



MATT  
JONES

# The Kissy-Faced Cha Cha

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## 1. A Funeral for the Boys

Plemon and Truman and Goodloe got picked off by our daddy sneaking back into the darkness one night. They left normal as usual, skinny ankles climbing high over the sill, crunchy footsteps in the snow drifting back toward the wood. But then there were three shots.

Daddy wasn't sorry, but he kept apologizing. He said, 'It makes me sick to think what you've been up to with these boys.' It was kind of like an apology, but one for us instead of to us. He said it with his head cocked to the sky as if his words were better suited to things that much higher above him.

I wanted to say a lot of my feelings as words during the service, which wasn't really a proper service at all. Daddy dug one pit as part of his apology and we swung the bodies down in it so they were stacked messy from tall to small, Good's chunky face at the top of the pile, Plem's at the bottom.

Coody spoke for a long time. She babbled on and on about the eternity of love, the plot in her chest with the headstone of her heart that would always read, 'Truman—Dearest of Gentlemen in the Ailing River Valley. The keeper of my kisses.'

The man of my loins—’ and Daddy jumped in to clear his throat and tossed a shovel on the ground. ‘That’ll do, Coody,’ he said. ‘Close ’em up now.’

Wavie stepped forward and tossed one handful of dirt atop the bodies. I did the same. If I had to pick one person to be like in life, it would have been our mother, but she left us and maybe became the queen of the harpies or died. So, I would be like Wavie instead because she was most like our mother. Coody was too emotional.

After we sealed up the pit, Wavie dazed off into the house. She didn’t say one word throughout the entire service. Didn’t shed one single tear. She just stared off into the trees, probably imagining what it would be like to never run away now, to be stuck where we were. I couldn’t tell whether she was just daydreaming or really seeing something. She could do that with her eyes, set them to running in the distance, veins like shaggy tracks leading from her head. Our father rested his hand on her shoulder and said, ‘Now Wave,’ but she shook him off and walked toward the house. He knelt down in front of me so our heads were even and said, ‘Shu. You know how much a father loves his daughters, right?’

‘Enough to kill,’ I said.

He smiled and kissed my forehead. ‘That’s right.’ And our daddy loved us a great deal.

Coody didn’t come inside for days after the service and the snow chewed at the nailed bits of her feet, gnashed ’em up into ice mash. She lay flat on the dirt, six feet above a cold Truman. She cried and cried and her tears turned to ice slicks

beneath her cheeks, rubbed the skin red and raw. As a sister, I wanted her tears to mean something, for the earth to spit up some dainty ripe stalk of fledgling bulb that blossomed just for her. But there was nothing, at least not yet.

Our daddy wasn't having any of it though. After a week of Coody gone cold out there above the boys' plot, he set to digging them back up. He drove the head of the shovel through the hard-packed and frozen dirt until the boys were visible once more. Preserved and white from the cold, dirt-smearred cheeks as if they'd just been hiding down there. He hauled each one of them back out of the earth and placed their rigid forms on sleds that he tied to the back of each of our mules. He led those mules down the mountainside and through the laurel thickets with the boys in tow, and he returned two nights later with three mules and three empty sleds.

'What did you do with 'em?' Coody asked.

'They're in hell now,' he said. 'Fodder for the bears.' And he walked back to our shed behind the house to tie up the mules, calling out over his shoulder, 'Now come on inside, Coody. It's over.'

I found it hard to believe our father sometimes. He had lied before about what happened in the woods around where we lived. He made it sound as if all the space between the trees was too small to slip through, every branch and hanging twig a claw reaching for the skin that passed closest to it, a layer for the bark to chew up and wear as a mask glued by the sap. He told us, 'The last thing I want to have to do is pick up my three little girls piece by piece.' He told us the forest scraped

you clean little by little as you hurdled through the trees. Hair and scalp cleaved by the branches and taken up in nests by the cockyollies. Tattered clothing cut free to spill and tumble like the leaves. Flesh and lips raked away by razor-thin leaves until bones scattered themselves lost in the darkness. 'I couldn't stand it,' he said. 'It was hard enough with your mother.'

## 2. Queen of the Harpies

Plemon used to sneak to us in the middle of the night, foot-whacking over beds of twinkles, his heart a frantic tapping at the wall of his chest so that when he came into our room, a pent-up peckerwood flew out of the hole in his chest. He climbed through our window while Daddy was sleeping and did the kissy-faced cha cha with Wavie until they were both sweaty and loose-lipped. He said, 'Your momma's not dead. She's living down on a harpy boat docked just where the forest turns to floodplain.'

That was why we called her our dead or gone mother, because we didn't know.

Our dead or gone mother left us when our daddy was sick, when his fever cooked his joints to goo and his skin raged tiny fires stoked to burn pustules to popping, to smoking, to signaling the smolder that was to come. She said she was going to get medicine, to pick the bloodroot from the forest floor and mash it into tea for him to drink, to rid the fever from his body. He sizzled for her but she walked out into the cold and never

came back. When Daddy did get better, it had already been a week. He went out looking for her and came back empty-handed. He told us that she had perished out in the woods, that the bugs turned her flesh to meal smeared beneath his boots, but Plemon told us different.

Plemon was the oldest of the band of brothers that would make their home in the wild. When he snuck into our room, Wavie scooped over in the bed to make room for him, which pushed Coody to the edge and I fell out on the floor. That was okay though. I climbed underneath the bed and listened to their breathy flesh gasp for air, Coody's elbows fighting for space as Plem and Wavie gathered heaps of each in other in their own arms, peeled away flesh and stuck hair strands like rinds around a fruit of salmon chard. When they were finished, Plem propped his hands up behind his head and said really coolly like we knew what he was talking about, 'Yeah, she's down there with the rest of the harpies where the river cuts out of the valley.'

