

rites of leaving

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

rites of leaving

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a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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# Never the Same River Twice: Genre, Intention, and Audience in the Stoic Art of Journaling

## 1. Introduction

The school of Stoic philosophy traces its roots back to 300 B.C.E and thrived until the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E, when it fell into decline and was ultimately assimilated into other systems of philosophy. It experienced a limited revival during the Renaissance and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. We owe the resurgence of modern interest in Stoicism to the 1971 publication *Problems in Stoicism* by A.A. Long. Interest in modern Stoicism has only deepened in recent years, with non-academic self-help publications rooted in Stoic philosophy finding commercial success. Notably, the bulk of the modern Stoic movement is based on online modalities, including online forums, podcasts, Facebook groups, digital Zoom conferences, and pay-on-demand online lectures.

While modern Stoicism has previously been critically examined in the context of healthcare, there has been relatively little focus directed at how the Stoic practice of exploratory journaling may benefit patients and the family members of patients who are experiencing life-altering, chronic, or terminal illnesses, a benefit best interrogated via the application of composition theory. This despite the field of narrative medicine, a framework in which healthcare providers are encouraged to “close read” the stories and histories of their patients as though they were close reading a piece of literature, is becoming more widely recognized and endorsed by the larger academic and medical community as a legitimate field of study. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a brief survey of modern Stoicism and clear up misconceptions that prove

deleterious to conversations about healthcare, to parse out the purported benefits of reflective journaling in the context of mindfulness, to consider how Stoic journaling practices situated in the digital landscape provide an opportunity for democratic community and healing, and finally, to identify the limitations of composition theory as it pertains to genre within online digital modalities.

Most mainstream self-help publications identified with modern Stoicism focus on how Stoicism can serve as a tool for the benefit of mental health and wellness, such as Donald Roberson's *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life* and Ryan Holiday's *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*. Stoic philosophy lends well to conversations about health and wellness. The core tenants of Stoicism — virtue, justice, courage, and wisdom — elucidate human happiness by encouraging people to confront and temper common human anxieties.

## 2. Foundational Ancient Stoicism

Ancient Stoics postulated that *arete* (virtue) is the key to happiness, with virtue being sub-divided into the categories of justice, courage, wisdom, and temperance. The opposite of these virtues (foolishness, injustice, and gluttony; the stoics did not consider there to be an opposite to wisdom) were to be avoided. The Stoics believed that humans tended toward virtue (Stempsey 457), and deviation from virtue was due to a failure to live in accordance with one's nature.

Besides the core virtues of justice, courage, wisdom, and temperance, there existed "indifferents" or things that were neither good nor bad, since they did not aid or hinder one's pursuit of the core virtues. Examples of such indifferents are outlined by

Laertius in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* as "life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth" (7.101-103.) The Stoics acknowledged that indifferents may nonetheless be preferred or not preferred. William Stepmsey, who currently serves as a professor of philosophy at the College of the Holy Cross, writes in *A New Stoic, the Wise Patient*, that "health, for instance, has a positive (although non-moral) value (axia). In normal circumstances, we ought to prefer health to its opposite. This is so because health is in accordance with our nature. Disease, on the other hand, is contrary to nature and is a disvaluable (apaxia)" (Stempsey 458). Nonetheless, plausible situations exist where disease would be preferable to health, as in the event that being afflicted with a disease directly prevents you from engaging in a situation that would compromise your virtue.

To live in accordance with nature is to choose to live in "conformity with reason and the natural order of things" (Reddoch, 53). This proves to have several applications, but the two which are most consequential to this essay are that of acceptance and redirection. One lives in accordance with the natural order of things when one lives in accordance with reason; that is, when a person acknowledges what things are possible and impossible in the situations they face. Living in accordance with reason also requires that one directs their attention and energies on things within one's sphere of control (Reddoch, 53) and seeks to overcome *pathê* (passions). Passions, including distress, pleasure, fear, and lust, are considered to be remnants of animal instinct and thus in accordance with nature (as humans are animals) but only for the brief moment it takes to



return to reason (as humans are uniquely endowed with the ability to reason and pursue virtue).

An example may bring the concept of living in accordance with nature into further clarity. A common thought experiment offered by both classic and modern Stoic philosophers to illustrate what it means to live in accordance with nature is the advisement of how one should react to the sickness and death of a child. In the case of Stoicism, it would be considered non-virtuous to worry over a child who is ill, as the child's fate (be it life or death) is not within one's control. Following that logic, it would be considered non-virtuous to excessively grieve the death of a child past a prescribed period of passion. A Stoic should recover quickly from their distress, reminding themselves that their child did not belong to them, but the gods and that they always knew their child was mortal. Moreover, a Stoic would reason that any further energy or attention focused on the situation would not be in accordance with reason. Their child, after all, could and would not come back from death, no matter how deeply their parent mourns their passing.

There are a number of popular misconceptions about ancient and modern Stoic philosophy which are necessary to debunk. The philosophy of Stoicism is often conflated with the noun stoicism, which describes the practice where one refrains from displaying emotion in response to what otherwise would be considered an emotional stimulus. This is a behavioral practice, and for clarity, it will be presented as lowercase and italicized in this essay. The behavioral practice of *stoicism* has been a point of interest for researchers and academics for decades, with many arguments centered around whether a stoic personality is related to a genetically inherited "psychological trait" (Moore, 164) or

the result of specific generational pressures. As a result of these studies, practitioners of Stoicism (as a philosophy) are "often caricatured as leading bleak lives of forbearance and denial" (Ganson 92), a lifestyle encouraged neither by ancient nor modern Stoicism.

The philosophical practice of Stoicism, with its hyperawareness of emotion and its aim not to suppress it, but instead manage emotion by directly acknowledging its existence within the context of reason, is therefore not the same as stoicism, which is a blanket term describing either an unwillingness or inability to feel, acknowledge and express emotion. As Todd Ganson writes in his review of *A New Stoicism* (Lawrence Becker), "modern stoicism does not require that one always be cool and detached. Instead, one should be so only when the situation demands it" (92).

Much of this misconception is due to publications failing to distinguish stoicism from Stoicism as Stoicism exists as a philosophical practice to readers. For example, a 1995 article proposed the Liverpool Stoicism Scale to classify an individual's tendencies toward *stoicism* and defines *stoicism* as "a lack of emotional involvement and expression, and exercising emotional control and endurance," (Wagstaff, 181). In 2019 the American Psychological Association released a new set of guidelines guiding practitioners in their interaction with men and boys (Pappas), designating facets of traditional masculinity, including "*stoicism*, competitiveness, dominance and aggression" (Pappas), as detrimental to emotional wellbeing. Targeted studies within the past decade have characterized *stoicism* as a source of frustration to nurses in home-care settings (Spiers) and the cause of "help-seeking delays, inadequate pain treatment, caregiver strain, and suicide" (Pathak) within the context of healthcare. As a result of readers misreading these

studies, modern Stoicism is often at the center of criticism from those that consider it a problematic endorsement of toxic masculinity (Church).

So what happens, exactly, when we take the Stoic virtue of living in accordance with nature and apply it to healthcare settings?

### 3. Stoicism and Healthcare

Christopher Gowans writes in *Medical Analogies in Buddhist and Hellenistic Thought: Tranquility and Anger* that the ancient Stoics believed "a person's mental disease, understood as emotional turbulence, was thought to depend crucially upon beliefs of the person that were false or unwarranted, and psychological health, interpreted as implying tranquility, as though to depend on eliminating those beliefs and, at least sometimes, replacing them with true beliefs" (Gowans 15). To those familiar with modern approaches to therapy, the emphasis on identifying false and unwanted beliefs and recontextualizing them into something more accurate and palatable may sound familiar. Indeed, the central tenants of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which as of 2018 was "fast becoming the majority orientation of practicing psychologists," (Gaudio), is based on ancient Stoic philosophy (Robertson), most notably the writings of Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher born around 50 C.E. Keith Dobson identifies the core tenants of Cognitive Behavioral therapy as:

1. Cognitive activity affects behavior
2. Cognitive activity may be monitored and altered
3. Desired behavior change may be affected through cognitive change.

(Dobson, 4)

However, a critical difference between proponents of modern Stoicism when compared to contemporary models of therapy (including cognitive behavioral therapy) is that while contemporary models of therapy are reactive to distress, modern Stoicism encourages the use of “lifestyle regimes as a way to pre-emptively build emotional resilience before a stressing situation occurred” (Zeiger 26). In other words, therapy is marketed as a tool to address situations after they have happened and feelings after they are felt. Conversely, Stoicism sees the active pursuit of living in accordance with nature as an ongoing regime that should ultimately preclude the need for formal therapy.

However, I do not mean to suggest that patients should not consider or prioritize formal therapy as an option. However, in the United States, one of the more apparent benefits of engaging with a philosophical framework designed to help one cope with the perils of living is underscored by the reality that professional mental health care is regrettably unaffordable and unattainable to many. Developing healthy coping strategies before a stressful or traumatic event can make such situations’ financial and human burdens softer. At the same time, it is well established that stigma makes it less likely to seek out mental health care in the first place, a note of importance that I will touch on later in this essay when applying composition theory to the art of journaling.

Stigma, in this case, is not limited only to self-stigma, but also public stigma (Corrigan 616). Public stigma is pervasive throughout the medical establishment. Those suffering from or perceived as suffering from mental illness are "less likely to benefit from the depth and breadth of available physician health care services than people without these illnesses" (616). While we must all work to remove the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness, that is a different conversation and one that is likely to

require a generational shift in thinking. In the meantime, it is a fair argument that patients who find themselves reluctant to seek help over stigma concerns may find relief in personal philosophical practices like Stoicism and may likewise replicate the didactic environment of organized therapy by embracing the practice of reflective journaling.

#### 4. Stoicism & Journaling

Journaling is a core component of the Stoic "lifestyle regime" (Zeiger). Practitioners of Stoicism are encouraged to journal about their progression in the philosophy, daily moments of success and failure, and their spiritual preparations for life and (ultimately) death. The modern emphasis on journaling has ancient roots. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus directly references the act of journaling in book one of *Discourses*:

What should we have ready at hand in a situation like this? The knowledge of what is mine and what is not mine, what I can and cannot do. I must die. But must I die howling? I must be put in chains-- but moaning and groaning too? I must be exiled; but is there anything to keep me from going with a smile, calm and self-composed? That's the kind of attitude you need to cultivate if you would be a philosopher, the sort of sentiments you should write down every day and put in practice. (1.1 21-24)

Epictetus notably makes the connection in *Discourses* between the practice of reflective journaling and the active search for outside input, as well: "Both by night and by day, keep these reflections at hand; write them down, read them, make them the subject of your conversation, whether with yourself, or with another: 'Can you come to my aid in this matter?'" Epictetus is not an outlier in his stance on the importance of journaling. One of the few intact Stoic texts that have survived history is the personal diary of the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. While Aurelius' journal does not

appear to have ever been meant for distribution (Aurelius xxvi), it was preserved after his death, with copies widely circulated.

The "modest" (Smyth 4) but statistically significant physical and mental health benefits of keeping a journal have been backed by a number of peer-reviewed studies. These clinical studies seem to have been reactive to a still popular commercial sub-genre of the self-help book industry, which I will refer to as the genre of "journaling how-to." These publications are widely credited with popularizing journal keeping as an art. In "Writing by the Book: The Emergence of the Journal Self-Help Book," Anne Whitney traced the history of this sub-genre and found that the concept of publications that intend to "teach" the skill of journaling is a modern phenomenon. She establishes that the "journaling how-to" genre first appeared in the mid-1970s and did not become truly popular until the 1990s (Whitney 3). However, despite commercial success and popularity, such publications are still considered by many academics as "lowbrow and unworthy of study, trashy--as neither good writing nor good psychology" that is "nonetheless widely read" (4).

In her book, Whitney identifies a set of reoccurring tropes present in these self-help publications. In some publications, journaling is presented as a means of empowerment and direction. Other publications may encourage readers to use journaling to reflect upon and rewrite "the previous narrative" of their lives to become a "new, strong, positive person" (4) situated in a retrospective position. Others may guide a reader toward an approach based explicitly on cognitive behavioral therapy, whereas journaling is presented as a tool by which one may "amend their narratives" not by rewriting them,

but by placing them in new contexts, considering them from new perspectives, and thereby arriving at a sort of peace.

Of course, the fact that journaling has become a mainstream pursuit is owed to the mass market commodity status of the self-help book industry. This is a decidedly modern situation and arguably comes from a different point of rhetoric than Epictetus did in his prescription to keep a journal. Indeed, for those living contemporaneously with Epictetus, the ability to read and write would have come only with an educational privilege that was generally restricted to certain classes; or in the case of Epictetus, who spent the first eighteen years of his life in slavery, the opportunities granted by a wealthy benefactor. Scholar William Harris put the estimated literacy level in Roman society at only slightly more than ten percent (Wright 161). That a person would even own the necessary materials to record one's thoughts in writing suggests a financial situation unattainable to many, if not most persons living in this society, with anthropologist and Pompeii scholar A.K Trusler describing formal journaling as an "elite pursuit" (Trusler).

Therefore, since formal journaling was an "elite pursuit," it is fair to characterize journaling as a non-egalitarian practice in the ancient world. However, those identifying as Stoics today benefit from improved literacy rates, the general availability of writing materials, and a revolutionary digital landscape that has redefined how we create, consume, communicate, and conceptualize identity. The practice of journaling no longer requires tangibility, as one only needs to save a document to a computer or upload it to the cloud to have it stored indefinitely. Nor do journals necessarily even require the act of writing itself, as evidenced by the popularization of video blogging. Some academics

have also noted how the transition from written journals to the digital complicates the relationship between the writer and text:

At its core, an online diary is a set of ones and zeros, or even more fundamentally, electrical impulses sent through the circuits of a computer and network. Its author and others read it as flickering signs on a screen: it is perpetually revisable, with revisions leaving no trace of previous versions. The fact that an online diary exists not as a physical artifact but as a digital code stored on a distant hard drive problematizes the material relation of writer and text. [...] The question of the diary's materiality also involves its permanence, its existence as an artifact that can extend beyond the life of the writer (Sorapure 4).

Sorapure explains Philippe Lejune's observation that while most written journals are eventually destroyed, journals posted to a digital space can often be retrieved at the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine long after being taken down or deleted from the active internet (5). Therefore, journals submitted to a digital landscape can prove more enduring than those recorded on paper, despite the paradoxical impermanence of the text itself.

The hybridization of the introspective aspect of the journaling experience with that of public expression in the digital landscape was first evidenced by popular journaling websites that first gained prominence in the early 2000s, with the first online diary created in 1995 (Sorapure 2). Blogger first appeared on the internet in 1999. At that time, "starting an online diary became a simple point-and-click procedure, and posting entries became a matter of sending an email message" (2). While early pioneer websites included "Blogger, Diary-X, Diaryland, and Livejournal" (2) today, the opportunities for online diary-keeping have proliferated exponentially and assumed formats that encourage self-replication. Social media platforms like Twitter, Tiktok, Facebook, and Reddit are publication platforms in which a post is not only consumed by a primary audience but



where posts can be replicated to an infinite number of secondary audiences via likes, tagged comments, and shares.

One way to frame how the digital landscape has changed the face of journaling is to consider it against cannon theoretical frameworks within the discipline of composition studies. John Dewey (1859-1952), an American educational reformist, was the first to differentiate "uncontrolled thoughts" from "controlled, focused" thoughts in his article "How we think: a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process" in 1933 (Lowe, 2). Dewey categorized controlled thoughts as "reflective thinking," which "airse[s] from situations of perplexity," (2) guiding a person toward a process of inquiry. From this theoretical framework, later theorists wrote up case studies on how reflective journaling can serve as a means for students to organize their impressions and evaluate themselves as learners (3). A key competent of reflective journal writing is self-awareness and intentional introspection, or, as L.B Smith writes, a way for us to "conduct a private dialogue with our individual beliefs, challenging them and discovering how they might be holding us back, causing us pain, and clouding our dreams" (7-8).

However, it would be misguided to continue under the pretense that the act of "journaling" is undertaken as a uniform process with uniform intention. To appreciate the fluidity of the genre, one must consider audience and specific intentions behind the act of writing. Roger Hiemstra does just this in his article "Uses and benefits of journal writing," subdividing journaling into the categories of "learning journals," "diary journals," and "professional journals." "Learning journals" are kept in association with an "educational experience" (Lowe 4) and are frequently associated with secondary and

post-secondary institutions. "Diary journals" are typically catalogs of personal experiences, and are largely "unstructured, chronological recordings of events" (3). "Professional journals" are distinguished by the fact that they are composed with an audience in mind, unlike the others (3); the writer, therefore, is ever aware that their recorded thoughts and ideas will be eventually consumed and judged by another, which I believe may indicate a higher presence of demand characteristics and social desirability bias.

It is likewise my opinion that a Facebook status update, a "tweet," a post to Reddit, or any form of personal expression on any number of social media websites that include "focused, controlled thoughts" in respect to one's personal experience may be defined as an act of journaling as defined by Hiemstra. However, one can appreciate how the very nature of social media platforms complicates the definitions set out by Hiemstra. The changing landscape of how and on what mediums we communicate with ourselves and others challenges those definitions that assume either a fixed or absent audience. The fluidity and multimodality of the internet complicate the standard definitions that exist, not because the intentions behind journaling (or reflective journaling, in particular) have changed, but because the very concept of audience is now unstable. After all, much of the social media content on these platforms is just "put out there" to be discovered by whoever may stumble upon it, a novel consideration in the long (even ancient) history of journaling.

Madeleine Sorapure was one of the earlier critics to identify how the internet complicated audience and narrative. In her 2008 article "Screening Moments, Scrolling Lives: Diary Writing on the Web," she notes how the internet has become a "popular

medium" for "forms of self-representation and autobiographical writing," expanding this definition to encompass "personal home pages [...], webcams, video projects, and avatar-style role-playing games" (1). In particular, she identifies online diary websites as having "democratic potential" (2), citing Rebecca Blood's observation that blogging platforms provide a space where "everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect" (Blood).

Returning then to the definitions proposed by Hiemstra, how should we recontextualize the genre that is journaling within the context of a digital landscape? Should all journals present within the context of a digital landscape and available to at least one person besides the author be categorized under the genre of a professional journal simply because an audience *may* exist for it? Should a series of posts made to a media platform be considered a diary if the subject is appropriately personal? Should a thread of tweets detailing a learning experience, be it formalized or unformalized, be classified within the genre of a learning journal?

These considerations are essential when we consider the journaling practices of modern Stoics, as community conversations about Stoicism and journaling practices are often held in the same online modalities. These journaling practices reflect a range of intentions, but I have identified them as generally falling into one of two larger categories. The first are those journal practices that most clearly align with that of a learning journal, but are, like professional journals, submitted for public consumption. The second are journaling practices that most clearly align with the intentions of a diary. These posts are highly personal, present with a chronological narrative, and sometimes end with an open-ended question that hints at a need for or at least openness toward

community advice. While standard definitions of composition theory do not directly interrogate situations where reflective journaling is coupled with requests for advice, it is nonetheless a significant trait by which we can "categorize" Stoic approaches to journaling in the digital landscape. After all, advice seeking is a substantial component of modern stoic practice, as it was in ancient Stoicism. Epictetus directed, "write them [your thoughts] down, read them, make them the subject of your conversation, whether with yourself, or with another: 'Can you come to my aid in this matter?'"

A 2017 study published in *BMJ Open* argued that *stoicism* is "a system for self-regulation rather than a behavior or personality trait" (Pathak 5). In referencing Kathy Charmaz's 1983 article *Loss of self: a fundamental form of suffering in the critically ill*, it argues that the pain of the loss of self that occurs during devastating illness should be considered as significant as the physical manifestations of pain resulting from an illness. Part of the "loss of self" associated with illness results from becoming dependent on others for help and being regulated to a sick role, which I would argue is paralleled by the anxieties felt within the role of caregiver. *stoicism*, according to Pathak, may be an effective form of "self-regulation" in the face of frustrations of dependency. However, it is essential to consider the difference between *stoicism* as a behavior and Stoicism as a philosophy. Along with advice seeking, the act of seeking and accepting help is explicitly endorsed within the tenants of Stoicism, as referenced in the diary of Marcus Aurelius: "There's no shame in being helped, because you've got to do the job you've been set [...] [you] were unable to scale the battlements on your own, but could do so with someone else's assistance" (Aurelius 149). While Pathak does well to identify the anxiety of the "loss of self" that many patients (and, by extension, caregivers) face in the context of

illness, I would like to invite readers to consider how online modalities offer modern Stoics a unique opportunity to explore their feelings and seek targeted help. Let us consider a sampling of Stoic journaling practices present in online modalities, in the spirit of "backyard ethnography," as Smith and Watson define it in their book *Getting A Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (X, X, and Sorapure, 1).

## 5. Stoic Journaling in Digital Landscapes

A series of anonymous posts that appeared on the website "Reddit," a social media website founded in 2005, which describes itself as being "home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection" (Reddit), speak to the versatility of the digital landscape. In particular, a community titled "stoicism" (cataloged as /r/stoicism), created in August 2019, is pertinent to conversations about Stoic journaling.

Many communities within Reddit, including /r/stoicism, represent the "democratic space" defined by Sorapure. The website is free, and posting requires a user to make an account, with the submission of identifying information during account creation optional. As /r/stoicism attracts persons who share a common interest (that is, modern Stoicism), it also represents a space where anyone in the world may pose anonymous questions alongside their reflections to an anonymous community that shares at least some similar values. The anonymity feature allows patients and caregivers of patients to explore their new roles and seek advice without the risk of stigma or embarrassment.

First, consider a post made in December of 2021 by the user "Liil\_Sebastian." In our analysis, we should take for granted that all posts we consider on Reddit should be

classified under "professional journaling," but *may* be further and perhaps more accurately categorized concretely within the sub-genre of diary or learning journal. In this case, I would classify it as falling within the sub-genre of diary. Its title reads "Dealing with cancer as a 28 year old female." Within the post, the user describes her recent cancer diagnosis in November and how Stoicism has helped her cope with some of the more abstract fears related to her diagnosis. She reflects on how her chemotherapy will likely make her infertile and how she cannot afford to have her eggs frozen. She writes, "Cancer is potentially taking away my opportunity to be a mother in a biological sense... But I feel very indifferent about it. It isn't bringing me to my knees. I accept it. [...] I can always have a fulfilling life because I chose to. Stoicism taught me that. [...] I have been posting a lot about my cancer diagnosis. [...] The support helps so much." In response to her post, community members of /r/stoicism left 109 comments. Some of these commenters shared their own stories about cancer and infertility, while others replied with supportive messages or suggested readings. The key here, which the poster references, is how the act of journaling in this modality has given her a space to explore her feelings and parse out her story, and connected her to avenues of support specific to her worldview.

A second post to consider was posted in December of 2021 by the user *lexmarking* under the title "All that "Memento Mori" did actually work." In the thread, the poster reflects on the death of his father and the struggle of not being able to be with him in his final days due to covid restrictions. He writes, "I tried to [console] my brother and mother while rarely crying and showing despair to them. [...] Because my family needed me. Now, my father is gone, rest of my family is getting a little better every day. I

find myself weak, very very unlike how I was during these times. [...] I find it hard to enjoy anything thoroughly. [...] But how am I going to enjoy life now, since I saw the suffering of my beloved and others firsthand at the hospital? How can Stoicism help with that too?" The community responds with condolences, reassurance, and advice, and the original poster thanks some users individually, hinting at the very least that the original poster is open to community engagement and a reactive audience. The advice, notably, is overwhelmingly an affirmation of feelings, rather than a redirection toward suggested readings. One user writes, "Allow yourself to feel it, do not let it cloud your judgement, but Stoics feel, Stoics love, Stoics weep." Another, "Don't ignore how you feel, because this is part of being human. Grief is natural. What we can do, once we are ready to move on, is practice gratitude for being able to love and be loved [...] and appreciate what we can control [...]"

Other threads explicitly seek advice in such a way that aligns the posts within the sub-genre of a learning journal. One user (who later deleted their post, removing their username, but speaking to Lejune's observation about the enduring nature of the internet record) writes under the title "Cancer and Stoicism" about her frustration in learning how to "navigate[e] corporate politics" of her job after her cancer went into remission. She is now "struggling to find meaning" and requests titles of Stoic books to read. The community obliges and provides lists of books.

The journaling presented here is not only a reflective process but as an active and intentional step toward community engagement. This is new and unique to the past few decades and a promising area of future academic research. But for the sake of

comparison, let us briefly consider another example of a Stoic journaling practice situated within the digital landscape.

Medium, an online blogging platform, was first launched in 2012 and describes itself as a "new model for digital publishing" that "supports nuance, complexity, and vital storytelling without giving in to the incentives of advertising" (Medium). Medium may be distinguished from other popular blogging services in that it directly employs the talent of professional journalists to publish on its platform. Therefore, publications solicited from professional journalists appear side-by-side publications from those who pay a subscription fee to publish on Medium. Aside from this, Medium contributors tend to post self-contained articles heavy on narrative and intentionally directed toward general readership, rather than friends, family, or a particular community. However, Medium offers readers the ability to leave comments and "clap" at articles, thereby offering the opportunity for community engagement, even if tangentially.

Owen Lloyd posted his reflective piece titled "How Stoicism Has Helped Me Live with Chronic Illness" on Medium in January of 2022. At its core, the article is a straightforward success narrative about illness and generally would be considered an exercise in narrative medicine. Lloyd contracted covid-19 in 2020 and, at the time of the article's publication, was still suffering symptoms referred to colloquially as "long covid." Lloyd describes his frustration with managing these symptoms, the cycles of hope, and explains how the Stoic philosophy has helped him cope with these feelings. The article is brief, no more than one-thousand words. A sidebar allows readers the opportunity to access other articles published by Lloyd. One can appreciate the topics of his other publications: advice on journaling, philosophical reflections in reaction to life



situations (including, but not limited to, the school of Stoicism), and intentional narratives of his experiences (and what he learned from them.)

There is, arguably, limited access to community here. The format of Medium does not facilitate the same conversation as the format of Reddit does. Despite Lloyd's follower count of over one-thousand accounts, there are few comments on his submissions. But here is where the rhetorical choice of the platform itself communicates authorial intentions and speaks to genre. Lloyd is not asking for advice, nor is he seeking anonymity. Nor does Lloyd, who is quite literally paying a subscription membership to a blogging website, even consider the writings he posts there to be an act of journaling. In his entry "How to Journal Your Way to Closure with 2020," Lloyd admits that "the first thing I always jump to when I need an emotional release (but don't have the budget for a therapist) is journaling," but that he does "not journal often, just once a month or so" (Lloyd). Lloyd makes the connection between journaling and pen and paper, suggesting, by extension, that the tangibility of a journal or diary is a vital part of how he defines the genre of journaling and, by extension, Stoic journaling. In contrast to Lloyd's perspective on journaling against the perspective of a user of /r/stoicism, user "home\_iswherethedogis" writes: "Personally, I do save all my contributions to public forums in a private word document, and I definitely consider those permanent entries as a part of my Stoic practice and total journal experience" (Reddit).

These examples suggest that while we can try to adapt canon composition theory to online modalities, if we want to honor the authority of intention and authorship, if we still believe in its significance as Hiemstra did when he divided journaling into classifications based on context and intention, there may no longer to be a straightforward

or universal way to apply it. The digital landscape is unstable ground. Or, in such words as the philosopher Heraclitus might choose: "In the same rivers we walk and do not walk; we are and are not" (Konsan, 47).

## 6. Areas of Future Study

While my intentions in this essay were to interrogate the intersection of genre, intention, and authorship as it applies to Stoic journaling practices, I believe that much research is left to be done to properly evaluate the questions proposed. In terms of considering future research, I find my investment is in two plausible approaches.

The first, which I briefly alluded to before, would be to consider how activities (not limited to but including journaling) that were previously regarded as cloistered activities have used digital landscapes to build communities via interactive processes. How does this reality change our understanding of the personal versus the public? How does it change the integrity of the activities themselves or the spaces in which they are carried out? Which lens of modern critical theory is best suited to tackle these questions? The second approach would be to perform targeted ethnographic studies within Stoic communities to appreciate better how the digital landscape has transformed reflective rituals. I believe the most logical process here would be to design a method of data collecting that, when rendered statistically, can speak to if these practices help or hinder the fundamental goal of the Stoic journaling practice: mental wellbeing.

I do not feel that these two avenues of further research diametrically or even tangentially oppose one another. I think that, in many ways, it is a fool's errand to consider these questions without the benefit of an interdisciplinary approach. However, I

fear that those academics who approach situations from a theoretical foundation may be reluctant to apply methodologies borrowed from the hard sciences. Likewise, those researchers that have been trained in hard sciences may be uneasy at the thought of identifying and evaluating underlying assumptions that cannot necessarily be assessed in a data-based approach. Therefore, it is my encouragement for scholars to bridge this imaginary gap between the humanities and the sciences.

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## RITES OF LEAVING

### CORA

My partners knew about the murders before I did. The news had been the highlight of the morning conference, but even so, there was work to be done. The heatwave kept bodies arriving by the hour. Maika, assuming that I had been informed of the development in my mother's case, announced my absence to the entire department and suggested sympathy cards. But the old news was new news to me. The night before I had stayed late working on paperwork, trying to determine the next of kin for a man who had his utilities cut off a week before. There were few clues. We knew he was a veteran. The two dogs found at his side, apparently having died sometime before he did, wore bright red collars with tags listing his long-deceased wife's name and phone number. After finding a cousin's cousin in Oregon, it was only fair to allow me to sleep in a few hours. I'm sure someone from the hospital tried to contact me, that the pager in my office buzzed again and again, and again. My phone number had been disconnected months ago. I like to imagine the person who inherited my phone number shaken out of bed at three-in-the morning: this is the FBI. Then the mistake realized, an apology, a story to be told at family gatherings for years.

I received the news two hours after my coworkers and eight hours after it was leaked to the media by a police officer that mentioned the investigation to his brother at a potluck. My mother had apparently been murdered. To be dead is in and of itself nothing spectacular: we all expect it to be waiting for us under some distant hill. But to be

murdered is something a bit more exciting. We all make statements: before I die, I want to have a family; I want to visit the beach; I want to go sky-diving, etc. Never: before I am murdered.

According to the news anchor, my mother had been one of two dozen victims of a young nursing home assistant. Beatrice Arnold, a thirty-four-year-old native of Michigan, was taken in for questioning after a doctor called in a tip about three deaths within the span of thirty minutes at a nursing home with eighty-five beds. Old people die, but this was a pattern that turned heads. My job wasn't publicized, so it would take the media a while to find me. In the meantime, Harper, Maika, and I stood together in the breakroom and watched as reporters harassed the family of the other victims; a man rolled up his rearview window and caught a microphone in its vice, the cord trailing tail-like behind as he sped away; a bewildered girl in uniform stood in front of a gated school, milky blonde hair pinned back with butterfly clips. I snapped the remote away from Harper and turned it off.

"I won't have her here," I said, directing the statement to no one in particular.

"They're going to exhume her. But they will not send her here."

Harper put a hand on my shoulder.

"No. Of course not," he said. "But – they're probably going to send her here."

"Take her north. Take her to Belview."

"They're out of room and backed up three weeks. We've had to take some of their bodies here."

"Then they'll have to wait four weeks to exhume her."

"You know how these things are."

“Are you sure she wasn’t cremated?” Maika suggested from the other end of the room, chewing a granola bar.

The question startled me.

“Yes. I’m fucking sure. What kind of question is that?”

Maika and Harper both looked ashamed. I recognized at that moment that they were struggling with the situation more than I was.

The FBI was efficient: two agents checked in at the front desk by noon. A copper-headed woman and a young man in his mid-twenties still experimenting with a mustache requested to speak with me. I asked them to show me their badges. They were cold in my hand and genuine enough, although I didn’t know quite what to look for. They questioned me about the nurse’s bedside manner. Had she been suspicious? For example, did she ever joke about murder? Did she ever say something so discrete and forgettable as, “I kill old people.” No, no, and no, I told them. I advised – my mother’s death is a tragedy for you, I’m sure – but please spend your resources elsewhere. The least of your concerns should be a fifty-five-year-old woman who died of dementia ten years before she was murdered. Forty-five, I reiterated to them: she had died at forty-five, not fifty-five and I dare you to look me in the face and tell me otherwise. And to their credit, they didn’t. I did not tell the two that on the dozen or so occasions that I had met this nurse that she had hinted to me that in her state, it would be better – if, well, you know; that my silence, explosive in its declaration, was on my part an affirmation. She could have pulled out a meat cleaver then and there, and I would not have stopped her. I wanted my mother gone.

I know that even putting these feelings into words will read as terrible. But I didn't hate my mother. There has never been room in my life for hate. And I had spent much of my life with her. Our time was divided between winters in a cabin in Iowa and summers on a houseboat near Norfolk, where she designed the interiors of upper-class mansions she would never be able to afford. She earned enough to support the both of us and put away a small savings but nowhere near enough to cover the decline that began when I had just earned my learner's permit. It began as most bad things that hint at some necessary end do – she forgot things. Her car keys, the laundry – sitting in the washer for days, soured and ruined—the name of her supplier for silk curtains, which she had used for the better part of twenty years, and words, how *wet* and *cold* became *slimy*, as is, the bathroom floor is so goddamned slimy and, it's slimy outside, close the door. She forgot how to dress, and then how to eat, and then me, and then her name.

My mother was an only child and without family. Her mother had murdered herself sometime in the 50s. Her father, whom she remembered fondly as a level-headed but useless man, died a short time before I was born. She told me that my father could be any one of the other men in the world, that I should throw a dart and see where it lands. So. As her next of kin, I assumed power of attorney. When the time came that I could no longer take care of her and the bank balance had dwindled to under ninety-thousand dollars, I decided to sell the cabin and the boat and place her in a private facility in Iowa that had been recommended to me by her primary care physician. It was near a lake and advertised a woodworking shop, concert hall, heated indoor pool, and a greenhouse, none of which my mother was able to partake in, but the good intentions were there. Good intention remained the only thing that I could give, and even it could not save her. I

funded three years of this fantasy, and when she did not die, which the doctors had hinted was a real possibility worthy of investment. After her money had run out completely, she was transferred to a state care facility.

I was bright, and the fact that I am bright has been the saving grace of my life. I split my time between two high schools, took night classes at a local community college, graduated, and became a coroner. It was unusual to be hired as a woman for such a position. I'm willing to bet that the sob story of being the sole caretaker of a single disabled mother didn't hurt. But what I know helped was that I was considered something of a medical mystery, which entertained the at-the-time chief medical examiner. I presented with pain insensitivity shortly after birth. This was incredibly rare: I was one of six persons identified in the entire world, although there were suspected to be many more born each year that did not survive infancy. Now and then I still would receive letters from the odd investigator, or doctor, wanting to know if I would participate in research.

I always declined. The disease was not the worst one could have. It was fine, maybe even preferable, to grow up without the experience of teething, or stubbing toes, or skinning knees on the pavement. But I had torn out my fingernails more times than my fingers could count, and my palms were thick with scar tissue from hot handles and sharp objects. I almost went blind after running through a grove of pine trees. And the absence of pain manifested in other clinical presentations. Fear is born from an awareness of risk, and the recognition of risk is a skill we learn through the experience of pain. My condition meant that I had never associated pain with fear or fear with danger. And so, for many years, I was unable to recognize risk. I had to train myself to label it. You don't want to play with knives because medical bills are expensive. Eyes and hands are nice to

have. You don't accept a drink or a ride from a stranger because you might die, and life is, generally speaking, a good thing. But there is a short time for a young woman to learn these things and I consider myself lucky.

Working at a medical examiner's office had been a natural choice for me: I wanted the opportunity to study those who had failed at recognizing danger, even with all of their advantages. Our office building was like a museum with rotating exhibits. Here were the men and women who ignored an ache or bump until it was too late. See this man, who didn't break quickly enough, or went out to pick up a late-night prescription, or buy toilet paper, and was T-boned by a man high on meth. This woman cleared out the ghosts in her head with a shotgun. Often the failure to recognize or predict danger wasn't their fault, and that was the point, really, of the exercise. I wanted to convince myself that the world was not a pattern to learn or code to break. I wanted to believe that unfortunate, unpredictable things could happen and that it was OK when they did.

My job paid well. There was always a need for autopsies. I could, theoretically, move anywhere without too much consideration. But early on, I had survived on less than minimum wage when my wage was adjusted for hours. I had used the last of our money to buy a partially burned-out trailer once used as a drug den twenty miles outside Norfolk. There was no heating, no running water, and a well in the back that "may or may not work with a bit of effort" as advertised in a newspaper listing, and as it turns out, it did not. But it was close enough to the city to where I could arrive home at nine, sleep for a wink, and be back by eight.

And then, she was dead. A phone call from the hospital. Paperwork. Her body was transferred to the nearest funeral home. I gave the consent for burial with a simple

pine casket and the vault; mandatory so the earth would not sink, an inconvenience to the mowers. A man on the phone tried to guilt me into embalming. Did I want her to be eaten by worms? I was honest: I don't think she would have cared. And I don't care. Look, I see bodies all the time – it's the same in, same out. I paid the bill in installments over two years. The entirety of her material life had been reduced into a small box of personal effects, which I took home and stored in a closet. There was no long, prolonged period of mourning. I didn't cry.

Harper had been right: we were the only suitable medical examiner's office in the state, which had been brought to its knees in the crisis of heat. I imagine they could have waited, at least until this passed. But the murderer had been arrested, and by court order my mother's body was exhumed sent on her way to us. In her office, Harper was stern in her warning: you aren't going near this. We will take care of it. And if for whatever reason we can't, we're going to bring in outside help. Go home.

"You're overthinking things," I observed.

Overhearing this from the other room, Maika laughed. I hadn't meant to be funny. Harper scowled and repeated: go home.

I imagine neither of them would have been surprised to know that the same evening, once the office was closed and everyone had signed out, I returned and used my key to override the alarm. It wasn't difficult to locate the drawer with my mother. She was zipped inside a yellow bag labeled as biohazard in bright red letters. As soon as I touched it, I understood whatever was inside was a feather of a person and nothing: the

decay would be advanced. I confirmed this as the case. All that was left of her besides the cold dark bones were a few tufts of strawberry blonde hair and the fabric of her dress, dotted with spots of white mold. I could make out a thin gold necklace tangled in a mess, a necklace that years ago she told me she had no sentimental attachment to but “enjoyed the glow” of it. I had shipped this same necklace express to the funeral home so that she could carry its light with her. What, I wondered, could we hope to glean from this? I had been under the impression from news reports that the suspected poison would have a short half-life, but maybe they were looking for a heavy metal. In any case, they had torn my mother out of her small place in the earth, sent her as a package halfway across the state, and at the end of it, all one of us would provide a brief report that would bring about a justice no one but the state was demanding. A fool’s errand if there ever were such a thing.

The distinct slam of our backdoor cut through our silence like a knife. Was it Harper? Had he forgotten something at his desk or perhaps misplaced his keys? He had done it before and picked open the backdoor with the barrel of a pen, a skill that impressed everyone but me. I thought of what I could say to challenge his anger. Perhaps: this was my way of grieving. This closure. I needed this, Harper. I needed to see what this terrible nurse had done to my mother. She demands justice. But instead of Harper, a stranger stepped into the morgue. He was in his late fifties, perhaps early sixties, face sun-kissed and marked with a scar that traveled under and across his neck, from ear to ear. He wore a tan suit with an excellent blue stain over his left-breasted pocket; the suit was somewhat out of fashion, the shoulders too boxy, the pants oversized, a suit someone wears when they want to look impressive but lack the money for the proper impression.



