

So this is my new home.

It's a ramshackle old thing, really. I've not the slightest idea why you decided to claim such a dilapidated cottage. Then again you always were one of those leapers—the kind that doesn't look first. It's nothing close to a pretty little place, like the sort you used to always gaze at in those slippery magazines that came in the mail; charming buildings with all the ivy and petite knee-high picket fences that I'm sure have no use other than tripping up the neighbors. So idyllic and calm they seemed, so quaintly unattached to the real world. I hated glancing at such impossible peace and comfort, such a thing that was so much out of our reach. It was like a worm trying to wish itself into a swan. It's strange how I could feel this bitter angst as your gentle hands held so much joy in turning through the magazine every month. As I came home from work, exhausted and late, always late, I often found you flipping through those glossy pages by the flickering lights, looking out the grimy window at the city line and the concrete and the skyscrapers. Silently you would stare at all the gray. I used to avoid speaking to you at those times, when you would look at me with those eyes. They were eyes filled with such melancholy and longing, a deep blue like the color of the sky. You would get up to your feet and shuffle across the peeling linoleum to me. Then you would try to get me to look at you, gripping my arm and softly turning my gaze to yours.

It's strange how beautiful the face of a teenage daughter can be, even in an old apartment filled with dust and disappointment. Your face was glowing, Amelia, a young face brimming with so much life and desire to live. It was like looking into the flare of the sun; so lovely, yet so damaging.

I used to weep while you slept in your bedroom at night, during those times when you looked at me that way. You had so much spirit in a dark place. It was so hard, and I wanted so much to see your smile. Sometimes I wondered if that was the only thing I really looked forward to in life. But I could never do anything for you, never, never, never.

It's no wonder you ran away all those years ago.

* * *

Ah, I don't know why I'm even here now. After seeing this excuse for a house I wonder if maybe I should have just gone to one of those mushy old nursing homes like all the other old women around these parts. It's been a lengthy, bouncing and jarring journey to this diminutive house. Right in the middle of a forest that's pretty close to nowhere, and my body's aching like nobody's business. Untidily, my luggage lies around me in small piles where they have been dropped by my helpful neighbors, who offered to drive me out here. It is a little sad to see all my precious belongings packed into a few tattered travel bags. But I suppose that's because nothing seemed too important anymore after you left.

When the neighbors started worrying about my condition, they sent me off to that nursing home down the road, the one especially for those who need "special assistance". What was it again? Relaxing Sunrise Hills or something ridiculous like that, something you'd laugh at. I took one earful of it and rejected the idea immediately. Yes, I'm sure I didn't want to go, even if I don't have anyone young with me anymore, even if these old bones start to fail me, these liver spots grow, these wrinkles extend, these hands shake, and nothing seems to be appealing anymore. So what if I fall? So what if I can't pour my own dang milk? Who needs help these days? I don't want some ninny of a nurse waiting on me at all times. They say it can "help you heal", though I bet it closer resembles salt in a cut!

Hah! I suspect I have finally become a crotchety old crone after all those years, huh, Amelia?

So I decided to escape to this secluded space, to live the rest of my life alone and in calm, even if the peace is fabricated by my weary heart. I had no idea what shape it would be in.

Really though, this cottage cannot be called a cottage. Not that it's too small—three or four rooms is more than enough for an old woman like me. It is the general condition of the whole building. The walls are crawling with cracks. Though I take that at one time they were a delicate cream, weather has been hard on them, and now they are some sort of dank wind-beaten gray, spangled with stains and mold. The windows are broken; whispery threads of cracks form intricate webs of white, or just entire chunks of glass are gone, leaving jagged, gaping holes. The door is on a single rusted hinge and the wood itself is disintegrating, already on its way to becoming a pulp of splinters. Overhead, the roof shingles are practically hanging by threads, old scales on a rotting fish. The yard has become a jungle of weeds, knee high and chorusing with the bug calls that fill the spring. Something slightly resembling a fence wraps its way around the

property, poles sharp and moldy; yellowing teeth on a monster. I think perhaps this was once a nice home, but I wonder if at this point it is beyond saving.

After one look at this place, suddenly I'm so weary. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't *want* to do anything anymore. Sometimes I don't want to go to the effort of breathing, I'm so tired. So tired of everything.

In the mottled shade under the oaks, I slump down slowly, leaning my bent spine against the crooked fence. Perhaps if I were someone else, the tears would fight their way out, but I have not cried in so many long years. Gradually, I seem to have dried up, like some sort of sad, wilted prune. Sighing raggedly, I tremble slightly and close my eyes.

I thought it would be decent to go somewhere, somewhere other than that suffocating apartment I've lived in for the past long years, watching the days flow by like cold molasses. Especially if it was a pleasant place you had bought. I may have even got my hopes up a little, got a smidgen excited for once, that maybe it would be something nice.

But you were just being foolish again.

I want to see your face once more, Amelia. I want to see your beautiful eyes.

