THE COUNT CORNELIUS CARNIVAL

by

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I am a lucky girl.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Human Hercules</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Painted Lady</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bane of the Beard</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Monstrua</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tallest man Herman had ever seen stood there at the end of the alley with a wide grin on his face. Save for his teeth, he seemed to be made entirely of shadow. Herman wiped his mouth with his hand. He staggered backward a bit, looking over his shoulder toward the rusty backdoor of the tavern he’d exited several minutes ago.

“Hello!” the man greeted Herman, as though they’d agreed to meet there. He moved closer.

Herman took another step backward. He wondered if the man had seen the fight, had seen those three oafish lumberjacks run bloody and broken, and now wanted a crack at Herman himself. He came closer still, and Herman could make out some of his features. He was incredibly tall, probably over seven feet, but he looked thin, fragile.

“Look,” Herman tried to say, but it came out slurred, wrong.

The man began to close the gap between them. “I’d like to introduce myself,” he greeted.

“Huh?” Herman’s eyes came up to the stranger’s ribcage.

The man bent down then, and held out a hand the size of a dinner plate. He was wearing a suit, a black one, one that looked like he had just put it on. Up close,
Herman could smell the man: clean, and spicy, like some musky, fresh herb. Herman glanced at the hand. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He started to jerk a thumb toward the door behind him, but his arm went limp halfway through the motion. The man smiled again, flashing an even row of bright teeth in the dark alley. His eyes were dark, Herman saw, but warm and eager, zealous.

Herman realized all of a sudden that he probably didn't smell very good; he hadn't bathed since his final morning at the barracks, and that had been almost two weeks ago, and he was sweating now. Not to mention: after he'd fought those men, he'd vomited violently and remorsefully. He had drying blood spattered on his yellowed shirt. He ran a tongue over his gums and realized with sudden alarm that he was missing a tooth.

"Angus," the stranger asserted, extending his hand out farther, so that he almost picked Herman's hand up in his own.

"Herman," Herman replied after a beat, finally just taking the stranger's hand. When they shook, Angus's fingertips rested near Herman's elbow.

The man laughed. Then, still bent over, he looked around the alley, taking in its trappings with a gleeful look on his face. His hair was oiled back, and his face was shaved incredibly close. He turned back to Herman.

"I happened to catch you fighting those three lumbermen," he said.
Herman took a deep breath and tried to sober himself enough to assess the situation. The stranger didn't look accusatory, or threatening. Instead, he looked downright delighted. “Yeah?” Herman replied.

“You're deceptively strong.”

Herman wondered what this meant. “I'm stronger than I look,” he said finally.

“I can see that,” Angus replied. Then he straightened and swept his palms together briskly, as though he’d just come to a decision. “Would you like to make some money?”

Herman frowned.

Angus continued, “Your strength may be of use to me.”

A bookie, Herman decided. Maybe looking for a dog in an underground fight. Probably against his brother, who was two stories tall. Then Herman thought about how he’d had nine dollars walking into the tavern. And how he’d already bought himself six whiskeys. He tried to do the math.

“I need help moving something,” Angus explained.

“What, like a body?”

Angus threw his head back and expelled a low, whooping laugh, a sound that bubbled straight from his stomach and ballooned up toward the sky. It was such a loud, unexpected sound that Herman started. Angus laughed hard, his eyes shut
tight, his hands on his knees, as though Herman had said something downright uproarious.

“Oh!” Angus said, wiping his eyes when he calmed down. “I’m so sorry!” He grinned and shook his head. “Your skepticism is completely understandable! An unfamiliar man approaches you in the alley of a bar and tries to hire you for a job!”

“Well, --”

“No, of course! Of course!” Angus continued. He patted Herman gently on the shoulder. His grin simmered to a smile. “Allow me to explain. I’m a proprietor, of sorts. I recently acquired a train. I saw you fight those large men with my own eyes, so I have confidence enough, but I’ll ask anyway: do you think you could lift a vehicle?”

*Acquired a train? “I don’t - -”*

“I can offer you two hundred dollars, but not a penny more.”

The stranger turned on his heel and strode back down the alley and toward the empty lot behind the tavern. Almost gliding, Herman thought. Angus looked like some kind of a dancer. Herman felt himself being propelled forward.

“Where are we going?” he asked.
“Well, Herman,” Angus called over his shoulder, keeping up his brisk pace.

“Sometimes you purchase a train only to find it doesn’t handle very well on the roads.”

Trees had begun to crop up around them. Angus looked behind him at Herman, as if to make sure he was still there. Herman caught Angus’s eye and immediately felt his body pitch forward; he’d tripped on a root. He straightened himself and began to watch his feet instead of his companion. The gibbous moon shined whitely on his boots, which, he noticed, had begun to detach themselves from their soles.

“The train can ride a few lines up and down the coast according to a predetermined schedule,” Angus explained. “I just rode it up from North Carolina, where I purchased it last week. I have an agreement with several railroad men. Not all of them, only a few. Now, I thought the clearing was over here...”

Railroad men? North Carolina? He’s wacky, Herman realized. He slowed his pace, thinking back to the alley, how the man had appeared, grinning in the darkness. How he kept laughing even though Herman wasn’t being funny. And he was clean, too clean for a man to rightly be past midnight. How had Herman gotten here? How had he allowed himself to be lead into the woods by a giant in a three-piece suit, expecting to walk away with two hundred dollars?

“Hey!” Herman exclaimed, louder than he’d intended to.
Angus continued to walk, bending several branches away from his face with his enormous hands.

“I’m heading back!” Herman called.

“Here we are!” Angus hollered, as if Herman hadn’t said anything at all.

He’d come to a stop at a large clearing, maybe a quarter mile around. Despite himself, Herman walked up behind Angus. The field’s long, wild grass flashed silver in the moonlight. Running across the clearing, perpendicular to the path Herman and Angus had been walking, was a set of worn-looking train tracks. And on top of the tracks, about a dozen cars long, sat a train.

The cars of the train had been constructed from a light, unfinished wood. Each one had several glass windows framed in ornate moulding, and a door with a golden knob. The first car was twice as tall as the rest; it looked like a parent, leading its children home.

“It’s a work in progress, of course,” Angus apologized. “I’m hoping to paint soon.”

Herman cleared his throat. “Did you have this... Did you have this made?”

Angus chuckled. “It was an investment.”

Herman looked up at Angus’s smiling face, and behind it, the haphazard ladders of bare branches disappearing into the dark blue sky. Then he turned back to the clearing. A doe emerged from the other side and nibbled at the dark brush.
Angus reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a disfigured silver pocket watch on a chain. It looked like it had been melted. “What do you think?” he asked. “It has to be off the tracks in an hour.”

The deer started at the strange sound of Angus’s voice, rustling loud leaves as it ran instantly back into the woods. Herman blinked. He knew now Angus wasn’t a murderer. Was he crazy? Herman doubted it. An eccentric man with some pennies from heaven.

Herman motioned toward the train with a limp hand, resigned. “Looks doable.”

“Wonderful!” Angus exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “But just to be safe, let’s sober you up a bit, shall we?”

Angus unlocked the tall car at the front of the train with a key from his pocket, and, after ducking through the door, beckoned for Herman to follow.

Inside, Herman watched Angus light several sconces on the tall walls. A long counter stretched along the wall from the door Herman had just entered to the door to what appeared to be a small closet or bathroom. Across the car, Angus took a seat on a long, thin bed underneath a large window and began rummaging through a wooden crate in front of him. He produced a pot and a foreign-looking bag of coffee.
from the box, and began to brew a cup for each of them over the two-burner stove atop the long counter.

Herman looked around for a place to sit other than beside Angus on the bed, and settled on a still-shut shipping crate just beside the door. Other than the two crates, the room appeared completely unfurnished. Cabinets of various shapes and sizes lined the walls around the bed from floor to the ceiling. Herman wondered what secrets Angus would stow in these once he settled in.

“So where are you from?” Angus asked politely.

Herman considered telling a lie. He decided against it. “Kansas.”

“Kansas?” Angus asked, digging through the crate again. “That’s a long way from a nameless bar in New Jersey.”

He produced two handle-less ceramic cups from the crate and held them up for Herman to see: *ta da!* And poured steaming coffee into each. Herman took one and smiled gratefully.

“Vacationing?” Angus continued, settling back down on the bed, his eyes level now with Herman’s again. “Or visiting family?”

Herman shuddered, an involuntary reaction he chalked up to the first blissful taste he’d taken of the delicious coffee. He hadn’t allowed himself to spend the money on a cup of coffee in the past two weeks; he’d left basic training with a few dollars in his pocket, and he squirrelled them away until night fell. But this cup was
bold and rich, and it replaced the whiskey warmth that had flowed through his body
almost an hour ago with something rounder, more solid.

He realized Angus was looking at him expectantly.

“Do you like the coffee?” Angus asked.

Herman nodded.

“I’m glad. So, Kansas, by way of...?”

Herman ran his free hand over his shaved head and studied Angus’s friendly
expression. “Fort Dix,” he answered finally.

He expected Angus to raise his eyebrows, widen his eyes. Instead he laughed.

“So is Herman your real name?”

“I didn’t defect,” Herman blurted, as though he’d been accused of it. “I’m a
patriot.”

Angus laughed again. “Don’t worry. A man with his own train can hardly
expect to be friendly with the government.”

Herman reminded himself that the army was the least of his problems, and
held his breath.

“Or the law, I suppose,” Angus added, raising his eyebrows now. “Tell me
about it. We’re friends, are we not?”
Herman reddened at the word; he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a friend. Angus reached a long arm over to where Herman sat on the crate, and took Herman’s free hand. Angus’s hand was bony, but warm and soft.

Herman knew the telling would hurl him farther back into his memory than just the last two weeks. But the more he told, the more he had to tell. So he told Angus the entire story.

On the first morning of basic training, Herman rose from his bunk with the other men in his barrack, fumbling in the dark to get everything washed and squared and hospital-cornered. As he reached for his uniform shirt, his head was a dim crawlspace. He realized, too late, he had been tugging his left sleeve too hard past his forearm. The sound of the fabric tearing around his bicep roused him from his groggy daze with a start.

He groaned. Accidents like this had plagued him all his life. People told him he didn't know his own strength, but it was more than that. When he was seven, he threw a beloved ball from the backyard into the next neighborhood. When he was twelve, he had accidentally crushed a field mouse he'd caught in his hand. At home, there had been several instances where he'd accidentally bent his father’s stainless silverware between his fingers, and at school, Herman had dented half a dozen brass door handles, and more recently, had broken a few clean off. The boys in the
schoolyard dared each other to pick fights with Herman. His superior strength made him a poor playmate, which in turn made him a poor friend.

Standing rigidly in line in the company area that morning before sunrise, Herman felt every breeze rush a tunnel of cool air into his sleeve through the opening he’d created for it. The tear seemed eager to flag down Herman’s drill sergeant, a red-haired, red-faced man much taller and sterner than Herman could ever imagine being. The man did a double take when he spotted Herman’s shirt. He marched down the line, coming to an abrupt stop in front of Herman. Suddenly, their noses were less than an inch away from each other. Herman noted the curl in one of his eyebrow hairs and a freckle on his upper lip.

“How’d you rip that shirt, boy?” His voice sounded limitless.

Herman stuttered.

“Talk!”

“I--I put it on wrong! Sir!”

“You put it on wrong? Boy, you ever learn how to dress yourself?!”

“Sir! Yes! Yes sir!”

“Seems to me our uniform regulation shirt is too small for them arms of yours.”
Herman had no idea whether he was expected to respond to this, so he remained silent.

“You think you’re strong?”

Herman hated lying, but he did it anyway. “No, sir!”

“You think you think you’re stronger than me?!”

“Sir no sir!”

“That’s right. Now drop and give me forty, boy!”

Herman dropped, but before he could lower himself down to the ground, first one, then two hard rubber soles pressed into the middle of his back, carrying the sergeant’s weight behind them. Herman tried to imagine how it looked to the rest of the recruits: the drill sergeant standing with his arms crossed, a fiendish smile on his face, rising and falling steadily on Herman’s back as he barked out numbers. With every push-up, this image in Herman’s head faded, until he had lost count completely, until he was nowhere.

Herman’s first week at the base was also the week a new boxing ring appeared in the modest gymnasium. On the first Sunday, those who weren’t writing home or catching up on platoon duties were packing themselves into the gym. Though Herman still felt out of place, he didn’t feel homesick, and he was diligent
about his platoon duties, so he went to watch his fellow recruits try their hand in the new ring.

This turned out to be a mistake. Herman found himself in the middle of the crowd when the drill sergeant stepped up and into the ring, searching the faces in the gymnasium. Herman turned and tried to head back to the door.

“Private!” the drill sergeant bellowed.

Herman turned slowly back to face the ring. The man already had his boxing gloves on.

“You ever fought a man?”

The true answer seemed long, and insolent. Herman shook his head.

“Come up here, boy!”

Herman took one last look at the door. He could feel every eye in the crowd on him, branding holes into his hot skin. People parted as he made his way to the ring. After he climbed into it, the drill sergeant threw him a pair of moldy leather gloves. Herman reluctantly slid his hands inside, leaving the laces dangling. Briefly, he considered the consequences of allowing himself to cry.

“Alright, boy,” the drill sergeant yelled out, bending his knees a bit and bouncing. “Put those hands up! That’s right. Now I can’t promise to go easy on you!” With this, he threw an exaggerated glance over his shoulder at the crowd. Then,
before the grin had even faded from his face, he threw a punch that left Herman reeling.

It had hit him right in the orbital, and he knew when he opened his eyes that it was already swelling. He shook his head once violently, trying to shake it off, but as he did, he felt two boxing gloves clamp on top of his shoulders, and a sudden explosion of pain in his groin. Herman stumbled doubled-over to the corner, sputtering and gasping for air. He could see, somehow, in his peripheral vision, that the drill sergeant was heading toward him, his red hair blazing like fire. Herman spat onto the floor of the ring to rid himself of the taste in his mouth, and stood up as straight as he could. Then, the drill sergeant was in front of him, and a split second later, had hit Herman on the other side of his face. Herman could hear the smack of the glove against his cheek, and as it echoed softer and softer in his head, the pain throbbed louder and louder. He forced his eyes open just in time to take it all in: the gymnasium, the shiny new boxing ring, and the drill sergeant's sweaty, grinning face.

“What’s the matter, boy?” the drill sergeant jeered. “Scared you might not make your mama proud?”

The pain in Herman’s head turned white. He roared, using one hand to shove the drill sergeant away from him, while the other followed the sergeant and connected with his face, cracking it wide open. He couldn’t explain what happened
next: it was like he lost track of himself. His body kept moving, but his mind had
gone black, like a film at the end of its reel.

On his long, thin bed, Angus rested his head in his palms, and his elbows on
his knees. For a while, neither of them spoke. Then Angus cleared his throat.

“They couldn't get you off of him?” he asked quietly.

Herman shook his head. The cup in his hands had gone cold.

Angus rubbed his eyes. “Herman,” he began, looking up. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Sorry?!” Herman started, rounding on Angus. “Sorry for me?!”

“You have an incredible talent. I’m sorry it’s felt like such a curse.”

The night was at its darkest point, and in the dim light of the train car’s
sconces, Angus’s face was full of consternation. Angus hadn’t been shocked, Herman
realized. Or worried for his own safety. Only worried about Herman, really.

“How did you know about me?” Herman asked.

The expression drained from Angus’s face. “I beg your pardon?”

“How did you know how to find me? You don’t just need a train moved, and
find a man in an alleyway who seems like he can lift a train.”
Angus rose to his feet and shuffled toward the stove. He lit one of the burners again to get another pot of coffee going.

“You heard about me,” Herman realized.

Angus nodded. “Really I assumed it was just another story in a bar. Someone’s friend’s friend.”

Herman winced. “Someone I fought?”

After a beat, Angus nodded again.

Herman suddenly felt miserable. He had never meant to become cruel, and now legends about his brutality were blowing through taverns at night. He placed his cup down on the counter and wrapped his arms around himself, an old tick he hated, but couldn’t shake.

“How did you know where to find me?” Herman asked. Even he had lost track of where he was after several nights of his destructive behavior.

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” Angus replied.

Herman sat back on the crate, tucking his knees toward his chest and rocking.

It had all started with the jacket.
Herman’s father, Frances, had raised him alone in a skinny white two-bedroom house. Francis had never explained what happened to Herman’s mother; he had gotten close several times, but he assumed a terrible expression each time, which worsened the farther he got. It was a look Francis only wore when Herman’s mother came up, and it was so severe, it pained Herman. He never needed his father to finish his explanation.

Other than this, Francis rarely demonstrated emotion. His reaction to almost everything was his resting expression, a watertight look that made Herman seriously consider the possibility that Francis couldn’t feel emotions. Francis had been an army man himself in the first war, and Herman was too young then to understand how badly this had affected him. Whether Herman told his father that he received an A on a recent assignment, or had torn a shoelace while tying it, Francis’s reaction appeared to be the same to Herman: constant disapproval.

Herman pitched in as much as he could: he kept his room tidy, he swept the house weekly, and kept the icebox stocked with groceries. There were cookbooks in the house, which Herman made use of. Even as a boy, Herman prepared his own breakfast of hot cereal and packed his own lunch in the morning.

