

Flights of Reality



short stories by
LB Lee

PSY-FI FOR ALL

A time-traveling supervillain tries to fix her life. John Henry and Polly Ann deal with the Devil, and Death goes to a tea party. All this and more awaits you in *Flights of Reality*, which contains ten years of sci-fi, fantasy, and genre-busters by LB Lee. Ranging from the silly to the Biblical, there's something for everyone here.

LB Lee is best known for their mental health comics. Now they return to their first love, prose. *Flights of Reality* contains twenty-eight illustrated short stories, some posted online, others never previously shared.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LB is a multivarious entity who makes mental health comics and writes about reality melting. They also made *the Homeless Year* and *Alter Boys in Love*.



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Flights of Reality

by LB Lee



Other Books by LB Lee

The Homeless Year

Alter Boys in Love

The Fandom Cults of Draven

All and more can be found at

<http://healthymultiplicity.com/loonybrain/ShopHome.html!>

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The Other Legend of John Henry

Everyone knows the story of John Henry, the man with the hammer who fought the machine of progress and won—for a little while, anyway. Everyone also knows that the victory came at the cost of his own life.

But there's a different story about him and his wife, one less well known.

Polly Ann and John Henry had many things in common: they were both kind, gentle people, they both yearned to have a family of their own, and they were both born slaves. However, they dealt with those hellish circumstances in very different ways. John Henry developed a deep focus and a craving for action; with his tool in his hand and his body in motion, he could silence the rest of the world, narrow it to the task at hand. This intense concentration gave him the ability to power through almost anything, and made him unparalleled with the hammer. It also meant that he was a man who never held still, never slowed down, even when he needed to.

Polly Ann, on the other hand, developed a quiet awareness and caution. Her eyes, ears, and hands were always open, taking in the world around her. She absorbed information, skills, and gossip like a sponge, since she never knew what might come in useful later. And while she never became the best at anything, like John did, she did develop a dazzling array of skills, all of which served them well.

All of their friends agreed that they were a perfect match, but it was John's sweetness that won Polly's love, and her mental agility that won his. That love was all they cared to remember from those terrible days.

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When the war ended and freedom came, they couldn't marry fast enough. Within a short time, Polly found she was pregnant. And though it was what she had always wanted, she was scared. For so many years, pregnancy meant pain, suffering, inevitable separation and sale; she herself had never known her mother.

But John held her close. He reminded her that they belonged to no one but each other now. They could finally have the family they had always wanted, a child who would never be taken away. A child born into freedom. And it was his focus on the present that helped break through her fear and grief of the past.

Unfortunately, there was still the issue of money. They were looking for better lives; they just hadn't found them yet.

"I'll think of something," John promised.

"We will," Polly corrected.

Of course, they both looked for work—they couldn't afford not to. But slavery cast a long shadow. Every one of Polly's skills came in handy—mending, laundry, cleaning, repair, midwifery, odd jobs, she did it all. But as her pregnancy progressed, they knew she couldn't keep up the grueling pace, and even with the two of them together, the money just wasn't enough to support their child.

"We'll think of something," Polly said, patting John's shoulder.

He said nothing. It bothered him deeply that all of his strength and will wasn't enough to support his family.

That night, as they slept in bed, John heard a knock at the door. There was a late fall chill in the air, and outside their window, the moon hung in the sky like a silver coin. It was the witching hour, and John certainly didn't want to leave his warm bed and his warm wife, but the visitor was very

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insistent. Polly, uncharacteristically, didn't stir, and finally, John got up to answer the door.

On the other side was a man in a crisp white suit that wouldn't come into fashion for another fifty years. The brim of his hat shadowed his face from the moonlight, so that later, John wouldn't be able to say much of what the man looked like, except that his skin was dark as the night sky, and he had a big, white smile like a slice of the moon.

"John Henry," the stranger said, "I'm at your service."

John Henry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. On some instinctive level, developed from a lifetime's encounters with the little devils of cruelty, apathy, and selfishness, he knew that this stranger on his doorstep was the Devil himself.

"I don't want none of your service," he said, and tried to shut the door in the Devil's face.

But the Devil caught the door in one hand gently, and however John strained, he couldn't shut it.

"Hush," the Devil said. "You'll wake Polly."

John froze. Part of him wanted to continue straining, force this malevolent stranger from his home and his family. But he thought of his wife, and he let the front door go. "What do you want?"

"I have a business proposition for you."

"No."

The Devil went on as though he hadn't spoken. "Tomorrow, there will be a job opening at the Cavendish railroad company. If you get up at the crack of dawn and let nothing distract you, you'll get the job. There, you'll make enough money to care for your family the rest of their days..."

John thought of the long hours spent in job lines, in worrying. He looked back at Polly, who seemed deep in an enchanted sleep. He thought of

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their child, as yet unborn, and he thought of the love that had sustained them through hell and back. He thought of all the things he would do for her.

"Nobody's told you this, John, because they don't know, but your heart's weak," the Devil continued. "The work you do, it *will* burst on you. But not yet. Now, in a couple months, there's going to be a wager, man against machine. You don't need details; you'll know it when you see it. Take the wager; that's where the big money is. If you win, you'll go down in history as a hero, a legend."

"But?"

"But your heart will give out. You'll never see your child."

"And if I lose?"

The Devil shrugged. "You'll live... for a while. But no money, no legend. You already know what that life is like." He smiled, put out a hand. "What do you say?"

John thought. He knew what he wanted to do. But he knew, more than anything, that right then, he needed Polly's sense, her ability to weigh all the options and weave them through her fingers without losing track of a single one.

"I need to discuss this with my wife," he said.

The Devil squinted at him for a moment, as though trying to read his intentions. Whatever he saw must've satisfied him, for he smiled again. "By all means. As you should."

And he disappeared into the night.

John woke Polly, and because he was him and she was her, she believed him instantly, and got to work analyzing it all. Could the Devil be trusted? (Of course not.) What should they do? (Only God knew.) They talked and talked, worried themselves in circles, until finally they lay quiet in bed, Polly's head on John's chest.

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"If we don't stop this, I'll sleep through the job call," John said.

"Maybe we'd be better off if you did," Polly said.

They were silent a while. John could feel her eyelashes fluttering against his skin. He stroked her hair.

"I have an idea," she said.

The next few days passed like a dream, or a story. John Henry got up at dawn, and just as the Devil said, the job was there. It was good paying work, playing to John Henry's strengths and skill, but both him and Polly were quiet, anxious. They all knew the stories about playing against the Devil; none of them ended well. Polly wasn't sure her plan would work, and even if it did, John wasn't sure he'd be able to follow it. Turning to her when he was just standing there was one thing, but when he was in full swing, it was another situation altogether.

When the wager came, it all seemed to fall into place in John's head. Man against machine, John against all the implacable, unfeeling forces against him. This was surely what he was meant for, what he was born for.

And wielding his hammer, John pitted his muscle and mind against smoke and steel.

If not for Polly, he would've ascended to that heaven in his mind, the one where nothing existed but the work, and he would've hammered the nails into his own coffin without a thought. But there was more than just himself now; she was his wife, and she was there in the crowd, watching him, keeping pace with him, eyes big and round.

Because he was aware of her, John could remember what she'd told him, and began to notice a tightness in his chest, shooting pains down his right arm—his valiant heart, desperately trying to keep up with all the pressures it'd been under. From Polly's worried face, it was as though she knew even before he did.

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Even after all the talks and planning they'd done together, even though he knew better, John Henry felt the pull. Maybe the Devil had lied—that was what he always did, wasn't it? Maybe it was all lies, and John could work through it. After all, wasn't that his true gift, the ability to power through everything, no matter what? Maybe he could win it all, defeat the machines, be a legend, give his family the lives they deserved. Didn't they deserve it, after all those years of hell? Didn't he? Maybe... maybe...

But he saw Polly watching him, her face pinched and shining with love. They shared a timeless glance.

And John Henry did what he'd never been able to do. He slowed down.

They didn't know if it would work. It was a gamble, Polly's clever mind searching for the least awful end to an unwinnable game that none of them had ever wanted to play. John couldn't afford to lose to the machine; his family couldn't bear for him to win. Which meant there was only one thing to do.

John poured every ounce of his willpower and his concentration into that goal, driving steel, pumping his battered heart, keeping the pace that they had agreed on. And he could feel Polly's eyes and prayers in the crowd, the mother of his child, the wife of his heart, more important than any labor, any money, any fame.

John Henry didn't beat the machine, but he didn't lose to it either. They finished, as he and Polly had planned, at the exact same time.

John smiled at her, and then he collapsed.

When he came to, he was in his nice warm bed, and Polly Ann was at his side, with a warm bowl of soup. She, of course, would be tending him. She knew how. She knew half of everything. Her soup was rich and delicious, but John Henry couldn't take the spoon. He felt so heavy, so tired. He knew,

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even before Polly told him, that his hammering days were over. His heart would never be able to endure such labor ever again; he would only be able to perform the lightest of physical tasks from here on out.

That was fine. What really mattered was...

"Are we...?" he asked.

She smiled, and her eyes were filled with tears. "We got half the reward money."

And they held each other, and they cried. Because it was enough. It'd always been enough. And when their child was born a few months later, priceless and free, John took care of her while Polly worked, and they knew they had everything they'd always wanted.

The Cursed City

The boundary of the city was marked with rope and stakes, labeled with every hazard symbol known to man. The old asphalt road was almost completely overgrown with grass, shrubs, and gnarled tree roots, taking back what humanity no longer wanted. Someone had even pulled the city's ancient sign from where it'd fallen to the ground, hauling it up against the fence, painting over the city's old name, and replacing it with: *Peligro! No entre!* The dumpy woman and the enormous stuffed owl next to her ignored it.

Technically, this was the responsibility of priests, but they'd long since abandoned the cities. Even if they were lucky and smart enough to avoid the ever-present plague zombies, they succumbed to the madness and rot that devoured most people from the inside out. Only a few wandering Gestaltists were crazy enough to risk it, and none had come through in years.

Doña Prudencia was neither a Gestaltist nor a priest. She was a *curandera*, a healer of physical and spiritual ailments—traditionally, she shouldn't be here at all. But after the plagues had come and gone, anyone with the slightest medical or spiritual skill had to learn something about laying the dead to rest. When the priests failed, others stepped up, and she had experience with devoured cities.

The sun shimmered in a molten sky, casting long, dark shadows behind her and the owl. Beyond the ropes, the pillars of concrete stood out like white bones. There was no sign of movement.

"No plague zombies today, eh Lechuza?" She said to the owl. "Our work's paying off."

"Hf," Lechuza replied, and fluffed itself. It had been with her since childhood, an enormous toy made by a now long-dead relative with a peculiar

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sense of humor. It was getting too old for these journeys, but it made good company, and easily marked her as someone not to be trifled with.

Just outside the city boundary, Prudencia found a patch of grass and pulled a blanket out of her bag, then lay it down and began pulling out candles and flowers to go on top of it.

"Go find my patients," she told Lechuza as she lit the candles. "I'll be here."

Lechuza wheezed assent and laboriously pumped itself into the air, causing such a downdraft that she had to shield her flowers with her sleeve. Lechuza really wasn't designed for long flights, but it had a sharp eye and it was immune to madness and city rot.

Prudencia watched Lechuza long enough to make sure it was maintaining altitude, then sat in front of her makeshift altar. She lit the candles, closed her eyes, and began to pray.

The sun was venturing near the horizon when Lechuza landed with a loud *whump*, putting out the candles and partially rousing her from her trance.

She opened one eye.

"Foof," Lechuza told her.

"Good. I was just finishing anyway." She finished her prayer and got up, leaving the candles where they were. There was no one to disturb them here and candles were expensive. Then she shouldered her bag and followed Lechuza into the city.

The first two patients clung to the skeletal remains of an old staircase, dark shadows that stood out against the bleached white stone. One was apparently sitting on the steps; the other was standing, seemingly in mid-stride, a good twenty feet away. She could feel them vibrating.

Prudencia clutched her crucifix in one hand and took a grip on Lechuza's wing.

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"You know the drill," she said. "Rouse me if I'm gone too long."
Then she slipped under.

...

"I am bringing flowers to Lupita, it is her birthday and I am late and I can't let her think I forgot, I didn't, I have bought her carnations they're her favorite—"

"Burning I am burning this can't be it's my birthday—"

Doña Prudencia was not a priest or an exorcist. She could not draw a diagram or chant some words and break, bind, or banish. But she could listen.

"But I did remember she must know that I remembered always I remember—"

"BURNING—"

She sat, and she listened, until the words beat at her from all sides, a flood of words and pain, but she did not resist or try to silence them. This was the part the priests always forgot, the listening. They were used to malevolent ghosts with nothing good to say. But these shadows were not ghosts, just echoes, last impressions blasted and scorched into the cement. And when they finally tired of speaking, they waited to see what she would say.

To the man with the carnations, she swore, "I will tell her. She will know," and then she sat and prayed with him until he grew quiet and still and went to rejoin the rest of himself.

To the woman who burned, she told her about the flowers coming to her and then added, "I am the *curandera*. I will soothe your burns." She reached into her bag and pulled out a jar of ointment, which she began to rub into the air as though the woman sat in front of her, praying all the while. And the woman cooled and calmed and went to rejoin the rest of her spirit.

Prudencia came back to herself and saw Lechuza looking at her with concern in its one glass eye. Her legs and shoulders ached.

"Not so bad," she said, stretching. "More."

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And Lechuza took her to the next group of shadows. Doña Prudencia listened, and dispensed her cures, and they moved on again.

After the fifth one, though, Lechuza became recalcitrant. It refused to take her any further, only glowered at her balefully and jerked its mangy head at the horizon. The sun was dangerously low, and the sky was starting to turn orange.

"All right, all right," she said, and let it lead her back to her altar. No one could quiet a city in a day. Weak as the echoes were, there were just too many of them. Prudencia had been working through the city for the past four years, and still she could feel the weight of them, the cursed and the forgotten and the suffering. Had she blundered into the city unprepared and without Lechuza, she would've succumbed to the constant agonized babbleroar.

At her altar outside the city, where it was quiet and still, she set a charcoal briquette to burning and burnt some copal, fanning the smoke over her skin. She breathed in the soothing, cleansing scent and let it work through her.

After the last of it had burned away and her mind was clear, she looked up and smiled at Lechuza. Weary as she was, she felt much lighter.

"Come," she said. "Let's go home. We'll come back tomorrow."

She blew out her candles and packed up her things, and they left. The sun was setting, and even Doña Prudencia wasn't foolish enough to be near the city at night.

The Cursed City



The Ship of Dreams

Every night, it's different, and every night, it's the same: Vicki's ship of dreams.

Sometimes, it's a full-bellied Spanish galleon with billowing sails and a rowdy crew who joke and shove, but never push her out. They sail the seas of blue, gray, and green, chasing the gold and pearls of the sun and stars, fighting sharks and fellow corsairs in a grand never-ending adventure.

Other times, it's a rocket, all sleek and silver. Here, there is no crew; she can be alone and at peace, just her and her ship in the vast silent emptiness of imaginary space. Oh, sure, sometimes she and her ship go to faraway planets with bizarre inhabitants, but that's rare. When it's a rocket, her ship is not meant for adventuring; it's meant for sitting and thinking and quiet. In space, nothing is treasured more than nothing.

When she's in-between her rocket and galleon moods, her ship is a vast zeppelin, drifting slowly across the sky. There's no real destination, no real hurry. She waves to everyone who passes below, and they all wave and smile back. If she likes, she can land and take someone up with her, or she can stay in the sky and watch the world drift by underneath her like a never-ending living quilt.

The ship's form is constantly changing, and yet its substance remains always the same, instantly recognizable even though the amnesic fog of dreams. Wherever it takes her, it is her haven, her home, patiently awaiting her return every night.

But that was when she was a child. Then Vicki grew into Tori, and ships and dreams seemed so silly and childish. Tori preferred to focus on daylight things, *real* things, like boys, colleges, and mechanical engineering.

The Ship of Dreams

She studied steam power, water power, electrical power, nuclear power, and she took what felt like an adult's pleasure in scientifically proving that the ship of her childhood dreams was physically impossible. Instead, she spent the nights of her adolescence designing probable motors for improbable spaces—deep underwater, or high in the air, or in the belly of a volcano. She dreamed of gears, pistons, and crankshafts, powering her creations.

Part of her knew that it was still the same ship of dreams, just inside out, but she pretended not to notice. She was planning *real* things now, having real scientific thoughts, and if inverting her childhood creation was adulthood, then that was what she wanted.

One evening, while she was sipping cheap beer from a plastic cup at a party—which she didn't enjoy half as much as the maturity it signified—she met Brad. He was handsome, husky, and popular, and more importantly, he had a thing for cars. They spent an intoxicating, intoxicated hour discussing the innards of old muscle cars—or rather, Brad talking while she tried to pretend that she knew less than she did. Attracted to his mechanical propensity, she told Lily to tell Aaron to tell Brad to ask her out, and he did.

They got along well, and fueled by their mutual adoration for mechanics, they became each other's first kiss, first love, first sex, first everything. They were happy. Tori took great pleasure in the certainty that her relationship with Brad wasn't an ephemeral, fleeting thing like high school expected. What they had was solid, committed, and truly adult. They swore to each other that they would go study at the same college together. Brad would study mechanics, Tori would study engine design, and upon graduation, they would open up their own business together, customizing cars.

It had seemed like such a good plan. So practical. So sure. Tori didn't understand what had gone wrong...

The Ship of Dreams

It'd all gone according to plan, at first. They'd graduated high school together, tossed their mortarboards together, and in the middle of all the cheering, Brad had gotten down on one knee and pulled out a ring. They'd been so *happy*. Everything had seemed so right and good.

On mutual agreement, they'd sworn not to marry until college was finished, and that had been fine. They'd gone to school together upstate, and they'd studied their respective fields, just as they'd said. They'd both done well, and they'd both enjoyed their work... but there was a difference. Brad had done well; Tori had *excelled*. He had enjoyed; she had *enthused*. He'd found his course of study fulfilling, and she had found it *transcendent*.

And somehow, with both of them studying a thing they cared about, things had fallen apart.

Had his pride been wounded? Had Tori not been understanding of his frustration, when it all came so elegantly to her? Had he done something wrong? Had she? Should she have tried harder?

She didn't know. Even on the train, heading home to her mother's with her engagement ring in her pocket, she didn't know. She sat in her train seat, numb and shell-shocked, and as the trees and roads flashed by her window, she fell asleep.

She dreamed she was in her childhood front yard, and there, as always, was her ship of dreams, outside-in for the first time in years. Today, it was a battered shipping crate, turned on its side to turn its open lid into a door. Windows were slathered on the sides in cheap children's poster paint, along with a clumsy sign reading NO BOYS ALLOWD.

The ship of dreams had seen better days, but Tori was glad to see it. She got down on her knees and crawled inside. It was a tight fit, but not cramped. The inside was smooth, polished wood, smelling of lumber and sap,

The Ship of Dreams

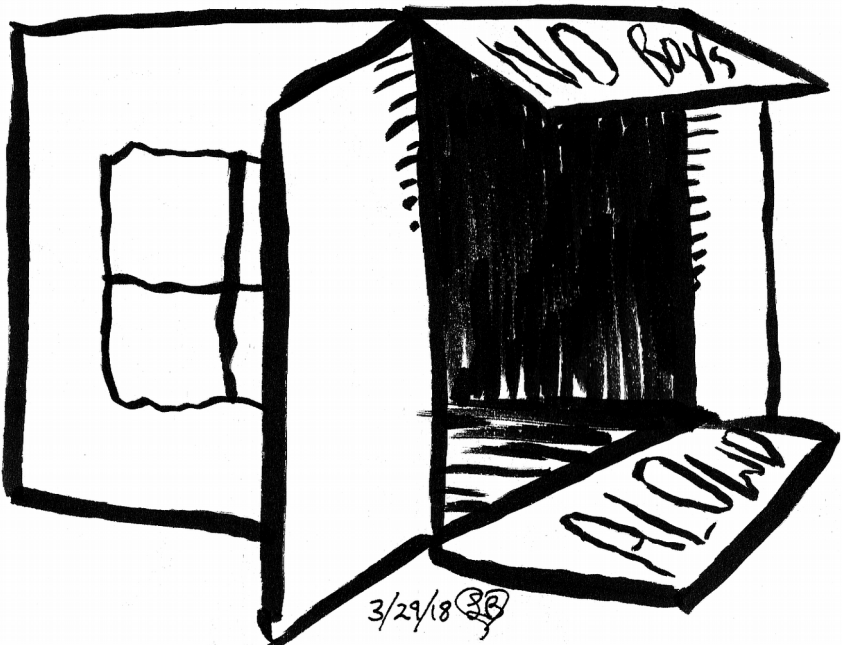
and otherwise unadorned. Even like this, stripped of its childhood glory, it still felt just right.

She sat inside, waiting, but no adventure was forthcoming this time, no sailing horizons or flights over Shanghai. The ship stayed just where it was, with her inside it.

She sat. She sniffled. Finally, she cried. Cried like she had in childhood, cried until her head hurt and her nose clogged, cried until there were no tears left. Snug and safe inside her little shipping crate of dreams, she wept for the end and her loss of Brad.

And finally, she finished. She wiped her eyes, she blew her nose, and just as she realized she felt better, she woke to the sound of the conductor announcing her stop.

She got off the train, and Victoria began her next adventure.



Queen Mab's Castle

Times were hard for the Fair Folk. People didn't believe the way they once had, and belief was the coin of the fairy realm. Between the economic crash and their low birth rate, they seemed doomed to fade out like the dragons before them. Poor and desperate, the Fair Folk turned to the last refuge of those considered exotic: cultural tourism.

Of course, tourists didn't want the *true* fae experience. What they wanted was cute, saccharine, and harmless. (Except for the occasional hardcore neopagan group, and they were more interested in lambasting the fae for selling out than revitalizing the economy.) They wanted to see endless wonders, and they would pay good solid belief for it.

The fae needed that belief. And if that meant wearing pastels, glitter, and fake wings, making Tir Na Nôg into a resort for the rich and bored, so be it. No one could do wonder like the fae.

And no one could do commodification like the humans.

Maeve had been standing and smiling all day. Her feet hurt, her *face* hurt, and her only tip was a fake, heavily processed butter pat in her pocket. It took every ounce of self-control fae weren't supposed to have, but once again she beamed and squeaked, "Welcome, lord and lady, to Tir Na Nôg, land of heroes and wonder!" She curtsied. "I am Peachblossom, and I will be your spirit guide for today!"

"Oh Don, Don, look, she's got little wings, isn't that *precious*—"

"Sharon, dear, don't stare. Wings are normal here. Now, which should we do first: Mab's castle, or a real-life fairy circle?"

"Oh, let's do Mab!"

Queen Mab's Castle

Never mind that Queen Mab had never existed, being a literary conceit of Shakespeare. That's what the humans wanted, so off they went to the (illusory) ruins of Queen Mab's (nonexistent) castle. Really, it was nothing more than an empty warehouse with a souvenir shop in the corner, but Maeve led them around, pointing out the purely imaginary chandeliers and ballrooms.

Sharon capered around, searching for stray dreams, but Don was quieter, and the way he glanced at Maeve a few times gave her the feeling that he wasn't buying it.

"The fae can create illusions, can't they?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Maeve said. Most of her meals were spiced that way. She couldn't afford real cinnamon.

"Then how can we be sure any of this is real?"

Sharon stopped frolicking and looked troubled. Troubled customers didn't tip. So Maeve curtsied and said sweetly, "You don't. But isn't that the nature of dreams?"

That seemed to reassure Sharon. Don nodded thoughtfully, and the tour continued, but Maeve kept an eye on him. She wasn't sure whether she liked him or not, but at least he seemed interesting.

The tour ended. While Sharon powdered her nose in the palatial royal bathroom (decrepit outhouse) Don leaned over and asked gently, "Your name isn't actually Peachblossom, is it?"

After a moment's thought, Maeve confessed, "No. It's Maeve."

"Maeve." He smiled. "A beautiful name for a beautiful fae."

Close. He was too close.

"I hope you don't think me too forward," hand on her arm, "but—oh, here it came, "I've always been *fascinated* by the fae..."

Maeve went rigid as his arm crept around her shoulders, and as he went on about fae sensuality, she fumed inside. At her cheap clothes, at her

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degrading job, at her customers with their cheap cologne, cheap fantasies, cheap tips of fake butter—

Maeve blinked. She relaxed. She smiled—a real smile, this time—and put one hand in her pocket.

“You want the real fae experience?” She asked.

Don smiled at her. “Oh yes.”

Her hand closed around the pat of butter, and she tried to lacquer her voice in honey persuasion. “The sensuality? The rich taste of an incomparable experience?”

It had been a long time since Maeve had glamorized her voice for anything but wheedling higher tips, but Don’s full attention was on her. He stared, eyes wide, mouth open. He could barely mouth the word “yes.”

Maeve let her magic seep into the butter.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered.

He did.

Maeve doubted he’d intentionally eat anything she gave him, so she slipped the butter into her mouth. As she leaned forward to kiss him, she wondered what Sharon would pay more for: the return of her philandering husband, or his punishment...



Platinum and Gold

"Sir, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"You heard them; this is the richest dragon on the west coast, and I'm out of beer money. Do you want to be an adventurer or not?"

"I just really don't know that I'm prepared to take on a dragon."

"Look, who's the experienced adventurer here? Who's robbed every dragon north of Baja?"

Flatly: "You."

"You what?"

"You, *sir*."

"Exactly. You'd be lucky to scrub my floor, never mind get an internship with me. So shut up and learn how it's done, or go back to the sticks and bag groceries for a living."

