

BRITISH FANTASY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

HELEN  
MARSHALL

GIFTS  
FOR  
THE  
ONE  
WHO  
COMES  
AFTER

INTRODUCTION BY  
ANN VANDERMEER



“HELEN MARSHALL USES THE FANTASTIC TO PRY HER WAY  
INSIDE HER READERS’ RIBCAGES AND BREAK US WIDE OPEN.”

—NEIL GAIMAN

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

# GIFTS FOR THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER

“Helen Marshall is a writer who creates real people in real situations, then uses the fantastic to pry her way inside her readers’ ribcages and break us wide open.”

—**Neil Gaiman, international bestselling author  
of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane***

“Helen Marshall whispers in your ear when she fits the noose around your neck, filling you with wonder and dread, urging you into a startling, beautiful darkness. These stories—which sometimes feel more like spells—are the very best kind of unsettling.”

—**Benjamin Percy, author of *Red Moon*, *The Wilding*, *Refresh*,  
*Refresh* and *The Language of Elk***

“Helen Marshall is one of my favorite living writers. Her elegant, grotesque stories are best encountered like this, gathered together in a book and in conversation with each other; only then can you appreciate the staggering variety of her imagination. What unifies them, and what elevates them from being merely great fantasy to being literature, is the ache of human experience that informs them all: the yearning; the heartbreak; the desperate, misinformed love. This is life, in all its beauty and sorrow.”

—**Nathan Ballingrud, award-winning author  
of *North American Lake Monsters***

“Helen Marshall’s *Gifts for the One Who Comes After* is in turns chilling, heart-wrenching and uplifting. Marshall has a way with words that makes even the most peculiar seem possible, and the stories here are each so layered with character and meaning, they are like perfect, condensed novels.”

—**Kaaron Warren, award-winning author  
of *Through Splintered Walls***

PRAISE FOR

## HAIR SIDE, FLESH SIDE

“Sometimes a book comes along that is so original, so vibrantly alive, so beautifully imagined and so much a law unto itself that the only comment or advice a reviewer can offer is to say: go read it.”

—**Nina Allan, *Strange Horizons***

“Stories subtle and unsettling: Helen Marshall clothes the uncanny in new flesh and then makes it bleed.”

—**Kelly Link, author of *Pretty Monsters*  
and *Stranger Things Happen***

“Sometimes you hear people talking about the new face of horror. Well huddle closer, children . . . *Hair Side, Flesh Side* is it. . . . Marshall’s stories are frightening, touching, quirky, sexy and deeply lyrical.”

—**“Best F/SF Books of 2012,” *January Magazine***

“*Hair Side, Flesh Side* is a strong first collection of speculative fiction borne out of faded manuscripts, old libraries and the memories of the past. However, it’s how Marshall sees us reconcile these ghosts with the world of the living that give her stories the weight of immediacy. She is a talent to be discovered.”

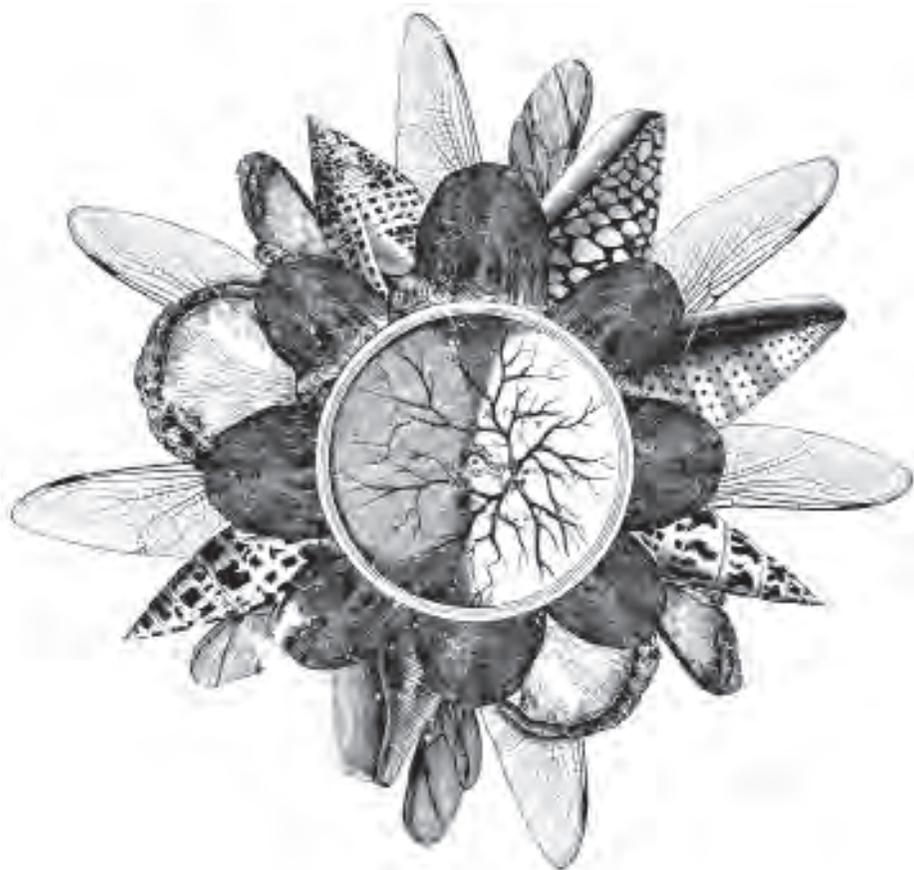
—***The National Post***

“Helen Marshall’s debut collection reads like a fanciful walk through her dark imagination. . . . Strangely touching, disturbing and weird as hell, Marshall proves herself a potent new talent.”

—***Rue Morgue Magazine***

“A tour de force of imagination, this remarkable debut collection uses the conventions of dark fantasy and horror as the framework for some of speculative fiction’s most unusual stories. VERDICT Fans of experimental fiction and exceptional writing should find a wealth of enjoyment here.

—***Library Journal, starred review***



# GIFTS FOR THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER

BY HELEN MARSHALL

INTRODUCTION BY ANN VANDERMEER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS ROBERTS



ChiZine Publications

## FIRST EDITION

*Gifts for the One Who Comes After* © 2014 by Helen Marshall

Cover artwork © 2014 by Erik Mohr

Illustrations © 2014 by Chris Roberts

Interior design © 2014 by Clare C. Marshall

All Rights Reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Distributed in Canada by  
HarperCollins Canada Ltd.  
1995 Markham Road  
Scarborough, ON M1B 5M8  
Toll Free: 1-800-387-0117  
e-mail: hcorder@harpercollins.com

Distributed in the U.S. by  
Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc.  
10150 York Road, Suite 300  
Hunt Valley, MD 21030  
Phone: (443) 318-8500  
e-mail: books@diamondbookdistributors.com

## Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Marshall, Helen, 1983-, author

*Gifts for the one who comes after* / Helen Marshall. -- First edition.

Short stories.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77148-302-5 (pbk.)-- ISBN 978-1-77148-303-2 (pdf)

I. Title.

PS8626.A7668G54 2014

C813'.6

C2014-904065-2

C2014-904066-0

## CHIZINE PUBLICATIONS

Toronto, Canada

www.chizinepub.com

info@chizinepub.com

Edited and copyedited by Sandra Kasturi

Proofread by Michael Matheson



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
du Canada

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$20.1 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada.



Published with the generous assistance of the Ontario Arts Council.

Printed in Canada

*To Laura:  
My gift to you.  
I owe you much more.  
(But you already knew that.)*

We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march.

