

A person's silhouette stands in a cave, looking out at a sea stack coastline under a starry night sky. The scene is framed by the dark, jagged edges of the cave entrance. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is filled with numerous bright stars. The person is standing in the water, their back to the camera, looking out towards the horizon where several large, rocky sea stacks rise from the water. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

TWISTED MYTHS

Dandelion Revolution Press

Winter 2025-2026

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MESSAGE FROM DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS

We launched Dandelion Revolution Press (DRP) in 2020 and in our first three years, we published three anthologies of short fiction. We experienced the joy of intentionally building a press with connection at the core through creating and collaborating with other writers. Since 2024, our momentum has only grown, along with our team. Our online issues have expanded our scope to include both fiction and creative nonfiction, while remaining grounded in our core mission: sharing female-forward stories with the world.

For our Winter 2025–2026 issue, “Twisted Myths,” we invited writers to reimagine the stories we think we know. The response was electric. Submissions bent myths, fables, and fairy tales into daring new shapes and, in some cases, invented entirely new myths. Characters we recognized became strangers again when seen through fresh eyes; new life was breathed into old, familiar narratives.

Within the pages of this issue, you’ll find untold perspectives and narratives that refuse to behave as expected. Together, they remind us that reinvention is an act of both reverence and rebellion. Our hope is that for you, dear reader, this issue successfully reinvents timeless tales in a surprising way, showing that we can both receive comfort from the old and excitement from the new.

This month's artwork is sourced from [The National Gallery of Art](https://www.thenationalgallery.org/) public collection, and we selected pieces that resonated with our stories. The cover photograph with its mystical vibrations and mermaid echoes is from [Jens on Pexels](https://www.jensonpexels.com/).

We invite you to step into these twisted myths with us. We’d love to know how this issue found its way to you!

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SIRENE (HIPPOCAMPE) PIERRE ROCHE (1896)

Mountain Mermaid *by C.J. Beecher*

Let me tell you a story about a Mountain Mermaid who lived not so long ago...

In the harsh cold of winter, a young child named Lizabelle lost her way. Her family foolishly tried to pass through the mountain valley in this harshest of seasons. The snow swirled like a sheet in front of her face. Lizabelle's small steps couldn't keep pace.

As her father, mother, and brother trudged on through the deep snow, Lizabelle fell behind. Slipping on her sinew and wood snowshoes, Lizabelle fell down a small ravine where the wind swallowed her scream.

No one heard Lizabelle fall, except the ancient Glacier Mother who cared for this territory. Taking pity on the girl, Glacier Mother cracked open, forming a sheltering moulin. Lizabelle fell into the icy water-filled crack. She lay there very still and cramped, but out of the storm's icy reach.

Once the storm passed, Glacier Mother saw that Lizabelle could only lie shivering in the moulin, with no strength to pull herself out. Lizabelle's clothing was wet, so Glacier Mother entreated the marmot to give the little girl some of his fur to replace Lizabelle's clothes.

This warmed the girl up, but when she tried to stand and move about, she fell back into the moulin. The long walk in the storm had turned her toes black, and her legs no longer worked the way they should.

So, Glacier Mother heaved and groaned until an alpine lake appeared. Glacier Mother then convinced the silvery trout in the lake to give the little girl one fin. The fin was fashioned into a tail so that the little girl could swim.

As her final gift, Glacier Mother blew into Lizabelle's lungs while she slept, giving her the ability to breathe above and below the mountain lake waters.

One day, many seasons later, Lizabelle stirred in her underwater sleep. It was always much warmer to sleep below the surface. The faint sound of a mountain chickadee rippled above her. Lizabelle knew the peachy glow of sunrise would soon project dappled shafts of light onto her underwater bed. She opened one eye to wait for the light to penetrate the crystal blue water that surrounded her.

Turning slowly, Lizabelle's tail flicked ever so gently against the rocks forming her bed in silty sand. She caught the iridescent glimmer of the few trout that lived in these waters with her. It was still early enough that the small cold-water mayflies were not beckoning the fish to the surface to feed.

Closing her eyes, Lizabelle tried to re-enter her dream, lapping up the last few moments of dawn.

A faint rumble vibrated the water, and the hair on Lizabelle's body prickled. No matter how many times the glacier that fed her watery world shifted like this, Lizabelle never felt prepared. She did not know that Glacier Mother protected her in this mountain valley.

Marmots with thick brown furry bodies, rivaling Lizabelle's own, whistled to each other at the lake's edge. The little brown balls of fur foraged for the glossy huckleberries and tender grasses all day. The mountains were waking up, and soon, the spring alpine valley glittered with verdant life above and below the water.

Easing herself upright, Lizabelle smoothed her front until all the dark toffee-colored fur that formed a sweetheart neckline at her collarbone was slick and shiny. The fur became bushier and less tame as it continued below her waist, meeting the scales and thin translucent tailfin. Her long hair floated and waved around her face like an underwater crown. Her eyes glinted in the blue-green water.

Lizabelle rarely felt cold during this season in the mountain valley, even if the temperature of her lake remained icy. Only in winter, when the lake iced over and there was so little sunlight to heat the surface, did she gain an extra layer of fat around her middle to keep her warm. Often, the fish schooled around her to help stave off the chill at night as they all fell into a deep sleep beneath the ice together.

It wasn't necessarily lonely at the lake. Lizabelle had plenty of things she tended to throughout the day. The other animals above and below the water's surface provided some entertainment for Lizabelle as she watched their comings and goings, but the animals were mostly indifferent to her presence.

On the other hand, Lizabelle was anything but indifferent to her presence high up in the mountains. She could never quite retrieve the whole memory of how she came to be a Mountain Mermaid. As distant as the milky white galaxies in the middle of the night, Lizabelle held onto a memory of running on two fleshy human legs across a worn dirt path towards a tall figure.

Turning over the rocks to keep the algae from forming and sweeping the sand back into place with her hand, Lizabelle made her silty bed. Exhaling deeply, bubbles formed in front of her face as she prepared to peek her head above the surface of the lake. With her lungs empty, she slowly rose through the string of pearlescent bubbles until she reached the surface to gulp in fresh air.

At the top, Lizabelle scanned her surroundings. Turning in a slow circle with her arms outstretched, Lizabelle lifted her gaze upwards to see fluffy cumulus clouds building in the pale blue sky. The warmth of the morning sun licked at the icy droplets of water that clung to her arms and hair. Lowering her chin, Lizabelle caught the movement of a small doe coming to the water's edge for a drink.

Over the last several seasons, Lizabelle noticed how frequently the glacier rumbled. She observed how the gentle sloping of the snow-cruled talus near her lake home shrank, while simultaneously producing more volumes of water that fed the lake from above. As the glacier's rumble reverberated in the valley, the deer paused her drinking.

Water still dripping from the doe's closed lips, she took a few hesitant steps back from the water, turned, and ran into the nearest thick leafy wild huckleberry bushes. Lizabelle took her cue from the doe, ducking back down under the water's surface to her own safety.

A fish gave Lizabelle a glossy side-eye glance as it floated past her submerged face. Lizabelle swatted at the strands of hair that insisted on obstructing her view.

Sensing whatever the deer feared had passed, Lizabelle brought herself back to the surface of the lake. The sun was now higher in the sky and quickly warming up the valley floor. The scent of wildflower blossoms opening wafted across the lake. Lizabelle made long sweeping breaststrokes, heading for a large flat rock at the water's edge, just at the mouth of the stream that fed the lake.

The rock was worn in the spots Lizabelle continually used to grip and pull herself up out of the water to sunbathe on sunny days. The cool granite surface felt familiar under her palms after so much use. With the ease of a well-practiced mount, she pushed and glided onto the top of the rock in one quick movement. Unbeknownst to Lizabelle, a man approached the eastern edge of her mountain valley.

Lying face up on the rock, Lizabelle patted her damp fur as water evaporated from her body. A gentle tinkling of water dripped down the vertical rock face above. Her tail flicked gently back and forth against the cool stone, the fanned tip dipping now and then into the lake water below.

It was on this rock that Lizabelle did her best thinking. Sometimes she daydreamed, creating worlds within worlds. Her imaginary characters engaged in everyday dialogue with her. She, as the protagonist, would say out loud to no one, "Why yes, I did notice the marmots were a bit standoffish today." And "Should we go explore the new rock formation at the foot of the talus?"

Without hearing his footsteps over the din of the meadow and her drowsy daydreams, the man now made his way towards Lizabelle's rock. Sensing his presence, Lizabelle froze in fear, not opening her eyes.

The man spoke in a strange, low tone, chuckling to himself in a language she could not understand. Lizabelle willed herself to stay as still as a statue, the way she'd observed the marmots doing when a bear or a moose ambled by the lake.

Suddenly, there was a loud “thwack!” The wet, sickening sound bounced off the sides of the mountains in the valley. A searing pain shot through Lizabelle, and she writhed on the rock. Opening her eyes wide with fear, Lizabelle watched as the man heaved his large axe up and away from her tail. The tail, she saw with horror, was now spliced in two. It quivered involuntarily, but almost no blood oozed out.

Lizabelle tried to cry out but couldn’t find her voice. The man stood over her maimed body, staring wide-eyed back and forth, from her fin to his axe. Then, as though he suddenly resurfaced from his own daydream, the man turned and hurried away. He let the heavy axe drag in the soil, leaving its mark in the earth behind him.

As the shadowy woods at the edge of the meadow absorbed the man’s figure, Glacier Mother gave a loud, grieving shudder. She loved all the creatures in her care. Seeing Lizabelle harmed, unable to protect her, broke the Glacier Mother’s heart. With Glacier Mother’s shuddering cry, all the snow, ice, and rocks layered above the alpine lake came crashing down into Lizabelle’s lake.

Lizabelle lay still on her rock as the sun made its slow arc across the blue sky. With the warming air, the snow and ice surrounding Lizabelle began to melt. Finally, she began sobbing. Her salty tears mixed with the tiny streams of fresh water flowing around her.

The alpine lake, now drained, looked like nothing more than a broken pile of boulders. Without a home or her fin, Lizabelle felt dark thoughts creep in, “What reason do I have to live?”

Many suns and moons passed over her, but Lizabelle barely lifted her head off the rock. Being of both the water world and the terrestrial land, she did not need the water to survive. But Lizabelle felt a yearning to glide through the silky water—the last place she’d felt safe.

Shivering on the cold rock at night, the marmots thought to creep a little closer, curling up at the base of her rock. The warmth of their collective bodies radiated up towards hers.

The deer still came in the early morning hours to drink from the small trickles seeping out of the now-buried lake. The doe’s soft brown eyes met Lizabelle’s when she drew her mouth away from the water, and Lizabelle craved to have the doe’s sense of peace. Unsure what became of the fish who shared her underwater world in the lake, Lizabelle dreamt about their flicking tails.

Somewhere underneath the layers of scree, glacial boulders, and ice, Glacier Mother continued to weep for the Mountain Mermaid. Glacier Mother sometimes wondered if she’d been mistaken in saving the little girl. Would it have been kinder to leave her to die in the snow so many seasons ago? Save Lizabelle from this horrible fate?

As Glacier Mother wept, water collected into the veins of a weeping rock wall high in the mountain. The water cascaded down the mountainside into the valley, forming a waterfall. The waterfall grew in volume and eventually, Lizabelle's rock was constantly covered by the flow.

Without a tail, Lizabelle could only roll herself off the rock and out of the water's constant splashing. She sat at the rock's base, using the gray stone as a backrest. A new pool of icy blue water began to form around Lizabelle at the base of the rock. She sat for several days like this in the pool.

Because the Glacier Mother is an ancient one, her tears have power. As Lizabelle sat in Glacier Mother's tears, the cleaved-in-half tail began to change. The silvery scales fell off as the wounds healed over with a kind of translucent skin.

Several moons later, the bottom of the tailfin on either side hardened. Bones began to form. Lizabelle realized she was growing human legs and feet! Finally, on a clear moonless night as Lizabelle slept, the Glacier Mother's tears completed their work.

