

*First Place*

# A Genie Walks Into a Bar

Asher Allen

*Part I*

*A Midsummer Night's Wish*

The apocalypse found me slightly inebriated.

Chasing skirts was my game that Friday night. It involved the expensive “privilege” of drinking around drunken losers who wanted to tell me the unabridged version of their life stories, seasoned with gems of recycled philosophical musings. But amid the seedy crowd of barroom philosophers there lurked hot chicks in the process of drowning their inhibitions in booze.

Bars are, of course, not great places to meet good girls. Everyone knows it, but we keep up the bad habit for the same reason we play the lotto, do drugs, and vote Libertarian—we lie to ourselves.

“I’m different,” we say. “I can stop anytime.” Or, “The political climate will change.”

Ah, humanity. A few charming and attractive anomalies thrown in with a mass of mostly idiotic scum.

Zombies. Lemmings. Rats, following the Pied Piper of pop culture.

But, anyway. The night humanity came to an end, I was at a bar, listening to a live band that only knew three guitar chords, and drinking a beer that wasn’t nearly cold enough.

I was also pondering a good way to introduce myself to the dusky beauty sitting a few stools down the bar, idly scrolling on her phone. She was Middle Eastern, I guessed, and a solid eight.

I eased myself one stool closer, putting myself within reasonable speaking distance.

“Agree or disagree? The beer here isn’t cold enough.”

The girl glanced up from her phone, looked at me, then at her beer. She shrugged. “I never noticed.”

“Love the accent. Where’s it from?”

She took a sip of her drink before answering. “UAE.”

“And that is...?”

“United Arab Emirates.”

“Oh. Never been. But I hear it’s a nice place.”

The girl offered a polite smile, then reengaged with her phone.

Somewhat deflated, but undeterred, I threw her another question. “Is that a stout you’re drinking? Most women I’ve met can’t appreciate the darker beers.”

Her expression softened a bit as she looked back up. She set her phone down on the bar and gave me her full attention. “Move closer so I don’t have to yell.”

I slid over to the stool beside her and extended a hand. “Cillian.” “Nice to meet you, Cillian. I’m Jen.”

As she extended her hand, I noticed a charm bracelet. Now, whenever I meet a girl wearing jewelry like that, I do my best to break it. See, I worked in jewelry repair. So I would

“accidentally” break a charm or earring, which gave me an opportunity to endear myself with heartfelt apologies, then explain that I was a jeweler, and she simply *must* come by the shop and let me fix it. But in the meantime, she *had* to let me buy her dinner and a drink. I wouldn’t forgive myself if she walked away without allowing me to make up for my blunder.

It rarely went as planned. I’d even had a drink thrown in my face once. To be fair, though, I was too obvious about breaking that particular girl’s earring.

So, anyway, when Jen extended her hand, I took it, then touched her charm bracelet with my other hand. “I like your bracelet. Is this an Arabian lamp?” I took one of the dangling charms between my fingers, brushing it with my thumb.

The charm broke free of the bracelet quite easily when I applied pressure to the right place.

Jen gasped as it came loose. “You freed me.”

“I am *so* sorry. I didn’t know it was so delicate. Let me see if I can fix—”

“No.” She pulled her hand away. “You rubbed the lamp. Now you get three wishes.”

I laughed. “Oh, I see. Well, then, where’s the genie?”

“I am the genie.”

“Ohhh. Right, well, aren’t you supposed to be *inside* the lamp until it’s rubbed?” I placed the little charm on the bar counter.

“I’m an unconventional genie.”

“I see.”

A pause. “Well, don’t you want your wishes?”

I smiled, appreciating the role play. “I’m not sure you would grant my wishes.”

“But I must. You freed me.”

“All right, then. I wish you would go on a date with me.”

“As you wish.” She clapped her hands once, then motioned to the bartender. “Two glasses of pinot noir, please. And an entrée menu.”

She turned back to me. “Your wish is granted. We’re on a date.”

I chuckled. “Well, I must say, it’s not quite the romantic setting I had in mind. If I had my wish, we’d be the only ones here.”

“Here? As in the bar, or, like, the whole planet?”

“Honestly, the whole planet.” I laughed, then took a sip of my lukewarm beer. “Yeah. I don’t care much for humanity. I wish to be alone on this planet—with you being an exception to that solitude, of course.”

“As you wish.” She clapped her hands.

Glass shattered. A guitar hit the floor. The music and chatter stopped.

I spun on my stool to face the rest of the bar.

There was nobody there.

Every sign of the former crowd’s existence remained, from unfinished plates of food, to cell phones on tables and purses on chairs. Just no people.

“OK...” I looked back at Jen and forced a bemused smile. “Am I on a hidden camera TV show or something?”

She shook her head. “No, your second wish was that we be the only ones that remained here on the planet. That makes you the last man on earth.”

“Oh.”

“I can suggest a few books and movies that tell of characters in your situation, although I have no zombies or vampires for you—unless that’s your third wish.”

I took a fortifying sip of beer and slid from the stool. *We’ll just see about this.*

I strode to the entrance and pushed through the door.

The din of car alarms greeted my ears. Several vehicles, with no drivers in sight, had crashed into the rows of parked cars in the lot. On the street beyond, every vehicle had either come to standstill or crashed.

No movement anywhere.

I slowly stepped back through the door to the bar.

“Next question,” I said, approaching Jen where she sat, looking unconcerned. “Did you slip something into my drink?”

“No, but maybe I should have. You’re looking rather pale. Care for a shot of whiskey in your beer?”

My legs threatened to fail me, so I stumbled back to my seat beside Jen. “Or,” she said, “shall I pour the wine we ordered? The date is still on.” I said nothing, finding it difficult to think of an appropriate response. “Would you care for a menu, Cillian?”

“The people...”

“Yes, all the people are gone.”

I didn’t fully believe this. I wasn’t buying the fact that I was actually the last man on earth. Actually, my prevailing theory was that I was tripping on hallucinogens. Nevertheless, I found myself worried and full of questions.

“Let’s say...well, let’s just say this is all true. I still have another wish, right? I could reverse all this if I wanted?”

“Yes. You could do that. But that’s not really what you want, is it?”

I frowned. “Honestly? I’m not sure.”

Jen said nothing, and a moment of silence elapsed. I glanced around the room, feeling a chill run along my spine. “I think I’ll pour that wine.”

I stepped around to the other side of the bar, selected a dusty bottle of expensive cabernet. As I opened the bottle, I made a decision. Whatever may be happening in the world, this bar, or my own mind, I would roll with it. At least for tonight. I would enjoy my weird date with this crazy chick.

I grabbed two glasses.

“You’re not about to pour cabernet sauvignon into white wine glasses, are you?”

I laughed. “The world has apparently ended, and you’re going to nag me about the shape of glass?”

“Actually, I think those are crystal.”

“Oh, go sit on a scorpion.”

“Is that a joke about my Middle Eastern heritage?”

“We’re in California, baby. We have scorpions, sand aplenty, and date palms too. So, no. That was just a blanket suggestion to nitpickers.”

I replaced the glasses, not to indulge her incorrigible wine snobbery, but to prove I could actually identify red wine glasses if I cared to. Adopting the air of a stereotypical butler, I put on a haughty expression and poured the wine one-handed from the base, filling the glasses to that just-so level. “Will that suffice, madam?”

“Quite.”

I held up my glass. “To humanity.” “What’s left of it, anyway.”

“To humanity’s leftovers, then.”

We drank our wine, rustled up some food from the abandoned kitchen, and carried on a lighthearted conversation about Arabia and apocalyptic movies for awhile.

At around midnight, Jen glanced at her Cartier Tank watch. “Well, time’s up. Date’s over.”

“Arbitrary genie rules, I presume? C’mon, the night is young.”

“Well, you didn’t specify how long the date must be, so I feel justified in calling it quits after two hours.”

“Really? You haven’t even asked me about what I do, or my interests—anything.”

“All right, I do have one question for you. What have you decided? Are you going to use your third wish to reverse your last wish or no?”

“Let me guess, my wish expires at the stroke of midnight?”

“No, but I’m about to head out. Now that I’m free, I have much I would like to do. You can wait to use your third wish, but you will have to come find me if you delay.”

“I’m going to need some time to think about it. Can I get your number?” “No.”  
With that, Jen got up and walked through the front door.

I remained seated. A heavy sense of solitude descended on the place, and I decided it was time to leave.

Just in case this was all some elaborate joke, I left some cash on the table to pay for the meal and drinks.

I walked out into the cool evening air, and saw once again the parking lot and street full of crashed vehicles. I wasn’t sure I would have been able to navigate through the congestion if I had driven to the bar. But my apartment was not far, so I had walked.

I strode through the lot, across the street, and made my way along the empty sidewalk.

Lights shone in many buildings, but there was no sign of anyone around.

I quickened my pace, my attempts to explain this all away as a bad trip growing less sustainable with every step.

A block from my apartment, I had a thought. I stopped and pulled out my phone; dialed 9-1-1.

Nobody answered, so I pulled up my list of contacts and tried a coworker I knew would still be awake.

Voicemail.

I called a handful more numbers, then tried the police again. Nothing. I attempted to pull up the internet, but received a system error.

To say it felt like I was in a dream would not do that night’s experience justice. But, as in most my dreams, I decided to go along with the flow of that current reality—right after I tried very hard to wake up. Just in case.

Despite a degree of inebriation, I had the presence of mind to realize I probably wouldn’t be safe in the city that night. With all the residents having suddenly vanished, the number of unattended stoves and other accidents waiting to happen might soon make proximity to buildings a hazard to my health.

With this thought in mind, I rushed home to my apartment, loaded most of my portable belongings into my Jeep, and drove to a park outside the city.

I had to weave in and out of the oncoming lane to get around stalled and empty vehicles along the way.

Once at the park, situated at a higher elevation, I saw that there were indeed several portions of the city that already glowed orange in the night.

So it was really happening.

The end of the world as we knew it. As *I* knew it.

## Part II

### *I Am Legend Become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds*

I opened my eyes, then shut them against the stab of sunlight through the windshield. I wasn’t sure when I’d fallen asleep. Hadn’t intended to.

Forcing my eyelids back up, I peered into the distance. The city of Perris lay charred and lifeless in the valley, and the northern horizon smoked as the fire continued in that direction.

Grim as the sight was, I knew the fire wasn't endangering human life. Also, the property being destroyed was kind of my own now, and I could spare a state or two, being king of the world and all.

I couldn't ignore the obvious question, though. What had happened to the people? Were they dead—vaporized? Or transported to an alternate dimension? It wasn't as if they had never existed; all their cars and homes still surrounded me.

*I am become death....*

Maybe I should have been more specific with my wish. But, of course, I hadn't taken the supposed genie seriously. I still wasn't sure I did.

What if I'd been poisoned last night and was dealing with some sort of near-death experience? But weren't those normally characterized by out-of-body sensations?

I felt very substantial.

And very hungry.

I started up my Jeep and headed south on back roads toward Menifee to find something to eat.

At the first Stater Bros. I came to, I raided the bakery and helped myself to some day-old donuts. I realized then that there would never again be anything fresh-baked unless it was me doing the baking.

