

ELEGANT LITERATURE

FOOL'S ERRAND



#020

Elegant Literature Issue #020
Fool's Errand

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ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

MAGAZINE & AWARD

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

CONTENT WARNING

Work published in *Elegant Literature* varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OUR PARTNERS	7
ISSUE PROMPT	8
HONORABLE MENTIONS	10
EARLY BIRD PRIZE	11
THE GREATEST GIFT N. M. LOCKE	12
JUST DUST AND HATHAS ATHENA ABRAMS	20
THE END IN AUTUMN CORINNE HARRISON	28
A NICE GUY ADAM WOHNOUTKA	35
BEARING GIFTS TONI JULIETTE LEONETTI	40
SEASON OF THE CROW BRANDON PAUL	48
CAKE IN THE NECROPOLIS NESS	56

A WOMAN, A WITCH	64
ELIZA BLACK	
TOOLS OF THE TRADE	72
RICHARD KUNZE	
LOW EBB	80
DAVID DENNISON	
JUDGE'S COMMENTS	88
RICHEL BILLING	

THANK YOU TO
OUR PARTNERS

SUBTXT
NOW NOVEL
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

FOOL'S ERRAND

Write a story involving Fool's Errand, and a cage.

Embark on the futile quest. Can you hear the whispers of the impossible, drawing you like a moth to the flame? What secrets lie within the hearts of those who chase the unattainable, the improbable, the absurd?

Fool's gold, a wild goose chase, or the search for the philosopher's stone. Tasks born from folly and curiosity, undertaken in earnest. For fortune, knowledge, or the thrill of adventure. Follow the map across shifting sands, over the highest peaks, and to the very edge of the world. Further, to the realm of gods to challenge the trickster himself. But the quest need not be so grand. A rite of initiation. A novice sent out for a left-hand screwdriver or the dreaded "long weight". Or perhaps it's something more personal. A beautiful soul, their love unattainable. What mad acts will you perform to win the object of your desire? A triumph of human resilience and futility. When the chase is done, will you have succumbed to the inevitable, or achieved the impossible?

This contest invites you to explore fool's errand, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

Head Judge
RICHIE BILLING

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

BEN GALLEY
AI JIANG
HAYLEY MILLIMAN
JORDAN KANTEY
NATHAN BAUGH
JIM HULL
DJANGO WEXLER
NICKY SHEARSBY
MAX GLADSTONE
CREAG MUNROE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE
HONORABLE MENTIONS
PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

8:30 PM	Jack Gorzynski
A Crab Shaped Key	Michael Chirichella
A Wolf in the Woods	Ashleigh Adams
Assemblage of Ur	Huron Loft
Barry DiSilvo's Fairy Godfather	Dana Stewart
Compost	Emma Burnett
Dirt	Jessica L. Hughson
Greasing Gears	Cecelia Sieting
Happy Meals on a Hamster's Wheels	Sandra Bridges
Her Decision	Dana Lindamood
Homecoming	Tracey Martinovich
In Closing	Antony Pütttschneider
One of the Gang	Josh Huffstetler
Padre Marisol's Immolation Spectacular	Reid Keller
Perfectly Adequate Goose	Klarika Hume
Phantom Wings and Being Seen	Joshua Stavick
Phool's Gold	Heather N. Kluge
Songbird	Elizabeth McLean
Specimen Pair 37	Steve Lance
Star Anise	Maya Ru
Terrible Taste in Demons	Jo de Groot
The Dust	SC Morse
The Golden Green	Rain Sullivan
The Hand of Titus Beck	Jara Fatout Lang
The Song of Jophiel	T. Coachman

EARLY BIRD PRIZE

THE NOW NOVEL PACKAGE

**AWARDED TO HEATHER N. KLUGE
FOR “PHOOL’S GOLD”**

THE GREATEST GIFT

N. M. LOCKE

I STEEL MYSELF BEFORE KNOCKING on the Prime Minister's door, preparing for both the best and worst Christmas in history. I wish I could put this off for longer, but that would be unprofessional. And that is something, today of all days, I cannot afford to be. I tap the door and when there's no answer, I quietly let myself in.

The office layout is designed to both welcome and intimidate. Hardwood panelling contrasts with soft cream carpet on the floor. Bulky mahogany desk, with a stuffed koala hanging off one of the legs. A subtle balance between 'I am the most powerful person in this room' and 'I am just like the rest of you'. The perfect embodiment of an Australian leader. Dancing that line is what made Katherine Verges so popular in the polls.

She's asleep, sprawled across her desk like a child's discarded doll. The paper under her cheek is damp with drool. I'd smile if I wasn't so exhausted. It takes everything in me not to curl up at her feet and join her.

A couple of months ago, this office was spotless. Now, trash lies piled in the corner. No one's bothered to empty the bins in days. We quietly sent the support staff home earlier this week and the only people left are a skeleton crew. After the hell we've been through, that's exactly what we look like. The restless undead. Katherine looks the worst, although you'd never guess under all that protective makeup.

I gently lay my hand against the Prime Minister's arm. "Excuse me, Ma'am."

She jerks awake, hands scrabbling at the desk as if checking it's real.

"What time is it?" she demands.

"Three thirty, Christmas Eve," I reply. "Plenty of time before the announcement."

She rubs her forehead and grimaces. "You let me sleep for *four hours*? You should have woken me sooner."

"You've been running on caffeine and adrenaline for weeks. You needed rest."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

I swallow and look at my shoes. She never used to be this blunt. Even with the hardest job in the country, she'd always spoken with calm assurance.

"I'm sorry, Steph," she sighs and stretches her willow-thin body. A gentle breeze could push her over. "You're right. I needed that. Thank you for all your help."

"Of course, Ma'am."

She groans and uses both hands to push herself onto her feet. I help her into the blazer she'd discarded over a chair.

"What would I ever do without you?" she asks. There's a spark of the old Katherine in her smile—a special warmth she saves for those closest to her.

"What would any of us do without *you*?" I reply. "You're the one who pulled this all together. It's because of you that we can make this announcement."

She gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "Thank you for still being here."

This is my job, Katherine, I think. I support you as you support a country. Where else would I be?

Katherine sits at her desk as the media team prepares for her special Christmas message. Normally she would wait in another room until we were ready, but I think she wants to be around people. Everything looks tidy on camera, the trash having been pushed under the desk.

One of the media assistants lets out a small gasp and makes a bee-line straight for me. "Is this true?" he demands, shoving a copy of Katherine's speech in my face.

I've already settled my face into its 'work setting'—calm, controlled, and quietly satisfied with how everything is unfolding. The same expression I use whether announcing raises or retrenchments. "It's true."

The assistant stares at the paper like it's Moses's third tablet. "Whoa."

Everyone moves into place and a hush falls over the room. I step

into the shadows, a silent sentinel. Now that it's quiet, I can hear the faint sounds of arguing in the hallway. Probably Dr. Kamau again. All it takes is a sharp look from me to send security running.

Of all my duties, only one matters—protect Katherine. Promote her wins and downplay her losses. Stop those irritating protest groups from growing. If her dickhead ex-husband needs handling, I do that too. Whatever it takes to keep her in that seat, because in my heart of hearts, I know she is the person we need leading this country.

“Good evening, everyone,” Katherine begins, her voice filled with strength and warmth. “Thank you for listening to this very special broadcast. Christmas has always been a time where we focus on what's important. Family. Friendship. Community. And this Christmas, it's my absolute pleasure to share with you the greatest gift a leader can give. Hope.”

The room is dead silent. We've kept this announcement top secret, but even those who know what's coming are holding their breath.

“I've been in extensive talks with other world leaders to rally a call for action. If the pandemic has taught us one thing, it's that we can't take anything for granted. Everything can disappear just like that.”

Katherine snaps her fingers. The sound is razor sharp in the silence.

“So why waste a single day? We have the power, the money, and the minds. All we needed was the motivation. All we needed was to set aside our selfishness, to come together and finally do what's right. At this very moment, every world leader, Fortune 500 CEO, entrepreneur and influencer is speaking to their community with this same message. It's time to do better.”

Katherine outlines their plan. Governments around the world have just signed new treaties for peace and nuclear disarmament. Business leaders have pledged billions of dollars to address the most complex global challenges—poverty, climate change, health, inequality, forced displacement, and so much more... One extraordinary, collective agreement for action, all centred around the sustainable wellbeing of humankind.

It shouldn't be possible, but the conviction in Katherine's voice cannot be denied. I see one face after another shift from confusion to

scepticism to a delicate hope that all this might actually be real. She's the only PM in Australia's history who could say these things and not be laughed at.

"I know this might seem impossible to believe," Katherine says. Her voice is steady, despite the water in her eyes. "But I *promise you*, every one one of us making this announcement today, means exactly what we say. We want to do better."

Once she's done, there's a long moment of silence. Then everyone speaks at once. Katherine is swallowed up by adulation, while I wait in the shadows for it all to be over.

I can barely hear the television over the sounds of raucous partying. We'd moved to the Lodge after the announcement—a small Christmas party just for those closest to us. Lots of hugs and lots of tears from the people who've worked so hard to make this moment happen. World peace, actually achieved. What a privilege to see.

"Next up, another Christmas gift!" the TV news anchor says. "Comet Fey-Tuttle will be passing close enough to see tonight. Get out your telescopes, astronomy fans, and check out this once-in-a-lifetime Christmas star..."

As things quieten and people start to leave, I search for Katherine. She's on the balcony, face turned towards the distant sound of protestors at the gates. It's not until I stand next to her that I realise she's holding a cigarette.

"You smoke?" I ask. This shocks me more than when she'd first told me about her plan.

Katherine coughs and stubs the cigarette on the railing. "No. Just thought I'd give it a go. Seems like the right time to try something new."

"Was it worth it?"

"No."

The protestors' chant is carried on the wind, the same demand they've been screaming at the government for weeks.

No more lies! No more lies!

"Do you think people will believe the lie?" I ask quietly.

“It’s not a lie,” says Katherine. “At least, we don’t mean it to be. But if by some miracle we survive the next few days, some people might go back on their word. If that happens... well. At least we’ll be alive to try again.”

I stare at Comet Fey-Tuttle, burning bright despite the city’s light pollution. It looks so innocent up there. So beautiful. But Earth is full of beautiful, deadly things. I shouldn’t be surprised that the rest of the universe creates more of the same cruel mix.

“This planet became a cage we didn’t have time to escape,” Katherine mutters. “We tried to. Really. The entire world pulled together the moment we realised the comet was heading our way. But a few months isn’t enough time to figure out interstellar travel. There was nothing we could do.”

I know all this, but she’s trying to convince herself that she did everything she could. I was with her through it all: the shock, the denial, the anger... we’re still waiting on acceptance. We only have about thirty hours left to find it.

“Many have called this a fool’s errand,” she continues. “And I can understand why. But when I thought about the last thing I wanted to do as Prime Minister... no... as a human being, this was it. World peace. If humanity’s tale is ending, we should make the last chapter a happy one.”

A Christmas gift for billions, even if it only lasts a day. We could have announced the end of the world like those science-nerds wanted, but what would be the point? I wish I could trade this knowledge for sweet ignorance. I wish Katherine could’ve spent the last few months happy.

“Anyway,” Katherine says, leaning on the railing. I suppress the urge to move her away from the edge. “What are you doing here with your slave-driver boss? Our job is over, and this will be the world’s last great party. Don’t you have somewhere to be? Or someone to be with?”

“No.”

I want to say, ‘I have given all of myself to this job, because you were the leader we needed and there wasn’t time for anything else.’

But I won't. Katherine hates that kind of stuff.

She sighs, as if she could hear my thoughts anyway. "You worry me, Steph. We've been together what, ten years? And I've never seen you let go. This might be your last chance to do something crazy."

"I'm a professional. I don't do crazy."

"Oh, come on! Do it for me. My last request as your boss. I promise I'll forgive you, no matter what. Think of it as my Christmas present."

I grit my teeth and clench the railing so hard my knuckles turn white. "Why start something that will only last a day?"

