

MAYFAIR
ROAN PARRISH



Ruby startled half awake at the crunch-slip of boots in the leaves.

Three crushed ants—no, four. Bruised tender stems of October grass. Acorns and twigs and delicate bodies of clover pressed deep into the mud. The tracks of squirrels and the trails of slugs and snails obliterated.

The impressions of things in the earth and in the air. The shapes they carved and the spaces they left behind. Those were Ruby's language.

It wasn't time for the first tour to begin yet. She sniffed the loamy air. No, she had hours yet.

An amorous couple? She enjoyed the way their delicate heartbeats tripped with risk. How their thready blood thrilled to it. But there was no arousal here. Idiot boys with drugs, then? She scented the air again. No. Patchouli and mint. Perhaps the legs of old marijuana clinging to fabric. And none of the ripe, sour scent of sweat and shit that would mean transients looking to bed down for the night.

Ruby lifted her face to the kiss of night air. She pulled her layers around her bones and skin and muscles and the heat banked deep inside. Rolled herself smaller and fit herself deeper into the shadow that would hide her unless she wished to reveal herself.

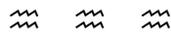
Pressing her cheekbone against the cold marble of the grave Ruby moved her attention from the tickle of an ant at her neck and the frond that tangled itself in her ragged hair and the frog snuggled against her ankle bone. She focused on the scents coming toward her, sorting through the layers of chemicals to get to the truth beneath. And she waited.

First, a girl the snap of hot sugar and something easily bruised, like peaches. Fizz of confidence and steel of determination. Dazzling. On the edge of rotten. Could go either way.

Next, a boy. Or perhaps not? Unimportant. Unfurling like mint leaves around the edges but placid cream underneath. Cinnamon and cool water. Dissatisfaction.

Then—oh, then, then. Singed and brittle outside of a girl, but. Crack the carapace and underneath: a warmly glowing lantern. Amber and heartwood and smoke. And something that pricked Ruby deeper than past or future. An oceanic yearning that unfurled, purple as a bruise.

No, Ruby had no problem waiting. She had all the time in the world.



I kicked at a chunk of cement hard enough to jar my Discman, wedged precariously between my AP Bio book and *Wuthering Heights*, the startling silence broken by the raw cry of a crow overhead. As I looked up, a second crow settled on the branch, its feathers glistening blue-black in the late afternoon light. I thought I could see my own reflection in the crow's glittering eye.

My long purple hair and the cheap maroon lipstick that always clotted. My too-long jeans blown out in the back where my bootheels had worn them away and the sweep of my purple skirt, its hem hardened with a layer of the street. The tight waffle-knit henley and gray and black flannel under my black sweatshirt jacket. The silver rings stacked on every finger that clinked softly when I held a pen.

I saw it all as clearly as if I were looking in a mirror. Then the image shifted, twisted me up, and the bird blinked me away.

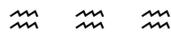
But of course that was impossible. *I'm probably just hungry*, I told myself, and kept walking.

The trouble was, I had been seeing a lot of impossible things lately. And hearing them.

On the way to school that morning I'd seen a tiny face peeking out at me from between the claws of a denuded bush. I'd gasped and jerked backward to get away from the bone-white curve of skull against dirt. But when I looked it was just a doll's head, disarticulated from some child's toy. Nothing more.

Yesterday it had been a nearly imperceptible susurrus that trailed behind me along the line of lockers in the 2200 hallway when I walked to the bathroom during calculus.

Last week I had woken from music video dreams to something crouched at the foot of my bed. Something homuncular and twitching, as if it had been pulled from a nightmare itself. My screams had brought my father to the door, his thin, drawn face alight with more than its usual worry. Nothing there, of course. Still, my father's added anxiety thickened the air all day.

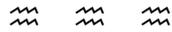


Beauty did strange things to people. That was the conclusion I had come to after a whirlwind year of friendship with Bethany.

Beauty was a contagious weed. Find it one place and it crawled to another and bloomed there, intensifying itself. Remaking what was there until you couldn't unsee it.

Once I realized Bethany's cornflower blue eyes were beautiful, the beauty spread to absurd places. The curve of her neck where the velvet shave of her honey hair became skin. Her pointed kneecaps that jutted through torn denim like they were the blades that had shredded it. Her slightly turned-in toes. Serrated edges of her overlapping front teeth.

Yes, beauty cut into you like a fishhook, entering superficially but digging in far deeper, lodging in the softest primal guts of you.



In the broken darkness of City Club, eyes roamed over Bethany, from her messy topknot to her knee-high boots, but mostly in between. She absorbed it all, drew the energy into her like a star, but none of it touched her.

We danced until I felt drunk, the sweet throb of bass sinking into my skin and the harmonies turning my blood to their tune. I was a shivering supernova, a perfectly contained and perfectly exploded thing vibrating at the mercy of the music.

