

# DREAMS OF GLASS

—Short stories and other fictiony things—

By Azure Bottorff

To all the friends and strangers who've offered me rides, given me food,  
or wanted to read my writing.

## Introduction

What you have before you is a collection of short fictions in various stages of rough draft (except for “Cold Hot Chocolate,” which has been published, so I’m not inclined to do more work on it). I imagine a sort of Darwinian approach to these stories. The good ones will survive to the next collection I write. Some will need to evolve if they want to do the same. Many will die, and others will be born. This process will be assisted by readers’ feedback.

Addressing those who have offered to provide said feedback: I’m particularly interested in knowing what worked, what the favorites are, and why, but any comments are welcome.

To all readers, thank you for your time. It’s very gratifying.

## Table of Contents

The Prince and the Merchant .....	5
Journal .....	9
The Library of Alexandria .....	10
On Daddy's Lap .....	14
The Heart's Music .....	15
Skyfall .....	24
Cold Hot Chocolate .....	26
Blown Kiss .....	31
The Voice-snatcher .....	32
Hello .....	39
Kester Visits .....	40
In Memory of Rumpelstiltskin .....	46
Cracked .....	47
Cherries Without Stone .....	53
The Twelfth Day .....	58
Frost and Matches .....	59
Humanity (Bonus) .....	63
Ball and Bike (Bonus) .....	64

## The Prince and the Merchant

A man is not a “real” man until he goes through some culturally prescribed rite of passage. It was the same thing with princes. A prince wasn’t a “real” prince until he went on a quest or did a good deed. Tradition dictated they announce their quest on their eighteenth birthday and complete it by their twenty-first birthday.

“The hard part is coming up with something that’s unique and personal,” counseled Prince Haven’s father. “Nobody’s impressed with slaying dragons or giants anymore— any George or Jack can do *that*. But it takes an inventive and resourceful man to, for instance, find a dog that can fit into a walnut shell or pull a sword from a stone. Think about what makes you special, and let that guide your decision. So... What do you have to offer the kingdom?”

Haven blinked up at him. “Sardonic commentary.”

Apparently, that wasn’t good enough.

Haven considered rescuing a princess from a curse, like his father, but these days princesses insisted that they could take care of their *own* problems, and didn’t need a *man* to rescue them. That was all well and good, but it left Haven without a quest. The problem remained— like Sisyphus’s rock.

The king grew frantic on his son’s behalf. He harried his wife with several impromptu soap-box rants against procrastination. And teenagers. A week before Haven’s birthday, the king had a nervous collapse. The queen informed him he was to stay in bed and let her take care of business— no arguing, dear. Three days before Haven’s birthday, the king returned to the breakfast table, looking very calm and combed and neat. The royal family stared at him.

Haven said, “You have a plan.”

“I’ve arranged for you to meet with Sylvester the Merchant on the morrow,” the king announced. “All princes go to him for special items to aid them in their quest.”

“Can I come too?” asked the youngest princess.

Haven gave her his sausages to shush her. “I haven’t decided on a quest yet.”

The king stabbed his fork into his eggs. “You will by noon tomorrow, or I disown you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you too.”

\* \* \*

Haven doubted browsing weapons and baubles would inspire any ideas for his quest, but at least he would be doing something. Besides, he’d heard good things about Sylvester the Merchant— a man who started his trade with a single pushcart and a few unusual trinkets. Now he commanded a caravan of wagons and only served royals and noblemen.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning, Haven went down into the courtyard where Vester and his assistants were finishing setting up the displays. If the prince expected the courtyard to be overflowing with booths displaying magic weapons, enchanted armor, and magical rings and broaches, he was disappointed. Most of the stalls were stocked with common objects: shoes, brooms, mirrors, tabletop games, toys, a cauldron, hats, and other assorted items.

Haven's spirits sank further when he saw Sylvester himself. Everything about the man was crooked—teeth, mustache, eyebrows, robes, even smile. "Your Highness!" said Vester. His voice was like butter on toast. "May I interest you in anything?"

"That remains to be seen."

"Don't disparage," said Vester. "The craftsmanship in these items is incomparable. Look at this..." He handed Haven a deck of cards. "Hand-painted by the finest artists, intricately detailed, beautifully interpreted."

Haven shuffled through the deck with practiced hand. The colors on the cards shone like a stained glass window, the patterns as subtle and fine as frost. But something was wrong. He turned the deck to face Vester. "Why does the King of Diamonds not have any diamonds on his card?"

"Ah," said Vester. "The king went bankrupt."

Haven shuffled some more. "And the Queen of Hearts' hearts have cracks in them because...?"

"Saw the King of Hearts winking at the Queen of Spades."

Haven fanned the cards. "... Who has a bishop instead of a jack?"

"Midlife crisis."

The prince raised an eyebrow. "I can't even *find* the King of Clubs"

"That's because he went off to find himself." Vester snatched back the deck. "Then again, perhaps Your Highness is looking for something else."

"Perhaps," said Haven, straightening. "Have you anything that can help my kingdom?"

Vester's eyes brightened. "I have!" He beckoned to Haven and lead him to the cauldron.

Haven raised an eyebrow. "Cookware?"

"Not just any," said Vester. "This is a cauldron of plenty—magic, you know. It produces whatever kind of food you desire and can satisfy even the deepest hunger."

Now both of the prince's eyebrow's raised. "Truly?" That's it. He could be known as a hospitable prince. Prince Haven the Guest-Pleaser. It wasn't what he'd hoped for, but it was better than he expected after the cards.

"Yes! Of course, the food isn't really real, so it doesn't actually provide sustenance."

Haven's eyes narrowed. "No sustenance?"

"None. As far as food value goes, it's as empty as a politician's promise. But you will *think* you're eating heartily... until you collapse from malnourishment."

"What good is that to me?"

Vester shrugged. "You need to furnish royal feasts, don't you? This is perfect for guests!"

"Starving them?"

"Well now, I didn't say that, Your Highness. Only you might use this to *supplement* those meals. It'll impress *and* save on budget!" Vester caught sight of Haven's expression and ducked his head. "Just a thought."

"What else have you?"

"Ah!" The merchant unveiled a wall mirror. "This beauty is magic too. It can find the fairest in the land. Maybe your future bride?"

Haven's manner became very, *very* nonchalant. "And how much would that be?"

"Well now, well now, Highness, I already have a patron interested in buying it, and she has offered me youth. You would have to give me something even more valuable.

The prince's shoulders dropped. "Perhaps you have a weapon instead?"

Vester bit his lip. Then he went to the very back of his wagon, and pulled out what looked like a sword wrapped in deep crimson fabric. "I can give you a special deal on this one."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You see, I will actually *pay* you to take this off of my hands."

Haven sighed and looked at the sky. "Oh, dear Fates. I almost don't want to know why."

"The blade is called Drake. It thirsts for blood. Eh, literally. If you don't feed it, it feeds itself. I've been keeping it quiet on chicken blood for a while now, but it *must* be quenched somehow or another. It's very valuable."

The prince frowned. He'd heard of this sword. The king who once wielded it slew legions of his enemies. Then, when it finished with them, it turned on the king's own army. It's insatiable thirst drove the king mad. Haven didn't know how it came to Vester's possession, nor did he care. "The sword doesn't suit me." He hesitated. "However, I must ask if it has a prospective buyer."

"I thought of taking it to King Henry," Vester admitted. "He's mad enough to actually buy it."

This was true. King Henry was a violent man. Haven dreaded to think of what he would do with the sword and thought to buy it himself if only to keep Henry from getting it. But how could he do that without endangering his own kingdom? What if it were his own father or brothers who fell victim to its appetite?

At last, he said, “I will take the blade off your hands if you promise to give me whichever of your wares I choose.”

Vester’s eyebrows raised in understanding. “Ah! So *that’s* how you’ll pay for the mirror. I’ll miss getting youth, but I’d give it up happily if I could lose the sword.”

Haven grasped Drake’s handle. It vibrated in his hands, as though the metal was humming. It stilled the him a moment, then he shook his head. “Now,” he said. “The cauldron.”

“The what?”

The prince didn’t answer Vester, just walked over to the cauldron and cast the blade inside. The cauldron could satisfy the deepest hunger— even Drake’s never-ending thirst for blood. When the two objects met, they canceled each other. *CRACK*. The cauldron fell in two pieces, and the sword lay shattered.

Haven nodded at the dumbfounded Vester. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

## Journal

January 8– Got myself to sit down and write some New Years resolutions at last. One was to not procrastinate.

February 14– Happy Valentine’s Day to Sierra, who doesn’t expect flowers, chocolate, or an expensive dinner. She’s the best cactus in the world.

February 29– Went out with roommates to celebrate my fifth birthday. They gave me a dinosaur coloring book and crayons as a joke. Hah.

March 2– Actually really proud of how this dinosaur turned out.

April 1– Today I died.

May 8– Mom has three kids. Each of us get gifts on our birthday. Don’t know why. Mom did all the hard work.

June 19– Dad has three kids. Each of us give him gifts on Father’s Day. Don’t know why. He wouldn’t be a dad without us.

June 27– Cut my sandwich into triangles. It was that kind of day.

July 4– Everybody smiled and cheered as if they haven’t been cursing their country and politicians every other day this year.

August 19– Had a picnic in my apartment living room. Best kind.

September 14– Required to keep a journal for my creative writing class. Doubt any good will come of it.

October 31– Barricaded the door. Won’t go down without a fight.

November 24– Thankful for Sierra, the best cactus in the world.

December 21– First day of winter. Guess I better start wearing a coat then.

December 23– Probably should’ve put up the Christmas tree before now.

## The Library of Alexandria

Lexanne didn't know how she got there or what "there" really was. It seemed like a sort of labyrinth where the walls were made of shelves filled with books. They weren't divided into genres or organized by author. But they were hers. She knew because when she picked up a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, she found John Tenniel's illustrations colored in with crayons.

As a child, Lexanne always colored her books. Alice had a different color of hair and dress in each illustration. In the margins, Lexanne had calculated that if she chose between four colors of hair and six colors of dress, she could create twenty-four different color combinations for Alice. That was before she thought of putting polka-dots and stripes on Alice's dresses, which she did in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Coloring the pages was the only thing that got Lexanne through those particular books.

Some books she never finished. She couldn't get past the first chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*, which is why she was puzzled to find it on one of the shelves. When she picked it up and looked through it, she found it only had the first chapter. There were many incomplete books. The Bible only had Genesis, the gospels, and a few select pages from Revelations, along with some of her drawings of the unlikely beings it described.

When a book didn't contain illustrations, Lexanne drew her own in the margins. She particularly enjoyed *The Hobbit* and *Narnia* for that reason. *The Secret Garden* was harder because the flowers in there really existed. That meant she had to get them right. One last page, she had written, "I think everybody has a secret garden of some sort, even if it is only in their head."

*Perhaps that's where I am now*, she thought as she walked through the branching passageways surrounded by books. *Not a dream, but a place you can only get to by dreaming*. The ceiling, much higher than any of the bookshelves, was made of glass— but it was so dark outside and so bright inside that it looked like a mirror. Lexanne could navigate better by looking up there, but she preferred to look at the books. She'd forgotten some of them— *Winnie the Pooh*, *Marry Poppins*, and Andrew Lang's fairy books. She was glad they hadn't forgot her.

The passage opened into a living area with a worn couch, coffee table, and end table. They were arranged the same way as her living room when her mother read to her as a little girl. Lexanne sat on the couch and closed her eyes, remembering her mother saying, "Books take you places." She used to think this meant that well-written books allowed people to experience different settings. When she got older, she understood that books take you places in your mind too. Many of those places were pleasant, but some recesses were so dark that nobody would go there except through a book.

Those moments when Lexanne sat on the couch were so quiet that the sound of paper ripping cut through the air like a scream. She opened her eyes and stood, looking around her. Her heart beat so fast it rattled. The sound came from her left, but knowing that in a labyrinth wasn't very helpful. Paper tore again.

She looked to the ceiling at the reflection that mapped the maze of books. The lights flickered, making it hard to see. She squinted. There was a shadow where it didn't belong in one of the passages. She ran through the twisting corridors, her bed slippers hardly making a sound on the carpeted floor. She breathed heavily. With every inhale, she heard a page tear. The sound got louder with every breath.

Then she turned a corner and saw him— a tall young man with black clothes and blacker hair, calmly tearing the pages out of a Beatrix Potter book she had lovingly annotated. It was like watching someone cut a child. Empty book covers lay scattered around the man like little corpses. Lexanne shrieked something— she wasn't sure what but probably something obvious like “No!”

