

FILTER HOUSE

Short fiction
by
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Seattle

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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 my sisters,
Julie Anne and Gina Mari

Cover photograph of a filter house is by Norwegian Research Scientist Per R. Flood of the *Bathobiologica* A/S. Dr. Flood first described the structural characteristics of appendicularian feeding filters in a 1973 publication. Since then, he has made significant contributions to the understanding of appendicularian feeding house architecture and function, mucus production and histochemistry, and bioluminescence.

Appendicularians (Larvaceans) are filter feeders that primarily occupy the euphotic zone (upper sunlit portion of the ocean), but some species can be found in deeper waters. The morphology of larvaceans superficially resembles that of the tadpole larvae of most urochordates; they possess a discrete trunk and tail throughout adult life.

Like most urochordates, appendicularians feed by drawing particulate food matter into their pharyngo-branchial region, where food particles are trapped on a mucus mesh produced by the pharynx and drawn into the digestive tract. However, appendicularians have greatly improved the efficiency of food intake by producing a "house" of glycoproteins that surrounds the animal like a bubble and that contains a complicated arrangement of filters that allow food in the surrounding water to be brought in and concentrated 400 to 800 times prior to feeding. These houses are discarded and replaced regularly as the animal grows in size and the filters become clogged. Discarded appendicularian houses account for a significant fraction of organic material descending to the ocean deeps.

Modified from text at

<http://www.answers.com/topic/larvacea-1?cat=technology>

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Introduction
Where Everything Is
a Bit Different

by Eileen Gunn

One of the great delights of reading science fiction and fantasy stories is the feeling of being immersed in a world where everything is a bit different. Ordinary people—even children—have unusual abilities. The dangers are different, the power relationships are different, even “normal” is different, and the reader has to figure out this new world on the fly. Every word has potentially a different meaning than in the familiar work-a-day world. New words—made-up words, words you have never heard before—can indicate entirely new ways of thinking.

Samuel R. Delany, many years ago, mapped out the exhilaration of reading a sentence, word by word, that, because it is science fiction, can go anywhere and be anything. The door can dilate. The red sun can be high, and the blue one low. Delany’s essays in *The Jewel-hinged Jaw*

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make the very act of reading a science-fiction adventure, an experience in which the reader intellectually and emotionally participates in creating the book.

The stories in this book offer that level of exhilaration. They are not all science fiction: some are fantasy, and some are really quite arguably neither—just life, with all its ambiguities and spiritual mysteries. In every story, remarkable words and thoughts and characters carry the reader from one sentence to the next, building a story so naturally that it's a surprise to realize that you're caught up in it like a child. Is there such a thing as an eaves trough? What's going to happen next?

The book is filled with voices, each one the voice of an individual in a particular place and time: someone of a particular age, a particular heritage and education. All are different: clamoring, wheedling, scolding, disagreeing, telling their stories, keeping their secrets. You can tell from their diction and vocabulary that the old lady's from the country, that the woman is in service, that the girl absorbs knowledge like a sponge.

The personal is political here: everything means something, and it is not always what you think at first. A candle is not necessarily just a candle: it might also be a message from the dead. Or maybe it *is* just a candle: will we find out? A character might use a divination technique and at the same time view it as a superstition. The stories embody a very science-fictional way of reading, actually: they require the reader to distinguish what is different and meaningful from what is just different. (An eaves trough, since you ask, is merely a gutter. Isn't it a wonderful phrase?) This shifting point of view, the experience of looking at the world from two perspectives at once, is a hallmark of reading science fiction.

Most of the stories examine the shifting of balances of power between men and women, adults and children, whites and blacks. Often the structure shifts internally without ever changing the balance: the poor get poorer and the rich get richer in a way that is all too similar to real life. In these stories, however, almost everyone has some sort of power, has control over something.

Which are my favorites? Maybe “Wallamelon,” for the total pleasure it gives, making the reader once again a mature ten-year-old learning to understand the world. Maybe “The Raineses’,” for all its remarkable characters, living and dead. (A bit of advice: Don’t read “The Raineses’” late at night, all alone in the house.) Maybe “Good Boy,” for its wacky verve, and simply because I’ve been trying to figure out a way to use *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer* in a story for nigh onto forty years, and Nisi beat me to it. Really, every story in the book is a potential favorite. “But She’s Only a Dream” is smokey and allusive. The folktale-like African story, “The Beads of Ku,” is remarkably satisfying aesthetically.

Okay, they’re all my favorites. Remarkably involving stories that pull you along a path of wonder, word by word, in worlds where everything is a bit different.

Eileen Gunn
Seattle
February 12, 2008

Wallamelon



“Baby, baby, baby! Baby, baby, baby!” Cousin Alphonse must have thought he looked like James Brown. He looked like what he was, just a little boy with a big peanut head, squirming around, kicking up dust in the driveway.

Oneida thought about threatening to tell on him for messing his pants up. Even Alphonse ought to know better. He had worn holes in both his knees, begging “Please, please, please,” into the broken microphone he’d found in Mr. Early’s trash barrel. And she’d heard a loud rip the last time he did the splits, though nothing showed. Yet.

“Neida! Alphonse! Come see what me an Mercy Sanchez foun!” Kevin Curtis ran along the sidewalk toward them, arms windmilling, shirt-tails flapping. He stopped several feet off, as soon as he saw he had their attention. “Come *on!*”

Oneida stood up from the pipe-rail fence slowly, with the full dignity of her ten years. One decade. She was the oldest kid on the block, not counting teenagers. She had certain responsibilities, like taking care of Alphonse.

The boys ran ahead of her as she walked, and circled back again like little dogs. Kevin urged her onto the path that cut across the vacant lot beside his house. Mercy was standing on a pile of rubble half the way through, her straight hair shining in the noonday sun like a long, black mirror. She was pointing down at something Oneida couldn't see from the path, something small, something so wonderful it made sad Mercy smile.

"Wallamelons," Kevin explained as they left the path. "Grown all by theyselves; ain't nobody coulda put em there."

"Watermelons," Oneida corrected him automatically.

The plant grew out from under a concrete slab. At first all she could see was its broad leaves, like green hearts with scalloped edges. Mercy pushed these aside to reveal the real treasure: four fat globes, dark and light stripes swelling in their middles and vanishing into one another at either end. They were watermelons, all right. Each one was a little larger than Oneida's fist.

"It's a sign," said Mercy, her voice soft as a baby's breath. "A sign from the Blue Lady."

Oneida would have expected the Blue Lady to send them roses instead, or something prettier, something you couldn't find in an ordinary supermarket. But Mercy knew more about the Blue Lady, because she and her half-brother Emilio had been the ones to tell Oneida about her in the first place.

"Four of them and four of us." Oneida looked up at Mercy to see if she understood the significance.

Mercy nodded. "We can't let no one else know about this."

"How come?" asked Alphonse. Because he was mildly retarded, he needed help understanding a lot of things.

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Oneida explained it to him. “You tell anybody else, they’ll mess up everything. Keep quiet, and you’ll have a whole watermelon all to yourself.”

“I get a wallamelon all my own?”

“*Wa-ter-mel-on*,” Oneida enunciated.

“How long it take till they ready?”

They decided it would be at least a week before the fruit was ripe enough to eat. Every day they met at Mizz Nichols’s.

Mercy’s mother had left her here and gone back to Florida to be with her husband. It was better for Mercy to live at her grandmother’s, away from so much crime. And Michigan had less discrimination.

Mizz Nichols didn’t care what her granddaughter was up to as long as it didn’t interrupt her tv watching or worse yet, get her called away from work.

Mercy seemed to know what the watermelon needed instinctively. She had them fill half-gallon milk bottles from the garden hose and set these to “cure” behind the garage. In the dusky hours after Aunt Elise had picked up Cousin Alphonse, after Kevin had to go inside, Mercy and Oneida smuggled the heavy glass containers to their secret spot. They only broke one.

When the boys complained at being left out of this chore, Mercy set them to picking dried grass. They stuffed this into old pillowcases and put these underneath the slowly fattening fruits to protect them from the gravelly ground.

The whole time, Mercy seemed so happy. She sang songs about the Blue Lady, how in far away dangerous places she saved children from evil spirits and grown-ups. Oneida tried to sing along with her, but the music kept changing, though the stories stayed pretty much the same.

There was the one about the girl who was standing on the street corner somewhere down South when a car full of men with guns went by, shooting everybody. But the Blue Lady saved her. Or there was a boy whose mom was so sick he had to stay with his crazy aunt because his dad was already dead in a robbery. When the aunt put poison in his food he ran away, and the Blue Lady showed him where to go and took care of him till he got to his grandparents house in Boston, all the way from Washington, DC.

All you had to do was call her name.

One week stretched, unbelievably, to two. The watermelons were as large as cereal bowls. As party balloons. But they seemed pitiful compared to the giant blimps in the bins in front of Farmer Jack's.

Obviously, their original estimate was off. Alphonse begged and whined so much, though, that Mercy finally let him pick and open his own melon. It was hard and pale inside, no pinker than a pack of Wrigley's gum. It tasted like scouring powder.

Oneida knew she'd wind up sharing part of her personal, private watermelon with Alphonse, if only to keep him from crying, or telling another kid, or a grown-up even. It was the kind of sacrifice a mature ten-year-old expected to make. It would be worth it, though. Half a watermelon was still a feast.

They tended the Blue Lady's vine with varying degrees of impatience and diligence. Three weeks, now. How much longer would it take till the remaining watermelons reached what Oneida called, "The absolute peak of perfection?"

They never found out.

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The Monday after the Fourth of July, Oneida awoke to the low grumble of heavy machinery. The noise was from far enough away that she could have ignored it if she had wanted to stay asleep. Instead, she leaned out till her fingers fit under the edge of her bunk's frame, curled down, and flipped herself so she sat on the empty bottom bunk.

She peeked into her parents' bedroom. Her father was still asleep; his holstered gun gleamed darkly in the light that crept in around the lowered shade. She closed the door quietly. Her dad worked hard. He was the first Negro on the police force.

Oneida ate a bowl of cereal, re-reading the book on the back of the box about the adventures of Twinkle-toes the Elephant. Baby stuff, but she was too lazy to get up and locate a real book.

When she was done, she checked the square dial of the alarm clock on the kitchen counter. Quarter to nine. In forty-five minutes her mother would be home from the phone company. She'd make a big breakfast. Even if Oneida wasn't hungry, it felt good to talk with Mom while she cooked it. Especially if Dad woke up; with Royal and Limoges off at Big Mama's, the three of them discussed important things like voting rights and integration.

But there was time for a quick visit to the vacant lot.

The sidewalk was still cool beneath the black locust trees. The noise that had wakened her sounded a lot louder out here. It grew and grew, the closer she got to the Curtis's. And then she saw the source: an ugly yellow monster machine roaring through the lot, riding up and down over the humps of rubble like a cowboy on a bucking bronco. And Kevin was just standing there on the sidewalk, watching.

There were stones all around. She picked up a whole fistful and threw them, but it was too far. She grabbed some more and Kevin did too. They started yelling and ran toward the monster, throwing stones. It had a big blade. It was a bulldozer, it was pushing the earth out of its way wherever it wanted to go. She couldn't even hear her own shouting over the awful sound it made. Rocks flew out of her hands. They hit it. They hit it again. The man on top, too.

Then someone was holding her arms down. She kept yelling and Kevin ran away. Suddenly she heard herself. The machine was off. The white man from on top of it was standing in front of her telling her to shut up, shut up or he'd have her arrested.

Where was the Blue Lady?

There was only Mizz Curtis, in her flowered house dress, with her hair up in pink curlers. No one was holding Oneida's arms anymore, but she was too busy crying to get away. Another white man asked what her name was.

"Oneida Brandy," Mizz Curtis said. "Lives down the street. Oneida, what on Earth did you think you were doing, child?"

"What seems to be the problem?"

Dad. She looked up to be sure. He had his police hat on and his gun belt, but regular pants and a tee-shirt instead of the rest of his uniform. He gazed at her without smiling while he talked to the two white men.

So she *was* in trouble.

After a while, though, the men stopped paying attention to Oneida. They were talking about the rich white people they worked for, and all the things they could do to anyone who got in their way. Kevin's mom gave her a

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crumpled up Kleenex to blow her nose on, and she realized all the kids in the neighborhood were there.

Including Mercy Sanchez. She looked like a statue of herself. Like she was made of wood. Of splinters.

Then the white men's voices got loud, and they were laughing. They got in a green pick-up parked on the easement and drove off, leaving their monster in the middle of the torn-up lot.

Her father's face was red; they must have said something to make him mad before they went away. But all Dad did was thank Mizz Curtis for sending Kevin over to wake him up.

They met Mom on the way home. She was still in her work clothes and high heels, walking fast. She stopped and stared at Dad's hat and gun. "Vinny?"

"Little brush with the law, Joanne. Our daughter here's gonna explain everything over breakfast."

Oneida tried. But Mercy had made her swear not to tell any grown-ups about the Blue Lady, which meant her story sounded not exactly stupid, but silly. "All that fuss about a watermelon!" Mom said. "As if we don't have the money to buy one, if that's what you want!"

Dad said the white men were going to get quite a surprise when they filed their complaint about him impersonating an officer. He said they were breaking the law themselves by not posting their building permit. He said off-duty policemen went around armed all the time.

Aunt Elise brought over Cousin Alphonse. They had to play in the basement even though it was such a nice day outside. And Kevin Curtis and Mercy Sanchez weren't allowed to come over. Or anybody.

After about eighty innings of "Ding-Dong, Delivery," Oneida felt like she was going crazy with boredom. She

was sorry she'd ever made the game up; all you did was put a blanket over yourself and say "Ding-dong, delivery," and the other player was supposed to guess what you were. Of course Alphonse adored it.

Mom let them come upstairs and turn on the tv in time for the afternoon movie. It was an old one, a gangster story, which was good. Oneida hated gangster movies, but that was the only kind Cousin Alphonse would watch all the way through. She could relax and read her book.

Then Mom called her into the bedroom. Dad was there, too. He hadn't gone to his other job. They had figured out what they were going to do with her.

They were sending her to Detroit, to Big Mama. She should have known. The two times she spent the night there she'd had to share a bed with Limoges, and there hadn't been one book in the entire house.

"What about Cousin Alphonse?" she asked. "How am I supposed to take care of him if I'm in Detroit?"

"You just concentrate on learning to take better care of yourself, young lady."

Which wasn't a fair thing for Mom to say.

After dark, Oneida snuck out. She had stayed inside all day, exactly as she'd promised. Now it was night. No one would expect her to slip the screen out of her bedroom window and squirm out onto the fresh-mowed lawn. That wasn't the kind of thing Oneida ever did. She wouldn't get caught.

