

One, two, three. I measure out the coffee spoons.

Yellow light seeps through the kitchen like water through the paper filter. Sparrows shriek a spring song outside the window.

“Faith?” My father’s shout, muffled overhead. “Out of there, now! Other people need the bathroom!”

I smirk. When I slept until the last moment, my sister would wait for me to get up, then dash into the bathroom two steps ahead, laughing. Now that I’m first up in the house, she can stay locked in there all day, for all I care.

The timer buzzes, and I pour myself a big cup. Faith can’t have any—she’s not allowed for another year. I turned 17 just a couple of months ago, but already it’s not morning without coffee.

Sitting down with my mug, I open my English textbook.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I read it again, aloud. I savor it for the fiftieth time. It’s beautiful.

I glance up at the bowl on the counter. Grandma’s bowl, filled with bananas and peaches, shining in the young sun. Do I dare to eat a peach?

Pushing aside my coffee, I walk over. One of the bananas has the first stanza of “The Raven” slowly ripening on its peel. A few days ago, I wrote it there with a toothpick, knowing my mother would freak out when the letters showed up. The peaches are flawless.

THREE

Do I dare to eat a peach? I pick one up. Heavy, fragrant in my hands. I bring it back to the table, weighing it.

Well, do I? Do I dare?

Yes. Yes, I'll always dare.

I bite into the peach. The skin explodes under my teeth, and juice splatters my shirt. I wipe my face with the back of my hand.

I'll always be brave, and someday the mermaids will sing to me.

The hall clock chimes a quarter past. I hear my father on the stairs, and close the book.

No. What's so daring about eating a peach? I hold it up to the light, its fuzz glowing like a halo. How does anything so easy take courage? Wouldn't not eating it disturb the universe more? Like one of those fasting saints I read about, living on nothing but the Host for years. Now that's daring. I'll be brave as that.

I gently put the peach back.

The hall clock chimes a quarter past. I hear my father on the stairs, and close the book.

Maybe. The question suddenly seems too big, too frightening. Maybe. But soon. I'll dare soon. I swear.

I drop the peach back into the fruit bowl. For later.

The hall clock chimes a quarter past. I hear my father on the stairs, and close the book.

ÁNTONIA I

I can't see the platform tonight. I glimpse it so rarely now. In brilliant summer twilights, it glittered like a fantastic city in the distance. As the leaves fell, I could see the windmill tower—still standing—reflected in the last light. But the December horizon is an anonymous line of smoke, dissolving as the days fade. Glowing in the dusk, white shapes bob in the water, flotsam of some faraway wreck. A cold wind stings my face. Gone. The light is gone. I breathe in winter, its clean, sharp smell of absence.

My hips and knees screaming like a forced door, I struggle upright. I'm not supposed to sit so long, not supposed to get chilled, but the gray tide has slapped into my shoes. Every step is a shower of sparks as I pick my way up the littered shore. No moon. Salt ice and rustrotten cans crunch under my weight. The wind brings the scent of tar, of fish, of diesel exhaust.

Cursing, I wrench my foot from a newly emerging tire. Up the embankment, a dumped couch melts into the sand, its innards faintly phosphorescent like a decaying sea monster. I step over the rail into a gush of traffic. Nobody honks as I pass through the waves of cars. Am I as ghostly as these first snowflakes, illuminated by a thousand headlights?

There are no streetlights to avoid beyond the highway. Dark buildings loom on either side of me, their shattered doors and windows gaping like lost teeth. I smell vomit and ash in invisible alleys. Gentrification somehow skipped this neighborhood while I was away. It's a city of the dead. Five blocks, six blocks, I should be afraid here. But nothing frightens me anymore.

My passage makes no sound.

THREE

Raw, sulfurous light spills up from River Street. From the shadows, I watch a cabbie slouched against his bumper, flipping a coin high into the air. Tails. Tails. Heads. His baseball cap hides his face. Tails. Heads. The coin gleams as it falls. One bolt passes across my face, and I wince. Heads. Random, and not so random. Each toss collides with circumstance: a convergence of air, of snow, of the caster's indifferent hand. Every outcome halves possibility, one more irreversible step towards the future. Heads tails will never be heads heads tails, never progress as heads heads heads. Heads, not tails. Tails, not heads. Heart loud in my ears, I wade into the glare, the sallow streetlights casting triple shadows around my feet.

I'm only steps away before he notices me. With a hard, angry motion, he snatches the coin from the air and shoves it deep in his pocket. He jerks his head towards the dead city, giving a glimpse of his vulturine nose. Nobody comes out of there, he means. My hands and mouth empty, I shrug and brush past him. He moves to stop me, but hesitates as his radio shrieks a command. I don't look back as he drags his door shut and launches to his next fare.