A faint tickling against her skin woke Lizabelle. After pulling herself away from her dream, Lizabelle opened her eyes to see the tiniest purple-blue fish swimming between her toes. She had toes! Carefully, Lizabelle flexed her feet back and forth. The fish continued to swim around her new feet, making her giggle.

Lizabelle attempted to stand. Flexing her knees to her chest, she used her arms to steady herself on the rock. Wobbly at first, Lizabelle stood calf-deep in the cool pool of water, laughing aloud. All the animals nearby looked up at the peal of her laughter. She wasn't positive, but Lizabelle could have sworn she saw the other animals smile at her.

With two new legs, Lizabelle learned to use them and became stronger every day. She ventured further away from the safety of the pool under the waterfall, surveying the mountain valley with fresh eyes.

Sometimes it was painful for Lizabelle to observe the rubble covering up her old lake home. Other times, she appreciated how lucky she was to survive both the horrible man's axe and the glacial avalanche. Lizabelle had hidden in the pool with her injuries for so long that she now felt restless. So, she gave herself a job.

Each day, Lizabelle came to the rubble pile at the buried lake. With the help of her new sturdy legs, she removed the boulders one by one. It was hard work. Lizabelle's hands and feet bled from the rough stones she hauled away, but eventually, the outline of the lake began to reappear. The closer Lizabelle got to uncovering what she hoped were remnants of her lake, the harder she worked to rebuild her home.

Glacier Mother looked on with joy as the waterfall caught the sun and cast a rainbow over Lizabelle's hard work. Lizabelle knew this mountain valley would never be the same. Lizabelle knew she was not the same. But Lizabelle would always be the Mountain Mermaid, and she was stronger than ever.

The End.

C.J. Beecher is a professional archaeologist and avocational writer. Her stories and poems are usually an attempt to capture the awe of nature and the resilience of the human spirit. She has won 2nd place in The London Writers' Salon Flash Fiction contest (2025), received Honorable Mention for a poem published by Wingless Dreamer (2021), and received Honorable Mention for Ruminare Magazine's Flash Non-Fiction contest (2020). C.J. lives in Montana with her husband and pomsy. She can be found on [Substack @cjbeecher](#).

The Gingerbread Baker *by Teresa Renton*

So, the gingerbread man sits on the fox's tail. And the fox begins to swim.

-The Gingerbread Man Ladybird book

She baked gingerbread men daily—whole families of them—using her own recipe. Ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg spiced the air as she swished her wooden spoon around her bowl, kneaded, rolled, and cut her figures. She'd even baked her own family—Mr. Robinson and the children. It was the only way to guarantee a perfect family.

“If you want decent gingerbread, then bake your own,” she always said, “you know what goes in; you're in control.”

She fed them homegrown vegetables; anything in a packet containing more than one ingredient was off-limits.

The children grew into sturdy, flawless gingerbread kids. They pleased their parents with unblemished school reports, and impressive sporting and music achievements. Victoria played the violin in the orchestra while Harry's fingers rolled over piano keys like a breeze over a soft sea.

Each day, her husband kissed her on the left cheek and drove off to the city in his Tesla. Yes, she possessed the perfect recipe and no one, not even her husband and children, realized they were gingerbread. So perfect was her creation.

However, children grow and discover fast food. Victoria's first bite of a burger and chips from a well-known outlet caused her to almost crumble at the edges. Harry drooled when he licked his first lollipop at a friend's house recently. “How is this not good for you?” he said, his lips red and sticky from food coloring and white sugar.

A week later, Mrs. Robinson joined her family in the dining room, ready to enjoy a quinoa vegetable and seed bowl with them. Their laughter reached her and she smiled as she sat. But with no warning, Victoria stood up and cried out “OW!” and glared at Harry. Harry's face was bright red and his eyes blazed.

“It was her!” He pointed, unnecessarily, at Victoria. “She's been kicking me!”

“Go to your room Victoria,” Mrs. Robinson said, her voice barely disguising a quiver.

“Come on now,” Mr. Robinson tapped his fingers on the table and nodded for Victoria to sit.

“Now!” Mrs. Robinson ignored her husband, stood up and pointed at the dining room door.

“Let's calm down, love, there's no need to let this get out of hand. Children argue sometimes. Victoria, say sorry and we'll forget all about it.”

It was Mrs. Robinson's turn to flush red. Taking deep breaths, she composed herself enough to sit and accept her daughter's apology. But as the winter wind blew outside and the rain beat against double glazing, she felt the same storm inside her. *What is going on? What is happening to my perfect family? Even my husband contradicts me now. Was my recipe flawed? Did I not bake them right?*

She looked at each one in turn, and suddenly she noticed them. Tiny, almost imperceptible crumbs gathering at their edges. And flaws, cracks. A faint hairline crack on Harry's left hand and a blemish on her husband's neck. *This is not good*, she thought. Her hands shook as she lifted the plates into the kitchen.

That night, when the children slept, she stole into their rooms and brushed away the minor flaws with her fingers. *I can fix this*, she resolved. *I'll eat their flaws away if I have to, and all will be well.*

That night, she slipped into her antique-lace slip, his favorite, and slid into bed beside him. His eyes failed to echo the smile on his lips, but she interpreted his sigh as pleasure.

“I want to eat you.” Her voice was soft and raspy as she nuzzled into his neck and began to nibble. *Nibble away the flaws*, she thought. *All of them.*

Over the next few days, Mrs. Robinson found herself eating up her family's flaws more often. More cracks, more spots, blemishes, and dents appeared, and it was hard to keep up. It wasn't until she was putting clean washing away in Victoria's bedroom that she discovered the cause. Sweet wrappers. *Sherbet sweet wrappers!*

She combed through the children's drawers and found a discount coupon for Pizza Press and a small plastic toy from that famous fast-food chain. She folded into herself that tainted relief you get when something terrible is confirmed, but at least you have an explanation, a reason, a prognosis.

Her thoughts drifted to her husband. *Surely he's not eating crap?* She made for their bedroom and, after 20 minutes of frantic rifling through his cupboards, found nothing suspicious.

I know, I'll check the study, and she headed towards the oak-paneled room. Apart from the walls, the rest of the room was modest: one bookcase, a large wooden desk, and a fabric-covered chair.

She pulled open the drawers under the desk one by one and studied the contents. His black-covered diary held nothing more than appointments, figures, meeting notes, and calculations. Other than that, the contents comprised invoices, statements, a stapler, envelopes, pens, and other random bits of stationery.

She replaced the pens and something struck her, something unfamiliar. Amongst his pens—a

spare fountain pen and a couple of Bic biros—she saw an elegant one decorated in a dark Liberty-style design. Holding it up to the light, she admired the gold swirls against the navy. *Not his usual kind of thing*, she noted. Then she noted again:

NOT his usual kind of thing!

That evening, Mr. Robinson was working late. Mrs. Robinson usually fussed over him in the evenings when he returned late from work. She would wait for him, make him rest and give him homemade cookies, using organic coconut sugar only. She always noticed he looked tired, with his loose tie, disheveled appearance, and thought he worked too much.

However, Mr. Robinson hadn't been working late at all. That very evening, he passed on organic vegan amaranth, washed down with kefir. Instead, he quenched his thirst and satisfied his hunger for forbidden fruit, elsewhere.

He ate of a foxy woman who nourished him with sweetmeats, white sugar doughnuts, and triple-fried fries. She relished crisp batter and non-organic peaches; he watched as pesticide-contaminated juices ran down her chin and traced the crevices between her breasts.

He tasted, he ate, and discovered he liked the taste of these forbidden juices and the salty sweat of imperfection. She had promised a way out. He ran to her outstretched arms as she seduced him and carried him away from his cage, if only for a while.

Mrs. Robinson had made plans. She didn't need explanations or gory details. This could not continue. It had to be fixed before it contaminated the children any further. When Mr. Robinson came home that night, Mrs. Robinson didn't offer cookies, the organic, coconut sugar only; instead, she pulled his tie knot, bringing his face closer to hers and ruffled his disheveled hair with her other hand. Then she kissed him passionately, her tongue searching his, her hands undoing zippers, buttons. He had nowhere to run. They made love on the living room floor, urgent, loud. Then she ate him. Every last crumb.

The next morning, after the children had gone to school, Mrs. Robinson set about baking gingerbread. She knew she'd had to eat her husband with all his flaws. But she needed to bake the children a new father before they returned home from school.

Teresa Renton writes poetry and flash fiction from a messy desk in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. Her work appears in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Ink* in *Thirds*, *Across the Margin*, and elsewhere, and will feature in Good Printed Things' Poetry Anthology: *If Memory Serves*. Teresa was a finalist in Women On Writing's Winter 2025 Flash Fiction Competition. Teresa's work is found [on her website](#).

The Tempest and the Temptress *by Ashley Felice*

June is seasick on the deck of the ferry boat that will take her back to the island. She feels the familiar weight in her stomach, the wetness of her tongue, and it reminds her that she does not belong.

Siren Island was once hers. Her dad reminded her of that on his last voicemail.

I need your help now, Junebug. It's time for you to come home.

But home isn't supposed to feel foreign. Or rather, home makes June feel like a foreigner.

As the choppy water shoulders against the boat's hull, the line of the horizon bends to kiss the bow, and all the objects that were loyally solid only moments earlier give in to the undulation. Everything melts willfully; only June resists, unswayed by the ocean's affectionate overture. She takes a deep breath of salty air and tries to remember the feel of solid ground beneath her feet.

Closer to the front of the boat a coltish boy holds a pair of binoculars as he stands on tiptoes, his arms wrapped around the ledge.

"I think I see one, Max!" a man shouts, teasing his son and pointing at the water. "Hurry up, don't miss it!" Max continues to try to muscle himself into a better viewing position before his father hefts him up by the armpits.

"I don't see it," Max says. "Where is she? Where'd she go?"

"She must have dived under, Max. They're fast swimmers, remember? Keep those binoculars Grandpa bought you handy. You'll need to be vigilant if you want to catch a real mermaid."

June has to roll her eyes at that. There hasn't been a confirmed mermaid sighting in well over a hundred years, not since the existence of a mythological creature required more substantial proof than the drunken testament of a fisherman washed ashore. Grainy photographs of aggrandized ocean debris or a pixelated image of what could be a face on the ledge of a rocky inlet just doesn't cut it these days. And yet, it always amazes June how even the most pragmatic residents of Siren could so heartily indulge in whimsical hope despite the futile evidence to support it.

It's not that mermaids don't exist. June isn't bitter enough to ever utter such nonsense as that, although she recalls some of her more conservative neighbors preferring to whitewash that particularly gruesome episode of the island's history. It'd be more accurate to say they don't exist *anymore*.

In a few minutes June is going to step off this boat, and the port will welcome her as it has all the other twisted tourists and morbid voyeurs who have come to the island over the past century—like carnival spectators hungry for a glimpse of once vicious beasts, now toothless and tamed, to see what was once wild and magnificent mastered into submission.

How simple it all could be if June could truly be as she's always felt: an outsider. She could buy a cone of handmade ice cream at the candy store, rent VHS tapes of movies she would have no desire to watch on the mainland, rent a bicycle and circle the coast, buy groceries from the market and be charmed by its meager offerings.

June could visit the museums, the old fisherman huts preserved as historical sites. She could brush her fingers along the indestructible threads of moonlit hair braided into fishing wire or weaved into casting nets and sweep her eyes across the glass covered display of boning knives tipped with pearlescent sea scales, almost imperceptibly small. She could purchase what she'd be told is a genuine sharpened incisor wrapped in copper and hung on a black cotton cord like some common quartz crystal, but she would decide upon leaving the gift shop that it is too ugly to ever actually wear around her neck.

She would find it all to be quaint, and then she would leave again.

"Junebug!" She hears her dad call to her just as her feet find the shifty dock. She has a sudden urge to get back on the boat, but a wave of nausea encourages her forward.

"Junebug, over here!" June's dad reminds her of a music box she had as a child; the ballerina's smile was painted on, but she twirled interminably in an arabesque to some morbid Tchaikovsky melody. June's father is the only man she knows who could look so miserable while smiling and waving both arms from behind a wooden barricade in the ferry parking lot. June waves back and she thinks she even manages a comparable countenance.

