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Mirrors in the Sky: A Novel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English from
The College of William and Mary

By
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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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May 3rd, 2012

I'm told you are a writer.

Yes.

So is this a story?

I suppose so.

But, I don't understand. Why Nepal? Why Everest?

To look.

To look for what?

Something you won't believe I can find.

When the thin, toothless man at the gear shop asks her why she has come to Kathmandu, she will say she is looking for her Adia. He will sell her thick gloves, a sleeping bag lined for three seasons, sunglasses, and blue walking poles. No, thank you sir, no shoes. She will not need hiking boots. Her boots will be long broken in on the Scottish hills. Her boots will be ready for the mountains ahead. The man's shop will smell faintly of pine and smoke and leather. His worn brown eyes will wink at her playfully as he hands over her supplies with tobacco-stained fingers. Dhanybhad, thank you. And as she turns away, of course he will ask again, but why, why are you here? And she will say she is looking for Adia.

Her little plane will rock in the air, and there out the windows she will see the mountains Adia whispered of so long ago. Her breath fogs the glass, and she will clutch her fleece tighter. Her ears will hurt even through the protective cotton. Next to her a man is to be sick, but she will not notice for her eyes cannot leave the green and white and her

mist mist mist. Leaving the orange fog of Kathmandu for denser clouds. Her eyes will mist mist mist until she cannot see Adia's mountains anymore.

In the first village of the Himalayas, the village that will serve as gateway to her journey, she will drink warm yak's milk tea at the monastery and light a candle for Adia. Namaste. Welcome to Lukla. Her hands will spin the prayer wheels, her feet circle clockwise around stupas and mani stones. All for Adia.

Shops crammed with calendars depicting Buddha, notebooks of thick homemade paper, knives carved like dragons, batteries, head torches, hand sanitizer, bright scarves, pillow jackets, toilet paper, chocolate bars. I give you best price. A mismatch of objects familiar and foreign greet the lines of mules and horses and yaks and dzopahs and men carrying boards on their heads as they pass on the dirt and cobble road. She will stop, turning her head from side to side and wondering if she hallucinates the Scottish and Irish pubs across the street from each other.

Stairs that go on forever and her uncooperative lungs will make her doubt herself. Ben Nevis, tallest of Scotland's munroes, stands at a meager 1344 meters. Here, she will be at 2860 meters above sea level. After many stops to regain her breath, she and her daypack and big hold-all will make it to a room. Her windows will overlook Lukla's airport—a short landing strip enclosed by a wall and a cliff on either end. Her things will fall in a clutter across the empty bed opposite her. She will kick off her boots and massage her tired feet. I have grown old, she will tell the empty room.

Brightly painted, almost garish but somehow sublime, she will drink in the tea house's dining room. Two dogs will play hide and seek across the creaking wooden floor. One will keep disappearing beneath the table while the other whines in desperation. Eventually they find each other again and nuzzle and bark until the sneakier of the two decides to resume the game. Both dogs will be grey with long spirally hair. She will name them Gandalf and Dumbledore because they look wise.

Her dream will be of Anatzia and Enzyotee climbing up a tree of pine in order to see the snow leopards. She will not know why her two old friends have come here to look for snow leopards. Because Tatiana sent us, Enzyotee will tell her. She will reach for the other girl, but Enzyotee is on the opposite bank of the milky river and when Anatzia finally crosses the suspension bridge, her eyes straight ahead, Enzyotee will have sunk into the river like a mermaid.

Snow, blinding white snow, atop mountains previously hidden in an ivory haze. Shadows of the mountains behind her will fall like a dark second ridge against the green ones in front of her. It is the start of a new day, and she will stand outside in the brisk chill with a fleece over her pajamas and listen to men, women, and children singing as they begin their work. Prayer flags will flutter in a quiet breeze and aggressive whiteness will return to devour the mountain peaks once more. As outsiders wake, the singing stops.

Namaste. Namaste, Pimba. Her guide. Pimba will be his name. Her porter will be called Bally. She'll name the dzopah carrying her supplies Tinkerbelle. Her necessary companions on a solitary journey.

Following her, Dog will trudge along. Down the path and up. White and black, she will name the dog Oreo for Adia's favorite cookie. He will wiggle between the single-file procession of mules, horses, dzopahs, and yaks, occasionally chasing chickens off the road or making friends with the scrawny puppies and giggling children they pass.

Jade green mountains—hills, her guide will claim—rise from valley, and she will find a little village with a red cottage high on the hill. It will be the mirror of Adia's picture lost long long ago to fire. She will move to her left to let pass the dzopahs with their multi-tone bells. Dzopahs. Endearing creatures shaped like their yak mothers but with less hair to reflect their cow fathers. Trailing behind the dzopahs will be the young curly-haired dzopah-herder who moves his charges forward with whistles and shoves and small stones. The young man will greet her with a hand-clasped bow, which she will imitate. Namaste. Pimba will shake the dzopah-herder's hand and call him brother. Two smiles just for each other. Two brothers meeting by chance on a road. And she will deny the moisture in her eyes when they ask why she cries.

Drinking, drinking, drinking, she will feel as if all she does is fill, purify, drink, and pee. They stop on the half hour. You must drink. But, I'm not thirsty. Drink. It is to keep away sickness, of course. Well, I need to use the facilities, all this drinking. Pimba

will laugh at her and point to the wooden hut suspended over a pile of straw. Another drop toilet. And it will be breezy today. She will hear Adia's long ago laughter echo on the wind that blows her pee astray, and she will begin to sing a song to herself about old friends and new ones. One is silver and the other is gold. Her trousers will be dirty enough to ensure that no one notices her difficulties.

Monjo. A small collection of two to three story white-stone buildings with red and green roofs. The village sits in a curving line along the path and gazes serenely down at the river and up at the green hills. Monjo will be the entrance into that which belongs to the Mountain. She must get a permit with her picture plastered on to its upper corner and smile at the military men with their long rifles guarding the gate. For the night she will stay here in another double-room with white walls. Her guide will feed her pasta and rice and potatoes or some combination of them at every meal in the tea house. Already she will begin to long for vegetables. And fruit. And a medium-rare prime rib.

Again she will dream. Of Marlowe and Shakespeare writing a story together at the North Pole about wishing bottles. She will wake in the dark night without light or a means to make it and reach her hand outwards towards a wall. She will feel her way to the door, struggle with the latch, and then move blindly down the hall to the toilet. Sitting in the night and listening to her pee fall into the abyss, she will wonder why Shakespeare and Marlowe felt the need to write a story.

No, I can't. There is no other way, Miss. No other way. She will gulp, looking down at the white line of the river far below, and then turn to the metal bridge dangling between the two mountains. It will be the longest bridge yet. And the river will be very very far beneath it. On the other side, Bally will be smiling at her encouragingly. Miss, Pimba begins again. She will hold up a hand, take a deep breath, and walk with her eyes straight ahead, not looking anywhere but at Bally, her hands gripping both walking poles tightly and holding them above the metal grating. The bridge will sway, and she will tremble and wish for Adia with all her might. Her walking poles, surely they will fall through the cracks beneath her! And then surely she will fall too. You are there, you have done it, Pimba will be telling her. Miss, you should breathe. Right, breathing, right.

Yet breathing will grow more labored after the rocky banks and the many high blowing suspension bridges. Her path goes up up up, and she will follow it higher and higher into the green forest, her step steady, her guide encouraging. Dudh Kosi, the milky river, will soon be a small strip of white in the valley below. She will watch the faces of Sherpa carrying boards on their backs. She will watch for a face with deep brown eyes dipped in golden sunlight. Namaste, Madame. Namaste. Going to Sagarmatha? Yes, I am going. The eyes she wants will not appear.

She will be exhausted upon reaching Namche Bazaar. The horseshoe-shaped town will be perched on an upward sloping mountain so that the buildings look like a giant staircase from a distance. Clear water runs from the top of the mountain to here at the town's base, and the water runs off a sheer drop somewhere farther down. After so many

barely-villages, the size of this collection of red, green, and blue rooftops will amaze all the more because she is at the bottom looking up at many levels rising like a half coliseum around her. Women will greet her from their bent positions washing clothes, and a little girl will shake her hand, singing hi-hi. Will this girl—this girl building castles from the river's muddy banks, sporting a mischievous smile, and wearing a pink sweater streaked with dirt—will she be Adia's daughter? No. Yet they will look so much alike. Hi-hi. Bye-bye.

Hot water will soothe sore muscles and make her feel clean. This will be an unexpected treat, costing a few green and red rupees. A boy takes her down to the cellar that looks like a dungeon, but at the very back of the room there is a shower. She will luxuriate in cleanliness, taking time to wash her dirty socks and trousers and hang them from a makeshift line attached to the window to create a curtain from drying clothes. She will breathe deeply and only glance once to the empty bed opposite her in the double room.

Here in the place of adjustment and rest, the toilet will become her new friend. She will run to the toilet's safety three times in the night and now knows the toilet better than the bed. She will feel this is unfortunate. A true waste of an excellent pasta dinner. Her hands will massage her sore tummy, releasing pockets of air and cramps. She will wonder why? Why?

Chilly winds and the sparse air will work against her until she is forced to count out paces. One, two, three, four. Breathing hard. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. A climb to adjust. Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight. Keep moving. Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty. Break. Water. Her guide will explain this is natural at such a height. This is why they will be taking a day to acclimatize. But she will be convinced that Adia could climb this mountain—hill, a viewpoint, her guide says—in a third of her time. She was always slower than her Adia.

Mountains taller than earth, beyond the sky, mountains will rise above the layer of filmy vapor, sunlight glinting off their snowy tops. She will stand literally breathless looking across at mountains mountains mountains. There, tip of Sagarmatha. See? I do. Clouds will blow in suddenly and mountains mountains mountains become whiteness.

Back down she will journey to her room. And her friend toilet.

For a moment she will be sure she sees Adia buying apple pie from the bakery in the horseshoe-shaped town with its bright-colored roofs. She will run towards the woman with orange flowing sleeves and pants. She will tug at her arm. When the woman turns quizzically, her eyes will be too black and her nose too thin. Too young. She will apologize for the woman's puzzled expression and smile. Sorry, sorry. Okay. Okay? She will not be able to help but watch the orange figure disappear into the crowded narrow streets.

At her lodge in Namche Bazaar, a group of young backpackers will play cards with the guides. She will sit and listen to the cards being slowly dealt. Six, seven, nine, Jack. Laughter. Cards will be laid down. Cheers and groans. One of the girls will ask for a clarification of the rules. She and Adia once played Stress under their covers while waiting for Monster to come out of her closet. Stress! And she still had three piles left to do. Adia was always better at the quick games, while she was better with the slow tricky ones. She got Adia back in 500 Rummy that night of waiting. You got two aces stuck in your hand, minus thirty! Adia sulked for twenty minutes, grumbling about her going out after putting out a straight of queen, king, ace and, to add insult to injury, using another ace as her drop card. Now she will smile at this memory and watch the younger trekkers play cards.

Curled up in her sleeping bag with raggedy Sasha the lion, she will pet the fake thinning fur. Sasha, a gift from her mom long ago after a prolonged trip abroad. Adia said that Sasha should go to Nepal. And so Sasha shall. Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite. Her eyelids droop, but she will clutch Sasha tighter and dream a creek and sunlight and the laughter of two girls. A fish named Igor. And two polar bears.

Clouds will descend over Namche Bazaar. Clouds will make the sheer drop off the cliff—the drop marking the path out of town—invisible, and she will gaze into white white white, keeping her eyes on the four visible feet in front of her. Her ears will hear monks chanting in strange deep thronging sounds from the monastery behind her and the bells of yaks ahead, but her eyes know only clouds.

Eventually daylight will chase away the fog. She will stare across a valley far below where the waterfall she now stands beside meets its milky river twin, and her eyes will mist the view away in alarm. Jum-jum. Just a moment. Her pack will be re-shouldered, water returned to its pouch, and her feet will turn towards the up and down yet ever upwards path. Nepali flat, Pimba will tell her, a little up and a little down. She will be sweating in the bright sunshine. Jum-jum. Let's go.

Her clothing will consist of tee shirts, waterproof trousers, thick hiking socks, long shirts, fleece, sweatshirt, windbreaker, rain jacket, thick gloves, wooly hat, scarf, underwear, long underwear, sports bras, regular bras, and good solid hiking boots tried long by Scottish heather. Tinkerbelle the Dzopah carries her unused clothes in a black hold-all on her back. Her red day pack will hold extra jackets, Sasha, a picture of her parents in younger years, oatcakes, chocolate, sunscreen, bug spray, hand sanitizer, her water bottles, and a toilet roll.

Excellent. The food. Delicious. More dal bhat? Yes. Delicious. Yum-yum, very good. Laughter. Dhanybhad. Thank you. Welcome, you want more, Miss? Please.

Monks will let her into their monastery high high on the tree-embraced hill called Tengboche. Bright colors and dull light create the small room's mystique. She will bow her head to the large golden Buddha and sit listening to monks singing their prayers. Silently, she will cast forth a hope of her own.

Blue skies will turn to grey, and the clouds will slowly lose their water. Her rain jacket and pack liner will already be in place for the onslaught. Rain, rain, go away, come back another day. But it will desire today and now. She will feel like a brave adventurer ready to go the distance or defeat the Huns. Perhaps Adia will have a lucky cricket with her when they meet.

A single building in the woods with a blue roof and silvery sand all around. Wilderness and isolation. Sitting drinking lemon tea and awaiting dinner, dry and warm, she will remember Adia's very special laugh that started deep in her belly and erupted with dry heaves before the sound would come suddenly in a burst of melodic tones.

Adia will come to her again in her dream. This time Adia will be alone and completely herself sitting quietly on a rock ledge with mountains rising all around. A perfect picture of thoughtful repose. She will appear much older than ever seen before in the waking world. Middle-aged, her skin still a perfect brown, her body slender as that of a princess, and her hair will be long and unbound even as grey strands begin to overtake the black-brown shine. Her beautiful eyes will be glued to the view. And she, the dreamer, will not be able to see Adia but for profile. Adia. She calls to her again and again, but her friend will not turn.

Ding-ding? No. Sure? Yes, my head's fine today.

The daughter of her hosts in this blue-roofed tea house in the woods will blow her kisses and steal them back with a smile. She will be young, five or six, and will wear a blue and white patterned hat with a blue pillow jacket and hiking trousers. A brave explorer. The child will climb up on to her lap at breakfast to the laughter of Pimba. She will smile at the little girl and start to tell her a story. While she eats porridge, toast, and a hard-boiled egg, she will tell a story that happened long ago on a different continent in a different world. A story about another little girl who was also a brave explorer. Another little girl who once followed a treasure map to a mysterious cottage in the woods to discover a princess pacing the dusty floor. Her guide and her hosts and this little girl in Nepal will smile at her story without understanding.

Through the trees she will march, and then the trees will end and grasses and scrubby bushes and stones and dust will begin to become all the world. All her world. It will become difficult to find hidden places to pass water—the drop toilets by this time will be a pleasant memory of the past—and it will ensure that her shadow is longer than before stretching for miles across the treeless landscape. Mostly a flat day, Nepali flat, but then the air will be disappearing. Over the ridge she will see a glittering city in a bowl of silver sand and bright in the sunlight. Dingboche. Ashen mountains rise in all directions around.

Nights will grow cold. Colder and colder the higher she is. The stove oven lit in the main room of the tea house will draw all the lodgers to its warmth. They bring down the soft squishy blankets from their beds upstairs. Fleece and pillow jackets and head

torches to guide the travelers back into their dark rooms. Many cuddle together while she will sit alone, distanced by her age and purposes. She will curl up in the corner staring out into the dark with her notebook and writing an ode to her right boot. If perhaps Adia's voice teases her in her head, she will promptly blame her behavior on the altitude.

Her dream will take her to Caledonia's sunset shores where she watches Adia with a crown on her head dance a Ceildh in the ruins of a castle by the sea. Her partners are all tall men in kilts whose faces remain in shadow, but they are unmistakably royalty. At the end of the dance the others bow to Princess Adia, who claims the wind-swept fallen castle as her own before the sunset's last rays fade.

Sixty paces. Count them. Now you will drink. She will literally crawl with hands and knees and feet up the last one hundred meters. At the top she will not be able to bring herself to move. Water. More water. Her eyes will droop. Down now, Miss. We must go down. Her hands look wrinkled when she holds them in front of her. A rest day. Acclimatizing. Adjusting. Walk to a viewpoint. Up to near the top of the world. 5100 meters. She will have *never* experienced true exhaustion before this moment. I am growing old, she will think to herself. Three times she will fall while descending, and her guide will insist upon her drinking a liter of hot orange water to rehydrate. Rest but do not sleep. She will not find the energy to nod in affirmation.

Another night in Dingboche, and she will not dream.

Morning. The sun will frame Ama Dablam. Third most beautiful mountain in the world, her guide will remind her again and again. A double-peaked rounded mountain of unusual shape covered in snow with wisps of white vapors swirling away from it into the harshly clear blue sky. Never before has this mountain been so close. The sun will force Dingboche's randomly-spaced collection of homes and tea houses to cast dark shadows across the flat brown valley. Meandering stone walls will encase the buildings that billow their smoke into the still and crisp morning air. And above it all will tower the white peaks cutting through the sharp blue sky.

You'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road, and I'll be at Chomolungma before ye. One foot will fall in front of the other as she comes to the top of her milky river. Pimba will be above her, keeping pace with her slow progress over the stones and grey dirt rapidly replacing loose brown soil. But me and my true love will never meet again, on the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.

Oreo will leave in Tengboche, and black Luke will join her in his place at Dingboche. Luke will lie in a pile of prayer flags strewn across the ground and smile up at her. She will sit on an uncomfortably jagged rock looking at the monuments to those who tried to bring themselves to the top of the world and failed. She will want to raise up the fallen prayer flags so that they can join with the others adorning these stone memorials and the painfully blue sky above them. But she will not be able to make the flags transform from dog pillow to fluttering colors in the air. Luke will decidedly lack

the Force necessary to move himself or the flags beneath him. Yoda could do it. Luke will only blink up at her lazily.

Ding-ding? A little ding-ding. Drink more water, and your head will feel better. Hopefully.

Tools against rock will supply a steady click to the otherwise deserted and silent landscape. Plant life has been left behind entirely and grey-green bushes will yield to brown and grey and rock. Now she will see real mountains with snow and ice and peaks reaching high high all around her. Close; she will be in the sky. A great gaping ravine and white rock will bear witness to the icy glacier. Air will dry and the wind will blow cold even in the warm bake of the sun. Keep hat on now always. I'm sweating. Then sweat.

An old man and his young guide will sit looking out across the mountains. His hair will be grey and the boy's black black. Namaste. Hello. Why are you here? Because I'm dying. It will be as good a reason as any.

Dust will turn her snot black and her beige trousers brown. She will sneeze and use her sunglasses for more than protection from light.

Namaste, welcome to Lobuche. How high? 4900 meters, not too high. Pimba will steer her to a table and bring her a large steaming bowl. Garlic soup. A proven cure for altitude sickness. She must, Pimba will insist, have at least two bowls every night at this

high high place in the beyond world of mountains. Her head will hurt and her legs will be sore and her back will ache and the thought of food will turn her stomach. But she will sip the soup and relish its warmth.

She will go to the sink in the hall to wash her short greasy hair before retreating to her room with a wet wash cloth and a little soap. Shivering, she will strip and perform the now nightly ritual of cleaning her body's creases and curves. The layers of sweat and dirt will be less pronounced as she towels herself dry and redresses in warm clothes. She will hear laughter and crack her door. In the room across the hall from hers, two girls braid each other's hair. They will laugh gently and create queenly crowns from their dirty locks. Rapunzel Rapunzel, let down your hair. Her hair will be much too short for braids. More practical for a trek perhaps. Adia's hair, she will think, is probably still long so that it can blow in the mountain winds.

The song her guide sings about a hunter will echo in her ears. Resham firiri, resham firiri. His heart is light as a feather, so he floats into the hills to call his love. Maia lai dakeka. Like Enzyotee he will wait only for his beloved deer. Sometimes this will be a fierce trekking song. Ek male banduk, Dai male banduk. Other times slow and beautiful. A love song. Resham firiri.

Nights will be frigid. Her sleeping bag will prove its worth.

Her dreams will grow increasingly disturbing. She will see Adia's home on fire burning burning burning and Monster ripped from his dress and Grol killing Adia's screaming mother with a long bladed knife. Then there will come snow burying all of them alive. She will sit on the mountaintop watching the snow turning red with blood and awaken screaming.

Half a bowl of porridge will constitute her breakfast. She will be proud of each spoonful she forces down her throat into a rebellious stomach.

Barren rocky ground with barren rocky hills and mountains. Real mountains rising high high, and she is among them. Through the glacier's path she will walk and walk and walk. Her feet will leave no footprints in the rocky terrain. There, fifth highest in the world. There is the fourth. Makalu. Lhotse. There, there is The Mountain. Sagarmatha. Chomolungma See, see, there! The ridge through the clouds? Everest.

The last stretch of rock and sand and glacier and turquoise water will not be particularly difficult. Except for the physical exhaustion making her bones and muscles ache. And the altitude making her lungs scream and head hazy. And the rain making her sight blurry. She will push with her last breaths, her eyes glazed over under sunglasses for the wind. Her hood and hat and sunglasses give her only a very narrow window of vision mostly glued to her feet's progress.

Last stop before the end and just for lunch. Gorak Shep, you are almost there. When walking, her stomach growled, but now she will look at the food in front of her, good food, and she will be unable to bear even the sight or smell or thought of putting it in her mouth.

In her tiredness, the rocky ridge will feel like it goes on forever, but naturally she will soon come to the piles of rock that so easily cascade downwards. There ain't no mountain high enough. Once on this path, her guide warns, you cannot stop. Foot over foot she will make her way upwards towards prayer flags and stones. Not stopping for to stop is to tempt a landslide. Oh mirror in the sky, what is love? Through pouring rain, up up the loose rocks. She will approach the base of the Mountain she cannot climb casting the wish she has saved, and you wonder, naturally, what she shall find there.

Journeys happen, that's the thing. They just do. And journeys make us tell stories. Because, well, physical movement often preludes a mental quest. When we travel across some distance our romanticized minds assume that something within ourselves should change, that we should somehow become stronger, wiser, more enlightened. And for writers, that means we have to put ink on paper.

But I don't understand. Whose story? I thought this was your story. Who is 'she' then? Where does it all start? Why is she in Nepal?

I don't know yet.

But if you don't know who does?

You don't understand yet, do you?

You wonder many things while dreaming that journey still to come. Her journey, never yours. It seems better somehow to leave the imagining of your inevitable climb to her. And so, you imagine another woman making her way up into the mountains, searching for you. You can see her path. If you very much force your memory—or your false memory— you can see a trail through the green hills and snowy mountains and little villages with children roaming free as the yaks. You can almost smell the yak dung and the river and flat bread baking in the mornings and dal bhat at night.

Somewhere far away, surely she is lying in bed thinking about that mountain too. The Mountain. For the Nepalese officially Sagarmatha, but locally long known in Nepal and Tibet as Chomolungma: Holy Mother. Yes, somewhere she is thinking of Everest. Of course, she could be working; your night could very well be her day. There would be irony in that. Irony that she would end up in Europe, and you would settle in America. You like irony. And so, in the spirit of irony, you dream her to Scotland. She will be a

professor at St. Andrews University, of course, working in a beautiful stone building across from the castle ruins. Her office window will look out across the North Sea. On weekends, she must take trips to the highlands and walk up the hills through the thick heather in preparation for the cobbled roads in Nepal. You found her name on the staff list of the St. Andrews English Department years ago, and you are very determined that this isn't a mere doppelganger. You dream her to Scotland, the place you lived before meeting her and to which you have never returned.

You glance at the red numbers on the clock: 4:37 AM. The alarm remains almost three hours away. A sigh. It's happened again. There was a time when right after you closed your eyes, you would be blearily hitting the snooze button. She was an early riser, but you need several cups of coffee to jump start your day and would very happily sleep until noon, other obligations notwithstanding. But these nights! Long sleepless nights occurring more and more frequently when you stare across at the painting of Everest you bought long ago, and, even though you cannot see it in the dark, you trace the curves of it in the air. Lately the darkness means losing yourself to the imaginings, and it is only the alarm that brings you back to the world again. Perhaps you should start sleeping during the day? She would make some comment about vampires, and you would laugh. If she were here.

Now you lie awake listening to traffic outside and watching the passing lights trace patterns across your walls. The quiet hum of the air condition unit competes with the click click of the more traditional clock on the wall, and both noises are out of sync with the brief flashes of red from the smoke detector. Your bedroom feels so empty,

devoid even of Toffee's affection after his accident last month. You really miss that big black lab's slobbering kisses.

The darkness makes you melancholy. Or perhaps it is thinking of her that drags you into this awful insomnia. You hope that she does not go through the same, but know she probably does. It is the habit of women your age. It puzzles you. In your imaginings she always begins her climb your age, at the periphery of "old" but not quite there. Yet whenever you stop imagining, for you can never see farther than Base Camp, she is ancient, weighed down by many years gained over the course of only weeks.

The alarm goes off. You do not know where the time has gone to but wearily rise from bed, stretching until your bones creak. Red desert light seeps through your shuttered window and falls across a pile of literary journals. You read them mostly for the articles she—that is, Professor Mason of St. Andrews, who at the very least shares her name, but you hope shares her memories—writes. There's a good one this last month about Willa Cather's *My Antonia*.

You sigh, pulling on some dress pants and a flowing yellow blouse. On the way to the kitchen in your moderately-sized flat ('apartment,' she—forever the American despite her new European home—would correct you, if she were here), you flick on your laptop in the living room. While waiting for it to boot, you pour yourself a bowl of cheerios with 2% milk, and you cut up a banana to decorate the top. Over breakfast, emails command your attention. Richard wants to meet for coffee after your appointment for the morning. The local community theatre is curious if you will come out of your semi-retirement from acting to help with a production of *The Tempest*. Once upon a time you played Ariel, and it was your break-out role on the Santa Fe scene. Meanwhile the university is interested

in your application. You finish your cereal and update your Facebook status with something more cheerful than you feel. Then the laptop powers down, dishes find their way to the sink, and the keys start your car.

It is a short drive to the hospital. You only get through a quarter of a chapter in the Agatha Christie book on tape that currently passes time on long drives into the endless red and orange and purple sands. The driving started about two years ago. It started with your insomnia. You have begun to visit all the old native cities and hunting grounds and burial sites. You took a long weekend to the Grand Canyon and even went to the Alamo for kicks. Occasionally you've crossed the border south, but in general you stick to the surrounding areas. Plenty to see and do in the desert. Plenty of books to pass the time.

To your right is the rounded facility. It is, as always, a pain to find parking, but soon that is done and you walk to the entrance with its revolving doors into reception. You have never managed to get used to the industrial impersonal feel of hospitals and compare them always with your visits to a family physician years and years ago back on the island in Scotland. True, NHS, but still the rooms were covered in lions and tigers and Dr. Herdman remembered your name and gave you a lollipop when the visit finished. Now, the receptionist kindly asks you to wait. You sit for some time with your old copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* covered in red highlights and margin notes before being called back. Adia? This way please. The nurse takes you to a clean sterile room where you remove your clothes and put on that horrible hospital gown that opens at the back to submit you to the world's scrutiny. They put you into a machine and scan everything.

Before, the first time, they only scanned a certain area, but now they need to scan everything. You hold your eyes shut until they let you out again. They take you to another room where they draw enough blood to keep any vampire content for several days. Finally you can put your clothes back on. By the time you have your yellow blouse over your bra, you have stopped shaking.

The doctor tells you that she will call when the results come in. You nod at her and try to leave before she reassures you, but you are unsuccessful in your covert race to the door. It will be fine, she says soothingly. I know this is hard and—you try to quietly assure her that you do not need her to be so very—I am here if you want to talk about it, but we will of course let you know. Thank you, doctor. You slip past her to the door.

From the hospital you head directly to the post office and mail a VISA application, your passport, a mail-order check, and a recent photo to the Embassy of Nepal.

*

Do you want to talk about it, Adia? No, not particularly. You know I'm here if you want to talk about it. Right. Your coffee is too hot, and you sip it impatiently, drumming your fingers against the table. Coffee, so American. She probably drinks tea, but then she never liked coffee even when you were barely-teens and coffee was cool. Blowing cold air over the top of your black strong brew, you cast your eyes away from Richard. He places his very large hand over your smaller one resting on the table. Then

we'll talk about something else. You understand each other. The only rule you and he have is never to push or pry or ask questions. It's why your on-and-off-again friendship with benefits has worked so well the past ten years—neither of you knows all that much about the other.

He canceled a date with Nicole to be here with you. Nicole is the pretty middle-age artist from Sweden that he is now engaged to marry. Richard told you about meeting her when out on research to Florence. He took her to see Michelangelo's David. Nicole the art professor, currently teaching at the college of great books. You've met her and like her. They are good together. Richard's been a stalwart friend through throw-up sessions and crazy hair loss and the realization that you can no longer eat artichokes because the stupid chemo treatment convinced your body that you are allergic. And so, even though your bed has become lonelier since Nicole, you don't begrudge Richard happiness. Honestly, after the first four years of your relationship you were only rarely well-enough for sex anyway. The remission your doctors announced two years ago was accompanied by renewed restless energy and the realization that you and Richard worked much better as friends than lovers anyway.

Now, the talk turns to your recent theatrical offer, and you spend the pleasant post-hospital-visit brunch discussing Prospero's release of Ariel. Richard tells you that, should you want to get involved as an actress or even to help direct, he certainly will jump back into the company for *The Tempest*. He still directs shows occasionally—the two of you met as actress and director when you were still new to the company—but his new job at the university tends to keep him pretty busy. Now, he invites you to the community production of *Wicked*. Glen's been pretty involved in that. Yeah? A-huh, says

it's a brilliant cast. Mostly university kids. You'll come then? Oh yes, definitely, wouldn't miss it. Richard gives you a big bear hug and then leaves for his twelve o'clock directing workshop. You wander out of the coffee shop into the dry heat. Cars surround you in a crisscrossing pattern and you cut across to the next row of Spanish-style buildings, earning an angry honk from a blue Chevrolet. Down three blocks and over two, and then you are downtown. It is particularly hot today, and you are regretting the decision to wear full-length pants rather than shorts. It is with relief that you arrive at the little shop with its big purple sign: Namaste Books.

Good afternoon, Adia.

Hello, Denise.

Denise looks a bit like her, or at least Denise looks a bit like what you'd expect her to look like at sixty. She has shoulder-length brownish-grey hair that frames a round soft face. Thick eyebrows and a hint of Eastern European in the lips and set of the cheek bones. Her curves only serve to highlight your very thin frame. Denise tells you in high school she was always cast as the mothers in her school plays because of her thick-set shoulders and early-developed boobs. Yes, Denise looks like her, except for the eyes. For one thing, Denise wears glasses, and you have never been able to picture her with glasses. And then there are the eyes themselves. Her eyes were hazel and changed colors with her mood. Denise's eyes are brown.

Adia?

Sorry, just a bit lost in thought, that's all. Denise still looks anxious. I'm fine, really, you assure her.

Okay. She heads back to the cash register, and you find yourself a chair in the reading room. Namaste Books was a gift to you and Denise from your longtime friend Professor Donaldson after he decided to abscond to Bermuda for retirement. You never were much involved in the day-to-day, instead leaving that to Denise's enthusiasm. But with your semi-retirement from acting, the bookshop has become increasingly more important to you. You enjoy being amidst the books, and often find yourself reading from them at random while waiting for the next customer. A steady stream makes its way in to buy or to sell. Your favorite part is finding an old book with secret notes or marks or coffee stains. Books with secrets. You read the story, a wonderful thing in of itself, and then wonder about the previous readers. Who else scored the pages of Huckleberry Finn's adventures imagining the smell of the Mississippi River in summer and dog-eared pages 47 and 143? What was the person like who left an endearing note to his sweetheart on the interior of an old blue volume of *Jane Eyre*? Did she accept him or find her Rochester elsewhere? Why and how did the red stain find its way on to the pages of *Prisoner of Azkaban* just as Sirius unveils a true rat?

Equally to the company of the books, you enjoy meeting those who come in to deposit an old volume or to find a new one. Usually these are students, naturally. Young and enthusiastic and very much wanting to save money on their lengthy lists of necessities. Some of them search for the most pristine copy of a book they can find. Others are more like you and enjoy the feel of age skirting against their fingertips. As technology advances, you see fewer students. Many now put their required lists on Kindles, and still others read out of order so they can borrow from the library and avoid costs. Many find it easier to use the more expensive campus store where they are

guaranteed to find everything they need, and those who truly want to save do so on Amazon or even Ebay. Still, students come to you. The townspeople come too, eager for another trip into the heart of darkness or down the back alleys of Victorian London or across the wastelands of Mordor. They come, and you are privileged to guide them to the adventure that will suit each best. You pride yourself on your matchmaking skills.

Adia? Yes. Should I shelve the Dark Tower books under fantasy or horror you think? Fantasy, I'd say. Oh, Adia? A-huh. This woman wants a John Irving but hasn't read any before and doesn't know where to start. Maybe *Cider House Rules*? Another customer comes in looking for Tennyson's poem about a dead friend. 'In Memoriam'—it should be in your standard collected works. Denise reminds you that she's going to be out of town next weekend with Tom. They're driving over to Albuquerque to see some concert. Can you cover? Sure. Okay. Are you still leaving, Adia? You wonder. You planned to do so soon. You don't remember when you made up your mind about it, but you want to go away. I'll let you know when.

It is because of Denise that you have steadily been racking up the credits necessary for a Masters in Library Science. She got you your first none-theatre internship as an undergrad working at one of the local libraries doing research on southwest playwrights. You fell in love with the city of holy faith and permanently went south. While acting has been your passion, library provided the financial support necessary to feed you during the years when getting a part was not guaranteed. Once the local theatre company recognized your talent and put you on the pay roll, books became more of a hobby, and, if you are honest, a link to her world, to that faraway Professor Mason. Books became her life, and so you wanted them to be a part of yours. And you are glad of

it. Books saved you when sickness made the physical demands of your chosen trade too much.

Adia, I'm leaving for the day. It's not dark yet, but this time of year that means little. You have been sitting here in Namaste Books for a very long time, poring over her latest article. It is her; it must be her. You need it to be her because then you are connecting with her. You are connecting, and even if it is only intellectually, you are reading the thoughts she wanted to publish about Jim Burden's obsession with his idealized image of Antonia. Go on out, Denise. I'll lock up.

You close the shop carefully and walk a few blocks to your car. It is so expensive to park in town. If not for the hospital visit you would have used public transportation like usual. You sigh, pay your parking ticket, and then get into your little beat-up red Ford. It's nearly six, so you drive across town to the theatre company's favorite bar and catch up with your friends. You don't drink with them, but order some fish and chips and ask about the current rehearsals for *The Glass Menagerie*. Brilliant, everything's brilliant! How're you doing these days, darling? You lie to them. They can't read you like they once could. You get a thump on the back and smiles. Perhaps it is time to get back into the acting business if only so that people can better see through your mask.

Around midnight you call a cab. The hospital visit feels very far away, and getting involved in *The Tempest* sounds like a much better idea than it did earlier in the afternoon. You keep us up to date, one of the younger girls tells you as you prepare to leave the bar. You nod to her, your smile artificially wide. Everyone gives you tight hugs, and Glen and Claire both make sure you get into your cab.

Upon arriving back at home, you promptly heave your entire dinner into the small toilet in your flat. The face that looks back at you in the mirror is a bit too thin and tired, and you understand why they wanted to know whether or not you were alright. You flush the toilet, take a very warm shower, and feel marginally better by the time you tuck yourself under the covers.

Your alarm goes off, but you stay in bed. You don't feel well today. So you won't move. As the sun comes through your window, you finally get some sleep.

*

You yawn widely, throw off the covers, and then proceed to quickly make yourself presentable. It's a Thursday, and you have to make this trip on Thursdays or you won't go at all. You can't bear to go too often. It makes you feel guilty. It reminds you again of how much your current freedom is predicated on another's imprisonment. You sigh, exit your apartment complex, and make your way to the trolley station, buying some flowers en route. You're at your stop within a half hour.

It's a nice place. It sits on a little estate on the outskirts of the city with lots of trees and a view to the purple mountains that guard the city. A wide veranda with orange-pink tiles protrudes out front into a garden, and there are lots of older men and women sitting with doctors and nurses outside in this beautifully warm weather. Your destination, however, is indoors. They know you at reception and nod you on to the

elevator. You get off on the second floor and make your way to room 212, stopping only to ask the floor attendant for a status report.

How is she today?

Bit out of it, I'm afraid.

You enter cautiously, taking in the room first. It's a standard room for a place like this. A bathroom to the right and a small sink next to the entrance for the nurses. The flowers you brought last week are still on the counter, and you replace them with the roses you purchased on your way to the trolley. You throw the shriveling carnations into the trashcan, and arrange the new flowers. With a sigh, you glance at the single bed. It is too neat, and it is clearly a hospital bed despite the pretty Navajo quilt you've spread across it for color. Behind the bed, you've covered the wall with pictures of all the important places. There are pictures of Orkney and Aberdeen Harbor and Edinburgh Castle and London and the cottage in Pennsylvania. There are cutouts of Nepal you've collected from magazines. On the bedside table there is a photo of you and a young red-haired woman laughing in the sunlight. This snap-shot was taken when you were four while on the ferry heading in to Kirkwall from Aberdeen. The woman holding you looks so happy, so young, her green eyes alight with excitement. She wears an Elizabethan dress from the production of *Richard III* that she was starring in at the time.

You turn from the photo slowly to take in the figure in the wheelchair staring out the window. Hello, Mother.

Your mother continues to look out across the red desert and the purple mountains without answering you. Confined to the wheelchair, she can no longer pace back and forth across her room like she did in her last home. The nurses here have given her simple

clothing instead of the long flowing costume-dresses she wore throughout your childhood. Her beautiful red hair is white, and when she speaks—only occasionally and usually to herself in a low muttering tone—the Irish lilt to her voice is now indiscernible, lost to a raspy whisper.

I went back to the hospital, you tell her quietly, pulling up a chair beside her. She isn't listening, but that doesn't really matter. I'll find out whether it's all in my head soon. The headaches, the throwing up, the aches and pains. Might all be in my head. Sometimes, I don't think I really care anymore. I mailed off for my VISA. It's about time, I think, to stop putting that trip off.

Looking up at the cut-outs on the wall, you can almost see Nepal. A place far away and long long ago where you think perhaps you have been. A place with twisting roads along sheer cliffs. A place without the luxury of rules for the honking lorries and tourist buses and old gas-guzzling cars and cows and water buffalo. Kathmandu. Buildings and buildings and buildings reaching across the valley on and on and jam-packed with people selling and buying and showing off wares in the streets and the bright open red squares where women barter fruit and chickens scatter this way and that. To the south, Pokhara. Another cluster of humanity with a lake stretching outwards like a mirror punctuated only by row boats and the island with the monastery blowing smoke and all this is framed with green hills and snowy white mountains and a sky so very blue. You wonder now why your mother went to Nepal all those years ago. Mother certainly was there, even if you never were. Your father must have been Nepali, because goodness knows your mother isn't and anyone looking at you knows you have Nepalese blood.

You stop talking to the figure in the wheelchair and start to tell the story of your week to the red-haired woman in the picture on the bedside table instead. This is the mother you always wanted, and you did have her for a time. Far back there are good memories. Back on the island in Scotland. There was a time when she took care of you more than you took care of her. Before she started to see things, hear things, think things that...

Richard knew the moment he came into your house back in grad school. It took Richard and Denise two years between them to convince you to commit your mother to psychiatric care. Once in the hospital, Margaret Thomas remained there until transferred here, to this beautiful nursing home that makes you hate yourself every time you see it from a distance. You force yourself to visit once a week, but age has destroyed what small visage of sanity Mother ever had. She can't dance with the lamps anymore now and sometimes forgets to recite Shakespeare even to herself. She just sits in her wheelchair staring out the window. Broken. Once in a blue moon, she'll recognize you.

You turn away from the picture of the red-haired woman and the small black-haired girl. You rise and walk over to the wheelchair, kissing her on the forehead from behind. Goodbye, Mother.

Quietly you walk from the room and shut the door behind you.

*

Adia? The customer interrupts your thoughts which are, as is usual lately, not even on this continent. Re-shelving books, you do not turn. What do you need?

Sorry, I'm looking for something. The woman up front, Denise, was busy with someone else, so she sent me to you.

What is it you're looking for?

Well, something I lost. I keep asking, you see, Tony, Tony come around...

Something's lost that must be found. You both recite the ending to the old rhyme in unison. You turn from the bookshelf to face the customer. The voice belongs to a young Hispanic man with a hint of Navajo in his face. He's wearing a button-up white shirt. Around his neck is a silver chain with an icon of what you recognize to be Saint Christopher. You notice that his eyes roam up and down your body appreciatively.

So, then, your name is Adia, nice name...like the McLaughlin song? Believe me, Adia, we are still innocent. That one?

Yes.

Hmmm, yep, he looks at you thoughtfully, circling you. It fits you. You look like a woman with a secret.

You tell him that you've played a few women with secrets in your time.

Yeah, he tells you casually, I know. You played them quite well too, from what I hear.

You look at him quizzically, but he ducks your gaze for the bookshelf. Anywho, I'm looking for *Peter Pan*. Had a copy forever, but it seems to have gotten lost when I moved away from Gran's to my new apartment. And Gran is sick this week. Used to read me Peter when *I* was sick, so I thought I'd go read it to her, you know. And then—he snaps his fingers in agitation, and you think he *must* be an actor—I realized it was

missing! The company sent me to you. Might as well meet the legend when you're at it, Christophé. That's what they told me.

He turns from the bookshelf he's been examining throughout his speech and winks at you conspiratorially.

The company? It's your turn to avoid his gaze. You move over a couple of shelves to find a copy of *Peter Pan*. He trails behind you at his leisure. There's something confident yet unassuming about him. He reminds you a bit of the late Toffee, your black lab.