Francis was the town’s constable. He rose at dawn each day and knocked three times on Herman’s door to wake him before leaving for work. Francis returned home late, sometimes long after dinner. Herman ate on his own if he had
to, keeping his father's plate warm it in the cast iron stove. He knew his father had a hard life and a short temper, so he made every effort to stay out of Francis’s way.

Herman had had a particularly bad episode with a broken window he’d accidentally slammed shut one Friday night when he was thirteen. On Saturday, Francis took the car and left the house before Herman awoke. He came home over six hours later to Herman putting food together in the kitchen, humming to himself.

Francis walked into the kitchen and held up a paper package. “I got you something,” he said.

Herman pushed aside the dandelion salad he’d been making for lunch and turned his attention toward Francis.

Francis untied the package himself. “I drove to a hospital in Wichita to purchase it. Should fit you just right.” He let the paper drop to the floor and held up a canvas jacket with several gleaming buckles on it. The jacket didn’t have an opening or sleeves; rather, it was closed, and had one endless sleeve that both arms shared.

“You’ll wear it an hour a night during the week. It will teach you to be calmer, and more gentle.”

Herman took the jacket from his father to inspect it. The fabric felt rough against his fingertips. The jacket’s metal buckles chimed each time they met. Francis ducked his head and walked out of the kitchen.

*   *

*   *
Francis seemed to let up on Herman after that. He started to come home earlier from work, and was usually on time for dinner. After they ate, Herman and Francis sat in the living room and listened to the news on the wireless, while Herman wore his jacket. This went on for years.

The jacket was fairly difficult to get into, and Herman had to sit away from the wood stove so as not to overheat when he wore it. He had tried several times to see if he could break out of it, the way he supposed he would break a rope had he been tied up, but the jacket was triply reinforced, and rendered Herman virtually immobile. By the end of the hour, his hands had usually fallen asleep.

Francis began to act more kindly toward his son; the jacket seemed to alleviate some of the stress Herman’s unworlly strength caused his father. Some nights, if Herman stayed especially still during their time in the living room, Frances even fed Herman a caramel, crinkling its wrapping as he peeled the candy away and placing it directly in Herman’s mouth. Herman resented having to be fed, but he began to look forward to the caramels, and the tender face his father wore when he offered one to Herman.

One night, a strange broadcast came across the wireless. Neville Chamberlain announced that a note he had written to Germany had gone unanswered, and that this meant a war had begun. Chamberlain’s voice sounded tired but insistent. Francis lowered his newspaper into his lap, and stared blankly at the radio.
“His action shows convincingly,” Neville Chamberlain went on, “that this man will never give up his practice of using force to gain his will.”

Herman sneezed, and bits of mucus landed on his lips and down the front of the jacket.

Soon after, a stern, static face greeted him one morning when he walked into his school building. A poster hung across from the doorway, and a drawing of a wizened man in a spangled top hat and a royal blue jacket pointed his finger right at Herman’s face. Blue letters blazed across the poster: “I WANT YOU... FOR THE US ARMY.” The man seemed to see Herman, to judge him. Herman felt unnerved, and walked faster to the eleventh-year classroom.

At night, Herman couldn’t sleep. In his dreams, he stood in a dark hallway, wearing the jacket. His classmates stood across from him in a line, and their laughter bounced off the hallways like the cacophony of birds taking flight. Sometimes Herman ran, taking off down the dark hallway until he saw a light. But the light always turned out to be nothing but the wintry face of the man from the poster, shouting at Herman in Neville Chamberlain’s wheezy voice.

*    *

*    *
Herman was drafted the following September. His physical went off without a hitch. The army physician did make a note of his “extremely dense muscle tissue,” but other than this, Herman was cleared and classified as I-A.

His father arranged to have him travel by train to Fort Dix in three months’ time. Herman had never travelled anywhere before, and was fairly convinced that New Jersey wasn’t located on the eastern coast of the country, but was instead in the middle of nowhere.

He had never been so panicked about anything in his life. His nightmares became so extreme, he flailed wildly in his sleep. On two separate occasions, he had broken the antique lamp on his dresser and splintered his nightstand without even waking. Each time, Francis ran to the room puffy-faced and red-eyed, to find his son sleeping through his own violent rage. Soon, Francis began insisting that Herman sleep in the jacket.

Herman dreamed of escaping the straight jacket, the skinny white house, and the draft, and living in a cave somewhere. Sometimes, he imagined that he became general of the US Army, and propagated peace in that dark land overseas.

On the day of Herman’s departure, Francis helped him pack three days’ worth of clothing, and lead him to his seat on the train.

Herman was nervous just sitting there. Francis reached into his briefcase and pulled out a single caramel, unwrapping it from its cellophane. Herman accepted it
clumsily, his teeth chattering. Then, without so much as a “Good luck,” Francis closed his briefcase again and left his son there, shuddering.

Herman took a last sip of his second cup of coffee, which was cold now, and unsatisfying, so different from the first taste of it he’d had. He felt exhausted.

Beneath them, the floor rumbled. An earthquake? Herman looked around at the walls. His eyes fell on Angus, who suddenly looked panicked, and fumbled in his suit pocket for his melted watch.

“Oh, God,” Angus said, almost gasping the words in.

The rumbling grew louder, seeming to come up from the ground. “A train’s coming?” Herman asked.

Angus swallowed and looked up, completely white-faced. “You need to go,” he asserted, standing and rushing Herman toward the door.

“No, let me move this thing!” Herman promised. “Before the other train comes, I can move it!”

“That’s not the train coming,” Angus said. His pupils had dilated to black specks. He looked horrified. He whispered to Herman, “Run.”

* * *
Herman tore open the door of the car just in time to see a monster emerge from the trees. It stepped into the clearing, a brown, long-haired wolf standing on its hind legs. It bared a set of yellowed teeth at Herman and growled, an impossibly low sound that Herman felt in his bones.

“No!” Angus bellowed from his spot beside Herman. He waved his arms, trying to distract the monster. “It’s alright!”

The beast snarled. It lowered its front feet and bounded toward the two men, its pink tongue flapping against its cheek.

Herman took a deep breath and reacted before he could think. He shoved Angus to the side. The wolf, Herman noticed, watched Angus’s vast body fly to the ground. The animal lunged for Herman’s midsection. Herman kicked the thing away. The wolf flew in the opposite direction, but he caught it by its hind legs. He held it at the feet, and for a moment, in his hyper-alert, fearful confusion, he thought he felt toenails in his hands instead of claws.

The wolf barked. It turned its head to look at Herman, snapping its teeth. Its snout was completely missing; there was only a dark, hairy face and a huge set of rotting teeth. Herman shouted in horror, almost dropping the creature completely.

“Please!” Angus sobbed, scrambling to get up from the ground, the fear mounting in his voice.
Herman swung the animal in a circle through the air before sending it careening back into the woods. A splintering noise cracked through the clearing, followed by the crash of several branches falling in the depths of the dark trees.

“What the hell was that?!” Herman exclaimed, his dirty clothes saturated in sweat, his blood hammering in his ears.

“Oh!” Angus cried, taking two running steps toward where the monster had disappeared, as if hoping to see after it. “Do you think you killed it?!”

“I hope so! That thing could have eaten you alive!”

Angus rounded on Herman, and looked at him with wet eyes.

“This is going to sound crazy--” Herman spat. He wiped his mouth. “But that wasn’t a wolf! I think it had human feet!”

Angus opened his mouth, then closed it. It was dark, but Herman could see Angus casting his gaze about. He glanced back at the edge of the clearing, then looked again at Herman. His eyes moved to the train. He slid his hand into his pocket, but instead of pulling his strange silver watch out, he merely fumbled with it for a few minutes, his eyes moving all over the ground. He was thinking. Herman feared he’d said the wrong thing, or that he looked crazy.

Suddenly Angus looked up at Herman and sighed. The worried, terrified expression on Angus’s face vanished, and the same amiable, open look he’d worn all night slid into its place. It was as if he’d changed masks.
“Human feet?” Angus asked finally, looking bemused.

“I don’t even think that thing had a snout,” Herman said, although now it seemed so improbable.

Angus regarded Herman for a minute, and then chuckled. “What do you suppose it was?” he asked. “A werewolf?”

Herman shook his head hard.

“Maybe the child of Bigfoot,” Angus supplied.

Herman shook his head again, although now the certainty of what he saw was beginning to fade, like a dream upon waking.

Angus pulled his pocket watch out once more. He checked the time and looked off down the train tracks that disappeared into the woods. “Look,” he said. “We haven’t much time.”

Herman nodded now, saturated with confusion. He could have sworn... But no. Angus was probably right. Herman’s mind was unreliable. He thought about the amount of whiskey he’d had that night, how he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in weeks. He wondered if one of the three large men had managed to hit him in the head. A mangled coyote, he decided. Some strange species of wild dog.

Angus clapped Herman on the back. “You saved my life.”

Herman shrugged. “I saved mine too, I guess.”
“No. You protected me,” Angus continued.

Herman looked up at Angus, who was smiling once more. He smiled back, feeling cold air rush deep into his mouth through the empty socket that a tooth had occupied mere days before. In the distance, the unmistakable sound of a whistle blowing travelled on a night wind. Herman rolled up his sleeves.

Once, when Herman was a teenager, his father’s furnace had died. Frances disconnected the thing on a cold winter day, and had Herman carry it up the stairs in the dark crawlspace of the tall white house. Herman brought it out to the front lawn, to be picked up and disposed of. Afterward, he allowed himself to read the tiny embossed writing near the base: 800 LBS.

Herman knew while he was lifting them that the train cars were the heaviest things he had ever picked up and carried by far. But adrenaline still coursed through his veins from his fight with the coyote, and he felt light-headed and capable.

The train whistled again, growing closer now. Angus ran from car to car, disconnecting their hitches. Herman faced the exact middle of each car with a wide stance, squatted, and took a deep breath. Then he hoisted each one off of the rails an inch or two, bending backward as much as he could without straining himself to balance the heavy car in his arms. He placed each car down in the grass, several feet away from the tracks. His movements were methodical but swift.
The light from the oncoming train had just begun to flood the clearing when Herman finally lifted the engine car from the rails. He screamed while he carried it the several steps off the tracks, a painful, guttural sound that seemed to echo for miles around them. Then the train was derailed, neatly, as though a great hand had appeared from the sky and plucked it from its tracks.

The whistling train roared as it flashed by, each car catching light in the dings and dents in its aluminum surface. Angus and Herman stood beside each other, out of breath, admiring the way the train glittered before it disappeared back into the woods.

“Herman?” Angus said.

Herman looked up at his companion sluggishly. He’d never felt so tired; it was as if all his blood had drained to his feet, and without it, his torso was flimsy as a kite.

“Would you like to sleep in one of the empty cars tonight?”

Herman nodded.

Angus got Herman settled in the car behind his, one with much lower ceilings and a shorter bed. He had procured from his own car a clean set of sheets and several fluffy pillows, and when he was finished dressing the bed, he lead Herman over to it gently, like Herman was elderly or ill. Herman, in his exhaustion, had no
use for inhibitions; he removed his shirt and stepped out of his pants, keeping his shorts on. He felt his eyes close before he’d even finished sliding between the clean, crisp sheets.

“Herman,” Angus called softly on his way out.

Herman opened an eye. Angus stood at the door, his warm, smiling face lit by a single sconce on the wall next to him.

“I owe you my life,” Angus said. Then he left, closing the door lightly behind him.

Herman felt himself blush in the dark. He smiled for the first time in many years. It felt like putting down a great weight, he thought. Then he fell asleep.
THE PAINTED LADY

1948

The church was a house of ventriloquism. Judith sat facing the pulpit, but the priest’s homily resounded off of the great marble walls, so that the words arrived at Judith’s ears from behind her back. The priest had been speaking for quite some time now. Judith wondered if her cue to lead the congregation’s next song would come in the next half hour.

“I’m certain you’ve all heard the recent news,” Father Hackett’s voice droned from behind her. “President Truman has withdrawn religious instruction from the classroom. Snatched God right from the children’s hands. They’re describing God’s work as ‘unconstitutional.’ They call it separating church and state. They’re writing laws based on a catchphrase.”

Judith knew what Father Hackett was referring to; she had read about it in the paper last Tuesday. And even if she hadn’t, Father Hackett had sermonized about it every weekday mass since. A mother had sued her son’s school district because he’d been banished to the hallway each day for choosing not to participate in religion class. The boy didn’t believe in religion, and didn’t want the instruction. Judith had finished the article and folded the paper up, feeling content. Her country was changing, evolving. People could choose the lives they wanted. It relieved Judith, made her feel free. Now she almost questioned relishing in the result of the
trial, because Father Hackett’s resistance to the news had grown more fervent each day since. She wondered if anyone had even been so impassioned about anything.

Judith wasn’t Catholic; her parents had both been Jewish. She’d gone to the library one day after she’d started working at Our Lady of Sorrows in Baltimore three years ago, and had looked at books on Gothic architecture in an effort to feel more involved. She remembered her curiosity with amusement; now, she knew it had been nothing more than fascination with the novelty of a new environment. She was bored, sitting each day at the organ bench, alone in the church’s balcony. But she was proud of how much she’d learned about the architecture, and rattled off what she knew in her head. She looked up at the marble ribs in the ceiling’s vaulting, still a hundred or so feet above her. Beneath the vaults were the clerestory windows, letting meager light into the huge church. Beneath these was the arcade, a covered aisle on either side of the church’s body. These were flanked with giant stained-glass windows bearing portraits of disappointed-looking saints, though most of these were impossible to see from the balcony. Judith could just make out several pairs of the saints’ feet beneath the arcade’s arches. Lead and solder placed to look like muscle definition dissected the feet at odd angles. Sunlight soaked each dismembered pair, making them glow.

“Do we separate our patriotism from our love of God?” Father Hackett was asking. “Do we allow our fate to be changed by a man in an oval office?”
The priest looked insignificant, almost comical, from such a distance. His face was a dim red bulb, and his purple vestments flapped like banners when he shook with rage. Behind him rose the tower of silver organ pipes. Each pipe had a rectangular flue cut into it that looked like a stern mouth. Judith turned herself around to face the organ. She ran her stockinged toes over the smooth bass pedals at her feet. They made a thunderous sound when she pressed them, and the notes tickled Judith’s sternum. She had laid her coat across the top of the organ’s cabinet, and she looked at it now, picturing the pipe and tobacco pouch in its pocket. She wanted a smoke. She always thought she’d enjoy a nice smoke while she sat down at the organ.

“One nation under God, indivisible!” Father Hackett hammered. “And yet they divide us more every day!”

She sat up straighter and placed her fingers on the keys. Judith’s mother had referred to this as “assuming the position.” After Judith’s father had left the house to pursue some sort of preferable lifestyle when Judith was still just a child, her mother had become convinced that Judith needed “extra backbone” in her father’s absence. They had little money, so Judith’s mother began to give Judith lessons on the organ in the living room.

Judith’s mother was strict, and cold, but not unkind. She liked everything “just so.” She played the bass pedals until Judith could reach them, and frequently doubled the bassline mid-piece to teach Judith to play faster. She had only been too
slow once, which was the first time her mother had tried the trick. Judith
concentrated hard when it happened, breathing in quick sips of her mother’s
powdery perfume and the menthol cigarettes that she chain-smoked at the organ.

Then, when Judith was eighteen, her mother died of an unknowable cancer.
Judith moved out of the too-familiar house less than a year after she’d graduated
secondary school, selling almost everything. She didn’t want to part with the organ
in the living room, but she didn’t know how she would bring it with her to the third-
floor walk-up she’d found several miles away. Besides, she hadn’t played the organ
in over a year since her mother had died, and it was in complete disrepair. A
neighbor’s friend picked it up from the house, and he offered Judith a fair price, but
she refused to accept any money for the instrument. She inspected her shoes while
the man carted it to his truck.

She worked as a secretary for five years at a machine shop on the other side
of town. The job was uncomplicated, and the pay was fine, but Judith spent her
lunch hour eating alone at her desk and perusing the Want Ads. She talked herself
out of each opportunity, convinced she wouldn’t like it any more than her current
situation, until she saw the unusual ad Our Lady of Sorrows had taken out.

They needed an organist. Judith remembered her organ playing days fondly;
often, when she missed her mother, she soothed herself with memories of the two of
them playing organ together. Perhaps the ad was a message from her mother, a
small prod at Judith to continue with something she’d been good at. The idea of
being an organist excited Judith, so she jumped at the opportunity to do something different. She left her old job and moved from the suburbs to the city to be closer to the church.

Now she wondered if she’d fulfilled her urge for excitement at all. She thought about an old movie she’d seen as a girl, before she’d ever considered playing the organ. It was an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. While Dr. Jekyll spoke in that first scene, he played Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue in D* on his pipe organ. Judith remembered being scared even in those first moments of the film. The piece’s introduction, those haunting sustained notes, felt so ominous.

Then it spiraled into a manic melody, Dr. Jekyll’s hands creeping furiously across the keyboards. When he spoke, the audience saw nothing but the dark shadow of his head bouncing back and forth over the sheet music in front of him. Years later, Judith’s mother had insisted she learn the iconic Bach piece. The fear that overcame Judith when she even thought about the piece felt irrational, so rather than explain to her mother how she felt about the composition, she had just learned to play it. Practicing it had made Judith feel like everything in life was cyclical, like there was no room for possibility. She had been so eager to be done with the entire thing, she had mastered it in a week and never played it again.