Harpies were river whores. They shared an old sternwheeler on the water where the harperella grew up high over the railings, a steamboat with fifty human whistles aboard, screeching into pillows, roaring hollow whispers into the ears of the men stoking their silence and suffocating their flame. The harpies harvested the bitter hollow stocks of harperella and filled them with oil and flame so they burned ripe throughout the night. The harpies rented out rooms by the hour to any mountain man or outlandish alike that could make the journey to their slimy decks and rooms of sultry heat. It is

hard to picture our mother there.

It's hard to think beyond the trees, to imagine outside of them. Thoughts get lost and turned around. They get tired trudging through the snow and up the slopes. They freeze and starve trapped in the bush and die out in the cold, but then they come back to you. Their ghosts like memories fly home and haunt the space behind your eyes. I try to imagine where our dead or gone mother might have ended up. When I imagine her, I see her trudging through the snow. Down the mountainside. Tired. Exhausted. Out of breath. She stumbles and twists her ankle, shoulders up against a gum log to break the wind at her back. Huffs on the crisp for a while until her bones are frozen in place. It's just the way my thoughts work.

But there are places in the woods where the laurel grows too thick to pass through. These thickets are called hell and I imagine her stuck in there, vines poised around her slight throat like pungent beads. I'd rather her dead than just simply gone. Dead is easier. The dead live like worms that wriggle and churn through that first damp layer of earth. Invisible. All but unreal without the digging.

Plemon said, 'Some say that she's the queen of the harpies even.'

Wavie sat up and the mattress above me creaked with her fine rustling. 'And who says that?' she asked.

Plem smiled nervously and said, 'It's just the truth.' They grew silent for a few moments and Plem spoke again. 'We could go find her, if you were still interested.'

I liked to hear them whisper about running away the most. Building a place out of the high winds of the bald that we lived on. Wavie sounded like she wanted all of it, all of Plemon, but she always responded the same way.

‘I can’t leave without them.’

‘Hell,’ he’d say, ‘We’ll all go. You and me, Tru and Coody, even Good and Shu.’ The mattress creaked and he leaned over the bed. His face came to me upside down and he said, ‘You’d like that Shula, wouldn’t you? Goodloe is a nice kid. He’d go slow with you.’

I heard Wavie swat him on the butt and Plemon winked at me before ascending back up to the world above the bed. I tried to picture Goodloe. A chunk of a boy. Red in the cheeks. Teeth that looked so slick I wanted to touch them with my tongue. Just to prod them. Feel for their soft spots.

Plemon climbed out of the window, skinny ankles hoisted into the cold night air, shirt flapping open in the breeze so I saw the bones of his ribs, the cage in his chest where he kept that pesky bird of his.

I crawled out from under the bed and snuggled up next to Coody. Her grin was pulled so tight that I felt the sheets might rip. ‘What are you so happy about?’ I asked.

Her cheeks flushed and I turned over to get some sleep. She hadn’t even so much as met Truman before, but she was in love already. I was warm. I thought that could be love.



### 3. The Unkindness of Boys

They came back to us as ravens first, perched upon the roof, stringing together a squawking chorus of wicked words. A group of ravens is called an unkindness because of their tendency to gather and riot with the wind, their sound carried by breezes and well, unkindness. Sometimes a group of ravens is also called a storytelling. Many of our histories are remembered in terms of unkindness.

Wavie was skeptical at first that the birds could be the boys, but Coody was sure. Coody was sure in the way that she was always sure. Sure that the snake who bit and filled her with poison, sure that the bear that clawed her tummy clean of its tender parts, sure that the bullet that bit her cheek to a thaw of runny blood, was just a strange symbol of love. The poison a kissvitation to the grave, the claws digging simply to have her heart and hold it close, the blood upon her cheeks just a rosy flush. But it was them all right, the boys.

They flew in low once night had fallen, their feathers a dim shine under the dense foliage. They called out, 'Tuft Tamer, Doughbeater, Double Cousin!' Our daddy took to the yard and fired shots off in the direction of their voices, but he missed every single time. When he got tired or ran out of bullets, the ravens flew into our room with their greasy feathers and avian fleas trapezing across the bed in a circus of itches and welts. When we were alone with them, they squawkspersed the tune of our names, of their remembering. 'Wavie, Coody, Shula!' Sometimes, 'Bastard, Murderer, Coot!' Those were

directed toward our father.

Coody had highs and lows that came too easily. She let Truman peck holes in her face that turned to scaly sores and she called it love. Wavie though, she kept Plemon at a distance. Made him perch out on the windowsill.

‘Wavie,’ I said, ‘What’s wrong? You don’t want Plemon anymore?’

‘I want him alright,’ she said, ‘I want him so bad that I can’t have him.’ She held her arm out and her hand shook and Plem climbed aboard her fingers. She stroked his feathers and the oil came off on her fingertips. She rubbed it across her lips so they shined. ‘I want him so bad that I’m afraid to have him. I want him so bad that I’d about wring his neck and break his wings if I let myself. I want him so bad that I might pluck his feathers free one by one just to see his beautiful pocked skin again.’ Plem let out a shrill sound and jumped free from her hand, fluttered out into the night. Wavie smiled and called, ‘Fly away, little birdy, but come back soon.’

By the time morning came, Coody had crushed Truman during the night. Plemon soared high into the sky and dove hard and fast through our daddy’s window. The glass sliced him eight different ways and the worms in his belly speckled our daddy’s beard and dug deep into the wiry hair before he could pluck them out. After that, Good was the only one left.

‘Make it quick,’ Wavie said. ‘You can’t do nothing fun with a bird anyway, Shu. He’ll come back better.’

Coody sniffled and said, ‘Be gentle, Shu. He’ll remember your touch in his next life.’ Wavie laughed at this and said,

‘Yank hard and quick. That’s about as gentle as you can hope for with a man.’

Good hopped around with his wings at his side and turned his head at me curiously. I picked him up and stared into his black eyes. ‘Is flying fun?’ I asked. He made a shrill gurgle that told me flying was fun, but lonely without his brothers. ‘You’ll have to tell me about it more sometime,’ I said.

I wanted to see him again already. The waiting was the hard part. I grabbed his neck in a tight grip and pulled hard away from his body.