All the fast food and other perishables would soon spoil. Refrigeration would give out, along with most everything else powered by standard electricity. Water pumps would go, too.

But the grocery stores around town could keep me alive on bottled water and nonperishable foods indefinitely. I could adapt to a more flexitarian diet. I was quite capable of hunting, but it wouldn't really be necessary, as there was plenty of jerky that wouldn't spoil for a good long while. And while my nutritional needs could all be met by canned goods, I could supplement with the fresh fruits and vegetables that would grow untended in many California orchards and gardens.

There would be some tough aspects of being the planet's sole human inhabitant, but I chose to think of all the positive elements that made this glass seem half full rather than half empty.

We now had world peace. Or, at least, I did. No more wars, murders, rape, poverty, or politics. There would be virtually no pollution or deforestation. Not even another animal need die by human hands if—

Wait. Houses, kennels, farms, and pet stores around the world—to say nothing of zoos—were full of animals that would die if not released.

Well. That wasn't cool.

There was no way I would be able to save every pet in the city, let alone beyond. But I could at least do what lay in my power.

I grabbed some snack bars and an energy drink, and headed back to my vehicle.

As I drove out of town, I saw an animal shelter. I broke the window with my tire iron and let myself in. I opened the cat cages first, gave them a good ten minutes to clear out before opening the dog cages.

When I climbed back into my Jeep, one of the ugly mutts jumped onto the floorboards and clambered up to the passenger's seat. He looked at me, then glanced eagerly out the windshield as if anticipating a Saturday joyride.

I shrugged and pulled out of the parking lot. "Suit yourself, old boy."

I considered naming him Sam, then thought of the movie *I Am Legend*, and thought better of it.

I made my way down to the San Diego Zoo. Once there, I committed another act of breaking and entering, then located and commandeered a map, keys, crowbar, and tranquilizer gun.

Consulting the map, I made my way around the zoo. I pried open or busted up the weaker enclosures, found the right keys for the more secure ones, and tranquilized the animals that were likely to eat me when I tried to set them free.

At the primate enclosures, I hesitated, imagining a *Planet of the Apes* future for myself. I consulted a nearby chimpanzee. “Will you promise not to enslave me if you become a scientist one day?”

The chimp grinned at me and put his hand on the glass that separated us.

“Very well.”

I imagined a headline—though of course there would be no one around to write it.

### **MADMAN MAULED, EATEN BY FREED ZOO ANIMALS**

The article would surely conclude with, “He is survived by no one.”

If I was to describe all the details of my day at the San Diego Zoo, it would be lengthy and embarrassing. And also a waste of time and paper, as no one is going to read even this short account of my time upon post-apocalyptic Earth.

Except maybe the aliens.

(I hope this missive finds you well, E.T.)

Suffice to say, before the day was over, I had locked myself inside the reptile exhibit to escape a troop of baboons. (If they’re talented, is it a troupe?) By that point, I had released so many animals that I hesitated to venture further into the zoo. So I sat there in the dark building with all the cold-blooded critters, and ate a couple of snack bars. I leaned my head back against a terrarium and closed my eyes.

I hoped the unnamed dog I had left in my Jeep would be OK for awhile. I wasn’t sure how long the baboons would hold me hostage.

I decided that the day’s recklessness would be the extent of my humanitarian efforts. Most of the caged animals of the world would die anyway. And after all, I wasn’t the one who had put them there.

I’d made a grand gesture at the zoo, and I supposed that had to count for something. No one contradicted my supposition.

### *Part III*

#### *Fair Is Foul, and Foul Is Fair: The Genie Has No Hair*

I spent most of my time in seaside mansions, enjoying criminally expensive wine, and upgrading my wardrobe in a rather empty show of vanity.

However, I soon grew tired of wearing pants that cost more than rent at my old apartment, and then I mostly stopped wearing pants altogether.

The watches were nice, though. Rolex, Omega, Patek Philippe.

Of course, there was even less reason to wear a watch now than there was to wear pants, so it was all rather pointless.

Nobody saw or cared that I could wear or drive luxury. If I was the richest man in the world, well, there was also none poorer.

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” I remembered hearing that once. A line from the Bible, I was pretty sure.

Speaking of which, I was ever more aware of my own mortality in a world without doctors to heal you, friends to remember you, and zookeepers to feed hungry lions.

I found myself torn over my final wish. Unending life, or a reversal of my previous wish? But was it really such a dilemma?

What had humanity ever done for me?

Yeah, yeah—I was the worst human alive for thinking this way. But I was also the best.

Did it really even matter what had happened to all the people? What I didn’t know wouldn’t hurt me, right? And in any case, there was no one around to make me feel bad about anything I had or hadn’t done.

*I am not the hero of this story*, I realized without shame. *I am the villain*. I’d done what every megalomaniacal baddie wanted to do in all the stories. I’d destroyed the world.

*Now I am become death...*

And I didn’t even feel that bad about it.

I suppose I was the ultimate selfish hedonist. And probably a high-functioning sociopath or something.

But I didn’t really care.

Standing atop a skyscraper L.A., with a bottle of \$38,000 Scotch in my hand, I looked out over my domain. And I laughed. It began as a chuckle, then evolved into some type of mad guffaw.

I decided I would find Jen soon. I would wish for unending life.

If I was truly the only one around, eternity might not be fun, but Jen was a hottie, and I felt certain she would fall in love with me given enough time.

I was, after all, the king of the world—and not too hard on the eyes.

I found Jen when I wasn’t even actively looking. Strolling along the beach one day, I noticed fresh human footprints that weren’t mine.

So I followed them around the sandstone cliff, and there she was. Dressed in a white and blue sundress, she strode barefoot through the sea foam.

“Hello, Friday,” I said as I approached.

Jen turned to me and smiled. “Hello, Crusoe.”

“My third wish is to live forever.”

“As you wish,” she said, and clapped her hands once.

Of course, nothing changed. And I trusted it would stay that way.

“Thank you.” I smiled at her. “By the way, were your eyes always such a stunning green?”

“I’m a genie,” she said. “I can appear however I want.”

I supposed this made sense, but it caused me pause. “But...well, I mean, your true form is still attractive and female, right?”

In answer, Jen’s form seemed to melt. Hair, dress, and supple flesh dripped like lava from a nearly skeletal form. Before me in a pool of bubbling goo stood a shrunken man-shaped creature, with talons for hands and catlike eyes.

It opened its spittle-flecked mouth and growled out harsh and guttural words. “I...am...Jinn.”

I realized then that it had been saying *Jinn*—not Jen—all along.

Jinn, as in spirit or demon.

A Bible verse came to mind. Something about devils disguised as angels of light. Also a Shakespeare quote about fair being foul, and foul fair.

“Well,” I said. And it was all I said for a good minute or so.

The genie/jinn/devil thing just stared at me, unblinking.

“So, this is all rather awkward,” I finally said. “I think I would like to reverse my wishes now.”

“Too late.”

“Is this the point where you spring upon me and suck out all my blood?”

No answer.

“Or are you going to offer me another round of wishes in exchange for my soul? Because I might take you up on that. Lose your soul and gain the world? That’s a saying, right?”

An encore of “No Answer” by Jinn. Up next, “The Sound of Silence.” I ventured another question. “Is humanity really gone?”

And, lo, the dumb creature did speak: “It is gone for you.”

“Alternate timelines? Virtual reality?”

“Something like that.”

“Not cool.”

“A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgement.”

“Is that...the Bible? Can evil spirits quote that?”

A smile. “Oh yes.”

I don’t recall the rest of the conversation clearly enough to recount. Suffice to say, we bantered a bit more, and then the jinn said it was going back to the Middle East or something. “Good luck following me,” I think it said.

I, like a wraith myself, have wandered desolate places for years. Exactly how many years, I couldn’t say.

I’m thinking of making a giant sign, in case any aliens make a pit stop here.

**Welcome to Fool’s Landing**  
**Home of the Idiot Whose Wishes Came True**

Please send help. Also, bring duct tape.

“A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.”

## Second Place

# Annagon

Annika Lee

### PART I

#### 1. And darkness shall cover the earth

Against my will I live in fear of the oblivion that awaits me after the end of my life. It is *not* an irrational fear. We have nothing, you hear me, *nothing* to carry us forward into the total annihilation of our being. Just a cessation, the cutting of thread in less time that it takes you to breathe in, breathe out. And then—

#### 2. Nothing

#### 3. Eavesdropped conversation no. 1

—“Is there anything else we can be doing?—for Carolyn?”

—“Just keep her comfortable. And don’t sugarcoat it. She knows what’s coming.”

#### 4. Dear Beth,

I still remember the stories you told me. But I think they’re pretty foolish now.

#### 5. Once upon a time,

... there was a place where no one cried because there was nothing bad to cry about.

Think of the happiest you’ve ever been, Carolyn, and then triple—no, quadruple that. That kind of happiness doesn’t exist here! But in a land called Annagon, it does. It exists every day.

6. Elizabeth “Beth” Ou-Yang

They printed your obituary in the local news and I saved three copies just in case. I didn't want to forget. How could I forget? But you never know.

7. Eavesdropped conversation no. 2

—“Two daughters gone in two years? Can you believe it?”

8. I suppose I should clarify.

I'm a victim of mastocytosis; Beth died in a car crash. I was supposed to live enough for the two of us, but here I am, dying before I can even legally drink, like some kind of loser.

9. Medication

100mg prednisone daily would've killed me if the mastocytosis didn't first.

10. Palliative care I'm home for good now—till my dying day.

11. A non-eavesdropped conversation

—“Mom, I'm sorry I'm leaving too.”

—“Don't ever apologize, honey. It's not your fault.”

—“Two daughters in two years is pretty lousy luck, though.”

—“You two were the greatest blessing of my life.”

—“Then that's a pretty lousy life.”

—

—“I'm sorry. It's the—you know.”

—“The drugs.”

—“Yeah. The prednisone makes me a crazy person.”

—“It's okay.”

—“No. It's not. I'm spending my last days mean and hungry and—really mostly mean.”

—“Let me get you a snack. Do you want applesauce?”

—“That sounds good.”

12. And great darkness the people

Against my will a pinprick of hope remains—the tiniest thing, like a speck on your glasses you keep rubbing with your shirt but it stays and then you realize it's not a speck at all, it's a crack. You're broken, actually, and hope is the same thing as being wrong, because it's not part of the cosmic deal.

And you're stupid if you keep trying to just clean the glass a little more.

13. Once upon a time,

... there was a little girl who loved her grandmother, but the grandmother was sick and going to die soon. One day, the little girl asked her grandmother, "What if I went with you?" To which the grandmother replied, "What do you mean?"

"Well," the girl replied, "you're going to fall asleep and go far away. What if I fell asleep with you? Then we'd never say goodbye."

The grandmother took her granddaughter's hands in hers and said, "It's not time to follow yet. Though you will be sad for a little while, you will also be happy again afterwards."

The little girl turned away. She was sure her grandmother was wrong and she was right, and if only she could find a way to convince her, then they could travel together.

One morning, the grandmother called the little girl in. "I know where I'm going," she announced. "I've seen it. I'm slipping into it, as one slips into the tub for a bath. When I close my eyes I see the pink blossoms overhead."