— Sir Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	11
The Hanging Game	15
Secondhand Magic	23
I'm the Lady of Good Times, She Said	43
Lessons in the Raising of Household Objects	57
All My Love, a Fishhook	69
In the Year of Omens	83
The Santa Claus Parade	99
The Zhanell Adler Brass Spyglass	105
Death and the Girl from Pi Delta Zeta	125
Crossroads and Gateways	135
Ship House	149
A Brief History of Science Fiction	185
Supply Limited, Act Now	193
We Ruin the Sky	209
In the Moonlight, the Skin of You	223
The Gallery of the Eliminated	237
The Slipway Grey	253

# INTRODUCTION: STORIES THAT HURT SO GOOD

BY ANN VANDERMEER

Helen Marshall has an uncanny way of getting under the readers' skin with her stories. We are itching and uncomfortable and yet . . . we are attracted to the scratch. *Gifts for the One Who Comes After* is Helen Marshall's second short story collection. Her first, *Hair Side, Flesh Side*, was embraced by readers all over and met with critical success. It dealt mostly with themes concerning the individual. Those stories were focused on the internal conversations we have with ourselves as we try to make sense of the world around us. Some of those stories explored how we fit into the universe.

In contrast, this collection deals with the connections we strive to make with others—those close to us and those that are merely in our way. Within these stories we have to deal with the legacies of the past—the histories of our ancestors, families and neighbourhoods. How do we maintain those traditions and yet still move confidently into the future? Will maintaining those traditions hold us back? And if we do abandon them will we lose something ultimately priceless in the process?

The collection opens with “The Hanging Game,” which centres on what looks like a harmless children's game. Yet this game is deeply ingrained in the history of this small town community. So it's much more than just a children's game; it's the town's heritage as well.

If we are not deeply connected to others, if we push them away when they come close, what are we left with . . . an empty life? Perhaps as empty as Leah in “In the Year of Omens,” who is waiting for the right signal. She wills it to come as it came to all the others. “There had always been signs in the world.” But Leah is still looking for hers. She does not want to be left behind.

There are things better left unsaid—left undone—things that will cut you down in your prime if you give voice to them. Things that hang there on the periphery of your vision—you want to look but as soon as you turn your head, they disappear. As Melanie says in “Supply Limited, Act Now,” “Why ya always gotta go doing that? Why ya always gotta go making things small just so that you can grow up? It doesn’t have to be like that, you know? Why do ya wanna go on being the kids that just wreck everything because ya don’t know better?”

The characters in Marshall’s stories would do well to heed the advice of those that went before. They should think twice before leaving their long-held beliefs and traditions behind, because if they do discard these precious values, what will they be left with? In “Crossroads and Gateways” we hear from Dajan, “If only it were so easy to change the past.” He struggles to make sense of what is expected of him. Yet he takes the next step. It is the only thing he can do.

So, let’s talk about the legacy of the family. “Ship House” is full of family obligations and expectations, however, “It was home, it was home, but it didn’t feel like home any longer.” Eileen reluctantly returns to Ship House only to be surprised at the affection she feels, instead of feeling repelled. “Now Ship House felt strange on the inside to Eileen: too small and too large at the same time.” But still, she can’t turn away.

These tales demonstrate how families are the most complicated of relationships. Marshall’s characters go through so many stages of connection to reach out to each other. In “The Gallery of the Eliminated” we are introduced to a different kind of natural history exhibit that makes you question your place in the wider world. You think about the inheritance you will leave once you are gone, “It’s bewildering, you know. To realize that you are next. Link by link, generation by generation, the chain of your people are yanked into death. And you are *next*—the link before you? Gone. Your last protection. But losing a child is different. It’s like seeing the end of the chain. Watching it dangle over the abyss.” And yet in “The Zhanell Adler Brass Spyglass” we meet Danny who is only trying to figure out what went wrong in his parents’ past so he can fix it and make everything right again. So, you see . . . it goes in both directions.

Then there are the stories where the familiar is strange and the strange becomes familiar, the memories are locked inside finding their way out when visuals stimulate the memory. Whether you are dating Death or trying to know and understand who your parents were before you were born; whether you are finally giving away the secrets of who you are or disappearing through someone else’s magic, it’s all about the connections with others. Families, neighbours, friends, lovers and exes.

You can't imagine your life without them even as they seem to want to change you or to destroy who you really are. Or maybe they know you better than you do and you've only been fooling yourself. Even when you try to escape your destiny, it comes back with a vengeance and claims you. That's what these stories will do. They will claim you . . . and you will *want* them to do this. They will itch inside and out, but oh the feeling! Just as the song says, it will hurt so good when you can finally scratch that itch.



*“I give you to Hangjaw, the Spearman, the Gallows’ Burden.  
I give you to the Father of Bears.”*

## THE HANGING GAME

There was a game we used to play when we were kids—the hanging game, we called it. I don’t know where it started, but I talked to a girl down in Lawford once, and she remembered playing it with jump ropes when she was about eleven, so I guess we weren’t the only ones. Maybe Travers learned it from Dad, and from father to father, forever on up. I don’t know. We couldn’t use jump ropes, though, not those of us whose fathers worked the logging camps, climbing hundred-foot cedar spars and hooking in with the high-rigging rope just so to see that bright flash of urine as they pissed on the men below.

For us the hanging game was a sacred thing, the most sacred thing we knew save for one other, which I’ll have to tell you about too, and that was the bears.

What you need to know was that north of Lawford where we lived—Travers and I, Momma, Dad sometimes, when he wasn’t at the camps—that was a country of blue mountains and spruce and cedar so tall they seemed to hold up the sky, what the old men called Hangjaw’s country. They said the bears were his, and the hanging game was his. We all had to play, cheating death, cheating Hangjaw but paying him off at the same time in whatever way we could. Living that close to death made you kind of crazy. Take Dad, for instance. Dad’s kind of crazy was the bears.

I remember one summer he killed nine of them, which was still two short of old Sullivan, the skidder man, but enough of a show of guts, of tweaking Hangjaw’s beard, to keep him drinking through the winter following. He’d caught the first one the traditional way, see, but he didn’t clean it how he was supposed to. He just left it out on the hill and when the next one came he shot it clean through the eye with his Remington Model Seven. He took another seven throughout the week, just sitting there on the porch with a case of beer, just waiting for when the next one came sniffing along, then

down it went until the whole place smelled thick with blood and bear piss, and Dad decided it was enough.

But we were kids and we couldn't shoot bears, so for us it was the hanging game. That was the kind of crazy we got into. Bears and hanging.

The first time I played it I was just a skinny kid of twelve with her summer freckles coming in. I remember I was worried about having my first period. Momma had started dropping hints, trying to lay out some of the biology of how it all worked, but the words were so mysterious I couldn't tell what she was saying was going to happen to me. It scared the bejesus out of me, truth to tell.

That was when Travers took me to play the hanging game.

He was fifteen, copper-headed like me, just getting his proper grown-up legs under him. He brought a spool of high-rigging rope he'd scavenged from the shed, and we went down to the hollow, my hand in his, a stretch of rope with thirteen coils hanging like a live thing in his other hand. It had to be high-rigging rope, he told me, not jump rope like I guess they used in Lawford. High-rigging rope for the logger kids for whom the strength of rope was the difference between life and death.

Travers stood me up on the three-legged stool that was kept for that very purpose. I remember the wind tugging around at the edges of my skirt, me worried he might see something I didn't want him to see, so I kept my fist tight around the hemline, tugging it down. But Travers, he was my brother and he wasn't looking. He tossed the end of the rope over the lowest hanging branch, easy, and then he fitted the cord around my neck.

"Close your eyes, Skye," he said. "That's a good girl."

There were rules for the hanging game. This is what they were. It had to be high-rigging rope, like I said, and you had to steal it. Also it had to be an ash tree. Also you had to do it willingly. No one could force you to play the hanging game. It couldn't be a dare or a bluff or a tease, or else it wouldn't work.