The big orange moon hung low over Lincoln Elementary. Away from the streetlights, in the middle of the ravaged vacant lot, it made its own shadows. They hid everything, the new hills and the old ones. It was probably going to be impossible to find the watermelon vine. If it had even survived the bulldozer's assault.

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But Oneida walked to the lot's middle anyway. From there, she saw Mercy. She stood stock still, over on Oneida's left, looking down at something; it was the same way she'd stood the day they found the vine. Except then, the light had come from above, from the sun. Now something much brighter than the moon shone from below, up into her face. Something red and blue and green and white, something radiant, moving like water, like a dream.

Oneida ran toward whatever it was. She tripped on a stone block, stumbled through the dark. "Mercy!" she shouted as she topped a hill. Mercy nodded, but Oneida didn't think it was because she'd heard her. She ran on recklessly, arriving just as the light began to fade, as if, one by one, a bunch of birthday candles were being blown out.

Oneida bent forward to see better. The light came from a little cave of jewels about the size of a gym ball. A blue heart wavered at its center, surrounded by tiny wreaths of red flowers and flickering silver stars. As she watched, they dwindled and were gone. All that was left was a shattered watermelon, scooped out to the rind.

Magic! Oneida met Mercy's eyes. They had seen real magic! She smiled. But Mercy didn't.

"Blue Lady say she can't take care of Emilio no more. He too big." Emilio had been thirteen last New Year's, when he left with Mercy's mom. Mizz Sanchez hadn't been so worried about him; bad neighborhoods weren't so bad for bad boys. But now...

Mercy looked down again at the left-behind rind.

Oneida decided to tell Mercy her own news about going to Detroit Saturday and being on punishment till then. It was difficult to see her face; her beautiful hair kept hanging in the way. Was she even listening?

"You better not go an forget me, 'Neida."

What was she talking about? “I’ll only be there until school starts! September!” As if she wouldn’t remember Mercy for ever and ever, anyway.

Mercy turned and walked a few steps away. Oneida was going to follow her, but Mercy stopped on her own. Faced her friend again. Held out her hand. There was something dark in her pale palm. “Ima give you these now, in case—”

Oneida took what Mercy offered her, an almost weightless mass, cool and damp. “I can sneak out again,” she said. Why not?

“Sure. The Blue Lady, though, she want you to have these, an this way I won’t be worryin.”

Watermelon seeds. That’s what they were. Oneida put them in her pajama pocket. What she had been looking for when she came here.

She took a deep breath. It went into her all shaky and came out in one long whoosh. Till September wasn’t her whole life. “Maybe Mom and Dad will change their minds and let you come over.”

“Maybe.” Mercy sounded as if she should clear her throat. As if she were crying, which was something she never did, no matter how sad she looked. She started walking away again.

“Hey, I’ll send a card on your birthday,” Oneida yelled after her, because she couldn’t think of what else to say.



Wednesday the Chief of Police put Dad on suspension.

That meant they could drive to Detroit early, as soon as Dad woke up on Thursday. Oneida helped her mom with the last-minute packing. There was no time to do laundry.

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Dad didn't care. "They got water and electricity in Detroit last time I checked, Joanne, and Big Mama must have at least one washing machine."

They drove and drove. It took two whole hours. Oneida knew they were getting close when they went by the giant tire, ten stories tall. There were more and more buildings, bigger and bigger ones. Then came the billboard with a huge stove sticking out of it, and they were there.

Detroit was the fifth largest city in the United States. Big Mama lived on a street called Davenport, like a couch, off Woodward. Her house was dark and cool inside, without much furniture. Royal answered the door and led them back to the kitchen, the only room that ever got any sunshine.

"Y'all made good time," said Big Mama. "Dinner's just gettin started." She squeezed Oneida's shoulders and gave her a cup of lime Kool-Aid.

"Can I go finish watching cartoons?" asked Royal.

"Your mama an daddy an sister jus drove all this way; you ain't got nothin to say to em?"

"Limoges over at the park with Luemma and Ivy Joe," she told Mom and Dad. They sent Royal to bring her home and sat down at the table, lighting cigarettes.

Oneida drank her Kool-Aid quickly and rinsed out her empty cup. She wandered back through the house to the front door. From a tv in another room, boingy sounds like bouncing springs announced the antics of some orange cat or indigo dog.

Mercy watched soap operas. Maybe Oneida would be able to convince the other children those were more fun. Secret, forbidden shows grown-ups didn't want you to see, about stuff they said you'd understand when you got older.

Limoges ran over the lawn shouting “’Neida! ’Neida!” At least *somebody* was glad to see her. Oneida opened the screen door. “I thought you wasn’t comin till Saturday!”

“Weren’t,” she corrected her little sister. “I thought you weren’t.”

“What happened?”

“Dad got extra days off. They’re in the kitchen.” Royal and the other kids were nowhere in sight. Oneida followed Limoges back to find their parents.

It was hot; the oven was on. Big Mama was rolling out dough for biscuits and heating oil. She had Oneida and Limoges take turns shaking chicken legs in a bag of flour. Then they set the dining-room table and scrounged chairs from the back porch and when that wasn’t enough, from Big Mama’s bedroom upstairs. Only Oneida was allowed to go in.

It smelled different in there than the whole rest of the house. Better. Oneida closed the door behind her.

There were more things, too. Bunches of flowers with ribbons wrapped around them hung from the high ceiling. Two tables overflowed with indistinct objects, which pooled at their feet. The tables flanked a tall, black rectangle—something shiny, with a thin cloth flung over it, she saw, coming closer. A mirror? She reached to move aside the cloth, but a picture on the table to her right caught her eye.

It was of what she had seen that night in the vacant lot. A blue heart floated in a starry sky, with flowers around it. Only these flowers were pink and gold. And in the middle of the heart, a door had been cut.

The door’s crystal knob seemed real. She touched it. It was. It turned between her thumb and forefinger. The door opened.

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The Blue Lady. Oneida had never seen her before, but who else could this be a painting of? Her skin was pale blue, like the sky; her hair rippled down dark and smooth all the way to her ankles. Her long dress was blue and white, with pearls and diamonds sewn on it in swirling lines. She wore a cape with a hood, and her hands were holding themselves out as if she had just let go of something, a bird or a kiss.

The Blue Lady.

So some grown-ups did know.

Downstairs, the screen door banged. Oneida shut the heart. She shouldn't be snooping in Big Mama's bedroom. What if she were caught?

The chair she was supposed to be bringing was back by where she'd come in. She'd walked right past it.

The kitchen was crowded with noisy kids. Ivy Joe had hit a home run playing baseball with the boys. Luemma had learned a new dance called the Monkey. Oneida helped Limoges roll her pants legs down and made Royal wash his hands. No one asked what had taken her so long upstairs.

Mom and Dad left right after dinner. Oneida promised to behave herself. She did, too. She only went in Big Mama's bedroom with permission.

Five times that first Friday, Big Mama sent Oneida up to get something for her.

Oneida managed not to touch anything. She stood again and again, though, in front of the two tables, cataloguing their contents. On the right, alongside the portrait of the Blue Lady were several tall glass flasks filled with colored fluids; looping strands of pearls wound around their slender necks. A gold-rimmed saucer held a dark, mysterious liquid, with a pile of what seemed to be pollen at the center of its glossy surface.

A red-handled axe rested on the other table. It had two sharp, shiny edges. No wonder none of the other kids could come in here.

On every trip, Oneida spotted something else. She wondered how long it would take to see everything.

On the fifth trip, Oneida turned away from the huge white wing leaning against the table's front legs (how had she missed *that* the first four times?) to find Big Mama watching her from the doorway.

"I—I didn't—"

"You ain't messed with none a my stuff, or I'd a known it. S'all right; I spected you'd be checkin out my altars, chile. Why I sent you up here."

Altars? Like in a Catholic church like Aunt Elise went to? The two tables had no crucifixes, no tall lecterns for a priest to pray from, but evidently they were altars, because there was nothing else in the room that Big Mama could be talking about. It was all normal stuff, except for the flower bunches dangling down from the ceiling.

"Then I foun these." Big Mama held out one hand as she moved into the bedroom and shut the door behind herself. "Why you treat em so careless-like? Leavin em in your dirty pajamas pocket! What if I'd a had Luemma or Ivy Joe washin clothes?"

The seeds. Oneida accepted them again. They were dry, now, and slightly sticky.

"Them girls don't know no more about mojo than Albert Einstein. Less, maybe."

Was mojo magic? The seeds might be magic, but Oneida had no idea what they were for or how to use them. Maybe Big Mama did. Oneida peeped up at her face as if the answer would appear there.

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“I see. You neither. That niece a mine taught you nothin. Ain’t that a surprise.” Her tone of voice indicated just the opposite.

Big Mama’s niece was Oneida’s mother.

“Go down on the back porch and make sure the rinse cycle startin all right. Get us somethin to drink. Then come up here again, and we do us a bit a discussin.”

When Oneida returned she carried a pitcher of iced tea with lemon, a bowl of sugar, and two glasses on a tray. She balanced the tray on her hip so she could knock and almost dropped it. Almost.

It took Big Mama a moment to let her in. “Leave that on the chair seat,” she said when she saw the tray. “Come over nex the bed.”

A little round basket with a lid and no handles sat on the white chenille spread. A fresh scent rose from its tight coils. “Sea grass,” said Big Mama in answer to Oneida’s question. “Wove by my gramma. That ain’t what I want you to pay attention to, though. What’s inside—”

Was a necklace. Made of watermelon seeds.

“A’int everybody has this in they backgroun. Why I was sure your mama musta said somethin. She proud, though. Too proud, turn out, to even do a little thing like that, am I right?”

Oneida nodded. Mom hated her to talk about magic. Superstition, she called it. She didn’t even like it when Oneida brought books of fairy tales home from the library.

“How you come up with these, then?”

“I—a friend.”

“A friend.”

“Mercy Sanchez.”

“This Mercy, she blood? Kin?” she added, when Oneida’s confusion showed.

“No.”

“She tell you how to work em?”

“No.” Should she break her promise?

“Somethin you hidin. Can’t be keepin secrets from Big Mama.”

Her picture was there, on the altar. “Mercy said they came from the Blue Lady.”

“‘Blue Lady.’ That what you call her.” Big Mama’s broad forehead smoothed out, getting rid of wrinkles Oneida had assumed were always there. “Well, she certainly is. The Blue Lady.”

Oneida realized why no one but Mizz Curtis and Dad had come to her rescue when the white men tried to arrest her: for the Blue Lady to appear in person, you were supposed to call her, using her real name. Which Mercy and Emilio had never known.

“What do you call her?”

“Yemaya.”

Oneida practiced saying it to herself while she poured the iced tea and stirred in three spoons of sugar for each of them. Yeh-mah-yah. It was strange, yet easy. Easy to say. Easy to remember. Yeh-mah-yah.

She told Big Mama everything.

“Hmmp.” Big Mama took a long drink of tea. “You think you able to do what I tell you to?”

Oneida nodded. Of course she could.

Big Mama closed the curtains and lit a white candle in a jar, putting a metal tube over its top. Holes in the sides let through spots of light the shape of six-pointed stars. She made Oneida fill a huge shell with water from the bathroom and sprinkled it on both their heads. Oneida brought the chair so Big Mama could sit in front of Yemaya’s altar. She watched while Big Mama twirled the

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necklace of watermelon seeds around in the basket's lid and let it go.

"Awright. Look like Yemaya say I be teachin you."

"Can I—"

"Four questions a day. That's all Ima answer. Otherwise you jus haveta listen closer to what I say."

Oneida decided to ask anyway. "What were you doing?"

"Divinin. Special way a speakin, more important, a hearin what Yemaya an Shango wanna tell me."

"Will I learn that? Who's Shango?"

"Shango Yemaya's son. We start tomorrow. See how much you able to take in." Big Mama held up her hand, pink palm out. "One more question is all you got for today. Might wanna use it later."

They left the bedroom to hang the clean laundry from the clothesline, under trellises heavy with blooming vines. In the machine on the back porch behind them, a new load sloshed away. Royal was watching tv; the rest of the kids were over at the park. Oneida felt the way she often did after discussing adult topics with her parents. It was a combination of coziness and exhilaration, as if she were tucked safe and warm beneath the feathers of a high-soaring bird. A soft breeze lifted the legs of her pajama bottoms, made the top flap its arms as if it were flying.



Mornings were for housework. Oneida wasted one whole question finding that out.

Sundays they went to the Detroit Institute of Arts. Not to church. "God ain't in there. Only reason to go to church is so people don't talk bad about you," Big Mama told them. "Anything they gone say about me they already said it." They got dressed up the same as everyone else in

the neighborhood, nodded and waved at the families who had no feud with Big Mama, even exchanging remarks with those walking their direction, toward Cass. But then they headed north by themselves.

Big Mama ended each trip through the exhibits in the museum's tea room. She always ordered a chicken salad sandwich with the crusts cut off. Ivy Joe and Luemma sat beside her, drinking a black cow apiece. Royal drew on all their napkins, floppy-eared rabbits and mean-looking monsters.

Oneida's favorite part to go to was the gift shop. Mainly because they had so many beautiful books, but also because she could touch things in there. Own them, if she paid. Smaller versions of the paintings on the walls, of the huge weird statues that resembled nothing on Earth except themselves.

The second Sunday, she bought Mercy's birthday card there. It was a postcard, actually, but bigger than most. The French lady on the front had sad, soft eyes like Mercy's. On the back, Oneida told her how she was learning "lots of stuff." It would have been nice to say more; not on a postcard, though, where anyone would be able to read it.

In fact, in the hour a day Big Mama consented to teach her, Oneida couldn't begin to tackle half what she wanted to know. Mostly she memorized: prayers; songs; long, often incomprehensible stories.

Big Mama gave her a green scarf to wrap the seeds in. She said to leave them on Yemaya's altar since Oneida shared a room with the three other girls. After that, she seemed to forget all about them. They were right there, but she never seemed to notice them. Her own necklace had disappeared. Oneida asked where it was three days in a row.

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“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” Big Mama answered every time.

Oneida saved up a week’s worth of questions. She wrote them on a pad of paper, pale purple with irises along the edges, which she’d bought at the gift shop:

1. Is your necklace in the house?
2. Is it in this room?
3. Is it in your closet?
4. Under the bed?
5. In your dresser?

And so on, with lines drawn from one to another to show which to ask next, depending on whether the response was yes or no. On a separate page she put bonus questions in case Big Mama was so forthcoming some of the others became unnecessary. These included why her brother had hardly any chores, and what was the name of Yemaya’s husband, who had never turned up in any story.

