

Bag Field & Other Stories

*A Handful of Fiction and
a Smattering of Poems
(all quite short, thankfully)*

BEN CROWDER

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a Smattering of Poems
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by Ben Crowder

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AI WAS NOT USED IN MAKING THIS BOOK

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Bag Field

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Dear Mum,

Made it here safely. (Which surprised me given how rickety and ancient that train was!)

I'm sitting in the shade with a deviled egg sandwich outside Frederic's Cafe—the one Peter used to frequent. The sandwich is lovely beyond description, and the air—the air! Clear and rich and wholesome, and there's a cool breeze that makes me want to weep for joy. Nothing like Rabble's stale fumes. The book I'm reading is less delightful—Minaroque's *Meditations in a Garden*, surprisingly dull, and unless it picks up soon I'm liable to abandon it for another.

From what I've seen so far (admittedly just what's between the train station and here),

modernization has Wisbury Fold tight in its grip, but Frederic's continues to resist. No electricity, so they choose to close an hour or so after sunset. The decor is quaint and homey and the servers are as friendly as my actual friends. My chair and table out front? Hand-carved wood, with unbelievably intricate curlicues and other designs on the back of the chair and the top of the table. I love it.

A curious thing has just happened while I've been writing this letter. A man ran up the walk—red-faced, dark hair cleanly cut, stout, close to fifty if I had to guess, wearing a clean white apron (over ordinary gray and black work clothes, I hasten to add).

“Catty l’Estrelle!” he called. “Catty l’Estrelle!”

“I am Caty,” I said, after a moment’s hesitation in which I debated whether to repeat his mispronunciation to keep him from feeling bad for getting it wrong. (In hindsight, I doubt he would have cared one bit. Linguistic accuracy seemed far from the top of his priority list.)

I was of course wondering how he knew my

name, since to my knowledge not a soul in Wisbury Fold knew I was coming—and if Peter were here, I wouldn’t be here searching for him, now, would I.

The thought also crossed my mind—too late—that perhaps I should have been more careful revealing my identity so quickly to a complete stranger. But nothing came of that, so don’t worry.

It turns out Bella cabled ahead and wrote me a welcome note, and apparently she begged and bribed the clerk to hand deliver the message once the train came in. He’d been running all over looking for me, with only Bella’s loose description to go off. (“Brunette, mid-twenties, hair probably a mess, face a bit long, lustrous green eyes, fond of wearing gray, bound to be reading a book.”) So apparently that’s how my friends see me. I’ll grant the hair, but a long face? Trying not to take it as a bad thing—especially since I inherited it from you and Granddad! But really it says more about Bella, and besides, it doesn’t matter anyway.)

After I check in at the hotel, I’m planning to

stop by the smithy to learn what I can about Peter there. He surely must have left some things behind, and the new smith surely must have kept at least some of them.

Time willing, I also want to go to Peter's old house, and I want to find Emmaline, but that all may have to wait till tomorrow. It's a bit of a walk out there. If you remember anything else he may have said to you—any places he frequented here, any people he mentioned—that would be enormously helpful.

I'll write again tomorrow if I have time.

Love,
Caty

■

Dear Mum,

What a day!

I walked to the edge of town to visit the smithy early in the morning, before breakfast. The building is smaller than I expected—not much more than a shack—and its age is certainly

showing, in an endearing yet slightly worrisome way. One hopes it doesn't fall apart while anyone is inside.

The new smith is Charles, a relatively recent graft all the way from Penneth Woods. He's very young, very large, and very self-assured (too much so, I think).

He says he knows nothing of Peter, however. Months after Peter disappeared, Charles's older sister (who lives here) told him that the Wisbury Fold smithy had been abandoned. The village still needed work done, so they established a special, temporary arrangement where Charles uses the smithy even if he's not technically the owner. If two years from now Peter still hasn't shown up, ownership of the land and smithy will revert to the village and they've agreed to then turn it all over to Charles.

So, while I severely doubt he had anything to do with the disappearance, Charles almost certainly does not want me to find Peter. I think he knows more than he's telling, too.

I breakfasted at Frederic's again, hungry for familiarity as well as food. He has this dish called

Fredericks where he cuts strips of fried egg and then plaits them around a skewer with strips of grilled lamb and peppers and onions and drizzles it all with a fresh, spicy sauce. I could eat this every morning for the rest of my life, even with the ghastly dish name.

Satiation complete, I wandered off in search of Emmaline. Emmaline the mysterious, the enigmatic, the invisible. Nobody here has heard of her. I'm beginning to wonder if Peter made her up. (While I don't want to cast any shade upon your brother, Mum, you have to admit it's possible. He was lonely, and if there weren't any real girls to write home about, maybe he invented one.) Don't you worry, though—for now I'll proceed as if she were real, blood and flesh and bone and all.

In one of his letters Peter said that she was from Bronyddur. To my knowledge he didn't ever say how long she had been in Wisbury Fold. Maybe I should ask whether the people here know anyone from Bronyddur, in case Emmaline goes by a different name now. The rest of Peter's descriptions of her—"sweet as a sunrise," "hair

that reminds me of corn cobs but in a good way,” “deeeeeelightful”—aren’t quite as helpful, unfortunately.

I digress. An early afternoon a-wandering proved fruitless in regard to Emmaline, but I did meet a kind old woman who was out tending her front porch garden when I walked by. Her name is Penny and she’s lived here as long as she can remember—“Fold through and through,” she said.

Her husband died a few years ago (fell off a roof, leg got a vicious infection while he was recuperating). She misses him dearly, that much was clear. Her mother was a widow for the last twenty-two years of her life and poor Penny has been afraid of a similar fate ever since.

We ended up in her front room drinking grape juice and eating bland barley crackers. Her husband used to eat the crackers with black currant jam, so of course she did too after he passed, but eventually she ran out of jam and the shrub died so now she just eats the crackers plain.

I worry about you, Mum. Being lonely like this, if Dad goes first. I know you’re both still

young, at least compared to Penny, so hopefully we have many a year before it becomes relevant, but in the event that it happens, what would you think about having one of us move back in with you? Just a thought. (I know you treasure your independence like it's fine gold.)

One thing Penny told me about has been wriggling around in my brain ever since: there's a convent up in the northern hills called Bag Field. She made an allusion to something odd or awful that happened there several years ago. Something painful enough that my (subtle) prodding didn't coax it out of her.

Tomorrow I'm going there to see what I can find. Don't worry, Mum. I'll be careful.

Love,
Caty

Dear Mum,

Progress!

After breakfast this morning (assorted fruit finely chopped and served with cream) I walked up the hills to Bag Field.

It's not visible from the village, though you can see all the hills that surround it. A hidden valley convent! Just like in those Alamara books I used to read when I was young. (I tried reading one a year or two ago. It has not aged well.)

Bag Field was built two hundred years ago by the Clarevent order, which I hadn't heard of before. They were fleeing some kind of persecution and made a home here in the hills. That's what a plaque at the door said, anyway.

The convent walls are at least twenty feet tall and perhaps half as thick. Persecuted indeed—these people built themselves a castle, Mum. It's a sight to see. There are towers with slit windows, there's a bit of crenellation on one of the walls, and I almost wish I lived here, at least for a short time.

Penny said the place had been abandoned, and

the door was unlocked, so I went in. Yes, I know you wouldn't be happy about that but Mum, I'm a grown woman now. I can make my own choices. Besides, I found something.

Abandoned was accurate. Not a soul in sight. No bedraggled ghosts or even devilishly handsome hermits, either. All the valuables and perishables appear to have been taken when the Clarevent people left (or plundered afterwards). What's left is the stuff nobody cared about. Or at least that's my reading of what I saw. I'll let you make your own.

When you walk through the door (which really is more of a gate, now that I think of it) you immediately see the courtyard. It's in the center (naturally) and it's just dirt. Flat, with an odd hint of furrows or treads, and bare.

The only thing in the courtyard other than bugs and dust is a tree. It's off-center, almost like it was planted in haste. I wish it were centered. The tree itself is also unnerving: ramrod straight, stark gray on both trunk and leaf, solemn beyond belief—like a cranky old schoolmaster. There was no plaque to explain why it was there.

The courtyard is surrounded by brown and gray stone buildings, most only a single story tall. I explored many of them and found the following: a kitchen (with no food, just pans and utensils and such), bedrooms (no linens), what may have been an infirmary, classrooms, and what I think were individual offices.

I also found a couple libraries! With books still in them! Lots of them! I've started going through them, to see if there's anything that might help—records that might mention Peter or Emmaline, for example. It's laborious, time-consuming work, but I was born for this. The game is afoot.

Love,
Caty



Dear Mum,

Spent nearly the whole day searching the library, book by book, with breaks only for eating (I brought a lunch, don't worry) and bodily

necessities (I won't go into unnecessary detail).

Nothing so far.

Love,

Caty

■

Dear Mum,

I found something!

There's a section of the library devoted to local history. (I wish I'd known about it beforehand so I could have just started there and saved hours of time—and so much sneezing.) In it I found a short manuscript by one of the sisters who lived here, Sister Felicia.

She starts with irrelevant but interesting autobiographical details about her upbringing and what led her to cloister. Her mother and father were second cousins, which didn't sit well with some of the family, so they were largely ostracized and ended up moving to Thrilch, which as you can imagine wasn't the best environment for a young girl. She was kidnapped,

escaped, kidnapped again by a different group, killed her captors (she doesn't say how), and decided to leave Thrilch not only to avoid further kidnapping but also to seek absolution for the blood on her hands. The Clarevent migration was passing through Gully La just as she arrived there, and she joined up with them.

Part of me wonders just how much of Sister Felicia's history is fiction. This casts some doubt on the next part of her record, naturally, but for now it's the best lead I have.

After Sister Felicia's admission to the order, the nuns traveled here to Wisbury Fold and came across the hills. The perfect location, they decided. Over the next several months they built Bag Field, which at the time was called Matirransatet ("hill sanctuary"). The northeast tower was where Sister Felicia helped the most, selecting stones and mixing mortar.

All was well and good for several years. Then trouble came to town.

It took the shape of a man called Tlain. And he had nothing to do with the original persecutors of the Clarevent order, if you were

wondering. (I was.)

One morning toward the end of an abnormally muggy summer, Tlain showed up in Wisbury Fold, pulling a wobbly cart. In the cart was a gray wool blanket riddled with tears and holes. No other belongings.

He parked his cart in the middle of the town square and began waving his blanket around like a madman. This snagged people's attention, as you might imagine. A minute or so later, when a decent sized crowd had gathered, he whipped his blanket back and lo, there was a chair. A sleek wooden rocking chair, conjured out of nothing.

Tlain sat himself down in the chair. He ignored the people watching him. He swatted a fly that had landed on his arm, then (apologies for including this next part) picked its corpse up and ate it. The people here were no strangers to hard living, but something about Tlain's manner came across as particularly feral and bent. Most of the crowd took a step or two back.

Ignoring them all, he waved the blanket around again above his lap. A minute later, a crown appeared. It was crudely fashioned of

burnished gold, with clear hammer marks, poorly set jewels, and a severe tilt to the wearer's left. No artisan work, this. Tlain set the crown upon his head and looked out over the crowd with a cold glint in his eye, as if daring them to defy his assumed authority.

One of the townspeople there, Roderick the cobbler, had a small knife in his hand (for cutting leather, no doubt) and a boiling hatred of suppression.

For most of this account, by the way, I'm just copying in Sister Felicia's words, with some adjustments and edits. Consider it a seamless collaboration.

Roderick pushed his way to the front and raised his knife and hollered that he would have no king, not in Wisbury Fold, not nowhere. (The irony here is that he already did have a king, Puirrello, but that king was a distant one and Wisbury Fold rarely felt his hand around their neck and thus rarely thought of him.)

Quick as lightning, Tlain whipped his blanket with one hand, a dagger dropped into his other hand, and before anyone had a chance to

call out or move to stop him, Tlain hurled the dagger into Roderick's chest.

Sister Felicia includes a note here saying that she was at Bag Field at the time and did not see it herself, but that she heard all about it from Sister Penniworth, who was in the crowd. So now of course I'm utterly convinced that Sister Penniworth is Penny, the old woman I met. I'm determined to go see her again tomorrow and try to get her to confess. (Though if she doesn't want to, I suppose it would be wrong to keep pushing.)

Anyway, Roderick fell, the crowd fell still, and Tlain sat imperious and cold on his ridiculous rocking throne.

After that, King Tlain began to rule. Surprisingly, he wasn't awful, as far as rulers go. Roderick's was the only execution for a while. Taxes were reasonable. Tlain expanded his kingdom bit by bit over the following years, as kings are wont to do. He married, sired, trained. Notably, he kept using his magic blanket (how silly that sounds), though it doesn't often say what for.

Sister Felicia's account ends with some notes

about a land squabble on the west side of Wisbury Fold. I don't know what year.

Oh. Oh indeed. Just now, as I was rereading that last page, the light angled just right and I could see impressions of writing after the end. Someone erased the last few sentences on the page (Sister Felicia?), *and* upon further inspection I found that someone also cut out three pages at the end, too. Intriguing.

Some parts were tricky, but the erased sentences read: "Today Roderick's cousin Gil coaxed a sorcerer puppet here, tall, imperious, terrifying. Don't know its name. It pulled a tree up out of the ground in the courtyard, full of dark magics, and it embedded Tlain deep into its trunk."

!

I'm too tired to keep writing tonight even though this is groundbreaking. Or interesting, anyway. I don't know if it'll help us find Peter at all.

Love,
Caty

Dear Mum,

In the night I was sleepwalking again and stubbed my toe on the foot of the credenza in my room. It was bad enough that the nail has turned black and guess who now walks with a haggard limp. But don't worry about me, I'll be just fine.

My dreams: reading the cut-out pages from Sister Felicia's book, which had somehow come into my possession. Reading them over and over and over again, no less. I don't remember what they said, though! Not that it would be what they actually said, so it doesn't matter.

I hobbled over to Penny's today, to see if she is in fact Sister Penniworth. She sat me down in her sitting room and fed me cupcakes while she hemmed and hawed and kept trying to change the subject, but fortitude is my name and eventually she did confess. I was right! (I feel like I pushed too hard, though, and that has left me with a queasy feeling in my stomach the rest of the day. I'm also wondering if I might be coming down with a cold.)

Penny said yes, Tlain was embedded in the tree

in Bag Field, and she didn't remember the name of the sorcerer puppet either. What mattered far more to them at the time was their frustration that the infernal puppet had put him in the convent instead of somewhere else in Wisbury Fold, and—even more importantly—that a day or two later, nobody could leave the convent.

It was particularly hard to get her to open up about that part of things—very traumatizing, even now—but she did eventually tell me. She tried to go into town to pick up some bowls the potter was making for them, but when she got about six feet past the convent walls, she couldn't go any farther. Like someone was holding her wrists and ankles back, she said. Others tried to leave, same result. Penny said it made her feel like someone had poured icy sludge into her bones. Not only the lack of freedom, but also the fear of not being able to get supplies, of being cut off and isolated, of being trapped with a monster.

The fielders (as they called themselves) initially thought the barrier was the sorcerer puppet's doing, trying to keep Tlain in. A year or two later, though, they figured out somehow that it

was actually Tlain's magic. Stuck there in that tree, he was keeping everyone close, probably as some kind of survival mechanism.

He himself was unconscious as near as anyone could tell. The brave ones tried talking to him. He never answered, never opened his eyes. (His face was the only part of him that wasn't behind the bark.) No movement beyond an uncanny breathing in the part of the trunk where his chest must have been.

That same day they learned something new and awful. A bunch of the fielders went up on the walls and hollered until some folders (people from the village) came over to see what the ruckus was. The fielders explained the situation and begged the folders to get them out. A few folders tried. They didn't know where the invisible line of no return was, inadvertently crossed it (it was impermeable on only one side), and became fielders.

So of course no folders wanted to get anywhere near it anymore. Some of the fielders put stones around the perimeter so people would know where the real boundary was. That worked out

relatively well except that the boundary kept changing, ebbing and flowing, waxing and waning. Most of the time no damage was done, when the line grew smaller, but occasionally it snatched someone who got too close to the stone line.

That led to the folders building the outer wall, waist high, fifty yards out. (This is probably boring you, Mum, isn't it. Thank you for enduring it for my sake. I can't tell you how much I love this kind of thing. But I'll try to get to the point more quickly now.)

A few fundamentals the fielders and folders learned those first couple months: the boundary was a sphere centered on Tlain, so there was no going over the invisible wall or digging under it. No holes in the boundary as far as they could tell, either. And it only stopped people; things could be passed back and forth freely. This, Penny said, was a huge relief in the midst of a terrible time.

Time passed. More sorcerer puppets were brought in to try to undo what they thought the first one had done, but they wouldn't go near Bag Field—said that it was too dangerous, and that the puppets were too expensive. Eventually,

though, they found one willing to do more investigative work, and that's when they learned that it was Tlain's magic and not sorcerer puppetry.

And that's as much as Penny told me, because her back and legs were aching. (Mine too, if I'm honest.) Tomorrow I'll go back, since clearly Tlain is gone and the boundary is gone, so something must have happened.

Penny did tell me one other thing, at the very end. I asked if she knew anyone named Emma-line, and this time she said yes, she did. The Emmaline she knew—who matched the descriptions Peter gave, though that's not saying much—was one of the folders who accidentally got too close to the boundary and became a fielder.

!

Penny had to leave right then for “urgent personal business,” so I wasn’t able to ask if she knew about Peter—or what happened to Emmaline after everyone escaped Bag Field. Tomorrow!

This evening I finished reading the Mina-roque. The last quarter was ever so slightly less dull than the rest, but I really should have abandoned it for another.

