

Love and Other Fairytales

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Abstract

Love and Other Fairytales

Sarah Penney-Flynn

Love and Other Fairytales, is a collection of four short stories that explore the lives of several women and girls as they struggle to make sense of their identities. The stories are informed by fairytale and folklore motifs but focus more on transliteration rather than holistic interpretation of the tales. 'When I Awaken' is the story of a young girl who has awoken from childhood and must deal with the harsh realities of her world – her father, whose words had the power to turn her into a princess, has abandoned her and her mother blames her for the loss. 'your dreams rifling through a dark sea to me' is a reworking of the familiar story 'Little Mermaid' and, influenced strongly by Newfoundland folklore, is set in the outports of that sea-driven province. 'As White as Snow' introduces a character who has been raised in a traveling carnival and follows her as she embraces her own constructed mythical identity, defies her mother and falls in love with a mysterious stranger. "Of the Weird and the Wild' is a dramatic retelling of the fairytale 'Hansel and Gretel' in which brother and sister struggle against their father's wish to leave the magical house where they were raised by their witch-mother and end their incestuous love for one another.

For my parents, who raised me on a healthy diet of seawater and fairytales and for those friends who presented me with evidence that having faith in love is really about believing in magic.

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Lies my Parents Told Me

The night her father left, she fell into sleep thinking 'I am a princess I am a night-swollen moon.' Walking down the hallways at school she thought 'I am a starburst in darkness, I am a punk rock glam glitter girl.' Sitting in class she thought 'I am a map without destinations, I am a wicked black-winged bird.' The day that she came home to find her mother sitting in the bathtub with her wrists sliced open, the blood dark like violets against white porcelain, she misplaced her words.

But her mother had plenty, even after she came home from the hospital with bruises beneath her eyes and her wrists all wrapped up. Words sharp like raw-edged razor-blades: 'I knew this would happen, that he would leave. He always loved you more than he loved me, son of a bitch.' Sometimes Eve wanted to put her fingers in her ears and hum the way she used to when she was a child and her parents' fighting snaked up the stairs into her dreaming.

"You'll never know what this is like," her mother hissed. "You'll never grow up and find a man who you love so much you feel like your heart might burst and then have him walk out on you."

After a month spent creeping from day to day, trying not to breathe too loudly, Eve opened the front door to find her Aunt Cass sitting on the doorstep. She was leaning against a suitcase smoking a cigarette, watching the man across the street wash his driveway with a hose. As Eve stepped out into the cool morning, her Aunt turned and smiled over the rim of her sunglasses. "Hey kitten," in her low purring voice, "came as soon as I heard."

It got better for a while. Her Aunt roused her mother from the living room sofa, made her shower and shave her legs, brought her to get a new hairstyle and a manicure. Eve sat in one of the pink vinyl chairs underneath a hair dryer, reading a magazine and listening to the woman next to her snore as her mother's hair slowly transformed into sugary spun blond candy.

"See, Margaret?" Aunt Cass told her mother. "All you have to do is spend a little time on yourself. Men can tell when you don't."

The house began to smell of smoke. Eve would come home in the afternoon to empty bottles in the kitchen, to the cloying scent of the cocktails her mother and aunt made and drank on the back porch. Sometimes they would save her a maraschino cherry. She would sit and listen while they talked about being young, cheerleading girls with bright smiles and about boys who would drive by their house in the middle of the night in black convertibles with the top rolled down, hoping to catch a glimpse of them through the windows.

"That's when you know you're pretty," her mother said, mouth stained red with grenadine. "When boys are fighting over you."

"You always did have about ten boyfriends," Aunt Cass slurred, stretching out a long brown leg, "and you could never remember their names."

"Until Ted."

And then her mother would begin to cry, fat salty tears that pooled in the dent of her lips. Sometimes Eve wanted to ask 'is love always like this?' Instead she rose and walked back into the house, all the way up to her room where she closed the door and lay

on her bed. There she would listen to Leonard Cohen records, his voice a lullaby that made her craziness quiet.

Summer came fast, days lengthening into twilight; school ended. Eve dug her old red bicycle out of the garage, tied purple tassels to the curved handlebars and began to spend all of her days riding around the town, up and down the streets, watching people play frisbee on their lawns or sit outside the pharmacy licking ice creams that ran down the cone onto their wrists. Twilight was her favorite time to ride. The air was cinnamon-spicy on her tongue as she pedaled fast, the world blurring into shapes.

That's how she finds the swimming hole. Pedaling along in darkness, she gets suddenly sick of smooth roads with no bumps, no potholes, and swerves onto the grass. Jiggles along, knuckles turning white on the handlebars, past the baseball diamond, down the dirt path where there is a field with cows that lift their heads as she passes. A firefly sparkles out of the darkness next to her face. She blinks, once, twice, and there are dozens of them bouncing off of her bare sticky summer skin. Dazzled, she veers away from the road, branches reaching out to scrape her as she bumbles to a stop in front of a pond.

Crowing with delight, she strips off her shorts, her thin t-shirt with the 'Owl Camp 1999' logo and wades into the cool, still water, laughing at the way it pulls the heat from her skin, shivers at the base of her neck. When she stretches her arms wide the fireflies shudder and spiral over the water, creating an aura of space around her body so that when Charlie finds her, she looks like she has a halo.

He sees her before she sees him. Hunkers down in the grass and moss and sits watching for awhile, chewing on a twig.

“Hey there.”

When she turns all she can see is a boy-shape in the darkness and realizes how silly it is for her to be here, wearing nothing but her bra and underwear. Her arms break out into goose bumps.

“Sorry.”

“S’okay. “ He puts out a hand, sees her look at it, pulls it back again quick. “My name’s Charlie.”

Arms crossed over her chest, she looks past him to where her clothes are lying. He smiles, scoops up her shirt and shorts, holds them out so that she can reach them. He turns his back as she tries to pull her shorts up over wet legs.

“Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I wasn’t scared,” she says, too-quick.”And my name is Eve. But I’ve never seen you around here before.”

When he turns around again, she’s standing there, arms crossed, looking strange and lovely with her hair sticking to her cheeks. He moves the twig back and forth between his fingers.

“I just moved here,” he tells her. “Haven’t really had time to meet anyone yet. I just found this place yesterday; thought I might come down for a swim.”

“You don’t have any trunks,” she points out, and then blushes.

He laughs.

“Neither did you.”

Her blush deepens and she laughs too. He sweeps an arm in the direction of the cow field. "My parents bought a house behind the farm." And then, because it looks as though she might take this as an answer and go away, "They're writers. I mean, really my Dad's a writer, and my mom's his editor, but they wanted to find somewhere a little quieter. The last place where we lived was pretty...noisy. Not like here. But of course, we're pretty far back here."

He waits for her to tell him where she lives. She thinks: 'My father has forgotten I'm alive, and my mother's tried to kill herself, except now she's better. Now she's a drunk and I think my aunt might be a witchy vodka martini-girl, and no one in my house really believes in love.' Instead she says, "Well, goodnight."

And, picking up the handles of her bike, swinging a leg up and over the crossbar, she smiles at him. She rides back through quiet summer streets, trying not to run over blow-up balls and Tonka trucks left at the end of driveways. In the darkness of her room, she falls asleep dreaming of fireflies hovering above her bed.

Eve begins to comb her hair in the morning before she goes down for breakfast, stealing crystal brooches from her mother's trinket box to pin against her black uneven curls like a shining, shimmering omen. Every time she takes a shower, she steals her Aunt's lotions, wonders at the colored bottles with names like 'lilac kiss,' the promises to 'make you smell like a spring breeze.' Her Aunt sits and smokes a cigarette every morning with her espresso, watching everything through narrowed eyes.

“Where you goin’ these days, kitten?” she says, her voice thick and raspy with sleep. “Haven’t seen you around in awhile. Your mother and I are gonna take a trip into town. Maybe you wanna come along, pick out some new clothes for school?”

And so they go, crammed together in the front seat of her Aunt’s red Honda. When Eve plays with the dials of the radio, her mother barks at her to stop for Jesus’ sake before you drive us all mad. After they’ve parked the car, Eve follows them along Main street, listening to their chatter. They pull her into a second-hand clothing shop, ‘La Luna’ painted on the wooden sign outside, and tell her to sit on the chair outside the dressing room. Giggling and throwing things over the partition to the dressing rooms, slinking out tugging lace bustiers up around their cleavage, they inspect themselves in the mirrors.

Eve wanders over to the check-out counter, leans down looking at the second-hand jewelry through the glass.

“That’s a pretty hair pin you’re wearing.” A woman, standing in the doorway to a back room nods and smiles at Eve. Bangles make tinkling sounds around her wrists. Her eyes are smoky like indigo. She’s holding something in her hands.

“Thank you.” Eve bites her lip.

“Who are you wearing that for?” And then, in a lower voice, leaning forward, “It almost looks like you have fireflies caught in your hair when you move. In my experience, fireflies follow girls who are in love.”

“Really?” Even though she knows it’s not true, it’s just a woman trying to be nicey-nice to a kid who’s wandered into her shop with a crazy aunt and a crazier mother.

“You know, I have a dress here that might just fit a girl like you.” When she holds it up, Eve can see that it’s a cocktail dress that’s all black glitter and twilight grey chiffon, embroidered with purple butterflies, mossy vines snaking up the shoulders. She reaches out, runs her fingers along the hem, pulls back again. The woman smiles at her, but then her eyes move past Eve’s shoulder. Eve knows without looking that her Aunt is watching them.

“That’s lovely.” The click of her high heels on the floor, the humming sing-song in her voice as she looks at the price-tag. “Isn’t that lovely, Eve? I bet I would look absolutely fabulous in that dress.”

The shop-keeper’s eyes darken, her smile becoming tight. She tucks the dress beneath the counter.

“Sorry,” she says. “I was just showing it. It’s already been sold.”

Eve could swear that the woman winks at her. Her Aunt makes a sound deep in her throat, and Eve knows that on the way home she’ll talk about the audacity of some people you’d think they didn’t want to make a profit the way they acted around their customers.

Eve finds her mother standing in front of the mirrors next to the dressing room.

“Look at me,” her mother says, “look at this.”

Eve looks. She can remember when she was a little girl curled up in a tangle of bed sheets in her parent’s room, watching her mother get dressed to go out. On those nights Eve could have sworn that the smell of roses and jasmine rose in a mist from her skin as she leaned down for a kiss good-night. And Eve would fall asleep in that smell,

safe. Now her mother smells like lemons. As she turns towards Eve, her shoulder catches a row of bead necklaces that hang overhead, sending them swinging madly.

“I was beautiful, once upon a time.”

Nothing in her words, not even sadness. And Eve thinks that ‘once upon a time’ are strange and bewitching words.

Eve waits at the swimming hole three nights in a row. On the fourth night she waits until the moon comes up, waits until the fireflies come to whisper around her bare head before she picks up her bike and pedals back to the cow field where she stands by the ditch and calls to the cows, “Do you know where to find Charlie?” One swings its head at her and moos. She searches for and finds the dirt path that leads her along the crooked fence, through a mud puddle, to the farm house where the fence ends. She lowers her bike down onto the dirt and stands for a moment looking. She’s about to pedal away again when the front door – a bright red shiny door– opens, and there’s Charlie, waving to her.

“Hey,” he says. “My mom says you should come in and have some cocoa.”

Nervous, she climbs the steps, following him down the hallway with photographs hung haphazardly along the walls– little boys in blue pyjamas jumping on beds and a man holding an umbrella in the rain– and into the kitchen.

“Hullo.”

Charlie’s mother has smoky grey eyes, and bangles that make a twinkling sound around her wrists when she moves. When she sees Eve, she throws back her head and laughs aloud.

“Well,” holding out a hand. “I believe we’ve met, but it is certainly lovely to see you again. I’m Charlie’s mom, but you can call me Hazel, if you like. Sit, have some cocoa.”

Charlie nudges Eve’s shoulder, pushes her towards a small table cluttered with papers and opened mail. “I won’t have it without marshmallows,” he admits. “My dad used to tell me that he grew them himself.”

“He did,” says Charlie’s mother, ruffling Charlie’s hair.

He frowns, ducks his head. Eve snickers. The mugs that Hazel brings them are shaped like stars and Eve has a feeling that when she’s finished her cocoa she will find stars drawn on the bottom of the mug. The cocoa tastes like bitter dark jungles and vanilla beans, dream-filled midnight sliding down her throat. Hazel winks at her, takes a plate of cookies out of the oven and places them on the table.

“Well, Eve,” she asks, “How long have you lived here in Crowe?”

“Always.”

“We came for the quiet...and so I could help a friend out with her shop.” Hazel says, winking again. “It’s a beautiful town. Did Charlie tell you that his father...writes?” A swift shadow that comes and passes. Eve looks to Charlie. He lowers his eyes to the cookie in his hand.

“Yes.”

Charlie’s mother is distracted now, moving towards the window to peer up at the moon. There is something tense about her, as though if Eve listened close enough, she might hear Charlie’s mother humming. “By the way, you should come by soon and pick up that dress. I’ll save it for you.” Something passes and she smiles. “Well, you kids,

have fun. I'm going to go up and check on your father." And then Charlie's mother is gone.

Eve clears her throat, sticky sweetness of cookie, and starts to say something when Charlie stands, sudden. "Let's go out in the yard."

The clicking prayers of crickets travel to them across the fields as they sit watching the moon. Charlie points out a star as it blazes away into nothing in the sky just above them. Eve closes her eyes and makes a wish "What did you wish?" he asks, watching her. Their hands brushing against each other on the table.

"I can't tell. It won't come true."

She's wished for fireflies; maybe then he would look at her, see the sparkle of the crystals in her hair, the lipstick she put on before leaving the house, but instead he's looking out across the fields. "You're mom seems really nice," she says.

"Yeah, I suppose. What about your mom and dad? Are they cool?"

She shivers in the cool night air. Somewhere in the distance, the howl of a dog chained onto its doghouse dreaming of the mossy damp earth and the leafy smell of forests. "My dad left," she tells him.

"Really?" And then, when he realizes the way that sounds, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I don't talk about it much. In fact, I guess I haven't talked about it at all. He left a few months ago. He and my mom fought a lot, so it's probably better that he's gone, y'know? It's a lot quieter around the house, but sometimes it seems like it made my mom a little bit...crazy."

"D' you miss him?"

Tears behind her eyes and she twists her mouth. The taste of salt and anger.

“Yeah,” in a hitched voice. “He was cool, y’know? I mean, sometimes he was... Sometimes it was like I wasn’t even there, when it got really bad between him and my mom, but then he’d come in just as I was about to fall asleep, to say goodnight...and it would be okay for a little while. Sometimes, I feel like I’m still asleep and this is all a dream.”

They sit quiet for a moment, the moon looking down on them.

“Wanna see my room?”

They leave their mugs in the kitchen, creep up the stairs and down a dim hallway on their tip-toes, past a door that’s slightly ajar, light peeping out, to the last door on the left. Eve stands just inside the door, letting her eyes adjust to the dark as he steps across the room, switches on a lamp. And suddenly, there’s bright fish, mermaids, starfish swimming along the walls, across the ceiling. She holds out her arms, watches them glow in the watery gold light. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she bounces up and down, running her hands along the homemade quilt. He has black and white photographs propped on his night stand, one of him with his mom and a man who looks familiar from the photos in the downstairs hallway.

“Hey,” she asks. “Did you take this?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Is that your dad?”

He shrugs.

They lay on the bed for awhile, staring at the walls, talking about school, the kid on her street who keeps stealing their newspaper, the boys he found at the swimming hole

today throwing rocks into the water. Every now and then she can hear coughing through the walls. Charlie's arm tenses. He sits up, turning his back to her.

"Maybe I should go to bed," he says. "How about I meet you at the swimming hole tomorrow?"

"Sure."

She rises, moves like silence down the stairs, out into the night. Rides home on her bicycle with fireflies a shining trail behind her.

In the afternoons Eve meets Charlie at the swimming hole, spends hours dangling from the swing they have hung from the branches of a nearby oak tree, lets her toes skim the water like a dragonfly. Some days they scrounge together enough money to buy popsicles, always breaking them against their knees and switching flavors halfway through. Sometimes Charlie will bring his camera to snap pictures of her suspended in the air just before she hits the water. He tells her about the city where he used to live, blinking neon signs and junkies who twitch and jitter along the sidewalks with their veins glowing. So the summer falls away, leaving the crisp smell of earth, dark and damp in the air.