I remember the rope rubbing rough against my neck. It was a sort of chafing feeling, odd, like wearing a badly knit scarf, but it didn't hurt, not at first. I let go of my dress, but by then the breeze had stilled anyway. My eyes were closed tight, because that was how you played the hanging game, we all knew that. We all knew the rules. No one had to teach them to us.

"Take my hand now, okay, Skye?"

Then Travers's hand was in mine, and it was as rough and callused as the rope was. It felt good to hold his hand, but different than on the way over. Then he had been my brother. Now he was Priest.

"I've got you, Skye, I've got you. Now you know what to do, right?"

I nodded, tried to, but the rope pulled taut against my throat. Suddenly I was frightened, I didn't want to be there. I tried to speak, but the words got stuck. I remember trying to cough, not being able to, the desperation of trying to do something as basic as coughing and failing.

"Shh," murmured Travers. "It's okay, it's okay. Don't be afraid. You can't be afraid now, understand? Be a brave girl with me, Skye, a brave girl."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Calmed myself. Let a breath go whistling out through my lips.

"Good girl," he said. "Now lean to me."

This was the tricky part.

The stool tilted and moved under my feet. It was an old thing, and I could tell the joints were loose just by the feel of it. That movement was sickening to me, but I did like Travers said, I leaned toward him, his fingers warm against palms going cold with fear. I leaned until the rope was tight against my throat, drawing a straight line, no slack, to where it hung around the tree branch, my body taut at an angle, my toes pointed to the ground. The edge of the stool pressed into the soft space on my foot between the ball and the heel.

"Good girl," Travers told me. "Good."

God, it hurt. The rope cut into my throat, and I knew there would be bruises there tomorrow I'd have to cover up. But this was how we played.

I knew the words that were coming next but even so, they sounded like someone else was saying them, not Travers. "Skye Thornton," he said, "I give you to Hangjaw, the Spearman, the Gallows' Burden. I give you to the Father of Bears." And he touched my left side with the hazel wand he had brought for that purpose. "Now tell me what you see."

And so I did.



I don't remember what I told Travers.

None of us ever knew what it was we saw, and no one was ever allowed to talk about it after the fact. Those were the rules. I remember some of the stories though.

When Signy played the hanging game she told us about how her husband in ten years' time would die high-climbing a tall spruce spar while he was throwing the rope and getting the steel spurs in. Ninety feet from the earth it'd get hit by lightning, crazy, just like that, and he'd be fried, still strapped to the top of the thing. But the problem was she never said who that husband was gonna be, and so no one would ever go

with her, no one ever took her out to the Lawford Drive-In Theatre where the rest of us went when the time came, in case she wound up pregnant by accident and the poor boy sonuva had to hitch himself to that bit of unluckiness.

That first time I wasn't afraid so much of playing the hanging game, I was afraid of what I was going to see in Travers's eyes after. I was afraid of what he might know about me that I didn't know about myself.

When he took the noose off after and he had massaged the skin on my neck, made sure I was breathing right, I remember opening my eyes, thinking I was going to see it then. But Travers looked the same as ever, same Travers, same smile, same brother of mine. And I thought, well, I guess it's not so bad, then, whatever piece of luck it is that's coming my way.



It was stupid, of course, but we were all taken by surprise that day things went wrong. There were four of us who had gone to play the hanging game, Travers and me, Ingrid Sullivan, the daughter of the skidder man who had killed two more bears than Dad that summer, and Barth Gibbons. Ingrid was there for Travers. She'd told me so before we set out, a secret whispered behind a cupped hand when Travers was getting the rope from the shed. But it was Barth I was there for. Barth was a year or two older, a pretty impossible age gap at that time to cross, but that didn't matter much to me. All I knew was Barth had the nicest straight-as-straw black hair I'd ever seen and wouldn't it be a fine thing if he slipped that coil around his neck and whispered something about his future wife, some red-haired, slim-hipped woman, when I was the only red-haired girl north of Lawford. That's what I remember thinking, anyway.

It was Travers who played Priest. Ingrid and I were there, really, just as Witnesses, because sometimes it was better if you had one or two along, just in case you were too busy handling the rope and you missed something. Old Hangjaw didn't like that.

But as it was when Barth went up and played the hanging game he didn't say anything about a red-haired, slim-hipped woman after all. He said something about a she-bear he was going to cut into one day at the start of a late spring, holed up asleep in one of those hollowed-out, rotten redwood trunks. And when he tried to open the wood up with a chainsaw, how the woodchips and blood were just going to come spewing forth, take him by surprise. There was kind of a sick sense of disappointment in

me at that, but we marked down the blood price of the she-bear anyway so that we'd be sure to let Barth know how much it was and how he could pay it when the time came.

Then up went Ingrid, and Travers, who was still Priest, which was what Ingrid wanted, held out his hand for her. She giggled and took it. She didn't seem the least bit afraid, her corn-yellow hair tied behind her, smiling at my brother, leaning toward him when he told her to.

Like I said, I don't know why we had never thought of it. I mean, of course, I'd thought of it that first time I was up there, that the stool was a rickety old thing. I'd felt it moving beneath me but then that was how it was supposed to feel, I thought, that was part of it.

But then while Ingrid was leaning in, we heard this noise, all of us, this low growling noise so deep you could feel it in the pit of your stomach. Then there was the rank smell of bear piss, which is a smell we all knew, living out in bear country.

Ingrid screamed, although that was the stupidest thing to do, and she twisted on the stool. Snap. Just as quick as that it had rolled beneath her and her feet were free, tap-dancing in the air.

It was quick as all get out.

Barth had turned and was staring into the woods, looking for that damned mother of a she-bear we had all heard, and so he hadn't seen Ingrid fall.

But I had.

She was choking bad, and her tongue had snuck out of her mouth like a thick, purple worm. Her eyes were screwed up into white gibbous moons, that yellow hair of hers twisting in the wind.

Travers had long arms even then, the biggest arms you'd ever seen, like a bear himself, and he tried to grab her, but Ingrid was still choking anyhow. I was scared of the bear, but I was more scared for Ingrid so I took the Sharpfinger knife that Travers kept on his belt for skinning, and I made to right the stool and cut her down.

Travers, I think, was shaking his head, but I couldn't see him from behind Ingrid, whose limbs were now flailing, not like she was hanging, but like she was being electrocuted. It was Barth who stopped me. He was thinking clearer than I was.

"The wand," he said, "do it first, Skye. You have to."

And so I took the hazel wand, which Travers had dropped when he grabbed hold of Ingrid, and I smacked her in the side so hard that she almost swung out of Travers' arms. I tried to remember what Travers had said for me, but all I could come up with was Hangjaw's name. Then Travers had her good, and I was able to get on the stool and saw the blade through the high-rigging rope just above the knot. She tumbled

like a scarecrow and hit the ground badly, her and Travers going down together in a heap.

I looked over at Barth, absurdly still wanting him to see how good I'd been, to get her with the wand and then cut her down, but Barth, because he was still thinking of the she-bear, wasn't paying a whit's worth of attention to me.

So I looked at Ingrid instead. Her face kind of bright red with the eyes still rolled back into her skull, body shaking and dancing even though she was on the ground. Travers had gotten out from under her, and now he was putting his ear next to her. At first I thought he was trying to tell if she was still breathing, but of course, he wasn't, he was listening. He was listening to make sure he caught every word she said.

It could have only been a few seconds, that whispery grating voice I couldn't quite catch. But still it scared me even worse than seeing that stool run out underneath her feet, the sound of Ingrid's truth saying. I don't know what she said, but Travers's face went white, and when she was done her body stopped its shakes.

