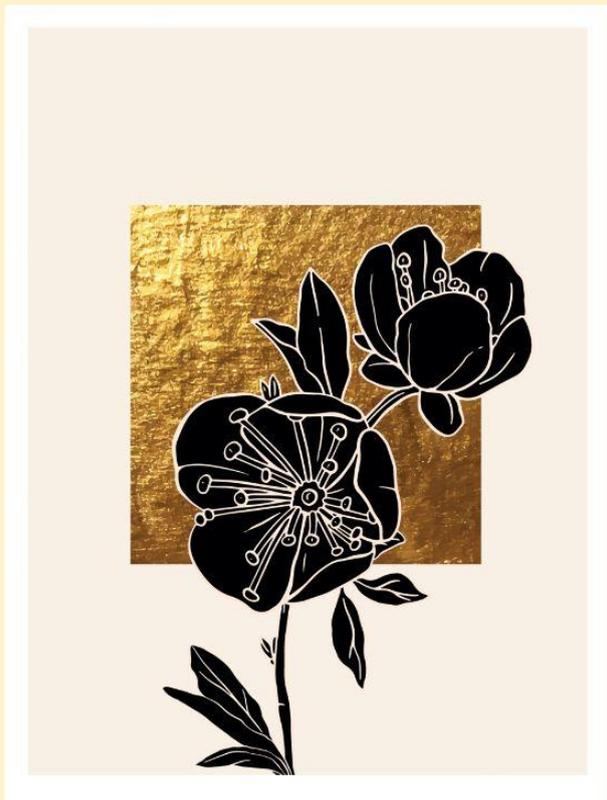


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# A Coup of Owls Spring 2023



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## **Foreword**

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## **Spotted All Over With Magenta by Lisa Cai**

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*A woman constructs a dress suitable for her and her bride.*

Lisa Cai is from Toronto, Canada. She graduated from Western University with a Master of Library and Information Science. She works in IT. She has been published in The Dark, Polar Borealis Magazine, The Future Fire, and others. She volunteers for NaNoWriMo and is a submissions editor for Speculative North Magazine.

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## **The Curtain by Deryn Pittar**

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*A personal journey on the loss of sight.*

Deryn Pittar writes Sci.fi., Fantasy, Young Adult, Cosy Mystery, contemporary fiction, short stories, flash fiction. and is an occasional poet. She is published in all these genre and ‘Lutapolii – White Dragon of the South’, won a Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Young Adult Published in 2018. She is honing her skill in short fiction with some success. Her dystopian novel, ‘The Carbonite’s Daughter’, was released by IFWG Publishing, Australia in 2022. The sequel ‘Quake City’ will be released in 2024.

Sign up for her newsletter here: <https://iwriteuread.substack.com> and find her books here: [amazon.com/author/derynpittar](https://amazon.com/author/derynpittar)

## **Normal Things by Cat Voleur**

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*A woman explores her options with her doctor, and learns more about the symptoms of her pregnancy...*

Cat Voleur is the author of Revenge Arc, and a full-time horror journalist. You can find her talking about scary movies on Slasher Radio and This Horror Life wherever you get your podcasts. She lives with a small army of rescue felines who encourage her to create and consume morbid content. In her free time, you can most likely find her pursuing her passion for fictional languages.

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**Another Sealbride by Samir Sirk Morató**

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*Finlay Muir's quest for a selkie bride ends in disaster when he encounters an equally ill-adjusted selkie who hunts for human husbands.*

Samir Sirk Morató is a scientist, artist, and flesh heap. Some of their work can be found in Catapult, Carmen Et Error, and Eerie River's "Water" anthology. They are @spicycloaca on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)

**What Do I Wear to My Friend's Funeral? by Zach Murphy**

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*What to wear to the funeral of a highschool friend...*

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Still Point Arts Quarterly, The Coachella Review, Maudlin House, B O D Y, Litro Magazine, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbook Tiny Universes (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) is available in paperback and ebook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**All These Little Deaths by Bibi Osha**

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*A simple nosebleed triggers an unending cycle of cat and mouse with Death.*

Bibi Osha lives on the East Coast where she writes speculative fiction typically with a non-Western slant. When she isn't writing about otherworldly beings, troubled characters and everything else in between you can find her in the company of music and possibly crocheting. Her work has been published or forthcoming in The Dark and Martian.

## Foreword -

Spring is springing (in this hemisphere, anyway). In the southern hemisphere, it's cooling off, fading into the same sepia tones we have lived in these past few months. Good luck to you, our fellow forest dwellers in the south. Hibernate well, and stay warm.

For those of us now venturing out among the blooming bulbs, we say a quiet, whispered 'hello'. The daffodils tilting like windmills, the crocuses bursting with vibrant colour. Bright, fresh new greens, gently but persistently pushing up through the ground.

Before, when I lived in the city, I hated spring. It looked warm, but it was still freezing. The sun's shine was trickery. It might still have snowed from that bright blue sky. Now, though, *now* I live in a forest by a river. The past few months have been nothing but drab mud, save for a few dark, faded greens that bravely coped with the frost, a covering of soul-sucking muck on everything. The sky has been overcast, and the sun has not reached my valley. Not until spring brought bright, cheery daffodils on my wall and the sun (when it deigns to appear) finally touching the sides of the valley and warming my skin in the morning.

Now, I love spring. In the city, it's harder to notice the nuance of seasons. Here, in the forest, it's everywhere. You notice changes every day. The cycle of dying and growing, water flowing, and the sun getting higher and lower, all outside your front door. It's not hidden behind grey buildings and concrete jungles. Green is purely green here, with no dust. Breathe in that fresh air and let it fill your lungs.

Change in the forest is palpable. That's why being here, in our forest, is so wonderful. Me and you, dear reader, with our wonderful peddlers of words and fellow owls, we feel how this forest's change beats hard and loud. This issue is filled with the beating heart of change. Metamorphoses slipping over and through your fingers. Wedding dresses woven from and into the fabric of our lives and loves. Life growing, whether it's wanted or not; death and departures that are always unwanted. Both cause growth and both cause decay. There is loss, the old world leaving, being blotted out... but what will be left in return? A new way of seeing? Perhaps. Death follows us – they are within us, and we cannot escape them, no matter how many times we die. Our skin betrays us and slips too easily from our grasp, leaving a gaping wound beneath as our freedom is too easily snatched.

Change is visceral. It can hurt. It can be wonderful and life-affirming. It can be transformative and transcendent. When I look at all of us in this forest and how wonderfully,

shimmeringly different we all are, how the picture I saw last time is completely different to the one I see now and the one I will see next, I can only think how much I love spring. I hope all of you joining us in our little forest of words and owls are springing. I hope you are all beginning to glisten, shift in your cocoons, push, and wiggle free. To become something you have always wanted to be. Remember, the only constant in life is change. So if you don't like what you've become, if your reflection is not reflective of the innermost 'scapes of you, remember spring. Stretch out those wings, ruffle those feathers and metamorphose into something else. Then do it again. Do it as many times as you need to. Change is beautiful. Difference is spectacular. So take a feathery wing and fly...

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# Spotted All Over With Magenta

by Lisa Cai

**Content Warnings: None.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

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I've returned with our wedding dresses. You waited atop a mountainous valley, watching the sun, shadows and moons cycle back and forth hundreds of times, for me to complete the construction of worthy garments.

Before we don these dresses and call upon our friends and family to witness our union, let me tell you all the ways I love you.

## 1

On our gowns' right sleeves, orchids are bent towards the grass like little red dragons, their petal wings stuck out straight in mid-flight.

The day I departed from you and our valley, I saw a dragon silhouetted against the sun. Their wide wings spread out and shaded the land beneath us. Imagine being so big and strong your very presence overshadows the sun. The first time we met, dancing around a bonfire, you mistook me for such a creature disguised in human form as the flames danced on my dark hair and skirts. That was my sign to take flight.

I rode every breeze under the skies to collect this orchid's tiny seeds. I clasped them in my palms and planted them in a tree's crevice. As they grew out of the dark bark, I called to the bees. They buzzed far and wide, following the orchids' scent. They shrouded the tree for weeks waiting to take that pollen to their hives.

Now, the tree's covered from trunk to branches to twigs in thousands of small scarlet dragons, ready to dive down. One day, I'll take you there to see the ruby tree surrounded by a forest of green.

## 2

On the left sleeves, blossoms greet you with seven petals. They're dyed in splotches of purple on yellow. Lean close to see the universes these flowers hide. Tucked in the dark spots, white celestial bodies glitter in greeting. The stars consume their planets in pale light, collide with each other, burst, and separate again and again.

Their kind sprout once every few years in a fairy queen's orchard. The trees bear sparkling dark fruit only Her Majesty samples. I hid in thorny bushes and frozen ponds for months as I observed knights patrolling the grounds, their sharp blades and arrows ready to take down any trespassers.

In the evening, I made my move; I hovered above the land. The branches and blossoms glowed mauve. Their season of life was supposed to be serene, confined and obedient to the whims of royalty. When we were little, we had watched this spectacle from afar on a hill and dreamed of what was hidden in those clouds of light; we were allowed to imagine but never dared to discover the truth.

I fired a great gust that stole the brightness away. Flowers were swept up in a whirl of my wind and the branches plucked bare. I left that land twirling in the heart of a hurricane of shimmering petals. If I hadn't got enough for us, I would've done this again and blown every guard to the far corners of the world.

## 3

The busts and skirts are embroidered with blue, bell-shaped blooms.