He looked up at her. Then he ran, clutching the pages. She tore after him. She hated him. She *hated* him. He knew the labyrinth well enough that he didn't need to look at the ceiling to find his way, which Lexanne thought was unfair. This was *her* world. He pulled books off the shelves as he passed to trip her, mostly ones she'd read for school, like *Hymn to Demeter*, *Dante's Inferno*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. She fell a few times, but the trail of books allowed her to follow him without looking up at the ceiling. She rounded a corner in time to see him open a book case like a door and slip into the room behind.

She opened the secret door with such force that books fell atop her. She shook them off and stumbled through the entryway. The room beyond was dark. The only light, tainted red with the dawn, came through a barred window and shone on the young man. He stood in the center of the empty room, facing her. She hated him. She *hated* him.

She must have looked fierce, because his face was pale and his body trembled. His captured pages crumpled in a tight fist. “You shouldn't have followed me here,” he said.

“I know a place you can go where I won't follow.” She stepped toward him.

He shook his head, his face almost as white as paper now. “Now that you've gone away, *they* can get in.”

“Who can get in? Shut up, I don't want to hear.”

She raised a hand to strike him, but he dropped the pages to catch her wrists. “They're quick. They only need you gone a moment.”

“Who does?” She twisted but couldn't break free.

“Can't you smell it?”

She stopped struggling and sniffed. The scent of burning pine was unmistakable, and it came from the labyrinth. The man let go of her wrists as she turned and ran back through the door.

The lights had gone out. Still, in the dawn light she could see that the shelves once filled with books were empty. The books knocked to the floor were gone too. When she stepped forward her bed slippers crunched on broken glass, and she felt a draft from the ceiling. She could hear the cackle of a fire and see smoke rising above the shelves. She didn't know how to get there through the maze. It was hard to breathe.

The young man came out of the door behind her. She grabbed him by the collar. "The books! Where are they?"

He shivered. "*They* took them. Books have power. Power is dangerous. Power creates inequality and change. They— the Book Burners— hate them, hate anything with too much individuality. They're took the books, and they're going to..."

Lexanne jerked on his collar. "Take me there!"

He clasped her wrists again, this time in entreaty. "Don't—"  
"Now."

He ran. She followed. They returned to the place where the couches had once been and where a bonfire was now. Figures in black darted around it. They dressed in the same clothes as the young man, except they wore cloaks and white masks. The young man, upon seeing them, shrank back into the labyrinth, leaving Lexanne to watch the figures throw her books into the fire. Paper curled, bending to the will of the flames. All of her colorings turned to black ash. Book covers were eaten away, and pages crumpled like autumn leaves.

Lexanne saw a letter opener on a desk that had been shoved back to make room for the fire. She didn't know why it was there; she'd never used one before, but she grabbed it and ran toward the nearest Book Burner. Her vision blurred with tears, yet she saw him clear enough— a blot against the blaze. But the young man was right; the Book Burners were quick. Before she reached her target, they caught her and twisted her arms behind her back, confiscating her letter opener. Smoke filled her eyes, nose, and lungs. She sobbed. "*Why?*"

They said nothing, only kept her facing toward the fire while she choked and wept.

Then they looked up at the sound of paper fluttering. Lexanne looked up too. Origami cranes flew above the fire, then used the updraft to take them higher and through the broken ceiling. Paper airplanes too rose toward the roof and then escaped to the sky. Dozens of them. Hundreds. There were white mostly, with black typing. Some of them had colorful illustrations, broken and disjointed by the folds so they looked like Picasso paintings.

The Book Burners that weren't holding Lexanne tried to catch the cranes and throw them into the fire but couldn't reach them. One Burner loosed his grip to catch a little airplane, and Lexanne twisted around to look back at the labyrinth. The young man sat in the passageway, folding a page he tore from *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck*. Like the other Book Burners, he was quick. When he finished, he lifted a paper crane to the air, and it took flight.

Lexanne's vision blurred, darkened, then went black.

\* \* \*

She woke in her apartment, her eyes still stinging from the smoke. Her pajamas were spotted with soot. It was night again. The moon's cool light was a relief against the memory of the flames. She looked around the room, and her eyes fell on her end table. There were folded paper lilies piled top. Lexanne knew that lilies were often associated with funerals. She unfolded the largest. It said only:

*I'm sorry.*

## On Daddy's Lap

–Once upon a time, there was a goldfish.

What color was the goldfish?–

–Gold. And this gold goldfish had a son.

How old was his son?–

–Five. Five? About your age.

I'm five and a half. –

–Right. Five and a half. One day, the goldfish's son asked for a story.

What did the goldfish do?–

–He told him a story.

Was he a good story teller?–

–About the same as me.

Oh.–

–“Oh”?

What do you mean “Oh”?

Don't take that tone of silence with me.

Did the goldfish's son like the story?–

–The goldfish never finished the story. He decided that if his son was old enough to sass his daddy, he was too old for stories.

Oh. When's dinner?–

## The Heart's Music

Her name was Overcast. This was because the village she grew up in went through a phase of giving their children names like "Autumn," "Brook," "Forrest" and "Rain." By the time she was born, all of the good names were taken. So her father named her Overcast, and her mother didn't get any say in the matter, because she died shortly after delivery.

One day when Over was a young woman, her father came home with what he called "Unfortunate news." It seems that when he went out gaming, he got rather drunk and lost several hands to Gale Creston. Everybody knew *of* him but only that he was young, handsome, rich, and a widower. He would be the most eligible bachelor in town if he hadn't been rumored to be completely heartless. Over's father owed more money than he could earn in a lifetime. He was buried six feet under debt. "The good news," he said, "Is that Master Gale will forgive all if I promise him your hand in marriage. So everything's taken care of."

Over was miffed. However, she softened when she learned the benefits of being rich. She'd never been rich. It had many advantages. Still, she worried about Gale being cruel. Then she met him and found out that he wasn't. He wasn't kind either, just... vacant. He was tall and always stared over people's heads with his glassy grey eyes, even when talking to them. Not that he said much. When he did speak, he was very polite, but he hardly ever offered opinion.

Over thought he was boring, but she didn't intend to let that spoil the pleasure of being married to him. Especially after she saw his home, Gatehaven. It was like something from a story book. She asked him why he was so interested in marrying her. "I'm no one of importance, after all," she said. "A flower vender's daughter."

"You are beautiful," he said to the space above her head. "I like beautiful things."

She slapped his arm. "I'm a person, not a thing."

His eyebrows frowned. "I did not mean you are an object, I meant that you are a... unit of existence."

How flattering. "How do you know I'm beautiful anyway? You don't really look at me."

He took a moment to look her up and down. "Content?"

"For now."

Overcast knew a lot of people in town, thanks to her father's profession. Still, she never expected her wedding to be as big as it was. People she barely knew came. She wasn't sure if that was for her or her new husband, who people had mostly heard of but never really come to know.

At first, she liked the attention, people telling her how they always knew she would have a special future. Then they'd ask her to remember them if they were ever in need. After all, she's come into a fortune. With great blessings come great responsibility. At any rate, it wasn't as if she earned that fortune. She was just pretty. It wasn't like beauty was really valuable anyway. God only let her marry that man so that she'd be in a place to help out here friends. Why, they practically raised her. What, did she think she was better than them? Did she? Proud witch! Pretender! Fortune huntress!

Conversations kept turning dark. She had never known hostility like this and it hurt. She was not a romantic, but she didn't think she was the kind of person they said she was. She tore herself away from them and went to Gale. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then she whispered into his ear. "Can we leave now? It's quiet in Gatehaven."

Gale stroked her hair absently, then announced their departure to the gathered crowd. Everybody cheered and clapped and murmured the usual comments about eager grooms.

Over's mood swung a lot during the first few years of her marriage. On the one hand, she loved her new place in life. Gale really did like beautiful things, and his home showed it. He had a library filled with books that she'd never read, and he gave her full reign of his extensive garden. Her pantry and wardrobe were well stocked. She funded her nieces and nephews' education and paid their medical bills. She felt blessed.

On the other hand, people who were once her friends seemed suspicious of her, like they were at her wedding reception. Their picking and prying made her feel affronted and guilty at the same time. She sought isolation and solace in the library and her garden.

She saw little of her husband. He always gave her his attention when she asked for it, but he rarely asked for hers. That bothered her most. She wasn't romantic, but she thought she could expect a little more initiative than this. His mood never seemed to change. He was always passive and content. Sometimes, she thought he wasn't quite human. During the day, Gale stayed in his study and played the pianoforte with mechanical precision. At night, he tried to father a child. Two years passed without success.

"Your first wife didn't have children either, so maybe it's your fault," said Over one morning. Then she blushed deep, almost purple. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to be insensitive about your wife."

"I do not mind," he said, pulling his shirt on.

He never talked about his late wife, so Over always avoided the subject. All traces of the woman were gone from the house— no paintings, no dresses, no half-

finished needlework projects. Even the staff had all changed since her death, so nobody spoke fond memories of her. The only remnant was a sarcophagus in a wing of a private chapel on the grounds of Gale's estate. It was marked only BELOVED. Over hugged a pillow to her chest. "What was she like?"

"I do not remember."

"Really?" She frowned. "What was her name?"

"I do not remember."

Over shivered, then muttered. "You really are heartless."

"Yes," he said. He stood at the vanity, looking in the mirror. "It hurt too much, so I took it out."

She stuffed the pillow further into its pillow case. "Took what out?"

"My heart."

She paused. "You don't have a heart?"

"I do," he said. He'd lathered his face and opened his razor. "It is just somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I do not remember." He started shaving.

Over hated interrupting him while he shaved. She was always afraid the blade would slip. She made the bed and sat on it, waiting for the world to make sense again. When he finished rinsing his face, she said, "So what's keeping your body going if not a heart?"

"A music box."

"You're joking."

He knelt on the bed, took her face in his hands, and pulled her to his chest.

She pushed against him. "What're you—"

"Hush. Listen. Where there should be a heartbeat."

She listened. After a moment, she heard a little tune— Greensleeves— in high *pings*, like a music box. She drew back. "Why haven't I heard this before?"

He stared straight ahead, not quite into her eyes. "You have to know what you are listening for."

She gripped the blankets. Her voice only faltered a little. "That... explains so much about you."

"Yes."

It explained the gaps in his memory too. Banishing one's heart must have been a traumatic experience; nobody could expect come out of it unscathed. "I've known you for two years, and you never told me this."

"It is not something one wants to spring on somebody."

"No, it really isn't," she said, looking at him pointedly.

"I am sorry," he said, not sounding particularly apologetic. "There just... never seemed to be a good time to mention it."

She crossed her arms. “Anything else you’d like to tell me?”

“You are beautiful.”

That wasn’t good enough. “Why a *music box*? That can’t possibly do anything for you. Wouldn’t you be just as well if you left your... heart cavity empty?”

“Yes, but I did not like the emptiness. It was too light. I needed something to weigh me down, something beautiful to keep me anchored.”

Over thought a question she didn’t want to ask but would anyway. “Is that why you married me?”

“What?”

“To fill in the emptiness.”

He blinked, as though he’d never considered the matter before. “That could be.” He seemed pleased with the revelation.

Over glared at him. “Gale?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to find your heart.”

He shook his head. “You won’t. I’ve tried.”

“I’m sure you have, but I bet your heart wasn’t in it.”

He pulled her close again and kissed her. “You amuse me.”

She clasped his arms and stared into his eyes. “I mean it, you know. I *will* find your heart.”

“Mhmm,” he said. He kissed her again.

Finding his heart proved difficult. Gatehaven was large and its grounds extensive. There were too many places to hide a heart. It would take her a lifetime to search, and what if it wasn’t in Gatehaven at all? It didn’t help that she searched whatever places came to her mind first, which generally involved pacing from one side of the estate to the other— looking one room, remembering a place she overlooked in a previous room, abandoning her search of the second room to return to the first, and then forgetting whether or not she actually did a complete search of the second. When she was diligent, she felt frustrated with her lack of success. When she was distracted, she felt guilty. She grew tired and resentful towards Gale for ignoring her efforts.

After a few weeks, she decided she needed a system. She couldn’t just bring a shovel to the beach and expect to find buried treasure.

Buried?

She had, of course, explored the little chapel— including the hexagonal room with BELOVED’s grave, looking for loose stones or cavities in the floor and walls. Now she wondered what she would find if she were to remove the stone slab that covered coffin...

No! That would be sacrilegious, irreverent, not to mention disturbing. But then, so was taking one's heart out and replacing it with a music box. The idea had already taken root, and it grew like a weed— too fast and unwanted. She thought she'd rather try and live with the regret than remain wondering if she was right. Where would anyone lock away their heart if not with their beloved?

She gave the groundskeeping staff the day off and forbade herself from reading her new book until she did the deed. She strode to the chapel, not allowing herself to think too hard about it. Inscribed in the stone above the door was the phrase, "Ask and ye shall receive, knock and it shall be opened unto you."

