



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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A SKIRT OF MANY COLORS

by Catherine Mintz

I wake with my heart beating hard. Frightened? No: excited. It is birthing day, when all girls become an official year older. My age group will don our first skirts. Tonight, we will be women.

Today is my last day as a child. I'm going to visit all my favorite places and run as fast and far as I can on the beach. They say I will miss wearing trousers. That's hard to believe. I have waited so long for my skirt.

Boys, men, they wear pants all their lives. The boys who no longer need their mothers will be leaving today, before the ceremony tonight. Five of the men came to guide them to the high pastures. That's where our goats and sheep spend the summer.

Yawning, I finger my summer blanket. It is blue: my stepmother is fond of bright colors and her sister, Helena, is a dyer. No one but her family knows the secret of how to make this blue, the color of a summer sea.

We grow the plants in secret, in the old house behind our own. The roof fell in long ago, and the inner walls have

tumbled down, but the encircling stonework, thick as my arm is long, still stands.

Long ago, it was a wealthy merchant's house. His ghost haunts the place, hunting for his vanished gold. My family has many stories about the ghost and the nightmares he brings. I was encouraged to tell them to the other children.

It is so quiet. No one else is awake yet. I was to sleep late, to be ready for the ceremony. Without even thinking, I am up, out of bed. I am too excited to lie still, let alone sleep. Tonight, I will be skirted.

Wrapping blue blanket about my hips, I turn, and turn, until I am so dizzy I fall back on my bed. I hug myself until my head stops spinning. My face hurts from smiling. I rub it with both hands until I am composed. Skirted! Tonight!

I stand and pull on my oldest pants, white, with patches at the knees and in the seat. In some places they're so worn I could force my fingers through the soft cloth. New ones are never so comfortable. It's the last time I will wear these.

All of my girl's clothes except the ones I have just put on have been washed and mended. They will be traded, mostly for new clothes for my younger half-sister, Esme. Except, except! Except for my girl's sash which I promised her. She'll wear it out with fingering before she is old enough for it.

She's been trying on my things: the red sash, the white top with drawn work, the black pants for best. It's birthing day for her, too, although Esme will only be a year older. Still, she will get to stay up all night—or as much of it as she can—and she will get the sash.

I tidy and fold and put my bedding away. The next time I sleep here I will be an adult. The thought is—a little—scary. I press my hands to the walls that have sheltered me ever since I remember. Change is coming.

First I must say goodbye. I go out, drawing the drape over my door as if I were still asleep. The other bedroom drapes are still closed, but main rooms are, as always, open. Only the keeping room, underground, has a solid door.

In the loom room, my skirt is stretched, almost finished, on my elder sister's loom. A long piece of deep blue is on my stepmother's loom. The third loom is mine. My younger sister is not yet ready for hers, but it is there, waiting. I turn away. No weaving today. Not for me!

Our house has its own smell: stone, earth, smoke from the fires, herbs drying, a lingering fragrance of last night's dinner, and the pot of pottage sitting in the warm ashes, ready for early risers. I lift the lid and dip a bowl.

The lentils are flavored with herbs, olive oil, and sea salt. I crouch, eating slowly, letting the heat stored in the

hearthstones warm my feet. It will take me most of the morning to go everywhere I want to go. I wash my dish and spoon and set them to dry: first, my chores.

After washing my face, I fill a pitcher for the kitchen under the inflow, and take it in. Bringing out the double-jug yoke, I see the sun rising over the peak of the Leukothea's mountain. The white goddess has lighted her kitchen fire: a fine line of smoke rises above the summit. The day will be fair.

The door into the old ruin is in what was my mother's bedroom, hidden behind the always-closed red drape for the dead. The way is around a corner and blocked by a wardrobe. You must be at the narrow gap before you know it is there.

Stepmother tends the precious plants, but I must make sure the old cistern is filled. Even a little rain and the water spills over: I keep it that full. The excess runs into a shallow pond, back under the eaves of the old house. Moss grows there, thick and green. The shadowed places beyond are too dark for anything to grow.

The pond was a bathing pool, long ago. You can still see pictures in stone, under the water and scum. It is one of my special places. I will go there today, but first I go into the court under the bay tree. We have a spring that keeps its cracked marble basin full in all but the driest weather.

Seeing the ancient cistern in my mind, I fill the high-shouldered jugs to brimming; bend my back and don the yoke. In the old courtyard the woad flowers smell honey-sweet. Already bees glitter in the air, coming and going from the hives stacked against the south wall.

Father will help harvest them when he comes down from the pastures. But from now until the autumn, the only males in the city will be the boys still at their mothers' skirts.

I like the summer city, the littlest girls playing in the fountains naked, bare-breasted mothers nursing on their doorsteps, the hum of women gossiping as they bargain for food, fuel, and work, the shrieks of laughter at jokes that I don't always understand.

Early summer is the flights of boys scaring birds—from the gardens, from the dripping fresh-dyed cloth, from the racks of fish drying in the sun. At night I know they whisper in anticipation to one another about the men's camp but I—I smile as I tip the jugs into the old cistern—I need never leave the city.

When the cistern slops over I add two more jugs for good measure. It is not a day to stint. I set the yoke down, carefully, ready to take up again. The old bathing pool ripples as I wade in. Beneath my feet, the small colored stones feel curious, rough yet smooth. They are very old.

I am going further in, to the ghosts. The first ghost is the ghost of the Boots. They are two holes in the wave of stone that half-fills a room of the old house. No telling who felt inside the pair of holes and found they were the shape of the inside of a boot.

If you slide your feet into them—first checking that nothing has gotten there first—you can ask the ghost for a wish. I stand, eyes closed, and wish for a long and happy lives for me and my family.

I wait, listening for a sound, some sign the ghost has heard and what its answer is. It's very quiet, just the faint whisper of the breeze in the woad. A small stone clatters down from the crumbling stonework. A bird starts to sing and stops.

No answer: maybe it was too big a wish. I slide my feet out of the boots, not very disappointed. Such things are the things of childhood and I am bidding them farewell.

Now for a bit of a climb, rough for bare feet. The waves of stone surge higher and higher until one breaks through the old vaulting. There's a splash of light: enough that plants can grow. Everywhere in the gloom are hollows that suggest human figures.