#### 4. The Boys

Plemon brought his brothers Truman and Goodloe through the window when they were still boys. Good stood around awkwardly until I reached out from underneath the bed and grabbed his ankle. ‘Here,’ I hissed, ‘crawl underneath.’

He looked confused and I gestured my head up to the four bodies above me. ‘There’s no room. Come on down.’ He lowered himself warily to the floor and his belly scraped softly against the wood. At first, he just lay on his back next to me and didn’t say a word. Sounds came from up above and I narrated each one as if it were a constellation or a wild animal cooing off in the distance.

‘You hear,’ I’d point my hand at the underside of the bed, ‘that right there. That kind of ky-eee ky-eee.’ I turned my head to the side and Good nodded. He must have been the same

age as me, chubby like his body didn't mean to be. 'That's Wavie purring. She does that when Plem takes his fingers like this,' and I curled two of them up like a talon and tickled the underside of Good's chin. 'Open your mouth,' I said, and he did so I could see those gummy teeth of his. I itched the roof of his mouth with my fingers and felt the high ridges above the valley of his throat. 'See,' I said, 'Just like that. You don't have to ram 'em back there is what Wavie says. Just hook 'em up.'

Coody and Truman talked to each other in the way that mothers talked to their newborn babies, whole lives spread out in front of them. Coody and Truman talked to each other like it was their last night on this earth, whole lives like pinpricks of errant dust balanced delicately on the tips of their noses so every new breath drew in that same fear that it could all just fall away in any moment. I don't think they ever even so much as kissed.

'You're about the prettiest girl I've ever seen, Coody. I do swear it's true. I want to rake my fingernails across your fine and strong back like a heelfoot does to a he-balsam. I want to burrow inside of your arms like a whistle pig when the sky goes gray and the wind picks up. I want to grow an extra beard that keeps your face warm. I want to...'

'Geez,' I said, 'Does your brother want to do anything that doesn't sound plum crazy?'

Good sighed and spoke for the first time. 'He gets like this. Come to think of it, I think he said the very same thing to Jorjamae just the other week.'

'Who's Jorjamae?' I asked.

Good turned his head to me. ‘She lives down on the harp...the holler on the bottomside of the backridge. Way back in the beyond.’

‘Oh,’ I said, wondering what he was going to say. ‘We haven’t been out that way yet.’

‘You girls haven’t been much of anywhere yet, have you?’

‘...I want to be a wind-sick bird that finds refuge in the nest of your pucker. I want to be the snowflake that lands on your tongue...’ I considered Good’s question while Truman went on crooning up above us. Wavie let out a deep and throaty ackooo ackkoooo, and I knew that Plemon had found the space inside of her that there was no map to.

‘We haven’t,’ I told Good, ‘but I hear your brother talking about leaving with Wavie all the time. Batching up on the river.’

Good turned over on his side to face me, bumped his head on the wood, rubbed his hair with his one free arm. ‘Yeah. The world is a much nicer place off the mountain.’ The mattress rustled above us and Wavie got to that high-pitched whistling.

‘Did you mean that Truman really met Jorjamae on the harpy boat? Is that what you meant to say?’

When Good’s eyes got bright, I could tell that he looked like his brothers, just more fleshy, younger, weight he had yet to shed, to leave behind in favor of less innocent things. ‘How’d you know about that?’ he asked.

I said, ‘That’s what Plem talks about running to. He said our mother lives down there.’

Good smiled, ‘If that’s her, she’s probably about the most

perfect woman I've ever seen.'

'You've seen her?' I asked.

He got real nervous like he was sorry for having seen a ghost. 'Yeah, just from far away. I never tried to be with her or anything.'

'You been with people?' I asked him.

His face got real bright again and the light cut up his cheekbones raw and gaunt so I could see a man somewhere inside the boy. 'Women,' he said. 'I've been with women. Two of 'em. Jorjamae and Heckie. Tru set it up for me. They were real nice, a little slobbery, but sweet.'

I thought about Plemon and Wavie crawling above us, their heaving and folded yelps coming out faster and faster. 'What about Plemon?'

Good shook his head adamantly. 'No, Plem's in love with your sister all right. He just comes down to the river because he likes it.'

We heard Plemon's twistification above us, the groan that escaped the contortion of his bones and the seizing of his body and all went quiet except for the Coody crooning.

'...I want to taste the sweet sap in your honeyhole and know that I have found home. I want to make my way through the laurel slick...

'Check this out,' said Good, and he buried his mouth in the skin of his elbow and blew hard so rumbled wind escaped in one fast burble. I giggled and we waited for their reaction.

'I know you didn't just pass gas in this bed of mine,' we heard Wavie say. And Truman went quiet. Then two pairs of

skinny ankles showed themselves dressing on the floor and Good said, 'I think they're all finished up there. I better go.'

### 5. The King of the Mountain

After they were ravens, the boys came back as lots of different creatures. I remember when Good was just a cray beetle in my pocket. His back was shiny and hard and purple and green and I could put my hand down into the denim of my trousers and feel his little pinch. I could place him on the cusp of my lobe and hide him like an earring.

I walked around the house and mumbled into the top of my shirt until our daddy caught on and squeezed Good between his thumb and forefinger. In fact, once our daddy caught on, he cut the life out of any living creature that wasn't bathed in skin and his bright light. The birds that came to sing at our windowsill with the coming dawn took in rough pellets that pushed their songs from their abdomens in ten small holes all at once. He lit balls of tinder that he tossed into the whistle pig dens and the smoke pushed their scurrying bodies to the surface where he noosed each one and strung it high from trees for the hawks to pick clean. When the hawks came, he pulled his trigger once and again and the feathers floated to the ground. He set traps like hungry steel jaws in the dense brush where the bears tread, and when the teeth bit down through the fur and bone of some old heelfoot, he walked out to the forest to meet the wounded bear, to carve the striffin from the

skin, cleaved its coat of every stitch and tanned it on the porch where we watched the animals disappear. Where we watched and listened as the forest fell quiet and dark.