The music. It worked on me like a skeleton key, tumbling my choking self-consciousness from me like a husk.

Arms flung wide, I pulled Bethany and Gabe to me, fingers gliding against Bethany's sweat-slick skin and tangling in Gabe's KMFDM shirt. Gabe squeezed me and his smile was as music-drunk as my own, his small even teeth glowing in the darkness. When he spun around to mold to an older man with a shaved head, I pressed myself to Bethany's side, breathing her in through sweat and dust and the chemical bite of the fog machine. Knowing I could get away with it under the cover of the dance floor.

"We're the hottest ones here," Bethany said, chin to my shoulder, lips to my ear.

I snorted. "You, maybe." And Bethany smiled.

Earlier, as we'd snaked through the twisting Detroit streets on our way here, the Opera had been letting out, spilling colorful satin-swathed women onto the pavement, their hair touched with moonlight and their ears and throats aglitter. But they had nothing on Bethany. Her cut-off

jean shorts barely caught on her hips, the skin stretched tight across the sharp bones. Her black tank top was cut off below her belly button, somehow managing to look natural, as if she'd simply caught the hem on something as she turned. Aggressively simple. Like any effort at all was an effect of those who looked at her.

Later, shaky with adrenaline and something Bethany scored off a guy at the bar, I slammed into the bathroom, grinning. The girl in the dirty mirror grinned back at me, heavy hair frizzed from sweat and black eyeliner smeared. When I sank onto the toilet in the last stall my head buzzed and I closed my eyes and dropped my forehead to my knees as I peed.

The door scraped open, letting in the din of the dance floor for a moment. But there were no footsteps. No sound of the sink or one of the other stalls. No sound at all but the suddenly deafening trickle of me peeing.

Then a sound like crinkling paper or snapping twigs.

I froze.

The sound came again, closer now. And maybe it wasn't paper or twigs. Maybe it was the subtle *scrish* of flesh rubbing against something not flesh. Wings. Or hair. The sweat on the back of my neck dried in a shiver.

"Is someone there?" My voice sounded thin and afraid.

Scrish.

Feathers. Or dirt.

"Hello?"

Scrish.

I tried to stand but my movements were clumsy and my pants caught around my ankles, snagged on my heavy boots. I dropped back onto the toilet as the air thickened.

Suddenly, out of corner of my eye, movement. Through the crack where the door didn't quite meet the stall, *something* crept closer. My breath caught in my throat and rattled there. I slammed a hand over my mouth like I could contain the choking fear along with any sound. As if that mattered. My feet were plainly visible under the bottom of the door.

Scrish.

My body wanted to scream but my caught breath wouldn't allow it. I scrambled to pull up my pants, needing, if nothing else, not to be so exposed. Then I stood and, slow as I could manage, put my eye to the crack in the door, lightheaded with terror.

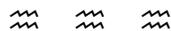
For a second—just a second—I saw ... something. Something ragged and dark. Something I didn't recognize.

And then everything shattered as the door flew open.

“Jocelyn? You in here?” Bethany called, sounding irritated.

When I tried to answer, my mouth was so dry I could only croak out, “Here.”

“Jesus, you look ... are you okay? I don't think that was E, man.” Bethany's arms were around me, just where I wanted them, and I shivered there as long as I could.



We'd found each other in the usual way, bonding over mutual scorn and irritation at school. Swapping snark and compliments and eventually confidences. Bethany had pulled me into her orbit, introducing me to a circuit of unlikely friends.

We would cut sixth and seventh period and take the bus downtown with Gabe. Check out plaid pants, band tees, Manic Panic, and fetish accessories at The Cat's Meow. Hang neon SALE fliers for the dude who owned Rag Tag in exchange for one flannel each. Flip through the free poster box at Tower Records and shoplift pocketfuls of nothing at Middle Earth. Grab day-old bagels from Amer's, buy cigarettes and Mike's Hard Lemonade from the guy at The Party Store who never checked ID, and sit on the roof of the parking structure that overlooked State Street.

From there you could see all of downtown Ann Arbor, from the football stadium to Kerrytown. You could see the students in maize and blue crossing the Diag. The guy who danced to Michael Jackson on his boombox in the graffitied alley behind the Michigan Theatre. The campanile that, Gabe told me, Cory Stevens' mother jumped to her death from two Novembers ago.

As we smoked and ate the bagels slowly, rolling their soft innards into balls of dough we'd swallow like pills, washing them down with too-sweet alcohol, we traded secrets. First stingily, then with a thrilling abandon, each new revelation a tether of intimacy.