Judith had heard versions of this homily for almost a week now, and Father Hackett’s ardor had doubled each day he delivered it. Father Hackett’s voice began to boom around the shrinking walls of the church, bouncing not off one wall but all of them, creating a terrifying echo. “Teaching these children to be individuals means
teaching them to value rebellion! Going down this path will lead to the premature destruction of mankind!”

He slammed his clenched fist down on the pulpit. The members of the congregation gasped. Their reactions didn't surprise Judith, but her own did.

She pressed her fingers into the organ's keyboard, letting the first three notes of Bach’s *Toccata* crash around the church’s walls. Father Hackett cried out as if he had been plucked from a flame and dipped into a crystal pool. Churchgoers whipped around in their pews, scraping against the hard wooden seats.

Judith sent the spooky introduction's next six notes into the church, this time depressing the bass pedals with her toes. The low notes resonated in the bench beneath her. Fear tangled into a messy knot in her stomach. She couldn't stop now.

She finished out the slow introductory notes and started on the piece's onslaught, unleashing herself onto the organ, her shoulders arching and bowing, her fingers cascading along the organ's three keyboards. Her feet moved furiously, as though she were dancing from her seat. The organ’s music seemed to smash against the walls, cracking the stonework open and letting the cool air rush in. From her seat at the organ, Judith shivered.

Then a noise rose above the feverish music: the sound of screaming. Parishioners had begun to hurry down the aisles toward the front door below Judith's balcony. She heard their footsteps pound against the marble floor.
“Stop!” Father Hackett howled from the pulpit. “Do you hear me? Stop the music!”

Judith didn’t stop until she’d finished, at which point the entire church had emptied. She nodded politely when Father Hackett commanded her to never to set foot inside his church again, even smiling after a fleck of his spittle landed on her cheek. She waited patiently for him to storm off. Then she reached into her coat pocket, packed her pipe, and smoked the whole walk home. She exhaled tiny gray clouds. She inhaled the cool afternoon air.

By the time she’d reached her apartment, her momentum had only grown. She packed the things she considered necessities into a suitcase: several modest, versatile outfits, a few old books of sheet music, a toothbrush, her sleeping cap. She wrote a farewell note to her landlord and slipped it under his door on the way out, along with a check for the month’s rent. She tried to think of the most exciting place she knew of. Then, resolving not to look back on the city she’d known since she’d been a child, she left.

She took the overnight Royal Blue from Baltimore straight into Grand Central Terminal, and stumbled out into the city wide-eyed before the sun rose. The streets were dark, and several twitching rats scurried expertly along the sidewalk curbs.
Judith dragged her suitcase several blocks, until the smog began to settle into her skin, dragging the panic behind it.

She had never been somewhere really new. Moving from Baltimore’s suburbs to its hub had taken minimal adjustment. Now, the energy she’d unknowingly started to accumulate inside Our Lady of Sorrows drained from her.

She realized she was hungry, and lugged her suitcase into a drugstore. She sat at the end of the counter by the window and absently plucked a muffin from the round case in front of her. There was a constant flurry of movement behind her, patrons bustling in and out of the door and several waitresses tending to them. Did they know it was still dark out?

At sunrise, the man in the stool beside her left his newspaper, and Judith picked it up, turning to the Want Ads, which by now felt like an old habit. She would tear out anything that she was even remotely qualified for, try her best to get a couple toes on the ground. In the end though, she only found one job. She paid her check and went to find a phone booth outside.

The call was brief; a terse female voice on the other end of the line demanded Judith’s qualifications, and then scheduled an audition for her in two days’ time. Despite the woman’s obvious satisfaction with Judith’s responses, her voice did not shift toward anything more compassionate or interested as the phone call progressed. Judith should have felt annoyed with the woman, but she couldn’t help but feel intimidated instead.
After she hung up the phone, she stood in the phone booth with her suitcase at her feet, listening to the harsh city wind knock against the glass. How was it possible that a place could be so windy without being cold?

She thought about wild animals, and how they adjusted to new environments. She wondered if they ever chose new environments for themselves, or if they only ever had to acclimate under more forceful conditions. Zoos. Sanctuaries. Laboratories. Finally she turned to unfold the glass door to her right, but something stopped her.

A brightly-painted poster had been fastened to the folding glass door with a piece of gummed tape. The poster advertised a circus coming to town that weekend. No, Judith saw, studying it closer. It was a carnival. The lettering had been done in shades of gold and rich burgundy. The design itself was simple: it had a photograph in its center of a bald man in a burgundy wrestling singlet lifting a car over his head. Had the photograph been doctored? Judith bent forward to get a closer look, but as she did, she tripped over her suitcase. She put her hands out to brace herself, pushing against the phone booth door. The door gave way, and the wind hit her across the face. She landed on the sidewalk in a heap.

Walking to the studio’s building from her motel room in her three-piece suit, she felt like she fit in with the rest of the women in the city: tall and purposeful,
confidant and mysterious. She lurched toward the revolving glass door the second she caught sight of it. Her shoes clicked through the bright lobby.

She depressed the elevators’ call button, and imagined them all waiting in a row, jockeying, eager to serve their purpose. She peeled open the grated accordion door of the elevator that had arrived and stepped inside.

The studio on the sixth floor was lit with tracked lighting, so that spotlights shone in certain circles on the walls. A secretary greeted Judith in the waiting room. The girl may have owned the abrupt voice on the phone, but she smiled genuinely, recognizing Judith before she’d even introduced herself, and led Judith down a short hallway and through a soundproof door. Before she disappeared, she wished her “the best of luck.”

A tiny round man in pintucked trousers and a pressed shirt got up from a chair at a round table in the middle of the studio. The strange studio lighting reflected brightly off of his bald spot.

“Judith?” he greeted brightly, sticking out his hand. He had a jeweled ring on his pinky finger.

Judith nodded and shook his hand. She had about six inches on him, and probably fifty pounds. Being taller and larger than a man made her feel strange, as though she should pity him.

“Larry Peat,” the man continued. “I hear you’re a very talented organist.”
Judith thanked him. She looked around the studio. The center table Mr. Peat had been sitting at contained several stacked pieces of broadcast equipment housed in bright wooden cabinets. One short microphone stood atop the table, its oblong silver head gleaming in the light. Half a dozen of its taller cousins waited in a line against the wall a few feet away. Her eye fell upon a crate of sundry objects off to the side: a small piece of sheet metal, a ball of wax paper, a limp pair of cotton gloves.

“Sound effects?” Judith guessed, nodding toward the box.

Mr. Peat smiled and nodded. “Thunder,” he said, waving the sheet metal in front of him. Then he picked up the wax paper and began to crumple it. “Fireplace.” Lastly, he picked up the cotton gloves and flapped them through the air, raising his eyebrows at Judith expectantly.

She shrugged.

“Birds’ wings!” he supplied cheerfully.

Judith smiled back, continuing to take the studio in. Finally, her eyes settled on the electric organ. “Let me tell you,” she said. “This is a far cry from a Baltimore church!”

They laughed, and Mr. Peat began to explain a bit about the radio show. It was called The Wily Adventures of Inspector Webb, he said, and it only aired four times a week. The show’s ratings had been suffering, so they were making several moves to capture a wider audience. One of them was to move the show from early
afternoon to late night. Another was to replace their string section with an electric organ, a sound that had just begun to catch on in radio shows. Judith would get paid to come in and practice when her schedule allowed, so long as another show wasn’t recording in this studio.

Mr. Peat showed her over to the organ. “It’s no Hammond or anything,” he said. “But it’ll do.”

Judith sat at the small organ and fiddled with the drawbars until she created a sound that suited her mood: lively, round, snappy. It was the first time she’d played an electric organ since her mother had died, and the difference from the thunderous leaden pipe organ she’d grown so used to felt immediate and enormous. Judith fell in love now with the electric organ’s bouncy, syrupy sound. She played a jazz piece, something hopeful and bright, soulful and unpredictable.

Mr. Peat listened patiently the entire way through. When she finished, he leapt from his seat and began to clap.

In front of the mirror on the back of her motel room’s door, Judith unpinned her severe French twist and shook her dark hair out. She was still taller and larger than most New York women, but she had lost weight, she thought, in the past week or so. She thumbed the dimple on her chin, a deep divide. She let her arm fall to her side again and examined her reflection until it looked unfamiliar to her, searching
her face for the change she’d begun to feel had overtaken her since she’d arrived in New York City.

She felt less friendly. This Judith wouldn’t feel afraid of a certain piece of music; this Judith would denounce the piece as a negative force in her life and forge forward. She felt stronger: her past seemed like a pitiful prison to her, rather than her own personal history. She studied her face, wondering what a stranger’s first impression of her would feel like. She felt so plain, as though her skin were a steel capsule and her insides were made of flame.

Judith received her first paycheck from the radio station two weeks later. She cashed it immediately after work, folding the bills in half and burying them in the deep pocket of her coat. Then she went to see a basement apartment on the Lower East Side, but she started to feel strange and claustrophobic inside of it. She told the realtor she had another place to see that afternoon, and would call him that night with an answer.

Outside, she took deep breaths of the grayish air and began to walk back to the subway station. Here and there, a square of sidewalk near the curb seemed to have been lifted away to make room for a single stunted sapling. Weeds grew around the trees’ thin trunks: dandelions, milk thistle, white clover. The wind rolled a bent bottle cap from a bed of patchy Bermuda grass onto the cardboard-colored sidewalk beside it. Judith listened to the steady sound of her low-heeled shoes
ticking against the sidewalk. She glanced up at a street sign. Then she sighed; she’d been heading the wrong way.

She stood for a minute on the street corner, frustrated with herself and feeling like an outsider. Two children skipped by her, screaming a rhyming chant. An elderly lady across the street unloaded open crates of what looked like apricots from the back of a green pickup truck. From somewhere behind her, a record started up: something bright and brassy and loud. Swing music.

Judith turned to find the source of the song. She took several steps until she stood directly in front of a shop’s open door. The music blared through the doorway, a recorded trumpet springing off of the groundwork diligently laid by a set of drums and a double bass. Across the street, a tired-looking woman in a headscarf leaned out of a third-story window.

“Pipe down!” she hollered in Judith’s direction.

Judith turned back to the doorway. It belonged to a tattoo parlor. A trombone joined in on the recording and launched into a solo. The trumpet fell back toward the rhythm with the double bass and found a repeated staccato riff.

Judith reached into her pocket and stroked with a fingertip the edges of the folded bills she’d placed inside. Then, impulsively, as though she were hungry and had just found a place to eat, she walked through the tattoo parlor’s door.
The music overtook her now, and she felt the trombone rattle something in her ribs. The walls were papered with hand-drawn artwork, some brightly-colored illustrations, some intricate line drawings, revealing yellow paint chipping underneath. Past the storefront, a row of reclining chairs faced tables of shining silver tools. Like a dentist’s office, Judith thought.

“Hey, city girl!” shouted a voice from the shop’s depths.

The man straightened one of the chairs with a lever and sat up in it. He smiled broadly at her. The way he had spoken his greeting, Judith thought he was someone she knew, though she realized now that would have been impossible.

The man removed the needle from the record on the phonograph beside him, stopping the music abruptly. He must have been about ten years older than Judith, but something about him looked childish – it was the gap in his teeth, she realized. Big enough to be visible from across the room, but thin enough to make him look innocent instead of clueless.

“What are you thinking?” he said when Judith didn’t speak.

This was an odd question for a stranger to ask, Judith thought, until she realized he was gesturing toward the drawings on the walls around them.

“Or I could always do something freehand if you’re the creative type.”

“I’m not sure,” Judith said absently. She studied a drawing on the wall to her left: a thin-waisted woman blowing a kiss and reclining on a patch of empty space.
“You look lost,” the man observed. “Maybe no city girl after all.”

Judith squinted at him. The man laughed.

He stood up and started to walk toward her at the front of the empty shop. He wore a pair of green suspenders over a white undershirt, and a pair of ancient-looking brown trousers. He had several large, disconnected tattoos on his arm. He wiped his hand on his pants before offering it to her. “Maynard,” he said.

He was about two inches taller than she was. Judith took the man’s hand and introduced herself. Then she removed her coat and pointed to her bicep.

“Surprise me,” she said.

“Shouldn’t be hard,” Maynard answered. “Seeing as we just met.”

He turned and walked back to the rear of the shop, and placed the needle on the swing record once more. He lowered the player’s volume and smiled up at her, the open gap between his front teeth like an unspoken invitation.

While Maynard washed his hands, Judith sat upright in one of the reclining chairs. She retrieved the contents of her coat pocket and gathered them in one hand: tobacco pouch, wooden pipe, box of matches. She opened the drawstring pouch and pinched out a pipeful. She pressed this down into the pipe’s belly with her thumb. She topped the pipe off and set it down on the seat next to her, then slid a match from its little cardboard drawer and struck it on the box’s red patterned siding. The
singeing stench of sulfur clouded the air in the tattoo parlor. Judith stuck the pipe in her mouth, and brought the flame to the tobacco. She looked beyond it, at Maynard, who had taken his seat across from her. A smile twitched across his face.

“You don’t mind people looking at you funny for smoking that?” he asked.

Judith shrugged. “They can look all they want.”

Maynard nodded. He loaded his little brass machine with a new needle. He swabbed her arm with a ball of cotton soaked in alcohol. Then he flipped a switch on the power supply, and the handheld machine began to whir. The engine on the machine, a small disc that Maynard told Judith was powered by an electromagnet, spun into a blur. An arm attached to the protruding center of the disk, and the whirring movement hammered the arm up and down. Maynard gathered ink with his needle from a small pot on his table and asked Judith if she was ready. Then the needle at the end of the machine’s arm went into Judith’s bicep.

The pain felt familiar and novel all at once. It was a finger scratching a burn made by hot oil. It was a burning razor dragging across her skin. It was a thousand inoculations, given all at once. Judith settled into her chair, tried to still herself.

During her session, Judith learned that Maynard was, in fact, older than she was, but by fifteen years instead of ten: he was thirty-seven to her twenty-four. He’d lived in Chicago most of his life, and had studied under a renowned tattoo artist out there, a German immigrant named Martin Grün. Maynard had also been married. He
moved to New York seven years ago when he walked in on his wife sleeping with his mentor.

“I’m so sorry,” Judith said.

“Best thing that ever happened to me,” Maynard replied, stopping to dip his needle into the pot of ink again. “Although not the best career move. You see how empty this shop is. Martin ended up being a horse’s ass – excuse my language – but damn if he wasn’t the best tattoo artist this country’s ever seen. And I studied under him! Still my boss got no photographs of my work up in this parlor, just those flash drawings. Tattooed a couple pretty famous people since I moved out here, but who would believe it? There’s just no room for tattoos up in the Northeast. Hard to know a place before you get there, though. You must know something about that.”

Judith nodded. She took several smoky sips of her pipe and told him about Baltimore, and her mother, and how she got fired from Our Lady of Sorrows. Maynard put down his machine and howled with laughter when Judith got to the part about playing the Bach piece, even once slapping his knee raucously.

“Sounds like that’s the best thing that ever happened to you,” he said when he calmed down.

Judith didn’t look until Maynard told her to, which was when he finished, almost three and a half hours later. He’d drawn a large poppy, its petals flopping like water from an overfilled bucket, a tiny bud clutching the stem beneath the bloom. The whole thing looked like a brilliant watercolor painted on Judith’s skin.
Maynard bandaged Judith’s shoulder carefully. “Come back if it’s not healing right.”

Judith nodded, raising her sore arm, testing it. She picked up her coat.

“Actually,” Maynard suggested, “To be honest, I’d prefer you came back either way.”

Their first date was to the carnival Judith had seen advertised in the phone booth. Maynard had jumped at the suggestion over the phone, telling her he heard there was a man in it who could lift a car, and that the show was starting to get “a hell of a reputation.”

They took the train together out to Pennsylvania. It was much less windy outside of the city, and warmer. The colors of the carnival rose up from a campground that appeared to be in the middle of nowhere. It was all incredibly decorative, with burgundy and gold banners and booths, bells ringing, and lights flashing everywhere Judith turned. There didn’t seem to be civilization around for miles. Where did the electricity come from?

Maynard paid their entry fee, and also purchased a long ribbon of tickets, which he tossed around Judith’s neck like a scarf. The carnival was packed; the crowd multiplied each time Judith looked around at it. The booths flanked a long, seemingly endless aisle, and advertised games and attractions in antiqued writing:

First Judith and Maynard played a fishing game, which involved feeding worms into a glass tank of live piranhas. Then Maynard shot a rickety wooden crossbow at a target in hopes of winning Judith a ghastly porcelain doll. Gratefully, he was a terrible shot, and they walked away empty-handed. The even played a game called the Wheel of Misfortune, which involved spinning a wheel that could land on such unlucky prizes as “Headless Marionette!” and “Forfeiture of One Eyelash.”

“Kind of dark, don’t you think?” Judith asked.

Maynard shrugged and ripped one of the tickets off from around her neck. He handed it to the booth operator. Then he reached up and spun the wheel, and was consequently forced to sport a drawn-on mustache for the rest of the afternoon.

