



RABBIT PIE

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THE YEAR IS POURING OUT THE LAST OF ITS GOOD DAYS BEFORE THEY RUN COLD.

When I'm not at the school, I'm outdoors in my garden or swaying barefoot in the grass and laying myself down in my lawn chair until the sun is gone. There are mums, little carlows, and lemon queens in the front yard by the gate.

Today is no different. After I dismiss my class and get home, I find myself outside, sandals by my chair, book spread open so wide the spine creases, and Finnow, a brown pointer, circling the lawn with his tail stirring. My pretty neighbor Martha tends to her painted bird houses and flower pots with her toddling daughter at her side. Alma's shadow falls into my yard around four. I almost miss it from under my sun hat.

Finnow growls at her and I tell him to go away.

Alma, a young woman about my age, has been walking by my house every day for two weeks now. When she first came, I lifted my eyes from a magazine to see her leaning over the gate picking my flowers. I introduced myself and asked her not to do that again. She said, "It's good to meet you, Bonnie," before hiding them in her pockets and walking down the road. The next day, she came again around the same time and I learned her name. On the third day she came, I asked her where she was from and she said what is important is that she has never been here before.

Martha thinks she's odd.

"Good afternoon, Alma," I say.

"Hello," she says and grins.

I sit up in my chair and fold my book closed. "How are you?"

"I'm lovely. You look lovely, too."

I wipe the sweat off my palms by pretending to smooth my dress over my knees. Finnow comes back around the house again and barks at her.

"What are you doing today?" I stand up and swat Finnow away.

Alma draws her hair back from her face and finds a comfortable place in the fence to lean. "I heard we'll be getting some bad weather and I want to catch some of it." She laughs. I've never heard her do that before.

"Bad weather? Don't be too hopeful," I say, mindlessly turning a ring on my finger. She smiles through it without a word.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Same thing every afternoon," I say.

"What are you reading?"

"It's an anthology," I say. "*The Wind's Twelve Quarters*."

"Doesn't it get old?"

"Not really," I say, "My class read *Frog and Toad* today and *Little Bear* the day before. I need a change of pace."

"You should walk with me sometime and talk about your books. I thought you would have started following me by now."

I whiten.

"I'm teasing," she says.

"I know."

Finnow paws at the front door to be let inside. Alma says that she will see me again tomorrow and departs down the street. For dinner, it's tomato sandwiches for me and rice and beef liver for Finnow. I let him lick the butter, mayonnaise, and toast crumbs off my plate when I'm done.

MY STUDENTS WORK DILIGENTLY THE NEXT DAY.

I announce that we will be starting our *Peter Rabbit* unit next week. As it nears dismissal time, the children know somehow that they will be free even though half of them can't read

clocks yet. I help them collect their bookbags and have them line up by the door. I remind them of their homework to practice their cursive writing with words that start with the letter *U*, *V*, or *W* and wave them off at the bell.

I decide to groom the flower bed by the fence when I get home. The tangles of roots are hard to see through the mulch and the shade of the mums. I catch sight of what looks like a glimmering eye and it startles me. Hiding here in this corner of my yard is a woody sprout of deadly nightshade. It has already produced berries, some pale green, others shining and dark like blisters. When Alma comes, she asks, "What's wrong?" I pull off my gloves and hat after I set down my garden spade. I wonder how miserable I must look. Dirty lap, pink face, wild carrot hair.

"Weeds. Two years ago it was bindweed. Lately it's been path rush and bittercress, and now nightshade." I've filled my empty watering can with the spoils and show her.

"Belladonna? That's an evil one," she laughs. "Where does it come from?"

"I think it blows in from the woods behind the house or birds leave it somehow."

"There are lots of things on the wind this time of year," she says.

"I almost ate one once when I was a child, one of the berries when I was in the woods with my father." I had been struck by their beauty, thought they must be some kind of black cherry, and wondered about their flavor.

A look of amusement crawls across Alma's face. "What stopped you?"