But when Big Mama called Oneida upstairs, she wound up not using any of them, because there on the bed was the basket again, open, with the necklace inside. “Seem like you learnt somethin about when to hole your peace,” said Big Mama. “I know you been itchin to get your hands on my *eleke*.” That was an African word for necklace. “Fact that you managed to keep quiet about it one entire week mean you ready for this.”

It was only Oneida’s seeds; she recognized the scarf they were wrapped in. Was she going to have to put them somewhere else, now? Reluctantly, she set her pad on the bed and took them out of Big Mama’s hands, trying to hide her disappointment.

“Whynchou open it?”

Inside was another eleke, almost identical to Big Mama's. The threads that bound the black and brown seeds together were whiter, the necklace itself not quite as long.

Hers. Her eleke. Made out of Mercy's gift, the magic seeds from the Blue Lady.

"So. Ima teach you how to ask questions with one a two answers, yes or no. 'Bout what you *gotta* know. What you *gotta*. An another even more important lesson: why you better off not tryin to fine out every little thing you think you wanna."

Oneida remembered her manners. "Thank you, Big Mama."

"You welcome, baby." Big Mama stood and walked to the room's other end, to the mirror between her two altars. "Come on over here an get a good look." Stepping aside, she pulled the black cloth off the mirror.

The reflection seemed darker than it should be. Oneida barely saw herself. Then Big Mama edged in behind her, shining. By that light, Oneida's thick black braids stood out so clearly every single hair escaping them cast its own shadow on the glass.

"Mos mirrors don't show the difference that sharp." Big Mama pushed Oneida's bangs down against her forehead. "Folks will notice it anyhow."

Oneida glanced back over her shoulder. No glow. Regular daylight. Ahead again. A radiant woman and a ghostly little girl.

This was the second magic Oneida had ever seen. Mercy better believe me when I tell her, she thought. It was as if Big Mama was a vampire, or more accurately, its exact opposite. "How—" She stopped herself, not quite in time.

"S'all right. Some questions you need an answer." But she stayed silent for several seconds.

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“More you learn, brighter you burn. You know, it’s gonna show. People react all kinda ways to that. They shun you, or they forget how to leave you alone. Wanna ask you all kinda things, then complain about the cost.

“What you gotta remember, Oneida, is this: there is always a price. *Always* a price. Only things up in the air is who gonna pay it, an how much.”



No Mercy.

When Oneida got home from Detroit, her friend was gone. Had been the whole time. Not moved out, but run away. Mizz Nichols didn’t know where. Florida, maybe, if she had left to take care of Emilio like she was saying.

Mizz Nichols gave Oneida back the birthday card. Which Mercy had never seen.

The white people’s house next to Mizz Curtis’s was almost finished being built. Everyone was supposed to keep away from it, especially Cousin Alphonse. While she’d been in Detroit, unable to watch him, he had jumped into the big basement hole and broken his collarbone. Even with his arm in a sling, Aunt Elise had barely been able to keep him away. Why? Was it the smell of fresh cut wood, or the way you could see through the walls and how everything inside them fit together? Or just the thought that it was somewhere he wasn’t allowed to go?

No one wanted any trouble with white people. Whatever the cause of Cousin Alphonse’s latest fascination, Oneida fought it hard. She took him along when she walked Limoges to Vacation Bible School and managed to keep him occupied on Lincoln’s playground all morning. After school, they walked all the way to the river, stopping at Topoll’s to buy sausage sandwiches for lunch.

So successful was this expedition that they were a little late getting home. Oneida had to carry Limoges eight blocks on her back. Aunt Elise was already parked in front and talking angrily to Dad in the tv room. It was all right, though. She was just mad about the house. She thought the people building it should put a big fence around it. She thought one of their kids would get killed there before long. She thanked Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Oneida had enough sense to keep the others away from it.

But after dark, Oneida went there without telling anyone. Alone.

Below the hole where the picture window would go, light from the street lamp made a lopsided square. She opened up her green scarf and lifted her eleke in both hands.

Would it tell her what she wanted to know? What would be the price?

Twirl it in the air. Let it fall. Count the seeds: so many with their pointed ends up, so many down. Compare the totals.

The answer was no. No running away for Oneida. She should stay here.

Her responsibility for Cousin Alphonse—that had to be the reason. The Blue Lady made sure kids got taken care of.

Would Mercy return, then?

Yes.

When? Before winter?

No.

Oneida asked and asked. With each response her heart and hands grew colder. Not at Christmas. Not next summer. Not next autumn.

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When? And where was she? There were ways to ask other questions, with answers besides yes or no, but Big Mama said she was too young to use those.

Finally she gave up guessing and flung the necklace aside. No one should see her this way. Crying like a baby. She was a big girl, biggest on the block.

“Yemaya. Yemaya.” Why was she saying that, the Blue Lady’s name? Oneida had never had a chance to tell Mercy what it was. It wouldn’t do any good to say it now, when no one was in danger. She hoped.

Eventually, she was able to stop. She wiped her eyes with the green scarf. On the floor, scattered around the necklace, were several loose watermelon seeds. But her eleke was unbroken.

Yemaya was trying to tell Oneida something. Eleven seeds. Eleven years? Age eleven? It was an answer. She clung to that idea. An answer, even if she couldn’t understand it.

On the phone, Big Mama only instructed her to get good grades in school, do what her mama and daddy said, and bring the seeds with her, and they would see.

But the following summer was the riots. No visit to Big Mama’s.

So it was two years later that Mom and Dad drove down Davenport. The immediate neighborhood, though isolated by the devastation surrounding it, had survived more or less intact.

Big Mama’s block looked exactly the same. The vines surrounding her house hung thick with heavy golden blooms. Ivy Joe and Luemma reported that at the riot’s height, the last week of July, streams of US Army tanks had turned aside at Woodward, splitting apart to grind along Stimson and Selden, joining up again on Second.

Fires and sirens had also flowed around them; screams and shots were audible, but just barely.

Thanks to Big Mama. Everyone knew that.

Oneida didn't understand why this made the people who lived there mad. Many of them wouldn't even walk on the same side of the street as Big Mama any more. It was weirder than the way the girls at Oneida's school acted.

Being almost always alone, that was the price she'd paid for having her questions answered. It didn't seem like much. Maybe there'd be worse costs, later, after she learned other, more important things. Besides, some day Mercy would come back.

The next afternoon, her lessons resumed. She had wrapped the eleven extra seeds in the same scarf as her eleke. When Big Mama saw them, she held out her hand and frowned.

"Yeah. Right." Big Mama brought out her own eleke. "Ima ask Yemaya why she wanna give you these, what they for. Watch me."

Big Mama had finally agreed to show her how to ask questions with answers other than yes or no.

Big Mama swirled her necklace around in the basket top. On the altar, the silver-covered candle burned steadily. But the room brightened and darkened quickly as the sun appeared and disappeared behind fast-moving clouds and wind-whipped leaves.

"It start out the same," Big Mama said, "lif it up an let it go." With a discreet rattle, the necklace fell. "Now we gotta figure out where the sharp ends pointin," she said. "But we dividin it in four directions: north, south, east, an west."

Oneida wrote the totals in her notebook: two, four, five, and five.

"An we do it four times for every question."

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Below the first line of numbers came four, one, seven, and four; then six, zero, two, and eight; and three, three, seven, and three.

“Now add em up.”

North was fifteen, south was eight, east was twenty-one, and west was twenty.

Big Mama shut her eyes a moment and nodded. “Soun good. That mean—” The brown eyes opened again, sparkling. “Yemaya say ‘What you *think* you do with seeds? Plant em!’”

Oneida learned that the numbers referred to episodes in those long, incomprehensible stories she’d had to memorize. She practiced interpreting them. Where should she plant the seeds? All around the edges of her neighborhood. When? One year and a day from now. Who could she help her? Only Alphonse. How much would it cost? Quite a bit, but it would be worth it. Within the Wallamelons’ reach, no one she loved would be hurt, ever again.



Two more years. The house built on the vacant lot was once again empty. Its first and only tenants fled when the vines Oneida planted went wild, six months after they moved in. The house was hers, now, no matter what the mortgage said.

Oneida even had a key, stolen from the safebox that remained on the porch long after the real estate company lost all hope of selling a haunted house in a haunted neighborhood. She unlocked the side door, opening and shutting it on slightly reluctant hinges. The family that had briefly lived here had left their curtains. In the living room, sheer white fabric stirred gently when she opened a window for fresh air. And leaned out of it, waiting.

Like the lace of a giantess, leaves covered the house-front in a pattern of repeating hearts. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, sibling plants, self-sown from those she'd first planted around the perimeter, arched from phone pole to lamp post, encircling her home. Keeping it safe. So Mercy could return.

At first Mom had wanted to move out. But nowhere else Negroes could live in this town would be any better, Dad said. Besides, it wasn't all that bad. Even Aunt Elise admitted Cousin Alphonse was calmer, better off, here behind the vines. Mom eventually agreed to stay put and see if Dad's promotion ever came through.

That was taking a long time. Oneida was secretly glad. It would be so much harder to do what she had to do if her family moved. To come here night after night, as her eleke had shown her she must. To be patient. Till—

Then.

She saw her. Walking up the street. As Yemaya had promised. And this was the night, and Oneida was here for it, her one chance.

She waved. Mercy wasn't looking her way, though. She kept on, headed for Oneida's house, it looked like.

Oneida jerked at the handle of the front door. It smacked hard against the chain she'd forgotten to undo. She slammed it shut again, slid the chain free, and stumbled down the steps.

Mercy was halfway up the block. The noise must have startled her. No way Oneida'd be able to catch up. "Mercy! Mercy Sanchez!" She ran hopelessly, sobbing.

Mercy stopped. She turned. Suddenly uncertain, Oneida slowed. Would Mercy have cut her hair that way? Worn that black leather jacket?

But who else could it be?

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“Please, please!” Oneida had no idea what she was saying, or who she was saying it to. She was running again and then she was there, hugging her, and it *was* her. Mercy. Home.

Mercy. Acting like it was no big deal to show up again after disappearing for four years.

“I tole you,” she insisted, sitting cross-legged on the floorboards of the empty living room. One small white candle flickered between them, supplementing the street-light. “Emilio axed me could I come help him. He was havin trouble...” She trailed off. “It was this one group of kids hasslin his friends...”

“All you said before you left was about how the Blue Lady—”

“Neida, mean to say you ain’t forgot *none* a them games we played?!” Scornfully.

The price had been paid.

It was as if Oneida were swimming, completely underwater, and putting out her hand and touching Mercy, who swore up and down she was not wet. Who refused to admit that the Blue Lady was real, that she, at least, had seen her. When Oneida tried to show her some of what she’d learned, Mercy nodded once, then interrupted, asking if she had a smoke.

Oneida got a cigarette from the cupboard where she kept her offerings.

“So how long are you here for?” It sounded awful, what Mom would say to some distant relative she’d never met before.

“Dunno. Emilio gonna be outta circulation—things in Miami different now. Here, too, hunh? Seem like we on the set a some monster movie.”

Oneida would explain about that later. “What about your mom?” Even worse, the kind of question a parole officer might ask.

Mercy snorted. “She ain’t wanna have nothin to do with him *or* me. For years.”

“Mizz Nichols—” Oneida paused. Had Mercy heard?

“Yeah, I know. Couldn make the funeral.” She stubbed out her cigarette on the bottom of her high-top, then rolled the butt between her right thumb and forefinger, straightening it. “Dunno why I even came here. Dumb. Probably the first place anybody look. If they wanna fine me.” Mercy glanced up, and her eyes were exactly the same, deep and sad. As the ocean. As the sky.

“They won’t.” The shadow of a vine’s stray tendril caressed Mercy’s cheek. “They won’t.”

A disclaimer: the system of divination Big Mama teaches to Oneida is my own invention. It borrows heavily from West Africa’s Ifa, and it also owes a bit to China’s “I Ching.” To the best of my knowledge, however, it is not part of any authentic tradition.

The Raineses'



A bell hung below the back porch. It was as big as Annette. She wanted to ring it, to shove the dirty, cobwebby metal hard enough to swing it; back and forth, back and forth. It looked like it would make a lovely clang. But it was only for emergencies. Like a fire, or if somebody broke a leg. Gransie said. So the bell stayed still under the dark, creaky wood, over the drifted scraps of last year's fallen leaves, half in cool shadow, half in lake-reflected light.

Walking over the bell, you could go lots of ways. The porch went all around the house, though it changed in nature several times during its journey. To the left it widened into a verandah furnished with dusty, deserted deck chairs. To the far right was a door into a long glass passage, which, as Annette realized one rainy and intuitive afternoon, was really the porch with windows on. It led to the front hall and the archery range.

But usually she went in the doorway that was right, but not so very far right as that. This led to steps that she had

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promised never to go down, and to another choice: left or right? Right was a tiny yellow room, crowded with narrow wooden chairs, a lace-covered table, and lots of cupboards with glass behind glass doors. So most of the time she went left, into the big broad kitchen.

The kitchen sparkled blue and white. Painted cupboards gleamed, floor to ceiling. The linoleum was skating smooth. On a little platform two tall-backed benches curled up together over a pale blue table-top. That's where Gransie was, with her breakfast.

Gransie had made Annette her Maypo. Steam rose up from the solid, green-rimmed bowl on the table. Gransie always made her hot cereal for breakfast, even in summertime.

“Your hands clean?”

Annette nodded. They had to be; she hadn't done anything yet. Just run out into the morning to make sure that it was there.

“Let's see, then.”

She held her hands out for inspection, pink palms up.

“The other side. All right. You be sure and wash em, though, after you're through eatin. Specially if you're plannin on playin inside again. I don't want you messin up with none of Miz Raines's things.”

Butter melted in her mouth, mixed with cream and sugar. “I want to go swim. In the lake. Can I?”

Gransie frowned. “You better wait. After an hour you can go in. I'll let you know. Stay where I can see you until then.”

“Yes, Gransie.” Annette finished her cereal and washed her bowl and hands in the low kitchen sink, then headed back outside. This time she went through the “morning” room, out onto the verandah. Cement steps swept down

to the lawn, cradled by fieldstone arms. Annette walked along the curving stones. The sun struck through distant trees, making pretty patterns on the big white house and the empty, weedy lawn. At the end of the steps she looked around, deciding what to do. The rose arbor beckoned. She jumped to the ground and ran obediently toward it.

The rose arbor was an arching trellis of soft grey and white wood. The roses were just beginning. Later in the summer they smelled so sweet and sent spent petals drifting down, covering the seats. But now they were secret, dark green and closed.

