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DINNER WITH THE VALKYRIES
(a novel excerpt)

By

Tanya Perkins

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Chair, Carol Guess, MFA

Dr. Brenda Miller

Dr. Lysa Rivera

MASTER'S THESIS

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(a novel excerpt)

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Tanya Perkins
May 2011

ABSTRACT

In this novel excerpt, a food addict named for a Norse battle goddess, Svafa Lindeman is a woman caught in a half-life. Suspended between the reality of running a junk business with her aging, hostile mother and evanescent memory of her missing sister, Svafa seeks solace in comestibles from homegrown eggs to double-decker burgers. A chance to write restaurant reviews for the local paper seems like a dream come true, but making peace with food proves to be as tumultuous and ultimately elusive as making peace with the ghosts of her childhood.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	15
Chapter 5.....	22
Chapter 6.....	30
Chapter 7.....	41
Chapter 8.....	49
Chapter 9.....	56
Chapter 10.....	64
Chapter 11.....	71

Chapter 1

"You don't need to help. I've got it." Svafa worked faster as she spoke, her mother stumping into the kitchen behind her, the creaking vinyl, the sliding sound of her pant legs against each other, a kind of rasping like something metal might have entered her. Straightening her spine. A weight in the air.

But she didn't have it and in the nervousness of her sins, the frozen peach pie slid from Svafa's hands and skated across the floor.

Alice thumped her cane down, pinning it in place.

"Peach pie?"

"On sale, look there on the side. Dollar-fifty, in black ink. They've got a freezer bin for mark-downs now, did you know that?"

"You think you're going to fool me, well you're not."

Grocery shopping had been Alice's domain until the arthritis in her knees got too much and Sissy had taken over. A month now, and her daughter still couldn't be trusted to bring home plain food, the kind that took not too much chewing and even less thinking, that slid down gracefully. Graceful food. Now she sounded like Sissy.

"Cream cheese! What d'you need that for? And honey bacon, how much was that now?"

"I don't remember."

"Yes you do too. Where's the receipt?"

"I mean forget it, mother. I got you the canned corn you like, the ones with the pimento mixed in. See? You want that for supper? And look at this, Ritz crackers, just like you asked."

But Alice was rooting through Svafa's purse for the receipt. Orderly, Svafa was, in some things--credits and debits and bank statements (not much to keep track of). A mess when it came to food, like a sickness without conscience or control. A whiff of cheesecake, peach, roast beef--

whatever it was--obliterated all restraint. Crazy, sending her grocery shopping. Everything else went out the window. Even her money sense deserted her.

"Get out of my purse, mother! It's not in there, anyway."

"We can't afford this, Sissy. You know it."

She wasn't Sissy, but she'd given up trying to get Alice to stop using it. "If you hated the name so much," she had said once, "why'd you pick it?"

And Alice had said, "It wasn't me, you can be sure of that."

Now Svafa hunched down over the open bag and all but dumped dented canned goods into the cupboard. "We can so. The dwarf sold, didn't it? I took the Paypal money for the groceries. We're fine."

A fine lie. The truth was, she'd left with a list penned by her mother and a resolve to stick to it, for her own sake, if not for peace. She'd turned a corner--a certain age, a certain weight. Forty was the age. Now the black pants wouldn't go up past her knees and they were elastic topped, made from that horrible stretchy acrylic that all fat clothes were made from. Time to get a grip. Crammed the pants under her bed and pulled on the elephantine sweats she fed the chickens in.

Besides, Svafa liked peace. There was peace when Alice was calm, the leaning wooden house muttered, the scrawny chickens scratched peace among the goatweed and tansy, even the slow depression of the back yard was peace, caving silently like a failed soufflé (Svafa's soufflés: virtuous, buoyant).

Except she lost her resolve on aisle seven--frozen food. Those bright boxes, the silver-framed doors! Pretty pictures of broccoli in plastic-yellow cheese sauce and barbequed chicken pizza made her come undone. Melted resolve faster than butter on a warm waffle. You'd think she'd know better by now, but no, away she went, tethered to her taste buds, her mouth, her vast stomach that yearned for something to quench the craving. To fill the unfillable. By the time she

was fourteen, she was five-ten and two hundred fifty pounds, weighing twice what Susan did. (But who remembered such trivia? And what difference did it make, the adolescent ballooning, the cracked scale she'd finally heaved into the river?)

Mesmerized, she'd watched her own thick hands draw out a tub of Rocky Road ice cream, reach for the peach pie. Onion rings, Texas toast.

And now her mother was winding up, drawing great lungfuls, filling like a sail. "We're fine? I'm fine! You're a mess. What're you thinking--onion rings! I can't eat any of this, this fatty shit!"

Alice rattled the bag of frozen onion rings in Svafa's face, then threw it down, where it spun across the floor, knocking against the peach pie.

A bottle of chocolate syrup rested at the top of the next bag and the name of it--Uncle Sam's Stickee Sweet--erupted like fireworks in front of Alice. What had Sissy said earlier? That she'd follow the list.

"Liar," Alice said. Iron jawed, like tetanus. "Liar--liar!" She grabbed the chocolate syrup, wrenched it open and threw it at Svafa. (Later she will think it a minor miracle, her fingers working so well.) Brown liquid arced through the air like paint, splattering cupboards and floor. Svafa ducked.

Alice clawed at a pizza box. Arthritic fingers aching, she took a knife and tore at the cardboard until the partially-thawed pizza came free. Ripping it into chunks, she advanced toward Svafa.

Moments like these, Alice glimpsed herself as if in another body, and her shame thickened until it was laser-white, mirrored back onto itself, blinding.

"Hungry, are you? You bought it! Well, now you'll eat it, every bite of it."

"For Christ's sake, calm down, mother. You'll give yourself a heart attack. Here, sit down."

(Kill your own monsters, Susan would say. You made them.)

"Eat it--all of it!" And twisted her hand into her daughter's hair and with the other tried to force the frozen pizza into her mouth.

Svafa knocked her hand away, shoving her back. "Stop, mother--just stop! You sound like a crazy person."

Alice staggered, grabbing onto the counter. "You should see yourself--you're a barge--hell, you're the great whole goddamn flotilla! Go on, go into my room and look in the mirror. Do it now, because at the rate you're growing, you won't be able to fit through the door next week." Dropping the pizza, she reached for another bag.

The Wolfgang Puck chocolate-chocolate chunk cookies would be next. Svafa heard Alice rip open the box with the same knife she'd used on the pizza, which sounded like a big zipper unzipping. Her mother was unzipping, they were both unzipping, the coarse, ghostly aches they lived with spilling out as if there might be a kind of salvation in the display. Yes, the cookies would be next, whose first ingredient was coco butter, of all things, for how could a cookie hold together, Svafa had wanted to know, when it was composed of such softness?

*

Later. Alone in the kitchen, Alice's ears rang with tinnitus. She set the ruined cookie box on the counter and pressed a hand to her neck where her pulse crashed in the softness beneath her jawbone. Her throat was sticky, bitter, as if she had burped poison up into her own mouth and swallowed it again.

She knew weakness, the eviscerating kind, that left you flailing blindly in the wind. Svafa's was food. Not so bad really. Not compared to Alice, whose own weaknesses now made her breathe regret by the lungful. Could she be blamed for trying to protect her daughter? Protect! As if that was what you were doing. Well, she'd talked to her about controlling her diet,

watching her spending, hadn't she? Useless. What couldn't be reasoned out of a person had to be forced. Physically, if need be.

Yes--yes. That's what I was doing.

Her anger still echoed, useless now, in the empty kitchen. When she got like that, she unleashed ghosts that lingered, replaying what they wanted against the screen of her mind.

At the sink, she ran water until it steamed, then rinsed and wrung out a white dishcloth edged with faded red embroidery. She examined it closely, leaning toward the late afternoon light of the window. One of her three daughters had done the needlework long ago in a home economics class, but which one--Svafa, Susan or Linda? Linda'd never been patient enough for fine work. Svafa or Susan, then. If it was Susan's handiwork, then it must have been done before she ran off with that thug she'd taken up with. How long ago was that--twenty years now?

She turned the wet cloth over and sought the initials stitched in the corner. A simple S and an L.

She smoothed out the cloth with stiff fingers and carefully laid it over the top of a cabinet door to dry. She got another dishcloth from the drawer, one without embroidery, and, after rinsing and wringing it out, began to clean the kitchen.

Chapter 2

Svafa drove without thinking. The seatbelts were broken. Her mother's anger was nothing new. As much a part of life as odd lots of warped steak knives or hills of used clothes. Duct tape in the glove box, in case of more breakage. A body should be used to it by now. It wasn't always so bad, being more often verbal than physical, though Alice liked throwing things and, being a junk dealer, there was always plenty on hand. Once she'd gone clear through a whole set of Royal Doulton, chucking them at the living room one by one.

When she was fifteen, Alice caught her smoking and had used the broom on her, like banishing crumbs. Svafa grabbed it away and stood there, holding it like a baseball bat. To her horror, her mother started crying--Alice, bigger than God--crying. Helpless as a downed juggernaut.

"Oh, Mama." She'd dropped the broom, put her arms around the solid, shaking form. Alice snatched up the broom and walloped her across the back until she hit the floor. No, no. Alice was ready to strike but Susan wrestled the broom away. "Pick on someone your own size," she said.

That was Susan all over.

Svafa wiped her nose with the back of her hand, keeping her eyes on the road. Not that she needed to pay close attention. For once, she knew where she was going--that was the great thing about a landmark like Hell's Belly Burgers. After a lifetime of familiarity, it anchored her in a loving, secure kind of reality. But still terribly exciting at the same time. Founded forty years earlier, Hell's Belly was now run by the son of the original owner. But that wasn't why it was so well loved. God, the burgers! There was nothing like them in the universe. Grilled until crumbling dark-brown, nestled lovingly on floury buns, partitioned by lettuce, tomato and sweet onion, they were so splendid that you almost hated to break perfection by taking a bite. Almost.

Svafa had never been in love but she suspected it was something like the first bite of a Hell's Belly burger. She could find her way there stone blind, if she had to.

Just that knowledge made the foment of her mother's anger recede. The double bind of anticipation and security. In elementary school, the girls lined up at recess to play tetherball. Her own depth perception was lousy, eye-hand coordination nil. But she loved the shiny ball, its leaping yet diminishing orbit that wilded around the pole. What comfort, what a thrill, to fling yourself out and never fall to the ground.

She gave her order: "Hell's Special Belly and a pineapple shake to go." This was where the mending took place. The possibility of broken edges forming something approaching wholeness.

"Fries-with-that?" said the cashier, a teenager with black-rimmed eyes and purple lip gloss.

Hand-cut, fried in pure beef tallow. A person would kill for a fry like that. Should she? Just a large, not a Bellybuster.

"Eight-fifty with tax," said the cashier, purple-mouthed.

Svafa opened her purse and her heart bumped. Her wallet was missing. Gone! Rummaging in her purse, Alice must have taken it out in her rampage to find the grocery receipt.

"Eight-fifty," repeated the cashier. A line was forming behind Svafa; she could hear little noises of impatience. A fly buzzing at the window grew enraged.

"Changed my mind," she said, reddening. The beefy smells had already curled up inside her nose and weaseled their way into her ache. It was enough to start crying all over again.

Turning to go, Svafa almost bumped into a small girl and an older boy. A woman and balding man trailed behind them, smiling apologetically, pushing past Svafa, and out the door.

She stood aside. There was their booth by the window, the remains of their meal spread over the table among crumpled paper napkins. Why was she looking at it? This was why: one of

them, probably one of the kids, had left a whole burger on the plate, with one little bite gone. The table was a wreck, shattered onion rings, fries sogging in ketchup pools, but the plate itself, which held the near-whole burger, wasn't messed up. It was as if the little girl (Svafa was sure it was the little girl) had taken one very small bite and changed her mind.

Svafa glanced around, then stared at the lone, near-perfect burger, mesmerized. This was the thing about Hell's Belly burgers: They looked just like their pictures. In a world where exaggerated advertising was expected, such truthfulness almost seemed deceptive. Tall, proud, perfectly rounded, the radiant essence of burgeriness. Svafa could imagine a gentle light shining on it from somewhere up above. How could she let that perfectly good burger go to waste when it was such a thing of beauty? So thrilling and alluring? Waste was to be avoided at all costs. Her mouth was watering already.

Slowly, she slid into the booth, ignoring the mess of ketchupy napkins and pool of orange pop. She picked up the burger with damp hands. Glory be, it was still warm. Her first bite made her jaw ache and filled every nook and cranny in her mouth. Filled her to brimming. A dome dropped down over her; she was alone. Everything was warmth, savory, mustard-sweet.

After a few moments, Svafa opened her eyes and allowed herself to refocus on her surroundings. In the parking lot, the father was lifting the little girl into the van. She was five, maybe, and smiled at Svafa. Open-mouthed, perfect, small teeth. The mouth of a kitten. Friendly, not mocking, not that. She lifted one hand--to point? To wave? The van door slid shut. The father tossed his keys in the air with one hand. Winked at Svafa,

Chewing hurriedly now, she pushed the rest into her mouth. The first bite was always the best, the most thrilling. Downhill from there, like a tetherball fleeing around its pivot. Rummaging among crumpled napkins, she found cold fries. Tasted the grease, the sweet ketchup slick in her mouth, feeling the inevitable diminishment even as she sat there chewing remorselessly. Rope tightening with each turn until no further movement was possible.

Chapter 3

When Alice was twenty-nine, she fell in love the way she might fall down a mountain. It was the spring of 1965. The first twenty-eight years of Alice's life were unremarkable. The only child of German immigrants, she grew up at her parents' dry cleaning business. Most of Alice's first three decades of life were spent pre-treating, pressing and folding, in between ten years or so of school, two or three lackluster boyfriends, and Friday night pinochle games with her parents and their friends. She had been born to her parents in the middle years (So this is what happens when I let my guard down, her father said. You didn't let nothing down, her mother said. That was the problem.) Her childhood was subdued, as was her youth. It was as if a grid was being slowly pressed down upon her, which allowed vertical movement but no horizontal. Her reactionary energies were being channeled upward, like inching up a flat, grey wall. The more she stretched, the further away the tiny patch of white sky drew.

Then everything changed.

She was pedaling her bike down Third Avenue, freshly folded shirts in her basket, when she spied a young man on his hands and knees in the wet gutter. He was staring so intently down into the storm sewer that he didn't notice Alice pull up beside him. As she gazed at his blonde head and strongly muscled neck, bent there on the pavement before her, her antagonism towards life and the silent, formless dread that had started to take hold of her shifted. The sky suddenly unfolded itself, expanding until she was nothing but a speck. Dizzy, she got off her bicycle.

