

Apparition Lit

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A Word From the Editor

by Preme Mohamed

Im so grateful that Apparition Lit took the chance (hah!) on me guest editing this issue. The guidance, taste, and wisdom of the Apparition editorial team was a joy to experience and I hope that together, we have done justice to the voice and vision of this magazine.

Ask ten people what the word ‘chance’ means and you’ll get ten different answers. “Good,” we said in our pre-submission meeting. “That’s a *good* thing.” Chance means something different to every person; our individual definition probably hews most closely to the role we feel that chance has played in our lives. And we wanted to see individual definitions, see the full range of chance as opportunity, as calculated (or uncalculated!) risk-taking, as hope, randomness, coincidence, openings, odds.

As I looked at the stories that came in, I found myself thinking about their connections to the upheaval and turmoil of the last year. Randomness can feel comforting when terrible things happen that we feel we’ve done nothing to ‘deserve.’ “It could have happened to anyone” relieves our sense of guilt and responsibility. It can also feel oppressive when we feel that the terrible thing could not have been avoided no matter what we did.

Lotteries regularly change lives and ruin them. The gambles we make and take can feel weighted, fraught, unfair. Risks can pay off handsomely for us and our loved ones, or they can close doors forever. We take a chance on every decision we make (including the decision to not make a decision).

And speaking as someone raised by immigrant parents to avoid surprises, to seek out security by (frankly) trying to control every aspect of my surroundings, it felt breathtakingly freeing to move out of that atmosphere, and into one where I could take risks and try to create my own opportunities.

In 'Bride, Knife, Flaming Horse,' the one thing that some South Asian parents absolutely do *not* want to leave to chance is their children's matrimonial arrangements (and we know how that works out!). In 'Queen Minnie's Last Ride,' we watch breathlessly as a chance is taken to become free of an impossibly dangerous gun. Unasked-for, certainly. Undeserved? Maybe! In 'The Swamp Exchange,' we see how the randomness of family ("You don't choose who you're related to!") comes to a head when, on someone's big day, a choice has to be made that's been put off for years. Finally, in 'Watcher, Worker,' we hope and fret along with the characters in a tightly circumscribed world struggling to create their own chances out of a seemingly immovable structure of surveillance and informers.

To me, these stories embody the full range of chance that we hoped to see for this issue; they are fearless, unexpected, a little off the beaten path. I hope that readers will appreciate them as much as I, and the rest of the editorial team, did; and I hope that everyone will take away something different from the role played by chance in each story!



Premeemohamed is an Indo-Caribbean scientist and speculative fiction author based in Edmonton, Alberta. She is the author of novels 'Beneath the Rising' (2020) and 'A Broken Darkness' (2021), and novellas 'These Lifeless Things' (2021), 'And What Can We Offer You Tonight' (2021), and 'The Annual Migration of Clouds' (2021). Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of venues and she can be found on Twitter at @premeesaurus and on her website at www.premeemohamed.com.

Queen Minnie's Last Ride

by Aimee Ogden

Ruth stood in the shade of the farmhouse, drinking coffee and watching a hare pick its way between the rows of peas in the garden. It lifted its nose, tested the air. She could have fired from here, but she preferred to save the shot. God had granted her the gift of patience—though He'd been less than forthcoming with regards to the price.

Well, darlin'? asked the ghost in the spookgun at Ruth's hip. Death had never yet hammered flat the teasing lilt to her voice, nor sanded smooth its hoarseness. *You going to shoot, or not?*

Most of the fields stood empty since Abraham passed on, except for the back acres she rented out to the Holmbergs to graze their cattle. Ruth had sold all her oxen and the horses, save one. The farm was too much for one woman alone. The garden got her through the lean times, in between laundry outwork and mending, when it wasn't picked over by pests, at least.

The pearl grip caressed her palm. Holding the spookgun felt more like being held. If she had it in her hand too long or slept with it beside her bed, Ruth's thoughts and the ghost's blurred at the edges and ran together like mud. We'd rule this state together, you and I,

laughed Queen Minnie—a name the ghost had stolen, just like everything else she'd ever wanted, taken it all by guile and grace at first and sheer bloodthirsty force in the end. *'Sides, what you're playing at here won't work. You won't get rid of me so easy as that. And you don't want to. Do you?*

All the long days, the gun sang sweet songs of riding hard and living harder, of leaving behind a rainbow trail of bloodied bodies and golden coin. Ruth was a farmer's widow and washerwoman, never made for that kind of life. But the gun sometimes, the gun and its ghost, made her think she wanted to be. It was growing harder and harder to tell it—to tell *herself*—no.

Ruth rotated through the cylinder: six identical lead-gray eyes stared back at her from the cartridges. One of Abraham's more useful bequests: several boxes of unused ammunition. She crouched to set the tin cup of coffee soundlessly on the porch.

The gun's laugh was a gnat brushing her ear. *Don't miss now.*

Ruth sighted along the gun. The hare lifted its head, looking through Ruth, not at her. Its ears lifted, but the white flag of its tail stayed down. It was so close. A little closer and she could have leaned over to stroke its dun-brown pelt.

She didn't need a pet and she didn't need meat for the evening's stew. But she needed a life to replace the one the spookgun held: a small life, a quiet one, whose hunger would never reach for gold or glory. An equal trade, though hardly a fair one.

"Goodbye, Minnie," she whispered, and fired.

The hare bolted. It got a few yards before it figured out it was dead, and it screamed like a wounded woman for a spell after that. Its head went down first, back legs driving it hard into the ground. Its shoulder dug a divot from the dry soil as it jerked along. Then it went down hard among Ruth's potatoes and did not rise again.

Ruth's head rang clear as church bells with another woman's mirth. *Now what did I tell you?*

The gun caught when Ruth tried to slide it back into its holster. Only reluctantly did it resign itself to the shallow sleep of its sheath. She sat on the front step and steadied her hands on the tin cup.

A spook gun held on tight to the last soul it had killed. No soulless beast alive would take Queen Minnie's place. Ruth gulped coffee, her mouth sifting the coarse grounds at the bottom from the tepid liquid. All the more fool, for thinking she could dislodge such a fearsome woman so easily.



The rain is driving down, down, and Ruth still has the gun in her hand, the dying bandit queen's own spook gun. She stands over the bleeding woman with the faint urine smell of the gun smoke still clinging to her mouth. They'll sing ballads about her for this one, "The Death of Queen Minnie"; they'll paint Ruth's name across on the banners of the Wild West traveling shows, and embroider false bright colors to sew her story into the pages of the Chicago Tribune. They'll make a hero of her.

When you make a murderer of yourself, they have to make you either a hero or a villain.

Black blood bubbles up from the bandit queen's mouth and the storm washes it away just as fast: two forces of

nature, unevenly matched. She's trying to say something. The rain scrubs that away, too.

An open saddlebag has spilled at her side, silver ingots, more than Ruth could carry at one go, and Ruth's no delicate lady. Ruth's mouth fills with vomit.

She can't let go of the gun. Not even when the nickel goes colder than ice and the shine leaves the dead woman's eyes. Not even when borrowed laughter peals hysterically in the back of her mind.

Especially not then.



Ruth cleaned the house from top to bottom, more thoroughly than she had in years. She swept out all three rooms: the kitchen and the bedroom and the little room beside it that Abraham hadn't lived long enough to build a cradle for. She scrubbed the chamber pot and threw lime all about the summer-stagnant outhouse. A pair of the blacksmith's shirts, starched and hot-pressed, hung inside the door, and a dress belonging to his pretty daughter, who always had a smile for Ruth when she picked up or dropped off the laundry. The last of the mending she'd taken in for the Ludvigs sat in a basket just below. They'd paid in full, after all.

Now, now, cajoled Queen Minnie. Let's go for a ride. Let's go for a drink. Talk this all through. You ain't the type to do something hasty. Come on now, widow-woman, don't tell me you're not hungry for a second chance at this life. I can give you a chance like that. I can give you so much!

What did you do with a gun that stained your dreams scarlet? That promised you whatever you wanted, so long as you were willing to reach out and seize it and never let go though your fingers broke and your nails splintered?

You couldn't hide that gun somewhere and simply hope no one ever found it. It would always call out to be held—even if it liked Ruth's hand best of all. You couldn't trust it to the depths of a well or to the silent worms of the soil. Whoever found it next might be weaker than you. Whoever found it next might listen when the gun sang a siren song of riches and rampage; might bend their knee when the gun beckoned.

You couldn't turn it against someone worse than Minnie, well though they might deserve a pearl-and-nickel prison. Hard enough to say no to Minnie. The next one, the worse one, might find a tune that jerked harder at the puppet-strings in your heart.

And you couldn't turn it against someone better. That wouldn't be right. That wouldn't be just. The only people who deserved a spook's fate were those who couldn't be trusted with it.

In her room, Ruth changed into her second-finest dress: no sense in spoiling the best one. Her braid went up around her head, pinned in place; a crown scented with cheap lye-and-tallow soap. *Aren't you a pretty one, Minnie crooned, in the secret spaces of her skull. Aren't you just the finest thing?*

When she went outside under the noonday sun, the spook gun went with her. It went everywhere she did. She moved the rocking chair off the porch and down into the yard, and sat. Not a cloud muffled the sapphire sky; she squinted into the blazing sun.

You're more than this. You're better. A note of begging honed Minnie's voice to sharpness. Not so queenly now. I'd show you how to be the best of them. You're a young woman yet! We could set Missouri blazing, you and I. Anything you want, I'll take it. Make it yours.

Ruth set the revolver in her lap. It was heavy; she'd refilled the chamber that she'd emptied into the hare. The weight of all six bullets deepened the dent in her skirt, pressed against her inner thigh.

If you wouldn't turn the spook gun against someone better, and you couldn't turn it against someone worse... well. Who did that leave, but a widow with nothing to lose and a good deal to make up for?

The gun kissed her lips with a cool metal tang. It tasted like blood. Like it knew what it was for.

Angle it up, now. Toward your brain.

That was Minnie again, thoughts thick with—disgust. Dread? “Are you afraid to meet your Maker, Minnie?”

I made myself, Minnie snarled, smashing against the walls of Ruth's skull. Then she receded back down to an itch that Ruth could never quite scratch. If you're going to do this, make it quick and easy. Don't go drowning us slow in your own blood.

Ruth closed her eyes and inhaled the gun's sulfurous breath. Its muzzle struck the roof of her mouth, and she gagged. Though her arm trembled in protest, her finger snaked around the trigger. All she had to do now was pull—just pull—

She stopped fighting the spook gun's terrible weight. It fell softly into her lap, her finger still laced through the trigger guard.

Her eyes had stayed dry, as if they'd known all along she couldn't do it.

You done right, Ruth, the ghost whispered, an invisible breath on Ruth's neck. That's a girl.



There's only Minnie and Ruth in Ruth's little kitchen, but Minnie makes it feel like she's holding court. A stained bandana sits on her temples like a crown. She swaggers around the table where Ruth sits, eating Ruth's biscuits and butter, talking with her mouth full.

Ruth's hands are beneath the table. She squeezes them around a fistful of apron. She watches the bandit queen out of the corner of her eye—the same way a body studies the sun, wary of getting burned. You need to look up, then you look at the corona. Never full on.

Queen Minnie lifts the tin ladle from the pail and puts it straight to her lips. Water follows the deep, hard channels in her neck and soaks into the open collar of her shirt. She's dirty from the road and where the water goes it leaves behind streaks of mud.

Outside, the wind shifts. Water spills on the floor when Minnie's hand falls to her holster. The ladle does a lazy flip through the air and lands between her feet a moment later. For a moment, nothing moves. Minnie strokes the pearl grips with one thumb. Then the alarm flits from her face, not leaving its shadow to show where it's been.

In spite of Ruth's silence, or because of it, Minnie has hardly stopped talking since the moment she walked through the farmhouse door and told Ruth she needed water and good grazing for her horse. "I'll pay you handsomely," she'd said, with an evaluating smirk.

Ruth doesn't know yet what kind of currency will be extended, but Minnie has been declaiming the gilded secrets of the ghost in her gun. When she's done with him, she'll make herself another ghost, she says, one with a good eye for horseflesh this time maybe, or maybe somebody who knows how to crack those Wells Fargo safes. Minnie swings

her hips from side to side as she walks, so that Ruth can't miss the gun's pearly shine. She'll remember that later: how clean the gun is, worn by this woman made of sweat and earth and Lucifer's own pride.