On each of his hands, he wore a pair of white leather gloves. We shared a long silence. He seemed on the verge of saying something, but the words kept catching in his throat. I noticed he was holding a revolver at his right side.

“Why do you have a gun?” I wondered.

The man jumped at the sound of my voice. He hastily sheathed the gun.

“I was afraid,” he said simply.

“That’s reasonable,” I acknowledged. “After all, it’s illegal for you to break in here.”

“I have every right to be here,” he snapped. “You, on the other hand – what are you doing? Do you have any respect for the dead?”

Ah: so this was about her, I thought.

I took a step toward him.

“I’m not interested in the state pursuing an investigation. I told the FBI the same. You don’t even have to intimidate me. Are you here for her?” I said, gesturing at my mother. The man was silent. “But I can’t let you take her, if that’s why you’re here. It would end my career. I’m not even supposed to be here. I have to leave this place the same way I found it, or else everyone will ask questions tomorrow. And I’m a terrible liar.”

The man took a deep breath.

“Don’t interfere, Cora.”

I laughed.

“You know my name. And my face.”

“I do. And I knew your mother. And I need you to set aside your best judgment and let me take her with me.”

“Oh – set aside my judgment and let you steal a corpse?”

“I’m relocating it.”

“You brought a gun. How bad do you want her? Enough to shoot me?” I asked.

“Do I have to actually say it?”

“You don’t have to say anything,” I observed. “I can’t make you, at least.”

“Then fine: get out of my way, or I’ll shoot you.”

I took another step toward him until he was nearly at arm’s length.

“Do it,” I challenged.

“You’re such a brat,” he exploded, pushing me backward. I was surprised at his strength and caught myself before falling. He hurried to my mother’s side as though he were hungry for a meal.

“You’re committing a felony,” I cautioned.

“It won’t be the first.”

“You knew her well,” I observed.

“I did know her. Yes, I did.”

“I didn’t see you at the funeral.”

“You didn’t have a funeral,” he said. “You had her buried in the dead of night, as though she were a criminal.”

“It was raining all day. I told the cemetery I couldn’t wait another day. It was out of my control.”

“You could have held a memorial service at the very least.”

“A memorial service—for who?” I swallowed a laugh. “Who exactly would have come to celebrate her memory?”

“I would have,” he said. “But you never gave the opportunity.” The man zipped the bag and slung it over his shoulder. “All you’ve done is gawk at her corpse. And you have the nerve to judge me for seeing to a proper reburial. I don’t understand you.”

I considered his statement. He wasn’t wrong. There was logic to his sentiment.

“Fine,” I exclaimed, slamming shut the drawer. “I’ll bury her with you.”

“You won’t.”

“I will, unless you shoot me,” I said, gesturing at the revolver still in his hand. “Or I suppose I can call the police and save my job. I have the key to my boss’s office. The nearest police station is only four minutes away.” The man was quiet. “I don’t object to her burial,” I continued. “Honestly. I didn’t want any of this to happen. I should be thanking you.”

And to my surprise, the man agreed.

Outside, the man directed me to his vehicle, a bike on the far end of the parking lot with a makeshift trailer attached.

“I had a seizure a few years ago,” he remarked casually. “I can’t legally drive.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Seizures are nothing to joke about.”

“We’re using my car,” I said, gesturing to it. “I’m not sitting in a trailer with my mother while you peddle us down a highway.”

“I can’t leave my bike,” he said. “It has fingerprints all over it. Will it fit in your trunk?”

“Probably,” I said, and we made it work: the bike, the trailer, and my mother, all fit snugly.

Even at the time, I understood that what I was doing was dangerous. A strange man threatening to kill you with a gun is danger. Getting into a car with strange men is danger. Stealing a corpse at the center of an active murder investigation is danger. These were patterns that I studied carefully in books, movies, and in the story of an old friend, who had been snatched out of a pre-school playground and could no longer remember seventy-two hours of her life or have children. The situation I was now facing was not something I should have cooperated with. I knew a logical person may have stepped back, thrown up their hands, and said, I didn’t even see you here. But I recognized another pattern: the man was terrified. Of what, I didn’t know, but I could smell the terror on him. And I am not exaggerating: fear has always presented as a scent to me.

We passed through the city proper without exchanging a word. He directed me away from the highway and down a long a side road. I was somewhat familiar with it. Years before, I had dated a man who liked to take me fishing in Wayne Creek. By the standards of Norfolk, it was a clean creek, flanked at each side by wealthy residential areas for miles. You could get there if you took a particular exit. But we passed our opportunity and drove south of the city until industry turned to forest, and we crossed state lines into North Carolina. We arrived at a gravel road that we took up to a dirt road that led to a clearing. We got out of the car. The man fetched my mother from the trunk. And then the two of us cut through a shoulder of woods until we reached a cabin.

“We’re burying her inside of a cabin,” I observed.

“No,” the man said. “We are not.”

I sighed. Oh, so it was a trick.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

The man considered.

“Tom.”

“Well, Tom. It seems it’s almost dawn.”

“Fortunately for us,” said the man.

A finger of violet curled over the trees. Tom and I stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the cabin. He seemed faint and swayed. I asked him—do you want to sit down? I can hold her. Tom shook his head.

“Jack,” the man called out. “It’s me. Come out, please.”

There was a shadow of movement inside the cabin. The door groaned. A young man stepped outside, perhaps in his late thirties, dark-haired, dressed in a loose moss-green cardigan and black slacks, and so solemn in composure that the world seemed to move around him. He looked at me, looked at the bag, looked at the man.

“Why is she here?” he directed at Tom.

“I’m reburying her.”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Why is she here?” he said, directing his gaze at me.

“I had no choice. She’s as fierce as her mother.”

Jack nodded.

“Do you know who we are?” Jack asked me.

“I’ve never seen you two in my life.”

“You’re sure?”

“I don’t forget things,” I lied.

“You forget things all the time,” said Jack.

It was true, I knew: I did forget things. Silly things. Appointments. The name of a dog I had as a child. The recipe for my mother’s cookies. It was not a thought I lingered much on; even if it had made sense for me to worry over these omens, I was incapable of doing so.

“Tell me who you are,” I demanded.

“We’re your parents,” Jack said, gesturing inside the cabin. “Come in, lost daughter. You’ve returned. A celebration is in order.”

## JACK

I suspect, Cora, that you won't know what to make of this letter. You won't remember me. You won't know who I am to your mother, or what I was once to you. I ask that you bear with me. I understand that by writing this I am not putting any of your ghosts to rest. And as you probably already know, the very nature of ghosts makes it impossible for them to be buried the same way we bury people. I'm not talking about lost souls or cemetery phantoms. By ghosts I mean the stories we let guide us: ghosts are our lovers, fathers, mothers, our precious children; the wisest among us understand that in time, we will become ghosts ourselves, and adjust our behaviors accordingly. But if I may offer a word of advice: like most hauntings, if you choose not to believe in the possibility of ghosts, they won't appear to you.

I will begin with your mother's story. I was introduced to her father sometime before I came to know her. It was a little over two decades ago, in 1963 or perhaps early 1964. I must have seen dozens of truckers just like Joe every day. Your grandfather was nothing remarkable. But over time, Joe became familiar to me in a special way. I could never guess what he was thinking and had myself convinced for a long time that he didn't much care for me. But he had perfected manners and knew how to make conversation about anything, and this endeared me to him. Joe spoke with a hint of the Tidewater accent. Without it, he really could have been anyone, from anywhere if he so chose; he was that dangerous sort of man who (perhaps for the benefit of the world) never realized his full potential.

I gathered that his life hadn't been too easy. As the months passed, he came to trust me enough to confide just a little, and I recognized that Joe was a very sad man that could slip a happy face on and off as casually as a winter coat. One night, after he told me Coca-Cola had slashed his route and salary by half, I offered him some black beauty pills to sell. Truckers loved them because they made it possible to drive two days straight without sleep. I didn't even ask for a commission. I felt so sorry for him. And when your grandmother strung herself up in a closet a year later, Joe was god-smacked at the truck stop for at least three days. He drank so much that he forgot how to walk. I didn't kick him out. I told him that he didn't have to leave if he didn't want to. He said to me, *fine*, and buried himself in pussy for another two days.

It was nice to have him around. Not because I loved him – I could have let myself, I'm sure, because at his heart he was kind, and he was shamelessly handsome— but because he was a friend, and the feeling of being in good company was so rare to me that I never wanted to let it slip away. Every moment I was preparing myself for him to leave. Because of course he had to leave, to return to your mother. Back home in Norfolk, she was still just a young woman, a girl, even. She was straddling maturity and still hadn't fallen victim to her monstrous condition. And she called every night. I couldn't understand how she found our number or knew when Joe was at my gas station and not at any number of the other gas stations along the 35. Joe couldn't make sense of it either. He would gesture at me to let her know that he was sleeping. And she heard through my lie. She threatened to come down and cut off my dick if I didn't send him back. The implied violence shocked me, and I wondered how someone as mild-mannered as Joe had managed to raise a kid up that way.



Joe had found himself in a position where he couldn't continue with the trucking. Not with his daughter – your mother—back home. Not unless he took her with him. Or sent her away. Or found a cheap bride, which was something he considered but ultimately decided against. Joe told me that he cared enough about her to not confuse her by bringing another mother into the house so quickly after her own had died. It was very progressive thinking for the time.

At that time, I had been a runner for the mob for a little over five years. Nothing huge – but I did exercise a tiny spear of influence in West Virginia—and wanted to find Joe options. But I couldn't dig up any connections in Norfolk. However, my boss, Hankish, had established seats of influence in Youngstown and Tampa, and I knew he was looking for a way to move the smokers he was fencing down to Cuba. I called up one of his assistants and proposed the idea. His assistant asked me how well I knew Joe. I told him that Joe was a reliable person and there wouldn't be any wife sniffing about in his business. Hankish would like that, I Knew. He always said that wives were the downfall of good business.

Joe said he was open to running a small enterprise.

At the time, beach towns weren't epicenters of industry like they are today. It just wasn't practical to invest in a money-laundering front there. It would have been possible, maybe, if Joe had some startup money, but he was a broke, thirty-something, skilled in motors and fishing and not much else. And remember, this was Norfolk in the late 50s. Today it's all bikinis and hotels, sex, gambling, but at the time all of that was far and few between, and all the markets were saturated. So at the end of the day Joe was looking at a fruit shack or souvenir cart, and because I liked Joe, I decided to give him the most

interesting of the two choices. A little fruit shack not far from the boardwalk. He could sell whatever fruits he wanted as long as he sold fruit. Hankish didn't micromanage, and I didn't care about specifics. The less I knew, the better.

Joe agreed. Once a week, a man would come with a delivery of smokers that Joe would take and keep stored in the backroom until another man came to take them away. One, two, three done! In a way, Joe filled a gap that had been pressing us for over a year: it was hard to hire anyone that wanted to make that trip within a shoestring budget, and the feds had been sniffing around our usual drop-off points. But no one was going to look anywhere near Norfolk, at least for a while.

I was excited for him. The day before it was scheduled to open, and after the first shipment of smokers arrived, I chartered a plane to Norfolk and looked over. It was a skeleton of a building with a great big canopy ceiling stretched taut as a drum plastered with signs that advertised "cold juice" and "gift fruit boxes" and "heirloom strawberries." When I asked to taste one, Joe admitted that they were not heirloom strawberries. The backroom was separated from the market floor with a partition that Joe had drummed up out of plywood. As Joe busied himself arranging the oranges into a neat pyramid, I cracked open a box of smokers and held the film to a bulb to see what genre Hankish had bet on. These were the soft type, a tease with a woman in a tub of feathers coming out and up of them just enough to make you want more.

"You should buy a projector," I told Joe. "No one is going to know if you watch them."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Sure. So long as you put them back. Otherwise, Hankish will take it out of your

cut and put a bullet in your head.”

Joe asked how much the bullets cost. If that would be taken out of his cut, too. I said I didn't know what Hankish shot, but probably, yes, it would be deducted from his paycheck.

This, then, is how I came to know Joe and how I both saved and ruined his life by introducing him to the criminal underworld. It took him like a fast undercurrent, and by the time I came to understand my wrong, it was too late.

You might ask: how did you find your way into this life? Were you born into it? I was not. Yes, I was the youngest son of a family of Italian immigrants. And at that time, society tended to associate Italians with the criminal element of society, just as it had done with the Irish and Germans before us. However, neither my parents nor my siblings committed a crime in their entire lives. Or, at least none that I am aware of, and as I have kept close tabs on them, I am certain I would be. I was introduced to the criminal profession or rather forced into it, by a young man named Blair.

You never had the opportunity to meet Blair, but I'm confident that you have turned out very much like him. Even now, I see the similarities, the pleasant reminders. It is comforting. Blair was the center of my life for many years. He was also the only of Hamish's subordinates to survive him for more than ten years. His predecessor had disappeared after he pawned some electronics from a guy he was contracted to kill. And the man before him was found bloated in the Kanawha after mentioning he'd like to fuck

Hankish's wife. Blair didn't care much about money and had the sex drive of a geriatric panda. So naturally, Hankish adored him.

Blair and I met unconventionally. We were teenagers. In 1945, one week after my thirteenth birthday, I took a summer job in Youngstown for Fuller Brush, selling hair grooming products door to door in the upper-class neighborhoods. It was the kind of opportunity that hired all sorts but sent the negroes into the negro neighborhoods, the scruffy whites to the scruffy white neighborhoods, and the nice-looking boys to the most excellent houses with the most promise. Our pay was based on commission. I knew that I was at a disadvantage as an Italian, so I told the company my name was John Beaumont and passed myself as a good Methodist boy. I had the best sales of the best group. Some of the houses would order half a dozen different hairbrushes after I explained that I was selling them to put on some Memorial Day parade for veterans in my little town of Adbingdon, or Atlantic, or Ann Hill. I stuck with names that started with A because names that started with A were easier to come up with and remember. Our boss didn't care what we told them, so long as we made the sales and brought him his cut.

And then Blair entered my life like a disease. It was at the blue house at the end of the cul-de-sac with little flamingos in its rose garden and hop soc sketched all over the driveway in pink chalk. The grass was a tried green. I almost skipped over the house because the day was so late and the sidewalk to the front door was so long. And when I chose to aim for one more sale, a few more pennies, I almost rang the doorbell, as was standard practice. But while standing vacantly on the front porch, I noticed the door was puckered open and offered a tiny sliver of light. And I had to know what was inside. I had to see what luxury was like before a butler, or maid, or governess answered, or perhaps

some pretty lady in a pretty dress with a silver pen and intention to buy out of my catalog. I nudged open the door with my foot. The light cut me. And there was Blair and a man, dismembering a pretty woman in a pretty dress in the foyer.

At the time, Blair must have been no more than fifteen, but he was at least twice my size, and, seeing me, snatched me inside and beat me within an inch of my life. His partner, a middle-aged man missing an ear, clipped him on the back of the head before he could cut my throat with the same knife he'd just had blade deep into the woman. Maybe it was my last name: Bruno. I had told him Beauchamp, but the man was Italian and, taking a long look at me, asked me to correct myself. So I was honest: my name is Jack Bruno. Or maybe it was my eyes that gathered his mercy; one blue and one brown, inherited from a great-great-grandfather to his son to his son to my father to me. No one could kill a boy with such pretty eyes. I was not going to argue. That evening, as I lay only half-conscious in a dark hotel room, the man undressed me and garroted me with his belt. I was in too much pain to overthink the situation. It occurred to me that this situation was not one I had been expecting when I stepped on a bus that morning. My mother would miss me and probably never know what happened to me. And as the dark narrowed my vision, my ears popped. Blair had come up behind the man and shot him through the chest. I remember flinching from the weight of the man when he fell onto me, but the sound of the shot was still quieter than the rush of blood returning to me, and I closed my eyes for a moment to recover my thoughts, and when I opened them again the man's body was gone, and the blood had been dabbed to a pink stain and Blair had disappeared. There was enough money for a few days of meals and a ticket home on a dresser.

I only tell you this story so that you understand what ghosts are.

Blair returned to my life years later, in 1957, when the last thing on my mind was guns and newspapers. I was a young man, already married and divorced from a woman I'd tolerated for two years. I'd spent two years in the Navy fucking around the Pacific and another three working as a paper pusher at a democratic precinct office. I didn't care much for politics, but everyone told me I was a good paper pusher. That day my secretary came in and told me that a man off the street wanted to meet with me; he had given my family name as his last name: a cousin or something. Blair came in and stood at my desk. I recognized him immediately, even after so many years. He had grown into a man, shoulders broad as an ox but with a look of hunger that never really went away for as long as I knew him. He opened his coat to reveal a revolver in a shoulder holster and asked me if I'd like to get lunch.

We walked to a deli a few blocks down the street owned by a Jewish woman who always offered me free samples of their in-house pastrami even though I ate pastrami there at least three times a week. Once inside, I took a breath. I thought it was reasonable for me to expect not to be shot in a deli. I asked Blair if he wanted anything and suggested the pastrami. After all, everyone knew this pastrami was the best in Youngstown. Blair stared at me in silence for a long moment and then took a seat facing the street. I followed suit without ordering the pastrami.

"I never told anyone about what happened," I said, picking up a conversation that I assumed we began a decade ago. "I'll never tell anyone. You can trust me on this."

"That's not why I'm here," Blair replied.

“OK, then.”

Blair leaned back into his chair and took out a pack of cigarettes. He offered me one. I declined, explaining that I didn't smoke, and he insisted until I took one. I swear that his eyes looked right through me. I lit it on the table lighter and pointed my gaze away from him and out the window.

“You're in politics now,” he observed.

I took a moment to consider what this statement meant and how he wanted me to respond to it.

“I am,” I said. “You know, I didn't think you would remember my name. Much less come find me.”

“I never forget names.”

“Sometimes I forget my name,” I said.

“You tried out the Navy,” Blair said, tapping his cigarette on the center ashtray. “I take it you weren't a fan of the sea?”

“It was boring. That's all..”

“It would have paid well.”

“Yes.”

“You're a democrat.”

“That's what they think,” I joked.

Blair didn't laugh.

“I am a registered democrat,” I confirmed.

“The man I work for is a democrat,” he said.

“Adlai Stevenson would be pleased to hear that.”

I forced a fake laugh.

“They hate you. You know that, right? Those bastards hate the Italians. You’re only one step above the Negroes and Jews.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But they’re mostly discrete about it.”

He leaned in close to me. His breath was warm.

“That makes it even worse,” he said.

“The Democrats have done a lot for Italians,” he said. “It’s not like it was for my parents. This world is improving for us.”

“If you say so,” said Blair. “Look, my boss is also a democrat. He wants to offer you a job.”

“I already have a job.”

“He has another job for you.”

“But I don’t need another job.”

“He has a job for you or a funeral,” Blair said. “It’s your choice and the same amount of work for me.”

I was quiet.

Blair continued: “My boss wants some files from the archives. It’s the sort of stuff you could pull for him without a chance of anyone noticing.”

“Do I know your boss?”

“He’s a discrete man.”

“Why does he need these files?” I asked. “I need to know. This would put my career at stake – if I was caught, I might even go to prison. And then --”

“He needs it for business,” said Blair.



“And I need my career.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about your career.”

“I have to send my wife alimony –”

“Do I look like your fucking wife?”

“I need to understand what you’re asking of me,” I said. “I need clarification about who you are. You’re just some man showing up at my workplace with a gun. Anyone can do that. I mean, frankly, people already have. It doesn’t even surprise me anymore.”

Blair opened his mouth to continue, but as he did, the lady behind the counter reminded us that the tables were for paying customers only. Blair turned around in his seat and told her to fuck off back to Auschwitz, which was an unfortunate choice of words, given that she had actually survived Auschwitz. The woman came out from behind the counter with a baseball bat, swinging madly, narrowly missing a customer who had ordered, and Blair sprung up from his seat, ready to pluck it out of her hands. I seized the moment and rushed out the front door. I pushed my way onto the first bus I saw and found my way back home after five transfers.

I found Blair in my kitchen, eating raw bacon out of brown paper.

“I’ve been watching you eight years, Jack,” he said. “I know everything about you. I know you’re a shit sticker. I don’t care. But I promise you everyone else in your miserable life would care. So I would advise you to accept this job.”

So. What other choice was there? I smuggled out the documents for him. I didn’t even read them. I didn’t care. The requests came weekly, and I met Blair at a park every

Friday to pass them off to him. For each errand, he slipped me an envelope of fifty dollars. The money was excellent. And as time passed, we became comfortable with one another. Sometimes we would even head over to the deli, where he apparently had made up with the woman, as he would bring her the occasional flower. We would split something: a sandwich, maybe. Sometimes a large bowl of soup. No one was any the wiser at the precinct office. But what Blair and his boss failed to consider was that I was also expendable at the office, and when funds were redirected to campaign efforts, my position was consolidated, and I was let go. And then I found myself not only useless to Blair and his boss, but a liability, which was a problem for Blair in that he had split enough sandwiches and soups with me to feel at the very least sentimental about my life. I recognize that he would have killed me if I had been anyone else. And I swear that the fact he didn't kill me, or couldn't bring himself to kill me, was the only weakness he betrayed in his entire life.

So in 1960, he sought out arrangements to secure me in another service position to his boss. He said I would be no good at killing; my nature was too 'flowery.' At 5'8" and 140lbs, I was far too slight for any sort of work that involved moving bodies. I didn't have connections in high places or any pedigree to speak of. But I was smart and – he searched for the word—artful. So his boss set me up in a brothel in Kentucky, a six-hour drive south, to film pornography.

I'd never seen a smoker in my life, and here I was in charge of a studio. Somehow I was well-liked from the get-go, a first for me. The girls thought my coyness was the sweetest thing that ever passed through the town. They would steal the hat off my head and toss it around, up the stairs, down the stairs, having a riot as I clambered after it and

begged mercy. I'd come home to my duvet covered with oily red kisses. The madam, Carla, made me sleep in the basement, far away from the girls, until one day at dinner she passed me a bowl of creamed corn and observed, "You look right through them." I finished my plate in guarded silence. In the middle of the night, the girls burst into my room, grabbing my guitar, my pillows, my dress suits on their delicate hangers, anything they could find, and teased me with them all the way upstairs, where they set up my new room. It had a view of downtown Ashton that I would often lose myself in on clear nights.

Clara liked me; she accepted me. Maybe it was for the same reasons Blair liked me; I was good at what I was asked to do and did it without much complaint. I had a talent for inventing stories on film. Before I was on the scene, the only smokers on the scene were comedies. A woman goes fishing at a lake and catches a man. She brings him home, only to get bored of him after the first go and flush him down the toilet. Or some fancy lady undresses in front of a window, but each layer she peels away reveals a costume more and more ridiculous. The rest were just fucking plain and simple. No plot, nothing to work you up to anything. You may as well have put a bunch of hot cats in a room. I considered my duty the duty of an artist. I had beautiful girls, a beautiful set, and a camera as hot as a firecracker that probably cost a year of an average man's salary. I was interested in drama— fetish stories with plot and suspense. A police officer arrests a prostitute and finds himself dominated by her in a holding cell. A couple brings home a new baby, but the husband gets jealous and climbs in the crib and demands milk right out of her tit. That shit sold because it was unique, and no one knew what to do with it. So naturally, there was a demand for it, even down in Cuba.

My favorite of all the girls was Valentina, an Italian with big brown eyes and the longest hair I'd ever seen. She kept it on top of her head in two pinned-up braids that she dipped each night in olive oil and let down only for the camera. I commented on them once, something like they look so real, I don't know how you manage it, and laughing, she guided my fingers through her hair like a comb. No suggestion of a wig. Not even a hint of resistance. She would take lunch with me in a robe she wouldn't bother tying, her nipples like two rosebuds. She told jokes, gossiped about the others, and teased me; you know, you are a handsome man; women must wonder how you're not married.

"I was married," I admitted, eventually.

Her mouth dropped in earnest surprise.

"But not anymore, certainly."

"No," I said. "It was a mutual decision. We split on good terms."

"You're lying," she observed.

I was holding a glass of whiskey and took two long drinks.

"I am," I admitted. "You see, the day I told her about my plans, she threw all of my clothing out into the yard and poured ammonia over them. She was out of bleach. But that wasn't enough, so she tried to set them on fire. But some chemical reaction happened, and there was an explosion, and it set a tree in the house we were renting on fire. The police came. But they didn't arrest her because she said it was an accident. Then she moved out and took the little schnauzer she'd gifted me that Christmas."

She shrugged.

"At least she didn't kill you. Suits, pants, trees, those sorts of things can all be replaced."

“Things, yes. But not the schnauzer,” I pointed out. “Bobo. He was small with perfect heart. He never left my side.”

“I had a pincher as a little girl,” she said. “It hated everyone. One day it ran away. Or that’s at least what my mother told us.”

“Mothers are liars.”

“So are fathers.”

“I have a daughter, you know,” I said. “Or so I’m told. My wife found out she was pregnant after the divorce. I suppose she could have been someone else’s. But there’s no point to speculation.”

“Would you lie to her – your daughter?”

“Probably.”

“Of course you would,” she laughed. “Men, like mothers, are full of lies.” I looked at her, trying to decide if she was serious and if she thought that about me. “If she walked into the room right now, what would you say to her?”

I paused, considering.

“Dearest daughter, I have been waiting for you all these years.”

My films were a hit in Cuba. We must have moved four times as many as before and passed the money up the ladder. But eventually, Blair told me that Hankish decided that my take on pornography was putting off the more traditional types that just wanted to pop out their dick and let loose. And the most extreme, the more attention. We didn’t want to taunt the feds. And given my lack complete of judgment and wantonness, maybe I’d be suited for fencing stuff. Like the smokers, pills, or whatever else needed to move

from Wheeling down to the central or south coast. That was a quiet business that involved no artistic decisions. Or—Hankish suggested—Blair he could grow a pair and kill me. Blair relayed this information with a smile, but I knew he was serious, that his boss really would say something like that. We were standing on the roof of the brothel, splitting a pack between us. I now smoked twice as much as Blair did. I demanded: why does your boss want to kill me so much? He's never even talked to me. I swear to God if it weren't for you, this world would have long forgotten my name.

As it was, within a week, I was up and out of there and sent to manage a truck stop in Winfield. I was given the freedom to run a whore house upstairs, which was also something that did not require artistic decisions. I could keep sixty percent of the profits, so I asked Valentina – do you want to come? You can call the shots. You can be the madam. Our madam Clara, but younger and more beautiful. We can split the profits equally. I presented this as she sat at the vanity, the dim lights glowing green on her skin, and she smiled: Why not? And she ran the place, handpicking the best girls she could find in the area, shaking down men who refused to pay, refurbishing the upstairs of a shitty truck stop into a sex paradise. Our rooms had themes. So far as I knew, we were the first in the state. Valentina wasn't a working girl anymore, but like me, she liked Joe, and unlike me, would find herself upstairs with him once the other clients were gone. I wanted to intervene, but I didn't. I knew I shouldn't have disapproved about her falling in love with someone solid like Joe—but I did. And one day, Valentina came down to the counter, poured herself a double shot of vodka, and announced that she was pregnant. She had missed her second period by three weeks.

I begged her: please tell me you have been fucking at least one other man.

Valentina shook her head.

She could have gotten rid of them, the two little beans inside her. I knew a doctor for just that sort of thing. Lots of the women at the brothel did it. But she did not. I didn't argue with her on it. She was as dear to me as a sister, and all I wanted was her happiness, and she said – don't you dare, this is my choice. Six months later, there was a crib and two screaming babies in my bedroom. They were fat, unhappy things, born in debt, their cradles already crowded with the shadow of death.

Valentina gave them the names Alba and Nora.

She didn't tell Joe. I didn't tell Joe. At the time, it seemed the right decision.

And, of course, there was Joe's fruit stand.

The day I checked in on Joe, I had left him with a promise that things would get better, that things always get better. Everyone knows that these are the empty words you are meant to say to someone you care about when you feel as helpless as them. My life in Winfield continued as usual and we phoned less and less. I sold black beauties to men that needed them. I sold girls to men that wanted them. I ran the diner like a top-notch manager, made payments to Hankish, and helped with the twins. Blair and I still went out once in a while for sandwiches. I saw a dentist for the first time and had four molars pulled—little life things. And then Valentina disappeared. Gone like a shadow at noon. I can't even remember what I had been doing the night before or that morning. The other girls hadn't seen her leave. Her room was just as she would have left it on any typical

day; bed tucked neat, syrup-stained breakfast pancakes on her vanity. The girls suggested I call the sheriff. I thought: that is crazy. We pay him money to keep him away.

About twenty-four hours later, Joe called.

It was five in the morning. He told me to come down to Norfolk to meet him at the fruit stand. It was so early. I had just gotten to sleep. So I told him I was busy. I told him to fuck off and hung up. Joe called back. He told me to shut up and listen.

A crate of fish had been delivered to the fruit stand. It appeared overnight. Inside the crate and buried under the fish was a young woman.

I knew it was her.

I don't remember the journey to Norfolk. I know that I arrived on a chartered plane three hours after the phone call: this much Joe later told me. I don't know if I reserved the plane or if one of the girls did. It must have been Joe who picked me up at the airport. Had I told him to meet me there? I had taken a handful of valium out of my selling stash with a quarter of vodka after I got off the phone with him. I remember seeing Valentina: I demanded to identify her and wouldn't trust Joe's judgment. This moment was one moment of an entire lifetime of moments, and nonetheless I doubt I will ever recover from it. I suggested: she is sleeping, Joe. Wake her up. Bring out soap and water—shake off the cold off her, let her sleep, and come evening, we will find skin glowing and pink and eyes bright with life. I was violent with Joe when he shut the crate, and he was violent back at me. He swung once and cleanly broke my nose. I remember the shock of it, having never sensed any potential for violence in him before. And then he was gone, and then he was back, and then he told me, she's gone. Where? Into the sea.



And because I had taken all of the valiums and spoke truth, the next thing I had said was:  
the mother of your children!

And then I was somewhere else. Not Norfolk, not Winfield. I must have hitchhiked my way out of Norfolk. Or taken a bus. I never found out. I had nothing but my clothes. I could not remember how to walk or how to stand, or my name. All around me was grass, and it stabbed like needles. I could hear the hum of traffic. I turned my head. The morning was blue along the horizon and moved like a sheet of ice. And then there were police, or paramedics, someone of authority that had a uniform and a badge and spoke to me softly in a way no one had spoken to me since I was a little boy. The man said, what is your name. And I said, I have no name. And he said, where are you from. And I said, here. Manchester? Always from Manchester. I sat up, and all around me were dead swans, necks trampled and crushed, wings snapped in half like used matchsticks. The men led me to a car and then into a room with white walls, and there were nurses who reminded me of Valentina, and then I remembered that I was Jack and captured the neck of a young woman with dark, soft hair, not unlike feathers.

## TOM

My brother, Willie, was born healthy. I remember the day he came home, his first Christmas. Nancy sewed him a little stuffed firetruck that he teethered on for months. He became sick right before his first birthday. It was meningitis. Nancy had brought it home from kindergarten. Our mother took his little firetruck to the hospital. It never came back. Maybe a nurse threw it out. Or maybe it was left intentionally. In the hospital chapel, we had prayed together for the fever to break; we prayed for crying, and struggle. We were told by the nurses that a quiet baby is a dying baby. And the fever did break, and William did cry. But meningitis had scrambled his brain. After he came home, none of us had much to say about him anymore. Willie was left to the care of a nanny, so our parents could justify keeping him home. But when his condition became apparent, and doctors declared it unreasonable that he would ever be able to take care of himself, dad had him committed.

His transfer to the asylum occurred shortly after my ninth birthday. There were three people in the world William could recognize: mom, dad, and me, and even knowing this, we sent him there, where he would live out the rest of his life surrounded by strangers. I tried not to forget him. Throughout high school I brought him chocolates and bazooga gum, and little toy soldiers that he liked to arrange in formation on the windowsill. His favorite thing in the world was cobs of corn, so I could cut out every picture of corn I came across in a magazine or newspaper to make up for the fact he would never be able to hold a real one again. Cobbed corn was a choking hazard and was never served at the institution.

In many ways, I moved through my early years under the shadow of expectation that Willie had passed on to me. Willie, by all estimates, could have been some many things, done so many things. Both my mother and father were bright and driven, and Nancy and I scored in the high 120s on IQ tests. And when his potential was lost, my parents looked at us to match it. When Nancy married at seventeen, it became up to me to make a name for our family.

Dad pushed for the military. He had served, and the thought was I should too. So, I enlisted in the Marines for the minimum term of four years of service. It did nothing for me. It was the early days of Vietnam, and I did not see deployment. I worked in intelligence as a paper pusher and put on so much weight that I had to be put on a special diet. So in early 1959, I returned to civilian life and entered the job market. I was able to send out only two applications before a federal agent reached out to me by phone and suggested that I had the aptitude for the Bureau. I had the intellectual aptitude. I could pass the fitness test easily, having taken up long-distance running. And I had a good family background. We were all patriotic enough, and no one was a communist. So that summer, I enrolled in the academy.

The academy was three months long. I missed twelve visits with Willie. When I came back at the end of that summer, he didn't recognize me. I gave him his favorite little candies. I gave him corncob cutouts. He took them and sobbed. And then he pissed himself. I flagged a nurse, and she brought him back to his room to clean him up. She returned to tell me that Willie had been given a sedative because he had become combative. And any time Willie was given a sedative, he had to sleep it off a few hours in isolation. A few years back, he had tried to rape a nurse while sedated. Willie was at least

two hundred pounds and sedation changed something in him. I'm sure there was science behind it. But the point was that I was going to have to wait.

I had nothing planned for the rest of the day, so I took a seat in the patient common room next to an aquarium overstocked with tiny silver fish. The tank water was yellow. Most of the newspapers on the table in the center of the room had been torn up and were unreadable. There were old posters about God and Jesus on the wall and one about hygiene. In twelve years, not a single one had been changed. And nothing else had been changed. The same damn gray carpet, stained with vomit and urine. The sun-bleached striped wallpaper. But there was Jack, sitting far across the room. He was new. We caught eyes; he immediately looked away. I must have stood out to him, being the only man in the room not in a gown. I knew immediately the sort of person he was. I walked over and took a seat beside him. After a moment, I extended my hand.

“I'm Tom,” I said.

Jack made no effort to take my hand. I sat back in the chair. We were close enough so that our shoulders touched. After a moment, he pulled away. I noticed the bruises where his gown met his wrists. His sleeves were stained with dots of rust-brown. I took some gum out of my pocket and offered it to him. Jack made no effort to take it, either. This startled me. I popped a piece in my mouth and cracked it until he finally turned his head and snapped, “What do you want?”

I caught his eyes again and did a double-take. I had seen correctly: the iris of one eye was blue, almost crystalline, and the other glowed honey brown. They were the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. I told him that I wanted nothing. I noticed him from across the room and wanted to be friendly. I asked him, where are you from?

“I don’t remember,” he said.

“There’s a suggestion of an accent. Appalachia?”

Jack was quiet. He folded his hands in his lap. After a long time, he told me that he was from ‘around here.’

“I’m from around here, or at least not far from here,” I replied, adjusting my cufflink so that my cuffs lay flat. “About an hour north. It’s not too long of a drive. I come here a lot. I see familiar faces everywhere I go. And your face isn’t familiar. You aren’t from here.” We shared a pause, and I continued, “What’s your name?”

“I don’t remember.”

“What do they call you here?”

He considered for a moment and then said, “They don’t call me anything. I have a number.”

I nodded. It did not surprise me.

“So, what’s wrong with you?” I waited for him to speak. When he didn’t, I continued: “I’m here to visit my brother Willie. Don’t imagine you’ve met him – unless I’m here; he’s kept in his room. He has violent tendencies.”

A silence.

“I killed eleven swans,” said Jack.

I wasn’t expecting him to be so straightforward. I was familiar with the incident, and it took me a moment to reconcile that the gaunt and defeated man next to me was capable of such brutality. The story had been news in the paper for weeks. The swans were mainstays of the park, the descendants of a pair of swans donated by an heiress in the late 1800s. She, in turn, had inherited the pair from her grandfather, who claimed they

were a gift from Napoleon. There were once over one hundred of them, but Newcastle disease had wiped out most of the flock in the 1940s. Before Jack, there were fifteen in number, still considered by many residents to be the pride of the city. Jack had struck them down one by one with a rod of iron pried off a nearby fence. The four that had survived were too old to breed: the flock was doomed. But police had declined to press charges, citing the mental instability of the assailant. Everyone in the town wanted to kill Jack.

“Why would you kill eleven swans?”

“Are you a cop?” he snapped.

“What?”

“Why are you asking me questions?”

“I’m not a cop,” I assured him – which was not a lie. I waited for him to say something, to insist I was a liar. But he seemed to accept what I said and settled down. The burst of energy had exhausted him. “You don’t want to be here,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“No,” he said. His voice cracked.

I leaned very close to him.

“I can get you out of here,” I whispered. “Let me.”

Jack was quiet. I noticed that his hands were shaking. Was he cold, I wondered? I motioned for a nurse, and requested a blanket. When she returned, I took it and draped it over his shoulders with the same tenderness I would have with Willie. I repeated to him: let me. Will you? And Jack nodded.

Jack was released into my custodianship an hour later. It was the 1960s. Things like this happened. I simply informed them that by coincidence, he was one of my estranged cousins, given named Timothy, but went by Tim. Of course, he was a known alcoholic. Since I understood that no charges were to be filed, I could bring him home to his family in Maine, no questions asked, and this burden would be off their hands. The staff knew me well enough to trust me and were more than happy to realize my offer. I helped Bruno outside. His heart was beating as quickly as a bird's. I tried to reassure him. I showed him pictures of Nancy, my mom, and my dad. I explained who I was and my history so that he didn't think I was going to murder him, which is what most reasonable people would worry about in such a situation. I told him we could stop somewhere to eat. But whatever the case, despite any fears he had or did not have, he fell asleep immediately. We drove to my temporary place in D.C., where I lived on the top floor of a five-story apartment building at the end of a ghetto side street. It was quiet and anonymous. No one asked questions. A negro bellboy who never made eye contact with me carried Jack up fifty steps for a quarter when Jack proved unable to manage them. I helped him onto a sofa. I found a pillow, a blanket. Jack took them and wept.

I didn't ask about his experience at the hospital. But it was enough to say that Jack was not right. He didn't speak at all for a long time. I let him have control over things. I asked him if he wanted to shower instead of telling him to take one. I allowed him his choice in my closet. Whenever I made something to eat, I let him know that there was enough for him. And for the first few weeks, he ate like a starving dog. The blinds could be opened or closed. The radio dialed on or off. Did he watch TV? What channel? When he was ready to sleep, I let him have the option of the sofa or my bedroom. I could

make do with whatever was left. But for a long time, Jack insisted on sleeping in a corner in the living room.

It took him three weeks before he even shared his name with me. It took another week after that for him to sit at a table to eat. And that same week, he took my chess set out from a cabinet and sat down with it in front of me, expectingly. I was surprised that he could play chess. I was even more surprised that I could not beat him. I had played chess semi-competitively for sixteen years. My grandfather had competed internationally and taught me the game as soon as I could hold the pieces. I asked him where the hell he had learned to play. Who taught him? Jack shrugged. He said he picked it up as a child while watching people play in the park.