She wanted to seize him with both hands, tear him with her teeth, his flesh between her jaws. Grind herself into him until they both were obliterated.

The young man glanced up at her. "Dropped my ring down there."

Alice propped her bike on its kickstand and crouched beside him. Spring rains had turned the run-off into a small stream that swept into the sewer, carrying twigs, leaves, cigarette

butts and other trash. Through the mess, she could make out a faint twinkle down in the darkness.

How wonderful he was, and how indifferent she was to his plight. Retrieving an item out of the storm sewer was easy, so long as the thing hadn't been washed away. Once she'd helped a customer rescue opera tickets that had fallen out of a coat pocket, straight into the sewer opening in front of her parents' store. The grates weren't welded shut, after all. The right tool and the metal covering lifted off. Alice understood tools.

"I got to get that back," the man said. He leaned back and sat on the curb. Alice looked at his hands. Calloused, roughened, plank-square. Imagined squeezing them between her legs.

"Wedding ring?"

"Nah, just a ring I keep for luck. Took it off to do some cement work over at the wharf. I was putting it back on when I stumbled and it flew out of my hands."

"You sure the ring fell down this hole?" Alice said, peering down into the black. "Something's shining, but it looks more like a gum wrapper. Maybe it bounced further down the sidewalk. It's hard to tell how far something like that will go. Little things like that, pins and cufflinks and such, they can roll a long way."

The man sighed and raked his hair with his fingers. "It's the damndest thing. I was on my way to pawn it, too."

"I'll help you look," Alice said, her eyes never leaving his face.

They combed the sidewalk, weaving on hands and knees between pedestrian legs and kids on bikes. Alice's shirt delivery was forgotten, as was any thought of telling him how putty on a pool cue was ideal for retrieving fallen objects, or how Public Works could rescue items that were waylaid. In their shared future--which she already could see as easily as she had spied the gold ring in the muck--she would be at the helm, the one that had the right answer, that made things worked. That came to the rescue.

She lent him the twenty dollars he needed (for what, he never said). That evening, she returned with a wire coat hanger and fished out the ring.

"I'm Alice," she said, offering her hand.

"Henry Lindeman," he said. "Pleasure's mine."

*

Svafa flicked on the kitchen light. A little smear of chocolate still clung to the edge of a cabinet, but the rest of the kitchen was clean.

Alice stumped into the kitchen, looking pleased. "Sissy, you'll never guess. I sold that ugly cherub lamp and, what's more, I got fifty for it. Can you believe it? It's that brass thing from the Dirk Street alley we got last summer."

"And the buyer doesn't mind the problem?" Snatched out of a dumpster, the lamp only stayed on for ten or fifteen minutes, then it died. Turn it off, then back on and the same thing, fifteen minutes and then dead.

"Who said I told? Let the buyer beware, Sissy, it's our golden rule." Alice sat at the kitchen table and leaned back, watching her daughter at the stove, satisfied as an old crow who knows how to dodge and dart.

"You'll be barred from eBay, you know."

"Hah! Let them try. It'll be his word against mine anyway. It works! Do I have to guarantee for how many exact minutes? That's his problem. You bought 36-inch boxes today?"

"No, just the smaller sizes like you told me. I don't want to have to go back to the store tomorrow, that's for sure." Svafa made supper as they talked. The fight might have been nothing more than her imagination. Brown rice steamed, last night's vegetable stew sizzled. She added a spoonful of curry for its warm earthiness.

"Well, it's got to go out tomorrow. That's why I've got such a high rating, you know. Some of those other sellers say, "May take up to ten days to ship." Not me. I don't care how you do it, but it goes out tomorrow, you hear?"

"You'll lose your rating when he finds out you lied, mother. You know what they say. A carpenter is known by his chips." Svafa got out two mismatched plates and, after pushing magazines, scissors, a stack of CDs and a child-sized saddle out of the way, laid them on the table.

"He won and there's no damn way he's going back on it. I won't let it happen. What're you making?"

"Vegetable curry from last night's stew and rice. With a touch of saffron." Last month, she splurged on a miniscule capsule; now she added a fragrant thread to the simmering vegetables.

"Why can't you make white rice, like they do in Chinese restaurants?" Alice thudded her cane against the cupboard door, sending dishes shuddering.

"How do you know what they serve in Chinese restaurants? When did you ever go?"

"Common knowledge, Sissy. And I won't let you speak to me like that."

"For God's sake, that's not my name!"

Even after forty-odd years, "Svafa" stuck in Alice's throat like gravel. From the moment Henry had uttered it, the name had levitated like a foul fog at the edge of her vision at all times. But he'd been adamant, had dug in his heels in a way that she had never seen before.

"Follow your own rules," he'd said. "It was your bet, not mine. All I did was win. That's what bugs you, isn't it? That I won."

It was the raw ugliness of the name that Alice hated. Metal against bone, the way it struck her ear like a wound. She had never heard anything like it before.

"Well you have now," he'd replied.

Alice still felt the spearing words.

Now she said, "Sissy's easier to say and it's a damn sight better than the curse your father put on you." Her feet were suddenly hot and she slipped them out of her matted bedroom slippers. They looked like transplants. Second-hand feet. Yellow-white and clawish and fragile, as if they could never support the weight of a real person. Her nails needed clipping, again. Strange how each part of the body glided toward decrepitude, except for the toenails, which continued to grow luxuriantly. Like a joke.

"I like my name, mother," said Svafa.

Shoving her feet back into her slippers, Alice struggled to stand. As she did a fart escaped her.

"That's what I think of it," she muttered. Shut the bathroom door behind her.

When her mother first decided to shift the junk business onto the internet, Svafa had thought she was crazy. First, neither she nor her mother knew computers. Second, who in their right mind would buy something that they couldn't examine up close, hold and touch. Didn't a thing need to be hefted in the hand, stroked with the fingers, turned upside down or inside out to decide if it was worth the price? Besides, any profit would be eclipsed by the exorbitant cost of shipping.

Alice wouldn't budge.

"I'm not blind to the currents of modern commerce, Sissy," she had said calmly. "This is where the junk trade is going and so, by God, am I. Only it's called 'collectibles' and 'vintage' now. Or get this: 'shabby chic.' Yvonne Sweeny's oldest boy's into computers. I'll get him to help us get set up. We'll buy a digital camera and you can take pictures of the stock. There's no use saying nothing because I'll need your help."

"It's going to cost." Her mother hated spending money. "And computers only come new, I think."

"I know," Alice said. Clutched under her arm was a new book: *Internet for Dummies*.

"And what'll you do when the thing breaks down, like it will?"

"Look, stupid girl. Junk's all we know. We got to change with the times or it's lights out. I'm not afraid." She retreated to her sagging brown plaid sofa to ponder the mysteries of the information age.

"I'm not stupid," was Svafa's only reply, which fell on empty air.

Now Alice monitored sixty different online auctions at any given time. The computer was constant trouble, and it took forever to get the hang of the mouse, her arthritis making double-clicking hard. Transactions disappeared at the accidental click of a button and were shockingly impossible to find again. The system, with its humming hard drive, was a demigod that needed cajoling and constant supplication. Still, Alice doggedly learned its spells, relishing the glowing numbers of a completed auction. Gloated over five-star seller ratings, hooted triumphantly when a bidding war drove up the price of a three-foot high garden gnome or faux Dior bag. She hunched in front of her screen late into the night, and was there again early in the morning, before Svafa even had coffee made.

"At least she's not in a rut," was Linda's observation. Younger than Susan by five years, Linda could always be counted on to give an opinion, welcome or not. But then, she'd married and left as soon as she could.

Alice took care of the online action--listing objects, monitoring auctions, e-mailing winners--while Svafa packed and shipped. They both knew the moment when discount stores reduced marked-down merchandise by an additional seventy-five percent, the best time of the week to hit Goodwill and the local Sallyann, which days the upscale neighborhoods set out their trash and which alleys offered the best booty.

The old Lincoln's trunk would overflow on those days and Svafa would tie it closed with a rope so rough and burred that her hands stung for hours after.

Chapter 4

When Susan and Svafa were little, you couldn't tell them apart. Svafa was older by less than two years, but they were the same size and inseparable. Adolescence fell between them like a guillotine.

Susan never minded the names: Rag-picker, dumpster-diver, beggar. Alice said that sticks and stones may break your bones but names will never harm you. Ha! Svafa knew better, would have preferred a whack on the head with a birch stick to the names. Words were parasites, burrowing inside, laying eggs under her skin. They didn't harm Alice or Susan, or Linda for that matter, but for Svafa, they were cycles of humiliation.

"Ignore them," Susan would say as they walked home from school, trailed by two boys chanting insults. *Bag ladies, crumb-bums, street-sweepers*. "They're imbeciles. Did you know Evan's mom buys him velcro sneakers because he don't know how to tie a bow? And his brother eats cat shit for breakfast." She laughed, holding Svafa's hand, not looking at her, giving her the dignity of private tears. Moments like that, Svafa felt like the younger instead of Susan. Linda nowhere to be found.

"I hate mom's job," Svafa said in a burning whisper. "I hate having a mother that's a junk dealer." Then, "Hate her."

It was early summer; she was wearing a red gingham top that tied in bows over each shoulder. The firmness of Susan's hand, the smell of dry, warm sidewalk, the thin yowls of the boys that were following them. Grade four was almost over. Susan was humming "Yellow Submarine" and despite the meanness of the neighborhood kids, there was an underlying anticipation of summer's freedom just ahead.

Then, an oddity. The shadow of a tree, or maybe it was a house, fell between them, encompassing Svafa alone. Hand in hand, they were bisected by a line of shade so that Svafa

walked in the brief, cool dark while ambient warmth sparked around her sister. The boys' taunts were suddenly louder in the shadow, as if the sound waves were absorbed by the darkness, amplified. While Susan was brilliant, already distanced, the way the blurred sun appears to a deep sea diver gazing upward.

It was untrustworthy, that memory. Perhaps she only dreamed it, as she so often dreamed of Susan.

*

Ignoring the set table and vegetable curry, Alice poured a bowl of Cheerios and retreated to her office. Alone, Svafa filled a chipped mixing bowl with curry. After moving a pile of laundry, three toy trucks, two printers still in boxes, and a stack of red kitty litter pans (ten cents each at a local close-out), she made a space big enough for herself on the living room sofa. With television as a noisy distraction, she ate mechanically and mindlessly until the bowl was empty, her chin and cheeks greasy. Filled the bowl again, hardly chewing before swallowing, vaguely aware of the slurry of flavors.

Turning up the volume, she crammed another forkful in her mouth. "...Local essay contest," a brisk announcer was saying, "To celebrate the great food here in Scofield..."

Svafa went back to the kitchen to fix peanut butter sandwiches but as she was slathering the slices, the words came to her ears. "...Restaurant or homemade, organic or not, describe your idea of good food and win dinner for two at the award-winning Silver Palate. Sponsored by the *Scofield Vanguard*, we're looking for the best food writing around to promote our region's wonderful gustatory bounty. Send your entries to..."

Now she was back in front of the TV, peanut-butter covered knife in one hand. An essay contest. Gusta--what? Something about good food, that much she got. What was it about it that enthralled her? She'd never entered a contest in her life and now, on this cold, solitary evening,

she should have already turned the channel. Instead, to her increasing surprise, she found herself scratching down the website address on the margin of a sale flyer.

Back in the kitchen, she made three sandwiches and ate them all, one after another, standing over the kitchen sink.

*

Even now, when Svafa makes garlic egg sandwiches, she makes them for Susan. Who invariably took her first bite crust first. She made them for Susan and Linda, cutting them into triangles with the wobbly-handled carving knife that her mother had traded for, decades earlier. Its blade is, mysteriously, still as sharp now as it was then, still useful beyond measure for all kinds of tasks in and out of the kitchen. A master sandwich maker, she learned the art before she knew it was a parent's job to feed the family, not a seven-year old balancing atop a three-legged stool. Alice gone, hunting down parts to rebuild a cast-off chandelier. Haggling over the price of a box of crusted flower pots.

Of her father, she has little memory. He was killed in a hunting accident shortly before Linda was born.

She'd smash hard-boiled eggs with garlic and mayo and black pepper, sinking curry or mustard or nutmeg into the pale drift. Top it with thin purple onion rings and whatever kind of lettuce her mother's tired fridge offered. Last, she sealed the filling with a wisp of white sugar. No one ever guessed about the sugar. Linda and Susan knew there was something ambrosial about those egg sandwiches, but could never guess what.

Does she make sandwiches, now, for Alice? Yes, the only kind her mother will eat: White bread from the surplus bakery, process cheese, swipe of Miracle Whip. Svafa slices these stingy sandwiches with the same sharp blade. Different for each of them, the sandwiches, just as they were so different, mother and daughter, that there was nothing in common except the crowded old house they shared, and the unspoken memories they would never admit to.

*

When Svafa graduated from high school, they all went out to dinner at a restaurant. Susan's choice. Which was odd, because it was Svafa's graduation. By then, adolescence had performed its recalcitrant surgery, transforming them from near-twins to two people who looked only vaguely alike. Tall, that much was the same, but whereas Svafa had thickened into, as Billy Helder so ineptly observed, a big girl, Susan stayed skinny. Skimmed over the sidewalk, white-blond hair floating. In the right light, you could see through her to the other side.

As Susan became air, Svafa became earth. Legs thickened into sandstone columns, shoulders of granite, as if born from mountains. Dirt-blond hair bunched in frizzy lobes, skin that browned in minutes, size twelve sneakers perpetually dirt-caked.

"Two sides of a funhouse mirror," said Alice.

The accompanying social change was simple: Susan got boyfriends--who changed regularly until Rot--and Svafa didn't. (Not then, not since, though that's not something she likes thinking about either.)

The restaurant Susan chose leaps in Svafa's memory like the opening of an action movie. Neon lights, beach music. Their waiter wanted to know their first names, touched her mother on the shoulder and hand.

They crowded into a booth, Rot and Susan on one side and Svafa, Linda, and her mother on the other. Linda was thirteen, clinging to her own circle of friends, all with tidy, split level homes which she envied. The graduation ceremony had been that afternoon, and Svafa had lumbered across the gym stage without tripping or farting or otherwise humiliating herself. The black graduation gown was snug and too short, but otherwise, everything had gone alright.