Annette picked one. She sat down and tried to peel back the first layer with her nails.

"It won't work. What you're trying to find isn't in there, yet."

Annette looked up. It was a tall, grey-clad woman with straight brown hair pulled back in a bun. She had a white scarf around her shoulders. She was one of them from next door.

"I'm not trying to find the flower," Annette explained. "I'm trying to find what makes the flower."

"A budding botanist."

"What's that, a botanist?"

"A botanist is someone who studies plants." The lady took the other seat. She did it without brushing aside the twigs and leaves lying there. "Someone who dedicates their whole life to the study of plants."

"Unh-unh," said Annette. "That's different than what I want."

"Really?" said the lady, sounding like grown-ups always did when they thought that she was cute. "What exactly is it that you want, then? Do you know?"

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Annette thought how to say it. “I want to know what makes things. What makes everything happen.”

The lady laughed. Not in a mean way, but she laughed. “A little colored philosopher-girl. How fine. Things have truly changed. And we actually are related?”

There were layers of pink, packed tight under the green. They were thin, pressed way down from what they were going to be. She pulled one petal off, held it up to look through at the sun. The lady was gone.



She had on her swimsuit. Gransie said it was okay. As she walked, tiny wrinkles of blue and green stretched and bunched together in a way that pleased her. This was the favorite swimsuit she'd ever had, with seahorses like in Daddy's aquarium.

Dirt steps boxed with big boards led down to the lake. It was called Maple Lake. Most of the trees were on the other end. This side had reeds and lily pads and that strange, hollow grass that squeaked when you pulled it apart.

She went out to the end of the dock and waved up at the house. Gransie waved back from the kitchen window. She was not supposed to go in past the bleach bottle buoy. Maybe later Uncle Troy would come by and take her out to fish.

She sat down, careful of splinters in the weathered wood. She slipped her bare feet into the dark green water. It was cold. Maybe she would just sit there with her feet in for a while. An enormous lavender dragonfly streaked past her head to land glittering on the tip of a nearby reed. The reed, bent under the insect's weight, arched and quivered in the breeze.

The sound of a car engine swooped up the driveway and shut off. A car door slammed. She looked up. Uncle Troy was taking a suitcase out of the trunk of his car. It must be some of the Raineses. She couldn't see who. She waited, swirling the water with her toes. They would be down here soon, if it was anybody nice. She wasn't supposed to get in their way.

Footsteps on the dock. "Annette, is that really you?" Miss Margaret came up and sat down beside her.

"Course it is," Annette said. Grown-ups.

"I didn't recognize you; you've grown so big since the last time I saw you."

"Thanks," Annette said. Trying to be polite she added, "You look like you've grown too." That wasn't quite right; it sounded like she was calling Miss Margaret fat. She didn't know what to say to make things better, so she shut up.

Miss Margaret was quiet too, for a while, then went on. "Well, I *have*. I've been at college for a whole year, now. But Mama still fussed about me staying in Chicago all alone while she and Daddy went to meet Bruce in New York. So we compromised. Do you know what that means, Annette?" Annette shook her head no. "It means we neither of us got what we really wanted. She didn't get to drag me to New York and dangle me in front of all her phoney-baloney friends, and I didn't get to stay in Chicago with Roger."

"Who's Roger?"

"Oh, he's someone *very* special! He's a painter, Annette." Miss Margaret moved her round, serious face closer to show how important this information was.

"Pictures?"

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“Yes. Wonderful pictures. Oh, Annette, maybe he’ll come here, maybe you’ll get to meet him. Mama didn’t say he couldn’t. She and Daddy and Bruce won’t be up till the end of next week, at the earliest.”

Good. She still had time to explore the house. She looked up at the sky. Hazy clouds melted imperceptibly into the blue. Maybe tomorrow it would rain, and she wouldn’t feel so bad for staying inside.

Uncle Troy came down the stairs. His white T-shirt had little dark spots of sweat around the collar and big ones under his arms. “Your bags all up in the Rose Room, Miss Margaret. If there’s anything else?”

“Not at the moment, Troy. I might ask you to go into town to pick some things up at the drugstore; I packed in kind of a hurry, and I’m not sure what I missed.”

“If it’s all right with you, then, I’ll just use the boat and take Annette out on the lake.”

“Fishing? Wrong time of day for that, isn’t it?”

“Well...”

“Tell you what, save the fishing for evening. See if Aunt Nancy’s got anything for you to do. I’m sure she can find something. This place is getting to be a wreck.”

“Yes, ma’am. But Annette...”

“Oh. Well, Annette, you’re going swimming, aren’t you?”

Annette nodded. There was nothing more to say. She slipped into the water and dog-paddled away.



The gentle mutter of rain through the eaves troughs woke her. Her room was high up, a turquoise-colored place full of bunks and cots. Lots of people used to stay there and help out around the place. But now there was

only Gransie, and sometimes Uncle Troy drove over from Paw Paw.

Gransie stayed downstairs as much as she could because of her rheumatism. So during her visits Annette had the whole room to herself. She slept in the top bunk, opposite the window.

Scorning the knotty pine ladder, she jumped down onto the sea-grey carpet, then crossed to the window seat. The sash was already up. All she had to do was rest her forearms on the white enameled sill, press her forehead against the dark, rusty screen, and breathe.

Cool. The scent of grass, of wet clover. The exhalations of worms, writhing in the earth. And closer, sad, pungent mildew rose into the air, remembering itself from other rainy days.

Clouds hung low over the lake, almost seemed as though they would touch the trees. The rain would be here for a while, for all day probably.

She put on her clothes: red corduroys and her black-and-yellow-checked cowboy shirt. There were stars sewn over the pockets and pearl snaps instead of buttons. A shirt to have adventures in.

She went down to the back porch and stood over the bell. The rain was louder here, falling in fine streams from the porch roof, splashing on the sidewalk. Breakfast smelled good. She washed her hands and considered how to approach the day's project: top to bottom, or bottom to top? Miss Margaret wasn't up yet, so downstairs first, she decided.

After they ate Gransie headed to the little yellow room, so she went into the "morning" one. Bare boards stretched before her. There used to be a big pretty rug here, with so many colors she didn't know all their names.

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There was still a dark spot on the floor where it used to keep off the sun.

The wall to her left was made up of glass doors with sparkly handles, so that one was not worth checking. But to her right square panels of wood promised great things. She pressed along the trim with patient, sensitive fingers. There would be a whir, a click. Something would give way, and a new aspect of the house would be revealed, mysterious facet of a familiar stone.

She came to the end of the wall without discovering anything. Maybe higher up...but she couldn't reach all the way unless she had a stool. She would have to see about that later.

The bathroom next. Black and yellow, like her shirt. The tile gleamed royally. The shiny black toilet was just a little bit scary.

"Did you find it yet?" The boy leaned against the sink's butter-yellow pedestal.

"No," she answered. "I just started. Is it in here?"

"I'm going to teach you a song."

"Okay." She had learned from past experience, it was best to let them take the lead. Some questions they just ignored.

"It's a very bad song. Promise you won't tell anybody that I taught it to you, or I'll get in trouble."

She felt a thrill of guilt as she hunkered down next to him, shoes scuffing damp echoes from the floor. "Promise."

"It goes like this:

*Well, it's wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the corps (in the corps), in the corps (in the corps);
Well, it's wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the good old actor's co-o-orps!"*

Annette loved it. The boy's voice went down real low when he sang in the core, in the core. Then it swooped all around like a circus band on the last word. Very satisfying. Too bad it was bad. It would be a wonderful song to sing real loud while marching around. She learned all the verses.



In the library she pulled all the books from the shelves one by one, then put them back. Nothing moved or turned or revolved. Nothing lurked behind the red leather couch except dust and old chew toys left from Turk's last sojourn. The Raineses didn't bring him up much anymore. She asked Gransie why as she ate her bologna sandwich in the kitchen.

"Gettin old," Gransie said. "Same as me, he just doesn't want to move around much anymore. Eat your salad; it's good for you."

Annette pulled a pickled bean from the crystal bowl next to her plate. One was enough, she decided, as the vinegar bit its way up through her sinuses, bringing tears to her eyes. A sip of Kool-Aid, a bite of bologna and mayonnaise, and she was all better.

"Gransie, can I have a stool?"

"A stool? What you want a stool for?"

How much to explain? "I want to reach up on the walls, in the morning room. Up where that pledge sticks out."

"The pledge? You mean the *ledge*, don't you? Where they keep the keys?" She nodded. "What on earth do you want up there?"

Annette paused. Should she tell? There was no other way to get what she wanted. "I want to find a secret passageway," she said.

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Gransie snorted, pushed herself away from the table, and rose ponderously. “Child, however do you manage to fill your head with such nonsense? Must be all those books you read.”

Annette lowered her eyes in shame. It was a silly idea. She was a silly girl to have had it.

Metal legs scraped lightly on the linoleum. She looked up. Gransie was pulling the white enameled step-stool from its place next to the fridge. “That room could use some dustin anyway, I guess.” She reached into a drawer for an apron. “Now don’t you go touchin any Miz Raines’s things, Annette. She forgave you over that leopard, but if you ever break a real expensive piece, I don’t know what’ll happen. Some of those things are real nice. Worth more than I make in a month.” She tied the apron on Annette, folding it up at the middle so it wasn’t too long.

“Now.” Annette stood still for inspection. “Go get me a head-scarf,” said Gransie.

She shot up the stairs and almost collided with Miss Margaret, talking and laughing on the telephone. “Sorry,” said Annette. Miss Margaret patted her on the head to show that it was all right and went on talking.

“Honestly, Roger,” she said to the receiver. “You really should come up. What does it take to convince you? It’s the most frightful old place—you’d love it. It was actually a stop on the Underground Railroad. Just a moment, dear. Annette, is there something you wanted?”

Annette realized she had no reason to be standing there besides her utter amazement. She shook her head and continued slowly down the hall to her room.

“Oh, that was just our maid’s little granddaughter. The cutest thing. Yes, Nancy’s been with us practically forever, like family really....” Annette heard Margaret’s voice

trailing off behind her as she walked away. But there was nothing more about the Underground Railroad. She tried to remember all about it, what she knew from school. It was how they got colored people out of the South, away from Slavery. White people helped the colored. They had to; it must have been a lot of work to build so many tunnels and lay all that track.

She rummaged in her drawer for several minutes before she remembered what she was supposed to be looking for. A scarf. Here was one, white with yellow flowers. She carried it downstairs, deep in thought.

Gransie tied the scarf over her pigtails to keep off the dust. She grumbled that the scarf was so light and would surely show the dirt, but she didn't send Annette back for another. She gave her two cloths and a bottle of lemon oil and showed her what to do.

The panels did look much nicer after they'd been polished. She liked the candy shop smell she spread around herself. And best of all she had a perfect excuse to press and finger every inch of wood on the walls. Only, there was no response.

She had to leave the stool behind when she went into the yellow room. It just wouldn't fit. All that glass. It made Annette nervous, since the leopard broke. She was very careful, really she was, but still she dropped the goblet.

Not because she got startled. Nothing was sudden like that; first there was a dry, sweet, scent, like burning flowers, and then a golden flame. The dark lady showed up slowly, like a shadow growing from the light of the candle that she held. There was nothing sudden or scary about the way she came or how she looked. But looking, Annette forgot to hold onto the glass. It fell and rolled along

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the white lace table cloth, turning over and over till it came to the other end, to where the lady stood.

The candle wavered and sank, so Annette could see the lady's smooth, dark face. Not one that she had ever seen before. Her chin was sharp and pointy, like Annette's.

"You the maid?" Her voice was sharp and pointy, too.

"No."

"You live here, though, don't you?"

"No, I'm on a visit.

"How long?"

"All summer, if I want. Mommy says—"

The lady interrupted. "How long?"

"The end of August, when school's gonna—"

"How long? *How long?* *HOW*—" The lady stopped herself from shouting and looked down at the table. "Rufus gave his word. It ain't broke. It ain't. Yet." She raised her candle and looked at Annette again. "You come on along. I can show you."

When Annette got to that end of the table, the lady and the light were gone. But she could still see by the windows. Like the lady said, it was all right. The only marks on the goblet were ones that were supposed to be there: flowers, carved twisting up the curving sides.

Gransie grumbled, but Annette was able to go over the kitchen without getting too much in the way of dinner. Miss Margaret had a tray in her room. After they ate, Annette had to bring it down.

Then she tried the archery range. There weren't many possibilities there, so she finished quickly and went to bed. As she knelt to pray she remembered what Gransie was saying as she left Annette to her task that afternoon. Grown-ups always said strange things, especially as they got older and closer to being one of them. Like Grand-

father. But this stuck in her head and went along with the prayers. She had said something like in church: "Not mine, but Thine, oh Lord." Then: "But still, it's such a shame. For the sake of the child alone, it's a sin, and a cryin shame."

A cryin shame. Not mine, but thine. Oh, lord.



It rained again next morning. Miss Margaret ate in the kitchen with Annette and Gransie. She had cornflakes. She was up early so Uncle Troy could take her to the station to meet her friend.

So Annette could explore upstairs.

The Red Room. It was so pretty. She always wanted to sleep in here. Once, she did. It was in winter, and this room had a fireplace that still worked. She checked there first, running her hands over the cool, rough stone. No. And the closet was nothing but a closet. Disappointed, she solaced herself with the feel of the silky red curtains hanging down over the bed. They rustled, whispering of beauty. She rubbed her face in them, wished she could wear them, nothing but red silk, like a lady, a queen.

"So. This is what comes of recklessness."

It was a man. One of them? Another new one? Or was Uncle Troy back already with Miss Margaret and her friend? Couldn't be.

The man smiled under his curly moustache. He walked away from her, toward the fireplace, then turned and looked back. He wore funny old clothes, like an ad for an ice-cream parlor. Them. "Well," he said, "at least you are a fairly good-looking pickaninny. If I do say so myself. Rachel was true unto me, and I was true unto my word."

"What's a pickaninny?"

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“That you can see me at all is proof, I suppose.” The man frowned. “You haven’t seen *her*, have you? Rachel? Rachel?” His voice faded and he was gone.



How come they were around so much right now? She searched the other rooms listlessly, strangely disturbed. The one with the green wallpaper, called the Nursery. The Rose Room, where Miss Margaret’s bags still waited to be unpacked. The Study. The Master Bedroom, white and untouchable. All were void of mystery. She gave up and retreated to her room. As she put her hand on the doorknob she suddenly thought, “It might be in here.”

