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Ailen

a novel by Ksenia Anske

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Prologue

I was ten when I failed my first hunt and my mother abandoned me.

I don't blame her. She hated bearing children. Her slender body turned into impregnated fish, bloated from the leech inside, sucked dry of her liquid. For that, she expected me to be faultless. I wasn't. Too bad.

I don't know why she didn't drown me right away, like others did. Not perfectly white, small head stuffed with two huge eyes and thick matted hair, and, worst of all, silent. I didn't sing. She brought me the best pearls. I didn't eat. She forced them down my throat, held my mouth shut until I swallowed, eyes swimming in tears. Despite her effort, I proved her wrong again. When I turned ten, I didn't want to hunt. And she'd had it.

My little heart shriveled, but my legs moved, dragged down pine trunk with her icy grip. Others watched us silently from above. She propped me straight, and pushed me forward. I staggered.

"Sing." she said.

I blinked.

"Sing!" she said.

And I was born. Of air. In my lungs, past the gills, I filled my heart, rose into my throat, forced my lips open. I sang. Trees swayed in response, the lake pulsed to the rhythm, the earth moved under my feet. Others stared. The veil of a human soul sped through the air and slammed into my mouth, warm. A human memory hit me. Life paused.

Hunger for air:

I build a city from plastic blocks. I sit in the middle of a never-ending wooden floor. Buildings grow, cars zigzag through the streets, doll people rush back and forth, airplanes touch my face with their wings. Monorails zip past the skyscrapers nearly missing my hair.

Stars circle the sky, pulsate with yellow light, envelop the city in the night, and suck out all air. I can't breathe! People panic, tiny police cars smash into buildings, blocks tumble down.

I grab them and throw them at walls, I crush them with my feet and claw them with my fingers, I gnaw on their smooth surface, but they stand firm. I see fire coming out of my chest, burning the buildings, the cars, the blocks. They turn black and stink, melt into sticky puddles.

My city dies, like it was never alive, just a pile of scorched plastic blocks. They lay scattered across the floor. I force my hands to crawl towards them, drag my fingers across fake birch planks, stumble every inch over gaps in between. After a long minute, I finally reach them. They crumble, no magic left. I sink to the floor. Mom's hands cradle me, she kisses my eyes, holds an inhaler to my lips. I breathe.

I choked, the song stopped. A little boy stepped from the trees, his soul strung in mid air between us, his memory heavy with love, eyes wide with suicidal admiration. I glimpsed my mother's white mane over her eyes distorted with disgust. Droplets of water caught between needles of pines. Dozens of hungry eyes peering from above. Cold. Distant. Bent on feeding our lust. I didn't want to be a beast, I wanted to be like him. Be part of his colorful memories.

"Run!" I mouthed.

He stared.

"Ailen!!!" My mother slammed my back with inhuman power. I coughed. His soul fluttered up, arched, folded into a ribbon on his mouth. He inhaled. I stepped to reach him. Mother grabbed my wrist and yanked me to her side. Her chill made me shrink. She grabbed me by the waist and tore through the trees, to the lake, for the safety of water. From the others. I guess that was the

last of her love, if you can call it that. Sirens don't leave witnesses. It's against the rules.

She tossed me. I rolled on the ground, dirt stuffing my eyes, my mouth. Tasteless, crunchy. She glared. Her nostrils flared, eyes pinned me down, lips tight.

"Not worthy", she said. And jumped into the water.

Splash. The last I heard of my mother was just that. And every time I jump, every splash reminds me of it.

Not worthy.

Ailen was born in Lake Crescent as it is siren's breeding ground, because of how easy it is to train young sirens to suck the souls out of the dead meats, before they do it on real people. And on real people, they first try the weak – children or elderly. So Ailen failed her first real hunt, and she didn't like eating souls of dead meats either, she was afraid of the dark. And not it is the time for her to breed, and that urge gets her back to the lake again, where Yoki is waiting for her to guide her through the process. The spheres are abandoned as not many sirens are left alive, so since Ailen is one of the few, she must breed, but instead she falls in love with Paul. And Rolf is tracking her and others to here, as he has finally uncovered this breeding ground (there are others? Other water spots where people turn to soap after drowning?)

Hunger

Hunger struck me. There was no escape. It hit my head with a void, made me dizzy, deflated my chest, tossed around my intestines, twisting them like wet rugs with the hands of a washing woman. Its fingers pulled at my gut, clawed on shoulders, brought me down into a crouch. Water lost its blue, silvery mud chocking my vision. It was too much to bear, slow agony of empty soul, empty chest were a soul should be. Which it shouldn't, never was there, never will. I hugged the hunger, impossible to fight, only to float like driftwood. Passive. Every movement fed it, lurched it to torture me more. Stiff. Dear water, thanks you for being.

I'll just drift like this, I decided, and maybe it will pass. Or I will learn living with it, somehow. Thump.

"Ailen?"

My head bumped into Wauna's glossy back. Great. I completely forgot. It was hard enough to hold on to human memories, nothing left for my own. She turned to me.

"You're late, girl."

Her face said I'm late. Her hair pointed to how late I was. Like white fingers of a dead octopus. Smack in the middle of

endless grey liquid, without bottom or walls. I always wanted long hair, mine just wouldn't grow past a few inches or so.

She smirked. A rush of helpless anger washed over my eyes, my fingers curled into fists at the prospect of strangling her neck. Words stumbled behind closed lips, imprisoned. I didn't answer. Why does she always have to make fun of me? Am I just a magnet for jokes? Nobody takes me seriously! Ever! My face must have been quite a sight as Wauna rolled her eyes.

"I'm not going," I said through teeth.

Wauna tilted her head to the left, like she always does when she's frustrated.

"Fine", she said. "It's not like anybody is dragging you."

Water gurgled as she sped off into the deep end of the lake. An urge to follow overcame me, but I held still. I don't need her approval, or anybody else's, for what I'm doing. So stop following! Sometimes I think my head had been separated from body at birth, that's why my mother didn't like me. Whatever the head would command the body to do, the body never did. They always lived two separate lives. My head knew I had to eat, but my body wouldn't.

Hunger struck again, this time - harder. It tugged at my heart, and poked its parasitic nails into every muscle, even the ones I didn't know exist. It wove braids of bones, just for fun, to see how my eyes look when pushed out of sockets. Lovely, I

imagine. Coupled with twisted tongue, gaping mouth, and spine bent backwards. Perfect siren souvenir, sealed in a jar of its own weakness, shark baby from a tourist shop.

A stem of bubbles broke my fixation. She was leaving.

"Wait!" I said. "I'm coming."

A white shape hid in lush green shore. I pierced the water and hit the warmth of evening rain. I tossed my head up and inhaled the air with a rasp whoosh. My thin chest heaved up and down, drops of clear sweat mixed with droplets of the rain. I needed a fresh soul, quickly. Couldn't starve anymore. I gulped, shook my head like a wet white dog, shot up my hands to a low hanging branch and pulled up into the steep incline packed with emerald undergrowth. Rough bark scraped helplessly against the silver of my stomach. I slid into the bushes, next to Wauna. We strained our ears for souls. Nothing. Wauna turned into the forest, and I glanced back at the Lake Crescent.

Its turquoise water stood still as if it was no more than paint in a giant stone bucket. Fog clung to the surrounding mountains, patches of snow rested untouched between scarce moss on rocks. Too faint to be detected, a white oval shape rose from the depth of the lake. Water bulged and scattered over glossy skin of its back. It paused and slid silently under water. Or

maybe it didn't. Maybe it was just a certain slant of light that made the water white. I shrugged and followed Wauna.

Wet moss hung in shards from skeleton thin pines. Needles crunched under our bare feet. We climbed up, higher, into the shattered tunnel, left over from mid-century coal trains, now emanating cold onto the backs of rare hikers. Stone crushed into paper-thin strips under our feet.

Wauna went first, and a couple sighs and doubts later.. I tried, but couldn't. I shouldn't be scared. I could suck the soul out of any living being in seconds, but I was afraid of the dark. It enveloped me with its sweaty palms, smiling at my tremble with all of its nothingness. I had to rely on echo and sounds, but my eyes always strained to see even a flicker of light. Anything.

A new wave of nausea hit my stomach, and I dove right into the mouth of the tunnel, head first. Deep cold air, without bottom, then something soft with my face.

"Ailen? Ailen!" Wauna slapped me.

I opened my eyes.

"Darn it, girl, what do you think you're doing? You're gonna get me in trouble one day. Open your mouth!"

I held my lips shut. In the little light that trickled in from outside, I saw her spit out a tiny pearl.

"This will last you a couple hours."

She pulled my lips apart, just like mom did, and pried my teeth open with her fingernails. I didn't budge.

"You'll be the death of me. What now? Open your mouth, I said! I'm not gonna babysit you here forever. You want to hunt, or you'd rather me drop you back to the dead meats?"

The idea of extracting souls from drowned people again rippled through my skin with goosebumps. My hair stood up, and I opened my mouth. Wauna pressed the pearl on top of my tongue, then shut my jaw with a clunk, holding it with both hands until I swallowed. A fraction of a memory hit me. I stared inside.

Hunger for beautiful things:

Blue was my favorite color, every hue from deep indigo to the light blue, pale petal variety that can be mistaken for white. I carefully stepped around the corner of the room and peered into the doorway. I didn't really need to do it, as the distinct staccato sound gave away grandma, sawing on her old sawing machine, pushing the pedal with her right foot, and folding the cloth with her right hand, stuck so close to the needle that I always wondered how it never got sucked in and pierced by it.

She would take dad's old shirts and remake them into dresses for me, with short puffy sleeves, wavy bottoms, and rows of shiny buttons all the way to the collar. No other girl in

school had dresses like that. They hated me for that even more - because I was mute and because I always dressed in blue and because I smelled of fish, just like my father. The boys didn't care, they passed coded notes behind the teacher's back about the next adventure after school, inviting me bike-riding, roof-climbing, or simply hanging out by the pond listening to frogs and pulling out long strands of their eggs, offering to me as necklaces. Which made the girls hate me even more, with their proper braids ending in colorful ribbons, white socks in shiny mary-janes, and clean knees - mine were always scabbed.

I breathed into grandma's back, and watched, mesmerized, how the silver goose foot ate the fabric, and folded it neatly into a wavy edge of yet another dress, light-blue, sprinkled with little navy diamonds. I leaned in closer, and hit granny's back with my nose.

I snapped out of it. Wauna held a fist to my nose.

"Sorry."

"There is no time for sorries. Quick, pick out what you're gonna wear." She pushed a sweatshirt into my hands, then kneeled back to a large overturned stone, with a narrow crack behind it.

"What color is it?" I turned it towards the light, trying to make out if it was blue.

"Look, I'm tired of your questions, ok? It doesn't matter what color it is, just put it on."

Rain stopped. We hurried through cold pines, a huge brilliant blue hooded sweatshirt billowed around my thin body, legs stuck in matchstick jeans and beat up Converse sneakers. I was wondering who wore these clothes before me, they smelled faintly of violets and sugary sweat. Maybe the girl whose memory I just saw? Wauna trotted ahead of me, her curvy frame wrapped in layers of cascading silk, silver flats matching her shiny mane. She stopped to listen. A distant soul echo tickled my ears. Highway 101. We're here.

We jumped the fence and stood close to the road. A delivery truck sped by. I cringed at the loud sound. The wind ruffled through my ashen hair. I crossed the double lanes and stuck out my right hand with the thumb up, just how I saw in one of the memories.

Wauna laughed.

"Girl, you wanna wait forever? I got us covered. Tim should be here in 10 minutes." She waved her cell phone.

"Who's Tim?"

"Tim is off limits, got it?" She bared her teeth.

My cheeks flushed, and I felt my ears burn. That's not why I asked! I turned to the road, for help with an answer. The road looked back at me, empty.

Wednesday didn't mean much traffic to this part of Washington, hours away from any large city. Minutes slipped one by one. An orange Mazda wheezed by, with a sharp and prickly buzzing of a... female? In her 20's, maybe. I wasn't sure, too little time to detect. Girls her age usually sounded more delicate, like metal bells or flute. My torso howled, the way a human stomach would growl in anticipation of a late dinner.