They shared a bag of peanuts and watched a dark-haired man in a burgundy pinstriped suit make his way through the crowd on a pair of tall stilts, beckoning the people down the aisle of booths.

“The rumors are true!” the man yelled down at the people. “He plays catch with cannonballs! He gives his car a lift! Come see the Strongest Man in the World!”

Maynard looked at Judith with raised eyebrows, and they started to follow the stilted man, leaving a trail of peanut shells behind them.
The aisle came to an end at a small stage with a burgundy curtain hanging before it. Judith and Maynard grabbed seats somewhere in the middle of the audience; the chairs were filling up quickly. Maynard took Judith’s hand in held it in both of his own. He smiled at her, widening the silly doodle above his upper lip.

The stage’s curtain rustled, and the stilted barker they had followed stepped out in front of them. Judith realized instantly that he was walking not on stilts but his own legs; he was simply incredibly tall and thin. His prim suit blended almost perfectly with the curtain behind him. Several members of the audience cheered. The man on stage grinned and swept his body into a low, graceful bow.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen!” he bellowed. “Welcome to the Count Cornelius Carnival! I must preface the performance you are about to see with an urgent plea: steel yourselves! The feats of physical strength you will witness have been known to inflict awe and panic on the faint of heart! Many carnivals claim to deliver you strongmen; today you bear witness to The Strongest Man in the World!”

Maynard began to squeeze Judith’s palm alternately with one of his hands, and then the other.

“Please be advised: you will experience disbelief! I myself was skeptical when I first met this man, before I saw him break eight men bodily in a fair fight! I assure you, this is no illusion! As proof, would a member or two of the audience be so cooperative as to inspect the equipment?...”
Judith’s arm shot up, but the man choose someone closer to the stage, who looked like he himself could be the strongest man in the world. The curtain rolled back, baring several large dumbbells, a pommel horse, and a cannonball.

“Hey where’s the car?” Maynard whispered. Judith stifled a laugh.

The man onstage tested the equipment, and much to the audience’s delight, couldn’t lift many of the objects. He walked off the stage, but the tall man stopped him.

“Ah, I seem to have forgotten one thing, sir,” the tall man said apologetically. A car appeared from behind the stage, its headlights flashing and its horn honking. A carnival worker parked it off to the side, turned it off, and hopped out. The audience cheered.

The volunteer laughed, doubled back, and bent to try to pick up the car to no avail.

“Thank you,” the tall man said, motioning for the volunteer to take his seat. Then he turned back to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, with phenomenal pride, I present to you... The Human Hercules!”

Judith and Maynard experienced the next twenty minutes in complete awe. The Human Hercules spun and flipped on the pommel horse as though he’d never tire. He tossed a cannonball around like it was a baseball, catching it each time one-
handed, his arm not wavering once. He lifted an eight-hundred pound barbell clean over his head and spun it around like a blade.

Finally he made his way down from the stage and over to the car. People stood up in a wave from their seats. Judith and Maynard rose to their feet as well, but they couldn’t see anything over the rest of the audience. The audience began to chant something indecipherable and building. Then, people began to cheer.

The car appeared in Judith’s view above the heads of the audience members. It began to bounce in the air as the Human Hercules carried it over his head, walking down the aisle so everyone could see.

Judith couldn’t close her jaw. She looked back at Maynard, who mirrored her expression. They began to laugh hysterically, so hard they had to sit, doubled-over, grabbing and slapping at the other, because it was all so unbelievable.

Judith insisted upon meeting the tall man. She wanted to continue to marvel at the carnival’s magic, to feed their own fascination, which was already paling regrettably, only minutes after the Human Hercules’s performance.

The man wasn’t difficult to find; he was striding quickly down the midway, his head feet above the crowd.

“Excuse me!” Maynard yelled up, tapping the barker on his lower back. He stopped, as if he had run into a glass wall, and turned to regard Maynard and Judith.
For a second, Judith froze. The tall man’s expression was urgent, and it appeared as though they were interrupting him.

Judith spoke first. “I just wanted to say – I think your show is amazing!”

“Yeah,” Maynard added. “It’s really something out here.”

The man gave them a small, tight-lipped smile. “Why thank you,” he replied in a smooth voice. He didn’t bend to hear them better; rather, he stayed perfectly erect as people rushed between them.

“Did you see the Human Hercules?” he asked.

“Yes!” Maynard nodded fervently. “There’s no tricks there or anything?”

“No tricks,” the tall man said simply. “Just a taste for exquisite talent. We’re touring the country!”

Judith suddenly felt extremely ordinary. Need an organ player? she wanted to ask. She rolled her eyes at herself, shaking her head.

The man pulled a misshapen silever pocket watch out of his burgundy vest’s pocket and glanced down at it. “We’ll be back in the fall, if you’d like to revisit!” he said. “Bring your friends; we’re only getting better!” Then he turned and disappeared, as though he had been nothing more than a peculiar dream.

*   *

*   *
Judith slept with Maynard that night, in the small apartment above the tattoo parlor he rented from his boss. Afterwards, she lay awake for a while, taking comfort in the dark, allowing thoughts to come to her as they pleased. The realtor from several days ago popped into her head, and how she’d never gotten back to him. He probably thought she’d liked the second place she’d seen much better than the one he’d shown her. He wasn’t wrong. Maynard breathed heavily beside her, mumbling incoherently every now and then. Could there be anywhere else she’d rather be? She remembered an apple orchard she’d visited with her mother as a child. Judith had demanded her mother hoist her up on her shoulders so that Judith could reach the best apples at the tops of the trees. She had always been like this: insistent, single-minded. Her mother had explained that the best apples fell from the trees at the pinnacle of their ripeness. For hours, she and Judith looked on the ground for the best unbruised apples. Judith wondered now if her mother had been telling the truth. She wished she could call her on Maynard’s telephone, a now-unfamiliar desire. For the first couple years after her mother’s death, Judith had felt propelled to the phone at night, like a strange ghost limb twitching at her side. She deserved tree apples, she thought now. At the very least, it would feel good to be up in the air, seeing a new world of things, the tart smell of apples crowding her nostrils. Was it any more complicated than that?

The tall man at the carnival swam into Judith’s mind. That sort of perspective was not just an occasional treat for him; he experienced his entire life from above. And the Human Hercules, didn’t he have the same advantage? He could simply lift
his obstacles and rearrange them. Did they have parents? They both seemed so mythical.

Maynard shifted in his sleep, and splayed his arm across Judith’s face. She stifled a laugh. Then she took the hand and placed it on her chest. She held it there, and fell asleep.

Judith walked through the studio’s empty waiting room and down a short hallway, punching the top button on each light switch she passed. She entered the main room that she had auditioned in, where the station recorded the show. She turned the organ on and packed a pipe while she waited for the instrument to warm up. Then she spent the better part of two hours playing music that disappeared an instant after she’d invented it, stopping only to puff her pipe. She played so exuberantly in the empty room that her arms strained against the short sleeves of her shirtdress. By the time Mr. Peat’s heavy cologne preceded him into the stage room, she had completely forgotten where she was.

“Good evening, Judith,” he said, flapping his wide hand in front of him to clear the smoke away from his face. He hung a garish tweed hat by the door a few hooks away from her coat. “How are you doing?”

“Alright, boss.” Judith reluctantly took her hands off the keyboard and sat back on the organ bench.
Mr. Peat bustled toward the row of silver microphones standing opposite the door. He began to distribute them around the room and individually adjust their heights. Finally he faced her again. “Feeling practiced?”

Judith nodded. “That I am.”

“Great. Tonight’s a big night. We have a very well-known voice actor from Boston coming in. Should do the ratings some good.”

Judith nodded. It wasn’t unusual to have a visiting voice on the program; in fact, they had one almost every show. But she had assumed the ratings were in better shape since she’d been hired. She plucked her pipe from the organ console and went to empty it in the trash. She returned to the instrument, set her pipe down on it, and played a mindless, nervous riff.

When she finally spoke, her voice cracked. “The rating’s still aren’t so good?”

“Unfortunately, it looks like the Mr. Webb’s wily adventures may be quite numbered if Richard can’t pull us through. Ah, here he is!”

A squirrely man in a fine wool suit walk through the doorway of the stage room, followed by Gerald, the voice of Inspector Webb himself. Gerald was short and red-nosed, and always looked at someone as though they were the one person he’d wanted to see. Both greeted Mr. Peat before regarding Judith. Judith waved to Gerald, who returned with a wave twice the size.
“Richard,” Gerald said to the squirrely man, gesturing toward the organ.

“Meet Judith, our accomplished organist.”

Judith stood and extended her hand over the instrument, but Richard did not take it. Instead, he raised his eyebrows and stared at the colorful ink that had begun to spill out from its cover beneath her sleeve.

“What have we here?” he said after a moment, almost to himself. Then his eyes travelled elsewhere on Judith’s body.

Revulsion bubbled in Judith’s throat.

She walked across the room and put her jacket back on. Then she went back to the organ and stuck her hand out again. The welcoming smile on her face had waned into a tight, matronly look of disapproval. “Judith,” she asserted, elaborately miming a handshake to the man.

The man’s nostrils flared, and he huffed a breath of air out of them. Judith rolled her eyes and sat back down, abandoning all pretense of being professional and reaching for her pipe and her pouch of tobacco.

“Alright!” Mr. Peat exclaimed obliviously from the table in the center of the room. He clapped his hands once. “Let’s get to our places. Richard, I’d like you over here...”
Gerald turned away, his cheeks matching his ever-flushed nose for witnessing the awkward exchange. Judith thumbed the tobacco flat in the bowl of her pipe as though she were pressing juice from it.

Mr. Peat placed a script on each of the actors' stands. Richard barely glanced at his. Gerald flipped through the pages and mouthed several lines to himself.

“Dark and stormy!” Mr. Peat directed Judith, handing her a script. Then he shuffled toward the door and turned its lock.

A minute later, at the top of the hour, a dormant “ON AIR” sign lit up over the door. Mr. Peat shot his index finger toward Judith, who depressed her foot onto a bass pedal, and with her left hand struck a mate for the note on the lower manual keyboard: a low, ominous chord. She followed this with its third, and then sustained its second while Mr. Peat spoke in a voice very unlike his normal nervous chattering.

“From New York City, the makers of Elmer’s Custom Garments on 68th Street present... A weekly peak inside the mind of the world's most famous detective... The Wily Adventures of Inspector Webb!”

Mr. Peat signaled Judith again, whose fingers crawled up the organ's keyboards.

He continued: “Tonight’s episode... The Case of the Moonshine Marauder! Starring, as always, Gerald Gaberdine as Inspector Webb. And tonight, all the way from Boston... Mr. Richard West!”
Mr. Peat pressed a button, and applause erupted from a wooden console on the table before him. Richard, at his microphone, bowed dramatically, an act that seemed especially pompous for a radio star. Hot loathing spread across Judith’s skin, but she didn’t dare remove her jacket.

Maynard made her breakfast the next morning, a lop-sided omelet with two slices of tomato tucked inside. She studied him across the table in his kitchenette while they ate, he in his shorts, she in her blouse and underwear. He looked up at her and smiled. The bare bulb above them shined down on the table’s small surface and Maynard’s forearms lying across it. He had several vibrant illustrations splashed across the skin there: a pair of lucky dice, an anchor done in incredible detail, a wolf depicted mid-howl. Judith wished to have a blanket of Maynard’s drawings, to wrap around herself. They were… Exquisite.

“I want another tattoo,” Judith said suddenly.

“Oh yeah?” Maynard raised his eyebrows. “I know a guy.”

Judith laughed. “Is he available now?”

“Now?!” Maynard looked down at their half-finished omelets.

“I was thinking, yes.”
“Alright.” Maynard turned back toward his plate and separated a large chunk of omelet with the side of his fork. “Where’s this one going?” he asked, shoving the bite of food into his mouth.

Judith glanced down at the area around her scabbing poppy. Then she studied the fleshy skin of her bare thigh. It looked almost amorphous, a pink slab flattened against the seat of Maynard’s caned chair.

“Maybe down here somewhere,” Judith suggested.

Maynard peered over the edge of the table. “Hurts.”

Judith shrugged.

It was early still; the shop didn’t open until noon. Judith and Maynard finished their food and went downstairs, where Maynard unlocked the backdoor to the studio and closed the blinds on the front windows.

He was right; it did hurt. He put a record on the phonograph, and instead of talking, they sang together while he worked. When the album ended, he got up and put on another one; when that one ended, he was finished.

Judith’s pink thigh was now aflame, raised and smooth and angry. A butterfly perched on the sore spot, its wings separated in blue and green segments like tide pools. The light shone off of its abdomen, and disappeared at the tips of its wings. It looked fragile, gentle, wary.

“You ought to have advertisements of your work,” Judith said.
Maynard began to straighten up his station. “Nobody advertises tattoos,” he replied. “It’s just word of mouth gets you jobs.”

“Like a customer gets a compliment on a tattoo, and refers the person to you?”

“Yeah, like that.”

Judith nodded.

Maynard’s mood seemed to have darkened. He bandaged her and took several drawing supplies from a cabinet in his workstation. Then he told Judith he was going to keep the shop open rather than close it up for a couple hours – “Wishful thinking,” he explained -- and sent her back upstairs to get some more sleep.

The hot skin on Judith’s thigh pressed into the muscle beneath it as she walked up the stairs. She let herself into the apartment, suddenly realizing how exhausted she was. She fell into Maynard’s bed, and slept.

In her dreams, she was late for work. She descended down the steps to the subway and waded into a sea of freezing water. The water covered her feet, then her knees. She drew a deep breath, wrapped her coat tightly around her, and dove in, heading down toward the turnstile. She swam toward the train platform, trying desperately to make the next train, feeling the air in her lungs growing thin. Her body grew heavier. She felt trapped, trapped underground in the city's strange and
arbitrary system. Music blared on the speakers, a brass band playing out the somber soundtrack to a tragedy. Then the dream drifted away from her, and Judith slept deeply.

Richard West had not fetched the ratings Inspector Webb had needed.

Judith’s heart fell when Mr. Peat delivered news. The show would air four more weeks’ worth of episodes, after which a new soap opera featuring a string quartet would replace it. Mr. Peat begrudgingly informed her there would be no more guest actors, a fact for which Judith could barely conceal her gratefulness. Gerald walked in, and for the first time since Judith had met him, he looked positively glum. His hair stood up on end in the back of his head, as though he had given up in the middle of combing it.

Mr. Peat gave her little direction for the show that night, so she allowed herself to play what she felt. When she pressed her fingertips to the keyboard, she was surprised to hear the introduction to the Bach piece emerge from the instrument. More surprising still was that now it sounded new, different: mournful instead of alarming, poignant instead of unsettling.

She made her way home with determination; by the time she reached Maynard’s apartment, her plan was plump and prepared.
He was sitting at his kitchen table, several pens with different-sized nubs laid out before him. His pad of thin paper boasted a colorful chalice wrapped with a ribbon that read “HONESTY AND PURPOSE” in ornate lettering. He had carried the phonograph up from the shop, and a raspy voice sang blues music from the counter.

Judith kissed him on top of his head.

“I have a question.”

“Shoot,” Maynard responded, still shading his drawing.

“Do you want to go back to that carnival?”

Maynard looked up. “That Count Cornelius thing? Yeah. We had such a great day that day.”

Judith nodded. “That man said it’s coming back in the fall, so I figure we have at least a month.”

“Alright,” Maynard said, turning back to his drawing. “Let’s go then.”

Judith swallowed. “Would you like to be in it?”

Maynard laughed out a loud, harsh guffaw over the music. “Sorry darling. Can’t lift any cars. Can you?”

“No-o,” Judith said. She drew out the chair across from Maynard and sat down. “But your work is striking, and I could spend the rest of my life looking at it. Which is why I’m happy to have the privilege of carrying some of it on my person.”
Maynard capped his pen and put it down on the table. He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to continue.

“You heard that man. He said his carnival is only getting better. He’s got some games, some rides, and the start of an interesting freakshow.”

“One strongman isn’t a freakshow,” Maynard argued.

“No,” Judith agreed. “So I’m thinking they could use a painted lady.”

Maynard studied her face. She was out of breath, she realized. Her cheeks felt hot.

“We have a month,” she said. “Let’s see the country. Let’s have the country see your work.”

Maynard looked down at the paper on the table in front of him. The chalice was covered in jewels, the writing on the banner gleaming in uniform type. He looked back up at Judith. She felt naked under his gaze, as though he were gathering her expression as evidence, and interpreting it as information.

“You’re no object,” he said finally. “And you’re not a work of art. You’re a woman.”

Judith pushed a short puff of air out of her nostrils, and ran her tongue over her bottom molars. She pulled her pipe from her pocket and packed it.
“That strongman isn’t proving himself, Maynard. He’s demonstrating his
talent. He’s showing off. His friends don’t care that he’s strong.”

Maynard pushed his pens together and organized them. He straightened his
drawing against the edge of the table. He studied Judith, not her eyes or her face but
her limbs, her bare arms, the skin beneath her shirt’s collar. The blue music picked
up, something in a major key, bursting from the phonograph in a rapid time
signature.

“A month?” he asked finally.

Judith grinned. She took a final puff of her pipe, lifted her head, and pushed
the smoke she’d held inside her toward the ceiling.