Even as he settled into life, he was easily startled from it. Little things, as harmless as a knock on the door, sent him into a panic. Once, he burst into my room with a knife after a car backfired. I never knew what to do about these behaviors besides have him sit down and drink a shot of brandy. He must have gone through a bottle a week. And occasionally, I would lose my patience. I would insist that he was safe. It would take a moment or so for the brandy to kick in, and he would raise his voice at the suggestion of safety. Once I snatched the glass of brandy out of his hand and launched it across the room, where it hit a dresser and shattered. I demanded: who do you think is going to hurt you? Me? The bellboy? Do you think one of the nurses from the asylum will turn up and drag you back? He screamed: yes. All of that. I told him to get out. And immediately regretted it. I caught him at the door, where he was trying to pull out the chain lock. His hand was shaking so violently that he could not get a grip on it. I told him that I was



sorry, that I had been cruel and unfair, to stop, to stay. Jack let me guide him to the sofa, where he covered his face and screamed like a dying animal.

I suggested that we go to the grocery store. Or the park. Or even to church, if that was what he needed. I wasn't particularly religious but had nothing against God. I was worried he had settled into the role of a prisoner. And I wanted him to know he wasn't. That he could – if he wanted – leave this apartment. Or leave me. I even offered him money to get back home, suspecting he did remember something of it. But he wouldn't have any of it. I asked finally, because it was a significant part of the academy curriculum, and we had both had too much to drink: are you on the run because you're a communist?

At this question, Jack laughed.

“Who are you afraid of?” I demanded.

“Not communists.”

I offered him a cigarette, which he took with a nod. Finally, he said, “What do you do, anyway?”

The question caught me off guard. For months I had left each morning and come back, ten hours later with the day's weight heavy on my shoulders. For months Jack had watched me come and go and did not ask once for specifics. At first, this bothered me: I wanted him to know what I did. I wanted him to think of me as someone important and not a door-to-door salesman or some office attendant that could be replaced by the wave of a hand. I wanted him to be interested in who I was.

“I work for the FBI.”

“Doing what?”

“I work in intelligence.”

“You aren’t very good at your job.”

“That’s mean. Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re still asking me questions after all this time. You haven’t managed to tell me a single thing about myself.”

“I’m not a mind-reader,” I said in defense of my expertise. “You’ve given me nothing to work with. And I have no leverage against you.”

But the truth is that I knew he was right. I had tried to trace his identity. I had been paying close attention to everything he said. I knew he must be from the Appalachia region, perhaps eastern Kentucky. I knew that despite his hints of genius, he was unlikely to have undertaken any formal education. He lacked any foundation in history or the classics. He did not know Greek from Latin. He probably worked blue collar. But his hands bore no indication that he had ever worked with them. I searched his body for tattoos. I found none. There were several unremarkable scars on his legs, one under his chin, all white and old. And while trimming his hair, I discovered a sweet little birthmark in the shape of a smile on the nape of his neck. But all this evidence led nowhere. It told me nothing.

Jack must have sensed that he had struck a nerve. He asked for a sheet of paper and wrote out a specific set of ingredients for me to bring home the next day so that he could cook me up a hint. He asked for coals, of all things. And I had to visit three separate butchers before finding the specified cut of veal. But the next evening, I watched from the living room as he burned the coal in a pan next to the window. Once the coals had whitened with a thin layer of ash, he arranged thin strips of veal in the pan, pre-

seasoned with a generous handful of spices. When he declared the meal ready, he had me take the first bite. The veal melted under the pressure of my tongue. I composed myself and stated that it was delicious. Where did the recipe come from?

“Tuscany,” said Jack.

“Oh,” I observed, embarrassed. “So, you’re Italian. But you don’t look Italian.”

“I do,” he said defensively.

“I only mean to say that your features are lighter than most Italians.”

“I see,” he agreed. “Well, my mother was from northern Italy.”

So, he was Italian. This was what I needed. Or at least this was the start of it. I needed to assign him a complete identity. I knew that we were impossible. I could not bring him to the next part of my life. But he must have a home, somewhere. Someone must be missing him. I recognized that the only way I could cope with my loss would be to return him to wherever he belonged. So, I asked Jack to be honest and tell me if he remembered who he was. Jack hesitated for a long time. He finally admitted that he did remember but that he didn’t want to and that if I cared for him, I wouldn’t ask for his honesty.

I promised him that I would not. And I didn’t. I wanted him to love me the same way I loved him. I hoped that he would believe that I was a person worthy of his love by respecting his request. But whenever we exchanged affections, Jack behaved as though he were performing me a service. The act of it was empty. He seemed resigned to my love, even saddened by it at times, and when we had finished our nightly ritual, he would turn away from me in the bed. He would permit kiss him on some nights, starting between the dimples on either side of his hips, up to the sweet birthmark at the start of his

hairline. On other nights, he would tell me not to touch him, and I would leave the bed to take a shower. I would remind him, we don't have to do anything if you don't want to.

And he would tell me to shut up.

Maybe it would have been best for us to part ways there and then. I should have encouraged it. Or forced it. But the decision was taken away from me. A week before I was scheduled to be assigned to my first field office, I woke out of a dead sleep to the sound of an argument. I felt for Jack. He was not beside me. I found him in the living room, struggling with a man over a gun. His face was bloody. I reached for the gun in my holster, only for my hand to slip down a bare thigh. Jack screamed for me to get back in the room. The man seized the moment of opportunity and kned him in the stomach. Jack doubled over, and the man caught him by the collar of his pajama top. He turned the gun toward me.

"Who is this man to you?" the man demanded of me, gesturing at Jack with the gun.

"Jack," I said.

"What else?"

"I don't know," I said. "Don't hurt him."

"Are you the 'cousin?'"

"Yes," I said. "It's me. I did that."

"I should put a bullet in both of your heads."

"Not him. Just me," I said. "This is my fault. He had no choice but to come with me. I forced him to."

“Stop,” Jack said. He seized the man’s outstretched arm at the crook of his elbow and forced it down. The man put the gun to Jack’s head. Jack did not even flinch. “Stop,” he repeated. “I’ll come with you.”

The man holstered the gun and hoisted Jack to his feet.

“If I hear you following us, I’ll shoot him,” the man said.

And they were gone.

## CORA

The cabin inside was stifling, even in the early hour of morning. In the middle of the room was a slab table atop what appeared to be a genuine zebra skin rug. Two dark veins ran down the length of the polished wood. The walls had been converted into stacks of long shelves. In the corner of the room was a sink. Toward the far side of the room was a ladder that led upstairs to a loft. I appreciated the assortment of items hanging by nails from its end boards: a cast iron pan, a hatchet, a potted plant – flower blooming; a violin, an entire elk skull, a bible – nailed entirely through. Jack took a seat at the table. He motioned for me to sit across from him. I did. Tom stood by, uncomfortably, shifting on his feet.

“For the love of God, put that outside,” Jack said to Tom, motioning at the bag containing my mother’s remains. Tom obliged and returned a moment later, taking a seat beside me.

“I want you to speak to me honestly,” Jack began, softening his voice. “Did this man kidnap you?”

“He didn’t,” I said.

“There was no coercion?”

“Not a bit.”

“So why are you here?”

I shrugged.

“A shrug isn’t an answer,” he scolded.

“I had nothing better to do,” I admitted. “This man said he wanted to bury my mother. And since I hadn’t held a real funeral for her, this seems like an opportunity to make things right.”

“But there are consequences,” he said sincerely, as though I somehow did not fully appreciate them and needed his counsel. “Your coworkers will discover your mother missing. And you will be missing, too. These are suspicious circumstances.”

“My boss told me to take a few days off. I’ll say I took a trip. And when I get back, and they tell me what happened, I’ll act surprised.”

“But we’ve already established that you’re a bad liar.”

“You two aren’t my parents, are you?” I said, taking the measure of the situation.

Jack glanced at Tom.

“In a manner of speaking, we are,” he said. “We helped raise you for a while. Tom longer than me. Alongside your mother. But we had to raise her, too. It was a complicated situation.”

I looked at Tom.

“So, are you my father? He’s too young.”

“I’m not,” Tom said.

“Damn,” I sighed. “I wasn’t entirely honest. That was the reason I drove out here. I thought maybe you were.”

“I know,” said Jack.

“Of course you did,” I said. I leaned back in my chair until its front legs lifted off the ground. I balanced there for a moment and then let the chair snap back. Sweat was

dripping down my back. “I don’t remember you, Tom. And you, Jack, would still have been a child yourself when I was born. So how did you know my mother?”

“It’s a long story,” Tom said.

“One that we won’t get into,” Jack continued.

“Can I assume that you have nothing to do with the current scandal? She was murdered, apparently. She along with a number of others.”

“We have nothing to do with any of that. And I think you will find that the poor woman who was arrested did not, either.”

This caught my attention. I crossed my arms.

“You think they have the wrong person?” I asked.

Jack shook his head.

“No. I think people like to look for patterns, even when there are none.”

“She made a number of inappropriate jokes. She told me my mother was better off dead..”

“That was rude. But being rude doesn’t make someone a murderer. And was she wrong?”

I paused to consider. No, she was not. She was honest. More honest than even I could be at the time. And that was why, I think, I had no desire for the case to be prosecuted, murder or not. I felt guilt. I decided to change the subject to something more in favor of my character.

“Why don’t I remember you?”

I directed the question to Tom, but Jack answered first.

“You have a poor memory. I left when you were five.”



“What—were you thirteen? Fifteen?”

“Quite a bit older, actually.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I don’t have an excuse, really,” he said, his eyes betraying regret. “I can only say that it was necessary.”

“And you?” I inquired of Tom.

“You were eight,” he said. “I left because your mother asked me to.”

I laughed. Of course – he left when I was eight. How convenient. That was the year my mother began to show her first symptoms. I was too young to understand at first. She seemed forgetful. Confused about some things. Unintelligent, even. I had my theories. But it wasn’t until I was eleven that the pathology of the disease became apparent. I traveled alone to the mainland with my mother’s library card and checked out every book they had on dementia. I never returned them. The books stayed under my cot until my mid-teens when there was no longer any mystery in her condition, and I discarded them page by page into the sea. But at ten, all I knew was that I needed to hide my mother from the world. I could not let anyone see her vulnerability. If I did, she would be taken away from me.

Movement in the loft above caught my eye. A man confidently swung over the side and then climbed cautiously down the ladder, placing each foot solidly on a bar before lowering to the next one. Once on the floor, he turned to face the table. His eyes met with mine. The man seemed close to Jack’s age. He had dark features with thick eyelashes that I could appreciate even from where I was sitting. He wore a green work

shirt with rough jeans, and his black hair had been cropped close and crowned him in tight curls.

“And who are you?” I said, addressing him.

Both Tom and Jack turned to look. The man didn’t speak. Tom and Jack turned back to me and demanded in unison to know what I saw. Before I could answer, Tom jumped up from his seat and launched a plate in the man’s general direction. It missed by several feet and shattered on the wall across the way. The man followed it with his eyes.

“I knew it. I fucking knew he watched us,” said Tom. “He’s a pervert.”

Jack gestured for Tom to stop with a wave of his hand. The man betrayed a small smile and came near the table, passing Jack, who kept his eyes fixed in the direction of the ladder.

“They can’t see me,” the man said to me. “I choose not to let them.” The man took a seat along the table’s edge, facing me. “It’s good to meet you, Cora.”

He extended his hand. I reached for it – and as I did, he snapped it back.

“Careful. Never touch a ghost. We will suck the life right out of you.”

“I don’t understand the joke.”

“There is no joke. I’m a ghost.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Well, that is a personal choice,” he acknowledged. “Do me a favor. Tell Tom to go fuck himself.”

“What’s your name?”

“Blair,” he said simply.

“I’m not going to be your translator, Blair. Tell him yourself.”

A moment passed. Tom let out a cry of fear, and Jack jumped out of his seat. I rolled my eyes at the dramatics. Jack fell back into his seat. The color had completely drained out of his face. Blair glanced down at Jack and nodded.

“Hello, Jack,” he said softly. And then, to Tom: “Go fuck yourself.”

The men, it seems, were familiar with one another. Listening to their conversation, I began to suspect that the three of them were on drugs and if this adventure of mine was just me behaving like a sober babysitter for a group of adult men’s acid trip. Tom and the man named Blair exchanged insults for a while. It was a heated conversation. Tom’s face turned beet red, and he seemed about ready to pass out. Jack, who took some time to compose himself, finally spoke. The two immediately fell quiet.

“How long have you been with me, Blair?” he asked.

“Awhile,” Blair said. “I’m not sure. It’s been off and on.”

“You could have appeared to me – at any time. At any moment.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t.”

“You didn’t need me distracting you,” said Blair.

“You ruined my entire life,” Jack said.

It was a statement.

“I won’t deny that,” Blair agreed. “But you must admit that part of this – a significant part of your loneliness—is your own doing.”

“It is not. None of this is my fault. Your decisions made me desperate. And I made choices out of desperation.”

I slammed both my hands down on the table. All three turned to look at me, startled, as though they had forgotten I was there. Perhaps they had.

“I’m getting impatient. Who are you three?”

Jack waved at Blair.

“Cora, this is your father.”

“This is my father,” I repeated. “The ghost.”

“Well, he wasn’t a ghost when you were conceived, if that is what you are wondering,” said Tom. “He was very much alive when that happened.”

“She does look like you,” Jack said to Blair.

“Only a little. It is mostly her mother,” said Blair. “I bet she never told you about me, Cora. Rest assured, she could see me her entire life. We had wonderful conversations.”

I stood up abruptly from the table. I took a long look at all three of them. Then I turned my attention to the interior of the cabin, reminding myself of its contents, imagining that it was something that I may eventually need to describe to police. I then turned and left the cabin, moving with confidence to my car. Tom followed me.

“Wait—please, wait,” he said, blocking my way. “Just stay awhile. We can explain things.”

“Move.”

“There’s a perfectly logical explanation for this. I promise you.”

“You’ve wasted several hours of my life already,” I said. “I regret coming here. I regret not calling the police on you.”

“Just listen to me. We wrote everything down, Cora,” he said. “I have it all here with me. Your mother told me to destroy it. Jack told me to destroy it. But I saved it. I saved it because I thought there would be a need for it one day. I will give it to you – the entire story.”

“What story?”

“Your story. Your mother’s story. Our stories.”

## JACK

I was committed to an asylum. I choose not to remember much about the experience. The fact of the matter is that I was admitted to the hospital remembering very little of who I was, and after a series of therapies that was supposed to improve my condition, I remembered even less. I think the doctors meant to erase me. And I let them try without resistance. The months passed. The seasons turned with them. I found some hints of myself returning. It would be a moment here and there. The slightest suggestion of memory, trailing at my feet like a hungry shadow. I pushed them away. I pretended they were not there. I let myself decay. It was the boredom, mostly. There were no books. No outdoor extrusions. Only a few windows and even these were bolted shut. I did not see a tree or feel fresh air for my entire stay. Talking amongst ourselves was discouraged. I saw others get beaten for it. I never found myself in that situation because I never wanted to speak to anyone in the first place. So far as they were concerned, I was a model patient. I had made myself invisible.

I spent my days sitting alone, lost in thought. It was not all too unlike a haunting. I convinced myself that every doctor and nurse who crossed my path was a false intruder. I alone was real. And there was the apparition of Valentina, who sat with me at times. She never spoke. She did not pay any attention to me at all. I could never will her to appear or force her to leave. She was neither sad nor happy. She kept her gaze fixed on some faraway point, as though trapped in a moment. I tried to touch her once, to place my hand over hers, but it was like trying to reach the moon through its reflection in still water. As real as she seemed to me, I knew she could not be.

Time passed. Perhaps a year. Perhaps less. I managed to escape the hospital. And I was able to forget my reality for the briefest moment, in the care of a friend. But I was found and brought back to the station. At the time, it had seemed the greatest absurdity that Blair had managed to track me down halfway across the country. Of course, Poppy had taken part in this, guiding Blair to me. But at the time, there was no way that I could have known this, and in the weeks following my retrieval, I found myself mythologizing Blair, paranoid that he knew my thoughts before I did.

The first time I met your mother there was nothing about suggesting she was anything besides a spirited young woman. I don't think she fully understood her situation yet, either. Poppy was neither here nor there, this nor that. She straddled a liminality invisible even to her. Blair and I never put a name to what she was. We considered many traditions and folklore; we debated their merits, as though putting a name to something like Poppy would prove that she was something capturable, controllable. Was she a dybbuk, a vampire, or a jinn? Maybe she was just a demon, the sort a priest warned me about as a child. It was as though she and her kind had allowed the world brief glimpses of themselves throughout the scattershot of history, and the many generations before us had attempted to do just as we were attempting. We sought to delineate and categorize, to make sense of something inhuman, but not so inhuman that it was impossible to fall in love with.

Blair explained to me how he came to meet Poppy. She had appeared to him in the little hours of a humid evening. He had been taking a piss on the side of the road on his way back to Wheeling when she pulled over in yellow Muntz, almost clipping him.

She stepped out of the driver's seat and slammed the door behind her. Blair swallowed his anger. He thought she was too young to drive, much less be driving on a highway. He noticed bloody stains dress and a red, swollen eye. As cruel as Blair could be, he could also be—on rare occasions—compassionate. So he asked her if she was OK. She produced a knife out of her bra and gestured at the backseat. Blair took a look. Sitting slumped against the right passenger door was the corpse of a man, with his head almost entirely removed. Poppy explained that the man had picked her up with the intention of killing her. She demonstrated the bruising on her neck, and gestured at her eye. But it was a miscalculation on his part. Poppy had gone out that evening because she wanted to know what it would be like to kill someone. She knew when to step forward to the road. When to signal. She had been waiting for him.

Blair helped Poppy hide the body in the woods. What else could he do? Nothing in all his life before this had prepared him for a moment like this. On their walk back to the road, Poppy explained that she had been planning to visit him—that is, Blair—in a week or so, when her father would be out of town, and she could borrow his car. But once she had killed the man, she had a car then and there, and it made sense just to drive out to him directly.

Blair was confused. Poppy recognized this.

“You don't recognize my voice? I've taken your phone call a few times. You're Blair. And I am Joe's daughter.”

They had indeed spoken before, if only in passing on the telephone. He would ask for Joe. She was tease him, asking for a password. Blair did not play games and would



become stern with her. She loved it. Joe was gentle at heart, and she found Blair a challenge. Blair had called Joe on several occasions to talk logistics. Blair had been running the gas station since my disappearance. Remarkably, he had not shared the fact that I was missing with Hankish. The entire operation was to be admired: the girls were all new faces; the interior was redone. Blair had gone by my name to avoid confusion or slip up to Hankish. Somehow, he had been able to manage the entire operation through daily phone calls and a weekly visit. The girls he chose were entirely self-sufficient; he joked that he always knew what to look for in an employee and that I was his only mistake. The income for Hankish had more than doubled. Blair's success shouldn't have surprised me, but it did.

I couldn't understand why he had taken such a risk for me. It's not that I doubted our commitment to one another. I considered Blair to be as close to me as a brother – perhaps closer, given that I had not spoken to any of my actual brothers in five years. But as much as I cared for Blair, I had never seen the potential for great altruism in him. I mentioned before that the one moment of weakness I witnessed in Blair was his decision to keep me on after I was fired from the precinct office. I am not naive: he made that decision out of loneliness more than anything else. He had grown used to my company and couldn't let me go. But this was not the case with the gas station, where he had no reasonable expectation that I would return. He made the choice to run the gas station in my absence out of hope and love.

Blair stayed in Winfield for several weeks. He was seldom far from me. I think he was worried that I would hurt myself or disappear again. And he was right to worry. I was devastated. I did not want any part of this life anymore. I fantasized about moving to

another state and finding something legal and boring to waste the rest of my life on. Blair explained to me, as kindly as he could, that this was impossible. I was in too deep. So deep that I did not even understand how deep I was. Maybe I could leave this life eventually, but I would need to ease out of it, so Hankish did not consider me a liability. I needed to know less and less until I knew nothing relevant. And then I would find a distraction. Another wife, maybe, who has family in Oregon, and they're sick. Some kids. Blair told me that is how it is done.

In my absence, Joe had taken charge of Alma and Nora. When I arrived at the gas station and headed downstairs to my room, I was so grateful not to find them there. There was not even the suggestion that they had been there. The crib. The diapers. The toys. All gone! Even as everything else, from old newspapers to empty beer bottles, remained just as they were a year before. It was remarkable to me how easily I had managed to forget them. I don't think their names crossed my mind but a handful of times for the duration of my absence. I wondered if Joe hated me. I wondered this out loud to Blair, who had followed me downstairs to quietly observe me as I tidied my room.

“Joe thinks you're dead,” he said.

“He told you that?”

“His daughter told me,” said Blair.

“His daughter?”

“Yes. And well, Joe wanted to kill you himself for a long time. He told me that much, at

least. But she mentioned that he's given up hope that you'll ever come back. So you can rest easy."

"How do you know his daughter?"

"She's come around here before. Looking for her dad."

"Call Joe and tell him that I'm alive," I said. "And for the love of God, tell him to keep his daughter away from this place."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I don't think he'll kill me, Blair."

"He for sure wanted to. I heard it in his voice."

"Then it is his right to," I said. "Call him. Please."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"You're still not yourself," said Blair.

"I feel like myself."

"I can't be your keeper anymore," Blair said. His voice was suddenly firm. "If you break down again, I can't promise anything. I need you to think about my needs, too."

"You think I'm broken. That I'm going to lose it."

"I think you're fragile," he corrected. "And not ready for a serious conversation. Can you agree to that, at least?"

I was quiet for a long minute. And then, aware there was no other choice but to agree, agreed.

I made peace with my situation, just as I had done at the asylum. I did the best I could with the resources I could. I settled minor disputes between the girls and clients. I had the downstairs remodeled into a small kitchen and hired a cook to serve burgers, sandwiches, and fries. I painted the outdoor siding. I did all of this without my landlord's consent, who soon sent me a letter of complaint in the mail. I had to repaint the outdoor siding blue. I gave Hankish his cut. I gave Blair a portion of my cut, to thank him. I took the little of my cut and put it in the bank. I had little use for money. I never drove out to the city. I never played cards. I tried to read a lot: mysteries, thrillers. On occasion, the ghost of Valentina would appear. I would drink and try to wish her away. But whenever Blair visited and found me drunk, I would not utter a word about the young, dead woman beside me.

One evening, a few months after my return, one of the girls came downstairs and knocked on my door. She informed me in a soft voice, as though I had been sleeping, that a man was upstairs to see me. She did not have a name. As I reached the top of the stairs, Joe appeared at the threshold and punched me square in the face. I fell backward and must have been out for a minute or two. When I found my bearings and had crawled up the stairs, the girls, the cooks, and the patrons were gone. There was only Joe, sitting at a table by the bar, and Valentina, who followed me like a shadow. I went behind the counter and wet a towel to clean my face. I knew from the stinging that he had broken my nose again. There was blood everywhere I turned. I stood facing him, head bowed. My vision was blurry.

“You're still mad at me,” I observed.

Joe was quiet for an uncomfortably long time.

“You were raising two of my children in this dump, and you never told me,” he began. “And then you hot-footed it out of here. And today, I hear that you’re back. No phone call. No letter. Nothing. I would be willing to overlook it if you hadn’t dumped half a family on me, but no, you don’t get out of this.”

“Blair told me I couldn’t.”

“And is he master over all your decisions?”

“Apparently, yes. But I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” Joe said, standing. He took a step toward me, both fists clenched. I grabbed a steak knife from one of the tables and turned the point toward him.

“I swear to God, if you come at me, I will slit you open,” I warned. Joe stayed as he was. I stumbled past him, still holding the knife, and took a seat at a table. I set down the knife to cradle my face in both hands. “I’m sorry,” I continued. “The fact is that I wouldn’t have been able to write anyone at all for a year. And when I had the opportunity, it was just too difficult. I didn’t want to come back to any of this. But Blair knew where to look and forced me to come back. And he told me not to reach out to you. He said that I was too fragile.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the children?”

“She told me to say nothing to you,” I said simply, unable to say her name while she was standing next to me. “She said they were hers before they were yours. I don’t know, Joe. I wasn’t going to be the one to betray her confidence.”

Joe suddenly was seated beside me. I did not even react.

“I thought you were dead,” he said. “I thought that the man who took over this place had killed you.”

“Blair?”

“Who else. I know what he does for Hankish.”

“Blair is my greatest advocate.”

“Where were you?”

“Somewhere in Massachusetts. In an asylum.”

He nodded.

“And you’re better now?”

“Does it matter?” I sighed. “I’m here, aren’t I?” I raised my eyes to meet his “I heard you are running things for Hankish now.”

“Cars.”

“Oh – that is something,” I said, trying to sound excited. I waited for Joe to elaborate. He said nothing. So, I continued cautiously: “How are they? The children? Did you keep their names?”

“You don’t get to ask me about him,” he said simply.

The door chimed. Poppy stepped inside. It was the first time I saw her, and as I said before, there was nothing particularly remarkable about her presentation. She wore a short blue peter pan collar dress with black penny loafers and matching light blue hose. Her strawberry blonde hair was undone and fell from a straight part over her shoulders in the day’s fashion. While her body had matured, her face was still childlike; not exceptional, nor off-putting, but homely in a way where it was apparently not much care had been taken to shape it into something. It was endearing, in a way.

“It’s cold outside,” she stated curtly.

“Then come in here and sit,” Joseph replied.

“I’m tired. I want to go home.”

“There are beds here,” I offered. Joe gave me a severe look. “Clean ones, for guests with families. If she would like to take a nap.”

She looked me up and down, catching my eyes. Her gaze nauseated me. My mouth went dry. Joe resigned himself. He stood, apparently humiliated by a fifteen-year-old, his own flesh and blood.

“She’s at that age,” he said. “I can’t trust her to be at home alone at night.”

“I got suspended from school,” she said. “And he spends so much money here that he can’t afford to pay someone to watch me.”

“Poppy, mind yourself.”

Joe had raised his voice at his daughter. I couldn’t stand it. My head already felt as though it was going to split open. I suggested or maybe begged that he go home with her and that we continue whatever conversation was left between us over the phone in private. Joe agreed.

I called Blair the same evening and accused him of telling Joe that I was alive and had returned to the gas station after forbidding me to do it on my own. I was distraught at the apparent betrayal and ready to tell him to never come near me again. He denied this and seemed disinterested in the conversation. But when I mentioned Poppy, remarking in disbelief that Joe could have managed to raise such a difficult young woman, he drove four hours from Cincinnati to check on things. Looking me once over, he smiled and

remarked that Joe had done a real number on my face. I saw Blair smile so rarely that it made me uneasy. I let him tape my nose. Blair suggested that I must have had a concussion. I admitted that this was likely the case. He asked a lot about Poppy. What had been her mood? Did she smile? Was she well dressed? They were questions from a grown man that would have startled or at least given me pause, if not for the ringing in my head.

There is little else to write about between my first introduction to Poppy and the moment she made herself known to me. Those weeks were more of the same monotony. But one morning, at daybreak, Poppy found her way into my bedroom at the station. I don't know how, exactly. She was slight enough that she might have managed to slide through one of the small windows I installed to permit a little light into my room. But she could have just as quickly picked open the locks to the main station and let herself into my room by its doorway. I stirred awake and sensed that someone was there with me in the room. I called out for them to identify themselves. Poppy turned on my desk lamp, and I drew a sharp breath in as I tried to make sense of the situation. I was frozen under her shadow.

“Finally, a moment alone,” she sighed. “I reached the limits of my patience weeks ago. But Blair told me to tread gently around you.”

“Is he outside?”

“No.”

It was not the answer I was hoping for.

“What do you want?”



My voice was trembling. I could not explain it.

“You, of course,” she said, approaching my bedside.

“No,” I said.

“Don’t be disgusting,” she said. “I’m not there for that.”

“What, then?” I climbed out of bed. My knees were weak. “Is this about the twins? Did your father send you here? Listen—I can leave again. Your father can have this place and everything in it for all I care. Just tell me, and I’ll go.”

“I’m not here to chase you away,” she said. “I’m here to help you.”

I heard the squeak of the bed sinking. I turned to see its source. It was Valentina. She sat on the edge of the bed. Her eyes were cloudy. Her mouth hung agape. Bright white maggots twisted out of her nose. I remember making a noise like a dying animal. I did not recognize the sound as my own. I collapsed onto the floor and vomited. Poppy pulled me by the scruff of my shirt a safe distance away from the bed. I did not understand where her strength came from. I curled into a tight ball. She placed one of her hands on my forehead and the other on the small of my back. A moment passed, and with it the terror. I was filled with warmth and the sweetness of honey. When she took away her hand from my mouth, my lips tingled. The room was suddenly filled with rosy light. Valentina was gone. We stayed like that for some time. I begged her to keep me where I was. I did not want to see it again.



## TOM

If I had reported the kidnapping and made my relationship with Jack known, it would have been the end of my career. So, I did not call the police. It's difficult for me to admit to this now. But you must understand that even if I did report it, there was no real chance of finding him. I hadn't been able to coax out a last name out of Jack. I had my doubts that Jack was even a real name. All that I remained confident about was that his accent was from the mid-Appalachia region. But the thought that he was dead and bloated in some highway ditch haunted me. I imagined his face filled with dancing maggots. And as the weeks passed, when my mind turned to imagination, his skin had turned to leather under the heat of the sun. He was unrecognizable. And even when I finally allowed myself the fantasy of his yellow bones bleaching to ivory and long grass overtaking his grave, the vision startled me from whatever I was working on, and my heart would race.

For months, I couldn't focus. I slept at most four hours a night, and even these hours were full of terrors. It was difficult to eat. I lost at least twenty pounds. The academy, however, was nearing the end, and in short time I was a federal agent. I was asked about my preference for field agencies: there were some flexibilities. I listed, in order: Los Angeles, Boston, and Pittsburgh. My reason? I had none. Those cities seemed more or less the opposite of where I had grown up and earned my education, and I wanted new experiences. I was assigned to Pittsburgh. I purchased a house and moved over one weekend. I set out my books on tall shelves built into the living room walls. I

organized the pots and pans neatly, with ease of access, preparing for meals I would never cook. I set out the chess set with the pieces in neat alignment.

My work was tedious but bearable. I was shuffled into the organized crime division and assigned to work on intelligence based on an aptitude exam. By and large organized crime was our primary pursuit in Pittsburgh. There was the presence of the La Rocca crime family, and on occasion, the Buffalino and Gaminbo families. This was before there were major wars: in the sixties, it was still common for the families to work together in mutual interests. I was tasked with verifying claims made by informants or suspects during interviews. For example, if a suspect said he couldn't have been at the so-or-so place because he took his daughter to violin lessons each Friday afternoon, I would designate an agent to trail him and confirm that he took his daughter to violin lessons each Friday afternoon. And if he didn't, I would mark that in the file. Little things, little lies, sometimes yielded significant leads or at least something you could use to coerce someone to offer up a lead. But on slow weeks, I found myself tasked with condensing stacks of intelligence reports into one document and then faxing them to other relevant field offices, mainly to Philadelphia. My only complaint was that it became predictable very quickly—there were always the same names, the same stories, and we couldn't do anything. This was before RICO. Even if we managed to make an arrest or secure a conviction, it was always the low-level sort that no one in the families would miss.

I tried to find meaning elsewhere. I made an active effort to engage with my local community for the first time. I joined a Lutheran church, even though I did not believe in God, and regularly attended until the sermons became as predictable as my intelligence reports. I accepted any and all dinner invitations offered by my neighbors. I dated a few

women. I went on fishing trips with coworkers, a few duck hunts, and even a bird-watching expedition for some rare species that did not materialize for us. Nothing worked out. I was well-liked. I was always invited back. But none of it gave me any pleasure. Even in the rare moments when I could forget myself to a good laugh, the rush lasted but a minute or two, and then I was back to the monotony of it all. It was impossible not to feel alone.

One evening, as I sat finishing a microwave dinner, a thought occurred to me—the chess set. I'd befriended a man named Robert, who worked in the fingerprint division. I brought the chess pieces to him; I had not played the set since before Jack was taken, and it seemed probable to me that his prints would still be on them. Maybe there would be a match. I told Robert that I wanted them dusted and sent for identification. I explained that at least some of them would match my file in the same breath. God bless him, Robert did not even ask – he only said, “It would make it easier for the main office and me if you could give me a reference for her. That way, I wouldn't even need to send it in. A hairbrush, maybe, or curling iron.” It took me a moment to catch his meaning. I imagine many men had passed through his office with the odd tool or gadget after suspecting a cheating wife. I suggested that he had misunderstood me and insisted they be sent in for proper identification. Robert shrugged, ran the prints, and sent them out.

And I waited.

I once explained to Poppy the importance of fingerprints and what we had learned to do with them in the short span of a century. I described the massive underground complex in DC, where the fingerprints of anyone and everyone deemed noteworthy were kept, organized into labeled cabinets. There were miles of these cabinets. And women

were fluttering about like bees, pulling cards with prints marked as matches to the arches, loops and whorls of whatever had been sent in and analyzed by the men with magnifying glasses. She thought it was the silliest thing in the world. It wasn't the scene I described. Instead, it was the idea that some crime or deed could follow someone for an entire lifetime. That someone might absently reach for a doorknob and be matched to that exact moment thirty years later. She thought it was something not unlike magic, a trick that even went beyond the influence she held over time. Opening her hands, she held them out to me, pink palms up, and asked if they seemed human to me. I agreed they did. She remarked how unfair it was to humankind that she could commit whatever casual atrocities she wanted and, in short time, slip into another set of hands, a clean slate.

I asked her how many sets of hands she had gone through. How many fingers? She told me she did not remember exactly. It was in the low two-hundreds.

“Hands or fingers?”

“Hands.”

I told her this was almost too incredible for me to believe. And this, even after she had demonstrated her tricks and convinced me the reality I had placed my faith in for twenty-something years was unstable.

“When were you born?”

“I wasn't born, at least not like this,” she explained. “I came into being.”

“But when?”

“I'm not sure. We didn't have metals. I was a slave. But we did not think of enslaved people as slaves then. It was a temporary position, an extension of the same hierarchy everyone suffered.”

“And you remember all of your lives?”

“Of course not,” she laughed. “I remember bits and pieces.” I was disappointed. She must have sensed it, as she continued, with a reassuring voice: “Tom, believe me, it’s been so tedious. I’ve been a slave many times and, on occasion, a mistress. I’ve enjoyed wealth beyond measure. But I have known poverty. I once saw two of my children – twin boys, the firstborn – starve to death before me, and I could do nothing for them. I’ve belonged to many peoples, empires, and kingdoms, and worshiped many different gods; sometimes, I even believed in them. I remember what is necessary. It would be horrible to remember everything and so much worse to remember everything all at once. How could I focus on surviving in this world, which all its changing expectations and standards? Languages tend to stay with me – but many are dead or too archaic to use in the modern era. I retain skills. I could weave you a lovely flax tunic. I remember how to cook out the bitter taste of an auroch’s liver. But life biographies, they are insignificant. Whom I married, the number of my issue, their names, my names – I cannot recall most after a handful of generations. But my companions – the ones I bring into my fold, I never forget them, even if I sometimes wish I could. It is the one human thing about me.”

As Poppy spoke those final words, she glanced down at her hands, which she had folded demurely in her lap.

“You’ve had as many names as hands,” I suggested.

“No. I frequently reuse my names. Whenever I can. Of course, names eventually become outdated. Tastes change. Poppy is new. I don’t like it very much. It was my husband’s choice. Joe’s choice.”

“Is the name you began with still used?”

“No. I imagine it has not been spoken for at least four millennia. Probably longer.”

“What was it?”

“It’s a secret,” she said. “There’s great power in names, or there was. The world lost its magic at some point. But the magic in mine is still there. I think it is a pretty name. It has always been my favorite. No one today would admire it. The first language I spoke, well, it did not have a name. But all the vowels were very low in the throat.” She looked at me and smiled. “But Tom. Tom is another story. Tom is a very boring name.”

Robert sent me a memo three weeks later. There had been a match to the set of prints.

In his office, he scolded me.

“You didn’t tell me this was official business,” he said, passing a fat envelope. “Next time, follow protocol, or I’ll report you. I should have put a rush on this.”

I nodded, offered an apology, and returned to my desk with the envelope. The match on file was to a set of prints lifted from an intercepted shipment of pornographic movie reels in 1962. A record salesman had been selling them under the counter in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and an entire crate, still nailed shut, was discovered in the backroom of his store. He claimed to have purchased several crates from some anonymous gentleman whose name he could no longer recall. It was his first offense. The films were confiscated, and he was fined for obscenity. The report suggested that the confiscated films were likely related to mob activity in Wheeling, West Virginia, due to confiscations in that area of the same film and the same type of crate. There was a name:



Paul Hankish. The name was vaguely familiar. He was considered an associate of the Pittsburgh crime family, albeit a low-ranking one.

The same evening, I noted in the intelligence report: PAUL HANKISH OF WHEELING– POSSIBLE PHILADELPHIA CONNECTION. SEND RELEVANT FILES TO PITTSBURGH FOR REVIEW.

This was, of course, pure conjecture. I had no reasonable reason to believe that Paul Hankish was at all involved in organized crime families that ran Philadelphia, and as a matter of fact, he was not. And it would have been difficult for me to explain to any superior if they cared enough to ask why this name, in particular, was significant enough to request personally, knowing that doing so would mean extra work over the weekend to meet the 8 AM Monday deadline. But I knew no one would. And I knew this was the only feasible way forward if I wanted to find Jack.

## CORA

When I stepped back inside the cabin, I found that Blair had taken my seat and was admiring the elk skull hanging just above him. Jack sat near him, quietly, with his chin cradled in his hands. It was as though the excitement of their reunion had left them deflated and at a loss for words. Jack did not raise his eyes to meet me, but Blair turned and studied me intently, with a gentleness that didn't suit him. I took a seat across from the both of them and placed my hands on the table, palm down. I meant it to be a gesture of peace. Of apology. Look, I come before you unarmed. Tom disappeared again outside.

"I didn't realize ghosts could sit down," I said.

"I don't need to. But it's polite."

"So, you're corporeal."

"If I choose to be."

I let out a small laugh. I assumed we were both in on the joke now. He was teasing me. I took a small delight in the fact. I thought it was a strange feeling – I only rarely felt delight. It was, perhaps, too strong of an emotion for me, whose baseline rested somewhere between apathy and disinterest. The experience of a strong emotion always made me feel dirty. Tom returned inside carrying a metal box, corroded on the outside to a scaly skin of rust. His pants were dirty now, and the flesh under his fingernails darkened with quarter-moons of soil. He set the box on the table and tricked it open with a knife, which he borrowed from the kitchen. Inside was another box, this one neat and shiny; he flipped some numbers into a combination lock, and it opened.

During all of this, Jack and Blair watched with muted curiosity but said nothing, as though these sorts of endeavors happened on the daily, and neither had the energy to scold or question him. It was only when Tom took out the papers that Jack's betrayed recognition and dread. The papers were yellowed and brittle, held together in several sections with bind clips. I could make out the shape of fading typewriter ink and coffee stains. Tom handed it to me. I received it and flipped through the pages.

"Tom – is that..." Jack managed, stumbling on his words.

"It's my mother's story," I replied before he could finish.

Jack reacted, reaching to take the papers away from me. I snatched them away and pushed my chair back from the table.

"My mother's story," I warned. "My story."

Blair laughed.

"You were supposed to destroy them," said Jack, addressing Tom. "We both agreed it was a mistake to write them. Even her mother agreed. You said you would."

"I know."

"And here they are."

"I lied to you," Tom admitted. "I couldn't bring myself to do it. We both had put so much effort into the project. Before it, I hadn't written so much as a diary entry – and then, I created what I did. I had spoken honestly for the first time in my life."

"We wrote down very personal things in those pages. And now, she is holding them."

"And yet, when we wrote candidly about all those things, we wrote them with her in mind," said Tom, gesturing at me. "At one time, we thought she deserved to know

everything about us, our lives, and her mother's life – because it was all part of her story and where she came from. And yes, of course, there was Poppy.”

