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WRITTEN ON THE HIDES OF FOXES

by Alex Dally MacFarlane

I'll pretend I'm going blind if I have to: start fumbling my work, carving sloppy lines onto the dolls, squinting, tripping over nothing. Everything my mother did in her twenty-fifth year. Everything my aunt and uncle did. Now the three of them sit in the best positions by the fire; how honored they are, for giving their sight to feed us. How well-fed, while we labor carving more dolls for the pot.

They'll kill me for laziness if I don't go blind in the next year.

* * *

Summer in the taiga: for ten weeks, the sun soaks the trees in gold. I walk among them, head tilted high, but the sun doesn't sear the sight from my eyes.

“Shit!” I scream at the sky. “Shit on you!”

I keep walking.

In summer my family goes hunting and wandering, filling our bellies with meat and mushrooms and berries, meeting with people from the nearby villages—and, in some years, bringing back a womb full of daughter, a womb full of sons.

After five pregnancies and three surviving children, I use the village women's herbs to keep my womb empty. I want that fun again without the strain of babies. When else in the year can we laugh at winter, lie on moss and crushed flowers and kick our bare legs at it? But I can't do that this summer. I think of my sons, who cuddled each other in my womb and came out soft. What will they do without me? I think of my daughter, my first child, born after the worst winter any of us remembered, who came out all sinew and hair like a fox and tore at my too-small eleven-year-old body like she had claws. The twelve-year-old boy I had fooled with didn't expect to see me the next summer with a baby wrapped in hides on my back. I laughed at him. My daughter's tough.

She's already turning blind producing the finest dolls in the house. My daughter, blind before me! None of my family's stories tell of that.

What's wrong with my eyes that I still see so clearly?

I keep walking, because surely after another two months of staring at the sun I'll be honorably blind, or close enough. I don't want to pretend, I don't want to be caught out, killed anyway, doubly dishonored: sighted *and* a liar. I *want* to go blind from so many winters of hard work, carving the dolls unceasing. What spirit have I angered to put this misfortune on me?

It's spirits on my mind, still, when I trip on something and fall face-first on the snowless dirt.

"Up you get," a woman says. "I'll be needing that."

It's a dead fox on the ground, in its silly bi-colored summer-coat, and it's an old woman with hair white as a fox's winter-coat and skin a different brown to mine, standing over me with a long knife in her hand. I imagine its tip puncturing my eyes—but there's no honor in that.

She doesn't look like she's going to hurt me, so I get up and wait to see what will happen.

The fox is in a trap, its back leg crushed, the ground stained dark. Around my family's house, the traps will be filling with foxes and hares and wolverines and sable for the children to collect and cook. In summer we eat well. In winter, the darkness comes down and there is nothing, nothing at all but the trees and our carving knives and the dolls in the pot, barely filling our stomachs.

The old woman bends down for the fox. It goes over one shoulder, the trap over the other. "Coming?" She turns around without waiting for my reply. "I've got hare stew."

I follow her through the trees.

Our walking is done wordless but not in silence. Small pine-branches snap against our shoulders and faces, and fallen ones crunch under our feet. A far-off bird calls out. Insects

make all their noises, although we're far enough from water that they're tolerable. The day smells of sun and green: life. I drink it in, as if it will fill me like a pot of steeped doll.

I feel heady by the time we reach her tent, like I've been chewing fly-agaric mushroom, not swallowing doll-soup. I blink it away, un-blind still.

Her tent is barely anything—hides draped over low slanty wood-supports—but sturdy. Un-set traps and a few tools sit on the ground outside. Little enough to be turned into a sled and dragged behind her through the taiga, moving, moving, while my family lives in its house of stacked-up stone.

The inside of her tent smells of smoke and stew and carcasses. I wince. Our house is beautiful: the hides covering its walls are full of the smell of burning pine. This reeks, and I can barely stand up inside. I squat beside the pot, hungry. I wonder if she wants anything in particular or just company.

"Name's Oruguaq," she says, dropping the dead fox on the floor. It thuds.

"Kegulan," I say.

"Help yourself to stew."

There's a single bowl near the still-glowing wood, made of something's skull. I hesitate.

"Eat, woman. You aren't getting any fatter just smelling it." She squats on the other side of the pot with new branches for

the fire, coaxing it back into life. I pick up the bowl and shift aside the pot's battered lid so I can scoop out some liquid. There's plenty of meat floating in it. I don't feel at all presumptive taking several bits. Anyway, she says, "That bit's nice and thick with meat. One of its haunches. Grab that one. I won't have any guest of mine saying the pot's empty."

"Just this bowl will fill me up," I say.

"Nonsense."

I bring the bowl to my lips.

Only hare and water went into that pot; it's rich with the taste of the hare meat, hot and filling. I sigh contentedly. "Have as much as you like," Oruguaq says. "Plenty of hares at this time of year. Put some fat on you for winter."

I'm glad to do just that.

Once the hare is sitting in my stomach, I start looking around her tent, curious about a woman traveling alone—traveling far, by the look of her. I see her sleeping furs, piled against the hide-walls. She'll need a lot of them, without the heat of other bodies. I see a bow and some arrows, propped near the entrance-flap.

And I see a low wooden thing like a big stool with something on it, I can't tell what, draped in fox hides. Under the table are bones. I catch myself squinting in the dim light to see if any look like human bones. Stories of old women out

among the trees who eat errant children are just that—stories. Plenty of people have bones on their floor. She's only been generous to me.

Still, I squint at the stew before taking another sip.

I can't deny her strangeness.

"So," she says, when I'm just holding my bowl, not sipping from it, "you've seen my book."

"Your what?"

She gets up—and she's nothing like a woman her age should be, limber and stocky the way she is, nothing at all like my mother by the fire. I realize I can't even tell her age; older than me, but how much? Right then I think she'll draw a massive knife from under those hides, long and wide as a fox, and flay me all in one. Instead she draws something blocky, like a wide flat rock made of hide-layers. "This is the book of the endless lands," Oruguaq says. "I have lived in these lands for a very long time—since there was light for the first time, putting an end to the endless night. It is made of foxes, which have been here since the beginning."

My aunt has all sorts of stories for that feat, but Oruguaq's mention of foxes makes me think of just one: the fox was a more cunning shaman than the bear, and this meant it got the sunshine it wanted. I can't tell it like my aunt does, but it's a

good one for sitting around the fire in winter, waiting for the sun to come back. *Bring it back, fox! Quicker!*

Oruguaq beckons me to her side. I obey, more curious than afraid, and crouch to look at the cover of the book, which is sturdy enough that I suspect there's wood under the scraped-thin hide. It's dark and plain.

"It is written on hides, only fox-hides," she says, and lifts the cover at one corner. It bends right back, revealing more hide, tanned and pale and amazingly thin, covered in scrawling patterns that look a bit like the writing I saw a trader use, years ago. "These are the pages. And these..." she touches the patterns with her dark fingers "...are the stories of the endless places."

I peer at the writing. It's a useful way of storing stories, I suppose, if you have a lousy memory and there aren't any good storytellers around to remember for you.

"Look." Oruguaq turns the pages, and there aren't just words: there are drawings too, of people who look a bit like me and people who look nothing like me, and pieces of fabric and pine and bone and a splash of blood and the scale of some vast fish and things I can't identify.

I gape at one piece of fabric, embroidered with a woman who wears a magnificent headdress and robes that shimmer.

“She lived five hundred years ago,” Oruguaq says, “and this image of her was created four hundred years ago. The story I recorded tells of her feats, defending her land against invaders from the south. Women sewed images of her onto their clothes for luck, whether in battle or childbirth or the dark days of winter.” There’s satisfaction on Oruguaq’s face. “Almost no one living in the endless places has seen a headdress like that or knows a story about its wearer, but I do. I walk all throughout these lands, stopping here, stopping there, meeting people, learning about them, and I record everything I learn in my book.

“A lot changes in every hundred years, every thousand. You people have long memories—when you tell stories around your winter fires, you remember so much—but eventually everything is lost; forgotten, or drawn so far into something else that it can no longer be told. I don’t want that to be so. As long as I record it here, it won’t be forgotten. I travel all over the endless places, writing in my book, keeping the old and adding the new—and telling people what I know.” The book is massive—it must have thousands of pages—but it’s also something she can hold. It’s playing tricks on me. Looking bigger, looking smaller.

“Huh,” is all I can think to say. I feel like I’ve taken a side-step into another taiga, another kind of tent, where the stars

will be my roof on the flank of a deer and they'll give their milk to me, if only I know how to ask. I feel unrooted, unsure of what to expect. Anything could happen.

I wait, because what else is there to do?

"So who are you?" she asks, and she's just an old woman again, squatting by the fire with something in her lap. It could be a sleeping baby. The change almost tips me onto my back.

"Just Kegulan." I don't like talking about the dolls. There's an illness on us—it's old and complicated, and I don't like the way people cringe from me if I say it.

"Kegulan, Kegulan, whose fingers smell of wood."

She's strange again, for a heartbeat. Does it mean she already knows?

"Why were you staring at the sun when you tripped on my fox?"

That fox is still lying on the floor, looking up at us with dead dark bead-eyes. I wonder what will go on the pages she'll make from it. Me and my family and our dolls? There's no others like us, as far as I've managed to find out. Or maybe we're already in her book, great-great-great-grandparents put on her pages in those pretty signs.

She's not someone I'll see again, I reckon.

I tell her.

Her eyes light up like stars in an autumn sky.

I finish it by telling her about my eyes: how they won't go blind, even though I'm already twenty-five. "My mother and aunt and uncle are old and unpleasant," I say, starting to get embarrassed at having to talk about my strange ill family under her amused gaze. "My mother's almost forty."

Oruguaq snorts. "You're too healthy."

"What?"

"Who was your father?"

What does *that* matter? I don't even know his name, and I'm not sure my mother ever did, either. "Some man my mother found."

"Your family sits in that house going blind earlier and earlier each generation—do you know it used to be thirty-five years before anyone went blind? Half of you are born from cousins—or someone closer—not the men your mothers go out to fool with."

I feel cold, as if someone's stuffed my insides with snow. "Is that what it says in your book?"