On the other side, dim porch lamps stain doorways like old urine. Blue light flickers in windows, and I hear the muted drone of televisions. Strangers drift past me. I avoid their eyes.

The city quickens. Neon, beating like a pulse. The flood lights of new banks. The strobe and shouts of a topless club.

My withdrawal stopped nothing. Our withdrawal. The world had pounded on, relentless as surf. Three years. We were forgotten like a boat over the horizon.

The brick of my building is streaked with rust. Hands numb, I fumble with my keys. A teenager catcalls as he drives by, bass thumping.

Grimacing, I shoulder the steel door until it clicks loudly behind me. The hallway stinks of cat piss. A few cigarette butts

ÁNTONIA I

bounce down the steps as I slowly climb four flights. By the top, the air is clean and thick as steam. I jerk open the last deadbolt and step into the darkness of my apartment. A thin curtain snaps in the wind like a battered flag. Pushing it aside, I look over New Haven through a yellow fog of falling snow. Beyond the void of the dead city flows the bright gash of highway. Farther, the blank ocean. Somewhere in it lies the platform, no beacon on the tower. We took that down the first day.

“And pull! Pull!”

The warning light tumbles into an explosion of glass and metal on the concrete. We whoop and stamp.

Shaking her broom like a weapon, Josephine steps forward. “We’re out of range! Unseen! Under the radar!” Her hair shines red in the dawn.

I yank the window shut. The radiators shudder and spit as I snap on the kitchen lights. 5:40 p.m., twenty minutes until work. Unfolding the can opener from my pocket knife, I pry the top from some bean soup. All the blades are worn round. It was a present on my tenth birthday, the only thing I have from before.

The soup boils in the moments it takes to wash my spoon. Laying my camping pot next to the mattress on the floor, I force myself to eat. I taste little but salt. The Tarot cards and miniature gong sit next to the old rotary phone. 5:58 p.m. I light a single candle.

“This is Ántonia of the Psychic Guidance Network. What is your name, my friend?”

“Debbie.” The caller mumbles, and I switch the phone away from my bad ear.

“Debbie,” I coo. “Lovely name. From Deborah.” I don’t need to consult my baby names book. “In Hebrew, it means priestess.

THREE

What guidance from the spirits do you seek today, Priestess?"

"I ..." Debbie collapses into childish sobs.

Willing the clock to move faster, I make vaguely encouraging sounds while I pick at the mattress binding. At last she's quiet, and I pick up my cards.

"The spirits will speak to you through the mystery of the Tarot. Clear your mind." After a weighty pause, I lean over and strike the little gong three times, deliberately, like I'm announcing the arrival of Kublai Khan. I bought it in a head shop the day I picked up my first paycheck. At \$3.99 a minute, people want their trappings.

"Debbie, your signifier will be ..." I pluck a card and glance at it. The Tower. I shove it back and put the deck down. "... will be the Page of Wands. This card symbolizes the young person on a quest, a young person searching for answers. Are you looking for answers, Young Priestess?"

"Yes," she whispers, awestruck.

By July, I had recovered enough, and the money was gone. I needed a job. The ad said the open house would serve refreshments. The hotel ballroom strained with hundreds of applicants, nearly all women. Trying not to look at my reflection in the mirrored walls, I stationed myself near the fruit and cheese. I had hoped to look like a wandering fortune teller, but the effect was more bag lady in mourning. The tea and cakes and ices—I hadn't seen food like that in years. I was wondering how I could discreetly tuck a wheel of brie under my skirt when someone tapped my shoulder.

"Next. Let's go," she commanded.

Shoving in one more mouthful, I followed her. The last applicant floated past us, barefoot and in flowing purple. She left a smog of patchouli in her wake.

In the interview room, three middle-aged women in pastel linen suits scrutinized me.

ÁNTONIA I

"Name, please?"

"I am Ántonia, daughter of Atlantis," I declared, locking eyes with the one with the biggest shoulder pads. Take me to your leader.

Cream Suit smirked, and Pink Suit coughed.

"Ántonia. Atlantis. I see." Lemon Suit crossed her legs behind her desk. "How nice of you to come all this way. What skill would you bring to the Psychic Guidance Network?"

"Clairvoyance. I was given clear sight when I was struck by lightning in my homeland."

Lemon Suit suppressed a yawn. "How interesting. Several of our applicants today received their gift in the same way." Cream Suit smirked again, and I had had enough.

Growling, I yanked the ridiculous gypsy blouse from my shoulder to expose the red, branching scar that curls around me like an invasive vine.

All three stared for a moment, then looked away.