Bethany narrated her parents' divorce. How her older sister folded in on herself in silence, refusing to choose sides, and her younger sister got in screaming fights with anyone who'd let her, demanding, always, that her parents soothe whatever small hurt set her off in exchange for the large one they were inflicting. And Bethany explained with a smirk how she did what she wanted and her parents didn't have the energy to stop her.

She told us about Justin, her boyfriend, who was ten years older than us and lived with his mother on the outskirts of town. She made him sound romantic and dangerous but when I met him—wispy mustache and grimy tennis shoes—he just seemed dangerously afraid. He talked too

fast and his eyes darted around and when he touched Bethany it seemed like he was asking permission.

Gabe talked about dreamcatchers and past lives, symbols of power and modes of surrender. Monologues that sounded impersonal until you realized that in them he was burying bits of himself too tentative and shimmering to expose to the air. Dreams where he was held tight, held down, re-shaped into another form. Past lives where he was the daughter of a lighthouse sentinel on a wind-blasted beach. The wife of a Catalan soldier wounded in a war he didn't believe in. The sister of an 18th century beekeeper, drowning sweetly in clover honey.

About his older brother who watched him, sometimes, in ways he didn't understand.

I told them how my mother left. How one morning she simply wasn't there anymore and how my father rummaged around for the pieces of her until there was nothing left of her either. How his fears lived with us now, near-physical beasts that tried to attach themselves to me if I stayed home long enough. That I'd thought perhaps, when we moved here, my father would become a different person and I wouldn't have to edit the world to be less scary for him. Wouldn't have to make sure I was always okay because anything less would feed the beasts. Make them buck and roar.

But I didn't tell them that sometimes bits of the things I dreamed had a way of actually happening. How time had a tricky way of folding back on itself, like a ribbon with its ends sewn together. And how much it scared me.

And I didn't didn't didn't tell them about the flutter low in my stomach when Bethany laughed hard at something I said, or pulled an errant leaf from my hair, or leaned her shoulder

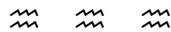
against mine to say something and let, just for a second, her weight rest upon my body as if she were completely secure in my ability to hold it.

I wasn't ashamed. But the thought of losing even a shade of the natural openness between us felt like more of a sacrifice than I could bear to make.



My mother wasn't crazy. The things she told me? They were just lies. Just the egocentric fantasies of a woman disappointed in the way her life had turned out. Frustrated dreams concretized into something like entitlement. Things didn't simply go missing. Glass didn't just break. Objects didn't move themselves.

Right?



By the beginning of October school was already unbearable. The entire building pulled me down, exerting the gravity of a planet as I trudged through the halls, and the repetition worried at me like sandpaper.

One Thursday, the prospect of going to chemistry impossible, I caught Bethany's arm in the hallway and tugged her after me into the woods. Before I'd met Bethany, I would've found a corner somewhere on such a day. Would've put on my headphones, pulled up my knees and the hood of my sweatshirt, and drawn, blocking out everything and disappearing into the worlds I

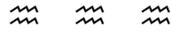
created on the page, ink the blood of dreams I didn't dare hope and nightmares I didn't dare speak aloud.

Unused to having a partner in crime, I half expected Bethany to shake me off, but she came easily, loose-limbed and so alive with the chill that the gloom lifted. We made our way through the patterns of sun on pine needles until we got to the creek behind her mother's subdivision and sat on a fallen log watching the water pick its way by. We smoked a joint and sat in the kind of silence that feels like it means something and then went to Bethany's and smoked another, so high we ate Potato Buds out of coffee mugs and made frozen tater tots afterward because potato was the only thing.

That night, lying in the windowless damp of her basement room, the cinderblock floor cold even through a pile of blankets, my head was flying in a million directions but my body was magnetized directly toward Bethany's, only two feet away in her bed. The darkness was absolute and for a while we traded disjointed sentence bubbles that one of us would toss and the other would catch. Not a conversation, really, just an offering of our thoughts.

Bethany always put music on to sleep. I slept and woke and slept and woke to *Pretty Hate Machine*, never sure how many times the album had played through between moments of awareness, the mechanical beats driving my dreams to an intoxicating rhythm. Sometime in the night I rolled toward the bed and Bethany's arm drooped over the side, resting close enough to my hair that it was the ghost of a caress.

The next day at school, dressed in Bethany's tights, jeans, shirt, and boots, I walked the halls differently, as if I were looking out from inside her skin.



“You’re as bad as me,” Gabe said. His voice was kind. It was always kind. “She loves the attention, but she’ll never like you like that.”

I sat very straight, looking out the bus window at the road to Gabe’s house, and braided a chunk of my hair as my heart started to race. The green vinyl of the seat was split, sharp edges poking into my thighs. “Who?” I asked.

When I met Gabe’s clear green eyes his sympathy was almost painful.

“Sucks, huh?” he said.