"Oh dear," she said a little shakily. It sounded so inviting, which made her intrusion all the more discomfiting. She went to the burial chamber and faced the tomb, wiping her palms on her skirt. After fifteen minutes of shifting her stance, she took the lid off.

Of course, stating it like that makes it sound like an easy task, but it was *heavy*— as though the weight of her conscience wasn't enough of a burden.

As she moved the stone, she peered into the coffin. There was no body, no smell of death, only a set of stairs leading down into a crypt. Shakily, she returned to the estate to get a lantern. She heard Gale playing and prayed he wouldn't pause, wouldn't look at her, wouldn't ask her what she was doing.

She ran back to the tomb and carefully descended the steps. At the bottom was large, stone door, without doorknob, keyhole, or hinges. She pushed, she pounded, she ran her hands against the surface and edges, searching for a break or a catch. Nothing. It was immovable. She let out a groan of frustration and leaned her forehead on the door. She got this far, and she couldn't go farther, all because she couldn't get a door open.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and straightened out. She stared at the door and balled up a fist. *This is one of the stupidest ideas I've had yet*, she thought. But she knocked on the door all the same.

The stone groaned and ground as it slid open. Over's lantern shone into a tunnel. At the end were more steps. Down, down, down, until she arrived in another hexagonal room. This one was brightly lit, though she couldn't quite tell where the source of the light was. It was empty, except for a black cat sitting in the center. He tapped his tail on the floor. "Well," he said, "it's about time you noticed something was wrong with him."

"You talk," Over stated.

"I also sing baritone in the Feywood Opera Company," said the cat. "But enough about me. Come here to the center, cricket."

She did as she was told. The cat circled her. “What exactly are you?” Over asked.

“Gale has fey blood in him,” said the cat. “That’s the only reason he’s able to function without his heart where it should be. But he couldn’t just leave it lying around for anyone to walk in and collect.”

Over fidgeted under his pointed gaze. “Then what do I have to do?”

The cat rubbed against her legs. “Oh darling, you don’t have a chance. It took you this long just to realize he was missing it.”

“But I got here not long after!”

The cat bathed his tail.

“I got through the door!”

Het glared with glassy grey eyes. “I practically *gave* you the answer to that one.”

Over knelt down. “Yes, the inscription above the door said ‘Knock and it shall be opened unto you.’ It also said, ‘Ask and ye shall receive.’ All I ask for is a chance to win Gale’s heart.”

He stared a while, then sighed. “Alright then, let’s see. How shall we do this? Death favors playing chess. Other Fates prefer dice. Mortal combat is traditional, but hardly fair since I’m not mortal. How do you feel about riddles?”

“Riddles?” Over asked, drawing her eyebrows together. “I hardly see how solving riddles would qualify me for—”

“Excellent. And the stakes.”

Over’s throat constricted. “Stakes?”

“And the stakes for a heart are particularly high.”

She bit her lip. “You aren’t thinking... my life... are you?”

“No, no no no. Well, yes, in a manner of speaking.” The cat paced in front of her. “I grow weary of being a Guardian, and for such a common commodity as a heart! If you fail to answer my riddles, I want you to take my place as Keeper. This will, of course, mean you cannot possess the heart for yourself. It also means you’ll grow very acquainted with these walls.”

The cat sneered at the stones. Over gaped. “I couldn’t! I’m too... mortal.”

He flicked his tail. “Oh, you needn’t worry about that. I know a man who knows a woman who knows a man who knows a thing who knows a necromancer.”

Over squeaked.

The cat started bathing his tail again. “Well, if you’re not interested—”

“No,” Over tried to say, but her voice broke. She cleared her throat. “No, no. Let me try.”

The cat smirked. “Excellent.”

He took a moment to try to make himself comfortable on the cold stone floor. Over tried doing the same the same but gave up on comfortable and focussed

on breathing and not shaking. She twisted her wedding ring, trying to keep her clammy hands busy.

“We begin,” said the cat.

*“Who builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?”*

“Um,” said Over. Her head still reeled thoughts of necromancers and spending the rest of her life (or non-life?) in a crypt. “Oh! Oh! A gravedigger!”

He arched an eyebrow. “*Not* what I was thinking,” he said. “What do you offer in defense?”

“A gravedigger’s buildings will last until Doomsday.”

The cat nodded. “I’ll give you that one. I had thought a gallows-maker. His frame outlasts a thousand tenants.”

Over let out a relieved, nervous laugh.

“We continue,” said the cat.

*“What binds two people together yet touches only one?”*

“Binds...?” said Over. “Two.... touches one....”

She thought of every material she knew that could bind— rope, twine, shackles, chain, welds?

“Hickory, dickory, dock...” sang the cat.

What else bound people together? Blood, money, promise, duty?

“The mouse ran up the clock...”

Over started to panic. Her wedding ring bit her finger as she twisted it.

“I like mice,” the cat mused.

“A wedding ring!” said Over. “A wedding ring binds two yet touches only one.”

The cat fell silent, then flicked his tail. “Fine. Last one.”

*“If you break me,  
I do not stop working.  
If you touch me,  
I may be snared.  
If you lose me,  
Nothing will matter.”*

Her mind was impossibly blank. She wasn’t even sure she could remember what she had for breakfast. She was only conscious of a sense of horror. She

breathed heavily now, looking wildly about the room for inspiration. All she saw were cold stones and a bored cat.

“It’s not so bad, being a guardian,” he said. “Not for the first few decades anyway. If you do a good job here, you might get relocated to somewhere more attractive. I enjoyed working in a labyrinth. You could guard the Forbidden Fruit or the Sword in the Tree if you’re good enough.”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life away from her family and Gale to protect something she didn’t care about when she couldn’t even recover—

“A heart,” she said. “That’s the answer, a heart.”

The cat’s eyes rested on her a time. Then he nodded. “Well done, cricket.”

Relief flooded into her mind so swift and strong she got a headache. “I can have his heart then?”

“Even better,” said the cat. Somehow that inspired more caution than comfort. “You can choose whether or not to have his heart returned to him.”

Over’s eyebrows drew together. “Why would I chose not to?”

“Only because his heart is broken shards, and it would tear him up inside. That’s why he took it out in the first place.”

The cat batted his tail while Over stood in a few moments in a ponderous stupor. After a while she said, “Cat?”

“Please, call me Bartholomew. Or Lomew for short.”

“Is it alright if I give away my choice?”

Lomew regarded her with interest, but said nothing.

“I think Gale should decide.”

“Hmm...” He tapped his tail on the stone. “I’ll ask him then. You’ll most likely know what he chose by the time you return to him.” He paused. “I doubt our paths will cross again. If they do, don’t expect more from me than, ‘Oh, it’s you again.’”

And with that, Lomew faded from sight.

Overcast spent some time trying to breath deeply and recover from the events that transpired. When that didn’t work, she walked unsteadily back to Gatehaven. As she approached Gale’s study, she heard music. *No!* she thought. *After all this, he still just spends all his day on the pianoforte?* But as she got closer, she recognized the tune— Greensleeves. She knocked on the door. Silence. She opened it.

Gale slumped over his desk, his head propped up by an elbow, staring at the music box. His hair was a little askew from running his hand through it, and his face was lined with melancholy. At the sound of Over opening the door. He turned.

His eyes darted from her face to the floor. "I... had to take out the music box. There's no space for it where it used to be. Not quite sure where to put it now."

Over grabbed the piano bench and pulled it over to sit next to him.

He took her hand and rubbed his thumb against it. They were quiet a time.

"It hurts. Fates, it hurts so much," he said at last.

"Yes."

"I might need help readjusting."

"I can do that."

"That will mean leaving me alone sometimes."

"I know."

For a while, the only sound was of Greensleeves.

"Overcast?" said Gale.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

## Skyfall

The night was warm and thick when Errol stepped into his backyard. He meant to catch fireflies. He ended up catching a falling star. These things happen sometimes.

When he saw the lump of blazing glory careening towards him, he trotted inside and grabbed a potholder. Then he decided a baseball glove would work better. He took one from his brother's bedroom, then went back outside and waited for the star to arrive.

It took a long time.

Errol's mind drifted. He imagined the star asking "Am I there yet?" and the birds answering, "You'll get there when you get there!" Then he wondered what would happen if a bird swallowed a star and turned into a phoenix. He was so lost in thought he almost missed the star going above his head, but instinct saved him. He reached up, and caught the star in its tracks. That was the plan, anyway. It almost succeeded. The star carried him with it, lifting him off his feet so that he crashed into the ground a few yards away.

Good thing boys have hard heads.

He got up, brushed himself off, hid the star in a sock, then went to bed so nothing else exciting would happen. But he couldn't sleep. He knew he should return the star. It was probably worth a lot of money. Besides, the sky might want to keep it for sentimental reasons.

\* \* \*

The next morning after breakfast, he found Dad fixing the car in the garage. "Dad," said Errol. "I have a hypothetical question."

"I have a hypothetical answer," replied Dad.

"If I caught a falling star, how important is it that I give it back?"

"Very important. Can you imagine what those poor constellations without it? What if it one of the stars from Orion's belt?" Dad chuckled. "He'd be made into a celestial scandal!"

"Hypothetically, how would I get it back up to the sky?"

"Mail it to the Man on the Moon."

"How much would that cost?"

"Cost depends on the weight and dimensions of the package, the distance it has to travel, and the carrier. Anything to the moon is going to cost more than a lifetime's allowance," said Dad, wiping his hands on a rag. "Plus, the customs paperwork for interplanetary shipments are a pain."

"How am I going to do it then?" asked Errol.

"Good question," said Dad. "Let me know when you find the answer."

This is what happens when your dad's a manager.

\* \* \*

Errol went back into his room and wrote a list of ideas for how to get the star to the Man on the Moon. The next night, he tried throwing the star upwards while jumping on the trampoline. It never made it past the second story of the house. The day after that, he taped the star to a bottled rocket and launched it. It didn't even go higher than the roof. Errol was ready give up on the whole venture and flush the star down the toilet.

On the third day, he bought a bundle of red helium balloons and tied them to the star, along with a letter addressed to the Man on the Moon:

*Hopping this star reaches you in good time.  
 Sorry for the delay. No reimbersment nesisary.  
 Sincerly, Errol Stoddard.*

Errol watched the balloons disappear above the trees, waited a few minutes, then went inside to see if there was anything interesting on TV. There wasn't.

Three days later, Errol found a package in the backyard attached to a blue helium balloon and a letter:

*Thank you for the safe return of the star. To show our  
 appreciation, we are enclosing the first volume my recently  
 published autobiography entitled- *The Man on the Moon: An  
 Autobiography*. We hope you enjoy it.*

*Regards, TMOFM*

The book was as thick as Dad's copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Errol put it in his closet and never read it, but he kept the blue balloon long after it deflated. Twenty years later, Errol still goes outside at night to catch falling stars. Mostly, he gets fireflies.

## Cold Hot Chocolate

The sunlight on the snow was blinding. Hilary usually went grocery shopping around noon, when the sushi bar gave free samples. Today she went early because she had a group meeting for her science class later. As she walked past the Cocoa Lodge, she saw a college-aged guy standing by the service window. His jeans were frayed, muddy, and salt-stained from too many Rexburg winters. One knee was ripped. He called to her. “Want hot chocolate? I’m buying.”

She course-changed toward the Lodge without pausing. “Heck yeah, I want hot chocolate!” Then she stopped and glanced at him sideways. “Wait, you’re not going to give me a political spiel or try to sell me something, are you?”

“I promise, just free hot chocolate.”

Her grin crinkled her eyes. “Cool. I mean, sweet. Like, literally and figuratively.”

While the guy bought her a Death By Chocolate, she asked, “So are you a student? What’s your major?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she said, taken aback. She tugged on her scarf. “Are you working, then?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what?”

He tensed. “Errand boy for my uncle.”

“My parents work together. Mother’s a writer. Dad works for Namco, but he was an English Major in college, so he helps edit. I’m taking a writing class now. I’ll see how that goes. Officially, I’m a chemistry major, but this is only my second semester, so I might switch.”

His shoulders relaxed as Hilary talked. She was in the middle of describing her ninth-grade field trip when the Cocoa Lodge cashier poked his head. “Hey, Tyrell! It’s 10:30, just so you know.”

“Thanks.” Tyrell nodded to Hilary, then got into his rusty truck and drove away down Main Street.

Hilary turned to the cashier—Nick, according to his name tag. “You know him?”

He shrugged. “You would think so, but not really.”

Nick said Tyrell always arrived within five minutes of 10:00 a.m. and ordered a small hot chocolate with whipped cream. He stayed for a half-hour, offering hot chocolate to passers-by. “What’s weird is how many people turn him down,” said Nick. “Who doesn’t want free hot chocolate?”

Hilary nodded solemnly at this mystery. Tyrell was definitely an interesting “find,” and she didn’t want to share him. Until she wrote a story about him, of course.