“We wrote those things, thinking we would die,” Jack hissed. “And we thought that by the time she got her hands on it—if she got her hands on it—we would be long gone.”

“Why does that change things? If we are alive, dead—what does it matter?”

“It matters because it is easier for the dead to be honest about what they have done. And it is terrible for the living.”

“Have I hurt you, Jack?” said Tom, earnest. When Jack did not reply, Tom looked at me and offered an embarrassed smile. “Cora, may I have that back? I’m afraid I’ve crossed a boundary.”

“Not a chance,” I said.

“If I may,” said Blair, reaching across the table and patting the place where, just a moment ago, I had set my hands. With hesitation, I placed the papers down on the table, keeping a hand on them. He placed his own over mine. It was ice-cold. “I have read these letters,” he continued. “Stories. Diaries. Whatever they are. I read them from beginning to end. In fact, I watched them both type them out over a few days. And I know this will not answer the questions you have.”

“And what questions do you think I have?”

“I know your questions. You are my daughter, and I am a ghost. There are no secrets between us. Your mother didn’t share anything about her history with you. But you’ve always wanted access to her history because you believe yourself to be a casualty of it in your heart. Maybe you haven’t admitted that to yourself yet, but that is the gist of

what you are feeling. We are all aware of your unique condition. No pain, no fear. But unfortunately for you, you're intelligent and understand you are missing something. It's bothered you for years. Because it's not only fear and pain. You don't understand what relief is like. You don't understand jealousy, envy, gratitude, or even love because you have never feared losing something or becoming lost yourself. But all of this must be replaced with something. And so, it's replaced with frustration. And you want to blame your situation on someone. You want, even, to correct it—and who wouldn't? I am not blaming you. But you won't find a cure in these letters. And you won't find anyone to blame in these letters. The problem with these letters is that it presents every choice as one made of causality and not the intention. It is just two men trying very hard to prove that they are not monsters. You are an afterthought. And you don't have time for all of this, anyway. Your time on this earth is short.”

Blair meant to continue, but I interrupted.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that you are going to die soon. As a ghost, I know these things.”

“It's not funny anymore,” I said. “That joke.”

“Well, I don't have much experience with humor,” he admitted. I did not move my eyes from his, even as I felt the papers slip away from me. Once Blair had them, he bounced their edges against the table to level them out. “I will tell you what you need to know. And I will speak honestly.”

“Fine,” I said. “Then begin. Now.”

Blair nodded.

“Tom—do you still have your tape recorder?”

Tom took a moment to consider.

“I have a tape recorder.”

“Then get it out,” said Blair, smiling at me with teeth. “I want my go at this.”

## JACK

After I calmed down, she helped me back into bed. She arranged the sheets over me and kissed my forehead, as tender as a mother. I slept soundly and dreamed dreams so bright that I mistook them for heaven. And in the morning, she was gone. The room was in disarray. An antique crystal decanter that had survived at least three generations of my father's family was shattered on the floor. I was so bewildered that I did not even react as I cut my foot on a shard. I found Blair upstairs in the kitchen. He had sent away all the staff and marked the front door with a closed sign. The first he said to me was: how much did she tell you? And she had told me nothing. That night her only purpose was to mark me as hers, as she had done to Blair, arriving before him with a knife and a corpse for show. She knew the key to each of our hearts. She knew where to strike.

Blair was breathless in his confession to me. Poppy, he claimed, was the beginning and end of everything. He acknowledged that I would want to doubt her, that it was my nature, but everything she would say would be true. She offered the two of us an incredible gift: we could live forever. What Blair meant was: youth, health, and time. And I could not wrap my mind around why anyone would want to stay a moment longer in this world than they had to. And even after what I had seen, and even as Blair, the most reasonable man I knew, presented at my gas station in a cultish fervor, I found reason to doubt.

“She could be a demon,” I said. “She could even be the devil.”

I felt confident in this possibility. There were demons in the Bible. And I was, after all, a confirmed Catholic and still marked myself as Catholic on demographic surveys, even though I had not stepped inside a church in fifteen years.

“It doesn’t matter what she is,” he said, sitting across from me. “If she decides she wants you, you’re already hers.”

“I hardly recognize you,” I remarked. “Where is all of this coming from?”

I was aware from sensationalist newspaper articles of the trend of people young and old falling for parlor tricks, the bright orange robes and melodic chants that promised a truth belonging to a purer, less culpable culture. It was, after all, the height of the Vietnam War and the peak of disillusionment. People—from all walks of life; rich, poor, educated or not, family men, wild women—would simply disappear or take long road trips and refuse to return from them. It was a fantasy to me, almost desirable. But seeing this same fervor in Blair concerned me. Blair was supposed to be immune to these sorts of passions. I did not want to lose him to anyone.

“She’s performed miracles,” he said. “I’ve seen them.”

“What miracles?”

“She will show them to you herself.”

“I don’t have time for that. She doesn’t have any control over us, Blair. I could go downstairs and put a bullet in my head. She could not stop me.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would, if for no other reason than to prove the stupidity of this conversation.

Whatever



she did last night—if she is not a demon, which is far as I am willing to go—was some sort of trick. She must have drugged me. She took advantage of my vulnerability. Christ, Blair, you do the same to people all the time – it is your job; how are you so blind when those same tricks are played on you?”

“She’s offering us an opportunity, Jack.”

“Ok. How often do I need to chant her name before I piss gold?”

Blair drew in a sharp breath. I could see that I had offended him.

“I’ve been offered opportunities before,’ I continued gently. “You know this better than

anyone. And none of them have worked in my favor. So, forgive me if I approach all of this with skepticism.”

If Blair understood this, his expression did not betray it.

“She showed me visions, Jack. She took my hand and showed me the past. It was as real

As anything.”

“And what incredible things did she show you?”

“A little village from many years ago; it was night, and everyone was wearing these colorful cloaks. And then came out young men in dresses with pointed shoes, there was fire, it was a festival. And then an old salt mine with men mining it. And a mammoth.”

“A mammoth?”

Blair slammed his hand on the counter. The silverware jumped.

“Take me seriously,” he said. “Yes, a mammoth.”

“It’s difficult to take you seriously,” I said, swallowing a laugh. “But I am. I apologize.”

“Ask her a question,” said Blair. “Ask her anything. It will convince you. It doesn’t matter what you ask. She will have an answer for it. She knew things about myself that only I would know.”

“And how do you think she knew?”

“She knows things,” he emphasized. “She can see right through us.”

What a strange place to be, I thought to myself. This girl, this Poppy, had hooked him. It was within the realm of possibility that she was recruiting him for someone else. In any case, I never imagined that I would be the rational one out of the two of us. And what if Hankish were to learn about Blair’s behavior? If Blair lost his mind, he would become a liability. I wasn’t prepared for this. What would he have done for me? He would not let me leave his sight. He would confine me in this gas station, take away the guns and sharp objects, and be a constant companion. So, I recognized that I had already failed him that morning. But I also was no match for him. He would have snapped me like a twig if I had tried to bar him from leaving.

I considered that I might be looking at this the wrong way. Perhaps Blair was too embarrassed to admit the reality of the situation: that he had been duped. And if he could convince me to make the same mistakes as he did, to fall for the same trap, it wouldn’t be so difficult for him to recover his pride.

I had been ready to call Joe, knowing that he could address this behavior at the source. But I decided Blair just needed space. There was time to see, at least.

I called the staff to come back in, opened the shop, and tidied my room. It took me some time to gather the courage to dress my wounded foot. I was someone to dread the sight of blood. Once the chores were done and I had settled, I found a cigar box on my desk. I did not recognize it. It was not a brand we sold at the station. I opened it. My legs grew weak, and I collapsed back into my chair. Inside was a dead chickadee.

I have omitted some things from my story, Cora. But not out of shame. It is not easy to shape a narrative. The more I write, the more I realize that the significance of events is rarely discovered in the order in which the events happened. I have made use of shortcuts and suggested cause and effect when at the time of the experience, neither cause nor effect suggested themselves to me. I have gestured forward with a false smile, but I worry that this has made a liar out of me. I must write about Tom.

I did not escape the asylum on my own. I was kidnapped by a young man named Tom. But I let myself be kidnapped. I understood the risks. I knew that Tom might have been sent by the mob, that Hankish had finally tracked me down to the asylum and decided to make sure I could never talk. Or maybe Tom was the sort of guy that took pleasure in killing vulnerable men. I decided that even this was better than slowly dying in the asylum. But he did not. Instead, he opened his doors to me and was generally an agreeable roommate.

I didn't like him at first. As good of a man as Tom could be, he always held himself in a higher opinion than any of his actions or talents could justify. He was unforgivingly blind to his shortcomings. But I came to admire him, if for no other reason than him being such a gentle spirit. One morning a chickadee found its way into our

apartment through an open window. In desperation, it flew from wall to wall, crashed against a mirror, and finally sat defeated in a foyer hallway. I went to get a frying pan, meaning to kill it. A blue jay attacked me as a child, and I have never liked birds since. But before I could kill the chickadee, Tom knelt down and scooped it up with a handkerchief. He perched it at the window. The bird hesitated a moment, as though to consider its options—our apartment, the world—and then was gone. I'm sure Tom thought little of this: the event was not mentioned or remembered in any of our conversations, and I don't recall remarking anything when it happened. I simply put the frying pan away. But it was one moment of many that turned my affection towards him.

And now, someone had left a dead chickadee. I thought: it's true, then. Poppy had drugged me. And I must have talked about Tom. My belly filled with heavy stones. What else had I said?

I made an eight-hour drive to Norfolk.

I arrived in the little hours of morning. The sun had not yet risen, and the grass was still wet with dew. It was humid. Joe lived in an unassuming trailer near the naval base, beside a quarry lake that smelled like sulfur. He moved in after his wife passed on: staying in the house was out of the question, and he had needed something quick. I assumed he must have more money now. I never knew him to have a gambling problem. And I had always been surprised he never chose to upgrade to at the very least a modest house once his paychecks became regular. But for whatever reason, he had not.

His lot was familiar to me. I had visited before – a quick stop when Poppy was perhaps nine or ten. I knew through the grapevine that Joe was out on some run for Hankish. There was no sign of his car. But through the window, I noticed the slight

silhouette of a young woman. I slammed open the front door. A step inside, and I had already confronted her. Poppy was sitting now at a small table, attending to a pile of mathematics homework. She was dressed in her school uniform, a skirt with a scalloped hem that fell to her knees, a tan vest, and a forest green tie. Her hair was in a high bun. She looked at me strangely – not with surprise but with a sense of bemusement.

“You’re early,” she said.

I could have strangled her then and there. I could have slapped her. But I could not bring myself to terrify her in the way I knew I might. I stood at the threshold and collected myself.

“Listen closely because I won’t repeat it: this stops here,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re after or how you’ve managed it all, but you won’t step foot in Winfield from here on. You won’t reach out to me. You won’t say a word to Blair. If he calls you, you will refuse his call. If he comes here, you will turn him away. If he refuses to leave, you will tell your father that he is harassing you. And whatever you think you know about my life, I promise that I have twice as much on your father. Either of us could take out a hit on him or you. I won’t hesitate to. And I dare you to tell Joe about this conversation. He won’t believe a goddamn thing that comes out of your mouth. Are we clear?”

“Come and sit down,” she suggested.

“I have nothing more to say,” I said, turning to leave.

Poppy leaped up from her seat.

“I like this, this decisiveness,” she said, following me with quick steps outside. “I always knew you had this potential. You play the quiet part for everyone, but you’re angry inside. And if you had the right tools, if there were no consequences, you’d

slaughter half this city, just to make a statement.” I felt her hands on my arm, as hot as an iron. “It feels good, doesn’t it? Letting out your anger?”

Up until this point, my anger had directed me. But I was primed for terror, and her touch ignited me. I drew my revolver and set the tip of its barrel against her chest. I aimed directly at her heart. And I shot her. It was reflexive, like snapping away a hand from a hot handle or turning from a headlight. I drew in a short breath. I looked at Poppy. She stepped away from me with registration in her eyes. My hand was stinging. I looked to discover it was bleeding. I tried to make a fist. I could not. I dropped the gun. The bullet had turned against me. My thumb and two fingers were hanging by threads. Poppy knelt to retrieve the weapon. I felt nauseous and grew suddenly faint. She seized my elbow and repeated, very matter-of-factly: “Come sit down.”

She led me inside. I took a seat at the table. She pushed her math book, notes, and pencils onto the floor and fetched a towel from the kitchen. I was quiet as she tied it around my hand. After it had reddened, she fetched another. And another. I set my forehead on the table. I was unable to feel it. The adrenaline was still raging. I thought that I should not be sitting there. I should go to the hospital.

“You will need to go,” she said. “To the hospital. These fingers cannot be saved.”

“You’re a monster,” I observed.

“If you would have asked, I would have told you as much.” She shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could heal this. It’s not that I won’t. I can’t.”

“I need that hand.”

“You are left-handed. And left-eye dominant. Why do you shoot with your right?”

I looked at her, speechless.

“You were taught that way,” she continued. “Blair taught you. Because he is right-handed, and he never thought to accommodate you. But now, you will shoot more accurately.” She took a seat beside me. I flinched. “I wish you would have cooperated. I would have shown you visions as I did for Blair. He wanted to see all the furry creatures that lived here before people did. And then he wanted to see people. They were simple requests, straightforward and quiet. It was something a little boy would ask for. I knew that yours would be more demanding. You have an old soul. You would want to see something from the age of great men, something important, that you could later pick out of a history book and compare against your vision. But I suppose this will do well enough. You aimed a gun at me. And I made the bullet turn toward you. And you’ve lost a hand.”

The blood had slowed.

“What are you?”

“I don’t have a word for you,” she shrugged. “There is none to give. It was never important to us. But I can give you my reasons for courting you two. I want you and Blair to mind me when I am vulnerable. Not like parents. Or siblings. Or guards. Not like servants, even. I want you to be just as you are, two devoted companions, devoted to one another as devoted as you will be to me.” Here she paused and drank me up with her eyes. “You’re confused. You are thinking, she is perfectly capable of defending herself. I was today, yes. But that’s not always the case. It’s dangerous for me to be alone. And I have been living dangerously for the better part of a century.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. All you need to do is agree to stay with me, and I will make your life beautiful. It’s all that Blair has promised. You’ll be able to go anywhere. You can become anyone you’d like. All the things that keep you from happiness right now will be inconsequential. Give me the word, and I’ll deliver Hankish’s head on a platter. I’ll make this world a safe place for you.”

I was resigned now. I grasped at anything I could.

“How would you kill Hankish?”

She leaned in close.

“I could rip off his head.”

“No.”

“I could make him die slowly from an illness,” she said. “He’ll have to think about it for months.”

“You don’t have that kind of power,” I dismissed.

“You’re right – I don’t. But you don’t want him to die, do you? That’s what’s special about you. It’s one of the things that sets you apart from Blair. You don’t want to see anyone hurt. Sure, you’d take out half a city, but you’d feel guilty about it.” She caught my eyes. I could not look away. “Well? Give me an answer. Will you accept my gift? There is only one answer I will accept.”

“Yes,” I said. And after some time, I repeated: “Yes.”

And it was done.

“I will reward you with a vision, as I did with Blair,” she said. “If you give me a time, I cannot promise a place. And if you give me a place, I cannot promise a time. But I promise you something.”



“I don’t want anything.”

“Nonsense. Choose.”

“Must I?”

“Yes.”

I considered.

“I want to see the beginning of things.”

“The beginning of what?”

“I don’t know. Just the beginning.”

She considered for a moment and then took my hands into hers. I cried out in pain. And then, it no longer hurt. My hands were numb.

“I will get you as close to the beginning as possible,” she said.

## TOM

I don't know what stars aligned, but I found my way onto the Paul Hankish case.

Philadelphia gobbled up my theory. An intelligence expert at their field office had suspected that Hankish had his hands in the city for some time. A car brought into an auto shop in Philadelphia for detail work was discovered to be stolen out of West Virginia. Police traced its previous sale back to a confidential informant, a negro nicknamed 'Apples,' who identified the 'no legs man' as an associate of his boss, Leo Calandros. Hankish had, only two years earlier, had his legs blown off in a car bombing, so we were able to connect the dots. Calandros was already under investigation for the interstate transport of stolen merchandise, so the suggestion the two had colluded was not so unbelievable. But Apples redacted the story and claimed he had lied to get the agents off his back. The harassment had nearly cost him a wife. So they sent him to prison and called it a day.

But there was a file on Calandros active in Philadelphia, a file on Hankish, and an allegedly respected agent who once suggested a connection between the two. And now, a second if not as well-respected intelligence agent in Pittsburg had suggested the same connection, apparently arriving at the conclusion independently. They did not even ask *why* I suggested there was a connection – the declaration that there may be one was enough to make them relook at the situation. And then it was a big deal—a sophisticated auto theft ring between Hankish and Calandros. Everyone was concerned with the Italians when the middle easterners and Greeks were running the show. And I was the designated intelligence expert in Pittsburg. I deserved it: I had found this case.

All the reports were under my jurisdiction. A secretary transcribed recorded interviews in the evening hours and had them on my desk by morning. I would read them and identify potential persons of interest from the names mentioned. I would then pass on this information to a subordinate agent, who would determine the subject's home address, phone number, and place of work. It was clear from the beginning that my impressions were not entirely misguided. And as the investigation deepened, the syndicate revealed itself to be one of the most complex rings that had come out of West Virginia. The Richmond and Philadelphia field offices could locate sixteen more luxury vehicles in four separate states, all traced back to the Wheeling area. One had been fished out of a river, two were discovered abandoned in a forest, and the rest had been sold to unsuspecting buyers. We found one informant who (in exchange for clemency from any future discoveries found in our investigation) claimed that he helped broker a deal between Hankish and Calandros to purchase several hundred dollars worth of women's dresses stolen out of Ohio. And that was only the top of it. There were new names every day. But none were Jack. I asked for the recordings of the interviews. I listened for his voice. Strangers, all of them. No mention of a man with a mismatch of a brown and blue eye.

It occurred that while I had been right about a criminal connection, I could have been wrong about Jack's involvement. The fingerprints may have been a red herring. I was chasing ghosts. And by this time, Jack was becoming little more than a ghost to me. I could not even remember the sound of his voice. So I buried myself in my work and pushed him to the back of my mind.

But one day – well over a year into this investigation—a few details in the transcript of one interview gave me pause: the man being interviewed, a film salesman,

mentioned there was a known pornography studio in Kentucky, once led by a madam, Carla Dellerba, that Hankish was rumored to have executed three years prior. In retaliation, a hitman was sent to kill a man named John Bruno, who at the time was Hankish's top producer of pornography in West Virginia. When pressed for more about Bruno, he said he had never met him and didn't know much about him. But he did remember the name of the truck stop Bruno reportedly ran: Myrtle's Truck Shop in Winfield, West Virginia.

This was hardly enough to justify the excitement. A man named John Bruno. *John* Bruno—not even Jack. A service station. Pornography. But it was a Wednesday evening, and I decided that I would be sick Thursday morning.

I often consider how different would have played out if I'd only glanced at that page or given no thought to the name called John Bruno. Or if I had written the file number and page down on a note, passed it to my assistant, and forgotten my suspicion by lunchtime. I remember stepping inside the truck stop in my office suit, weaving through the tables, and placing my hands palm down on the bar. A young woman, probably underage, was working the counter. She asked if she could help me. I told her that I was looking for John. I was an old friend. She said there was no John who worked there. Did I mean Jack? Yes, I said. Jack. She called out to him from where we were standing, her voice reaching downstairs: when Jack turned at the top of the stairs and saw me, he was quiet.

I returned the silence in full. Then I took a step toward him, and another, until I stood very close to him. I could not read his face. He glanced down the stairs, and even after so

long, I knew exactly what he was telling me to do. I followed him downstairs and turned into his room. And he followed me. And shut the door. And locked the door. And we fell into bed together. There were no questions. No hesitation. No sense that the situation was impossible and that out of all the billions of people in the world, I had managed to find this one person in this tiny room. We tore at one another. It was violence. I tasted blood. My lips bled openly. Jack had bitten them. I felt his teeth at the nape of my neck. His hands seized my wrists in a vice.

And when we had finished, I wept. It was like a spirit possessing me. Jack got out of bed and padded naked around the room, recovering his clothing. Holding them in a bundle against his chest, he stood in front of the bed.

“Why are you here?” he demanded.

“I’ve been looking for you for almost two years,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“But *why*?” he repeated. “What are you expecting out of this?”

I couldn’t follow his sudden change of mood. There was anger in his voice.

“I wanted to make sure you were OK,” I said. “I wanted to let you know that I was still here.”

“You knew I was here.”

“I suspected it.”

“And instead of calling, you drove here.”

“Yes.”

“You have no idea what you’re walking into,” he said. “You have to leave.”

“I’ve come a long way. I’m not leaving so soon.”

Jack turned away and slipped on his clothing. He struggled to button his shirt. I noticed his right hand: it was mutilated, with only the thumb and pinky remaining. A bright pink scar marked his palm like a stigma. I told him to come to me. He did, as if out of habit. I buttoned his shirt. I wanted to ask about his hand but held my tongue.

“You must be a federal agent by now,” Jack said. “I’m sure that had no small part in how you managed to find me.” I said nothing. Jack continued: “I’m sure there’s a file on me. You must have read it and thought, ‘this man can’t be the same man I knew. But maybe so. I guess I’ll go see for myself.’”

“There wasn’t any file, Jack.”

“Then tell me why you are here.”

“I’ve already said why,” I said, raising my voice. Its tone caught his attention. “Is it so difficult to believe that I would come looking for you? I thought you were dead. You can’t imagine the guilt. I didn’t even have a name. I didn’t have anything. And just the thought of seeing you again – of at least, being able to look you in the face and say goodbye.”

“But you understand what you’ve walked into. What I’m doing in this gas station.”

“So it’s a front, Jack. I don’t care. Truly, it’s my job to care, and I don’t.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“I thought we were friends,” I said.

“Friends?”

“I thought you loved me.”

“What did you think was going to happen? Did you think I would pack my bags and run away with you?”

“No.”

“Just how far do you think we’d get? I’d be dragged back here within an hour, and you’d be dead in a ditch before we cleared the state lines.”

“I didn’t come with any expectations. I just wanted to see you.”

“You’ve seen me,” he declared.

“Jack,” I said softly, recognizing his hurt, “I’m not here to judge you.”

Jack nodded.

“So go back to your life, then. And I’ll stay here in mine.”

“Your house is on fire,” I said. “This can’t last.”

“You’re too late for talk like that,” he said.

“What talk?”

“‘Your house is on fire.’ Are you worried about me? Did you come all this way to protect me?” He slipped on his pants. “None of that’s necessary now. I don’t need your help.”

“I’m offering more than help,” I said. “Look, whatever you’re involved with, I can get you out of it. There are programs now for people like you. You could have a new life if you came clean. You could start over. A clean slate.”

Jack laughed and shook his head.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because I’ve heard those words before,” he said.

“You can trust me.”

“Don’t deceive yourself, Tom,” he said. “This is more about you than it is about me.”

“It could be about us,” I admitted. “But only if you wanted it to be.”

“There it is!”

“I am being earnest.”

“You really believe there’s a place for us in this world.”

“There has to be,” I said.

“Well, here is it,” he said, gesturing toward the bed. “Is this everything you imagined?”

“You’re being cruel.”

Jack, to his credit, recognized this.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to do with you,” he admitted. “Nothing had prepared me for this.” He stopped to consider his words. “The fact of the matter is that my life is already over, Tom. You can’t save it. I can’t save it. I stay here – I do what I’m tasked with—because I have to. There is nowhere else to go. Nowhere I can run. I’m on my deathbed, and your bureau is the least of my worries. And no one ever wants to be here. No one wants to be in my situation. But where, realistically, could I go to hide from it?”

“Are you ill?”

“Not in the way you are thinking,” he said. “I appreciate you. I do. But you’ve Come too late. You need to let go of this idea of me.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re a fool, then,” he said.



Jack again requested that I leave. This time he spoke gently. And this time, I made no protest.

I called in ill to work three days in a row. I claimed a bad case of the flu. No one pressed me. A team of new agents was ready to take on my duties in the meantime. They wanted an opportunity to make a good impression. I played the sick role. I seldom left my bed. I tried to sleep but would feel myself falling and jolt suddenly awake. My thoughts raced, and I could feel the pit in my stomach growing, growling like a hungry animal.

Look—I am not proud of it. But this is the only time in my life that I truly lost sight of myself. Madness boiled over. I saw signs everywhere. Everything was speaking to me. Go to him, said the voices. Protect him.

I decided on something reckless. I drove overnight to Winfield, arriving sometime in the little hours. But I did not go inside the service station; instead, I staked out in a tractor-trailer park across the street. I positioned myself so that I could see everyone who entered and exited the station. And finally, a little before dusk, I saw Jack leave the station and slip into a car. I had been trained at the academy on how to trail cars and followed him down the highway, some thirty miles north into the city of Point Pleasant, careful to keep two cars between us at a minimum. I stayed some ways back after he turned down a street marked as dead-end: he had come to a stop at a ranch-style home toward the middle of the road.

Jack let himself inside. I considered that this must be his house. It was well-tended, with a small garden out front. It seemed something that would suit him. Or it may be the home of an associate. Or maybe it was a lover's house, the man that had replaced

me. In any case, it was a tether to this place, this life. So I would make him appreciate the sincerity of my resolve. I had never killed a man. I had never even needed to carry my issue service weapon before, but now it was heavy in my hands, and I had it in my mind to take out the entirety of his associates. Not one or two, but every such name on the list I had compiled at the field office. I would fill Hankish up with lead. I would beat him to death with a hammer. I would lock him and his family in their home and burn it to the ground. All of this for Jack.

I opened the front door and stepped inside. As soon as I turned a corner, I saw Jack sitting at the conversation pit's head. To the left of Jack stood a man in a leather coat, his gun aimed directly at me. I recognized the man as the same who had once already stolen Jack away from me. To his right sat a young woman in a pink peony dress. It was Poppy.

“Lower your gun, Blair,” said Poppy to the man. He obeyed her, even as I still held mine on him. She looked sideways at Jack. “You didn’t mention that he was a lunatic.”

Jack looked at me. He looked at Poppy.

“He isn’t.”

The man Blair glanced down at Jack.

“He is not,” Jack repeated, meeting his eyes, more defiant now.

“Lower your gun,” Blair told me.

I considered. And the situation as absurd as it was, I did.

“And you’re sure that this is your choice?” said Poppy to Jack.

“Yes,” said Jack.

“Fine, then. So long as it makes you happy.” Poppy patted the cushion beside her. I hesitated. “Come sit, Tom. I’m not here to hurt you. I’ve come here to carve out a place for you two in this world.”

It should not surprise you, Cora, that Poppy convinced me that same evening of her divinity. She need only take my hand. Her warmth fell over me like a shroud, and every worry or doubt that had ever cautioned me vanished all at once. Angel, or monster, I did not care. She was to me in that moment of exhalation. So, I did not prove the same challenge to her as Jack. Unlike him, I have always been able to easily convince myself of things, which pleased her. It endeared me to her, I think. Be patient, she told me. And in return for my patience, she would lay the world at my feet.

## CORA

### THE TAPE BEGINS:

I don’t want you two to interrupt me. This is my time.

Cora, I want you to think about when your mother started to get sick. Not when things were mild. But when you turned sixteen and finally gave in, bringing her to a doctor recommended to you by a geriatric specialist. When you finally said the word out loud. The specialist explained the progression of the disease, which you already knew

well. And at each milepost, you accepted the inevitability of the situation and came closer and closer to peace with the thought of losing her forever. Not that you were afraid of losing her. But you understood, cognitively, that when she was gone, you might be sad, and it would be better for you to have worked that out beforehand.

Remember that you worked on this all by yourself. You never sat down with your mother and expressed your feelings to her. You never said, look, mom, you've forgotten all these years of your life, and next thing you're going to forget me, and then you're going to forget everything, and you're going to be scared all of the time and confused, and the nurses will ignore you because there's nothing they can do to help. Of course not. What good would that have done? That information would be punishing. So instead, you passed her on to a care facility, and brought her sweets from her favorite bakery on the daily, and told her about the things you were studying on your own, and then in college, and talked about the weather and told her funny jokes you had heard at your part-time job at a seafood shack. You offered the barest of details when she remarked on her own condition. You're suspicious. I know. How could I know all of this? It is because I was there for many of those conversations. I did not let either of you see me. The time was not right. But I was proud of how humane you were to her. When she finally lost the last of herself to her illness, she was as happy as possible.

I will be humane with you, as you were with her. There are some things you must understand in order to place what I am telling you in context. First, I've told you I am a ghost. I know you say you don't believe ghost. But I know you do, because if you didn't, you wouldn't be able to see me. I'm sure you had some ideas about what it means when someone says they are a ghost. And some of those ideas are probably accurate. But you

need to understand that ghosts experience many of the same limitations as people. I can only be in one place at one time. I'm not bound to a location, but I can't wish myself somewhere else, which I've often hoped I could. I must travel if I want to go somewhere, just like you. But have a considerable amount of freedom – and much more than you. After I died, I discovered that I could go anywhere I wanted, without giving so much as a thought to money or feasibility. And I took full advantage of the fact. I spent time in Moscow, Rome, and London, for no reason other than I could. And no one could see me. I could do anything I wanted. I spent a week inside a lion enclosure at a zoo. I toured the Vatican's private collections. I eavesdropped on conversations that would make the CIA green with envy. I encountered other ghosts from all periods; but most did not speak English, and sometimes, I couldn't understand them at all when they did. None of them were terribly old, however. None had seen Jesus. Ghosts don't live very long – we move on often. I got bored. I decided I should come back to America, where I might find a companion to talk to. But you would be surprised. There aren't as many ghosts here, and the ones I found didn't like me. I eventually became so lonely that I returned to check in on how Jack, Tom, and your mother were doing.

After you were born, Jack found himself in a real pickle. But before I get into that, you first must understand that before you were born, your poor mother had been possessed by a spirit. I won't pretend to know what kind of spirit. All I know is that the spirit was not a ghost, and it was not a god. The spirit told us stories, but as you can appreciate from this conversation, sometimes we are only told what we need to hear, and not all there is to hear. The important part is that you were born, and the spirit went somewhere else, and Jack let you and your mother live. You're correct in your

observation: Jack is young. He's young because that same spirit stopped his time. It was the nature of the spirit's cruelty to do this. She offered youth as a gift, but all it did for Jack was made it impossible to settle down or make a name for himself.

It's true: Jack and Tom raised you for a short time. And they had to raise your mother, as well. She was young—still a child in most ways. When the spirit took over, it didn't allow your mother any access to consciousness, and so her mind did not mature, even as her body did. She was entirely innocent of all the spirit's mischief but had to carry all the consequences of its behavior. She had lost so much time to that spirit; one moment, she was taking an exam in class, having just entered the eighth grade, and in the next moment, she was a mother, alone with a strange man that tried his best to convince her he was he ally. That would break anyone. I arrived somewhere in the middle of her rehabilitation. Your mother was recovering, still shellshocked from the entire ordeal. Jack and Tom were trying to establish some form of normalcy.

I was there when you took your first steps. When you spoke your first word. You were a very small child and didn't thrive as well as I thought you would. You never took much pleasure in the food prepared for you. Even as an infant, you would have to be coaxed to drink from your mother's breast. You never cried for it. But you were inquisitive. You loved picture books. You were fascinated by the storms that rolled in from the south and would climb on top of chairs to watch them split the sea in two. You enjoyed petting the fish that Tom would catch and bring on board. You wanted to keep all of them as pets but were more than happy to eat them at dinner hours later.

I remember the day that Jack told your mother that he was leaving. He explained that he had done all he could and that Tom was more than enough to manage things. You

see, he was frightened. Jack knew what was coming for your mother. No one touched by that spirit could escape without damage, and like you, your mother was short for this world. But Jack was also frightened about his own situation. He too had been touched by this spirit and carried its poison inside. He was always afraid of it rearing its ugly form. He did not want to lose control of himself. I was there when Jack contemplated death. But he did want to leave Tom behind with the burden of the heartache he had caused. So instead, he sought out penitence.

Jack purchased a train ticket from Norfolk to Spokane. I was with him for the journey, sitting across from him in a first-class cabin he had purchased entirely for himself. He stayed inside it for five days, not daring to venture out, even as the train was delayed by snow. Once in Spokane, he took to the woods and made his way north into Canada on foot. Of course, you're thinking – impossible. It is snowing. Isn't it winter? One of the blessings that accompanied the spirit's curse was a particular hardiness, and Jack didn't mind the cold. He made good time, only stopping to purchase a down coat and proper clothing when he reentered civilization near the Alaskan border some weeks later.

He continued diagonally through the state until he reached a little village named Barrow. Jack had arrived prepared, carrying a false identity and access to money. He purchased a tiny plot of land near a lake. And he could have done nothing. He could have just lived quietly on the money he had stored away until it was necessary to move on. But instead, he chose to put himself to work and began to raise malamute sled dogs. He purchased a few books on the topic and made an offer on several puppies promised as good breeding pairs. He built his own cabin and kennels from scratch. The puppies

matured and began to have regular litters. He would deliver the puppies alone, wean them from their mothers—alone, of course. He did not resort to dog feed, as other breeders in the area did. He fed his dogs entire caribou, which he hunted himself. He selected the adolescent dogs that showed promise and culled those that did not. He trained them to tow in teams – with help, now—and earned a reputation in the area for having the top of the line dogs. But even as they loved his dogs, the villagers never shook their skepticism of him. What, they wondered, was a white man doing up here? Why did he never come to town or talk? What did he do during the long night?

The long night. Jack had selected Barrow intentionally. Jack has a moderate vision impairment. He cannot see well during the day, or in places that are very hot. I'm not entirely sure what it's like, since I've never experienced it myself, but I have overheard him complain to Tom many times. There are remedies to this disability, but it is a bitter medicine and one Jack has tended to avoid. And Barrow is a city of extremes. For about three months, the sun does not set. And for another three months, the sun does not rise. And it is always very cold. So, Jack took advantage of this. The coldness, the long night – it let him have more peace than he would otherwise; and it gave him isolation, which he was willing to trade anything for. I think the world must be unusually beautiful to him when he can see it well. And I was there the entire time, his silent shadow. He was there for almost a decade.

And then the time came for him to move on, as predicted. Jack did not have the luxury of remaining in one place for very long. People would notice that he did not age. People would have questions. So, he arranged for a new identity and found a new life. He sold the land and business in cash to an elder in the community and made his way back to



the east coast. And he could have done anything. He could have done something worthwhile. But instead, he checked in on Tom.

And Tom was sick. It was lung cancer, but what was making him sick was the chemotherapy meant to treat it. And he started having seizures. Tom had hired a live-in nurse to help him make it through the days, to cook for him, dress him, bathe him, but Jack dismissed her and took over. He was as attentive to Tom as he had been to his dogs.

And I suppose I wasn't as interested in his role as a caregiver. It lacked the novelty of raising dogs. And I didn't care for the weather. So I went out on my own, again. I went looking for you, Cora.

## JACK

Poppy explained that her gift must be earned. If I were to enjoy the benefit of health, youth, and timelessness, she would need to make me in her image. However, this must be done slowly, or else the process would poison me, and I would die. I came to understand what she meant by this. Whatever made her what she was and whatever she had within her power to give to others was kept in her blood. Once a week, she presented it to me in a short amber glass—never more than this--and watched me drink it. Her blood made me ill. It burned my mouth; it made my throat sting and my insides cramp. I would spend days feverish and in constant nausea. Whenever Joe was away, she would come to Winfield, and I could suffer in a familiar room. But most of the time I traveled to Norfolk, where the two of us would meet in a motel. After the ritual, she would leave me to sleep off the illness in a strange bed. I discovered that if I drank too slowly, her blood would congeal in the amber glass and then turn black. It horrified me. I asked her – how on earth has no one noticed this before? Haven't you ever skinned your leg on the sidewalk? Or had a nosebleed? She explained that her blood had not always been like this. It changed at menarche. And yes, she had to be more careful now.

Blair followed the same regimen as I did and had apparently been doing so for the better part of a year. He explained that it was always his intention – and her intention – to share this with me, to invite me into their covenant, but the two were waiting for the right time. Blair explained to Poppy that I was fragile, and she took his word for it. But I did not have to be fragile anymore. Poppy said that her blood would give me strength. The longer I drank it, the stronger I would become until finally I would no longer need it. But

as the months passed, I felt no stronger. I asked Blair if he felt any stronger than he had. Was there any point to this ritual, or was it, like so many things Poppy had done, her idea of a test. Blair said that I would appreciate everything after she stopped my time. She had told him this herself. I asked if he knew what that meant. How does someone stop time? He said he did not know, only that she said it was a terrible process and something that she would do only when necessary.

This is about, he told me.

I developed a healthy fear of them both. It was gradual and built with each passing week. I suspected they sensed it. And I felt ashamed because I knew that neither of them meant to scare me, at least not anymore. The two of them were gentle with me in conversation. Blair was attentive. Poppy, when we spoke, listened to me with a sense of compassion. And each tried to convince me that I was their equal in this endeavor. But I knew I was not. I still cannot say if I was secondary or not to Blair, but the two of us were her underlings, and I did not doubt for a moment that if either of us chose to step away from our performed roles that her benevolent façade would crumble. We were prisoners.

But my meetings with Poppy were short, at least. At most I spent half an hour with her. Sometimes, we would not even speak to one another. She would turn her attention to a magazine or start to paint her toenails once I had the amber glass in my hand. Blair, on the contrary, came to infiltrate my life even more than he already had. He purchased a home in Winfield in a respectable neighborhood. Whenever he was free, he would come to the service station. I asked him once why he continued to work as a contract killer for Hankish when he seemed well off enough to step away and take a

lesser, less dramatic role in Hankish's operation. And in any case, it seemed neither of us needed to think about long-term financial security anymore.

His answer: Poppy. She had requested that we continue exactly as we were because even when we became what we were to become it was necessary to remember how to live among people. We could let ourselves forget our duties to society or our debts to people; she would expect us to play this game through many lifetimes, and she would not tolerate us slacking off now.

Blair spared no expense outfitting his home and furnished it well above its market value. The living room was stocked with high-end Drezel furniture. There was a full-service bar and the newest model of TV. He purchased a fur duvet for his bed and finished his floors with marbled tiles. Gone was the hungry, astute man I had grown alongside. Blair was finally living.

And maybe it was this first taste of life, pleasure, and comfort that gave him the permission to open up to me about things he never had before. We discussed our families, something that was an untouchable subject before. Blair was the last son out of six sons and had been born not in West Virginia, as he had let me assume, but in North Carolina. His father died from injuries earned in a bootlegging incident the same year he was born, and three of his five brothers were lost to polio in the next decade. Blair's mother had been a passing mixed-race woman, and he worked alongside her and his brothers on an old plantation until he turned old enough to get the attention of some of his father's old associates. He didn't stick around after that, and as he understood it, his mother died when he was a teenager. His brothers were probably somewhere, but he wouldn't know where to start looking.

“And you?” he demanded.

And me. What could I say about my own family? I had not been in touch since 1948. My father was dead. My brothers and sisters are married with children and grandchildren. My mother was alive so far as I knew. But the decision to divorce my wife had turned her against me. It was not an honorable thing to do – not for a Catholic. I tried to make amends with her. I called her often. And it was during one of our conversations, she told me that she had heard rumors. I told her rumors were just rumors. But I never called again.

So it seemed no one would miss us.