"Grandma," the little girl said, thinking her grandmother was speaking nonsense, "I can pick you some pink flowers if you'd like."

"The place I'm going is so beautiful. I hear bees buzzing and birds singing. I hear a river running. I hear the wind in the branches of the apple trees. I hear the voices of everyone I ever knew and loved—they're having a party. Don't you think it's time for me to join in?"

"Then take me with you!" cried the little girl, wrapping her arms around her grandmother. "I want to go to the river and the apple trees!"

The grandmother stroked her granddaughter's hair. "But the call has sounded for me. Can you wait patiently until your time is called?"

"Who calls the time? Can I talk to them?" Already the granddaughter's mind was buzzing with ideas. She had very convincing arguments about why she should go—after all, she did love her grandmother very much.

But her grandmother had fallen into a deep and peaceful sleep, so the little girl decided to return later.

When she came back her grandmother was gone, and the little girl never did get to hear anymore about the time caller. And she cried for her grandmother, and through her tears wished and wished she could see her again.

In a dream that night the little girl approached the Great Timecaller, who held thousands of little watches, one for each person in the world.

"Call my time," the little girl pleaded. "Call my time. I want to go. I want to be there."

"YOUR WATCH HAS SEVENTY YEARS, THREE MONTHS, TWO WEEKS, FOURTEEN MINUTES, AND FORTY-THREE SECONDS TO GO. YOU MUST WAIT," replied the Great Timecaller.

“You’re wrong, and I’ll prove it,” the little girl said. She snatched her watch away from the Great Timecaller and pulled at the little knob on the side and turned it and turned it until it was at zero.

Ecstatic at her victory, she turned around, hoping to see her grandmother. But it was just the Great Timecaller.

“IT DOES NOT WORK LIKE THAT,” said the Timecaller. “YOUR CLOCK SHOWS THE TIME. YOU YOURSELF ARE HERE UNTIL THEN.”

The little girl sat down and cried and cried, there on the ground while all the clocks ticked around her. When she had run out of tears, she looked up at the strange person in front of her. “Where do you get the clocks? And can I see my grandmother?”

The Timecaller considered it. “FIRST, I MAKE THE CLOCKS, BUT I DO NOT SET THE CLOCKS. SECOND, YOU CAN SEE HER, BUT WHEN IT IS OVER YOU MUST PROMISE TO LIVE YOUR TIME AS BEST AS YOU CAN WITHOUT TRYING TO LEAVE AGAIN.”

“I’ll do it,” the girl said, grabbing the Timecaller’s hand. The Timecaller sighed, but then, since they had made a promise, kept it, and took the little girl with them across many solar systems, through many beautiful and colorful nebulae, through the vast expanse of space.

At the very end of outer space, there was an apple orchard. The little girl could indeed hear music in the distance, and a roaring river. But among the trees, she paused, for a great sadness had overcome her. She realized, for the first time, that by doing this, she was cheating, and that disappointing the Timecaller was making her very sad.

“I want to go home,” she decided, turning to the Timecaller. “One day I’ll be happy here too—but not yet.”

“NOT YET INDEED,” said the Timecaller, and walked her back through the vast expanse of space, through many beautiful and colorful nebulae, and across many solar systems.

Back home, the little girl cried again, but not because she was torn up inside about following her grandmother. No, that had passed. What she was doing now was grieving, like every person grieves when they lose someone. But now she had learned something important. There are those who want to live when it is their time to die, and that is a sad thing, for death comes to us all eventually. And then there are those who want to die when it is their time to live, and that is a sadder thing, for life comes to us all, and how brief it is!

So the little girl grew up and became a woman, and then the woman grew older and became a grandmother, and told all the children who visited her stories of Annagon. And the Great Timecaller watched, and returned to watchmaking, and hoped that the lessons of Annagon would not be forgotten soon.

#### 14. Once upon a time,

... there was a different little girl who had heard about Annagon. Unlike the other girl, her time was fast approaching, and she dreaded it. What if she got tired of pure, perfect happiness? What if apple trees and rivers weren’t the things she liked? Annagon sounded awful, and she didn’t want to go.

One day she wandered into a field of flowers and began picking them for her dining room table. Pastel pink, pale yellow, cornflower blue—the colors danced in her vision.

From far away she heard the sound of running water, and turned to see that there was now a river where there hadn’t been one before.

“How odd,” she said to herself, and went toward it to see what was happening.

You see, Annagon was encroaching on her just as it had to the little girl's grandmother, for often when you're close to the borders of things you get to see across them.

The river looked cool and refreshing, and she decided to wade in the water while holding her flowers, just to cool off in the sun.

From the other side someone called, "I like your flowers," and she replied, "Thank you—I picked them just over there!" And she turned around, but the field was gone. In its place was a tall, foreboding forest, filled with darkness and strange animal noises.

Frightened, she backed into the river, but the current was strong and she was a poor swimmer, and she would've been borne away had it not been for the person on the other side who rescued her and brought her back safely to the other riverbank.

"You were on the wrong side of the river," the other person explained as she sat up.

"There's no such thing as the wrong side of a river," she said. She had lost her flowers in the rushing water and was now very upset. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to cross over and go home."

"But this forest isn't safe," the new person said. "Annagon is on *this* side of the river. Haven't you read the map?"

"Annagon is just a story," the girl said, and started walking along the river to find a place to cross back.

The new person walked with her, hoping she would come to her senses.

As she walked, the girl realized she was no longer as upset, but had grown curious about Annagon. "Can you tell me what you meant?" she asked eventually. "I thought nothing bad happened in Annagon."

"Oh, of course, Annagon is a *good* place," the person said. "But not all the land here is Annagon. We're still fighting, you see—the fae creatures that live in the forest would like to take Annagon and all its orchards for itself."

The girl was surprised to hear that. "Annagon isn't *safe*?"

"This side of the river border, we're safe. And the border used to be further in; sometimes we lose ground or gain it. Why? Did you think Annagon was just flowers and parties?" They laughed at that thought.

Now the girl was confused. "But Annagon is a perfectly happy, beautiful place—isn't it? Were the stories wrong?"

The person considered that. "Not wrong, incomplete. We are happy here, and it is very beautiful, but there *are* adventures in Annagon. Newcomers to train, fae creatures to outsmart. What, did you think we *just* have parties? Wouldn't you be sad without worthwhile work to do?"

She thought about it and realized that yes, she would be sad without something worthwhile to do. "Life with no pattern or rhythm doesn't sound like happiness to me," she said. "I wouldn't like Annagon if it was just a party."

She looked up, waiting for an answer—but the new person was gone, as was the river and the forest. In front of her was the flower field, and, in the distance, her home. She had stepped out of it without noticing.

But she knew now not to fear death or what would come after. It was something not to dread but to welcome, like people when they discover that the gray and monotonous weather they were expecting was actually a rainbow. So in the end, she passed from one world to the next happily, and fought many brave battles against evil foes, and picked many beautiful flowers from fields across Annagon, and lived happily ever after.

15. I typed up Beth's stories as best as I could and I'd better get an ounce of appreciation for it, because it's freaking weird and the thought of the "Timecaller" still gives me major anxiety.

16. That world encroaching on this one

I have yet to see pink blossoms in my waking moments, but my time is running out. Tick, tock, and the Great Timecaller watches my seconds trickle away, and I take my medications and lie in bed and wait, and even though I've heard every story Beth could tell about Annagon, I have never learned a single lesson. Against my will I live in fear of the oblivion that awaits me after the end of my life, the nothingness, the abyss; so goodbye to everything I know, goodbye to this meager existence; I'm going now, goodbye—

17. Goodbye.

## PART II

I awake in a castle.

Ruins, to be precise. There's birdsong. There are no pink blossoms, but there is a blue sky. Fluffy clouds, fresh air. I haven't been outside in so long—too weak, too high a risk.

I make my way down the grassy hill. I'm not wearing my old clothes, I'm wearing something new: boots, a skirt, a blouse, a cloak.

Ahead of me something shiny glints in the sun. I make my way to it. Still blurry, still wondering if I'm dreaming.

Leaning against an old stone wall is the thing I saw gleaming—a polished wooden staff. I weigh it in my hands. I could lean on this while I walk.

While I walk—where?

Hust ahead there's a book and a satchel and a knife, and I know these are for me too. The satchel is full of dark bread and little cheese wheels and fruit. I open the book—a notebook, I think—maybe if I were Beth I would write stories, but I'm not Beth; Beth is dead. I flip through the pages, aggravation growing—

—and then a note slips out and flutters to the ground.

I lean over to pick it up, unfold the old parchment paper, scan the lines.

*Knew you'd make it, it says. Head north to the river. At night, surround yourself with flowers. Take care. -B*

B.

This is either the worst prank in the world, or the stories were real, and I was wrong.

The stories were real, and I was wrong.

At least, I'm starting to think that. At midday I climb a tree and eat. I know the sun rises in the east and sets in the west so I can calculate north that way. I'm walking a lot, depending on my trusty walking stick, using the knife (multi-purpose!) to cut and collect flowers along the way, but also to slice cheese and apples.

At night I surround myself with flowers. The pale pink are my favorites, but there are light blue ones too, pastel yellow, red and orange tulips, multicolored petals of all shapes and sizes strewn about me like an art installation. I keep some in my bag for later, because the colors have so enchanted me.

The forest surrounds me. I lie down in the moss and close my eyes.

A low, slithery laugh wakes up, and a twig snaps.

In a moment I bolt upright. All is dark around me. I grope for my satchel and knife, but what would I even do with it? Stab someone? Yeah, right.

The laugh comes again, chilling me to my bones.

"Who are you?" I call out. "What do you want?"

"I see the *sister* has finally arrived," the voice says, hissing right up at my ear. I swat at the air, but of course there's nothing there. But I can be braver than this, dear God, I hope I can be braver than this.

The voice continues. "Here at *last*. What do you say, Carolyn? Is Annagon what you thought? Or is it... lonely?"

Well, I want to say, though my limbs are trembling and my voice probably wouldn't work, it's not wrong to say that it's been lonely. A whole long day of travel and no Beth, no anyone? What kind of afterlife is this?

"You've heard so many stories of beautiful Annagon, and now you're here," the voice says, "*and you're alone.*"

"Beth is here, I know she is," I say. My voice is so frail, I immediately regret speaking.

And the voice just laughs and laughs in return. "And if she *isn't*? If it's just more forest and field and sky, forever and ever? And this is what death is—the great loneliness?"

"Hey," I say, grasping for my last bit of strength, and reaching in my satchel for the flowers I tucked away, "I told you go away," and fling the petals with all my might at the general direction of the voice.

The voice doesn't return, but I don't get a lick of sleep either. *You're alone*, the entire world seems to say to me, the crickets, the clouds, the moon in the sky. *You're alone, and there's nothing you can do about it.*

I trudge through the forest all next day. How far to the river? How far to Beth?

Then it's starting to get dark again, and I'm this close to despair when I crest a hill and suddenly—there it is.

The river is laid out before me, long and winding down to distant mountains. I can't believe I didn't hear it earlier. Maybe I mistook it for wind in the trees.