The Man has his arms and legs wide spread; the Women, curled on their sides, frame a mossy spot we call the Baby. Away from the light, there are the Boys, three pairs of empty

legs and feet, like the Boots. When I was young I believed they were the remains of real people.

My stepmother hates this place. When she came to our house, she planted thorn bushes to bar the opening. They are almost as hard to get through as masonry and far less obvious.

At first, in the driest weather, my elder sister and I carried water to the young plants: one trip, at dusk. Remembering, I touch the moss in the Baby. I shiver as if with cold, odd on such a fine day. I smell—death. Amid all this growing green, I smell death.

I stand, listening. There's nothing, nonetheless my hair bristles. Dry-mouthed, I swallow painfully. "I'm going," I whisper to the air. "Ghosts? I'm going—" I had not remembered my fear of this dark place filled with green false-people.

When I have a say in the family, I will say we should do more to bar this opening. Ghost stories and thorns might not be enough to keep us safe. What keeps out children may not keep out men.

We are known as the City of Women, for that is all that is here when the traders come. They watch us with dark, hard eyes when they come, checking how we guard ourselves.

There's little to take. Our wealth is in our hands and our herds. Men watch the herds in summer and make cheese.

Women card, spin, and weave in every season.

While the boys are here, we cut the pastures three times for winter hay, then let them grow until the men return with the herds—

Going too fast, I stumble forward, cut my knee. With the shock of that small, sharp pain, I am all right again. I am grown up and this is just a dark, smelly place that should be better defended. I am right to be worried by it.

In the sunshine, I take a deep breath of the honey-sweet air, and go into our house. As I put away the yoke, I can hear the steady clack of a loom. Vesna is up and weaving already. My skirt must be finished by this evening. One can depend on Vesna.

It is good luck for a mother to make her daughter's first skirt, but my stepmother is weaving a long bolt of cloth on commission. So she set up the weaving on Vesna's loom, sent the shuttle through for the first pass.

My elder sister, swift and sure, took over after that. Thump, thump. There's not much of the main color to finish. The skirt color of our street is brown-black, the darkest natural color of goat fleece: hardwearing, practical, dull.

I am glad my sister is weaving mine, for her specialty is patterns in colors. "Vesna," I say and go in, covering my eyes

with my hand, so I can't see the web of weaving. I squat by her loom and touch the balls of thread in her workbasket.

"Go away, Celina," she says. "It's bad luck to watch."

"It's bad luck to watch any of it," I say. "You didn't say anything yesterday."

"You knew it was going to be black," she says, practically. "This part should be a surprise. Take Esme and go down to Iris Street. Tell Naiyah you'll card fleece if she'll sing a story."

I smile: so my skirt will be special. Hand still veiling my eyes, I stand, turn around, and go out. There was red and blue in the basket, but Vesna is clever. She may use quite different colors or even do a new pattern for me.

Stepmother is still asleep. It will be a long night for her, too. Youngest sister is up, her doll swimming in a lake made of her blue blanket. I take her hand. "Come," I say, "We're to go to Naiyah's."

"I'm hungry."

"Naiyah will have something." The storyteller is not a good cook but she is paid in good things and is generous with them—especially those that will spoil. "Zenina baked yesterday." Naiyah and Zenina are old friends and both love sweet things.

Esme leaves everything where it is and comes. I decide not to make a fuss. Stepmother can tidy it up when she gets up.

“Come,” I say, “I’m hungry too. I wonder if there is fig bread—”
Mouths watering, we hurry down our street, hand in hand.

We take the shortcut thorough the dyers’ yards, under hanging skeins of fresh-dyed wool, dodging drips and puddles of henna orange and madder red, which is what everyone is dyeing today.

There’s plenty of noise, but few people in sight. Lots of old clothes are being turned celebration-bright in the vats, now that the last batch of new wool is out.

They’ll drain the vats this afternoon, scrub them out, ready for a new batch day after tomorrow. Only the darkest blue is kept, aged, renewed forever.

I tell Esme to stand still and splash one puddle high and wide. She follows me. I’m the big sister. So we both caper like kids in the colors. We have dyed feet and splattered pants when we arrive at Naiyah’s door. One look, and she tells us to stay outside.

“Wash,” she says.

“I don’t think it comes off,” Esme says uncertainly.

“Only where you don’t want it to,” Naiyah replies, eyeing her white paving. It’s marble, the slabs laid in a fish scale pattern, one of the few things I’ve ever seen that is not old or a copy of something old. I want one like in for our house, one day.

I laugh, embarrassed, feeling very foolish. Well. It is the last time. “Come to the street cistern, Esme.”

“Take the soap jar,” calls Naiyah, coming after us with it. “There’s new cheese, oranges, and—”

“Fig bread?” asks Esme.

Naiyah mock-frowns. “And almond cakes.”

I am generous with the soap. Being careful, I sluice the cobbles, driving bubbles and colored water into the drains. I can hear it chuckling away to the sea. Probably. Eventually.

No one really knows where all the drains go. Our stone city is old, worn comfortable, with empty houses children run in and out of, pretending they are theirs for a day, or a week, and then forget.

Parts of the city are only used when the men and the flocks are down for the winter. Some buildings hold hay. Some are fitted with cheese rooms. Some warehouse raw wool or cloth ready to sell. We are far fewer than we once were: most of our city is only inhabited by the sun, wind, snow, and rain.

Birds won’t roost in the oldest part, where rippled stone fills the streets as if it once were liquid, frozen instantly. The well-known rule is, “If you don’t see birds, don’t go there.”

Sometimes Naiyah tells stories about what does live there: ghosts born from the earth’s womb. The sulfurous stink of their

breath warns when they are near. Their breath can kill, does kill. It kills the small things first, but it can kill people.

I take Esme's small, wet hand. I smell—but the odor is gone. I remembered Naiyah's winter stories and the ground shivered. That was all it was. The ground shivered, as it sometimes does. "Come," I say to Esme, "let's go back."

In the courtyard I give my sister's message. Naiyah laughs her big, careless laugh. "Today is special. Today I give my stories for free. Sit down there. I'll get your breakfast."

I sit; Esme curls up on the red and orange rug that pads the bench. Naiyah brings a tray full of good things.

Some time later, when we can hold no more, Naiyah says, "What shall it be? Something happy for a happy day? No," she answers herself. "Today it shall be a tale about growing up."