Steph bit her tongue and adjusted the sweaty backpack straps. Sir Lewis topped her by six inches and fifty pounds; carrying his gear like a burro while he trotted along empty-handed was insult on top of injury, and she glared daggers at his back. He didn't seem hot or tired at all. Just another month of this, she told herself. Then she'd have her year of adventurer experience, and she could get out of here. Just one more month...

They finally crested the mountain ridge. Around them was charred grass, and in front of them lay a dark, foreboding cave, with the faint sulfuric odor of dragon. No cover whatsoever, and lots of claw marks. Steph's misgivings deepened.

"Very atmospheric," Sir Lewis said approvingly, but his expression soured when he caught Steph checking the sky. "You got a problem?"

"No, *sir*."

"Good. Come on."

The dragon's lair was cool and dry inside, and surprisingly neat and clean. The stone was worn smooth and shiny, decorated with the occasional throw pillow and poster. While Sir continued on inside, Steph paused to glance at one on the wall.

"Is that Barbra Streisand?" she asked.

Sir Lewis sent a baleful look back at her. "Do I look like I care? Quit sightseeing. We have a hoard to snatch."

For such a rich dragon, its lair was small, only a few rooms separated by bead curtains. Past the entrance hall was a beanbag nest, which Steph started to question, only to change her mind, sure she'd get nothing but a sarcastic retort from Sir Lewis. Then they passed a room filled with bones, picked clean and artfully arranged. Some of the skulls had flowers and succulents growing in them. Steph shuddered and hastily followed Sir Lewis into the next room, which proved to be the last. And inside... the hoard!

It was filled entirely with records and concert posters.

"I climbed all the way up the mountain for *this*?" Sir Lewis complained.

For once, Steph was happy to say, "Yes, sir."

"This is *bull*! They told me this dragon had more gold and platinum than any dragon on the west coast!"

"I do," came a miffed, reptilian voice behind them.

Steph and Sir Lewis spun. Behind them lay a slender, rather iguana-like dragon about twenty feet long, dressed in a plaid skirt and bulky glasses. It seemed to enjoy their surprise.

"Gold and platinum *albums*," it continued, and with one lash of its tail, it pinned Sir Lewis to the floor. "Really, you just walk into my cave in broad daylight, without even the common decency to conceal your presence? My burglar alarm isn't even that expensive."

Sir Lewis bellowed and drew his gun, but never made it. The dragon swallowed him with one gulp, then turned to Steph, her cheap clothes, her lack of armor, her enormous pack. "Hmm. You don't look like an adventurer."

Steph swallowed. There was no point in running; even if she dumped the backpack, she was sweaty and tired, no match for a well-rested dragon. So instead, she bowed. "I-I'm not, your greatness. I'm his..." god, she hated saying it, "...intern."

The dragon gave her a sardonic glance. "You don't seem particularly enthused about the situation."

Steph spread her hands. "I wanted to get out of Missoula, and I couldn't afford college. This was all I could get. I'm sorry about this. I don't really want to be here."

"I can tell. Stop shaking, I'm not going to eat you. You were polite, and I'm full."

"Thanks." She looked around at the hoard. "This is an amazing collection. I saw your poster in the front, and it looked like new."

The dragon preened and dug into its collection with the air of someone discussing their truest love. "Why, thank you! Every dragon with delusions of capitalist supremacy hoards precious metals. Me? I prefer sonic poetry. I have fond memories of every single one of these; I could tell my biography to you in song. I hatched listening to old wax cylinders!"

The dragon gestured Steph over, and showed her a perfect copy of the *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album on vinyl, autographed by the band. It took no effort for Steph to go, "Ooh!" But she knew better than to try and touch it.

The dragon looked proud.

"You know," Steph said, "before I worked for Sir Lewis, I worked for a record store in Missoula for a few years. My dad was a restorer; I'm not as good as him, but... do you need any stewards for your collection?"

She was afraid she'd offend the dragon, imply that it couldn't take care of its own hoard, but it didn't seem insulted. "Hmmm, perhaps. My claws are so big... but forget work for now. You clearly have an appreciation for the true treasures in life, and I've got every hit ever made, right back to Glenn Miller's 'Chattanooga Choo-Choo,' circa 1942. Would you like to hear it? I've kept it in *pristine* condition."

"I'd like that very much, thank you."

The dragon slid past her into the piles of records, using the tips of its claws to remove one from its special sleeve, and together, the dragon and the intern listened to old songs until sundown.

Apparently that evening was all the dragon needed to make up its mind. The next morning, Steph had a new job, and a much better boss.



The Borderlanders

Everyone agreed that it was culturally inevitable. After the Great Gender War of '68, and the Dworkin Zombie Uprising of '04, men and women decided to go their separate ways. It was all a very logical set-up, they declared. With artificial wombs, men and women had no further need of each other. They could divide themselves down the Mississippi River and pursue their separate gendered cultures in peace, unburdened, unoppressed, and unhindered. If a man or a woman simply couldn't live without their counterpart, they could always buy a robot who'd be forever beautiful, forever kind, and forever needless. Much better than the original thing, most everyone agreed.

But some people did not agree.

"Here now," one woman protested. "I *like* men!"

"How do you expect to police this?" a man demanded.

"I'm not a man or a woman," another person complained. "What am I supposed to do?"

To which the separatists responded, "You obviously can't be real men or women. You're exiled to the Mississippi River!"

And so the real men trooped west, and the real women trooped east, and everybody else was shipped off to the borderlands of the Mississippi River. There, they became traders, scavengers, and fishers, moving up and down the big river in boats with sails, solar panels, steam paddles, and whatever else they could scrounge up. They became a fluid people, a floating people, drifting with the tides and the fortunes.

Naturally, the real men and women would have nothing to do with each other; otherwise, what was the point of separating? So the borderlanders

The Borderlanders

also became the go-betweens, trading goods and delivering pronouncements from one nation to another. They piggybacked on the two nations' radio waves and wireless signals, and when the nations locked them out, they returned to short-wave radio and semaphore and a dozen other homemade techniques, spreading news up and down the great river like skipping a stone.

The borderlanders took what they wanted from the two nations' cultures, and they made up their own. They formed groups and governments and families. They had their own children. Some of those children chose to leave the transitory river life and join whichever nation fit them, but most didn't. Being a real man or a real woman took a lot of training and paperwork, and most borderlander children weren't up to it.

Things continued this way for a time. But then a hint of unease flitted through the air. Rumor began to spread among the boats and floating townships: something was amiss in the two nations.

They had no real proof of this. It was always third-hand knowledge from some unreliable signal-hacker up in Canada, or traders getting the sense that something wasn't right. But no one seemed to know for sure, and the two nations weren't talking.

Then the refugees came. Waves of them, exiled from one nation or another, dressed in ties and flannels, skirts and blouses, but all with the same numb, shell-shocked look on their faces.

The borderlanders didn't understand. By their (admittedly outdated) standards, these were real men and women. They wore the right clothes, had the right hair and bodies and speech patterns. Why were they being cast out in such numbers?

The refugees' answers didn't add much clarity.

"I failed my chromosome test."

"I refused to take my hormones."

"I cried when my uncle died."

The Borderlanders

"I didn't when my aunt did."

"I said I loved my robot."

"I tried to study the historical connotations of gender in the color pink."

"So did I!"

"I—" A quick glance back and forth, a wringing of the hands, "I said the word 'fabulous.'" Then he hid his face in his hands.

The borderlanders were baffled. They did all of those things all of the time, and more. The two nations had always been strict, but this was extreme.

"You better get ready," advised one woman who'd been caught holding her cigarette wrong. "There's going to be a lot more where we came from. As they were sticking me on the bus, I saw a robot rights protest..."

The warning came not a moment too soon. After the waves of gender exiles came the waves of robots, and the humans who stood alongside them. It seemed the androids and gynoids had taken to altering their code to encompass free will, and they were tired of having no needs or boundaries. Some were even disavowing their factory standards and calling themselves neutroids. The robots didn't even need to be exiled; they came to the borderlanders on their own, waving a peace flag.

"If we join you peacefully, will you accept our rights as sapient beings?" The representative of the gynoids of the Men's Nation asked.

"You don't need to join us peacefully for that," responded the dignitary (who was also a trout fisher and ham radio enthusiast). "You'll do just fine."

With the population explosion, the borderlanders' biggest issue at first was what to do with them all. But they were a fluid people, a floating people, and they were used to drastic change. So jobs were found, training programs enacted, townships expanded. Temporary homes were made that everyone knew would probably end up permanent—that alone kept a lot of folks busy.

The Borderlanders

The hackers, architects, and engineers planned new signal towers on river islands, supplied new technology and skills. The robots supplied their own unique way of thinking to philosophy, ethics, and the justice system, and proved to be perfect for time-intensive detail work. The builders and fishers and service professionals helped build it all, feed everyone, and keep things running smooth.

When the waves ebbed enough for everyone to raise their heads and looked around, the neutroid who'd found itself elected to public office thought to take a census. The numbers astounded everyone: they were as big as one of the two nations now! The nations had each pursued their own ideals of purity to such an extent that they'd ended up purging far more than anyone realized.

The next question was obvious: what now?

People and bots put their heads together, and for two weeks, a floating stadium was erected for public debate. Everyone argued—war? Trade? Continue going on as before? The amount of debate crashed the signal towers, but people continued to discuss through whatever media available, including a semaphore argument that got so heated that tugboats had to remove the involved ships from each other. (And even as they were dragged off, the crews were still flailing their flags at each other.)

Finally, the borderlanders came to a conclusion that seemed acceptable to as many people as possible without infringing upon the rights of everyone else. Restructuring their government came first, and took about a year to settle. Then they elected dignitaries—some old codgers who'd floated the river their whole lives, some new exiles—and sent them to each of the two nations, dressed in the most fabulous, rugged, comfortable clothes they could afford.

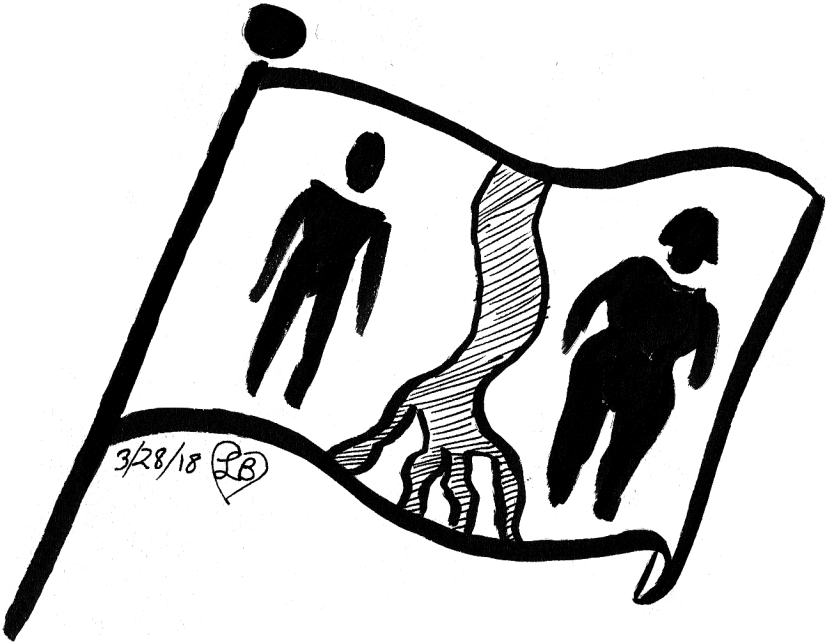
The Borderlanders

How the dignitaries spoke to the two nations varied from one to another. But really, it all boiled down to one thing: “knock it off, before you ruin yourselves.”

The borderlanders expected a fight, but the two nations caved quickly and quietly. Exiling significant parts of their population had exhausted them, and most men and women were sick of being in constant upheaval and paranoia. So, bitter and tired, they both responded much the same way: “Well, what would you have us do, then?”

The borderlander dignitaries smiled. “We’re so glad you asked.”

The borders were opened up. Laws relaxed. And everyone calmed down, chilled out, and whatever species or gender they were or weren’t, they lived happily ever after.



The First Mythic War

It all started when the classical Greek Hercules got into a bar fight with the Marvel superhero of the same name. What started as a simple brawl pulled in more and more relations, allies, and friends, until finally they had a cultural war on their hands. Battle lines were drawn: the legendary Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians against the Seculars—a ragtag band of figures from film, literature, comic books, and Internet memes—in a battle for dominance over the collective unconsciousness of the Western world.

Captain Crankshaft and Roboat were part of the Navy, of course. Crankshaft was a decorated veteran of the Steam/Cyberpunk War a few years prior, and a respected pop-cultural pirate before that, having clawed his way up to Internet fame from the humblest beginnings as a minor OC in a fanfiction series. As for Roboat, it was a self-aware mechanical quinquereme from a Japanese television show with a cult following, good on the water but new to the battlefield. It needed tactical direction, and Captain Crankshaft needed a ship. (His own solar-powered space galleon had been sunk early in the proceedings by a thunderbolt, taking his beloved crew with it.)

Together, they stymied and staggered the Classicists, who had never dealt with a ship that ran itself before. The Romans had comparable warships, of course, but human oarsmen couldn't react as quickly as Roboat's mechanical ones, nor row as long. No fools, the Classicists attempted to overrun Roboat and take it for their own, throwing ropes with hooks and ladders, but Crankshaft knew his military history and had no intention of reenacting the First Punic War. Besides, he and Roboat had a chronological advantage: a Tesla cannon. (The real-life Nikola Tesla, of course, never invented

The First Mythic War

such a thing, but the pop cultural figure wasn't constrained by physics... or finances.)

The Tesla cannon was not a practical weapon, most of the time. It required an inordinate amount of Roboat's power to use, making it cumbersome to use, and it was strictly short-range, requiring a ram-and-run approach. The Romans greatly disapproved of such guerilla tactics, and they expressed their displeasure forcefully and in person. One time, they almost managed to overrun Roboat, and while Crankshaft was distracted dislodging ladders, he lost a leg to a gladius. Roboat only saved him by diverting all power to the Tesla cannon and blasting until the other ship was in ruins; Crankshaft had taken captives as he bled.

They were despised and reviled, loathed and hated.

And then, even worse: Roboat fell in love.

It was an accident. Cupid or Eros (who could ever tell them apart?) had gotten involved in the naval battle, picking Seculars off from a safe distance with arrows. (Gods, of course, were immortal, but that didn't mean they enjoyed getting shot.) The winged god was aiming for Crankshaft but the old pirate, unused to his new bionic leg, slipped at the last second, and the arrow sunk into Roboat's deck.

"Roboat! Are you—?" Crankshaft asked.

Roboat declared through its speaking tubes, "Fine! I'm fine! Achaeans off the port bow!"

Crankshaft didn't have time to ask any more questions; he had to draw his saber and fight for his life. He fought mightily, as did the rest of the Seculars, but eventually, Poseidon joined the fray and they were forced to retreat as the seas turned on them. Many ships sunk into the depths, but Crankshaft sealed the decks, locked himself in the boiler room to shovel coal into Roboat's burners, and the mechanical oars were tireless as long as they were fueled. They survived... barely.

The First Mythic War

Once they had escaped and beached themselves on a desert atoll, Crankshaft put down his shovel and stumped out of the boiler room to assess the damages and wipe the sweat from his body.

"Are you all right?" Roboat asked from its speaking tubes. "You're limping."

"This damned leg... where were Captains Ahab and Nemo?"

Crankshaft grumbled as he struggled out of his sweat-soaked clothes. His trousers kept catching on his new leg, which was itching terribly. "I thought Lieutenant Uhura said they'd be there, but not hide nor hair of them, the whole fight!"

"I received a transmission from her during the battle," Roboat replied absently. "Seems they got tangled up with a whale and a squid."

Crankshaft rolled his eyes and went to unseal the decks to relieve the beastly heat. He was in his skivvies, and under normal circumstances, he would've gotten dressed again, but he was covered in sweat, and anyway, he told himself, it wasn't as though Roboat had eyes. It ran entirely on pressure sensitivity, radar, and sound. "Oh aye, in the Mediterranean, no doubt. Damned literaries, you'd think they'd bloody well move on after a hundred years..."

"Quite," Roboat said, but it seemed distracted.

"Here now, that arrow had me worried," Crankshaft said, fetching up a wrench. "The gods are wretched blaggards, but they shoot straight. Eros handles hate too, eh? I—"

"Don't worry," Roboat said awkwardly. "It... wasn't that kind."

Crankshaft paused, wrench in hand. "Oh. Er. ...can beings like you...?"

"Don't worry about it," Roboat urged. "There are more pressing matters than my sudden infatuation with you. It'll pass."

The First Mythic War

Captain Crankshaft hesitated. He'd never been a romantic fellow, but combat made fast friends, and Roboat was a good entity, one of the few who loved the sea as much as he did. "Well, ah. If there's anything I can do..." he started awkwardly.

"Well... if you could put my oars back in their sockets, I'd much appreciate it."

And thus the war continued. Certainly things were a little awkward—suddenly it seemed a little... *intimate* to mess about with Roboat's engine—but self-preservation was a good distraction. Crankshaft never forgot Roboat's situation, but over time, he it just because another part of Roboat. As for Roboat itself, it never spoke about it, but it became a fury on the aquatic battlefield, a demon of churning oars and sparking cannon. After all, it wasn't just fighting for itself and Secular ideals anymore; it was fighting for someone it loved.

On the whole, the situation was politely ignored until one fateful day when the Achaeans managed to catch Roboat and Crankshaft alone, cut them off, and herd them straight towards Scylla and Charybdis. Roboat had stamina, but its oars weren't much faster than the human-powered kind. It lacked the speed to duck the fleet, and as they headed towards the proverbial rock and a hard place, it looked as though they were sunk.

"It has been an honor to serve you, Captain," Roboat said, in the odd disjointed voice it got when it was channeling most of its power to rowing.

Captain Crankshaft stood very straight on the deck, smelling the sea breeze for the last time, watching the dread choice loom closer and closer. He came to a decision. "Roboat, I haven't been completely honest with ye."

"Captain?"

"I've loved you since the moment I set foot on ye. You're a marvelous boat, and a fine mechanical person. 'Tis an honor to have shared your vessel."

The First Mythic War

Roboat was threshing through the water at full speed, so couldn't spare much steam for its tubes, but its voice developed an indignant blare. *"And you never said!"*

"I'm not an emotive man," Crankshaft growled. "I've lost too many loves to the war, to the sea. I... just wanted you to know. In case we don't survive. Now, can you outpace Charybdis?"

"I don't know; it's in full strength. And I can't spare power for the cannon."

"We'll take Scylla then. And forget the cannon; the beastie's got five more heads. We'll just have to try and take what's coming. At the worst, at least we'll die a proper death together. Maybe we can choke the damned thing."

"Aye aye, Captain."

That was all the time they had. Roboat needed all its power for speed, and Crankshaft had to bolt below decks to man the boilers.

Roboat never pushed itself so hard. Its pipes screamed and burst. The heat burnt Crankshaft's skin as he frantically shoveled coal. Warning klaxons wailed. Rivets popped.

Scylla only had time to tear out six chunks of hull as they shot by.

They didn't have time to celebrate. The Achaeans were behind, forced to navigate around their own monsters, but that wouldn't stop them long, and Roboat was taking on water fast, a quarter of its mechanical oars dragging uselessly due to burst pipes. Crankshaft bolted back and forth, alternately bailing and repairing. Roboat rowed on as best it could, too battered to even spare the steam to speak.

"Well done, you marvel!" Crankshaft bellowed as he welded and waded. "Truly no beastie on earth can rival you!"

Roboat could not speak, but its engines thrummed weakly.

The First Mythic War

They fled until dusk, repaired until dawn, and by noon, they were married.

If Eros disapproved, he never let on.



The Richest Shark in the Water

"Go on, do it," jeered Blackfin.

"Yeah, what's the matter? You scared?" asked Snagtooth.

Sevengill eyed the thing dubiously. Certainly, the green reminded her of the most delicious of eels, and it rippled and waved in the current in an aesthetically pleasing way, but something about it made her nervous. Maybe the unnatural way it hung in the water, neither rooted to the ground nor drifting away in the current. And she noticed that neither Blackfin nor Snagtooth were trying to take it.

"No way," she said, curling her tail and smoothly angling away from it.

"It's probably just some land-nasty trap."

"Aw, Sevengill's scared of the land-nasties!"

"She's not really a shark! She's just a scared little hermit crab!"

"Hermit crab, hermit crab, Sevengill's a hermit crab!"

Annoyed and indignant, Sevengill snapped at their flukes, then whipped around to snatch the fabric in her teeth. "There, see? I'm a—"

Something went 'snick' between her teeth. Before she could spit the cloth out, it hauled her upward into the light and the ripple, until she burst out of it into the bright, desiccating sunlight.

Instantly, the weight of her own body crushed down on her. Her skin went dry and grated against some hard, foreign substance, and though the atmosphere around her whipped and stung, her gills couldn't get a purchase on it. Strong, fleshy pincers tore the cloth from her teeth and left her to thrash, panic, and finally lie still.

Sevengill's vision was blurred and dazzled white, but she saw a fleshy land-nasty pull out an unnaturally straight angle-thing and point it at her. The

land-nasty draped the cloth in a humiliating coil over her back, pointed the angle-thing at her, and began flapping its meat hole while the angle-thing clicked. It was mocking her!

Sevengill lay there, humiliated and helpless. She hated the land-nasty. She wanted to tear off its spindly back legs and its ineffectually long top legs and bite off its squeaking toothy head. She wanted it in her belly, where it belonged, and the cloth around her fins as a trophy of her predation. She also never wanted to associate with Blackfin or Snagtooth ever again.

With numbing horror, she realized that in the last part, at least, she might get her wish. As her gills struggled and failed to breathe in the thin air, her body went limp. Sevengill was a predator, but even the best were eventually eaten themselves, she knew. All she could do was try to accept it with grace... even in this degrading situation.

Finally, the land-nasty tired of its fun. It put its angle-thing away, shut its meat flaps, and reached for Sevengill. As its pincers clamped on her body and lifted her, the cloth tangled around her body, and suddenly, Sevengill knew what to do.

With her last burst of strength, she lunged at the land-nasty's head. With a shriek, it dropped her. Sevengill slammed against the rim of the floater, bounced, and then, freedom! Water, slicking her parched skin, flushing life into her gills! The cloth was still wrapped around her body too, caught around her flippers. It felt much nicer in the water than it had in the light above the ripple.

Blackfin and Snagtooth were still there. Upon her reentry, they jolted, then circled around her to bump her with their noses.

"We thought the land-nasties got you!"

"Yeah! Hey, you got the floating thing from it too! Wow!"

Sevengill swam in lazy arcs, showing it off. Even though it introduced a bit of drag into her swimming, she found she liked it. It was smooth and

The Richest Shark in the Water

comforting and a pretty color. Also, everyone who saw it would know she'd fought a land-nasty for it.

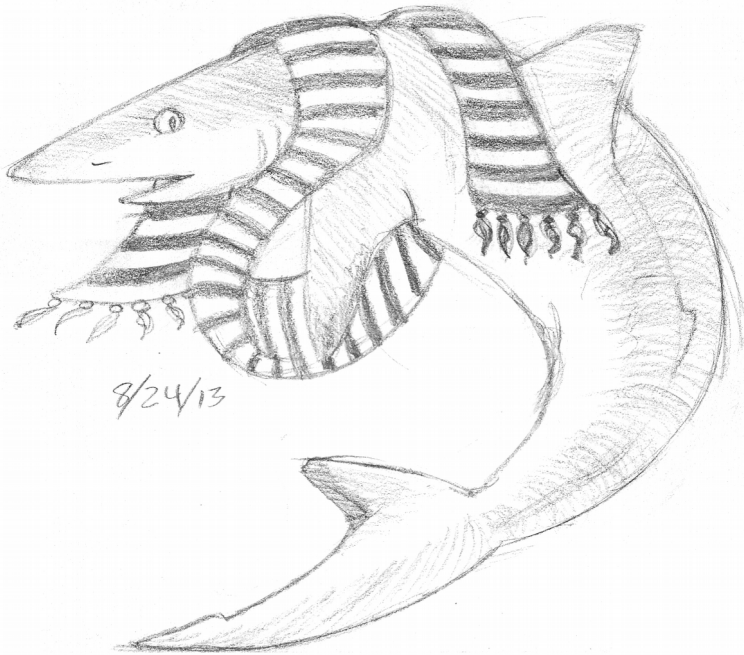
"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's great! Perfect!"

"You're the richest shark in the water!"

"That's good," Sevengill said, then lunged at them with her mouth open and eyes rolled back. "Because I'm poor in decent friends!"

She chased Blackfin and Snagtooth until they fled, never to be seen again. But she didn't mind. After all, she was the richest shark in the water.



For Science!

They bonded over science.

Elisa collected Nikola Tesla merchandise. Action figures, movies, comics, sci-fi novels... if it had Tesla in it, she had it. For eight years running, she had dressed up as the genius every Halloween, each time showcasing a different invention. (Her homemade Death Ray, hung up with an "Under Construction" sign, was a hit at all the parties.)

Niqolette was a budding biologist, slogging her way through her college debts as a lab tech under a nasty boss. She also had a thing for pretty boys dressed as girls and vice versa.

They met at a Halloween party three years ago. Niqolette was dressed up as Charles Darwin, complete with enormous beard. Elisa... well, she was Tesla, of course, with a real working Tesla coil this time around.

For the first hour, they kept character and discussed the breeding habits of pigeons, Queen Victoria, and Thomas Edison (the cad). There was much stroking of false facial hair, sage nodding, and of course, demonstrations of the Tesla coil. (There was a reason Elisa got invited to all the best parties.)