"Travers," I said. Even though I was scared, I wanted to be Witness still, it was my job, and so I wanted him to tell me. "Just whisper it," I told him then. "Go on."

"No use," Travers answered, and I couldn't tell quite what he was talking about but then it became clear to me. Travers let go of her head. I realized how he'd been holding it steady so he could hear, but then the neck lolled at a strange, unnatural angle, and I knew it had snapped like a wet branch during the fall.

"Old Hangjaw wanted her to pay her daddy's blood price," he said.



That frightened me something fierce. Not just that Ingrid had died—well, I'd seen death before—but the way I had seen her mouth moving even though her neck had been snapped clean through. We never played the hanging game after that. Some of the men from the camp brought down that ash tree and burned all the wood away from town where no one would breathe the smoke of it.

And so we all grew up. Those of us that could, that is.

A couple of years down the line Travers won a scholarship and followed it south past Lawford and out of bear country. I was lonely, but I never could blame him. Dad did, though, and they never spoke much after that. And me, well, I married Barth Gibbons, even though he never whispered about a red-haired, slim-hipped woman. I guess we can all make our

own luck. That's what I did that day when I was seventeen, and I went with Barth out to the Lawford Drive-In Theatre. I didn't know at the time how easy it was for something to take root in you, but several months later after I'd been retching for a week, convinced I had a helluva stomach flu, Momma told me she reckoned I must be pregnant.

She was right, of course. Dad was pissed for a while but after Barth proposed and we got properly married then he was okay. The baby, though, didn't come the way we expected it to. She came two months too early, in a slick of blood that sure as hell smelled to me like bear piss though no one else would say so. I lost the next one that way too, and the next, just so many until I wouldn't let Barth touch me because I didn't want to see all those tiny, broken bodies laid out in the blood pooling at my legs.

Then one day, after the spring Barth bit into that she-bear and I had to knock him in the side with the hazel wand until he bled just to keep old Hangjaw happy, Travers called me up. I'd just lost another, a little boy who I had already starting trying out names for even though the doctor told me that was a godawful bad idea to do so. And Travers said to me, "Okay, Skye, I know we can't talk about it, I know we're not supposed to, but I'm going to say anyway. You just keep going, okay, Skye? You're almost paid up."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I couldn't do it anymore, I'd seen all of the little bodies that I could and all I could smell was bear piss. But I loved Travers, I always had, and I remembered what it was like to hold his hand out there by the tree. I remembered the hanging game.

And so that night, though he was tired of it too and his eyes were bright and shiny and he said he couldn't face another stillbirth either, still, I kissed Barth on the mouth. Nine months later out came little Astrid, as clean and sweet smelling as any a little baby was.

So now I'm cradling that body of hers close to mine, her little thatch of black hair fluffed up like a goose and the rest of her so tightly swaddled there's nothing but a squalling face. I'm looking at her and I love this child of mine so much, more than I can rightly say. "Shh," I'm saying to her. "It's okay, it's okay. Don't be afraid now, girl."

But I can't stop thinking about that hill Dad left covered in bear bones that one summer way back when. Can't stop thinking about the nine little bodies I had to bury in the dirt before this little child of mine came along. As I'm holding her in my arms, feeling the warmth of her tucked tight against me, that thing which feels like the best thing in the world, I'm also wondering if she'll ever go out one fine afternoon to play the hanging game, and I'm wondering about the things our parents leave us, the good and the bad, and whether a thing is ever truly over.



*“Magic can only give you a thing you want that badly, that desperately. No one can work magic over you. You can only work magic over yourself.”*

## SECONDHAND MAGIC

A bad thing is going to happen at the end of this story. This is a story about bad things happening, but I won't tell you what the bad thing is until you get there. Don't flip ahead to the end of the story. Stories like this only work if you don't know what the bad thing is until you get there. Wait for it to happen, don't try to look ahead, don't try to stop it from happening. Because you know how magic works? When you try to cheat it, it just gets worse and worse and worse. That's the way of it. So, please. Just wait for it. I'll ask nothing else from you. Cross my heart.



Sayer Sandifer had very few of the ingredients necessary to be a true magician. His patter? Weak and forced on account of a childhood stutter he got when he turned four. His fingers? Short, stumpy things that couldn't make a silver dollar disappear no matter how long he practised. His sense of timing? Awful. And worse yet—crime of all crimes!—he had no assistant. The fact of the matter is that lacking any of these things might not have been enough to sink him, but all of them? What chance did the poor boy have? And at twelve years old he was just learning the first and only real lesson of being grown-up: that wanting a thing so bad it hurt didn't mean getting a thing, not by a long shot.

The only thing Sayer *did* have going for him was the prettiest set of baby blues you ever saw. That wasn't nothing. Not for a magician. And those eyes were only useful for one thing: getting an audience. When Sayer put on his star-spattered cloak and the chimney-pot hat he had swiped from Missus Felder's snowman the winter before; when with utter seriousness and intent he knocked on your door at eight in the morning while the coffee brewed and the scent of fresh-mown grass

drifted through the Hollow; when you had just kicked up your heels to browse the paper in search of discount hanger steak and sausages, then Sayer would be there.

“Missus S-S-Sabatelli,” he would stutter. Or if he was having a particularly bad day then he might not get that far, you might see him swallowing the word like a stone and searching out a new one. The first name instead, “Marianne,” he might say and bless him for being so formal. “I require your attendance this afternoon at the house of my mother and father. Please bring gingersnaps.”

And maybe you’d fall in love with him just a little bit right then, the way you could tell just by looking that he knew he didn’t have the right stuff in him yet for magic, but he wanted it, oh, he wanted it. He’d chase it even if it meant looking a fool in front of all his mother’s friends. He’d stand there, trembling, waiting for you to deliberate. Waiting for you to make some sort of pronouncement upon him. And you’d know how badly you could hurt him, that was the thing, you’d know you could crush him right there if you were of a mind to do so.

“Whatever for?” you might ask, hoping to surprise him, hoping to give him a moment to deliver a staggering statement of pomp and circumstance of the kind you knew he ought to have rattling around inside his head, because, *God*, you just wanted this kid to have it in him. Have that special something, even if it was just a flair for the dramatic. But, no, Sayer didn’t know the turns of phrase yet, he didn’t know that a magician was supposed to do something besides magic. You couldn’t expect him to, not at twelve years old, not even if he had studied the masters like Maskelyne, Thurston, Houdini and Carter. Which he hadn’t. All he had was a “Magic for Beginners” tin set an uncle had gotten him for Christmas—the same Christmas Missus Felder’s snowman had lost its chimney-pot hat and knitted scarf.

What Sayer didn’t know was that magic was never at the heart of being a magician. There was supposed to be something else. Something kinder.

But, as I said, what Sayer did have—what made you say “yes, sir, gingersnaps it is!”—were those wide baby blues of his. Eyes a kind of blue I never saw before, blue like a buried vein. His father’s eyes.

Joe Sandifer had all the things that Sayer lacked: clean and polished patter; his fingers long and grateful like he’d filched them off a piano man; a near perfect sense of when to come and when to go; and you can bet your bottom dollar that he was never without a partner. Us girls, married though we were, still resented Lillian Sandifer a little for managing to grab hold of good old Joe. Handsome Joe. Joe who could lie like it was easy and beautiful.

Sayer might have had the beginnings of what Joe had, and would

surely have discovered more as he passed the five-foot mark, but for now he was too much of a kiddie. A little lamb. All he had was his dignity, which he tugged as tight about him as that star-spattered cloak. And that dignity was the one thing that we in the Hollow were scared to death to take away from him.

Thus, we dreaded that Tuesday morning knock.

Thus, we dreaded that chimney-pot hat.