He went on a rampage of sorts. If so much as a cricket rubbed its legs together in the night, he boiled up a pot of coffee and spent himself in the darkness hunting down its music until he could cut its strings from its woodwork.

There was a time when we thought the three of them had returned to us as orbweavers with dense webs that hung up in the corner of our room. Wavie thought we should just smash them into stains on the wall. 'I'm not messing with no spider,' she said. Coody hoisted her delicate hand up to the web and we all watched as one pair of eight legs crawled down the length of her arm and onto the back of her neck where it sank its fangs in a frenzy. It dashed up under her throat and turned its daggers into the soft space beneath her chin until she was covered in red welts tinged green, oozing pus and pain. When it slunk off into her hair, I swatted her across the back of her head with my shoe and she passed out for a few hours. By the time she woke up, Wavie and I had knocked the web down from the wall.

I untied the mules from the pen we kept out back and ushered them into the woods. Still, one of them returned. It stood dumbly outside our window and Wavie brushed its long face with the tips of her fingers. She kissed its long mouth with her own, sucked its buckteeth until her cheeks were covered in a smooth sheen of spittle.

She said we could probably ride it all the way down the mountain.



‘How do you know its Plem? It could be my Tru come back once more,’ Coody said, wounds across her neck still healing.

Wavie climbed out of the window and probed her hands underneath the mule. It brayed. ‘It’s him, all right. I can tell.’

Daddy was most mad about the mules. He needed them to help him haul up and down the mountain, so he was naturally a little irate when he had to cut ’em up. He turned their hard flesh into a stew that he ladled into bowls for all of us to eat. Wavie and Coody zipped up their lips and refused to take so much as a bite or a streusel of grease through their gapped teeth. I tried to imagine what Good would do and I filled my mouth with a heaping spoonful of gruel and grease that ran down my chin. Our daddy smacked his lips and raised his bowl to mine. ‘To my girls,’ he said.

## 6. The Band of Boys

The brothers returned last as brush wolves, bush howlers, silver-backed sheaths of fur and fine muscle with fuses of red and orange sinew lit and burning up their backsides. They stalked the shaded side of the mountain. They yipped to each other through the night, high shrieks of whispered howls that touched the air and then shivered across the space of the forest. Peeling the bark from the trees in the shape of bald and splintered hearts that I traced with my fingertips the next day.

My sisters and I sat up in the branches and cupped cold

hands over our ears. Coody sighed breath in a fog in front of her face. I could feel the heat mixed up on her tongue. ‘That’s him,’ she said. ‘You hear him?’ They yipped and yipped and yipped. ‘Yes, that’s Truman calling for me. I hear you, Tru! I’m here for you, baby,’ she yelled into the night. Icicles cracked from their holding and fell like knives into the grave of footprints below.

‘Shhhh,’ Wavie said. She smacked Coody across the shoulder. ‘You want Daddy to hear us?’ Coody frowned and rubbed her shoulder. Daddy was asleep with his shotgun tethered to the tilt of the gaze that spilled from the space between his eyes like a snowball down the slope of his crooked nose, gathering speed. Gathering all in its path. I dangled my legs from the branches and listened more closely to their yips. I heard one just for me. It was Goodloe crying out for me, his screech the low and soft sizzle of wood split, the shout from grain to grain to grain that occurs with the separation.

‘How long do brush wolves live?’ I asked.

Wavie’s lips were blue and still, frozen, not trembling. Her face was full and high, her cheekbones the perfect ledge for weary feelings to take refuge on during the climb down from eye to mouth. She was the oldest of us and I hoped to have her smell one day, a scent so dark and brooding, trapped like a thaw underneath the topsoil of skin so you feel buried in it when it surrounds you. Buried in it in a good way. Like you’re decomposing. Like the earth’s devouring your body to be made into spike lilies and chestnut trees that grow high above the ground, branches perched on your face like eyelashes so you

can see everything beyond yourself.

‘I don’t know, Shula.’ Wavie plunged her hand beneath a build of snow on one of the branches and watched her fingers disappear. Relief rolled across her face in such a way that you’d have thought her hand was on fire. ‘I’d bet ten years. Maybe fifteen if they’re well fed.’ I pictured Good with a fat, low-to-the-ground tummy and a pink tongue lolling as he scooped up mouthfuls of gelica and ginseng root. It seemed about right.

‘You think they like being wild?’ I asked.

Wavie sifted some of the snow through her fingers and watched it flutter to the ground. ‘Oh, I’ll bet they do. I’ll bet they’re latching onto every hound bitch they can find tied to a tree.’ This thought made Wavie smile. ‘That’s what boys want anyway. To be wild.’

If the queen of the harpies was a wild woman living on the water, snatching up men to feed on each dusk, then I guessed that made our mother a caged pet when she lived with us. The boys yipped again.

‘They sound like they’re in so much pain,’ Coody said. ‘My Truman, my poor Truman.’

Wavie snickered which helped me to laugh too. ‘Oh it’s a pain they’re howling about all right. A deep pain that only dogs and men get.’ Wavie started sniffing the air, twitching her nose. ‘Just between their legs under a batch of bristly twine.’ Wavie started to roll her hips on top of the tree branch, riding it like it might crack off and fly her away somewhere. She pushed her hips across the rough bark and shut her eyes, licked her lips. ‘I got the pain too sometimes,’ and Wavie went to howling and

squealing up into the sky until we were all laughing.

Our giggles ground with their yips off in the distance until the darkness was raving mad.

‘I do miss him though,’ Coody said.

Wavie huffed. ‘You haven’t seen him but more than a few times. You two barely so much as touched lips when he was a boy. You’ll let a spider sting your throat and a mangy bird share your pillow, but you won’t let a boy so much as dry his sweaty hands on the frill of your skirt. Heck, even Shu had the sense to do more than you while she had the chance. Isn’t that right, Shu?’