I'm ecstatic, flying down the hill, bag thumping my leg and and cloak fanning out behind me. I don't care if I stumble on the way, trip over my own shoes, recover and keep going. I'm close. I'm close. Maybe all of this is over.

I reach the river, catching my breath, but there—well. There isn't anything *here*. It's just a river. And it's wider than I even thought, looking at it from a distance. I'm not a strong swimmer. Beth taught me to swim, helped me swim when I floundered. I can't cross alone.

So I do the only thing I can do, I sit on a log and cry my heart out, cry all the tears I have in me. And there are a lot of them. I cry for my mom. I cry for my eighteen years, gone just like that. I cry for Beth, gone at eighteen too, two years ago. I cry for everything I've lost, and for the loneliness that ensnares me now, and for the despair that waits just on the edges of my thoughts.

Is this it? Beth was the one who knew the stories. Did she make it all up?

I don't have any answers. What I have is a walking stick and enough food for at least another day. And I'm fresh out of tears, so I dry my face and pick up my things and walk. Maybe, like that girl in the story, I'll find someone, someone will find me, and I can figure out a way across.

The sun is setting as I approach a bend in the river. I squint into the sky, the disappearing light, and wish, hope against hope, that this will be over soon.

Then I halt. There's someone in the river ahead of me, golden sunlight on their hair. I don't dare do anything, say anything. I just freeze.

Then she turns. She's smiling already, like she *knew* I was here. From the river she's plucked a pale pink stone that she throws, skipping three times. And she turns to me and says, "Carolyn, what took you so long?"

I throw off the cloak, the satchel, kick off my boots so I can plunge straight into the water. We embrace as my skirt gets soaked up to my knees. I hold her tighter than I've held anyone.

"It's really you," I breathe.

"Of course it's me," she says. "You didn't recognize my handwriting?"

I draw back, stepping away just to look, to shake my head in disbelief. "Why weren't you there when I got here?"

She shakes her head, contrite. "When it all started, we met everyone at the castle, but that territory isn't safe anymore. We have to trust in speed and secrecy to ferry people across the border. But you made it, didn't you?"

"But the letter," I say, "the food—"

A grin spreads across her face. "We have birds and forest animals who deliver things for us!"

"Forest animals," I repeat, a tad numb, but—well—you understand. It's a lot.

"Not kidding," she says. Then: "Hungry? I brought food."

"Starving," I say, and follow her gaze to the shore I just ran past. There spread out on the riverbank is a perfect picnic tableau: a wicker basket atop a checkered blanket, overflowing with grapes, cherry tomatoes still on the stem, a loaf of bread, sausage links, a cheese wheel with a knife stuck in it; figs, dates, plums, peaches, berries. I stare.

But then I turn back to Beth. "It's almost dark," I say, thinking about the voice that haunted me last night. "Is it safe?"

She lays a hand on my arm. "It's safe. They don't like the river. But we can't cross tonight either—we'll need the light. We'll go in the morning."

We feast by the river and trade stories; she tells me of what awaits me. "There are bonfires all night and the smoke never gets in your eyes," she says, eyes alight, while I devour blueberries so sweet they'd make you cry. "And you get perfect roasted marshmallows

every time, and there's no such thing as headaches or stomachaches. there It's beautiful, Carolyn, and you never tire of it, because it grows with you—on and on.”

The sun is almost gone. The sky is fading quickly. We put the picnic basket away and huddle under our cloaks.

“Do you think I'm ready?” I ask.

“For Annagon? Who is?” She's contemplative, tucking her head into my shoulder.

“But we all figure it out.”

I take a deep, steady breath. “Is the river deep?” I ask, looking out at it, the churning water, the waves lapping on the stones.

“Yes. But I'll help you. It's not so hard to cross, you know. And there'll be *such* a celebration when we arrive.”

We lie down and look into the night sky, the strange new constellations. From somewhere in the distance I hear the music they all talked about, the singing, the dancing.

“I'll be ready in the morning,” I say, covering a yawn with my hand. And I really mean it. I've been proved wrong after all. I'll cross the river like they all said I would; I welcome it.

“We'll go together,” Beth promises. Before the sky is completely dark I drift away into the most peaceful sleep I've ever had, and step into Annagon without hardly realizing it, hand in hand with my sister.

## Third Place

# Salvaged Feelings

Mary Rudd

“Did you get any joy?”

“A couple fragments at the merry-go-round. A good chunk of anger, too; I bet some kid wasn’t ready to go home yet. You?”

“Some really good bits of fear in the Tunnel of Terror. I found a piece of lust, too, which like, I don’t even want to *know* what that was doing in there.” The fragments of emotions glowed like bits of stained glass; I zipped up my duffle bag, shutting the colors away. “Was this the last section?”

“I think so, yeah. Not a bad haul, considering we can’t be the first salvagers to go through here.” Joey pushed his beanie back to scratch his head, a light haze of satisfaction tinting the air around him a warm mahogany. “Ready to head back?”

I glanced at the sky. The sun was still high, only starting to tip toward the west; we’d worked our way through the abandoned amusement park faster than I’d expected. Mom didn’t have work today, and I knew if I went home now I’d find her draped across the couch, blissed out on cheap emotions, feelings that wouldn’t change whether I walked in early or not at all. I pulled my duffle bag strap over my shoulder. “Want to swing by the graveyard first? I bet we could find a few spare fragments of grief.”

Joey pulled a face. “Aw, no, I hate collecting the downers. Nobody wants to buy them, anyway.”

“Hey, there’s a market for everything. If you get hit by a bus tomorrow, how else is your mom supposed to be able to cry at the funeral?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, I can’t anyway. I promised my dad I’d go fishing with him today.” He swung on his backpack and started walking, kicking a crumpled popcorn bag. “Come on, before the market gets hit with the rush and we have to wait in line.”

A hint of something uncomfortable stirred in my chest, but as always, I shoved it into the heavy old trunk behind my ribs, locking it inside before it could turn into a feeling. Following Joey, I mentally ticked off the attractions we passed to be sure we hadn’t forgotten to check any. Gridlocked bumper cars, a kiddie rollercoaster with missing tracks, a faded prize booth still displaying several stuffed ducks and bears, all blackened with mildew—all had already been combed over and picked clean of any scrap of old emotion we could find.

I could remember when feeling fragments once littered the street like candy wrappers; nobody ever took any notice except to complain about people not picking up after themselves. Now, those who still could produce emotions tended to hoard the scraps, so if you wanted to sell feelings you either had to make them yourself or salvage for fragments that had broken off before the Numbing. I chose to salvage.

“Have you ever been to one of these?” Joey ducked under one of the drooping arms of a spider-y looking spinning ride. “You know, before.”

“Nope.” We turned a corner, and the Ferris wheel by the entrance came fully into view, towering above the food stands and smaller rides. From this angle, the tip of the rim just covered the sun, so it looked like the top car was radiating light.

“My parents used to take my brother and me to one like this every summer.” He smiled, the air around him swirling with lavender and light blue. “Rob always threw up on the tilt-a-whirl, but every single year he wanted to try again. One year Dad started to give him a lecture about learning from the past, until Mom reminded Dad about how much money he’d spent over the years trying to beat this obviously rigged duck-hunt game; he couldn’t say anything after that.” Joey laughed, then sighed, the blue around him deepening. “I wish we could just go back to before.”

People were always saying stuff like that, as if everything had been perfect before the Numbing. Sure, if the other two-thirds of the world’s population could still produce their own emotions, there would be a lot more amusement parks in business, and not nearly as many singers and actors and writers would be out of work. But I remembered how it was before, and there had still been unemployment, and crime, and dads who decided they weren’t happy with their families anymore and left. Being able to feel didn’t make things any better.

Joey was still talking. “There was this other time, at a different fair, where I accidentally wandered off and Dad had to get on the loudspeaker...” He broke off. “Hey, where are you going?”

I’d branched away from the path to the entrance and started walking toward the Ferris wheel. “You go ahead,” I told him. “I’m going to stay and check the wheel again.”

“But we already looked in the lower cars.” Joey’s sneakers scuffed the cracked asphalt as he followed me.

“I know.” I bypassed the maze of metal dividers meant to keep people in an orderly line and walked in through the exit, climbing the steps to the bottom of the wheel.

“You’re not gonna be able to get it moving, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t think it’s even hooked up to anything.”

I ignored him, walking past the very lowest car to the next in line, about three feet off the ground. Grabbing the short walls on either side of the gently swinging door, I pulled myself up without too much effort and climbed onto the back edge, leaning out a little while gauging the distance to the next highest car.

“Maggie, come on, I don’t wanna be late.”

“I told you, you go ahead. You don’t have to wait for me.” The angle was too steep. I pulled off my duffle bag and lifted it onto the hard, canopy-like roof of my car, pushing it closer to the middle before clambering up myself, nearly losing my balance as the car tipped and swayed.

“What the heck are you doing?” The blue-gray haze of confusion around Joey was starting to take on a greenish tint. “Wait, you aren’t going to—”

I tossed my bag into the next highest car and followed with a jump of my own, just managing to grab the edge and sending the whole car rocking back and forth as I hung on the outside.

“Maggie, are you *nuts*?”

I hooked a leg over and, with a grunt, hoisted myself into the car. Right away I spotted a scrap of nervousness under one of the seats, glowing a delicate puke green. Not as good as if the rider had been terrified of heights—extreme emotions always sold best—but it would make me a couple bucks. I scooped it up, ignoring the tightening in my stomach and faint wave of nausea that hit me as I held it. “See?” I stuck my top half out of the car and waved the fragment for Joey to see. “I already found something!”

The orange sparkles of surprise around Joey were already fading, replaced by a strong, queasy green not unlike the color I held in my hand. “Okay, fine, you found something. Now can we please go?”

“I’m just getting started.” I stuck the feeling in an outside pocket and pulled the duffle bag on again, tightening the strap so it would stay more securely against my back. With a grunt and a strain of arm and stomach muscles, I climbed onto the car roof again and examined my options. The next car was too steep to jump to, even from the roof, so instead I turned my attention to the crisscrossing metal spokes of the Ferris wheel, leading like a complex ladder to the very center of the circle.

“Maggie, this is stupid.” Joey crossed his arms, obviously trying to reign in the cloud of green around him and failing miserably. “You’re going to fall and break your neck, and then where will I be?”

“Probably at my graveside, clutching flowers and sobbing ‘Maggie, no—it should have been me! *It should have been me!*’” I gave one of the metal bars of the spoke a tug, just to make sure it wasn’t rusted through, then pulled myself up. The structure had much larger gaps than an actual ladder, but there were so many bars and cables making up the inside of the wheel that I felt confident I’d have something to hold on to the whole climb up.

“Maggie, seriously.” The churning cloud of green around Joey had thickened so much that a piece broke off and tumbled to the ground. Another fragment he could sell at the market—he should have thanked me. “Will you *please* just come down? We’re going to be late.”

“*You’re* going to be late, you mean.” My gaze constantly flicked over the metal bars as I climbed, making quick decisions about what to grab next, where to put my feet. It was a little like the old jungle gym at the park. “I’ve got nowhere I need to be.”

“Well, your... Your mom’s gonna worry.”