"My father." I recall him finding me the moment I set the vile thing on my tongue. He pulled it right out of my cheek with his finger.

"Close call." She almost seems disappointed.

"Yes."

"You can't leave it because of your dog?" Alma asks.

"The nightshade? Yes. And the rabbits."

"Oh, you have rabbits?"

"There's a hole back by my garden beneath a juniper shrub. Do you want to see?" I stand and scrape the mud and mulch off the knees of my slacks.

"Sure."

I grab my spade and watering can and let Alma in by the gate. She follows in my shadow at my heels around the house. My garden is huddled across the yard from the old horse barn. The woods spread out behind them endlessly.

"You like rabbits around?" Alma stoops and looks into the small warren beneath the juniper when I point it out to her.

"They don't bother my garden much. The kits hide all day. And Finnow leaves them alone. Martha hates them though."

"Martha seems like a bitch," Alma mutters.

"She doesn't like you either," I say and laugh. "She's a little severe sometimes."

"A little?"

"They keep eating her cornflowers and comfrey, which is funny because my students are reading *Peter Rabbit* soon."

"*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*?" Alma gives me a cool stare and I'm terribly conscious again of how I must look to her. Sweat gathers itself beneath the hollows of my blouse and under my bra wire. "That's the one where he goes to eat from the garden?"

"Yes, that's about right," I nod.

"And the gardener eats rabbits?"

"Yes. Makes them into pies."

Alma takes me back by the horse barn to view the expanse of wooded country beyond the border of my yard. The wind and light stir the upper leaves and branches, but the gloom between the trees remains untouched and untamed. "Have you ever eaten rabbit?" she asks.

"No. My father hunted them when I was a girl though."

"You never ate any?"

"I was always too scared," I say as I remember my father digging out the warrens in the woods, or following him down trails as he carried long limp rabbits caught in his cable snares.

"Scared? Why?"

"I always felt like they were something I wasn't supposed to eat," I say.

"But you nearly ate from a poisonous plant?" She grins and my face becomes hot with blush. She places my sunhat back on my head and winks at me before she tells me good night.

After I feed Finnow and thumb through the students' addition and subtraction assignments, I take a bath. I sink down into the tub so its lip blocks my view of the bathroom door and I touch myself and come after some time. I catch myself thinking of Alma, her heavy eyes, the sweep of her throat, the small of her back, imagining it bare. I sit up in the bath and immediately drain it. *I should not*, I think as I put out the lights and go to bed, *I must not do that*.

MOST OF THE CHILDREN DID DELIGHTFULLY WELL on their homework in the morning. I have each student share a favorite word they had written and ask them to tell us how they came up with it. I write the words in cursive on the blackboard. There are beautiful words. *United, wooden, violet, wiggle, unicycle, vulture*. The next word is *onion*, which one of the boys misspelled as *union*. “Thomas, a union is when two or more things come together and make one thing. An onion is what your mother was using for dinner,” I say and smile. I move on to the next student.

She tells me her chosen word is *which/witch*.

“How did you spell it? There are two that sound the same,” I say. She spells it out for the class. I write both on the board to show the students the difference between the two.

“And tell us how you came up with it.”

“Michael and Jacob and I were playing out at the creek and on my way back home I met a witch,” she says, her eyes bright like silver dollars.

“Jana, witches aren’t real,” I say, fully turning from the board. “You and your friends shouldn’t be out in those woods anyway.”

She insists, though, and the other children begin to stir and laugh. Heat flashes across my face. “It was real! She even talked to me, Miss—”

“Jana, please, stop teasing,” I say. She settles into her chair, defeated. I ask the class to continue sharing. The next word is *umbrella*.

Before I leave the school for home that afternoon, Miss Susannah asks me into her room with Miss Caroline to discuss my curriculum choices for the term. They think *Peter Rabbit* is too frightening for the students. “Peter isn’t actually made into a pie,” I say to them, but they don’t listen and suggest I use *Cecily Parsley* if I insist on teaching Beatrix Potter’s books. I don’t like *Cecily Parsley*, but what Jana said in class makes me worry about which stories might make dangerous impressions on children.

