

Unbecoming

Advance Praise for Unbecoming

“Lesley Wheeler’s *Unbecoming* is a delightful, beautifully written 21st century gothic novel set at a Virginia university and also in the borderlands between the literal and the metaphorical, between the realistic and the fantastic. Like all universities, this one is a school for wizards and conjurers. Professors offer portals to undiscovered countries and enchanted lands. Portals lead to demons and horror and death too. Cynthia has recently become English Department Chair. She’s perimenopausal and coming into her blood-magic, witch woman power. The English Department is a tiny realm, fighting other more powerful realms at the University that would swallow any beleaguered humanities discipline. How do we survive each other, resist the demons or easy escape to a deadly realm that could destroy us? How do we conjure a path to the world we want? Lesley Wheeler says, ask the poets and the painters!”

Andrea Hairston, author of *Will Do Magic for Small Change* and *The Master of Poisons*

“The story of a woman leading an ordinary life who discovers within herself extraordinary powers, *Unbecoming* is sage, funny, and warm, like a long conversation with your best friend about all the strange and wonderful things that have been happening to her lately. Lesley Wheeler’s writing is so deft and magical that I’m convinced that she must have learned it from the fairies. This smart, beguiling debut fantasy casts a spell that readers won’t want to break.”

Emily Croy Barker, author of *The Thinking Woman’s Guide to Real Magic*

Unbecoming

by

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

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for Chris

One

Alisa's name lit up my phone while I sat in my car, waiting for a hot flash to subside.

"I need you to make a stop," she said in her new voice, high and dreamy. My best friend was about to head to Wales for the year on an obscure faculty exchange program, and she was changing. "There should be a fax waiting at the office."

"Since when is there a fax machine at the office?"

Since always, she insisted, so I promised to look. Every element of this process had been peculiar. Prickling with misgivings, I hung up, reversed out of my driveway, and detoured to campus.

There were no spots, so I made a risky place for my Hyundai at a yellow curb and scurried to our building. A print-out waited in a corner of the mailroom, on top of a hunk of beige plastic I would have sworn I'd never seen before. I squinted at the sheets, so often copied that the print was fuzzy, each page crested with a dragon.

When I grabbed them, the last page leapt up and opened a red slit in my thumb. Cursing, I jammed the cut into my mouth and sucked. Later I would have a vision of an empty socket next to the dusty machine, plug lying idle, but I must have misremembered.

I shoved the papers into my messenger bag and jogged back to the car, climbing into the driver's side as a vengeful parking enforcement officer raced up in his golf cart. "Not this time,"

I whispered, inserting the key with uncharacteristic dexterity and revving out. My rearview mirror reflected his scowl.

Speeding for a couple of blocks, I turned down Lord Fairfax Street and slowed. The poshest avenue in our Virginia town began not far from its small college, past a run of boutiques and farm-to-table bistros. The first houses were red-brick aristocrats, built just after the Civil War and set standoffishly beyond cool front lawns. Then came wooden Victorians with turrets and tin roofs and smaller but exquisitely maintained gardens. Alisa's Arts and Crafts bungalow sat further along, after a gentle incline began to falter downhill toward the river. Parking by her elderberry hedge, I took a deep breath of air-conditioned chill before killing the engine.

I would get through this day by force of will, putting one foot ahead of another, delivering my dearest ally to the airport, picking up her inadequate replacement.

The door stood ajar. I hesitated in the August heat. Then I rapped the brass knocker before ducking in.

Alisa lived by herself now. Her once-overstuffed rooms, painted in blossomy colors, seemed sparsely furnished. Tumbleweeds of dog fur were long swept away. She kept a tidy house, mostly because domestic efficiency gave her more time to write. Still, the space seemed preternaturally neat, almost expectant. Chenille throws were folded over the backs of chairs. Photos of nieces and nephews had disappeared from end tables, although pretty watercolor miniatures still hung around, islanded on the walls. Marked-up article drafts had been packed out of sight.

Alisa was standing in the middle of the living room. A petite woman in her early fifties, she usually vibrated with impatience, the kind of person who rested from research by running half-marathons, who talked more brilliantly than anyone in the meeting and laughed louder than anyone in the bar. She had been all self-assurance and appetite, with claws. Now

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Alisa had one toe in another world. She seemed unaware of me, clutching a clump of long reddish-brown hair in each fist, so I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “Forget something?”