And in that moment, on the shitty school bus that served the kids from outside of town, I wanted to tell him everything. Not just about Bethany and how I’d found pieces of myself in her that I didn’t know how to recognize until she reflected them back to me. How I wasn’t even sure exactly what I wanted. At some moments to belong to her like a second in command, at others to run with her hand-in-hand through some euphoric field of ridiculous wildflowers. To tumble her down on the leaf-strewn floor of the forest, at others, and bury myself in the warmth of her skin and the sweetness of her mouth, strawberry bubblegum and menthol cigarettes.

Not just that but also the way I wasn’t quite right. The way things didn’t line up, recently, and I was beginning to be afraid again.

As if he could see my desire to confess, Gabe saved me. He pointed a pale finger, nail bitten to the quick, to the boy in the front corner seat. Pat Stanby.

He was a walking, talking ball of seething fury. Never still, never neutral, he practically vibrated with energy. His hair was shaved on the back and sides, the top long, fried green by bleach, and caught up in a greasy bunch high on his head. His skin was ravaged by acne as angry

as he was, his lips dry and bitten. He wore greasy jeans shoved into combat boots, a Green Jellö t-shirt, and a motorcycle jacket with the anarchy A in white paint across the back, lines of safety pins glittering like epaulets at his bony shoulders.

“Someone told me he’s a skinhead,” I whispered. Something about the red laces in his combat boots, a patch on his army backpack.

Gabe’s expression was thoughtful. “Maybe. But not for real. Misguided punk offshoot, not true hate. I’ve ridden the bus with him since elementary school.”

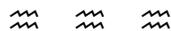
As we watched, Pat sighed impatiently and rested his chin on his hands, knees bouncing. And for a second, like one of those Magic Eye pictures, I could see it. There was something about him. The manic energy, the hair-trigger temper, the aggressive ugliness. His extremity had an appeal.

“He was a mercenary,” Gabe said. “A sword for hire.” He was picking up a conversational thread from earlier, about guessing people’s past lives.

“You mean amoral?”

“No. Just someone who’s seen enough to know that neither side is right forever. Maybe sometimes the most moral thing you can be is an instrument.”

I didn’t agree with that but something in the way he said it made me stay quiet.



Bethany, the only one of us with a car, had driven here after school, refusing to tell us where we were going. As we got off at Michigan Avenue, I thought we were going to City Club again, but it was far too early and we weren’t dressed for it. The city was a circle, streets turning

unexpectedly into highway ramps and twisting to dead ends. On one block, trees draped in brilliantly colored leaves reached their branches toward stone churches and the porches of homes, while on the next block the trees were dead, the houses abandoned, crumpled with neglect and taken over by vines and weeds and animals. A factory, a school, a block with a restaurant and a few people milling about. Then three more blocks of slumped houses, empty lots, jackhammered concrete, and men standing in twos and threes on corners.

More populated as we got downtown, the glitter of neon signs and the late afternoon sun sparkling in glass and chrome seemed strange against all that stone and cement. For a few blocks, the gothic D of the *Free Press* and the sports teams peeked from every roadside merch stall, bodega, and gas station. It was on every hat and the back of every blue and white jacket.

Bethany parked behind a huge truck, bed encrusted with dirt, and we rounded the corner as a gust of wind picked up a pile of raked leaves and scattered them toward us, skittering along the pocked cement like the dried husks of insects. In the half-light, the wrought iron gates looked like something from a comic book. Thick lines of ink against the blue-washed page. But up close, black paint clung to the metal bars in curlicues and hung off it in peeling strips, rust the red-brown and orange-brown of dried blood beneath.

In a sweeping arch atop the open gates, thick metal letters spelled out MAYFAIR.

I waited to get a creeped-out feeling, but though the graves were somber, the whole cemetery was touched with warm autumn light, decorated with brightly colored fallen leaves, and suffused with the scent of woodsmoke mixed with the hotdog cart around the corner.

We wandered up and down the rows of graves near the front gates, choosing our epitaphs, naming each others' children, and perching on the backs of graves while we tried to blow smoke

rings. The menthol in Bethany's cigarettes made my nose itch. Over half an hour or so, a few tour groups met at the gates and began to make their ways around the cemetery, tourists in white sneakers and khaki pants snapping pictures that cracked the silence.

"Check this out," Bethany said, jogging over to a large tomb a few rows in. A stone cross reached toward the sky, but at its base an angel carved of white marble cradled an animal in its exquisitely textured wings.

"Is it a lamb?" Gabe asked.

"It's a *dog*," Bethany said, eyes sparkling. "Whacked-out rich lady did this all for her Pomeranian or something, can you believe it?"

I laughed but Gabe and I exchanged a look that said we were thinking the same thing. That Bethany would never care for an animal in a way that would inspire such a memorial, because her life would always be full of people she valued more highly.

"You've been here before?" I asked.