"Why not? It's not like you'll have another chance."

How could she make it sound so easy? She's asking me to trample on the one line I swore I would never cross. This conversation wouldn't be happening if not for that damn comet. But she's right. We're running out of time.

I stare into her gaunt, exhausted, perfect face. Recklessness sparks in her eyes, as bright as the comet above. She has never looked more beautiful.

And I have never felt so brave.

I move quickly, before common sense can catch up. Leaning in, hand cupping the nape of her neck. I press my lips to hers, tasting coffee, tobacco and something sweet that underpins it all. I kiss her like it's the end of the world.

The protestors' cries fill my ears.

No more lies! No more lies!

I indulge longer than I should. She said she would forgive me, but this... this is too much. I pull away, embarrassed. There are things I should be doing. Calls to be made...

Katherine brushes her thumb against my cheek, and I realise I'm crying. Her eyes shine as tears well up in hers too. I barely hear her shaky whisper.

"Finally."

N. M. LOCKE

Nicole is an Australian speculative fiction writer, currently editing her debut Science Fantasy novel. She loves building colourful, fantastical worlds that reflect the best and worst of reality. When she's not writing, she's working as an environmental engineer, supporting efforts to improve health and sanitation in rural Cambodian communities.

IG: [@science .and. fiction](#)



JUST DUST AND HATHAS

ATHENA ABRAMS

THE ONLY REAL NECESSITY WAS staying far enough from the four immense scaly legs and somewhat erratic tail.

Indigo jogged slowly in the shadow of the great beast, eyeing a side as high and smooth as a cliff in the Rarsak mountain range. If a rope ladder indeed dangled there, it was invisible even from this distance, tiny against that monstrous curve of belly.

If the hatha weren't moving, Indigo thought, he would quickly forget it was alive.

The illusion of immobility was just that, however. Think for too long that he was standing by an innocent cliff face and sooner rather than later one of those house-sized footpads would darken the sky and flatten him into oblivion. It was just Indigo and the beast out there in the desert of orange dust—nothing and no one to know if he ended his life in a quick pancake of flesh and splintered bone. Far off, other shapes loomed, but whether they were more hathas, too distant to see their movement, or mountains, he couldn't be sure.

Squinting against the dusty glare, Indigo prayed that this would be the right hatha—the one from which he'd heard the radio signal—hollow-sounding as all prayer was in these after-days.

There: a ladder.

It had taken three blistering days and icy nights in the empty dust of the Rars plain to find this hatha, and now Indigo willed the ladder to stay in sight and not vanish into camouflage against the beast's side. He angled himself parallel beneath the curved overhang of belly, running now, ready to catch the ladder at a precise moment in the rhythm of the beast's feet and swing of the rope. Calculating his moment, he reached, felt rope beneath his hands, grabbed, swung his feet up.

For a moment, he clung with everything he had, swinging crazily, his shoulders bumping impotently against the hatha's dusty side. If there really were a box for passengers perched on the creature's back, it would be impossible to see with the naked eye from any angle. As the ladder swung itself to stillness, Indigo breathed a sigh. As long as he climbed tight and steady, he wouldn't fall.

When at last Indigo reached the ladder's top, a cackle of delight and a tangle of white hair greeted him. The owner of the cackle climbed to his feet, set down a flask, and helped heave Indigo over the platform's low wall onto welcoming cushions. For a blessed moment, Indigo simply lay face down, panting, feeling his body settle into the gentle lift and fall of the hatha's gait—its titanic, unceasing motion forward.

"Martin," the white-haired man introduced himself, continued, "Could have sworn there wasn't a life within a thousand kels of desert, just dust and hathas, before your funny face appeared!" Martin helped Indigo to his feet. Only once Indigo was firmly planted, did Martin clap Indigo on the back in a vigorous greeting. "Trying to get to the ends of the earth, to Coramanth at least. Damn hathas keep takin' me thither and yon: been to Marluck, Minras, and now Madra—all sorts of places I wasn't never supposed to go, and still not reaching the edge of the land and Coramanth! Thing is with hatha travel, you know it, the damn beast simply stops, turns midstride, and dumps you straight back into whatever mess you were leaving behind!"

From up here, the little group on the hatha's back did indeed appear entirely alone in the world: all that was visible until a hazy horizon was the endless orange plain of Rars and the vast gray slope of the hatha's back, both head and tail invisible past curved spine. Two traders slept in one corner of the passenger box, heads pillowed on their packs.

As the sweat dried on his forehead, Indigo dug out his own flask, its etched silver some of his finest work. It had been a hot climb. Taking a grateful swig, he was startled by a laugh; turning, he saw a young man with blond curls sprawled on the lookout's platform behind and slightly above. The man was speaking into a radio—undoubtedly the same radio from which Indigo had received the signal that brought him here.

"And so, our new companion aboard, we continue onwards," the man paused and consulted a small golden instrument, "still heading for the coastal towns, so if you are in Madra and can muster a jog

about a hundred kels east, look for the hatha with the ladder and join us in Hatha Car 000. No, we don't really exist..." He trailed off, blinked, looked down at Indigo and the other passengers, smiled, introduced himself as Rarros. "What brings you on our hopeless journey, hopefully east?" he asked.

"Looking for work," Indigo replied. He took another sip of water then accepted Martin's flask and a slug of something much stronger. He felt he deserved it after the heat of following Madra's rail line out into the desert, the running, all the choking dust. "I want to get a job on the Coramant rockets."

"Moon and beyond! Why don't they respond?" Rarros half sang. A playground chant, the sad words of a dying colony, cut off from its homeworld. "Will you ride inside them? Search for the homeworld? For a cure?"

Indigo looked at the strange young man, half crazed with sun, yet full of gaiety and life. He was about Indigo's own age, another of the last generation to be born to a population that could now only shrink and shrink until it was dust. "Probably not," Indigo answered. "Though I certainly wouldn't turn down an invitation. Where are you going?"

"I just ride hathas!" Rarros laughed again, a light clear laugh that somehow made Indigo feel that the lonely, empty streets of Madra he had left behind perhaps didn't matter so much after all.

"And drink," Martin added, toasting them both.

"Yes, well, that," Rarros agreed.

"And a good thing too," Martin continued. "I'm old enough that I won't have to see the end of it. But you youngsters... I wouldn't fancy living in that world, so few people, no one to move the cities. And I don't hear such good things of the coast no more. Ask them." Martin jabbed a thumb at the two sleeping traders. "Townfolk say there's work on the coast, coast folk say there's people and work in the towns. Truth is, ain't no people anywhere no more. Ain't no jobs. We're all lonely."

"Amen to that." Indigo toasted Martin in return, feeling the weight of his solitary travels lifting a fraction.

“Soon it really *will* just be hathas out here...” Rarros’ voice was dreamlike. “You can’t see the change from up here, you know. The world has always been empty on the Rars plain. Soon these beasts will have it all to themselves. I suppose they did before we were here.”

The three fell silent, and evening gathered as the hatha lumbered on.

Indigo gazed up at the red sky of the Rars plain, a matte blanket of dust hung above him, then he closed his eyes.

He must have drifted, for when Rarros’ laugh awakened him, the sky was the deep living blue that the red dust in the air turned at night over the plain.

“Halllooo, here we come!” Rarros was singing out into the night, slender fingers cupped about his mouth. He glanced down at Indigo and smiled. Martin was fast asleep, and the traders slept on, sunk farther down to the floor of the box. “They can’t hear me, but here we come anyway,” Rarros added to Indigo with the air of a confidant, then gestured Indigo to join him.

Rarros’ hand, pulling Indigo up the short ladder to the lookout platform, was smooth and cool in the coming cold of deep desert night.

The lookout’s platform was caged on three sides to allow easy standing and peering about without danger of an entirely lethal fall, and a lantern hung from one corner, each great step of the hatha sending it swinging and casting weird shadows over the beast’s sloping side and the two men’s faces. Once Indigo stood steady beside him, Rarros draped a blanket over their shoulders.

Ahead, across the darkened plain, a tangle of light was moving slowly.

“Manth,” Rarros said, pointing at the city trundling out of the way of the hatha’s great feet. Indigo imagined people in the city, asleep mostly, not feeling or hearing as the great engines rolled their whole town slowly west, north, back again. Many fewer people, undoubtedly, than the city could support—an aging population dying with no one to replace it, as in Madra. Indigo imagined the guards in their

bright towers keeping tired but watchful eyes out, no rush of adrenaline at sight of the monstrous sides heaving slowly into view; instead, a routine relay of commands, switches and wheels turning, a great mechanism built in wiser ages set once more in motion to roll the city out of the path of the beast.

"I wonder what the hathas think of all the to-ing and fro-ing of these tangles of lights?" Indigo asked, then cleared his throat, still scratchy with dust from the plain below. "Though I suppose the hathas will be able to investigate them all they like when there's no one left to move the cities."

"Investigate them or simply crush them to dust."

"Maybe they won't be interested. By then, there won't be any more lights."

"What do we know of how they think? Perhaps the hathas are philosophers," Rarros continued, a smile in his voice. "Perhaps even now, this one is chuckling silently at the tiny cage of tiny riders on its back—it is contemplating the endlessness of the red plain, wondering about the ocean, pondering the stars..."

"Perhaps the hathas have their own civilization without buildings or walls, so slow and so vast we can't even guess at it," Indigo rejoined. "Maybe their wanderings, seen from a rocket's height, would form a dance?"

"I like that! Up here on its back, we are dancing a dance so large, we can't even see it."

"What do you think the last people will do? Will they man the guard towers to the end, rolling the cities? Or will the last inhabitants watch a hatha grow closer and closer, decide to leave the city in place—"

"A tangle of stone and dry bones to be crunched beneath its feet..."

"We could be among those people, the last people," Indigo said, and the two men fell silent, pondering a future growing ever emptier.

The city was still equally far away, rumbling along its track. Eventually they passed the spot where Indigo thought the city had been when they first glimpsed it. All was dark there, dark and silent, save for the heavy plodding tread of the hatha on which they rode.

As he watched, a stray beam of light from their lantern caught a gleam of silver rail far below them, embedded in the plain.

It wasn't until much later, when Indigo had climbed back down to the passenger box and settled on the cushions once more, that Rarros' words properly registered with him: Manth. The slow-moving city had been Manth. They had turned north in the night.

Well. Perhaps he would reach the coast and the rockets eventually.

He glanced up at the now sleeping form of Rarros, curls bright even in the darkness, head pillowed on one arm.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps he would stay here, where it was just dust and hathas.

ATHENA ABRAMS

When she's not traveling, Athena spends her days in her study, looking out at the trees and alternating between writing her own words and editing the words of other people.

THE END IN AUTUMN

CORINNE HARRISON

CONTEST WINNER

“The trees are dyin’.”

My grandmother’s low southern drawl dripped the words like syrup, her round face upturned to the trees. It was October and their heads had turned to torches. I watched her scan the branches crowding the sky, her nails digging into the arm of my puffer jacket to steady herself. Then her eyes emptied. I knew she was back in the doctor’s office; the moment of perpetual torment when the news hung unclaimed in the room.

I followed her gaze up and around Central Park’s trees. A leaf fell through the air to join others on the walkway. It landed, a splayed hand at our feet, colours of green and fawn fading into a Sahara sunset.

“I actually think they seem more alive this way, they’re pretty,” I mused. Then I hesitated, stealing myself. “I’ll still be in the city next year for my third year of college. Maybe you can visit next autumn and I’ll bring you back here.”

I’d been nervously waiting for an opening like this, for a moment to steer the conversation to the untouchable subject. My mother had sent me on this mission. *You’re the only one she listens to.*

“Next year,” my grandmother repeated.

She gave me a sad, knowing smile and the rest of my well-planned words dissolved in my mouth. She was about to say something else when she winced, her features collapsing in pain. She took several shallow breaths, before deteriorating into a hacking cough. I stiffened. Her hospital prescribed painkillers only worked to a point. When she recovered, I guided her to a nearby bench.