"Getting hungry again?" Wauna smiled.

"I guess."

Wind from another speeding truck swept her hair forward. She tucked the locks behind her ears, peering right into me. When she looked at me like that, I thought she cared, I almost felt we're family. Since I first saw her by the lake this winter, unable to believe that after eight years of scavenging through northwest lakes and rivers, finally I wasn't alone anymore.

"I hope your singing is better than your talking."

"Me too," I barely mouthed.

"What did you say?" Her eyebrows shot up in suspicion.

"Nothing."

A yellow cab pulled over to my rescue. I tensed at the sound of a human soul, like new rubber rolling on wet ship deck, deep yet squeaky. Bald driver rolled down the window, his mouth gaping at me. I thought I would launch at him, just like that.

But I didn't. As if I'd eaten a pound of licorice and couldn't stand another bite. Wauna pushed me out of the way, and snaked her torso into opening, resting elbows on the door.

"Hey Tim, how are you?"

"I'm all right, thanks for asking, hon. S'that your sister over there?" He pointed at me with a stubby finger. "Sure looks like you, the hair and all. S'all your folks white like that? Cause I ain't seen two albinos together before." His face wrinkled with a snort.

"No, she's just a friend. Let's leave it that, ok?" Wauna's lips stretched into a smile. The power of her voice mesmerized Tim, but made my heart sink. I loved the sound of the word sister. It had a ring to it, a roll and a dancing rhythm.

"Sure, hon. Where to?"

"The usual."

He nodded. Just doing his job. Not meddling into anybody's business. The engine revved, Wauna dragged me out of my thoughts into the backseat, and we were off.

Hours of familiar landscape stretched along the road. Mountains shouldered grey misty clouds, green masts of pines, cedars, and firs. The steadiness of blue-green blur of the forest broke into rare stretches of brown grass hills devoid of snow. Early spring. I turned my body to the right, so that Wauna wouldn't see my face. Not that she cared, her eyes staring into

the rear view mirror, lips tight, straining not to sing. I put my hand to my neck and pulled out a thin chain with a tiny, perfectly round milky pearl, set in a silver flower. It rested in my palm like a stolen sunrise. I curled my fingers into a soft nest around it. Tim's squeaky soul skipped a beat. I turned left to intercept his quick side-glance into the rear view mirror. He looked back at the road, I tucked the pearl back into the sweatshirt.

Another turn on I-5 south revealed a jagged skyscrapers line, sitting up to its neck in the clouds. Seattle. The emanating human noise became louder with each minute, swarming my head like a cloud of bees. The cab veered to the right for an exit and stopped on top of the hill at the red light, joining the crowd of patient traffic. As red turned to green, cars started one by one, into a road that uncurled itself from the highway pretzel and sloped down into the night. I stuck my cheek to the glass, and pressed hard to see the street. The car turned sharply to the right and stopped.

"Here you are, ladies," said Tim.

"Thanks, no need for back ride today," said Wauna and slipped a roll of cash in his hand.

"Y're welcome, hon." He turned to me, but spoke to Wauna. "Your friend here, she doesn't speak much, does she?"

I pressed two fingers to my forehead, to not explode from irritation. Soul sounds all around made me dizzy already. Wauna sized me up and down like she was buying a fish at the market, checking for freshness and meat quality.

"She's just not the social kind," said Wauna. And with that I jumped out the other side of the car and slammed the door.

Hunt

We faced a patchwork of doors and windows on colorless walls. I swayed like a drunken sailor. The street lights glowered in the mist, rare passerby cowered in rainproof coats to warm up a little from the bone-chilling humidity in the air. Wauna grabbed my arm and pulled me into a narrow alley lined with recycling bins. We took care to stay out of the street light. Not that it helped. We could pass as lights ourselves, the fancy non-electric "glow in the dark" kind. Wauna moved with barely any footsteps, in one seamless movement, without noise. I stumbled behind, trying to mimic her. She stopped a few feet away from a well-lit entrance door. Ground rippled with loud music and a cacophony of human souls. She looked at me, her face twisted in a satisfied smile.

"You remember the rules?" she said.

"Yes."

"Let's do it then." She opened the door and we plunged into a wet mass of bodies, music, and smell.

Down one flight of stairs, two black suits blocked our way. One with darker skin and beefy shoulders, the other a redhead with a boyish upturned nose and a strain to look ten years older. A perfect mismatch of a trombone solo pierced by an occasional whistle. The beefy guy turned up his palm to us.

"ID's, please."

I flinched. Wauna winked at me and stepped closer to him.

"What did you say, again? I can't hear, it's so loud in here." She reached out to stroke his hair, and he melted into a puppy.

The readhead nearly toppled over in an attempt to get closer to Wauna. "How can I help you, miss?"

I didn't hear the rest of the conversation as a single clear note blocked out the rest of the noise. I stepped onto the dance floor. Icy light flickered on and off, grabbing stills of dancing people in grotesque forms, their white teeth and t-shirts sprinkled through the crowd. People who danced close to the entrance turned to stare at me, a living walking fluorescent light bulb. I listened intently for the note. It vanished. Then resurfaced again.

I closed my eyes. How to describe it? Among a bunch of rhythmic holes, high-pitched scratches and out of tune woodwinds, it was simply perfect. Deep and beautiful sound, oddly familiar, yet abruptly vanishing into a gaping void of

silence. Must be a flaw in the soul, caused by an immense internal pain. The pain is tearing the soul apart, must be hard to live in such torture. I opened my eyes, set in my decision, and wedged ahead through the tangle of people.

Faces jumped to the beat of the music, sweaty bodies surrounded me like scores of jellyfish in shallow water. I pressed on forward, to that beautiful pulsing sound. And then I saw him. His face was young, even handsome. Dark hair cut to a fuzzy short buzz, white skin covered with freckles, thick eyebrows. Wiry body under a simple shirt and jeans. He danced with his eyes closed, drink in hand, next to another guy and a girl. I stopped in shock. How could he harbor such excruciating pain and be so young, so careless? Something was not right. By now his friends noticed me and looked up. My whole being trembled at the sound of his soul, and I forgot who I was, or who I wanted to be. I was going for the kill. It was too late to be afraid.

I licked my lips, inhaled and breathed out. Dense mist descended onto the crowd like a giant tongue, licking people into oblivion. I breathed out some more, the mist thickened, drowning everything, except the man who still danced right in front of me. Thumping rhythm of the club died down into an echo.

I moved my mouth to his ear and sung a single low note. It trembled, wove around his head and into his ears. I caught

myself inhaling his scent, pine with musk undertones. It reminded me of home. The man smiled and sighed, still dancing. I added a couple more notes. My song streamed effortlessly from deep inside, and struck upon his ears with hypnotic force. The man uttered a half-moan, half-sound. Perfect! I inched my face closer to his, and infused the song with the full force of my voice, aimed at awakening his soul. It worked on dead meats, it surely should work on a live one. The song entwined with my words into an ancient lullaby, spellbinding. Lethal. And yet, it was the most beautiful sound in the whole world, if fallen upon the ears of a human. Only birds and animals knew to run from it, to run for their lives. The man hummed to the tune, his face almost touching mine. I hoped it would work, it seemed to work. He opened his eyes, dark and drowsy, and focused on my face - his pupils widened.

"Ailen?" he said. Sleepiness left him in an instant.

My song broke mid-note, as abruptly as if someone has crushed my chest and forced all air out of my lungs.

"What?" I gasped. My voice came out croaked, and didn't have any effect on him.

"So I'm not crazy then. It is you." He grinned.

"What?" I felt my head completely lose touch with body, stupefied. The fog disassembled itself. Music and human noise

seeped through to us. My hands trembled. People looked in our direction with interest.

"I didn't know you were looking for me, too." He touched my shoulder. My stomach dove a thousand feet, then rose back up, all in one second. An almost physical string connected us.

"Worth what?" Bewildered, I pushed him away, turned and dove through watching people.

"Ailen, wait!" I heard him stumble after me.

I didn't want to hear his shouts, I didn't want to think what I was thinking, I just wanted silence. For once in my life. I pushed past tangled bodies, past Wauna with some young guy, past the guards, stumbled through the door, and bumped smack into a tall man who was about to enter. My wish was granted, just like that. Silence fell over everything. Our eyes met, and for a second I felt a tug in my gut, a sudden horror. He was dressed as a hunter, in sandy colored tall lace-up boots, in a camouflage shirt and pants, as if covered with leaves, his face dark with years of suntan, his eyes the color of his boots, faded. I didn't have time to think, so I shoved him aside and ran forward into the noise. I ran all the way to the waterfront, guided only by its sound, past lights and people and cars and buildings, and jumped.

Splash.

Not worthy.

My silvery shape tightened as if a bent string, sweatshirt and jeans clung to my body, arms pressed to sides. As my head touched the water, a silvery skin spread from my face all the way down to sneakers, peeling clothes off and forming fins in place of hands and feet. I inhaled the water, and shook all over, glad to get soaked. The water hushed me. Quiet. Thank you. I didn't think what I was doing, I just swam, deeper and deeper into pacific waters. Rare fish rushed aside to avoid collision.

As I swam, the tall man surfaced in my thoughts. Water sloshed peacefully at my side, lovely lullaby. All noise died, darkness deepened, I relaxed. And it hit me. When the silence fell, his soul had no sound, none at all, like it didn't exist.

Hunger for sound:

Write a memory on the hunger for sound.

Lake Crescent

A new wave of hunger rolled over me and kicked me out of my dream. My heart sent waves of panic up my throat and through the gills, making it easy for any predator to spot me. I failed again. My world failed me. How did he survive the others? Why is it that my voice had no effect on him? Was it him or somebody else? And how come the tall guy had no soul? Or no sound to his soul? Or have I gone deaf?

My body weaved through spheres of jello, hundreds of them, hung in mid-water as enormous frog eggs. Once occupied by an old siren pack, now abandoned. I went straight home, to the smallest sphere, apart from others and close to mountain base, right next to the deep crevasse opening into an under water cave, at the sight of which my skin crawled. I tried to block out quiet whispers from the cave, parted the gel-like mass and let myself inside. The sphere gobbled me whole, snapping shut in an instant.

I half-swam, half-walked on the velvety surface to the dividing membrane, smooth and soft and slippery. I poked my head through the membrane and lay on my side. Like it was going to help. What was I to do now? I had no idea. And how could I leave

Wauna alone? She will be mad at me again, and will never take me hunting, for sure. At least not this season. I was screwed. Had to go eat something. I squeezed myself into the lake.

I zigzagged between dark blobs. They aimed at my face like boxing gloves, as if they shouting "we told you not to go that way!", or "wrong exit!", or "keep out!" They didn't want to let me go. I swam faster. Hunger gnawed its silky torture deep into my chest. Suddenly the dark cave seemed more than inviting. I turned around.

Weakness swallowed me. My fault. I opened my mouth like a fish, gasping for water. The cave hummed behind me. My hair stood up, and yet I swam toward it. I had to eat, I simply had to. The hunger overcame the fear. I crawled towards the entrance. There they were, waiting. The dead meats.

Native Indians who lived in this area said the lake doesn't give up its dead. If somebody drowned in it, the body never floated up. Their worst fear was to end their lives in the lake, as the water sealed in their souls and they couldn't rest. All several hundred of them, piled one on top of another in the cave, or, rather, in a tunnel, with under currents dragging them here, to be stuck, until they turned into soap. Their delicate grey limbs peered from under the mountain, murmuring age old

stories of their lives. Dead music to my ears, easy food for a siren predator. Or more like a pathetic dead meat eater.