No, better than that--there were two wonderful things. Susan, clapping wildly for her, whistling through her fingers. She'd shown up with Rot, naturally, but also with roses and baby's breath for Svafa. The moment mortarboards were flung skyward, Susan had pushed her way

through the crowd to find Svafa, hugging her fiercely. Linda, too, wrapping thin arms as far as they would go around her.

Alice lodged in her seat. But present. And willing to take them out to dinner--and pay.

That was the second wonderful thing. Restaurant food! Ordering anything at all, as much as she wanted! Svafa agonized over the Surf Club menu.

"The prices!" muttered Alice. "Highway robbery."

Across the table, Rot whispered something into Susan's ear and she giggled. They nuzzled each other like horses, ignoring the menus, and tossed mocking glances at Alice.

The tousle-haired waiter wandered over, sandals slapping against the floor.

"Ready yet, folks?" He crouched by the table, so close that Svafa could smell suntan lotion and clothes softener.

"We're celebrating my sister's graduation," said Susan. "Just this afternoon!"

"Hey, congratulations. We've got cake for graduates, on the house. How does that sound?" His voice had taken on a fake-heartiness. Svafa blushed with pleasure.

"What's this?" Alice asked, ignoring his offer, jabbing at the menu.

"Sloppy joe enchiladas? It's hamburger in our housemade chili sauce, wrapped in a flour tortilla, then topped with enchilada sauce and pepper jack. Very popular."

"I can read that from the menu. What else is in it? Ever had it?"

"Jesus, Alice," muttered Rot, sliding down in his seat.

"Haven't tried it yet," admitted the waiter. "But it's a big seller."

"For six-fifty it should be ground steak, not hamburger."

"Well, I know what I want," Susan said loudly. "Fettucine alfredo. And my boyfriend will have the t-bone, well done. And two cokes. What d'you want, Linda?"

Linda ordered fish and chips, Svafa remembers this clearly. And hot chocolate, a strange choice for a warm Saturday. Svafa, dizzied, chose the mushroom burger, with fries and a pineapple shake.

Alice had chicken salad and a beer. The waiter gathered the menus and retreated, his loose sandals beating out a hasty rhythm.

"God, mother!" Susan said as soon as they were alone. "How embarrassing!"

"Don't get out much, do you?" said Rot. He'd ditched his leather jacket for the day and wore a yellow t-shirt with "gas-huffer" in green letters.

"Ever hear of manners?" Alice said in a low voice.

"He's only saying what everyone else is thinking," said Susan.

The details are so fine and raw that Svafa can see every stitch in Susan's denim jacket, and all the little, fuzzy pills dotting the side of Alice's sweater, the one from the bale of clothes Svafa had helped her haul home from the New-to-You surplus sale just the week before. She sees the thickened pores in Rot's skin and can't look away. And Linda! She wants to hug her, to smooth down her fly-away hair but she can't, because Svafa's trapped behind the glass, only able to watch and watch and watch.

"Please," Svafa had begged. "Let's not fight." It was so mortifying, her mother and Susan and Rot wrangling in public like that. She'd hide under the table if the waiter wasn't bringing buffalo wings.

"I don't need you to lecture me" Rot says, ignoring Svafa. "No wonder Susan can't wait to get away from you."

"That's a lie, and if it's true, it's only because you've poisoned her against me."

"Fucking true and if you don't believe me, ask her yourself." Alice and Rot both looked at Susan. For a moment, she and Svafa are twins again, with faces as cold and stark as an empty house.

Rot put his arm around Susan and squeezed hard. "It's true," she said. "I can't take it anymore, the way we live. Everything broken down and used. How you control every move we make. How you lie to us. Yes, Svafa, it's true, she's been lying to us our whole lives. I have proof."

"Lying. About what? I never did."

"About daddy! He wasn't killed in a hunting accident. I know because it was never reported and never investigated. I went to the sheriff's office and tried to look it up. Well, guess what? It never happened!"

"Probably suicide, just to get some peace," said Rot. Susan didn't laugh but stared at her mother, corpse-still.

Alice stood, the hand that reached for her big purse trembling slightly. "C'mon, Sissy, Linda. We're going home."

Stepping back, she collided with the waiter, who had come up behind her, a tray of food on his shoulder. Pasta, steak, mushroom burger, chicken wings crashed to the floor. The noise was deafening, the waiter flummoxed. The food a gorgeous pastiche across the tile.

Susan grabbed Svafa's hand. "You don't have to go with her, Svafa! Please! Stay with me, and I'll tell you what I found!"

Why didn't she stay? The question haunts her, like a corpse that won't stay submerged, dragging guilt on its heelbone. Wilding through her night thoughts, even now. White-blond strands dragging into the water glass, her cold, urgent skin.

Wouldn't have mattered anyway. Not then, not later.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Svafa sat at the kitchen table with coffee, paper and pen. Sunlight shone through the window of the back door, illuminating the blank paper in front of Svafa. Alice was at her computer, her door closed; silence ruled the house. Even the chickens were quiet.

What to write? Svafa had lain awake during the early morning hours, trying to talk herself out of such a waste of time as entering an essay contest. She had no fantasies about winning. So why bother? She had no answer. Describe your idea of good food! Nothing poetic, nothing magical, except the odd thrill it roused in her. Alice had said that junk was all they knew. That had to be wrong.

Svafa was chewing the end of her pen when Linda burst through the back door, a large cardboard box in her arms. Her youngest two--Gwen, six, and Mike, four-- dashed past her into the living room. The TV blared.

"Turn it down!" shouted Linda, "Or I'll do it for you!" She hefted the box on to the kitchen table, and dropped into a chair. "What's that?"

"Nothing." Svafa jerked the box toward her, sliding the pad under it. "What's this--oh, the office supplies Dave got?"

"Yup. Found all this stuff piled outside the office of one of his customers, who told Dave it was going into the dumpster anyway. Guess the previous tenants left it all. Look at this crap--binders, memo pads, logo pens. There's three more boxes plus an office chair crammed into the back of my car."

Linda leaned back in the chair, stretching out her legs. "Like my jacket? Got it yesterday. Think this color works on me?" She was wearing a bright pink nylon bomber jacket. "Took me weeks to find this exact shade. You could wear this, you know. Why're you always in such gloomy colors? I think the store even had your size." She slipped off the jacket, held it

under Svafa's chin. "See, I knew it! You look wonderful in pink. What size are you wearing these days anyway? I'm sure these went all the way up to a twenty-two."

Alice shambled into the room, cane thumping. "Twenty-two what? Oh, good, you brought the stuff. This all of it?"

"No, we'll get the rest."

"But my back--" Linda began.

"Well, mother can't bring in the boxes and I don't think Gwen and Mike will be much help. Have a pumpkin cookie when we're done. Made them last night."

"Cookie!" Mike yelled from the living room.

"Good grief," said Alice irritably, but she didn't look up from stacking the office supplies across the table. Svafa's writing pad was pushed to the floor.

"Grandma, can I have this?" Gwen held out an evening-gowned Barbie doll. "It was on the couch with some other stuff."

"You took it out of its box!" Alice said, grabbing it. "Don't you know that cuts retail value by sixty percent?"

"Oh, Mama, she doesn't understand that," Linda said. Gwen buried her head in her mother's side. Mike, who had followed his sister into the kitchen in hopes of finding cookies, started to kick one of the cabinets.

"It's my livelihood! You got Dave to support you. What do I got? My business, Sissy and a miniscule Social Security check."

"I'll pay you for it, for goodness sake, Mama!" Linda tried to snatch the doll from Alice, but Svafa pulled her out the back door.

"So," Linda said, "what were you writing when I came in?"

Svafa dragged a box out of the trunk of Linda's car and passed it to her. "Nothing." She lifted a box and started back to the house.

"Then why'd you hide it?"

"It was nothing, I told you."

"What else?"

"God, Linda, ease up. It's only a Vanguard contest. Write about the best eating in Scofield. Satisfied?"

"What's the prize?"

"Doesn't matter." The truth was, she couldn't remember--and it still didn't matter. "And I'm not a size twenty-two. But thanks anyway."

After Linda and her kids left, Svafa sat on the backyard porch steps where she could watch the chickens. They ran in formless paths all over the sunken yard, among the shabby crabgrass and knotweeds. Greedy, eating whatever. Shuttled red, white and grey feathers like tortoiseshell, tufts of down clinging to the tops of their gold legs.

Svafa went into the stifling chicken shed. The floorboards cracked under her weight. Shallow shelves held nests like a collection of mashed hats. She reached into one and found a warm egg. Holding it to her ear like a shell, she imagined a faraway roar. It grew louder as she stood in the stinking dark until, at last, she went back into the yard, still holding the egg, and saw that it had started to rain.

*

August 14, 1962, sticky-hot, 88 degrees. Unexpected, for Seattle. Henry and Alice stood before George Hawood, J.P.--"Jeep George." An odd nickname for straw-colored man with small hands and twice-repaired wire glasses. When not officiating or notarizing, Jeep George stuffed local fauna. Rubber-stamping legal documents was his bread and butter but taxidermy was his passion. A wolverine snarled down at Henry and Alice from above the door while across the room, a moose stared resolutely into the middle distance. Along the top of a bookcase, quail--thimble-headed mother and four chicks--froze in mid-step.

Henry was instantly impressed. "You shoot these yourself?"

"Couldn't hit a barn with a baseball bat," Jeep George said. "People bring me their, uh, prizes. I just stuff 'em. Preserve the glory, keep the shining moment alive. Gotta have proof when you bag the big one."

Alice couldn't take her eyes off the wolverine, its stiff fur and posed crouch. Its glass gaze cut through her new dark green suit, through her lacy brassiere, right into her bones. Bore through the purse that she had set on the floor, right into her wallet that held Henry's gold ring.

She had retrieved the ring from the storm drain later, alone. In her hand, it was the color and texture of rough cheddar. Pitted, marred. Stupid, to sneak around like that. Why didn't she return it the next evening? (Their first date: *The Miracle Worker*. She asked him. The irony was not lost.) But she didn't. Now it was even better: a surprise on his wedding day. She could bend down, right now, and take it from her wallet. In a few moments, when Jeep George called for the exchange of rings, she could slip it on Henry's third finger instead of the cheap band they had bought yesterday. The perfect wedding gift.

But she didn't. Oh, she could fantasize about surprising Henry with its return but in the dark pit of her heart, Alice knew she would keep it. A kind of insurance. So why was she marrying a man against whom she needed such a guarantee? She loved him, she desired him, she wanted him in her mouth, between her teeth. To sink into him and never leave. Her abasement was nearly complete, leaving her adrift in a stupor from the moment she'd met him. The ring might offer a bit of protection, from where appetite might lead. Money, even a little, might be all she had one day.

She forced herself to look away from the wolverine. Outside, children were flying kites, people were walking, riding bikes, eating ice cream. A summer day in Seattle, uncannily hot. Her wedding day. Wolverines and ice cream and a gold ring that would stay lost. She would look back at the wolverine and it would be nothing, just nothing.

Feeling her shiver, Henry put his arm around her and squeezed her.

"Almost there," he whispered and kissed her temple.

"Now, then--" Jeep said but was abruptly interrupted by his daughter, who was acting as witness. She'd gone into the waiting room and returned, clutching a large, dripping bunch of pink peonies.

"You can't get hitched empty-handed," she said, thrusting them at Alice. "Here, take them!" Jeep George's daughter took great pride in making sure the civil ceremonies were as festive as circumstances allowed.

"No," Alice said, taking a step back. She hated peonies, the impudent violence of them, the way they looked like they might have sharp teeth under the ruffled petals.

"Oh, take them, you're a bride!" The flowers shook, flinging droplets onto Alice's suit, staining the shantung.

"I don't want them, really."

"For God's sake," Henry said. He snatched the flowers, then motioned to Jeep. "Let's go."

*

If Alice could scrape her mind bare of the clutter, she would. Instead, she built a bulwark, walls of junk inside and out. If light and images chinked through occasionally, what of it? She'd reinforce her shelter of greenbacks and throw-aways.

Now, she was on the phone with Linda.

"When's Dave going to bring that desk by? Not left out in the rain, is it?" Dave was Linda's husband, who had the sharp eye of a collector himself and often deposited his finds at his mother-in-law's feet.

"I've been bugging him about it, mama. Tonight, he said."

"Is it?"

"Is it what?"

"Left out in the elements. I can't get nothing if it's rusty. Well, as scrap metal, I guess, though the price has fallen so much it's hardly worth it anymore."

"I have no idea." Linda had long since distanced herself from her mother's occupation.

"Anyway, what did you think of Sissy's big win?"

"Big win?" Alice's ears twitched.

"Didn't she tell you? The Vanguard's essay contest. She won, of all things."

Silence.

"Mama? Didn't she tell you? Well, she just found out yesterday. Now I've stolen her thunder. I'm sure she was going to tell you."

"So what was it? Some sort of contest?"

"Write a food essay or something. And guess what? She wrote about your chickens, mama! That's what's so funny--she won, writing about your stupid chickens!"

"My chickens? Huh. So what'd she win anyway? Cash, I hope."

"Nope, not cash. Dinner for two at the Silver Palate. She won't say who's she's taking."

"What kind of a contest was it, not to have a cash prize? You say she came in first?"

"That's right, Mother," Svafa said, coming in the back door. "I won."

At exactly three o'clock that day, K-mart moved the last of the summer stock to the rear of the store and marked down by 90%. In her arms were plastic bags bulging with pool toys, toddler's swimsuits, plastic fins, slightly scratched sunglasses, and tangled garden hoses.

She dumped them on the floor. Her mother blinked, unperturbed, holding the phone to her chest.

"Sissy! Linda was just telling me about the contest you won--"

Svafa reached for the phone. "Thanks."

"Well, I assumed you'd already told her," said Linda. "What's the big secret?"

"It's not a secret. Not now, at any rate."

"Figured out who you're taking to dinner?"

"You'll be the first to know." Linda wasn't fooling her one minute. Svafa knew her sister was itching to push through the Silver Palate's glass doors and sit at one of its posh tables.

"Ho-ho. Look at these," Alice said, holding up a pair of blue rubber sandals. "Only fifty cents?"

"An even dime."

"Now that's talent. Got to post these right away. Summer stuff's selling like hotcakes. Must be all those rich snowbirds planning on Christmas cruises." She scabbled up an armload, all distractions eclipsed by the joy of Svafa's haul.

"Sissy! You still there?" Linda asked.

"Yeah, sorry. Look, I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

Svafa let out a deep breath and rubbed her face. Scalding tea was what she needed. Set the kettle and then re-read the letter folded in her pocket. She had read it five times since it came that morning, a no. 10 envelope. Its return address a delicious thump--the Scofield Vanguard.