"Yeah, with Brandon," she said, too casually. And, before I could say anything else, she walked toward the front gates, gesturing for us. "Okay, follow my lead," she said.

Brandon was one of the guys we hung out with downtown sometimes, smoking and spanging and arguing about music. He was slickly handsome and confident in the way boys are who have gone through every day certain of their place in the world and never questioning that they deserve it. I wanted to hate him on principle but his charm was undeniable. I knew Bethany and Justin had fought about him after Brandon paged Bethany three times in an hour.

When a group of three forty-something couples wandered in past the gates, Bethany walked up to them, arms caught behind her back in a way that threw her chest forward and made her look taller.

“Are you here for the tour?” she said, and they nodded.

Adults loved Bethany. They respected her. Trusted her despite her tongue stud and her undercut and her band t-shirts. They looked at her and saw someone mature. Responsible. And it was true. Mostly.

“Great. Follow me. You two coming?” This was directed to Gabe and me. Her tone was so matter of fact that we followed automatically, Gabe linking his elbow with mine.

“What’s she doing,” I whispered. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged, years more familiar than I was with Bethany’s mercurial whims.

As we followed Bethany it became clear that she had spent a lot of time here, or at least done a lot of research. Or maybe she was making it all up? She did it all so smoothly I honestly couldn’t tell. She spouted facts about the history of the graveyard—“built in 1846 and opened to the public in 1849, this is the largest non-denominational cemetery in Michigan”—and told stories about the inhabitants of the tombs—“a governor who died in a freak lightning storm”; “a young girl mauled by an animal that crossed the bridge from Canada.”

She was sparkling charisma, so at ease I found myself almost forgetting she wasn’t a real tour guide. Forgetting that this was a joke of some kind. That Bethany never enjoyed herself more than when she was telling a story and hadn’t yet revealed the punch line.

The cemetery was enormous, and the farther we walked from the front gates the more a creeping unease settled on me. I was relieved when we circled back around to the entrance, the couples laughing and chatting with Bethany.

“Oh,” she said warmly when one of the women asked her how she became a tour guide, “I’m studying local history at Wayne State so I started learning about this place last summer.”

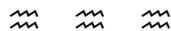
They thanked her and passed her tips, complimenting the tour and she accepted gracefully.

Then the second they cleared the gates she collapsed on the grass in giddy laughter, pulling us down with her.

“Oh. My. God.” She gasped. “I can’t believe that worked. I seriously cannot. Brandon’s going to die. And owe me twenty bucks.” She winked at me and rubbed the bills she’d just collected between elegant fingers. “Denny’s? My treat.”

We sat in Denny’s, smoking and talking and playing cards until we had to go home.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d felt something shift when we walked out the gates. How the darkening sky had seemed to thicken behind me, as if something weightier than air were creeping closer.



“We should do a ritual,” Gabe said. “A cleansing as we move to the darker half of the year.”

There was never any food at Gabe’s house so we were sharing a tub of Twizzlers, biting off the ends and trying to use them to slurp our vodka and Big K. We were huddled together under a pile of musty crocheted blankets watching a movie where some deranged serial killer was placing his victims’ bones in the frets of a rollercoaster.

Since visiting Mayfair Cemetery the other day, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. And not just it but why Bethany seemed so drawn there. Was it because she had something going on with Brandon and associated it with him? Had something happened there? Had something happened between them? It was hard to know with Bethany. She was aggressively open, never ashamed of anything she did, and yet I sensed she had a vast capacity for secrecy.

When Justin paged her a bunch of times she went upstairs to call him and Gabe and I went outside to smoke, pulling the blankets around us.

"We could both use it, you know?" Gabe said. "Something to take away their power over us. It's like a spell. Maybe we can break it."

The picture in my mind was of Bethany's hair tied in complicated Celtic knots.

"How do you do it?"

"However you want. A ritual's a way of connecting with an intention is all. Acknowledging something you want, or need, or wish you could change. When you know your goal, you find some way of translating it." He was staring at the moon, thinnest crescent peeking from behind the clouds. His skin was so pale it nearly glowed, the way marble takes on the edge of light.

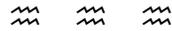
"Usually you use the elements. Air, water, earth, fire. Then you just do what feels right."

"How do you know if it feels right?"

Bethany, dressed in gossamer the wind tosses away. Bethany emerging from the surf, clutching armfuls of pearls strung on seaweed. Bethany, opening her lips to mine and, from the corner of her mouth, a trickle of dirt.

"You'll know, Jocelyn. Don't you think you'll know?"

Bethany stepping close, her eyes fire, and her hair fire, and fire fire fire everywhere her fingers singe my skin.



My mother wasn't crazy, but maybe I am. There is something wrong with me. There is something wrong with me and no one knows. There is something wrong with me and no one knows and if they did . . . If they did . . .