I floated closer to the darkness and closed my eyes to contain the shudder. They are dead! They won't grab your arm or leg or neck, so relax! I floated closer. The low murmur of souls grabbed at my chest and pulled it closer still. I would float here forever, if not for an instinct to feed. It overcame the fear, and I plunged in. Better fast than never. The dark slime oozed out of them all, blackened, sticky. I felt with my hands, afraid to see again those gaping mouths, empty eye sockets, looking at me, begging me to let them die in peace. If you ever dove into the swarm of warm jellyfish in the sun, that's how it felt. Only cold. Freezing cold. Voices mixed with tubas, on top of occasional shrieks of a violin, all hushed down by death. It's not so bad, it's ok. I listened. The cleaner, the longer it will last. There, seems to be a light flute. I stretched my hand out, and something grabbed me, forcing me down.

"Aaaahhhhh!" I shrieked, gulped too much water and gagged. My eyes flew open.

"I'm sorry if I scared you, dear. I'd gotten so impatient of waiting over the years, that I couldn't contain myself." I tracked the voice to the bottom, between the dead meats, in a little side grotto illuminated by her glow, there sat a tiny old woman, her face wrinkled like crumpled paper, stretched into a

smile, framed by snow-white strands of impossibly long hair. Her eyes pierced me, she loosened her grip. I floated down.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Nice to meet you too, dear." She smiled, folding the bottom half of her face into a pretzel.

"I'm sorry, I'm Ailen."

"Ailen. What a beautiful name. I'm Hopi Yoki Nukpana. But you can call me Yoki." I didn't notice her lips moving as she said that. In fact, I didn't see them move at all, except to stretch into an even wider grin.

"What were you waiting for?" Curiosity spilled from me, obscuring the fear and silencing the constant murmur of dead souls.

"It's not what, it's whom." She paused. "You were supposed to be here last month, dear." She smiled again.

"Yoki, I just met you, how was I supposed to know you were waiting here for me a month ago?" The absurdity of our conversation, in the midst of dead bodies, downed on me, together with another hunger spasm. I buckled together, my head separating from my body for good, for sure.

"I'm sorry, I've been hungry for so long, I need to eat something right now, that's why I came here." I gagged.

"You're doing everything right, dear. Just as you should. Come here."

Yoki stroked my head gently, then pulled me over to her lap, her arms so much a baby cradle it made me mother sick. "I only wish you'd come earlier. Such a stubborn girl, you remind me of someone I met a long time ago. Here, this will help a bit. She took a pearl from her hair and put it in my mouth.

She always cut her hair herself. She'd just pull it behind her neck, clasp it tight and cut it with enormous scissors, more suitable for cutting rugs or fabric. Strands would push themselves out of the mass, so the scissor blades always slid to the right, as she was left handed, so her right side would always be a little bit longer than the left.

"Stay here, and don't come after me, or I won't let you have any jam tonight!"

I scowled.

"I said no. You have to stay here, I'll be right back." She grabbed both of my hands away from her dress and put them down to my body, like a soldier on the watch. She stepped down the stairs, walked through the flower garden, and disappeared into a little shack with only one room in it. Its small wooden porch creaked under her footsteps, as did the door, shedding strands of blue paint every time she'd open it.

I waited for a few minutes, then lifted my skirt with both hands (as if that would make it quieter!), and quickly ran all the way to the shack. I knew each piece of wood like they were

my old time friends, only stepping on the ones what didn't moan. I also knew that the door didn't cry if you just pushed it with one finger and let it open on its own. I peeked inside. Damp air filled with wet ashes and dog hair washed over my face. By the metal hospital style bed pushed to the wall and close to the wood stove, stood a cardboard box, full of warm licking and whining, and granny crouched beside it, the sleeves of her shirt rolled up to her elbows. On the floor, next to her, lay a few rags, bloody, with strands of black hair.

"Good girl", she whispered and patted Kesha, my favorite dog from the four that usually occupied our garden in the summer time. Her gentle whining joined in chorus with other weak yelps.

Puppies! Oh, how I wanted to touch them, to inhale their puppy smell, both icky and delicious, full of doggy breath and baby sweetness. I stuck my nose into the door just a little bit further, when it screeched like an old grumpy lady. Granny was next to me in an instant.

"Where did I tell you to stay?" Her voice rose above my pounding heart, my face turned red from shame.

Granny just grabbed my hand and dragged me behind her, marched me to the house, shove me in and closed the door, locking in from outside. I smeared my tears with my right arm and ran into the bedroom, hoping she forgot to lock the windows, like she usually did. I knocked off the vase with the flowers,

climbing to the window on the table, the water spilled and left a big wet spot in the middle of a beautiful white table cloth that Granny decorated with crocheted edges.

Darn it! I Lifted the hook on the bottom of the window, and it gave way. Great! I climbed over the sill, scraping the inside of my left leg in the process, and jumped in the bed of white cauliflower, smashing one of them into the soft dirt. I crouched behind the bushes all the way through the garden, to the shack on the other side of the entrance. I carefully stepped on the wooden crates and peeked into the window. Kesha still lay in the box, but the puppies and granny were gone. I jumped from the crates, and made my way around the shack. Granny was nowhere to be seen. I ran towards the house and almost fell over a bucket, nested behind a big bush. I hit my right leg just below the knee, adding to the long line of faded bruises one more. Still mad at the bucket, I kicked it and wondered why it didn't tip over. I looked inside.

The bucket was full of water, up to the brim, and something dark lay on its bottom. I reached in and grabbed the dark mass, lifting it to the surface. It felt so soft, like a scarf my grandma made me for Christmas, that at first I couldn't believe my eyes. I held a puppy, one of them, all drowned in the bucket.

I can't remember exactly what happened next. I cried, no, I wailed. I took all six of them out, or maybe there were eight. I

laid them out, putting them next to each other, and covered them with my socks like a blanket, or maybe I tore my skirt to do it. I don't remember how long I was sitting there, but I remember when granny showed up. "Murderer!", I yelled at her. She carried a large shovel, dirty from digging up potatoes in the morning, with an angry face, walking very fast towards me. She slapped me on my face, hard.

I came to feel Yoki slapping me lightly on the cheeks. "Now, dear! Do you hear me? You're a sensitive one, aren't you. How curious. We can't waste any more time. If you just hold on to my arms." I looked around. Yoki grabbed me with surprising strength for her small body, and dragged me up to the lake's surface, pushing the water down with powerful strokes, away from the cave. I draped around her left arm like a wet washcloth, frail on the edges from use, lightly dirty and damp. But satisfied. As we made it to the surface, I gasped for air.

"There we go, dear. That's better. Quickly, now, we need to get under water." Yoki patted me on the shoulder. I coughed. I forgot I needed air, to avoid turning into a fish all together. How many hours has it been? My memory never served me right, except when it was about some horrors.

As we dove down, a beam of white light shot through the surface of the water. Shit! What the hell was that? Yoki quickly pulled me away.

"Yoki, what was that?"

"Nothing to worry about, dear. We've just got some visitors." Through the surface of the lake an explosion of artificial sun tore through. By some insane curiosity, I tried swimming up, but Yoki jerked me further down, hard.

"What do you mean, what kind of visitors? I can't remember the last time-

"Hold your mouth shut, and follow me," she mouthed.

My gills convulsed. I pressed my eyes shut, my mouth tight, my whole body squeezed into one single muscle, ready to burst. Yoki dragged me deeper, towards the entrance to the river, and then out into the ocean. The sun was left behind, quietness enveloped us. Not yet, my body said. Don't speak yet. I ached to ask, but trusted my instinct. It said it was dangerous.

A sweet sound of a heavenly flute reached my ears from above the water.

"Yoki, did you hear that? How beautiful!" I turned towards the surface, but Yoki kept pulling me.

"Trust me, you don't want to be the lady of the house yet, dear. Not all guests are welcome. Just ignore this."

"But it's the most beautiful sound I ever heard!" Oh, Yoki, can we please just only peek?" My body convulsed at a craving, to swim up, to listen, to taste it. Even if just for a second.

Yoki kept dragging me. I yanked my arm out of her grip, only to be grabbed again by her other hand.

"Who do you think you are to pull me who know where! I don't even know you, you jut show up like that and you think you can tell me what to do and what not to do? I've been on my own just fine, thank you. I don't need you to protect me, got it? Let me go!" I tried pulling from her grip. The sweet flute beckoned from above. Yoki held like stone, and kept dragging me forward. I lost control of myself.

"Let me go, you old hag! Do you hear me? Let me-" Yoki slapped her hand on my mouth. A mess of churning water, shrieks, swearing, and cacophony of loud souls slapped into the water above us.

"There they are!" a man's voice echoed above. A boat veered in our direction. Two pairs of flashlights shone at us through the water, the first boat departed. Yoki dove under the mountain into a crevasse, and pulled me closer to her, her hand still over my mouth.

A sharp pang slid my throat open with its sound, the spot deep inside my chest burned. Yoki dragged me deeper, I didn't protest, feeling sick like from a bad flu gone three times worse. Another wave of sound reached me, my gills nearly collapsed, I jerked up and bumped against a rock with my head. In pain, I collapsed near Yoki. Nothing meant anything anymore.

I suddenly lost my will to fight. My limbs fell flat, dangling like forgotten laundry under the rain, grey and limp and wet and deformed. The frantic concoction of sounds of the motorboats above faded into white noise of dull lifeless world, without meaning, without soul. If I would have ever had a soul, I felt as if I just lost it, snuffed it out, stretched it and tossed it aside like a piece of garbage. Useless. Rotten. A piece of crap.

Yoki pressed me harder into the corner between the rocks, whispering to me to calm down, singing lowly to block out the piercing sound, ever so gently into my ears. She promised to hide me from this nonsense, from the gloom of no future, from the aching hole of no past, and from the emptiness of no present. If it was tears, I didn't know, I let them mix with the water around, giving up the last will to live, to exist even, to keep crawling forward in spite of nothing. The sound of nothingness surrounded my mind, pressed against my ears, seeped into my eyes to get even the remaining color of life out. Why did I want to live? What would be the purpose of it? What was life really? Hunting for souls? Hiding from people? Alone and alone again?

How long I dwelled in my thoughts, I didn't know. The sound seemed to die away, when it aimed at my chest and shot precisely

there. Something dark and sinister woke up in me, and it was mad. Mad for being disturbed, mad for being chased like an animal. It seeped into my mind, and in an instant all my indifference was gone, replaced by hatred, a type of anger that toddlers have, irrational, consuming, blind. I ripped Yoki's hand off my mouth, pushed her away and roared to the water, to people, to fish, for everyone to hear, to run and to despise me. The energy of hatred emanated from me in waves, so all living beings vanished into holes or gaps or anything to hide, as their bodies reverberated to my accord. I continued to scream, stretching my body, speeding up to the surface, to those who dared to disturb my quiet, oblivious to anything or anyone in my path, living or dead. My face broke through the water in a poisoning agony, spitting my voice all over the lake basin, with terrifying echoes bouncing off the mountain walls.

Two men in a white motorboat pressed their hands against their headphones in vain, for my voice penetrated them with such force, there was no barrier against it. The dark sky amplified my rage like an enormous loud speaker, and followed it into the lake with immense wind power.

It hit the water, like a boulder the size of the lake, forcing vertical waves to splash the mountains and then converge upon the boat. If a tsunami was ever possible on a lake, this was a rare occurrence of it. Seconds later it was over. As the

last ounce of pain shot through me, it was gone just as it came, in an instant. I calmed, inhaled, and looking around myself with wide eyes.

Remnants of the broken boat floated around. Three human bodies were sinking to the lake's bottom, their hands waving goodbye with outstretched fingers. The absence of any sound pierced my ears. I shuddered and looked at the victims. Two men and something small. A baby?

A baby? I killed a baby? But their souls are still intact? How can it be? I dove in after it, white as a fish skeleton against the sand. They're dead, they're all dead! While the man sank fast, the baby floated lightly above them, its blonde curls rolling to the rhythm of the water, mouth open in a perfect O, eyes wide, looking at me. I swerved under it and grabbed it. It didn't weigh a thing. I cradled it in my arms and kicked off to the surface, when Yoki touched my right shoulder.

"Yoki, what happened to me? How did I do this? I killed a baby, Yoki, I killed a baby!" I turned my face into the baby's clothes, listening to a faint sweetness emanating from her dead body.