"It's what I remember." She says it matter-of-fact, like she's describing the blueness of the sky, and I'm not imagining the mockery that lies behind her words. Then she tells me that seventy years ago, she met someone from our family fleeing the house and the dolls but not the illness. "He kept running," she finishes with a shrug, uncaring, when I'm suddenly desperate

to know if it's possible to get far enough away from the illness after all. "It was winter. I suspect he died. There's no nutrition in your dolls; he was weak as a sapling."

"I've talked to the people from villages," I say, done with her disparagement. "I know what their lives are like. How they starve in winter because there's nothing to trap. How some winters an entire tent dies, with everyone found in it the next spring, frozen solid. The ones with lots of their own animals do all right, but then there's a sickness or they get stolen by other people. Whereas we sit in our house carving our dolls, boiling them, filling our stomachs almost every day. Tell me that's worse."

"Your own mother will kill and eat you," Oruguaq says, laughing.

I laugh back at her. "You think no other mother's done that when winter's teeth are sharper than usual, and you claim to have wandered the whole taiga? You don't know anything."

"Then why do you care about it?"

"Because I don't want to be eaten!" What a stupid question.

And I'm not a small child, unable to pull its weight. I make as many dolls as the other adults.

"Live with me." Oruguaq shows her teeth like a fox. "I would like an assistant. The last one died ten years ago—tough

woman called Magga, from a family of reindeer herders that all died one winter.” I shudder in sympathy. “It was just her, sitting with a single reindeer when I found her. She lived to a good age with me: seventy-one. Traveled all over the endless forest—and beyond.”

I narrow my eyes at her. There’s nothing beyond. And no one lives to seventy-one.

“And,” she said, “I won’t go killing you because you’ve got good eyes.”

“What if I do go blind?” I ask, wanting to find the flaw in this offer—other than the fact that I don’t think I could stand Oruguaq’s company for much longer than I already have.

“There’s plenty more a blind person can do than sit in a chair and be fed by her relatives. I won’t leave you out in the snow for the wolves—or eat you myself. Give me a bit of time and I might even break your ridiculous illness.”

The way she talks is making me feel like a vole, small in her eyes, even though she’s offering freedom.

But even if I got freedom from the illness, I wouldn’t go with her. “Why would I want to live with you? It smells of dead foxes in here. I want to sit by a fire and tell my nieces and nephews that their dolls are ugly. I want to eat all the best meals and see nothing.”

She laughs again. “I’ll be staying here through the winter. I’ll look for you.” Baring her teeth in that unnerving, foxish grin, she adds, “Just try not to get eaten this winter.”

I’ll go blind. It happened after my mother turned twenty-five. It’ll happen to me.

But I ask, “Do you have anything for my eyes? To make me blind faster?”

“I don’t work with medicines except the ones I need.” She’s still grinning. “Good luck, Kegulan-whose-fingers-smell-of-wood.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling as full of confidence as an empty pot is of water—but I know I don’t want to live with someone who makes me feel as vole-small as she does.

I think I know.

Well, she’ll be there if I need her.

I won’t. I’ll go blind.

I walk home.

* * *

Winter creeps across the taiga, covering the trees in lumps of white and driving all the animals away. Our stomachs groan for food. Shut in our house by the cold, we bend over our dolls. We carve.

There is always a doll in the pot. Each one takes a day and a night to steep and stew into the light brown broth we drink.

Each doll takes a week to carve.

We wake in the morning—although it is hard to call it a morning when the sun rises later and later, then not at all, as if embarrassed by our hunger. We wake and the pot is simmering full of light brown liquid and we drink, like desperate foxes around the week's first kill, and for a short time we feel full.

We carve all day.

The dolls must be unique—and breathtakingly beautiful. We must weep when we drop every one in the pot. If the doll is too plain, it'll be like we're just boiling water. That's part of our illness.

I like to carve mine with great pieces of jewelry on them, because I once saw a trader wearing a disc of silver hung with tiny bells that each chimed their own note, so that whenever she took a step I heard a whole song. My dolls wear jewelry that covers their whole bodies like stitched-up furs. It's a style I've passed on to my daughter, although she prefers to clothe hers in the carved shapes of bone jewelry. My sons like smaller repeating patterns, as if the dolls are dressed in pine cones or orderly stars.

This is what my mother told me, as a very small girl:

“Many years ago, in the time of my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother, someone in our family went out to cut wood. It was a harsh winter, and the pile

of firewood was getting small. Everyone was ailing and weak. This man staggered out of the tent, his whole body empty, and cut down the first tree his axe landed on—bad luck for the whole family, because it wasn't ready to be cut down. It begged him to go to another tree. But the man was so weak, he didn't care, so he kept on swinging his axe. Then with the last of its strength, the tree told the man that he and his family would spend every day of every winter working with wood, preparing it and eating it, because there would be no other food, and only the most beautifully carved dolls would do. And so it still is today. We can't hunt in winter. We can't move somewhere else—we take the illness with us. We can't do anything about it. So we live in this house and carve dolls and that's our winters. Work hard. We don't have time for laziness."

I am so intent on my work, on chasing away hunger with every flake of wood, every exquisite facial detail or jewelry-incision, that I don't notice how she stares at me with her sightless eyes—listening, not seeing. Listening for the fumble of my tools, listening for the stub of my toe. I'm still not going blind. I start thinking, as I lie in the furs with everyone else, that when I get up the next morning I'll trip over something. Or I'll slip and cut my finger, not deeply, but enough to prove with red drops and a hiss of pain that I'm struggling to see.

Every day I forget, too intent on my work.

I'm still not even squinting.

And they've noticed, all of them: my mother and aunt and uncle with their flawless ears, my cousins who are my age, my brother. At least the children mind their own business.

I don't know what to do. It's winter. I can't leave. I can't get myself to talk about it with them, to reason them out of killing me.

I'm hungry. I carve.

* * *

"We're sick of dolls," my aunt says, harsh as an eagle. "We want meat. Bring us meat."

"There's no meat," one of my cousins says, but I see how he glances sideways at me. I see everything, still.

"Yes there is." My aunt points right at me.

I'm fixed with fear on the fur we're sitting on.

"No!" my daughter cries. "You can't! Leave her alone!" She stands up with her small carving knife in her hand and such fierceness on her face. My bold, beautiful daughter! But she trips as soon as she takes a step and clatters down to the floor with a cry.

My cousin laughs. "Be careful, Tamke. Take a seat. We'll bring you the meat you deserve."

She looks up like a spitting wolverine. “I’ll tear your tongue out, I’ll tear your fingers off, I’ll eat *those* for my first meal by the fire.”

I need to get out.

Two of my cousins stand, looking at me like I’m a deer, and I get up too, thinking that if I can just get to the door—

They grab me firmly and yank my head back by my long braids, baring my throat, and I close my eyes. I don’t want to see it.

But the knife doesn’t fall. I look—and there are my sons, clinging one to each of my cousin’s legs: Bomak on the left and Turkam on the right, like identical dolls. And Tamke is on her feet again, squinting, and this time she doesn’t trip. This time the knife is in my cousin’s eye before any of the others can react.

Then there is chaos, like on a hunt.

I slip free and pull a longer knife from my boot, making my other cousin back off. I grab furs to add to the ones already on my back. I grab a small traveling pot. I grab Tamke—her cheek is reddened from someone’s fist but she has avoided knives—and I shove her outside. I turn back—my sons are up against the wall, wide-eyed, as another of my cousins swipes cruelly in the air before them. “You’ll make a doll every day!” she’s

yelling. “You’ll work for four people! Or it’s you we’ll be cooking, you stupid brats!”

Anger swells in me like a snowstorm. I’ve never been fond of my children the way I’ve seen other parents be, but to see them threatened like that; I’ll kill anyone who tries to kill them. I shove my cousin aside, tripping her to the floor, and my sons only need one yell from me to run outside.

My brother and my cousin are going after them. “Run!” I yell. “Keep running!”

The boys run off like wolves. Tamke doesn’t make it far before she trips.

I’m outside—I slam the door behind me, and suddenly the world is muted, just me by the house and my daughter lying on the ground, and my brother and my cousin between us. It is dark, but not black. All that’s left of my sons is the sound of branches breaking and snow falling. “Get back inside,” I snap at my brother and my cousin, who are faint in the starlight. “Or I’ll cut you open as well.” They turn towards me, forgetting that Tamke is capable of getting back up.

I see her standing, I see the weapons we’re all holding. There’s only one path. Tamke sees it too.

Between the two of us, we kill them quickly.

My daughter is gasping, crying.

“Run,” I manage to say.

I take her arm, and we flee into the forest after my sons.

* * *

No one follows to exact vengeance. The old ones must be terrified: so many able hands lost, it'll be death if they lose another.

The knowledge of what we did, Tamke and I, sits in me like I've swallowed a massive stone. I can't ignore it. For all three of my children, it sits on their tongues, silencing them—but we'll die if I let it stop my feet.

I put my thoughts on one thing: our survival.

I long to take us directly south, to the parts of the taiga where winter's teeth are blunted by having already gnawed on so many people, but that route would take us close to other people. In winter we're feared. We bring our illness to the lands we pass through; our illness drives the animals away. People would kill us for that, angry and hungry. So it's west we go, following the map of the stars, into the uninhabited lands I know from my summer wanderings.

Towards where I met Oruguaq, although I don't know if I want to find her. I don't think about it much. It isn't important enough. What is: the daily work on the dolls, trying to get one in the pot almost every day, staying warm, keeping everyone on their feet even if there is ice at their eyes, getting far enough

from our house that we can set up a shelter for the rest of the winter.

The light is poor but it's returning. The sun skims the underside of the horizon like a knife across wood, giving us hours of pale light. We use it to walk and work. The boys and I are nimble enough, even in our mittens, to carve as we walk. When the sun has sunk too far to give us light, we use the moon's silvery glow. When we tire, we stop. Working together, we chop wood and gather kindling and build up a fire, and the boys and I build up a shelter around the fire and around Tamke, already seated, honored like an old woman.