You left me, and that pushed a chisel in my heart, deep, cold, dark, despairing. I worried, I panicked, I begged. *Someone, anyone! Bring my baby back!* I hyperventilated, collapsed onto the counter. I vomited, I screamed.

But I did not cry. I was so shocked and frozen that the tears did not come. I told myself they would arrive eventually, in torrents, but they never did. Although I did not weep then, I was crushed nonetheless.

You were only sixteen, such a vulnerable young age. And all you left was a note, a meager few sentences, still clear in my addled mind: "*Goodbye, Mother. I can't do this anymore; I can't live in this place. I have places to go, things to see! Okay, I know that's cliché but I don't know what to do anymore. I can't breathe here any longer. But please don't worry about me, I promise I'll be okay. Maybe I'll find a job and make some money so you won't have to cry anymore. I don't know what to write, but I know I won't see you again anytime soon. I'll miss you.*" Then, smaller at the bottom of the page, "*I love you so much.*" The handwriting was shaky, as if your fingers had been trembling. Why didn't you just stay?

I remember your father. You used to remind me of him, even if he left before you were born and then died soon after. He was such a rough man, yet his heart was filled with such a

capacity to love. Though I used to wonder if his wife and child were enough to satisfy such a large space; because as much as that pompous, kind, beautiful man loved us, he seemed to be overflowing with yet more wanderlust.

In the end, we just weren't enough.

And so he left me. Your father scurried off, back to the ocean and the sky, and he abandoned me here, alone, damaged and lost, heart torn. But it was alright in a way, because he left me you, my darling; my beautiful, radiant child.

And yet after you forced that frigid spike into my soul, you had to do more than that.

When the news came 'round, my battered heart shattered, just like the glass plates you would always drop when you were a small child.

You're really just like your father, going and dying like that. It was only five years after your departure that I received a letter explaining your death. You were on a motorcycle. Why a motorcycle? Didn't I always tell you that they're dangerous? Your daddy must have left some spunk in you, then. But your little bike went and swerved straight into disaster, and now you're lying somewhere, just dead. And I won't ever see you again, just like you said.

Those days after your death, I retreated into myself, and seemed to stop living.

But still I did not cry. People were stunned to find that I did not sob over my own daughter's death, that my eyes were not even moist at the mention. But I suppose at that time I was long frozen into rock, trapped in my sorrow, never to escape.

They were such bitter, bitter weeks, the ones that followed. Even bitterer than that dark chocolate you loved, or the black coffee you drank every morning, steaming while your soft hands wrapped around the mug.

You broke my heart for the second time, my daughter. But now I don't have anyone to help me put it back together.

* * *

"Hey, old lady. What're you doing sleeping over here?"

"What if she's DEAD?"

"Shut up idiot, she isn't *dead*."

A face swims into my view, uncomfortably close. Cherubic with short blond curls, and somewhat grubby looking, a bright little boy pieces together blurrily. Involuntarily, I flinch and

draw back. Not coming in contact with any sort of warm flesh in years makes you a tad jumpy around people.

“Ah, she really ain’t dead!”

Before I can say anything in response, another hand comes out of nowhere and yanks the boy away by his collar, and another, much taller and leaner companion appears.

“Don’t mind him, he’s a bit strange,” the thin kid says in a conspirational whisper, whirling a finger around a temple. At first glance, this other child is most definitely a male, with short hair haphazardly cut into choppy tufts. But as the child’s face turns to me directly, I’m stunned by the beauty of it—*her* face. She makes me think of you, all of a sudden. Of when you were in elementary, like this girl looks now. You were always the prettiest child to me, more so than any of the magazine models, any of the TV commercial girls.

“So watcha doing here?” The squat child watches me curiously. “I like sleepin’ in the grass too, but it sure makes me itchy. Mia says I’m proly allargicle, but I don’t wanna to listen to her.” He comes closer to me, looking like he wants to poke me in the face.

“Not allargicle, dimwit, *allergic*.”

“That’s what I *said!*” His little face wrinkles in irritation.

I just sit there, slightly dumbfounded and unsure about what to do. I’m close to slipping into a murky pool of memories; of those days back in the city with you—or maybe just back into a fitful sleep. All I can think is that I’m tired, and these children are becoming a nuisance.

“Are you homeless? Or maybe you live in that house now?” Mia (I assume this is the girl’s name) gestures her long arm in the direction of the cottage. “Cause I don’t know if you want to go in there. It sort of looks like it’s going fall any minute now. See?” To prove her point, she gives the crumbling wall a stout kick, with a grunt for effort.

The entire structure shudders, shivering like it’s cold. It moans ever so slightly, dust bursting from its seams and plaster chunks dropping easily, not unlike scabs. It looks ready to collapse and just give up. This whole scene makes the house seem even closer to a dying human in my mind than when I first lay eyes on it. The three of us watch it quake, in the greenish shade of the trees, almost like we’re viewing some sort of twisted fireworks show. I’m about to say something when the chubby boy runs towards the building. Pulling his leg back slowly and deliberately, he seems ready to give the bricks another thorough rattling.