ALMA COMES AGAIN WITHOUT FAIL. I talk to her about the children in my class. She asks about my family and I tell her my parents live north, upstream. She says I should follow her, that she has found some paths in the woods that she likes, but the suggestion frightens me. I consider it though, consider rising up out of my chair, leaving my sandals and book, walking with her past the magnolias and over the shoots and blooms of mushrooms into the shaded country, the deep bowers. Alma is beautiful. I have been trying to deny that. She’s a kind of woman not expected around here. Pretty mouth, hazel eyes, and hair the color of blackstrap molasses. I’m a smear of chalk next to her.

I tell her that I believe I have removed most of the weeds out of the flower beds when she says, "You were wrong about nightshade. Rabbits can eat it." She bends over the fence.

"Really?"

"Yes. Dogs can't eat it, but rabbits can."

"I didn't know."

Alma is rolling a stone in circles beneath her black shoe and then looks at me. "People can, too."

"I thought it was toxic to people," I say.

"It is if you're young or if you aren't careful. If you eat just enough of it, or make it into balms and oils, it can give you dreams that you're flying."

"Hallucinations?" I ask.

"No. Visions," she corrects me, even though I'm not certain of the difference. "Some people believe it can even let you leave your body."

I blink rapidly, surprised by this peculiar interest of hers. "Have you done it?"

"I won't say."

"How do you use it to give you dreams like that?"

"Come here," she says.

I take a breath and set down my hat. I smooth my hair and rise and go to her.

"Close your eyes and hold out your hands," she says. Her gaze rests upon me with all of its power. A bit of nervous laughter rises in my throat and try to swallow it. I shut my eyes tight.

"You can put it here," she says and touches my wrists and curls her fingers into my palms. I shiver. "And here." I flinch as she softly touches my eyelids. "And here," Alma says and I can hear the smile in her voice. She touches her fingers to my lips. I become weightless and imagine that I am hovering over a flame, that at any moment I could be set alight. I wordlessly bid her to kiss me, bid her dark beauty to lean forward and taste the place where her fingers are. When her coolness leaves my mouth and hand, I wait a little too long to open my eyes.

When I do, she's gone.

THAT EVENING WHEN I RETURN from walking Finnow, Martha calls me over before I take him inside. "Something went through my flowers and ruined them," she says and I look over the fence to see her cracked, overturned terracotta pots and her yard littered with shreds of marigolds, comfrey, and hollyhock.

"What do you think it was?" I ask.

“Was Finnow in my yard today?” Her blonde hair sweeps over her shoulders as she bends over to scoop up a wedge of pottery.

“No.”

“Maybe it was those rabbits,” she says.

“I don’t think rabbits could do that.”

“What about foxes?”

“I don’t see many around here,” I say.

Martha sighs, drops whatever she was picking up, and then asks, “Could I come over and talk?” Her change in tone surprises me, “I have some cola I could bring and there’s some ambrosia salad in the icebox, too. I’d invite you over, but Tess and my husband both came down with fevers this afternoon.”

“Thank you, but I have some spelling tests to go through,” I say.

She speaks in whisper now, “You know how I feel about that girl.”

“Alma?” I ask. She nods.

I don’t speak. Finnow pulls on the leash. I drop it and let him go up to the porch.

“You keep her around, Bonnie, and I know she’s your friend, but it’s just not right.”

“What do you mean?”

“It isn’t decent for two women to be like the way you are,” she says firmly.

I back away from her and the fence. “What are you implying?”

“My husband and I, we’ve noticed. The way you two are with each other, the way she touches you.” Her lips are an unnatural pink blur around her teeth. “But it’s always been plain with you. You’re not married, you live alone.”

“Excuse me?” My composure crumples in horror, and I turn from her to go inside.