We dreaded the hungry eyes of Sayer the Magnificent.



Maybe it seems cruel to you that I'm talking like this about a poor runt of a kid with his heart stitched onto the red-and-black satin handkerchief he tugged out of his sleeve—courtesy, again, of that "Magic for Beginners" tin box. I swear I'm not trying to be cruel. It's the world that's wild and woolly. The world that cursed a stutterer—who couldn't holler "sunshine" or "salamander"—with a name like Sayer Sandifer.

You want to know I'm not cruel? Shall I prove it to you? Let's make him a Milo. Milo's a good name for a kid his age. Milo Sandifer. Easier with that "M." At least for a little while. Until he grows out of it. We can do that much for the little guy, can't we? The poor duckling?



When the time came, and we all knew it without really having to look, we went over as late as we possibly could. We being the women of the Hollow, me with my plate of gingersnaps. Just as the boy asked.

Lillian had set up the backyard with lawn chairs. An old red-striped beach umbrella in the northeast corner, just past the rhododendrons. Card tables covered with plastic cups and lemonade for the parents. Nothing is quite so apologetic as homemade lemonade in these circumstances.

"Thanks for coming, Minnie," Lillian whispered as I laid down a plateful of gingersnaps like the boy asked.

"It's nothing worth mentioning," I told her. "I need me some magic today, you hear? Must be he's got a sense for these kind of things after all." I let her smile at that. "It's a good day for it too."

"Some kind of good day," Cheryl Felder muttered. She scowled at the top of her chimney-pot hat poking out from behind the stage and

curtains that Joe constructed special. Poor Milo. He never quite figured out that of all the women in the Hollow, Cheryl was the one you didn't want to mess with. Most kids know this sort of thing; they can sense a real witch with a bee in her bonnet if you catch my drift. Or maybe he was just bolder than we gave him credit for.

The other women were coming in then. They laid out licorice strands and tuna fish sandwiches with trimmed corners, whatever the boy asked for. Lillian didn't meet our eyes at first, but then she all of a moment did and, you know what?—give her credit, her eyes were just blazing with pride for little Milo. That buttered us up some. You could see it changing people. Missus Felder's face, well, her face was the kind of face you might associate with sucking lemons, but even it got a little bit of sugar into it.

And the rest of us? Well, I'd always liked the boy. He had a proper kind of respect and reverence, and if there's two things a magician ought to fluff his hat with, it's respect and reverence, magic being no easy business, magic being a thing that ought to be done carefully. Not that I ever suspected poor Milo could mend a cut rope or pull the secret card, but there you have it. He would try, and we, the ladies of the Hollow, we kept company mostly by Hoovers and the Watchtower babble and crap society; we would smile those husband-stealing smiles of ours come Hell or high water.

And so the show began.



“And now for the Lost Suh-suh-suh . . .”

Milo's face screwed up with concentration so hard you could see a flush of red on his neck. Lillian was saying the word alongside him in the audience, but he wouldn't look at her. Missus Felder shifted in her chair.

“And now for the . . .”

His hands palsied and twitched as he shuffled the oversized Bicycle deck, patterned blue flashing in front of our eyes. But no one was watching the cards. We were all watching his mouth. We were all clenching the edges of the Sandifers' lawn chairs.

“For the Lost Suh-s-s . . .”

He paused again. That moment stretched on and on like putty. Just when we thought it was about to snap. Just when we thought *he* was about to snap—you could see Missus Felder leaning forward now, *she* might've said something, none of us would've dared, we knew you didn't

she speak for a stutterer, not ever, but she would've, she had the word on her lips and she was going to give it to him—that was when Milo swallowed, pushed up the brim of the chimney-pot hat with his wrist.

“Beg pardon, ladies,” he murmured ruefully, but it was out and the words were solid. “And now for the Lost . . . Sisters.”

The applause was bigger than it had been for any of the other tricks. Milo took it as his due.

“For this I need a volunteer. Anyone?”

No one budged. We couldn't, not yet. We weren't ready for it.

“Anyone? Ladies, please. Ah, good. You there. The . . . missus is the blue dress.”

It was Ellie Hawley from across the street in the blue cotton frock with the raglan sleeves her husband brought back from Boston. We were all a bit thankful. She was a good sort. The type who knew to bring licorice strands to a boy's magic show.

“I'm hard of hearing, boy,” Missus Felder said. “Which was that?”

God, we were thinking together, do not make him say it again.

It was no good though. She was smiling. Her words were sweetness and light, and she was smiling like she was some sort of old biddy about to offer him tea and biscuits. You couldn't trust a smile like that. Oh, boy, not ever.

“I, uh, suh-suh-s-sorry, folks.” The hat tilted forward again. Milo pushed it up, and licked his lips. “I meant . . .” He paused. Why was he pausing? Don't pause here, boy, we were thinking. Stick with Ellie Hawley. She's already getting up. She's halfway to the stage now, boy. Stick with her.

But we could see the look coming over his face. It was a proud look . . . and something else, something I couldn't quite tell yet. A look older than he was. He knew that Ellie was the easy choice. He knew it the same way we knew it. He knew this was a trap, but there was something in him that wouldn't let it go. We were watching. We were waiting. Milo was fighting with this thing, and we let him do it.

“ . . . you there, in the front. Missus Felder. Puh-puh-please. Come on up here. Ma'am.”

No, we were thinking together, do not ask for her. Do not do it, boy. Do not call on her, boy. Can't you see the Devil has come to your garden party? Can't you see the Devil has gotten into Missus Felder, and there ain't no way to cheat the Devil if you let her up on stage with you?

Missus Felder, she just smiled.

She took her time getting there, walked almost like an old woman even though she didn't look forty yet. Passed Ellie Hawley along the way, just swished past her blue dress with the raglan sleeves.

“Well, boy,” said Missus Felder.

“Thank you, Missus Felder.” Milo said like he meant it. He shuffled the cards again, each of those big, blue Bicycles. Missus Felder watched primly, patiently, hips swaying slightly as she shifted her weight from side to side. As he was shuffling, you could see Milo starting to look for the words, starting to line them up in his mind like bowling pins so they’d fall down easily once he got going.

Just as he opened his mouth to start the patter, Missus Felder piped up:

“Aren’t you going to ask me my name?”

Milo paused at this, chewed back those words he had all lined up for the show. “Nuh-no, Missus Felder. They all nuh-know it already.”

She nodded at this, like it was what she had been expecting all along. We all breathed a sigh of relief, but half of us were saying something pretty foul with that breath, let me tell you. Milo smiled a little wobbly smile and got with the shuffling again until he was all good and ready.

This time he got three words into the patter—three perfect words, three flawless, ordinary, magical words.

Then: “Aren’t you going to ask me where I’m from?”

Milo shook his head, and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His hands missed the cards and three of them went flying out: an eight of spades, a red jack, and the two of diamonds. Milo tried snatching them out of the air, but he missed with those little hands of his and they fluttered like white doves to the grass.

He placed the deck down steadily on the card table, and all the while Missus Felder was watching him with a look as wide and innocent as his own. There was a hush. We all knew something was coming. The kid knew something was coming. The kid was the kind of kid born with enough sense to know when something was coming but not enough to figure how to get out of the way. We could see the poor kid’s hands were trembling. He stooped to grab the cards, and as he was stooping, off slid that the black magician’s hat.

Missus Felder was faster than a rattler. Like lightning striking or tragedy.

The hat was in her hand then. She was holding it up to the audience. She was squinting at the inside of the brim of it.

“My boy,” she said, squinting away, “my boy, it seems as if you’ve dropped this.”

Milo straightened up right away with only the red jack in his hands. He was staring at the hat. He was staring at Missus Felder.

“Aww, c’mon,” someone whispered in the audience; we didn’t know who, but we loved that person.