"Well, then," said Pink Suit, finally, "would you like to demonstrate your abilities?" She seemed genuinely sympathetic, and for a moment, I was grateful to her.

I approached, extending my hands. Her eyes flicked to Lemon Suit, but she took them. Her hands felt warm and a little moist, her grip flaccid. I gazed out over her shoulder, as if listening to a distant voice. In my peripheral vision, I noted her mild expression, the touched-up hair escaping from her barrette. About my age, fortyish. Wearing a Mother's necklace, the kind kids buy with their babysitting money—four birth stones and a puffy gold heart pendant. No wedding ring.

I shook my head slowly. "Terrible, wasn't it?"

Pink Suit started. "What was?"

"Your husband. When he left. Terrible." I looked her directly in the face. "How long has it been now?"

THREE

"Three years," she blinked.

"Yes, and it still stings, especially when you hear about him and... well, her, right?" Even if he didn't dump her for another woman, no middle-aged man stays single long. "At first you didn't think you could do it, did you? Dark days. But I see four bright spirits around you—your children?"

She smiled.

"Two boys, two girls."

"One boy, three girls," she corrected.

Hecate's dogs.

"Wait." I peered over her shoulder again. "One of your girls, she's a bit of a tomboy, isn't she?"

Josephine jabs her finger at the podium. "Ninety percent of all adult women say that they were tomboys as children. Ninety percent! That's how narrow the definition of femininity is in our culture." Her face is flushed and radiant and the crowd can't take its eyes off her. "Ask yourself, if ninety percent of girls aren't girls, what happens to us that we become women? What happens to us?"

Pink Suit giggled. "Yes, Julia. Her nails are always dirty."

"Ahh. She had me fooled for a minute."

We chuckled indulgently. Oh, those kids.

"Your four angels are sent from heaven. They were the light in your darkness. Without them, you would have been lost."

She nodded wildly.

I hesitated, smiling coyly. "I see someone, someone special." Maybe there's a love interest.

"Really?" She wriggled like a puppy teased with a table scrap. No, no boyfriend.

"Yes, in your future." I frowned, conferring with the ether. "He is a good man, but he has spiritual work to do. If he does that

ÁNTONIA I

work, he will be your heart's partner. If he does not, do not cling to him, set him free. Just remember ..." I looked her deeply in the eyes, "... you are complete as you are. Never doubt it. You. Are. Complete." I squeezed her hands on each word, then dropped them.

"Thank you," she breathed.

I turned to face Lemon Suit.

"You won't see them on the phone." Her lipstick-red mouth twitched.

I closed my eyes. "The spirits of Atlantis have a message for you."

"Oh?"

"They say never ... never, ever skip your colonoscopy."

She stiffened. Why can't I keep my mouth shut? At least it was over. Maybe Pink Suit would bring me back to the fruit and cheese if I asked.

Lemon Suit broke into a rapid series of snorts that became a loud, braying laugh. The other two tittered cautiously.

"Training starts Monday." She offered a folder, and I took it. "Let us know by the end of the week whether you'll be there."

"I'll be there."

"Excellent." Lemon Suit stood up. "I think you'll find most of your questions answered in the orientation packet." She leaned towards me. "Oh, and honey? Lose the shtick, okay?"

But I don't. I do dump the outfit back at Salvation Army, but Ántonia of Atlantis holds the regional record for average call length at 53 minutes. Ántonia of Atlantis cashes her bonus checks and hides the money in the freezer. Ántonia of Atlantis has a refrigerator full of imported cheese and fruit out of season. I have no other name now.

"Young Priestess, I am going to shuffle the cards now. Listen to your heart and tell me when they feel right. Close your eyes." I

THREE

hold the deck up to the phone and riffle it with my thumb.

"Now," she whispers.

"I am going to divide the cards into three, and shuffle each pile. Your inner wisdom will know when they are right."

"Now."

Riffle.

"Now."

Riffle.

"Now."

I strike the gong solemnly. "It is time."

Debbie holds her breath.

"I see a man," I pronounce. No, really?

Debbie gasps.

"Who is he?" I demand.

"Tyler! My boyfriend! Oh!" she wails.

"Knight of Swords," I intone. "A little rough on the outside, but you see the finished gem inside him." I poke the candle, and a rivulet of wax runs down onto the floor.

"That is so true!"

"What is the problem, my friend?" Well, Debbie? Do your parents hate him? Did he screw your best friend? Did he knock you up and leave town? You don't cry hard enough to have had him beat you until you gave him your paycheck.

While the customer tells me her story, I empty the Major Arcana cards from the deck. Justice, the Magician, the Lovers. The Wheel of Fortune seems to turn in the stuttering light as I lay the Minor Arcana into a game of solitaire.

