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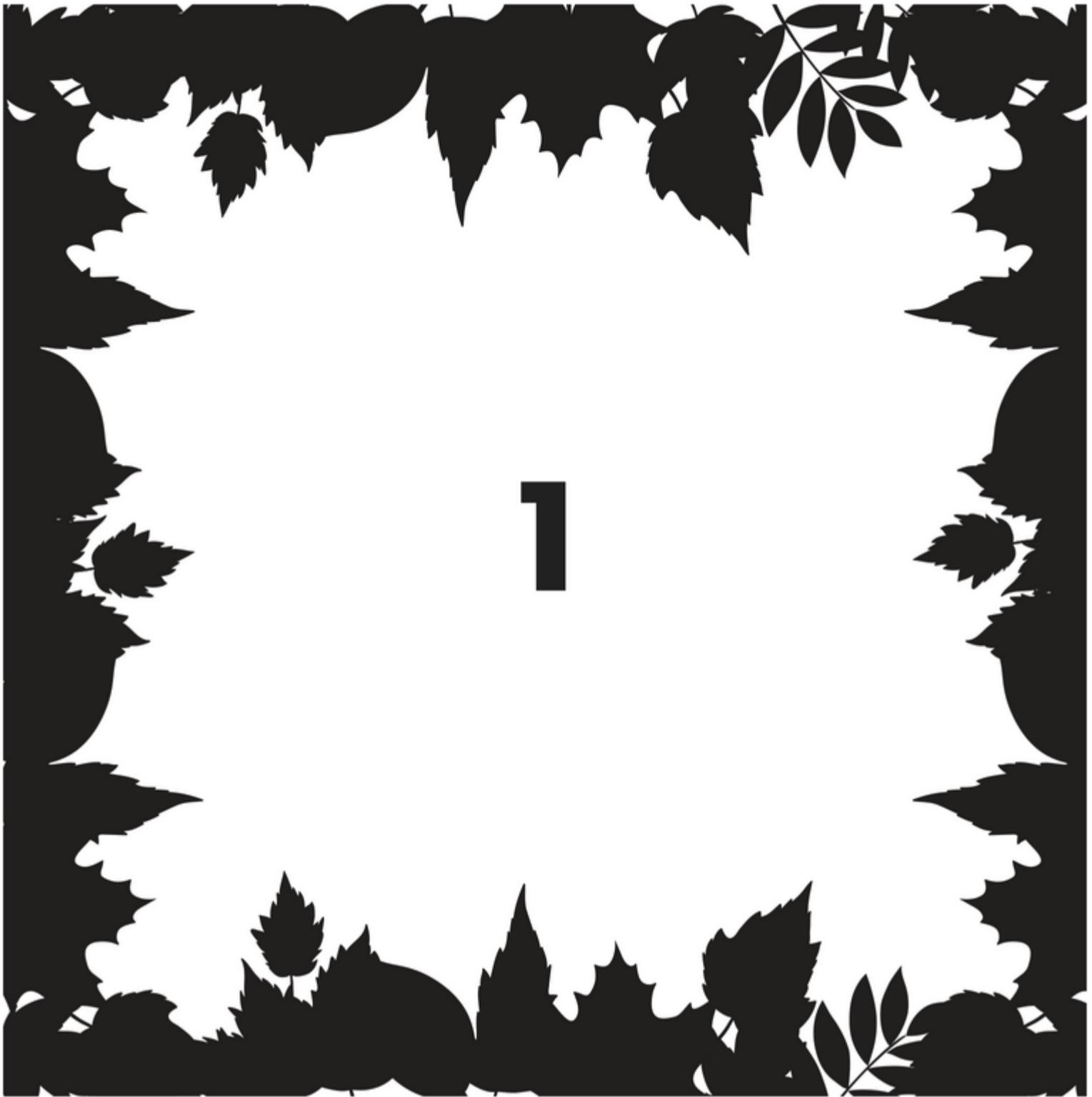
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## All the Ugly Things by Brigitte N. McCray

The week before the spring festival, when some of us village girls were sixteen, the age ripe for the river god, my mother crawled into my bed one night, wrapped her arms tightly around my chest, and whispered, “Ingrid, if the god should pick you above the others, imagine all the honey and fish the village will leave on our door stoop. Think of the banners that will fly in our name.” She combed my long hair with her fingers, and I fell asleep to the gentle tugging out of tangles, the promise that such combing would keep the tiny river demons, known to ache for lovely hair as much as the river god, from crawling up and attaching themselves to my scalp. The very idea was horrible, for the demons would cause our hair to fall out.

In the morning, my mother gone to the bakery for work, I kneeled at the bed and brushed my hair, a hundred strokes, as I recited the most repeated river god tale. I said it soft, like a prayer: “Each spring, one sixteen-year-old girl is selected to join all the ones who came before. To be that girl is to wear strings and strings of freshwater pearls, sleep on golden pebbles at the river bottom, and eat all the snails and mussels she desires. That girl will never go hungry like the villagers once did so long ago. Please let it also be me.”

All day I couldn’t concentrate on my chores. I daydreamed of Meg, the girl taken five years before, her sinewy torso in an empire waist dresses that I coveted so much. I thought of Leah, taken three years ago, who wore a dress so long that the edges grew dark from mud because she enjoyed wading through the river. I remembered Katie, from the previous year, and

how she would race through the field behind the river. She would call for me to catch her, and, by the time I caught up, our breathing was in sync as we ran side-by-side. They were all there under the river, dancing and singing. I stopped gutting one of my father's caught fish; I clasped my hands together and closed my eyes. Please, please, please.

I wondered how often my mother had prayed.

A month before, when I turned sixteen, she cut off her hair. I sat at the kitchen table with my father tying fishing lures. When she entered, he gasped at her baldness, at the blood drops decorating her head, but I understood her action as her giving the dream that was once her own over to me.

Her hair, at sixteen, had once been prized by the village. They all believed she would be picked. She scrubbed it in the river every day, and before wringing the water out, she would mix a combination of lavender and orange oil and beeswax to keep the locks shiny and sweet and the river demons from climbing up. Her hair, a village woman told me not long ago, could be smelled a good half of a mile away, brought by the breeze while my mother washed. Her special care and secret she would never utter. For the river god loved hair free of those demons and hair that especially reminded him of the flowing river. My mother washed it so often on that shore that she could not imagine the god claiming another.

But he did.

She remained diligent with her hair though, as if hoping, despite getting older, that her time would come.

It never did.

At the start of the spring festival, when the village outlined his image in river pebbles on the town square ground, my mother pointed out his hair and beard, thick with fish to give us food for the long winter; his chest, muscled and large, how strong to move the current down and around so that the village would not flood; his feet webbed, just as his wife's would become so that she, too, could live under the river in the water city, where otters catered to every need and an abundance of fish kept the wives and the god well fed. "Some villagers," my mother whispered, "believe that the long hair of all of the river god's wives create the waves in the river."

We knew a girl had been chosen when the storm came, blowing out the candles in our windows, and the river's crashing waves flooded the town square, the pebbles, his image, vanishing along with the girl, and the river demons screeching, their teeth scratching against the rocks.

Like my mother, I wanted it to be me so that on the morning after the storm, the villagers would raise their coffee mugs in my name and paint my image on the banners that flew above the shops. They would whisper my name and wonder how I was learning to live with the fish and otters.

"Tell me your secret," I asked my mother that night. "Take me to the river in the morning and help me wash my hair."

"It didn't help. The god didn't pick me."

"But I'll have a much better chance than I do now." My hair hung limply and smelled of fish.

All the other sixteen-year-old girls and their mothers had the same idea. We gathered in the square around the boulder that had been pulled from the river long ago. The ground there was soaked from the rain that came day after day before the river god arrived. Our boots sunk into the mud, but our mothers wouldn't let us wipe them clean for fear we'd dirty our hands.

In our circle around the boulder, we held the thick, long braid of the girl next to us. The hair needed to shine as the sun on the river's surface. Our voices rippled as we chanted our praises to the image on the boulder: the first girl taken by the river god. Her hair—yellow, long lines that never faded. Some villager always came before the annual spring festival to paint the hair anew. The other colors on the boulder remained vivid. Her skin painted sky blue. Eyes painted silvery-white to look like tiny pebbles. I squeezed shut my eyes and hoped for such beauty. When I opened them, the rest of the girl image caused my stomach to flip. Hands scratched out. Feet painted over with tiny fishes. That first girl seemed incomplete. Whatever wholeness she once had had vanished, along with the river god who had taken her. Only parts of her survived there on the rock.

With our chants finished, the villagers lined up to bow to the boulder and to kneel before the river god's image. Then they returned to their shops, where they kept river pebbles on their window sills. "Bring forth fish, keep the harvest good," they said. They blew on the pebbles before placing them neatly side-by-side. Minutes later, they opened their windows to let the spring breeze inside and stuck their heads out of their windows to watch the pale blue banners from the tops of their doors blow in that wind coming off the river. All of us girls watched the banners fly.

My arms tingled and my chest hurt when I thought of ruined crops, drought, and our villagers starving, but when the image of the river god on the banner seemed to dance, I sighed. We all hoped we would be the one to dance with him under the

water on that spring festival day. Our beauty to grow the crops and call forth the rain for a full river. Our head adorned with a cypress crown. Our hands gifted a magnolia bouquet.

At the embankment, our mothers scrubbed our ankle-length hair with cider vinegar, sandalwood, and rosemary. "I'll give you my secret when we're alone at the house," my mother said in my ear. Some of the other girls and their mothers, who remembered my mother's lovely hair from when she was a girl, stared, perhaps hoping to spot her secret.

The river demons crawled up the embankment and scampered toward us. Their tiny legs carried their fist-sized bodies through the wet sand and left behind fingernail-sized imprints. The trail led straight to us girls. We jumped, ready to run. Our mothers, though, were fast. With prayers to the river god on their lips, they lifted rocks from the ground and chased the demons into the water.

"How such ugly things can live in the same water as the god I'll never know," my mother said.

At home, my mother unwrapped a bread loaf she had baked at her shop that morning. She fixed tea, and my father tore off chunks of the bread for us as she tipped a spoon soaked in honey in each of our cups.

"Will you tell her the secret now?" he asked.

"This," she said, holding up a piece of bread, "is how my hair became so sweet and shiny."

"Bread?" I asked.

"Not exactly."

Over the steaming chamomile, she told me of how she once fed the fish pieces of her bread. They loved the taste so much that they jumped from the water and the tiniest fish became caught in her long hair. She freed them by pitching more bread into the river. How different was the river god from the fish? His skin was scaly, his feet webbed. If they loved her bread, then surely the same ingredients could lure the god. That night, by the moonlight, she washed her hair in the river with honey and egg yolk.

She washed my hair there in the kitchen with some of the water she had collected at the river as my father sang a shanty and smoked his pipe.

"This'll also attract the river demons." She rubbed ash from the cooking stove into the locks as well because, she said, "The ash'll remind them of fire, of burning, and death."

I hated the ash smell in my hair.