And then, a few days before school is due to start, Eve comes home to find a postcard on the kitchen table. Her mother has anchored it with the salt and pepper shakers so that, at first, Eve cannot make out the handwriting, only the carefully capitalized letters of her name beneath the stamp. After pouring herself a glass of lemonade, she sits down and pulls it toward her. The day is so hot and she is still buzzing with the chill of

the swimming hole in her veins, so that she doesn't even consider who might send her a postcard— who she might know who is not already here.

'Having a great time here in New York, honey. Wanted to send you a postcard so that you could see the night skyline. Always, Dad.'

There's no 'love;' there's no 'wish you were here.' Every girl knows that 'wish you were here' written on the back of a postcard is not something to set one's star to, but he couldn't even be bothered with that. Her father didn't even care enough to lie to her. Leaving her half-drunk glass of lemonade on the table, she slams the front door behind her.

There's only one place to go. The tears on her cheeks are licked away by the evening breeze that whirs past her as she swerves through the streets on her bicycle. As she bumps along the path towards Charlie's house, the potholes and bumps jiggle sobs from her throat; she is pissed that, with just a few well-placed words, her father can still make her break down and cry like a little girl. Charlie looks up from the porch as she comes to a stop in front of him, dismounting and sending the bike crashing to the ground all in a smooth movement.

"Hey," he says, and then, seeing the tears. "Hey, hey there. What's wrong?" His face crumples in concern as she drops next to him. But she can't let him see her like this, her face all red and snot-stained. She just thrusts the postcard at him, keeping her face turned away. "What's this?" Silence as he reads the back of it. "Aw, shit. What an asshole."

He sits there as she cries, his hand at the small of her back as if holding her there. "Can I tell you something?" he says, soft so that she can ignore it if she wants to. "I

mean, I know it's nothing like...but...y'know my Dad? Well, he's dying." Sharp breath.

"They keep telling me that I shouldn't say that because it sounds kind of...well, kind of like I've given up already. It doesn't help with 'morale'— like we're in the goddamn army or something. So we came here, cause it's quieter. So he can 'die in peace'."

Eve turns her head slightly, watching through the folds of her sleeve as he lowers his head, half-laughs, an angry snort of breath. She grabs his hand and holds it tight. When he looks at her, she can see the desperation in his eyes.

"I sometimes think about running away," he tells her. "Go to New York or somewhere just so that I'm not here, y'know. I could sell my photographs— he always says I should send them to a gallery, if for nothing else just to get my name out there. So people would know who I am. I could send him postcards of the Empire State building or of all those stupid tourist attractions you see along the highways. It would make him smile I don't know how to do that anymore. I dunno, it just seems stupid to be here just waiting for him to die."

"Or waiting for him to come back." Eve says as the porch light flickers on above them.

"I would send you a postcard," he promises her, staring at their intertwined fingers— her dark nails against his pale skin. "A postcard that didn't make you cry."

"Not yet though, okay?" The tears in her rise again. She swallows them. "Don't leave me yet? No more waiting."

"No more waiting," he agrees as the first star wavers into being just below the moon.

Eve doesn't say anything to her mother about the postcard. She keeps it hidden in her top drawer, pulling it out occasionally to reread it. The words are always the same. She grows angrier every time she reads them, wishing that she could wake up one day and be someone else; someone who wouldn't be hurt so easily by just words. She could be a 'wicked warrior princess, an icy icelandic queen'— someone who could run away if she really wanted to, who would fit in perfectly with kids on the street who carry their scars and their anger with them like steel armor.

The week before school Aunt Cass gives her two hundred dollars to go into town and buy herself some new clothes. Ignoring her mother's questioning eyes, Eve takes it, kisses them both on the cheek, dry skin against her lips, and rides her bicycle to 'La Luna.' On the first day she wears her new combat boots, the toes polished to a black sheen, a knit cap embroidered with bright red stars, a grey dress with purple butterflies; a dress that perfectly fits a girl like her. She feels like a package just opened, all parts intact, the promise of something.

She finds Charlie after second period, standing in front of the science lab with his hands jammed into his pockets. His mother has stitched his name onto his backpack. A group of guys walking by shoulder him, one reaching out to flick his ear. Loud, braying voices, 'pansy boy,' 'nancy.' Hunching up his shoulders, he watches them walk away.

"Hey," she says, linking her arm with his. "Wanna skip third? I know this excellent spot where no one will see us."

She takes him out to the hockey field, scrunches up and slides into the narrow space beneath the bleachers, pushing candy wrappers and empty pop bottles out of the way so that they can sit down. There they can watch the cheerleaders practice, the coach

scream red-faced at the soccer team, giggling and making faces every time the bell rings and the shop class comes out to sneak cigarettes behind the school. After that, every time they walk down the hall together, people turn to look; pretty girl with dark tangled hair and a boy who looks like her shadow. The next time a guy calls Charlie a name she rides him all the way down to the ground, legs jacked around his waist, biting and clawing. When she gets called into the principal's office she won't say a thing, low in the chair with her skinned knee showing through her tights. She feels like she's slithering, sliding away into a nightmare.

"You wanna get kicked out of school?" her mother asks when she gets sent home; her face looks different, falling in on itself. "You wanna be one of those girls that never make it out of here?"

"What, just like you?" Eve snarls and gets the backside of her mother's hand across her face. Her Aunt, standing in the doorway to the kitchen, arches an eyebrow.

So Eve starts wearing pink laces in her combat boots, goes to school with an anarchy symbol a thin black slash across her chest. When a guy in gym class calls her a dyke, she gets sent home for leaving the imprint of her fist on his face; for dyeing her hair the color of a split pomegranate; for calling a teacher a cunt when she gets a 'D' on an exam she studied three nights for. She never goes home on those days. On those days, Charlie invites her home to his house and they sit in his room eating carrot sticks and playing Scrabble, listening to the coughing through the walls.

But he never kisses her.

Some night in November, her open window frosted lacy with ice, Eve wakes to the sound of her mother on the stairs, a strange male voice. When she creeps to the door and cracks it open she can see, there in the dark of the hallway, her mother struggling against the wall, pinned beneath a dark, broad body; strange half-gasps of pleasure.

In the morning Eve walks to school half-awake, strung out on coffee and sugary cereal, her breath crystallizing through her scarf. She wanders through her first few classes. Somewhere before fourth, she skips out to check the basement and beneath the bleachers for Charlie without finding him.

Her mother and Aunt Cass are waiting for her when she gets home. Her mother is sitting on the front steps with her knees bent together primly, wearing her bright red trench coat that cinches around her waist tight enough to make her lose her breath. As Eve approaches, her Aunt reaches out and places a hand on her shoulder, then lets it fall away.

“Hey, darlin’.” Her mother, all sugar and spice. “How was your day?”

“Fine.” Eve kicks at the cement walkway, squints across the street.

A station wagon pulls into the driveway and her mother jumps up. Her Aunt narrows her eyes against the sun, raising a hand to shield her face.

“Oh, look, it’s Joe!” her mother squeals, waving.

As Joe honks the horn, leans and stares at them from behind the wheel, Eve’s mother takes her hand, hisses from behind her smile. “Honey, why don’t you come to dinner with us? It’d be so nice.”

“Come on, kitten,” Aunt Cass smirks, reaches up to tousle her hair, straighten her collar. “Can’t be all that bad.”

And even though Eve opens up her mouth to say 'no' she ends up sitting at a table for four at the Holiday Inn out by the highway. When the waitress comes to take their order, Eve asks for the New York sirloin, rare, with a Shirley Temple and a creme brulee for dessert, ignoring her mother's glares and Joe's constant throat-clearing. Aunt Cass just smiles. Eve swings her legs beneath the table, lobs her maraschino cherry into the ashtray where it douses Cass's cigarette. "So, Eve," Joe says, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "Your mother tells me you're very artistic."

"Like she would know."

"Eve," her mother's voice, soft and hurt.

"Hey, girly," her Aunt's warning growl.

Eve snorts, cracks the crunch on her creme brulee with the back of her spoon.

Joe's persistent. He smiles, flashing white teeth.

"What kind of art do you like?"

When he reaches a hand across the table to her mother she takes it, practically beaming. Eve leans back in her chair, grabs the lighter he's left on the table and flicks it open. Her mother takes it from her, sharp nails. "Photography," Eve tells him. "Mostly the naked kind, y'know? I think it's very erotic."

Her mother turns to glare at Aunt Cass, who's snickering as she lights another cigarette. Joe clears his throat, eyes flicking to her mother.

"Eve," her mother hisses. "You behave yourself right now or I swear to god."

Eve stands, throws her cloth napkin onto Joe's half-empty plate.

She walks the mile back to the house— eyes on the bone-white moon that watches her from the sky— blinking back her tears. The front door is locked and she waits for an

hour on the steps, before walking to Charlie's house where she stands out in the yard pitching snowballs at his window. He opens it just as she throws another one, and it catches him against the cheek. She hears him curse, doubles over trying to stifle her laughter against her mitten.

"Jesus' sake, Eve," he murmurs. "What the hell?"

"I'm locked out," she calls. "Can I come in?"

He hesitates. Behind him, on the wall, she can see mermaids and bright golden fish twirling in a dance she sees sometimes when she closes her eyes. She steps backwards.

"Never mind." She turns to go away.

"No," he calls, leaning out over the sill. "Come up through the back door. Mom leaves it open."

Lost in the darkness of the house, she pushes past the shoes left in the porch, finds the stairs and tiptoes down the hallway towards Charlie's room. She can hear the hushed sleepy breath of his parents through the walls. He opens his door just as she reaches it, pulling her in and she lands in a giggling pile on the bed, blinking up at him.

"What're you doing?" he whispers, eyes flicking to the wall between them and his parents. "My mom will kill me if she finds you here."

She stops laughing, feeling something dark stir and rise in her. When she begins to cry, Charlie scrunches down behind her, legs on either side, and pulls her back into his arms, murmuring sounds against her neck. "She's found someone," she manages between sobs, half-words. 'Someone...else. His name is Joe... Joe... What kind of moron has a name

like Joe? And that means my dad isn't... coming back...mean, why the hell would he want to now anyway? There's nothing to come back to, and..and."

She turns to face him. He raises a hand, slow, and puts it against her cheek and she can see in the twirling golden darkness that he is crying too, so she kisses him, their teeth catching, salt on their tongues. Snarls her hand in his hair, shifting herself so that she is half-sitting on him, feels him slide his hands up under her shirt, fingers like flames against her skin. She hears him moan and she thinks that maybe right here it could be okay. Not once upon a time, not happy ever after, but okay.

But he's pulling away, fists wrapped around her wrists, eyes darkened with something that's not desire.

"Eve," he breathes. "You..we can't. It's not that...I just..."

She thinks of the coughing through the walls, and the medicine bottles in his bathroom cabinet; she thinks of the way his mother sometimes stands in the hallway downstairs staring at the photographs with a strange little smile on her face. And she thinks that maybe there are things in him that she cannot release, sadness burnt so deep that no one can touch it. So she swings her leg up and over him and stands for a moment fumbling with the buttons on her shirt. As he holds out her parka, he is still talking, words that would slide and slip away if she tried to hold onto them. She leaves him standing there, moving down the stairs and out into the still, blue night with tears freezing on her cheeks.

Walking in through the front door into the darkness of her house, she almost trips over her Aunt Cass, sitting on the floor, a smoky haze rising around her, an ashtray full of

cigarette stubs between her crossed legs. Squinting, Eve can see that she's fully dressed, her packed suitcase standing next to the kitchen table.

"Hey kitten," she whispers, reaching out to grab Eve's wrist, and then when she sees the tears on Eve's cheeks. "Hey, what's the matter?"

She tugs gently on Eve's arm; Eve kneels beside her, rests her head in her Aunt's lap. The pungent scent of the smoke around her, the thickness of the sleeping house and the swaying movements of her aunt's body as she is rocked back and forth.

"Quiet, now," she's murmuring. "It's okay. No one ever said it would be easy."

And like that, Eve falls asleep. When she awakes, her Aunt is gone and the house is still asleep.

Eve doesn't return to school for three days. Instead, she holes herself up in the basement, watching the television from beneath a pile of blankets, crusted bowls of half-eaten macaroni and cheese scattered across the orange carpet. Her mother comes down every so often to call her name quietly. Even Joe comes down, once, sits on the edge of the couch and clears his throat, but when she doesn't speak to him, doesn't move, he goes away again.

When she finally emerges, she finds her mother gone, only Joe there. She stands in the kitchen doorway for awhile, watching him stir something in a pot on the stove.

"You should leave," she says.

"What?" he turns, spoon in his hand.

Words pouring out of her: "You're a goddamn liar you think she really loves you, huh? Shows how much you know." And then a hand on her arm and he's trying to

hold her still. She pounds at him with her fists, a fingernail catching the side of his jaw; manages to give him a black eye before he finally pins her against the wall. He stands staring at her with wide eyes as she spits and snarls, "You're just a goddamn freak if you think she'll ever love you the way she loved him."

When he lets her go, arms falling to his sides, she stays there for a minute, startled. She catches sight of herself in the shiny stove, black mascara smearing down her cheeks. She begins to sob. When he rests a hand on her shoulder, she turns and stumbles up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Voices, murmuring distantly downstairs when her mother comes through the door and then footsteps on the stairs, slow and tired. Eve's bedroom door opens. Her mother moves into the room, sits on the edge of the bed, and pulls her into an awkward hug.

"Did you forget me?"

Her mother stiffens, the gentle disturbance of her breath in Eve's hair. "Eve, what am I going to do with you?" she sighs.

"I know."

Her mother looks at her, 'He didn't love me, you know. I mean, I know you think it was probably my fault, but he didn't love me,' she smiles, a strange smile. 'The only boy in all of Crowe I couldn't get to love me.'

And Eve has a feeling that if she asked her mother if she ever owned a grey dress with purple butterflies and green vines, she would say yes, might even be able to remember the night she wore it and had her heart broken for the first time.

"He used to tell me that I could be anything." Eve says.

Her mother looks for a moment like she can't breathe. And what she says is:

"Me too."

Nights spent sleeping under the same roof, both dreaming of her father, of the way his hands could make you quiet when it felt like dark things inside of you were stirring, of the way he made pancakes on Saturday mornings and how, when he walked away, he still looked like he might come back.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Sometimes I wish we could be perfect, y'know? But I guess we're just ...us."

Her mother's lip trembles, just a little. Eve knows that it's not going to come that easy. Her mother isn't going to break down and tell her that things will be okay. But she knows that maybe now on those lonely nights they can lie staring at the ceiling only a few rooms apart and each know that the other is awake.

Charlie's father dies on a Tuesday afternoon in December.

When Eve's mother tells her, having heard it from a woman in the checkout counter at the grocery store, Eve thinks for a moment that it cannot be true. She breaks a cup while washing the dishes; she bursts into tears and leaves a white layer of salt on her mother's shoulder when she tries to comfort her; she cannot sleep without waking herself with her own sobbing. She tries phoning him. Someone picks up the phone and when she asks for Charlie, goes to find him, saying 'just a moment.' She can hear noise in the background, the muted hum of voices and imagines people swimming through Charlie's house in black clothing like fish, saying things like 'I am terribly sorry. He was lovely.' The thought of it makes her throat constrict. A few minutes later someone picks up the

phone and curses upon discovering there is no dial tone, hanging up on her. She doesn't phone back.

Eve cuts up scraps of metallic wrapping paper, a magazine ad of a red bicycle, draws yellow stars and blue fish; puts them all in a red envelope, addresses it to 'Charlie and family.' When she puts it in the mailbox she licks two stamps to make sure that it has enough postage and stands for several minutes with her hand on the box, sending her wishes with it.

"Will you go to the funeral with me?" she finally asks her mother on the third day.

"I can't," her mother tells her. "I have an appointment." For a few terrified moments Eve thinks that maybe she will have to go alone.

But Joe clears his throat, turns to her, and says, "I'll come."

She irons her black dress, but she can't bring herself to wear it. Instead she wears her grey dress, the one that makes her feel strong and invincible, that covers up all the holes in her armor.

Joe drives her to the cemetery in his station wagon, both of them stiff and uncertain in their funeral clothes. As soon as he pulls up to the curb outside of the cemetery gates and shuts off the engine, she desperately wants to ask him to turn around. She reaches out and grabs Joe's hand just as he's about to open the door. "I can't," she says.

He says nothing. Nothing about how she really should, that it's something friends do for friends or that she is being a child. Instead he just sits there, giving her time to change her mind.

“Joe,” Eve says, crumpling tissues in her hands. “what if they think I’m a crappy friend?”

He considers this for a moment. “Well,” his hand tightening on the steering wheel. “I think you can’t let anyone else tell you who you are. Only you know your reasons.”

“Can we go home?”