"... broke up when I was in school. But then ..."

Long-term relationship, off and on. I flip the Ten of Wands into an empty spot.

"... if he really loves me. My aunt says I can do better, but ..."

Aunt doesn't like him, aunt in position of giving advice. One,

ÁNTONIA I

two, three, I cover the Five of Cups with the Four of Swords. One, two, three, the Ten of Pentacles onto the Page of Wands. I move the Nine of Swords on top and turn over the Three of Swords.

"It's like that song, you know? Don't give up this love, baby, it's like a tree that's shady. Oh my God, I love that song."

The Queen of Pentacles won't fit anywhere and I'm stuck. I scatter the cards across the floor.

"Young Priestess, I see a heavy heart. A heart ripe with love, but burdened with questions. It asks, where is my true love? Why doesn't my young man answer my song? Is this your heart, my friend?" Somehow I've lapsed into an Eastern European accent.

"Yes!" Debbie exclaims.

"You have known your young man before, in past lives."

"I knew it!"

"But he has never married you. Your Tyler is a young soul. A boy. A boy who has not put away childish things."

Debbie breathes raggedly.

"Your young man is back again, but he has forgotten the lessons of his past lives. He stands at the crossroads of love, hesitating. He looks to the left, then the right. Does he want to join hands with you on one path, or does he answer the call of adventure from the other? He does not know." We do not use contractions in Transylvania.

"How can I make him choose me?" she begs.

"Young Priestess, you cannot force him. He has free will."

"Who's Will?" she gasps.

I swallow a sigh. "No, I mean he has to choose for himself." I pause. "Do you know you have a guardian angel?"

"I do?"

"Yes, I see her. She is incarnated, which means she appears as a person to you. A mature woman. Not old. A friend? No ... an aunt?"

THREE

"This is so freaky, you know everything! My Aunt Janey. She is so good to me, we're really close."

"Listen to her. She will guide you towards Heaven's purpose. Your outcome card is the Ten of Cups, the card of dreams come true. Your Aunt Janey will advise you as you walk towards your golden future, which is your destiny no matter which path Tyler chooses." I glance at the clock. Sixty-one minutes, and I need a break. "The spirits are fading, my friend. We need to thank them for their wisdom."

Three chanting, gong-banging minutes later, I limp to the bathroom and gulp straight from the faucet. My voice gets stronger all the time, but I still rasp by the end of my shift. Fresh, cold water, here whenever I want it. A marvel.

I gingerly touch my tongue to the end of the glass tube, and a few drops run into my mouth. Blood warm, but not scalding. Thank you, Goddess, thank you. I suck the flat, insipid water from the distiller eagerly, panting between swallows. I slowly become aware of cold air flowing over my sweating neck. The door of the Fireshack hangs open, and Ixchel stands watching me, glowering.

"Look at you. You look like a hamster." Her waxy face darkens.

I jerk my head up. "Animals are not ours to use materially or metaphorically," I counter, mechanically. A few precious drops spill down my chin and I lap at them.

"Thanks for the correction, sister," she spits from between clenched teeth. "But you are holding back our transformation from our domesticated bodies to our wild be-ings. How can we ever reclaim our true selves if you cling to what Patriarchy says we have to drink?"

"Ixchel," I wheedle, "some of us are able to get the oppressor out of our heads more quickly than others. And our bodies. I admire your success. What are you up to now, yourself? Twenty-five percent?"

She calms. "I personally drink a third directly from Mother Ocean

ÁNTONIA I

now."

"Wow. Do you feel different?"

"Very. I can't describe it. But I can't carry the burden of our shift alone, Ántonia. You'll have to try harder. How else will we break free?"

My heart drops like a pebble through water. "Keep on reminding us, sister," I defer.

Ixchel bares her translucent teeth and closes the door. I stare at the distiller as it drips onto the concrete floor.

"This is Ántonia of the Psychic Guidance Network. What is your name, my friend?"

"This is Ántonia of the Psychic Guidance Network. What is your name, my friend?"

"This is Ántonia of the Psychic Guidance Network. What is your name, my friend?"

2:10 a.m. The candle has long since blinked into darkness. I wind myself into a sheet. The radiators growl as lightning flashes in my closed eyes.

KATHERINE I

The patient reports never being well since an influenza two years ago. Her lymph nodes remain swollen, her throat chronically raw and shooting pain into her ears on swallowing. On examination, her tonsils appear inflamed, although there is no discharge. Her oral temperature is 98.3°, and she experiences periodic flushes of heat. She suffers from a peculiar vertigo, with the sensation as if she's floating. Floating. Interesting. Shoving aside my cold coffee, I reach for a reference book.