I sigh, very softly. Esme sighs, dramatically. She has just picked up this trick of imitating people. "Esme!" I say.

Naiyah laughs again. "Well, I will keep my wisdom for another time."

"No," I say. "You are right." I hesitate. "But—something for Esme? First?"

Naiyah smiles and I smile back, conspiring. Esme, up since dawn and full of food, may go to sleep, soothed by the familiar chant of a story. She's over-excited and I want her celebration to be happy, too. A nap would be good for her.

“Once there was a linnet, that hid among the hemp—”

I hardly listen. I could tell “The Linnet and the Weaver” myself, although not so well as Naiyah. Looking down, I see that my dyed feet, smudged as Esme’s, seem dirty.

If I am to look adult tonight, then it’s a long time in the baths and plenty of silver sand for me this afternoon. Tomorrow, everything will be different. I shiver, and, as if sympathizing, the earth shivers, too. I smell ghost breath.

“She is awake,” says Naiyah softly. “She will hear our prayers.” A gray banner flies from the peak of the Leukothea’s mountain, smoke on the sea breeze.

“Tell her story,” I say, impulsively. Esme is already asleep. “The Leukothea’s.”

I am asking a great favor. The Leukothea’s story must be told from beginning to end, without pause. I want to hear it, very much. I pull a fold of rug over Esme. The wind is freshening. There are grains of salt sparkling in the air.

On one deep breath, Naiyah sings the first long line. “The Leukothea lived under the sea, among the sea people, those scaled, and finned, and clever with water and with wind.”

Eyes closed, I listen. When I am alone, beyond earshot of anyone, I have tried to sing like that, but I cannot sound like the water and the wind.

Naiyah is not sparing her voice. She is singing at full volume: a performance for me alone. I wonder when the neighbors, who must be curious, will slip into the white courtyard and settle on the benches, the paving.

There is a roar deeper than thunder, although the sky is clear. The ground heaves beneath us. The marble fish scales gap apart, close, gap again. Esme is awake, screaming, and I pull her to me. “Hush, “ I say automatically. “Hush.”

“Look!” Naiyah’s hair lashes about, binding her mouth, blinding her eyes, but her arm points. I rise, holding Esme, staring.

From the top of Leukothea Mountain, a dark fountain is rising higher and higher. It splits the sun, then blots it out. In the twilight darkness, hands to our ears, the three of us turn as one and start running.

But Esme’s short legs cannot carry her very far or very fast. I go back to help her and when I start out again Naiyah is gone. “Naiyah,” I call. “Naiyah!” I don’t expect a response. I know she has left us.

People brush past us as if we are invisible. Fine ash is falling, powdering everyone into ghosts. It is hard to breath. I wrap Esme’s mouth with her top, say, “Hold on to my waistband. Don’t let go.”

Then I do the same for myself. She is young enough to go bare-breasted. It is a day early or years too late for me, but I have to breathe. “Hold my hand,” I say. “Don’t let go.”

She grips me so hard my fingers hurt. Back we go through the dyers’ yard, where the fresh-dipped yarn is filthy gray and the once-bright puddles are grimy slime that makes it hard to walk fast.

Our mother’s courtyard is empty. Esme clings to me; my legs shake. “Mother!” I call. The earth shudders. I hear dishes fall in the kitchen.

“Mother!” wails Esme. Something big, one of the oil jars perhaps, shatters. From our doorway I can see fine dust falling from between our heavy roof beams. I am afraid to go in. I have to know.

I pick up Esme and go in, calling, “Vesna? Mother?” My skirt is not on the loom, only the cut ends of the warp. They are gone then. They expect us to be with Naiyah.

“Where’s Mother?” says Esme. Her wet cheeks are gray with ash.

“I don’t know,” I say, looking around. “Let’s go find her.”

“And Vesna,” says Esme as I put her down.

“Yes.” I find a market basket, a cloth. My hands shake so it is hard to do. I must hurry. Water. We will want water but there is only pottery—heavy and frail—to carry—

The ground heaves again and something explodes in the street. A woman cries out. “Mommy!” screams Esme and bolts out the door. I go after her, leaving the basket behind. Hope and fear give her a speed I could never have imagined.

They do not give her any idea where to run to, for she starts back to Naiyah’s. She is running through the gritty puddles in the dyers’ yard before I catch her. “Not this way,” I cry, and lift her up. Her legs pump a moment longer before she yields.

The fall of ash has gotten heavier. Every so often something larger bounces off the canopies that protect the shop fronts. There is no one in sight and no one has bothered to close up.

It is a city of ghosts.

I can smell them. “Esme—” I say.

“The stones hurt, Celina. Make them stop.”

I’m so overwrought I can’t feel them, but I hear them: rattling on the street, clattering off the roofs, pecking on the dyers’ baskets stacked, waiting for the finished yarn.

Esme is crying, steadily and without hope.

“Now,” I say in a silly voice. “Let’s pretend.” She looks at me as if I have gone mad. “Let’s put these baskets over our heads—” I do as I say, “—and be sea snails, creeping along the bottom.”

Esme's voice drops into let's pretend. "Can the Leukothea see us?"

"Yes," I said, guiding her up the street, listening to pebbles beat on wickerwork, "but she loves the murex best of all the sea creatures. It makes the purple dye for her—" Words flow out of me like water from a broken jug.

Basket over her head and shoulders, Esme, listening, runs at my side, hand knotted in mine. I keep to the middle of the streets: there are tiles cascading off the roofs. The wind stinks of ghosts. It is hard to breathe.

For some time we see no one and I wonder why. When I do see someone, my whole thought is to keep Esme walking and listening. It is hard to see through a basket; hers covers her more completely than mine. The two of them lie against a wall. Their skirts are brown-black, our color. That much I can see, despite the ash that whitens everything.

Then I know the patterns on their hems; I know what the roll of brown-black fabric spilled from a crushed basket is: my skirt, its unfinished edge sea-blue and sun yellow. Vesna's long, clever hand lies, useless, in the dust.

Don't think, I tell myself, listening to a silly voice pattering on about the Leukothea and the purple dye she loves best of all. There is no time to pause; no time to console a grieving child. "—made a purple dark as wine—"

“Are we going to die,” Esme says.