"We'll survive," I tell them as we sip the thin broth of a hurried doll, all four of us huddled together under the furs. Everyone is tired, cold, hungry. Alive. "We have enough furs. Soon we'll set up a shelter with pine branches, using the needles like poor fur to block out the wind."

A herd of lies. The truth is, we're dying. It's just a lot slower than if my cousin had cut my throat. I don't tell them that. I don't know if they already know.

When I do think about Oruguaq, I doubt my ability to find her in just one small tent in the vastness of the taiga.

It's Oruguaq who finds us.

I hear the swish of snow falling off branches outside our thick-needed shelter and think, for a strange moment, that the

illness is over, that animals will come near us when we're far from the house—but no, it's Oruguaq standing at the narrow opening of our shelter, with a dead fox slung over her shoulder almost blending into her furs, winter-hidden.

Just her dark face stands out in the light cast by the fire. She looks like she's trying not to laugh. "All the animals run from you," she says. "It's like you're a fire, crackling at their backs. This one ran straight into my trap, even as I stood there, which is good for you. You'll get some meat instead of those ridiculous dolls."

Just a few sentences and she makes me feel vole-small again. Why is this woman our only chance for life?

"So give us that meat," I say, even though she's a guest to our fire—but what can I offer her? Ridiculous dolls? "And go catch more whenever we start walking again."

I don't mean that last bit. Scaring off the animals like that isn't the right way to treat the forest. It might not even work, if we send someone out. The illness is thorough.

I eye the fox over her shoulder. It won't be much hide, but anything to keep out the cold. And I want that meat, for all of us. Meat, in winter!

"I'll have some of this meat first," Oruguaq says, "and then we'll get moving."

"Yeah?"

She doesn't say anything more. She drops the fox in front of me and goes back outside, where I see the faint dark outline of her sled, and gets more furs and hides. Some she drapes over our shelter, shoving back at the wind that's been cutting us for so long. Some she drapes over us. Pressed against my side, she works with me, skinning the fox and putting it in pieces into the pot, where there's still a small doll bobbing.

"Let me tell you something," she finally says. "I once had an assistant called Arnatsiq. Found her on an ice-floe, more ice than woman by that point, crying out yet more ice because her people abandoned her there for having her vagina in her palms instead, two vaginas in fact, one in each palm, that she pissed out of same as we piss from between our legs."

Tamke makes a face. The boys giggle.

"If you laughed at her, she'd slap you in the face, and she wouldn't hold back her piss."

The smell of meat's making me heady.

"She sounds interesting," I say, meaning it.

"I take in assistants who have survived," Oruguaq says, cutting into my light-headedness. "Usually it's cruel winters or cruel husbands they've survived, but sometimes it's cruel families. You can be the next one."

"What about my children?"

“There’s a shaman about six days from here. Maybe he will want a wife,” she says, leering at Tamke, “and maybe he will want some assistants.”

“I’m not giving my daughter to someone.” I look at Tamke. “Not unless she wants it.”

Tamke’s looking down, at her hands. I wonder how much she sees. I don’t really have to wonder what her thoughts are. “What else will I do?” she asks.

“You said that a blind woman can do a lot more than sit,” I say to Oruguaq. “Well, what would you have Tamke do?”

“I don’t need two assistants,” Oruguaq says, caring about us as much as about a block of ice falling out of a tree. “Or four. I don’t mind looking around for a place to put them, seeing as you don’t want to let them die, but we’re getting rid of them one way or another. Children are easier to get rid of than adults like you, or maybe I’d take one of them. And who else but a shaman’s going to want people who scare off animals in winter?”

“Maybe the shaman will end the illness on us.”

“I’m hoping he’ll do it on you, but four people is four times the magic. I don’t know if he’s strong enough for that, not all at once.”

“I will marry the shaman,” Tamke says quietly.

I don't like it and I say so, but it's like shitting to put out a snowstorm; what does it change? Only our family's illness has stopped our women being sent off to the nearest families. We have left our family and we have left that life.

It gets into me, like a bone splinter.

What use is being upset by it? This is the life of countless women. But the discomfort stays.

My sons are quiet, too tired and hungry to have an opinion on becoming a shaman's assistants. Probably worried about having a new person yelling at them. Well, it's better than going into the pot like a doll or a fox or an unwanted niece.

"Let's go see this shaman, then," I say, because just sitting isn't going to get us anywhere.

* * *

It's a tiring walk. Though Oruguaq's the one pulling the sled, she's strong and fast; she's spent the winter eating meat. We struggle to keep up, still carving our dolls because there isn't enough in Oruguaq's sled for all five of us to eat.

"The shaman's name is Sodortur," Oruguaq tells us as we walk. "He lives outside a village. They look after him; bring him meat and fuel sometimes."

"Won't we drive away their animals?" I ask.

"He lives far enough away that you won't. A bit over a half-day's walk."

Tamke stays silent all throughout what Oruguaq says, concentrating on not losing her footing. And I suppose it takes a lot of time for a woman to resign herself to a marriage.

I don't know what to say to her. I made her but I never got to be—never really wanted to be, never knew how to be—the one who comforted her or explained the world to her, except for telling her that nothing's ever easy and not many people are kind. All that's still true. I know it's not what she wants to hear.

“Will you visit me?” she asks one night when Oruguaq has fallen asleep, snoring loud as thunder. “I'm...” She swallows down her fear. “I think I'm going to be lonely.”

“In the summer, there'll be the village women.”

“What if they fear me, as the shaman's wife?”

There isn't an answer for that, but I can't stand the sight of tears in her eyes. She deserves better than loneliness, my skilled, brave Tamke. “A shaman's better than a normal man, probably. More interesting.” I go crude, because it's all I've got to offer her. “Maybe he'll shape-change during sex.”

Tamke, who was about to say something sad and unhelpful like “I hope so,” starts laughing, properly cackling like an old woman. So I tell her what animals her husband will change into, even though I'm not sure if eagles have penises, and Tamke's whole body shakes like the eagle's already down

there. “Now you *have* to visit,” she says when she can finally speak again, “and find out if it’s really like that.”

* * *

The shaman’s tent is small and conical, with smoke escaping from the flap at the top. It’s in a small clearing with chopped wood stacked outside it, mostly covered in the snow that makes all the ground and trees white. While we stop—Tamke and the boys and me, all of us looking at the place where they will live if they’re lucky—Oruguaq walks right up to the entrance flap and pulls it open and goes inside.

“Should we follow her?” There’s fear in Tamke’s quiet voice.

“No point waiting till our noses freeze off to get an invitation.”

So I lead them inside, my frightened daughter and my silent sons, to where Sodortur the shaman and Oruguaq are sitting on the fur-covered floor of the shaman’s smoke-filled tent. Something’s cooking. My stomach cramps. The shaman watches as we all sit around the fire, crowding the tiny tent, coughing. The air inside the tent is hot. I’d forgotten what hot feels like. I start removing furs.

The shaman is wearing all white furs, fox-thick, and over them an apron covered in detailed embroidery. I can’t help staring at it. It’s just like the patterns my sons carve on the

dolls, but all in color: red and white and blue and yellow. There's more of the embroidery on his fur jacket, down the front where it fastens shut, and I see some on his boots too. Then there are the metal pendants hanging off his outfit everywhere, carved with various symbols. I wonder when he has the time to do all that embroidery and carving—but then I remember that he has the villagers to bring him at least some of his food. If he's lucky, there are days in a row he only goes outside to empty the piss-pot and take more wood off the pile.

“So which one of these two is to be my wife?” he asks, gesturing to me and Tamke. “The younger one, I hope.”

His voice is high.

“Yes,” Oruguaq says. “Her name is Tamke. And those are the boys who'll assist you with trapping and wood-chopping in summer, if you take them. Bomak and Turkam. Kegulan is mine.”

I don't like the way she says that. It's my choice to go along with her. Except it's not, really.

“Hmm!”

And that's all Sodortur says to us. He starts conferring with Oruguaq in a quieter voice, and because he speaks our language a bit differently I can't figure out what he's saying to her.

Meanwhile my sons are staring around the tent with wide eyes, at the bright-clothed shaman and his myriad tools and objects hanging around the tent and the stewpot, which they want to get a bowl into as much as I do. I'm glad they're taking an interest in what's happening. Tamke just stares through the smoke at her husband. After a little while she whispers, "The shaman sounds like a woman."

I smack her on the arm. "He is a *shaman*." They cross the boundaries between this world and the upper and lower worlds. What's the boundary between woman and man after that? Doesn't Tamke know any of the stories?

"So...."

"So he's a man, even if he..." and I drop my voice as quiet as I can "...has bits like ours."

"Oh." I can see her mind getting quite quickly to how sex between them will work. A mixture of surprise and mirth crosses her face. "Well, you warned me there'd be shape-changing," she whispers, with a tiny giggle.

I smack her again. "Show the shaman some respect."

If he takes offence at Tamke, if he refuses her, if he mistreats her....

My slap puts tears in her eyes. "I'm just...." Frightened. I know. The shaman's bits aren't her worries.

“From what I hear, marriage is often not what the woman expects,” I say. Sometimes it’s even more brutal. I don’t say that. “Work hard for him and it might surprise you by being a good marriage.” I never thought I’d have to say such things to her. I thought it’d be a life of going blind and telling her to work harder to keep me full of dolls.

I hold onto her as she cries onto my shoulder.

“I’ll take her,” Sodortur says, “and I’ll take the boys. Kegulan’s illness will take a day and a night to end. My wife and assistants will have to live with their illness for a bit. Tamke, go outside and get more wood for the fire.”

That’s how my daughter’s marriage begins.

Sodortur instructs me to sit beside him on the hide of a bear and he blindfolds me with a strip of unknown hide, stuffs berries in my mouth and starts humming something. I try not to gag on the berries. As surreptitiously as possible, I eat a few.

The smoke in the tent thickens and I start to choke. I hear Tamke moving about as the shaman orders her to, doing her best not to fumble and trip. I hear my sons coughing. The shaman keeps up his hum and starts a beat on a drum. I clench my jaw and swallow down more of the berries to help me breathe better. The ones still in my mouth start leaking bitter juices.