Alisa widened her eyes in my direction. “Almost certainly.”

As I watched her, guilt blew through me. Alisa’s partner of thirteen years dumped her last winter, and a blunt-shaped misery had squatted on my friend since. By June, I’d been sick of her grimness, just as I felt exhausted by my husband Silvio’s depression. I fantasized about a break from both of them—but not so far, for so long. I wouldn’t have wished for this.

Now Alisa trembled, despite the heat. “Was the fax there?”

Kicking off my sandals, I pulled the folded pages out of my satchel and handed them over. “Last-minute paperwork?”

Grasping sheets in each hand and peering at them, she said, “They booked me on some airline I’ve never heard of. I couldn’t *find* online check-in. But these are supposed to get me to Wales somehow.” Then Alisa came back into focus and smiled.

Oh. She wasn’t withdrawn, at least not the way she had been since Sunshine moved in with that plain-as-kale farmer. She wasn’t even fretting about the trip. Instead, Alisa looked lighter. Surprise, and chagrin at my own surprise, made me glow back at her. Alisa’s dreamy voice, so different from her recent sadness—there was weird confidence in it.

The pre-breakup Alisa would have noticed bloodstains on her documents and interrogated me. Now she just slipped them into a tote on the side chair and waved me deeper into the house, touching the frame of an English-looking landscape as she passed. She spoke over her shoulder as she crossed the dining room.

“You know,” she said, “I was about to apply for medical leave when this exchange came through.” The coffee machine was a new single-serve device, not the stovetop espresso maker Alisa had always used. Nor did she prepare to beat sugar into crema, a practice learned from her grandmother, one of Alisa’s

countless varieties of arcane expertise. She used to enjoy an audience for performances like brewing Cuban coffee. Now, she lifted a full cup from its plastic platform and shoved it at me. “I just didn’t think I could get my act together for another September.”

“I was worried.” I watched as she dumped the cartridge and set up another. The businesslike machine gurgled and spat.

Alisa carried a sugar bowl and carton of half-and-half to the counter, where I pulled out two stools. “My therapist would have testified to mental derangement, for sure,” she said. “I’ve been in a stupor most of the time, but every once in a while I imagined myself as Bertha.”

“*Jane Eyre’s* Bertha?”

“The mad wife Rochester stashes in the attic,” Alisa explained with irritating condescension. I had been her colleague in the English department for nearly twenty years. “First Sunshine, who is basically a witch, persuades me to stay here in the *boondocks*”—I winced—“then I get dumped. When I think about Sunshine shacking up with the cute young governess instead of me, I want to set fire to something.”

That sounded like the old Alisa.

When she fell silent, I tracked her gaze around the kitchen, which was as immaculate as the rest of the house, and as foreign. Someone had wiped the small window over the sink clean of soap spatters and erased fingerprints from cupboard doors; a fug of spices had dissipated. Already signs of Alisa had evaporated like mist. I turned my eyes from the room back to her face, half-expecting the freckles to start winking out.

Suddenly I felt bereft. “I can’t believe you’re leaving.”

Alisa wasn’t looking at me. She lifted hair off her neck, auburn threaded with gray, then stared at a small, dark painting of trees. I didn’t remember it, and the placing was odd, right next to the window, but her next comment distracted me. “I needed to make this happen.”

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Alisa clasped her mug with both hands as if to warm them. I sweated.

Instead of asking what “need” meant, I pulled over the sugar bowl. She had started taking coffee bitter, but I still believed in consolation. “I can’t believe you did everything in a week—not only paperwork and packing but setting up your house for a tenant. I get a migraine just thinking about it.”

Alisa shrugged, pleased, maybe, to hear her competence praised, as if an ego still kicked inside this oddly relaxed person. “The house was half-empty anyway. Besides, it’s easier to leave knowing they’re sending over another professor to babysit the place. A Victorianist, even.”

She leaned back. I followed her eyes down to my wrinkly gray clothes as she asked, “Did you find out anything else about her? Beyond her resume?”

