

HEX

a novel

To Helen and Louisa

To John

“I have been loved,” she said, “by something strange and it has forgotten me.”

—Djuna Barnes

“The Future has an ancient heart,”

—Carlo Levi

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The Before

I have known Thingy since before we were born. This is not hyperbole. The womb is patterns of light and heat. Rose light, black light; a wave of heat that is the sun or a heating pad shifting as the mother rolls in bed. The fetus doesn't know the mother's body because it doesn't yet know its own body, but it knows light and heat and Thingy was like a searchlight beaming from the guntower. She was intermittent, penetrating. As her mother turned to face mine, she beamed to me through the old walls of her father's house and the walls built around those originals, over the gullies of her father's orchard and up the increasing hill, past the stone border which somebody's great-grandfather (not mine) had stacked and through the flapping sheets and sodden jeans of my mother's clothesline to my mother, stretching with her hands on the small of her back, clothespins clipped to the hem of her dress. My mother stooped over the basket and rose with a paisley patterned sheet, a garland of my father's dripping boxer shorts to hang like Christmas lights along the line.

In my neo-natal life, Thingy was a dazzling code: Darkness, Brilliance, Darkness, Brilliance. This could also be described as solitude and awareness. At first I was alone, a pulse, the convulsive absorption of nutrient and oxygen. Then there was another, something that came from Outside, which contained within its shape—like mine, our bodies unconsciously mimicking each other's tuck and slow gillesness—an awareness of Outside and thus, inversely, an awareness of Inside, of Self, of Me. It is to Thingy, who did nothing but latch to her mother's womb and stick around, that I owe what has been described as my almost supernatural composure. It is also to Thingy that I owe my greed.

And now, as if by accident, I have begun my story. There will be consequences to this telling. Perhaps to me, more likely to Ingrid the Second who even now, asleep in the basket tucked in the corner next to my table, kicks a prescient leg as if warning me away. She is so new she still can slip effortlessly into the no-space of before; she is effortlessly alone. She yawns and I can see the jutting berms from which, in a few months time, her teeth will erupt. Surely it is a mother's heart that wishes them sharp—fish-killing teeth cut to strip the fine bones. She yawns again, fisting a hand near her mouth, her palate receding in pale ridges like the gullet of a minute whale. She is enormous in her infancy, her fingernails so sharp I have to keep her hands snapped inside terry-cloth mittens or she will scratch her cheeks open. She is growing and growing. Every day she appreciably grows.

The men are on the porch—one as always talking and the other present only in the slow creak of his chair. the sun slips past the edge of the tallest ridge, another early dusk. Soon, Ingrid the Second's father will come into the room, as he does, to marvel over her basket and Jacob will lean in the doorway watching me; I will get up and begin again the work of being a woman in this strict house. But for now the table before me is strewn with papers and the light from the lamp I've switched on mellows the mountain shadows that begin with the dusk to wick through my window. A bee, disoriented, attracted by the flowered dash of my curtains, beats herself against the glass. Her body makes a tiny sound, a patter that reflects nothing of the terrible bruising she must feel and when she finally reels away, stuttering back to the hives, Ingrid the Second relaxes a tension I hadn't recognized and lets loose a trilling, liquid fart as if she had struggled along with the bee, battering the panes of an inexplicably hindering world.

From the porch the men are seeing the last of the day flash out exuberant in the summer ridges, but from my window it is already dark—our yard filled with shadow, the hen-house quiet, the hives settling by the creek, the forest pressing closer, testing its borders. I hear the screen door creak, Ingrid's father's voice draw closer. "But you agree it's a philosophical problem," he is saying to Jacob, "not a social one, not a practical one. A problem of misplaced will." Jacob's answer isn't audible, but I hear his particular footsteps coming down the hall and in these last moments, seconds as he rounds the corner, I begin, I begin, I begin.

This is my story. I am sorry for nothing. Should Thingy appear now, tapping on the window, I would say, "Dear Love: Remember, now you are nameless, but I am still here."

"I am here," I would say, "and my name is Alice Small."

The Dragon's Tale

My mother was the daughter of a family of some small renown; my father was infamous. They were raised in adjacent towns, but where we are from that may as well have been different kingdoms—the geography of the mountains is jealous and indifferent to the human need for a hive. So the story of their meeting is like a fairy tale in which there is a King and a Queen, a Princess, a Knight, a Dragon. I used to tell it to my brother Luke in quiet hours when Thingy was away at her flute lesson or her tap-dancing class—her tap-dancing costume was a red tulle skirt and a black leotard armored with sequins; I coveted it and picked sequins from its hem at every opportunity—but it was never clear, even to me, which of my family members filled which roles.