“Wait, Bonnie, please wait,” Martha cries.

I keep my back to her.

“She watches you a lot.”

“I know. She takes walks every afternoon,” I say over my shoulder.

“No, when you’re gone at the school, she’ll come. Even at night,” Martha says.

“What?”

“She stands at your gate in the middle of the night, sometimes on your porch, and my husband has seen her in your garden, too. We’ve thought about calling someone. She’ll scare the baby, you know?”

Darkness eases in like a quiet tide.

“Good night, Martha,” I say and leave her while trying to rub off my goosebumps. Finnow follows me inside and as I close the door, I hear someone laughing.

I neglect my grading and go to my room with Finnow following silently. On the edge of my bed, I sit and stare at my reflection in the dim round window. Within, I appear suspended, as if caught in a hoop. My memory assaults me with every interaction, every intimacy, every electrifying touch and glance I have shared with Alma, a woman about whom I know nothing.

As the hours creep into midnight and onward, and the moon encircles the house, peering into each window like an eye, I lie fitfully in bed. Martha’s warnings sit as phantoms at the perimeter of the room. I pull myself upright and Finnow looks at me from the floor, his eyeshine meeting mine in the dark. I press the quilt against my hurrying heart and listen to all of the night sounds, pondering which might be Alma. Alma landing lightly on the roof, stepping upon the porch, hanging on the sliding door of the horse barn. More wind than woman, I picture her as a silhouette in the sky, occulting some of the stars.

THEN IT’S FRIDAY. I go to the school when the morning is deep blue and the streetlamps are still bright. In the cupboard in my classroom, I sift through the stacks of books until I uncover my set of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. I draw them out and pile them onto my desk. I expect to be elated upon seeing them out in the light, but I’m dampened with grief when recalling my colleagues’ comments. Throughout the day while I teach, the assemblage of books takes the form of some huddled creature at the edge of my vision, and every time I pass by it, I’m certain it bristles and sighs.

The day ends after a weary stretch of hours and as the students depart for the weekend, I follow them out. I see Jana bent over on the school’s front steps who tells me that there is a stone in her shoe. I help her sit and take off her slipper so the rock rolls out. I ask her if she really met a witch a while back. She says yes.

“What did she do?”

“She gave me cherries out of her pocket to eat,” she says as she lifts her bookbag back upon her little shoulders.

“She offered you cherries?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t eat them because they looked funny, but she told me they would give me magic dreams.”

I feel my coloring leave me. “Dreams?”

“Yes,” Jana says, and rises up when she sees her mother round the corner.

“What did she look like? Can you tell me?”

“She was very old,” she says, “like a skeleton.” I study her little face and wide eyes, trying to determine if she is lying to me, but she descends the steps before I can ask anything else of her. Uncertain if the sharp thing materializing in my stomach is anger or dread, I go quietly back into the school, careful not to rouse the attention of anyone in the halls. I collect my papers, my bag, and leave my classroom locked and dark, with the *Peter Rabbits* cowering in their corner.

At home, I decide to confront Alma when she arrives. I consider combing my hair and searching for some lipstick in my dressing table, but in my mounting unease, that seems ridiculous. I sit down in my lawn chair rigidly. No book. I take Finnow inside when my small watch reads a quarter till four. Wind streams over the house. The needle strikes four. Then four ten. Four fifteen. Four thirty.

Alma doesn't come.

I feel cheated, confused. I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, trying to blink away my irritation. The sun flickers like a red film across my eyelids. I sigh heavily and I wait for her, and wait, and wait.

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES AGAIN, it is dark and I hear the faint cry of crickets. The sun has gone completely and the moon is a blur behind thin clouds. I groan, stretch my arms and legs, and palm the sleep from my face.

“Do you know what nightshade is named for?”

I lurch upright. My breath catches in my throat. Alma is standing over me in the moonlight. “Christ, Alma. You scared me. When did you get here?”