"Hi, Dad." June squints and shields her eyes from the late morning sun. "You didn't have to meet me here."

"Well, you won't stay at my place, so the least I can do is give you a lift to the house. Are you sure you don't want to just stay with me? There's a guest bed. It's clean."

"I'm allergic to cats."

"Since when?"

"Since the third grade, I think, if I had to pinpoint a specific time."

"Right," he blows out a puff of air and smiles. "It's good to see you. Let's get going." He takes the bag from June's shoulder even though he walks with a limp now and rarely in a straight line. June

doesn't argue.

The drive along the shoreline is short and quiet, neither of them knowing what to say. June watches the water on her right, the waves crashing over rocky jetties and lapping into the sandy inlets; it's always moving.

The house is tucked away on a shaded road. There's an ocean view at the back, but only from the balcony off the bedroom on the third floor. That was where Grams slept.

The property looks darkened somehow, even with the summer sun so high in the sky. The front lawn is overgrown, a sight that makes June bite her tongue to stop from speaking aloud the accusations in her head. The path from the mailbox to the porch is narrowed, crowded by menacing weeds like creeping thistle and white flowering bindweed.

"It's a bit...untended. Maybe I should have warned you." June's dad looks sheepish from the driver's seat.

"It's alright, Dad. That's what I'm here for, right?"

"Well, no, Junie, that's not right. That's not why you're here. I mean, is that why you're here?"

"No, of course not," June says, thinking she must not have been biting down hard enough.

"Well, I'll leave you to settle in. You know how to reach me."

"You're not coming inside?" June asks, but the disappointment in her voice is more in herself. She's out of practice expecting the worst of people.

"Oh," he says, like he hadn't even considered it. "No, I have some things I need to take care of. There's still some paperwork to be signed, I think. And my suit."

"Your suit?"

"I had it dry cleaned. Can you believe it still fits? Well, it mostly fits. I wasn't sure how it should be. I haven't worn a suit in...oh, I don't know—"

"Six years."

"Yes. I guess that's right," June's dad says, averting his eyes. "So, anyway, I have to pick it up this afternoon."

"Fine. Let's meet for dinner. At the Inn? Six o'clock?"

"Sounds good, Junebug. I can pick you up!"

"That's alright. I can walk." June kisses her dad's cheek. He smells like old memories, like summer evenings and the Red Sox radio broadcasts, like tobacco and Budweiser. "I'll meet you there."



Mermaid legends are the island's favorite pastime, and every family has one that becomes slightly augmented with every retelling, each generation corrupting the island's history with their own bastardized version. While June outgrew the romanticization of mermaids long ago, something about the way Grams always told the story still resonates with her. It was because of that story that June left Siren Island believing that sometimes—when you boil it all down, when the bare bones are stripped at the bottom of the pot—a lie tastes no different from the truth.



One day a mermaid swam too close to shore and fell in love with a fisherman. She had never seen a man; her kind were only female, immortal, and never mated. The fisherman had strong hands, a muscular back, and black hair that he trimmed close to his face and neck. At first the mermaid only saw him aboard his fishing boat, shielded from the waist down by the boat's hull. She followed him, careful to avoid the nets he cast. When she discovered that the man had legs, that the two of them were incompatible, she wept in the way that only a mermaid could weep, a song of sadness that called forth storm clouds. The sky cried salt water that day, the winds churned the water the way a baker kneaded bread, and lightning crackled along the horizon.

In her despair, the mermaid could not understand that she was putting the man she loved in danger. It was her first man, after all, and she hadn't known they could be so frail. The vessel capsized, and the crewmen were all tossed to their watery ends.

Though the mermaid knew she was interfering in matters not of her own kind, she felt she had caused the wreckage, and she was compelled, both by her heart and by her guilt, to save the black-haired fisherman with legs. She pulled him under the water, below the churning waves, to the depths where the sounds of the storm were hushed. She kissed him then, and breathed life back into his lungs.

The fisherman was found washed up on a rocky inlet after he was presumed dead along with the rest of his crew. He told his village the story of the storm that came out of nowhere, of hail the size of his fists, gusts of wind that could lift a man off his feet, and the salty spray that cut at his face like lashes of a whip. He told them how he was dragged underwater, how he watched his prayers escape his lips in bubbles, but then was saved by a beautiful creature with long tendrils of silver hair and icy blue eyes that seemed to glow in the darkest depths of the ocean.

Some believed him, some called him a fool, and some others pitied him thinking his grief had driven him mad. Still, every night he went back to where he was found, waiting for a glimpse of the creature to whom he owed his life.

The mermaid begged her gods for legs so she could walk on land like her fisherman did, so she could embrace him again. When her gods forsook her, she made a bargain with the ocean itself, a heartless beast. For the freedom to leave the water, the mermaid would have to be willing to sacrifice her first-born child into the open mouth of a humpback whale. Not yet knowing what it meant to be human, she did not hesitate to agree.

The mermaid appeared to her fisherman as if in a vision. Her hair reflected the light of the full moon and was draped over the length of her body like a white robe, her exposed skin was sleek as a silver dolphin's, her voice was a mournful hum that quivered in the fisherman's chest, and she had long slender legs that carried her towards him. He loved the mermaid, right there on the beach, and he thanked her for choosing him.

The mermaid fell asleep content, but she woke up in a world unknown. Her skin was dry and tight, and the morning sun burned her eyes. The rocks underneath her body were abrasive, and there were tiny black spiders that crept between her toes. The man beside her, her lover, was surprised that the mermaid woman was real. He convinced himself she had been only a dream, but now he was disillusioned by the light of day.

This woman was not the creature he remembered; she had too blue veins that vined over the pallid skin of her chest and neck, a mess of knotted hair the musty color of sea foam, and crooked teeth slightly, but unnervingly, too large for her mouth.

The mermaid could never have known, but the man she loved was already taken, married to a local woman, a gentle woman who was right then at home fussing at her husband's absence. The fisherman called the mermaid cruel to have tricked him so, to have tempted him and made him stray from his poor, sweet wife. The mermaid cried, but she had no tears; she left them in the ocean.

With nowhere to go, and with no fin to swim, the mermaid woman hid herself at the shore. She fished with her bare hands and cracked mussels open on the shore rocks. She collected rainwater to drink, for she found the ocean water no longer felt clean to her; it had a sharp mineral taste that only made her thirstier. She learned that there were human women too, and human children, babies, and human elders. She watched them live their dry land lives and saw how easily she could hide from them; how invisible she was simply because they did not believe she existed. Sometimes she saw her fisherman, but she did not go to him. It was agony to know the way he regretted her.

Months went by, and the mermaid woman's stomach swelled. She was glad of it, glad to soon have a child born with which she could pay her debt to the ocean and return to her life at sea. She hated the unwet sand, hated the way the sun made her too hot in the day, and the moon made her too cold at night, and she hated the sound of screeching birds and human voices.

She thought it would be simple, but when it came to pay, the price was just too high. She could not give up her daughter, the tiny wriggling fish of a thing she pulled from herself; the baby was the only piece of the man she loved that she could keep.

The ocean cursed the mermaid, the child, and all the women in their line. They would be born human but crave the water, they would dream of places they could never go, and they would love men who could not love them back. These wretched women, who would learn to live like humans, would be thirsty always, their skin would be dry and itchy, and they would forever feel the pull of the tide on their hearts.



That's one version of the story. There are others. All of them offer up reasons for why the women on Siren Island are notably unhappy. In this town it is still tradition to blame misfortune on the water. Too many women on the island claim to be descendants of that first-born babe destined for the belly of a whale. Some sink themselves in bathtubs trying to breathe underwater. Some fill their pockets with shore pebbles and quietly wade out to sea. Others drown themselves from the inside out, drinking clear liquors to quench insatiable thirsts.

June never wanted to be like those women, like her mother. She applied for scholarships, got accepted into college on the mainland, and vowed to keep the Atlantic at her back.

Yet here she is again.



The key to the house is still hidden under the same empty flowerpot, but June finds the door unlocked. She lets herself in, some part of her still expecting to hear the home shopping network from the television in the living room making too-soon suggestions for Christmas gifts, the whirring of the window fan, and the shuffle of her grandmother's house slippers on the carpet. But it's quiet.

June pauses at the entrance holding her bag tightly against her, hesitant to disturb the air inside. She knows that this is the moment when the house becomes something else to her entirely. Once a childhood sanctuary, from now on reduced to its details: glass elephant figurines, the unweaving of wicker furniture, a set of blue crystal wine goblets, and stained white tablecloths embroidered with flower petals. It becomes a paper deed with her grandmother's signature—the matching swoops of capital, cursive M's—and parting notes under refrigerator magnets that start with “upon my death...” and end with “xoxo.”

June slips off her shoes and carefully places them in the entryway closet beside a pair of canvas loafers—smaller than hers and with the soles worn thin—before she carries her things up the stairs.

She stops at the second story landing, places the palm of her hand on the closed door to her old room, but then continues up to Grams's bedroom instead. It's hot in the house, and the stairs are steep; she feels sweat along her hairline and her upper lip already.

The old wooden door isn't locked, but it's swollen and stuck. June allows her bags to fall to the floor so she can put both her hands and weight behind it. When it suddenly gives with a crack, layered white paint crumbles from the frame, and June stumbles inside.

Wet, salty air, sucked from the room into the stuffy hallway, rushes over and around June, sweeping her hair from her shoulders. June inhales, realizing she hadn't been breathing. The balcony door is left open—or maybe the latch gave and nobody was here to secure it—and the curtains beckon June forward, snapping in the sea breeze like the sails of a ship. Sand whispers secrets as it sweeps in circles across the floorboards, gritty under June's bare feet. The bed linens are damp. The metal bed posts are starting to rust.

In the distance, the horizon is blue and straight—a cerulean sky folds over deep indigo waters like a woman's compact mirror—broken only for a moment by the grayish curve of a whale and the frothy white splash it leaves in its wake.

“I need a drink,” June says to herself or the ocean.

She leaves her bags in the bedroom and heads back down the winding set of stairs; they greet her feet like old friends in their languid language of creaks and groans. When she gets to the bottom, her feet slap in a shallow expanse of water; she grips her toes against the carpet, soft and slippery as sea moss, and follows the sound of its source into the kitchen. The faucet emits a thin but steady stream of water into an overflowing basin. June rushes over to the sink and tightens the knob, but the water continues to drip, echoing a sound like popping lips.

June retrieves a half empty bottle of apple brandy from the cabinet under the sink and a glass tumbler from the shelf above it. She pours two fingers worth into the tumbler and leaves it on the counter. A rusty red peekytoe crab clicks across the blue laminate to investigate its contents but then shuffles back and folds itself into the corner from whence it came, the blank and glassy specs of its eyes still watching June.

“Cheers, Grams,” June says and takes a swig straight from the bottle. She stalls with the liquor in her mouth for a moment, laying a hand on her stomach to quell a wave of queasiness, and then quickly spits the brandy back out into the overflowing sink. June wipes her mouth with the back of her sleeve. She pours the rest of the bottle's contents out onto the flooded floor. The water swirls around June and laps at her ankles like an overeager puppy, never settling.

Still holding the bottle by the neck, she shakes open a black garbage bag and opens the refrigerator; the house's power has been turned off, so it's no longer keeping anything cold. Polished pink mollusks and rough, cream-colored barnacles emboss the inner walls, and the door shelves are embedded with olive-green algae. Appreciating the empty produce drawers—Grams knew she hadn't been promised the time for perishable goods—June indiscriminately tosses the old condiments and expired bottles of salad dressing into the open bag along with the brandy bottle.

June does the same thing in the freezer, tossing boxes of defrosted fish sticks and microwavable bags of peas and corn amongst the silver yawning oyster shells and spiraling periwinkles like blinking eyes. When she closes the door, a note beneath a lobster magnet catches her: *Junebug, Don't forget garbage and recycling pickup is Thursday. Secure the bin lid or the raccoon will get into it. You'll see not much has changed on this island. Except it's almost certainly a new raccoon. Xoxo, Grams.*

Suddenly the garbage bag doesn't feel big enough.

