swept over me.

"How long were you going to lie and not tell me? Why did you want me around?"

"Meredith, lower your voice." Anna's tone was sharp, but I heard a slight quiver in it.

"How long has this been going on? I just wanted to know how dumb I should feel."

John stood up and stepped towards me. "Look Mere, Anna didn't want you to feel weird. We think you're great. I think you're great. You're just too young."

"I'm too young?"

Anna shook her head at me, her eyes were wide, and her face had tightened. I could feel a set of eyes drilling into the back of my head. It was Mrs. Hollis. She was staring at the three of us. I knew I should stop, but I couldn't.

"How old did Anna say she was? What did she tell you? Did you even ask? I'm older than she is. She's only nineteen." Mrs. Hollis moved forward, next to me. "John is dating her, and she's only nineteen."

John turned back to Anna whose cheeks had flushed red.

“Nineteen?” Mrs. Hollis folded her arms. “John that’s ridiculous. You’ve been serving her wine?”

“I didn’t know she was that young.”

Part of me wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. My fingers had already twisted around the thread holding Anna’s lie together and I was ready to pull it all apart.

“I bet there’s a lot she didn’t tell you. It’s all a big lie. I just can’t figure out why she’s with you. Normally she only fucks people who will buy her things. Maybe you’re suited for each other. That’s why you flirt with Mrs. Hollis, right John?”

“Shut up.” John’s voice frightened me.

Anna shoved her chair against the table, knocking my glass on its side, spilling red wine on her, and the floor. She looked at John and then at me. Her eyes burned into mine. They had begun to tear up. Anna didn’t say anything at all, neither did John. She grabbed her purse and ran past us, brushing against Mr. Hollis. Anna didn’t even look back before disappearing out the door.

Mrs. Hollis reached for John’s hand. He pulled it back, and she sank down to the ground.

Mr. Hollis stood up.

“Let’s go. Enough is enough.”

“Why? You flirt with women all the time. I’m not stupid.” She slumped against the wall under the exit sign. “It’s too cold out there.”

“Linda.” Mr. Hollis was standing over her. “You’re done. If you don’t leave with me, you’ll have to get a cab.”

“You loved me when I was young and pretty. Beauty and youth are all that count to you men.”

Mr. Hollis stepped in front of John and scooped Mrs. Hollis up to his chest. He exchanged a long, intense look with John. Then he tilted Mrs. Hollis’s chin up so she would look at him. She sniffled. Her blue mascara was rolling down to her chin.

“I still love you, Linda.”

“And, I really love you.” Mrs. Hollis had begun to sob as she staggered toward the door. She clung to Mr. Hollis, who walked with slow, deliberate steps. He was stroking her hair. Several busboys and some of the kitchen staff had come out and were staring. Mr. Hollis waved his hand at them.

“Get this place in working order for tomorrow. Stop staring.” I looked up, rather surprised at Mr. Hollis. He draped his coat over Linda’s shoulders as they slipped into the night.

John got close to me, his eyes were wild.

He looked repulsed, but I didn’t care. At least we were alone and he could see me. I didn’t have to be a reflection anymore.

“John, this isn’t fair. You both lied to me. I was being honest.”

“Don’t play innocent. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“Anna lied to you. I was telling the truth.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Meredith. Don’t give me your justification for spite and call it the truth. Telling the truth is this beautiful concept, but not when it’s done for the sake of competition or jealousy, or whatever the hell all this was.”

“You think this was all a competition?”

“I think it was a way for you to feel better about the fact that you come in here every Saturday night with Anna. What are you hiding from, Meredith? Why are you always following Anna around?”

I froze because I had no answer. Sure, I’d been hurt as much as the next person, but hiding away in this restaurant every weekend wasn’t making things any better. Everything had unraveled now and the room felt like it was shrinking, collapsing in.

John took his apron off and started toward the door. He waved his hand, dismissing me. I followed, extending a few twenties in his direction. He took it and threw it on the ground.

“Don’t you understand - I’m not for sale.” He paused and dropped his apron next to the door and walked back toward the kitchen.

I didn’t follow him. Taking a swig of wine from the bottle, I allowed the familiar feeling of warmth to rise up and swallow the awfulness that had crept inside. I sat for a moment in Anna’s chair. From there, I could see dozens of colors refracting off the stained glass door, which was illuminated and back lit by the streetlight. I imagined Anna, alone in the amber glow beyond the door, concealed by the colored glass, and I was sure that whatever was out there in the open, was better than hiding in here.

Artificial Light

“You have been to Greece?”

His voice startled her out of her daydream. The man had slid down next to her and was looking at the picture in her hands. Muriel was frozen, without an answer.

“Is that your husband?”

She looked down at the picture in hand. A handsome man in his early thirties was standing in front of a large ornate white column. In the next picture the man was seated, but this time his blonde hair was framed by a terrace of beautiful red flowers.

“Let me guess, the national botanical gardens in Athens, no? I am from Olympus- in the north. Did you visit the north? There is beautiful country in the north, beautiful country in the south, too.”

“The south, we only visited the south.”

“Oh, very nice there too. I will visit home in five months. I have not been back for many years.” The man studied the picture like a reflection. “When did you and your husband go, in the spring?”

“Yes, last spring, with my- husband.”

Muriel hated the words as they slipped from her lips. She felt an awful weight bearing down on her ring finger where her mother’s wedding band rested. Ever since her mother died two years before, Muriel had worn it.

“To Greece.” He said, raising his glass to her. Muriel smiled and did the same.

“To Greece.”

“I’ll buy you another. How about a gin and tonic, is that your drink too?”

“Yes, a gin and tonic.” Muriel didn’t have a “drink,” except maybe a glass of wine with her father every now and again, but after the stroke that stopped all together. Now, every night blurred into one tireless stream, the runny scrambled eggs and squash soup, sponge baths, the incessant flicker of the television, which kept time with the beep of the respirator.

“Two gin and tonics and another toast, to your marriage.”

The man smiled at her. His arm was extended out, his glass raised. His dark eyes were drilling into hers. She was certain that he could read her every thought. She avoided his gaze by focusing on the flecks of white in his black hair.

He raised his glass higher. “To your half.”

Muriel cleared her throat.

“My half?”

“Yes, your half. You know your love. We are all a half until we find our half. Then we are whole, like the world. You are lucky.”

“Muriel.”

“Muriella.”

Muriel loved the way it sounded on his tongue.

“I am Ilius.”

“Ill-e-us.” She repeated him.

“Yes, yes very nice, you do well. Your husband is a lucky man to have a nice woman. But, why are you all alone at the bar, so late in the night?”

“He works often.”

Muriel hoped this would suffice. She took a long swig from her glass. The gin burned her throat and made her eyes tear a little.

“Ah. That is what my half said. I worked too much. Now I am alone. It is what it is though, no?”

Ilius gazed ahead at the clock. Muriel wondered how old he was. His face was smooth and almost free of wrinkles, but his eyes reflected a loneliness that came with age.

“Two o’clock, Muriella, when I was young like you so was the night, but now I am old and it is time to go.”

He took a few bills from his wallet and left them on the counter, before removing a cigar from his front pocket. He threw the last of the drink down his throat and smiled.

“Kalinichta.”

Muriel looked into the mirror and watched him leave. She turned as the bell sounded signaling his retreat into the night. His silhouette stood out against the streetlight and the orange glow of the cigar burned like an eye into her, until at last he disappeared around the corner.

Taking one last sip of her drink, she looked around the empty bar. Then she put the photographs in their envelope and back into the sequined purse, which she set behind the bar counter. *Somebody might be looking for this. They will come back for it.* She picked up her own cream handbag from the ground. As she did so, she paused to follow the vein that trickled all the way down her ring finger. Muriel removed the ring and put it in her purse. She was tired of pretending it was hers and not just a consolation for the years wasted, trapped beneath the inherited contents of her life: the cluttered house that

smelled like musk, the plastic covered couches and needy cats. *It is what it is*, she thought. Her footsteps echoed as she walked into the stillness of the night toward her car, which appeared anchored, alone, and half-illuminated in the artificial light.

The Patient

The Christmas tree looms among shadows of garbage bags filled with scraps of red and green. A few presents remain perfect, and unopened. Behind Becca the dim orange of the streetlight gleams weakly through the tiny kitchen window and highlights the grease stains on the dirty casserole dishes in the sink.

“What are you doing up, Mom?”

Becca’s question rises over the running water; she is standing by the sink. She picks up the dishes and rubs them in a methodical way. My eyes are still adjusting to the fluorescent light that flickers above the stove. She doesn’t turn to face me. I take a mental picture of her slender back, which is draped in a white robe.

“I’m just getting some warm milk, seeing if Santa has come.”

She laughs a little and moves some dishes around in the sink in the same useless way she pushes food across her plate.

“I thought Santa didn’t come anymore.”

