

**SHORT STORY
COLLECTION**

Ksenia Anske

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ANGER



Anger. It's the red behind her eyes. The pulse in her hands. The gnawing wish to circle her fingers on his throat. It would be so easy. He looks so peaceful. So innocent. Or maybe it's better with a pillow? No. Hands. The rhythm in the ears, the pounding, overwhelming. Perhaps it will go away. Just close your eyes and it will go away. But it's worse, oh, it's nagging. The heat in the bones, the scorching in the gut, the need to close them, close them, close them. Whatever happens after is not important. There is only this moment, and him, and this cutting knife of anger that slices lazily across her stomach. Perhaps it's drawing something, perhaps it's mocking her. It dares her to try, to cinch, to end his life. The words he said, the words. They were only words. Maybe it's too high a price to pay? He should've thought better. There was a string inside her, a musical string, and he broke it with his clumsy fingers. Now she's mute. Now she can no longer sing, the instrument that was so keen on seeking sounds.

Anger. He doesn't sleep. He pretends. The knife is under the pillow. Now? Or let her hair fall closer. Why should he wait? Why should he forgive? The calm, the cold, like under the water. Still. Mind sits in his darkness like a missile, poised to deliver the demise, the demise she brought upon herself. It wasn't him, oh no. She did it. She must die. If

only she would make another step, and lean, and open up her chest to his closed eyes. He can smell her, that offensive pungent whiff of some cheap perfume. Of course she'd pick something like that to mask her sour stink of anger. Yes, she is angry, he can feel it. It marches all over his skin like hot pincers taken out of a livid fire. But he will wait. The waiting is part of the pleasure. The keeping, the holding of the gushing blood under the cover of cool, under the pretense of sleep. What could be more delicious?

Anger. They're poised to kill each other. They don't know that we're here. The fire, the fury, it consumes us. Shall we let them? Shall we watch? Shall we come out when one of them is dead? Or shall we surprise them, my little helper? Quiet. Quiet. It does not become us to rush into this, it will ruin the sweet taste. We're hidden very well here, in the shadows. We shall wait. Per chance the girl will go first, per chance the boy. Per chance we won't have to do naught except to wash our hands. What do you think, my little helper? Show me your teeth. That's good, very good. Keep your voice down. We'll only have to wait a couple minutes longer...

THE BENCH



A letter. A boat. He thought he could reach her that way. A paper boat. A page torn out of his memory and folded and sent across time. Could it possibly find her? He didn't know, didn't think, but did it anyway. He wrote a book, a letter to her, too long to hold what he yearned to say, too heavy to float between them. It sunk. What they have built, what they have breathed to life, the tissue flowers and the wings of hopes, it all got poisoned. Not once but many times. There was nothing left but shreds of touch, gestures of extended hands, to caress, to hide in the nook of an elbow. Was it foolish? He thought so. Still, he dared. What could words describe? How could they paint what was too many colors?

It's been years. He wrote it. He forgot about it. He moved on. His stories floated and drifted who knows where. He learned to ignore the nagging pain, the pulling at bottom of his sorrow. And then a call. A call from a distant friend.

"She read it." His friend said.

He had to hear it. He had to believe. He pressed the phone into his ear. "When?" There was no other word. When?

"About three days ago. I think. Why?"

"I didn't," he faltered. "I didn't know. Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"What did she think?" The questions were too many, and he had to swallow them down. Did she like it? How did she find out? Did she read his other books? Did she understand? Will she ever...was it conceivable to hope for...if only once. Only once to hear her voice?

"I don't know, mate. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"Yes. Yes, of course. How do you know?" He asked and didn't hear the answer. It didn't matter how. It mattered that she did. It happened.

Could there be a bridge? Could paper hold their past, would it crumble? If he stepped on it, would it collapse?

"You there?"

"Huh? Sorry. Yes, I'm here."

"I gotta run. Talk later, okay?"

"Sure. Sure."

He wasn't aware of this footing for the rest of day. His hands didn't feel like his. His ears heard music, music in the wind. It bloomed in his face, it made him weightless. "Sonia." That one word, he hasn't said it for years. "Sonia." Oh, how beautiful it rang, how it rolled off his tongue. "Sonia, Sonia." He couldn't stop.

Their park, that bench where they met. She read a book. What was it? He couldn't remember. His feet carried him there, or maybe they didn't. He didn't know how he stood in front of it. Green peeling paint. One board missing. The iron handles still intact. And footsteps. Her footsteps. Dare he look?

"David?"

It took years. Year for him to lift his head. Years to turn. Years to see.

A simple white dress. Hands clasped, holding his book. THE BENCH stamped on the cover in green letters, that same shade. THE BENCH by David Brooks. Her smile, the sunlight of her face.

They stood without words. There was a bridge to cross. Neither dared. She shifted, perhaps from standing too long, and the book escaped her hands. It dropped. The sound startled them, they rushed to

recover it, reached for it, brushing hands. Just like that first time. Over a book. The gaze that was impossible to wrench away.

"I didn't know." She said.

He shook his head, wanting to say, "No, it's okay, it's fine. It's not your fault." But the words wouldn't come, stuck in his throat.

"I..." She began.

He pressed a finger to her lips. He was afraid for it to crumble. So fragile, so new.

"It was for you." He said. "A letter for you."

He watched her fingers, the nails cut so short it looked painful, the cuticles in disarray, the fleshy soft parts, the wrinkles on them, the blemishes. So warm. Dare he hold it?

Dare he?

Will it stay?

CROWS



Crows are autumn. The sign of autumn. Their "cra-cra-cra" and then another "cra" like a period at the end of a sentence hanging in the air. And the colors. The burned sienna. The fire of maples. The cold sun. You'd think it would warm your face, but it's only there for show.

The damp chill after the rain. Puddles glistening like mirrors.

"Cra-cra-cra," go the crows.

"Shhh, I hear you," goes the wind.

It rips off the leaves. It twirls them, and they dance and land in the puddles and float like discarded summer.

There is the tickle of crispness on your skin. It nips a bit, only a bit. Like a warning. It's not that cold yet. No roofs are covered with hoarfrost, no sheets of ice break under your feet. None of it is there. Only fall. Only October.

And that kiss you've been waiting for, it's warm on your lips.

You hold hands and walk about aimlessly, kicking at the leaves, smelling decay. The scarf is hugging your neck and you pull it up and lower your face in it and breathe in. It's pleasant.

You stop by a pond and sit on a bench and feed ducks pieces of

bread. They are perfectly insolent, the ducks, and spoiled. They snatch the bread right out of your hand and waddle off, very important looking.

"I love you." He says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I love you too." You say, smiling, there and not there. "This is lovely."

"It is."

"Do you have more bread?"

He offers a handful of crumbs. All that's left. "Would that do?"

"Sure."

You throw it.

Now the pigeons are here too, and the sparrows. And the crows go, "cra-cra-cra," like they're saying, "it's mine, it's mine." The crows.

They are autumn.

ILKA



There. No, not there. Right there! See it? See the river? That's where they lived, at the bend. By that brown spot. That moving one. See it moving? Cattails. Puffy bursts of white fluffy stuff on top. Like they're wagging. Or nodding. Or maybe it's the wind playing with them, because it's bored.

See her walking, on the bank? See the cotton dress? Azuline. It has flowers printed on it, forget-me-nots. Her grandmother made it from her father's old shirt, right after he died. She kept the buttons. The buttons were little pearls. Fake, of course, don't think they were real. But she thought they were real, the girl, Ilka. She thought they were real, and she thought her dress was made from the sky, and she liked going to the river—a little stream, no more—to that rotting wooden bridge slung over from one side, sandy and flattened, to the other, grassy, and farther off, where the stinging nettles looked at her, nodding.

She knew not to touch them, she knew not to come near. She helped her grandmother snip them off, just right—she sensed their spite—right by the bottom of their thick hairy stalks, and then tear off the leaves in the kitchen, in the aluminum basin, and watch her grandmother make a soup, on the stove, and eat it later, with a bent spoon, puffing up her cheeks and hissing out air, cooling the greenish broth and

watching half of the cooked egg float around, winking at her its yellow eye. Yellow like the water she looked into. The water of the stream. Golden. Like liquid sun or weak tea. Her grandmother liked weak tea with cubed sugar. She called it orphan's piss and cackled and slurped it, her eyes smiling.

Ilka kneeled and flattened herself on the bridge and hung her head, close to water, the moving mirror, and watched pond skaters chase each other, stop, wait, as if for her signal, her weak whistle, then take off, their spindly legs moving so fast, they jerked from place to place. And Ilka thought how she would like to walk on water like that, smooth and cool to touch, like a melted sugar drop. It would hold her up, and she'd make friends, and they would run around and call to each other and escape the toad that croaked every morning—Ilka could hear it from the open vent of her window. Then down below, on the sandy bottom—no, over it—floated a shape. A long black line, shrinking, stretching. A leech. Ilka thrust her hand in the water and missed. She liked to roll them in hot sand with a stick and watch them squirm. The bloodsuckers. They didn't disgust her like the other girls, and for that Andy next door let her ride his bike.

"Ilka!" Grandmother's voice floated through the cattails. "Dinner!"

Ilka sighed, stood up, brushed off her hands and knees and skipped along the bank, in that azuline dress that played with the sky. Like it was saying, *Look at me, we're the same color. Aren't we?*

WRITER'S DREAM



I read. I want to read, but they're first, so I just stand there. And the woman says, she says, "You're next". And the boy starts reading. Boy. He's a boy to me. In his twenties, lanky. "Read the last two chapters", she says. He stammers a little, nervous. Then opens up, chest out. Proud. I can't listen. I want to, can't. Something...it's scary. What if they tell me it's horrid, what if...or not. Who knows. What can I do? Wait. It slips out of my hands. Sweaty. I press it to my breast, my left breast, where the heart. He's not done yet. He got into it. What rage. Primitive. His sentences are primitive. Not the good kind. The stupid kind. Is that okay to think? Stupid. I'm stupid. What am I doing here? How did I get here? I can't remember.

The books on display. All those famous authors. And me. What? I want to fall through the floor. The boy. He's still reading. Saliva, sputters. Arms, left, right, swings them, like he's about to hit me. Boring. It's something about, a traveler? An explorer? Pompous. The turn of the prose is pompous. He's trying too hard. I want to say, "You're trying too hard. That's bad. Don't..." but I don't say anything, just stand in the corner. By the books. Shelves. Piles of, something. Manuscripts. Paper. I smell paper. He forgot he's here. I can see it. His cheeks flush. The woman frowns, not a good sign, she frowns. Her hair, her dark colored

hair. It's to her shoulders. And her sweater. Why such a sweater? Coral. Did she knit it herself? Not appropriate for her age. Wants to seem more, better. Younger? Turgid lipstick. She scalds him with her eyes. I can see it's over, in her eyes. Over. She's polite, nodding. The boy, encouraged.

I forgot. I forgot my name. Horror. Horror of...she looks at me. Just a glance. Curious. They always do. Are you the one? Is she the one? Can you? Can I? I don't know. What do I know? Nothing. Why do I stand here? What's the use? I take a step. His hand, though. Firm. Stops me. With love. "No, you're not going anywhere." His voice. I nod. Can't say anything. He's next to me, so I can lean on him. If I need to. Has he noticed? "Have you noticed?" I whisper. "Yes." He says. "Shhh." We listen.

The boy is close. Then, finally, the end. He waits. The woman, there is a spot in the armchair, a place, an indent. She left it. An indent, it speaks more, speaks of haste. He wants to see, I think he can see, and he refuses. So young. I was this young, like that, I believed. I see he does, he's decided against his instinct. Waits, triumphant. And the girl he came with, she's blonde, plain and blond. She smiles, too. "That was..." the woman says, "something." The boy, "Please, tell me." "Please," picks up the girl. "Don't hold anything back." She doesn't, of course, why should she? "No." she says, sharp. "We can't accept it." "But..." He begins. I can see his face slacken, slacken and slide off him. "But..." He stammers, again, not nervous now, appalled, crushed, from this high up all the way down.

The floor here, it's parquet. It creaks if you push right on that spot right there, and I push it, with the tip of my toe, of my shoe, black dusty shoe, I test it. It speaks to me, something, in its floor language, it says, it saw so many of us here, hopefuls. It laughs at me, almost, as if it wanted to ask what I'm doing here, how did I end up here. I can't form a single coherent thought. They're a jumble. The light, the ray of light, and jumble. And my shoes. I need to clean them, polish them. With that rag, where did I put it, I can't remember.

The boy and the girl left. Then, the woman's breath, on my shoulder.