I haven't sent anything to Bella, by the way, under the unvoiced assumption that you would have her over for dinner and read these letters aloud to her. (If Skillet—that's her new boyfriend, and apparently it really is his legal name—leaves any openings in her schedule, that is.)

As I've been writing this, by the way, I've been nibbling on some leftover fried raspberry crepe sticks from a delightful little shop I found this afternoon. I'll send part of one in the envelope with this letter. It might only be crumbs by the time it gets to you, though!

Love,
Caty

■

Dear Mum,

I'm coming home.

After breakfast I limped back over to Penny's to get answers. Guess who wasn't home. I don't know if I scared her off or if she just had that urgent business to take care of. I'll probably

never know.

Since I didn't want to waste the day lolling around at the hotel—my toe still feels like the bone has the flu, by the way—I dragged myself into the heart of town in search of someone who might have known Emmaline. And of breakfast.

I found both at Frederic's. (There aren't really any other cafes here, which I meant to mention earlier. Given the size of the town, I'm surprised even Frederic's can stay in business. I wonder if he has another enterprise out of sight.)

The girl who took my order said it was good I came in when I did, because they're closing early today. Old Lem saw two sorcerer puppets stiltling about at Bag Field early this morning and everyone is spooked. Nobody knows why they're here. They're never good news, though, as you well know. (Now that I'm older and have more points of comparison, perhaps you'd be willing to tell me more about what happened when you were a child? I can handle it.)

A bit later I was sitting there finishing off my buttered grits when in walks Old Lem himself. The waitress pointed him over to my table—I'd

asked her where I could find him, so that was nice of her—and, with a raised eyebrow, he sat down across from me.

Old Lem: not as old as you'd think. Late forties, maybe. They call him Old because he has an adult son named Little Lem (who begrudges that name now and has been pushing to be called Big Lem since he's six and a half feet tall and weighs over two hundred pounds). Old Lem and his wife live down the street from Frederic's. He's a carpenter.

And yes, he saw two sorcerer puppets going inside Bag Field at dawn today. He didn't see anyone else nearby, but he also didn't stick around. (He was scouting the area for a fallen branch for carving. There are lots of trees on the west side of the convent.) He and his wife are spooked and plan to leave today to go stay with her family in Rabble.

When they said the words, such a pang of homesickness hit me! Rabble, my city beautiful! And grimy and loud, but still a thing of beauty in my eyes. I do miss it dearly. Even the fumes. But I digress.

Old Lem was there! At Bag Field, back when Tlain was held captive! Lem was one of the people who tried to help and got stuck. He was there four years, years made shorter when he met and married his wife. And guess who his wife was friends with? Emmaline the enigmatic.

Thia (Lem's wife, short for Hyacinthia) and Emmaline were around the same age and spent a lot of time together growing up. (Yes, yes, I realize you could probably say that about any two people in Wisbury Fold given how small it is.)

I'm realizing you don't need all the long anthropological details on this. (Things to tell you about in person when I get home: how they set up beds for everyone, their food and water supply, the internal political system they set up, Tlain's magical tics, the time people tried to cut down Tlain's tree, the tunnel, and Sister Felicia's untimely demise.)

Skipping forward to the meat, then. Old Lem says Emmaline was at Bag Field when the boundary went up. (Which does conflict with what Penny said, but Lem seems to be a more reliable source here.) Emmaline and Thia and several

others were attending a little flute performance some of the children were putting on as part of a Clarevent music education program. Uncle Peter wasn't there, though—he was home visiting you and the rest of the family, trying to borrow a few thousand from Grandad (as you well know, of course). Lucky. Or not, depending on your perspective.

By the time Peter got back to Wisbury Fold, they'd found what happened if a folder crossed the boundary, so he kept his distance and didn't get pulled in. But he did visit Emmaline several times a day from over the wall. Sweet thing. Emmaline talked Thia's ear off about every last one of his visits, apparently.

Then one day Peter stopped coming. Emmaline insisted he hadn't abandoned her, but she wouldn't say why he'd left either. Lem didn't think she knew. None of them did. But it seemed pretty clear to Lem that distanced visits weren't as satisfying as being up close, so he assumed Peter had moved on. There were other girls in Wisbury Fold, after all.

A month or so after that, the unexpected

happened. It was late in the afternoon, in the fall. A small army of sorcerer puppets marched into Bag Field, right through the doors, and surrounded Tlain and the tree in the courtyard. All the tree's leaves had fallen already, giving it a harsh and angry demeanor. Lem watched from up on one of the walls, where he'd been doing guard duty.

He was sure they were going to kill Tlain right there, but no, they linked their tentacles, the tree started shaking, and then Tlain fell out of the trunk and collapsed on the ground. Lem's ears popped, too. That's why he's convinced the boundary collapsed at that moment and not later. (Though we're in agreement that the exact timing is not in fact relevant.)

Tlain wasn't lying there more than a few moments when a gigantic cormorant swooped down, snapped him up in its beak, and flew off with him to who knows where. Thia is convinced it ate him, but Lem feels certain the cormorant was Tlain's and was there to rescue him.

That was the last anyone saw Tlain.

Until this afternoon.

Apologies for the dramatic paragraphing, Mum, but goodness! It took all my willpower to keep from blurting it out at the beginning. Tlain has returned to Wisbury Fold. To Bag Field, more specifically. He has holed up in there and has done some kind of dark magic because now the walls are three times taller than they used to be, and now they look like they're made out of bones. Nobody has dared get close to find out any more.

I'm tempted to stay to see what happens, but the situation is precarious enough that I've decided to follow the path of prudence this time. Hard to believe, I know! I'll drop this letter off in the post early tomorrow morning and then catch the 10:00 train back home. If you don't have evening plans, I'd love to have supper with you and Bella (and Skillet, because otherwise Bella won't come) and everyone else. I can fill you in on everything I wasn't able to include in these letters, which was a lot.

This leaves Peter's story unresolved, I know. My hunch? He went off looking for a way to get Emmaline out. I don't know, maybe he's the one who found those sorcerer puppets who freed

Tlain and brought the boundary down. Or maybe he left Emmaline and made a new life for himself somewhere else with someone else. Oh. I hadn't thought of that before.

Either way, I hope someday we can find out where he went and what he's been doing. I hope he and Emmaline are together and happy. Who knows, maybe I have cousins! That would be something, wouldn't it.

See you tomorrow!

Love,
Caty



That letter is the last we've heard from our dear, sweet Caty. Five years now, years long and bitter. You could fill a few bathtubs with my tears alone, not to mention the rest of the family's.

Wisbury Fold is still there—we've been able to see people moving about inside—but we can't get within a few miles of it and nobody from the inside has come out to where we are. We've tried everything we can think of to get our Caty out.

And we'll never stop trying, not as long as
I'm alive.

Never to Return

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Salviana pulls a small potato out of the fraying wicker basket in the corner. The potato's too small, not enough to feed one, let alone the five of them. She feels around in the basket, hoping. Little clods of dirt, a few bits of straw. No more potatoes.

Well, then. Dearly missing her parents—Father, anyway—she turns to her younger brother Elátor, who is leaning against the wall and clearly daydreaming of his girl Dietri. Draped in some of Father's threadbare clothes that are too large for him, he's sixteen and thinks himself thirty. His fingers are too nimble for his own good. Father always made him give it all back, whenever he caught him at it.

“All we have is this,” she says, holding out the potato. Her meaning is clear.

He stares at her for a long, long moment. Scratches his nose. He’s been trying to stop. He winces, then softly shakes his head, refusing to give in this time. “Anamora?”

What he’s referring to is Aunt Anamora, Father’s older sister. She lives in the city with her detestable slug of a husband Rault, and ever since Father died she has been constantly conniving to get Salviana and her siblings to move in with them.

“No,” Salviana says firmly, withdrawing her hand. She rubs the dirt off the potato. “She’s insane. And she’s still painting those disturbing landscapes, so it’s going to get even worse. And Rault? Ugh, no. If someone swapped him out for a squash I don’t know if I’d even notice.”

Elátor has blanched during all of this. He awkwardly clears his throat. “Um.”

“Maybe we should go now.”

Salviana spins around, surprised that she didn’t hear their approach, wondering how much they heard. Probably all of it. She feels her

cheeks go hot. She doesn't know what to say, so she says nothing.

Aunt Anamora is of course standing in the doorway. Of course. Of all the luck. She's holding a flimsy cardboard box that smells delicious. Uncle Rault hovers behind her, the picture of insipid blandness.

Ria, Salviana's younger sister, has jumped up and given Aunt Anamora an exuberant hug. Timo, the youngest brother, and Navi, the baby of them all, join her. It's pathetic.

"I'll be back soon," Elátor says as he picks up Father's knife and slides past the visitors. He's going to hunt for a rabbit, clearly. Good. They're able to take care of themselves, even if Aunt Anamora can't see that.

"I didn't know you felt that way." Aunt Anamora is still staring at Salviana with those huge mournful, hurt eyes. Rault's unblinking gaze is fixated on the dirt under his feet.

Now wishing she had picked up on Elátor's meaning before opening her mouth, Salviana swallows. "Sorry," she whispers. "I didn't mean it."

She watches Ria take the box from Aunt Anamora and start unpacking it on the table. A cloth bag of little dried gray windfish, lots of them. Gilded bean triangles wrapped in leaf. A ceramic bowl that turns out to carry some kind of potato curry Salviana hasn't had before, but it's the source of the good smells. They'll have to return the bowl later, of course, which is probably why Aunt Anamora chose to bring it. She's sly that way.

"We can't stay," Aunt Anamora says. "Rault has a meeting and I have to finish three more paintings for this show. If you need anything, though, let us know."

With that, she backs herself out of the doorway and she and Uncle Rault get back into their carriage—a new one Salviana hasn't seen before—and off they go.

Salviana finds herself wishing Aunt Anamora lived farther away. Other side of the world, even. She knows the woman means well, but can't she see that Salviana is more than capable of taking care of everyone?

Salviana realizes she's still clenching the

solitary potato.

She puts it back in the basket and joins the others at the table, where Ria has already set plates. “We wait for Elátor,” Salviana says. It’s important to her that they stick together as a family.

“Tell us a story,” Navi says, leaning her cute little chin on the palms of her hands, elbows on the table.

A story. There are many to choose from, thanks to Father and his insistence on not telling the same story twice.

Salviana’s lip begins to tremble. She misses him. Misses him tucking her into bed. Misses the off-key sailor tunes he’d hum while she drifted off. Misses his hugs, his smell, his beard.

But he’s gone. And she won’t see him again until she too is gone, so there’s nothing to do but keep living.

“Long ago,” she begins, her voice all a hush, “there was a village called Laza. A small, baby village. The people there were good and kind, and they loved each other.”

This was the first story that came to mind,

though Salviana now wonders why, since it's not exactly a pleasant tale. So few of Father's were, but still.

“The people of the village lived happy lives until one season, when the morquelazas came.”

Timo frowns. “I thought they were called molakalazas.”

Salviana shakes her head and puts her finger to her lips. “The morquelazas came from who knows where, for they had never been seen in that part of the land before. Not until now. Now then, who was the first to go, and the first to see?”

Timo shrugs, Ria smiles knowingly, and Navi slaps her hands down on the table. She knows this story well. “Poor Inim was the first to go. And the first to see was Wennicormirit.”

“Yes,” Salviana says. “Poor Inim was a father of three tall, hard-working girls. Wennicormirit, the youngest, came out of the house in the dark of the morning to milk the cows. She saw her father standing in the middle of the lane and, beyond, a cloaked creature. A morquelaza. It swept its cloak up in the air and when it brought it back down again, Poor Inim was gone.”

“As if he’d never been,” Navi whispers.

“Never to be seen again,” Salviana continues, nodding. “Over the next week the morquelaza returned again and again, until the only one left was Wennicormirit. Did she stay or did she go?”

“Go go go,” Timo said. “She got out of that creepy place. Plus, if she didn’t go, there wouldn’t be anyone to tell the story.”

“Not so. You’re forgetting something about morquelazas. Navi?”

Navi grins nervously. “They don’t vanish their victims until someone’s there to witness.” It’s Father’s line, passed down to them and now precious far beyond the words themselves.

Though these words are mere stories, they still unsettle the children. They hear the wind picking up outside and branches rattling. This, Salviana thinks, is when it would be especially helpful to still have parents.

Timo’s stomach grumbles loudly. The food is getting cold.

“Okay, okay,” Salviana says. “I’ll go get him.” Elátor is probably waiting for Aunt Anamora to leave—he can’t stand conflict.

Through the window Salviana can see that dusk has come. She grabs the other knife, the small one for paring. She fumbles with the latch to the glowbug jar on the shelf near the door, grabs the second to last bug after only two tries, sticks it in her mouth, and swallows. “Only one left,” she says over her shoulder to Ria as she walks out and closes the door behind her. A few steps out she hears the bar slide into place. Good.



Where oh where has Elátor gone, Salviana wonders. Hunting, he said, but he’s said that before when he’s gone to see Dietri in the city (an increasingly common occurrence), or gone to hunt valuables out of the pockets and closets of unsuspecting persons.

Elátor is as hungry as the rest of them, though—probably even more so, at his age—so Salviana expects he is in fact hunting. He has probably ambled out toward the woods. Along the edge of the forest it’s a little easier to find rabbits, and squirrels, and nightdoves, too, so that’s where she’s heading.

The stark line of trees stands half a mile from home through tall weeds and tangled bushes. She finds the trail and trudges along it. A slight cool breeze gives her the shivers. She doesn't like being out at dusk, when men and beasts go prowling. Several times she yearns to go back home and start the meal without Elátor—he's almost a man, he can take care of himself, and he has the better knife—but she's now as close to a parent figure as the other children are going to get, and it doesn't seem the responsible thing to do.

She steps around a half-rotted stump and feels another flush of shame at the memory of what she said about Aunt Anamora. Better to hold your tongue, Father always said. He was right. Even if everything Salviana said was true, and it was, it still wasn't right. She wanted to be a good person.

Her glowbug looked large enough when she was fishing it out of the jar, but it must have been weak or more of a baby, because Salviana can't see quite as well as she expected. She hopes her night-sight lasts long enough for her to get back home.

After almost twisting her ankle on a rock that

isn't as stable as it looked, Salviana approaches the edge of the woods. She stops. She listens. Chittering and buzzing, a bit thicker woodward. That's all she can hear. She's drowning in it for a moment, swallowed up by the sound. She could just lie down on the ground—the soft, soft dirt under all the weeds—and curl up and relax. That would be nice.

No. She bites her lip hard enough to draw blood, and the feeling passes. She's here to find her brother.

To keep from getting lost, she walks along the edge of the forest, peering in as best she can, hoping Elátor will be close enough for her to see. If he has gone farther into the forest than that, well, that's his choice, his consequences.

She mulls as she walks. Back at home, their money is starting to run thin. Father left a good-sized pile, and Mother didn't take all that much with her, but feeding five is more of a drain than Salviana ever expected. Someday Elátor will marry—Dietri, perhaps, though she doesn't seem the type—and he'll move out to build his own life. That'll still leave four, though. And

while Timo or Ria may turn out to be good at hunting, they may not.

No sign of Elátor yet. Salviana's hand scrapes against a sharp burr on one of the tall stalks she pushes past. There is no trail here. She isn't worried about finding her way back, though, because when she looks back over the weeds, she can see the lights of the city. West Alz, home to buildings so tall the clouds have to watch out.

She hears a sound from within the forest, a sound that pierces the chittering and buzzing. Someone nearby is chanting.

Her heart beginning to skitter, Salviana walks farther along the edge, and the chanting grows louder. Closer.

Elátor is a foolish young boy, and one who seems to delight in frustrating her, but she knows he knows that hunting requires quiet. So it's not him. A trickle of cold slips down her spine. Her breathing has gotten shallow.

It could be a camp of wistwomen, with the annual Alzan carnival only weeks away. She wouldn't expect them to camp in the forest itself, but their ways were often inscrutable.

Could also just be someone escaped from the Alz Imperial asylum. Some were harmless, but others less so—she'd had more than one nightmare about a bonebreaker getting hold of her.

She is sweating now. She stops. Listens. The chanting feels slanted and sticky, somehow. It's probably nothing to do with Elátor, and she should turn round and check the other direction. The food is getting cold.

She steps forward. She's very close now. Another few steps and she can see something, though she doesn't know what it is. She's slow now, very careful, doesn't want whoever it is to know she's here.

Salviana takes one last step and now can see. It is, in fact, Elátor. He holds a dead rabbit by the ears in one hand. With his other hand, trembling, he's pointing a knife.

The coolness of the dusk begins to feel cold indeed. As Salviana squints, she can see someone standing ten, twenty feet farther into the forest. They're cloaked and hard to see, but the chanting is theirs and their head is bobbing up and down with each syllable.

She doesn't know who it is or what they want but what she does know is that she needs to get Elátor out of there, and now.

Planning to heft a stone at the chanter, Salviana steps forward, ever so careful to avoid making a noise, watching her feet. Yet she does. A snap, underfoot. Betrayed by a twig.

When she looks up again, the chanter is gone. But so is Elátor.

This startles Salviana. She spins round, wondering if she's somehow turned the wrong direction. No sight of either of them. The trickle turns to a flood.

She knows, now.

She turns back—thankfully she can still see the lights of the city—and she runs.



Salviana is home, swaddled by the walls of her house against the bleak darkness beyond. Timo and Navi are curled up on the bed, gently snoring. Ria sits across from Salviana at the table, frowning. “Tell me already.”

“Elátor,” Salviana says. Her voice quakes and

cracks. She's teetering on the edge of collapsing into sobs but somehow manages to keep from falling into that abyss, at least for another minute.

Why hasn't she told them yet? Why indeed. She knew she should. She meant to. But it was almost bedtime, and she thought it would be kinder to tell the younger ones in the morning. Bad news is worse in the dark.