“Oh, well, you know, Katy will be upset if we don’t open anything here tomorrow. She’s still young, even if she wants us to think she’s big stuff.”

I squeeze past her on my way to the refrigerator. She turns to face me. A look of disgust flashes over her eyes, which are even bluer than her father’s. The refrigerator door is spackled with letters from the dean commending Becca’s accomplishments, MCAT scores, and newspaper clippings announcing her Goldwater scholarship. Her father has littered the house with other markers of her success: track and field medals and

soccer trophies. I have hung Katy's artwork because I know what it is like to be ignored by him.

When I open the fridge door, I pretend not to see the unwrapped, ravaged pie, or the half empty tray of potatoes, which are pushed to the back of the shelf.

"I thought I'd do the dishes, since you didn't." She is scraping a fork like a scalpel against one of my frying pans, scratching at the surface.

"Well, thank you, Rebecca, but you don't have to do anymore. I'm letting the pans soak." I pour the milk into my big blue mug and force a toothy smile in her direction.

Becca stops and runs her long fingers over the pristine china that is drying on the rack. She has the hands of a surgeon. It is hard for me to imagine that she even feels the textured pattern beneath her fingertips. Everything about her is measured and precise. She eyes the plates, like specimens in a lab. I wonder if she is imagining the food I ate, or maybe everything she didn't. There was pecan pie, German potatoes, broccoli with hazelnuts, and corn casserole.

She is staring at me now, studying the pull of the red-and-green checkered nightgown over my broad hips, examining the curve of my belly.

"Would you like some milk?"

"You know I don't drink milk, Mom. Not since I was five."

"I have some of that low fat soy stuff you like."

"No, no thanks. I don't eat after ten." She glances at the clock on the oven. It is half past twelve. She rinses her hands and shakes them before sliding them down the sides of her pajama pants. Her legs are thin, her arms thinner.

“You shouldn’t either, Mom.”

I put the milk in the microwave and listen to the hum. She is fiddling with the sleeve of her robe.

“Do you want to talk about something, Becca?”

“No, I have to go to the bathroom.”

She cuts past me; her tiny body shudders as it grazes mine. The bathroom door shuts and I hear the faucet go on. The roar of the water bangs around in my head. I pull open the drawer beneath the microwave. It is lined with chocolate candies and cookies, all the things she didn’t want in her stocking. I open one mint chocolate bell and inhale the aroma. It melts on my tongue. I suck in the flavor, all of it. The timer beeps.

I imagine what Becca does before she goes to the bathroom, when no one is around. Then I picture her standing in the white light, cool air moving over her face. It is all there, in plastic tubs and re-used whipped cream containers. I have left just half of the pie right in the center, wrapped it in holiday Saran wrap. She counts, there are 518 calories per 1/8 slice. Next, she peels back the wrap and pulls off a sugared pecan, then a piece of crust, 40 calories. Her fingers reach in further, dragging through the syrupy filling. Now her hands are in the pie; it is so terribly sweet. The glaze rises above her wrists and coats her teeth. Her tongue has stopped tasting. She is no longer breathing between bites. The potatoes are just behind the milk. She takes the slick, film coated serving spoon from the sink and extracts the potatoes out of the dish, into her palms. Then she slices a piece of crust through the potatoes, dragging it over the shards of crisp bacon that stab out from the piles of fluffy white. The salty taste mixes with the sweet pecan flavor. She’s inhaling everything now, everything that’s bad; everything she

couldn't eat all day. Then she hears it; the slow, deliberate sound of my slippers shuffling on the linoleum. It echoes through the house. I know there is nothing that makes Becca cringe like the sound of my weight. Her heart beats fast as she looks for somewhere, anywhere to hide. My footsteps are closer now.

I heard the frantic slam of the refrigerator door and the sound of water pouring from the faucet. She was wiping the sticky film from her cheek when I found her huddled over the sink in her white robe, which I realize now, was draped like a hospital gown.

I sit, among piles of foil wrappers, eating a piece of raspberry liqueur filled chocolate and sipping my milk. Then I flip on the TV and wait; she will have to come out soon. There is an infomercial on, something with Suzanne Somers. I wonder what Becca eats when she is away at college, if she eats her cereal out of measuring cups or weighs her grapes. We need to talk. I am sorry I am not a mom like on TV; one that is skinny and perky, who never cries when she talks about love. I mute the TV and wait for the aching creak of the bathroom door.

"Are you eating chocolate?" She is standing erect, her eyes, narrowed, glaring at me. I want to mention the torn Saran wrap and the dent in the potatoes, but Becca's eyes are reddish as if she's been choked. She takes a large step backward into the bathroom and shakes her head. The wooden doorframe holds her like a picture. She is portrait still as she gazes off toward the Christmas tree. The blinking colored lights flickering shadows over her face. She folds her arms over her chest and looks up.

"Becca, baby, come sit with me."

She looks at the empty wrappers that encircle me and she crouches, allowing her body to swallow up her knees.

I push myself up from the couch and drop down next to her. She lets my arms engulf her. I shudder at her frailness. She feels like my mother did in the last days at the hospital, when I held her. I remember her smell, death mingled with Estee Lauder White Linen. She wore lipstick until the end. “You have no color” she would say, or “My how you’ve let yourself go.” I push Becca’s head to my nose and smell the thin wisps of blonde hair. There is no smell of death. She still smells like she did as a baby, powder and a hint of sweet sweat. I press her to my breasts.

“I’m empty.” She whispers; it is almost inaudible.

“What?”

“I’m always empty.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just hard to be this.”

“What? It’s hard to be what? You’re perfect just how you are.”

She jumps up and stares down at me. Her cheeks are flushed and stained with glistening streaks.

“That’s it. That’s exactly it! I’m not perfect. He thinks so. You think so. She thinks so.” She rushes toward the framed collage Katy made her. It’s full of newspaper clippings about Becca and some pictures of them together. She pulls it from the wall and stares into it like a mirror. I move toward her, expecting her to throw it to the ground, but she doesn’t. She just sinks to the floor again.

“She thinks I’m a hero.”

“You’re her big sister.”

“He thinks I’m perfect too. I can’t let him down. Everything I do is to make him and Katy happy.” She gestures down the dark hall, toward the master bedroom, where her father’s snore growls.

“He loves you no matter what, Becca.”

“No, that’s not true. You of all people know that his love is conditional.”

Her words sting, I can deal with Rick not loving me, but not with Becca knowing it.

“I don’t even like biology anymore. I’m a robot. All I can do is count calories. I’m empty.”

“That’s not true, sweetheart.”

“Hah.” She cups her palms around her calves and runs them up and down. “I didn’t even workout today. Do you know how many calories I ate? I had to fix it. I had to. There wasn’t an option - over 2,500 calories.”

“This was one day. You can exercise tomorrow. It’s not an absolute end-all, just eat less tomorrow.”

“What do you know? You’re fat anyway.” She sneers at me and stands up. I can hear her father’s condescending tone; I will have to be the patient again.

“You need to eat better, Mom, you really do. If not for yourself, do it for Katy.”

“Right, Becca, you’re right. I should eat better.”

“You should make a New Year’s resolution. You could cut back to 2,000 calories a day and exercise on my old treadmill. I have this Healthy Meals cookbook for Heart patients, your heart is in danger of a...”

As her diagnosis drones on in the background, I know the transformation is complete. We won't talk about anything but ingredients, portion sizes, blood pressure and all the science behind the heart-that it is a machine. I know I have failed her. She has spent a lifetime trying not to become me, to escape the layers of fat, the thin skin. I have taught her nothing about compassion, empathy, or loneliness, or what it feels like to be heartbroken. I have spent a lifetime trying, but she keeps it all hidden in secret drawers, and plastic Tupperware, with all her other unexplainable and unmentionable emotions.

Becca finishes her lecture and smiles at me. She has written a prescription for me, and I can tell she believes this will make it all better. My heart won't be in danger anymore. That's what scares me; love shouldn't be based on scale numbers and calorie intake.

"Goodnight, Mom, I'm glad we talked. Don't you feel better? You'll be so much happier when you're thin again."

We will not talk about Becca tonight. I wonder if we ever will. The TV infomercial is still muted, and I can see flashes of Suzanne Somers using a thigh-master. I imagine she is embraced by her husband as she sleeps, while her perfect body flashes on TV screens across America. Yet, each night, when her perfect children are asleep, in the light of the moon, she transforms. She goes to the fridge and fills her empty self with food, and love and she feels, but only at night. In the light of the refrigerator, her feelings are illuminated, and her features are not her own. She is someone else entirely. She is her mother and she hates herself.

The Wrecked

I was sitting at a bus depot outside of Delano, California, when I noticed her watching me. Her face was round and framed by a boyish bob, but her linen skirt clung to her shape. I caught myself staring as she bent down to pick up a floral print suitcase from the curb. The greyhound bus from Bakersfield roared off to Fresno, cutting between us. When the dust cleared she appeared a few feet from me, her dress hem sticking to her thighs. The suitcase was clutched over her breasts, as her black eyes studied my tattered coat and shaggy face.