In a month’s time, Judith got eighteen new tattoos. On one shin, she got a
lighthouse, a single eye instead of a lantern beaming at its top. On the other,
Maynard drew a vertical cherry blossom branch, with a bird posed mid-song beside
one of its blossoms. On her arm, beneath her poppies, Maynard drew a scarab
climbing a peacock feather, roses sprouting from a chattering skull, and the floating
pinup model Judith had admired the first time she’d entered the shop. Sprigs of
baby’s breath sprouted on the bare skin she’d had left. They dubbed Judith’s left arm
her lucky one: she sported an ornate upturned horseshoe, a pair of snake-eyed dice,
and a royal flush. Ladybugs scuttled among these, navigating the empty space. Her
back became a nautical scene: her shoulder blades boasted a compass and an anchor
to match the one Maynard had on his arm. A many-sailed ship floated in the middle of Judith’s back, and beneath it, a pensive mermaid’s infinite hair became the ocean's waves carrying the ship.

Judith’s stomach had hurt the worst, but Maynard made an effort to lessen the pain by bestowing several virtues upon her with the tattoos he chose. He inked an owl on one set of ribs and a crow on the other, for wisdom and suspicion. On her belly, he granted her a prowling lioness for ferocity, and an elephant’s head for remembrance. Across her chest and collarbone, he drew her an octopus, its tentacles stretching as far from its head as possible, protecting her.

Judith had seen Maynard’s boss throughout her sessions, a terse man with tattoos almost buried under his ashy skin. She wondered what he thought about the fact that Maynard constantly worked on one customer, but the man didn’t seem to notice that Judith was the same woman each time. Instead, he came in simply to empty the register about every other day. Maynard appeared embarrassed each time the man gave Judith a polite hello. Judith preferred it; Maynard had decided not to put in his notice, in case the carnival man didn’t want them. She made an effort not to stand out in Maynard’s boss’s presence, which meant she wouldn’t smoke her pipe in the shop.

Maynard came back from the corner store one day looking triumphant. He shoved a rumpled flyer under Judith’s nose when she emerged from the bath.
It was the same flyer Judith had seen in the spring, except the dates were changed. The Human Hercules had an almost vacant look on his face while he lifted the car up over his head. The carnival would return in a week.

Maynard put the flyer on the kitchen table and stowed the groceries away quickly. He assembled his supplies while Judith dried and dressed. He had her sit across from him at the table, pointing her face so that the sunlight hit it through the window. Then he got to work.

After the last episode of The Wily Adventures of Inspector Webb, Judith said goodnight and goodbye to Gerald and Mr. Peat. Mr. Peat ensured her he would keep her in mind for future projects, to which Judith simply nodded and thanked him for the opportunity.

After they’d left, she looked down at the organ, clean, efficient instrument with which she had bonded so much, and wondered how she could say goodbye to such a close friend. She allowed herself some time with it, playing several jazz pieces to the vacated room. Then turned the instrument off and left the studio, shutting the lights off one after the next on her way out.

She worried the long sleeves on her sweater on the train ride out to Pennsylvania, and felt herself sweating in the thick tights she’d worn. Maynard
stared out the window, looking preoccupied. Judith glanced out too, and for a few seconds, the backyard of everything rolled through her vision. She found it unsettling. Who could know what these buildings were from this point of view?

“Some of them aren’t completely healed,” Judith said suddenly.

“Well, they look great anyway, if I do say so,” Maynard answered. He spread his legs wider, bumping his suitcase beside him. They’d each packed one, and the rest of Maynard’s belongings they’d thrown away. They’d also taken the phonograph. Technically, it belonged to the shop, but the couple couldn’t part with it. Now it bumped around on the seat next to Maynard, looking funny and oversized in the small train compartment.

The train sliced toward their stop, a station less than a quarter of a mile from the campground.

“I’m terrified,” Maynard said suddenly.

Judith took his hand and kissed his palm. It didn’t ease any of their fear, but it didn’t worsen it, either.

The man was more difficult to find this time around.

He wasn’t acting as Barker, nor was he patrolling the carnival’s long aisle, looming over the gawking faces in the crowd. Judith and Maynard walked beyond the small stage at the end of the aisle, dragging their suitcases and the heavy
phonograph out to the open field. Judith looked back at the carnival. It seemed so contained; no one stepped out behind the booths, although the field seemed to stretch for miles beyond it. At one end, something gleamed in the distance; it looked like series of tiny gleaming buildings, all placed in a line.

“What is that?” she asked herself aloud. She frowned.

Maynard turned, squinting. “I think it’s a train,” he mused. “Derailed.”

“Think that’s how they get around?” Judith asked.

Maynard shrugged, and together, they started to walk toward the train. As they got closer, she could see it was the carnival’s signature deep burgundy, its gilded edges flashing in the sunlight. Judith started to sweat again in her warm outfit.

The train was magnificent. It sat next to the tracks, still assembled, and contained at least two dozen cars. On its side in ornate gold lettering read “The Count Cornelius Carnival.”

“Which one do you think is his?” Judith asked.

Maynard spoke between his labored breathing, the phonograph slipping in his straining arms. “I’d bet on the tall one.”

Judith looked at the first car, which was double the height of the rest. They went up to it, and she knocked lightly on the door.
A muffled growl sounded from inside the car. Then, the door swung open.
The tall man stepped delicately out of it, closing the door behind him so that Judith and Maynard saw nothing of his car’s interior.

The man looked down at them, at their suitcases and their phonograph, at Judith’s full-coverage getup, which was only growing warmer.

“Excuse me,” the man said. “I was just getting some rest. How can I help you?”

Maynard reached into his pocket and pulled out the flyer, which he unfolded and handed up to the man.

The man smiled broadly. Maynard had redrawn the flyer he’d pulled from the corner store’s door, with the Human Hercules lifting his car over his head. Only now, Judith sat in the car, smiling out the passenger’s window, holding her chin in her brightly decorated arm.

“How fantastic!” the man exclaimed. “Did you draw this yourself?”

He looked down at Maynard, who didn’t respond. Then he looked at Judith. His eyebrows rose as he referred back to the flyer, then back to Judith.

“This is you?” he asked.

Judith nodded to the man. She motioned toward the door behind him. “Can we speak to you for a minute?”
The man seemed uncomfortable with letting them into his private car, so he brought them several cars down, to one that seemed not to be inhabited by anyone. It contained a small cot, a sink, and several cabinets. It was spotless.

The man sat on the cot so that he was face-level with Maynard and Judith. “I apologize for my grogginess. I am Count Cornelius.”

“Judith,” Judith asserted, offering the man her hand. “This is Maynard. He’s an inkslinger.”

“Hi, Count,” Maynard offered.

“Oh please!” the man said delightedly. “Call me Angus!”

Maynard shot Judith a look on his way to put the phonograph down on the counter behind her.

“Angus,” Judith started. “We met briefly last spring when we attended your carnival. We were in complete awe of the Human Hercules.”

Angus smiled, and nodded for her to continue. She doubted he remembered their meeting at all.

“You mentioned your show is only getting bigger and better. But we noticed you don’t have a Painted Lady.”
“No, I do not,” Angus agreed. He looked at Judith, in her long sleeves and stockings. He held up the flyer. “I’m not looking to be lewd, but... Is this a fair representation of what I can expect?”

Maynard nodded. “We’ll get to that. We’d like to negotiate.”

Angus raised his eyebrows.

“We’re a package deal,” Judith explained.

“We’d like to share a car.” Maynard pointed to the walls surrounding them. “I need a workstation, and so does she.”

“You work?” Angus asked Judith.

“I play organ.” Judith looked at the tips of her shoes, which had gotten scuffed during their walk through the field. She cleared her throat. “I play brand new customized Hammond A-100 organ, to be precise.”

Angus chuckled. “Alright,” he assented. “Anything else?”

Maynard grimaced and mumbled: “I left my apartment before the lease ended.”

Here, Angus threw his head back and laughed, the sound echoing off the train car’s walls. “Taken care of,” he assured them. “And in return?”

Judith glanced at Maynard, who shrugged. She took off her jacket, revealing the colorful ink adorning her two arms. She drew the silk scarf from her neck,
exposing the octopus’s tentacles groping above the collar of her shirt. Lastly, she kicked off her shoes and yanked off her stockings by the toe, showing her vibrant, flashy legs.

Angus looked enthralled. He got up and made his way half-hunched to the sink. There, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. It was made of gold silk, and appeared to have been steam-pressed. Angus ran a corner of it under the faucet. He returned to the bed and held his hand out for Judith’s arm, which she relinquished immediately. He rubbed the wet cloth over the picture of the skull to ensure its permanence.

He flapped the handkerchief in front of him and folded it up neatly again. When he looked up at Maynard and Judith, he was beaming.

“You’ll certainly need a bit of practice,” he said to Judith.

Judith drew in a sharp breath. Maynard grasped her hand tightly.

“I assume you’ll be continuing your work on her?” Angus asked Maynard.

Maynard nodded.

“Would you be open to having your own booth, as well?”

Maynard’s eyes widened. He squeezed Judith’s hand. “I’d love it!”

Angus clapped his hands once. “Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I’ll draw up the contracts. On behalf of the entire show, I’d like to welcome you aboard.”
The train swayed gently on the tracks. Maynard sat at his desk at the other end of their car, pen in hand, his arm swooping over the giant pad of paper before him. He faced the window, the blue night cycling outside of it. Judith also sat before a window, against the opposite wall of the train car, on the bench of her new organ, which still smelled of fresh varnish. She cracked her knuckles, each one individually, then all of them again in unison. She selected several drawbars at random with her index finger, sliding them out toward her, creating tonight’s sound. Then she pressed her fingers into the keys, feeling her body melt into the instrument. Maynard tapped his toe along as he drew at his desk.

Judith strived to play something jazzy and spirited. But her fingers kept defaulting to the Bach, those first thundering notes, the sticky, ominous syrup they created in her throat. Finally she just gave herself over, allowing Dr. Jekyll’s theme song to roar through her new home. The floor of the train car shook. Judith glanced out the window above her instrument. A red moon radiated in a clear, tranquil sky.
THE BANE OF THE BEARD

1949

Stella was beautiful. Her skin was smooth as sweet cream, and her body at seventeen had begun to curl in on itself at the hips. Her nose was straight and slender with an adorable round tip. Her dark eyes shone wet like onyx. And perched beneath her small pink lower lip were the makings of a robust beard.

She was twelve when the beard first began to appear. First she plucked the hairs with tweezers, then pliers. She used expensive creams her mother bought her at the pharmacy. Each time, the hair grew back in a matter of hours, defying Stella's fretful consternation. Exasperated, she had taken to shaving it several times throughout the day.

The beard baffled her parents. It showed no trace of originating from her maternal lineage, though neither did any other part of her. Her mother's nose was less adorable than expansive, as though her nostrils reached desperately for her ears, and her mouth was permanently pursed. She was also a particularly cruel woman. Though her daughter had a polite demeanor, impressive grades, and was the best knitter in the county, her mother neglected to notice anything about Stella but the hair on her chin. She noted frequently with momentous volume that there was such thing as a “proper woman”: always aproned, perfumed, and, of course, beardless.
Stella’s father, a proprietor, had only to shave every fourth day to maintain the appearance of his smooth face. He loved his daughter without affection; she was his only child, a member of his household, and one of the two people he came home to. He was neither grateful for her presence nor expectant of her for more than it. If Stella ran into her father early in the morning, he pretended not to notice the thick hairs she had sprouted the night before. It was as if he wanted nothing to do with the entire situation.

Stella’s daily routine went like this: Wake up. Shave. Eat breakfast, go to school. Run home for lunch and shave. Return to school. Come home. Shave and wash up for supper. Eat. Do schoolwork. Knit or read a book. Some nights, she shaved before bed, in the event there was a fire, or if she felt she needed a particularly restful night’s sleep.

Stella’s habit of constant shaving resulted in her dulling her father’s safety razor almost every other day. She considered buying a razor of her own, but even the thought of this ashamed and embarrassed her. So she replaced the blade each night in order to ensure her father a close shave when he needed it, and every few weeks, when the blades ran out, Stella went into town after school to purchase several new boxes for him at the pharmacy.

On a particularly chilly March night, an orb of white moon cast shadows on the front lawn. Stella sat in the rocking chair on the veranda, her fingers dexterously
weaving the various forms of Cat’s Cradle with a loop of scrap yarn. She brought her heels up onto her seat, looping the string around her big toes when she needed them. Jacob’s Ladder. Now, Cup and Saucer. The moon shone on her handiwork, as though cocking its head to the side, watching.

The screen door creaked. Stella’s mother put her hand out to catch it just as it swayed drunkenly back. With her other hand, she reached behind her and pulled her apron strings loose.

“Stella.”

Stella bit the loop of string and pulled downward with her index fingers: Witch’s Hat.

“Stella,” her mother said, more impatiently, in her sharp, pinching voice. “Your father and I are going to sleep.”

“Mmhmm,” Stella murmured with a mouth full of yarn. She knew full well her father had retired to bed nearly two hours earlier. Stella ran her tongue against the grain of the yarn in her mouth, tasting its feathery threads. Then she flicked her thumbs out of the loop. Soldier’s Bed.

“You haven’t been shaving,” her mother noted.

Stella reddened. She had been shaving, diligently in fact. But it had been almost three hours, and she knew stubble likely blanketed her face. The beard had been growing in thicker lately, as though it, too, were throttling through puberty.
The screen door creaked again. Her mother had turned to leave, but then she stopped.

"Maybe soon you won’t even need your string for that game - you’ll be able to play with your beard!" Then, as if someone else had made the joke, she threw her head back and let out a bark of laughter that pierced the night. The door slammed shut a final time and she cackled her way deep into the house and up the stairs to bed.

Stella felt the last breaths of winter press into her eye sockets. She blinked once, twice, then simply kept them shut, letting the string go slack in her hands.

In front of the mirror in the washroom the next morning, the prickly hairs on Stella’s chin buried her face. Her only light came from two yellow fixtures above her head, and the dull blue dawn outside the window.

She plucked the bar of shaving soap and the squat badger-bristled brush from the mirrored shelf above the faucet. Then she turned on the water and rested the back of her hand on the top of the shining steel faucet, feeling it turn from cold to warm. When it was hot, she stopped up the drain. She dipped the brush in the growing pool forming in the sink, and swirled the wet bristles on the top of the bar of shaving soap. She reached again toward the shelf and picked up the handheld tortoiseshell bowl and began to whisk her soapy brush around in it. This always made her think of meringue.
When the lather started to make peaks, Stella swirled the cream onto the lower half of her face with the brush. Then she picked up the leather-handled safety razor off the shelf with two fingers, wet the blade in the sink, and with the lightest touch, began to sweep away the pearly layer of shaving cream on her face. Her hairs against the blade made a noise that resounded through the hollow handle of the razor: rrrp rrrp rrrp! The first time she felt the razor tug against her bristle, she rolled her eyes. The second time, she stopped to rummage in the cabinet beneath the sink for a new razor. She came up with an empty box. Today, after school, she would go to the pharmacy.

She dabbed her face with a towel when she was done and reached into the hot water to unplug the drain. Just like that, her ugliness disappeared, swirling out of sight in a miniature tornado. Then Stella looked back into the mirror, meeting her own eye.

The schoolhouse, an old brick building with less than a dozen classrooms, always seemed dim and poorly lit inside. Despite this fortunate fact, Stella still took a seat in the back. Her teacher, Ms. Mason, never resisted Stella’s defiant attitude toward her seating charts, and Stella assumed it was because of her choice to sit in the back that several conflicts within the classroom disappeared. Firstly, the children could no longer shoot spitballs at Stella’s chin, as they weren’t allowed to turn around in their seats. They had also stopped passing notes obsessively focused
on Stella's facial hair. Once, Ms. Mason had confiscated an intricate illustration of Stella's facial hair done in colored pencil. It had been drawn collaboratively by several of her pet students. Stella had watched Ms. Mason place this artifact in her desk drawer, instead of throwing it in the trash. Now that Stella had removed herself from the view of her fellow students, the notes they passed were free to explore a wide variety of fascinating new topics.

The sun was still high in the sky at the end of the school day. Stella wished she had time to stop home and shave, but her house was in the exact opposite direction of the pharmacy, and she couldn't explain to her mother why she needed to go to town, for fear of being shamed and prevented from completing her errand. She brushed a finger over her chin and felt about a half an inch of stubble. She wanted to rip each hair out.

From her schoolbag, she pulled her latest knitting project: a black shawl, to wear in the winter months when the nights became chilly and crisp. She found the end of the knitting and ripped out half the stitches, tucking the ball of unused yard back safely into her bag. She wrapped the half-finished shawl around her head in the unforgiving light, covering her mouth. Then she began to walk down the main road toward the center of town.

The town itself was one of the smallest in the county. The center contained the pharmacy, a food market, the post office, the library, the police and fire
departments, and the inn and alehouse. Stella walked by all of these buildings and into the bank.

“Hello,” she said to the teller, who couldn’t have been much older than she. “I’d like to make a small withdrawal.”

“Yes, certainly.” He glanced around nervously. “Do you have your—do you have your book?”