My mother, I have been told, was a good student, pretty in her way with long brown hair that was slick at the tips from her habit of sucking it as she read. She had very small teeth, some sharp, which were spaced far apart from each other. When she smiled she gave the impression of jumble and roominess all at once. This made her self-conscious, as it might any girl, so she rarely smiled, or when she did she raised a hand to her mouth as if her smile were a private thing, self-referential and treasured.

It might have been that mannerism that so attracted my father. Or it might have been her hair-sucking habit, her tendency to keep place in her book with a hawk's feather, or the way her skirt slipped up over her round knees. It might simply have been the fact that my father, then as now, is a roving cock, as helpless to contain himself as he is to constrain the desires of the many women who see him as a once-in-a-lifetime lay. The kind of fuck they will learn from and bring home to their husbands as a gift to the marriage.

However it came about, my mother and my father met.

My mother's father owned the longest running business in the town of Elevation: the Taut County Feed & Seed which he had inherited from his father who had founded it with his father as a dam to stem the tide of money flowing out of the mountains and down into the Piedmont where, every spring, mountain farmers were forced to make the winding trek to buy their seeds and supplies for the short growing season up in our old, thin-soiled hills. The Feed Store began as a typical farmer's co-op selling sweet alfalfa hay, turnip and beet seed, various equipments, cracked corn for the hens, sorghum grain, lengths of calico cloth, calipers and rolls of cattle wire, post-hole diggers, crackers and hunks of waxy cheese, multiple poisons, dark bulbs for the ladies to bury in rings around the well. By the time my grandfather inherited the store the times had begun to change, if not the mountains. For one thing, there weren't as many farmers around. These had been old families—the McClountrys, the Rourkes, the Talberschmidts—who had washed up in the ports of South Carolina and found the low country too stagnant and bloated for their tastes. I imagine them as evolutionary tangents, covered with a coarse, russet hair and many-jointed, spidering their way up into the hills where they found some semblance of the lands they had left. For the McClountrys and Rourkes perhaps it was the air, thin and sinewy; for the Talberschmidts perhaps the fauna—squirrels like those in the vast Bavarian forests, boars truffeling the loam, black bears as beetle-eyed and innocent as the witch's many victims transformed from boys and girls into ignorant, powerful brutes.

In my grandfather's time, there was also less water. Some of the creeks had dried up entirely, leaving what Thingy and I recognized as roads from the other world—smooth-rocked paths with high banks twisting up the ridge. Others had thinned to a trickle, hemmed with a thick yellow foam which Rosellen's breeding pugs snapped at when it piled at the edge of their run and Thingy's mother warned us never to touch, and if we did touch to wash our hands instantly, and never, in any event, to put our hands into our mouths, and to come inside anyway, it was getting dark, the both of us she supposed if it wasn't time already for me to go home.

The foam and the waterlessness and the way the skunks and possums and raccoons came up to trashcans during the day and rooted there, grunting in the backs of their throats, were a product of the modern mining concerns which moved into our mountains in the eighties. This was after the old concerns had guttered through the ancient rock beds, leaving some mountains almost honeycombed by caverns and tunnels; sinkholes green and fathomless with their unnatural birth then abandonment. In short,

along with their greed and hope, their foolishness, their luck, leaving behind the opportunity for magic.

As for our town, prosaic Elevation with its synchronic roads—Top Road and High Street and even an Up-Side which meanders a little way along the flint ridge above the high school before dead-ending into the quarry—it behaves as if everyone who ever lived there mumbled the answers to a census all at once. *Where do you live?* Up. *Where are you going?* Up. *Where did you come from?* And so on...

The old concerns were memorialized in sepia-toned photographs on the walls of the Feed Store. These were pictures of men—singular at first with their pick-axes and thick leather boots, then groups, then committees, then coal-faced working parties in Dickies, the foreman smoking a cigarette, the piping of their machinery glinting in the frosty light behind them. Aunt Thalia once said these photographs were not history, but nostalgia. At the time, still mired in my pupae form—I think of myself then as featureless, my true self a shifting gather of shape taking place behind a veil—I had never heard the term. The way she intoned the word made me think of the way my father said ‘management,’ or Rosellen, then only my father’s friend, said ‘ladies’ rotary,’ so I asked for a definition from the Nina, one of the three girls my father employed to tend the house in the years before Rosellen became my father’s wife.