Yeah, I'm one of the new kids. Friends call me Chris.

Right, you say. There are three copies of *Peter Pan* currently in Namaste Books. You carefully take all three off the shelf and hand them to him.

And you, you're Adia. The Adia. All I hear about is Adia this, Adia that. They all *adore* you. Richard swears by you in my directing class. 'The most perfect actress to work with.' More of an actor myself, really, but thought I'd take a directing workshop to try it on for size.

Class?

He's been examining all the copies of the book, and now picks out the oldest of the editions, the one whose cover is nearly falling off, giving you back the two newer ones. I can see why you get all the attention too, Adia. Anyways, thanks for this.

How old are you?

Oh, twenty-four last month.

You start to laugh.

What? What's so funny? The boy gives you a confused look. You can't stop laughing. You decide his puzzled expression is adorable.

Nothing at all.

Anyways, think I'll take this, yeah?

He gestures to the book.

Yes, yes, of course, go on and pay for it up front.

And I'll be back, I think. I like...books, you know. Chris winks at you again and leaves the shop. You stand for a moment with two books in your hands feeling a bit bewildered, but then you start to hum a tune from *Cinderella* quietly as you finish re-shelving the remaining *Peter Pans*.

*

It's seven in the evening, and you feel restless. Your VISA still hasn't arrived and your doctor still hasn't called. You sigh.

Time to head out for a drive. You shrug on a cast t-shirt from your production of 'Thoroughly Modern Millie' and throw on some beat-up jeans. Then you head out to your car. Strangely, Poirot's company does not appeal to you right now. Without the usual books on tape, you notice how noisy driving is. Gentle whirring engine and wheels on pavement and the other cars passing or passed. The wind stirs around you, and even the shifting of your jeans against the leather seats keeps the silence at bay. The car pulls out of town. You drive to the highway. And then you pick a direction and continue driving.

Eventually it grows dark, but you keep driving long after the red sands have turned to black. Empty nothing. Cars leave the road for hotels and homes. You are tired but you keep driving and driving because you don't want to stop. You replenish gas with your spare barrel, a necessity to desert driving after what Richard calls Adia's Insane Three in the Morning Call from the Middle of Freaking Nowhere Two Miles from Her Car Because She Couldn't Get a Damn Signal. He is still annoyed about this particular episode. So you keep spare gas in your car and make sure to stop whenever you are warned there won't be anymore gas stations for an absurd number of miles. You drive for several hours into nothingness before including Agatha Christie in your journey. You drive and drive in the darkness. Until crazy blinking lights suddenly appear out of thin air as if summoned by a demon. While you enjoy Las Vegas, you decide tonight to turn around and head a different direction. You're putting your money on Flora Ackroyd being the killer right now because Dr Sheppard should know murder mysteries enough to understand that the butler *never* does it.

The sun rises in a spectacular violet display over the orange and red sands and you cannot help but think of her again and the life you lost. Finally exhausted, you check into a hotel somewhere in Kingman, Arizona, off Route 66. The manager politely informs you that you look ready to collapse. You look like shit then. When you make it to your room and catalog the bed with a pinkish comforter and clean white sheets, you decide the manager's deduction isn't far off. You do collapse without even bothering to change out of your t-shirt and jeans.

Adia?

This is a dream. It must be. You respond instinctively to her voice anyway. You are half-asleep and half-awake and your room overlaps with the red and orange desert. A double image. An odd image: a white-pink hotel room in a desert. She *would* make you move your room into the desert.

Hmm?

Do you think maybe it's like sci-fi? Worlds upon worlds never touching?

Maybe, you tell her sleepily.

It would make sense.

You think too much, you say. You watch the reddish light trace patterns across the sandy carpeted floor of this very strange dream. You don't look at her because she isn't real.

Well of course I'm not real. This is your subconscious. A hotel room in a desert. Creative. But no, I'm not here. Not really.

You laugh at her and dare to lift your eyes to hers. They have a golden twinge in the desert light. They look brownish green and light up her beautiful face.

But, you tell her, even here in *my* subconscious it's you doing the thinking. Not me. And you *are* here. From my perspective. You exist here. I exist here, hence you are here.

Who is thinking now?

You both laugh.

Other worlds, huh?

Never touching. Except, occasionally, when they do.

It's a thought. I wish you were here.

I thought I was.

It's not enough really. Never was. I'm running out of time.

She nods. You always understood each other perhaps as well as two people can understand each other. But how well can two people understand each other in the end?

Splendid isolation, she says to you, her quirky girlish smile endearing still. She could be ninety, and still, beneath the wrinkles, she would look like a seven-year-old ready to go forth on an adventure.

But we cross it sometimes, you tell her. Some people, they touch us. You taught me that.

People touch. Worlds upon worlds never touching except when they do.

Precisely.

The desert fades with her laughter, and now you are alone in your hotel room. You flip open your cell phone, check the time, and scroll through the numbers upon numbers. Friends, old and new, a life mapped in names. Yet her name, the only number you want, is not in your phone. If you could call, what would you tell her? She'd ask where you were and wouldn't think it too strange when you said you are in what you think is a Best Western in Kingman, Arizona. Yes, a Best Western. Says so on the bedside packet. That's good actually, you have a Best Western card. It'll be cheaper. She'd laugh at that thought. If she were here.

Damn it all, you say aloud, burying your face in a fluffy hotel pillow. You swear, for a moment, that you can hear her giggling at you from somewhere far away.

When you arrive home many hours later, it's to find your passport finally returned to you with a new green and pink visitor's VISA to Nepal tucked into the back.

*

When the time comes to take up Richard's invitation, *Wicked*, unsurprisingly, makes you cry. It's hard for you not to make comparisons. The set was fantastic. I mean really, that dragon clock. You nod to Chris in agreement. The boy, Chris, dropped by Namaste Books again last week, and you somehow invited him to join you and Richard and Nicole tonight. I mean, the artistry that goes into theatre sets when you consider they'll only be up for such a short while. You try to tell him that there is something profound to that. Chris agrees with you and babbles on about Buddhism while Richard says that's just plain bullshit, and to please stop being such an obnoxious flirt, Chris. Nicole giggles, but Chris doesn't even blush.

Oh shut up, Rich. Adia doesn't mind, now does she?

You put your face in your hands and chuckle beneath your breath.

Of course Adia doesn't mind, see? I mean really, the night is young. Adia and I are going to go check out a nice restaurant, aren't we, Adia?

I'm tired tonight, you tell him with a yawn, maybe later this week? Dinner Friday, he responds immediately. You sigh and put on a show of checking your cell phone calendar. Oh, alright, I suppose so, kid. He smiles and kisses your hand before sauntering off with a spring in his step. Richard glances back and forth between you before breaking into delighted laughter. Good for you, Adia, he tells you. You cougar,

you. You stick your tongue out at him. Club tonight? But you don't feel like drinking, so you decline Richard's invitation. You don't even feel like companionship, so you tell Nicole that you will catch up over coffee and dessert later.

After sending away your friends, the night feels strangely unsafe. You watch the people moving about in the dark streets wearily. Back at your flat, you jump when Mr. Jones down the hall pops out to bring down his trash. Sorry there, Adia. No, no, it's nothing. You wish she were here again with you, and then there would be one point of reliability. Even here in your apartment with the door double-bolted, the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. And this frightens you, for you have seen what paranoia can do.

You've always told yourself that you are different. You aren't like Mother. And you *are* different, surely you are. This is just fear, fear brought about by your age—beyond hers when things deteriorated— and the current hospital visits. Always when Mother fell apart you put her back together, held things together. And it was bearable because of that one person you always trusted and then because of the memory of her. Which perhaps... You wonder, for not the first time if—

But that thought is too much. You cannot bear it. You do not let it reach completion. It is always there deep down threatening you. Does she question, too, wherever she is now? Do you both question together? The other thought that comes to you sometimes in the very dark of night is even more horrific, but yes, somewhere deep down you are almost more prepared to complete that thought than the first. You would sacrifice your whole perceived world, your whole being, for hers. That is, after all, what friends are for in the end. How would one know? Did they know, Anatzia and Enzyotee? You wonder if ever, in the dark of night, they wondered. If ever Shakespeare and

Marlowe wondered. But then, maybe everyone does from time to time. Or maybe, of course, only people like you.

You take a deep breath to rid yourself of the uncanny feeling that threatens your being. Then, spontaneously, you sit down at your computer before bed and book a flight to Philadelphia for Sunday afternoon.

*

You call Chris and set up a date to go dancing on Friday. Dancing? Yes, I want to go dancing, you tell him. You realize that you haven't been dancing in years. And you miss it. You really really miss it. You had a lot of training with dancing and have done your share of musicals, but no, you always enjoyed dancing at the clubs in college. At university, dancing of any sort appealed to you far more than the frat parties and pub crawls. Sometimes you went with friends, but oftentimes you met friends by going alone.

Tonight you take Chris to a Disco playing 'Staying Alive' for a bunch of old men with wigs that are supposed to replace their former froes. Chris particularly enjoys 'Billie Jean' and murmurs something to you about Michael Jackson's genius. Around one o'clock you decide to move on to another club playing newer music. You call this newer, Adia? This stuff is ancient. Yes, it is, but it is your music. This Chris, this is the '90s. Welcome child of the new millennium. He tells you that you are old. Richard is right, a cougar. Hey there, Mrs. Robinson. You stick your tongue out at him and send him for more drinks. You know your body has held together quite well, thank you very much. Very impressive considering what it has been through. And you are, in any case, not very

much older than him really. The Macarena comes on, and you show off your moves to a laughing Chris who cannot contain his glee at your butt-shaking prowess.

Around four in the morning, you catch the end of a more formal night ball out in the desert under the stars. You are both ludicrously underdressed but at this point the party you are crashing is composed of people much drunker than you are, so they don't really notice.

The night is cloudless, and the stars bright. You cannot see the stars like this in the city. Light pollution. These are the stars of your childhood, the endless black expanse with twinkling lights. The stars you and she used to make into your own constellations and stare at when you needed to feel small. Chris, it's so beautiful. He stands behind you and pulls you into his chest.

Chris, Chris, a shooting star! Look, there, a shooting star.

There's another, look! Little meteor shower? He is murmuring into your ear, his arms around you tightly.

Star light, star bright. The first star I see tonight. Chris tilts your head so that he can smile at you, can look into your eyes. He's too young to hear the seriousness in your voice. He's too young to understand the importance of a child's rhyme. I wish I may, I wish I might, he chants with you. Have the wish I wish tonight.

They start playing some old time rock 'n roll. Chris kisses your forehead clumsily but sweetly. What are you wishing for tonight, Adia?

You laugh. I've given all my wishes up. He kisses you hard on the mouth, and you close your eyes to see more shooting stars. Star light, star bright. His hands run

across you, and it's been so long since anyone has touched you like *that*. You sigh, feeling safe somehow in this young man's powerful embrace.

Should I call a cab? He nibbles your ear. You nod against his chest, unwilling to let yourself out of this small haven created by his arms. Let's see what we can do about those wishes of yours, Adia, hmm? Adia, why are you crying?

It's nothing, nothing at all. You pull yourself to rest your chin on his shoulder while waiting for the cab. The new position lets you look up into the night with all those small clear lights telling the stories of long-dead suns light-years away.

You don't know why you tell him. Perhaps it is the thought that someday no one will remember. Maybe you are just tired from holding all the secrets to yourself. For one reason or another, afterwards, naked in his arms with your head pillowed against his strong chest and your eyes locked with the ceiling, you start to tell him as he strokes your hair. He doesn't stop the stroking, so you know he's awake. You can feel the cold icon of St. Christopher grow warm against the back of your neck. You keep talking and talking even when the morning light comes streaming through your window to fall on the bedroom carpet. You keep talking until the sun must be directly overhead. He doesn't say anything. The ever-so-talkative Christophe remains silent. He doesn't interrupt, not even when you pause for long spaces and everything is soundless but for his breathing and your breathing and the air condition unit and the traffic outside. From time to time his hands move cautiously to wipe away the tears from your face. The tears he knows are there even though he cannot see them.

When you finally finish, both of you lay quiet for a long time. He clears his throat and shifts slightly.

I don't know what to say, it's all so...fantastical.

I know.

But why haven't you just, you know, called her? Gone to see her? Christ sake, Adia, it's easy these days to find people. You could do it on Facebook in a heartbeat.

You shake your head. It isn't that simple. You sigh, trying to think of a way to explain the inexplicable. Chris's hands move to your stomach and start to trace patterns there. I just can't. Not like that. You toy with some of the hair on his left arm. It's...that's not how it's supposed to be and what if—

You're afraid, aren't you? Didn't take you for a coward.

Of course I'm afraid but, I mean... It's more than that, it's...And it's better for her, anyway. I hurt her. It has to be her choice. I can't barge back in.

Stop it.

We always said Nepal, you see. Do you understand? It *has* to be there. That's where it would be allowed.

Allowed?

Yes.

He's quiet, processing what you've just said. You sound like my gran with her superstitions.

I know it sounds stupid.

It's not stupid, he says softly. It's just...I don't know.

I have tickets to Philly for tomorrow. To go back to the start. And I got my Nepalese VISA last week. I'm cleared to go next month if I want. So, I thought, I'd go to Pennsylvania and plan it from there. I mean, if I want to go to Nepal. Maybe it's better if I don't. Ditch the whole thing.

Chris flips you gently so that your heads share the pillow and you can look into his dark eyes. You have to go. To Nepal. You *have* to. I mean...it...it's a story, see? A great story. Adia, you have to finish it. It can't just end like that. You're right, I mean, it does have to be Nepal, doesn't it? A magical place. A Neverland. I guess I get it. And you have to go.

I know.

You don't talk as you get dressed. It's in silence too that you bring him into the kitchen and prepare pancakes and syrup and butter and fresh strawberries and blueberries and apricot jam. Breakfast for dinner. You are silent because what more is there to say? You make plain pancakes and chocolate chip pancakes and blueberry pancakes. You feel ravenous, as if you have not eaten in weeks. Pancakes were always her favorite and you have grown fonder of them in the passing years. You both eat and eat, glancing at each other from time to time as if embarrassed. Several times Chris opens his mouth to speak and then changes his mind.

After the dishes are done, you stand staring at each other. You have this feeling of heavy importance, as if somehow what you have done this night is as momentous as Columbus first finding America. It's been a long time since anything in your life has felt this significant. It probably hasn't happened since last you've seen her.

Chris takes his coat off the living room chair where one of you threw it early this morning. You walk him to the front door of your flat. He looks at you for a second, searching your eyes. You're going, aren't you? You don't answer him, and perhaps that's answer enough.

I...He sighs and shifts from foot to foot, and then looks back into your eyes. Silently, he reaches behind his neck to unclasp the chain, and passes you the icon of Saint Christopher. For protection, he says softly. You aren't religious, but you accept the necklace anyway. Your mother, when she was anything, was a Catholic. You slip the chain around your neck, and then kiss Chris lightly on the forehead. He's having none of this, pulling you into a deep hard kiss on the mouth. Thank you, you tell him softly before slipping out from under his arms. He nods, his eyes looking a bit teary, and then he turns away. I hope you find her, Adia. I hope you find her in those mountains. You watch him leave your flat, your fingers tracing the silver icon around your neck.

*

Strange to see you on a Sunday, Miss Adia.

How is she today?

From inside the room you hear her call your name. Adia.

Recognition. Always a good sign. You make your way into the little room. Hello, Mother.

She turns the wheelchair away from the window to face you.

I'm just here really quick, Mother. I'm heading to the airport. Going away for awhile.

Where?

To Pennsylvania. And then to Nepal.

She's quiet for a minute, her eyes flashing dangerously. Nepal. For your father, I suppose?

No, not for him.

There's only one other reason, and you both know it.

For her then. You are going for her, aren't you? Mother spits out her name like a curse. The nurse, straightening the sheets on the bed, jumps from his spot, the vehemence startling him.

Greg, can you leave us for a minute? You look at him. He seems to understand and quietly exits the room. You wait for the door to the hall to shut.

I must go.

Silly little girl, she will not come to you.

I will go anyway.

Your mother's green eyes turn away from you to look out of the window. She will say nothing now. She has entered that stage again. The drugs can only do so much. Her coherence is only ever borrowed and rarer with each passing week. You turn to leave.

I was enough before her, Mother mutters softly. We were fine before her.

You freeze, your hand on the doorknob, and turn back towards her. Her eyes are still focused on something out the window.

No, Mother, no we weren't fine. We hadn't been for a long time.

Your mother is trembling. Her body is old and withered and small. She holds up her shaking hands imploringly as if to God. Adia, please. No more of this! No more of her. Let it go!

I can't.

She turns to look at you again, tears streaming down her cheeks. There's a moment when you are looking at each other and there is something like understanding in her eyes for the first time in memory. Adia, I...And then something snaps, something clicks, and her eyes dim. They turn blank. She looks through you. The spark of recognition is gone. She no longer knows who you are.

You shake your head. She is still crying, her hands still raised as if in prayer, but she has forgotten why.

Slowly, you walk over to her and kiss her forehead. Goodbye.

She looks at you without seeing, and you back away from her, casting one last glance at the red-haired woman in the picture by her bedside. I forgive you, you whisper to the picture as you close the door.

*

You hop a plane for Albuquerque, and then take another flight to Newark and a third to Philadelphia. You stay a night in the city of brotherly love and in the morning take a jog, like a million other people, up Rocky's training steps, luxuriating in the rain and punching the air for joy. Soon you may very well not be able to dance and run

anymore. But now, for awhile, your body still does what you tell it to do. It could make it to Everest Base Camp if you wanted it to do so. Probably.

After a hot shower you wander down to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall. You are annoyed by how drained you are from your morning run. In the afternoon you rent a car and drive on the turnpike until you reach the suburbs. Exton with Downington right next door.

God only knows what you expect to find. It is very different, the place you called home for the happiest remembered years of your life. In your absence more people have moved here, and there are cars everywhere clogging up the widened roads. Most of the woods and farmlands that sprinkled their way through the suburb have been developed. The grocery stores have changed names. Local restaurants have gone under to be replaced entirely with chains. The tree farm across from her old elementary school has become a new housing development and the school itself has changed its colors from bright turquoise to dull grays and reds. You keep driving.

Her old neighborhood has escaped many of the changes that ravaged the surrounding area. Many of the houses have been refurbished and new owners have obviously left their mark, but the layout is the same. The streets look the same. Most of the trees remain in place. You park and walk the length of the road. It goes down a sloping hill until reaching a dip. Another road running perpendicular ends here in this dip before the hill slopes up again. Past this intersection where the school bus picked up all the children on the street. And the house on the right. Her childhood home.

It is unrecognizable. Trees have been cut down and replanted. A pool takes up space in her backyard. The front deck has been enlarged and a screened porch added to the side. All the paneling has been redone, the shutters changed colors.

The family seems to be out, so you carefully make your way to the backyard, resting a hand on one of the two great pine trees. The path through the woods is no longer overgrown and you follow it, remembering a time when a smaller version of yourself had to scramble and duck to avoid bushes and tree branches. Your creek is still bubbling but an apartment complex has been built on the far bank. It makes the crooked tree look somehow lonely.

You follow the creek to your left until you make your way out of the strange open space that was once only a field but now sports many windows with possible curious eyes. Finally there are trees, and you follow them out and over into the densest part of the forest to reach the small cottage with its decaying porch and overgrown gardens. But before you achieve your goal the trees disappear and more houses take their place. You continue through an eerie neighborhood of empty buildings that sprang into existence during times when people kept deeper pockets, and you realize that the cottage where you and your mother lived has long since been demolished.

Over the next week you walk the streets, revisiting your old haunts and trying to trace what her life would have been like after you were gone. You visit her junior high school and walk the hallways looking for her on plaques and old lists. She does not disappoint. In the high school she is even more prominent. You wonder, not for the first time, what public school would have been like. When you finally entered a university, considerable gaps existed in your home-school education. Enough so that you very nearly

failed the first year at community college. But it got better after that. After all, you were taught a very great deal, just not necessarily with order or method. She did well in school just as she has done well outside of it. Her teachers probably never knew, never guessed, what went on every Tuesday and Thursday at five o'clock sharp. You wish you could erase everything you did to her without meaning to. It was never your intention to hurt this Student of the Month, valedictorian, short-story-prize-winning, brilliant girl. You know she would tell you there is nothing to forgive, but it makes no difference because you know, just know, what you by your very existence ended up costing her.

*

In the morning, your doctor calls. The latest results are in. You ask to hear the news over the phone. It isn't good. But you already knew that. The symptoms were the same as last time, the headaches, the problems with food, the nausea, the pain. Only the insomnia is new, the insomnia that began with your remission. Nothing debilitating yet, but the early signs. You know what's coming. She, your doctor, says you should be fine for a few months before it really hits you, and then you probably won't be fine anymore. You discuss options briefly. She tells you that since you are near Philly you really should try to—but you aren't really interested right now. You will, you promise her, you will try everything. In a couple of months. First, before you get too sick to do it, there are some things you must do in case the options do not work this time. Live now, they say, but so much of now is made up of before and after. How can now exist without before and after

existing on either side? You have a lot of before, and you need to make peace with it to get to after, if there is an after to which you can get.

So it is now you send the letter to her. Well, you send the letter to Professor Mason and to a few others that perhaps could be her. It is harmless and the others sharing her name will not think anything of it. You are very sure, you see, from the articles you've read by her, that Professor Mason is the person she has become. Because you know her. But you never dared confirm for fear of disappointment. Now there can be no disappointment because the letter may not reach her in time or she may decide not to come, and you can go on believing that she is alive and well and missing you as much as you miss her.

Looking up where to send the letter, you discover Professor Mason isn't at home this year and is not scheduled to return for another week yet. She's taken two weeks as a visiting lecturer in the States at her Alma mater. Ironic indeed that now you are probably not even an ocean away from each other. Six hours drive south, and you could see her. Chris would be furious at you for not doing so. Superstition? Is that all it is? Silliness? No. It has to be her choice. You will not force your way back into her life without permission. She can come to Nepal if she chooses to do so. Both of you will have a choice.

Remembering the time difference, you call Denise and tell her to mind the shop. Richard is next on your list, and you give him a goodbye. Both are confused about your current location and sudden impulse to go even further away. Nepal? Really? Surely, considering? You affirm to them that all your vaccinations are up to date, and you are truly not going to die any quicker in Asia than America. You call the theatre to sadly

decline helping in *The Tempest* project. There are a few other calls to make to others in the theatre company, but the very small number of people you need to tell about your sudden departure hurts. Before you got sick there would have been so many numbers to call. You just couldn't keep up with it all and battle the cancer. But there are people to call, so you call them.

And then you begin to map your long-delayed adventure. In truth, two very frightened teenagers made the majority of your basic Nepal Emergency Plan long ago in a little cottage that no longer exists. As an adult you slowly re-crafted these plans so that they are now realistic. Today, you merely go to the old blue notebook you carry with you in your briefcase alongside your laptop. There are all the correct numbers to dial, the right websites to visit. You spend a half day at your computer booking flights and guides and places to stay. The journey across the Atlantic is mapped, and then a two-week stay in Scotland, first to where she has made her home, and then to where you once made yours. This will give her time to receive your letter and to do with it as she will. From the Orkney Isles, you'll get yourself down to London. You give yourself two nights to recover from the long train ride. Then you find flights from Heathrow to Delhi and then on to Kathmandu. Hesitating, you only book a one-way journey. You speak with the travel company you will be trusting to find your path. You even find a place of rest for afterwards in Pokhara. You book all your rooms for two. As the work is done you imagine that somewhere mere hours south of you, another will soon bring out a notebook or open a Word file and steadily plan her journey as well.

Wouldn't you imagine these very things at this moment? You see your version of her responding in just this way. She will receive her letter and begin preparing to meet you as you prepare to meet her. That's what you would imagine. And you would be correct. But how would she envision you, Adia? Is this account of your life correct? Is it the truth or has it been constructed for you out of thin air? You really can never know. The actress follows the script, but surely you must wonder sometimes in the very late of night when you cannot sleep. You wonder if you have ever been the one writing your own lines. Whether anything is quite as you think it is. And you fear this. You fear discovering who is really dreaming whom. And so you dream your memories. Once you were a little girl newly-arrived in the suburbs of Pennsylvania. You were young and brave and so very much in need of a friend. And so, of course, was I.

Now I'm confused.

Why?

Before, I asked you a simple question.

No, you asked for a story. Don't you understand yet? It is rather like death and rebirth with every stroke of the pen or click of the keyboard. Something precious and central to one's being is lost and gained. A story.

No, no more stories. I simply want the truth.

Right, the truth. Because that's so simple.

I met Adia the day I first realized I was going to die. I remember it was afternoon. Was it the beginning of first grade? Second? Autumn. It was autumn. Rake the leaves, Dad had told me, and so I stood out in my yard breathing in the clear blue sky and crisp air. All the trees in my yard had shed their normal emerald clothing for bright gold, ruby, orange, and violet. I remember the leaves, the smell of the leaves, the crunching noise they made under my feet, the bareness of the trees. Even now, when I walk through fallen leaves, I still cannot help but dream of my Adia.

Rake the leaves. But I didn't want to. No, no, of course not. My young self was ignoring the rake that leaned against the maple tree to remind me of my purpose that afternoon. Instead I climbed up the woodpile and became Tommy, the Green Power Ranger. I was about to take on a giant monster I'd created from my limited knowledge of mythology to be a cross between Minotaur and Medusa.

Prepare to meet your doom, I told the invisible creature. I skirted backwards on the log as the monster advanced. There was no practical reason that Tommy had to be on top of a huge log, but it made things cooler. I jumped to a log that put me even higher up to better see my foe. This new perch was wobbly, but Tommy could now see the trapped Kimberly on the other side of the monster he had to face. Tommy was terrified. Oh, my one-true-love, my Kimberley, trapped by a snake-bull-woman...thing! An evil thing that can—I decided on a whim—breathe fire. Ducking around the sudden burst of flames, I caught Kimberley's eye and poured out reassurance. It is all right my love; I shall rescue you.

The next burst of flame from my monster caught me off guard, and I side-stepped quickly. And yes, yes the music in my head reached a dramatic peak, and Kimberley gave a scream of horror (I wasn't Kimberly precisely because she didn't get to do much in this whole rescue business). Now was the perfect time to save the girl. As I moved to fulfill this goal, I missed my footing.

It happened in an instant, but just like in the movies all time slowed to a crawl. I watched the woodpile crumble underneath me and went up up into the air, staring in horror at the cloudless blue sky. And then gravity reaffirmed its authority, and the sky was falling away from me. I hit the ground hard, expecting pain and feeling nothing. I could hear my heart pumping madly in my ears but all other sound was blocked. Even my vision seemed blurry, unfocused. And then I realized that I wasn't breathing.

I was going to die. For a split second, flat on my back with the wind knocked out of me, I imagined not getting up. I fast-forwarded to the moment my dad found me dead. I made her rake the leaves, on the last day of her life, I made her do chores. He would

cry. And I, I saw the possibility of my death as a weapon. Here it was, finally, my ability to get back for all those unanswered tears. I imagined my funeral, the weeping. My parents begging for forgiveness for every time they'd made me feel guilty for forgetting to clean my room. My mother laying the special New York City t-shirt she'd promised to bring me on my corpse like a flag for soldiers.

And that was all good but... Death. I'm going to die. Forever. Because that's how it works, death. Forever dead. We can't die, take our revenge on parents, and then come back alive. There's no dead followed by not-dead. I was going to die and where was Dad, and what if Mom couldn't make it back from New York in time for the funeral and would I make a really freaky corpse and what if Dad found out about the chocolate bar I'd hidden in my drawer from Halloween even though I said I didn't know where it was and would they make me into a mummy or burn me or put me under the ground and—I am going to die! Forgotten, under a tombstone somewhere. The worms eating me. Dead. Dad, where is Dad? Because I'm dying!

From the growing abyss of terror above me, I made out a hand reaching down to help me up. Dad! But no, it was a small hand, like my own, though the skin was darker and the shape more delicate. I grasped this savior hand, and it pulled me upwards. As instinct had already told me, the moment I found my feet I could breathe again. I gasped in the air. I kept breathing, listening to my lungs fill and waiting for the dizziness to stop.

The hand belonged to a little girl dressed all in red. About my age. She was very small and elegant, reminding me of a fairy princess or my favorite American girl doll. Her skin was a rich brown, her long black curls were wild, and her red cloak was covered in leaves. Was she Indian, Italian, African? I was too young to know. She was beautiful.

That image, my first image of her, remains frozen in my mind. It never goes away. The girl did not speak to me, but looked deeply into my eyes with hers, with those deep-brown-almost-black eyes dipped in sparkling gold. I could not even find the words to thank her.

I sat down, shaking. The whole world looked different. I noticed the very particular color of blue above me. I noticed how the leaves made this beautiful carpet across the dying grass. I noticed that the despised rake was sort of pretty in a way when you looked at how it stood there against the shed. The sunlight was dancing on the ground at my feet. Light can dance. I might have said this aloud, because the girl agreed with me.

And then I turned, and I looked up at her standing there. I looked at her for maybe minutes or hours and then I started to cry because I almost died! The girl in red sat next to me hesitantly and put an arm around me. I shrugged her off. We sat there, suspended in time as would-be comforter and victim. Slowly, she approached me again and rested a hand on my arm. I allowed it.

I half-expected my father to come running, for someone to realize somehow that the world had just started spinning backwards and no longer made sense. I waited for someone somewhere to share my wonderment or for something truly profound to appear from thin air. Since it soon became apparent that the world wasn't going to suddenly stop spinning because I thought it should, I finally took a deep breath and turned to the girl. I half-mumbled a thank you.

I saw you fall, the girl told me. As she spoke her eyes looked down at her delicate hands. She saw me fall really hard, and she wanted to help because it looked like it hurt badly. I thanked her again.

My name is Adia, she told me. Her hands gestured vaguely to the woods to indicate that she lived somewhere over that way. I tried to smile, but I think it probably came across as a strange grimace. Sophie, I offered finally, giving up on smiling. My name is Sophie.

I'm going to die. I murmured the admission aloud. We all die, Adia said. She was humming a tune from Cinderella and kept one arm posed to direct her mice helpers. Adia insisted that mice must help us with the raking or it would not be done properly. I didn't see these mice because I apparently did not look in the right way.

But I'm going to die.

Yep. You, me, and even the poor Justin and Sara and Timmy and Dawn.

Justin and—? The mice. Right. The rake scraped against the muddy mush of leaves that shielded the drier upper layer from the earth. I already knew, of course, that I was going to die. As Adia said, everybody died. Even heroes like Tommy and Kimberley, even Jane and Laura from *Little House on the Prairie*, even the teenage-mutant ninja turtles, even Mom and Dad and President Clinton, even all of them would die. And I knew that, everybody knew that.

Uh-huh, agreed Adia with a snort. Everybody knows that. She raked like a dancer, twirling around this way and that. Adia stuck her tongue out at me when I pointed to my

bigger pile of leaves. She twirled more in response. I was a better raker, but she was a much prettier one.

If I was going to die then there were only so many years I could live. I knew enough about life-spans to think that the very, very most I could hope for would be one hundred years and that was if I was lucky and—and I'd already eaten into those one hundred years which meant I was down before I even knew that the clock was ticking. Just pausing to think was wasting my time. There was another second gone. And another...I listened closely to my heart. For a second I thought it wasn't there, that it had stopped, but then I could hear it again, slowly counting away the seconds of my life.

You are so dramatic, Sophie. You are scaring the mice. Like Mother. Mother scares the mice too.

I watched Adia nudging Justin and Dawn away from the fascinating red-orange rock they both considered more interesting than freeing the lawn of leaves. It is a magical rock, Adia was telling the invisible mice, but we can see what it does later. Only Sophie can use it anyway. It is her rock because this is her home. You are guests. Behave.

If my time was in fact limited then that probably meant I couldn't do everything in the world I wanted to do. I couldn't become the first woman president, find the cure for cancer, join an award-winning rock band, become a clown in the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and save the world like Captain Planet told me to! I had to go to Africa, travel down the Amazon, climb Everest, and go to the moon and still make time for school and getting married and raising my twelve children on a dairy farm. And there were only one hundred years, if I was lucky. And—my horror grew until I was forced to put down my

rake—what if I somehow managed to do all of those things, and it didn't matter because I was dead!

Sophie—

It's death, it's, you know, *death*.

Okay?

I mean, you know, I said, gesturing to the brown leaves carpeting our lawn. These were the last to fall. There would be no more. Adia looked confused, but she nodded as if she understood my admittedly inarticulate pronouncement on human mortality.

*

When *I* remember our story, it is never the fall that I think of first. No, it's several weeks later, it's the first time that Sophie invited me into her room. We tiptoed up the stairs so that her dad wouldn't know I was there. We snuck up, giggling to ourselves, and Sophie whisper-yelled at me when I stepped on the one stair that creaked. Shhh! Sorry. The house was very clean, I remember that, how clean it was. There were pictures hanging everywhere upstairs. Pictures of a little Sophie in a green dress and Sophie at dance recitals and Sophie and her mom and dad in New York City. And Sophie's Mom and Dad getting married. There were so many pictures. My mother didn't keep any pictures in our house.

Her room was on the other end of the hall from her parents' room. The walls were light blue, and it was a small room with a white closet and a twin bed covered in

'Pocahontas' sheets. A little desk tucked itself into the corner of the room. Her beanie babies and Power Ranger action figures and McDonald's and Burger King toys were piled up in crates by her bed. And she had dolls too! They were standing together on her window sill. The only thing our rooms had in common were books. She had lots and lots of books on a little bookshelf next to her desk. I had books in my room, too.

Welcome to my room, Sophie told me shyly, waving her arms excitedly but keeping her eyes on the white carpet. See, the bed, it looks like a bed, but it is really the Great Purple and Orange Field, and, and these look like just toys, but this is Spot and Frollo and...she fell quiet again, indicating the crates with all the friends I was about to meet without meeting my eyes. It's wonderful, I told her. I walked over to the window sill and took down a doll. Hello, I'm Adia. And you are? Clare, Sophie whispered. Her name is Clare. Nice to meet you, Clare. Sophie looked up at that, and the redness of her face started to go away. You, you like my room? I nodded to her and then asked if Justin and Dawn, who were my favorite mice, could sit on her bed. She said yes.

Oh, Adia, I can see them now! She told me, squinting at them really hard. Justin has on a little funny hat?

Yeah, he kinda likes that hat. The blue one?

Green.

We both squinted at Justin for a bit before deciding finally to call his hat turquoise. Can you introduce me to your friends now, Sophie? Sophie must have let me meet all of them, Spot and Frollo and Sasha and Mrs. Gertrude and the others. I can't remember. It was afterwards, we were both lying on her bed facing each other, and we

decided we would tell each other secrets. So I said, Tell me a good thing that happened before, Sophie.

Before?

Uh-huh. Want to know about you, about before we were friends. A good thing.

She was quiet for a bit, wrinkling her nose up as she decided which memory to give to me. And then she started to tell me about the good thing that happened before.

Dad would sing when I couldn't sleep. I remember being very sick and cold, though he told me that was because I was too warm. But I felt cold and wanted to curl up under all the blankets. I couldn't seem to get warm. He held me under the blankets, and I shivered and shivered. He sang to me: I guess you'd say, what can make me feel this way? I nuzzled into him and smelled something minty and very Dad. My girl, my girl, talking about my girl. And I yawned even though I was pretty sure that there were monsters just over there in the shadows. He told me I was seeing things because I was too hot. I told him I was too cold. I got sunshine on a cloudy day. Then the door was opening, and the light from the hall made me blink and sniffle. Mom was there, still in a blue suit and the light framing her like an angel. Sophie. She crawled into my bed on the other side. Now I was between them, and I decided I liked that very much. It was warmer. They were talking above me, and Mom sounded scared and Dad was trying to make her feel better. I yawned again and decided not to pay any more attention to what they were saying but rather just their voices. His rumbled deep and was very steady-like, and hers was higher and came out like a surprise every time. Mom started to sing to me then. She told me, you are my sunshine, my only sunshine. She smelled like flowers, and she was supposed to be in China or Singapore or somewhere else far away, but she was here. Dad

started laughing in his chest because he said I was purring like a cat. And then somehow it was morning and I wasn't cold anymore. And that was a good thing that happened before.

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So now that we are best friends, we should go on a quest. This suggestion puzzled Adia. A quest for what? I had no answer to this either. I must have looked embarrassed for suggesting it because Adia immediately told me that it was a good idea, but we had to figure out what to quest for, obviously. What could we quest for? The fountain of youth had been found too many times, everyone already had rights under the Constitution, we'd landed on the moon, and the Power Rangers really didn't need any help. We could end death, but Adia thought that was silly and probably bad. I didn't see why, but as I had no idea how to go about ending death except for beaming my consciousness into an ugly robot, I decided to abandon the idea. Because then you'd become all robotic-like and probably start trying to upgrade people or forget about emotion or something. I had no idea what Adia was talking about, but agreed with her on the principle of the thing.

We were lying behind the woodpile in the early spring looking up at the cloudy sky and drawing in twin black notebooks with my colored pencils. I was making an evil fairy-man with red eyes and Adia was busy with a willow-woman and her friend, the flower-woman with raindrops for hair. You should draw the sky *all* the way down, I told Adia. She snorted and affirmed that the sky was only up at the top. She told me that my fairy's mustache was in the wrong place, and I said that Poirot had a mustache like that

on the covers of Agatha Christie, so there. But villains and heroes have different mustaches. No they don't. Yes they do. I changed the mustache but just to make it bushier. Adia didn't understand why my fairy's nose was green, but I didn't understand why the willow-woman had an orange suit on, so we just agreed to disagree.

But, about the quest. Something we need to do to become women, like the Knights of the Round Table. What did they do? Damsels in distress, the Holy Grail, battling monsters...stuff like that.

We tried to figure out if damsels existed that were not in distress, and then decided that damsels must have disappeared from the earth entirely, because they didn't seem to wander around needing help anymore. Indiana Jones found the Holy Grail and it turned people into skeletons and made big temples collapse, so we didn't see much point in having it, even if it made Indiana's dad stop bleeding. There were probably still monsters around, because we didn't believe the adults when they said they didn't exist, but monsters seemed to only be in places like China or Iceland. We wondered about dragons for a bit. Slaying dragons seemed mean though. I wanted a pet dragon. Adia agreed and specified that it should be a Chinese dragon because they were really neat-looking. She proceeded to draw a Chinese dragon, and I started to draw a light bulb fairy that was like a firefly with a bird's head and cute antennas that lit up.

Adia really liked my light bulb fairy, and I really liked her dragon, so we exchanged pictures to put up in our rooms. Then we grew bored of drawing and decided to play hide and seek. I was It first, so I closed my eyes and counted one, two, three, four, five, and went on all the way up to twenty-eight, twenty-nine and thirty! Ready or not here I come! Adia was a very good hider. I looked all around the wood pile and in the

little plastic toy castle, and then I went behind both of the big trees and even under the back porch where all the snakes would go in summer. Adia wasn't anywhere.

The grey sky had finally managed to drizzle. March wasn't really doing a good job coming in like a lion. The not-quite rain did get me wet, though, and I was now cold. I decided that Adia had won our game. I didn't like this, but I wanted to go inside and have some hot chocolate. I started to cry out: Olly olly oxen free, olly olly oxen free! But Adia would not come out. Olly olly oxen free! Come out, come out, wherever you are! I went to the front yard searching for her too. She was nowhere, and I was so angry that tears started to make my eyes sting and my nose run. Olly olly oxen free!

I ran back to the backyard and hid underneath the tower of my plastic castle shouting out my surrender, but no one appeared to claim victory. I sat there tapping my foot against the ground until I made a really big hole. Then I started to worry. I ran out and re-searched all the usual hiding places and even went into the woods much further than I was supposed to looking behind all the trees and wiping drizzle out of my eyes. I started to take apart the pile of firewood in the neighbors' yard, thinking Adia had hidden herself inside it.

Olly olly oxen free! Come out, come out, wherever you are! Adia! The drizzle was not too bad anymore, but I was very muddy from digging through the leaves and wood. I painted my face with some of the mud and drew circles of brown on my cheeks. Adia!

Coming back into my yard, I started to search again. I bent to look under the porch and felt hands on my shoulders. I jumped.

There you are! Adia looked delighted to see me, as if *I* had been the one who had disappeared for hours. Scaredy-cat, I couldn't find you.

I was not amused.

Where were you? Adia giggled but would not tell me. I hit her. This stopped the giggling, and then we were wrestling in the not quite alive grass, me trying to pin her and she biting down on my hand. I screamed out, and she rolled so that she was on top of me, holding my legs down with her own smaller body. I threw mud at her.

Not fair! Adia shielded her eyes and lost her grip over my legs. I pushed her over onto the ground and got mud all up her t-shirt with Beauty and the Beast on it. She stuck her tongue out at me. Where were you? Not telling. Tell me.

I reached out to start to tickle under her arm pits. No, not fair! But I wouldn't listen. Soon I had her laughing and trying to pull away from me. Stop! Stop! Uncle! Uncle!

I stopped. Where were you?

Okay, okay! Get off, okay! I graciously allowed her to sit up, my fingers poised for further tickling torture should she refuse to comply with my request for information. Adia reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper that she slowly unfolded to reveal a picture done in crayons. She told me, I was here, silly Sophie. It was a picture of a red-roofed house in a small village with lots of green mountains in the background. My special place. She pointed to the picture. This is where I want to go when I grow up. The tan-stone house with the red roof looked very pretty. Mother says that this is in Nepal in the Himalayas and that's where I want to go. It's the picture

Mother has on the wall, and Mother says she was there a long time ago. She told me stories. And that is where I was just now. I was on my way to Everest.

I told her that it looked like Nepal was very far away, and she couldn't have gotten there and back so quick unless she used teleportation. Well, said Adia, that's where I was. I told her she was a liar, liar pants on fire, but Adia wouldn't tell me where her real hiding place had been. Why didn't you come out when I called? Adia told me she had not heard me call because she was in Nepal, but I wouldn't believe her.

