

From the Clay

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The sun bore down on my Aunessa's brown back as she knelt by the creek she insisted on calling a river. I was covered from head to toe in my stiff blue dress, but she wore only her bra when she was doing this, and I secretly reveled in seeing the expanse of her skin bare in the morning sun. I was fascinated by the curves of her form, the tiny sunspots that had formed over the years. I had seen her like this many times, as she dug all of her own clay for her pottery back then and I was almost always allowed to go with her on these trips. Aunessa had a strange love for all things earthly, and she preferred to sort the clay out here in the woods, rather than take it back to her studio. She said, so that the rocks and sticks and bugs we picked out could make their way back to their homes instead of being tossed out behind the shop where they might be lost from them forever.

She loved the clay too, in the way that she loved me, I think, or maybe more. We got up early on the collection days, dressing in the oldest clothes we had and creeping through the early morning swamp forests like nymphs sneaking through the world of men; Aunessa carrying bags that flowed behind her like long tresses, I flicking my butterfly net this way and that like wings. When we got to the creek she stripped her shirt off immediately, even though the mists of early morning were often as cold and uninviting as the water itself. She would thrust her hands deep into the deposits of clay

caught in the bends and eddies of the creek and dig around like she was searching for something in the depths.

I was young then, probably no more than seven or eight, and I watched her from my spot on the bank as she pulled and kneaded the clay to find the bit that was just the right consistency. Not too sandy, sandy enough, relatively free of the slimy algae that coated most everything in our swampy world. I remember her as a vision of beauty, even when she was elbow deep in the clay, the green muck from the water clinging to her arms a little higher like an adornment for an earth goddess. I read too much then, books about myths and legends, and as Aunessa was my teacher in all things, I think it was natural for me to see her as just another character in a long list of beloveds. She was like Demeter, goddess of earth. In my mind I called her Aunessa, goddess of clay.

She slopped the clay into giant plastic bags that we would come back later in the day and cart to her shop in a wheelbarrow. I remember the bags being so foreign and unwelcome to the scene, their crinkling sounds breaking the quiet birdsong of morning in a way that made what we were doing feel like something wrong, like theft. The wet squelching sound of the clay leaving its home was reluctant, like a plea or sometimes like a dying sigh. We were robbers in the early light, shoving the treasures of the earth into our bags right under the eyes of the owners. Aunessa was my goddess though, and most times she seemed to own the earth she shoveled with her hands as much as she owned our house and our lands.

The day it happened, I had brought a book with me about dragonflies. I was in my spot on the bank where I sat and read while she collected, my little net sitting beside me in case I saw a chance to catch one and look at it more closely. Aunessa was on the

far side of the creek, her mind absorbed in her work as she ripped handfuls of clay out of the ground and rubbed them between her hands, poking her fingers into their depths and then pulling it out to study the stability. She sniffed the clay, taking long deep breaths of what I could only imagine was an earthy scent like musty books and the stagnant pooling water she had knelt in. A dragonfly, riding on the current of the air floated out into the open. It fluttered around the standing water in a bend of the creek. I was mesmerized by its form; its mostly transparent wings tipped in blue and black, its long thin body an iridescent blue. I picked up my net and wandered towards it. I was caught, watching it flutter from one spot to another in search of whatever it is that dragonflies search for. I followed it with my eyes, my feet moving wherever it wanted to go. It fluttered out, towards Aunessa, and I swished my net after it and fell.

The thing about the water here is that it's not clear. I knew that, but as I was sinking into the moving water, watching Aunessa's back as it disappeared into a haze of greenish yellow it became real to me. I saw her start to turn when she heard the splash and I heard her call for me once. Anna, my name, it sounded thick through the water as I drifted down, down into the water and downstream. The hazy muted world engulfed me, made everything outside of it look tinted with age and nostalgic beauty. I wanted to be able to stay there underneath, in a world of my own, where it was calm and the things I had known were only a memory. My body turned as I started to float back to the surface and I grasped at the slime covered weeds on the bottom of the creek, trying to hold myself down. My hands couldn't hold on, they slipped, so I dug them into the mud, grasping at anything I could. I knew I had to breathe but for a moment the peace of the underwater world, disconnected from everything above, felt like home.

Aunessa dragged me, bodily, from the water. Her voice was harsh as she questioned me. "What on earth were you doing, girl?" she hugged me to her sun warmed skin.

I coughed and sputtered my new world from my lungs. "There was a dragonfly."

Her hands were rough against my skin, gritty from the clay. "What?"

"I was trying to catch it." I cried then for my lost net, sputtering about it as Aunessa ran her dirty hands up and down my back.

"We'll get you a new one, child," she cooed, rocking slowly. Her legs stayed in the water and the gentle splash made by our movements lulled me. "You're lucky we didn't lose you. Kids drown all the time you know, they follow the fairies and fall into the river, never to come back up. Do you even know what a dragonfly is?" she asked.

I burrowed my nose into her neck, smelling the salt of her sweat laced with her verbena perfume. "A fairy?" she shook her head no. "A bug?" I asked.