“No,” she gasped. “Let’s git lunch. My treat.”

“You sure Edie? Mum gave me money to take you out you know.”

She’d put her foot down on *grandma* the moment my elder brother had been born. She would be Edie to all her grandchildren, a friend, rather than an *adult*. She’d moved from Atlanta to our neighbourhood in New Jersey to establish the role. My mother still thinks it was to compensate for the strict matriarch she’d been to her own children. Whatever the reason, her steady hands stirring the roux for her vat of gumbo, mending holes in our clothes, spending evenings

whittling our afros into cornrows, sneaking us Hershey bars behind my mother's back, made her my grandmother.

"I'm sure. Y'know Lloyd, soon you'll be twenty-one and too busy partyin'. I wana treat you before you too busy to give me a thought."

"I'll always give you a thought," I mumbled. A lump rose in my throat.

I was sure we looked a comical pair. She was a stout woman of five-foot four, top lip crumbling, slate-grey curls pulled back in a bun. I was six-foot two, wearing my basketball team's jersey, hunched over to lend her my arm, for she'd tired quickly during the short walk. Even in this position, she led the way.

We bumped shoulders as we walked and I relished the contact. Since the diagnosis she no longer sat with me on the sofa during my visits, no longer hugged me goodbye, no longer patted the back of my hand whenever I made her laugh.

We entered the Boathouse, a restaurant overlooking The Lake. We were led through rows of starched tablecloths, the scrape of cutlery on plates, the rumble of chatter, and sat by a window looking through colonnades and onto the water.

There was a rattle and a chirp. A white three-tiered bird cage sat in the corner of the room, several rows from our table. My grandmother stared at the candy-coloured parrot perched on the bars. The lost look she'd worn in the park came back. With a rattle, the parrot flitted to its perch and my grandmother sighed deeply. The waitress had to ask twice what she wanted to eat.

She ate half her sandwich and picked at the rest. I noticed with a pang that her cardigan no longer fit snug around her waist.

"Edie, I—I wanted to—" I took a shuddering breath and played with the cutlery on my empty plate. I realised I hated that the role of adult had been thrust upon me. A strong need for my mother, one of my brothers, *anyone* else in the family to be here to talk in my place, swept over me. "I wanted to talk to you."

She was looking distractedly at the parrot again, a deep notch between her eyebrows. Her hand massaged her chest, the same way she'd apply Vicks on our chests when we were sick with heavy colds.

“Bout what, honey?”

“The—what the doctor said. There’s so many options these days, a—and treatments. I really think—”

“Oh, let’s not waste time talkin’ ‘bout that nonsense.”

I remembered her argument with my mother the week before. My mother too, had used the doctor’s advice to drive home her point. She’d then asked my grandmother to think of her children, of her grandchildren, the ones who would be left behind. But my grandmother had defied all our expectations and been laconic with her responses, her mercurial temperament disappearing like water into cracked ground. Like the rest of us, my mother had seen its meaning. She’d descended into a rage—and then burst into tears.

“I think the poor thang’s gone mad,” my grandmother said, her voice a croak.

The bird twittered hysterically. It flitted from the swing, to the bars of the cage, nibbled the wrought iron, to the water bowl and back to the swing. My grandmother winced again and took a deep gulp of air. She settled after a few moments and nestled her coffee cup in her hands.

“Do y’know what it’s like to live with pain, Lloyd?”

The question left me numb and blinking.

“Even before you wake, you feel yourself dreadin’ it. Every mornin’, you will yourself to stay unconscious,” she said levelly. “But there’s no release. Not from the pain, nor from the fear of it. Your mother, her sisters—my children don’t understand.”

The dusty-pink wings of the parrot fluttered against the iron bars, its talons rattling the cage. I felt something I thought was stacked and sturdy inside me, crumble and crash.

“I’m sorry Edie, I—no. I didn’t know—”

I tried to say something else, something mature and empathetic. But the words I searched for split and failed me. At that moment, she looked so small. I couldn’t stop staring at her fingers, trembling around her coffee cup. I reached out to touch them, hoping to comfort her, to stop the shaking. It took her a moment to notice the contact. Her hands slipped from my fingers. I swallowed and cleared my

throat.

“I’ll ask for the bill. Please don’t pay Edie, mum wants to—I want to treat you.”

My grandmother fumbled with her coat and I pinched my eyes shut. She always said grown men shouldn’t cry in public.

I walked her back into the bright autumn afternoon, the park bubbling with life. Cold New York air breezed through the trees, trailing city life under our noses: a whiff of boiled peanuts, dog poo, petrol fumes. We walked aimlessly under the trees in silence. She seemed to be as involved with her thoughts as I was with mine. We turned a corner and came upon a group of children playing tag on a stretch of grass. Beside them, a mother was grappling with her son, attempting to button up his coat as he strained towards the scene of play. I watched the mother secure woollen gloves on the child before she released him.

You’re the only one she listens to.

My grandmother, holding my arm again, stopped to watch the children swarm around each other, shrieking laughter tossed between them. A slow, nostalgic smile crept across her face. I remembered how she used to sit on the veranda with my mother, watching through the flyscreen as my brothers and I chased each other around the garden, wrestling and laughing.

Do y’know what it’s like to live with pain Lloyd?

I felt something break from me, like an ice sheet breaking in two. In its place, grief flooded in. I spoke, fighting to keep my voice steady.

“Maybe next year’s too far away for you to visit again. How—how about I bring you back here next weekend? I’ll stay at mum’s Friday night and pick you up the next morning.”

Silence at my arm. I looked down to check she’d heard me, and saw her eyes were wide and focused, exploring every feature of my face. She nodded. Then she started to ask questions. Questions about my studies, if I had any girlfriends, told me it was good that I wasn’t dating because I needed to focus on finishing my math degree. Once I had my degree, I could do whatever I liked, and could I tell her again what it is I wanted to do after college. Questions, nodding, smiling,

questions. And gazing, as though she'd stumbled upon something bright with wonder.

Eventually, she let me sit her down on a bench and I felt better, a measure of control coming back.

"Y'know, I think you're right. About the trees." She took my hand and squeezed it. I held it in both of mine. Her skin was both crisp and soft. "They're stunnin' right before the end of the year."

"Before the end," I repeated, my mind clinging to the words. I looked down to ensure her hand was still secure in mine.

She leaned on me, a half hug.

"Yes Lloyd. Before the end."

CORINNE HARRISON

Corinne is an avid reader, writer and coffee drinker. She's a digital nomad who's been traveling the UK for a year, taking inspiration for her writing from the places she visits.



A NICE GUY
ADAM WOHNOUTKA

JERRY WAS A NICE GUY. A damn nice guy. He was so nice, in fact, that McSmiley's retained him as the sole employee when the restaurant went fully automated. The omega man of fast food, Jerry was to provide a warm human smile in contrast to the coldness of the machinery. He also took the occasional order and was responsible if the equipment malfunctioned, which it never did.

"Why, hello, Mrs. Beaman," Jerry said with a smile. "The usual?"

The blue-haired woman smiled back. "Hiya, Jerry. You got it."

Before Jerry could turn around, the percolating black liquid was cascading into a cardboard cup courtesy of a flexible robotic arm, which then gently set the black coffee on the counter before Mrs. Beaman. Jerry reached for two sugars and a cream, but the arm beat him to it. He snatched Mrs. Beaman's credit card and swiped it. "See, I do still serve a purpose," he joked.

Mrs. Beaman insisted she preferred Jerry's coffee to the robot's, but what could she do? It was company policy. This was a lie. The robot's coffee was the best she'd ever had. She retreated to a corner table to finish her crossword and tried to hide how spectacular the coffee was.

Six sets of liquid silicone rubber arms operated with the breathtaking precision of a Tchaikovsky ballet. Beef patties flame-broiled to millisecond perfection, golden potato wedges seasoned and sliced to inhuman uniformity, and milkshakes like chocolate and strawberry clouds. Ingredients were arranged flawlessly, then placed on plastic trays and wrapped in paper bags like Christmas presents from grandma. This was the lunch rush.

Jerry busied himself restocking ketchup packets and rewashing his hands. He wasn't even required to take orders. Kids, getting a kick out of interacting with an android, along with adults weary of face-to-face niceties, eschewed the man altogether, opting for either the touch screen or voice recognition software. The machine spoke nine languages, and even though Jerry knew it was a nonsentient mess of wires, he couldn't help but sense the pretentiousness when it declared "Bonjour, combien je vous aide?" in a thick French accent.

Jerry's heart fluttered when he heard the splat. For that meant his

services were actually required. He wielded his mop, his Excalibur, and got to cleaning up a little girl's Orange Crush. Jerry's issue was he was a people person, and after six hours without human contact, he was desperate for connection. The customers humored him, maintaining conversations while he soaked up their filth, though—truth be told—the overzealous cleaning man made them a little uncomfortable.

Four hours later, just as Jerry's shift was ending, a teamster chewing an unlit cigar dollied in a large crate stamped with the letters "ADAM". Jerry reluctantly provided his electronic signature and pried open the box.

McSmiley's was spotless thanks to ADAM (Automatic Duster And Mopper). Every 30 minutes, the efficient little robot made a lap around the restaurant, a bi-hourly cleaning odyssey. It could detect a spill up to 50 feet away, and unlike its human counterpart, it respected the customers' space, always maintaining a six-foot buffer between robot and flesh.

Jerry watched the whirring contraption spitefully. Once the manager, Jerry had been usurped by those ever-busy arms, reduced to little more than a glorified custodian. And now even this title, which generated a modicum of self-worth, had been snatched away.

Just then, Jerry received his first human visitor in three days. It was Mr. Conklin, the owner. "Can we talk, Jare?" he said.

A handful of sugary compliments were supposed to make the medicine less bitter, but Jerry tasted ashes when Mr. Conklin delivered the news: they were cutting his hours in half. Just the direction the company was heading, nothing personal.

Of course nothing personal, Jerry thought. *Nothing was personal anymore.*

"You haven't called out in five years," Mr. Conklin said. "Why don't you take tomorrow off? Fully paid."

Jerry had no interest in a placation vacation day, but he'd never been a dissenter, and he wasn't going to start now.

Almost as infrequent as his days off were the days Jerry drank. Yet today he combined the two, guzzling Johnnie Walker Blue to drown his blues. There was a nature documentary on television, the life of an octopus. When those eight tentacles wrangled a sea slug and squeezed the life from the poor gastropod, Jerry began to feel nauseous. The walls closed in like some ever-constricting cage. He set down his bottle and went to the garage for some air.

Some hours later, Jerry staggered across the McSmiley's parking lot wearing a ski mask, gripping a baseball bat in one hand and hedge shears in the other. He slid his key into the lock cylinder and entered. There was a mechanical hum, a sound Jerry knew well. He set down the shears, grasped the bat tightly with both hands, and unleashed ten years of frustration in one mighty wallop.

ADAM convulsed on the floor; the damn thing almost looked alive. Jerry finished off the robot with three compact blows before moving on to the primary source of his ire: those fucking arms. He opened the shears' steel jaws and prepared to sever his nemesis.

But then, a woman's voice: "What are you doing, Jerry?"

"I'm reclaiming my post," Jerry slurred. "I'm making the burgers, I'm talking to customers, I'm mopping up all the shit!"

The machine responded, "Do you think that's wise? Data has shown me to be far superior at these tasks."

"I don't care!" Jerry howled. "You! Are! Not! Alive!"

He moved in to cut the cord of this imposter, but the arm was faster, striking him in the chest with 2,500 volts of electricity. Jerry hit the floor; his heart stopped and never started again.

The next morning, Mr. Conklin was called in to identify the body. "That's him," he confirmed. Jerry's eyes were still open, staring up at the robotic arms. "Jerry was a nice guy. A damn nice guy."

ADAM WOHNOUTKA

Adam Wahnoutka enjoys writing.