Was it a joke? She'd held the letter to the light, run her fingers across the back to detect the ridges of an authentic signature, even cautiously licked it as if to test the words (she was like an animal, always testing things with her mouth): Freelance opportunity in our entertainment section. Skipped down to read your essay with considerable interest and believe you may be an ideal candidate. Winning the contest was a miracle; she'd pinched her soft underarm repeatedly to make sure she wasn't dreaming. The wonder of it--her essay to be published in the paper in exactly two weeks. The friendly young voice from the Vanguard had phoned to say that they would mail her the gift certificate to the Silver Palate, unless she'd like to pick it up in person?

She had hastily refused. Not in person.

But this! She could rationalize that her essay had been the best of a bad lot, that there few submissions to choose from, considering what a backwater Scofield was. But this letter, this invitation from the entertainment editor himself?

She drained her tea and moved to the phone. What was the name--Tony Corn? Sounded like a fake name. She didn't know anything about the newspaper business but writing jobs couldn't be easy to come by. Had to be dozens, hundreds of eager, experienced writers vying. Mind you, this was Scofield, not Vancouver. There'd be a catch. Yes, that was it--she'd be expected to pay a premium, perhaps, for the privilege of "working" for the paper. Sell a quota of advertising space. It smelled like a swindle designed to get her debit card number, then delve into her bank account, where they'd find nothing but disappointment.

Carefully typed bait, that was it. She a great fish, gaping. No, the letter wasn't the lure--hope was. As impossible as it seemed, she could not refuse.

Chapter 6

Svafa remembered her father in brief clips, like an old movie. He was a hunter and an opera buff of sorts, though Svafa never could extract details from her mother. Buff, an odd word that didn't match the memory of him. It was the word Alice used, which also meant color, like the beige of his canvas hat that was still on the top shelf of the coat closet.

Her parents had made a bet about the first hunt of the autumn season. It was shortly before she was born, the time of year when Henry set out alone to shoot a deer and fill the freezer with wild meat. Alice, in a mood, had challenged him to bag the biggest one in town, beating out even Winchell Gary who was the Scofield's leading shot.

By now, they were renting a one-bedroom cabin on the outskirts of town, on the banks of Scofield River. Henry had got wind that Scofield Lumber Mill was hiring at a decent wage. Work was steady; Alice learned to make blackberry wine from the wild bushes that grew all over the riverbank. Of course, liquor licensing laws prevented her from selling it, but what was the point of all that work if she couldn't make a buck? Enterprisingly, she found the wine could be coaxed into first rate jelly. At the mill, Henry passed around biscuits spread with the stuff. Before long, Alice was selling jam jars of it from her kitchen door.

Then two things happened: Alice got pregnant. And, in a whim of perversity, she made a bet that she would spend the rest of her life regretting.

She challenged Henry to bag the biggest deer of the season--bigger than any other taken in the county. If he failed, he'd have to forsake hunting for the rest of the season. And if he won?

"I get to name it," Henry said. Pregnancy had made Alice fretful; she hadn't anticipated his ready acceptance of her challenge. Hoped he'd read between the lines and stay home.

Besides, he was a bow hunter; how would he ever bring down an animal big enough to win the bet? Even if he did, how would he transport it? He only ever went hunting by himself.

Undaunted, Henry set off with a packed quiver, longbow over one shoulder. Alice curled up in her bed, wool blanket over her head. Nurtured resentment toward the webbed interloper who, even unborn, could wedge itself between her and Henry.

Four days' later, he stumbled out of the woods, shivering, bloodied, staggering under the head of the biggest stag that had ever been seen in those parts. Antlers like the spreading branches of a young oak, so big that the Vanguard photographer took it as a fake at first, pinching the cold, spongy nose with skeptical fingers before he was convinced. He took three pictures, one of the deer, one of Henry stiffly poised beside it, and one of Henry and Alice, the head between them. The last made it to the front page of the Scofield Vanguard, Saturday edition. The effulgence of the photographer's bulb made Henry's hair almost white-blonde, his jaw smooth from his monthly shave, Alice's eyes smoky black in her pale face that floated like a lily over her striped maternity smock. Henry clipped the picture out of the paper and stuck it in a \$2.00 frame above the mantel where it stayed until much later, when everything changed.

Henry didn't just have the biggest stag in more than a decade and a bloody bruise above his right eye. He had a story so fantastical that he couldn't bring himself to tell the Vanguard photographer. The public humiliation was more than he could stand.

The truth he saved for later. Released it hesitantly in the private darkness of bed. "First two days, maybe a little more, I saw nothing--no deer, no hawks, bears, nothing. It was like that story you read about the poisons getting so bad, you know, and the birds eat the dead bugs and then the coyotes and cougars and bears eat the dead birds and pretty soon everything's dead--"

"That wasn't real," Alice interrupted. She was lying on her back, hands across her stomach as if trying to press the fetus back to its starting point.

"Happens in some places."

"Anyway..."

"Anyway, I ran out of water. There should've been water in that canteen."

"Maybe the lid was loose."

"It wasn't. But there it was, dry as bone. I stopped to eat, afraid I was going to have to come home and dammit, I didn't want to lose our bet. And then I heard water in the distance, low, like I might of been imagining it. When I started walking, the noise of the brush covered it. So I'd have to stop, pick it up again. Walk and stop, walk and stop, just like that. Sound was drawing me deeper into the forest, where I'd never been before, where the trees were--" He broke off, one hand gently stroking Alice's plum nipple, eyes staring into the darkness.

She knocked his hand away. "Were what?"

"Old, diseased maybe. And the thing was--it felt like, I mean, that they were watching me. Like they had eyes."

She snorted. "What else?"

"That was when I saw the stag. Alice," and he put his hand on her forehead where her hair streamed back like a banner. "It was magnificent. Like a king. I didn't--didn't want to shoot him but, well, that was what I'd come for and besides, he would win the bet for me. Hell, I knew he'd get me into the paper, I knew that for sure. And I was right on both counts, wasn't I? My first arrow took him down. It was too easy. Like someone else was shooting him too. Or he wanted to be shot. He went down so smooth, so fast, that I let down my guard. When I got near him, he suddenly kicked out, and that's how I got this," his hand grazing the swollen lump on his forehead. "I was lucky that was all I got. He could have killed me, the size of him. He knocked me out as it was."

How could he describe to his cynical wife the stag materializing out of the trees like a mirage, the way his arrow nestled into its mark so swiftly? He wasn't sure what happened next. Darkness, suffocation. Confusion. A sense of moving through water, like a fish and not like a

fish. A woman was stepping away from him. Pellucid skin, floating-white hair. The glint of a shield. He called to her, but made no sound because his larynx had been cut out. He was eviscerated. Muscle, bone, lungs--gone. He wept.

"And then?"

"I woke up and found the head of the stag cut clean off. Pretty and neat as anything I could do. Better. And my canteen filled, right to the top. Someone helped me, I know it."

"A hallucination! What else? You were knocked unconscious."

"How do you explain the stag's head cut off? And water in the canteen?" Infinity had brushed by him; he was a changed man.

"Did you check your knife?"

He turned on a lamp and opened the top dresser drawer. He took out his knife and held it out to his wife. The blade blackened with deer's blood.

"You did it yourself. You just don't remember because of that knot on your head." She turned on her side, snuggled down into the blankets. The fetus stirred, so softly it might have been a gas bubble.

He carefully sheathed his knife and returned it to the drawer. He got a glass of water and drank it standing at the kitchen sink. Turned out the light and crawled into bed beside Alice.

"I still win," he said. But she was already asleep.

*

Tony Corn was pleased to hear from Svafa and suggested meeting at a downtown restaurant in four days. He'd like to meet sooner, but he was working on an editorial on the politics of the Seattle Lollapalooza.

"The Toy, have you tried it yet?" A thin voice. Small and high. A toy himself, she thought.

"Not yet, but I hear it's worth visiting," which was a complete and total lie but sounded shockingly competent.

Svafa hung up the phone and collapsed on floor, bruising her knee on a verdigris sun dial that Alice had snagged from Goodwill the day before. Sounding worldly and competent for a two-minute phone call was one thing, but now she was going to have to pull it off in person for thirty minutes or more. Didn't matter, she told herself, staring up at the ceiling, with its garland of cobwebs. Just being asked to interview was a trophy. Like winning the lottery. Finding a Picasso at the Sally-Ann. Even if the job didn't pan out (and, let's face it, there was little chance), just being asked was a consolation during the grey hours.

She'd never been on an interview before. Other than working for her mother, her only job had been waitressing at a mom and pop restaurant on the outskirts of town, where she was hired based on Alice selling a dozen dented industrial-sized boxes of plastic wrap to the owner.

A restaurant job--even now, she felt the initial thrill. Her nineteen-year old imagination had whirled off in all directions. She'd test new recipes. The cook would call in sick and she'd step in and whip up gourmet magic. A Zagat reviewer would happen to drop by. She'd eat anything she wanted, whenever she wanted.

Reality was far removed. The cook opened cans and defrosted blocks of fries. Svafa did everything else, including scrubbing the bathrooms. The job lasted slightly longer than the plastic wrap; she quit when the owner demanded half her tips.

And now? She had nothing to wear on an interview. Her wardrobe consisted of sweat pants and men's work shirts, ideal for sifting through trash, kneading bread and feeding chickens. Not so much for an interview.

For about three seconds, she considered calling Linda. Linda knew about clothes. She'd listen appreciatively to Svafa brag about being interviewed by the entertainment editor of the city paper. But then she'd demand to know how much the job paid, and--worst of all--tell Alice.

When Svafa didn't get hired, the subject would be pawed through interminably by the both of them, mother and sister.

In desperation, Svafa ransacked Alice's closet. She had the largest bedroom, located on the street side of the second floor, where the sun first streamed in each morning. Wasted utterly, since she rose long before the sun made its first appearance. She'd painted the room a deep gold when they first moved in, which had faded to beige before being submerged behind piles of merchandise.

The few items of clothing that Alice wore every day hung at the front, hiding a logjam of garments in a bewilderment of sizes, colors and styles. Throwing nothing out and giving less away, she sporadically sifted through the mass to find merchandise. Suffocating, like a bale of fabrics compressed for shipping, all smelling of her. Cumin and wet newsprint. A living, smoky pepperiness--Alice's own pheromone. Opening the closet was like opening a hatch, releasing the odors of anger and obstinacy. Shuttered vision and second hand silence.

"Abandon hope all who enter," Svafa muttered. Still, what choice did she have? She couldn't wear a plaid workshirt to meet Tony Corn. Couldn't show up naked. Physically, anyway. The air around her seemed to shift and close in. Dust motes gleamed as the sun slipped through the window slats, then faded away. She threw an armload of clothes onto the chenille bedspread. Polyester, nylon, cheap cotton, wormy wool.

She pulled a flash of yellow from the pile, a t-shirt with "A-OK" across the front in big green letters. When she was ten and Susan eight, they had pooled their money and bought it as a surprise for Alice. The tag still dangled from under the sleeve and it had the crispness of a garment that had never been washed.

She threw it across the room. If she could put a match to it, every wasting object in the house, she would. Dance around the magnificent flames.

A dark green suit stood out against the tide. The jacket had a wide shawl collar and the three-quarter length sleeves of the sixties. A straight and simple skirt, lined with a dark sateen. There was a confined polish to the suit, a subtlety. The person who wore this might sip martinis, scatter ashes from the end of her mother-of-pearl cigarette holder. Cheat at bridge. That this lovely thing was her mother's was hard to believe. More likely it was a found item that she'd snatched up to sell.

It was a size 10. Wouldn't fit her right arm.

She left the suit on the bed and went back to the closet. There were a couple of things that would work for her interview--a plain grey skirt with a vast waist, a passable blue turtleneck. Could she wash them, or air them out somehow? Otherwise, her mother's smell, her aura, would infect her actions at the interview; she'd be wearing bits of Alice, like dog hairs clinging to the fabric. Then it might be Alice struggling with an attempt to appear like someone who could Write--and that was with a capital "W." Funny thing was, her mother probably could. Thump her cane on the floor, glare unblinkingly at Tony Corn, steer the conversation in whatever direction suited her. She'd slurp her coffee and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. And snatch at whatever it was that Tony Corn was offering, because she was the Mother of all dealers.

Svafa picked up the blue turtleneck, breathing in the peppery odor. Maybe a little of it wouldn't hurt after all. Didn't ancient warriors steal their enemies' possessions to inoculate themselves against their poison, to imbibe their bravery? Or was it that they ate their hearts?

Pathetic, that's what she was.

She tried on the skirt and sweater hurriedly, suddenly impatient to be done with it. The skirt waistband wouldn't close by several inches. She rummaged in a drawer for a safety pin to close the gap. That was one thing she was good at--dealing with gaps, with yawning pits and cavernous holes. She was used to them, at least. The sweater fit okay. Good color--blues and

pinks suited her, but she rarely wore them. Maybe she could sneak a pair of vintage earrings from her mother's jewelry box.

Her foot bumped against a box as she was stuffing clothes back inside the closet. Like cramming toothpaste back inside the tube. She pulled out the box. Inside were baby clothes. The palest pastels, thin lace. She lifted a yellow puff-sleeved dress, with fine seed stitching along the hem. Not one but two dresses, exactly alike. Beneath them, a pair of white cowboy boots with tassels hanging from the front.

She balanced one small boot on the palm of her hand. Memories like netted minnows-- she was wearing the boots, the plain joy of them filtering through the uncertainty. Four years old, shivering with delight. Shivering...shivering. The happiness diminished as other forms materialized. She was hiding behind a velveteen armchair, a castle wall. Angry voices, so loud and angry...

"Jesus Christ, what're you doing?" Alice stood in the doorway, leaning heavily on her cane. Under one arm were three hardcover books.

"Mother! I thought you were napping."

"I bet you did! Snooping through my stuff, are you? Looking for cash, maybe?"

Visions of spattered chocolate milk and ripped pizza suddenly rose in front of Svafa but she had just breathed of the poison and was churning antibodies. She would not wilt so easily this time.

"No, just looking for something to wear."

"Wear where?" Alice threw the books to the floor, more in weariness than anger. They'd been rejected by all three of the second hand book sellers in town; it was doubtful she'd find a buyer for these particular ones, even on Amazon. "Nothing in there'll fit you, unless it's a sofa slipcover. Bloody hell, you've made a mess. You'll clean it up, too, every last--"

"Where'd this come from?" She held up the dark green suit.