The horrid thread of story snaps. “I hope not,” I say. “We will go fast. If we get separated, go uphill, out of the city. Follow the goat trails. I’ll find you no matter how far you go.”

Now there are more bodies. I have gotten this far by not thinking about who the first two bodies were. They had waited for us. “Faster,” I say.

“Are we going to Mother?” Esme asks.

“No,” I say. “No, we must hurry.”

Another shower of stones rattles on our baskets. I can smell something burning. The ground heaves and we fall. Esme is silent. When I get to my knees and bend over her, I find her eyes rolled back in her head. I shake her. “Esme!”

I put my ear against her chest. I can’t hear her heart. I can’t hear anything. The entire world is one huge roar. The air stinks. I cough as I drag Esme across my shoulders like a stray kid and shuffle forward, leaving the baskets behind.

In some places the pebbles roll underfoot and in others, they form drifts that leave me staggering. I miss the protection of the wicker, for although what is falling now is small stuff, it stings. My cut knee hurts.

I have my top clenched in my teeth, so I breathe through a mouthful of soggy cloth. My lungs labor but as long as I bite on

the fabric I can pretend it is the cloth that makes it so hard. I stop, panting, look about me.

Somehow I have turned the wrong way. This is part of the dead city. Trees, gray with ash, grow in doorways, through windows, up through roofs. I don't know which direction to go in. The smell of ghosts comes and goes in the air.

"Ghosts," I whisper. "Ghosts. Help me." Foolish, foolish.

"Girl," says a voice.

There is a mist before my eyes or the ash falls more heavily than before—although it is easier to breathe. I should sit down, I think. Rest. Just for a little while. Close my eyes.

"Girl," sings the air.

There is a bench, with a cushion of carved stone, offering false comfort. I put my sister down, sit beside her, holding her hand. The hot rain turns the gray powder to liquid mud. A torrent runs in the grassy gutter.

"Girl." A sweet throaty voice.

My throat is sore as if with fever and my chest hurts. "Who's there?" I ask. The ash-dusted trees shade the bench from the gritty rain, but there is someone just out of sight. I can hear her, humming to herself, as women hum when they work at the loom. I call, louder, "Who is there?"

The loom clacks on but there is answer. "Alexia. I—am Alexia."

“What are you weaving?” I ask politely.

“A skirt,” she whispers. “A skirt for birthing day. Turn. See the colors.”

I do. The skirt is all I can see; I have never seen a skirt like it. The colors ripple like water. “O,” I breathe. “Beautiful.”

She sighs.

I can see her more clearly now, the long, fine bones of her fingers, the ivory curve of cheek. Her hair is a cloud of darkness. Alexia smiles. I know she smiles, although her face is turned from me. “Would you like it?”

“O,” I say and my voice is pure longing. Then, “I must wear black, undyed fleece. Only the hem may be colored.” In my mind I see sea-blue and sun yellow, Vesna’s last weaving.

“Must,” Alexia says, and her shadow billows and wavers. “Must is a fool’s word.”

“What should I say,” I murmur, feeling my sister’s hand in mine. Esme is so still, her fingers so cold.

Alexia reaches for a great pair of shears that flash in the grayness and begins cutting the web free of the loom. “Can,” she said. “Always say can. Can you go?”

“What?”

“Can you go? If you can, you should, although you will have plenty of company here, and, see, the skirt.” She lifts it high. “Is it not fine? Colored like lost sunrises and sunsets.”

“Lost?” I say, and fall silent, terrified.

There are others stirring, other whispers, so soft I cannot quite understand what they say. Alexia’s voice is becoming like them. “If you can go, you should. Your sister will be safe with us—”

That final “s” dies out into a hissing. Ice touches my knee, my waist, my heart. I feel fabric, smooth, heavy, binding my legs, my waist. My sister’s fingers stir in mine. They are cold, but soft and trusting.

I can no longer see, or hear. The smell and taste of ghosts is overwhelming. Still there is touch. I feel for Esme’s body, and gather it, knees and shoulders, to myself. I stand, shuddering.

There is grayness all around, heavy fabric binds my legs, but it is—brighter—there. Step by step, I lurch toward the light. I can hear grit underfoot, taste salt wind—

I look up into blue, blue sky. The bush-fringed mouth of an adit gapes behind me. Sledges, hooves, and feet have worn a smooth path into solid stone.

A hawk screams and stoops. High above the old city, I hold Esme, and beneath the ash her cheeks are pink. I kiss one then the other. “Wake up, sleepy,” I say.

“Celina?” says my drowsy sister. “Your skirt.”

I let Esme down. “What?” I say, stupidly. I didn’t think she had seen the two bodies with my skirt. Then I see what I am

wearing, touch it. It is smooth, cool. Beautiful.

“Ah,” says Esme. “Pretty, pretty.” She presses her face into it.

There are people coming, running. Men. Looking like a herd of goats, all tangled hair and untrimmed beards, they stop and stare. The men have brought great bows, spears, and herders’ crooks: pitiful in the face of this disaster.

Hands on her small shoulders, I hold Esme tight in front of me, swallowing hard, trying to speak. The sea wind is so fresh it makes me dizzy. I sway, a little, and then stand straight.

“Woman,” says a man’s voice. “I do not know you or the pattern of your skirt. Have you news from the city?”

“Father?” I say, peering through a haze of confusion at the hairy faces. “It’s Celina.”

He comes forward, one hand outstretched, touches my arm. “Celina,” he says, testing the familiar name for the unfamiliar woman before him; then, more certain, “Celina.”

Rivers of fire are rolling down the mountain’s sides. I smell ghosts on the wind. “If you could carry her,” I say. Inside their cocoon of fabric, my legs are shaking. I feel blood running down my shin.

“Yes,” he says suddenly, finding himself. He slings his daughter, my half-sister, across his shoulders. She bawls, as much angry as frightened. “Daddy!”

“The other two? My wife? Your sister?”“

I shake my head, my eyes sliding toward Esme.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Father’s mouth clamps shut. He bends to the load and begins climbing. I follow, watching where my feet go on the unfamiliar path. Thinking, I finger the smooth cool folds of amber, coral, and murex purple: my skirt of many colors. I wonder if there will be a price to pay and what it might be. For today, I am favored; tomorrow, I shall see.