He nods and pulls away from the curb. He drives slowly down the street and when she lets him drive around the corner without saying ‘stop’ he just keeps going. At home, he sits next to her on the couch for hours watching old black and white movies, in their funeral clothes. When she laughs at a joke and starts to cry, he passes her a box of tissues.

When Eve gets a postcard in the mail a few days later, she is certain that it is from her father. The postcard is a photograph of her; the camera has barely caught the blurred edges of her body against a blue sky, the water still and undisturbed beneath her, her reflection hurtling up to meet her. When she turns it over to examine the smudged postscript, she finds a cow drawn with shaky lines where the return address is suppose to be. Next to the cow, Charlie has written. ‘New York is big. Maybe this postcard will make you laugh. Love, Charlie.’

So, she has lost Charlie. Holding the postcard to her heart for a moment, she wishes that she was able to save him from this, from the nettled heartbreak of loving someone who has left and will not return. Entering the kitchen, her mother sees her

standing there like that. "It's okay, honey," she whispers, pulling her into a tentative hug. "You can't wait for them all."

Eve tucks the postcard into the corner of her mirror. In her unlit room, wearing her grey dress with her eyes smudged with kohl and her lips painted scarlet, she cannot see herself in the glass. She feels as though she hasn't seen herself for awhile. Slowly, she lifts the dress up over her head. In her hands, it looks worn and over-used. She wonders how many girls before her wore it—on their first dates, to their proms, on the nights their hearts were broken. Turning, she suspends her arm over the garbage basket, hesitates for a moment and then lets the dress fall. She licks her fingers and runs them across her eyelids, wipes away her lipstick with the back of her hand. "There you are," she says, smiling at the star-brightness of her naked body in the glass.

Before Eve goes to sleep, she opens her window, breathing crystals into the cold night air. Eve thinks of the way it felt to kiss Charlie, of how his mouth tasted, thinks of darkness and fireflies, of the moon where it sways low in the sky. She thinks of the glittering lights of New York and hopes that maybe, there, Charlie will see something through the lens of his camera that comes somewhere close to 'once upon a time.' And as she falls into sleep, Eve sends her dreaming out into the world.

From the Sea

“Tell me the story,” he says, his body swaying on the continent of her bed. Here in the darkness, beside the length of her body, he feels like he, too, is something made of scales. He has to remind himself to breathe.

“What story?” She reaches for her cigarette package and finds it lying crushed beneath her underwear on the floor. She manages to smooth one out.

“The story about you.”

She exhales, making him wait. “Why do you want to hear that one again?”

“Come on.” He turns his face to her shoulder and bites once, hard. She tastes of seaweed. No matter how often he tastes her, he is still startled.

Just like he is always startled by that biting whisky edge to her voice that keeps drawing him back over and over, even though he knows what will happen. The guys on the boat goad him that he has been drawn into a siren’s spell. “She’s bad fer ya, that one,” they nudge and wink with loneliness flashing in their eyes. “She’ll love you ‘til there’s nuthin’ left.” At moments like those he wishes he could evoke for them the slippery slide of her hand between his thighs, the way she gleams beneath him. How, on nights like this when she tells him stories, her voice grows low and he can feel sadness rolling, restless, beneath her skin.

“Should I start at the end or the beginning?”

They both know that she will start where she always does. He just smiles, his weight making the mattress list to one side. Around them, the pale shapes of her room float in the dim kerosene light.

It is a story, really, of the sea.

It was my mother who taught me how to swim, holding me waist-high in the waves before I even knew how to walk. My father would watch from the shore, always nervous. He was a fisherman from a family of fishermen. He had never been taught how to swim. Even as a child, I could sense how watchful he was of us as we skimmed the waves, dipping like the seagulls who would hover and then dive without warning.

When I became old enough to swim without my mother's protective arms, I would spend entire afternoons diving for treasures. My eyes would be wide open and stinging in the salt water, my fingers out like feelers to scoop up the sand. No matter how often my mother warned me, I always let the currents carry me out past the shallows, where the water became cool and dense. Where it fell away into the wild sea, I could feel something pulling me down. Down there, I was sleek and silvery like a fish, dime-bright. I could swim deeper and faster, without breath.

It always took all of my will – and I was a strong-willed creature even at that age – to turn away from the sea towards the shore. On those few afternoons that I dared to let myself be carried out too far, I would receive fierce tongue-lashings and go to bed without pudding. When I was younger, I used to think it was so that she could guarantee my safety – if I were to get caught in a current, she could tether me to the earth with her arms. As I grew older and began to understand what a pull the sea must have had for her, I realized that it may well have been the other way around. She counted on me to keep her from returning. But, eventually, the call of the sea became so violent in her that even I could not hold her here.

It is not something I can describe for you – that continual lure. It's what took my mother back to the sea; although for her it was too late. She had been human for too long and her body had forgotten how to adjust again to the tides. She did not wash up onto the shore until days after her disappearance. Her body was found by a group of boys poking through the line of garbage washed in by the tide – probably looking for sea-washed glass and driftwood. She was spread against the rocks, seaweed dark against her pale, bruised skin. I heard them say later that they thought at first she was a mannequin. One of the boys bent down to push at her mouth with a stick and when her sightless eyes flickered open he wailed, skittered backwards and lost his footing on the slippery rocks. It was the sound of his fear that drew people out of the general store to peer down over the cliff. When they saw what had been found they crossed themselves and muttered a prayer. Someone was sent for my father.

I fell in love with the kind of boy my mother had warned me against on those grey afternoons as she and I sat on the shore mending nets. She would bend her head over her darting hands and tell tales of boys that could possess a girl like me; boys with salt water in their veins. Boys who could catch my heart in a net as easily as they caught a snapper. I knew that she had been caught by such a man. Even though I did not intend to be caught in such a way, by any boy, I did not anticipate Jack McGee.

There was an abandoned fishing shack, much like this one, down by the shore, where teenagers would go on summer nights to pass around a flask of whisky and smoke cigarettes stolen from their fathers. The damp boards were defaced with graffiti -- skittering red lines and crudely drawn hearts-- and the heat of bodies made the stench of

fermented liquor almost unbearable. Each night someone would clear the floor in the middle of the shack and begin to measure out a rhythm on a bodhran fashioned out of barrel slats. There would always be someone to pick up the tune on a tin whistle. Girls would begin to rise. The patterns of their feet would start slowly, and then faster and faster they would whirl, faces a pale blur in the darkness.

But whenever Jack McGee stepped into the close kerosene-light, bending his head to fit through the doorframe, a voice would be raised above the din to order the drum quiet. “‘S good ol’ Jack McGee, fellas, stop the tune. Give ‘e a chance to choose ‘un.” A glass of whisky would be passed from hand to hand until it reached him. He would throw it back, a lean salt-darkened stretch of throat above the collar of his plaid jacket. “‘The Ballad of Sam McGee’,” he would yell above a whoop of laughter, pulling the fiddle from the folds of his jacket and raising it beneath his chin. The beat would begin again, faster this time; the fiddle rising over everything. Girls would reach out to touch him with slim fingers as they danced by. I could never bring myself to join them, but the vibration of his music traveled up through the boards into my bare feet, as intimate as though I held his heartbeat inside of me.

Once he had finished playing, he would sit and roll a cigarette, a routine I caught glimpses of through the eddying bodies. The night he spoke to me, he did so without looking up from his cigarette: ‘So, girly, you goin’ ta sit there looking at me, or ya goin’ to say somethin?’ As he lit it, smoke drifting from the corners of his mouth, “‘cause, considering how long you been thinking on it, yer gonna say something mighty damn important when you get around to it.” But I said nothing, even when he crouched over me and leaned to run his tongue along my lip. This was also a routine he had; there was not a

girl in the village that Jack McGee hadn't kissed. But I reckon that before that night he had never before kissed a mermaid. "Seaweed," he told me, an astonished look passing over his face. "You taste of seaweed."

I began sneaking out at night, climbing down from the second storey of the house. Running through the sleeping village, I would arrive at the shack breathless, the moon chasing me the whole way. I was lunatic with desire. In the wee hours, with the beat of the bodhran still throbbing through our bodies, he would pull me into the anchor of his arms. We would lay together on rough ship blankets stacked in the corner and heat each other with the tide of our breath, with fierce, hurried kisses. Then he told me that we had to stop, that he was leaving school to work on the boats with his father. Out of pride, I said nothing, made no fuss. I walked home that night wearing nothing but my slip and galoshes, his salted love leaking down from between my thighs, feeling triumphant. I imagined that there would be nights when Jack McGee would lie in another girl's arms dreaming of me.

The fishermen down on the wharfs will tell you queer tales of selkies who climb from the sea beneath a full moon to shed their pelts. Once human, they creep into the bedrooms of sleeping women, their bodies luminous and irresistible, only to disappear with the morning light. Back down to the rocks where they resume their fur, their throaty chuckling calls carrying across the dawn. Those women are left constantly longing, spending months knee-deep in the tides, waiting, until they die of pneumonia and heartache. Some fishermen will tell you of 'La Pincoya'— a legendarily beautiful woman who rises from foreign waters to seduce unwary men to their watery graves with a smile on their lips. Those who have traveled into her waters dream of her voice calling to them

in their sleep. They'll tell you of mermaids who wait on the wet rocks for a ship to pass in a storm, watching through the spray as sailors throw themselves from the deck into the black sea. Out of the wreckage, they salvage bruised, bloated bodies to lay across their laps, crooning and clucking. They prop them up as ornaments in damp caves, hiding the rot with pearly oyster shells and strings of seaweed. Eventually they forget them, their lifeless lovers in a row.

The stories do not account for the tender fleshy heart of a mermaid as a young girl. The way love is like a hook that tears her open.

My mother collected maps. She bought everything she could find at the local bait store, and then had Earl order them in from a bookstore on the mainland. She tacked them up to the walls, and when that was covered, to the kitchen floor. Sometimes she would scribble on them, borrowing my crayons to make the Indian ocean bluer or to trace the arbitraries of the Nile. I asked her once why she did it, and she told me that it was because she liked to pretend that she had once swam those oceans, had seen gaily colored parrots squawking in the trees above the Amazon and listened to the deep, ghostly voices of humpbacks off of the Pacific coast. After she died, I took them up, folded them and kept them beneath my bed. Every day, the sticky spaces they had left behind became grittier with sand, dirtier with the prints of our feet. My father never spoke of it. So when I left, I took the maps with me.

On the mainland, I could fool myself that no one knew who I was, where I was from. The only thing that gave me away was the slight annunciation of "h" at the beginning of my vowels, the jarring expressions "through the jigs and the reels" that I

worked into every day conversations in those first few months before I cultivated away even those signs. The first job I managed was in a gas station, under harsh fluorescent lights that left my skin flaky and grey. It was so far removed from home that I was relieved. But then the manager hired a Newfoundlander, a clever buddy, even though everything about him was perversely stereotypical, down to the rolling gait when he walked. And the fierce loyalty, the strange devotion to “the island.” He was always “heading home,” every paycheck bringing him one step closer. He refused to ask his girlfriend to marry him even after she threatened to pack up everything in their apartment and leave. It wouldn’t be fair, he said, he was “heading home.” When the station was slow, the guy would take extended cigarette breaks. I would watch from behind the cash as he stood outside, hurriedly sucking back cigarette after cigarette, eyes always skimming the horizon, looking for something past the buildings, the streets, looking east. I eventually had to quit. His loneliness reminded me too much of my own.

Each night, returning to my small apartment, I would sit by the window, straining my ear past the ambulance sirens, the distant voices, towards the horizon. As though, if I listened hard enough, I might hear the surf. I discovered that, on those nights when it got bad, I could sit beneath the spray of my shower and dream of the far off rumble of thunder traveling over the sea. My mother used to say that the moon guides people the way it guides the sea. That all you have to do is listen to it inside of you, calling to you. It can make you calm, falling asleep with it spinning across the sky outside your window, watching over your sleep. Or it can broil inside of you like a great white-hot heart. Jack McGee was my moon.

I took lovers to distract me. They were content with my facelessness, drawn so violently by my body, that they could barely remember my name while in the throes of passion. Around them, I did not need to pretend that I was human. Sometimes, moving above me, they would say that my loving reminded them of lullabies. But when I closed my eyes, it was the wild yell of the fiddle I heard, kerosene lamps lighting up shacks that stank of sweat and whisky. It was water that I felt as they gasped and flapped like fish inside of me.

My father died. Although it saddened me, he was only a distant figure in my life. It took them months to find me. They tore down the old house, but they left this fishing shack, so this is where I came. I had forgotten how dark it is here on the island. I spent that first night curled up on a tarp next to an old, cracked ship lamp, listening to the wind whistle through the boards. When I finally fell asleep, the northern current carried dreams that woke me up crying.

Eleanor was standing in the kitchen drinking a mug of tea when I walked in through her front door and still she managed not to look surprised. "Hello girly," she said. "Heard you were coming. Home again. Must be nice."

"Nah, no' really."

"Ah, go on with ya, of carse it is. Always nice to get back to where you came from. And you, only young." Patting her rollers. "Don' I look fetching? Gotta date tonight. Some poor young thing down the way wants a gen-ew-ine fortune teller at her wedding shower. Heard I was the one to be watchin' for, called up and offered me twenty dollars." She was always moving as she spoke, cleaning the table with a washrag,

pouring a mug of tea. "Here, I put some crushed lavender in it. It'll help you with those dreams you been havin'."

Sitting across from me, she lit a cigarette. "An yer man—Jack? Don't be blushing, girly, I knows who you came home fer. He's found another, you know. A right jacky-tar, if you ask me, but the girl's beautiful, no doubt. She's got them laughing eyes, the dark hair. Loves him something fierce, or so they say. I haven't seen him since you left, although he passes by sometimes on his way to the wharf in the mornings. I can almost smell the loneliness he leaves behind him, girly. He thinks of you often, no matter how he loves this one."

Eleanor's lover — a deacon from the church, a worker on the boats who had been courting her for thirteen years and still hasn't produced anything approaching a proposal — called her his "wee black witch." There were many who crossed themselves when they passed her garden gate. Whether she was a witch or not, she could always tell me when it was going to get bad — the dreams, the headaches, the tide of loneliness that washes over me. She could always give me something to hold it off a little longer.

"Tell me."

She tapped her ash. Sniffed. 'Ye know already. I don't need to spell it out for you. You can smell the beast in you getting stronger, already, like it did in your mother." She took my hand, her long slender midwife's fingers strong enough to crush my bones. "Yer afraid that it will happen to you like it did to her, that it's too late to go back. And you don' want to go."

My strangled voice. "Is there a remedy? Can I hold it off, if I make Jack love me?"

She smiled, laughed deep in her belly, and let me go. “Girly, I reckon you can do anything you put your mind to. Yes. He can hold you here, for awhile. Every kiss, every time he touches you, he’d be wiping away that part of you that isn’t human and you’d have to be willing to let it go. Your mother thought she was— she thought she could forget the sea altogether— but in the end she couldn’t do it.”

She tilted her head, her eyes so dark they were almost black. “ But you could do it. Gotta make him fall back in love wit’ you. Wit’ only you. Don’t think that would take much, a sweet wild thing like you but Jack McGee has grown into a fierce loyal man, he has.”

Her face brought into sharp relief by the quickly falling twilight, Eleanor told me how, if I were to return to the city, it would only be a matter of months before my skin turned entirely grey, before it began to come away in great sheaves to reveal the raw muscle beneath; my body needed to be fed by the sea and yet it was the sea I fought so against. She told me that it was possible, to forget the sea altogether and become human. It was possible to keep my memories, the love that throbbed like a separate beast in the cradle of my ribs.

But it took a certain kind of magic.

Adrienne turns away from him, the rasp of the sheets beneath her body. Her shoulder beneath his hand swells and falls with a sigh. “I need a drink.” The bed tilts as she rises, her body pale in the dim kerosene light. He watches her kneel in front of the

small box of groceries – mostly cans and bottles – that she keeps in the corner. She pulls out a bottle of Screech rum and holds it up to the light so that it reflects across the walls.

“This,” she whispers with a sad, tilted smile, “I will miss.” She takes a swig, waves of amber flitting across her face and throat. She looks as though she is underwater.

There are some nights, when, deep in the innards of the boat, he closes his eyes and tries to imagine what it would be, to belong to the sea. To have the darkness of the ocean pressing in on him, nothing for miles except water below and the wavering moon above. To be inhuman, to be able to reach out with a swift hand and grasp the wriggling body of a fish between his fingers and snap it between his teeth.

“Did you come up the cliff path?” She moves so that she’s standing by the window, her fingers against the pane. He can see the white globe of the moon shining through the fogged pane.