Alma smiles, her lips a luminous fruit. “I’ve been here for a while.” She reaches over and smooths a lock of my hair with her fingers. “Do you know what its name means?”

“No, I don’t.”

“*Atropa* for the Fate who cuts the thread of life, and *belladonna*, which means ‘beautiful woman.’”

I shake my head. “Where were you? Why didn’t you come earlier?”

“Bonnie, did you ever watch your father kill the rabbits?” Alma presses, ignoring me. She lowers herself to her knees next to my chair.

“Are you all right?” I lean away from her.

“Did you ever watch?”

“No. I hated the sight of them.” I glance back at my front door.

"You never saw him skin them?"

"No."

"The color inside of them is incredible," she says.

"Alma, you're worrying me."

"You want to talk, don't you?"

"You've been watching me," I say, my voice a little too quiet.

"Invite me in and we can talk," she says.

"No."

"Are you a virgin?" She grins. In the dimness, she appears significantly older than she did just yesterday, the dark gathering into the hollows of her face. My stomach goes sour. I feel dirty being with her here, like the shadows on my skin are coats of soot.

"Are you?" I snap back defensively. I wonder if the black velvet choker around her neck keeps her head on her shoulders.

"I am whatever you think I am," she says. She reminds me of a nocturnal animal, her gleaming eyes shifting between green and yellow.

"I need to go inside." I begin to rise from my seat. Alma stops me with a firm hand on my leg. I sit back down.

"Your daddy can't stop you this time," she whispers. Suddenly I can't make myself move, like I'm bound to the chair with wire. Her fingers test the border of my skirt. "Kiss me."

"Alma."

She hushes me. My body prickles with electric fear. She lunges forward and sets her teeth hard around my lip. Martha's porch lamp flashes onto us and startles Alma. I twist out of the chair and her nails scratch my thigh. I race across the yard and throw myself up the porch as Alma's glare bores into my back. I turn the deadlock. A sob spills out of me.

Finnow is barking. I hear Alma creep to the door.

"Go away, Alma."

"Let me in," she says. "Please let me in."

"Alma stop," I say through aching lips.

The door shudders as Alma strikes it with her fist. Three sharp knocks. "Let me in."

"Leave me alone!" I cry. Then silence. I wait for her to hit the door again, but there is no sound. A growl boils in Finn timer's chest, his ears are flat against his skull. I go to the living room window that looks out into the front yard. I see my lawn chair on its side.

Alma has vanished.

I wait an hour and nothing comes. I check the locks on the doors and windows three times each. I feed Finnow, but can't manage to eat anything myself. I draw a bath, unpin my bra, and step out of my skirt. I try to shave, but give up when I nearly lick open my knee with the razor. I don't feel clean even after I drain the tub.

Finnow follows me to my room when I go to bed. The long nail marks Alma left on my thigh burn like a poison oak rash. I swear they glow under my quilt. My face and back gleam with an ill sweat.

I flicker in and out of sleep.

I dream of her.

She steps down from the air, her long feet and legs like the blades of scissors never quite touch the ground. She comes to me, places her fingers on my lips, paints me with the oil of her skin. Her nipples look like rose quartz, her eyes mirrors. She puts her mouth on mine and it turns long and dark like roots and slithers over my tongue and falls down my throat. Her teeth scrape past my lungs, and when she finds my wet, lush heart, she eats it.

She says it would be good in a game pie.

I WAKE TO CRYING, BUT IT'S JUST A RAIN DOVE.

I look at the window by my bed. The glass is painted with morning frost. Groaning, I sit up, look at my watch on the nightstand, and shrug into the coat I left hanging on my bedpost. I pull on my boots and creep downstairs.

Finnow meets me at the back door. We both slip out onto the porch and he dashes into the yard. He alerts me immediately to the rabbit warren under the juniper bush with a whine. The hole has been destroyed, clawed out in a frenzied spray of black soil by some animal. I don't see any sign of the rabbits. I grab a couple of baskets and a pair of gloves and begin to gather what I can from my garden. I save tomatoes, beets, dill, chives, lettuce, parsley, radishes, and more, but the ice has ruined or bruised most of it. I try to not think about Alma, but the marks on my leg burn and bid me to bear her in my mind.