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PALE

by Kathryn Allen

The pitchfork stands like a flagpole, both tines thrust so deep in the Deputy's belly that it didn't shake loose when he was shoved from the hayloft and fell across the trough, breaking his back.

Could he see it, sticking out of him? Feel it, while he waited for the mercy shot? I walk into the livery stable's warm shadows and look down at his face, wondering what thoughts The Hired Gun's bullet tore apart.

We don't die easy. He's the first, this go-around, but the rest of us will follow along soon enough. The Marshal rides into town with his Deputies, but they can't stay for the showdown—that's *mano-a-mano*, one on one. Even if it's The Marshal who's been chosen, so fated to win, his opponent kills us off before that gunfight. Whichever of them rides into the sunset, he rides alone.

I sense movement, in the deeper shadows back of an empty stall, but don't react. Could be I'm next—that The Hired Gun doesn't figure one corpse is enough for an opener, or he wants to even the odds a little faster this time. Hope isn't any part of me, but I don't leave the barn, or reach for my six-

shooter. I wait on him making a move, despite there's not so much as the faintest whiff of his gunsmoke.

And it isn't him steps forward.

"He dead, Mister?" the kid asks. Small for his age, dark-haired, pale-eyed and intense.

"Deputy," I tell him, because there ain't much else left to me. No name. No face.

The kid looks over, like he asked a real question. As if someone could be stabbed, and broken, and shot in the head, and still live. That's when I know for sure he's the one who summoned us.

More often than not it's a young boy, or a girl just shy of being a woman. Not always, but a calling forth takes the kind of feverish certainty that's burning this one up. Faith and hate become a consuming passion for revenge. Whatever the right and wrongs of it, they always get what they want because nothing else matters a damn to them. When they choose us, the law, for their champion, The Marshal calls them an innocent. But there's no innocence in what they want, or what they ask.

The kid doesn't blink. "He dead, Deputy?"

Maybe. Finally. But the odds ain't good.

"Yes," I say, because if he is, one day I might be too. Finally. In a way that means some rancor-steeped 'innocent' can't bring me back.

He nods, throws his chest out, and sticks his thumbs into the waistband of his pants. The pose should be kind of funny on a kid his age only it ain't, and I'm chilled numb when he says, "Good."

* * *

The Marshal's staked his claim on the La Llorona. Sitting at the saloon's poker table, washed and shaved, a bottle of bourbon at his elbow, his chips piled high. No townfolk were bold enough to join him—they seldom are—so he's playing five-card-draw with his Deputies.

He can't lose.

Circling the tableau vivant, I hesitate a couple of paces wide of The Marshal's shoulder. He looks up and raises an eyebrow. I was gone longer than expected.

Called at the undertaker. Not that it matters.

The grey eyes narrow.

We both knew what I'd find. But he sent me, so his want's a worm in my guts, worse every minute, and it won't stop squirming till I've done his will. I step closer. "He's dead."

Hard to tell if The Marshal's poker-face is schooling or indifference. He lifts the bottle, pours till his glass is back to three-quarters full, sets it down, then plucks a card from his hand and tosses it away. I see the discard's face because he means me to. Jack of Diamonds.

Death doesn't matter.

But I'm hankering for when it did.

The Marshal takes his draw, slips it in with the other four cards, and pushes out a stack of chips. "Drinks are on the house, if you want one."

It's not an order, so there's no compulsion besides the vague familiarity of an abandoned habit. I nod and walk over to the burnished redwood bar, trying not to see myself in the big gilt-framed mirror on the wall behind. "Bourbon."

Our faces change, one summoning to the next, and looking at a reflection that must be mine but instead seeing a stranger unsettles me more than a mite. I never shave myself. When the town's too small for a barbershop I let the stubble grow. Because if you stare too long in the mirror you get to thinking your real face might be hidden under that mask, and I don't want to find out what scars I'll wear after searching for it with the razor.

The bartender sets me up, hesitates, but leaves the bottle and retreats. He's nervy. He'd step into the back room, only The Marshal might take offence at being left unattended.

That, and the mirror, and the place being so quiet I can hear the cards shuffled, drives me out again after a single sip of whiskey. Glass in one hand, bottle in the other, I head for the

doors. Might be The Hired Gun is waiting on me. Might be I could care less.

“Deputy?” It’s not The Marshal challenges my departure, but another, dark-haired Deputy.

Seems like we used to try and work out who was who, but there’s no time for friendship, no point recalling old debts, and the memories fade. It’s for the best—we watch each other die, over and over, and that’s easier when you don’t have much reason to care.

“Getting some air before I hit the sack,” I tell The Marshal, because it’s him that wants to know. He nods, and I push through the swing doors without spilling a drop from my glass.

* * *

I work through half the bottle while I stroll the town’s lengthening shadows. We can’t get drunk, and I’ve never sipped bourbon for the taste, but the act’s a solace. Only, each time I think I’ve found the perfect place to sit, watch the sunset, and finish up, I change my mind. I don’t question, but walk that little bit further until I’m past the false fronts and boardwalks, the scattering of shacks and lean-tos behind the main street, and almost out of town. The creek stops me. A wide, steep-banked cut with the water shrunk to a trickle.

I follow its meander. There’s a rope strung between two drought twisted cottonwoods, festooned with checked shirts

and flannel underwear. Down on the shingle of the dry bed, the girl's got a washtub and board, and a big pot over a fire. Didn't know it, but she's what I was looking for.

The kid is with her, throwing pebbles at one of the creeks shallow pools. More of them hit rock than water. He's all lines and angles, and stiff as a puppet.

The girl upends the tub and watches the water spill over the stones. Her voice is a sad murmur that the breeze cuts into incomprehensible snatches and the creek's babbling drowns. Still talking to him, she bends double beside the copper, smothering the last sullen flames beneath.

I can't hear what she says, and the kid's not listening. The only peacemaker he respects is The Hired Gun's Colt 45. He talks back and the rage that's eating him into a shadow spits its bile.

She shakes her head, straightens, and I can't tell if she tries to shrug off the sharp words or stretch the soul-deep weariness from her bones, but he stops sniping and goes back to tossing pebbles.

Stepping as cautiously as an old woman, the girl crosses the shingle and climbs the bank. She touches one of the drying shirts, slips off the pegs, and folds it into her elbow. Holds it there while she sidesteps and checks its neighbor.