“Excuse me, sir?”

I didn’t look up at her as I sketched the Zephyr blowing waves over the ocean.

“Do you know where the bus to San Francisco leaves from? I’m trying to catch it.”

A firm tone had emerged in her voice. It made her seem older, but when I looked up I could tell she was young, too young to be alone at a bus station talking to a guy who looked like me.

“Are you all alone? How old are you?”

“What’s it to you how old I am? How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

She laughed. “Right, me too, you look older than that. How old are you really?”

“Old enough.” I continued shading the soft edges around the swollen cheeks of the wind god.

“Aren’t you a little old to be doodling?”

She leaned over and looked at my sketch.

“I’m working.”

“Here?” She glanced around the depot. “Are you an artist?”

“I was a tattoo artist.”

“Don’t tattoo artists usually draw on skin?”

“I always sketch first, besides I don’t have equipment right now.”

“Why are there two pictures overlapping?”

“This is a cover-up.”

“A cover-up?”

I rolled up my sleeve and pointed at my father’s profile.

“You can’t erase a tattoo; you can only cover it by making it into something else.

See his eye, right there.”

She nodded.

“It’s gonna be the eye of the Zephyr.” I held up my drawing. “He’s the god of the west wind.”

She bent over, squinting at it. I felt her gaze drift from the paper to the scars on my arm and then up to the white line that crossed my lip.

“Where’d you get those scars, Vietnam?”

“Jesus, sweetheart, you need to relax with all the questions. Do you work for the government or something?”

“My dad did.”

“Is your dad Richard Nixon?”

She rolled her eyes the way teenagers do, to show me how stupid I was. Her gaze focused on my swollen knuckles and the deep red lines that ran over my hands. Then her eyes lowered to my large belt buckle, which read “Born to Ride,” before settling on the tobacco stained pavement where my duffel bag rested.

“Do you just sit here all day drawing tattoos in some book, or do you actually tattoo people?”

“There aren’t any shops in town.”

“So, how do you get money? Do you give people drawings and say, ‘Bring this to someone with a needle.’”

I shut my sketchbook.

“I really need to find out about the bus to San Francisco or my grandma will be worried about me.”

“I thought you were meeting your aunt.”

“I am. You don’t expect my grandma to come get me from a dirty bus station, do you?”

“No, I guess not. Go ask somebody at the ticket counter.”

I picked up my duffel and dropped my sketchbook in. Maybe, she would get the point and go interrogate someone else, maybe her aunt or grandma or whoever. My gut was hollering for food and I didn’t feel like sitting there and letting some kid judge me.

“Do you have a name?”

“People call me a lot of things. Around here it’s Trainwreck.”

“Is that because your life’s a mess?”

“Yeah, kid, yeah, something like that.”

“What does your mother call you?”

“She called me Jack, but I haven’t seen her in years.”

“I’m Pauline, after my dad. His name was Paul.”

I shuddered at the thought of being named after my father. Another slow rumble came from my stomach.

“Jack, would you draw me a tattoo? I mean, I wouldn’t get one or anything, but would you draw me one?”

“Not now.”

“Why, because you’re so busy?”

“No, because I don’t feel like it and I’m hungry.”

I steadied myself and picked up the various odds and ends that made up my life.

“I’ll pay you to. Do you even have money to eat? I’ll buy you lunch.”

I wanted to produce a couple grand out of my back pocket and wave it under her nose, but all I had was an almost empty pack of Marlboro cigarettes and about twelve cents in pennies.

She reached in her purse and pulled out a dark purple scarf and unwrapped it, revealing a pack of Camels. I laughed a little remembering all the times I had stolen my father’s cigarettes.

“You don’t need to be smoking, kid.”

I opened my own pack to light a cigarette. She did the same, only her pack had no cigarettes. Inside it was a thick wad of bills.

“Your mom give you some travel money?” I took a drag.

“How about lunch? Where can we eat?”

“There’s a diner inside.” I gestured over my shoulder.

The diner was a desert oasis filled with travelers and military flatheads, and as usual, the counter was a trough for the local pigs. I scanned the room for Diane, hoping to catch her eye before she saw me with Pauline. The familiar smell of hot grease floated past. I had worked on grill for a short stint, but Bill, the manager, didn’t like me trying to fuck Diane, so I was out of a job. In a one-restaurant town, that left me without work. We squeezed past the counter, causing the cops to break from the country-fried steaks they were chowing down. Bill cocked his head and eyed me as we sat in a booth along the wall. He nodded at one pig who tapped the monstrous gut that hung over his black leather gun belt. Pauline swung her feet on my side of the booth as she grabbed a grease soaked paper menu from behind the ketchup.

“I think I’ll have something fried.”

“Well, that’s good, because even the salads are fried.”

“When I was a little girl, I lived in San Antonio. My father and I would get cheeseburgers on Saturday afternoons at a place that looked like this, right off the base.”

“I’ve worked in dozens of joints like this. When I lived down south a couple of years back, there were a ton of these places. I didn’t plan on staying, but I got stuck there, story of my life.”

“Drugs?” She flipped the menu and glanced up.

“Drugs, women, accidents, you name it.”

“Women?” Her voice was filled with loathing. “Are you a romantic? I’d given you more credit than that.”

“Whoa - what does that mean?” I wondered how this kid got to be so cynical.

“There are still days when I forget a woman isn’t going to save me.”

“My sister was a romantic, always buying those romance novels and *Gone with the Wind* collector’s plates. She was in love with everyone on the television, but my mother wouldn’t let her go on a date, not until she turned seventeen. So what happens? She turns seventeen, goes on one date with this male nurse from the base. Then she gets married at eighteen and is pregnant by nineteen. The guy ends up being an alcoholic who treats her bad. All he ever did was buy her red roses and it was romance. I stay away from the stuff.”

“Red roses are not romance, kid. It’s more than that.”

Diane walked up to the table and looked at me, and then over at Pauline.

“I didn’t know you had a sister. Is she visitin’ from Utah?” The sarcasm didn’t get past Pauline, who was now examining Diane’s skeletal figure.

“You know she’s too young to be my sister.”

“Daughter?”

The line between Diane’s brows crossed.

“Diane, really.” I tried to check the exasperation in my voice, but the situation was wearing on me.

“I’m Pauline. Jack’s a friend of mine. Could I get a coffee with lots of cream, and a cheeseburger?”

Diane shot me a look.

“The usual, Jack?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Diane folded the menu under her arm and walked away.

“Is that your girlfriend?”

“You wouldn’t get it. You’re fourteen.”

“Fifteen.” Pauline folded her arms and ran her hands over her shoulders and made a shivering noise.

“Are you pouting?”

“No, I’m cold.”

I looked up at the vent just above us, and the stream of arctic air shooting down over her, causing the thin material of her blouse to ripple over her smooth skin.

“You should wear more clothes,” I said, sliding my jacket off onto the table, “put this on.”

Pauline wrapped the coat around her body. Then she reached forward and grabbed my wrists. She ran her fingers over the blend of scars and deep green ink that covered my forearm. With her other hand, she pushed my shirtsleeve up, revealing several more tattoos. She circled her fingers around the whirlpools of rippled skin that covered the large calla lily on my forearm. Diane set the coffee on the table with a thud and a snort before walking away. Pauline didn’t look up. She stayed, leaning over the table, swallowed in my large coat, gripping my arms.

“You have so many tattoos and scars. Did somebody set you on fire?”

“No.”

Her fingers ran over the places where my skin was withered, across lotus blossoms, scores of seductresses and the haloed frame of the sun god on his chariot.

“What are they from, then?”

“The tattoos or the scars?”

“Both.”

“Lots of things.”

She pulled my arm closer to her nose and traced his eye, which was caught within a tempest of other images. I wondered if she noticed the way his eye followed her every move or how much his profile looked like mine.

“Who is he, Poseidon?” She pointed at the trident striking the tsunami wave that curved around him.

“He’s my father.”

“Why do you want to erase him? He looks so real. Do you just not like it anymore?”

“I never did. I just thought I could handle it, but I can’t.”

“That’s why I couldn’t get a tattoo. Things change and then I’d be stuck with something I didn’t want. Even if it was covered up I’d still know what was underneath, that it was there.”

Pauline rested her hand on her chin. I shifted my weight and stared down at my forearm and then at her.

“What do you want me to draw?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then I can’t help you. Everyone should have an idea, a symbol that represents them.”

“Which symbol represents you, Jack?”

“All of them.”

She snorted and went back to studying me.

“What does this say? Here on your wrists.”

“Train.”

“And this one says ‘wreck,’ then?”

“Yeah.”