"A bug. Yeah it's a bug, a mean little thing that will bite. But they're something else too." She held me away from her body. "You telling me you were going to catch one and you didn't even know what they are?"

I shrugged, uncertain if she was angry or serious or if the tone of her voice was still a remnant of the scare I'd just given her.

"They're ancient," she whispered to me, like it was a secret even from the woods around us. "Every single one of them carries a spirit sent down to watch us. And the little old ancient dragonflies take in the spirits, and fly them around so they can spy on us/

"But dragonflies don't live that long, Aunessa, my book says..."

She snorted. "Your book. Is that the same book that didn't bother to tell you what it was you were reading about?" She leaned back and pulled my face up, her hands cradling my cheeks. Her eyes drawn into a worried stare. "You have to be more careful what you reach out for, Anna."

I nodded, cheek sliding against her soft skin. "What do the spirits want to see so bad?" I asked.

"Us," Aunessa smiled. "Everything about us. Our insides and outsides, our spirits."

I frowned, pulling myself out of her grasp and standing in front of her. "Why would they want to see me?"

Aunessa turned away, she pointed to a dragonfly that had landed on a soggy branch that dipped down into the water. "They're people we knew, or will know, who are up in heaven."

"Like my father?"

"Like your daddy."

"Does he always watch me, Aunessa?"

She glanced up at me. "I imagine it's not always him."

I looked down at the water and took a step back so that it rose to my knees, remembering the feeling of floating around, seeing the world through the dimness. Outside of my body and yet in it. "Do you think Mama ever watches me through dragon fly eyes?"

Aunessa sighed. "Your Mama's not dead, honey, you know that. Just because she wants to be with your Daddy doesn't mean she can be yet."

I stared at the dragonfly.

"But she has ways of keeping an eye on you/' Aunessa added.

"You think she watches me with her mind? Like Mr. Denker says she can?"

"It may be."

I grinned watching the dragonfly flutter over a squirming pool of larve. "What do you think daddy thought of what he saw today?"

Aunessa laughed as she stood up and straightened her clothes. "If I know my brother, he thought it was a good laugh that you fell in the creek." She reached out to wring the water out of the skirt of my dress. "What do you have in your hand, love?"

I looked down, not even realizing my hands were still clenched. When I opened them there was a clump of clay in each, light grey and curled softly into a ball.

"Well now, let's see that." She took the clump and rubbed it between her fingers, softly singing the song she always did when she threw her pots in the workshop. A melancholy ballad about man, who sprang from the earth, worked the land, and returned to the dust every day the same way. She brought her fingers up to her face and inhaled the scent.

I looked down at my other hand and did the same. The clay was cool like the water it was pulled from, and a strange mixture of gritty and silky as I rubbed it against my skin. The smell was like sea, though there was no ocean near our land.

"Now *that* is clay, Anna. Where did you find it?" Her eyes searched the murky depths where she had pulled me from the creek.

I fought the desire to keep it from her, strangely possessive of the world at the bottom of the creek, but Aunessa was goddess of clay and she would find it. I pointed out the spot.

She thrust her arms into the water, her face inches from the surface and I waited, wondering if she would enter the murky world to search for the clay—she didn't. She leaned back, water falling down her in streams, tendrils of her hair drifted around her face and curled, where they had fallen into the water. In her hand was a clump of the earth from the bottom of the creek. She grinned at me, and motioned for me to bring her the bag.

"You're gonna be my little good luck charm from now on, Anna. You have a gift for finding the clay."

The dragonfly had resumed his frantic search of the still water and I watched him warily as I rubbed the clay in my hand, squished it between my fingers into a more tightly packed clump. When I opened my hand it held the shape, and I dropped it back into the stream.

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I think I'm justified in saying that my childhood was lonelier than most. It wasn't a matter of where we lived, as much as it was a compound of events and places—even family. My Aunessa always kept me separate from the people of the town, and Mama ventured out of the house less and less as the years went on. Time was, a week could go by when I wouldn't see a living person besides the two of them.

We lived in the country, yes, but not so far out that it was impossible to get to the town on a regular basis—even if my aunt didn't believe in having a car. Aunessa ran a pottery shop and there was always a constant flow of locals and tourists alike passing through our land. Yet, they kept me away. Every day I wandered the acres or helped out in the back of the shop with the cleaning and glazing. There never seemed to be anything for me to do upfront during the open hours. True, I wandered out there from time to time and stared at the tourists as they held up the little vases and plates that I'd painted scenes on, but my interaction was kept to a minimum. When Aunessa caught me out there I was usually shuffled off out the door to amuse myself in the woods or to go back to the house and read to Mama while she wasted away in her bed.