BEARING GIFTS

TONI JULIETTE LEONETTI

MARCH 21, 1991, SANTA BARBARA, California

“What makes you think he’s cheating?” As usual, Melanie did more than cut to the chase. She cut to its crashing end. To the heart trapped under its wreckage. Even when—especially when—that heart belonged to her best friend.

“I didn’t say he was—” Melanie’s squint was enough to stop her. Anna put a hand on the heart stuttering below her own. Alexander’s or Daphne’s. “I know you hate this kind of job.

I could hire another detective, but I don’t trust anyone else to tell me the truth.”

“You trust *me* to? I’ve never been Dion’s biggest fan.”

“That’s a plus. He’s so well-known. Another detective might go straight to him for a better payday and tell me whatever he ordered—”

“You don’t sound like his biggest fan, either, if you think—”

“I don’t know what to think, Mel. But something’s off.”

“What? Too many business trips? Late nights at the office? What?”

“He’s always had those. But now he—”

“*What?*”

“He. Loves me. Too much.”

“Too much?” She leaned forward. “Is he controlling, jealous—”

“Jealous?” Her laugh jabbed. “Of what?” She gestured at her mass, two months away from giving birth. And looking as if she were two months overdue. Though Dion insisted she was more beautiful than ever. He’d fed her in bed, yogurt crackers and *taramasalata*, melon-mint salad and *amygdalota* almond cookies—the only foods she could stomach in the beginning—then hired a chef to sate her cravings for more, once hunger replaced nausea.

He massaged her every day, followed the trail of his fingers with his lips, kissing all her stretched bloom as he never had her unseeded husk. He bought a one-story home with no stairs to threaten tumbles, and a pool for the sole exercise he deemed safe, as long as staff monitored her every stroke. “He can’t do enough for me. He never stops saying how much he loves me—”

“About time! Isn’t that what you always wanted?”

Yes. Always. Ever since she fell for the Adonis called Dionysos in their college freshman class, amber curls falling over amber eyes, amber honey in his voice. Ever since she tutored his English, studied his Greek, invited him home for dinner. Where he met her older sister, Sarah. And chose her, instead. Anna couldn't play bridesmaid when they married, couldn't face her parents' wallpapered photos of Dion's daughter that wasn't hers. So she cut herself off from them all. Until Dion and Sarah divorced and he drifted back to Anna. A dream resuscitated in its grave.

She'd dreamed him for too long to risk doing anything that might wake them. She didn't press when he turned away from questions of where Sarah and Sophia lived, why he never visited his daughter. Because, before he turned away, she glimpsed in those amber eyes what she'd seen in her mirror for the years without him, the same grief that couldn't speak. His only answer was the paper he thrust into her hands the day he proposed, the New York Court's declaration of his divorce awarding custody to Sarah. Then he held out a diamond circled with tiger's eye stones just like his own.

Her bare left hand closed to him. "I'm not my sister. I can't be a—substitute—for—"

"Xéro." *I know.* His tears wet her lips when they kissed. "I want you, Annoúla. You came first. She was *your* shadow."

She didn't ask, *Then why didn't you choose me first?* That, also, her mirror told. Sarah was a beauty she could never match. But first wasn't necessarily last, or lasting. Anna's fist opened like a rose, to the sting and succor of his ring.

A ring she couldn't wear now, that finger—like all of her—too swollen with him.

"What's wrong then?" Melanie persisted. "If he's loving—"

"Not—" Another jab in her throat. She swallowed past it. "Not physically—you know what I mean—"

"Yeah. We've met." She shook her head at Anna's blush. "He must've been shocked you were still so innocent."

"He was happy." *Thank God you waited for me.* "But maybe I was too innocent. Maybe he's tired of me. Before—he couldn't get

enough, but now—”

“Come on.” Melanie’s hand covered hers. “Some men—I’ve heard—worry about hurting the baby.”

“That’s what *he* says. Even though the doctor said it’d be fine—”

“Well. Maybe he’s one of those relics who think a madonna isn’t meant for—”

“Then how will he feel when the baby comes? I keep wondering why he and Sarah split after they had a child.”

“You’ve never asked him? Or—her?”

“I couldn’t. Even if I knew where she is. Ever since Mom and Dad died, I don’t have any—”

“Dion must know.”

“I couldn’t,” she repeated. “You can find that out, too.”

“I can, huh? Along with what? If he’s getting physical with someone else?” When Anna nodded, she sighed. “Damn it, that’s why I never take these jobs. Fool’s errands, that’s what they are. A wife hiring me to find what she hopes isn’t there. She’ll hate me if it is—”

“I won’t—”

“Unless she only wants leverage, more money or—”

“That’s not me!”

“No kidding. That’s what makes us both fools.”

It took two weeks for Melanie to learn how much of a fool’s errand it was, another week to dare tell Anna as they sat beside the pool.

“They’ve been here all along?” Anna asked.

“Not all along. Sarah and Sophia were on the East Coast until six months ago.”

“Six months?” Six months ago, she learned she was pregnant. Six months ago, Dion began showing her love as never before. Showing, not making. “He still loves Sarah? They’re together?”

“I don’t know about love. They’ve *been* together. At her Bel Air house. But maybe he’s just seeing Sophia—”

“Don’t lie to me! Not you, too.”

“Sure you want to hear it? Everything?”

Anna's head spun as she nodded. She kept both hands on her belly as she always did these days, as she couldn't help doing, now that that globe obtruded everywhere. And small ears needed covering. "Are they really divorced?"

"Yeah. The papers he showed you were valid. But terms were privately agreed between them. Even custody. He never asked for it."

"Why? He didn't—care enough?"

"Huh! The opposite."

"Opposite?"

"According to a friend—*ex*-friend of Sarah's—he had to show he had no connection anymore with her. Or Sophia. So he could build one with you."

Anna paused on that ledge, toes curling over it. "Why?"

"Sarah had a rough time giving birth. The doctors couldn't stop her bleeding, so they had to do a hysterectomy."

Her hands clutched and covered more of her center. But she wouldn't let herself feel for that onetime sister, constant thief. "What's that got to do with Dion and me?"

"Sophia's sick. Leukemia. The only hope is if there's a match to donate bone marrow to her." She draped her jacket over Anna's shivers. "Neither Sarah nor Dion matched. And Sarah can't have more kids, so—"

A cry from Anna pierced the soft April air and sent the housekeeper inside running toward them. "Keep her away," she managed through gritted teeth. "Keep them all away or I swear—"

Melanie kept them away and brought blankets to swaddle her, hot tea to melt the ice freezing her solid. No, not solid. Cracked.

Cracked as the jar of honey Anna swept off Melanie's tray, to splinter on the ground in oozing shards. Dion's favorite thyme honey from Crete. "Damn that bastard's eyes!" She forced her hands away from her buried mound. Not Alexander anymore. Or Daphne. A dump. Junkyard. A totaled car to be stripped for parts. "*Damn him!*"

After an hour of tears and tea just as bitter, Melanie asked, "What will you do?"

"I don't know. If I told you what I—you'd think I'm crazy, evil—"

“No.” Melanie scooted onto the arm of Anna’s chair, to hug as much of her as she could. “That’s what I think of *them*. It’s one thing to want to save your child. But he—they’re monsters to use you like this. Still. You’ve wanted this baby forever—”

“No more. I hate it. I hate him. I never want to see him again. Any part of him. Or me.”

Her eyes dove into the pool, then the close sweep of ocean downhill. No. Not close enough.

No escape. Not when someone was always watching her incubate. The thing inside poked against the bars of her ribs. Wanting out from its cage? Or reminding Anna that she was caged, too, by the creature she contained, that she’d be bound even more tightly, forever, once it burst from her?

“Promise me you won’t do anything to hurt yourself. Please, Anna. Or I’ll have to call your doctor—”

“You wouldn’t. If you do, he’ll tell Dion. I’ll be stuck.” *I am stuck*. “I’ll have no one.

I couldn’t live then—”

“Then live now. You’re not alone. I’ll help any way I—”

“Get me out of here.”

“You promise?”

Anna nodded.

“Okay.” Melanie exhaled. “You can stay with me—”

“No. Dion knows where you live. I don’t want him to find me.”

“Never? He can have someone on your trail so fast—”

“You cover trails.”

Melanie followed Anna’s shifting gaze, from the ants bathed in honey and broken glass, to the streak of sunlit coast. “Ron’s brother Jim has a cottage in Carmel.”

“Ron? Your boyfriend?”

“No title. Yet. But reliable. Dion couldn’t buy a word off him. And Jim’s a good guy, too. He rents out his place when he’s not there. You’ll have time to rest, think things over—”

“Think? That’s the last thing I need.”

Melanie helped her stand. “Then focus on what you *do* need. You’re

going to smile and tell that nosy Mrs. Danvers we're going to lunch. Get it? No packing—" She stopped on Anna's groan, the pinch of pain on her face. "You're not having it now?"

"No. Hell, no." She wiped her eyes and steered around the ants. "Just hunger pangs."

She crammed laughter in her voice as they approached the door to the kitchen. "Now where are you taking me for lunch? Louie's?"

Lark—no Apollo's Daphne—waited another six weeks to fly from her mother. Enough time for Melanie to find Anna an attorney who filed for divorce against Dion with ample evidence of his fraud. Enough time for Anna to decide that her enemies were named Dion and Sarah, not Lark or Sophia. Or, even, Anna.

The day after Lark's first birthday, her marrow fed her half-sister life. When Anna carried her daughter from the hospital, safe and free, Jim's arm wrapped around them. "Now can we plan that wedding you promised?"

She looked into his blue eyes. No amber there to trap her. Just open sky. "I didn't promise. I said we'd talk about it after—"

"I say we've talked enough." He leaned down to kiss her, then Lark's cheek. The baby blew a bubble at him, her own froth of kiss, and giggled. "Aha! The 'aye's have it." He paused at Anna's silence. "Don't they?" Fear flashed in him, as clear as everything in him had been since they met. *Who needs his money? Let him choke on it.* He'd assured her. *I just need you. And Lark. And any others who'll join our flock.*

She searched his sky. Another marriage might be a fool's errand, like her last. Like the detective's job she gave Melanie. That job led nowhere Anna ever wanted. But she wanted now—oh, how she wanted—where it led. She pulled Jim in for another kiss, deeper, more fervent, than any fool's dream. "Aye."

TONI JULIETTE LEONETTI

Toni has always resided in the San Francisco Bay Area, but she lives in books. Her writings include short stories, poetry, and a mystery novel... all fool's errands, until they're read.



SEASON OF THE CROW

BRANDON PAUL

IN THE SEASON OF THE crow, we harvest corn. It's the same on all the farms in this valley. When the fields begin to glow like warm gold and the blackbirds swarm like flies in the air, we go out into the cool twilight to harvest.

This year, the stalks brittled early. The ears, heavy as Grandpa's own ears, are ready to pluck. We must work quickly to gather them, not only for Grandma's sake but so they won't lose their yellow sweetness.

Aunt Patty calls to us from the porch. "Bring in those sacks!" she hollers and the screen door slams like a gunshot behind her. My sister and I, we lift our heavy bags of corn and carry them toward the house, eyes squinting under the sinking sun.

In the yard, Grandma sits in her chicken wire cage, shucking a dwindling pile of corn. She hums her songs and doesn't wear her teeth anymore. Seeing us, she smiles sweetly, too sweetly. "Hungry birds are always black!" she sings, spitting a wad of saliva onto the ground. "Fill up your sack. Or you're never, ever coming back."

Sissy and I ignore her as we toss the ears over the wire fencing. Aunt Patty says Grandma's gotta stay in the cage or else be locked in the house. She can't be trusted to wander on her own and somebody should be watching her, she told us.

Grandpa can't do it anymore. Grandma is too moody and unpredictable when she's not occupied. She gets as mean as a dog, Grandpa says. There's a smile on his mouth when he speaks of her, but it's not in his eyes. His eyes are empty when he speaks of her.

So we keep Grandma busy this season by giving her corn to shuck. And as long as she's busy, she's happy. "Don't get lazy, don't you slack," she sings, "or you're never, ever coming back."