Once, at nine or ten, she woke me in the middle of the night. Pulled me up by my forearm and marched me into the back garden. That was when we lived in Vermont. She pointed at patches of the darkness and made sounds like an animal. She pointed definitively, like you'd say, *there!* And in each of the places, nothing.

I cried silently and swallowed it down and the darkness was just darkness, certainly, but what if it wasn't?

At twelve, I got my period on the bus coming home from swim practice. I didn't tell anyone. Rolled pads I'd stolen in toilet paper and hid them in my closet until they stank enough my mother found them. She was happy. Proud, even. As if I'd done something rather than failed at the thing I really wanted, which was to stay in a place where I wasn't female. Where the path wasn't laid out before me in a way that, even at twelve, I knew led somewhere inescapable.

This time I was already awake when she came in my room. This time she smiled and held my hands in hers. Secretive. As if we shared something. *Your father will never understand*, she said. Which seemed true. But only because he never understood anything except fear. And, again. Nothing was there. Nothing.

But now.

Something is.

Something is there.

It's as if I've started to see the bones beneath the flesh. As if the things the world hides because it has to are rising to the surface like a cork in the bath.

At school, I can see the things they're keeping secret. Just a flash, here and there. But clear and sharp like lemon.

Lemon. Carly Mason hit a dog with the car her parents bought her and she drove away. Lemon. Vince Chin pinches his baby sister on the arm sometimes and doesn't know why he needs to. Lemon. Nadiya El Khatib takes money from her mother's wallet and sneaks it to the man who sleeps outside the diner down the street from school. He calls her princess.



“Two days until Halloween, fuck yeah!” Brandon crowed to the group of guys I hardly knew, jabbing the buttons on Mortal Kombat so hard the machine creaked. “There’s a party above the Blind Pig and some U of M chemistry geek’s gonna blow up pumpkins with science. I’m gonna go as Tom Araya, bitches, whaaaa!?”

We’d come to Pinball Pete’s to shoot pool but all the tables were full, stacks of quarters three deep to call next game. Gabe and I had played skee-ball and given our tickets to some kid who was there with his older brother and was saving them for a pack of stick-on glow-in-the-dark stars. It was an arcade, yes, but there were rarely any kids there. Mostly people our age and older, hooking up, bathing in cigarette smoke, and dealing in the bathroom. Pete’s blasted heavy

metal and served only bags of stale popcorn and ice cream sandwiches dug from a chest freezer that looked like it held a body.

Gabe was trying to chat about music with Brandon and the rest of those guys that we knew from around town but they didn't take him seriously and I couldn't stand to watch it. With me, they were casually playful, seeming impressed by how I could play pool, though it was just geometry, and amused when I said things they found strange.

The night before I'd startled awake from a dream that was tomorrow and so when today happened the whole thing felt strange. Like I was running backward and tomorrow, though I had no idea what it would bring, would still feel like *deja vu*.

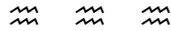
"You want to go sit by the fountain?" I asked Gabe.

Before he could answer, Bethany stormed out of the alcove next to the bathroom, fuming.

"Can we go to the fountain?" she asked, and threw her arm around my waist. She smelled like beeswax and patchouli, menthol and apple shampoo. She reached out a hand and grabbed Gabe, but didn't say goodbye to Brandon, though he watched her leave. As we walked up the stairs to street level Bethany told us about her fight with Justin and how sick of him she was.

"It should be tomorrow night," she said, as we sat on the side of the fountain, our smoke curling up toward the bell tower whose shadow fell like a knife blade across the statue of the mermaid and her dolphins spouting water. "And we should do the ritual at the cemetery. At Mayfair," she clarified, and chill shot down my spine.

Gabe had been quiet all night and now he just nodded. When Bethany said she'd drive us home, he said he'd get the bus. But the city buses didn't run as far out as his house and it struck me how, some nights, I had no idea what he got up to.



I'd ended up spending the night at Bethany's. She hadn't wanted me to go home. I'd snuck a note in the front door for my father, knowing he'd worry, then crept back out to her car, waiting with the headlights off on the street. We'd talked long into the night, staring into the same darkness as *Little Earthquakes* played over and over.

She'd mostly talked about Justin, but after a while she'd said, "I think maybe I'm not a good person." I'd thought I misheard at first, the music taking an edge off her words. "I just don't care about that many people. Or, I care. But then I stop." And, before I could respond, "Will you sleep in the bed? It's so cold in here."

And of course I had. At various points during the night, something in the music or the air or her body would rouse me and I'd come awake with my head fuzzy and always some part of me warm against her as if every molecule were straining toward her. Even the rough skin of my ridiculous elbow had reached for her.