The other was the Pinta, a sad amalgam of her parent’s genetics, and the third the Sainte Maria, dark and fast and scornful, a furious shadow stitching the edges of our childhood. Their real names were Nina, Pauline, Marie, easy targets for Thingy and I who had nicknames for everyone in almost every occasion. They were just three girls, at first in high school and later not in high school but still hanging around as so many girls in Elevation did, working cheap jobs, going on cheap dates, everything about them provisional and spare.

First they all three worked for my Aunt Thalia, running the register at the store or running dishes from the kitchen she had tarpapered onto the side of the building, down the long corridor and into the high windowed back room which my great-grandfather had built as a tack room, my grandfather used for storage, and Thalia, always a restless innovator, had re-imagined as a dining room serving up blue plate specials in shifting dust-gilded light. Later, with my mother gone and my brother clearly incapable of improvement, the girls formed a shifting phalanx of wholly unqualified home-care givers: preparing meals for Luke and I, scrubbing us down in the tub, bunking at night in a cot at the foot of Luke’s bed because he

could not be left alone, not even in his sleep, for fear of the damage he might inflict on himself.

Of all of them, the Nina was the most approachable, and when I had questions Thingy and I could not work out the answer to between us, I went to her. In this particular instance, she seemed hardly to be aware I was there and went on scooping coins out of their individual wooden slots in the Feed Store's antique register and sifting them through her fingers, keeping a tally on a stenograph tablet as she counted. Thalia kept the register polished to a high shine and its many long-levered buttons seemed to reach out toward the Nina's face like the spines of some loving but poisonous animal. The Nina could only have been about nineteen at the time, her face lengthening into a caustic horsiness accentuated by her stiffly teased bangs and the generally dusty color of her hair. I stood at her side looking up at her as the coins spilled from her fingers and back into the drawers.

"Nostalgia," I repeated for the third time, resisting the urge to slip my hand between hers and the drawer and snatch nickels out of the air. "Aunt Thalia said it and I don't know what it means." "Stop whining," said the Nina without looking at me. She closed her eyes as if catching up with something in her head and referred back to the steno pad, moving her lips as she counted. "It means knowing better, but thinking you can make a profit," she finally said and then fluttered a hand in front of my face. "Go away now, Alice," she said. "You're a pest."

At the time, overheated and dirty inside the hot-dog casing of my brother's used down jacket, I was disappointed in this answer. First of all, I knew I was a pest. I could feel my pestiness, my meat-toothed smallness, in all my actions. Secondly, I have always resisted riddles. *I am taken from a mine and shut up in a wooden case...I go around and around the wood and do not enter...I live in a golden house with no doors or windows...Scarcely was my father in the world before I could be found sitting on the roof...* I don't want there to be answers to their litany; certainly not ones as simple as lead, as bark, as egg, fire, smoke. If there is an answer, I want it to be me: Alice Small dug from a mountain burrow, skimming the undergrowth, locked in a golden bower, escaping up the chimney.

I wouldn't leave the Nina's side and sat instead on a vegetable crate beside the counter scuffing black streaks into the floor with my cheap rubber soles and counting out loud in random order. From my vantage, I could see the back wall, those framed photographs hanging at dusty angles, and across the hallway into the kitchen. The Pinta was there, bowed over the deep stainless steel sinks with a pad of matted steel wool in one hand. So was the Sainte Maria, who was supposed to be at our house but had been called in by Thalia to help with a particularly busy lunch crowd.

Where was Luke? He must have been in the store somewhere. He couldn't be left at home alone, and there was no one else to sit with him. My father was working. At that time of year he was probably on the crew charged with clearing and leveling land in anticipation of the summer pool installation season; or perhaps, the timing is right, finally tearing down the town bandstand whose rotting, bunting-draped pillars had framed everything from church revivals to the annual grade-school food pyramid pageant (Thingy was a lemon, firm and resplendent; I was a shoulder of lamb). Minus my father and Thingy, who was undoubtedly at one of her many extracurricular accomplishments, everyone in the world who knew me was in that building. I have interrogated my memory, but I still can't find Luke in it. Not a noise from him or a dark corner where we might have parked his chair out of the way of both the girls and the customers, pulled a blanket over his shoulders and let him sleep, or stare, whichever.