"And this son of a bitch?" Minnie went on, patting her holster again, "killed the rest of his crew. That way, he thought, he was gonna be the only one who knew where the silver was hid. But I killed him." She sits on the table in front of Ruth, so that Ruth is forced to stare at the crook of her elbow. It's bare, sleeve rolled up nearly to her shoulder. Tendons twist and shift beneath the skin; nothing hidden there, flesh so close to the surface that Ruth breathes through her mouth so she can't convince herself she smells blood and lymph. "Can you imagine so much coin all in one place? Now what could you contrive to do with it all?"

With money in her pocket, Ruth could buy train fare back to Cincinnati, visit her mother and brothers. Sit at her mother's table and eat mutton on bread; soft brown bread, not the tart sourdough to which she's become accustomed. Wash dishes in the good big sink and carry the bright clean scent of Castile soap on her hands the rest of the day.

"Buy better soap," she says.

Queen Minnie throws back her head and laughs. The faint shimmer of a scar wraps her throat like a necklace: a rope burn, maybe, as if some fool thought a hang knot could hold this woman down. "You dream too small! Didn't anyone ever teach you how to do it right? Way he tells it, there's enough silver there to put a coin to every star in the sky." Her smile softens against the pull of whatever pain she's scoffed away. "I'd buy you rivers of soap, though. If that's what you wanted. And if you asked real pretty."

Ruth's hands have crept from her lap to the edge of the table. Red hands, cracked and rough with the work, soil tattooed deep into the cuticles. "He's probably lying to

you. About how much there is, or how to find it." A splinter jumps up to nip her, when she runs her fingers against the grain. "If he's as much of a son of a bitch as you say he was." And, she thinks, if he knows that Minnie plans to dispose of him in favor of a new haunt as soon as his value is paid out.

"Oh, no. Don't you know nothing?" Minnie's eyes are honey-brown, and they pour over Ruth just as sweet and slow. "Spooks don't lie, darlin', and that's God's honest truth."

Outside the house, the floorboard creaks. Minnie explodes in motion: drawing the spook gun in one hand, throwing her free arm in front of Ruth. She fires twice and, by the time Ruth realizes that there is a man in her house, there is a dead man in her house.

Minnie stalks over and stands astride him. Then she cants her head to the side—listening for more? No, she bends low with a paroxysm of laughter. "Oh, isn't he just mad," she gasps. "You think I'm going down to the first two-bit joe who heard I got something shiny in my back pocket? Revenge don't come so cheap as that."

She strides back to Ruth while the wood of the floor is still drinking down blood. Ruth's legs slide wider apart. When Queen Minnie straddles her in the kitchen chair, her mouth is open. Minnie's lips crush hers, and she breathes down the smell of the air after a long, hard rain.



Ruth couldn't sleep anymore without the gun close by: on the empty pillow opposite, or furrowing deep into the counterpane. But whenever she lay down with it, it whispered of things other than sleep.

It rattled the bars of her sleepless thoughts until she could stand it no more. She twisted her fingers around a knot of skirt and ground it against her groin. Her hips rose up to meet her, heels pressing the mattress's thin

tick all the way down to the ropes beneath. When she imagined Minnie's touch, she imagined it this way, hard and fast and desperate. Always afraid the moment would go slack at the report of a stranger's gun. Or the call of the road, of her ghost and his silver, throwing ash on the fire in Minnie's eyes.

Abraham had reached for her regular as clockwork, dutiful, diligent. He'd never known how to touch her the way she wanted; though his body had asked sometimes, hers had never known just how to answer, or if it should. He'd promised to take care of her always, until the lockjaw had taken care of him.

Minnie had handled Ruth like she handled the spook gun: grabbing for her at the sudden break of a breathless moment, caressing pale shoulders and hips like she caressed the pearl handle. Parting her with the stroke of a thumb as easy as nudging the hammer from single-action to double.

Ruth had loved a good man and a bad woman and it was hard, from here, to see the difference. Either way, she was left to sleep alone.

Come on, crooned the gun, from the table beside the bed. In the fermenting mix of memory and desire, the gun became both lover and beloved, it was Minnie and it was Ruth too, no walls left between subject and object, pursued and pursuer. *Come, my darlin'. I want you to sing for me again, like you used to do ...*

The moment dried up. Ruth sat up on the bed, alone, with cooling sweat prickling the back of her nightdress. The spook gun haunted all her memories of Minnie. How could it not, forever by her side, forever bearing up the weight of her restless searching hand? Forever ready to shrill its retort to those who would have parted it from its owner—

—Minnie explodes in motion: drawing the spook gun in one hand—

Ruth closed her eyes, fixing the image against the darkness beneath her lashes. “It’s not the gun,” she said, and Minnie’s silence rings church-bell-clear in her head. Minnie had shot that man dead without dislodging the soul she’d already trapped. “It’s not just the gun.”

The heavy case shoved under the bed dug deep grooves into the planks when she pulled it clear. Inside, fingers of tarnished silver gleamed weakly, too shy now to boast of their worth.



She’s awake without knowing why, eyes slicing through the shadows for a scrap of light to see by. She breathes, and there’s a thousand pounds of dark on her chest to smother her. The bed is empty; she’s alone. For a moment’s stillness, she listens for the familiar creak of a step on the porch boards.

Nothing.

Barnacles of dried sleep still cling to her eyes, her thoughts too. Widow woman, some of the men in town are forever calling after her, you still sleeping alone? Slow down, missus, I’d keep your bed warm—sweat in their beards, grabbing their crotches, laughing at her, laughing. She rolls from the bed, legs a-tangle in the bedclothes. Crushes a posy of Wild Sweet William laid gentle on the pillow—but she won’t know that till the red hateful morning comes. The hard curve of the spook gun rises to meet her hand against the counterpane. She seizes it, instead of the rifle in the corner. Not a thought as to its provenance. Checks the chambers. Only one bullet, bright-shining silver, too new

for tarnish. She doesn’t stop to question the precious metal; one bullets better than none.

She trips on a saddlebag without seeing it for what it is. The kitchen door is open, someone’s out in the yard. A shaft of moonlight marks him out like God’s own avenging angel. “Stop!” Ruth cries. The gun lifts, points. Her finger kisses the trigger.

In the broken second between the gun’s thunder and its lightning strike, she recognizes Minnie’s face beneath the broad-brimmed hat. A strange man is laughing, too close against her ear. She ignores him, starts running. The gun slaps her thigh with each step.

The moon slides behind the clouds, and the man’s taunts fade.



They passed a companionable month together, Ruth and Minnie, speaking little, saying goodbye in deep pools of silence rather than a shallow sprinkle of words. Then, on a sunny Tuesday, as Ruth drove the wagon into town to swap out clean laundry for soiled and mended shirts for torn, the blacksmith hailed her with a shout.

He had the package he’d sent out for her. The box was bigger than she’d expected, its paper wrapping stamped with the name of a silversmith in St. Louis. She tore it open in the soot-and-sweat heat of the forge, and found two dozen bullets—each engraved on the back of the case with the silversmith’s sign, too.

Shoot him, suggested the gun cheerfully, and Ruth’s hand went to her heavy apron pocket. It wasn’t loaded, thank God, but that didn’t stop Minnie. *Cheaper than paying him. Don’t have to shoot to kill if that puts a crimp in your belly. Just take the money in his apron and a couple*

of good steel core knives and maybe a kiss from that pretty daughter of his.

"I don't need so much as all that," she said, for Minnie and the blacksmith alike, though her eyes did cast around for a glimpse of that pretty daughter. She thanked the smith kindly all the same and passed him an ingot for his trouble.

Back at the farm, she sat down on the porch. One silver bullet slipped neatly into its chamber, and she rested the gun in her lap. One silver bullet, to silence the silver laughter in her head. "I thought," she said, "that spooks didn't lie."

Half a truth ain't the same as a whole lie.

"Isn't it though?" It was a good cloudless day, fine bright light she could have been sewing by. Staring out into the sun-beaten yard raised tears in her eyes. "Isn't it?"

You don't really want me to go.

"Now there's another half-truth," Ruth said, and half-smiled to match it. "But you've got to. Judgment Day comes for all of us, sooner or later."

Ha. You're a praying woman, aren't you? You pray for me there's no hanging-trees in Heaven, now.

The pearl and nickel warmed under Ruth's hand and the insistent press of the sun. Silence would serve her best now, but she was bread on the rise, half-formed, and the leavening breathed out a question. "Why are you so keen to stay in there?"

Why? Minnie scoffed. You forget what a hard life you got here? When you pick me up, I can count the cracks in your fingers. When you lay down to sleep, I feel every crick of your back. Your footsteps echo in that empty old house, and it's not the way it should have been. The dam of righteous

rage cracked, and sorrow flooded through. We should've been two queens together: diamonds and hearts. We still could be, Ruth, if you keep me close and point me true. You could take whatever you wanted as easy as setting eyes on it.

"I took you." Ruth's eyes tracked a doe, picking its way along the edge of the field. She sighted along the back of the revolver. The doe moved slowly, drawing closer all the while. "Didn't need a gun for that."

Silence. Then: *no. I suppose you didn't, at that. A laugh, silver-bright. You could've had more though. Wouldn't you just look a picture in an honest-to-God crown?*

The image blossomed in Ruth's eyes, but there was no pull to it, no barbs to catch the soft flesh of her desire. She breathed out slowly through her mouth. "Goodbye, Minnie."

Goodbye, darlin'. Goodbye.

When the doe stopped kicking, the spook gun went cold in Ruth's hand. After that, it stayed silent.

She buried the doe between Abraham and Minnie, without skinning or dressing it first—it didn't seem right. The gun, too, beneath the velvet of its flank. The shovel slid without complaint into the soft spring soil; the work went fast, though Ruth found herself looking over her shoulder often.

After, she hauled water for a bath. She didn't lay long in the tin tub, not with the cold water sucking bloodlessly at her skin. She dressed as quickly as she could, feeling invisible eyes on her naked flesh. In bed she lay with dry alert eyes, listening. For the scuff of a foot in the dirt. For a creak of the porch's floorboards. A borrowed alertness. She could live with that, the rest of her days. She'd have to.

In the morning, she ate biscuits with butter, and nestled the remainder of the batch in a good big basket with a jar of preserves. She put on her best dress, the yellow calico with the drop sleeves, and put the laundry and mending and the basket in the wagon. She had clean shirts for the gentleman who ran the bank. That wasn't so far, after all, from the shop where the blacksmith worked, and where his pretty, smiling daughter lived, and a pair of fine strapping sons too. Maybe she had dreamed too small for too long. There was, after all, room for a whole world of dreams whose scope fell somewhere between glorious gunfights and good soap.

Ruth checked her reflection in the shine of the preserves jar and sent up a brief prayer for the sin of vanity. God knew she had paid dearly enough for the gift of patience. She was done waiting now.



Aimee Ogden is a former science teacher and software tester; now she writes stories about sad astronauts and angry princesses. Her other work has appeared in magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Analog*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and her novellas “Sun-Daughters, Sea-Daughters” and “Local Star” debuted in 2021 from *Tor.com* and *Interstellar Flight Press* respectively. She also co-edits the magazine *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, a venue for fun and optimistic speculative fiction.

Fifteen Steps

by Marisca Pichette

1. There is a path.
2. There are many paths. Pick one.
3. Or pick none. Follow the line of trees that suits you best. Forge out into an empty field (only it's not empty; it's filled with wildflowers and thorns). If you trip, don't worry. Blood always has a purpose.
4. When you get to the top of the hill, pause. If you look behind you, you'll see that there are footprints and deep trenches from wheels of all kinds. If you look in front of you, you'll see fruit trees. The fruit is for you to share with those who came before you, and those who will come after. You can leave a plum here, and your future self will pick it and enjoy it and thank you. Always thank your past.
5. Continue down the hill, and come to a valley. Here, you feel alone. Here, you think perhaps you want something more, so you make your way to the road.

6. There is another road beside this one, of course, if you choose to take it.

There is always another road.