I take a swig of bourbon from the bottle, not bothering with the glass.

The kid yells. Something short and sharp. He runs across the shingle, leaps up the bank, and snatches the shirts from the girl's grasp, throwing them down.

She fends him off, but he shoves back, harder, and she falls to hands and knees in the dirt. Yelping and snarling, he drags a pair of long johns from their pegs, flings them in her face and reaches for another. They don't give as easy, but they bring the line lower and he grabs hold and tugs.

It isn't my business, but I head over anyway. "That's enough!"

The crack as the branch breaks is sudden as a gunshot. The kid falls to his knees with the rope, but he's up as fast as he went down, kicking clear of the laundry, stomping a little more for good measure. No fool though because he runs, vanishing into a thicket of sage brush and osage before I can lay a hand on him.

And the girl doesn't wait on me being gentlemanly. She struggles to her feet, hugging the long johns to her chest—the only piece of clothing that hasn't touched the ground.

"Thank you," she says. For politeness sake, because I didn't do anything to earn it.

I pick up a shirt and brush at the dust. "Ain't so bad." Only, half the washing was damp and the dirt'll stick.

"Mrs. Jacobs makes certain I don't cheat her boarders." She finds the shadow of a smile for my masculine foolishness, shakes her head, slings the long johns around her neck like a muffler, and picks up the loose shirts. "They need doing over but there's not enough heat left in the day for them to dry."

It's her quiet courage draws me in. Her eyes are red with tiredness and tears, but there's stubborn in the back of them. I push the bourbon into her free hand. She stares at it, and me, then takes a swig.

"You came with the marshal." It isn't a question. "Mr. Daniels called you in, to take care of the stranger."

I nod, and almost say 'I'm a deputy,' but she passes the bottle back and I drown that half-lie in bourbon.

"Only it's him as started it." She takes the shirt from me. "My brother brought the stranger here, didn't he."

There's no doubt in her, she knows the truth, but I still say, "Yes."

And she nods. "I could kill him for that."

While she gathers the laundry, I fix the washing line and drag the tub and the copper close by the bank. We don't talk about anything but what needs done. Then I walk her home.

* * *

The shack's a few bits of lumber and some old boards, hammered together and roofed with tin. She's piled sod against the walls—so they keep the drafts out and don't topple at the first nudge.

“Folk wanted us to leave, even offered money for the fares,” she says. And they'd made it hard to stay because no one wanted a reminder of what they'd let happen, without any of those good neighbors saying a word against. She shrugs. “We hadn't any place better to go.”

I don't know what she sees, looking at her home, but I see her defiant stand. Her hate and self-pity and anger, used up in hauling salvage and hammering bent nails.

She opens the narrow plank door, vanishes into the darkness, and lights a candle lantern. The room's still gloomier than the twilight. She takes the washing from me and sets it on a three-legged table that's leant up against one wall.

There's always an innocent, and there's always a woman, and I don't have any business being here. But she turns, beckons, and I close the door behind me.

The broken-splatted chair I'm fussed into is a match for those at the La Llorona. She busies herself in the meat safe, then serves us a cold supper of bread and hard cheese and a wrinkled apple. I don't refuse her hospitality.

We talk a little. She helps me finish the bourbon, and we sit companionably, with the darkness pressing closer.

After a while she clears the plates. There's a mattress rolled in the far corner of the door-side wall, and she rummages through the blankets folded beside it, coming back with a short stack of well-read dime novels and story papers. She puts them on the table beside me. The topmost is a copy of *Brave and Bold*.

"They don't have names or faces, not real ones," she says. "That's what he's called up, isn't it? The stranger will make everyone sorry, and kill Mr. Daniels, and—" Her voice breaks, and she puts her hand over her mouth, as shocked by what's come from her lips as a lady who's let rip an unbecoming belch.

I shouldn't be here, shouldn't be talking to her. "He's summoned vengeance."

She shakes her head. "He's called up a story and made me a part of it." Taking the books and papers she flings them at his mattress. "And I don't want to be."

But she is. There's always a woman. And she plays her part, one way or the other.

"The stranger'll come for you," I tell her, trying to tip-toe round the vulgarity. "If you're nice to him—"

"I turned him away," she says. Just that and no more.

Whether it's The Marshal or The Hired Gun, the innocent's champion gets the woman. He'll be good to her, but she'll never forget, never be quite the same when he rides away.

"If it's not him, willing, then it's..." His opponent. And her unwilling. One or the other. I don't like to think about it. Not this time around; not with this girl.

"No," she says, soft and sweet, but there's steel in the refusal. And a sting. "I've read the stories and I've made my choice." She smiles at me. "Not him, and not your marshal. I'll have you."

It isn't my business. I shouldn't be here. I'm a Deputy. I ride in with The Marshal, and The Hired Gun kills me. That's how it is.

I head for the door, but I don't make it. She's faster, standing in my way. If I'd really wanted to go, I'd have made it. If I didn't want to be kissed, I wouldn't let her pull my head down. There's bourbon on her breath, but it's not the whiskey reminds me what life tastes like.

She breaks the kiss, presses closer, one hand searching out my shirt buttons.

"I was a man, once." The words escape me, but they don't sound like what I mean. She pauses. "Before. A long time ago." I can't explain.

"Once upon a time," she says. "That's how stories start."

I can't say no. Her certainty is a thousand times stronger than mine, and I've nothing else. Maybe I gave all of it away to become... whatever it is I've become.

She takes my hand, and the lantern, and leads me to the blanket-door in the partition. The other room's a closet—no space for anything but a mattress and blankets and a small chest at the foot of her bedding that she sets the lantern down on. Next to a battered cloth doll.

My last chance. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” She unfastens the buttons of her dress, and puts my hand inside.

I palm her breast through the petticoat and don't tell her she looks older. Worn. “You've done this before...”

“Not enough to lose my reputation.” She closes her eyes, leans into me. “Or I'd be nice and cozy in a room over the La Llorona.”

I take my time undressing her, half-expecting to be interrupted. For The Marshal to come calling. And not sure what'll happen if he does. She doesn't rush me.

Maybe I've used whores, the same way as I've bought shaves and drunk whiskey, but I don't remember the last time I made love. If I ever have. Bit parts in a story just don't.