Our pictures had gotten very wet and ruined when I had been searching for Adia even though I had left them in the plastic castle so that they'd be safe. I blamed it all on Adia. I decided not to speak to her for ten whole minutes. This made her so upset and she said sorry so many times that I caved after only probably three minutes, and we went into the toy plastic castle with the roof so that the drizzle didn't get us wet anymore.

If you can go off to Nepal any time, how am I supposed to find you when you hide, I quipped to Adia. She promised that she wouldn't hide there again, and I couldn't hide anyplace either that wasn't in the yard. She explained that she could only go to Nepal for a short time when she tried really hard. But when she grew up, she wanted to go there for real and be able to feel the mountains and taste the sky. Her short trips only let her see it through a layer of mist so that it wasn't really there. Well, I reasoned, we can go together. Adia thought this was a brilliant idea and said we could take mules up the mountain roads with our stuff and walk up high until the mist was underneath us and everything was real and solid. Mother told me about it. The road to Everest. We will go together. Best friends.

Okay. Maybe, I thought, that could be our quest. Adia agreed since we couldn't think of anything better.

My dad started to call because I shouldn't be out in the rain like that or I was going to catch a cold. Adia took the picture of my light bulb fairy with wet splotches ruining the wings and making the beak look too long. I took her Chinese dragon that had mostly lost its tail and one of its eyes. I decided it had had an accident involving a really unfriendly knight.

*

Enzyotee, was, as usual, late. I had adjusted long ago to her strange hours for coming and going. She had more difficulty sneaking away from her father than I did getting away from mine, especially in the summer when the wildflowers bloomed and her father wanted her to weave those she picked into little wreathes to put in her hair. It was something her mother used to do, and her father insisted she do it now although she found it boring. I was irritated, however, with Ad—Enzyotee. I would soon be forced to return to my village for supper.

I wandered under Auntie's refuge listlessly, playing with her branches that bent sideways like her crooked body. Auntie's roots reached out over the creek, and I sat on them looking at the big tadpoles play. The bubbling water became my music, and I sat in silence remembering the argument from the night before. Father had been so angry at me for my refusal to do the typical work of women. For deciding not to take part in the girl's

dancing. My dalliances in medicine and the healing arts were improper. A blot against our family's good name.

Anatzia?

I jumped, startled as usual when Enzyotee appeared seemingly from thin air through the trees. She was born a huntress. Her agility and silent footsteps never gave the deer any time to flee. She could dance the girl's dance well.

We embraced. Our meetings were as sacred as they were few. It was difficult given our position. The tribes were not yet in all-out war, but neither did they have any contact. Every time we saw one another we crossed taboos and entered enemy territory.

I had brought cheese and grapes. Enzyotee was delighted. We sat side by side to share the bounties of the earth, each reporting on the other's doings since our last meeting.

Sometimes, my dear heart sister, it feels as if the world does not exist except when you are here. I understood this feeling; my father and the warriors and women of our tribe always seemed distant when I left this clearing. They were like echoes or ghosts. Here I was assured of my own reality and that of the world outside. We had to be together for things to hold firm.

Enzyotee had been hunting recently and was concerned, for the rabbits seemed particularly few in the fields across the river. Something, she was sure, was amiss. Shadows were coming for the rabbits too soon. We must discover what can be done.

Together we left the safety of our Auntie, the beautiful crooked tree, and ventured forth to the river wide and rolling with white caps. We crossed via the secret path of stones and came to the great field with its grasses of gold and silver.

The rabbits, once more numerous than pebbles on the river's bed, were decidedly scarce. It made hunting far more difficult. We must go into the rabbit lairs to discover the cause of this misfortune, my sister. We were both resolved on this course of action and approached the nearest of the rabbit holes cautiously. We feared the possibility of wonderland and the queen of hearts. (No, no. Wait, back up. Wonderland is not on the other side. Wrong story. Sorry, let's go back. Yep, sorry, I mean, well, where were we?) My sister, the hole is surprisingly big enough for two girls of reasonable size to fit into without struggle.

I rolled my eyes at Enzyotee. (Seriously, two girls of reasonable size? Seriously?) But we none-the-less continued downwards into the pit of despair. (You aren't an Albino or Wesley! As you wish, Adia.) We continued downwards into the dark underworld of the rabbits where disease was rapidly diminishing their numbers. They are sick? Well, yes. As a future healer, I could naturally smell disease the moment that my nose came into contact with the stale air.

What, pray, caused the disease? Enzyotee and I were momentarily unsure how to approach the problem of finding the disease's source and thereby its cure. We ventured further into the pit of de—into the dark rabbit hole. We came at last to the center of the rabbit colony. Which, though I really thought it would be more dirt and burrows, somehow became a great floating golden city. Clouds had appeared. I disagreed very much with the appearance of the clouds, but then I no longer had full control of our surroundings. (Adia, I whined, I thought it was *my* turn to be in charge of the story! Underground clouds are cool, Sophie.)

I should have known at that moment what we were facing. I should have seen that only power as great as that of the shadow sorcerer could ever produce such fantastic visions. As it was I am afraid that my refusal to see clouds underground in a pit of des— in a rabbit's burrow interfered with my clearer judgment. Fortunately my heart sister Enzyotee immediately grasped the true horror of our situation.

We are doomed for the clouds are turning to grey! They were indeed turning very grey and soon rain began to fall. We're underground! Oh Enzyotee, we'll be drowned! The water came higher and higher until we were both swimming, struggling against the grey monstrous waters and the winds. The golden city had turned to a place of ash and decay.

Take my hand, Enzyotee! She did, grabbing on to me. Together we held to each other like life rafts while the shadow sorcerer made the underground sky rain. Oh Anatzia, you know the ways of healing. Surely you can fix this disease.

Disease. It was raining. Underground. In the pit of despair. Where the rabbits lived. I could not think of what disease my heart-sister spoke. I must have been wrong in my earlier evaluation. Clearly. (Help me, Adia.)

We were drowning, and I didn't know a way out. Neither did my heart sister. We would die here. (I...what about, oh, that's a good idea. Yeah? Yeah!) We were drowning, that is, until we both remembered. We remembered in unison, as is so common of me and Enzyotee. We remembered an impossible memory of the time when we were both very small. We remembered how our mothers died. The shadow sorcerer. He offered my mother the chance to be a man's equal, a potion that was in fact poison. And he offered my mother, Enzyotee said softly, the man she truly loved, but the love potion was only

poison, too. The shadow sorcerer dealt in trickery. The clouds underground were not real; they were delusions. All this was his magic spell.

How do we fight this wickedness? Only, I knew, with that weapon which always could fight the shadows. Keep holding my hand, oh my dearest friend. Now say it with me, remember who you are and what is true: Hello. My name is Anatzia! You killed my mother, prepare to die!

(Really, *really*, we're going with that?)

Yes!

My heart-sister saw the wisdom of my suggestion nearly immediately. Without questioning it even for a moment. My name is Enzyotee. You killed my mother, prepare to die!

We repeated the spell over and over, clinging to each other as the waters took us to the top of the empty tunnels—the golden city which turned to ash had continued to sit proudly on a cloud and then at some point the ash and the cloud had disappeared altogether—and we gasped out our spells. Hello, my name is Anatzia. You killed my mother. Prepare to die. Hello, my name is Enzyotee. You killed my mother. Prepare to die!

The ceiling burst open suddenly through the force of our combined spells, and we erupted like a volcano of water on to the fields above. Both of us were gasping for breath, soaked, and scared from our very close brush with death. Water continued to sprout like a geyser and it was—golden? With Time Lord regeneration energy? Huh? (Really S—I mean Anatzia, you need to watch more British tele—I mean, to listen to more legends from the stars across the water.) The water was golden and life-giving and suddenly all

the rabbits were emerging from their dens glowing gold. One had on a vest and had a watch and kept going on about being late, but Enzyotee and I naturally ignored him because he didn't actually exist. (But—no, no watch-carrying bunny rabbit!)

And that is how Enzyotee and I saved the bunny rabbits from the shadow sorcerer and discovered the truth about our mother's deaths. We did not know it, but it was only the beginning of our fight against the shadows. Great sacrifices were yet to come.

*

I hid behind the tree watching them on the front porch. It was hot that day, nearly summertime. Soon Sophie wouldn't have school anymore. Soon we could play all through the day in Sophie's backyard. This was a Saturday, however, and Sophie didn't have school. She had told me she would meet me, but she hadn't come to the backyard. It happened a lot, her saying she would come and then not coming because there was homework or her dad decided to take her out to dinner. So here I was, feeling like a spy or a traitor or both, but I didn't care. Sophie had good reasons when she broke her promises to come. She always did. There were other things, and she did share with me sometimes. She tried to tell me about it all, but I only ever got it second hand. I only ever got to watch.

It was like a play at the theatre sometimes. I watched him twirl her up and around in his arms. He struggled with it a bit. She was getting too big for this. But he still tried. Sophie was laughing and laughing and gasping for breath because she was laughing too

hard. He was thin and strong and a dad, a real dad. The sort of dad mine would have been if he had been there.

Dizzy!

Okey-dokey, Soph. He let her down, but their hands met, and Sophie was talking to him without stopping. He was laughing and shaking his head, but still listening to her talk and holding her hand.

He went back into the house eventually, and Sophie came to find me eventually. I told her that I had just gotten there. I didn't tell her that I watched sometimes. I think she knew. Come on then, Adia. And we went off into the backyard behind the trees so that Sophie's parents wouldn't be able to see us from the windows. We went to our next adventure and left Sophie's house and Sophie's dad behind us.

*

Afterwards, we could never agree who found the message in the bottle. We had been catching fish at the creek that was right behind my house in the woods. Igor was the biggest of our fish, and he had had a very bad childhood. Igor's dad was the king of the fish kingdom under the tree roots and hated for Igor to meet other fish because it would mess up his princely manners. I can't recall the other fish that day or what their stories were, but Igor had a strange black mark on his back shaped like a claw, and we caught him several times that summer with our bright orange butterfly nets. Igor now liked us quite a lot. When we first caught Igor he was snotty to us, and Adia very nearly threw him back. But I convinced her to hold on to him until we figured out his story. It was

very sad growing up without a mommy, and with a daddy who wanted him to think he was better than everyone else. Igor was in the large red bucket alone because he was still learning to play nice with other fish. We were telling him about Anatzia and Enzyotee's latest adventure. He'd never been told stories when he was a baby fish.

Adia had let her mice helpers go on a journey to Antarctica to meet the penguins, so now our special fishing helpers were two polar bears named Shakespeare and Marlowe. I preferred Marlowe to Shakespeare because he had met Winnie the Pooh and had a Mexican accent. Shakespeare worked a bit harder than Marlowe when it came to finding fish, and he had black marks like glasses around his eyes. Shakespeare, however, thought Barney was still cool, and I therefore couldn't take him that seriously. In any case Marlowe was a vegetarian while Shakespeare really wanted to eat Igor the Fish. This meant that for our current story-telling hour, Shakespeare was seated on the opposite bank of the creek, which was a high and grassy field. The polar bear did not take his isolation well, even going so far as to enact the very worst possible revenge.

I love you, you love me, we're a happy family—

—bang! bang! Barney's on the floor. No more stupid dinosaur!

Shakespeare gave me a very teary look at my rendition of his beloved song, and turned his back to us to sulk while Marlowe sniggered. Adia gave me a reproachful look. Shakespeare likes Barney, and you should be nice. I stuck out my tongue, and she rolled her eyes at me, making me feel like I was about five and I wasn't. I sighed and walked into the creek with my special new magenta water shoes and climbed up the natural staircase to the other bank. I sat by Shakespeare while Adia continued took over in telling

Igor his story. Marlowe kept interrupting Adia with silly ideas even though he knew nothing about Anatzia and Enzyotee. Only Adia and I knew about them.

I'm sorry, Shakespeare, I told the polar bear. He was crying, and his tears fell off his face and turned into little sparkly sapphires. I started to feel very bad. I will try not to kill Barney in any more bad versions of the song. I put a hand on the bear's shoulder and gave his white fur a firm squeeze. Shakespeare made me promise and swear to be nice to Barney before he finally forgave me. Marlowe came over to sit next to Shakespeare, and Adia brought Igor over too so that all five of us were looking out at the creek and the crooked tree whose roots hid all of Igor's future subjects. It was a brilliant place for a kingdom because the butterfly nets couldn't get under the tree roots so the fish could always go there to be safe.

Marlowe put a hand on Shakespeare's other shoulder and gave him little kisses on both eyelids to make the last of the tears go away. The two of them argued all the time, but they really did love each other very much even if Marlowe thought that Shakespeare's meat-eating habits were against bear goodness and Shakespeare could not stand Marlowe's irreverence towards his friend Barney.

It was then that I saw the bright blue bottle. Of course, Adia believed that she saw it a whole ten seconds before I did, and Marlowe and Shakespeare both agreed that they saw it before either of us. But *I* know I saw it first. In any case, we had a four-way jinx when we all shouted out look! at the same time. The bright blue bottle rested just beneath the slightly higher bank we all sat on. It was about two yards to our left and a little nook had caught it so that only the very top of it stuck out from the outcropping of earth.

Adia got there first but only because I tripped over Marlowe's paws. She yanked the blue bottle out of the mud and started to make a high-pitched excited sound that really didn't have any words in it. Marlowe, Shakespeare, and I gathered around her.

After some deciphering, it was clear that Adia was squeaking the words 'a message in a bottle' at a register that perhaps dogs could pick up, but so, thankfully, could polar bears. It is a message in a bottle! That means that we get wishes.

I thought wishes were with genies, but Adia growled at me before trying to pull out the message that surely must be in the bottle. After a few minutes of trying, Adia said it didn't really matter; the important thing was the wishes. The polar bears out-voted me about the wishes just being a genie thing. We apparently got three wishes, and that meant one for me, one for Adia, and one for the bears.

Well, said Shakespeare, I already have Marlowe so I don't need any wishes. This made Marlowe get a bit misty-eyed before he agreed. The polar bears were uninterested in the wishes, and that meant that Adia and I had three whole wishes to ourselves. We asked Marlowe and Shakespeare if they were sure about giving up the wishes, and they said absolutely. They did really like the blue bottle, however, and wanted to put it in their home in the North Pole, so we gave it to them. They both gave us hugs, we'd all forgiven each other by then, and headed home with the blue bottle.

So, three wishes?

Yep.

One would be just mine and one would be just Adia's, but the third had to be ours. We decided to save our shared wish for Nepal because we figured that the magic of the bottle and the magic of our special place would make that wish very very powerful.

Neither of us could decide on our individual wishes, but we knew that we would find them one day soon. The important thing, as Adia said, was that now we each had a wish, and there is nothing better than having a wish at hand.

*

One afternoon, we decided that secretly Sophie's mother was a superhero. A woman super-hero. Only she wears clothes instead of bathing suits. A blue business suit with a green cape and a green mask in order to hide her true identity as Mary Mason. Of course, her superhero days started before she became Mary Mason, back when she was still Mary Maslovskiy. It started when she took a trip to the Middle East in college and saw the women there but especially the little girls. That's when she decided to become—

Super Girl?

That sounds silly. Like Bat-boy, that sounds silly too. Superwoman? Isn't there already one of those? I don't know, never seen her in a movie. The only cool sort of girl superhero is Cat-woman, and she's a villain usually. Yeah, because Batgirl, not so cool. Agreed. It's like my school. Lions are the mascot but then they call the girls Lady Lions. How is that scary, being a *lady* lion? Ladies don't fight! And it doesn't even make sense, Adia agreed, because the girl lions do the hunting, so it should be Lionesses and Lord Lions. I started to laugh. Because the Lord Lions just sit around having food brought to them. Yeah. Anyway. Right, side-tracked. Yeah. What's her superpower? She doesn't have one; she's like Batman. Batman's cooler than Superman *because* he doesn't have a superpower. But jet packs, I think she should have jet packs to fly.

The Tempest.

Hmm?

It means storm, but sounds better.

Okay, The Tempest.

After her trip to the Middle East, Mary decided to devote her life to making the world better for little girls like the ones she met. She started working for charities and eventually got involved in things like the United Nations, but she knew this was not enough. So one day she found herself a costume and jet packs and became The Tempest. And wherever there were little girls in slavery or being married too young or hurt by their dads or anything like that she would swoop in from the sky and help. She fought villains and corrupt governments all over the world. And she did it all without ever letting her make-up get smeared. Like in all the movies. And whenever she got covered in dirt and dust or got punched, it only made her look prettier. Because she was a superhero.

*

She's dead. I immediately protested that she was, in fact, just tired. I prodded the salamander in the small bowl I'd furnished with a large assortment of woodland necessities: mud, rocks, leaves, grass, and even a small structure that held water. My salamander, Sally, appeared to be unappreciative of this great effort and remained motionless, stretched across a leaf.

It's been getting cold again, she probably just, you know....last night, in the frost? Adia offered her explanation timidly. I shook my head. Adia had never liked Sally. She didn't understand. My lower lip was trembling. Sophie? I'm sorry, but—

I cut her off with a sharp acknowledgment. I was crying, and I hated to cry because big girls weren't supposed to. I hated that Adia, who did not like Sally, could see my grief. Adia stood awkwardly beside me, trying to allow my quiet sobbing to go unnoticed, trying to ignore my anger.

We should go inside. Adia pointed to the cloudy sky and reminded me that it was going to rain. She was right; the clouds had darkened and hung low, preparing themselves for the coming storm. It smelled like rain. We could feel the moisture, taste it. As if to confirm all of these intuitions, a crack of thunder sounded above us in warning. But I couldn't just leave Sally.

I got up and patted Auntie's trunk. It was here that I had taken Sally the Salamander after we'd caught her three weeks before, and it was here that I'd made up her home, painstakingly, making sure every little thing was right. Adia had refused to help me. Adia, I was convinced, was jealous, jealous of how very much I loved my Sally.

Sophie, I only wanted to set her free. Because to keep her in the cage, it was wrong. We argued. We'd argued for hours about Sally. I'd attended to her nearly every day, changing her water and making sure there were plenty of accessories in her cage. I'd even played with her, letting her out for awhile and holding her in my hands to run criss-crossing patterns around my fingers. I'd taken good care of Sally. Adia had looked on angrily, pouting.

And now Sally was dead.

I'm sure she lived a good long salamander life, Adia suggested quietly. She was a good salamander, Sally. I sat down, looking at the salamander. Clouds were swirling above me and I knew that it was time to go back inside, time to leave, but I couldn't.

What do you want to do with Sally? I thought about this very hard. What to do with a dead salamander? Sally was my first pet to die, aside from goldfish, and Dad had just flushed these creatures down the toilet. Sally the Salamander deserved more than this. She deserved a burial. A real funeral, agreed Adia.

There was a large rock under Auntie. I struggled to move it aside and with Adia's help flipped it to reveal the insect life beneath it. Earthworms, centipedes and other creatures whose names I did not know swarmed in the loose earth. Without speaking, we began to dig the grave with our hands. Blackness worked its way up our arms and I knew that some explanation would be called for when I saw my father later. We didn't know it, but the dirt under our nails wouldn't disappear for weeks. It had rained recently, and the earth was moist and fresh to our touch.

The sun was now totally obscured by clouds. Winds were picking up and blew fiercely. Growling thunder kept us glancing upwards as if in prayer. Adia looked over to me often to see if we were done, but I wanted to bury Sally deep. I'd heard stories about animals eating away at the remains of creatures too close to the surface.

Okay, I said finally. We'd made it down at least a foot. I reached up to brush the hair out of my face that had fallen from my ponytail, and I smeared myself with mud.

As we stood up, the rain hit. Even through the trees the pelting bullets of water found us, splashing in our faces. Adia gasped at the sheer force of the rain. We gathered close together and tried to move tighter beneath Auntie's branches. Flashing lightning

and echoing thunder made us both jump. We looked at each other. Being under a tree during a thunder storm was generally not considered intelligent, and we both knew it.

Let's just bury her quick, I told Adia. Her eyes widened. Sophie, there's thunder! We were obviously in mortal danger. Fine, Adia muttered, and before I could do anything she bent to pick up Sally and carried her ceremoniously towards the grave. I walked directly behind her, in procession. Another flash of lightning lit the sky. Trembling, I fell to my knees. Adia carefully set Sally at the bottom of the grave. Thunder followed still fairly far after the flash. We were still safe. I looked at Adia, thinking we should say something and not sure what exactly would be appropriate.

Mother Earth, Adia said quietly, take back Sally. Auntie Tree, grow strong through her.

May her body make you whole, and feed the plants so that more salamanders can eat the plants. It is all a cycle, the circle of life, I said softly. Thunder made me shake again. It sounded as if a tree had fallen right beside us.

The mightiest lion must become the food of the grass, Adia continued. But in this way we won't forget Sally, because she was a good salamander, and because she lives on in everything, in the circle.

Goodbye, Sally.

We bent together and slowly filled in the dirt that was turning into mud as the rain poured around us. My ponytail couldn't hold back all my hair. It was wild and wet, getting into my eyes. Once the grave was filled in, we both moved the big rock back on top of it.

Na-na-na-na, Na-na-na-na, hey, hey, goodbye, I sang to Sally. Adia joined me and we gave our final goodbyes in this way.

Adia gave me a quick hug as we were leaving Auntie Tree and then took off at a run towards the wood. I imitated her in the opposite direction. My brand-new sneakers squished in the mud and even the rain couldn't wash away the dirt all over my body. I was trying to figure out how to best explain this. Even before I reached my backyard, I could hear my dad's frantic calling. And I was afraid of more than thunder.

*

My heart-sister Enzyotee was less than pleased to hear of my entrapment, what my father, the great chief of the tribe, called being 'grounded.' It made my meetings with Enzyotee far more difficult to arrange. In fact it was nearly two months before I could finally get away from my village to Auntie in order to see my heart-sister.

Where have you been?

As I rid my boots of snow, I explained about the thing called The Grounding.

You still could have snuck out. My god, do you even know how worried I was? I was going to sneak into your house, but your parents must have moved the key. Why didn't you just sneak out, or send a message, or *something*!

I told Enzyotee that things were not this simple in The Grounding. (And the key is now under the blue flower pot instead of under the mat.) Parents sought vengeance of great horror should a child disobey within their designated punishment. I had been restricted to my tee-pee except to attend my lessons with the other children and meet with

a wise woman from the village who sought to correct my bad behavior. Shaman Sarah, she was called, this wise woman, and my father thought it necessary that she and I discuss my shamanistic visions and other personal matters I only wished to talk about with my heart sister. Why would he ask you to do that? Because my inexcusable lack of regard for his rules or my own safety forced him to ask for Shaman Sarah's assistance in correcting my behavior. My distance of late—presumably, heart-sister, my various forbidden meetings with you—is apparently appalling, and I am too often lost in my own world. Furthermore, my wise father the chief is convinced that I need to have more friends within our village and spend less time alone in the woods.

Oh.

Yes, it has been a very boring two months, though I have gotten much reading done, my dear Enzyotee.

My heart sister, who had been very angry upon our meeting, relaxed with my explanation. We both agreed that grounding was a horrendous atrocity never to be inflicted upon our future children. What shall we do now that the time of punishment has ended? Enzyotee wished to hunt in the snow, and while I struggled with the killing—a necessity for life to continue, from death life, my heart-sister reminds me—I agreed to accompany her into the woods. We left Auntie and saw our footprints trailing behind us side-by-side. This was dangerous, for if either of our tribes, who had been at war for some time, ever discovered these footprints we would both be killed as traitors. I found a brush of pine and tried to erase our trail behind us. The snow was very deep, coming all the way to my waist in the drifts, but it was also the very loose snow that easily blows into twisting shapes. Treacherous, because in one spot there would be no snow and in

another it would be a pit deep enough to bury a child whole, but also easy to move around and to obscure trails.

In the woods the snow was less deep, as the trees prevented major drifts from forming except around their bases. Very well Anatzia, now you shall see a great winter hunt. I narrate, but this was truly Enzyotee's story, her element. Watching Enzyotee hunt was indeed a thing of beauty. She had a grace that her counterpart—myself—never would. Her body moved like a deer, steadily rising and falling in blowing drifts of snow. Her movements were so slow and deliberate that she scared nothing, not even the birds in the trees. I have yet to see anything quite so lovely or haunting. The closest thing I can cite is perhaps the theatre of ballet. Even these choreographed masterpieces, however, somehow fall short after seeing Enzyotee's natural and skillful dance.

I watched Enzyotee hunt many times, but that day I saw the greatest hunt. That day I saw the hunt of the stag.

We saw him first in early morning. Enzyotee froze, but I kept moving forward to brush against a tree branch. The noise alerted the stag only three strides from us of our presence. He looked up, his eyes wide but unafraid. He studied us. Then he threw down the gauntlet: Oh young huntress, could you ever catch a thing as noble as me? He ran and we, startled, began to follow. Enzyotee was faster than me and nearer to the stag.

Where are you going, stag, my friend, great stag?

I go to the snow and the frost and the sky. To find me you must first take the water of the purest stream in the forest to Auntie, but you must not drink it, not even a drop.

The stag vanished into the mist. What now? Enzyotee looked over at me in frustration. Obviously we find the purest stream in the forest. Under all this snow? We trudged back through the deep snow to Auntie for her guidance, asking her where oh where is the purest stream in the forest? Auntie told us that only the old oak knew the answer to such a question.

Enzyotee and I looked at each other and sighed. In fairy tales, the great wanderers could spend years searching for something but the stories only recorded it in a sentence. We did not have that luxury. The great oak was back the way we came, so we turned around, wearing a fine path through the snow now, and together trudged back into the barren woods.

The great oak tree smiled kindly down upon us when we came. He was very much a grandfatherly figure to Enzyotee and myself. We came here when we did not understand the ways of men, and Grandfather Oak would tell us very kindly. Oh Grandfather Oak, where oh where is the purest stream in the forest?

Well, Grandfather Oak told us, you can only find it if you circle the grove three times at midday and ask the western wind to point your way. We thanked Grandfather Oak and, checking the sun's position in the sky, made our way to the clearing on the far side of the wood. We waited until the sun was directly overhead, and then we walked around the grove three times and called out to the western wind.

Oh Western Wind, Western Wind, where oh where is the purest stream in the forest?

The Western Wind focused the sun's rays, and we saw the beam of light leading us onwards. We rushed ahead, following the sunbeam deep into the wood until we came to a tree covered in icicles. The purest stream is ice ice ice.

Both of us pulled an icicle from the tree and held it carefully. We slowly made our way back through the wood and back through the deep snow to Auntie. We presented her with the water from the purest stream in the forest whose life-giving flows had not touched our lips. Auntie smiled down at us. Her branches swayed, pointing us back to the wood. There, at the edge, stood the stag.

Will you prove yourself worthy of me? The stag was taunting us with his beauty, his flanks reflecting sunlight. He held the summer in this wintry world. Ancient and young and golden. He was waiting.

Enzyotee raced after him with me on her tail. The stag looked back at us with a smirk but turned to run deeper into the wood. The barren trees closed around us and grew denser and our feet were cold from the snow.

Enzyotee caught up to the stag before the purest stream in the forest. The icicles reflected rainbows.

I will give myself to you, huntress, the stag said, bowing bravely to Enzyotee's bow and arrow, for you are worthy. Enzyotee thanked him for his courage and his challenge and his sacrifice. I looked away as she shot the arrow. The stag fell and the sunlight, so blinding against the snow and the icicles, suddenly seemed less bright. Such is the world, Anatzia, the stag said. To the worthy huntress and her friend I have a warning. The stag told us that the world would rip apart because it could not stay together as it was. We didn't understand. He told us that the fabric was threatened. Fire

would come and catch it because we did not see the flames. He told us that in the very darkest of night, the stars would be called false gods, but the stars were true. And we still could not unravel the riddle to find what wisdom the stag was trying to teach us with his noble death. I bent over the proud creature to get closer and to hear his warning more clearly, but his eyes had already turned to glass.

*

Tell me another secret. Tell me about something bad that happened before.

Something bad?

Something bad.

I refused to behave because the dance instructor wasn't mine and this new woman with her red face and small eyes looked like a rhinoceros. I didn't like her because she wasn't my teacher, and my teacher was the only one who should be allowed to tell me to go into first position or second or third. So I cried in the middle of the dance floor, demanding that my teacher come now. All the other little ballerinas stood around me looking down at me and not understanding that we had to say no to the rhinoceros. Their eyes were cold and empty. And I cried because I defied them all. I would not listen to this impostor. I refused. My tears were my only way, my last defense. I would not listen. I was a *real* ballerina, and I listened only to her, my real teacher, not this other person who pretended she knew ballet. And then Dad was there looking down at me with angry eyes because I wasn't supposed to say no; I was supposed to behave. He pulled me out of the studio in my tutu and my slippers. I screamed and cried and told him I wanted to stay

now. I would dance now. I just wanted her, my real teacher, and then I would dance. He told me he was disappointed. Told me to take off my dance clothes because I wasn't a good ballerina today. I was a bad little girl. Big girls behave. I sniffled my way out of my clothes and out to the car. He put me in the car seat. I screamed because I shouldn't sit in the baby seat. I wasn't a baby. But he told me I behaved like a baby, and I would sit in the baby seat until I earned the big girl seat. And I cried again but the tears were different. I wanted to die suddenly. I wanted the car seat to eat me like a monster. He sighed and shook his head when he buckled me in. I was the girl who had cried in front of all those good ballerinas. I had failed him. And I wanted the car seat to eat me up.

*

I can't believe he isn't real, Sophie told me pointedly. I won't believe it. He is real, isn't he, Adia? I lied to her, told her yes. Sophie looked very confused, I mean, he should be real. I can't...they lied to me! My parents lied to me!

The adults were just pretending, I protested. You know, giving us a story.

But it isn't real!

So what.

So Dad and Mom put all the presents under the tree at Christmas and eat the cookies and the carrots for Rudolf. Santa can't mean anything if he isn't real! He just...he just...Adia, he isn't *real*.

But that isn't really important. It's like, it's like Anatzia and Enzyotee. I mean, they're important even if...I mean, they *are* real, even if they, um, aren't?

Yeah, 'course they are.

I wasn't sure what to tell her. She wasn't crying, wasn't upset, just confused, and her eyebrows were crinkled up in that way they got when she was trying to solve a really difficult puzzle.

He is real, of course, Sophie finally whispered. Santa is real to *us*.

And that's all that really matters, I agreed with her quietly, though I wasn't entirely sure whether or not I believed it.

*

It's silly. Why can't I meet your mother anyway? I asked Adia this for at least the five millionth time one particularly cold day from my curled up position inside the old plastic play castle that we had turned into a snow fort. It was the last real snow of winter. Though the snow had only frosted the ground, I, as well as the rest of the kids on my block, believed that the dusting constituted snowman-building, snowball fights, and sledding. We'd discovered quickly that none of these activities were very fun for those who were not fond of mud, but our abandonment of winter pursuits was certainly not for lack of trying. I had met Adia after all of my failed attempts at merriment and was consequently cold, wet, and covered in mud. I kept trying to rub the mud away from my purple winter jacket. A shower and blankets and hot cocoa awaited me inside, but Adia had wanted to meet here because she hadn't seen me for a day. I had been off with Chris and Jonathan and the others at the cul-de-sac playing in the snow.

Sophie, I've already told you about this. We—she poked my chest with each word to emphasize her point—I repeat: We. Are. A. *Secret*. Sisterhood.

Adia was insistent upon this one point. Her mom couldn't know about us. We were a secret sisterhood, just like in the movies and books about witches. At first, this had added an allure to our friendship, a mysteriousness that excited me. As months stretched on and another spring approached, however, my fairy-like friend had begun to irritate me. I wanted to share Adia with my parents, and I was also running out of excuses for my more and more frequent absences from my past playmates. And then it was difficult, because Dad and Dr. Sarah always wanted to know about Adia's parents, so I tried not to mention Adia that much. You know, that girl down the block. Meet her by the creek sometimes. And then all the sneaking up to *my* room. Never Adia's room. I'd never seen Adia's house.

I think that we can stop being a secret sisterhood now. You should come with me to build snow forts at the cul-de-sac next time it snows. It's fun, except for the not-being-enough-snow part. And then, afterwards, we should go back to *your* house, not mine like always, and your mom can make us hot chocolate.

No, Sophie. Adia put her hands across her chest and started tapping her foot. Let's just go and do something. We can play King Arthur and Lancelot.

We can go meet your mom, and she can lend us all the costumes you say are in your house so that Arthur and Lancelot will have real armor.

No.

Why not?

Just no! And it's not like I've met your parents, Adia said quietly. I fell silent. We glared at each other. That was different, surely Adia knew that. Dad liked to meet my friend's parents after all. This was *her* fault. And it was complicated now, especially with Dr. Sarah asking so many questions about all my friends and what I did in the backyard and other stuff like that.

And you don't understand, Adia continued after a moment. I'm not allowed. Mother says no. Mother says no. Always the same response. Mother says no. Adia never called her mother by any endearment or nickname. She was always the Mother, who I heard so much about but still had never seen. The woman who wore long purple or green dresses that trailed across the floor when she walked through the house reciting Shakespeare with her Irish accent. I could picture her in my mind and hear her telling Adia to please, my dear, bring me a copy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and could you read the part of Charmian in this scene for me? I asked Adia again why I couldn't meet this phantom.

Mother, she... Mother wouldn't like it. She doesn't like me hanging out with anyone, alright, you know that we move around a lot and, I don't know, I guess she's just afraid that...

Adia was very uncharacteristically embarrassed and lost for words. I, meanwhile, went from irritated to angry. Adia curled up into a ball sitting on the top of the slide in our toy-castle-snow-fort and twirled her feet childishly. Let's just go on an adventure, Sophie. We'd had to take the roof off the castle because the fort was too small for us. My mom had told Dad that the fort should go away because I was too big for it. And my mom was right. Adia looked silly curled up on top of it like that, twirling her little feet.

The whole fort was silly. I suddenly wanted to tear it down. Secret sisterhoods were silly too.

Perhaps I should just go and tell someone, my dad, about the other things Adia had told me. About the mutterings under Mother's breath and the times when she would stare forever out the window of the front room. Times like yesterday when the house had nearly caught fire because she had left the homemade bread in the stove for six hours as she stared and stared and stared and—

No! Sophie, listen to me, please listen. Adia jumped from her position and grabbed me so that we were looking into each other's eyes. Her grip was very strong, cutting off the circulation in my arm. I told her she was hurting me.

You can't tell *anyone* about my mother. About that! I tugged at her hand and jerked her off me. She fell to the ground and started to shake. I didn't care. She was just acting it up probably, acting it up like her actress mother who I wasn't good enough to meet. But then she started to cry and beg me to please, please not tell to please not tell, and I could not be angry anymore. I sat down next to her, squatting. The mud lining the bottom of our castle covered Adia's favorite red cloak.

I'm sorry. I won't tell. Just please stop crying, okay?

I saw two tears leak from her eyes and fall on to her cheeks unclaimed. Her little mitten-covered hands ignored them. I reached out for her and helped her up again. She was so much smaller than me; I felt that if I wasn't careful, I could somehow break her, shatter that little face.

When it appeared that Adia was calm once more, I finally asked. I asked her what it was that her mother was so frightened of. She didn't answer me. She never had before. She curled herself back into a tight ball at the mouth of the slide, looking up at the sky.

There has to be a reason why. I pressed her, for there had to be a reason, or it wouldn't have to be a secret. Adia glanced around nervously. She covered her face with her hands, and I heard her take several deep breaths before looking up at me, still holding her head firmly between those little mittens. This was scaring me because Adia was white-faced and that was strange.

Why are you so afraid? I asked her, my voice a little softer.

We'll have to leave again if we are found, she told me so quietly that I had to lean in to hear. I'll have to leave, and I won't get to see you anymore.

I knew that they had done it before, picked up and left without a trace. They'd crossed the Atlantic not so long ago. Jumped all around the UK before that. But why?

Mother's scared...we're hiding from something. It is very important that Mother thinks no one knows where we are, or we'll have to move. And then you and I won't be able to see each other anymore, alright? Mother thinks we're safe here. So you can't meet her yet, because she won't trust you. She gets very angry when...you got to be quiet and not tell anyone about us. Adia's eyes grew angry. *I keep quiet when I sneak up to your room and I haven't bothered your dad and I don't talk about your mom when you don't want to. I don't ever do anything you don't want me to! Sometimes you're so...*

So what?

Adia looked me straight in the eye. Sometimes you are so *selfish*, Sophie.

I turned away from her and tried to wipe the mud from my pants with dignity. Then I started to exit the snow fort without another word.

Well it's true! Adia shouted after me. I turned around to yell at her, and then I noticed that she was crying again. Just leave, right, you just go off and leave then. See if I care. You disappear for two months and don't come when you say you will and—

That's not fair. That stuff isn't my fault!

Yeah, well whose fault is it then?

I stood outside the plastic castle now in my baggy winter coat covered in mud looking over at Adia curled up on the mouth of the slide with her dainty little red cape that even caked with mud still made her look like Little Red Riding Hood.

Not all of us have parents who don't care if we go missing any time we want to, I told her quietly. Not all of us have mothers that don't care.

Oh yeah, yours cares so much whenever she happens to be home long enough to bother with it.

Something in me snapped. At least my mom isn't crazy.

There came a dead silence in which I could almost make out the laughter of children still attempting to sled in the muddy snow. And then she lunged at me.

Get off!

Take that back! Take that back now! Take it back!

I lost my balance and fell on to the muddy ground, and Adia was hitting me with her little fists and pulling my ponytail. That hurts, Adia! Get the hell off me! I slapped her hard across the face, and then rolled so I had her pinned. Her upper lip was bleeding, and she was crying. Red-faced.

My mother is not crazy. She's not, she's not...

I'm sorry, I didn't mean. And I hugged her because I realized that I was crying too.

S'okay, it's okay. It'll be alright.

Sophie, I don't want to leave again.

Okay, it's alright. We're okay.

I'm sorry.

Me too.

We stayed that way for a long time, until we both stopped crying, and then we pulled away a little bit and brushed off our clothes, not looking at each other. And then, out of nowhere, she told me.

I think my mother is a princess.

She said this so quietly that I thought at first I hadn't heard her properly.

What? A *real* princess? Like Princess Diana? I asked her incredulously. You think your mother is a real princess?

Adia was still looking at the ground, but I snuck a look at her face. It was red and blushing. She started to explain to the ground. And her explanation—recounting and rephrasing what I already knew—it did make some sense. It would explain everything.

It does explain everything, Adia agreed finally looking up at me. Her lip had stopped bleeding but her eyes were still puffy and red. She wiped away at them distractedly.

I was puzzled on one point, I told her, ignoring her puffy eyes. Wouldn't a princess live in a castle somewhere far away, not just here in Pennsylvania?

No, Sophie, that's the thing, see, Adia explained impatiently, my mother's kingdom must have been taken over by villains, and she had to flee!

The idea that Adia's mother was a princess running from some evil tyrant who wanted her dead did not alter my desire to meet said princess in the slightest. Adia hesitated, her hands moving to hug herself. Sophie, maybe you can meet her, but not for a while. Not until I can make sure that she'd trust you. She's probably been hurt a lot, Sophie. She doesn't trust anybody. Sophie, I promise one day you will meet her, okay?

But—

Please, Sophie. Mother thinks things, sees things that...I need to take care of her, Sophie. It must be hard being a princess. And I think there might be a spell too, from some evil enchanter or something. But you'll be patient and keep the secret about her being a princess and how she's not quite—you won't tell anyone about things like that, about when she does things like that. Like the oven and the staring. You promise?

Without quite realizing what I was doing, I held out my pinkie solemnly. My pinkie met Adia's in a firm grip. I promise.

*

Princess Isabella, we decided, was a beautiful red-haired girl with green eyes that always lit up whenever something particularly interesting happened. Her parents, the king and queen of a small island kingdom off the coast of Ireland, named her Isabella. The king and queen loved their daughter very much, and they gave her all sorts of gowns and jewels and even ponies. The king and queen made sure that Princess Isabella was given a

special fairy Godmother named Nellie. Nellie also loved Isabella very much and taught her magic and reading, which, as Nellie always said, were really one in the same. Isabella preferred her books to the usual princess things, and so her parents gave her shelves and shelves of them. She read each and every one.

When she was just eleven, Isabella went to the great royal university. There she astonished her elders with knowledge from lands far and near. In particular, Isabella loved Shakespeare, and she would recite his tragedies for captivated scholars. Isabella learned all about becoming a queen, but she preferred her theatre lessons. Here she played Rosalind, Viola, Miranda and the other heroines of her favorite author.

Isabella didn't like being a princess. She wanted to act instead. But she was an only child, and she had to become the queen. Her mother and father were very sad for Isabella because they wanted her to be happy. She went to all her royal lessons and paid attention very well, but she always wanted to act instead.

One day, Isabella traveled to Nepal with her parents on a diplomatic trip. There she met a handsome man named Thomas. He was acting the part of Romeo in Kathmandu, and Isabella decided to become his Juliet. When acting out the famous balcony scene before a vast audience including the king and queen, the two fell madly in love. This was problematic, because Isabella was supposed to marry a prince. She was betrothed to a Prince Xavier from a neighboring kingdom. Their marriage would unite the two warring kingdoms forever.

In secret, Thomas and Princess Isabella got married when they were barely nineteen. Just nine months after getting married, they had a beautiful baby girl named Adia. The day she was born was the happiest of Isabella's life.

Princess Isabella continued with her princess duties, but flew home every other week to a secret little cottage in the Himalayas to spend time with her beloved husband and daughter. She and Thomas started a Shakespearean company in the little village where they lived and shared their love for Shakespeare with all the Sherpas passing through. They were very happy.

But the happy life that Thomas, Princess Isabella, and Adia were living was doomed to come to an end. Prince Xavier, curious as to where the princess disappeared to every other week, had spies follow her home one evening. Then, when he heard she traveled to Nepal, he flew out after her himself. He saw Thomas and Princess Isabella kissing on the porch of their little cottage home in the mountains. Furious that the woman he was engaged to was already married, Prince Xavier kidnapped Thomas and threw him in prison for no reason. He threatened to kill Thomas unless Princess Isabella agreed to divorce the ‘filthy commoner’ and remarry him. He knew this would make Isabella very unhappy, and, being a bad person, he wanted her to suffer.