7. If you cross the road instead of taking it, you will find train tracks. Follow them, and see—

8. If you take the other road, you go back to where you came from. This does not have to be a bad thing. You may encounter your earlier self along the way.

9. If you are sick of directions, you do not have to walk. You can stay exactly where you are.

Some of us derive pleasure from watching the world go past.

Some of us make tea and sit by the fire.

Some of us sit on the porch and watch the rain.

10. Some of us walk in the rain.

11. Some of us go outside on a winter's night, and listen to the stillness.

12. If you found this guide on the road, give it to the person behind you. They may need it.

13. If you bought this guide yesterday, there may have been changes. Don't be afraid to ask someone coming down the hill if theirs is the same. Compare them for differences.

Remember: the newer version is not necessarily better.

14. When you are finished, please keep this guide. Give it to your friend. Put it in a book.

Cut it up and scatter the steps to the wind.

15. If you are lost, keep going. Everything you may find is ahead.



Marisca Pichette is a queer author of speculative fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She earned her BA from Mount Holyoke College and MFA from Stonecoast. Her work has appeared in PseudoPod, Daily Science Fiction, Room, and Voyage, among others. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

Bride, Knife, Flaming Horse

by M. L. Krishnan

To Kalavati, it was well known that if one reached marriageable age, parents and aunties and cousins thrice-removed would clump themselves into anthills of worry. Missiles of relationship managers and matrimonial websites would then be launched to nab a match. It would be a process of adjustments—of settling and tucking and hiding. Of second-rate suitors with second-rate mustaches and identical beige shirts. That was what Kala had always believed, had always known to be proper and true as an oft-repeated lie.

Until she met the man that was a ghou, but also a knife. Until she met the woman that was a deity, but also a mare.



Kala had recently turned twenty-six and, just like that, it was time for her to be married.

At least, her parents seemed to think so. In their household, mornings were filled with her father's grunts that smeared the walls with the embers of

his dissatisfaction, with her mother's unceasing intonations that gusted through every room, tugging at her ears.

“Don't go out into the sun when it knocks you over the head Kala, your forehead is one color, your upper arms are another, your neck is a third color, please make a pigmentation appointment, did you go to the fetus goddess temple and circumambulate it with your entire body, you didn't, of course not, she'll get angry so take lemons and bael leaves next time, please when you go throw spare change on the ground for the beggars in front of the temple, avoid the one on the left, he is a rogue who smokes beedis, can you believe him, can you believe, did you thread your eyebrows, have you been brushing your tongue for optimal candidiasis defense, stop eating Tirunelveli halwa, it will make your hips spongy, stop singing those cheap film songs, it makes you look like a porriki, like those boys at Elliots beach who smile with all their teeth but not their eyes and whistle from the sides of their mouths at anything, people will talk, they always talk, Lalitha aunty did, stop wearing your father's shirts, stop driving his Pulsar motorbike, are you still stealing rum from his cabinet, are you drinking hooch or varnish, what will happen to your skin and liver, I smell ganja on your clothes, how can you be a software technician, are you working or roaming the streets, think about your father who wears valplast dentures and has hypertension, let us do our duty, let us, then you can be a loose girl with your spouse in Muscat or Dallas or Kuala Lumpur or even Chennai right here, but not with us, okay, okay leave all that, please come home at 6.00 p.m. at least, please, please, please.”

And one morning, with drapes of exhaustion hanging from her eyelids, Kala said to her mother, “fine amma, okay fine.”

Filled with worry-laced happiness lest she change her mind, Kala’s parents quickly uploaded a profile on a matrimonial website.

Hello. We are creating this profile on behalf of our one-and-only daughter. She is 5’1” of curvy build. Wheatish. She holds a B. Tech from a prestigious college and also an MBA. She is interested in rain, Carnatic music, poems and many cuisines. She believes in family members and ethical values. She is a gem of a girl, our Kalavati.

They waited with technicolor aspirations for a bridegroom with a midsize car, a 100-cc scooter, or even an oxcart drawn by morose bullocks or goats. Almost immediately, a knot of potential suitors flung themselves at Kala’s profile.

- *Hai*
- *How r u*
- *I am 30 years of age and muscular build, government office employee*
- *I like lemon rice, what abt u?*
- *I have elderly mother in elderly house, u take care of her, I take care of u*
- *I like wheatish girls only, fair girls are too arrogant and adamant*

Finally, after a profusion of similar messages that crumbled into a series of phone, credit-card and hotel-room numbers, her parents almost resigned themselves to their daughter’s cheerful unmarriageable status until this message arrived.

Time: 15:30:33 IST

Subject: Response to Kalavati’s Matrimonial Biodata

Respected Sir and/or Madam,

I would love to meet and get to know your daughter better, with your esteemed permission, of course. Please let me know what date and time works for you, if you are still interested.

They stared agape at the computer screen for what seemed like a week, but it was only about thirty seconds or so.

On a Saturday, the Kaateri visited their home. He arrived as a charcoal-grey blotch that coalesced into a sunken-eyed and sunken-cheeked man, only the merest suggestion of flesh and skin with a stubbly outline around it.

He surprised Kala with deft politeness, as he carefully sidestepped her mother’s well-intentioned offers of filter coffee and thattai, with jokes that made everyone laugh and blush in unison. He countered her parents’ questions with humble, yet thoughtful responses that turned her father’s grunts more rhythmically sonorous and joyful as the evening wore on.

But above all, when she managed to catch a glimpse of his knife-teeth that seemed to hold promises of a disquieting violence, Kala could feel a thrill that prickled at her scalp and cascaded down her back, her arms, the soles of her feet. She could not take her eyes off him. She wanted to feel the metal of his mouth on the swell of her calves, on the soft concave of her inner-elbows. She wanted to press into the blade of him again and again and again—

“I’d like to speak to Kala alone aunty, if that’s okay.” His gaze, steadily holding, centering the form of her.

“Of course,” her mother trilled.

Kala reached for him, and his wrist slipped into the space between her thumb and forefinger.

Somehow this felt like an omen.

As they stepped—wrist in fingers—across the living room, across the kitchen that was actually a corridor, across the alcove holding the washing machine that shuddered with gusto, he wrapped himself around the swell of her, until her breath constricted and sputtered, until his eyes dilated.

She kissed him then, unexpectedly. His razorblade canines scored her lips, the flesh under her nose.

They let go of each other as quickly as they had crumpled into one another. As he made a show of nonchalantly walking back into the living room—his voice fizzing and spilling over her parents, Kala slumped against the washing machine in an unsteady heap. The rust and iron-tang of blood filled her mouth.

Somehow it tasted like an indulgence.

After he left, Kala tumbled headlong into the murky recesses of the internet. She pushed stale Milk Bikis’ and lukewarm tea into her throat at even intervals for sustenance. She learned that, contrary to popular opinion, Kaateris were not irritable flesh-eating seaside goddesses or B-Grade movie plots from a miasma of TV producers, cocaine, arrack, Chicken 65 and statuesque Eastern European models whose bodies were mostly made up of varicose-veined thighs. From the scraps of information that she could piece together, Kala understood that Kaateris preferred roads with sharp turns. Their feeding schedules were agonizingly

complex; involving a lunar eclipse, two or more visible planets in the sky, an errant asteroid or a coconut husk resembling an asteroid in a pinch, custard-apples, and several fresh bodies.

Kala pictured herself fitting into the hairpin-bend of him.

Finding newly dead corpses for the Kaateri to feed on wouldn’t necessarily be a challenge, she surmised. Especially if he lived on the busy, helical intersection—as he had loftily claimed in his profile—that was a constant scream across newspaper headlines about wayward trucks and lorries pulping people on pavements. Besides, Kala was not entirely concerned about her survivability in extreme circumstances. Once, she had barricaded herself in her own (secret) sublet for two weeks, subsisting only on sour curd rice and hooch to meet a project deadline. Her mouth stank with the aftertaste of corrugated tin and her stomach had felt distended, but she had been fine otherwise. But she was her mother’s daughter above all else, so she decided to meet the Kaateri for lunch instead.

Suddenly, a shout from the kitchen. There was another suitor.

Time: 18:45:36 IST

Subject: Some Doubts

*To Whomsoever It May Concern or Kalavati’s Parents,
I hope this finds you well. I am intrigued by your daughter’s passions. Is she studying to be a meteorologist or a chef? Please do not answer this question through email, I would like to find out in-person.*

On a Tuesday, the Muniandi appeared.

She couldn't quite fit through the doorway of Kala's house, so she gamely made herself comfortable in their sometimes-courtyard that was a rainwater harvesting pit and also a weedy cricket strip for the boisterous kids in their colony. What it was on any given day was entirely reliant on the weather.

Kala found her breathtaking.

She watched the Muniandi as she delicately ate rusks from her mother's outstretched palms, as she attentively answered her parents' questions with soft, acquiescing neighs that were measured and serious.

During their time alone, the flaming plumes of the Muniandi's mane and tail singed the air around them. Her beauty was that of the sun at its zenith; relentlessly harsh and impossible to perceive directly. Kala's head started to balloon into a helium-edged lightheadedness. Whether from the flames, from the overwhelming consideration of the Muniandi, or from the disarray of her own feelings, she could not say.

The Muniandi pushed her muzzle against Kala's neck, her breath condensing on her shoulders. She took Kala's hair between her teeth and gnawed on it with careful deliberation. Kala didn't seem to notice that her head was mildly on fire.

At that very moment, it dawned on her that she could inhabit this scaffolding of flame and woman and equine grace with considerable ease.



Lunch with the Kaateri was a 3:30 a.m. jaunt to the morgue. Kala's mother pressed a bag of custard-apples into her hands and sent her off with fears folded into reassurances folded into entreaties folded into parental

dreams about monetary responsibilities and squalling grandchildren.

The Kaateri tried to kiss her when she arrived, but he blushed in and out of focus, his corporeality an elusive aspiration at best. He struggled to hold his edges together. Kala tried to grab his wrist, but it dispersed into vapor between her fingers.

Concern foamed up her throat. "Saapadalaama? Why don't we eat?"

"But there's nothing for you here," the Kaateri mumbled apologetically.

Kala gestured at her mother's bag. "Right. I don't eat lunch around three in the morning, but I brought fruit."

As the Kaateri fed on a freshly minted corpse that might have been an old woman, Kala arranged herself in a broken wheelchair and chewed on a lumpy segment of the custard-apple. A restful silence unraveled between them.

He didn't seem so disconcertingly charming anymore. She watched him masticate on each of the woman's knuckles until his outline ultimately emerged into focus.

Mid meal, the Kaateri paused and stood upright. "Please. Don't look at me."

"Chee, don't be ridiculous." Kala stepped forward and seized his elbow. It felt solid in her hand. She tugged the Kaateri towards her for a kiss, but licked the keen edge of his teeth instead. She tasted phenyle, strawberry jam, raw eggs, and an acrid, sulfuric hint of isolation. It might have been the old woman, but Kala was mostly sure that it was him.

“Come. I want to show you something.” The Kaateri took her by the wrist past a sweaty bank of tiered freezers housing the newly dead—the unnamed, the unclaimed, the unwanted, and the untethered—drowsing in their cooling racks, past a paint-flaked sign in Tamil that read “அமரர் அறை” or the “Immortal Room”, past an embalming lab that reeked of cavity fluid and formaldehyde, and up a winding staircase that opened out to a verandah packed with the appendages of forgotten stretchers.

“This is what I wanted you to see.” He wrapped his arms around Kala’s waist as he nudged her towards the railing. “Look.”

Kala was overwhelmed by the expanse of the Egmore Railway Station looming before her, its colonnades and domes awash in sheets of light that flowed out of its passageways in greens and purples and golds. She felt giddy somehow, unspooling into the warm iron of the railing, into the station’s many-hued radiance, into the Kaateri’s new heft, into the murk of the night and this moment in time that felt almost full.

“Have you been here long?” she finally asked.

“Long enough.” He placed his chin on her shoulder. “When I first got here, Egmore was called Ezhumbur, you know.”

“Seems like Ezhumbur’s consonants were a bit too slippery for our British dorais.”

The Kaateri coughed up a laugh in response, his mirth softening into the curve of Kala’s neck. “You should have seen them.”