\* \* \*

Hilary became a regular, planning her grocery trips so she’d pass the Cocoa Lodge between 10:00 and 10:30. Free hot chocolate won over free sushi. Every time she saw Tyrell, he wore the same jeans and knitted hat. No scarf or gloves, even when the snow descended in a white fury. Hilary, in her warmest winter clothes, shivered on his behalf. “Aren’t you cold?”

He inclined his head. “That’s why there’s hot chocolate.”

“Wouldn’t it be more effective to—”

“How do you like your roommates?” Tyrell asked quickly.

Her face cleared. “Oh, they’re great. Love them to pieces. Except that one of them. . . .” By 10:30, she’d wandered into an analysis of film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. And Tyrell left, having said nothing.

It wasn’t until December that she realized she had learned nothing more of him since that first week. She knew it was her fault for talking so much. He must think her so selfish. She wouldn’t let it happen again.

\* \* \*

The next week was the Saturday before finals. Blue sky, white ground. Hilary greeted Tyrell with her usual smile. He offered to buy her hot chocolate. He always offered, never taking her answer for granted. While Nick collected the cash and loyalty card from Tyrell, Hilary asked, “So why do you do this? Why buy hot chocolate for people? Strangers, even.”

He gathered his change and card from Nick. “You asked that before.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t answer.”

“I did.”

“You said you did it on a whim once, and it stuck. That’s not an answer. Not really,” she said, accepting her hot chocolate. “I’ve been thinking about this. It all has to do with entropy.”

“Entropy?” he asked warily.

“Chaos, basically. The idea is that without an organizing force, the world descends into disorder, which of course explains why there has to be a God,” she said, waving her cup. He flinched. “So, back to the point. I can see you becoming a chocolate donor on a whim, once. But whims don’t turn into habits, especially at such a cost, unless there’s a real reason—an organizing force—behind it. So what’s yours?”

He looked around. “Why do you want to know?”

Hilary drew him a few steps away from the Lodge, so they wouldn't be distracted by other hot chocolate patrons. She wanted him to look only at her while she spoke, especially now that she'd discovered his tactic. Every time she tried to get him to talk about himself, he diverted her attention, asking her about her classes, family, or homework. She looked into his eyes (they were green) and said, "Thing is, I have to write a nonfiction story for my creative writing class, and I was hoping I could write yours."

His head jerked back. "Mine?"

"Yeah! See, I could write about me, but I already know those stories. Also, I've told them a lot, so they aren't fun anymore. Yours is new. It's like, 'Ooh, shiny!'" She reached out a gloved hand as if to grasp a mirage.

Tyrell squinted down at her. "I don't have a story."

"Everybody has a story. Especially you. You buy hot chocolate for people even though you're broke. That's paradoxical," she said, flicking his arm with the end of her scarf. "What motivates you? Something must. Strong characters are deeply motivated. They want something. That drives the action. When forces get in the way of their wants, that creates conflict. Where there's conflict, there's a story. And you do this at the same time every week, so it's like a rite, right?"

He clenched chattering teeth. "Routine."

She shook her head. She'd been thinking about that too. "Routines are set for the sake of efficiency and order. Rites are patterns that hold deep significance—usually spiritual. So, hot chocolate. Why hot chocolate? Do you have some sort of sentimental attachment? Childhood memories?"

His brow was furrowed, his shoulders hunched. Not exactly a trusting, open posture. She rotated her cup between her fingers. "Look, I just, I think what you're doing is great. It reminds me that there really are nice, chivalrous people in the world. If I could tap into that vein of humanity and then capture it in a story, I think it could do people a lot of good."

He said nothing.

"Please?" she said, tilting her head—a persuasion technique she nurtured over the years. "Talk to me about it? Just a little?"

He sighed, watching his breath spiral upward and buffet a few snowflakes. "Fine."

"Really?" she breathed.

"I can talk until I have to leave." Then he looked down at his watch. "Uh-oh. 10:32. Time for work. Bye."

What? What? She gasped as he turned and headed for his truck. "What about the story?"

"Make something up," he said, opening the driver's door without looking at her.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” she called.

He got into the driver’s seat and shut the door. She could only stare after him, clutching her hot chocolate. The truck wheezed. She waited for it to rumble to life, but it went quiet. Did he change his mind? The truck rasped again, and again fell silent.

She hesitated. Then, careless of the icy parking lot, she marched to the passenger door and opened it, still clutching hot chocolate in one hand. Tyrell was bent over the steering wheel, gripping the keys in the ignition. He didn’t look up as she climbed inside. The sound of the door shutting got his attention. He stared at her. “What are you doing? You can’t just get into someone’s car. It’s dangerous.”

She rolled down the window and yelled toward the Cocoa Lodge. “Hey, Nick, if I end up dead, tell the police Tyrell did it.”

Tyrell gaped. It was a delicious expression, she thought, and it served him right.

She turned to him, her face red all over, not just where the cold pinched her. “If the story was too personal to share, you could’ve just told me.”

He faced the windshield again and gripped the steering wheel.

“You said you’d talk until you leave.” She glanced at the keys in the ignition. “You haven’t gone anywhere yet.”

He took the keys out and stashed them in his coat pocket. Then he leaned his head against the headrest. Hilary bent her knees and rested her feet on her seat, conserving warmth.

After a long silence, Tyrell asked, “Why do you write?”

“Because I like people. I like knowing why they do what they do. I always thought writing was—”

“You like people? Well, I don’t. I don’t like the way they look at me, judging me. Asking when I’m going to get a real job. Have I thought about college? Is there anything they could do to help? I hate their concern more than their ridicule.”

Hilary’s mouth filled with frozen breath, and it tasted stale on her tongue.

“But I like hot chocolate. Give someone some hot chocolate and it shuts them up. Puts them in my debt.”

Hilary sat hunched in the passenger seat, clutching her empty hot chocolate cup. Maybe she hadn’t wanted him to tell his story after all. She had wanted him to tell the story she had in her own head, one that inspired love and warm fuzzies. One that didn’t make her doubt herself.

Tyrell tried the ignition again and the car started. She opened the door and got out. Before she shut it, he said, “Don’t get into people’s cars again.” As soon as the door was closed he pulled onto Main Street.

As he drove away, Hilary shivered. The cold had moved inside her. She turned and walked home, her steps slow and heavy. Back at her apartment, she

opened her laptop and stared at an empty document for a long time. Then she wrote a story for her creative writing class about the day her dog died. Weeks later, she wrote about Tyrell in her journal, naming the entry “Cold Hot Chocolate.” That story was never printed.

## Blown Kiss

Grant blew Amora a kiss. The problem was she was in St. George, Utah and he was in Cederville, Ohio. The kiss grumbled about moving halfway across the country on such short notice, but it jumped from Grant's fingertips. The wind lifted it above the tree-crowded horizon to an overcast sky.

Traveling wasn't *so* bad, the kiss decided after a while. At least it didn't have to travel internationally. Kisses usually got held up in customs. As it passed over the Mississippi River, the kiss got to thinking... what if Amora didn't even notice when it arrived? What if it travelled all that way just to be ignored— a pointless gesture? What if— No, never mind. It was just tired, that was all. It sulked again about Grant sending it off— not *only* to travel over 1,800 miles— but to do so just before *dark*. It was starting to dry out a little too. “Long distance relationships shouldn't even be a *thing*,” the kiss shouted at a passing airplane. “Am I right?”

The plane rumbled in response. It wasn't particularly sympathetic.

The kiss sighed and faltered a bit. It hadn't even reached Kansas yet. “There's no place like home,” it muttered.

The sun rose in St. George, tinting the red rocks redder. By this time, the kiss had lost its lift and was walking the streets. It was close, *so close*, but Grant didn't think to give it an address. It was almost worn away. “If I don't find her soon, I won't have enough to give when I arrive. She won't even notice me,” the kiss told itself. It lifted a plaintive cry to the heavens. “And all because the Good Lord didn't endow kisses with an innate sense of direction!”

Hearing the kiss, a prayer stopped mid-ascension. “Everything alright?”

The kiss perked up. “Amora Walters. Do you know where she lives?”

“Oh yes, she's a regular,” said the prayer. It pointed down the street. “You're pretty close. She's in the one with all the yard toys.”

“Thanks,” breathed the kiss.

It limped another block, navigated through the surrounding yard toys, slipped through the doggie door, then followed the sound of the blender.

Amora stood in the kitchen, making a smoothie. Her eyes were distant and her brow was furrowed. She sipped her breakfast. She didn't seem ready to receive the kiss, but it was fading. It was now or never. “Please,” the kiss thought. “Please, let this work.”

It used the last of its strength to fly up and rest upon her cheek.

Amora smiled and touched her cheek absently.

## The Voice-snatcher

“Madam, I’m a watchman,” said Feyson. “If you’ve lost your voice, you’d be better served by a doctor.”

*“I haven’t LOST my voice, haven’t you been ~~listening~~ reading?”* Donna Windon scribbled in his notebook. *“It was STOLEN I ~~tell~~ write you!! There’s a rogue magician out there, and if you were doing your duty, you’d stop asking me questions and go out to find him!”*

Trace Feyson squinted at the words under the lamplight. It would’ve been hard enough in broad daylight, but the small office tucked into the corner of the old Reverie Watch House didn’t offer much natural light. Not that there was much to be had. The autumn sun was already setting.

He stifled the urge to correct the comma splice, cross out the extra exclamation points, and adding a note that asking questions *was* his duty. Instead, he lit another candle and asked, “Why do you say ‘rogue magician’?”

Most people who couldn’t explain the source of their problem blamed magic, since that was also seen as unexplainable. Everyone who made that claim was sent to Feyson. He had a sensitivity to magic that was scarce among most of the village and the other watchmen. In fact, he probably wouldn’t have been accepted onto the force if it wasn’t for that gift. Feyson matched his fellow officers in height, but he was too slender and boyish-looking for the town rabble to take seriously.

*“It disappeared mid-sentence,”* wrote Donna. *“Gone. Just like that— clear as a bell one minute, and not even a whisper the next. Mark my words, it’s MAGIC!”*

Feyson rubbed his forehead, then let his hand slide down his face. He hated it when people insisted it was magic, since they turn out to be false alarms more often than not, but in this case it was a distinct possibility.

Feyson swore silently. Niche-magician’s were tricky. Especially since he couldn’t figure out why anybody would *want* Donna’s voice. It wasn’t exactly melodious, though it projected well. She didn’t train in singing or elocution, except by gossiping to anyone who would listen and several people who wouldn’t. There was no motive.

He handed his notebook and pen back to Donna, suppressing a sigh. “Please write down the people you spoke to and the places you visited on the day of the disappearance and anything out of the ordinary from the week.”

It would have been nicer if the magician hadn’t targeted Donna. She wrote the way she spoke, and that meant that questioning would take some time. He stood up to stretch his legs as Donna bent closer to the light. He heard the pen scratch the paper as he turned to gaze out the window. The sun had already gone,

though the sky wasn't completely dark. Still, it looked like he'd be working late again.

At length, Donna knocked on the table and held up his notebook. Feyson took his seat again and began translating the scribbles. Well, he couldn't fault her for not being detailed enough. She wrote everywhere she went and everyone she met, and included extra notes about what she thought about these places and people. Her commentary went for pages.

Feyson envisioned the streets of Reverie, then placed a figure of himself on the sidewalks— tall, slender, blonde, and brown-eyed. This was his avatar, whom he called “Trace” and used for most of his mental exercises. In Feyson's mind, Trace held a copy of the notebook. He read it like a treasure map, following the steps that Donna had outlined and eyeing the places and landmarks that she described. Nothing caught his interest. He kept walking until he entered the artisan's district and stopped in front of a large, but simply built toy shop. He read the passage from the notebook.

*Then Kitty and I went to Dross L. Mire's shop— not to buy anything, you understand, (except maybe a few trinkets), just browsing before the matinee. The man himself was there too. He looked agitated— but then he always does. I can't help but feel something is not quite right with him. Perhaps if he had married when he was young, instead of hiding away. That's the problem with men these days, they're always working.*

The shop was called Dross L. Mire's Toys and Wonders, and Dross's creations were indeed wonderful. Supposedly, as a child his mother told him to make a name for himself— better than the one she gave him. So he did. He became the greatest toymaker in the world.

He was the greatest because his toys... lived. Not all of them, and not to the same degree, but he heard that the shop had rag dolls that hugged you back, wooden soldiers saluted flags, and puzzles that ‘mourned’ when one of their pieces were lost. Dross even had a few curiosities that even brought him to the attention of the king— a nutcracker that destroyed a rat infestation, a mechanical nightingale that soothed a young boy's madness, and a music box that memorized new songs.

The vision of the streets, shop, and Trace vanished from Feyson's mind. “And are you sure this information is accurate?”