Princess Isabella finally did marry Xavier to save Thomas, but the prince was not done with his cruelty. He demanded that little Adia be sent away from her mother. Princess Isabella would not allow this, so one night, with the help of her old friend Nellie, she snuck away with her beautiful daughter. She managed to bribe a ship captain to take her to the United Kingdom.

Prince Xavier, furious, tortured Thomas for information. Fortunately, he didn’t know anything and couldn’t betray his family. The prince deployed the most skilled trackers in the land to find the princess. They did find her, and they delivered to her the finger of Thomas. Princess Isabella cried and cried, but she managed to escape again. She

vowed that, when Adia was old enough to be safe, she would return to her kingdom and save Thomas from Xavier.

Being an actress helped Princess Isabella as she went from one side of the country to the other, trying to find a safe place. She renamed herself Margaret and joined various Shakespearean companies, always running from Prince Xavier's trackers. Finally, Princess Isabella and Adia crossed the Atlantic to America. They settled down in a very nice town somewhere in western Pennsylvania. There Adia grew up happily with her best friend Sophie, not knowing the truth of her mother's secret past.

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What are you doing here? I asked Adia incredulously. Your mother's going to kill you if she finds out! I'd told my friend the previous afternoon that I was going to watch the sun rise this morning, but to see her actually here beside me did not compute. It was about four in the morning. The mere fact that I was on my back porch reading was a violation of childhood rules. To be away from home alone at this time was beyond my ability to grasp.

Adia, however, seemed unafraid of possible repercussions for her early morning stroll. She was dressed very warmly in her new orange jacket and had a flashlight dangling idly from her left hand. (This was rendered largely unnecessary by the bright full moon.) Across my friend's face was a very large and excited smile. It was this smile that frightened me most. Danger, Will Robinson! sounded in my brain with bright red flashing lights.

Nice pjs, she told me casually. I blushed red in my Batman and Robin pajamas. Adia knew I had a thing for Bruce Wayne. She asked me if I was ready to go, or, more accurately, told me we were going. I had not the faintest idea what she was talking about. Well, duh. We gotta go.

Go where? Where on earth would we go at this hour of the night? I have a strong recollection of cementing my feet very firmly against the porch.

Sophie, look, it's a surprise. I know things have been a bit...I just want to show you something special and, we'll miss it if we stay here arguing.

I was mentally imagining how loudly my dad would scream if I was discovered missing from my house at four in the morning. Adia jumped on to my back porch, almost tripping over the sled that Dad and I had never bothered to put away. She came out of her trip in a graceful twirl. I would have fallen on my butt. Adia smiled, and then gently took *A Wrinkle in Time* from me and tucked it beneath her arm, taking my hand in hers. She pulled, and I held my position. Adia nearly fell over.

Adia yelled at me in annoyance. I gestured wildly to the window above us, and my friend lowered her voice. It is vastly important that we leave *now*, she whispered to me urgently. She neglected, naturally, to tell me where we were going, and sighed in distraction when I asked her. She tugged again at my arm. I was a sufficiently intelligent child to sense that I would lose this argument. I'd never seen Adia in such an agitated state, but I knew that she was beyond reasoning. I either could comply with her voluntarily, or she would forcefully drag me.

With this in mind I slowly rose from my chair, glancing up at my parents' window nervously. I gave up questioning Adia and blindly followed. She was pulling me

around my house to the front yard. We paused at the street, formally held hands, looked both ways, and crossed.

Across the street from my house was an abandoned field that belonged to my neighbor, Judge Henry. I was terrified of Judge Henry, naturally, as were all the children on my block. Everyone knew he believed firmly in the right to bear arms and further believed the age of a trespasser irrelevant to her offence. Adia, we can't—

Oh, it's four in the morning, Sophie! Adia didn't even look back before scampering onto Judge Henry's field. I followed her, my heart pounding, wondering whether I'd rather encounter Judge Henry with his shotgun or my parents in their pajamas. Adia—

She shushed me.

The field was divided into two sloping hills with a valley between them. On dares, the kids of my block would often roll down these hills to the valley base, though even without Judge Henry this wouldn't have been advisable due to the very long unkempt grass that hid ticks and poison ivy. Now, a light dusting of frost covered the ground and reflected the silvery light of the full moon. Adia trampled over this and led me down the first slope of the hill to the valley. I felt safer here; the chances of discovery were slimmer.

See! There it is!

I followed her gaze. At the base of the valley a single flower had crept out from the frost: a crocus. And I understood. Spring. The moment the crocus bloomed, spring came to our home. I'd been taught this for so long I couldn't remember where I'd heard

it. Others heard stories of groundhogs, but, for my neighborhood, the end of winter occurred when the crocuses could survive the morning frost.

It's the very first crocus, Adia explained to me. You know what that means.

I didn't, but I allowed her to pull me down to lie against the slope anyway.

She's coming! You gotta be quiet.

I leaned further into Adia. She smelled always of the earth and was so warm. Her heart beat with mine. For some reason, when we were together like this, I had trouble being afraid of anything. Why does winter have to become spring and then summer and then fall and then winter again? Why does it always have to change?

Adia put an arm around me. I don't know. Why were we there then if she didn't know? Why were we out in this early morning darkness waiting?

You'll see.

Minutes passed as we lay in each other's arms gazing at the crocus and the glittering frost and the silvery moon. I spied a shooting star streak across the tapestry of darkness knit with miniscule lights. Star light, star bright. Adia, look.

I see it.

Adia, you got to make a wish!

Why?

Because it's a shooting star, silly. You make wishes on shooting stars. But they're not like wishing bottles, you have to make the wish right away. You can have this one, the wish. I wish I may, I wish I might...

Go to Nepal. All together. Your parents and my parents could get a hotel in Kathmandu, and you and me could climb to Everest.

Hmm, good wish. Glad I gave it to you. I curled up into her even tighter and began to drift between waking and sleep. Night is very silent in winter, and I lived on a quiet block. All that the world contained was our unison breathing and heartbeats. We were both shivering until Adia draped her coat beneath us and I thought to use my robe as a blanket. I closed my eyes and thought about us in Nepal. We would go up the path that Adia had shown me pictures of. And there'd be lots of trees and then bushy-grasses and then brownish sand and then grey rock and then maybe snow. And yaks and cows and chickens and very skinny dogs and super-strong men who carried heavy stuff on their heads. And bells and chants and singing...

Sophie! Adia whispered suddenly, awakening me again to the world. Look! There.

I looked where Adia indicated and saw nothing. Look harder! I squinted against the moonlight, bending its rays, and then, quite suddenly, I saw her.

Her hair was made of the moonlight and the morning frost. Her eyes reflected the stars. Skin like snow exaggerated her rose lips. Her long trailing dress was nearly translucent, but it contained the crocus, snowdrop, lily, daisy...flowers that I cannot place even now. Wings sprouted from her back, and they were like the autumn leaves but transparent and glowing. Where her bare feet touched the ground, the frost melted, and a crocus freed itself of the earth. Tatiana, the fairy queen. Adia had told me her story. Most could not see her, Adia told me quietly. Most would not look.

Tatiana continued to glide past us, barely touching the ground. I had to look very hard to see her, and I could hardly believe her real. I felt the passing of seasons, that feeling only present during that time when one cedes to another. It was akin to my fear

after falling down that autumn some two years previous the day Adia and I met. Tatiana breathed of the passing nature of the world in which we find ourselves. I couldn't articulate this but to know that a hole had dropped into my stomach that was both terrible and beautiful. I drew even closer to Adia.

Is this a dream, Adia? My friend looked at me oddly. No, Sophie, you're awake. This is real.

Adia and I watched Tatiana cross the valley and melt the frost. The queen only lingered for a few minutes before disappearing again into the moonlight and the flowers. We stayed longer, watching the sun rise over the hillside to color the dew and frost in purple hues. The valley was filled with crocus buds that had braved the cold night. Later that day, they would bloom.

*

Tell me a secret.

What kind?

Something good that happened from before.

Can it be something someone told me?

Sure.

This is what Mother told me then:

It was a world away, Aberdeen, glittering shiny granite in the sunlight, and we walked the streets that fractured with light hand and hand. That's when she first told me about him. She probably always told me, but that's the first time I remember. She never

said his name, but that his hair had been black like mine and his eyes the same as mine and that my smile was his.

She told me that they had been in a carriage like a wheelbarrow that had a man on a bicycle instead of a horse. That's where he had kissed her like Cinderella got kissed, in a carriage like a wheelbarrow. And he had taken her up to the Monkey Temple in Kathmandu as the sun set. It had been a greenish sort of sunset that made the whole city look like milky emerald. He had not been afraid of the monkeys with their red faces. He made faces at them, and they made faces at him, and she had laughed until she had to clutch her sides to keep them together. They went up and up and up the steps that went on forever into the sky until finally they were at the very top. He made her circle the temple clockwise and spin every prayer wheel in the right order for luck. Then they sat and looked over the city until the sun was gone and there were only the city lights below them glittering under the thin clouds that never really left. They climbed back down and down and down the stairs in the darkness holding on to the railing and each other and watching the glittering eyes of the monkeys who watched them solemnly like little gargoyles in the night. Back in the street he bought her a bracelet from one of the peddlers.

She wore the bracelet that day in Aberdeen, and she showed me the charms made to ward off evil or bring good luck or maybe just to make tourists spend money. She said that when he went to argue with the peddler and haggle down the price she had looked back up at the temple. One of the monkeys, she said, looked down at her from the steps. The monkey had intelligent eyes and cradled her baby close to her like it was the most precious thing in the world. And Mother said that her hands went down to her belly for a moment. She swore to me the monkey smiled at her because they were both mothers, and

mothers always understand each other. She thought of the monkey again the first time she held me in her arms because I was the most precious thing in her world. In Aberdeen that day when she told me and I remembered, she took my hand in hers in front of a granite-gray cathedral rising from the shimmering streets. And she said I was the very best gift he had ever given her. Much better than the bracelet.

*

He fed on things in my closet. First it was socks, a single one of a pair here and there. Occasionally he'd take underwear. His favorites were those with bright-colored stripes. Then a shirt or two started to go missing and I knew, just knew, whatever Mom said about me losing things and Dad said about me being scatter-brained, it was all the fault of the Monster living in my closet.

I explained to Adia that I knew he was there because he would growl sometimes, and he ate the light at nighttime. He ate the light? Yes, he gulped it down like water until it became very dark, darker than night was supposed to be, and all the warmth in the room, it just left. Adia asked me if I was scared, and I told her very much. Naturally, Adia decided that we would have a slumber party to help me fight the Monster or make him go away. But your mother....Oh, she won't notice I'm gone, Adia assured me.

I thought it better just to leave the Monster alone, but Adia explained that we had to exorcise him, even though we weren't priests and the devil probably wasn't living in my closet. The principle of the thing would be the same. And we did want a quest,

remember, and here was a real monster to slay or reason with. I told her I'd forgotten about questing, and she said I'd make a bad knight.

It made me feel better knowing Adia would be with me. After all, usually monsters only ate people when they were alone. As long as the good guys stayed together in the haunted house they would be safe. Or, if we were eaten, we would go into the dark stomach together, and maybe we could find a way to light a candle and get food. It could be quite comfortable living in the Monster's tummy if Adia was with me. We could make sure to have a guitar and sing kumbaya, my lord, kumbaya. Adia really thought that we would die if we were eaten even if Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother survived. And, I reminded her, Hon Solo and Leia. They survived too.

Sophie, be quiet. It's dark. Adia and I were hiding underneath my covers with our hands held tightly together. Adia was not afraid of the dark outside, but she was afraid of the dark inside houses. It is darker than outside dark, and it is very evil. She pressed closely against me, and I turned to kiss her hair. Maybe we should have called Shakespeare and Marlowe. But they were helping Santa this week. We listened to my parents turning off the television and heading up to bed. Their footsteps were on the stairs, and then we heard the bathroom sink going on and off. Dad poked his head through the door to check on me—the other reason we were under the covers—and then my door shut. After a little more fumbling, it was silent. We were alone. Except for the Monster in the closet.

Hello, Sasha. Adia hugged my old raggedy stuffed lion. I had smuggled Sasha under the covers with us. Adia patted the lion's head. We'll be brave together, right Sasha? Adia purred like a cat and rubbed against me insistently until I started to pet her

hair. We can do this, Sophie. We got to be brave. Adia's hands were shaking a little because of the inside darkness, which she didn't like, but her voice was very firm. Unlike me. I couldn't speak very much at all.

When does he come out? The Monster had decided not to bother me yet tonight. No growling, no light-eating, no cold. I didn't know when he would come. But he would. Of course. Adia did not doubt me. She yawned against me loudly and snuggled down on to a pillow, making sure the covers stayed securely above us both. We stayed there, Adia occasionally sneaking a peak out from the covers towards the closet and me clinging to her hand and to Sasha. I was quite happy not to see. At some point Adia's yawns and peaking ceased, and I knew she had fallen asleep. Her breathing had slowed, and she felt somehow lighter against me, as if she would drift off into the sky if I let go of her. I held on tightly, counting my heartbeats, feeling unnaturally warm with Adia's heat against me and the enclosure of the blankets around us.

The Monster seemingly had gone on vacation, I finally decided doubtfully. I tucked myself more firmly against Adia, eased Sasha against my shoulder, and closed my eyes for the first time in quite a while. I kept opening them again, however, expecting the Monster to have appeared. I don't know if I ever slept or not, though I do distinctly remember the scream that pulled me from my doze. Adia. In trouble. I shot bolt upright but my friend was still lying against the bed under the covers, and she was moaning. Please, please, Sophie, stay, Sophie, not her, not—

I threw the covers off of both of us and started to shake Adia. I'm here, I'm here. Wake up. Adia, wake up. She was shivering violently. Adia, please—

And that was when all the air left the room, and I believe my bedside clock turned from 11:59 to midnight. Everything was cold and I couldn't breathe just like after the fall and I was so very scared and I was going to die and—

Sophie.

Adia. A hand was in mine. Just breathe. Just breathe. The coldness was unbearable, and it came with every breath. Yes, the Monster in my closet was breathing, sucking in the light and the warmth and the goodness. Hush, Sophie. I'm scared. But so was Adia. We were both scared. I could hear the growling coming from the closet and I pulled the covers up more securely. If we can't see him—Sophie. But—Sophie. Slowly, we peaked over the top of the covers and saw a blue-grey light seeping from my closet. Let's just go sleep with Mom and Dad. Sophie, I'm scared too, but we need to get rid of this!

I couldn't let go of the covers because my hands were frozen. Adia's teeth were clattering so loudly I was surprised my parents did not appear to investigate the racket. We could see our breath in the blue mist that now lined the floor to make misty mountains and valleys where the floral patterned carpet had once stood. He's bringing Nepal to us, see the mountains? I did. Peaks and valleys and mist. Just like the pictures we'd found in books and on the internet about Nepal.

The closet door creaked open. I honestly don't remember whether we screamed or not. I think we must have, because I do remember the very big red scaly hand that appeared on the closet door. The Monster began to emerge. He was red-faced with a tuft of frizzy black hair sticking up from his head like a samurai. And he had big yellow fangs in his wide, thick-lipped mouth. His fangs were pointed like daggers. Long dangling

golden earrings pulled down his impressive ears. His eyes were green. He was also so tall that he had to stoop in order not to hit my ceiling. Like an angry Buddha, Adia whispered to me, that's what he looks like. I've seen Mother's pictures of festivals. I was shaking so badly that the bed was rattling, and I had turned to stone even though the Monster was assuredly not Medusa.

Little girls, little girls, are you afraid? The monster said in a deep rumbling voice. Why are they always frightened? He took a breath and it got even darker and colder. Are you afraid little girls, little girls?

We were. But neither of us could manage the proper words to answer him. The bed was, of course, still shaking because I was shaking. Adia glanced at me and then took a deep breath. She squared her shoulders like a woman. Monster, this is all my fault. You must leave my friend alone. She wanted to leave you alone, but I said that we should make you stop scaring her. So—Adia took another deep breath—if you're going to eat anyone it should be me.

I gaped at Adia. No, you should eat me, I squeaked out. Or, or both of us, I guess.

Eat you? This suggestion seemed to puzzle the Monster. Is that what I should do, eat you?

Well, Adia choked out, clearing her throat several times to make it work, you, you don't have to eat us. I mean, we can do something else. I hastily agreed with Adia when the Monster continued to look confused.

What else is there to do? The Monster was looking adrift. Am I supposed to tell you a scary story? We both immediately told him that this was not necessary. Should I turn you into socks and hang you in the closet? Adia and I glanced at each other in the

dark. We couldn't actually see each other very well as the only light the Monster had sucked out and replaced with the strange blue glow.

No, we don't want to be turned into socks. The Monster turned his head to the side and scratched his scaly chin with an equally scaly paw. Then what should we do? Adia and I gripped each other's hands tightly in the dark, and I could feel her thinking as hard as I was. We could, we could—dance? I said this uncertainly. Dance? The Monster seemed equally dubious about my suggestion, and I just knew Adia was giving me her why-are-you-being-so-stupid? look in the dark. Well, yeah, you know, we could put on a ball or something.

Are you sure that is the type of thing one does in my position?

Oh, yes, yes absolutely! Adia began.

Yeah, I told him, all monsters absolutely adore going to make-shift balls with their victims.

Adia gave me a look. Maybe I'd just pushed my luck too far. Maybe that had been too much—

You are certain of this?

We both nodded solemnly.

Oh, very well. We shall put on a ball.

It was at this point that we began to suspect that our Monster was a bit new to the art of monstering. This, naturally, worked to our advantage.

We took the Monster into the closet in the guest room where my parents kept all their formal wear. We directed our would-be scarer to one of my father's suits.

Unfortunately, he hated suits with a passion unexpected and began to eat all the lights from the stars at the suggestion he wear them.

Suits, the Monster explained, are boring because they all look alike. Our solution to this very large dilemma was to suggest that the Monster pick out a dress, for dresses had the advantage of being very different from one and another, and they came in all colors. Suits that were aqua or magenta would just earn laughter from the Monster's monstrous friends, but dresses could be anything in the rainbow. The monster tried on an orange and black dress that looked very Caribbean, but Adia thought it made him look a bit too much like a Dalek, although she wasn't sure why. I had never heard of a Dalek, which the Monster found scandalous and Adia impossible. After a good fifteen minute lecture on the merits of British pop culture, we put the Monster in an outrageously revealing black slip that made him uncomfortable. The emerald-green oriental robe did not suit his figure at all, and the striped red, white, and blue dress made us think too much about the flag. We finally settled on a very dramatic purple lace gown with sleeves that trailed down like petals. He was stunning.

Like some Medieval maiden, Adia told him. He blushed.

Adia found herself a very nice black suit that was rather large for her small frame. Her pants and sleeves she dutifully rolled up. My friend also put on a bright orange tie that she couldn't make look like anything other than a shiny scarf. Well, if you will help me here—you think I know how to tie a tie? What about Monster? But the lone male presence was useless. Adia swapped her tie for an indigo bowtie that we managed to make look correct. I put one of my mom's yellow sleeveless summer gowns with white polka dots. I also found a bowtie, a lilac one, because bowties looked neat. Adia gave me

a smug look as she adjusted her bowtie, and I decided right then that by the next time I saw her I would know how to tie a tie properly just to spite her. Adia smirked as if she were reading my mind. Sometimes, I hated her.

Very well, Monster, have you ever learned to dance? You are dressed for the occasion. The Monster, bashful, shook his head. We agreed to show our new friend the basics, though neither of us knew how to dance either so our offer was perhaps deceitful.

Miss Eyre, shall we dance, Adia offered with her hand outstretched.

Naturally, sir, we shall. I played the coy orphan to perfection and blushed just the right hue. Adia deepened her voice and became rakishly dashing with a British accent. Beautiful weather here in England, don't you think, Miss Eyre? Fabulous sky lines and such. Fancy a tea?

I was giggling now as Adia spun me in a strange version of a waltz that had me stepping several times on her toes. Our monster friend watched with curiosity.

It does not look fun, he bemoaned. Adia explained to him that it was necessary to try it prior to dissing it. I agreed with a stern matronly expression and my hands on my hips. The Monster pursed his lips and then bared his long fangs when we laughed. He was not remotely frightening anymore.

I started to show the Monster the Macarena. Adia, who had not seen this dance before, picked it up a little faster than our new friend, but I decided this was because she was wearing a suit. Which is, you must admit, more practical than this gown. The Monster nodded demurely. He agreed that dresses made for difficult maneuvering. It makes you feel rather like a flower on display. Which you are, Adia and I told him. This made him glow very brightly, and he expelled some light from his mouth. Soon all the

lights were back on in the room. The Monster began quickening his pace with the Macarena dance. A la tuhuelpa legria Macarena. Eeh, Macarena. Adia called for a speed round, and we shook and moved our hands so fast that all three of us ended up collapsing in a heap after only a good two minutes. The Monster may have possibly knocked down most of my parents' clothes in the process of falling, which did cause me a lot of trouble later, but for now, Adia, Monster, and me just laughed and laughed on the closet floor.

*

Sophie was crying. She did cry from time to time when I was there to see it, but this I wasn't supposed to see. She was hidden there beneath the crooked tree to cry alone. I remember she wore that beautiful violet scarf her mother had given her for her birthday. It was her grandmother's and then her mother's and now it was hers. She'd pulled it around herself to try to hide the tears, and I thought she looked like a Russian maiden who had just traveled through the fields during harvest. I watched her from across the creek. The water was busy making lots of second Sophies on its surface. The real Sophie's face had never looked so red and round. Her sobs made her body contract as if they were fighting their way out from somewhere deep in her stomach, and she was struggling against them, trying to keep them within her because she didn't want to let the sobs go. I wasn't sure if I should leave her or go to hug her. Maybe she wanted to be alone. I thought about this for a moment, but I couldn't leave her. She was Sophie and I was Adia, and if Sophie was crying then Adia was comforting her.

I picked my way across the creek stone by stone, cursing silently when the last greenish rock wobbled and got my left shoe wet. Sophie was too busy crying to see me, and when I sat down on the tree root next to her she didn't see me either. I watched her for a minute in the creek because it was easier to watch her cry when the image was all blurry and moving. I scooted closer to her still looking into the water, and only when I was as close as I could be did I finally look at her and put my arms around her tentatively.

Go away! She threw me off of her. I remembered then the day that she fell, the day that we met. She'd pushed me away then too. Sophie? Adia. We looked at each other for a long time, her hazel eyes big and blue with the tears held inside them. She told me again to go away, but I couldn't because I was me and she was Sophie.

Tell me.

She shook her head angrily and told me that it wasn't really about me and that I had better mind my own business and go away. I told her no. If it was about Sophie then it was about me, and she knew that.

You have things that aren't about me, Sophie insisted. I haven't met your mother. I reminded her angrily that I hadn't met hers either. Sophie told me that this meant that she was right and there were things that belonged to her that weren't about me after all just like I had things that weren't about her.

I was angry at her now even though she was crying. Tell me what's wrong.

It's nothing.

You got to talk about it. You're being stupid. Because she was being stupid. She was crying, and I needed to help her and make it better. And she didn't, couldn't, shouldn't keep secrets from me. What happened?

Nothing happened.

But something did. She told me to shut up. What are you crying about, Sophie, why are you crying? Let it go, Adia!

But I wouldn't or I couldn't.

Tell me.

She looked tired and old. Not like usual at all. I felt bad now and patted her knee in a conciliatory fashion. She put her hand over mine and looked at our hands for a little bit. Then she picked up my hand as if it fascinated her, and she turned it over and over tracing the lines on it. It tickled a little. I looked up at her face, but she wouldn't look at me. She fitted our fingers together so our hands were clasped tightly like they would never fall apart. When she started to talk, she was still looking down at both our hands.

They're fighting again, she said. About me.

Oh. I wasn't sure what else to say really.

They say it isn't about me, but it is. I hear them sometimes at night after they think I'm asleep and they're talking downstairs. My room is above and the vents make it like they're talking right there.

I'm sorry.

It's not about you.

Sure it is.

We sat there for awhile looking into the water. Sophie still had hold of my hand, and she was still crying when I snuck glances at her face.

Do you tell them about us?

Not really. It isn't about them, you and me. Do you tell your mom?

No, not really. She's too busy being, well, being—

A princess.

Yeah, I agreed with her. She's too busy with magic spells and trying to figure out how to beat Prince Xavier and protect us and stuff. Sophie nodded and squeezed my hand. In the water, I watched many Sophies holding many Adias' hands tightly as if terrified of letting go.

*

In school we had a project where we had to find out three things about a different country. I naturally started to look up everything I could find about Nepal. Three things were just not enough. Adia quite liked my project and decided to help me out. We both sat down with a bunch of books from the library I'd asked my mother to get for me. I think Mom thought my commitment to the project rather adorable just like she found it adorable that I was currently writing a story. About what? Oh, I'm going to write up Anatzia and Enzyotee's adventures. Adia thought this story idea was brilliant, not just adorable.

For several hours we looked at pictures and read about Nepalese children. I thought Adia looked very Nepalese. She reminded me that her father was from Nepal, so she should look Nepalese.

We sat on my computer for several hours—Adia did not have a computer at home so she quite liked using mine—trying to get more information online. This was a slow process because America Online kept booting me off, then it took forever to dial up and

restart after it booted me off, and even once we were on certain sites threw up the parental controls for no reason. Adia thought all these efforts were silly and that computers were something to be used to play games like Zoombinis the Logical Journey or Sim Park. We played both because we were bored of the researching.

The late hour recalled us to the task at hand, namely writing down three facts about Nepal. Instead of taking my pencil to the paper, however, I designed a big triangle made of colored paper and got pictures and quotes along with my three facts. Adia thought my final presentation was pretty but told me I might be trying too hard.

Fact #1: Nepal is located in Southeast Asia and has 8 of the 10 tallest mountains in the world and a tropical jungle in the south.

Adia told me that Fact #1 actually had three facts in it already, but I said that it was all about that same type of thing so it should just count as one.

Fact #2: Nepal used to be part of India and it is where Buddha was born, but outside of the Himalayas the country is mostly Hindu. The Himalayas are primarily Buddhist.

Four facts. But also about the same sort of things.

Fact #3: Objectively looking at pictures, Nepal is the most beautiful place in the world.

Sophie, you cannot objectively state an opinion. But—No, really, that doesn't work.

Revised Fact #3: Sophia Mason and her best friend Adia both think that Nepal is the most beautiful place in the world.

*

So, she put his penis in her mouth. That's really gross, Adia whispered. Is that the way it's supposed to work? Cause I'm not doing it if it is. Ever.

I shifted a bit uncomfortably, and explained, to my feet, that how one did it when babies were being made was different. Adia bent down to meet my eyes and demanded an explanation. Her foot began to tap impatiently.

It's kinda weird.

Weird?

Well, you know the bad parts of movies, the parts that you try not to watch when your parents are there.

Yeah?

And they're sometimes lying on top of each other in bed?

She nodded. I squirmed, turning away from her again to inspect the very interesting knot on the nearby oak tree. A squirrel was working its way up the tree, peering down at me nervously. Just spit it out, Sophie.

The guy has to put his penis inside of your vagina.

Adia looked at me for a long moment in shocked silence and then—

Oh.

Yeah.

So all that....moving around and grunting and stuff, that's part of it?

I guess.

But the President didn't do that. Well, he had to with Hillary, I reasoned. Chelsea otherwise surely wouldn't exist. Adia and I agreed, however, that with Monica he had faked it a bit.

She put his thingy in her *mouth*?

Yep, mom said it's called 'oral sex' because you do it with your—

Yeah, I know what oral means! Adia looked absolutely disgusted.

And so Bill Clinton forced the issue of sex from the ether into a reality.

*

Right when she was beginning her career as *The Tempest*, Mary met Keith while doing laundry in New York City. They were both at a Laundromat because they couldn't afford to have their own washers and dryers back then. This made things difficult for Mary, who had to hide her *Tempest* outfit, though on the occasions that someone commented on it she just said it was her Halloween costume. Because laundry takes a long time to do, Keith and Mary both had out books to study. They were students in two different universities in New York at the time.

So, *Social Justice*? Keith asked across the room, looking at the title of Mary's book. You going to become a lawyer then?

Yeah, she laughed. God, I'm bored with it now though. What do you have there? *Economics*? *Businessman*?

Someday.

They started talking and decided to go out for coffee, and before they knew it Mary had invited Keith to a big charity ball, and then all of a sudden Keith had a tooth brush at Mary's place and she had one at his because they were having lots of sleepovers. Anyways, the trouble was that Keith didn't know that Mary was in fact The Tempest. She hadn't told him because it was a secret. Obviously. And Mary was afraid because she was falling in love with Keith and didn't know if he would like her being The Tempest or not.

Over the next three years, Mary and Keith did all sorts of things from taking a trip to Ellis Island to hiking through Ireland together. Meanwhile Mary was getting more and more involved in her charities and getting her law degree and becoming world-famous as The Tempest. Because Mary was amazing like that. Eventually she and Keith had enough money to buy an apartment with a washer and dryer inside it. And, after falling more and more in love for three whole years, Mary knew, just knew, that this was the man she was going to marry someday.

One day, Keith decided to go looking for a perfect ring to give Mary when he proposed to her. He went to a jewelry shop at the top of a skyscraper with his sister Wendy. Together they found the perfect ring with a pretty green stone, because they knew that Mary really didn't want a diamond. Keith was wrapping up the ring and looking out across New York City, when suddenly a man came barging through the door with a gun and decided to rob the jewelry store! It was one of The Tempest's arch foes: Lightning Man. He had the superpower of controlling lightning, and now he made it strike the jewelry store. I will take all of the jewelry and then kill everyone wearing purple! Lightning Man proclaimed because he was insane and didn't like purple.

Keith was wearing red, but the man behind the counter was wearing purple and so was Wendy. Lightning Man, wouldn't it be better to kill those wearing red? Keith challenged, or are you afraid of people wearing red like me?

Enraged, Lightning Man agreed to kill those wearing red instead of those wearing purple. No! screamed Wendy. Someone must stop you. Lightning Man laughed at Wendy and told Keith that he would die. Then he and Keith started to fight and in the struggle Keith was rammed through the window. The glass shattered everywhere, and Wendy screamed as Keith fell out the window.

Luckily on his way down, Keith grabbed hold of one of those window-cleaning metal things that happened to be hanging two floors below him. He held on tight. He thought he was going to die but thought that at least the man behind the counter and Wendy were safe. Mary would be proud of him even though it would break her heart to know that he had died. Keith looked down at the ground far below. He'd always wanted to be a husband and a dad, and he had thought that when he and Mary got married he finally could be. Wendy was screaming above him, and he held tightly to Mary's ring.

And then he heard the sound of jet packs and saw something rising through the air. Keith gasped, It's The Tempest! You've come to save me.

Yes, of course I have, The Tempest told Keith as he dangled from the building. She quickly picked him up in her arms, though he was bigger than her, and, holding on to each other The Tempest brought Keith back up to Wendy. The woman in purple hugged her brother tight and told him to never make such a sacrifice again.

Oh Tempest, how can I ever repay you? Keith asked.

Just remember to treat women with the same respect that you would treat men, The Tempest told him. Now, I must be off to stop Lightning Man! And with that she took off after the villain, who had already made his way out another window and was flying away to another jewelry store.

That night at dinner, Keith told Mary all about his encounter with The Tempest, and she smiled but said nothing. The two went into the kitchen to wash the dishes together, and Keith looked over at Mary and thought about how beautiful she was and how close he'd been to dying. Keith had planned something much more romantic, but Lightning Man had scared him so badly that day. Before he could even think about it, as they were washing dishes, he asked her: Mary, will you marry me?

Mary turned white and looked at him in shock for a while with her sleeves rolled up and her arms in the soapy water. I—I...

I'm sorry, I just thought...

Keith, Mary began, I do very much want to marry you, but there's something about me that you must know first. Mary took his hands into her soapy ones, and then brought him into her bedroom closet. She hit a special lever, and the floor dropped out beneath them. What! What's happening? An elevator took Keith and Mary down into the secret Tempest cave, which was underneath the Hudson River.

Oh my God! Mary, this is, this is the Lair of The Tempest! How did we get here?

Well, um, Mary began. She took out The Tempest mask and put it over her face.

Mary, you're....you're The Tempest?

Yes. Yes, Keith, I am.

How Keith failed to see the resemblance between Mary and The Tempest can be put down to a virus known as Superman-Clark Kent Syndrome. Sufferers of this disease are completely clueless as to what is right before their eyes. It is a very useful virus for superheroes everywhere. Even people who love superheroes are not immune.

But Mary, you mustn't endanger your life like that. You could get hurt.

I must, for the good of people everywhere. Please, Keith, you must understand!

Keith tried very hard, but he was so frightened for Mary. Eventually, he decided that he loved her too much to stop her from doing what she thought was right and what made her happy. Keith agreed to keep The Tempest a secret, and he and Mary planned their wedding. After getting married, they continued to live in New York City together, and Keith worked at his business office. Mary worked in her charities by day and saved the world as The Tempest by night. She was gone a lot, but Keith always waited for her and had a nice dinner on the table when she got home.

About three years after getting married, The Tempest had to retire briefly because her belly got way too big to battle crime. There was much rejoicing among all the villains of the world, but it would only be a brief reprieve. Soon Mary gave birth to her beautiful baby girl, Sophia. She and Keith moved to the suburbs of Pennsylvania so that Sophie would have the very best childhood with very good schools and a nice neighborhood and even a creek behind her house!

And so Keith started working from home so that he could care for and protect Sophie, and Mary went forth to continue saving the world. As Mary Mason, she campaigned for women's rights, and as The Tempest she took out the bad guys who tried to take those rights away.

*

I tried to warn Sophie about how dangerous the plan would be. I tried to tell her what could happen if anything went wrong.

Adia, we need to do *something*!

I bit my lip, looking at the jar where the fireflies we'd caught kept twinkling innocently. Sophie was undoing her container and releasing its captives into the night. All around us the yard was full of the little lightning bugs. I'd never lived anywhere with them before, and it had become one of my favorite summer rituals to catch them so that we'd have special lights for our evening games. The jars of fireflies had just finished serving as Anatzia's spirit-guiding lamps. Anatzia had just performed her first full shamanistic spell with Enzyotee looking on in awe. The power unleashed had allowed us to banish the shadow sorcerer to the darker realms for an entire year.

Adia, let your fireflies go, Sophie muttered distractedly. She was scratching her head. She'd just gotten her hair cut to shoulder-length, and I was still having trouble adjusting to the new look.

I slowly unscrewed my jar and watched the fireflies go off into the night.

Sophie, it's a bad idea. I shouldn't have brought it up.

But if talking to this Grol can do something to help...

He takes people away, Sophie. That's what Mother said in the story. He makes people like him, takes them out of the world of light and into the world of shadow.

Your mother also said that he makes people think they've stopped loving each other. So he's sorta like the shadow sorcerer. He tricks people. We know how to deal with that. We just find something really true, and then all the tricks don't work anymore. My name is Anatzia, you killed my mother. Prepare to die. Remember? We got to go and make Grol stop what he's doing.

Getting mixed up in dark magic is dangerous, I told her. Mother sometimes fiddles around with charms out in the garden, to keep things like that away. Giving-magic is okay, but this is taking-magic, you know? That's what Grol is, a taker.

But if the hidden people *are* in the woods, and they *do* make people fall out of love...

Sophie looked so desperate, glancing back at her house. And part of me, a very terrible part of me, was almost glad about it for a moment. For a moment, I even thought it through. If Mrs. Mason left the family for good, then maybe Sophie's dad could marry my mother. We could be real sisters, and Sophie's dad would be my dad and make Mother better. One big family. Maybe I *wanted* Sophie's mom to leave. I could envision it all so clearly. Sophie could be my sister. Mr. Mason could be my dad.

I looked back over to Sophie. In the firefly-glimmering twilight her face appeared suddenly very old. I remembered how she's looked that day by the creek when she'd been crying. They think I don't hear them, she'd told me. And she'd assured me, It isn't about you.

Adia, Sophie whispered, her eyes on her hands. I can't do it alone. I'd be too scared. Like Monster. You were the brave one with Monster.

I looked over at Sophie, and for the first time in a long time I saw the little girl who'd taken me up to her room and blushed, afraid to introduce me to her friends. And suddenly I felt more horrible than I'd ever felt in my life. I'm sorry, Sophie.

Sorry for what? Adia, are you crying?

It's nothing.

Sophie looked at me quizzically, searching my eyes, and then she pulled me into a hug. It's okay, whatever it is.

I'm sorry.

Okay, I forgive you.

I breathed her in for a moment and then pushed away, wiping my eyes on my sleeve. I just....Sophie, it isn't that I don't want to help, but I don't like this idea. Mother's told me about the hidden people, like I said, but they're really dangerous. They like to spirit people away, that's what Mother said. They take people and make them like mist and then take them to someplace else. Grol needs humans to serve him in the other-place.

Where?

I don't know, but no one ever gets back again. It's really dark magic, Sophie.

They're sleeping in separate rooms, Adia. Please. We have to try.

I bit my lip again but nodded. We did have to try. For Keith and Mary. They loved each other, and love like that shouldn't be messed with. And so we began to make our very careful plans to fix things. We were going to the hidden people beneath the woods to stop Sophie's parents from fighting. I only hoped we'd both come out of it alive.

*

Two weeks of planning. Two weeks and the fireflies had all gone away for the autumn and the crickets started to chirp instead. Two weeks and my parents were still fighting. The plan was set for tonight.

At 11:45 on the button, I snuck out of my room to meet Adia. I'd never done this before and was rather astonished at my superb ability to not make any noise. I was so proud of my amazing skills that I nearly cursed the floorboard of the stair when it squeaked. All my preparation and care, and I'd ignored that stair! I froze in fright, my heart pounding, waiting for my mother to come out of her bedroom or my father to come out of the guestroom and start screaming at me. I tried to come up with some excuse for being out of bed. None were needed; the squeak went unnoticed.

I managed to take the salt from the kitchen for the magic we were going to do. Then I slipped out the back door, finding the key under the flower pot to lock it behind me. The complete darkness of the night swallowed me whole. I'd never before ventured outside at this very late hour. Sure, I'd seen the sunrise and Tatiana, but it'd been early morning rather than late night and that made a difference for some reason. And there were no stars in the sky tonight, and no moon. I'd earlier procured a flashlight, but it seemed insufficient to fight the great blackness all around me.

Adia? I whispered so softly that I wasn't even sure if I'd spoken aloud.

Here. She was waiting for me at the edge of the wood, holding a real-life lantern with real fire inside. I figured the more protection we have, the better. Fire's supposed to be powerful, right?

I nodded, admiring her foresight. Adia had also brought birch branches for the magic protective ring we were going to make. Instinctively we clutched each other's hands as we walked slowly into the very dark wood. The trees enclosed us as did the odd noises of the night.

Do you hear the owl? I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest. I'd heard legends suggesting that when an owl cried out someone had to die. Or the Goddess of Wisdom, Sophie, Adia hissed back to me, Athena's symbol. Why did they make the owl wisdom *and* dying? That's not right.

We'd come to a small clearing. The clicking of crickets had faded and now we could hear the croaking of the bull frogs by the creek. They would be gone soon as the cold closed in, but the frogs generally persisted into the autumn. I watched a toad jump around on the ground. Despite myself, I leaned forward and caught it in my hands, feeling the slimy life against my palm. I absolutely loved catching things, especially things that made other girls squeamish. There was something empowering about holding another creature within my grasp. The toad struggled with me and jumped away.

No time for that now, Adia told me a little sternly.

I nodded and straightened up, brushing off my hands against the bottoms of my pajamas. These were covered with pictures of Hon Solo, Princess Leia, and Luke Skywalker. My parents had just deemed me old enough to view the epic space odyssey,

and it had immediately found favor with me. My mother had paid for allowing me to watch three movies with an entirely new set of pajamas, actions figures, and band-aids.

Adia was looking at my pjs critically. Maybe, if we call on the Force, our circle will be more powerful.

I readily agreed, and as we set each of our birch branches down in a circle, we blessed the twig with May the Force be with you. As soon as this was complete, we began the far more difficult task of spreading the salt. Even with our flashlight and lantern, we couldn't see where the salt fell, and we weren't sure how much was necessary to enclose the circle. I went around slowly, shaking the salt out.

Oh great Force and great Spirit of the earth and the forest and the whole universe. Make our circle more powerful than all the darkness and bad things hiding out there. Thank you.

The air tingled with our magic, spreading through my whole being like a fire. It was not a feeling of safety, but one that furthered my fear. I had the universe's greatest secrets and mysteries at my command and yet did not understand the meanest one of them.

Adia set her lantern down at the center of our circle and bowed to it. I imitated her. Together, we straightened up and stood on opposite sides of the flames, studying each other in the darkness. In the shadows, Adia could have been my twin, but I knew her to be darker and more exotic than I, a doll-like creature with the grace to match. Still, for a moment, staring at her that night, I felt as if she were my other self, something inseparable from my being.

Now we have to call the hidden people, Adia said softly. We weren't sure why we talked in whispers.

I offered her my hands, palms up, and she placed hers on top of mine. I told her to close her eyes. Adia obeyed. I too shut my eyes to the night. I took a deep breath, and Adia breathed with me. We were One, our purpose was stronger than either of our weak identities.

Hidden people! Hidden people! God made you hidden, but I want to see! Come out, come out, hidden people! Come out, come out, to dance with me!

The rhyme was my own invention on the spot, but it felt right. We waited for what could have been five seconds or five minutes and then, quite suddenly, there was a crack that echoed through the nightly noises and made our arms tremble. My eyes were tightly shut, but I felt the lantern lighting my face and the breeze blowing through my loose hair.

Who calls us?

The voice was partly a croak, partly a guttural grunt, and as indistinct as a snake's hiss.