Ria can't know what's coming next, but her eyes well up anyway. This pushes Salviana off the edge.

Slow minutes of stifled sobs pass. Between the flashes of blind agony her mind tries to make sense of it. Elátor was frustrating and irritating, but he was still her brother and she loved him. She misses him. She needs him. The pain is just as deep as it was with Father.

"I think it was a morquelaza," Salviana says finally, her ragged voice just a whisper. "I didn't think they were real."

Ria, who has been her companion in tears, shakes her head. She doesn't understand.

"It was standing there, chanting. Awful,

dreadful chants. It took Elátor. Somehow. He just vanished.” Salviana swallows as the realization settles upon her. “I was the witness.”

Saying it aloud makes it seem foolishness, but she saw what she saw and she can’t deny it. Nothing else could disappear like that.

“Are you sure?” Ria asks. “It was pretty dark out there, even with a glowbug. Maybe it was someone else?”

Salviana plumbs her memory. She’d been so sure at the time, and until Ria’s question she felt secure in that knowledge. But now, she feels that surety cracking a little. The edges of her memory are already wearing away, worn down by a couple hours of time. It could have been someone else. It could have just been trees.

No, no, no. She knows what she saw. Besides, Elátor is not home, and he would be by this hour. Hard as it is to accept, he is gone.

Salviana nods. “I am sure.”

So, she thinks to herself, trying to stave off another bout of sobbing, there are morquelazas in the forest. Their home is too close.

Suffocatingly close. They can’t stay here, that

much is clear. Navi or Timo could go wandering and run into one. Or a morquelaza could leave the woods and come to them. The mere thought makes Salviana start shaking.

But where to go? Aunt Anamora's is the obvious answer, she knows. Not an option. She'd go mad living there with them.

Ria has her head in her hands. "We're never going to see him again."

Salviana doesn't know what to say to that. It's true, of course. Unless... "That's possible, but maybe Father's story is wrong. Or incomplete, at least. Maybe the morquelazas aren't eating their victims—"

"Ew," Ria says. "I never thought they were eating them."

"Really? I thought it was pretty clear that that's what was happening. Either way, maybe they're just being taken somewhere else. Maybe we can find them."

Saying those words is when it becomes clear to Salviana what she needs to do.



In a crammed neighborhood in West Alz near the pond, Salviana and her three remaining siblings stand on Aunt Anamora's doorstep. Sway, rather—they've been walking for over four hours with little food or water. Twice along the way they got lost, dead-ended in trash-strewn alleys, because Salviana was young when last they visited and her memory of how to get there has frayed.

But here they are at last. Everything of value that they own is behind them tied to a ram-shackle wagon Timo and Ria built a few weeks ago. It's not much.

Salviana swallows—she still doesn't want to do this—and raps her knuckles on the door. She doesn't use the fancy sculpted bronze knocker, because her hand is just as good. She almost hopes nobody answers.

The neighborhood here is nicer than in the outskirts where their home is, but not as nice or as large as Salviana remembered. Everything is rammed up next to each other in one solid mass, no breathing room between apartments. Pale trees jut out of the dirt sidewalks, and at least half of them have someone living in their meager

shade. There are dogs everywhere.

Across the street some children with sticks in hand are hitting a ball down the walk. They keep staring at Salviana and her siblings. She wishes they wouldn't.

Ria sits down on the porch and within seconds Timo and Navi join her. Eventually Salviana does too. It's too hot here. No wind. The air is stale and reeks a little.

Time drags on, with no answer at the door. Her plan might not work after all, she realizes. Maybe this isn't Anamora's house after all.

But then, after what feels like hours, the door opens. It's Uncle Rault, bespectacled, wearing a hideous red and blue woolen sweater over light striped pants. From the arched eyebrows and pursed lips it's clear he is not expecting them.

Which he wouldn't be, after what Salviana said the day before. She feels like her stomach is all twisted up, from that and from losing a brother and now from being here, begging.

"Hi," she says, wishing she hadn't done this. She knew it wouldn't be worth it.

Uncle Rault coughs into his hand. He's

wearing white gloves. Goodness, Salviana thinks, the man looks ridiculous. He stares off into the distance, taps his foot on the floor, clears his throat. He clears his throat again and speaks. “Best be off. I’m sure you’ll be happier at home.” He begins to close the door.

Salviana’s heart sinks. She’s misread the situation. This really is not going to work. So they need to go. Where to, she doesn’t know, but anywhere would be better than here.

Ria sticks her foot in the door just as it’s about to swallow up the last few inches. “A morquelaza took Elátor.”

Uncle Rault stops closing the door. They can’t see him, hidden behind it. But Salviana hears his breath catch.

They remain there in deadlocked silence for several prolonged seconds.

“Please remove your foot,” he says in an angry whisper.

Salviana nudges Ria, who defoots the doorway.

The door closes with a slight slam. From the other side they can hear a lock turning and, high up, a bolt sliding loudly into place.

“It’s okay,” she tells the others, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. “We’ll figure something out.”

“I’m hungry,” Navi says.

Timo nods. “My legs are going to fall off, too. Can we rest first?”

“Let’s find some shade and rest a minute,” Salviana says, “and then we can find food.” Where or how to find food in the city, she doesn’t know.

They step down from the porch and are ten or so paces down the walk when she hears the door open again, behind them.

“Wait! Don’t go.” It’s Aunt Anamora, wearing a color-stained apron, her hair tied back in a tail. She vaults down from the porch and hurries over to them. “You look hungry. Do you want some lunch? Are you okay? What happened?”

They tell her.

“You can’t stay there,” she says, shaking her head. “Too dangerous. We have plenty of room and would love for you to stay with us.”

Salviana puts up a hand. “But Uncle Rault said—”

“Ignore Rault, he’s in a mood. He’ll come round. Come on. Let me get that.” Aunt Anamora takes the end of the wagon’s stick handle from Timo and pulls it around. The handle falls off. She shrugs, leans down, and grabs hold of the wagon itself. “I was thinking of making sweet rolls for lunch. Not healthy, I know, but every once in a while it’s fun. Does that sound good?”

She leads them up the porch and into the house—the Abbey, she calls it. It’s chock full of stairs and oddities. It isn’t at all what Salviana remembers.



It’s several weeks later. They’ve all gained a few pounds. They’ve woken Uncle Rault in the night with their crying, missing Father and Elátor. Aunt Anamora is surprisingly good at comforting them. Ria is learning how to paint. They all have new clothes that actually fit.

It’s time. Early one morning, Salviana leaves a note: “Thank you for everything. I have to go find Elátor.”

Part of her thinks she should try to enlist

Aunt Anamora and Uncle Rault—they’re adults, after all—but they don’t seem to believe that it was actually a morquelaza, or that Salviana saw anything at all. She’ll have to do this herself.

Her stomach is a bag of butterflies and her eyes are leaky as she slips out the back door, ever so quietly. She’ll be back someday, she vows, and on that day she’ll have Elátor with her.

Tyrk

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Tuesday was Laura's first time at the circus. She'd read about circuses all her life, but her mother insisted they were dangerous. Laura suspected that the truth lay more in her mother's fear of clowns than in any real danger, and that was why her mother didn't know she was here.

Laura walked from tent to tent in awe at the feel of magic that drenched the fairgrounds. Anything could happen here. Trapeze, bearded lady, even the not-so-scary clowns—all of it intoxicated her. The hours flew by and before long it was almost dinnertime. She was tired and her legs felt a little stiff, but she still hadn't been to the last tent, the one out past the Ferris wheel. It wouldn't take long.

The tent had a hand-painted sign that read “Tyrk, a creation of Dr. Anders Schneider.” Laura pulled aside the flap and stepped in.

A man, who she guessed was Dr. Schneider, sat to the side of a contraption that dominated the center of the tent. The thing—the “Tyrk,” probably—looked like a jumble of scraps from the dump. There was a big metal box, and perched on that were some leather steering wheels (or at least they looked like steering wheels), and then a heap of wires and pipes and bulbs and goodness knows what else. Everything was bathed in a pale green light that seemed to come from within the machine.

“Welcome, welcome,” said Dr. Schneider. “You have heard of my Tyrk?” He tapped the machine with his long finger. Laura noticed the funny robe he was wearing—it was like he took a thick Persian carpet and wrapped it around himself. Not to mention the hat, squatting on his head looking for all the world like a fat stuffed chicken. Laura tried not to giggle.

“It is a magical, mysterious machine,” he said. “Many years in its gestation. Twenty-seven

prototypes before this. Simply drop your face here, on the portal”—he pointed out a circular opening on the side of the machine—“and voila, transportation to a world of wonder. It is unlike everything you have ever seen. You want to try?”

Laura nodded. She handed him her last penny.

“Excellent! When you have satisfied your curiosity, simply crack the egg. You will find it in your pocket. Simple, yes?”

She nodded again.

Dr. Schneider scratched his head. “But it is not wise to crack eggs in your pocket. Messy. Remember that.” He laughed, a high, reedy little laugh that sounded fake to Laura. “Are you ready, little girl?”

While she didn’t really like being called a little girl—she *was* thirteen—she stepped up to the machine and leaned forward until her face was in the opening that Dr. Schneider called a portal. The inside of the machine was so dark that she couldn’t see anything. Then, a blue light twinkled far away, like someone holding a candle at night on the top of a mountain. Laura wondered if this was the “world of wonder” Dr. Schneider was

babbling about. If so, she wanted her money back.

She heard Dr. Schneider fiddle with something on the Tyrk and suddenly the blue light drew closer and closer, filling her view. It sparkled around the edges, danced with little pricks of light. Kind of pretty, she thought. A loud popping sound from behind the light startled her, making her bang her head against the top of the portal opening. Ouch.

Just as she was about to step back, thank the doctor for his time, and head home, she felt herself falling forward into the machine. The portal and the floor just weren't there anymore. Down, down she fell toward the shimmering blue light, arms and legs flailing. Then she couldn't breathe anymore. She tried, but she couldn't suck in any air. She stuck her hand in her pocket. No egg.

She fell through the light, catching her breath long enough to get a whiff of cotton candy.

Then Laura found herself flying in a meadow, looking up at mountains that seemed impossibly high. Monstrous puffy pink clouds hugged the sky. She felt a cool breeze on her cheek and long blades of greenish-purple grass tickled her arms.

It couldn't be real. It just couldn't. Dr. Schneider must have slipped some kind of crazy-making powder into the portal. The nerve! Illegal all over the place, especially since she wasn't a grownup yet. She wondered how long it would take to wear off.

Still, this was a pretty strong illusion, and it wasn't nearly as bizarre as Laura had always expected powder visions to be. Whenever Uncle Wynn was powdered up, which was every time he lost at a game of innocence, he waddled home and jabbered gibberish till early morning.

Laura got up and walked down the meadow to a cluster of trees. The first one glittered. As she got closer, she could see pennies and nickels dangling from its lowest branches, with what looked like quarters and silver dollars up near the top of the tree.

She reached up and plucked a penny. Seemed real. She bit it, because that's what people in the movies did. It tasted like a normal penny. Must be real. Maybe this wasn't crazymaking after all.

She had to jump across a brook to get to the next cluster of trees. The closest one, a tall, thin

tree that looked like it would fall over if the wind started blowing, had big bubbles all over its bark. Laura popped a bubble and out fell a piece of pink taffy. It smelled good. She nibbled a little bit. It tasted even better than it smelled—strawberry with a hint of coconut.

Behind the taffy tree there was a little hill, and on top of it sat a thick, black, ugly tree, gnarled and twisted so much that it looked more like a pile of branches than an actual tree. Laura climbed up next to the trunk of the tree and looked up at it. She caught the smell of chocolate on the breeze, but she couldn't see anything on the tree that looked like chocolate. Figuring it would be up top, and since it looked easy to climb, she got up on the lowest branch—it was as low as her knees—and pulled herself up. The bark flaked off on her hands, leaving a black dust. She smelled it. No, it wasn't chocolate.

As she climbed, she saw some pods hanging inside little openings in the thicker branches. She pulled one out. It was hard and black, as big as a silver coin. She twisted it with both hands—bracing herself against a branch so she wouldn't

fall down—and it tore open. She shrieked. A spider crawled out and dropped in her lap. Ew. She grabbed a leaf and brushed it away with a trembling hand, somehow managing not to smush it. She shuddered. Spiders were gross and nasty.

Catching her breath, she looked at the pod. She'd accidentally crushed it, but as she peeled it back open again, she saw a light brown piece of chocolate in it, perfectly round, smelling just like the bars of chocolate her mother had her buy at the drugstore every Saturday morning. Laura wrapped the chocolate in a leaf and put it in her pocket. Hopefully that would make up for her sneaking out to the circus and probably being late for dinner. She'd have to leave soon.

Down the other side of the hill there was a tree with branches that Laura could see through. On its branches hung eggs—big ones, small ones, all different colors. Laura remembered what Dr. Schneider had said. She reached into her pocket and, sure enough, pulled out an egg covered in gold and silver swirls. It didn't look anything like the eggs on the tree, but it was beautiful. Laura fingered the swirls—they were etched into the

surface—and then put the egg back in her pocket.

At the base of the mountain, only a few dozen yards away, she could see a dirt path that led upward. Perfect. The view would be better up there, and she'd be able to get a quick look over the valley before she cracked the egg and went home. She took one step up the path. Suddenly she was above the trees. She took another and she was hundreds of feet up. The path was only a few feet wide, and being so high and so near the edge made Laura dizzy. She sat down. This couldn't be a dream. It was too real.

She backed up against the mountain and, grabbing hold of a large rock to have something to cling to, took a few deep breaths. That helped the dizzy spell pass. Up here she could see a big river out in the distance, reflecting the pink sky and a very tiny sun that looked to be setting soon. Long canoes floated along the river, and she thought she could see people on them. The trees grew thicker out near the river.

Off to the left were hundreds of blue and yellow striped hills, each one with a round houselike mound on top. Some of the houses had puffs of

green smoke billowing from tall, skinny chimneys that swayed back and forth.

To the right Laura saw flat plains with dark dots moving around. Probably cattle, she thought. Though they looked kind of tall to be cattle...

She felt a drop of rain on her arm, then another. A thick purple cloud had moved in above her. She'd had enough of this Tyrk world. Time to go home. She'd get there before her mother whistled for dinner if she hurried.

She scooted down the path. This time it took a lot longer, like she was fighting against gravity to go down. At some points she even had to grab hold of some big rocks just to keep from being blown into the sky. Finally, though, she reached the wonderful, safe ground again and took a deep breath. No more mountain climbing. It wasn't raining down here yet, though the cloud was still there.

She pulled the egg out of her pocket. Hard to believe cracking an egg would do anything, unless maybe there was something inside it. She found a nice, large rock a few feet away and knelt down.

“It won’t work.”

Laura jumped. She’d been sure she was the only one here. The voice came from a man leaning against the egg tree. He wore pinstriped pants and an old velvet jacket with white polka dots.

“I’ve tried.”

Laura stepped back and tripped a little on a rock, but luckily she caught herself before she fell. “Who are you?”

“A long time ago I was Schneider’s assistant,” he said, scratching his patchy beard. “Name’s Rhys. I’m not going to hurt you, kid.”

“What do you mean, it won’t work?” Laura felt chills drip down her spine.

He laughed, sad and distant, and sat down on the grass. “Your egg. It won’t crack. Mine didn’t. I’ve been here in Tyrk for thirty years, darling. No way out.”

Laura didn’t trust him. There was something shifty in his eyes, reminding her of Uncle Wynn when he wasn’t powdered. That wasn’t a good thing.

Ignoring him, she knelt back down and hit the egg against the rock. Nothing, though a few

flakes of rock fell to the ground. The egg was just as solid as before. She felt sick inside.

“I told you,” Rhys said. “It’s useless. But you never know, maybe this time will be different.”

She tried again and again, scuffing her knuckles and flaking off more of the rock. The egg didn’t crack. She stood up. Maybe she needed more force. She stepped back and threw the egg as hard as she could at the rock. It bounced back and fell at her feet.

“There’s got to be a way out,” she said. Or whimpered, really. But she wasn’t going to let herself cry in front of a strange man. Especially not one who looked at her like that. She felt swallowed up by a thick, uncomfortable feeling. If only her father were here.

Rhys pulled out a pocketknife and trimmed the nail on his pinky. “Believe me, I’ve looked. There’s nothing.”

Laura looked at the useless egg in her hand. That conniving Dr. Schneider, he knew it wouldn’t work. She shouldn’t have come here. She should have gone straight home. Her lip quivered.

The egg was now dead weight as far as she was concerned, so she made ready to huck it back behind the trees, toward the plains.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Rhys said.

Laura rolled her eyes, trying not to look the way she felt inside, all crumbly. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Last person who threw their egg away got eaten by gizzlets. Feisty little things. They’re what Schneider calls his Tyrkish delights.”

He was probably lying. She had to get away from him before it got dark and before it started raining hard.

Laura put the egg back in her pocket, left Rhys a cold glare, and made for those houses on the hills. Somebody there had to be able to help her get home. Maybe even in time for dinner.

Earth Below

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A long time ago, my dear child, there was a young boy named Xander. He loved all sorts of things—running, exploring, cooking, building contraptions—but more than anything else he loved his older sister, Marny.

Often, when Xander couldn’t sleep, he would steal into Marny’s room and together they would watch the stars through her window.

“I wish I could go up there,” she’d tell him. “Past the moon, past the belt, past the whole solar system. I wish the stars were waiting for me.”

Marny would show him books about rockets and physics, and she would spend entire afternoons and weekends drawing trajectories and coming up with ideas for how to make propellant

without getting herself blown up.

“If they let me go up there,” she’d say, “it wouldn’t be long before you were way, way older than me.” Xander would ask her to tell him about the twin paradox again, because he knew that’s what she wanted him to ask.

“One twin stays on Earth. The other goes out into space on a ship at a really fast speed. When they come back, are they the same age?”