The smoke thickens and thickens and I start breathing smoke instead of air. Sodortur's drum is beating in time to my heart, or is it the other way round? I can't feel my body anymore. Very distantly, I wonder what type of berries he's put in my mouth.

I'm a heartbeat, blind and mute, pounding, pounding, hot, cold, so hot I burn, so cold I burn.

I'm sitting on a hide, my whole body aching, my mouth swollen. Sodortur removes the blindfold and I see him with the drum in his lap. I see Tamke making a meal. I see Oruguaq and my sons sitting by the fire. My sons are talking to each other, but they stop when they realize I'm awake.

I don't know what boundaries Sodortur sent me across, but I feel exhausted like I've been traveling for at least a day and a night.

"Sleep," Sodortur tells me. "In the morning you will be ready to leave."

Not cursed. Not eating dolls through another winter.

I fall back onto the bear hide and straight into sleep.

* * *

Saying goodbye to them is difficult. My sons are starting to look keen, although they go still whenever Sodortur looks at them. I think they'll be fine. Tamke looks sad. I hold her for a long time.

“He just orders me around,” she whispers. “I keep tripping. What will he do with me if my eyesight goes completely before he can heal me?”

I feel all cold inside, not like during the boundary-crossing but like I’ve been left outside to die. “I don’t know.” I want to be more helpful. “Remember that you can upset his relationship with the village by going near it and scaring off the people’s animals.”

“I don’t want to do that,” she says.

“Let him think otherwise.”

“I will.”

“And spend time with the women in summer. That’s how women survive in this kind of life.”

“I will.”

I breathe in the smell of her, smoky and sweaty from her cooking, and I tell her I will visit her. I mean it. I also want to see how my sons grow as the shaman’s assistants. They won’t become shamans unless he sees the talent in them, but maybe they’ll finally fit into themselves in some other way. I smell both of them, both smoky—but each a bit different—and words suddenly swell up in my throat, stuck there.

It’s time to go. Oruguaq is standing by her sled looking impatient, with the harness in her hands. I walk away from my children without looking back. I take the sled’s harness and put

it on and follow Oruguaq through the falling snow into the taiga.

* * *

My work begins when I see the sea for the first time. It's spring. The ice is slowly cracking open like skulls, creaking and groaning and fighting against the rising temperature. The sun has brought its reindeer back into the sky, and the air sometimes goes a little bit above freezing; warm enough that I bare my arms as I pull the sled. I have an affinity with reindeer now. I look up at the sky and acknowledge them as friends.

Oruguaq hasn't pulled the sled since I joined her, and I've decided that she just wants a reindeer who talks back sometimes rather than a proper assistant—and then she says, “Do you see those tents by the shore? They belong to the seal-people. I haven't sat with them in over three hundred years. So we will sit with them, and afterwards I will teach you how to add to the book.”

“Huh,” is all I say as I follow her down the slope to the sea.

In-between the ice-cracks, I can see water. It goes all the way out to the horizon. I can't tear my eyes off it. Where are the trees?

I'm glad when we're among the tents, all tall and thin and ragged in the wind. I pretend they're trees.

Then I start to see the seal-people, or some of them; dark lumps of flesh on chunks of ice. There are small faces at their sides. “The mothers,” Oruguaq says, noticing my attention. “We won’t be talking to them. Look.” She points ahead, at a cluster of the lumpen animals.

They don’t flee me. I’m still not quite used to that.

One of them regards us with curiosity on its long-whiskered face. It’s handsome, for an animal—much more handsome when, a moment later, it turns into a man.

His seal-skin falls to the ground and he steps off it, ignoring it, already clad in sturdy hide leggings and a thick coat and boots. A shame. I like the look of him: taller and a bit darker than the men I’m used to, fat with health. He’s a welcome break from looking at Oruguaq’s old face.

He speaks to Oruguaq in a language I have never heard.

“Unfortunately we will not be able to speak in your language,” she says in the one I know. “My assistant has not yet learned it.”

“Welcome to my village,” he says to me, and I don’t think I’ll have trouble understanding him. I’m starting to get used to dialects after so many weeks of traveling. “My name is Shore.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I reply.

“Do you both need a place to sleep?”

“We only need to stay with you for a day or two,” Oruguaq says.

“Nonsense. You must stay longer. We never have visitors, and we want to make sure you have eaten well before we send you on. Our clam stews are the best you’ll ever eat—you’ll be as fat as us in a week.”

Behind him, the seal-people bellow and snort. I can’t tell if it’s agreement or just normal seal-noises.

Laughing, Oruguaq says, “I’ve never been able to refuse a good stew.”

My stomach agrees with her.

All at once the seal-people discard their skins and become men—who take orders from Shore to tidy up the main tent and get the fire started and stew the clams. Their skins remain in a heap on the shore. Oruguaq and I are led directly to the tent, where furs are laid out for us to sit on and the pot is quickly set to bubbling. Shore sits with us while the other men finish bringing in furs and clams and bowls. Then they join us, and the storytelling starts.

I find out that the seal-men love to tell stories about themselves. Most of these stories involve fighting bears and whales—whatever those are—and fighting over their women and having sex with their women. I’ve never heard men brag about that before. I sit with my bowl of hot clam stew in my

hands, thinking that I could be one of the women they're discussing. How he mounted her! How she moaned!

I wonder, as I often do, how Tamke is being treated and how my sons are faring. If this is how the shaman thinks of her.... I feel sick.

The seal-men are telling their stories so loudly that they don't notice when I get up, as if to use the piss-pot, and keep on walking, right out the tent, right down to the shore where the ice butts against the pebbles.

The very edge of the sea is churning ice and liquid, but I walk along the shore like I'm prospecting a river for a safe place to cross, until I find a still calm place where I can step out onto the ice. To get from chunk to chunk I have to jump carefully, but I've been crossing rivers since I was hip-high; I make it out to the first of the seal-women, nursing her pup.

She sheds her seal-skin. Unlike the men, she picks it up again and wraps it around the fur-clad infant for another layer of protection. The infant needs it, out here on the ice where the wind's teeth are wicked-sharp. I huddle in my hides and hood beside them.

"Hello," the mother says shyly, in my language. "Have the men fed you well?"

"Yes. They're very kind."

Her dark eyes are lowered.

Silence grows between us.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” I say, suddenly awkward. “It’s just that the men are....” I’m not sure how she’ll take my honesty, but I’m tired after all those stories. “They keep telling stories about mating and fighting, and it stopped being interesting.”

I see the twitch of her lips.

“Usually I talk to the women when I come to a new village,” I say. “Is it all right for me to sit with you?”

“Oh, well, they might not like it, but....” Her gaze drifts upwards, to my eyes. “I would like to talk to you.”

I have a feeling I’ve violated a taboo, but if the woman—the one under the taboo—doesn’t mind, then does it matter? I’m not sure. Or maybe it’s the infant that’s under the taboo, but surely the mother’s a better arbiter of that than the men far off in the tents.

Well, I’ll find out how bad it is when I get back to the shore.

“What is your name?” the woman asks.

“Kegulan. Yours?”

“Gytyn.” That’s different to Shore. Or maybe he translated his. “It was a gift from my mother, who received it from her mother before her, who met a shore-dwelling woman with that name. They developed a very close relationship—they were lovers. When they parted, Gytyn told my grandmother that she

could take her name to remember her by. The men call me Swell.”

I feel hot under my furs, like someone’s lit a fire under my belly. *They were lovers.*

“Gytyn,” I say, because it’s clear as the cloudless sky which name she prefers, “they....” I stumble. Oh, I like to fuck men—I like the look of them—but women.... I never knew other women did that, besides me and Pasan one long summer when we’d both got our wombs full from the men and wanted not just talking, wanted a different touch. That winter, rumors told her about my family’s illness and she never talked to me again. Sometimes I wondered if my stillbirth the next spring was because of what Pasan and I did. “Tell me more about your grandmother and the shore-dwelling woman. Will you? I’d like to hear it.”

“I know that Gytyn the shore-woman had a beautiful voice, like the wind coming down off the cliffs—hard and strong. It almost blew my grandmother back out to sea. She fought against it and found Gytyn teaching her daughter how to catch fish. Something had happened and Gytyn had lost her village—or they lost her—so it was just Gytyn and the girl. My grandmother spent the summer with them, nursing her own child and sending it out to sea to learn how to swim. The two mothers became lovers. Then winter came and they parted, and

that was that: winter separated them like it does the water from the sky.”

I sigh.

Gytyn, sitting up, with her skin-wrapped infant in her lap, smiles at me and places a mittened hand on mine. “Will you tell me about yourself and the journey you are on?”

I tell her everything—and she tells me more about her grandmother and the shore-woman, how they sang shore-songs and seal-songs together, how her grandmother brought clams to the rocks and tasted a stew different to the one the seal-people make.

It’s only because someone starts shouting from the shore that we stop our stories.

Oruguaq is standing by the sled, looking ready to go.

“It was a fairly bad taboo, then,” I say. There’s no sign of the seal-men.

“They think so.” Gytyn shrugs. “My pup will not be harmed by your presence, any more than my grandmother’s was by spending the spring and summer with Gytyn. *That* pup is now one of the adult males, and he should know better.”

“You’ll be all right? They won’t be angry?”

“They will forget when mating comes around.”

“Mmm.”

“I will be fine,” Gytyn says, smiling. “They are a small part of my life. Go. Come back, one day, later in the summer, and I will introduce you to my daughters, who are all called Gytyn, although maybe this one will be Kegulan, if you would like that?”

“Yes. That would be....” I stumble again. “I’ll come back.”

At this rate, I’ll have to retrace all my steps. Oh well. Oruguaq will have to cope. I press my face to Gytyn’s and breathe in her scent: salt and warmth and milk. Then I return to shore.

Oruguaq and I leave the seal-people’s village in silence, until after about an hour of walking she smacks me on my head and tells me that the men never want to see us again.

“The women do,” I retort.

“Hmm!”

Two days later, still following the jagged line of the groaning coast, we set up the tent and Oruguaq gets out the book and says that now I’ll learn how to really help her.