At night, I used to sneak out of my window, down the sloping roof of the porch and jump from the edge onto the soft clover lawn. I'd walk the mile to our nearest

neighbor's and plant myself on their front lawn, under a giant pecan tree, to watch them through their bright-lit windows. They were like a play to me, a drama, acted out before my eyes as they passed to and fro getting ready for bed. Their house was pristine, a mixture of new and antiques that blended for me into an image of ideal perfection far superior to the broken down antiques that filled our house. The wife served dinner at an old farmhouse table that I was sure they had bought because it was attractive, not because it was what had been there for the last sixty years and they were too lazy to get a new one. The parents' bedroom was a soft yellow-gold that was warm in the lamplight, and I imagined they never felt a cold draft crawling under their covers. Most nights the husband kissed his wife before she reached over and turned off the lamp. It was then, after the whole house was dark, which was ironically my favorite time. I could stare up and imagine what their daily lives were like, and after half an hour their daughter would stick her head out the window and wave to me. I must have been like a ghost to her, an apparition in my long-sleeved white nightgown, the large brimmed straw hat that I wore every time I went outside.

I still don't know what the girl's name was, but she came and whispered secrets to me every night. I was always afraid to talk back; afraid it would break whatever spell that made her want to talk to tell me about her life. I knew everything there was to know about her school and her friends, I knew when they were mean to her and when there was a boy she had a crush on. In my mind I called her Clara, the name of one of the little princesses from some old storybook of Mania's. Clara was me, the way I wanted to be, normal, able to go to school and have friends and crushes. Her whisper always rode on

the warm summer breeze soft, barely audible for fear of waking her parents. Her secrets smelled like the jasmine, like our nighttime confidence they only bloomed at night.

It was in July of the year before I met Clara, that I first realized something was wrong with me. At first Mama thought it was a sunburn, and she scolded me for not wearing my hat as I should, but I knew better. I had been picking through the brambles all day, eating wild blackberries under a heavy canopy of oak that left no room for the sun. I had known all summer that something was wrong. I could feel the itch deep down in my skin before anything happened on the surface. It cracked and was always tinged pink like a gentle sunburn, and it peeled. My skin became dry, so dry that sometimes I could feel the fault lines of my pores pulling apart, shifting around and making new islands of rough scaly terrain. But as Mama soon figured out, it was nothing like a sunburn, where soft flakes of dead skin fall away and leave behind something new and tender. My skin turned into something like a pot that wasn't turned just right on the wheel, it had snags that caught on everything it touched. It was always catching, flaking off and leaving pieces of me behind. Mama started buying my dresses just a little too large, so that the long sleeves could extend past my wrists and cover my hands. When even the smallest amount of sun shining on my naked skin started to feel like too much, I was confined to the house. I spent weeks wandering back and forth through the rooms like one of those ghosts they call a repeater, until Aunessa came home from town with the huge straw hat that I hated and loved because it gave me the outside world again.

It was my skin that got me over my fear of the swamps. In them, I could push the hat back so that it hung by the strings around my neck and wander through the thickly overgrown land without worrying about the pain of the sun. I'd fantasize that I was a

vampire, sneaking about in human guise, confined to the shadows of the swamps by the angry, deadly, sun. When I went to see Clara at night I sometimes continued this fantasy, wondering what it would be like to scale the walls and climb into her room through the window, to come upon her like a nighttime fog while she was sleeping, and suck the life out of her veins and into me. I'd dance on the lawn, the curling mists of the nearby bog twirling around my ankles while I pretended that I belonged among it. It danced with me like it welcomed me. Always tough, when Clara first poked her head out the window and waved down at me I felt a horrible guilt for pretending to take her life from her. She caught me in my dance once, her soft laughter trilling down from the window stopped me mid twirl. She smiled, and called out to me to dance for her. I turned and ran home, through the woods and straight to our porch where I sat down to breathe. I didn't go back for days, so afraid that she would figure out what it was that I had been dancing for. When I did finally wander back weeks later, she seemed to have forgotten about that night. In any case, she never asked me to dance again.

In July of the year I met Clara, Aunessa took ill. Not so ill as to be in danger of dying, but ill enough that she had trouble running the shop in what was the peak tourist season. Mama said she didn't feel up to helping her so I was called out of the back to run the register while Aunessa hobbled slowly around the shop to help the customers. I couldn't help but notice their stares that day, even though I tried to keep my sleeves down over my hands so they could only see my face. The face that Aunessa had taken to scrubbing down every morning with buttermilk to ease the appearance of my disease. One man, who must have been from Georgia, by the gruff drawl of his accent, stared blandly at me, then smiled as he looked me up and down.

"Been spendin too much time in the sun, ain'tcha girl?" he laughed.

Aunessa came around the corner of the display shelves and stared from me to the man and back. I found myself wanting to answer him. To tell him about my life in the swamps, the way that it hurt every day when Aunessa got a rag and tried to peel away the layers of roughness to find something shiny and smooth underneath, but I didn't know how to tell him that I never went out in the sun anymore without a hat and long sleeves, that it wasn't safe for me to lay around like other girls did. I couldn't explain myself any more than the doctor had been able to explain what was happening to me. In the end I smiled as best I could, and nodded as I rang up his purchase.

"It's bad for you, you know," he said. "All that sun is just gonna land you in a world of trouble later on."

I looked up, my eyes landing on Aunessa.