I shudder when I hear the fence out front creak. I walk around the house, my fingers still laced in knots of carrots. No one is there, but the gate is wide open. I figure it's the wind, which has been picking up all morning.

I get the last of the cabbages and then collect the baskets. I pile what I salvaged from the garden onto the kitchen table. Soon, the sink is full of lettuce I'm rinsing and there's dirt all over the chairs and floor. But then I hear Finnow barking outside. I look through the window over

the sink and see him out by the horse barn. I hurry across the lawn and find him, tail tucked, staring out into the woods neighboring the property. He bolts into the first stand of trees.

“Finnow!” I run after him. The wind howls through the gaps in the birches and magnolias. The south bend of Sugar Creek is in these woods and I worry about Finnow falling in it and drowning. I keep calling after him and scanning the spaces between the trees, but I don’t see him. I walk a hundred feet, look around, walk a hundred more, and look around again. As I approach the sound of water, I come across dozens of stalks of nightshade and my blood freezes. The berries are round and diabolically black. I move among them cautiously so that their leaves and flowers don’t touch the skin of my legs.

At the banks of the creek is where I find abandoned clothes strewn across the shells, stones, and mud like corn husks: an organza blouse, a skirt, silk stockings, a bralette, and a thong. Fear turns like a pointed screw in my gut. I imagine Alma leaving her body like she left her clothes and walking as a shadow around the woods.

I am compelled to check the skirt pockets and I half expect its fibers to shock me when I touch it. I slip my hand into the first one and find a smoking pipe, a little black book with illegible writing, and nightshade berries. In my palm, they are just as unholy as they are beautiful, not unlike obsidian or deep-colored jewels. A mean instinct, the same one from when I was a girl, urges me to eat one, set it in my teeth, relish its strange flavor.

I should not, I say silently and return them to their pocket. *I must not*.

I look out into the woods. I don’t see anything, but I feel like something is seeing me. I hurriedly remove the contents of the second pocket: three of the rabbit kits stolen from the warren. A whimper climbs out of me and I drop them on the ground. They’re dead. Not broken, just gone.

I run.

Panic froths up and crowds my chest. I spin at every crow sound and every skip of gravel, charge through twigs and branches that pull at my hair, coat, and nightdress like long fingers. I don’t find Finnow on my way home.

Breathless, I resist the urge to flee inside to hurriedly collect some kindling for a fire. The gale has combed down the clouds and fog smothers everything. The wind stings my face and hands while I gather heather and birch twigs, enough to make three brooms. As I rise from stooping, something catches my eye behind the horse barn.

Strewn across the ground is what I presume to be the mother rabbit. In pieces. Red and purple parts knotted in the grass.

I nearly drop my kindling as I run to the porch, dizzy with nausea. The wind catches the screen door and all but tears it off its hinges. I put the branches in the fireplace and go through a roll of newsprint and a matchbox before the pile catches. Once the fire swells up enough, I retreat to the door and call out for Finnow again. I don't go into the yard, though. I don't want to see the rabbit again.

When night comes, I am undone. I cover all of the windows with their curtains and shutters. I think I catch a glimpse of Alma by the front gate, but I close the drapes before I look a second time. I turn at noises so many times that I'm sure my feet will fall off soon, or they're fastened on the wrong way now. Doorways have become menacing to me. They sit like mouths too perilous for me to reach through to flip on the lamps in the following rooms.

Finnow does not come home. I wait for him to come to the door, but he never does.