I would not put the death scent in my hair, and I left my strings smothered only in yolk and honey, and the orange and lavender oil when I went to swim in the river with the other girls.

We crawled on the river bottom, and when we came up for air, our bellies flopping on the embankment, the sediment was stuck inside our toenails and fingernails. Dirt on our bodies never bothered us. It was the hair we worried over, but the river never dirtied our hair. Once our hair dried, we splashed back into the river and tried to swim as quickly as the fish that darted between our legs. We raced them and each other from one side of the river to the other. We believed the fish let us win because they knew how much the river god loved our hair strands that reminded him of the river's ripples. The ripples, we were told by our mothers and all those in the village, would only continue to flow if we kept our hair long. Once we came out of the water, I had to pick emerald shiners from my hair. The charmed fish couldn't help it. The fish, in touching me, could reach for a bit of grace from the river god. I placed my fingers on my wet lips and licked the river water from my fingers, my own bit of grace from the god.

One of the other girls shrieked, and then another and another. They pointed at my head. "Demon!"

I reached up, caught it, and flung it back to the river. The splash caused me to shiver. I thought of the demons burning, how their screams kept me awake throughout the night of the villagers' cooking. Had I killed it? I wanted to know and so waded into the water.

"Where are you going, Ingrid?" one of the girls called.

I dove, the girls' voices disappearing.

I swam deeper than I ever had before, twisting and turning, my eyes searching for the demon. Something tugged on my hair.

The demon wiggled in front of me, my hair in its teeth. It seemed to grin. The creature's face, which I had always thought of as a mush of grey, scaly flesh, was silver and bright and the eyes were like Kate's, when she would press her forehead

against mine in celebration of winning one of our races. When I began to push myself up, my curiosity satisfied, the demon tugged harder. "Come, Ingrid," it said in a sad girl's voice.

I shook my head and kicked my feet, rushing to the surface. I breathed and swam in circles there with my long hair floating far from my body. They frightened me, the demons, but I kept hearing them: come, follow.

I dove again.

The demon caught my hair and pulled harder. Another demon appeared. Then another, until many were pulling me farther away and even deeper.

"See what you desire," they hummed.

Within seconds, I saw what they wanted me to see: the god, asleep on the river bottom.

His hair, long as my own, was matted with mud and duckweed. A dead otter, its mouth twisted and open in frightened awe, decorated his neck and shoulders. Water moccasins slithered in and out of the river god's beard. Although the beard was long enough to cover his entire body, I could see skin slivers between the hair; his scaly skin was like the trout my mother fried on Saturday afternoons, not shiny and silvery like on the banners that flew in the village, but nearly burned black. That skin, that skin slept on a hair bed, braided like a mat, but thick like a king's mattress. Where were the girls whose hair he now slept on? As if he sensed my question, the river god opened his eyes and yawned.

Up, up, up I went, breaking the surface with a loud cough and cry.

The other girls giggled and splashed over at the embankment, ignorant of what lay beneath.

I swam to them, gasping as I crawled from the water. "Terrible," I managed.

"What?" they all asked.

"The river god."

"How do you know?" Martha asked.

"I saw him."

"Why would he give you a glance? I have the shiniest hair," Nan said.

On and on all the girls prattled, hoping for his gaze, while I slipped quietly from the water and rushed home in my smock, dress in hands, hoping the river god would return to sleep and never wake again.

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That evening, as she did every night, my mother called for me so she could comb and wash my hair. When I remembered how our mothers spat on, shooed, and threatened the creatures with large rocks, I wished I could do the same to the river god, who had banished the demons to the section of the river where they hid deep in the water, under the muck and rocks.

"I can wash my own hair," I said at the washtub, hiding myself behind the sheet used for privacy.

As my mother pulled at my hair, readying her brush, I could only think of my hair added to the god's bed, all the strings fallen or yanked out.

"After the spring festival, you'll be scrubbing your own hair. But it's still my job," my mother said. She smelled of cabbage and wheat honey bread, and of the smoke from the ovens at the shop where she baked. Water and bread. A pebble and a comb. They were the things that had told me I was loved. I came out from behind the sheet, but I would go no closer to the water. I could only think of that dead otter's face and the water moccasins biting me.

My mother waved me over. "Hurry up." She described the dead fish stench, the sulfur under the demons' nails, rotting seagrass stuck inside their sharp teeth, the film of mud covering their skin. "You don't want those demons nesting inside your hair."

I wanted to tell her that I would rather the demons have me than that god, but how could I tell my mother?

I started to undress. Just for one more night, I would have her hands combing through my hair.

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I refused to work a comb or brush through my hair. My mother made the silver comb, with peach champagne and lilac tanzanite flowers on the handle, to prepare me for the spring festival. It sat untouched on the vanity in my room. I missed one wash day after the next.

My mother chased me around the house with the comb in her hand while my father sat slumped at the kitchen table, ripping up pieces of bread that he dunked into his bitter coffee. "Leave her be," he said. "She'll learn when those things crawl inside the nests she's made with all that hair." He sat between us. I stood at the ready on one side of the kitchen table, and my mother stood at the other, her arm raised, as if the comb were a sword and she was prepared to strike. She wouldn't strike me in the same way she tried to strike the river demons.

But her arm came quickly down.

In the end, I was faster, and I ran all the way to the river.

When the girls saw me, they all shouted.

"Why do you want those demons against your scalp?"

"To keep the river god from me."

"Better for us, then."

They brandished sticks at me, the same sticks they had been using to draw images of the creatures in the wet sand. They laughed about the creatures' ugliness and my ugliness and talked of their luck.

I was happy to be considered so ugly.

\*\*\*

I climbed up the embankment. I had swum from the other side, knowing the other girls and the mothers wouldn't think to look for me so near the demons' haunt. I made a small fire, hung my wet dress over an oak branch, and, then, I sat as close to the fire as I could to avoid a chill. I soon fell asleep.

Next to the oak, I woke to a thing crawling to claim me. I stumbled up and jumped from the tree and shook my hair, so knotted that my head felt weighed down and my neck ached. I used my hands to dig at the knots, but whatever it was, a slimy slickness darting up, secured itself to my neck. My strands were being pulled, yanked. The river demon—for I was sure that was what it was—began nestling inside my hair. The cool body stuck against me calmed me.

I kept my head still, afraid to blink, afraid any body movement would . . . What? I knew what the mothers and the other girls said, but I thought of that river demon tucked inside my hair and how like me it was. The day of my sixteenth birthday, I had jumped into my parents' bed after my father had gone out to the fields, and I snuggled against my mother with the covers over our heads. I had wanted to stay in that calmness forever, but my mother would soon hope me gone, a sacrifice for wheat, corn, and clear water.

For the river demon, my hair was a comfort blanket, so I left it there.

After an hour, the river demon started whispering, like two wet rocks scratching against each other. The low sadness that came from my neck was the same noise I had heard for years, but this time, I could understand.

It was a story, the kind my mother told, of the river god and his desire for us girls with long hair. After the demon told the beginning of the story, though, details started to change. Instead, the girl danced with the river god that night to the coarse waltzes of bullfrogs and owls. They were alone; he took what he wanted. Then, not wanting to be saddled with a wife, but desiring the villagers to continue their worship, he didn't send the girl back; instead, he turned the girl into what the villagers would hate most, what they would never expect. Before that, he yanked out her hair, her screams unheard above water.

As the river demon finished her narration, the others crawled out of the river to greet me. Instead of seeing a slimy, elongated stomach, I saw Meg. Instead of shivering at the way a long tail flicked over a slick rock, I thought of Leah. Instead of backing away at the sight of the scurrying feet, I remembered Katie and how we ran side-by-side.

I allowed as many of them as could fit to rest inside the nests of my hair. I would not allow the villagers to burn them or crush them.

I swam to the other side of the river. Then I walked to the market. The mothers needed to know.

"Gah!" the village mothers exclaimed. They rushed over, throwing their baskets to the ground, their eggs breaking and yolks spilling.

"Those nests are big enough for fifty demons!" one mother shouted. The river demons crawled under the nests and latched on to my skin. Their tiny, muscled bodies tensed in fear. My own muscles tightened in fear for them, for me, for all the other girls.

"The sweet scents have vanished from your hair," my mother wailed.

The girls, the river demons, all rushed down my back, down the soaked dress, and danced around their mothers' boots. The mothers jumped and tried to crush them, but the girls were too fast.

"Listen." I shouted the word three or four times before they quieted. The river demons scurried up my dress again and remained there, waiting as I told the mothers the story.

Meg's mother spat at me, at the girls hanging to my dress. "Liar," she said.

All the mothers recoiled and turned. When they walked off, the girls crawled up my dress. Inside the nests, they whispered to me, "You tried, Ingrid."

My own mother was crying. Her nose was crinkled like when she smelled a bad batch of dough.

I stepped forward. "Mother."

She put up her hand. "Return home with your hair combed, with dry clothes, and no more of those things."

"Take us back to the river," they whispered. "You shouldn't have to be without your mother, too."

I missed the way my mother's fingers massaged my scalp and how she gently pushed my head forward, saying, "Hold still, my love." I didn't really know how to comb my hair without listening to her stories about the village girls, famous for our thick and quick-growing tresses, and how the river god found our hair so soft and warm, not at all like the cold river bottom, where the demons he banished burrowed, hunting for food.

The tiny claws massaged my skin at my neck's base. Like my mother kneading dough. Just as the mothers had turned their backs on us, I turned from my mother. "I will never comb my hair again," I said to her.

The villagers now call me mud girl, tangled nest of hair. I live near an old oak on the other side of the river, where we eat day-old, crusty bread my mother leaves for me early in the morning, before the others venture near the river. I share it with the demon girls, and each year, when we gain a new girl, we all whisper curses to the river god and wait for thunder and the river waves to splash us. I laugh at the water. We all play in the mud, and, at night, when so many demon girls are sleeping in my hair nests, I praise the mud at the river bottom, where worms and all other ugly things live, and I am thankful for bad hair and this filthy embankment with the absence of river songs, banners, and a river god with a terrible, wiggling beard.

END

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## The Tin Man by Kyle Kirrin

I filter out onto the shining steel streets with the rest of the Machina. They glide around and across each other in a hundred different directions, with only millimeters of clearance between them. Their motion is mathematical—no space goes wasted.

I don't glide. I can't calculate the trajectories like they do, not anymore. I can't even see the pattern. Every step I take causes aberrations in the code. Stutter steps and pivots. Dented chassis and sparking limbs.

They call me Broken. The lightning did it. It leapt for me seven years back, and I've been this way ever since. It melted something inside my head. Sometimes I overclock for no reason at all. Sometimes my heart throttles and whirrs until my chest plate glows white-hot.

So I hang back four strides behind the others. It's a ninety-seven-minute run to the Fringe, where the metal ends and the grass begins. Nobody speaks. There's nothing to be said. We're pouring metal today, as always. We're expanding, because that's what we do.