June wants to fill the bag with everything she'd rather not look at: the checkerboard placemats and the plastic salt and pepper shakers, the mounted phone with the length of its coiling chord, the paper calendar thumbtacked to the wall, chipped ceramic coffee mugs and a drawer of stolen sugar packets.

As June fills the bag, the murky water rises and offers up more items for disposal. June is nudged by a floating paperback novel with a bookmark wedged at the halfway mark, a framed school photograph of herself from the fourth-grade floats idly by, an empty ceramic painted vase bobs up and down like a buoy in front of her, and a small school of mackerel brush up against the backs of her knees.

June is thinking about a black sheath dress, woolen with an embroidered lapel, which she's sure is still in Grams's closet and a string of baroque pearls in her jewelry box, and that that's all she'll keep. She'll wear them to the wake and walk away in them. The rest can drown in the sea.

June is trudging through waist deep water now, the garbage bag floating behind her, and even the furniture has lost its footing; the wicker living room set rises, the loveseat and chairs tipping over onto their fronts. The walls groan like the heaving cabin of a sailboat. Crude oil paintings—a more recent hobby of Grams'—fall free from their wall hooks and the doors of the upper cabinets sway back and forth, purging their contents into the waiting water beneath them.

It's the mosquitos, though, creating ripples on the water's surface like raindrops and biting at the exposed flesh of her neck and forearms, which make June finally quit.

Lugging the now full garbage bag behind her, June makes her way out the back. When she opens the door, the water rushes out onto the porch, a tumbling wave in a tidal pool, and sifts through the screen like a sieve. The storm door slaps its frame behind June as if to say *good riddance*.

June heaves the black bag into the refuse bin and then gestures rudely towards the house, but she doesn't look back. She's dripping wet and barefoot on the water warped wood of the boardwalk, on the sand and stone footpath that meanders towards the shore through beach rose and bayberry shrubs, and then on the sun-soaked pebbles of the beach.



When June arrived on Siren Island earlier this afternoon, the sky murmured in hushed, white cumulus clouds between the peeling rays of a summer sun. Now it's sparsely blue, and it rumbles loudly, a guttural sound. The water trembles with shadows and white ghosts. The tangy sweet smell of a storm agitates the air around June, but she walks along the shore unstirred.

She was a good woman, her dad said of Grams in his voicemail, the one where he broke the news to June about her death. *She never liked me much, but that's just a symptom of good sense.*

June is meant to meet him at the Inn soon, and she could get there, walking the rocky coastline like this. But she would be late.

June wonders what they'll even talk about, or really what they won't.

The men and women of this island speak different languages: Men, who build vessels and exploit the plentiful waters for profit, who draw maps with straight lines, who trust the mercurial winds to bring them safely home from sea. It's the women of Siren, who want nothing more than to drown themselves in it, to touch their toes to the sea floor with too little breath left to surface, to feel the chill in their soft bones and be devoured, heart and soul.

What could June tell this man about the ocean?

With that thought, the sky crackles icy blue, and something glimmers at the end of a jetty. June looks in the direction of the Inn but then turns back and climbs atop the jutting rocks to get a better look. The fin of a large sea creature—possibly a sea turtle or a dolphin—flaps desperately against some entanglement, a fishing net caught on the jagged rocks, probably thrown over by a rogue wave. June left her phone—and her shoes, for that matter—back at the house, so she couldn't report it or call for help.

It will die here, slowly, while June has dinner with her dad, before she says her last goodbyes to Grams, before she boards the ferry back to the mainland. Unless she does something.

June knows better than to venture out onto the jetties in fair weather, let alone in the imminent threat of a storm, when the tide is high, but that is exactly what she does. The rocks are slick with sea spray and algae, and they shift precariously beneath her. She gets down on her hands and knees to steady herself, crawling towards the metallic looking appendage at the edge, as the waves crash

around her. When she comes upon the creature, though, she recoils from it.

The mermaid isn't beautiful. Her skin is dull and bloodless, and it's coated in a slimy film to which coarse sand and broken bits of seashells cling. Her shoulders are broad, and her chest is strong, but the ribcage expands and contracts rapidly out of the water.

She hasn't aged the way humans do, but June can tell she is elderly; the hair around her temples—a tangle of lusterless, moss-green cords—is thin and receded above her forehead, and the lobes of her ears hang loosely over flattened gills. She is scarred—opalescent striations across her muscular arms and torso—like she has already survived several lifetimes of violence.

The lower half of her body is covered in coppery scales like rusted armor, and the fin—less delicate than the tears in it would suggest—is ensnared in a length of knotted nylon, wrapped around a boulder. But June is looking at her eyes, unblinking, black and iridescent as an oil slick, and looking back at June.

June crouches over the fin—it flicks in warning and June raises her arms in surrender.

"I'm going to help you," June explains. A short series of clicks and high-pitched wails—like scratching forks on dinner plates—escape from the mermaid's mouth. June takes it as consent.

I'm going to help a mermaid, June panics to herself. But how?

The netting is frayed. There's nothing in her pockets, not even a pin in her hair, so June searches around for something sharp like sea glass or a shell shard. She settles on a shifting rock that she hopes she can lift.

Heaving the black basalt above her head, June lets out a primordial scream—a sound swallowed by the crash of thunder and ocean and squalling winds—before she brings the rock down as hard as she can against the fraying rope. She does this over and over, grunting with the weight and the effort, her hands vibrating from the impact, but she doesn't stop. Not until only a single thread is left intact. Then a wall of water slams into her before she can think to hold her breath.

June's feet are knocked out from under her, and her body is slammed down against the rough rocks of the jetty. She considers herself lucky not to have been swept out into the tumultuous water—she knows what it's like to be at the whim of a wave, chomped on and chewed up until you're spit out like a plum pit onto the shore—but the air is pummeled out of her, and her skin stings. June grips the rocks, shredding the pads of her fingertips, but she's able to keep herself above water. There's a deafening roar in her ears, the ocean calling for something she's not willing to give, and then suddenly it's broken into a feathery quiet.

When June eventually tells this story, she doesn't remember how she finds the strength to pull herself back up onto the jetty, but she'll say how the mermaid is gone when she does, and the sun is shining again. She'll leave out the part where she goes back to the house to change out of wet clothes and bandage her scrapes before she calls her dad to pick her up. He's happy to do so.

At dinner June and her dad talk about anything but mermaids, anything but the ocean, anything but the ferry meant to take her back to the mainland. Instead, they talk about how the Red Sox are faring, the weather, and the name Mabel for a girl, which she's sure of.

When June eventually does tell this story, she does it in the same way Grams used to, making a drink more palatable by muddling the magic with the mundane at the bottom of the glass. She'll say it like she's certain it's the truth: *mermaids don't exist anymore*.

Ashley Felice, formerly a high school English teacher, is now a stay-at-home mom of two young girls and is married to the love of her life. She reads tarot cards, drinks a lot of tea, reads as much as she can, and writes magical fiction for her [Substack @ashleyfelice](#). Ashley's work is inspired by childhood magic, holidays steeped in tradition and nostalgia, and the changing of the seasons—which she enjoys with her family in their Hudson Valley home. Her current work-in-progress is a young adult gothic fantasy novel.



APHRODITE, PIERRE ROCHE (1914)

Peas for a Princess *by Ashini J. Desai*

I had begged my family to let me travel alone to my uncle's summer castle, Chateau du Provolone, where we would be meeting for my cousin Princess Brie's pre-wedding ladies' celebrations. I had already selected a custom ruby tiara for her and pink satin sashes for the rest of us with "Bride Squad" embroidered on them. I needed to be there as a member of the esteemed Royal Family.

"I'm eighteen now and do not need a chaperone," I explained to my parents.

"But Lola, you've never traveled alone before," my mother said, looking up from her needlepoint.

"Why are you being like this? So dramatic! I won't be alone. Lipton always likes driving on these long excursions. And Joanna is always at my side as a good Princess's Maid. She never leaves me alone, you know. She loves being with me." I waved to Joanna who was standing on the side, looking straight ahead per her rank.

Father started to say something, but I quickly interjected, "You never let me do anything. Ever! I'm absolutely bored here!" My Loubou heels made the perfect clicking sounds as I marched across the marble floors of the Great Room, and I tried to drag open the royal blue velvet curtains onto the window. "I want to see the world!" I underestimated how heavy the curtains were; when I forced them open, I got tangled inside of them.

Mother was still looking at her embroidery while motioning to Joanna, who came over to release me. She used the velvet curtain pull to draw the drapes open. Who knew?

Finally, Mother and Father agreed. "Yes, it would be nice to have you out of the house for a month. That is an idea. Go." I squealed with delight and embraced them before they changed their minds.

"Joanna! Come, we must pack," I called as I strode through the halls. "I'll tell you what I need."

We left early on Friday morning. I wore my pink Rucci athleisure outfit and my Kory Brich open-toed platform espadrilles. After Lipton had stacked my six bags into the back of the car, I advised Joanna to keep her own suitcase in her lap in the front seat. I was eager to recline in the backseat with my sleep mask on; since I woke up at 9:00 am I would surely have dark circles under my eyes. Someone said there was rain and I noticed the drizzle, so I put on my silk cap for protection.

Little did we know that the rain had engorged the rivers and the roads were flooded. We had to take new paths upon new paths, braving into unrecognizable terrain. Lipton's maps were all useless. After hours of suffering through the tempestuous weather, Lipton suggested we seek refuge for the night at the nearest castle on the hill. We saw the lights inside the building glowing like a golden beacon. We ventured towards it and Lipton stopped as close to the front door as he could go. We waited as he went to the front door to knock. When he returned, he said, "My lady, the butler tells me there is a royal family in residence here. We are welcome to take shelter."

"Good. Don't crowd my entrance," I reminded Lipton and Joanna.

Lipton held an umbrella for me, and I stepped into a puddle in the darkness. I squealed when I felt cold mud sliding into my Kory Brich open-toed platform espadrilles. Well, I *was* going to toss them anyway since they were from last season. Now the wind and rain whipped through my hair, and I could feel the frizz forming since my scalp is sensitive.

Their butler came to take our bags and lead Lipton and Joanna to the servants' quarters. "Lipton, do not forget my six bags. Wait. You must be tired. Just bring in five." I stood in the entry hall and the royal family in residence, I assumed, entered from the side.

The butler announced, "King Jenneth, Queen Kristal, and their son, Prince Kyle, welcome you." I turned to the King and Queen, and I introduced myself, which is unusual since everyone typically knows me.

"I am Princess Lola of Applebottomjeanshire," I said as I walked toward the Queen, extending a curtsy as you do for old people. "You know me. Everyone knows me. I'm an icon. A legend. You must know my family lineage and the realms we govern."

The Queen looked at me and said, "What are you wearing? You look poor."

I was shocked and shot a look over my shoulder at Joanna. I had asked her in the coach if I needed to reapply my lip color and she said I was fine. I can't believe her.

"It's this horrible weather, your Highness. It has destroyed my naturally silky hair. And these are my travel clothes. To fit in with the locals when I travel." I leaned closer to whisper, "so they don't know I'm a royal. My mother says it is risky to flash wealth on the local roads." I gave her a look and she nodded in understanding. I refrained from asking her why her castle paths were so muddy that my Kory Brich open-toed platform espadrilles were destroyed.

I continued, “I’m quite surprised you are not acquainted with my family’s estates and domains.” Their knowledge of regional geographic and imperial acquisitions was quite limited. I assumed it must be due to the desolate location of their sad muddy little property.

“Please consult with your royal cartographer to show you where our kingdom of Applebottomjeanshire reaches,” I advised them. The King stroked his beard and smiled.

The Queen, also smiling, said, “We shall surely inquire after your family, Princess Lola. In the meantime, your driver can leave your coach in our parking lot.”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “How lovely for you to have a parking lot. We have one too. It’s a parking garage. We have two levels to accommodate our own coaches and one for visitors.”

I was pleased with their generosity in offering what little they had. “And upon my return home, I will ensure that my father will compensate you for your kind hospitality. Obviously, as a princess, I do not carry money. All my assets are tied up in a trust fund, but my father will wire you.”