Around this point in time, Joe reached out to me over the phone. He had had a scare after falling from a ladder. Everything was OK: a line of bushes had broken a twenty-foot fall, and aside from a dislocated shoulder, he was no worse for wear. But it had been a moment of reckoning for him. Since the death of his wife, he'd been letting a nanny raise the twins at her home. She was divorced, young, but severe in attitude; even so, he had proposed to her, and she declined. It was nothing personal; she explained that she had inherited a good amount from her late husband, and there was no pressing need for a marriage of convenience. Joe explained all this to me clinically. If something had not broken his fall, his children would now be orphans. His family may take in Poppy for a year or two, but not two bastard children. And he had no one else in his life that he could trust.

“If something were to happen to me, would you take them, Jack?” he asked. “Not that it will. But if it did. I'll write up a will and leave everything to you.”

I didn't know how to respond. I could tell he was in earnest. I could hear the desperation in his voice. But of all the possible options in the world—including an orphanage—I seemed the worst choice.

“Your children would grow up in whore house, Joe,” I said.

“I know you're a good man. You'll teach them right from wrong.”

“You wouldn't say that if you knew me well.”

“I do know you well,” he lied.

I felt a pit in my stomach.

“And there's no one else?”

“No one,” he said. “You know these girls. You held them before I did.”

“And Poppy?”

“You won't even need to worry about her,” he said. “She's nearly seventeen.”

I took a sharp breath. I knew that whatever I told Joe, I would be wronging him. And yet I felt as trapped by Joe as I had by Poppy.

I said yes. I told him to write it into the will. I would take them.

I confessed the arrangement to Blair. I was expecting him to lose his temper, but to my surprise, he wasn't bothered. He remarked that it is easy to break a promise with someone who is dead.

“We won't be around here for long, in any case. Once Poppy graduates, we will disappear with her.”

“Disappear?”

“She doesn't want to stay in Norfolk.”

“But where will we go?”

“She says she doesn’t care. It’s our pick. We will have new identities. We could even leave the United States. So long as we agree to learn the spoken language and pursue a trade.”

“Just like that? It’s not easy to start over somewhere new.”

“We will have to adapt. We will never be able to stay in one place for too long. We aren’t like her; she will age. But when she stops our time, we will no longer change.”

“How can she age but not die?”

“When she feels the time is right, she will move on to another body,” she Blair.  
“She never lets herself get too old.”

“How does she choose?”

Blair took a moment to consider his words.

“There is not much choice involved. She will give birth to a daughter and assume its body. And she will forget everything for a time. It will not be Poppy, but another soul. We will watch over this person until Poppy remembers who she is and who we are. She will have a new face. But she will recognize us by ours.”

“I don’t see how this works in her favor.”

“Oh?”

“You said it herself: she will be helpless. She will need tending to. But what is stopping us from abandoning her?”

“What a terrible thing to say.”

“I didn’t mean for it to be terrible.”

“If she dies, we die with her,” Blair said. “Or at least what’s what she told me. I don’t think you want to test the theory.”

“And what about the body she leaves behind? Will we need to dispose of it?”

“The original soul returns. It is chaotic. She told me that it will be like waking from a deep sleep, one decades-long, and remembering nothing. Insanity, she said, runs in her bloodline. And any child born to a body she inhabits, save the one she assumes as her next host, won’t live very long. There are deficits. When so many people died young, it was less noticeable—but in recent centuries, they have lived long enough to lose their minds entirely. Part of the reason she needed minders in centuries past would be to arrange clever adoption stories to rid herself of the stigma of a mad bloodline.”

“What does Joe know about this?”

“Nothing. Why would he?”

“Why would she keep it from him?”

“Why would she tell him? She needed him for his security and nothing else. All of this would only complicate his life. She does love him, Jack. He has provided well for her. And he has treated her kindly.”

A thought occurred to me.

“How old is she?”

“I don’t know. Old.”

“There must have been others before us.”

“Of course.”

“Well then: what happened to them?”

“They died.”



“I thought we couldn’t die,” I snapped. “Did she make them die?”

“I don’t know.”

“It seems like something we should establish.”

“We won’t be invincible, Jack. Even she is vulnerable. But we are rare. She has not explained everything, only that the act of creating us will put her at risk of harm. We aren’t worth creating just to destroy.”

“And you believe all of this?”

“Yes.”

“But she could tell us anything,” I said. “You understand that, right? And you’d believe she means no harm just because she says so.”

Blair gave a defeated look.

“What else is there for me to do?” he said.

There, I thought: the doubt.

An entire month of silence followed our conversation. Neither Blair nor Poppy reached out to me, not even the day before what should have been our weekly blood ritual. I wondered if I had said something wrong – or crossed a line. Or maybe Blair had told me too much. I lost sleep over it. I wondered if one of them would come from me in the night, just as Poppy had done. But as a week became two weeks, neither did, and I began to settle into the idea that perhaps they both had talked and no longer considered me a viable option for their endeavor. Maybe I had said all the right things. I began to take care of myself again. Each morning, I walked down the bank of the Kanawha until the dawn shed its rosy coat. I went to the barbershop and had my hair styled as a slick

back—a style I had always admired but never felt confident enough to pursue. I purchased new suit sets and designer sunglasses. I had a bothersome molar pulled at the dentist. One of my cooks left to cook for a diner, which offered better working hours. So, I hired another one. I began to have nightmares. I got a prescription for valium, so I could sleep through the night. I let myself sleep well into the afternoon. The ladies upstairs only bothered me if someone came and asked my name. I knew it would happen, eventually. Would it be Blair? Or Poppy?

Instead, it was Tom.

I could scarcely believe it: it was Tom. In a suit and wearing a fancy felt hat with a loon feather. So familiar in his gestures, yet somehow so strange. He did not belong to her, not in the gas station. This was wrong. But I could not take my eyes away from him. He seemed to have aged at least ten years. But his expression was still gentle. I wanted to run and embrace him. My legs trembled. But I swallowed my excitement and directed him downstairs with my eyes. And once downstairs, in my room, we reconvinced. It was a moment of love.

I know it was selfish of me. Even as I shut the door and seized him, pushing him onto the bed, I knew that he could not stay, not in that room, or my life. Not until this situation with Poppy was resolved. And when would it be? Would it ever be? Would I dare to step into his life, knowing that I may need to step away with it without so much as a goodbye, an explanation? How could I do it to him again?

I tried to discourage him. I told him that this fantasy of his was just that—a fantasy. He had to leave.

“I can’t forget about you,” he told me, in some certain words.

I told him that he would manage to, eventually. I spoke as coldly as I could. I spoke as though he were a stranger. I spoke with the intention to hurt him. I hoped that he would hate me for it and welcome our parting. And it seemed to have worked, too. I watched from the second story as he walked out to his car, spit in the parking lot, and drove away.

That evening, after I had finished dinner, I decided that I did not want to live anymore. It was a sudden realization, born out of a single moment. I made a phone call to Blair. He was surprised to hear my voice. I told him that I needed to meet him tomorrow. I didn't care where; it could be up to him. But the venue needed to be private. If Blair was suspicious about my intentions, he gave no indication and agreed: yes, tomorrow. At this place. A little after eleven in the morning.

I did not have a will. It had never occurred to me that I needed one. I wrote a brief note, leaving the money I had accumulated in the bank to Joe to take care of the twins. I noted the approximant value of my bank account in the margin. It was not substantial, but I knew it was enough to be significant to him.

The first thing I said to Blair was, "I can't do this."

I wanted to continue, to explain to him how I had arrived at this place and why what I was going to do would be for the best. I struggled to find the words. Blair waited for me to speak. Instead, I unholstered my gun, which I had hidden in a shoulder holster under my coat.

"Jack," he said softly.

“I can’t play your game anymore,” I said. “I tried. I can’t.”

“Talk to me.”

“Will you do it for me?” I asked. Blair was quiet. He did not understand. “I’m afraid I will go to hell if I do it myself.”

And this was not a lie. But why I thought Blair, of all people, would perform me this service, I cannot explain.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Give me the gun.”

“I’ll make you do it,” I said, aiming the gun at him.

But Blair called my bluff. As a test, he took a step forward. I did not shoot. And then the gun was out of my hands. There was not even a struggle. He tossed it across the room and let me by the arm to the sofa. I sat down, buried my face in one of its cushions, and screamed. I felt his hand on the small of my back. I wanted to kill him.

“You’re upset,” he said simply.

“You were the worst thing to ever happen to me.”

“Probably,” he agreed.

“So help me.”

“I’m trying to.”

“You’ve trapped me here. In this city.”

“Poppy is on her way.

“Don’t. Not her.”

I was desperate. I was begging.

“This isn’t something I can fix,” he said.

And Poppy, presumably, would be able to fix something. Fix me. And she did. Before she was inside the house, I could sense her presence deep in my bones. The distress that had paralyzed me since the night before was tempered by complacency. I could think again. It was her work. When she entered the living room, she did not say anything at first but took my hands into hers and gave them a firm squeeze. Then she sat beside me. I would not look at her.

“It’s that man, isn’t it?”

I said nothing.

“You can’t hide much from me,” she continued. “Not now, at least.”

“I can’t live forever like this,” I said. “I can’t even last another day. I am asking you both for mercy.”

“This is mercy,” she said.

“I am stuck here. I have been stuck here. I can’t shake this.”

“But your sickness won’t burden you forever. You won’t always feel this way.”

“I’m not sick,” I said. “I’m tired.”

“I can give you whatever you need to feel better. You need only ask.”

“I’m alone. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

Poppy placed a hand on my cheek.

“There you are,” she whispered. “That’s all this is. Blair isn’t enough. So we will find you a companion.”

## TOM

It wasn't long after our meeting that Poppy welcomed herself to my home in Pittsburgh.

Poppy had borrowed one of her father's old cars and arrived a little before an evening at my home. It was unexpected, but I let her in, of course. She immediately asked if I had a typewriter. I said that I did. She inquired if I could type. Of course, I said – not as fast as my secretary, but adequately. It was a relief for her: neither Blair nor Jack knew how to type. And she wanted our conversation to go on record. Why? She explained that it would be easier this way; in the past, when she had minders that would remind her of things, she had been able to remember herself at a younger age – sometimes as young as ten. And to remember herself at a young age meant less time spent vulnerable and at the mercy of the situation. But so long as she could read, a simple document worked even better; her own words, without embellishment and set in static perfection. She had kept a small diary for this purpose exactly throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but when her last minder was lost, it was lost as well. And what point was there of a diary? It had been some four-hundred pages. We were in a new world, where brevity was key. She cautioned me: I will give you the essential details, and you will type them exactly as I say. I now present them for your consideration below, Cora.

POPPY, 5 JANUARY 1968

I had planned to talk about my life sequentially and in order. But I don't think that will work.

I'll begin with the life before this one. I spent it mainly Canada. I was born in Prince Edward Island in 1922 and moved to Nova Scotia at the age of eight. I met Joe as a teenager when he was visiting. He was fresh out of the war – not as a soldier, but as a merchant mariner—and was hungry for attention of any kind. I knew he was the right sort of man, and I let myself fall for him. A week later, I skipped away with him down to Virginia.

I know you must have your opinions about him, but he is one of the few gentlemen that I've had the pleasure to meet in my many lifetimes. I think for a time, I really loved him. He has always been kind and generous and sincere, and it's my regret that the only gift I could give him was the gift of never letting him in on any of this, of sparing him of his duties. When the poor soul inhabiting my old body woke up missing twelve years of memory and went mad, it destroyed him. He grieves when he looks at me because this body looks so much like my old body. You're wondering – why don't you fix it? Why don't you take away his pain, like I have seen you do with Jack? I don't have a clear answer for that. In general, however, people need to grieve. And so I let him.

When I met Joe, my surname was Hunt. Before Hunt, it was McEachern. Three generations ago, I was born in Scotland near Mallig. Even today, it was a village you must search for, tucked between the sea and a range of dusty mountains. The men in my family worked as fishermen. The women made nets. I regenerated and lived a fair number of simple lifetimes in Mallig, hushed, safe centuries, but I was in the Netherlands in the mid-sixteenth century. I have a sense of the date because a renowned artist of the time came through my city one winter, and my father hosted him. He painted a portrait of me at the time, but I have never found it or any of his work in any museum, so I assume

he is lost to the world. That generation marked the downfall of my prospects. Before this life I had enjoyed a relatively high status and spent most of my time in Brussels at court. I was trained in the highest arts and court languages and received education equal to my brothers. Now, there is a portrait of me that survives from that time – one of only three. You may find it under the name of Petrus Christus. I was young at the time and wearing my mother's pearl necklace and a lovely black velvet hennin. But then my father fell out of favor, and I was married off to a man of minor nobility, and then to a wealthy merchant – and I ended up in Mallig, at no fault but my own.

But still, these lifetimes come much later in my long succession of lifetimes. I am very old. My work has been famous, even though I was careful to remain anonymous: in one lifetime, while I was living in what is today western Germany, I was an excellent illuminator, permitted to entertain the trade by my father, who was taken by my talent and gave me over to nuns for training; in another, I served as a respected midwife that could read and write and penned many scrolls on best practices. My scrolls did not survive, and you cannot find my name anywhere in the history books, but some of my illuminations still exist and are credited to the Master of Girart de Roussillon, although I'm not sure why.

Now you must be wondering: how old am I? In recent years there has been a demand for a value, an estimation of years. I don't recall this ever being the case before the seventeenth century. The fact is that I have no idea what numbers to give. I was born into a culture that did not carry any concept of time, at least not in how we think of it today. There was day and night, the earth as it lived and the earth as it died. Seasons were of consideration, but we did not count years by the sun. A year suggests that something



has both a beginning and ending, and in my culture, we never saw that reality present anywhere in our world. It's not that we didn't notice how the sun moved or the rationing of sunlight: we were well aware of the shortening days. The sun was a significant deity in our religion. We just didn't care about time.

In my first life, we were still wearing tanned animal skins. We did some farming, namely wheat, and millet, but the yield was meager. The fruits and vegetables that you are familiar with today did not yet exist, and those that did had not been selected for taste or bounty. There were no metals, but we were skilled at pottery. I was an underling. It's difficult to know which word to use because we did not have these words, and even as they exist today, they fail to capture my status. But I had been taken from another tribe as a prisoner with my mother before I had memory. My mother was sent away somewhere else. I was not free to leave but was nonetheless a valued member of the community, and my compliance was rewarded with equal shelter and food. I can remember being mistreated only a handful of times. It was a small community: twenty or so lodges. Most were at that time. But these communities did grow. And as they did, they discovered weaving and metalwork and tamed all the animals you keep in cages today. I was there when that happened. And it was a slow process. There were no great thinkers among us. The first tame chickens I encountered were simply jungle fowl someone managed to trap in an underground cellar.

I was thirteen when I became what I am. We were preparing for the dying earth. All the grain had been collected in storage. We were drying game and fish. There was a woman among us who could see the other world. Today you might call her a shaman or a prophet, but we did not use those words; we only acknowledged she could see things we

weren't and gave her space to do that. We looked to her for predictions. Once, she predicted a wolf would carry away a certain young boy, and even as the mother took care to not let him out of her sight, he nonetheless was taken in the middle of the night, the wolf sinking into her home and crushing the child's neck before he could cry out.

Another time she foretold death to a hunting party. They never returned. And at the time of the preparation for the dying earth, she predicted a disaster that would take all of us into the ground. It was the first time we chose not to believe her. We were so upset by the prediction that we chased her out of the village. I still wonder sometimes if she survived.

But her prediction came true, of course. Within a week, half the village had fallen ill, and by the end of the next week they had died. And then vermin found their way into our grain stores and had consumed a quarter of it before we realized. The meat and fish spoiled. We tried to eat it anyway and became ill. More of us died. It was a terrible winter with tall snows. Even the hunters that survived had become so weak that they could not track the game. Those of us that were remaining, the last nine, starved one by one. We ate those that died before us. We ate everything. The flesh, the organs, the brain, and bones, which we boiled for hours until soft and then chewed. But there was already so little left of us that even this was not enough.

The last person who died had been a good woman and had given birth to six children, four of whom survived until they died with everyone else. I did not eat her. I knew it would not save me, and the endeavor did not seem worth the effort. I no longer felt the pain of hunger. With the bit of spark of light that remained inside me, I climbed out of my shelter. I meant to walk as far as I could until I could walk no more and then die. But I could walk no further than half the distance of a field before becoming faint. I

closed my eyes and felt my way to the ground. When I opened them again, a figure stood only a few steps away.

It was a woman, I think. Her appearance startled me. Not that she was alive, but her vibrancy. She was wearing strange clothing—it did not seem to be made out of an animal. Her dress and cape fell over her like water. They were both colored as bright as summer berries. Even her lips were bright like a berry. She wore hammered plates of gold around her neck. I had never seen gold before and thought it to be pieces of the sun. There were red stones fastened around her wrists and ankles. But her feet. She had no feet. I noted the vacant space between the white snow and the end of her cranberry-dress.

She did not move her lips, and yet she spoke: I heard my language. She asked if I was the last alive. I said that I was. The others had all gone to the other world. She told me she had killed them: she had made them all go to the other world. She had stolen their last breaths. How did that make me feel? Sad, I said. But you are a god, as you wear pieces of the sun around your neck and will do as you will. She said she wanted what was inside of them. To experience their thoughts. To see all the things people see and taste many tastes and smell many smells. There were things she and her people could not do. I asked why so many. She might have demanded a sacrifice of a dozen and let the rest of us be. We would have obeyed: it would not have been the first time we cut someone's throat in the name of a newly discovered god. She said she had only taken the firstborns. But when she did that, everyone else ended up dying. She apologized. She had not known that everyone depended on everyone else. But she understood now because she had the benefit of so many memories.

Try to imagine my situation.

I asked her if she planned to do it again. She said that she would wait until winter had passed. But yes. She would. Now that she had seen so many things and tasted so many tastes and felt so many feelings, she could not stop herself.

I begged mercy. I had seen people from other villages. I knew that beyond our short space of earth there were many of us.

She told me she could not help herself. It was a hunger: she wanted more.

I offered myself. I said: take me, god of the sun and sickness. Take me and experience the world through me. Then you can experience all there is to experience in the flesh and need not settle with the stale memories of the dead.

She asked: will you smell things for me? And taste things for me? Will you walk barefoot in a wet forest, so I can feel the leaves underfoot?

Yes, I said. If there are things to smell and food to eat and a forest free of snow.

So were agreed on a contract. She entered me as a burning mist right here at the base of my skull. I have a mark there. See? It is in the shape of a waning moon. All my kind have some variation of this mark. It persists throughout all our lifetimes. We are not born with them; they tend to appear right before puberty. And the mark likewise appears on any person we change into companions. It is something like a heraldic crest. We used to be very open about them. But you may recall the sixteen-century belief in the witch's mark. Suddenly a mole or pimple was enough to get you burned at the stake for cavorting with the devil. So, we began to take pains to hide our marks. Aside from my husbands, you are the first person to have seen mine in five hundred years.

The god's greatest gift to me was immortality. But she had not explained the terms of this arrangement to me. Imagine my surprise the first time I woke as my own

teenager daughter, my soul having been thrust out of my first body and into hers. It had hibernated there alongside the god-spirit for fifteen years, while my daughter lived a life that I was not privy to. Then my consciousness stirred awake, and my menarche came, and the god lent me some of her magic so that I could exercise some power on the world. But no one was there to guide me. I did not yet understand what I was. But my behaviors, at least, were driven by instinct, and I could impersonate my daughter. Her favorite berries tasted most favorable to me. My fingers remembered how to fix the same hair braids she did. I could perform all the ritualistic dances expected of someone her age.

I spent centuries like this, believing that a god possessed me. I no longer believe in gods but have never shaken the habit of referring to her as one. I used to feel her presence often, but now I do not feel her presence, even when she intervenes, as she once did when Jack tried to hurt me. I consider her a quiet friend and sometimes wonder if she has lived alongside me so long that she has become me. Perhaps there is no distinction between us anymore. Maybe that was her goal to begin with.

She was not alone. I know there were others like her in those days, seeking out the novelty of human experience, wantful of our pleasures and pain.

But back to the day she and I agreed on our contract. After she entered me, she guided me to the foot of a tree. At its base was a burrow with newborn mice within an arm's reach. I could see the light of their lives glowing through the snow. They squirmed between my teeth as I chewed.

I wandered and foraged and found another village. For a long time I was made to live on its outskirts. I was sickly and seen as a liability. But finally, I was accepted into it

when I proved myself to have some skill in healing. One night, as I was caring for a man who had broken his leg on a hunt, I heard her voice: take his life. My hand became very hot. I placed it on the man's forehead. His breathing slowed, his face turned ashen, and he finally died. I felt a sweetness in my mouth. It was unlike anything I had ever had. I had not yet experienced the taste of honey and would not for two hundred years, so it was a novelty I was quick to seek out again. So I did the same with a young woman I slept near one night. I tasted the sweetness, and she died. And I felt so strong, so invigorated. I did this again and again. Sometimes I would take just a little of their life. Enough to make them ill or lethargic. Sometimes I killed them. Meat returned to my bones. My belly filled out with a soft layer of fat.

A man noticed my health and took a fancy to me. We lay down together in his roundhouse. We made love. He was dead by sunrise. Weeks later, I came to understand that I was carrying a child. It was a difficult pregnancy. I was constantly sick. The voice told me: take blood. I would escape to the forest and hunt the small things I could catch and drink from them. But it was not enough. The child inside me stirred. I felt pain in my joints, my muscles cramped. So I sought out human blood. I took it from little children too young to speak. Childbirth came early. My blood had turned milk-white, and the villagers thought a moon deity had possessed me. But my baby, a girl, was born healthy. I remember watching her be lifted above me toward the ceremonial smoke. And that was the end of that life. My soul entered my daughter, the poor, doomed thing.

In that lifetime, I discovered during a minor famine that I no longer needed to eat as others did. I would not waste away so long as I had access to blood. I began to prioritize blood: the blood of carnivores nourished me more than herbivores, but the

nourishment of human blood far exceeded both. Human blood was a feast of feasts. And during these famines, it was easy enough to take someone without raising suspicion quietly. The powers lent by the god are magnified with human blood. I could see deeper into the dark valleys than our best hunters. Each rustle in the forest announced itself clearly. I became very strong, something I care to hide from others. Wounds, no matter their size, healed quickly. But it was not convenient in most lifetimes to subsist on human blood long term, so I would make do with human food and permit my powers to dimmish.

The god continued to offer hints. In time, I understood that if I were to conceive a new body, one that would receive my soul, two conditions must be met. First, I must be well-nourished with human blood. Second, I must be ready to let go of whomever impregnated me, as they would not survive the ordeal.

It has always been easy for me to say goodbye to someone. I tend never to impregnate anyone I have any genuine feelings toward. But there have been times when I have had to work around being a pariah. In one life, my face was deformed with a cleft palate. I was fortunate to have escaped death, as most mothers would have abandoned me. In another lifetime, I was born without a nose. And in another lifetime the community decided that I was unclean because I menstruated for two months straight, and no one would touch me. But it was a matter of survival. I got creative. I had my daughter. I created my new body.

As I mentioned, at one time, there were more of us. Perhaps thousands, scattered across the world. I was not alone. It was easy to find one another: at night, it was possible to feel one another's vibrations, this small pressure in the pit of our stomachs, from

several miles away. I met the first one of my kind while living among the Mycenaeans. She was at the time the head wife from a well-respected family, and I gained employment as her servant. She went by Poulxeria in this life. Poulxeria did not tell me much about her history, only that the spirit that possessed her was ancient and came to her kindly with its request. But she was able to teach me all about the benefits of my state. She chastised me for settling for human food: people, she explained, did not need it unless you I wanted them to, so I should find someone I trust and teach them to love the ritual and drink without guilt. And if I could not bear that, then lynx and peacock were acceptable alternatives. However, she held humans in low regard and killed many men and women just because she could.

She explained to me the process of creating a companion, by which I could stop someone's time so that they might follow me through many generations. They would not be like us, but nor would they remain human; any companion would sit somewhere on a hierarchy between the two. However, with careful planning, a companion might be made to be very strong – even stronger than she that made them. They could be counted on as protectors. But creating them was also a way of not being lonely, mostly. A companion could only be made with a gift of my blood during pregnancy, when it was milk-white, so it would need to be a planned affair. And the process would take a long time. My companion would be in a stupor for several days after the change. They would be confused. Their voice, their face, their smell would become annoying to me. I would want to kill them and needed to suppress the instinct. It would not be my fault, she said, and I should not be ashamed of having those feelings; it was something that came deep out of the soul of whatever was possessing us. Jealously, perhaps. But once they were



recovered, they would prove useful as protectors and subsist well on a diet of fresh hearts, human or otherwise.

Most of our kind did well with one or two companions, but Poulxeria had known another one of our kind with six. This one had turned everyone she fell in love with, and she fell in love easily. Not that it worked in her favor: all of them were eventually destroyed, and she followed them in death not long after. Poulxeria asked me earnestly: haven't you ever fallen in love with someone and not wanted to see them die?

I told her that I had made many friends in the nine-or-so centuries I had been walking the world, but none that I could not say goodbye to.

Poulxeria and I stayed near one another for six generations. We would take turns raising one another. We only went our separate ways after the city of Orchomenos was destroyed. Poulxeria wanted to explore the rest of the world, to see new things. I was tired of exploring. I understand that she lived for some nine-hundred years after we parted, until she was slaughtered as an infant somewhere in imperial China.

I made my first companion a few centuries after we parted. At the time, I was no longer a Mycenaean. The civilization that I had come to adore and set as the foundation of my identity had fallen, and our people entered a period of hardship. I will admit that I do not remember much about my companion, only that his name was Bion. I was sixteen and had taken notice to him. I waited two additional years until the timing was right. Poulxeria had warned me that my companions could not settle for human food as I did. To ingest it would cause them great pain. Instead, they survived best on a diet of fresh hearts. Preferably human, but animal would do. Blood alone was not sufficient. She did

not know why, only that she once tried forbidding her companion from eating hearts, and he withered away like a cat fed mashed grain. But she had withheld from me a critical point, for reasons I cannot understand: first, the first few weeks after the transformation, my companions would require a regular supplement of my blood. The god inside did not warn me, either. Perhaps Poulxeria was right, and the jealous god did not want me to turn my affections toward another. So even as Bion ate the hearts of at least a dozen men, he became very ill and died like a common man. My second and third companions perished the same way. But on my fourth, Kusos, it occurred to me that I might offer my blood, which I had begun to consider a source of sacred power. I filled myself with the vigor of several men and presented a bowl to him as he lay on the bed, struggling to breathe. He kept some of it down with difficulty, and his gasps became less frantic until he finally was able to sleep. Kusos was recovered the next day.

I discovered that my blood was vital to their livelihood. If I did not keep my companions nourished with it, they would not do well in sunlight or heat. I used this to my benefit. If a companion misbehaved, all it took was the threat of me denying my blood for them to correct themselves. And yet, it still could not be avoided in the years between birth and puberty. They would make do, shifting their sleep schedules, so they were active at night, and taking refuge in caves or under the roots of great trees should they need to travel on foot.

Kusos stayed with me for three hundred years before he fell in love with another woman. A mortal woman. I loved him, but I told him to go on, be happy, hoping that if he were not near me, the spell I set on Kusos might dissipate, and he would be able to age and die like a mortal. But I discovered two hundred years later that this was not the case.

It didn't matter; he always managed to find someone to love, the same way I always managed to find a worthy companion. After Kusos, there was a woman named Myrrhine and her brother, Simonides. Then was Benipe, my sweetest companion. Myrrhine, Simonides, and Benipe died in accidents involving fires. Fire is, in fact, one of the few ways to destroy a companion – the other being the removal of the heart. You would be surprised at how resilient you will become; once Benipe fell from the side of a mountain some eighty feet. Some hours later, I arrived at his side to discover him decapitated, his bones crushed to a pulp. But the voice inside me told me to be patient. So, I was. And there was no decay. Over the course of a week, everything fell back into place, reconnected, reformed, healed to perfection, and Benipe opened his eyes again, none the wiser of what had happened.

I found myself alone for the first time in the fourteenth century. I was settled in the Netherlands. It was the time of the Black Death, and suddenly everyone around me was dead. My husband, my sons – I had given birth to three, intentionally, since my husband was kind and I was happy with this particular life—my neighbors, my church. I alone was immune. It was a very difficult time for me. The god would not speak to me. I fell into depression and looked for signs everywhere. One evening, as I sat outside on my balcony, the moon darkened her face. At the time, no one understood anything about eclipses or why they happened, and I was inclined to see her face as a message from some greater god than my own. I decided to return to the very beginning, to the first village that adopted me and where I had first fallen under the spell of her face.

I was confident I could find it again. I had passed near the place centuries before while taking an ancient roman road. My old bones had called out to me from the earth. I

am always able to sense when they are nearby. So, I traveled to Rome. It only took me a week. I was well nourished with human blood and could travel at impossible speeds. I found that ancient road to still be in use, and I traveled through the forest alongside it, picking off humans as I carried on.

I arrived at the site of my old village within six days of my departure from Rome. The sun masked itself in an eclipse only hours after I arrived. The show excited me. I was convinced the gods were speaking. I poured out a sacrifice of my blood onto the earth and covered it with urine and soil. I chanted songs in my old tongue. And that same evening, a man came to me, carrying a large satchel under one arm, and folded green cloak under the other. He was a companion. I could sense the terrible power of his magic long before he appeared. The man didn't speak any Dutch but was gentle and seemed to have been guided by the same signs I had been. He gestured at the moon. Then he made a fist with one hand and covered it with his other. I nodded to signify my understanding.

I was apprehensive toward the man and would not let him approach me for days. Poulxeria warned that lone companions should not be trusted because they were traitorous. If they were virtuous, they would never have left the sides of their masters in the first place. But I had permitted several of my own to take leave and explore the world without me, and I had never considered them traitorous. And this man seemed well-bred and deferent, albeit malnourished and somewhat odd-looking. So, I warmed up to him. I let him hunt for me. Still, I was hesitant to leave the site of my village. I felt as though it was not done with me yet. I waited for another sign. It arrived as another lunar eclipse two weeks later. I interpreted that as permission to leave. I did, and the man accompanied me.

The man had a nonsense name, so I gave him a pick of a Dutch one. He chose Johannes. Johannes was easily instructed and came to speak Dutch quickly. I took him with me back to the Netherlands. He would not tell me much about himself or his maker but was obedient, almost to a fault. Together we looted what we could from the homes of the dead. We slaughtered the wealthy we encountered and took their gold, jewels, and anything we could barter for comfort. I assumed the identity of a wealthy young woman and Johannes, my husband. We took over a manor house together. You may think it mad, but all we needed to do was present ourselves at an estate of our choice and kill the entire household. The master and mistress, the ailing mother and father, the servants, groundsmen, brothers, sisters, everyone there! So many people were dead everywhere that no one questioned us. We destroyed all the portraits. And once the death had settled down, we found ourselves welcomed to many different courts across Europe.

Johannes followed me faithfully wherever I went. However, I eventually grew bored with him and desired an additional companion.

I first encountered Maes when he was a stable boy. He must have been eight or nine. I saw great potential in him, even at this young age – so I let him taste my blood and did so for years until he came of age, and I stopped his time. He was very strong. Stronger than I ever had been or would be. He performed magic. He could throw a stone up in the air and, with a smile, suspend it there. He would slow the world around us so we could travel quickly without people noticing us. He could make objects very hot or cold with a look. Parlor tricks, of course – but enough to make us impervious to whatever the world chose to throw at us. So, the three of us ran away together to seek a new life. But Maes was my preferred companion, and I spoiled him with favor at the deliberate

expense of Johannes. I'd graduated out of court life and found myself ousted from nobility by this point. None of us were leaving much of consequence. Maes and I stayed together for three centuries until he went one way and Johannes and I another. That would have been in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was only supposed to be for a period of time. He wanted to explore the world as an independent man, just for a little while. How could I say no? We agreed: three years. Maes never came back.

Once the realization set in, I was devastated. Johannes was my sole comfort. I felt incredible guilt for having treated him so poorly. Johannes offered me his total devotion for centuries, yet I had sought out another at his expense. And he had endured it all patiently. I assumed Maes had intentionally abandoned me. I worried that Johannes would, too. And it seemed like he might, for a little while. Centuries before, he had become smitten with one of my kind, a man who originated from ancient Crete. From time to time, when I was settled and content with Maes, Johannes would run off and serve this man for a period of time. I gave my permission. I thought it would be good for him to know about others like me; there were so far and few opportunities at that time, as our numbers were waning. And after Maes left, I saw the same desire in his eyes, as though he were regretful that it had not been him who managed to escape me.

But Johannes stayed with me another one-hundred and fifty years until he ended his own life. He did it with fire. I assume he chose fire because it was less painful than destroying one's own heart. But I wish he had something left of him to hold on to—a lock of hair. A fingernail, even. He told me there was nothing more he could do for me. He needed to die. And once he set his mind to something, there was no luck dissuading him. It was 1913, and right before I was to give birth. We were living in Scotland. This,

too, was a dark time for me. I don't like to talk about it. I have not made another companion since his death.

You must believe me, Tom, that it was not uncommon to run into my kind at one time. In general, we were not hostile to one another and took the opportunity to share our stories. Most of those I met were women. The men were quite rare, and I only encountered a handful in my lifetimes. They operated differently. The men never changed their bodies. But once every century or so, they would fall into a deep sleep. This sleep would last a decade or two, and when they woke, they would be returned to their prime. This made them very easy targets for destruction. I believe it is why there were so few of them: they were all destroyed.

In any case, I was not alone. All of those I met were ancient. All of them carried their own stories, memories, and precious catalogs of lost histories. And I could still sense their presence in the world as late as 1923. But when I tried to do so again in 1925, it was as though they had all vanished. I believe I must be the last one.

This past century is the strangest of all I've encountered, Tom. I have been tending to horses for three-thousand years, and within a decade, they disappeared, pushed aside by moving machines. And then airplanes! I remember when steam trains were considered the pinnacle of human accomplishment, and now we have just sent a man to the moon. The moon! Do you know how many lives I've spent burning offerings to her? And now I can pay a quarter and own her face in a newspaper. My people had imagined her as a ball of white fire. I saw her again on the television the other week: she is nothing like we expected. But still, she is the same moon! I looked upon the same one, Tom, thousands of years ago.

It is always painful to remember all this. I fall in love all over again. I feel the loss as deeply as I did the first time. I wonder how I might have changed things for those that knew well. It is torture. I met my first Christian missionary in the seventh century. He described to me what hell was. It sounded so lonely and boring. There was no pain in this hell, only separation from his god, separation from humanity, separation from everyone you loved. And darkness you could not escape. I think he meant to convert me – to frighten me with its idea. But I remarked to him, in the broken language of the Franks, ‘We are here. This is it.’

That’s all I have to say, Tom. It is enough.



CORA

[TAPE CONTINUES]

CORA: You came looking for me?

BLAIR: I did.

CORA: And where did you find me?

BLAIR: With your mother. I suppose you were in high school, well –you were homeschooled. You had just turned fifteen. That was the same age when I first met your mother. I could not get over how much you looked like her. It made me a little sad. You had my eyes. But everything else was her.

CORA: Fine, then. Tell me something only I would know.

BLAIR: Your mother never told you what sex was. But you figured it out after finding an adult magazine on the beach. You hid it inside your mattress. You were upset. She never sat you down and explained things.

CORA: She should have told me.

BLAIR: She didn't need to. You figured it out on your own.

JACK: So, you heard me? All those times I spoke to you. When I was upset.

BLAIR: Yes.

JACK: I had no way of knowing. I asked you to send me a sign that you were there. I begged you.

BLAIR: I know.

JACK: And you didn't send me a sign.

BLAIR: It's not a comfortable experience to interact with the physical world, Jack.  
Sometimes it truly hurts.

JACK: You didn't even appear to me.

BLAIR: As I said before, you didn't need a distraction. I had controlled your life in one

way or another since the day we met as teenagers. I'm not apologizing; I'm just reminding you. I wanted you to be free. Or at least think that you were.

TOM: You were a voyeur.

BLAIR: I wasn't a voyeur. I have reasons for doing everything I do. v

CORA: Why did you go searching for me?

BLAIR: You are my daughter. I was invested in your well-being. I still am.

CORA: You spent a decade in Alaska.

BLAIR: It's true. I will admit that I was more invested in Jack. But that is because Jack can hardly take care of himself. You are born out of my stock. I never doubted you.

TOM: He has seen everything. Absolutely everything.

BLAIR: I gave you two privacy, Tom.

JACK: How long did you stay with Cora?

BLAIR: At first, for a few weeks.

CORA: A few weeks?

BLAIR: To get a sense of who you were as a person. That didn't take long. But it was hard for me to watch you struggle, Cora. You were born with the

condition you have because the spirit damaged you. Just as it damaged your mother and Jack. You had such trouble navigating the world. Every encounter was a calculus. Are they good – are they bad? Will that hurt me? I did not envy you.

CORA: You left. But you came back?

BLAIR: Yes.

CORA: Where were you, then? When you stepped away.

BLAIR: Here and there. I would visit my old haunts. I would visit this place and spent time in the cabin. I am buried just out there. And my father was a ten-minute walk away. And I would bother the ghosts here. You know, there was a minor skirmish here during the Civil War. And some of the rebel soldiers are still prancing about here. They like the stones a certain way over their graves. Even though it hurt me, I would move them about just to upset them. It's something I would never have found pleasure in during life, but death changes you.

CORA: That's what you chose to do with your spare time?

BLAIR: Well. I would check in on Jack, of course. During one visit, it became clear that it did not look like Tom would recover.

JACK: Ah, of course.

BLAIR: And you were telling him, Jack, that if he died, you would follow him since there was nothing more for you to do if he was gone.

JACK: Yes.

BLAIR: And Tom suggested you prepare a document.

JACK: He did.

BLAIR: And it wasn't a terrible idea. 'Let's leave something behind so that Cora will understand things.' Because she will eventually have questions. The past has a way of catching up. You two were convinced that it would be cruel to abandon her with a dying mother with no sense of who she was or what to expect in her future.

JACK: It was a terrible idea. There was no way for us to do it correctly. If we wrote about the situation candidly, there was no way she would take any of it seriously. And if we censored it, if we were to have made it believable, it would have been a book of lies.

TOM: But we could have included evidence.

JACK: What evidence? I am the evidence.

BLAIR: And here is where it gets interesting, Cora. Tom says – we will each write her a letter, honest about what we remember. And we will tell the entire story. We will take the time to make them beautiful and include enough detail that she can eventually crosscheck our claims—

JACK: Which she would not do because there is no way she would take any of it seriously. She would stop reading.

BLAIR: —and it will be our parting gift to her. We will say everything we could ever want to say to her in it. And then we don't have to lie forever with our guilt, in hell or heaven, or the soil, wherever we go.

JACK: Impossible.

TOM: It was an excellent idea.

JACK: I only wrote my letter to make you happy, Tom.

TOM: And yet you told me the exercise helped you put all your thoughts in order. After writing it, you were able to take the first honest sleep in years.

JACK: So what if it did? That wasn't the point of the exercise.

CORA: And then Tom lived.

BLAIR: And then Tom lived.

TOM: You sound disappointed.

BLAIR: What's there to be disappointed about? It was a miracle: complete remission. Jack is happy. Tom is even happier. Until Jack tells Tom that he wants to move on again. He wants to experience the world. No more Alaska. No more isolation. And he remembers the letters.

JACK: I tell Tom to destroy them. Because we no longer face the same deadline. There was no reason we had to reconcile our guilt then and there.

TOM: It's such a cheap word. 'Reconcile.'

CORA: And he doesn't destroy them.

BLAIR: And he doesn't destroy them.