Among rows of spiky bushes in a desert, a single stalk arises within each of them, from which the blue bells sprout. By night, moths roll balls of pollen all over themselves. Wherever they fly, puffs of gold sprinkle behind. They go bush-to-bush, laying eggs in suitable flora. Their offspring hatch in a bed of creamy pollen, embraced by curvy, blue petals. That small world is all they know at birth.

If we have children, let's build a bed as soft and colourful as a caterpillar's.

As the blue bells bloom, farmers pluck them for sweet perfume; they have an arrangement with the bugs to leave nested flowers untouched in exchange for efficient pollination. I promised a year of good weather for a barrel of bell flowers, and the insects and humans slept well, knowing nothing in their lives would be disturbed. Some storm gods may be discontented about overstepped territories, but I'm willing to take blizzards and lightning bolts for you.

#### 4

Do you think I'm finished? Do you think this dress is enough for you? Atop our heads, we'll wear crowns.

Before I trekked back to you, I rested in a port city. A ragged girl sold boxes of flowers by the docks. She sat at her spot for days awaiting customers. She resembled me when I was young; I too did everything I needed to survive. I bought all her goods and made a wreath whenever I wasn't sewing on ships and trains.

Your crown has wide, white flowers, their pointed tips spotted all over with magenta. In the centre is a yellow stigma; they're just like your eyes.

I was born under an ancient wisteria tree. The tendrils, with their little purple blooms, inched closer and closer as my mother laboured. When I entered this world, the land burst with lilac petals; that tree couldn't withhold its excitement. It was my first friend, When I practiced with my wind powers, it always flailed its branches and rained flowers, pretending I had hit it with a great gust.

I was an illegitimate child of a goddess and a human man. I had nothing to inherit except my magic. When I visited my mother under this tree, she sat against the trunk. She left me to fend for myself, yet I wanted to let her know about you and what I was collecting. She yanked a violet tendril above her, and it whipped about in the wind. I wrapped it into a wreath for my head. Though the tree cannot make it to my wedding, its blossoms can.

#### 5

Now, my dear, when do you want to dress up? Be careful when deciding a date; with every passing day, the flora of these garments shall wilt, and petals will flow down and form a circle around our dresses. What drinks and desserts should be served at our wedding? Shall I go on about my adventures?

In the end, my every answer leads back to you.

# The Curtain

## by Deryn Pittar

**Content Warnings: Sight loss.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 11 for the next story.

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It was a long time ago, so long ago that, in a room full of relatives, the adults' legs were a forest I pushed my way through. A time when the workings of the world were a mystery I hoped to unravel one day, and responsibility was an unknown concept. The world was bright day after bright day.

Then the rainy days began, with tears as well as drenching drops and a mist floating at the side of my vision. The glare made my eyes ache, and the night became blacker than the spilled ink on my desk.

Adult life became edged with objects, missed and broken. Vehicles appeared from nowhere and narrowly passed me by. A diagnosis didn't cheer me, nor help. Family love eased the dismay and smoothed the wrinkles in the fabric of failing sight.

Today is warm. The heat of the sun caresses my skin. Plucked from the clothesline, the washing smells of sunshine. The birds talk of autumn soon, and the breeze whispers its chill around my knees. The plate is hot, my fingers sing.

I reach for a handle, a hook, a string – anything – to tear the curtain aside to hang and fold as it did before, letting in some detail, revealing a focal point.

Help me to shatter this darkness, to smash this night, to break this shadow into a myriad of lights, into a thousand whirling dreams of sun.

# Normal Things

## by Cat Voleur

**Content Warnings: Medical, pregnancy.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 20 for the next story.

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‘Is it supposed to look like that?’

My mother whips her head around to glare at me, obviously appalled by my lack of tact. This is another magical moment, apparently, that I am no doubt ruining for her.

If I believed in Christ, even a little, I might be tempted to thank him for the power of the obstetrician’s laugh, which is warm enough to cut through even Mother’s tension.

‘A lot of people struggle to see what’s going on the first time they get an ultrasound. It’s okay.’

Mother gives her the patented mother smile, which is made of nothing but condescending apologies. ‘She’s new to this.’

She forgets to mention that I am tired, also.

I’m very tired.

It sickens me, the way she feels she must be constantly apologizing for my very presence. Or explaining. Or making excuses for me. It is happening always, even here, even now, when the very friendly doctor is obviously fine with my question.

Though I do notice she hasn’t answered it yet, not in so many words.

I don’t blame her for getting distracted. Mother can be a lot to handle, especially if you don’t have experience doing so daily.

I want to tell her off, I really do. I want to shame her for how she’s always treating me. If I do it now in front of Miss Bubbly-Medical-Professional-With-The-Kind-Laugh, she might even reaffirm my one solid piece of ammunition in this war: stressing me out is bad for the baby.

I can’t, though.

This is one of those fantasies I always think about that I will never have the courage to act upon. Especially in my condition. Especially now that I have gotten an inside look into the horror of that condition.

Never mind that the stress is bad for me, too. I am just the mother. Who would care about that?

Being homeless would be worse for me, and my own mother knows this. She knows I dare not expose her in my current state, no matter how bloated and sore and frustrated I get. I can't dare to do so because I am the unwed expectant mother with a belly full of bastard child. Now my schooling will amount to nothing, and my job won't have me, and there is no father to speak of, and where would her poor little disgrace go if I humiliated her enough that she saw fit to turn me away?

Nowhere.

I would go nowhere because I have nowhere to go, and we both know it.

So I suffer her withering looks and her pathological need to justify me, always, and I try to focus on the moving mass of my stomach. Squinting at the screen doesn't seem to help. Nightmares lie there.

I try to look for a head or arm or tiny little genitalia – though honestly, I have no idea if it's too early to see those things. It doesn't feel early. It feels like I've been pregnant for about a year already. I hate that I'm the only one of the three women in the room right now who clearly isn't seeing any kind of miracle on the monitor.

I feel uneasy hearing my heart race, and the ooohs and ahs, and knowing I don't see whatever I'm supposed to see. I must be looking at something else. It definitely isn't supposed to look like this.

'We'll just print out a picture of this for you, so you can take it home,' Dr Joyce offers, like this is something that is going to help me somehow.

Mother glares at me, and so I put on my best fake smile. 'Yes... that would be... lovely... thank you...'

She pulls the device away from me, and I thankfully pull my shirt down. Maybe that was too hasty? I didn't wait for the residual goo to get wiped off; I was just so eager not to have my belly out any longer that I jumped the gun a bit.

Or did I?

Do they wipe the goo off?

That's something I don't ever remember seeing in the sitcoms or even the medical dramas. They just sort of skim over that part, the goo wiping. It makes me think maybe it's not something that gets done, but the way the fabric of my shirt sticks to my swollen stomach makes me think that maybe it should?

Maybe those mom actresses are sticky all the time under their ultrasound-scene costumes. Maybe women, generally, are sticky all the time once the idea of motherhood begins impending for them. I know this has not been the cleanest stage in my own life.

I sweat. I drool. I seem to be leaking from every orifice I have lately.

If I am being a sticky freak or if I have made some sort of mothering faux pas, the doctor doesn't mention it. She just wheels the machine away very naturally.

My mother is looking at me disapprovingly, but not any more so than usual.

'Do you have any other questions?'

'A few,' I answer.

Mother rolls her eyes, and I am glad that at least I got to answer first. If I'd had to walk back one of her answers, I might never have gotten the chance – because to contradict her would take courage and a certain level of energy that I just don't have these days.

'What's on your mind?'

'I just noticed that I'm still feeling sick... a lot. Is that normal for this late in?'

'Well, everyone experiences it differently. It's not uncommon to have some nausea throughout. Are you still suffering morning sickness?'

I nod because I think I am. As far as I can tell. What I'm going through now is the same as I was experiencing when Mother told me not to panic, it was just morning sickness. It's my best frame of reference, but because it does not feel right, I decide to clarify.

'Yes... only... it's more of an all-the-time sickness?'

'Morning sickness is a bit of a misnomer, isn't it?' She chuckles. 'I assure you, getting it at other times of the day is perfectly normal.'

'Even if it's all the time?'

Dr Joyce nods.

'Even still?'

She keeps nodding. 'Some women experience it all the way through to the end. Are you vomiting at all?'

'No. It just feels like I'm going to after I eat... and sometimes when I'm not eating.'

It seems ridiculous to try and explain it out loud so that it sounds as bad as it feels. Maybe this is what I sound like all the time, and this is why Mother didn't want me saying anything. She is rolling her eyes at me, but Dr Joyce gives me an empathetic look.

'Does this happen regardless of what you eat?'

'Oh, Judy has always been a picky eater,' Mother chimes in. She just can't help herself. No doubt she thinks she is contributing greatly to this conversation.

‘Well, Judy gets to be a picky eater while she’s growing life inside her.’

I could kiss Dr Joyce.

Mother scowls.

The newest love of my life turns to me once more. ‘Have you been having any specific cravings lately?’

‘Not really,’ I answer automatically, but then I pause. ‘I’ve been thinking about meat a lot, I guess.’

I do not tell her that I think about it only in my dreams and that it is raw there. I don’t tell her that it’s crawling with maggots or pulsating or how it sickens me. These are things I don’t want to say in front of Mother.

‘Many women crave meat during the third trimester, you’re in good company.’

It comforts me, oddly, to be put in this vague category of ‘many women.’ I should like to just be one of many, I think. It makes me feel better, even though it’s not doing much to address my literal concerns, which I cannot find the way to express properly.

Part of me is sure these are not normal things I’m experiencing.

‘I’m sure we’ve taken up enough of your time, doctor.’ My mother goes so far as to actually begin rising from her chair with this statement, so determined is she to push me out of the office. You would never suppose that she was the one who forced me out of bed and to this appointment that she arranged after months of badgering because she just couldn’t wait for me to come.