“Yeah,” Xander would say, knowing the right answer.

“No! Time dilation. The one on Earth is older —maybe even already dead. Going out to the stars means saying goodbye to everyone you know.”

That didn’t sound like such a great idea to Xander, but he put on a smile and pretended it was amazing.

While they orbited the massive oak in the backyard on its tall tire swings, she would tell him about all the new exoplanets astronomers had found lately. “If I ever find one,” she said, “I’ll name it Xander, after you.”

Down at the pond one spring afternoon, he

was flicking stones into the water when he caught sight of her running wide-eyed toward him.

“Faster than light!” Her cheeks were red. “They did it!” Xander got goosebumps.

Later that summer, their parents sent Marny to Florida for a two-week high school space camp. Xander missed her terribly. He hoped she missed him too.

She came back from camp gushing. She’d met dozens of astronauts and had had scads of conversations about wormholes and light sails and space elevators. She didn’t say anything about missing Xander.

What she talked about most of all was the newly discovered Cavalier system, just eleven light years away. “There are five planets, all close to Earth-size. All in the Goldilocks zone, too, and at least three look like they have breathable atmosphere. Incredible.”

“But the best of all”—she started jumping around the room every time she got to this part—“is the colony ship. They’re going to send humans on an honest-to-goodness colony ship to explore Cavalier and set up an outpost. Not

just professional astronauts, either—they want normal people, too. I have a chance!”

Xander had no doubt that she’d do it, and that was when he realized she’d be leaving him. And not just for two weeks either. He wished space would just go away and leave his family alone and not try to steal his sister away from him.

Marny didn’t pay much attention to Xander over the next few months. She was always filling out paperwork or studying or exercising or chatting with astronauts and other applicants online. Whenever she did talk to Xander, it was always to say something like, “There’s no way they’ll choose me. I don’t have any special skills. I’m not near the top of the charts. I’m too young. It’s hopeless.” But she didn’t give up, sweet child. She didn’t give up.

Late in the summer, Xander was digging a big hole in the backyard when he heard a happy holler from inside the house. Marny ran out to him wearing a huge smile and waving a large white envelope. “I got in!”

Xander tried to be excited, for her sake, but that afternoon Marny wandered into his room

and found him curled up on the bed, shaking with sobs. “I’ll miss you too,” she said, wiping away his tears, then her own. “More than you’ll ever know.”

The next month after that was a blur. Marny was always gone at medical exams or seminars or training. In the moments when she was home, she’d tell Xander all about their itinerary, the fast Holdaway engines, the artificial gravity, everything. Her eyes were brighter than he’d ever seen them before. He pretended to care, but inside he just wanted her to stop talking about it. He built several treehouses and started learning how to make flutes. He dug more holes. He hated space. He hated change.

One day in the early fall, things changed again.

Xander came inside looking for a bandaid after he fell from a treehouse and scraped up his knee. He found Marny slumped against the living room sofa, sobbing, clutching her phone. The doctor had just called with results from the last medical exam. Marny looked fine on the outside, but inside she had suddenly become so sick that it

was a miracle she wasn't already gone.

His parents took her to the hospital, where new doctors did more tests and confirmed the bleak prognosis. They had a hospice bed moved into the living room for her, and as they carried her to it, Xander watched the already dimming light in Marny's eyes darken into a haunted look that punctured Xander and left him with nightmares.

He'd wanted her to stay home, but not like this.

In a room at 72° that somehow still felt colder than the vacuum of space, Marny lay in the hospice bed. All day, every day, she lay there, not moving, not speaking, just staring at the ceiling with an occasional tear or two sliding down her cheek. Xander sat next to her and tried to cheer her up by reading magazine articles about neutron stars and dark matter, but she only cried harder and begged him to stop.

The colony ship left for Cavalier, and Marny stayed in that bed. While Xander and the rest of the world watched passenger vids and counted down the days till landing, Marny refused to

listen to any ship news. Instead, she buried herself in old books about ancient history, weakly regaling Xander with tales from Herodotus and Thucydides. He pretended to care.

The afternoon the ship landed on Cavalier, Xander ran into the living room and was on the cusp of telling Marny when she turned to him with a heavy, tired gaze. “My universe is dimming now,” she said.

He frowned. “I know, but—”

“No,” she said. “This is it. Right now.” She reached out to Xander and held his hand. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wish I’d spent more time with you.”

Realization pushed him onto the bed. He hugged her and together they wept. Slowly, her jagged sobs began to fade, and her muscles went limp, and then, so quietly Xander almost didn’t notice, Marny’s star went dark.

“Bon voyage,” he whispered to her as he gently lay her body back down on the bed. A pain like a black hole opened up right in the middle of his heart. He sat next to her, staring at the carpet, until their parents came home from the store.

A few days later, at the burial, Xander watched the earth swallow up Marny's coffin and he made a vow that someday he would leave Earth behind, that he would go to space. For Marny.

If it hadn't been for Marny, your great grandfather Xander would never have led the Cavalene rescue mission, Cavalier would have been lost, Xander would never have met your great grandmother Sue, and we sure as the stars wouldn't be sitting here right now.

And that, dear child, is why we honor Marny each year. On this day—her birthday—we look up toward Earth cradled in the sky and down at the world around us and we thank our God for Marny Russell.

When the Aliens Finally Came

FIRST PUBLISHED MAY 2014

STORY 1

When the aliens finally came, just a week before the rogue planet—the one we didn’t see coming till two weeks before that, when it was too late to do much of anything except arrange the deck chairs and say a few prayers—when they came, we thought maybe they could save us. Just maybe. But we were wrong. They came, not to save us, but to be saved. And the thing slithering through space after them—well, let’s just say we were grateful the planet got us before it did.

STORY 2

When the aliens finally came, our xenolinguists were stumped. The aliens didn’t talk, at least on

any frequency that we could see. They didn't chitter. They didn't make signs with their heads or the appendages we arbitrarily called hands. They didn't seem to grok the equations the mathematicians showed them. They didn't reverse the magnetic fields around themselves like the swimmers do down in the outer core. (Most people still think of the swimmers as aliens, by the way, and I suppose they are in one sense, but you could make a strong argument that they're more native to the planet than we are.) Then we figured it out. It took us longer, you see, because they lived on the outside of their ship, and our suits didn't pick up smells from the vacuum, and long story short, Milner—the one from New Canada—somehow noticed the constantly shifting scents, and one thing led to another. Heaven knows what the aliens thought we'd been saying to them all that time. Anyway, it wasn't long before they were hugging the astronauts like long-lost relatives, and next thing we knew they'd taken a chunk of Brooklyn—a big one, too—right up into their ship. Haven't seen them since.

STORY 3

When the aliens finally came, they arrived not in large ships, but in a hail of small cocoons that fell scattershot across the East Coast. At sunrise the next morning they wriggled out, small like a grain of rice, and burrowed down, gnawing at the dirt and rock, growing bigger and bigger. We didn't notice any of this, mind you, until buildings and subways started collapsing and sink-holes began showing up everywhere. Terrorists, we thought. By the time we realized what had happened, it was too late.

STORY 4

When the aliens finally came, sir, no, I wasn't at my post. I was... hiding. Yes, sir, I understand. No, not at all, sir. They appeared to be shapeshifters, sir. Knots of tentacles, shiny, all over the place. Real tall one second, short and stumpy the next. Sometimes they were in two or three or ten places at the same time. Weirdest thing I ever saw, sir. No, she's doing fine, sir, thank you for asking. They say what I saw was,

uh, fluctuating cross-sections of higher-dimensional beings. No, sir, I don't think I understand it, and if I may say so, I don't think I want to. Thank you, sir.

STORY 5

When the aliens finally came, ribbons of light all a-dancing in the sky, they put the northern lights to shame. Some fools on the news said something so beautiful couldn't be evil. Me and my folks, we bundled up quick and got out of the city, went down south into the jungles, to get as far away from other people as we could get. Apparently we weren't the only ones with that idea. We've been holed up here for a month now, listening to the explosions up north. Lost my oldest to a snake bite. Lost my second oldest to a spider bite. My wife's been down with the trembles for five days. I don't know what those aliens can do, but it's looking like it can't be much worse than this jungle.

A Past Not Yet Forgotten

FIRST PUBLISHED APRIL 2022

Your name is Retzi (short for Yaretzi) Gurschman. I'm you. But you're not going to remember me.

Don't know how much time I have, so I'm writing down everything you should know about yourself. It won't be complete—a whole life in just a few pages! utterly impossible—but I'll do the best I can. Apologies for anything I forget to include.

I'm a wreck. From my perspective, this is death hurtling toward me like a crazed bear. (I watch too many nature shows. You should maybe lighten up on those. Fewer nightmares would be nice.)

You're pregnant. I found out a couple months ago, so we're due in the fall. It's our first. Not much morning sickness so far. The father is...

let's just let that cretin be forgotten, and good riddance. I know, I know, our baby's going to want to know who their daddy is. Make something up. Let them think that he's noble and kind and good. (And now I'm worrying that he's going to show up on your doorstep and you're not going to know who he is. Maybe forgetting isn't the best idea. I'll think about it more.)

You're Quushti (mostly), a citizen of Quushtar. That's the country where you live. (I don't know if you're going to forget literally everything or just the specific details of my life, so I don't know what to include. Elista—coworker, best friend of ten years, though now she doesn't remember me at all which is unbearably tragic—Elista still remembers the countries and flags and basic history, but Gorgor—another coworker, not so good friends, Gorgor isn't really his name, it's your nickname for him—is a completely blank page as of last week. This is what I fear most right now. That and getting bombed.)

Your identification papers are at the bottom of the top drawer in the study. That's the room with two windows just past the stairs, with the

black leather chair. (I don't know if you should move your IDs after you read this, in case someone finds this paper. Because this is pretty much the keys to your life.)

Your mother, Dweri, passed away six years ago when—well, it doesn't matter. Better to just forget that part. Mom's maiden name was Lreivasa. Nobody pronounced it right. More about her family later.

Your father, Toritemno Gurschman, is alive and well. He lives in Vo, the town you grew up in, though your childhood home burned down in the big fire so he's now in a cheap rickety apartment in the center of town. I don't know why—he can afford better. He's weird. His address is in your brown notebook, on top of the desk in your bedroom. (That's the room with the bed.) (Sorry, couldn't resist.) Dad's from Quushtar but was adopted by the Gurschmans (we don't know anything about his biologicals) and spent most of his childhood in Mirza.

(If I were you, by the way, I'd downplay the Mirzan connection. There's a war going on with them. It's not looking good. That's why I've been

in the kovamnes for work, which I suspect has something to do with why we're all losing our memories.)

You're an only child. You had a decently good childhood, I guess. Lonely here and there. Not many friends. Not close ones, anyway. Especially not after the rift. (Your parents belonged to a political party that ended up becoming wildly unpopular all of a sudden. It doesn't really matter now but it mattered a lot back then.)

You live in Slaver City. (Pronounced "slavver." Name of the man who founded it and promptly got eaten by subterranean monsters. That second part probably isn't true but it's part of the lore.) (But maybe it's true.)

This is your apartment. 373 Coalt Street, #63. Don't take the elevator, it's not safe. I'm not kidding. I've written up a checklist on the desk for what bills to pay and when and how. Next paycheck should be here in a week, but lately it's been unreliable so who really knows. (Wartime woes.) There's still enough food, which is an unexpected relief. Don't know how long that'll continue.

I'm know I'm forgetting things that will no

doubt end up being vital. I'm sorry for that. This situation is...less than ideal. Bleak. Horrific (to me anyway) (talking about losing my mind, not so much about the war though that too is horrific). If I sound cool and collected here, it's an utter miracle because I have to break every few minutes for long sob sessions curled up on the floor.

You're my other baby, in a way. Newborn into a world you don't know. I imagine it'll be scary. Know that I've been praying for you each day. (Well, mostly praying that you never end up existing. Selfish, I know.)

I almost forgot to tell you about work! That's how we got into this mess... So, I went to university and studied ancient languages. I don't know if you'll remember any of that. Elista's knowledge is patchy and Gorgor's is of course a gaping hole. Good news: for what they're currently having you do, it doesn't matter as much. You really just need functioning eyes and hands and legs.

Straight out of school I got snatched up by the gov to work in their translation division. Did that for a while, then moved to Preservation,

where I've been ever since. In peacetime we prepared artifacts for museums, and it was lovely. I miss it so much.

Then the war started. Mirza wants its ancestral land back. That's mostly Ghasht province, next door to the east. (Quushti people moved in a thousand years ago after the Mirzans left because of a famine.) (I'm going to feel a little silly if you still remember all this.) The fighting is all in Ghasht, so far. How long that lasts, who knows. There's been a lot of back and forth, gaining territory here, losing it there.

Why it matters: about a year ago, when it looked like war was on the horizon, the gov found out what Mirza is actually after. Or why they care about getting their land back, anyway. You know how there are all the ancient cities everywhere? Built over or grown over, linked by underground tunnels, all that. You'll probably remember this. But I guess I'm doing this just in case, so: while most of the old cities are in Mirza, a handful are here in Quushtar. So the gov mobilized Preservation to go to each city, find all the kovamnes (most are mapped but some aren't),

copy down all the spells on the walls in each kovam, and then scrub down the walls so Mirza can't get the spells.

It's awful—these sites are over a thousand years old!—but it's better than the Mirzans getting their hands on the spells. In theory, anyway.

So I've been spending my days walking around Ord Ilt (one of those ancient cities, abandoned to nature, and what a majestic, glorious wonder it is!) with my coworkers, looking for kovamnes, frantically copying and scrubbing. Not what I signed up for, but it must be done.

(Just yesterday, by the way, my home sashta issued a declaration condemning what they call “the kovamnetic desecration.” With enough opposition, maybe the gov will change its mind.)

I just realized you're probably wondering what a kovam is. It's just a room. A special room locked in such a way that you have to glove your hand with a pig's bladder to use the handle to get it open (because magic). A room with spells written all over the walls, by the ancients, presumably as a kind of library. Very creepy. You can feel the weirdness in the air, thick and musty. Every time

I expect something awful to happen. I guess I was right.

The kovamnes are usually high-ceilinged, so we're up on precarious ladders a lot. Because of the baby, though, Gorgor has recently been handling the higher spells for me. I appreciate that, even if I can't give him the romantic attention he so clearly craves. Craved. I suppose that's a silver lining.

So: we're all losing our memories. It's utterly terrifying, and I mean that intensifying adverb with everything I have. Our best guess right now is that there's some kind of remnant magic in the kovamnes, maybe in the dust or something on the walls. An ancient curse, basically. Let me tell you, nothing like knowing you're walking into an ancient curse each day to boost morale.

And yet we still have to do it, for the war effort.

I've thought about deserting—switching jobs to something safer. But the baby's coming and I don't want him born into homelessness. (I now think of the baby as a he, but I don't actually know yet.) If I keep this job, I'll have months of maternity leave and things will be okay. But if I keep this job, I'm also going to be a blank slate.

(And it may be too late already.)

I wish you could tell me what to do.

Okay, I'm back after a couple hours of night-time sobbing. No shame in that, right? I should be sleeping, but I can't. Is there anything else I need to tell you?

Oh, yes, family. I promised that, didn't I. There's something else niggling at my brain, though, and to be honest I don't know how much Mother's side matters. If you really want to know, go find cousin Derret—he knows everything about the Lreivasas and can fill you in.

Address is in the book.

It's a day later now. I don't think you actually care when I'm writing this, but for the record: it's 8:29 pm and I've just gotten back from dinner at the Rietanska. Figure if it's one of my last meals, I may as well splurge. (I apologize for the small hole I've left in your bank account as a result.) I'm sitting at my desk in the study, lamp on and curtains closed even though it's not quite dark yet.

Enough of the meta. That niggling I mentioned? I remembered it this morning and followed up on it. We've been thinking that the

memory loss is some kind of ancient curse, or some bizarre biochemical response to something that's in the kovamnes. (I don't think I mentioned the biochemical idea, did I. Sorry about that.)

Well, this morning in my shower I had an epiphany: not all men are good. (This may have come about from stewing on thoughts about The Ex. And we'll let him stay forgotten. Sorry if that causes you grief later on.)

Not all men are good, and this holds true even within Preservation and the gov. It's so obvious in hindsight: someone is using one of the spells to wipe our memories. (It's embarrassing how obvious this is.)

It has to be someone with access to the spells. I checked the archives and yes, yes, there is a spell for wiping away memories. It was attached upside down to another spell sheet—somebody's been covering their tracks—but it was there.

I took it.

100% illegal, yes. I know I shouldn't have, but I detached it and slid it right into my purse. (Technically I wasn't supposed to have any bags

in the room, for this very reason.)

So...there we are. Hopefully this stops whoever it is from wiping any more memories. Oh wait. I forgot, there's a backup copy somewhere. I don't know where.

I guess this is my diary now. I may have written about The Grand Theft with more cool and calm detachment (see what I did there?), but I'm still shaking and sweating and flushed, and I had to lie down for an hour straight after I got home (before dinner). I am not made for a life of subterfuge and espionage.

Finding out who is behind this is key. Because it could be anyone who has access to the archives, I need to find someone with authority who doesn't have access, so that I know it's not them. Unless they had an accomplice. Oh dear. It could be anyone.

Think, Retzi, think. Whoever it is, they want us to forget what we've done and seen. Somebody who doesn't want the spells in our hands, or doesn't want the spells taken. It could be a Mirzan sympathizer embedded in our midst. Could also just be someone from a sashta (or anywhere,

really) who thinks we're desecrating the kovamnes. That's a broad pool.

One thing I'm worrying about: if whoever it is just wants us silenced, taking the memory spell probably won't stop them. With it gone, maybe they'll escalate.

To murder.