I stared down at the ground from our perch in the tree. It would be so nice to be able to leap and not fall, to ascend up toward the sky. If being wild was like being free, then it seemed like the difference between dead and alive didn’t matter so much. ‘That’s right,’ I said.

Coody sneered at me and said, ‘If I had my rathers, I’d still choose Truman trapped inside of a hog than Goodloe trapped inside of himself.’

I shrugged. ‘Do you think we’ll ever get that chance, you know, to do it again?’

‘I hope so,’ Wavie said.

‘Will it be different?’ I asked.

Wavie smiled. Coody listened eagerly. ‘I doubt it,’ she said. ‘I think he’ll just latch on and go.’ This made us all laugh again, the echoes coming from our throats aching into the dark.

I didn’t always understand Wavie. Coody was easy. She

oozed sentiment like a sheep's head dripped blood. Wavie though, sometimes I wanted to say that I saw her fur bristle. That I saw her eyes yellow and her hackles raise. I thought I could hear her growling in her sleep, gnawing at my heels while I dreamt. She doesn't have any fur though. I think Wavie is just hungry. Starving even. She's wild and fierce and I get the sense that life doesn't offer her enough room to roam.

### 7. The Kissy-Faced Cha Cha

In the morning, there was only sparse winter breath from those who were still sleeping. The songbirds broke their necks craning for the warmth of the sun and their feathers turned heavy and cold before they hit the ground. I got the sense that Wavie never slept. She was exhausted, fumes made combustible caught to spark by the friction of her restless joints. Fire and flame. I remembered that love is hot, not warm.

I walked outside and saw our daddy driving the head of the shovel into the frozen earth. I thought he probably heard us up in the tree the night before. He peered up at me, sun-slit eyes over the snow and hollered, 'Your sisters up yet?'

'Nah, they're sleeping.'

He smiled and said, 'Head out on back and grab another shovel. I'm working on something over here and could use your help.'

I was our daddy's last hope. Everything eternal and precious still trapped in the spit bubbles that crowded the

corners of my lips. He never knew what I did with Good under the bed. I liked to keep it that way. If he ever found out, I expected that he might take dynamite to the entire mountainside, just blow up bits of rock and boulder into one sharp slide that sliced up the trees and buried the bears in their dens and turned everything into a space too rocky to find a foothold. Our dead or gone mother described him as trigger-happy. Wavie said Plemon was quick on the trigger. It sounded like the same thing, but our mother always said it with a sense of dread, clasped her hand over her heart with fingers spread like growing vines of ivy that reached for the thin swoop of her neck, like she were in hell already. Wavie said it with a kind of frustration that indicated it was nice to be frustrated about something.

On that last night we had with Plem and True and Good when they were still just stretches of pink skin and yellowed teeth and ruffled hair atop the lumpy rounds of their heads, I did the kissy-faced cha cha. Wavie told me that our mother came up with the term.

There were times when our daddy got sick from the cold and she took the mules down the mountain instead. She always came back about a day later than she was supposed to with a little something extra in the way she moved. Extra sleek. Extra quick. Extra rhythm. Extra movement. And she told Wavie about the men she met down near the river, men who wore their chests bare and swam through the bitter fog coming off the water like a group of ghost stallions on parade just for her. She told Wavie about what it meant for a man to take your

hand, 'to lead you in a dance that really took you places, places you never thought you'd go. A dance that made you squeeze your eyes shut so tight you thought they might roll back into your head and see your brain lighting up like jimmy works set to pop, soaring off in a whirlwind of smoke that made you cough and drool and open your eyes to see that you'd just been traveling the most magical of circles.' When our mother came back from those trips, she tried to teach our father to dance, but his spirit was too clunky, his feet too flat for flare and finer things.

I'd seen Plem and Wavie do the dance plenty of times. He took her hand and led her straight down into the dirt and the fire, the floor so hot their feet flexed and toes curled and sweat made a delightful stink out of the salt and sweet come from their runny mouths. Coody never danced. She got asked plenty of times by Truman, but she was always too busy fixing her hair, straightening her dress, counting the beats in her head until the rhythm of the easiest music just became one big thud pounding in her ears.

I danced though. Underneath the bed. The sounds above Good and I a soft and shifting rain that bled right through the mattress and left both of us shivering and wet there on the floor. He put his hands on my chest and said, 'You're a lot flatter than Jorjamae, but that's okay. I wouldn't mind being a little lighter up top myself.'

I touched his belly and his boy breasts, pinched their rubber between my thumb and forefinger. 'You're soft,' I said.

He bumped his head up against the wood and leaned

over to kiss me. His lips moved like slugs across cherry-snap bark, a slick coat of slime left smeared just under my nose and I felt the urge to say something like, 'I want to plant seeds in the streak of your eyebrows and watch petals fall across your face.' Instead, I just pressed myself up against him madly and felt all the things that my mother and Wavie and Coody talked about. All the disappointments and fears and thrills and beating hearts that stampeded in one dumb untamable herd off a cliff to nowhere. I hesitate to say it felt like a sort of flying because I had never really flown before. Maybe it was just more of a falling. It was something I would have to ask Good about.

## 8. A Garden for the Boys

We dug out a lily garden around the house and the progress was slow. It was a lily garden because the trenches took on the shape of budding flowers, the plants of which were pits and ate up any animal too stupid or hungry to fall in. My hands bled with the driving of the shovel into the hard earth. Our daddy sweated and the cold air licked the salt right off his skin. He dug the first pit as deep as he was tall. He had Coody and Wavie hack branches from the trees and carve them into sharp tips that could be stuck in the bottom of the pits.

I was a cute digger. The shovel at a height taller than myself. Every time I scooped up a measly pile of dirt and tossed it over my shoulder was a time our daddy could look at me and feel some relief. Wavie sheared the peel from her branch



and the shavings gathered at her feet ready to catch and burn. Coody hacked messily away as I imagined she would. A sloppy and eager thing not fit for any bout of perfection.

‘We’re going to dig these all the way around the house,’ our daddy said.