There’s a strong wind gusting all around our tent, roaring like a giant bear. There’s the sea, cracking and creaking and groaning, like it’s alive. Maybe it is. More importantly, I wonder how I’m going to hear a word Oruguaq says.

“First, you need to learn how to bind new pages into the book.” Somehow I don’t have any trouble at all hearing her. It’s

like her mouth is against my ear. “I’ve already tanned the pages and dried out sinew to sew them with, so you can get started straight away on sewing. You need to be *careful*. I’d tell you to do it like you’re making clothes for a ceremony, but I know your family hasn’t had ceremonies in a long time.”

Even after my family tried to kill me, I hate how she talks about them like they’re ridiculous. She should try having that illness on her. If she’s given herself the duty of recording the stories of all the peoples in the taiga and the other endless places, shouldn’t she respect them all a bit more?

“I can sew carefully,” I say. “Just show me where to do it.”

So she holds open the book at the back and directs me to sew several thin hides against it. I pull the book closer to me, thread the stiff but pliable sinew on her needle, and start sewing.

Once I’ve done it, Oruguaq goes, “Hmm!”

“Good enough for you?”

“I’m glad you’re going to be useful. But you can’t write, so give the book back to me.”

She gets a fox-hide bag and opens it, revealing little transparent containers of black dye.

“This is ink. I make it from all sorts of things. That’s one of the things you’ll learn how to do later. But for now, watch.”

I do. The fox-hide bag also contains a long narrow piece of wood with a pointed tip, which Oruguaq dips into the container and draws across the page in her writing-signs like a water-skater across a stream. The ink has a strange smell and I breathe it in, entranced. I watch every mark as it's formed: all sharp points and gentle swirls and dots above and below the signs.

Then Oruguaq draws a seal-man discarding his skin, with his long dark human hair a-tangle.

I won't argue with Oruguaq if she tells me I'm not allowed to do the drawings—it'd take me at least forty years to get that good—but I'd like to write.

"Tell me what you've written," I say.

"I've written about how we found them lying about in their seal-skins on the beach with their tents in disarray, how they fixed the tents for us, how they told me, while you were off breaking a taboo, that they're getting bored of their human-skins and want to spend all their time as seals now. I've recorded some of their seal-skin stories: fighting over the females, mating, eating."

"The most boring stories I've ever had to sit through," I mutter, and to my surprise Oruguaq laughs.

"You broke a taboo talking to that woman."

I snort. "Even *you* care about that?"

“I care about being made welcome.” She’s smiling at me, warm as a summer morning. It’s unsettling. “This is why I like to have an assistant. It is far easier for a person to break unnecessary taboos like that one if there is someone else to apologize for them and blame their youth. When you get old we’ll have to blame that, but for now you’re just young-looking enough that we can blame residual silliness. I think those dolls must be good for your skin.” She taps her own wrinkled face. “Too late for me, I think.”

“Huh.” I’m twenty-five; closer to death than birth. At least, I should be. Oruguaq seems to keep her assistants going for far longer than the taiga normally permits.

“Keep talking to the people who get ignored,” she says. “And now tell me, what stories did your woman tell?”

“She’s called Gytyn.”

I can already tell from the size of the book—it’s big, it’s still playing tricks on my eyes, but it’s definitely finite—that we can’t record every single story we hear, but I tell her everything Gytyn told me about her grandmother and the shore-woman. I’ve never been good at turning stories into the kind of art you want to hang on your ear and hear forever. I feel stupid when I tell stories—I can think them prettily, then when I open my mouth it’s just woodpecker tapping that comes out—but it’s good to tell this one.

There's nothing Oruguaq says to make me think she's disgusted by the story. Maybe it *is* normal for a woman to love another woman. Maybe it's much better that I've become Oruguaq's assistant than I first thought.

I think of Tamke, who might spend the rest of her life unhappy. Might not. Might.

Life's varied in ways I can't count. Satisfaction, too.

"I like that story," Oruguaq says, and turns to the other side of the page to write it there. She draws the two women together, holding hands, bare-breasted like it's the middle of summer. They're smiling. Happy. Their children play on the seal-skin. Then Oruguaq writes.

* * *

"This is what it is to be my assistant," Oruguaq says in the night, when we're wrapped tight in furs around the fire, eating the stew I made with some caught fish. "Lots of walking. Pulling the sled. Cooking. I saved you from being eaten and I'm old and a long time ago I brought the sun into the world, so you owe me your whole life's worth of work."

I can't argue with most of that, but technically it's Tamke who saved me from being eaten.

"And you'll get to add stories to this book that maybe no one else cares about, but we do. We remember them. If you get a bit better at storytelling, maybe you can help me tell these

stories to some of the people we meet, the ones who *do* care; keep the stories alive in more and more places.”

“Will you teach me to read? I want to know what’s on the other pages.”

Oruguaq smiles. “What do you think we’ll be doing this winter?”

That’s plenty of time to convince Oruguaq that she’ll get even more stories with two assistants. If Tamke wants it.

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Alex Dally MacFarlane lives in London, where she is pursuing an MA in Ancient History. When not researching ancient gender and narratives, she writes stories, found in Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons, Shimmer, and The Other Half of the Sky. Poetry can be found in Stone Telling, Goblin Fruit, The Moment of Change, and Here, We Cross. She is the editor of Aliens: Recent Encounters (2013) and The Mammoth Book of SF Stories by Women (forthcoming in late 2014). Visit her online at www.alexdailymacfarlane.com.

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THE GOOD DEATHS, PART II

by Angela Ambroz

The day Augustus died, I heard the voice of the Lord Up Above telling me to take my smashers and destroy the saloon in Kiowa, Kansas.

Now, I had never been to Kiowa before, but I—a meek human woman, a simple, plain-spoken woman and widow and sufferer—would never think to question Our Lord and Savior.

I went to Kiowa. I stood in the streets of Kiowa. I found some rocks and weighed them in my hands.

They felt like shards of the Holy Lord's righteousness itself, firm and unconditional, and they crashed into the glass windows with a satisfying commotion. Of course, the men—those drunkards and louts—came screaming outside, brandishing weapons and their johns and all sorts of foul language. What can you expect from such types?

When they saw what I was—and I am a woman who tends to be noticed—some laughed, some continued hollering, but none dared stop me. I am big, and I am powerful. Augustus once said I must have been a bulldog in a previous life, and indeed I welcomed that supposition.

I towered above those men, and—by the Lord—I threw the *Hell Realm* out of those stones.

After ten minutes of work, all the windows were smashed wide open, bits of glass lying like glittering teeth scattered in the muck, and I had sweated through my undergarments and bodice. The men stood around me, quiet now and staring.

“There!” I said. “You wet-brained fools! There’s your fun and there’s your damnation for the day. Now get the hell out and get on home to your poor wives and little ones! And don’t you dare try to clean anything up!”

“At least grace us with a name, fair lady!” one grime-marinated idiot yelled from a safe distance. “Or tell us who sent you!”

“Gentlemen—and I am funning you in calling you that—the Almighty Savior of mankind sent me: His Holy Gloriousness, the Buddha Himself. Now who’s gonna argue with that?”

“He speak to you personal, did He?”

“Every day! Every damn day!”

Every day through the grass and the soil and the sky, there He’d be. I saw His righteous face in the tumbling clouds, and I heard His laughter in the brook. I knew it sounded insane, but I had seen Him everywhere in Kansas—and in parts of Texas and Missouri, too—and I was sure He disapproved of all this

drinking. Just like He disapproved of the war, and of the slaves, and of all our damn human stupidity.

* * *

I was mending my bodice the day the man came.

I smelled him before he knocked; an earthy, unwashed scent, layered with old booze. He came to the window, peeked in, and then gave a polite rap. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, felt his shadow on my back, and pretended not to notice him. He rapped again.

Muted: “Ma’am?”

“You go on back where you came from!” I yelled over my shoulder. “We don’t take in tramps here.”

He tapped his fingers against the window, drumming. “Ain’t a tramp, ma’am. Doctor Leonidas Lazarus Suttner. A professional. I’m a physician. Been called out to one of the mining towns, up in Indian territory. Was wondering if I could stay a night or two to get my bearings and some rest. Been traveling for weeks, you see.”

My Augustus had been a doctor. The Lord Buddha said coincidences were a sacred thing.

Reluctantly, I turned around.

A uniform gray color, his hair was wild and his eyes were wild, and he looked half-dead to me, all pale and rheummy as he was. He also looked like he had lost his mustache comb, and

his shaving blade, and his soap. A yellowy white shirt could be seen poking through patches on his army jacket; a jacket, I noticed, which had been turned inside out.

“Do you drink liquor?” I asked.

He stared at me hard. “No, ma’am.”

I squinted, transmitting my acknowledgement that he was a damn filthy liar. A fog, that’s what the Lord said lies were. Especially intensely lied lies.

I turned back to my needlework.

“You can stay in the barn then. There’s a stream about a mile off. I expect you saw it when you arrived. If you leave now, you might have enough light to do some washing and come back. There is a stink about you, sir. It is permeating my window.”

I heard him walk away; boots crunching in the grass. The footsteps faded, returned. “I can’t seem to locate the barn, ma’am.”

“It’s the stall with the half-starved cow in it, you cock-eyed fool! Don’t get smart!”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

* * *

So now we were two fools. Me and good ol’ Leonidas Lazarus.

He seemed to cringe at being called ‘Leonidas’, so I stuck to ‘Suttner’ or ‘you there’. He told me his friends called him ‘Len’ or ‘Leo’, but I thought that was just an undignified thing to call any man. The Lord gave us our names, as they were. Why did we need to go infantilizing ourselves, clinging to a childhood softness we no longer had any right to?

My house—a plain soddy in a field’s depression—didn’t allow much air in or out, and so I kept the door open when I did my cooking. Leo Suttner hovered in the doorway. The sun was bright; blinding me to anything but a silhouette. I worked on, pushing the grits around the pot and getting a slab of dough ready and refusing to acknowledge him or the muffled growl in his stomach.