We fan out upon arrival, each heading for a Conduit. They stick out of the ground like loose wires. I pick mine up and silvery metal gutters out of the tube. It kicks back once, twice, then the flow is thick and mercurial. I let it pool around my feet. The heat ignites the grass exactly six inches ahead of the flow.

I pour the molten metal into ant hills, into cracked earth and dry riverbeds. Over sun-bleached bones, over rusty crosses. Into holes in the ground where soft things live. Sometimes their screams make me flinch. I've never seen another Machina flinch.

Everyone else hums as they work. I hum, too, from time to time. But no matter how hard I try, I can never seem to hit the right note.

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The day's work is over and regrettably, I am home, in my father's small domicile. My brother's head is mounted above the mantle, which is a terrible risk, but one worth taking to preserve his memory according to Father.

"How far is the Fringe?" Father says. His voice is thunderous, and his eyes are acetylene. The flames were sapphire-blue in his youth, but now his fire is pale and dusky. Sometimes you can't see the flames at all.

"It was ninety-eight minutes today," I say. "To the eastern front."

Father grunts. "Getting there."

Father's fading; it happens. He's all iron and ember, built to toil, not to last. He used to work for weeks at a stretch, shoveling coal into the furnace of his stomach, burning, belching. He worked the Fringe until oil spurted from his joints. These days, he hardly moves at all. It's the quiet moments that seem to get to him most. The small sounds the world makes as it drones on without him.

One day his Spark will die for good, and we'll cannibalize him for parts. But Father isn't that old—not really—and I'm not ready for him to fade. He's the only thing I have left.

He scoops a handful of coal off the floor and drops it into his stomach. The flames lick up and out of him. "No sighting then?"

"Not yet." He's waiting for the day when the Fringes meet. That day is decades, maybe centuries off.

"Any news from the other fronts?"

"No."

He nods, averts his gaze.

I let the silence deepen, wishing I had the words to break it. Beacon—my older brother—would have broken it, or maybe he wouldn't have needed to. His presence was always enough to span the dead zone between Father and me. The space between us seems infinite now that he's gone. Because Father's world is practical, and I am anything but that. It was almost a relief when he named me Broken. It meant that he'd finally given up waiting for me to become someone else.

Eventually, Father shrugs and powers down. I stay up late into the night, waiting for the right moment.

Once the fire in Father's stomach has dimmed to a smoldering glow, I creep over and press my ear against the warmth of his chest plate. His heartbeat ticks and slurps—the seals have given way. The heart needs to come out.

I pry up the loose steel floorboard that hides my stash. It's Father's old hearts, mostly, wedged between piles of raw components. Some of the hearts are still beating. Water dribbles from a loose valve here; steam vents from an aorta there.

I'm not sure how I make them. My fingers seem to know more about it than I do. But I'm working, and everything is clicking, then the pistons fire and a new heart beats once, twice, right there in my hands.

The real trick is in the switching. I watch my father's eyes as I inch his chest plate open. It creaks, but he doesn't wake. His old heart pumps, hisses. The inside of his chassis is slick with oil. I study the rhythm, the click-clack-hiss, the one-two-three one-two-three. I rip his old heart out after the third beat. I plug his new one in and it thumps the fourth.

He'd have me melted down for scrap if he found out. There is no greater sin than a resource wasted. But I don't think he's ready to fade, even though he says otherwise. I'll keep him online until the Fringes meet if need be.

It's the least I can do. I'm pretty sure that I'm the reason his heart keeps breaking.

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I execute all the right protocols but can't seem to power down, so I pry the floorboard up again and my fingers take it from there. I work bits of brass into a cord, into a casing. I fill it with aluminum bevels and rings, with racks and pinions and helices. I wind it up until it tick-tocks so loud that the sound reverberates through the domicile.

I smother my invention with my hands and dart a look at Father. He doesn't stir.

I unclasp my fingers. It's a clockwork heart, an antique even in my father's time. It's so small. But I don't stop there, though I know I should. I use LEDs for eyes—one blue, one red. Four copper springs for legs, an old crankshaft for the torso. I mold the head out of nickel plating. A piece of steel wool for the tongue, a curl of stripped wire for the tail. I turn it on and step back.

It cocks its head at me, kinks its neck from ninety degrees to one-eighty to two-seventy, then back again. It bobs up and down on its springs. Its crankshaft spins and whines, a noise that vibrates something deep inside my chest plate. I should disassemble it; I know this.

Instead, I decide to call it Quick.

Father groans. He rubs at his unlit eye sockets.

I bundle Quick up with frantic fingers, switch it off, and stash it under the floorboard. Then I set myself back to powering down. It's almost morning, and as always, there's real work to be done.

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I run for ninety-nine minutes, then pick a spot at the top of a hill. I wedge my Conduit between two rocks and let the silvery metal roll down like lava.

I should be focused on maximizing the flow, but no matter how hard I try, I lack the capacity to make myself care. Instead, I'm thinking of Quick. Of how I could leverage it into some purpose, so that Father wouldn't despise it so. So that maybe—just maybe—he'd be proud of me for once.

There are other Machina around, as always. Most of them are like me—sleek and small, rechargeable— but some lumber and smoke like Father used to. No matter the build, they all scowl at my unattended Conduit as they pour and adjust, readjust, resume pouring. Their attention is unerring. They tend their silver tributaries like they know nothing else.

I am envious. Because I see grass burning, see forests wilt and wither. Because I wonder why we do what we do, and because wondering is the loneliest thing in the world.

\*\*\*

The day's work is over, so I head home. A dozen different schematics are bouncing around inside my head when I find our front door smoking in the street. I push through the gathered crowd and into our domicile. The floor has been torn apart.

Father towers in the corner, burning as bright as I've ever seen him. His old hearts are everywhere, scattered and mangled, pumping amidst the wreckage. Quick whines on the floor near Father's feet. It raises its head, sees me, and bounces over.

Father lashes out with his foot and Quick is in the air and then it's hitting the wall and then gears are clattering all around me. Quick's eyes dim, then fade. Something in me winds down.

"How long," Father says.

"I don't know."

He kicks a heart toward me. It skitters across the floor, hissing steam. "How. Long."

"Six years," I say.

His grits his titanium teeth. They bend, groan. One pops loose under the strain and pings against the wall. "And that thing?"

I look at the pile that I once called Quick. "It's new. A day old. I was going to find a use—"

"You don't *find* use," Father says, quiet now. His anger is sputtering, hardening over, and somehow, that's worse. He's silent for much too long. "Could you have helped him?" he says at last. "If you'd known there was a problem."

I hesitate, because I did know. Because I was the one who forgot to reopen Beacon's safety valve after I cleaned his central boiler. The explosion threw his head halfway to the Fringe. "No. I couldn't have helped him."

Father's response is instantaneous: "I figured." He welds his chest plate shut as I scavenge what parts I can from Quick. I'm not sure why I bother, but I don't know what else to do. Afterward, Father holds the door open until his meaning becomes too clear to ignore.

I say goodbye, he doesn't; this isn't supposed to happen.

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I stumble into the maelstrom of movement that is the town square. The other Machina give me a wide berth—inches rather than millimeters—but it isn't enough. I trip, brush against, collide, end up on my back staring up into a steely sky. Nobody tries to help me up. They just step around me. The truth has never been more obvious: I am an obstacle.

Once the last footfalls have faded, I climb to my feet and slouch toward the scrapyards, my decision made. I will be helpful. I will be a part of this, whether they like it or not.

An aluminum gate swings open to admit me, and the space within it is sprawling, crisscrossed with columns of inert Machina that stand still as gravestones, some of them missing hands or arms or faces.

The Machina that minds the yard stomps over. It greets me by sticking a pair of wired electrodes to my temples. It flips a wall-mounted switch and the current surges into me, makes my skull hum, makes my eyes vibrate in their sockets.

When the darkness comes—when the whirrings of my mind quiet for the first time in so many years—I am grateful.

\*\*\*

"Recoverable," a voice says, jarring me awake.

"No." My hands jump to my temples, to the electrodes that have fused to my skull. I tear them loose. "You're wrong. Run the diagnostic again."

"The scan came up positive," the Machina says, shrugging. "There's nothing I can do. Debugging is expecting you in four minutes."

"Please," I say. "I could be useful this way. They can't fix this, not me."

The Machina's huge shoulders dip; its massive head tips toward me. It drops to one knee so that we're eye-to-eye. "My daughter was the same way," it says, "too sensitive, too unfocused. She's better now. She's worked the Fringe as long as anyone."

"I don't want to be better," I say. "I want to be someone else."

"They can do that too. All it'll take is time."

\*\*\*

The journey back to the Fringe is nothing. My world is small and comfortable, it is a single step, it is the all-encompassing thrust of movement. Then my world is the next step, then the next, until I've left the scrapyards far behind.

The other Machina are waiting for me. We do not speak, because there is nothing to be said, and because there is work to be done. One of them bolts Father's furnace to my back. He faded; it happens. The furnace is still warm, and I feel an echo of something, but it slides away.

The others pile coal into my furnace, and I pour and pour. The grass wilts, the leaves turn, snow falls, melts. Everything is simple now. The world is green, and I will drown it in chrome.

\*\*\*

I'm running low on power for the first time in ages. The coal is gone. All of it is gone, everywhere. Even the scars in the earth that it was harvested from have been plastered over with metal, made smooth. I need to recharge, so I head back. I'm not sure how much time has passed since I started working, but the world has changed.

The other Machina have sprouted turbines that snatch the wind. Others wear panels of black glass that drink in the light of day. But they're still pouring metal, and that is all that matters.

I make it home. My charging station is in the corner, as I left it some months or years ago. Beacon's head still hangs above the mantle. I'm two inches from the plug when I hear a scratching sound, the telltale shriek of metal on metal. It's coming from underneath the floor. I find a loose board and pry it up.

It's what's left of Quick. Its eyes are faint, but still glowing, somehow. Someone must have fixed it up. But I have no use for Quick, not anymore. I force its head down and slide the floorboard back into place. The scratching quiets, but never stops.

\*\*\*

It is a six-hundred-and-ninety-four-minute run to the Fringe. My Conduit is waiting for me, as always. There is an ocean just beyond it. The Machina line the shore, spewing silver into the waves.

I pour, and the sea boils around my knees. It is acceptable work. There are so many variables to parse that by the time I'm running low, it seems like no time has passed at all. I set my Conduit down and turn away. I am the only one who has moved.

Heads turn in my direction. For once, the others seem to have something to say, but nobody wants to be the one to say it. Another Machina steps up and takes hold of my Conduit. It dips a set of bronze fans into the waves, and I understand.

I have become obsolete.

\*\*\*

I am fading; it happens. The Fringe is simply too far away, and my charging station is antiquated. The other Machina have become self-sufficient. They never stop working. I wish I were so lucky.

There are others like me, relics that have been left behind. We let the days burn by, mostly. I hear the same sounds that Father used to dread: the clinking of footsteps beyond the window, the droning of my own failing heart. These sounds are no easier on me.