"I've told her a thousand times not to fall asleep under that tree," she told the man, "but you know how little girls are with their heads all caught up in dreams."

Dreams. Only, my dreams now were usually filled with days of being like those girls Aunessa was talking about. "I didn't," I mumbled. "I just—my skin..."

"It's a little sensitive," Aunessa finished for me.

The man nodded. "I gotta fight day and night to keep my little girl inside. She'd run around with the boys all day if she could."

Aunessa laughed. "I have time with her," she said, gesturing to me.

I wrapped his purchases in old newspaper, and slid them into a bag. As he left the store I watched him walk out to his car, huddling a young girl into the back. Her long

brown hair was trapped in a pony tail, and she kissed him on the cheek before he leaned out and closed the door. Aunessa came over and put a hand on the counter.

"Don't you think that's enough for today, honey?" her tone always said so much more than her words. "Let's close and go back up to the house."

That night when I climbed out the window I left my hat at home. I rolled the sleeves of my nightgown up and ran to Clara's house. I was late, and the husband had already kissed the wife. The lights were out, and I had just settled under the pecan tree when Clara leaned out of her window and waved her little white hand.

"Hello!" she called softly.

I waved back, like I always did, but something came over me. I thought maybe I could tell her what I couldn't say to that man in the store. That maybe if I tried to talk to her, some miraculous explanation for me would come out of my mouth. I wanted her to know, finally, that I wasn't some figment of her imagination, a fae friend that only existed in her nighttime world. I could see us running through the swamp in the daytime. She would be so scared but I knew all the things to avoid, like the leafy little snake holes, the hot spots where the rats lived, she would have nothing to fear. "Hello," I whispered back.

She paused in her window, both hands going to the sill. "Did you say something?" she asked.

"I'm Anna, I live up the road, at Sandy Bend."

"Sandy Bend?"

"I live there, with my mom and my aunt."

"But what are you doing here?" Clara asked.

"I come here every night, to see you."

Clara frowned, the moonlight catching on her brow and shadowing her eyes with anger as she leaned out to peer at me. "It's been you?" she asked.

"All summer."

"Who have you told?"

"Told?" I asked.

"I told you everything! You've probably been blabbering to everyone you meet!"

"I wouldn't!" I shouted. Though I didn't tell her I never met anyone. For a minute the image of me spilling her pre-teen secrets to the Georgian man from the shop that day flooded into my mind, the way he would puff up with disbelief, I imagined him shocked at the thought of what Clara's best friend had told her. I laughed.

The wife turned on the lamp, and the husband got up.

"Go away!" Clara hissed. She turned from her window, and I was left with the shadowed image of her father checking on her.

Every time I went by after that she didn't show. I spent two weeks full of nights waiting for her on the lawn, until one night her father was there under the pecan tree waiting for me. I skirted the edge of the woods, watching him from afar. He didn't look angry, but nervous, as he watched for me. I wondered then what Clara had told him about the girl that visited her every night. The way that she must have seen me as a specter, or an imaginary friend until I broke the unwritten rule. I was real now, something unwholesome that could be chased away with a stern word from her father. I turned and went home. When I snuck out after that I stayed in my brambles, picking through the vines for the last of the summer berries until I tired near dawn. I sat on the

gable of the porch and watched the sun come up to burn the foggy haze from the fields,
and I whispered the mists goodbye, before I crawled back into my room.

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Mama had been trying to die since I was born, laid up in her bed in Aunessa's house, waiting to go to heaven or wherever it was that daddy went. He'd gone on a week before I was born, in some kind of accident that nobody talked about. Aunessa said Mama had started out talking to herself and wandering around the house all day. Now, she didn't talk much anymore or even do much of anything. I read to her every night, and during the day when it was raining outside or I didn't have anything else to do.

Sometimes on rainy days I camped in her room with her while she stared at the ceiling or at the tiny TV that played static-filled PBS all day and night. I crawled in bed with her and lay my head on her stomach. She didn't touch me much, but every now and then her hand would come up and rest on my hair.

She could get up, and she would, to walk down the hall to the bathroom I shared with her, and those times when I'd find her walking calmly and carefully were the strangest times in my youth, like something that looked and acted dead was just tricking you, was actually alive. But my Mama wasn't alive; she hadn't been for sixteen years now.

As I'd gotten older I'd began to wonder about Mama's commitment to death. She still ate, still took minimal care of her earthly form. Why couldn't she just starve herself to death or take a leap off her balcony and have it all done with. It seems cold to remember now the thoughts I had about her then, but I hadn't ever really considered the woman that lived in that bedroom my Mama in the realest sense. She was my mother, the woman who gave birth to me and had known my daddy, but Aunessa was my Mama in the more practical ways. She was the one who cooked and cleaned and cared for me when I was little. I can't imagine my ghostly mother ever wiping my nose or my tears.