I copied Alisa’s shrug. Two things I knew about this doppelgänger, Sophia Ellis: one, the Welsh dean had testified in print that the woman was qualified to teach all three of Alisa’s previously scheduled fall offerings. Two, she couldn’t replace Alisa in any other way. “She comes up online as the author of a few articles and poems. But no, nothing else. Their university website keeps crashing.” I paused. “I’m still picking her up today, right, when I drop you off?”

“Yep.” She pointed at a folder lying next to the sad new American coffeemaker. “I collected all the appliance instruction booklets. You just have to show her around and give her my keys. I even stocked the fruit bowl. Want something?”

A couple of bumpy-skinned lemons gleamed among shiny pears and nectarines. I thought of apples of knowledge and goblin fruit. “No, thanks.”

I downed some tepid coffee, chucked the rest, and rinsed the cup at the sink, where dappled light heaved and subsided. Alisa followed and patted my damp back. She was already a ghost of linen and warm air.



We rolled Alisa's baggage into the airport, chewing over details of the unusual fellowship. "Did I tell you?—I did find one thing online," Alisa said, heaving the larger case onto the scale. "The cottage I'll be living in, Sophia Ellis's house. They finally sent me the address and I looked it up." As she accepted her boarding passes, proffered by the agent with a puzzled expression, and we moved toward security, Alisa pulled up a satellite picture. "Here."

I stared at her phone. "It's thatched! And look at that red door, and the apple tree, and all those flowers." My pitch rose with the escalator. "It's so *cute*."

"Cute like the roof leaks, probably, and the heat doesn't work." But Alisa beamed.

Near the start of the cordoned security line, she dumped her purse and carry-on to embrace me. "Listen. I know I'm leaving at a terrible time, with the dean plotting a coup and all. And Silvio gone."

"Silvio," I repeated, as if the name were a spell.

"And everyone left in the department is either untenured or useless or an agent of destruction."

"Heads up their asses."

"You can kick them into shape." Alisa straightened. She was never more herself than when diagnosing my problems and telling me how to fix them. "But it's hard in ways you don't expect, becoming the chair."

"Surely I know the worst," I protested. Alisa had done a yearlong stint once and depicted it in epic Technicolor.

She shook her head. "No, it's not just extra work. Everyone changes. People seem different, especially the people you thought you knew best."

"Not me, though?"

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Alisa snorted. “No, you were always the same. But you have to change now.” She stared right into my eyes. “It’s really, really important to pay attention.”

I blinked and pulled my head back. “What are you talking about?”

“You refuse to see things that don’t fit whatever story you’re spinning about the world. Keep playing that game, and problems will creep up on you.”

“There’s no *game*,” I said. Before I could assemble a more coherent response, her attention swiveled elsewhere. Alisa balanced mismatched bags and removed her passport from a pocket. Fluorescent lights hummed. She kissed my cheek and headed into the security line, bumping and dragging the weight of too many books and shoes. Soon she was feeding those bags into a scanner’s black mouth and stepping into a portal, arms raised.

She was gone. No one was left to tell me how to live.

I stood alone for a minute. The so-called Arrivals Lounge, one of those nowhere places, contained a single row of mean-spirited chairs, but it would be an hour until Alisa’s surrogate arrived. I finally sat down and stared through a giant pane of glass for a while. Beyond it, worn mountains, hazed by heat, turned their backs to me.

Soon I was twitching through work tasks on my phone and messages related to my promotion. The scrolling emails must have sent me to sleep, because I started dreaming of a dark-haired woman carrying a knife, running uphill, pursued by blurry figures—until I caught an unlikely scent. It reminded me of crushed grass. I woke and saw a stream of exiting passengers.

A few swift loners darted through the gate. A cluster of travelers with clumsy carry-ons followed. After a blank moment and another waft of coolness, there she was.

At the security threshold, gazing right into me, stood the most stunning creature I'd ever had the ill fortune to behold. Tall and glamorous in a tailored dress, she held an aqua suitcase, the retro kind without wheels. She seemed unburdened.

I knew, sure as summer always ends, this was Sophia Ellis.

"Call me Fee," the visitor said. Her accent was crisp but not quite placeable.

How old was she? As we bypassed the checked-luggage conveyer belt and strolled to the parking lot, I stole glances at her. Not young. Twenty-somethings had a touch of softness still; Fee looked definite. When we arrived at the car, she planted herself on the asphalt, staring skyward, as if she had grown there for centuries.