The office, her office, it's a room with books. Not her books, other books. "Go ahead," she says, pushes me a little, impatient. She has a schedule. I don't have a schedule, but she does. She's busy. "I'm listening," she says, fingers steepled. And I take a step. Where? Somewhere. It's important to take a step, it's a beginning of my journey. Just one step, and I stop, and I open my book. My book, the book I wrote. Did I write it? Did I really write it? I can't say a word. Can't...

"The last two chapters, please." She says, waiting.

His hand, behind me, his hand, it's all I need. "You can do it," he whispers. "I know." I take a breath. Look. It's the wrong book. My tongue, glued to my teeth. The wrong book. I'm holding the wrong book in my hands. Someone else wrote it, the pictures, the name, other name, not mine, how...I clear my throat. Back. Back to mine. It's mine. Just...nerves. "Go on." She says. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm...anxious." "It's okay," she says. I can see it's not. She's looking at her watch. Expensive golden watch. I don't have a watch, I have nothing. My books, my rags, and nothing. No. I have him.

I open, leaf through.

"How does it end?" She prompts, to keep talking, to fill the air with talking. The pause is too much.

And I freeze. The end. How does it end? I can't remember. My own book, and I can't remember. Paralyzed. I look up, he smiles. He almost laughs. This happened before. He draws a circle, with his hand, a circle in the air. "There is no end," I manage, "it goes around and around, it ends where it began." "How interesting," she says. I look down. Sentences swim. They break and swim and letters jump and my heart is about to die. My heart beats so fast it will burst any second. It slips from my sweaty fingers, the book, I catch it, tear pages, press it to my breast. She studies me. "Well?"

I clear my throat, cough up my heart, I'm afraid I'll cough up my heart. I read, "He wrote her a letter." One. I managed one. One sentence. I look at the words, they stack. The hate me, my words, they hate me and stumble, on purpose. "He..." I try again. I think I will

choke on my tongue. It's fat, dry and fat and it fills my throat and...his eyes. He gives me thumbs up. I look down, at the page, at the place where I hold it open. My book, I hold it open, with my thumbs. They made an imprint. "He wrote her a letter," I say, stronger now. "She didn't answer. He wrote another. And another. Like leaves, leaves of the maple that stood in front of her house, yellow and dead." I stop, swallow, or try to. It doesn't work. Nothing works in my mouth. My hands shake so hard, I think I will lose it, drop my book and lose it.

The woman, her face? Did it clear? A little, did it? Like a light, a passing of light. Better not to think. I go on. Try to go on. I read. I want to read, and I read. I read them, sentences, one after another. They listen, at last, they stopped fighting me, my words, and they listen, they're tied to my rhythm. "Thank you," I want to say, "thank you." But I'm reading. I hear something, a noise. I stop abruptly, lift my eyes. The man. In his fifties? Something. He joined her, the woman, they both look at me. Expectant. Like I'm now supposed to deliver. And I lose my voice, it won't come. Two of them, it's too much. I claw at my throat. It won't come. It won't come, it won't come, it...he catches me. He caught me. Steadies me. "They like it," he whispers. I can hear laughter in his voice. "Do they?" I move my lips. "Yes, I think." He pushes me up, upright.

I'm in my story. Or my story is inside me. Which is which? Does it matter? They listen. That's all that I can think about, all I can see. They listen. Their mouths are open. The man, he's on the edge of the seat. The suit he wears, the folds where he leans, the tie. So official, and I'm so ragged. Who am I to be here? So ragged. But I read and they listen. And now I can't stop. I don't care. I don't care anymore. I just read.

I read.

I stop.

And the woman, she's happy. And the man. And a piece of paper. They give me this piece of paper. I can't see it, because...I can't see it. What if it's fake? What if I see it, and the words on it, what if they yell at me something? What if it's a trick? What. I don't know, my face. My

face in his chest. And my tears. They accepted. My tears. And he holds me, rocks me a little, and holds me. Words, spoken, some words, something about a contract. That piece of paper, a contract. And I press my hands, my book, to my heart. I press.

CUBE



If you took the wrong turn off the main forest trail, chances were, you could get lost. Anyone knew that. Dylan knew that too, but the need to go see what kinds of berries hung on that bush just a few paces away from the trail overrode his rational thinking. And who knows how to think rationally when you're ten and only had a couple hard-boiled eggs for breakfast? Pine needles crunched under his feet as he stepped in between roots and, avoiding raccoon holes, finally made his way to what looked like a blackberry bush. But the berries weren't blackberries. Number one, they were golden in color. Orange, almost. Number two, they were shaped a bit differently, rounder, as opposed to a conical in shape.

He reached out for one and promptly plopped it in his mouth. A burst of tart sweetness tickled his taste buds and he proceeded at grabbing another one, and another, and another.

"Dylan, where are you?" Angie's voice pulled him to a halt. He froze with yet another berry barely touching his lips. His freckled face grimaced in exasperation, summer sun dancing across his cheeks.

"I'm coming! Just a minute! I need to pee!" Lying was easy, as always, and Dylan hoped that his sister would let this fly. After all, it was not his idea to go search for mushrooms, and he was tired of being a sidekick to

her and her obnoxious friends. She dragged him with her only because she had to look after him while mom and dad were gone shopping. And, of course, on mom's insistence, she had to get him outside "to get fresh air and not be stuck all day long in front of computer." He hated these trips, always either serving as a punching bag for her soon-to-be-boyfriend or a repository for their jokes, starting from his red hair and ending with his jumpy gait.

"Well, make it quick then and get your ass over here. Got it?" Angie called. "Catch up, we're not waiting for you." A few choked laughs followed this.

"Sure!" That was directed towards Angie in a bright cheerful voice of a smaller agreeable sibling. "You can suck it." He added under his breath, and ventured further away, to the next bush.

It took less than a minute for Dylan to clear both of them, since there weren't many berries to begin with, but when he looked a bit beyond, there was another cluster of bushes in the grove, beckoning him. He shrugged his shoulders and decided that it won't do any harm if he quickly ventured out there. In a few minutes he was in front of them, grabbing at berries greedily. He took another step and saw a small incline lead to the base of the hill and continue into a clearing of sorts, with something dark standing hidden under the overgrown vines and more golden berry bushes. A hill? No, it was definitely not a hill, but a manmade structure covered with green.

"Whoa!" Dylan exclaimed and promptly forgot about his sister. "I think it's a house." His curiosity took over and he sprinted down, falling once and rolling on the grass, picking himself up and making his way to the object in question. The closer he got, the more certain he was it was, indeed, a house. A cabin, perhaps, or a shack, very small, maybe ten feet by ten feet by ten feet...

"Wait, it's a cube. Its roof is flat." He stood an arm length away from one of the walls, lush with greenery and completely hidden under a latticework of twisted vine twigs. He was afraid to touch it, afraid to push the leaves apart and see if it was made of wood or of metal, and if there is a door or a window in this wall. Instead, he circled the shack,

carefully stepping around, in between what seemed to be a tree wall planted by someone. They grew to close to each other and too close to the shack, leaving only a corridor of about six feet between themselves and the structure. On all four sides.

On the third circle Dylan worked up his courage and came up closer to one of the walls, to where he supposed a door might be, because it was facing the clearing from where he came, so it seemed a logical place to start. He slowly raised his arm, and, trembling, poked a finger quickly and retracted it. Nothing happened. He then pulled the leaves apart and saw that it is indeed made of wood, some old oak or pine, and painted orange and looking old, very old.

"This is so cool..." He muttered and looked back briefly, suddenly wanting the company of Angie and her friends like never before. "I'm not a coward, I don't need you." He turned back his head and licked his lips. "You will see. I can do it myself. I will find the door, look inside, and then I will run back and tell you what I found. All alone. You just wait."

Continuing to mutter. Perhaps more for his own comfort, Dylan gently hovered the palm of his right hand over the blanket over vines. Growing bolder, he tore at a couple of them, exposing wood, orange painted wood. The paint job was ancient, peeling off and hardly looking like orange anymore. Dylan's heartbeat spiked to double the usual speed, pounding in his ears. His mouth has gone dry, and still he couldn't tear himself away from the place. A little bit above the line of his eye sight, to the left, he saw what looked like a gap. Sure enough, when he traced it with his finger, right about the height of his waist, he found a door-knob, rough to touch. He grabbed it and turned.

"What the hell am I doing?" The hinges creaked its rusty song and the door opened an inch, held back together by the vegetation. A smell of berries hit Dylan's nose. No, it was better than berries, it smelled like berry pie. He expected a dank odor of mold and old wood, so this delighted him and he broke into a smile.

"I'll only take a quick peak..." He said, and stuck his face close to the gap, simultaneously thinking back to all the R.L. Stine's Goosebumps

stories and feeling his spine turn to ice at the idea that someone, worse, something, might grab his nose right this minute and...

He shrieked and without having taken a peak inside fell on his butt and proceeded to crab-walk on all fours, in an inverted fashion, suddenly terrified of the place. The door stood ajar, as if waiting for him to proceed, and the smell became stronger. Dylan waited a minute. No scary monster poked his head out of the shack, no undead being stumbled out, and Dylan's breathing returned to normal. He sat and brushed his dirty hands on his blue jeans, then licked the right one and smoothed his unruly red hair.

"Okay, okay, it's just a *fig*-ment of my imagination." Dylan loved new words and this was the perfect occasion to use the word *figment* which he learned from reading the other day. "I'm in a park. It's not even a real forest, so nothing creepy can happen here. Nothing." The insatiable need to know what smelled to deliciously inside got him on his feet and poking his nose inside again.

He took a deep breath and let it out, disappointed, grabbing the door and pulling it open halfway.

"That's it?"

Inside it was dark, but sheets of light broke in between the wooden slats of the walls and the ceiling, which wasn't so much a ceiling as it was a top side of a cube, because the interior was perfectly square in any way you looked at it. In the middle of the wooden floor lay a small colorful cube.

"What the hell is that? It can't be this thing smelling, can it?" Without thinking, Dylan took a step in and kneeled next to the object.

"A Rubik's cube!" He exclaimed and picked it up. "A scented one. Weird. I've never seen one like that before." The cube smelled deliciously, a fragrance that suggested it might be made out of the berries he just ate as opposed to plastic. And it was hopelessly scrambled.

"Whoever left it here, didn't know *nothing* about solving Rubik's cubes. But I do, ha!" Dylan said, without any premonition about how right he was saying it just this very moment, and how wrong he was saying it just this very moment. Because the next moment, he turned it

this way and that, then fixed his stare on what he decided will be the top, with yellow center, and twisted the side that had an orange center. The cube's orange face pivoted, and for a second Dylan felt like the floor moved, but he ignored it, too concentrated on the puzzle at hand. He clicked the whole side in place, and simultaneously the same click, but amplified tenfold, emanated from behind his back. By the time he turned his head around and realized what was happening, the entire wall behind him, the one that was painted orange and had a door, shifted, rotated, and locked itself in a new position, door shut.

"NO!" He screamed, dropped the cube and run up to the door. There was no door. In fact, the walls ceased to be wooden, they were plastic now, solid, with strange colored light oozing from each of them, all mixed up. Red, orange, yellow, blue, green, and white.

"Let me out! Let me out! LET ME OUT! ANGIE!!!" Dylan pounded on the walls, screaming his head off and finding himself on the throes of panic, his legs feeling weak, his knees growing soft, his eyes filling with water and spilling on his face in angry tears. "I said, let me out! Please! I don't want to die!" He pounded on each wall in turn, to no avail. The only effect was dull sounding thuds produced by his fists and his face smeared with snot as he tried to wipe off his face. Finally, he lifted his t-shirt, blew his nose into it and decided to think straight for a second.

"I don't want to die. I don't want to die..." He sniffled, involuntarily picking up the cube and turning it in his hands. "Wait a second. Is this..." Understanding dawned on him, and he looked around to confirm it, pointing at each wall and calling out its color, ending on the ceiling. "They're Rubik's cube sides, and I'm inside! So maybe all I have to do is solve it and it will let me out. Will you?" He asked out loud.

Silence greeted him. Dylan sat on the floor, cube in his hand, paralyzed, his eyes open wide in fear, multiple colors of light playing on his pale skin. His hands shook and his face got covered with a sheen of cold sweat. "If it's a joke, it's stupid." He said, thinking back to Angie and wishing with all his might to turn back the time and never venture out for those berries. "All right then. Let's see here."

He sniffed once more and set to trying to solve the riddle. Each time

he turned the face of the cube, a wall shifted and he got thrown around to it, because gravity shifted and whatever wall corresponded to the face he was pivoting, became the floor. At first he shrieked, but after a few of these tumbles he got used to them and didn't even mind hitting his head on the walls. After all, they appeared to be made of plastic and didn't hurt that much. Puzzle solving frenzy took over him, especially because his father bought him one recently and he was spending all his free time reading tricks online and watching YouTube videos on how to solve one. The toughest part was the last layer, and it took him what seemed like an eternity. At last, exhausted yet exhilarated, Dylan clicked the bottom face in place, and the floor shook him off to the neighboring wall, opening up into a door.