“It is physically impossible for my mom to worry about me.” Something tried to surface in my chest, but I shoved it in the trunk without giving it a second glance. I’d been keeping my body close to the metal as I climbed, but now I stood, positioning my feet so I only swayed a little, watching the cloud around Joey grow even more frenzied. “Look, if it bothers you this much, just go. It’s not my fault you can’t walk up a staircase without having a panic attack.”

A hint of red crept into the swirling cloud. Joey clenched his fists. “Just because *you* don’t feel anything doesn’t mean there’s never a reason to be scared.”

“I don’t let feelings make my decisions for me.” I held his gaze a moment longer, then went back to climbing. “I’m fine. Just go. You don’t want to be late for fishing with Daddy.”

I didn’t look down again until I reached the hub of the wheel, so I didn’t know exactly when Joey left. I stood for a moment, catching my breath, then picked the next spoke and climbed back toward the edge of the wheel to the next car.

I found a few more fragments as I went—anxiety, excitement, another piece of lust—and I might have found more if I’d traveled all the way around the wheel, but by the time I’d made it halfway I was exhausted. *One more*, I told myself, pushing a damp curl of hair away from my sweaty forehead and climbing straight up. The sun had moved further across the sky, making it sometime in the late afternoon; I’d rest a while in the top car, take some time to enjoy the view, and by the time I climbed down and sold my haul at market and rode the subway home, it’d be evening and I could head straight to my room and pretend the late hour was the only reason why Mom had nothing to say to me.

When I finally hauled myself into the highest car, I collapsed next to my duffle bag and laid there a moment, feeling the car swing gently beneath me. I rolled over, preparing to push myself up look at the view, when my gaze passed under the seat and I froze. There, just behind a crumpled paper napkin, was a huge chunk of emotion the size of my fist. From the

soft golden glow it looked like it would be joy, maybe wonder; I'd never seen a positive emotion this size.

I reached for it, already calculating what I might be able to sell it for—this piece alone had to be worth at least half of what I already had in my bag—but as soon as my fingers closed around the glow, my body gave a lurch.

*It's dusk. Faint music, laughter, and the smell of popcorn drifts up from below, and my fingers are sticky as I grip the metal bar of my seat. I kick my feet in space, legs dangling above the floor, as the Ferris wheel slowly climbs. I hear screams from another, faster ride somewhere behind me, but I'm looking over the trees to the distant cars and houses, staring at the carpet of glistening lights beyond the river with eyes so wide that they start watering.*

*The car gently sways beneath me as the wheel comes to a stop, leaving us at the very top. A breeze brushes my hair away from my face. We're so high, higher than I've ever been, and there's a giddy kind of lightness in my chest, like a bird is fluttering its wings inside my rib cage.*

*"You're shivering," a deep voice says from beside me. "Is it too high? Are you frightened?"*

*I tear my gaze away from the lights long enough to look up at the man sitting next to me. His scratchy beard is dusted with powdered sugar, and his eyes are filled with concern. I smile, the taste of fried dough still sweet on my tongue. "No," I say. "I love it. I want to stay here forever!"*

*He laughs, a low, comforting rumble, and puts his arm around me. I nestle deeper into his side as the Ferris wheel gives a quiet jolt and begins to turn downward again, and I watch the distant lights until they slide out of view, lifting my hand to wave goodbye.*

I came back to myself with a gasp, the noises, sights, and smells cutting out as abruptly as if someone had pulled a plug. I blinked against the sudden daylight and spotted the feeling resting on the floor in front of me, glowing unobtrusively. It must have slipped from my fingers; had I opened my own hand in a wave when the girl in the memory had raised hers?

*The memory.* I rubbed my eyes, looked again. How had I found a fragment with a memory attached? That was rare, something like one in every ten thousand—or was it one in every hundred thousand? Either way, for every ridiculous number of emotions to fragment, only one of them would have a memory break off with it. And for this one to be attached to such a positive feeling on top of that? I was going to make a fortune.

And yet... As I stared at the glowing fragment, my stomach kept growing tighter and tighter, and I found myself filled with the illogical urge to pick it up and hurl it over the edge of the car, watch it shatter into pieces as it hit the ground.

This made no sense. I was rich! I needed to wrap the fragment up, tuck it safely in its own pocket in my duffle bag, and take it directly to market to find a buyer. This was going to change everything. I could do whatever I wanted with the money—get a car, my own apartment, a new life—all I needed to do was sell the memory. But I couldn't bring myself to touch it again.

As the squeezing in my stomach grew tighter, I realized that I hated the little girl in the memory. I hadn't let myself feel anything for so long, but I recognized this feeling, and I hated her. I hated how happy she was, how oblivious to the way the world was going to change. I hated that she was probably out somewhere right now blissing herself out on cheap emotions, trying to chase something close to what she had in the past, but only blinding herself to what was right in front of her. And I hated her father, who made her think he cared about her, made her think that what they were feeling was real, but had no way of promising that the light in his eyes when he looked at her would always stay, who didn't warn her how dangerous it was to feel so much of something you could lose.

A drop of something fell in my lap, making a small dark dot on my jeans. My eyes were blurry, so I scrubbed at them with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, and when I could see again, there was a new fragment of feeling beside the memory.

It was small, not even the size of a marble, and it was a murky swirl of browns and grays and swampy greens, like the muck you'd find at the bottom of a pond. My throat was almost too tight for me to breathe. Did that come from me? It couldn't have—I hadn't produced any fragments of my own since before the Numbing. But then there was another plop in my lap, and I brought my hand to my face to find that water was dripping from my eyes.

I felt sick. Something was rising in my chest, pressing at my throat—it felt almost like when I needed to throw up, but this was something different trying to get out. I clamped down on it, forcing it back into the trunk the way I always did. I was the one in control. I was the one who decided what I felt.

*You're shivering*, I heard the man from the memory say, and suddenly I saw myself as a kid again, sitting on my old home's front steps, clenching my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering as I craned my neck looking for shooting stars. Mom had told me to come in, that I was going to freeze to death out there, but I'd stubbornly stayed, hands tucked under my thighs for warmth, tapping my toes to keep them from going numb. The door behind me squeaked open, and I could hear Dad's footsteps on the creaking wood. I hadn't turned to look, thinking Mom had sent him to talk me into coming inside. I remembered how he came and settled on the steps next to me with a sigh, and then, without saying a word, wrapped a heavy blanket around my shoulders, tucking and adjusting it until I was completely surrounded by warmth.

My stomach clenched. I pressed a fist to my mouth and squeezed my eyes shut, shoulders shaking.

*You're shivering.*

The lock in my chest snapped.

A wave rushed out, tearing the lid of the trunk off its hinges and crashing over me. It flooded me, leaving me helpless as my body spasmed with sobs, barely able to suck in a breath before the wave crashed over me again, gasping for air as the tears just kept flowing, flowing, flowing like I'd never be able to shut them off. And along with the tears came images, flashes—

*His laugh when I couldn't blow out the candles on my birthday cake.*

*His hands waiting to catch me as I balanced on top of the monkey bars.*

*His bristly kiss against my forehead before he turned out the light.*

I sobbed, eyes burning, snot pouring from my nose. Through the wavering blur I dimly

noticed that more of the dark, muddy fragments were pouring from me too, landing in drops and pooling together to form a growing, quivering blob.

It felt like I stayed there forever, arms clutched around myself as the waves kept rushing back over me, knocking me down again and again, but in time the tears began to slow. I sucked in deep, shuddering breaths, and slowly regained control of my body, until I was finally still.

The world seemed silent around me. I blinked at the thick, murky mass on the floor in front of me, a few leftover tears rolling down my cheeks. It dwarfed the little girl's memory, larger than the widest I could spread my hands together, and as I thought *That was inside me*, I realized my chest was the lightest I could ever remember feeling it.

I found a kerchief in my bag and wrapped up the golden fragment so I wouldn't touch it again—I wasn't sure if memories wore down the same way feelings did with use, but I didn't want to risk it—and then I curled up in the car's seat. I was so tired. I closed my eyes, just for a moment.

“Maggie!”

I blinked, disoriented, and lifted my head, my neck aching. The sky was dim. How long had I been asleep?

“Maggie!” The call came again, and I leaned to look over the edge of the gently swaying car. Below, right around the center of the wheel, was someone clinging to the metal railing, surrounded by a cloud of green fear.

I shook my head, trying to clear away the fog of sleep. “Joey?”

It took me a few minutes to climb down, careful to watch where I put my feet in the dusky light. Joey was curled up on the small platform at the hub of the wheel, arms wrapped around the largest solid piece of metal it seemed he could find, shaking like it was the dead of winter. I did my best not to jostle him or step on any of the scattered green fragments when I joined him on the tiny space. “Joey, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t talk,” he said, eyes squeezed shut. “Need ground.”

It seemed he had found some kind of service ladder leading to the hub; I stepped down to it first, then coaxed him after me, staying just below so he’d have something between himself and the ground. It took a long time, and he kept quaking and spilling fragments as he went, but we finally made it to the bottom of the wheel, where Joey collapsed and put his head in his hands.

I stared at him, pushing my mouth to the side. “What on earth were you doing up there?”

“You couldn’t hear me from the ground,” he mumbled, head still down. “And I knew you had to be in one of the cars.”

Okay... I adjusted the strap of my duffle bag, still watching him. “But why were you looking for me?”

Joey took a deep breath. “I ended up going fishing before I could sell my haul. So when I went to market after, it was already getting late, and your mom was there looking for you.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She was asking people if they’d seen you. Said you should have been home by then. She asked me if I could find you.”

I lowered myself to the ground, gripping my bag’s strap tight. “But... But she can’t get worried. Why would she...?”

Joey lifted his head and gave me his best “you must be an idiot” look. “She might not be able to make her own emotions, but she still cares about you.”

The sky was getting darker. I sat and watched the stars slowly poke their way out, one by one, distant crickets chirping as I waited for Joey to recover. When the green cloud had finally dissipated enough for him to try standing up, I offered him an arm and hauled him to his feet. As we walked to the subway station, he asked “Well, after all that, was it worth it?”

I thought about it, tilting my head up as the streetlights fizzed and flickered on, one small piece of the glowing mosaic the little girl had seen from the Ferris wheel. The dark weight in my chest was gone, but the space wasn’t empty—I could feel something else stirring, trying to make its way to the surface. I didn’t know what it was, but for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t afraid to find out.

“Yeah,” I said, and as I watched, a sliver of light streaked through the sky, there for a moment then gone. “Yeah, I think it was.”

*Finalist*

# Ashen

Moss Besse

I am Tamet-Tamel-Marelkitchencorner. I am named for my mother and her mother and where I was born. This is the way all mice are named, or at least all mice that I have ever encountered. My same-mother-Marunderfloor, two litters younger than me, likes to weave wild stories about the mice from far away places and the grand adventures that they have.

I think she gets the stories from Ash.

My same-mother-Marunderfloor and I are the only ones of my mother's children that remain in the kitchen. Occasionally my same-mother-Borelkitchencorner will sneak around for the visit, if the pickings in the barn have been insufficient for his pups. Everyone else is gone, as is my mother.