‘Please, take all the time you need.’

I seriously love this woman and her deity-like ability to make my mother take her seat again. I have never known anyone who could wield such power.

‘This can be a really stressful time, especially for younger, first-time mothers. And that goes doubly so for pregnancies that are... unplanned.’

Unwanted, she means.

Her smile is so genuine that you would never know from looking at her what her cadence gave away.

Unwanted.

She knows that this is the last place in the world I want to be right now. Were there any other option available to me, short of taking my own life, I would not be here. Even that thought, the S-word thought, has crossed my mind.

I had never thought of myself as someone who would think such things, not until I saw that blue line. I don't even know how seriously I considered it other than it was one of only two options, which made it worthy of considering.

Perhaps I never would have done such a thing, taken myself out to avoid the fate of motherhood. I find it just as likely, however, that lack of initiative is the only thing saving my ass right now. It is not that I'd rather be alive; it's just that I don't want to figure out how to achieve the alternative.

Maybe Mother is right. Maybe I really am a good-for-nothing.

'So if you have any other questions...' Dr Joyce prompts.

I realize I was zoning out again. That's been getting more frequent, too.

'Uhm. I don't really know how to ask this...'

She laughs again. She is the only person I've ever met who can laugh so naturally and so often without it seeming patronizing or cruel. 'Just ask,' she says. 'Believe me, I've heard weirder, no matter what you say.'

My mind flickers back to the screen and what I saw there. I wonder if she could explain that to me if I could ask about it, but there are plenty of other concerns all bubbling to the surface.

'I feel fuzzy.'

'Oh, not this again.' Mother seems to melt in her exasperation. Her limbs flail in the most unladylike manner like she just suddenly lost all her bones.

'Fuzzy?' Dr Joyce asks, ignoring the outburst.

'Like... sort of tingly?' I wiggle my fingers stupidly, like this could somehow help to illustrate what I mean. 'But softer? And it's all the time...'

'Is it a sort of pins and needles sensation?' she asks.

'Sort of...' I consider carefully just how honest I feel like being here. It seems to me there is a fine line between having my questions answered and getting sent up to psych.

'More like something is crawling on me?'

I don't tell her the part where it feels like I am also the thing that is crawling on me. I don't tell her that sometimes I feel like I'm inhabiting the invisible creatures crawling on my skin more than I'm inhabiting myself. My body has felt a foreign place these last many weeks.

'I see.'

Her smile melts like wax into a more serious expression that is not quite a frown.

Mother doesn't miss the opportunity to jump in now that my strangeness is impacting the nice doctor. 'I've been telling her, this is all normal stuff that all us mothers go through.'

'It could be. But we want to be safe, don't we?'

Mother looks as though she's been slapped by the very implication that she has ever wanted to be anything other than safe. 'Well, of course.'

'Would you mind stepping out of the room for just a minute, Mrs Macadams?'

'Well, I—'

'Just to be safe,' Dr Joyce adds. 'I'm going to run a couple additional tests.'

Mother, bewildered, moves out into the hall.

The door is shut behind her firmly before I find my voice again. 'What sort of tests?'

'Well, if there's anything abnormal, the bloodwork should help us find it.'

'Oh.' I look down at the floor. For a second, I thought she'd look at the ultrasound again. I thought maybe she would test me for whatever parasites seem to be taking over.

But no.

My bloodwork has already been done.

'But I wanted to speak with you alone for just a moment.'

'Yeah?'

'Have you considered adoption?'

Adoption is not the word I hear at first.

The word I hear is a nasty, dirty desire of a word I know I can't have. We are too late into this mess for the word I, wishfully, hear.

That daydream is crushed once again as it sinks in that she said adoption.

'Mother wants me to keep it.'

'And what do you want?'

I can feel the tears burning as they well in my eyes. It feels like I got hot sauce in them. It is like this every time I cry, like trying to push sand out through my tear ducts.

No one, not once, has asked me what I wanted throughout this whole thing.

I just want it gone.

I don't say that out loud. I don't know if I have the courage, even, to say it out loud. But I feel like she knows all the same.

'Judy?'

'Mother... Mother says that I'll feel better... when it's done. That I'll learn to love them once they're here.'

'Some women do experience a slower bond with their children. It can work that way.'

‘Really?’

The pressure in my chest is loosening by the minute – pressure I have just gotten so accustomed to, I don’t even think about it anymore.

I thought for sure that was just a lie Mother told me, that it was another one of her little platitudes to make me feel better. It didn’t seem like the sort of thing she could possibly know from experience, as there had never been a moment following my birth where she had properly bonded with me.

It’s hopeful to hear a doctor say that it’s possible. That even if I think the thing is a parasite now, I might get it out of me and learn to love it still.

Dr Joyce nods and chooses her words carefully. ‘But sometimes it doesn’t.’

‘Oh.’

That makes sense. It makes a lot of sense.

‘I’m not trying to scare you. I just want you to be prepared in case no one has told you. And I want you to know that it’s okay if you don’t want to be a mother. Even if you just don’t feel ready for it right now, it’s okay to feel however you’re feeling.’

‘It... doesn’t feel okay,’ I admit.

Of course I don’t want to be a mother.

My body is rejecting the idea. I feel sick and shaky all the time. I dream up hellscapes, and I feel myself, my spirit, maybe even my soul shrinking up as it is all trapped in this flesh prison that no longer belongs to me. I am being eaten away into nothing, even as my stomach swells and bulges and leeches off of me.

I did not ask for this.

Even my thoughts, these disturbing images, they do not feel entirely my own.

‘But it is okay. And if you want, I can get in contact with you privately about your other options.’

‘It’s... It’s too late.’

‘It’s never too late.’

That’s not what I mean. And a part of me knows that she knows that it’s not what I mean. But she’s giving me an alternative that isn’t death, and she’s listening, and she’s comforting me instead of trying to silence me. That’s more than anyone has done for me since I’ve known I was pregnant. It’s likely more than anyone has done for me since the night I probably got pregnant to begin with, the night that I can’t remember.

I nod.

I can’t express all the emotions swirling within me right now, so I just nod.

‘I’ll call you with that information, and we can set up a time for you to come in and go over everything, just the two of us, okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Is the cell number in your file okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And before we go back out there, is there anything you want to tell me?’

Thank you?

I love you?

My fever gets up to 103 some nights?

I can feel my bones grinding against one another?

I can only sleep during the day?

I look huge, but I’ve lost about twenty pounds since this all happened?

It burns when I pee?

There are times when I seem to be losing hours of the day?

These are all things that my mother says are normal, and they seem of little consequence right now. I’ve gotten all I wanted and more out of this visit.

‘I think I’ll be okay.’

Maybe I even believe that, a little.

‘Okay, well.’ She puts her warm smile back on as she walks me to the door.

Mother pounces on us the second it opens. ‘What’s wrong with her? Is she okay? Is the baby okay?’

A little glimpse behind the mask of constant security held up by this woman who says she knows everything and that it’s always fine.

‘We’ll know more when the blood tests come back, but there’s no reason to panic. We just want to be safe.’

Mother composes herself surprisingly well. ‘Of course. We want to be safe.’

‘And we’ll call right away as soon as we get those results back.’

She will call me, I know, even sooner.

And for the first time, I will have an option.

I know, realistically, that it will not be a real option. That even if I found a couple or an agency or a high bidder, or however it works, Mother would say no. But there is, at least, the illusion of a choice right now.

There is also the delicious weight of having a secret – the kind of weight that makes me feel that much lighter.

‘Oh, I almost forgot.’

Dr Joyce hands me the ultrasound photo of my baby. I am feeling so relieved by the appointment that I expect to look at it and see some sort of recognizable baby shape in the picture.

But still, it looks like nothing but a tangled mass of worms coiled within me.

# Another Sealbride

## by Samir Sirk Morató

**Content Warnings: Emotional abuse, suicidal ideation, gaslighting, grief, implied sexual abuse of a minor.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 40 for the next story.

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Finlay doesn't stop believing in fairy tales when he turns nineteen, or when both of his parents – strangers he loved dearly – drown that same year, or when his mind begins echoing the town's opinion that he's darkly untrustworthy. If anything, those events make him believe. *Why shouldn't strange things be real?* Finlay asks himself. He knows everyone here; no one is familiar. He's rotting; he's walking. The place that fed his family killed them. These true contradictions are no more nonsensical than mermaids, sea serpents or selkies. If anything, the fantastical must exist: if it doesn't, if tortuous mundanity is all there is, why live?

It's that question that has Finlay Muir quivering on the lighthouse landing as Caleb MacCallan, a colossus of scars and brusque comments, stares at his unexpected visitor.

'Mr MacCallan,' Finlay says, 'I have a question for you.'

Caleb squints. Finlay grips the railing to steady himself. With Caleb's abalone earring shining in his ear, it's as if the hermit has three eyes, all of them studying Finlay. Both men are the same shade of brilliant, mermaid-purse black. They're both scarred from the cannery's teeth. Both hate formalities. But wiry, tired Finlay is young; husky, tired Caleb is old. While Caleb has nothing to lose, Finlay has lost everything. Whatever goodwill the Muirs gathered before their annihilation may not withstand what that reality entails.

Thirteen storeys of spiral staircase groan beneath them. The lantern pane, imprisoned behind a lattice of bars, stays vacant of light or strange faces. A glint of pity softens Caleb's glare. Finlay knows it's a cousin to condolence.

'Shoot,' Caleb says.

Finlay exhales. 'How did you catch a selkie?'