Fresh summer air gushed through it, and Dylan, beside himself, tossed the cube away and crawled out of the shack on all fours, crying and sobbing and continuing forward until he made it about ten feet away from the grove of trees at the bottom of the clearing. Then, and only then, did he turn his head back.

The woods looked at him, wondering what exactly was he staring at. The shack simply wasn't there. In fact, the trees that grew in a strange fence-like manner weren't there either, replaced by an irregular growth of furs. Dylan gasped, but was unable to say anything, was unable to even call Angie for help, wondering if it was maybe the next day, because the sun was as high as when it was at ten in the morning, when he and his sister with her friends took off into the woods from the parking lot. His tongue simply wouldn't move, and in this state he proceeded to crawl until he made it to the bushes with fragrantly smelling golden berries on top of the incline.

"Dylan! Dylan!" Multiple calls echoed around and somebody nearly tripped over him. He could only turn around and lay down on his back.

"Dylan, Christ, are you out of your mind? Where the hell were you when I was calling? Jesus!" Angie leaned over him, her face contorted in a genuine mask of concern. "Are you all right?" She added, her voice scared now.

"Angie-doll, did you find him?" Matt, her soon-to-be-boyfriend stepped out from behind her back. "Guys, over here!" He shouted.

"What happened? What--" Angie started.

"I... berries." Dylan said, pointing at the bush above, quickly weaving a story in his mind.

"You ate those??? Are you crazy? What if they're poisonous!" Angie exclaimed and proceeded to give out her botanical knowledge of all things weeds, which wasn't much.

Dylan tuned her out and turned his head to the left, his gaze tracing all the way across the clearing. He thought that maybe for a moment he saw the cube-house and the grove of trees around it. He blinked and it was gone.

I'll come here again. I'll tell Max and we'll come here together.

"Dylan, are you listening to me?" Angie's voice brought him back.

"Yeah, sorry." Dylan said. "But those berries were good. Very sweet. And so... orange. I wonder if... I wonder if there are red ones on the other side, and maybe blue ones that way..."

GULP



Darkness swallowed her. Even when she stretched out her fingers, spread them in a fan and moved them an inch away from her nose, still, she couldn't see them. It was like being blind without being blind, yet knowing that the dark milk around you is a complete absence of light that is only possible in an airtight bunker. Or a photographers dark room. Or a black hole. This was none of those, however. This, she realized, was the throat of a ghou, and she was being swallowed alive, in once piece, to be digested by his acrid juices.

"Fuck, I didn't know ghouls eat fairies," she thought and flapped her iridescent wings in a mad desire to make him choke or cough, or sneeze her out, slime and all. How she'd escape him didn't matter, she'd think of something, she'd... Her feet touched slimy muscles of his stomach opening's and she felt it yawn in a hungry grin, a ring of doom, and welcoming door to her ultimate dissolution. She tried to imagine how her golden hair would look as slime, fully digested, and... "No, that's NOT what I need to think about, I need to think about how the hell I'm going to get out of this thing!" She tensed her fingers and punched them into the walls of his esophagus with all her nail-manicured might. The ghou yelped and shuddered with a spasm of pain and fury. It sounded half-bark, half-cry. Then it swallowed. A gush of brine or beer

or some other nasty tasting liquid trickled on top of her head leaving no air to breathe and pushing her further down. The circular door opened with a sickening whoosh. "No!!!" She yelled, but it was too late. Muscular walls surrounded her like an endless velvet sack. The bad part, she realized was, she's definitely NOT going out of this thing. The good part? There was more light, she could see, and there were others here, in various stages of digestion, perched along the walls in sad rows of grey faces and clasped knees, moving slightly to the rhythm of smooth muscular contortions. They didn't even raise their eyes to look at her, staring at their own misery as if it was displayed right by their feet in some magical acid stomach-juice writing.

"Hi." She waved her hand. No response.

"All right. I'll just sit here. Is that ok?" She edged to the body sitting closest, a grey unidentifiable mass of a man who could be only an elf in his past life that retired into boring slumber. It didn't look like he cared whether or not he lived or died in the next hour or so. She made sure her knees didn't touch his and proceeded at wringing out her wings from the secreted enzymes tracing stomach walls. "Right," she said, to reassure herself that she, in fact, was still able to think and talk. "That means I live. I'll come up with a plan. This is not the end of the world. I've seen worse." She thought back to the time when she was swallowed by a gigantic flying gargoyle who took off and flew with her for five thousand miles, above the cloud, above...

"Miss, are you going to exit or not?" The retired old man punched his elbow into her unceremoniously, holding out his briefcase as if a parting tool to get through the crowd.

"Me? Uh...no, sorry, no. I'm...not." She squeezed back into breathing bodies, trying to give him space.

"Next stop: Central park. Doors to my right." Female recorded announcer blared into her ear. "I hate subways." She said under her breath, watching train-car doors close and attempting to get back into her daydream, but it was gone.

"Fuck."

FERRET'S LAIR



They tore at his whiskers. He squealed and bit in the tail of the one that hissed nearby, a few inches by the pipe that opened into gutters. The one nearby moved his massive body a second too late. They all will be doomed, from the tips of their pink tiny tones to the tips of their furry tails, to the very last hair at the very end of each of their ears. All three of them, destined to be swallowed by the vast expanse of slimy gluttony called WOOZEL LAND, ruled by the fattest of them all, with lines of skin rolling in undauntedly clusters on his neck, from brown to beige to a creamy type of white, the result of eating too many pellets of ferret food as proudly produced by Fake VOLE & Co.

He sighed and proceeded to chewing the tail, cleverly using his maneuver to distract the big one and knock the skinny one off balance, all in one swift move with a terrifying look, a special clucking noise as from an angry chicken. Annoyed and hissing, the big one rolled on his back, straining to pull the tail out of his teeth and escape into the gutter, before it would be too late. Before the impending doom would cover them all with its vast unpreventable vastness and its bleak naked non-furriness that instilled a feeling of absolute horror in anyone who happened to look upon it, except the one that ruled them all, of course.

Our friend suspected, they had some kind of a deal. Possibly, involving mice. Quite possible, still, involving rabbits or some other small rodents, the thought of which was so terrifying that he almost forgot to swallow and clenched his teeth on the big one's tail to which he slapped him with a paw and missed, because a sudden itch forced him to arch his fat body back and nervously but with pleasure scratch in that damned spot until it was gone.

The skinny one decided he's not part of the game anymore and shivered, perhaps thinking he could conveniently slink up the drain pipe, perhaps even have enough strength to grasp at its insides with his claws. He pulled back, puffed his tail and performed an extraordinary number of Weasel War Dance, complete with ten bounces, twenty flips, and then popping on the ground.

Our hero simply looked on, his little black eyes distant, contemplating. Perhaps there was a way out, perhaps the universe wouldn't collapse on itself, not yet. Perhaps the hand of wrath hanging over the edge of the impending doom was, after all, something else, an entirely different species. Perhaps...

The cage door opened and Molly dropped a piece of cooked chicken: "Here, fuzzies, come here. Molly's got a treat for you. Come on, get it. Come on, now!" She smiled her punctured eight-year-old smile, unaware of exactly what she has just interrupted.

The end.

THE CHASE



They were sprinting down a narrow road. The thing that chased them was nowhere in sight, but they could hear its distant footfalls.

"How much farther?"

"Another block."

They turned and rushed under the arch and through the door and down the steps and along a hallway to the dark ahead, and in the room in the dark they collapsed.

"That was close."

"You idiot."

"I know. I'm sorry."

They sat for some time without talking.

"Where to now?"

"You're asking me? You're the expert."

"Since when?"

"Since tonight! You said you know how it works! You got us in this mess! You get us out."

"I was only trying to help."

"Yeah, right. Big help that was."

The room was quiet. In the dark and the cold the water dripped and somewhere far ahead the rush of the water echoed.

"If you ever do this again, I'll scratch your eyes out. I'm dead serious."

"Then I'll bite you."

"Shhh! Did you hear that?"

"What?"

They listened.

"We can't stay here for long. It'll find us. Let's go."

They scrambled to their feet and slunk into the dark, and the sounds of water got louder, and the air got colder. They came upon a large stream of water that was churning and gurgling and rushing ahead, and the shapes on its surface bobbed and twirled and, deeper still, across the stream, many eyes were watching them without blinking. They started moving and the eyes disappeared, and there was only the scurrying of the feet and the scratching of the skin on the ground.

"We could have chased them, you know. Eat some."

"No thanks. I've had enough chasing for tonight. My head is hurting and my back is cut. If I won't stop bleeding I'll die by morning."

"So what do you suggest?"

"We could try that house."

"No."

"Why not? It has a hole in the door."

It took them the rest of the night to find their way out and, slinking in the shadows and crossings streets at the run, they came upon the house and stopped and peered inside.

"They're sleeping."

"You sure?"

"Let's go."

They squeezed through the hole in the door and crept up the steps, and in the living room they plumped on the sofa, stretched their paws, curled their tails and slept, unaware of a pair of eyes glowing green in the darkness.

"Young fools. I'll have to explain *dogs* to them in the morning."

The fat housecat curled in his fluffy bed and slept, and in his dream he saw his own first encounter with a dog, and in that dream he was victorious.

SLEEP WELL, PAPA



Papa came to me in a dream. He said the first time was in the bathroom. He was washing me.

“Why?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he said. “You were so little, so sweet. I started kissing you between the legs. You liked it.”

He said the other time I saw him running out of the bedroom, naked, erect.

I said, “Why are you telling me this? It's disgusting.”

He laughed and said, “What's so disgusting about it. Look.”

“I don't want to,” I said.

I woke up.

He came again, and he wouldn't let me go. He said, “I want to show you,” and dragged me with him to the bed. We struggled, and I lost.

My alarm started ringing.

I jerked awake and sat and breathed for a long time. The sheets were soaked.

I didn't go to work that day.

That night I set the alarm an hour back.

He showed up the moment I closed my eyes. “You like seeing me. That's why you keep coming.”

“Leave me alone,” I said. “I need sleep. I didn’t come here to see you. I don’t want to see you.”

“Tough luck,” he said.

He dragged me in an outhouse. It was dark and it stunk, and he suspended me over the hole and asked, “Are you scared?”

“Let go of me.”

I thrashed. He was stronger. He pulled off my pajama bottoms and pushed me in the hole. The chilly air goosed my buttocks. I sunk in halfway.

“You know what you have to do,” he said.

“I don’t care.”

“Oh, yes you do. How about this?” He pressed on my head.

“Don’t.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“I said, do it!”

And I did.

I woke up gagging, fell out of my bed and retched. The vomit steamed on the carpet. It was dark, two hours before the alarm.

The next night, I didn’t go to bed at all.

I drank three cups of coffee around midnight, and by four in the morning I was wide awake and grinning. I had won.

That day at work, I dozed.

He was there right away.

“Did you miss me?” he asked.

“Get out! Out!”

“I knew you’d come. It’s not like you have a choice.”

“I said, out. Get out of my dreams!”

“They’re your dreams, aren’t they? It means you want me in them.”

I stumbled home that night and fell asleep while eating dinner, my head on the table.

He didn’t even talk to me. He stripped me, shoved me in his car. It was freezing. I hugged myself. My teeth chattered like crazy.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

There was nothing to see. Only the dark and the white below it. Snow.

“Papa?”

“Be quiet.”

“You can’t keep me forever, you know.”

“You’re so naive.”

“It’s only a dream.”

He smiled. “Is it? Feels plenty real to me.”

I pinched myself and slapped my cheeks. “Wake up. Wake up, dammit. Come on.”

He stopped the car. “We’re here.”

It was our old house.

He hauled me out, pushed me to the door. “Get in.”

I took a step, another, turned and ran. I could run with my eyes closed. I knew every rock, every tree, every pit in the ground. The snow froze my feet. It didn’t matter. I was free. I’d just keep running until I woke up.

I never did.

Not that night, not the next, not the five nights after. He kept me in the house, locked in the upstairs bedroom. He fed me, let me use the bathroom, let me wash myself, always there, always watching.

After a week, I didn’t think it a dream anymore. It felt real. There were neighbors, cars in the street. Stray dogs. Some kids came to the backyard alley. They smoked cigarettes, had a snowball fight. I watched them from my window. I wanted to open it, shout to them.

Papa stood behind me, his hand on my neck. “You want to go out there and join them?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

He tightened his fingers.

“I’m not, Papa, I promise.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“But Papa—”

“Kneel.”

“But—”

“Kneel!”