“Come now, Milo, we can’t have the magician without his hat, can we?”

Milo didn't move. No one moved. No one dared to. Only the breeze tickling at the edges of his star-spattered cape.

"Come here, boy. Now." Her voice cracked like a whip. Milo couldn't ignore it. None of us could ignore it, our feet itched to stand. Ellie Hawley went so far as taking that first step forward before she caught hold of herself and paused.

Milo, though, he was too young to know better. He had been trained to obey voices like Missus Felder's. He was stepping forward, he was stepping forward, and there—he was forward, he was just in front of her, and she was putting down the hat, she was resting it gently on his head, and she was tugging just so at the brim to set it straight.

And she was tugging at it.

And she was tugging at it.

And down came the hat an inch farther.

And down came the hat another inch.

She was still tugging at it, still smiling like she was doing a favour for Milo, but none of us could see his face anymore. The hat was past his nose. The hat was past his mouth. The hat was past his chin, but Missus Felder just kept tugging it down and down and down. Now his shoulders were gone, and it was taking the boy up into it, Milo, he was just disappearing into the hat, disappearing to his knees and his shin and his ankles until the hat was resting on the ground.

Missus Felder blinked as if she was confused. She blinked as if she didn't understand what had happened. Then she picked up the hat. Quizzical. She held it out to the audience, showed us all the inside and it was empty. Perfectly empty.

"Well," she said, almost apologetically. "I guess that's that, then."

And she stepped off the stage.



The thing about magic is it only works when you let it. It only works when you believe in it entirely, when you give yourself over to it entirely. Magic can only give you a thing you want that badly, that desperately. No one can work magic over you. You can only work magic over yourself.



Cheryl Felder knew something about magic.

There were stories about Cheryl Felder, stories that poor Sandifer kid ought to have known the way that all kids know whose trees not to filch apples from and which backyards shouldn't be ventured for Frisbees and baseballs. Some might say that these sorts of stories were nonsense and spoke only to the curmudgeonly tendencies of the grumbles who reside in any town block.

But those people would be dead wrong.

After Sayer disappeared not a single soul spoke, not a bird twittered, not a skirt fluttered in the breeze. You could see those faces, each of them white as snow, white as a snow-woman caught in a melt.

Lillian trembled, but she said nothing.

She watched Missus Felder pluck a crustless tuna fish sandwich off the platter and vanish it with three remorseless bites.

"Could use some cayenne," she said with a sprung smile, "but all around, fine work, Lillian. Thanks for the show."

Cheryl Felder knew something about magic, and the biggest trick she knew was that people don't like messing with it. Messing with magic was like sticking your hand down a blind hole, you never knew if there might be treasure at the bottom or if it might be some rattler's hole. And all those women, they had something to lose, they had sons of their own, they had husbands, they had pretty hair or blue cotton frocks—something they didn't want vanished. So after a while each of them stood up and collected leftover plates still piled high with uneaten licorice strands or oatmeal-raisin cookies and then each of them filed silently past Lillian Sandifer with neither a glance nor a touch nor a whisper of comfort.

Don't be too hard on them.

They had loved that boy. We had all loved that boy.

They tried to make up for it over the next couple of months, knowing as we all did what a bad time Lillian would be having with that empty room at the top of the stairs, the room filled with arithmetic workbooks and bottle rockets and adventure paperbacks. They dropped off casseroles. Their sons took over the raking of the lawn and the watering of the flowerbeds. Ellie Hawley brought over a fresh-baked apple pie every Sunday. But it was never spoken of, why this neighbourly hospitality was due.

And Missus Felder, she did the same as she had always done. She shopped at the grocery store, squeezing peaches and plums to be sure they were ripe. She got her hair done once a week at the salon at the corner of Broad and Vine.

The missuses of the neighbourhood never spoke to her of it. None could manage it. I wanted to. I did. That little boy had a way of being loved that seemed a brand of magic all his own, but if there was one thing

I knew it was that I couldn't meddle in this.

Once I saw Lillian try, but only once.

This was about three weeks after it had happened. Poor Lillian was looking wasted and fat at the same time, her cheekbones sharp as fishhooks but her chin sagging like a net. Joe had gone on one of his business trips out of town, leaving her by her lonesome for the big old holiday weekend. All the ladies of the Hollow were bringing out bowls of punch and wobbling gelatin towers filled with fruit and marshmallows, while the children lit up Burning Schoolhouses and Big Bertha firecrackers. There was a fizzy feeling to the air on those kinds of days, as it exploded with pops and whistles and sparks and the smell of hamburger sizzling on the grill.

Missus Felder, she came out too for the block party and she brought with her a bowl of plump, red strawberries. She set them up at the end of her driveway on a little wooden table with a lace cloth thrown over, and she handed them out to kiddies as they whizzed by.

Now she was trimming the hats off them, one by one. *Snip!* A little stalk and a flourish of leaves went skidding onto the sidewalk. *Snip!*

And there was Lillian standing in front of her, trembling, thin-boned, in a yellow print dress that made her skin seem old as last year's newspaper.

"Please," Lillian said. Just that. Just that word.

"Careful," said Missus Felder, never looking up, her fingers dusted white to the knuckle as she pinched strawberries out and laid on the confectionary sugar. "You'll spoil your makeup if you keep up with that. You've too pretty a face for tears and if I'm not wrong there's others around here that'd be willing to hook that husband of yours. A nice man, Joe. A handsome man. He deserves a pretty wife."

Lillian didn't say anything. Her lips trembled. They were chapped and unrouged, and maybe she was wondering why she hadn't put a touch of red on them. Missus Felder plucked up another strawberry and she looked at it carefully.

"You're a beautiful woman, Lillian, and children wear you out. They trample the roses of youth, leave a woman like some tattered thing hanging out on the clothesline. Let the boy go. He was ungrateful, selfish. Have another one if it's in your heart to do so, but let that one go."

"But he's my son, Cheryl. Please."

"Son or no son." Now Missus Felder sighed a worn-out, old sigh as if the weather had gotten into her bones and really, she was just an old woman, why was she being troubled with this? "Do as you like, Lillian. But I'll tell you for nothing that some children are best let go."

And that was that.

The last flickers of September's heat burned out in the flood of a ravenous, wet November that shuttered the windows and played havoc with the shingles; by the time December whispered in, we were all thankful for it. All of us except for Lillian Sandifer.

There were some women who could take a loss and find their own way through, but Lillian, bless her, had had an easy life. Joe was everything you ought to have in a husband. He treated her gently. He brought her back fine cotton sheets from Boston, dresses and trinkets, a music box, a tiny wind-up carousel. Lillian loved all beautiful things. She had come as close to a life without loss as one can. But when December blew in—an easy December, full of light snows and bright silver days—it was like she took all the harshness, the cold, the cutting, fractured freeze into herself, and she let it break her.

And then we all saw the snowman in Missus Felder's yard.

The snows had been light, as I said, barely enough for a footprint, really, but there it was: round as a turnip at the bottom; a thin, tapering carrot for a nose; two silver dollars for eyes; and a fresh knitted scarf in green and gold hung beneath its hawkish, polar jowls. It was a king snowman, the kind of snowman that children dream about making before their arms give out from pushing the ball around the yard, the kind of snowman that wouldn't melt until halfway through May.

And on its head was a black chimney-pot hat, creased somewhat at the brim with a red silk ribbon drawn around it to set off its colouring.

A beauty, that hat; gorgeous to the eyes of a child and pure pain to his mother.



I could never do a big thing with magic, and that has always been both a blessing and a curse to me. Oh, there are ways and there are ways, and I know this is true, but the ways have never worked for me. It's an easy thing to change a boy's name. It's a little thing, particularly if it is a thing done kindly, if it is a thing that might be wanted. Then the change comes easily. But I cannot get blood from a stone, nor flesh from bread, nor make healthy a woman who wishes she were sick.