I hear Quick from time to time, scratching at the underbelly of the floor as if it's trying to claw its way out. The scratching grows louder as the days pass. It makes me think of Father. Of whether he was the one who fixed Quick after I left. I push the thought away. I don't want it inside my head.

When the scratching becomes too loud to ignore, when I find myself vibrating in the middle of the night, I pry up the floorboard, hammer in hand. It's time.

Quick pokes its head out. I swing and miss, and the hammer sparks off the floor. Quick scampers between my legs and bounds out the window. I follow it outside, but it darts ahead again. Thunder sounds in the distance, and the first drops of rain splatter against my shoulders. The streets are slick beneath my feet.

I catch Quick almost an hour later, at the very top of a hill. The sky is full of clouds that could be anvils. I raise the hammer high above my head.

The air above us crackles. Quick watches the sky with something like hope.

END

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## An Accidental Coven by Laura Blackwell

One Saturday night six months ago, my husband and I attended a party where we saw three women wearing the same dress. To save those present from embarrassment, I will not identify them by name, career, or family status, but instead describe the fateful three by their avocations: the Artist, the Athlete, and the Gardener. This is my attempt to piece together the events of that evening, what led to them, and the subsequent fallout.

\*\*\*

The Artist happened across the dress two months before the party, while shopping for a new set of kitchen knives. As she ascended the department store escalator, the dress caught her eye, summoning her with its exuberant splashes of color against a rich brown ground. When she got close, she saw that the splashes were full-blown blossoms. She tried it on, reveling in the full skirt's swirl around her legs. She wore it often, no matter what the occasion was.

\*\*\*

In their natural states, one of the women was fair-skinned, with brilliant red hair; one was dark-skinned, with tight black curls; and one was olive-skinned, with loose waves of deep brown.

On the night of the party, one of the women wore her hair short and one wore it up. One had no hair, thanks to the chemo.

\*\*\*

The Athlete went shopping specifically for something to wear to the party. She tried on several outfits, dismissing the ones that required any kind of special washing. She circled the dress on its rack several times, attracted to the bright colors, before she ran her hand across its silky fabric, checked its care label, and decided it was worth a try. She loved the way it draped on her shoulders; she loved that she could wear it with any kind of footwear. She set it in the closet, and she looked forward to Saturday night all week.

\*\*\*

One of the women had generous curves; one was so thin her bones stood out; one was precisely average on every physical measurement.

\*\*\*

The Gardener wasn't sure she'd make it to the party, but she ordered the dress online. She loved the jasmine and pansies and lily of the valley—which would never all be in bloom in the same place and season, but looked wonderful together—and the fact that they were against a deep, loamy brown. When she tried it on, she appreciated the way the unusual neckline, with its high collar and small cutout, added interest while revealing very little skin. She laid it over the back of a chair to remind her about the party.

\*\*\*

One of the women wore the dress with a pair of shatteringly stylish metal-heeled stilettos; one wore boots because she was cold; one wore beaded flip-flops and elaborate pedicure art on her toenails.

\*\*\*

“Uh-oh,” I said when I noticed the same flowers sparking like just-lit fireworks from different parts of the party's main room. “How embarrassing. Watch the triplets dance away from each other all night.”

My husband caught my sightlines and made a noncommittal “hmm.” He smiled sympathetically; I wasn't sure at whom.

But I was wrong. The Artist, the Athlete, and the Gardener found each other and exchanged compliments. They sat down together near us, glasses of wine and whisky and diet soda in hand, laughing and chatting. They did not attempt to keep their voices low, so I learned that they had never met before.

Although the party wasn't a major event, it was big enough that a friend of the hostess was acting as photographer. When he strolled around to our corner, a panicky look crossed his face. I saw him fiddle with his camera's controls, trying to get close-ups of each of the three women without the other. It didn't work, as they were ignoring him, leaning in to hear one another.

“Ladies!” the photographer said at last. “The hostess would love to get your picture, but could I put some other people in with you? Maybe this fine couple,” he said to my husband and me.

“Why?” the Artist, the Athlete, and the Gardener asked in unison.

“Because you look like a three-headed sofa,” a woman behind me muttered into her wine glass. I chuckled, and she shot me an impish smirk, the big diamond in her ring flashing as she took another sip.

“Because I'd hate to have you run together,” said the photographer, plowing ahead as if no one had said anything. “It would make you look . . . bulky,” he added, trying not to look at the heaviest of the women.

“We're not furniture,” said the Artist. “We don't need to be staged.”

“We're just here to enjoy the party,” said the Gardener. “Why don't you take a picture of us together, doing that?”

“We wear what we like,” said the Athlete, “and we don't care who else likes it or doesn't.”

A wave of silence rippled from the three women who sat together, no longer laughing. The lights dimmed, slipping the room into a near-dark I can describe only as deep brown. The scent of damp, healthy soil slammed into the suddenly thin air. For a moment, I thought we were being buried alive.

Then a leafy, bitter scent crept in, intensifying as if a gentian flower were coming into bloom with every breath. The lights brightened, flecks of color falling out of nowhere. Swaying, I looked at the floor and saw a litter of petals thickening to a carpet that threatened to swallow us all.

The Artist, the Athlete, and the Gardener strode out of the party, skirts swishing, petals swirling in their wake. When the door shut behind them, the air was clear, the hardwood floor shining, the clinks and chatter of the party returning. More guests trickled out after the three, claiming sudden illness. To protect us all from embarrassment, I can't give you their names, nor mine.

None of us has been the same since.

The woman with the big diamond has abandoned her obsession with fashion. No matter what she wears, no matter where she goes, her clothes take on the colors and patterns of the background. I have seen her out to dinner, where she makes the most of her décolletage because her little black dress is now just a transparent shape that shows the chair she sits on and the bustling servers behind her. Winter is the hardest season for her, when she needs long clothes and a hat and gloves. Then, she's just a face bobbing in the air. She is less critical of others' clothing now, since the effect goes both ways; she has no idea what anyone is wearing. I used to feel sorry for her, since her change is strong enough that I can see it through mine, but oddly, she seems less frustrated now than she did before the party.

The spell's effect on the photographer is less obvious, but in some ways it's a bigger change. He takes more photos than ever, all candid, never posed. Unable to discern which shots will work out, he has stopped arranging his subjects and started charming them. He avoids interrupting, and when he must do so, he's friendly about it. His event photography business has improved; everyone says he makes them feel interesting and attractive. Since he can't determine which shots are best, he's hired an assistant to help him. The only events he can't do are weddings, because it seems he can never identify the bride.

My husband has lost his sense of smell, or rather, had it hijacked. No matter where he is, he smells nothing but flowers (the only one he can identify is iris). Although he says it's a pleasant scent, I can tell he grows tired of it. He doesn't enjoy working the grill at barbecues anymore, but he doesn't complain; he knows he got off easy.

We have all tried to get the Artist, the Athlete, and the Gardener to undo their spell, but they say they don't know how. The Artist, the only one I knew before the party, says that she would undo it for us if she could, because she thinks that the point of this lesson has been learned. The Athlete thinks that they had no part in it, and that we did it to ourselves.

I last saw them both at the Gardener's funeral. Out of respect, the two surviving members of the accidental coven wore the fateful dress. I know this only because my husband told me.

Since the night of that party, I've seen every person—woman, man, girl, or boy—wearing a rich brown dress covered with all kinds of flowers. I find team sports hard to follow now, but aside from that, I enjoy the effects of the spell. Sometimes I notice the way the dress drapes on someone's shoulders or swirls around their calves, or I think the peek of skin at the neckline is fetching. Most of the time, though, I barely notice the dress; seeing it on different persons makes me more aware of the variations in footwear, in accessories, in face and hair and smile.

With everyone in the same dress, I finally see every single person.

END

*Laura Blackwell's fiction publications include PseudoPod, Strange California, and World Fantasy Award-winning anthology She Walks in Shadows. A former journalist, she is Shimmer's copy editor. Find her at [www.pronouncedlahra.com](http://www.pronouncedlahra.com).*



## The Memory of a Memory by Marc A. Criley

I crack time. Part the seam, step into gray-green gloom. I wait as eyes adjust, hear the seam flutter closed. Bookshelves line the corridor, extend into the past. Shelves crammed with books, spines to the wall, smelling of ozone and rose water. Hardcover, paperbacks, trades, loose leaf. The past as hardcopy, minutes pressed against minutes, fossilizing through time.

Hand-inked bookboard sign hangs from the ceiling: "Uhrbuch Collections".

\*\*\*

I walk along the shelved past, brush fingers across fore edges emanating hot/cold/wet/arid. I touch history, literally *touch history*, re-experience its shadow. I seek a specific time, a specific place. Close my eyes, tactile sensations only. Seek by touch. I feel the beat of seasons, fingertips warmed and chilled. Zeroing in on a humidity, an odor of grass and burnt rubber, hot black asphalt, a child's still warm skin, slick blood.

\*\*\*

This is the book—*the uhrbuch*.

*Squealing brakes, dull thud and muffled crack. My beautiful baby boy, smashed on star-halo glass, rasped by asphalt and gravel. Become a baby rag doll before my eyes.*

Over and over in my dreams. My waking dreams, my sleeping dreams. I lost my footing that day. Swimming against a riptide of memory each day, every day. Cannot move on—failed so many days, so many ways.

Until today. I can do this. Cut one page—cut one day. The *memory* of a memory is sufficient.

\*\*\*

I find it in hardcover. Hoped for loose leaf—simply spread the covers, find the page, snap/pop. Out and over and done. Hardcover are hard. But I prepared. A craft knife, my “time cutter.” Spring clamp holds a laser-cut, laser-honed hook-tip blade.

I push a fingernail in, twist to spread a gap. Force space for a finger, for two, for three. Fingers brush black asphalt, gravel, grass blades, curly hair. I stifle a gasp, choke a sob. Between the pages I slip the knife, seesaw to the binding, millimeter by millimeter.

I still my breath, hold the blade—flush to the binding—count one-two-three. Just like I practiced.

*Draw up firmly and without hesitation.*

I catch the severed page. It is hard to see, to read in the gloom of the stacks. Raised ink, ever so slight, forms dim letters, symbols, codes, line drawings. The shade of my son, in midair; myself, uncomprehending. The page crackles and whispers: a crunch, squealing brakes, a howling come to engulf my soul. No more. This leaf will crumble, a page of memory crumbling to dust and fiber. I exhale, loosen my grip, let it flutter to the floor, let it flutter to dust.

My fingers slip from the book.

\*\*\*

Pages burst from hardcovers. I jam my hands against the thrumming blizzard. Panicked sobs as pages scatter. The binding is torn. My blade. I cut too deep, severed the binding of time and memory. Time compacts the past, ejects unbound memories. An avalanche of memories. I can’t catch them. There’s no time. I can’t remember them all again.

Those weeks, months, that year? All fade. Sharing a glass of wine, a fancy burger, a bed warm as fresh bread; my child’s last, best birthday, Christmas morning under crystal stars, strewn wrapping paper, bows, squealing joy; spring peepers calling out an unseasonal February twilight. Pages cascade, splash at my feet. I flail, grab at crumpling memories, fading, dissipating, un-recollected memories.