As time wore on in my teen years, and I'd started attending the private secondary school in town, I told my Mama-in-the-bed, more and more things about me. She never spoke a peep, never made a disapproving frown the way that I knew Aunessa would. Mama heard my tales of terror and embarrassment, my shame and the torture other children inflicted on me without even the slightest acknowledgement. It was almost comforting to talk to her, like writing in a diary without making the effort of putting pen to page.

It was in the rainiest July I can ever remember that Mama finally won her silent battle with life. The second thunderstorm that day was raging outside and it was barely ten o'clock in the morning. Aunessa had gone to her shop, claiming that tourists weren't afraid of a little rain, but I knew she just needed a break. We'd been a week inside the house because of a hurricane, and Aunessa had never seemed real comfortable in her own home. Whenever she had to spend time cooped up in it she got a wild look in her eyes like a trapped animal. I knew the feeling but for some reason it didn't bother me as

much, perhaps because I sometimes felt a bit like an animal anyway—or maybe a monster.

Aunessa didn't scrub my face or fix me up on the days when there was little thought that Pd be leaving the house, so when I wandered into Mama's room that day I was in my full red, scaly, glory. Mama was on the bed staring out her French windows at the rain, and when I walked in she made the barest twitch of her hand so I went to her.

Her room always felt cold, always smelled like lemon and sickness. Mama wasn't dirty because she took her ritual baths every day, but there is something about a person dying that has a smell, like their insides are congealing and giving off a musk to attract the bugs and worms to them to finish the job—a dinner bell for their evening meal. She didn't have anything beyond the basic furniture in her room, a metal bed, a dresser with her little TV on top, and a bedside table with a decanter of water that was never touched. When I wanted to read to her I sat in the rocker by the windows and stared out at the lawn instead of at her.

Her breakfast plate from that morning sat on the bedside table and there was still a long yellow streak from the yolk of her egg, encrusted with little bits of biscuit. Had Mama fed herself? Enjoyed it so much that she had taken the last bite of her biscuit and used it to sop up the egg yolk from her plate? I tried to see it, her slow soggy movements as she brought fork to her mouth and pulled the egg from the tines. The way her hands would look holding on to something as mundane as a biscuit. It didn't seem possible. Perhaps Aunessa had fed her.

That day her hair was braided down her back in a large plait and I tried to picture her doing that herself, but I imagine Aunessa had done that as well this morning after

Mama's bath. As I walked around the bed I could see that she had on what I thought of as her favorite nightgown, a white old-fashioned one with a tiny pink bow that drew the neckline closed. The bow lay untied, and when I knelt down beside the bed so that I could be face to face with her I took up the ribbon in my hands and tied it back into a bow. I almost thought she smiled, but she couldn't have.

I sat with my back to the bed and leaned back, so that I too could stare out the window. The rain was so heavy that you couldn't even see the yard through it, just heavy streaks of brown and green, flashes of bright blue-white light that backlit the streaks and made them look like stained glass. I stared as long as I could, my mind wandering over the days before, searching for something to talk to Mama about, but we'd all been in the house together for so long that I didn't have a story to tell. I leaned my head back til it was pillowed against her stomach and sighed.

Because it had been days since I had gone out, Aunessa hadn't scrubbed my flaking skin in three days or more. It had been a long time since I'd seen my disease stare back at me from the mirror in it's fully realized state, and it was a shock to me now. The painful dryness made it feel like it was pulling itself apart, trying to show the world what was underneath. It was flaking off in big pieces, and when I flopped my head back onto the bed to pillow it on Mama, a big fluttery flake loosed itself from my forehead and fell down into my eye. I pulled it off, wincing at the way that it could be an excess, practically off of my body, and yet still cling to me enough to hurt me. I held the skin up in the eerie greenish blue light coming through the glass and stared through it at the ceiling. There was nothing inside of it, nothing to explain or see. It was just an opaque bit of skin, rough around the edges and curling slightly in on itself.

Mama's hand came up to rest on the top of my head, startling me, and when I glanced up at her face it was angled towards me, her eyes looking directly into mine. I'd always been wary of her eyes, avoiding even looking at them whenever I could. Mr. Denker, the mayor of the town and a friend of my dead father's, told me that if Mama looked into my eyes she could see straight through to my soul. But not only that, she could read all the thoughts I'd ever had and know everything. He said that she'd killed daddy with her mind, gone in with her mind and done something to his insides, and that was why she was so silent these days. He said it was guilt, and sometimes that the devil had taken her tongue as the price for making her such a powerful witch.

As I stared into Mama's eyes I think I finally believed him. Oh, not that she was a witch that made some deal with the devil, that was ridiculous, just that she knew everything I thought and felt. Her eyes held a dark pool of swirling knowledge that I likened to Charybdis, the whirlpool that Odysseus runs away from only to end up in the many headed danger from Scylla. I couldn't help myself though; I had to try to run away as well, even if I might be eaten alive.

"It's hot in here, isn't it Mama?" I asked, knowing she wouldn't speak. I moved out from under her touch and towards the French doors. "It'll be all right if I open these now, the worst is over, I think." Our power had been off for the past day and a half, and suddenly the stifling heat of her room felt even more oppressive, like it was bearing down on me, the punishing flames of hell for refusing to meet my Mama's eyes, for thinking of her as a murderer, and a woman who was too weak to murder herself.