She nodded vigorously and leaned to reach into her bag. Feyson pulled his eyebrows together. Donna sat up again holding a little leather diary. She pointed to that day's entry which said nearly the same things she wrote in his notebook. Feyson imagined a brick wall for Trace to bang his head against.

\* \* \*

The next day, shop glowed golden as light bounced off shelves overflowing with dolls, clocks, music boxes, pull toys, picture books, rocking horses, kites, marbles, dream catchers, and other assorted baubles and knick-knacks. It smelled of wood polish and lady's perfume. It hummed with magic. Feyson could almost *sense* which toys had life. It crowded the shop even more. He didn't like it. It was like an alchemists lab, volatile.

A man's voice rose above the general clamor, apparently mid-tirade. "Whaddaya mean by telling her she can't touch? It's a toy, it's *supposed* to be handled. Ain't ya got enough sense in your noggin to know what a toy is, woman? It's fine, I don't bring the unfriendly ones out to be sold. Well, not most of 'em anyway. What? Then it's had a life well lived. Who *cares* about the price value?"

Feyson followed the voice, appreciating the way the crowd parted in front of him, until Dross came into view. He had a stooped back, scruffy face, and thick silver-streaked hair. His arms were folded as he scowled at a woman with her daughter holding a doll.

"Mr. Mire?" said Feyson.

He watched with amusement as Dross's grey eyes turned to him, then flickered with recognition. This wasn't Dross's first encounter with the watchmen. The older man's shoulders slumped. "Trace," he said. "You know every time I see you, I shudder?"

"I'd like to speak with you."

"Somehow, I ain't surprised," said Dross with a sigh. "Come on back, stripling."

Dross lead him to his office at the back of the shop. The items there came in more unusual flavors than in the shop— a couple of life-sized wooden dolls, a clockwork castle, a wooden theatre, and several indistinguishable and unfinished crafts and curiosities. Feyson relaxed a little here. The place was still cluttered, but it was quieter, and the magic was more... dormant.

Dross pushed a stack of fabric off a stool and offered the seat to Feyson. The toymaker grabbed a lump of hand clay and shaped it as he leaned back in his chair. "You know I don't create life," he said musingly, staring at the clay. "That's something only the Fates and parents can do. The toys... they don't get their life from me. Only form."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

Dross clenched the clay, and it lost his shape. He avoided eye-contact. "Think so."

Feyson pulled out his notebook. "Tell me about it."

Dross shifted in his chair, and reshaped the clay. “I have a boy– well, a puppet. His name is Pipsqeaq. I call him Pip. He’s a rascal, that one. Got too much life to sell. Won’t be tied down. He shed his strings,” he said, a touch of pride.

“And?”

“He’s a good boy,” said Dross. “Really. Always looking out for me, making sure I don’t work myself to death.” He sounded as if he meant that in literally. “But he... has a gift, and he dun’t always use it right.”

“Tell me.”

“He calls it ‘involuntary ventriloquism.’”

“And what would you call it?”

Dross held up the clay figure and scrutinized it so that he wouldn’t have to look at Feyson. “Voice-snatching.”

Feyson’s face stayed passive as he added a note to the book. “Where is Pip now?”

Dross shrugged. “Dunno. He dun’t have a voice of his own, you know. I let ’em borrow mine. That used to be enough, but recently I’ve gotten complaints from people. Said their voices disappeared, and mine’s the most magical place in town, so they came to me. Had no proof, but they threatened to go the watchmen. I talked to Pip, told ’em he couldn’t do that to people. Then he left.”

“Do you have any idea where he went?”

“Where could he go? This is his only home.”

Feyson asked for a description of the boy– puppet, that is, and took notes:

*Height: knee-tall*

*Skin tone: basswood*

*Hair color: terra cotta*

*Eye color: blue (glass)*

*Gait: stiff*

*Distinctive features: made of wood→ sensitive to climate (particularly humidity), pyrophobic.*

“He gets more lively when he’s around people, especially excited people,” Dross said. “That’s part of the magic with the toys, they’re animated by the spirit of other people.”

Feyson finished scribbling, and tucked his notebook into the inside breast pocket of his coat. “Thank you, Mr. Mire. We’ll be in touch.”

Dross leaned forward in his chair. “Wait, what’ll happen to Pip?”

Feyson stood up and straightened his coat. “That remains to be seen,” he said calmly, though really he hadn’t the vaguest idea how to prosecute a puppet.

“He’s a good boy,” Dross pleaded.

“We’ll take care of him.”

\* \* \*

Watchmen ask themselves strange questions, Feyson realized. Like, “If I were a run-away puppet, where would I hide?”

Feyson closed his eyes and imagined a puppet version of Trace, imbued with all of the tendencies and preferences appropriate to a puppet. He sent Trace through a mental map of the town. Or would the puppet have left? Trace stared as wagons and horses passed through Feyson’s mind. None of them seemed appealing. He looked down at his wrist. A marionette string kept it tethered to door handle of Dross’s toyshop.

Pip wouldn’t have left town. He was tied to Dross.

Trace started walking through the street again. He was attracted to crowds. Excited crowds. He found himself entering the forum, where the venders, missionaries, politicians, and struggling artisans were all fighting for attention, shouting, clamoring, debating, singing, and quoting. It filled him with energy, and he lingered.

Then he heard Feyson’s voice, as if from the sky. “Consider *all* the possibilities before narrowing down.” He kept going.

Trace had nearly finished his rounds of the town when he noticed groups of two, three, or more heading to the amphitheater. Feyson opened his eyes, and Trace vanished. He flipped through his notebook to find what Donna wrote. “... *just browsing before the matinee.*”

He snapped the book shut and headed toward the amphitheater.

\* \* \*

The matinee had finished some time ago, and though straddlers still occupied the stands, most of the bustling came from the actors and stage hands as they returned the props, costumes, and instruments to their respective wagons. Feyson drifted around the amphitheater, taking notes and drawing a map in his mind. Then he closed his eyes and sent Trace through it.

Trace wandered through the stands with little interest. He perked up as he approached the stage and then explored the wagons in back. The brown glass eyes roamed from the instruments to the costumes to the props. When he looked at the prop wagon, an image Dross’s shop flashed through his mind.

Feyson opened his eyes again and went to the prop wagon. He spoke quietly with the owner, showing his badge and then the page of his notebook with Pip’s description. The owner rubbed his jaw. “You know, it’s a funny thing, but I did notice—”

After that his lips moved, but no sound came out. His eyes widened, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. Feyson whipped around in time to see a little wooden figure with terra cotta hair and basswood skin leap from the back of the

prop wagon and run towards the center of the town. Feyson gave chase. The puppet wasn't built for running. More likely, he would try to hide. Feyson accelerated as Pip ducked into an alleyway. When Feyson entered the alley, he stopped short. Pip had disappeared.

“What do we have here? A tenor?” said a voice. Feyson's voice. But he never spoke a word. “Yeah tenor,” the voice continued. “Ooh, rusty too. I prefer bass, but at least your voice doesn't go hoarse the way Drossel boy's does. How is he, by the way?”

Feyson looked up. Pip sat on a roof, legs dangling over the edge. “Don't tell me— no joke intended— that I have the right to remain silent,” said the puppet with Feyson's voice. “As if *that's* such a great privilege. And I mean it about Dross, how is he? You can answer, by the way. It's always possible to wrest your voice back if you have something worth saying.”

Feyson tried to say, ‘He's fine.’ No sound came. He tried again. “He worries.” His voice cracked a little, but it was there.

Pip nodded. “He does that, and yet he gets offended when I worry about him.”

“Was stealing the voices supposed to help somehow?”

“What do you care?”

“I want to understand.”

“I wanted to make a statement,” said Pip. “Donna, she— she was saying bad things about Drossel boy. She has something I will never have for myself, a voice. And she uses it to abuse people. How is that fair? And how are you going to make it fair?” Pip pulled up his legs so he sat cross-legged and looked down at Feyson. “You're an enforcer of the law, but not of justice.”

“That's the best any of us can do.”

A few moments of a loud silence followed. Pip leaned his head back a little. “So what will that mean for me?” he asked. “You can arrest me. I'll go willingly. But don't think I can make a genuine apology.”

“When did Mr. Mire finish crafting you?”

Pip's head tilted backwards. After a pause to make sure he understood the question, he said, “Eight years ago.”

“Then you're a minor. You get lectured and returned to your guardian, then he will be accountable if we receive any future complaints about you. If he proves irresponsible or ineffectual, the state will take custody of you and any other sufficiently animated toys and Mr. Mire may face charges depending on the degree of his negligence. ”

“Don't you *dare!*” said Pip, leaning so far forward he nearly fell of the roof. “None of this is his fault.”

“I’m an enforcer of the law, not of justice. I suggest, for his sake, that if you want to borrow any voices in the future, you obtain written consent. For now...” Feyson jotted some notes, then closed his notebook and put it in his coat pocket. He lifted a hand to Pip. “Let’s get you home.”

Pip hesitated, but allowed himself to be lifted down and escorted back towards the shop.

\* \* \*

“You know,” said Pip, breaking the silence. “You have things to say. Whenever I have your voice, I can almost feel the words on the tip of my tongue.”

“Have I?” asked Feyson, his eyebrows arched in amusement.

“Yeah. They taste kinda stale too. You’ve been wanting to say them for a long time. But you don’t. Humans!” said Pip. “Donna squanders and you hoard. Do any of you consider investing?”

“Investing?”

Pip nodded. “Could be one of those rocking-chair granddaddies that tells stories to the little whippersnappers. You’ll have to get over your habit speaking in questions, though.”

“Stories?”

Pip rolled his glass eyes. “Saw that little notebook. Bet there’s a bunch of stories in there, waiting to be born,” he said. “That’s how Dross describes the way he makes toys. Not that he gives them life, but—”

“—That he gives them form,” Feyson finished.

In his mind, he saw Trace stroking the open face of his notebook. His fingers almost seemed to sink into the page. It was like those stories where children got transported to a different world through a book or a painting. When he pulled his fingers away from the page, they started to drip ink onto the surface.

“We’ll see,” said Feyson.

Hello.

I'd still be a blank page if not for you.

Thanks! —♥

## Kester Visits

### CHARACTERS

**Narrator**

**Roddy**

**Kester**

**Roddy's Wife**

### SCENE

*A dimly lit bedroom. The time period is uncertain. The decor is generic, as it is a guest bedroom. It is also, in this case, a sick room. An old man, **Roddy**, lies asleep in bed. He is pale, sunken, and red-rimmed. There is a chess board on his dinner tray. He is apparently in the middle of a game with himself. The white pieces are closest to him.*

*Another man enters. He is dressed in black; he looks like he might be a stage hand. As the scene progresses, none of the other players are aware of him. He is our **Narrator**. He is also something else. He holds a large hourglass, which he turns over and sets on one of the end tables, then addresses the audience*

**Narrator**

First they called the doctor, then the minister. Then they called Kester the Jester. Like the doctor, he was always called in times of illness. Like the minister, he was always called when there was nothing left to do but wait.

**Roddy's Wife enters with Kester.** *The bedroom lights up.*

**Roddy's Wife**

*(whispers to **Kester**)* We're so glad you could come.

**Narrator**

She spoke in a quiet voice. The world was too fragile for a loud one.

**Roddy**

*(waking, shouts)* Is that you, Kester? Get your backside in here!

**Kester gestures for Roddy's Wife to take her leave— which she does, fighting tears.**

**Roddy**

*(attempts to wave Kester closer)* Come here, fool. I'm ill.

**Kester**

*(drawing a chair by Roddy's bedside)* That's a pretty invitation if ever I heard one. *(pulls out his lute and begins to play)*

**Roddy**

*(looking at the ceiling)* They think I'm dying.

**Kester**

*(unmoved)* Is that so?

**Roddy**

Well they're right. I am dying. *(shakes a fist at the ceiling)* Dying of boredom!

**Kester**

You're killing me.

**Roddy**

Hah! I see what you did there. *(looks at Kester)* You know, for a jester, you ain't very animated

**Kester**

A little grave, you might say?

**Roddy**

*(laughs shortly)* Too soon! Literally. I ain't dead yet, you know.

**Kester**

Just having a little pun.

**Roddy**

You came all this way to play on words at me?

**Kester**

To play on my lute at you.

**Roddy**

Oh, get out of here. No, wait! Stay and let me shout abuse at you.

*Beat. Narrator moves one of the black chess pieces. Though Roddy doesn't seem to notice the change, he shifts uncomfortably.*

**Roddy**

Talk at me. I haven't been allowed any company since I fell ill. Wife's orders. Then she got the doctor to side with her.

**Kester**

Did he seem to be in a hurry?

**Roddy**

No. Why?

**Kester**

Sometimes that doctor loses his patients

**Roddy**

Do you tell that one on every deathbed visit?