If I ask my memory in some other way, I still return the same basic results. The smells: old wood, floor polish, bacon fat and the synthetic flower scent the Nina wore mixed with the warm fug of her feet inside her pantyhose. The sounds: the regular clunk of metal against wood, the hiss of pressurized water hitting the sides of the sink, rasp of dishes, clitter-clat of the Sainte Maria's guava-pink kitten heels, which she was wearing with two sets of ankle socks, as she trotted up the hall with loaded plates, trotted down the hall with empty ones.

Further away, I could hear the hum and grumble of the diners and the soaring tones of my Aunt Thalia, her voice carrying like a bell that had been hammered flat on one side. Every luncheon, no matter how many or how few customers there were, she made it her practice to go from table to table catching up. Rosellen would have called this a sound business tactic. "Butter them up," I can hear her saying, "No one's more likely to spend some money than a man who thinks you give a shit about his mother's corns." Thalia was an equal opportunity judge. She reacted to the news that a neighbor had committed some obvious farming gaff—raising pigs on the side of a notoriously flood-prone branch, or planting tobacco too many years in the same plot—with the same tone of incredulous superiority as she would the news that his child had been born with a brain tumor, his house struck by lightning and burned to the ground. For her, there was no such thing as luck—only planning, only work. She understood opposition, but had no time for pity. The girls, even the Sainte Maria, were terrified of her.

When Jacob and I were first married we lived with Thalia in the house on Newfound Mountain where she and my mother grew up. It was only for a short while, four months during which we three

battered around the house like dazzled moths. Or, I suppose that's what it felt like at the time. So many years have passed since then and it is possible I am remembering the gustiness of that time, the sense of being individually pulled toward something only to find we had, all three, simultaneously ended up in the kitchen staring at each other over the empty expanse of the butcher block table, in light of the events which came after. Which makes the image of Thalia as a moth—a great white moth with scarlet dots at the tips of her wings, false eyes rising in peacock fringes from her antenna—a terrible sort of joke given what came next. I might as well tell you now, Ingrid: it was death by fire.

I don't think I'm spoiling the suspense. Surely, by whatever age you come to read this manuscript you'll have already heard the story of your Great-Aunt Thalia. No matter how gently we tried to expunge her, there are clunky artifacts left all over the house. Just this morning, you in my arms, both of us in white and the white pine boards of the stairs airy under my feet in the cool, clear light, I came across Jacob in the hall turning a pair of Thalia's work-boots over in his hands. He'd fished them out of the cedar chest we use to store things that can't be left behind. Some of my mother's school books are in there. One of Thingy's raincoats, primrose pink with a wide, soft belt and used tissue still wadded stiff in the pockets. Jacob knocked the boots together. A little sift of red dirt drifted down from their treads and Jacob brushed it into a wide seam in the floor. Then he tucked the boots under his arm and strode into the dining room and through that into the kitchen and so out the back door. We hadn't yet seen each other that morning and, as he passed us at the foot of the stairs, Jacob pressed your head into my chest and held it there, his hand square and economical over your ear. He grazed the back of my nightgown with the other hand, not touching, just ruffling the cloth. He and I are not moths but a man and a woman who have known each other for a long time now and have learned how to share a space. Whether or not we could have come to this understanding if Thalia had stayed in the house—her house, after all, her boots and stairs and butcher block and sideboard decorated with a frieze of humming bees—is a part of the time-line we have not had to consider. Closed to us forever. Consumed by flames.

Later in the day I came out to feed the chickens and saw Thalia's boots jutting from staves on either end of the garden, laces undone and tongues flapping. To scare the birds, I suppose. What else would find a pair of boots so dreadful that, even empty, they would frighten them away?

Aunt Thalia came down the hallway toward the kitchen. She was a tall, square woman, packed with meat and muscle the way an

ox or a cow is packed, not fat so much as filled. Her hair had gone white at a very young age and she wore it long, white as rope woven from a horse's tail. If she had been born only slightly earlier in the century, she would have come kicking at the hem of a boiled green wool skirt and rattling a ring of keys at her stout, matronly waist. As it was, she came wearing jeans, a man's leather belt buckled high over the unflattering pouch the pants made of her underbelly, a thin red tee-shirt she had picked up somewhere which strained across her breasts so the swooping white script stretched and warped like a reflection seen in the blade of a saw. *The Lucky Bunny Bar and Grill*, the shirt said. I still remember; it was one of her favorites.