“Why get a stupid nickname tattooed on you? Besides, the ink is so light it’s hard to read, especially with all the scars.”

“I got hit by a train.”

“I don’t believe you. Nobody gets hit by a train and lives.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was counting on.” I unrolled my shirtsleeves and jerked them down over my wrists. “I was leaving town the quickest way possible. So, I get up one morning, pack all my stuff, and start down the tracks. The Illinois Central blasted through every morning at nine, and I was determined to get on it even though I didn’t have six bucks to my name.”

“So, without a ticket?”

“Yeah, I’d done it before. Anyway, the train comes and I go to make the jump between the second to last car and the caboose. Well, my bag gets hung up on the undercarriage, and then my leg goes under and snaps. I could hear the bone splintering along with the sound of my bags getting crushed. All I heard was sound, and then nothing. There was just this white light.”

“A white light?”

“So I’m thinking this is it. I mean, this is the fucking light, but then I start to hear voices. I realize I’m in surgery and the light is just like the ones at the dentist. I’m not

going anywhere, at least, not to heaven. So I blackout again and I wake up, but this time I see an angel.”

“An angel?”

“Yeah, it’s Lily, this girl I used to date. She’s standing over me. Her eyes were sad and full of pain, like she’s been crying a lot, but God, she’s beautiful. So then I hate myself even more, and figure maybe I should have died, but then I realize it was just a hallucination, a dream, something I saw. The drugs I was on. It was like a whole new level.”

Diane walked up to the table with our food.

“One hamburger steak for Jack, and a cheeseburger for you. You need anything else?”

I shook my head. Pauline took a bite of her burger as I dove into my food. I inhaled the first few bites without stopping to take a breath. Diane walked away, but turned back to peek at us through strands of bleached hair, which were faded to almost the same color as her fair skin.

Pauline leaned forward and whispered, “She’s watching us.”

“She likes to keep an eye on me.”

“My mother’s like that, always watching me. She’s been stuck in 1967 for years. She even makes all my clothes like they were when I was seven. After my father died, she went off the deep end, and then Debbie went and got married to that asshole. Now, I’m stuck with her. I can’t do anything”

“I feel like that a lot. I’ve been clean for six months, not counting my birthday, and nothing has gotten any better. Sometimes it’s best to in cash your chips, and not even try. At least then it can’t get any worse.”

I took a large bite of the soggy greens on my plate and ran my fingers through my hair. Outside the grimy diner window, I saw that the bus was arriving. The brakes screeched to a halt.

“You’re a coward. It doesn’t sound like you know how to face anything at all. Not even me, and I’m just a little girl, right?”

The intensity in her voice startled me. A few flatheads looked up from their feeding bins.

“Lower your voice, kid. What are you talking about anyway?”

“Do you really think I believe you accidentally got hit by a train? You’re a liar, and it’s pathetic and so unfair.”

“What, that I’m half crippled and that my body is beaten ragged from that fucking train?”

“No, that people like you, Jack, liars, get to live and people like my dad get to die for them. Have you ever been spit on? The day my father’s empty coffin arrived from overseas, I went with my mother to get him. A bunch of fucking protestors spit all over us, just because we were leaving a military base. My father died for this country, even for cowards like you, cowards who spit on children.”

“I never spit on anyone. I know what it’s like to be spit on. People spit all around me here, on the sidewalk, at my feet. They don’t like bums, but shit, I don’t like them much either.”

“Well, either way, he died for an asshole that tried to kill himself. It’s selfish and disrespectful.”

Her black eyes drilled into me, but her lip began to quiver, so she turned and watched the people getting off the bus.

“I’m sorry, kid. My brother went to Korea. I’d hate to think about anyone disrespecting him.”

She was still staring out the window, looking lost.

“You’ll figure it all out, kid. Just because things start out shitty doesn’t mean it can’t get better. You’ll be fine.”

“Ha, yeah, like you.”

“Look, all I do is doodle away and work in one fucking kitchen after another. One day, I’m gonna save enough cash to buy some equipment. I just keep getting held up in shitty towns with even shittier people.”

“Where would you go?”

“To the coast, maybe, where I could open a shop, and grow a nice garden.”

“A garden?”

“Yeah, isn’t that what old guys do? It would be something. I can see right in front of me. I hear the soil’s great near Eureka. My brother lives up there. He let himself get stuck with a wife and a bunch of kids. You do whatever it takes to not get stuck. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to do, but my mother’s so damn protective.”

“At least she’s letting you go stay with your aunt or whoever in San Francisco.”

Pauline picked at the melted cheese that had trickled off the burger onto the plate.

Then she forced her fry through the ketchup, twirling it until it looked like a casualty of some bloody uprising. She looked like me the day I left home: that same half-broken spirit, that desire for someone to save her. Pauline might not have believed in romance, but, like me, she was looking for someone to write her a happily ever after. She threw her napkin down on her plate.

“I gotta go to the bathroom. Where is it?”

“Outside, near where we were before, by the ticket counter.”

“Oh, will you pay the bill?” She picked up her suitcase and slid her purse toward me. “Leave her a decent tip. She looks like she needs it. I’ll wait for you outside.” She flipped the collar up on my jacket. “I’ll take this as collateral.” Then she smiled and disappeared out the door. Her innocence made me smile too; maybe that’s what she was counting on. Whatever was in her purse was worth more than a shitty, flea-market jacket.

I stared at the crochet bag that lay open before me. As I reached inside, my hand felt wrong against the satin lining. I groped for the pack of Camels. When I found them, I lowered the pack below the edge of the table and thumbed through the cash. There was over a hundred dollars. I had a feeling Pauline’s mom never loaned her the money. Craning my neck up, I checked to see if anyone was watching. I glanced out the window. The bus was sitting idle in front the station. Pauline’s ticket west was edging out of her bag. I dropped a twenty on the table.

As I got up to leave, Diane came around the corner and blocked my path.

“Your money’s on the table.”

She looked over my shoulder.

“Wow, twenty bucks. I’d up and die if I ever got back even half of what I’ve lent you. I’m not paying shit for you again.”

“Are you done, Diane?”

“You’re a piece of work. Go ahead and tell everyone that you fucked me. You know, I have a kid almost her age I have half a mind to get Lou right now.”

I glanced at the counter where Lou was sitting with the other cops. They were all shoveling giant spoonfuls of apple pie into their mouths.

“Diane, I have work to do.”

She laughed.

“All you’re good for is making excuses and spinning sob stories.”

“No, honest, I’m gonna do a tattoo.”

“With what? On who? Not on that little girl you picked up?”

I grinned.

“You better not touch that child. God, you’re fucked up, Jack.”

“Relax, she’s going back home.”

“Alone, I hope.”

“Yeah, alone.”

My heart stuttered as I hurried out the diner with Pauline’s purse. I was certain Diane would come running after me with a couple of hulking cops in tow, but no one came. The drone of the engine and the clatter of the luggage being unloaded from beneath the bus filled the air around me. Pauline was standing by the ticket counter, rubbing her hands on the front of her skirt. She had smoothed her hair.

“That bathroom was gross.”

“When does your bus leave?”

“In about thirty minutes.”

“We better get started on your tattoo then. Come on.”

She giggled and followed me to a grassy area on the side of the building next to where the bus was pulling up to be refueled.

“Is this where you sleep?”

“What?” I laughed. “No.”

“You said you were a bum.”

“I am, but I usually find places to stay. I bum selectively. Like with old Diane in there.” I lit up my last cigarette. “It’s a vicious cycle of codependency. This time I think I might have pissed her off for good. Oh, well, I always end up entranced in something new and it’s usually a woman.”

I took out my markers and opened up my sketchbook.

“I want you to draw it on me. Tattoos go on people, don’t they?”

“Kid, I don’t know.” My eyes darted around, looking for any of our friends in the diner who might want a reason to pound me.

“Please, just on my stomach.” She turned and unbuttoned the bottom buttons on her shirt.

I glanced around and muttered. “For fuck’s sake.” At any moment, I expected some Suit to jump out and beat the fuck out of me and accuse me of molesting the kid. I took a deep drag and tried not to notice the curves of her hipbones or the smoothness of her skin. Her stomach was rounded and white, like a blank canvas. There was a time when part of me looked like that, perfect and untouched.

“Pauline, when I first ran away I was about your age.”

“Right, when you got hit by the train.” She rolled her eyes, but I could tell she was still interested. I took out my red marker and began to sketch on her abdomen. She sucked in real tense. The grit under my nails stood out dark against her skin. I wanted to tell her something true.