\*\*\*

I don’t remember dropping to my knees.

Pages crack and tear, I claw up what I can.

Happy Hour beers and anchovy pizza, Band-aid on my child’s knee, kissing a forehead, a car too cold to start, calling in sick, playing Chinese checkers.

My hands gnarl into fists.

I gasp, “The memory . . .”

Pages turning to fragments, turning, to flakes, turning, to dust.

“ . . . of a memory . . .”

An undone binding, something I once remembered.

“ . . . is sufficient.”

END

*Marc A. Criley avidly read fantasy and science fiction for over forty years before deciding to try his hand at it. He has since been published in Beneath Ceaseless Skies and Abyss & Apex (with more forthcoming), so rest assured it is never too late*

to start writing. Marc and his wife "manage" a household of cats, along with Tammy the Dog, in the hills of North Alabama. Find him on Twitter as [@That\\_MarcC](https://twitter.com/That_MarcC) or [www.kickin-the-darkness.com](http://www.kickin-the-darkness.com)



## The Girl Who Ate Galaxies by L'Erin Ogle

There's a black hole inside me.

Yesterday Oklahoma disappeared. The dry dusty fields stuck in my throat for a moment, my jaw unhinging and elongating to accommodate that wide rectangle of land. Part of Texas came with it. Lake Meredith and the Canadian River came last and cooled my sunburnt throat, as the salt skated on swollen blisters. Pain needles arced through me.

Dr. C. crosses his legs and gazes at me through square spectacles. He is handsome, and around my father's age. Someone must have done their research.

"Kaylie," he says. "How are you feeling?"

"Not so hot," I tell him.

My throat is lined with thick burns. Oklahoma doesn't go down easy in the middle of August. Some of them have popped and maybe I'm going mad, but I think I can hear screaming in the liquid spatter before the black hole sucks it down.

"Did you sleep?"

Swollen fat with despair, I did not.

“You look tired,” he says.

I am tired.

My name is Kaylie Kristal Collins, and I am eating the world.

\*\*\*

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about, Kaylie?”

Dr. C. never wears anything protective like the others. It’s like we could be at a regular shrink appointment, the way he sits in his chair, yellow legal pad on his lap, his hand on his chin with one finger extended up his cheek. Another time, another world, different circumstances, I’d ache for him across the room.

But the leather restraints keep me immobile. They, the ones in suits and breathers, release me one limb at a time and perform a series of bends and massages. They apologize through their masks.

Everyone’s always so fucking sorry.

They muzzled me for a while, but then the black hole just pulled harder and people were carved into pieces being sucked in. It was inhumane to see them splintered apart, how worlds split around the gaps and slithered inside me.

“No,” I say. I have a lot to say but it all means nothing, when I can’t understand it myself.

“Can you tell me how it started?”

How it started? Me, or the hole?

I was an accident. My mother had actually shown up to her appointment at the clinic to have me sucked out, the reverse of what I do now, but changed her mind at the last moment. Cold feet or something. I like that better than what Nana, Daddy’s mom, said. She pressed her lips together and shook her head when Margaret’s name came up. No, she said, she knew she couldn’t keep her hooks in Brad if she got rid of it.

It, meaning me. The unwanted.

The hole started as a hollow place inside me.

“You know how you maybe don’t eat a day or two?” I ask Dr. C. “How maybe you’re just too sad or broke as shit to get a meal in? And then all of a sudden, you’re like wow, my stomach’s eating my backbone, I’m fucking starving to death here, but even then, no matter how much you eat, there’s this spot you just can’t get to? You can pile all this food on top of it, but underneath you’re still so fucking hungry?”

Dr. C. shifts. “Why wouldn’t you eat for two days, Kaylie?” he asks.

Of course, he doesn’t understand. People like him don’t.

No one does.

I turn away from him. I don’t tell him the rest, that there was this big hollow ache inside me that had nothing to do with food. I was hungry all the time, but nothing could fill me up. Not sex or books or movies or booze. Not even dope.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” I say, and close my eyes.

\*\*\*

The ache is back. I’m being eaten alive inside.

Am I the black hole, or is the black hole me?

\*\*\*

It started with Dodge City, Kansas. At a little bar where they played ear-breaking country music and men tracked shit all over the floor. I opened my mouth to take a drink, because that’s all I was good at, drinking and waking up not knowing where I was, sometimes not who I was. And then the bar disappeared right down my throat, this whole big place just compressed into a wind whistling down my throat.

I closed my mouth, and I ran.

They came anyway.

\*\*\*

“How are you?” Dr. C. asks, again.

Nothing, not even a pair of latex gloves, separates us. He has hair on the back of his hands. He has a sunspot on his wrist. His pants are too short and his pale leg shows above his black socks.

I ache inside.

“Kaylie, can we talk about your scars?”

Scars define you. Anyone who says they don't is lying.

Maybe not all scars. Maybe only scars you give yourself. First with a sliced-up Coke can, next with a knife. Dr. C., you wouldn't understand. How the pressure in my chest just grew and grew until I couldn't take a breath? You ever suffocated under the weight of how terrible you are, your life is, and the only thing that saves you is seeing your skin split in two? A line, separating yourself, and then the blood comes, big fat ruby beads that swell and swell until they reach across the white fatty tissue and run like weeping rivers?

And oh, Dr. C., how fear and joy get wound up inside your soul when the bleeding won't stop.

“Want to tell me how many sexual partners you've had?” I snap at him. Quid pro quo, motherfucker. Show me your scars too.

“Is it about sex, Kaylie? Or love?” he asks.

Isn't it always about that?

Maybe it's not. Maybe it's about fathers and mothers and unloved children.

“No,” I say. I'm thinking about the Texas lake that soothed me like a mother's tit in her baby's mouth. But I can only base that on seeing a squalling baby latch on to a nipple and suck away. My mother was never a mother. She handed me over to Nana and Dad and disappeared.

“I know you hurt,” he says.

I stare at my eyelids. I think about lakes and cities and swallowing them whole. From Dodge City to the Texas coast is gone, inside me to somewhere else or just blanked out. Maybe I'm God's eraser, clean slating this shithole world. Really, though, if that were true, we'd have started with Indiana.

“Kaylie, I don't think people have been very kind to you,” he says.

People can really fuck you up, you know. They can open old wounds with a word.

My dad, he remarried. I remember the wedding. White dress, fancy church, the look she gave me when she removed my grubby hand from her dress. You know how someone can look at you like you're dogshit? I guess I didn't catch it for what it is, or maybe I thought I should try harder. I reached out with grubby dogshit hands on clean dresses, until my hand was red as a fresh sunburn, raw and oozing with rejection.

“Go away,” I say. “I don't want to hurt you, Dr. C.”

“I don't think you want to hurt anyone,” he says.

But God, I do. I turn toward him, but then I can't take looking at him being sucked into me, so I eat most of the Gulf of Mexico. Just like drinking too much on an empty stomach, it rolls around inside me, making me seasick.

\*\*\*

They were keeping me doped up, but I kept gobbling up cities and towns while I was asleep. They tried a lot of tests and medications and even giving me electric shocks. After the Gulf of Mexico incident, they come with long needles they jab into me. Whatever it is they have in those cylinders, it burns like fire. My body rejects it. My body says NO. It jets right back out of me, and with it comes some sort of shimmering clear substance. As it shoots out it begins to separate into silken strings, a spiderweb net cast over my bed.

I don't know what I'm supposed to become. I feel my skin tight around me, snug on my skeleton.

My skin is more scar than flesh. I wear the past tattooed all around me like a secret language. No one cared about my scars until I started eating the world, but now they care. Now they want to know where it hurts, who I am, what I feel.

Who am I?

I don't know.

I'm not much more than bitterness with a side of hunger, or maybe it's the other way around.

\*\*\*

They brought Daddy today. He pressed his fingers to the cocoon, the pads of his fingers embedded in the transparent membrane. I never looked but I register the things happening outside my sight. I feel them in space and time sliding around me.

I scored 146 on an IQ test once.

In school, they talked about that kind of thing. About my ability. I couldn't explain it to them either, how my brain was exposed and quivering underneath their good intentions and good will.

Good intentions, those will fuck you up every time.

\*\*\*

"May I come in, Kaylie?"

Dr. C., of course.

You know, I've gotten so good at not asking questions that show the little grubby piece of dogshit I am, but I want to ask him —

In a different life, would you love me? Would you, could you, love someone as scarred as me? But I can never ask. Questions like that are what makes you red and raw inside.

I must decide to let him in, because the cocoon splits to make a door, and he steps inside. It seals behind him with the sound of wet lips kissing.

I can't see him, because my eyes only see the world ahead of me, but I can feel the sadness in his eyes. He doesn't sit this time.

"How are you?" he asks.

I know they were trying to kill me. Bitter is my heart, hollow my ache.

Hungry, hungry, hungry.

He reaches out and touches my arm, and my scars light up. They sizzle and snap and it's been so long since anyone's touched me.

There's a high-pitched whine and then I realize it's me.

"Can you stop this, Kaylie?"

My dad liked to drink. A lot. I asked him for a ride to the movies once. I was going to meet Jack, the first boy who ever asked me out, and he told me to get out of his face. "You're so goddamn needy," he said. "No one's ever going to love you."

Then he sat on the couch and got drunker and drunker until I gave up and went down to the Smith house. They were two boys always partying in the little garage behind their house. I drank my first hard liquor that night and woke up with blood staining my thighs.

Jack didn't ask me out ever again.

I don't think I can stop.

\*\*\*

Dr. C. sits with me all the time now. He doesn't have anywhere to go. I've consumed North America. This cocoon we float in is all that's left, suspended in the sky. He's getting skinny, pale flesh hanging off his skeleton. Sometimes he strokes me the way you'd stroke a dying pet, but I don't know if it's for his comfort or mine. Rest of the time, he just stares through the cocoon, at what lies before us, South America, being devoured countries at a time.

My jaw has been hinged open for days. I think. I can't really tell time anymore. The pain takes me sometimes, though I never know for how long.

The hunger keeps growing.

I think I could stop if I let myself get swallowed up. Just stick a hand in my mouth and get sucked away, collapse like the stars in the sky, those dead shining bright things. Maybe I'd turn into another sun, maybe I'd matter somehow.

There are billions of people on this planet and not one person came to my hospital room who wasn't paid to.

Is this what you wanted? I should to get to ask that, before everyone's dead. Did you have to be fuckin' indifferent? You thought I was nothing, but look at me now.

Look at me now.

Tears burn webs over my eyes.

Kaylie, Dr. C. says. I only mean to ask him what he wants but he disappears into my mouth. I try to grab him, but I miss. I can feel the hole sucking at me, and I jerk it back, let it have him instead.

\*\*\*

I would have loved you, Kaylie, Dr. C. says in my head. Scars and all.

He's not real. I know that.

He still talks to me. I had to pick someone and he was nice to me.