Outside the rain had lessened some, but the angry growl of thunder directly overhead told me that I was wrong about the worst being over. I opened the French doors

anyway, letting in the blast of cool wet air. I heard Aunessa chide me in my mind, warn me about the dangers of wet air in your lungs, the way that it could crawl down in there and make itself a home where you'd never be able to get it out again. I wasn't worried about this for myself, and I figured Mama would appreciate it if I killed her. Not that I hadn't thought about that in a more literal way as well. On my worst days I had idle fantasies of slitting her neck and then my own while we lay side by side in her bed of pristine white sheets with the pool of red ebbing out of our bodies, eventually covering the room, the whole house, all the way across our lands to the town.

I shook my head and walked out onto the balcony. Mama's room was a guest room, and her view wasn't as spectacular as the view from Aunessa's balcony but it was superior to the view from my own tiny windows on the other side of the house. The rain soaked into my dress so that it clung to my form and I felt Mama staring at my back, knew that she could see through my dress as easy as she could see through my mind. It made me angry at her in a way I'd never been before.

Her way of knowing things had never felt as invasive as it did today. Before, I'd always sought it has a comfort in my lonely world, she was the only one I could share my whole mind with completely, but it felt different today, as if she were probing farther than she ever had before. I could feel the tickle, building ever higher to a burn at the base of my skull. It felt like needles burrowing into my brain, leaving behind tiny voids in my grey matter as they worked their way to the center. I fought them, not knowing what I was fighting, because I was sure once they reached the center that something awful would happen.

I turned and stared at Mama's prone form on the bed. The rain washed down over me as it grew heavier and I felt the crack of electricity as lightening built across the sky. Thunder rumbled and it felt like my own unreasoning anger, as insensible as the sky's anger at the earth. "Stop it, Mama!" I screamed, wind carrying my voice away. "Stop!" I held my head as the pressure inside grew, the needles burrowed ever closer to the center, it felt like they were forcing my brain out, to the edges of my skull so that it rubbed mercilessly against bone. Soon bone would give way and I was sure my head would explode. Is this what she did to daddy? Is this how she killed him?

"Anna," Mama's voice was soft inside my head, weary.

"Mama?" I peered into the room, reluctant to walk over to the bed and confirm that she wasn't really speaking to me.

Yet, she said nothing more so I walked in off the balcony, dripping dirty rank rainwater all over the hardwood floors. It would stain, discolor and leave its mark on the floors forever, a trail from the window to the bed where I knelt down beside her. I know that she smiled then. I could not have been imagining it. Her eyes closed and a feeling moved through me of peace and acceptance, but mostly of fulfillment

"Mama?" I asked again.

She turned her head to me, it was the most movement I'd actually witnessed her make since I'd seen her wander down the hall yesterday. It was the biggest movement I'd ever seen her make in response to me. "What's goin on, Mama?"

Her eyebrows drew together and she reached out a hand to my forehead. I shied away from it, I didn't want her to touch my skin and feel its scaly roughness, its unnatural heat.

"You're not ready/" Mama croaked, her voice was mellow but low, not at all the voice I'd heard from the window, "but I had to. You can take it."

"I can take what?"

She remained looking the same on the bed, but in my mind I felt a smile, it was like the sun coming out after the rain and warming cold shoulders; the kind of thing that makes you look up at the sky and bask.

"The gift," she whispered to my mind.

I tried to search out in my head where she was making these sounds and feelings, her contentment, like crawling under a blanket that's already warm, grew inside of me. I couldn't find it, I tried to send her some message back, but her stare had reverted to the way it usually was, there was nothing inside of it but a blank wish for death. I backed away from her and took my seat in the rocker, my wet dress clinging to me. I pulled it away from my body and it suctioned back to me.

"I'll read to you, Mama. How about Jane Eyre?"

I was not halfway through the first page when I felt it. I'd been to enough dying wakes and vigils that I knew what it felt like when somebody's spirit left their body. Something goes out of the room, like a breath, but not. It's like vacuum, sucking the air from the room as it takes the spirit away and if you're not careful it will take yours with it. I read on, out loud, my voice shaking. Poor Jane was being abused by her cousin John.

I tried to ignore the fact that I could hear Aunessa thinking about lunch as she walked back towards our house from the shop, or that I could feel concern (soft like a touch on your fevered forehead at night) pushing in around the edges of her

consciousness. She had a feeling, an omen, that something was wrong. But I knew that something was wrong, that the needles had worked their way in, all the way, they were there now to send out these new signals to my body and things had changed. Mama was right, I may not have been ready but now I had it and as much as I feared it I liked it. I knew things, people, in a way I never could have before.

These next two were written when I was trying to write the story in a different way,
which didn't quite work out.

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2/1/06

1. Sisters

Cassandra was heard but never believed. I hear but I never believe. We're sisters she and I, though she is the more talented, more far seeing, of us two. I find her luckier in her gift than I. She saw the future. I see the present, vicious, visceral feelings of the moment, tinged with sadness from the past. Who trusts their feelings? At least Cassandra could always believe herself.