Someone came in the front door of the shop, letting a gust of chill air in with them, and crossed heavily behind me to the trowels and gardening forks, but the noise seemed far away. Even the Nina's counting, the Sainte Maria's little jog as she maneuvered past Thalia, careful not to touch her or brush up against any of her clothes, seemed to dim and retreat. Thalia's head was bowed, her arms canted behind her at an awkward angle like wings about to downbeat into flight. She was fixing her hair, concentrating on the action her hands were taking beyond her sight, and had not yet seen me. For a long moment I watched my aunt as she stood bisected in the shaft of light that drifted down the hallway, her head in darkness, her hair falling one panel at a time across her hot, square face.

It must be understood: I was a motherless child. I always had been. I didn't know how to yearn or mourn, how to soften my face so it could be filled with whatever the person I faced had to offer. Things could tilt her head and peep until whatever it was she wanted was offered to her of the adult's own accord. She was marvelous at letting people believe they were giving her a gift rather than fulfilling a demand. I, however, was a clumsy, blatting thing: the kind of child who will stand at the refreshment table all through the magic act and the pony rides eating and eating, stuffing herself past the point of illness because she is incapable of understanding that all this will come again.

I imagine I was disgusting. Thalia certainly looked disgusted when she finally looked up and saw me there. Slowly she stuck the pin between her lips, the last twist of hair tumbling to her waist with a shifting whisper. We stayed like that for a while, regarding each other. I hunched on the crate so my belly pressed against my thighs, craned my neck. My posture was awkward and abject. Thalia stood, pins bristling her lips, hands on her hips, hair crackling around her as if offering advice. Then she decided something and beckoned me over to her side.

"I'm not asking you, Alice," she said when I hesitated. She turned away from me without waiting for a response and began to

rummage in the pockets of the flannel shirt hanging from a peg on the wall.

I crossed the hall reluctantly. Thalia, still without turning back to me, reached out and hooked my shirt collar. Her fingers where they rubbed against my neck were so rough it was almost as if the skin had curled up into scales and she smelled like the split-pea soup and ham hock she had tasted and retasted as it simmered on the stove.

“You keep forgetting we’re related,” Thalia said, finding what she was looking for and bending forward slightly to peer into my face. This close to her I could see the sweat beaded under her eyes and at her brow-line. Her hair was damp at her temples and droplets of sweat hung in the fine blond hairs above her upper lip. “You forget we share blood and that that means something,” Thalia said, shaking my collar slightly. “There’s really no excuse for it. Give me your hand.” By this point, I was in a trance created by her smell, her odd clanging voice, the precise detail of her sweat, her color, her waxy complexion and the hectic blots of red that rose high in each cheek. She had to reach down and unfurl my fingers for me in order to drop whatever she had pulled out of her shirt pocket into the palm of my hand. Then, she rose to her full height, which seemed even more geological than normal. I could hear the Nina finish her count and bang shut the register drawer behind me. In the dining room, a man raised his voice as if shouting after the Sainte Maria’s retreating back and said, “With extra gravy, please. Make sure. I don’t want it dry.”

“Look at it,” Thalia said. “We haven’t got all day.”

At first it seemed to me that what Thalia had put in my hand was nothing more remarkable or interesting than a ball of wax. It was red, pliant; the sort of wax that covered the round white cheese the Pinta put into my lunch sacks and which Thingy and I often used as casts to compare the growing discrepancy between our bite-marks. For once, I was the winner here. I had my mother’s teeth, small but even, and though the problem would soon be corrected by braces, Thingy’s mouth was rapidly filling with an off-kilter snaggle of which she seemed very proud. I brought the ball up to my nose and sniffed at it carefully, keeping my eyes on Aunt Thalia’s face. The ball still smelled like cheese, probably even the same brand, and I shrugged and dug my thumbnail into the wax, disappointed.

“Go on, you stupid girl,” Thalia said, looking over her shoulder toward the dining room where the Sainte Maria could be heard repeating an order. “Do I have to spell out everything? Open it.”

Obediently, but with no great expectations, I dug my thumbnail deeper into the ball, prising it with my other nails until it

suddenly split and fell into almost even halves. Nestled inside a cavity in the wax was a nasty thing. It was like a broken tooth, the shape bulbing into a jagged crown with two long roots forking downward. It was deep maroon in color and when I jiggled the ball I could see it wasn't quite a solid, but rather something like jelly. It seemed to be oozing, a slick of tea-colored liquid coated the wax where it had rested, and it was bound at the top and bottom by what was surely just a thread, though one the same dead white color as Thalia's hair. It smelled as well, a sharp copper tang that reminded me both of blood and the smoke from my father's soldering iron. I reached to touch it and Thalia tapped my fingers away and fit the other half of the ball carefully back onto its seam.