‘What for?’ Coody asked. I hardly heard Wavie speak to him anymore at all.

‘To protect my girls,’ he called, his voice a thorned syrup, sweet to slide down and sharp to get caught. He walked back inside the house.

When I got tired of digging, I sauntered on over to Coody and Wavie. Their forearms were covered in wood shavings as big as sand grains and their muscles sparkled like glitter in the light of day. I picked up one of the branches they had carved and tested the edge with the tip of my finger.

‘You think Daddy means to keep the brush wolves out?’ I said.

Wavie carved rough wooden knots down to smooth shaven hides. ‘I think that’s part of it, Shu.’

Coody struggled with her blade. She had trouble dragging the sharp through the rough and the edge of the knife kept getting caught.

Wavie looked up at the house to make sure our daddy was still inside. ‘I think he wants to keep us here more than anything.’

I didn’t like that thought. I wanted to ask Good what flying was like. I didn’t know how he would tell me since he was a brush wolf, but I figured that I could find a way. Wavie

picked up the pace of her carving and the branch got whittled down to nothing more than a smithereen cracked in half from the pressure of her hold on it. 'That man,' she said. Splinters fell to her feet. 'He means to keep us here, but we can't stay. I won't stay.'

'What would we do?' asked Coody.

'We'll do what mamma did,' said Wavie.

'Become whores?' I asked. 'Or die?' I said.

Wavie stopped carving and broke a quick smile, or maybe it was just the way the light caught the lines of her face. 'You stick with me, Shu. You too Coody, and I won't let anything bad happen to you.'

We dug those pits until night came and went and by the time the sun sought to show itself once more, we had made a trench around the house. There was a moment when our daddy needed help climbing out. He spent his time digging the spears into the dirt at the bottom of the trench so they stuck up toward the sky like pointed teeth, the earth a mouth ready to swallow bodies whole. I thought about not offering my hand to help him up, but Wavie gave me a nod that told me it was okay.

Our daddy clapped his dusty hands across our shoulders and said, 'Would you look at that! I've seen birds that couldn't fly over a gap this wide.'

## 9. The Little Death

Good told me about their trips down to the harpy boat.

He said that making love was not so much like dying, but ‘like living someplace else for just a little.’

Truman walked the halls of that harpy boat like it were heaven, every water-warped plank an uneven step leading into some hallowed beyond of seared hot and ready flesh. He lay down with women who had moles stuck to their jawlines with hairs growing up out of the center, blades of thin grass born from wads of brown and crusted clay.

I don’t know why Plem never told us that our mother lived down there for sure. He always speculated, but he never made any sort of judgment on the claim. Good though, Good told me all about her.

‘She looks like a mix of fog and sunlight, just a glimmer of a person, a ghost really. I’d be too afraid to even approach her, like if I reached out my hand her fine gowns would turn to ripples in front of my face.’

‘She wears fine gowns?’ I asked him.

‘Yeah, she does, but not the others. There’s so many bare teats aboard that boat that you’d be hard pressed not to trip face first into a swarm of nipples, all perky and teeth-nicked from the eager mouths that take their tips between their teeth.’ Sore nipples seemed like one of those surprises in life that you wanted but didn’t know how to ask for. Somebody just had to know how.

‘Does she look like me at all? I remember her a little bit, but I just wonder about now, if she looks like me.’ I crossed my arms over my bare chest and crinkled my toes together as if it would help hide me there underneath the bed.

Good laughed a little bit then straightened his face. ‘Well, Wavie’s got more of her blood than you or Coody, but the parts of you that I can’t see look like those parts of her that I’ve never seen. I’ll bet they do.’ Good scrunched his face like he wasn’t sure exactly what he said, but it sounded nice in my ears. The bed shook above us and Wavie bassooned a rich moan. Truman told Coody about all the things he planned to do to her. He would be planning for a long time.

‘Our mother’s a whore, I guess.’

‘Nah,’ Good said, ‘she’s the queen of the harpies.’

‘But a harpy’s a whore, isn’t that right?’

Wavie squealed above us, stuck by Plem, left out to baste from the fragrant slaughter of all her inside parts.

Good tucked his lip under his teeth before saying, ‘A harpy’s just a woman with too many to tend to.’

‘Like us,’ I said.

‘That’s not true,’ and he scooped himself across the floor and put his arm under my head. The weight of the mattress played on the bed-cords and sagged inches above his brow. ‘I’ve seen her staring across the water from the uppermost deck, looking at the river that cuts through the valley into these ridges.’ Good took his hand and pulled his knuckles across my belly, over the lines of my waist so I could picture that valley he was talking about. ‘The dusk just about turns her to flickering like the wind might blow her completely out. She looks like she just might about melt for the three of you.’

I felt the melting. I saw it behind my eyes. It was hard to be human just a little sometimes. It felt nice to go someplace

else, even nicer to want to stay.

## 10. The Tenderness of Boys

Our daddy caught Plem as a quill pig with nothing but a handful of Wavie's hair and a well-hidden snare in the high grass. He thought it was the funniest thing. He kept him in a cage and spit on him through the bars.

A lot of people don't know it, but quill pigs love to climb trees. They've got these hairless pink soles on the bottoms of their feet that they use to grip the bark just like people do. They're just like little thorny bears. When Wavie and Coody and I would climb up the trees to listen for the yipping off in the distance, I curled my toes to grip the trunk and all the muscles from my waist to my chest flexed tight.

Every day Plem was in that cage, our daddy set aside time to pluck out a handful of quills from Plem's body. He called us inside the house, waved to us with his gloved hands so we knew to come watch. Wavie never showed much in the way of emotion, but Coody probably shed ten tears for each quill that came out. It was the sound of them that was hard to hear. The detachment. The pop they made getting picked from the skin. Plem always let out a sharp gargle and cough each time another one was pulled free. I surely thought that Truman and Good were out there up in the trees somewhere, staring down through our window and watching as their brother got made into a pink and bald rat.