Alice limped over and shoved it back in the closet. "Don't remember. Someone gave it to me, a long time ago. Should've sold it when vintage sixties was all the rage. Now who'd buy a thing like that." And of course her daughter couldn't see the bile that welled up at the sight of her suit, worn once and put away. Age and losses heaped like an unlit bonfire, unsold inventory, until no light showed. Had she ever been that slender, poised woman on the arm of a blue-eyed man who held dripping peonies? If Svafa had looked closely, she might have seen water spots on the skirt. Alice saw them, even in the dimness of the room.

When she turned around, her eyes fell on the box of baby clothes. "And what in God's name is that?"

"Who wore this?" Svafa asked, holding up the tiny yellow dress.

"You did. Susan wore the other."

"We were that close in size?"

"Almost identical. People thought you were twins when you were small. I used to try and dress you alike, put you in the same colors, that sort of thing. Never afforded buying two sets of new things. Don't remember where these came from." She had liked the attention it brought, her two little girls, like matching pearls. What they wore depended on her finds. Tops and socks and pants that were, if not identical, at least similar in color and style. They looked like they belonged to each other.

"Truth was, you and Susan were cheap advertising. I had the store then, remember?"

Even with two babies, Alice had jumped at the chance to work part-time at a local junk store. It suited her, the dim light, the must. Dented, sticky odds and ends that came her way. Learned how to paint up a tin dollhouse, repack a set of screwdrivers so they passed as new. Arranged mismatched chairs around a wobbly table so it looked like a dining set. The girls napped on carpet samples piled up behind the counter. When the owner retired, as rusted and worn as his merchandise, Alice took the lease, paid so much a month for the inventory. The store

itself was damaged goods--leaky, drafty, molding, with a floor that gave way under each footfall. Not in the best part of town, either.

"It was on Smith, across from the bus station. I'd dress you and Susan up and set you outside the store on plastic ponies. Remember? Oh, people thought you two were as cute as bugs and they'd come on in." Even now, she hadn't the least twinge of conscience at using her children as advertising props. Survival, was the key. By then, Henry could no longer be counted on.

"What happened with the store? I kind of remember, but..."

"Caught fire," Alice said, holding the dress to the light. "Look at this workmanship. This'll get a pretty penny. Glad you found them. I'd clean forgotten about this box."

"No!" The matching dresses linked her to Susan. Which one had she worn and which one had her sister?

"Don't be stupid. You know, you two might have been alike as babies but that didn't last." Alice said, packing up the box. "You didn't end up looking alike and you sure as hell didn't end up acting alike and I can't say that's a bad thing. Susan was like your father, always wanting something he couldn't have. Made her turn against what she could have. Well, I'm selling the clothes and that's that."

"Can't you just stick them back in the closet where they've been for so many years?"

"No!" said Alice loudly. "We need the cash. Look--" She fumbled in the pocket of her cardigan and brought out a white envelope, handing it to Svafa.

It was a letter from the city building department. An inspector was being sent out to look at their property. There had been reports of shifting ground; the neighborhood was built over a labyrinth of mine shafts. In recent years, minor seismic activity had weakened the whole hillside. Dangerous sinkholes had been discovered. The whole area was being inspected, yard by yard.

"Lord only knows how much they'll charge to fix the hole out back," said Alice. "If we're lucky, that is. At least we know what's causing it now."

"Our backyard is nobody's business. They won't do anything. You're just trying to get rid of Susan all over again." Her voice started to rise.

"Sissy, don't be an idiot." She snatched back the letter. "If the city inspector thinks that great gaping pit can't be remedied, he'll turn us out. Condemn the house! What do you think is happening in our backyard, anyway?" Her fingers smacked against the letter for emphasis, sounding like the snare drum of an approaching army.

Svafa stared at her mother. The sinking backyard was part and parcel of their home. Annoying, yes, and maybe dangerous, true. She'd often envisioned the whole yard finally folding in on itself like a collapsible table, taking Alice, herself and all the chickens with it. At times it seemed inevitable. But it was their annoyance, their danger, existing within the closed circle of their home, a circle unbreached by any outsider.

"It's a sinkhole, Sissy, and it's getting worse. I'm trying to sell anything that will bring extra money. We're going to need it."

"When does he come?"

"Day after tomorrow. Sometime early in the afternoon. Get pictures of these posted on eBay right away. I'm heading over to the Turner Street alley. There was an estate sale there this morning. Should be over by now and hopefully they've set out the stuff that didn't sell. Might be good pickings."

Svafa heard her mother shuffle out of the room. Day after tomorrow, her mother said, early in the afternoon.

Exactly when she would be meeting with Tony Corn.

Chapter 7

One memory Svafa keeps like an ornament on a mantel, polished, laid on a doily. All around are chintz-covered walls hiding other things, things that lay in ropy tangles. This is her mental parlor, decked with shiny-leafed plants and objects that reflect sunlight. When the knotted mess starts pushing through, she sets her eyes on the carefully selected ornaments.

Sometimes Susan shows up, cross-legged on one of the velveteen wingbacks.

You wouldn't think that a beating would have any place there. They were somewhere around six or seven. Their father dead. Alice had just moved them into the house that they lived in now, only Svafa thinks that they were renting it back then. Linda no more than two. Alice was working from home, selling junk out of the front of the house. She left the girls at home most mornings and evenings and went scavenging, rattling down the road in her dusty pick-up.

"There's a man coming by to drop off an envelope for me," said Alice one morning. She was getting ready to leave, stuffing her purse with plastic bags, hoisting rope over one shoulder to tie things down. "Put the envelope on the counter and don't open it. Understand?"

Susan and Svafa were at the kitchen table, eating stale corn flakes (unsold surplus from a downtown convenience store). Still in their p.j.'s.

"What's in it?" asked one of them. Sometimes it's Susan, sometimes Svafa. That was the problem with some of her well-used memories; they got fuzzy in places. Or rather, she ended up with multiple versions, each as credible as the next.

"None of your beeswax," said Alice, and left.

It was money, of course. The man was long-limbed and moved like a predatory bird. Svafa was afraid to go to the door; from the window, they could see he wore a broad hat and a patch over one eye.

"And a long black cape," offers Susan, from her corner of Svafa's memory parlor.

No. But the man moved like he wore a cape; the air churned around him. And he produced a slim envelope without seem to reach into any pockets. There it was, at the tips of his fingers.

"Tell your Ma thanks for the valise," he said. "Tell her it works just fine."

Svafa, summoning courage, sidled up behind her sister. "Who are you?"

He laughed. Or no, he hadn't. Susan laughed. And then the man reached down and pulled a five dollar bill out of Susan's ear. Susan clutched at her ear as if stabbed but nothing could tarnish a trick like that. He gave them the magical bill and left. The funny thing was, the man handed the bill to Svafa, not Susan. Of that, she is very sure. That never changes, no matter how many times she replays it.

"Yes," says Susan from her corner. "He gave it to you. That's why you got the beating."

They put the envelope on the counter, like their mother had said, hoisted Linda into her little umbrella stroller, and walked down the street to the 7-11 on the corner. They were still in their pajamas, only Susan had pulled a red and white poncho on over hers. Svafa wore mismatched ballet slippers. She doesn't remember what Linda was wearing. At the store they spent the five dollars on Smarties and O Henry bars. Svafa wolfed her share of the candy before they reached home.

Only when they arrive back home, Alice is there, ready to start breaking things. Where had they gone? That they had squandered precious dollars on candy was outrageous. Susan still had most of hers, Svafa nothing but sticky hands and a grubby face.

"We're fine, Mama, we're fine," she repeated, as if reassurance might offer release.

"We're fine? I'm fine--you're a mess! What were you thinking--going off like that? Without a word?"

She and Susan were herded to their small room. Alice's hands were square and hard but not hard enough, so she made use of what was within reach: yardstick, pancake flipper, wooden

spoon (a favorite), loose chair leg, curtain rod, even a lampstand once. Tea towels, wetted and wrung out. This time, she grabbed a plastic trowel from a box of tools, the kind used to spread drywall mud. Unleashed vast anger aimed at Svafa, fueled by the scrum of the day, her meager haul rolling like loose buckeyes in the back of the truck all the way home. The vacancy left by Henry. Svafa wore red v-shaped welts on the backs of her legs for days, but that's not why the memory is so carefully archived. This time was different. Yes. In this version, Susan stood on the bed, interjected herself between Alice and her sister. Bare, blueish feet sunk into the blankets. She took the trowel from her mother's hands with a flutter; she moved like the man in the wide-brimmed hat.

"But you said you had marks on your legs," says Susan from the velvet wingback.

Yes, but then Alice always got in a few good licks.

*

At two-twenty-five p.m., Svafa eased open the swinging doors of the Toy. Tony Corn had said two-thirty; she was five minutes early, enough time to sit and catch her breath.

She wedged herself into a booth and tried to relax, taking deep, slow breaths, in through her nose, out through her mouth. Water appeared before her, brought by someone in a ruffled apron. Svafa smoothed down her blue turtleneck, fussed with the sleeves a little. The skirt from Alice's closet wouldn't fasten around her middle, not even with the help of the biggest safety pin, but the sweater was long enough to cover over the open zipper. If she didn't make any sudden moves, the costume would work.

Why had Tony Corn chosen this restaurant for the interview? The salt and pepper shakers were kewpie dolls. Teddy bears, ringletted dolls with leather shoes, hula hoops, wind-up metal monkeys clutching drums, Monopoly games, jars full of marbles, chalkboards with colorful scrawls, red flyers and Barbies of endless variety abounded. The table top was a checkerboard,

complete with game pieces stacked on the side, ready to play. The menu was a giant coloring book and there was a striped mug of crayons in the middle of the table.

"Ms. Lindeman?" A young man stood beside her.

"Uh, yes," she said, struggling to her feet. Immediately she regretted it, for she loomed over him. He couldn't be more than five four. She might have lifted him with one hand.

"It's nice to meet you," Tony Corn said, sitting across from her. Long brown hair swooped down over his eyes. He had the translucent skin of a child. He opened a folder.

Svafa's eyes immediately dropped to its contents. Impossible to see anything.

"I was really impressed by your essay on organic chickens. Congratulations, by the way, on winning. You've a way with words and that's what we're looking for."

"Thank you," she replied, leaning back in the booth and trying to breathe calmly. He was so young! Didn't look ready to shave, yet alone edit a paper.

"We're looking for someone to take over the restaurant column that comes out every Wednesday. Are you familiar with it? Oh - can I order you something?" The aproned waitress had reappeared with more water.

"Uh, just coffee." She didn't even know the Vanguard had a restaurant column.

"Here's this week's. Sid Vallance is leaving next month to take a job with Wikipedia and we need a replacement fast. It's very part-time, you understand, and the pay's pretty modest. I need to let you know that up front."

Svafa took the paper and started to read, though the black and white blurred into grey. Giddy, sick, she'd faint if she stood up. Get a grip.

Maybe she had misunderstood him. There was an old saying about this kind of situation, but her mind had gone blank, totally blank.

"What kind of food background do you have?" he asked suddenly. "It was hard to tell from your essay."

Food background? I cook and eat, she wanted to say but of course that was impossible. You do have a little bit of experience she told herself severely. Magnify it.

Svafa plucked her resume out of her bag and slid it across the table. "I worked in a restaurant some time ago," she said, running her finger along the top of the water glass. "I did a bunch of stuff, from hostessing and waitressing to assisting the cook and bookkeeping. You know how it is with a small, family-owned business. Gave me a good exposure to all aspects of, of restauranteuring." Was that a word? It sounded good anyway and she was gratified to see him nodding in agreement.

I was a waitress in a greasy spoon, she thought, her fingertip encountering a tiny chip on the glass rim, a miniscule, jagged razor against which she pressed her finger. I busied tables and scrubbed urinals and cleaned up little kids' vomit when they ate too much of the free ice cream.

"Anything else?"

"Well, I love food. Good food, that is, which is why I put up with those chickens. They're really my mother's chickens and I'd kick them all out, if I could. Those eggs." She shook her head. "They're wonderful. And I know how to cook. I'm a really good cook. And I like writing."

Tony Corn was listening intently, his eyes so sharply focused and alert that she faltered. "How would you sum up your philosophy regarding food?"

Oh God, would she ever get through this? All she wanted to do was to get up and run, away from the plastic-coated dolls and tired teddy bears and most of all from this pretty little man prying into things about which she knew nothing. Intent on revealing Svafa Lindeman to be the most fraudulent oaf that ever breathed.

"I would have to say that--uh, too many cooks spoil the broth."

"Right, like the glut of cooking reality shows all over the cablesphere. Might be a cool idea for a special feature. Could you elucidate?"

"Not on a first date," she said weakly, heat flooding her cheeks at Tony's startled look. She dug her finger into the chipped rim and wondered if the blood would run down the inside or the outside of the glass. "This is some amazing place, isn't it?"

Tony Corn looked around as if seeing the toys for the first time. "Pretty cool. Vintage stuff like this is hot right now."

"Vintage?" She replied, summoning a light tone that was at odds with the sodden lump in her stomach. "Watch it! I used to play with this stuff, you know."

She meant it as a joke but Tony Corn looked at her anxiously, tucking his hair behind his left ear.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to imply..."

"I was joking," she said quickly.

"What kind of restaurant reviews do you read?"

She pressed hot hands against her face as if in thought. A bouquet of red and black licorice whips sprouted behind Tony Corn's head and part of her brain wondered if they would taste good. What were those titles on the magazine rack at the supermarket? "Good Eating and, um, let's see, Coastal Living. Wine Spectator, of course. And naturally, the Vanguard."

"What did you think of Sid's style?" The waitress set coffee in front of them both. The cups were chunky toy drums. Tony reached for the clown face sugar bowl.

Svafa gulped hers black, buying time. "Well, you know, he's pretty good." Oh, that was lame.

"Any other observations?"

She had no idea what Tony Corn wanted. Did he expect her to criticize Sid Vallance? Gamely, with a heart sinking faster than a stone down a well, Svafa read the paper quickly, casually, trying not to look like she was reading it but that was hard to do. A fake, she thought,

one huge fake, like a cardboard set in a play. Give up the ghost right now, get up and walk out. You can't do this. You won't. Her eyes skimmed the copy while the voice in her head raged on.

"Well," Svafa said, "Maybe he's a bit long-winded."

"Long-winded? What do you mean?"

She spoke quickly, frightened at plucking nonsense from thin air. "I mean, it was clear that he definitely sampled each item, but it was too detailed, too gushing. It was like forkful-by-forkful account of the whole meal when all you really want is a synopsis."