Grandma reaches out a firm, determined hand. She grabs an ear of corn and tears at it the way a starving animal attacks its prey. She grins as she rips at the hair, the way she used to rip at our mother's hair when she was younger, when we were all younger.

The yellow corncob is tossed into the basket and Grandma grabs the next one from her pile.

Sissy and I return to the field. We push through the crisping corn

stalks until we are under the watchful eye of the scarecrow. He creaks on his wooden post. A straw hat perches on the stuffed head with its funny crooked smile and blue button eyes.

"I don't wanna do this anymore," Sissy says. "My hands hurt."

I stretch out my own calloused fingers. "Mine do too," I say, "but we gotta bring in the corn before Grandma runs out again."

"Who cares if she runs out," Sissy groans and slumps into a pile on the ground. "She's locked in her cage."

I squat beside her and smile. "If we don't fill up our sack, we're never, ever coming back."

"Good!" Sissy shouts. "I don't wanna go back. Grandma is as mean as a dog. Grandpa says she needs to get put down before she does something bad."

The scarecrow twists as the wind blows. It looks like it's waving at us with its gloved fingers. I raise my hand and wave back.

"I know Grandma's mean," I say, "but we have to pick the corn and we have to take it to her."

"No!" My sister folds her arms and huffs.

"Well, you know what happens if we don't bring in all the corn?" I give her my best, toothy grin.

"What?"

"We wander in the dark until we find every last ear."

My sister glares at me. "No we don't and don't try to scare me. I'm not a baby anymore."

Hands on my hips, I smile at her. "Remember how scared you were last year? Remember when the Hansen kids went missing from their field?"

Sissy shakes her head. "I wasn't scared."

"Yes you were! Remember? We all looked and looked and when they found them floating dead in the canal, you didn't sleep for days. Remember that?"

My sister sits up. She stands up and wipes the dust from her britches. She nods. "I remember they were bad kids. I remember I was glad they drowned but I wasn't scared."

The sunlight is nearly gone as Sissy picks up her empty sack, slings

it over her shoulder and pushes further into the field. I follow behind her.

“Where are you going?”

“To the canal,” she tells me. “I want to see where they found them.”

“No!” I say, reaching out to grab her arm. “It’s almost dark and we’ve gotta bring in the corn.” I pull her to a stop and turn her to face me. “I don’t want to be like the Hansen kids. I don’t want them to find us floating in the water, all soggy and dead.”

“No one’s gonna find us,” she promises me. “Let’s just go look. It doesn’t hurt to look.”

Above us, I see the crows swarming in the air. They are getting ready to settle into the field for the night as they watch us. They are daring us to defy them by not doing our job.

“We’ve gotta hurry then,” I tell her. “And we need to fill our sacks as we go.”

“Fine!” She agrees and we go, grabbing at ears of corn as we move deeper and deeper into the field.

I can hear the water swirling and gurgling before I see the edge of the canal. “Quick,” I say. “Look and let’s go.” I shift my half-filled corn sack from my left to my right shoulder.

Sissy shoves her way through the stalks and there is the canal. The water is rushing along, dark and filled with debris. Thick white foam floats like scum along the edges. “Don’t get too close.”

Sissy picks up a clod of dirt. She raises her arm and launches it. With a great splash, it lands and my sister laughs. “They probably all jumped in, just like that.”

“It’s not funny,” I tell her. I reach out for her arm again and pull. “Let’s go!”

She yanks away from me and picks up a rock. She tosses it into the rushing water. “Bet ya they all sank like that too!” She giggles.

“Don’t talk like that!”

It’s her turn to give the toothy grin. “Who’s scared now?”

“Sissy,” I cry, “the light’s almost gone.”

And it’s true. The moon is not even a half of itself and the starlight is dim. The field is dark and the air is humming with the sound of

crickets and the shushing of mice running through the brush.

“Sissy!” I say again, stomping my foot. “I’m leaving, let’s go!”

My sister lifts one more rock and tosses it into the black water. “Fine,” she snaps. And this time, she follows me through the field. It’s too dark now to search for corn. It’s too dark to see anything with the tall stalks all around us.

“Kids!” I hear my Aunt Patty call. “Where are you?” She hollers and I hear the screen door slam like a gunshot.

Then I hear a scream. I hear a wailing, terrible cry. I stop and Sissy stops behind me. The screaming continues until the screen door slams again.

Then there is silence.

There is no screaming.

There are no crickets chirping or mice running. There is only the black field and the silence.

Even the moon and stars have crept behind the clouds.

“Sissy,” I whisper. “We gotta get back to the house.”

My sister reaches out and takes my hand. I step carefully between the rows of corn and together we move through the dark. We walk and walk in silence, listening for Aunt Patty or the screen door or Grandma’s singing.

Then there is the creaking sound. We squeeze between the corn stalks and find the scarecrow. He’s rocking on his wooden post, the breeze pushing him this way and that. “We’re getting closer,” I whisper.

Sissy’s hand is sweaty in mine. Or mine is sweaty in hers. We hold on to each other tightly, walking on and on in the silent darkness. Our eyes are wide, searching for the house lights, searching for the tall lamppost Grandpa always keeps lit by the barn.

But everything is doused in night. The stalks whisper as we slide between them and then I hear something. It’s quiet, like the squeak of a mouse. “Did you hear that?” Sissy asks me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

The squeak gets louder as we push through the stalks and there he is again, the scarecrow, rocking back and forth in the breeze.

“We just saw him,” Sissy says. “Did you turn us around?”

“No!” I tell her. “We didn’t turn, we just went straight toward the house.”

“It’s this way!” She tells me, pulling on my hand and I follow her. We move back through the stalks and walk and walk until there he is again, the dark shadow of the scarecrow on his post, waving his gloved fingers and swinging his straight arms.

“Is there more than one scarecrow?”

“No,” I hiss. “I think we’re stuck here.”

“Stuck?” my sister whimpers. “What do you mean stuck?”

“Maybe it’s like Grandma’s song, we need to fill our sacks or we can’t go back.”

“Okay,” she agrees and she and I both search blindly, with our hands fumbling along the stalks, scavenging for any remaining ears of corn.

For hours it seems, we are searching, plucking and tucking the ears into our sacks until finally, both bags are full.

The moon slides out from behind her clouds. The stars wink into place in the sky and the houselights come on in the distance.

“That way!” I say and pull my sister along behind me. We run, we shove our way through the stalks until we are there in the yard, standing beside Grandma’s cage.

But she’s not in there.

In the darkness, there are only shadows.

“Was Aunt Patty screaming?” I finally say aloud. “Do you think something happened?”

Sissy doesn’t answer me.

We step up onto the porch. The window into the house is bright. The kitchen light is on but we can see no one inside. We set down our bags of corn and open the door slowly, quietly.

“Hello?” I say, careful not to step all the way into the house. “Grandpa? Aunt Patty?”

I inch forward. Sissy enters behind me and eases the door closed slowly. We step forward, a foot at a time and wait.

We listen.

Then my sister gasps.

Grandma is in the hallway. She is dressed in her black nightgown and in her hand, she is holding Grandpa's gun.

"Hungry birds are always black!" she hollers. "Show me your sacks! Show me your sacks!"

"They're outside, Grandma," I tell her and we step backwards.

"Like your Aunt Patty, did you get lazy?" She asks us. "Like Grandpa, did you slack?"

Sissy and I shake our heads as we press against the screen door that opens into the night. Grandma shows us her pink smile as she lifts the heavy shotgun.

"If you haven't filled your sack," she points the gun at us as we back onto the porch. "You're never, ever coming back."

My sister grips my hand. She pulls me.

Grandma's gums are so pink and her eyes are as dark as the crows.

I let go of the door and it slams closed behind us, like a gunshot.

BRANDON PAUL

Brandon works as a nurse by day and a writer by night. He loves a good spooky story. Working with a writers group every month, he loves being part of a community of writers. Brandon writes every day and is currently working on a fantasy novel.



CAKE IN THE NECROPOLIS

NESS

IT'S BRIGHT THIS FAR NORTH, where the sun hardly sets for much of the year. The snow bounces the light back, blinding unprotected eyes. A colorless world, white fields and black cliffs, speared with gray trees too stubborn to die. But even the pines would be gone soon, like everything else. The beasts can feel it. They've gone to ground wherever they can. It won't help.

A lone soldier travels the wasteland, wearing tinted goggles beneath an ornate helmet. Their ceremonial armor is as beautiful as it is poorly suited for the cold. Two swords are frosted in their scabbards, but the soldier won't be needing a blade. They don't fear the saber cat's fangs or the yeti's enormous strength, and they haven't packed for a return trip. They wish they'd worn more layers beneath the too-large plate, but it won't matter much longer.

The soldier walks a path treacherous but well-marked. Stone cairns show the way, indicating a mild slope fit for hiking. Each one is emblazoned with a large orange sun beneath a semi-circle of seven yellow moons, crescent on the outsides and full in the center. Where the snow is thin, ancient brick peeks through, patterned with geometric arrows stretching forward and back. Some stairs even remain, cut into the living rock by the long dead, little trails that start and end nowhere.

A deep rumbling from within the earth dislodges overhanging sheets of packed ice. The soldier ducks their head as the hail comes plinking down upon their helm. A minor one this time, but a reminder: there is no time to waste.

The entrance to the old temple is impossible to miss, a sudden right angle in the terrain. The ancients carved out a corner of the mountainside, a level courtyard fifty feet wide and a sheer vertical edifice a hundred feet tall. Twin doors, two stories high marked the entrance to the mountain, one hanging open, the other in pieces.

Out of the light, the soldier is briefly blind once they step inside. They remove their helmet, goggles, and pullover face mask, and that face is not a day past twenty. They tie the helmet to their belt. The goggles and mask they drop on the floor.

The temple was a marvel of engineering in its day, polished pillars

like the mountain's ribs stretching from the tiled floors to the vaulted ceilings, everything tiled or carved or covered in bas-relief. But more than time has taken a toll on this place. All but the grandest statues have been looted, everything shiny scraped loose. The refuse of campsites and cooking fires are littered throughout, with plenty of animal bones in various stages of consumption. Once a chapel made for mourners, replete with altars for each deity of the Myriad Pantheon, now little more than a place lost travelers go to wait out a storm or die trying.

The soldier steps over tumbled chunks of rock and old bodies, bandits or travelers or mourners, none freshly-dead enough to cause concern. At the far end of the chamber stands a long-dry fountain, with seven towering pillars in a semi-circle. Each one is carved into the shape of a moon phase, full in the center and crescent on the ends. The pillars seem untouched by time and tremor, with only a touch of creeping green moss to suggest its age.

In the very center of the pillars, a wide spiral staircase cuts a circle in the floor, steps leading downward. The soldier rustles through their meager supplies, producing an empty green beer bottle stopped at the end with a thick seal of wax. They raise the bottle to their lips, whispering an incantation—a little mote of light appears in the bottle, faint at first but growing brighter, turning the soldier's skin sickly with green light. It's a poor substitute for the real thing, they discover as they descend; when the bottle's light is all that remains, a meager halo illuminating only the next and last few steps, the gloom seems to go on forever.

Another rumble of the earth, no longer below, but all around. The soldier pauses until it passes, then presses on.

"We're buried at the bottom," a grandparent had liked to brag when the soldier was small. Occasionally the stairs flatten into landings, halls of the dead marked in a dead language. But the stairs keep going down, and so goes the soldier.

Finally the soldier reaches the bottom floor, a round chamber with seven archways. They shake one of their swords loose, a fine broadsword with intricate filigree of the hilt that matches the soldier's ar-

mor. A line of runes in the same ancient script runs along the blade. The soldier holds the sword vertically before them, attempting to match the characters with those on the door frames.

Their options become limited further by the next quake, more violent this time. One of the seven paths caves in altogether, blocking one of its neighbors with rubble.

It'll take too long to scan every line. So the soldier tosses the sword to the ground, and follows where the blade points. They keep the weapon drawn from here. They can't imagine using it, but the weight of a weapon in their hand is a comfort.