**Kester**

Not every. *(strums lute and sings)*

*If one doctor doctors another doctor  
Does the doctor who doctors the doctor  
Doctor the doctor the way the doctor he is doctoring doctors?  
Or does the doctor doctor the way  
The doctor who doctors doctors?*

*The doctoring doctor doctors the doctor the way  
The doctoring doctor wants to doctor the doctor.  
Not the way the doctored doctor wants to be doctored.*

**Roddy**

*(grunts)*

**Kester**

*(Stops playing long enough to move one of the white chess pieces)* I know a few cures myself.

**Roddy**

Yeah? Got one for hangovers?

**Kester**

Sobriety.

**Roddy**

*(makes empty-hearted attempt at laughter; then sighs)* Things have been a bit too sober here for my liking. Nobody knows what to say. They all just stand around, tongue-tied.

**Narrator**

*(moves a black chess piece)*

**Kester**

Do you know the cure for a tied tongue?

**Roddy**

No. What?

**Kester**

A slap in the face

**Roddy**

*(hastily chokes down a startled laugh)* Kester!

**Kester**

*(moves a white chess piece)* There is a story—

**Roddy**

Oh here we go.

**Kester**

—A story of a man named Joe Schmoe. He was typically a soft spoken man, but one day in town a stranger came up to him and slapped him in the face *(slaps his hand for emphasis)*. Then the stranger said, “I beg your pardon. I thought you were someone else.” Well, soft-spoken Joe started shouting swears in all the languages he knew and a few he made up just for the occasion.

**Roddy**

So what’d he do?

**Kester**

He brought the stranger before a judge and demanded compensation. Soon, however, he discovered that the judge and defendant were friends. The latter admitted his guilt, and the judge announced that the defendant must pay the plaintiff a penny. “If you do not have a penny with you,” said the judge, “then you may bring it here to the plaintiff at your convenience.”

Hearing this sentence, the stranger went on his way. Joe waited for him to return with the penny. And he waited. And he waited. Some time later, he asked the judge, “Do I understand correctly that one penny is sufficient payment for a slap?”

“Yes,” answered the judge.

Thus answered, Joe slapped the judge in the face, said, “You may keep the penny when the defendant returns with it,” and walked away.

**Roddy**

Where do you get these stories?

**Kester**

A mute tells them to me.

**Roddy**

*(laughs quietly. Beat)* You’ve met a lot of people dealing with... unfortunate circumstances, haven’t you?

**Narrator**

*(moves a black chess piece)*

**Kester**

*(moves a white chess piece)* Certainly. Came across a drowning man once.

**Roddy**

Eh?

**Kester**

You know what to give a drowning man?

**Roddy**

I will in a minute, won't I?

**Kester**

A bar of soap.

**Roddy**

Soap?

**Kester**

Then he can either wash himself to shore or meet his maker with clean hands.

**Roddy**

*(laughs)* You're an odd one, Kester.

**Kester**

I am— what is the expression? “All mirth and no matter”?

**Roddy**

Doesn't mirth matter?

**Kester**

I wonder.

**Narrator**

*(checkmates white king)*

**Roddy**

Well, that's enough of that. I'm thinking I can do with a bit of rest now.

*(makes himself comfortable)* Why don't you play something. I'm not one for lullabies usually, but... now might be a good time.

**Kester**

*(plays his lute and sings)*

*Sleep my child and peace attend thee,  
All through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee,  
All through the night  
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping  
Hill and vale in slumber sleeping,  
I my loving vigil keeping  
All through the night.*

*While the moon her watch is keeping  
All through the night*

*While the weary world is sleeping  
All through the night  
O'er they spirit gently stealing  
Visions of delight revealing  
Breathes a pure and holy feeling  
All through the night.*

*Love, to thee my thoughts are turning  
All through the night  
All for thee my heart is yearning,  
All through the night.  
Though sad fate our lives may sever  
Parting will not last forever,  
There's a hope that leaves me never,  
All through the night.*

**Kester** continues playing, watching the sand run through the hourglass. The lights dim, with a single spotlight on the hourglass until it is empty. Then all is quiet and dark.

## In Memory of Rumpelstiltskin

Well, friends, I must admit I'm not sure what one says on occasions such as this. I want to thank you for preparing this service for my father. I'm sure if he were alive to see it— well, if he were alive to see it, we wouldn't be having it. Heh heh. Um. Anyway.

As members of the fair folk, I know funerals are something of a rare occasion for you. Those accustomed to immortality may see death as a horrible, scary... concept thing. But I grew up in the mortal world, and I see my father's passing as nothing but poignant and beautiful.

That could be taken the wrong way. Sorry. Um.

What I mean to say is that he lived a good life, and he left with us that legacy. Even as a child— not that I was alive then, but I've heard stories — even as a child he was clever, always spinning straw into gold and milking wine from cows. Wining cows? It's actually very disturbing to watch; I don't recommend it.

But my father, though small in stature, became a giant in the world of business. I myself am a product of one of his... exchanges. Yes. Mother's better at telling that story. I am confident that if she were here today, she'd talk about how good my father was to her and how he never locked her in a room full of straw or threatened to execute any of her relatives. He knew that a good relationship was about give and take. Give the gold, take the necklace. And ring. And... well, me. Except that last one didn't work. Long story. Mother tells it better.

Back to my father though. I had little time to get to know him before he died. I didn't even know *of* him until a few days prior. And yet in that short of time, he struck me as very... good at what he does. Um. At that time, it was snoring. Heh heh.

I wish I'd gotten to know him better. But that's life, you know. It's just sort of full of surprises. Some day you too might learn that the man you thought was your father isn't, and the man who is your father is dying. That's why you got to seize the day, meet strangers who are actually relatives and friends, and really... live. Yep, that's the moral of today's funeral is to... live.

Um. So thank you all for coming to my father's funeral and then making me talk at it. I hope I shall some day render you the same honor.

Good day.

## Cracked

Stupid talent show.

They were gratifying back in middle school. I don't know what made high school so different. The buzz of small-town gossip, the smell of popcorn and grandma perfume, and the configuration of the room— with display tables in the back and chairs facing a stage in front— were the same. The gym was just bigger, with shinier floors and a better sound system. When people got bored with the performances, they got up and wandered to back to look at the displays and converse quietly. I lurked around the art exhibits, tugging the drawstrings of my oversized hoodie. I twitched chapped lips. Occasionally, I broke into a high-pitched, wavering hum— like Mom in the kitchen when she has to save something from burning. Irritating habit. Served me right for picking it up.

I kept hoping to hear something new about my paintings. I didn't. I could have scripted their lines before I came that night. I swear, if I heard another person say "*I can draw stick figures,*" I'd... well, I probably wouldn't do anything. But I'd want to. Their self-abasement did me no good. What was wrong with stick figures anyway? That's how I started.

A girl from my physics class pointed to my painting, *Cracked*. People knew it was special because it was framed and marked with a yellow ribbon for receiving honorable mention in the Governor's Art Competition. "Kendra, did you do that?"

Yes. "Yes."

"You're really good!"

*Decent, yes.* "Thank you!" I said, trying to mirror their enthusiasm in my voice. I watched a Youtube video once that said matching tone establishes rapport.

"I wish I could be that good an artist."

"Aw, thanks, 'preciate it," I said, crinkling my eyes so that my smile looked convincing. *No, you don't. You don't! If you did, you never would have stopped drawing. Everybody draws as kids. Why do they stop? Why did you stop? No. You would have drawn and drawn and drawn. Hours on top of hours. Time that could've been spent napping or reading Terry Pratchett books or... having a social life, you'd have given to burning out your eyes and wrists, filling sketchbooks, and blowing your Burger King paycheck on paint instead of movie tickets and shoes. But you didn't then, and you won't now. You don't want it enough.*

Unfortunately, people can't go on tirades in front of poor, unsuspecting civilians. Social conventions and all that.

Physics Girl gazed back at the painting for another moment before shifting her weight to one hip to look at some watercolor landscapes on the adjacent table. Lean, step, pause. Just like all the others. No doubt she'd make similar comments a few displays over.

I gave up people-watching and stared at my painting as if I weren't already intimate with every square inch of the 16 x 20 canvas. *Cracked* depicted a woman— I hadn't named her— made of porcelain, sitting in the dreaded three-quarter view. Hair-thin cracks riddled her skin. It took a lot of time and photo references to get the texture and highlights right, to make the china skin look convincing. And the cracks— oh, the *cracks*. My wrist cramped at the memory of thinning the paint, gripping the slim handle of the brush, keeping my hand above the canvas, trying to make the lines fine enough... then starting over and trying again. Pieces of her ceramic skin fell away like a pierced eggshell, revealing flesh beneath. A few more fissures and she'd lose her glassy exterior altogether. She studied the breaks on her wrist with a mild interest that made me sigh through my nose.

I had modeled her. Not to sound vain, but she was supposed to be beautiful, and I have a well-proportioned face. I figured that was God's way of compensating for all the acne He gave me. Still, I should've painted someone else. Then it wouldn't seem so autobiographical. I shifted my weight to one hip, following the lean, step, pause procession along the display tables, pretending to be just another observer. I didn't want to hover around my artwork like a dog begging for table scraps.

After I made my rounds, I sat in the bleachers at the side and looked for people to sketch— someone with unique features or an ugly sweater. There was a guy with a blonde afro that made me smile, so I pulled out my sketchbook and grabbed a pencil from where it stuck in my bun like a hair stick. When I looked up again, I saw Physics Girl cross the gym to talk to her friends. Frowning, I pressed my pencil to the paper but didn't move it. *Why? Why waste the energy?* I stared at the dot on the page. I tried to add more dots, make them into a woman made of sand trapped in an hour-glass or something, but I couldn't even do that.

I stowed the sketchbook, so it wouldn't remind me of my failure, and paced the gym floor. Then, because walking without going anywhere seemed stupid, I strode to *Cracked* and stared at the porcelain woman. How dared she look so impassive? I stood before her, arms crossed like the night I finished her. It had been past two a.m, and I stared at her unmoving for eight minutes trying to believe I was really done and didn't have to make any more last-minute fixes.

*I don't know if I can keep doing this*, I told her, rubbing the back of my neck. *They'll never love you like I do. They'll never hate you like I do. How can you mean anything to them if they didn't have to give up anything to see you like I did?* She didn't answer. Not that I expected her to, but I didn't expect God to answer prayers either, and He's surprised me in the past.

More viewers wandered past, but a short guy lingered beside me. I was about average height for a girl, and he was an inch or two shorter, but he couldn't

be much younger. I might have seen him in the halls before. He had a well defined face: square chin, square jaw— even the contours around his eyes and cheekbones set in solid angles. I wanted to trace it in my mind, but that would mean staring him point-blank for a long time, which— like bursting into angry rants in front of your viewers— people simply don't do. Especially to those they'd probably see in school next week. Maybe if I were just sitting at the bleachers...

The bleachers. I remembered the page of my sketchbook, marred with a single dot. It reminded me of the “black spot” from *Treasure Island*, a death sentence. It sounded like a bad omen for my future as an artist. I'd already toyed with art for the last fifteen years of my life, and it was time to put it to rest. I wouldn't draw Short Guy.

He looked from me to *Cracked* and back again. “You the artist?”

I considered denying it. Better that he didn't expect any future work from me. “Why do you think that?”

“You're scowling at it.”

Oh. I hadn't realized. I relaxed my shoulders. “Maybe I prefer realism.”

He twisted toward the table behind us. “You didn't seem to mind that one,” he said, indicating one of Keith's paintings, *Riven*— a mash of various shades of red in heavy brushstrokes that left thick ridges of paint on the canvas. Not my favorite style, but I thought it had a soul. I'd nodded at it when I passed earlier. Guess Short Guy saw.

I sighed. “Yeah, I'm the artist.”

“Mm-hmm.” He gazed back at *Cracked*. Without moving his eyes, he said, “So, Kendra, what do *you* think of it?”

I turned furrowed brows to him. “How do you know my name?”

“Signature.”

“Oh.” Of course, the corner of the painting where I signed and dated it: *Kendra Hayes, 2011*. Most people don't look there. “Do you watch that new BBC *Sherlock* or something?”

“My question first. How do you like the painting?”

People usually asked things like how long I'd been doing art (since I was three), what year I was (senior), and how long it took to finish a painting (a long time), but nobody ever asked what I thought of my own work. I scrutinized the painting, head tilted. “It's alright. The craftsmanship needs refining, like in the shading and brushwork maybe— but I like the palette, and I think it's a... sufficient vessel for the soul of the work.”

“Wow,” he said, face still.

“What?”

He shrugged. “Nothing. You're just weird.”

*Brilliant, Sherlock.* I hoped he'd go away soon. Or ask me another question. One of the two. Maybe I'd move instead.

Just as I was about to step sideways, he asked, "So what does it mean?"