"Actually, we're thinking of a shorter, easier to read format. Something like this," and he slid another paper out of the folder. "Of course, I'm not the final decision maker. I'd really like you to meet some others on the entertainment team but everyone's swamped right now. But I think I've got enough information at this point. Look, Ms. Lindeman--"

"Call me Svafa, please."

"Svafa. I can't give you a dollar figure because our managing editor is reviewing budgets right now but I can tell you that the pay won't be much. Plus the reviewer has to buy his or her own meals out of it. A lot of writers just don't want to put the time into something with such modest return. But that's the cold truth about a small town paper."

He stood. "Thanks for meeting with me, Svafa. That's an unusual name. Where does it come from, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Norse mythology," she said, standing. She could probably touch the ceiling. "We didn't get to play," she added, gesturing to the checkers.

"They're glued down." The chasm of a generation gaped between them. She could easily be his mother. "Cool name."

Svafa watched him leave and then sat back down. Should have known better than to fake it like that. Oh, well, it wasn't something that she could have done, or even really wanted to do,

especially if the pay was as bad as he said. She should've asked how much it was. A weekly column! The amount of pressure would be dizzying.

She touched a baby doll in a buggy suspended over her head and found its blonde hair had a protective topcoat sprayed over it. The wheels didn't turn. The board games were shellacked shut, the jack-in-the-box was permanently sprung. Tony Corn was right about the checkers--they were glued down.

It occurred to her that the whole place was a fake, a sick joke. It would scare the crap out of most kids. It would her, if she was still a kid.

The rain was turning to sleet, slickening the roads. She drove, her hands tight on the wheel while the grey landscape slid by, until she came to the familiar street. The road dipped just there, a long slope that descended between dripping trees. Turning the day to sepia, turning left and then slowing down as Hell's Belly came into view. She sat in the middle lane, turn signal clicking, staring at the big sign with its flashing hamburger and yellow letters like flare guns winging shots into her heart, until finally a car behind her leaned on its horn. Then she eased the old Lincoln into the right lane and headed home.

Chapter 8

Henry would never say it aloud, but he knew he had witnessed something unearthly. A supernatural transience, a glimpse of grace. Grace, yes. A good name for his first daughter. Grace Lindeman. Even Alice, uncompromisingly practical to the bone, could approve. It was simple, easy to spell. Pretty, too. A boy would be called Henry, naturally, after himself and his unrivalled valor in bagging the stag.

By all rights, that's where the whole thing should have been left. Henry had won, fair and square, and had come up with two names that pleased everyone involved. It was, as they would say now, a done deal.

But it wasn't quite right, somehow. Try as he might, Henry couldn't escape the niggling suspicion that he had conceded too quickly, that he had given someone else's name to the protean creature forming within his wife. For a boy, the name Henry definitely worked, resonating squarely, sounding out with every fell of his axe as he chopped firewood behind the tiny house: hen-ry, hen-ry, hen-ry. But, Grace. No matter what spells he conjured within the silent enclave of his brain, he couldn't make it fit. He tried to hear it, the way he heard his own name, with each scrape of his shovel, each whine of the saw as it slid through the raw orange bark of Scofield's cedars. But nothing helped. Something or someone was blocking it.

He finally broached the subject. "Not so sure about Grace anymore, Alice."

Dinnertime; tuna casserole emitted ribbons of steam. After months of Saltines and white rice, her appetite roared back in the third trimester; now she heaped her plate. "It's a nice name. Easy to spell."

He held his fork between his fingers, tested the metal's strength. "Doesn't fit, somehow. Doesn't work. Maybe there's a better name."

"Like what? Christine?" The name of a sheepdog he'd had as a boy, still kept a picture of her in his wallet. She'd put one of herself there instead if it wasn't such a humiliating act.

Replacing a dog.

"No, no. Something else."

"What, for pity's sake?"

"How the hell should I know? Where d'you get baby names anyway? Go around and ask folks, hey, what'd you call the kid?"

She shoveled food onto his plate. Surprised herself by saying, "You might try the library."

"Where's that?"

"Bottom of Wey Hill. Just across from the hatchery. You know it, the big brick building with the fountain."

Locating the place was easy; once inside, Henry was lost. The imposing wood, the slick floor. It smelled of wax and something vinegary; the silence magnified his work pants, the grime under his nails, the way he crept along, like a bug.

"Can I help you?" A small, stout woman peered at him from over half-moon glasses.

"I'm looking for a book about dreams." Dreams! He had meant to say baby names. It just came out, without even trying. Like dropping something you secretly wanted broken all along.

"Well, you'll have to be more specific. There's only about a hundred books on dreams."

He was committed. Could he just ask for baby names? The librarian would think he was crazy. She would anyway. "I-I had this dream and there was this person, this woman in it. I wanted to know if it--she--was real. Or a character, like in a book. I mean--is there a book about that kind of thing?" Sweat tickled the back of his neck, trailed between his shoulder blades.

"You mean, a mythical figure?"

"Yeah, maybe a fairy godmother, or a witch? White hair and--armor, like a shield."

"Well," the librarian said, adjusting her glasses. "All sorts of possibilities come to mind. Athena, the goddess of war, for instance, or Artemis. Can you remember any more details? Was she alone, did she have companions? Anything to narrow it down."

Relieved that she hadn't fallen to her knees laughing, Henry tried to remember. The episode had sunk into a dim marsh, where what is, what was and what might be were so entangled that they were indistinguishable. He saw again the fleet form with its white, shining hair--no, not hair but a helmet, shining like glass. Some kind of projections or decoration on either side.

"A helmet, you say? With embellishments? And a shield." The librarian set off between the towering aisles of books. Henry trailed behind, hoping no one saw him.

The librarian swung a volume onto a table and flipped to the index at the back, running her finger down the column of print. She looked up at Henry and winked.

Opening it widely, she tapped the page. "How about this?"

Henry stepped closer to take in the picture. It was a group of white-haired women, dressed in armor and fiery helmets. Each with a small shield and a sword. Though it was only a pencil drawing, they stared out at Henry with eyes of such ferocity that the back of his neck prickled and his nipples tightened. In the forefront, one stood with her sword raised, pointing outward of the picture. On the third finger of her right hand, she wore a thick gold ring.

"Woton's nine daughters," he read, "The Val-"

"Valkyries," said the librarian. "Scandinavian battle goddesses. Well, not goddesses exactly, though they were immortal. The daughters of Woton, king of the gods."

"Valkyries," repeated Henry. He read aloud. "Valkyries led those who died in battle to their final resting place in Valhalla." He had no idea what Valhalla was but was too shy to ask.

"Well, that's just one interpretation," the librarian said, moving closer to Henry. It had been a long time since anyone who looked like him had entered her library. She felt the years dropping from her. "Some sources credit the Valkyries as being saviors of men, of a kind. Still, the most common idea is that they selected men for death, and escorted them to the hall of kings, to Valhalla."

"What do you mean?" He hadn't taken his eyes off the picture.

"They chose who died and who lived. Led the chosen to the land of bliss. The heroes, that is," the librarian continued, consulting the index once more. "Let's see, oh yes, they're listed on page 276, if you're interested. Their names are quite unusual." She turned to the page and began reading names that sounded like wind streaming over ice-cruled hills. "Sigrun, Hrist, Olrun, Svipul."

"Can I write those down?" Henry made a motion of feeling in his pockets for pen and paper but he knew he had none.

"Check the book out," she offered. "Mr, er--?"

"Lindeman," he said, but then thought of Alice and her inevitable, vinegary remarks over such a book. "Does it say which one she is?" And he pointed back again at the terrible Valkyrie leader.

"She could be any of them. Mythical creatures are like that, completely open to interpretation. That's where they get their persistent power--they allow us to imbue them with whatever interpretation fits us best. That's why they've lasted so long, you know."

"How long?"

"Millenia. Long after we're gone and forgotten, Woton and Thor and Svafa will still be here, wielding their power over us."

Svafa. The smell of wet stones and moss rose to his nostrils and in his ears rang faint laughter. Svafa. A translucent presence, floating white hair--a sign. The librarian was still

talking. He couldn't make out the words because all he was aware of was a low pulse, the intake and expelling of air, the tide of his blood rocking with the name, gently, perfectly: Svafa, Svafa...Svafa.

Of course, he couldn't avoid telling Alice.

"Svafa?" Alice said, horrified. "Are you crazy? You're joking, you must be."

"I won, and that's her name." His jaw set, unflinching.

"Instead of Grace? Have you been drinking? Did you fall down and hit your head on something?"

"Grace isn't right. That--that Valkyrie woman saved my life and now she wants me to name my daughter after her. And that's what I'm going to do. That's her name." It was too much--Alice's incredulity, his own shaky reconstruction of the forest scene. The knowledge that, somehow, he'd been sideswiped by mortality, if that's what it was. He slammed out of the house, unable to release the words to Alice: I think I know what she was after. She was there for a kill. I was supposed to die, there in the forest, alongside the stag. But I didn't.

What sort of person would Svafa have been, had she been Grace? Perhaps it would make no difference. As it was, Svafa stood out against the scape of grade school names like a Queen of the Night tulip in a field of buttercups. She waited, red-cheeked, the moment when her teacher, reading the roster on the first day of school, would come to hers--the pause, the false start, the slow, labored attempt which was always wrong. Inevitably, her first words to each year's teacher were reluctant corrections. The teacher frowning, marking her name with phonetic symbols that would never adorn a name like Grace. Svafa learned to recede from sight. Hunch down, slide back, squeeze into the smallest space and move as little as possible.

Svafa's sister, Susan (named by her mother) was born less than two years later, and Linda three years after that. The next year, Henry went hunting alone and was shot by a group of rifle-wielding hunters in orange jumpsuits who mistook him, they said later, for a stag.

That was the story Alice told her daughters, whenever they asked.

*

"How much does it pay?" asked Linda. It was seven-thirty in the morning and they were on the phone. Svafa could hear children in the background. Outside, it was grey and wet.

"I don't know and I don't care. I'd do it for free, don't you see?" She'd do anything, start jogging, shave her head, give up ham.

"Well, don't let on," her sister said. "Of course, this is Scofield so it probably pays next to nothing. But if you're good at it, which you probably will be," and Svafa blessed her easy confidence, "then you can ask for a raise. Just don't leave it too long. Dave says between two and three months at the outside. What did you wear?"

"Just a skirt and top I found in mother's closet. Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters! You never get a second chance to make a first impression. You should have worn a blazer."

"Blazer. I'd look like a tweed armchair."

"I found an amazing Lauren jacket at Ross the other day, military style, with leather trim. I'd have lent it to you if it fit. Why didn't you wear that grey dress you wore to our anniversary party two years ago?"

"It's not a grey dress kind of job." She didn't add that it hadn't zipped.

"What does mama think?"

"She doesn't know and that's how it's staying. If I get it, which I won't, I'll tell her then."

"Would you still do the junk business with her?"

"Nothing's going to change. I'm not even sure if I want it. It's one thing to write a one-time essay, but to write seriously, I mean, something that the paper would publish? I'm kidding myself. Whole different ball game."

"You said you'd do it for free."

"I did?"

"I don't think you know what you want."

"I want--I want to feel full."

"Full of what?"

"Full of shit. I got to go. Talk to you later."

Linda was not so easily brushed off. "And what about the Silver Palate?"

"The gift certificate hasn't arrived yet," Svafa said, knowing what her sister was asking.

"Well, if you've got no one else to take, I'll go with you. Dave can watch the kids. I've heard that their pasta is simply amazing."

"I'll see."

"Sissy! C'mon, who are you going to take anyway? I want to go so badly and Dave will never take me. He's such a Scrooge." Linda changed her tone and Svafa imagined her eyes squinting into points. "I'll tell mama about the job interview."

"That's blackmail! What kind of an example are you to your kids with that kind of trick?"

"When am I going to get a chance to go somewhere like the Silver Palate? Besides, I'm good company."

Linda, the brat, who always knew how to get what she wanted. Maybe it was time for Svafa to take lessons.

"Later," she said, and gently hung up the phone.

Chapter 9

The Silver Palate was an irritating mystery to the locals. The creation of two vivid Californians who'd renovated a dilapidated roadhouse, it had opened a year ago, after a flurry of public advertising and private speculation. Scofield people laid bets on the brevity of its tenure. It wasn't the prices, unpronounceable menu or florid decor destined to show every speck of grime. It wasn't the owners themselves or the odd assortment of strangers they brought in to redesign, decorate and market the venture (despite the perfectly competent workers available right in town). No, the real rub was that the Silver Palate would use only locally grown ingredients. Bill and Raj announced that they would grow the vegetables themselves. Raise their own chickens, fatten their own cows, make their own cheese.

Such uninformed daring had not been seen in Scofield for ages. Didn't they know that winters were sopping, moss-glutted eternities? That sunlight was doled out by the eyedropper? They would find out the hard way. And it must be admitted that the Silver Palate's demise was accepted by many as a foregone conclusion. A woeful, satisfying reassurance that things weren't changing as fast as they feared.

"It's busy, isn't it?" Linda said in a low voice.

"Why are you whispering? We were lucky to get in. I heard some reservations can take weeks." The chair groaned as she eased herself into it. If she moved her legs at all, her knees bumped the underside of the table but when she stretched them out--oh, God, it felt good--her feet left dust marks against the pant legs of a man seated eighteen inches away.

Arriving at Alice's house to pick up her sister, Linda had been almost apoplectic when Svafa appeared in jeans and a beige shirt. By contrast, Linda had marked the occasion with a trip to the tanning salon, a sparkly dress and earrings that brushed her shoulders. She'd insisted on ransacking Svafa's closet to find something more appropriate for her for wear.

"Good luck," said Alice.

"I need to be comfortable," said Svafa helplessly, watching her sister fling first one garment, then another on her bed. "And warm." Miraculously, Linda fished a red dress from the back of her closet. It was so old that Svafa had no memory of it, but was pleasantly surprised that she could get into it, the generous folds of fabric adequately covering her own generous folds. She felt like a glamorous bottle of Heinz.

"Dave heard that it's like this all the time, especially on the weekends. Did you know that people come from as far away as Seattle to eat here?"

"And with such a color."

"So cozy."

The Silver Palate was a deep pink cocoon. Fabric hung from the walls, curtained the windows and tented the ceiling. Dim lighting intensified the drama of pink tablecloths, upholstered booths, carpet the color of Kool-aid.

"Cozy for a tumor maybe," said Svafa. "I feel like I've been swallowed."