"It's a root," she said, "a rare one. One of these days, I'll show you how to find it for yourself, but until then pick one of these pockets." She gestured to the wall in front of me. A couple of Thalia's extra shirts hung there, a black, deep-pocketed kitchen apron, Luke's new parka (evidence! he was there after all, behind me somewhere in the long gray building) and the coats the Nina, the Pinta and the Sainte Maria had shrugged off and hung, each on her particular knob, at the beginning of their shifts. Somehow I knew it was the latter three to which Thalia was referring.

"Go on," Thalia said again, "It's okay." It was not okay, that was something a deep, shifting part of me unequivocally knew, but before I could stop myself—without wanting to stop myself, with a wild glee like one gets from breaking a window—I shot out my hand and dropped the tiny ball in the pocket of the Sainte Maria's tatty fake leopard fur coat.

"So," said Thalia, nodding, laying her heavy hand on my shoulder. "That's the kind of girl you are, is it? I can't say I'm too surprised, though I might not have made the same decision." Thalia bent down again, swooping very close to my face as if she wanted to kiss me. "Still," she said, scanning me from chin to forehead and back again, each time managing to avoid looking into my eyes, "now at least you know what you are, don't you, Alice?"

"No," I said, "I don't," but it was a lie. It was clear to me something had changed. I felt flushed all over, an ache in my armpits and at my groin as if I suddenly had a fever. In the back of my throat I could feel a hot plug as if something in my body had surfaced and was bobbing just behind my teeth. I felt as if I was still touching the tiny ball of wax where it caught in the lint of the Santa Maria's pocket, or could feel without touching its dead, plastic surface, could sense somehow the particular, nasty quiver of the root.

"Mmm-hmm," said Thalia. She straightened up and backed away. Just then the Nina came into the hallway and yanked me back by the arm.

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Lutrell,” she said, her voice high. “I was doing the cash drawer. Is she bothering you?”

“Yes,” said my aunt. “Yes, she is,” to which the Nina responded by giving me a hard shake and pulling me back into the darkening store. A storm was blowing in, the clouds tinted green as they streamed past the windows. Thalia stood in the hallway a moment longer, twisting the last sheet of her hair up with slow, thoughtful motions, and watched us. Her niece and her shop-keep. Two sullen girls surrounded by relics for sale from another century, ugly and stooped in the sudden dottering glare of lightning over the mountain. She paused after the last pin, patting the top of her bun reflexively, and smiled before turning into the kitchen already shouting at the Pinta for letting the soup bubble over onto the stove.

I don’t remember what happened the rest of that day. I suppose the Sainte Maria gathered Luke and I up as soon as the lunch shift was over and took us home. She probably packed the kitchen leftovers into styrofoam take-home boxes, as the girls often did at the end of the week when my father hadn’t yet given them money for groceries. At home, around our kitchen table, she fed us the gritty soup and fatty ham, cutting Luke’s meat into small bites while a cigarette burned in the ashtray next to her. Later that evening, just before the Pinta came on to take the night shift, she gave us both our baths and, as was her habit even though she was the one who ran the washcloth over my body and wrung it out over my head, shut the door to my bedroom quietly behind me to give me privacy as I changed.

Probably, the Sainte Maria took her jacket home with her that night and hung it in her own front hallway. The ball was so small and her pockets so cluttered with thread and coins and stones and all the usual detritus of a girl with busy hands that I doubt she even noticed the thing was there until much later when she may have drawn it out, examined it with brief curiosity and tossed it away. One more inexplicable object that had been drawn to her. One more tiny satellite at orbit around her fickle moon.

I still don’t quite know what the object meant, but I know that I marked her and I know that Thalia—moth white, moth red—watched and made note of the marking. That I was a child is no excuse. A child can smell smoke on the wind, after all. Even today, with so few people left in the world who can do me any harm, I am cold when I think of Thalia’s smile, mean as a cut, opening across her face.