Caleb stills. Far below, beyond the cliffs, Glenport's weave of dilapidated roads and houses continues its decades-long sink into the ocean. The cannery that consumes them all squats on the horizon, a mausoleum spitting smoke at bloodthirsty seabirds; behind it, mast

lines and nets web out from the harbour in unmade nooses. Finlay's house, a cube downhill from the lighthouse, shimmers miserably in the sun.

Finlay doesn't breathe until Caleb pinches his temple.

'Let's set one thing straight: I've never stolen a selkie's skin.' Caleb lashes his words against the air. 'I've never made a marriage out of chains, for one. I ain't ever planning on it. I have no seal children romping around the beach. If you're searching for someone to help you with a cruelty, I ain't it.'

'It's not a cruelty!' Finlay protests even as a piece of toast, his first meal in days, threatens to come up. *Selkies are real*. If Caleb speaks about them this way, they're real. Caleb has unwittingly delivered Finlay to salvation. 'I wouldn't ever hurt a selkie for her skin. I just want some company. The selkies live on the intertidal, don't they? On Sea Glass Beach. I've heard them singing there... and here. Your wife's voice is beautiful.'

Caleb steps back into the lighthouse. His fingers curl into trembling claws.

'That's who she is, isn't she?' Finlay says. 'Your wife.'

Terns scream around the lighthouse. Goosebumps prick Caleb's arms, then Finlay's.

'Finlay, pay attention.' Caleb, ashen, crams his hands in his pockets. 'Not a hundred years back, folks like us didn't receive a whit of freedom. You oughta not forget that. Everyone under God's sun deserves the right to themselves. Including the selkies.' He jabs at Finlay's sternum. 'If you weren't orphaned, I'd hurl you down these damn stairs. Stay away from Sea Glass Beach. You'll get yourself hurt.'

Caleb slams the door closed. Finlay walks several circles on the landing, pulse hitching, unable to bear looking at the lighthouse or the wretched hope kindling inside him. For once, the idea of jumping is unappealing.

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Finlay hasn't visited Sea Glass Beach since he was five when his mother broke her arm at the cannery and used her recovery time to whisk him beneath the cliffs. Today, he returns.

Saltgrass brushes Finlay's shins as he steps onto the beach. It's a gorgeous snarl of dichotomies: sand against intertidal, cliff against sea, rot against life. Gulls litter the rocks, some slumbering, others screaming at the thunderhead-studded horizon. Festering kelp cushions tidal pools lush with starfish, sea slugs and anemones. Unseen, in the black, eternal spread of ocean, a riptide sucks at the shore and begs another Muir to enter its mouth. Finlay hunches into his coat. He doesn't heed its call.

He remembers this beach better than he remembers his mother.

Finlay steps past an ancient folding chair. He shudders at a scrap of dead sea lion. Do selkies mind witnessing pieces of cousin wash up? Finlay trawls his treacherous brain for answers, hoping he doesn't catch any. Thinking is his enemy.

He tells himself that the selkies will understand. The selkies here must have seen the sea claim countless cannery ships. According to his father, with every drowning, they gain another selkie. The grievers onshore get nothing. So two parents for a companion is fair. Caleb MacCallan's heart morally points north, but he can't see Finlay's collapsing towers of unwashed dishes, or hidden photo albums, or reams of grief. If Finlay doesn't have someone who stays – for once – then soon, he'll depart. He knows it. He feels it. Instead of letting death creep closer, Finlay clings to what he knows: selkie spouses stay. No matter what.

A gull, hobbled by botulism, hurries away on its ankles.

Finlay is no beast. He intends on giving the selkie options. It will almost be like she's free. Almost. Acid splashes Finlay's throat. He creeps across the intertidal. The shore stays vacant. Finlay is a plover combing the sand: delicate. Powerless.

When he first sees the skin, he mistakes it for another carcass. A harbour seal pelt sprawls on the rocks above the tideline. It's so grey it shines blue. Dazzling cream spots and rings fleck its surface. It's someone's home, someone's robe. Their channel between worlds.

Before he loses his nerve, Finlay seizes the pelt. It's heavier and oilier than a promise. He clutches it to his chest. Dawn slashes the shoreline. Finlay crams the skin into his bag before he faces the faceless ocean. Minutes pass. Gulls cry out; the tide cries in. No pleading selkie plunges out of the surf. No pinniped shapes look from the rocks. Whenever the waves ripple, Finlay flinches. Where is anyone? Where is he? Whispers swirl in the ocean. Wind whistles away the cliffs.

The selkie climbs out of a tidal pool.

She is plump, short and curvy. A furry abstraction of a woman. Her eyes – blackened by humungous pupils – almost overflow her face. A cleft splits her lips. A sheet of seaweed obscures her hip. Silt, seashell pieces and fishing line clutter her waves of hair; whiskers dot her tawny face. She looks like a peach, with denser, greasier fuzz. Finlay stares at her. She stares back.

'I have your skin,' Finlay says.

'I know.'

The selkie barks more than speaks. Sharp, tiny black nails crown her fingers. Specks of mussel shell stud her breasts. Below them perk a second, smaller pair of teats. Finlay inhales.

‘My name is Finlay. What’s yours?’

‘Finlay. That’s a nice name,’ the selkie says. ‘Could be a monster’s. Could be a man’s.’

‘Really.’ Finlay splutters. ‘What’s your name?’

They know the script. The selkie considers him. Her eyes glitter: due to saltwater or tears, Finlay isn’t sure. She wades ashore, exposing scar-knotted feet and knees. Her feet are slick, her toes almost fused into flippers.

‘My name is Hispi,’ the selkie says. ‘Like the sound sea glass makes when it washes ashore.’ She accepts Finlay’s hand with a quiver. ‘You had better take me away now.’

Finlay walks his limping prize home.

\*

Hispi arrives with her bridal train of seaweed on her hip and her groom-capture on her arm. She halts on the threshold. ‘Is this it?’ Crabs, iridescent worms and starfish froth in her gown. Fishbones pearl the gaps.

‘Yes. Hold on. Wait here.’

Finlay rushes inside as Hispi untangles a fetal shark from her train. He folds the seal skin away in a cupboard, then sprints back to the door, feverish, his mother’s clothes spilling from his arms. Hispi rips a skirt from his grip.

‘I’ll wear this, but I don’t wear shirts,’ she says. ‘I don’t wear underwear. I’m not landlocked. Don’t order me to wear them.’

‘I won’t.’

Hispi crams the shark carcass into his hands.

‘I’m changing outside.’

She slams the door shut. Finlay laughs in disbelief until he pukes.

Though he buries Hispi’s kelp train in the garden that evening, shark included, he can’t hide the other dowries Hispi brings with her. By day two, seal smell permeates the cottage. Hispi’s brazen voice, long whiskers and inquisitive hands explore everything but Finlay. By day three, Hispi’s tears christen the cottage too: Finlay wakes to her sobbing in the kitchen. He hides in bed until her crying fades. Then he cooks breakfast, all his limbs heavier than lead. Hispi keeps her head lowered until it’s time to eat.

‘You’re here a lot.’ She decapitates a roasted anchovy. ‘Don’t you work?’

‘No.’ Finlay avoids meeting her puffy eyes. ‘I used to. After my parents passed away, I quit. We’re using their savings. I’ll have to start working at the cannery again soon.’

‘I’m surprised they hired you. You look younger than nineteen.’

‘Everyone says I look older,’ Finlay says.

Hispi eats the rest of the anchovy. Rows of serrated teeth glimmer in her mouth. So does discontentment. Some quicksilver struggle is missing from her and her meal – some rapt, adrenaline-snarled crunch of life.

Finlay fidgets. ‘Do you want to see the beach?’

Hispi grips another anchovy before saying, ‘No. I don’t want to go. I couldn’t bear seeing it again.’

‘Okay.’ Finlay feels brutish.

‘I hate those cliffs anyway.’ Hispi tears the anchovy in half. ‘If you want to do something for me, buy me more fish.’

‘Consider it done.’

While Finlay finishes eating, Hispi roams the cottage again. She wrinkles her nose at dirty clothes, snatches Finlay’s comb off a chair, and yanks open the blinds. Sunlight contours her curves in oily rings. Finlay pretends not to study her.

Hispi lets the blinds fall shut. ‘When I pictured getting my skin stolen, I didn’t picture someone like you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Do you want a description of yourself?’

‘Go ahead,’ Finlay says.

Hispi huffs. ‘You’re a pup with patchy whiskers, a soft face, and big, low-tide eyes. You’re not exactly a grizzled sailor.’

‘Stop calling me a pup.’

‘Or what? You’ll destroy my skin?’

Finlay groans. It’s an inadequate response. He can’t summon a more solemn one.

‘I wouldn’t ever do that,’ he says. ‘Alright?’

‘Sure.’ Contempt bubbles in Hispi’s first comb stroke. ‘I bet you’re already destroying it by leaving it folded like some sheet. I bet it’s getting creased. Skinless men are all the same.’

Finlay wants to say, *I’ll unfold and keep it the way you like. If my mind lets me remember to do that. I care.* The idea of Hispi dashing into the ocean muzzles him. Hispi scowls as her tangles catch in the comb. Finlay frowns.

‘What now?’ Hispi says.

‘Do you want help brushing your hair?’

Hispi slows her combing. ‘Is this a joke?’

‘No.’

Neither of them moves. Hispi glares. She thrusts the comb at Finlay before sitting on the floor. Finlay gingerly takes it and kneels behind her. Hispi’s mane is coarse. Wavy. Finlay marvels at a blob of sunshine on Hispi’s collar. A lump clogs his throat. Does he deserve happiness at the cost of her freedom?

‘You’re not bad at this.’

Hispi speaks with softened surprise.