Yet her skin was unlined, black hair unsilvered, figure lean. She lifted a single case to the trunk in an easy motion.

I babbled the whole time about how magical the logistics of this exchange had seemed. Somehow I was confiding, too, my bewilderment at becoming chair. "The part of the budget under my control is pretty small," I found myself explaining, "but let me know if you need anything, and I'll do my best."

Fee responded with a calm expression just this side of a smile and answered mundane questions as if surprised. Yes, the flights did go smoothly. She slept the whole way across the gray Atlantic. (Her words, "the gray Atlantic.") No, she had never traveled to the States before. About chairing, she observed there were always ways to work a system, no matter how Byzantine the rules.

"Orientation?" Fee asked during the drive to town. I had been describing activities scheduled for new faculty members, beginning, alas, Monday morning—tomorrow. She stared directly east and nodded. She was already oriented.

The afternoon blinked past. I brought her to Alisa's house, where she would be living, as well as sitting in Alisa's office. I showed her the fruit bowl, two upstairs bedrooms tucked be-

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neath the roof, and the landline, because she hadn't brought a mobile phone. She liked the screened-in porch best, reaching out to the steel mesh without quite touching it, skimming her fingers over the hammock.

Here is the thermostat and here is the router, I said, as if chanting a nursery rhyme. Fee was fascinated by the controls for the shower. She peered down the drain. No, thank you, she did not need me to drive her to the supermarket today. She would take a stroll this evening. The downtown was so close.

Time in Fee's company passed jerkily, in ellipses and vivid dilations. Alisa would be high above foreign waters now, but I had crossed some kind of border, too.



My airport dream revisited me that night. When I caught a glint of the knife in the woman's hand, I told myself, *Blood. There's no crossing between worlds without blood.*



In the morning, still half-asleep, I faltered on my front stoop, grasping a watering can. I only meant to duck outside for a second, for a chore I had forgotten, before the construction guys started up across the street.

A garbage truck was clanking in the distance. I had no desire to confront sanitation workers in misbuttoned pajamas. Yet some kind of darkness hunched at the end of my walkway, near the recycling bin. Had the cat escaped? I stepped forward, squinting, unable to make sense of what I saw.

It seemed to be the vintage telephone from our spare bedroom, the room I was supposed to use as an office. The telephone was never hooked up, and I hadn't touched it for years, except with a dust cloth. I certainly hadn't lugged it to the curb on trash day. Yet there it sat, Bakelite handle knocked from the cradle, brushed-metal rotary dial gleaming in the half-light, a crescent moon of numbers. Who had moved it?

The cast-iron telephone was one of many quirky presents Alisa had given me, often apropos of nothing, as if filling some kind of hole in our friendship or my personality. Most were useful as well as beautiful. As well as outclassing me in professional accomplishments, Alisa had taste. This gift, however, had languished upstairs. I would have said its pointlessness annoyed me.

Brakes groaning, the garbage truck finally rolled into sight. A man riding the rear leapt off, seized a bin, emptied it. As he turned to claim the telephone, I dropped the watering can and ran flat-out across the lawn, arm flung across my chest for decency. “No, no, don’t take that!”

He stared at the crazed woman rushing him, down at the antique, up at me again. He backed off.

“It’s a mistake,” I said, as embarrassment or fear welled up hot, dampening my cotton nightclothes. After a beat he nodded, climbed onto his vehicle, and signaled the driver. Wheels turned.

I stood there, panting, while the truck shrank into the distance. Then I gazed down at my wandering appliance.

I willed my heartbeat to steady as I examined, one by one, the possibilities. Had my son dragged it here? I couldn’t think why. My daughter had liked playing with it as a child, nattering away to imaginary people, but she was too grown-up for that now. Silvio was out of town. I had been exhausted after helping the kids get organized for their second week of high school—so many forms to sign—but I couldn’t have moved the phone myself without noticing. “I don’t sleepwalk,” I said to it, “or practice telekinesis.”

From the lilac, a mockingbird rang and rang.

I crouched next to the stranded hunk of iron. Picking up the handset, I flashed a glance around to make sure no neighbors were watching, then placed it next to my ear.

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The receiver was cold and dead. Why so much upheaval? Why now? What did I want to happen next?