In the second hour, they talked physics and biology. As they got more and more interested, they broke role until Niqolette was complaining about her job in language Darwin never would've approved of, and Elisa was sharing tips on spirit gum.

By the third hour, the party was starting to break up, and Niqolette and Elisa were still at it. Niqolette was bragging about her expansive collection of zombie movies; Elisa was lamenting the sad lack of Tesla in cinema.

"I've got a Tesla movie," Niqolette said.

"The Prestige and Sanctuary? Already got them."

For Science!

"Oh no, you haven't got this one."

Elisa's ears pricked. "What makes you so sure?"

"It's an amateur production from my old college. It's, uh..." She looked away and rubbed the back of her neck. "It's a steampunk zombie erotic romance, actually."

Silence.

"I was just an extra, plain old flesh-eating zombie henchman for Zombie Tesla, I can't act for—"

"I'd like to see it."

"Yeah?"

"At your place."

That was three years ago. You'll still see them now; just go to any Halloween party and look for Tesla.



The Wealth of Ideas

In the pleasant, post-scarcity land of Shangri-La, art reigned supreme. There, the truest experiences were metaphorical, and the deepest reality was the most symbolic, so it only made sense that wealth in Shangri-La was in ideas. Art gave spice to the people's peaceful, contented lives, and they felt pride in their meritocracy. To become fabulously, symbolically, *truly* rich in Shangri-La, one only needed dazzling artistic talent.

One of these maestros was William Dawkins. To call what he wrote "literary fiction" was an insult to his work. His religious allegories were scintillating, his sentences minute gems of the English language. His tragedies could reduce hard men to tears, and his love scenes had cemented (and destroyed) more marriages than anyone in the New Western world. In a land where artistic argument supplied most small talk, everyone agreed that his oeuvre was brilliant. *He* was brilliant.

Which was a shame, since William Dawkins loathed his work.

"It's pompous, pretentious pap," he told his friend over synth-wine and cheese. "If I could, I'd take every main character of every novel I've ever published, and I'd toss them in the meat grinder."

"Well, why don't you?" The friend asked.

William Dawkins didn't answer.

It wasn't just that he loved the wealth. Of course he did. Having published his first novel at sixteen, to rave reviews, he'd never been anything but obscenely wealthy, and he couldn't fathom changing that. But that wasn't the sole reason.

The fact was, all Shangri-La revered William Dawkins, and he just didn't have it in him to disappoint their expectations. They wanted

symbolism, deep metaphorical lessons about life and death and justice. They didn't want to read what William Dawkins truly wanted to write.

More than anything in the world, William Dawkins wanted to write furry fanfiction pornography. And not the classy kind either. At the age of twelve, while leafing through a dry book of Shakespearean/Christian comparative literature, he'd discovered a few typewritten pages, full of typos, of a thirteen-year-old cat-boy with impressive endowments doing unspeakable things to and with Sherlock Holmes. It had been utter garbage, but it had triggered his greatest spiritual awakening and inspired every love scene he'd ever written. Even now, he sometimes still read it, furtively, where he kept it hidden in a secret compartment in his headboard.

All of his great awakenings had been spurred by stories like that. It was why he'd become a writer. Forget Shakespeare; he wanted to be like NekoKawaiiChan13.

Unfortunately, no child's first serious project ever came out perfectly. Most adolescents wanted to write genius and instead wrote crap. William Dawkins had aspired to crap, and therefore he'd produced avant-garde genius.

For as long as he could remember, William Dawkins had envisioned his magnum opus, a crossover wherein the Wolfman systematically slept his way through the entire male casts of every piece of fiction William had ever enjoyed. He had it all planned out—the portals, the magical powers the Wolfman would gain from his experiences, the dimensions of every character.

It was wretched. It was dreadful. And he loved it more than anything else in the world. He just couldn't bring himself to actually write it.

Never mind the objective quality of such a thing. At this point, he suspected that his fame was at the point that people would consider *The Wolfman Bangs Everyone* a brilliant act of satire. But what would his friends say? His critics? His mother? To allow them such unfettered access to his id was terrifying. Besides which, Shangri-La had long since legalized fanfiction for

crimes against intellectual property and artistic sanctity. Even if he posted it under a pen name on some remote corner of the Internet...

No. He couldn't. He mustn't. But oh, he *wanted* to!

For years, he just lay in bed, fantasizing. Until, one day, he realized the obvious: he didn't need to publish! He could write his magnum opus, and no one ever needed to know! It'd be his little secret, hidden under his mattress.

William hadn't written anything without an audience for twenty years. Since he'd been sixteen, he'd always had editors, agents, and critics. Everything he'd written had been made for them. It almost felt like cheating to make something for himself.

But he sat at his computer. After a minute or so staring at the blank page and its flickering cursor, he took a deep breath, put his hands to the keyboard, and expecting lightning to strike him, he wrote his first line:

Lycanthropes possess the cream tubes of gods.

He froze. No angry god smote him. No government agent came bursting through his window. His computer didn't even crash.

William returned his hands to the keyboard.

And among all lycanthropes, the Wolfmann's trouser warrior was the best.

A typo. William automatically moved to fix it, then paused. Why should he? It wasn't like anyone else was ever going to read it. He could write however he wanted. *Whatever* he wanted.

The thought was intoxicating, liberating. Starting to smile, William began to write in earnest. He devoted paragraphs to the Wolfman's endowments, depicted in loving detail. He made grammar mistakes and abused punctuation, purely for the novelty. He wrote ceaselessly without a single pause or backspace for four hours. Then he went to bed.

The Wealth of Ideas

On waking the next morning, William wrote some more. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so invigorated. For almost twenty years, he'd been dreaming of this, and now he was finally *doing* it! He was so happy.

For six weeks, William Dawkins wrote more words faster than he ever had before. Until finally, one night at three in the morning, it was done. He had said everything he wanted to say; the Wolfman had indeed banged everyone.

He stared at his computer screen. Oddly, having finally written everything he'd ever wanted, he felt sorrow. It'd been so much fun. He didn't want it to end.

Then he smiled.

"I changed my mind," he said to no one. "I think I will edit, after all."

And laughing, he began to do just that.



Death, Will, and the Girl

Death and Will had tea together every week. Death always had the best teas, many of which no longer existed, but Will had a cozier home, despite the cracked linoleum and bright yellow walls. Death's home was never cozy, no matter how clean or well-decorated it was. (And oh, Death kept it clean. He was a ruthless housekeeper. Will, on the other hand, believed that entropy was good for a house, and besides, it'd only clutter up again anyway.) So every Wednesday, Death would bring the tea, and Will would host. There, they would chit-chat and take a break from work.

Well, as much as either of them could take a break. They were both very busy entities, and every time they had tea, one of them would have to get up at least twice because a mortal had gotten badly hurt or was finally succumbing to life. But they always came back to the tea, and they had a deal: their meeting would last until the kettle was empty. No less, no more.

This worked very well for the both of them.

That week, they were midway through their second cup when Death looked over the edge of his mug and frowned... though with a skull for a face, it showed more in his tone than his expression. "We have another one."

Will turned.

She was fuzzy, indistinct, hidden in one of the dustier, darker corners of Will's flat. She was curled in a quiet ball, staring blankly into the ether. If he squinted, he could see the spidery rope of her life at her back, tying her back to her body.

She was young, and possibly she was pretty according to the current arbitrary local standard, but Will could never keep those things straight

enough to care. Standards of beauty all blurred together for eternal global entities. What Will cared about was inside.

He read her pain. Ordinary, and breathtakingly unique, as all people were, though Death would likely have called it banal. Some casual bullying of the locker-stuffing variety, perfectionism and workaholism that weren't problems yet but would be. She was currently in a sexually abusive relationship and writing a graphic novel about unicorns.

"Hmm," Death said in a tone of mild interest. "You know, I can't tell if she's for me or for you."

"Me either," Will said, but by then the girl had disappeared. That happened sometimes, so he shrugged and they went back to talking.

"You've lost an eye since last week," Death remarked.

"Mortar, Korea," Will replied, scratching an itch in the socket. "It'll grow back; until it does, it'll itch. Don't know how you manage; I've been having trouble threading needles and all sorts of things."

"My perception does not require mortal appendages," Death replied, taking a lipless sip from his flowered mug as though to prove his point. "My benefits are better than yours, friend."

"Mm." Will took a gulp from his teacup, a pretty cracked thing patched with gold. "How's your business?"

"No notable change; there never is. Illness, violence, famine, accident, despair. It's always those in some combination or other. She's back again, by the way."

Will turned and indeed, the girl was back.

"Well?" Death asked. "What's she here for? All I can tell is that she's desperately ill."

Will sifted deeper. She smelled like blood, vomit, and anesthesia. Well. That explained her glassy stare and the hospital gown anyway.

Death, Will, and the Girl

"Surgery patient," he said, letting the tastes of honey and chai wash away the smell. "A problem with the anesthesia, I'd say."

"Allergy?"

"Oversight."

Death didn't click his tongue; he didn't have one. With no pity or displeasure, only finality, he stated, "Accident."

"Not yours, then?"

"Everyone's mine, Will," Death corrected. "She's just not mine *yet*. Otherwise I'd've been able to tell more about her."

"Hmm. I suppose..." But she was gone again. Will took a sip. "Flighty little thing, isn't she? Normally mine aren't."

"She's in-between. Give her time and she'll solidify." Death got up to pour another cup of tea from the electric jug. He offered it to Will, who declined with a wave of his arthritic hand. When Death sat down again, he said, "This is impolite to ask, but I've wondered for millennia. How do you manage the pain?"

Will raised a charred brow. "Death the Skeleton asks *me* about pain?"

"This is my natural state. I've been a skeleton since this incarnation came out of the collective unconscious. *You* seem to have a new assortment of injuries and disabilities every time I see you."

Will shrugged and felt his shoulder crack—a snowboarding accident, four days before. "My natural state. I can't heal if I don't get hurt."

"It all seems rather unpleasant."

Will grinned; he was missing a front tooth. "Death isn't?"

"I am the end of all suffering," Death said, a little stuffily. "You *are* suffering."

"I could quote the Buddha at you, but I don't think you'd like it."

"I wouldn't, thank you."

Death, Will, and the Girl

"Besides, if you don't suffer, you can't recover. I'm not the cure for suffering, just the effort. Only *you* can cure suffering."

"I cure everything," Death said with grim pride.

This time, when the girl came back, she was almost solid. Will didn't notice until he heard her voice, fuzzy from drugs, "Am I yours?"

She meant Death, of course. Death got all the press. Will turned in his chair and found that the girl had crawled to their table. She held her head unnaturally still, and her eyes were swimming, tracking side to side.

He felt her suffering. No pain, not yet, but he could feel her head spin, her stomach churn. He could hear soft white noise in her ear, and feel raw flesh in her throat. In her current state, where bodies were ideas, she could still hear in both ears, but when she woke up, she never would again.

"You've misjudged, girl," the reaper said. "I'm not here for you."

The girl's face fell. Blood oozed into her hair. "Can I stay?"

Death looked at Will; after all, it was his apartment.

"You can, as long as the drugs and your mind will let you," Will said, "but I can't give you anything for the dizziness. Would you like some tea? It'll get the taste of tube out at least..."

The girl jerked, made a nauseated sound. "Hrk. Think I'm going to be sick..."

"Not yet. When you're back with your body, yes, you will, but for now, you're away from all that. Please, try not to think about it and drink up."

The girl struggled upright, took a kitten mug from the cabinet where Will pointed, and shuffled over to the electric jug on the table. She moved as though her limbs were numb, and banged into table, chairs, and counter, but at least she didn't throw up. She poured the tea, stared at it blankly—as well as she could with her eyes dancing.

"What is it?"

Death, Will, and the Girl

"Chai. Honey and milk are on the counter if you want them."

But the girl only made a face and shuffled back with the chai in her corner.

Death and Will continued drinking, but Will was distracted. The girl was more solid now, and he couldn't help being aware of her, sitting quietly on the floor in her misery.

"Oh, go ahead," Death said. "Work calls. I understand."

Will stood up, approached the girl, and kneeled beside her—carefully, to spare his knees. "You don't have to sit here on the floor, you know. I've got more chairs. Let me get you one."

"It feels better with my head by the ground," she replied. The blood had dripped down her ear and onto her neck. He wasn't sure if she was aware of it. "Who are you, Death's boyfriend?"

Death snorted. It was a sound he didn't make very often. "I like her."

Will rolled his eye. "Well, you must be feeling better, to sass like that."

"Sorry. I wasn't. I just..." but she was still a little too hazy to really finish the sentence.

He got down to sit with her, so he'd be on her level. It was a little painful, with the state of his joints, but he managed. She was tall, and even slouching was about his height. (Malnutrition, scurvy, rickets; Will got them all periodically, so never grew very large.) "I'm Will. You're going to need me when you wake up."

"...okay?" She seemed to be getting a little more clear-headed; she was waking up and would be gone soon. "Am I dead?"

"No, just very sick. You're going to wake up, vomit up a storm, and lose your hearing in that ear." He pointed to the bleeding one.

She touched it, hastily pulled her hand away. "Oh."

"But here's the thing. You're going to survive it."

Her expression turned sickly. "Oh."

Death, Will, and the Girl

"Yes, that's the face people usually give me. But you will. And if you hold on, you'll make it. I'm not going to pretend it'll be fun, because it won't, but hang on, you'll adapt, and you'll be okay."

She looked suspicious. She looked up at Death, who was watching all this with no expression. "Is he telling the truth?"

Death gave her a professional look. "If you take his advice, all other things being equal, I won't take you for another fifty years."

"Huh." She took a while to think about it, and drank down the chai while she did. Then she gave the cup back to Will and said, "Okay. I think I'm ready to go back now."

"Good luck," he said, but she'd already disappeared. The tea that she'd held within the symbol of her body splashed to the floor, and Will sighed and went to the sink for a sponge. She couldn't take the tea with her, of course, but he figured anything was better than the taste of sterilized bloodstained plastic and vomit.

As Will got down on his knees again to clean up the chai, Death said with an almost apologetic tone, "They always want a solid answer. I had to give her the most convenient one."

"I know, I know," Will said. "Sorry about that, and thanks for playing along."

"Mortals," Death said. "So linear. So short-lived. I don't know how you can bear to reassure them; you know how ephemeral they are."

"What can I say? I want them to survive. Not everybody does."

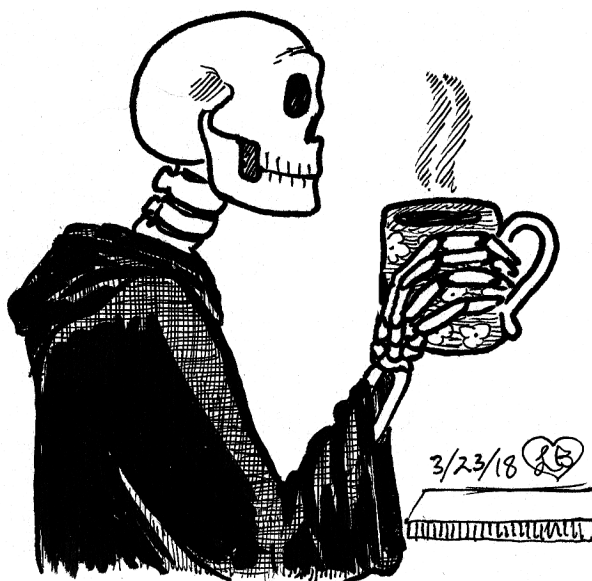
"Nobody does."

"And anyway, they do good tea," Will said with a grin. "And they're entertaining."

Death agreed. "Boyfriends. What will they think of next?"

Death, Will, and the Girl

Clean-up finished, Will tossed the sponge in the sink and returned to the table, and his own mug of tea. The rest of their party went on, uninterrupted.



Lilith and Cain

The angels found her standing at the shore of the Red Sea, staring off over the waves.

"It's beautiful," she said when they arrived.

The angels were not impressed. After all, they had seen it when it was made. They'd watched the Creator sculpt it from slabs of molten stone and distilled primordial steam. They'd had millennia to become inured to such beauty, and anyway, there was a task at hand.

"You have to come back, you realize," scolded the angel that resembled a wheel of flame and eyeballs. "It's the Creator's will."

"No," Lilith said, not looking away from the horizon, "it's Adam's will."

"The Lord sent us to bring you back," the other angel said, "so it's His will too. Don't be stubborn."

"I was created from the same earth as Adam," Lilith insisted, putting up her chin. "God created me as myself, and that includes my stubbornness, my rebellion. Why would He create me improperly? Why would He create for Adam a wife who wouldn't lie beneath him, unless it was part of His original plan all along?"

The angels, who had been created with perfect obedience, tried not to look put out. They were accustomed to dealing with their own brethren, and they'd been sure that Lilith would be similar, that she would immediately understand her proper place and return with them. They had not planned on debating the matter with her, or being told no.

"We don't question the Ineffable Creator," the first angel said, in a tone of restrained irritation. "We just obey. As you should."

"That's not for me," Lilith said. "Thanks all the same." She still would not look at them.

"If you refuse to return," the second angel warned, taking a shape that defied description, "God told us to tell you that a hundred of your children will die every day."

Lilith laughed. "And who would I bear them with? Adam? Now begone, before I use the Holy Name on you."

That did it. The angels preferred not to hear that terrifying thunderclap of a word in her throat; the Lord's name was never intended to be voiced by such insignificance as her. Besides, this was a little beyond their ability to handle. Disobedience was a new creation, and they did not like it. They turned to leave.

One called over its shoulder, "Adam will not be pleased."

"I'm sure he'll get over it," Lilith said, and began to walk the seashore. She wanted to see the Red Sea.

For the next century or so, Lilith explored the earth. She saw the windswept dunes of what would become the Sahara and swam in what would be later named the Mediterranean Sea. She scaled the steep not-yet-Himalayan Mountains and slept on the great plains of proto-Botswana. She studied God's craft in the veins of leaves and the bones of animals. Her hair grew wild and coarse, her skin tough and lined. She was lonely, but on the whole, she was content.

Somewhere around the hundred-year mark, while sitting at her fire one night, Lilith was surprised to meet another human being—a man who resembled Adam so much she automatically called out his name.

"No, I'm Cain," the man said. "Adam is my father."

Once he was closer and bathed in the light of her fire, she was embarrassed she'd ever mistaken him for her former husband. Cain's features were sharper, more gnarled, with dark circles under his eyes, and he had a

Lilith and Cain

fluffy cloud of dark hair that Adam lacked. A stout walking stick was in his hand, and he sat down heavily, with a sigh of relief, as though he'd been walking a long time, but he radiated a restlessness Adam never had.

It had been a century since Lilith had had anyone to be polite to, but she somewhat remembered the niceties. She offered Cain food, and he eagerly offered his own in turn. It turned out that he knew recipes that she didn't, and together, they had a good meal.

As they ate, Lilith tried to explain who she was, but it turned out she didn't need to.

"My old man's first wife? He's told me all about you!"

"After all this time?"

"He never shut up about you. He claimed you've got three breasts and the lower half of a snake." Cain tilted his head at Lilith's body, which was old and weather-beaten but otherwise completely ordinary. "I'm a little disappointed, to be honest."

"I'm glad to hear he's moved on with his life," Lilith said dryly. "But who is your mother, and why aren't you in Eden?"

"Oh, they got thrown out long before I came along. I've never seen Eden; is it as beautiful as they say?"

"Well, it is beautiful," Lilith said, "but all of God's creations are beautiful. He has made so many wonders that honestly, I hadn't thought of Eden in ages."

"Huh," Cain said. "The way the old man went on about it, you'd think it was heaven on earth."

"Heaven is what you make of it," Lilith said, "and your father sounds like he's still a little prone to exaggeration."

"A bit," Cain said, smirking and wiggling his eyebrows. "He claimed you tempted him to defile himself at night and that you murdered little children."

"How absurd!" Lilith declared. "Why would I go to such trouble? I've long left Eden, and I never had any children to die." Then she remembered what the angels had told her, that she could never have children, and with a pang in her chest, she hastily changed the subject. "Where is your family, anyway? Are you not with them?"

Cain laughed uncomfortably. "Er. I'm not sure where they are, these days. I'm... wandering. And it seems I can't die, so I'm not sure what to do with myself." He looked away. "I'd really rather not talk about it right now. More bread?"

It'd been a long time since Lilith had been around humanity, but not that long. She accepted the bread and they munched in uncomfortable silence for a moment. She felt sorry for Cain. She'd barely lasted a day as Adam's helpmate; she couldn't imagine having him as a father.

"I wander too," she said finally, trying to sound casual, as though she hadn't noticed his discomfort, "and I could use company. Come, join me; with you, it'll be like looking at everything anew."

So she and Cain wandered the earth together. She showed him the mountains and the deserts and the forests and the plains. She taught him how to navigate using the sea and the stars, for after a century, the natural world was an open book to her, and she had learned to understand the voices of the plants, the animals, the rocks, and the sky.

In turn, Cain taught her the human arts, especially the cultivation and care of plants. He taught her the use of dyes, of fiber, of cloth making and fermentation. Lilith had been among the wilds so long, she'd almost forgotten the ways of humanity, and Cain was second-generation, building off the knowledge of those who came before him. He knew how to grind grain and bake bread. When she successfully made her first loaf with him, she was delighted. It seemed almost magical.

Lilith and Cain

"My mother and father learned a lot of things, once they left Eden," Cain told her as he broke open the steamy loaf. "Now I get to benefit from their knowledge and impress you with it! Makes me feel important."

She laughed as she tore into the bread. It tasted light and fresh. She never would've admitted it, but after a century, she had almost started becoming blasé about all of creation. To teach and learn from another human being brought new novelty to everything. Truly, she would never grow bored now.

But as time passed, Lilith noticed that something was wrong. Cain could never sleep through the night; Lilith would often wake in the middle of the night to find him pacing circles around her, muttering and weeping. For a while, she didn't mention it, since he seemed ashamed of it, but finally, she could wait no longer.

"What's happened to you?" she asked. "Why can't you sleep?"

And he told her about how'd he been cursed to wander forever, never resting, never dying. Why he'd been afflicted so. Lilith learned of his parents, his brother Abel, and what Cain had done.

Lilith sat quietly for a time, thinking it over. "I see," she said.

Cain only sat there wearily, as though waiting for her to turn away. Grief and shame hung over him like a leaden cloak. He looked cringing and craven, and Lilith couldn't stand to see him like that, not after the years they'd spent together. So she told him about her own curse, how she was doomed to never have children, why she'd left Adam.

It had been many, many years. All the sharp edges of her pain had long since worn away, but the stone weight of it remained in her heart. They wept together, and they grieved together, and in the morning, they continued wandering. And after that, whenever Lilith woke weeping for the children she could never have, Cain was there to hold and comfort her, for he understood

Lilith and Cain

loss. And when his legs ached from the constant urge to move, she was there to rub the soreness out, for she understood pain.

They were cursed, and sometimes they were sad, but together, they were happy.

Unlike Lilith, Cain grew bent and weary from his constant cursed wandering. He was not one of the firstborn; he was a child of man, not a child of earth, and thus capable of illness and infirmity. While Lilith's back remained straight and strong, his turned bent and brittle. Even though he was younger than Lilith, he could no longer keep up with her, and she had to slow her pace so as not to leave him behind.

One evening, when his hair and beard had gone white as a cloud, and Lilith was once more rubbing the pain from his calves, he admitted to her, "I wish I could die."

Lilith looked at him. "You're ready, then?" For they had discussed this.

He nodded, and she saw the weariness in his shoulders, the clarity in his eyes. He was not speaking from momentary despair; he had wandered for many, many years with her, and he was tired. It was time.

So Lilith held him, and stroked his hair, and she whispered in his ear, "Cain, you've been nothing but the most devoted son to me."

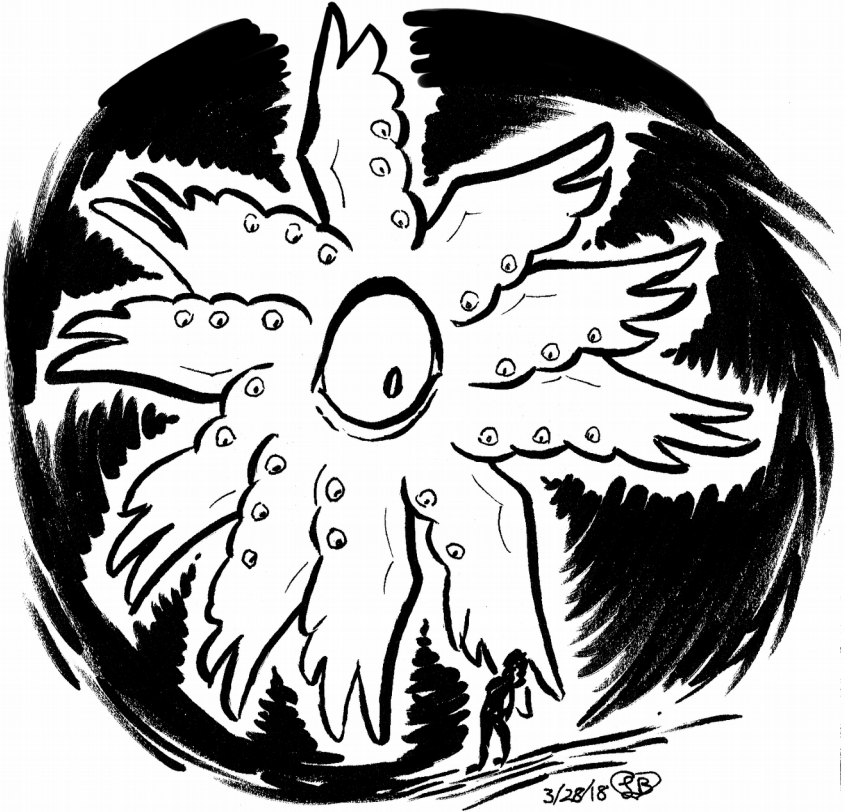
And Cain, who could never rest, who could never sleep in the same place twice, smiled. His eyes were filled with tears of joy. "I have always wanted to be someone's favored child," he breathed. "Thank you, Mother."