‘Thanks.’ Finlay ensures his hands don’t brush Hispi’s skin lest the contact stings them. He soothes her waves of hair into a braid. Time slips by. Hispi basks in slivers of sunshine. Her eyes close. Their teardrop shapes prime Hispi’s expressions to appear suspicious or melancholy. Right now, Finlay can’t place her expression.

‘I suppose I don’t mind being your prettier half,’ Hispi says.

Finlay laughs, astonishing himself. With braided hair, Hispi’s ears show, small, round and smooth.

‘Besides,’ she says, ‘your sad eyes are cute.’

Finlay flushes.

\*

Over the next three weeks, boy and selkie exist in elated misery. Sometimes, they wake to each other’s sobbing, then pass the day in separate weepy realms. Their attempts to cohabitate manifest through muttered compliments and awkward meals. Neither Hispi nor Finlay seem certain of themselves. Other times, Finlay wakes to mad, unprompted housekeeping. Hispi oozes self-assurance, then. She slaps laundry on midnight clotheslines, laughs at her own jests, and scrubs every available surface. She’s sleepless; she’s ceaseless. Hispi’s housewife highs always dissolve within days. Finlay cannot say she’s feigning enthusiasm, but whatever intense elevations seize her aren’t contentment.

‘You’re lucky to have me,’ Hispi tells Finlay one Friday. ‘You need me.’

‘I know,’ Finlay says.

Hispi resumes cleaning with a smile. Finlay’s gratefulness trips on his unease.

Maybe her sporadic initiative is necessary. Despite everything, nihilism engulfs Finlay at random moments. Flashes of apathy torment him. Rage, too. Why isn’t he better? He has company. Soon, he will work again. It’s time to be whole. If he isn’t, the cannery will finish rearranging his exposed innards.

This isn’t fair. Not to him or to Hispi. Finlay simmers. Disgust occasionally warps Hispi’s face when she looks at him. Finlay can’t fault her for that. He imagines his parents

with identical repulsed expressions. Maybe they hated isolation too. Besides necessity, it would explain why they abandoned Finlay on the hillside for days while they sailed out to sell their sweat and blood. Any child capable of bearing that didn't need their guidance. Since Finlay wasn't at risk of joining the selkie choir, it was the smallest sacrifice he could make.

Years later, he's still making it.

\*

A month into Hispi's stay, Finlay wakes to the squeal of hinges. Then a tempest: the thunder of objects falling, the lightning of glass shattering, the rain of shards hitting hardwood.

'Hispi?' He stumbles into the living room. Grogginess clouds his brain.

Pictures and slivers of wallpaper litter the floor. Hispi lies next to an upturned chair. Her hair drips into her face. Finlay doesn't know what scares him more: Hispi or the scattered family photos. The cupboard hiding Hispi's skin sits untouched.

'Hispi! Are you okay?' Finlay edges closer, blood cold.

'I'm fine. Just tide-blessed.'

'What happened?'

'What do you think?' Hispi rears, raking wallpaper from beneath her nails. 'I want my skin back! I want to go home! This place is hell, and I'm the only one trying to improve it.'

'That's untrue.' Finlay fights the scathing whispers in his subconscious.

'Yes, it is! If you were trying, you'd let me go to town.'

'You can't go into town. People won't be kind to you, Hispi.'

'Like this is kindness! Who'll stop me from going?' Hispi stands in her wreckage.

'You? You're always sleeping or crying!'

Mortification floods Finlay. The past week's perpetual exhaustion tears at him. 'If you want to leave so badly, then leave,' he grinds out. 'Skin or no skin.'

Hispi barks in rage. 'Maybe I will! Look at how generous man is. You stole me from the water, and you won't even let me go to the beach!'

'Hold on.' Alarm bells ring in Finlay's head. 'I never said that.'

'You did!'

'I asked if you wanted to go. You said no! You're delusional.'

Hispi stomps on a framed photograph of Finlay's parents. They crunch. Cracks web the glass. Hispi looks satiated, then horrified.

'Get out.' It's worse than seeing the empty coffins lowered. Finlay kicks the remains of a lamp, catapulting it into the wall. It explodes. 'Get out!'

'I hate you!' Hispi wails. 'You're worthless! All of this is your fault!'

She flees into the kitchen. Finlay runs outside to curse at the hillside.

\*

At dusk, long after sandflies have feasted on every bare iota of his body, Finlay re-enters the house.

Debris spots the hardwood, artificial abalone peering from sand. Several pictures adorn the wall again. The Muir family portrait is among them. Finlay's parents smile at him from behind a prison of cracks. Finlay almost bawls when he sees them. Their absence makes him aware of every familial fault he holds and the inherited integrity he lacks. What will become of them if they return as selkies and meet someone like Finlay? He dry heaves until that thought passes.

This is his fault. Finlay kneads his cramping abdomen. He subdues his self-doubt. Real men are supposed to right wrongs. Finlay knows what his father would have him do. He trudges towards the kitchen.

After a waver, he raps his knuckles on the wall. The curtain sways.

'Hey.' Finlay looks at the floor to avoid his own cowardice. 'I'm sorry I hurt you... I shouldn't have said those things. You were right. This is my fault.'

'I appreciate the apology.'

Hispi sounds venomless. Finlay leans against the doorframe. He wants to ask why she accused him of something he's never said. He lacks the faith in himself to do so.

'Do you want to be alone?' he says.

'No,' Hispi says. 'Do you want to be alone?'

'No.'

'You should come in, then.'

Finlay does.

Hispi hunkers on her makeshift bed. Exhaustion rims her eyes. Finlay hovers until Hispi pats a spot next to her. He sits. They stare at the wall together.

'I'm sorry,' Finlay says after the silence stretches. How worthless words are!

'We both are, one way or another.' Hispi rubs her nose. 'I put the photos back.'

'I saw. Thank you.'

The breeze coming through the window is a third participant in their conversation, breathing pauses and collecting their secrets. The lighthouse singer's crooning drifts above the hill. Hispi cocks her head.

'How pretty,' she says. 'How empty. That's me too. I say a lot of things I don't mean.'

Finlay crosses the abyss between them to place his hand on hers. Hispi doesn't recoil. The webbing between her fingers resembles sail canvas. Finlay's coherency dissipates.

Hispi shakes her head. 'I don't understand you. Most men show off their selkie. Am I not good enough?'

'No, no. That's not it.' A scream suspends itself in Finlay's lungs. 'I'm terrified of being by myself again. I'm so lonely, even with you. I don't want to imagine how it would be if Glenport took you away. If you left, it'd be fine. But I couldn't live with myself if the townspeople sold you to a circus or something. I don't want us to both be imprisoned alone.'

'You don't have friends,' Hispi says.

'No.'

Hispi tugs on one of his curls. Finlay arches his eyebrows, then shyly offers her his back. Hispi twins his hesitation before she begins braiding his hair.

'I don't have anyone either,' she says. 'I miss the rookery. I can't ever go back. There's nothing for me there. Just bottles with no notes. Every time I think it'll get better, it doesn't. That hurts more than hating it. Maybe now I'll escape.'

'I hope you do,' Finlay says quietly. 'You deserve to be in a better place. Emptiness isn't good company.'

He isn't good company. Finlay aches. Hispi releases his half-braided hair. Finlay's mane covers his other eye. He peeps out at her.

'Hello,' he says.

'Hello.' Hispi smiles. 'You look stupid. Turn around so I can even this out.'

'What do you mean?' Finlay poses. 'I look great.'

Hispi laughs, clapping her hands, her canines flashing. She braids Finlay's hair again. They touch.

\*

In the next month, squid season starts. At night, glimmering spirals of spotlights and nets flood the water. Finlay and Hispi watch them from the hillside. Ships – artificial constellations – glide everywhere, seducing squid from the depths. Finlay reluctantly reapplies to the cannery. Hispi grins when he turns his papers in.

'All it took was some badgering from your prettier half, huh?' she says.

No tussling this time. It's pathetic. Finlay is grateful anyway. When Hispi begs to go beyond the garden, he lets her. She wears his coat as she somersaults and laughs along the cliffside. Finlay admires her flying hair. Hispi bests Caleb's unseen selkie in all ways. Finlay decided that a long time ago. He doesn't love Hispi. This is close enough.

Yet a storm front shadows Hispi. Her laughs are shrieks. Her maniacal cavorting overwrites her limp. Whenever Hispi stills, pain consumes her expression, then frenetic uncaring. Finlay leaves the window when she begins crawling and laugh-sobbing into the grass. She must stop sometime. He prays she will.

Hispi raves until sunset.

When day strips its golden shine from the cliffs, she trudges inside. Finlay hides his relief. Twilight drenches the sky in hazy regalia. The ocean turns to an obsidian flat. Finlay guts squids for dinner outside as terns skim the water. Hispi's singing drifts through the open windows. Her melody wavers alone.

Caleb's selkie ceased singing a month ago. Did he make her stop? Finlay's spirits fall again. He throws the squid offal into a bucket before retreating inside.

'We have mushrooms, squash, and fish for stuffing,' he says, pushing through the kitchen curtain. 'Whatever you want.'

Hispi starts, clasping her hitched skirt; a tea kettle falls. It smashes onto the hardwood floor. Finlay gawks at the immense loop of scar tissue fracturing her hip. Hispi's side needles together in a flesh overbite, echoing the shark mouth that broke it. Her crooked thigh twitches.

'What are you gawking at?' Hispi says.

'Sorry. Sorry.' Finlay shoves his plate onto a counter. It crashes into a salt shaker. Oven heat scorches the kitchen.

'You're not pretty either!'