“Yes ma’am.”

“And the sea tonight?” It’s a question she often asks of him. He wonders if she ever goes herself, to stand at the edge of the cliff and look down at the tide. He suspects that she doesn’t, that she pays children to carry buckets of salt water to the shack so that she can bathe because she daren’t go too close to the shore herself. She probably hears it calling to her from all this distance.

“It’s burning.” Burning star-bright with phosphorescence, a sure sign of a southern wind and trawls-full of fish on tomorrow’s haul.

She nods and smiles as though he is merely confirming what she already knew. She comes to him, across the room, and leans down into his arms. Allows him to pull her

closer, to nudge his hand down between her thighs. "Burning bright," she whispers as he kisses her.

You have to imagine it: a girl standing at the edge of the wharf. The first of the boats have pushed away, the rest still thudding softly with each swell against the rubber tires fastened along the length of the wooden planks. A sound she has heard every night in her dreams, like the beating of her own heart. In the dim light of the morning, the men kneel to mend a broken net with a quick flash of a needle or pulling on their yellow rain gear over longjohns. Voices are mild and joking in the stillness, already yearning for the wider horizon. The girl moves closer to them, looking amongst them for a familiar face. She knows he's there, even though she can't see him.

"Good marnin' t'is, Adrienne," one of the men, recognizing her, nods with a wink and a smile. At her name Jack turns. They stand staring at each other.

"Hello."

"Adrienne," in his low voice. "How ye been?"

"Not too bad. You?"

One of the men, passing, claps him on the shoulder with a sideways grin. She can feel him being pulled away, his eyes on the boats that are drifting out past the mouth of the bay, out into the sea. "When d'you get in?"

"Few days ago."

"Right," he says, searching her face. The girl's gaze falls to his hands. She can remember the summer he began fishing, how he would try and pierce the skin on his fingertips with a needle, to show her how tough he was, that even steel could not break

him; those same hands could coax a tune from a fiddle that would break your heart, make you sob with your face in your hands.

“Do you still play?”

He nods. Probably surprised that she even has to ask.

“I haven’t heard you for awhile. You should come see me.” The girl tries to smile. “I’m up in my father’s old fishing hut.”

He raises his shoulders slightly. “Might do. I’ll see ya, then.” She waits and watches as he steps into the boat, straddling the seats; thinks of him out on the sea, every day, with nothing for miles but the water beneath him. She wonders whether, leaning to let his hook drop into the water, he thinks – like her – of faces lost, furred in algae, the tiny quicksilver of fish making nests in their hair. In the evening, he will lift from the boat the gleaming bodies of those fish and throw them towards the table where they will be gutted, bright blood against the glint of the knife.

Imagine that. Just imagine.

Jack McGee met his girl on the wharfs, or so Eleanor told me. The girl had been thought nothing but a hang-a-shore, one of the urchins who came and lingered around the boats each evening hoping for a hot meal and a kind word, maybe even a few dollars to stuff into her brassiere for a crude grope. Until Jack McGee took notice.

“That one with his big heart,” Eleanor said, shaking her head. “Suppose she reminded him of another little thing used to follow him around.” Cackling away as she leaned over the table to tug at my hair. “Dark hair and all, Addy. Same way of laughing

as you. And after that, no one thought to say a thing, since it's well known that boy has a temper on him."

Then came the evening that I awoke from my afternoon nap to find scales scattered across the sheets. Glinting in the dim light, brittle to the touch. And so I went down to the boats and waited, knowing that Marina would be there. She was beautiful, Jack's girl, even I can admit that. As she stood there leaning against the pilings, caught against the darkening sky, smiling at me nervously. He had captured her the same way he had captured me, all those years ago, and kept me – with the sadness in his eyes, that face – that face in a boy who has been raised by the sea, it's so rare. I've told you already about him. It's her I was speaking of.

She said something to me. I can't remember now what it was, maybe some bland sentence about the weather, about the catch the previous day – who knows? I wasn't really listening to what she said, but the way she said it. It was easy to tell that she wasn't certain if I would agree with her. As though I might reach out at any moment and clap her across the ear. Her lips were reddened by a cheap gloss lipstick, probably from behind the counter at Earl's. It gave her a slapdash look. With the collar of her coat turned up around her ears and the way she leaned far out over the wharf railing to look for minnows in the shallows, she looked like someone I might have liked. Perhaps as children we would have scrambled through the beach caves together, stuffing our pockets full of sand dollars and polished stones.

I just smiled at her and turned my eyes back to the horizon. She fell silent.

The boats came in, the jostle of men, the slippery silver bodies of the fish sliding across the wood. I watched when she threw her arms around Jack. The other men

watched too from the corner of their eyes as they yelled to one another and bent their bodies over the knots of the ropes. He buried his face in her hair, keeping his hands at an angle so that he wouldn't leave the slime and stench of fish on her jacket. His eyes closed for just a second. I knew in that one moment that it wouldn't work. I would not manage to make Jack McGee love me. Not enough. Never enough.

Jack saw me standing there. Bending his head, he whispered in Marina's ear. After casting a questioning glance at me, she scrambled up over the embankment towards the road. She went without looking back. "Hullo Adrienne." He nodded at me. "Will you wait while I finish?"

I shook my head. "No, come find me when you can." And I left him there, to walk along farther along the beach towards the caves.

That's where he found me, spread like a starfish with the tide tugging at the hem of my dress. His face appeared against the wheeling kaleidoscope of the stars. "Sometimes it's too big," he said, tipping the head of the bottle he was holding towards the moon and tilting his head back. "If you're out on the water at night, with the sea black beneath you, and the sky black above you, it all seems too big, like it might swallow you whole. And you never know what's down there, what you might catch if you throw your nets out. Could be a mermaid, could be a tin can, could be one of them giant squid...anythin', just like up there."

He cleared his throat and laughed. "Might even be cod if yer lucky."

He sat beside me and offered me the bottle but I declined. Alcohol made me dizzy. "Sure?" his voice, solemn. Seeing the look in my eyes, he nodded. "Aye, it'll take the legs off ya, that will. Wicked stuff."

We sat in silence.

“Did you ever think of me while I was gone?”

He shifted his weight, his head lowering towards his knees. “Someone goes, doesn’t come back. Happens often enough, I guess. After awhile, you stop looking.” He smelled of fish scales and wet wool. All fishermen carry that smell with them, like a ghost, even after the showers, the scented soaps.

“Did you look for me?”

He tilts the bottle, staring down into it as though it might offer answers. “For awhile. But then, I found Marina.”

“Marina.” I whispered her name. Marina: “she from the sea.” In darkness, I straddled Jack as he sputtered whisky from his nose, and pushed my tongue into his mouth. I felt him push against me slightly. A moan hissed from his throat, catching between us before sliding away into the noise of the water. “You want me.” The feeling of being touched, here, so close to the sea that I could feel the waves on the bottoms of my feet, was heady. “Don’t tell me you don’t. I could give you things she couldn’t.”

He shoved me once, hard. I slipped, my weight bringing me onto one knee on the sharp boulders beneath us, my dress shoved up around my thighs. The grip of his hands on my wrists. “You can’t, luv. We can’t do this. I know it was that way once, but we was only children. It can’t be again.”

His face blotted out the sky as he leaned over me. His fingers were rough on my skin, rough from handling fish and squid, from handling the knives. I rose towards him until I caught him again. Distant laughter, from teenagers on the rocks who were probably passing around joints or sneaking off into the caves. Laughing at a pair of lovers

in the sand. The snick of my teeth on his, and I sat up, coughing, as he cursed, "Jesus Christ." Sitting there, with his hand to his mouth, he remembered his girl. "I can't do this, Adrienne. I knew...I knew you were coming back, that you would want to...but can't you see I can't?"

"Please." The only word I could think of. Please. How often have you ever said please to a lover? "Jack, I dreamed out of you." I reached out to him as he rose.

"What are you lookin' for 'ere girly." Frustration. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm not human," I hissed at him, feeling by the tenseness of his body that he had already surmised this, dreamed of it, pushed it back into the depths of his mind. "I'm not human, and you know I'm not. You could do things with my body that you can only imagine now. Things that would make you forget anyone else." He avoided my eyes as I stood. "Fucking Jesus, mother of god. Why did I come back here to this godforsaken place. I hate this place." A burst of cold at my ankles, the edges of the tide washing up around the rocks beneath the pilings, over the top of my galoshes. I cursed, flinging my foot out. The boot went flying off my foot, making a bright red arc in the evening before disappearing into the waves. "I could make you love me, Jack McGee. I could make you flay yourself alive, throw yourself from a cliff. I could make you bring me oyster pearls. I could make you love me. Don't think I couldn't."

"Bloody hell, woman." Taking the distance in a few smooth movements, he bent at the knee, lifting me into his arms. "Yer not gonna do this. Please don't do this, my love." His breath against my ear. "Go home for Jesus' sake."

"I don't want to."

“Sure you do. You just don’t know it, girl, in your head. You didn’t come home to find me.” With the storm streaming down his face, he rested a calloused thumb against my lip. Shifting my weight across his knee, he struggled up the path towards the fishing shack. I could breathe deeply the scent of the sea on him, feel the pressure of his hand at the small of my back. He set me there, on the porch. The water from the roof poured off onto our heads, catching against my lips, trickling in the space between my collarbones.

“Adrienne.” His hand stroking my hair; his arms around me. “You wee, dark tangly little thing. How precious you are. Thought of you so many times out there on the boats; thoughts of you almost drove me mad. Can’t return to that, y’know?” His breath was hot against my ear. “You don’t need me, love. Not me.”

Looking at him, at the rain sluicing down his cheeks, I thought of what it might be like to walk out into those waves, to let them suck me down and carry me away. No matter how much part of me wanted that, the rest of me strained to stay here, to see what real love felt like when returned. He would deny me that. And still I loved him. “Jack,” choking things tangling and turning in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

He pulled himself from me, inch by inch of his body, and stood with his head bowed so that I could not see his eyes. Then he nodded, once. And, turning away, he strode out into the rain.

It took me a long time to believe him. Every time I opened the door, I half-expected to find him standing there, shoulders hunched against the northern wind, smoking a cigarette and waiting for me. Some nights I would walk down through the

village and crouch in the darkness outside of the pub, where I could hear the sounds of his fiddle traveling up into the night, razor-sharp and sad against the moon. I don't go anymore.

I see him sometimes. Him and his beautiful wife. Him and his beautiful wife and the beautiful boy who came just a few months after the wedding. A savage little thing with dark matted hair and his father's fierce brown eyes. He comes to visit me sometimes, like the other children. He stands outside the shack to try and see in through the windows. Eleanor laughs at him, devilskin, and says he has the spirit of his mother and the folly of his father. He hears stories of me from the other children, I expect – how I've turned half-wild. How I wait down by the docks sometimes for the ships to come in so I can lure sailors back to my bed. How I probably eat young boys for supper, sucking the hearts from their chests and using the bones to clean my teeth.

“And me?”

Adrienne turns her face towards him, and even in the darkness he can see that her eyes are wild. “And you? Even these nights, these elusive moments of love bewitched from strangers like you, passing through on the boats, aren't enough to keep me here for long.”

“Eleanor tells me that it probably won't hurt. I will wake up every day with a little less memory of who I am and where I belong. There will be a thirst for salt water. Sometimes, even now, I run down to the sea and scoop it up into my bare hands. After awhile it will become difficult for me to hide the scales, even with makeup. I am drawn to the sea more and more. Now all that's left is hope that I will forget him, forget the way

he held her in his arms instead of me. One day I'll walk out into the shallows, out past the current line, out into the depths, down and down and down."

Snowbird

Sometimes when I'm up there, way up beneath the big top— so high that I feel like I can reach out and touch the cold blue glitter of the stars— I can't hear anything but the hush of my own heart. The call of the ringmaster, the voices of the crowd, it all gets lost. There's only the rope beneath me. I can close my eyes, stretch my arms out wide and fall. For those few seconds before I hit the net it feels like I'm flying.

It started with Grimalkin telling the story after the crowds were gone and the tents were swept out, as the clowns huddled around the barrels smoking cigarettes, their faces half-washed away. The story became a part of every midnight— the pink gum stuck under the wooden seats, the stench of burnt popcorn and that sour-sweat smell from Savage's cage where he sat huddled in the close darkness — all underlaid with Grimalkin's soft voice as he swept away the litter and footprints to make it all new again before leading me from trailer to trailer so that I could say good-night to the carnival. Then Grimalkin started telling the story underneath the sideshow tent. For the crowd, it was just all part of the promise: Charlene, the fat lady who likes to knit spider webs and wear them as shawls, or Phillip who's an albino, but if he did have color, he tells me, he would be a black so dark it would be blue like the night sky. My story became a part of all that.

Once upon a time, in a town far away, Queenie gave birth to a daughter right there in the straw and sawdust of the sideshow tent. The baby came out covered in blood and feathers. At first her mama thought she'd given birth to a freakish bird. Except after

the ringmaster washed the baby in a rain barrel, they saw that the baby had ten toes and ten fingers and two wide brown eyes just like most other babies. The feathers were just from her mama's costume and the blood was from her mother's womb. Still, Queenie wouldn't touch her; she just locked herself in her trailer and refused to come even to do the burlesque show. That baby became property of the carnival sideshow. She was fed by the fat lady, spent her afternoons with the elephants, had her nap with the snake charmer and fell asleep each night with the wolf boys, clutching their hair in her tiny curled fists. Even though they knew she wasn't one of them, they pretended. They even made her a costume out of feathers and sequins. When it came time to give her a name they called her 'Snowbird.'

I always knew that Queenie was mine, even before the first time I heard my own tale. I never spoke it, but I knew. Grimalkin could have told me anything about my mother. He could have never mentioned her at all. But still, somehow when I looked for home, I would have kept coming back to Queenie. When I was a little girl I used to sneak in to see the burlesque shows, to see her up there on the stage, kicking up her long, slim legs in their stiletto heels, flashing her purple garter and her white teeth. She was beautiful— all black hair and big hips. The crowd loved her. They jostled each other to get close to the stage. They held up folded dollar bills for her, shouting marriage proposals whenever she bent down to scoop up her tips and stuff them into her brassiere. She took it all in stride. Never once did she take them up on their offers. Except with my father.

Grimalkin told me that story once. One of his talents is skimming the crowd for someone who looks like they might want to get inside the sideshow tent to see what he's

offering, but they're not too sure. Some people seem to think that 'freak' is a disease that they might catch, carrying it away with them afterwards out into the world or sometimes they've just eaten a stomach full of candied popcorn and soda pop and aren't sure if they could handle an *AMAZING SHRUNKEN WOMAN!!!* or *WOLF BROTHERS— THEIR ENTIRE BODIES ARE COVERED IN HAIR!!!* But no matter how certain they are that it will just be another illusion, another wasted nickel, they still need to see it. Just to make sure. That's when Grimalkin gets them; he'll sidle right up to them, talking a mile a minute, and before they know they're pushed into the sweating throng of bodies where they're forced to see whatever's revealed.

Even though Grimalkin sees a thousand faces a day he swears he remembers my father. I asked him once a day until the year I turned seven to tell me about my father and all he would tell me was that my father was beautiful. More beautiful even than Queenie with all her sparkling jewels. More beautiful than Rory, the snake charmer, who has bright blue eyes; sometimes I catch him and Grimalkin out sitting behind one of the tents sharing a cone of popcorn and holding hands.

But one day, after I had turned eight, Grimalkin told me the story. "I remember," he winked. "Your father I remember. He was tall. As tall as a house maybe— at least seven— no, eight feet — because I had to shade my eyes when I looked up at him, he was so tall. And still I could see his eyes. His eyes were just like the sky they were so blue. And his voice— I tell you — his voice was kind of soft and low. Not like a girl's, no siree. That boy had a voice that would make ladies stop and stare as he walked by. I tell you, he was somethin' special.

As soon as he saw your mama— right over there in that peepshow tent — he knew he wanted her, yessir. He went up to her after the show and put a dollar bill in her garter. I reckon that’s all he had, even though Queenie thinks he was cheap. He told her ‘Queenie, I’m gonna marry you.’ He believed it too, even though your mama laughed at him. He came with us down through Mississippi— even though, you know, it’s against the rules— but your mama, she never cared much for rules and I reckon he didn’t either. He looked like the type that could just charm his way out of everything you might want to pin on him. But one night, Queenie caught him staring at Jade — although, who doesn’t stare at Jade, right?— and she got real mad at him. You know, your mother’s got one hell of a temper on her, kid. So she told him to go to hell and he said, ‘Reckon I just might.’ Took off right there and then. Piled his things into a blanket, tied it up at the edges and took off walking down the road in the middle of the night. No money or nothing. Never saw him again. Here you were, si months later. Maybe one day he’ll come back. He seemed like that type, too — one of those that’ll just show up on your doorstep years later with a wink and a grin, thinkin’ they can make things right again.”