She pulls my shirt from my pants and drags it off, her hands roaming. Then she leans away, turns me into the weak

flickering light from the lantern, and stares.

“Scars.” She traces the lines with one finger. The slashes of knives, the dots and stars of bullet holes, the ragged seam of an amputation: pale silver marks that aren’t true scars but the ghosts of my wounds. Death upon death recorded on my skin. Her hand drifts up, to the circle of the hangman’s noose.

“They summon us, and we die,” I tell her. Because she’s got a right to know, before me and her lie down on the mattress, before—”I die.”

She shudders, presses her lips to my chest, my heart. “You were a man, a good man,” she tells me. “I don’t think you’ve stopped being one.”

* * *

Afterwards we sleep, wrapped together in her blankets. It’s barely dawn when she leaves, murmuring, “This isn’t fair.” But she tells me to stay, to close my eyes and she’ll wake me for breakfast.

I’ve barely roused, so it’s easy to slip away into dreams again. They turn into a nightmare, where an angry mob puts a noose around my neck and I drop, kicking and choking.

I jerk awake, heart in my mouth and pulse racing, not sure if it’s the bad dream that scared me or that I dreamt at all. We don’t. Sleep’s our escape, a few hours away from the nightmare of what we are.

The door-blanket twitches, and poking her head through she sees I'm awake and smiles. "Breakfast's ready, when you are."

And I'm hungry. It's been so long since eating was more than a habit, a pastime, that I didn't recognize the hollowness in my chest. Or maybe it's not food I'm hungry for, but her. I pull the door-blanket aside, finding my clothes and dressing by the half-light that creeps from the open cabin door.

I find her outside, cooking grits over a cowchip fire. She smiles, and I wonder if we haven't got time for another poke before I go die. Standing behind her, I wait till her hands are clear of the pot and hang myself around her shoulders. She leans into me, turns her head, and I kiss her cheek.

Things get a little warmer, and we're near to forgetting about breakfast and going back inside when I hear the rattling cough. Might be it's meant as a polite warning.

"Deputy." The Marshal's standing not ten yards away, and I didn't sense him.

Slow and easy, I put myself between him and her. But I'm thinking it must be too late for him to be after her, that what we did changed how this story will end. "Marshal."

"Surprised you didn't hear the commotion," he says. "They found a body in the creek. A boy." Her breath catches, and she presses her face to my shoulder. "Folks tell me it's this girl's

kin. Her little brother.” Her hands fist in my shirt, dragging on it as her knees buckle. I turn to catch her up. Hold tight, and feel her shaking. “I’d be obliged if the girl’d take a look, so as we’re sure.”

We walk with him, down to the creek and the shingle strand where I met her. The Marshal watches me, not the girl tucked into my side. He senses the change—that I’m not keeping half an eye on him, like a dog waiting on his master’s next command. But it goes deeper. Last time he saw me I was a part of the same story he is, but now—

—the kid’s dead.

They’ve left him on the shingle. His hair soaked black and his shirt wet, but his pants aren’t more than splashed.

“He didn’t come home last night,” his sister says, a quiver in her voice. “But we’d quarreled, and sometimes he sleeps at the livery, or on Mrs. Jacobs’ porch swing.” I hug her closer, for comfort, and so she can hide her face.

The Marshal nods. “Looks like he slipped, fell in the water, and drowned before he’d got his senses back.”

She went out early to catch up on the laundry he’d spoiled. The copper and tub are tucked in by the bank, but not where I left them last night. I don’t do more than glance that way, but I see the washing hanging on the line. Either she missed seeing

him, even while she was hauling water from the creek, or he drowned after she finished. When the sun was up. Or else...

I let go of her, crouch beside the kid, and make a brief examination. Closing his eyes, I take a sniff over his mouth. Lye soap, and there's the faint white circles of dried bubbles round his nose. Standing, I look The Marshal in the eye and say, "Well he weren't drunk, but seems like he hit his head when he fell."

I'm in the way when he tries to see for himself, but not to stop a grieving sister falling to her knees beside the dead boy. She brushes back his fringe, and wipes his face with the hem of her skirt. Like a mother making her child presentable for company.

The Marshal drops his voice to a rasping whisper. "Did you kill the innocent?"

"No." Never occurred to me he'd think I would, or that my purgatory allowed for so direct a salvation. But I've changed, and he knows it.

Was it before she killed her brother that I started having appetites rather than habits? Because she wanted me or because— The Marshal's set his narrow-eyed stare to reading my soul, and might be he still can, so I stop thinking over the how and why.

"An accident," I say. "That's the start and finish of it." Which it is. The kid's dead. And anyhow, he chose The Hired

Gun as his champion, not the law.

Takes a moment or two, but The Marshal nods. “Nothing left for us to do. Time we were leaving town.”

“I’ll carry the k— the boy to the undertaker.” I shrug. “There’s no room in his sister’s shack for laying him out proper.”

The Marshal blinks. Waits on me saying something more, and then tells me, “Saddle up, Deputy.”

It’s an order, plain and simple, but I don’t feel the slightest compulsion to obey. I offer my hand. The closest to a goodbye that I’ll give or get. “It’s been”—endless—“You’ve always been decent.”

His grip’s stronger than mine, but colder. “I was a man once, Jack.”

Disturbing words, but the name... fits me the way a name should. As if I’d been called by it all my life.

It’s my turn to nod. “A good man.”

He glances at the kid’s corpse, and walks away.

* * *

After we’ve done with seeing to her brother, she leads me back to her place. Not a smidgen of remorse showing, until she sets eyes on his bedroll and the dime novels. Then she’s crying again, but for what she’s done, not for the loss of her only kin.

“You killed him,” I tell her, because it’s easier on the both of us than waiting till she can force the words out. She sags against me. Her grief as hard as the struggle to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. I sit her down in the chair, and crouch beside her.

“He was angry, like he was yesterday, over me saying no to his... stranger,” she says, through her hands. “Only worse, because—” Because she’d made her own choice and not gone along with his. I put my hand on her thigh. “After all I’d done, he called me dirty names. I —”

She lifts her face, and the anger pushes through the sorrow for just a moment. “It wasn’t fair. He didn’t care one bit what would happen to me. It was all about his pain and his story and his revenge. It wasn’t fair and it wasn’t right and then he hit me and called you a— and I hit him back and he fell against the tub and I just pushed his head down...” She’s thin, from sharing what would have been little enough for one, but you can’t haul water and make soap without building muscle.