"How can you say that? Peach is such a relaxing color. In fact, this makes me want to redo my bedroom."

"Linda, this isn't peach. It's fleshy pink. Like the middle of a rare steak. Maybe that's why they chose it, to put people in mind of ordering a nice, expensive New York strip."

"They only do local food, so I doubt they offer steak from New York. Oh, I know what it reminds me of! Susan had an angora sweater that color. Remember, Sissy? I loved that sweater."

Of course Svafa remembered. She'd pulled it from a rummage sale heap because it looked like raspberry sherbet. She wanted to lick it and feel it running down the back of her throat.

"It won't fit," Alice had said, making her give it up to Susan.

"I borrowed that sweater once," Linda said. "And, oh boy, did I get it. Susan could throw a punch."

"Good Lord, it's hot in here!" Svafa said, ignoring her sister. "It's like being in a raspberry flavored steam room."

"Maybe you're having a hot flash."

"A drink to start out with, ladies?" A waiter paused at their table.

"A velvet martini," said Linda in her most polished voice.

"And for you, ma'am?"

It struck Svafa, as he said the words, that this was one of the few times in her life she'd been asked the question. What did she want? Overwhelmed by the fleshy pink, dream-steam heat of the place and the waiter in his long black apron, she thought she might faint. And for you, ma'am? Her sister was staring at her from across a gulf, a figure seen through the wrong end of the binoculars, tiny and distant. Linda was like Susan in that way; both had traveled so much further than she had. Left alone on the dock with only the sound of lapping waves.

"I'll have the same," Svafa said to the waiter. "And bread, please? I'm starving." She was light-headed from hunger.

"Sorry," said the waiter. "Anticipation is an essential ingredient in any dish. It's part of the owners' philosophy."

"Oh," she said.

"Appetizers blunt the appetite. Believe me, it'll be worth the wait."

After he left, Svafa said, "Can you believe that? Not even a cracker. What kind of a place is this? You'd think they'd want you racking up the bill."

"Well, we're not getting a bill."

"'Anticipation is essential.' What kind of stupid philosophy is that?" The emptiness was beginning to spread, like a black hole that swallowed all, only it wasn't black, it was a deep fleshy

pink that stretched to match the warm folds surrounding her. When the two pinks met, she would disappear utterly. Low blood sugar, that was it. What had she eaten for lunch? All memory of the day had vanished in the heat that rushed up through her torso and arms and neck, igniting her cheeks, blistering her brow. Unbearable pressure tightened across her forehead.

"Sissy," said Linda, "I just want to say how sorry I am you didn't get the job."

"You got anything in your bag--granola bar, gum? I'll even take a cough drop."

"C'mon, stop it. Drink some water, for God's sake."

Svafa pressed the cold glass to her face, expecting to hear a sizzle. "I haven't been formally turned down."

"You're very talented. I've always thought of you as the gifted one."

"What do I have? No degree, no experience, no kind of training except in junk. I won't kid myself."

"Give yourself more credit! You know that binder full of your stories, all written in your horrible writing? Well, once I snuck into your room and copied one of your stories to turn in at school."

"You turned it in under your own name?" Svafa would bring her binder out only when she was alone, after her sisters were asleep, and write stories by flashlight, sweltering under a tent of blankets.

"They were so good, Sissy! I copied one about a ball that bounced by itself. Only I wrote it out in a big hurry, never wondering whether it made sense. I thought it was about a bull--a bull that bounced by itself."

"But how did you know about the binder?" said Svafa. "You were sleeping in the downstairs bedroom then. You couldn't have ever seen me writing."

The waiter appeared with their drinks.

"Cheers!" Linda said brightly.

"C'mon, I want to know."

"Doesn't matter, does it? Not after all this time." Linda reached for the menu again but Svafa pulled it away from her. "Hey! Okay, fine. For your information, Susan used to take your binder to school and sell your stories to kids who needed to turn in work. Okay? They'd copy them in their own writing and pay her, I don't know, two bucks. It was crazy--all these kids turning in your stories, Susan pocketing extra cash. You trotting along in your own little world, oblivious."

"I supposed I should be flattered," Svafa said slowly. "That anyone would pay money." A ribbon of sweat was making its way down her neck.

"You know how Susan was. She always made things go her way."

"What does that mean?"

"Let's change the subject. Talk to me about the job. So there's still a chance?"

"There's no more to say. I set my sights too high with this one."

"And why shouldn't you? Look at me, I set my sights on marrying Dave, when he was so much older than me and a college graduate to boot. You'd never think someone like him would glance my way but here we are, a decade later. No, you're selling yourself short. You won the contest and here we are at the Silver Palate. It's an omen, I think."

The waiter appeared and they ordered, stumbling over the names of the dishes, neither of them entirely sure what they were requesting.

"How can you tell an appetizer from an entree from a dessert?"

"Bill and Raj don't like to be pigeon-holed by labels," the waiter replied. "Any of the dishes, which are 'nibbles,' can function as any course. Life is the primary entree."

After he left, Linda leaned over to Svafa. "If life's the entree," she whispered, "Is death the dessert?"

"I kind of like the idea. No calories, anyway. Life is the primary entree. Wonder how long it took them to come up with that."

"You could wear it on a t-shirt."

"Good slogan for a fat farm."

"Or an abattoir."

"I see what he meant by "nibbles," said Linda when the food arrived. The scallop feuilletés she'd ordered were layers of pastry only slightly bigger than a small pad of Post-it notes, centered on a black porcelain platter, adorned with strands of arugula chiffonade. "Thank goodness for the garnish. This is two bites!"

"I could do it in one," said Svafa. Her own order turned out to be a steaming demi-tasse of pale blue soup. "What was I thinking, ordering soup in this sauna? You know, I think the menu was nothing but appetizers! I think the waiter really meant what he said about life being the entree."

"It's wonderful, though. Oh, wow. Here, try it. Have you ever had anything like that?"

The pastry was as delicate as air, the scallops seasoned to perfection. Svafa's blue soup was redolent of wild herbs and cream. She felt as if a breeze had swept across her neck, filling her with an indescribable peace.

"I've been reborn," Linda said, dabbing her mouth. "I feel like a queen sitting here! Makes the humdrum of the day seem a million miles away."

"Well, I'm still starving! I can't believe they expect to get away with serving food by the thimble full. I'm ordering something else. Or asking for some bread. They've got to have some somewhere in the back recesses of the kitchen." Her stomach howled encouragingly. It wasn't just her usual runaway appetite, it was the pink cocoon conjuring up an odd anticipation, as if she was at the end of a diving board. She hadn't noticed at first, but now--the sensation flooding her was like breaking the cellophane off a fresh box of pink pencils. Like the pop of a bottle of pink

champagne. Or a shove out the door. The hot, cramped folds of the place were catalyzing something new within her, some weird evolution that made her want to break glass and overturn tables, to rip down the fleshy ceiling fabric and shred it in her hands, to let out a yelp that would scare children for miles.

Growing up, they never ate out. Svafa and her mother still didn't, even in a good month. Once, two years ago, they'd driven down to Oregon to visit an old friend of Alice's. The friend had cleaned out the house of a deceased neighbor and had accumulated a load of odds and ends. Such a windfall was irresistible. Svafa and Alice ate at a fast food place on the way down but the next day, coming home, Svafa had insisted on a real restaurant. Well, after a fashion. They sat in a sticky booth and ate heaps of over-salted mashed potatoes, sticks of beef and desultory fried peppers and onions.

Svafa had thought it bliss.

"Sissy!" said Linda, leaning forward across the table. "Why don't you write a review of the Silver Palate and send it to that guy at the paper? Show him what a great job you'll do."

She shook her head, not wanting the mortification of the interview to intrude.

"I mean it," her sister continued, waving her empty glass to catch the waiter's eye.

"Didn't you say he gave you a sample of the new format? So you know how he wants it done."

Svafa sat up, stretching her back. Now she felt like she was looking down at the other diners, awash in the low pink light. She might touch the silk-covered ceiling if she reached out her arms.

"I don't want to think about Tony Corn or anything to do with that day. All I want right now is another drink, and a turkey dinner with oyster stuffing."

"Oh God, there's something I have to tell you! I can't believe I almost forgot. Remember I told you last week that Dave's got a new boss? The higher-ups finally figured out Frank needed replacing, so they brought out this hotshot from the Colorado office. And he has a girlfriend."

"I'll have another, please," Svafa said to the waiter. "And any crusts you can find back there!" She called after his receding form.

"Sissy, listen! His girlfriend, that's the exciting part. Guess her name."

"Oh, Linda, just tell me, for pity's sake."

"You're not going to believe this. Her name is--Susan Lindeman!"

"You mean, like our Susan?"

"Look, it could be her. Don't you ever think about seeing her again? You two were so close, so much alike. I would think you'd think about it once in a while."

"I think about her all the time. For all the good it does me." She closed her eyes. It was too much, the heat, the intense pinkness, the rich food, and now Linda's announcement. The earlier exhilaration had passed. All she wanted was cool air. Maroon oblivion.

"I don't think it's coincidence that Dave's new boss's girlfriend is named Susan Lindeman. I think it's an omen. And I'm going to find out about her. No, don't try and talk me out of this. My intuition is right and it's telling me two things, loud and clear. First, that you should write a review of this place for Toby Corn--"

"Tony Corn. You're loopy. And so am I."

Linda waved her hand impatiently. "And two, that this Susan Lindeman is a very significant occurrence. I'm right on both counts, you'll see."

She could not think about the possibility of Susan's return. She could not think of the Susan Lindeman from Colorado. Linda was wrong. About that, at least.

Svafa rummaged in her vast bag.

"What are you looking for?" Linda asked, reapplying her lipstick.

"Something to write on."

"Ha," said Linda, smirking. She pulled a notepad from her purse and slid it across the table. It was brand new. "I knew you'd need it."

Chapter 10

It was true, what Alice told Svafa. Her junk shop on Smith Street burnt to the ground, just as she was finally coaxing a profit from it.

The memory of Henry's forest encounter metastasized within him. Every time he looked at his small, blonde firstborn, the vision returned, only the fragrance of the day had turned rank. That it lived only in memory was what embittered him. He had penetrated whatever barrier between spirit and flesh for a few fleeting moments. But more than that. He had been chosen-- and then rejected. There was no other explanation. The beautiful Valkyrie had visited him in the forest for a reason, as the librarian had explained. She was going to lead him to the hall of the gods. Valhalla, the celestial palace.

But she had changed her mind! That was what galled him. She must have detected a flaw within him. He could arrive at no other explanation. From her reaches in the spirit realm, he had been perceived as worthy, but once Woton's daughter had drawn close, there in the thick forest, she had found him lacking. A dry well. He had been rejected.

This was the way Henry's thoughts went, over and over. Treading the same ground until a trench was worn and his own self-loathing so profound that he could not bear to even look at himself in the mirror. He stopped shaving, he bathed only when prodded by Alice. Spent hours alone in the woods, retracing his steps, calling to ghosts.

Granite-boned, Alice pounded her own frustration and confusion into action. When the owner of the junk shop retired, she jumped at the chance to take over the lease. Junk was something Alice could sink her teeth into, could get her arms around, could submerge her still-frothing passion. She bundled her two daughters into her rusty pick-up and left the house at eight every morning, not returning until early evening.

Late in the spring, Alice closed up the shop early to cruise by an estate sale where she nabbed several old lamps, a set of china dogs and a portable record player, all for five dollars--a bonanza. She couldn't help being in a good mood.

That evening, they ate supper together, the four of them and not a raised word, not a shattered plate. He smiled at her across the table and the old frenzy rose again within Alice. She relaxed under the facade of normalcy. Henry put the girls to bed and returned downstairs as she stood at the sink.

He came up behind her, lacing his fingers under her breasts, nuzzling her dark hair that smelled of cumin and pine. She stood perfectly still, her hands still in the soapy water, then drew breath as if to speak but he said, "Shh."

His heat press through the layers of fabric until clothes melted away like butter. The fit as perfect as it had ever been. Her latent tension and anger dwindled, replaced by the bright bullet of passion that was Henry. Tears stung her eyes. Alice, who never cried.

The phone rang.

"Let it ring," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"It's almost eleven, might be an emergency." No one they knew called so late. Each peal rang with alarm.

"Leave it," he said stubbornly. "I'm more important." And kissed her open-mouthed, pain-ridden, blotting all other images from her mind and his--the junk business that had swallowed Alice whole, the endless torment of rejection. The fleeting glory that existed only to mock.

And this was what coming apart in the middle was for Alice. Body pointed one direction and mind another, trapped between Henry and the phone, which rang and rang. Scraping her nerves as Henry erupted in her bones. Wondered if she would ever be whole again, if she ever was. At last, her body vanquished her shopkeeper's mind and the phone was silenced along with

alarm. Strewn across the floorboards beside her skirt and faded bra. For the first time in months, she fell again into the abyss of Henry. The sanctuary of his body, where nothing else existed. For a little while, anyway.

Later, a red car with lights pulled into the driveway. The chief of the Scofield Fire Department stood at the door.

Alice set the china dogs on the table, smoothed her hair with trembling fingers. Upstairs, Henry slept on.

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Svafa spent most of the next day packing up goods to ship, thirty-one packages that were going all over the country, some to Canada and even overseas. It wasn't hard work. She made sure the item, say, a set of nearly-new black lacquered trays from a rained-out garage sale, was clean and in good repair. Then she filled a box with Styrofoam peanuts into which she nestled the item like a baby bird. Professional packing, according to Alice, convinced the purchaser that they were getting a quality product, even more than the product itself. Mindless work, it left Svafa free to re-taste blue soup and velvet martinis.

She managed to tape her finger to the top of a box.

Later, she sat at her computer. The plan was to type up the notes she'd taken. Just fit them into the format Tony had given her. At the Silver Palate, the words had flowed like peanuts into an empty box. Now, her fingers resting on the keyboard, everything jammed. Worse, her mind kept returning to Linda announcement about Dave's boss's girlfriend.

She wouldn't let herself go there.

“Just start,” she said out loud. Instead, she cleaned the chicken house.

An ancient structure, it was originally a storage shed, built over a cold cellar that by turns fascinated and terrified Svafa and her sisters. They'd creep down into the moist chill, flashlight wobbling wildly. Sniff the dank earthen air, light playing off dusty mason jars, molding rope,

pottery shards, a broken ladder, and spider webs like rotting drapes. Alice told them black widows lived there, a single bite from which would make their nerves spasm and blood to ooze out every pore. Once they saw a rat wiggling down a hole.