Yoki's eyes illuminated with greed, she reached and tilted my head by the chin, as if appraising an animal for sale. "How special. Who would have thought! Worth waiting a month, worth waiting years, if I knew!" Her little body shimmered in delight,

I almost waited for he to clap like a three year old at the sight of a new shiny toy.

"I killed three people, Yoki - is that what you're calling special? I'm a monster, don't you get it? Don't you see I'm dangerous? Aren't you afraid of me? What if I wanted to kill everybody, including you - just to be left alone? Huh?" I bared my teeth, three sharp rows of them, nature's last resort at feeding its stubborn child, with fish meat if it came to that. Only every meal would turn me further down the road of an animal, if fish can even be called animals, cold stupid creatures.

Yoki smiled broadly, baring her ancient gums. "Oh, no, dear, you can do much more than that. Much more. Come on, now. We're already late. It's breeding season, and you are my best offering in the last thousand years." She pulled me by left arm, as my right was still cradling the baby.

"What do you mean, breeding season? Who are you to jerk me around like I'm yours?" I twisted my arm and kicked Yoki with legs, those stubby feet without fingers, rather fins in disguise. Yoki pulled me with inhuman force close to her face. Our noses touched. Her face was dark. All cuteness gone, replaced with deep hatred and loathing. Favorite doll gone wrong.

"Who I am? You are asking me. Your kind owes me. If you weren't so special, you wouldn't be much to bother with. But damn me if you aren't going to thank me later. Now, shut up and listen - do you want me to show you something?"

The sudden sweetness of her voice gought me off guard, I was ready to punch and kick and scream, and it all evaporated at the tug of childish curiosity.

"What?" I didn't say it, the word jumped from my mouth before I could think.

"Oh, you will like it." Yoki's eyes shimmered in the dark water with delight. And warmth? Love? My resistance melted into that warmth, and I tagged along, like an obedient puppy, lolling my tongue out in anticipation of a treat.

NOTES FROM MEETING: Good feeling of the environment; describe Ailen – how does she look, fish; webbed feet? Joseph Cambell, writing about sirens; mythology on Young and Freud, book "The Power of Myth". Loved wet rugs of a washing woman; Very focused – short sentences. Short sentences – good. Hunger – tell more about hunger, especially connected to the mother, mother's perception of hunger – memory, was it the last memory before they died, the first conscious memory as a child? What tpe of memory? Allen doesn't eat because she gets all those memories, but nobody else gets the memories like her. See her more – what she looks like physically, she can see a reflection of herself. Is Tim a pimp. Talk about the human conflict – fitting in, fall back on survival, how do you have both of those skills; she is not a scary monster –

how do you control you monster, how do you control it. Binge, feeding – Ailen is like a janitor.

Dead meats – read more about; Dialogue – just write it. Thelma & Louise, movie

Now they have to leave, before he seals the lake off. And they have to find Paul, for Ailen to mate with him, to make a baby siren. Lake Crescent is 8000 years old, is Yoki about the same age?

Have to bring in Wauna, Paul, Rolf, Tallula. Where are they now? What happened to them?

Have to tie in the memories – whose memories are they? How do they intersect? Do they help the plot, the character development?

Theme of the novel – HUNGER

Everyone is HUNGRY for something

Every character is HUNGRY for Ailen for different reasons – Yoki to breed a special kind of siren from her, Wauna for a master she never had, Rolf for establishing his self-esteem by killing her, Paul for her love, Tallula is hungry for a perfect child, Ailen is hungry for family and love.

Ailen is the only one who fights her HUNGER – and she wins in the end

Each memory is about HUNGER – for love, for death, for ...

Breeding

We swam through a dark tunnel at the very bottom of the lake, under the lake. After a few minutes it opened up into a carved out cave, polished to perfection. A *surgical room*. White rock of the walls illuminated a stalagmite stump and a white bundle on top. A leech. A gigantic colorless leech. I swam closer, fascinated by its milky transparency. The thing was my size, bloated, and almost pointed at one end. There, where usually all of its ten eyes sit, I could find none. Something squirmed inside it, barely visible through the mass of living jelly. I dared not look into it, afraid to glimpse its last meal in the primitive stomach cavity, and counted the rings instead.

"Thirty four", I said. "I've never seen one so big, and so... clear."

"I knew you'd like it", said Yoki. "Want to see what's inside?"

I dared not answer. I burned from curiosity. And I froze at the horror of the unknown. Leeches helped sirens for centuries. Not the common leeches from human memories, but the humongous leeches of the deep, able to swallow anything and anyone whole, five times the size of their body, crawling storage compartments

with an oral sucker for the door. Their primal brains were easy to command with a siren's voice. If there was one emotion they felt, it was pleasure from the sound waves stroking their rings, making them contract and expand in a graceful yet quick up-and-down swimming style. Most often they were ordered to carry a human without digesting it, vomiting it out through toothless jaws. Covered in slime. Rewarded for delivery with plenty of blood. Later. I shuddered.

"What if I don't want to see?" I said.

"Oh, but you have to, dear." She almost sang the last word. Then she closed her eyes. And hummed. The force of ritual pinned me down, or was it the horror of what I would see? *It filled my limbs with lead, like in a bad dream when you want to run, run away as fast as you can, but your legs don't move, atrophied and heavy.* Paralyzed, I saw and felt through my skin, taking in everything.

Water around the leech shimmered. Leech contracted its rings, one by one, into a bloodsucking dance of a parasitic vacuum. Only it was backwards. From its rear sucker to its front. One convulsion, two convulsions. The murkiness of its gut moved, inch after inch, closer to the pin-shaped head, to its mouth. Yoki spread her arms, strung like a bow of a violin, about to tear from tension. The buzz of her hum penetrated walls, my bones, and the ground beneath us, calling to the

animal instinct of procreation, the only survival mechanism so intently linked to pleasure that we don't even consider fighting it, for the dread of life steps away ("for" and "steps away" don't make it clear that it's about the experience in that moment) in the moment of bliss. In it, we think we're happy, loved, safe, immortal. Nothing bad could ever happen again. Devious. Our own nature tricks us into the act, and we forget everything, ignorant as newborns, plunging with all our trust into it. And then it's over. Just like that. Pop.

I felt I saw the scene all over again, *déjà vu*? Yoki still hummed, but her tone changed. Three jaws of the leech curled open around the mass of jelly, matted dark hair on a man's head, being born the wrong way. I had to get out of here before my thirst kicked in. I could already hear his soul's weak sound, rolling in irregular bursts, like it was stuck from being too long on the bottom of the lake. It sounded familiar, but I had to stop listen. Stop it! Stop, cover your ears!!! As if it would do any good, I could hear it with my skin. I looked down at my feet, dangling just above the smooth rock. My legs sightly bent. Naked pubic skin like that of a little girl, destined to never have any hair. Small breasts on a thin chest, no nipples on their white skin, as no milk would ever flow from them. Bony arms attached to squarish shoulders. And suddenly I felt it. Felt naked. All over. Ashamed, hands over breasts, knees into

the chin. The nakedness of my body didn't bother me before, not at all like what I saw in human memories. And now it did. I felt it, I knew it. It was mine, and it was foreign. Time slowed to a crawl. I looked at Yoki.

Her long hair surrounded small shriveled body. Two empty skin sacks hung in place of breasts, almost touching her single round perfection - a protruding stomach. To my horror, I saw long floating hair just beneath it, covering the opening between her knotted legs, ending in big flat feet, bluish from centuries of use, stark against the white of the rock.

I closed my eyes to cut off the vision. Concentrate! I looked again. The opening into the tunnel was right behind Yoki. I gently made my way towards it, a tenth of an inch at a time, as delicate as a breath of a dying woman, her last exhale, inaudible yet moving. The intensifying whistle of the human soul pulled at me, tugged me with its fingers. No, not right now! I can't be hungry, please don't. Just a little bit more, and I promise I will feed you. Dear body, please listen. It did. I moved. Leech vomited. Man exited. I reached the opening. And there she was.

"Wauna?" I couldn't stop the words. They just lived on their own sometimes, most of the times. Like they didn't care what I thought, or what I would say. None of their business.

Wauna clasped her hand over my mouth. "I told you you'll be the death of me, girl", she moved her lips without a sound, but I understood. I nodded, and she let go of my mouth. I motioned towards the tunnel, she smiled. And I thought she cared. It just felt so good, she really did. She hugged me, then wheeled me around and pushed me towards the stalagmite. I turned. I was wrong. All this time, I was wrong.

"No!" I shrieked. I beat the water with all my might, both Wauna and Yoki descended on me. In that moment, strangely I paid attention to how different their bodies were. Next to the leathery prune of Yoki, Wauna's flesh rounded into ripe creamy breasts, firm as kelp bulbs (is there another noxious weed, so the aggressiveness is clear?), smooth as if inflated to extreme, protruding above narrow waist and a pristine water lily of thighs, notched at the base with a fistful of silky hair, followed by plump legs and delicate feet. A true siren. Designed to lure, seduce, and kill. One moment she's as sweet as her voice, the other a noxious weed, gobbling up souls, greedy in her lust. I felt something big and round being pushed into my mouth.

So small and fragile, cute and furry and grey. The girl who held the kitten asked, if I wanted to have it. I nodded my head

furiously, and extended both hands. The girl plopped the kitten on my palms, and exhaled.

"It's your now. What're you gonna do with it?" she said.

I said I'll take it home and give it some milk. Elated from feeling important and protective, I ran to our house, jumped two steps at a time, and pushed the front door open with my back. White and Keesha met us with furious barking, I edged past them, kitten raised high above my head, hissing his head off. Stork and Beanie hit grandma's room door open, and joined the ruckus. What was I thinking? Beanie jumped high up my chest and nearly knocked me down, but I held. I squeezed my right leg, and then my whole body into my room and shut the door. I felt dizzy, blood pumping through my head. I lowered the kitten down to my chest, it clawed my fingers bloody, and shook violently from shock. I kissed it on the nose. I said it's gonna be ok, I will build it a special house, and the dogs will never harm it. I plopped down the patchwork quilt covering my bed, and put the kitten beside me.

The door burst open. Dad stood in the frame.

"What's all the ruckus?" he said.

The dogs ran in, Beanie knocked me down on bed, and before I could grab the kitten, grabbed it by the neck. I screamed and pulled him by the collar, but dad grabbed my t-shirt and yanked me away. The kitten wheezed, and hissed, and shrieked. Stork and

White joined, with Keesha at their heels. Within seconds, they mauled the kitten to death. I stood in shock, unable to speak. Dad hit the back of my head, hard.

"I told you no more stray animals in this house, didn't I?" I was quiet. "Didn't I?" I nodded. "Good. You're grounded for two weeks, and no dinner tonight, until you get this thought into your stupid head. And clean up this mess after yourself."

He turned on his heels, pushed the dogs out and slammed the door shut. I looked at the kitten, lying on the floor, its head half torn off, eyes clouded, teeth open in a protective sneer. It twitched slightly, still alive, covered with dogs saliva covered its fur like sticky jello. I kneeled and picked it up.

I opened my eyes and tried to move. My body ached, my legs shivered, and I was looking into the smooth ceiling from the same stalagmite. But I wasn't hungry anymore. I floated off it. Heavy. Feeling stuffed, like from overeating. The leech was gone. A man lay on his back by the wall, peering with surprised eyes through the translucent slime all around his naked body. He didn't breathe, but I could tell he was alive. The guy from the nightclub. Simply perfect. I recognized his sweet sound, the short buzz of his hair. The slime glued him to the stone, body sprawled over it, a strange limb, like a capsule, between his

legs. I'd seen this capsule before, in some of the memories, and I knew its job was to thrust into another body. Just like mine. A realization hit me.

I felt poked, punched, torn inside, all to produce a little siren, to Yoki's delight and my pain. All she wanted was a baby, not me. I was to be just a vessel, to be penetrated, to carry, and to deliver. To be discarded later. A used up shell. Empty. I clawed at my stomach, I hit it with fists, I tried reaching it with my mouth to tear it open with my teeth. I heard the sweet sound faint. He is dying! My attention turned towards him, and my heart ached.