I make notes in the chart margins ... *Lachesis*, *Calcarea arsenica*, *Asarum europaeum*, *Lac caninum*, *Argentum nitricum*, *Nux moschata*—snake venom, arsenate of lime, European ginger, bitch's milk, silver nitrate, nutmeg. Any of those states could include a floating sensation.

During our consultation, the patient expressed great fear about her health. More so than her symptoms warrant, although to be fair, she's not a well woman. According to her, her headaches portend a brain tumor, her frequent urge to urinate, bladder cancer. After an extensive series of tests had been negative, her primary physician had suggested a psych referral. Insulted, she had come to my office on the advice of a friend.

I pore over the file, searching for the one detail that will tip the scales towards the correct judgment, the key to the locked door. Her less recent health history is unremarkable. She does not particularly desire sweets. She did not appear spacy. Then I find it.

She sleeps poorly, sometimes waking from dreams of rats invading the house.

THREE

Rats. I smile. I live for this moment, the deep pleasure of perceiving the pattern, the recognition of the animating godlet's features. Only one thing can address the floating sensation, the persistent throat symptoms, the apprehension, the disturbing dreams of vermin.

I will give her bitch's milk.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have issues around my liver," the new patient repeats.

I put my clipboard on my desk. "Could you be a little more specific?"

"I have issues around my liver!" She gestures vaguely towards her left abdomen.

I am the Quack, the one consulted when all else has failed, the receiver of the chronic, the anxious, and the dying.

"I see. Could you tell me how these issues manifest for you?"

She blinks at me.

"Pain? Nausea?"

She shakes her head.

"Bad taste in your mouth? Night sweats?"

"No, I just have issues around my liver, Kathy." She frowns.

Katherine. As I mentioned in the front office perhaps ten minutes ago. Not Kathy, not Kate, not Kay, and especially not Kitty. Failing Katherine, I'll always answer to Dr. North. Those are your options; it's not terribly difficult.

"How about irritability? No?" Feeling more than a touch bilious myself, I smile. "May I examine your liver?"

She lies down in slow motion.

"And your knees up like that, yes, thank you. Now ..."

"Wait. I need to center myself." She inhales and exhales meaningfully, enveloping me in a miasma of garlic.

"Ready?" I percuss over her right ribs. Thump, thump.

KATHERINE I

Thump, thump. "Let me know if there's any pain."

"Right now I'm feeling some discomfort in my neck," she announces, delighted to be so in touch with herself.

"Right. Any where I'm pressing now?"

"Let me check in with it." Her eyes roll into her head. Pause. "No."

The margins of her liver feel smooth, and don't extend below her ribs or across her midline. Her skin and eyes appear unjaundiced. I straighten.

"Well, your liver seems normal, at least on external examination. We could run some tests, I suppose. Who diagnosed the problem?"

"An amazing medical intuitive. She saw it right away." She beams, but her tone is accusatory.

I am not a believer in New Age, that ugly adolescent of philosophies. But its adherents infest my waiting room, transient and insubstantial as wood sprites, eager for aphorisms to heal their malaise. They expect earnest inquiry into the paper cuts of their psyche, and are alarmed by my discussion of pus, sputum, and blood. They crave shamanic intercession from the wise root-worker woman they imagine me to be, but a glance from my gods would turn them to stone. I despise their facile, cobbled pantheon. Not for me their laughing Buddha, their blissed-out Jesus, indulgent as a dope-addled parent. Sniggering Fortune has made me troll among pixies.

"A medical intuitive. Ah." Neutral, clinical. "What problems led you to consult her?"

"The issues around my liver." Her face widens into a practiced, mawkish innocence. Some guru has told her not to lose her childlike sense of wonder in this wicked, wicked adult world. How spiritual.

They deny the left hand of life, the demands of our barely

THREE

contained animal selves. No, they see guardian angels and strawberries where there is only blood and fur on the grass. I hate them abstractly, as you would a stupid child.

What could the actual presenting complaint be? Ennui? I jiggle my prescription pad. Persistent fatigue, probably. Dull color, limp hair. Her muscle tone is poor, and her joints crack every time she shifts.

"Are you a vegetarian, by any chance?" Of course you are.

"Vegan. Well, mostly. Sometimes I just crave cheese." She looks down, embarrassed at her failure of transcendence. Issues around the liver indeed. She's not plethoric enough to muster a blush.

"Eat the cheese. And consider eating red meat." I stab the pen to paper. Complete blood count with hematocrit. Thyroid panel. B-12 level. Oh, and liver enzymes. I'll send a copy to the amazing medical intuitive.