“Of course.” Stella dug in her school bag for her bankbook, and found it at the bottom, underneath a textbook and several readers. She offered it to the teller, but he was now about twenty feet away, on the telephone. How rude, Stella thought. Couldn’t anyone else answer the telephone? She could just make out her reflection in the thick glass divider in front of her. Her eyes, against the white wall behind the glass, looked particularly stark and intriguing today. She noticed her makeshift veil had fallen a bit, so she put her bankbook on the counter and readjusted the material around her chin. She glanced at the teller on the telephone and wondered if he’d seen her beard. He looked at her and immediately looked away. He had. A plum pit materialized in Stella’s stomach.

Just as she was wondering if she’d even heard the telephone ring, a loud voice spoke right behind her. “Ma’am,” it said, “Put down the bag and put your hands in the air.”
The plum pit grew into the pit of a peach. Stella started to turn, but she was too fearful to move. What was going on? She looked to her right and saw two other bank patrons staring at her, wide-eyed.

“Me?” she asked.

“Please put your hands in the air!”

Stella moved the straps of her schoolbag from her shoulder and lowered the bag onto the floor. She raised her arms into the air.

“Officer --” she whispered to the source of the firm voice behind her. “What’s wrong?”

She felt two rough hands grab her wrists and pull them down and behind her back. Then, she felt the cold of metal on each of them. “Ma’am,” the voice said. “I have reason to believe you are robbing this bank.”

Stella tried to turn her head to look at the officer, but she felt her shawl slipping off her face and hanging loosely around her shoulders. It was then that she realized: the shawl!

“Please!” she started to explain, but already he was jerking her toward the door by the handcuffs. In unison, the bank patrons and the teller broke out into applause. The shawl fell from Stella’s shoulders and fluttered to the floor of the bank lobby like a collapsing bird.
People milled about on the street outside, picking up packages at the post office or bringing home groceries before suppertime. The police officer emerged from the bank, pulling Stella by her handcuffed wrists. No one could concentrate on their errands, and a crowd gathered as Stella finally broke away and turned to face the officer.

“I wasn’t robbing the bank!” Stella yelled, exasperated, though she was still unsure how to begin to explain. She squinted one eye in the leveling sunlight and calculated. It had been almost five hours since her last shave.

The officer reached toward her again with one hand, while the other went to the holster on his hip. “Right,” he said. “Then why cover your face?”

Even as he spoke, Stella could tell he saw why. She watched the officer’s brow shoot toward his hairline as he took in the dark hair on her chin, spreading up along the curve of her cheek. He stuttered.

The circle of people pressed closer at the sight of the officer’s stunned reaction. Stella tucked her chin into her chest, but she heard the crowd titter. She looked at several of the faces: an elderly woman with a puckered sneer, a child in delighted awe, a man in paint-speckled dungarees outright laughing. Stella had not kept her secret.
The police officer reached toward Stella’s chin with a trepidatious hand. Stella held her breath, turned, and ran.

She barreled through the crowd of people and into the road. The officer might not even chase her now, might not make it through the thick crowd, but she had to outrun the looks on the faces peering at her.

If her classmates had been unkind before, they would be downright cruel now that their mothers had seen her beard, now that her unwanted facial hair had almost gotten her arrested. She sobbed as she ran down the road from the town center, her breath catching in her chest every few steps, the handcuffs behind her back slicing into her thin wrists.

She couldn’t be in public any longer. She wouldn’t stop at the pharmacy. The dulled blade at home would do, or no blade at all. It didn’t seem to matter, because Stella resolved never to step outside the front door again. Her life, she decided, was over.

Without her arms at her sides to balance her, Stella stumbled down the road to her house. Slick blood trickled down her palms. She wondered what she would tell her mother. Above her, the trees bled together into a long stream of naked branches. The spring’s first birds had returned, and they sang together in a trill chorus. Their harmony was seamless, as though they’d practiced their entire lives to share this one experience among each other. Stella was alone.

*   *

*   *
Stella’s father was sitting in his armchair in the living room when she walked into the house. “There she is,” he said, as if her arrival simply answered a question. Then a confused expression overtook his face as he took in her frazzled appearance.

Stella’s eyes flicked to her mother, who lay on her stomach on the sofa next to her husband, her stockinged feet in his lap. She was organizing her recipe box.

“Are those handcuffs?” Stella’s father blurted.

Stella sighed.

Her mother pulled a recipe card from the box and held it closer to her face, trying to read her own handwriting.

Stella’s father asked: “Where did they come from?”

Stella didn’t answer. Her mother made a marking on the card she’d been holding. She walked two fingers along the tops of the cards in the recipe box and placed the recipe back where it belonged.

“Are you bleeding?!” Stella’s father questioned, his voice rising.

This seemed to stir Stella’s mother. Barely looking up from her work on the sofa, she said lazily: “If your blood is on this rug, you’ll drink it back up through a straw.”

Stella looked back at her father, who, in the absence of answers, seemed to be scrutinizing Stella’s chin. She slumped up toward the stairs, her hands pressed to
the back of her dress, careful to keep her blood to herself. She was hungry, she realized, but she felt almost annoyed at the thought, as if it were irrelevant.

She didn’t have to explain to her parents what happened. The police dropped her schoolbag off at the house, and later, a reporter arrived. Stella watched him walk up the front path from her window, the nub of a pencil tucked behind his ear. In his hand, he held a small notebook.

Her ear to the floor, Stella tried to listen to the muffled conversation her mother had with the reporter in the threshold of the front door, but she couldn’t make out the words. The conversation was short, and Stella’s mother’s voice was smooth and soft. Then the door closed, and the reporter got into the green Plymouth he’d parked on the street, his confused expression visible from Stella’s window.

In her room, Stella stared at herself in her small, dim mirror. She watched her beard shadow her face, her feet growing sore in her shoes. She pictured Ms. Mason’s instructions, trying to do the math in her head. It seemed to grow another eighth of an inch every twenty minutes. The silver under the mirror’s glass had melted unevenly, so that Stella could see the pale pink of her bedroom wall through a corner of the glass. Her shoulders were sore. When she looked back up at her face, a fresh beard completely obscured it. In one swift motion, she shifted her weight and kicked the mirror. She jumped out of the way but lost her balance, falling to the floor.
loudly. She let out a low, guttural howl. The mirror followed her, crashing around her body and smashing into thirty pieces on the floor. She tried to pick herself up, but her legs flopped ineffectively like gasping fish. She went limp. A single sob escaped her throat.

“For God’s sake,” Stella’s father exclaimed, bursting into the room. In his hand he grasped the handle to his chipped blue aluminum tool box, which he placed on the floor next to Stella’s desolate body. Slowly, deliberately, he dismantled the handcuffs behind her back. Then, before she even rose from the floor, he had packed his tools up and left, closing the door behind him.

Stella stepped over the shards of mirror and walked into the bathroom to dress her wrists properly. She avoided her reflection, certain now that she had over an inch of hair on her chin. She dumped the shaving supplies from the shelf on top of the sink into the garbage bin with one long sweep of her bandaged arm.

Stella’s hunger ballooned in her stomach when she awoke the next morning.

Her mother moved around downstairs. What had she told the reporter? Goosebumps pimpled Stella’s forearms; she didn’t want to know. She felt tempted to reach up and feel the length of her beard, but she stopped herself. She hadn’t gone this long without shaving since the hair had first started appearing, when she was still just a girl. The beard was undoubtedly longer than it had ever been. She stayed in bed, frozen.
At seven o’clock, something slid on the hardwood beneath Stella’s door. Breakfast? Her mother’s heeled shoes clicked away down the hall, back toward the stairs. Stella flipped over in her bed, keeping her quilt up under her eyes.

But it wasn’t food. It was a newspaper. She pulled the covers aside and tiptoed toward the bedroom door. From the floor, her classmates’ drawing of her that Ms. Mason had confiscated stared up at Stella from the front page. Absurd, overgrown shrubbery shrouded the bottom half of her face, and large sloppy tears dripped out of her eyes. The headline above the drawing glared at Stella: BEARDED CHILD BOLTS AFTER BIZARRE BANK BUST.

Stella scanned the article. There was a straightforward account of yesterday’s events, in what Stella thought to be a fairly honest portrayal. Her name was there, as she assumed it would be, because she’d left her school bag. But the information about her seemed to stop there; the article claimed that an interview with Stella’s mother had proven inconclusive, as her mother was quoted as saying: “Nonsense! I have no daughter. And I’m thankful to have no part in such a disgrace.”

The article was said to continue on page A5, but when Stella turned to it, she had to double-check to make sure she had the right page number.

Page A5 contained a full-page ad for a carnival that was coming to town the following weekend. The Count Cornelius Carnival, the ad proclaimed in ornate lettering at the top. Underneath, a squat, mustachioed man in a carnival costume lifted a car over his head. A large woman entirely covered in tattoos peered out of
the car’s window. Stella turned back to the front page, to make sure she had gone to the right place. An unfortunate typo, she thought. Or a cruel joke.

Either way, she burst into tears.

She heard her mother leave the house around midday on her errands. Or bridge club, if she wasn’t exiled for her newsworthy daughter. A deluge of sunlight had come into Stella’s room. She tried not to touch her beard to anything, afraid to register how long it had gotten.

After several minutes, she decided that she couldn’t ignore the growling in her stomach any longer. She hurried downstairs, determined to gather food for herself before her mother returned and witnessed the state of Stella’s beard. From the icebox she tore a hunk off of a wheel of cheese, and from the cabinet she extracted several pieces of rye bread.

The doorbell rang, an insistent, shrill ringing that lasted as long as the visitor kept a finger on the brass button. Another reporter. From a regional paper, perhaps. Or her classmates, banding together to pull a prank on her. She placed her supplies on a ceramic plate from the cabinet.

The bell continued to ring, several short sounds and then a prolonged ringing, as if the visitor were growing more impatient. She attempted to creep past
the front door to the stairs, but the sight outside the window beside the door stopped her.

It was a pair of human legs, stretching endlessly toward the porch ceiling and bent at the knee. They were dressed in burgundy pants. Stella blinked hard, convinced she was hallucinating. She opened her eyes wide again, but the giant legs were still there. The plate of cheese and bread clattered to the floor.

At the sound of the dropped plate, a set of knuckles rapped on the door.

“Hello?” asked a polite voice. “I’m looking for Stella!”

In the window, the enormous legs shifted their weight.

Stella stepped over the shards of her mother’s plate and placed her hand on the doorknob. The knees bent in the window beside the door, and a long, pointed face appeared in the frame, staring right at her. Stella yelped and swung the door open.

The legs straightened again. She gazed up to the waist, then the midsection, then the chest of an extremely tall man. By the time she looked at his face, the back of her head was flush against her neck. He wore a burgundy pinstripe suit that had to have been custom-made, and several shiny, large rings on his fingers. The collar of his shirt was pointed and crisp.

He crouched down again in front of her until his face was level with hers. He wore a look of pure curiosity. “Are you Stella?”
The man’s eyes widened on her chin. Stella clasped her hands over her mouth in an effort to hide her beard, hoping she looked as though she were aghast at the man’s height.

“Excuse me,” the stranger said. “I’m sorry. You must be Stella.”

She thought about closing the door, but couldn’t move. Several small noises eked out into her cupped hands. The man continued.

“I must assume your name is Stella. I hope you’ll excuse my impertinence. But would you be so kind as to let me touch it?”

Stella’s hands dropped from her mouth. “Excuse me?”

The man smiled apologetically. “I mean to say, the hair on your chin. Would you be so kind as to allow me to test its authenticity?”

Stella gasped. “Of all the requests! You think you can just read some article –”

“Article?” the man mused.

“Yes,” Stella said. “The newspaper article. About my beard. Or are you pretending you don’t see it now?”

“Of course not!” the man exclaimed delightedly. “How could I miss it?”

Stella gasped again. “I’ve never met someone so rude!”

The stranger exchanged his delighted expression for one of amusement.
The slight rearrangement of his features blew onto the embers of Stella’s rage, and just as she turned to slam the door in his face, the man spoke again.

“I am rude,” the man exclaimed. “I do apologize! I came by to introduce myself, and I’ve been so stunned by your talents, I’ve forgotten my manners completely. I’m terribly sorry! My name is Count Cornelius. But you can call me Angus.”

Stella immediately remembered the ad for the carnival she’d seen in the newspaper. The Count Cornelius Carnival.

“Did you replace my article with your ad?” she asked.

“No,” the man answered. “I can’t claim any responsibility for this town’s shoddy reporting. I would imagine most people around here don’t observe things critically. Otherwise –” he peeked into the house, glimpsing the broken plate of bread and cheese on the floor behind Stella – “someone of your stature wouldn’t need to sneak food to her quarters!”

Stella squinted, scrutinizing the man. He watched her do this. Then he cleared his throat.

“I own the carnival in the ad you saw. I have a great admiration for the exceptional. Many unfortunate souls cannot share this admiration without a certain type of context. I’ve built my life’s work around providing such a context. The elation
I experience upon encountering a talent such as yours is most certainly meant to be shared.

"Please work for me. I read the article. It injures me deeply to know that you alter your true nature each day by attempting to eliminate your talent. You are a rarity, Stella. Not a miscreation."

Stella stared up at the strange man on her front porch. Angus. She looked out at the front lawn behind him, toward the bushes, wondering if this were all a joke.

"I understand your skepticism," Angus continued. "Especially because the carnival is still small. So far, it’s only the Strongest Man in the World, a Painted Lady still quite in progress, a series of excellent rides, and some unusual, fascinating games. Soon there will be a set of conjoined twins. Their names are Pepa and Paola. And I’m closing in fast on a several other leads, including a fortuneteller. The show is growing rapidly. I’d like to invite you onto the ground floor of something quite huge."

"But aren’t those people freaks?" Stella asked.

"Not anymore," the man concluded. "Not to mention, I’ve done my research on this town. Someone like you doesn’t belong someplace like this. I’d like to build a better home for you, if you’ll have me do it."

Angus’s pointed features looked sincere, almost apologetic, as if he had accidentally deposited Stella in the house she’d lived in all these years. She wasn’t
sure that she trusted him. But she imagined waking up in her bed tomorrow. She pictured walking around school, or town, or even the house, with the beard she’d grown overnight. Then she wondered how long ago her mother had left the house. She wondered when she’d be back.

“We don’t have much time,” she said finally.

“Would you like to gather your things?” Angus asked, clasping his hands calmly. “I can help, if need be. Or we can always outfit you anew on the road.”

Stella gave Angus a stiff smile. She looked behind her, at the staircase that led to her room. She glanced downward at the broken plate on the floor behind her. Then she looked back up at Angus and shook her head.

She grasped the outside doorknob on the front door, feeling its smooth, cool texture against her palm. Then she took a breath and closed the door to her old home behind her. She smelled the wet, musty scent of spring. She looked up at Angus, who smiled down at her reassuringly on the porch, the sun beaming behind his head like a halo. Then Stella stepped forward, and into the light.
This is what Pepa and Paola knew: they each had their own heads, and their own brains inside them. Their necks lengthened from their constant stretching away from each other. They possessed two pairs of browned arms, their elbows bony and sharp. The chest was where it got messy. They each had their own ribs on the outside, but on the inside their skeletons fused together, as though someone had taken a blowtorch to their bodies while we were sleeping. Their doubly broad chest tapered into a thin waist. They shared a pair of legs, whether they liked it or not.

At twelve years old, each had a length of thick, delicate black hair, which they wore in two long braids down their shared back. Their cheekbones jutted into the sharp angles of their indigenous ancestors’, and they shared a view through four heavily lashed, almond-shaped eyes. Their legs were strong and lean.

The girls didn't look identical; while Pepa had a small, puckered mouth, Paola's lips were shapely and plump. Pepa's ears came off of her head like wings. Paola had a prominent bump in the bridge of her nose. These details looked less like flaws than subtle ways to name the girls, to tell them apart, because aside from the strangeness of their shared body, their beauty was absolute.

*   *
The girls were lucky to have been born in such a remote place. Their story rarely reached across the South Pacific to the mainland. When it did, people almost never considered it true.

The sisters lived on an island that descended straight down into the sea in a series of terraces. Its original inhabitants had constructed the terraces; this way, they made the island’s hilly terrain useful for growing wheat and vegetables.

The settlement of the island village had preceded the sisters’ birth, though not by many years. The island’s transformation into a livable village had happened fairly recently, but the sisters arrived late enough that the harvests were reputed to be plentiful, the church had been erected, and a tight community had formed.

This last fact was unfortunate. Communities were quick to identify outliers and convert them into common enemies. A community tightened against irregularity among its ranks, and united to stamp it out. A wise newcomer knew to conceal his strangeness, his peculiarities. Pepa and Paola had no such option.

After their mother died giving birth to them, the twins were placed in the care of the church. It was a modest building: a large, stone and adobe room with paneless windows and a small balcony for additional seating, which went unused. Beside the church sat a smaller building, the rectory, in which the church’s priest, an ancient, troubled-looking man, lived and did his good work. Beside the rectory was an even smaller hut, where Sister Isabel lived.
Sister Isabel was a grim, stooped woman with scrutinizing eyes and cottony tufts of hair spilling from beneath her habit onto her wrinkled forehead. She took up Pepa and Paola’s cause immediately, determined to defy their monstrousness and save their shared soul. We are all God’s creatures, she said, even the bothersome and the hideously disfigured.