Queen of the Tie-Snakes

But wait... I've confused myself. I began intending to write about my mother—little Alice Luttrell, who grew up on a mountain and should have stayed there—and ended up at Thalia. I can't say I'm too surprised. If Thalia was anything, she was an omega. A stocky vanishing point standing spraddle-legged in heavy brown boots. It is Thalia who I miss the way I imagine a daughter might miss her mother: with a mixture of melancholy, indignation and relief. My own mother is harder to quantify.

What is more, in between where I began and where I find myself now, several days have come and gone. It was a rainy spring, Ingrid—your first—and the season has passed into a rainy summer. Our house is high on the southern slope of the mountain, parallel to a gap where millions of years ago some geologic schism thrust one fold of rock deeper into the mantle and levered another to crooked angles above the valley. It leaves us exposed, which is to say when a storm rolls up from the south it finds the house unprotected on its bald and levels us.

When you are older, Ingrid, you will be able to stand with me on the creek bank and watch the storm come. The house will be behind us, its windows catching the sunlight and flashing it back as if they were shields, and before us: the creek, swift and busy, the lower field frosted with bluet and the edge of the forest where the solomon seal and jack-in-the-pulpit grow. Then there will be nothing but trees, miles and miles of them rolling variously green up and down the sides of the ridges. And the storm, of course; always the same storm coming back around. You'll find it feels a little like being on a boat. We here, the family, with our hens and bees, our piles of wood and stone, all together hanging as if tossed from the crest of an enormous wave. Frozen in the whistling space

between the foam and the green depths, watching the ocean come rushing up.

I have laid you on a quilt on the floor where you can see the birds as they squabble at the feeder, but you are unusually intolerant, thrusting your arms and legs into the air and grunting in the way you do just before you lose all patience and begin to cry. A spell of bad weather unsettles everyone. It brings the men into the house, brings us all too close together for comfort. Daniel claims to be fond of this.

“Nature’s vacation,” he says gaily, leaning back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head. The perfect conscientious picture of a man at ease, but he is faking it. I can tell by the way he watches Jacob as he paces the rooms, pausing to consult the windows as if he feels the evidence of his hearing—rain pounding the tin-roof, roaring in the gutters, tocking the windowsills with the hollow rap of a geologist’s hammer—cannot be wholly trusted. When the men are in the house there is very little time left for anything else. There are the usual meals to prepare and serve and then the cleaning up to do. The usual chores: beating the rugs, changing the linens, washing the laundry, darning or mending or cutting clothing into strips, blacking the belly of the coal-black stove...all made infinitely more tedious by the presence of an audience.

When the storm comes and stays to swell the creek in its banks and devil the hens until they are uniformly beleaguered and peevish, I get up at night and creep down the hallways on the hard edges of my feet just to remember myself as I am without someone watching. Sometimes, if I am very tired, I do this in my nightclothes: a moth-white woman haunting the halls of her cold house. More often I get up from whichever bed I have lain down in and re-dress in a dark corner of the room. Then I walk about the house like a fairy tale child who has gone to sleep in the familiar world and woken up in its mirror twin—the dolls and jacks, cups and boots and brushes, needles and pearls that surround her all the more sinister for their insistence that nothing has changed.

Thingy’s father, Mr. Clawson, had a collection of steins in his basement entertainment room. He arranged them seasonally in the niches behind his half-bar with the two mahogany vinyl-padded bar stools which always squeaked when we came down the stairs as if a party of somber drinkers, already elbow-deep in their beers, were turning to observe us, not particularly impressed. The steins were lidded and fanciful. Some were ceramic, some pewter. There was even a wooden one, the belly lined with lead, a motif of berry-laded vines massing up its sides; one stein even glass, soldered into panels,

the glass old and wavering toward its bottom, the lid tinted an optimistic pink. Do I need to say how much I loved them? They were forbidden; they were jealously tended. Sometimes Thingy would take them from their niches and we would consider them closely. Thingy insisted on holding them. I constrained myself to reaching out one finger to mark the dust in the pursed mouth of a rosebud or brush a cobweb from the brim of the mountaineer's cap. Sometimes, I fit my thumb into the groove at the top of a handle and pressed the lid slowly open and shut.

The mountaineer stein was a particular favorite of Mr. Clawson's. This was another ceramic mug, the base thick and imprinted with the name of its Swiss manufacturer. The lid was shaped like a mountain top—austere and alpine, its glacial peak bearing no resemblance to our own worn, tree-furred ridges—and the handle was an oversized, rosy-cheeked, loden-capped yodeler, lips puckered, head flung back, pheasant feather unfurling brilliantly down his spine. It was a beautiful, foolish thing. Mr. Clawson was proud of it.