"Red meat?" Aghast. The groovy alternative doctor is not prescribing a raw juice fast.

"Yes. I want you to strengthen your vitality. It's weak."

How do they always manage to look simultaneously thrilled and worried by that assessment? Yes, yes, I knew it, I'm weak, take care of me, I just can't. Oh, no, I'm weak, what's going to happen, help me. I sigh inwardly.

"Here." I put down my pen and gently take her arm. "Watch." I straighten her elbow, and it hyperextends ten degrees beyond the midline. "That's too far. It's indicative of inherited poor fiber."

"It's not normal?" She smiles nervously. I knew I was special. I'm scared.

"No. This is normal." I slide up my sleeve and straighten my own. "Elbows shouldn't bend backwards. Five or ten degrees of flexion should remain." I tap my cubital fossa for emphasis, and she looks askance at the thick muscles of my forearm. More

KATHERINE I

evidence that I cling to a corporeal path. *Quel scandale.*

I rebutton my cuff. "Although you can't change your genetics, you can build your vital force, chi, prana, whatever you wish to call it. Red meat is very helpful, as is exercise like weight lifting." She recoils as if I've suggested recreational dog beating, but I continue. "Vegetarianism is contraindicated in your inherited constitutional body type." Yoga and mung sprouts are only going to make your natural wimpiness worse.

I hand her the blood work orders. "There's a lab nearby on Browning, but if your insurance doesn't cover it, any lab can do these tests. Typically the results come within ten days. I'd like to meet afterwards to discuss the findings and a treatment plan."

She's not listening. I'll never see her again.

"Any more questions for today?"

She frowns. "Do you think an olive oil and lemon juice flush would detox my liver?"

It would certainly make you vomit all night.

"Can't hurt," I say, brightly.

Watching from my window, I see her turn in the direction of the local health food market.

Four o'clock, I better hurry. Reaching for my coat, I pause. Did I imagine the sound of someone entering my waiting room? I fling open the interior office door, not waiting for a knock.

She startles, a magazine unopened in her hand. "Oh, hello. Sorry for barging in without an appointment. Dr. North?"

"Yes?" Clearly, the woman is seriously ill. Monochromatic, angular, as if she were a single splatter of zinc. I don't like the jerkiness of her motions. M.S.? Parkinson's? Some variety of heavy metal poisoning? My eye falls on the emptiness of her blouse. No. Breast cancer, no doubt metastasized somewhere in the central nervous system. She's young. Has chemo made her gray?

She sees me looking and shrugs. "You helped Beth Golonski.

THREE

They gave up on her, too. Yale told me to go home and put my affairs in order.”

Golonski. Not a referral that opens wide my door. I had only taken that case because the poor woman had been dismissed from mainstream treatment with three months to live—a remarkably aggressive infiltrating lobular carcinoma spread from her breast through her lungs, liver, spine and brain. Only 36, without family, without insurance. I had hoped to palliate; certainly I could do no harm. Instead of dying, she wept a foul yellow-green matter from her mastectomy scar and her navel, the same color as the *Chelidonium majus* preparations I continue to give her. Much to my astonishment, I attended her fortieth birthday party in August. I periodically receive hate mail from physicians she refuses to let cauterize the drainage, per my instructions. I am a charlatan, a menace, and ought to be investigated. I know that the future holds a registered letter from the ethics board. No good deed remains unpunished.

“I’m afraid I really can’t. I don’t normally take terminal cases, the legal liabilities ...”

“Please, Doctor.” A rumbling command, not a plea. Taken aback, I hesitate. I search her gaunt face for a long moment. It’s relentless as Fate. Perhaps she would live.

“You realize, of course, that I can’t guarantee results like the ones in Ms. Golonski’s case,” I murmur. May the gods help me.

She nods, smiling.

“All right. Come in.” No dinner tonight.

She grins, exposing vivid, receding gums, and follows me into the consultation room.

I’m late. I pretend not to notice Mrs. O’Keefe look at her watch as I toss my coat and briefcase in a pew.

Sister Bernadette looks up from the score. “Ah, Katherine, I

KATHERINE I

thought we wouldn't see you tonight."

I pull at an imaginary forelock. "*In spiritu humilitatis, et in animo contrito, suscipiamur a te, gloriosa sorore.*"

She snorts, but to cover a laugh. A few in the crowd stifle snickers. Mrs. O'Keefe coughs pointedly.

"Too bad I don't have the power to absolve you, Katherine. You'll just have to take it up with your confessor."

I bow my head to hide my smile. She knows quite well I don't have one.

She waves her arms. "A penance anyway. *Rollend in schaumenden Wellen.*"

Tilting my head to the clerestory, I close my eyes and sing.