My father didn’t come back. But Alligator Boy came. Somehow, I think, that was almost as good.

I had just finished practicing my routine the first time I saw him. Sometimes at the end of a practice I like to just lie in the net letting it swing slow beneath me, lulling me into sleep, as I stare up at the tightrope high above me. I try to imagine what the crowd sees when I’m up there. Hearing a familiar voice, I turned to see Queenie strutting across the center ring. When she walks, she moves her hips so that her skirts sashay back

and forth around her ankles and her hair crackles from the static like live wires that whip around her neck. Her eyes met mine and then flickered past, as though she had not seen. The boy walking next to her had to keep his stride wide to keep up. He carried a red backpack across his shoulders.

SEE THE ALLIGATOR BOY!! REAL SCALES!! I thought in my head; not mean – just like I did with everyone. To try out the words in my head; to see why they might be worth a nickel. Why they might be worth finding Charlene out back after the show crying her eyes out, all her flesh jiggling and shuddering under her pink tutu like it had a mind of its own. Sometimes I thought it did – have a mind of its own. Whatever made us ‘freaks’ – our skin, our hair, our parents – it was something that lived and breathed all on its own. We just had to carry it around wherever we went, never able to get out, never able to stop feeding it.

But Alligator Boy was different somehow. He didn’t move like Bob, who was always shuffling, raising up dust that stuck to his fur and made him look dirty no matter how many rain barrels he emptied trying to get it shiny and smooth. As if it made a difference. He didn’t move like Jade either, who liked to pretend that she could crush things under her feet if she wanted to, but ended up wobbling and whirling all over the place since she could never quite balance herself. Her eyesight wasn’t too good. Alligator Boy, he moved like he wasn’t even thinking about who might be watching. Freaks always walk like someone might be watching them. Queenie was talking away to him, her hands fluttering and flickering. He just nodded his head, his eyes moving across the empty stands and around the ring where the clowns were practicing for the evening show.

I turned over onto my stomach so that I could see better, letting my arms dangle down through the holes in the net. The net was just a precaution. I only fell once, when I was just beginning and still not used to the routine – not used to that feeling just after you step out onto the rope from the platform when you have to keep your body perfectly still otherwise gravity will trick you. Pull you down. I can barely remember the fall. I just remember the shocked breath of the audience and then the net, almost as if it rose up to meet me. I liked that feeling. So after that I ended every performance by diving off the platform into the net. After awhile that became my trademark. The reason people came to see me, Snowbird, was to see me dive through the air, my body twisting in and out of rolls or figure eights and finally coming to a rest down here in the dirt where they were. Queenie caught me staring. Frowning, her puckered mouth looked like a little red petal that someone had stomped on. She *tsked*, waved her arms in my general direction and that's when he looked at me.

His eyes were green. Green like grass, but greener. Green like the precious stones that Queenie had sewn onto her outfits so that when she danced beneath the lights she would look a jewel and not like just another burlesque dancer with an illegitimate kid and no place to call home. I looked away real quick, ashamed to be caught looking. I knew what it was like to be looked at like that. Not because I was a freak on the outside but because whenever I went into town people knew that I wasn't one of them. I hated that look and felt real bad that this alligator boy might think I was looking at him because I thought he belonged in the sideshow.

Queenie got called away by one of the dancers who was having a crisis; apparently she'd burnt a hole in her vinyl costume which had melted onto her fishnet

stockings. She went with a glance over her shoulder at me, her head high, barely wobbling even though I knew it must be hard to walk across the swept dirt in those high heels. I looked down at my hands, stretched out my fingers wide, trying to pretend that I was busy, that I was thinking of other things and didn't need anyone to talk to me. Alligator Boy came over anyway. First I saw his feet, those thrift store black army boots that he polished to a sheen so that I could see my own face, closed-mouthed and heavy-lidded. Then he crouched down so that we were eye-level.

“Hey there,” he said, reaching out a hand to touch mine. He didn't leave his hand out there like it was a suggestion to shake hands; he just reached out and touched my fingers, real soft, then pulled away again. Without thinking, I reached out. I wanted to feel what his skin was like. He let me, without flinching or pulling away like Bob or Charlie did when I wanted to stroke their fur or like Charlene did when I wanted to see what her stomach felt like— whether it was like marshmallows or Jello. Alligator Boy just smiled, let me run my thumb across the back of his knuckles where the scales began. Those scales weren't like the scales of a snake where you could feel the muscles underneath moving. It wasn't like a fish either. His scales were dry and soft. Whistling through my teeth, I ran my hand down his arm all the way to the elbow and he just crouched quiet and let me do it.

Sometimes I get nervous. Not before a show, when I'm busy making sure that my costume is not flashing a thigh or a hole in the back of my tights or that my feet are chalked enough that I won't slip. Not when I'm standing in the shadows just inside the entrance during the first two acts. While I am standing there waiting, I get to reach out to

touch the elephants just at their ankles as they lumber past slow and steady, turning their heads this way and that like they can't figure out what the fuss is about. I used to be scared of the elephants when I was little; one day Joe, their trainer, made me stand in the middle of their holding cell with my palm full of peanuts. I was petrified. Whimpering, I closed my eyes while he chuckled and called, soft under his breath, for Sephina. She recognized his voice, came shuffling towards him. When she smelled the peanuts she uncurled her trunk and snuffled up my arm until she found them. That feeling – the whiskers and the leathery feeling of her hide – made me laugh and she laughed too, after snorting up the peanuts. It was a strange kind of breathing sound that made me think of sleeping. So every night as the elephants pass me by I reach out to touch them.

I don't get nervous when I have to walk across the ring and, blinded by the spotlight, reach out to find the bottom rungs of the ladder. It used to be that I would climb up the middle of the ladder during the first act so that when the audience finally saw me I was already about to step out onto the rope. Harry decided that it wasn't suspenseful enough. He liked to think of ways to work the crowd. An occasional heart attack is good for business, he figures. So I had to get used to climbing the ladder with everyone watching me. At the very top, when I'm standing on the platform taking a deep breath – letting the murmur of the crowd below, the stench of the sawdust all fall away – that's when I get nervous. I'm alone up there. If anything happened – if the crew forgot to check the net that day or if it's gone and stretched overnight – no one can help me. I'd be dead before they could take a breath.

That's not what I think about – not really. I think about my mother in the burlesque tent and how, at the very moment that I'm getting to step out onto that rope,

she's probably sliding across the stage in a gold lame bikini shaking her head so that her feather headdress flutters and flaps around her like the elephants' ears. Whatever she's doing she's not thinking of me. But that night, the night I met Alligator Boy for the first time, I was thinking of him. Wondering if he'd been set up in the sideshow tent and whether they're gonna set up a pool for him to lie in amongst the coy scent of lily pads or just have him sit on a chair in the middle of a stage blinking at his audience like the gimp who has never said a word. Although sometimes, after the last person has left the tent, when the lights are turned off and Grimalkin is humming as he sweeps the sawdust into the corner, you can hear the gimp, crouched in the corner of his cage with his back to the tent flaps, purring. I wondered if Alligator Boy was even showing that night. He might just be wandering through the vendors, throwing a ball here, buying some popcorn, maybe stopping to have a cigarette outside of the haunted house. And maybe when he walks by the peepshow he'll hear the voices inside 'come on, sweetheart,' 'oh yeah darlin;,' he'll go in to stand at the back where no one can see him. If she sees him there my mother will throw up her leg to show him a glimpse of her red lace stockings or shake her behind to make the bells on her costume shimmer. Seeing her like that, like a peacock, he'll lick his lips and his pupils will grow gold.

That's what I was thinking about that night as I eased out onto the rope, bent slowly at the waist and swung myself down. I didn't hear the sharp gasps or the girls giggling because they're nervous. Just the rhythm of my own breath as I hooked my ankles around the rope and let go with my hands. I closed my eyes, not daring to look down. Afraid that if I did, I'd just let go; just fall, fly, down like a feather where the net will be waiting to catch me. Pulling myself back onto the rope – kneeling, then standing –

I do a pirouette on the tip of my toe, as nice as you please, pulling a fan out of my leotard to unfurl in front of me. It's a dark purple flash of color up against the glittering white spotlight. Harry began telling another version of my fairytale, censored for the dreams and nightmares of these people who have paid to see me dive: "Once upon a time there was a girl who could fly from the time that she was two years old, folks. That isn't her costume-- those are real feathers. She's part bird, part girl and tonight you get the special privilege of seeing her fly" and like that I'm just another freak. This time when I stretch open my arms and let myself fall, I don't close my eyes. All the way down all I see are those green, green eyes.

Watching the crowd drift across the field, carrying lanterns and smoking cigarettes -- a web of lightning bugs fanning out across the grass -- I wandered back to my trailer with the call of the barkers ringing in my ears. When I was little I found this hour the saddest, a stuck-in-between time; the dancers with mud on their fishnet tights and their mascara smeared, the lions yawning as they are led back to their cages, Harry walking around wearing nothing but his suspender pants and his top hat. No one has ever seen him without that hat. Grimalkin swears that he wears it to bed.

The trailer was in darkness, so I lit a kerosene lamp. The adrenaline trickled through my veins, fizzing away like electricity with no place to go. If I held my hands up in front of me in the darkness as I lay on my bed, I could almost see it sparking blue and purple between my fingertips. "Snowbird?" The trailer door opened. Not moving, I could hear Charlie padding around on the linoleum floor. I knew that he could see the lamp but I didn't feel like talking. Not then. "Hey kiddo, you there?"

Charlie swore that, as a baby, I was the first living thing ever to fall asleep in his arms. Charlie's arms were kind of hairy, like his brother's; they have a skin condition which made them grow fur, thick and black, all over their bodies. When I grew too old to just be passed from trailer to trailer, old enough to want a home of my own, Bob and Charlie made me a room in the corner of their trailer. They put up a little green curtain to give me my privacy and hung white lights above my bed so that I would always feel like I was sleeping amongst the stars. Charlene and Talullah – the world's smallest woman – kept complaining at first. They thought that, being girls, they should get to keep me with them. But after they saw the shelf that Bob and Charlie built so that I would have a place to put photographs and the quilt they sent away for from a catalogue, the girls kept their mouths shut. So as far back as I remembered, I'd lived here in this trailer. Whichever town the carnival ends up in I still have this corner of the world where I can fall asleep and dream.

“Snowbird?” Charlie tried again. I could see his shadow, thrown by the lamp, distorted behind the curtain. “You in there? Your mama's calling for you. She's a-lookin' for you alright, and looks like she had a temper on her. If I was you, I'd get my bee-hind over dere and see what's up with her, cause you know what she's like if she get all worked up.” He begins moving away again.

“Charlie?” I called out. There was a movement, and then he pulled back the curtain, staring down at me. Bob liked to let his hair grow long so that it curled at the end, but Charlie trimmed his almost everyday. He gathered up the trimmings and kept them in a burlap bag under his bed. He swore that one day he was going to have enough

to make a mattress. "Hey birdie girl. How's it going?" he asked, soft— like he knew what that hour was like and he didn't want to startle me.

I raised my legs, my hands up into the air and stare at the dim shapes they make against the moon-filled window. "Have you seen the boy?"

He didn't even need to ask which one I meant. He just nodded "Yeah, and I reckon that's what your mama wants to see you 'bout, too. She's seen him, surely. Surely she has. Hard not to see a boy with eyes like that."

I didn't say anything for a moment. Charlie just stood there, hand on the curtain, waiting. Some of the freaks got nervous if you were quiet around them too much. I guessed they were used to people thinking bad things about them, maybe wondering how they can possibly look at themselves in the mirror every morning, or in the case of Charlene, how they even walked around without just slowly grinding themselves into the dirt. But Charlie, he likes quiet. Sometimes he would take me into the haunted house, into one of the lower rooms that stands empty and we would sit there in the dark listening to the distant moans of the mechanical ghosts.

"Charlie," I finally said. "Do you think I was supposed to be a bird — like Charlene was supposed to be a fat lady and Rory was supposed to be a snake charmer — do you suppose that's what we were meant to be, that someone made us this way?"

"I think so," he said. Just like that. "I think so, I do."

"And Mama?" I asked. "Was Mama suppose to be a burly dancer? Do you think when she was born, her mama looked at her and said 'Why, this child is gonna be a dancer in a dirty show'?"

Charlie looked at me, real strange, and shook his head. “No, birdy girl. I think Queenie’s mama looked at her, and thought ‘this child is gonna be beautiful’ just like your mama looked at you and thought that you were gonna be beautiful.”

I snorted. “But she didn’t. She took one look at me and she burst out crying. Said I was a freak.”

He cringed a little at that word, but then he just sort of shrugged his shoulders. I could smell popcorn on him and the smell of Charlene’s lily perfume, straw and sawdust. All caught in his fur. “Honey, whatever that man tell you out there, your mama looked at you and she thought to herself, she thought ‘This child is gonna fly like a bird.’”

That was not part of the story. That’s not the way the story went. “Yeah, right. That’s why she gave me up. I bet that’s why Alligator Boy’s here too. His mama looked at him and thought ‘That boy is beautiful’ so she kicked him out, told him to go join the carnival.”

Charlie got a far away look in his eyes. There was his reflection in the window, high up against the night sky. “No, birdy girl, that’s not it. Not for him, not for you. S’different than that. You ever figure your mama took one look at you and saw something she’d never be?”

“Sure. That must be it.” I said, swinging my legs over the bed. “Close your eyes.” While Charlie squeezed his eyes shut, I shucked out of my costume and threw on an old sweater that Charlene knit for me last Christmas. She knit it too big – more like her size – so I wore it as a dress, with a ribbon tied around the waist. I crept up behind Charlie to lay my head on his shoulder. His reflection smiled at me as he reached up to pat my

cheek. "Go on, Snowbird," he said. "Think your mama has gone and seen the truth after all."

So I went to find my mother, passing the trailers and half-lit tents where voices rise like a flurry of birds flocking up against the moon. I could hear someone laughing out behind the roller coaster. Somewhere a radio was playing a slow sultry song. The grass was mostly stomped down from people tramping on it all day. Here and there it released the scent of summer, of green things blooming and wanderlust. The flaps to the peepshow tent were tied down so I had to go around to the back and duck under the canvas. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dark but I could hear the girls giggling, the clink of bottles.

"Queenie?" I called. The paper lanterns they had hung from around the edges of the tent glowed and simmered in the damp air, casting their rainbow shadows over the grass.

"Hey, Snowbird!" someone called as I stood, toeing a line in the grass, not wanting to approach them. "How you doing, girl? Come join our picnic." Ever since I could remember, the burly dancers had been kind of off to themselves, away from the rest of the carnival; almost like royalty, even though in the right way of thinking, it's the acrobats and the horse rider who really made the money. But it was the burly dancers who had the prettiest costumes, the sweetest voices. We all kind of looked at them as being special, since here in our world money doesn't mean much. We didn't stay in once place long enough to spend it. Harry said that's why they called my mother Queenie, "Cause if the dancers are carnival royalty, your mama is most definitely the queen bee." She'd been here the longest. In all that time she remained the best dancer the carnival

had, the only one who is sure to draw a crowd on her reputation alone. And a crowd means profit, Harry liked to say when he'd had a few beer and was strutting around like a pigeon with his chest puffed out.

The dancing girls were strewn across blankets and quilts, some of them still in their costumes – a few scraps of sequins and chiffon that barely held in their plump white breasts and slender legs – as they braided each other's hair or sipped at bottles of chartreuse, trying to teach each other dance steps. A few girls in the corner were swaying in each other's arms, their eyes winking closed as they imagined someone else or maybe another place that was far from here. The carnival was always picking up dancers here and there. Sometimes dancers wandered off to get married, or just to find some kind of normal life for themselves. Every now and then one of them will come to visit when the carnival has gotten around to their town again, towing along their husband, towing along their husband or their new baby, looking proud and somehow lost. Those are the girls I felt sorriest for. The only worse thing I could imagine than being stuck in the circus was not being able to get back in once you left.

“Snowbird.” Queenie talked real quiet, like she expected people to lean in close to listen to her. Even so, when she talked it was like the whole world hushed up just to hear what she had to say. “Honey, what took you so goddamn long? You know I got important things to do. I can't be sitting around all night waiting for you to get your behind over here. A girl has got to get her beauty sleep. Right girls?”