Maybe silence was preferable to answers. I dropped the receiver onto the base and hoisted the whole contraption with a grunt.

The day was brightening, but as I limped back along the walk, having skinned an ankle against the curb, shivers forked through me. I sidled indoors and dumped the telephone on a table in the front hall, not where it used to live, but never mind.

I showered, harried the kids through breakfast, urged them upstairs to dress, then called them down again. They had missed the bus twice last week; it was Teddy's fault, but Rose covered for him. "Get a move on! You still have lunches to make!"

Teddy stumbled into the kitchen behind his sister. I thumped into a nearby chair and was smoothing a plastic bandage onto my ankle when a rumble shook the house. Startled, I lurched to my feet. The clocks had blinked out, and the dishwasher was no longer grumbling.

Contractors were demolishing a damaged garage across the street—had they knocked a line down? Heat kindled in my gut and licked up my chest.

In the sudden silence, Teddy looked up from looting the pantry. "A cosmic sign."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Just another blown circuit." Unfazed by shadow, she resumed layering slices of rare beef onto grainy bread.

Teddy checked his phone, probably for notice of a last-minute school cancelation due to apocalyptic collapse of the electrical grid. Disappointed, he resumed raiding the cupboards. Rose must be right: a circuit breaker had flipped. The power in our old house was becoming excitable, prone to surge and collapse. But the box was in the creepy, cricket-infested basement, and I didn't want to go down there.

I paused in front of the cellar door, the cat rubbing against my legs, then shook my head. It would be perfectly reasonable to use the toilet first.

In the bathroom, I glimpsed a perspiring woman in the mirror. She was repeating a pointless ritual, calling on indifferent forces, and hoping for a different outcome. Powerless and bleeding out.

My period had hit the night before, and I was coping with slasher-film quantities of gore. Actually, slashers were predictable. This was blood I'd never seen before, not on screens or in books. Perimenopause: more taboo than serial killings, less plausible than vampire tales. And with Silvio and now Alisa gone, I had no one to gripe to. Middle age, so far, was all about involuntary secrets. I flushed then compressed what remained of my dignity to get my pants fastened.

Cleaning up, listening to the clatter of teens in the hall, I felt lightheaded again. There was also a sensation I didn't have a label for. The word *eagerness* came into my mind, but I batted it away.

On the rug sat my only witness. The cat was waiting for me to conjure water from the tap. No creature looks at a woman my age with personal interest; I was merely the vehicle of his will. I reached for the faucet, but for all Pluto cared, the handle might as well have rotated supernaturally.

When I finished in the bathroom, the kids were already by the front door, shrugging on their knapsacks. Teddy's drooped on his slim back, empty except for overpriced snack bars and the paperwork I'd shoved in. Rose's pack strained at the seams.

I considered asking the twins about the iron telephone, but though they were standing right next to it, I couldn't figure out a way to phrase the question. Instead I followed them, picking up an empty potato chip bag, a dirt-stiffened hoodie, a doodle of a winged woman.

"See you later, Mom," Teddy said.

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“Have a tolerable day.”

“You, too.” Rose, a pace behind, turned to frown at me from behind a blonde tangle. She glanced up and down, presumably surveying my gray tee-shirt and baggy charcoal trousers, so similar to yesterday’s. She called this a “groutfit.” Rose clamped her lips, but her eyes said, *Change*.

Lamps came on and appliances ground into action. Rose’s pupils shrank to points, then she turned to follow Teddy. The screen door banged behind them.

Two

After work, I parked in my driveway and listened to the engine tick as it cooled. My feet throbbed, my ears rang, and my belly kept cramping. I shot a message to Alisa, whom I hadn't heard from yet, wondering how a year's freedom might alter her. It might undo me completely.

Although I never noticed my cell chirping, I found two texts from Silvio. *Sorry we got our signals crossed last night. Alisa get off okay? Then, Should be home by 8. Call if you can.* My husband's part-time North Carolina apartment was already "home," apparently. It was unnerving how quickly he had settled in.

Silvio had decamped for his new faculty orientation only ten days ago, but our grass looked unkempt, as if the whole property were pining away. The possum who lived under the front steps was chomping my basil, unless it was the groundhog, or the rabbits. It was hardly worth growing even the sturdiest herbs. I should get out there and pinch off flowers, I told myself, but I was afraid of bleeding through my clothes if I moved.