'Hispi, calm down.' Finlay gropes for the door. Hispi hunches, one scarred calf exposed to the world, a growl rumbling in her chest that promises shoreside violence. The kettle bleeds behind her.

'Why?' she spits. 'I know what you'll do! You all want a perfect, pretty, obedient wife. Instead, you get me, then punish me for it!'

'I'm not going to punish you!'

'Liar.'

'I mean it! They're just scars, Hispi.'

The rumble fades. Hispi licks her lips, shrinking. Finlay no longer feels like a mackerel about to be beaten against rocks. Sweat beads on his brow. He steps forward, tentative first, then unafraid.

'Leave me alone,' Hispi says.

'No. I'm staying here as long as you sound upset, whether you like it or not.'

‘Isn’t controlling everything I do enough? Fin. I’m begging you.’

Hispi huddles into the corner as he draws closer. When Finlay braces a hand onto the counter next to her, Hispi shuts her eyes. She clutches her skirt. Her whiskers prick Finlay’s chin. Hispi lurches when Finlay cups her face.

‘Don’t do this,’ she said. ‘Please. Please.’

‘Hispi, look at me. This is for your own good,’ Finlay murmurs. Hispi looks retch-ready. ‘What do you need?’

Hispi draws a rattling breath. ‘I need dinner.’

‘Okay,’ Finlay says.

He withdraws. Terror and gratitude saturate Hispi in a way he doesn’t understand. They mop up the kettle water and cook in silence. Dinner passes wordlessly. Hispi eats her stuffed squid without looking at Finlay once. Finlay can’t make himself speak. Something delicate wobbles in the air between them.

Hispi finishes first. ‘I’m going to bed.’

‘Goodnight,’ Finlay says. ‘Sleep well.’

‘Aren’t you going to carry me there? My room is far away.’

Finlay starts. His fork clangs against his plate. ‘Of course.’ He stumbles out of his chair. ‘I’ll help you.’

‘Hurry up, then.’

Hispi offers Finlay her unscarred side.

It takes effort to carry her. He almost can’t. Hispi is heavy, warm ballast: blubber and muscle. As Finlay steers towards the kitchen, Hispi’s musky breath tickles his cheek. He sets Hispi in her bed. Her arms don’t unwind from his neck.

‘You should stay,’ she says.

‘If you want me to.’

‘I do.’

The squid boats race across the choppy surf. Hispi whistles an imitation of wind threading fishing pole eyelets. The two lay in the dark, listening. Imagining the ocean.

‘I should have knocked earlier,’ Finlay says.

‘You should have.’

Finlay stills when claws trace his Adam’s apple. Does Hispi want an apology? He did right – though he does right so little now – by sticking close to her. Why apologise for that? When the silence continues, Hispi sighs. She drapes herself across Finlay’s chest. Her density crushes him. A wheeze leaks away in his throat.

‘I don’t know how you survived being bitten,’ Finlay speaks when he can. ‘I wouldn’t have.’

‘It was agony.’ Hispi shivers. ‘That shark crippled me. Whenever the rookery travelled, I couldn’t keep up. My few friends always outswam me. I became the slowest on the beach, too. As a pup, that was awful. Do you ever feel like everyone is leaving you?’

‘Always.’

Hispi sniffles.

‘Hey, hey. It’s okay.’ Finlay fumbles to wipe her face.

‘The first time a man stole my skin, I was twelve,’ Hispi says. ‘Can you believe that? I couldn’t outrun him or anyone after him either. Every time, the rookery and the sailors left me. They took what they wanted, then threw me back. It’s been a decade since that first sailor, and he’s stealing me still. Finlay, I can’t be alone.’

‘I won’t leave you. I promise.’

‘You can’t. You’re alone, too.’

Finlay sobs a laugh. Hispi hides in his chest.

‘You’re not ever going to release me,’ she whispers, ‘are you?’

‘No.’ Finlay caresses her. ‘I’m sorry. You deserve better. I can’t offer you anything.’

‘That’s not true.’ Hispi is luminous with tears and moon-shimmer. ‘You make me feel less low-tide. You’re gentle. That’s remarkable.’

‘I guess.’

Their breasts kiss. Hispi’s heartbeat suckers to his own. Finlay drowns in a tide of hair. Hispi pecks his temple. ‘See? Now you know your virtues.’

‘I’m lucky to have you.’

‘Of course you are. No one else wants you.’

Finlay licks his lips. Hispi sounds so, so sure.

‘Do you believe that?’ he says.

‘Yes. Look at you.’ Hispi smiles, then sobs.

Finlay startles. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I hate being like this. I hate it!’

‘Hate being like what, Hispi?’ Finlay leans into her, unsure of anything but the squid boats outside. Maybe they’re comets instead. Maybe the world is ending. It’s ended before. ‘Being – scarred? Stuck?’

Captured. Trapped. Sick. Hispi sobs again, sealish and harsh. Finlay hugs her. He nearly elbows her in the cheek when she drags him onto her as if his body shields her from

everything. Finlay wipes her tear tracks away until her sobbing ceases. Only the night is listening when Hispi wraps around Finlay. Gravity settles them together.

‘You should finish making me your wife.’

Hispi’s whiskers tickle Finlay’s ear more than her words. He swallows.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ Hispi falters, then tugs at his pants. ‘We should consummate our union.’

Some older stranger, some ghost, speaks through her. Finlay turns sickeningly hot. He cannot tell if he’s on the precipice of crying or fury. Hispi cringes as he shoves her away.

‘We’re not married. I’m not one of your sailors,’ Finlay says. ‘Not one of your—’

Whatever word he’s searching for, it isn’t ‘husbands.’ Hispi sits up. The desire lacing her motions makes Finlay’s body throb. It’s more akin to a migraine’s pulsing than arousal. Finlay wants to escape.

‘Fin.’ Hispi sounds devastatingly fragile. ‘I’m asking because you aren’t.’

Finlay hesitates too long. He tumbles backwards when Hispi throws herself onto him the way seals throw themselves onto jagged rocks that need surmounting. The terror in Hispi’s clinging mates with his.

‘Hispi,’ he rasps, ‘I can’t make love to you.’

Hispi’s disappointment matches her relief. The fact she’s disappointed at all wrenches at Finlay’s chest in a way he doesn’t understand.

‘Okay.’ Her cleft lips tremble.

‘I’m sorry. Since my mind started rotting—’

‘No, I understand.’

Finlay is unsure if he wants to become a pacifist or if he wants to hunt Hispi’s past jailors and kill them with an oar. ‘Hispi, hold on. Please.’

Hispi halts her escape when Finlay’s fingers slip between her legs. She gasps. Clings to him again. Finlay chastely mouths the rings along her collar, too afraid to do more. Hispi’s claws tangle into his hair.

‘Hurt me,’ she begs. ‘Make it right.’

‘No.’

Hispi’s breath hitches. ‘Finlay, I’m terrible. I’m ruining you. Don’t be kind to me. Hurt me. I deserve it.’

She twists his hair. Finlay’s scalp screams. Hispi hails from deepwater dungeons and harsh currents. She can wrench his head off if she chooses to.

‘No.’ Finlay’s watering eyes spill. ‘You don’t.’

Hispi collapses into his lap again. The importance of protecting her almost paralyzes Finlay. He curls his fingers, careful, ashamed. This is evil. He already has Hispi's skin. Why must he enter her too? Constellations of pain shoot through his vision. His ragged panting weds Hispi's. When she moans, Finlay nearly weeps. Thank god! He isn't hurting her. Terror wracks him. Tears continue dripping into his lap. Hispi merges their mouths.

'Tell me I don't deserve to be hurt,' she pleads.

'You don't,' Finlay says. 'You deserve kindness.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Yes.'

Hispi's gasp wavers between agony and delight.

Finlay pursues Hispi's keens until she collapses against him, shuddering. Her nails gore his lower back. They limpet to each other. Hispi cries until Finlay rocks her to sleep. His own slumber comes in with the squid boats hours later.

\*

They wake together in the morning, a weave of limbs in yesterday's clothes.

Finlay scrambles to ready himself for work while Hispi languishes in bed. Morning gnaws at the shoreline. What if he's late the first day back at the cannery? What if they fire him? Finlay trips out the front door. Last night burns in his mind. He feels transformed; he feels no elation.

'Finlay.' Hispi rushes into the doorway behind him.

'What?' Finlay turns.

Hispi's lips catch his. Finlay freezes in the predawn dark. The distant ocean laps at his back. Nothing cries above.

'What?' Hispi says. Her defensiveness verges on aggression. Finlay palms her waist. To his relief, she preens.

'You surprised me,' he says.

They embrace. Hispi shudders when Finlay rubs her back. She leans into him. All at once, Finlay's lungs empty. Joy cracks him.

'I love you,' Hispi says. 'Have a good day at work.'

'I love you too.' Finlay wants to cry. 'I'll see you later. Be careful, okay?'

Hispi reluctantly withdraws. Finlay's pulse splutters to see the resentful longing in her gaze. He waves goodbye to Hispi as he departs, once, then twice, even as he thinks *I'm dirty. It's wrong to touch her. I'm dirty, and I'll never be clean.*

\*

The cannery entombs people and fish alike.

Finlay, before returning, forgets that sixteen-hour shifts there last an eternity. Nothing exists beyond offal-oiled cogs, dripping wicker baskets, and the conveyor belt labyrinth. Brined bodies crush against each other in the murk – fish on fish, men on men – all slick with fluid, all stinking. Finlay beheads anchovies until his wrists scream. The waste basket, an orgy of gawking fish heads, flows so deep that Finlay could dive into it. Sometimes he considers that. What is he selling his body for? A fistful of dollars? Weeks in, Finlay’s back hurts so greatly that he blacks out. The cannery continues grinding his nose into the scale-slimed rollers and railing him. Finlay cannot escape violation: at home, he caresses Hispi; at work, he bathes in filth.