I swam up to him and grabbed his by the waist, my fingers slipped on the slime, oily and firm. I heaved him up, his back on top of me, my arms curled and clasped around his chest, and pushed my way towards the tunnel. It was quiet, eerie almost. Yoki and Wauna weren't there. We moved through the tunnel, slowly, then up into the abandoned siren hatchery, empty bulbs swinging at us. Water hummed all around, with noise and vibration from above. I sensed people, ten, maybe twenty, with a mismatched chorus of souls, up above. I steered away from it, looking left and right, in case Yoki or Wauna showed up. But they didn't. I paddled higher still, away from the noise, into a little laguna, tucked away from the main access point for humans. We surfaced. I could hear a helicopter above the water,

sending waves of guttural sounds, a siren, policemen shouting. I hoisted the man with my left arm, and with my right grabbed at the nearest branch and pulled up. On to the shore. Into the dirt. Safe.

The man lay on his side, motionless. I could barely hear his sound. The slime, so perfect, so slippery, didn't give me any way of peeling it off, tearing a hole in it, nothing. I tried it with my teeth and nearly vomited. Revolting taste of a leech's gut stayed in my mouth, for what I thought would be an eternity. The sound faded more. I grunted in frustration. The slime vibrated slightly. I hummed. It moved more, bloated a bit. Empty bubbles of air sprouted inside, and popped. Where they popped, a hole remained. But I'd kill him with my song! His soul was barely audible. Do I even have a choice? Either way, he dies. At least I can try freeing his body. And I sang.

I sang my first hunt song, about dew on pine needles, about damp air and smells of wet ground, about quiet water, about love. I sang and tears rolled down my cheeks, real tears, I licked one, salty. I sang until I had enough air to go on, my body and my longing poured out, wove the pain into music. Thick with love. The slime popped, a myriad of guns fired at once.

The song stopped. I collapsed. Next to him. He coughed. Like a newborn, amidst sticky slime, pink and naked. He rolled to his side. The sound of his sweet soul enveloped me.

"Ailen", he said. "I'm sorry."

He touched my cheek gently.

"Me too," I said. "What's your name?"

"Paul".

"Nice to meet you, Paul". And my numbness was gone. As if skin stripped from body, every nerve exposed and raw. A flood of feelings rushed in, and I wailed. I shook violently, crying and wheezing, holding my knees, rolling on the ground, grabbing onto dirt and throwing it in handfuls. Paul grabbed my wrist, gently. I let him. He hugged me, his arms and legs stretching around my body on a protective shell, my face buried in his shoulder, my knees flash against his chest. I quieted. He held me some more. And I relaxed into his embrace.

So we lay in the forest, amidst slime and pine needles, naked, whole.

Paul

I could tell Paul was freezing. His sound fluctuated slightly out of discomfort. Goosebumps covered his skin, yet he held me tight. Morning sun trickled through the young leaves above us.

"Paul?"

He looked at me with warm eyes. Brown. I drank from their depth.

"What are we going to do now?"

"Get some clothes, first." He smiled.

I couldn't stop drinking from his eyes, and now saw a laughing sparkle just around the pupils. I smiled in return, barely aware of his skin all around my body. He leaned on his elbow, then crouched and jumped up, his hand in midair offering me support. I grabbed it and stood up next to him.

"You're so smooth", he traced a line on my left shoulder, down the arm, and to the hand. He grabbed it and pulled me into a walk.

"Like marble", I said.

"No, like silk". He blushed and turned his face away. His sound paused, skipped a beat, then resumed.

I suddenly felt naked again, and tensed.

"Do you feel anything?" I said, and stopped facing him.

"Well, I'm cold, for sure. And maybe..." He stepped forward, trying not to look at me, but I held.

"No, I mean, when I talk - do you feel anything at all?"

He furrowed his eyebrows at my question, which caused his forehead to crease. He tilted his head just a notch, *like a dog that is trying to understand what it's supposed to do*. Then he got me.

"No, nothing at all."

"Strange."

We walked on, avoiding sharp sticks on the ground and weaving between trees, up the mountain, away from public trails and the lake.

I waited for Paul to respond, listening to his soul singing.

"Paul?"

"I'm thinking. I do feel something, like a connection, a sweet tug right here," he put his palm on his chest, "going down into my stomach, just like when up on a swing, and then down, you know?"

I didn't. I closed my eyes and searched within my memories. No swing. He realized it quickly.

"I'm sorry."

"I want to swing with you." I said. "How do you do it?"

"I can't show you now, after we get some clothes, ok? I'm sorry, I just can't... when you're like this..."

I felt a pinch of guilt, I forgot that he is naked too, and probably felt it every moment, unlike me.

We walked without talking, ducking under furs, until we reached a small clearing surrounded by tall blueberry bushes. Inside, a metal box stood up to Paul's knees. He quickly turned several wheels with numbers next to a round handle, and pulled the door open. Inside was stuffed. A backpack. A mini-stove. A tent. A radio. Dry food.

He took a sack of heavy-duty plastic coated fabric, and reached in. He rummaged in it, mumbling to himself. The sound of his soul became a soothing rhythm to me, something I couldn't imagine living without. I sat down on a rock. Soft fabric touched my back. Paul, dressed only in hiking pants, offered me a bundle of clothes.

"Here, it's all I could find that would fit you." He took the top piece, brilliantly blue. "This is a sweatshirt, it's not as large as my other jacket, and these are fleece underpants, kind of like long pijamas, you know." I nodded and took the clothes.

"Let me find you some shoes." He turned back to the box. I pulled on black fleece pants, more like loose leggings, and

slipped into the sweatshirt, so brilliantly blue, I couldn't stop looking at it.

Blue was my favorite color, every hue from deep indigo to the light blue, pale petal variety that can be mistaken for white. I carefully stepped around the corner of the room and peered into the doorway. I didn't really need to do it, as the distinct staccato sound gave away grandma's sawing on her old sawing machine, pushing the pedal with her right foot, and folding the cloth with her hand, stuck so close to the needle that I always wondered how it never got sucked in and pierced by it.

She would take dad's old shirts, and remake them into dresses for me, with short puffy sleeves, wavy bottoms, and rows of shiny pearl buttons all the way from top to bottom. No other girl in school had dresses like me, and so they hated me for that even more, calling me Ailen - because I was mute and because I always dressed in blue and because I smelled of fish, like my father. The boys didn't care, they passed coded notes behind the teacher's back about the next adventure after school, inviting me bike-riding, roof-climbing, or simply hanging out by the pond listening to frogs and pulling out long strands of their eggs, offering them to me as necklaces. Which made the girls hate me even more, with their proper braids ending in

colorful ribbons, white socks in clean mary-janes, and clean knees - mine were always scratched.

I breathed into grandma's back, and watched mesmerized how the silver goose foot ate the fabric, and folded it neatly into a wavy edge of yet another dress, light-blue, sprinkled with little navy diamonds. I leaned in closer, and hit granny's back with my nose.

"And here are socks and boots", Paul woke me from my slumber. "The boots are too bog, but at least they won't slide off your feet when walking." He pointed at his hiking sneakers. "These would've been worse." I looked up. Navy rain jacket made his eyes even warmer. He held two black lace-up boots and grey wool socks, paper packaging still attached.

"I don't need shoes," I said.

"I know, but people will think it odd. It's March."

"Where are we going?" I asked, but I didn't care, as long as we were going together, as I could keep listening to his sound. Never again in silence. A different kind of silence, the one of being alone.

"Home" he said.

Nobody spoke this word to me before. Home. What a magical sound, soft and enveloping and breathless. Exhale it, breathe it out, form it out of nothing - just like that, between lips

formed into an O - home - and close into an embrace. Safe.
Together. Painless.

We trotted down a trail, a path worn by human shoes and miles of wilderness desire, or desire to get away, away from it all, without knowledge where to go next. Without destination. I concentrated on listening for human souls. A faint chorus edged into my consciousness, perhaps a mile away. I reached out to grab Paul's hand and jerked it away upon in the moment of touch, the lightness of it uncomparable to what must have happened between us already. Paul turned, reached out and held my hand, his fingers closing in on mine. He looked deep within me, beyond eyes, into the empty cave of the absence. The absence of soul. There was no soul he could search for in my eyes, only the vast blankness of a nothing.

"What is it?" he said.

"People, about a mile ahead". I pointed down the trail.
"Three, or four, hard to say. Probably hikers."

"Let's move out of the way". Paul stepped off the trail, into the thick undergrowth, and pulled me with him. I stepped on, next to a mushroom size of the human head. More of them hid behind the tree, small and tight, proud little forest soldiers. Sand brown, each with a thick stalk, planted firmly into the

ground, capped with a spongy all-season hat. An envy to a lost passerby, always home, always protected. I've lost Paul's hand, kneeled next to it, touched its cap. Crawled forward to its babies, all a perfect copy of the parent, clustered together in a tight group. Next to a pair of boots, sandy colored boots. I looked up.

The tall man looked down at me, or rather pierced through me with the exuberance of a hunter's thrill, a victory. He had no sound around him, or within him, that I could hear.

"Absolutely silent", I said. And all sounds left me, Paul's beautiful strings, distant hikers, trees, animals, wind. There was nothing to hear, nothing to listen to. I felt deaf.

"Isn't that what you want?" he said. The smile on his worn face pulled at the wrinkles around the eyes, but it couldn't kill the coldness of his pupils, deep dark wells of hatred. It spilled out and beyond him, wet and sticky. Oil to my rusty thoughts of suicide. It pinned me to look inside. I longed to glance aside, to see Paul, but couldn't.

"Not like that". I pressed into my hands, now etched with dry pine needles, to push up from crouching position. And a moment later etched with the intricate design of two boot footprints, as he pushed both of them hard into the ground.

"I'd like it if you stayed where you are, as you are. I like you like that." Greed entered his voice, mixed with lust. My eyes glued to his. Can't move. Can't hear. And I laughed.

"What's so funny?" he said. I heard an edge of frustration this time. I felt the tug of his stare lessen.

"Nothing. A reversal of fortunes, I guess. It's me who is supposed to enchant you - and here I am, in trance of a mere human. How pathetic is that?" Another hearty laugh shook my chest. The bizarre of this moment let me go, let me be here, all fear left to the logical, meaning it left. No logic present. I couldn't stop. It shook me, all of me. Tears spilled and crawled along my cheeks. They say there is nothing worse than a siren's voice, except a siren's laugh. And so I laughed more. I couldn't remember if I have done this before, as no memories of mine ever lived with me. Only those of prey, swallowed and absorbed, but not quite digested. I know what's wrong with me, what my mother didn't like so very much, I suffer from human memories indigestion! This shook me more. The word *hysterical* poked its head and disappeared.

The tall man blurred through my tears. I saw him reach behind into his backpack and pull out a transparent tube, and shuddered at the memory of the leech, now suspended in mid-air,

an almost miniature copy. A memory? I pressed grabbed at its tail, but it was gone. Something happened, but what exactly? Where have I seen it?

"Die!!!" The tall man aimed the tube at me, pulled at a trigger and let go. A massive sound wave hit me in the face. I was glad our eye contact was broken, in that instant. And I flew, backwards, over my head. Paul's face upside down. His body, knocked unconscious, oddly grey against the brilliance of green grass. Afternoon sun. And sound. I stopped mid-roll, on the side, on the ground. I could hear again, but only one sound. The terrible screeching of a sharp rock against glass. A sick bird near death mixed with an uneven howl of a rusty tuba. It came from the man. I could hear his soul. It was deaf. It emanated sounds without hearing their dreadfulness. And it couldn't hear me. Until now.

I jumped up. My legs felt restless, ready to move. Hair stood up on my head. The rush of the wind prickled my skin, the sounds of life returned one by one, and yet the one that stood out, stood right in front of me, and I yelled at him.

"Eat this, fuckhead!" I didn't quite know what this meant, but it felt so good to say it. It just rolled off my tongue and kicked me into action. I inhaled and began low, picking one note below my usual reach, aware with my skin of Paul breathing on the ground to the left of me. I sang it.