“You seem quite young, my dear,” said King Jenneth. “I am surprised your parents let you travel alone... especially as a royal, as you say. That is not the custom in our region. You should have had senior royal escorts with you.”

“It was my idea to travel independently, and my family agreed. My father always said, ‘We are rulers so we can make our own rules.’”

The Queen pursed her lips before forcing a smile. “Yes, but the old ways have their place. Charles will see you to your room and your maid can help you freshen up for dinner. I requested a late supper to be prepared for you.” I bowed my head in appreciation and nodded to Joanna to follow their butler. “You will be escorted to our special guest room. This is the best room—it is fit for a ‘princess.’” She did air quotes as she said the last part, which I thought was odd.

We followed their butler through the castle, and I was grateful to see a warm fire in the room. There was a plain olive-green nightgown and robe laying on a chair.

“Oh, how quaint this room is!” I declared loudly. The butler bowed and left. This sparsely furnished room hardly rivaled the fine amenities of our own guest quarters in the palace. The red velvet drapes were open, and the storm beat against the tall windows. We have tapestry on the walls for extra warmth and window draperies are always drawn at night. Our bedding is simple, but

luxurious. Why do they have all these mattresses with a ladder to climb into the high bed? That is so sad they need so many layers.

“This truly looks quite dangerous,” I said, touching the ladder. “Do I have to climb up? What if I roll over? We should put some of the pillows on the floor in case.”

“Yes, my lady,” replied Joanna. She climbed up the ladder and brought some pillows down to the floor to create a safe landing.

“Thank goodness it is only for one night.” I scrunched my nose, looking around the room.

“My lady, let us get you washed and changed for dinner,” said Joanna. She had laid my lilac Valentinago dinner gown on a chair.

“Thank you, Joanna. It’s so lovely.” Remembering what the Queen said, I added, “With you as my witness, I will never look poor again!” I proclaimed with my perfectly manicured delicate fist in the air. “I am in prison, and I shall still accessorize.”

“Yes, my lady,” replied Joanna.

When I entered the dining room, I noticed it was set with white and green porcelain on the ivory tablecloth and all the candles in the room were lit to make it cheerful. I thought of our exquisite gold place settings at home, but it is always good to try new things when one travels.

“Please enjoy this meal. We are renowned for having the finest peas in this region,” the Queen declared. I accepted her invitation and Prince Kyle seated himself beside me. He looked about my age, so I was eager for some company. We could get caught up on royal and aristocratic gossip; we must know the same people, even if they don’t know me.

Prince Kyle said, “I love peas. Peas are like the potatoes of the garden. You can snap them, you can peel them, puree, boil, mash, bake, sauté, and stir-fry. You can have it in the pod or without the pod. You can have it with carrots or without carrots. You can make pesto or salsa. You can fry them and toss in wasabi.” His green eyes suddenly lit up when he talked about peas. His whole face became alive in anticipation.

The footmen came forward with trays of food to set on the table. There were pea hummus wraps, pea shoots and watercress sandwiches, a hot curried pea soup, a platter of peas couscous and a tray of pea breads and rolls. I had never seen pea bread before. How would I know if it was moldy or fresh? I suddenly realized how famished I was since we missed teatime today. I accepted everything set before

me and simply devoured each course before the next was served. My body welcomed the warm meal and I felt energized.

“My, you have a hearty appetite, Princess. In our region, women of the nobility have delicate constitutions, unlike the peasants,” said the Queen, slowly raising her spoon to her lips.

I glared at her and she met my eyes. I smiled and swallowed the large bite of pea hummus wrap I had taken. “Oh, I’m so impressed with your selection of pea dishes.”

The Queen raised her eyebrows. “We are appeased you didn’t poo-poo our peas,” she chuckled.

Prince Kyle looked up from his pea shoot sandwich in delight. “See, I told you! “Princess, would you please pass the pea pesto! Isn’t it marvelous? The words simply roll off the tongue. Just as peas do. Wait until you have the pea mousse cake for dessert. We also have pea frozen custard, and they make a peas and carrot cake. But we had that last week, so you won’t be able to try it.” He looked a bit crestfallen at the thought of missing the cake.

After dinner, Prince Kyle and I carried on with our conversations, and he showed me around the library. He had his favorite sword, which was signed by this year’s Most Valuable Knight and some exquisite goblets inscribed with his name. He was quite charming, and his eyes twinkled with enthusiasm when he spoke. He listened as I told my stories, and he would occasionally push back a lock of blond hair from his eyes. I enjoyed his humor and we discovered we had much in common, especially music. He offered to bring in musicians this evening, but I politely requested he not since it was late. He took me over to the grand piano in the corner.

“Will you be playing this for us?” I asked, impressed.

“No, I didn’t buy the piano to play it; I bought it because it looks nice,” he explained. I was surprised because I would have done the same.

“Oh, I buy myself a gift every year, so this year I bought everything I wanted,” I said. We both laughed and exchanged ideas for gifts for ourselves.

When the King and Queen walked by us, they were whispering to each other; I thought I overheard the word “marriage.” But the Queen had shaken her head. I did not want to concern myself with them, anyway. Prince Kyle was offering to sing one of the songs he wrote.

“I think this one is perfect for you,” he said. I noticed his eyes were dark green like simmered peas. He flipped his head back to push that lock of hair from his eyes.

Stay with me, baby.

Baby don't break my heart.

We can't be apart. Peas, baby, peas.

That's all I want... give peas a chance.

I was amazed at his talent. Although we just met, Prince Kyle made me believe I was the one for him. He sang more love songs and dropped fanciful words and wisdom.

“I have a swagger instructor that teaches me different swaggerific things to do. He has helped me with my style and stuff like that.” I was in awe and made a mental note to ask father to get me one.

Prince Kyle spoke of a future, combining our kingdoms and conquering the world! “We can do anything we want!” he said, “But, you know... as long as my parents agree and allow us to do it.”

“Of course,” I said. Is this true love? Is this how it happens? It must be, I thought, as I looked at his blond hair, wanting to push that lock back for him. The Queen was seated nearby and kept eyeing me. I would flash a grin whenever we made eye contact.

“Shall we play some mini croquet in the hallways? I always do that on rainy days,” he suggested. However, I longed to sleep so I politely requested a reprieve.

“Yes, of course. We'll talk more in the morning. We have a special pea pancake breakfast that I'll order for tomorrow,” he said cheerfully. “Good night!”

The Queen said their butler would lead me. “You know what they say, dress your best when you go to bed because you don't know who you'll see in your dreams.” Her face cracked a bit as her tight lips strained upward. Meanwhile, I automatically pasted the perfect twinkling princess expression on my face and nodded.



In bed, I stare at the ceiling, suffering with the jagged rock between my shoulder blades. I know the royal family is behind this. It is not by coincidence that I am in this horrid sleeping situation.

I gasp for air as I suffocate in this deception of comfort. Kicking off the blankets, I take the satin pillow to the foot of the bed. I stretch easily and exhale in relief. But now there's a stab in my thigh—a reminder that I'm still not free. I curl my knees to my chest, wrapping my nightgown over my toes and burying my face into my body like a ball. I nod off to sleep and dream that I have turned into a big pea. I am a pea bobbing inside a large green pea soup tureen. My pearl earrings had turned into petite peas!

When the early morning sun hits my eyes, I raise myself onto my elbows and observe the room painted with an orange glow. My body aches and my head feels heavy, but it is much clearer now. This is not what I deserve. How dare they!

I am a respected member of our royal family, and truth be told, all our subjects appreciate my service. I know who I am in this world. Forget the wire transfer. I will tell my father to destroy them!

I need to stop lying down. I need to throw off the smothering illusions because this is not true love. I cannot sleep with rough stones underneath me. I need to control the situation. I call Joanna to hold the ladder for me so I may climb down.

“We are to set upon the road immediately! We must get to Chateau du Provolone today.” I say as I step down carefully. “Ask their servants to fetch me my breakfast. I shall dine here.”

“Yes, my lady.” Joanna scurries away. She returns shortly holding a tray with a goblet of green pea smoothie and some avocado toast. Wait, not avocado. Of course. It is mashed peas on toast.

“Leftover food? I. Cannot. Tolerate. This,” I exclaim, pushing the tray away.

“No, this is what they typically have in the morning. The famous green pea pancakes will be served as a second breakfast.”

There is a knock on the door and the Queen peeks in. “I heard some commotion, and I came to see if everything was agreeable.”

“I’m afraid not, your highness. I had a terrible sleep last night. I cannot stay in these conditions.”

“What conditions may I ask?” She leans in a little closer to me, staring at my face. I look at her with my bleary eyes and rub the sleep from them.

“That high bed was highly uncomfortable. There was a sharp pain in my shoulder and under my knees.”

“Why, you *are* a Princess!” she exclaims.

“Uhh... yes. I told you a hundred times last night. Princess Lola of Applebottomjeanshire. Everyone knows me,” I explain. “Except for you all.” The queen is now fluttering across the room and hugging me.

“We’ve had so many girls come through to try to marry Prince Kyle and inherit the Grand Pea Kingdom. We need him to marry an authentic blood princess. All these frauds have been showing up. The only way to identify a true royal is to place a pea under their mattress. A real princess will feel it.”

“Wait. A pea under my mattress?” I look at her, bewildered. “Good God there are peas everywhere! This was a test? I almost died on those mattresses! How could you? My father will...”

“No, no... hush... you would not have died. You’re so dramatic. It’s perfectly safe. I had to go through this test myself when I married the King. I had bruises on my shoulder for at least a week. We would ice it down. A pack of frozen peas works wonders.” Kyle and King Jenneth poke their heads into the guest room, holding their goblets of green morning smoothies.

“My darlings, Jenneth and Kyle, she is the one!” she shouts. “She felt the pea! She has royal blood!”

King Jenneth beams, “How ironic. Her face is basic. Peasant face, which is how you know she is legitimately wealthy. No one who looks like that could get away with being poor, not in our world.”

All the squealing and laughter hurt my right ear. What if there were peas in the pillows and now they’re in my ear? These people. I check my ear and tap on the side of my head in case something does fall out. I think I’m safe.

I turn to the Queen. “How dare you do this to me. I will tell my father. I do not have time for this. I do not have time for you. And you’re all so basic, you know.”

The Queen glances at the King and Kyle. She takes a deep breath. “Yes, there’s a lot of baggage that comes with us, but it’s like Luwee Veeton baggage; you always want it.”

Kyle leaps forward. “Lola... wait...what if my parents had not done this. Would you stay for me?”

I look into his pea green eyes and this time, I brush the lock of hair away from his eyes. I enjoy mind games for a while, but once I figure him out, I am bored.

“No, I would not. I’m heartbroken... yes, but I’ll cry at the end of the day. Not with newly baked makeup. Excuse me.” I sip my smoothie. “Wow, this is creamy. Can I get this to go?” I ask Joanna.

Kyle reaches to touch my arm. “Lola... you know, I’ve realized that I’m perfect and it’s everybody else around me that’s got issues,” he said, glaring at his parents.

“But son... you need to get married to a princess. What if we die and you’re still single? How will you manage alone?” his father says.

“I need to go. Kyle, I really like you, and the curried pea soup was delicious, but I cannot deal with this family,” I say.

“Lola, I’d like to come with you. I know you said you have a ladies-only retreat, but maybe I could hang out anyway. I could bring my music and sing a few songs. Oh, I can bring along our chefs and have them make the pea and carrot cake for your cousin.” His pea green eyes are shining bright again.

“Sure, you can join us. But no marriage or anything,” I say sternly.

“Not at all. I’m not ready for that. I’m working on a cookbook and am thinking of calling it ‘Peas – The Final Frontier’ or maybe ‘A Field of Peas’ or ‘Peas, Love and Baking.’ Or ‘Easy Peasy Recipes.’ Or ‘Peas de Resistance.’ Or ‘Break You Off a Peas.’ Or ‘Peas, Sir, I Want Some More.’ Or ‘Peas In Our Time.’ Or ‘Peased to Eat You.’ Or ‘Diners, Drive-Ins, and Peas.’ Or ‘Peas Believe Me.’ I have a list of ideas!”