Rolling in foaming billows,

Tumultuous swells the raging sea.

Mountains and rocks now emerge,

Through clouds their tow'ring summits rise.

I'm emptied, I burst like sparkling wine from an uncaged bottle. My quick hurtles, light now, ecstatic, into air.

"Thank you, Raphael."

Face carefully neutral, I climb into the choir.

I'd raised eyebrows when I auditioned for the part, but Sister Bernadette chose me. Whether from artistry or perversity, I don't know.

At her signal, the chorus shouts.

Sound the harp, strike the lyre!

KITTY I

I squint through the shrink wrap. The broccoli has that floppy look it gets when past its prime, but it's not yellowing. Good enough for soup, anyway. If I boil tonight's chicken carcass, there's the stock, and cream's on sale this week. Okay. Broccoli chowder tomorrow. Tossing the package into my cart, I burrow deeper into the discount produce rack. An elderly lady shoves her way into the narrow space, pointedly ignoring me, as if age gives her first dibs. And it does. I was brought up right. I let her snatch the last yellow peppers, even the shelled pecans. She doesn't smile back as she hurries off. Poor thing. Maybe she's ashamed to be rooting in the marked-down racks. I'm not. Deciding against a cracked carton of figs, I move on.

I look away as I pass the seafood department. It makes me sick to see the lobsters struggle, kidnapped and suffocating. I want to ransom them and drop their buggy bodies into the sea, one by one. But what good would it do? There'll always be more to be saved.

Safely in the pasta aisle, I grab ten boxes of the buy-one-get-one-free ziti. I don't use a list. I learned to shop watching my mother: like a peasant foraging in a capricious forest. When the basics go on sale—rice, frozen vegetables, butter, chop meat—I stock up. I navigate supermarket circulars like maps to cities of warmth and plenty. I know, within ten cents, the going price of tomato paste, tampons, lemon cookies.

I put the tuna back on the shelf. Even forty cents off, it's more expensive than the store brand. I'll wait for better. No rush, I have a couple dozen cans at home. My sister sneers at my crowded

THREE

freezer and pantry. “You and Ma, you’re pathetic. Killing yourself for a nickel.” Faith’s never looked at a price tag in her life. Strip steak on weeknights, strawberries in January. When we were growing up, Mom always said she’d end up in the poor house, and I’d be a millionaire. Funny how things turn out. She married money. Kevin and I do okay, but she doesn’t ever have to worry. She can afford to let asparagus wither in her fridge.

I don’t recognize the cashier at the check-out. Will she pack the bags right, or just shove things in as they’re rung up? I unload potatoes and cans first, heavy stuff that won’t get crushed if it goes on the bottom. As she scans, I notice two girls wandering towards the registers. Their shoulders brush easily as they get in the express line. Sisters. No, roommates—they’re sharing a shopping basket. At our age. It’s sweet. I meet eyes with the taller one, and we smile. She’s really pretty. Nearly as pretty as Faye.

They fly through the check-out, buying only a head of romaine and—what is that? I can’t see—a piece of fruit. At the foot of the lane, as her friend counts change, the shorter one reaches deep into their string bag, through the folds of lettuce peeping from the mesh. She offers the peach to the taller one. Instead of taking it, she cups her hand and takes a bite. Juice shines on her mouth and chin. Laughing, the shorter one runs a lazy finger over it, and brings it to her own lips.

Stop. Stop looking. I jerk open a paper bag. Onions, olives in glass ...

The shorter one’s noticed me gawking. She nudges her friend. They whisper as they walk away.

Vinegar. Deli bread, cold cuts. Don’t look up. Bananas eggs tomatoes. Meat separate, in plastic so it won’t leak all over even though I hate plastic bags and how they stick to each other and you can’t get them open and—

“Ma’am?”

KITTY I

I focus on the eye-rolling teenager behind the register. "Oh, sorry, yes?"

"One sixteen forty-eight. Cash, credit or debit?"

"Check. And may I have twenty back in cash, please?"

The cold air clears my head. Three-thirty, and the parking lot is the perpetual dim of December afternoon. The flurries they've predicted all week finally start as I shut the trunk.

The oldies station is playing a song I loved as a kid, and I turn it up. When my parents weren't around, I'd sit with my head against those huge old speakers, electrified, that one note sending me flying like in one of my dreams. Even now it gives me a little shiver. Smiling to myself, I shift into reverse.

Halfway out of the parking space, I'm jerked in my seat. Hard. A silver Jeep looms huge in my rearview mirror. I've hit another car. But there was nothing there a second ago.

Taking a deep breath, I dig through the glove compartment and find the registration. The driver's stooped over her bumper as I approach.