I did. And in my head, I planned my escape. If I couldn't leave him, I'd take him with me.

The next morning, he came to my bedroom before I woke up. I felt his breath on my cheek.

“I know you're awake,” he said. “No use pretending.”

“I'm not sure if I'm awake or not anymore.”

“I thought it was your dream.”

“I don't think so now.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think this is real. I think you're real. I think you and I can live here together like you always wanted to, without Mama. What do you say?”

He looked at me. “I don't like this.”

“What?”

“You're playing games with me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You hate this. I know you, and I know you hate this. I won't let you go until I teach you to love it. Then you'll stay on your own. You will not want to leave.”

The prospect chilled me. “I want to stay.”

“Too fast.”

I paid for my lie.

That night I didn't go to sleep after he finished with me, wiped himself, and left. I lay under the covers, breathing. Then I had it. I crawled out of my bed and crept out of the room and down the stairs. He was in his bed, asleep. I climbed in with him.

“Papa.”

“Hmmm.”

“What are you dreaming about?”

“You.”

“What am I doing?”

“Eating dinner.”

And so, I went into his dream. I was in my kitchen. I was eating spaghetti, and Papa was sitting across the table, watching me slurp it up and chew.

“You want some?” I said.

“No, thank you. I’ve already eaten dinner.”

“There’s plenty more in the pot.”

“I said no.”

“Just trying to be hospitable.”

“You don’t need to be hospitable. It’s not your dream, it’s mine.”

“You sure about that?” I twisted my fork in the spaghetti and smiled.

He shifted in his seat. “What’s there to be sure about?”

“The dream. Whose do you think it is?”

“This is a pointless conversation.”

“You’re scared.”

“Finish your dinner.”

“Scared because you’re not sure, aren’t you?”

“We’re going.” He stood up.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying. I quite like it here. Nice kitchen. Nice food.” I scraped the last of the spaghetti to the edge of the plate and licked it off. “I want seconds.”

He understood then and made a dash for the door. I was already on my feet. I sprang after him and leapt on his back like a monkey.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” I said.

“Get off.”

“Tough luck, Papa.”

He rammed his back against the wall. It knocked the wind out of me. I held on.

“Nice try,” I said. “It’s not real, remember? It’s your dream. You want me here, don’t you?”

“Get off me.”

“You know what you have to do,” I said.

“No.”

"Suit yourself. I like it here."

"No!"

He ran out the door.

It was like when I was little, riding him piggy-back style. I curled my legs around his waist and held on to his neck. He panted hard, running himself into exhaustion. He tried shaking me off a few times. In the end, he gave up. We ran all the way to my work and past it, to the railway and to the woods behind it, stopping by the dark, slow river. There, he collapsed.

"You got what you wanted," he said.

"Not yet."

"What else?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

He looked at me.

I looked at my watch.

"No," he said.

I shrugged. "I'm in no hurry."

He was wheezing. "Let's go back. Just you and me. In the house. Wasn't it nice?"

"I didn't know the dead can dream," I said. "Didn't know their dreams were so boring."

A train went by, and we both looked up and watched it disappear into the haze.

He sat up. "The dead don't sleep," he said.

"In my dream they do."

"We talked about this." He got to his feet.

"Did we?"

I was fast.

It was the first time I used the trick he'd taught me. He once used it to fight off a man with a knife when he was a boy. I hunched my shoulders, tucked in my neck and ran at him, driving my head into his stomach. He doubled over. I pushed him in the river. It wasn't deep here, but the bank was steep, and he couldn't swim. I watched him struggling,

calling to me, watched him recognize the look in my eyes. That's when he sunk.

I woke up in my bathroom.

The water was running over the edge of the tub. It was cold. I put my hand in it, stirred it around.

"Sleep well, Papa. I know I will."

CTHULHU ON A TRICYCLE



Cthulhu looked three years old, and he was riding a tricycle.

Exactly three months ago, on a sunny April morning, his mother Bobbie Bungey had a strange cosmic dream before she woke up pregnant with a rapidly growing fetus in her belly. However it got there, she had no idea. The last time she had sexual relations was in January at her cousin's wedding with an inebriated individual by the name of Franky Frocatlev, whose face she couldn't remember (never mind how she met him or where he went since).

She tried getting rid of the fetus by taking a very hot bath and banging on her abdomen with both fists. When that didn't work, she tried suctioning it out with an inverted vacuum hose. No luck. Finally, she jumped off the roof of her loathsome unpainted wooden house that she had inherited from her long-dead parents. To her immense disappointment, instead of stalling the growth process, she only accelerated it, and upon landing on the bed of green, slimy vines below, with a stupendous cry and an unbearable pain in her pelvis, she ejected a hideous creature that plopped on the ground and with a rubbery squeak proceeded crawling to the pond where it dunked its octopus-like head and took great gulps of stale, cloudy water. At the sight of this horror,

poor Bobbie fainted. When she came to, the sun has set, and the baby was gone.

She found it in the kitchen, eating something looking suspiciously like a cockroach. It didn't exactly chew it; it simply slurped it up between the many wriggling feelers that comprised its face. While she stood in the door, holding on to the jamb for dear life and contemplating what to do next, the baby opened the fridge, pulled out a styro-foam tray full of chicken breasts, ripped open the plastic wrap with one sharp claw, and happily devoured the contents, then mopped up the juice on the floor by sticking its face to the linoleum and swishing it around in circles, snuffling in content. Bobbie worked hard on keeping the contents of her stomach down, then made herself turn the thing over. It felt cold and scaly to touch.

"It's a boy," she said. She'd forgotten she had a voice.

"Cthulhu fhtagn," the boy squeaked in response, and burped. A foul stench of putrefaction washed over Bobbie's face. No matter. She had been through worse before, when Dana Anne locked her up in the mortuary and turned off the light, and she had to grope her way out, bumping into naked corpses and sinking her hands into the hollows and cavities of their stiffened flesh.

Holding Cthulhu at a safe distance, she washed him, wrapped him in a blanket, and put him to sleep, and for the next three months, after quitting her nursing school on the pretext of uterine cancer, which was not far from the truth, fed him raw meat in increasing quantities, all the while watching with astonishment the process of his rapid maturation. What normal babies took a year to do, Cthulhu mastered in days. Today he was three months old, though he looked all three years, and on the last of her savings Bobbie bought him a tricycle to keep him from chasing Jenkin, the fat family cat she also inherited from her long-dead parents, which, so far, had miraculously managed to escape Cthulhu's claws, unlike the rats, the squirrels and the birds in the backyard.

Jenkin had seem to sense at once that the baby was evil. His fur stood on end the morning he returned to the house. He slunk into the bedroom,

hopped on the bed and hissed at the ugly, stinky thing that prominently occupied his pillow. Cthulhu clearly didn't appreciate such a rude awakening and reached for Jenkin's tail just as Jenkin snapped his jaws around Cthulhu's wrist. The noise that escaped the baby's throat caused Bobbie's heart to implode and her stomach turn a full three hundred and sixty degrees in an instant. By the time she reached the bedroom, hastily wrapped in a robe, her hair dripping, her feet leaving puddles of sudsy water on the creaky parquet, Cthulhu victoriously held Jenkin in one fist, dangling him upside down by the tail. It was a game to him, and the cat's pitiful cries were discordant against the sound of Cthulhu's inhuman cackling. Bobbie had no choice but to watch the feelers close around Jenkin's head, then his fat furry body, and then the paws trying to claw their way out in Jenkin's feeble attempt to preserve his feline dignity and his short, comfortable life. The last to go was the tail: Cthulhu slurped it up like a long spaghetti, and when his dark, beady eyes shifted to Bobbie and took her in, she didn't like the hungry gleam in them. Bobbie took a step backward, at which Cthulhu laughed so hard his scaly skin bristled, his feelers smacked, and in a jet of fetid, gooey drool, he disgorged the poor creature, half-alive with fright, right at Bobbie's feet. Then he slid off the bed and crept on all fours to the kitchen, without a backward glance.

Since this unfortunate incident, Jenkin's continued presence could only be attributed to the food and perhaps a need for revenge. Cthulhu chased him lazily and without much vigor, as he preferred smaller animals that didn't require him to stretch his mouth quite so, but Jenkin calculated his every approach, teasing the hideous offspring and jumping out of reach at the last possible moment. Jenkin's erratic behavior and acute distress roused the neighborhood cats to the danger lurking in Bobbie's house. They congregated on the walls, peering in from the height of eight feet at the lumbering, burbling oddity that took its pleasure in eating rats and afterward splashing in the muddy pond waters.

No toys interested Cthulhu; they always ended up in a heap of chewed up wood and broken plastic. The tricycle, however, was a stroke of genius. Bobbie has noticed that circular motion has mesmerized the boy, in particular, anything spinning. He watched her twirl the spoon in

her coffee, whisk the eggs, wipe the table in large, energetic circles, and when she peered closer at him, she thought she saw in his dark, brooding eyes the mighty eddying of the cosmos itself. The illusion lasted perhaps a fraction of a blink. It was enough. It gave her an idea.

The moment Cthulhu laid his eyes on the tricycle, he was on top of it and pedaling as though he's been doing it all his life. The result of this innocent purchase was unpredictable and escalated rapidly in the next twenty-four minutes.

Pale and trembling with both horror and excitement, Bobbie retreated from the boy happily riding around and around the backyard to her car, where she plopped in a seat with a stifled sigh and for some time stared at her ghastly reflection in the rearview mirror. She wiped the cold sweat from her brow, and nodded with the determination steeled by three months of suffering and many sleepless nights. She looked awful. She had lost twenty pounds, though in the back of her mind it made her deliriously happy. What wouldn't she give to see the look on Dana Anne's face! Alas. Her friends long ceased trying to reach her over the telephone, and she shopped at night to avoid bumping into anyone who might question her: she didn't have the answers. Today, she emptied the last of her savings account, and tomorrow she faced either starving while watching Cthulhu devour the rest of the food, or abandoning him, her first and only baby. Her hands were shaking and her eyes were wet, but she felt brave, and that was good. She turned the key in the ignition, let the car idle. She could do this. She knew she could.

Cthulhu stopped and stared at her through the windshield. Above him, on the thick wooden fence the cats sat motionless in a furry tableau. Bobbie waved to him weakly, and he continued riding around, each time coming closer to the car, until he finally stopped by the driver's door and said the only words that he has uttered since birth.

"Cthulhu fhtagn."

"Mommy is here," said Bobbie with the voice she didn't know she owned. "My little twinkie wants something?"

"Cthulhu fhtagn."

“All right. No need to be so impatient. Mommy is coming in a moment, sweetie pie.”

“Cthulhu fhtagn!”

The blow to the door was such that it shook the car, briefly lifting it off the ground. Bobbie startled; her heart pounded fiercely. She had neglected to bring any kind of a weapon, even a kitchen knife was better than nothing, but now it was too late. The strong, sharp claw has wrenched the door open, and the awful octopus-head was inches away from her heaving chest. The feelers writhed and tangled into a pulsing, undulating cluster, and with rising horror Bobbie surmised what her boy was demanding of her.

“Mommy will give you chicken, babycakes! Would you like some chicken?”

If it was possible to name that which was borne on Cthulhu’s face as an expression, then it was an expression of disgust accompanied with hungry gulping noises. Bobbie regretted her decision for the next eighteen minutes. She had no time to think; her conscience had taken a hike. She pushed the rubbery body off the tricycle, sprang out of the car, picked up creeping Jenkin off the ground and with a clumsy shove threw him at Cthulhu’s face. On instinct the hissing mouth and the extended claws clamped fast to the tentacles, and it seemed to Bobbie a victory. She was wrong, of course, and she should’ve known better. In a sickening wriggle of noisome feelers, first Jenkin’s head disappeared, then his body, then his paws. The last to go was the tail, and Bobbie knew this time Jenkin was gone for good.

She didn’t remember how she got back in the car. She sat staring—it was a sight to behold.

It seemed as though the entire feline population of the neighborhood has launched an attack on the hateful monster who ate their beloved Jenkin. Like delirious fiends they launched at him in a screeching, hissing mass of fur and limbs, the shrill cacophony of their mewling voices raising hairs on Bobbie’s neck and forearms. She dimly heard the neighborhood dogs join in on the madness, yowling and barking, and she

thought them stupid, just making noise, when the cats were the smart ones, going in for the kill.