Am I being overly dramatic? I have to remind myself that it still could just be something in the dust, or just an ancient curse. ("Just"!) It doesn't have to be someone bent on exterminating us, even if that's effectively what they're doing.

Well. If it's someone with the spell, and if they don't have access to the backup copy, then we shouldn't see any more people losing their memories. In the meantime, I'm going to try to find out where the backups are.

It's a few days later. No luck. Tight security on the backups, which is good. And no new memory losses. I don't know what else I can do except wait.

Another week has gone by. Bortomisli lost his memory yesterday while he was scrubbing down a kovam in Ord Ilt (we're almost done, but there are a lot of kovamnes there, more than we

expected). He was with Tregger, who was copying. All of a sudden he turned to her in a panic and asked where they were and what was going on. She thought he was joking at first. But no, he's forgotten everything.

Everybody's spooked. Everybody thinks everyone else is a Mirzan agent. We all assume we're next. It is without a doubt the worst thing I've ever experienced. (Sorry, Mom.) (I'm probably being overly dramatic.)

I need to get out of here.

It's later. I tried. Didn't work out. I don't want to talk about it. So I keep scrubbing and copying, hoping for salvation.

Hello, dear unofficial ad hoc neglected diary. Six months have gone by and whew! A lot of things have changed.

The war is over. People say we won, but Mirza ended up with Ghasht province so I don't know that I'd agree.

We finished copying and scrubbing the kovamnes a week before the armistice. If only it had come sooner. They probably would have had us finish anyway, though. The Quushti gov is

nothing if not thorough.

I got married.

After Bortomisli, nobody else has lost their memory. Including me!

Someone in the archive ran an inventory and found that the memory loss spell was, well, lost. The gov did not like that one bit. Thorough, invasive searches of homes and everything else, for everyone in Preservation as near as I can tell. Guess what they found. So...I lost my job. Which is not great (thus the marriage, which I'd also rather not talk about here), but it's better than jail or execution.

Guess what they also found. Our boss, Narit, had copies of all the spells stashed in his apartment. And Mirzan gold. He was supposedly about to leave the country. Never would have suspected him. (Until I started suspecting literally everyone, I mean.)

Most importantly: only a little longer till baby comes. She's a girl. Sorry for thinking you were a boy, dear.

So, as is probably clear, I did not in fact lose my memory. And you, future Retzi, do not exist.

And hopefully never will. I feel heartless and morbid saying that, but I'd rather keep my life, all things considered.

Unlocked

FIRST PUBLISHED AUGUST 2022

Picture a family bustling about the house as they get ready to leave for a trip. It's a journey shorter than you might expect, one they've taken dozens of times, but each time they treat it as if it were once in a lifetime.

That's because of Rob, the father. He's the tall, slightly hunched, gangly man with jet black hair in a clean, crisp ponytail. He's pacing the house calling out the kids' names, begging them to go to the bathroom before they leave. Even though there are bathrooms in their house on the other side. Even though the journey is only twenty paces on this side and a couple miles on the other.

Willow, the mother, has baby Annie perched

on her hip while she gets more wipes for the diaper bag and washes the lunch off Annie's hands and face and tries to do Huffy's hair, even though nobody on the other side cares what anyone else's hair looks like. Huffy is four and grimly determined to cling to whatever independence she has, including the right to not have her hair done. Willow is about to lose the battle. She has done her own hair, though—a ponytail matching her husband's, though hers is bright red.

That leaves Zane, six. He's limping because of an errant baseball (yes, he shouldn't have run onto the field, so really he was the errant one). He's lost a couple teeth and will show the gaps to you multiple times a day. And, most importantly for now, Zane is the one who found the door in the first place. Found where it went, that is.

See, the Portwell family—Rob and Willow and offspring—lives in Lionsbeard, one of the less popular outer-ring suburbs skirting Dremmers. The Portwells purchased the home six years ago and moved in a week before Zane was born.

In the southwest corner of the ample backyard

stands a shed: an ugly, squat, concrete thing built two owners ago for inexplicable prepper reasons. It's around eight by ten feet, it's seven feet tall, and the ever since Annie was born, this part of the yard has been off the Portwells' radar, so the weed stalks surrounding it have sprouted waist high.

The steel door to the shed was locked when they saw the house and was still locked when they moved in. A sturdy, solid lock, too. Rob and Willow both tried to jimmy it open but gave up before long. They hired two separate locksmiths to come do a professional job of it. Both failed.

The Portwells talked more than once about razing the shed, since it was useless locked—and more than a little creepy, at least in Rob's mind, since someone could be living in there, coming and going in the night. He'd read stories. But the cost to tear it down—this wasn't a huge surprise to them—was more than they could afford.

So there the shed stood for their first five years in the house.

Then one day Zane was roaming the yard, as he was wont to do. He jiggled the knob on that door, as he always did. This time, though, it turned.

To the Portwells' everlasting relief, Willow was on the porch that day nursing Annie. She saw the door open. She saw the sky on the other side. She screamed at Zane and, for once, he listened. Rob heard the scream and sprinted out of the house, worried he was too late.

It didn't take long before that initial panic washed away and revealed curiosity underneath. A portal to another place. Incredible. Was it some kind of illusion? A trap? A blessing? Who made it? Which part of the country did it open to?

What they saw when they looked through the doorway was this: a clearing skirted by clumped groves of trees, with a broad dirt path perhaps twenty paces away and a rough saddlehorse fence along it. Western America, clearly. They couldn't see anything to clue them in more specifically than that, though. (Neither Rob nor Willow knew much about plants or trees or dirt.)

Sounds and smells came through the door, too. The cawing of birds. The scent of some plant Willow thought she'd smelled as a child when visiting the New Mexico desert.

When Rob realized he could feel wind from

the other side, he closed the door, worried that the temperature or pressure differential between here and there would stir up problematic weather patterns of some kind.

Willow opened it right up again and tossed a handful of small rocks through. They landed and rolled as expected, bending plants that were in the way, sending up little clouds of dust. She closed the door and the Portwells had a talk.

The talk lasted several days, running through and around their mundane routines. Willow wanted to go through the door. Rob felt that was insane. Willow felt that it was insane not to.

You can guess who won.

As Rob sprays sunscreen on the kids' arms and legs, he's thinking back on their first trip. Tentative, nervous, fearful. That was him. Willow, in contrast, was pure excitement, like nothing he'd seen in her before. Buzzing, glowing. Alive for the first time in her life.

And so the Portwells opened the shed door one spring Saturday morning. They propped open the door with a large cinder block (Rob's idea). They'd left a notarized will on the kitchen

counter (also Rob's idea). They lugged heavy backpacks with enough food and water for three days (Willow's idea, actually). They were ready.

The other side was surprisingly, almost disappointingly normal at first.

Rob and Willow took photos of the door from the other side, so they'd be able to find it again. It was embedded in the side of a rangy hill of dirt and rock, spotted with low shrubs. It looked to their eyes like the entrance to an old mine. They wondered—and not for the first time—who made this door and why.

The dirt path followed the base of the hills down a bit and then curved behind the hill out of their view. In the other direction it led out across a flat plain with nothing in sight for a mile or two.

The Portwells decided to go around the hill, to have a better idea what their options were. They went that way, and found that the path went down an incline into a large, flat valley. A couple miles down, there was what looked like a village, with concentric rings of thatched-roof huts. On the other side of the valley, just where it started to

turn into hills again, there was another village.

Rob commented on how it would be nice if they could get their minivan through the door. Willow joked about buying a couple motorcycles.

They returned home shortly after that because the kids were hot and bored.

The next time, though—which happened to be the next day because Willow’s curiosity was alive and kicking—the Portwells took bicycles with them. They still had to go slow because of Zane and Huffy, but it was better than walking. (At least they told themselves that.)

Rob worried that the village might not take to visitors and that soon they would find themselves slow-roasted over a hungry fire or pincushioned with poisoned darts. Luckily for the Portwells, this time reality proved more kind than killer. The villagers welcomed them with open arms.

There was a language barrier at first, but subsequent visits helped with that. Gradually (it took longer than you might think), they learned that this was not western America after all. Nor Earth, as far as they could tell.

The main question between Rob and Willow

at the time was what to do about their discovery. Should they tell? If so, who? The Portwells felt sure that if they told anyone, their home would no doubt be seized, one way or another. Whether they'd be paid to relocate was unclear and not something they wanted to gamble on. So they told no one, and they hoped that people didn't wander into their backyard while they were gone.

The villagers on the other side insisted on building a house for them, so they could stay with them longer. Willow of all people resisted, but in the end their kindness proved indomitable and the house was built. It looked primitive on the outside but turned out to be surprisingly modern inside, if modern in a different direction.

The house was so comfortable and the village so pleasant that the Portwells ended up spending more and more time there. They'd been visiting on and off for over a year when Rob first suggested that they stay for good. Go off the grid back on Earth. Close the door and lock it from this side.

Willow was shocked. She'd been having similar thoughts but had convinced herself that Rob would never go for it.

They made plans. They arranged for Willow's nephew and his wife and baby to housesit for them, and left a will deeding the house and land and car to them. Rob took all his PTO in one chunk, to delay the inevitable day when his employer wondered why he hadn't come in and wasn't responding.

The Portwells knew that at some point things would fall apart back in this world. They'd leave a sad cloud of dread and mystery behind them. Their friends and family would probably think they'd died or been kidnapped. They wanted to tell them, but worried that then everyone would follow them and the other side would soon be colonized and ruined by greedy expansionists.

So today they're ready to go and they know they're leaving a mess behind them. They feel a little bad about it, but they believe the consequences on the other side will eventually fade and things will go back to normal.

They've talked about whether they should try to destroy the door once they're through. Locking it instead seems more prudent, in case there's an emergency and they need to go back. They don't

expect that to actually happen, though.

Willow herds Zane and Huffy and Annie toward the shed. Rob locks the house (they've given a key to the nephew) and follows them.

The Portwells aren't bringing much with them on this last voyage. They've already made several earlier trips with all the belongings they want to have with them in their New World. Keepsakes, Willow's flock of diaries, the eight annual photo books Rob has painstakingly put together, the kids' favorite blankets, clothes, first aid kits, silverware, books, Willow's art supplies, Rob's guitar from his dad, to name just part of it. It's all in their house on the other side, safely secured and waiting for them.

The moment comes. They turn around and say goodbye to their house, their yard, their friends, their family, their world. Rob has last-second doubts but the momentum is unstoppable now. They are pioneers, he reminds himself. Exploration is rarely comfortable. The new world is better in so many ways, too.

Willow reaches the door first. She turns the knob.

Tries to turn it, rather.
The door is locked.

■

Willow tries several more times, with increasing frustration and panic. The knob won't turn. Rob takes over, hoping maybe it's just stuck. He secretly feels a small amount of relief.

"All our stuff," Willow says. "It took it all."

Rob's relief vanishes. "Anthropomorphizing the door isn't going to help," he says. He regrets it immediately. "We'll get it all back." Mere words. He knows, and Willow knows, somewhere deep inside, that the door will never again open for them. Their time has come and gone.

"Was any of it real? Are we crazy people?" Willow says with jagged pain in her voice. She's lying on her back on the weeds, letting Annie crawl around because nothing matters anymore. The dream is shattered. Zane is staring at the doorknob. Huffy is plucking blades of grass and trying to whistle with them.

Rob is still trying to jimmy the lock. He's looking around for something to stick into the

gap between jamb and door. His credit cards are in his wallet, which is in a small safe tucked away under some loose floorboards in the attic, covered by a rug. The house is locked, awaiting the nephew and his family, otherwise Rob would run in and grab a butter knife. Their copy of the key is on the kitchen table, safe and secure.

A frustrated hour slips by. Willow and the kids are sitting under one of the trees along the fence. Rob is still at it, stubborn and unrelenting.

“It’s over, honey,” Willow says. “We need to get inside.”

That is the problem indeed. Their nephew isn’t coming till tomorrow. Their phones are inside in that safe. And they would rather not break a window when they now have to sleep in the house tonight. (If they can get in.)



They’re in. They went to their neighbor’s and called the police over. Things got messy for a bit with proving their identity, but after a painful hour they got through it and the police left and now they’re sprawled out in the living room

recovering from it all.

“It doesn’t feel like our house anymore,” Willow says. Her red hair is wild now from all her agitated fiddling with it. She’s on the green velvet sofa.

Rob nods from his rocking chair. “Probably because it’s empty.”

He hears himself and winces. It’s not technically empty at all—all the furniture is still here—but when it comes to the things they care about, it’s a bleak wilderness. (Their children are not things. If they didn’t have Zane and Huffy and Annie, who knows what they would do at this point.)

“We should check the door every day.” Willow has a determined look on her face. “Maybe even a few times a day. If it’s ever going to open again, that’s how we’ll know. Don’t want to miss our window.”

Rob nods again. Everything feels hazy and floating, like a dream. Is he actually even here in this room? Hard to tell. “But realistically”—a word now without much meaning to him—“we need to accept that we probably are not going

to see those things again.” He wills himself not to think about them. It’s only when he’s remembering the guitar (and by extension his deceased dad) or the other items that he feels sad, so he just needs to forget. He knows they can move on from this. “It’s just stuff.”

Willow stays silent for a long time. The kids play. Most of the toys are still here, though these are the ones the kids didn’t care for as much.

Willow goes upstairs and locks herself in the bathroom. Even from down here Rob can hear her sobbing.



Every day at 8, noon, 4, and 8 they check the door. If it ever opens, they have their trusty cinder block ready to keep it open long enough for them to get through.

Days and weeks go by. Willow is struggling. She put her heart into those diaries, and with them gone it feels like she’s lost part of her body. Seeing her pain, Rob wishes he’d followed through on his year-old to-do list item to scan the diaries with his phone. Then at least the

words wouldn't be lost, even if the paper was.

Their relationship with the nephew and his wife has deteriorated, thanks to the Portwells' reneging on the deal. They did offer to let the nephew stay with them anyway, but he and his wife were apparently only interested in having the house to themselves. He doesn't return Willow's texts anymore.

Rob and Willow have remained on the periphery of their social circles because if that door opens, they're gone for good.

Or at least that was the original plan, held to because it was the plan. But Rob's having even more second thoughts. If the door were reliable and he was the one locking it, sure. But being locked against their will (if they changed their minds) in some other world is less and less appealing. He's started worrying that maybe the door will open.



One month after move day, Willow is in the backyard on her watering rounds. The weeds—which she's not watering—have been tamed for

now by a mow. Her phone bleats its 8:00 alarm, and so she tries the knob to the shed.

She doesn't expect anything to happen. She's done this multiple times a day for weeks now with nothing happening. Just one stubborn knob that refuses to turn.

The Portwells have spent hours theorizing why the door is locked (they grew too old, the other side is not intended for permanent residence, someone on the other side locked it, the door can only be open certain parts of the year or for a certain amount of time, it's an old lock that broke in an inconvenient way, etc.). Nothing has come from this.

Willow's hand clutches the knob, hesitant as always. She swallows.

She twists the knob.

The lock gives.

Willow Portwell pulls open the door, her heart already beginning to soar at the imminent restoration of her journals, at the resurrected hope within her heart.

Then she sees what's behind the door. Not the other world. Not even the mundane innards of a

dingy shed.

No, to her confusion she gets an odd wave of vertigo and sees a frothy maw of lava and brimstone, burbling at a frenetic pace. It feels like the devil himself is breathing hot on her face, and the sulphuric smell is unbelievably rank.

She's in shock. This is not the other world, clearly.

There's something white and glistening amid the fire. It's getting bigger. Closer. Two tails whipping about in a frenzy. A jaw with far too many needlelike teeth.

Willow slams the door, her heart jackhammering, expecting any moment a thud and the sound of that awful, hideous thing scrabbling at the door. She holds the knob tight with all her strength and puts her full weight against the door, hoping it'll be enough.

Annie's in her crib, and Zane and Huffy are thankfully downstairs playing with toys. Rob is in the office. If Willow yells for him, she'll wake Annie. So she waits, quiet on the outside, screaming on the inside.

There is no thud. No scrabbling. Nothing. It is

almost worse this way, not knowing if the creature is there on the other side of the door biding its time, about to open it as soon as Willow's grip begins to loosen.

For a long time Willow waits there. Her hands and back ache, but she won't let herself be the reason a demon creature from hell—for surely that's what that place is, she thinks—erupts into her world. The havoc it could cause...

She hears Annie crying, awake from her nap. She hopes Rob can hear her.

It's in these long moments that Willow decides to let it all go. Not the knob—not quite yet—but the cherished belongings, the hope of a future on the other side, the house and neighborhood. They have to sell. They can't live here anymore, not when there's a door with this on the other side.

Eventually, at dusk, Rob comes out holding Annie on his hip, confusion all over his face. Willow explains. They switch places and Willow sinks to the grass with Annie on her lap.

After a minute or two Rob carefully tries to open the door. The knob doesn't turn. It's locked, the same it's been every day for weeks.

■

Several weeks later, Rob rents a moving truck. He and Willow pack. It's mostly furniture.

Then the Portwell family is off to a different part of the country. Their new house has no shed, no door, no exotic surprises. But it also has no unthinkable horrors, which more than makes up for it in Willow's mind. (Rob was weirded out by the whole experience and would prefer to have nothing remotely interesting happen to him ever again.)

So they live their lives. Once in a while they think back on the door, but most of the time they leave it locked in the past. Better that way.

It all goes well until a couple years down the road, when the doorbell rings. Rob answers it. There's nobody there, but lying on the porch is something that makes his stomach twirl and his throat seize up a little: there on the mat, staring at him like something ordinary when it's anything but, is one of Willow's long lost diaries.