“No, that was down in Louisiana. I’m from Utah originally. My mother lived down in Louisiana and I went to find her. She had a whole new life with a cop husband and a little girl. I stayed with her off and on, but her new husband didn’t want me around. I was almost as alone as I was in Utah with my father. Look, I have no business telling you what to do, but I’ve left and I’ve stayed and it’s all about the timing. When I left Utah, I left because I didn’t want to end up like my father, a guy who hit the bottle and then hit the rest of us. Then I didn’t want to be like my mother, who disappeared at the first sign of trouble. Or be like my older brother, for that matter, who ended up in the army, across an ocean, fighting for something he didn’t care about. Now, I learned about being stuck from my father, even more than I learned about leaving from my mother. My father was stuck and he blamed me for it and everything else that went wrong in his miserable life. He blamed everyone but himself. So, I didn’t see a problem leaving the ranch, just like I didn’t see a problem leaving Lily. Pretty soon, I didn’t have a problem leaving anywhere or anyone. If you’re constantly leaving, you can’t see you’re stuck.”

She sprung up real straight. Her cheeks were blushed red.

“So I should just go back and live like I’m seven years old? Never grow up? Just listen to Rogers and Hammerstein records with my mother and talk about my father like he’s still in Vietnam?”

“I don’t know, kid. If I had an answer for that I wouldn’t be sitting in this shit hole. All I know is that one-day, I woke up and it was pointless to go anywhere or try anything. I needed something to make everything less real. Things got mixed up.”

I thought of all the myths about my life, the people, what I had made it all into, how it had sunk into my skin. I peeled my shirtsleeve back.

“All of it, all this- the scars and the tattoos have bled together. I don’t even know what was on purpose anymore.”

I sketched dozens of tiny petals, all trickling down her side, each one shaded a different color of the sunset. Pauline propped herself up and looked down, cocking her head.

“Jack? Why are some of the flower’s closed, are they dead?”

“No, they’re Lotus flowers. They open each day with the dawn and close at sunset.”

“What’s that?” She ran her fingers over the swirl of color I was highlighting.

“That’s the cosmic ocean.”

She smirked.

“It’s the ocean that all life comes from. In nature, lotus flowers grow in swamps. They rise up out of murky water, but when they blossom, their petals are always clean.”

The steady hum of the bus engine echoed between us. She nodded and lay back on the grass, staring up at the concrete side of the building.

“Three years isn’t so long, is it Jack?”

“For me, no; but for you, well, it might be an eternity.”

I put down my markers.

“What do you think?”

Pauline examined my work. “My mom will kill me when she sees this. I wish it was real.” She grinned as she buttoned up her blouse and held her hand against her stomach. “There’s a bus that leaves for Bakersfield in a couple of hours. I’m gonna catch it. I won’t need this.” She held the ticket to San Francisco out between us. “Take it, Jack. It’s my payment for the tattoo.”

“Pauline, I can’t. It’s just gonna wash off anyway. I can’t take your money.”

She picked up my sketchbook and folded the ticket between the worn pages and handed it to me.

As the bus rumbled up 99, I remembered all the places I had waited in, surrounded by people who managed to stay afloat and on course, while I waited on islands of dirty pavement. I opened up my window and closed my eyes, letting the breeze filter across my face. The sun was seeping through my eyelids, pulling me into sleep. Pauline’s presence appeared, hovering over me, her small, cold hands sliding over my cheek, her delicate fingers tracing my bottom lip and then down to my chest. I opened my eyes and she disappeared into the glare on the bus window. All I could see was my own reflection, which transformed, until I saw myself, so many years ago. The last chill from that bitter morning when I left home was swallowed up in the afternoon light. A smile crept across my face as I pictured Pauline, still flawless and untouched, washed in the same light, traveling all the way back home.

I sank into my seat, as a strange sense of contentment fell over me. Without her, I knew I would still be sitting, wrecked and unwanted, in the shadows of the station, and she would be alone on this bus- blinded by the sun. A deep anxiousness had grown in my

gut where, for years, lethargy had been. I imagined the journey ahead, the miles of open road, the air growing cooler by the minute until I neared the warmth of the California coast, and the blue of the Pacific. Maybe I would arrive in time to see the sunset.

I closed my eyes and saw myself standing steps from where the ocean broke against the sand, walking barefoot toward the water, the foam collecting in clouds around my ankles before being sucked back into the sea. The ocean was spackled with hues of pink, purple and orange. Breathing in deep, I knelt, and allowed the water to wash over my hands. My hands would be clean again, like a boy's, not the hands of a man, not the hands of my father. While the sun set on the outside world, for the first time, I was young and bright, and within me, the lotus blossoms were opening anew.

Commentary

The Lotus Flower is a series of interwoven stories that examine the struggle of the human psyche to mature through life. This collection draws on the way the ancient Greeks, via Homer's *The Odyssey* and classical mythology, wrote about the human condition. Ancient epics and myths are an inspiration when framing modern struggles, as are the heroes, gods, and witches that result from thousands of years of keen observation. Even today, these archetypes provide modern writers with multi-dimensional characters to build upon.

While Greek mythology strongly influences *The Lotus Flower*, there are a number of 20th century influences as well. Some of the stories in the collection also retain folkloric elements and others even pay homage to modern authors. While the collection has its roots in mythology, it is still a contemporary body of work, linked through thematic elements and pervasive motifs. Through various motifs, including the use of food as substance, the lure of intoxication, the recurring paradise-like image of the garden, and the duality of artificial v. natural light. *The Lotus Flower* illuminates the search for salvation. These motifs also highlight the transitional states of the characters, revealing their inability to move forward. True self-actualization is in effect only discovered when the motifs synthesize, allowing the characters to achieve enlightenment.

Morning

The primary influence for "Morning" was the Cyclops episode from Homer's *The Odyssey*. In "Morning," the character of Polyphemos, a Cyclops, is paralleled by Jack's abusive father, who is a bully and a drunk. While Jack is not in danger of being killed

and eaten like the epic hero, Odysseus, his father's mean disposition and hair-trigger to abuse place Jack in an often volatile situation. Over the course of the story Jack becomes more and more isolated as his companions, first Robbie and then Violet, are stripped from him. This loss of companionship and increasing isolation occurs in *The Odyssey* as well, as Odysseus loses his shipmates to various forces. As Robbie is departing, Jack has an encounter with his drunken father, which results in his father striking him. Jack knows that his father's inebriation creates a hazardous situation, but like Odysseus, he bets that his own sobriety will give him the upper hand. Later, when Jack awakens, he finds his father passed out on the floor. Jack is then able to escape the cold, dark ranch house, which is not unlike the damp world of Polyphemos' cave. He discovers the pure outside world has been tarnished with blood and disemboweled livestock. Jack's attempts to lie to and trick his father are unsuccessful, and as a result he loses Violet. After his father kills Violet, Jack does not lash out physically or blind his father with a weapon, but he does leave knowing his father has already blinded himself with alcoholism. Without the help of his wife or his two sons, Jack's father is left with as real a handicap as Polyphemos.

"Morning" is in many ways a more psychologically self-aware story than *The Odyssey*, especially since Jack's journey is focused on avoiding the fate of becoming his father and finding himself in the process. As Jack leaves, his father calls out to him, saying "all you're gonna ever be is a coward and a nobody" (19). Jack does not respond, thus showing the absence of the hubris that beleaguered Odysseus throughout his travels. Jack's father's words serve a function similar to the curse uttered by Polyphemos. While his utterance does not physically impede Jack, it does reinforce his worst fears, which

may prevent him from securing piece of mind and the confidence he needs to forge his own way.

As mentioned, “Morning” borrows from the Cyclops scene in *The Odyssey*, but Jack’s age, as well as the story’s focus on the beginning of his quest, resembles the mythology surrounding other young heroes, such as Theseus and Perseus. Unlike Odysseus, they are depicted at the beginning of their quests. Like many of the aforementioned heroes, Jack is born in obscurity, raised in poverty, and at a certain age he is forced to go out into the even harsher landscape of the real world. Jack, however, lives in modern times and is not faced with the same challenges or rewards as his ancient counterparts. Also, many of these classical heroes embarked on journeys to prove themselves to their fathers, or other rulers, in order to secure the inheritance of their kingdom. Jack, by contrast, makes a conscious effort to avoid following in his father’s footsteps. His journey is as much a mental one as a physical one. While Jack’s departure is a means of escape from the external conflict, it is also a key aspect of the inner struggle he must undergo to separate his own identity from his father’s.

Jack, again like Odysseus, diverges from the typical epic or quest hero archetype by relying on his cunning and trickery to defeat his foes, as opposed to brute force. A trickster uses his wits to defeat physically stronger gods or giants. These attributes make both characters a blend of the trickster and hero archetypes. Unlike Odysseus, Jack, in addition to embarking on a physical journey, begins an introspective to avoid becoming the monster that is his father.