## JACK

Poppy brought Tom into our fold. The decision to do so was out of compassion and little else. She did not want me to be lonely and appreciated that Tom on his part was willing to go to great lengths to secure my safety. As monstrous as Poppy could be, she could not stand to see me suffer.

She was aware, of course, that Tom complicated things. His status as a federal investigator meant that his identity would not be shaken so easily. If he were to disappear suddenly, it would be a concern of national security: people would look for him longer than they would look for me and Blair. And she suspected that it would not be easy for him to voluntarily step away from that part of his life. She guarded no illusion that Tom would make a good minder. He would not be expected to perform the same duties as Blair and I would. He was there simply to serve as my object of pleasure. She would stop his time, of course, so that I would not need to worry about the cruelty of age and disease or see him as a fleeting thing – but once she did stop his time, he would become my responsibility. If he acted out, or if he strayed, she would not be the one correcting him.

Poppy was hellbent on graduating from high school, as she had never had the opportunity to do so. And she would like us nearby when she did. That gave us time to retire quietly from things. But we all recognized that Blair, myself and Joe were working on borrowed time due to the federal investigation. Poppy acknowledged that it may be within Tom's power to redirect the investigation away from us, even as it narrowed in on Hankish. But if he were discovered tampering with evidence, then he would become a liability. She did not want to risk her life and limb breaking into a federal prison to

extract any of us – period. And even if Tom were to quit his job right now, it would do nothing to slow the progression of the investigation; another agent would be assigned to the case. So, he may as well continue on. Blair and I faced a similar situation. We could declare ourselves free from all criminal enterprises, and run off to another city, but Hankish would send out someone to for us. Blair argued that it would be easy for us both to disappear into the wilderness, where none of his men would stand a change of finding us, and where we could remain at her back and hall. Poppy scoffed at the idea. Before we went through that trouble, she would kill Hankish herself.

“It would draw too much attention,” Tom suggested. “You can’t kill everyone that inconveniences you. Not in this day and age. You understand that, right?”

“Well Hankish seems to take that approach, and it works fine for him,” she snapped. “Besides, you should be concerned about yourself, Tom. Do you really think the bureau won’t find out about your relationship with Jack during their investigation? You should be begging me to throw in a distraction.”

“It’s too risky,” Blair agreed. “And I don’t see a clear benefit. When Jack and I step away from our lives, we will do it together, and we will do it with you. Hankish is old news, Poppy. Jack and I have survived him for nearly a decade. I am more concerned about the federal investigation. We don’t know when the arrest warrants will be issued, or if our names will be on them.”

“But I should know,” Tom interrupted. “The warrants will be issued by a judge. The agents on the case are always the first to know. I can give you forewarning enough time in advance that you will be able to leave.”

Poppy looked at Blair.

“Is what he saying true?”

“I don’t know,” Blair admitted, in honesty. “But it stands to reason.”

Poppy gave Tom a small smile.

“Then it is settled. I won’t kill anymore. The three of you will continue as you were. And Tom – if any arrest warrants pertaining to the case pass your desk, you will call the gas station immediately from a payphone at least twenty minutes outside of Philadelphia.”

And we went our separate ways.

I kept to my business as usual. The station was almost self-sufficient at this point. The profits were remarkable, considering the size of our venue, and the quality of the clientele. I swear that some of the men that came through would sacrifice a month’s salary to have a woman at his side for the entire weekend. I participated in a few adventures, opportunities that I had not anticipated. In mid-summer, one of Paul’s associates stole an entire truckload of Virginia hams and was unable to fence it before they rotted. He abandoned the truck in the forest near the Kanawha River. Joe was called, having apparently been in on the scene. And me, for reasons I never did understand: the hams were not my problem. Joe drove up and together we offloaded some six-thousands pounds of ham into the river. Joe then sent the truck following after all of it. I came home in the early morning hours, smelling like decay. One of the girls had called Blair to handle something in my absence, and he stayed behind to meet me. When I stepped inside Blair took one look at me and burst out laughing. Two days later he left a



newspaper on my desk, with a front-page article circled. The hams had made the news, having washed up down shore.

I began to spend more time with Joe. I would find reasons to be in the area when I knew he was in town and stop by. This was not by my own initiative, but at Poppy's request. She was worried for him. He had become depressed in recent months. He had always suffered from moods here and there before, but this was the first time he was unable to shake it, and she worried he would do something impulsive. There was only so much she could say to him, in her position.

Her tenderness toward Joe surprised me. I never quite understood it. When she saw him hurting, she hurt too; and yet she refused to intervene in any way that would benefit him. She might have found a way to warn him of his imminent arrest, and encouraged him to disappear, to flee Norfolk and not look back. Or she may have shared with him the same secrets she shared with me – it would have helped him, I think, to know that part of his wife was still with him. If either of these thoughts ever crossed her mind, she did not share them with me. At the same time, I wondered what exactly Joe had done to earn her love. He had never seemed a particularly adept father. Joe was a man who liked the idea of children but did not know what to do with them. Even the twins, who were now turning six, were so attached to their nanny that they referred to him as uncle Joe, and not father. And Poppy bore the worst of it – she had neither a father nor a nanny to tend to her. I did point this out to her once, when she was in a good mood.

“I've had terrible husbands in the past,” she confided. “Ones that beat me. Ones that raped me. I would kill them. But it is still a miserable experience. And the aftermath is so lonely—is has been difficult, in the past, for a woman to remarry. And even more

difficult to bear a child out of wedlock. But Joe was as sweet as honey. I never even had to consider the risks with him. So what if he's an absent father? My character has been shaped through many lifetimes – I don't need to be doted on. And the soul of the young woman inside of me seems to have turned out well, too. In any case, it's the role of my minders to look after me when I am young and helpless, to shape me. I hold no grudge toward him."

"And how will we shape you, Poppy?" I asked.

I spoke with sincerity. Try as I might, I could not imagine myself present in Poppy's life before she became self-aware of who she was. How would I have ever introduced myself to Joe and his late wife? How could I possibly justify my infatuation with his infant daughter? And how could it be feasible to spend so much time in the presence of someone who is alive, and mortal, but not age before them?

"You complain, but trust me, these arrangements are much easier today than in the past," she began. "I've been lucky enough to have had two companions blessed with the gift of influence. They could turn minds in the directions they would not otherwise turn, but it is such a rare gift that I've not often been able to capitalize on it. Overall, things really improved in the early ninetieth century, Jack. In major cities of the era, people stopped paying attention to things. People could move around all the time. Strangers in, strangers out. But even before then, there have been periods of relative ease for companions. Historically, the idea of family has not been as restrictive it is today. In the early cultures I was born into, there was no concept of the family unit. That only began once people figured out iron. But there were other situations, as well. I spent a few centuries as a Roman citizen, and my companions were adopted into my family directly,

either legally as freedman, or as slaves that performed some vital duty in service of my wellbeing and were rewarded with freedom and a place at our hearth. And many times, my female minders found paid positions in rearing me.

“But everything changed in the early Middle Ages. A few centuries into it, and you can’t imagine what excuses we had to come up with. Sometimes plans would need to be made generations in advance. A common one we employed would be to have a companion show up at the residence of my parents and claim that one of their mothers or fathers—conveniently dead, of course—was secretly born illegitimate, and some rich-beyond-belief benefactor wanted to see to the proper education of his only grandchild. If the household were poor, they would be grateful for the attention of wealthy relations, and my companions would shower them with food and money and gifts of jewels.

“But the rich were more difficult to convince. If anyone in the household were to resist, often the simple mention of scandal would be enough to put it to rest. In these situations, my companions would serve as my appointed tutors. Occasionally it would be possible for a minder to kill off my husband and assume his place as my lover or new husband. My baby, of course, would have to come from someone else. Or if I were a widow, I would write my minders into a will, and give the order to kill me after I had moved on to a new body.

“The worst situations where ones in which I need be taken by force, either because my family would not cooperate, or some grave danger faced me. The threat of war as the most common. This was only done when I did not yet possess my own faculties, when I was too young to remember myself, and so I neither recognized my minders, nor saw them in acting in my best interest when they tore me away from my

family. It was terrifying. And it has happened many times. It is why I have moved around so much. If it were up to me, I would have never left the Mediterranean.

“And there are the logistics. You will need to find excuses to declining food. You may accept water—in fact, you will need to drink it in order to look human—but most liquids will poison you. And in new places you must present yourself for as young as you may pass, with youthful fashion and makeups; it is a careful act, as you will not be able to present yourself with a beard that you later shave to boyish skin, but with commitment it will normally it will take fifteen years before people began to comment on how well you look for your page. But eventually you will have to move to a new city. You must kill someone alone in the world, who looks somewhat similar to you, and assume their identity. Or just kill someone and pay another person to make you fake papers with their name. There are so many choices. New York City, maybe. Or Los Angeles. Or San Francisco. Or even Chicago – I have heard good things about Chicago. And you two could just be there with me.”

“And Joe?” I said, after a long silence. “You would not take him with you. And you would not have us check in on him.”

“Never,” she replied. “Not even once.”

When I thought about Joe, I could not help myself from thinking about the twins. Valentia’s girls. Her name seemed strange to me now. Perhaps I had grieved her thoroughly, or perhaps Poppy had used her magic to gently tease Valentina to the very back of my memory, another act of mercy. When I had visited Joe it stunned me how much they had grown into her image. They had her nose and eyes. Both were rich in

personality. Alma loved bugs and collected all the ones should found around a trailer in a shoe back. She showed it to me, a graveyard of ants, pill bugs and spiders. Nora was obsessed with horses. She had torn out pictures from dozens of library books for Joe to tape on the walls. She would trade model horses with her friends, so she could line up a succession of different breeds along the floor, from the rarest, to the most common. How bizarre to realize that they had become their own persons. As infants, they had been undisguisable from one another. When Valentina had named them, it almost seemed like a symbolic gesture, because neither of us could keep the two straight. But now Alma's hair had more curl than Nora. And Nora's eyes were just a bit more brilliant blue.

I had forgotten that they were blue. In my memory, they had been brown. I told myself that I was a better person now. That if I could go back in time, and be given the opportunity to raise them again, I would remember the color of their eyes.

## TOM

Some weeks after Poppy requested that I write down her story, the four of us gathered together: Poppy, Jack, myself, and that sour man who went by the name Blair, who now understood to be Jack's criminal accomplice. Our purpose was to determine what things would look like moving forward. The investigation was closing in, and we were all in agreement that it would be disastrous if either Jack or Blair were to be arrested.

The decision was made that when arrest warrants were to go out, I would tip them off, and both Jack and Blair would have enough time to get out of town. And by July, our field office had wrapped up the first round of interviews. Hankish and his twenty-five associates were scouted in five different states. Both Jack and Joseph received a visit. Blair, however, could not be located – not at his home or any other address we once associated with his name. It appears the rumors of his fellows being interviewed was enough to spook him and he took off like a tiger into the night. A few days later, Jack disappeared, as well. A missing person's report was filed by the women at his station.

Blair did not trust me. I understood the sentiment: I did not trust him, either. But I lost sleep over the fact none of them, not even Poppy, had informed me of their departure. I had to be informed by my own field office that the two had disappeared. It was even suggested that both may have been murdered by Hankish. I cracked a joke that, if that were the case, we now had less work to do. But I was worried.

I studied Jack's interview ten, maybe fifteen times, trying to get a sense of how good of a liar he was. I had always considered him a poor one, but the fact is he had

never lied to me, at least not deeply. He denied knowing anything about the murder of his previous madam, Ms. Carla Dellerba. He denied knowing anything about the disappearance of Valentina Russo. He denied knowing anything about the auto thefts. He denied that his service station was a front. He conceded that it was possible a waitress “on occasion” may have taken liberties with visitors, but that as far as he knew no payment had ever been exchanged, and if it had been and had he known he would not have tolerated it. When questioned why there were so many phone calls to Hankish and known associates of Hankish made from the service station, Jack explained so long as someone paid upfront, a customer was free to make use of the phone. He had never thought to monitor his phone before, but promised that he would screen all calls in the future, and report any suspicious activity.

Joseph’s interview was unremarkable. His name had come up in our records a few times, but mostly in the context of selling amphetamines. He had, however, made at least sixty calls to Jack’s service station in the past year. When asked about them, he explained there were some women who worked there who he had become familiar with and liked to talk up over the phone. But he could not remember their names, exactly. Joseph also denied involvement in an auto theft ring. He denied selling drugs. He denied being an associate of Hankish. He’d made a steady income through trucker for many years, and after the death of his wife, made ends meet working as a contractor and mechanic. And now he was remodeling bathrooms on the side.

But we had every phone record. Bank statements. Interviews from neighbors and community members familiar with them. Someone even reported Jack to be a “pervert.” The only reason we hesitated was because of Hankish. We wanted him. More than we

wanted the handful of the others combined, we wanted him. This was before RICO and there was no evidence that Hankish himself had committed any crime, only that he had benefited from them. Hankish was smart. Hankish was a better criminal than Jack and Joseph. He knew what he was doing: he even had a job. A local auto dealer in town had hired him. And although Hankish never went to his place of employment once in twelve years, he still received a paycheck that he paid taxes on. And he kept a bank account that reflected. He lived modestly.

If we were going to indict two-dozen men on racketeering charges, we needed Hankish's indictment at the same time. And I knew that so long as Hankish remained out of reach, Jack and Blair would be safe. So would Joseph. And by extension, Poppy.

I could not stop thinking about Poppy. Jack had shared with me the miracle of the ritual of blood that he shared with her – how it had made him ill, but then filled him with vigor. Poppy denied me the ritual. She seemed to recognize that I was hurt by this and explained that she could not manage to initiate three persons at once. She only had so much blood to share. Perhaps if she had been born larger – she stood, at most, an inch or two over five feet—it would be possible. As it stood now, once she was satisfied with Blair and Jack, she would devote time to me.

I forced myself to focus on my work. And then my mother died. My mother and father had invested well and saved almost every penny they earned. Once the house was sold, and the investments divided, and my father's life insurance released from trust, there was some five-hundred thousand dollars divided between myself and my sister. My salary at the bureau was nine-thousand dollars a year. I realized that I could leave if I



wanted. I had a good excuse now. Only a handful of men would continue to work if a fortune like that fell into their lap. And the only reason I continued on with my work was because Poppy advised me to stay engaged in the day-to-day role of my life. She told me that it would only get harder once she changed me. I must learn to lower myself, to continue on with the labors of life even when I, with a wave of a hand, could dismiss them as nonsense. This was a necessary, so that I could blend in with society. So that I would survive.

William had not attended the funeral, of course. But afterwards I visited him in the asylum against my better judgement. The nurses hardly recognized me. They said I looked like a real professional now, which my suitcase and tie. And who was the lucky woman? I said, a lovely young lady in Philadelphia who I plan to propose to in a few months. William did not remember who I was. I had purchased him a magazine about farming with lots of photos of corn in it. He set it on his lap and I turned the pages for him, one by one. It was incredible how much he looked like our father. When it was time for his dinner, I said my goodbyes to him, went out into my car and wept. I couldn't understand why the visit had affected me so much. I had always visited William out of obligation and not love. But it would be the last time I saw him. Weeks later, I received a call from my sister informing me he had had a stroke and died overnight. We buried next to our mother and father but held no service.

I can write about this sensibly now, but at the time, this took a real toll on me. It has never been easy for me to say goodbye to someone. And even as an adult, it has seemed to me the greatest absurdity that we put our loved ones in the ground, cover them with cold dirt, and leave them there.

The following Sunday, Poppy called. She told me to meet her at a local coffee shop that same afternoon. I was there. She was dressed in the oddest fashions of the time: a checkered dress collected at the waist with a white belt, with white tights, patent white shoes with large silver buttons and a white knitted cap. It was not something they would have ever allowed her to wear at school, but as she sat by the window with a large bookbag, she looked just like an ordinary young woman. When a waitress arrived, she ordered us both a black coffee and cherry tart to split. I had never told her that cherry was my favorite sort of pie, but somehow she knew.

“You’re not well,” she observed.

“I’m not.”

“You look terrible.”

“I know,” I agreed.

I had caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror early that morning and marked the dark circles under my eyes. My skin was as white as fish-flesh.

“Are they concerned at work?”

“No one has said anything. Is it really that bad?”

“Yes,” she said.

She reached into her purse and produced a small mason jar filled with red liquid. She offered it to me, and I accepted.

“This is?” I asked.

“My blood,” she said. She smiled at my surprise. “You’ll need to drink it soon. It only works when it is fresh. But it will put color in your face.”

“Jack told me that your blood would make me sick.”

“It will make you sick,” she said. “But then you will feel better. You are anemic. I can see it from here.” I nodded and slipped the jar into my briefcase. My face must have betrayed a lack of confidence. She reached out a hand and placed it over mine. “I know it’s difficult to lose people.”

I withdrew my hand away and disguised my discomfort with a quick sip of coffee.

“I imagine you have experience with it,” I said.

“It becomes easier. Once you live long enough, you’ll come to understand that nothing is really yours. Did you ever read the classics?”

“Of course.”

“Diogenes Laërtius?”

“No,” I said. “Not him. Not those classics.”

“Well—in *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Laërtius writes about a general. The general is at war. He is told that his son has just fallen on the field. And is sad. But he says, ‘I knew my son was mortal,’ and returns to battle.”

“Did you know him?”

“Laërtius?”

“No,” I said. “The general.”

“Unfortunately, no. Back then it is just like today. Unless you were someone worth knowing, it was not very easy to know people.”

“Then how do you know he said that?”

“It is what is written, Tom.”

“But by who? Laërtius? Was he there at the field of battle? Did he hear the general say those words?”

“Laërtius was reporting what had been told to him.”

“And you trust him,” I said. “You trust the man who told Laërtius what this general said in the middle of a battle.”

“With my entire heart.” Poppy took a long drink of her coffee and directed her gaze out the window. Some children were walking down the street with a dozen balloons in tow. “You think too much, Tom,” she said.

“I’m paid to think.”

“You’re paid to write up reports about things that men describe to you. And you give these reports to other people, so they know what is going on. You do this day in and day out, but can’t swallow a little story that I prepared to comfort you.”

“I apologize,” I said.

“You don’t need to apologize. My point is, Tom, that I have managed to survive for as long as I have without losing my mind because I’ve come to accept that nothing is permanent. Not the world. Not time. Not my body. Not my lovers, or friends. Not my companions. Nothing. Death is a natural part of this. When you are expecting loss, it can’t sting as deeply. Things are hard for you now. Mourn them. Know that moving forward, loss will never again weigh as heavily on you, because you’ve been warned to expect it.”

“You should tell that to Jack.”

“Jack is a special case,” she admitted.

“So you have higher hopes for me?”

“Different hopes. You outpace Jack in some areas. And he you in others.”

“Don’t take him away from me,” I said. She gave me a puzzled look. “Don’t take him away, and leave me. He’s that all I have.”

“Of course not. I’m not so cruel, Tom.”

“But you are.”

“Not to you,” she said. “Never to you.”

## CORA

Tom switched off the tape recorder asked to be excused. Once he was gone, I looked at Jack.

“In my opinion, if you really wanted the letters destroyed, you would have destroyed them yourself,” I said.

“It’s not too late to correct the mistake,” he warned.

I turned my attention to Blair.

“How are you so sure I am going to die?”

“If I am going to be honest, it’s your odor. People that are soon to die have a certain smell particular to them. There’s no reason to be embarrassed. I couldn’t sense it before I was a ghost, so it’s not something other people take notice of. And it’s not a bad odor. It’s a bit like the smell of fresh dough.”

“I must be sick, then.”

“Not necessarily. I have smelled it strongly on people on top of high buildings. And then they jump.”

“There aren’t any buildings around here.”

“No. But there is always a danger, somewhere.” Jack brushed his finger against the butt of a cigarette in the middle of the table, which Tom had discarded. “If you’d like, when you die, you could stay with me. It would be your choice.”

“My choice?”

“It’s a choice to become a ghost. I’m not trapped here. I just wanted to see how things would turn out. You could do the same.”

“If I die out here, everyone will wonder what happened to me,” I said. “They’ll try searching for me, probably. It will create so much work for them.”

I spoke without thinking and paused to consider what I had just implied. Who did I mean by ‘them,’ exactly? The police? My coworkers? Who in the world assume the burden of searching for me, and why did I care?

“You should go home, Cora,” said Jack.

“Absolutely not. Neither of you have explained anything to me. At least, nothing of consequence.”

Jack seemed defeated.

“There’s nothing more to explain,” he lied.

“Where did the spirit go?”

“Somewhere else.”

“So, it’s been destroyed?”

“You can’t destroy a spirit,” Blair declared, with a short laugh. “Fuck, judging by my own situation, you can hardly destroy people.”

“It’s gone,” said Jack. “Just like you’re about to be.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “Give me those letters, and I’ll leave.”

Jack braced his back against a wooden support beam and cupped his face in his hands. He said nothing.

“It would be nice to have you buried here,” Blair said. “Beside me, and my father. It would be a beautiful gesture.”

“I don’t want to be buried beside you,” I said flatly.

“Why not? This is your ancestral land.”

“Is it?”

“It is. My mother’s family has lived on this land for six generations. Well—for the first few generations, they couldn’t leave. But even when they could leave, they ended up staying here anyway. We have a small cemetery here, even. But there are no markings anymore. Do you want to see it?”

I considered.

Yes, I would.

The cemetery was about a twenty-minute walk away, as the crow flies. I followed Blair quietly in tow. He moved slowly for me, stopping to give me time to catch up to him. Blair, who apparently really was a ghost, could pass through obstacles as though he were made of air, whereas I made do with crawling through the odd bush of thorns and crawling over fallen trees. The terrain was rocky in places, and I was not wearing the

right shoes to navigate it. Blair explained that when he was young there had been a path here, that he and his brothers would take to go fishing. The cemetery was only a little farther past the lake. The only remains of the trail now were the sparse, young growth of trees, hinting at a time in the past where the way had been cleared and managed. Like the trail, the cemetery had been lost to time. There was nothing to suggest the parcel of land before us had ever been touched by any human hands, save a few deliberate piles of rocks, which may as well have been deposited by a badger digging its own path into the earth. Blair gestured from right to left, directing my gaze.

“There is my great grandmother – and there is my grandmother, and her husband,” he began. “And some of their children. Many of them. It was the flu. And here is one of my sisters. She died at a week or so. I was too young to remember her birth, unfortunately.”

Blair continued until he arrived at his father, in a far corner.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I’m by the cabin.”

“Why there? Why not here?”

“There is no good reason, if I am to be honest. The person who buried me was lazy and couldn’t be bothered carrying me all the way out here. Not that it matters much where someone is buried.”

“Are they here, too?” I asked, canvassing the forest. “Your family, I mean. Our family. Are they ghosts?”

“No,” he said. “Only a small percentage of people become ghosts. You see, it’s a choice you make the moment of death. I imagine most people are so afraid that they look



for the first exit. And once you take it, you cannot come back. And those that resist it and stick around like I have get bored easily. I know for a fact some of my family became ghosts. My father, for example. But they did not stick around very long. I wish they had.”

“How did you die?”

“Kindly,” he said, simply, and chose not to elaborate. He took a few steps out into the cemetery and stood there quietly.

“I have the feeling you brought me out here to talk,” I said.

“I did. The cemetery was just an excuse.”

“Is it something you can say in front of Tom or Jack?”

“I could. But it wouldn’t be the smartest choice.”

“What is it, then?”

“She’s on her way.”

“Who?”

“The spirit.”

Blair took back to the trail, heading deeper into the forest. I followed him. We continued until we reached a lull in the trees, where a stream had divided the forest. Flat stones dotted its surface like pockmarks, and the water so clear that I easily made out the mossy bed. On the other side of the stream the land lifted, cutting sharply upward into rock. Blair paused here, as though to consider something.

“I thought the spirit was destroyed,” I said.

“None of us said that.”

“Why is it coming here?”

“I suppose she wants her bones back. And she is following them here.”

“What, did she put a tracker on my car?”

Blair shot me a strange look. Then, his eyes lit with understanding.

“Of course. There is no way for you to know. She is very jealous of what is done with her old bodies, during and after death. Ritual is important to her. It doesn't matter which rituals, really—just so one is observed and kept. She is always aware of where they are. When they move. When they die. It is guilt, maybe. Or a compulsion. Once she stole back an ancient set of her bones from the British Museum, only to return them to some cave in the middle of Iran. I suppose it's possible she only shared this obsession with me. Or at very least, never told Tom.”

“You knew her well.”

“She was once my greatest ally,” he said, with sincerity. “If she is coming from that direction, she must pass this way.”

“She's on foot?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“It's difficult to explain.”

“Try.”

“She has the same gift you do. She didn't, not always. But now she does. I cannot hide from her. And she cannot hide from me.”

“I suppose this is why I smell like dough,” I said. “She's going to kill me.”

“She may. But probably not. She holds no grudges toward you.”

“We should go back,” I suggested.

“No,” he said, placing a firm hand on my shoulder. “She is as much your mother as I am your father. It would be good for you to meet her.”

## JACK

It was only a week later that things heated up, and Hankish put everything on hold. And I do mean everything. The auto theft ring, which Joe had settled into as something of a career. His gambling operations. The pornography and prostitution enterprises. Federal agents appeared at the doorsteps of our homes, at our places of business, at our churches, at our children's schools – anything to humiliate us into consenting to an interview. My interrogators arrived at the station early one morning. I invited them to sit down and have a burger, which they declined. It was casual. I was straightforward in my lies. Neither of the men managed to upend me. It was Poppy's blood, I knew, that made me brave. She had resumed our weekly ritual, and the blood was beginning to change me. What could these men do to me? How did they intend to keep me in a cage?

Blair was less composed. He came to me later that night, and said simply, "We're leaving." I reminded him that this was not what we agreed to. Tom had given no indication that arrest warrants were out for any of us, and if anything, the coerced interviews signaled that they did not yet have enough to make a move. He would not hear it. He dragged me to down the stairs my collar, shoved me inside my room, and told me to pack.

I complained bitterly. Did Poppy know that he was now making decisions on her behalf? Had he obtained her permission? Blair said that he didn't care how she would react. There was no time. He had calmed down by then, and seemed so sincere that I stopped questioning him. I threw a change of clothes into a bag. I collected my most

treasured letters, a handful of watches I had invested thousands into, dress shoes. A fountain pen that someone had once left at the station, and was never claimed. Twelve hundred dollars that I had once stashed in the wall, foreseeing such an emergency. A revolver with two-hundred rounds of ammunition. A rifle with seventh-five. We took a car I did not recognize.

Blair's chief complaint was that Tom had not warned us about the interviews. He must have known. There is no way the orders got past his desk without him signing off on it. I defended him. Tom had never agreed to inform us about every aspect of the investigation, only the arrest warrants. Making a phone call to us would be dangerous, in any case. Any phone call made to us would be traced back to a particular payphone, in a city near an FBI field office. Someone would connect the dots. He was clearly being prudent.

"You put too much faith in him," said Blair.

"You don't like him."

"I don't have to like him."

"But you won't even trust him," I observed. "Why? Clearly, he is on our side. If he wasn't, we would both be in jail."

"He is on your side," said Blair, raising his voice. "And he doesn't need to hide his intentions. He probably doesn't have any. He's too damn stupid to scheme. That's point. You're placing your trust in a man that doesn't think it's worth warning us about federal agents showing up at our doors. He could drive to another state and make a phone call. He could have put in effort."

"Maybe he didn't know," I suggested, aware of the impossibility.

“He’s in charge of the goddamn investigation.”

“You’re jealous,” I accused. “You’re upset because for the first time I have placed faith in someone besides you.”

We were traveling at forty miles an hour. Blair turned suddenly for the curb and slammed on the brakes. I lurched forward, striking my face on the dashboard. I tasted the salt of blood in my mouth. He waited a moment for me to regain my composure. And then he slowly, deliberately returned to the road.

We drove straight for some eight hours. Blair would not let me drive. I dozed for some of it, but was awake when we passed the state lines into North Carolina and turned off the highway; we continued on an off road for some time, until turning up a gravel road cutting up the side of a mountain. Pressure built in my ears. I yawned to pop them. Eventually we descended down into a low valley that wore the mist and humidity like a silken robe. We cut straight through the state, until we arrived at some point to the northeast of Gatesville. By now the light of morning had breached the sky. Blair turned off the road and drove as far as he could into a wooded area, until the road came to an end, and then told me to get out. Jack took the guns and I carried my bags quietly as we continued on foot. In short time we reached an old stone home in what once might have been a clearing, now overtaken with bushes. What was left of the door to the cabin, a rotted panel of wood, lie on the ground. We stepped inside. It smelt of moisture and mold. I could see daylight through the roof. The floor was dirt. There were some selections of furniture – a wooden bed frame, with what appeared to be fresh blankets; a

short table; two chairs. A cast iron stove was in the corner of the room. Blair set his belongings down on the floor.

“We are staying here?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because no one knows about this place. And it is a short drive to Poppy.”

“You know about it.”

“I was born there,” Blair said, gesturing at the bed frame.

I set my bags atop it.

“We can’t stay here,” I said. “It’s uninhabitable.”

“I will fix a door. I will repair the roof. The structure itself is sound.”

“We have no provisions.”

“There is a stream half a mile away,” he said. “We will hunt. You were smart to bring the rifle. For everything else, there is a general store in the town we passed. I will go there for whatever else we need.”

“But we passed at least three motels,” I suggested.

“We don’t want to be around people,” he explained patiently, as though I were a child. “People talk.” Blair moved over to the cast iron stove and opened the door to inspect its firebox. He began to scoop out the feathered remnants of a mouse’s nest and then, finally, the skeleton of the mouse. “I’ve come here off and on for twenty years and have never seen any sign of another person. That path we took is very old. My mother told me it was an old miner’s trail, cut out by slaves, her own family, and the forest never took to it again. There once was a plantation two miles or so over. Her mother’s mother

watched it burn down. She always said that this land is hungry, that it wouldn't let anyone survive on it unless they belonged here. Even then, she would sew charms into our shirts." Blair here gestured at the floor. "Do you feel it, too? How hungry this land is?"

"I don't feel anything," I admitted.

"My father died there," he said, gesturing to the same bed in which he was born.

"Place your bags somewhere else."

Winter came quickly. Blair made good on his promise. He left one day and returned the next with all the carpentry supplies needed to make the cabin livable. We made a clearing around the cabin. We cut down trees and processed them together, replacing the roof, the door, and adding a hardwood floor. We packed the inside of the cabin with quicklime, so that the heat kept, and the cold rains didn't leak inside. We dug out a root cellar. Blair returned with canned fruits, three 60-lb bags of salt, and an assortment of cast iron pans. I took three deer within the first month and he showed me how to smoke the meat over a gentle coal fire so it would keep, how to tan its skin with its brains. It was such a novelty, covering the wooden floors with their skins, and finally able to go barefoot without risking a splinter. And as the colder weather set in, we were thankful for the warmth. Poppy did not visit us, but kept in communication with Blair, who traveled to a town twenty-some minutes away once a week to use their only payphone. Tom was somewhere. Blair assured me Tom was well. Poppy was well. But it was too dangerous. A round of arrests had been made in Wheeling, not long after we had



left. Blair managed to find a newspaper with the story. Hankish, incredibly, had been spared the first round of arrests— as well as Joe.

“They’re waiting for someone small to turn state’s witness,” he explained. “I’ve seen it done before. They’ve destroyed entire families that way in New York. Once they’ve turned someone, it’s not nearly so hard to convict the rest.”

I wondered: were Blair and I small? Had they come looking for us? Was Joe small, too?

In the absence of Poppy’s blood, I went through withdraws. I suffered through day-long headaches. I lost my vigor. When nourished by her blood, I found that I did not have to eat as often, but was seldom tired, and gained muscle, even – but now hunger pains returned, the worst in the morning. Courage left me. I struggled to stay asleep through the night. I assume the same happened to Blair, although he never complained. I wish I understood her reasons. She was a thirty-minute drive away, at most, and had invested a great deal of time into priming our bodies with her blood. It was so that when the hour of change did arrive, our bodies would be in the best condition, and we would emerge even more impressively after. But now its effects waned day-by-day, until we arrived at a point where we were just as vulnerable as we had been before we even knew her.

One morning, I suggested to Blair that it was possible that Poppy had changed her mind about us. Maybe she no longer intended to make us her companions. The comment caught Blair off guard. He set his fork down on his plate.

“Where is this coming from?” he demanded.

“Nowhere,” I said. “It’s only that she hasn’t visited us once. We are easily replaceable. She could very well have found two other candidates, ones that don’t have to hide from the federal government in a forest.”

“We are not replaceable. I think she’s made that clear to you.”

“What—you think that because she has spent time with us, we aren’t replaceable? It has been a year and a half, Blair. What is a year and a half to someone that has lived millennia? She could walk up any street in Norfolk and find someone younger than us, more talented. Smarter, even. And she might keep them on her blood for five, ten years. By the time they reach our age they will be incredibly strong, much stronger than we could ever hope to be. And it’s in her benefit, isn’t it, to have the strongest people she can at her side?” Blair didn’t say anything. I could not read his face. I took a deep breath. “Think about it. We are both nobodies from the middle of fucking nowhere. There’s nothing remarkable about us. She may have told you that you are something special to win you over, but she was probably lying. And I don’t even know what I’m doing here. I guess I’m only here because she discovered an interest in you. Was I your Tom? Did she placate you the same way? ‘Agree to serve me, and you can have a companion of your own.’”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Then why?”

“Jack, every decision she makes is purposeful. She does not lie. And she doesn’t toy with people for the thrill of it.”

“And what distinguishes us?”

“She chose us because she saw potential in us.”

I laughed.

“What potential? A contract killer and a man that runs a whorehouse. Surely she could have done better.”

“Look over there,” said Blair, pointing toward a parting of two tall pine trees. I looked. There was nothing. “What do you see?”

“A clearing.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“There is a ghost there. Or an apparition. Whatever you wish to call it. It’s an old. Older than all of these trees.”

“We were having a serious conversation.”

“You don’t have to believe me. But you must admit that the idea of some people being able to see ghosts is not so far removed from the reality you are already living in.” Blair lifted his fork, and picked at his scrambled eggs. “I discovered the gift a decade ago. At first, it was only my father’s spirit. I thought it was a haunting. But soon there were others. All were lost in time. Only a few spoke English. My mother could see them, too. And her father. And his mother. I didn’t know until my own father told me so, years after her death. It was never mentioned. When my mother went blind, she could no longer see or hear them. He could no longer appear to her or anyone. It devastated them both. But in my presence, he was able to manifest himself again. And then the others. They can appear exactly as they were in life. Poppy loves to meet these spirits. It delights her.”

“Let me see it,” I said. “The ghost.”

“This ghost doesn’t want to be seen by anyone besides me.”

“Why?”

“It is shy.”

I nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“You overreact to things.”

I was quiet for a long time.

“Valentina. Was she a ghost?”

“No,” he said. “You were unwell. And you cannot see ghosts.” He hesitated. “I don’t believe she is a ghost, Jack. I think she went whenever most spirits go. I would have told you otherwise. Take comfort in that.”

I tried to take comfort in his words. But I felt sad.

“What Poppy see in me?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But you have the situation backwards. She noticed you first. She was taken by you. And when she saw me, that was her opportunity to get to you.”

This would have been a good place to end. The two of us, alone in a forest of ghosts. It seemed the correct metaphor, something we could both resign to, the natural conclusion of our friendship. We would spend out the rest of our years hunting the deer and rabbits and establishing fields of staple crops. We would prove to be hungrier and more ruthless than the land itself.

Blair had been correct in his suggestion that this land had seen no human traffic, save for us, for twenty-some years. I never saw any sign of it. Not a single shoeprint, or

tin can top, or charred remains of a campfire. And yet one early March morning, some hours before dawn, when Blair was away on some errand to the general store, I heard movement outside the cabin. I was still in bed and assumed it to be a deer drawn to the camp by the warmth of our smoldering coals. It had happened before, and I had taken a deer in her prime from the front door. I slipped on my boots and grabbed my rifle. But then there was a noise from behind the cabin, and a glow of light. The shooting began.

I remember falling to the floor, as though shoved forward by a great force. The pine logs splintered. The smell of gunpowder and pepper thickened the air. I began to choke. My ears rang. I buried my face into the crook of my elbow. Then I heard the click of empty chambers, a lull in racket. The light behind the cabin shifted. I found feet, guided by instinct. I prepared my rifle, thrust the door open with a kick, and returned fire until it clicked empty. I could make out the figures of least five men. Two fell immediately. The others scrambled away, one dropping a handful of ammunition. I bolted past them into the thicket and tossed my rifle. I was guided only by the thought that I must get away. I knew this forest, this land. It had become familiar in these past months. I had traced the deer trails so many times that I needed no light to guide me. I knew how to avoid the thorny trees, the curled roots. There was no hesitation in my step. And when I reached the end of my familiarity at the edge of a field, there was the moon. I chased it. I must have continued at this for at least fifteen minutes, until my legs gave out beneath me and I fell face-first into earth. It was wet from a dusting of snow, and warm with the smell in husk. But it was cold outside. I shivered from my own sweat. The pain came in waves.

I explored my body trembling hands. There was a wound in my left thigh and one just under my right shoulder. The bullets had gone straight through. This encouraged me. I traced my fingers over my face and through my hair. It was wet and matted. I found the entry to a bullet in my left forehead. Its exit was behind my right ear. The blood leaking from it was warm.

I called out for Blair. What else was there to do? I had lost feeling in my legs. My hands were going numb. My voice was thready, and weak. I thought: I must keep going. I can still crawl. They will be coming for me. Blair is not here. Somehow, I found my way onto my side. But my fingers would no longer curl. I was paralyzed. I screamed for Blair again. The cold sank into my bones. I went in and out of consciousness. Whenever my eyes came to focus, I would search for the moon in the sky. Centuries seemed to pass, and yet the moon did not move. And once there was the shine of two eyes above me. They were big and round, and I thought, it is a ghost. It is the spirit of this land.

And then eyes were gone.

I did not want to be left alone.

‘Come back,’ I tried to say—but the words would not form.

I wanted to cry. But all at once, I became very tired. I closed my eyes to rest, as though to take a nap. But this time, I did not wake up. But in sleep the eyes returned, followed by a halo of light. I was in the arms of a woman. She was dark-haired, with young hands, dressed in color silk. Her skin was the color of walnuts. I could not make out her face.

“I am death,” she said.

Oh, I thought. So this is death. I fixed my eyes on her halo. My mouth filled with  
a bitter

fluid. I tried to swallow it. It caught in my throat, found its way into my nose. It stung me.  
I wanted to scream. But she held me more tightly. The warmth of her patience soothed  
me. She offered me her name.

“Repeat it,” she commanded.

I struggled to find the constantans. It came out jumbled.

“Try again,” she said.

I tried again. This time, she was satisfied.

My body felt heavy.

My throat began to burn. Then my insides. Then everything. It was unbearable. I  
cried out. Were we on fire? Or was this what it was like to die. It was a cruel trick of  
God, to make the end so terrible. The fire spread its roots into my mouth. It fastened my  
lips shut. The halo grew brighter, and brighter.

## TOM

Shortly after our visit at the café, Poppy told me it was time to start getting my affairs in order. Not only in terms of my career, and my finances, of course. But was time for me to say goodbye to things. After the transformation, I would no longer see things the same way. Colors would appear differently. Light would not cast the same familiar shadows. Poppy suggested I visit as many museums as possible, and take in all the art, the nuances of genius, so that I could reflect on them in the future. And I should eat all my favorite foods. After the transformation most foods would make me ill. But don't get fat, she teased. If you do, you will be stuck like that forever.