Cthulhu laboriously spun around to greet the multitude of his adversaries. The thick rubbery appendages on his back spread out into a pair of bat-like wings, and his arms extended to the sides and upward, catching the first unfortunate animal in mid-flight. With frightening speed, the entire bundle of his facial feelers opened up into a hellish writhing flower, and in less than a second the whole cat disappeared, followed by a prolonged and satisfied belch. The green miasma issuing from Cthulhu's gullet obscured Bobbie's vision for a moment; when it cleared, the scene that presented itself to her eyes caused Bobbie to question the soundness of her mental state. The poor creatures had hardly any time for protest, whether by sounding their agony or by scratching at Cthulu's claws, which were infinitely more powerful and sharp than their furry appendages. One by one Cthulhu swept them into his noxious mouth, and the more of them he consumed, the faster he grew. Bobbie thought he might've passed for a ten-year-old, in the unlikely event some lost stranger chanced to look into her yard at this very moment and make such an observation before losing his mind.

On the twentieth cat Cthulhu grew another foot, and on the thirtieth another. When the earth around him was nothing more than a trampled slime of mud-soaked dying vines and the patches of fur scattered about and fluttering with each of his exhalations, when the last of the cats had been devoured, bones and all, and the fortunate few upon witnessing this terrible carnage were wise enough to flee, at that moment Cthulhu stood at his full height, and Bobbie knew that her life lay in her hands and in the power of her beaten up Volkswagen.

"Come on, baby. Don't fail me now."

She shifted the gears and floored the gas. For an unbearable second suspended in space and time, the tires squealed, and Bobbie's shaking hands slipped off the wheel under Cthulhu's questioning gaze. Then the rubber caught on the cracked, dusty asphalt, and the Volkswagen jerked and revved forward, slamming into the puzzled, abominable perversion that had once been lodged fast in Bobbie's uterine walls.

Bobbie never knew that the sound of tearing flesh and crunching bones could give such an immense satisfaction.

She stopped the car inches away from her garage, shifted in reverse, and backed over the grotesque remains squashed in a jelly. She rode over it at least a dozen times, ignoring the bumping and the nauseating, squelching sounds, making sure the thing was really dead.

It took her another four minutes to collect herself and step out of the car. There was no question that her beloved Volkswagen was ruined, but it was worth it. What remained of the demon was nothing more than foaming brine, the venomous stench hanging low above it in tongues of green vapor. Bobbie knocked her head back and laughed hysterically at the sky, the mental strain to keep herself sane at last loosening and letting go of her anguish. In another minute she was wiping her tears and catching her breath, and in another she heard a nasty sound akin to that of oozing froth and bubbling oil. She glanced at her feet and froze in utter, unexplainable horror. The nasty slush drew itself together drop by drop and recombined into a form she came to loathe: Cthulhu stood and spread his tentacles wide apart in what her reeling mind recognized as an attempt at a smile. She'd never seen what lay beyond; her son afforded her the pleasure. The ghastly hole was ragged, singed at the edges and covered with slime. It opened up into a darkness that was impossible to describe, as human language had no capacity to absorb the space so devoid of matter, so ancient, so cosmic. Bobbie glimpsed revolving stars and nameless skies, measureless aeons of time and nightmarish dreams. She was drawn to it, it called on her, it commanded.

"Cthulhu fhtagn," she heard herself say and fell to her knees.

It was a considerable effort for Cthulhu to swallow his mother. He labored hard at it, until even the heels of her shoes have vanished in his hellish maw. He straightened his back, a fully grown creature, and in two strides crossed the lawn to the pond. The waters seethed, rose around him, licked his pulpy body; the earth shuddered; what little noise there was stilled in the summer night. And from the depths of the churning black oily substance rose walls of Cyclopean architecture made from

greenish stone. The diabolic figure squatted ominously on what looked like a pedestal, reached down and caught an object from the ground before the vastness of rock bore him skyward on top of a colossal monolith; it obliterated the pond, Bobbie's house and most of the street.

Those who had enough time to see the queer, abnormal edifice before they were smothered, noted a peculiar silhouette of dragon-octopus form. It wasn't the fantastic shape of said monstrosity that had them enthralled, it was the incongruous activity it enjoyed.

It was riding a tricycle.

THE GHOSTLY WOMAN



She came out of the broken, woken castle, and the wish and the swish of her robes startled the birds that have settled in the marsh for the night, and the plaintive, sorrowful cries of the birds merged with the wailing, wobbling cries of the ghostly woman, and she soared above the grass and the dew that sparkled silvery like precious jewels, and she tossed back the mane of her diaphanous hair and her mouth opened and stretched until her face was gone, then her head, then she was blown apart by the wind that picked up her song over her dead and buried child, and so the song lived on in the echo of the night until the rosy hours of the morning, when a peasant girl with cheeks the color of the rising sun and with laughter that tinkled over the hills and beyond stepped onto the road with her pails of warm milk and sang another song—the song of searing, scolding love—and trotted gaily to her village to feed the milk to her ailing mother and to listen to her stories of the woman ghost who sings her song from the castle every night when the moon is full and the dew is silver and the child that is buried and dead is quiet in the earth, and whoever will see the woman, the ailing mother will say, will forever lose the gaiety and the gall for life, and the girl with her eyes wide open will listen like she does every morning, and will go on to do her daily work, and at night she will listen hard

for the song and will hear naught but the echo of the whistling, whining wind, and she will think her mother's mind was ailing more than her old, shrunken body, but that was not so, as that was the day when it wasn't how it always was, and it was that night that the ghostly woman appeared to the girl and she sang and sang until the girl had no more joy and no more rose in her cheeks and no more spark in her eyes or strength in her arms or wish to move her feet or to breathe and to taste sweet air on her tongue, and she lay where she stood, lay her head in the cool, soft grass, and she watched the dew dwindle to naught but a ghost of dew on the ghost of grass, and when the ghostly woman was done, she was joined by the girl, and together they sang their song—one of the dead and buried child, and the other of the child unborn—and they swung and strung their floating, flailing strands of hair, and they linked their hands, and set off across the fields and the woods in the quiet of the night, and when the next morning the ailing mother opened her unseeing eyes, she saw her child, her girl, in the moon in the sky that wasn't a moon but a ghost of the moon, and that wasn't a sky but a cry of the child, and it wasn't the grief over the life lost so soon, it was the joy over the life joined in earth to another who was lonely, so lonely in the dark and the cold, for the girl was with child that was conceived not of love but of grief, and the child was sweet company to the child in the earth, and together they sunk in the sunken eye of the dark, and when the ailing mother was gone, and the village, and the grass, and the trees were dead, there was still the song sung about the broken, woken castle, and the ghostly women—one old and one young—joining hands in the night and parting winds with their robes and circling, circling over the birds, and their sorrowful cries were for once filled with joy over the dead and buried child and the child unborn, as they were no longer alone and cold and still in the night, and when you read this tale, and the moon is high and the grass is wet and dew sparkles silvery like precious jewels, close your eyes and listen for the ghostly woman song, and sing back to her, and she'll know she's not alone.

FEAR



She was afraid not so much of the dark as of the noises it made. Or of who made them. Or didn't. Or why.

She was afraid of the soft, of the gentle, of the scratching scrapes of a nail. Did she imagine a nail? Could it be something else? Something more brittle? More sharp? More of bone than of flesh? More of hunger than of a simple itch?

She was afraid to stretch her hand into the dark of the void and to feel what it was or wasn't or why. She was afraid she wasn't alone, and of not knowing it she were closer to death or to life. And if the crack to her left was the crack of knuckle, or if it was the crack of a twig. And if the creak to her right was the creak of the jaw or the creak of the floor under feet. And if the drip of the water that wet her feet—if it was warm for a reason that it was no water but blood, or if the breath on her neck was the breath of a beast or the breath that escaped from her throat.

She was afraid to move and afraid not to move, and if she could, she'd become a stone. And if she were a stone, she'd roll and roll until she hit the wall, and she'd know at least she wasn't here always alone. There was someone who made it—the wall, the floor—someone who

thought she would think she's doomed. But she saw a way out. Yes, it was easy. The wall. The wall. The wall.

And so she stood on legs that she no longer felt, and she bent her head, and she ran until her head hit the wall. And so she greeted the wall like a stone on stone, until the wall greeted her back. And the wall, as she knew, was stronger than her, it was wet and warm and sure. And it creaked and it cracked, and the sounds were sharp, they bore deep into ears and they swirled in her eyes, and the bones, she knew, were hers.

When she stretched out a hand and felt her legs, she couldn't find her feet. They were gone. They were gone. They were gone.

And then she knew that she wasn't afraid before, because it wasn't the end. Not yet. And now it was.

So when the sounds came back, the scrapes, the creaks, she was no longer dead, she was alive, alive, if for the moment before she was gone, and so she reveled in screaming and roaring and thrashing and living. Living. Li—

THE ACCIDENT



The jelly didn't look like jelly and it wasn't jelly at all but the bloody brains that have squeezed out of the broken skull and squirted as far as the other side of the road on which we stood after stopping the car when we saw a shape laying in the road like a dark mass of something that could be human or could be animal or could be a pile of clothes that fell off a truck in a hurry and got rolled and kicked by the tires of the passing cars which don't frequent this road often as it's close to the mountains and remote and cold this time of the year when your usual tourists prefer to sit at home and drink beer and watch TV and in general have a good time as opposed to walking outside in the middle of the night in the dark with no destination in mind like this poor wretch must have done and met his untimely death either because he didn't see the approaching truck or maybe he was intoxicated and didn't care or even tried running away from it and didn't make it or was crossing the road which begs the question as to why he would do that and where he was going from one side of the woods to another that loomed over the road forming a long black tunnel with all of its lights out or broken and the few lights flashing in the road only those of cars the first of which was ours and after a few more and some more over time punctuated by the screeching tires and slams of the doors and the

intakes of breath over the horrific sight that to some might've been horrific but to us really wasn't all that bad considering it wasn't a man anymore but simply a dead body with its face mostly gone and the back of its head cracked and the jelly that was his brains squished and smeared over the asphalt and the blood pooling around him in a long black puddle with some tendrils reaching as far as our feet and when someone walked out and started asking questions we were already by the body looking him in the face and feeling for the pulse just to be sure though it was perfectly clear he was dead and maybe for over five minutes already and no vehicle that has done it in sight with the driver probably freaking out or not freaking out at all but simply thinking he has hit an animal like a deer or a wolf or even a fox as there are lots of foxes in these woods and they're not shy at all and like to poke their snouts out of the bushes and watch the cars go and wait for a break and then trot-trot very fast across and disappear on the other side of the road and who knows if you ever see them again but that was no fox but a man and he was dead and soon there would be police and an ambulance and the hustle and the bustle of the gawkers trying to get close and get pictures for their own entertainment or for tickling their fear and we both thought the same thought and looked at each other and decided to give him the last of his peace and cover him from a blanket that was actually for the kids to sleep under when we got to their grandma's but they didn't say a word when we took it out and covered the poor wretch and then stood there and contemplated what to do with all that blood that still trickled untouched across the road and acted some diving line making the cars on both sides of the body stop and form this oasis in the middle of the road like some no-man's land where everyone stood by this bloody line and a certain distance away from it that they have somehow agreed upon not to cross and watched us like were authorized to do what we did which was cover the man with the pale blue blanket that looked gray in the lights of our car and call the ambulance and explain to them what happened and then listen to them that it would take them a while to get up that mountain road what with it being past midnight and them asking for us to wait and stay with the

body on the occasional some wild animals decide to make it into a snack and us agreeing to it and standing guard by the body taking care not to step on the blood and fielding questions that were all of the same variety of who the man was and did we see him being hit and how long ago it happened and is the police coming and aren't we frightened a bit and wouldn't it be better to move him and us calmly responding no to most of those and glancing at the rear passenger windows in our car were we could see two noses pressed to the glass and two pairs of eyes staring at the body then at us then at the body again then at each other and then finally the rear door opened and out they came and slowly stepped up and looked and we told them this was part of life and there was nothing to be afraid of as death was a way for life to continue and it was all like a wheel and they listened and nodded thoughtfully and the spectators nodded as well and some murmured something and then left and went back to their cars and then at last we were left alone just the four of us and the dead body of a man who didn't know he was going to die this night and who will never tell us what he did on this desolate mountain road crossing from one side of the woods to another and who had dreams just like we had and whose dreams were now squished on the road into a jelly that didn't even look like jelly.