Loving me back, I tell him, was all I wanted.

Earth has become a semicircle. No one's going to be moving down there much more anyway, since they launched nuclear weapons at me. Mushroom clouds I ate like fresh-spun cotton candy, flames licking my insides.

And yet, the hunger remains.

\*\*\*

It's so dark here. I thought the stars would be brighter.

END

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## Refuge by Jack Caseros

"It will be dark soon," Tristán said.

Arturo cleared his throat in response. He looked like he could be Tristán's brother, but only in the way that the church ladies who welcomed the asylum-seeking families assumed everyone who arrived on that military bus were one big family tree, chopped down from a Central American war zone and relocated to the Canadian prairies for safe-keeping.

Arturo was battling through a second week of a throat infection—but he couldn't miss their second-annual hunting trip, even for ill health. He had been sick a lot since summer ended. It didn't seem to matter if he was one place or another.

Tristán wasn't sick yet, but he was exhausted from slogging with their guns and gear since sunrise. When the pair were in the city they exchanged broken English, but a hundred kilometers from the nearest streetlight, they sweated and huffed and dropped any pretenses. Their Spanish crackled in the mist.

"Do we go?" Arturo asked.

"I don't think we have a better choice," Tristán said. "If we want to make it before night, we have to go down and through."

But where down was and what they had to go through wasn't so straightforward. There were six miles of crevasse, from rim to rim. That was mostly manageable. It was the land's designation as tribal land that made it more difficult. The Tribal Council had a track record of frowning on trespassers. Particularly, outsiders with weapons.

The pair were not unfamiliar with that—they were outsiders to the tribe's colonizers too, welcomed by the federal government as a political pitch for globalism. Tristán and Arturo came from different villages in Honduras. They met after they heeded the open arms policy the Canadian embassy promised on six-inch televisions they watched idly at refugee camps.

The two years since had unfolded that promise. After the Canadians set up a hasty refugee camp on the American border for the summer, and after a winter at a military base in Manitoba, they were provided housing in various towns across the country. It was an opportunity to return to sensible lives. No raids, no dirty bombs, no decapitations. Now there was sugary coffee, icy roads, and currency that didn't become worthless overnight. Hunters by tradition, Tristán and Arturo were excited to go after the monster-sized Canadian game all the locals talked about toward the end of summer.

"That goddamn elk." Arturo spat and cleared his throat again.

"He ran us crazy. What a waste."

"That's the worst part."

"He will serve the wolves and ravens all the same."

"Then he serves no good." Arturo coughed and spat.

They shouldered their packs and lurched into the crevasse. There was half a hope that they might run into the elk and have a chance at hauling it to Arturo's pickup truck. Short of that, they only had the vehicle's heater to look forward to.

There wasn't much besides dense bush in the crevasse. For a solid forty minutes they elbowed their way through shrubs taller than either of them. When they broke through the bushes with cheeks lashed pink from elastic branches, it was a relief to see the creek. Clear water ran through tall grass and willows—and in the open, on its chubby flank, their wounded elk.

The elk's tongue lunged out of its mouth. They could see it, pink and bright, even in the misty day's dying light. The animal didn't move. They wouldn't need their weapons, but Arturo kept his handy, just in case. Tristán set his pack down a few steps from the carcass so he could unload his field dressing kit. On one knee, he sharpened his skinning knife while Arturo looked over the antlers.

"It's a monster . . ."

"You got yourself a nice mount, for sure." Tristán nodded, still on his knee and missing the tremble in Arturo's voice. "Twelve points? Fancy hat rack. I'm not so vain as you, naturally. All the horns tell me is that we outsmarted an elder."

"Tristán . . ."

"I mean, he doesn't look so wise now, but . . . we all go in our time, no? I say—"

"Tristán. Shut up and look."

Tristán rose and joined Arturo on the back side of the carcass. Then he understood why Arturo wasn't so interested in his trophy anymore.

When they spotted him in the field, and from where they had approached legs first, the elk looked like a robust buck. But on its back—erupted like a raw boil that stretched from its neck to its tail—was the torso of a man, face up. The man's chest was bare, but busy with tattoos. His shoulders and head merged into the elk's tawny fur. Along the torso's side, from the shoulder blades to the hips, the skin was torn, exposing oozing flesh.

"That wasn't there when I shot it," Arturo said, so numb that he barely enunciated the words.

Tristán looked around. He scanned the trees, the bushes, the creek. It could have been a trick, or maybe an accident someone was trying to pass off on reckless trespassers.

There was no one else. They were alone, for now.

Arturo gagged at the stench that rose from the open flesh. It didn't smell like a dressed elk would—although Tristán had smelled his first musky buck the year prior, and knew that it wasn't all hickory smoked sausage in the field.

For some reason, Tristán thought that the man looked too warm, too fresh. He took a knee and felt for a pulse around the man's neck.

There was a tattoo of a combination lock on the man's trachea, right where Tristán jammed his fingers. As Tristán searched for the pulse that wasn't there, the tattoo spun. Tristán tried to move the dial alone. With little resistance, he could wheel the man's tattoo to the left and right.

"What the hell is going on?" Arturo asked.

"You see this? Get your camera."

"My camera? Let's get out of here."

"Did you have a locker at school?"

"Of course not. Who the hell cares?"

"Once, I saw a lock like this. It was on a trunk," Tristán said.

"Fuck off."

"Don't be such a coward."

Tristán's blood pressure rose. He almost stood up, wanting to shout Arturo down for forgetting all the terrible reasons that made them uproot everything familiar for them and their families. It had been a long road to a steadier life, and forgetting that made them no different than the torso: decorated, but half-formed and lifeless.

The memories would never be easy. Tristán would give his wife and children a new life, but he never could leave where he came from. It was as lasting and legible as the tattoos on the man's corpse.

"They didn't bring any trunks to your town?" Tristán pushed on. "Just food and firearms? And the direction to shoot first and fuck the women before asking any questions?"

"This is not the time for that."

"No, of course not. Never the time. But tell me, how much of your time did it take away?"

"Grab your things, we need to leave."

Tristán ignored Arturo, staring at the throat tattoo once again. The combination lock he remembered was on a trunk that gangsters dropped off at his house. His uncle freaked out and cut the lock with bolt cutters. He didn't want Tristán to see the contents, but Tristán was stubborn and his uncle was impatient because blood seeped from the corners.

"My uncle carried my father out of the box."

"Animals . . ."

"My uncle didn't want me to help. So I carried the lock. Nobody wanted it. I kept it. It took me six months, but I finally cracked it."

"That's very precious, Tristán. Tell me more as we walk . . ."

"We can go . . . but . . ."

"Leave it alone, man. We need to go. We need to get back to the truck before it gets dark."

"I remember the combination . . . something like . . ."

Tristán gave it a go. 31 left, 27 right, 9 left. He heard a click and looked up at Arturo, who only shook his head and stepped back. When Tristán looked back at the carcass, he saw the two skins part even farther, the flesh itself peeling away and opening up onto darkness. Tristán couldn't look away, and didn't need to—there was nothing else to see.

Tristán's clothes crumpled as his body turned to leaves. They blew against Arturo's back.

There were six miles to the truck, and Arturo would have made record time if it wasn't for the uphill battle through the undergrowth. The alders and hazelnut thrashed at his face and forearms, but he didn't care. He didn't let himself think about what had happened. He focused on each step as if it were his last.

Which wasn't the first time Arturo had to count his steps like that. When the gangs first came to his town, they didn't bother with the girls. They went for the boys. They needed soldiers more than they needed pleasure. Arturo had been collecting butterflies in the trees behind his house. He had never fired a gun, nor had he ever heard a gunshot. When he heard the tattering stutter of a machine gun ring off in the town square, he leapt to his feet and flew off with the butterflies.

But it had been a while since Arturo had to run like that. His throat throbbed in the thickening fog. He stopped for a gulp of water and decided to load his gun. Arturo's hands shook, but he was able to load it quickly, like he had done dozens of times in front of his commanding officers, who assumed the role of guardians and drill sergeants for the boys of the villages they claimed.

Then back into the bush, lungs and soggy boots be damned. The gun occupied both of Arturo's hands, so he could maneuver around tree trunks but he couldn't keep the branches out of his eyes. A tree creaked and made him jump into a trunk. Arturo swore he heard Tristán's voice calling to him, but when he stopped to listen he only heard birdsong.

Arturo exhausted himself beyond fear. Now he was angry, fuming as he jogged. If Tristán had not insisted that they could revive their boyhood joys of hunting in the forest, albeit a bit colder—and if Arturo had not agreed to drop hundreds of dollars on gear—and if gun rentals were available, so that he would not need to own the last thing he wanted in his new house—if all these things had conspired differently, maybe Arturo would not have felt so dizzy and drained.

There was clearing for a pipeline corridor, thirty yards or so of grass in the otherwise untouched forest. It was the first thing that slowed Arturo down. He stopped at the edge and listened.

Besides a squirrel's trill somewhere overhead, he heard nothing. But as soon as he set his first boot into the clearing, he stopped again. Behind him, his friend had disappeared. Somewhere up ahead, their vehicle was parked off the road, just feet from the long black asphalt highway Arturo could ride home. Under his boots, he noticed a patch of Canadian thistle.

Unlike the name suggested, the thistle was native to Scotland and was considered a rampant pest in North America. Arturo knew that, because his neighbour threatened to call the bylaw officer after Arturo fortified his back fence with those towering, thorny stalks. His wife and daughters loved the flowers, but apparently, they started an epidemic in the neighbourhood that led to shortages of herbicide at the hardware store.

It had never occurred to Arturo until he saw the weed there, so far from his fence, that he had never been the problem. It was becoming so clear that Arturo bent to pluck the last flower on the thistle. But the combined act of reaching for the pokey bud and bending forward made Arturo cough until he gagged.

Arturo could hear voices after he lifted his head and wiped spittle from his lips. Arturo dug his rifle deep into his shoulder. There were three men, their guns raised in the middle of the clearing. Arturo stepped out and shouted to them.

"I just pass. I go to my car."

"Whoa, not so fast. You stop right where you are."

"No, I just pass," Arturo said, struggling to find the words in English. "No problem. No problem for me."

The trio stepped forward and one of them let a shot ring off in the air.

"Don't do nothing stupid. Put your gun down. There are three of us. Don't be an idiot."

"Yeah, buddy. You're on our land. Put your gun down."

"Why are we talking with this idiot?"

"He's going to get his empty brain blown out the back of his skull."

Arturo couldn't fully understand their insults, but he wasn't listening anyway. He was still trying to understand how he had been born in a country that had wanted to draw blood, only to move to a different country that only wanted to draw boundaries. How one was a hatchet and the other a scalpel, but he couldn't tell which was which, or which was better.

One of the men let off another warning shot. Arturo was juggling hatchets and scalpels in his mind and let himself forget where he was. When he heard the shot, he was fifteen years old again, with a rifle in a damp tropical forest. The man who had fired the shot had his gun raised above his head, leaving his chest clear. Arturo targeted the nook in the chest bone where he liked to feel his daughter's heartbeat, and he pulled the trigger.