For a while she sobs, but it calms into hiccups and sniffles. I don’t have a handkerchief to offer. Pulling up the hem of her dress, she wipes her nose.

“It wasn’t fair, Jack,” she says, and I know she’s scared to look me in the eye, but she does anyway. She’s strong.

“No, it wasn’t,” I tell her, and stand, and pick her out of the chair. She holds the blanket-door aside as I carry her through to her bed, and wraps her arms around my neck when I set her down, making certain I mean to stay with her. But I’d already decided that.

Later, half-asleep, I think on us married—with a small place of our own and a couple of kids—and whether I can talk her into that, and into going far away enough rumors won’t follow, so we can start fresh.

* * *

She’s crying, still, when I wake. The tears seeping from under closed eyelids. Her face is wet with them, and her hair, and a growing patch at the edge of the blanket. I watch her, in the dim light that finds us.

There’s not going to be a happy ending. But I can pretend for a little longer.

She knows there’s something wrong the moment she opens her eyes. Maybe there were tears in the dream she left. If she can still dream. Her fingers grip the damp edge of the blanket, touch her hair, her face. I kiss her forehead, because I can’t stand seeing the fear, or letting her see mine.

“La Llorona,” she murmurs. The Weeping Woman. Who drowns her children, for spite or love, and then wanders the riverbank. Crying. I want to deny it, but all I can do is hug her

close as she whispers into my shoulder. “Every bit of me feels dry, inside, and I want—” She shudders. “Need. To go by the creek.”

It takes me a while to say anything. Her tears drip, and roll down my chest. The ones on my cheeks and chin are mine. “I’ll take you there,” I tell her.

Because I can’t take her away. She broke the story we were trapped in and freed me, but fell headlong into another.

We dress. She finds a clean petticoat and her bud-sprigged cotton Sunday best. They cling, once her tears soak the cloth.

I’m strapping my six-shooter on when the notion strikes. “Is there a preacher in town?”

She shakes her head. “Not enough religion here to pay for a church. A circuit rider comes by twice a year.”

“I’ll go find one, bring him back with me, and he can marry us.” Might be it won’t work, that it wouldn’t work if we tied the knot this minute, but La Llorona doesn’t get her man, and breaking the story’s all I’ve got to hope on.

“You go find him, Jack.” There’s the glint of steel behind her tears. “I’ll wait for you.”

When I kiss her, her lips are dry and crack, and when we step outside she shrinks from the daylight. But the sun’s low and the shadows long, and between them she walks in the darkness of mine.

I talk over where I'll look for a minister—wondering if she can wait, if the story will let her, or if she'll have to be summoned somehow—and then I tell her about the house and kids. And because I'm looking at her, and hoping she'll smile, we walk straight into The Hired Gun.

I'd figured him as long gone, like The Marshal, but he peels from out the shadow of an oak tree.

"You killed him," he says, not looking at me.

"Yes." She knows there's no use explaining. Her brother wanted revenge, and that's all The Hired Gun's about.

He draws his Peacemaker.

"You're not the law." I step between them as he cocks the hammer. Might be she's already legend enough that a bullet won't harm her, but might be she's not.

"I'm the law of the gun." He smiles. "What are you, now?"

Jack. "Her man."

"No, Jack. Don't." She pushes against my back, but I don't move.

"Won't it feel better, to do this right?" I challenge.

He nods, slowly. The champions fight first. That's what he understands. He slips the Peacemaker back into his holster. "Yes."

I walk from the shadows, taking the fight where she can't follow—though she does, pulling on me and begging me to

leave, until the sun blinds and burns her and I have to carry her back out of it.

The Hired Gun waits, patient. He's got time enough before sunset to put a bullet in both of us.

But there's less time than he thinks, because you can't kill what can't be killed. I take my stand, there, between the edge of town and the creek. She sits, silent tears running down her cheeks. By the time he's finished with me, might be she's close enough to the water and the story... La Llorona doesn't fear bullets when she walks the night.

I face The Hired Gun. The way I never have, and never could have. And for that, too, I'm thankful she chose me.

He makes his move. Fast and startling, even with me knowing he'll draw.

I take my time in a hurry. See his muzzle flash. Hear the shot and the echo that's my return. But no bullet bites.

The Hired Gun falls. Dead. I didn't miss.

There's a silence, the whole world standing still. I put my six-shooter away and walk back into the shadows.

She's pale and trembling, and I feel cold to the bone when she wraps herself around me. Her kisses sting my throat, my cheek, my lips. I sweep her off her feet and carry her to the creek.

One last chill kiss, before I set her down and step back. The water's only up to my ankles, but she sinks into it, like she's taking a bath, till her hair's floating about her shoulders.

"Wait for me," I tell her. "I'll come back."

"I'll wait." She lifts her eyes to mine, but all I see is the glint of tears. "However long it takes."

She sinks lower, vanishing into a drowning deep. I walk away, climb the bank, and I don't mean to go anywhere near the Hired Gun's corpse, but I do.

The Peacemaker's lying there, six inches from his outflung hand. I tuck it into the waistband of my pants. My taking it doesn't signify.

"I'll wait and hope," she calls after me. "But any like my brother, any who'd summon The Hired Gun, if they come by the water..." Her voice whispers. I look back, but I don't see La Llorona. "What they'd do isn't fair, and I'll stop them."

The shadows are merging into nightfall, and I've business to take care of. Somewhere else to be. A purpose.

I fetch my horse from the livery, and ride out of town.

Into the west.

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Kathryn Allen likes chocolate, Western movies, dogs, and over-dyed floss. She lives on a blue-green planet circling a yellow main-sequence star located in the Orion arm of the barred spiral galaxy known as the Milky Way. Which, disappointingly, is not a sweet you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite.

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COVER ART

“Chinese Steampunk Village,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste has been an Art Director on Videogames and Cinematics for over seven years; he worked at Ubisoft on such licenses as Assassin’s Creed. He won a VES Award in 2006 for his work on Prince of Persia and the Two Thrones. He currently works as Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts Montreal. View his gallery at www.raphael-lacoste.com.

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