Here the halls are wide enough for four people to walk abreast, and the walls are stacked with the dead. Individual resting places are carved in a honeycomb structure leading up higher than the soldier's light can reach. Many of these alcoves have little left to show of their interred. The hilt of a sword atop a flat husk of wrapping; six-foot blotches of rust and jagged metal that used to be a suit of armor. Some had also been disturbed, bones and grave soil spilling into great heaps on the floor.

The soldier comes to an intersection, marked with a much smaller number of names. The soldier holds up the blade again, and barks a laugh that bounces through the catacombs. One of them is a match.

The family tomb is more of the same, until the soldier reaches a domed room, an intersection with paths in each cardinal direction. The walls are still pocked with burial chambers, but they're roomier here, with more space in between each one. Suspended in the center of the room hangs an iron cage, only just big enough for the human hunched inside. For a flash the soldier is unsure if it's actually dead: it's sitting upright, cross-legged, leaning forward with its elbows on its knees. But as the soldier draws near the decay becomes more obvious. The desiccated flesh is little more than a glossy coating on its yellow bones, its nose and lower jaw rotted away entirely. The soldier isn't sure what's keeping it in one piece. It looks like a sneeze could blow it down.

This is as good a stopping point as any. The soldier lowers to their knees, setting down the sun bottle and the family sword. They re-

trieved the final items from their pack: a large, stoppered drinking gourd and a small wooden box. They uncork the gourd and take a swig of mulled tea, lemon juice, and white spirit alcohol to keep it from freezing. Much more carefully the soldier cracks open the wooden box. Not long ago, the mass inside it had been a cake. Now, jostled and frozen, it doesn't look like much, but still smells sweet.

The soldier didn't pack a fork.

They strip off one gauntlet and scoop up a bite with their fingers.

A few handfuls in, and the light is beginning to shift—the frosting is starting to look more blue than green. The soldier glances up, quietly chokes, then looks straight back down, trying to manage their coughs with dignity.

The corpse in the cage seems to be glowing with cold light, teal-blue and luminous like a deep sea creature. But then the light begins to move. The light leans forward; it has the same face as the corpse, with one eye that rolls back and forth between the two sockets. It raises a skeletal hand, as if to stroke its missing chin.

“Ahhh!” the spirit wails at last. “The old fart’s sword! So it’s still passin’ on down, I’ll be damned. Grip been replaced. That the original blade?”

The soldier stifles their cough but finds no words. They reach for the sword with a cake-covered hand, but switch before sullyng the artifact with frosting. They hold up the blade for the spirit’s inspection. It mimes squinting.

“Ehhh... can’t tell. Don’t care, neither.” The spirit leans forward, eyeing the cake with naked desire. “*That*, on the other hand. What in the Myriad’s shits is it?”

The soldier is too staggered by the idiom to be embarrassed by the dessert on their hands. “Strawberry honey cake, with buttercream frosting. It’s a family recipe, but it didn’t really turn out like my grandparents’ used to.”

“Ain’t that the way! Still looks mighty tasty from here.”

The soldier eyes the cage, the long chain stretching out of view. “Wouldn’t anything?”

The spirit cackles.

Then the crypt rattles. The soldier instinctively throws their hands over their head, though only a few chunks of stone come loose.

The spirit cackles quietly this time. “Heheh, don’t know my own strength.”

The soldier barely hears it. They’re realizing they should have covered the cake, now powdered in crypt filth.

“Whole world’s ending,” they say.

“Ah.” The spirit stills its roving eye to watch the soldier watching their cake. “And here you was just getting started.”

A dam breaks in the soldier’s heart.

“My whole childhood, everybody told me that if I made all the right choices, if I studied hard and trained harder and focused on my future, that I would eventually get to live my life. But that future’s not going to come. I’ve never fallen in love, or been in a real fight... I never even learned how to make a decent cake. I don’t get to live a regular life.”

“Ehhh. I ain’t the right one to talk to about a *regular life*.” The spirit clears its throat, useless but silence-filling. “Er... I did some of that. Not sure any of it made me happy. Know what I liked? This fruit used to grow in the winter, too hard to eat off the vine. But it kept good a long time, yeah? Take ‘em out in the summer?” The spirit heaved a deep sigh, leaning back, staring straight up. “Thaw too long, wear all the juice. Not long enough, break your teeth. But the perfect bite on a warm day... that made me happy, I think.”

The soldier smiles. They haven’t in a while. “That sounds nice.”

The world shakes. A panoply of cracking stone and falling rubble. The soldier rolls into a ball as the crypt crashes around them, the sun bottle shattering. The cage rattles on its chain, and the pile of bones within topples apart in a puff of dust.

The rubble settles, eventually, lit only by the soft blue of the spirit. At long last, and with a grunt of effort, it stands. A ruined foot extends between the bars, steps experimentally onto a chunk of carved stone that was ceiling moments ago. It passes through the bars with its next step, descending carefully to where the soldier is struggling under dead weight. It extends a hand, takes the soldier’s hand, and

hoists them upright.

The soldier staggers, disoriented in the darkness. Only now, the sun bottle extinguished, can they see the little lights: two in each alcove, like the eyes of a person lying on their back with their head turned. They aren't much, dim little candles, but the soldier knew they were all watching.

"Hey," says the spirit. "This ain't no place to watch the apocalypse. Let's go see what's next."

Together two souls rise to watch the end of the world.

NESS

Ness is a bookseller living in Spokane, Washington. They hope to make a living someday writing weird stories.

A WOMAN, A WITCH

ELIZA BLACK

THERE'D BEEN A TIME IN my youth when I couldn't bear even an hour without seeing another person.

Now, with my skin wrinkled and pockmarked and sun-stained from time, I was much happier in the company of the woods. Even if the bottoms of my skirts, my shoes, and my ankles had already been torn to shreds from the land around my hut, it was better than wandering close to the town of Warren. Even if the underbrush was less wild there; less cluttered, choked, and violent, it was better than being seen. Even if I rarely saw the sun anymore through the tangled canopy, at least I had my friends in the trees to keep me company.

It had been a relief when I'd started hearing their voices. Otherwise, I did believe that I would have gone mad with loneliness.

I knew my friends better than I knew anything, even myself.

So, on this particular day, when the sun was out, I decided to leave my cottage and go out for a walk. It wasn't long before a flock of ravens scattered into the sky and the forest went quiet. I went toward it to investigate.

"Strange creature," I muttered to the woods in a voice that hadn't been used in quite some time, after I saw her but before I recognized what she was: a girl in the beginnings of womanhood. "What are you doing in my forest?"

She had clearly never ventured far enough for the forest to start collecting pieces from her, like it had from me. With the exception of her petticoat being a little damp and dirty, she had all the fleeting beauty of a young, bonneted maid in the sun.

The Creature was kneeling beside a decorated golden birdcage that she'd set down in the middle of some clover.

"Go on," she was saying to the bird inside it. I couldn't see what kind of bird it was, so I came forward into the clearing. "Fly away!"

When I got close enough, I saw that it was a yellow-feathered canary, staring out at the clearing overwhelmed. It chirped and hopped closer to the girl's skirt without leaving its cage through the open door.

"Come on now," the Creature said, trying to be stern. "Master Bur-

roughs won't have you in the house anymore, so you'll have to fly away now."

The trees and I chuckled, forgetting that she could hear me.

The Creature yelped and spun to see me at the same time as she got to her feet to back away. I laughed louder.

"My apologies, dear. Didn't mean to startle you. It's only an old woman out for a walk."

That was a joke that would only be funny to me and the voices. If this girl was from Warren, like I was, then she would have grown up fearing the witch in the wood. I'd feared the witch when I was her age, too.

"It's you." The Creature was frozen staring at me like a startled deer. "Everyone says you signed your name away to Satan so he'd make it so cold they couldn't spare the firewood to burn you."

Her naivety was endlessly funny. I'd heard the same thing when I was a girl. I came forward to the birdcage she had abandoned between the two of us, saying, "She must not know yet; they'll say anything."

"Talk you to the Devil, Witch?" she demanded, interrupting whatever response the wood might have given. "What don't I know yet?"

The canary's chirps mimicked the way the Creature spoke: "Answer me, by God!"

"Oh, hush all that," I snapped at both of them, kneeling with effort next to the birdcage and closing the door to it again. "Come here and take your bird back."

She didn't budge, but her eyes flicked to the canary.

"Come, witchling," I picked it up gently, stood up, and held it out to her. "There's no trickery."

"I shan't," she said. "And I'm not a witchling."

"You are." She was.

"I'm not. I serve the Lord."

I laughed again. "Fine. Enough about the Devil and God. Here. Take your bird back, get out of my forest, and go back to town. A good servant of the Lord should be in church on the day of rest. They'll notice your absence."

“I...” The Creature glanced back in the direction of the town. “I can’t take her back. Master of the house won’t have her anymore. He says it’d be better just to drown her in wine, and...”

She clammed up again and refused to go on further.

“And what?” I prompted. Mischievously, I feigned a lunge forward to grab her. “And... gobble her up!”

The Creature jumped backwards, yelping again. The forest giggled at her.

“That’s mean.” After a few seconds of avoiding my eyes, she crept forward and took the birdcage again. She opened the cage door.

The bird stayed where it was.

“You’ll just have to keep her in your quarters,” I said, putting my hands on my hips.

“I have been! Master Burroughs can hear her singing.”

I huffed. “That’ll be John Burroughs, won’t it?”

She nodded.

“That man never liked pets.”

“Well, he was alright at first,” the Creature protested naively. “It’s just ‘cause—well, on account his wife never got sick so much before, and now... I’m having to care for her all the time, and she’s just not getting better.”

Her words made some familiar feeling tickle the back of my mind, so I pulled at the thread. I was lucky that the Creature responded obligingly.

“Elizabeth Burroughs is sick?” I asked. “How long?”

“A few weeks.”

“And you’ve been taking care of her all that time?”

“Yes.”

“What of the doctor?”

“Doctor Nash and Master Burroughs haven’t gotten along ever since... well, anyway, the Doctor refuses to come calling.”

“Does he, now?”

“He does.”

I turned away, a wave of cold anxiety making my legs tremble. I put my hand on my chest. It was too familiar. Sickeningly familiar.

“First, it’s the bird who’s bad luck,” I muttered to the comforting woods, trying to remember it all. “Then, it’ll be the nearest little witchling.”

“I’m not a witch,” the girl repeated, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh, such confidence,” I scoffed dismissively. I’d once made the same promise to myself. “I suppose you treat the Master’s wife with herbs?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you get them? The wood?”

When she didn’t answer, I looked at her again. The expression on her face told me I was right. This wasn’t her first time in the forest. I wished I had guessed wrong. I hadn’t realized how far along she was in her path to become a witch.

But maybe there was still time to reverse it.

“I’d stay away from John Burroughs’ woman if I were you.”

“You’re heartless,” she said. “Why should I?”

“A girl who skips church and collects plants from the forest. What if the plants heal her? Then you healed her with witchcraft. And what if the plants don’t work and she dies? A witch’s poison. And the bird, by the way, is your familiar. That’s what they’ll say.”

“Who cares what they say?” the Creature bristled. “I want to help her.”

Oh, how I wished I could get the message through this girl’s thick skull. I still wished that someone had once told me these things, and she was too pigheaded to listen.

“Who cares,” I chuckled ruefully and meanly, glaring at her. “I do. They do. You should.”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“When you’re my age, it won’t be nonsense.” I glared at her, hating how familiar her features seemed now that I was looking directly at her. I couldn’t even stand it for long, so I turned away again. “Clearly, you don’t even know what it means to be a witch.”

“You are a witch, aren’t you?”

The trees and I let out a truly mad cackle. “I am, I am. Because of what they say. That’s what a witch is. It’s just part of a woman’s life.

It's the same as the breasts, the bleeding, the babies—it's just a matter of time. Then, the crops aren't growing like they thought they would, or someone's wife gets a little too sick for a little too long, and then you're a witch, you're a witch, you're a witch!"