Alisa was always the person who got me off my butt—insisting I put my file in for full professor two years ago, for instance, when I was unsure my credentials were good enough. "Look how many men have sailed through with shorter resumes," she said. "Unlike the service jobs everyone wants you to waste your life on, promotions in academic rank come with actual raises. Step up and demand the money!" Alisa had been right, as usual.

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I wanted to dislike Fee for supplanting my friend, but as Fee's new supervisor I was bound to help her. Today I brought her to the office then handed her off to Harriet, our administrative assistant. I wondered if Fee turned heads at the orientation meetings. She wouldn't charm Alisa's students, though. A challenging professor, Alisa magnetized talent.

The kids would already be home. This was the first year Silvio and I weren't juggling schedules so one of us would be home to meet them at three. I mentally rummaged the vegetable drawer for things to sauté. I shouldn't be eating so much pasta, not if I wanted to stop accumulating pudge, but it was the only common ground between the nearly vegan pacifist and the carnivorous fighter. I would rather fatten than choose between them.

The front door opened and Teddy leaned out, longish hair with its one blue streak damp in the humidity, to call, "Mom!" Twisting like smoke, Pluto bolted between his feet. Teddy sprang after the cat, who was bounding across the lawn in discrete hops, aimed, as always, toward the road. Maybe Pluto had been watching rabbits through the window and, being an animal with limited outdoor experience, imagined lawns must be traversed that way. I dumped my phone and bag and joined the chase.



"Fee?" Rose repeated the name as we cleared plates and loaded the dishwasher. It was her turn to scrub pots. "I forgot to ask last night. What's she like?"

"Taller than me," I answered, bending over the wine rack to choose a cheap Malbec. I left the wine store's price tags on the caps so I could know how much money I was drinking. "Although most people are taller than me. Elegant. She reminds me of someone, I can't think who."

“But what’s she *like*?” Rose, haloed by sunset light, was eyeing a frying pan. Finally, she exhaled and picked up the sponge.

“I hardly know yet. British people don’t exactly tell you their life stories when you chauffeur them home from the airport. And I only saw her for a few minutes this morning. She somehow gets me to do all the talking.” I peeled off the foil and jabbed a corkscrew into the stopper. “She is the opposite of needy, which is good, I guess. Finally a person I don’t have to take care of.”

Teddy remarked from behind a bank of pillows, “You’re *supposed* to take care of her.”

I extracted the plastic cork and poured a glass. “I don’t know how universities work over there, but when I started describing HR forms, she just blinked. Like bureaucracy was below her pay grade.”

“Must be nice.”

“I couldn’t nail her down about the teaching, either, whether she needed to order different books. She just quoted Christina Rossetti at me. She’s more of a poetry person than Alisa, but maybe that’s good, shake up the usual offerings. I don’t know. She’s so gorgeous no one will be able to hear a word she says.”

“*Mom*,” Teddy protested.

“At least Alisa’s house is walking distance to everything. Europeans never understand how bad our public transportation is.” Our house stood further out, at the edge of town.

Casting an eye around my kitchen, which unlike Alisa’s looked better when the light failed, I sat in a scuffed but comfortable chair. “Oh, and the dog!” I cried. “When I picked Fee up this morning, the neighbor’s big fat Labrador bounded up to the fence, stopped dead, and then started barking himself hoarse until Mr. Mukherjee came out to calm him down.

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Right out of a Lovecraft story. Mysterious stranger comes to town. Horror ensues.”

Rose’s pointy chin lifted. She brought her own edge to the evening, upset about some high school trouble I would never hear the details of. “Sounds as if you resent her.”

As my blood pressure spiked, I gulped down the wine I’d been warming in my mouth. “What?”

“For messing up your life. You’re making her sound terrible.” Rose, who usually did the dishes more scrupulously than Teddy, was already wiping her hands on a cloth. “She was probably just jet-lagged.”

I flushed, but before I could retort, Teddy intervened from his nest of striped sofa cushions. “Listen to this. These psychologists did an experiment to tell whether children could judge the difference between fantasy and reality.” Blue light shone on his face as he leaned over the laptop screen.

I turned toward him, away from the omniscient goddess at the sink. “What are you reading?”