I dream of Alma. Her only dress is her hair floating at her collarbones, her eyes and palms shining with her flying ointment. She comes to my bedroom window, opens it with a smooth motion, and lures me out. We go to the woods and gather fistfuls of nightshade, and as we lie together, we gorge ourselves, eat every morsel of fruit until some sorcery raises us into the black sky. She embraces me, caresses my bare back until her fingers meet the groove of my spine. She opens it like a seam, wide enough that she can reach in with both hands to begin undressing me.

THE POWER IS OUT IN THE MORNING.

I look out the window and every stalk, every woody sprout, every leaf of grass, every bloom is bowing beneath a gale. I can hear it smacking the panes and raking and chewing the roof, the doors, and the sides of the house. Sitting on my bed, in my nightdress, I trace Alma's long scratches on my thigh with my finger. They prickle with heat. Before I descend the stairs, I ask my bathroom mirror, my ticking watch on its table, and any spirits at rest in the corners of my bedroom if Alma is inevitable, if her gravity is even something I can resist. When did I begin unraveling? When I became a woman? When I was a girl?

When I was born?

The fire on the hearth has died, no smoke or coals are left. I stagger to the back door to see if Finnow has come home and open it. The screen door is gone. The storm roars over the yard and pulls the clouds in shrouds and ribbons across the sky, washing everything in blue and yellow light. I lift my eyes to the shivering woods because something is there.

Alma.

She walks slowly over the ground, nude, unwavering by the wind. She drifts past the horse barn, battered and crooked, and past my upturned garden, now flattened and smeared. Her black hair gathers itself above her in the thrashing air. Her nipples are hard and the crescent of pubic hair crowning her legs looks like a second grin. She comes up the porch, quiet as a ghost, and says, "Hello Bonnie." She stops just before the open door, a few odd steps from being inside my house. "Let me in. Say that you'll let me in," she says.

I tell her no. Her pupils are enormous and dark, like two keyholes. They make her nail marks on me glow green from my knee to my groin.

"I know you want to. I know you want me to be with you," she says.

"Who are you?"

"You know me."

"No. I don't know you."

"You love me."

"No. I'm not like that," I say, grieving at how little conviction it carries.

"Like what?" She asks.

"Like this," I say. "Like you."

"You have to let me in."

"I don't understand." I look down at her bare feet. If she wanted to, she could cross the threshold and come inside.

"You have to say it three times."

"Please. Leave me alone," I say.

"It's going to be all right. You just have to let me in."

I shake my head and back away from her, retreating into the dim hole of my home.

"Let me in."

"Please. Don't do this."

"Let me in," she continues.

"I want to see the children again." I think of Thomas, Ruth, Nicholas. I think of Jana.

"No you don't."

"I want Finnow back."

"No you don't."

"Please stop."

She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, an upright shadow whose every curve and shape makes me ache to have her, and I hate her for it.

“Bonnie, if you let me in, you won’t have to worry ever again.”

“No.”

“I can give you dreams.”

“You’ve given me plenty,” I say bitterly.

“I know.” She smiles with bright teeth.

“I’m so tired of you.”

“Let me in, Bonnie.”

“I’m so tired.”

“Say that I can come in.”

I cannot stop shaking, and imagine that if I should shatter into smaller parts, I would at least be more difficult for her to collect. “If I do, will you leave me alone?”

“You won’t want me to when I come in.”

I fall hard to my knees upon the floor, crying and cursing her.

“Say it.”

“No, no, no.”

“Say it, Bonnie.” Her eyes glimmer wildly.

The words manifest in the deepest chambers of me like a spell. “Come in,” I say. It feels like treachery. I’m betraying myself with my own tongue.

“Say it again.” Even with the distance I have carved between us, her lips are a hex encircling my trembling rabbit heart.

“Come... come in,” I say again. The words are so quiet that they vanish into the scream of the wind.

“Say it again, now. One more time.”

I cannot rise to meet her. Her gaze pins me to the floor. I open my lips to speak and take another moment to behold her. She does not seem like a woman anymore. She seems like something greater. Something worse.

I know in the parts of me that she wants to eat that this is the end of me.

“Come in.”