She went straight to the window seat. With growing sureness she searched along the woodwork, pressing, pressing... Ah. A small section of trim moved under her touch. She looked around the room. No dim, dusty openings, no magically appearing stairways. The change was much smaller and closer. Below the seat’s blue-green cushion a wide crack showed in the enameled wood. Annette put the cushion on the floor and jammed her fingers into the crack. She pulled. A board flipped up. Two boards.

She was looking in someone’s hidey-hole. Nice, though not as exciting as a secret passage. She reached into the darkness and pulled out a wooden box, tied around with pale blue ribbon. Underneath the box was a fan like ladies used in church. Only this fan was made of cloth. Silk, deep red silk, like the curtains in the Red Room.

She untied and opened the box. Papers. She could read print. But these were mostly letters. The writing was sharp and difficult looking, not the round, loose script she had sneaked a look at in a third-grader’s book. Regretfully, she set the letters aside.

Underneath was something mostly printed, with words and numbers written in. The printing was fancy, like on the cover of Gransie's bible. She decided the short word at the top was d-e-e-d, deed.

A deed was what you did, if you were a boy scout or a shining knight. Maybe it would be exciting to read, but the alphabets were all twiney and hooked together, and anyway, what about those numbers? What would they have to do with an adventure?

"Lot 392...16 circle East...by 90 circle South...3 chains..." It didn't make sense. She scanned the page for what did. "I, Ruff-us Raines, do grant, war-rant and con-" con-something.

The word Rachel appeared several times. Like the man had said. She knew how that name looked, print or cursive. It was her own. Annette Rachel Hawkes.



The rain stopped around noon.

Miss Margaret was back for lunch. She ate on the verandah with her friend, Roger. He had big yellow teeth. Annette didn't like him, but that didn't count. He was going to stay in the Red Room.

Uncle Troy and Gransie and Annette ate in the kitchen, after Miss Margaret and her friend. While they were still having their dessert Miss Margaret stuck her head in and asked Uncle Troy if he would mind terribly getting the boat ready to go out. He said no, of course.

Annette went with him, for lack of anything better to do. The papers were still up in her room, in their box. Later, when Gransie wasn't so busy, she would ask her to look at them. They were probably even important. They just weren't a train station.

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The boathouse was spooky in a nice way. The boat made big booming sounds as Uncle Troy lowered it to the water. The sun came out while they were still inside, shining in little star-shapes through holes in the ramshackle walls. They sagged so much that Uncle Troy had to duck as he rowed out under the lake side.

Miss Margaret had changed into a pretty white dress. She was smiling and said that Annette could come along. Annette ran back to the boathouse for a life jacket. They smelled bad, but Gransie wouldn't let her on the lake without one, even though she could swim.

The sun was all the way out to stay. Annette relaxed in the warmth, watched the water lilies unfolding in light that the rain had newly purified. She was happy. So she sang.

*“Well, it’s wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the corps (in the corps), in the—”*

“Annette!” Miss Margaret snapped. “What’s that you’re singing? Where did you learn that song?”

She had promised. She couldn't tell her. She felt really bad, since Miss Margaret had let her come in the boat.

“Speak up, child.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Roger. “Insubordination in the ranks?”

Margaret laughed. It didn't sound like she thought anything was funny. “Not that it matters, only it seemed sort of...creepy.”

“What seemed creepy?”

“That song she was singing. I suppose she could have learned it anywhere. It’s just that I associate it so strongly with Cousin Freddy; I guess because he taught it to me when we were kids here.”

“So what?” said Roger. “So he taught it to the help, too.”

"Hardly," said Miss Margaret. "He died three years before Annette was born."

"Oh."

"As I said, it's not important. I just...wondered."

"I taught her," said Uncle Troy suddenly from where he sat rowing. "Mr. Fred taught it to me and I taught it to her."

Everybody in the boat stared at him. Miss Margaret and her friend looked like they had forgotten he was even there. Annette stared too, because Uncle Troy hardly ever talked unless you asked him something. And he never told lies.

Without another word from anyone the boat returned to shore.



After supper Annette sat at the top of the stairs, looking down. Down. How could she have been so stupid? The train station was *underground*. That's why they called it the *Underground Railroad*. And here she'd been looking for the entrance on the second floor.

The problem was, she wasn't allowed to go into the cellar.

She always tried to be good.

Gransie was with some ladies from church. They were writing invitations to the ice-cream social. They wouldn't let her help, even though she colored real good. And she couldn't show the papers to Gransie while she was having company.

There was nothing else to do.

There was no place else to look.

She could hear Roger and Miss Margaret talking on the landing. He said, "Parrish is a fine illustrator. But

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that's all he is." She said, "I suppose you're right. Still, it's so pretty."

They must be talking about the girl on the swing, Annette decided. Annette didn't know who the girl was. Not one of them, like a lot of pictures in the house.

"Pretty. A pointless, stupid word. A shallow compliment. I, I must confess, *I* am drawn to—the depths." There was a heavy silence, then the sound of clothes rubbing together. Kissing noises. "Tonight?"

"Roger, I—"

"You can't mean to make me wait. Maggie, I came here on trust. I came all the way from Chicago, tourist class. Maggie, my dear, you...you gave me your *word*."

Maggie was Miss Margaret. Had to be. No one else was there.

"I...Roger, I know, and my word means so much to me—"

More kissing noises.

"Nothing has changed, has it, darling? No, I can feel it. You are still the same true, dear, loyal, trustworthy soul. Oh, Maggie—"

"All right, Roger."

"You *will* come?"

"Yes. It's sure to be safe. Nancy never comes upstairs any more, and Annette will be on the other side of the house, in the old servant's quarters. I'll come."



The next day was disappointingly sunny. Neither Miss Margaret nor Roger seemed to want to do much with their breakfast. They came down, long after Annette had enjoyed her Maypo, and moped around the morning room. Gransie suggested a game of croquet, but Roger thought

the lawn needed cutting, and Uncle Troy wasn't going to be around till later.

After a while Annette saw them heading for the rose arbor. She wondered if the lady from next door would be there. She seemed to show up there mostly, maybe because her house burned down so long ago there were trees growing up inside the place where the basement used to be.

It was Thursday. Time to change the beds. Annette offered to do it and save Gransie's rheumatism from the stairs. Gransie took her to the linen closet off the cellar steps.

"Gransie," she asked. "What's more important? To keep a promise or to do what you really think is right?"

"Well, chicken, you sure do ask some tough questions. Where'd you get this one?"

"I was just thinking..."

"Thinkin, hunh?" Gransie picked up a stack of sheets and placed it over Annette's arms. "Well, when it comes to questions like that, time to stop thinkin and start prayin. God will let you know. He answers every prayer."

Annette reflected on God as she carried the piles of linen up the stairs. It took her two trips. Basically, she decided, God was one of them, only really old and related to all the people on the earth. So everybody could see him and talk to him if they tried. But you had to try hard, because he was so old. Was it something she was capable of? She didn't know.

The boy came in while she changed Miss Margaret's bed.

"Did you find it?"

"No, but I think I've got it figured out where to look."

"Pretty keen, huh?"

Sometimes she wondered if they heard a word she said. "Is your name Fred?" she asked.

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“You might say that, yes.”

“I almost got in trouble over that song myself.”

“Nifty, isn’t it? *Well it’s gin, gin, gin—*”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell.” She had never said anything about them to grown-ups. She didn’t know exactly why. She tried to imagine explaining to Gransie. It came out like a conversation with one of them: frustrating.

Freddy followed her to the Red Room. A note was taped to the door. It was in cursive, and she couldn’t read it. She opened the door. The Red Room was a mess. Blankets and clothes were tossed all over. It looked like somebody had had a fight. One of them got a nose bleed. A red-brown stain showed where they’d slept.

She thought maybe she should still just change the sheets. But when she pulled them off she saw how a little blood had soaked through to the mattress pad. So she went downstairs. Freddy was gone; she hadn’t seen him since opening the door.

Gransie was in her room. It was really part of the kitchen, where they used to keep some food. The bed was small and dipped down in the middle, even though Gransie wasn’t sleeping there right now.

She was sleeping in her chair. Soft zuzzing sounds came from where she sat. They mixed with the static and singing voices from the radio:

Just a closer walk with thee;

Grant it Jesus, if you please...

Gransie’s feet were out of their shoes, resting on a pillow. They were a funny shape, with bumps. Bunyumps, they were called. Annette decided she could find another mattress pad herself. She closed the door quietly. Not to be sneaky, but so Gransie could stay asleep.

The part of the linen closet she needed to get into was right over the cellar stairs. Maybe she could reach it if she took the stool down and stood on it on the landing. She was careful dragging it across the floor. No marks on the linoleum, and no noise.

It was harder taking it down the three steps to the landing. And when she got up on it, the shelf where Gransie kept the mattress pads was still out of reach. She could see them, but...

She could also see the shadows at the bottom of the stairs.

She sat on the landing, to rest and think. Her feet were on the next step down. Then one slipped and wound up on the one right after that.

She stood up. Six more steps to go.

But it was bad. Uncle Troy had made her cross her heart not to go there. It was dangerous, with bare electrics.

But how else was she going to find what she was looking for? The iron rails pulled her down.

Five more steps. Four more.

She stopped. A bitter smell came to her now: the captive earth. Wet, but never growing anything. A grey, unpromising weight upon the air. Maybe there was nothing. Nothing to be found. She would be breaking her word. For nothing.

She was ready to take the next step anyway. But suddenly there was a light. She had to turn around and see what from.

The lady with the candle was standing on the landing. "Don't tell me you ain't found it yet," she said. "Guess I better show you, then. Come on up."

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“Oh,” said Annette. “I thought it was down here.” She climbed the shallow stairs, happy she wasn’t going to do anything wrong.

“I kept it,” the lady said. “Hid it away.” She shrugged. “Didn’ know what good it was when he give it to me, but I kept it anyway. Long as Hawkeses was livin here, it appeared to be some hope.” Outside, a car door slammed. Footsteps drummed on the porch. “Now I guess we’ll see.”

Uncle Troy opened the door and stared at her. At the lady, not at Annette. They didn’t like that, so the lady wasn’t there anymore. Then Uncle Troy picked Annette up in a big hug and asked if she was okay.

He didn’t even listen to her explanation about the stool. He got her a glass of Kool-Aid and made her sit down at the kitchen table to drink it. Grape.

She heard some of their talking in Gransie’s room. “Oh, no,” said Gransie’s voice. “Not the whole family.”

“They were all three on the passenger list.”

“Poor Margaret. Last to carry the family name...”

Nobody said anything for a while. Then Uncle Troy started again. “Mom. I—I saw Rachel. She was talkin to Annette.”

“Troy, you know she’s been at rest in the arms of her savior these fifty years.”

“But maybe she wanted to tell us where she put—”

“If it is meant to be, it will come to pass, through the grace of our Lord.”

“But—”

“Annette!” It was Gransie, calling her. She ran to the doorway. Gransie was putting on her shoes. When she looked up, Annette saw that she was crying. “Fingers off the woodwork. Go find Miss Margaret. Tell her the Sheriff’s comin round, there’s been a bad accident.”

Annette stood on the verandah outside the morning room. The rose arbor was empty. Roger was on the beach. She saw him from the steps, throwing pebbles at the bleach-bottle buoy and missing. He was by himself.

She found Miss Margaret at the place next door. The lady from there was talking and talking. "...and so that's the connection. My half-sister married your great-great uncle, Chester Raines." Miss Margaret didn't seem to hear what she was saying.

She didn't give much sign of hearing what Annette said, either, except to drift away through the trees in the direction of the house.

Annette apologized. Just because they didn't always tell you what you wanted was no reason to be rude.

"Oh, don't concern yourself," the lady said. "Not everyone is as equanimous as you are. That means," she went on before Annette could ask, "that not everyone is able to take the situation in stride. In fact, most are not able to take it in at all."

Like Uncle Troy, she thought. He got scared when he saw the lady with the candlestick. Which reminded her to wonder why he lied, why he told Miss Margaret that about the song.

"The truth," said the lady, "can sometimes lead to unpleasant conclusions. As a potential philosopher, you should learn to understand this.

"I detest this spot," she added. "I always have." And Annette was left alone.



Vacation had just barely begun, but already it was time to leave. Gransie was riding the train down to Chicago with Miss Margaret for the funerals. Roger had already

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gone; he left the same day the Sheriff came. Miss Margaret didn't seem to miss him. The last time Annette saw her she was standing on the verandah, staring out across the lawn. She was all dressed in black, stiff and quiet.

Mommy came and picked her up at lunch, so Gransie and Miss Margaret could leave with Uncle Troy in time to catch the 2:45. Annette hated cars; usually she got sick in them. But she was so glad to be with Mommy again she forgot about that. Mommy let her lie with her head on her lap, on the soft beige skirt she wore. Just before she drifted off to sleep, Annette remembered that she'd left the box behind.

Most of the rest of that summer she spent at the library, downtown. It was cool in there, like the lake, and she found plenty to explore. Between columns covered with rose and olive tiles, she entered books on butterflies, books on boogie-woogie, books on Buddha, books on books.

Later, other libraries led her further on her search to understand "what makes the flower." The seed it comes from, or the light toward which it grows? By the time she was ready to leave the University it seemed to Annette these were the two most likely choices. Trying to decide, she examined her past, her seed. She came to no conclusion. But she learned many things.

For instance, she found out that for her forty years of service to the Raineses, Gransie received a lump sum of \$500. She lived with Uncle Troy in Paw Paw on this and her Social Security, helping out at church till she came to rest in the arms of her savior.

The deed in the hidey-hole had probably been valid—at the time it was drawn up. And the law student Annette talked to thought that because Rachel's descendants continued to live there, they might have had "visible, notori-

ous, and open possession" of the place. If the deed had ever been registered at court, if it could be proved that the Raineses conspired to prevent their claim, if...

But Miss Margaret had sold the place as soon after the funerals as was humanly possible. The buyer paid an extremely low price, since it was rumored to be haunted. The price was low, but the buyer didn't exactly get a bargain, for the house burned down before he could set foot on the property.

The bell never rang.

Deep End



The pool was supposed to be like freespace. Enough like it, anyway, to help Wayna acclimate to her download. She went in first thing every “morning,” as soon as Dr. Ops, the ship’s mind, awakened her. Too bad it wasn’t scheduled for later; all the slow, meat-based activities afterwards were a literal drag.

The voices of the pool’s other occupants boomed back and forth in an odd, uncontrolled manner, steel-born echoes muffling and exposing what was said. The temperature varied irregularly, warm intake jets competing with cold currents and, Wayna suspected, illicitly released urine. Overhead lights speckled the wall, the ceiling, the water, with a shifting, uneven glare.