"I'm so sorry. I've never had anything like this happen before. Ever."

She straightens and shrugs. "When your number's up, your number's up."

She's supermodel thin; her clothes hang on her. She's the same color as the snow-heavy sky. Her face is too young for her gray hair. Why doesn't she color it?

We look at our cars. Mine's fine except for a scrape on the rear fender. Light shines through a broad crack in her tail light.

"Looks like you got the bad end of that deal," I venture.

"Think so? You could have hidden damage. Ruin your alignment, wreck your bearings. It happens." Her voice is a metallic growl over the rumble and thunder of trucks passing on the highway. She makes me nervous.

THREE

"I really am sorry. Hold on, I'll give you my insurance information. And I can show you my license, if you want."

"Don't worry about it, okay?" She touches my cheek with a gaunt hand. "It's a present." She turns back to her Jeep.

The spot burns as if frostbitten. Flabbergasted, I grope in my purse. I should at least write her license plate number down. Isn't that what people do?

The woman climbs into the driver's seat, her gray coat flapping as if it were empty. I wave, and she grins at me, horribly, her face like that mask Van wore on Halloween. I look away; it's not nice to stare. I'm glad when she pulls away.

"Kitty? Where are you?"

Dad. He never knocks. I jam the twenty dollar bill into the strong box and close my closet.

He brandishes half a bundt cake in a battered Tupperware tote. "Your mother wanted me to bring this over." He frowns at the bags on the counter. "Been shopping?"

"No, Dad, I just like taking the groceries out for a drive now and then." I unpack. "I didn't hear you pull up."

Grunting, he drops into a chair. "I walked. You should walk more, stop driving everywhere. Good for you. Take some weight off." He slaps his stomach.

I wince, but remind myself of my resolution not to be so sensitive. He only wants you to be healthy, Kitty. "Wish I had that kind of time. Work's a lot farther than six blocks. So's school, so's the supermarket." Supermarket. "That reminds me, have any blue touch-up paint stashed over there? I kind of backed into someone at Stop and Shop this afternoon."

"You what?" He sits up at attention.

"No big deal. She didn't even want my insurance."

"Oh, Christ." He's across the kitchen. "She could claim she

KITTY I

was hurt or you totaled her car or something later. Did you get her information, at least?"

"I got her license plate."

The door to the garage bangs behind him.

I rifle through my handbag for her license plate number. I can't find it. I dump everything, and the lipstick I lost last month rolls off the table under the sink. The paper's disappeared. How can it have disappeared?

He stomps back in, smelling of gasoline.

"It's nothing that won't buff out."

"So there's no ... no hidden damage or anything?"

"Hidden damage? Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know, you just hear about things like that."

He makes a face. "Not that I can see. So you said you got her tags?"

"I thought I did, but I didn't."

He sighs. "The last thing we need is something to come back and bite us in the shorts. People sue over nothing now. Be careful, Kitty."

With the precision of a surgeon, Vanessa disembowels her slice of cake. "I have homework," she announces, and pushes away from the table.

Kevin spears the abandoned macaroon filling. "Your mother?" he asks, mouth full.

"Too good to be mine, huh?"

"Nuh uh. We don't have a bundt pan. And you'd remember Van hates coconut."

"Smarty-pants. Dad was over."

"At least he brought cake." He cuts himself another chunk. "He have any news? Do you?"

"Not really." I don't bring up the fender bender. Dad's

THREE

ridiculous, it's nothing. Besides, the whole thing kind of gives me the creeps, and I'd rather forget about it. "We're hosting the Christmas party this year at work. But Vicky's insisting the cookies have to be low-fat."

"Librarians. Always living on the edge. Yow."

"Yeah? Let's hear you beat that, Mr. Edgy."

"That kid we just hired waltzed in twenty minutes late again. I thought Dave was going to blow a blood vessel. Countdown until he cans him."

"Start a pool."

"Stewart already did." Getting up, he yanks his head from side to side. His neck pops as loudly as ice in hot coffee. "I promised Nick that I'd burn some Spike Jones 78's onto CD for his birthday. Heading to the Bat Cave."

"And I have to finish reading for tonight. See you later."

As he starts down the basement stairs, I call after him. "I'm going to talk to the professor about my paper after class. Don't worry if I'm a little late."

I stack the dishes in the sink for later and trudge to the bedroom. Homework at my age. But if I don't finish school soon, I'll lose my job. Never mind that I've done it with just a high school diploma for twelve years. Nobody needs a degree to read to kids. But new state requirements. At least the district helps with tuition. Picking up *Mrs. Dalloway*, I settle into my faded, flowered chair.

It's begun. Lady Rosseter. Yes, who's Lady Rosseter?