I got that question lot. Usually, I responded, *I like to leave that up to viewer interpretation.* This time, I snapped, "How should I know? I'm only the artist."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

I turned away, then murmured, "What does it mean to you?"

He waved his hand as though brushing crumbs off a table. "Well, it puts me in mind of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but that's only because I have to study it for midterms."

That seemed like a good opportunity to transition to safer, worn-out subjects like classes and teachers, but before I could ask anything, he stepped back to let a large, elderly woman shuffle past. She said "Oh, how lovely," to my painting, but I suspected she'd say the same to anything from a twelve-minute sketch to an Escher. I rubbed the back of my neck again, trying not to scowl. "*Lovely, huh? Well, good to know I ended on a high note. Now I can move on to figuring out what I'll do when I graduate and 'real life' begins. Whatever that is.*"

Short Guy nudged me, reminding me to step back too. Once I stood beside him again, he asked, "What did you mean 'I'm only the artist'? Doesn't that make you an authority on the subject?"

"No, that makes me an oracle," I said.

He closed his eyes, as if savoring something. Then he started chucking. It was one of those laughs where you could hear every syllable. He wouldn't stop.

I stepped back. "*What?*"

"S-sorry," he said, choking. "It's just... It's like you speak a different language in your head and then you forget to switch to the local dialect when you talk aloud."

"That's not how I usually talk!" *And see if I ever try doing it again.*

"Pity," he said, recovering from his bout of laughter. "So. You're an oracle. Cool. What does that mean?"

*Nothing, forget I said anything.* "It's... not my job to interpret the art, only to... reveal."

"Reveal what?"

"I don't know!"

My art teacher would have said, "*The profundities of the human experience,*" but that sounded a little grandiose to me. The truth was I had an idea of what *Cracked* meant to me. I just wasn't sure it mattered anymore.

I grabbed the pencil from my hair and drummed it in my hands. "People have this idea about artists that's wrong— all wrong. They think people do art to 'express' themselves."

He nodded. “So I’ve heard.”

“Hah.” I gripped the pencil in one hand, brandishing the dull point at Short Guy. “Give someone a hunk of wood and some carving knives and tell them to ‘express’ themselves. You think they’ll create art? No! Life sucks, and they’ve had a hard day. They’re going to butcher something!”

I pushed my thumb against the pencil and gouged the air a few times to demonstrate. The people milling around us stepped sideways and shot me reproachful looks that I ignored. “But a woodcarver, an artist, won’t vent his feelings on the wood. The wood has a soul trapped in it, and that soul... will help him get answers if he gives the soul form.” I waved my pencil at him. “Art isn’t expression. It’s exploration.”

Short Guy smiled slightly, but I didn’t know if he agreed with me. He was probably trying not to laugh again. “Anybody ever tell you that you have an aggressive nature?”

The pencil went limp between my fingers. “No.” I’d probably appreciate it if someone did. It’d mean people could see me past the yellow ribbons. I sighed. More to myself than Short Guy, I said, “Maybe artists are doomed to be misunderstood and lonely.”

Short Guy sighed too, tilting his head back to look at the ceiling. “Why do people think they have to be understood?” he asked the rafters. “Why can’t they just be accepted?”

I gawked at him. Only a guy could come up with such an idea. “What do you mean people don’t have to be understood?”

He didn’t respond.

I frowned, tapping the pencil against my leg. “But... *you’ve* been trying to understand, haven’t you? You’ve been asking me questions and... stuff.”

His head came down again. “Yeah, but I still don’t get you. And you know—” he waved to *Cracked*, “I don’t get this either, but I like it.”

*I like it.* I’d heard that from other people before. Lots of other people, lots of times. After *Cracked*’s Facebook debut, “Like” didn’t mean anything anymore. It did now... somehow.

*I like it.*

The MC announced the final performance— some freshman playing “I See the Light” from *Tangled* on the violin. The crowd around the display tables drifted back to their seats to pick up their coats and programs. Short Guy stepped in the same direction, then turned to me. “Best of luck figuring things out, Kendra.”

He didn’t wait to see my reaction. He wouldn’t have seen much. I just stood by *Cracked*, watching him return to his seat as the kid onstage pealed out the song’s introduction. Violin strings must have the same natural frequency as heartstrings. The resonance spread through my chest and shook things loose inside

me. Maybe that's why I cried. Stupid leaky tear-ducts. They should give warning before dumping hot liquid down my face.

*I like it.*

\* \* \*

I lost track of Short Guy in the herd of people heading toward the doors after the MC thanked everyone for coming. After I drove home, I sat on my blue flower pattern bedspread with my back against a pile of pillows. Instead of reading the final section of *Wyrld Sisters* like I'd planned, I balanced my sketchbook on my lap. After tearing out and throwing away the page with the "black spot," I drew Short Guy on the left facing right with his hand raised. It was hard to recreate his profile, to justify it with only pencil lines, but I managed something.

When I was done with him, I started a loose sketch of the woman from *Cracked* to face him. I named her Dorianne, a feminine version of Dorian from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She reached toward Short Guy's outstretched fingers. I switched pencils for a finer line to draw the cracks on her skin. Where her hand touched his, the breaks intensified. My mind told me I was being sappy. I ignored it.

My eyes burned with fatigue and saltwater residue by the time I finished. It was a decent sketch, good enough for its intended purpose. I scribbled a note at the bottom. *To Short Guy: Dorianne is experiencing a change of mental paradigm. She becomes more human through meaningful interactions and life experiences, crack by crack. Kendra Hayes, 2011.*

I shoved the sketchbook in my book bag, so I wouldn't forget it Monday. I knew Mrs. Ross taught *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in her junior literature class. I'd walk by. I didn't know if I really would give him the sketch if I saw him, but if I wanted to, it was possible.

## Cherries Without Stone

Once upon a time (which isn't vague *at all*), there was a king. There were several kings, actually, but this story focuses on one— a widower king named William Twain Rowling Cervantes Shaw XVIII. His Grandfather was called Euripides and his father was called William. Thus, according to the cycle, this king was called King Rowling, except on stuffy occasions.

One morning, King Rowling bounced the toddling Prince Cervantes on his knee. He loved the boy. He preferred doting on his son to leading his kingdom— which whined at him as often, but giggled less.

Prince Cervantes struggled in eating his cherries because his father's bouncing. He almost got pit caught in his throat. It was nothing serious; he managed to cough it out, but try telling *that* to King Rowling. "What does that wretched cook think she's doing!" he bellowed. "Does she want my son to choke to death?!"

Paranoia is an occupational hazard for kings.

He stormed down to the kitchens and demanded to see the cook. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked of her.

She looked up from the dough she was kneading. "Of what?"

"Serving cherries with pits to Prince William Twain Rowling Cervantes Shaw XIX."

The cook returned her attention to the dough. "Cherries are the prince's favorite," she said. "But he won't eat them if they're pitted."

"Nonsense. No son of mine would be such a picky eater." He glanced at the bread. "You are going to cut the crusts off before you serve that to me, right?"

"I'm sorry your majesty, but I can't give your son cherries without pits unless I pit them."

"Pity," said the Rowling. "Then bring me someone who can'."

At that moment a pretty kitchen girl of about eighteen years spoke up in a smug voice. "I can."

The king and cook both turned to look at her. "*You?*" they said together, the king doubtful and the cook wary.

Rowling was so surprised he forgot to reprimand the girl's impudence. "You can give my son pitless cherries?"

Her smirk widened. "Oh yes."

He squinted at her, waiting for life to make sense again. When it didn't happen he cleared his throat. "Very well. I look forward to seeing these miracle fruits tomorrow at breakfast." He paused. "While you're at it, bring me a chicken without any bones."

Later that afternoon, King Rowling was met by his steward, Sid. Sid looked worried, but that was nothing unusual. Rowling sat down to his paperwork. “Your Majesty,” said Sid, “I’ve been hearing some very troubling rumors.”

“About that last shipment Bastian furniture? Yes. Terrible tragedy.”

“I know you’re concerned about your son—”

Rowling stood up. “Has he woke up from his nap already?”

“No, Majesty.”

“Oh.” He sat down again.

“Sire, I will be direct.”

“Good for you.”

“Did you or did you not ask a kitchen maid to provide you cherries without stone?”

“Without pits? Yes, for Prince Cervantes.”

Sid wrung his hands. “And you followed up by demanding chicken without bone?”

Rowling sat back. “What? Don’t be foolish, that’s impossible. Oh, no wait, I did.”

“Ah-*hah*,” said Sid, pointing an accusatory finger. Then he remembered his position and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “So you *admit* that the tasks are impossible.”

“Oh, I hope so,” said Rowling. “I don’t want to be shown up by a kitchen maid.”

“But sire!” Sid removed his hands from his pockets so he could wring them again. “Don’t you understand what this means if she succeeds?”

“I shall be acutely embarrassed, but get to enjoy a free meal. I suppose I might be obliged to promote her.”

“You’ll have to do more than that,” said Sid. “You’ll have to marry her!”

Rowling’s quill punched a hole through his paperwork. He tried to figure out how he misheard. Surely Sid said *burry her* or *carry her* or something equally harmless. But no. “*Marry*? How? Why? She’s a kitchen maid!”

“But,” said Sid. “There is *Tradition*.”

“Dear Fates.” His voice quavered. If there was anything that ruled with a stronger grip than a king, it was Tradition.

“Eight generations ago,” said Sid, “Your predecessor, King William Twain Rowling Cervantes Shaw X set to a peasant girl an impossible task— to come to him neither naked nor clothed, and—”

“I know, I know. She came to him dressed in a fishnet, and he married her for her cleverness,” said Rowling, shoulders drooping. “And since that time, none of my fathers have issued an impossible challenge without marrying the successful

challenger. But I don't *want* to marry a clever girl! I want someone who will love Cervantes and not make me feel stupid when I'm with her."

Rowling and Sid fell silence.

"Perhaps... it isn't an *impossible* task," Sid ventured. "Merely... improbable?"

"Right," said Rowling dolefully. "Maybe the girl breeds cherries and chickens in her spare time."

They went silent once again.

Rowling sighed. "I should probably see what sort of ring I can dig up on short notice. "

"Well advised, my king."

Rowling got little sleep last night. It wouldn't be so bad if he could be *sure* that he would marry the kitchen girl, but he still hoped to finish breakfast unbetrothed. He sat twitched at the table with Prince Cervantes on his lap. Other servants came with the usual platters of eggs, sausages, cinnamon rolls, hot cakes, and porridge, but the kitchen girl had yet to come, and the king chewed his fingernails while the prince played with the silverware.

When at last the kitchen girl came, she carried a covered dish. The king leaned back in his chair and eyed it with suspicion as she approached. She stopped before him and flipped the dish so that the domed lid served as a bowl. With a grand sweep, she removed the covering plate to reveal a pile of what looked like pink herbs.

The king had anticipated a plate of lush, crimson spheres. He wasn't sure if he should blanch or laugh. He looked at her for clues. She didn't. She stood with the corner of her lip turned up and eyebrow raised. *Blanche*, definitely. He cleared his throat. "I asked for cherries without stone."

"And that is what I brought you," she said. "They're cherry blossoms."

"Cherry blossoms?"

"They're out of season now, but I had some dried and preserved from spring."

While Rowling's bachelor life flashed before his eyes, Prince Cervantes reached for the dish. When he got it, he threw the petals like autumn leaves in the air and giggled as they fell on his face. The king sulked as they also landed in his milk and porridge.

Then he straightened his back and set his crown higher on his head. It was one of the few ways he could exert kingly dominance while the young prince splattered bits of porridge on his robe to use as a sort of paste for the dried cherry petals. He couldn't have the girl think she could go and be clever on him and then marry him for it.

“You forgot,” he said archly, “To bring me chicken without bone.”

The kitchen girl reached into a pouch at her side and drew out an egg. She set it before the king. He stared at it. Cervantes looked at his father, then at the egg, then set his chin on his hands as though waiting for the thing to hatch into a dragon.

Rowling pushed out a smile. His last hope was that the kitchen maid didn’t know the Tradition. “Ah... congratulations on the very... pharisaic way you approached the challenge. Well done.” He wasn’t sure what *pharisaic* meant, but it sounded impressive. “And you shall be duly rewarded. I shall have a word with Cook this very morning about your promotion.”

The maid chuckled. “You’ll have to do a bit more than that.”

Rowling set Cervantes on the table so that he could raise to his full– if negligible– height. “Impudence! I shall have you arrested for your presumption!”

Cervantes placed the egg in his dish of cherry blossoms like it were a nest. He knocked over a Rowling’s drink in the process.

The kitchen girl glared at the king. “Would you have the entire kingdom learn how you punished success and broke Tradition?”

Rowling returned to his chair with a thump and a sigh. “What reward were you hoping for?”

“A marriage, Majesty.”