Psyche Moth was a prison ship. Like all those on board, Wayna was an upload of a criminal’s mind. The process of uploading her mind had destroyed her physical body. Punishment. Then the ship, with Wayna and 248,961 other prisoners, set off on a long voyage to another star. During that voyage the prisoners’ minds had been cycled through

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consciousness: one year on, four years off. Of the eighty-seven years en route, Wayna had only lived through seventeen. Now she spent most of her time as meat.

Wayna's jaw ached. She'd been clenching it, trying to amp up her sensory inputs. She paddled toward the deep end, consciously relaxing her useless facial muscles. When *Psyche Moth* had reached its goal and verified that the world it called Amends was colonizable, her group was the second downloaded into empty clones, right after the trustees. One of those had told her it was typical to translocate missing freespace controls to their meat analogs.

She swirled her arms back and forth, creating waves, making them run into one another.

Then the pain hit.

White! Heat! There then gone—the lash of a whip.

Wayna stopped moving. Her suit held her up. She floated, waiting. Nothing else happened. Tentatively, she kicked and stroked her way to the steps rising from the pool's shallows, nodding to those she passed. At the door to the showers, it hit her again: a shock of electricity slicing from right shoulder to left hip. She caught her breath and continued in.

The showers were empty. Wayna was the first one from her hour out of the pool, and it was too soon for the next hour to wake up. She turned on the water and stood in its welcome warmth. What was going on? She'd never felt anything like this, not that she could remember—and surely she wouldn't have forgotten something so intense.... She stripped off her suit and hung it to dry. Instead of dressing in her overall and reporting to the laundry, her next assignment, she retreated into her locker and linked with Dr. Ops.

In the sphere of freespace, his office always hovered in the northwest quadrant, about halfway up from the horizon. Doe, Wayna's honeywoman, disliked this placement. Why pretend he was anything other than central to the whole setup, she asked. Why not put himself smack dab in the middle where he belonged? Doe distrusted Dr. Ops and everything about *Psyche Moth*. Wayna understood why. But there was nothing else. Not for eight light-years in any direction. According to Dr. Ops.

She swam into his pink-walled waiting room and eased her icon into a chair. That registered as a request for the AI's attention. A couple of other prisoners were there ahead of her; one disappeared soon after she sat. A few more minutes by objective measure, and the other was gone as well. Then it was Wayna's turn.

Dr. Ops presented as a lean-faced Caucasian man with a shock of mixed brown and blond hair. He wore an anachronistic headlamp and stethoscope and a gentle, kindly persona. "I have your readouts, of course, but why don't you tell me what's going on in your own words?"

He looked like he was listening. When she finished, he sat silent for a few seconds—much more time than he needed to consider what she'd said. Making an ostentatious display of his concern.

"There's no sign of nerve damage," he told her. "Nothing wrong with your spine or any of your articulation or musculature."

"So then how come—"

"It's probably nothing," the AI said, interrupting her. "But just in case, let's give you the rest of the day off. Take it easy—outside your locker, of course. I'll clear your bunkroom for the next 25 hours. Lie down. Put in some face time with your friends."

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“Probably?”

“I’ll let you know for sure tomorrow morning. Right now, relax. Doctor’s orders.” He smiled and logged her out. He could do that. It was his system.

Wayna tongued open her locker; no use staying in there without access to freespace. She put on her overall and walked up the corridor to her bunkroom. Fellow prisoners passed her heading the other way to the pool: no one she’d known back on Earth, no one she had gotten to know that well in freespace or since the download. Plenty of time for that onplanet. The woman with the curly red hair was called Robeson, she was pretty sure. They smiled at each other. Robeson walked hand in hand with a slender man whose mischievous smile reminded Wayna of Thad. It wasn’t him. Thad was scheduled for later download. Wayna was lucky to have Doe with her.

Another pain. Not so strong, this time. Strong enough, though. Sweat dampened her skin. She kept going, almost there.

There. Through the doorless opening she saw the mirror she hated, ordered up by one of the two women she timeshared with. It was only partly obscured by the genetics charts the other woman taped everywhere. Immersion learning. Even Wayna was absorbing something from it.

But not now. She lay on the bunk without looking at anything, eyes open. What was wrong with her?

Probably nothing.

Relax.

She did her body awareness exercises, tensing and loosening different muscle groups. She’d gotten as far as her knees when Doe walked in. Stood over her till Wayna focused on her honeywoman’s new face. “Sweetheart,” Doe

said. Her pale fingers stroked Wayna's face. "Dr. Ops told a trustee you wanted me."

"No—I mean yes, but I didn't ask—" Doe's expression froze, flickered, froze again. "Don't be—it's so hard, can't you just—" Wayna reached for and found both of Doe's hands and held them. They felt cool and small and dry. She pressed them against her overall's open V-neck and slid them beneath the fabric, forcing them to stroke her shoulders.

Making love to Doe in her download seemed like cheating. Wayna wondered what Thad's clone would look like, and if they'd be able to travel to his group's settlement to see him.

Anticipating agony, Wayna found herself hung up, nowhere near ecstasy. Doe pulled back and looked down at her, expecting an explanation. So Wayna had to tell her what little she knew.

"You! You weren't going to say anything! Just let me hurt you—" Doe had zero tolerance for accidentally inflicting pain, the legacy of her marriage to a closeted masochist.

"It wouldn't be anything you *did!* And I don't know if—"

Doe tore aside the paper they had taped across the doorway for privacy. From her bunk, Wayna heard her raging along the corridor, slapping the walls.

Face time was over.



Taken off of her normal schedule, Wayna had no idea how to spend the rest of her day. Not lying down alone. Not after that. She tried, but she couldn't.

Relax.

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Ordinarily when her laundry shift was over, she was supposed to show up in the cafeteria and eat. Never one of her favorite activities, even back on Earth. She went there early, though, surveying the occupied tables. The same glaring lights hung from the ceiling here as in the pool, glinting off plastic plates and water glasses. The same confused noise, the sound of overlapping conversations. No sign of Doe.

She stood in line. The trustee in charge started to give her a hard time about not waiting for her usual lunch hour. He shut up suddenly; Dr. Ops must have tipped him a clue. Trustees were in constant contact with the ship's mind—part of why Wayna hadn't volunteered to be one.

Mashed potatoes. Honey mustard nuggets. Slaw. All freshly factured, filled with nutrients and the proper amount of fiber for this stage of her digestive tract's maturation.

She sat at a table near the disposal dump. The redhead, Robeson, was there too, and a man—a different one than Wayna had seen her with before. Wayna introduced herself. She didn't feel like talking, but listening was fine. The topic was the latest virch from the settlement site. She hadn't done it yet.

This installment had been recorded by a botanist; lots of information on grass analogs and pollinating insects. "We know more about Jubilee than about *Psyche Moth*," Robeson said.

"Well, sure," said the man. His name was Jawann. "Jubilee is where we're going to live."

"*Psyche Moth* is where we live now, where we've lived for the last 87 years. We don't know jack about this ship. Because Dr. Ops doesn't want us to."

"We know enough to realize we'd look stupid trying to attack him," Wayna said. Even Doe admitted that. Dr.

Ops's hardware lay in *Psyche Moth's* central section, along with the drive engine. A tether almost two kilometers long separated their living quarters from the AI's physical components and any other mission-critical equipment. At the end of the tether, Wayna and the rest of the downloads swung, faster and faster. They were like sand in a bucket, centrifugal force mimicking gravity and gradually building up to the level they'd experience on Amend's surface, in Jubilee.

That was all they knew. All Dr. Ops thought they needed to know.

"Who said anything about an attack?" Robeson frowned.

"No one." Wayna was suddenly sorry she'd spoken. "All I mean is, his only motive in telling us anything was to prevent that from happening." She spooned some nuggets onto her mashed potatoes and shoved them into her mouth so she wouldn't say any more.

"You think he's lying?" Jawann asked. Wayna shook her head no.

"He could if he wanted. How would we find out?"

The slaw was too sweet; not enough contrast with the nuggets. Not peppery, like what Aunt Nono used to make.

"Why would we want to find out? We'll be on our own ground, in Jubilee, soon enough." Four weeks; twenty days by *Psyche Moth's* rationalized calendar.

"With trustees to watch us all the time, everywhere we go, and this ship hanging in orbit right over our heads." Robeson sounded as suspicious as Doe; Jawann as placatory as Wayna tried to be in their identical arguments. That usually came across as neutral, controlled, the way you could be out of your meat.

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“So? They’re not going to hurt us after they brought us all this way. At least, they won’t want to hurt our bodies.”

Because their bodies came from, were copies of, the people they’d rebelled against. The rich. The politically powerful.

But Wayna’s body was *hers*. No one else owned it, no matter who her clone’s cells started off with. Hers, no matter how different it looked from the one she was born with. How white.

Hers to take care of. Early on in her training she’d decided that. How else could she be serious about her exercises? Why else would she bother?

This was her body. She’d earned it.

Jawann and Robeson were done; they’d started eating before her and now they were leaving. She swallowed quickly. “Wait—I wanted to ask—” They stopped and she stood up to follow them, taking her half-full plate. “Either of you have any medical training?”

They knew someone, a man called Unique, a nurse when he’d lived on Earth. Here he worked in the factory, quality control. Wayna would have to go back to her bunkroom until he got off and could come see her. She left Doe a message on the board by the cafeteria’s entrance, an apology. Face-up on her bed, Wayna concentrated fiercely on the muscle groups she’d skipped earlier. A trustee came by to check on her and seemed satisfied to find her lying down, everything in line with her remote readings. He acted as if she should be flattered by the extra attention. “Dr. Ops will be in touch first thing tomorrow,” he promised as he left.

“Ooo baby,” she said softly to herself, and went on with what she’d been doing.

A little later, for no reason she knew of, she looked up at her doorway. The man that had held Robeson's hand that morning stood there as if this was where he'd always been. "Hi. Do I have the right place? You're Wayna?"

"Unique?"

"Yeah."

"Come on in." She swung her feet to the floor and patted a place beside her on the bed. He sat closer than she'd expected, closer than she was used to. Maybe that meant he'd been born Hispanic or Middle Eastern. Or maybe not.

"Robeson said you had some sort of problem to ask me about. So—of course I don't have any equipment, but if I can help in any way, I will."

She told him what had happened, feeling foolish all of a sudden. There'd only been those three times, nothing more since seeing Dr. Ops.

"Lie on your stomach," he said. Through the fabric, firm fingers pressed on either side of her spine, from mid-back to her skull, then down again to her tailbone. "Turn over, please. Bend your knees. All right if I take off your shoes?" He stroked the soles of her feet, had her push them against his hands in different directions. His touch, his resistance to her pressure, reassured her. What she was going through was real. It mattered.

He asked her how she slept, what she massaged, if she was always thirsty, other things. He finished his questions and walked back and forth in her room, glancing often in her direction. She sat again, hugging herself. If Doe came in now, she'd know Wayna wanted him.

Unique quit his pacing and faced her, his eyes steady. "I don't know what's wrong with you," he said. "You're not the only one, though. There's a hundred and fifty others that I've seen or heard of experiencing major problems—"

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circulatory, muscular, digestive. Some even have the same symptoms you do.”

“What is it?” Wayna asked stupidly.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he repeated. “If I had a lab—I’ll set one up in Jubilee—call it neuropathy, but I don’t know for sure what’s causing it.”

“Neuropathy?”

“Means nerve problems.”

“But Dr. Ops told me my nerves were fine....” No response to that.

“If we were on Earth, what would you think?”

He compressed his already thin lips. “Most likely possibility, some kind of thyroid problem. Or—but what it would be elsewhere, that’s irrelevant. You’re here, and it’s the numbers involved that concern me, though superficially the cases seem unrelated.

“One hundred and fifty of you out of the Jubilee group with what might be germ plasm disorders; one hundred fifty out of 20,000. At least one hundred fifty; take under-reporting into account and there’s probably more. Too many. They would have screened foetuses for irregularities before shipping them out.”

“Well, what should I do then?”

“Get Dr. Ops to give you a new clone.”

“But—”

“This one’s damaged. If you train intensely, you’ll make up the lost time and go down to Jubilee with the rest of us.”

Or she might be able to delay and wind up part of Thad’s settlement instead.

As if he’d heard her thought, Unique added “I wouldn’t wait, if I were you. I’d ask for—no, demand another body—now. Soon as you can.”

“Because?”

“Because your chances of a decent one will just get worse, if this is a radiation-induced mutation. Which I have absolutely no proof of. But if it is.”



“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and there we wept...” The pool reflected music, voices vaulting upward off the water, outward to the walls of white-painted steel. Unlike yesterday, the words were clear, because everyone was saying the same thing. Singing the same thing. “For the wicked carried us away...” Wayna wondered why the trustee in charge had chosen this song. Of course he was a prisoner, too.

The impromptu choir sounded more soulful than it looked. If the personalities of these clones’ originals had been in charge, what would they be singing now? The “Doxology?” “Bringing in the Sheaves?” Did Episcopalians even have hymns?

Focusing on the physical, Wayna scanned her body for symptoms. So far this morning, she’d felt nothing unusual. Carefully, slowly, she swept the satiny surface with her arms, raising a tapering wave. She worked her legs, shooting backwards like a squid, away from the shallows and most of the other swimmers. Would sex underwater be as good as it was in freespace? No; you’d be constantly coming up for breath. Instead of constantly coming... Last night, Doe had forgiven her, and they’d gone to Thad together. And everything was fine until they started fighting again. It hadn’t been her fault. Or Doe’s, either.

They told Thad about Wayna’s pains, and how Unique thought she should ask for another clone. “Why do you want to download at all?” he asked. “Stay in here with me.”

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“Until you do? But if—”

“Until I don’t. I wasn’t sure I wanted to anyway. Now the idea sounds *so much more* inviting. ‘Defective body?’ ‘Don’t mind if I do.’” Thad’s icon got up from their bed to mimic unctuous host and vivacious guest. “‘And, oh, you’re serving that on a totally unexplored and no doubt dangerous new planet? I just adore totally—’”

“Stop it!” Wayna hated it when he acted that way, faking that he was a flamer. She hooked him by one knee and pulled him down, putting her hand over his mouth. She meant it as a joke; they ought to have ended up wrestling, rolling around, having fun, having more sex. Thad didn’t respond, though. Not even when Wayna tickled him under his arms. He had amped down his input.

“Look,” he said. “I went through our ‘voluntary agreement.’ We did our part by letting them bring us here.”

Doe propped herself up on both elbows. She had huge nipples, not like the ones on her clone’s breasts. “You’re really serious.”

“Yes. I really am.”

“Why?” asked Wayna. She answered herself: “Dr. Ops won’t let you download into a woman. Will he.”