Jack’s “wolf dog” is an interesting symbol in the story in that she is wild and untamable, as are both the landscape and Jack’s father. Her one gold eye and one blue

eye add to the Cyclops motif, and also symbolize the dual nature that is present within her. The sheep serve a dual purpose as well, recalling Polyphemos' flock, but also functioning as a physical representation of Jack's vulnerability and subsequent aggression. The mother sheep, or ewe, is ripped apart by the "shifty-eyed wolf dog" (8) and her lamb perishes as well. It could not survive without its mother. Life on the ranch is very primitive and those who cannot defend themselves are sacrificed.

Lighting, both natural and unnatural, is prominent in "Morning." In the beginning, Jack is drawn to "the inviting yellow glow"(5) of Mr. Watson's ranch house, in the same way that Robbie is attracted to the idea of Hawaii. Yet Jack learns the fleeting nature of the artificial light as he watches "the lights back away,"(10) and the "red taillights slip into the darkness"(10) when Robbie leaves. In Jack's own home, which is dark and oppressive, light awakens him, as the "beams of sun [shove] in from under the window shade" (11). His initial awe of "the blinding whiteness of the light reflecting off the snow" (12) and "pure, flat light" (12) are spoiled, when the harsh sunlight reveals the ugly truth about Violet to Jack.

The harsh nature of the landscape provides a physical projection for Jack's inner world. While he is in some ways still a child, each event corrupts him, until he sees his life for what it is, tainted and disadvantaged from the start. Robbie's vision of paradise evokes a contrast between the world he and his brother are accustomed to and the one they in which they have a future dream. The Eden-like garden promised by the postcard is an unrealistic goal for both of them, especially Jack, who has no means of an easy escape. At the story's end, as Jack surveys the dismal land behind and ahead of him, he destroys the paradise Robbie promised him, knowing that it is not attainable. Despite his

young age, it is Jack, not Robbie, who has an epiphany that results in him better understanding the reality of the world around him.

The Christmas Oranges

Like “Morning,” “The Christmas Oranges” is in essence a quest story and a “bildungsroman.” Greta’s journey to prove herself to her father is even more relevant to the aforementioned hero journeys. Like Theseus and Perseus, Greta wishes to prove herself using her extraordinary courage and athleticism. Her athletic prowess is repeatedly commented upon by the other characters as the reason that she was chosen to go on the dangerous mission. The story of Theseus on the road to Athens is recalled during Greta’s journey from the gates of Augsburg to Herr Meier’s farm. After all, it was Theseus who cleared the road of the many dangers in order to gain his father’s confidence.

Greta does not fit the hero mold perfectly. After all, she is a young woman, which makes her relationship with her father all the more complex. The journey Greta makes would be dangerous to anyone, but it is even more so for her, considering her gender and age. Her father knows that no matter how exceptional she may be as a track star, her life is still being put in jeopardy, based solely on the fact that she is a woman. Greta could be raped and murdered by any one who comes across her. Yet her father proceeds to send her on a treacherous mission. He justifies his decision because it is a time of war and his actions could prevent the starvation of his neighbors and family. Like Agamemnon, who is willing to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, Greta’s father, Heinrich, willingly sends his virginal daughter on a mission of self-sacrifice. Greta

survives her mission, thus defying her role as sacrificial victim, but since she does not complete her task, so she cannot attain “hero” status either.

After her voyage into the woods, Greta understands that there are real monsters in the world. She also realizes that she is part of a calculated risk and that she’s somewhat expendable. The goal of her mission is more important than her life, because after all, every one is counting on the food she will bring back.

While there are many allusions to classical archetypes and hero quests to be made, there are also traditional folkloric aspects present in “The Christmas Oranges.” The structure fairly closely follows that of the story of “Hansel and Gretel.” The setting of the story in Germany pays homage to the famed folklorists, the brothers Grimm. The context of the story during WWII provides a modern setting where starvation was a very real and constant threat. There is no stepmother figure present to convince Greta’s father to send her into the woods, it is a decision he alone makes. As in the “Hansel and Gretel” fable, Greta is sent into the woods with some bread. She does not leave breadcrumbs, but she does pay attention to her surroundings, noting the landscape and even the birds she sees. In the traditional tale, a bird, most often a raven eats the trail of bread crumbs that Hansel and Gretel plan to use to find their way home. In some versions, the raven is, in fact, the witch.

The leaving of breadcrumbs in the Hansel and Gretel story shares similar aspects with another myth about the hero Theseus. When Theseus faces the Minotaur, Ariadne supplies him with a ball of string so that he will be able to find his way out of the labyrinth. As mentioned above, Theseus also had to navigate the treacherous road to

Athens. There are many folktales, such as Little Red Riding Hood, that undoubtedly borrow from the same tradition.

Along her journey, Greta recalls the tales her brother Albert told her about witches living in the woods. Witches were a common element in classical myth and in folk tales. Witches, like Medea, provide foils for obedient daughter types like Greta. Even though Charlotte is by no means a witch, her character serves as a blocking figure for Greta's journey. Greta feels that she wastes too much time at the Meier's farm and that for that reason her life is in jeopardy.

In the story of Hansel and Gretel, the house is literally made out of Gingerbread. The Meier's farm is of course not made out of food, but once inside, Greta is tempted by all the wonderful, albeit mostly frivolous luxuries. So while Charlotte is not fattening Greta up to eat her, she is not helping her either. In some ways, Charlotte is more naïve than Greta. She seems to lack the ability to understand the precarious situation that Greta faces on her journey home, supplying her with frivolous items like oranges and butter.

There are countless stories in Greek mythology that refer to female enchantresses who use food as a means of entrapments. The brothers Grimm would have been aware of all the classical examples when including the brutal, cannibalistic witch in "Hansel and Gretel." In *The Odyssey*, Circe uses lavish feasts and moly to keep Odysseus and his men on her island. She captivates Odysseus to ward off her own loneliness. Out of desire for companionship, Charlotte lures Greta in with conversation and food. The food Charlotte's offers Greta is by no means extravagant, as say, a house made out of candy and gingerbread, but it is luxurious in the broader context of the war.

“The first bite was heaven. It tasted like real bread from a bakery, not like sawdust and ash. For the first time in months, Greta chewed without fear of breaking a tooth on hard, stale bread. The creamy richness of the butter and the exotic marmalade made her toes curl. She closed her eyes for a second, allowing the warmth and satisfaction to engulf her” (33).

In the above passage Greta is possessed by the intoxication of food. Ironically, as Greta begins her journey home, her fears shift from the witches of her childhood, to more adult concerns about the rapists and robbers that may be lurking along the road. Of course these are very real dangers, but she fails to realize that the damage has already been done under the spell of the Meier’s farm, where she has been lulled by a false sense of comfort.

The Meier’s home is a world void of natural light, since “thick black cloth” (30) covers the windows, “allowing no light to come through” (30). Like Mr. Watson’s ranch house for Jack, the Meier’s house holds a promise of comfort for Greta. She first describes the house as “the color of the sky on a clear summer day,” (29) but she quickly realizes that “the paint wasn’t as blue as the sky, and the shutters were old and in need of repair” (30). Even the countryside, which Greta envisioned as pure “and unspoiled paradise,” (28) has been marred by the war. Her escape to the pastoral world is not free from the dangers of the city. Both the natural world and the bombed-out urban setting are devoid of beauty and food, functioning as anti-gardens that fail to soothe the human psyche.

The Waiter

“The Waiter” rather obviously references the “Judgment of Paris.” Despite its rather dramatic conclusion, “The Waiter” is filled with cheeky parallels to the myth.

Even the name of the restaurant, “Hesperidia’s,” is meant to recall the nymphs who guarded Hera’s mythological garden, the very garden from which the golden apple was taken. It is also the locale where Paris, a mortal, was asked to judge the three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, in a contest of beauty

In “The Waiter,” the goddesses are portrayed by three women dining in a restaurant, and Paris is symbolized by the waiter, John. Mrs. Hollis, like Hera, offers John power in the form of job stability. She employs him, since she is the co-owner of the establishment. Her shameless flirtation makes her husband, Mr. Hollis, appear to be a cuckold, but at the story’s close he takes command. Like Zeus himself, Mr. Hollis has chosen to abstain from making any judgments during the contest itself. He seems detached from the unacknowledged competition between these women, leaving the foolish game up to John to resolve. John is a hapless Paris, a mere man at the mercy of three attentive women in an escalating contest on Valentine’s Day. He cannot mediate the implicit competition between these women any more than Paris could have. Meredith represents Athena, who was not only the goddess of wisdom and justice, but also the goddess of warfare. She offers John quick wit and intelligent conversation. In the myth, after Paris falls from her favor because he picks Aphrodite, Athena is quick to side with the Greeks in the Trojan War. Meredith, although amiable and easy going throughout, lashes out brutally against Anna and John when she feels she has lost. She rather self-

righteously enacts her own form of justice and revenge, under the guise of wisdom.

Finally, there is Anna. Anna is the Aphrodite of the group. She offers John youth and beauty, and of course, sex.