“Did you have a name back then? You don’t have to say anything if you don’t—”

“Let me think.” He kissed her earlobe gently, as if to reassure her. Kala could scarcely hear herself breathe.

“I used to be called Ramesh. Maybe.”

“That’s a fine name. But aren’t you sure?”

“Well, I don’t remember if Ramesh was some fellow I once ate, or you know, who I was before I—before I turned into this.”

Kala twisted around and held his face between her hands until the craters of his eyes were level with hers. “Okay then, it’s decided. I’m going to call you Once-Ramesh.”

He started to protest, but she hushed him with her finger.

“See, it’s simple. Maybe you were Ramesh, or maybe you ate a Ramesh or many Rameshes. Either way, there’s a Ramesh somewhere that’s a part of you. You wouldn’t mention that name otherwise, I’m certain.”

Kala’s earnest forcefulness untied a faint skein of hope that ran along the fractured arcs of his deaths and lives and all the thresholds in between, eddying around them.

“Seri. Once-Ramesh it is,” he agreed, smiling. The light from the station caught against his billhook incisors, rippling across its carbon-steel edges in a deluge of color.



At exactly 11:55 a.m., Kala arrived at the Connemara Public Library for lunch. As part of an elaborate building complex in the Indo-Saracenic style with an accumulation of bulbous domes, voussoirs in contrasting colors, and horseshoe arches marking

corridors at odd recesses, it was at once deeply elegant and deeply mystifying.

When not a mare, the Muniandi appeared to be an archivist in her thirties who only donned crisp dress shirts under loosely draped silk-organza sarees in muted colors. She wore no makeup or jewelry, save a single nath that ringed her left nostril in a crescent-moon of saltwater pearls.

When she spoke, her voice unfurled in a slow, meditative husk. The effect she had on Kala was no less startling than her equine self.

“Do you—do you want to take a walk? Maybe I could show you my archival work on Kaaval Deivams later,” the Muniandi offered, after they had gorged themselves on lacy idiyappams, root-vegetable stew, and conversations about metrological phenomena.

“Sure, yeah, I would love to.”

Kala’s stomach knotted into braids of anticipation for something, for nothing at all.

Their fingers strung together as they walked around a pond cloaked in an algal scrim of colloidal green. A mottled eel broke the water’s surface in quick, slippery bursts.

At the far edge of the pond, a fanged goddess sheathed in silks and garlands of plumeria buds sat in a cement grotto. To her right, a terracotta horse in lapis hues stood calmly as sphagnum moss whorled across its back in yellowed clumps. Banded geckos slipped through the horse’s ears and darted down the length of its hind legs.

They paused to remove their sandals before walking up to the goddess. Kala couldn’t help but observe that the heavy-lidded eyes of the deity and her horse

were identical—bulging, ferocious, and unspeakably beautiful. She gently squeezed the Muniandi’s hand.

The Muniandi stood entranced, her face an opaque monolith.

As Kala waited by her side in an agreeable silence, she was drawn into a memory of spending summers as a child in her grandparents’ house at the mouth of a thinning forest. Every day, she would cross a latticework of paddy fields to the village shrine with her mother, sunlight pinpricking their skin in bright globules of sweat. When the afternoons sunk under the damp balminess of evenings, they would fold themselves within a magenta-hued grove of frangipani trees surrounding the temple. They would then leave pods of overripe jackfruit as an offering for the beings that sentineled the area in a bas-relief of stone and shadow. Kala’s mother would regale her with stories—of the scorpion-garlanded goddess that sat askance inside the sanctum-sanctorum, of each of the temple guardians in turn with their vigilant eyes and vigilant mounts of horse, dog, and elephant.

Be nice, and they’ll take care of you too, her mother had said.

But amma, who should I be nice to?

Her mother had explained that while there were hierarchies, it didn’t quite matter in the grand scheme of things, because the deities and their steeds and the people and their teeming abodes were wholly entwined in a mutual yoke of need.

So, all of them. Kala’s tiny face had puckered in a frown, this Enterprise of Niceness already irritating her six-year-old self.

Yes, all of them, her mother had laughed. But, don't disturb the guardians when they walk along their boundaries. They take their duties very seriously.

A few minutes passed. Kala hauled herself into the present and circled the Muniandi's waist with her arm, keeping her close. "It must have been tough to cover so much ground on foot. Given how huge Chennai is."

The Muniandi looked thoughtful. "What would actually be an edge of this city? The sea? Then I'd be swimming, no."

"So many lives lived and that's all you've got by way of a joke. Seri ma, podhum." Kala poked her rib, playfully.

The Muniandi gasped and made a move to jab her in mock-retaliation, but draped her arm around Kala instead, resting her head on her shoulder.

Neither of them wanted to extricate themselves from the other.

It slowly occurred to Kala that she could just exist in this teaspoonful of time, in the sweep of this deity that had found her through a dubious matrimonial website and a timely happenstance, and it would all be okay because the Muniandi was here, she really was, and that was enough, that was more than enough.

"Ellaiamma," the Muniandi suddenly whispered, almost inaudibly.

Kala pressed her lips into her hair. "Can I call you that?"

"Ellai is fine, for the time being." The Muniandi's face twisted upwards into a smile. "But that name is only for your ears, for your mouth."

"Oh? Careful, or I'll start addressing you as 'sanctified mother' then."

Kala lurched and arced her body forward, bringing her hands together in an exaggerated curtsy. "Thaaye!"

"Stop that." A peal of laughter escaped the Muniandi, and she collapsed on the ground to catch her breath, yanking Kala down with her.

The laughter that continued to ring across the pond soon surged into fevered kisses, into promises that pooled in the hollows of their necks. Flames licked at Kala's throat. They whistled through her mouth and dissipated into her stomach with a resolute hiss.



With the emergence of her two suitors, Kala's relationship with her parents kneaded itself into a calming disinterest. But on this morning, she sought out her mother over milky coffee and burnt triangles of toast.

"Amma, I like them."

Her mother scanned her daughter over the tabloid she was pretending to read.

"What does that mean?"

Kala added a tablespoon of decoction to her coffee to undercut its chalkiness. She took a sip and realized that it tasted worse than before.

"I like them both. Equally, I think."

"Enna di, how is that possible? Pick the one you like more." Apprehension seamed into her mother's voice.

Kala took another sip of her foul-tasting drink. "That is the problem. I don't."

“Seri. Pick the one you find less boring.”

“Less boring?”

“Yes, less boring! Kala, you are not a trading goods outpost, where you are the sum value of items and services weighed against each other.”

“Amma, I—”

“Listen to me. You are my daughter, *mine*, with choices and mistakes that are yours alone, that will always be *only* yours. Now think carefully. How do you really feel?”

Her mother’s words thudded against her eardrums, bouncing off the dining table. Kala’s coffee sat untouched. At long last, something dislodged in her chest.



Kala’s apartment complex was overrun with a bougainvillea vine that violently spewed papery-white blossoms from the cracks in its façade. Crammed between a TV-antenna’s limb and a water tank, her (secret) sublet was a detached room on the terrace of the building. On this afternoon, a bulbul with its black crest and black eyes peered at her from under a clay roof-tile.

“What do you want? I’m trying to clean, you know.”

She shooed away the bird and resumed wading through the thickets of clutter that swelled into larger and still larger piles. Heaps of newspapers, Tamil weeklies and office folders coiled around a peeling rexine sofa that sat in the middle of the sublet, taking up too much space. From the floor, discarded components of PC builds glowered accusingly at her.

“I can help.”

Kala spun around and dropped a stack of numbered files, igniting a cloud of dust. “You’re already here! Hah, we’re well past that point, Once-Ramesh.”

She plopped onto a mound of dishtowels and gestured for him to do the same. The Kaateri folded himself between Kala’s knees instead, laying his head on her thigh. Smoke-grey plumes roiled under the gauze of his skin.

“You don’t have to clean for me.”

Kala’s fingers stiffened in his hair. “Actually, I—”

“Enna ithu, what’s all this?”

At the entrance to the terrace, the Muniandi stood immobile. Draped in a saree tinted with the opalescent pinks of a conch shell, she glimmered against the crests of sunlight that rolled down her shoulders.

“If you were going to have company, perhaps I should come at a later time.” The Muniandi’s face was wiped clean of all emotion; a measured, precise blankness.

As distractingly lovely as the Muniandi’s appearance was, Kala was still seized by a panic, the ground heaving underfoot. Wobbling on the brink of collapse, her afternoon threatened to implode and knot itself into a gnarled snare that she did not have the patience or the ability to disentangle. In any case, Kala greatly preferred a battering-ram approach to solutions, as her mother always liked to point out. She had to wrench back control somehow.

“Great, everyone’s here! Let’s sit inside, no? It’s so hot.”

The Kaateri had already vaporized into a thin haze, emerging discreetly within the sublet. He pretended to examine a broken CPU tower while Kala urged the Muniandi towards the sofa. She shoved the Kaateri into

the sofa as well, sitting cross-legged on the floor before them.

Apropos of nothing, the Muniandi threw a sidelong glance at the Kaateri.

“You look fine.”

“Thanks. You look different, as always. But I see you.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Feeling disoriented, Kala pushed the pads of her fingers into her temples. “I’m sorry, but do the both of you know each other?”

“Somewhat. I was called to—to hunt him. There’s a small town on the edge of Dindigul taluk that was having a bit of trouble.”

The Kaateri shifted in his seat. “A bit of trouble, sure. That’s exactly it.”

Back then, the Muniandi’s skin was a glaucous blue, her sickle flashing copper in the late evening sun. He had flung himself at her feet and begged clemency for all the killings—as he was but freshly birthed, a laughable idiot, a starving ghoul. She sat stock-still through his histrionics, the ritual cymbals of the townsfolk occasionally interrupting his fervor with a resounding boom.

Finally, she had spoken, uttering only a single word.

Leave.

He did not wait for her to speak again.

“She should have slain me, all those years ago. I deserved it,” the Kaateri admitted.

“You were so young and screaming so energetically. See, you’ve grown now, done good for yourself.” The

Muniandi reached over and patted his arm. The edge of his shirt-sleeve crisped under the scorch of her fingers.

The Kaateri had heeded her words and never returned, not once.

She wanted to tell him about the resiliency and the fear and the heart, that giant pounding heart of the townsfolk, of how they now revered an entirely new being that metastasized from that event, of a demigoddess with collyrium-ringed eyes who was both a part of her and a part of him, of how they planted a loop of moringa trees around this fledgling deity to protect her, of how they addressed her as Pidari amma, the fierce specter who was also their mother, leaving her gifts of flower and fowl and fruit when the moon waxed into fullness.

Maybe the three of them could visit Pidari and say hello as a nice surprise. Maybe they could even make a trip of it, one day.

The Muniandi sat upright as Kala’s voice snapped her back into focus.

“I’m not good at these sorts of things, so I’m just going to come right out and say it. I like you, and by you, I mean you both.” Kala cleared her throat. “I’m glad that you’re able to put your differences past each other, and I’m sorry, but I can’t, actually I won’t choose, so don’t make me pick—”

“Aiyo, what’s all this about picking? He’s very frail. You have nothing to fear,” the Muniandi said, matter-of-factly.

The Kaateri pointed to his sleeve. “And she’ll protect you like no other. That’s good.”

Kala looked incredulous.

“I don’t understand.”

The Muniandi stepped forward and gripped Kala’s wrists, pulling her up from the floor, having her comfortably fit between them on the sofa. Their bodies nestled close together.

“We know how you feel ma, we already do.” The Kaateri took her feet in his lap.

“You’re not worried at all?”

He seemed pensive. “If you’re ditching us for a coworker with vehicle insurance, a haircut, and functional teeth, then I would worry.”

The Muniandi tucked a loose strand of Kala’s hair behind her ear. “Or a toothpaste mogul’s scion with a private helicopter and an attractive grudge. Irresistible,” she added.

In response, Kala took each of their hands in hers, grasping them tightly. Joy seethed over the plate-metal of her emotional armor, rendering it malleable, liquid. Sans armor, she was adrift—out at sea on a rolling tide of ease and happiness, of longing and being longed for in return, the cast-off spirit of seclusion gnawing at the edges of her existence. Fear lurked beneath the inflow of these new feelings, of feelings she had once stifled under the wafer-thin pretexts of academic and professional goals cocooned snugly within parental obligations. It festered in her lower intestines, filling her mouth with bile-laced saliva.