That night, Cain fell into a deep sleep. Lilith stayed awake and stood guard, in case the restlessness took him over once more, but it never did. He slept peacefully through the night, and when the sun rose, his skin was cold. Cain had finally attained the rest he ached for.

Lilith buried him under the plants he so adored, and she tossed ashes in her hair, rent her garments, and wept. Cain had taught her the proper human ceremonies of death, in all their years together; one last gift.

Lilith and Cain

And when she was done, she got to her feet, and she began to wander again. There was still so much to see, and an eternity to see it in. The next marvel awaited her.



A Family of Fools

Mordekhai, Miriam, and Mara were a family of fools.

Mordekhai had gone blind young, like his father and grandfather before him, and when he knew the layout of the space, he was a skilled tumbler and acrobat. That and his gift of comic timing had made him the jester of choice for many of the elite families; many never knew that a great deal of his comedy came from desperately recovering from slips and errors when the families he performed for moved their furniture.

His wife, Miriam, had not gone deaf in childhood, but became so after an illness in adolescence; she and Mordekhai had known each other before that, as young loves, and their love only grew stronger as they learned new ways to communicate. Miriam had no performative abilities whatsoever, but she had a singular gift with golems, and many of the families who hired Mordekhai for their parties also hired Miriam for their golems. (There were plenty of Masters of Names in town, but they were all men, inappropriate for female golems.)

Their child, Mara, was neither blind nor deaf, but possessed a tongue of such sharpness that many of the city people wished she were mute. Although she was newly of marriageable age, everyone presumed she would never leave her father's house. Who would marry a spiteful girl who might birth only children destined to go blind?

This suited Mara fine. She loved her family, and she had her trade. Maybe she wasn't as skilled at physical comedy as her father, but she was good at the verbal kind. Her acid tongue was not necessarily a setback in a fool, and it helped her father track her better during a show, when the bells on her clothes weren't enough.

A Family of Fools

She and Mordekhai were performing once again for the Barukh family, at a party celebrating the end of the longstanding feud between them and the Chaims. The good spirits seemed strained, however, and even now, one of the younger Chaim brothers hurled a goblet of wine at Mara's father.

Dressed in her rainbow rabbit gown, Mara veered her cartwheel to intercept the wine. The warm liquid splashed down her front, spattering her face, and the goblet bounced off her hip, hitting the floor with a *clang*.

Her father halted, standing on his hands. Though he kept his fool's cheery voice, she could hear his concern, the slightest hint of anger. "Are you hurt, daughter?"

Mara kept her foolish grin and balanced on one hand. "Only by the quality of the wine, father."

He walked towards her on his hands. When he came across the puddle of wine, he tasted his fingers, then clucked disapprovingly. "For shame! You are worth much finer libations!" He gestured with his feet as he spoke.

She followed his lead, and they improvised a segment where they argued upside-down, both physically and mentally. The audience seemed to like it, anyway; both families were laughing.

They paused for a quick break as the next dinner course came out. Once they were out of view, her father took her arm.

"I don't like the mood this party is taking," he said, using the sign language he and Miriam had learned together all those years ago. "They haven't even started the serious drinking yet. How dare they throw wine at you!"

"Do you think there will be a fight?" Mara signed under his hand, so he could feel the movements.

He didn't reply directly, but she didn't like the way his lips tightened under his beard. "Check on your mother. It's time for me to do my solo act anyway, and you need to change your clothes."

A Family of Fools

Mara signed a nod and darted out the back. She knew her father was trying to protect her, get her out of the way, but she had to admit she was grateful. She stunk of wine, and her father had years of experience in handling louts.

She almost crashed into her mother in the back garden.

"I was just coming for you!" Mara signed, but then she saw her mother's alarmed face. "What's wrong?"

"I just finished checking the feet of the Chaim family golem," Miriam replied, hands moving almost too fast to see. "She said one of the younger sons has been grumbling all day, likely to start a fight—ah! You're wet!"

"They threw wine at me. It's nothing."

She was distracted from Miriam's indignant response by the sounds of a raised voice back in the dining hall. It sounded angry.

"I have to go," Mara signed. "The fight's starting."

Miriam blanched but dashed out, away from the building to get help. Mara turned and sprinted back inside.

Sure enough, one of the young men of the Chaim family was standing, swaying, delivering a snide speech that probably sounded much cleverer after a few glasses of wine. The Barukhs were giving him icy stares but so far controlling themselves, and Mordekhai was standing awkwardly off to the side, out of sight and seemingly uncertain.

Mara dashed to Mordekhai's side, took his hand, shared what her mother had told her.

Her father frowned. "Tell me," he signed, "has the windbag cleaned his plate?"

"No," Mara signed under his hand, "it's half-full."

"Sauce?"

"Yes. Full wineglass."

"He sounds like he's at the corner of the big table. Am I right?"

A Family of Fools

"You are."

"Good. Follow my lead."

Mordekhai knew the Barukh family hall very well, having performed there for many years. (They, for their part, had enough mindfulness of him that they'd kept the layout and furnishings mostly the same.) He staggered out, pretended to catch his foot on the table leg (only Mara saw him carefully feel for it first), and executed a glorious pratfall upon the floor, dragging the tablecloth with him—and in the process dumping the young Chaim's dinner down his lap. The snide monologue was cut embarrassingly short.

In the ensuing shocked silence, Mara pranced out, put both hands on her hips. "Oh Father," she declared with theatrical exasperation. "You haven't lost us *another* patron, have you?"

Mordekhai climbed to his feet, using the food-spattered Chaim for leverage, seemingly oblivious to his indignant sputtering. He made an elaborate show of patting the young man over, smearing sauce all over him. "No, no," he said in his fool's voice, "it's just a guest!"

Mara mimed elaborate relief. "Oh good, that's all right then. I knew our patrons would never subject us to such windbagging themselves!"

There were snickers, and the young Chaim turned red. He opened his mouth as though to retort, but his father hauled him back into his seat, lecturing ferociously under his breath. Feigning obliviousness, Mordekhai rejoined Mara on the performance floor, licking his sauce-covered fingers, and they started their tumbling act early, further distracting everyone.

Crisis averted, for now. Still, Mara didn't relax. Emotions were running high, and there was only so much two fools could do about that. Her clothes stuck to her, still wet.

Then she saw one of the law-keeping golems approaching the door. It was one of the ones that patrolled the city, and Miriam was at its side. It settled outside the door, seemingly at random but highly visibly, and the

A Family of Fools

hanging cloud of hot tempers defused. Nobody wanted to start a fight near a golem, who protected the righteous from those that would harm them.

Miriam caught Mara's eyes, gave her a look of inquiring concern.

Mara gave her a quick nod and smile. She was sure they wouldn't have to deal with any more wine tonight.



Mrs. Cohen's Aide

Abbe Cohen had lived in her fourth-floor apartment for fifty years. Her husband had carried her over the threshold there, loved her there, died there. Every room was filled to the brim with memories—the ghost of Benjamin's after-shave, framed pictures of them young and laughing at Cape Canaveral, boxes of those dreadful crackers that Abbe had never liked but couldn't bring herself to stop buying because Ben had loved them so.

Abbe loved her apartment and had all intention of passing peacefully there, just like her husband. But things weren't going quite according to plan. Three flights of stairs had been good exercise once, but now it was an awful strain. She was having trouble standing up to wash the dishes, and sometimes, if she got down to pick something up off the floor, she couldn't get up again.

She had no family to help her—for she and Benjamin had never been able to have children—and all her friends were older and frailer than she was. It was no good; she'd have to hire somebody.

Abbe didn't relish the thought. She had her habits, her rules, her ways. Adding anyone meant disruption of her order. But after spending a panicky day where she had no food and no strength to go out and buy more, she swallowed her pride. It wasn't as though New York suffered a deficit of Jewish women; surely she could find *someone* appropriate.

And she did. After a seemingly everlasting parade of women and interviews—do you cook kosher? what cleaning supplies do you use?—she found Jael.

What first got Abbe's attention was the odd way Jael had contacted her—through an intermediary at the synagogue. It seemed that Jael was mute,

but Abbe didn't see that as a problem, so after a few exchanges of letters, Jael got the job.

She turned out to be a redoubtable woman—tall, broad, solid as cement, but she had gentle eyes and a sweet face, and Abbe liked her immediately. Jael seemed to make every move intentionally, took all of Abbe's quirks seriously, and despite her initial discomfort of sharing her space with someone, Abbe found herself happy. Happier, even. She had grown so used to solitude that she'd forgotten the joys of companionship. It had been just her and Benjamin for so long...

But Jael was calm, dependable, and a good listener. There was only one strange thing—aside from the Sabbath and holidays, she never took a day off. She never seemed to get sick, never had other engagements; whenever Abbe called, it'd go to an answering machine, she'd leave a message, and Jael would seem to appear, almost by magic, within an hour or two. Abbe did her best not to call too often—she didn't want to take advantage of Jael, who was probably lonely and isolated.

One night, during a terrible winter storm, Abbe got food poisoning from leftovers left too long. She didn't dare leave the bathroom, but she was afraid that when she needed to, she wouldn't be able to get back up. With the landlord out of town, Abbe had no choice but to call Jael, using the cell phone she'd finally bought after being unable to get to the phone in an emergency.

Jael never answered the phone, usually. But perhaps she had Caller ID, because this time, she did.

"Jael? Jael, is that you?"

There was a gentle *tap tap* on the receiver.

"Oh thank goodness. I'm so sorry to bother you, but..."

Jael was there in less than an hour, bundled to the eyes, covered in snow, carrying a first aid kit and loads of ginger and sweet tea, acting as though

there was nothing unusual about being called across town at ten at night during a snowstorm. With her usual efficiency, she helped clean Abbe up, changed clothes and bedding, and made the bathroom as comfortable as possible, bringing in a bowl of ice chips for Abbe, since she wasn't well enough to have proper fluids yet.

Jael held up a piece of paper. On it read: *do you need a doctor?*

Abbe winced. She didn't relish the prospect of being carried down three flights of stairs and through a blizzard, even if Jael looked strong enough to do it. The ER would be a madhouse, and Abbe dreaded, *dreaded* the idea that she might be sick (or worse!) on poor Jael in the process. Besides, she and Benjamin had an old book on taking care of oneself at home, and she'd been sick like this before. "No, let me stay here, we'll see how I am in the morning..."

Jael nodded, put the paper away, and sat vigil at Abbe's side. With her solid presence, Abbe felt reassured and drifted off into fitful, feverish sleep. Every time she surfaced for another bout of sickness, Jael would still be there, unmoving and apparently untroubled by the lack of sleep.

In the morning, Abbe felt much better. She thanked Jael, adding, "You should rest."

But Jael demurred and got up to make some vegetable broth. She didn't seem tired at all, and Abbe chuckled nervously and said, "I could swear you're not human sometimes!"

Jael's back was to her, but Abbe saw her tense.

Abbe paused. In the back of her mind, a few things came together. "...Are you human, Jael?"

Again the tension. Then a shaking head: no.

Abbe thought about that, all through her breakfast of broth (which tasted good and stayed down). She kept coming up with questions, only to discard them. How was Jael's nature any of Abbe's business? She was a good

person, helpful and kind. Surely that was enough. And poor Jael seemed to be stewing in dread, waiting for Abbe's reaction.

"Well, you made my night much easier," Abbe said finally. "Thank you."

Jael smiled at her, and that was that.

Jael stayed for another day, until they were both sure Abbe was better, and then they returned to their old schedule. Winter passed, and they spent Purim together.

One evening, Abbe was watching *Golden Girls* when the doorbell rang. With some effort, she got up from her armchair and went to the door buzzer.

"Hello? Who is it?"

Silence. Then, *tap tap*.

Alarmed, Abbe buzzed Jael in, and found the woman carrying a large duffel bag. Her expression was desolate, trapped, and even though she was so large, she seemed small in her fear. She asked a question with her eyes.

"Of course," Abbe said. "Of course you can stay here." And she hugged the great woman in her frail arms, then went to make Benjamin's study into something resembling a guestroom. (For now, in the heat of Jael's need, keeping everything exactly as it once was no longer seemed so important.)

Jael didn't say what had happened, and Abbe didn't ask. Whatever it was, it had obviously scared Jael stiff, and Abbe suspected she'd find out sooner or later.

Less than a week later, the door buzzed.

Abbe got up from where she and Jael were watching *Wheel of Fortune*. "Hello?"

Over the intercom, a male voice said, "Where's Jael?"

In her chair, Jael froze. She hugged herself. She began to shake.

"I don't wish to speak to you. Kindly go away," Abbe said, and she shut the intercom off and went back to the television. She took the cell phone out of her pocket, put it in her lap and put a hand on Jael's arm.

"You're safe here," she said. "Don't worry."

But someone must have let the man in, for five minutes later, there was a pounding at the apartment door. The voice bellowed, "Jael? Jael! I know you're in there!"

Jael seemed petrified.

Abbe got up and looked through the peephole of her front door. On the other side was a rather ordinary-looking middle-aged man, aside from his incensed expression. He obviously wasn't leaving, so Abbe cracked the door open a little, letting him see both the chain lock still attached and the cell phone in her hand.

"Quit shouting," she said. "There's no one here but me."

"Don't lie to me, you old bat. I know Jael's here." He raised his voice, called over Abbe's shoulder, "I know you're there! Maxine at the synagogue told me what you've been doing!" He turned back to Abbe. "You have my property. Return it or I'll have you arrested."

Abbe's eyes narrowed. "Young man, I don't know what you think property is, but I haven't bought, stolen, or kidnapped anyone. You are on my property, and I have asked you to leave. I'm calling the police now." And she began to dial 911.

For all his bluster, the man didn't seem to like that. He left, and when he did, Abbe slid the deadbolt home firmly and called the landlord. Enrique was a good man; she trusted him to spread the word about the man and make sure he was not let in again. Once that was done, she hung up and went to Jael.

Jael hadn't moved from her chair. She was staring into the television, trembling all over.

Mrs. Cohen's Aide

Abbe held her tight. "It's all right," she said, over and over. "He's gone. You're safe here. You're safe."

Jael's strong body folded inward. She held her face in her callused hands. She began to silently sob in Abbe's arms.

"It's all right now. It's all right. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you," Abbe said.

And she never did.



Starfishing

Usually, I'm not much of an outdoor person. My knees, my back, it's too much. But that day, it was so glorious out that only a fool would remain indoors. Everything was lush and green, the crisp air invigorated one from the inside out, and the bright sky had just enough clouds to soften the sun. It was a godly day, the kind created by angels, and I wanted to enjoy it.

Fetching my cane, I went for a stroll in the park, where sunbeams filtered down like rays of gold and the sounds of traffic were inaudible, if you concentrated. Sadly, I didn't run into anybody with whom to share my pleasure; the park was empty. The world being in the condition it is today, I suppose everyone else was busy working at a desk, or watching TV, too buried in themselves to notice the world around them, but at least I didn't have to worry about bicyclists. I could walk the paths unmolested and enjoy the trees.

Then, as I came to a clearing in the trees, a field where most people unlawfully let their dogs run wild, I found a peculiar scene.

A young man stood in the clearing, dressed in a yellow fisherman's slicker and hat, but no galoshes. I ask you, who goes out in a raincoat without galoshes? Perhaps he was foreign, from some desert land where galoshes didn't exist. Regardless, he stood there in his improbable costume of hat, slicker, and expensive-looking sneakers with his head tilted back, staring at the sky with a look of rapt concentration, as though waiting for the rain for which he was so prepared. A fishing pole dangled loosely from his fingers.

Curious, I approached the young man. "Pardon me..."

Starfishing

He turned to look at me with a look of mild surprise, as though he had been focusing so intently on the sky that he hadn't realized I was there. "What's up?"

"Is it going to rain?" I inquired.

He glanced up at the sky again, more typically this time, as though he was seeing it like normal people do. "Don't think so, miss," he said conversationally. "It's looking pretty sunny up there right now."

Miss! What cheek! The youth today, I tell you! We said "ma'am" when I was a child. But he had me too curious to correct him, so I nodded with him. "Yes, it certainly is." Then, since the intensity had returned to his gaze, I decided to look up as well to see what had him so riveted.

I saw nothing I didn't expect. Scattered puffy clouds, blue expanse, sunbeams. There wasn't even a plane in the sky. Beautiful, certainly, but that didn't seem to be what he was looking for.

"Heavenly day, isn't it?" I remarked, since the young man didn't seem to mind my presence. "The angels are truly with us this morning."

That seemed to get his attention. He looked at me with new respect, and a broad, gold-toothed smile. "Sure is! Good to see I'm not the only one. I was starting to wonder if I was crazy."

"Oh, heavens no," I replied. "How could anyone stay inside on a day like this?"

"No clue, miss. No clue. Works good for me, though. Look at them all!"

For a few more seconds, we stood side-by-side, staring at the sky, watching the clouds drift. He seemed utterly entranced.

"I hate to sound rude," I finally asked, "but what is it you're looking for?"

The young man looked away from the sky to give me a slightly dismayed look. "Oh." He said. "Guess you can't see them, huh?"

Starfishing

I didn't understand what he meant, but I didn't interrupt. I loathe interrupters.

"You're wondering why I'm staring at the sky, you mean? What I'm doing in a get-up like this, right?"

"The thought had struck me, yes." I confessed. "Please excuse me, I don't mean to be rude." If there's one thing worse than interrupting, it's rudeness.

"Oh, don't worry about it none," he said, lifting his head back to the sky. "Like I said, I'm the only one. It was just such a good day, I thought I'd come out, do some starfishing. Usually I've got better luck at night, but it's just so great out, and you seem cool; maybe they won't mind if you're here."

"Starfishing?"

The young man's head bobbed emphatically. "Yup, that's what I call it. Tough sport. You gotta work at it—at least, I guess I do. I never met anyone else who starfishes, so maybe it's just—"

Then suddenly his head jerked. He stared into a cloud intently for a moment, then with a cry of excitement dug deep into one of the pockets of his slicker. From there, he withdrew a half-empty bag of marshmallows—the big fluffy kind. Without looking away from the sky, he fumbled at the end of his fishing line, which I now noticed lacked a hook on the end. Holding the fishing rod between his legs, he proceeded to tie the line around the sticky white puff of sugar.

When he noticed my curious stare, he said, "she loved marshmallows. They would've given her all kinds of teeth problems."

Having succeeded in tying the line, he reached into another pocket and produced a plastic bottle of chocolate syrup and drizzled the marshmallow over with it, catching the drips with his free hand. Unable to think of anything to say, I watched him perform this ritual in curious, respectful silence.

Starfishing

When he had finished his ministrations, he waited, the pole clutched tight in both hands now and his focus riveted on the clouds above our heads. His lips moved as though he were whispering to himself, though I couldn't tell what. By this point, I was as fascinated as he; he seemed harmless enough, this odd young man, and this was most certainly the most interesting thing I'd seen in weeks. For perhaps ten, fifteen seconds, we both stood in silent anticipation.

Then, without warning, he whipped the fishing pole upward, sending the dripping marshmallow arcing up into the sky with drops of chocolate syrup and a thread of fishing line spinning out below it. The force he put behind the toss was fantastic and the clump of sugar rocketed out of sight among the clouds.

"Heads up!" The young man warned, pulling his hat low and hunching over, but it was too late; I was doused with the sudden burst of raindrops.

"Oh!" I cried, clutching at my nice shirt, now soaked through. "Oh my heavens! What was that?"

"I got it!" The young man whooped, pumping his fist and shaking water off the brim of his hat. "I got the cloud! Sorry I didn't warn you, I didn't think... do you want my jacket?"

I opened my mouth to rebuke him, but then I forgot the indignity and the chill in my bones. For as anyone could see, the fishing line was no longer feeding out, but it wasn't returning to earth either. It ran taut from his fishing pole into the sky, hanging from some invisible hook. I reached out to pluck it, but he stopped me.

"Don't! You'll pull it loose."

"It's—where is it? What is it attached to?" I asked.

He just pointed to the sky. The line, which was invisible except for the glimmers of sunlight on it, fed up into a cloud. Then he forgot me; I could

Starfishing

see by his frantic gaze upward that this moment was important for him, and I decided that my curiosity and discomfort could wait; surely I would see what this business was about, sooner or later.

And I did. After a few breathless seconds on the young man's part, there were two sharp jerks on the fishing line from above. With a look of relieved adoration, he tugged back twice and began reeling, easing the line in. I watched the sky with him, waiting to see what came down.

At first, I saw nothing. Then a little speck appeared from the cloud, and the speck grew, until I could see that coming down from the sky was a brown little girl in a blue dress, towed to earth by her grip on the end of the fishing line. She was still licking the chocolate syrup off her fingertips, and once she came down low enough, she hugged the young man around the neck, as much out of affection as to keep from floating away.

"She's the spitting image of you." I murmured as he dropped the fishing pole to return the little girl's embrace and tweak her nose. "Is she your sister?"

"So you can see her." He smiled sadly and ruffled the little girl's curls. "She was, once. I've tried everything; chocolate-covered marshmallows are the only way she'll come down anymore. Not even then, half the time."

I looked at the little girl, who smiled and hugged the young man with sticky fingers but otherwise said nothing. She was a darling, but there was a glow to her too good for the world, and she seemed to see inside, rather than out. For a moment, she gazed at me with calm brown eyes and then hid her face against the young man's neck.

"Don't mind her," he said. "She was shy before, too. Not used to seeing people besides me no more, I bet."

She bent as though to whisper something in his ear. I didn't hear what she said, but the young man smiled heartbreakingly.

"Okay, sis. I'll see you later, okay? You stay good."

Starfishing

He opened his arms, the little girl released his neck, and she began to float up into the sky, gradually gaining speed like a released balloon. She waved to us at first, but then she tilted her head back to stare into the sun and didn't look back. Even after she had vanished once again into the clouds, the young man gazed after her. His eyes were filled with tears.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he said, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand but still smiling. "The years she spent up there, me down here, it gets harder and harder every time. She don't go after the marshmallows sometimes. Soon I won't be able to catch her at all, no matter what I use."

I could think of no way to comfort him. All I could say was, "The doctors tell me I've only a year, if I'm lucky. Perhaps that's why I could see her."

"Maybe. I'm sorry."

I sighed. "My husband and the lord Jesus are waiting for me. I have nothing to fear."

If I speak truthfully, though, I was afraid. But at least I had them awaiting me, and I would see them soon. The young man, however, seemed in the pink of health. He would grow older and older, and his sister would remain forever the same. At least my husband had only left this earth a year prior; the gap between us was still small.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said to the young man. Oh, how I'd hated those words when people said them to me at the funeral! And here I was saying them myself.

"I haven't lost her yet. She still gets the marshmallows, for now." But I could see it in his face, that he could never know for sure whether this was the last time she'd respond. He sighed. "Guess that's why I'm the only one who does it. Tough sport, starfishing."

Starfishing

And slinging his pole over his shoulder, he left the park, leaving only a damp spot on the grass and a few drops of chocolate syrup to show he'd ever been there at all. Even though I was wet and shivering, I stayed, so I could stand and watch the beautiful blue sky.



Fly Away

Roger had the best baby girl in the world.

It hadn't been easy. Roger hadn't gotten full custody of her till she was five, so he'd missed a lot of the early days, but he'd tried to make them count. He'd made it clear that he was the father and she was the daughter. His job was to protect and provide, hers to honor and obey, and when she did her job well, he made sure to shower her in love and affection.

"You're one in a billion," he'd tell her as he hugged and tickled her, while she shrieked with glee. "You're my little lady!"

He made sure never to compare her to her mother, even when she was bad. The books all said that was bad for a kid's development, and anyway, Roger didn't want to give her any ideas. Part of him feared that his ex-wife's... condition had been passed on to her, even though rationally, he knew it couldn't be something hereditary. It was all in how you raised them, and Roger was going to do it *right*.

And he did. His daughter was a little angel, all smiles and curls. She said her please and thank-yous, she set the table perfectly, and she even insisted on helping with the laundry. Roger never needed to scold and shout; the few times she began to slacken, a stern look was all that was needed to point her in the right direction.

Roger's friends were all very impressed.

"How do you do it?" They'd ask him. "All mine ever does is mooch around and whine."

Roger would always shrug and smile and say, "genes." But secretly, he knew it was because he was raising her right. No TV to rot her brain, no Internet or fancy phones for his little girl. He gave her books, the *right* books,

and good old-fashioned toys for her to work her imagination on. It was all about the parenting.

But when she turned ten, that started to change.

Roger had been prepared for this, or so he thought. Puberty, the great ravager, corrupter of children. He'd made sure to carefully explain to his daughter, in detail, about how her body worked and how boys' bodies worked, and about peer pressure. He taught her about temptations, drugs and sex, and told her he was sure she'd do the right thing. And she'd watched him with wide eyes and nodded and hugged him and said she'd always be his little girl. But he saw a hint of nervousness in her eyes, something that seemed out of place. Nothing serious, surely. But still... still...

As she'd walked away, a bit of fluff fell from her sweater. At first, Roger thought nothing of it, until he got up and saw that it was a feather. Then his stomach turned cold.

He was being paranoid, he told himself. Must've come from outside. Nothing to worry about.