Our daddy did different things with the quills. Some, he hid inside the mattress on Wavie's side of the bed. Others he tucked inside of her pillowcase or sewed up along the stitching of the inside of her shirts. Pushed through the crotch of her jeans so that when she slid both legs through, she let out a sharp cry and the blood dripped forth in watery droplets that smeared down her leg. He shouted, 'You want him so bad? You can have him seven ways till Sunday.'

Eventually, Plem was threadbare and wrinkled and Wavie collected every quill she could and strung 'em around her throat, a necklace of barbs built for skewering all the fond parts that tried to scurry up and out of her chest, to pass through her lips and into the world. She tried to seem strong.

And Daddy eventually gave up first on trying to make a point and he pinned Plem to the wall, one quill in each paw. He hooked his fingers around a blade and brought it clean down the belly. He peeled away the skin and Plem made the sound of steam sizzling. Daddy rough-handled Plem's worn body, the pad of each finger rubbing up raw against bare flesh, and I thought that I had seen Plem naked plenty of times, but that made it no easier to watch.

'Look here,' he said. 'I want all of you to look what happens.' Daddy pushed the sharp of his knife down until the meat opened up. He picked the pulp out with his fingers and gave the heart a gentle tug so it heaved in between his hands. 'You see this,' he said. 'This is what happens when boys mess with my girls.'

'What?' Wavie asked, 'You gut a porcupine?'

Our daddy's eyes went as wide as they could go and he looked crazy with a heart the size of an acorn gasping like an egg ready to hatch in his palm. 'I kill 'em,' he said.

'You skinned a quill pig,' Wavie said. 'That's all you did. Not a boy. Not a man. You killed it nice and slow. But he'll be back tomorrow. He'll be back tomorrow and the next day and the next. He'll always come back for me. Not like you,' she said, 'Nobody'll come back for you.'

He dropped the heart from his hand and it sputtered to a stop next to his boot. Coody wiped her eyes dry and our daddy looked at me. I didn't know quite what to say. He lifted up his foot and brought his heel down over the heart in one quick squelch and then he took the forest to make things fall quiet.

## 11. Call of the Soft Animal

I wondered where Wavie took her advice. Our daddy often tilted his head up toward the sky when he spoke. He showed the throb of his exposed throat to the clouds, the beat and flutter trapped underneath the skin as if to say, 'If I am mistaken, cut me open and let my words fly up to meet you so you might see their flapping, their beating perched on the tip of your nose, feel their small wind like my breath.' It sounded like something he would say because he spoke crazy sometimes.

Wavie though, she seemed to take her advice from the trees. The way she stared off into their dense gathering of bark and green bristles, I thought there was something she could see

or hear that I couldn't. Either that, or she simply took advice from herself. I didn't understand how that worked. How you knew what was right or wrong or good or bad for you without someone else weighing in. I often wondered whether or not our mother had told her something before she was dead or gone. Something special.

I think that would have been the least she could have done. A few sweet words for each of us. When I pretended to be asleep, the gentle grinding of Wavie's teeth sounded a little like rain. Something soothing, something squeaky to stay up and listen to. When she did fall asleep, everything got real quiet. And even if Plemon or Truman or Goodloe weren't there, I snuck off onto the floor and wiggled my way under the bed. It was easier to not hear them when I couldn't see them either. In the same way it was easier to imagine our mother dead than just gone, out there on the river making coos and cries that echoed off the water that traveled back up in the mountain disguised as rustling through the brush and cracking of the bark. Under the bed, I snuggled up to a more complete silence that crowded the corners of my eyes like darkness until I too was sleeping.

When she left, I'm sure she heard our daddy's sick hacking. The wheezing of his sore lungs and tender chest rising and falling hard, quaking so every deep breath spit up gunk clung to his inner walls. She walked farther and farther away from our house and the sound eventually faded to an echo, something she could confuse as just a sneaky animal darting from branch to branch, some vocal bird bellyaching



the misfortune of its yolks smeared down on the forest floor.

When she left, I heard the crunch of her dainty feet treading carefully over beds of twinkles and dried leaves. Every step turned softer and softer until the forest fell into a hush once more. It's hard to just have that, the sound of somebody leaving. It would have been nice to have just a few sweet words. She could have pulled Coody away from tending to Daddy and said, 'Never love your body. Never love your legs or your hips or the curve of your breasts. Love yourself first and foremost. Men can sense that. They know what you love about yourself and if they find out that you've got a fondness for your thighs or the dimples of your bony butt, they'll cut those parts away for themselves so it won't matter who you are as a whole.' I think Coody could have used some man wisdom.

Maybe before setting off to become just a sliver between the trees, she could have knelt down to me and said, 'Make sure the first boy you ever know is good. And I mean good, really good.'

Maybe before she started her reign as queen of the harpies or ghost of the forest, the flicker of light men thought they saw strolling the uppermost deck, she really did give a piece of herself to Wavie. Some advice. Wavie didn't seem to worry as much. She seemed surer of herself and the way things could be. Something about her told me that she held on to more than just the sound of footsteps waning into the past. When Wavie listened to the forest, when she gazed out into the back of the beyond, she could hear something different than the rest of us. Wavie told me, 'Your soft animal lives in here,' and she took

my hand and placed it over my chest, held it there so I felt my own thumping. ‘Under all of this bone and muscle and raw hide. It’s not soft like mush or mud, but it’s soft for you, for your hands. It lives trapped in here, inside this cage, because it has to, because you make it.’ She pulled at my hair and pinched my skin. ‘It wears the hide of the beast heavy on its back.’ She pulled my hand away and placed it over her own chest so I felt her own pounding. ‘It starts its journey in the fading and makes its home in the light. It lives tenderly in the still spaces between each beat, between living and dying.’

I wondered if she heard that from our mother.

## 12. The Unattended Flowers

We were sleeping for a matter of hours when the yips started up again. The sun made its way into our room in shards that pierced our barely open eyeballs and sliced all the way into what we had been dreaming, slashed it into sheets of forgettable white.