She swallowed hard.

“Seri, now that’s all sorted, let’s go deal with my parents.”



It’s almost nightfall, and the blue floor of dusk spreads across the courtyard of her parents’ house.

Kala, pulling them by their wrists through the entryway.

Kala, *saying trust me, just trust me.*

Them, saying okay in near-unison—the woman who was sometimes a deity and sometimes a mare, and the murmur of a man who was not a man at all but sometimes a knife.

Their hesitant laughter bouncing off the walls, melting into the ceiling, the rain-streaked stairwell. Their laughter, melting into an easy silence that trickled in streamlets down their skin, down their hides, down the metal-glint of them.

Kala, so startlingly real, crystallized in their faces, in their arms, in the way they reached out and held onto her, onto the trembling edges of her possibility, unsure of anything, sure of everything.



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Watcher, Worker

by Rona Fernandez

15 December 2050

Thio knew what he had to do, even if it scared him so much that he finished the last of his Benzos just to get through his work shift. He was watching a ReConned Worker today. It was easy work, much easier than dealing with a screamer or a cryer, but ReCons made his skin crawl. Especially now.

She was around the age his mothers would be if they had lived. Her eyes had some brightness and didn't seem quite as vacant as the eyes of other ReCons he'd watched. But like the others, she had shuffled to her Play station rather than walked, her feet scraping slowly across the floor as she moved, and spoke in monosyllables, like a child. ReCons weren't violent, since most of their individual impulses had been stripped away, but they had enough sense that they could complete simple tasks like unloading boxes, digging trenches.

Thio wondered what the woman had done to get ReConditioned. He'd been told it happened only when there was no other way to help them, but now he knew that wasn't true. That information was blacked out on a Worker's file, but ReCons had a large red RC at the top of

their records. A green RC meant that the Worker was in line for ReCon. Thio had only seen that once, a few days before. He never wanted to see it again.

The ReCon touched the small flat screen in her hands carefully, tenderly, as if it was a pet. Thio glanced at her vitals on his dashboard that floated out from plastic rods attached to his waist. Her pulse quickly rose from 75 to 86. Hopefully, it would smooth out soon. She was watching a video of a man mountain-climbing, his eyebrows caked with ice. He wondered if she understood what she was seeing. When her mouth stretched slowly into a thin, childish smile, Thio thought of Tara, and wondered if his plan was going to work.



When his shift was over, Thio handed his gear to the next Watcher and walked towards the Play Room exit, past other Watchers observing other Workers. Some Workers sat in pairs, screen-sharing before they went back to their workstations: Recycle or Solar, Harvest or Water. Though the Water workers were probably too busy for Play right now, with the heavy rain they'd been having. Thio used to screen-share with Tara alone, then later with Tara and Marcus. It seemed like a long time ago. Thio swiped his pass to open the exit. As soon as the door slid shut behind him, he saw her.

Tara, her eyes glinting like tiny shards of black glass.

"Thio." Her slender frame was as tense as a coiled spring. Waiting. He was surprised to see her, but glad too. He had wanted to talk to her, but they'd locked her in her room.

"Do you need something, Worker 5223?" Thio tried to keep his voice light. This wasn't the right place for the conversation they needed to have. They seemed alone in

the long corridor, but there was a camera in the ceiling, and voices drifted towards them from around the bend.

“We need to talk, Thio.”

“Now’s not a good time, Worker 5223.” He kept his voice formal, distant.

“Quit this Worker-Watcher shit.” Tara’s dark eyes seemed to drill into his as she stepped closer. “You need to help me.”

Thio almost caved and told her everything, right then and there, desperate for their old closeness, but that would give them both away, and his plan would be ruined.

And then, the lights went out, suddenly and without warning. Another brownout. They’d been happening several times a day, all week, just like the previous winter. It was like this during rainy periods, which was good for the water supply but bad for the solar reserves. And bad for the security cams, which couldn’t pick up footage in the dark. This was his chance. Thio leaned towards Tara, grabbing her shoulders.

“We shouldn’t talk here. Your room. Just follow my lead. Trust me.”

“I have to know—are you really one of them now?”

“What are you talking about? We don’t have time, the lights could come on any minute. Let’s go.” Thio tried to pull her away from the Play Room door, but she resisted, and it was too dark to see her eyes and gauge her reaction. And then, as suddenly as they went out, the lights came back on, the low whir of power filling the air. Thio’s mind snapped back and forth between what he wanted and what he should do. The latter won. If they tried to talk now, they would be heard, seen. As his training had taught him to do, he reached for the

blue Call button on the wall just outside the Play Room door.

“Next brownout,” he said in a low voice, but kept her in his grip to make it seem like he was trying to control her.

“What did you do? Thio—”

Just then, a black-shirted Driver came out of the room in answer to Thio’s call, his bat-like Safety Stick ready.

“Worker 5223 is supposed to be in her room,” Thio said, shoving Tara towards the Driver, who quickly slid the stick against Tara’s body, pulling her tight against his burly frame. Tara yelped in pain.

“Thio! You vendido piece of shit!” Her voice cracked as she kicked at Thio’s shins, but the Driver jerked her away. Thio gritted his teeth, swallowing *I’m sorry*. He would apologize later.

“Let’s go, Worker 5223,” the Driver said, and took a screaming Tara down the hall towards her room, leaving Thio behind.

He took a deep breath. This hadn’t been part of his plan, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Next time there was a brownout, he would go to her room and tell her his plan. He hoped she would listen to him, hoped she remembered their promise. He just wanted to take care of her as he always had.



Before

Tara and her father had been friends with Thio’s family in a tiny town in the foothills. Once green, forested land when snowmelt from the Sierras was steady, it had grown brown and brittle, easy tinder

for the wildfire that killed Tara's father. No one could find her next of kin, so Thio's mothers took her in. A decade later, Thio's mothers died when the tornado of '47 tore through the solar factory they worked in, leaving him and Tara alone in a refugee camp full of orphans. Tara was eighteen, a depressive diabetic; Thio nineteen with anxiety disorder. But doing things for other people, especially Tara, helped him stay calm, gave him something to focus on besides the speed of his heartbeat and the tightening of his chest. It was why he'd gone to Watcher training, and why he was the only one who could help Tara now.

Right after the tornado, Tara fell into a deep depression and kept 'forgetting' to take her insulin injections, which made her loopy and shaky. If she went without it for more than a day, she could slip into a coma and die, which, Thio knew, was what she wanted.

"I don't want to be here anymore. My Daddy, now your Moms," Tara said between sobs.

"Remember our promise," Thio said, his heart racing as he took the syringe to inject her. When Tara acted more normal after the shot, it calmed him. A few days later, when she ran out of insulin, Thio went to the medical tent to get more, but they had none left.

"But she needs it," Thio said, his pulse quickening at the idea of losing the only person he could call family.

"There's a place called the Collective, eighty miles north. We're driving there tomorrow."

"What is it?"

"Sort of a hospital. They make medicine, but you can stay there too. That's where we get all our insulin."

There were few other options. The closest Cities were closed to newcomers, and they had no family or friends

who could help. Everyone was badly off; just doing their best to survive. So Tara and Thio got dropped off the next day. The Collective had everything they needed: three meals, ninety minutes of outdoor Sunlight each day, two hours of Playtime once their work was done. And most important, meds for depression, anxiety, PTSD, and diabetes. Tara got her insulin and SSRIs; Thio was given Benzos to keep himself steady. It was a good place.

Workers made up the bulk of the population and did most of the labor. Watchers and Drivers were less numerous but kept things steady, safe. Watchers used their voices and psychological training to de-escalate situations, while Drivers used Safety Sticks to keep things under control. The first time he saw a Watcher talk a Worker out of a crying jag without using meds, Thio thought, *I want to do that*.

The Collective was a warm, dry place for Thio and Tara to sleep and be together. They were placed in the same room; everyone assumed their closeness meant they were brother and sister. Thio made sure Tara took her insulin and ate enough, and Tara made him feel less alone now that his mothers were gone, and the only home he'd ever known was almost a hundred miles away.

Their second summer at the Collective, a roommate arrived for them. Marcus, or Worker 5400. He had a brilliant smile that made others perk up and warm brown skin that older Workers called cinnamon, though Thio didn't know what cinnamon looked like, only how it tasted, because it was sometimes added to their rations. Tara and Thio's complexions were the color of eucalyptus bark, but Tara's straight, blue-black hair made her striking while Thio's wavy brown hair made him common, forgettable.

Marcus arrived at the perfect time. Tara had been talking more and more about going back Outside to find her mother, and Thio was getting tired of hearing about it.

“I can understand wanting to know her, but you don’t even have a picture.”

“I can describe her to people. I just need to know if she’s out there.”

“There’s road-gangs out there too, and it’s almost wildfire season again. What would you do for food?”

“I won’t have any peace until I try, at least.”

“And what about your meds?”

This was where the conversation ended. Tara had no plan to keep her insulin refrigerated on the road, even if she could steal enough of it to leave the Collective. And they had no idea where another lab was. For all they knew, the Collective was where all the insulin in the state came from. The Collective didn’t allow people to watch news or have unscreened outside communication, said it was too destabilizing. And from what Thio remembered of the news reports from Outside—freakish hurricanes and heat waves, of the coast getting swallowed by the sea and inland valleys becoming deserts—he knew they were right.

So Marcus was a welcome distraction. At first, Thio resented how Tara couldn’t stop staring at him and would giggle whenever he said something even remotely funny, but Marcus was charming, with a contagious laugh. The three of them began eating meals together, screen-sharing during Playtime, even having sex together in their off-hours. Thio relished being held by not just one but two familiar bodies, and it didn’t take long before he learned the most pleasurable ways

to mold his limbs around Marcus’s rough angles and Tara’s smooth curves. Though Thio and Tara had slept with other people together before, with Marcus it felt more natural, relaxed. Thio didn’t even mind when the two of them slept in the same bed while he went back to his own. He’d never liked sharing a bed with anyone, but Tara had always craved it. Win-win for all.

Thio wasn’t too choosy about sex and learned early on that the Collective looked the other way when people traded it for favors. Like the piece of roast chicken he found in his room after he’d gotten a Driver off during Sunlight one afternoon. Or the Watcher who gave him printouts of his, Tara’s, and Marcus’s files after they had sex in a camera-blind hallway. It was also how Thio’d gotten a backdoor login, once he became a Watcher himself, that could access files beyond his own Workers’, and how he found out that Marcus wasn’t lying when he said he wasn’t on any meds, didn’t need them.

“Lucky shit,” Thio said.



By the time the searing heat of summer gave way to the more tolerable fall, Marcus and Tara were spending more and more time together without Thio. Their conversations centered around going back Outside despite Thio warning them the Collective would find out.

“So what?” Tara would reply. “We found a cooler in Recycle and hid it from the Drivers. We could stockpile enough insulin to last a month, and ration it so it lasts longer.”

“You’re loco,” Thio said, watching the two of them snuggle on Marcus’s bed.

“Is this what you want for the rest of your life, Thio?” Marcus said, gesturing around the sparse, blank-walled room. “It’s just a pit stop for me.”

Tara kissed Marcus when he said this, and it turned Thio’s stomach.

“We’ll find my mom, a place to live. Have kids,” she said, resting her head on Marcus’s shoulder, her eyes settling on Thio.

“Where? Do you know a place that will take both of you? You can’t survive without your insulin, Tara.”

“You think I don’t know that? I’m the diabetic, not you. You just need to find someone, Thio,” she said authoritatively, as if she knew something that he didn’t. Thio left, suddenly wanting to escape Tara and Marcus’s wet kissing sounds, and their private laughter that excluded him.

Not long afterwards, Thio requested a room transfer. He received it and was invited to apply for Watcher training. By then he was a supervisor in Solar, and the Collective said he showed leadership potential. He felt a swell of pride as he read the invitation. Being a Watcher was a way he could help people. Tara didn’t need him now, anyway.

“You don’t have to go,” Tara said tearfully a few days later as Thio packed his things—a few plastic-framed pictures of his mothers and of him and Tara, an old blanket, some books the Collective had let him keep. His new Watcher uniform was waiting in his new room.