“The Waiter” is a winking, sardonic and self-knowing piece. The identification of each woman as a goddess is clear when one examines the obvious symbols used to distinguish them. For example, Linda Hollis wears “peacock feather earrings,” (56) and the peacock was a symbol of the goddess Hera. Meredith weaves through the crowd when she enters the restaurant; a nod to Athena’s famed skill as weaver. Also, when Meredith rather self-righteously “pulls the thread” (60) of Anna’s lie, this emulates Athena’s reaction to the mortal Arachne’s hubris. In essence, Meredith undergoes a transformation by which she no longer wishes to elevate Anna to a higher or even equal status. Like Aphrodite, Anna comes from the sea. Her shell jewelry is a reminder of this, and it also evokes the famous image of Venus on a half shell. Of course, she is the one that has been chosen by John.

There is also a Dionysian effect at play in the story. The characters’ inhibitions dissolve as the night progresses. So while John is fated to be undone by the female predators, he is also stimulating the situation by giving them wine. The drowning of emotions, in other words escapism via alcohol is a common theme in modern fiction, particularly in Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Raymond Carver’s short story collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. The title story of the later provided a modern model for “The Waiter.” In both stories, and “The Waiter,” the increased consumption of alcohol simultaneously leads to illumination, blindness and even impotence.

The dimly lit restaurant offers very little chance for illumination. Meredith's patronage there prevents her from growing as a person. Some "natural light" is present in the flickering glow of the candlelight, which serves to simultaneously mask and reveal the characters. In the last scene, when Meredith rather hollowly assumes Anna's place at the table, she discovers that Anna's view was different than her own. She sees "dozens of colors refracting off the stained glass door, which was illuminated and back lit by the streetlight" (62). Yet she is not ready for illumination, nor can she see what is "concealed by the colored glass" (62).

Despite the setting in a restaurant, food is not consumed. Wine remains the real fuel in the story. As the wine flows freely there is a neglect of substance. Meredith, the supposed victim for most of the piece, orders eggplant parmesan, while Anna, the purported antagonist, gets veal. The utter humiliation of Anna at Meredith's hands exposes Anna not to be the true predator but the prey. Her order of baby cow could in turn signify her changing role from "goddess" to "sacrifice." The food remains "on the ledge by the kitchen waiting and untouched" (59). It is at this point that Meredith becomes incensed; the proper sacrifice has been neglected, thus violating the natural order. Frivolities, such as beauty and wine, have been chosen over wisdom and substance.

The Golden apple itself, the prize which the goddesses fought over, was also equally useless. It did not provide any real substance and the goddesses already had infinite access to riches and luxury. In "The Waiter," the same is true for the women fighting over John. Undoubtedly, all of them could have other men besides the waiter, but it becomes clear that it is the contest that drives them, not love or need.

Artificial Light

“Artificial Light” is best compared with the “Echo and Narcissus” myth. Muriel is modeled on the nymph Echo, and like nymphs in many stories, in that she is a passive character, the one acted upon. There are several key moments in the conversation with Ilius where Muriel could tell the truth, especially when Ilius wrongly assumes that she is married, but she fails to enlighten him. Instead, she repeats what Ilius says.

Ilius is not meant to be a Narcissus-like character per say, but he does allude to a time in his life when he was more self-involved, which was the reason for the dissolution of his marriage. If anything, Ilius is an enlightened Narcissus, sent to warn Muriel of her fate. Like Echo, she ceases to exist except in the presence of others. At the end, when she is alone in the parking lot, there is no speech, only her footsteps “echo” in the silence of the night.

Muriel’s guarded nature extends beyond her expression of language; she also hides behind the symbolism of the wedding band, as a means of escape. There are numerous stories in which young nymphs call upon their fathers for protection from suitors. By wearing her mother’s wedding ring, Muriel is using her father to ward off potential suitors much in the way that Daphne escaped Apollo with the help of her father. In order to escape leaving the “maiden” phase of life via a loss of virginity, she has had to live a frozen life, thus foregoing her humanity, a path Muriel seems almost destined to follow. Also, as a result, she is forever tied to her father by her roots, which rely on the water for life, thus creating a symbiotic bond. Muriel’s devotion to her ailing, elderly father has also manifested in codependence and stunted growth. Rather than leave behind

the role of daughter in favor of the next phase of life, she has allowed herself to become stagnant. Muriel protects herself by hiding behind her lies- the wedding band, the other woman's purse.

The title "Artificial Light" is self-explanatory. "It is what it is." The artificial light in the bar is a fleeting lie of a life realized, and the artificial light recalled in the apartment illuminates a living death, actually, two living deaths, as "the incessant flicker of the television... kept time with the beep of the respirator" (64). Artificial rather than natural light seems to signify the perpetuation of self deception, mirrored in the false sense of safety that Muriel creates for herself. She chooses her false world and rich fantasy life in favor of a real life that can not or will not be cultivated. False illuminations and reflections abound throughout.

There is no stream present in the story, except for the stream of alcohol they consume. Instead, their images are reflected in very modern ways, in the bar mirror and the photographs in hand. Like the false, artificial light, the photographs are misleading. They are the reflected vision of idealized perfection that both characters cannot attain. The botanical gardens capture Ilius' attention and Muriel's as well, but for different reasons. For Muriel, the pictures of the garden are symbols of a life never lived, a paradise still unfulfilled, and for Ilius they represent something that has been lost. The garden motif in this story thus serves to highlight the very different lives of the characters. Like Jack in "Morning," Muriel's glimpse of a garden paradise is fleeting and ultimately inconsequential on her journey.

One hopes the artificial light of the street light outside the bar will be a spark of illumination to Muriel, to plan a future, or at least some change for the day when she will

be alone. The final paragraph of the piece suggests uncertainty, and ambivalence in Muriel's character. She is still partially in shadow and only "half-illuminated in the artificial light" (66).

"Artificial Light" was also inspired by Ernest Hemingway's story, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place," which beautifully captures loneliness. The international feel, while a nod to Greece itself, considering the mythical context, is also an allusion to Hemingway's world travelers. Muriel and Ilius do not find a clean, well-lighted place and instead they must settle for the dim artificial light of the bar.

The Patient

This story is concerned with the portrayal of archetypes, in particular, the female pre-Christian trinity of Persephone (the maiden), Demeter (the mature woman), and Hecate (The Old Crone). The narrator of "The Patient," is the mother figure. She, like Demeter, is focused the rearing of Becca. The mother in "The Patient" is at a loss because she has been unable to provide either psychological or physical nourishment to her daughter. Like Demeter, the narrator is also deeply emotionally vulnerable via her inter-connected relationship with her daughter. The narrator recognizes that like Demeter and Persephone, who are said to be two different aspects of the same goddess, she and Becca share a troubling addiction.

In "The Patient," there is a sense that the mother-daughter bond has been severed for some time. The narrator's concerns are with what she can teach her daughter, not with herself. Becca, like Persephone, is an ice queen, both cold and aloof. Also like Persephone, Becca hinges between two opposing worlds. In Becca's case the line

between these two worlds is between the conflicting temptations of self-deprivation and over-indulgence. Becca's need for control manifests itself in bulimia. Like Persephone, Becca is eternally punished for what she has eaten. Becca attempts to keep her transgression in front of the cool air of the refrigerator a secret, but like Persephone's pomegranate, Becca is discovered. Although Persephone must adhere to a sentence from the gods, it is Becca who punishes herself. This signifies the difference between the flatter, broader context of myth, as compared to the more layered modern story. While the myths and archetypes provide a framework, as Persephone does for Becca, the external struggles they highlight are brought to fruition in the modern contexts. Becca, in essence, is pulled between ideals, causing an inner struggle, in the same way that Persephone drifts between worlds, causing external strife in the form of the seasons.

The inner struggle in the story develops out of Becca's refusal to admit that she is like her mother in any way. Yet, by the stories end, it is clear that Becca's problem is very much like her mother's. The problem is not just a mother-daughter dilemma, either. When the narrator recalls her own mother's last days in the hospital, she remembers her mother's criticisms. Even on her death bed, she remarked to her daughter, "my how you've let yourself go" (71). This multi-generational conflict emphasizes the three stages of life as symbolized by Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate. The narrator's recollection of her mother is when her mother is near death, which is fitting since Hecate is generally associated with the underworld, specifically as Persephone's liaison in the realm of the dead. The narrator's mother's coldness has trickled down to her own daughter.

"The Patient" originally began as a framing story for "The Christmas Oranges," but it developed into its own narrative. Becca and her mother were supposed to be the

descendants, perhaps the daughter and granddaughter of Greta. The potatoes that Becca binges on could in fact be the ones Greta made. This connection is never really made. So while this story does not emphasize any particular cultural heritage there are parallels between the food in “The Christmas Oranges” and the food in “The Patient.”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s contemporary story collection “Interpreter of Maladies” also has recurring references to the dwindling importance of Indian cuisine as a metaphor for a much larger loss, the loss of culture. The preparation of the food is one of many important traditions that is passed down and in some cases lost to Americanization. Here the contrast between the two societies is made in how the food is treated. For Greta it is the ‘golden fleece,’ a mission that she is willing to sacrifice everything for, but for Becca it is the enemy. The overabundant American Christmas leads to wastefulness and despair.