Wavie sat up on the edge of the bed staring into the glare of the window. She said, ‘Get up, you two.’ Coody groaned and wiped the spittle from her chin. Wavie knocked her heel against the bed’s frame and said, ‘Come on now, Shu. Crawl on out of there.’ The yips of the boys sounded far enough away that they just might have been in my head, shrinking away from the feeling of waking up.

I felt the dirt on my skin from all the digging that had

taken place. We had only been sleeping for a few hours. ‘Why are we getting up now?’ I asked.

Wavie pressed herself to the floor and reached one long arm under the bed. She grabbed a hold of my ankle and looked at me with half of her face pushed against the floor. ‘Don’t make me pull,’ she said. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Okay, okay. I’m coming out.’

I was dreaming about the harpy boat. Its white walls and white halls. Women of putrid elegance, dazzling in the way they were dirty. Men cuddled up next to their misshapen bodies like baby boys. I remember her yelling from the deck, ‘All aboard, girls! We’re leaving soon so get yourselves decent and get on down here.’

Wavie climbed up to our windowsill and hoisted her legs into the open air. ‘Come on, now,’ she said. ‘Follow me.’

Coody threw her arms down by her sides. ‘Just where do you think we’re going, Wavie? I haven’t even fixed my hair,’ she said, licking each palm, brushing them down the sides of her head so the spit mixed with the grease and the hair flattened itself out.

Wavie craned her neck back inside and hissed. ‘We’re leaving. Now are you coming or not?’ When she said this, she looked more at me.

The yips coming from the woods—from the boys dashing around red-chested and white-furred, their swift paws bounding through brush and branches that snapped back across their bodies—sounded more and more distant.

Coody struggled with the idea that had just been

presented to her. She huffed and tried to speak but her tongue went limp and her lips smeared uneven in front of her mouth. She looked like she wasn't sure what to say, but she settled on, 'But what about Daddy?'

'He can't come,' Wavie said.

'Why not?'

'He won't want to,' and she swung herself out of the window, bare feet champing down on cold snow and frost. I gave Coody a shrug like I too was confused, and then I followed Wavie outside.

The day was crisp and the first light of the sun barely breached the first layer of my skin. 'I had a dream last night,' I started to say and Wavie held one hand up to me. A whistle, a high-pitched moan sounded from far away. It blared from I don't know where and found its way to our ears. 'You hear that?' Wavie asked.

I did but I wasn't sure what it was. Then it sounded again and once more, a bellow blown up the mountain like a gust of deep tones blustering through our hair, driving pitch and sway back across our shoulders. 'We gotta hurry,' she said. 'They're leaving.'

Our daddy came out of the house sliding his shirt over his worn skin and looked to the trees and then us. 'What's going on out here?' he hollered. He buttoned his pants and hoisted his shotgun half-cocked in front of him, hanging lazy and limp around his waist like he might just fire off into the breeze to see what kind of gusts he could bring down and bottle up to swirl around the cage he kept inside. Coody followed him out

moments later, hair fixed, dressed up neat.

Wavie knelt down in front of me and put her hands on my shoulders. Daddy called out, 'Wave, what are you doing?'

Wavie looked close at me and said, 'You ever get tired of this place?'

I didn't know what to say and she kept talking, trying to find new words. 'I do,' she said. 'I can only love what I love, and I don't love this place. I don't love that man,' and she gestured her head toward our daddy. 'Do you know what I mean, Shu?'

I felt like I knew so I nodded. 'Good,' she said. 'Good. You think you can make that gap?' she asked.

I looked at the lily garden we had dug around the house. The spiked poles dug into the dirt at the bottom of the pit, how still they stood like stalks of thick grain with spiny bulbs. I couldn't make that gap with a running start and a pair of wings. 'Yeah,' I said. 'I think so.'

She smiled again. 'I thought so.'

The yips of the brush wolves kept happening in my head. I could no longer tell if they were still running through the trees, whipping up leaves and crashing through brush. But I heard the mix of their footfalls and soft pads mushing between my ears.

Coody stood behind our daddy with her hands gripped tight to his shirt.

Wavie stood up and took my hand in hers. I rarely got to feel how much bigger she was than me. 'We'll try it together,' she said.

'What about Coody?' I asked.

Wavie kept her eyes on the trees on the other side of the trench. ‘She’ll come when she’s ready.’ I looked back at Coody and our daddy and they already seemed so far away. I felt Wavie’s tug.

We started running toward the lily garden and all I could hear were the footsteps. Just at the edge of it, we jumped and our hands separated and I saw the other side moving away from me, the trees hoisting up their roots like trailing skirts taking off into the distance. The beats of our footsteps washed away in still waves stuck high and ready to crash hard in the pits of our stomachs.

It felt a little like falling and a little like flying. I could have gone anywhere in that moment, a seedling under the sun capable of being taken away with the wind, whipped into a state of airy sprouting, stalks like wings and roots like invisible talons grasping for a place to land and sink into the dirt, to swell between each grain and burst back into the world entirely new. And that smell. I could smell the dirt around me like it were pouring over my face. How dark it was rushing around my ears and eyes, the current of it so strong beneath where we once stood, always moving and made up of everything.

I had a hard time imagining things. Thinking beyond the trees. There were places I wanted to go again, places I had never been.

A lot of people don’t know it, but there’s plenty of river lizards and mudmanders that don’t have lungs. Breathing comes easier for them than it does for us. Life seeps in through all their slick-skinned pores even if they don’t want it to. There’s

just so much trying that goes into living and dying.

I closed my eyes and listened for the hush around us, angled my ears toward the rustle and the footsteps shuffling along with the silence and the unseen. I think I heard it, the whispering from the soft animal in my chest, the wind swishing through my ears, all that air fixed in a whirl down deep. I think I saw it building behind my eyes, felt it mustering at the back of my throat, that sore and painful gust bent on clawing its way out, that raw and tender yawn and howl, fiercely sensitive to the space beyond its own breath, hotly bound to twitch in the light until some new beast made it warm again.