GALINA IVANOVNA'S TERRIBLE FATE



Galina Ivanovna had lost her head. She hadn't noticed it at first. Her glasses were missing, as always. She looked under her bed. They weren't there. She looked in the kitchen. They weren't on the table. She couldn't find them in the bathroom. She couldn't find them by the television. She couldn't find them anywhere! What devil was playing these tricks? Then she touched her head. Perhaps her glasses were there? Only there was no head. Her hand touched an empty space. Galina Ivanovna frowned. She had taken her medication. She was still in her sane mind. Lyudmila Sergeyevna said she was "crystal clear." Not that it meant anything specific. Galina Ivanovna shuffled to the mirror. But the mirror wasn't there. What the devil! It was there in the morning! Galina Ivanovna touched the dark, brown wallpaper. Perhaps she moved it to another spot? Yes, that was it. She must've forgotten. She was almost ninety, after all. People her age forgot things. It was natural. Encouraged, she shuffled around her apartment. The mirror was nowhere to be found! Undeterred, Galina Ivanovna thought of a solution. The small mirror in the bathroom was long gone. That was no obstacle. She opened the faucet. She'd fill the sink with water! She'd look in it! She'd see! But no water would come. She twisted the faucet left and right. It coughed up brown liquid. Galina Ivanovna

wondered then. How could she see it without eyes? Surely she wouldn't be able to? The eyes were on her head! Once more she reached up. But once more it didn't work. Her arm was gone! And the other arm! Both of them! Galina Ivanovna sat on the bathtub. Now it was too much. Really, it has gone too far. Soon she'd lose her legs! She looked down at herself. Sure enough, her legs were gone. They simply weren't there! Galina Ivanovna moved to get up. She fell on the floor. She crawled out of the bathroom. "I'm a caterpillar," she thought. "I will move like they do." She crawled to her room. Her wardrobe was polished to shine. She'd see her reflection! Of course her wardrobe was gone. And her room was gone. And her apartment was gone. Galina Ivanovna wondered where she was. How could she think without her head? What was there left of her? "Crystal clear," she heard Lyudmila Sergeyevna say. "I always said she'd outlive us all." There they were! All of her girlfriends! But why were they crying? And whose coffin was that? And who lay inside? Then Galina Ivanovna finally found her head. There it lay, the nasty thing. It winked at her, too. "Lost something?" it said. Galina Ivanovna wanted to kick it. She had nothing to kick it with. So she threw herself at it. At last they reunited! Galina Ivanovna closed her eyes, at peace. She was feeling "crystal clear."

MATRYOSHKA'S SPECIAL BOY



Sasha Zakharkin was eleven years old, and he was sitting in the corner of his and his mother's communal apartment room, playing with his matryoshka doll. He was a little plump for his age, and the boys in the yard never passed on a chance to laugh at him, call him nasty names, and sometimes even throw rocks at him, but he turned a deaf ear to their insults. In fact, this week they were a little afraid of him, and he knew that and cherished that knowledge. It was no accident, of course. This week he was a special boy. He had his matryoshka, and she could hide inside her skins better than any of those dirty, loudmouthed boys could. She was magical, he knew that the moment he found her in the garbage pile, and he was the only boy in the whole of Moscow—that's what matryoshka told him—to learn how to take off the skins just like she did. She was going to teach him, she said. And Sasha politely nodded, took matryoshka home, washed her in the dirty, aluminum sink, the soap grime still caked on it from their neighbor Varvara Andreevna washing her undies, and he cleaned matryoshka properly, wiping her many smiling faces with his hanky, and then settled in the corner of their room, on his special, padded chair by his desk—his mother was afraid he'd bruise himself, her dear little boy—and watched the little ruby-red painted lips move and give him instruc-

tions on where to cut the skin, and how to twist it so it would open, and how to pull it off whole and find the next matryoshka inside, and the next, and the next, until only one remained—the smallest one, the little heart.

The next morning, after Mama prepared for Sasha his special breakfast—thick cream-of-wheat and a hearty slice of white bread with butter sprinkled with sugar—Sasha was walking across the yard to school, his matryoshka safely tucked into his school bag, the yard was in an uproar. There were two militiamen talking to the hysterical old lady, babka Darya, who was wailing over her dog Mishka, presumably killed by some madman, which of course wasn't true. Everyone knew that babka Darya was crazy. No one even remembered how old she was anymore, and how old her dog Mishka was—they seemed to be the permanent features of their yard, always there, shuffling around, the pair of them.

Sasha skirted the crowd and overheard two boys talk to one another, when he walked by them.

"The skin just pulled off like a sock, I tell you. I saw it myself," one was saying.

"No way!" The other one whistled.

"Pioneer's honor," the first one saluted. "Cut in two parts, too. I tell you, it's Saveliy the bum. He wanted to eat Mishka."

"No way!" said the other one again.

Sasha smirked and walked on, and he had a great day at school, with his matryoshka at his side. She whispered to him the whole time, congratulating him on good practice, and teaching him how to open the next skin. It would be harder this time, she said. He had to be brave. Sasha promised her he would be brave. He was a big boy. He was turning twelve this summer. How could she doubt him? He was special! Matryoshka fell silent and wouldn't talk to Sasha for the rest of the day. Sasha understood to never doubt matryoshka again and act superior. He was afraid she'd never talk to him again, but she did in the evening, when Mama started snoring lightly on her bed, and Sasha quietly climbed out from under his blankets, carefully dressed, picked up his matryoshka and quietly left the room.

It wasn't until three days later that the body of babka Darya was found. It was cut in half. It was skinned, too, and as the excited boys told Sasha, forgetting their fear and hate of him, talking one over another, it looked like someone tried to peel off her flesh, only it got stuck to her old bones and wouldn't go, or maybe he was interrupted. The militiamen chased the boys away, and they didn't get to see much more, but it was a horrible sight, all right, for poor Tatiana Borisovna to stumble on in the morning when she took out the trash. Wasn't she sick after that? And why didn't she scream? All women scream, don't they? Tatiana Borisovna was Sasha's mother, and he pressed his lips together and turned away from the boys. He wouldn't tell them how Mama cried and swallowed pills and cried more all day today, and how annoyed he was at her and how he wanted her to stop, but it wasn't time yet. Matryoshka said he had to learn to do his job better, and do it on a special day, so he'd remember it later. Sasha agreed.

In the next month Moscow's district Perovo was gripped with fear. The newspapers were quiet, but people talked, and soon Mama forbade Sasha to go to school and locked their door, only leaving for necessities, like milk and flour and sugar. There was a killer at large, a sick, sadistic killer. Three bodies were found so far, all dumped onto garbage piles, and all cut in half and scraped clean to the bones, that's what some people said, and some others said it only looked like their flesh was scaped off, but it was really was peeled off, and very cleanly, too. What kind of a man could do such horrid thing? And why didn't someone see him or heard something? Something evil was afoot. Mama called the school and told the director that her special little boy was sick with bad flu and wasn't coming to school for the next few weeks, and who knew, maybe even next few months. Sasha quietly listened to Mama drone on in the corridor, speaking loudly into the communal phone, and he smiled, his matryoshka at his side. Tomorrow was the special day he was waiting for. Tomorrow Papa was coming home after chasing bad people across the whole country and putting them into prison—Mama called them bandits and worried sick over Papa getting shot—and tomorrow at last Sasha would show Papa that he was a special boy, deserving of Papa's

love. Papa would never be ashamed of him again, of his soft girly manners and of his plumpness, he would walk with him across the yard proudly, telling everyone who it was his boy who fooled the whole of Moscow. It was his boy who could shuck anyone's skins like the skins of matryoshka and who could find the smallest matryoshka inside, the still-beating heart. His special boy, Sasha Zakharkin, was better than all of militia. His special boy could hide his inside those skins like no one else! Yes, that's right! Would they like to see? And he'd show them.

That night Sasha slept well, and after eating his special breakfast he complained of bellyache and trudged to the communal bathroom. He heard the bell ring in the apartment, heard Mama open the door and call out, "Sasha! Sasha! Papa is here." Sasha smiled. Now he'd show him. Now he'd know. He looked at his matryoshka, and she gave him his last instructions, and he got to work.

FOR THE LONGEST time the occupants of apartment number twelve on the third floor on Snapperskaya street, 7, couldn't talk of the terrible tragedy that befell the Zakharkin family that day, but one thing was clear to them and to the whole district of Perovo. After this the killings had stopped. Tatiana and Arkady divorced, of course, and who would blame them? When they broke in the door to the communal restroom, there was Sasha all right, only he was cut in half, stacked like a matryoshka: his skin first, then his flesh, then his bones, and then in the middle, in the puddle of blood on the dirty, tiled floor, lay his still-beating heart—his present to his Papa, and right next to it his matryoshka doll, smiling.

MY NEW MOTHER



My mother left one day and didn't return for one month. After two weeks grandma has decided she was killed in an alley one night and wasn't coming back, and she told me about my mother's sins, screaming into my face. I was eight and didn't understand why spreading legs made one a whore—I spread legs in gymnastics to do splits and to stretch my muscles—and I didn't understand what a whore was. I asked grandma but she yelled at me and put me in a corner and told me to stand there until she said I could come out. So I stood there, and I had nothing to do, and I started peeling off the wallpaper, and behind the wallpaper I saw a hole the size of my finger. I put my finger in, and someone on the other side grabbed it and pulled me through the wall. I don't know how it worked. One moment I was in the corridor, and another I was in a circus, in the middle of the arena. A woman stood in front of me, and she told me she's my mother. She didn't look like my mother, she looked like a gymnast, in a leotard and slippers. I said I had a mother, and that she was coming back. The woman laughed, and her laughter scared me. She said the other mother left for a reason, and that reason was me. I started crying. Grandma told me I could come out of the corner. I opened my eyes, and I was back in the room, and the wallpaper was back in place.

That night I couldn't sleep. I thought I heard music coming from the behind the wall. It was drums and trumpets and horns, like the music they play in a circus. I slipped out of bed and padded into the corner. The strip of the wallpaper curled away from the wall, and I saw light coming from the hole. I put my finger inside, and someone gripped it and dragged me in. A group of acrobats stood in the arena. They lifted the woman and threw her in the air. She somersaulted and dropped back into their hands, and they put her down. She greeted me and asked me if I wanted to stay with her, as she was my mother. I said I couldn't stay, because my grandma would miss me, and I had to go to school tomorrow. The woman didn't listen to me. She laughed and pushed me away. I fell and hit my head. I rubbed it, sat up, and found myself in bed, next to grandma. She was snoring.

Day after day I thought about the woman and wondered if she'd be a mother to me like my mother never was. I could learn to jump and somersault. I did gymnastics, and the trainer praised me for strength and flexibility. I could perform. I could quit school and travel with the circus and make money. And grandma would stop putting me in the corner and telling me about mother's sins—to spreading legs she added stealing, lazing about, and drinking.

I made up my mind to wait for school to end on June first and leave with the woman and the circus. On May thirty-first mother came home. She sat on the bench in the corridor without saying a word. I walked up to her and spoke to her, but she didn't answer. She turned away from me. I reached out to her, and she pushed me aside and walked to the room and closed the door. I tried not to cry, and I followed her and put my ear to the door. I heard music. The drums, the trumpets, the horns. It was the circus! I opened the door, and in the corner I saw my mother and the woman on top of her. She was strangling her with a scarf. I fought the woman. She pinned me to the floor with her knee. I clawed at her legs and ripped her nylons, but she kept strangling mother, and then mother died. She stopped breathing. I heard the silence, and I lunged at the woman, but she laughed and picked me up like I weighed nothing and took me through the wall to the circus. I don't know if grandma

misses me or not, but I don't miss her or mother. I got used to performing. I get praised by mother. Yes, I call her mother. We travel through walls. When there is a girl or a boy standing in a corner for punishment, we wait until they start peeling off the wallpaper, then we grab them. You know what happens to them. I don't have to tell you. We take care of them. There are twelve of us now. We perform. And we have one mother, the gymnast. She is not like our mothers. She doesn't leave us. She is with us day and night. Our mothers left us, and we don't miss them. If your mother left you too, go into the corner and peel off a bit of wallpaper. We'll take care of the rest.

MARYANNE'S BODY WAKES UP



Maryanne sunk her hands into the sudsy water, fished out the sponge and swiped it over the plate in large, firm circles. She didn't feel old at her fifty-three years, particularly not so since Arthur has left her for that young number in his office, supposedly revived by her to his vigorous, horny self. Maryanne smirked. She used to not even allow herself to think such a vulgar word: horny. For over thirty years she has worked in the King County library and not once has she thought of any of those words that didn't precisely name her or her husbands—ex-husband's now, she reminded herself—anatomical parts and the things he demanded of her in bed. She was amused by his acrobatics, with froth at his mouth just like the bubbly froth in the sink and on her hands. She lifted them out. Maybe she has missed out on life, after all. There were women who could experience pleasure doing those very same acrobatics. Perhaps she ought to explore that. Yes, tomorrow at the library she'd look for a book that would tell her about female orgasm and the mechanics of it. Though why she'd need to bother herself with this, she couldn't fathom. It was nice and quiet in the house now that Arthur was gone, and she could at last enjoy her sleep in bed alone.