The only other kitchen mouse is Rodea-Saden-Salbarnhigh, who moved into the kitchen before my mother was born and has outlasted everyone. He prefers to be called Sallie, but my same-mother-Marunderfloor is not good at respecting nicknames. She is also still quite in awe of the gray in Sallie's fur and the wisdom in Sallie's quiet voice. She thinks we should always refer

to him by his full honorific. It is polite, after all. Every time she complains about my disrespect, I call her Marflower, just to witness the indignant quiver of her nose.

Sallie is also Ash's favorite.

That's okay with me. If I were Ash, Sallie would be my favorite too. That's why I make sure that he is fed and warm and comfortable, whenever Ash is not around to see to it.

Ash is not a mouse. Marflower and I just call her Ash because we cannot understand what she calls herself, and she is often ashen. She has names for us all as well, but we don't understand those either.

There are two ways in which she is ashen: she sleeps on the hearth, shivering. Even if all the kitchen mice and all the barn mice and all the other big house mice and all the mice under the hill gathered, we would be too small to keep her warm. She is also often hungry, overworked, and too tired, for all she has to offer is snatched up and given to the others who live in the big house, but never come into the kitchen. It was a tired sort of ashen, but Ash was never a pale, paltry, wilting sort of thing. I think Ash is by far the stronger than all of us, in that quite strength of character my mother would so highly praise.

She tells us stories in a hushed little voice that we do not understand but cling to anyway. Sallie will pull himself up onto the hearth with her, each movement slow and steady in its intentionality. He curls up before her face. My same-mother-Marunderfloor will perch high above the proceedings and listen with tittering paws that tap back and forth whenever the cadence of the story swells to grandiose heights. I wander, mostly, half an ear tied to the ebb and flow of unknown words and the other half busy making sure Sallie's nest is prepared for his return.

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Marflower dreams that she can understand the stories; I am perfectly happy to simply absorb the unknown riches.

Perhaps I should tell you of the others, the ones like Ash, that do not come into the kitchen. There is the Old One. Sallie insists that this is also the mother, but I do not understand. If the Old One were a mouse, she would not be considered a mother. My mother fought and scrapped and worked and cared vibrantly for all her litters. She put her nose to the floor and worked with all her strength, all her life. She loved enough to teach us the right ways of life, not the easy ways. She cared for the lonely and the downtrodden. All these things are what a mother means. The Old One is meek and frail. She reclines and lets Ash fetch for her what she could just as easily have reached herself. She gathers no food, stores no goods, and offers no discipline to her apparent offspring besides to bark uselessly at Ash's hard work. I do not like the Old One.

The next is Orange. She is like-size with Ash, but like-mind with the Old One. She is shrill. She speaks in short, sharp, angry commands, and not the lilting stories of our kitchen companion. The other big house mice that would come to visit tell stories of her harsh shrieks at all hours of the day. They do not know what she does all day besides sit and whine. We call her Orange because she is garish in hair and in dress and in noise.

The only other one is Wallflower, who trots after Orange and the Old One with a grim determination to be the same as them but never quite manages to be as shrill or as cruel. She is, however, just as useless. Often, she seemed to wilt into chairs and do nothing whatsoever for hours and hours at a time. The other big house mice had named her long before I ever began to pester my same-mother-Marunderfloor with such an inappropriate and unnecessary nickname as Marflower.

Besse - 3

I did not like them, but since they did not come into the kitchen I only knew them through the scrubbed tears on Ash's face, the slow cadence of her voice on bad days, or the hidden quiet humor that sparkled in her face and in her work on the good days. I did not like them, but I loved Ash.

One day, Ash did not go to sleep when she normally did. She put a little cutting of cheese on a plate and set it down before Sallie on the hearth. Marflower and I tumbled and tiptoed from our normal spots and joined him for the treat. There was excitement in Ash's voice, I thought. I queried Marflower for her opinion and she just tittered back at me while indulging in the decadent treat. Sallie confirmed that he thought excitement sounded perfectly reasonable.

It was not an emotion we often got to associate with Ash.

She unwrapped a parcel at the table and curled herself onto a stool. Her chatter washed over us, warm and happy, although we did not know what she said. Busy noises, clinks and clacks, were an undergirding chorus to her entirely different story. When the treat was gone, Sallie curled up closer to the fire and Marflower and I clambered our way up the table to investigate what Ash was doing.

We'd seen her mend clothing before, but this seemed to be a far larger undertaking. The fabric was far finer and so brightly colored, it might have resembled something of Orange's if Orange had any taste. Or if Orange or the others ever entrusted Ash with their mending. Ash seemed to reach the end of her story and grew quiet.

Marflower nuzzled my side and guessed that whatever Ash had been saying something that had happened, something that was currently happening, that our favorite person had something she was desperately looking forward to. It was something real, as well as a story. The two of us jittered with our own excitement.

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Ash reached over and ran a finger over Marflower's spine. Then she tapped me on the nose. A broad smile burst across Ash's face, and then she went back to the click of her scissors. She began to sing ever so softly to not carry out of the kitchen and risk disturbing

any of the other big house residents. It was lovely. I pattered over to the edge of the table to check on Sallie, but he was already in the process of burrowing into his nest for the night. I wandered back to the side of my same-mother-Marunderfloor.

We tried to stay awake to keep Ash company, but she worked long into the night and outlasted both of us.

The next evening held just as much excitement as the one before, and the one after that, and the one after that. Ash's stories seemed to coalesce into the most gorgeous songs imaginable, sung just for us. She was still caring for the household, still subject to the torments of the Old One and the others, and some nights she still came back to us bent and bowed. The weight of too many responsibilities seemed to fall heavily on her shoulders.

Each night, she got started later and later as her daily tasks somehow managed to grow. She remained faithful to her project, and the soft bright pink of the dress began to take form.

On the best of nights, we'd get to watch her try a segment on and check the fit and the progress. The day after Ash first wore the dress's skirt, Marflower twittered on about how much it spun and sparkled. It floated with every happy step Ash made. Soon, the pieces that were together got larger and larger. Marflower and I watched and waited in anticipation. Something was coming. Something was coming soon.

We also worried because Sallie was not doing well.

He was listless, slow to rise, and often buried into his nest long before Ash came back for the night. She worried too. Little crumbs would be left for him. Some nights, she sat near him

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and stroked his fur. She would lean close and whisper to him. Marflower and I always thought those moments sacred, and we retreated far enough away from the nest that we could not near even the cadence of her voice. Still, Ash plugged away at her project and sang us soft lullabies every night.

It seemed to be that we were running out of time. Ash's excitement had been tempered by worry and the weight of the household, but it still simmered behind her eyes and her smiles and her songs. Sallie, when he felt up to it, would call Marflower and I close to him and tell us about his long days. He imparted so many experiences that it was all we could do to listen. So, we listened and cared for Sallie by day, and watched and waited with Ash by night.

Then the dress was done.

Ash scrubbed herself very clean one midday, something not in her usual routine. She had washed her hair the night before and spent time twisting and curling it together until it rested tightly on her head. She was not ashen that day. Marflower twittered against my side and asked if we should call her Beautiful. That seemed particularly apt to me, but I answered no. Ash had always been beautiful, regardless.

She put on the completed dress for the first time. It rested perfectly against her skin. A soft smile played on her face as she smoothed her calloused hands down the skirt and then twirled around.

She laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

After a few brief moments, full of spinning and sparkling and smiles, Ash looked around the kitchen, as if grounding herself in a domain all her own. She set her shoulders. She whispered something towards Sallie's nest, and then left the kitchen. The cause for excitement had arrived.

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Marflower wondered if she'd be back that night, but when the darkness arrived and she had not returned, we did not worry too much. It was only that Sallie was by turn hot and

cold. He muttered in near delirium as Marflower and I tried to keep him calm and comfortable. As the night dragged on, worry for her mentor and guide wore Marflower's temper thin. She blustered and blundered, a furious knot of tension settling tight within her.

Nothing worked. Sallie just got worse. At one point, Marflower fled to the other side of the kitchen and quivered with something like rage and fear. She'd done this too when our mother had withered away. Mother had been so central and so necessary to our very existence that the thought of plugging along without her, at the time, had felt impossible. And my same-mother- Marunderfloor clearly felt the same about Sallie. I did too, I guess, but someone had to work through the angry flood of despair.

Sallie managed to linger until the first light of day began to twist into the sky, and when Ash tiptoed home.

She arrived tired and barefoot. Her dress was torn to pieces, the hem of the skirt so dirty you could no longer tell its color. Yet she looked oh so achingly happy. Marflower twittered at her and she came investigating. She found us curled around Sallie's nest. A soft little breath escaped her. Reaching down, she lifted Sallie up and pressed a kiss against his nose. He quivered.

Ash whispered some secret benediction to him, and I have never longed more to understand her.

Rodea-Saden-Salbarnhigh was gone.

My same-mother-Marunderfloor went to stay with our same-mother Borelkitchencorner for a few days. She said she was coming back, but that she needed to clear her head of ghosts.

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With just Ash and me in the kitchen everything felt quieter. Ash also spent several days favoring one of her legs. It must have gotten injured during her night away.

The whole atmosphere in the big house felt colder, and I often considered if I should tell Marflower to remain in the barn. Sometimes I wondered if I should leave, but someone had to stay for Ash. My same-mother-Borelkitchencorner said I should join the rest of the family soon: that I would only waste away in this lonely, unlivable space. The Old One, Orange, and Wallflower must have gotten colder and crueler. Ash's back seemed to bend further under the weight of it all, but she did not break. She also did not clean up Sallie's nest, although she did take his body somewhere. I trust she followed whatever she found to be most respectful.

She still told stories at night, and I did my best to curl up on the hearth near her. Ash had always seemed fond of petting Sallie and Marflower, but I didn't like it all that much. Somehow, she seemed to know that. She'd tap me lightly on the nose sometimes, but that was it.

I loved Ash.

It made me sad she seemed so unhappy.

The house seemed to curdle. Even the very air felt toxic. On more and more nights, Ash's stories would fumble away and be replaced by silent, gasping tears. She would clutch her insufficient clothing close and roll nearer to the fire. It was nearly winter, and I worried that this would be the season that would break her. But somehow, Ash kept going. I do not know how. All I could do was wait for her each day, listen to her stories, and try to convey somehow that someone – no matter how small – loved her. I hoped that would be enough.

And then Ash went missing, for days and days and days.

The Old One, Orange, and Wallflower were gone too, and I occasionally wandered out of the kitchen to listen to the other big house mice chatter in endless circles regarding what might

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be happening, what could have possibly happened. I orbited those unfamiliar circles and tried not to miss Sallie and Marflower too deeply. My same-mother-Borelkitchencorner visited again and asked again for me to move to the barn. I told him I'd think about it and curled up on the cold hearth and shivered.

And then one day she came back.

Ash stepped into the kitchen timidly, as if it had become foreign domain to her. She turned, gestured, and a man stepped into the kitchen behind her, ducking his head to avoid knocking it on the top of the threshold. Ash smiled at him and, oh, oh!

She shone. Happiness was so deeply embedded into her face, into her shoulders, into how she moved. I skittered around the hearth in delight, for I never imagined, never dreamed, that I'd ever get to see this much happiness infused in her. Ash showed the man around the room, even pointing out the neglected remains of Sallie's nest. They talked to each other. He pressed his nose into her temple. He made her laugh so freely and so brightly.