The tall man fell to his knees, covered his ears with both hands, and a sound wave hit me from the left. It broke the song, but it woke up my ears, or what was beyond them. The haze fell, and I suffered from the cacophony of the disjointed sounds piling on top of another, squealing in high pitch. I had to stop it, I couldn't bear this sound. My body toppled, sprang back up and turned towards it like by a hidden command.

I jumped to the man, grabbed his face into my hands, and sang another note, looking right into his eyes. The hair on his head moved, the blackness of the pupils faded, he aged rapidly. Another sound entered my consciousness. Irritated, I glanced up. It was Paul, propping himself by his elbow, still lying on the ground, a thin trickle of blood running from his nose. His face white from shock.

"Ailen, stop it! You're killing him! Stop, please!!!" he barely mouthed, breathing hard. A shadow of fear crossed his features, distorting them. Not perfect, irritating.

"That's exactly what I want to do, and you've just interrupted me", I said.

"But you're not an animal, you're better than that!" Beads of sweat prickled his forehead, as he crouched to a sitting position, and propped himself up against a tree.

"Yes? How do you know who I am? Do you even know what I can do? What I was born to do? Have you ever seen it in your

nightmares? *You have no fucking idea!!!*" Again it rolled off effortlessly, like a perfect punctuation mark. I dropped the tall man and stood up, his thump against ground barely audible.

"Oh, don't I?" he fell quiet, and crept forward. Our noses almost touched, I could hear his rapid breath and smell sharp sweat. "And what about facing a pack of sirens when only seven years old? Walking into a paradise, the song of such magnificence I thought it was God himself? And it was only a little girl? Stealing my soul, beckoning me towards death, stupid creature. She couldn't even kill me." He breathed again, I didn't.

"It was you?"

"Yes. And no. After that night, it was never me again, obsessed with finding you again, unable to get you out of my freaking mind! Normal guys slept with half the high school while I was stuck in the forest, searching for you everywhere, all fucking Washington state rivers, one by one, until even my parents thought I was a loony." He towered above me, his dark eyes hard and unpleasant. I touched his hand, he jerked it away.

"And then your mother stole you from me, left me prepped for dinner, eight hungry sirens glad to tear me to pieces."

"How did you escape?" I said.

He unzipped his fleece jacket and lifted his t-shirt. A pattern of reddish scars covered his bare chest, nail marks. I

looked at my nails, sharp without ever being cut. I traced one scar, he pushed my hand away.

"Your kind, you don't take defeat lightly. They jumped down from the tree, horrible colorless naked bodies. Matted white hair, like from an old sailor's tale. I couldn't breathe, and just watched them come closer." He wiped the sweat off his forehead with the sleeve. I drank in his movement.

"One of them reached out and tore at my chest. It hurt real bad. She didn't even have time to start her song. I shrieked. My dad said no shrieking in his house, I pierced his eardrums. That saved me, I guess. They all cowered and yelped." He twisted his sideburns hair with his fingers, in thought. "And some minutes later, my friend's parent found me. They both hugged me to make me stop. I think I never yelled again after this."

He looked down and zipped his jacket up.

"I'm sorry", I said, afraid to reach to touch his sleeve. Or his face. Or even look up. I noticed the comforting violin of Paul's soul.

"Don't be. I shouldn't have blamed you for this."

He cradled my fingers in his and lifted them up to his lips. He kissed them, each finger one by one. The warmth of his lips bloomed inside of me, filled the void. I cherished the weakness it brought, softening my limbs, closing my eyes. I fell

deep into it, lost in time, his face so close. The shrill wailing of a mechanical siren cut through and yanked me out.

"Police." said Paul.

"He's gone." I looked around. The tall man vanished, together with his screeching. A chorus of human souls rapidly approached the trail. Barking dogs pulled ahead, sensing and fearing me at the same time.

"Let's get out of here", Paul grabbed my hand. We ducked under the bushes and ran up the hill, his training a match to my natural strength. I felt we started our hunt, although a police squad with dogs chased us this very minute. I loved to hunt. I knew then who I was, and I lost myself in the swift movement of our legs.

Caught

Paul led the way up the mountain, away from conventional paths, from the sounds of people looking for him, for me, for the dead baby, for bodies. The souls sound faded in and out, as we ducked under the wide pine arms, between thick blackberry bushes, and salal. I could sense the lake, it emanated calm and cold in the midst of the hunting agony. Dark, blue, deep, full to the brim with the lust for me, for me to come back, to dig down deep and procreate. To fulfill Yoki's dream. My stomach felt airborne for a second, my knees dug into soft dirt. Paul stopped.a

"What happened?" he said. His hand hovered just above my neck, so close, I could feel the warmth.

"My stomach, it burns." I crouched down more. Legs tightly woven into a protective cradle.

Paul stood up and furrowed his eyebrows, just like a dog when it's trying to understand what it has to comprehend, but unable to do so. He tilted his head to the right, then jerked it. A drop of water fell on his temple, cold and salty brine. He looked up, and gasped, his hands moving involuntarily to his chest, as if to protect it. I followed his gaze.

Up, on the widest arm of the pine we stood next to, sat Wauna, her long hair weaving around her body, a lotus torn out of its habitat, still fresh, on the oath to wilting. She grinned widely.

"Aren't you glad to see me, girl?" she said.

I lost my voice for a second. It dove deep under the diaphragm, but the heart pushed it out with menace. Paul cringed and covered his ears.

"Traitor!" I said. The word hung in the air like a visible hiss, so intense it materialized into a hand ready to slap Wauna in her face.

"You look terrible," she said.

I touched Paul's arm. I'm here, I won't let her do anything to you.

"Did you hear what I said? I don't want to talk to you, I don't want to see your face, I don't ever want to remember you. You're nothing to me, nothing! Go away! You're hurting him!"

I curled my fingers into two tight fists, close to chest. I wish I could just twist her neck and snap her head off, so it would roll down. Thump. Thump. Down the trunk. On the ground. Tangled in the bushes. Eyes staring into the sky.

"So, who is feeding you now? Can you even get food for yourself?" She jumped lightly down one branch, closer. Paul shrank, took his hands off his ears.

"It seems like you've gained some fat, eating all that food alone, haven't you?" He smiled one of his evil smiles, and cocked his head on the side, not really waiting for an answer, rather accessing the distance between her and us. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. His violin took for a sharper sound, up, up, to the higher notes. Stressed. It was making my stomach fall, burning in agony.

"I'm sorry we didn't get the job done the first two times. Three is the charm, isn't it, Paul?" She leaped down, caught the lowest branch with her right hand, hanging like on overripe pear, and shook her hair away from her body. Her nakedness hit me like an overgrown memory, packed with useless details, so full of themselves they don't make any sense. She opened her mouth and sang a low note. I threw myself forward, hitting her stomach with my head, a soft pillow of hatred. Paul shook all over and fell to the ground. The forest responded to our struggle with a light breeze, leaf by leaf into the rhythm of anticipated anxiety.

The dogs sniffed us. I heard their barking and the chorus of a dilettante orchestra from several policeman and a dozen search volunteers. Wauna kicked me in the face, in the stomach. She twisted my arms behind my back and slapped my face repeatedly until my head lolled to the side. All strength left me, all juices ran inside, to whatever lay in there.

"One day, I will kill you". She spoke so close into my ear, I could feel the words rolling off her tongue. "Like your mother should have done years ago. Weakling, she didn't have the strength. Always ran away from problems, even on her first hunt. And you're just like her, retarded, born the wrong way, fatal mistake." She flipped her hair onto her back, white face ablaze with disgust.

"How do you know?" I said. Still holding my arms, she grabbed a fistful of my hair and flipped my head up to face her.

"I'm her sister." She let go of me, a sack of empty potato shells, and hopped up the tree, jumped to another, and vanished into the thickness of the green pines, wet, wild, white.

Dogs were close. Paul lay on his side, eyes closed. I tried moving my arm, and let out a moan. The sound of people intensified, louder, louder, too loud. I faded.

Hunger for revenge

A dark room. I sit in the corner, naked. Its cold walls covered with old paper, cockroaches shuffle behind it in cracks between the plaster and the wall. I'm alone. The door cracks open - an old man's head pops in, hair shaved close to scalp, watery eyes dim with vapor of alcohol. I shrink. I try to push my skin inside of me, arms and legs tight in a know around my torso. My feet struggle to bend inside to cover up the

vulnerable entry into me, so I fall forward, legs underneath the breast, head touching the floor.

The man enters and closes the door behind him. His face glows in bursts of red shimmer from the cigarette. Inhale, exhale. Red, black. The room fills with smoke, coils and coils of it. I can't breathe, I cough. He comes closer. His hand reaches out and snakes up my legs. The warmth of his touch turns my hungry stomach inside out, raises every hair on my skin to a sharp prickle. I shudder and shrink away. He says something, something comforting to a child that just scraped her knee and is bleeding. And I yearn for that comfort, I hunger for that touch, for the love to envelop me, to hold me and protect me, but it's all wrong.

The exhilaration mixes up with guilt, shame, disgust, fear. He envelops his right arm around my knees and pushes them apart. I open my mouth to scream, but only a breath escapes, the last breath of a little girl, before she turns into a monster, an animal, with primal instinct to kill, kill, kill. A body of rage to lash out at humans, cruel to the point of pleasure, happiness at making them suffer, hunger for retaliation. Hunger for souls, hunger for memories, hunger for love.

My stomach churned with intestinal flames, on fire. I ratched and opened my eyes. I was lying on the floor of a padded room. A single light mounted into the ceiling, covered with protective wires. Walls protruded in series of little square pillows, the color of dirty sand. I smelled the stench of new fake leather and I heard nothing. My hands bound close to my body, on either sides, formed a white cocoon of fabric envelops so tightly around me that I couldn't move a finger. My mouth was gagged with the same fabric. I rolled to my stomach and licked the floor. It's all the same - ceiling, floor, walls, covered in vinyl. My stomach burned again, both from hunger and from an intruder deeper inside me. I threw up, nothing came out of me. I bent my body and hit the wall with feet, once, twice, three times. I bent my legs and hit again. Nothing, no sound.

One wall darkened as the glass opening hid behind a male face, peering hard into the room. I felt his sound, very faintly. I raised my head and looked him straight into the eyes. It was him. The tall man. The jumbled sounds of fear hit my ears with such force, I cringed. There were screams, an old screechy violin, and metal scraping on glass. His grey hair pulled away from strained forehead, raised questioning eyebrows. His eyes darted towards me as he opened the door and eased into the room. The door closed shut behind him without sound. The air filled with wet chlorinated smell of faucet water, freshly scrubbed

hands and soap. My burning sensation ceased. I breathed in, my lungs unfolded next to gills.

His white doctor coat bulged across his muscular shoulders, clearly not cut out for wearing this outfit. Dark pants fell over black dress shoes, their noses dug deep into the padded floor, sniffing. I tensed.

"Ailen," he said. "How are you feeling?"

I glared back, tongue and limb tied, flat out on the floor, nice target for his shoes, to be squished, to be stomped on, to be killed. The sound of his soul wavered. He tried to stabilize himself, to get rid of the fear. I smiled. He saw the smile in my eyes, and leaned forward, face hard.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" His right hand curled around his ear, all attention.

I went through a repertoire of all foul memories and words used in them, from bastard to pervert to creep. I laughed back with my eyes. He kicked with his right shoe nose right under my head, into the right side of my neck. A swift and precise kick. I twisted my neck to the side in pain. It hurt, but not too much to make me take my eyes off him.

"Oh, it hurts right here?" he pointed to my throat, his finger gnarled and thin, long, with a polished manicured fingernail at the end. "Well, we can certainly help you with that, Ailen. You came to the right place." He smiled. Or,

rather, the muscles behind his ears stretched out his lips into a long thin grin, toothless and cold.

I glared back, straight into his watery colorless eyes, and he looked away. He stepped with his foot onto my neck and I stopped breathing. My blood vessels collapsed, blood filled my eyes, pulsed in my ears. My gills opened and closed, helpless. I knew I couldn't be killed like a human, by merely being strangled, yet I suffered every second of it as if I was being killed, without dying in the process. I'd lost count of minutes when he let go. I breathed in, sharp. His face convulsed in disgust, he stepped away from me as if from a dead road kill that stinks.