“Hey, Ace, stop it, you’re going knock it down! That was just an example before!” Mia steps towards Ace and tries to pull him back, ropy arms wrapping around his cushy little torso. Nonetheless, being a young boy, he somehow manages to wriggle away from her restraint, and clambers toward the wall once more.

“Ace. “ No response. His small face is bunched up and defiant.

“Ace! Stop!” He gets ready to drive his leg, hard.

“ WALLACE COLBOURNE, come back over here *right now!*” He blatantly ignores her, and she hustles towards him, arms outstretched. I am forgotten, limp against the damp grain of the fence.

The house continues to quiver.

Seeing this meager cottage tremble like such a weak little babe, and knowing the further tremors it is soon to go through makes me feel something. Seeing this tiny home you claimed, Amelia, in those days before you died, being struck down and beaten, something inside me snaps. Snaps and lights like a bright matchstick flame in the velvety dark.

“That, is *my daughter’s property* and *what*, in the *name of Christ* do you think you’re *doing* to it?” My voice explodes in a shaky bellow that empties my lungs and leaves me panting. The echo goes on for a bit before it’s dampened by the dry spring air and the rustling leaves of the trees, and drowned out by the chirring of insects in the wood.

I never did have a reputation as a hotheaded mother, but it sure feels fitting now. How long has it been since I let someone have it? All I can manage to remember is that you never misbehaved, I never yelled. I suppose there was never a chance.

Gradually I get to my unsteady, sleep heavy feet, one of them nearly giving out as I extend my height to a full five feet.

Well, I always have been short; although I barely meet the tall girl’s eye level, it still has the intended effect. I suppose I must look somewhat like a witch; *baba yaga*, perhaps, or simply just a livid old woman, which manages to do the job for some. The two have halted struggling with each other, and just watch me wide-eyed, two small minnows waiting at the bottom of an empty bucket. Ace’s mouth is still open mid-yell and Mia’s fingers float, stopped before they could grab a chunk of his hair.

“I di’int think she’d yell, Mia,” the boy hisses. He clutches at Mia, pulling on her t-shirt.

“Idiot, that doesn’t matter, she looks like she’s gonna come over here and whoop our *butts*,” Mia hisses back, equally panicked sounding.

In this mad little flurry of frenzied whispering, Ace totters precariously on one foot, and suddenly his balance is gone, falling towards the house. Quickly, Mia stretches herself towards him and makes an attempt to pull him back onto stable feet. Too late though, as he’s already falling, sandaled foot outstretched, heading straight for possibly the weakest looking part of the whole wall.

With a deafening shriek, Ace’s stubby leg shoots straight through the flimsy wall, like a rock through tissue paper, plaster dust billowing up and rubble showering down. I watch, jaw dropping. Mia screams and covers her face. As the cloud of destruction dissipates, she hurries towards where Ace is now sobbing his eyes out. She coos soothing words to him as he strains to yank his small foot out of the ragged wall, still bawling, tears streaming and washing pink tracks down his dirty cheeks. Both children keep glancing at me with such worried, terrified expressions, as if their lives have just been sold to the devil.

A minute ago I wanted to grab both runts and give their heads a good knock. Now, as I watch them watching me, in such a wild predicament, I just need to laugh. I can’t help myself, actually, as this deep belly laugh comes out of nowhere, and suddenly I’m guffawing like a wonder-filled toddler. I can’t even recall anymore, the last thing that made me laugh. The part of my lungs that fills my throat with this sound must be swathed in dust and cobwebs.

You always told me my laughs made you feel better, especially those days I wouldn’t look at you, couldn’t stand talking to you. You said it was like colored balloons on someone’s first birthday party; jubilant and bouncy, floating and weightless. The sort of balloons that lifts your spirit just to see, the kind that makes you want to skip, heart light.

So I let my comforting laugh stretch out over these stricken children, I let it cover them like a soft quilt. I make this laugh of mine gather them close, and shush their tears away. They’re confused at first, gripping each other with white knuckles, as if I’m casting some ancient chant curse on them. But then their eyes soften, and they hesitantly smile. And then we’re all laughing together, Ace, whose foot is finally pulled free, tears dry on his face, Mia, standing tall and giggling at the trees, and me; just me, laughing my loud laugh under the sky.

There’s something wet on my cheeks, and I look up for thunderheads. But there aren’t any. Only fleecy, bright clouds drift by, soft and clear. Now I realize they are tears; small, salty

pearls that roll down my cheeks. They are the tears that have been there all along, waiting, for the day I finally thaw from my frosted state. I suppose I must have, in this mild spring, of cottages and children.

And I think, Amelia, I feel the slivers of my heart finding each other, putting themselves back together. It still hurts; the deep pain of loss, but it is a start.

The start of something, under this deep blue sky the color of your eyes.