"You are a cruel old woman," said the Creature. "That's a horrible way to think."

"You'll be a cruel old woman, too," I shot back. "Trust me. I know where your path goes. It's the path I'm on, too. You're just not caught up yet."

"I've heard enough."

"Ohh," I scoffed mockingly. "She's heard enough. Do as I said and stay away from the goodwife."

"Like you did?" she demanded.

"No," I said. "Not like I did. I wish I'd known when I was your age that you can't save everyone."

"I do know that. But maybe... maybe if I try, I can make things better just for a little bit."

"A little bit of time when things are good is not enough to save you," I said. "Goodie Burroughs is going to die because she is old, but they'll put the blame on you anyway."

I didn't know why I wanted things to turn out differently for her, or why I was still bothering to try. I knew who she was. I knew I couldn't change the course of time.

I wished witchcraft was real, so that I could.

"Well, if you're right," the Creature said, "then it's already too late."

Getting rid of the bird out here would have meant John Burroughs had no one else to blame for his wife's death except her. Bringing the bird back meant that she and the bird were working together to poison his wife.

Saving Goodwife Burroughs from death would have made the village look at her as a healer until the day that someone under her care couldn't be saved. Letting Goodwife Burroughs be would've meant that she was spiteful.

No matter what she did, by the time she realized what was coming, she had the qualities of a witch.

"I might as well keep trying to help while I still can," she said.

The tragedy of it all was that she had only tried to be compassionate.

I glanced at the forest as wind brushed through the leaves. "I didn't feel I had a choice, either," I said.

"I have a choice," the Creature insisted, stepping forward. "I already made it."

"All choices would lead to the same thing, anyway," I sighed. "It's the oldest story in the book. You're going to help them and help them, until they drive you out, and if you're the kind of woman that you want to be, then you'll forgive them anyway."

She smiled at me. "I don't think I'm going to turn into the kind of woman I want to."

"You don't think so?"

The Creature shrugged. "You tell me. You're further along the path."

"I have told you many things already. You don't listen." I shook my head, feeling very weary. "It's not worth that sacrifice. They don't deserve your help. Leave, before they make you into a woman as old and cruel as me."

"It's not about what they deserve," she said, her body shaking but her voice confident. "It isn't. It's about what's in my nature."

The words froze my bones. "Better let that bird stay with you, witchling. It doesn't want to leave."

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. "All right."

"Better go back where you came from now," I said. "Stop bothering me."

"Oh, I don't think that's ever going to stop happening," she said, but lingered a few more moments. "I'll tell them there is no witch in the woods."

"Maybe you would have." I shook my head and closed my eyes. "But you didn't."

I opened my eyes again. I stood alone in the empty clearing.

ELIZA BLACK

Eliza Black grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and is currently an aspiring author and playwright based in Los Angeles, California. She loves world-building in fantasy fiction stories, and drawing dragons and monsters. She has big plans to illustrate her own books one day.

[Website](#)



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

RICHARD KUNZE

THE DYING SUN BATHED THE port of Ranjord with a wash of blood on the day Briar returned home. Quite the contrast to the golden dawn that had waved its farewells to her nearly three years ago. The docks had been crowded then, filled with cheering friends and family and chanting priests blessing her journey. Now they were empty apart from a fisherman pulling in the day's wriggling catch.

Leaving the unloading of the ship into the capable hands of its crew, she disembarked onto the quay with Torstrom. She stole a glance back at the red-and-white striped sail and snarling prow beast as they ventured into the town, wishing to stay behind and delay the eventual farewells as long as she could. There were, however, more important matters to attend to at the moment.

They found their way to Master Vidaris's chamber easily enough. Briar had expected the city to be different, to change as much as she had, but the truth was she could have left yesterday. Same streets she'd played on as a young girl. Same tower she'd carried books up and down as an apprentice. Same iron latch she'd dreaded opening some days.

There was no dread today.

Inside the chamber, Master Vidaris sat hunched over his desk, his nose so close to a leather-bound tome she'd thought he'd fallen asleep on his face. The room was as disordered as ever, strewn with scrolls and bottles and animal skulls. Drying herbs hung from the rafters and drippings from ancient candles ran down table legs and window sills like petrified, waxen waterfalls.

The old man looked up from his studies, the lines around his eyes deeper and his beard whiter than when she'd last seen him. A brief expression of surprise flitted across his face before he smothered it beneath his usual austere frown. "So the adventurer returns home."

"Was there any doubt?" said Briar.

"Doubt? Of course, there was always doubt. Doubts and probabilities are the tools of our trade. Only fools deal in certainties."

Torstrom trailed her into the chamber, lowering his head to avoid a collision with the comparatively low door frame. Master Vidaris's

cold stare followed him around the room. “Who is your, *ahhh*, companion?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” said Briar. “This is Torstom, captain of the *Iron Orca*, the Gnasher of Axes, Bard of the Steel Song... did I get everything?”

Torstom nodded approvingly before his attention was quickly ensnared by a raven skull on one of the room’s many shelves.

“Think of him as my personal guard,” said Briar.

“I suppose you needed all the swords you could find up there in the Frozen Sea, eh?”

“Suppose so. How have things been holding up while I’ve been away?”

“Well enough.” Vidaris offered a dejected smile. “Why don’t you sit? Can I get you anything, tea... ale for your friend?”

“Nothing for us.” With the toe of her boot, Briar hooked a chair out from under his desk and dropped herself into it with a weary sigh. “I’m afraid we won’t be staying long.”

“Well,” said Vidaris, spreading out his hands, “I’ll get right to the marrow of it then. You’ve been gone a long time, Briar. Too long. Everyone—including myself, it pains me to say—feared you dead. A master needs an apprentice like a king needs an heir, and I could only wait and hope for so long. It is a poor merchant that puts his fortune into a single ship, so it is a poor scholari that places all his hopes into one plan—or in one person. You understand this, I hope?”

Briar nodded and picked at her teeth. “So who’s my lucky replacement?”

“Do you remember Flynn, my nephew? He’s been studying under me for almost two years now.”

“Aye, I remember. You always did love that boy, even when I was still your apprentice.”

“I have the mind to pass on my ring to him when he passes his tests.”

“If he passes his tests. You don’t make them easy, that’s for sure.”

“They never are. The ring of a scholari is no trivial ornament. It cannot be so easily attained, lest we cheapen the reputation of our

order. I'm so sorry, but the tests are the tests, and don't regret the ones I created for you. Thank the gods you are alive and returned home at all."

"Wait, wait, *wait*. Did I say anything about returning empty-handed?"

Vidaris paled. "You... passed the tests? That's im—what I mean is, that is a surprise."

"Aye, now there's a saga the bards could spin, one that'll keep us up all night and then some, but I'll save it for the feasting halls. So let me get right to the marrow of it. Would you like to hear a brief version of this tale? It's got beasts, cunning, adventure; just the kind I remember you enjoyed telling me by candlelight on winter nights."

Vidaris sat back in his chair and began biting his thumbnail. "Begin."

"Our tale begins with a scholari's apprentice, eager to earn a place in the guild. It begins with an assignment of three tasks, three seemingly impossible tasks, and a ship leaving north for the Frozen Sea. Never thought I'd even make the journey with the storms and such. Never thought I had an ounce of courage in me until, well..." She reached into her belt and produced an ice-white fang, hollow and nearly as long as her forearm from tip to root. "The fang of the serpent Valdall, the bane of the Frozen Sea—the first task."

"How did you ever—"

"A big hook, an ox head, and a crew that straddled the line between incredibly brave and incredibly stupid."

Torstrom chuckled at that.

"I am impressed. And after that, you went further north and—"

"Let me finish the tale. After months of ice mountains and storms, we landed on shores of black sand. Took some searching, but I eventually found Isefrefya the Ice Witch. Wish I'd gotten a warning that she was howling mad. After my apprenticeship for three months—your second task—she kept me locked in a cage to stop me from leaving."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Master Vidaris messaged his forehead, working his fingers around the deep wrinkles and liver spots. "Is-

efreya was... well, to be honest not the best of company at the best of times, but she was a skilled witch and a trustworthy friend to me once."

"No worry." Briar swatted the air. "At least my captivity was far from boring. She taught me much about herbs and poisons and all that. I finally managed to escape by mixing a sleeping draught into her tea and charming the lock."

Briar rose from her seat and drifted across the room, stopping to appreciate a dusty tapestry sewn with a map of the Frozen Sea and surrounding lands.

"Now the third task," continued Briar, "that one was interesting, I must say."

"Find the isle of Yarnburg and retrieve a stone from its shores," mused Vidaris, as if reciting something he'd heard from a bard's tale.

"Aye, Yarnburg," repeated Briar. "The Island that Steers the Compass. I remember the stories. A black mass of lodestone that rips the nails right out of ships that sail too close. Gods, how badly I wanted to see it. I searched with the crew of the *Iron Orca* for months. Circled around and around and around." She traced looping circles across the map with her finger. "Then a thought struck me: maybe Yarnberg was just a legend? Maybe all there was up in that frozen waste was nothing but ice and more ice? Now I'm certain of it. Just a legend." She turned to meet Vidaris's stare "But you knew that, didn't you?"

A croaking sound escaped Vidaris's lips. "I—I... of course not, that's—"

Distracted by their conversation, Vidaris had failed to notice that Torstrom had threaded his way around the cluttered chamber and stood silently behind his chair. Just as Vidaris was about to rise, Torstrom grabbed both his bony shoulders and slowly eased him back into his chair.

Briar crossed the room and rested her palms on the top of Vidaris's desk. She leaned in close, close enough to see the droplets of sweat beginning to form on the old man's brow.

"So let me tell you another tale. This one's not like the ones you

used to tell me. I've been working on it for quite some time. It's got power, favoritism, treachery, deceit—all the things I thought a scholari was supposed to distance themselves from. But these are just more tools of the trade, aren't they?"

She grabbed the fang from the desk and brought it down into Vidaris's right hand. The blade slipped between the bones smoother than a sewing needle through a sailcloth, pinning his hand to the wood. A high-pitched scream rattled the tower. Dark blood began pooling beneath his palm and soaked into the surrounding papers.

"But I'm sure you're familiar with the first part, so why don't we get to the ending? Well, when his apprentice returned home having done the best she could to complete the tests he'd set out for her, he was very—" she twisted the fang, earning a yelp from Vidaris, "very happy. Without hesitation, he removed his ring and presented it to her." Briar relieved his bony middle finger of his ring, the stuck hand offering little opposition, and hid it in one of her pockets. "And then she became the new scholari of Ranjord. Even has a happy ending, how 'bout that!"

Fury roiled in Master Vidaris's eyes. His face flushed red. "*You little b—*"

"Torstrom," called Briar. "Let's leave my old master to some private time. I'm sure he's going to be very busy packing up his things."

"You think you can just get rid of me like that?" hissed Vidaris. "Oh, you have no idea what you've done. I have friends among the scholari, powerful friends. You'll wish you'd stayed in Isefrefya's cage when they're done with you and your dog!"

Briar and Torstrom turned around as they were leaving the chamber. She couldn't help but let a satisfied grin spread across her lips. "Shame you won't get to say goodbye to them. Sorry 'bout that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Briar pointed at the fang lodged into Vidaris's hand. "There's some interesting stuff I put in the hollow of that tooth. Stuff that will have you coughing up clotted blood and worse in a few months. Ah, but don't look so glum! There's an antidote, but I'm afraid the only person in the entire world who knows how to brew it

is our dear friend Isefrefya. I'm afraid it's a long journey to her home. I'm afraid the winter ice is going to start choking up the straight fairly soon now. One would need to be on a ship rather soon if they had any chance of making the journey at all."

"Very soon," echoed Torstrom.

Briar slammed the heavy door before a final cry or insult from Vidaris could chase her through the frame. Outside, the sun had sunk below the mountains, bathing the sky with a wash of purple-black like that of a fresh bruise. She removed the ring from her pocket and inspected the simple iron and ruby piece in the fading light.