“Probably not. I haven’t even asked.”

Doe said, “Then what is it? We were going to be together, at least on the same world. All we went through, and you’re just throwing it away—”

“Together to do what? To bear our enemies’ children, that’s what, we nothing but a bunch of glorified mummies, girl, don’t you get it? Remote-control units for their immortality investments, protection for their precious genetic material. Cheaper than your average AI, no benefits, no union, no personnel manager. *Mummies.*”

“Not mammals,” Doe said slowly. “I see what you’re saying, but we’re more like incubators, if you think about it. Or petri dishes—inoculated with their DNA. Except they’re back on Earth; they won’t be around to see the results of their experiment.”

“Don’t need to be. They got Dr. Ops to report back.”

“Once we’re on Amends,” Wayna said, “no one can make us have kids or do anything we don’t want.”

“You think. Besides, they won’t *have* to make people reproduce. It’s a basic drive.”

“Of the meat.” Doe nodded. “Okay. Point granted, Wayna?” She sank down again, resting her head on her crossed arms.

No one said anything for a while. The jazz Thad liked to listen to filled the silence: smooth horns, rough drums, discreet bass.

“Well, what’ll you do if you stay in here?” Doe asked. “What’ll Dr. Ops do? Turn you off? Log you out permanently? Put your processors on half power?”

“Don’t think so. He’s an AI. He’ll stick to the rules.”

“Whatever those are,” said Wayna.

“I’ll find out.”

She had logged off then, withdrawn to sleep in her bunkroom, expecting Doe to join her. She’d wakened alone, a note from Dr. Ops on the mirror, which normally she would have missed. Normally she avoided the mirror, but not this morning. She’d studied her face, noting the narrow nose, the light, stubby lashes around eyes an indeterminate color she guessed could be called grey. Whose face had this been? A senator’s? A favorite secretary’s?

Hers, now. For how long?

Floating upright in the deep end, she glanced at her arms. They were covered with blond hairs that the water

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washed into rippled patterns. Her small breasts mounded high here in the pool, buoyant with fat.

Would the replacement be better-looking, or worse?

Wayna turned to see the clock on the wall behind her. Ten. Time to get out and get ready for her appointment.



“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Wayna.” Dr. Ops looked harassed and faintly ashamed. He hadn’t been able to tell her anything about the pains. He acted like they weren’t important; he’d even hinted she might be making them up just to get a different body. “You’re not the first to ask, you know. One per person, that’s all. That’s it.”

Thad’s right, Wayna thought to herself. AIs stick to the rules. He could improvise, but he won’t.

“Why?” Always a good question.

“We didn’t bring a bunch of extra bodies, Wayna,” Dr. Ops said.

“Well, why not?” Another excellent question. “You should have,” she went on. “What if there was an emergency, an epidemic?”

“There’s enough for that—”

“I know someone who’s not going to use theirs. Give it to me.”

“You must mean Thad.” Dr. Ops frowned. “That would be a man’s body. Our charter doesn’t allow transgender downloads.”

Wayna counted in twelves under her breath, closing her eyes so long she almost logged off.

“Who’s to know?” Her voice was too loud, and her jaw hurt. She’d been clenching it tight, forgetting it would amp up her inputs. Download settings had apparently become her default overnight.

“Never mind. You’re not going to give me a second body. I can’t make you.”

“I thought you’d understand.” He smiled and hunched his shoulders. “I *am* sorry.”

Swimming through freespace to her locker, she was sure Dr. Ops didn’t know what sorry was. She wondered if he ever would.

Meanwhile.



She never saw Doe again outside freespace. There’d still be two of them together—just not the two they’d assumed.

She had other attacks, some mild, some much stronger than the first. Massage helped, and keeping still, and moving. She met prisoners who had similar symptoms, and they traded tips and theories about what was wrong with them.

Doe kept telling her that if she wanted to be without pain, she should simply stay in freespace. After a while, Wayna did more and more virches and spent less and less time with her lovers.

Jubilee lay in Amends’ Northern latitudes, high on a curving peninsula, in the rain shadow of old, gentle mountains. Bright-skinned tree-dwelling amphibians inhabited the mountain passes, their trilling cries rising and falling like loud orgasms whenever Wayna took her favorite tour.

And then there were the instructional virches, building on what they’d learned in their freespace classes. Her specialty, fiber tech, became suddenly fascinating: baskets, nets, ropes, cloth, paper—so much to learn, so little time.

The day before planetfall she went for one last swim in the pool. It was deserted, awaiting the next settlement

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group. It would never be as full of prisoners again; Thad and Doe weren't the only ones opting out of their downloads.

There was plenty of open freshwater on Amends: a large lake not far from Jubilee, and rivers even closer. She peered down past her dangling feet at the pool's white bottom. Nothing to see there. Never had been; never would be.

She had lunch with Robeson, Unique, and Jawann. As Dr. Ops recommended, they skipped dinner.

She didn't try to say goodbye. She didn't sleep alone.

And then it was morning, and they were walking into one of *Psyche Moth's* landing units, underbuckets held to the pool's bottom, to its outside, by retractable bolts, and Dr. Ops unlocked them and they were free, flying, falling, down, down, down, out of the black and into the blue, the green, the thousand colors of their new home.

The Water Museum



When I saw the hitchhiker standing by the sign for the Water Museum, I knew he had been sent to assassinate me. First off, that's what the dogs were saying as I slowed to pick him up. Girlfriend, with her sharp, little, agitated bark, was quite explicit. Buddy was silently trying to dig a hole under the back seat, seeking refuge in the trunk. I stopped anyway.

Second off, the man as much as told me so his own self. He opened up the passenger door of my midnight-blue '62 Mercury and piled in with his duffel bag, and his jeans and white tee, and his curly brown hair tucked under a baseball cap. "Where you going?" I asked, as soon as he was all settled and the door shut.

"Water Museum," he said. "Got an interview for a job there." That was confirmation, cause I wasn't hiring just then. Way too early in the year for that; things don't pick up here till much later in the spring. Even then, my girls and me handle most of whatever work comes up. Even after Albinia, my oldest, took herself off ten years ago, I

never hired no more than a couple locals to tide us over the weekends. And this guy wasn't no local. So he was headed where he had no business to be going, and I could think of only the one reason why.

But I played right along. "What part?" I asked him, pulling back out on the smooth one-lane blacktop.

It took him a second to hear my question. "What do you mean, what part? They got different entrances or something?"

"I mean the Water Museum is three, four miles long," I told him. Three point two miles, if you want to be exact, but I didn't. "You tell me where you want to go there, and I'll get you as close as I can."

I twisted around to get a good look at the dogs. Buddy had given up on his tunnel to the trunk. He was lying on the floor, panting like a giant, asthmatic weight-lifter. His harness jingled softly with every whuffling breath. Girlfriend was nowhere in sight.

The hitchhiker twisted in his seat, too. "Nice animal," he said uneasily, taking in Buddy's shiny, tusky-looking teeth. "Sheepdog?"

"Nope. Otterhound. Lotta people make that mistake, though. They do look alike, but otterhound's got a finer bone structure, little different coloring."

"Oh."

We started the long curve down to the shore. I put her in neutral and let us glide, enjoying the early morning light. It dappled my face through the baby beech leaves like butter and honey on a warm biscuit.

On this kind of bright, sunshiny spring morning, I found it hard to credit that a bunch of men I didn't even know were bent on my destruction. Despite the evidence to the contrary sitting right there next to me on the plaid,

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woven vinyl seat cushion, it just did not make sense. What were they so het up about? Their lawns? Brownd-off golf courses, which shouldn'ta oughta been there in the first place? Ranches dried to dust and blowing away... Yeah, I could see how it would disturb folks to find the land they thought they owned up and left without em. I just did not agree with their particular manner of settling the matter.

I drove quietly with these thoughts of mine awhile, and my killer sat there just as quiet with his. Then we came to that sweet little dip, and the turn under the old viaduct, and we were almost there. "You figured out yet where you're headed?" I asked.

"Uhh, no, ma'am. Just drop me off by the offices, I guess...."

"Offices ain't gonna be open this early," I told him. "Not till noon, between Labor Day and Memorial Weekend. C'mon, I got nothing better to do, I'll give you a tour."

"Well, uhh, that's nice, ma'am, but I, uh, but don't go out of your way or anything...."

I looked at him, cocked my chin, and grinned my best country-girl grin, the one that makes my cheeks dimple up and my eyelashes flutter. "Why, it'd be a pleasure to show you around the place!" By this time we were to the parking lot. I pulled in and cut the ignition, and before he could speak another word I had opened my door. "Let's go."

The hitchhiker hesitated. Buddy whined and lumbered to his feet, and that must have decided him. With what I would call alacrity he sprang out on his side of the car onto the gravel. Ahh, youth.

I let Buddy out the back. Instead of his usual sniff and pee routine, he stuck close to me. Girlfriend was still nowhere in sight. The hitchhiker was looking confused-

ly around the clearing. At first glance the steps are hard to pick out, and the trail up into the dunes is faint and overgrown.

I grabbed my wool ruana and flung it on over my shoulders, rearranging my neckerchiefs and headscarves. “You got a jacket, young man?” I asked him. “Shirtsleeves’re all right here, but we’re gonna catch us a nice breeze down by the Lake.”

“Um, yeah, in my—” He bent over the front seat and tugged at something on the floor. “In my duffel, but I guess it’s stuck under here or something.”

Came a low, unmistakable growl, and he jumped back. I went around to his side. “Don’t worry, I’ll get it out for you,” I said. “Girlfriend!” I bent over and grabbed one green canvas corner of my assassin’s duffel bag and pulled. This is Girlfriend’s favorite game. We tussled away for a few minutes. “She’s small, but she’s fierce,” I commented as I took a quick break. “You got any food in there, a sandwich or something?”

“No. Why?”

“I just noticed she had the zipper open some.”

The hitchhiker got a little pale and wispy-looking when he heard that. He stayed that way till I retrieved his duffel and gave it to him to rummage through. He took a while finding his jean jacket, and by the time he’d dug it out and put it on he looked more solid and reassured.

So now I knew where his gun was. Should I let him keep it? He’d be a lot easier to handle without a pistol in his fist. Then again, the thing might not even be loaded, depending on how soon he’d been planning on meeting up with me; simpler for him to explain an empty gun to any cops stopped him hitching rides. And I’d be able to get him relaxed faster if he was armed.

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He threw the bag over his shoulder, and I locked the car. Girlfriend had already started up the trail. Of course he wanted me to walk ahead of him, but Buddy just looked at him with his dark, suspicious eyes and Mr. Man decided it would be okay if this time he was the one to go first.

I love the dance I chose when I made this path, the wending and winding of the way. As we climbed, we left the beech trees behind and ascended into the realm of grass and cherries, of white-backed poplar leaves, soft as angel fuzz. Poison ivy shone waxily, warningly, colored like rich, red wine.

We walked right past my offices. They look like part of the dune crest, coming at em from this side. I cast em that way, wound em round with roots, bound em with stems and sprinkled pebbles lightly over the top. The windows are disguised as burrows, with overhangs and grass growing down like shaggy eyebrows.

My assassin's Nikes made soft little drumming sounds on the boardwalk, following the click of Girlfriend's nails round to the blow-out and the observation deck. The promised breeze sprang up, ruffling our fur and hair. I watched my killer's reaction to his first sight of the Museum.

His shoulders straightened and relaxed, though I hadn't noticed they were crooked before that. He walked up and leaned against the wooden rail. "All that water..." he said.

I came up and joined him. "Yes," I said. "All that water." From the deck you can see it, as much as can be seen from down here on the Earth. Shadows still hung beneath us, but further out the Great Lake sparkled splendidly. Waves were dancing playfully, like little girls practicing ballet. They whirled and leapt and tumbled to rest just

beyond the short terminal dunes five hundred feet below where we stood. “All that water. And all of it is sweet.”

I took my killer gently by the arm and led him to the river side. That’s where the work I’ve done is easiest to take in: the floating bridges over Smallbird Marsh, the tanks and dioramas and such. “Where you from, kid?” We started down the steps.

“Colorado.”

“Pretty?”

“It used to be. When I was little, back before the drought got bad.”

I stopped at a landing and waited for Buddy to catch up. He’s all right on a hillside, but this set of stairs is steep and made out of slats. They give under his weight a bit, and that makes him take them slow and cautious, ears flapping solemnly with every step.

I smiled at my assassin and he smiled shyly back. It occurred to me then that he might not know who I am. I mean, I do present a pretty imposing figure, being a six-six strawberry blonde and not exactly overweight, but on the fluffy side. I’d say I’m fairly easy to spot from a description. But maybe they hadn’t bothered to give him one.

I dropped his arm and motioned him on ahead. “By the bye,” I called out, once he was well on his way. “I don’t believe I caught your name. Mine’s Granita. Granita Bone.”

He sorta stopped there for a sec and put his hand out, grabbing for a railing I’d never had installed. Well, I thought, at least they told the poor boy that much.

“Jasper Smith,” he said, then turned around to see how I took it.

I nodded down at him approvingly. Jasper rang a nice change on Granita, and the Smith part kinda balanced out its oddness. “Pleased to meet you, Jasper.” Girlfriend

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barked up at us from the foot of the stairs. “All right,” I shouted down at her, “I’m a-coming, I’m a-coming.”

“Sheltie,” I explained to my killer. “Herding animal. Makes her nervous to see us spread out like this.” By that time Buddy had caught up and passed me. He knew this walk. I followed him down.

At the bottom, I chose the inland path, past pools of iridescent black blooming with bright marsh marigold. Stabilizing cedars gave way to somber hemlock, still adrip with the morning’s dew.

“Water Music,” I told Jasper, just before our first stop.

“I don’t—”

“Hush up, then, and you will.” Even the dogs knew to keep quiet here. It fell constantly, a bit more hesitant than rain. Notes in a spatter, a gentle jingle, a high and solitary ping! ping! ping! Liquid runs and hollow drums grew louder and louder until we reached the clearing and stood still, surrounded.

It was the tank and windmill that drew him first, though there’s nothing so special about them. I went over with him and undid the lock so the blades could catch the morning’s breeze. The tank’s got a capacity of about four hundred gallons; small, but it usually lasts me a day or two.

With the pump going, the pipe up from the river started in to sing. It’s baffled and pierced; totally inefficient, but gorgeous to my ears. From the other pipes and the web of hose overhead, drops of water continued to gather and fall—on glass and shells, in bowls and bottles, overflowing or always empty, on tin and through bamboo, falling, always falling.

Adding to the symphony, Girlfriend lapped up a drink from a tray of lotuses.