I opened my eyes. All around our circle were toads, toads just like the one I'd picked up, but so very different. For one thing, their eyes were eerily human and they sat up on their hind-legs to emphasize this idea. Two wore spectacles, and a third had donned a top hat. This would perhaps not be frightening if not for the fact that the toads were all roughly the size of small cars.

My hands subconsciously squeezed Adia's. I glanced at her face and saw my horror reflected there.

Who calls us? Repeated the voice. It was coming from the largest and most wart-covered toad sitting on my immediate left.

I...I...

I looked at Adia. We, she whispered, we call them.

Sophie and Adia call you, I said firmly. The largest toad appeared to be testing our circle, for he crept closer and prodded it. Apparently the magic held.

Humans call us?

Yeah, I responded a bit shakily. Adia stepped around the lantern so that we stood together, holding one another. We would later say this was for the cold, but I believe we both had discovered the frigid breeze due to fright rather than lack of warmth.

The thing asked why humans had called it forth. Adia and I moved closer together. All of the toads were now testing our circle, pausing whenever the birch branches intersected, perhaps detecting gaps in the ring of salt.

We called you because you're messing with my mom and dad, and I want you to stop, I spat out in one breath. Adia's mother, she told Adia about you. She told Adia that you make people get divorces. The hidden people beneath the wood. It's your fault that my mom and dad are fighting.

The toad rose to its full height, towering above us.

I called because you're messing with my mom and dad and I want you to stop, it repeated in a sing-song voice. Your mommy and daddy shouldn't be together! Nobody should, because all those I love left me! Now I must take humans back with me to the other-realm to replace all the ones I've lost. You shall both come back with me.

You're Grol, I breathed in recognition. You're the king of the hidden people.

Of course it was Grol. The toad mutated, twisting upwards into a grotesque, misshapen man. Now do you recognize me!

We backed away and almost stepped outside our circle. The hidden person laughed and changed forms once more. Adia and I were prepared this time for the melting transformation. Now a handsome blond-haired prince stood before us, but blood seeped down from his lips.

Why should anyone be with the one he loves? Grol asked us in a different voice. Now he was a gentleman, a beautiful perfect gentleman who licked his lips of the blood—human blood we knew—that covered them. Love only hurts. There's nothing good about it. Better it all goes away.

My mom and dad have to be together—

My mom and dad have to be together, he repeated to mock me. My mom and dad are in love. My mom and dad are happy. My mom and dad love me.

They are and they do! Adia shouted at him, seeing the look on my face. Now, you are going to stop messing with them. What do you want, huh? It's obviously your fault that Sophie's parents are fighting.

What do I want? What do I want! Grol raged. Tell me what you will give to keep Mommy and Daddy together. It's not that Mommy is gone for too long or Daddy has to deal with little Sophie all the time alone. Little Sophie who spends too much time here in the woods and not enough doing normal good little girl things. No, it is Grol's fault, Grol who lost his Ulga. I lost my queen. What could you possibly have that I would want?

Shut up, you bastard, Adia said through clenched teeth. I looked over at her with wide-eyes. It's your own fault you lost Ulga, because you didn't pay her enough

attention, did you? Now Sophie is trying to be nice and give you something so that you'll be a decent hidden person and stop messing with her parents.

Yeah, I whispered. I thought over my meager possessions. I wasn't without things of value: my action figures, my jewelry, my beanie babies...Do you want my beanie babies? I got over sixty-seven of them. Everybody loves beanie babies. Only please could I keep Spot?

Grol was angry at this suggestion, raging on about a stupid little girl offering toys when his wife had left for all eternity. When the ranting slowed so that Adia and I could speak, we asked him again what it was that he wanted.

Something precious, he told us, something dear.

Adia and I looked at each other, unsure. You can't have my soul, I told him firmly. I explained that I just wasn't into that kind of thing and neither was Adia. We had both read *Faustus* thank you very much. (I hadn't, but Adia had told me the story). And in any case we knew his game. We knew he liked to take people away and make them like him, and we weren't doing that. He couldn't have our souls.

Grol was laughing again. What use would your soul be to me, little girl! I am not the devil. I do not deal in souls.

Well you can't have it anyway, I told him firmly.

You have nothing of value, nothing to give. Go away. Your mother and father will leave one another, and it will not be Grol's fault, but yours.

Your wish, Sophie, Adia whispered. What about your wish?

My eyes widened as I saw what Adia meant. I'd been saving my wish for so long. I thought about it. At that moment the deepest wish of my heart was for my parents to

stop fighting, and giving Grol my wish could accomplish that, so, it should be allowed, it should work. I can give you a wish, I told him. I can give you one wish from the deepest darkest part of your heart.

This caught Grol's attention. The demonic angel turned to us, his prowling around in circles at an end. For the first time, our eyes met and the full force of those blood-red orbs threatened to destroy me.

A wish?

I nodded, shaking with renewed vigor. Grol agreed. I wished my wish away to him. The transfer of the wish felt physical. It was as if some deep hidden part of me departed out of the circle. I fell forward, reeling from the loss.

Sophie!

But Adia's cry came too late; I had accidentally broken out of the circle.

Sophie! No take me, take me instead! Take me! Adia screamed at the toads that were around me now, holding me away from her. I was crying too, crying out to her, but the toads were all around, and I couldn't seem to see or hear.

Adia! Adia, save me! Save me!

The blackness took me over.

I came to in my bed with Adia wrapped around me like a blanket. She was crying. Adia? I'm so sorry, I'm sorry. It was all I could do. I'm sorry. Go back to sleep, Sophie. What? Adia? Sleep now. She kissed me on the forehead. She'd never done that before. I'm so sorry. I didn't understand, and I felt so very drained, so I comforted her with an

it's okay, everything's okay, and I started to sing to her rockabye baby on the tree top,
when the rain falls the cradle will drop. But I was too tired to remember what came next
and she kept crying and started to sing another song to me. Storm clouds may gather, and
stars may collide. I was asleep.

*

I need to tell you.

About?

Something bad.

Okay, tell me. You know you can always tell me.

We were walking in the city, and they were angry with each other. Because they
were angry, they were walking far away from each other and the distance felt like it was
packed with too much air. I tried to stand in that distance that felt too thick. I thought that
if somehow I stood directly between them I could hold them together like a thread or glue
or some other invisible connection that wouldn't break. I don't remember why they were
fighting, just that he had said something, and then she had exploded, and now they
weren't speaking. We had to get back to the car and go under the tunnel—we were in
New York I think—and go and see my grandparents. They had to start speaking again by
then because there wouldn't be any choice with my grandparents. With outsiders they
couldn't be angry. That was the rule.

I was thinking this and trying to stand between them like an invisible thread
holding them together so that they wouldn't break. The space felt heavy and my chest felt

tight but the thread that I was making was strong and it had to work. It had to hold them together. I looked over at him walking stiffly and turned back to her but, where? Mom had disappeared. The crowd had swallowed her up. I looked around but she wasn't there, and I wondered suddenly how we would find her because New York was very big and she was very small and how were we supposed to find her if she had disappeared? Dad took my hand and pulled me down the stairs to the subway. I looked at him, but he wouldn't look at me. She was gone. We couldn't take the subway because she wasn't here. We had lost her. The city was so big and there were so many people in it and in this place she could just disappear like that into the crowd even though I was the thread holding her to him. The train started to move, and it threw me forward. I felt his hand tight in mine. He caught me. But where was she and why wasn't my thread enough?

The train stopped three times before we got off. Dad didn't let go of my hand. We talked normally because we had to pretend that she wasn't gone and hadn't disappeared into the city never to come back. It shouldn't have been possible, it was against those rules that no one ever said aloud but they were still the rules. She had done it anyway, even though it wasn't in the rules, and now I didn't know the rules anymore. She was gone forever. But there was our car. And Mom was leaning against it because she didn't have the keys. Dad unlocked the door, and we all went into the car. And then they started to talk very politely to each other like strangers all the way to my grandparents' house. They were normal when we got there because with outsiders they couldn't be angry. Those were the rules. The next day they stopped being polite and stopped being strangers and everything was fine.

Except she had disappeared in the crowd, and I had thought that that was against the rules. And now I knew that the thread I made between them when they were falling apart wasn't strong enough to keep them together. She could just disappear like that anyway no matter how hard I fought the heavy air between them. Everything was fine, but Adia, what if she hadn't been there against the car waiting? What then?

*

It was morning before I woke. The only evidence of my late night journey was the mud that clung to my pajama bottoms and my wild hair. My flashlight sat at my bedside table. I had no memory of how I'd gotten back from the woods. I vaguely remembered Adia with me in my bed and singing. Immediately I stood up to go and find her, to make sure she was unhurt, but I collapsed backwards with a shout.

A fever raged through me that day, and my father refused to let me go to school or even get out of bed. Even in my half-confused feverish state, I managed to slip my pjs into the wash without Dad seeing the mud. He would spend days trying to locate the salt shaker.

Five long days passed before I could get out of the house to find Adia. I searched my yard and then sneaked into the wood to the place of our magic circle. It remained (for all I know it stays there still underneath the leaves) but in the daylight it seemed to hold none of its former power. The toads that lurked in the woods were just toads. Indeed, I would never again see a hidden person there, though I knew this was insufficient evidence to support a claim that they had left.

I called to my friend and criss-crossed the trees. Finally, I went to Anatzia and Enzyotee's Auntie Tree to ask her for wisdom. Sitting on Auntie's roots, I began to weep because Auntie Tree would not speak to me without Adia.

And then I saw the parchment.

At first, I thought it was merely litter that someone had left beneath the tree and, trained as a friend of the environment, I was going to throw it away and then curse the one who'd left it to dream of doomsday. Then I noticed the hair-tie on top of the paper and knew that it was Adia's.

I grabbed it and unfolded it. Symbols covered the page, symbols that looked strangely like...

A map! Adia had left me a map.

It was like buried treasure then. We were playing pirates, I supposed. I had to find Adia with the map she'd left me. The first marker was Auntie Tree, it showed her roots reaching down into the creek and marked out the kingdom of Igor the Fish. Igor had at this point long since taken the throne from his father, and we didn't see him anymore because he was too busy ruling. The drawing connected Auntie and the Kingdom of Igor to Grandfather Oak at the entrance to the wood.

I started to move, imagining myself as a small moving arrow on the map before me like in the Indiana Jones movies when the hero is flying somewhere. I crossed the creek on our little rock path and then ran through the field. There was Grandfather Oak. I put my hand gently on the tree. Adia had drawn a red arrow telling me to go to the grove. Then I needed to find the creek again and follow it to the right. Next popping up on the map with my little self moving across it was the Wood. I needed to remain on the

outskirts of the Wood for awhile, following the tree line. I started to sing aloud da-da-dun-duuuuuuuun, da, da, dun. Da, da dun daaaaaaaa, da-da, dun-dun-dun. My Indiana hat definitely needed to be ordered for next Christmas. There was a path leading into the forest. Okay, I had to follow this into the woods. It was an old path, very overgrown, and there didn't appear to be any signs of recent travel. I must have seen it before one hundred times and never thought to follow it. The road less traveled by. I began to move slowly and carefully, breathing perhaps a little too quickly and thinking about dying. I don't know why I was thinking about dying. Perhaps it was the thought of losing Adia, when finding her was so intricately connected to my discovery of death.

The path went on and on, and the light turned from bright and glowing to that green-gold filmy filter of the deep forest. Things were very quiet. Adia would not be afraid of this place, but I was. I was very afraid. I felt like Hansel bereft even of Gretel to help guide his way. The forest seemed to breathe around me like a living thing and my gaze kept slipping to the ground searching for toads and their more malicious cousins, the hidden people.

Breathe, Sophie. Just breathe. So much of life can be retained just through breathing. It made me feel more substantial, stopping and breathing and breathing. The forest was not going to gobble me up because it was significant and present around me and very real. Breathe, Sophie.

In front of me the path ended in a wild vegetable patch attached to an equally decaying cottage. The house looked like it had been given to goblins. It was partially obscured by vines and moss. Shingles from the roof had fallen off in places and trees grew so close to the building that their branches formed a covering from the rain as much

as the structure itself. A beautiful stone-built chimney came off the house at its front and connected with a stone front porch and steps that had fallen into disrepair. The screen door that stood in front of a thick oak construct was torn down the middle as if by wild animals. There were two windows that I could see, one on the other side of the chimney directly across from the front door, and the other on the side adjacent to the front area. A flower garden of sorts was on the right of the house, but it had long since over-crept its boundary and claimed the wilderness around. On the front porch a rocking chair was swaying back and forth as if just abandoned.

Adia? I whispered out of fear. Slowly, I crept up to the house. This yard was nothing like my parent's neatly-kept grass. My feet moved up the stone steps. They were well-worn.

Adia?

There was still no answer. I folded up my map nervously and approached the front door. The large oak door was cracked open, and I could hear strange noises coming from within. A woman's voice seemed to be repeating nonsense phrases over and over...sorrow that I have, by right is yours, and all the pleasures you usurp are mine. Begone, begone, oh woe begone! Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou liv'st, and take deep traitors for thy dearest friends. Begone, begone!

Hesitantly, I pulled the screen door open and slid into the small space between the door and the screen. Miraculously, the screen door did not make a sound.

So now prosperity begins to mellow and drop into the rotten mouth of death!

I peaked through the small crack. The room within betrayed none of the wreckage without. It was quite quaint, in its own way. A fancy old carpet hid the wooden floor and

a merry fire crackled just across from me. Two large cushioned crimson armchairs sat on either side of the fireplace with a comfortable lumpy sofa between them. They were all torn in places and stained, but still looked comfortable. Only one picture sat on the mantle-piece, and it was not of a person but rather a place. There was a white-stone cottage with a red roof in a little village wrapped around a white river. Green hills were all around the village and there were mountains behind the hills. Nepal. It looked for some reason as if the mountains with their white peaks were supporting the blue sky.

Turning to the right, I saw two doors that probably led to bedrooms and to my left was a small kitchenette. On every wall, every seemingly available space, were bookshelves filled completely. There was no wall space to speak of at all, for every inch of it was given over to books.

In the space between the door where I stood and the cozy fireplace, a woman was pacing the elegant carpet. She wore a green and gold dress that I associated with knights and dragons and queens. Her very red hair was frizzled and wild, unrestricted by any tie. She had the look of a former beauty that hadn't lost her looks but rather had lost the ability to care for her appearance. It wasn't that she was dirty—she was strangely clean, actually— but she looked like she wasn't really there. Her creamy white skin was almost transparent, and I thought maybe she was a ghost. In her hands she clutched a very old and much-used book that looked like it was about to fall apart. She was paging through this at random, and her lips constantly mouthed its words.

The figure seemed completely unaware of my presence, and in fact I think I could easily have slipped inside the house without rousing her attention if it weren't for the cat.

Yet the large, fluffy ginger cat with its yellow eyes did see me from her position on top of the sofa and meowed a greeting.

Immediately, the strange woman's eyes snapped up from her book and met mine. They were very familiar eyes, green as the sea and mysterious. Princess Isabella's eyes. Adia's mother, Margaret. I was frozen for a moment, but she looked right beyond me, not knowing, somehow not seeing. It was as if I was not real to her, as if *I* was some ghost. Hello? Who's there? Why couldn't Margaret see me?

The woman began to pace again after satisfying herself that no one had entered her house. The ginger cat stretched from its perch and jumped down, ambling up to me and rubbing against my legs for attention. I bent to scratch her ears. Where's Adia? Do you know, kitty-cat? The cat purred up at me, blinking her eyes in that very cat-like manner of contentment.

Adia's mother glanced over my way again as if disturbed by some gnat. She still seemed unable to register my presence. Mother? Adia's voice came from the hallway that probably led to the bedrooms. Is someone there? But the pacing woman seemed not to know or care about Adia's voice. I called her name and heard a clattering. My closest friend appeared suddenly in the hallway, stumbling over the bathrobe she was hastily putting on. Sorry, Sophie, shower. Mother, Sophie is here.

I ran the length of the room, ignoring Margaret. Adia! I threw my arms around her. Adia, you're safe! You're safe!

She reassured me with of course I'm safe, silly, laughing at my tear-streaked face and mopping up my nose in a mother-like fashion. But how did you escape? What

happened? Adia looked away from me. You don't remember? I didn't. Almost everything after that moment when the blackness had closed in was taken from me.

She told me that she had helped me back to the house, and I'd been very sick. I must have leaned on Adia's small shoulders, limped through the darkness with fever beginning to close in. I don't remember anything. How did she get them to let me go? Well, I just, you know, got them to, Adia told me evasively. But how? Did you have to give them something?

Adia would not meet my eyes. I grabbed her and forced her to look at me. What did you give them, Adia? She just shook her head. Margaret began muttering loudly, startling both of us. She spun in the middle of the room to turn, staring at Adia and pointing a finger at her. These our actors, as I have foretold, were all spirits, and have melted into air, into thin air. And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. Adia melted closer to me. Mother, please stop. Margaret turned, and, for just an instance, I think she saw me. She looked me straight in the eye, and then she turned away and began to pass again. We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with sleep, Adia. My Adia. You torment yourself needlessly.

We watched her for a moment and then turned back to each other with a chill deep in our hearts. What did you give them, Adia? But she just shook her head.

*

She was a beautiful red-haired girl with green eyes that always lit up whenever something particularly interesting happened. Her parents, the patriarch and matriarch of a

prominent Mafia family in Dublin, named her Hester. The Don never properly appreciated Hester, but the Dona loved her dearly. Neither of her parents understood Hester's need for stories. Hester would sneak away from her parent's house to the nearby library and read for hours. When she was caught coming home late, her father would beat her. He beat her mother, too. They were both afraid of him but didn't dare challenge his power. People who messed with Hester's father had a habit of dying.

Late at night, after the Don had gone to bed, Hester's nanny Nellie would sit up to read her Shakespeare. Hester would mouth the words and memorize their flow. They were so beautiful. Phrases came together with almost magical power. When no one was around Hester would play the role of her favorite Shakespearean heroines. In this way, she learned to be brave. Shakespeare made her strong.

One night Hester and Nellie were reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together, trading off roles. They were very happy, reading through the part about the fairy queen and the ass, when the Don came home suddenly, cursing and obviously drunk.

Hide! Nellie told Hester. Just hide!

But Hester couldn't move. She didn't want to leave her nanny. The Dona, Hester's mother, suddenly flew into the room, terrified. Oh, Nellie, he's so angry! Nellie grabbed Hester and threw her into the closet.

Where is that damn girl? You up reading those stupid plays again? raged the Don. What use are they? To a woman none the less?

He started to bang around, knocking over furniture.

Sir, Hester's mother began, for she always called him sir.

No, I don't want any more of your protecting, woman! I'm gonna teach the girl a lesson! Nellie, get out! And you, stupid wife!

But Hester's mother refused to leave, but she cowered in the corner. Where is the girl, Nellie, where is she? But the nanny wouldn't tell him where Hester was hidden. Nellie stood up to the Don. She was brave. Hester sobbed in the closet as her father started to beat her nanny. Nellie screamed and screamed, but there was nothing Hester could do. The Dona started to plead with the Don. He didn't listen. Hester's mother started to scream, too. Then, out of nowhere, Hester heard a gun fire. Again and again and again.

The room went dead silent. Neither Nellie nor her mother screamed anymore.

When the cops came, her father claimed that the Dona and Nellie had gotten into a fight and killed each other. Hester, who managed to get out of the closet finally without her father's knowledge, secretly told the cops the truth. She was taken out of her father's custody.

Hester entered Witness Protection at just fourteen. She testified against her own father at her mother and Nellie's murder trial. She also testified against other Dublin Mafia members in subsequent trials. Her life was constantly threatened. One day she had a knife brandished at her on the street before her body guards managed to restrain the would-be murderer. Hester reminded herself of her friends from Shakespeare. They were brave, and she could be too.

After the trials were over, Hester grew tired of Witness Protection. They wouldn't let her do anything she wanted to do anymore, even go to school. Hester decided to leave Ireland and run far away. She became an actress and traveled from city to city. She even

got a new name, Margaret. Eventually she traveled so far she ended up in Nepal. It was there that she met the love of her life, Matthew. He was an actor from the Himalayas whose father had been a Sherpa. They met while starring in Nepal's first production of *Romeo and Juliet*. They fell in love while performing the balcony scene for the very first time.

Matthew and Hester got married when they were barely nineteen. Just nine months later, they had a beautiful baby girl named Adia. The day she was born was the happiest of Hester's life.

The small family lived together happily touring with the Shakespearean company all over the world during the year and coming back to their home in the mountains of Nepal every summer. Everything was fine, until one day in the middle of a performance of *Macbeth* in Dublin, Hester saw a member of her father's Mafia in the crowd. Hester told Matthew immediately, and he told her not to worry. They reluctantly notified Witness Protection and were given bodyguards to protect them and their baby.

Late one night, a week after seeing the member of the Mafia, Hester was singing Adia to sleep when suddenly she heard a struggle. The front door of the hotel room where Matthew and Hester were staying was broken down. The body guards were dead. Matthew swooped up Hester and Adia, and the threesome ran for the fire escape.

Go, take Adia, I'll fight them off, Matthew told Hester. She didn't want to leave him, but her baby needed to be safe. She ran down the fire escape, watching Matthew take on the Mafia in the house above.

Hester went to a special pub where Matthew had promised to meet her. She waited and waited but he didn't come. When she'd nearly given up, she received a

telegram. In it Matthew said that Hester's life was too much for him, and he wasn't going to love her anymore. She didn't know if the letter was real and Matthew was alive or if they'd kidnapped Matthew and forced him to write the letter or if they'd killed the man she loved and written to break her heart. Meanwhile she saw another member of the Mafia around the corner heading towards the pub.

It broke her heart inside forever, but she had to save Adia. Hester fled that city. She didn't trust Witness Protection anymore, not after Matthew's death, and she knew that if Matthew had betrayed them, the Mafia would look for her in Nepal. So she ran away to Scotland and made her home on the remote Orkney Islands to keep her daughter safe. She worked as an actress in Aberdeen and kept her home in Kirkwall until her fame as an actress started to grow, and, scared, she started to move from city to city making sure no one was on her trail. Eventually, to be safe, she crossed the Atlantic to the United States.

Hester and Adia settled down in a very nice town somewhere in western Pennsylvania. There Adia grew up happily with her best friend Sophie, not knowing her mother's secret past.

*

Adia was accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry when she turned eleven, and, because it was too far from me, she turned down the offer. I, unfortunately, was not a witch. This depressed me beyond belief, and when Adia showed me her letter with its sealed waxed envelope and heavy paper, I was vastly jealous. If the

handwriting on the envelope looked suspiciously like Margaret's, we pretended not to notice.

Anyway, Hogwarts probably still thinks we're living in the UK, Adia told me. There have to be American wizarding schools, after all. The only wizards in the world can't be British. I wasn't so sure about Adia's idea. It would make a lot of sense if all the magicians were over in the UK. They, after all, had all the castles, and magic and castles go hand in hand. Adia told me all the good castles were in Scotland and that's where Hogwarts was too. Probably in the highlands. That's why the train journey takes so long. All the way from London up to the highlands. And where else would you hide a big castle like that anyway?

At this point Margaret called us in from our work—we were weeding the vegetable garden—so that we could have some lunch. We trampled into the little kitchen and sat down to our sandwiches. They were peanut butter and jelly. Last time she had gone shopping with Margaret, Adia had gotten grape jam especially for me. Adia liked her peanut butter and jelly with strawberry. I was over so much for lunch now that they had to stock grape jam, too. Margaret didn't eat sandwiches at all. While we had lunch she sat across from us sullenly eating nothing and staring out the window.

At some point during our meal, Margaret told Adia to eat some carrots. Because they are good for the eyes. She didn't look at either of us, still staring outwards. Adia quietly rose and took the baby carrots out from the fridge. We divided them between us, thinking the crunching crash of our teeth breaking down the carrots particularly thunderous in the quiet kitchen. Margaret rose from the table and left quite suddenly. The carrots tasted sour to my tongue.

Why doesn't she like me?

Adia sighed. You know it isn't about you, Sophie. It was better before.

Tell me again.

We lived by the ocean, on an island flat like a green green pancake sitting in a green-blue-clear syrupy ocean. The sky was so blue, a blue I've never seen anywhere else. When it wasn't raining. And the clouds would come and rain and rain for days sometimes. When it rained Mother used to tell me stories or read to me from her plays. She acted in the sparkling city, Aberdeen. Had to take the overnight ferry to get there and another to come home. Sometimes we took the train down to Edinburgh too, and once she took me to the castle. And Calton Hill. We went up and it was windy and you could see the whole city and all the hills and the castle and Prince's Street and...she held me up on her shoulders and the wind blew my hair all over the place. She told me I was a princess and that was my castle, right there.

And when we were at home sometimes she'd take me out to the dock and tell me I was Ariel and I could summon a storm if I wanted. I could raise the Viking ships from under the North Sea if I asked nicely.

Mother used to take me over to the other islands, to one of them that had two high hills, the highest places in the islands. It was hot there. Boiling. And we always ran out of water when we went. We refilled our bottles in the brown rivers that weren't really dirty. We'd climbed up to the top of the hill one summer. Well, Mother carried me up. But I remember. I was so little, I think it is the first thing I really really remember. You had to be careful because there wasn't really a path and the birds would attack if you got too close to their nests. They had a particular diameter around the nests that they'd defend

with their lives. That's why I remember; we watched them swoop down on a couple of tourists that day. I can't ever forget it. The birds just swooped at them over and over, cutting their hands with their beaks. They'd thrown their hands up to protect their heads. Mother told me not to watch. We were too far away to see very much, but I did watch. I couldn't stop. And I couldn't ever forget.

Did they get away safe?

Yeah, they eventually ran away, got out. But they were pretty badly cut up.

You still went up the hill after that?

Mother told me I shouldn't be afraid, that the birds were just protecting their nests. We went around them when we climbed, stayed out of the little circles they protected. That's the only reason the tourists got hurt; because they didn't understand. They just wanted to climb the hill. And the birds just wanted to protect their babies. It wasn't anyone's fault. They just came from different sorts of worlds.

But they had to be on the same hill.

Yeah. But it didn't have to end like that, you know?

I nodded and we were both quiet for a while. It was a rare moment when I couldn't say I had a clue of what Adia was thinking about. As for me, my head was full of a strange resentment towards Margaret for having had this adventure with Adia without me. I would have liked to know your mom back then, I told her. I hoped my voice did not betray my feelings. Adia nodded to me. Her eyes were far away on quests that I could and couldn't share.

But then perhaps she did see.

It would have been even better if you had been there, she said suddenly. It's like Hogwarts. You know, it'd be fun and everything, but it'd be better to have you there. Harry's not any happier because of the spells. He'd be pretty miserable without Ron and Hermione.

Adia didn't look at me as she said this. I glanced out the window at the way the light came through the blinds with gold and green patterns. I offered her my hand without looking at her, and she took it without looking at me. Together, hand in hand, we went back outside to care for the little garden we'd decided to grow.

*

Monster in my closet was in love with a beautiful Snake-woman who lived under Adia's bed. Unfortunately Snake-woman was a bit shy, which is how Adia and I ended up playing match-maker over the course of a good year.

We hadn't seen Monster since that night with the Macarena, so when we met up with him quite suddenly in the light of a very bright summer day, there were a lot of hugs and tears. We walked him out to the backyard and sat next to Sally's grave underneath Auntie Tree. Mother and Monster liked each other immediately, and the tree complimented Monster on his current crimson dress. The Monster puffed his chest out a bit at this.

Monster explained that he'd gone off on a trip like Genie in *Aladdin* to see the world. He'd become quite a famous dancer while away. We saw all his pictures of Paris and Bermuda and, just for us, he had a special set from Kathmandu. We looked across the

crowded streets and vendors, and both of us could almost smell the place. You probably wouldn't want to, Monster warned us. Monster particularly liked the Monkey Temple in Kathmandu and showed us the endless steps going up up up and all the big monkeys with their adorable babies. The temple itself was huge with twirling prayer wheels and golden trim. Monster had gone at sunset and taken pictures looking out across the city. It looked mystical. Monster introduced us to his very good friend, the Kathmandu monkey named Ti-ti-ti. Ti-ti-ti and Monster took a photo together on the red Durbar square, of which Ti-ti-ti gave Monster a personal tour. Ti-ti-ti had also given Monster a set of prayer flags just for Adia and me. We hung them from Auntie's branches.

Blue for space. White for air. Red for fire. Green for water. Yellow for earth. They fluttered in the breeze, and Adia and I kept smiling up at them. They would remain in that tree as long as it was ours. We promised Monster this. As long as the tree was ours the prayer flags would remain.

The three of us sat for a time watching the prayer flags and talking about Nepal and Ti-ti-ti and wondering what Shakespeare and Marlowe ever got up to nowadays because we hadn't seen them in ages. Monster kept glancing at us rather sadly until we asked him what was wrong.

You are becoming women. We knew this and were rather proud of it and laughed at his sadness. I should ask you to dance again sometime, he told us gruffly. Soon it will all be over. You'll go away.

We're not going away, we assured him. He told us that the world would soon end. Oh, you're talking about the end of the world. Y2K. The apocalypse. Unless you know how to hunt and stuff. Monster looked confused by this explanation and asked for

clarification. Adia smiled and explained that all the computers in the world were going to stop working at midnight January 1st, 2000. Monster had never used a computer and didn't know how a worldwide crash would affect him in the least.

Well, then you can come, we told him, and help us survive the apocalypse. We're hoping for some zombies or something interesting. Monster could totally have taken on zombies. You don't have to talk about being gone. You'll be back if the world doesn't end. Monster just smiled a bit, still looking sad and saying that we had to dance again sometime before it was too late. It was then, talking about dancing and partners, that Monster mentioned Snake-woman who lived under Adia's bed.

I've loved her forever, he explained, but have never been able to let her know.

We begged him for the story, and he explained that Snake-woman had never been out with anyone before and was very skittish around guys. She was a beautiful green-blue scaled creature with deep red lips and violet eyes. A dream really, he told us. And she once took the breath away from Yeti, squeezed him so tight. Monster, in a monsterly fashion, had brought her the head of a great wild boar several years ago, and it had only seemed to frighten her. But it was meant as a gift of love. Because monsters did have a thing for severed heads. This was considered romantic. Adia and I shuddered at this but asked him to continue. Monster explained that he had asked Snake-woman out dancing several times, but she had always declined.

We'll talk to her, we said, but Monster immediately told us that no, we could not interfere. Do you want to, you know, with her? We were giggling. Monster gave us a very dirty look and told us that he loved the woman and only because of his love did he want to do you-know-what. Adia and I had forgotten in the years that had passed why we

loved Monster so much. He drew himself up to his full impressive height and pulled on his samurai hair until he stood straight up. His fangs were out too. He was quite frightening when defending the woman he'd decided was his.

So began Monster's routine of sending special gifts home with Adia anonymously for Snake-woman in order to claim her as his lover. We helped him pick these things out. Sometimes they were wildflowers and sometimes they were beautiful paintings Monster did of Snake-woman from memory. And then he started to write her poetry.

Snake-woman, meanwhile, coyly would take all the gifts from Adia and demand to know her paramour. We were good at keeping the secret. Adia and I were a bit busy during this time saving the Last Great Beanie Baby Kingdom from the evil purple cat—the only way to defeat him was to remove his shirt—but we made time every evening to speak with Snake-woman and make sure she was properly receiving Monster's noble attentions.

Whoever it is, he loves me, she finally admitted in autumn. Adia and I just smiled at her. The Beanie Baby Kingdom had been liberated. We didn't know it then, but it was the last time we would assist in the Great Wars of the Kingdom. A satisfying conclusion, with the evil purple cat finally repenting his sins and agreeing to go under the tutorage of Spot the Wise. Of course he loves you, we assured Snake-woman. Do you want to go off on a date?

By Halloween she finally agreed. We took Snake-woman to the dress-up closet and found her a beautiful indigo sleeveless dress that clung to all her snake-curves just right. She, after some hesitation, put on bright red lipstick and we thought it complimented her green snake scales. You look beautiful, we assured her.

Adia and I both decided to be fairy waitresses that Halloween complete with roller skates. We kept the roller-skates off when trick-or-treating, but when we returned with the booty and hid out in my bedroom, the roller-skates returned for a test-drive. This, roller-skating-waitressing, is extremely difficult to do. The third time I rammed into Adia and knocked her over, she finally convinced me that I could be a chef without roller-skates and she would be the waitress. If I'd been a year younger this pronouncement probably would have made me cry. As it was, the grand-opening of Restaurant Everest in Sophie's Room may have found me pouting.

The first and only guests at our special restaurant arrived at midnight. Monster came in a delicate pale yellow dress that brought out the gold in his red scales. Snake-woman was on his arm. She looked radiant and was even literally glowing, which Adia and I didn't know she could do before tonight. It added more ambiance to our restaurant as we lacked candles. Monster smiled at us and held the chair out for Snake-woman to sit down. Would you care for a drink? Snake-woman was blushing and shy. Monster took over telling us to please bring some of that finely-aged grape juice.

Dinner went well. Adia and I tried not to snoop that much, though we did refill the water glasses perhaps more frequently than need be and did have to bring four courses of beast tartar, tortured fig salad, bloody meatballs, and eyeball on cracker dessert. Monster was asking Snake-woman lots of questions, just like we told him to, and had got her into an engrossing discussion about the moral reason for monsters. Were they a necessity or a horrid unnatural plague upon the earth? Well, argued Monster, children do need a few monsters and villains to fight off or heavens know they'll never become

proper adults. Just look at Sophia and Adia here. Monsters helped them to grow into quite nice young women.

Snake-woman, however, was convinced that monsters should all retire from the closets and under-beds and dark bathrooms at the end of the hall and go off into some other world where they could never scare anyone. The two argued about this very fiercely, actually shaking my house and making my dad knock on my door suspiciously.

That night, Snake-woman smiled at Monster in his yellow dress and headed off into the closet, twirling a come hither finger in his direction. He blushed a very deep red, and Adia and I both gave him encouraging smiles. Well, well, well, Adia told me, hope your closet's soundproof. I paled. We put a sheet on the gap between the door and the rug, just in case.

*

It was more an irritation than anything else. Having to wear pads and get rid of stained underwear and stained pants and bearing through the terrible cramps and mood-swings and trying to figure out tampons. Make them go in right, because they don't like to do that well, as I told Adia. The biggest irritant for that particular summer afternoon, however, was more a complete distrust of tampons which made the idea of swimming in the creek less than appealing. And then, of course, I had to explain to Adia why I wasn't going in the water. She, naturally, thought I was afraid of the snapping turtles that had been seen in other areas of the creek.

Fraidy cat! Scared of the snappers!

Am not! I was furious at this childish insinuation when the real reason spoke of my full maturity. I have my period. Adia gaped at me. I told her the story of discovering that my pee was red as blood in the school toilet. I spent a good two minutes convinced that I was dying from some kind of internal bleeding before remembering my mother's veiled warnings on this possibility. I stuffed a lot of toilet paper into my underwear to stop any staining and then went on with my afternoon of grammar lessons and times tables, with suspicious glances around me trying to figure out who else was a woman already in my class.

Well I'm not. Adia confirmed for me. Adia hadn't even really gotten the spiraling leg hair and underarm hair yet. She was several months younger than me, but I hardly thought it fair that she didn't have to put up with any of the very annoying bodily functions that I did. Women weren't supposed to have hairy bodies so Adia was more of a woman than I was in this respect. Adia argued that women got to shave when girls didn't have to. This seemed so ridiculous that we were forced to let the matter drop with a lingering respect for the French.

Adia and I sat by the creek in the brilliant summer light comparing our prospective bosoms. While Adia was the far superior beauty of the two of us, I, in this one area, did in fact have her beaten.

I could be a fucking boy! Adia raged. She didn't even need to wear a bra yet, though she had gotten her hands on some sports bras and bikini tops that she wore in the summer under her loose tee-shirts.

Least yours stay put and in. Try carrying this around. It's flabby, jiggle. I jiggled my chest to prove the point, looking at my reflection with all her curves. Too many curves. Beautiful people weren't fat.

You aren't fat.

I jiggle!

You have boobs though!

Adia also had breasts, they were just smaller. Non-existent. Smaller, not fully-developed. Adia glared at me. We both crossed our arms and looked away from each other's reflected eyes.

*

What's it like? School? I asked Sophie.

Fun, Sophie told me. Lots of stuff to learn.

We were making snowflakes from construction paper to decorate Sophie's room. Shakespeare and Marlowe were supposed to be coming over tonight, and Sophie told me they had some kind of big news. We wanted them to feel at home, hence the snowflakes.

Sophie told me about her current teacher, Mr. T., who she liked immensely. Last week, she said, the whole class went on a star-gazing fieldtrip to Mr. T's farm with their parents. Mom was away for business, but Dad came. Mr. T. does it every year, the stargazing trip. It's for our astronomy unit. There was apple cider, and we got to know all the constellations and even look at Venus through the telescope. It's like the moon,

Venus. It waxes and wanes and stuff. I can go again next year even if he's not my teacher anymore. Dad said it would be fun to go again. Maybe we can look at Mars next year.

They're named after the gods, the planets, I told her because I knew this even if I didn't have a teacher that took me stargazing. She nodded. Venus for love, Mars for war.

Sophie opened up a snowflake and it was shaped almost triangular. Looks like a cat-face, Sophie commented. I saw what she meant. It was cat-like at least.

Below we heard the doorbell ring and Mr. Mason's coming, coming! Then we heard the door open and the sound of laughter down below. Sophie dropped the cat-like snowflake and looked at me in panic. Below came a woman's voice. Sophie! Sophie! Mrs. Mason was home from her trip early. She was coming up the stairs.

You aren't supposed to be here tonight! Sophie hissed at me. Oh God. She searched around her room frantically as the footsteps got closer and closer. There was a knock at the door. Sophie? Just a minute, Mom. Sophie looked at me with wide eyes and then started to push me towards her closet. Just hide. I felt like the secret lover being thrown without clothes under the bed when the husband unexpectedly returns. A comedy scene. It was supposed to be a comedy scene, and so I tried not to feel angry for the treatment. Sophie pushed me into her small closet and closed the door. I was pressed against her dresses and coats and stood uncomfortably on several pairs of dress shoes. Be quiet, she told me from outside of the closet with a strained voice. *Please* be quiet.

Sophie!

Yeah, Mom, sorry, I was just, um, changing, that's all.

I heard the door swing open with a creak.

Hello there.

Hi, Mom. I could picture them hugging in my mind the way that Mother and I didn't anymore, the way we used to hug when I was little.

How was Florida?

Warmer than here, Mrs. Mason laughed. Dad told me about the essay contest. Congratulations.

There was a moment of silence and a mumbled thanks. Sophie would be blushing and looking down. Compliments unsettled her, even when they came from me. Sophie had written about *Harry Potter* and how much she loved Harry, Ron, and Hermione for the big school essay contest. She told everyone about how these characters had become her friends and made her a better person. I'd edited for her, and it really was a good essay. She wasn't happy with it though. It just doesn't explain it all, she told me. There's more, and I don't know how to make them understand. She was really surprised when she won the contest and had her essay published in the school newsletter, even though I told her she deserved it.

I'm so proud of you, Mrs. Mason was saying. I have such a bright daughter.

Well, Sophie said, I couldn't have done it without Adia. She really helped clarify everything and helped me gather my thoughts. I smiled in the closet because that was, of course, for me. There was another pause, one that felt very uncomfortable to me, though perhaps that was just because I was starting to feel really claustrophobic. Yes, of course, Mrs. Mason said with a high note in her voice. Be sure to thank Adia for me, okay?

I will.

These are beautiful, Sophie, the snowflakes.

Thought I'd decorate for the holidays. Looks like a cat that one, see?

I heard footsteps and could almost see Mrs. Mason bending to pick up our snowflakes and examine them. Do you want me to get out your nativity set from Aunt Wendy? You could set it up on your desk maybe. Okay. I'll do that. Look I'm off all next week after I clear a few things up on Monday. School ends...?

Tuesday morning; it's a half day.

Right. Do you want to go ice-skating Tuesday afternoon?

Yes!

Mrs. Mason laughed again. Okay. Consider it a date. Dad says dinner in about an hour. Come down when you're done with the snowflakes so we can talk?

K.

I heard footsteps again and then the door opening and shutting. Mrs. Mason was gone. The closet door creaked open, and I blinked in the sudden light. You okay? Sophie's eyes were large and worried. I nodded to her, and she started to smile. Mom's taking me ice-skating!

I tried to match her smile and told her I'd heard everything loud and clear.

We'll sneak you out the back, okay?

Right, I agreed quietly.

Adia?

But I wouldn't look at her for a moment. I turned away so I wouldn't have to. It wasn't really fair. She hugged me from behind, her chin resting in my hair. She was taller than me by a bit then. Adia, I'm sorry.

Just tell me about it after, okay?

I felt her nod into my shoulder. I wish you could go but...

I know. I slipped out of her embrace, and we began to plan how I'd get out of the house unnoticed. I wasn't supposed to be there after all.

*

Why have you risked this meeting in the middle of the day? I asked Enzyotee one bright winter morning under the shelter of Mother's branches. Enzyotee explained that it was necessary, that any other course of action would have yielded poor results. And we were safe beneath Mother. Even now in this war, we are safe here. Yes, even the evil shadows will not breach Auntie Tree, and certainly men will never disturb this sacred place.

Why have you called me here? I demanded. Enzyotee was crying. I couldn't bear this and stood, putting my arms around her so that we were toe to toe. Her tears fell from her eyelashes down to my collar bone.

My dearest Enzyotee, will you tell me what is wrong?

The shadows are gathering again.

But the shadows are made only through our very own fears.

Enzyotee agreed, nodding. The fear, she explained, was growing. It polluted the forest and the rivers. A wind ripped through Auntie, and we both shivered against the cold. We sat on Auntie's crooked roots, holding one another tightly.

That is why the fields spoil and the crops fail. Why we will starve this winter if things are not put to right, I whispered, understanding. It is this hate between our two people that burns like a terrible storm and destroys all.