I took her advice to heart. On weekends I passed my time at the galleries, arriving early in the morning, and leaving only when they began to dim the lights at closing. I finished at least one cherry pie a week. I would steal away from the office to catch the sunsets. I would try to catch the sunrises. I drank all sorts of hard spirits – the best that money could buy. I came to recognize how much in my life I had taken for granted. I now daydreamed about those same things, as though already familiar with their loss.

Just as Jack and Blair once did, I fell into the rabbit hole of trying to determine what Poppy was, exactly. And whenever I had a spare night without any obligations, I would spend it on this pursuit. I considered books on the occult, and folklore, magic and mysticism. I knew the librarians judged me and worried that my habits may get back to work. It never did. But Poppy knew. When she met with me one weekend, she inquired on why I was so hellbent on placing her into a category. I would never manage to. I admitted that I didn't know. It just felt like something I should do. And I felt ashamed.



I had not been the first, of course. And I would not be the last. Poppy told me the closest any culture ever came to capturing the idea of her kind were those that lived in ancient Mesopotamia. That is because in the early days many of her kind chose to settle in deserts, where the nights were long and cold, and lived openly as they were, drinking blood, performing miracles, and cavorting with humans. It was a pleasant time. People would leave her kind offerings and welcome their visits. But as her kind either met with terrible ends or became bored and moved on, memory mixed with new religion. Soon the stories began that they appeared in the form of animals or storms, and lived in filth, and sought only to cause harm. And eventually their collective existence was reduced to occupying the place of a single deity.

“The Akkadians based one of their gods, Lamashtu, on the stories passed down about us. Keep in mind this was centuries after the last of us left those lands. No one had any firsthand experience to go off on. You probably won’t recognize that name: Lamashtu. And I doubt you can recall more than a few facts about the Akkadian culture, if any. But their goddess has been borrowed by countless cultures that followed them. All people do is change a name, change a setting, and suddenly there is a perfect god, designed to fit the specific needs of a specific people.”

I considered my own upbringing. Both my mother and father had been dedicated Protestants. I kept up with the faith for a while but became bored with it once I hit high school. I didn’t dare let them know. I continued to attend services until I was able to leave the house. It was nothing in particular that turned me against faith. I didn’t become disillusioned with the hypocrisy. I didn’t consider the idea of divinity impossible or illogical. No clergy member raped me. It wasn’t because I liked men. I had left the

church years before I admitted that to myself. I just no longer had any interest in stories about redemption. They did not seem to apply to me.

“Do you consider the faithful to be foolish?”

“Not at all. Faith finds a way, in some form. Even after all I have seen, and being entirely aware of my own bias, I still carve the same little charms of protection from my first mortal life to wear during pregnancy. And I still pray to the moon, as though she has a soul, as though she is actually listening.”

There, I thought – that is the human in her.

I sent Poppy weekly updates on the case. She was concerned about her father. She wanted fair warning before his arrest warrant would be issued, even though she had no intentions of intervening on his behalf. I had pulled some strings with her in mind, destroying several key files relating to her father before they could be faxed to other agencies. Although her father had been interviewed, agents looking over the case now weren't quite sure why anyone had gone through the trouble to, since we didn't appear to have nearly as much on him as we did the others. And no one suspected anything. The only thing he needed to fear now would be someone turning state's witness and implicating him. But until and unless someone did, their hands would be tied.

“Do you think someone will?” she asked.

“It's possible,” I admitted. “But Hankish is well respected. Most men understand that if they turn, their families will be in danger. I doubt anyone will want to risk it.”

“I heard you can make people disappear now, if they agree to testify for the state,” she said. “You can give them new identities. You can move them somewhere else.”

“We can. But not quickly enough. And it’s a new program.”

“Could you do it for Joe?” she asked.

It took me a moment to realize she was sincere.

“I thought you wanted me to protect your father from being arrested in the first place,” I said.

“I did,” she admitted. “But imagine – if he turns to your side, and puts everyone away in jail, he will have a chance at a new life, somewhere far away from here. And if I were to disappear, if I were to let him think I was dead, he would have a reasonable chance at closure, at moving on.”

“That is not closure.”

“Closure isn’t always painless, Tom.”

“You think he’d be happier thinking that you’re dead as a result of all of this, rather than thinking that you got bored and ran away?”

She shrugged.

“I think he is someone capable of moving on from things.”

I told her that I would keep it consideration. It was possible, of course, to try to arrange for Joe to turn state witness. But only if he wanted to. And in my impression, he had no desire to do so.

In the meantime, I put out the hints to my supervisors that I was considering a career change. They were surprised that a promising young agent like myself would want to step away from what would eventually become a lucrative profession. I need only mention my inheritance, and they understood. I had invested it intelligently. The yearly

interest that would accrue would be more than enough to live comfortably. I suggested I may want to start a business. Or invest in real estate. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy my work with investigation – I did. But first and foremost, I was a money man.

I could sell my house remotely. I already had a few leads on respectable real estate agents. I assumed that wherever we went, I would not be able to take anything with me and looked into renting a ten-year-long lease for a storage closet, so I could hold on to the few sentimental items I had to my name. Perhaps Poppy would disapprove. And if she did, she would tell me. But no matter how much you prepare for something, it is difficult to move away from who you are, entirely.

## CORA

“She may be in a bad mood,” Blair warned me, finding the one flat-topped rock in the area, and taking a seat. “It’s been a year or so since I last visited her. She was in a bad mood then.”

“You’ve kept contact with her?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Why?”

“She has been my only companion for the past twenty-five years. I have never felt like saying goodbye to her.”

“You said she was monstrous,” I said.

“Yes. But not any more so than me.”

“Do the others feel the same way?”

Blair shrugged.

“I wouldn’t go by their judgment,” he said. “They are not on good of terms. I can’t imagine either of them welcoming this reunion. But it is their own doing. Tom shouldn’t have stolen her bones.”

“Can she talk to me?” I said. “Is she a person?”

“Of course. Her spirit sits inside of a body. Just as yours does.”

“Which body?”

Blair let out a small laugh.

“Well, someone who was not as fortunate as you,” he said.

“I think you must be the first person in my life to call me fortunate,” I replied, finding a bit of shade.

“Why? Does everyone feel bad for you because you can’t feel pain?”

“Yes, actually.”

“They’re just jealous. What man or woman wouldn’t like to be able to face the world without fear? If you were living five-thousand years ago, everyone would be singing war songs about you.”

“Do you see these scars?” I said, lifting my arms. “All of them were caused by carelessness. I didn’t know to be afraid of the pain I couldn’t feel. But my body has been marked by each wound. I’m not sure how I survived this long.”

“Tom and Jack tried to teach you caution,” he said. “But you were like a dog that couldn’t be trained. It was something you had to learn by yourself, through observation.”

“And my condition is the doing of this spirit?”

“Not intentionally,” he said. “It wasn’t a punishment. It’s just how things worked out.”

“Can she fix it?” I asked, in earnest.

“Absolutely not,” Blair said. “What—did you think she was a god?”

We waited at the edge of the river for a long time. I recognized high noon come and go. The sun takes a particular color as it slants toward evening. It had been years since I noticed it. I would watch the midday sun creep its way to sunset regularly while living on the boat with my mother. She would try to capture it in watercolor, even though she wasn’t very good at paints, and toss her attempts into the sea. Once I was helping

pick out paint for an elderly woman's sunroom that my mother had been hired to style. In the paint store she me to pick out a soft yellow. I brought a soft yellow that I thought would complement the milk-satin curtains. "No," she dismissed, taking the sample from me. "I want the yellow of the sun just as it hits the water." I understood exactly what she was asking for, and found a sample card titled "freckled sun," which when turned against the light alit with a blue sheen. She took it from me, declaring it perfect.

I became lost in thought, memories. They were bitter to me. I could not shake away their sadness. The heat had become so oppressive that I moved to the middle of the river, crouched down, and drank directly from it. Blair apologized. He said that it was easy to forget what living things required. The heat, of course, did not bother him, and he hadn't considered that it would bother me. And then she appeared, the spirit. I knew her first by her shadow, and then by her voice. She was standing on the pinnacle of the cliff beside us. She greeted Blair. Her voice was soft, gentle, but unapologetically direct. Blair returned the greeting and suggested how she could descend from the cliff. It had been another one of his old fishing spots, apparently; the trail curved down alongside the cliff face, and if she took it a minute or so north, then she could climb down and wade back through the river toward us.

She was around my height—in order words, not remarkably tall or short. Her long, dark hair was parted in the middle, and fell in equal portion in front of her shoulders. Its frizz had caught the humidity, and that, with the small twigs and branches that had caught in it during her journey, made her appear like a wild thing. She was dressed more sensibly than I was. She wore loose-fitting khaki pants, a dark button-

downed shirt, and boots that reached her mid calves. She navigated the slippery stones effortlessly, and when she noticed me sitting in the river, paused. She looked at Blair.

“Is this the twin?” she said. At this, Blair offered another shrug. I stood up and rang the water out of my shirt. She looked me up and down. “What’s her deficiency, exactly?”

“She can’t feel pain,” said Blair.

“That’s not so bad. It can turn out far worse.”

“Are you the spirit?” I asked.

Having satisfied her curiosity, she gave me a final dismissive look, and turned toward Blair.

“What have you told her, exactly?”

“Enough to confuse her,” he said. Blair gave me an apologetic look. “Are you here for your bones, Poppy?”

“Yes.”

“It was Tom that stole them,” he said. “This one drove him here with them.”

She shot me a severe look.

“You helped him?”

“I work at a coroner’s office,” I explained. “And my mother was exhumed. And all the morgues are overflowing, so she was sent to my office. After the...”

“The murder,” she snapped impatiently. “I’ve seen the news. The media loves that word. Murder sells. It gets people wet. For fuck’s sake, your mother wasn’t murdered. You put her in a nursing home that was once shortlisted for a dateline expose on elder neglect. She went septic and no one caught it.”



I nodded and waited to make sure she was finished. When I was certain, I continued: "In any case, Tom was going to take the bones. I asked him why. He said he wanted to rebury them. I wanted them reburied, too. So I agreed to drive him out here."

"This is not where I am going to be reburied," she said simply. "I need to be returned to the same spot."

"But why?" I asked, sincerely.

This question appeared to take her by surprise.

"A ritual was performed. My body was returned to the earth. It was meant to stay there."

"She's very particular about funerary rituals," Blair interrupted. "That's all. It's the way of her old faith."

"I never gave you a hard time about asking to be buried with a Bible."

"And why would you?" he asked.

"Because you never lived by it."

"Jack is here, Poppy."

"Oh, I'm well aware."

"Will you kill him?"

"I couldn't if I wanted to," she said. "He made sure of that when he did what he did to me."

"What did he do you?" I asked.

The woman warned me with her eyes.

"What does she call herself?" she asked Blair.

"My name is Cora," I said.

“Cora,” she repeated as if judging its merit. “Take your car and leave. You have my permission.”

“Blair told me I will die soon,” I said. “I thought maybe you would be the one to see that through.”

Again, she appeared caught off guard.

“She also doesn’t feel any fear,” Blair explained. “I suppose it’s part of not being able to feel pain. I don’t know. Apparently, the science makes sense.”

“Do you want me to kill you?” the woman asked.

“Not particularly,” I admitted. “But if I’m going to just die in a car accident on my way home—maybe.”

“Did you tell her that you are her father?”

“That’s all she knows,” said Blair. “Stop giving her a hard time. You must understand my affection for her, Poppy. Look—she’s done everything I couldn’t. She finished school. She even went to college. She has a real job. She hasn’t hurt a single person in her life.”

“Poppy was my mother’s name,” I said. “I wish you would stop using it.”

“Poppy was my name,” said the woman, taking careful steps toward me. “And it is still my name. I only lent it to your mother.” She came within arm’s reach. I could smell the sweetness of her sweat. “Again, Cora. Get in your car. Leave. Drive off a hill. Shoot yourself in the head. I don’t care. This is my business. And fuck your mother.”

I slapped her. The force of it surprised both of us. She slipped on the rocks, struggled for balance, and then fell sideways into the stream, catching herself with an arm. She looked up at me with indignation. Blair began to laugh.

“Isn’t my daughter remarkable?” he said between breaths.

The spirit found her feet again. She said nothing, but moved out of reach and tried to recover her composure. She made no effort to return the blow. She uttered no curses. I noticed that the side of her arm was partially skinned and bleeding.

“It will be dark soon,” I said. “The mosquitos are bad this time of year, even in the city. Let’s return to the cabin.”

## JACK

I woke a few days later, still somewhere between this world and the next. My senses were muddled. It was too dark to make anything out. But I knew Poppy was there. She tried to console me. My mind was still in the forest. I told her that I was shot. She took my hand and placed it on my forehead, where the bullet had entered. The wound had healed. I warned her about the men. She needed to run. They were all dead, she assured me. I asked her where the light had gone.

“It was me,” she said. “I was the light.”

I tasted honey in my mouth.

She had come to me, of course. Some fifty miles away, in the middle of class, she had felt my terror in the pit of her stomach. It was disorganized, almost animalistic, and though she could glean nothing from it, she did not hesitate to come. By the time she had arrived, the men were gone. Blair was there, having just returned a little before her. I was nowhere to be found. The two of them followed my trail through the forest. They came upon me at the edge of a field. She was unable to rouse me. Poppy knew death. She told Blair that I was short for this world.

“It was his choice,” she said simply.

I missed her meaning. When she explained that Blair was dead, I screamed until I lost my voice. She sat nearby with a careful hand on my back. The honey bittered. I vomited – and to my horror, it came out in tarry chunks.

“Keep going,” I heard her say. “Get it out. That is the stale life inside of you.”

I did not remain conscious for very long. This was the beginning of the change. Poppy later explained that throughout my transformation, I would wake like this, always back in the forest, always insisting on danger. But she only told me Blair died once. And that was the only moment of lucidity that I remember.

It took me a long time to forgive Poppy. For many years I remained convinced that there must have been some other solution. That she didn't need to choose between us. But, of course, it was necessary. There was no time to find an alternative. To save me, to turn me into her companion, she must have her future set inside of her. And so she took Blair inside of her and accepted his seed, and at once, her blood thickened like milk. It was life. And as she fed it to me, the same life drained out of Blair.

She continued to feed me small sips at the cabin until my wounds closed and I was roused to consciousness. She commanded me to repeat her name. Not Poppy. Her real name. The name was born out of a language that no longer existed and held the power over death. It took me many times to find the correct pronunciation – I struggled with it. But once I mastered her name, she could see its magic began to work inside of me.

It was not a gentle process.

“Some accept it easily—others fight it,” she said of the transformation. “You fought.”

As I slept, she removed my deformed right hand. She burned it inside the stove. And then, using its ashes, she fixed Blair's hand in its place. It was the work of an artisan, she told me. She had to tease out the ligaments, muscles, and nerves; once the two ends

were placed correctly, she wrapped it tightly in cloth she had soaked in her blood. And later in the evening, when she pricked the middle of the palm with a needle, the hand twitched. It was meant to be a gift – a way for me to become whole again as if that was what had been missing.

Three weeks passed before I emerged from my delirium. We were still in the cabin, incredibly. The stove was lit, and pine needles were boiling in a pot of water. I recognized the familiar smell. Blair had done the same. I was naked, covered with heavy fur blankets that Poppy had carried up to the cabin from somewhere, and partially reclined against a pillow. I counted no less than three oil lanterns.

“Are we really here?” I said to her.

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m still alive.”

“Very.”

Poppy turned and went to the stove. She returned with a cup of pine tea and offered it to me. I hesitated.

“Go on,” she said. “It is one of the few things you can still enjoy without consequence.”

I took it. She waited for me to sip it. I held it dumbly.

“We have to leave,” I said, not yet aware of the date. To me, my long sleep had felt like a quick cat nap. “Those were Hankish’s men. He’ll send more.”

“You’ve been asleep for a while.”

“Have they come?”

“No,” she said. “But even if they had, they wouldn’t have been able to find us. I was able to summon some of my ancient magic and set an illusion around the cabin. From an outsider’s perspective, it appears as a collection of pines too tightly packed to climb through.”

“And Blair,” I said, speaking before the realization hit me.

“Please,” she said. “I can’t take anymore. He is dead. You have mourned him. We have both wept for him. I am exhausted. Please hold back your tears.”

I was quiet.

“I killed the two men that escaped your gunfire,” she continued. “I tracked them to their homes. I tore out their throats. I tore out their throats, and of their wives, and their children. I slaughtered their cats and dogs. I did my part in avenging Blair. But Hankish is alive. I couldn’t get to him. He was in jail already. But he will be dealt with in good time. He will be your prize.”

“And Tom.”

“Tom is safe.”

“I want to see him.”

“It’s not possible right now.”

“But why?”

“You will see him,” she assured me, standing abruptly. “But you have put me through three weeks of hell. We have had this conversation several times now. You probably won’t even remember this iteration. You have been the most difficult of all the companions I’ve turned. I need you to focus on yourself right now. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

I held my mouth.

“What is it?” she said.

“How did they find us?”

Poppy looked at me sadly.

“Blair made a miscalculation,” she said. “But it wasn’t his or anyone’s fault.”

Poppy, let me rest for another week. I did not leave the bed. I did not stir, even. Sleep came easily to me. But at the end of the week, it was time to cut my teeth on things. And I mean this in the literal sense: my teeth had changed. My canines were subtly longer and very sharp; the premolars behind them were pointed and slightly curved. I tested them on my finger: they drew blood easily. She would wake me and feed me fresh animal hearts. This, she explained, would be my subsistence. It was complete nutrition. I accepted them. They tasted good. It’s not a taste I could have captured before. They were savory, sweet, and hearty, with a fleshy texture. When presenting me with one, she would inform me what animal they came from—rabbit, fox, deer, bear. Even a wolf, once. She asked me to compare them. Did any excite me, in particular? Her companions have always had different preferences in animals. A human heart is always preferred, but it can be more feasible to turn to other sources if one wishes to live in society.

“They are fine,” I said. “All of them.”

“You don’t like them, do you?”

“I do.”

“But tell me your favorite. I’ll bring you those.”



I wondered why she was asking me. Certainly, she must already know. She was able to sense my fear from fifty-something miles away. Could she not sense my pleasure? I asked her directly. No, she told me. Those days are over. You are no longer human. Now your thoughts are your own again. And that, she explained, is why it was so important that she teach me the ways of things. If I ever found myself in trouble again, she would no longer know to come and save me. I must find my footing. And it started with these hearts. If I preferred one heart over the other, I would likely eat more of them. And the more I ate, the more quickly I would regain my strength.

“Deer,” I said. “I prefer deer.”

At the end of the week, she took me outside. Not during the day – although her blood, still fresh within me, would have permitted it. She took me out at night. She wanted me to appreciate the gifts of my condition. I discovered immediately that my eyes had changed. I could see the heat of life. I watched glowing strings of deer move in careful lines through the valleys. Sleeping squirrels and songbirds beaded the forest canopy. At the riverside, we threw rocks to scatter the burning orbs of otters. Look, she said, pointing away, as the two of us stood at the crest of a hill. I made out a feather of light in the distance.

“Fire,” I said.

“Fire from a chimney,” she corrected. “If you are somewhere remote, the heat almost always means sustenance. The same cannot be said for cities. Heat in the city can trick you. If you follow it, it may even endanger you. But forests are safe. You will never go hungry so long as you keep this in mind.”

I was skeptical, of course. If I followed that fire, I might find a person beside it and overpower them. But I could not hope to chase down a deer. So, she had me test my legs. We ran together. We ran very quickly. Branches whipped past, stinging my ears. We made our paths. That night, she had me take a boar. I killed it easily, thrusting myself upon it with enough force to throw its body backward and with my teeth, tore open its throat without hesitation. My hands were very strong. I opened the hide to raw flesh as though it were raw dough. I gipped a handful of ribs and snapped them. I wiggled out the sternum, and there it was, the heart, still quivering, shining. I forgot about everything else. I forgot about Poppy. I plucked it out and ate in quick bites.

When I had finished, I was ashamed. I sat back, looking at the eviscerated boar, at my hands, stained by blood and pulverized muscle, and then back at Poppy. I felt ready to cry. But she praised me.

“Look at how well you’ve done,” she said. “It came so naturally to you. I don’t even have to teach you.”

Come spring, we took our leave of the cabin. By then, she was three months pregnant but not yet showing. We traveled by foot under cover of darkness to Knotts Island, a port village near the border of Virginia and North Carolina. But we did not walk—she insisted that we run, and we covered the distance in two hours. It was only some years later, when I was raising dogs that I calculated my maximum speed at sixteen miles an hour. Poppy, at the peak of her strength, was still faster than me and slowed her pace so I could keep up. In reality, reaching the speed of sixteen miles an hour is not remarkable; humans have nearly doubled its speed in competition. If I tried to qualify for

any big race, I would not have made even a conservative roster. But unlike those mad dashes, which capped at a few hundred meters, we could run comfortably at this pace for hours.

Tom had purchased a houseboat. It was an arrangement made with Poppy, weeks before my transformation. It was going to be our home, at least for a while. Poppy would give birth on it. She thought it safer. And afterward it would be up to us where we went. It was well-furnished, a welcome upgrade from the cabin. We pushed it a mile or so out to sea for privacy. She had me sleep in the cabin during the day and slept beside me, guiding my arms tightly around her. At night, she had me hunt for the two of us. Now that she was with child, she required blood. And I required fresh hearts. The moon filled the ocean with light, and I could make out the ghostlike shadows of sea creatures several hundred meters deep. Fish would not do, but dolphins glowed with bright intensity and were as hearty as deer. I would strip naked and wait for a pod to pass by. When their glow approached, I gave chase. I moved as quickly in the sea as I did on land. Their bodies were easy to stun at the surface, and I would fix a large hook through their bodies and have Poppy haul them onto the ship. She would bleed them out and drink. I would take the heart when she had finished and throw the carcass overboard.

However, there came a time that the hearts of sea life were not enough to sustain either of us. It was a serious conversation, one she instinctively knew must be introduced gently. She sat across from me, so close that our knees touched. I thought I had done something wrong and was ready to apologize. But instead, she took my hands and kissed them.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Jack?” she said. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“You seem grave.”

“I need you to bring me human blood,” she said.

It should not have come as a surprise to me; she had mentioned the need for blood before. But when she described it, it seemed to be almost a benign practice. The donor need not die. But the circumstances had changed. The child was growing. She needed to drink blood from a living body until the point of death. And the younger the blood, the better.

“An infant’s blood can sustain me for about ten days. A child’s blood, almost a week. A young teenager, perhaps a day or two. Any older, and the blood will not be suitable.”

“Poppy.”

“Don’t you understand?” she said. “It’s the most humane thing to do. To take the youngest. Fewer must die that way.”

“But babies?”

“Wouldn’t you agree death is death regardless?”

“No,” I said, bewildered. “I wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because the death of a child is the most terrible thing that can happen.”

“Will you kill me, then?”

The question was so direct. It took me off guard.

“No,” I said. “Of course not.”

“If you deny me blood, it is the same.”

“But why not you?” I said, almost begging. “You are a more skilled hunter than I am. You are smarter than me. You know how to charm people, how magic works. Why must I bring you blood?”

“I need to know that you can do this.”

“But haven’t I proved my loyalty to you?”

“It’s not about loyalty,” she said, and I saw the sincerity in her eyes, the hurt at the suggestion. “You can’t live on the hearts of animals, Jack. From time to time, it will be necessary to take human hearts. And the hearts of anything besides the young won’t suit you. You can try. You won’t be the first. But you will go crazy. You will become monstrous and a danger to yourself and me. The only time my kind has ever been exposed unintentionally is because companions tried to live by impossible ethical standards. And soon I won’t be able to teach you anything. I won’t be able to encourage you. Not for ten, fifteen years.”

“So long?”

“I will be a child myself. You will be responsible for everything. You must teach Tom, even.”

“How is it done?” I said after a long silence.

“You must find a child and bring it to me. I will send it back.”

“Send it back?”

“It is something a friend of mine used to say,” she sighed. “A euphemism, Jack.”

“I’ll be caught.”

“You’ve been able to startle boars and deer without any issue. People are not as attentive as either.”

“But the missing children. They’ll be noticed.”

“Use common sense. Don’t take them all from one city. Take them from across state lines. Consider police jurisdictions. They don’t communicate with one another.”

“But there will be patterns, Poppy. If enough go missing, it just takes one person....”

“You must take children that no one will miss. Follow the disease and addiction. Seek out the impoverished. You can take out entire families. No one will notice. No one has the time to notice.”

“That’s evil.”

“I’m speaking plainly,” she said. “Value that. Few people in your life have done so to you. It’s a sign of my respect.”

“I didn’t agree to this,” I protested. “When you made your offer to me, you promised what you did. You made no mention of killing people—killing children, babies.”

“You agreed to serve me. To protect me.”

“But not like this. You did not give the terms.”

“You didn’t ask for them. This is what serving me looks like.”

“I want to undo this.”

I was close to tears now. The gravity of it had hit. It paralyzed me the same way the news of Blair’s death had.

“It’s too late,” she said. “You need to kill as much as I need you to kill. And you agreed. You agreed in front of the gods and your God.” I was quiet. I bit the inside of my cheek until it began to bleed. “Do you judge me? For wanting to survive. And for wanting to make sure that you survive, Jack.”

“No,” I lied.

I did as she told me. I hunted for her. I took my first child near Greenville, in a rural area. The skill came easily to me. I could see the bright glow of the small body from across a field. My feet moved quietly through the thicket, up to a bedroom window. Inside, an infant lay in a cradle at the end of its mothers’ bed. I let myself inside. There was not even the suggestion of sound. When I lifted the infant out of the cradle, it kept quiet as though it understood that it needed to. It did not stir, even after I took to the forest. The cold seawater was a shock to it, but it held its breath, erupting in shrill cries at each periodic rise to the surface

Poppy drank from it first. Then, she tore out its heart and presented it to me.

“Sit down,” she said before letting me take it.

Its heart was a small thing, no larger than a grape. I swallowed it whole. Nothing in my previous life had prepared me for the experience. My body began to tremble. Looking out over the ocean, my eyes traveled with the moonlight, past the dark curve of the earth and then deep into the water until I reached until silt. I became lost there until Poppy forced my head back, and my eyes met with the night sky. It was blinding. Galaxies roared likes fires. I glanced at my hands. My veins pulsed with the same fire. I could make out the tiny granules of its components—the little crimson cells, the vibrating

fluids. And the planks of the deck! They became weedy, sprouting leaves, and greened, and then we were sitting atop a vacancy scattered with seeds, the ocean roaring beneath us. We were levitating above it, like spirits. I jumped up from my seat with a cry. Poppy seized my wrist.

“This is time,” she said, guiding me back to the seat. “It’s bending around you. That’s all. It can’t hurt you. You control it. This is what power is. This is where you begin. I want you to direct everything forward. Make the seeds become seedlings.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look at the seeds,” she said. “Imagine them moving forward in time.”

I studied the seeds. They were vibrating, almost gelatinous. I visualized them sprouting, turning into little saplings. But nothing changed.

“I can’t do it.”

“I don’t expect saplings,” she corrected, as though, for this moment, she could see exactly what I imagined. “Only seedlings.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You must believe it is happening, or it will not.”

I tried again. To my delight, the seeds sprung little white roots. Poppy pointed and drew a circle in the air. The seedlings exploded abruptly into the planks, and the boat lurched back and forth with so much force that we both fell over. I recovered to my feet quickly. Poppy was slower.

“Remarkable,” she said. “And on your first try. I’ve only had one other companion that ever managed to do this.”



## TOM

Joseph died in June. I imagine you will be tempted to find meaning in the timing, Cora. You will look at the context surrounding his death; you will consider how cause lends its way to effect. You will connect all the dots and decide that Joseph must have been murdered. I don't blame you for arriving at that conclusion. It is entirely within reason that Hankish would have tried to do away with Joseph, just as he had tried with Jack and Blair. And that may be what happened. Neither of us was witness to his death. We have only the testimony of a medical examiner. Imagine, if you will, this medical examiner slicing through flesh and sinew like a jackal. He arrives at the fatal organ, the heart. The jackal weighs it and carves it into many small, long strips. Here, he says to his assistant, is the blockage. The jackal points with the tip of a wooden ruler he has been balancing in the crook of his arm. The assistant looks. The jackal continues: no greater size than a marble, no heavier than a feather. This muscle may have beat for a century if not for it.

You will learn, if you have not already, that coincidence permeates life most unnaturally. We are not meant to feel comfortable with it. If we do, then we probably have not experienced a coincidence. What I am trying to say is that sometimes people die, and there is no greater mystery to it. And that is OK.

Death met with everything Hankish touched. Four of his best men turned up slaughtered in their homes, alongside their wives and children, in what seemed to be retaliation for the attack on the cabin. One of his top subordinates turned on him and

came to us for protection. Hankish had taken contracts out on their lives because of desertion. It had been a mystery to all of us how they had even located the two when we were unable to ourselves. Joseph was the judas sheep. Once, while Joseph spoke with Blair over the telephone, he had picked up on a familiar accent. Joseph's Tidewater accent had encouraged Blair's own, which he had managed to bury for some twenty-odd years. And so, when Hankish called on Joseph for clues about where he might find Blair, who had reportedly taken Jack, hostage, Joseph suggested that he perhaps maybe with family. And his family was likely in eastern Virginia or the border with North Carolina. Hankish had connections threaded like a spider's web all over that country and eventually obtained intelligence about a stranger that frequented certain general stores in a certain region of North Carolina. And the rest is history.

Joseph believed Jack to have been mortally wounded. It was understood by those close to Hankish that he had been, at best, collateral damage – and at worst, in cooperation with Blair, as he had returned fire. Everyone believed this. We believed this. We scoured the land for days searching for this cabin, a shell casing, evidence of blood, and could not find it. But we wrote that off and still believed it. Even I believed it. It was Poppy that recused me from my despair with a phone call.

Everyone believed that Blair had escaped and retaliated with a killing spree. We had him marked as an expert contract killer—who else could take out families so quietly, so completely? And poor Joseph. I do not doubt that he considered himself high on Blair's list. So as far as he was concerned, even if he somehow escaped prison, Blair would come for him. And his heart gave out.

I believe this, Cora.

Tom did, as well. He appeared at my front door one Thursday evening and pushed past me and into my living room without a word. He was disheveled, dressed in muddy plaid pants, a damp yellow sweater, and salt-stained leather boots. His nails were dirty. He smelled like seafoam. I rushed after him. He warned me to stop. To not touch him.

“But why?” I demanded.

“I don’t trust myself,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

He sat down on my sofa and buried his face in his hands.

“It’s true, then,” Jack continued, throwing back his shoulders and meeting my gaze. “Joe is dead.”

“Yes.”

“I should have seen it coming.”

“They say it was a heart attack.”

Jack nodded.

“I have to deal with Norma and Alma,” he said.

“There is no need,” I said. “The wife took them.”

“Wife?”

“Louise, I believe. She had been their nanny for years.”

“He convinced her after all,” he sighed. “But I will have to arrange something. She can’t afford to raise them well on her own.”

“She may have come into money,” I suggested.

“Joe was broke.”

“But I’m not.”

Jack looked up at me, startled.

“You’ve helped her?”

“I thought it would be one less thing for you to worry about,” I said. “She has forty thousand now to her name. I don’t know much about raising children, but I imagine it is enough to keep her for a while.”

“Thank you, Tom,” said Jack, with a sincerity I had heard only a handful of other times. His entire body relaxed, perhaps in relief.

I noticed his hand. It was whole again.

“Your hand,” I remarked.

Jack gave it a dismissive look.

“It was Blair’s,” he said. “She changed me. She didn’t tell you.”

I caught my breath.

“No. She did not.”

“I was shot in the head,” he said, gesturing to the side of his skull. “The only way to save me was to change me. And to change me, she had to be with child. And Blair was the only one there. She explained to you how that works, I assume. So now I am alive, and Blair is dead. And now, Joe.”

“You do not seem any different. You are much the same.”

“I am not the same.”

I took a step toward him. He warned me with his eyes.

“What is it like?” I asked.

“Terrible,” he said. “Just terrible.”

“How so?”

“In every way,” he said. “She demands incredible sacrifices.”

“Does she know you are here?” I asked.

“I have her permission,” he said. “She granted it, to lift my spirits.”

“But you don’t seem happy.”

“No,” he said.

Here, Jack buried his face back into his hands and broke into soft sobs. I moved to embrace him. He screamed for me to stay away. I was familiar with this. This was the same Jack that sat on my sofa years ago in D.C. But brandy would not do now. I left the living room for my study and fetched the chess set from its cabinet. I placed it cautiously on the ottoman before him. Jack stifled his sobs and watched me. I took a seat across.

“Talk to me,” I said, setting up the pieces. “Maybe I can help.”

“You can’t.”

“Is she mistreating you?”

“Of course not,” he said. “No.”

“Then what is it?”

“She was not forthright about things, Tom.”

“In what ways?”

“Did she explain all of it to you?” he said, in a tone of accusation. “Did she tell you what she would expect out of us? Or was I the only one kept in the dark?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“She has me kill for her,” he said. “She said that it is necessary. Children. Forty, so far. Some of them are just babies, some days old. And if she doesn’t have them, she

will die. And if she dies, I will die. And if I die, you will die, eventually. And even if she doesn't die, if I refuse to eat their hearts, she tells me I will wish myself dead. But I already am dead, Tom. I am dead. I know it."

He spoke so quickly that I could hardly tell when his thoughts began and ended.

"Slow down. Take a breath."

"Did she tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That you would have to give her children."

"No," I said. "Nothing like that."

"She says it is the most efficient way. She asks: how many lives do you want to take—forty or four hundred?"

"Jack—"

"And what is the right answer? And she demanded I answer. And I did not know how to. Nothing has ever prepared me for such a question. There was no psalm or proverb to turn to. I am not a philosopher. I ran a gas station, Tom. And I wasn't even good at it. Should I consider the years of potential life? Or the weight of absence? If I take four-hundred fathers or four-hundred mothers, how many lives will suffer from that loss? But forty babies. Tom, I worry about hell. I cannot sleep. When I sleep, I go there. And when I wake up, I am dead."

"Jack!"

"Stop saying my name. Don't say it."

"You don't belong to these conversations anymore. Choose four-hundred fathers, mothers, or babies. It doesn't matter."

“Of course, it matters.”

“You’re not like everyone else anymore. You need to stop thinking like you are.”

Jack upturned the chessboard and lunched its marble slab across the room. It shattered against the wall and spit fragments in every direction.

“I’m still a human being, Tom,” he screamed.

“Will you please calm down and listen to me?” I returned, raising my voice. “I am trying to help you.”

“Could you do it, Tom? Tell me. If I put a little baby here in front of you told you to slit its throat, would you?”

“For you, I would,” I said in honesty.

“You are the one that’s changed. I have not. You are not the same.”

“You asked for philosophy. I’ve given it to you.”

Jack bit his lip. It began to bleed. He reassumed his seat on the sofa and watched as I salvaged the chest pieces from the floor.

“She wanted me to let you know that it is almost time,” he said after settling down. “That she is ready to do for you what she did for me. Do you still want this? Knowing the burden of duty.”

“Yes. In a heartbeat.”

“But why?”

“Because it offers us a place in this world,” I said.

“Is that really all? You’re just doing this for us?”

“Yes,” I said. “Jack, there’s no point to this without you. I’m not starstruck by the glamor of it all. Agelessness and health. When have I ever seemed sentimental about life to you?”

Jack stared at me vacantly.

“Listen to me, like you once used to,” I said. “Go and take a shower. I will find you some clothes. You look rough.”

“I don’t want to shower.”

“But you need to. How did you even get here?”

“I ran.”

“You ran?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t come all this way just to yell at me,” I said. Jack was quiet. “Go take a shower. We can do something together. There are bars a few towns over where we can be discreet.”

“I can’t drink anymore.”

“For fuck’s sake, do you need to drink to enjoy my company?”

Jack shook his head. He went and showered. I prepared a set of clothes for him and a spare pair of shoes. My shoe size was at least two sizes bigger than his, but the shoes he arrived in were falling apart at their seams and not suited for public. Once he was dressed, I noticed that his nails were still dirty. He let me clean them with a brush. Once I had finished, I tussled his hair, found the familiar birthmark on his neck, and kissed it. He shivered.



We spent the evening in Allentown, at a bar I frequented. I tried to make conversation. Jack was very quiet. With the benefit of hindsight, I understand now that I had said all the wrong things to Jack. That my attempts to help him missed the mark entirely. When we returned to my home, I asked him if he would stay the night and share a bed with me. He agreed. I fell asleep in his arms. And come morning, when I woke, he was gone.

## CORA

I suppose neither of them expected a welcome reunion. Even to a stranger, it was clear that a heaviness weighed on the shoulders of both. As we approached the house, Blair told us to wait outside. He entered. There was a ruckus. The spirit gave a dramatic huff and made her way inside. I followed, somewhat reluctant. Tom was standing near the stove, pale as death. Blair was restraining Jack. I could see that Blair was in pain. I understood that he had been genuine when he excused himself from interacting with the world for so long on the account that it hurt him to do so. But this, it seems, was worth the sacrifice to him. Jack fought him like a captured animal. Yet as strong as Jack was, he did not seem capable of overpowering a ghost.

“Calm down, Jack,” said the spirit, stopping only a few feet from the door’s threshold. “There’s no way I can hurt you. I’m mortal.”

“She’s only here for her bones,” said Blair. “I promise.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack gasped. And then, to my surprise, he began to weep. “I’m so sorry,” he repeated, over and over.

I looked at the spirit and saw that her eyes were tender.

“Cora, make us some tea,” she said, keeping her eyes on Jack. “Jack prefers mint.”

There was a kettle and dried mint hanging above the stove. I prepared tea. Tom, who was visibly shaken, found four teacups. He apologized that they were mismatched, explaining that they had never had company before. I set them on the table and then

found another empty one for Blair so that he would feel involved. Poppy was sitting on one of the chairs. Jack was kneeling at her feet, his face in her lap. He was still weeping. She stroked his hair as gently as a mother would. I gave Blair a look to suggest my confusion. He came over to me, picked up his empty teacup, and said simply, "It's a complicated situation."

Tom took his tea and sipped it. He was the only one.

"You've been running from me for all this time," said the spirit to Jack

"Not running."

"Wandering, then?"

"Yes."

"It was unnecessary. Here we are."

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I wish I could take it back."

"But what's done is done. You can't."

Jack pulled his face away to look at her. His skin was flushed.

"How are you even here?" he said.

"I had a ghost to remind me who I was," she said. "I may be mortal, but I remember everything."

The spirit motioned to a chair. He did not want to leave her side. But Blair coaxed him. There we five of us now at the table. The spirit took one of the cups of tea and passed it to Jack. He accepted it.

"There wasn't a day I stopped thinking about you," she began. "Not a moment. Not since I remembered who I was. I wanted to look for you. But it was no use. I didn't know where to begin. And Blair wouldn't tell me where to find you. He would comfort

me. I would ask if you were doing well. If you were taking care of yourself. Taking care of Tom. Yes, he would say. No, sometimes. I thought, someday I will die, and then wherever he is, he will, too.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No more apologies. They can’t change anything.”

“But where were you, Poppy? I could not find you.”

“Did you look for me?”

Her tone suggested surprise, even as her face remained stoic.

“Once,” he said. “Where I had left you. You weren’t there. You weren’t with them anymore. You had disappeared.”

“Do you think I would stay with that family once I remembered who I was?”

“I hadn’t realized you could remember.”

“I’m not sure where you got that idea,” she dismissed. “Someone in that house was cruel to me. I can’t remember any of it. But my body does. The first memory I have is of Blair at the foot of my bed. He was telling me a story, trying to remind me who I was. God knows how long he had attempted to do so without success. I couldn’t stay another night. I packed some things and left them. I was thirteen, Jack. It is not easy to navigate this world at such a young age. But I made my way to Philadelphia. Blair told me which cars to trust. Which to take. Which to turn away from.”