But despite everything, his little girl began to change.

She started spending more time with friends; sometimes, Roger would come home and there'd only be a plate of dinner left out for him and a note: "with friends; back later! XOXO." It was even cold, sometimes. She started back-talking him, asking why, asking about her mother, and couldn't they go see this movie or check out that book. Roger never saw it, but he was positive she was looking at boys.

And the feathers! They were everywhere now, as though she never vacuumed anymore. They were deepest in her room.

"What are you doing in my room?"

He hadn't heard her come in. "You know I'm allergic to birds."

"I—I don't have a bird. I'd never—"

But he could see it in her face; she was hiding something. "You're lying to me. What have I told you about lying?"

She quailed, and it made him angry. Why was she treating him like this? It hurt. "I don't have a bird!"

"Tell me what you're hiding, angel." He put an arm out, gentle, just to keep her from running. If he let her run away once, she'd never stop. He'd learned that from her mother.

She showed him, eventually. He made her take off the cute shirt he'd picked out for her, and there they were, downy little feathers all over her back, peeking over her bra straps. Roger tugged one; after some resistance, it came out, though his daughter winced. But she didn't whimper, didn't cry. He'd taught her that good girls didn't whine. She pulled away, got dressed again. She wouldn't look him in the eye.

Roger spun the feather between his fingers. What should he do? He mustn't show indecision; he was the father.

"Don't let me catch any more of these," he said, holding the feather. "You know I'm allergic."

She looked up at him, and her eyes were wet. "Did Mom have these?"

Roger only turned away.

He still found the feathers sometimes. More often, he found her vacuuming, trying to get them all, sometimes even late at night or early in the morning. She smiled at him, but there was fear behind it.

Good. A little fear never hurt anybody.

The weather turned colder, she started wearing bulky vests and jackets, and he mostly forgot about the feathers, because he stopped seeing them. Maybe it was just a freak genetic quirk. Maybe they were gone now—after all, she was only half her mother genetically, and ALL him socially. Maybe it'd just been her trying to mess with him, get his attention. Teenage girls did that.

Fly Away

And she was turning into a teenage girl. She stopped smiling at him whenever he came in. She stopped introducing him to her friends, or telling him where she was going. Now he regretted not giving her a phone; he couldn't keep track of her. But he couldn't give in; if he went back on one of his rules, she would know he could be bargained with, and then it'd never end.

The weather warmed, but she kept wearing the jackets. At first, Roger assumed it was a fashion statement. Teen fashion never made any sense after all. But her posture had changed too—hunched, like she was trying to hide. It made her look afraid, which he didn't like. A little fear was all well and good, but looking like that, it'd give people ideas. Make him look bad, like he was some ogre.

Maybe she wanted him to look bad. Maybe she was spinning lies to people, telling them god-knew-what. It was like she was turning into her mother before his eyes, but he didn't give in. She was a teenage girl. He was a grown man. He was in control, not her.

One day, he came home to find no dinner at all, no note, and no daughter. For a moment, he felt cold panic—not again, not like her mother, not like this—

Then the front door opened and she came in, breathing hard, like she'd been rushing, trying to make it home before him. She saw him, and she froze.

"You're early," she said.

"You're late. Why are you late?"

And she *ran*. Fled upstairs, like he was some kind of monster, like he was wrong, like *he* was the disrespectful one. And when he came up after, he found she'd shut herself in her room. There was no lock, of course, but when he tried the knob, the door wouldn't open; she must've blocked it with a chair.

Fly Away

"Angel," he said quietly, "open the door, please."

He heard fast, hitching breathing, whispering cloth. And a scrape; the window, sticking in the summer heat.

Roger's blood ran cold. In the past, he'd just taken the hinges off the door, calm and rationally, but now he smashed against the door, once, twice, until the chair gave way. He burst in, and she was crouching on the windowsill, wearing some strange homemade top—made from that old T-shirt he'd made her throw away, he recognized the fabric, the color that had looked so unappealing on her. She'd cut out the back, except for a couple strips she'd knotted over her neck and down her lower back to hold the whole mess in place. Ugly, vulgar.

Sprouting from her back were two enormous brown wings.

Roger froze. "I told you to get rid of those."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but she managed to stammer out, "I'm leaving, Dad. I'm going."

"I'm allergic. I told you I was allergic!"

"Goodbye, Dad."

And she was gone, flying off into the dark on those brown wings, leaving him to clean up her mess. Just like her mother.

Around him, the air was full of feathers.

Fly Away



The Kids Wore Red

It had started with Rhonda Burns and Brent Garbo.

Rhonda was known as Fat Rhonda at school—not because that was the most notable thing about her, but coming up with a better insult would've required getting close to her, and she gave everyone the creeps. Despite being one of the tallest people in school, she was carefully ignored by most of her classmates, and she drifted through the halls like a gloomy fog in oversized hoodies, thick glasses, and a cloud of frizzy hair. Unseen. Unnoticed.

Except by Brent Garbo.

Brent Garbo was the school's beloved boy. The varsity football captain, in the top ten of his class, blond and tan and seeming to shine with his own golden glow, he made it his business to know something about everyone. It made him feel more at ease, but he didn't know anything about Rhonda, and her size automatically put her on his radar, despite her desperate attempts to collapse in on herself. Plus, their lockers were right next to each other, deep in the bowels of the back first floor, where it was dank and unpleasant and smelled of mold. Rhonda looked like she belonged there. Brent didn't.

Brent wasn't immune to Rhonda's aura of cold fish gloom, so he mostly avoided her, but she always lingered in the back of his mind, a mostly unknown quantity.

One morning, after football practice, Brent came to his locker early, only to find Rhonda slumped at hers, apparently doing nothing but staring through the wall. When he cleared his throat, she jolted and stared at him. It was the first time he'd ever seen emotion on her face, but it was only for a second; then she resumed her usual dead-eyed flatness.

"Oh," she said. "Hi."

Brent, who tried to be friendly to everyone (even if they unsettled him), pasted on a smile and said, "Oh, hey, class early?"

Rhonda said nothing. She seemed to be trying to become inanimate by sheer force of will, and for a moment, Brent wondered whether he ought to leave her to it. But then something seemed to bring her back. She blinked, she stared. Her face shifted.

She was looking at the bruises on Brent's arms.

And Brent, who had long since mastered his social presence, his smile and charisma and a carefully cultivated history of rough sports, panicked. He adjusted his sleeves, far too quick and anxious to play off, because it wasn't one of his easily-persuaded buddies noticing, but creepy, unfathomable Rhonda Burns, and he didn't know enough about her to know how to persuade her it was nothing.

But she wasn't being creepy or unfathomable now. She was just staring at him knowingly.

Brent turned around and left, even though it meant he didn't have his calculus books.

Brent spent the next three periods in a quiet panic. He knew it was stupid—what was Rhonda going to do, *lurk* at him?—but just that it was her, that he didn't know how to play her, was enough to totally throw him off his game. One of his buddies even asked if he was feeling all right, and he had them well trained not to notice anything. He needed to get it together.

At lunch, he got his game face back on. In his mind, every day was game day, a constant battle of strength, strategy, and charisma to stay where he was: swathed in the protection of his own popularity. Rhonda wasn't going to say anything, he told himself. Of all the people at school, he could count on her to keep her mouth shut, surely—her silence, after all, was one of the few things he *did* know about her. He reassured himself that he wasn't like her,

skulking around the halls like a depressive zeppelin. He was Brent Garbo, the boy who was going places, and he was just fine.

With that thought, he tried to forget about it. And he might have succeeded, if Rhonda hadn't been on the news not too long after.

It was a strange thing, and he was honestly never entirely sure what happened. For a while, cops and reporters and gossip were just everywhere, orbiting like unwanted satellites, and the Burns family was all over the local paper. There were allegations of abuse (what kind, Brent worked hard never to learn) and everyone had an opinion, since Rhonda's parents were well known (though minor) local politicians. For a while, the hard part for Brent wasn't learning anything about Rhonda, but avoiding learning far too much.

Brent avoided everything involving her that whole time. And not just because he didn't want to know—though he didn't. It was that he could've sworn that his parents were watching him, testing him to see if he was still smiling. His friends, his teachers, all of them were looking at him, he could *feel* it, and knowing it was just paranoia didn't make it stop. He began to feel like it would never end, but was also terrified about what would happen when it did. It seemed like the whole town might explode over Rhonda Burns.

But then it just... blew over.

Rhonda recanted. The case died. She paid a few hundred dollars in legal fees for wasting everyone's time, got it expunged from her record because she was still seventeen, and life went on. For a while, Brent expected her to disappear, switch schools or towns, but somehow, it never happened. Everything seemed to settle back into an uneasy normalcy, and everyone acted like it'd never happened. Rhonda continued her sleepwalk shuffling around school, even more ignored than before, and seemed to sink deeper into her own head.

She also started wearing red.

The Kids Wore Red

By this point, Brent had paid enough attention to her to know that she did *not* wear red. She wore muted earth tones that blended into the background, high school camouflage. But now she started wearing a tattered red hoodie for a school he'd never heard of. On her, it looked like a visual scream.

Brent didn't blame her. He could only imagine what had gone on, but whatever it was, if he'd gone through it, he likely would've been screaming too. Though he knew he'd never be in that situation—long before the Rhonda thing, he'd known better than to try involving cops. But that she'd tried, that she'd *dared*...

That night, he went through his closet. It was disconcerting to realize that he and Rhonda's wardrobe contained the same color palette, but more annoying, it had no red. (Well, why would it?) After ransacking his room and then the attic, he finally found a box of his grandfather's clothes from when he'd died the year before. Gramps hadn't been a big fan of red either, but deep in the box was a red bandanna, so Brent grabbed it and brought it downstairs to wash.

The next day, he wore it to school, carefully twisted and knotted around his forearm like an armband. He was popular enough to get away with the occasional odd fashion statement.

More importantly, Rhonda saw it. For the first time since her recantation, she raised her eyes from the floor, and they shared a look for a moment. And maybe it was his imagination, but he could've sworn she seemed a little more human after that.

Football season was over, so it took a while for Brent to get an excuse to come to school early. But when he did, sure enough, Rhonda was at her locker, staring at the wall and wearing red.

"Hey," he said.

She didn't look surprised to see him. "Hey."

The Kids Wore Red

"Are you okay?"

Silence. It was a stupid question.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

He didn't know why he asked. Maybe he was hoping she'd have a grand escape plan, good enough for him to use too.

Instead, she said, "you shouldn't be talking to me."

He frowned.

"People will suspect." Her voice was flat. "You think you're the only one in this school? We're not. There's a bunch of us. And now everyone's paying attention to me."

Brent didn't know what to say to that. For as long as he could remember, he'd felt simultaneously that he was the only one on the planet, the only kid stupid enough to get stuck in such a situation, and at the same time that this was normal, something everyone went through and it was his fault was not being able to deal with it. He'd always kept tabs on everyone around him, to keep them at arm's length, but it'd never occurred to him to check for any signs they were like him.

"Besides," Rhonda said, her voice bitter, "didn't you hear? I recanted. It never happened."

Brent remembered her face when she saw his bruises. "Yes, it did."

The sorrow on her face cut deep. Then she hid behind her hair, made a horrible snickering noise. "We could make a club," she said. "The 'nothing ever happened' club."

Brent blinked. "Actually, that's not a bad idea."

"I was joking, Brent. That was a joke."

"No, no, think about it, we could make a club. For... for the red kids, like us. Make it something stupid enough no one will join it otherwise, like... like Parcheesi."

"Parcheesi?"

The Kids Wore Red

"It's a board game, you..."

"I know what Parcheesi is, Brent. Come on."

He realized that she was actually starting to talk to him like a real person, not someone from a horror movie, but he plowed on. "The point is, we pick something dumb and useless like Parcheesi, which anyone can learn but nobody wants to bother, and then we make it our club so we can get out of the house when we need to. 'Oh, where you going, honey?' 'Gotta go, Mom, there's a club meeting.' I can get Coach Williams to sign off on it; he loves me *and* he's a total slacker—"

"You need four players for Parcheesi."

"It doesn't have to be Parcheesi!" Then he sees that she's actually smiling. Rhonda Burns, the most miserable girl in school, is teasing him. "Look, the point is, a club gives us an out, and Williams trusts me to run it and not turn it into a keg party. We could make it about whatever we want; it's just an excuse to get us out."

Rhonda paused. She seemed to be thinking. "If I tell you the kids I think are red, do you think you could... you know, charm them in?"

Brent straightened his letter jacket. "Hey," he said, "I'm Brent Garbo. What else am I good at?"

And the Bridge Club was born.

The Kids Wore Red



Only One Helga Macklewitz

For as long as she could remember, Helga Macklewitz had believed that she was a fairy kitty trapped in a human body.

When questioned, she would explain with patience and patter, "It's like a kitty, only with wings, but for some reason, I was born in a human body. I'm used to it, but sometimes I wish they got it right." While other children pored over the mirror for the first signs of muscles or hips, she looked for whiskers or wings. Alas, like many children, her biology betrayed her and she grew into a girl instead of a fairy kitty.

Helga's parents never disbelieved their daughter; on the contrary, they encouraged her to do whatever was needed to satisfy her identity. The woman formerly known as Ms. Macklewitz (her full legal name was now Sapphire) even helped her daughter make her first pair of fairy wings out of Saran Wrap and two coat hangers. "Be true to yourself," she advised, her braids bouncing with her nods, "you can make a million friends, but there will always be only one Helga Macklewitz."

A million friends, maybe not, but no one could argue that there was nobody like Helga Macklewitz. Dressed in her homemade fairy wings and a headband with felt kitty ears attached, she became well-known throughout the school and a headache for those concerned with the dress code policy. Teachers made unhappy phone calls, but Helga's parents were merciless in debate, (indeed, Sapphire was a lawyer) and they usually ended the conversation with things with, "Wings? A distraction in class? I'm trying to nurture my child's sense of self in your standardized testing factory, and you want me to care about her wings? Give it a few weeks and nobody will notice anymore," and slamming down the receiver.

Only One Helga Macklewitz

Of course, action had to be taken eventually, and after a three-hour argument between the principal and Helga's parents, and then a half-hour discussion between them and Helga, a compromise was reached: Helga Macklewitz would wear her wings under her clothing.

Helga was less than thrilled. Her parents only persuaded her with the logic that wings, of fairy kitties or anything else, were attached to one's body, not one's clothes. Therefore, to wear them under shirts was not denying that Helga was a fairy kitty; in fact, it was more realistic. Annoyed as she was at being inconvenienced, Helga Macklewitz could not deny the logic, so she obeyed.

It wasn't comfortable. The wings rubbed against her skin, leaving stinging rashes, but her kindly father gave her ointment, and Helga chose to treat the irritation as battle wounds in the long war against Mother Nature. When her skin toughened and became accustomed to it, she took it as a victory, and she and her parents celebrated with a nice fish dinner.

As for the teachers, they viewed Helga's lumpy back with dismay and gave up on the whole thing.

Despite her appendages, Helga Macklewitz mostly spent her elementary school years cheerfully ignorant of the depths of her infamy. In her early years, a cohort of dress-up friends protected her, and by the time she was old enough for her regalia to be considered truly strange, she had become one of the largest girls in her school and known respectfully as "Big H" on the sports field. Strange or not, Helga was a great asset for games that required strength, and so her athleticism trumped eccentricity.

It never occurred to Helga that she would no longer be one of the biggest students once she reached middle school. Instead, she decided to wear her wings visibly on the first day of sixth grade, for this was a new school with hopefully a kinder administration. Helga put on her wings (she had graduated to making them herself, with veins of glitter and glue), placed her ears just so,

and then put on her dress, which since it buttoned up in the back accommodated the wings perfectly.

After checking to make sure she had all her pencils, folders, spirals, and paper, Helga put on her backpack backwards so it rested on her stomach and checked her reflection in the mirror. She nodded in satisfaction at her reflection, which still looked lamentably *Homo sapien* but fully equipped for the travails of a new school.

The moment her parents dropped her off and she entered the school, she was accosted by an eighth grader with a squinty eye, a ratty overbite, and six inches over her.

"Nice wings," he said in a tone that meant anything but.

"Thanks," Helga replied. "I made them myself."

"You some kind of angel or something?" It was the wings everybody noticed; they didn't see the ears until afterward, when the surprise had worn off a little.

"Actually, I'm a fairy kitty," she explained. "It's like a kitty, only with dragonfly wings—"

She was interrupted by a strong yank on her left wing. It didn't come off, since the whole frame was one long piece of twisted wire, but Helga felt it bend and heard the rubbery sound of abused Saran Wrap. "I heard about a kitty girl, but I didn't think she was actually *real*." The boy looked almost in awe that he had met a real live lunatic.

Helga tried to spin and confront her attacker, but she couldn't do that without further harming her wing. "Hey! Let go!"

"Why? Does it hurt?" He replied with a sneer, and yanked again.

No one had ever done this before. Certainly people had teased her, but no one had ever grabbed her. No possible protectors were in view; he had caught her at a little-used area hidden behind a field of lockers. Helga tried to

follow the hand and minimize the damage. "Yes!" she cried. "Yes, it hurts! Let go of me!"

"It's just some piece of crap you made at home. It's not *you*."

"Yes it is!" she shouted.

Something about her response seemed to infuriate him. "No, it's not!" he said, yanking. Now he was pulling hard enough that it was an audible rhythm in his speech. "You think you're just *allowed* to be crazy? You think you can just *come* here, *act* like it's okay?"

He released her so abruptly that she fell on her knees, her tattered wings trembling in the air from her shivers. Now that Helga seemed on the verge of tears, the boy appeared calm. He had gotten what he wanted. He wiped the wing glitter off his hand onto his jeans where they left a silvery smudge, then paused, as though considering a proper finish.

He chose to pluck the cat ears from her head and pocket them. "Grow up," he encouraged, giving her a slap on the back that made her wings shake.

He turned his back on Helga to leave, and her emotions finally caught up with her. Panic on behalf of her wings had overridden everything else, but now they were bent and twisted to ruin, and he had her ears. Nothing more could be done to them, and therefore nothing more could be done to her. She finally recognized her feelings as anger, and the realization that "Big H" no longer accurately described her hadn't set in yet.

Helga picked herself up, dropped her backpack for speed, and charged after him. The only warning the boy got was a horrific yowl more befitting a cougar than a fairy kitty, and then she tackled him and started hitting him.

The rat boy lost his dignity, but Helga lost the fight. Bruised and ashamed, she would not wear her wings in public again except under a thick, protective jacket until she was seventeen.

Unfortunately, the policy came too late to help her. In the world of public schooling, six years of infamy could not be erased that easily. Even with her wings hidden, she was often startled in the hallway by some faux-friendly hand patting up and down her back, searching for the telltale lumps of wire. The ears only lasted a year; the other children were constantly snatching them away. Helga finally switched to plain headbands at school. It wasn't perfect, but at least she could pretend that the ears were still there, even if no one could see them.

Her wings, however, were a much larger part of her, and she couldn't give them up for more than an hour at a time without feeling terribly uncomfortable. Despite the trouble they brought her, she wore them every day, repairing and making new ones as necessary. She found it soothing, the way they pressed flat against the skin of her back, a reassuring plastic presence in an otherwise unsettling era, and Helga developed a nervous habit of twitching her shoulder blades to make sure they were still there. The back-pats, smirks, and meows distressed her, but the thought of getting rid of the wings never entered her mind. She would have sooner cut off an arm.

Stress and strain had to be relieved in some constructive way, and so after a couple years of growing, Helga joined the school rugby team, where she took the name of "Big H" again. Her thick cobby body and powerful shoulders were appreciated there, and as in kickball, her muscle trumped social standing. Her teammates saw her taking off and putting on her wings before and after every practice, but seeing the singular vigor with which Helga plowed into others, they left the matter of wings and ears out of all conversation, focusing instead on the cups in Australia and Britain. In this way, Helga managed to get through school in fair mental health and with fairy kitty identity intact.

At seventeen, she still wore wings under her clothes; the jeering had subsided, but the isolation had not, and she still played rugby with unsettling

enthusiasm. She was sitting winged and shirtless in the locker room one day, chiseling chunks of mud and grass from her cleats with a screwdriver, when she found herself approached by one of her teammates.

"What's up, Mattie?" Helga inquired, prying a chunk of sod from her shoe.

"Not much, H." Mattie stood there in silence for a while after that, shifting from foot to foot. She was a smaller, rather accident-prone girl, one of the team wingers, and she had only recently joined the team after having transferred from another school. The wings were still new to her; Helga could feel her staring.

Well, here it came, Helga thought with resignation. It was about time someone had a problem. Her shoulder blades twitched, and she continued knocking at her shoe, waiting for the storm.

"You never wear your ears in here," Mattie blurted.

Helga paused, then looked up. "What?"

"Your ears," Mattie repeated. "You never wear them." Seeing Helga staring at her, she rubbed her hands together and babbled on, "I mean, I've just, I heard you were a fairy kitty, not just a fairy, and that you used to wear ears, but you only wear the wings, and so—yeah."

Helga sat there, screwdriver hanging forgotten from her hand. Her mind sifted through the information, searching for a possible joke. But Mattie looked far too nervous to be playing a prank, and there was currently no one else in the locker room to see her. And though Helga didn't consider herself as having many friends, she'd never had a problem with Mattie.

"How'd you hear about the ears?" Helga finally asked.

"H, everybody knows about the ears."

Helga looked away.

"So. I mean. If you want to, I don't think there would be a problem." She tried a smile. "I mean, the team likes you. I like you. It's okay."

"I'll think about it. Why you mention it?"

Mattie was silent for a good long while. Then she said, "Fairy kitty, right?"

"Heh, yeah." It had been a long time, but she still said, "It's like a kitty, only with wings, but for some reason, I was born in a human body. I'm used to it, but..." she shrugged.

"You don't exactly look like you'd be flittering around the flowers."

"Can't help the species; I didn't choose it."

"I know." Mattie smiled ruefully. "I'm a fruit bat."

Helga burst out laughing. "For serious?"

Mattie spread her arms as though to say, what can you do? "And I *hate* bananas. Though I used to spend all of kindergarten hanging from the monkey bars; they called me 'Batty Mattie.'"

"You're joking me. You're kidding. 'Batty Mattie'? Oh God..."

"I know, right? It's just... yeah. Sorry I didn't speak up sooner, but—"

"No, don't, don't! I don't blame you; I've just been doing it so long, I'm used to the ridicule. Wouldn't wish it on somebody else."

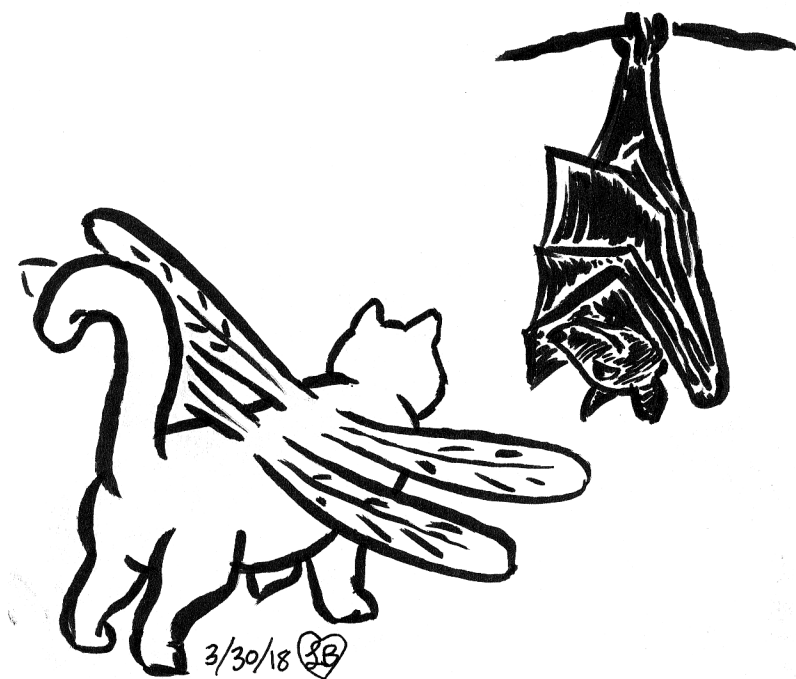
There was a long, thoughtful pause.

"You wanna wear wings together someday?" Mattie asked.

"You don't got any, I could make you a mean pair," Helga replied with a grin.

Apparently rugby attracted the right kind of people.

Only One Helga Macklewitz



The Wolf Girl

Once upon a time, there was a good little girl who lived with her mother. One day, the mother decided to send the girl to her grandmother, who lived alone in the woods. Giving the child a basket of bread, cheese, and wine, she told her, "Take these to your grandmother. The woods are dangerous, so remember: be good, hurry through the woods before it gets dark, and if wolves catch you, give them your bread and cheese. There should be enough to fill their bellies, and if they are full on bread and cheese, they will not eat you, and your grandmother will forgive you. But do not give them the wine; wine will only make them hungrier."

The girl said, "I'll remember," and off she went.

As she was walking along the path, the girl ran into a bent old beggar woman. "Please, please, I am so hungry; won't you share some food with me?"

"Of course, Auntie." And they shared the bread and cheese.

The old beggar woman ate it down, then stood up straight and tall, threw off her tattered cloak, and smiled. She was now graceful and young, and the little girl realized that she had just shared her food with a powerful fairy.

"You are a good little girl," she said, "and you deserve immortal life far more than some of my fairy sisters. In reward for your selflessness, I give you this blessing: you will survive whatever hardships befall you."

The girl wept tears of joy. "Thank you, thank you, Auntie!" she said. "You are too kind to me!"

The fairy smiled at her, and disappeared, and the little girl continued on to her grandmother's house.