“Dad sent me an article,” he said with an impatient wave, and I felt the usual pang at family members having interesting conversations without me. “So, even three-year-olds know the difference between reality and imagination,” he went on.

“Duh.” Rose depressed the switch on the electric kettle and browsed tea flavors with an appearance of concentration.

“Yet they can totally get scared of monsters they know are imaginary. So researchers put two large black boxes in a room.”

Rose made an impatient noise, but she was paying attention.

“They get a bunch of kids, bring them into the room one by one, and have them look in each box, make sure they’re empty. Then they say to some of the kids, now visualize a nice, fluffy, white rabbit in one of the boxes.”

He lifted his legs onto the sofa and crossed them, tucking a streaky lock behind one pierced ear, scrolling through results,

eyes flicking back and forth. “The others are told to imagine a horrible, mean, black monster.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “*Racist.*”

“Yeah, right?” he agreed. “Then the adults *leave the room* for two minutes and videotape what the kids do. A few kids beg the researchers not to go, they’re scared, although they insist they know it’s just pretend. Half of them go up and touch the box they were pretending about, even though they were told to stay in their chairs.

“And then,” he finished in triumph, “in the final interview, they admit, yeah, they did wonder if there was a rabbit or a monster in the box. Most of the kids know they can’t pretend it into existence. They don’t have the magical skills, they say... but they think it’s possible *other* people do.”

Rose’s tea released a scent of peppermint. “So, knowing what’s real,” she said, “they still recognize holes in what they know.”

“Doesn’t that seem like the definition of intelligence?” Teddy asked.

I had been swirling my wine around, but now I leaned my achy body against the chair and let one hand fall to the seat. Touch wood. “Why did Dad send you that article?”

“We were talking about how petrified Rose and I used to be of her bedroom closet.”

“Ah.” I hauled my body up again, feeling bloated and way too factual, but the chores never ended. On my way to the sink, I was startled to glimpse the iron telephone—I had already forgotten its early-morning expedition, as well where I’d parked it.

“Thinking about things does seem, sometimes, to make them come true,” Rose said, bobbing the sachet up and down by its string. “No one knows for sure a monster hasn’t materialized in the closet since the last time they checked. Saara says that’s how her parents think about ghosts. You shouldn’t talk

Unbecoming

about them, because that will draw them to you—or maybe it occurs to you to mention ghosts because they’re already there.”

She hesitated, cocking her head. “Like I just did.”

Returning the corkscrew to its drawer, I found a spoon bent almost into a loop. What the hell? Glancing at Rose and thinking of poltergeists, I shoved the spoon to the back and slammed the drawer shut.

Teddy leaped up and drew the curtains. “We always have these conversations at nighttime when Dad’s not home.”

“What, you don’t think I could protect you?” I waved a mostly clean pan in the air before swiping it with a rag and returning it to the cupboard.

“You’re scared of *mirrors*,” Rose answered, raising pretty eyebrows and scooping up her bookbag to retreat to her lair.

“Mirrors are terrifying.”



Standing in the back yard, barefoot again, I ignored a voicemail from my mother—she probably wanted to gloat over my abandonment, or maybe tell nightmare tales about latchkey kids. Instead I tried to call Silvio. He picked up after a few rings, but we could hardly hear each other. He was at a bar with his colleagues, he said through background laughter that fizzed like static. Was everything all right? he asked. Fine, I lied. Talk tomorrow.

I didn’t want him to have fun, although that was unfair. I had badgered him to apply for the job, exasperated by his gloominess. The local Psychology Department would only hire him as a part-time replacement. The more perfect a colleague he became, teaching their ill-designed intro courses to rave reviews while serving up uncompensated committee work and home-baked banana bread at meetings, the more they took him for granted. He talked about the professors in Psych so

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obsessively, with such mounting distress: couldn't he see this was a dead end?

Silvio scoured the ads. He applied around the region and scored a one-year, full-time, renewable position a few hours' drive away. I had felt such relief.

Hadn't I? My stupid heart stumbled.

Rust-brown flashed through the woods across the stream, with a rustle of leaves. I wanted it to be a fox, a small, lurking creature that seemed powerless but was clever enough to outwit every dog in the neighborhood. It was probably some gray scavenger, instead. I wiggled my toes in the grass while electricity thrummed through my limbs, seeking an outlet.