The girls chirped up in agreement, some of them snickering behind their hands. A few reached out to stroke my hair or pinch my ankle as I passed. Queenie had changed since the crowds had left, but she was still in costume. She was always in costume,

covered in glitter and feathers. When she reached out to fiddle with the end of my belt and to adjust the collar of my sweater I could smell the perfume on her satin kimono – jasmine and lotus flowers, faint but giddy like spring time in Georgia. Her hair was piled on top of her head, stuck through with a pair of whittled down sticks that have been painted black. She had a kind of worn look. When I was little I used to think like she was a princess who'd kissed too many frogs and just wanted someone to make her a strong cup of tea every night and sing her to sleep with a lullaby. Charlene said it was my mama's look that drew crowds. She made them want to be that person.

“Yes, Queenie, ma'am.” I nodded. At the tone of my voice she stopped playing, looked at me serious for a moment. “What is it you wanted?”

“I just thought I'd see how you're doing,” she sniffed, and then, “You *are* my daughter y'know, although Lord knows why he saw fit to make me anyone's mama. Anyone lookin' at me would think I'm your sister. Not old enough to be anyone's mama.” A few of the girls nudged each other and rolled their eyes at that. I could see that Queenie said this kind of thing a lot, thinking that she was the boss and all that. There were a few of the burly dancers that were more beautiful than her. A whole lot were younger, but she knew that she was the best. Something like that can change real quick. All it would take was for the crowd to turn their eyes, just once, and that would be it. That's the way the carnival worked, although Harry is better than most – at least that's what Bob and Charlie tell me and they'd worked for a few carnivals before Harry found them.

“I saw you practicing today,” Queenie folded her arms across her breasts, pushing them up so that they rose, pale and doughy, above the collar of her kimono. There was a

feather stuck against her neck, just behind her ear, and I wanted to pluck it away or tell her that it was there, but I didn't. "Getting pretty good, girl, considering."

"Considering what?" I wanted to say. "Considering what?" But I didn't. Just kept my mouth shut, looking at the litter that's left behind on the grass, shoved beneath the blankets, caught beneath the girls' bare feet. Anywhere but at Queenie.

"That boy, y'know," she said. "That freak. He saw you practicing today. And more, I reckon. It's shameful, is what it is, flirting with a boy like that. A real performer," she pronounced it funny, made the word all sharp and stone-hard "a real *per-for-mer* wouldn't waste her time on a boy like that." She reached to pull on a strand of my hair. Squinting her eyes, she looked at me as though she might be seeing me for the first time. "Y'know, you got potential, Snowbird. Real potential. Could be something. Not a dancer, mind you. You weren't born graceful like me. Walking the rope out there today you were a little wobbly, but you could be something, if you put your mind to it. Like I did. Put my mind to it, and look where I am today. People come from all over to see me."

"See you they do," someone piped up. The girls dissolved into giggles, biting their lips red.

Queenie turned to glare at them. It was easy to tell that she was used to it. "They don't come to see you," she told them. "They come to see me. It's my name out there on that tent, isn't it. Go read it. *Queenie*, it says, that's what they come for, so shut your mouths."

It was hot in there. I could feel my shoulder muscles tightening and I wanted to go ask Charlene if she would rub some ointment on it for me. Queenie caught me rolling my shoulder and reached out to pinch my cheek, hard. Hard enough that I yelped. "Listen

to me, girl," she said, stepping closer so that I could smell her breath, hot and full of liquor. "You listen to me. I saw you looking at that boy. Him looking at you, and whether you are my daughter or not, I can tell you that something like that's gonna lead you nowhere good, and fast."

"Was nothing," I murmured—embarrassed that she'd caught me like this, more embarrassed that I was still standing there. "Just talked, that's all. What do you care?"

"Not a bit, I tell you. Not a bit. But if you ever think you'll make something of yourself, looking at boys like that, living in a place like this, girl, you're dead wrong. You and he, you'd have freak babies. Little babies with too many arms, so fat you'd have to roll them around like prams, like Charlene over there. You want your babies to have so much hair you have to comb them every day? That what you want?" The girls were silent now, watching us, their heads darting forward to catch what Queenie was saying. Her eyes darkened. Her hair was beginning to fall around her face, sticking in the makeup and glitter that was still shining on the creases of her cheeks. "Boy like that, that's the only kind of boy would look at a girl like you. Boys like that are trouble, I'm telling you."

Turning, I stumbled away with the quiet of the burly dancers at my back. I heard my mother calling my name but, finding the canvas of the tent, I ducked under. Walking blindly through the grass, I almost banged into the animal cages. I could hear the lions growl gently in their sleep and see the elephants swaying as they dreamt. Reaching in through the bars I touched Seraphina's foot with my fingertips, in the darkness with the stars above sparkling and gleaming like razor blades.

I didn't tell anyone what Queenie said to me. Not Charlie, or Rory or even Phillip who saw me at breakfast, same as every morning, and gave me his portion of orange juice because I was a growing girl – growing bird, he liked to say, snorting and reaching out to touch me like I was something precious. It was at breakfast that I saw Alligator Boy sitting in the corner of the food tent, by himself even though there was space at the tables all around him. It was customary for the freaks to sit by themselves where they wouldn't bother anyone and everyone could eat in peace pretending they were not there.

“Sure is quiet,” Phillip said when he caught me looking at Alligator Boy over the rim of my coffee mug. “Didn't say a word last night when he come in to go to sleep. Doesn't have nothing but that bag, either. Gotta make you wonder what he keeps in there.”

“Probably photographs,” Jade offered. She always ate at least three bowls of cereal for breakfast. Charlene ate ten eggs and five pieces of bacon. “Everyone brings photographs. Or, y'know, a book or something that reminds them of home.” Jade kept a photograph of her ex-husband in her trailer, up above her bed like a crucifix. Charlene once swore to me that she kissed it each night before she went to bed and each morning when she woke up.

“Ain't everyone got a home, though.” Phillip chewed his toast really quickly. I think he was afraid someone might come and take it away from him. “Look at Snowbird here. She live at the circus, don't ya birdy girl? She got us to remind her.” He snickered at that, little chunks of egg spraying across the tablecloth.

The burly dancers came in late, like they did every morning. The cook glared at them as he piled their plates with eggs but Queenie blew him a kiss which made him

blush. She went straight for the table in the middle as usual, with the girls following her like a line of ducklings. I watched as she poured milk into her coffee, ignoring her food. When she saw me looking, her eyes narrowed but I just waved. But then I felt stupid for waving when I'd spent all night hating her, feeling the hate burn away in me like a lantern blazing brightly until I finally fell into a fitful kind of sleep. That morning I woke up feeling half-dead, feeling like I was wearing my anger over my skin, like Charlie's fur or Charlene's fat, for the whole world to see.

So with her still watching me, I got up real slow, ignoring Phillip who was still talking away to me, and moved to where Alligator Boy was sitting. He didn't look up at me standing there waiting for him to say something – 'sit down' or 'good morning.' He just kept eating, shoveling back food like he hadn't been fed in months. I cleared my throat and he still didn't look up. So I walked around to where he was sitting and sat right next to him, close enough on the bench that our thighs were touching; beneath the tablecloth I could feel the scales on his skin rubbing against my bare leg.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He looked up, around the room, at all the people looking at us, some only half-interested. I learned at a young age when I caught Harry 'auditioning' one of the acrobats out behind the toilets that the carnival was a incestuous affair; the dark winter nights, the hot summer evenings, moving from place to place with the scent of cotton candy caught in your hair and the sound of the crowd ringing in your ears – it was enough to make anyone forget that a real world existed out there somewhere. People just found each other where they could. To them, this was nothing more than that. The burly dancers stared,

nudging each other, giggling. Queenie looked as though she might tear the hair out of my head if she had the chance.

“What have you been calling me?” he said.

“What?” He looked at me then, and his eyes were so green that I want to touch them, so I sat on my hands. Watching me do it, he made no comment. Just laughed a little under his breath. “Well?” he said.

“Alligator boy,” I told him. As soon as I said it I was ashamed. You would have thought that someone like me, someone who lived with *WOLF MEN STRAIGHT FROM THE AMAZON JUNGLES!!!* would have known better. Would know that people aren’t always what they appeared to be, that you couldn’t judge a book by its cover and all that other stuff someone is always trying to convince you of. I wished that I could take it back.

But he laughed. He blinked and when he opened his eyes again my breath kind of fell away. I wished he’d laugh at everything I said. Just keep on laughing so that everyone in the tent would know that he was laughing because I had said something funny or sweet. Except that I hadn’t. “I mean,” I started to say, and he smiled. “No, it’s okay. That’s what I am, I guess.”

“What is it?” I pulled my hand out from beneath my leg and touched his shoulder at the seam of his blue shirt. This close, I could see that he still had dreaming in his eyes.

“I mean, what do you have?”

“What do you have?”

“I dunno. Nothing really. Except, I was born here, and Queenie – she’s my mama – she thought I was a bird. So I stayed here. I’m Snowbird, in case you were wondering.”

“Well, I guess the same thing happened to me, except I came out covered in scales, and my mama thought I was an alligator. So you see, you’re right. My name’s Vert. My grandma named me that, on account of the color of my skin, y’see.” He held out his hand, palm down so that I could see the slight green gleam of his skin.

“Do they come off?”

“Yes.” I imagined him walking around, leaving trails of scales around him kind of like the pythons when they molted. Except the pythons left entire skins; it freaked Jade out when she found them, lying in the dirt or under the tent— somewhere she’d never imagined snakes to be. “I keep them.”

“You do?” I thought of Charlie and his mattress. “For what?”

“I’m gonna make something from them one day,” he told me. I followed his gaze and saw Queenie staring at us. The girls were flustered by her anger; they fluttered and flapped around her, handing her cigarettes. Except the smoke was stinging her eyes, making them water. Which made her angrier. “I’m gonna make a necklace, all made out of scales. It’ll be big, y’know, almost like a collar and it’ll show all the different colors when it’s caught in the sun.”

“That sounds beautiful,” and it did. I wondered whether he had someone to give it to, or if he was gonna keep it all wrapped up someplace safe. Maybe he’d sell it. He could use the money to move somewhere else, away from the carnival. The thought of it saddened me already; other girls somewhere who would look at his pretty green skin and think that he was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. “Why’d you come here?”

He shrugged. “Got sick of Mississippi, thought I might see where the road took me. Saw the signs and ended up here.”

The signs. He'd seen the signs. '*Feltham's Carnival. Come see the lions straight out of Africa, the world's largest elephant. Come see Queenie, the world's most famous burlesque dancer.*' He came for Queenie. That's why he was looking at her. My heart beat once, twice, thudding deep in my chest like it might catch on fire. I told him that I'd see him later – maybe sometime before the evening show I'd drop into the sideshow tent to see how he was doing. He nodded, as I got up and walked away.

All that afternoon, I thought about asking Charlie to tell Harry that I couldn't perform. Curled up in the corner of the trailer, staring up at my paper lantern, I imagined just telling Harry that I didn't want to walk the tightrope anymore. Maybe he would put me in the sideshow tent where I could help Grimalkin draw in the crowds, could invent stories in front of the crowds, telling them about how once Charlene ate her way through a dozen chocolate cakes for breakfast, or how Jade has to sew three pairs of tights together to get a pair that will fit. Maybe then Queenie would leave me alone. She would see that no matter what, I'd never be a dancer. I would never be more than a strange girl with a bird name.

Listening to the far-off voices of the crowd gathering, the call of the barker and the whizz of fireworks as it grows darker, I closed my eyes. When I was very little, when the carnival was still a whirl of colors and sounds and smells, I would imagine waking up at midnight and creeping into the tents to unlock all of the cages. The lions would purr and bristle their golden fur against me as they walked past, the birds would flutter their neon wings around my head. I would stand outside the Savage's cage in the sweating darkness of the sideshow tent and reach out to undo the lock. He would unfold himself

from the corner, smile at me – a wondrous smile in my imagination – and we would walk hand in hand down the road with all of the animals following us. At night we would sleep with them gathered around us, their soft exhalations making our dreams fantastic.

I was thinking about this when the trailer door opened. I heard the strange shuffle of Bob and Charlie's feet. The trailer heaved slightly, then rattled and groaned as if it were being moved. I could see Jade's head, bent way up against the ceiling. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled. "Hey Snowbird," she said in her low voice. "We got something for you."

Pulling the curtain back, I could see Bob and Charlene and Charlie all pushed together over by Bob's bed, standing in a line with their smiles tight and something hidden behind their backs. With the door swinging open, I could see Grimalkin outside, and, behind him, Phil and Rory – they couldn't fit on account of Charlene taking up so much space – and they were all looking at me like I might have something important to say. Bob made a sound like a drum roll. Charlene started wheezing, "Come on, hurry up. Show her already." Jade was grinning at me, which made her look a bit like a giraffe, and then Charlie pulled something out from behind his back and unfurled it. I was staring at a carnival poster.

"Come and see Feltham Circus," it said. *"Come and see the Lions straight out of Africa and the world's largest Elephants. Burlesque dancers and amazing feats of wonder!!! Come see Snowbird and her flying feat of acrobatics!!!"* My name right there in big purple letters, right there above a picture that someone had drawn of Harry in his top hat and his suspenders, with what looked like a wand in his hand. "That's you," Jade prompted. I just stared at, at everyone's face, my mouth hanging open so wide a fly could

have landed in it. Charlie said “That’s you, birdie girl. You better get out there, they’re here to see you.” Standing, I reached out to brush my fingers against the poster, wondrous, barely noticing when the letters smeared crayon purple across my fingertips.

That night, after I’d reached out to touch Seraphina’s ankle as she passed, after the lights were turned on low, after the spotlight found me standing at the edge of the ring, I imagined that they were really there to watch me. It made the ladder feel strange and foreign under my fingers and my feet. I had to take a deep breath to steady myself, ruffle my fingers, close my eyes as I stepped out onto the rope. I got through the first few tricks fine – swinging myself up, doing my pirouette – but then I looked down at the crowd, saw them staring up at me. Rows of rows of tiny pale faces. Down there, in the shadows, I imagined Queenie fixing me with those dark sad eyes of hers and, for a single second, I lost my balance. It was enough. I fell too quickly, with no time to think about it, and instead of the net reaching up to catch me, I felt nothing.

They told me later that the net hadn’t been checked that day. Someone had forgotten to make sure that it was tied tight. It didn’t really matter though, did it? It was like I had been waiting for that moment my whole life. I had been waiting for it knowing that one day it would find me, and in that moment, I would not be able to fly. After all, mine were borrowed feathers, stolen sequins – fake wings. They told me that for a few moments, no one moved. No one could believe that it had happened, that I was lying crumpled on the dirt, not even breathing. In the burlesque tent, Queenie slipped on her high heel and went tumbling to the stage in a flurry of scarves and ribbons – that became part of the tale too.

They said that Alligator Boy came out of nowhere. No one could remember seeing him before that, since he was supposed to be in the sideshow tent. He walked across the ring, the spotlight following him, like he was used to all those people staring at him. Ignoring the gasp of the crowd, he knelt beside me and pulled my head into his lap. That's what they told me.

I remember darkness; feeling like I was suspended in darkness with nothing above me and nothing below. I remember feeling something dry and warm against my lips, sliding against my cheek. When my eyes flew open wide, my hands reaching up to find him, all I could see were the green gold of his eyes reflecting me back. "You can't fly," he whispered to me. "We're gonna have to make you a pair of wings." And he did – a pair of wings made out of scales, that shimmered and sparkled in the light. That glowed.

Spellbound

As children the twins were forbidden to collect fireflies by their mother. Upon walking into their room at night, she would be startled by the faint, intermittent glow of jars on their bedside tables. The tiny, wild things belonged outside in the dark garden, she told them in her low, murmuring voice; imagine if they were taken from where they belonged and could never return. On those summer evenings that she drove them out into the garden she told them explicitly not to bring back anything. It was not a rule they were meant to follow, they decided— very few of the rules their mother devised were such rules. It only meant they should regulate their collection, perhaps keep the jars hidden in closets or stashed away in drawers so that she would not find them. Of course, hiding things away in their house often meant never finding them again but this was a risk they were willing to take. Jane devoutly believed that sleeping with a firefly jar beneath your bed would bring you sweet, dark dreams. And anything Jane believed, Sebastien believed too.

On those nights when they tramped through the long grasses in the back fields, Jane would recount for Sebastien the fairytales she read in their father's library. Father was an avid reader of such tales and had come from the mainland to attend the University and study folklore. Even now, he sometimes traveled the island to hear them from the mouths of storytellers sitting by wood stoves in coves and harbors, organizing them into tables and types so that they would not be lost. Their mother scoffed when he attempted to preach to them over dinner, about how the tales of a people were their beating heart;

“Foolishness,” she would mutter over the clatter of dishes, “Words. Nothin’ more then words.”