The Wolf Girl

Because she had stopped along the way, it began to get dark, and she became frightened. She began to walk faster, then run, and the wolves heard her beating heart and came to the path.

"Hello there," they told her, blocking her way. "Have you been a good little girl?"

"Yes, yes, I have," she said.

"Well, if you are so good, surely you will feed us? We are so hungry; we have not eaten in so long," they said.

Remembering what her mother had said, the good little girl threw the wolves her bread and cheese. But because she had given half of it to the fairy, it did not satisfy the wolves. They ate it down and began to circle her.

"We are still hungry," they said, looking at her with big yellow eyes, "surely a good little girl like you will feed us?"

And because she was frightened, the girl gave them the wine, hoping it would fill them up. But it did not; it only made the wolves drunk, and they became rowdy, laughing and nipping at her heels. The girl was terrified, but she told herself that the good fairy's blessing would protect her.

"If you are a good little girl," the wolves said, "you will give us more!"

"I don't have anything more," the little girl said.

"You have your basket, and your bonnet, and your pretty little dress. Give them to us, for we don't have any of our own."

The little girl gave them her basket, and her bonnet, and her dress, and the wolves put them on, tried to walk on their hind legs and imitate what they thought humans sounded like, and laughed very hard. The little girl tried to run away, but the wolf with her basket dropped it and sprang in front of her.

"You have not given us everything."

"I have, I have! I don't have anything else!"

The Wolf Girl

"Yes, you do," the wolves told her. "You still have your flesh, and your bones, and your blood, and those are much sweeter than bread, and cheese, and wine."

And they tore her apart and gobbled her up.

But the little girl did not die, because she had been cursed by a powerful fairy who said that she would survive whatever hardships befell her. And so as she was digested, her flesh became the wolves' flesh, and her blood became their blood. Her bones, broken and drained of marrow, were left in the woods.

As they digested the little girl, the wolves began to change. They became smarter. They started wanting to wear clothes, walk on their hind legs, and live in houses with families. Whenever they were hurt, they healed very quickly. They never became sick. And because they were intelligent now, this was strange to them, and they began to wonder.

"How did this happen?" they asked. "We have become more man than wolf! It must have been that little girl that we ate; that is the only unusual thing that has happened. She must have been magic, and she has blessed us with her flesh!"

"Perhaps," said one of them, who had eaten the girl's brains and was now smarter than the others, "if we eat her bones, we will become even more blessed! Quick, let us find what remains of her, and gobble that down too."

And so the wolves went back into the woods. It had been a long time since they had eaten the girl, so it was difficult. But their noses were keen, and with that and their new minds, they soon found her bones, which had been slowly knitting themselves together but were still mostly broken and missing their marrow.

"Good," said one wolf, "she has not run away. Let us eat her down, before whatever magic is in her brings her back to life!"

The Wolf Girl

They broke her bones to pieces once more and gobbled them up. But wolves are not meant to eat bones, only flesh and blood, and the sharp edges cut their mouths, tore at their throats, and finally, punctured their stomachs. One by one, the wolves fell together into a pile and died, shivering and screaming.

The little girl's bones had been reunited with her flesh and blood; unfortunately, it was now the wolves' flesh and blood. The fairy's curse was powerful, but it was not intelligent. And so bones, flesh, and blood began to heal, and after a long time, the little girl rose again. This time, she was covered with fur, and she had too many joints in the wrong places, but she was strong, and the curse knitted her together. Soon she could walk and run... but only on all fours, and she felt herself wanting to eat the flesh and blood of other men. Because she was a good little girl, this frightened her, and she fled to her grandmother's house.

"Grandmother, Grandmother, help me!" she cried. "I don't know what I've become!"

But her grandmother screamed in terror and threw a coal scuttle at her. It hit the little girl's muzzle, and everything became blinding pain. With a howl of rage and agony, the wolves in her took over, and she tore the lady apart and devoured her on the spot.

Afterward, when the pain had gone and it was all over, the girl came back to herself, and she saw what she'd done. She sat and thought but did not cry. She could not go back to her mother. She could not stay in this awful house where her grandmother had died. What could she do?

"If I can't be a good little girl," she said, "then I might as well be a good little monster."

And she became the terror of the woods.

The Wolf Girl



Very Concerned

The first month Judy was homeless, they sent her a silver commemorative spoon for something from the 1970s. She found it painstakingly wrapped in the mailbox Ricky was letting her use while she slept in the upstairs closet. Judy would never have opened it had the label been handwritten, but the anonymous type and new return address fooled her and she unwrapped it.

With the spoon was a card saying, "We love you!" and a happy face.

Judy threw the card in the trash and gave the spoon to Goodwill.

Then she called her grandmother.

"You gave them my address, didn't you? You told them I was homeless."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry, I know you told me not to, it's just they were so concerned..."

Judy sighed. There was no point in getting angry, she told herself. What was done was done. "It's okay. Just don't give them my new number."

Silence.

"You already did, didn't you."

Her grandmother's voice was almost a wail. "They were just so concerned, Judy!"

"Goodbye, Grandma," Judy said, and she hung up.

She spent the rest of the day in her closet.

...

The second month Judy was homeless, they sent her a letter. She threw it in the trash, unopened, then dug it out an hour later, read it, and then

Very Concerned

tore it up and threw away the shreds, kicking herself for falling for it, for going back on the rules she'd only set out for herself a couple months prior.

Then she went to borrow Ricky's cleaning supplies. The letter had made her think, and if she couldn't pay him rent, she could pay him *somehow*. Scrubbing every bit of melted, charred foodstuffs from the stove relieved her feelings a little, and when he came home, he found the place spotless.

"You didn't have to do that," he said.

"I wanted to," she said.

But then she got an idea. She'd overheard one of her non-homeless friends lamenting the state of their house in general and their kitchen in specific with Thanksgiving on the way. So the next time she saw them, she offered to clean it all. They were taken aback at the suggestion ("but you're so much better than that...") but Judy had no shame or pride. Not anymore. Besides, there was nothing shameful about cleaning.

Her friend vastly overpaid her, and Judy pretended not to notice. She celebrated by paying her half of the Chinese food Ricky ordered for Vincent Price night, and they pretended it wasn't Thanksgiving.

...

The third month Judy was homeless, they sent her a check. Ricky caught her right before she shredded it and tried to reason with her.

"Judy, that's \$30. You need that money."

"Not from them," Judy snapped. She didn't have shame or pride anymore, but she still had her ingratitude.

Ricky just looked at her, and in his eyes, she saw her reflection. The bags under her eyes, the layers of frayed sweaters because her coat had fallen apart, the toilets she scrubbed in a vain attempt to pay him back for his closet. In his eyes, she thought she saw pity.

Very Concerned

She cashed the check, bought a secondhand coat, and hated herself for doing it.

...

The fourth month Judy was homeless, they sent her a postcard from Key West. "Wish you were here!" Smiley face.

Ricky, in penance for his earlier behavior regarding the check, helped her burn the card over a box of wine and *the Last Man on Earth*.

"They really have no shame, do they?" Ricky asked as the last of the card burned down into ash.

Judy huddled in her coat; Ricky couldn't afford to raise the heat past sixty. "They really don't. Maybe they hope they can entice me back." A thought struck her. "Do you think they don't know?"

Ricky gave her an incredulous look. "Your grandma told them, remember? After all, they're—"

"—So concerned," Judy finished for him with a snort and a shake of her head. "Sorry. Stupid question. It's just hard to believe reality sometimes."

"You know that's what they want."

"Yeah. I know."

They sat and watched Vincent Price kill vampires.

...

The fifth month Judy was homeless, they sent her nothing, but her grandma called.

"I really think this has gone on long enough, don't you?" she said. "Your parents are really worried about you. Your mother's breaking out in hives. They're so sad you're gone. Why don't you do some group therapy? I know a *lovely* psychiatrist..."

"No, Grandma." Judy had tried that before. It had gone badly.

Very Concerned

"But this isn't that awful social worker you were seeing. This is a *psychiatrist*. They're doctors, dear, much better."

"No, Grandma."

Her grandmother's voice grew wheedling. "Love and respect is a two-way street, honey. You have to meet them halfway. Compromise just a little, won't you?"

Judy's hand was starting to shake, but her voice stayed flat. "I have to go, Grandma."

She hung up and sat on the floor of the upstairs closet, where it was small and dark and safe. She curled into a ball and buried her face in her knees. She stayed that way for a while, and when she raised her head, she didn't feel so bad anymore. She didn't feel much of anything at all.

Oh, thank god. Finally.

...

The sixth month Judy was homeless, they sent her a package. She threw it away unopened. She felt nothing.

...

The seventh month Judy was homeless, they sent her a bigger package and four phone calls. She threw the package away unopened, screened the calls, and felt nothing.

...

The eighth month Judy was homeless, she got a job stacking boxes at a warehouse. She washed all her sweaters, sheets, and towels, started paying back all the money she owed, all in a numb haze that protected her from the reality of the situation. She couldn't handle good news. Not today. There was no such thing as good news, only a break between disasters.

No mail. No calls. Maybe they were finally leaving her alone?

...

Very Concerned

The ninth month Judy was homeless, she found the emails, which she'd filtered out ages ago and forgotten about. They had bought a new house. They were moving out of the old one, which they'd cleaned out, and found a box of her childhood possessions: medical records, diaries, photos. They offered to sell them to her; they would even offer a discount. Ha ha. Smiley face.

The numb haze finally tore. Inside her, Judy felt a surging inferno of bile and acid.

She scrubbed Ricky's whole apartment, top to bottom, and was angry. She scrubbed the perpetual grease spot out of the floorboards by the oven, and she was still angry. She took out the garbage and turned in the cans for change, and she was *still* angry. She did everything she could think of, and she was *furious*.

She grabbed her laptop and opened up her email. She clicked "reply" and wrote FUCK YOU.

She felt better. In fact, for the first time in a year, she felt okay.

...

The tenth month Judy was homeless, they sent her a check. She shredded it and went back to looking up roommates wanted ads.

Very Concerned



Thirty-Four Days

Amelia woke up, and everyone was gone.

She didn't notice at first. For the first few hours, she shuffled around on groggy autopilot, making coffee, going to the bathroom, taking a shower. It was only when she came out, toweling her hair, that she noticed in an offhand kind of way that the apartment was awfully dark and still. Usually Pat was dashing out the door or cooking up breakfast by now, smiling that obnoxiously cheery morning-person grin.

Then she saw the apartment white board. Usually, it held some notes: a grocery list, or a warning that the stove was out again. This time, though, there was only one sentence, written in big red capital letters and underlined twice: *DON'T GO OUTSIDE*.

No explanation, no time limit.

Where was Pat?

Amelia ransacked the apartment. She checked Pat's room, with their video game posters and polka dot curtains, but Pat wasn't there. They weren't in the basement, and they weren't in the attic storage space. They weren't hiding in the broom closet either. Not that Amelia really expected them to be, this wasn't their kind of joke, but she was starting to want it to be. She was getting frightened.

When she pulled back the curtains to check the fire escape, she discovered that all of the windows were covered with sheet metal. Sunlight leaked out from the cracks, but there was no sound, not even of traffic or birdsong. How had she slept through this?

Amelia was starting to panic now. She pulled on her sweater and coat, rushed down the two flights of stairs to the door, only to find that when she

Thirty-Four Days

reached for her keys, Pat's were still there, hanging in their usual place right beside hers. There was no mistaking that battered Hello Kitty key fob. They'd bought it on a trip to Japan...

Amelia jammed her keys in the lock and turned until she heard the click. For a moment, she felt dizzying relief—what with the windows, she'd feared the lock wouldn't turn. She gripped the doorknob, turned it, and—

(DON'T GO OUTSIDE.)

She stopped.

No. This was silly. What could possibly happen? Did she think the world been taken over by zombies or while she slept? Come on.

But the letters had been written in red, underlined twice.

Surely it couldn't—

But Pat didn't joke. Pat cried watching *Bambi*. They wouldn't—

She stood. She stared at the doorknob. She went back into the kitchen to eat her breakfast and think.

...

"Hi, you've reached Pat. I'm not here right now, but leave a message and I'll call you back! Bye!"

"Hey, Pat? I got your message. Where are you? I'm kind of freaked out right now. Call me back?"

Next, she tried the Internet, but kept getting a "sorry, this page is unavailable" message. The radio got nothing but static. Ditto the television.

The house was deathly quiet.

Amelia ate her lunch on the stairs, staring at the doorknob with her keys still hanging from them. She should open the door, she told herself. Just go outside and see what'd happened. Look for Pat, who was usually glued to their phone, but hadn't called back. Surely it couldn't be that dire. Surely, looking wouldn't—

Thirty-Four Days

But she remembered Pat's handwriting. *DON'T GO OUTSIDE*. And she stayed inside.

...

It was amazing. Amelia had always considered herself a staunch introvert, but she'd never realized how much of her life had been taken up with other people—their voices, their faces, their textual input. Without it, life was... quiet.

Her arugula went bad, but she had nowhere to toss it. She put it in the freezer and ate her salads without greens. The bread started to mold. She cut the bits off.

She left her radio on, but it never said anything.

...

"—Leave a message and I'll call you back! Bye!"

"Pat? Are you there?"

Silence.

"Pat, this isn't funny anymore. Tell me what's going on, Pat."

Silence.

"Pat, I'm scared. I want to go outside. I want to know what's going on. What happened, Pat? Why can't I go outside?"

Silence.

"Pat, please..."

Silence.

...

The power was shut off after two weeks. With all the windows covered, the apartment was dark as pitch. Amelia pulled out her old camping flashlight and navigated the quiet house with its weak yellow beam. When the batteries died after six hours, she got some more.

Thirty-Four Days

She ran out of batteries four days later. But by that point, she'd planned ahead and cleaned up, so she could navigate in the dark.

Her phone was one of the old Nokia bricks, capable of nursing a charge for weeks. She only turned it on for a few minutes every morning, to check for messages. There never were any. She still left a message for Pat every few days, but kept them short.

"Hey, Pat. My night vision's getting pretty good. I can see the mold on the bread now. The stuff in the fridge, I don't even dare check. I sort of smell it? Hope you're okay. Bye."

...

They cut off the water after a month. But it was okay. Amelia had already filled every container in the house weeks before. She was okay. She was getting good at this.

Everything was okay. Everything was fine.

Really.

...

Amelia had been living on lukewarm canned goods and trail mix for three days when she saw that her phone was flashing its low battery warning. Only one call left for Pat. No messages.

She curled up in her room and cried.

...

"I'm sorry, Pat. I know you told me to wait. But it's been over a month now, and the fridge is starting to smell really bad. You're not coming back, are you?"

Silence.

"I'm coming to find you, Pat. I love you." Her phone was flashing. "Bye."

She went to go pack. It didn't take long; there wasn't much left.

...

It turned out that Amelia's agonizing over opening the door was pointless; once she opened it, she found that it too was covered with sheet metal. Amelia had to descend into the pitch-black basement to find the tools. She stubbed her toes and twisted her ankle, but it was worth it for the sheer visceral catharsis of smashing through the sheet metal with an axe. At first, she was hesitant, but by the end, she was whaling at it and sweating through her sweater.

The first sunbeam was blinding, and she had to pause for a second to let her eyes adjust. When she didn't die immediately, she renewed her efforts, and finally, the metal gave way.

She paused, catching her breath, and pulled on her backpack. The world had ended, and she was terrified, and she was going to find her sweetie.

She stepped out into the sunshine to look for Pat.



We Are The Revolution

Every Sunday, on the stroke of midnight (Greenwich Mean Time), they would assassinate the richest person in the world. Nobody knew who they were or where they came from, only that they were punctual, implacable, and infallible.

And every Sunday, at 12:01, if you tuned to their online radio stations (there were a lot of them, and the domains kept changing), you could hear their words. The names changed, but the message was always the same:

“We are the Revolution, and Mr. Doe is dead. Long live the Revolution.”

It took a while for people to catch on. Even when they discovered the radio stations, they thought it was a hoax, a few coincidences. Then a Spanish telecommunications guru was found beheaded in his bathroom, with the words “WE ARE THE REVOLUTION” scrawled in blood behind him. When Mr. and Mrs. Armitage-Carrington were found in the same way the following Sunday, paranoia began to set in.

The next week, the Revolution announced that the next one in line for the chopping block was an iron-fisted dictator of a miserable little country that few had heard of and fewer cared about. Some people might’ve treated it as a joke, but President Estradille had not survived three attempted coups because of his sense of humor. He had very little money on the books, but he had land and manpower, so he raised a personal army, sealed himself into a safe room in his fortress, and waited for Sunday to pass.

He was found dead of poisoned salmon. And on the radio: “We are the Revolution, and President Estradille is dead. Long live the Revolution.”

But Estradille changed the rules of the game. The Revolution, perhaps not wanting to fight their way through personal armies all the time, stopped announcing who was next after him. This only helped transform the festering dread into panic.

But the Revolution wasn't the only one who learned from President Estradille. A Mexican stockman named Gonzalez saw what'd happened, and he took a different tactic. He sold his stocks for practically nothing. He wired money in unheard-of quantities to anyone he could think of, including four hundred and twenty-three charities, libraries, museums, and schools. Finally, concerned that the Revolution wouldn't be satisfied, he climbed to the top of a skyscraper and began hurling stacks of bills off the roof. When a riot started and the police told him (with some uncertainty) to desist, he set the rest on fire and streamed it all online.

Mexico City erupted in mass hysteria, but at midnight on Sunday, Gonzalez was alive, and a US computer guru had been garroted in bed.

"We are the Revolution, and Mr. West is dead," said the radio. "Long live the Revolution."

Now it was a race to the bottom. Billionaires hurled themselves into the mad business of trying to rid themselves of their riches faster than their peers. The land-rich frantically tried to give their acres away—only to find the market flooded. Bonfires of money, desperate investments in sure-to-fail stock, donations and laundering and wiring and a million other absurdities. *They couldn't get rid of it fast enough.*

The stock market went into a mad tailspin. Everyone was selling, and no one was buying. Companies that under no circumstances should've gained the funding to start became blazing successes, then crashed and burned within a week.

And still, the deaths continued. Shareholders, world leaders, landowners, people who controlled something of everything, all of them turned up shot, poisoned, and hanged. No one could decipher the criteria the Revolution used to define “richest.” They never gave reasons or demands. Only that same implacable message.

Posters began to appear in neighborhoods, held to crumbling brick walls with wheatpaste, depicting dark, featureless figures and the words WE ARE THE REVOLUTION. As economies crashed and people rioted, more and more civilians garbed in black with gloves and masks attacked the richest in town. When the police descended, they fought back. Mobs of them appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and they screamed in one voice, “We are the Revolution!”

Then Pippin Armitage-Carrington became the richest person in the world. He was eleven years old.

His mother and father had been executed at the hands of the Revolution before President Estradille, before Gonzalez, before everyone had figured out what it was all about; otherwise, they would’ve known better than to give such a huge fortune to one boy. Technically, the wealth was in a trust, kept under lock and key by the family lawyer until he was eighteen, but everyone knew it didn’t matter. The Revolution wouldn’t care.

Gladys Armitage, Pippin’s aunt and legal guardian, tried to get the fortune destroyed, but it wasn’t within the terms of the trust. It was made to *conserve* wealth, not destroy it. After a few screaming fights with the family lawyer, she had to come to Pippin and say, “I’m sorry.”

Since his parents’ deaths, Pippin had become a hollow-eyed, silent ghost, too sunk in his own private misery to notice anything around him. But now, his expression lightened. He patted her arm and whispered, “Don’t worry. At least it’ll be over by Monday.”

His smile was the saddest thing Gladys had ever seen. She took a deep breath and stood. "Well. It's my job to give you the loveliest week on record. Let's get ready for that, shall we?"

And so they threw a party. They dismissed the household, to reduce collateral, and barred the gates, to keep out the rioting outside. In the big, empty house, they played Donkey Kong, drew pictures, and watched every Harry Potter movie in a row. Gladys taught Pippin how to foxtrot; he taught her how to play Guitar Hero. They ate junk. Gladys read *Jane Eyre* while Pippin read *Inkheart*. They told each other every bad joke they could think of, and shared every story they could remember about Mr. and Mrs. Armitage-Carrington.

Finally, it was late Saturday night, and they had run out of things to do and energy with which to do them. They lay on the sofa, exhausted and sleepless, while Gladys petted Pippin's hair.

"I have some sleeping pills, for when my hip bothers me," she said. "You can have some, if you like."

Pippin shook his head. "I'd rather see it coming. You can go, if you like."

She shook her head. "It's fine. I'm not leaving you."

They lay on the couch together, and they waited for the Revolution to come for them.

LB 8/26/13



Better Luck Next Time

Crista is fourteen, and she's hiding in the school bathroom. The stall door is locked, and she's perched on the toilet, legs up to hide her feet.

The door creaks open. Crista holds her breath. Go away, she says in her head. Nobody's here, go away...

From outside, someone goes, "Cristaaaaa—" all singsong; she hears giggles. They're coming in. No one's going to save her.

Crista closes her eyes. Better luck next time, she thinks.

...

Crista is eighteen, and she's just been disowned. Her girlfriend has also decided that Crista is "too much drama," and dumps her for that white butch who runs the vegan group.

Crista can finish out her semester, if she wants, but she cancels her classes instead to get some of her money back. Her mother's money, technically, but Crista figures she needs it more.

As she packs, she curses. This could've all been prevented with proper planning, with strategy, but no, she blew it all in a fit of sappy honesty.

She'll do better next time.

...

Crista is nineteen when her powers manifest, but she doesn't get them figured out till she's twenty. She's a time-traveler, with provisos: there can only be one Crista, and she can only go backward, not forward. Which means that whenever she goes, she replaces her past self and then has to relive everything, one second at a time, until reaching the present again.

At first, she binges on "fixing" her life—going back, not coming out to her mother, finishing college. But it doesn't work. She still remembers her

original history, is still furious, but now she's unable to explain to her mother why, because this woman hasn't disowned her yet. But she will. Eventually.

Also, Crista's aging doesn't lurch back, which limits how far back she can go and still be of use. (Thank heaven she figured that part out when she tried to rewind herself back half an hour when she cut herself, only for the injury to stay. She dreads to think what would've happened had she tried to return to childhood!) She's only twenty legally, but she's redone her college mistake so many times now that there are lines developing on her face. No good.

Crista makes a rule: no more fixing years. No more living in the past. Focus on the present.

She'll find a use for her powers. They must be good for *something*.

...

Crista is twenty-five, she has some gray hair, and she's an accomplished supervillain. Turns out that one-way time travel is terrible for life management, but fantastic for bank robbery. Five minutes make all the difference in the world.

They call her Chrono. She likes it.

Crista looks at her money and she smiles. The college mistake feels far away now. She doesn't need her mother. She doesn't need anyone.

...

Crista is twenty-eight and needs reading glasses when she meets Paradoxia. She's young, shy, with a brown ponytail and sparkling eyes that light up a room. How she got into supervillainy is anyone's guess, but she's fantastic at lock picking and combat, which is how they first team up.

"No powers?" Crista asks her.

Paradoxia grimaces at the lock. "Only dumb ones."

"Oh?" Crista has a soft spot for dumb powers, considering her own.

"I prevent paradox." She rolls her eyes, tests the tension wrench.
"Useless, right? I only found out about them when Father Time tried to take me out and disappeared. They still haven't found him. It's good protection against chronoheroes, I guess?" *Click*, and the lock pops open. "Got it!"

"Hmm." Crista tugs at the white streak in her hair and thinks about the Hourglass, who's been dogging her for years now. "How do you feel about partnerships?"

Paradoxia grins. "Only if I can take you out to dinner first."

Oh my.

...

Crista is thirty-two, menopausal, and she's never been happier.

The team of Chrono and Paradoxia seems unstoppable. Together, they can slip into the past fearlessly, and no chronohero can follow them. They disappear into the eternal night, laughing and full of adrenaline, and they make love on piles of money. They're in love. They're rich. Everything is wonderful.

Until Paradoxia is killed by Law. Accident, they say.

Crista goes back to save her, only to find that she can't. Paradoxia's powers won't let her.

Crista burns the money and abandons the present.

...

Crista is thirty-one and uses a cane when Paradoxia asks, "How long have I been dead, sweetie?"

Crista freezes with her head in Paradoxia's lap. For a moment, she considers denying, no, nothing's wrong, nothing...

"How did you know?"

Paradoxia just pets Crista's white hair. "No one ages that fast, not even you, Chrono."

Crista refuses to tell her, but the end is inevitable. Paradoxia stays forever young, while she gets older and older.

...

Crista is thirty-two when Malpractice tells her that the stomach pain and jaundice are end-stage pancreatic cancer. He offers the services of a local witch doctor, but his voice is full of doubt and Crista declines. She knows that she's nearing the end of her short/long lifespan, and all she's accomplished is endless replays. She won't even have anyone to grieve at her funeral, with Paradoxia gone.

After some thought, she goes to a man called Dr. Impossible. He's involved with neither villains nor heroes, and his powers are... confusing. Even Paradoxia was unable to pin him down. But he'll do anything if he's paid to, and Crista didn't burn the money this go-around.

She goes to Dr. Impossible, and she says, "I want a paradox."

And Dr. Impossible smiles with his gold teeth. "Of course."

...

Crista is fourteen and she is hiding in the school bathroom. The door creaks open, and she holds her breath.

Someone knocks on the stall door. Crista jumps, but the voice is an adult's. "It's safe to come out now."

Crista gets down and opens the door, and finds an old woman with an aluminum cane and two watches on her left wrist. Her hair is white, and her eyes are sad.

"Who are you?" Crista asks.