The first thought my mother had when she looked at me was *Oh God, what did I do?* Not, *What did I do wrong?* but *What did I do?* A small distinction, yes, but important. See one might expect a mother in her position, a woman who had birthed something like me—to blame herself. Not my Mom though, my Mom only really wondered *Why?*

The nature of real horror is strange, nothing like what people feel when they watch horror movies, it's not the sweaty adrenalin induced rush of finding the dark behind you just a little too close, it's nothing like those. Real horror at yourself, is quiet. It is so silent and still that I've wondered at times if the brain shuts down, rewires, makes it so that the person can go on living without having to really know that they've done this thing. Real horror makes you calm.

That's how I know my Mother wasn't really horrified when she saw me, just scared and confused. I mean of course, that I know that now. Back then I was a barely functioning brand new brain, and tiny legs, and my gift, and.. .my skin.

It was my skin, naturally, that outward deformity, that disturbed my Mama that day. They can't really seem to say what is wrong with it, except that I have a hypersensitivity. That it's cracked and always red like a sunburn, and it peels. It's always flaking off and leaving pieces of me behind. We joked once, while we were sitting on the porch of my Aunt Tressa's house under the shade of the biggest tree she had, that I would never be able to be a serial killer in this age. I left behind clues, the mystery of my DNA everywhere I went.

It was funny then, but at the same time tempting. I wondered what they'd be able to find when they looked at me under a microscope. How the trail would lead them to me, quite easily. My disease ain't only rare—it's unique. I'm the only one. Hey, maybe someday they'll name it after me. It'll become contagious or I'll have kids and pass it on, and then I can be in textbooks beside Typhoid Mary and the drunken pirate of syphilis.

My inner deformity, my sensitivity as Aunt Tressa likes to call it, well they didn't know about that until I could talk. That first day of my life Mama had got as far as the lumpy blackness of scared, the thickness of confused, the thought of... *Why ?* before I broke out in what the doctor always called "The most hellfire of a scream I've ever heard." He's was a good man the doc. He liked to pretend that I just needed a rub of aloe, and a loofah. And he didn't see a damn thing wrong with the way I could read his mind, and feel the blackness when the thought of me and what I'd done to my family.

See family is tricky, and old families are worse. On day one I already had a Daddy in the ground, and a Mama half out her life—wishing she was in the ground with him. When I came out, I might as well have damned the name and cursed its future. Ironic ain't it? I wish I *could* have seen the future instead. Who doesn't wanna know if things turn out well for them? Fm like one of those people that get so caught up in a novel when they're reading it that they don't know it from reality. I'd rather be one of the ones that peek at the end before they read the story. I want to spoil it, I wanna know.

I'm not grotesque, no matter what I've been told over the years or what I've told myself. I am deformed. In some basic way we all are, none of us the same, no perfect cookie cutter molds, but my deformity goes one step further. I get to partake of the emotional deformities of others. I remember too much of my childhood, the thing that nature-naturally makes us forget. I know why it does. It's trauma. Nothing is right because we've forgotten something. We're actively forgetting something that we knew, so sure, right before we were born.

Unfortunately, this is something even I can't remember. But I have everything else. There are days I can recall in whole, fully, through the eyes and thoughts and feelings of my friends and family. Aunt Tressa remembers a tree, the angle of the sun. Mama recalls the food, the perfect crispness of the Julep. I remember my cousins and their crazy chaotic child-minds. These things flood me, I drown in them. Thoughts, feelings, they intermingle in my mind. Which is fine, is how it should be, except that I have more than my own to deal with and it is at the same time wonderful and grossly unfair.

Could Cassandra turn it off? Could she focus her mind so that she couldn't hear the prophecies of her hated god anymore? I wish that my sister had taught me if she knew. But I doubt it, or would she have walked into her own death? Mama asked me many times why I couldn't just *not tell* what I knew. If I could just hold it back and see. I wanted to tell her it was impossible to hold back the things that make us who we are, no matter their curse. She couldn't help being half gone from this world, and I couldn't help being too many people in one. She called me Anna, after her grandmother, but Cassandra's twin sister was Helenus and I call myself Helen.

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1/31/06

2. Helen

Cold fire, that's what it is to sit in the sun in the winter. Or, is fire too strong of a word? Maybe the sun is not fire but warmth, not even warmth but the perception of warmth. Certainly, in the winter there is no real heat from the sun, and sitting in it is less than it is in the summer. Fire in winter is about the hearth and the home, but in the South a fire is more like a substance. A means to keep warm, yes, but also a product of a desire to be warm. Like many things it's a defiance of what is seen as outside of the realm, an influence most sinister. Southerners don't get cold, they have a chill—an omen.

Sun shone, weakly through the opaque winter sky, on Anna as she sat carefully on the edge of the porch swing, awaiting her first bus to a real public school. She thought the day felt more like wading through cold tomato soup than fire. She would be in third grade this year, and this was her chance to get away from the house where they'd been mostly hiding her for the first years of her life.