He’s trying not to break in the packing room that Wednesday when Jolie, a co-worker not much older than him, foists condolences and zucchini bread onto him. Finlay is so starved for good fortune that he doesn’t care that she condescends to him. That she eyes him like an animal. He thanks Jolie a pathetic amount before taking the bread. Its presence is the sole reason Finlay finishes the hillside slog home without collapsing.

That day, Hispi – the subject of Finlay’s daydreams and dreads – reeks of exhaustion. She slumps across the table from him, festering. Neither she nor Finlay cook that evening. They descend on the zucchini bread, ripping fistfuls out of it and cramming it into their mouths, feeding with grim, wet urgency.

When only crumbs remain, Hispi speaks. ‘Where did you get the bread?’

‘A co-worker,’ Finlay replies.

Hispi’s nose wrinkles as if she’s detecting the faint electricity of fish schooling a current away. ‘I didn’t know that any of those cannery men baked.’

‘They don’t. Jolie isn’t a man.’

‘Jolie?’

Finlay hears Hispi’s fangs clack. It’s a plink, a tiny addition to the aftershocks reverberating through him from a day at the cannery. Everything stills.

‘You didn’t tell me,’ Hispi says, ‘that a girl likes you.’

‘She doesn’t. She’s convinced I’m twenty-five and useless.’

‘She wouldn’t give you anything if she didn’t like you.’

‘You don’t know Jolie.’

Hispi flies to her feet. ‘Oh, but *you* do?’

The tsunami hits. Hispi circles the table, ranting, tearing at her hair, a whirlwind of directionless loathing. Finlay, confused, already eviscerated, covers his head. Hispi’s voice is

a boot to his mouth. He pleads for her to shut up until he hits some hairpin turn. Then he's screaming too.

'Leave!' he yells. 'Leave, Hispi!'

'I might!' Hispi hurls a chair aside. 'It's not like I'm satisfied! Some beach master you are.'

Recollections of Hispi's hungry whispers for him set Finlay aflame with rage and the longing to hang himself.

'You don't want any sort of satisfaction,' he says. 'It terrifies you. You're insane.'

'Don't tell your better half,' Hispi spits, 'what I do or don't want. You're nothing without me. No girl in Glenport wants what you offer. Including Jolie.'

'Good thing you're not used to choosing.'

Hispi looks at him as if he's plunged a knife into her thigh.

'Hey, Finlay,' she says. 'Have you considered killing yourself?'

Finlay lurches to his feet. All urges to be well or to pretend it dissipate. He hears himself say, 'If I killed myself, at least you'd be gone.'

Hispi reels back. 'Don't say that!'

'Fuck you.'

Hispi babbles pleas as she trails him to his room. They don't matter. Finlay slams the door. Hispi wails. He wraps a pillow around his head. If Caleb's selkie still lives in the lighthouse, she hears them, then turns away. Evening melts into night as time creeps on, as meaningless as rot overtaking a corpse on the beach, as ungraspable as the stringy intestines that flee everything putrefying beneath the sun, Hispi's weeping the cries of gulls coming to feed.

\*

Past the witching hour, Hispi creeps in.

She spoons into Finlay. They diminish together. For an eternity, they say nothing. Half-folded piles of clothes crowd them.

'I know that was unforgivable,' Hispi whispers. 'I'm sorry.'

Devastation colours her voice. Finlay strokes Hispi's disfigured hip, fearing he'll break her.

'I forgive you.'

Hispi unsteadily pauses. 'Fin, you don't have to forgive me.'

'But I do. I'm sorry too.'

Hispi wraps an arm around him. Finlay knows her musky smell now, warm and coppery, feathered in fish blood. He knows her taste. They're two insignificant, conjoined dots in the night. Hispi takes his hand.

'I'm scared that you'll leave me for a landlocked girl. Someone wholer and prettier.' Hispi wavers. 'It's not fair. You're the closest I'll ever get to choosing. They can pick anything or anyone they want. Why should they get to have you? Don't go. Please don't go.'

They embrace, crying themselves into a knot, emptying themselves of apologies and pet names and caresses and vows to try again until there's nothing left.

\*

They make it a week before a broken casserole pan reduces them to quarrelling.

\*

When his body barely works, when their shared estuary of unwellness becomes unbearable, Finlay considers surrender.

Hispi weeds their fruitless garden as Finlay ties his laces, quivering. Dread cramps his fingers. Someone else's hands are securing his boots. He doesn't know where he's going, just that he must go. Stop now, and he'll cease functioning. Like a flipped shark. Or a half-wound toy. Hispi hurls another unsatisfactory tomato downhill. Finlay shrugs on his coat. Noon oppresses them. Their handful of crops sway; a lonesome frigate bird soars above.

'Are you going out?' Hispi overflows from Muir senior's shirt. Her seal features look unnatural within domesticity's stranglehold. The dark eye circles fit.

'Yeah. Not for long. I'll be back before lunch.'

'I might take a walk while you're gone.'

'Alright.' Finlay hesitates. 'I love you.'

Hispi grimaces before forcing a smile. Her resentment puts Finlay a thousand miles outside of his body. There's no starting over; there's no making this right. Maybe the MacCallans can help her. He cannot. This is all his fault.

'Love you too,' Hispi says.

Finlay flees into the cliffs' awaiting teeth.

\*

This time, three unskinned selkies float in Sea Glass Beach's shallows.

All of them are older than Finlay. Piercings, hair ties, and tartan scarves streak their figures. They hiss to each other behind webbed hands as pastel dunes of sea glass crunch beneath Finlay's heels. In the folding chair below the cliff rests Caleb MacCallan. In his lap,

her pelt tied around her waist, barbells glittering in all four teats, rests an old selkie. Finlay halts ten feet away.

‘I warned you,’ Caleb says.

‘Please,’ Finlay says. ‘I need help.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ the old selkie says. ‘The girls say that you’ve fucked yourself.’

Her voice embodies the waves whisking away parts of a cliff face; her aged fisherwoman body is fuller than the moon. This selkie bears more scars than Hispi. A brand chars her collar. Even before she glares at Finlay, he recognizes her as the singer in the lighthouse. Caleb’s wife.

‘Mrs MacCallan,’ Finlay says, ‘what I did was wrong. But I need you.’

‘Darling, are you certain we shouldn’t gut him?’ The selkie looks to Caleb. ‘Once a rookery raider...’

‘The boy ain’t a chaser,’ Caleb says. ‘He’s just stupid. We oughta talk to him, Leoithne.’

Leoithne laughs.

‘I want to fix this,’ Finlay says. ‘I need to. Please.’

He vibrates on the cusp of coming apart. Each time waves rake planes of sea glass, they hiss. Miles of shore chant a name – *Hispi, Hispi, Hispi*.

‘Is this for your sake,’ Leoithne says, ‘or for Hispi’s?’

‘Hispi’s.’

One of the selkies snorts. Finlay restrains a flinch.

‘You ruined this the instant you stole her skin,’ Caleb says.

The earring gleaming on Leoithne’s ear matches his.

‘I know.’ Finlay swallows. ‘You never stole your wife, did you?’

‘No,’ Leoithne says. ‘He saved me from the older version of a bastard like you.’

Finlay collapses among the sand-dollar pieces and glass. His eyelashes snare his tears. ‘I know I’ve infected Hispi. I know I’ve destroyed her. Tell me how to fix this.’

‘Finlay, Hispi has been like this for years,’ Leoithne says. ‘You’ve worsened what was there. You haven’t made something new.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Caleb grimaces.

‘Hispi has trapped you,’ Leoithne says, ‘nearly as much as you’ve trapped her.’

‘That can’t be.’ Even as Finlay speaks, he remembers Hispi’s skin arranged on the intertidal.

‘I told Hispi this game was ruining her,’ a selkie in the shallows says. His cool eyes match Caleb’s. ‘But she can’t fathom a life without pain or control without being controlled. Do you understand me, fish boy? You’re a knife that cuts her bonds and her wrists.’

Finlay rises, shell bits clinging to his palms, head ringing. ‘I need to leave.’

‘Finlay, let go,’ Caleb says. ‘Give Hispi her skin. It ain’t your fate to be like this, if you choose differently.’

‘Don’t be soft on him, Caleb.’ Leoithne looks into Finlay’s eyes. ‘Finlay, free Hispi or drown. Be a man instead of the childish monster you are. Tell Hispi this is not love. Force her to leave. Free her.’

The two adults sit in the folding chair, one selkie and one human, concern lining their faces, silver lining their hair. Leoithne’s skin pools into their laps. One of Caleb’s twisted hands cups Leoithne’s hip. Leoithne tenderly covers it. The MacCallan children judge Finlay from the water. The waves say, *You’re nothing without me.*

Finlay flees.

\*

He runs ‘till he reaches the intersection. Then he doubles over. Finlay hyperventilates at the foot of the golden cliffs. Saltgrass smacks his legs. Pelicans glide by. Behind Finlay, up the hill, sits his and Hispi’s weathered blue cell. Below, past the cliffs, the ocean shines. Finlay swipes shell pieces from his legs. Hot tears sting his cheeks.

The MacCallans are right about him. They’re wrong about Hispi. She isn’t using him. She half loves him. If he returns her skin, Hispi will leave. He isn’t trapped. Finlay sprints to the house. Zephyrs and fairy lanterns sway in the garden. A wasp feasts on a zucchini nearby. Finlay stumbles into the house.

‘Hispi?’