Mother Tongue

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You've heard of Siltasampra, yes? Jewel of the southeast, ancient city built upon a city upon yet another a city and so on until you're back thousands of years and you're looking at the first great city of the region: Kha. Not much is left of Kha, with the remnants of its glory largely built over or looted in the centuries since, but Siltasampra has proven itself a worthy descendant. In fact, recently I saw a petition (with many signatures) to give Siltasampra the name of Kha Urdit, which in the Khan tongue means "Kha Reborn."

But I digress. Among the millions and millions of people living and marrying and reproducing and dying in the city (whatever its name) was a young man named Dagh Ribandra.

He lived on the sixth floor of a rickety apartment on Olorth Road. That apartment, let me tell you, should have been torn down the day it was built. Shoddy craftsmanship, dangerous to all, and smelly to boot. It hasn't collapsed yet, but the day it does is lurching toward us.

Where was I? Dagh. Yes, Dagh. He'd been living there with his family, but his father died and his mother remarried and moved south to live with her new husband and his fourteen children (must have been true love), and his sister married and moved to the north side with her husband, and Dagh was left alone.

He did not like being alone.

Not because of fear, mind you—he was a man of twenty-five by this point, strong and healthy. Handsome, too. But strength and health and looks don't a companion make.

Oh, don't pity him too much. He spent most of his life surrounded by people. Some don't even have that. And he wasn't alone much longer.

So Dagh lived in his dreary concrete apartment with a scattering of decoration and adornment but nowhere near enough to lift the place from

drab to delightful. Almost purely utilitarian.

Most of the time—and perhaps this is why he didn't put much thought into his apartment—he was out walking the streets of Siltasampra, picking trash up off the ground, sticking it in large plastic bags, and hauling it to Ciocizzi & Rue for pitifully small amounts of cash.

He knew that he was not living the life, but he didn't know what to do to climb out of what he had. It took all his money just to pay rent and buy food. He hadn't been able to go to school. Most of the people he knew lived at the same level. This was life, and while he'd try to make the best of it, no grand change was coming.

(Which was true. He never did catapult himself out of poverty. This isn't a rags to riches story.)

We've set the stage. Now we get to introduce Maria Bonita Sanchez, his neighbor two flights up, and his friend for going on fifteen years. They were next-door neighbors as children, in another apartment on the riverside. (The river reeked. They were glad to move.)

Maria Bonita lived up on the twelfth floor

with her four-year-old terror, José. Pure energy, all the time. He was an exhausting child to care for, and it showed. Maria Bonita's marriage to José's father had collapsed the year before for a handful of reasons, none of which she'd told to Dagh, but he had some ideas.

Now the breadwinner, Maria Bonita made wicker baskets and brooms and sold them on the streets, walking to and fro with her toddler in tow. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd tried to sell José at some point.

(I really should add here that José wasn't quite as bad as I'm making him sound. Turns out exaggeration is kind of fun. He grew out of it and turned into a remarkable human.)

Now that you have a picture in your head for these people (Maria Bonita, by the way, was short and skinny with long black hair), we can get to the interesting part. The pivot, the crux, the hinge.



It was during the hot season. (That's a joke. It's always hot in Siltasampra.)

Dagh was out picking up garbage, stopping

regularly to rest in the shade and drink from the half-full water bottle in his canvas bag. (Dagh would have said it was half-empty.) He'd wandered into a neighborhood he hadn't been in before (yes, there were still a few), in the Olepre quarter.

This one had massive, creepy statues of crocodiles standing guard at the entrance, with too many limbs tangled in some kind of pattern. Dagh was surprised. There aren't any crocodiles in the waters next to Siltasampra, for one thing, but more importantly, the statues were in the old Khan style, with inlaid gold down recessed lines along their sides. (The gold had all been scraped off already. Not a rags to riches story, remember?) Also, he'd never heard of any crocodile gods in the Khan religions.

Dagh walked through the first narrow lane of this neighborhood and came to the end. It opened up onto a concrete courtyard jammed right up against the forest. Half a dozen monkeys were hanging out on a large pile of trash, and all of them turned to stare at him as he approached. A glance told Dagh that the pile had several shiny

things that were probably worth the hassle of shooing the monkeys away. Still, it was dangerous, and he didn't like it.

He picked up a clod of dirt and hurled it at the white monkey squatting at the top of the pile. He missed. The monkey chattered back—clearly an insult—and hurled a roll of toilet paper at him. He dodged it easily. He'd had practice.

Monkeys being monkeys, the rest immediately joined in the fun. Good thing Dagh had had all that practice. Rotten food, diapers, cardboard boxes, it all came flying toward him. He avoided it all.

Then (you knew a then was coming, didn't you) a small orange-and-black monkey with a wicked grin reached deep inside the pile and pulled out something shiny and dark. Dagh smiled to himself. Maybe he could get the monkeys to throw the valuables to him and he wouldn't even need to shoo them off.

The shiny, dark thing hit Dagh in the shin. It was also hard. It hurt. He knelt to look at it, holding his arm up to protect his head.

A spider. It was the size of his fist and looked

like it had been hammered out of bronze. Filigreed decorations lay along its thick legs, inlaid with what looked like silver. Into its underbelly were two large, lustrous yellow gems set in the shape of an hourglass. As Dagh turned the spider over, the gems caught the light and took his breath away. This was worth...a lot more than Dagh had ever gotten from trash-gathering before.

A soggy something hit his arm. Well, then. No sense in staying any longer. He dropped the spider into his bag and retreated back to the lane, and thankfully no monkeys followed.

He made his way out of the neighborhood, his thoughts racing. He made a mental note to avoid monkeys in the future, then amended the note to add that monkeys could be particularly lucrative so maybe he should seek them out, actually.

How much could he get for the spider, he wondered. Thousands, maybe. The thing was, though, Ciocizzi & Rue was almost certainly going to bilk him out of most of its value. That's how they operated. He could talk to Ciocizzi himself and try to wrangle a fair price out of him,

but the more Dagh imagined going down that path, the more certain he was that at the end of it he'd be sprawled in an alley with a shattered neck or a chopped-up throat.

So he had to take it somewhere else. Somewhere respectable enough to be honest, or at least closer to honest.

He had no idea. He'd never dealt with anything valuable. (Except in his daydreams, of which there were many.)

In the absence of a good plan, Dagh decided to stick with the safest option: take it home and let his future self figure it out.



On his way home, Dagh stopped by Choramn's shop to pick up Maria Bonita's knife, as she'd asked him to do that morning since she'd been having nerve pain in her left leg and didn't feel like walking more than she had to.

Choramn had taken his sweet time on the custom-made knife—well over a month, which pulled Maria Bonita's patience like brittle taffy. But the knife was finally done, and Dagh had it in his bag.

He trudged up the endless stairs to her apartment. Someday, he swore, he would move to a house with only one floor. (He did, years later. It was lovely. He did miss being perched up in the sky like a bird, though, peering down on the bug-size humans far below.)

His apartment was far enough from the stairs that as he passed his floor, he decided to go straight to Maria Bonita's first.

She opened the splintering door half a second after he knocked, like she'd known he was coming. (She didn't. She thought she heard someone cry out for help in the hallway.) He made a mental note to talk to the super about fixing the splintering.

“Come in, come in,” Maria Bonita said. “You got it?”

He followed her into the sparse front room, sat down cross-legged on the floor across from her, exulted in the cool air conditioning, and with more than a little unnecessary showmanship produced the knife. Flair! Drama!

She laughed and rolled her eyes as he handed it over to her. “Thing of beauty. Never thought

I'd see it."

"Choramn does good work," Dagh said.
"Even if he's a snail sometimes. Where's José?"

"Nap." She gestured to the back room. "Also something I never thought I'd see again."

Dagh shrugged. "It's a day of miracles. In fact, guess what I found over in Olepre." He reached into his bag and pulled out the bronze spider, showcasing it on his palm for her to see.

"Ooh," Maria Bonita said. "Pretty."
"I have to figure out what to do with it. Where to get a good price. Know of anywhere?"

"Not Ciocio?" Her nickname for the company.
"They'll rip me off."

José appeared in the doorway at the back of the room, rubbing his eyes. "Heya, Uncle Dagh."

Because of what happened later, we need to be clear here: Dagh and Maria Bonita weren't blood relations, just close friends. At least as far as I know. Given where their families came from, it wouldn't even make sense. So don't get icked out later.

"Hey, kid."

Maria Bonita stretched out her arms for José

to come hug her. “Kiddo, how was your nap? Want to see something?” She turned to Dagh. “Can I show him? I’ll give it back.”

“Sure,” Dagh said.

She plucked it off his palm and walked over to José, who had not come over for the hug because he was on the young side of four and even more stubborn than his mama. (He also didn’t like people touching him in general—and not just as a kid.)

Maria Bonita knelt down in front of her son with the spider in her cupped hands. “Kharaka silmit esh,” she said. (That’s Dagh’s best recollection of it, anyway, and it could be wrong. At the time he thought she was making pretend spider sounds to humor the boy.)

To their surprise, José began to cry. Not just a whimper, either. Torrential sobs. End-of-the-world-level crying. Maria Bonita set the spider on the ground and tried to whisper consolations to him but it didn’t work. She’d become agitated herself, too, with a terrified look on her face.

“It’s not real. It’s just a sculpture,” Dagh said weakly. “It won’t hurt you. You’d think he’s never

seen a spider before.” Which he knew wasn’t true, and which seemed like maybe the wrong thing to say as soon as he’d said it.

He picked up the spider and put it back in his bag. “I can leave,” he said. He began backing up toward the door.

Maria Bonita held up her hand for him to wait. Her trembling hand. “Ezvir sa troit khazavmirk.”

Dagh almost responded with a pretend spider language of his own, but Maria Bonita clearly was not joking. He’d never seen her so serious. Or so overcome with deep horror. “I...”

“Ezvir,” she said, more slowly, a crisp, jagged edge to each syllable, like each was slicing up her throat on the way out. “Sa troit. Khazavmirk.” With a wail she sank to the concrete floor, lying face down, awkwardly clutching her still-crying toddler with one arm.

Dagh had no idea what was happening. All he knew was that something was wrong—very, very wrong. A vast, dark, queasy something began to unfurl in his stomach. The spider was just a gaudy bauble, but somehow José’s fear had...it didn’t

make any sense. Yet it was fundamentally Dagh's fault, that much was sure.

(You can't really blame him for the confusion. This wasn't something any of them had ever had any experience with before.)

What he wanted right now was to quietly slip away. The spider had caused this; so if he took the spider away, maybe it would fix everything.

Yet.

"I don't know what's going on," he whispered. Realizing she probably couldn't hear him under her wails, he said, louder, "What can I do to help?"

Maria Bonita managed to prop herself up on her elbows. She stared at him with her mouth slightly open, confusion shot through her eyes. She shook her head slightly and shrugged.

"I'm sorry," Dagh said. There was a stain on the concrete beneath his feet. It was from a party Maria Bonita had held a few years back, when their mysterious tall neighbor had spilled his bowl of curry and fled from the room in shame. "I shouldn't have showed you. I didn't know he'd be afraid of it."

“Ezvir sa,” she began again. She shook her head vigorously. “Ezvir. Ezvir. Ezvir.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Dagh asked. It was like something had gone wrong in her brain. Maybe a stroke? He hadn’t considered that—she wasn’t an old woman at all—but it was more than just pretend now. “Stop. You’ve got to talk normal, okay? I have no idea what you’re saying.”

Shaking her head slowly as if in a dream, Maria Bonita crawled over to the wall, grabbed a pen, and waved it at his bag of trash.

Dagh understood. He poked through the bag until he found some parchment paper. It was spotted with grease stains but would do.

She took it and furiously wrote down a line, like it was the most important thing she’d ever written in her life. It probably was.

When she finished, she jumped to her feet and stuck the paper too close to Dagh’s feet. He stepped back.

“I...can’t read this,” he said, shrugging. “It’s just lines and loops.”

Gritting her teeth, she gave him the pen and paper and motioned for him to write something.

I hope the joke is almost over, he wrote.

From over his shoulder Maria Bonita was biting her nails. He could tell from the hopeless look on her face that she couldn't read what he'd written. It was not a joke.

Dagh didn't know what was going on, but to his credit, he did see that Maria Bonita's world had just shattered. If she couldn't talk to anyone anymore—not in any meaningful way—she was now a solitary raft adrift in an empty sea.

Unending loneliness.

Though it wasn't quite that dire, he told himself. She could still communicate with gestures, as she'd just done. Perhaps she could draw pictures, too.

Besides, he thought, maybe this was temporary. Why couldn't she wake up the next morning speaking Silt again? Not all roads were one-way, after all.

(Kind of charming, isn't it. Such hope! Misplaced, of course. I think it's also safe to say that things would be very different for some of us if Dagh had been right on this.)

“Can you understand me?” he asked, because

he wasn't sure.

Maria Bonita shrugged violently, like a spasm. It made Dagh uncomfortable. But it was a discomfort he embraced, because this was his fault and (even if it hadn't been) Maria Bonita was his friend.

He didn't know what to do. He tried to motion that he was going to return to his apartment to put the cursed spider away. (This was where it clicked for him—that touching the spider had caused this.)

Maria Bonita—who had calmed down a bit—nodded and motioned for him to come back afterwards. He nodded. He would not abandon her now.

■

Veena felt several joints pop as she gripped her makeshift cane and stood up. Standing wasn't the right word for it, though. Leaning, maybe. Always leaning. Or slumping. Or lying prone.

She'd never expected to live this long. Siltasampra was not a forgiving city, and she had watched her parents and almost all her friends'

parents fall before their sixties—some to illness or infection, more to violence.

Yet here she was, still standing (leaning), a lumpy, wrinkly crone of seventy-two. Unbelievable.

Enough. One moment of indulgent self-reflection was all she could give herself. There were tasks to do.

Veena limped out of the shade and onto the street, under a wild sun. She should have woken up earlier, when it was a smidge cooler.

(Wondering what's happened to Dagh and Maria Bonita? We'll get back to them before long, don't worry.)

A long, burning eternity later, she made it to the market, with its sweet, blessed roof of tarp and the magnanimous shade it gave. She wandered the aisles, pointing out the vegetables and fruits she wanted, handing over her hard-earned coins, laying most of her purchases into the ratty bag she'd found on the street a couple months back.

She stopped by the orphanage on her way back home—why the sun had to be so infernally hot, she did not know—and, pulling out a few

mangoes for herself (she didn't eat much these days), gave the rest to the kind young woman in the office, for the children. Scrawny little things. The orphanage used to get more funding, but the new mayor (curse his name) had promised generosity but post-election ended up being stingier than a street dog.

She kicked a couple of said street dogs on her way home, when they tried to nip at her ankles. She gave one of the mangoes to a vagrant young man who'd been sitting shellshocked next to the park these past few days. She picked up her patched dress from the seamstress and paid over another few coins. (It was something she should have done herself to save money, but she hated sewing more than she hated the mayor.)

Errands done, Veena returned home, put away the mangoes, turned the stuttery fan on high, and settled down on her mat for a much-anticipated nap.



As promised, back we go to Dagh and poor Maria Bonita (and poor José, too, by extension).

The next few days were rough. A shadow of despair fell across Maria Bonita, strapping her down to the floor almost as effectively as real bands would have. Dagh carried over meals each day to her and José and tried to get her to eat, with middling success. Every morning they all woke up hoping that the damage had undone itself and that she'd be able to speak Silt again. Every morning they ran into ice cold disappointment.

When Dagh was younger there had been an old man in his neighborhood who had been hit in the head by falling bricks (supposedly an accident but everyone suspected foul play), and from then on the man's speech was garbled. The words were all real (unlike Maria Bonita's case), but they made no sense strung together. Dagh figured this might be what had happened to Maria Bonita. But even that didn't really make sense, since she hadn't hurt her head at all.

Her friend Rosa was able to come over to stay the nights with her. (Rosa, Rosa, why you turned out the way you did, we'll never know. This was her kind phase. About ten years later she picked up a nasty habit of sprinkling shattered glass into

the bins at the market. No one knows why.)

In the mornings still-nice-Rosa told stories of Maria Bonita's night terrors, where she'd shrieked awful gibberish for hours. Neighbors complained, of course, which made it even worse. Luckily for Maria Bonita, Dagh was able to persuade the kind landlord to give them some time to figure things out.

At the beginning of the weekend, Maria Bonita started to feel a little better, enough to stand. Dagh felt she needed some fresh air, and rightly so. He helped her to the front door, but just as they got it open, a neighbor walked by (one of the complainers, as it happened) and sneered some unkind words at her. Maria Bonita couldn't understand what was said, but the facial cues were hard to miss. She stumbled back to the floor and back to her depression. It took a solid week before Dagh was able to get her to try again.

But finally they did make it out the apartment and down the stairs and along the street. It was a hot afternoon and Dagh would have rather stayed in the shade, but if Maria Bonita was ready at last to walk down the street, so was he.

She held José's hand and stared at everything as if she'd never been here before. (Not being able to read the signs made it feel like a foreign city.)

They went down to the corner to Ping's ice cream cart and got crepe rolls with chocolate mango ice cream, then found some shade on the curb and sat down to eat.

The street was busier than normal. A chaotic river of cars and bicycles and motorcycles and skateboards overflowed all four lanes. There were seven or eight kids on bicycles on the other side of the street, circling round and chatting. Several businessmen marched down the sidewalk with their suit jackets hanging over their arms, wiping sweat off their foreheads. A withered crone limped along with a bag swung over her shoulder, stopping to rest under each tree on the walk. A group of four or five young mothers, Maria Bonita's age, carried their babies or pushed them along in strollers as they chatted.

Dagh and Maria Bonita ate in silence. José didn't know silence and chattered between and through each bite.

"That's a big, big car," he said. "So huge. It

costs 68 million chortas. Why is a grandpa driving it? Grandpas just want to sleep, sleep, sleep. Look, an elephant!"