Ash gestured to the hearth and said something somber, her smile fading slightly. Her words were low and slow, as if she were caught and suspended between something so achingly tragic and something truly joyful. The man pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. She buried her face into his chest and sobbed.

It was unlike all the times I'd seen her cry before. He held her close. He stroked her hair and whispered so gently. He cried with her too, a little. Eventually, Ash quieted and pulled back. He ran his thumb against her cheeks to wipe away the remaining tears and she smiled at him. They still managed to look joyful.

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Then she knelt at the cold and empty hearth and gently brushed me on the nose. She whispered something to me, and it sounded exactly like her prayer for Sallie. Even if I didn't understand her, this time I knew it to be a fond, safe, comfortable, freeing, trusting farewell.

Ash was safe now. She was well, she was happy, she was joyful!

She stood and tucked herself into the man's side. They left the kitchen, soft twinges of laughter trailing after them.

I danced, for a time, and then left on my journey to my family at the barn.

I am Tamet-Tamel-Marelkitchencorner. My mother once charged me to look after the lonely and the downtrodden. Ash was neither of those things, not anymore.

*Finalist*

# Cold Stork Coffee House

Victoria Shanks

Ask anyone in Kentucky, and they'll tell you there's no place like Cold Stork Coffee House. It doesn't look like anything special—it looks like a brick rectangle in the middle of a soybean field, with a gravel road snaking to the little parking lot. (The soybeans resent the Coffee House, but what can they do?) Nobody can say exactly what makes it special. If they did, their tongues would be cut out.

Since I have a tongue and need to keep it, I can't say either—though I think I know. What I can do, however, is tell you a story.

Once upon a time there was a girl named Lucy Rose. Back then Lucy was seventeen, obsessed with Shakespeare, and just happened to be... me.

I had two friends then—my doppelgänger Ycul, and my pet pangolin Omeeve ne Pae Jones—and the only thing all of us agreed on, was we loved Cold Stork Coffee House.

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The day I made my third friend, Omeeve and I sat at our regular table in the back corner of Cold Stork. *The Sound of Silence* played in the background and I swirled my chai tea absently, eyes on the eponymous Mr. Stork.

His first name may not have been cold—it was Horatio—but the man certainly was. Even now, as he whirled from one mysterious coffee-creating machine to another, his black overcoat and scarf flapped like wings in his wake. His last name fit him and his frostbitten nose perfectly, though with his long cornstalk body I doubted anything else did.

My phone screen lit up and I knew by Omeeve's impatient huff who'd texted. I waited a moment before checking.

**Omeeve:** *I don't believe you understand how displeased I am, Lucy. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, and I am alone.*

Oh, of course Meev was capable of talking. The issue here was the Coffee House's one rule, scrawled on a chalkboard for all to see: NO TALKING. According to legend, a man once tried to circumvent the rule by singing. He was never seen again. Another time a new customer asked Mr. Stork if he was having a good day. He stared at her like a Windows 3.1 rebooting after a crash, blinked, and exploded into a flurry of moths.

I rolled my eyes.

**Me:** *awwwwwwww*

**Me:** *but ur not ALONE alone... Phyllis 'll be back before you know it.*

Phyllis, his girlfriend, was Ycul's off-brand scaled mammal. They'd just left on a cruise with Ycul's family. Meev huffed, tapping away with his little claws. I took a swig of chai and waited for him to finish.

**Omeeve:** *As opposed to you, who are, indeed, ALONE alone.*

*Ouch.*

**Me:** *shut up*

**Omeeve:** *As you wish.*

Very deliberately, I returned to my tea.

We always spent afternoons at Cold Stork. Usually I did homework while Omeeve solved crossword puzzles, but that particular day I was memorizing a monologue from *Twelfth Night*. I'd always wanted to play Viola—no way was I going to mess this up.

At four-thirty I stood. *Time to head home, help Mom with dinner.* A redheaded boy sitting near the door jumped up, too. *Oh, great. Duncan. Punctual as ever.*

He'd had a crush on me since second grade, and somehow found out I frequented Cold Stork... he couldn't talk to me inside, of course, but he was always there to hold the door when I left.

Behind me, Omeeve sniggered. I sighed and let Duncan hold the door for me.

"Your hair's so caramel today," he said as soon as we were outside. His voice cracked. "Did you grow it yourself?"

*Wow, smooth.* I tugged on my bangs. "Yeah, guess I did."

Duncan nodded, wiping his hands on his jeans, and dashed away in the direction of his bike.

"Bright boy," Meev said, "is he not?"

I fished my keys out of my pocket. "Hey, be nice."

"Believe me, I am." He lighted on the rearview mirror of my pickup. "Door, please."

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"Mom, I'm home!" I tossed my keys on the table by the door and pulled off my coat.

Omeeve ne Pae floated toward the couch but I caught him by the tail. "Keep outta my spot, Meev. Remember last time."

He nodded sourly, readjusting his Mr. Potato Head glasses with a little claw. *Attaboy. Being engulfed by overprotective couches isn't fun, is it?*

"Lucy?" Mom appeared in the kitchen doorway, dabbing at her eyes. Her voice quivered. "We need to talk."

*Oh, no. Did I forget to feed the fridge again?* "Yeah?"

She guided me into the kitchen. "You'd better sit down, sweetheart. It's about the monthly budget."

*Well, shoot.*

Mom and Dad were good parents. Great parents, in fact. But before I was born they made the serious mistake of doing too much research. They concluded they were allowed to spend no more than two hundred dollars on me a month (which sounds pretty generous, until you realize this includes food, water, medical expenses, school tuition, clothes, and electricity). For fifteen years it worked out—and then came appendicitis.

Mom sat across the table from me, gnawing on her nails. "We knew things were tight, but we thought we'd come out okay... but... I added up the cost of your new glasses, and..." A tear dripped off the end of her nose.

My stomach coiled into a knot like a snail's shell. "It was those anti-mirage lenses, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry, but... you have to find somewhere else to live for the rest of the month."

"But..." The room felt fuzzy, tilt-a-whirl. "...where?"

"Don't you always stay with Ycul?"

"She's on a submarine cruise to Atlantis." *Oh man... do I have any other friends?*

"She said they won't be back 'til July, with the whole Bermuda Triangle time-warping thing."

A sharp intake of breath from Mom. "I'm—I'm sure you'll figure something out. But you should leave before your father comes home. You know how this upsets him."

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my neck. *Stupid glasses.* "Guess I'll go... get my stuff together."

Within three minutes I'd piled a pillow, blanket, and a duffel bag of books in the passenger seat of my truck. Omeeve levitated in his bed and sixteen days' worth of food. *Now we just gotta find someplace to stay.* I poked my head back into the kitchen. "I'm, um, ready to go."

Mom glanced up from her budget books, eyes red-rimmed and teary. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"Yeah." I tugged on my sweater sleeve and adjusted my beanie. *I hate goodbyes.*

"Bye, Mom. See you." On impulse I blew her a kiss before darting out.

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For the next five hours and twenty-nine minutes I went door to door, asking my cousins and school buddies and church buddies if they had space for an extra human and pangolin. Invariably the answer was no—sometimes couched in less-than-polite terms. On the bright side, I learned I didn't need to give anyone valentines the next day. At last I turned to Omeeve. "So, Meev, whaddya think? Just find a parking lot somewhere?"

"Two words." He stared out the window. "Cold Stork."

"Sounds good." I pushed my glasses up my nose. "Mind if I turn the radio on?"

"If you must."

I turned the dial just in time to catch Host With No Name mid-sentence. "...not saying smoking is healthy, but is it really the worst thing you could do to yourself? I asked my multiple personalities, and together we compiled a list of things that actually might be worse. Our favorites include: shooting yourself in the face, jumping off a cliff, eating McDonald's, standing in a nuclear reactor, shutting yourself in a wardrobe..." The Host paused for air. I'd spent far too much time over the past couple years wondering about him. Who was he? Why did he have no name? Why did he sound so lonely? "... inhaling a mixture of ammonia and bleach, drinking battery acid, and swallowing lit fireworks. What do *you* think, Lucy?"

Why did he talk to me?

My pickup rattled down the dirt road to the Coffee House. I parked in the center of the halo cast by the lone streetlamp. "Blanket, Meev." He floated it to me and I spread it over us. "Hey, the lights are still on in Cold Stork. Didn't they close, like, an hour ago?"

"Yes, Lucy, it has closed at ten since the beginning of the world, and will continue so until the end. Be silent."

"Whatever. G'night." I leaned back in my seat and stared out at the Coffee House. Through the windows I glimpsed Mr. Stork, simultaneously sweeping the floor and wiping off tables. The Host With No Name talked on in the background.

“Well, my time’s about up.” *Already?* In the spirit of full disclosure, I’d always had a bit of a crush on that mysterious, mellow voice. “I’ll be eaten if I go over again, so farewell, listeners. Beware the Pope Lick trestle. Sweet dreams, my lonesome Lucy.”

I darted another glance into Cold Stork and sat bolt upright. “Meev, look!” Mr. Stork lay sprawled over a table, weeping his heart out.

“Emotions.” Omeeve sniffed. “How quaint.”

“Should we do something?” *Poor Mr. Stork!*

“Such as?” Omeeve snuggled further under the blanket, disdain etched across his face.

Maybe it was sleep deprivation. Maybe it was Mr. Stork’s sobs, audible even out here. Whatever the case, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I grabbed Meev by the tail, jumped out of my truck, and marched across the parking lot.

“Hey!” Meev yelled. “What do you plan to do, offer him antidepressants and a tissue? Perhaps your bleeding heart feels compelled to help, but I want no part of this!”

“Shut up.” I rapped on the shop window. Mr. Stork’s head snapped up and he stared at me, eyes huge and red-rimmed. “Mr. Stork? Are you all right?”

“Clearly,” Omeeve said.

“Shut up.”

“I’m going to murder you in your sleep,” he muttered as Mr. Stork stumbled to the window and cracked it open.

“H-hello?” His voice came out thin, brittle, like if he said more it might snap. Exactly how I’d imagined his voice.

“It speaks!” Meev perched on my shoulder and I could feel him grinning.

“Of course he does,” I hissed, then turned back to Mr. Stork. “Hi, I’m Lucy Rose... I saw you through the window, and wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“You wanted to... me?” His eyes filled with fresh tears. “Okay?”

“And here we go again,” Meev said.

“Please don’t cry, Mr. Stork!” I tugged the window open further. “Can I get you anything? What’s wrong?” He plopped his face into his hands, shoulders heaving so violently his elbows slipped off the windowsill and he stumbled. “Oh man, you okay?” I clambered through the window and helped him to the nearest chair. He didn’t *look* hurt. “Mr. Stork?”

He peeped at me through his fingers, and hiccuped. “I don’t—don’t have any friends...” Omeeve sniffed. “That is the precise opposite of a problem.”

“You don’t have *any*?” My head spun. *Poor, poor man! But...* “Mr. Stork, I don’t mean to sound rude, but if you want friends, why don’t you talk to people?” *Ouch. That definitely sounded rude.*

“I want to, but...” He sat up straighter, uncovering a bit more of his face. “It’s Marlo.”