The sisters lived in the balcony, and slept on a stack of a dozen or so straw mats, with a burlap blanket on top of them. Sister Isabel took great care not to advertise Pepa and Paola’s flawed existence to the congregation; the occasions the villagers were exposed to the twins seemed to coincide with the instances the men returned to the church at night, drunk and hurling bottles at the heavy wooden doors. Sister Isabel feared the men would break in, find where the sisters slept, and create within the girls new creatures, creatures with many heads and red, slithering tongues. The church’s congregation was certainly a most holy one, Sister Isabel explained, and its devotion was admirable. But there was something ungodly about the girls, which instilled an innate fear in the villagers. This devilishness would have to be teased out of the girls; their conjoined soul would be cleansed. Until then, they were to study the Word of God. This was the priority.

Sister Isabel believed there was a pinnacle of piety, and the girls would crack open and divide like a nutshell if they achieved this ultimate faith.

*   *
Pepa and Paola spent most of their days alone; they did not attend school, but instead received lessons from Sister Isabel, whose duties on the island were limited. She did not bother to teach them to read or write; Pepa demonstrated a dominant left hand, and Paola a dominant right. They were constantly knocking elbows and screaming into each other's ears. Besides which, they developed at different rates; the task of teaching them such skills seemed insurmountable.

Clothing was also an issue. Once a year, a female parishioner the girls never saw nor met created for them what Sister Isabel called their “uniform.” It was a bed sheet, folded over and stitched up the sides, with two collars cut into the top. Sister Isabel grinned her grayish teeth when the girls tried each new uniform on. They were not permitted a mirror, but they only had to look down and see the shapeless form of their strange body. The sheet scratched their skin.

The more the girls learned about Sister Isabel’s God over the years, the more questions they had about their own existence. Why would someone purposely sculpt them this way? Or had it been an accident? Were there such things? If not, why must they hide from the other God-fearing villagers? These questions spawned new questions unrelated to Sister Isabel’s cause: who was their mother? Where did she grow up? What was she like? Would she have loved them?

Each night, Sister Isabel read to them a bedtime story from the New Testament and monitored their nightly prayers. Then she descended back down
from the balcony into the church, and locked the door to the steps upstairs loudly before disappearing to her hut. But on the girls’ thirteenth birthday, Sister Isabel presented them with a gift of sorts. Instead of a story from the Bible, she elected to tell them the story of their birth.

Sister Isabel sat in a creaky chair with a straw-woven seat, and crossed her legs. She pulled a folding knife from her pocket and began to clean beneath her fingernails. After several minutes, she cleared her throat and began. The girls lay in their bed, rigid and rapt.

Their father was no one: “a runner,” as Sister Isabel put it. Their mother, they were told, was a hare-lipped peasant who had moved to the new island colony from Peru while she was pregnant, departing from a port balanced on Chile’s thin fingertip. She was determined to convert her pregnancy into an opportunity, to start a new life, far from the grim clutches of familiarity. She died giving birth to the girls, a fact the girls already knew. Sister Isabel said the midwife fainted, a fact the girls didn’t.

“We killed her,” Pepa murmured to no one, sullen and shocked.

“She killed herself,” Paola replied bitterly, staring at the raw wooden beams above their heads.

“This is why the village fears us,” Pepa continued.
“No,” Sister Isabel argued sternly. “You’re no killer, Pepa. They fear you because of the legend.”

The twins sat up simultaneously. A tree frog began to call in a corner of the church below them, its song muffled by the earthy walls.

Paola demanded, “What legend?”

Sister Isabel pursed her lips. She folded her knife and brushed the dirt from her lap. She shook her head and put her hands on her knees, making to get up.


Sister Isabel reached across and with her closed knife, rapped Paola on the knuckles of her nearest hand.

“Ouch!” Pepa cried out. For a second, the tree frog went silent.

Paola rubbed her reddening knuckles and ignored her sister’s consternation.

“Is the legend why they call us La Monstrua?”

Sister Isabel opened her mouth, then closed it. She rocked back in her chair.

“Where did you hear that?” she asked.

Paola grinned. “I dreamed it,” she replied, her tone almost taunting.

Sister Isabel’s eyelids fluttered. She crossed herself.

“Sister,” Pepa whispered, her eyes glassy and wide. “We need to know what we are. We need to know, so that we can change.”
Sister Isabel sighed so loudly, she could not hear Paola snort at her sister’s remark.

The legend was the reason the twins must foster their devotion to God, Sister Isabel said, and to do it in secrecy. Then she recited the legend of La Monstrua:

Generations ago, the Sapa, the Great One, emperor of the Incas, had a younger brother. This brother was named the Willaq Umu, the High Priest of the Sun. The High Priest was the second most powerful man in the empire after his brother; this was an oversight on the part of the gods.

The High Priest viewed vices as badges; as the brother of the Sapa and the foremost member of the council, he had ample allowance in his lifestyle for corruption. He exerted his power by engaging in as many disgraceful activities as he could, but his greatest vice was lechery.

During the Sapa’s rule, there was a great draught that lasted many years. Inti, the Sun God, called upon the High Priest to visit the starving and sick, and offer the power of his prayers to the gods. The High Priest’s servants carried him among the houses of the villagers for several days, and he anointed the ill.

One day, the High Priest prayed over a poor farmer’s dying girl. Her skin hung like cotton from the bones of her face, and her eyes rolled back into her head.
The High Priest pulled back the sheet that covered the girl’s rotting body, and he could tell she had once been beautiful. It was then that he knew: this woman would mother his children.

He took her from her family and back to the capital district with him. There, he arranged a ceremony in his quarters. He called upon Inti, the giver of life, to revive the girl, a request that would drain the High Priest of the power he needed to heal his starving empire. Then, he impregnated her.

Inti took great pity upon the girl. He spared her life from starvation by reversing her hunger, and from certain death at the hand of the High Priest by granting her a child. After these kind acts, the Sun God raged with wrath for his High Priest.

The earth quaked for many days, and rainless lightning ripped through the sky. The Sun God felt great remorse for the distinctions he had created between man and woman: man with his thirst for control of his circumstances, and woman with her capacity to endure unimaginable hardship. The Sun God created in the belly of the girl a being with two heads: one with the great ability to command, and the other with the great capacity to yield.

When his baby was born, the High Priest was horrified. He proclaimed it monstrous, and sent it to an island off the empire’s coast to die. Then he denounced his new Priestess and cut her throat.
But miraculously, the baby flourished. It maintained all the qualities the Sun God had instilled in it. In mere days it began to crawl, and it drank rainwater lying on its back. It grew into a child. With its innate ability to nurture and cultivate, it fostered vegetables and medicinal plants. And with its talent for force, it hunted and fished.

After many years, a group of men from the mainland who considered themselves South American pioneers travelled to the island in order to uncover the body of La Monstrua. But when they arrived, they were shocked at the island’s beauty. Its land was fertile and its beasts were fat and plentiful. The men found the child alive and well, and cultivating the island’s resources. The men knew then that to kill La Monstrua was to curse the land it had created. So they designed a cage for it on the edge of the island, where it lived for many years. Then the people built a village as far from La Monstrua as they could, and the villagers began to live off the land.

After hearing this story, Paola could no longer focus on her studies. For several weeks afterward, she was ashamed of her monstrousness. Then, one night, she resolved to fulfill it.
The church had several acres of land behind it for crops, including wheat to grind into Christ’s body, and produce to sell, to raise funds for the parish. It was nighttime, a new moon, and the girls would be up all night in the dark fields. The parish had workers to tend to the crops, but this was when Sister Isabel elected that the girls could work: monthly, in the near pitch darkness, when no one could observe them.

The success of the kumar harvest this year was significant, which meant nothing but a significant amount of work to Paola. She bent up and down the rows, pulling her sister along. They uprooted the tuberous orange potatoes on their respective sides, careful to preserve the greens. Sister Isabel followed behind them, leaning on a wheeled basket and singing hymns forcefully with her low-pitched voice.

The twins were almost at the brush toward the end of the field when they heard a rustling. A puppy, gray with mange and wagging its tail, bounded out from the bushes.

“Look!” Paola hissed, straightening up and dropping a sweet potato into the dirt with a soft thud. She was excited, feeling the way a child must when they are given a gift.

Paola straightened up, pulling Pepa and forcing her to abandon her work. She could feel Pepa noticing the puppy at the exact moment he noticed them. He slowed his run to a few cautious steps, looking from one human face to the other.
The puppy was beautiful. Paola felt a pang inside her, as though a taut string had been snapped against her lungs. She exercised restraint during Sister Isabel’s grueling lessons and lectures, she tolerated life in the dark church, with its echoes and its occasional infestation of bats. She lived with her sister, the coward, the fool, side-by-side day in and day out. She was qualified, capable, deserving. She was entitled to something she wanted. She was entitled to the dog.

The puppy bared his small, needle-like teeth and let out a mousy growl. Sister Isabel ceased her singing. Just as Paola felt her sister take an instinctive step backward, her own fascination propelled them toward the snarling thing. The dog stopped growling and turned his head to look behind him, at the woods. He wore a makeshift collar, a leather braid tied around its neck.

Another noise emerged from the brush behind the dog.

“Girls --” Sister Isabel’s sharp voice whispered from behind them, an attempt to reprimand, to foretell.

It was too late. A boy half their age stepped out into the clearing, in a dusty pair of pants and new, hand-sewn leather shoes. He looked at the puppy relieved and scooped it up by its collar. Paola watched him freeze. His eyes travelled slowly upward. He looked from Paola to her sister, and then to their midsection, where the air of the night should have passed between, but didn’t. He let out a sound, something between a squeal and a gasp. He took a step back.
Paola could feel her sister’s fear in her head, saturating her thoughts like spilled ink. She acted, hastily blotting the black fear with her own desperate want. She jumped forward, snatching the puppy around the middle. The collar in the boy’s hand slipped easily from the dog’s neck. For a second, everything paused. Paola’s entire body felt the shock of her own actions, and the shock her sister surely experienced toward the entire situation. She felt the soft fur of the puppy, the rumble of its little growl against the sisters’ ribcage. The braided leather collar swung pendulously in the boy’s hand.

“Run!” Paola howled at the boy. She flicked her tongue at him like a demon, a monster. Then, she charged him, forcing Pepa to do the same. Paola snarled and roared at the boy. Her animal noises tore through the silent night.

The boy fell, clambered to his feet, and ran. The dark of the woods absorbed him, then his shadow. Paola spun with her sister away from the scene. She propelled the two of them past Sister Isabel, who stood stunned behind them. As she raced by, she could hear Sister Isabel begin to pray, muttering under her breath, her voice moving up toward the sky. Paola dragged Pepa as fast she could into the house, the puppy clutched tight to her chest.

The memory of this night was more inescapable to Pepa than her own skin. The sisters began their new life that night, a life of persecution and imprisonment. The boy in the woods had run home, undoubtedly woken his family, and told them
about the demon that had stolen his puppy. Showed them the token of the dog’s necklace collar. It had taken less than an hour to gather the entire village, complete with the torches straight out of Sister Isabel’s worst fears.

Pepa remembered standing on the other side of the heavy church doors, perking up her outside ear to hear each of Sister Isabel’s words. She pictured Sister Isabel’s brown face reddening, her invisible upper lip quivering, as she preached the necessity for reform, the power of the Devil unchecked. Pepa even heard her fervently suggest the villagers return with offerings for the church, apologize for their outrage.

Beside Pepa, Paola was preoccupied. The dog crouched on the stone floor next to her, and she stroked his patchy fur. He growled intermittently. At one point, Pepa reached over to pinch his snout shut, hoping to silence the thing. He bit her fingers with his needle teeth, drawing small beads of blood to her skin.

The villagers were growing rowdy outside of the church. Red light bloomed beneath the church doors, spreading onto the gray floor: the number of torches outside was increasing. Pepa heard Sister Isabel begin to remind the villagers of the legend of La Monstrua, a blasphemy she had denounced mere weeks before. This was an act of desperation.

“Think of the land!” she bellowed. “Think of your precious crops! How will they grow?”
She was losing them, Pepa realized. Then she recognized too late what she had done just by thinking this: she had tipped her sister off. These were the kind of thoughts Pepa wished she could anticipate – realizations, epiphanies, instincts, consciousness in general. Although there was always a delay in travel from the birth of her original thought to its runoff into her sister's mind, it was never any longer than a second; who could react that quickly?

Paola could. Pepa whipped her head toward her sister, who was present now, suddenly listening to the scene outside, her hand limp over the dog's body. The villagers were chanting, not words but something much worse: a rhythm, several syllables at most, some rallying cry rapidly drowning out Sister Isabel's measured pleas. Paola snapped to her feet, yanking Pepa up with her. She snatched the cold iron handle of the church door. Pepa struggled to pull her sister back into the shadows of the church, almost losing their balance completely. She practically flapped behind Paola as she wrenched the door open.

"Close it!" Pepa pleaded. "Please, close it!"

But her efforts were useless. To Paola, the price of satisfying her own impulses was dirt cheap; each time, she generously split the consequences down the middle.

Paola drew herself up tall behind Sister Isabel's back, gathered a deep breath, and unleashed an unearthly scream into the air. She imagined the pain her mother
felt giving birth to her. She thought of the body she shared with her sister, its irreverence, its rejection of custom, all in favor of something twice as strong, twice as powerful. Her vocal cords swung in her throat like a slingshot, breaking her voice, sending an even higher pitch careening into the crowd. A few people gasped.

For half a second, nothing existed but silence. Then Paola screamed again, a wretched war cry, a feral sob. Three dozen faces regarded her, and her sister at her side.

Then, the crowded rushed the church.

The tsunami of villagers washed away Paola's entire memory of the rest of that night; in this way, she could remain guiltless. She had only the facts of the aftermath: that Sister Isabel was trampled to death, that she and her sister were beaten within an inch of their lives, that they were spared for the sake of a superstition, that the church they grew up inside of was corrupted in an instant.

And that somehow, she got to keep the puppy.

Several of the male villagers pulled together and built them a hut, a rushed adobe job on a notched wooden skeleton. Far from the village, on the island's cliff, it was a one-room house, with an outhouse and a shallow well with a hand pump in the backyard. There was little inside but the same thin, straw mattress they had slept on in the church's balcony, a small table and stove, and a large mirror. The
townspeople had included this as a finishing touch; after the hard work they’d done, they wanted La Monstrua to suffer its ugliness daily.

The men spent the most time working on the wall, a high partition made of stone that overshadowed the hut on three sides. This way, they could expect the continuity of their island’s bountiful resources, and ensure their own safety. The sisters’ sole view held up a mirror to them: it was a sea of constant torment, breaking daily against the confinement of the cliff’s steep wall.

They received rations in the form of offerings from the villagers; once a week, an unlucky member of the small town would travel all the way out to the cliff and throw a package over the high wall: stale bread or meat gone to mold. Pepa did the best she could with what they received, desperate not to entrust their only lifeline to Paola. She knew that to let her sister get sick was to sicken herself, and she doubted the villagers would part with any of their medicine. Some days, she wondered how long it would take someone to discover them if they died. This unknown was terrifying, and a convincing incentive to continue to live.

The puppy grew into a dog, a small, dirt-gray thing, the bottom row of its yellow teeth always protruding. The name Paola gave him, Sinchi, meant “boss” in their native Quechua, a name he lived up to with ease. At first, Pepa tried to make nice; Sinchi was, after all, the preferable roommate in the house. But soon she found the dog would have no substitute for Paola. He cried when he couldn’t touch his skin to hers, and early on dismissed Pepa as a poor imitation for his owner. He frequently
snarled at Pepa out of nowhere, wrinkling his small nose and rumbling that tiny body, as if to maintain her knowledge of his hatred for her. Pepa's side of the sisters' shared body was covered with bites.

Paola frequently insisted Sinchi sit on the lap the girls shared. While Paola stroked his patchy fur, Pepa stared ahead, wide-eyed, careful not to flinch. The dog hated everyone but Paola, and Paola in turn hated everything but the dog.

At first, the girls spent much of their time in front of the mirror, though they did it for separate reasons. Paola glanced from her own reflection to her sister's, insisting that their allure was virtually incomparable. It didn't matter if they had two heads or twelve. Beauty could be dangerous, she explained to her sister, in that it could cause a sailor to fall from the deck of his ship, or drive two men to fight to the death. As far as Paola was concerned, what she and her sister possessed doubled this sort of danger. She wanted to strut in the street. She wished they could climb the wall and strip nude in the market under the blaring noon sun. Their beauty was alarming, she insisted. The best kind of beauty disturbed.

Pepa kept silent while Paola ranted like this. She observed their reflection in horror, desperate each day to be greeted by ugliness instead. She reveled in the grubby, stained sack they wore, happy to don this small daily penance.
They turned fourteen, then fifteen, then sixteen in the lonely hut, and they only became more beautiful. Pepa believed the fact of their good looks was a slap in the face. It was like giving a weapon to a dying man at an arena before sending him to meet a lion: sadistic. To silently prove her theory to herself, all she had to do was look out the window of their shared prison, at the high wall, at the tall cliff they teetered on. Then Pepa had to admit, her sister wasn’t all wrong. Their beauty was, in fact, dangerous. Not dangerous like an elegant tarantula inching through the shadows. Dangerous like a curse.

Four years into the sisters’ solitary life on the cliff, someone knocked on their front door.