The same “orange glow” or artificial light that seems to symbolize failed revelation is present from the beginning, a signifier that the illumination will not come full circle. All the sources of light in “The Patient” are modern and unnatural; such as the refrigerator light, the street light, the flickering television, and most importantly the Christmas tree lights. “The Patient,” like “The Christmas Oranges,” is set during Christmas, a winter celebration. While typically a time of feasting, the holiday is tied to the extremes of deprivation and excess.

The stunted conversation between mother and daughter illuminates the disconnection between them, as does the extended trope of patient and doctor. Instead of being a warm, comfortable relationship, it is sterile. The Persephone/ Demeter story revolves around physical separation during the winter months, while “The Patient”

examines the emotional separation. Persephone's absence causes Demeter sorrow, just as Becca's illness and detachment hurt the narrator. In essence, even though Becca is physically near her mother, she remains separate, unable to speak with her. Becca's world, in the dim light of the kitchen, rather ominously resembles the underworld. Also, like Hades himself, Becca's father pulls her from her mother. He is a looming presence in the story, only his "growls" are heard from down the hall.

Food is clearly a central motif in the piece. The pomegranate seeds that Persephone eats keep her forever locked to the underworld for part of the year. While the pomegranate, though it is "the food of the dead," it is still part of the harvest. The food Becca eats is not harmful in and of itself, but the way she eats it is. She lives a dual life of binging and indulgence, of purging and deprivation. Like Persephone, Becca must also reconcile two worlds: living the life of her mother, which is one of bounty and life, as opposed to that of her father, which is one of measured precision and perfection. The food that is snubbed in daylight, at night becomes Becca's curse. The untouched items, like the "presents [that] remain perfect and unopened" (67) are good, while the ravaged food is a symbol of weakness that must be punished.

The Wrecked

“The Wrecked” does not attempt to cover *The Odyssey* in its entirety, but it glosses over a significant portion of Odysseus’ wanderings via the art on Jack’s body. *The Odyssey* opens in medias res, with Odysseus stranded on Kalypso’s island. “The Wrecked” opens with Jack, an older version of the character in the opening story “Morning,” stuck at a bus depot. While Diane does not play a substantial role in his inability to leave, it can be argued that Kalypso does not truly hold Odysseus back either. In both cases, there are larger issues at hand. In Odysseus’ case, he is at the mercy of the gods whom he has offended, particularly Poseidon. Jack, on the other hand, is victimized by his own inability to move forward and let go of the past.

After departing Kalypso’s island Odysseus washes ashore on the island of the Phaiakians where he is greeted by Nausikaa, a young princess. Jack also encounters a young girl, in the form of Pauline. Both Jack and Odysseus relay their troubled journeys over the course of a meal. Their stories are complete with tales of home, entrapments along the way- women like Circe and Lily, attempts at reunion- the underworld and Jack’s visit to Louisiana, encounters with monsters- the Cyclops and Jack’s father, and giants- the Laistrygones, or in Jack’s case, the train. Pauline, like Nausikaa, is drawn to the stranger, and it is Pauline, like Nausikaa, who supplies a means to end the hero’s wanderings.

Despite the story’s structural parallels to Odysseus’ stay on Kalypso’s island, the cops who Jack refers to as “pigs” are reminiscent of Circe’s victims, which were turned into swine. Jack is on an island either way, his island just happens to be a patch of tobacco stained pavement.

In addition to classical influences, there are quite a few outside influences at work in “The Wrecked,” ranging from Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* to Denis Johnson’s “Jesus’ Son” and Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*. These works, like “The Wrecked,” focus on man’s path toward redemption. Their protagonists also helped to provide a model for the enlightenment that Jack’s character undergoes. While the plot and structure of the story very much reflect “The Odyssey,” Jack experiences more emotional growth than Odysseus’. There is no real sense that Odysseus is seeking redemption, so much as he is seeking revenge. Whereas Jack exudes the flawed potential of the tragic hero, as in the tradition of most epic heroes, Odysseus does not undergo any transformation.

As asserted before, Odysseus has many of the markings of being a “trickster hero.” In “The Wrecked,” Jack also retains many of these characteristics. He is able to con and manipulate enough to get by without a means for employment or a roof over his head. His charm also gets him free places to stay, free meals, and even a free bus ticket. Also, like Odysseus, Jack is wily and cunning, constantly avoiding the watchful eye of the “pigs,” Bill, the diner owner, and Diane, his sometime lover. He is a storyteller, who capitalizes on the pathos of his audience. Odysseus is known for his clever tongue as well. While Odysseus’ ultimate goal is to regain his place as ruler of Ithaca and reunite with his wife, Penelope, Jack’s aspirations’ are more modest. Jack’s dream to go “to the coast...and open a shop, and grow a nice garden” (85) is reflective of characters like Voltaire’s *Candide* and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Jack’s journey is more focused on inner enlightenment and personal fulfillment. The inner peace that he achieves at the

story's end is equivalent to the vindication Odysseus feels when he savagely reestablishes his role as king.

This synthesis of eastern and western visions of accomplishment and is also seen in the lotus blossom itself. In accordance with *The Odyssey*, Jack's fixation with the lotus could be related to a drug experience. After all, it is in the land of the "lotus-eaters" that Odysseus' men become enchanted and forget all else. Having experienced this sensation himself, the lotus tattoos on Jack's arm could be from a stage in his life where he used drugs as a form of escape. Ironically lotus is eaten to forget and Jack immortalizes it on his body.

Jack never mentions this connotation of the lotus flower, instead he concentrates on its regenerative properties, telling Pauline that the flowers "rise up out of murky water, but when they blossom, their petals are always clean" (90). This explanation of the flower's meaning is more linked to eastern beliefs regarding the flower. Does the Lotus symbolize what he tells Pauline, or does he really want her to forget and let go because he was unable to do so?

Jack's tattoos require a substantial amount of attention, since they do provide most of the symbols in the story. Each tattoo symbolizes a different episode in *The Odyssey*, but also a chapter in his life. What they all mean to Jack or his understanding of them is somewhat of a mystery. Pauline's fingers trace what are literally books of the epic, "lotus blossoms, scores of seductresses and the haloed frame of the sun god on his chariot" (80).

At the beginning of the story, Jack is sketching a "cover-up," with which he plans on covering his father's face. His father's face is in profile, thus only one eye is showing,

like the Cyclops, Polyphemos. Jack is sketching a drawing of the “zephyr.” After leaving Polyphemos, Odysseus goes to Aiolus and receives a bag of winds to steer him home. Poseidon’s vengeance on Odysseus following the blinding of his son, Polyphemos, appears in the form of a tattoo as well. The sea-god is symbolized by a “trident striking the tsunami wave” (81). It is no coincidence that Jack’s father is linked to Poseidon, after all Jack’s father is his curse, just as Poseidon is Odysseus’. The characters in “The Wrecked” refer to getting “stuck” a lot. Jack, like Odysseus, seems to be at the mercy of fate. Ironically, unlike Odysseus, who is trying to escape Poseidon’s sea, Jack never seems to be able to get there.

At the story’s end, while Jack is not physically at the Pacific Ocean, it is finally within his grasp. The beauty of the sunset and the emotional release it represents are a contrast to the life he lived diner to diner. Jack’s final vision incorporates many of the motifs that run throughout the collection. As the sun seeps through his eyelids, Jack breaks through to the next level and releases the crippling limitations of his past. He no longer sits “wrecked and unwanted, in the shadows of the station” (91) and the natural light solidifies his conversion. Jack realizes that his illumination could not occur without Pauline, just as he understands that Pauline must go home because she is not ready to follow the path to the ocean, for she will be “blinded by the sun” (91) like he once was.

In the other stories, resolution was often blocked, behind “colored glass,” or incomplete, under “artificial light.” The other characters come close, but are unable to achieve self-actualization because obstacles remain in their way. Light, which was previously used to illuminate pain in people’s lives, in “The Wrecked,” encapsulates a moment of conversion, as the motifs unite to reveal Jack’s new awareness.

Like the lotus blossom, which opens at dawn and closes at sunset, the progression of the stories in this collection follow this pattern, with the first story, “Morning,” beginning at sunrise and the last story, “The Wrecked,” ending at sunset. Yet in order for the flower to blossom it must have a means by which to grow (substance) and natural light to nourish it. Essentially, human beings are confused and imperfect and can muddy up their lives, but at any stage there is a chance to blossom and have an awakening; and they can take what they have, no matter how little, to rise up and start anew.

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