Now, as we drove to the cemetery, the streets of Detroit were alive with fire. It was Devil's Night, and you could see them burning from the highway exits, smell the smoke and ash and lighter fluid from I-75. Trashcan fires and dumpster fires and storefront fires and homes. Fires kindled with leaves and with garbage and with malice and for fun. Smashed glass littered the sidewalks and crunched under our tires like burnt sugar.

We ran across the street to Mayfair, arms linked and hair and sweatshirts whipping around us. Gabe's bag of candles clanked and the bottle in the pocket of Bethany's jacket clinked and we couldn't stop laughing as we scrambled over the low spot in the wall to the north of the

chained-shut gates. The sky had a sulfurous cast against which MAYFAIR stood like crack-legged birds on a crooked branch.

The second my boots hit the mud and leaves below something seemed to snap. Recoil. Something in the air? Something in me? Nothing at all?

It was sludgy dark. Not quite the windowless black of Bethany's basement room, but close. And it stretched out on all sides like outer space, expanding as it unfolded around us.

“Can you light one of those?”

“They're for the ritual,” Gabe said.

“Yeah, well we might fall into an open grave and break our necks before we get to the ritual if you don't.”

Gabe grumbled as he lit the candle, holding its weak flame between us as we scuffed leaves and stumbled over clods of grass and fractured corners of graves too low to see. Bethany led us into darkness, stopping at a mausoleum that stretched up in gothic spires and sitting cross-legged in front of it where its sides curved around her like wings. The ground was cold but we warmed up as we sipped from the concoction Bethany had brought—vodka and rum and something with the bite of black licorice.

After only a few minutes a strange lassitude crept over me like fog. My muscles softened down toward the earth and my edges seemed to blur with the backdrop, as if we were made of the same material or were the same temperature. We passed the bottle between us, trading the gossip from school. Kyle and Rachel had broken up again at lunch. Kelly got caught blowing Jordan in the woods behind school. Devon cursed out Ms. Grayson in Spanish. Monica and

Donny were flirting and wouldn't that be weird. Colleen and Mr. Snyder disappeared together every day during second period.

When I went to take another sip and found the bottle empty we melted toward each other in laughter.

Gabe set three more candles in the space between us, our knees touching, Bethany's in ripped denim, her shiny black tights peeking through, mine in a black crepe skirt, Gabe's in a skirt like mine only dark green. He pointed to each candle in turn, expression gone somber.

"Earth." He lit the green candle. "Air." The white one. "Water." The blue. He snuffed out the red candle. "Fire." He lit it again. Those four flames danced in their glass with the breeze, revealing grass the green-black of beetles and the dark pits in the mausoleum's marble facade. The hood of Bethany's sweatshirt looked like a part of her and Gabe's apricot hair shone like copper. He took strips of paper from the bag and handed one to each of us, then took out a knife.

Bethany leaned forward, the guttering flames throwing strange eyelash shadows on her cheeks. "You brought the big guns, huh, Gabriel? Well, so to speak."

She sounded amused but Gabe was serious as he cleared his throat. "We prick our fingers and use the blood to write on the paper. Write the thing you wish to be cleansed of. Write it with intention, hold the paper to your lips, which speak the truth, your third eye, which sees it, and your heart, which feels it. Then burn the paper in whichever element speaks to you."

My head spun a little and I closed my eyes, tipping my face up to the star-studded velvet sky. The stars began to fall, spiraling down toward me like the sky was collapsing. I jerked backward as something cold as death kissed my cheek.

"Holy shit, snow," Bethany said, delighted as a child.

My heart hammered, the cognitive dissonance resolved faster than my body could register it. Lying on my back in the grass the falling snowflakes made it feel like I was hurtling through space.

But then, in the very corner of my vision, I registered movement. As if a shadow were trying to unstick itself from the darkness, something peeled away. But as I twisted around to see it, there was a sudden fluttering in the tree to my left. A crow settled there, head cocked uncannily toward us. Then a second alighted, its eye a mirror, impossibly halving the space between us. The three of us in a circle of light, the mausoleum more maw than wings now, and a blackness around us thick with something unknowable. Then it turned its head on a neck liquid beneath feathers to regard its companion and the image was gone.

What if . . .

What if it worked?

What if this wasn't just a gesture toward something but a thing itself?

If it worked, was Bethany's spell over me really what I wanted to cleanse myself of? Release myself from?

Bethany was holding the knife, paper pinned to her knee with her elbow so it wouldn't blow away.

"Jesus," she said, as the knife met her flesh. "It's not sharp enough."

"You have to press harder," Gabe said. "You want me to do it?"

She thrust the knife and her hand at him. He cradled her hand in his like a supplicant, then cut, welling blood glistening in the candlelight. Bethany bent over her paper, hiding it like it was a math test she didn't want copied. I reached my hand out to Gabe for the knife, but he took my

hand as he'd taken Bethany's and cut. The pain was a spark of light in my finger but it was as if I could feel Bethany's blood on the blade blooming into me like liquid fire. Entering me where my skin had parted to open me up to the world.