"When we cut your cords, you'll be useless, a peace of meat. Maybe a pretty peace of meat, but nothing more." He judged my body, from top to bottom, and a familiar chill ran down my spine as he undressed me with his eyes. "And I will have my last say this time."

He raised his right hand and signaled with his forefinger towards me. The door creaked open, and a low set fat little man with a balding head, in an identical white robe, wheeled in a metal gurney. The stench of his soul entered my being and was worse than any physical torture. My stomach growled, and he backed off for a second. He never took his eyes off the floor, so I couldn't quite see his face. He leaned in to hoist me up,

and I saw his face now, the familiar smiling face now taught with grief and strain.

"Tim?" I said inaudibly into my cloth mask.

Beads of sweat prickled Tim's forehead, then he forced himself back to the task of heaving my body to the gurney, strapping in my feet and torso, and wheeling me out into the ugly beige corridor, lined with identical cell doors, with narrow rectangular windows etched just at the height of the human eyes. The tall man led the way, Tim wheeled me behind him. As we passed those cells, I wondered who was held in them, sirens like me? Other people? And I wondered about Wauna - did she know she couldn't trust Tim? That he worked for the tall man? I strained to hear anything coming from the rooms, but there was nothing. A faint soul sounds emanated from the building, as we made our way to the right, into another narrow corridor, up several flights in the elevator of the same sickly beige color, and into another corridor, lined with pristine white walls.

Brightly lit rooms hit me in the face with their cleanliness and metal shine from behind all-glass doors, as if designed to show what's going on inside of each. Surgery. I got it now, where we were going. I pushed inside of my tight cotton covers, the gurney wheeled to the right.

"Sir, she is trying to move", said Tim. I now sank deep into his fear, and guilt, and shame mixed with... a little bit of affection? I wish they plugged my ears, not my mouth, so it hurt, and stretched my intestines to their limit with acid.

The tall man stopped, and turned around.

"Don't worry, Tim, she can't escape this, proven and tested for years. Just get her into room 10, I'll be there shortly." He opened a side door, painted white, and stepped in. Tim pushed me forward, towards the glass door with words "operation room 10" etched into its glass. He swiped his badge next to a red light on by the door knob, and it turned to green with a weak peep. The door slid to the right, and he entered into it, propped the gurney against the snow-bluish wall, picked me up, and with averted eyes, gently laid me down onto a white leather chair, the dentist chair, a memory suggested. I looked into his face, he turned his head sideways so as not to look me in the eyes. He stretched the straps from the chair's sides on top of me, fixing me tightly to it. I couldn't even moan, cotton stuck all the way down my throat, but I burned a hole in the back of his head, staring, and he turned, his hands kneading each other's finders, he finally looked up.

He trotted to the glass door, peeked to the left and right, then came close to me and leaned to my ear. "Look, I'm sorry, hon. I don't mean to do this to you, really. But I've got

m'family to feed, three sons and a daughter. She's sick, but we've hope. Doctor says, she'll be good as new if we just find her another kidney. They's expensive, hon, the kidneys are." He stopped and glanced towards the door. "I've got to do this, hon. Don't be mad at your old man."

He said "at your old man", just like he probably says to his daughter. I cherished in that thought, as he pulled the last straps to my head, fixing it firmly to the chair, and then he left. I heard the door swoosh into open and close behind him, the mix of his guilt and shame fading into the end of a desperate concerto, harmonica on the left, tuba as main theme, and little kitten's cries for tempo. There was a sad sweetness to his soul's sound, and I let myself get lost in it, just to retreat from reality into the sound.

Operation

The lights shone into my face, tears streamed down my cheeks, as I couldn't turn my head to avoid staring into them, Even when I closed my eyelids, they still shone through, there was no escape from them. Two people entered the room and brought with them the smell of alcohol, disinfectant, and the stench of a sick anticipation, the slaughter of an animal for sport. The gutting of fish to see what her steaming entrails are made of, how do they would shine in the artificial light, how she would move or not move without them. Her gut was her song, her song was her life. If they take it away, will she still live?

A parking lot on the other side, where we hopped into his old Volkswagen. The navy blue paint on it battered over the years into an undistinguishable patina of road dirt. The old engine sputtered a couple times before coming to life. It took all my strength to jam the buckle into the rusty slot.

"Sorry, this one is not being used very often." Paul smiled.

"No worries," I said and smiled back. It felt wonderful, to smile. "We need to find that man."

"Let's stop by my place first, I need to grab some gear and eat something."

"Yes, right, I forgot. I need to go into water soon. Where do you live?"

"A small apartment by Pike Plce market, the one they haven't renovated yet. You'll like it."

He told me how he found it one night when looking on Craig's list for places, having ran out of options for searching for me, and stopping by the big city to do some more research before his h=next trip. He got hired shortly thereafter as a Park ranger, and thought of moving out, but never did as he fell in love with the place. He said it takes three hours from here to make it to Seattle, but to me it felt like three minutes.

We entered through a highway exit that bent like a shiny pretzel. Wet fog stuck to buildings, unable to decide whether it wanted to turn into a drizzle or just stay lazy for the day. Grey cobble streets ran down and across the asphalt ones, into a farmer's market, full of shouts and laughter and fish flying from behind the counter to the happy and a bit surprised shoppers. The air was thick with fish smell, which let me blend in seamlessly, as my white hair attracted enough attention.

Paul wheeled into a side alley, parked the car and opened his door. I got out of the car. Paul tried acting relaxed, but I could hear him being nervous. We kept our heads low and hugged the walls, the crowd pushed us against them like the sea. I wasn't happy in the middle of the warm pulsing noisy mixture of souls, my head ready to split in two from reverberation.

A burning pain seared my stomach below the navel. I buckled and felt an urge to empty my bladder. Usually I just streamed it into the lake, at night, once a week maybe. This was sudden and unsettling.

"Ailen, are you ok?" said Paul.

"Should I be?" I said, looking at him from below.

"No, I guess not", a dark shadow crossed his face, then it became red, all the way up to the tips of his ears.

He looked down to my hand clutching the stomach from below, then nodded and led me to a wide stair packed with people. I didn't dare to penetrate this moving mass, then the urge tugged again. I ducked, pierced the crowd, almost falling over to the next flight, then the next, and finally to the entrance, open and dingy, stinking of chlorine, dirty bodies, and packed with women of all walks waiting in line. It was too much to bear.

Hunger for relief.

I sat down in the classroom, two boys at the table ahead of me, and another one behind. I knew I needed to go pee. But how to ask? The boy behind always laughed loudly into his fist, while the teacher walked down the row of table to smack him on his hands. The humiliation was obvious, so I decided to wait. A few minutes went by, like they were hours. I really needed to go. Oblivious to what else was going on in the classroom, I raised my hand. So be it, poking fingers at me at break, tossing my school bag and spilling all of its contents, and chanting "stinky Dinky, stinky poo, has to go to the loo!"

Right before I did that, Miss Daisy asked the class of where exactly lies the river Nile and who would like to report on it. Naturally, it was me she picked. I stood up. The school uniform dress all crumpled on my behind from sitting in the same position for half an hour.

"Ms. Blake? Come upfront, please." She smiled her pleasant unpleasant smile, and I had to go.

I turned to face the class, legs cramped tight together, cheap cotton tights pressed to hold it, to not let go.

"Mmm, river Nile is the biggest river in Africa". I stopped. And then it happened. First a trickle, then a thin stream, down the left leg, then the right, wet brown staining the dry natural color. The first to notice was Mary Waterhorse. She pointed at my legs, and snickered into her fist, then

whispered to Natalie, who sat next to her in an ever so rigid erect position, because her mom wanted her to be a lady, and a lady has to have a straight back.

"Quiet, Mary! Or I will ask you to hold out your hands, miss! Continue, please." Miss Daisy looked at me, her fat body twisted only ever so slightly as not to cause her tight dress to rip open at the seams.

After Natalie turned to Rowan, the boys behind my desk noticed too, and held their hands to their mouths to suppress laughter. I felt a deep red of shame cover my whole face. I couldn't hold it anymore, and it streamed, down to the shoes, and onto the floor, a little puddle of yellow. By the time Miss Daisy noticed, the whole class was laughing.

She clasped her hand to her mouth, and I saw her eyes laugh, her horrible little pig eyes. She coughed into her fist, and stood up.

"Quiet, please! Miss Blake had an accident. I will escort her to the nurse, while you all copy the map of Africa from the wall and color in the river Nile, please."

She heaved her body onto little stubby legs clad in sturdy heels, and grabbed me by the shoulder.

"Do you need to go right now, dear?" An elderly woman held my right shoulder, the skins on her face as if chewed thoroughly

and then spat out. Buried in folds, her little eyes projected a strange compassion, an understanding of how I felt, her melodic voice surrounded me. I froze.

"Yoki?"

"What's that you said, dear? I can't hear very well, at this age. Can you repeat again, please?" I shook my head, staring in horror. There was nothing she could do to me, here, with all those people around.

"Well, why don't I let you into my place? You can go right ahead", the old woman smiled. "Here, swallow this, it will help." She pressed a small pearl into my hand. Her woolen coat hugged her frail body, brilliant in its cold white color, strangely contrasting with her darker skin. I saw I was in front of the line. All other women stepped aside, and stepped inside.

Chlorine stench enveloped a row of low hung stall doors, cut high above the floor, so that every occupant's head and feet were on display, their body hardly getting any privacy. A group of women washed their hands across the stalls, water fizzed onto their cold hands, brown paper towels soaked drops from their fingers. The constant clicking of the door latches mixed with toilet flushing and the disjointed orchestra of women's souls, violins and flutes, basses and tuba's. I sloshed along the ceramic flooring to the farthest stall, in the corner, lit by a flickering light. I latched the door closed and slumped onto the

cold basin jammed next to the cold concrete wall. A little girl's eyes peered from under the neighboring stall wall, curious. She smiled, I smiled back. The little girl's soul sounded like a tiny bell, sweet and pure.

Hers could have lasted me a whole month. I involuntarily took my hand away from my mouth.

"Hi!" said the girl.

"Hi!" I said.

The girl's eyes opened wide at the sound of my voice, her head swung up, and she kneeled down.

"What's your name?"

I opened my mouth, like a fish out of the water, not sure if I should say it. When my mother told me stories of how to survive in this cruel world, she said to never say my name when asked by a human being. Poor such that my memory was, this was almost instinct, not needed to be remembered. The girl's mom interrupted.

"Jenny, it's not polite looking at other people here, please stand up. Mommy's done, are you sure you don't want to go potty?"

"I'm sure."

"Ok then, let's go wash our hands, sweetie."

I felt salt on my lips and licked them. A single tear rolled down my cheek. I peeked under the door to watch little

girl smearing her fingers with pink liquid soap. The girl felt being watched, turned and waived at me. I waved back.

"Jenny!"

"I'm just waving to that nice lady, mommy. She has a very pretty voice. She is so sad." Jenny's mother sighed, and threw a concerned look in my stall's direction. She grabbed Jenny's hand, still smeared with soap, and marched her out of the restroom, taking with her the magical sound of little Jenny's soul. I cried silently. And then I vomited right into the toilet.

I waited patiently until it was over. I took my left hand out of the pocket and unclenched the fingers around the pearl. My nails cut into the flesh of my hand, and clear liquid, thick as salty brine, oozed out. I fought with my hunger, until I won over. I stuck injured fingers in my mouth, sucking out the liquid, and threw the pearl into the toilet. Shallow circular waves scattered across the water. I flushed it, stood for a moment, held my breath, and exited the stall.

All heads turned in my direction. I stuck my head in the sink, wet my hair, and patted it with paper towels. Shocked women stepped aside and around me. I didn't care. I sprinted to the exit, up the stairs, and smacked into the back of a man. He nearly fell under my force.