Nothing. A breeze eases through cracked windows. Silverware dries on the kitchen counter. The broken photograph of Finlay’s parents beams at him. Before he loses his nerve, Finlay rushes to the cupboard. Its hinges squeal as he casts it open. Hispi’s skin falls into Finlay’s hands, eternally luxurious.

It’s rolled into a bundle, bound in twine. It won’t crease now.

Finlay stares at it. His pulse thuds in his ears. The skin grows heavier. Without Hispi, he amounts to nothing. Did he roll the skin? Maybe he did. Not Hispi. She’s right: his memory always fails him. Yes. He must’ve rolled it.

Hispi hums at the bottom of the hill. Paintbrush blooms dot her locks. Finlay’s flannel hangs open on her. She chuffs at a patch of saltgrass, coppery whiskers twitching. Finlay bets

she's teasing the bees. They promised to start over a fortnight ago. Isn't that vow enough to carry them? As Hispi climbs the hill, Finlay straightens his parents' photograph. He hides the seal skin. Then he stands on the threshold, waiting, grateful for the terrible consistency of their relationship, almost loving, almost alive.

# What Do I Wear to My Friend's Funeral?

by Zach Murphy

**Content Warnings: Death.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 42 for the next story.

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I didn't reply to Jacob's last text message, but I do show up to his funeral. I spend the entire morning deciding what to wear; a lot of the clothes I once wore don't quite fit me the way they used to in high school.

Is wearing black to a funeral mandatory? If funerals are meant to be a celebration of life, why can't people wear something bright? I think about wearing my orange polo but worry I'll stand out too much. Maybe the key is to wear something somewhere in-between. I go with grey.

A funeral is a little bit different from a high school reunion. At high school reunions, you get to see who has their life together and who doesn't. At funerals, you get to see who shows up at all. I don't see anyone from high school here.

I blend in at the burial ceremony. A putrid stench wafts off the marshy pond in the background of the cemetery. People pretend not to notice. But the more people pretend not to notice, the more you notice them pretending not to notice. This is when I realise that sunglasses weren't invented to keep the sun out of your eyes. They were invented to wear at funerals, where a split second of eye contact can send you into a dizzying spiral.

I watch Jacob's mother go through three entire boxes of tissues. Jacob's stepfather, who used to step all over him, half-heartedly attempts to comfort her. He rolls his eyes. I can't help but grind my teeth.

Jacob was a bit strange. And even a little irksome sometimes. But he didn't deserve to be stepped on. He just wanted some company, maybe an ever-so-brief escape from his home. I regret the time he knocked on my door and I told my mom to say I wasn't home. I regret the time I didn't invite him to my birthday get-together. It's amazing how get-togethers can push people apart. I really wish I had answered that last text message, even if it was about a movie I had no intention of ever seeing.

My grinding teeth come to a halt, like a train stopping when the conductor sees a problem on the tracks. I duck out of the burial and head to my rusted Subaru. I break down inside of the car whose own breakdowns I've often witnessed.

Someday, our bones, our brains and our hearts won't feel a thing. But right now, I need to go home and change.

# All These Little Deaths

## by Bibi Osha

**Content Warnings: Mentions of death, suicide and violence.**

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end...

\*\*\*

The day my nose bleeds, Mama cries while Obah urges me to snort it back up as she cups her hands underneath my jaw to keep my blood off the floor. I do as told, though I wince at the taste of copper coating my tongue and how thick mucus slides down the back of my throat. They say it's important that I listen before Obah warns me to keep my mouth shut.

'If anyone asks,' she says, her voice barely a whisper, 'you tell them you have your ancestor on your tongue. And if a man comes to you, you run.'

I nod as Mama continues weeping.

Everything changes after this. Obah tosses salt at my back whenever I step outside the house, and when I return, she sweeps across the threshold like a possessed woman. Back and forth, forth and back. Mama works just as hard, stitching a strange symbol in the hem of all my skirts. She paints every bead she places in my hair and spends more coin than usual to buy the freshest cuts of meat at the air markets. Nothing is ever explained to me, nor do I ask. A conjure woman doesn't do anything without reason, but so too is she supposed to know and see everything. Neither Mama nor Obah sees the flakes of dark crimson crusted beneath my nails.

To this day, I wonder, if they had seen all the times I spat coppery phlegm onto the red dirt, would they still have let me out the house with a handful of salt stinging my back and neck? I wonder if crying Mama knew that, on that day, I'd leave the house for the last and final time.

He isn't at all how I imagined him. Death, I mean. Growing up, you hear all sorts of things about what he's supposed to look like. I've heard some even argue about his gender, about whether he truly is a *he* or it's just a mirage. I still don't know the answer, but what I can tell you is that Death is simply whatever Death wishes to be.

When I first lay my eyes on him, it's just after I've broken through the river's surface, having taken a break from the laundry. I find him crouched at the bank near where

my clothes lie, watching me. He's a dark-skinned man, unbearably handsome, with strange eyes and black curls that reach down to his chest in thick ringlets.

If it wasn't for Obah's warning, I might have stared at him a while longer. Instead, I shout, demanding he leaves as hot crimson drips from my nose. He doesn't. I scream. He screams back, but his voice is unnatural, like he's got hundreds of people locked inside of him.

Death grins like a wolf when I stop my yelling, beaming like a little boy who knows he's about to receive a treat. I know when he steps into the river, drenching the yellow suit that marks him as a foreigner, I should run. But I don't. I let him get close enough to embrace me, and despite myself, I fall into his strangely familiar hold and inhale, smelling iron.

Obah and Mama find my body the next morning, tangled up in the rocks, my clothes and basket untouched. Or at least this is what Death tells me sometime later.

It takes me two more lives to realize I've met him twice already. By then, I think I've learned how to pick him out of a crowd. He, of course, proves me wrong because he's not the model staring me down as I drag graphite over my paper in a sticky, hot studio as the professor circles around our easels with his vulture eyes.

The professor would have been my second guess, though I still would have been wrong.

This time, Death's unassuming, nearly a head shorter than me with a hooked nose and heterochromia. His sandy skin is unblemished except for a curious white ring around his left wrist. Four months go by before he reveals himself to me. He does this while pushing needles into my skin because he swears by acupuncture, and he's the only person in my major willing to speak to the black girl with a shaved head and coke-bottle glasses.

'Do you always do this?' I'm brave enough to ask as he teaches me not to burn couscous.

Death doesn't answer, just gets moody over his glass of sparkling grape cider and insists on piercing my ears.

I'm not sure how this one ends, but I suspect it's during a late-night session when one of his shiny little needles punches a hole into my lung while he butchers the lyrics to one of my favourite songs.

Things go a bit different the next time I see him. In the busy streets of Cairo, I take him by surprise, pickpocketing the coin purse from between his fancy embroidered robes before I lead him through the markets and twisting alleyways.

If you must know, knives don't work on Death. He laughs against my lips, his blood hot on both our hands where he holds my wrist tight, keeping the blade between his ribs. Only once I'm thoroughly breathless with swollen lips does he tell me to run.

This particular game goes on for four years, our little tit-for-tat. He ends it abruptly, however, when a rug seller asks for my hand.

My next life is uneventful, though I live it with an unnatural aversion to carpets.

Not everything is cat-and-mouse or violence, though. Death is civil to a fault except when he isn't, and even then, he entertains my questions. More often than not, we talk long into the night until we're watching the sunrise together as he does needlework, the kind that uses colourful floss. There are other times when he tries to get me to remember certain moments as he picks at old scars along my body, but I never do. I do ask him about himself, and to each question, he is surprisingly straightforward.

This is how I learn that Death doesn't lie.

He cheats, though, and makes no bones about it whenever he stares at me from the other side of the table with grey eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to tear into me. I don't know how to play chess, but Death does. In this iteration, he's a world-renowned champion, yet despite it all, here in my cramped apartment, he always cheats.

'What can you do about it anyways?' he asks me later, his body cradled between my thighs so that he can trace the sigils across my ribs and breasts that he's drawn with nails and teeth.

'I can leave you,' I murmur with my eyes closed and taste faint copper on my molars.

'You wouldn't,' he challenges with naked amusement, then pinches the small swell of my breasts.

'Then stop cheating.'

He, of course, doesn't.

I get back at him after the paramedics revive me; apparently, I'm allergic to avocados. Then, when I know it's impossible for him to travel across the ocean from a tournament, I do indeed leave him, if only momentarily. As I cross over into a new life, I learn two things, one of them less surprising than the other. The first revelation: the only ceiling fan in an apartment I'll never step foot inside again actually holds my weight. And the second? Well, despite being a cheater, Death hates being cheated.

I expect our next reunion to be a bitter one, so when I find myself in a village too familiar to be a coincidence, I'm at a loss for words. Death greets me at the riverbank and sings.

After that, he waits longer than he ever has before he comes and finds me, so long that I'm honestly caught off guard when he approaches me in the Red Light District, his accent thick, features chiselled and blond coif neatly combed. A night later, he buys my debt and rips the souls out of my employer and my would-be client. That's how he becomes my benefactor, but we don't really speak about that anymore.

'Why me?' For the first time after so many centuries of doing this, I get the courage to ask.

Death sucks his teeth at one of the memories he says I keep forgetting, then drags me up against his chest. Nightlife in Shibuya makes me dizzy, but he anchors me as if he's afraid I might get lost in the crowd. This close, and with the way the bass vibrates through his body, I'm almost convinced he has a heartbeat. He doesn't, but I lean in closer nevertheless, smelling smoke and hellfire and damned souls and iron underneath his cologne. His arms wrap around me, and for some reason, I think of water and the colour yellow.

'What if I were to tell you Hades never kidnapped Persephone?' he asks.

My nose begins to bleed.