“There’s also ‘Peas on Earth’! That sounds wonderful,” I say. “Come with us. I’ll be honest and tell you that I am digging all your pea dishes.”

“I told you, peas are the potatoes of the garden.”

“Kyle,” his mother whispers loudly to him, “I don’t think it’s right for you to go. After all, you’re a prince. What will people say?”

“Haters are just confused admirers. Charles, can you please get rid of all these mattresses? And save that pea. We shall put it in the royal museum.” He turns to wink at me. My heart starts fluttering again.

Kyle offers me his arm and I take it. “C’mon, sweet pea, let’s hit the road!”

All characters and entities appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, social media/reality show personalities, global pop icons and fake German heiress/con artists, or other self-absorbed entities is intentional.

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Finding the Light *by Avery Bridge*

Persephone runs hard through the tunnel. The pounding of her steps against the earthen floor echoes back to her in time with her shallow gasps. Her blistered feet scream in protest, but she ignores the pain. She runs until her lungs burn and her head swims, then finally slows to catch her breath.

She's lost track of how long it's been. Hours...days?

As the roar of blood in her ears fades, other sensations push their way to the forefront, demanding her attention. Her throat feels like it's trying to swallow thorns while her tongue can't seem to release itself from the roof of her mouth. Something ice cold is sticking to her back, and she realizes her shirt is soaked through with sweat.

Logically, she knows she needs to pace herself to conserve her hydration and her energy. But whenever she stops moving, she feels the walls closing in on her, trapping her, sucking all the air from her chest until her vision grays around the edges.

She has to keep going. She has to get out from under the ground. She can't breathe here, can't think.

There is nothing left for her underground anymore.

Persephone savors the last bit of ration from her pack, swallowing it with a long drink from her canteen. She refills it from a nearby cave pool, grateful she has spent so much time exploring and learning how to find water.

Her body registers the changes before her mind makes sense of it: a slight warming of the earth beneath her feet and the air she pulls in through her nostrils. She's getting close.

Persephone tears a strip of cloth from her sleeve and wipes sweat from her brow. Then she uses it to tie her long hair back from her face. At this rate, there's little left to cover her body, but she has yet to see another soul on this path.

She is completely alone.

It's dangerous to lose so much of her hydration, but the closeness of her goal spurs her to push herself faster once again. The sooner she can put all those dank sorrows behind her, the better.

According to her memory of the atlas in Hades' library, she should be near the Gate by now. Persephone stares up at the solid rock ceiling above her. It's difficult to fathom an entire world up there, bustling and thriving on what seems such a precarious bit of foundation. Are they aware of the people existing below them, or are they as baffled by the prospect of her as she is of them?

The only books she has read about the Overworld are myths and legends. For all she knows, every single one of them was a complete fabrication. But she has to try. Even if it's the last thing she ever does and the sun reduces her to ash.

A few miles later, Persephone begins to register another change in her surroundings: a slight reddening of the tunnel walls around her. Persephone's feet hurry forward of their own accord, her heartbeat racing to match them. The light is faint at first, then as she marches around the bend on a gently sloping incline, it suddenly envelops her in blinding white.

Persephone throws herself to the ground, curling up around her knees, pulse thundering in her ears as she waits for the sun to claim her life.

When nothing happens, she waits even longer for her breath to slow before raising her head. From a crack hewn into the tunnel above her, brilliant golden rays stream down into the darkness.

This is no hearth fire, and it's brighter than hellfire itself. This is pure sunlight.

As her eyes adjust to the sudden exposure to natural light, Persephone approaches warily. Despite her determination to broach the surface, she is not ignorant of the risks. Retinal damage, skin damage, and hyperthermia are her top concerns. Keeping a safe distance, she sets down her pack and lowers herself to sit on the warm earthen floor just outside the patch of light.

She has done it. She has made it to the surface. No one in her lifetime, no one she has even heard of outside of folklore and stories, has ever left the Underworld. Most of the residents of Elysium scoffed at her, finding her obsession with the Overworld odd at best and disturbing at worst.

Yet here she is.

Tears of vindication threaten to spill over. Everyone told her to stop dreaming of the Overworld, to keep her focus down on tangible things. But she always felt it, that pull upward. As if something, or someone, was calling out to her. Begging her to come back.

Persephone closes her eyes, startled by the redness behind her lids as she sits facing the pool of light. She lets the warmth saturate her bones, chasing away the last vestiges of the cold, damp darkness that is all that is left of her life.

When memories of Hercyna begin intruding, Persephone forces her eyes back open, blinking against the painful heat of the sun. This is an immediate pain, something she can focus on other than the deeper scars that reopen every time she thinks about home. Curious, she reaches one hand out slowly toward the edge of the light. It hits the tops of her fingernails first, and the light refracting off them entrances her for a long while.

She reaches further, delighted to discover that the searing sunlight doesn't immediately burn her. She twists her hand this way and that, watching the way her skin seems to glow under the blinding radiance. But after only a few moments, the lovely warmth starts to become uncomfortable. Persephone reluctantly pulls her hand back into the safety of the shade inside the tunnel.

Transfixed, she watches the light make its way slowly across the tunnel floor and up along the wall across from her. She listens intently for any signs of life above her, but there is none. Nothing but constant wind howling a melody across the opening.

Her head droops forward, eyelids closing unbidden as exhaustion claims her.



Persephone kept to the outskirts of the grand ballroom in Hades' palace, watching the revelers sip ambrosia and dance the night away. She was keeping an eye on Hades, making sure to relocate every time he began to approach her. She wasn't paying attention to where she was walking and bumped into a beautiful nymph with golden hair and flushed cheeks.

"I found you!" Hercyna giggled, snaking an arm around Persephone's waist.

"Finally!" Persephone returned, pulling the girl closer to whisper in her ear. Hercyna's blush deepened, and her hands tightened on Persephone's hips as she bit her lower lip seductively. Persephone glanced across the room again to check Hades' location. He was deep in conversation with his brother, Poseidon, their heads bent toward each other. It was rare to see him in Elysium, but not unheard of.

Her concern was quickly forgotten as Hercyna's soft lips brushed her neck. Persephone leaned in to kiss her, and they became lost in each other for one blissful moment until a warning bell sounded in

the back of her mind. Hades was making his way right toward her, his face contorted with fury. She pushed Hercyna off her and ducked out as fast as she could.

Her sleep was plagued with nightmares, starting off with Hades finding Hercyna and punishing her for Persephone's indiscretions. Eventually it morphed into another dream, the same one she had every night: a woman's voice calling out for her, desperate and broken. She lurched out of bed with a gasp, rushing to the washroom to gulp down a cup of water brought up from the river Lethe. The dream faded instantly.

The next morning, she found Hercyna out in the Asphodel Fields to apologize.

"Whatever for?" Hercyna wondered. She scooped a pitcher full of cold, clear water from the river and poured each of them a glass.

"Last night we were reckless. Hades saw us together, and when I shoved you..." Persephone shook her head, overcome with guilt and shame.

"You're overreacting. Nothing bad happened," Hercyna replied airily. She ran a hand down Persephone's arm before lacing their fingers together. "Will you stay tonight?"

"I would love to," she squeezed Hercyna's hand. "But I'm so close to being done mapping Erebus' entire cave system."

"There's more to life than caving, you know," Hercyna raised an eyebrow suggestively, and Persephone almost relented.

"I'll finish mapping this new passage tonight, and tomorrow I'm all yours. Deal?"

"It's so dark and creepy up there, I don't understand why you insist on spending so much time exploring it."

"Every single soul down here entered through Erebus," Persephone pointed out. "Wouldn't it stand to reason that there's also a way back up?"

"Don't talk like that!"

"Our ancestors lived in the Overworld, why not us?"

“You know why,” Hercyna frowned, dropping her hand. “When mortals butchered his sacred cattle, Helios scorched the earth and forced everyone underground. You’ve always had this morbid fascination with the Overworld. It’s starting to worry me.”

“I just feel like there’s something up there for me. Someone waiting for me, or something that I’m supposed to be doing,” Persephone bit the inside of her cheek, not wanting to have this same argument yet again. “We can’t assume that the legends are accurate. We have no idea what actually happened. And until we send a team up, we’ll never know what’s there.”

“You’d be asking people to risk certain death.”

“We’d be careful,” Persephone insisted for what felt like the umpteenth time.

“The gods are never going to approve your request. Which reminds me, Hades has called everyone to the palace tonight. The Fates have foreseen a great disaster.”

“They’re always predicting some new catastrophe,” Persephone rolled her eyes.

“The gods are only looking out for everyone’s safety.” Hercyna drained the rest of her cup and filled it again. When she looked back at Persephone, her eyes were glassy. “What were we talking about, love?”

“Nothing important, apparently. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Persephone poured her untouched water back into the pitcher and left without glancing back.

Just as she returned to Elysium, Persephone ran right into Hades.

“There you are,” he reached for her arm, and she flinched backward. “The assembly is about to begin.”

“I’ll be right there, just going to wash up and change.”

Hades appraised her with a clenched jaw. “You don’t want to be in the caves tonight,” he warned, knowing full well what she was up to. “You’ve already delved too close to Tartarus as it is.”

“I’ll be careful,” Persephone promised, then hurried away before he could physically drag her back. But as he was almost out of sight, Hades turned and headed off in the opposite direction from the palace. She frowned and decided to follow him.

Keeping a safe distance, Persephone watched as Hades made his way down to the lake. A man was there, wading in the shallows of the water: Poseidon. She couldn't make out the words, but it was clear the brothers were arguing. Persephone frowned. She couldn't remember ever witnessing a disagreement between them. Poseidon stormed off into the lake, sending waves of anger slapping against the shore in his wake.

As Persephone turned away, a crack in the ground reached out from beneath the water. A pack of food, water, and tools strapped to her back, Persephone left the palace as everyone else was clamoring to get in to hear the Fates' latest prophesy. She spotted Hercyna amidst the throng of souls and pushed her way towards the nymph.

"Hey, beautiful." Persephone wound her arms around Hercyna's waist from behind, pressing a kiss to her neck. But instead of leaning into her like Persephone expected, Hercyna jerked away in fear.

"Who are you?" Hercyna's blue eyes widened as she turned around. "My Queen?" She bowed low, trembling. "Anything you ask of me is yours."

Persephone's heart clenched. Hercyna didn't know her. Everything they had shared between them was gone, washed away by the tide of oblivion. She shouldn't have been surprised; the same thing had happened with every other paramour she had dared become enamored with. But this one cut deeper, and her simmering anger flared into a blaze of determination.

Never again.

Hours later, deep in the misty caverns of Erebus, Persephone sketched the new alcove she finished measuring. The only sounds were the bats returning from their hunt, and her pencil scratching across the paper. The only light stemmed from a single candle. It was in these moments that she felt at peace.

It began as a faint rumbling somewhere nearby. Persephone stilled, listening, waiting for it to happen again. Only silence met her, accompanied by the distant drip of water from a stalactite in the adjoining cavern. She yawned, stretching her arms high overhead, and began packing her things. Then she heard it again.

This time, the ground beneath her feet trembled, sending vibrations up through her legs. Her candle tipped over and sputtered out. She ran through the darkness back to the larger cavern that would connect her to the main cave system. But as her eyes adjusted to the dark, the familiar rock formations began to change before her, jutting out at precarious angles as the earth shook violently.

Pebbles began raining down on her, followed by boulders. When a huge stalactite crashed into the floor of the cavern right beside her, she hurriedly squeezed herself into a nearby crevice for shelter.

The world groaned and clattered all around her, a cacophony she was sure would split her head in two. Through trembling fingers, she watched as a monstrous figure erupted from below. In the pitch darkness, she could only make out the sheer size of him as the Titan clawed his way up from the depths of Tartarus. Persephone froze, muscles locked in fear, until the massive creature pulled himself out of the ground and looked around.

Suddenly, she went from frozen to frenzied. The tools she had used to carefully excavate her way through Erebus now became weapons of destruction in her hands. Persephone hacked and slashed her way through the narrow crevice, terror infusing her limbs with strength. She paid no attention to the direction she was headed, only that it was away from the danger.