That is the province of my sister. And if it is none of mine to meddle with that greater magic, then it is at least something of mine to meddle with her.



It was a month into the hard end of winter I finally broke my silence.

"You must let the boy go," I told Cheryl, stepping in out of the cold, stamping my boots off to shed them of the slush that had begun to freeze around the edges. Winter always followed the two of us, winter and spring, summer and autumn, they had their own way about us whether we willed it or no.

"I will not, Minnie. . . ." She paused like the name was bitter to her. "Minnie, they call you. Ha. They have a way with names, don't they? Marianne. No, Marianne, I cannot." She closed the door quickly. She hated the cold, kept a thin blanket wrapped around her in the winter. I could see her curved fingers clutching at the edges. Winter turned her into an old woman as surely as summer made her a young one.

I gave her a look. It was not the dark and hooked scowl that came so easily to *her* face, no, it was a look entirely my own.

"It's time. It is long past time."

"Too skinny, and what has that husband of yours got you doing with your hair? I could never abide him, you know." Her mouth twisted as she looked me up and down

"I know. You could never abide any of them."

"I abided my own well enough," she said. "The poor duckling. The little lamb. Let me fetch you some cake." She did. Tea, as well, the heat of it warming through the bone china cup. Her movements were quick and sharp as a bird's.

She settled us at the kitchen table. I remembered this house, I knew the ins and outs of it. The gold December light filtered softly through the window, touching a lace cloth, a badly polished silver candle holder. She never had an eye for the details, no, and this was what came of it.

"Where is the boy, Cheryl?"

She touched her tongue to her lip, scowled something fierce. "You know as well as I do."

"Let him out."

"No."

"They will come to hate us." I knew she knew this. I could see it in her eyes, in the way she twisted at the lace cloth, but she could be a stubborn old biddy sometimes. "He was a good boy, and it was a small thing," I said.

"It was not a small thing!" she cried so harshly it took me by surprise, that her voice could go so ugly. So sad. I looked at my sister, and I saw then the thing that they all saw. That missus of nightmares and twisted stories, the hooked woman, the crone; she who devoured baseballs and Frisbees and footballs; she who stole the bright heart of summer and cursed the strawberries to wither on the vine; the son-stealer, the child-killer.

"It was," I said gently. "You know as well as I do that it was, and it is only spite and pride that keeps you from letting him go."

"You are a meddler too, Marianne, so mind your tongue," she muttered but the words stung nonetheless. "No," Cheryl whispered, chin curved down, and she was retreating, drawing in upon herself. "I know it as well. It was a mistake, all of it, nothing more than that." She cupped the bone china in her hand and blew on the tea to cool it. "I did not mean for it to happen, you know I did not, I would not do such a thing to a child. To his mother." She paused, took a sip, eyes hooded, lips twisting. "I know that the woman is dying. I know she will not live through the winter, but I cannot touch her, don't you see that? Don't you see, sister? I cannot heal the mother, I cannot summon the child. I cannot force a thing that is not wanted, and the boy will not *come out!*"

I could see the truth of it written on her face.

She was not a monster, she had never been a monster, and how I wished I could take her in my arms, her frail bones sharp and splintering as a porcupine; how I wished I could whisper the words of comfort to her. But she did not wish to be comforted. Her spine was made of sprung steel. She would not break herself upon this, for she knew what loss was and what mistakes were and the hardness of carrying on anyway. My sister knew this. She had buried a husband she loved. She had cried tears for her own lost boy, and knitted a scarf for him in green and gold, and hung it upon the cold reminder of his body in the yard.

Her fingers twitched, knuckling the bone china cup. I wanted to take her hand, but I knew something of her pride, the pride and the grief and the love of all of us missuses of the Hollow.

"Let us do something," I say. "Even if it is a small thing."



It is an easy thing to take a handful of snow and fashion it into a boy, easier than most anyone would believe. Snow longs to be something else. Bread does not wish to be flesh, water does not wish to be wine, stones do not wish to bleed—but snow, snow wishes always to be the thing that is not, a thing that might survive the spring thaw and live out its days whole and untouched. And a boy, a boy who is loved, well, what finer shape is there?

And so we two fashioned it into a shape, and we set the silver dollars for its eyes and we wrote its name upon its forehead. Then, of course, it was not a thing of snow any longer but a thing of flesh: a thing with Milo

Sandifer's bright blue eyes, barely nudging five-feet, and still as tonguetied as any boy ever was.

"Missus Suh-s-sabatelli," he whispered, trying out that fresh new mouth of his.

"Yes, boy," I allowed with a sigh. "That I am. Now get you home to your mother, she's been calling after you, and don't you bother her with what you've been getting up to. Just give her a kiss, you hear?"

"Right," the boy said, "Yes, of course. I'll do that. Thank you, ma'am."

Already his tongue was working better than poor Milo's ever did. But it wouldn't matter none, I reckoned. Missus Felder unwound the scarf from around the king snowman's neck. The hole in its chest where we had dug out the boy yawned like a chasm. Like Adam's unknit ribcage.

"Here," she said, and she wrapped the scarf around Milo. "You ought to keep warm now. Little boys catch cold so easily."

He blinked at her as if trying to remember something, but then he shrugged the way that little boys do. Then he was off, scampering across lawns and driveways, home to his mother. I looked on after him, staring at the places where his feet had touched the ground, barely making a dent in the dusting of white over the grass.

"What do you reckon?" I asked Cheryl. She'd gone to patting away at her snowman and sealing him up again, eyeless, blinded, a naked thing without that scarf, only the hat on him now, only that gorgeous silk thing to make him a man and not just a lump.

"He'll last as long as he lasts," she said with a sniff. "Snow is snow. Even if it wants to be a boy."

"And Lillian?"

She didn't speak for a time, and I had to rub at my arms for warmth. For me it had already gone February and the little snowflakes that landed upon my cheeks were crueller things than the ones the other missuses would be feeling as they took their sons and daughters to church.

"Maybe it's a kindness you've done here, and maybe it isn't." She wasn't looking at me. Cheryl couldn't ever look at you when she was speaking truths. She smoothed the freeze over the place where she drew out the boy, and her fingers were like twigs, black and brittle, against the white of it. "You can't ever know the thing a person truly wants, but you keep on trying, don't you? I hope your husband is a happy man, I hope you give him children of your own one day."

"Well," I said, but I didn't know what more to add to that.



She was right, of course, she always was about such things: maybe it was a blessing and maybe it wasn't, but the boy came home to find his mother curled up in his bed surrounded by arithmetic workbooks and bottle rockets and adventure paperbacks. And he kissed her gently on the forehead, and she looked at him and smiled, her heart giving out, just like that, at the joy of seeing him once again. But the boy had been made good and sweet, and so he wrapped himself in her arms, and he lay next to her until the heat of her had faded away entirely.

That heat.

Poor thing didn't know any better. But snow is snow, even when it is flesh. A thing always remembers what it was first. When Joe Sandifer came home it was to find his wife had passed on, and from the dampness of the sheets he knew she must have been crying an ocean.

Joe was a good man and a strong man; his fingers were long and graceful. He pulled up the sheet around his wife, and he kissed her gently, and he buried her the following Tuesday. Perhaps it was hard for him for a time; it must have been, for he had loved his wife dearly, and he had lived only to see her smile, but the spring came and went, and then a year, and then another year, and he was not the kind of man who needed wait long for a partner. It was Ellie Hawley in the end, childlike and sweet, whose husband had brought her the blue dress with the raglan sleeves, whose husband had left her behind when he found a Boston widow with a dress that didn't make it past the knees and legs that went all the way to the floor. Ellie was the one who managed to bring a smile to Joe's face and to teach him that there were still beautiful things left in the world for a man who had lost both wife and son.