Yes, yes, we agreed that this was what was wrong. But we did not know how to fix it.

Enzyotee, why are you crying?

Oh my Anatzia, my dearest heart-sister, I must cry. For you do not know what my father has planned. Oh, he will destroy us all! He is so cruel, so horrid.

I decided that it was because of our mothers. Our mothers had died and now our fathers could not stand to see either of us because we were the images of their former beloved ones. Enzyotee was convinced the fault rested in our status as daughter, because all the chiefs had were daughters. Except for Koto, but Enzyotee's brother was useless.

He is not useless, I muttered, blushing.

Enzyotee turned to me knowingly. Oh, I know how you feel about Koto. He thinks you beautiful, you know, even though he dares not admit it. But he is a failure to my father because he does not want to hunt. He wants to make pictures. Always making pictures.

I had seen Koto's sacred pictures. He recorded our people's stories, their precious stories. You and your stories, Anatzia. But this is no story. This is most terribly real... do you hear that?

We turned, hoping that Auntie's branches were thick enough to protect us from any wandering eyes. It sounded like marching, like... Your father has assembled his warriors!

Yes, the warriors were assembled but not merely to kill us all. It would be worse, much worse. Because Enzyotee's father wanted the shadows to stop. He wanted to heal the break between our tribes.

I did not understand Enzyotee's grief; this was good news. It certainly did not merit the tears spilling down my heart-sister's face. And then she told me how her father intended to buy this peace.

He means to marry the chief's daughter, my dearest sister.

And I understood. I stepped back from her in horror. I knew my father would never allow it. He would never allow Enzyotee's father to marry me.

And my father will kill any who stand in his way, Enzyotee told me. She was crying once more. I knew it must stop, the pollution. If I could stop it, if it meant giving myself over to a man I did not love—

No, Anatzia! We will find a way. We will save you!

I did not see how it could be done, but Enzyotee pulled me to my feet. She caressed Auntie's knot one more time in deepest love and I imitated her. Then we both gathered ourselves to leave the safety of Auntie Tree. The moment we parted the branches we could feel the shadows pushing down around us, wanting to destroy us.

What must we do, Anatzia? Enzyotee asked me. You are the shaman. What will it take to heal the earth? To banish the shadows?

We must go to the sacred grove and call to the spirits.

I pulled her with me and explained as I went. We would return to the grove deep within the woods, a grove of oak trees. Between them ran our creek, the sacred creek that was the boundary between worlds. Here we could call the spirits to our aid. Here we could summon their powers to stop the war, to stop the bloodshed, to protect our families.

We ran through the woods without making a sound. We were both of us terrified, but our strength of purpose was so intense that I think we could very well have flown that

day. We reached the grove, panting, our hands grasped together. Enzyotee scampered up one of the oak trees at my suggestion. She gasped in astonishment. They're fighting below! My father and yours are fighting! And all the tribe! Both tribes! Anatzia, oh Anatzia, we are too late!

I closed my eyes, concentrating on the power of the grove, on the spirits around us. Oh earth, Great Mother Earth! Spirits of the trees. Spirits of the water. Spirits of the earth. Spirits of the wind. Help us! Aid us in our need.

The wind blew through the trees and the earth quaked beneath me. The creek ran faster and the waters suddenly were growing red. Anatzia, oh Anatzia! Enzyotee cried out to me over and over. They have stabbed each other, your father and mine. They are both hurt. Anatzia!

She leapt down from the tree with skill that I envied and stood before me, weeping. Her mouth said the inevitable, that they would die, must die, that we were too late. But my heart refused this. We could save them, we *would* save them. Hold my hands! Together we joined hands and ultimate, terrifying power ran through us. The spirits were around us, within us, calling out.

The river bleeds, cried the spirits. The river bleeds with your hate!

But we do not hate! Enzyotee screamed back at the spirits after I interpreted their words for her. We are sisters! We do not hate! How can we stop these shadows? How can we save both of our people? I asked the spirits for assistance, for aid, trembling with this lightning energy that flowed through me. The spirits would not speak. Tell me!

They are telling me what must be done, Enzyotee whispered. She sounded terrified. They are telling me...Anatzia, you must leave, you must go! Leave this place! Go to the battle field below and find Koto! Find my brother. I must stay.

I screamed my denial of her truth. But I couldn't hold on to her. A force stronger than me was tearing us apart, and I was cast from the grove, crying out in horror as the magic of the place intensified to a peak. Enzyotee was rising into the air and I knew, I knew what the spirits had demanded to stop the horror, to stop the red river.

Enzyotee fell and was gone into the wind, the earth, the air, and a new crooked tree rose from the side of the creek. A little girl in red was sitting on its roots. And Sophie rushed to her Adia, shedding the cloak of Anatzia as she went.

Adia? I was shaking from my place right outside of the circle of trees. The sounds of the world came rushing back in upon me and the river before me was most definitely water, not blood. Adia leapt to her feet and ran over to me, bending down.

You okay, Sophie?

Yeah, that was just, yeah...

Yeah. It was intense. More intense than it had ever been before.

She put an arm around my shoulder. We were silent for a long time, listening to the creek bubble. I had eyes only for the crooked tree across the stream. My crooked tree. The protector of fish and giver of seats. Auntie Tree. My favorite tree.

So, what happened, afterwards? Adia asked me softly, looking at the tree as well.

Enzyotee gave herself to the spirits to save her people.

And she's there to this day, Adia pointed out. She's still here, in her own way. She's in everything. In Auntie most of all. Auntie was always Enzyotee deep down.

I nodded, a lump in my throat, and looked at my hands. My eyes suddenly were overly wet. But what happened to Anatzia? That, of course, was the question. We were both quiet once more, staring out at the tree.

She went to the battlefield, I said finally. And she stopped them all with Koto's help. They took the chiefs back to the medicine tent and Anatzia healed them. That's why she had to be there, because she knew the sacred magic, so she could save them both.

And then, Adia picked up the story from me, then of course Anatzia and Koto must have married and stopped all the problems between the tribes. And their first daughter, we decided, was named Enzyotee. And Enzyotee the Second became the first female chief of both tribes. And she was a wise ruler. Anatzia and Koto lived for very many long years and were happy, but Anatzia would always miss her Enzyotee.

It's so sad, I whispered. I wish it weren't so sad.

That's the real world, Sophie.

We never got to play with Anatzia and Enzyotee again. We were having more and more trouble seeing our old friends. We weren't sure why this was exactly. It was just becoming harder and harder to hold them together before our eyes. Kinda like Tatiana, remember? We talked about it sometimes in hushed whispers at our fairly frequent sleepovers. Something was changing. Y2K might not have ended up being an apocalypse, but when Adia and I counted down to the new millennium in my backyard— sitting under the tree where our old plastic castle used to stand and staying away from the big boisterous alcohol-friendly party my parents were hosting in the house beyond—we felt

as if we were counting down to the end of something and it made the night as cold as it had been all those years ago when we had first entered the pit of despair to save the rabbits from the shadow sorcerer during Anatzia and Enyzotee's first adventure.

*

We had been reading out by the creek in early summer, Sophie and I. I was tackling *Moby Dick*, and Sophie was engrossed with *A Brave New World*. I kept looking at my friend wondering how to tell her it was time to do something else, but then I'd see her eagerly turn another page. We'd both scheduled this reading day as an intervention to end our *Harry Potter* addiction. The latest novel we had read through twice when it'd come out a month before and then begun to reread all the other novels and discuss all sorts of theories. Neither of us had touched a book not set at Hogwarts in all that time. And so we had brought towels out to sit on the grassy bank opposite the woods with two new books. Mine, unfortunately, seemed mainly consumed with five-page descriptions of harpoons. I was thinking about re-reading Voldemort's rebirth when Sophie, perhaps noticing my irritation and guessing the direction of my thoughts, decided that we should go into the water.

It will be fun. And refreshing. Because it is hot. Sophie had been sweating for the last two hours or so and moved under the shade of the crooked tree. I'd joined her on the roots, watching the fish and darkly wishing that the bloody whale had just swallowed Ahab the first time, thus saving Ishmael several hundred pages of labor.

We aren't dressed for a swim, I told Sophie. She looked so disappointed that I was quick to suggest that if our clothes were in the way we might as well get rid of them. We're both girls. We can go in naked. Sophie looked at me incredulously. Then she looked embarrassed. I, however, glanced around to make sure no one was in our general area and then began to strip. It would pass the time before I needed to go back to the whaling ship.

Adia, I don't know about this. I told Sophie she was being quite silly. If it bothered her so much, she could leave on her underwear and bra. Naked, I glanced at my reflection appraisingly and then set a tentative toe against the water. Adia! Sophie?

I slid off our perch into the water sending the fish quickly into their shelter under the roots. I was floating, and I was the whale who ate up Noah and kept him safe. My head went under the water, eyes open and searching for someone to swallow. I emerged with a splash. Sophie!

She stood there in the bright sunshine, arms folded across her chest, rocking from side to side. It's just me, Sophie.

Slowly her arms unclenched and she began to undress. Off came the tie-dye t-shirt, off came the bright blue PE shorts, and she pushed her still shoulder-length hair away from her eyes. She stood, in her underwear and bra, looking down at me in the water. Sophie! Okay, okay! She tried to quickly go into the water, but, upon toe-testing, backed away from the coldness.

Sophie was all curves, like a South American painting, like the mother goddess painting from Nepal that my mother kept in its frame behind one of our bookcases. I could see the white ghost of her bathing suit written into her skin. Her arms and legs, her

face, all these were very dark. Sophie had begun shaving a long time ago so that her legs and underarms were smooth, a task of female grooming that I had also finally started this last year at my mother's insistence. Sophie told me I was staring. She was blushing. I had never seen her practically naked before, or if I had it had been long ago. She paraded to me, angrily, spinning around and asking if I'd had enough. She wasn't the traditional princess with a waist tapering into nothing. My shape was closer to that, but my face was a little too thin, my current acne breakout a little too obvious, my eyes a little too close together. Neither of us had that Hollywood plastic perfection.

Sophie came in with a splash, and we both drifted in the water, burning ourselves horribly without realizing it in the sun reflecting off the water and on to our faces. Do you ever get scared? About growing up?

I can't remember which one of us asked the question. Neither of us had an answer. Did we ever get scared? I think we were both very frightened. I think we both guessed. I think somewhere we both knew. We floated innocent as the day of birth in a creek that was rapidly getting too shallow for us, and we contemplated the blue blue sky above us.

Tell me again about Nepal.

The place I'd never and always been. I told her about the mountains, so very tall they were like clouds yet somehow more firm and reaching upwards to support the sky. The sharp blue of the sky. The small villages with their crops growing here and there and all around. The monasteries high atop green hills. The river so very white with the milk of the earth. I could see it all in my mind.

Soon we'll be there. One day.

We floated together in silence then, until the sun began to grow less impressive and goose bumps broke out on our arms. Laughing, we exited the creek with less production than we'd gotten in to it. Both of us had shriveled our skin rather unforgivably.

I don't know why I told her that afternoon and not before. I'd been living with the knowledge for some time. He's dead. I know this because she told me, but I could not accept the knowledge. Always I had believed that one day, someday, he would come back and we would be whole and complete. Our family could be like Sophie's: normal and healthy. Mother would be cured of her strange disconnect from the world. I believed this one of many fantasies. My prince father would return one day to save my mother from herself.

She could be lying. Sophie automatically suggested my salvation. You know it could be a lie, it could be untrue, it could be for your own protection, it could be for his. Your mother could be lying.

I know. I knew. The swirling oranges trapped in sky and water delighted Sophie and me as we watched the sun set over a lazy June day. Our legs trailed down from the tree roots, and our toes dipped into the glinting ginger waters to fracture the picture of the sky. We reached our hands towards the fireflies slowly lighting up the gathering night. The hands nearest the other met and clasped together. Sophie's hazel eyes sought mine and glowed bright as any of the fireflies. He will come back someday.

Maybe I don't want him to come back. Maybe he had abandoned us. Perhaps that was my mother's reason for never telling me anything about him. Sophie nodded sadly, tracing the fingers of my trapped hand. But you hope that isn't true.

Of course. There was always hope, the best of things, as Sophie said. Her eyes left mine for the sunset, And, Adia, the best of things never die. It was from some movie I could not place in that moment. She shivered and I twisted closer to her, offering warmth. Our hands remained clasped together.

*

Are you sure you want to hear about it?

Yeah, tell me about your trip.

You're sure? It won't make you sad?

No, it's okay, Sophie, really. It's nice to hear about you and your dad. Just tell me.

We stayed in a Bed and Breakfast in the woods and it was on the hill overlooking our river. It is our river now, Dad's and mine. There was a deck below the main building of the Bed and Breakfast, and we could walk down the steps from our little room off the house to the deck to watch the river. We sat there before bed at night. The first night we talked about school and about the creek and Harry Potter (he's reading them now so that he and I can talk about them) and about Mom and Bill Clinton and the Beatles. The second night we just sat on the deck together and looked out at our river, and we didn't need to talk because we could say more sitting side by side with his arm around me and my head listening to his heart beat. I can snuggle close against him because he lets me. Because it is him and me. Us, and—Adia, are you sure you want me to keep telling you?

Yeah.

You're crying.

Yeah, keep telling anyway. Please, Sophie.

Well, I mean, I...During the day we went out on the river in a raft with a guide called Jorge. We went over rapids and at one point it sprayed up and got Dad very wet. I thought he'd be angry because it was cold, but he just laughed and laughed until we got back to our Bed and Breakfast. He changed out of the sopping sweatshirt and jeans and took a hot shower while I read about our river. That night after the rafting trip we went to a fancy dinner, and I told him about Shakespeare and Marlowe and their efforts to adopt a little baby polar bear. Whenever I talk about things like this he gets this smile on his face that makes me feel like I'm five. I try to tell him about the story I want to write but decide not to because of that look. I started to talk about you, Adia, but he gets that look when I do that too, so we talked about school instead.

*

The dream Tatiana sent Adia began with a singing nightingale suspended in a swirling mass of violet-blue liquid fire. The fire pulsated, surrounded, enveloped. Gasping for breath, the nightingale struggled to fly out of the fire, to escape, but it was drowning in torturous pain. It screamed over and over again for assistance. And then the vision dissolved, and Adia saw the fairy queen perched on her throne of mountains, ruling over all of the earth.

Save her, Tatiana told Adia.

And there was nothing more. Adia dreamed this dream every night for a week that summer. She was terrified of sleep and would suspend the actual closing of her eyes as

long as possible. In the afternoons, she would wait for me to return home from my last days of school, hidden behind a grove of trees in my backyard. Telling me about the dream caused her to shake violently and even cry. She did not want anyone to see her so frightened. How am I supposed to save the nightingale? I don't know where she is....Sophie, what does it mean?

The dreams stopped, but Adia was still curious as to their meaning. My sole suggestion was to ask someone. But who?

I didn't know. My first thought was the stag, but he was dead.

Perhaps the dead would know.

You want to conduct a séance?

I meant this as a joke, but Adia took me quite seriously. Perhaps the spirits would know where the nightingale is and how to help her.

Adia—

But my friend was now convinced that this was the way to figure out Tatiana's riddle. Neither of us knew what a séance looked like, but decided that it should be conducted deep in nature and probably involved some form of meditative trance.

We sat in Auntie's branches. We'd climbed up inside of them even though I was dreadful at climbing trees. Adia had had to pull me up from that last knot, and that was not an easy task for my very small and thin friend.

Okay, now, I think we should close our eyes.

The world grew dark, and I shivered as Adia took my hand. Take a deep breath, Sophie. We breathed together, slowly. In and out. Out and in. Just breathing. Her hand felt so small and so infinitely large in mine, and I became aware of the feel of the branch

where I sat suspended above the earth. It was uncomfortable, yet I could not move, instead feeling the place where a knot poked into my thigh and accepting it and moving on. A strange feeling took root in my stomach. My breath came in, making my no longer flat chest rise and rustle my tee-shirt. For a long time that was everything. Adia and I just breathed in the scent of the creek and the pollen and listened to the insects buzz and the creek flow and a lawnmower far in the distance.

I can hear it, Adia said at last. I can hear the nightingale.

We were silent for an even longer time before I heard music somewhere, as if coming from inside of me.

She will climb, I think, Adia said at last. Her voice sounded so very deep. Who will climb? Who or what was it that you saw, Adia?

How am I supposed to know, Sophie. It's someone. I can see her climbing.

Well, I reasoned, it's not just 'someone.' We know it is a girl.

Duh, but someone can always be a girl.

I shook my head. Someone's always a 'he' until it is specified that someone is a 'she.' This declaration made Adia quite upset and devolved the conversation into a lengthy discussion as to the inherent difficulty of language construction, the merit of leg hair, and why men should wear revealing dresses and heels to properly appreciate the origin of the fairer sex's timidity. The mood broken entirely, our séance was, for the moment, suspended.

We tried again the following afternoon.

She will say... Adia paused. Oh, I don't know!

I took her hand in both of my own and felt warmth flare between us. The spirits are hard to read.

Tatiana is dreadful, Adia agreed, throwing back her long unbound hair to dislodge it from her eyes. She tossed her hair like a horse with a contrary mane. Together? Should we try together?

It couldn't hurt. We put our foreheads together and tried for a moment to just be one. Breathe. In and out. One, two, three. In and out. See? Yes. And there we were on the wings of the nightingale flying higher and higher to escape the suffocating flames. She will climb. We spoke together, eerily, into the silence that was not silence. We soared through the mountains up higher and higher until we finally could go no higher at all. And then we were watchers, seeing something that we did not understand then. I think we understand now.

At the top of the world, far beyond everything, there will be only the start. It is fitting, that all should turn back to the beginning. Seasons all circle, the place forever sought is the one always known, and every journey up a mountain ends at its base. And so, at the top of the world, she will stroll through the woods to where a magic circle once stood. The years will have covered the spot with moss and dirt, but a small salt shaker lays hidden next to one of the twisting trees for someone to find, for someone to wonder. Her creek will be much the same as it has always been, though less private now that the apartments have been built up behind it. The high bank will be grass where it once was enclosed by trees. The crooked tree that will still stand as Enzyotee's last testament defies any who wish to make straight its branches. In the yard with the two big trees it will be

autumn and a pile of leaves will stand raked next to the woodpile where Tommy the Power Ranger once confronted a monster.

Nothing will have changed and everything will be different.

She will look up to the top of the world and see the one she waits for far in the distance. Her friend will have aged in the years that stretch between them. They will have both aged. She will whisper a name into the chilled air, her voice so very tired. Tears fall too freely like little daggers of ice, but she will smile through them.

As their hands touch, all of the years will seem to melt away. They will once again be as two young girls, two sisters separated so cruelly, like Rochester's conjoined twins who cry out at the idea of being two instead of one. And then she will fall into her arms. And she will fall into hers. And they will hold each other.

The icy winds blow down from Everest through Auntie—the tree standing in a place past where trees can grow—and leaves will fall like white snowflakes all around them.

I don't understand, Adia.

I shook my head. I didn't understand either. Already the vision was fading away. I cannot believe we saw the same thing, Sophie and I, though I know we did. We must have. Do you remember? Did we save the nightingale?

But it was gone, whatever understanding we had had in that moment of revelation. The memory scattered itself to the darkest recesses of myself and even now only in the telling do I recall what I think I saw from where it hid.

*

I'd been waiting for Sophie for nearly an hour, and all the guests were crowded into her bedroom waiting with me. Adia, where is she? Spot asked me with a bark. I sighed and told him something distractedly. In addition to Spot the Dog and his beanie baby friends, Mrs. Puff (who was the fore-most dragon lawyer in the unicorn-run world of Willowspeak, a country Sophie and I had discovered earlier that year on an island in the middle of our creek), and Shakespeare and Marlowe, I had secretly invited a soon-to-be superhero named The Masked One. He wore, as his name suggests, a black mask around his eyes and looked dashingly mysterious. The Masked One reminded me vaguely of Zorro. I had found him out in the woods wandering around aimlessly several days ago searching for crime to solve. Fair maiden, are you in any distress? I assured him I was not and invited him back to my house for a cup of lemonade. We'd gotten to talking, and I had asked him to come to our party tonight to introduce him to Sophie. It was so rare that I got to introduce Sophie to a friend. She always introduced me to friends, never the other way around. I had been excited.

And now Sophie was running at least sixty minutes late. I had not the faintest idea how to entertain all the guests without her. Spot and Marlowe had gotten into an intense argument over which of the two of them had known Sophie and me longest. Meanwhile Mrs. Puff had accidentally singed Shakespeare's paw when laughing at one of The Masked One's jokes. Shakespeare was not happy about his burnt fur. Mrs. Puff was not happy either considering the amount of cold water Shakespeare had thrown at her to extinguish the flames. Consequently, everything smelt like burnt, wet hair, and I was standing

between an angry polar bear and an equally angry dragon trying to play peace-keeper. Fortunately, before Mrs. Puff burned down Sophie's house, my best friend came storming into her bedroom with a very red face. I couldn't tell if she had been crying or was fuming mad or both. Mrs. Puff and Shakespeare both stepped back timidly. Sophie did not get angry. Not often. At least not like this. Not with us. She was wearing a pretty purple dress I'd never seen before and had done her short hair up in elegant curls. It all looked wrong. It looked like she was a doll someone else had dressed up.

Why weren't you here on time! I was angry at her. Angry that she was angry and therefore I couldn't be.

She glared at me and then glanced around at the group. I'm sorry, everyone. No party tonight. Our guests all nodded politely. The Masked One looked down at his feet. I had wanted to introduce him to Sophie.

You can't just cancel on everyone!

I hadn't meant to say it. She was angry, and I knew she was angry. I couldn't be upset if she was. It was one of our little rules. Only one of us could be this mad at one time. Now that I had said it, however, I had no intention of backing down. I looked right back into her hazel eyes. Everyone else, meanwhile, had ignored my outburst but to look embarrassed. They were all filing into the closet, even The Masked One.

Everyone stay, I told them. The progress of departure halted.

I said go, Sophie countered. The partiers began to empty out.

Stay!

Go away!

The guests all looked at us uncertainly. I think they were embarrassed for us. I was embarrassed for us too. We glared at each other across the room.

She's right, I told them, you should go because Sophie's too much of an ogre right now to entertain.

Then I spun around and left the room, slamming the door behind me. I heard Mr. Mason shouting, Sophie? from downstairs but ignored it to scramble down the back staircase and out the back door.

We didn't speak for two weeks. It was awful. She left me a note in Auntie Tree within three days, but it demanded that I come to her room and it didn't have an apology. I ignored it. I caved and wrote her a note after the first week. I don't know if she ever got it or if she just didn't respond. We ran into each other in the woods during the second week but refused to look at each other. She was gathering berries for a magical potion, and I was trying to figure out what bird or creature was making the strange knocking noise I'd heard from the other side of the creek. When she saw me she quietly finished gathering her berries and turned around. She walked away without once looking back. I stood there alone in the woods for five minutes before I started to cry.

At the end of the second week we ran into each other again midway between our houses. We'd both made each other apology cards to stick in Auntie Tree. We didn't look at each other right away. I walked next to her in silence over to Auntie. It was sunset and soon Sophie had to be back at home or she would get in trouble. When we got to the tree, I snuck a glance at her. She was wearing another dress that looked wrong on her, blue this time, and make-up that made her look like a doll. Her mascara was running because she was crying.

I'm sorry, she told me, looking at her feet.

Me too.

We didn't hug even though I wanted to. Instead we turned around and started to walk back towards Sophie's house because it was getting dark. Sophie stopped at the creek and splashed her face angrily, scrubbing at the make-up.

You know that water's probably not...

Yeah, I know, she told me.

I followed her into her backyard and through the back door of her home. We tiptoed up the back staircase to her room, avoiding the stair that creaked. I closed her door quietly on my way in. We both sat on Sophie's bed without speaking, and looking down at our feet I noticed the hem of her dress was muddy. There was no light on in the room so it got darker and darker as the sunlight went away.

Mom wanted me to go to Helen's party, the girl down the street, Sophie told me finally. Says I need to hang out with more people. Dad agrees. They think I need more friends from school. They've been sending me off to a lot of them— socials, parties. Dr. Sarah thinks it's good for me. They make me dress up and everything.

Oh, I sighed. That again. She never told me, not directly, not really, but...

It's nothing, Adia. Just stupid parties with people who don't make sense to me.

Maybe you *should* go to more of them.

Sophie gave me her I-really-think-that-was-a-stupid-thing-to-say look. She was really good at that look. And it made me feel better somehow, because if she could glare at me it meant things were getting better between us. We didn't have to tiptoe around each other.

I hate this outfit, she muttered under her breath. And I hate this make-up.

Sophie pulled the pretty dress up over her head angrily. She blushed suddenly, folded her arms over her bra, and turned away from me. I diverted my eyes and only saw her shadow across the carpeted floor. On went a t-shirt and a pair of trousers. I only meant, I told the carpet quietly, that it might help if you went to a few of these social things if it means so much to your p—

I don't like parties.

We were having a party that night, I reminded her.

That's different. It's not big and noisy and with lots of people and nothing to do but talk about boys. I told Dad I didn't want to go, but he said to listen to Mom. Said I need more friends.

You have me, I whispered quietly.

Precisely, Sophie reasoned. So what's the point of all that anyway?

She sat down next to me on the bed again. I covered her hand in mine tentatively.

We okay? I asked.

Yeah, we're okay. She squeezed my hand and we sat there in the dark room until her father called her down for dinner. She loaned me a torch—a flashlight, Adia—so that I could get back home safely in the dark.

*

Monster and Snake-woman got married towards the very end of summer. Adia and I picked some of the late blooming azaleas and hydrangeas and roses to decorate

Adia's room, where we were hosting the reception. The wedding itself we had underneath Auntie's branches. We invited everyone except for Anatzia and Enzyotee, though they were there in spirit as well; Auntie was partially Enzyotee, after all. Shakespeare and Marlowe agreed to come almost immediately after receiving the invitation. Monster, naturally, had many friends from all over the world who came to witness the occasion. Our favorite by far was Ti-ti-ti, who was a very chatty monkey and loved his homeland nearly as much as we did. At the rehearsal dinner Ti-ti-ti spun Adia around in a traditional Nepali dance and complimented her style. When you come to Kathmandu I will give you a tour of the temples, the hidden ones by the ancient city on the street corners and out of the way. They are still used, covered in incense and flowers, little temples. I will show you. And then we will take the windy road on the mountains down down into the valley and go to Pokhara and you shall see the big lake with mist rising and boats everywhere rowing away. Adia and I were most definitely charmed and promised to look Ti-ti-ti up when we went to Nepal.

You wanna be the best man or the maid of honor? I asked Adia as we dressed for the big day. Adia told me she wanted to lead the toast, and that was sort of a thing for a best man to do. I readily agreed, enjoying wearing the long trailing gown I'd chosen for the maid of honor's role. Adia put on a suit similar to the one she'd once worn while dancing the Macarena with Monster for the first time. She'd even found the silly bow tie.

There was a knock at the dressing room door, and in walked our two favorite polar bears wearing matching suits. Shakespeare! Marlowe! I ran to Marlowe, Adia to Shakespeare, and we hugged them, receiving lots of polar bear kisses. There's someone we want you to meet, said Shakespeare. In walked a little baby polar bear perhaps only

three or four. She still crawled while Shakespeare and Marlowe stood upright.

Shakespeare swooped up the little baby into his arms. This, he told us, is our newly-adopted daughter, Chaucee. The baby purred. Oh, oh, can I hold her! Me first!

Chaucee giggled in my arms, and she was so very soft. I rocked her back and forth until she fell asleep. Shakespeare and Marlowe explained that they had found Chaucee abandoned in Alaska one day while they were teaching their dear Eskimo friends how to fish. We don't know who her parents were or where she comes from, Marlowe told us. We couldn't just leave her, so we took her in. They explained that Adia and I were joint godmothers for the little polar bear. We were more than delighted. I agreed to carry Chaucee down the aisle; she could be our flower girl.

It was just like old times as the four of us made our way outside to Auntie Tree. We could see the creek through the trees and all remembered our adventure with the wishing bottle. We explained that we had tried to find Igor for the wedding, but he apparently was too busy running his kingdom to be reached at present. Spot the Wise had nestled himself into a comfortable seat near the tree's roots and barked a greeting to us. His student, the formerly purple-shirted cat, meowed politely. Monster came in with a very brightly-colored dress and his very best dancing shoes. He looked very nervous, and Marlowe took him aside for a bit of a pep talk.

It's all going to be absolutely wonderful, Adia whispered to me. I knew she was right. We waited until the sun was just beginning to turn the sky purple before Adia gently led Monster to the highest tree root, and I left the tree with an encouraging pat from Shakespeare. Chaucee, who was very well-behaved, nestled herself tighter into my arms.

Snake-woman was crawling back and forth between the creek and Auntie Tree nervously. Hey you, you alright? She explained to me that her stomach was a bit upset. Like I've eaten several butterflies. I gave her a pat on the head. Setting Chaucee down in the leaves, I gently helped Snake-woman in to her white dress. There now, you look beautiful. I took her over to the creek so she could see her own stunning reflection.

The music from Auntie started. It's time, I told Snake-woman. I need to go first.

I went through Auntie's branches and up the roots, bearing Chaucee, who was laughing and squirming in my arms as she threw the flowers we'd given her. I arrived at the very base of the tree, over Igor's Kingdom. The highest root. There was a silence when I arrived, Adia smiling over at me admiringly, and then everyone stood. Snake-woman came past the tree roots. Monster let out a little gasp.

Her green skin was translucent and glowing in the purplish light and the flowing white dress only added to her unearthly quality. She carried with her a basket of fresh fruit and flowers and, from the moment she entered the tree, her brilliant violet eyes were glued to Monster. She floated down the isle up to the man she loved.

Auntie Tree began the ceremony with Dearly beloved, but I lost track of her words, instead watching Snake-woman and Monster, who had eyes only for each other.

I do.

I do.

I now pronounce you man and wife! You may now kiss the bride. And it was the most beautiful kiss I think I've ever seen. It took my breath clean away. Monster picked Snake-woman up and twirled her around and around in the setting sunlight and kissed her deeply and fully. Adia and I exchanged a glance as the audience burst into applause. Ti-

ti-ti whistled loudly, showing his rather lewd appreciation. Baby Chaucee laughed, not sure what all the adults were so happy about, but willing to be happy all the same.

We retired to Adia's bedroom with the whole wedding party. Margaret looked at both of us suspiciously and seemed ready to bar our way for a moment, but we ignored her. She opened her mouth to say something but then stalked out of the house in a huff. Everyone laughed because our happiness was so great that Margaret's behavior seemed more funny than disturbing.

Wine! Wine! Ti-ti-ti cried. I'm with you brother, agreed Marlowe. Everyone laughed. Monster and Snake-woman sat on Adia's bed as if it were a throne, and we threw on Adia's CD player to the disk of dance music I had brought with me. We were all chatting together eating apples and peanut-butter and Hershey bars. Shakespeare and Marlowe took Chaucee to the closet briefly to change her diaper, and Ti-ti-ti, who was truly the life of the party in every sense of the word, had already begun to dance.

Instead of any father-daughter dance, we played the Macarena, and Monster truly showed us just how much he had learned while abroad. Adia fell over laughing with my attempts to really shake my butt and I got into a tickling match with her in response. Eventually Monster broke us up, kissing us both on the forehead. Now we've danced again, he told us.

Toast, toast!

Adia proudly took her position standing up on her desk, a precarious position that concerned me immensely, but she seemed to pull it off. When we met Monster, long ago, Sophie and I were so terrified of him that we hid beneath our covers for hours. We soon discovered, however, that Monster was no ordinary monster, but truly an extraordinary

man and a terrific friend. We danced together, and then we parted ways. For a long time we didn't see Monster. He was busy having his own adventures. But we, thankfully, had the good fortune to meet again. And he told us that he was in love. It was our privilege, Sophie's and mine, to help Monster find a way to show his love for the very beautiful Snake-woman. I am so very happy for this couple, and I think I speak for all of us in wishing them well in their shared life together.

Everyone raised their glasses and drank to Adia's speech. Monster, I noticed, had a tear in his eye when he responded. To friends who sometimes are so briefly a part of our history, but yet change everything, toasted Monster. He raised his glass specifically to Adia and myself. Shakespeare, Marlowe, Snake-woman, Ti-ti-ti, Spot, the spirit of Auntie, all of them joined in.

To friends.

And to the happy couple! added Adia. The others laughed and we toasted Monster and his Snake-woman. They both took to the center of the room for their dance. It's a little bit funny this feeling inside. I'm not one of those who can easily hide. Ti-ti-ti approached me and set a paw on my arm. He was already very drunk and his words slurred a bit. Aren't they a beautiful couple? Indeed, I agreed. Beautiful indeed. Adia was sniffing a bit. I prodded Ti-ti-ti and glanced in her direction. He took the hint and led her on to the floor for the second verse of the song. Meanwhile Shakespeare and Marlowe started to dance together with Chaucee between them. I watched them all. It's not much, but it's the best I can do. My gift is my song, and this one's for you. Adia caught my eye and drew me to her. Our hands met and with Ti-ti-ti we formed a little circle. We started to sing along with Elton John, our hands interlinked. I hope you don't mind I put down in

words—There came a knock on the door. We ignored it. Surely Margaret would go away—How wonderful life is while you're in the world.

A louder knock at the door. Adia? Adia! And then Margaret kicked the door open. She was wearing a long black dress and a veil and carrying a broom in her hand. For a moment everyone in the room froze. Monster and Snake-woman looked horrified and Shakespeare put up a protective paw in front of Chaucee. Marlowe began to growl. Adia and I almost instinctively pushed Ti-ti-ti behind us. But the sun's been quite kind while I wrote this song. It's for people like you who keep it turned on—

Begone, you demons, begone! Away from her, not for her, not for Adia, no no no! Begone! Margaret advanced with her broomstick raised. Child, don't you see? Adia started to cry. Margaret looked eerily rational for a woman wielding a broom and dressed like a queen in mourning. Child, don't you see? I don't want you to become this. I don't want this for you. Margaret pulled Monster up by the scruff of his neck and Adia and I both cried out. Just a stuffed animal. Nothing more. Margaret twirled around the room in her dress, her whole body shaking.

It was so very much more. Margaret begged Adia to stop. You have had this long enough. Please, before you cannot stop anymore. I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind....Stop! At this point, her eyes grew haunted again. Frightened. Her monsters were always much more terrifying than ours. She looked down again into Monster's eyes, and she cried out and threw him across the room. He lay there, a small broken body, unmoving. How wonderful life is while you're in the world.

The music stopped. Margaret turned, looking across the room at our many friends, all of whom her eyes could not see properly because she wasn't looking properly, and then she turned back to her daughter. Sophie must go.

Adia looked at her with all the astonishment that I felt. It was like being stricken across the face. Margaret didn't even look at me. I forbid you to see her. Margaret drew herself up firmly, looking like a parent for the very first time in my experience of her. It ends here and now. Then, still holding herself upright and holding her mind in this moment, Margaret spun and left the room.

We ran to Monster. He looked strangely like a stuffed animal depleted of everything that had made him so special. Shakespeare and Ti-ti-ti were softly putting their paws on our shoulders while Marlowe cradled the wailing Chaucee. He's gone now. And Snake-woman, who now looked very much like a beanie baby, was gone with him. They've gone on, murmured the spirit of Auntie. It is time to leave now. Ti-ti-ti was crying.

We placed the stuffed scaly creature with his Samaria hair and the small snake under Adia's bed. Monster was gone. Shakespeare and Marlowe were hugging us and telling us to remember, just remember, and then dissipating into thin air as if they'd never been. Ti-ti-ti took both of our hands in his monkey paws. I'll see you in Kathmandu someday, yes? We nodded to him quietly, and then he too was gone.

Adia and I sat for awhile, knowing that Monster and Snake-woman were together, and that that was, after all, why we had bothered to see Monster again. Because we wanted him to be happy. We thought he deserved to be happy, that Monster with his

beautiful dresses who once danced the Macarena with us. At some point, sitting there staring at the bed together, we both started to cry.

Margaret barged back into the room. She was carrying my backpack filled with everything that was mine in the house. Now Sophie will leave. You are too old for her, Adia. She is... Margaret looked around the room in disgust, searching for a word strong enough to describe me. I banish her from you and you from her.

Okay, okay, I took my pack and looked over at Adia. Margaret was urging us to say our permanent goodbyes and be done with it. I gave Adia a tight hug and whispered in her ear to meet me at Auntie the following afternoon. She nodded into my shoulder. I'm sorry.

Hush.

I held my head high and walked like a woman out of Adia's room, past Margaret who refused to meet my eye. Margaret exited behind me slamming Adia's door shut. Out you demon, she hissed at me. And never return. Never ever return.

*

Our meeting time came but Sophie hadn't come. If she'd gone straight home that late...she must have told them that she was sleeping over at a friend's house. If she lied and they checked her story out only to discover that lie...I couldn't think about the consequences. But why wasn't she here now where I'd asked her to be?

I waited two hours under Auntie. She never came. Now I was frightened. Perhaps my mother had frightened her? But no, this was Sophie, Sophie would always come, had set up this meeting against my mother's wishes.

It was dark when I left Auntie's branches and made my way through the woods to Sophie's backyard. I glanced up at the two great pine trees on either side of the yard and then looked over at Sophie's house. The light was on in her room. I quietly made my way closer to the house, thankful not for the first time that the Masons didn't have a dog. The key to the back door was hidden under the flower pot on the back porch, and I undid the latch of the screen door, and then unlocked and opened up the back door slowly. I could hear the Masons in the kitchen down the hall. I shut the door behind me and pocketed the key before creeping further into the dark house. Jumping the stair that creaked, I made my way up to Sophie's room and knocked softly.

Go away.

Sophie, it's me.

There was a noise within and then the door opened a crack. Adia, you shouldn't be here. None-the-less, Sophie stepped back to let me into her room, shutting and locking the door behind her. A journal lay open on her desk, and I assumed she'd been writing.

What's up? Why weren't you there at Auntie this afternoon?

Grounded.

Oh.

Adia, you shouldn't be here. They are really thoroughly pissed with me right now. Sophie stepped closer to me and peered into my eyes. Hers looked blue and grey tonight.

Stormy. She scrunched her eyebrows up in thought, clearly trying to make out my expression. It isn't your fault, Adia.

Right.

She began to pace her small room. Back and forth, back and forth. Her hands clenched into fists and then relaxed over and over again.

Dad looked at me like, like...

She couldn't say it, but I could see it. I could see Mr. Mason looking down at his daughter with disappointment. It would be disappointment. Not anger, not even fear. Just sad disappointment. You have failed me. That's what the look would have said. That's what Sophie could not bring herself to say. I failed him. I let him down. But she couldn't say that.

They don't know what to do with me. That's what they say. They don't know what to do with me anymore.

Okay, I told her, putting my hands on her shoulders to stop her pacing. Okay.

But it wasn't and we both knew it.

They made me meet with her again. Dr. Sarah.

I was suddenly afraid. You didn't tell her anything about my mother?

Sophie glanced up at me. You know I never ever would. I told her I just wanted to camp in the woods that's all. And then it got too cold, so I went home. I didn't even mention you.

Okay.

I'd never tell them about Margaret.

I knew that. I knew she would never betray me. But what if, in her very loyalty, she was sowing the seeds for a worse fate? What if they took Sophie away from me? What would I have if I lost her?

She's silly, Dr. Sarah. And Mom and Dad, they're just...they don't get it. They don't get us. They don't get me.

Right.

Just, we gotta be careful for awhile, that's all. Maybe we only meet outside?

Okay.

Sophie glanced at the clock. It was almost 10:30. They'll be up to make sure my light's off in a few, she explained. You should get out now.

I nodded and gave her a hug before leaving her room. The Masons were still talking softly in the kitchen. I made out Sophie's name from the low murmur. She'd been thrown out of my home, and now I felt that I was being exiled from hers. I opened the back door and shut it, hearing a slight break in the Masons' voices. I waited until I heard the murmur again before locking the door and putting the key back under the flower pot. Then I made my way back through the dark to my home on the other side of the woods.

*

Can I tell you about something bad?

Of course, you can always tell me. You can tell me anything. .

The first time it happened, I didn't understand. She came into my room in the middle of the night, and she turned on the lamp. I remember blinking because it was too

bright for my eyes. I asked her what was wrong, but she wouldn't say anything. She muttered under her breath, but I didn't understand what she was saying. And then she started to open all the drawers on my dresser and throw my clothes on to the carpeted floor. I sat in the bed with my covers pulled around me watching her. I was afraid. I didn't understand. She left for a moment, leaving my clothes all over the floor of my room and me alone in the bed with my covers pulled all around me. When she came back with my suitcase I wanted to ask her again what was wrong but I was frightened, so I just sat there with my covers tight around me. She started to force my clothes into my suitcase, but she didn't fold them nicely like she normally did or anything. She was just throwing them into the suitcase and getting frustrated when they didn't all fit. She told me to stop staring at her and to put on my coat. So I put on my coat over my pajamas with fairies on them, and she put on my shoes and told me to tie them like I'd just learned how to do. She carried her suitcase, and I carried mine. We walked out into the night. I remember it was winter, and I got goose bumps under my jacket. The stars looked very big and bright and cold. I felt old and thought the stars looked old too. We took a taxi to the ferry and curled up in the recliner lounge on the ferry and the seats weren't comfortable and I couldn't sleep because I was too cold. Then we were in Aberdeen and it was morning but still cold. We got on a train and went south. On the train she spoke to me for the first time since telling me to tie my shoes. She said, Adia, don't cry. We're safe now. I asked her when we were going home and she told me we were going somewhere new. I hadn't brought any of my drawings or my favorite book or the music I listened to before going to sleep. She looked away from me and stopped answering my questions. I kept crying, but she wasn't paying attention. That was the first time.

*

In the years that followed, I would always blame that plane. The second one. The first could have been the most horrific accident in modern memory but it was the second one that confirmed to me and to the others watching on their TV screens that the world we had known was gone. By the time the plane went down in a field a few hours drive to our west, a gloomy horror had already begun to sink in. Hello, brave new millennium. You were just a year late.