"Now," said Briar, slapping Torstrom's shoulder, "let's find the great hall and introduce you to the Jarl, I'm sure he'd be grateful for all the help you've given the new scholari of Ranjord."

Briar slid the ring on her middle finger.

RICHARD KUNZE

Richard has worked in poultry farming, pharmaceutical research, and is now trying his hand at novel writing to keep everyone confused and guessing as to his next move. Worrying about the made-up problems of made-up people has been his hobby for nearly four years and one day he hopes to make a career out of it. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

LOW EBB
DAVID DENNISON

I KEEP THINKING ABOUT THAT last fight we had. Holy cow. If they gave awards for stupid things to be angry about, we'd both be threats to sweep.

To rehash:

I was doing the dishes after you made that chicken casserole and I guess I was grunting a little because the cheese had hardened just below the rim of the dish. You thought I was overplaying it. I was, to use your words, “being a diva” and “climbing up on the cross”, which—sorry—was bullshit. That dish had been sitting out for a good hour before I got to it and the cheese actually *was* clinging to the thing for dear life—all brown and hardened. Plus, the sponge was old, so the coarse side was no more abrasive than the spongy side and it was like trying to cut cement with a towel.

Anyway, you thought I was being intentionally precious, drawing attention to the fact that—*look at me!*—I was doing the dishes which, according to you, I “never” do. I felt that was unfair; I’d done the dishes the night before, thank you very much, and the only reason you didn’t know that was because, unlike *somebody* I could name, I don’t broadcast it every time I go out of my way to do something nice or helpful.

You rolled your eyes and did that little sigh you do, that you know I *hate*. Like, *well, if you’re gonna be all sensitive about it*. And yeah, I bit down hard on that bait. Told you if I wasn’t doing the dishes to your aural satisfaction, maybe *you’d* like to step in. And while you were at it, you could pay me back for that oil change you knew damn well was *your* turn to pay for. And along similar lines, you could finally get around to sanding off that paint you spilled on the floor of the garage *last year*, and call your brother to get that cheap exterminator he uses over here.

Boy, then we were off to the races, weren’t we? You emptied the whole gunnysack on my head, which, admittedly, has a lot more in it than I’ve ever been entirely comfortable with. You went down the full catalog of my shortcomings and misdeeds, basically since we started dating. I threw one or two back at you, compensating for your comparative *lack* of shortcomings and misdeeds by specially select-

ing the ones most likely to hurt and upset you. Played my greatest hits, I did:

You never try with my parents.

You never finished grad school.

You didn't follow through with that fertility clinic.

YOU ACT JUST LIKE YOUR MOTHER.

You.

You.

YOU.

You-statements.

Dr. Schlessenberg says they can be the death of a marriage, and I'm not sure Dr. Schelssenberg is wrong.

You started crying. I threw down the casserole mid-wash, almost broke the damn thing, and stormed outside for a smoke. When I came back in, you were in bed with your back turned, but you weren't breathing like you do when you're asleep—all fast and eerily shallow—so I knew you were awake and just didn't want to talk.

I seethed myself to sleep eventually and you left for work early, before I was up. I guess that was intentional. I spent the whole next day ragingly pissed—about took Jerry's head off at the office—and since we're peas in a pod when it comes to that, I know your day went pretty much the same.

Then, it was after work and you were coming home, and then, well, *this*.

It's kind of amazing to me how two people who love each other—and I *do* love you, Blueberry, you know I do—can stay actually, viscerally fuming at one another for a full 24 hours over a little burnt cheese on a casserole dish.

Maybe even more amazing is how easily we can let it all go. I'll spend the whole damn day thinking of things I should've said to you during the fight: snappy comebacks, zinger deflections, gotcha after gotcha, and I'll think about everything I'm going to say to you just as soon as I see you again, and then... I see you again.

And I don't say those things. I take you in my arms. I let you take me in yours. I kiss your forehead. I ask how your day went. You tell

me. And it's like it all just melts, you know? Like it doesn't matter and never mattered because, hey, *it never mattered*.

It's a helluva way to spend a day though. We only get about 30,000 of those in this life, I've heard, and that's being generous. I wonder how many we've flushed over dirty dishes. Over tit for tat.

You always think you've got time, don't you? I don't mean *you*, I mean the Royal You. *You* as in, *us*.

I guess you don't though. You don't always get more time. Because here we are.

Maybe your parents were right when they told you it was a fool's errand, marrying me. I like to think they've softened on me since then—the day your mother said that was the day she found out I called you 'Blueberry' and I think that made her be sick a little into her mouth. But maybe if you'd tied the knot with somebody less volatile, less—sorry—like *you*, you'd have been happier.

It's not fun, fighting with you. It's not nice. Because people say that, don't they? *Oh, they love to fight, they're like cats and dogs*. But in my experience, cats and dogs a) don't much like being around each other, making them a poor point of comparison for a marriage, and b) don't show any evidence that *they* like fighting either.

I *do* like being around you, Blueberry. I've liked it since the very first time I got to do it. I think in a weird way, I even like it when we're at each other's throats. I guess because I know deep down (or maybe not that deep) that I'm going to walk in the door, I'm going to hold you, you're going to hold me back, and together, we're going to put things right again. Effortlessly, wordlessly, and in the smallest of instants, we're going to rebuild the whole thing. Rome going up in a day.

It's holding onto bitterness that's the real fool's errand, you ask me.

What I wouldn't give to do that now. Instead, I had to be sitting there, ticked off about casserole cheese when I got the call.

Your brother was just here. Did you know? Did you hear him? He was talking to you just like I've been. He had to go home for the kids but your parents are on the way too. Should be here around morning.

I asked the nurse and she said it's "not impossible" that you could

be hearing me talk to you. What the hell does that mean, right? “Not impossible.” A double negative. Surely, a simple affirmative would get the job done. Unless it *can’t* get the job done.

Hold on a second.

You didn’t hear that just then because there was nothing to hear, but that was me leaning over and holding you and kissing your forehead, trying to make all that bullshit about the casserole go away. I was trying to do it wordlessly and effortlessly and in the smallest of instants like I usually do. Did it work?

Usually, your face tells me everything I need to know—I can read you like a book and always could. Not that you’re easy or you’re simple or something. You’re about as hard a nut as I’ve ever cracked. It’s just that you—again, quoting Dr. Schlessenberg here—“feel out loud”. I always thought that was a weeny, cheesy thing to say—like something you’d say to a kid—but I’m starting to see how right she was.

Sorry, how right she *is*. We’re keeping our hopes up around these parts.

Back to this “feeling out loud” business, I think I understand what Dr. Schlessenberg meant—sorry, *means*—by that, in regards to you. Because it’s like, now that I *can’t* hear you “feeling out loud”, I’ve stepped into a void.

No. Not stepped. Been pushed. I’m sitting here, but also, I’m in a soundproof booth and somebody locked the door on me. And I have to tell you, Blueberry, I am just *hating* the quiet.

Once, when I was little, we lived near train tracks. It wasn’t for long. Mom found work at a startup in Hartford, but it didn’t last, and we were back to Fairfield inside the year. During that time, I learned that what they say about living near train tracks is true. It annoys the shit out of you at first, but then you get used to it. When I got back to Fairfield, I couldn’t sleep for a week. I missed the rumble, and the clacking and clanging, and the whistles. You’re like that, I guess. Like train tracks.

Having you like this, this big presence that was out there is just static now. How about that? One drunk driver crosses the centerline,

and it's like God hit the mute button on my life.

They're telling me, "we have some hard decisions to make." I don't know who "we" is in that construction. Is that just a turn of phrase, supposed to make me feel less alone? Like I've got support or I'm part of a team or something? Because if so, L-O-L.

You're my team, Blueberry. My band. And if this is how the band breaks up, well, I guess there's an awful lot to hate about that. It'll hit me in time. Most of all though, right now, I hate the thought of us going out on a low. On an ebb. Over *dishes*.

Always hoped we'd be dancing when the music stopped.

Wait. What—what was that? Can you do that again?

Okay, Blueberry, you've gotta work with me now.

I've got a real problem here because, as things stand, the decision I have to make isn't really a decision at all. You were clear. Should *this* ever happen, you did not want to be kept around. You did not, as you so gently put it, want your brains to end up like the contents of our vegetable drawer after I abandoned one of my weight loss kicks. You made me swear I'd do the right thing if it ever came to this and I will honor that commitment, much as I emphatically do not want to.

If I have to, I'll pull that plug. Or flip that switch, or whatever it's actually like, doing it.

But...

Did I just feel what I think I felt? I'm honestly not sure. I've been holding your hand for several hours now and it's possible that I'm just getting a twitch. Maybe not even that. Maybe my mind is playing tricks. Maybe I know exactly what's what and what I have to do and my power of suggestion is just stepping in to protect me from it.

So you see, Blueberry, that's why I need you to do it again, okay? I need you to do it again, and if you're still caged up in there, and you've got any interest in making this remotely easy on me, I'd really appreciate it if you did it after I asked you.

Like, *right* after.

Like... *now*.

Holy shit. Oh my God, shit shit shit. Okay, just hold on, Blueberry, I'm calling the doctor over.

Okay, now I'm getting looks like I'm crazy. They're doing this sad head-shaking thing and it's making me want to punch something all the way through. One more time, Baby, okay? One more time, right... *now*.

Well. Well, look at that. Look who's awake.

Welcome back, Blueberry.

I love you.

Sorry about the damn dishes.

DAVID DENNISON

Despite being an American, I'm a graduate of Edinburgh University in Scotland and Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in London. My writing credentials include (and are limited to) a few freelance articles I wrote for the Arab American News right after college and a handful of people telling me I'm good at writing. I'm a drama and social studies teacher in northern Thailand, where I live with my wife, my two kids, my dog, and my cat.



JUDGE'S COMMENTS

RICHEL BILLING

The End Of Autumn is a very moving story involving a grandson and his grandmother. Our protagonist is tasked with convincing his much-loved elder to accept treatment for a serious illness, which she's refusing. It follows them over the course of an afternoon, with the protagonist trying to muster the courage to discuss it with his grandmother.

The story is cleverly woven around the theme, which comes to satisfying fruition at the end. It's driven heavily by dialogue and description and the writer has a terrific handle on both. I tore through the paragraphs, unable to stop reading, wanting to know what happens between the two.

The writer does a brilliant job of showing what you can do with just two characters and a conversation. You can feel the deep connection between them and a good sense of everything that has happened before. You learn about their lives, who they are and what matters to them.

I appreciated the clever contrasts and metaphors, such as the caged parrot and what it's like to be permanently wracked by physical pain. The reader's attention is cleverly drawn to these details throughout. It allows the reader to think about deep and meaningful things of their own accord without the author suggesting how you should think or feel about them. Instead, it offers you the perspective, a chance to put yourself in the shoes of the grandmother, in this case, and to properly understand how she's feeling. In a sense, the protagonist goes through this same process themselves. At last he realizes, which helps him to change tact with his grandmother, something which she appreciates and, in turn, that provides some satisfaction for the reader.

Above all, this story takes a meaningful look at growing old and letting go, something that can be so hard for many of us. It speaks of grief and how poor we are at coming to terms with it, as well as how reluctant we are to discuss these heartbreaking things. Nobody wants to say goodbye, and instead the writer suggests that you don't need to, but instead you can make memories in the time we have left, which is the greatest goodbye of all.

It's a story that makes you think and stays with you for some time

after you've finished. An excellent story all round. I'm pleased to award it the prize.

RICHIE BILLING

Richie Billing writes fantasy fiction, historical fiction and stories of a darker nature. His stories often explore real-world issues in fantasy lands. His short fiction has been published by, amongst others, the BBC, Kzine, Bewildering Stories, Liquid Imagination, and Far Horizons. His debut novel, *Pariah's Lament*, was published by Of Metal and Magic Publishing in March 2021.

Richie hosts the podcast *The Fantasy Writers' Toolshed*, a venture inspired by the requests of readers of his critically-acclaimed book, *A Fantasy Writers' Handbook*.

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