Maryanne lifted out the plate, rinsed it off in cold water, stacked it

on the rack, and got to washing the pot. But her thoughts stubbornly returned to their very first night together, after Arthur proposed, and she accepted, and they were married before she could blink. It was the evening after the wedding. They were getting ready for bed. Maryanne took off her bridal dress without Arthur's help. She prided herself since she was a little girl on being independent, and she knew he liked it. But when she attempted to put a nightgown over her head, Arthur circled his arm around her waist and touched her breast. Maryanne was surprised. Why would he touch it? It was something babies did, as she read in books, when you fed them milk. She could imagine herself having babies. Her mother told her children were the plague of relationships (meaning her and her late brother George) and the cause for her misfortune of suffering their father until his death. If not for them—children—she would've left long ago. Maryanne was eight, and she decided right then to never have children of her own, and for that she knew she should never allow her husband to stick his penis into her vagina. That's what the book showed—the one she found in the attic, from her mother's medical school days. Maryanne was appalled to learn that is was how her mother must have gotten her, Maryanne, in her belly. It was rather disgusting. And now here was Arthur, not only touching her breast but sucking on it like a baby. Really, it was too much! But Maryanne let him do it. She was going to be a good wife, and she knew letting him use her body in a number of unpleasant ways was part of it. She'd be fine with this if not for the pain.

Maryanne turned over the pot to dry on the rack and got to washing the cutlery, squeezing the sponge thoroughly over every fork and knife, and remembering how Arthur's penis entered her, just like a knife, and how she bit on her knuckles to stop herself from crying out. After the first year passed, it got better, and after five years he only needed it once a month, then once in two months, and finally, in the last decade of their marriage, barely once a year. Maryanne was only happy he left her alone. She could read her books at peace and not be bothered. When he was leaving, she wasn't even sad but relieved. He felt guilty and apologized, and left her the house and the car. She wasn't going to press him

for either, but she accepted, gratefully. That meant Luigi—their cat—was staying with her too. He sat now in the kitchen door, watching her curiously. Because when Maryanne recalled their first married night and those motions Arthur was performing over her prostrate body, a curious sensation flooded her, a certain warmth between her thighs. Maryanne blushed. Why, it was her vulva! Goodness, it felt like it was filling with blood, getting hard. And now her heart! It was beating faster!

Maryanne dropped the forks in the sink and fled the kitchen to the couch. She'd never interrupted her dishwashing so carelessly before, and she was ashamed. But even more she was ashamed of her body. What on earth was it doing? She must stop this at once. This would only complicate her quiet life. But her body had other ideas about it, which Maryanne was about to find out the next morning.

THE CAT AND THE PIGEON AND THE DEAD CROW



Marquis

Marquis the cat had found a dead crow splattered on the street and was about to eat when Plato the pigeon landed right next to him, practically dropping out of the sky on his head—Plato had such talent—and told him it was a nasty thing to do, to eat dead things, particularly a dead crow, particularly for a cat! No self-respecting cat should ever resolve to eating dead things, and then Plato fell silent, looking under the Carlsson’s fence. Marquis looked too and saw Choco—the love of his life, the chocolate colored cat who drove him to strange, loud meowing noises at night when he felt he couldn’t be apart another day from her—and Marquis of course had to show off, though he knew Choco would hardly care to give him a glance. He pranced to the dead crow, nudged it with his paw and in one theatric swipe kicked it in the air and caught it between his jaws, at the same time biting off its head with what he hoped was a startling, satisfying crunch. The head was easy to bite off because, as it turned out, the crow wasn’t particularly fresh. It probably had spent a good couple day in the sun, if not more, and Marquis spit it out, wrinkling his nose and sniffing at it, to which Plato remarked in a sad tone—Plato always talked in a sad

tone because he was a self-proclaimed philosopher and pessimist as there was nothing optimistic in this life except shitting on people's cars, which was Plato's therapy when he felt particularly gloomy—that he told him so and that of course Marquis never listened to his best friend and why Plato even bothered he didn't know. To which Marquis replied with a puzzled expression on his snout that what else could a cat eat if not dead things? After all, even if he ate a crow alive it would eventually die in his stomach, so what was he to do, eat dandelions? Plato said nothing to that and waddled off, offended. He had this sulky look to his feathers that Marquis recognized, and for the rest of the night Marquis practiced shitting on Carlsson's new Land Rover to make Plato happy, because although Plato sat way high on the cherry tree above the car, pretending he wasn't looking, he was, and Marquis could practically feel Plato's pigeon heartbeat in his ears, the one of pride at his pupil, when Marquis finally succeeded on laying a turd right on the windshield, a great surprise for Cosmo Carlsson tomorrow morning. And anyway, what kind of a human names another human Cosmo???

Plato

PLATO THE PIGEON was already feeling sad for the whole world this morning—it was his job, after all, otherwise who else would feel sad for the world? Not Marquis, certainly, not that silly young cat always excited and happy about the silliest things. No serious thought in him, not one. And look at him now. What is he sniffing? A dead crow? That was abominable in Plato's opinion, and he swooped down from the tree practically on top of Marquis's head as it was the only way to get his attention. But then of course when Plato tried to explain why this practice was nasty, the boy has seen that cat girl Choco. He wrote her poetry. Imagine that! What silly romantic! Plato didn't believe in romance, there was no love, just one big encompassing sadness as big as the sky. What was the point of this showing off now? He bit into the nasty thing, the dead crow! Oh, Plato couldn't stand it anymore. Such silly theatrics—no class, no style.

Plato remarked that he didn't know why he bothered teaching Marquis anything if he didn't listen to him anyway. All this wisdom of life, wasted! Marquis of course tried telling him that he'd have nothing else to eat if he gave up on eating dead things. Such nonsense, Plato thought. What about seeds? It seemed Marquis had read his mind and made fun of him by saying he'll start eating dandelions. Of course, Plato couldn't stand for that and flew up into the cherry tree. Really, it was too much. He tired very hard to ignore Marquis scrabbling around on Carlsson's new Land Rover, but when he looked again, oh miracle! For once Marquis listened to him! He laid a beautiful turd right on the windshield! Plato's small pigeon heart swelled with pride. What a great surprise it will be for Cosmo Carlsson tomorrow morning! And anyway, what kind of a human names another human Cosmo???

LUPINE PRINCESS



The girl looked inside the lupine flower and saw two tiny horses shake their long purple necks, and in the royal carriage made of purple petals she saw a tiny princess in a silky, lavender frock, her head so small it was barely bigger than the head of a sewing needle the girl's grandmother used to darn her socks.

"Hello," said the girl into the flower.

The princess looked up at her and threw her tiny hands over her tiny mouth. What a strange, gigantic creature was that looking at her so unashamedly? At her, the Lupine Princess on her way to the ball of flowers? What would she do to her? Oh! The Princess quailed. She'd heard many terrible stories from the other Lupine Princesses—there was in every flower—though she was the most beautiful of them all, she knew, and at the ball she'd be a success. The Bellflower Princes were coming to dance with the Lupine Princesses, and the Rose Ladies were going to judge them. Whoever danced best got to kneel in front of the Tiger Lily King and his wife, the Queen Calla. Oh, it'd be most dreadful if she were late! She could miss her Prince! One of those magenta Lupine Princesses might snatch him. They had no pride, those from magenta lupines. And the yellow ones were frivolous. And the pink ones were empty-headed, every one of them.

Only the white ones were a decent sort. Of course, the royal purple blood ran only in the purple Lupine Princesses. This creature ought to know that, big as she was. This creature ought to show Lupine Princess respect.

“Out of my way, filth!” cried Lupine Princess. Or Lupy, as her mother and father lovingly called her before their death, when another nasty creature, the one with a leathery, wrinkly face, cut them down with a sharp knife. “Out of my way, nasty thing!”

The girl heard a kind of a very faint peep. She put her ear to the flower. Nothing. She peered inside again, closed one eye. “Did you say something?” It looked like the princess was talking. She opened her tiny mouth and waves her arms agitatedly, until she knocked herself off her seat. “Oh dear,” the girl said. “How can help her back up?” The idea came quickly. Grandma’s needles. “Hang on!” she girl said to the princess who now flailed on the floor of the carriage, helpless in her many lavender skirts. “I’ll be right back. I’ll help you get up!” She darted into the blue-painted shack where grandmother liked to do her sewing, snatched a needle right out from under her nose—grandma was always dewing something, and today it looked like a purple dress, with bit of fabric and thread and needles strewn all over her sewing table—and sprinted back to the flower, though it was really only a dozen paces away.

“Here!” she put the needle inside the flower and tried to catch on the princess’s frock to help her get up.

The princess watched an enormous spear poke at her, and she screamed. The horses heard her scream and panicked. The carriage rocked, buffeting the princess from side to side, and soon she lost all her bearings, no longer able to tell up from down or left from right. All was truly lost now. She would be late. Her Prince would be taken. Her beautiful frock would be crinkled, and hair hairdo would be all askew! Oh, why did it have to happen today of all days? Why not on some other day, when there was no flower ball to go to?? The princess wailed and pounded on the floor with her fists, when suddenly the rocking stopped and she found herself hanging in the air, then softly lowered down on

her seat. She rubbed the tears from her eyes and looked at the creature with astonishment.

“There you go,” said the girl to the princess. “I’m sorry if I scared you. You look like you’re in a hurry somewhere. Can I help you get there?” She heard another faint peep, and she closed her eyes and put her ear to the flower and listened very hard. And then she heard faint words. “Flower ball.”

“You’re going to a flower ball?” she asked the princess.

The princess nodded.

“Where is it?”

The princess pointed to the horses, and they neighed and reared their necks. The girl turned and looked behind her. Well, of course! The horses’ heads were pointing to the large flowerbed in the middle of her grandmother’s garden. That’s where the ball was. That’s where she’d take the princess! But how? She’d have to cut the lupine flower for that, and then the princess would die! Oh no! She couldn’t do that. She stood looking at the princess who was now busy fixing her hair and looking at herself in a tiny mirror. Perhaps there was a way. Perhaps she could replant the flower? Put it right in the middle?

“Lupy! Lupy! Where are you?”

“I’m here, grandmother!” Lupy answered. And when she looked inside the flower, the princess was gone. And the horses. And the carriage. It was just the flower.

“Grandma!” Lupy stomped to the shack, her hands on her hips.

“What now?” Grandma looked at her above her spectacles, needles stuck between her lips.

“You killed the princess!”

“I killed a princess? Well then. How awful of me. Tell me how I did it.”

“You...you...you called me, and...” Lupy couldn’t find words.

“What princess was it? Can you tell me more?”

“The Lupine Princess! Her carriage is in one of the lupine flowers. And she was going to a flower ball. And dance with a Bellflower prince. And now you killed her!”

"I'm very sorry," grandma said. "Perhaps we can revive her? How about some royal drops?"

"Royal drops?" Lupy's eyes widened.

"Well, of course. Your princess is royal, isn't she? I bet she's got purple royal blood. Well, there are royal drops that you can sprinkle at the base of the flower, and she'll come back to life again. Hang on a minute." Grandma labored out of her chair, thinking fast. What devil got her tongue? Where on earth would she get royal drops? Ah! Her eye medicine! Well, of course. "here you go." She handed a vial of eye drops to Lupy who snatched it out of her hand and was gone in a flash, and grandmother watched her sprinkle it under the lupine, remembering how she herself used to play with flowers. She grew up poor and had no toys, and she loved plucking the petals off daisies and lick them and slap them on her nails, pretending they were nail polish. And one day she crawled into a flowerbed in the backyard and fell asleep, and she dreamed she was a flower princess invited to a flower ball, and she danced with a prince all night long, and she was happy, flower-happy.