Before Dagh or Maria Bonita realized what was happening (their sorrows had slowed them down), José had jumped up and began to run along the sidewalk toward the elephant on the other side of the street.

"Tak! Tak av!" Maria Bonita yelled after him. She jumped to her feet and began chasing him. Dagh followed, trying to push away memories of childhood friends who'd met their demise in the streets of Siltasampra in moments not too different from this. It was not a safe city.

José passed the old woman and was about to leap off the curb into the street when she dropped her bag and, in one surprisingly swift move, reached down and scooped the boy up. Startled, he went limp and tried to squirm out of her grip, but by that point Maria Bonita was there to take him (and hold on to him with a grip so tight Dagh worried it might leave a bruise).

"Zorav kimit," she whispered to the boy.
"Zorav kimit."

Dagh thanked the old woman, but she was staring at Maria Bonita like she'd seen a ghost.

(You probably picked up on it already, but that old crone with the bag? That was Veena.)



Veena's heart was juddering, both from the excitement and from the effort. She could already tell she'd overdone it, going off the sharp pain in her calves and lower back. She'd have to get some ice to salve them.

But that was all forgotten when she heard the boy's mother speak.

"I thought I'd lost you," the young woman said. "I thought I'd lost you."

Veena stared at her. She was so used to being unable to understand what everyone was saying, for so many years, that the shock of this—of comprehension!—made her legs go weak.

"You," she managed to get out. She had to stop and clear her throat. "What did you say?"

The young man who was with the girl now had quite the look of surprise on him. But it was nothing compared to the relief that flooded over

the young woman's face.

“I thought...I thought I'd lost...you can understand me?”

Weak legs notwithstanding, Veena jumped a little in the air (it hurt) and clapped her hands. “Sure can. Did you know, girl, you're the first person I've been able to talk to in twenty years? Lost my husband because of this curse. Kids don't visit me anymore, either. Always a stranger. But now here you come along out of nowhere! Where do you live? We're going to be friends, you know. We have to be. Have to stick together.”

She was talking too much, she knew, but all those words had been dammed up for so long that she just didn't care.

The young woman said, “I'm Maria Bonita. This is my son José. Thank you for saving him, I am so grateful. And this is my friend Dagh.”

“I'm Veena. I live that way.” She pointed. “Couple streets down. Doesn't matter. How'd you get the curse?”

Maria Bonita blinked. “A curse? No, something went wrong with my brain, maybe a stroke, but...” She stopped. “But then how can I

understand you?"

"You can understand me because we're speaking the same language, girl." Veena cackled with joy. She didn't want to scare off the girl but couldn't help it. "Witchtongue. The language of the coven. The bond that binds the undying sisterhood together. Or at least it would if anyone were still left. But here you are, you beautiful, lovely person."

She let out a big, glorious, satisfied sigh. After so many years she'd been convinced she'd never be able to talk to someone else, the witchtongue a cage of ice that kept her lonely. But now, at long last, it was melting away. Amazing.



At this point Maria Bonita was in a mild sort of shock. She felt sure the old woman was a crazy loon... but here they were, speaking and understanding each other. So the woman couldn't be completely insane.

Witches. Covens. Maria Bonita didn't know what to think. There'd been talk, yes, but always laced with uncertainty—were there witches at all,

were they here in Siltasampra or did they stay cloistered in the woods, was their intent as malicious as people said or were they harmless after all. She'd never heard about a different language for witches, though.

"Wait," she said, shaking, still wondering if maybe the woman was mistaken. "If you can't understand anyone else, how do you know it's this witchtongue thing?"

"Found a book." A vaguely guilty look crossed Veena's face. "I'll show it to you, don't worry. Now, whence your curse?"

Maria Bonita desperately wanted to see the book, if it was something she could still read. Maybe there was a fix, a way back.

She shelved that thought for now and turned to her curse, if curse it was. Really, when she thought about it, it had all started with the spider. (This was no doubt incredibly obvious to all of you. For her, not so much. She'd had no experience with anything like this, and the shock of it all had muddied her thinking more than she realized.)

"He"—she pointed at Dagh—"found a metal

sculpture of a spider. I touched it. But he touched it too..."

"Ah," Veena said. "Khan? Of course it was. Mine was too. So the coven was in Kha. I suspected as much but wasn't sure till now..." She shifted her weight and squinted in the bright sunlight. "My curse came when I picked up a shiny jade amulet. Never been the same since. But here we are, sisters bound by witchtongue. Come, let's go to my place in the shade and we can talk more."

Maria Bonita was torn. Someone who knew more about her condition, who she could talk with, was more than she had expected. Truly a blessing. But witches and curses? She'd hated those stories as a child and wanted nothing more than to stay as far away from it all as possible.

But that was no longer possible, was it.

So she stood up, wobbling a little, and held José's hand with an unbreakable grip. He was her anchor. She was so glad she had him. Dagh, too. He was a good man to help her like this.

Veena began walking toward the corner. Maria Bonita and José followed, and Dagh shrugged and went along because this was the

most interesting thing that had happened to him in a while.

The second worst mistake of Maria Bonita's life was now behind her. The worst was yet to come. (Poor José.) But that's a story for another time.

At the intersection, a horrible, dreadful thought occurred to Maria Bonita. "Am I a witch now?"

Veena chuckled, the sound crisp and crunchy and disturbing to Maria Bonita's ears. "Not yet," the old woman. "Not yet!"

Research Notebook 17

FIRST PUBLISHED JULY 2022

[Undated]

I'm resurrecting this research notebook in the hope that I can stick with it this time. It'll be useful.

My research question (or rather one of many, but this one has been top of mind for months): why is the magic so finicky? It's unreliable, sometimes working and sometimes very much not. We don't know why. (But perhaps will soon, if all goes well here!)

Hypothesis 1: Intonation matters more than we think. Get the tone or syllabic stress or some other vocalic quality just the little bit wrong and poof, no magic. [Note: To test this, we could run through a spell phrase dozens of times, changing

intonation each time. I don't feel confident that we could test every possible intonation—so many syllables, so hard to discretely separate different tones—but if this hypothesis holds, only one would work and the rest would fail.] [Note 2: Unless intonation matters but there's still a little bit of wiggle room. If that's the case, several intonations could work even if the intonation is what matters. That's good news—it's easier to cast spells than it could be—but will be harder to verify. One hopes the set of correct intonations would have some easily discernible common characteristic.]

Hypothesis 2: Magic only works on a grid and you must be standing precisely at a grid intersection for it to work. [Note: This is ridiculous. And provably false, since Abernathy cast multiple spells from the back of a galloping horse just last week.]

Interjection: To help come up with hypotheses, I want to move to higher ground for a moment and make a list of possible categories. Magic could work some of the time but not others because of:

1. The way the spell is cast
2. Properties of the caster at the time of the spell (physical pose, mental health, intentionality, focus/attention)
3. Where the caster is (maybe not a grid, but something else having to do with geography or topography—elevation, cloud cover, magnetic field strength)
4. When the caster is casting the spell (time of day, perhaps?)
5. Why the spell is cast (though this is really the same as intentionality and probably doesn't deserve to be split out)

Hypothesis 3: Magic only works when you hold yourself in a certain pose or poses. [Note: Seems unlikely. To test it, though, one could form a pose, cast a spell, change the pose ever so slightly, cast again, repeat.]

Hypothesis 4: Magic only works when you're casting a spell for a compatible reason. [Note: May be very difficult to test. Examining anecdotal evidence may help here. Oh, how I wish this field were more than five years old so we could have

some deep historical data to pull from!] [Note 2: I am of course grateful beyond words to be at the forefront of this new field. Pioneers!]

I don't know. This seems an impossible task.



[Undated]

No real progress. I took some of the hypotheses and tried running tests for each. Results are in the big beige notebook, but it doesn't matter because every test came out negative. No magic. Not a single event of interest happened, except me falling over several times while trying to balance on one foot.

I know this is how the process works and I need to not let myself get down about it and I furthermore need to be patient if I want to reap any harvest here, but still. It's difficult.

Fortitude, Issy Makrannan! You're a woman of intelligence and skill, and you're not going to let a monster of a problem defeat you. Tackle it one bit at a time. If anyone can solve this riddle, it's you.

That actually helped, a little.

So. I think what might be best at this point—and I've been avoiding it because half the professors here at Trimbridge have already done just this (not exaggerating)—is to catalog every successful spell casting that we're aware of so far. Every detail. It will of course be far from complete (people holding things back, misremembering, etc.), but maybe something will present itself nonetheless.

■

[Undated]

Oikostis was kind enough to let me copy her extensive table of spell castings, to get me started. I've since interviewed everyone in it (except for Jocelyn Humb, who passed away last month) (of old age, nothing foul or magical) to confirm what was there and extract whatever additional detail I could. I've also checked with the other professors; two of them let me see their records, giving me another six incidents Oikostis didn't have. I feel this is sufficiently thorough, even if

it's still not historically complete.

Tactics for approaching this mountain of information: read through everything and make a list of commonalities. I wish I also had a table of failures so I could compare the two. (I suppose there's nothing stopping me from making one. If nothing presents itself with this table, then I'll go ahead and do that.)

I've now read through half the table and the only commonalities are:

- The spell caster was human
- The spells were all cast during the day

Second point is quite curious. Has nobody been able to cast spells at night? I thought surely, but so far, nothing past sunset. [Note: might this explain the failure of all my earlier tests? I teach a full load of classes during the day so by necessity all my experimentation has been in the late evening.]

More hypotheses: Magic derives its power from the sun. [I need to find time during the day to test across sunny, cloudy, and rainy conditions.

Or get someone else to perform the tests while I'm teaching, but that's less ideal. Or I can just do this on the weekend. I don't work weekends as a rule (for my own sanity), but this might be worth the exception.]

What else could make magic work during the day and not at night? Maybe I'm thinking about it backwards. Maybe it's not a question of the daytime enabling it—maybe something about the nighttime blocks casting and breaks it. Darkness? [Note: as part of those daytime tests, try some indoors in dark, enclosed closets. Cloud cover might not be dark enough to affect it.]

Another unnumbered hypothesis (I need to be more consistent about these): Magic works based on the number of people around. [Note: Too few people (such as at night), no critical mass, no magic. But at night people are around, they're just asleep. Maybe it's the number of people who are awake.][Never mind. I just reviewed The Table and there are several cases where the caster was by themselves in a fairly remote location.]

[Undated]

I ran a series of tests throughout the day (minus two hours at brunch with Uncle Geir and Aunt Polippirain). Inside and out. Under the shade, under the sun. Dark closets, windowed rooms. The gamut. Not one was successful. The magic does not want to cooperate.

■

[Undated]

What I wrote last time has been worming around in my brain and I realized something which I've just now confirmed by going through The Table: as near as I can tell, the magic is only ever in one place at a time.

!

(Extra emphasis seems noteworthy here. This has the scent of a breakthrough.)

Magic only being in one place at a time leads me to what now seems an inexorable conclusion (but cart and horse): the magic didn't cooperate during my tests because the magic wasn't there

with me. Because it was somewhere else. Because it's a thing that can move around and can only be in one place at a time.

I find myself immediately thinking of it as a creature, a being, a wraith, but there's no evidence yet of intelligence or sentience or anything like that. It could be just a floating tumbleweed, granting magical powers wherever it tumbles.

But. What if it's intelligent?

Again, cart and horse. I first need to test and prove this initial hypothesis. How to do that—beyond collecting more accurate timestamped data for the table (though people are not going to be checking a clock while in the middle of casting a spell, so the data is always going to be woefully incomplete)—is beyond me.



[Undated]

Trying to think of other tacks. If it's a creature of some intelligence—a level somewhere between an animal's and a person's...or beyond (!)—then it can presumably be communicated with in

some way.

Come now, Issy. If it's a being that spends its time floating around the country providing magic to humans, can it really be that intelligent? More likely it's the tumbleweed equivalent. But benefactors do exist in the human world. The magic could also be an accidental byproduct of its actual business in the unseen realms, whatever that business is.

What we do know: it is invisible to us. Inaudible, too. No smell, no taste, no feel. Our only interaction with it (that we know of) is when casting spells.

So...perhaps spell casting is the way to communicate. If the magic is aware of the contents of the spell—if I cast a message onto a wall or written in a book, or maybe even spoken aloud—that could work. But there's no reason to expect that this magical creature would speak my language (or any other human tongue).

Folly. This is all madness.

[Undated]

I spent the morning wandering around town muttering “here, magic, magic” under my breath like a lunatic.

Dear reader, the magic did not in fact scamper up to me and lick my face.

Utterly hopeless. I should research something else. This is never going to go anywhere.

■

[Undated]

I've been asking people to notify me whenever anyone does magic. Intrusive, and I doubt many will comply, but if I can get there while it's still in the room, maybe...

■

[Undated]

Twice today I was notified and duly ran like a madwoman to the site of the casting. In both cases the magic left no discernible effect or imprint on the material world, beyond the effects

of the casting I'd arrived too late for.

Carpentry. That's what I'm thinking of taking up, since clearly I'm a failure at this professorship thing. (If you're wondering how the teaching side of things is going: seven complaints this term alone. Too dry, too hard to follow along, not attractive enough (the perennial), too much homework, tests don't match what was taught in class, etc. etc.)

Do I have any experience with carpentry? No. But I think I'd like it. A physical object as the output of my sweat and tears, something beautiful (or not!) that I can heft and feel and smell. What a change of pace that would be. There's a community workspace downtown (I overheard one of the professors talking about it, can't remember who), and my understanding is I can just show up with some lumber. (If only it were that simple, right?)

But if I'm ever to do it, I must begin, and I'll never get experience unless I do begin, so off we go.

In the meantime: should I pursue this line of research any further? I don't know. It feels

dead-ended. During my last months here (which will inevitably turn into years, I know, because carpentry won't be something I can pick up in a few nights), I should look into a line of research that's more productive, so that I don't get penalized. Something safe. More history of magic, perhaps. I bet there's room to explore what was happening in Rotorno and Ghart in that first year. The dirigible fiasco was certainly not the only spell that was cast there.

I just had a thought. Ordinarily research here is held very close to the chest for obvious reasons, but since I'm already planning to switch both research lines and careers, maybe I should publish or distribute what I have, for the greater good. The Grand Table, my theories about magic only being in one place at a time and consequently the likelihood that it's a being of some kind, all of that.

The danger with this, though, is that my credibility will inevitably be destroyed. Issy's folly. Can I bear the mockery and the shame? I must. Besides, it will help spur me on to dedicate myself more fully to carpentry. Motivation.



[Undated]

The cat is out of the sack. I typed up everything relevant (the table etc.) and made copies and distributed every last one to all the esteemed professors of Trimbridge.

I feel lightheaded. Probably from running hither and yon. Should have carried myself at a more dignified pace, one befitting a croaky old man. (Okay, they're not all croaky and definitely not all old. I hope none of them sees this.)

Well then. Off to the library I go, to read up on Rotorno and Ghart and probably Meskel too. I don't read any of the languages, which will probably hamper this project now that I think about it. Nevertheless, onward. Hindrances will crumble in the face of persistence, that's what Dad always said. Yes, I am aware of the irony given my circumstances.



[Undated]

Things are happening.

First, Oikostis asked why on earth I published all my data and hypotheses. Gave away the store, she said. I explained the pivot (as I'm calling it these days). I don't think she really understands that decision, but she can read Ghart fluently and knows a little Meskel, and (most relevantly) she is in fact interested in working jointly on the history. This is good. This is very good.

Second, I ran into Hurri-gha-Zeyk in the hallway. He has always intimidated me (all those awards, the man is a book-writing factory, and he's so tall, and I'd never actually talked with him) but he turns out to be incredibly kind and real. Which was a relief. He thanked me profusely for my data and said that because of it, he's on the verge of something, and that he'll keep me in the loop. Exciting!

Third, I bought a block of wood.

[Undated]

Not half an hour ago Hurri-gha-Zeyk distributed a preprint monograph with his world-bending findings: he has been able to prove that the magic does come from an invisible creature, one that is only in one place at a time. He calls it an iss, in my honor, and loudly credits me on the title page.

!

I overheard a few other professors in the hall, grumbling that they had been just about to reach the same conclusion. I'll admit this is all supremely satisfying.

I haven't read through Hurri-gha-Zeyk's methodology section yet so I don't know the details of how he did it. Some kind of imaging device that casts rays, I believe, though I was skimming so I don't know for sure.

Anyway, I'll read it later, after I'm done sifting through the last four massive volumes of Loij's *Delineation of Gharthan History*. (At least I don't have to go through the other thirty-six.)



[Undated]

The history project is coming along nicely. Lots to do, and it all feels doable. A good change.

Hurri-gha-Zeyk wants to collaborate on further research into the iss. We could do amazing things together, he said. (In spite of how it sounds, I'm fairly certain he was not coming on to me.)

I don't know. It's promising—fame! glamorous research!—but I don't know that I have a taste for it anymore. This historical stuff feels much more me.

As does the carpentry. I've been to the shop (the workshop) almost every evening this week, and I'm so, so close to finishing my first rocking chair. An ambitious first project, I know, but it's something I've wanted at home and there are plenty of very kind and supportive people at the shop to help me.

I'm learning so much there—how to use at least a dozen different tools, which techniques have which advantages and disadvantages, the best types of wood for different types of furniture.

I've also helped some of the others in the shop a few times. Nothing big, just bracing or fetching tools, but it feels good. I look forward to working with these people.

Not only that, but the work itself is soothing in a way that research and teaching never were. It doesn't stress me out, even when things go wrong. (Okay, maybe just a little bit. But it's nothing like the stress I feel when teaching.)

And most importantly, the thought of woodworking being a large part of my future makes my heart jump up and down with glee.

I think that's a good sign.

Saying Goodbye

FIRST PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2022

Chessy catches the ridiculous eight-foot purple foam ball that her grandson Stefan has thrown down to her from his precarious perch up on the little red biplane that circles twenty feet above.