“I thought you said—” I cut myself off. *Shut up and let him explain.*

“The Coffee House,” he said. “She’s jealous. She won’t let me talk to anyone but her when she’s awake. That’s why I made the no-talking rule.” His bottom lip quivered. “I thought— thought it would make me feel better.”

“Good coping method.” Omeeve lighted on the back of the chair next to Mr. Stork’s. “Lucy, are you taking notes?”

*The Coffee House? I guess it makes sense.* “Well, I’m your friend, Mr. Stork.” “You are?” His black hair tumbled over his forehead. “Really?”

“I’m not,” Meev said.

“Meev!” I shot him a glare. “Of course I’m your friend.”

Mr. Stork’s jaw dropped and he stared, eyes round as marbles behind his glasses. I’d never noticed how thick the lenses were. “What do people *do* with friends?”

“Ask them for money.” Meev yawned. Instinctively I yanked my sneaker off and hurled it at him. “Hey!”

“Um, I don’t know, Mr. Stork. Talk with them, hang out—”

Omeeve floated back into view. “On a scale of one to ten, the pain you’ve just inflicted upon me is, without question, a ten!”

“—help them when they need it...” I refused to look at Meev. Mr. Stork waited with bated breath. “... and real friends will do the same for you.”

“Fake ones,” Omeeve put in, “will forcibly drag you into coffee shops at midnight to commiserate with weeping wallflowers.”

I smacked the table and sighed, not looking at Meev. “Do you have any leftover coffee? Omeeve needs a fix.”

“This feels like a twenty-shot espresso kind of night,” Meev said. Mr. Stork blinked.

“I can pay,” I added.

Mr. Stork jerked to his feet. “No, no, no.” He crossed to the counter in four giant strides and busied himself with some of his coffee gadgets. His fingers flew and for the thousandth time I got the feeling he had more than just two hands. “But... how do you tell a real friend from a fake friend?”

Now *that* hit a little close to home. I let out a breath. “Sure wish I knew.”

“So do I,” Meev said as Mr. Stork brought over a steaming mug. “If you had one, we wouldn’t be homeless for the rest of the mo—”

“Ignore him,” I said.

Mr. Stork tugged on his coat sleeves. “You’re homeless?”

“Um.” I waved a hand in Meev’s direction. “He’s just running his mouth.”

“Her parents kicked us out,” the *he* in question said.

“But why?” Mr. Stork’s eyes moistened once again.

“It’s okay.” I patted his hand. “My parents have a budget, and we kinda... went over this month. Stupid glasses.”

“Yet,” Meev said, coffee dripping from his nose, “you no longer experience hallucinations of Batman and Robin breakdancing on your bedroom ceiling.”

“Fair point.” That was traumatic.

Mr. Stork bounced in his seat, actually *smiling*. “You wear anti-mirage glasses too?”

“Yep! Driving got pretty tough without them” I pulled mine off and inspected them. The frames were pretty, transparent and crystal-blue. “So how long have you owned the Coffee H— er, Marlo?”

“You mean, how long has she owned me?” Mr. Stork steepled his fingers. “Since my last birthday—I turned thirty-five—and that was one hundred and two Halloweens ago.”

.... *Okaaaaay*. “You’re one hundred and thirty-seven?”

“No, I’m thirty-five.”

“But—”

“Ahem.” Meev levitated his empty mug an inch from Mr. Stork’s nose. “Sad, confused man, I require more espresso.”

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Hours later I glanced out window to see wysteria streaking the sky. “Wow, it’s morning already!”

“Goodness!” Mr. Stork jumped up, scarf flying. “It’s almost time to open!”

“We’ll help, won’t we, Meev?” I stood too. “I’m so, so sorry for keeping you up all night.”

He only smiled. “Oh, I never sleep.”

“Brilliant.” Omeeve, who’d been dozing for the past while, stretched and yawned. “Lucy, what’s on our agenda for today?” *Hoo boy.*

“Um, agenda?”

“I see you’ve left the planning to me. As usual.” Meev turned to Mr. Stork, busy behind the counter. “Horatio, I require cardboard and Sharpies. We’re going to make signs and beg on a street corner.”

“Meev!” I swatted at him but he hovered just out of reach. *But wait...* “Mr. Stork... you aren’t hiring, are you?”

“Oh, no!” Mr. Stork almost dropped a syrup pump. “I’m sorry, Lucy! I want to, but I can’t!”

Meev rolled his eyes. “And why, pray?”

Mr. Stork turned his back to us, shoulders quivering. “Marlo—”

“I knew I’d regret asking.” Meev adjusted his Mr. Potato Head glasses.

I couldn’t help myself. “What about Marlo?”

“If I—we—hire you, you belong to her... and you can never leave!” Mr. Stork whirled, eyes big as moons. “You’ll be trapped in here forever. There’s no way out!”

“Is there not a door?” Meev put in.

“But... she lets *you* leave, right?” I asked. At the slight shake of his head my jaw dropped. “How do you survive?”

“I don’t want to leave. It’s—it’s big out there.”

I gestured at the window. “But it’s thrilling out there!”

“See? This is why I can’t hire you. You belong in that world, not this one.” Mr. Stork gazed at me, teary-eyed. “Not mine.”

“Ah, the pathos.” Omeeve sighed. “This is a touching moment, and it truly pains me to break it up, but I seem to recall that a certain someone has school today.”

“Forget school.” I dismissed the idea with a toss of my head. “Mr. Stork, you got an extra apron? You don’t have to pay me—I just want to help.”

He seemed about to speak, but then his mouth snapped shut and he stared at nothingness, eyes glazed over. His glasses slid down his beakish nose.

“Mr. Stork? Anyone home?” Meev waved a claw in front of Mr. Stork’s face. No reaction. “Lucy, I believe we should run now.”

Mr. Stork spoke slowly, mechanically. “Marlo wants me to tell you she likes you.”

“... Okay?” I bit my lip. *Weird.*

“And she says—” Mr. Stork didn’t blink “—she’ll make a deal. If I hire you, you can leave whenever you want, if—” His face froze, mouth open. “If?” I prodded.

“I—I can’t say it!” The old Mr. Stork was back. Limbs twitching, hair wild, eyes about to leak waterfalls.

“No, it’s okay.” I rested a hand on his shoulder. “Go ahead.”

“Sh-she says she’ll let you leave if—if—” I kept on patting his shoulder “—if you sacrifice one b-body part every time!”

*Wow.*

Meev sniffed. “Is that all?”

“That’s... generous... but probably not. But—” I squared my shoulders. “I’m still staying to help.”

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The day blurred by as I helped Mr. Stork worked the magic coffee machines. I'd never known time could do that—in school each second crawled like a million black caterpillars.

Sometime that afternoon the door chimed and I glanced over my shoulder to see Duncan, shaking like a flower in the wind. He smoothed his sweatshirt and stumbled across the shop. Instead of pointing to his order, he pulled a lacy Valentine out of a pocket and threw it on the counter. *Is that for...?* I stared as the door thundered closed behind him. The crimson streaks on the paper twitched and squirmed into words.

*Roses are red;  
Violets are blue;  
If you were a gerbil,  
Then I'd be one too.*

*~to Lucy with the Light Brown Hair*

*Huh. Not what you'd expect on a Valentine, but... wait a...!* I read it again. *This fixes everything!*

With a happy bounce I sprinted to Mr. Stork's side, grabbing a pen from the amethyst stag statuette by the register. I plopped the Valentine on the table and scribbled a note:

*You've gotta hire me, right away! Trust me, it'll be fine :)*

He shook his head, eyes wide, and I jabbed at the note with my pen. *C'mon! Please, please, please!* His shoulders slumped and his hand curled into a tremulous thumbs-up.

I would've written a thank-you, but a thunderous female voice filled my head. "Welcome to the club, Lucy Rose." And she gave a deep, blood-curdling laugh.

*Whoa!* I nearly yelped out loud. *This must be Marlo.* I directed my thoughts toward the voice in my head. "Uh, thanks, ma'am?"

"Just Marlo, hon." She chuckled again.

Then another voice, very small. "I can... hear you?" *Mr. Stork!*

"Wait." I squinched my eyes shut. The voices sounded louder, that way. "Does this mean we can talk to each other during business hours now?"

"Marlo?" Mr. Stork begged.

"Whatever," she grumbled. "Talk away. I don't care."

My eyes snapped open and I grinned at a frozen Mr. Stork. But some part of me wanted to push my luck just a little further... "Marlo, can—may—we talk to other people now, too?"

A huff. "I'm not enough?"

"Oh, no, it's n-not that!" My inner voice stumbled all over itself. "It's just so... *quiet* in here."

"If you ignore me," Marlo growled, "you'll be sorry!"

I let out an actual squeal before clapping my hands over my mouth. "Thanks, Marlo! I could hug you!" I didn't, but I *did* hug Mr. Stork, who went gasping sapling-stiff.

For a long moment afterward, neither of us spoke. He only stared at his blackboard—at the Rule. Then, in a puff of white dust, the Rule vanished.

A smile tugging at his lips, Mr. Stork turned to everyone in the shop. They stared back with fear in their eyes.

"Ahem—" he squeaked, and flushed pink as a peony. "—um... Lucy?"

“Everybody, listen up.” I clapped my hands and a girl jumped. “New rule in the house: we can talk, whenever we want, to whoever we want!” Stunned silence. “Let’s hear it for Mr. Stork!”

The shop erupted in cheers.

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At ten o’clock sharp, the last customer left Cold Stork. Mr. Stork never said a word as we wiped off tables and swept floors. When we finished I hopped up on the counter and pushed my glasses back to the correct elevation. “That was fun!”

Mr. Stork only shook his head, face longer than a boxful of Fruit by the Foots unwrapped and laid end-to-end. His lips trembled. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

I smiled. “Can I have my paycheck?”

He yanked at his hair. “But... but...”

“It’s okay, Mr. Stork.” I handed him a pen. “Trust me.”

Swiping away tears, he scribbled out a check. “Here you are... poor girl...”

“Thanks!” I held it in my teeth while untying my apron. “Thee ’ou—” Once my hands were free I tucked the piece of paper into my pocket and tried again. “—See you tomorrow!” I shouldered my backpack. “All aboard, Meev.” Meev scabbled on like the goodest boy he was, and I started for the door.

Behind me Mr. Stork let out a shriek. “I can’t watch!”

Marlo’s chuckle reverberated to my bones. “Whatcha gonna give me, hon? A finger? An ear?”

“Just a sec.” I fumbled for my multitool—it glinted red in the light as I pulled out the knife blade and held it to my head. *On three. One... two... three!*

I placed a single cut hair in my palm. “One body part. Bye!” I dropped it in the trash can on the way out and skipped into the night.

“Just wait ’til tomorrow,” Marlo grumbled in my head. “Imma burn your coffee, I swear I will. You gonna get the worst coffee you ever drank.”

I unlocked my truck and Meev glided to his seat, switching on the radio en route. The Host With No Name’s rich voice filled the pickup. “... so drive safely, and don’t worry. Tonight all roads lead to home. Good night, Lucy dear.”