Augustus said you never let a man come into your home like that—men and women being unattended, and the third present was the demon Mara!—but I didn’t abide by that no more. Not when I had to tend to the labor and the farm and the selling of our measly crop, or else die by starvation. Furthermore, I was taller and bulkier than every man I had ever met. Furthest most, upon dying, Augustus had turned into a Hungry Ghost, of all things. A damn thin-necked, fat-bodied Ghost that I had had to chase off the farm just two days after the funeral. That alone permanently proscribed him from giving me any advice from beyond the grave ever again.

Suttner, though. Suttner was a sly, small thing. I didn't worry about my ability to overpower him or chase him away, should it have come to that.

“Beautiful country, ‘round here,” he said.

“Where you from?” I packed the dough together, punched it, pulled it apart.

“Back east.”

“Oh, no kidding. You mean you wasn't raised on Indian lands?”

He pursed his lips. “May I come in?”

I gave him a long look. Finally: “If you must.”

The stove was smoking up the house, and he coughed and waved his hat in front of his face as he approached. I watched him enter, tracking him with what folks called my bulldog glare.

He sat himself at the table—dragging the chair against the swept dirt floor—then he placed his hands on the tabletop, kneading his knuckles. Trying to hide the trembling in his fingers. I wondered what this one would turn into when he died. Probably a garbanzo bean, all pale and slimy and useless.

“So, you fought in the war then, Mister Inside-Out Coat?”

He rolled his shoulders with a wince. “You have seen past my disguise, I guess.”

“Is that thing blue or gray? For the life of me, I cannot tell beyond the muck.”

“I was an army physician, and now I practice to the civilians. Just a physician. As I was back East, and as I shall be out West. I request no more historical questions.”

He was kneading his knuckles hard, so I let it be. After a moment’s silence, he cleared his throat.

“Ma’am, you never told me your name.”

“You can call me Carrie Amelia Nation.”

“Like ‘Hold A. Country’?”

I said nothing but kept working the dough. My old friend, the fury deep within me, my angry heart, loomed distantly on the horizon—hurtling towards me like a tornado on the plains, dancing in its happy rage.

“How do you spell that?” he asked.

“Any damn way I please, is how!”

* * *

Oh, Earth. Oh, Kansas. Oh, soil.

There were days—most days—that I hated my life, this burden that Augustus had left me. This filthy farm. This pitiful crop. But still I pulled up my skirts and pushed down the hoe and got yelling after those lazy sons of bitches calling themselves day-workers.

And, in the blazing heat and dust, rare moments of clarity.

I could feel the Lord Buddha's holy presence pushing against my forearms and hands as I dug into the earth. I could sense His happiness at what I was doing; expanding my plot, setting down the seeds and digging my roots into the ground. He said to seek no attachment. And what better detachment than uprooting yourself from hundreds of miles away, dragging your sorry items halfway across America (discarding many of them along the way), and then planting yourself down in some new, wild, godforsaken territory. A tumbling weed to Nirvana.

Anyway, sometimes the soil on my so-called farm was so dry you could inhale half of it. But by the brook, little patches glistened wet and moist with promise.

The Holy Lord Himself had had bad soil too, I reckoned. I didn't know much about far-off Lumbini, Holy Land of His Magnificent Birth, but I had heard preachers tell of its hard, clay-like soil and shrubby flora and pathetic little patches of grass. The Lord Up Above may have been born an Earthly prince, but His kingdom sure sounded dry to me.

What a nice feeling, when the shared cosmic suffering of His teachings felt so *true*.

* * *

The second night, Leonidas Lazarus Suttner did not appear to be readying himself to continue on his 'travel' to the

‘mining town’ in ‘Indian territory’, nor did he appear to be sleeping.

Instead, I heard his muffled voice and low thumps in the barn, and then I saw his shadow moving across each window in succession: north side, east side, south side. Flit, flit, flit. He paced a perimeter around the house before stepping through the tall grassy field to the south, where he walked and walked out into the darkness until I finally lost sight of him.

I wondered if he had gone away forever, but, some time later, he reappeared for another few loops around the cow, the soddy, the edge of the field. By then, it was two in the morning.

Drumming on the window.

I had the single candle burning, just enough light to let me work on my mending, and my eyes couldn’t adjust to the darkness so soon. But I pointed my face in his direction and growled, “What?”

“Acknowledging the inappropriateness, hoping you feel trustful and generous, can I come in?”

“Now? You want to come in? Now?”

“Well. We’re both obviously up, Miss Nation.”

“*Missus* Nation.”

“My apologies.” I could see him clearly now, fading into view, wide-eyed and fidgety. “So, can I come in?”

I shrugged. “If you must.”

He hustled inside, closing the door quickly. He was hunched over, stomping both feet, keeping his hands jammed under his armpits and glancing periodically back at the black.

“You afraid of the night, then?” I squinted, trying to poke the thread through the needle.

“A touch.” He pulled the chair from the table—*his* chair, it was becoming—and sat a distance from me. “I renew my apologies, ma’am. I’ll just be a few moments.”

“Bet you could use a drink now, huh?”

He stared.

“Oh, don’t think you’ve fooled me, Suttner. I smelled the stink on you when you were just coming up to my porch.”

He rolled his eyes and readjusted himself, trying to get warmer. He seemed to be fetching around for an appropriate response, eventually smiling a little. “So you call that a ‘porch’ then?”

I put down my mending. “Why do you mock poor ladies thus? All right, I’m humble. And if you haven’t noticed, I am running this entire operation *alone*.”

“I concede. Very admirable. And Mister Nation’s....”

“Dead.”

He shifted in his seat. “The war?”

“Liquor!”

“I see.”

“But, yes, he was also in that chaotic operation. A sawbones. Much like yourself, I imagine. Came out here not nine months ago. Came out here to chase the devil, it looks like!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“The freshness of it, I suppose.” Suttner shrugged. “Nine months.”

“Yeah. Well. We all got our wheels to break.”

“Amen, amen.”

* * *

The Lord spoke to me that night. He said to take my hatchet, dust it off, and get to those towns and saloons out there. Those damnable pits of damnation.

“HATCHET THEM, CARRIE NATION!” the Lord’s voice thundered in my ears. “HATCHETATE IT ALL, IN MY NAME! I WILL STAND BY YOU!”

No human—no animal, no Hungry Ghost, no Demi-God, no particle of disease roasting in the sunlight—could have resisted that call.

I pulled my bodice tighter. I tied up my boots. I smoothed down my skirts and tucked strands of hair behind my ears. And then I opened the door, stepped out into the chilled night, and took the hatchet from beside the door.

I set out for town.

* * *

Protection, Kansas. Four miles away.

When I arrived, the first glimmers of dawn were just poking over the eastern horizon. It was a red dawn: pure and angry.

Protection itself was quiet. The saloon's door was closed. No one in sight.

I began to smash.

* * *

I don't recall exactly when, or how, or why it all went wrong. Some confusion transpired between the friendly Fury inside myself and the Lord's natural fury, external to me; the rage in the sun and the dust and the winds.

First: a fire started in the saloon. I had smashed my way inside, and I had struck a keg, knocking over a stove. Liquid and fire had come pouring out, a river of fiery booze all the way back up to the bar.

I fled.

Now, outside, the air was picking up, and licks of flame were stretching higher and higher into the sky. I let my hatchet fall to the ground. More flames; the next house went alight. And another.

Beyond the edge of the town, a gyrating tower of brown-white air was pulling itself together, upright, belly dancing like a harlot. And it was hurtling towards Protection, lurching towards the town as if consciously intending to strike.

Air that whipped my hair around; that took my glasses and threw them off my face. Air that bit at me like the demons of the Hell Realm, tugging at my skirts and kicking up sand in my face.

Heat from the saloon: sparks flying faster than I had ever seen, shooting through the street and lighting up the post office, the barber shop, the homes of these people that I did not know. It was a fight between the fire and the wind, and I was in the middle.

“Get into the cellar!” someone yelled.

What cellar? Fire was blowing through the town, gutting its buildings, smoking up any protective shelters we might have had. People were running out of their homes, coming to expose themselves to the elements just as the tornado was laying into town. I considered stealing a horse and running back to the farm, where I could fall to my knees and pray to the Lord Buddha to forgive me, forgive me—

“Everyone get into the bank vault!” a man cried. His stiff collar was flapping away from him. “It ain’t gonna go up in the

fire—it's the safest we'll be! Frank, round everyone up that you can find and get them to the vault!"

The vault.

It was crowded, dimly lit. Huddled children. A girl in tears. I rubbed my forehead with both hands, scraping sooty grime away with my fingernails. If I pinched my nose, I could smell ash in the mucus.

"What in the hell is happening out there?" a man asked. "How did that fire get started?"

"Damned lightning, I guess." Another: fat, red nose. "Oh, sorry, Ruth."

"Damned!"

"Shh! Ruth! Proper folk don't use that word."

"Well, the Lord Buddha Himself must be angry about something."

"Ha! Sure."

I held my hands together, pressing hard. Beyond the vault, we could hear crashes, booms, and the high wail of the wind.

"All those folk out there...."

"If they're smart, they went into their cellars. Wind probably blew the fire out."

"Yeah. Probably."

"Hell of a coincidence."

"What?"

“The fire. Right, ma’am?”

I looked up. The man’s eyes were watery, his white beard yellowed at the tips. He was looking straight at me. The others in the vault noticed and turned as well, curious. Suddenly I was noticeable again. Suddenly, I was the six-foot monster again. I heard a child’s laugh.

“I reckon you know something about that fire,” the old man said. “Don’t you, Miss?”

“My name is Missus Carrie Nation, and I do indeed know about that fire.” I fixed him with my glare. “So what is it to you?”

“Wait, what do you mean, you know about it?” The bank man looked back and forth between us. “Jeremiah, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t know, sir.” He looked at me. “What am I talking about, *Missus Nation*?”

I inhaled. “I suppose you could say the fire is my fault.” Movement, murmurs. “But I don’t regret what I have done, nor do I despair at the tornado. Why not? Well, because they are both a punishment of the Lord Buddha for our sins, for all our fighting and money-making and boozing, and I say we should be happy to receive them!”