She steps back to throw the ball up to him and accidentally bumps into the line of cartoon goggle-eyed octopuses dancing behind her on the evergreen grass. This is Stefan's world. He's six, and boy does it show. Chessy wonders (and not for the first time) how much of this oversaturated, gaudy aesthetic is what Stefan actually likes, or if it's mostly what options the platform gave him or what he learned watching videos online. Goodness, she hopes he has better taste than this.

Clearing herself of the inconvenient octopuses, she gets ready to hurl the ball back up, but of course now she can't see Stefan. The biplane is still circling overhead (as it always is and presumably always will be), so he must have jumped off it. Or Erica may have pulled his patch off and he's back in the real world with his family, being picky about dinner or doing homework or glued to a tablet. Which is fine, except that Chessy has asked Erica multiple times (so many times) to always give them a minute to say goodbye first. Erica knows full well why this matters. Chessy starts rehearsing in her head the mild diatribe she's going to give her daughter the next time she sees her.

Ah, no diatribe needed. There Stefan is, hunting with Mariana through the long grass for Olly, who may very well win this round of hide and seek. Not gone after all. Good.

Chessy tosses the ball to the side and sits down on the grass to rest. She's tired. But then she's always tired now, lying there in her hospital bed back in the real world, getting older every day. Eighty-six years now. Or was it eighty-seven? She

stopped caring fifty-odd years ago when Mama died, and then stopped caring even more when Frank passed.

With the grandkids busy for a few minutes, she takes a break and opens her real eyes. Late afternoon, warm sun rays shining through the blinds. Blessedly alone, with no nurse in the room, though surely it won't take long before they return.

Her real arms ache from a jungle of IVs. She should just pull them out and skedaddle on out of here, she thinks. Then she remembers with a start that she's footless: they sliced off her left foot earlier in the week, for reasons that made sense at the time but have since blurred and smudged in her memory. She's not sure she's ever going to get used to being an amputee.

Incomplete. Though on second thought that's how she's felt all these years anyway, after Mama and Frank; this is just one more step in that direction. Which is a metaphor she is now determined to stop using.

Chessy wonders how much more of this she has to endure. Frank's been gone seven years this

coming March, and she doesn't know why she's still here. The extra time with her children and grandchildren is usually worth it, yes, but she wants to move on.

She closes her eyes and returns to Stefan's virtual reality world, where she's young again, out of pain, and completely footful. Walking! Running! Pleasant lies.

Stefan and Mariana and Olly are sitting in a circle in the grass playing some silly game that involves slapping hands and knees. The kind of game that she'd have to bow out of in the real world because of fragility.

"Grandma is back," Stefan says without looking up. "Olly said you died."

"That's not what I said," Olly insists. He punches Stefan lightly. Or maybe that's part of the game. She can't tell.

Chessy sits next to Olly and tousles his hair, which is in dire need of a cut. "It's okay. The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Not catching the reference (which seems to be more and more the story of her life as she gets older), they ignore that, broaden the circle, and

make room for her. The next half hour is full of random soft slaps and, later, frantic duck duck goose. Even with a younger VR body she feels like she can barely keep up with it all. But it is good.

“Mom says it’s time for dinner,” Mariana suddenly says. “We have to go. Bye, Grandma.” She and Stefan are in a later timezone on the east side of the country. Olly decides to leave too, even though he’s on the west coast and his family eats late anyway.

After a round of nourishing hugs and good-byes, all three kids vanish in a cloud of sparkles, leaving a whiff of peppermint behind them.

Standing there near the dancing octopuses, Chessy is hit by a not entirely unexpected wave of grief. Mama’s gone, and she didn’t ever get to say goodbye to her. In spite of Chessy’s attempt to think of something—anything—else, the memories begin once again to autoplay in her mind’s eye. Working on her French homework at uni, curled up in a library carrel. The phone call from Papa, ignored. The second call, also ignored. (It’s a library, after all.) The fateful text. Frantically cramming her textbook into her backpack and

accidentally dropping it on the floor with a very loud thud. Jogging outside and calling Papa back. Collapsing quietly on the grass, then having to shoo away a handful of concerned students. Later, seeing Mama's urn at the funeral and collapsing again, this time wracked by sobs.

Chessy still can't remember what her last words to Mama were, or when they were, or what they were about. She very much remembers that she had another missed call an hour or so before Papa's that she ignored for the same reason, a call that was from Mama, a call she wishes desperately that she had answered even if she'd gotten shushed.

She sees her imagined version of what happened to Mama in that self-driving car. The cement truck, the avoided pedestrian family. She wonders again how long Mama lay there before passing. Whether she was in much pain. Whether she thought about Chessy at all.

Hush, Chessy tells herself. That was all long ago. A different life. Mama might not have gotten to see Chessy's children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren with her own eyes, but

maybe she's been able to watch from where she is.
And even if her end was painful, surely by now
Mama is no longer hurting.

Chessy opens her eyes and wipes away the tear that's streaking down her face. A nurse is quietly closing the door on his way out. The pain in her left leg has gotten worse, like someone is scraping the marrow out of her bones. She briefly considers pressing the button for more medication, but it's cheaper and faster to just jump back into VR, where the patch overrides her real-body nerve input with its simulated sensations, so she closes her eyes again.

She's about to hop out to the overworld to pick a less childish world when she sees a flash of white moving in the distance, through the long grass. It looks like it might be a person. Which is a problem: there shouldn't be anyone still here—it's a sandbox world, locked down to just Stefan and those he invites. Erica said not three days ago that she and Dmitri had checked the user access list recently and it just had their family, the cousins, and Chessy.

She isn't about to let some creepy stranger

prey on her grandson. Metaphorical hackles raised, she pursues. Periodically she jumps ten feet into the air (ah, Stefan's world) to check her bearings.

The stranger is sitting, leaning back against a solitary spindly tree with marshmallows instead of leaves.

The stranger isn't a stranger after all. It's Mama.

She's wearing an angelic white robe made out of what looks like linen. Her hair has gone white. It looks good on her. She's watching Chessy with a warm expression on her face, like she's been looking forward to this reunion for a long time.

Chessy is not prepared for this. Confused, she bites her finger and tries to hold back tears. Mama shouldn't be here. It doesn't make sense. Did Stefan program her in as an NPC? How would a six year old even know how to do that? Even if he asked the AI to do it, where would it get reference material to train on? This is impossible.

Maybe it's a glitch and her brain is interpreting something else as Mama. That's entirely possible, she thinks, though she's also very much not

an expert in VR.

“Hello, Chessy,” Mama says.

That sure blows up the dam. Chessy stands there like a glitchy NPC herself, shaking, sobbing, unsure whether this is real and what real even means.

“Been a while, hasn’t it.” Mama pats the grass beside her for Chessy to join her.

She stays where she is. “How? Are you...? I don’t understand.”

“I believe I’m real, yes,” Mama says with a laugh that Chessy has missed so, so much. “I don’t know how, exactly. But here I am. I don’t know how long I can stay.”

Chessy decides that even if she’s just dreaming this, it feels like Mama and that’s good enough. She plops herself down next to her and they hug. Oh how she’s grateful for this VR body, because this kind of a twisting hug would be murder on her real back.

They talk about life after the accident, about Frank, about the kids and grandkids and great-grandkids. Even a little bit about Papa, though neither of them want to dwell there for long.

Decades to catch up on. The conversation meanders through Chessy's advanced age and imminent passage, too. It's the kind of long, fulfilling conversation she's been having with Mama in her head for years.

A glowing notification orb shows up at the edge of Chessy's field of view. It's the nurse telling her she needs to come back. She ignores it. Another orb appears, flashing more urgently this time. She begins to worry that the nurse might pull the patch off her neck.

"Mama," she says, holding her mother's hand — still familiar, even after all these years. "I have to go. If I don't, maybe we won't get to say goodbye, and I can't do that again."

Mama's eyes get crinkly. "There's no goodbye this time. You're coming with me."

Surprised, Chessy opens her eyes to commotion and pain. The hospital room is full of people and swishes back and forth like she's on a boat. The monitor is making startling, screeching noises. Something bad is happening. She closes her eyes again and returns to the tree in Stefan's peaceful world.

Mama is still there. She's standing, reaching her hand out to Chessy.

"Wait," Chessy says. If she goes now, she's leaving Erica and Stefan and Mariana and Olly and the others without saying goodbye, doing the same thing Mama did to her.

"There's no time."

"Maybe I can leave something for them," she says, trying to think. It's getting harder. The sloshiness of the real world is seeping into this one. There's supposed to be a way she can pull a new object into this world and write on it, but she's tapping her tongue all over her mouth and still can't find it. She kneels, grabs a stick, and tries to scrape some letters out of the dirt. But the ground is hard as diamond.

Mama touches her shoulder. "We have to go now." She extends her hand.

Shuddering with a panicked sadness, Chessy stands up. This is what she's wanted for years, ever since Frank's heart attack, but now that the moment is here, she finds herself wanting to stay —at least long enough to say goodbye. She doesn't want to leave the same wound behind.

But she's old, where Mama was not, and she's in a hospital where her children in all likelihood expect her to pass at any moment. Oh, how she wishes they could be gathered round her, the way one ought to die.

But Mama appears to be right. Stefan's world is quaking violently now, chunks of sky falling and causing volcanic eruptions when they hit the ground. It won't be long before one lands in their vicinity, and who knows what will happen then.

Chessy takes a deep, shaky breath. She whispers an apologetic goodbye to those she loves and hopes they feel it, somehow.

She takes Mama's hand and the world shifts.

Seventeen Steps

FIRST PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2011

“It’s seventeen steps down the old path,” she said.
“Not more or less, dear, or you’ll end up dead,
Then turn to the left and count all your toes,
Your fingers and eyeballs and even your nose.
Follow the footsteps that lead to the woods
Where darkness and danger and shadows like
 hoods

Cling to the trees like a leech on its prey—
You’d better walk fast or you won’t get away.

Take the first pathway that leads to the right,
Downward and inward, away from the light.
Terror may seize you but don’t you turn back—
There’s six hundred goblins out trailing your
 tracks.

Look for the voices which shimmer and sing,

And then you must ask them to give you their wings.

Take them and fly through the canyon below
Till you get to the edge where the wild things grow.

Deep in the tangle of brambles and thorns
You'll find a gold jacket, all tattered and torn.
Don't you dare touch it, whatever you do—
Though tempting it seems, it just won't get you through.

Three steps past the jacket you'll find a tight hole;

Stomp loud with your feet till you bring out the mole,

Then sing him a song of lost love long ago,
Till the leaves in the trees whisper tales of dark woe.

Now, quick, while he sleeps, climb down into the hole,

You're closer than ever to reaching your goal.
Take the top tunnel, then right left left right,
And soon now the sunlight will grow in your sight,

Stronger and brighter, just follow your eyes,
You'll come to the exit, but don't mind the size—
It's meant for a mole, not a creature so big,
So roll up your sleeves, dear, and dig, dig, dig, dig.

The wind will be cartwheeling out of the west,
So run like a shadow and don't stop to rest.
The end waits not more than fifteen feet away,
Just dodge past the flickering edge of the day.
And, yes, there it is! On the cusp of a tree
Hangs a silver-white apple, a king of the sea.
Pluck it, my dear child, and bring him to me."

Then my old grandmama closed her dark eyes,
Muttering words mixed with wheezes and sighs.
She slept long and hard for some ten thousand
nights,
Till the day that I brought her that apple, still
white.

River's Tale

FIRST PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2014

One hot afternoon, on a thick, muggy day,
A boy trotted off to the river to play.
His newspaper boat floated out, spun around,
And snagged on a stick stuck in front of a
mound.

The boy found a stone, hurled it straight at the
lump
Made of twigs and old leaves, dirt, and trash, like
a dump.

But then the mound roared, and it shook, and it
stood—
A monster, a fright cloaked in wet, slimy wood.

It towered above the lad, tall as a bear,
Its mouth dripping sewage. A shriek of despair

The boy cried in his fear, knowing well he would die.

In vain he threw rocks at the beast's darkened eye.
The demon reared back, seeking out its new foe,
And spotted its shivering prey down below.
It lunged for the lad, who leaped out to the side
And pulled himself up a tall tree, there to hide.

From there he could see in the river below
An eddy suffused with an eery red glow.
But then the beast rammed itself into the tree,
Dislodging the boy, who fell hard, hit his knee,
And tumbled down into the river's red maw.
He flailed and he kicked and he tried hard to claw
His way up to the surface, through current so fast,
But water was stronger. He sank at long last,
Deep down to the bottom, right into the glow,
Which caught him and pulled him through its
fiery flow.

The dark wrapped itself 'round the lad's light
blue eyes
And sounds melted down to a silence of cries.

The boy blinked. He lay on the banks of a stream,

Beneath the blushed rays of a swollen sun's
gleam.

It swallowed the sky with its vastness and girth,
Too large to be safe. The lad wasn't on Earth.

He wandered through ruins of white stone long
dead,

Through jungles and rainstorms; the ground was
his bed.

He helped a small town fight the worms of the
mist,

A battle which cost him his nose and left wrist.

The boy grew in stature, all thanks to the care
Of farmer and wife, kind old couple, white hair.

A year or two later a man from the core
Came seeking young sailors who wanted to soar
Up out into space, to the sister world green
That hung in the sky with unnatural sheen.

The boy joined the ship and they flew out to space
And landed on King's Eye, that unexplored place.

For years the lad ran with that spacesailing crew,
Exploring the new world. Then one day they flew
Around a strange object arrayed in bright bloom,

The Circle of Lights. It was half the crew's doom.
Escaping the frenzy with ship limp and torn,
They fled from the creatures of gas cloud reborn.

Much later, the boy, now a man tall and lean,
Was asked by the council to help save the queen.
He built a vast slingshot that hung up in space
And hurled asteroids toward the incoming chase,
Destroying that army before they came near,
And piercing their massive, unholy black sphere.

One day the man flew over jungle and lake
While tracking a treacherous, air-sliding snake.
He came 'round a bend at the foot of a hill
And saw it—the river—which haunted him still.
He landed his skiff on the banks of the stream,
Not far from the place of the hollow red gleam.
He tracked down the glow, steaming under the
skin
Of water. He thought of his parents, his kin,
Back home years ago, wond'ring how their son
died.

He took a deep breath and stepped off the side,
Down into the water, down into the glow,

Which caught him and pulled him through its
fiery flow.

The dark wrapped itself 'round the man's light
blue eyes

And sounds melted down to a silence of cries.

The man woke to find himself back on the bank,
The beast tow'ring o'er him, its stench sour and
rank.

He rolled out from under the monster, then drew
His gun from its holster. He shot. The beast flew
Back into the water, then stumbled and fell
Apart and exploded, wood, sewage, and gel.

The man returned home to the place of his
youth,

His parents now younger than him, and the truth
He told of his ventures amazed every child.
The river runs still, water dark, water wild.

The sight of you

FIRST PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2019

The sight of you begins to curl away,
off to a world and time I'll never know.
My sob-stained pleas can never make you stay,
and through it all I wish you wouldn't go.
Goodbye, my love. I hope it's not for long.
I pray the Lord will carry you back home.
Remember us, your stalwarts brave and strong,
no matter where or when your ship must roam.
We'll wait for you, though months or barren years
may die before we see your face once more.
We'll bide our time in patience, love. My tears
will dry. And now I softly close the door.
I go back to the dishes, drying plates
and dreaming of that blissful future date.

Bernadette

FIRST PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2019

One silvery winter afternoon,
the week after school got out for Christmas,
we knelt in the soft, perfect snow
frantically drowning Bernadette
in the cold skin of the lake.

Bernadette the witch.

For science, we told ourselves.
But Archimedes would not shout
were he watching.
Bernadette would shout if she could;
Bernadette's parents would do more than shout.
Or perhaps they would join us.

She wasn't floating much.

As I held on to Ignacio
to keep him from toppling over
and joining the experiment,
I thought about Bernadette.
A girl; my age, freckles,
ink black hair, green eyes,
a disposition given to consorting
with demons,
an inclination toward frolicking
with corpses,
an indenture irredeemably binding her
with unholy Lucifer himself.

As bubbles punctured the surface,
I recalled Bernadette's questions
in calculus and chemistry.
Questions that had been nesting
in my head too.

I thought about prom and
—with a blush—
about Bernadette's scandalous red dress.
The same dress, I now remembered,
that Valentina had worn.

Bernadette the girl.

The only difference, really, was
the witchery.

A frown crawled onto my face,
like the beetles Bernadette kept
in her sock drawer.

The frown tugged behind it
a feeling,
a notion, that
maybe, just maybe, this was
worse
than the witchcraft.

The feeling blew up like a balloon
and pulled my heart up
up
into the sky
where I could see more clearly.

Later,
after a frantic tussle,
a bruised thigh,
two black eyes,

and a mouth with fewer teeth in the way,
I had become a rescuer of witches—
a witch spluttering but alive
and recovering quickly enough
to curse the ordinary kind of cursing.

Outcast together,
we trudged home through the snow,
clearly in league with the
terrible and dreadful forces of darkness,
but mostly just hungry and tired.
Bernadette made fire in her hands
to keep us warm,
and I found that witches
—some witches, anyway—
make good friends.

Rusted Crowns

FIRST PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2020

You left me cold and lonely here, arrayed
'mid skeletons, their rusted crowns replete
with diadems and mud-caked gems, obeyed
no more, their mighty power stilled and stayed.

You thought I joined their ranks, in weakness slain.
You thought you stopped this boiling, crackling
rage.

You thought your spells would save you from the
pain.

I'm smiling now, no longer in your cage.

The hunt begins. I'll find you soon again,
and when I do, you'll envy each dead lord
whose bones and flesh are free at last, for then
Your soul will be entombed inside this sword.