Persephone emerged on the other side of the cave wall and started running blindly. Her feet remembered the route better than her mind in its panicked state. When she came to the main cavern, she stopped to take stock. She was bruised and battered but otherwise unharmed. Persephone started toward the left tunnel, intending to rush back to Elysium and warn everyone. But then she glanced to her right.

A new tunnel had opened, leading upward.

Indecision waged war within her heart. She should try to get back home and help. But what if it was already too late? And what could she even do against the Titans anyway?

The new tunnel beckoned.

She might never get another chance like this. Hades had surely called Cerberus to him for protection, leaving the exit to the Overworld unguarded. And with everyone distracted by the attack, they wouldn't even notice that she was missing.

Before she could second-guess herself, Persephone turned right.

The tremors continued around her as she fled, her steps hastening to find safety and to put some distance between herself and the way home. Were more Titans escaping from their eternal prison? It felt like the earth itself was crumbling beneath her feet. When she finally stopped to look back, the caverns were completely unrecognizable, collapsing in on themselves until they were an impassable pile of rubble. Persephone couldn't go home now even if she wanted to.

When it was all over, the silence was deafening.



Persephone jerks herself awake, fingers scrubbing at her face to chase away the sleep and the memories. When she opens her eyes, she's saddened to find the sunlight has disappeared. Her pupils absorb a new, soft light that streams through the opening. Even at night, the darkness isn't complete.

Though she already misses the novelty of seeing real sunshine, the absence of it means that it's finally safe to pull herself up through the crack and onto the surface at last. This is what she came all the way up here for, after all.

But now that the moment has arrived, her heart clenches in fear. She has no idea what is up there, right above her. It could be anything—or nothing.

She doesn't even know if the moonlight is dangerous. She wanted to do this differently. Safely. With a team, and supplies. But in this moment she has only herself.

Persephone drains the last of the water from her canteen, rewraps her bleeding feet, and takes a deep, calming breath. No more food, no more water. The only thing left to do is reach.

With eyes squeezed shut, her entire body trembles and refuses to move at first. It's as if her very cells are rebelling against her heart's desire to explore the Overworld. Persephone has to force her mind to override her survival instinct. There's no turning back now. She grits her teeth in determination before pushing one foot forward to step inside the faint circle of pale moonlight. Then she pulls her other foot in, now standing directly beneath the opening.

The wind, still raging above, picks up loose tendrils of her hair and whips them around her face. It blows tiny pieces of sand down onto her, and they bite into her skin. But the air smells fresh, devoid of the thick humidity she'd been inhaling all her life. She turns her face upward and opens her eyes.

Above her, the night sky. She drinks in the sight of it, registering an indigo so deep it takes her breath away.

Even more astounding, starlight fills her vision like a glowing, twinkling canopy. She is instantly reminded of the glowworms she used to cultivate in Erebus. Pain lances through her every time something reminds her of home, and she pushes it away to focus on the wonder up above. This spectacle is brighter and more beautiful than any fungus could ever be.

She has to see more.

Heart pounding and hands shaking, Persephone reaches upward and grasps the edge of the opening. She hangs there for a moment, muscles straining. This could be the last thing she ever does. A flash of Hercyna's blue eyes the last time they spoke barges into her thoughts. This time, she lets the memories of her life flood her mind. Every laugh, every touch, every moment has led her here. If this truly is the end, will she see any of them again, on the other side?

Whatever is waiting for her up there, it has to be better than the misery waiting for her down below. New resolution infuses her muscles with a strength she didn't know she had.

Her last decision, one more move to make, a final breath of life. The force of her will wins out against the fear, and she hauls herself upward. Toward the unknown, toward her doom.

Toward hope.

Avery Bridge has been a reader and writer most of her life, and she is determined to bring more queer stories into the world for all to enjoy. Stories have the power to bring us together, and her dream is to create worlds of hope that everyone can believe in. Avery lives in the American southwest, where she gains inspiration from the natural beauty of the surrounding desert, mountains, and endless skies. She loves discussing all things book-ish, life-ish, and everything in between. Feel free to reach out to her on her website: www.averybridgeauthor.com

Our Fallen Stars *by Afra Masud*

Based on the Brothers Grimm's "Star Money"

The day that I had the dream, I was ten.

I was in the hospital, recovering from my 9th, or 10th, or 11th (quite frankly, I'm not sure) surgery. They cut me open and put a rod in my tibia, before sewing me back up again. It was the night afterwards. I was still extremely under the influence of anesthesia and morphine, and my leg was throbbing even though said morphine was pumping through my veins. I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to turn on the TV because Ma was sleeping.

I remember looking up to the ceiling and wondering how long my life would be like this.

I saw the small lights imitating the starry night sky, wondering what would happen if they fell and landed on me.



It took three years for someone to adopt me, and yet, I'd rather be in a New York City orphanage than here in rural Wyoming, only five miles from Yellowstone National Park. I know no one and no one wants to know me. The only halal food comes from my adoptive parent's farm.

I grab the handle of my quad cane as I wait for the car in front of me to crunch down the gravel path that I'm walking on. Overhead, the sky sparkles and twinkles, just like the song.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star...

The car throws gravel up as it speeds away. I adjust my thick sweatshirt and dust the skirt of my dress, which is really an extra large shirt Hajar gave me when I first came here. "I didn't know your size," she reasoned when I looked at it with disbelief.

Yeah, I thought, then and now. So, you thought I was super big, or why else did it take so long for me to be adopted?

I shake my head, tug on the hem of my *hijab*, my Islamic covering for my hair and neck, as a breeze comes through, making the trees around me shake and whisper, and continue my walk to the only spot in this whole place that I enjoy here.

Under my shoes, brand new and surprisingly the perfect size, the gravel crunches under my weight. The world seems to be whispering its secrets to me as I pass by the trees, their leaves rustling against each other and whispering hushed words that I can hardly make out.

You... Look... Stars... Heart... Somewhere...

I wonder what they're trying to say and wonder why they're trying to tell me. But I keep walking because I don't think I am able to hold anyone's secrets except my own. I mean, look at me. The kid who lost her family to a house fire, the girl who smiles a little too widely when she sees an animal or a child, yet refuses to look most others in the eyes, the Muslimah who only knows one *juz* of the Quran. Who would want to share their secrets with *me*?

I turn a corner and find myself standing in front of a view of a mountain, tall and rugged and rough around the edges, soaring into the sky full of stars.

I stop, lean against the old wood railing. It barely separates the road from the rest of the area, more a part of the landscape. The scene is beautiful, a little too beautiful. It looks like someone's AI generated Pinterest post, or something that *National Geographic* photographers have the resources and time to see.

Maybe it's not that bad here. Maybe I was overreacting because of how overwhelmed I was by the beauty of this place. Or maybe it is part of the deal of being here: it's beautiful in the dark when no one can see you, and so the world conceals the glitter of the sky when everyone is awake.

Or maybe it's none of that, and I am just overthinking, as usual.

Meow. I hear it, but there can't be a house cat wandering around in a place where grizzlies and wolves roam. No sane person would let their cat out here, right?

Meow. I look around me, not seeing anything. My New Yorker heart must be missing the stray cats that would be part of my mom's garden ecosystem (even though she wasn't happy about it) and is making me hear things that aren't there.

Meow. Something scratches on the wooden railing, and so I turn my body and look. My eyes widen as I see a small kitten. The dim light from the stars and the moon outline its body, and its eyes reflect the light.

I get down to the ground, so that I can look this creature in the eyes. "Hi," I say, holding out my hand. It shrinks away, hiding behind the railing while still looking at me. "I won't hurt you."

And then I remember, and I pull out the small wrapped sandwich that I had brought on my walk. I pry the bread off the top and offer the insides. “Tuna.” I say. The strays in New York would go crazy for the fish. How I would beg Mom and Dad to get it, and how they would always give in. A lightning bolt lines my throat, and I try to swallow it away. “Here, have it.”

As the kitten eases forward, I find myself holding my breath, thinking and wondering. Why does this still hurt even though it’s been so long? Why can I still hear my mom warning me not to touch the kitten even though I haven’t heard her voice in years? Why is this kitten here and not with its mother?

Maybe it’s like me. An orphan.

A fallen star on this Earth, all alone and shining too bright for any normal person to look us in the eye.

Waiting for a wish when the wish is me.



I remember standing in the *masjid* the day my family’s *janazah* was, their bodies being carried to the front of the masjid, and how no one wanted me to be there.

They didn’t say anything. But they all passed by me. They didn’t look at me directly, just directed their glances at me. The aunties who whispered all the time stayed silent when they saw I was nearby. The aunties who usually said nothing but gave you a look that told you everything only gave me the cold shoulder that day.

Only one person came up to me. Dad’s best friend, the *imam*.

He was sobbing, because well, my dad was his best friend, even though the age gap was bigger than the number of years that I was alive.

“I’m sorry,” he said to me between sobs.

“Why?” I asked him.

He attempted to wipe his tears, to talk without crying, but he couldn’t. “I promised your father that if anything happened to you, I would take care of you.”

I already knew what he was talking about. “I know,” I said to him. My heart felt like a stone, feeling nothing but the weight of itself. “I saw the rejection forms.”

He was so stunned that he stopped crying. The remaining tears fell down his cheek, landing into the many gaps between the thick curly hairs of his beard.

“I...”

I shrugged—what could I do? I turned towards the door and gave him a broken smile. My heart turned from a rock to a cracked vessel holding all the stardust from the last supernova Earth was close enough to experience.

“See you in Heaven.”



The kitten follows me as I walk towards my destination, getting closer and closer to the mountain that is trying to reach Allah. It trots behind my ankle, its breath hot against the small strip of skin that’s exposed between my leggings and socks.

The trees keep whispering, the stars keep twinkling, and the mountain gets bigger with each step. The lightning bolt lining my esophagus makes my heart beating faster and stronger. *Is today that day?* I wonder, thinking back to the dream that I had that day.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Does it matter?

When the gravel path forks, there’s a small gas station with a small deli. In order to get to where I’m going, I have to leave the mountain to my right and go to the side where the gas station is. I take the rest of the way without having to worry about speeding cars and herds of bison, but only the fences of people’s backyards and mosquitoes.

Mosquitoes are much better than bison in my opinion.

I look left, then right, then make a dash across the road, my quad cane a bronze blur. The kitten runs behind me, only a little slower than me. We make it to the other side mere seconds before a blaring truck’s headlights blinds us momentarily and blares its horn at us, telling me to stop being crazy and go home.

But I haven’t had a home, not in many years.

“Those things are beasts,” says a voice from behind.

I whirl around to see a couple sitting on concrete blocks lining the front of parking spaces, a tent nearby. “You better be careful.”

“Yeah.” I say, the shock of my voice surprising me. I haven’t spoken at my own will since I came here. “I should.”

The woman looks beautiful, her curly hair turning red when a passing car’s white lights fill the air. She looks tired, like she hasn’t slept in a bed in a long time. Her skin is the color of skin that has been outside for too long; she needs a good bath filled with bath salts and nice shampoo that smells like berries and pineapple. The man beside her looks the same, his long brown hair tied in a ponytail and his lips turned into a permanent frown.

“You look familiar,” he says to me.

“I got here two months ago,” I reply. “And I only go to school and the library by foot.”

“And whatever’s back there.” He raises an eyebrow, and I step away from the street and sit on the nearest concrete block, close enough to still see them. “You have a boyfriend?”

“No.” I shake my head. “No one wants me.”

They’re quiet. “I know the feeling.” The woman says, and we share a smile that’s illuminated by the rays of moonlight falling behind me.

“Ron,” the man says, nodding but still not smiling.

“Adhara,” I say, just like how my dad would have said it, proudly with zeal, heavy with wonder.

“Melissa,” the woman says, holding out her hand to the kitten. The kitten looks up to me and nestles itself against my quad cane.

“A shy one.” She says admiralty. “I have one like that at home.”

Home? “Where’s home?” I ask before I can stop myself.

They both look at me, weighing their options. “Where’s home for you?” Ron questions me with the authority of a man who only needs his dignity.