Sophie, why did this happen? I had no answer. I still have no answer. How could a person, a person like you and me, deliberately do something like this, Sophie? I don't know. But if one person could do this, couldn't anyone do it? Are we evil, Sophie?

No, I don't think we are. But I didn't know it that day. I didn't know it as I cried and watched my parents cry. I didn't know it amidst those desperate phone calls and strange coincidences that decided who lived and who died. I didn't know it as the television screen showed me over and over the same images of destruction. I didn't know it when President Bush spoke to us in consoling tones or when our school hung the flag at half-mast.

Adia and I sat at the creek, she stirring her hands through the fallen leaves. This here, the place between our homes, was now our greatest sanctuary with me barred from Adia's house. It was a very beautiful autumn that year, the colors very brilliant though unusually brief before their fall. Adia was crying. Mother is very frightened. Sophie, Mother is so frightened. She wants to leave. She doesn't think it's safe anymore.

I went home terrified, trying to think of some way to pacify Margaret. Adia swore to me that of course she wasn't going anywhere, but she couldn't control Margaret entirely. Not really. Because Margaret was...well Margaret. Adia could delay her if she wanted to leave but could Adia stop her?

I could barely get my head to think properly when I sat down at the computer to write the short essay assigned to my class as a means of processing the collapse of our most iconic skyline. After an hour in which I was pulled away from Adia's fears and into America's, I finally had written out something worth turning in the following morning.

I clicked out of my essay to fact check the number of people who had died in the twin towers, though the figure was still changing then. The internet was already open to my mother's email account, and I was about to log off when her latest email caught my eye. My name formed the subject line. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Mason, I am writing regarding your expressed concerns for your daughter, Sophia. I know my colleague, Dr. Holmes, suggested you speak with me. I tried to stop reading, scrolling down nervously through the very lengthy email without seeing until another line caught my eye. You and Dr. Holmes could be correct, and it may well be necessary to sever her relationship with Adia, who is the apparent trigger of her symptoms. I urge you, however, to take no action until we have determined the exact nature of Sophia's condition. Please call my secretary to schedule an appointment as soon as possible. Best Wishes, Geoffrey Bradshaw

I logged off my mother's account. I printed off my essay, and then I logged off the computer, trembling violently over the mouse. My parents in the next room were watching the never-ending coverage on buildings crumbling to the ground and planes crashing and fire catching in the cities and riots and conspiracy and inevitable necessary

war and poison in the mail and religiously motivated killings and loss of constitutional rights and—

I twisted and turned in the computer seat.

I made the show of going through all my bedtime preparations, came out and kissed them both goodnight, went to my bed, and I waited. The television turned off at around 11:00 and my parents went about their own preparations before heading to bed. When their lights turned off in the room across the hall, I waited another twenty minutes for my father's snore. Then I quietly slipped out of bed, took my pre-packed bag from under my bed, slipped on a robe and some sneakers, and snuck past my parents' room. Down the stairs, avoiding the stair that creaked, and out the back door, shutting it carefully behind me. I even remembered to lock it with the key under the flower pot.

It took me about fifteen minutes to traverse the path through the woods, cross the creek, and make my way down the dirt path that led to Adia's home. The lights were all off, but that didn't mean Margaret was asleep. Adia's house was double-locked at night. I made my way up into the garden. Adia had hidden two spare keys for me in a box under the azalea bush. Carefully, I made my way up to the little porch and used the little key to get through the screen door and the bigger key on the battered wooden door behind it. Poking my head around, I assured myself that the front room was empty. Slowly and carefully, unable to avoid certain creaking noises, I made my way over to Adia's room at the end of the side hall. Her door was open and I slid in, setting my bag down beside her dresser.

Adia was very much asleep. She looked very small and delicate, and breathed slow and deep. I crawled into Adia's bed quietly and gently. The last year or so we rarely

slept together, both preferring our own space at sleepovers. She sighed in her sleep, made a yawning noise and opened her eyes. She looked at me for a long time as if not quite accepting I was really there, but then seemed to wake up enough to comprehend the situation. Adia turned to the door wearily. She doesn't know I'm here. My friend nodded, alert now, and pulled the covers up more securely around us. Her hand slipped into mine. What's wrong? You can't be here, if Mother finds out....I curled up closer to her and she wrapped her arms around me. Sophie?

You remember the day we met? I asked into her shoulder.

A-huh. Kinda hard to forget. You fell.

You helped me up.

Yep.

I thought I was going to die.

Everybody dies, Sophie.

Yeah, I know.

Light rain began to fall gently against the cottage roof. We fell silent, hearing footsteps coming from somewhere in the house. She's really out of it today, Adia told me softly. From down the hallway in the center room we heard a chair pulled out and then a click. Margaret started to play a Beatles medley on the piano. I remember thinking it somehow unsettling to hear 'Hey Jude' in an untraditional form. Sometimes I lie awake listening to my heart beat. Sometimes I'm afraid it will suddenly stop. Sometimes I have dreams where I fall again that day in autumn but no Adia comes to help me back up. And I die.

I was there, Sophie. They're just dreams.

I know.

We lay there in the dark, listening to the Beatles remade eerily on a piano and the rain lightly falling on the roof, and we pretended that neither of us was afraid and neither of us ever questioned those things we once knew to be certain. At some point we both fell asleep.

We thought it was two days before Margaret noticed I was there. She was in a 'withdrawn' mood which meant that she would spend hours staring at nothing and refused any food or sleep. Sometimes she would murmur nonsense under her breath, and if we didn't know better, we probably would have identified her as in a deep meditative trance. Adia told me that sometimes she wondered if her mother had at one point trained as a Buddhist nun. That implied more deliberate intention than I saw evidence for, but then with Margaret one never really knew.

Our deduction, therefore, that Margaret did not notice me, was sound. She didn't seem to notice anything. I still kept to Adia's room and out of Margaret's way, but we didn't think she knew I was there. It was a logical conclusion. It was also wrong.

The third night since I'd run away to Adia's cottage found both of us going to bed on the early side after a rousing game of Scrabble. After we'd both brushed our teeth, and argued over what constituted the best-tasting toothpaste, Adia went to put her mother to bed, practically forcing Margaret to lie down. She would probably be up within an hour, but Adia thought that making her lie down could quicken her recovery time. Since there was no other bed in the house, I continued to share with Adia and we both lay with our

backs to each other, Adia nearer to the wall and me with one arm hanging off the bed. Night, Adia. Night, Sophie. It was lightly raining outside again and the pitter-patter against the roof was soothing. I turned out the light and must have been asleep within ten minutes.

The smell woke me. There were no alarms in that house. We could very easily have died that night. But the smell woke me. Smoke. Adia?

My first thought was that we had forgotten to unplug the stove and Margaret had gone off to make bread and then forgotten it. I blinked, breathing in the smoke and choking a bit on its strange thickness. The room seemed unusually warm. I blinked again. Flames licked my backpack. My things had been set on fire.

Adia!

The fire had spread to the thick carpet of Adia's room. I shook Adia, who woke with a start muttering something about the unreliability of Nepalese dzopah drivers. Adia! I rolled us both off the bed away from the flames which were already heading in our direction.

And the smoke was suffocating. I cannot breathe. Adia, Adia...She was looking around in shock, unable to process the scene before her. Crawl, Adia, crawl! I pushed her forward, towards the door in front of me. Adia's nightgown was catching somehow. She started to scream. Fire, fire needs to be suffocated, fire needs to be stopped. Stop, drop, and roll. I grabbed her, wrapping her in the bed sheets and forced her to roll back and forth until the flames extinguished. I registered vaguely that one of my hands stung badly. But Adia, still a bit shocked, appeared unhurt.

The window! I opened the catch and pushed open the window into the garden. Adia crawled out first, and I followed her. We heard a scream behind us, back in the house and then through the glass there was Margaret shouting for Adia. She had a bucket of water and threw it at the flames. Mother!

We need to call for help, we need...

It was raining and it started to rain harder. Margaret was beating back the flames with water buckets, screaming for Adia and apologizing in equal measure. Sorry, sorry! Adia, where, where? Mother!

I held Adia away from the house, glancing around helplessly in the sheets of rain. They didn't even have a phone to call for help. Maybe I should run home...

But Adia was crying too hard, and the flames, which had never been very large, were dying with Margaret's efforts or the rain's. The holes in Adia's roof, so irritating in storms like these, appeared to now have a use. Margaret kept running back for more buckets of water long after the flames had stopped. Finally I let Adia go to her. She ran into the house, throwing her arms around her mother. I followed more sedately, smelling the smoke and looking at the charred room. All my things were burnt beyond recognition. My hand I'd obviously injured, though it didn't look serious. It hurt and was a reddish color on top. My palm seemed fine.

Oh Sophie, Sophie! Adia seemed to be attempting to reach Margaret, who appeared inconsolable. She sat in the middle of the soaking smoking room and rocked one of Adia's surviving pillows in her arms. Baby, baby on the tree top....

Margaret was broken. She was done. And Adia and I were cold and wet and gasping. The bedroom smoked black and cringed in on itself in a twisted dark mass of

wood. I almost died, Adia whispered so softly. Oh my god, Sophie, I almost died! And suddenly I couldn't breathe anymore. I just couldn't. I fled that house to the garden Adia and I had planted and cared for. And I started to cry helplessly, sitting in the dark with the drizzle of rain from the dying storm making me wetter and wetter. And I cried as I had never cried before. I felt the moment Adia came to sit beside me, sensed rather than felt her arms around me. We both sat there in the wood watching the light slowly filter through the trees to attempt a new day.

We go to Nepal, I told her. We go now. But Mother—We take her with us then. I'll get things from my house. I'll steal out a new bag. You just need to get your stuff together. Margaret has money, right? Adia and her mother received weekly checks from some unknown source. When Adia essentially took over her house's financial obligations and started handling and depositing The Check every week, the mystery of it had fueled our current theory that Margaret was in Witness Protection. Yes, we have money. A lot of money in the account. Then, I told her, we will use that. If the world refused to accommodate us, then we had no other choice but to flee from it. We had to go. We had to get out before there were no more options for us.

We planned it out there in the run-down charred cottage. We planned it out the best that two barely teens could plan out something so massive. We had fought shadow sorcerers, confronted monsters, and saved the world on numerous occasions, but Adia and I were not accustomed to the mundane necessities of running away. We didn't know how to navigate bus schedules or what age you could get hotel accommodation or when to get to an airport ahead of a flight in the post-9/11 world. For now, we just needed to

take the train. That was easy. We just needed to get on a train. A train that went far far away from here. A train ran through town and one was leaving for the east. Adia and I—making use of Margaret’s make-up kit in case I was recognized— went to the station and purchased three tickets to Philly. There was an airport there. We could get to Nepal. We both had passports—my parents had gotten me one when I was very little when they took me briefly to Edinburgh, and I could pick it up when I went back to my house for clothes—and we had money. We would need Margaret to register for the hotel in Philly. We’d find one when we arrived. We could spend a couple of nights there, maybe run up Rocky’s steps together. Right now we just had to catch a train.

The earliest train we could book left that night around 8:00. We stayed cooped up in the cottage until then. I started pacing back and forth across the center room and Adia watched me for several minutes before bringing up the objection that both of us had, up to that point, been ignoring.

Your parents. I told her that I would write them a note explaining everything, and it was only for a little while anyway. Only until we could fix everything. I hadn’t told Adia about...so many things. And I never had to. I never would. We needed time. It wouldn’t be forever. We needed to fix things. I would leave them a note.

Sophie, you should tell them face to face, your parents. This is like abandoning them or something. Maybe, maybe you can get them to help. Maybe it’s time to ask for help.

I knew this on some level but disagreed for a fundamental reason. They would not listen to me. They would stop me. They would throw Margaret to the authorities if they knew the truth and banish Adia from me as surely as Margaret had banished me from her.

Adia, sniffing, told me that maybe they should. I hugged her tight then, tighter than I ever had before. And for a long time we stood there in that little house still smelling of smoke from the fire and listening to Margaret's steady crying and the trees rustling against the leaking roof and each other's heart beats. The world is too big. Or perhaps it's too small? It is not the right size for people like me and you, Adia. Time was suspended and all the noise stopped and it was just Adia and me and what we were to each other.

I'll be on that train, Adia. For there is nowhere else I ever could have been.

I'll go, to drop off a note for Mom and Dad. A note explaining. I'll go and get my things and my passport. But I didn't want to leave her. I don't know why. It seemed like an easy enough thing to do, go home, drop off a note, sneak up to my room and pack another bag, return back here, catch a train. All Adia needed to do was pack up the suitcases, the last fragments of her life here in Pennsylvania.

If we get separated, we meet in Nepal. In the mountains. But where exactly? We'd already planned the route of the walk we both wanted to take to get to Everest, to the base of the greatest mountain in the world. Lukla? Namche Bazaar? All the way up at Dingboche? So many little villages to choose from. We'll meet somewhere along the trail. It's easy to find people on the way up and down. You always pass them because there's only one way to go. We'll find each other. It would be easier in the Himalayas than in the crowded insanity of Kathmandu or even the more chilled Pokhara with its many tourists.

If we get separated we will meet in Nepal. That was the essence of our plan. It may possibly have worked in a different world, but we could hardly have known that then. There was so very much that we could not have known.

I went home to drop off the note that night, ready to sneak out again to get back to the cottage in the woods and help Adia do whatever needed to be done in the dark of that endless night before we caught the train to Philly. I snuck around the back of the house to head upstairs, just barely coming into view of the living room, but on the stair was a police officer on a cell phone coming down. He stopped dead in his tracks and I walked backwards, right into the living room and on to a classic movie set.

My parents were sitting in their two high-backed armchairs and then there was a tall thin man on the couch and a younger woman with glasses and very deep red lipstick and a police man who was portly and with mustaches like Poirot. If I had entered through the front door rather than through the back I would have noticed the three police cars parked out front of my house as well.

Upon seeing me, my parents both leapt to their feet and ran up to me—I was rooted to the spot—and they hugged me and cried over me. I was very embarrassed. I'm fine. Your hand! Oh my God, Sophie. Sophie. I'm fine.

Sophie! Sophia, Sophie! My mother was kissing me frantically, and I slipped from under her. The policeman began to ask me questions but seemed satisfied that my disappearance had been my own choice rather than anything untoward. He exchanged a glance with the tall thin man on the sofa, who nodded quietly. It seemed to be some signal because the police cleared out of our home, my parents thanking them profusely.

This all must have taken a very long time, but I cannot remember it. I was far too busy calculating my escape. Getting back to Adia was more important now than ever. The note I could drop upon my exit. Or I could just forget about it. My parents would surely know my absence was of my own choosing if I just left? I had to move very very

quickly. When my parents were distractedly thanking the woman with the lipstick, who may have been a reporter or some investigator, I was never sure, I started to head towards the kitchen and the backdoor.

Sophia. It was the thin man on the sofa, whom I'd forgotten about at my own cost. My parents turned and looked at me, not quite believing that I would ever do something so horrendous as leave them after just coming back. I felt a surge of guilt for the first time. This wasn't particularly fair to Mom and Dad, but it was the only way. They had to understand that, didn't they? Adia needed me, and I needed her.

I remember that living room so clearly. The green-grey sofa against the far wall and the fireplace over to the left. The tv was across from the sofa sitting in a big wood cabinet that could shut and look like a wardrobe. Our family portrait sat atop the TV cabinet. I was about seven in the picture in a little purple dress and my parents looked so very startlingly young, he in a black suit with a purple bowtie, she in a lilac and white sleeveless gown. I forget now the occasion for that portrait. We looked happy. It was the type of picture you'd expect to find in a normal family living room. And it was normal, until that thin man sat on my grey-green couch and called for Sophia to come back from the kitchen. I think I hated that room until my parents finally sold our old house when I went to college.

Where are you going, Sophie? my mom whispered. She looked white, my dad whiter. She was still in traveling clothes, and I wondered from where she'd flown in. I felt guilty again. Meanwhile, the thin man looked at me calmly. Sophia, answer your mother's question. It was a commanding though not unkind voice.

I looked between the three adults, back and forth. We need to leave. Things are bad. I need to help her. She needs to help me. We need to leave now. I didn't see why any more needed to be said. If Adia was in trouble then I had a duty to make the trouble go away. She was my closest friend. That's what friends did for each other.

My parents exchanged glances that highly disconcerted me. They also looked at the tall thin man on the couch whose presence up to this point had still not been explained. I told him as much, and he introduced himself as Dr. Geoff and said he was a friend. Why was there a doctor present? Was I expected to be hurt? Your parents called me when the situation became clear, Sophia. I gave him a curt nod, understanding absolutely nothing about his cryptic remark.

Where is Adia now? Surely Adia was gathering the last of her things together, packing a suitcase with all her day-to-day necessities. After all, she'd done this before many times. There was a train to catch, and we were running out of time. I needed to get back and get back now. I needed to get back to Adia.

Dr. Geoff commended me on my courage and my dedication to a friend. It's truly a credit to you, Sophia. Again I nodded. People only called me Sophia when I was in trouble. But Sophia, you know that this is going a bit too far now. Surely you see how this has gotten out of hand?

Adia, you must have been sitting now outside the cottage with your luggage and Margaret's. You must have been telling your mother that everything was going to be alright and staring into the woods waiting. How long did you sit there in the dark, waiting?

I didn't understand what Dr. Geoff was talking about and told him so. He looked at me for a long time and then turned back to my parents. They exchanged another one of those adult looks. Finally Dr. Geoff was looking at me again. Aren't you a little old now for imaginary friends, Sophia?

I stared at him. I didn't know what he was talking about. My father chimed in at this point very gruffly. We've had this conversation before, Sophie. Had we? I was suddenly very confused. You need to spend less time off there, out there, in your little imaginary world. Now they were wasting my time. I again pressed upon them just how important it was that I get back to Adia. My mother was looking at me as someone would look at a chimpanzee in the zoo, like she didn't know me anymore. It didn't matter, couldn't matter because Adia was waiting. Sitting out there with a mad woman, scared, and waiting for me. None of this mattered in comparison. I had said I would be on that train.

I started to move away from them towards the door but my mother, moving faster than I've seen her move before or since, blocked my way. No more Adia! I could only look at her in shock. I felt like a soldier forced on a battlefield with only familiar faces staring back at him. But these familiar faces were pointing loaded guns directly at my heart. Mary, we agreed not to—

But my mother was far beyond the reasoning of either the kindly Dr. Geoff or my father's more experienced soothing. She started to shake me. No. More. Adia. My father pulled her off of me roughly. No more. My only reaction was to continue looking at her without seeing. Enough, Mary. Calm down. No. We should have stopped this years ago! You kept saying it was normal.

Sophia—Doctor Geoff was talking to me now in that slow quiet way—Sophia, it *is* quite normal for a little girl to have a companion that—

Adia is my best friend and has been for years. The feeling in my legs was beginning to come back, and I found myself suddenly quite angry. We met outside, just over there, by the woodpile. Ages ago. Years ago.

Sophia, it is important for a young woman your age to be able to distinguish between the fantasies of her mind and the reality—

I am quite able to do that, thank you. Adia and I play a lot of games and have a lot of friends who you can't see. I've told Mom and Dad about some of them. They didn't like to hear so I stopped.

And these friends you play with, you know they are not real?

I stared him down as I thought of a tactic to prevent him from saying such degrading things about Shakespeare and Marlowe and Monster and Anatzia and Enzyotee and even Grol, for in that moment I had sympathy even for Grol. I couldn't quite think of anything to say, so I just nodded. Better to give the enemy what he wants to hear. They would forgive me my tacit betrayal under the circumstances.

The doctor looked over at my parents. My father was still holding my shaking mother whose tears did not soften the fire in her eyes. He just looked somehow empty, and I didn't know why. I think it would be best if we go to meet this Adia now, don't you Mr. and Mrs. Mason?

No. They couldn't find out about Margaret. I knew this, knew I had to protect Adia's secret. It wouldn't take them long to realize that something was not right with Margaret. There simply was no hope of them meeting Adia's mother and not putting her

into some hospital. That would be devastating to Adia. And it would probably remove her from me.

I argued with them. I refused to show them the way. I needed, absolutely needed, to get a message to Adia, to tell her that I was delayed. I didn't know how. My mother was screaming at me and the doctor and my father were trying to get me to bend more gently. Why? Why wouldn't I take them to Adia?

I tried to make a run for it but my father and Dr. Geoff caught me. The doors were all locked and I was taken up to my room. The door was locked from the outside. I was trapped. I ran to the window, but it was also bolted down. I still don't know how or why the window was bolted shut. I screamed. I must have woken most of the neighborhood. Then I grabbed my alarm clock and used it to smash against the glass. Glass is much harder to break in real life than the movies. It was at this point that the door opened again and Dr. Geoff was back with some other people whose faces I can't remember. I fought tooth and nail, until there was blood under my fingers, but I felt a prick and then everything fell into blackness and, oh my God, Adia, and sleep.

In my dream we are climbing. Together up through the mist and rain and sky. You and I, climbing. And at the top of the mountain we both stand at the same place, but neither you nor I can see the other. We cannot see anything but the rain suspended all around us and the thicker rain falling down from the sky. So we keep climbing looking down at the icy mirrors nature provides and seeing ourselves in every cracked and shattered surface. And we keep climbing through the layers upon layers of mist and fog

and torment. Our feet tread through the tough snow to the top of the world where the air is too thin for anyone to stay very long. We will go to the mountains and we will climb and climb and climb. We have no choice but this one. Nothing open to us but to keep climbing, hoping desperately to spy each other somewhere along the way. In the meantime we walk. Alone.

*

I waited. I waited for Sophie in the rain and the darkness. She will not come, oh no, she will not come. My mother's voice was like a hoarse prophecy. She will not come, rain, rain go away, and no one comes. No one was ever there to come. All a dream, a dream.

Two girls with crumpled leaves decorating their wild, tangled hair running through the shadows. I try on tip toes with arms straining to capture the mist, to gather it and form it and make it solid. I try to capture us as I once captured Enzyotee, pulled her into our world that day in summer under the green-tinted light of the woods.

We must leave *now*, Adia.

No.

Mother laughs at me. Like mother like daughter, Adia. You think she was real, your Sophie? She will not come and it is time to leave, you silly girl.

Shut up.

Adia?

We're waiting.

But Adia—

No, Mother, we're waiting. Wait for me, yeah? Mummy, please?

She looked at me, her face rain-streaked and oddly beautiful in the light from the burning lantern. Like a princess. It is all dark, she says. You will wait for her like I wait for him.

No, Mother, not like that.

She started to tap her foot, agitated, looking into the darkness and terrified of whatever she saw there. Shaking, Mother leapt to her feet, No, no! We must go away. I rose slowly and watched her pace the porch, back and forth and back and forth. I'll make the preparation, Adia, and we must go away! I grabbed her as she came near me and held her still. Sit. Just sit down. Her green eyes were wide. Just sit down. See, look at the pretty lantern? Sit here and keep warm. Good, Mother. She sat down in front of me like a child, and I sat on the chair before her, taller. Okay, look, let me tell you a story. Okay? This is your story while we wait, okay?

I told her how we'd met Anatzia and Enzyotee. Do you remember that day, Sophie? It was all I could think of that night in the rain. I'd been waiting then, too, waiting behind the great big tree in Sophie's backyard for her to finish her room-cleaning so that we could play at the creek. My back was against the hard grass and I was staring up at the blue blue sky with its fluffy warriors cutting their blunted swords across its surface. I'd been drawing fairies and monsters for some time, and many of my creations

danced across the sky in the form of clouds. I was, of course, thinking *very* hard about my mother's last lesson on Aristotle's *Ethics*. I was.

The enclosure that made up so much of our world was typical for a suburban home. Two huge towering trees guarded Sophie's backyard on either side from the view of her neighbors and, with the house and the wood to its front and back, it was a fortress of sorts. The wood, besides holding the long twisting pathway to the creek, was also an entity on to itself. The wood was frightening. Sophie told me there were practical reasons for this— poison ivy, stinging nettle, and an assortment of garden snakes all lurked in the trees— but the traps of nature paled when I told her about those other things that hid in the trees. Demonic creatures lurking in the shadows. Mother had warned me about them, told me to be weary for something wicked this way comes. Sprites and gnomes and hidden people. Beware of them, child.

That day, sitting and tracing the clouds, I suddenly heard a scream from in the wood. Adia!

Sophie, in trouble. I sprang up, scared, and ran into the trees towards her voice. The moment I passed from the neatly-kept grass into the mud and decaying leaves and fallen branches, I broke out in goose-bumps. Mellow sunlight drifted golden-green. My long hair caught in low-lying branches. Adia, help me!

Shadows and dark magic and creatures from the abyss. Beware of them, child.

Hello? I called softly. I heard footsteps in the distance, the soft rustle of disturbed leaves. Hello? I half-whispered.

Adia? Her voice came from somewhere further down the path. I started to make my way through the trees quicker. I cut my arm forcing my way through the branches too

fast. Ow! I ignored the blood and kept running forward before breaking through the trees and nearly falling into the creek.

Sophie was beneath the crooked tree under whose roots the fish always hid. For a moment I stood still, watching Sophie. From what I could see she was fiercely wrestling with thin air.

Adia, help me! Sophie cried out. Her wide green-blue eyes, the color of the sea in the islands I'd lived in before, her eyes met mine. Can't you see? I wasn't sure how to respond to this and therefore stood staring up at her, watching her continued struggle with some unknown force. Adia, it's like the mice, remember? You need to look harder!

Wanting to help her, unsure how to help her, I obeyed and squinted at her as hard as I could.

You brought one too! Are you completely insane? She shouted at me, glancing at something that only she could see to my right.

Sophie glared up at me in annoyance, kicking out at something and seeming to dislodge herself from whatever she was struggling with. No longer afraid, I crossed over the little creek by the stone steps to reach my friend. And suddenly, out of nowhere, my vision seemed to expand and I saw it. It was like the wind given solid form. Nearly transparent, the thing was a whirling ball of energy, of sunlight and blowing leaves and air. It was roughly the shape of a human being, but its substance kept shifting until I couldn't place it in space. It had a faintly green-gold glow, and the ground swirled up beneath it as if it were some mini-tornado. The thing charged at Sophie and pushed her to the ground once more.

What is that? I cried out in horror. Look to your right! Sophie shouted at me. I spun, obeying her command, and felt my stomach drop. Another thing was lurking right beside me and seemed to be preparing to spring. I screamed and moved out of the way.

What is it? I shouted at Sophie, backing away from the thing. I began to tremble.

It's a never-mind, Adia. My friend threw her thing off herself once more with a well-placed kick. A what? I couldn't understand. A never-mind. But what did Sophie mean? What was a never-mind?

There was no time to talk or clarify. In my brief moment of confusion my thing had charged once more. Before it went hurtling off with the force of my kick, the fleeting moment of contact between me and the thing made me feel as if a hole had settled in my stomach, and a blind terror swept me.

Sophie righted herself, ran to me, and pulled me backwards, away from the two things, which had both regained balance and seemed to have combined forces. We could barely see them but for the shimmering of the air.

What are they? I asked Sophie again.

Sophie, annoyed, repeated herself with a I told you Adia, I already *told* you that they're never-minds. Haven't you ever heard of a never-mind?

I shook my head. The two things seemed to be considering us, though neither had distinct enough features to express emotions particularly well. They were separate entities, both similar in their substance but somehow fundamentally different, as if they were two leaves of the same tree that had fallen and become individuals.

It's all my fault, Sophie muttered to herself. I made it angry.

I didn't understand how one would make a never-mind angry. Well, a never-mind never starts as a never-mind. It always starts as an a-ha, and then it becomes a maybe and then a never-mind.

Okay?

Yes.

So, never-minds are—

Unfortunately, the two things in question took our momentary lapse of concentration to charge again. We both tumbled backwards against the tree with yelps of pain. Sophie kicked her never-mind hard, and I copied her with mine. They both fell away from us again.

What do they want? What on earth did they want? I have always wondered this over the years. Sophie told me they wanted to destroy us. When I asked why, she just told me, Because we're real, Adia. I didn't understand then. Maybe I still don't.

Sophie was looking at me as if I were a moron, which I thought unfair. I knew that I was relatively smart. I'd never before come across a never-mind, and what I didn't know about probably didn't exist. The trouble with this theory, of course, was that there was *something* in front of me. What we chose to call it really didn't matter. It was there, it did exist...

But it *is* real, I said quietly as this thought entered me. In unison, both of the things before me paused. Perhaps it was my imagination, but they seemed to have a more defined shape suddenly.

Of course they're real, Sophie agreed, sighing in frustration. She turned to her never-mind. And now that you've finally decided to give me a chance to think, I'd be glad to give you what you want.

There was no doubt about it now. The thing was definitely adopting a more distinct shape, or perhaps it is better to say that Sophie's never-mind was gaining a shape. Mine still seemed wind-like.

Never-mind, you aren't a never-mind anymore, Sophie called to her creature. Your name is Anatzia and you lived long, long ago in a world like this one but not like this one. You're a girl like me, a young girl with black hair and pretty and sparkling eyes like....like—

Like the midnight sky, I interjected. The never-mind had turned from formless air to a ghost-like figure that reminded me of a very old blurry photograph.

That's good. Sophie approved of my addition with a smile, so I continued. And you are a person of the earth. Your best friend is named Enzyotee. You, other never-mind that isn't a never-mind, your name is Enzyotee.

Sophie smiled again. Yes, and you are the best of friends, like sisters, but the two of you cannot always see one another, because....because...

Because your fathers are both chiefs of rival tribes!

Yes!

The never-minds didn't look at all scary any more. They both were filling out to become the two girls we described. Transparency still clung to them as if they were being projected on to a movie screen. They smiled at us winningly, but I was not sure if they were truly there or just a trick of the sunlight.

Are you ready? Sophie asked me. I stared at her. Well, are you? Would I ever be? Is anyone ever ready? Ready for what?

Well, you got to make them completely real, Sophie explained to me slowly. I just looked at her. Sophie sighed. The whole situation seemed so dream-like that I needed some solid ground. My best friend just rolled her eyes. Just pay attention to what I do, okay, Adia?

Sophie stepped forward, pointing to her eyes and then at herself: Pay close attention. Smiling, Sophie made a gesture to her never-mind as if she wanted to shake hands. The thing immediately took the out-stretched hand and then, suddenly, the never-mind and Sophie became one.

I was looking at Anatzia the former never-mind, but I was looking at Sophie. They were one in the same and two. If I blinked the vision shifted from one to the other. Concentrating, I realized that I could control which of the two I saw: Anatzia or Sophie.

Anatzia gestured to me to approach my own never-mind. I was paralyzed with terror. Witch-craft and demons and hidden people. Beware of them, child.

Adia.

I turned to look at Sophie, who was smiling at me. It's okay, I promise. It'll make things better. Please. Anatzia can't tell me her story without Enzyotee. I trusted Sophie's sea-filled eyes. And so, partly for myself, partly for Anatzia, partly for Enzyotee, but mostly for Sophia Mason, I walked forward like a woman and reached out to my never-mind, to my Enzyotee, and let her enter our world.

Sophie, I waited for you until the train had come and gone. The story pacified my mother. I eventually took her to bed, put her to sleep. I watched her for awhile. Traced the lines that were starting to appear on her face. I got a sleeping bag and curled up beside her on the only usable bed after the fire. But I didn't sleep. I waited, feeling the drip of the rain hitting my arm through a leak in the ceiling. I waited until the sun rose up again coloring the woods green. Mother kept sleeping, and then she was off in her own world for awhile, telling me that my father would be there when we got to San Francisco. Won't that be nice, Adia? Your dad, I promise he'll be there. That's why we need to go away again. So you can be with him. Yes?

Not yet, Mother.

I waited and waited all that autumn day. Had she decided that I was to go on my own? Had it all become too much? I left my mother humming to herself in the garden and snuck to Sophie's house briefly around noon, but no one seemed to be home. The blinds were all drawn and no green car was in the driveway. I found the key Sophie's parents always hid in the back flower pot and snuck in through the back door. I crept through Sophie's house feeling like an intruder in a domestic scene that could never be my own. No one was there. The living room was bare. The kitchen spotless. I walked like a ghost, unable to understand or accept. My feet went up the staircase.

Her room was a disordered mess. The window was smashed. On the floor, the bedside lamp had shattered. Stuffed animals had been thrown this way and that. A beanie baby, the Diana bear, had lodged itself somehow on top of the ceiling fan. Amidst the shattered glass on the floor were dark red stains. Blood? Sophie's blood?

I tiptoed past the glass and lay down on Sophie's bed, breathing in the faint scent of her that lingered there. Sasha the lion lay there, abandoned on a pillow. I hugged the raggedy friend close. Where's Sophie, Sasha? Where is she?

I resolutely picked myself up, left the room, found my way down the stairs with that one creaking step, made my way back out the door, and I went out to the front yard. I always thought of the backyard as Sophie's and the front—with its neatly kept lawn and flower garden and two cherry trees—as belonging to Sophie's parents. A family was walking down the sidewalk, pushing a stroller with a young boy sucking his thumb.

The Mason's house.

They stared at me, and the woman smiled softly. You okay, sweetheart?

Fine.

They continued on, dismissing the girl they didn't recognize. They need a child; Mary needs a child, the woman was telling the man.

Don't they have a daughter? Isn't she a little, well—

The man fell silent, casting a strange look to me. Oh, I don't know Bill...

The man continued to look uncertain. That scruffy boy—

That's the Gaslolis down the way.

Oh.

Should get themselves a kid, nice young couple like them.

I stood there, looking at the man and woman slowly pushing that little boy towards his future as they walked down the street over a fallen carpet of gold, ruby, orange, and violet. The leaves swirled on the midday air and I stood watching them walking away. A normal family. That which I had never and would never have. Do the

Masons have a child or don't they? The woman shook her head again. She didn't know. Not really. She didn't know the neighborhood too well after all. Maybe Bill, maybe you are right. Maybe that girl...

I turned away, walked back to *our* yard, and glanced over at a woodpile Mr. Mason had begun to get ready for winter. It was piled high as ever. I remember watching him pile that wood when I first came to the neighborhood years and years ago and wondering if I could climb to the top. But surely I would just fall down very hard. Maybe even die. Sophie fell the next day but she didn't die because I was there to help her back up.

My mother was singing when I came back home. When you wish upon a star. Come on, child. Get the rest of your things packed! Most of the furniture was gone from our house. There were tire tracks through the woods from what looked like a big truck. The cottage was bare. Mother had been busy while I was gone.

No.

The two boys from the junkyard, Ben and Vince, they'll be coming back soon for the rest of it, Mother said brightly. And we mustn't be here when they come. I told them that this was a vacation home and there'd been a fire, you see? No questions asked. Free furniture, go on and take it. No questions.

Mother had crammed as many of her dresses and books as could fit into her two massive traveling trunks. The other books were making their way into boxes. That nice man from the grocery store, Tyrone, nice young man, he's going to mail our books for

us! Isn't that nice, Adia? I'm just to leave them in boxes on the porch for him. We're all ready to leave.

No!

Adia, don't be silly, child. We're leaving now.

I started to run, but she caught up to me and tripped me to the floor. Now, now, silly girl. You don't understand how this world works. You're just a child. It's time we leave this place. Her eyes flashed at me angrily. We need to leave it all behind now. We need to forget.

I'm not leaving without Sophie.

We need to forget all that now. Adia, Mother suddenly looked so tired, don't be like me. We have to leave, don't you see? You can't be like me. We mustn't be here when they come back because they do not know about you, and they'll take you away. Now, now, don't cry. She took her handkerchief out and dabbed at my eyes. There, all better.

She started to sing again, putting the last of the books in boxes. When you wish upon a star. I could not stop this move any more than I had ever been able to any of the times before. What was I in the end? I'd thought to run away, to take care of Mother, to go to Nepal with Sophie. I was going to be brave. But I was just letting it happen again. Listening to Mother singing and then when she took my hand I was walking with her through the woods with my suitcase towards another life. Fate steps in and sees you through.

Mother, please. We can't go. Not without Sophie.

Mother ignored me. Anything your heart desires will come to you. She began to swing her hands back and forth excitedly, not paying attention to me anymore. I started to cry again and wished and wished and wished.

But the wishing didn't work because I didn't have my wish anymore. I'd given it up that dark night in the woods. I'd given it up and it was daytime now so there were no shooting stars for me to get another wish.

You can have it. That's what I told Grol. My wish, you can have it. I was saving it, but now I can't anymore. Save it, that is. I'm going to give it to you. Makes no difference who you are. I have to give it to you.

I already have a wish, girl, Grol told me with a growl. The toads, they were closing in around us. I don't need yours. I need someone to come with me. Sophie was panting and muttering beneath her breath.

You don't need us both, I whispered to him.

How could I take one of you without the other? Grol asked me. It is not possible. I am going, and you are coming with me. This one, he pointed his foot at Sophie, she broke the circle. You were safe before, but she broke the circle and now I will take you away.

Where?

Somewhere else.

Sophie was crumpled to the ground, two toads holding her arms. They held her away from me, knowing I could not leave. Adia, help me, she mumbled under her breath. I stepped away from Grol, closer to Sophie and the toads holding her. You don't need us.

But I do. I demand that you come with me.

Only take one of us then. She gave you a wish, a wish from the deepest darkest part of her heart. Isn't that worth something to you? Only take one of us.

I kept my end of the bargain. I will not bother the girl's parents anymore. But you broke the circle, and now I will take you away.

Then just take me.

How could I ever take just one of you?

I wish you'd take me and only me, Grol. Take me instead. Let her go. Take me instead. Star light, star bright. I wish for Sophie to be safe. I wish. I wish. And then everything was dark and the toads were just toads and I felt terrified because I wasn't sure if I was really there. I wasn't sure who or what I was. Take me instead. Let her go. You *can* take only one of us now, because I wished it so. And for a moment I looked up at the dark woods and the trees blurred. Nothing looked real. Nothing was solid. Not even Sophie. Especially not me.

And then the moment passed, and everything was normal, except it wasn't. It never would be again.

And maybe that's why I had to sit on the train alone next to my mother who hummed Disney tunes a million miles away from me. Maybe that's why I sat on the late overnight train telling myself that it would be better for Sophie, that now she didn't have to keep secrets. That now I wouldn't get in the way of all those things her parents wanted her to do and be. Let her go. Take me instead. You *can* take only one. Oh, Sophie, I wish for you to be safe.

*

It is a week before you can get back to the cottage. Your parents and Dr. Geoff follow you. At that point it hardly matters. You take all three of them through the woods around noon. You cross the creek via the rock path and then cross the meadow to the forest on the far bank. You follow the tree line until you come to the little dirt path. In to the forest you go through the trees to the little cottage with its overgrown garden and unkempt path. In front of the others, you open the door.

It is empty. The walls still smell of smoke, the rats roam free in the dark with the cockroaches through the thick dusty carpet. Drawings—Adia's and some of yours—blow across the floor like litter. The books and the furniture are gone. She has left without me. It is then that you start to cry, because how are you supposed to find her if she and Margaret have left?

They try to comfort you. See, we know this is hard. Part of the recovery process. Must be made to see—but you have no need for their comfort. You look around frantically because surely Adia would have left a clue, something somewhere anywhere. Another treasure map. Sophie, what are you doing? Sophia, please stop! You are ripping up loose carpets and crawling through the dusty floor searching. Looking over every scrap of paper. Sophia, she was never here. Adia is not real. You ignore the psychiatrist. You ignore them all until the two men physically restrain your search. Let me go now. You are beyond anger, beyond even panic, and a cold calm grips you. You need to find her now before it is too late. What they believe or don't believe no longer matters. Slowly, the two men let go. Sophia, listen to me. But you won't. Sophia, this isn't one of your stories! There is nothing. The room is empty. No clues, no hidden treasure map,

nothing. Sophia—And you scream at them until your throat rips apart that you are telling the truth that Adia has left, been forced to leave, and you have no way of finding her, need to find her now. Your parents are looking back and forth between themselves in that significant way that tells you they want to communicate something to one another without your knowledge. Your mother starts to cry now. She looks broken.

I am not crazy. I have never been crazy. None of them believe you. You can see it in the exchanged frightened looks, in the growing horror on your father's face, in the psychiatrist's sigh. You don't care about their doubt. Adia. Oh my God, my Adia. Gone. Untraceable. Forever gone from you.

You turn away from it. The empty house. The dead end. The story closing before it has had time to ripen and grow. And you run. They call after you, but you don't want to hear it. Your father runs to catch you, and you elbow him hard when he gets too close and keep running. You run out of Adia's empty home. You run down the path. You run out of the wood with your parents and the doctor running after you. Sophia! But in this reoccurring nightmare that never gives you peace you just keep running. You want to run all the way to Nepal.

But then, who are you?

We cleared that up already. I'm the writer.

But surely you're a character.

Suppose so.

But, I still don't understand.

Perhaps you are asking the wrong questions. Did you think of that?

During the first real psychiatry session you ever have with Dr Geoff—after the hospitalization and the stabilizing drugs, after The Breakdown has been officially ‘corrected’—he sits across from you in his desk chair and demands something of you.

Tell me a story.

Which one?

Your story, I suppose.

Which one?

Yours. The whole thing. Tell me who you are. Is that so hard?

Shouldn't it be?

The next therapist you have makes the same demand. Tell me your story. Tell me the story. All variations of the same. Adia isn't real, you know, but tell me your story.

You don't. You refuse. You are the model patient once outside of a doctor's room, and the worst patient when across the table. Because you refuse. And the years go by and the therapists change and eventually you don't have to see them anymore because you are old enough to declare yourself better. Fixed.

Tell me a story, Sophie.

You wake up from your nightmares screaming. Again. Take a deep breath. Another. And another. The bedside clock announces 3:58 AM. The dreams begin to fall away from you. Nightmares of that day when you ran from Adia's home in the woods. Nightmares about the persistent chant of tell me, tell me, tell me. A demand only she was ever permitted to make. Lately there are also nightmares about her faraway and sick. Adia needing help, and you not being there to give it. Just breathe. You let the nightmares go.