“Wow, Granita, this is really, uh, elaborate,” said Jasper when he’d pretty much done looking around.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah, but isn’t it kinda, umm, kinda wasteful?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But like my mama always said, ‘You don’t never know the usefulness of a useless thing.’” Right then I just about washed my hands of good ole Jasper. But he hadn’t even seen any of the other exhibits, so I decided I’d better postpone judgment. My assassins did tend to have a wide stripe of utilitarianism to em. At least at first. Couldn’t seem to help it.

Buddy stood where the trail began again, panting and whining and wagging his whole hind end. He was looking forward to the next stop, hoping to catch him a crawdad. The fish factory’s never been one of my favorite features of the place, but Buddy loved it, and it turned out to be a big hit with Jasper, too. He took a long, long look at the half-glazed ponds that terraced down the dune. Me and some of the girls had fixed up burnt wood signs by the path, explaining the contents of each one, but Jasper had to climb up all the ladders and see for himself. He disappointed me by flashing right past all my pretty koi. Can you believe it was the catfish that caught his fresh little fancy? He must have spent twenty minutes to check out those mean, ugly suckers. Though, to give him his credit, he dallied a fair while with Yertle and that clan, too.

Meanwhile, me and the dogs kept waiting on my killer to make his move.

We looped under the deserted highway and came back by Summer Spring Falls and the Seven Cauldrons, then started across the marsh over the floating bridges, which Buddy doesn’t like anymore than the stairs. Maybe it’s the way the wicker that I wove em from sorta sags, or the dark

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breezes stirring up between the chinks, or the gaps you have to hop over going from one section to the next.

The breeze picked up again as we headed towards the beach. Small clouds, light on their feet, flickered past the sun.

I let him get behind me. Wicker creaks. I could hear his footsteps hesitate, sinking lower as he stood trying to decide was this the time and place. We were alone, he had a good clean line of sight, nothing but the wind between his aim and my broad back. But when he stilled and I turned, his hand wasn't doing nothing but resting on the zipper of his duffel bag, and that wasn't even open yet. His eyes were focused over my head, far off in space or time. He was listening.

Red-winged blackbirds. Sweet and pure, their songs piped up, trilling away into silence, rising again from that pool of quiet, sure and silver, pouring over and over into my ears. "When I was a boy..." said Jasper. I waited. In a moment he started again. "When I was a boy, there was a creek and a swamp, where the river used to be. I didn't know, I thought it was just a fun place to play. Some birds there, they sang just like this."

Well, making allowance for a few inaccuracies (swamp for marsh, and the bird songs had to vary a *little*), this sounded pretty much like his truth. And it made actual sense to me, not like them pipeline dreams of those cowboys sent him here. Now we were getting somewhere. Closer. He'd be making his attack real soon.

I turned back around and trudged a little more slowly along the baskety surface of the bridge. The back of my neck crawled and itched, like itty bitty Jaspers and Granitas were walking all over it. I kept myself in hand, though,

breathing deep and regular, balanced on the bubbling well of power beneath my feet, telling myself soon—soon—

He didn't stop, he just slowed down a hair. I didn't hear any zipper, either, but when I turned again he had finally pulled his goddamn gun out and it was pointed straight at me. Was it loaded, then? He seemed to think so.

My chest cramped up and my temperature dropped like I'd been dumped head first into Superior. I could wind up contributing my vital nitrogen and phosphorus content to the cycle like right *now*. I let my fright sag me down and grabbed the rails as his eyes hardened and his gun hand tensed. He was a lefty.

With a sudden lurch I threw myself against the side of the bridge and tipped us all into the cool, ripe waters of Smallbird Marsh. The gun cracked off one shot, just before we all made a nice big splash. I shrugged out of my ruana and kicked off my clogs and I knew I'd be okay. Fluff floats. Buddy woofed and Girlfriend yapped, all happy and accounted for.

Girlfriend and I pulled ourselves right up onto the next basket, but the menfolks stayed in a while longer. Buddy loves to swim, and he's good at it, too. Jasper was floundering, though, wrapped up in weeds and trying to breathe mud. By the time I got him hauled out he wasn't more than half conscious. Still had a grip on that gun, though. I pried it loose and tossed it back.

Now how to get him up to the offices? I thought about it while I whipped a few of my scarves around his wrists and elbows and ankles and knees. My sash in a slip knot 'round his throat for good measure. I shoved him till he sat mostly upright. "Ain't this a fucking mess?" I asked him, tilting his head so he could see the tipped over basket, then back around to me. "I *just* had my hair done, got the

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dogs back from the groomer's *yesterday*, now you pull this stunt! What in the name of every holy thing were you trying to do?"

"Kill you." His voice was rough, sort of a wheeze now from coughing up marsh water.

"Well, duh. Yeah. Question is what you thought that was supposed to accomplish?" He just stuck out his bottom lip. Put me in mind of Albinia, age eight.

"Ain't I done told your bosses, time and again, getting rid of me is gonna do em not one whit of good? Ain't I told em how it's the oracle decides whether or not the Water Museum's ever gonna open up a pipeline and exercise its rights to sell? And if I hadn't told em, ain't it right there in our charter, a matter of public record for every passing pissant to read it if he remembers his A-B-Cs? Well, ain't it?"

My killer kinda shrunk his shoulders in. Breeze picked up some, rustling the reeds. I'm pretty well insulated, but Jasper couldn't help a little shiver. That was all I got out of him that while, though.

I left him and walked a couple of baskets to the boat-house for a life jacket. Had to untie his arms to get it on, and he wanted to wrestle then, having dried out enough to get his dander up. I got a hold on his nice new necktie and pulled. Finished bundling him up while he was trying to recall if he still knew how to breathe. I gave us both a chance to calm down, then dumped him back in the marsh.

Good thing I had Buddy's harness on him. I whistled him over, hooked up Jasper's life jacket and we were on our way once more.

"You're in luck," I told my assassin. "Usually we skip this part of the tour, but I noticed you gronking all the

technical dingle-dangles. So I figure you'll get a large charge out of our sewage treatment facilities."

The jacket worked fine. Buddy paddled joyfully along next to the bridges. He likes to make himself useful.

It wasn't far to the settling ponds. I gave Jasper plenty of chances to tell me about Colorado wildlife and the dying riparian ecosystem, but he didn't seem to be in the mood. He was mostly silent, excepting the odd snort when Buddy kicked up too big a wake.

Really, the ponds weren't that bad. Joy, my youngest daughter, got the Museum a contract with a local trailer park, but they're pretty much dormant till early May. Right then, the park was mostly empty, just a few old retirees, so the effluent came mainly from my offices and the tanks of a couple friends.

I glossed over that, though, in my lecture. I concentrated instead on wind-driven aeration paddles, ultra-sound and tank resonance, and oh, yes, our patented, prize-winning, bacteriophagic eels. As the ponds got murkier and murkier, Jasper's gills got greener and greener, so to speak. He held up well. I had dragged him over two locks, and had him belly down on the third when he broke.

"Nonononono!" he gibbered at me. "What is it, what is it, don't let it touch me, please!" I bent over and looked where he was looking. Something was floating in the water. I fished it out. One end of a cucumber had my killer sobbing out his heart and wriggling like a worm with eyes to see the hook.

People are funny.

Girlfriend came up and sniffed the piece of cucumber. It was kind of rotten, and after all, she is a dog. I threw it back to the eels, unhitched Buddy's harness and rolled

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Jasper over on his back. “You ready to come clean?” I asked him. He nodded desperately.

I wasted quite a few minutes trying to untie the wet silk knotted around his ankles. Then I got disgusted and sawed it through with my car keys. Still left him hobbled at the knees as I marched him off to the laundry room.

We came in through the “Secret Tunnel,” what the girls like to call it. Really, it’s just a old storm sewer from under the highway. But when I excavated the place and found how close it passed, I annexed the pipe onto my basement there. Handy, sometimes. Grate keeps out most of the possum and nutrias. The big ones, anyways. I locked that into place and set Jasper down on a bench next to the washer, under the skylight.

I nabbed a towel off the steam rack and wrecked it rubbing Buddy down. Took off his poor harness while carefully considering my killer.

He looked a sorrowful mess. His tee shirt was gonna need some enzyme action before you could come anywhere close to calling it white again, and his jeans and jacket weren’t never gonna smell clothesline fresh no more, no matter what. His hat was gone, his hair matted down with algae and such. His eyes were red from crying, his upper lip glistened unbecomingly, and the rest of him steamed in the cool laundry room air.

I prayed for a washday miracle.

“Jasper,” I told him, “you are in a terrible spot right now.” He nodded a couple times, agreeable as any school-child. “Sometimes, the only way outta danger is in. You gotta go through it to get to the other side. You gotta sink to swim.

“I’m telling you honest and true that in spite of what went on out there I bear you absolutely no grudges. You

believe me?” Again the nod. “Good. Try to bear it in mind over the next few days.”

I reached my shears down from the shelf above his head and cut away the rest of where I’d tied him up: hands first, elbows next, then knees. Those were some nice scarves, too. One my favorite. I was sure hoping he’d be worth it.

“Strip,” I told him. He only hung back a second, then he put off his modesty or pride or whatever, and the rest of his wet, useless things right after. Girlfriend tried to run off with a sock but I made her bring it back. “Dump that shit in the washer.” I had him set it to low, hot wash, cold rinse, add my powder, and switch on. He didn’t seem to know his way around the control panel, and I wondered who’d been taking care of him back home.

Pale goose pimples ain’t exactly my cup of vodka, but Jasper was a nice enough looking young man. Given the circumstances. I admired his bumptious little backside as I scooted him on ahead of me over to the Sunshower. Light shafted down through the glass, glittering off the walls of black sand that lined its path for all of two hundred and fifty feet. It was midday by then, and the water pretty warm. He stayed under there a good, long while. I could tell he was finished when he started to look for a way to turn it off. Weren’t none, of course. It ain’t my job to tell the water when to stop, only to help it through the flow. And naturally, any little deviations I do participate in ain’t nothing like what them so called “Water Interest” cowboys got in mind.

“Leave it, Jasper,” I told him, motioning him on with my shears. Girlfriend gruffed a little bit to underline the suggestion. We took him along the hall past the Glowing Pool and the steps down to the Well. Later, on his way out,

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I planned on stopping to offer him a sweet, cold dipperful. Like drinking a cup of stars.

Gradually, the way we walked kept getting darker, the skylights scarcer and more spaced out. Joy and Gerrietta's mosaics running up and down the walls barely glittered by the time we hit the Slipstream, and I heard Jasper gasp as he stepped into swiftly moving water. "Keep going," I told him, and he sloshed obediently on ahead. The dogs were between us, now.

Somewhere close by came the sound of icebergs calving, the underwater songs of whales. I barely heard them as I fumed to myself, wondering if I loaded up a fleet of helicopters to drop off leaflets and trained a flock of condors to fly across the whole United States with a banner in their beaks, if I could make them idiots realize they were not gonna get their Great Lakes pipeline open by killing me off.

Maybe the first few assassins were just to put a touch of fear on me. Maybe they thought the oracle wasn't nothing but a sham, and I could be bullied into letting them use the Museum's exclusive access.

For a while there, looked like they really did want to kill me. With my oldest girl, Albinia, off in the wild blue yonder, there'd be a bit of a legal tussle over the Directorship. Guess they might of planned to take advantage of the confusion ensuing upon my untimely demise.

Lately, most of their moves they seemed to make just purely to annoy me. Sending out an amateur like this here Jasper—

Up ahead, the sloshing stopped. My killer stood waiting for us on the ledge, in the dark.

"Here's where you'll be staying." I opened the door to the Dressing Room. He didn't seem much taken with the

place. Sure, the ceiling's kind of low, 'cept for that two-hundred-foot skylight. And you got to sleep on the floor or in the sandpit. But that sand is soft, and nice and warm on account of the solar heat-exchanger underneath. "I'll give you a little while in here by yourself to figure out what you're gonna be when you come out. Say, a week maybe. Then I'll come back and you can tell me what you'll be needing."

"But—food, water!"

"They're here." He looked around at the bare driftwood walls. "You doubting my word? You're a bright boy, Jasper, I'm sure you'll find where they're at in plenty time."

"I don't understand. You're not trying to torture me are you? I mean, if you want a confession I've already—"

"You don't understand? Then let me explain. I don't need a confession. I got that the first time them cowboys sent someone up here to murder me, fourteen years agone. That's right, Jasper, you are by no means the first hired killer I met up with, though you have got to be the most naive by a crane's holler. *Hitchhiking* to the *hit*? Talk about your sore thumbs!"

Jasper turned red from the collarbone up. "My van broke down in Bliss."

"Yeah, well, guess you couldn't afford a rental, and probably just as conspicuous to get one of them, anyways. But you coulda just given up. Couldn't you?"

That's when my killer started in again about the black-birds, and added a sheep farm and I don't know what all else. It wasn't the sense of his words I paid attention to: none of them ever had much worth listening to to say at this point. The Earth owed them a living, and a silver teat to suck. And it better be a mighty long dug, cause

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it wasn't supposed to dry up, no matter how hard them cowboys chewed.

They all seemed to need to give their little speeches, though, so I had got used to sitting politely and listening to the kinds of sounds they made. Rattles and grates and angry, poisonous buzzings was what they usually come up with.

Jasper surprised me with an awful good imitation of a red-winged blackbird. Lower register, of course. But his voice trilled up and spilled over the same way, throbbing sweet and pure, straight from his poor little heart. A pretty song, but he was singing it to the wrong audience.

Once, I was one of the richest women on this continent. Powerball winnings. I took and built the Water Museum, then finessed an old congressman of a lover of mine into pushing through our charter. He secured us the sole, exclusive rights to be selling off the Great Lakes' water to irrigate them thirsty Western states.

Or not.

Didn't them cowboys kick up a dust storm! Kept us real busy for a while there, in the courts and on the talkiest of the talk shows.

I'm not rich no more. What I didn't use building the Museum or fighting to protect our charter, I wound up giving us as a donation. Not so famous no more, neither. And important? Not in the least.

During the season, I sell tickets and polish windows, hand out sea-weed candy to unsuspecting kids. Nothing but that would stop because I died, much less if I changed my feeble mind.

I sighed. Jasper had finished his aria, and I prepared to shut the door. Then, shears still held tight, and Buddy close and attentive at hand, I did the funniest thing. I kissed him, right on his damp, still-kinda-smelly fore-

head. He looked up at me, and he done something funny, too. He smiled. I smiled again, but neither of us said a thing. I backed out, still careful, and locked him in. I have a sneaky suspicion this one *might* turn out to be interesting. When he's good and ready.