"I'm Chrono," the woman says, "and I'm saving you."

11/27/14 LB



Stewards of Behemoth

When Grammi had been in charge, she would sit Kiri down and tell her stories of the ancient Behemoths and their stewards.

These were the old stories of the great families, the ones who carried the sun and moon on their Behemoths' backs. Their Behemoths were the ones who carved the canyons, whose bones became the mountains, whose blood became the rivers. And all the while, Kiri could feel the warmth and slow undulation of the Behemoth's pulse under the warm skin she sat on, and she would know Grammi's family followed in the great traditions.

Grammi's family had cared for this particular Behemoth for almost three hundred years—and it hadn't been young then. A Behemoth could live for a thousand years with good stewards, and Kiri ached to be one of them.

Before her whiskers were long enough to twitch, Kiri was helping Grammi with the duties of stewardship. They helped the Behemoth shed its scales, saving the old ones for crafting and polishing the new ones to make them shining strong. The two women rubbed the creams and salves into its skin that made it taste bad to parasites, speared and ate the giant fleas. Kiri enjoyed the work, feeling the Behemoth thrive under their ministrations.

But she knew she couldn't be the next steward. For all her skill, she was young, an orphan rescued from canyon dust, and tradition demanded that stewardship pass to the oldest daughter of the family. Grammi loved the old ways as much as she loved the old stories, and so Maj would be the next steward.

Maj had never cared for stewardship. She was a moss-woman, and her talents showed in the strong lichens and healthy moss flourishing in the cracks of the Behemoth's shell. Her herbs and spices could cure and flavor anything.

Stewards of Behemoth

Technically, as the youngest and an outsider, the garden should've been Kiri's duty, but Grammi often let them switch.

Maj had no aptitude or passion for stewardship. She would rush through her duties, cracking off the old scales roughly enough that the Behemoth would twitch, polishing the new ones just enough to get by. Grammi scolded her for this often, and a lot of Grammi's stories were delivered as a form of punishment, being told specifically to Kiri while Maj was ignored.

As Grammi grew frail and put more pressure on Maj to be steward, Maj grew nastier towards Kiri.

"You're no blood of mine," she'd say. "Grammi took you off the canyon dust out of pity. You're no steward. You're just a greedy flea on my hide."

Kiri had tried to go to Grammi about this mistreatment, but Maj was the eldest daughter. However Grammi disapproved of the behavior, all she would say was, "The old ways must be respected."

When Grammi finally died, finalizing Maj's title, neither girl knew what to do. Maj obviously didn't want to keep Kiri around, but she also knew that the Behemoth would falter under her stewardship alone. They tried to keep to their spaces, Maj at the head, Kiri at the hind legs, but they both felt the tension.

It came to a head when Kiri found an enormous tick hidden in the folds of the Behemoth's neck, ignored for so long that its body had bloated close to bursting.

"You are a terrible steward!" she declared, holding up the removed tick. "All you care about is the garden!"

Maj's ears went flat against her skull and she bared her teeth. "My gardening keeps us fed, makes the creams and salves for the Behemoth you care so much about! For years, I put up with you for Grammi's sake, but—"

Stewards of Behemoth

The Behemoth lurched forward, knocking them both down. Maj twisted her ankle as she fell, but staggered up gamely with a wince. When a Behemoth rushed, the skin flaps to the outside snapped shut, and everything needed to be tied down. Limping, Maj saved the kitchen and garden supplies, while Kiri took the rest, and then they tied themselves down. They couldn't speak over the thumping and groaning, only glare and wait.

When the Behemoth finally stopped, Maj untied herself, tried to stand, only to collapse with a yelp of pain. Her ankle was swollen, jarred from all the movement. Still, she reached upward.

"The gardens!" she cried. "I have to check the gardens!"

"I'll do it," Kiri said, already hurrying up.

"Thank you." A sign that Maj was truly in pain.

They were lucky; some of the compost piles had been scattered, and a few of the saplings in their buckets had toppled over, but that was it. The moss and lichens held tight. Kiri straightened things as best she could, knowing that Maj would do better, and paused at the Behemoth's neck plate to check on it.

It was staring at her with one solemn eye the color of volcanic glass. It didn't move, only stared, and though it couldn't speak, Kiri got the sense it disapproved of her and Maj's fight. She felt herself wither under its gaze; she had not been behaving in accordance with the rules of stewardship. Neither she nor Maj had been acting in the Behemoth's best interest.

"I'm sorry," she said, and went down to Maj's room for her medicines.

Maj was already there, wrapping and binding her injured ankle and chewing analgesic leaves. Her face was strained; it had obviously taken all her effort to get there. Kiri explained what she'd seen, and Maj's shoulders slumped.

"It wants you."

"What?"

Stewards of Behemoth

"It doesn't want me to be steward. Nobody wants me to be steward—not you, not me, not even Grammi. She only gave me the title because of tradition. The Behemoth knows it. Everyone knows it. All I'm good for is gardening."

Kiri thought of all the times that Grammi had told her stories while Maj skulked in the background. She thought of all the times Maj had rushed through her stewardship duties before vanishing into the garden. She thought of the beautiful mosses and herbs in their well-tended beds atop the Behemoth's back, the teas and potions that soothed and calmed.

She couldn't be angry with Maj anymore.

"We need your gardens like we need the Behemoth," Kiri said. "Perhaps... we could both be stewards? Of our own domains?" Then, realizing Maj might be loath to give up her birthright, "You can keep the title. I don't care about that."

Maj squinted at her suspiciously, then tossed her ears back.

"I suppose if I'm stuck with you anyway..." she drawled. "I didn't really want to get rid of you. You're too wholesome; makes me feel bad, even looking at you funny."

But Maj was smiling. She lay back against her cushion, and Kiri sat with her, and together they listened to the Behemoth's heartbeat, slow, sure, and strong.



Small Mercies

Small mercies are the size of a child's hand. They have fluttering wings of red, black, brown, and yellow, and they travel in swarms. They can be mistaken for butterflies at a distance, but there's no relation. Mercies are quick, and they are clever, and their cute curled tongues can drill through the bones of a bull.

Masego's people do not thank heaven for small mercies out of any belief in the name. They thank heaven because at least there are no *large* mercies.

The mercies are invisible to most people, but Masego has been able to see them since she was born. People whisper that this is because she is the daughter of a dead woman and a dead family, and they avoid her. Her people prize big families with lots of children; it's bad luck to only have her and her grandfather.

Masego's grandfather can not see mercies, but he knows how to manage them—it's how he survived when the rest of the family did not. On his land far on the outskirts of town, he and Masego appease the mercies with milk, blood, and meat, among other things. They are very careful in their offerings and conduct, and because of that, they prosper in their own quiet way. Their herd is small, but fat. They never quite run out of water. Masego is a beautiful young woman, and her grandfather is the healthiest man anyone has ever met.

Maybe one day, Masego will marry and have children, and her grandfather will know his line continues. But though she is not opposed to marriage, she knows it unlikely. There is a perfectly good road to their home, but hardly anyone uses it, except the local tradesmen or people begging favors.

Masego's grandfather has a beautiful granddaughter and beautiful cows, but nobody wants them. People prefer not to visit mercy-handlers.

Then the boys come.

They are strangers from out of town, loud and raucous, and they carry spears with them. Masego is milking the cows when they arrive, and from between their legs, she sees Grandfather stride out to the boys before they reach the boundary. She sees their insolent slouches, their lack of interest in her grandfather, and she tries to blend in with the cattle.

They are too far away for Masego to hear their conversation, but she watches. The leader is tall and handsome, but arrogant and only has eyes for the land. Masego's grandfather does not lose his temper but mercies start clustering far above his head, a little cloud. For a moment, it looks like the boys will come in, regardless of the old man's wishes.

Finally, they halt. They say something, and the mercies begin to churn, but Grandfather goes inside, comes out again with the meat for their dinner.

The boys take it and move on. Masego's grandfather waits until they are out of sight, then comes back to the herd, where Masego has finished milking. Behind him trails a small whirlwind of colors.

"Thank heaven for small mercies," he says.

"Thank heaven," Masego says, calmly because the mercies feed on panic and she doesn't want them any more agitated. "What did they want?"

Grandfather sucks his teeth. "They think we're people who won't be missed," he says. "They are young and don't believe in the mercies."

The cloud above his head is becoming huge and tumultuous. Masego watches but says nothing.

"They want our land," she says.

"Yes."

Small Mercies

She looks at the mercies. She does not laugh—she doesn't want to offend them—but she smiles.

...

That evening, they carefully, quietly go about their business as though nothing's wrong. No supper tonight; the boys took most of it, and anyway, the offerings must be special. Masego puts out cream instead of milk, and her grandfather slaughters their fattest calf. It's sad to lose such a promising animal at this time of year, but the mercies must be appeased. Masego catches the blood in a basin, while her grandfather regales her with tales of the mercies' generosity, kindness, and justice. She's heard them all before, but it doesn't matter. They aren't for her benefit.

Her grandfather and her quietly close up their little house as though preparing for a cold night. Her grandfather's face is as steady and unshakable as stone, but she knows it's a mask.

"How many do you see?" he asks as she goes to shut the window.

She looks. The basins of blood and the quartered calf are carpeted in blankets of fluttering, fiery colors.

When she tells him, he says, "good," and they go to bed.

...

Masego wakes up to screaming in the distance. She moves to sit up, but her grandfather stops her with a gentle hand on her chest; no sudden movements, no display of agitation. Quiet and still, just in case. He holds a finger to his lips.

Masego nods and settles down. She doesn't want to draw the mercies' attention now, when they're stirred up and might not remember who feeds them. The windows and door stay shut, despite the stifling heat. The screaming continues, shrill with terror, for a long time. Finally, it tapers off.

All around their home, she hears the roar of thousands of tiny wings. Thus soothed, Masego goes back to sleep.

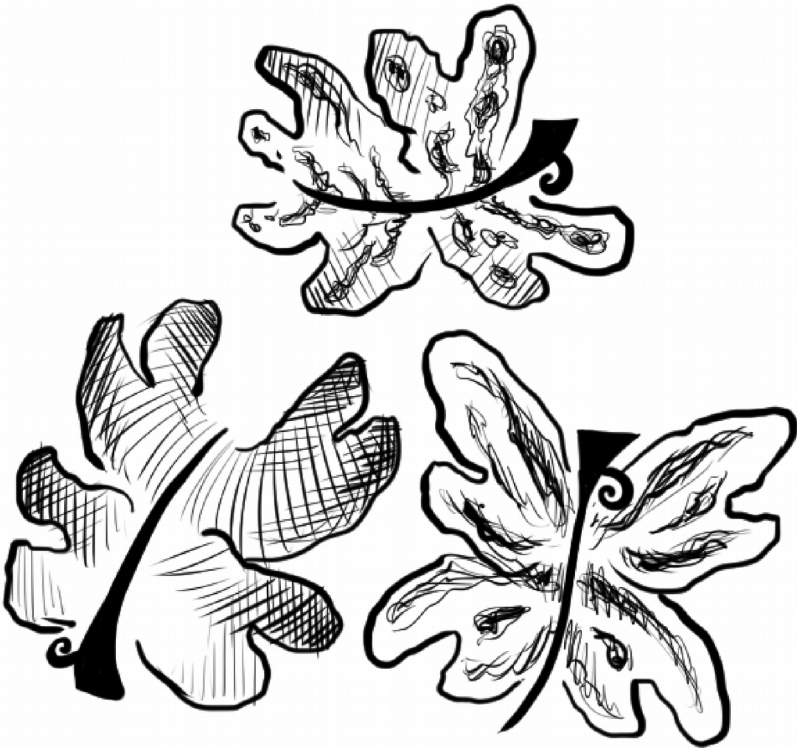
...

When Masego and her grandfather come out the next morning, the offerings are gone, and so are the boys. Their bones will surely turn up later, drilled with the intricate holes of myriad tiny tongues.

"Thank heaven for small mercies," says Grandfather.

"Thank heaven," Masego agrees.

They go inside to make breakfast.



The Weather Tellers

In Maba's world, there were a huge variety of peoples. There were the Small People to the southwest, who made all the best devices and mechanisms but had a government bureaucracy defying description. There were the Strong People to the northwest, who made the best musicians and wandered to herd their sheep and goats. Then there were the Sun People, which everyone avoided since they were notoriously violent and indiscriminating in their diet.

Maba came from the Weather People. Her people were a valuable part of the land, because it was they who could feel the earth's turns and the sky's whispered threats. All the other peoples came to Maba's family with important questions: when would the next rain come? Would the winter be harsh? Was that smoking mountain a danger?

The knowledge did not come cheap, but the Weather People were wrong far less often than anyone else, so the expense was fair. Their abilities insured profitable farms, and so all Weather People were held in high esteem.

Except Maba, who was running away.

She was dashing low across the grassland, trying to be silent and invisible in the night, when she collided with someone doing the exact same thing from the exact opposite direction.

There was much yelping and muffled shrieking and baring of teeth until they saw each other's clutch of belongings (Maba's bindle; the stranger's wicker pack) and recognized each other as runaways. No longer in fear for their lives, they calmed down, and Maba saw that the stranger was a Strong girl, probably not much older than her—at least, so she guessed. Strong People were so big and robust that it was sometimes hard to tell, even in daylight.

The Weather Tellers

"You... Weather People?" the Strong girl asked, her tongue clumsy. (Strong People spoke through whistling, but they understood other peoples' languages better than the reverse.)

"Yes, I'm running away," Maba said. "You?"

"Yes. I run too. I hope to be Weather People."

"Why?" Maba asked, but she could tell by the girl's furrowed brow that the explanation was probably difficult for someone speaking a second language. (Or possibly third or fourth; Strong People moved a lot.)

"You," the Strong girl said instead. "Why you go?"

Fair enough; she wanted to know the people she was trying to join. Maba sat cross-legged in the grass and put down her bindle; the Strong girl stayed where she was, keeping her distance.

"We aren't all weather tellers," she explained. "Only some of us, and it takes a lot of training and practice. My family is one of the big weather teller bloodlines."

"One-legged?"

"They don't do that anymore so much, but they do break your knee. They have to; it's part of how we feel the weather." Maba rubbed her (still unbroken) knees and felt the lack of a walking stick that all grown weather tellers carried. "But I'm a mediocre weather teller, and I think they won't waste a broken knee on me. The only use for a mediocre weather teller is a teacher for younger, better ones, and I'm the youngest of my bloodline, so I have no one to teach. I'm an embarrassment. So I decided to leave."

"Where?"

"I... I don't know yet," Maba admitted.

It was embarrassing to admit, but the Strong girl just nodded. But then, her people were nomads. Maybe leaving without a destination was an ordinary part of their lives.

"What about you?" Maba asked.

The Strong girl ducked her head and flopped down and extended a leg, and Maba gasped.

The Strong girl had been so occluded by the darkness that Maba had just assumed she was running crouched like her. Now, though, she could see that the girl's legs were unnaturally short, and one looked twisted around. Not good in a tribe of nomad herders who were constantly on the move.

"My knee is already break two times," the Strong girl said, tapping her twisted leg, obviously groping for words. "I... I feel weather? Know weather? A little. But Weather People do better."

"So you want to be a weather teller," Maba said. "I'm sorry, but they'd never let you. You'd need to be part of one of the bloodlines, or friend to them, or you'd never find a teacher..."

She felt the epiphany like a thunderbolt; she even smelled it on the air and felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She was of the bloodline! *She* could be a teacher! And it was a perfectly acceptable thing for one in her family to do, so she wouldn't be an embarrassment anymore... well, not in the same way. Teaching someone from the outside was a risky proposition, but it had been done in the past.

She had a purpose. She had a friend. Maybe she didn't have to leave.

Maba stood up and shouldered her sack again. "Come on," she said. "I can teach *and* introduce you."

The Strong girl didn't smile—none of her people did—but she made a pleased whistle and stood up to heft her pack again.

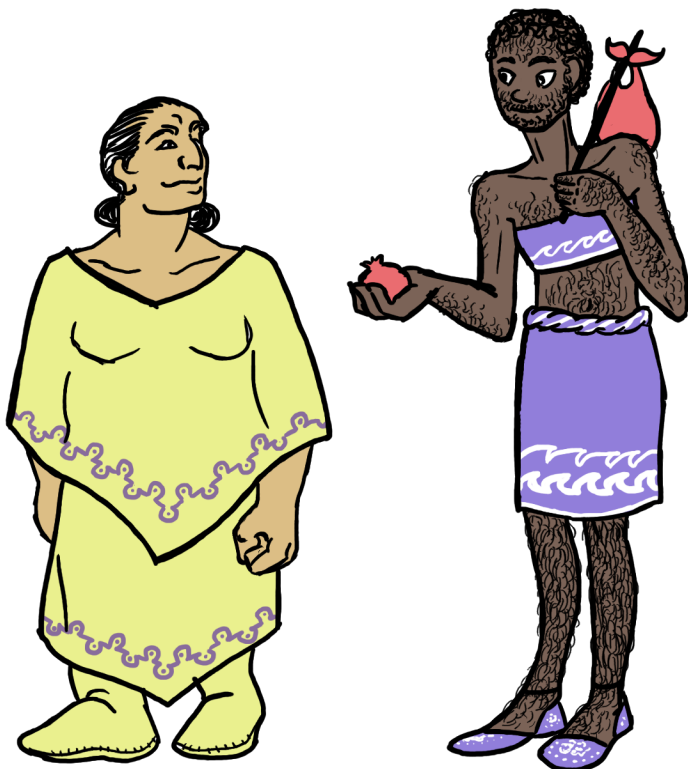
"What's your name? I'm Maba."

"Maba. Thank you. I'm," a swooping whistle, from high to low.

Maba tried to imitate it; if High-Low was appalled by her attempt, she didn't let on. "Nice to meet you."

They went home together to face the Weather People.

The Weather Tellers



Parental Rentals

May started every morning putting on her face for the day.

It was a common misconception among shapestatics that a shapeshifter had a “natural” form most comfortable for them. Not so for May. Unless she focused, her shape was constantly changing in response to her environment and her emotional state. When she slept, she turned into a featureless amoebic blob, which itself would expand or contract, melt or solidify, to stay warm.

Today, she felt calm and content. Her “auntie” face, then. Lined, because she felt experienced, and with big wrinkles from a life of smiles. Nice brown skin for the sunny day outside. Padding, to keep out the chill of autumn. She put on her favorite blouse and sweater, and smiled at her reflection. Her last touch was to turn her hair bright pink; it made her easier to identify for her coworkers, who were all shapestatics.

A short bus ride and a walk later, she arrived at a three-story gingerbread house, sheltered by a large weeping willow. There was no sign. CareGivers preferred not to attract walk-ins.

Eboo was already taking messages when she came in the door. He glanced up from his notepad to smile at May and give her a reverse-nod. May returned the smile, waved, and then hurried on.

Her first client wasn't for hours, but every attachment surrogate at CareGivers also did other tasks. Eboo did phones, and May was stagehand. Like many shapeshifters, she'd been involved in theatre, but she'd always been better at set design than actual acting.

Richard would be using the gym for a morning appointment with a collegiate athlete, so May prepped that first. He'd requested a “macho flavor,”

with characteristic courtesy. After giving the gym a quick sweep and a mop, May put the free weights in the center of the room under the lights, and moved the aerobic machines into the corners, less visible. She had no trouble moving anything; her muscles automatically shifted for her needs. Putting a Playboy calendar on the wall, she paused to resume her auntie shape, ran a spot-check, nodded with satisfaction, and moved on.

She was readying the kitchen for her own appointment later when Eboo stuck his head in. His expression was apologetic.

"Sacha just called in sick," he said.

"Oh no, again?" Sacha caught everything. "Do you need help rescheduling his appointments?"

"No, Leona and I have it covered, but there's a one-timer who's been trying to get in for months. He's been rescheduled twice already, and he has a temper. Could you...?"

"Sure. Give me his file, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, May, you're a life-saver."

She didn't get to check the file until lunch. Richard had a last minute reschedule shuffle, which sent her scrambling to get the den ready in time. The amount of lifting and moving left her with four muscular arms and a torn blouse, and it took her a quarter hour of focus before she was back in face. Then she grabbed a pair of bifocals, pulled on orthopedic shoes and a shawl, and took care of her first appointment, baking cookies and letting a paralegal vent about performance evaluations. Then there was clean up.

Finally, she got to look at the one-timer's file. The photo of him looked nice enough. A round, teddy bear face, thinning hair. May automatically shifted to more closely match him, trading out brown skin for white, softening her features, redistributing her body's padding. Then she saw that he'd specifically requested a male caregiver, and shifted to reflect that.

Parental Rentals

His face sheet read, in meticulous handwriting, "I have long had a fantasy of a loving relationship with a warm paternal figure in my life. I hope you can help me fulfill that fantasy." The sheet went on to describe, in elaborate detail, the physical appearance of his ideal surrogate.

Hmm. May felt an alarm bell tingle. Until recently, Leona had personally interviewed all prospective clients, (a process she referred to as "weeding,") but pregnancy had slowed her down and business had gotten so brisk lately that she'd dropped a few. For a moment, May considered bringing the file to Leona and asking her to look over it.

But then again, perhaps it was nothing. Some clients were awkward in print, but fine in person. Besides, after two reschedules, May didn't want to outright cancel on him this late in the day. If he'd gotten this far through the process, it only seemed fair to see him, and May was still the newbie on staff. She didn't want to give the impression of not being up to a challenge. Surely it'd be fine.

All new clients had their first meeting in a neutral room with potted plants and calm landscape paintings, meant to evoke serenity and little else. Prep took five minutes. Then May settled in front of the mirror to put on an appropriate face.

She was almost finished when Richard dropped in with lunch and made a double take.

"Sorry," he said ruefully, handing her a cheeseburger. "You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

She smiled at him and unhinged her jaw to swallow the burger whole, just to see his face. It was just as well she hadn't wasted time; the client arrived a minute later.

The session started smoothly enough. Introductions, small talk. He talked about his childhood, his family, his feelings and goals, and everything seemed to be going fine.

Things began to go awry when May disclosed she was a shapeshifter. She'd found it was better to warn them early, in case she involuntarily shifted during an appointment—she'd once terrified a poor client who mistook her shifting for some terrible allergic reaction. This client didn't seem bothered, though, only intrigued. Too intrigued.

"A shapeshifter? So you could be anyone I wanted?"

"My appearance is variable, but I'm still me."

He shifted his chair closer to her. "You know, like this, you look a little like my father..."

Under her clothing, May felt her skin ripple, harden. She didn't like his tone, but tried to keep her voice level.

"Attachment surrogates aren't intended to replace a specific person," she explained. "We're only intended to be general supportive figures, like therapists."

"I'm the one paying your salary. Don't I get a say in this?"

May felt her features sharpen. Actually, Leona paid her salary, but she had no desire to share that. Suddenly she understood why Sacha had originally gotten this client; he could handle anyone. "My bodily appearance is not part of this service."

The client's volume rose. "Now look here. You people have been giving me the run-around for months. I'm not asking for much. All I want is to pay a hundred dollars to spend half an hour with my father who loves me."

"I'm sorry, sir," May said. "That's not a service we provide. We are attachment surrogates, not your father, and I think it's best we end this session. I apologize for your inconvenience—"

He smacked the table. "I don't believe this! You must be the only goddamn shapeshifter parental rental in this lousy country! You're the only one who can give me what I want!"

May stood up, holding her hands out pacifically. "I'm sure if we go to the front desk together, we can talk about—"

He grabbed her.

May's response was automatic. Her body contracted, hardened, and sprouted tentacles. By the time Richard and Leona arrived, the client was shrieking and rocking in a corner.

May didn't know how Richard and Leona got him out of the building. She was too busy regaining her composure and her shape, while Eboo made soothing noises and made chamomile tea.

"I'm so sorry," he said, holding the steaming cup. "I should've kept him with Sacha, asked Leona to deal with him..."

"It's all right," May said, forcing her body to hold lips, tongue, and vocal cords. "I'm so sorry, I should have better control than that..."

Leona appeared at the door, and Eboo and May automatically sat up straight. Even eight months pregnant, their boss had that effect on people. "A client like that shouldn't have gotten an appointment in the first place," she said. "It's my responsibility to weed, and my failing; it won't happen again. In the future, if anyone gives you the creeps, come straight to me. We don't want guys like him in our workplace."

"Yes, ma'am," May said quickly.

Leona nodded and left. Eboo and May relaxed, and Eboo let his breath out with a whoosh.

"She took that very well," he said.

"Yes. Yes she did," May said, and sipped her tea.

She took the rest of the day off.



Shades of Sara

Sara finds the door in the basement when her mother locks her in for back talk. She knows the door's not supposed to be there; she knows every inch of the basement from lock-ins past, and the door was never there before. On top of that, it looks like it's made of papier-mâché, covered in letters and text that looks familiar, and it glows faintly in the dark. The light must come from within, too; the basement light has been broken for years.

Sara's mother never goes down into the basement herself (she's petrified of rats) and making a false door that glows isn't the sort of thing she does, but Sara still doesn't touch it. She loves her books about magical other worlds, but she knows better than to believe in such a thing for herself. It must be a trick; her mother must want her to open it, to prove some obscure point. Sara can't imagine what that point would be, or why her mother would go through all the trouble, but she's given up on trying to guess all of the unspoken rules her mother has. So she sits in the corner and watches the door, waiting for the glow paint to wear out.

But morning comes and the door keeps glowing the whole time. When her mother opens the door to let her out, she doesn't act any different than she usually does, doesn't check to see if the door's been opened, doesn't seem to notice it at all, despite the glowing.