“New York City.” And then I shake my head. “Well, it used to be anyway.” The lightning bolt is peeking its head, causing my heart to jump. “I have a feeling I won’t be able to go back for a long time.”

“We’re from San Francisco,” Melissa says, and Ron looks at her disapprovingly. She ignores him and he softens. “Always was and always will be.”

“I used to work on the Golden Gate Bridge,” Ron mutters. “For security.”

“My family died in a house fire when I was twelve.” *Why am I telling this to these strangers?* “I have been waiting to be adopted for the last three years.”

Melissa gasps. “That’s horrible.” A breeze blows and she shivers. I see her bare sleeves and the raised goosebumps. “I’m sorry.”

“I am too.” I give the same broken smile I gave the *imam* and find that somehow the cracked facade of my heart doesn’t feel as broken anymore.

She shivers again, and Ron wraps his arms around her. “We don’t have any money to get out of here,” he says, answering my unspoken question. “We were robbed and then kicked out of the hotel.” He sounds ashamed and angry. “I’ve been working for the deli and keeping the tips for the past three months and I’m still short.”

“How much?” I ask.

“Thirty fucking dollars,” Ron hisses, and Melissa shivers again. “I just need thirty dollars for the plane tickets.”

I don’t think twice. “Here.” I grab my quad cane and take out a fifty dollar bill that Hajar gives me for the work that I do on the farm in between school every week. “Take it. Go home.”

They both looked flabbergasted. “No,” Ron says, choking on the word, flushed red. “I can’t take this.”

“Please.” I walk closer to them. “I want nothing more than for you guys to go home and be happy again.” I see an empty cup at their feet, the bottom of it barely covered by dimes and pennies, and I stuff the bill inside it.

“And here.” I sit down next to them and pull off my sweatshirt.

“We can’t take this,” Melissa says from her partner’s embrace. I lean forward and drape the sweatshirt around her shoulders.

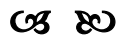
“I’m not taking no for an answer.” Before either of them can do anything else, I get up and start walking to the path. I don’t look back, even though I feel the bite of the breeze and the hiss of air.

“Wait!”

I stop.

“Thank you,” they say simultaneously. I turn and smile at them, still broken but happy. Another car rushes by, going somewhere that isn’t here.

“Don’t,” I answer, and the kitten follows me as I pad my way onto the path.



I had beamed as the couple sat in front of me, my social worker by my side. My hair, usually covered by a hijab, is pulled into tight pigtailed like I’m in second grade and not in eighth, and my shirt has a picture of Popeye on it, even though I’ve never seen anything with him on TV ever in my life.

“Hi,” I said to them.

“Hello.” The woman’s face looked pinched in, like she ate too much salt before coming here. The man sitting next to her has his hands clasped together on the table, fidgety.

They both stared at me, looking at me with deep eyes that bore not into my soul, but into my body.

“My name is Adhara,” I said, trying to offer myself to them.

Nothing. My social worker shifted in her seat, and we just sat staring at each other, and the feeling of discomfort settled into my stomach. It was like there was sand at the pit of my gut, gritty and gross that I just wanted to wash off.

“Why are your shoulders like that?” the man asked.

I swallowed. With my *hijab*, people are less likely to notice this, and those who did never asked me about it. “I used to have scoliosis. When they did the surgery, they couldn’t fix everything, and my upper 10 vertebrae are still curved, but not that badly.”

“But badly enough that your shoulders are uneven?” The man seemed to be accusing with his words. Of what, I’m still, to this day, not completely sure.

“Some things you can’t fix,” I replied, and the woman flinched.

The silence resumed, and the social worker reached for my hand under the table and squeezed my hand. “Tell them about things that you like, Adhara.”

“I like to take pictures.” They simply blinked. “I like reading thrillers. I like making people smile. I like glitter. I like space.” I don’t tell them what I really like. *I like learning about the world. I like making friends, even though no one wants to be my friend. I like cats. I like my hijab. I like my religion.*

I like stars.

“Oh, that’s nice,” the man said, his eyes not moving from my shoulders. “Tell me what you know.”

I remember thinking about the most recent things that I recently learned and reciting them like I was reading off a list. “Jupiter has enough room for 1,000 Earths. Rings surround the four giant planets and one asteroid. The shockwaves from a neighboring supernova created the solar system. The scent of alcohol and raspberries fills the Milky Way.”

At this, the man finally cracked a smile, but it was too brief to fully register. I continued, “There are stars that we will never see. The Sun loses a billion kilos per second. The Andromeda Galaxy has 1 trillion stars. Stars can orbit each other.”

“That’s very interesting,” the man said, businesslike. “What, do you want to be an astronomer when you grow up?”

I shake my head. Finally, we make eye contact, and I feel naked.

“What *do* you want to be?” he asked.

“I want to catch the stars,” I answer, and from the way his face twitches and his partner’s face looks like she just sucked on a lemon that they wanted nothing to do with me.

That feeling of not being wanted in this world lingered much longer than they did.



As someone who has never been a big fan of sidewalks, I find this one to be one of my favorites.

Above, there are more stars than ever. The trees are growing on the slope that begins at the lip of the sidewalk, wild and untamed. The sidewalk itself is flat and well taken care of, with no bumps, potholes, or cracks. I can hear the hoot of an owl, and the trees are still whispering their secrets. They aren't words anymore though; they're jumbled up into a language that I don't understand.

At the end of this block, the sidewalk stops, ramps onto a freeway that I have never seen any cars or trucks on. I need to get to the other side.

But today, I'm not alone.

There's a girl, head bowed, looking at the freeway. She's wearing a worn hoodie and jeans, and Converses just as beat up as her demeanor. I recognize her from school where she sits in the back of the class – she in one corner and me in the other. Wired headphones snake from her pocket into the veil of her hood. When her sleeve pulls up, I see a beautiful tattoo of ivy wrapping around her wrist and moving up her arm.

Every day, we exit through the same gate, and her father and mother stand in the parking lot waiting for her in their dirty pickup truck. They wrap their arms around her as I cut through the parking lot and walk to Hajar's farm.

I only know that her name is Ally.

Suddenly, the first vehicle I've seen on this comes speeding forward, and Ally runs in its way. She stands in its way, arms spread, and something in me kicks at my heart. A mix of anger and shock sends me forward, unable to believe what is going on.

I run, the kitten somehow runs faster than me, and I knock into her, sending us into a whirl as we crash into the tarmac, her body taking the shock of our fall as I land on top of her. The car speeds off, the horn shattering the silence of the night.

"What the—" The girl rasps, smelling of shock and sweat. I groan as I get off her and get to my knees.

"What were you thinking?" I hiss, the kitten coming next to me.

"Why does it matter?!" She gets up, rubbing her back. "You could have died!"

“Yeah,” I say, glaring at her. “*You* could have died, stupid.”

She glares back. “I’m not stupid,” she says. “I *want* to die.”

I feel everything in me stop. I did realize this, but her saying it makes it more real. “Why?” I feel my bones shudder as I move.

“Because I hate my life,” she looks at me like I’m crazy. “Don’t you see? No one pays attention to me.”

“Yeah, but you have a house over your head. You have your parents.” I think of all the children who are like me, who don’t have their family anymore because of something tragic that changed no one’s life except their own. How personal this suddenly is to me. *I hate my life*. “I don’t have that. I’m no longer in my own home city anymore. I have no more family who wants me.”

She blinks, taken aback. “Everyone says that you’re Hajar’s daughter, and that she homeschooled you because of your...” She pauses and gestures at my quad cane.

I let out a barking laugh. Of course they thought that. They never saw a Muslim *hijabi* or a disabled person in their lives, and Hajar is the black sheep here.

“She’s not my mother. My family died in a house fire. I’m from New York City, and no one who could have kept me wants me.” I look up at the scene around us. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Why doesn’t anyone want you?” She asks me, not wanting to believe me. “You’re crazy smart and you talk to everyone and like, the dream daughter.”

“Because,” I answer, suddenly realizing that she had watched me as much as I had watched her. “I’m disabled and Muslim.”

Under the twinkling stars, there are the two of us, two girls that everyone overlooks, except for the people who love us. There’s two of us, one with brown skin the color of caramel and the other with skin the color of clouds on a sunny day, one with a bronze quad cane and one with a tattoo. One who loves her life besides the pain, and the other who hates it even though it’s filled with love.

“Thank you,” she says, the rasp in her voice fading away.

I grab my quad cane and pull myself up. “Thank me,” I offer my hand, “when we get off the tarmac.”



“Why did you guys name me Adhara?”

We were washing the dishes—me, Ma, and Baba. They were at the sink, scrubbing everything, soap bubbles hovering over us like fairies. I was standing on a stool that we made from my little brother’s first baby bathtub. The bottom stood green and thick and long enough for me to take several steps right and left to put the plates, cups, forks, spoons, and cutting boards where they belong.

Baba sprinkles soap onto his greasy plate. “We named you after a star.”

This is not what I expected. “What?”

“It’s in the constellation known as Canis Major in the southern sky.” Ma hands me a clean spoon. “It’s the second brightest star in the constellation, the 22nd brightest star in the sky, and it’s one of the 57 stars of celestial navigation.”

Ma and Baba weren’t experts on space, but they were both schoolteachers. Ma was an Earth Science teacher, and that was how I got my hands on my first book about space.

“I never heard of it before.” I told her. “Remember the book that you—”

“It’s not that popular.” She straightened a plate on top of my stack. “Only those who truly know anything about stars and astronomy recognize it.”

“But why a star?”

Baba and Ma stopped everything, looking at each other in that way they did when they weren’t sure if they wanted to share the answer, but it was important.

“Because,” Baba finally said. “We always wanted a bright child, whose light would outlast everyone else’s existence.” He smiled, tears in his eyes. “Just like a star.”



We lie on the grass of the field, our eyes to the stars. Between us, the kitten is looking up at the stars, and Ally’s scratching its ears.

“Boy or girl?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure.” The breeze is starting to become a wind, and the air is so fresh it’s crisp. “I found it while coming here, and a lot has happened since then.”

Ally blows the air through her lips. “Let’s see.” She picks up the kitten and looks at its underside, as I look at the stars, and wonder what it would be like if they fell onto the Earth and I were to catch them.

Thinking that maybe, just maybe, we’re the fallen stars, with broken hearts and burnt families, lost souls with loving parents, people who just want to go home. Catching them would be easy if that was the case: kindness, smiles, generous hands and hearts would help them find their ways back to where they belong.

In our universe, one out of trillions and counting, shining our light through our healing scars, trying to shine and be seen.

Trying to find someone who wants them.

“It’s a boy,” Ally says, sitting the kitten down. “What are you going to name him?”

But before I can answer, the wind picks up, and the stars start shifting, and the trees are whispering, “*It’s happening, it’s happening.*” There’s a huge boom, like thunder.

But instead of rain falling, it’s the stars that we never knew existed that drift down and make their way through this new world. Confused, free, and wondering if anyone is willing to catch them.



In my dream, just like now, I am sitting up, and the sleeve of my full sleeve shirt is pulled back. You can feel the wind dying down, feel the trees release their words. The secrets that they’re sharing aren’t theirs to share, but those of the stars that are falling from the sky.

In my dream, which is no longer just that, the grass smells like fine sugar, the sky smells like raspberries, the world around me is familiar but unknown, and my heart is suddenly not cracked or pained, but whole and shining and filled with starlight.

In my life and this beautiful moment, I know that Allah is sending me and the rest of the world a message.

Take care of our fallen stars.

And so, I lift my hand, with my index finger outstretched.

And catch the first one.

Afra Masud is a college student at Adelphi University, studying psychology and creative writing. She's a proud Muslimah, first generation college student, and dreamer. Afra has Osteogenesis Imperfecta, and wants to write stories of girls like her whose stories aren't heard. She loves books, Islam, storytelling, and the color purple. If Afra's not writing, you can find her doing henna on her friends, watching documentaries on YouTube, and dreaming up her next story. You can find her on [her website](#).



SOUHAITS SOUHAITS AU GUI LE SIECLE NEUF PIERRE ROCHE
(1901)