Rowling sighed deeper and got out of his chair again to stand before her. “I suppose I am honor bound. I won’t give William Twain Rowling Cervantes Shaw XIX reason to be disappointed in his father.” He knelt on one knee.

The girl looked horrified. “What are you doing?”

“Um,” the king blushed as he looked down on his porridge-stained robes. “I suppose I might ask permission to change before I propose–”

“*You?*”

“–But this is the sort of thing you have to deal with when you’re a parent. If you’re going to be a mother to Cervantes–”

“I don’t want to marry *you*. You’re *old!*”

The king drew himself up. “Excuse me, madame, but I’m twenty-four!”

“When I said ‘marriage,’ I meant to a young lord who is desperately in love with me and who I am...” she twisted a strand of hair, “mildly fond of.”

The king stared at her. His whole body began to relax, starting from his toes and reaching up to his mustache. He blinked. “So what’re you scaring me for? Go panic that younger-than-twenty-four lord of yours.”

“Small problem of rank, Majesty. Marriage between a kitchen maid and lord can only be sanctioned by the king.”

Rowling brightened. “Oh. Well then, bring him in! Drag him in if you have to! King’s orders. Let me change into something suitable. Here, have a wedding

breakfast! I daresay the birds are singing again! What a glorious morning to *not* get married in— saving your presence.”

He scooped up his son from the table. “Come, William Twain Rowling Cervantes Shaw XIX,” he said. “You can be the ring bearer!”

Cervantes threw some dried cherry blossoms over Rowling’s shoulder.

\* \* \*

*The Riddle Song*  
(English Folk Song)

*I gave my love a cherry without a stone*  
*I gave my love a chicken without a bone*  
*I gave my love ring that had no end*  
*I gave my love a baby with no crying*

*How can there be a cherry that has no stone?*  
*How can there be a chicken that has no bone?*  
*How can there be a ring that has no end?*  
*How can there be a baby with no crying?*

*A cherry when it’s blooming, it has no stone*  
*A chicken when it’s pipping, it has no bone*  
*A ring while it’s rolling, it has no end*  
*A baby when it’s sleeping, has no crying*

## The Twelfth Day

Christmas, Day 12

Dear Diary,

Today, my true love gave me twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four calling birds, three french hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.

What was he *THINKING*?

Sorry, I mean, it's lovely and all, but where am I going to *put* everybody? I'm overstaffed as it is— my housekeeper is throwing a fit! Still, extra hands are useful when accommodating the sudden increase of nobility in the estate. The lords spend so much time admiring the ladies that I shouldn't wonder if I'm to host an engagement party on top of everything. I could contribute one of my golden rings to the occasion. And musicians. Not that they'll be heard over all the birds I just acquired. That's another thing I have to take care of; they quite give me a headache. I already know what I'm going to do with the hens; Cook's been hankering for good poultry. I look forward to seeing what she can do with pears.

Perhaps one of these years I'll have a nice, quiet Christmas, but I'm afraid that won't happen until I break it off with my true love.

Or marry him.

## Frost and Matches

Jack Frost ignored mortals most of their existence. They couldn't possibly be more interesting than the work before him. He loved being himself. His friend, Death, found that his most striking quality. It was refreshing after associating with mortals for so long. Jack spared the human creatures little attention— except to bite their noses and ears. Affectionately, of course.

Then the Industrial Revolution hit western civilization and gave birth to the Romantic Era. She gave her mother grief and spent a lot of time exploring her feelings and appreciating nature. Jack was part of nature. People began to notice his work more. They speculated about him, illustrated him, and wrote about him in songs, stories, and poems. He liked the attention. Then he, driven by an unconscious sense of reciprocity, began to study humans closer too.

He was fascinated.

How could he have missed this for so many centuries? Such amusing creatures— what with their little fears and prejudices, their laws that didn't make sense, their strange interest in birthdays and eating utensils... Foolish beings. Silly darlings.

He manifested himself in the physical world with greater frequency. Fates— such as Death, Birth, War, Love, Luck, Irony, and Jack Frost— were created in the image of humans. Jack's image had a pinched face, with steely grey eyes, a snow-bright smirk, and cheekbones so sharp they could cut through wood. His skin and hair were so fair it almost hurt to look at him in the light.

Most Fates preferred to stay in the aether— the layer of reality beyond the physical, where they could interact with the material world without being sensed. They grew concerned with Jack's dalliances in the mortal realm and appointed Death to learn the extent of Jack's attachment to the humans.

Death said nothing to them nor to Jack when they walked together in Luketon's aether one night in late spring. Jack relaxed around him. He complained about the smoke stacks and talked of his latest masterpieces. He'd started naming them, a trait he probably acquired from the humans. He drew *Light in Shards* on a rich couple's window. "The wife was the only one home. She sang 'The Catalogue' from *Don Giovanni* all evening— very poorly," Jack said, laughing. "The things they do when they think no one is watching."

"Yes," said Death.

"Like when the urchin boy who dances in the street. Do you know the brat? Of course you do. He's fun. He collects everything, even stray cats— even *after* they scratch him. Oh, the imp," he said affectionately. "Gutter boy."

Death said nothing.

Jack stroked the threads of a spider web, coating them with frost.  
 “Sometimes, I make stories about the mortals. Is that wrong?”

“What kind of stories?”

“Well, the runt picks up some magical object that either raises him to wealth and prosperity... or dooms him. I haven’t decided. And the— Wait, let me show you my favorite human. She’s just over here.”

*She?* Death sighed. He hoped the boy didn’t fancy himself in love. It happened sometimes between Fates and mortals, but it was highly discouraged.

Jack took him across the lane to a small house with cracks stopped up with straws and rags. He circled around to a window in the back and cross-hatched a frozen boarder on the glass. “See her?”

There was a girl-child inside, asleep but shivering beneath a thin blanket. Her lifeline was vibrant. Death’s shoulders relaxed. “I see.”

“I don’t know her name, but I call her Ember for how much time she spends by the fire, trying to prod it to life without adding fuel. Ignorant child. Cinderlet.” He chuckled. “She plays with matchsticks too. Just stares at the flame. Dreaming, I suppose.”

“Has she a story?”

“I thought a rags to riches tale, with me her fairy godfather.” He tilted his head. “That’s the only story I put myself— Hah, here’s her father.”

The figure approached the house, staggering. He leaned against the wall, cried a bit, then went inside and shouted at his daughter.

Jack tugged Death’s arm. “I don’t like this part. Let’s go.”

They went.

Death followed Jack, wondering aimless into the woods, away from the lamplights. Jack was quiet for a long time. Then he said, “I know the younglings need to be cared for until adulthood, so they’re put in families, but it seems to me like a patch in a flawed design. If humans weren’t created to be so dependent—”

“The design is not flawed,” said Death. “Humans are.”

Jack tilted his head back and looked at the stars. “I like humans, but I’d hate to be one.”

One of the stars fell. Death turned. “I have work to do.”

Death reported nothing to the other Fates. They were discontent but not surprised. Most of them guessed that Jack grew fonder of humans than was appropriate for a Fate. He was, after all, a young soul. Unwise. Reckless. “And if he *has* formed an attachment to a human,” they told Death, “it is your job to sever it.”

Death was good at severing ties.

\* \* \*

New Year's Eve in Luketon was dark and damp with half-melted snow. The matchman's daughter scampered through the streets. She'd tried selling match sticks all day to no avail. They still filled her pockets and her fists. She couldn't go home— not now, not without money. She'd be hit. If she couldn't sell here, she'd have to go to the next town.

She wore her late mother's slippers, but they were too big. They fell from her feet as she scurried across the street, dodging two incoming carriages. She was scared to go back to collect them. While she stood indecisive, an urchin clutching a stray cat to his chest snatched up the slippers and disappeared into the crowd. The little matchgirl ran on, her feet turning red and blue from cold. The road was long, and the sky was getting darker. The girl managed to preserve the little warmth she had by running.

Then, between towns and too far from help, she tripped and fell into a puddle, soaking her dress and the matches in her pockets. They were useless now. She seemed to understand, then, that it was all over. Still, she crawled out of the puddle so she could at least look halfway respectable when she died.

\* \* \*

Death watched from the aether, then stepped toward her. He nearly bumped into Jack, who stepped between them. He'd never looked so coldly. "You can't have her," he said.

Death sighed. "Jack—"

"Death," Jack snapped. "My confidant. My *friend*. What? Taking orders from *them* now?"

"No one orders me."

"It's not her time yet. It can't be. She's too young."

Death got this complaint a lot. "She still has eternity. She can see her mother and grandmother again."

"But *I* never will," said Jack, leaning forward. "I'll never see *any* of the dead ones again."

"I will take care of her."

"No," said Jack, stepping out of the aether into the mortal world. "*I'll* take care of her."

He lifted the limp child onto his lap and pulled off her wet dress. He hoped a sense of propriety would call the girl to her senses, but she remained motionless. He wrapped his cloak around her and pressed her to his chest. After a while, she stopped shivering. In the bad way.

Death stepped into the physical realm. Jack looked up at him, white-faced. "Why isn't it working?" he asked. His voice cracked like thin ice. "I've seen

humans do this. They save themselves from freezing by being near each other. It keeps them warm.”

Death pressed a hand to Jack’s forehead, as though checking for fever. “You have no warmth, Jack,” he said gently. “None of the Fates do.”

Jack buried his face into the bundle. Death patted his head six times– Jack’s favorite number. After a few moments, Jack muttered something.

“What?”

Jack lifted his head. “I said, I want to relinquish my immortality. Become human. Then I can keep her warm.”

Death considered. He always knew Jack would surprise him one day. It was unusual for a Fate to relinquish their immortality, but not impossible. A new Frost would arise to replace Jack. Still, Death worried. The boy would choose differently if he had time to consider, but he didn’t have time. Nor did the girl.

“I will make arrangements,” Death said, and stepped into the aether.

\* \* \*

Jack thought he went blind. He couldn’t see the aether anymore. He couldn’t see Death or any other Fate. He felt heavy and solid, but that wasn’t what bothered him most.

For the first time in his life, Jack Frost felt cold.

It was like tiny hooks tearing at his pores. His lungs tightened, his breath solidified, and his body convulsed with shivers. “*Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop!*” Then he cried, because he could never draw with the ice again.

Fates can’t cry. Jack never desired the ability. He thought the salt-burn would be horrible, judging by the red-rimmed eyes. Well, crying did burn, but in a very different way than he expected. He supposed he didn’t quite know how to be human yet.

What else had he to learn? He’d have to learn how to die someday. He wondered if it was hard. Humans made it look easy, but this– shivering in the cold, was hard. Even if he didn’t die, he’d age. He wasn’t sure which thought scared him more. He’d get facial hair, another reminder that he existed in time. He’d learn how bruises felt, what milk tasted like, and why men acted silly around pretty girls. He’d experience all those things and more, and he couldn’t stop that from happening. Mortality was so terribly involuntary.

The little matchgirl started to shiver again.

## Humanity

---

Recipe adapted by William Shakespeare

*Prep time: Varies*

*Serving size: Friends, Romans, Countrymen*

1 cup     Quintessence of dust  
 1/3 cup     Milk of human kindness  
 1 tsp     Such stuff as dreams are made on  
            Wit (enough to keep him warm)  
            Greatness to garnish (inborn, achieved, or thrust)

*Directions:*

1. Combine ingredients
2. Stuff with honorable virtues
3. Round with sleep
4. Place in the womb of time
5. Let old wrinkles come with mirth and laughter
6. Pass through nature to eternity
7. Test (choose 1 of 4 options)
  - Prick– should bleed
  - Tickle– should laugh
  - Poison– should die
  - Wrong– should revenge

The final result should be noble in reason, infinite in faculty, express and admirable in form and moving, angelic in action, and godlike in apprehension.

Serve warm.

---

Bouncy Ball  
By Jasmine Bottorff

Ball  
 Fall Up  
 Fall Up Fall Up Up  
 Bounce Bounce Bounce Roll Roll Rollrollrollroll Stop.

Little Red Bike  
By Azure Bottorff

Wheeee  
 eeeeeeee!  
 Yeah!  
 Look, no hands!  
 Oooo  
 ooooooh!  
 Whooa!  
 It's  
 getting  
 faster  
 This  
 hill  
 is  
 too—  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ow.

## About the Creator

But then, how do you really sum up a person's essence in a paragraph or so? You don't. That's why you write facts that people don't really care about like when the writer was born, where they grew up, and how many cats they have (1992; Jamestown, Ohio; none).

At age twelve, her uncle asked her if she was going to be a writer, like her mom. The answer was obvious. "No." Then she started dabbling in creative writing halfway through high school and continued through and beyond university. She published "Cold Hot Chocolate" in the Fall 2015 issue of *Outlet*, the undergrad literary journal for Brigham Young University (Idaho).