“I’ll see you during Sunlight, and at dinner sometimes.” Thio looked up at her, saw her red-rimmed eyes and her trembling lower lip. It was the first time in months that she’d shown she needed him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, squeezing his hand so hard he winced.

“This will be good for you, for us,” he said. He liked that it made him sound mature and understanding, but underneath it all he enjoyed her tears, hoped that her missing him would be enough to shake her out of the delusion that she could leave the Collective and make a life for herself without him. After Thio moved, the only time he and Tara were alone together without Marcus was during Sunlight, when they got to go outside if the weather allowed. There were no cameras since they were too valuable to be left to the elements, just a few Drivers to keep things safe. Thio would tell Tara about his Watcher training, how he was learning about brain chemistry, yoga, and breathing techniques.

“Dopamine helps us feel pleasure,” he said, his mind full and buzzy. “Meds help keep the happy chemicals floating around in our brains.”

“I can’t believe you’re falling for it,” Tara scoffed. “They just want you to be one of their spies.”

“It’s science.”

“Do they give you real food and not that slop they make the rest of us eat when they tell you this stuff?”

“Yes, but that’s just to help us stay focused. It’s hard work learning all this stuff.”

Tara rolled her eyes and changed the subject. “Marcus said he heard about someone finding their parents. In Sacramento, they have records of all this stuff. Can even tell you where people live.”

“How do you know your mother’s even alive?” Thio didn’t mean for the words to come out as bluntly as they did.

Tara's eyes softened with hurt. "What a shitty thing to say."

Thio wondered if her meds were making her delusional. Sometimes meds stopped working, or had unintended side effects.

"I'm sorry," Thio said.

"You should come with us." Tara lifted her chin towards a tall man who stood on the other side of the yard by himself, facing a corner of the fence, staring at it like it was a screen, head tilted to one side. A ReCon. "You don't want to end up like that, do you?"

"They only do that to people who can't cope otherwise, when there's no other solution," Thio said, repeating what he'd been told in Watcher training. Tara laughed so hard that a group of Workers standing nearby turned to stare.

"You believe that? Then you are lost." She got up and left him by himself, with the hot October sun bearing down on him, making his flesh feel liquid.



9 December 2050

Two months later, in the middle of the night, the soundless alarm went off in Thio's room, its bright flashing light and vibrations pulsing and waking him and his roommate.

"What do you think it is?" Thio asked as he got dressed.

"Escape, has to be. Didn't you hear the chisme?"

Thio shook his head. Hummingbird wings beat in his chest, so he took half a benzo. He only had a few more left and had to make them last the rest of the week. Then he headed to his alarm station outside the Collective

office. He stood and stared at the black door, his breath slowing as the medication kicked in.

Blue-shirted Watchers and black-shirted Drivers went in and out of the office. Soon, night shift Workers walked by, transitioning to their rooms. Thio searched for Tara amongst them. This was her shift, but he didn't find her. One Worker, noticing that Thio was a Watcher and not the usual Driver posted outside the Collective office, asked what was going on.

"Running a drill," Thio said. He could tell that the Worker didn't believe him. When a Driver came to relieve Thio, he asked what was happening but only got silence. Thio made a bee-line for Tara and Marcus's room, but two Drivers stood in front of the door. Thio kept walking, eyes down. When he got back to his own room, his roommate pulled him inside.

"Five of them! All but one got out."

"Who?"

"Worker 5400 for sure. Crazy-loco, you ask me. What's out there besides fire and a shit-ton of grief?"

Thio's chest seemed to squeeze in around his ribcage. He rubbed hard circles over his sternum, willing the benzo to last, to loosen the tightness.

"You all right?" his roommate asked.

"I just need to lie down."

Thio lay on his bed, wondering, is she gone? He blinked furiously, not wanting to cry. Crying just made him feel tired and shitty afterwards and never brought anyone back.



10 December 2050

The next day, Thio was called into the Collective office. He'd only been inside once before, for his Watcher interview. A Driver had hooked Thio up to monitor so they could check his heart and brain activity in response to images flashed on the screens across the room. Justin had looked a lot like Thio, but prettier, though Thio had only seen him onscreen. The Collective members were rarely seen IRL, so no one knew what they really looked like.

Now, as back then, there were six screens on the wall facing him, and a table with a square hole in the middle in between him and the screens. Only half the screens were on since power reserves were low, displaying different images: furry calico kittens climbing over each other in a box, their cat-mother sitting nearby; a nighttime fire burning, orange-red flames licking black trees; the view from the main gate, the empty road leading towards it slightly hazy through the steady drizzle of rain. The videos were soundless.

Thio's eyes flicked back to the wildfire for a moment, then to the kittens, then back to the fire. His heartbeat quickened. Kittens, he decided. He settled his eyes on the fuzzy creatures, waiting for his pulse to smooth out. Soon, a melodic voice filled the air around him.

"Watcher 302. I'm Shauna."

On the fire-screen, a woman's head materialized, oval face above bare shoulders, skin the color of pale sand. Her black hair was tied back severely, her green eyes gazed down at him. She appeared to be naked, but Thio could only see from her shoulders up. The suggestion of what was offscreen made him sit up straighter.

"Hello, Shauna."

From the square hole in the table popped up a glass of water. Thio picked up the glass, sipped. Clean, sweet water. Everyday water was gritty, metallic-tasting.

"We have your favorite, Watcher 302. Real chicken and greens."

A metal plate piled with food emerged from the hole, and Thio dug in without hesitation, his fingers tearing the meat away from the bone and stuffing it into his mouth. Shauna stayed quiet while he ate. When he was done, Thio pushed his plate away, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Thank you," he said, savoring another sip of water.

"Watcher 302, what can you tell me about Worker 5223?"

Thio tried to keep his face slack, blank, but he could tell by the way Shauna's eyebrows lifted that she sensed a change in him.

"She used to be my roommate. She's my friend." Friend wasn't the right word, but he didn't know how else to describe his relationship with Tara. Sweat broke out in his armpits, and he hoped that the dim light of the room would keep Shauna from being able to see the damp circles that must be darkening his shirt.

"Do you know why she would want to leave us?"

Thio wet his lips with his tongue. "She tried to leave?" He attempted to put a surprised lift at the end of his question. If he'd had electrodes on, Shauna would know he was lying.

"Workers 5400, 5494, 5495 and 5571 all left last night. Worker 5223 was with them but was detained."

“Oh,” Thio exhaled, not realizing he’d been holding his breath.

“Anything you could tell us would be appreciated. It would help us help Worker 5223.”

“Is she all right?” Thio asked.

“No injuries.”

Thio couldn’t bring himself to ask more questions, because he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answers.

“Would you have a problem with watching Worker 5223, Worker 302?” Shauna’s voice had a pleasant lilt, as if she was just asking him if he wanted more water.

“Her Watcher? She already has one.”

“We need to reassign her. Not right away. But soon. It’s best that she’s watched by someone who knows her.”

“Sure, of course,” Thio said, though it made no sense to him at all. It wasn’t normal for Watchers and Workers to be friends or even roommates. It complicated things.

“Good,” Shauna said. “I’m sure Worker 5223 will be happy to have you take care of her.”



11 December 2050

On Thio’s next shift, he set his Workers to watch videos that were at least twenty minutes long and used his backdoor login to access Tara’s file. He’d only looked at it once since he’d become a Watcher, too worried that it might get both of them in trouble. But now, he needed to know. Why was the Collective asking him to be her Watcher? And what happened when she was caught trying to escape with Marcus? He hadn’t worked up the nerve to try to see Tara in person, afraid that a Driver might still be guarding her door, might ask questions that Thio didn’t want to answer.

He typed in her number, 5-2-2-3 carefully. When he hit ‘enter,’ her face popped up on his screen—the picture they took of her when they had first arrived at camp, more than two years earlier. Tara with her tousled, pixie-cut black hair and her dark eyes that were guarded and cautious. Her heart-shaped face. She looked plump and child-like and Thio wondered, for the first time, if he’d been wrong about telling her to stay.

He scanned her file but didn’t see anything that he didn’t already know. Her insulin and SSRI dosage. Age, weight, height. Thio saw his own number in passing but not much was attached to it. He scrolled down for more information about the escape but could find only the date of her attempt. The Collective must be storing those details elsewhere. They probably figured this part of their data system had been hacked.

Thio did find something: Tara was on light sedatives and roommate-less. Her room wasn’t being guarded, probably due to the power outage, only checked every couple hours to keep her medicated. Other than that, nothing of much interest. Thio scrolled back up, exhaling with frustration.

And then he saw it. In big, green letters at the top of his screen, of Tara’s file. How had he missed it before? RC. Reconditioned. They were going to ReCon Tara. That was going to be her punishment for trying to escape—and he would have to be her Watcher. Suddenly, Thio felt like his chest was being gripped by a giant, invisible fist. He took three deep breaths, recalling his training, but suddenly hating it. Was Tara right? Was he just one of their spies now? Thio felt the first twinges of a headache and forced himself to do what he knew would help him stay calm: he thought of home, those quiet dark hours with Tara in their room, the way the full moon hung bright and round in the big sky outside

their window. Injecting Tara with the insulin, seeing how it made her feel better.

Calm, he had to stay calm.

But then there was a quick, drooping sound, and several Workers groaned in annoyance. The power had gone off again. The Play Room went dark except for the illuminated rectangles of his and his Workers' battery-powered screens. As he checked on his Workers to make sure they were okay, Thio realized something: the brownouts could help him help Tara before it was too late. Most of the Collective's energy went to the medication manufacturing, so when the solar reserves were low because of the rain it left less energy for non-essential uses. Thus, the brownouts. The med labs were the priority—without them, the whole system would fall apart. Maybe this was an opening, a way out, for both him and Tara.



15 December 2050

And then it happened, as Thio left the Play Room that morning with the ReCon worker, Tara waited for him outside the door. It had been too dangerous a place to talk, even with the lights off. Anyone could have come across them. So he'd called the Driver, and now he hoped that she wasn't being guarded, that he hadn't ruined everything. He still didn't know why Tara had come to him. Whatever the reason, Thio knew he didn't have much time. They had to make a plan together. They had to keep their promise.

He waited for the next brownout. It happened while he was walking back to his room from Dining that afternoon. As soon as he heard the downward whoosh, he pivoted left, towards Tara's room, their old room. She should be resting there, alone. It would be dark. He

walked quickly but carefully, knowing the lights could come on at any moment. Thankfully, the small numbers above each Worker's door were still illuminated, thanks to the glow-in-the-dark material they were made with. When he got to Tara's room, he was relieved to see there were no Drivers guarding it. Thio didn't knock, just pushed the door open.

Tara was asleep, her room dark except for a dim orange glow-globe on the nightstand.

Her voice came through the dim light. "Meds again?"
"It's me."

"What the—" he heard her move around on the bed, trying to get up, but her body thudded down again.

"We don't have much time."

"What do you want?"

"They're sending you to ReCon. Shauna told me."

"Shauna?"

"Collective." He inched closer. He needed to see her, but it was too dark. "I came here to tell you, if you really want to get out—" Thio took a breath.

"Fucking vendido." But there was no malice in her voice now. It sounded like a pet name, an old joke. "Why'd you do it?"

"What, become a Watcher?"

"No," she said, her voice suddenly thin, child-like. "Why did you leave me?"

Thio sat down and put his hand on the bed between them. "I couldn't deal. I felt like you didn't need me anymore "

"I haven't changed. But you have."

"We don't have time to fight, Tara."

He felt the warmth of her hand on top of his. The hand he used to hold when she cried, the same hand that used to caress his face, his chest, the flesh between his legs.

“I’m not fighting. Don’t you remember our promise?”

“Of course,” Thio said.

“What do you think happened that day, when Marcus and the others got out?”

“You got caught.” But even as he said it, a vague awareness that it might not be true came over him.

Tara let out a curt, mocking laugh. Thio tried to refocus.

“Look, the Drivers change shifts at a different time every night. I can figure out a way to distract them. We’ll have to steal some insulin, somehow. But the brownouts will help—”

“Thio, stop,” she interrupted, in the whispery voice she used when they talked back in their bedroom, before they came to this place. Before everything. It had been higher and smaller then, but somehow the same. The sound of secrets and promises. It made Thio want to lie down next to her on the bed.