My writing was sloppy, the first letters blobs of blood, the cut dry before I could finish the last, but still. I knew what it said. I folded the paper, bone white and blood red, and I kissed my lips, forehead, heart with it, then touched it to flame of Earth. Because Gabe had been right. I did know.

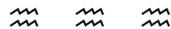
The fire ate the paper until I had to drop it or burn myself, so I dropped it onto the leather side of my boot where it smoldered to a snip of ash and was gone, leaving a foul-smelling back spot of heated leather.

I didn't feel any different.

But, then, I did.

My head started swimming, as if the alcohol were hitting me all at once, things rearranging themselves as I blinked.

"Gotta pee," I muttered, and stumbled away into the dark.



Ruby pulled herself up tall as the girl rocketed toward her. Didn't count the backs of bugs broken underfoot. Wasn't even tempted. Couldn't have any distraction from the glowing warmth in the cold blackness. She could tell the moment the girl saw her. Could feel her toes draw backward in the grass, feel the air she fanned forward interrupt itself. Could sense the wet place

where the girl's mouth must be open in surprise. Smell the bite of alcohol on her breath and the dried sweat under her arms and the musk between her legs.

"You're not real," the girl whispered. "Oh, god, what's wrong with me?"

Ruby gathered together the language that wasn't hers. Wrapped it around her tongue and said, "Nothing's wrong with you. You're perfect." Her voice was graves.

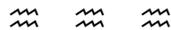
"Of *course* that's what I would hallucinate." *Plick plick* of hairs being torn from her scalp. *Plosh* of skin becoming a bruise where the girl pounded.

"Stop," Ruby said, and moved herself forward to where the girl would be, catching at the skin that draped wrist bones.

"This isn't happening," the girl said, and several variations of it over a few minutes, until. She softened. Dropping her shoulder blades back to smack the grave Ruby leaned against. The girl's swallows were music. Her tears had the bite of desperation that made Ruby's mouth water.

"Everything looks strange," the girl said softly, her scent changing to suspicion. *Screesh* of eyelashes scraping on a squint. "No, seriously. I can see the ... I can hear the ... You're ... What are you?"

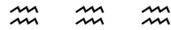
Ruby shrugged and the space between them became nothing. "I'm Ruby."



Right before my mother left I'd had one of those strange backward days when something from my dream crawled out and made a home in the real world. Just a little thing. I'd dreamt my father had gotten spaghetti sauce on his tie and when he did my mother said some things to him I

didn't understand. But his fears had taken over and so I decided I would swallow it down. Choke it small and put it in a place no one would ever find it. Because the way he'd looked at me.

God, the way he'd looked at me.



Ruby felt like the peeking, creeping things I'd seen and heard and dreamt. Ruby was tall, skin drawn over ropy muscles. Her tight black jeans were tattered at the too-short hems. Far too short, for they made her legs look almost like they had an extra joint in them. A subtle bend where only bone should be. She wore a black and white striped long sleeved shirt, thumbs poking obscenely through holes along the cuffs, and an oversized black cardigan under a black leather jacket encrusted with mud and grass. Her hair was like ragged black feathers that had been torn at by angry claws.

And her face was wrong.

Everything out of alignment. An approximation of a face by someone who had only ever heard faces described.

But it didn't matter. This wasn't the pull I felt to Bethany where something in me reached out to her. Ruby pulled at me like the ocean drags the sand from under your feet as the water rolls itself back out to sea.

We faced each other in the darkness, her head cocked strangely on her overlong neck, her unseeing eyes trained on my face.

Finally, she reached for me, her fingers dragging roughly through my hair, pulling me to her as the rushing in my ears became deafening. When our mouths met my skin began to throb to the

beat of her heart, and her tongue stroked mine until I was clutching at the back of her jacket so I wouldn't crumble.

I saw the slip of paper behind my closed eyes, saw my fingertip trace the word of what I wished to cleanse myself of in blood. Because, when it came down to it, my feelings for Bethany weren't my biggest problem. They weren't what I needed to get rid of. Not really.

It was *them*. The creeping things in my periphery. The objects that moved on their own. The wrong and freaksome and terrifying things that made me feel like the world was being pulled out from under me like the tablecloth in a magic trick. *Abracadabra*. So I'd written an intention to get rid of them. So they'd leave me alone. So I could just be normal. Be okay.

I'd written *Illusions*.

And as Ruby bent to kiss me again, over her shoulder the darkness sprang to life. Stripped of the shim that separated us, the things revealed themselves. Tiny and mammoth, familiar and new, simple and mind-rending, the beasts bucked and roared and tore the world apart.