Sometimes Jane made up her own tales. Tales of things living beyond the boundaries of the house, that would lead you into the fog, over the harbor, where you would lose your footing and be swallowed by the sea without a sound. Tales of imps who beguiled babies from their cribs and beasts with fetid breath that would allow you to climb onto their backs and carry you away into the forest. Tales of a wondrous miniature circus in the basement that had a mime and midgets the size of a thumb who ate flies for dinner. If the tales made the twins shiver, they would stop to hold hands, eyes fixed on the stars that sparkled above them, gathering their courage. As they flew through the darkness with their jars held aloft, it all became part of their naive magic – the tales, the fireflies themselves, the trampled mushroom circles and the lilies that only opened their pale petals under the light of the moon.

“Le’s catch as many as we can,” Sebastien would yell. “Jars and jars. We can let ‘em go together, up high where we can see them fly away.” They would hide them beneath their shirts, giggling hunchbacks, and ascend the stairs to the attic where they would climb out onto the roof. Sebastien first, since he was the more agile of the two. After Jane had passed out the jars one by one, he would give her a hand. “As fast as ye can,” Sebastien would tell her. “Give ‘er.”

So Jane would unscrew the jars, holding them up to the breeze that came in off the cove. The fireflies would burst into the air in a flaming web while the twins sat, breathless, clutching each other’s hand until the last had faded. Their pulse in their palms,

the steady *beat beat* of their hearts and the roof beneath them holding them up close to the moon.

As they grew older, every time that Sebastien touched her, that was what Jane thought of; fireflies, his hands alighting on her body. The low, lullaby sounds of their strange love.

They knew somehow that they should be ashamed. But what was shame to Jane when her entire world revolved around Sebastien – when she awoke to him leaning over her, fastidiously placing rose petals on her eyelids. What was shame to Sebastien when Jane said things he could not say, but felt– when he fell asleep with Jane’s arms around him, her fingers slotted into the space between his ribs. When they were babies their mother would always swaddle them together, binding them with blankets that smelled of rosewater. They shared her breast milk, passing it from mouth to mouth. Father would complain in his loud, logical voice that she was perverting them. Their mother would just smile – her queer, secretive smile – and pluck at their tiny fingers with her teeth. At night, she left their bedroom door open so that, at the slightest sound from the twins’ room, she could slip from her husband’s embrace to soothe them. As they grew older, their father’s complaints became the glance from beneath his eyebrows, the mutter beneath his breath when they insisted upon holding hands beneath the table at suppertime. “Faggot,” he would say when he came upon his son lying with his head in Jane’s lap. “Sissy, mama’s boy.” The alternative, perhaps, was to him unthinkable. It was not something to even be voiced.

Their mother was such a soft person, always reaching out to stroke their hair or pull them against her. The sound of her laughter followed them as they passed through the house, leaving a long trail of mud and petals behind them. She never scolded them, and never seemed concerned when they disappeared for days on end into the various upper rooms and attics of the house, whispering through the vents. She joked endlessly about her 'darklings,' her 'li'l savages.' It seemed to them that she, too, was an outcast from the small village where they lived: wherever she went, the hiss *witch witch*. The fishermen at the wharf always turned to watch her as she passed. Delivery boys left packages at the end of the driveway, refusing to come too close to the door.

So it was under her magic that their guileless sin was hidden from accusing eyes. When they slept curled together beneath a pile of blankets in the dusty darkness of the living room, Sebastien's fair head against Jane's dark one, Father could stand only inches from where they lay and never see them. Sometimes Mother would lie with them, making up her own stories about the house. They had always known that their house and garden were not like others'; it was easy to get lost in the tangles of rosebushes while playing childhood games and the wind that came in, faint, off the water held the musk of salt and fish but also brought a fog that crept in across the window sills. Their mother rarely cleaned all of the rooms, so often they found ancient dusty cupboards where they could barely fit or old moth-eaten costumes. Even after they outgrew hide-and-seek, becoming long-limbed teenagers, there were the vague memories of games played that involved fairies and trolls in those rooms, that garden, and the distinct feeling that it had not all been make-believe. But none of them ever said so.

They were fifteen the first and only time that Sebastien pulled away from one of Jane's furtive kisses, worried that Mother might see. But she had just smiled sadly, leaning over them to burrow her face into their shoulders. "My wee tangly things," she had said, "and I'll keep you close." And Jane had told Sebastien, in bed that night, that sometimes Mother seemed as though she wanted desperately to belong to someone the way they belonged to each other.

When the policeman appeared at their door at 12.36 on a Tuesday morning to tell them that their mother had died, neither of them thought of why she might have been out driving without them. Why, with the blinding headlights of the oncoming car in her eyes, she might have turned to the lover sitting next to her and rested her lips against his as their bodies were crushed in a squeal of metal. Instead they thought of her laughter – what a bareness its loss would leave around them.

The gossiping came later, as it always does in a small town. "One of these days they'll come bearing torches" their mother used to say. They heard the stories at the funeral, as strangers came drifting in and out of the house– the Church Women's League bearing casseroles to put in the freezer and the fishermen who stood outside on the porch smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, tipping their heads whenever they caught sight of Jane or Sebastien through the screen door. A tragic affair: the car found upside down in a ditch with shards from the windshield sparkling in blood-matted hair, the two children left behind to take care of the father, who had gone half-mad from grief and, besides, was well on his way to drinking himself into a grave alongside his pretty wife. No money to fend off the bank that was threatening to foreclose on the house.

And then there were the children: the daughter, a girl so beautiful that toads threw themselves at her feet, singing their throaty songs of love, wherever she walked. She could sometimes be seen sitting in the driveway straddling the boy, supposedly playing childish games of war, her long black skirts tied up around her milky-white thighs. And the boy barely even putting up a show. The boy who spoke to himself, who was rumored to see things that are not there— a strange and rare illness. Him so pale, with bright blue eyes. As weird as his sister was wild, they said.

The bank manager came after the funeral was over and the freezer was once again bare. Rapping on the doors and rubbing condensation away from the windows so that he could peer into the dusty rooms, he called their father's name repeatedly. Father just sighed where he was sitting amongst teetering towers of books in the library. The light that intruded through the dirt-covered windows carried luminescent motes of dust that settled on his shoulders and in his hair; he refused to eat, only emerging when the bottle in his hand was empty. One afternoon, the bank manager caught sight of Jane as she was crossing the field from picking cloudberry in the forest. Sebastien watched from his hiding place beneath the porch lattice. When the bank manager held out the court's order for repayment, his meaty hand lingered for just a second over Jane's pale one. In the darkness, Sebastien growled. Some said the bank manager left town that summer, unwilling to face another harsh winter spent collecting debts from out-of-work fishermen. Some said he just disappeared. People looked sideways at Jane when she strode down to the corner store to buy more tea, but no one said a thing.

Three days after her mother's funeral, Jane was awoken by the hum of praying voices. She rose from her place next to Sebastien and went from bathroom to bathroom turning all the taps, convinced that the water would drain counter clockwise. The chilled mid-dawn air creeping in through the half-open windows carried with it the scent of wet earth and lavender from the garden, but also something else – something that Jane couldn't distinguish. Moving out onto the porch, she saw that the rhododendron bushes that perpetually leaned against the siding of the house, long slanted and infertile, had burst into full, purple bloom. Something was changing. Jane felt as though, if she pressed her hands against the cracked walls of the house, she would feel it breathing.

Someone had left a casserole on the porch steps. One of the Women's Church League, no doubt– the only ones that seemed willing to walk down the long driveway. When Jane unwrapped it from the cloth meant to keep it warm, she found a tract hidden in the folds. She already had several of them neatly stacked in her bureau drawers. Some of them had been left on the porch steps with a tray of homemade molasses cookies and others she or Sebastien had found stuffed into their desks at school. She kept them for the Biblical stories they invariably paraphrased; sometimes, on those nights when Sebastien asked for a story to lull him into sleep after loving, she read to him by the light of the bedside lamp of resurrections and lush, fruit-laden gardens. Secretly, she also kept them because something in her admired the meddlesome women who dared to approach the front door, and suspected that her mother had as well. Her mother would smile, when she saw them, murmuring “‘s another one, girly, come to cleanse our soot-black souls. There's all kinds of magic in the world.”

Everything felt so much barer without her. Jane felt as though there had been too much she had never asked her mother: the ingredients for a tea that would make someone tell the truth, under which bushes the best blackberries grew, how exactly something as fragile as love could be kept from breaking.

Standing with her stomach pressed against the sink, singing to herself, Jane began to prepare a tray for her father's breakfast – the spoon, the bowl, the mug of chamomile tea with the shot of whisky. Even with the whisky, it was inevitable that one day Father would shake off his grief like an ogre woken from its sleep. Their love would be found out. Jane could not imagine leaving this house; to wander alone into the forest and find a gingerbread house that would take them in.

“Jane.” She was startled from her trance by Sebastien, who stood in the kitchen doorway with his sleep-mussed hair and dreaming eyes. “We can't leave,” he told her. Jane began to cry. She buried her face in her hands, but the tears leaked through, staining the front of her nightdress. “Look,” he said. A voice of wonder. So she looked.

Great salty tears pooled on the ceiling and fell to the floor where they puddled, seeping into the floorboards. “Look,” as he reached across to take her hand. Small buds poked up, inch by inch, through the slatted wood. A rose vine there – by Sebastien's foot – and there, between Jane's toes – hot, heady roses that smelled like the rain. Vines that crept, crawled across the floor, twining around their legs, nudging thigh and hand and spine, up onto the walls. “It misses her,” Sebastien said. “It's sad like us.” When he placed his hands against Jane's body, she could feel rose petals pushing against her bare arms.

She began to laugh as she kissed Sebastien's mouth. "We can't leave." To leave all this, this savage garden of their childhood. To leave these rooms.

Sebastien swallowed her tears as he kissed her. The house sighed, exhaling softly against them as Sebastien began to rock her, gently at first and then with greater urgency, against his body.

"We can't leave." Jane whispered, closing her eyes. There were fragrant smudges of red on Jane's neck, a scratch where the thorns tore at her like an insistent lover. "We stay."

Seeing the marks when Jane carried him his breakfast meal on a tray, Father frowned and reached out with a firm hand to take her wrist. "How was that done?" he asked. She lowered her eyes and did not answer. "You two, you play too much," he said. 'It's dangerous for siblings to play with each other this way. This house...perhaps we should move from here.'

As children, they had learned quickly that Father did not want them. Besides the evenings when he would gesture for them to join him in the library so that he could read aloud his newest find – a first edition, a rare written copy of a Finnish folktale – his disregard for them was impervious. It was Jane who persisted long after Sebastien gave up trying to win his Father's attention, if not his affection. As a toddler, she would raise her grubby little hands to him even after he had already pushed Sebastien away from his knee, or turn her dimpled smile his way even after he had raised his voice. But it was not until, in the year she turned fourteen, that he began to really see her; one afternoon as she carried him a mug of tea, he reached out to grasp her chin in his hand. She stood patiently as he turned it this way and that. "You look like your mother," he said, not harshly.

“Maybe that’s what that whelp sees in you.” Jane held her breath for days afterwards, expecting the words to carry strange consequences in their queer, close world but he never said another thing about it. However, he began allowing her to read the tales in his library books. Although Sebastien was not given the same privilege, Jane carried the tales to him herself, divulging them in their own secret manner.

It was because of this that she could pity Father. She pulled her wrist from his grasp, set down the tray and slid quietly from the room.

The seam of light opening across the bed fell across Sebastien’s face, sifting into his sleep. Snarled beneath and around the heavy, sex-scented limbs of his sister, it took him several moments to ease up onto his elbows and, blinking, make out the shape of his father in the doorway. “Sebastien.”

As Father approached, his eyes widened at the sight of his children entwined on the bed. “Sebastien?” There were leaves and rose petals scattered across the rugs. The floor swelled slightly and he threw out his hands to grip the edge of the bed. What his hand touched was Jane’s bare leg which made her mutter and raise her head. Her hair was a crow’s nest, her mouth swollen from kissing yet when her eyes met her father’s gaze there was no guilt in them. No shame. Instead, she smiled. “Father,” she said, raising her chin. He flinched.

The fermented stench of whisky was evident on Father’s clothing, on his hands and on his breath as he shut and locked the door. Leaning against the doorframe, he turned his head away from them. His eyes fell on the framed photo of his dead wife

resting against the bureau mirror opposite to the bed. Jane and Sebastien watched his watery reflection as he reached out to pick it up. He looked like a man who had awoken from a dream to find that he had been sleeping for a hundred years.

“Your mother loved this house,” he murmured. “And it loved her. It was a witch’s house – that’s what the real estate agent told us – that’s why we got it for so cheap. Rumors in the village, haunted rooms – your mother could barely resist. She was no match for a city boy like me.” The kind of rueful smile that only ever crossed his face when he spoke of her. “So I bought it for her. For us.” He turned towards the bed, his face crumpling in on itself. “And what did the bitch do? She went and left me. For some godforsaken fisherman. Left me with you.”

Jane’s hand snaked from beneath the blanket to find Sebastien’s, finding the pulse of his heart through the palm of his hand. Sebastien buried his face in Jane’s hair as Father sat on the edge of the bed and told them that they would be leaving the house. They wouldn’t wait for it to sell, since it was unlikely that it would sell at all. He spoke calmly of his plans to separate them – strange, really, why he hadn’t thought of it before. There was certainly a boarding school somewhere on the mainland that would be willing to take Jane for her last year of high school. Sebastien would be easy enough to home school. It made Jane shiver the way he refused to look at them – his eyes shifting across the floor, along the walls, towards the closet – anywhere but at their faces. But then again, he had never really seen them. They had just been shadows of their mother, darting specters that appeared suddenly in his peripheral vision in their hide and seek games through the rooms and, as they grew older and their games more curious, disturbed him occasionally with the muffled sound of their laughter through the walls.

They would not be taking the books, the photographs, the furniture. That would all stay in the house, he insisted. They would start afresh as much as possible. Sebastien and Jane were only to take what they absolutely needed. "Nothing of your mother's," he said, massaging his temples; the slump of his shoulders and the dull gray pallor of his skin in the dimly lit room. The walls seemed to sag a little around them and Jane began to softly cry. "Nothing of Matilda's," he repeated again.

Black Hill Commons was not a place where fairytales belonged. The floors of the apartment were covered in pocked white linoleum, the sagging second-hand mattresses reeked of dust mites and sour milk. The landlord lingered in the doorway with a solicitous smile, as Father pulled back the curtains, sending light streaming into the corners of the bare rooms. "It'll do fine," Father told him with a nod. "How many bedrooms?"

"One," the landlord supplied. "With two beds. 'S down at the end of the hallway there."

Father nodded again, his eyes skimming past Jane and Sebastien where they stood, huddled in the kitchen. "That's fine. Sebastien can sleep on the couch," as he bent to test the springs. He pulled a wad of bills from his back pocket, counted them out carefully and held them out to the landlord.

Despite their father's protests that they bring only what they absolutely needed, Jane had insisted on drying flowers from the garden. She had hung them from the ceiling in the kitchen – a bunch of the black roses that their mother had grafted herself, a few

hazel twigs which were meant to keep away interfering spirits. Sebastien unscrewed knobs from the bureau in the attic in which, as children, they had hidden away for hours, cramped against each other and dreaming that they were stowed away on a pirate ship set sail for foreign seas. Now, they were glad that they had managed to salvage some small part of their former life to bring here, to this place which seemed so unfriendly.

Father fiddled with the heat as they unpacked. They hung up clothes in closets and lined their shoes neatly in the corridor by the door. By the time they had supper and were ready for bed, the sound of trickling water had begun to emanate from the radiators. Jane tried to undress with as much modesty as she could muster, her back turned against her father's rustlings as he readied himself on the other side of the room. She burrowed beneath the blankets, stretching herself wide across the mattress so that she would not feel the empty space quite so keenly, and closed her eyes. As her father's snoring shuddered up from the darkness, seeming much too close, she dreamt of how, in the old house, the sea seemed to pour in over the window sills to cradle her into sleep.

It became Father's habit to sit at the kitchen table with deeds, papers and scribbled notes spread before him as he yelled into the phone, trying to balance the sale of the house and the search for an appropriate out-of-province private school for Jane. His position meant that he was able to keep a watchful eye on Jane and Sebastien as they sat on the couch reading or watching the small black and white television that the landlord had offered them for twenty dollars. Sometimes he would ask Jane to make tea, and sit watching her from his chair as she moved around the kitchen. She was made claustrophobic by his steady gaze, by the way he tilted his head as she leaned over him to set down the mug.