"You're a strange one, Anna. Why do you have on two sweaters? Where's your coat?" her Aunt Tressa asked from behind the screen door. *Concern, worry, knowledge—this won't be a good day for my Niece.*

Anna smiled. "I couldn't find it, Aunessa. I'll be fine at school."

The lady gave her a weak smile. "Yeah, it'll be warm at school. You'll be fine."

Anna nodded, staring down the long drive.

Tressa sighed. "You best get going if you're gonna make it to the end in time for the bus."

"Where's Mama?"

The woman behind the door cleaned her hands carefully with her apron. "She's having a lie in." *Anger, disgust, concern—children are so mean.*

Anna shook her head. "I'm going then."

"Walk careful, little sooth." Tressa called. *Be careful.*

"Yes, Aunessa. I will." She would be sure no one knew. Their practice would pay off. She would be able to handle it fine; the minds of the kids in her class couldn't possibly be as busy as her own.

But she was wrong. Oh she was so wrong. She felt them pushing on the edges of her mind as the bus rounded the corner and rumbled down the road towards her. They were loud, like the hum of bees but less uniform. They surged and retreated like yelling on the playground, but their playground was her mind and they battered against her like their shoes would against hard packed dirt. One step on the bus and she knew.

Overwhelming *anxiety, happiness, disgust* crawled into her. *Disgust* at her, because of how she looked. And the thoughts, the minds of children were so chaotic. They were churning like the sea, and she was thrown up against the rocks, rejected. They all stared.

They all wondered. *What's wrong with her, Is she stupid? Why doesn't she sit down? She looks so weird. She's a freak.* Judgment was passed.

Anna stood still at the door, helpless against the flow of their minds that not only thought about her, but a thousand other things like home and family and school and TV and music. One girl, she couldn't pinpoint which among the bunch, was thinking about cheese.

The bus driver turned and looked at Anna, her face curling into a frown. "You're either on or you're off. If you're on, you gotta sit."

Which was awful, the thought, the horror of sitting down and staying amongst these tearing, grubby thoughts. Of wrapping herself in their chaos and their hate—kids weren't just mean. She'd known adults that were mean to her, and they weren't really putting any thought into what they said or did. No, these kids knew what they were thinking. They were focused on her, building hatred for her presence, her existence. They felt things differently than adults. Their thoughts were weaker, but their feelings made up for it. They were potent, ten times stronger than anything she'd felt from an adult. Well, almost anything.

Anna shook her head numbly and backed up a step. Aunessa would be so sad when she came back home but she couldn't do this. The bus driver sighed. *They gotta stop trying to put the retarded kids on my bus.* Anna turned, and ran.

Her legs were too short and the rush of their laughter overtook her. She fell, lying on the soft wet grass she sunk into its coolness, but the terrible chatter wouldn't stop. Why wasn't it getting quieter? She couldn't hear, the rush of mockery roared in her ears. She looked up and saw the bus still there, idling as it was. The bus driver stood on the

bottom step, staring at her. Anna would have known she was afraid to come down and see what was wrong with her, even if the woman's mind hadn't been whispering it to her. She realized, that she might be screaming.

"Go away!" Anna shouted. "Please go away."

The woman looked up, behind Anna, and relief flooded her.

Anna sobbed. She felt the cool calm of her aunt sliding into her head, and grasped at it just as she wrapped her arms around her neck and held on when Aunessa picked her up.

"You go on," Aunessa growled. "We're just fine."

The woman nodded, and the bus and the thoughts were soon gone. Anna curled deep into Aunessa's arms and mind. Her Aunt had many nicknames for her but it was the first time she heard the one *Cassandra* slip through her thoughts.

"Am I cursed like her?" Anna whispered into her Aunt's neck.

"You've done nothing to deserve a curse, my little sooth."

"Then I can't be her."

"I'm afraid you're like her, that's all."

"She's like me, but not me."

A chuckle shook her aunt's frame and she paused in the road, putting Anna down. Tressa put her hands to the small of her back and pushed in, cracking it, as she looked up at the murky sky. "That'd make you two sisters then. She had a sister, you know. The stories don't speak about her much, but it's said she had the sight too."

Anna watched her aunt, as the cold winter sun turned her thin skin pale. "Was she cursed?"

Tressa shook her head, looking away back towards the house.

"What was her name?" Anna frowned.

Her aunt looked down at her and smiled. "Helenus. Come on girl," she took Anna's hand and tugged her towards the house. "We've got to get to work if I've got to do your schooling and the housework."

Anna knew her chance was lost, at least this time, in those subtle words. Her aunt would be doing her schooling, and she would be once again trapped on their acres. "Will you call me Helen, Aunessa?" she asked, resolve filtering into her words,

Tressa paused in the road and looked down at her. *Confusion, -worry.* "Why?"

Anna stared ahead towards the house, her eyes sliding to the fields and woods beyond. "I don't wanna be like Anna anymore."