"Ailen!" Paul looked down at me from his six feet height, his brown eyes framed with thick slanted eyebrows, worried. I absorbed all of this in less than a second, my heart skipped a beat, a distant memory forming in my mind. Next second, I violently pushed him aside, but Paul held me firm with his big hands gently pressing down my shoulders. I looked up at him.

"Paul?"

"Ailen, I waited forever, I was about to go in there to check on you."

Home

Ailen turned a corner and hit a busy street, one of those clubbing neighborhoods that spit out drunks after two am in the morning, to be stuffed into yellow taxis and delivered home, up and down Seattle hills. Quiet thumping of the music echoed in her ears, and a group of dark men paused their conversation to eye her body. Seconds later, Paul caught up with her, his breath came out in quick rasps. He opened his mouth, but Ailen raised her finger to his mouth and listened intently into the darkness. Paul quietly grabbed the back of her cloak. Ailen's eyes widened, and she started forward but was stopped by Paul's grasp.

"Let go!" she hissed. "Or I will turn you into a soulless jelly".

Paul's eyes glazed at the sound of her voice, the he shook his head. "We need to talk...".

"There's no time to talk!" Ailen used the moment when Paul became mesmerized, and ran. At the same time, a white van with MPH on its side, screeched to a stop a few feet away, jerked and followed Ailen, who dug into the dark back alley and disappeared. Paul quickly hid behind a thick tree trunk.

The van's doors opened, and a squad of 4 guys in dark blue uniforms and headphones jumped out, and ran after her, scanners at the ready in their outstretched hands. The group of the dark men whistled at the spectacle, and as more people piled out of the club, a big crowd started to form around them, as they waved their arms around explaining what they saw.

Ailen ran from building to building, orienting herself by the sound of the human souls, emanating at her through the walls. She heard all four men at her heels, and Paul slightly behind them. She didn't know where she was going, her legs carried her through the streets, as if they knew the direction, Ailen simply let them carry her tired body.

Quiet darkness enveloped the buildings, indicating that the downtown area already ended. Ailen still heard the souls, but the sound was fading. She sped up and crossed a big dark bridge, with parked cars on the sides, leading her directly over the highway and into a quiet neighborhood, with scarce street lights and narrow side walks. She slowed down a bit, passing houses with a patina of poverty and neglect, big heaps of junk piled in the driveways, overturned garbage bins gaping their mouths into the night. Her legs carried her on, her mind drifted.

She said it was now 4138, I have to remember it, she said. Other girls write their codes on their hands, so I knew I had to remember mine to be different. I opened the heavy metal door, and met with three grins from above - Paul, Andrew, and Derek, all dangling their feet from the metal fence next to the entrance.

"Hey, Ailen!" called Paul, and jumped down into the dust on the street. "Wanna come check out the new garage?"

I nodded my head. Sure.

Andrew jumped down, then Derek. They grabbed their bikes out of the pile next to the building's wall, and sat down. Paul waited for me to hop on the back seat. "You're all right there?" he said. I nodded, and the metal spikes that dug into my buttocks through the thin cotton of my dress didn't matter next to his smile. "Cool, let's go!" He whistled, and we started down the street, then to the right, and to the right again, towards the newly built garage rows, with white doors and black roofs, next to the playground, and the grocery store.

We stopped, and I jumped off the same second, landing with both feet on asphalt, concealing pain in my heels with a graceful smile and gentle twirl of the skirt. Paul's eyes were on me, that's all that mattered.

"We've got to go around, there is this tree, you can totally climb to the roof", said Derek.

"Yeah, did you try it already?" Andrew blew his nose into the grass, then spit on top, with a loud sucking sound, only he could make with his lips, because they were split down the middle. His father was an alcoholic, and my grandma told me he got lips like that because of it.

"I sure did". Derek shrugged his shoulders and led us to the other side of the row, towards the old tree, its trunk a perfect twisted ladder to the roof top. We all climbed, I was last, and Paul has given me a hand from the roof, to hop over. Every time we touched, an electrical current ran through me, and I didn't really know what it meant. We sat down on the hot roof, and dangled our feet down. Andrew spit with disgust into the ground and jumped to his feet.

"Dave's gang is here, let's get out of here". A quiet rumble of motorcycles neared the garage from the side of the tree. "Shit!" Andrew looked over to the side we came from, where the bikers parked. A tall guy, blonde long hair stuck to his forehead, jumped down and looked up the roof.

"Hey, check this out, preschool is checking out our new garage!" Other guys laughed, we froze, looking at each other. "How about we show you how it works, eh? Need help climbing down, or should we come and get you?" He pit his black boot on the tree trunk, and we ran. We hopped across the roof, to the opposite side, and balanced on the edge.

"What do we do now?" yelled Derek.

"Jump!" cried Paul, and he glanced at me. "Ailen, do you think you can jump too?" I looked down 8 feet at the ground and nodded. "Ok, then, go!" On the other side of the roof, the blonde head showed up. I hesitated, Paul pushed me to the border. "You don't worry about me, ok, just go!" And I jumped.

Pain shot to my heels, and pushed me forward on the knees and palms. I scrambled up, dust smeared with blood, streaming down my legs, and ran. I ran as fast as I think my legs could carry me, after Derek and Andrew, then to the right to my house, I didn't dare look behind me. I ran all the way, until my chest ached and burned, but I kept running. I turned the back streets all the way around the main street with the garages, then back to the alleys and to grandma's house. I slammed into the door, and pushed the code. 4139. It didn't work. My hands trembled, fingers didn't bend, and palms burned and pulsed with warm blood. 5139. It didn't work again. My heart thumped into my ears, ringing. Faint sound of motorcycles turned a corner and roared louder. I sobbed silently, pushing again and again. I should have just written it on my palm, like the other girls did! What was I thinking? What if they catch me? Kathy from the second floor said what they did with the girl from across the street. They made her take her panties off and touched her breasts, oh my!

I breathed hard, the roar behind me stopped a few feet away, laughter emanated from the bikes. "Do you need help, honey?" I froze, and closed my eyes. Grandma wrote it for me on a torn piece of a newspaper, it said 4138. I pushed the numbers, the door beeped, I fell in and shut it behind me, just as the tall blonde guy approached the entrance.

Ailen found herself in front of a shabby apartment building. Everything about it looked out of place to her, from peeling paint that didn't want to stick to the walls, to asymmetrically placed windows that gazed cross-eyed inward, to the quiet lake right behind it, oddly out of place. The entrance code device looked at least a decade old, with rectangular buttons, brown from use, supposedly white in their former life.

Ailen swayed towards the door and touched the buttons, her finger paused on one of them, slid down to the worn numbers pad and with a quick gesture entered four numbers - 4138. The door beeped and let her in. *I'm in my memory, my own memory, but it's real.*

Ailen shut the door, cocked her head and listened. A chorus of mismatched instruments moaned back at her, strewn across five floors, all squiky and false and broken and... What's that? A flute? Ailen stepped forward. She caught a clean sound, among

the cacophony of the rest of the musical debris. It stood out, battered with age yet clear and strong and familiar. She stepped into the corridor and ran, all the way past other doors, to the door on the far right, at the end of the corridor, from where the sound was coming from. In the darkness, she stepped towards the door, and creaked it open.

Everything seemed big, yet it looked painfully familiar. The old couch in the corner, endless bookshelves, rolls of wool in the basket, green lamp. Ailen wove her way to the end of the room, to the grand piano. She sat down on the cracked leather stool and placed her fingers on the closed lid. A picture of a woman hung above it on the wall. She sang in front of a microphone, decked in a beautiful indigo dress. Her eyes looked out on the crowd, and yet didn't see it all, absorbed in the music. The sound was coming from the picture. *Impossible. It's not real, is it my memory of her singing? Grandma?* Ailen touched the picture. A wave of convulsion ran down her fingers into her throat and down her legs. Water burst from her eyes, and she bent down from exhaustion. Tears kept dropping from her eyes into grey shabby carpet, scrubbed clean a thousand times. Ailen touched one drop, licked it, raised her eyebrows.

Quiet footsteps echoed down the corridor. Ailen crouched into the patio, and down the dirty beach, licked by the lake, quiet in the night. She made it behind a large log, when the

last of her strength gave way to hunger and exhaustion. Her knees hit the sand with a quiet thump, her head sunk deep, heavy with grief, and pulled her to the ground. Bleached driftwood raked of rotten crabs, inches from her face. A moment she hovered, then tipped and folded into a faint half-moon, fragile and colorless, perfect addition to the rest of the beach, full of sea toys, broken and tossed and abandoned.

She didn't move for hours, indifferent to sounds, smells, or life itself. Light wind tossed the sand on top of her into a thin layer, until there was no difference between her and her surroundings. She remained still.

Paul

Paul stepped into the open door, crossed the room, brushed by the piano, and out into the patio, to the beach. His frequently turned left, then right, then down, like a hunter's dog, unsure of his target, lost, at the end of the chase. He carefully stepped into the sand, legs wide, arms stretched out to feel the darkness. So he stood for a moment, ready for a search, until the impossibility of his task pushed his arms down. Helpless, he sat on the closest log, head deep in the shoulders. He looked at the sand in front of him.

"Ailen?"

He kneeled next to her body, dusty and still. His warm breath sent the sand sliding down her fingers, white in the surrounding darkness. He reached out and touched them, one by one, like a pianist in anticipation of an important performance. Thin and cold, her fingers lie lifeless in his warm palm. He bent down and kissed them. Ailen stirred. He blew gently into her face, wiped sand off her forehead and from her hair. Her eyes opened, foggy.

"Alien."

Paul lifted her out of the sand and propped her back against the log. Ailen head slumped down, he caught it with his left hand and propped it on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry", said Paul.

Ailen parted her lips, once used to frame the deadly beauty of her voice, now quiet and dry. Her voice battled through in a faint rasp. "Don't — "

"Shhh, you're weak, don't talk. I need to feed you first." Paul curled his hands under her knees and lifted her body, pressing it into his chest, like a proud fisher with his biggest catch. He walked carefully towards the lake, into the water, until it covered his shoulders and Ailen floated in his arms. Water seeped into her slightly open mouth, opening it wider. Her eyes bulged behind the closed lids, her skin bristled with silvery stripes. Paul placed his free hand on her cheek.

"Not good." He brushed her hair away from her face, now silvery blue. "I have a couple hours, maybe, at the most." He mumbled to himself something else, inaudible, lifted his legs one by one to slip out of shoes and socks, propped Ailen on his back and dove into the water, towards a distant pier with lights and boats next to it.

Several men in blue uniforms stood by the hangar. Paul's head bobbed from under water, a dark blue shape draped over his

shoulders. All that remained of Ailen was white hair and clothes, sticky wet on top of a dark slimy form, more fish than human. Paul closed his eyes, pressed his lips, then looked down at what remained of Ailen. His jaw tightened, and he walked out of the water, straight into the pool of light in front of the hangar. Water dripped down to his bare feet, as he was spotted by one of the guards.

"Hey, you there, what do you think — Paul?" Recognition crossed the guard's face into a tight smile. "What a surprise. Look who paid us a visit, guys!" He nodded to other guards, who now circled Paul. "What do we have here?"

"I think you were looking for her", said Paul.

"Seems like water did its job already, less work for us to do", the guard grinned. He touched Ailen's fish-face.

More episodes for Ailen's daydreaming: She walks into a bathroom in the hospital when she had her adenoids removed, sees the bath full of blood, the nurse has put bloody gowns in there to soak; she helps her great grandma deliver puppies to her dog, then in the morning she can't find the puppies, instead she finds a bucket with water and all puppies drowned in it by her great grandma; she is hiding between the coats on the coat rack when the game of hide-and-seek turns scary as her mom, aunt, grandma and great grandma are looking for her and can't find her, but she can hear them running around and screaming her name, not daring to come out; she is helping local boys catch fish in the river with the net, the river is shallow, the boys get the fish out of the net and throw it to her, she slaps their heads hard on the edge of the bucket and puts

them in, first hesitantly, then faster and better; she eats bone brain on dark bread; Ailen in the daydream, "You know, how we always have those daydreams after the hunt, from the human whose soul we got, all their feelings? I think that one was mine, it was my grandmother, and she called me Ailen."