I puffed up my chest, swelling it nice and big. But, in their wide eyes staring back at me, I saw the great abyss opening up —and heard the silence in our tomb, and in the town outside.

* * *

When the vault opened, Protection was gone.

Milky sunlight gleamed through the dust-colored cloud cover, and suddenly the world was completely flat again. Most of the buildings had been reduced to blackened cinders or blown-apart shells lying in sad little heaps. A few had survived; maroon skeletons with their windows blown out. Dead animals, rubbish, pieces of someone's wardrobe, and a broken wheel were lying strewn about the thoroughfare. I saw human legs poking out from under an overturned cart, and my jaw ached something fierce.

“Frank!” someone cried.

A horse approached.

“Mr. Gibson, I found a doc!”

The young man, Frank, advanced; Leonidas Lazarus Suttner bouncing in the saddle behind him. Suttner saw me and gave me a look.

Then he addressed the bank man, Gibson, standing behind me. “Doctor Leo Suttner.”

“Thank the Lord Almighty you're here, Doc. I'm W.P. Gibson, chief officer of Protection Town Company and Bank.

Our regular physician's out doing the rounds in the rest of the county, so it is a blessing indeed to have found you."

Suttner clambered off the horse, landing on unsteady feet. He had his bag with him; a medical kit. Just like Augustus. I meditated on this comparison while tonguing my loose tooth.

"Point me in the direction where my services are needed."

And so we spent the rest of the day, accounting for the destruction. I shied away from the townsfolk, sitting on an uprooted plank of wood, waiting my turn. Or waiting for what, I don't know. I just watched Suttner work, listened to the things he told people.

"Don't move it or try to raise it. I'll check it again in a day or two, but, so long as the bone knits properly, it'll be just fine."

A family was standing over the body of a young boy. The mother cried into her handkerchief. The father tugged at Suttner's elbow.

"Doc?" the man said. "Doc."

"His name?" Suttner kneeled.

"Romulus."

"Hi, Romulus. How are you doing?" Suttner kept speaking to the child, as if he could hear him. But I didn't see no movement. "Mind if I check this, son? Don't worry about nothing, you'll be fine. Just fine."

"Doc, I don't think—" the father began.

“Can you hold this for me?” Suttner asked, shifting his bag over. He sat back on his heels, heavily. “Oh, Romulus. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ....”

“What is it?” the father asked. “What’s wrong? You reckon we should take him to Greensburg?”

Suttner looked up. “Can I speak to you, sir?” He glanced at the mother. “Private?”

“Tell us both, Doc,” the mother said.

“All right. His back’s broken.”

“Romulus! Oh Lord, no, no—please!”

“Martha, please....” The father looked at Suttner, all shaky and pale. “Does that mean he’s—?”

“It won’t be long.” Suttner shook his head. “Jesus, I’m sorry. You should sit with him. Sit with him while he’s still around. I’m so sorry.”

The woman crumpled downwards, sinking into her hoop skirt like a deflating balloon. Her husband tumbled with her, knees giving out. They knelt over the boy, sobbing.

Suttner stood back up. I watched him. Our eyes met.

Others were running up to the family now, coming to console, or ask questions, or I don’t know what. Curious, sympathetic, goddamned vultures.

The final tally: three people dead. Fifteen wounded.

Suttner came to crouch in front of me, eyes red, hands wavering like leaves. Gently, he reached out and touched the bruise on my cheek. I tried not to fidget under his examination. He laid a knuckle against my swollen jaw. I hissed.

From this close, I could see the gray stubble, the grease in his hair, each oily smudge on his spectacles. He looked drab and sorrowful, like the rest of Protection.

I started breathing fast. “I didn’t mean for none of this to happen.”

“I know you didn’t,” he murmured. “No one’s saying you did.”

“That’s not true. They’re all saying I did. Why’d you think I got my face near broken for? They’re gonna try to tell you this was all my fault. I bet they’ve already told you, haven’t they? But I didn’t bring no tornado to this town. I didn’t mean for no one to die.”

He stopped working and looked me in the eye. “Carrie, it ain’t your fault. And what those men did to you was *wrong*.”

“I did burn down the saloon though,” I kept blabbering. “But it was something of an accident. And all I said was that this was just the karma, coming back around. That ain’t so cruel, is it? It’s just the Teachings, is all!”

Suttner worked quietly. Without looking at me, he dug around in his bag, muttering under his breath. My scalp was

still sore from when that old Jeremiah had pulled at my hair, jerking my head around.

Suttner pulled a bottle out and poured something into a handkerchief. “Well, you won’t be losing any teeth.” He dabbed at my lip. “Sorry if it stings.”

I snorted, sucking up snot, embarrassed that my nose was running all over my lip and mouth. Embarrassed that I was suddenly falling apart, like the Protection houses, or that mother over there. I hadn’t lost anyone, so what did I care? And it was all law of the Lord, so what was I getting so tender for?

My tears burned hot, cutting into the scrapes on my cheeks.

“It’s all right, dear. Shh. It’s all right.” Suttner stared at my chin, saying it to me, or himself.

I grabbed the handkerchief from him and pressed it against my trembling lips, wanting to hide my whole face.

“Should we find someone to help that boy with his bardo?” I asked.

“No. No. We can leave them to it.”

“Suttner. Look at me.”

He did.

“You think I did wrong, don’t you? Say it. Say that you do.”

“I don’t, Carrie. I really don’t.”

I was shaking now with the sobs. “Why you got to lie like that? Why can’t you be straight? I’m always straight with you! No one’s straighter than I am!”

“I don’t disagree with that. Come on, hush now. It’ll be fine.”

A third voice: “What’s that elephant blubbering about?”

It was the old man from the bank vault: Jeremiah. My enemy. My Devadatta. He stood away from us, glaring, hands on hips.

“Ain’t this all what we should be ‘happy’ for?” he said. “Ain’t that what you said in there? That we ‘deserve’ it and all?”

“Oh, leave it alone, Mister Huxley,” a young woman said.

“Yeah, come on, Jeremiah.”

Jeremiah started gearing up for another insult, walking forward with mouth open, when Suttner spoke abruptly, turning around. “You leave off now.”

“What?”

“You are being foolishly provocative. If you keep goading her and she hits you, I will not provide you with my services. And she just might, given it’s one-on-one now. So go away, and good riddance to you.”

“Who the hell—? You ain’t even from around here!”

“Mister Huxley,” Gibson called from further off. “Would you just shut the hell up for a moment? And Doc, we need you over here, please.”

I cowered down into myself, searching for the Lord’s holy light, for His voice, wanting to get from Him some meaning, some explanation or, at least, some powerfully offensive rebuke to use against that old goat, Jeremiah. Instead, I found nothing: I found the abyss, a gaping maw, a mouth like a Hungry Ghost, begging me into it. I squeezed my eyes shut and chanted the Lord’s Prayer: Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum, oh om shanti shanti....

* * *

I didn’t sleep that night, and I didn’t hear no voices.

The Lord was quiet, maybe ashamed about what we had done. I laid awake in bed, still in my tornado clothes, staring at the ceiling and thinking about Augustus. Augustus who had been ten years older than me and grimy and sour-faced and had smelled like rancid butter. Augustus with his judgments and opinions and never-good-enough-ness. I had been too poor to re-do my entire wardrobe according to the proper full-, heavy-, and half-mourning periods, but I had tied the white armband every day for the past six months.

I had used to think that had been real grief, but now I felt different.

Sounds from outside: the peaceful buzz of a sleeping countryside. Still air. Kansas. Damned void-of-the-cosmos Kansas!

Every time I shut my eyes, I saw burnt buildings and broken-backed boys, and so I kept them open, and thought about how badly Augustus had smelled. And how strangely he had looked after his bardo: his Adam's apple shrinking inward, his neck elongating and his gut expanding like a newspaper cartoon about overly fat politicians.

What a shame it had been, to have Augustus turn Hungry Ghost on me like that. And in front of the Reverend, even.

I wondered when dawn would come.

Lord. Oh, Lord.

Outside, the sounds of a horse clopping, snorts, men's voices. I sat up and saw the shadow of Suttner pass.

"Suttner!" I whispered.

He heard me and stopped, glancing in the window. I motioned for him to enter.

He looked dizzy when he came in, and he leaned hard against the door when closing it. I saw him press his forehead against the wall, to rest or to push something into his brains, I don't know, and I heard his heavy breathing.

"Everyone," he slurred, "seen to. At least until tomorrow."

"Good," I said.

“How’s your jaw?”

“Not as sore as earlier,” I lied.

“Well, keep something cold on it. And don’t lean back too much.”

“I won’t. I’m not tired anyway.”

“You’ll have a rainbow of colors to go through before it heals.”

“I don’t care none about how I look. Never have.”

“Good mentality.” He sat heavily in the chair, burrowing his head in his arms. “Missus Nation, do you mind if I sleep inside tonight? Your cow tends to urinate on me.”

I didn’t mean to, but I laughed. Suttner smiled.

“Everyone’s all right then?” I asked.

“With some rest and some prayers against infection, they should be.”

“The Lord is merciful.”

Suttner just exhaled onto the table.

I stood. “I’ll make coffee.”

With the lamp and stove going, and the smell of coffee grounds bubbling murkily in the water, and another warm body in the room with me, the soddy felt almost home-like.

Suttner sat obediently and cradled the tin cup in both hands. I sipped my coffee, leaning against the counter, feeling massive and completely unwomanly. I wondered why I had

been born so big, as if the Earth wasn't made to my size. Then I speculated as to what damned fool decided what size women should be anyway.

Suttner indicated a picture on the wall. "You pray to the Saint Christ too?"

The saint had rosy cheeks and rosy lips; his head was cocked to one side. He looked gentle, healer-ish, clean and foreign.

"No. That's Mister Nation's. My faith don't include the saints. I don't reckon even Mister Nation cared for him, but it was supposed to bring luck to physicians, so we kept it in the house."

"And did it bring him that? Luck?"

I sipped. "None."

Suttner rolled the cup around in his hands, drawing his fingers over the rim. "The Finches asked me to see their son through his bardo," he said.

"The Finches?"

"Romulus."

"Oh."