“But why didn’t you go to Tom?”

“What could Tom do for me? Look at him. Even now, I frighten him.”

“I’m not frightened,” said Tom.

“Then move your chair closer to me,” she said.

Tom did not.

“I wish I had known,” Jack said. “I would have come for you. I mean it. I promise. I knew I was wrong. It has haunted me, Poppy.”

“It should haunt you,” she said. “A haunting is a fair punishment. But I imagine that you’ve learned the lesson that I failed to teach you in the time since our parting. That is that we have no choice but to behave according to our natures. You didn’t survive on deer and rabbits these past twenty-seven years.” Jack was quiet. “Don’t you want to know what I’ve been up to?”

“I don’t know if I do,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter what you want. It’s my story to tell, not yours,” she said. “I sold my body in Philadelphia. I tried to make it as a thief but wasn’t any good at stealing. It was too risky. A brothel became my home for three years. It was much different from the one you ran. Much more discrete. Men paid more for me because I was so young. It was a difficult life. Not what I had to do, but the fact that I could not recover from it. If I was hurt or a wound began to fester, it didn’t heal as quickly as it once did. The pain was magnified enormously. And then, one day, we were raided. I and a few others evaded arrest. I had some money on me. Enough for a bus ticket, a few weeks of food. I made the journey to the only place of comfort I could remember. This cabin.”

“Here?” said Jack.

“Yes, here.”

“But when?”

“1988, perhaps? You weren’t here. And it seems you hadn’t been here for a while. I was grateful to be able to find it. It was as we had left it but in worse repair. There was

no longer a roof. I was able to nail a tarp over it. I stayed here for a few months, living off the land. The skills I'd learned throughout my many lifetimes were helped me. I ate rabbits, and squirrels. I began incredibly thin. And then Blair found me. I do not know how he always managed to, but I don't care. I was so grateful for a friendly face.

“He told me to go to the twins. Yes, her twins. Joe's twins. I'll be honest: I hadn't thought of the girls once since I regained my consciousness. They presented as mere blips in my life. I didn't mind them when I lived with Joe. I treated them kindly, with love. But I ran away when they were six, and now, they were all grown up. And they could have grown up to be anything. Good or terrible. Generous or selfish. And how could I present myself as their relation, or even someone worthy to be taken in and looked after? I was no longer the Poppy they remembered. And if they knew that Poppy became a mother, if they had ever reconnected with her, they would know of only one baby. But Blair suggested that I present myself as their half-sister.

“And that's precisely what I did. It was shameless. Their nanny had passed away a few years before. It was a drowning. Alma had married and already divorced at twenty-two. Nora was pursuing a law degree. At the time, they lived together in a modest apartment outside of Richmond. And they got me on my feet. I found a housekeeping position. I earned my GED, which, as you can imagine, wasn't a challenge.

“They loved me. Truly, they did. They doted on me. They felt sorry for me, probably. I had told them everything that I had gone through. But I think it was because the two of them were starved for family, having lost their mother and Joe before they were capable of capturing them in memory. They claimed to see shadows of their faces in my own. It was nonsense, of course. But I let them linger in their fantasies. I encouraged

them because it brought them such pleasure. Yet when I felt it was time to leave, I left without notice. I did send them a letter of thanks on a postcard, but only as an afterthought.

“Why didn’t you stay?” said Jack.

“Because I didn’t love them the way they loved me,” she said. “Because they were not my family. And even if they were, it was my last lifetime. I couldn’t bear the thought of spending it in one place. But I didn’t go far. I hitchhiked to Norfolk. And I found your mother, Cora.”

My head shot up. She was looking at me now. I caught my breath.

“My mother?”

“Yes, your mother. I’d become sentimental. This was the first time since the beginning that I had been forced to navigate life in the certainty of death. Everything was uniquely precious now. Every moment measured. And the idea of seeing her – your mother – what once had been me – seemed so novel. Perhaps, I thought, I could even speak to her. I understood she was still alive. Jack had mentioned that he had seen her once while following you on a visit. I confirmed her placement at the nursing home over the telephone. But the nurse had misrepresented her condition. Perhaps she was new. I don’t think she meant to mislead me. But by the time I arrived, your mother was in advanced decline, little more than a vegetable.

“The nursing home was hiring. They needed housekeepers. I submitted my application, and by the next week, I was employed there. I saw you sometimes. As I made my rounds, I would catch glances into your mother’s room. I would sneak in there, apologizing soft, to empty the trash can. You were so tender with her. So patient. It made

me incredibly jealous. But it also moved me. And it moved the god inside of me, Jack. I heard her again—the first time in centuries! She told me to eat. So, I went to the break room and ate the sandwich I had prepared for lunch. But it didn't satisfy me. And it occurred to me what the god was suggesting. I went into the room of an older man with advanced cancer. I placed my hand on his forehead and took his remaining life.

“It was the same sweetness as before. I didn't realize it was still possible for me to feed on human life. I had tried to do so years ago, at the brothel. I had wanted to kill many of the men that used me. It hadn't worked. But I had fed, and the god stirred inside of me. At once, I could feel a connection again. To her. To my old bones. To Jack. It was tangible. I continued to feed. Here and there. Sometimes I would take too much. I would become greedy. And a patient or two or three would pass away. I'm not proud of it. But it's hard to control my hunger. And now that poor nurse is being fingered with it, all because she made a few off-handed remarks in front of patients.”

“You killed my mother,” I accused.

“I never touched your mother, Cora,” said the spirit. “I wouldn't. I couldn't. She had become, somehow, a person to me. I can't explain it. I felt like I knew her intimately. I felt such guilt for the necessary evil I inflicted on her. And you. You came less and less. I could see the recognition of betrayal in your face. She was gone from you and unrecoverable. Eventually, you stopped coming entirely. So, I kept vigil in your stead. Sometimes I read to her. Sometimes I played her music on the radio. And eventually, she died.”



## JACK

The child took quickly in Poppy. She began to show at the fourth month, and by the fifth, she required a new wardrobe. She seldom wore any garment more than a few times, discarding it into the sea once it became discolored with sweat. I made constant trips to the mainland, returning with an infant under one arm and a new dress under the other. Upon returning from one of these errands, I found her in screams of agony. Joseph, she cried, was dead.

She was in such a state that she did not even recognize my loss. I tried to console her. I took her trembling body into my arms and held her so tight that I could feel the flutters of her heart. She struggled to catch her breath between moans.

“Give me an hour,” I said, stroking her hair. “I will get to the bottom of this.”

“Don’t,” she said, pushing me away. She wiped two strings of snot onto her arm. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“There is if someone harmed him.”

“It’s not like that.”

She set her vacant eyes on the floor and was quiet for a time, as though my voice had managed to soothe her. The thought occurred to me: how does she know? It must be a part of her magic. Her bond with Joe. I stood and hung her new dress from a nail on the wall. I went to move the infant that I had set at the foot of her bed. It was already dead, I realized. The water had put it into shock.

“Why would you even tell me?” she screamed. She directed her words in the direction of the door. I stood there, waiting for someone or appear. No one did. It

occurred to me that she may be in a fit of madness. A small hope took alight. This may all be a fantasy. Joe was probably fine. I knelt before her and took her hands into me.

“I’m right here,” I said.

“I didn’t want to see him go,” she wept. “At least, not before I had moved on. And he was older.”

“I think you’ve had a nightmare.”

“No!”

“You are on a ship, away from shore,” I pointed out. “So, how can you know that he is dead?”

“Blair told me.”

I took a deep breath.

“Blair is dead. You know this.”

“No, Jack. He is here with us.”

I made a sweeping gesture around the cabin.

“See?” I said as though I were speaking to a child. “We are alone. It’s just you and me.”

“I took his eyes,” she whispered, her lips trembling. “I gave you his hand and took his eyes. So I could see him. I didn’t want to tell you. But they were just going to decay. And it was too hard to say goodbye to him.” She pointed in the direction of the door, with a frantic look. “He’s right there, Jack.”

I stood abruptly. I considered carefully what to say so as not to encourage a fantasy that would hurt both of us.

“That is not how his magic worked, Poppy.”

“You are less than a year old!” she said with indignation. “What do you know about the ancient magic or how it works?” She looked back at the door. “Blair won’t appear to you. He refuses to. He says that I shouldn’t have told you.”

“And what else does he say?”

“That I’m upsetting you.”

“I’m not upset,” I said, standing. “I’m going back ashore. You need blood. While I’m out, I’ll visit the trailer and sort all of this out. I won’t let anyone see me. I’m sure I’ll bring you back good news, Poppy.”

She stood suddenly and slapped me. The strength of it knocked the wind out of me.

“How dare you doubt me?”

I took a deep breath and collected myself.

“I’ve been patient with you,” I said, steadily and intentionally. “All this time. I’ve met your every need. I’ve done everything you’ve asked, even when it hurt me. But I swear to God, if you strike me again, I’ll tear out your throat and throw your body into the sea.”

I made this threat idly. I didn’t imagine that I held any control over Poppy or that my teeth could ever be weaponized against the very thing that made them. But to my surprise, a look of excitement flashed across her face, a reprieve from madness. Had she wanted this reaction? I let myself out of the cabin. I returned to the bank. But I did not travel to Norfolk. And I did not fetch her another infant. I hunted the forest for deer, foxes, and all the little creatures that crept along the trees.

Poppy was out of sorts for two weeks. She would drink, at least, and accepted my offerings in quiet melancholy before returning to her cot in silence. Soon my mood carried after hers. I stopped eating, tossing the used corpses in the water, hearts and all. The starvation was not painful. I did not feel hunger, even. The effects were more subtle. Everything became empty. It was a chore to move. My joint stiffened, and the light of life drained out of the world. The sea at night was no longer lit with color. The galaxies no longer flamed.

But I tried to occupy myself. As Poppy slept, I worked to set the planks of the deck back to seedlings and then back to planks, again and again. Fish would occasionally find their way back onto the deck. Try as I may, I could not return them to guppies or push them forward to bones. But there was a new revelation. I see the potential life within sea life in the clarity of hunger: fish roe glowed like bunches of plump grapes. Within a pod of dolphins, I could make out the pulsating bodies of unborn calves curled safely inside their mothers. Or sometimes, I could even see the flecks of unfertilized eggs in their ovaries. Ah—I thought, so this is what it meant to have time curve around me. Now I could see it.

Poppy eventually found it in herself to apologize. She admitted that she had behaved poorly toward me. She had been unfair. I should see Tom, she suggested. After all, it was almost time for his transformation. He had only another six weeks to be a human, if even that.

“Can’t you be excited for that, at least?” she asked haplessly when I couldn’t even muster a smile. “You should go enjoy him. For what he is now. It’s always different once

someone transforms. Once they're no longer as vulnerable. You won't be the same as you used to be. You'll have to readjust. But for now – it is exactly as it was.”

I agreed to take a few days to see him. The idea of it did make me a little happy, at least. Even though I had set him aside in service of Poppy, he had never left my heart. I dreamed of him often. I constantly wondered if he was thinking about me. If he missed me.

Before I left, Poppy handed me a wad of rolled bills. It was an extraordinary amount of money.

“Make a good impression,” she said. “Purchase a suit or something expensive. There are shops open late in Norfolk. You should take a bus to Pittsburg and then a taxi to his house. And for God’s sake, feed on something. Anything. Don’t go to him as you are now. I can see the hunger in your eyes.”

I accepted the money with intentions of following her advice. Throughout the night, buses ran almost hourly from Norfolk, and I could not very well purchase a suit and then ruin it in route. But I was unable to quell my curiosity about Joe. I stopped by his trailer. I expected, of course, to witness signs of life. To have something to keep in my pocket, should Poppy ever bring up the matter about Blair again. However, there was a vacant lot where the trailer once sat.

I lingered there for some time until someone noticed me and asked me what I was up to.

I tried to make sense of the situation. Where was Joe?

I made my way to Tom on foot. I did not purchase a suit. I lost the money somewhere along the way. When I arrived, everything was a blur. But I heard these words clearly: Joe is dead. Tom tried to comfort me. I yelled at him, and punished him for his kindness. I huffed and puffed around his living room like a child. Every time I looked at him, I felt hunger, and it made me ashamed. I wanted his heart. He was glowing so brightly. I took a shower, and when I had returned, Tom presented me with the body of a fresh cat. It was a neighborhood cat, and he had been feeding it for some years. He had ushered it to him and snapped its neck underfoot so that I could eat.

We spent time together, but I hardly remember it. He made an effort to convince me to stay the night, and I let him make the fuss, even when it was already my intention. I shared his bed. I remember the smell of him. I had missed it terribly. But an unfamiliar sadism had rooted in me. I wanted him to understand the nature of my condition. I needed that particular intimacy for him to share in a game of cruelty. When he pushed his fingers into my mouth, I bit so hard that he screamed. I didn't let go for a long time. I let him howl. When I finally released, he hurriedly wrapped a pillowcase around his hand and pinned it under a knee, weeping bitterly. After he had gone through all of this effort, I snatched his hand from under his knee, tore off the pillowcase, and held his wrist firmly, letting his wound bleed out until he became faint.

Tom accepted all of this passively. He didn't even struggle. Eventually, I let him leave to bandage his hand, and when he returned to bed, he let me take him into my arms and fell asleep almost immediately.

I left in the middle of the night and was back on the boat the following evening. Poppy was surprised to see me.

I told her that I did not want Tom anymore. She demanded to know what I meant.

“I mean just that,” I said. “I don’t want Tom.”

“Ever?”

“Yes, ever.”

Poppy did not mask her bewilderment.

“But why?”

“Who is he for?” I demanded. “Is Tom for me or you?”

“You, of course.”

“You admit that you have no use for him, then.”

“I never said I did,” she protested. “He was meant to be here for you. To make you happy.”

“He doesn’t make me happy. I don’t want him.”

“Where is this coming from?” she said.

“Nowhere. I’m just bored of him.”

“You need some sort of companion,” she said. “Blair is no longer here for you. I cannot let you push Tom away. I won’t be here soon, Jack. And you cannot confide in strangers.”

“It’s my decision.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “But if this is your decision, you must kill him. I have shared too many secrets with him to turn him loose on the world without supervision.”

“No one will be killing him,” I said. “Not you. Not me.”

“Ah-ha! So you do have affection for him.”

I considered my options.

“He’s too young, Poppy,” I said. “He’s younger by eight years. I can’t stomach it.”

“Is that all it is, then? You want him to be older before I stop his time?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“I was embarrassed to admit it.”

“There’s no reason to be embarrassed; I’m not here to judge you,” she said. “We could wait a life cycle, Jack. But he may end up much older than you. What if I choose not to have my next child until I am twenty or twenty-five? Perhaps even thirty. He would be in his sixties. And you—still young and handsome, in your mid-thirties. Are you willing to risk that?”

“I like older men,” I said simply.

“That old?”

“Yes,” I lied.

“I’m still not judging you,” she repeated. “But what if he dies in the meantime. Are you willing to risk that, as well?”

I nodded. I wondered if she thought me selfish.

“Fine, then,” she agreed.

The matter was settled. I wondered at the time what Tom thought about the sudden silence. I sent no letter. I made no phone call. He must have understood what the weeks passing meant for him. That he had been overlooked, his chance lost. And it hurt me to imagine him hurting.



As far as Poppy went, she seemed to have moved on from him almost immediately. It seemed he was only there for my benefit, and so long as he was no loss to me, he was no loss to her.

Only a few weeks later, Poppy informed me she was having twins. There were two babies inside of her.

“That’s why I’m so big,” she smiled. “You probably thought I was getting fat.”

“How do you know?”

“I feel their spirits individually,” she said. “First, Alma and Nora. And now these twins. They are both girls! You must have been born under a new moon. In my first life, there was a superstition that if someone born under a new moon tends to be a pregnant mother, the mother is likely to have twin girls. So were you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But what does this mean for you? Are you going to become two different people?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “I am always the first girl that comes out. The second girl will be an ordinary human.”

“In that case, what do I do with the second?”

“You must cull it,” she said. “Throw it into the sea.”

“But why?”

“Any excess child born of a body that I’ve inhabited inherits defects,” she explained. “Not just twins. Any boy that is born. Any additional girl born after I abandon the body. They come out missing some part of them. Sometimes silly things. Sometimes things of great consequence. To wait and see what they are missing is a cruel exercise. I

try to have them put out of their misery whenever possible. You are aware that even this body that now speaks to you through will begin to degrade once I leave it. I would have you throw it into the sea, too, before the girl in here regains consciousness—but I have always preferred my old bodies to be cremated or buried on land. So you will let her live out her natural lifetime, short as it may be.”

“And what does Blair say should be done with his child?” I asked pointedly.

Poppy gave me a surprised look. It was the first time I had voiced a suggestion of his presence.

“He’s not here right now,” she said. “He travels. He told me he wants to see the world.”

## TOM

The next time I saw Jack, he was at my doorstep. On one arm learned Poppy, or at least the shell leftover. And cradled in the crook of his other arm, a baby. Not Poppy. Cora.

## CORA

“There is a way to undo all of this, Jack,” she said. “I can’t save Cora or her mother from their fates. But I can make the world fairer for them. And I can repair things. Tom need not grow old and sick. You need not be alone. And I need not die. But it requires sacrifice.”

“Tell me what to do,” he said. “I’ll do anything.”

“You must go back and correct your decision.”

“I don’t have that power, Poppy,” Jack said.

The desperation in his voice was plain.

“But you do. I’ve seen it. I’ve admired it more than you even know. It’s old magic, forbidden for as long as I have existed. But as I am the last of my kind, it seems silly to observe our old laws.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“It’s simple. Go back to the moment where you made your choice. Convince yourself to make a better one. You must remember who you were at that time and have the right words ready. You won’t survive more than a few minutes. You will be an interloper, a duplicate of yourself, and time will root you out. There is no coming back from this journey, Jack. No reward. You won’t see the fruits of your labor.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Wait,” said Tom. “Wait just a moment. I don’t want to see him go.”

“But you won’t miss him,” said the spirit. “We will all start over. And we will eventually arrive here, at this moment, together, if not in the same place. Be our

situations the same or different than before. None of us will ever know the pain or joy unless we arrive here again.”

“So we all die,” I observed.

The spirit shrugged her shoulders.

“I suppose everyone in the world does,” she said.

Jack took her hand.

“Teach me what to do,” he said.

“You must borrow someone’s time,” began the spirit. “You must use every bit of it. You must go back to their very beginning. To their first moment.” The spirit here paused and gathered herself. “I’ve always known this was possible through you, Jack. And for a long time, I wanted this more than anything. And then, suddenly, I didn’t. Soon after leaving the twins, I put a down payment on a cemetery plot. After all, humans are so fragile. They can die at any time. I am at peace with the fact. But if what Blair says is true about Cora, this seems to be guided by a hand beside my own.” She looked at me. “Cora, Jack demands a specific sacrifice of time. And I am certain of only two people born at the very moment he must change. He can’t use me. A string of fate binds us. If I die, so does he, and nothing changes.”

I glanced at Blair.

“So we’ve solved it, then,” I said to him. “You were right. I am dying soon.”

I agreed to the sacrifice on three conditions. First, I would be given a week. For what, I would not disclose. I just demanded to have it, and they were in no position to

refuse. Second, I needed one hundred dollars for a hotel room. Third, I would be allowed to read the manuscript. Jack refused, again. But the spirit overruled him.

“It is only fair,” she said. “You are sacrificing yourself for us. You deserve to know why.”

I refused to stay in the cabin a moment longer than I had to. I promised to meet at the designated spot in seven days. But before I left, it was necessary to alter my appearance. There was a search for me. I was considered a missing person, and the stolen bones already added to the intrigue of an already sensationalized case. Jack begrudgingly went to town and returned with my disguise: a dark lace top, a black leather corset and miniskirt, combat boots with buckles up to my knees, green nail polish, and black hair dye. Tom did an excellent job transforming me into the opposite of who I was. I did not even recognize myself when I caught my reflection. It seemed fitting.

I asked Blair to come with me. He agreed. And we set off together.

## JACK

Labor began two weeks later, a little after midnight. It was late July, and the sky was dark with a new moon. Poppy cautioned me days before that her birth was imminent. She had gone through the experience of childbirth so many times that she was familiar with the subtleties and predicted, down to the hour, when contractions would begin. I was worried that I wouldn't know what to do. I had no experience with childbirth. I hadn't seen anything born before—not even the birth of an animal. She told me it was no matter, that she would talk me through the process when the time came.

And she did. I prepared the floor with a sheet. The pains became regular. She paced the length of the deck back and forth until the timing between contractions became short enough in duration that she declared it time. She took a seat in a chair, bracing herself against its arms each time she pushed. She betrayed no pain but breathed intentionally and steadily, her arms trembling, her feet mottled by the cold floor.

And then, she was born. Poppy was a baby, slick with blood and birthing custard. A frail wail echoed: her protest to the world. It grew louder and louder. Baby Poppy's eyes were amber, her fuzzy hair suggesting the potential for dark curls. She had tiny, pink fingers with even tinier, pinker fingernails. I cradled her entire body in the palm of one hand. She was so helpless! She had turned everything over to me in absolute trust. And even knowing this, my heart soured. The young woman, that poor shell of a human being that Poppy had possessed and now abandoned, fell unconscious in the birthing chair. The soul of that young woman would soon awaken. But Poppy was not yet awake in this new body, and she would not be for a decade. Who was this tiny creature crying, I wondered?

What soul had just been dragged into this world only so that it could be eventually displaced for Poppy's benefit?

The second baby was crowning. That is, you were crowning, Cora. I set baby Poppy down on the sheet and guided you out. You came into this world easily and betrayed the same amber eyes as your sister. But your tufts of fair hair were honey-like, like your mother's. You let out one piercing wail and then settled down.

I had intended to destroy Poppy for some time. One late evening, the possibility occurred to me as I was returning to the boat with an infant for her to consume. It hurt me to deliver those young lives to her. I felt that the most humane thing for the world would be for Poppy to return to the earth, to pay the same debt expected of all others. And here presented a window of opportunity. It would be painless to destroy her when she was brand new to life and unaware. It would be a kindness. I understood that by destroying her I would destroy myself. Blair had warned me that our fates would be bound irrevocably once she changed me. But my affairs were entirely settled. I was already dead to all who had known me. And Tom was still human. He had been spared the worst of this. He would forget me, eventually. He would live on, find someone else, and be happy.

I swaddled you in a towel and set you on the bed, within reach of your mother. It was never my intention to destroy you. There was no point. Nor was there any justification for destroying your mother. I took baby Poppy into my arms. I walked out onto the deck and looked out and over at the sea. The galaxies were shining again. Poppy was shining. And below, the shadows of cold fish fanned around the boat.



I heard a scream. The scream nauseated me. Its quality, of course, was familiar to me. The scream was carried in Poppy's voice. But it was your mother's distress. I returned to the cabin with quick steps. Your mother was awake, on her feet, standing at the center of the cabin. Her eyes were wild, like those of a captured animal.

"Where am I?"

"On a boat," I said.

"Who are you?"

"A friend," I lied.

Your mother took a step back away from me, stumbling over the sheet. She glanced down at her hands, her arms, and her chest, trying to make sense of herself. I thought, poor thing. Her attention shot up, and she directed her gaze above my shoulder.

"Who is he?" she said.

I turned. There was no one.

"Who?"

"He says you can't see him."

I took a quick breath in.

"What else does he say?"

Your mother paused as though waiting for a reply.

"He says that he'll kill Tom if you do what you're thinking about doing. Who is Tom?" She turned and noticed you on the bed. Then, she looked back at baby Poppy and me. "Are these mine?"

I nodded. I walked past her and took a seat on the chair, cradling baby Poppy in the crook of my elbow. I glanced in the direction of the door. So, Blair was still here after

all. What was Blair after, exactly? I looked down at baby Poppy. She was white from the chill. If not death, then what? Your mother was weeping. My heart ached. How could I explain the monstrosity of the little thing in my arms or the thousands upon thousands of lives she owes in debt, the blood and heartache that would follow in her wake?

Then I saw them. Tiny flickers of potential life to either side of her pelvis, no larger than grains of wheat. There were her infant ovaries. And inside of them, her savage seeds. There she was! The heart of her. The totality of her legacy—everything that Poppy would ever be. I placed my hand over her. I closed my eyes.

I imagined her voice as it had been on the boat the first time she instructed me in her magic. Turn the seeds into sprouts. The sprouts to saplings. The saplings to trees.

Turn it forward. Turn it forward. Turn it forward.

And like that, I had won. She was trapped. Or at least until this body died, and her soul was carried along with it. The little flickers inside of her were no more. The seeds had withered and perished.

That is the end of the story, so far as I am concerned, Cora. I am not sure how any of this can help you. I hope you get something out of it. In any case, these pages exist.

This document exists. Do with it as you will.

## TOM

I did the best I could to accommodate my guests on such short notice. The young lady, visibly exhausted, undressed and fell asleep in my bed. The color had drained entirely out of Jack's face. He took a seat on the sofa, holding the baby out to me as though it were a contagious disease. I took it from him and bathed it in the kitchen sink. It was a girl, I realized. It was you, Cora. You cooed and shook your tiny fists in protest. I asked Jack – is this Poppy? Did she move on?

She had moved on. But the little thing I was bathing, not Poppy. It was just a baby.

“So, where is she?”

Jack explained to me the circumstances of the birth. Poppy had given birth to two children, two girls, and taken root in the first to breathe. You, the baby that followed, was a causality, one of Poppy's many victims. Poppy had ordered him to destroy you. But Jack had decided that you were destined for significance. You would be her last victim. And you would live. Jack used some magic or curse to ensure that Poppy would never harm anyone again. I expressed skepticism. But he said matter-of-factly, “She will never reach sexual maturity now. So, Tom, she will never wake up. She's trapped in that body, forever. Until she dies, and she will die, eventually.”

So, Jack did what he had done. And then came the question of what to do with baby Poppy. She had been rendered helpless—yes. But if he were to destroy her, he would also die. And he could not abandon me like that. So, he left with Poppy. And he

left your poor mother with you on the boat—your mother, who had no memory of her pregnancy or the past four years of her life.

Jack reached shore with the baby Poppy shivering but still alive. He considered abandoning her at a church or placing her into a collection box at an orphanage. She would be well cared for and well educated. She may live a very long time. But Jack was angry with Poppy, even at the expense of himself. He wouldn't admit it, but I knew him well. His frustration was palpable. But the root of the anger was complicated. She had not wronged him, not really. If Poppy was guilty of anything, it was caring for Jack too excessively and placing the world at his feet without proper thought to her safety and preservation. But no matter her tenderness and generosity, Poppy was what she was, and to those she had not managed to impress or fully persuade, she was a monster. She represented the closest thing to the living memory of the world we will ever know. And even this did not persuade Jack that the sacrifices she demanded were justifiable. Memory, after all, is just a story. It grows on its own, even when not tended. She was not that special. And he could not continue to collect her tribute in good conscience.

Jack did the most outrageous thing he could do, but also, in the heat of anger, the only thing that made sense to him at the time. He offloaded baby Poppy onto Hankish.

He described the scene to me. He caught Hankish alone at his house when his wife and children were away at some school event. Hankish tried to defend himself, drawing a gun from a shoulder holster and taking a shot at Jack. But Jack was fast and now much stronger than Hankish. Once he had Hankish subdued, a large German shepherd tore into the room and fixed its teeth around Jack's forearm. Jack pried open its

jaws with a free hand and tore off its mandible with a sudden thrust. The dog yelped and retreated, frantically pawing at its face.

Jack then presented the baby Poppy, whom he had kept swaddled close against his chest in a blanket, to Hankish.

“This is yours now,” he told Hankish. “You’re going to take care of her. If you skirt your duty, I’ll know. And I’ll find you. I’ll kill you and everyone you love.”

And to make a point, Jack went to the shepherd, who was cowering in a corner and tore its head clean off.

He reported all of this to me matter-of-factly, as though it were old news and something inevitable. But after a moment of consideration, he continued: “That man did not even know who I was.”

Jack’s original intention was to abandon you and your mother on the boat at sea. He figured that if your mother was invested in living, she could lift the anchor and turn the boat back to shore. Most of it was common sense, after all. The vessel wasn’t complicated. And you and your mother were not his charges. He had held no obligation to the two of you. But his conscience ate at him. He returned to your mother and explained what had happened to her to the best of his ability and with as little elaboration as possible. I call your mother a young woman because she presented physically as seventeen at the time. But really, she was a girl; her maturity and mind stalled at fourteen. Thankfully, this was an age where mystery and fantasy could still bloom unencumbered in the mind. Your mother accepted everything we told her without much resistance.

She named you Cora, after her mother.

The two of us helped raise the two of you. We referred to your mother as Penelope, which was not fair to her, but necessary to maintain our sanity. It was not easy for her to cope with the loss of everything. Her father, whom she had loved dearly, was dead. Her mother had killed herself only six months before she ‘fell asleep,’ as she chose to refer to Poppy’s possession, and the wound of that loss rubbed raw. Her friends had grown older in her absence. She could not bear to reach out to them. What would she say? What of their lives could be relevant to her own experience? You were the death of her childhood. She had been young and carefree at that tender age she fell asleep. And as soon as she woke up, everything was gone, and a life depended on her.

In today’s world, we would have tried to find her a therapist; she was smart enough to know what she could say and couldn’t say. But that option was not well represented at that time. So, we tried to do the best we could for her. Jack was terrible at listening, but proved wiser than myself and was able to offer sound advice. I did not yet have the depth of Jack’s experience, but she felt comfortable talking to me.

The two of you grew. Poppy matured. She obtained her GED and earned an associate degree in interior design. She became known for her freelance work and found her way onto some significant contracts in the greater Philadelphia area. We did the best we could to manage your unique condition. But once you could walk, you proved a challenge for us. You always wanted to explore. And you had no sense of self-preservation whatsoever. But you were bright, and when you began to talk and then read, it was clear that you stood a chance in this world. For your eighth birthday, you said you

wanted a telescope. Jack stole you an extraordinary one from a university department. On one cloudless night, he found Jupiter and held you up to the eyepiece so that you could see its colors.

Your mother eventually outgrew our nest. She understood her time was short in this world, and she wanted to raise you to be strong. You would never know pain, but you would need its lessons. So she announced one morning that the two of you would set off and make it on your own. She thanked us for all we had done. She accepted Tom's houseboat as a parting gift. And she was gone.

Jack left soon after that. He told me there was nothing more he could do for me. We were now on two different trajectories. I would grow old and die. And he would not. He thought it would hurt me more to see that reality pass daily. And he was right.

But he has returned to me, Cora. It seems that I am now at the end of that trajectory. It is sooner than I had anticipated. I thought I would make it at least eighty, like my father. But luck is as consistent as scattershot. I have no regrets, only one remaining obligation: this document. There will be a time when you have questions and start to forget. And no one will be here to answer them. Jack intends to follow me into the grave. I am, as he put it, his last dependent. This document will outlive us both. And I hope that it will help you appreciate where you come from and what you represent. I have asked Jack to prepare his document. I will leave both to you in my will.

Take care.

## CORA

Jack—

I hope you never read this letter.

If you are reading this, how unfortunate. But at least you'll appreciate all the effort I've put into this task. I feel that I deserve at least some recognition for it.

I've had this volume bound in sheepskin. It wasn't easy finding someone willing to undertake the task and complete it in such a short amount of time. I convinced a man who typically prints diplomas to do so for the sum of three thousand dollars. Where did I get that money? It wasn't mine. Blair stole it from someone's apartment while I stood outside the door. You have him to thank.

The text is tiny because I wanted to keep the volume small and easy to carry. My apologies.

So, you have found this note tucked behind the last page. It means our plan did not work.

Or, well—it is also possible that another version of you is reading this, Jack. One where the contents of this volume are not yet hindsight. In that case, our plan did work. And if that is the case, the reader need not read further.

Jack (my Jack)—

It took me a day to read the manuscript. It took me an additional day to complete it with my perspective of events. I did this for the benefit of your mission. I hope you



appreciate my observations. I've given my honest impressions of the situation and remained unbiased.

I don't know where in time you are. But you've traveled far enough that you're safe and have discovered this letter. Your goal, I'm sure, is to find your spirit. And this is an easy relativity task. You only need to find a relevant clue in Tom's narrative – a time, a place—and travel there to seek her out. But you must appreciate that there is a right and wrong way of doing this. There is a specific moment that you must seek her out. It is her moment of greatest need. Your approach cannot be selfish. You cannot just appear out of the blue.

I'm in a reading room at the Library of Congress as I write you this letter. I have spent the last few days here with Blair. This visit is not for pleasure. We have been seeking out resources to guide you to the right moment.

Here are our relevant findings (mostly mine, as Blair is functionally illiterate):

1. During the years of the black death, your spirit traveled north of current-day Prague to find the location of the first village she was adopted into
2. What she describes about her culture suggests she was born in the Late Bronze Age, perhaps between 2000 and 1800BC
3. Blair has drawn a rough map indicating the location of an (at present) thirty-year-old archeological dig of a settlement belonging to the Unetice culture near Prague, dating to 1750BC.

4. Based on the evidence above, I suggest that your spirit was near or nearby this location.

I acknowledge that this information is not helpful unless I can pinpoint a time for you. Therefore:

1. The black death spanned approximately five years, from 1346 to 1351
2. Your spirit mentions three astronomical events marking her journey to the site of her village. Two weeks before her arrival, she documents a lunar eclipse. Upon arriving at the site of her old village, she documents a total solar eclipse and meets a companion that would accompany her for many centuries. Two weeks later, after this meeting, she reports another lunar eclipse. At this time, she and her new companion make their way toward what is present-day the Netherlands.
3. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, 1347, a total solar eclipse was visible across most of Europe. Two weeks before, and two weeks after, there were penumbral lunar eclipses.
4. Based on this evidence, I would suggest that the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1347 was the approximant, if not exact, time of her arrival to the archeological site north of Prague and the earliest appearance in your spirit's timeline.

I do not doubt my instructions are accurate because you have already used them to find her once before. And now you will find her again. Blair is concerned that no matter

how you try to save this situation, we will all end up back together at the cabin, doomed to repeat the cycle ad infinitum. But I acknowledge there is some random causality to this. You have been born, traveled back, and perished. And you have been born, and will travel back, and perish. But at one time, you were simply born.

What you aim to change is a decision that happens many years after you die and some years before your birth. So, you must seek to sow the seed of change not in yourself but in your spirit. In Poppy. She must read a copy you prepare of this manuscript at some point. She must have the information she needs to make the right choices. But for the sake of the world, let her read this at a time that is least damaging to the continuity of history. Consider leaving it to her somehow, to be discovered after your death, but before your birth. Our aim should not reshape the world, although the power to do so is tempting.

And maybe, when your spirit finally meets Joe, she will not fall in love with him. Or maybe she will. Perhaps she won't be able to resist his young face. So they'll marry, and my mother will be born. But she won't seek you out. She'll spare you. Or maybe that's too much to expect from your spirit. She'll find herself seduced by the memory of the centuries of love you shared between one another and shower you again with tenderness. But this time, she'll keep you under constant protection. No harm will come to you. And Blair will live. And Tom will be at your side, never old, and never sick. And your spirit will not creep like the angel of death through an underfunded nursing home. And no mothers will arrive at morgues staffed by their daughters. And maybe there will be no daughters at all.

That's OK, if so. The world has suffered worse.

It was a pleasure. Safe travels, Jack.

Cora

#### ADDENDUM

It was as Cora had predicted would happen. The five of us met at the pier that overlooked the stretch of water where my boat had been docked twenty-five years before. She presented me with her gift, the manuscript, packaged inside a dry bag. I performed the ritual. It was painless, for her, at least.

The pier was the best I could do, no longer having any sense of where we had anchored the boat at the moment of her birth. The transition was gentle. I arrived without incident. I sensed Poppy immediately. I swam in the direction of her pull. I swam as quickly as possible, the dry bag tied around my waist. But even with the fresh vigor of Cora's heart, I proved too slow. When I arrived at the boat, the act was already done. My familiar had left with Poppy. She was on her way to Hankish.

I loitered on the deck for a moment, considering my options. Penelope came out of the cabin cradling Cora, her face flushed. She looked at me almost sleepily. Then terror alit in her eyes. She wailed and hobbled to the side of the boat, bracing herself against the scansion. I watched with regret as she scanned the dark waters for a sign of her other baby. She had assumed I had tossed it into the sea.

She did not understand the situation, of course. And there was no time to explain it to her. Pain radiated through my bones. I was dying. I did what I considered reasonable. I pulled her into my arms and snapped her neck. She fell unconscious immediately, and I took her heart. I traveled again, now to the moment of her birth. I knew the date to be in December of 1952. I arrived in the early hours of morning. I was in the sea. The cold water cut through me like a knife. I found my way back to shore. Two older men were on the pier, fishing. The air around them was rank with cigar smoke and the rotting squid they used as bait. I approached the two without speaking. They both noticed me at the same time. One cracked a joke at my expense. I nodded, killed him, and then took the heart of the other. And I went back, again.

It was July of 1870. The pain did not return since there was no longer any contradiction for me to contend with. I had not yet been born. I killed the first man I saw for his clothing and used the money on his person to purchase a room at an inn several cities over. There, against candlelight, I consulted the manuscript to plan my strategy. It was then that I found Cora's considerate letter.

I set my aim to the year of 1347.

But there was no rush, I thought. I may as well enjoy the journey. I spent time here and there. I tried to keep up with the shifts in regional pronunciations. I learned new languages. I consumed young human hearts regularly, something therebefore had been unthinkable but now seemed without consequence. Every time I traveled backward, the world I left ceased to be. The hearts gave me incredible power. I tried to sense Poppy or any of her kind. I could not. I wondered if a duplicate of me existed somewhere in the world. Could there be another interloper, having already completed the mission that I was

undertaking? What would I say if I ran into myself? Would he also be tending to a cumbersome manuscript? Would it read the same as mine?

In 1690 I took a ship from the New World to Florence and managed to establish myself there. I spent the next few years between there and Lyon. Altogether, it took me one hundred years before I arrived in 1346 and began a leisurely journey toward the place Blair had outlined on a map.

I followed the signs. The moon darkened her face. On the day the sun fully eclipsed, I arrived at the future dig site. Poppy was there. She was small and slight in this life, weighing at most ninety pounds. Her hair was fair. She had passed herself off as a boy and wore a short brown kirtle tied at the waist and green hose. She regarded me with suspicion; fear, even. She yelled something at me in Dutch, which I did not yet speak. I gestured to her that the meaning was lost. As I drew nearer, Poppy made as though she were going to run. I could see the alarm in her eyes. I held out my hands in a gesture of peace, just as Tom had once done for me during my fits of terror.

I fell to my knees and pulled my hair aside, which I had let grow long and wore in loose curls. There, on the nape of my neck, was a birthmark in the shape of a half-moon. It was a mark that both Tom and my mother had traced with kisses many nights. It was her mark, the mark which appeared on all of her companions. I am certain that at one time, before this cycle began, I had been born without it. But once she placed it on me, it was there always, in all times and at all moments, bridling death, even. She approached me. She considered the mark. She placed a finger over it. Her finger was cold.

I felt static throughout my body. I had been here before. This was familiar. But it was not exact. Some change had occurred, some benevolent distraction. I waited for her

rejection. But instead, she motioned for me to stand. As I did, she pushed her way into my arms. I felt her tremble. She began to sob. We stayed like that for a long time. The love was unexpected. It was not foretold.

We were meant to wait for a sign but did not. Once the sun had set, we took to the road in what I imagined would become the direction of home.

## VITA

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