And so it goes.

And it goes and it goes and it goes.

Until one day Milo came back.



"Missus Sabatelli," he said when I opened the door to him, that bright June Tuesday with the scent of fresh-mown grass drifting through the neighbourhood, nine in the morning, just like he used to.

He was a grown man then, the height of his father, with his father's good looks and easy smile. A handsome man. The kind of man you'd fall in love with, easy, but the kind of man you'd never know if he loved you back.

"Milo," I said, and I had to hold on to the doorframe. I was half

expecting him to be wearing that star-spattered cloak of his, to chew on his words as if they were gristle in his mouth. But he didn't.

"Thank you for that kindness," he said, "but I'm not Milo any longer. I've learned a thing or two since then." I saw then that he was right. Whoever he was, he wasn't little Milo Sandifer.

"You've come back," I said. I shivered. For him it was June, but for me the wind was already blowing crisp and cool, carrying the smoky scent of September with it. Time was running faster and faster ahead of me.

"Yes," Sayer said, lingering on that "s" with a lazy smile as if to show me he could do it now and easily at that. "I've come home again. Would you mind if I stepped inside, Marianne? I'm not one to gab on porches, and if it's not too impertinent I could use a cup of coffee something fierce."

"Of course, boy."

He chuckled, and the sound was rich and deep and expansive. I stepped aside, and he took off his hat as he came in. Not *the* hat, of course. The one he wore was an expensive, grey Trilby that matched his expensive, grey suit and his expensive, leather shoes. He followed me into the kitchen: I regretted that I hadn't had time to clear up properly that morning, but he didn't seem to mind so much. He said nice, polite things about the colour of the curtains and about the state of things in general, and when he sat it seemed as if he were too big for the chair, as if that chair wanted to hold a small boy in it but had now discovered a man instead. The coffee's aroma was thick in the air, and I found I could use a cup myself so I poured for both of us, and served it plain. He seemed the sort to take his coffee black.

I was nervous. It had been some time since there had been a man in my house.

"You found your way then?" I asked him.

"I did, ma'am. I surely did."

"And you know about your mother?"

He smiled, but this time there was something else to the smile. "I do," he said. "Missus Felder told me of all that, and I'm sorry for it, I suppose. She whispered it to me while I was gone. She cajoled, she begged, and she pleaded. She has a tongue on her could scald boiling water, Missus Felder does, could strip paint off a fence."

His eyes were bright blue, and surprisingly clear. I wondered if he was lying to me. I could see he had learned how to lie. Like lying was easy and beautiful.

"You didn't come back for her," I said.

"I did not." He paused, and breathed in deep, like he never smelled coffee before and found it the finest thing in the world. "I could say that I was unable." He glanced at me underneath a fan of handsome eyelashes,

quick as a bird. “But you know that’s not true, you know that’s not how magic works, don’t you? I wanted to stay. I wanted to stay, and it didn’t matter. What Missus Felder did—your sister, yes, I know about that—what she did was cruel in its own way, sure, but not in the way you’d think—”

“No, boy,” I cut him off. He looked surprised at that, like he was not used to people cutting him off. I wondered who this new boy was, this boy that Cheryl and I had made. “We figured it out, of course, though it was too late for anything to be done. You were always a boy who was looking for magic, even then, even then you were, and we knew it, Cheryl and I both knew it, but we had hoped it might be a different sort of magic. A kinder sort.”

“But it wasn’t,” he said.

“No, it wasn’t. You found something in there, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“And you stayed for it.”

“I did.”

“And now?”

“Now I have taken what I need from it,” he said, and he flexed his fingers, long and graceful. They were not the fingers he had when he was a boy, those poor stubby things that couldn’t palm a quarter or pull off a faro shuffle. These were magician’s fingers.

“So I see you have, my boy. Has it done ill for you or aught?”

At this he paused. I could see he wanted to get into his patter now, and it was not the same kind of pause as when he was young, when he knew the word but still it tripped him up; this was a different beast.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “I want you to tell me. That’s why I’m here, I suppose, Marianne.”

“No one can tell you that, Sayer.”

He took to studying his fingernails. Maybe he learned that trick from Cheryl, not looking at a person. “I think you can. I think you are afraid to tell me.”

A shiver ran down my spine like ice melting. I tried to shake the feeling though.

“No, boy.” He looked up at that word. “Your sense of timing was always characteristically awful. You never learned how to wait for a thing. Don’t you know that? When you try to cheat magic, it just gets worse and worse and worse. What you found in that hat—some sort of secondhand magic I’m reckoning, that piece of truth you were looking for all that time—it’s yours now. It ain’t your daddy’s magic. It ain’t Lillian’s either. Poor, sweet Lillian. You’ve suffered for it, and you’ve caused suffering for it, so it’s yours to own, yours to do with as you will.”

“There is a bad thing coming at the end of this,” Sayer told me. He reached out that long-fingered hand of his, and he touched me on the wrist.

“I know, boy,” I said. “We always know these things. Time’s always racing on for us; even if most other folk can’t see it properly, you can. But, God, the thing we never learned right, Cheryl and I, is that magic is about waiting, it’s about letting the bad things happen. It’s about letting the children pass on into adults, and the mothers grieve, and the fathers lose their way, or find it, and the sons come home again when they are ready to come home. That is the thing you will not have learned in that place you went to, because that is only a thing you can learn out here. What are you going to be, Sayer Sandifer? Why, whatever it is you choose to be. You saw what was coming that day when you invited her up on the stage with you. Boy, there were twenty people out in the audience who loved you, who would have waited with you, who would have helped you get there on your own, but you wanted what she had and so you took it.”

The words were hard stones in my own mouth, but I had chewed them over so long that I had made them round and smooth and true.

“Where is my sister?” I asked him.

“She’s gone now,” Sayer told me, and this time I could tell that he wasn’t lying. I didn’t know what kind of a thing he was, this man drinking his coffee in front of me, this man who had taken power into himself but not knowledge, not wisdom, not the patience of a boy who learns to speak for himself.

“Well,” I said, and the word hung between us.

I felt old. I felt the weight of every summer and winter hanging upon me.

I knew it would only happen if I let it. I knew it would only happen if I wanted it to happen. I knew this just as my sister knew it.

Then Sayer laid down his grey Trilby on the table, and, lo and behold, it was the thing I’d been looking for after all. The hat, the chimney-pot hat. That little piece of secondhand magic. He turned it over so that I could see that yawning chasm inside—the pure blackness of it, deep and terrifying. The place he disappeared to. The place he found his way out of.

“You could marry me,” he said. “You always loved me, and I can see there’s no man about now. Living like that can be awful lonely.”

The words pulled at something inside me. He was right. I was lonely. This life of mine felt old, misshapen, stretched out by the years. But I did not want him. I did not want that stranger. “No,” I said.

He sighed and shook his head like it was my tragedy. My funeral.

“I’m not cruel,” he said to me in that handsome, grown-up voice of his.

And he looked at me with eyes wide as two silver dollars, but flat-edged and dull as if the shine had been worn off them by residence in too many dirty pockets. "I swear I'm not trying to be cruel. It's the world that's wild and woolly."

And I knew that magic only worked if you let it. I knew that magic only worked on a thing that wanted it. But I was tired, and I was tired, and I had lost my husband, and I had lost my sister, and I had lost that little boy I loved.

Sayer pushed the hat toward me.

I took it up carefully, studied the dilapidated brim, fingered the soft black silk of it.

And Sayer smiled. Just once.

And then the bad thing happened.