"I said no, initially. That's preacher work, after all. Not my specialty. Not my work at all, to be blunt. I wouldn't know what..."—he rolled the cup, his voice falling—"wouldn't know what to do, really."

“Ain’t they got a preacher in town?”

“Don’t look like it.”

I sat in the other chair. “So are you gonna do it anyways?”

“I suppose I have to. I mean, I did some during the war. It was never very pleasant. The things... men turn into, what when they’ve seen what they’ve seen. Done what they’ve done....” He snapped his fingers. “Sometimes it’d happen like that. Fast as lightning. One second, alive. Then, dead. Then—like that!—into the bardo. And it was never a pleasant experience. Good bardos were rare there, as you can imagine. And those fast bardos. Well.” He was blinking fast; all agitated tics. “I suppose—I mean, I suppose a child like Romulus Finch would never bardo like that, of course. He’d—pass peaceably from this life to the next. Isn’t that what the Teachings say we should expect?”

I nodded mutely.

“‘State of mind in the final moments’ and all that bull.” He laughed humorlessly. “Though how in the hell am I to know what state of mind Romulus Finch found himself in when—when he passed on? He was probably shitting his pants with fright, for all I know. Pardon me. Or he probably had no idea what the hell was going on, if he was lucky.”

“Well, it ain’t just the last moments. It’s all the moments of the whole life. That, and some prayers from the family. So if Romulus was a good boy, and his parents....”

Suttner was staring at me witheringly, so I stopped.

“So are you gonna do it or not?” I asked again.

“Yes,” he said. “I did eventually say I would. I’ll need your help, though.”

“Me? What? No—I mean, why would—? That wouldn’t be right.”

“You’ve got to. You know the prayers and all. I don’t. Ain’t you always going on about religion?”

I shook my head. “No, no. Half the town hates me. I ain’t going there to hold their hands now.”

“Do not,” Suttner suddenly raised his voice, “let ignorant old fools like Jeremiah Huxley prevent you from doing a good deed!”

I stared. Suttner was red in the face. He was breathing hard out of his nose, like a starved, scrawny wolf, spooked and in the corner. Fast air, tornado gusts.

“You are coming with me! You are helping me with this!”

I opened my mouth to say something—and said nothing.

* * *

The Finches were Orthodox, but we didn’t have no white clothes.

Suttner found a strip of old gauze in his medical kit, and he tied that around his jacket sleeve a few times, making an armband. I found an off-white lace tea cozy and folded it into my dress's pocket.

“That’s as white as we gonna get.”

I grabbed a copy of the Canon and we set off for the Finch farm.

They had laid Romulus Finch in a patch of grass under an apple tree. The Finches had a tiny orchard that they tended to, and they told us that Romulus had always played in that orchard, inventing games about cowboys and Indians, Johnny Reb and Billy Yank, magicians from the Orient. The tree had his initials carved into the bark.

“We want him to wake up here. We want this to be the first thing he sees.”

I didn’t mention that even I knew Orthodox law said you should never bardo a body so close to its original home. That the whole point was that this life was *over*, and a new one was beginning, stripped of all its previous entanglements. I didn’t mention that when I had held Augustus’s bardo on the farm, he had plagued me with his ravenous Hungry Ghosting—eating up the crop, puking out cow shit, draining the stream—and I had been too embarrassed to call for a proper exorcizing, having instead to do it all myself.

Suttner knelt by the boy—who was porcelain pale now, looking cold and peaceful in the dappled sunlight—and placed a finger under the boy’s nose. I cracked open my Canon and started to read.

“Hark ye, all the winds do dissolve in the seventh cycle of mind dissolution, and, when this is observed, prepare ye for the clear light of death.”

We sang a couple verses of ‘Follow the Deer Into the King’s Arrow’ followed by ‘Another Turn of the Wheel’, droning and off-key, and then began the wait.

Now, professional preachers and holy men can pinpoint a bardo’s proper commencement down to the minute, but Suttner and myself only had a vague idea that Romulus Finch, since he had been young and generally a good boy, would probably start transfiguring about a day or two after his death.

But it was real embarrassing waiting there, waiting for any change in the boy, while his parents snorted and sniffled and cried fresh tears. Suttner eventually stopped kneeling, and sat back in the grass, keeping his hand on the boy’s forehead and pushing the hair back, rhythmic. As if he could comfort him alive. I cleared my throat. The day got hot.

Romulus Finch didn’t start changing until well into the afternoon.

In the golden sunlight, we heard movement. Shifting in the grass. Suttner looked up. I opened up the Canon again.

“And the Lord Buddha said, ‘Hark, for the journey of life is long, and faith is your best companion. It is your best refreshment,’” I read, exchanging a look with Suttner, “and it is your best property.”

“Amen.”

“And the Lord Buddha said, ‘Neither fire nor death...’”

Romulus Finch was shivering all over now; his body jolted like someone was feeding it lightning.

“...’nor birth nor death can erase our good deeds.”

“Amen,” Suttner and the family muttered in unison.

Romulus was making noise now too: yelps, little whimpers, ungodly gasps. I prayed hard he wouldn’t turn into something from the Hell Realm.

“Now, it’s customary for the preacher to talk about the particular transfiguration currently occurring,” I said. “But I ain’t no preacher, and I can’t really tell what’s going on, to be honest. Do you wanna say something instead?”

The mother was crying into her handkerchief too hard to answer, and the father, holding her shoulder, was staring transfixed as Romulus flopped around in the dirt. Suttner kept both his hands on the boy’s shoulders, trying to stop him from jumping away from us altogether.

“What?” Mr. Finch asked. He looked back at me, eyes glimmering. “Oh. Right. Well, Romulus was a good boy. A real good boy.”

“He never did nothing!” Mrs. Finch sobbed.

“That don’t help,” I said. “You gotta be specific.”

“He—he liked swimming,” Mr. Finch managed. “He’d go down to the stream—I think it runs through your property, Mrs. Nation—and he’d play in that water for whole days if the weather was hot.”

“He liked pumpkin seeds,” Mrs. Finch added. “He helped his little cousin study her letters, but he wasn’t no good at it himself. He just encouraged her, trying to be nice.”

Romulus Finch howled, a straining keen that interrupted us. Suttner tried to use one hand to adjust his spectacles, but the boy nearly bucked out from under him. Suttner struggled against the thrashing, using both hands, his knee, an elbow—anything—to keep the boy on the ground. His spectacles fell off.

“He said, when he grew up,” Mr. Finch said, weeping, “that he wanted to go to Missouri to be a newspaperman.”

“We have family in Missouri,” Mrs. Finch explained.

“But I told him he can’t get no newspaper job if he don’t do well in his schooling!”

The change was well underway now. I flipped through the Canon frantically, trying to find the chart that told you how to

detect which Realm a human death was flying into. Where was that chart? I used to know its page number and contents off the top of my head.

“Someone get a bowl and fill it with water!” Suttner cried. “Quick!”

I looked down. Three rubbery slits were forming on each side of Romulus Finch’s neck. His eyes flew open: filmy and opaque. And his mouth gaped. Struggling for air.

Mr. Finch ran into the house.

Moments later, Romulus Finch was a fish, slipping out of our hands, shiny and wriggling. We wrestled him into the bowl. He expanded though, kept growing larger. *Oh Lord*, I thought, *this one’s turning into a whale!*

“A bucket!” Mrs. Finch said. “I’ll get a bucket! It’s bigger!”

“No!” Suttner said. “Where’s the stream? The stream you mentioned?”

Half-in, half-out, the Romulus fish splashed around in the too-small bowl. We hoisted it aloft, everyone holding the rim, and ran together down the hill and towards the stream. Romulus kept struggling to get out, and Suttner used his free hand to push the fish-head back in, dunking it underwater and keeping it there.

We dumped Romulus into the stream as soon as we found a suitable depth. The cold water rushed past our knees, and

Romulus crashed in with a sploosh. We caught sight of his wavering, still-expanding form in the clear water for only a moment before he disappeared, darting downstream.

Heavy breathing. Birds. The sound of rushing water.

Mr. Finch and Mrs. Finch hugged, crying and smiling and whispering to each other. I felt happy too. Strange. Before, I never would have tolerated an Animal Realm transformation in one of my own loved ones. But today, it seemed natural and pure and right.

* * *

After looking for his spectacles and eventually giving up, Suttner and I trudged back to my farm.

The fields—the world—smelled like shit. It was not unpleasant. Suttner was wiping at his eyes. I looked down at him.

“Are you crying?”

“Dust. A lotta dust here.”

“Sure.”

He coughed, made a pretext of wandering further away from me, returned. I pushed my hands into my skirt pockets.

“So are you gonna move on then?”

“Can’t yet. Still got some injuries in town to tend to.”

“And after that?”

Suttner smiled. I could see the trails of tears on his cheeks, shining clean in the dirt. “I reckon I could help build Protection back up. For now. See to your cow, too.”

“As long as you don’t touch any of the Devil’s brew, Doc, you are more than welcome.”

He didn’t say anything.

Ahead, I saw the unattractive lump that was my home.

* * *

A prayer from Carrie Amelia Nation to Our Lord, the Holy Prince Siddhartha, Most Enlightened Being, Buddha, Liberator and Emancipator and Most Awakened Of All Creatures Ever.

Dear Lord,

Forgive me for my sins. I am a murderer and a widow and a sufferer, and I have done You wrong. I have tried to break out of the wheel, and I have failed, and I’ll probably fail forever. But by the laws of karma, I await Your true and pure punishment with a happy, open heart. Just don’t let me be born back east and don’t let me love a drunk and don’t let the crop fail, and Heaven help Kansas. These things I beg you, and that’s all. Thanks.

Amen.

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COVER ART

“Pillars,” by Tomas Honz



Tomas Honz is a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, who believes in the traditional approach to art. To him, painting is a science that is necessary to acquire in order to make an art of it. He has years of experience in the entertainment industry as a concept illustrator, but his desire to create his own work, as well as a serious trauma—one of those things that make you reconsider your whole life—led him to leave that career, to open his eyes and soul to the fascinating world around him and shift his attention to traditional painting. View his work at tomashonz.com.

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