Once his first shot was fired, the next two were easy. Arturo had to work fast, finding the clearest kill shot by instinct and bracing for the rifle's kickback.

Arturo leapt into the bush on the other side of the clearing while the shots rang in his ears. He leaned against the thickest tree he could find and reloaded his ammunition. He coughed again, shaking so hard he dropped a couple bullets that he didn't bother to retrieve.

After another thirty minutes of bushwhacking, Arturo had to stop. His thighs burned. His lungs ached. The compass told him he was keeping a straight line, but somehow, he still had not reached his truck.

That was when he heard movement in the bushes behind him. It was the first thing to sound louder than his speeding rampage, so it startled him. Arturo flipped around—but it was only Tristán. Tristán's hands looked bloody, but otherwise, he looked the same.

Tristán couldn't say the same. He saw very differently now. Arturo wasn't of Tristán's kind any more. He was weak. He was foolish. He was food.

"Where the hell did you go?" Arturo asked, stunned.

"I didn't go anywhere. You are the one who ran."

"You disappeared in front of my eyes. What was I supposed to do?"

"You didn't need to hurt those men."

Arturo realized he had lowered his gun, but he quickly tucked it into his armpit and stood ready to keep the barrel warm.

"You could have come with me," Tristán said.

"Where did you go?"

"You don't see. What a shame."

"You have lost your mangos."

"Says the tree who could never grow mangos. You killed those men."

"I should kill you."

"Arturo . . ." Tristán put his arms out and bent his head. "I am unarmed. Please, it's good to see you."

"It's fucked up to see you."

"That's only because you will never see. Not now."

Arturo set his rifle down and marched toward Tristán. Arturo had no interest in shooting his friend, but he was done with talking. Everyone wanted him to talk. Talk about the war, talk about his hometown, talk about how flushing toilet paper was a novelty. If Tristán couldn't understand that they lived it every day, talk or no talk, then no one would.

"Then no one will," Arturo grumbled.

Arturo launched his hands to his friend's throat.

Tristán saw the chokehold coming—as clearly as Arturo noticed Tristán drool when his hands were knocked away. Right when Arturo realized he would regret touching someone he saw transform to foliage, he felt Tristán's teeth sink into his throat.

Before he was full of warm flesh, Tristán's skin had already sprouted fur. It was dark and tawny like the elks, but almost luminescent. Something like morning twilight breaking through a moonless night. When the Canadian government investigated the following week, they would not be able to close the five missing person files. They would find nothing, even if it was as lasting and legible as the tattoo of a combination lock that rose like a rash on Tristán's neck as he scampered off into the crevasse.

END

*Jack Caseros is an Argentine-Canadian writer and environmental scientist whose creative work has appeared in cool places like Every Day Fiction, Literary Orphans, and Drunk Monkeys. His uncreative work has appeared in drearier places, like boardrooms and government databases. You can read more about Jack at [www.jackcaseros.wordpress.com](http://www.jackcaseros.wordpress.com).*



## Us, Them and the Future by David Beyt

Maria has been in the waiting room most of the day. She expected to be, and she brought a lunch with her. But it was only the leftover rice. She ate it hours ago. A screen on the far wall carries news of the vote, but Maria keeps her eyes out the window. She watches dotted lines of traffic inch through the smog outside. She doesn't want to see the news. She doesn't even want to think about it. No matter what happens, someone is sure to blame her son for it.

Another hour passes, and Maria's eyes slowly close. When she opens them again, there are two men there. They have their backs to her watching the screen. Maria recognizes the one on the right. He's not the prime minister, but he's somebody. He's always on the news.

"So have you met this kid?"

"No, sir. No one has."

"What, like 'no one' no one, or no one under Gascoigne?"

"No one at all. They keep him in an isolation chamber. It's part of the process."

“A what chamber?” He snorts. “Jesus. It’s all so bloody mystic voodoo witch doctor if you ask me.”

“Yes, sir.”

They watch the screen as the one from the news, Hastings, drinks a coffee.

He shakes his head. “Five hours till the damned vote . . . They couldn’t have done this a week ago, a month?”

“It’s more accurate the closer you get, that’s what they said.”

“And more useless.” Hastings growls. “What’s the point of seeing the future if you’re already bloody there?”

“Yes, sir.”

They stop talking as someone passes them going out to the elevators.

“It should be one of our kids in there.”

“Our kids?”

“Our kind. Do we even know which way his parents vote?”

“He’s in the care of the state.”

“What, like an orphan? Jesus.” Hastings snorts. “Biggest vote of my life, and they leave it to a kid out of the bargain bin.”

Maria keeps very still, her eyes closed to look asleep.

“Do we have a plan for if this kid predicts against us?”

“Yes, sir. It’s file three in your drive.”

“Alright. I want Henry on the line the moment this kid rules. We’ve got too damned much riding on this.”

Maria hears them moving. She glances up and freezes as one of the men looks sideways at her. He doesn’t do anything, though. He doesn’t care. They leave the waiting room for the interior, in the direction of her son. Maria sits there alone with the news talking to empty air and daylight dying out the window.

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Down the corridor and deep into the tower, Maria’s son, Noah, lies in a chemically-induced fugue state. He is hooked up to tubes and cranial patches, small nodes and data ports. The room around him is dark and warm. Only a few essential buttons light up the black like distant stars.

A woman stands over him. She is dressed all in black, barely visible in the dark room. Even her face is hidden. She checks a data port just behind Noah’s ear and disappears again. Quick and quiet so he won’t notice her, so that she makes no imprint on his thoughts.

Nanobots swim beneath Noah’s skull like fish under the ice. They have been there since before he was born, looking after his synapses, inhibiting their pruning and reorganizing them, establishing a structure laid out in four years of computer modeling. Making a mind that had been unfit for a normal life into a great gift for all mankind. A world, a future without a foot put wrong.

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Outside the isolation chamber, a small crowd of people watch the prediction unfold on a bank of screens. Video and data readouts monitor every aspect of Noah and his neural activity. His enlarged synaptic webbing cycles through an unknown number of iterations unfolding in the multiverse, an infinite series of possibilities all turning into inevitabilities and then into realities, all playing themselves out with only this small boy to witness them. A child too young to understand the meanings of the messages.

In the observation suite, three doctors monitor Noah’s vitals and the mixture of chemicals flowing through his brain. A chaotician and a probability statistician calculate and recalculate the different potentialities. A child psychologist and a semiotician stand by to interpret Noah’s responses and render his verdict. Behind them all stands a group of men in suits, everything about them polished to a shine.

The chaotician confers with a doctor. One nods, then the other. The doctor turns back to the room. "He's ready."

A man speaks out of the back corner. "Wake him up."

The psychologist and the semiotician pull hoods over their heads to hide their faces. They enter the isolation chamber like thieves into the temple.

\*\*\*

Maria jumps at noises coming down the corridor. She freezes like a rabbit as half a dozen men in suits charge through the waiting room.

"What the hell does a three-year-old know about the world anyway?"

"The statistician said there was an eighty-two percent potentiality of that outcome, sir. Eighty-two percent."

"That means there's an eighteen percent chance this kid is wrong then."

"No, sir. Not exactly. It's not that simple."

"None of this matters, gentlemen. The only thing that matters is that when people hear the outcome they're going to vote no."

Hastings smacks his fist against the wall. Maria snaps her eyes shut as the other men glance her way.

"Then we can kiss all this bloody goodbye, can't we?" He swears, then, louder, swears again.

"Bruce, calm down. We've planned for this. File three in your drive, remember?"

"It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a file to beat that kid, Giles. A hell of a lot."

"No, it won't. He's already beaten. You know as well as I do, the facts don't matter in a vote anymore. They haven't for decades. The only thing that matters is 'us' versus 'them.' So all we need to do is make sure that kid's a 'them.' That should be easy enough for you, shouldn't it? Get in front of the cameras and stir up your base. Give them whatever reason you want. Claim bias, claim that the process was flawed. Hell, claim it's all part of some deep state conspiracy. It doesn't matter. All that matters is us versus them. Easy. Nikolai's already drafted the talking points for you." Giles gives the other men a satisfied smirk. "Open file three, and calm down."

They start walking again out toward the elevator.

"And the riots? We should get security here."

"Don't be an idiot. We'll look weak. Like we're worried."

"Fine. But get our people out."

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Another hour passes before Maria can see Noah. As she waits, Hastings appears on the muted news feed. He stands beneath a flag and gestures like a leader. Maria turns her face back to the window. The sun has sunk between the toothy, black spires of the city, and the sky has deepened to red behind it. There's a feeling in Maria's chest like a moth caught in a jar.

"Maria?"

Without looking up, Maria gathers her coat and joins Felicity at the door.

"Noah's doing just fine. He's asleep now, waiting for the medication to flush out. Do you want to come sit with him? I still have some of the data ports and the respirator hooked up, but it's just to keep an eye on him. He's doing really well."

Maria takes a deep breath and fixes her hair. In the isolation suite, Felicity raises the lights enough for her to see Noah. He's there on the bed, a small shape inside a sleeve of black material, tiny lights and panels on him that Maria will never understand. His face peeks out like the moon. She puts a hand on his ankle so he'll know she's there. His body feels cold so she gently rubs his leg. She whispers to him. Her beautiful little boy.

When the doctors told Maria there was a problem with her fetus, they'd offered her this chance to save him. Maria wonders now, not for the first time: if she'd had her son's gifts then, would she have made that decision differently?

Felicity gets a chair out of the corner and sets it by the bed. "I'll leave you two alone and come back when he starts to wake up, okay?" She pats Maria on the shoulder on her way out.

Maria grabs her hand.

She doesn't look up. She did it without thinking. She's glad she did it, though. If she'd thought about it, she might not have had the courage.

"They are going to hurt my son."

"What'd you say, Maria?"

Maria clears her throat and says it loud enough for Felicity to hear. "They're going to hurt my son."

"What?"

Maria starts to say it again, but then she feels Felicity's other hand on her shoulder.

"Who is, Maria?"

"Everyone."

"Maria, no one is going to hurt Noah. Why would they do that?" She squeezes Maria's hand. "Hang on."

Felicity drags another chair to the bedside. She leans forward to make contact with Maria's lowered eyes. "What's going on?"

Maria tries to start again. She has trouble making sense in English when she's upset. "The vote, it will go wrong. They will blame my Noah."

Felicity chuckles. "Maria, no one is going to blame Noah. He did wonderfully today. He helped a lot of people. He helped us all, alright?"

"No." Maria shakes her head. "Hastings. He was here. I saw him in the waiting room. He will convince the people my son made the wrong choice."

Felicity doesn't speak for a moment. One of the machines in the room beeps. "Maria, I don't think he can do that. People are smarter than that." She frowns. "They are."

"No." Maria swallows. "They will believe him."

"Maria . . ." Felicity holds Maria's hands in both of hers. She is trying to understand, but she doesn't.