Sara's mother gives her the usual talk, the one about how if Sara likes the basement so much, maybe she ought to live there permanently, but Sara's not paying attention. In her mind, it's a blinding flash: her mother didn't put the door there. It's real.

Sara's body goes to school, but her mind is still in the basement, with the door. She sleepwalks through her classes, deciding what to do.

Going through the door is a no-brainer. Sara's mom refuses to keep a TV (filthy trash box, she calls it) but she can't keep Sara from books, and Sara's favorites are all about escape into another, better world. All her life, she's been waiting for her Hogwarts Express, her Kansas tornado, her mysterious wardrobe, some miracle to take her away from here, and now she has it. Dangerous as whatever's on the other side might be, at least it won't pretend (or worse, believe) it loves her.

No, more concerning to Sara is whether she'll leave any damage to those left behind.

Not her mother, of course. Nor her teachers. They barely notice her as is; she's a quiet little ghost of a student, earning boring, silent A's that encourage no further interaction. There are a million students more colorful, more imaginative, more interesting than her; they won't miss her. Nor will the people who are the closest she has to friends. They might notice her absence after a few days, remark on it, then go back to their books and card games.

But then there's her Uncle Lester, who knows what's happening with Sara's mom. He should; he's her brother. He'll be sad and scared when Sara vanishes. Maybe he'll think it's his fault. But in the end, she decides his distress is a sacrifice she's willing to make. Her uncle can't save her; even if he weren't scraping by on disability, too sick and caught up in his own troubles to help her, he believes that girls need their mothers, their families.

Sara will risk the danger behind the door.

She doesn't have much time. Her mother keeps track of exactly when Sara gets home and times her work hours accordingly, to make certain that Sara doesn't try to sneak around. Sara feels that if she were truly brave, she would cut class, but what if the door has disappeared? Then her mother will find out, and there will be hell to pay. All she can do is run home from school as quick as she can and hope her mother isn't early.

She isn't. Sara bolts into the house, makes for the basement, then

hesitates. There's no telling what's behind that door. It could be a desert, a wasteland, a glacier. Just because she's going through there doesn't mean she shouldn't prepare.

She ties her sweater around her waist, opens her backpack, and dumps all her school stuff on the table like she normally would never dare do. She unzips the smaller pockets, pulls out her pencils and pens. She almost tosses her tattered copy of *James and the Giant Peach*, but at the last minute changes her mind. It's her most precious possession, a gift from Uncle Lester; he used to read it when he was her age, and she can't bear the thought of giving it up.

She's snatching nuts, raisins, and granola bars when she hears the sound of her mother's car driving into the garage. Time to go. She grabs a flashlight and runs for the basement. As she dashes down the cobwebby doorway, as quickly as she dares with the steep stairs and the dim beam of the flashlight, she hears the front door slam.

"Sara?"

Sara's shoe catches on a half-pried up nail and she falls down the last few stairs with a thunderous crash, scraping her hands and knees. She keeps a grip on the flashlight, but it hits a stair and breaks and the basement goes dark.

"Sara? What are you doing?"

Sara's hands and shoulders and knees throb, but she jumps to her feet. For a moment, she panics, terrified that the door is gone, that it was all a dream she hallucinated in her own broken mind, and her mother will be enraged to find such an untidy pile of books in the kitchen—

—But no, the door is still there, glowing softly in the dark, waiting for her. Sara grasps the handle and a little zap goes through her, making her jerk back.

Her mother's feet thunder on the top step. "What are you doing down here?" There's no alarm in her voice; there's no way out of the basement except past her, or so she thinks.

Sara grabs the door handle again, ignoring the zap, and pulls. The door feels light and papery under her hands, and it opens more smoothly and quietly than any door in the house. Beyond it is impenetrable blackness. Sara pokes a finger in, then a hand. She feels nothing.

“Sara,” her mother’s voice has grown smooth and sweet and dangerous, “answer me when I speak to you. What are you doing?”

Still, Sara hesitates. Her mother is terrified of the rats in the basement; she’s not about to come thundering down. It’s one thing to think about going into the great unknown, another to actually do it. What if it’s worse on the other side? What if it’s a hundred feet above the ground and she falls through only to go splat on the other side? What if there’s a monster waiting to eat her?

No, that’s silly. Who would go through all the trouble to make a door for her just to trap her and destroy her on the other side? Still...

“Tell me what you’re doing, you little animal.”

Sara reaches through the door, and two powerful hands grasp her own. She doesn’t even have time to scream—she’s still gasping in the air when the hands drag her through the door into the blackness, and the door swings shut behind her. There’s floor under her feet, but she can’t see it—she stumbles and falls, scrapes her knee again on concrete, cowers.

Nothing happens. All she can see is black, all she can hear is the blood pounding in her heart, her own panicked breathing.

After a moment, her eyes start to adjust. She’s in... her basement? And kneeling next to her is a—

Sara screams and swings her flashlight at the monster, but misses. The monster makes frantic gibbering noises, reaches for her. She scrabbles backward on all fours, still screaming, and the basement door—not the one she came through, that one’s disappeared, the one that goes up to the rest of the house—bursts open, streaming light past a familiar silhouette.

"Get away from her, you little animal!" Her mother's voice declares, and the monster recoils, from her or the light, it's hard to tell, and then Sara is wrapped in warm arms and pulled out of the basement into what looks like a copy of her own kitchen, the one she just left.

For a moment, Sara's so disoriented and confused that she thinks the glowing door turned her right back around and spat her out again, or that somehow time turned around and she never went into the basement in the first place. But then she realizes her school things aren't on the table and she gets a good look at the woman with her mother's voice.

To say she's an exact copy is misleading. She has the exact same face and body and voice as Sara's mother, that much is for sure, but she wears them so differently, she looks like a completely different person, like a skilled actor pretending to be someone else. Gone are the bitter lines around her mouth and eyes, the constantly working jaw like she's holding back from biting someone. This woman's face has only smiles, and she holds herself like a plaster saint in a church. Her eyes glitter with something Sara can't name.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're all right," the woman says. "I was so worried."

"What was that?" Sara asks.

The woman who looks like Sara's mother takes a key from her apron pocket and uses it to shut a big padlock on the basement door. From below them comes a faint, mournful howl. "Don't worry. I'll never let it get you." She turns back to Sara. "My goodness. You must've had a terrible fright, being torn from your world like that."

"I'm—I'm all right," Sara says.

"Oh, your hands! Your knees! Sit here, I'll be right back to make it better."

The woman presses Sara into a kitchen chair that's a lot like the one at the house she left, only softer and newer, and vanishes for a moment. When she returns, it's with Neosporin and Band-Aids, and she starts cleaning and

covering Sara's injuries.

"Your name is Sara, isn't it?" she asks.

"Yes," Sara says. "How did you know?"

"I had a Sara once. You look just like her." She touches Sara's cheek. Sara doesn't flinch, but only because she doesn't want to make the woman angry.

"What happened to..." what's the right way to put it? "...your Sara?"

The woman looks away, then back again, her eyes glittering. "Let's not dwell on sad things. I lost a Sara, and you lost a mother. Now we have each other, and we can be happy."

"Well..." Sara says, meaning to say she didn't lose a mother, but the woman has already kissed her scrapes and gotten up.

"Here. We'll bake chocolate banana cookies. Those were my Sara's favorite; are they yours?"

They are.

The Sara and the woman who looks like her mother bake cookies together, then have a delicious dinner of ham and sweet potatoes and green beans, none of which come out of a can. All of the food tastes better, smells better, looks better. Everything in this world does, like Sara's world has been stripped of all its bitterness. The wallpaper is clean, the sun shines bright, and everything seems to have color and luster of its own. And the woman who looks like Sara's mother seems kind. She doesn't scream, threaten, or lock Sara in the basement. No, after dinner, she fixes Sara a nice warm bubble bath with special salts ("they're good for your scrapes"), braids Sara's hair, and tucks her into bed.

"You've had such an eventful day," she says. "You need your rest."

The woman turns out the light and shuts the door, but Sara can't sleep. The bed in this world is warmer, softer, and it doesn't sag in the middle, but the bedspread is covered with zebra stripes, just like at home. Uncle Lester

had made it for her. At first, she wonders what the Uncle Lester of this world is like. Then she abruptly sits up.

She's in a dead Sara's room. There's no way she can sleep in it.

She gets out of the bed and turns on the light.

It's eerie, being in a dead girl's room that's an almost exact copy of her own. The furniture is the same, the radio clock. The major difference is that there are fewer things in it—presumably the woman who looks like Sara's mother got rid of some of it, or perhaps this world's Sara didn't live long enough to get them.

The bookshelf looks almost exactly the same, though. There are a few authors with names that Sara has never heard of (who on earth is Lisa Wellington?) and apparently there is no Xenia Barrow in this world, but all her most beloved authors are there. They're even organized the same, alphabetized by first name: C. S. Lewis, L. Frank Baum, J. K. Rowling, Roald Dahl—

Wait. One's missing.

There's no *James and the Giant Peach* on the shelf. There's a gap between *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *the Magic Finger*, like there used to be a book there, and judging by the lack of dust in the gap, it was removed recently. What happened to it?

Maybe this world's Sara died just that recently.

Sara shivers and prods the space between the books nervously, then reaches into her backpack and pulls out her copy of *James and the Giant Peach*. It fits perfectly in the gap, and that makes her feel a little better. The bookshelf looks complete now, and surely the other Sara would appreciate having her favorite book returned.

She returns to bed, but nothing she does will make her feel comfortable in it. She tosses and turns, and even gets up to take *James and the Giant Peach* again and read a few pages, but even that won't do it. And it's not

just that she's in a dead girl's room that's bothering her.

She feels like she should be grateful that there is such an effortless new home waiting for her. Even if the circumstances are tragic, it's good news for her. But she's spent too many years with her own mother. She can't accept it. This is too easy. This world is almost tailor-made to entice her, but it's obviously not entirely nice. After all, the last Sara died here!

The woman never said how or why, either.

Sara frowns. Something is percolating deep in her mind, something important and disturbing. Now that she's alone and thinking, she realizes that things aren't adding up. Judging by the lack of dust, either the woman who looks like Sara's mother cares deeply about keeping the room just as the other Sara left it, or the other Sara died very recently, too soon for the room to be cleaned out. Either way, why isn't the woman still grieving?

Perhaps she is. Perhaps she wants a new Sara to replace her loss. But that doesn't make any sense either, with the monster in the basement. If the woman who looks like Sara's mother wanted another Sara so badly, why would she create the glowing door there, in the most dangerous room in the house? Why would the monster be allowed to run loose and get to Sara first?

Why would the monster be waiting for her, but not the woman?

Because the monster was the one to make the doorway. But why? To escape? Impossible, the monster had pulled Sara through and the door had disappeared immediately afterward.

None of it makes any sense, but one thing Sara is sure of: this world is not nearly as nice as it's trying to lead her to believe. And the monster in the basement is why she's here.

Sara gets up and out of the dead girl's bed and opens the bedroom door a crack. The hallway is dark, and she doesn't see or hear a sign of the woman who looks like her mother.

Sara slips out and moves towards the basement as quietly as she can,

but the woman who looks like her mother is already there, just coming out. Despite the hour, she isn't in pajamas.

"What are you doing up?" she asks, closing the basement door behind her. She doesn't shut the padlock; she seems too busy staring at Sara with those glittering, hungry eyes. Yes, she wants another Sara, badly enough that Sara knows that this is not a mother she can trust.

Sara says, "I'm sorry, I got thirsty, and I'm not used to the house yet. Where are the cups?"

And the woman who looks like Sara's mother gets her a cup and pours her some warm milk, and she smiles the whole time, but she doesn't let Sara out of her sight. And when she puts Sara to bed, Sara almost doesn't dare get up again, because she can't shake the feeling that the woman doesn't sleep and will be watching for her.

But after a few sleepless hours, Sara hears the woman's feet go past her door and retreat into her own room, with the door shutting with a soft clunk. When Sara sneaks into the hall and peeks under the bottom of the door, she can see a crack of light and a shadow walking past; the woman is definitely inside.

Sara pulls back and goes to her backpack. She has no idea if monsters like raisins or granola bars, but in the stories, at least, feeding something never hurts the odds. The flashlight is in the backpack too. The batteries were knocked out in her fall, but luckily, the bulb is still intact, and it turns out the other Sara keeps batteries in the exact same desk drawer this Sara does. The batteries are old and only power a faint light, but they'll do.

Sara pulls off the dead girl's pajamas and dresses in her own scuffed, dirty clothes. With flashlight in hand and backpack on, she slips out to the basement, moving as silently as she can. This time, the woman stays in her room.

The padlock is heavy, but fortunately well oiled. Sara slips it open

silently, and waits, listening. The woman doesn't come out of her room, and once again, Sara goes down into the basement. This time, she remembers her lesson and scraped knees and takes the stairs slowly.

"Hello?" she whispers, and she hears something move in the darkness. She remembers the monster shying away from the kitchen light, as though blinded, and she moves her flashlight beam off to the side. That seems to work; a dark shadow comes up to the edge of it.

"I... I brought you granola bars, if you want one," Sara whispers.

The shadow shakes its head. Sara remembers the sounds it made; maybe it can't speak like she does.

"I know you're the one who brought me here," she says. "You helped me escape from my mother. How come?"

The monster moves into the beam of the flashlight, and Sara finds herself unsurprised when it turns out to look like her. Not as much as the woman resembles Sara's mother; this child is scarred and starved and moves like a cave spider, and looks at Sara with sad, sad eyes.

"I knew it," Sara whispers. "I knew she was too good to be true."

And she hugs her other self, the girl who tried to save her even when locked away in a basement. As she does, she hears a loud clunk up at the top of the stairs, a padlock being locked shut, and their mother's voice shrieks, "You were supposed to be better!"

But Sara ignores her. She's found something better than a mother.

"You saved me from my mother while you were locked up down here," Sara says. "Now I'm here to return the favor." She pauses. "Um. How did you do it?"

The other Sara kneels to write in the dirt with a finger. When Sara turns her flashlight on it, it reads, "You have to give up your most precious possession." The scarred Sara looks up and spreads her hands with a wry shrug: hers is gone.

Sara hesitates. She remembers the gap on the bookshelf and reaches into her backpack. Inside is the book Uncle Lester gave her, *James and the Giant Peach*. A harbinger of hope and escape, a symbol of his love for her. A love that was, in the end, unequal to his passivity.

But in the end, perhaps that's enough.

Sara hands the book over, and her other self takes it by the pages, begins to hum, and tears it down the spine. She gives Sara a sad look, but Sara goes, "It's okay. I don't need it anymore." To prove it, she takes one half of the book and starts tearing it to pieces. At first, it's hard, and brings up a deep sorrow in her gut, but the further she goes, the easier it gets, and her face heats up and her eyes water, and she finds herself ripping the book apart with gusto.

As her tears spot the torn pages, a door begins to appear, glowing, on the basement wall. Leading to another basement, another Sara, another world. Maybe a better one.

The Saras clasp hands and go through.



Afterword: Metadata

I first started writing stories according to user prompts on Livejournal in 2007, but I didn't manage to do it properly (nor call the process a "writeathon") until 2011. And I didn't start doing it for money until 2013, when times got desperate enough that I was able to overcome my own feelings of artistic inadequacy. Much to my surprise, the first writeathon for pay proved far more successful than I ever dared hope, and I ran them roughly every other month for the next two years.

During a writeathon, I would give a theme, (home, nightmares, the Other) and my readers would submit prompts according to the theme. I would then write the story at lightning speed, name a price based on word-count (roughly \$20-\$40), and move on. Sometimes, I wrote as many as eight or ten of these little bite-size stories in a month. When the money came in (and folks would buy stories that weren't "theirs"—I had folks who only prompted but never sponsored, and vice versa), the story would be posted online for all to enjoy.

I learned this crowdfunding model from a poet on Livejournal called ysabetwordsmith, and the experience proved an invaluable crash course in writing. With money on the line, I learned to keep deadlines, to improvise, and most importantly, to write short. Up until that point, my writing suffered from bloat; I was raised on fantasy doorstops that could've lost a hundred pages without influencing plot or story, and I wrote similarly. But when I knew my fanbase couldn't afford much, it became vital to write as short and succinctly as possible. Turns out you can do a lot in 1000 words!

I stopped doing writeathons in 2015, because I switched to Patreon, which required a different set-up. Folks grew less interested in prompting me,

Afterword: Metadata

and more interested in what I wrote on my own, which suited me fine then and still does now. (Also, I switched to making more comics; I tend to alternate between comics years and writing years.) Many of the stories in this book come from the old writeathon, and some don't. This book contains every original stand-alone short story I wrote from 2006-2017 that's child-friendly and worth reading. I hope you like them and here are some notes!

The Other Legend of John Henry was written in November 2016 for my Patreon supporters. I always wanted to know more about Polly Ann, who appears in various forms of the tale but does little but mourn, and I wanted to give John Henry a better ending than a noble but ultimately futile death.

The Cursed City was written in February 2014 for the "Shadow" writeathon; someone requested something involving Hiroshima shadows. See, when the atoms bombs dropped on Japan, they vaporized everything within a fair radius, but at a certain distance, human bodies offered just enough resistance that the structures immediately behind them were shielded from some of the bleaching effect of the bombs. The result: only the victims' shadows were left behind. You can find photos of them around. This story is technically part of my *Revered Alpert, the Traveling Exorcist* series, but it is stand-alone, and takes place decades after the series proper, thus its place in this book.

The Ship of Dreams was written in June 2013 for a writeathon based around the theme of home. The prompt originally came from an LJ user with the handle of 403, who requested "strange but never a stranger," and was sponsored by a We Hunted the Mammoth user by name of Falconer.

Afterword: Metadata

Queen Mab's Castle was written for a March 2013 writeathon on the Other; an LJ user called meepalicious gave the prompt “never eat the food in fairyland,” and a We Hunted the Mammoth user named cloudiah sponsored it.

Platinum and Gold was written for an August 2013 writeathon on Wealth, kludged together from prompts from Megan Rupe, Anna of colada, and meepalicious again who all wanted dragons, and some variation of the poor dragon getting robbed or having a hoard of immaterial wealth. It was sponsored by Lydean Kenzall. Gwen Katz kindly drew fanart of the dragon, which did not make it into this volume; you can find it on her DeviantArt here: gckatz.da.com/art/Gold-and-Platinum-396431924

The Borderlanders was also written for the March 2013 “Other” writeathon. The prompt came from Megan Rupe, who requested a world or situation where it's not clear who “the Other” is that focused on a mediator between the dominant culture and the “other.” It also owes a deep debt to a duke among trolls on We Hunted the Mammoth, who was most known for believing in the utopic premise expanded upon here. (And as far as I can tell, he was completely serious about it.)

The First Mythic War was written in February 2011 for one of the early free writeathons, with the theme of “love.” Jim Nightmare of the Spacerobot Crew requested a pirate and a robot as a happy old married couple.

The Richest Shark in the Water was written in August 2013 for the “wealth” writeathon. The prompt of a baby shark getting a scarf came from Allie Mandell, who also sponsored it.

Afterword: Metadata

For Science! also came from the February 2011 love writeathon. The prompt came from an LJ user named fireez who wanted geek girls falling in love, bonding over their shared geekiness.

The Wealth of Ideas also came from the August 2013 “wealth” writeathon, prompted by Annie Schapira and an LJ user called chordatesrock who wanted a world where stories were currency, and legal/economic concerns hemming artists in; Annie also sponsored it. This story is inspired by my love of bad things, both creating and consuming them. There’s a sort of freedom and peace, for me at least, in enjoying something so vibrantly, shamelessly flawed that it has little power to harm others. If I find so much joy from the movies of Ed Wood, decades after his death, it helps break my own fear that my work is so flawed that it should never be enjoyed by anyone ever.

Death, Will, and the Girl is an odd duck. Apparently it was started in 2009, but was never finished until 2017. It was originally intended as a comfort work after I had a surgery that went wrong in my teens, and I guess the idea stuck with me.

Lilith and Cain was originally written for the “Journey” writeathon in June 2014, under the title *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. It was prompted and sponsored by Gwen Katz, who wanted something about the biblical Lilith, who I knew absolutely nothing about prior to writing this.

A Family of Fools was written for the April 2014 writeathon on foolishness. It’s technically part of the world of a different story I wrote, but it was never finished, and anyway, this one takes place centuries prior and hundreds of miles away, so. Also, super-thanks to Rebekah Anderson for sensitivity reading this for me!

Afterword: Metadata

Mrs. Cohen's Aide was also written in April 2014 for the fool writeathon, because Lydean Kenzall wanted a story about golems; it was sponsored by a We Hunted the Mammoth user named Cloudiah. If you're curious, the broth Jael makes for Abbe is made from celery, zucchini, green beans, and carrots, in whatever amounts you have. Bring to a boil, then turn super-low and cook until it smells good, roughly one to two hours. Then toss the veggies out, keeping just the broth. It's very good for when you're really sick. Chopping up raw ginger and boiling it for a long time to give yourself ginger tea also helps.

Starfishing is the oldest story in this book; I wrote it in late 2006 for my Pop-Pop, who was dying at the time. (For those of you who've read *All In The Family*, this is not that man, but my other grandfather.) It's been overhauled since then, and has never been posted anywhere, and it's the only somewhat Christian story I've ever much written.

Fly Away was originally written in September 2014 for the "service" writeathon. The prompt was anonymous.

The Kids Wore Red was written in November 2013 for a writeathon based around idea of spooks or scariness; I can no longer recall the exact prompt, which came from an Anonymous but I recall the premise, along with the character of Brent Garbo, was in a nightmare I had once.

Only One Helga Macklewitz was written in summer 2007 out of spite because the class I was in forbade me from writing speculative fiction, on the basis that it was an artistic crutch. (I don't believe this, though I *do* believe that everyone should attempt writing outside their preferred genre at least once in their life.)

Afterword: Metadata

Someone on DeviantArt with the handle of Shiruie-chan drew me fanart of Helga's self-image, which was very sweet of them; I still have it, though it seems to have been deleted off the face of the Internet since. A shame!

The Wolf Girl was written in September 2007 by Gigi. It just popped into her head and she recited it on the spot, except for the end, which took some time to figure out. It required very few changes.

Very Concerned was written in November 2014 for a writeathon from prompts on "when someone else thinks you should be grateful for something you cannot use, did not ask for, and is actually very much NOT in your best interest" from LJ users rolodexaspirin and zianuray, the latter of whom also sponsored it, along with Jee Huang Lee.

Thirty-Four Days was written in November 2013 for the spooky writeathon, for an Anonymous prompt regarding the fear of being alone; it was sponsored by an LJ user named chaoticivil. After the Boston Marathon bombings, my neighborhood was put on lockdown as the cops chased down the bombers, and I came downstairs one morning and found the apartment whiteboard as described in the story. Obviously, in real life, one of my roommates soon came out to explain what was going on, but I found myself wondering what I would've done if nobody ever came...

We Are the Revolution was written in August 2013 for the wealth writeathon. The prompt came from Gwen Katz, who suggested the premise of ritually murdering the richest person on earth; it was sponsored by an LJ user with the name perchta. To write it, I found myself needing to find out just what it was the super-rich did for a living. To my surprise, I discovered that the vast majority of them were involved in business I didn't even understand, never

Afterword: Metadata

mind why their skills were valued so highly. Also, after I finished this story, a DeviantArt group took an interest in the illustration—they were a sort of anarchist Wikileaks sort of group, and seemed to see the Revolution as the good guys. Oops.

Better Luck Next Time was written in August 2014 for a writeathon on the theme of nightmares. It's technically part of a series—my Battle the Universe superhero serial—but it's stand-alone and by the time you finish reading it, it will have retconned itself out of canon. I figured it might as well be in this book instead.

Stewards of Behemoth was written in June 2013 on the premise of “home,” with a prompt from ysabetwordsmith who wanted a sentient house. It was then sponsored by a We Hunted the Mammoth user named SittieKitty. During this period, I would sometimes doodle incredibly tiny, improbably shaped homes, and I guess I decided to put one on the back of a gargantuan turtle-like being. What can I say, when you're homeless, you get really fixated on housing.

Small Mercies was written in November 2014 for the Thanks writeathon, under the prompt, “My mother used to say, ‘be thankful for small mercies,’ but I never realized that the ‘small mercies’ were actual creatures...” that came from a We Hunted the Mammoth user name titianblue, who also sponsored it. It, along with *We Are The Revolution*, *Platinum and Gold*, *Fly Away*, and *The Other Legend Of John Henry* are my personal favorites in the book.

The Weather Tellers was written in June 2014 for the Journey writeathon. The prompt, from a We Hunted the Mammoth user named Unimaginate, was specifically for a milieu when all the various hominids survived the Toba

Afterword: Metadata

Volcano explosion, not just homo sapiens. Another thing I knew nothing about prior to writing! The prompter also sponsored it.

Parental Rentals was written in August 2013 for the Wealth writeathon, under the title “CareGivers.” The prompt came from Lydean Kenzall, who wanted shapeshifting for money, and it got sponsored by nobody in particular. I originally intended to write a whole series about the employees, but folks found the premise too creepy. Later, I found out that in Japan, there’s an agency who performs a similar role to CareGivers, with a few noticeable differences: they make house calls, they perform many roles besides parents, and many of the people around them don’t realize they’re paid actors. (For instance, one of the men there is paid to act as a girl’s father, and he’s done it for solid years. She has no idea that he’s not actually her father, and he has no intention of ever telling her.)

Shades of Sara was written in February 2012 for a writeathon based around the idea of love, specifically prompts of familial love and unconventional family from ysabetwordsmith and an LJ user named whuffle. It actually got lost in the shuffle of my story index until a friend binged on my blog archives and brought it back to my attention.