At this time of year it is nearly sunrise in your northern town. You shrug your covers off and stretch, hearing bones crack. Tina meows in a put-out voice at being dislodged from her warm resting place next to your legs. The neighborhood still sleeps, and you love the quiet. In silence you remove your clothes and stand naked in the dark feeling a sudden longing to run from your small house down the trail of yellow flowers to the beach, naked and free. Despite the dark and empty world, you don't follow your instinct. If Adia was here you might, if only to make her laugh.

In your dresser beside the bed you find a bathing suit and put it on. Over this go your warm trousers and a wooly green jumper. After brushing your teeth and putting your

short hair up in a ponytail, you put on some sandals and find your keys at the table by the front door.

A faint glow lights the horizon, signifying the soon-to-come sunrise. You glance up at the crescent moon and shiver slightly in the chilly breeze. The last stars stretch above you, and you remember Tatiana and feeling small. Your footsteps crunch loud on the path in the silent world as you make your way down from the cliffs to the beach beneath. Last week at this time the students from the university were out on your beach in their bathing suits running into the ocean for a ritual cleansing. Their bonfires and music started late in the night and remained on the beach until morning. Now, however, no one is about and the boat house where you keep the red kayak is deserted. You take it down from its resting place two slots up on the right and find your oars hanging from the wall. It is a short carry to get your boat to the beach and then an even shorter length to the ocean. You flick off your sandals, leaving them on the sands, and roll your trousers up above your knees. With a deep breath you wade into the salty—and freezing— water just far enough before getting into the kayak, a tricky procedure you are only too familiar with.

You row across the gentle waves as the sun rises slowly over the water glinting orange and yellow and streaking the clouds with red. To your left the town's outline begins to form, and you smile at the silhouette of the cathedral and the castle ruins. You row hand over hand, liking the pull and take on your back and shoulders. Away from the town your rowing takes you towards the cliffs. You look up at the high rocky peaks covered in what the growing light reveals to be yellow flowers. Venus, brightest star in the sky, still shines stubbornly on the horizon.

At one of the private beaches far from the eyes of the world, you stop and ground the kayak. For a long time you look across at the cold North Sea and watch the sky's color turn and fade into blue. You feel very real here looking out across the ocean. You bask in that feeling, holding tight to it. In comes your breath and then out again. Your eyes glaze and everything in your being focuses on the breathing. One in and out. Two in and out. Three in and out. Everything is the breathing and the breathing is everything. Your breathing is like the waves slowly coming in and out. In and out. In and out...

After many moments of breathing meditation, you slowly emerge to the sunlit ocean and the blue blue sky and the waves tickling your numb feet. You push the kayak back into the water and row back around the cliffs to the beach. People have emerged from their homes in the town. You can see them above you. A runner and a couple walking a big black dog both walk on the path that hugs East Sands. You exchange a good morning with the couple as you put your kayak away. Good morning, my dear. The elderly couple smiles at you encouragingly. When you turn to the runner, she is plugged into her iPod and doesn't respond to your good morning but to nod.

Sandals back on feet, you make your way up the short path to the homes perched on the cliff, unlock your door, throw your clothes into the laundry bin on your way to the shower. Ten minutes, a new set of clothes, and a steaming mug of English Breakfast later, you make a bowl of oatmeal with milk boiled on the stove and add fresh blueberries and walnuts to the thick steaming mixture. You eat it, finish another mug of tea, and then turn on your laptop. It is time. You are ready. Too long you have put off writing these words and now, now they must come.

You aren't sure why, after all this time, the words have decided to form themselves. And you are so very afraid, but for some reason you feel it is time. It is time to tell your story. Hers and yours. You take a deep breath and begin to type.

*

This weekend, you are kid-sitting Christine's grandchildren again. As is tradition on your last afternoon together, you take Clarice, John-John, and Rhea to the graveyard for a picnic. It is a mark of the beauty of this graveyard and the bright sunshine of this summer day that none of the children think it strange that they are eating peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches while lying on top of the dead. You braid little Rhea's hair as you tell her a story about a kingdom out in the ocean where the waves bring all the treasures of the earth. Meanwhile Clarice and John-John are sword-fighting with tree branches, skirting in and out and on top of the gravestones.

Two of your postgraduate students, Mannie and Jessica, are lying together reading, Jessica's head against Mannie's knees. Further along some tourists are snapping pictures of the old cathedral tower and a little girl is asking her mother if we can please go to the castle next!

Rhea smiles up at you as you finish up her braid. You tell good stories.

You are a good listener, you tell her.

The sword fight to your right has deteriorated into a game hide-and-seek. John-John counts loudly one, two, three, four while a giggling Clarice runs further and further away. The ground is fairly flat, and the gravestones low to the ground. Clarice's strategy

must be to descend to the lower level of the graveyard. There are several levels from here at the top with the cathedral all the way down to the cobbled-road that opens on to the beach. You make a half-hearted attempt to call Clarice back, but then decide the graveyard walls will keep her from going too far. Ready or not, here I come! John-John scampers off after Clarice.

You look away from Rhea for a moment to wipe the tears that have unexpectedly formed in your eyes. Sarah McKinley, Rhea says quietly, her finger tracing the nearest tombstone's inscription. 1575 to 1589. That is not very long, Miss Sophie.

No it is not very long, Rhea, you tell her, recovering yourself. Rhea climbs back into your lap and smiles up at you with that chubby face with a long brown braid. You pull at her braid teasingly, and she giggles.

Somewhere in town the church bells ring out the time. The tourists leave the graveyard for the castle or the beach, and new camera-wielders replace them.

Olly olly oxen free! Clarice is calling somewhere out of sight. John-John, olly olly oxen free! Come out, come out, wherever you are!

You smile, sit back, and tell Rhea another story, this one about a brave warrior fighting off an evil monster and falling off a great cliff. Rhea looks frightened until you explain how another warrior rescued her. And then, you tell Rhea, they became the best of friends and fought off monsters together. Rhea gazes up at you happily with her big chubby smile.

A shadow falls over you and Rhea, and you turn to face the people blocking the sun, readjusting the sunglasses over your eyes.

Professor Mason?

You look up at Jessica arm-in-arm with Mannie.

Hello!

Sorry to bother you, but I noticed you were here, Jessica tells you with a quiet dreamy sort of smile. She's a very tall and thin girl from London with rich black skin and short curly hair. She's usually quite shy in your writing seminar, and it surprises you to see her so assertive. Um, your daughter's beautiful, Professor.

You give Rhea a big smile. Oh, she's not my daughter.

Grandmother already?

You laugh. I don't have children. This is Rhea. Rhea, this is Jessica.

Rhea holds out a hand proudly, and she says how do you do with a strong Scottish brogue. Nice to meet you, Jessica says solemnly shaking Rhea's little hand. This is Mannie, my boyfriend. Rhea shakes hands with him too. Aren't you a pretty one now? Rhea giggles at Mannie's Edinburgh accent and allows him to pick her up and start telling her about his little brother who is apparently exactly Rhea's age.

Professor, could I speak to you a moment in private? You step away from Mannie still chatting eagerly to Rhea, keeping both in the corner of your eye, and you locate John-John and Clarice still playing hide-and-seek on the other side of some tombs.

Jessica looks nervous, toying with her hands before using them to shield her eyes from the sun.

Well, out with it, you tell her, trying to smile kindly.

I, I need an advisor. For my project.

Doing?

I'm writing a novella. I have a few chapters done and a proposal, of course, if you'd like to look it over before agreeing.

I didn't know that you write.

Yeah, I mean, I'd like to, obviously. Just changed my postgrad from literature to creative writing.

Hence the need for a new advisor.

Yeah, Jessica agrees with a bashful smile. Mannie told me I should at least ask since you're here.

Of course I'll look over it, you assure her.

Thanks. She shuffles from foot to foot awkwardly and then holds out her hand. You laugh and shake it.

You're welcome.

She scampers back to her Mannie from whom you take back Rhea. You watch the couple head out of the graveyard. Soon after, Christine arrives with her bouncing purple hair. Grandma!

The children leave with their grandmother, chattering happily about the weekend they've spent with you, and you sit alone in the graveyard for a time looking out over the ocean below.

*

Your computer rings out, identifying Dad. Until just this past year it was Mom and Dad. You toggle your mouse up to answer the call receiving a Hello, Sophie! before the video kicks in. His voice sounds happy rather than morose. That is encouraging.

Hi, Dad.

His face appears, thin and wrinkly. Still, there is a huge grin on his face that shows off all his fake teeth, and there is a sparkle in his eyes not quite beaten down through recent years.

In the background of the room you see the poster of Antigua your Mom and Dad have always kept in the office over the many moves and changes in their lives. It was hanging there behind you that day you wrote an essay about September 11th and discovered an email that would change your life forever.

They'd always planned to go there, Antigua. It was supposed to be their honeymoon, but finances had made that impossible at the time. They thought perhaps it would be an anniversary trip, but there never seemed to come the right time. They'd finally planned it all out and bought the plane tickets and everything about a decade ago. But Mom had fallen ill and the next five years saw them putting off those plans until she could get better. But she never did, not really. She recovered from stroke—stress, probably, the doctors said—and finally retired, but by then she was tired and weak. They'd given up on Antigua even before the second stroke.

After it was all over, and you'd both cried over the replica of your mother in a coffin, you had offered, tentatively, to take your father to Antigua yourself. But he just

smiled sadly at you because it was their place, his and hers, and there was no reason for him to go if she wasn't holding his hand. In any case, with a bad hip and pacemaker in his heart, he told you gruffly that he wasn't much up traveling anymore either.

So Soph, what is this new thing I hear you are writing?

Oh, the Nepal novel.

It's set in Nepal? His eyes are guarded.

Yeah, Dad.

But you've never been, he says lightly.

Not yet perhaps, but soon, soon you will go. How is it so much time has passed? How is it that it has taken you so very long? He looks closely into your eyes and decides not to bring it up right now. Instead he starts to tell you about a childhood trip to Crater Lake in Oregon with Aunt Wendy. No more spiritual place in the world. You really should go, Sophie. Set a novel there instead of Nepal. Blue blue water and it goes so deep. Of course there are all these shops out along the rim, but we went in the winter and the snow had them nearly buried. Your Aunt Wendy had never seen so much snow before....we snow-shoed up to the edge and looked down the cliff at the lake and there was no world, you know, no cars behind us and no planes in the sky....just this lake that was so deep with cliff walls that looked like faces. It was like something out of one of your stories.

There's a pause when he realizes you are only half-listening to him recounting a story you've heard again and again in various incarnations. His face looks sad again suddenly, as if he knows why you are absentminded. He sighs, and you feel guilty for not listening more closely.

Anyways, you really should take that trip some day. He knows that soon you must go to work and this conversation must end. He doesn't want to ask, but he will. He always does.

Have you seen her again?

But the answer is always the same, and you can never look in his eyes when you give it. He lets out a sad laugh and is silent for a moment. Some variation of the next question always follows the first. Have you been seeing the new person over in Edinburgh? Your father has a sort of mental block about referring to your psychiatrists by name. This has been true since Dr. Sarah and Dr. Geoff and continued with their two successors in your college years. You tell him now what he probably already knows. I stopped. I don't need them anymore.

He looks at you with big grey eyes. His hair rebelled against whiteness until this past year, until your mother's passing, but now has begun to snow over. Wrinkles and laugh lines mark his face, and you wonder how many of the lines on his forehead are your offspring. You have given him no grandchildren that live and breathe in the real world and part of you regrets this now. Soph, you do know that Adia isn't... that she never could have been...the world has rules and...

Well, if you want a scientific explanation, you say quietly. What if there are worlds, different worlds, worlds running parallel to each other? What if from time to time two worlds meet?

Your father has no argument for this. He just sighs. There is more in heaven and earth? he says finally with a smile. Yes, you agree, there is. And you both will leave it there, suspended, an issue that can never be resolved. But you think, looking into his eyes

as he smiles back at you and begins to talk about his upcoming holiday plans to see a true Edinburgh Hogmanay—to come and see you even with his weak knees and tired heart, even when you offered to come to him— you decide that maybe, just maybe, you’ve both made your peace with irreconcilables. Maybe you are finally both okay with things never being resolved. You’ve become modern at last.

*

Jessica quietly walks up to you after class. Have you looked over it, Professor? Her eyes don’t meet yours as she asks. You reach into your bag with essays and papers and creative efforts. There, tucked into a little red folder is Jessica’s proposal and the beginning of her novella.

I have, you tell her, pulling out the red folder. I quite enjoyed it. The whole thing about hiking reminded me of what I’m writing.

Your Nepal story?

Yes.

The woman searching for someone.

You smile again, handing her the red folder. I’ve marked it up a bit, and given some bigger general comments attached. I suppose I’m agreeing to advise you, aren’t I? Why don’t we head to my office to discuss?

The two of you make your way out of the classroom and down the crowded hallways to your office with its window over-looking the castle and the ocean. Jessica pulls up a chair, and you clear up some space on your desk. The two of you chat for a

while about Jessica's story, you giving her some ideas about style and telling her to perhaps include more of the psychiatrist Bob. Did I write the psych part convincingly? You may want to watch some videos or talk to one of the psych professors. If you want a very Freudian idea of psychology, yours as written does seem to work, however. And trust me, let's say I've met a few of Freud's followers and they definitely do sound just like the TV shows.

You both laugh, Jessica assuming that you are, of course, joking, even though you are not. She begins to stop playing with her hands in your presence and starts meeting your eyes. After about a half hour and the promise to look over a revision later in the school year, Jessica asks in passing how your own writing is going. You tell her a little more about the novel that is unfolding too slowly, but soon run out of things to say. You are still in that place where a story is too fragile to be spoken of aloud and survive intact. Jessica seems oddly to understand this and does not question you. Instead she glances at the clock and rises to leave, you turning back to get your things in order.

Just wondering, does she find her?

Hmm? You look up at Jessica, who clutches her precious pile of paper now covered in your markings tightly to her chest.

The woman searching through Nepal, does she find the person she's looking for?

You look up at Jessica, startled. Her eyes ask the question again. Does she find her? You tell her, honestly, that you just don't know.

But you will, obviously, Jessica says firmly. You'll figure it out by the end.

I just don't know, you tell her.

*

The ocean rolls below on the sands. Perched on the cliff you sit on the porch of your small home in a park of homes the same size and shape raised off the ground so quickly that they still draw a certain disdainful scorn from those with more means in the town below. The view of the ocean-side town in nighttime soothes your fears. The moon plays across the waters, and the ruins of the cathedral and accompanying graveyard present a dark patch amidst the town's lights.

You had the dream again tonight. The dream of Adia climbing through the mountains. Often you wonder when age will make such a journey impossible, and whenever you think such things you feel the need to book a plane ticket tonight, now, this moment. But you are afraid. Nights like these you are restless and want to run across the cliffs. You want to be rather like her, you suppose, dashing into the night to the Judge's yard at four in the morning to spy crocuses. But yet you are still afraid. For without her here who will catch you when you fall?

You watch a shooting star streak across the night sky. I wish you were here, Adia. I really wish you were here. You close your eyes and try to smell Nepal. The dust on the path between Lukla and Monjo and the pines climbing the hill to Namche Bazaar and the stove oven burning wood in the center of the teahouses and the incense in the monastery at Tengboche and the strong lemon tea brewed in the restaurant at Gorak Shep. You try to smell the rice cooking—does that have a smell?— and the bakeries with their fresh rolls and yak-cheese pizza and the river and even the dirtier water running down the endless staircase on the dingy-side of Namche Bazaar. You open your eyes in frustration. All you

can smell is the salty air of the ocean. You cannot seem to dream yourself to Nepal tonight.

So many times you have begun booking that ticket from London Heathrow to Delhi to Kathmandu. So many times you have canceled right before the last confirmation. Lately you have gone through the process more and more. It is, of course, this novel. All your drawers of unpublished writing reflect on her, but this one is more direct. This one, finally, will have her name alone in its dedication and damn the psychiatrists to hell. This story is for her because it is hers. And she deserves no less than unashamed recognition. You sigh and stretch, looking out across the waters again. You feel a deep sense of dread in the pit of your stomach wondering, not for the first time, if perhaps you are no more than Monster and Spot the Dog. You know you are so much less than her. But you wonder, you think, therefore...

Another sigh. You are tired. It has been a long day. Perhaps tomorrow you will book the plane ticket. Or the next day. After finals. Later. Tomorrow. Your personal Antigua. You make your way back inside and slump into bed suddenly exhausted. The ceiling. Staring up. The bland sheet of white yields to freckles and veins that cast shadows in criss-crossing patterns. You are too tired to think anymore.

*

The near blizzard has made this talk less-attended than it usually would be. Out of friendship more than interest you have trudged through the fierce chill and deep drifts.

You told me it never snows in St. Andrews! Your father is pouting. It never snows here, until, of course, it does.

Really, Dad, you didn't have to come. Could have stayed at home. You don't even *like* Virginia Woolf.

Sophie, I'm here. I'm seeing how you do things, like lectures. Lectures in the snow. Being a Professor and all that, he tells you, his teeth chattering. You put his hand firmly on your arm to take more weight off his bad knee. You had to buy him a new jacket when all the snow fell because his was not warm enough. During the shopping trip he also bought himself a new woolen Scottish hat and a year's supply of scotch. Which you know you can't take back with you, right? Well, then you can have what's left of it, Dad insists. When in Scotland, buy Scotch whiskey. Simple. You sigh. Tomorrow you are off to Edinburgh to stay from Christmas to New Years. Assuming you can get through the snow to the city.

Oh, hello, Jessica.

Hi, Professor! God, I must really love Virginia.

And you are, my dear? Dad asks sweetly.

Dad, my advisee, Jessica. Jessica, my father. Now let's get inside please.

This building, despite its age, is at least modestly warm. You keep your coat on anyway and watch your dad stomping his boots off. Jessica is with her friend Vanessa, and both of them are literally white from the snow. They begin to brush the snow off their coats. You do the same for your father and yourself. I'm not a child, Sophia. He ruffles your hair free of the whiteness clinging to it, and together you make your way into the

lecture hall. There are only five other people present, all of them involved with the Woolf Symposium. You take your seats and watch your friend Christine approach the podium.

Christine's lecture revolves around Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West. She gushes about Vita, who you think Christine would marry if only she could find a time machine. Almost like Chrissy is mellowing with age, comments Dad. He's met her before several times, and he knows she has been something of a fiery mentor to you here at St. Andrews. Now, now, you tell him, Christine the Defender of Woman's Virtue hardly knows how to mellow. Dad laughs and pats you on the arm. Christine, who may possibly have overheard you, raises her eyebrows in your direction but continues her presentation. Though, you whisper to Dad, you'd think the purple spiked hair is a bit much at her age. Dad chortles but comments on how well she pulls the look off in spite of it all. She and Vita definitely would have made an interesting couple.

Christine, meanwhile, is getting much more worked up about her argument, and you both tune in to the way her purple hair bounces as her arms gesticulate fiercely. Virginia clearly feels that time and space can be disregarded and rewritten in fiction. Orlando, like Vita, was someone for whom reality was relative.

You drift and start to dream about Adia. What did she do for her career? Not academia. She wouldn't have tolerated all these lectures and papers well. You used to wonder if perhaps she became a dancer. She had the body and the grace for it. But you dismissed the notion. An actress. She would become an actress. You smile, imagining her playing Peter Pan and flying through the air. Years ago, of course. She couldn't play Juliet anymore, but perhaps right now she stars somewhere as Lady Macbeth. Perhaps she acted in Kathmandu, though you know there are no theatres there to really speak of,

at least not the grand Shakespearean theatres you imagined for Margaret and Adia's father when you were children.

No, she probably has not gone to Nepal yet. She would wait for you. You imagine that she settled somewhere in the States. Somewhere warm and southern. Dry heat though, the desert. Southern California perhaps? New Mexico? You used to scroll through all the theatre announcements and look at cast lists. Eventually you found yourself an Adia living in Santa Fe with a prolific acting career. And you decided that this must be her. For years you followed her career, Adia of Santa Fe. The last name has changed, but perhaps she is married? Or perhaps she has a stage name. Either way, you want this successful woman to be her. Your Adia should be beloved by the public. Every time she steps on a stage it is to adoring reviews. People are moved. Adia would be able to move them. It must be her. But that frightens you, because your Santa Fe Adia has disappeared from the theatre as of late. She hasn't given a real performance in almost four years.

Where are you now, Sophie? Dad asks you quietly. Christine appears to be wrapping up, and you've not heard a word of her final argument.

Off in my own world.

Spend a lot of time there?

You laugh and pull a face at him. More than most.

The room is emptying out slowly, everyone bundling tightly against the chilled night air and the snow which necessitates boots even for the stoutest.

Want to grab a few down at the pub, Soph? You, me, and the defender of female goodness over there?

Christine sticks her tongue out at Dad and promptly announces to the room that she will in fact be indulging in a few drinks in Greyfriar's if anyone wants to join her for further discussion. You, however, are already looking for a way out of a late night watching others drink.

Dad, let's just go home. Early start tomorrow, right?

Right, he says, searching your eyes. So I don't suppose you'll give me the real reason. Just don't want to stay out, in case the snow starts up again. Want to get home.

Dad pretends to believe you, though he gives you a sad-looking smile. Christine tells you how much Rhea is looking forward to seeing you in February and how she never stops talking about all your stories. You send your love to Clarice, John-John, and Rhea, thank Christine for an enthralling talk, and wish Jessica a Happy Christmas! Then you and your father trudge back through the snow to your home on the cliffs.

*

Spring. The bus takes you to the train station, and you take the very most beautiful train journey in the world along the green and yellow and rock-strewn coast looking out at the blue of the sea. In the city of granite a cloudy sky dulls the sparkle of the buildings. You make your way to the Aberdeen ferry terminal and purchase a ticket north to the island. Late in the night you arrive at the small port of Orkney and hail a taxi to take you to your home for a week and a half right at the center of Kirkwall. You collapse into a clean bed with a white pillow comforter and big fluffed pillows. You are asleep quickly and do not think or dream of her for exhaustion.

Mrs. Steward makes you some of the very best porridge you have ever tasted for breakfast the following morning. She tells you stories about the town's history. She was, earlier in life, a history professor at St. Andrews. Her husband is a hard-of-hearing thin old man who spends most of his life following the Old Firm matches over in Glasgow. Mrs. Steward is big and boisterous and enthusiastic and you just know students loved her. Whenever you come here to Orkney, her Bed and Breakfast is your home base.

The week and a half of your spring vacation passes in a haze of rain and sun. You walk and try to connect to that time Adia spent here. It was directly before meeting you. That time when she used to sneak on the ferries between islands hoping to find a friend somewhere, anywhere. She didn't know it, but finding a true friend would merely require taking a plane across the Atlantic to a different world. In Orkney, Adia had a mother who wasn't quite so very sick and still made her corned beef and cabbage and brushed her hair every night and read her proper bedtime stories with her Irish rhythm.

You ferry across to Stronsay and check in on Mrs. Potter, who is still there older than death and minding her little shop off the ferry terminal. It is the only grocery store on this island. Monks have come to the island in the years since Adia lived here, and you hop a boat across a brief channel to their island monastery. There you say a Hail Mary in the chapel. Adia's mother used to recite the Rosary sometimes before going to sleep. Brother Jacob takes you back across to the bigger island and you walk a long time before finally finding a beach. It's midday now. You lay yourself out on the beach and look up at the blue color of the sky, the blue that artists say only exists here in these islands, and at the water clearer than the tropics. This was her world before you. You lean back on the

hot sands and listen to the waves, trying to feel the imprint of the little girl she must have left behind.

At some point, you must fall asleep, for suddenly it is colder. Adia, of course, is there because you want her to be there. Only you aren't where you were a moment before. Your location has changed.

Sophie, you worry too much.

Do I? You try to place yourself. It takes time to recognize the castle ruins above you on the cliff. A winding road snakes down from above to allow passage to this small beach. Across the street is the English building where you work. It is cold, and there is inexplicable snow lining the sand that the waves melt slowly away. Snow on a beach feels out of place, and your mind stumbles. The tide is out making the snowy sands wider and all the rocks visible. She sits perched atop the largest rock available. You sit on another not quite as high. She is older, forty or fifty probably. She has matched you.

Yes, I think you worry too much, she tells you again. About the novel. You just have to write it and stop worrying.

You nod quietly.

I remember so much of Orkney, she tells you. I sat where you sit now on that sandy beach. I watched the blue of the sky and the green blue depths of the sea.

I am here now, you tell her. I vacation here every other year or so. I never told anyone about your time on Orkney, so no one ever thinks much of me wanting to come here. And you, do you often go back to Pennsylvania, to that place where a lone creek in a thin stretch of woods once convinced us we were in the wilderness?

She shakes her head. I don't go.

You sigh, I haven't gone back either.

You should wake up now, Adia. Or I should, I suppose. It isn't good to get too lost in dreams, even my dreams.

This coming from the writer.

Perhaps we know that best.

The snow disappears and the cliffs are gone. You are lying on the white sand in the hot sun looking up at that very special blue sky of the Orkney Isles off the northern coast of Scotland. The castle ruins of St Andrews are far to your south, and she is somewhere beyond your reach.

*

When Jessica knocks on the door to your home and you call for her to come in, you are in the middle of packing your books for your trip to Virginia. Your Alma mater has asked you take part in a two-week symposium. You agreed to give a couple of talks, and you'll be guest-lecturing for several classes as well.

Professor?

Hello, Jessica. Thanks so much again for doing this.

It's no problem.

Your cat, Tina, meows a yawn from the couch and Jessica nearly coos before dropping to her knees and introducing herself. Hello, Tina-weena. I'm Jessica. I'm taking care of you for awhile.

Here's her food, treats, and a list of instructions, but she really shouldn't be too much of a bother. Litter is right over there. Right? Just check in every three days or so.

So, two weeks?

I'll be back for graduation, you assure her.

She smiles softly and reminds you that she's going to be in town all summer working on her creative writing thesis. I mean, if you do want to make a real vacation out of it, Professor.

You laugh. Are you hinting at something? Do I look over-worked?

Jessica chuckles quietly, ducking her eyes from yours. No, it's just...

Yes?

Well, I was reading through the part of your book you gave to me and just thinking...just really curious I guess, so I glanced over the internet, and...

Come out with it, Jessica.

It's just... flights from New York to Kathmandu are dirt cheap right now. You know how airlines are; sometimes it's cheaper to go farther.

Oh, right.

You look away from each other.

So, Jessica claps her hands together, I'll see you at graduation in a few weeks? When you get back from Virginia?

Yes, of course, you tell her.

She turns around for a moment and smiles at you, giving Tina a pat on the head. If I don't see you at graduation, I think I'll forgive you, though. And Tina, she's no problem. And with that she heads out of your home.

*

You settle back into your brief life stateside hesitantly. You have grown oddly more accustomed to British accents than American. You find yourself overindulging in Mexican cuisine and craving Indian. Pace at this college is in some ways much faster and busier than yours across the sea. But you, as a visitor, do not have too many demands on your time. The visit is good. You needed to move before your restless feet took you off a cliff by mistake.

You rent a car and drive north up 95 on what feels like the wrong side of the road. You wonder whether she has come back here in the years since. You wonder whether that was ever even an option for her. Once you graduated high school you never once looked back. One time, driving up to Maine to visit a university friend, you made a deliberate loop to the east to avoid driving through your old neighborhood. You leave high school reunion notices unanswered and meet the few friends you have from this area somewhere else. There really aren't many friends here anymore. Small towns and cities may retain those who lived within them, but suburbia has a tendency to attract merely drifters; few people who graduated from your high school settled within a fifty mile radius of the football field where commencement was held.

You sit on your crooked tree with roots reaching into the river to provide shelter to another generation of fish. Squinting, you try to see a wood that has long since built a series of new modern apartments. Across the creek another small patch of trees separates you from a backyard now made small through the addition of a massive swimming pool.

The house beyond still stands, but it is re-modeled, repainted, no longer yours. A man mows the lawn out front, keeping the property immaculate. You introduce yourself, and he is kind. He has two young daughters. You wonder if they like the pool. You wonder if they walk along the wooded path to this creek, if they sometimes sit together here in this too-small nook watching the fish cautiously skirt out from under the tree roots hiding from shadows.

*

Professor, comments a boy at the back of the classroom, certainly a reasonable interpretation is to just say that Alonso is mad, his sense of reality overwhelmed by fantasy. He is unable to reconcile the real world with the one he idealizes.

But, interjects another assertive girl sitting upfront, ultimately his idealism triumphs. Reality is complicated and twisted, but he brings magic to it—

How? By killing sheep and tearing down windmills? The class laughs. Another dreamy-eyed girl raises her hand tentatively. I don't think it is about idealism at all, actually. I think it's about a creator and his creation. I think that Quixote is a kind of bridge between us and the author.

It's all about death. Quixote is afraid of death and he's done nothing with his life. It's a mid-life crisis. He invents this magical realm where he does things. He means something.

But that invention isn't real. It doesn't mean a thing.

But how do we know that Quixote doesn't see the truth after all? The visions of the lovers are real. Maybe all of it is true. Maybe others just can't see. Maybe Quixote is the only sane person there is.

We can argue that there is no singular reality, that the world is subject to the person observing it. Current physics would support this, that our observation of an object changes the object itself.

This reminds me of Dumbledore in Harry Potter. You know, that line at the end when Harry asks if it's real and Dumbledore says it doesn't matter.

I still just say he's crazy.

Students continue to argue as they pack up their books. Professor Nolan, the man who asked you in as guest-lecturer today, thanks you for leading the discussion. Several of the students come to you and Nolan to ask more questions on the ambiguous ending of *Don Quixote*. Professor, says Michelle on her way out. I was supposed to give this to you. The other Professor Mason, apparently, said it was delivered to her mail box by mistake. The girl Michelle hands you the old-fashioned envelope. There is an actual wax seal and for a moment you think it is a long-awaited letter to Hogwarts. Written in a beautiful looping hand that you would recognize anywhere is your name: Sophia Mason. Is it her handwriting, you wonder, or is it yours?

You wait for the lecture-hall to clear before gathering your notes and placing them safely in your bag. Still holding the letter in your right hand, you shoulder the blue and green bag, put on your sunglasses, and walk into the hot humid air of late spring in this southern place which was your home for four years long ago and has been your home again for the last two weeks. Few students are out and about this time of year; most have

closed themselves off in their rooms or in the library to study for the exams coming up in the next couple of weeks. These college students are the same and different from yours at the university across the sea. In two days you are scheduled to return to the place that has become your home, going further away, of course, from that backyard which was once all your world.

As your feet move on autopilot you slowly break the seal of the letter in your hand and unfold the thick pages. You hold it for a moment without looking, feeling the rise of the ink on the paper. Handwritten. So rare in this new world to see handwritten notes. Your eyes drift downwards almost against your will. They drift because they must see, because you cannot prevent that and don't really want to do so. Dear Sophie, Why do people start letters that way for people who are not dear? I've never understood it. I don't know if this will reach you. I don't know if you will want it to do so. Perhaps the gateways between your life and mine have closed long ago. But yet I am sending this to you, my dearest friend. My time is running short. If we are ever to quest it must be now. I will see you in the mountains. Always yours, Adia

A bright late afternoon sun hangs heavy in the thick air, and you stand transfixed with the library's high clock to your left. Low lying trees with pink blossoms catching the golden glow stand in a circle around the sundial, itself enclosed by orange and purple flowers. The radiance of the colors matched with the light draws your eyes down the path with its ring of pink petals to the sundial. You look at the picture before you in its frame of pink flowers on elegant tree branches. Campus is bizarrely empty. Breezes blow a whistle in your ears and you feel oddly as if you are dreaming, as if the world around you is too beautiful and full and sultry to be quite real.

The letter dangles from your hands, and you wonder. Again you wonder and know somewhere she is wondering too. Perhaps you will never stop wondering. You will walk home now through the relentless heat, open the door, eat the leftover fajitas you made the previous evening, and then you will find the little orange book in your top drawer with trip plans laid long ago. You will call your university and say you are not returning for the summer sessions due to a family emergency and go on the internet to book some plane tickets—really book them— and make some Skype calls. What time is it, you wonder, in Nepal?

I think I'm beginning to see now.

You did ask for truth.

Yes, I see.

Do you? It hides so often, truth, it gets lost inside reality, I think, lost in the tangled web of facts and figures. The truth hides right before our eyes, but people are so blind to it. That's why we need our stories, I suppose.

So that's where it ends?

Not quite. One person must go up the mountain, but it must be someone else entirely who journeys back to the start.

The time will come to go back down. No more staying up here, Miss Adia. The air is too thin. She will descend from the mountain's base, watching the ice field white white and her breath mist mist mist. Her eyes will look up at the mountain whose top she cannot see, and she will wish. And if you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills. Her eyes hold the mountain high high up beyond her reach.

Descent will be easier than ascent. Her tired feet will slide against the rocky path and place themselves one after the other on the sandy ridge. It will stop raining enough for her to distinguish her raindrops from the sky's tears. When she reaches one of the two lodges which make up Gorak Shep, she will go to her room and strip off her wet clothes, toweling dry and repositioning the silver icon of Saint Christopher on her neck. Then she

will take her blanket to sit before the fire with a cup of lemon tea. She will eat half her dinner. A vast improvement. Lentil soup and rice with curried vegetables. Fantastic.

Exhausted and content, she will fall asleep as soon as her sleeping bag has been zipped up. She will be too tired to dream.

Morning and she will wake to snow on rooftops glinting in the misty sunlight outside her window. Still Gorak Shep. Heading down. Mountains peak through the white veil, and she will curl tighter in her sleeping bag, watching snow melt off roofs. It will be early and quiet. She will glance around the empty room and rise, shivering, to place a hand on the empty bed opposite her. It will feel warm.

In the big center room, eating her porridge and flat bread, she will sit looking across at the flags of world and signatures of brave explorers. She will leave her own insignia, a portrait of a light bulb fairy. In a clear hand, she will write both their names. Adia and Sophie. Two new adventurers are added to the walls.

A little up and then down down down. She will reach the ridge and stop abruptly looking out across the rocky barren valley far below with little yaks and naks roaming freely. The new dog, whom she named Spock because of his pointed ears, will look back at her and shrug her forward. Perspective. She will not have realized how beautiful it was before when she was just staring up at the steep slopes.

An old man and his young guide will sit looking out across the mountains. His hair will be snowy white and the boy's black black. Namaste. Hello. Why are you here? Because I am living. It will be as good a reason as any.

At lunch she will finish an entire plate of pasta with real parmesan and chips with ketchup. She will take a picture to commemorate such a historic occasion.

Monuments will rise from a dense mist. Memorials to those fallen. She will use the pile of rocks to hide her modesty and watch steam rise from her pee to join the fog. Prayer flags shift in and out of focus through the mist. Shadowy shapes will move further up the path, and she will wonder at the figure of a woman that appears for a moment silhouetted next to the memorial stones.

Rain has made the river rise high and the river has flooded the marshes so that she will pick her way over the rocks through a chilled wind and drizzling rain. Splashing splashing splashing. Oh Caledonia, I'm coming home.

The little farming village will sit next to the white river on a rare stretch of flat ground. Pheriche. A few green-roofed one-story buildings and several stone-walls enclosing fields where goats graze. One tall hotel stands at the back on higher ground. She will need to go up up up the staircase to the tall hotel but her breathing will not labor. Air! There will be air again. Her guide will smile when she begins to run up the steps.

In the fogged up window she will draw Tatiana with her dress of flowers and stars and then she will draw two girls lying on their stomachs spying on the fairy's grandeur. They will be smiling lazily, the two spies. Eventually the picture fogs over itself.

In her dream Anatzia and Enzyotee will journey into the snowy glacier. They will hold hands tightly and whisper a secret story of ghosts. Cold seems not to bother them and when Anatzia slips on the ice, she will be there to catch her. Anatzia will smile, and Enzyotee will smile back. White breathes mingle and the two will employ Marlowe and Shakespeare to carry them up the mountain. At the top they will be crowned queens of all the earth.

Much uphill will mark this second day of descent, though she will not remember having gone down quite so far when heading upwards. Spock will keep looking back at her in annoyance and when she reaches the third steep slope she will groan aloud. The rain will conceal her single tear of frustration. At least she will be able to breathe better with the air getting thicker.

Rain will begin to fall harder and harder and it will not stop. Her rain jacket gets much use on the way down. It will rain so fiercely that she will wonder what the sky is mourning, and the fog will grow so thick that she will wonder what the earth is concealing. Everything will look different going down in the rain. Trees, when they reappear, will be a different color. Dust will become mud. Valleys will now be high hills

and sharp evil slopes transform to quick downwards vistas. Air will be fuller. Heavier. Real.

Hi-hi. A beautiful little girl will blow her kisses hello. She will catch them and return them with her own. She will tell the little girl a story about two sorceresses who stood in the scary darkness of a forest and faced toads bent upon destruction. The little girl will giggle and play with the silver icon around her neck. Patron saint of travel, she will tell the child. After lunch, the little girl will blow her kisses goodbye. She will hesitate but return them like before. Namaste. May the road rise up to meet you. Namaste. Bye-bye.

Finally flat and high, looking across the smallish green green hills, she will try mentally to capture just how the waterfalls move and how the mist clings. Of course the moment she thinks she has the measure of the water, it transforms again.

Back in the horseshoe-shaped village of Namche Bazaar, she will return to her previous hotel, and flush toilets will amaze her. Electricity. Showers. Cleanliness. She will find a book of translated Chinese poetry in the dining room and will open it at random. Long, long has been my road and far, far was the journey. She will read as the other trekkers around her chat merrily.

Two girls on their way up will ask her about what to expect. Water? More than you think you need. Altitude sickness? Headaches, diarrhea, loss of appetite, fatigue.

Everyone's different. They will seem unbearably young, these two girls washing their socks, as she did less than two weeks before. Who did you go up with? Just an old friend.

The hot towel bouncing through her hands will smell of lemon. Hot potato. She will wash her hands and face in preparation for dinner and feel newly-made. Within moments the too-hot-to-handle towel grows cold. Chicken will be served for dinner. It will be her first taste of meat in many days. She will devour it and gnaw at the bones.

She will dream of two old women climbing a mountain, their wrinkled hands attached to sturdy walking poles blue and orange. What do you see on the horizon? But the other woman doesn't know. They will stop to breathe and hand in hand watch the night slowly come to the world. Both women will turn into birds and fly off into the starry night sky.

Sunshine will come for the last day. The green pine trees will be greener. The blue blue sky sparkling. She will take her time. Her eyes will fill with color. The rooftops red and the fields yellow and green-gold and emerald. Yak bells chime further up the path and someone is singing in one of the villages below. Smells of yak poo and pine and dust. Sharp. Her sunglasses will fog with heat.

Crossing her last suspension bridge she will look down down at the milky water below. There ain't no river wide enough. On the way she was afraid, but now she will

stand solidly on the swaying bridge with no seen support and look across the valley with green mountains rising high.

Welcome back to Lukla, Miss Adia. She will go up and up the stairs that defeated her just weeks before to arrive at the teahouse overlooking the little airport and what will now seem like a large town. Two old graying dogs will greet her happily in the brightly-painted dining room where she finds some lemon tea and biscuits. She will sit outside looking out across the green mountains and the red and green and yellow and blue rooftops. Men will strap supplies on to their head carriers and make their way through the dusty streets below while women hang clothes to dry in the scorching sun and warm breeze. Yaks and dzopahs and mules and little horses and chickens and dogs and small children all share the pathways below. She will sip her tea and try to taste the color of the sky.

Sophie's voice will call to her through the blizzard in her dream. Grol will hold her tight in his slimy arms pulling her away from the friend she will not be able to see through the falling snow. Grol will hold her immobile as the snow piles higher and higher until only her head rests above the drifts. And she will be so very cold, and she will not see anything but the whiteness. Take my hand. I cannot. But Sophie's hand will fold over hers and pull her up through the snow. Grol remains buried, but she will break free. And then she will find herself alone on top of the snow, the blizzard ended, and the mountain world remade pristine and eerie and white.

Little plane takes off on the short downhill runway. It takes off from the cliff. Out the windows will be mountains—their mountains. She will fly through mist and land in a green field. The airport is closed for rain, and she will be diverted. She will sit in the little village watching women carry vegetables on their heads and contemplate how big even this small country truly is. Little plane again takes off from the grass runway to show her rivers and valleys and a whole world not made from mountains. Soon she will see the dirty sprawling city that is somehow magical and grand and more present than regular cities. Kathmandu. In time she touches the earth once more.

When the young professional man at the counter of her hotel asks why she came to Nepal, she will say she was looking for her Sophie. He will hand her a jangly room key and offer a wide grin. Why did you come? Did you find what you were looking for? She will not answer him. Instead, she will climb the red-carpeted stairs, twisting the silver icon of Saint Christopher around her neck, and she will use her new key to open the door at the end of the hall. She will throw her big bag and her daypack, both grubby with dirt from the mountains, on to one of the empty beds. She will cross to her reflection on the wall. We are such stuff as dreams are made of. Perhaps. Her face will bear too many lines in the mirror of her Kathmandu hotel, and her eyes will be baggy from too many dreams. But she would not trade them. Not one. She will be tired, and she will know now that she deserves her tiredness. It will be real and true, and there will be nothing to fear from falling to sleep.

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In one of the earlier versions of this novel, Adia's adult self went by a fake name: Danielle Thompson. I abandoned this false identity thread as too complicated fairly early on. The name Adia chose, however, was going to be my in-text tribute to perhaps the two people who have had the greatest direct impact on this story. Their names are Daniel Frenzko and Marie Thompson, they were my two closet friends growing up, and I think will always be my dearest friends for our shared childhoods. My brother and the Half-Blood Princess are intricately connected to all my memories of that backyard in Pennsylvania, and they probably coauthored many adventures found in these pages. A special thank you to Marie for Enzyotee, because, after all, Anatzia would be nothing without her. And Dan, do you remember you and me on our creek with our orange butterfly nets and neon water shoes getting irritated because the fish kept going under the roots of the crooked tree? Yeah, I remember too.