“I could have left, Thio. I almost did.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t do it. Our promise.”

Thio inhaled deeply and held his breath, knowing that if he exhaled, he would start to cry too.

Suddenly the power came back on, the overhead lamp’s bright light flooding the room. In the full light, he saw that Tara’s face was wet. Tears. Her face crumpled, and she fell back onto the bed and curled into a ball, fists covering her face. He thought she would start sucking her thumb like she did when they were kids, but she just

cried, quietly, and Thio thought he would never be able to leave that small, familiar room ever again.



Before

After her father died and Tara moved in, Thio let her choose the shows they watched together on the screen in their room, trying to make her feel welcome. When she would weep and say *I miss my Daddy* at bedtime, he put his arm around her small shoulders. He’d seen his mothers do this with their crying friends.

Once she stopped crying, Tara would suck her thumb. Then they would look at the stars and moon in the vast, dark sky outside their bedroom window and talk.

“Where’s your Daddy?” Tara asked him.

“Don’t have one. Where’s your Mom?”

“Daddy said she’s far away.”

“Why?”

“She’s sick, but Daddy said she loves me. Now Daddy’s gone. He loves me too. Why do people leave if they love you?”

Thio pondered this. He had not never thought of what love could be outside of the familiar, warm safety of his mothers’ presence. Was love also tears, sadness?

Neither one of them couldn’t remember which of them said it first, during one of those childhood midnights. Eventually, it got to the point that one of them said it every night, until just saying promise, wherever they were, made them recall those hushed nightdark hours, when for a little while the whole world was unthreatening and calm.

“We’ll never leave each other. Promise?”

They hooked their pinkies together, made the most solemn vow that two children can make. Unbreakable.



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Bought and Sold // Trader

by Ellen Huang

Many a child has turned to the door
banging open on a storm-drenched night
perhaps they peek and see a white-
ashen face, but they always hear
the dreaded taboo—

I went to get a rose—

I went off the straight path—

I’ve been gambling—

*—there was a beast
—there was a creature
—gambling with the devil*

The dreaded words that tomorrow
some monster will take the gambled
child away—nothing to be done.

Let them hide with me. Though I look
a creature still. There remains beautiful
music, there are candy houses, there are
pretty ponds with castles reflected.

In times of desperation, you trade.
In times of anxious need, you trust.
Is the old lady an enchantress or a witch?
The piper, a trickster or a savior?
Do you let them inside?

What else can be done?



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The Swamp Exchange

by Laura Barker

You're in the swamp. That's sort of not what you planned to do with your day, but it's your sister Quince's wedding, so you've all driven up there. You've gone along with her when she tells you the legend of the swamp. About the dead lady trapped down there, about her necklace made magical by the water, about the necklace can only be retrieved by a very special person. Quince tells you in her cutesy voice that she wants you all to dive down to retrieve that necklace because it is going to be her something old and her something blue.

She would go in, she tells you, but she's pregnant. So that glow is not just her cockroach milk face-masks. Everyone pretends to be happy for her. Everyone is not happy for her. But no matter. Her pregnancy is beyond your control. Your therapist has told you about boundaries, what they are, how to set them, and you tell her, "I don't do swamps," before you realise that you are justifying, arguing, defending, and explaining, and that 'no' is a complete sentence.

She smiles at you. "Please let's just have a nice day with no arguing," she says, and then she pushes you in, your mouth open, stagnant water filtering right in through your teeth that grit quickly but not enough

to stop any of it happening. You come to the surface spluttering and coughing, your linen suit instantly stained with dirty liquid and mossy sludge. She shrieks with giddy happiness, jumping up and down, waving at you, telling you to find her the necklace. Her betrothed tells her how cute she is.

A kerfuffle breaks out behind you. Your eighty-year-old grand aunt has found a piece of jewellery. There are whoops and cheers. But your sister inspects it and finds that it is just some other necklace, not the necklace of the dead lady of the swamp, and she grins and says, “Back to the drawing board,” before throwing the just-some-other-necklace back into the water.

“Has she always been like this?” friends and lovers want to know. Not at first. At first they think you’re exaggerating and you’ve got unresolved issues. Then they meet her.

You never know what to tell people. You know what it sounds like, and everyone understands trauma these days. Yes, isn’t it truly awful what Quince went through. Yes, that’s enough to make anyone go over the edge. Yes, you hope she finds the support and healing that she needs. You don’t know how to explain that she chose to go through something awful simply in order to be able to behave like this with impunity. Because yes, she was like this before. Of course she never told you but you know full well Quince went out looking, specifically seeking something that would justify it and make it make sense. But the few times you’ve tried to explain this to someone, late at night, past the drunk stage of inhibition and through to the early morning hours of bonding and confessionals, they have chalked it up to an even more complex trauma response. “So she was troubled before, and then this happened to her, and no wonder she’s struggling like this now,” they say. And

you nod, and you thank them for their insight, because you cannot bring yourself to be the monster that says she deserved it, or that she masterminded it, or that she did it on purpose in order to be able to control and manipulate you.

This is how it went. The two of you are twelve at the time. And yes, it is a coincidence that two stepsisters should be born on exactly the same day. And you’re not even stepsisters, just to complicate matters. Stepsisters are sisters you acquire legitimately, through your parents meeting one another in later life and forging a blended family. What actually happened was this: your mother and her father had extramarital relations, both with white people. Probably on exactly the same night, although you’ve never cared to investigate this. Two conceptions happened, by two religious people who think children are a gift. Her mother dies. In childbirth. Yes, yes, it’s awful, poor her, alone in the world. So her father, your adoptive father, takes her home with him, and your mother, who is still high on the drugs it took to give birth to you, adopts her. They call you twins. “Not identical,” people say, and yes, it’s true you’re not as beautiful as she is. But once you know her, all that beauty rubs off and all you can see is her greasy little heart and her long manipulative fingers and her stupid big eyes.

Anyway. The two of you are twelve and there is a game going round the neighbourhood. The game is that you all go into an attic. You light candles. The setting is very important here. You sit in a circle, like all good games, and you lean in close and you whisper. “Who shall start?” You whisper it to each other, and then eventually someone elects themselves the starter. “I’m thinking of a number between one and five,” they say, and they hold out a certain number of fingers behind

their back where the others can't see. All a gentleman's agreement. There's no way of telling whether the starter changes their number halfway through to suit the intricacies of the game. So maybe it's a game of skill, maybe it's a game of chance. Everyone else comes up with a number.

The person with the number furthest from the starter has their head eaten off their body while they are alive.

Not really, of course, but there are screams and shrieks and hilarious attempts made, and it's a wonderful and delicious way to pass the time until the adults hear what you're up to and come up the attic ladder to break it up. Nobody says, "Where did the kids come up with such an idea?" because the game is a version of a very real game, so then not really a game, that an adult serial killer, a real adult serial killer, has been playing, and playing for the last eighteen months.

People have been dying. Not here, but near enough that everyone is spooked. The thing that seems to scare them the most, besides the dying part, is that people have returned home from holiday to find a dead person, head chewed, upstairs in their attic. No other signs of a break-in.

There is a curfew.

Nobody walks outside alone at night anymore.

Except for Quince.

She keeps going out at night.

Alone.

Sneaking out of her window.

Your parents put a lock on it, but a lock is no match for a twelve-year-old girl who has figured out how a house works. There are always other means of escape.

"Oh just let her," says your mother, after the twelfth night of it happening. "Honestly. Whatever happens, happens. Just let her." Your mother is exhausted from a miscarriage and working two jobs. Your father, your adoptive father, is exhausted by her exhaustion. Neither of them can be bothered anymore.

So on the thirteenth night, Quince goes. You see her going. The two of you share a room, so you can see damn well when she sneaks out of it. She slides out of the room and you know the way you know about a good melon that she has gone to find the adult who plays the face chewing game.

It's all over the news the next day. Which is unusual for a black child. But Quince is light skinned and has all of that 3C hair. CHILD MISSING. At church and at school you're called young ladies. It's always, "You're young ladies now," and about sitting properly and eating properly and setting an example to the younger children, but suddenly now that Quince is missing she's a child.

You're questioned. You lie through your teeth, of course, because how else can you explain that you watched her go and did nothing about it? Your parents also lie through their teeth. That conversation about letting Quince do what she wanted never happened. The three of you never talk about it.

Quince returns home the very next night. Sneaks right back into bed and tells you, in excited whispers from beneath the coverlet that the police inspected earlier for signs of abuse, that she saw someone get eaten alive. You feel trapped. You can't open your eyes. You can't move. You are so terrified that you can't do anything, and it is not the adult murderer you're terrified of, it's this power she has now, you can sense

it already. So you open your mouth and you do the only thing you can do—scream. Your parents rush in.

She manages to lead the investigators to the adult murderer's lair. The adult murderer is locked up. Fine. Kept in prison for years until someone starts a restorative justice programme in that area, and obviously Quince wants to get involved. Your parents think it will be good for her. Give her closure. You know she will enjoy it. And a part of you, a part of you that you are ashamed of, wishes it was you. Everyone is always thinking of what will be good for her. Nobody is thinking of what will be good for you. And you'd like to meet an adult murderer. She gets to meet everyone.

And so somehow you both go. Your father, your adoptive father, drives you both there to meet the people, the other people 'personally affected by' the adult murderer. You two are the youngest there, so your father stays; otherwise, he would be told to wait in the other room with the other people who are here to support the people 'personally affected by' the adult murderer. That's what it's called. Support. That's your role, technically, but you don't think of it like that. Quince doesn't need support. She needs something else—something to make her love people. But you don't know how to do that.

All the other people are very troubled by having seen a corpse with no face. Quince is not troubled. She is pleased. And so is the adult murderer. They are looking at each other as if they have a private joke, and in fact they do. Because at some point during the conversation the adult murderer says, "That turquoise necklace," — you can't remember why—and this sets Quince off. She laughs like there is no tomorrow, and the adult murderer giggles. Everyone else is quiet. You are not. You want, more than anything, to be in on this joke. You are

desperate for it. So you start laughing yourself. You are so determined to be included that you just get involved. You open your mouth and tip your head back and you start cackling. And as soon as you do, Quince and the adult murderer and your father, your adoptive father, and everyone else gathered there, they all look at you as if you are a very disturbed and attention-seeking child.

You all drive home in silence. When your mother asks what happened — she was unable to attend, working all day — your father shakes his head and says he will tell her later. He is obviously extremely disappointed in you. Quince smiles at you as soon as he leaves the room. "Don't be embarrassed," she says, squeezing your hand. "Everyone wants to be like me. It's natural. But you have to be you instead." She flashes you a smile, every one of her brilliant white teeth gleaming in a sort of light she has created all by herself, and she runs outside to play horses on the old apple tree round the back that has not borne fruit since the big thunderstorm a decade before. You do not join her. You are too embarrassed and ashamed to do anything but sit in that chair in the living room and let the tears leak out of you.

You keep your head down. You do well at school. You do well at college. You do well at adult jobs, at boyfriends and girlfriends, at acquaintances, and friends, and networking. You learn what asparagus is, and how to eat a warm salad. You see L-shaped couches, you travel by plane and by boat, you know how to hold a conversation in a bar with someone you are trying to impress. You see Quince only when you have to. You get through it and you reward yourself at the end with a big drink and a plate of something greasy in a sauce that numbs your mouth if not your mind.

But today is different. It's her wedding day—a day when she is allowed and expected to make a big fuss of herself—and you are not having it. You climb out of the swamp. You spit fetid fluid out of your mouth and you unbutton your suit jacket. Quince is not even watching you. She's watching your father, your adoptive father, duck dive under the surface and grab at something deep down with his long hands. Not the necklace. Just some kind of hard pondweed that feels like charms under the water. You felt it when you were in there, and for a moment you thought you found the necklace she wanted, and you were excited for the opportunity to withhold something from her.

You take off your jacket. You take off your blouse. You're not wearing a bra. You barely ever do, these days. You let the soft weight of your breasts inspire you to take off your trousers as well, and then your underwear. You don't care that it's mostly family in the swamp, or that her future husband is standing right by her, staring at you with his mouth slightly ajar in what looks like disgust. You have decided, for reasons, that this is your day.