“This,” said Susan, “is hell.”

“No way,” said Svafa. “Hell is fire.”

“If you couldn’t get out of somewhere dark and scary, with no one to help, that would be what hell is.”

Svafa had pulled her back up into the yard where they forgot about hell, and chased their mother's chickens until Alice came out and yelled at them to stop.

Maybe Svafa imagined it. The mind played tricks.

Svafa approached the chicken house, wearing coveralls and work gloves. Good Soviet farmwear. She would rake the place out before starting on the disinfecting.

Instead, her right leg went through the floor like it was yogurt. She plunged face first with such force that the breath left her body. Arms flailed, the rake clattering against the shelves where the nests formed a messy line. Her leg dangled down into the cellar, the only part of her to actually break through, the broken ends of the floorboards digging into her thigh.

The door slammed shut. Utter darkness.

She lifted her face from muck of the floor. The best she could do was to roll partially over on one side and rest on her right elbow. The rotted boards held her leg like a bear trap. Gingerly she wiggled her toes, her foot dangling far below, still encased in the rubber boot. Nothing broken.

The stench was indescribable.

Breathing through her mouth, she inched forward, tried to ease her leg up and out. No. If she could roll all the way over, she might brace her left leg and haul herself up. Gritting her teeth, she managed to turn over all the way, but now her right leg hung at an excruciatingly

awkward angle. Impossible to raise her left leg even a couple of inches. She eased herself back onto her stomach. Could hardly draw breath, the air was so acrid.

"Teach you to let the coop get so bad," she muttered.

Perhaps she could--slowly, now--draw up her left leg underneath her for leverage. She started to push with her knee but her head butted against the end wall of the coop. She was simply too big. Not enough floor area for her to creep forward, pulling her right leg free as she went.

Now the ends of the jagged floorboards were digging into the top of her leg more than ever. Worse, she needed to pee.

Alone, half-prone on the unbearable filth, she remembered Susan's words. Dark and scary, without anyone to help. Here she was, dangling--according to Susan--half-way between earth and hell. More poetic to say between heaven and hell, but the chicken house wasn't anybody's idea of heaven, not even the chickens who lived there. Her bisected self, a parable of a half-life. Like some big radioactive rock, within which time and memory ticked down. To think that last night she was nestled in the warm womb of the Silver Palate. Now she was trapped on the shitty floor of a chicken coop, half-way to hell. Like a magic act, coming apart in the middle, torso pointed one way, legs another. Leg. The trick was being fitted together again.

A phrase from a Mary Oliver poem she'd read long ago came bobbing up to the surface. *So this is fear. A dark spider, the last dollar, the last piece of bread.* She could add to that list.

She could yell. Maybe someone in the alley would hear her, come free her. The only true freedom is the kind you make. That was what Susan would say. Or perhaps she did say it, right before she left. A sunny day when Alice took them all, even Rot, to the Surf Club. Svafa had finished high school but it was Susan's graduation. An all-of-the-way departure, whole body, whole mind, whole soul. A hole of her own making.

Susan was laughing, the kind of peals that shook her shoulders and made her nose run. Stop it, Svafa said but it was no use. There she was in the memory parlor. Kicking the floor with her heels. Tossing antimacassars.

It was the suffocating darkness that was made her thoughts bloom like those big tropical flowers that attracted flies instead of bees. Vampire lilies. Like purple calla lilies but bigger and impossible to kill. Reeking of the grave, they were growing right now, here in the darkness. Memories with no sunlight to stunt them, waxed lilies with Susan's face at the end of each stem.

Maybe she could the rake to push the door open, if the lock hadn't caught. She grasped it, trying not to move her torso too much, and poked it the door. It rattled open a sliver then fell shut.

She threw the rake at the door. Pain ripped down her side but the door opened with such force that it slammed against the clapboard siding.

Svafa took a deep breath. She began to call for help.

After a long time, there was a sound.

"Good lord above, what have you done?" Alice started to hobble in, then stopped. "I'll get help."

"No! Mom--don't go. Please."

"For heaven's sake, Sissy--I can't lift you."

"Don't leave me."

Her mother hesitated at the door, then slowly entered. Leaning on her cane, she bent and grabbed Svafa's hand. The floorboards racked like a damaged ship. Svafa hoisted herself up enough to draw her left leg under herself. Slowly she stood, pulling her right leg up from the pit. Her mother's hands gripped her.

Outside, Svafa collapsed on the walkway. Bleeding from where the boards had scraped into her, but nothing broken, the scrape only superficial. Coated in filth.

"Why were you cleaning the coop today anyway?" said Alice. "I was planning on doing it myself Saturday." In the sunlight, her face had the looseness of an empty sack.

"Thanks for rescuing me, mom."

Alice gave her daughter a rough, quick squeeze that from anyone else might have been a hug. "Lucky I heard you. Can you stand?"

"Give me a minute."

"That stinking old coop. Not surprised the floor collapsed, it's that old." She leaned heavily on her cane to examine Svafa's bleeding thigh. "Need to get some soap and water on that , make sure impetago doesn't set in."

Limping, Svafa followed her mother back to the house.

Chapter 11

The inspector had had to reschedule his visit. Bad case of flu going around Public Works, he explained over the phone to Alice. Everyone's schedule was being shifted around. He planned on being at their house next Monday morning. Would that work?

Alice handled it like she handled everything else--burying herself in junk. A big box clerk had mispriced fifteen room-sized wool rugs, leaving off a zero so they were tagged at \$18. Alice stood her ground and got noisy. Svafa made five trips to bring them all home tied to her car roof. She drove very slowly. In the flurry of it, Alice neglected to mention the Monday appointment.

So when Svafa opened the front door and saw the inspector, clipboard in one hand and a camera around his neck, her heart dropped.

"Mrs. Lindeman?" He had a round, pink head and narrow glasses.

"I'm her daughter."

"I'm here to take a look at your backyard."

Alice appeared, scowling. "I'm Mrs. Lindeman. How long is this going to take anyway?"

"George Hawood, Jr. here. We spoke on the phone a few days ago, right?"

"I'll be damned," said Alice. "Jeep George."

The inspector was startled. "What's that?"

"Your father was a Seattle justice of the peace, a little taxidermy on the side."

"That's right--but how--"

"Recognize the name. Your father married me and my husband. My late husband. I ran into him a few years ago, right after he retired. He bought a double-headed axe off me, got a hell of a deal, too. But none of that matters. You look a little like him."

"Well, well. Small world."

"He still have that axe? That was a good one."

The inspector was solemn. "You know he went missing a few years ago--must've been right after you saw him."

"Missing?"

"He bought himself a condo in Orlando about five years ago. My wife and I helped him move in. Last we heard from him was when he called to tell us he just bought a new car. That was around the end of 2009. Police searched high and low. His Malibu was in the garage, everything in his condo was there. He was even getting ready to start a new project. Someone had brought him a gorgeous buck they'd shot. Biggest one I ever saw."

"Oh, that's terrible," said Svafa. "I'm so sorry."

"We had to have the State wildlife people come and haul it away," he said. "It was starting to stink. Well, now, you have a sinkhole to show me?"

He trotted back and forth through the knotweed and pineapple tansy, a bulky case slung over one shoulder. Mud splattered his pant legs. The chickens settled down. He took pictures and measured the diameter and depth of the sinkhole. Squinted and took notes and soil samples. The sky darkened and spit wads of rain.

The inspector stood on the back porch beside Svafa and watched the sinkhole turn into a pond.

"So what'd you say?" said Alice. "Doom and gloom?"

"Get yourself some ducks instead of those hens," he said with a laugh. "It's a regular wetlands here." It was a joke, Svafa supposed, but she didn't know how to respond. She asked him if he would like some tea.

"No, thanks," he said.

"So what's new?" said Alice. "I've lived with that hole for thirty five years or more. Neither of us is going anywhere."

"Well, Mrs. Lindeman, that's the problem. It is going somewhere. It's a real mystery, these kinds of sinkholes here in town. They're common in places like Florida, where it's all limestone. Rainwater dissolved away the bedrock and leaves gaping holes underneath. Or over in West Virginia, where the mines turn the ground into swiss cheese. But not around here. This is the third property in this neighborhood I've had to check out. The other two were just like this one, a long slow depression. Like a big ocean liner chugging across the ocean. Seems like they're not moving, then they disappear over the horizon before you know it."

"So what does it mean? C'mon, out with it! Don't give me any of your bureaucratic bullshit."

George Jr. refused to be intimidated. "Look, this kind of hole is only going to get worse. Eventually, it'll compromise the foundation of your house. I'd give that chicken house there six, maybe eight months before it starts falling apart. Maybe less. You notice any shifting, any damage happening with it?"

"Last week, I fell--" Svafa started but her mother pinched her arm.

"No," said Alice.

"In all fairness, I got to tell you that there's a possibility that the city's going to want to cordon off this property. It's just not safe, or it won't be soon."

"Condemn it?" Svafa asked, horrified.

"Well, fuck that," Alice said, bashing her cane against the step. "I'd like to see them try." Her eyes were bright as glass.

The inspector sucked in his cheeks. "Hate to give you news like that. But safety has to come first."

"Can't we fix it, shore it up somehow, fill it in?" asked Svafa

He shook his head. "You need a solid base to work from and I doubt there's one under there. That's my initial impression. Look here." And he set off across the yard, down the slope of the basin to where the water was pooled.

He crouched in the muck. "See that? You got to watch it for a while--maybe it's not so obvious. This movement across the water? See how there's a little current making the water snake just the tiniest bit toward us?"

Svafa watched. The water was a glum brownish green. Tiny craters erupted as the rain hit. A gum wrapper rocked gently--Bazooka Joe's face was down to an outline of hair, memories for eyes. Three hens stalked among the goatgrass that fringed the edge, not minding the sticky mud. Water dripped from the hunchbacked apple tree, whose bark was already stained black.

"I don't see anything."

"The water's draining through, fast enough to cause a little current, which means it's probably just pouring down into empty space. Fast is a relative term, of course. That's my guess."

"Are you saying we'll lose our house?"

He stood up. "I don't know. Still, if I were you, I'd start thinking about my options. Just your mother and yourself live here? Not that it's any of my business."

"And the chickens," she said.

The inspector glanced at his watch. "Got to be on my way. The city'll be in touch. You'll get a copy of my report." He zipped up his jacket and pulled his hood over his head.

Svafa crouched at the edge of the sinkhole. Her sinkhole. The inspector was right, ducks would love it. She pictured it--lilies, water lettuce, fairy moss. A mother duck followed by a chain of grey fluff balls. What did duck eggs taste like, anyway? Delicious, no doubt. Yet the sinkhole didn't stay a pond. The water drained out, like the inspector said. She knew it from experience. All she had experience in was junk? She was a hole expert, queen of holes, who

knew only too well that they didn't go away so easily. It didn't matter what you plugged them with, they always drained out. That was the problem with fillers. When they wore away, you were stuck with emptiness once again.

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In the cold wet, Alice wrung the neck of a hen. No good to get Sissy to do the job, not her. She'd tried it once and ended up mutilating the bird, and Alice had to finish the poor thing off. It wasn't a task to do half-heartedly. It took a steel grip and a steel eye. Grab the chicken quick, before it knows what's happening. Then, you take the small, hot head in your hand. Stretch its neck a little, bend it forward and jerk it back in one lightning movement. A smart, little snap.

When she was younger, she could do it so fast that the bird never knew what happened. She's slowed down. Now, the bird sensed the approaching death-wrench and struggled, uselessly, expelling feathers.

Alice cut off the hen's head and hung it to drain. She'd been counting on a large sale (a nearly complete Edwardian tea set that she'd bought at an estate sale last year) but the buyer backed out, leaving her short on grocery money. The chicken would last a couple of days--with plenty of potatoes to fill up Sissy. Something would come through by then.

The city inspector could go hang, just like the headless hen. As far as the floor of the chicken house, well, Sissy had slung some old boards over the hole. They'd tread carefully. It was all they could do for now.

"Sissy," Alice said. "You got a phone call the other day. I forgot to tell you."

"I did? From who?" She had just come in from collecting eggs.

Alice lowered herself into a kitchen chair. "The Vanguard. Vegetable name, Tony somebody."

"Tony Corn. What did he want?"

"Something about a job, if you still want it. What's all that about, then?" Alice flipped through a catalog of Victorian style hardware. Pages of metal bells and door knockers, shaped as pineapples, cows, even grimacing goblins. Like advertising your own nightmare.

"He said that? You're absolutely sure of it? He said I got the job?"

"Still got my faculties, don't I?"

"What else did he say?"

"That's it." Alice held up the catalog. "See that? It's a reproduction of a Victorian doorplate, forty-nine bucks retail. I bought the genuine article, solid copper, from that downtown salvage company, last week. Six ninety-nine."

"It's a writing job, mother! I applied to write a weekly restaurant column. Do you have any idea what this means to me?"

"Sure, free food everywhere you go. Oh, that's right up your alley." She tossed the catalog onto the floor. "Well, I told him you got a job already and you didn't need anything else."

Svafa set the bowl of eggs on the counter with trembling hands, trying to fathom her mother's words.

"Sure you do. I need you here with me, helping me. You got no reason to look at me like that--Sissy!" She ducked as Svafa threw an egg at her. It smashed against the wall harmlessly but the next one hit Alice squarely on her right breast, followed by a warm splat on the side of her face.

It was as if something had broken apart inside Svafa, a wild flapping. She hadn't gathered eggs for a day or more, so the basket held a dozen. She pelted them at her mother, one after another, in deep, swinging arcs, drawing close so she wouldn't spend the dripping yolks and albumen on the walls or floor, until finally Alice, sodden, spluttering, stumbled from the room.

Svafa leaned against the counter, trying to catch her breath, her ears singing violence. God, what a mess she'd made. Was that all from her? She shivered, touched her own arms as if

feeling for a broken bone. Shocking, her actions. Her record of daughterly order in shambles. Such focus, such accuracy. Vengeance is mine. Another line from somewhere, not Mary Oliver, but Old Testament prophets, white-bearded, vitriolic. Now was restored to her a measure of wholeness, a brand new way of moving. No wonder those angry old men liked those words so much. Was this all it took, a dozen smashed eggs? Perhaps she was a better bargainer than anyone knew.

Crossing to the kitchen sink, she stood over the plucked chicken, cold and bare against the stainless steel. There was a little smear of blood on its breast, red against the stark white. Her heart might burst out of her chest at any moment. She splashed her face with cold water, then dried it off with a brand new dish towel she'd bought at the Salvation Army for only a quarter.