Maria looks at her now. "Will you help me?"

"Help you?"

"Give me my son back."

Felicity just watches her. Maria cannot read her face.

"Please."

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Maria steps out into the street, clutching Noah to her chest. He is wrapped into her coat, still sedated and limp as a sack. Lights across the alleyway shine like searchlights through the smog, but there is no one there. No one lives at street level anymore.

Maria adjusts her air filter on Noah's face. It's too big for him. The smog creeps in around his cheeks. Maria frowns and adjusts it again. It will have to do. Holding him in her coat tight against her body, Maria takes off into the dark.

Felicity hadn't understood what Maria was asking of her. All she saw was a worried mother who had nothing to worry about. But because she didn't understand she didn't argue. She humored her. She signed Noah off for ten hours of "attachment leave" so Maria could have him home during the vote. She let Maria check her own son out like a library book.

In the street, Maria tells herself she would have attacked Felicity if she'd had to. She doesn't think she actually could have done that, but it doesn't matter now. She will not be bringing Noah back in the morning, not ever. She never should have made this bargain.

Down the street, old Chinese women wade through garbage piled like snowdrifts at the feet of skyscrapers. They wear filters and gloves, high waders and frayed conical hats, and they stop to watch Maria rush past. They gaze up together at the earthquake thrum of transports passing overhead. Then they go back to work balancing salvaged plastic in overstuffed sacks, one on each end of the yokes across their shoulders.

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Screens wink on as Maria passes them. They are hooked up to motion sensors. Cracked and filthy, no one maintains them anymore. When they light up, they change the colors of the smog. Reds and blues and billowing yellows. Distorted sounds of Hastings pounding the podium and telling crowds the kid is not a good kid. His parents were druggies and gangbangers. There are images of people rallying somewhere not big enough to hold them all, images of kids with hoods and masks, of police with armor and shock sticks. The same pictures replicated again and again, chasing after Maria.

\*\*\*

High above the tube station is a bridge. Protestors there are pouring out of the tower blocks to march on the police. Maria hears chants and shouts and smashing sounds. Bottles hit the streets around her. They burst against the concrete, scattering small diamonds of glass. A tenement on fire lights up the windows of the buildings around it.

Maria gets the tube to the east end. She and Noah are nearly alone in the car. Only an old man there, Greek or Turkish, dressed in a muddy, hi-vis coverall. He's slumped over his own belly with his head bowed and his eyes closed. His body rocks with the movements of the car, but he doesn't go over. Maria watches him, certain the next jolt will spill him to the floor.

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Maria has her hands full so she kicks the door with her foot. She glances up the corridor and down, and she prays Ramon is there. Somewhere a baby cries through a wall.

The door opens. "Maria?"

Maria pushes past Ramon into the darkened hallway. From somewhere deeper in the flat comes the sound of a newsfeed, the rally shouts of "Bar-gain bin! Bar-gain bin!" She follows it and finds the kitchen, a square room of laminate tiles and winking fluorescents. Four or five other men sit there. They watch the screen until they turn to look at her. Maria lays Noah gently onto a countertop. She makes sure her coat hides his body before she turns around to face her cousin.

Ramon looks confused but not angry. "O que está acontecendo?"

"Eu preciso de você para me tirar da cidade."

"O que?" He chuckles, bemused. "Por quê?"

"Tonight, Ramon."

Ramon stops smiling. He shakes his head. "Can't do it, Maria." He looks over at Noah wrapped in her coat. "What is it, you in trouble?"

She grabs his chin to get his eyes back. "How soon then?"

He frowns. "You got money?"

She gives him the same frown back. "You know I don't."

Ramon shrugs and holds out his hands. Maria knows the other people in the room are watching them. Their heads swing back and forth like a ping-pong match.

"Everyone wants to get into the city, Maria. You're the only one wanting to get out."

Maria feels her foundation eroding. Give her time, she will go over. "I need help, Ramon. Please."

Ramon looks back at Noah.

Maria goes to her son. She stands in front of him to block the other eyes in the room. She doesn't trust them. She doesn't want to trust Ramon, but right now it isn't up to her. She pulls back the tail of her coat and looks at Ramon. She watches his face change as he sees the black grafts and the data ports, as he sees who her son is.

\*\*\*

When the results of the vote are declared, Maria is sitting in a cramped bedsit somewhere near the old city docks. A part of her had been ready to call the whole thing off, to take Noah back in the morning before she went to work. But only if the vote had been a no. On the bedsit's screen, she watches Hastings raise his fists and beat the air. Whatever comes next, deserved or not, the people have asked for it.

Ramon will come in an hour to move them somewhere, a place where they can rest awhile or get something to eat. Once the lab reports Noah missing, they will need to move every couple hours, but eventually Ramon will arrange a way out for them. A hold in steerage, the cavity of a bulkhead, something. When Maria entered the city, she spent seven hours laying down under the floor of a haul freighter, packed in and sweating with thirty-six other people. The way out will be easier, though. No one else wants to get away, at least not yet.

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4 a.m., and the government starts to come apart. There's a report on the newsfeed that the prime minister will resign in the morning. When people wake up, they'll be shocked. They will wonder how it went wrong and what they have done. They will want someone to save them, and they will want someone to blame. Hastings can't save them, so he will blame her son. They all will.

Maria looks over at Noah lying next to her on the sofa. They can blame her son, but they will not have him.

Noah's asleep now instead of sedated. Ramon says he knows someone who can remove his data ports. Maria knows that person will not be a doctor, but she can't get Noah out looking like he does now. She reaches out and touches his ankle. She feels the warmth in it, and she speaks to him in Portuguese. "I won't let them get us." She wonders if he knows what will happen to them.

It doesn't matter, though. Even if they catch her now, she knows she never could've done anything different, not and still be his mother. She'd squandered too many choices over the years, and too many more were taken from her. This one was hers to make, though, and she made it. The only thing Noah could tell her now is what price she'll pay.

Sooner or later, there will be a noise at the door. She'll jump and freeze, her heart will stop, and she'll wait until either Ramon or the police come into the room. Until then, she turns away from the screen and watches her son. Her and her beautiful little boy, together for whatever is to come.

END

David Beyt was born in southern Louisiana and lives now in Edinburgh, Scotland. Find him on Twitter as [@DrunkandBear](https://twitter.com/DrunkandBear) and <https://dailysciencefiction.com/fantasy/magic-and-wizardry/david-beyt/futures>.



## Goldengrove Unleaving by Dafydd McKimm

I'm swimming through the void, a great winged whale fortified against the cosmic deep, when the message comes, relayed from an orbiter I long thought defunct.

I pause a parsec, unsure whether or not I should interpret it.

Stars pass me by like raindrops on a car window; a metaphor that feels so alien now, so much like a dream . . .

I read the message.

*Come quickly, it says. Goldengrove is unleaving.*

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Goldengrove, my first great creation, my first paradise.

I remember it, before I dug my thousand greenfingers deep into its earth, a small dull body barely bigger than a moon; but to me, new-born then, without the limitations of flesh and bone, it was a blank canvas. What drove me to transform that dead piece of rock, I don't now recall. Perhaps I'd had a garden in my life before, my own little piece of chaos to care for and potter about in, to tend and re-form according to the seasons and the mercurial whims of my biochemistry. But whatever the reason, whether it was indeed some vestige of my former self or a completely novel impulse of my newly uploaded consciousness, I breathed life into it: gathered hydrogen from the billowing smoke-stacks of peony-pink nebulae, oxygen from the sheltered eaves of massive stars; gene-spliced a whole ecosystem of seeds, pressing each into the newly thirst-quenched earth with a thousand remote hands. And before the galaxy had turned a single degree, the rock that had once

been so empty shone gilt-leaved and fecund, glinting like an ingot in the darkness, a forest world of perpetual autumn, where the gold and red never ended.

\*\*\*

Autumn; I remember autumn; not one single season but all of them at once, the seventy I saw before ascending, one long, glorious season of dying.

How long has it been since I thought of dying? How many millions of years since I made contact with another? There are others like me, of course, billions of us who shuffled off our bags of blood and bone and made the leap into eternity. But space and time are vast. Sometimes, we cross paths, passing like great vessels in the dark night of space, perhaps affording a brief nod of acknowledgement for our hominid rootstock, but no more than that. Never more than that.

*Come quickly*, the message repeats, more urgent this time. *Goldengrove lies in leafmeal*.

\*\*\*

Of all the many worlds I've built, of all the countless paradises I've set amongst the stars, dewy bowers where any star-weary traveller can lay their heads and rest awhile or stay forever in bliss, why Goldengrove, why now?

The answer is absurdly simple. As my earliest offering, it must in turn be the first to fall into entropy. The cunning that holds the world together can only last for so long—has it really been that long? All those meticulously crafted trees undressing, shuffling off their golden garments, like some old woman at her bedside preparing for a long and dreamless sleep.

Goldengrove at last experiences winter.

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I put on a faster body, a sharper form, one that can puncture the Fabric where it's worn thin, and fly to Goldengrove, my first, my dearest, through holes in space and stars.

My first, my dearest, made back when I still remembered the smell of honeysuckle, the sting of poisoned ivy, the furry caress of a dandelion before I'd puff its seeds into the universe, just like I and billions of others would later blow away into the great undiscovered. My first? No, something about that rings false. As I push through the hearts of galaxies, I search within me, diving deep down into a million years of data, where old things, of a life before a life, lie buried. I find fragments: a book of poems, dog-eared, spine bent; something snug in the cranny of my elbow; a beautiful thing with a head of dark curls that smell of strawberries when I push my face into them; the soft warmth in my two painfully impractical arms, useless for fabricating plant embryos or harvesting hydrogen from nebulae, perfect for wrapping around someone small and dear.

\*\*\*

Such warmth, that heat of a body with a beating heart, so immense; I feel it again as I emerge from the space between spaces and see Goldengrove on fire before me. The sun I left it hurling around swells red like an angry boil; the trees I planted blistering and spitting in its crimson rage; the water I harvested boiling away: my paradise aflame. And though I float in a body of unimaginable dimensions, made of elements unheard of by any advanced ape, plucked from places more terrible to that blip that was humanity than any nightmarish vision of Hell, the heartbreak of that sight hits me like it hasn't done in so, so long; and though this space-hardened form has no tears to shed, the memory of a thing called grief wells up like a monster from the deep and swallows me whole.

When I come to myself again, Goldengrove is gone.

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As I leave the ashes of that once perfect conception, I pass another in the night, another dark and lonely vessel. I afford it a nod, but it replies with a question.

*Mum*, it says, *is that you?*

The thing I see before me is not small or covered in dark curls. Its contours are larger than continents, its shell frosted with the ice of the outer reaches, pocked with impact craters, scorched with nova burn. But I'd know it anywhere; and if scent could travel the distance between us, I'm sure it would smell of strawberries.

\*\*\*

Yes, I say across the stars. *It's me*.

*I knew you'd come*, she says. *I've missed you*.

*Me too*, I reply. I never realised how much until now.

END

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