It was early morning, and the sun pressed a ruddy square onto the floor of the hut. Paola dragged Pepa out of bed, a dulled shiv she’d crafted herself poised in her hand. She peered through a small knot in the wooden front door.

“It’s a man!” Paola hissed. Her stomach gurgled with excitement. She held the knife up high. Then she glanced back at her sister, whose face was dressed in its usual frantic paranoia. Paola swung open the front door.

The girls squinted upward into the sunlight; the man was tall, taller than anyone that lived in their village. He was swarthy, and every one of his features seemed to be pointy, although none of them protruded very far from the plain of his face. Paola thought his suit looked expensive; it was the red of dried blood, with thin
white stripes from his shoulders to his shoes. She wondered how this man found clothes that fit his body. This made her think of herself and Pepa, and the potato-sack dress that hung limply from their body.

Paola’s gaze lighted on at the vast, colorful shape in the yard behind the man. It was a large, shining bulb, the same color of the man’s suit, but taller, taller even than the girls’ hut. Beneath the bulb was a basket large enough to collect an entire harvest inside. The two pieces connected with four ropes, one from each corner of the basket. Several sacks of what looked like grain were folded over the basket’s rim.

“Good afternoon!” said the man in terrible Spanish.

Paola’s eyes snapped back to his face. She poised her precious knife, ready to strike his long torso.

The stranger eyed the weapon. “Pardon the intrusion,” he offered. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Count Cornelius --”

“My name is Count Cornelius--” Paola mimicked in perfect pitch, raising the knife even higher. She could feel her sister’s embarrassed gaze on her, which only fueled her need to escalate the situation.

Sinchi emerged from the bowels of the hut and slid between the girls’ legs. He began to bark and growl, stomping his tiny feet.

“Ah!” said the man. “Good morning, pooch. It’s Sinchi, am I correct?”
The dog yelped; he had never heard his name spoken in a third voice before, and seemed to dislike the sound very much.

Paola squinted at the man: who was he? A new villager? But no, even the villagers had no interest in the name of her dog, and besides, his skin was too light, almost bluish.

Paola felt her sister's cold fear ooze into her side of the body, as if she were chilling the blood they shared. The humid air around Paola seemed to crystallize in her lungs. The knife faltered in her hand. She became annoyed at herself.

The man was talking again, looking down at his gigantic hands, which held a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. “I've brought you something.”

Pepa's eyes widened; Paola's grew narrow.

“Perhaps I could come in,” the stranger suggested gently.

Sinchi whimpered, hiding behind one of the girls’ ankles. Paola realized she hadn’t seen her dog act frightened since the night she’d found him. She suddenly wanted nothing to do with the entire situation.

“No!” she yelled up toward the stranger's face. Then she spun away from the outside world, slamming the door behind her.

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113
Pepa’s desperation festered while the girls watched the man retreat through the hut’s window. This person could have saved them, could have whisked them away. Didn’t he say he was a prince? Anyway, he had some kind of title. She could have learned to love him. They both could have.

The man placed the brown package delicately at the front door and walked back to his bulbous vehicle. He swung one long leg and then the other into the enormous basket. He smoothed his fancy clothing down with his long spider fingers, reached up toward the giant bulb over his head, and pulled a lever.

Flames erupted above the stranger. Pepa gasped. He seemed to expect the explosion, and had ducked his head out of the way, but what if he hadn’t? Pepa imagined his black hair aflame, its slickness fueling the fire like the oiled head of a torch. Then, the entire contraption, the bulb, the basket, and the man inside it, rose from the ground.

Pepa gasped again, immediately feeling her sister radiate with exasperation beside her. Pepa couldn’t help it; the man was flying!

Sinchi weaved in and out of the girls’ two feet, unable to look out of the high window with them. Pepa knew that to Paola, it appeared as though the dog hadn’t trusted the stranger; this was foolish, Pepa thought. Sinchi’s trust was no measure of a person’s character; he trusted no one but Paola. Still, she could tell what her sister had been thinking. Pepa tutted at the dog, partly in an effort to quiet his growling, partly out of disapproval for complicating the new plans forming in her mind.
The girls watched the man float higher and higher, clearing the wall, then the entire island. Pepa made them stay at the window until he was no longer even a speck. Then she allowed Paola to turn them back toward the hut, toward the fact of their calamitous existence.

The questions boiled in Pepa’s mind. Who was the man? Where did he come from? How much more did he know about them? If he knew the dog’s name, he must also know theirs. Did he know their mother? What did he want? And the question that bubbled the wildest: how could he simply climb into a basket and fly?

He’s a magician, Pepa thought. He can go anywhere. He can shift shapes. He can produce anything from thin air. He can make things disappear.

Maybe even halves of things.

Pepa’s voice was high, pestering like a mosquito, begging. “What do you think is in the package?”

Paola frowned. She was ready to forget the intruder, the untrustworthy man who had no respect for hundreds of years of island history. “Poison,” she suggested.

“Maybe it’s rations,” Pepa countered, “delivered early, by hand.”

Paola considered this. Then smile twisted on her lips. “Yep,” she agreed. “A new routine. A brave man from the mainland pays the village so he can bring La Monstrua its rations. Then invites himself in to have both women at once.”
Pepa gasped. Paola worked to smother an all-out grin.

“N-no,” Pepa stuttered half-decidedly, looking at the knife Paola still held in her hand. “You would kill a man if he tried to do something horrible like that to us.”

“What do you know?” Paola retorted. “Maybe I’d thank him.”

Paola watched in delight for the rest of the day as her sister’s thin lips quivered and her eyes flitted toward the window. It was choice entertainment: every few hours, Pepa gritted her teeth, suddenly resolute, desperate to open the gift outside the front door. Then the fear would inevitably overcome her expression again, and she’d begin to shiver.

Paola possessed no curiosity about what the man had left them. She doubted it was poison or rations. He wasn’t trying to kill them or keep them alive. He was trying to take them away. His flying contraption had first allowed him access to their legend, then access to their hut. Not to mention, his Spanish was horrible. He’d come a long way, and he clearly didn’t intend to stay. No, he’d made a plan and had come to enact it.

The package was, no doubt, part of all this. The man clearly had an interest in novelties, Paola reasoned; his suit was downright flamboyant, a poor choice for a voyage. Paola guessed the stranger meant to lure them back with him with delicacies from his foreign land. These were in the package.
Sinchi spent much of the day with his front paws on Paola’s chest, licking her chin. *My life here is perfect,* Paola thought as she fielded the dog’s affection. She had no intention of leaving. Here, the sisters were a legend, and they sustained the life forces of an entire island. The village had gone from antagonizing them to providing for them. They could live alone; they were no longer made to fear God or common village people. Rather, everyone and everything feared them. To leave all of this would be foolish.

That night, Paola dreamed about the man. She saw him as a skeleton, still dressed in his deep red suit but skinless, muscleless, standing in the yard. His bones glowed, casting a ghoulish light into the hut. In the dream, Paola got up from the bed to look outside the window.

Paola looked down and realized suddenly that the side of her body was covered in blood. It was her own blood. Where was Pepa? Paola looked out again at the yard. There was her sister, sitting atop the skeleton man’s shoulders. She hooked her ankles around his neck.

The man made a sound. It was the music of his bones clacking together, his jaw working wider and wider, his teeth chattering. Paola watched the pair as Pepa joined in the song. Paola realized: they were laughing together. They were together, laughing.

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Pepa woke up feeling strange, as if she’d slept the whole night with her eyes open, and waking simply meant deciding to use them. The ceiling of the hut sloped downward over her head; she counted the eyes in the knotty half-logs staring down at her expectantly. She’d had such a vivid dream. A flying giant...

Pepa froze. A prickling perforated her limbs. The visitor, the stranger. It had been no dream at all. The tall prince. The memory choked her: the way Paola had scared the man away. And the way she had scared Pepa away from the man, with what Pepa saw clearly now as lies.

Paola had gotten them banished to the end of the earth. She had sacrificed Sister Isabel’s life, had caused violence in God’s house, had offered up her twin sister’s free will, for what? A dog? A miniature brute? She had scared a visitor away in favor of remaining imprisoned at the edge of a cliff. Pepa couldn’t move. She tossed her eyes toward her sleeping sister, who snored softly beside her. A string of drool floated down Paola’s chin toward their neck.

Then Pepa remembered the package.

She sat upright in the bed, sending Sinchi to the floor, yelping and growling in protest. Paola dragged behind her, barely waking. Her dead weight pulled at Pepa’s side. She allowed herself a small gasp before hauling Paola out of bed and throwing their double-collared frock over their heads. Then Pepa lugged her sister’s slumbering body across the hut to the front door.
Sinchi barked. Paola thrashed, waking violently as her body bumped behind her sister’s. Pepa swung the front door open, grabbed the gift off the ground, and slammed the door shut before her sister could wake enough to understand what was happening.

“What the fuck...” Paola growled.

Pepa placed the present gingerly on the small table.

Paola blinked hard and rubbed an eye with the butt of her hand. “What is that?”

Pepa reached for the tail of the twine bow just as Paola began to scream.

“Don’t touch that!” she wailed in Pepa’s ear. “We are not opening that!”

The sisters both grabbed at the package, ripping it from the other’s grasp. The wrapping tore. Their gift fell right on top of their feet.

It was fabric, a shade darker than the stranger’s suit. Pepa bent and plucked it off the floor. It was a dress.

Pepa squealed. She wrestled the ratty sack back off of their body. When Paola protested, Pepa simply ripped the old frock clean off her. She wiggled her head through one of the collars of the new dress, and shoved Paola’s through the other.

The fabric felt breezy and clean on Pepa’s skin; rather than trapping the morning heat, the dress seemed to convert it to cool air. Pepa had never known clothes to feel this magnificent. She ran to the mirror. This time, both girls gasped.
The dress was shiny and appeared lighter than air. It hugged their budding chest, giving it shape, and flared at their shared legs. They looked womanly. Their body looked purposeful. The dress was made for them.

Paola sat on the floor before the mirror, her dirty feet splayed out in front of her. Pepa followed her down, kneeling beside her. The two spent a long time staring at their reflection. Pepa braided her own hair, expecting Paola to follow suit, but when she didn’t, Pepa simply shrugged. Then, she waited.

The man returned late in the afternoon. He looked satisfied when the sisters came to the door wearing his gift. Paola scowled.

Pepa threw herself onto the ground at the man’s feet. Paola hung on to the doorjamb, trying not to kneel.

“We love it!” Pepa screeched. “It’s the most beautiful thing we’ve ever seen!”

The man smiled warmly, clasping his spindly hands together. “I’m so pleased,” he said. Then he turned to Paola. “Is this true, Paola?” he asked. “Is it the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

Paola snorted.

“Ah,” the man answered, still smiling. “No? Then what, may I ask, is?”

“My own face, you giant fool.”
“Rightfully so.” The man had been expecting this answer from her. “I agree wholeheartedly. In fact, I think the rest of the world would agree with us.”

Paola pursed her lips; this was not quite the conversation she had anticipated. Sinchi bumped his small, warm nose against their ankles, alternately growling and whimpering.

“My name is Count Cornelius,” the man tried for the second time. “But please, call me Angus. I own the foremost travelling carnival in the world, if I can be so immodest, and we tour the United States together. I would like to showcase the two of you. Not as a fearsome monster, but as an unparalleled beauty. I have here a contract.”

The stranger reached into his blood-red pocket and pulled out several folded pieces of paper. From another pocket he extracted a heavy silver pen and handed it to Pepa. He unfolded the papers and pointed at a line on the last page. He did all of this without looking at Paola.

Paola watched Pepa as she examined the pen in her hand, uncertain how to use it. Then she squinted at the words on the pages, trying to make sense of them. She looked up at the man.

Suddenly, Sinchi lunged. He sank his yellow teeth into the man’s ankle, ripping the leg of his pants.
The man cried out and shook his leg about, swinging the dog around in the air. Pepa shrieked. Paola stooped to try and catch the dog safely, but before she could, the stranger flung him into the yard. Sinchi lay stunned for a second, then scrambled up and into the hut.

Pepa reached for the contract in the man’s hand. Paola swung her body around, forcing her sister inside. Then she spat at the dirt near the stranger’s feet.

“Don’t come back,” she threatened. She bared her teeth at the man the way her dog had, demonstrating her monstrousness. Then she slammed the door a second time.

Sinchi spent the rest of the day whimpering. Pepa spent it staring down at the silver pen still in her hand and weeping. Paola heard nothing over the sound of her own blood thumping in her ears.

At night, she dreamt of the skeleton man again, creeping around outside their window. A silver wrench glittered in his hand, reflecting the light of his bones. He tampered feverishly with the hand pump in the backyard. He paused, looked up at her with his empty eye sockets. Then he kicked the hand pump, knocking it over and crippling it.

* * *
Pepa awoke the next morning feeling terribly unrested. She dragged her sister out of bed and picked the purple dress up off the floor. Then she thought better of it, and trudged out to the backyard so they could wash up first.

The sisters stood in front of the well for a minute, stunned. The hand pump lay on the ground next to the well pipe. They took a step closer. The well had been filled with dirt. The sun beat down on their necks.

“The villagers!” Pepa exclaimed. Paola just shook her head.

The man, who Pepa had begun to call Mr. Angus in her head, did not return that morning. Pepa dressed them in his dress and braided their hair. By nightfall he still hadn’t appeared.

Pepa wondered whose throat was more dry, hers or her sisters. She wondered if she could outlast Paola, that she and Mr. Angus could spend the rest of their lives alone together. Beside her, Paola coughed. Pepa smacked her dry lips.

The next day, the morning heat had given way to one of the hottest days of the year, and the air was dense and tacky. Each girl made an effort to conserve her energy for when the stranger came back. They lay in bed side-by-side, weak but unable to sleep.

After twelve hours, Sinchi’s eyes began to slump deep into his little skull. He shuffled around the hut every few hours, trying desperately to hide: under the table,
beneath the stove, in a corner of the hut. There he vomited and cowered – cowered even from Paola. He was too small to go without water for this long, Paola knew. He was dying.

It was midnight when Paola realized the man would not return on his own accord. The dog was hiding under the bed now, hoping to finish his life out of Paola’s line of sight. Paola nudged her sister, the first gentle move she’d made toward her in their shared life. They rose from their bed. Paola’s head felt light. She stooped, scooped the dog up from his hiding spot, and the girls stumbled into the yard.

Paola cradled Sinchi in her elbow and lay down on the ground with her sister. They looked up at the sky. The stars were swathed in a cloud of purple dust. For a while the girls counted meteors. Then a dark, bulbous shape eclipsed their view, and Paola whispered to Sinchi that they were safe.

Pepa was so thrilled to be flying away from the cliff house that she forgot about her thirst for several precious minutes. Mr. Angus’s smile broadened his sharp face, making it look round and handsome. He gestured wildly about his flying machine, which he called a “hot air balloon,” and explained how it flew. Pepa made an effort to at least appear as though she were listening, but she was too excited to absorb anything.
She leaned over the edge of the basket, watching their terrible hut become a speck in their personal history. From their spot in the sky, the wall looked like an animal’s shriveled tail.

Pepa looked over at her sister delightedly. Paola’s eyes were closed, and her cracked lips fluttered. In Paola’s arms, Sinchi gasped in several breaths. Pepa frowned.

“Mr. Angus,” she shouted over the loud machine. “Do you have any water for us?”

“No water until we land,” Mr. Angus replied contentedly, fiddling with the balloon’s intricacies. “You girls should be fine until then.”

Pepa smiled, reassured. “Thank you!” she yelled. “But my sister is worried about her dog!”

Mr. Angus looked down at Paola, who had paused her fervent prayer to regard him.

“Yes, the dog,” he said simply, as though he hadn’t forgotten at all. “I’m afraid it will likely not survive our journey.”

Pepa felt the blood drain from first her sister’s face, and then her own. She looked down at poor Sinchi, whose breathing rattled his little body. His eyelids were closed over half his eyes, and his pupils roved beneath them.
Something glittered beneath him, at their feet on the floor of the basket. A silver tool. A wrench. Pepa looked back up at Mr. Angus, who pulled the lever above him, causing flames to burst over his head. The balloon soared toward the sky’s downy white clouds. Mr. Angus began to hum to himself.

Pepa looked over the edge of the basket again, at their world, which was rapidly dwindling. She watched the island village shrink to a memory, and wondered if revisiting that memory would be more delicious than bitter in the coming days.

Pepa could feel an emotion seep into her head from Paola’s side of their body, one Pepa hadn’t experienced second-hand before. It was devastation: tart, potent, compelling. The pressure of the air pressed against Pepa’s ears, mixing with Mr. Angus’s mindless humming. Paola cried out; the dog had fallen limp in the crook of her arm.

The shadow of the balloon passed over the island. From above, the terraces appeared as flat plains colored brown and green and bright maize yellow of. Several field workers looked up at the balloon travelling above them. Their mouths gaped wide. They dropped their tools.

The wind whipped loudly against Pepa’s ears. She could hear nothing else. Beside her, Paola shivered with her first taste of fear. The water that surrounded the island crested into white waves, then smoothed out again before reaching the shore. The clouds above hovered closer still. Several long, spider-like fingers came to rest
on Pepa’s back. The world below fell fast away, and the air grew thinner the higher they rose. The twins held hands. Together, they gasped for air.