You run up to Quince and you kick—not push, kick—her into the swamp, pregnant, and in her pre-wedding dress. She emerges coughing and you bend your naked body down to her and you hold her head beneath the surface, biting away her fiance who has bounced in to save her, batting back elderly relatives, and count to ten. A trick your mother taught you when you were little. For when you are angry. Count to ten. It works. After ten you are ready to let her come back up for air. Her eyes have done something feral. They look like animal eyes. When you realise you are seeing the reflection of your own eyes in hers that have rolled back into her head, you are proud.

The spell is broken. Perhaps this is all you had to do all along. The dead lady of the swamp glides out fat, beautiful, glistening. Nobody notices. They are all looking at Quince, rushing to help her, even though they know in their heart of hearts that she belongs to the dank water now, and will exist there, trapped, for some time, but the dead lady of the swamp is looking at you. You embrace. She drapes herself around you like silk and rubs buckthorn oil into your skin. She presses her finger into your mouth and the two of you kiss for longer than is strictly necessary. You have the necklace on now, the wild charms of solid turquoise heavy on your clavicle. She has her freedom. Otherwise naked, you step into your car, and you drive the long way home, not stopping along the way for petrol or for toilet breaks or for food.



Laura Barker is a writer, artist, and facilitator. She runs a queer black writing group in London, UK. Her work has appeared in *Apparition Lit*, *midnight & indigo*, and *The Other Stories*, and her YA novel *Picnics* was shortlisted for the Faber Andlyn BAME (FAB) Prize. Follow her @LauraHannahBar

Crafting Chance

with Erion Makuo

Throughout the issue, Chance can be interpreted in so many different ways. It can be the unknown, an act of blind faith, or the calculated gamble you take when the chips are down. Each finalized cover design has its own element of chance. When we pitch ideas to the artist, the design is influenced by whatever whimsy or interest floated our way during preliminary research. Olympic weightlifting, semaphore systems, ama divers, and galaxy marbles—all influenced our cover art.

Our pitch to Erion was inspired by the images and clips from the Oscar-winning skateboarding documentary *Skateistan: Four Wheels and a Board in Kabul*. Skateistan is an international non-profit that provides outreach, education, and safe spaces through skateboarding. An accompanying photo exhibition called *Skate Girls of Kabul*, by Jessica Fulford-Dobson, showcased girls outfitted in helmets, pads, and sometimes holding a skateboard almost as big as they were. The joy in the photos is tangible.

When I sent the photo board to Erion, I mentioned we were thinking about an action pose, showing a skateboarder in motion. Within a couple days, Erion sent back three concept images. The first, an older woman in a suit holding a skateboard. The second, a young woman on her board in front of a mosaic screen. The last was the action shot we originally described, the woman on her skateboard gliding down a ramp.

Erion took the initiative and researched different types of clothing styles to display in each image, from full traditional garb to the more modern pantsuit that some Muslim businesswomen adopted. While we had craved the action shot, it is a truth universally acknowledged that you can't forget the commanding gaze of a woman in a pantsuit.

We asked Erion to move forward with the first image but asked if she would be willing to merge the background of the second image. We loved the textural element of the mosaic and the lighting quality of it.

The set of colour compositions that Erion sent were tinted yellow, blue and red. Again we were drawn to the pop of bright red in the first image. It reminded us of the first cover art that Erion created with us—the devilish pirate in a fluffy orange coat from Issue 6: Ambition. With a talent for drawing powerful women, we've always joked that if Pygmalion spouses ever became a reality, that Erion would be tasked with designing our spouse.

Colour ended up informing how the design was finalized. We needed a strong speculative element in the cover. The first thought was to knock the wheels of the skateboard and create a hoverboard à la *Back to the Future II*. However with the wheels off, the image still didn't read speculative. I suggested to Erion that

the skateboard would be glowy to read as magical or electric.

Clients think they know everything right? Erion very quickly let me know that, while she understood the idea to add a glow, it would create a ripple effect that would mess with the rest of the lighting and colouring in the image:

...one of the things that makes red pop so much is that it's the only accent color in the picture so having blue on the hoverboard would diminish that. Also, under such bright daylight artificial lights usually seem very dim. So yeah, having an electric glow won't break the picture, but it won't help it either. I guess this is a choice between what looks good vs storytelling?

We wanted the colour pop—that was non-negotiable. After some thought, we suggested that, rather the skateboard, we transform the woman into the missing speculative element. We pitched an alien claw that would stretch the arm and distort the fingers. Erion responded with an even better idea, an old-school robotic arm with a ball joint.

The result was spectacular, the worn metal of the arm, the powerful draw of the pantsuit, and the implied play of the skateboard. It was a beautiful lesson on stepping back and trusting the knowledge of our illustrator. The final design isn't an element of chance. Rather the opposite. One of the best parts of working with people you trust and respect means that the end result is always a certainty.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

Erion Makuo is our Artist-In-Residence for 2021. You can find more Erion's art at their website: <http://www.erionmakuo.com/>

Find the sketches from Erion Makuo on our website.

For more information on Skateistan, check out their website.

Ripples of Love

by Marguerite Croff

1.

Once upon a time, I facilitated a creative workshop for adults. The criteria given to me for accepting the attendees boiled down to whether or not the applicants were talented, capable, and willing to do the work. All of the applicants were smart, capable, and had futures with great potential. Some also had mental illnesses or disabilities.

Although acceptance was supposed to be balanced on talent and drive, I later learned some of the workshop's board members did not believe people with mental illnesses and disabilities should be allowed into the workshop, even though these people were capable and able to do the work.

Despite my anger about the ableism and elitism these board members espoused, I took a chance and moved forward with accepting an inclusive range of attendees, knowing I was risking my reputation. I took a chance on those students, despite what the broader culture, and the board, believed about people with mental illness or disabilities.

I know I could have played it safe and only accepted those who appeared to be obvious successes. I could have quit the job. But I didn't. Taking this chance was too important to me.

The foundation of this decision goes back to the early 1950s in Boise, Idaho.

2.

Chance is an interesting word. It's one of those English words that hold so many different meanings. Chance can mean the possibility of something happening, as in "there's a chance of snow." It can also mean something happening without any obvious design or intention, like "I ran into Mrs. Jones by chance." It can also mean to do something, even though there is a risk or the outcome is uncertain, like, "I took a chance."

I took a chance. I gave someone else a chance.

These are two of those weird English phrases I imagine are confusing to people who don't grow up speaking English as a first language. My Ojibwe ancestors didn't always grow up with English as their first language—they started with Ojibwemoyen and eventually, to survive the conquest of North America, Canadian French and ultimately English.

3.

Boise, Idaho, 1953.

It's time for my blind Chippewa mother to start school. (At the time, my mother used the terms "blind" and "Chippewa.") My grandparents had two options: send my mother away to a school for the blind or find a local school willing to enroll her. My mother being institutionalized in a federally-sponsored Indian boarding school, as had happened to my grandmother, was not an option. At this point, my grandparents and

mother lived off-reservation and, given my grandfather was white, there was enough power in the family to ensure the privilege for education that had not been available to my great-grandmother.

My grandmother and her siblings were required to attend Indian boarding schools. It was the Assimilation era; Indigenous children were sent to the boarding schools across the United States to turn them into “good white children” and, therefore, good citizens. When she was five, my grandmother left her beloved mother in Minnesota for an Indian school in Wisconsin where she was educated by nuns. The separation from her mother and the extreme abuse she endured at the boarding school was so painful my grandmother never fully healed.

The public schools in Boise refused to enroll my mother. My grandmother tirelessly advocated for my mother, determined that my mother would have a better childhood than she’d had—my mother would not know poverty or the same abuse and separation from family. Finally, regardless of her painful childhood experiences with nuns at the boarding school, my grandmother approached the local private Catholic school. It took convincing, but the Mother Superior agreed to enroll my mother. My mother graduated as Salutatorian of her class and went on to complete a bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate. She worked as a speech and language pathologist, typically in public schools, for four decades. This is not a story about a Native girl with a disability who makes good.

This is a story about a mother who took a chance that the nuns she asked to teach her child would provide her child with a good education and not harm her child as she’d been harmed. This is a story about a mother who

took a chance and a school administrator who took a chance in turn.

4.

There are events in families that ripple through the decades. The narratives about my grandmother’s separation from her family and her boarding school experiences were stories I listened to over and over again. The story about my grandmother searching for a school for my mother and finally finding success at the Catholic school was part of my childhood stories, alongside myths, fairy tales, and Disney.

Mostly, it was my grandmother who told these family stories. My mother was focused on another kind of storytelling.

5.

When I was ten, my mother introduced me to Ursula Le Guin with a well-read school library copy of *The Wizard of Earthsea*. Eleven brought a beat-up mass market paperback of Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*, while twelve brought a pristine copy of Vonda McIntyre’s *Dreamsnake*. There were other beloved books too, but these books were extra special to my mother, and by extension, to me.

There is a thing that happens with the books we read as children. They imprint on our brains; they become a part of our DNA. The books my parents handed me when my brain was developing and discovering the world became a part of my blueprint for living my life.

My grandmother’s stories about her years at the Indian boarding school in Wisconsin and later at Haskell in Kansas were also embedded within me. The story about my grandmother’s search for a school for my mother and the stories my mother read me are so deeply

ingrained within me that the values inherent in the stories have inspired how I live in the world.

From Ged in *The Wizard of Earthsea*, I learned to be patient and take a chance on others, even if it seems my hopes are going nowhere, like when Ged waited on Ogion to teach him and it first seemed as if Ogion was offering nothing.

From Meg Murray in *A Wrinkle in Time*, I learned I was worth taking a chance on. Meg was flawed and so aware of and frustrated by her imperfections. But, if she was willing to take a chance on herself, she discovered she was the one who could save her father and brother.

From Snake in *Dreamsnake*, I learned it's worth taking a chance on others, even if they don't prove themselves out. Taking a chance on others—especially when it's risky and even when things don't go as planned—can lead to what ultimately needs to happen.

6.

I grew up in the mid-to-late 1980s. There wasn't a lot of diversity in speculative fiction. Reading white women authors, especially feminist authors, was the diversity. Though they were already publishing, it wasn't until the early 1990s that I was introduced to science fiction writers like Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, or magical realist writers like Isabell Allende and Louise Erdrich. At the time, most speculative fiction writers—the writers I read in *Omni* or who showed up on the Science Fiction and Fantasy shelves at our tiny local library or bookstore—were white, and usually men.

I wanted to write. Where was my place on the shelves?

We are living in a glorious age of speculative fiction where the bookshelves offer writers like N.K. Jemison,

Amal El Motar, Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, Victor LaValle, Ted Chiang, and Malinda Lo, to name a handful.

And there are Indigenous writers, like Stephen Graham Jones, Rebecca Roanhorse, Cynthia Leithich Smith, Cherie Dimaline, Eden Robinson, and Darcie Little Badger.

7.

The people I took a chance on in the workshop went on to do great things: pursued entrepreneurship, finished graduate school, wrote and published books. The sorts of resume builders our broader society considers successful. More importantly, also made friends, developed deeper relationships with themselves, discovered more joy. Became more fully themselves.

8.

A lot has changed for me over the past year—I've stepped out of my comfort zone: I wrote for a podcast, edited the script for another podcast, then voiced a character on a third. I wrote stories that were very different from my previous stories. I applied for and attended a writing intensive run by one of my literary heroes. I'm writing a very personal essay that will be read by all kinds of people. It's all been scary because, like Meg Murray, I'm very aware of my weaknesses.

And all the while, I'm asking, what if I take a chance? What if I take the hardest chance there is to take: What if I take a chance on myself?

What might happen?



Marguerite Croft (she/her) was born, reared, and came of age in Southern Idaho. Her academic background is in biomedical anthropology and American Indian Studies, and she's worked in public health, education, the anthropology and paleontology departments in a natural history museum, tech, and publishing. She's a graduate of Clarion West and has published short stories in a variety of magazines. Currently, she lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and provides story development and script editing for the Point Mystic podcast, focuses on her family, supports her communities, maintains a serious library habit, studies Ojibwe, and, of course, writes. You can find her on Twitter @MargueriteCroft and at www.MargueriteCroft.com.

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