Sitting there on the couch, in the too-bright light streaming through the windows, everything in Jane felt strained and skewed. This place made them both sick. Jane could barely eat without retching. She did her best to make this apartment feel more intimate, but the small details that at home would have just been familiar – the cracked mirror in the bathroom, the tile in the kitchen corner that had obviously been torn up and replaced inadequately – here seemed ugly. She could not convince Sebastien to eat at all. With the dark sleepless bruises beneath his eyes and the vacant way he stared at the television, sometimes he looked like an entirely different person. She could no longer finish his sentences. When she reached out to rest her palm against the small of his spine, he would inevitably pull away, avoiding her eyes.

In Black Hill Commons, their love felt dirty.

Then, one day, Sebastien took the bureau knobs he had lined up lovingly along the window sill and chucked them all in the garbage, saying “They’re just taken up space.”

There had been a night, when they were children, that Jane was woken from her sleep by the unbearable heat of Sebastien’s body. He had been fighting a fever all week. Unable to wake him, she had run to fetch her Mother. Mother had carried him into the bathroom where she knelt next to the tub trying to relieve his fever with cold presses, her hands fluttering over his pale face. She murmured words that neither child could hear; Sebastien in his feverish fugue and Jane staring at the both as though she were still asleep and dreaming. There had come a sound from the hallway, the creak of a foot on the floorboards, and peering, Jane had seen Father standing there, looking in at them grimly.

Noticing her eyes on him, he had nodded, the way she had seen people do in churches, and stepped back into the darkness. At midnight, Mother had pulled Jane onto her lap and, stroking her hair, whispering wordless sounds of comfort. Jane had reached out to take her brother's icy-cold hand, his tremors passing up into her arm. It didn't seem possible to her that, if he died, she would live.

In Black Hill Commons, however, he did not belong to her. Trying to convince him to eat, she would cook him star-shaped pancakes only for him to tell her that he wanted cereal. She would bring him cereal, setting it on the table in front of him and he would just play with it, eyes darting towards where Father sat. He made desperate attempts to draw Father into conversation, to impress him with a scant knowledge of geography or art at the dinner table. He didn't seem to notice the tolerant tone of Father's voice, or the way that Father's eyes were always flickering to Jane. She felt as though he were slowly moving farther and farther away. All of her movements became uncertain, falling just short of him.

Eventually, tired of their constant quiet presence, Father told them to 'go outside and play for Christ's sake as though they were only children. Without speaking they pulled on hats and coats and wandered out onto the road where Sebastien stood scuffing at the pavement. Jane crouched, watching. The afternoon was a cold, dull grey.

"School's gettin' out." His face was turned away from her. From across the road and down the embankment came the distant ringing of the school bell "We should skedaddle," Sebastien said. "They'll walk this way." He hated being around people. In elementary school, they had made games of hiding in the closets during recess where

they would close their eyes and list off the names for the plants their Mother dried – fireweed, blue-eyed grass, starflower, cattails, blood root.

“Do you wanna see what we can find back there,’ Jane twisted to point towards the trees that lined the apartment building’s muddy parking lot, “in the woods?”

Sebastien turned his eyes on her, sharply and shook his head.

Jane felt something in her chest tighten. She rose, brushing her hand across the front of her skirt and tossing her hair. “Sebastien, we are not *children* to be ordered about. Ye going to come or not?” But he avoided her eyes. “Fine then.”

She deliberately brushed against him as she passed, scrambling down over the embankment towards the school. There were children skipping across the fields and flocks of boys loitering outside the doors, their collars turned up against the sea wind. Seeing her approach, they flicked away their cigarette stubs, nudging each other. Jane stopped just short of them. “Hey.” One of them called, raising his chin in greeting. Turning, Jane saw Sebastien at the road, his hand raised to shield his eyes. He was frowning.

It became a habit, then, every afternoon for Jane to meet these boys outside of the school and, always with an eye towards the apartment building windows, lead them into the forest. Perverse childhood games of love played with Sebastien had taught her to use her body coyly. She insisted on going down on the boys in the middle of raspberry bushes, where thorns would scratch against their thighs. Sighing and squirming above her, they would open their eyes to see her tongue and have dreams of snakes for nights to come. She made them lie down in the swamp reeds so that with every movement water squelched up beneath the moss to wet her long strands of hair and creep into their lungs.

“Wild,” they would say to her when they had finished, their hands territorial against her waist as they lit cigarettes, smirking. “You’re wild, aren’t you girly?” But wild was not what she felt with these boys whose names she could barely bring herself to remember, her body bruised and sore from their rough loving. Wild was what she had felt when lying with Sebastien, with the house pulling its dark starry skin over them.

Then, as they wandered back to join their friends, Jane would straighten her clothes and climb the stairs to the apartment. Her father would raise his eyes as she entered, squinting for a moment; as though, when he looked at her, he saw someone else entirely. “Get me some tea,” he would mumble. As she set the mug in front of him, smiling nervously if he looked up, he would reach his hand to rest for a moment on her wrist. And without Sebastien to wash it all away – with his soft words, the way he touched her – it felt like everything was leaving stains on her. Every touch felt like a bruise.

Even when she sat next to Sebastien on the couch, drawing her legs up beneath her, he would not turn his head to look at her. Her tears, in the flickering light of the television set, turned blue.

One afternoon, in the attempt to clean the glass panes Jane pried open the bedroom window to find a small heap of dried-up fireflies on the sill. She scooped them into her hand, their tiny bodies crackling beneath the touch and smiled. She remembered falling asleep to the light of a firefly. “Hey.” she called in delight. Sebastien came from the living room, their father following along suspiciously. She pointed at the heap so that they would both see it. “Fireflies,” she told them. “They must have been trying to get in.”

The suggestion sounded childish beneath the weight of Father's gaze. The phone rang and he left them.

"Don't ye see?" Jane held out a handful of fireflies towards Sebastien. "They must have followed us."

"From where?" He shrugged.

Jane frowned, her excitement shrinking. She lowered her voice as if Father might overhear them. "From home. Maybe they tried to get in. But Father sleeps with the windows closed. Bastien, they came for us."

"For us?" he raised his eyes to hers, smirking. "Jane, fireflies do'n follow. They are not faithful bitch dogs that sniff out your scent and heel when you say." He stabbed a finger towards his forehead. "You're going feeble, you are." Jane said nothing. She had bitten her lip until it bled, the blood sweet and coppery on her tongue, but it only made her look coy, like a temptress to his eyes. With the scent of other boys on her.

That night she went to bed early, feigning monthly cramps. She realized that soon Sebastien would look at her the way that Father did, his lips curling up when he caught the ripe smell of his body, his touch cringing even as he touched her. She knew that she could lie with a thousand of these strange bay boys and Sebastien would never admit that he cared. Maybe he would eventually stop caring at all.

It only took a few minutes for Father to fall asleep. His snoring swelled against the walls, drowning out the sound of the bed springs as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stole into the hallway. Sebastien was not yet asleep. He eased himself up onto his elbow as she came creeping up beside him, his face arranged into sleepy disarray. "Jane, what..."

“Ssshhh.” She reached for his fingers. “There’s something outside I wan’ to show you.” Tugging gently on his hand, she waited as he threw back the sheets. They were clumsy in the darkness, almost stumbling over the coffee table as they moved towards the door. He seemed to wake up as she jiggled the lock open, the cold night air hitting them through the screen door. “Jane, this is...Father...” but she was already outside on the stairs, the ghostly light of the moon turning her blue.

“What is it?”

“Look.” She raised an arm. He looked, seeing the patterns of fireflies that hovered at the tip of her fingers. There were dozens of them, illuminated like small suspended bonfires – impossible. The summer insects would have died by now, unable to withstand the winter temperatures. That’s why they would have found fireflies on their window sill. Yet, here they were. It made something flare inside of him.

He pulled his hand from hers. “Jane, we can’t.” His voice caught. “The house...it’s closed up...Mother’s gone...this ‘s only a dream.”

She slipped closer, resting a hand against his chest. “Is not. It’s not a dream.’ She pressed her lips to the space over his heart. “Wake up. Wake up now.”

He let her lead him, gently, to the end of the driveway where she stood, waiting, for him to move on his own. He glanced back. Back towards the room where Father slept, oblivious. And then he stepped forward and began walking down the street with a steady stride.

Black Hill Commons was sleeping, shop windows darkened and porch lights blurred with frost. Jane removed her own sweater as they walked and coaxed him to wear it, but still they were shivering. Several times he looked behind them, as if expecting to

see Father jogging down the road towards them. "Do we even know where we're going?" he asked his sister, not recognizing the fields that slowly began to replace the houses or the fishing shacks that eventually gave way to uninterrupted shorelines. The murmur of the sea sounded like something much too vast and threatening in the blackness.

"Home,' she whispered, turning a glowing face towards him. "Going home. Besides, look," she nodded towards the trails of fireflies that they were following. "They know the way."

The house was exactly as they had left it. Even in the early morning twilight, they could see it rising up out of the brambles like an apparition. They spent the last few hours of the night sitting with their backs against the shingles, below the parlor window, curled into each other's heat and hidden from the road by columbines. Once the sun rose, Sebastien wandered around the house until he found a window left ajar. He walked slowly through the still rooms to open the front door, feeling as though he had just awoken. He kissed Jane right there, on the threshold, pulling aside her blouse and cupping her bare breast in his hand. Their teeth snicked together, their hands were clumsy, and then it all became a lovely game to which they had returned.

It was evening when they stirred again, rising lazily to greet the rooms. As though displaying its pleasure, the house shifted its walls, showing them hallways filled with beautifully etched mirrors and rooms bursting with lavish roses. Upon entering the upstairs bathroom, they found the sink filled with water lilies, a toad gazing at them calmly from atop the faucet. "Do ye think anyone will come lookin' for us?" Jane asked, smiling when she saw their reflection in the mirror.

“Father will.”

She turned, looking up into his face.”I hadn’t thought. I mean, I knew, but....how could I not have thought of that?”

He stroked her hair away from her cheek. “Don’t. We’ll keep the curtains drawn for now. That should keep the neighbors out.”

The twins went from room to room, running their fingers along the dusty bureaus. Standing in front of Mother’s old bureau, Jane draped strand after strand of glass pearls around her neck and watched them flash as she posed in front of the mirror. ‘Do ye think she loved him?’

Sebastien turned towards her, holding a bottle of Mother’s lotion in his hands. It smelled of violets. Mother used to tell them that, to secure the devotion of their most beloved, they should wash with water that had been colored with violets; the scent aroused love in the most cold-hearted. “Who, Father? Could be. Once upon a time. Maybe she was in love with how he loved her.” He smiled at this fanciful thought, then shrugged. “If ye ask me, if she loved him so much she wouldn’t have left. Not how she did.”

“Are you mad at her?” Jane asked. A question they have not asked each other before.

“Sometimes.”

She nodded. She, too, was angry sometimes with Mother. Sometimes she tried to pretend that this was one of Mother’s games, that she would appear from behind a door or a closet clapping her hands and laughing at their confusion. It was eerie to think that, if she had not been killed, Mother still would have left them. She had been on her way to

another house with her lover, and would have left them alone. “Do you think she loved him more?”

“Who, Father? More than us? No.”

“No.” She fingered the pearls. In the mirror, her mouth was a red petal. “The man. In the car with her.”

Sebastien looked at her for a long moment. She was standing by the mirror, her hair loose around her shoulders like the etchings in Father’s books of princesses in faraway towers whose faces were arranged into expressions of perpetual loss. She felt his sadness, coiled, too, in her stomach.

“I don’t know,” he said, and then, “Sometimes I think she was goin’ somewhere else. Somewhere like this, but without Father and other people to come and bother us. And then she would’a sent for us. We could of lived like kings and queens together. ‘S what I tell myself.”

“I know.”

They found the good linen – embroidered with tiny leaves and gold vines – in one of the hallway closets, which they carried up to the attic along with several patchwork quilts. There, they constructed a fort as though they were still children, draping sheets over chairs and layering pillows into nests. As they fell into a fitful sleep, the house gathered itself protectively around them.

Father came while they were dreaming.

Awoken by the shattering of glass – the front windows – they became immediately aware of the thick scent of saltwater and grief that filled the darkness. The house was

awake, already grieving at this new presence. There came the crashing of bookshelves from the library and Father's distant voice.

Sebastien knelt to sweep his hands across the boards in the general area of the attic trapdoor. "It's gone," he hissed. "The house has closed it."

Scuttling towards him, Jane pounded her fist against the floor. Around them, fireflies were blinking into being. They illuminated the small room, the folds and billows of the fort. The house was trying to soothe them, to keep them to itself. "No, open," she demanded. The floor creaked slightly. The opening appeared as though it had never been gone.

The darkened lights in the second floor hallway flickered on as they passed—*blink blink*. Father's voice was very close and yet, standing at the top of the stairs and peering down into the welling black, Sebastien could not sense any movement. He thought that, perhaps, the house was moving the rooms. Making it harder for Father to find them. "Jane, what..." Turning to look for Jane behind him, he saw her standing at the open doorway to Mother's bedroom. There was an eerie hush to the untouched bed, the walls, as though they had interrupted a whispered conversation.

With her hand raised to the pearls around her neck, Jane looked almost like Mother herself. Bewitching. "Sebastien," she murmured. "He loved her."

"As did we."

"Yes." Setting her mouth in a narrow line, Jane gestured towards the smooth quilt on the bed, at the photographs that Mother tore out of magazines to hang on her walls with thumbtacks. They were photographs of faraway places, of the endless gold of Asian

deserts and the moist, black foliage of South American jungles. "And he hates us. He'd take me away if he could. But here, maybe..."

So, in the end, Sebastien stood where he could not be seen as Father came rushing up the stairs. Seeing Jane at the end of the hallway, he stopped, his mouth agape. "Matilda." His voice full of both love and fear.

"Jack." Jane's smile was uncanny. For a moment she was Mother, with Mother's mischievous way of tilting her head and flirting with her wide, dark eyes. "Come here to me." The house cast shadows across her face, hollowing her cheeks, changing the colors of her hair. Her skin, in the darkness, glowed.

Taking her outstretched hand, Father allowed her to lead him into the tense quiet of the bedroom. The window over the bed shattered, startling him momentarily but Jane was able to soothe him with a low hum as rose vines began to swell in through the broken panes. The vines scrolled across the walls and along the bedposts towards where Father sat on the bed, staring dumbly up at her. When she made to move away, Father grasped her nightdress in his fist, mewling. "Ssshhh." She reached out to stroke his cheek with trembling fingers. "You're fine here."

Sebastien watched from the doorway. Sitting next to Father, Jane began to speak and, although he could not hear the words, Sebastien knew at once what she was saying: "Once upon a time." Rosebuds unfurled around them, releasing the sharp scent of sea-mist. The lines on the wallpaper began to bleed into curious scenes of castle ruins and overgrown briars, knights in battle and thick, gnarled trees. Beginning beneath Jane's feet and rippling across the floorboard towards the doorway, the floor gave way to black, rich earth. Snarled within it all were the thorny boundaries of Jane and Sebastien's world,

deftly revealed within the tales she told; tales of trolls burdened with the guilt of love, of spellbound witches and forsaken gingerbread houses. She did not finish until the last vine had coiled around Father's thigh, pulling him back down amongst the roses.

"I love you," came his voice as Jane rose. In the hallway, the twins turned to watch the light narrow across Father's face as the door closed. The last thing they saw was the sweet expression on his face as the thickets covered him over. Jane rested her cheek against Sebastien's chest, her quivering passing into him before becoming still. Fireflies began to settle tenderly on their bodies, alighting their peculiar love.

As their mother always suspected they would, they became something of a local tale told to naughty children at bedtime to scare them into going to sleep without an extra glass of water or another folk song sung by weary parents. Eventually driven by necessity, a real estate agent drove up the lane – as far as the overgrown thickets would allow – and, standing for a moment with his eyes shaded from the sun to stare at the front porch, drove a For Sale sign into the swampy dirt. The house never sold, even though it was in excellent shape, considering that no one bothered to keep an eye on the gutters when it rained or shovel the snow from the roof in the winter. Every now and then a newly married couple would come vacationing from the mainland and fall in love with the sight of the property. Sometimes even with the story itself: the peculiar family, the mother that had died in a spectacular car accident, the father and children that had disappeared. The house that seemed to be waiting for all of them.