THE DRAGON QUEEN



The cave was scorched. The bones were strewn all over the floor, some of them the size of a horse. The ceiling went high up into the roiling darkness, and at the top of the entrance, at the very rim, a few scales got wedged between the cracks in the stone, the size of foot, iridescent and golden in the rays of the setting sun. No bird cried its evening song close to the cave, no rodents scurried in and out of the brush. All was still. The wind itself took a wide detour. The air stood rampant with the reddish glow of the waning day, the silence occasionally crackling with soft little snaps like those of twigs, only stronger, sharper—the sounds that came from the cave, as though something charred was cooling off in the bluish shade. The sun dipped down below the horizon, but before it did, it sent out an orange ray that fell at an odd angle and shone right into the cave's mouth, through the breadth and the depth of it, and oh, what a feast to the eyes there was to behold. A mound of gold—coins, knickknacks, jewels—sat in in the middle of the cave like a giant hill. Almost a little mountain, it was, contained within the cavern of another mountain, cold and still. The imprint of a long, serpentine body was caked into the treasure that looked like it was undisturbed for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, grimy with soot, molded together in places from incredible heat, in others simply

smearred with dirt as old as dirt itself. Only the top layer shone, as though it was slithered over and around quite often, the rest of it ran down into the gloom of the cave and disappeared in the shadows, and who knew how far it stretched. The sunray flashed for the very last moment of its life, and it was that it illuminated a blackened figure curled up on the uneven floor next to the mound, a sword beside it. The chain-mail sparkled red as though on fire. The helmet lay on its side. The black, burned face turned up as though in its last breath, the mouth open, the white teeth shining brighter in the last sunray than all the gold, then the light vanished as quickly as it flashed, and the cave and the rocks around it sunk into the coolness of the night. A small animal, a curious creature, darted out from the brush as it forgot it wasn't wise to cross the desolate space in front of the cave, then it remembered, but it was too late, and so it froze—perhaps a prairie dog, perhaps a ground squirrel—so great was its fear, it didn't move even when its mother shrieked to it in the high-pitched, frightened call. The silence pressed on the rocks. The birds and the animals hushed as though in the last minutes of anticipation, as though the cave and the charred, unrecognizable figure wouldn't be lonely for long. There was no chirping, no scurrying, no bustling about. All was still. Even the owl that sat on a tree not too far from the cave looked like a carved statue. The minutes stretched. And then from high in the dark, purple sky, came a cry of such fury, the air itself fled away from the cave in a rush of torn leaves, twigs and grit. And then the night bloomed orange at the top of the mountain, and down to the side of it, all the way to the cave, it rolled and rolled, eating up everything living in its wake—fire.



THE DRAGON QUEEN cried her furious cry, “AAARLAAAANGHH-HH!” It was her name, Arlang, given to her by her dragon mother who was long gone, but who when lived was older than earth and its every creature. When Arlang was small, she thought her mother was earth itself, with her warm brown scales the color of soil and her flaming

breath the color of lava and her clear, blue-green eyes the color of the deep, whispering ocean. Arlang never knew the pain of loss. The morning her mother turned to stone, she burned everything living off the sides of their mountain, and for miles around it, and farther out, to the ocean itself, where she made the water boil and the fish blacken instantly, the ocean bed once more black sand on top a caked, cracked wasteland. But no matter how mad Arlang was, the ocean was bigger. The ocean won. Arlang soon learned that her fury did nothing to bring her mother back, and instead she breathed liquid fire into the dead belly of her mother, and soon she made a cave for herself, and with years she made it bigger and blacker and colder (her mother's dead heart gave off terrific heat for hundreds of years after she died, so great was the fire within her), and then she settled inside the cave she made for herself, inside the mountain on top of which she was born—in the middle of a thunderstorm that coincided with the eruption of three nearby volcanoes—and waited for the time to pass by to feel the hunger in her hot, rumbling belly and fly out in search of a whale, or if that failed, a flock of mountain goats, or even stray birds which she snatched out of the air with a mere sigh. They dropped on her tongue already crisp, the feathers fried off their tiny, fragile bodies. It was only to tease Arlang's appetite, to swallow these birds, but she had to continue existing. Not to live. Life lost its color when her mother left her. But to protect her cave. It was all she had left of her former life—life she could no longer remember, dimmed by thousands of years that have vanished in the blink of an eye—and of the future she had no opinion, no want. It was to be what would come, as her mother said, "Trust not your eye but your belly." Arlang thought her mother meant hunger, the terrible beast that on occasion threatened to burn her from inside out, but after hundreds of years of hunting alone she understood. Her mother meant trusting her impulse, not her mind, of which Arlang had a vague idea, having no other dragons around to explain to her the age-old wisdom of their race. She had to discover it for herself, and she thought it was quite small as it didn't seem to fit in all her thoughts at once—of which one was nagging her the most—the way some creatures on the mountain

side behaved. They rode horses, and they not once, and not twice, but multiple times attempted attacking Arlang. She was amused by it. All she had to do was exhale, and they dropped dead, charred beyond recognition. It was through them that she found her love for gold, as one of them had a sword with a golden hilt, and Arlang was enthralled. She sat in the middle of the burned-out clearing she created with her breath, and she ate it up with her eyes, the play of sun over its smooth, yellow surface, and then the smell of it, rich and soft, and finally, the way it felt on her tongue when she snatched it into her jaws and carried it off into her cave and laid it down—her first golden treasure.

The Dragon Queen cried “AAARLANG!”—the name give to her by her dragon mother, long dead. Arlang thought her mother would always be there, like earth, like sky, like sun itself. So when one morning her mother turned to stone, Arlang in her pain burned their mountain and miles of forest on her way to the ocean where she made its saltwater boil. At last she was spent, and the ocean sloshed back in its bed, but her mother didn’t return. Hurting from grief, Arlang burned a cave in her mother’s belly and crawled inside, getting out only to hunt when the searing hunger in her belly grew hotter than her terrible fire. She ate anything moving—birds, goats, even whales, if she was lucky—all this not to live but to exist, to protect her cave, as bestowed by mother’s words, “Trust not your eye but your belly, Arlang.” It was only hundreds of years later that Arlang understood her mother meant trusting her gut over her mind. She had to come to it alone—there were no other dragons to teach her. There were, however, plenty of strange little creatures on horses who tried attacking her, and whom she fried to crisps with her mere breath. It was through them she discovered her love for gold—their swords, their helmets, their bags of coins that shone yellow and liquid just like the sun itself. Life had meaning again for Arlang—to hoard a golden treasure.



GALENA WAS UPSET at her older brother for leaving on the dragon quest.

It was the rite of passage in their village—all boys who reached the age of sixteen by the first summer moon went on the mountain to seek the Dragon Queen. Those who brought back her black heart would be sung about in legends. Only none did. For the last three hundred years, even since the dragon made their mountain her home, boys and men kept disappearing. Those lucky enough to have their charred remains found were buried. The unlucky ones vanished forever, as did their father when he went last Spring to hunt rabbits that were most plentiful by the cave's mouth.

"Denga, don't." Galena stepped in the door, blocking his passage.

"Get out of my way." He shoved her aside but not without strain.

Galena was a year younger, but she was as strong, their father having trained them both to fight since they could walk. There was no mother to teach her how to be a girl—she passed giving her life. Galena enjoying sparring with Denga, using sticks for swords, until two years ago, when she won and stood over him, triumphantly. There was fear in his eyes. He never sparred with her again. Galena suspected he didn't want to be beaten. It was a disgrace, to be beaten by a girl. Girls in their village were praised for the width of their hips. Those who were ripe enough to be married got married off quickly, the villagers holding their breath, waiting for a boy to be born. And what use was Galena, with her narrow bum that couldn't pass a good fart, never mind a newborn child? Her father protected her from vicious talk, as long as he was alive. When he disappeared, life became unbearable. Galena couldn't step out of their house without hearing a jeer shot in her direction, or worse—a rock thrown in her back. To add to her misery last month she started to bleed. She wore Denga's old trousers stuffed with rags under her dress. How else was she supposed to deal with it? Her father never taught her. It irritated her, and on those days she was able to wrestle Denga into submission without a second thought if he crossed her path. He was wise enough to avoid her.

And so they existed.

Denga hunted and spent most of his time outside the house. Galena made passable stew and sparred alone in the garden with a tree, ignoring

the neighbors' snide remarks that soon ceased. They got bored with her, and she was glad. She knew she was getting better, and she was afraid they'd tattle to the village elders.

"I'm coming with you," she declared, her head held high.

"Sure, to cook my meals." He sneered.

She slapped him across the face.

He put a hand to his cheek, stunned.

"I'll go alone, then," she said and turned on her heels. "I don't need you. What use is the boy who can't even *cook his own meal?*"

"You big loudmouth!" He lunged at her, but she twisted out of his way and grabbed a handful of his long, wavy hair, yanking up his head. "Da' would've whipped you for this language."

"He'd whip you first for raising your hand on your brother!" Denga punched her painfully in the side, and the breath whooshed out of her. She doubled over and sat down on the earthen floor, hard. Bit her tongue. Blood filled her mouth.

"If I see you, I'll shoot you. I'm not joking." Denga heaved a bag on his back, picked up his bow, his sword—bought last week from Chucker, the best smith in town—and stomped off, not forgetting to slam the door in his wake.

"Stupid boy," Galena mumbled.

She had everything ready. It was ready for months, hidden under her bed. Boy's clothes, a cloth bag filled with jerky, nuts and dried berries, flint, a length of rope, a knife, needle and thread, and a sword she had stolen from some Chucker when he was drunk out of his mind on the night of the summer moon, necking with Ravven, the village whore. Last she took the locket her mother left her. Da' said just before mother passed her dying breath, she pressed it into his hand and whispered, "Galena." Inside the locket was a tiny bit of parchment wrapped tightly with a strong silk thread. She was not to open it until she turned sixteen. It was supposedly a token passed for generations to the women in her family. The Weavers, they were called, though Galena couldn't weave even if she tried. Still, it gave her a certain stillness, added the weight to her step, kept her back straight.

“Sorry, Da’.” She glanced around the house one more time and stepped out, the locket growing warm against her skin, right between her breasts. She thought it grew warm from the heat of her body.

It did not.



INSIDE GALENA’S locket was a dragon scale. She knew it the moment she opened it in the thick grove of stunted pine trees that climbed the mountainside like gnarled fingers. She climbed on top of a boulder, watching the village wake up—the smoke curling up in blush plumes, the women hustling wit their wares to the market, the men leading out the sheep to the shearing barn—it air smelled of spring, but Galena’s breath was shallow with fright. She wasn’t sixteen yet. She broke her promise to her Da’. And she was going to pay for her impatience and discomfort. The locket grew hot as she skipped up the path, light on her feet. She could’ve simply moved outside her leather jerkin. But no, she was stubborn. She was going to grit her teeth and keep going. Well, the result was blisters. When she swung over a crag and dropped to her knees on the other side, the locket scalded her, and with a shriek she yanked it out and bashed it on the nearby rock until it cracked open.

“A dragon scale,” she whispered, and froze still. It seemed the small rodents that were making a scribbling racket not too long ago froze too. The birds stopped their lovely morning song. The rustling pines quieted. Not a branch moved, not a tiny needle. The smell of sap and earth wheedled into Galena’s nostrils. It was the urge to sneeze that made her finally close the locket and climb into the boulder, holding it tight in her fist. She gazed for some time at the labyrinth of familiar streets, then slowly opened the locket again and laid it flat on her palm.

The locket was golden, plain and simple in shape—an oval with a clasp that refused to budge unless one knocked on it with a sharp edge of a rock (which is exactly what Galena did, unknowingly and out of fear and rage). It was the size of a gold coin, the likes of which was rare in her and Denga’s household. It filled half her palm, and it felt smooth

and warm, as though it were a skin of a living animal, living and breathing. The scale was iridescent, catching the first rays of sun in a rainbow of shifting colors. Galena looked closer. It wasn't a scale, it was a chip of a scale. It was too small. The old men and women who were lucky (or unlucky, one might say) to get close to the mouth of the cave and come back alive said the scales wedged in the rocks were the size of a foot, but this one was barely the size of a fingernail.

"A young dragon?" Galena asked.

The air was so still, the sound of her own voice startled her.

She hooked the edge of the scale with her nail, pulled it out. It was thick yet sturdy, triangular in shape, with two rounded edges and one sharp one, on the bottom. When she experimentally drew it against her skin, a few brilliant drops of blood beaded over the cut.

"Mighty early for you to be out and about," said a voice behind her.

Galena jumped. The scale slipped from her hand, and she patted around the boulder frantically. Her hand fell on it—warm—and her fingers clasped it, her heart pumping blood through her veins at the gallop of a crazed horse.

"Auntie Basille," she managed.

"Saw your brother hurry on his way to lose his life," said Basille, her wrinkled face stretching into a smile like a leather purse, revealing black, uneven teeth. "You've decided to up him just this one more time, I gather."

"No, Auntie Basille. I was...gathering mushrooms for dinner."

"On a boulder. Gathering mushrooms. Why, you never learned to lie properly. What you got there? Show me your hands."

"Nothing."

"You don't need to hide that locket behind your back. I know what's in it. Was there when your mother gave up her last breath..."

TO BE CONTINUED...

THANK YOU

Oh no! There are no more stories!
But don't despair.
There are books, lots.
Pick one and email me,
so I can reserve you a copy.
Subscribe to my scary newsletter, if you dare.
I love you.



XOXO

Kate Lister

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ksenia Anske was born in Moscow, Russia, and came to the US in 1998. She is the author of dark fantasy short fiction and 7 novels, and the winner of Amtrak Residency Program 2015. Her novel *Rosehead* won Honorary Mention in the YA Category in the Indie Ebook Award 2016. When she's not writing, she's reading, and when she's not reading, she's scaring other writers into writing or terrifying unsuspecting readers into reading her nightmarish books. She lives in Seattle with her partner Royce Daniel and her son Peter.

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