“Purchased from a store on Mount Blanc,” he told Thingy and I as we sat uneasily on the barstools. He was drinking clear liquor from a tiny glass into which he would sometimes allow us to dip the tips of our tongues. “Little place, untouched by time, the glacier melt turning a water wheel outside.” Mr. Clawson considered the stein ruminatively, turning it to its best advantage. “It made a little scooping noise. That's the only way to describe it. That water wheel I mean, and the glacier water like milk, I mean milky like what is that liquor? Ouzo? the one the Greeks drink. Right away I knew I had to have it, and what's the name for a glacial valley, Ingrid? Morass, that's right.”

Then us alone, Thingy with the stein cradled in her lap, her corduroy skirt pulled over her knees to form a sling for it, and I with my rough finger pressing the hinge that would make the mountain open and the mountaineer's head tip back still further, unperturbed, whistling now in idiot surprise to see the wall of rock suspended above his face. But of course it never fell. The mountain opened and shut, hollow, disgorging no treasures. When one day we filled it with water from the bar sink and each took prim, sacrosanct sips, the only prophecy the stein reflected was the sad fate of a spider, washed from her web, drowning peevishly in the water's dusty ripples. “Yodeleheehoo,” I instructed Thingy, but she was listening to the sound of her mother's footsteps in the kitchen above our heads and she would only titter. “Hee Hoo, Hee Hoo,” she said while clapping the lid of the stein roughly shut.

In the other real world that was going on all around us it wasn't as simple as clapping the top of the mountain back on, but

this was the general idea. The new mining concerns understood the pace of the century better than the old loners. Certainly, better than the gaunt, blackened pick-men with their company issued work pants and their 1930's collectivism who were so saturated with coal dust that when cut they bled first black and only later a reluctant red. What I'm trying to explain is how it was to be a child then. Thingy and I can be imagined in any number of topical scenarios—picture the legwarmers and Thingy's flaxen perm—and that would be true, but what we were also like was two small, densely furred creatures crouched in a burrow, listening to the sound of a huge, inexplicable purpose going on over our heads. We grew up. Time can't really be stopped; only paused, vibrating along its edges like a bee trapped in a glass jar.

The new mining concerns drove through mountain towns in phalanxes of white vans, pick-ups and belching diesel trucks. When they came to a mountain that seemed likely they arranged the ranks of eager machines and sheered the top of the mountain off. Then they went to work rooting out what they found there: copper and lead, zinc, gold, silver, olivine and feldspar, mica, quartz, emerald and kyanite, apatite, tourmaline, saltpeter, marble, slate, quartz and porcelain clay, beryl, amethyst, ruby and sapphire, limestone and even uranium, innocuous and deadly.

When I was a child, the days of discovery seemed to have ended. Off came the mountain top, out came the treasure, dumped with the fill dirt for later sorting. It was business, progress. What the mining concerns really wanted were the iron and the coal. Jacob tells me that some mountains still show to the south or east their ancient faces thick with deadfalls, but from the north or west they reveal themselves to be hollowed entirely. A mask. Scooped so only their expressions remain.

When they were finished, to tidy things up I suppose, the mining concerns gathered all that had been sorted and discarded, all that was left, and tumbled it back into the mountain's empty core. Imagine that: bears and panthers, long needle pine, the massy trunks of tulip poplar, eagles, moss, river trout, old leather shoes, gold panning plates, brick foundations, lakes, bones and older bones, wood burning stoves, hickory ghosts, balding tires, skins, fish-rib hooks, boulders, flint arrow heads, generational beds of bluebells, church spires, snakes, chicken wire, sulfur-bellied newts all jumbled together, slick with muck. And their voices...a torrent of voices, unintelligible, meaningless as the shadow of the mountain top crests over their pit, as the lid claps shut.

These were not our mountains, Ingrid. This happened further up the chain, and what rimmed the edges of the creek beds was just an echo. When the mining trucks came through Elevation—traveling north, skirting the park lands, heading

upstream—Thingy and I would stand on the corner and wave. Sometimes we clasped each other's hands and held them up over our heads and the men in the trucks and vans waved to us. They were mostly young, hair held back in practical fashion from their eyes with blue bandanas. Thingy and I thought they were handsome, and we looked winsomely after the trucks though we were too old to chase them as some of the boys in the neighborhood did. Later, we lingered in the hollow heart of Mrs. Clawson's forsythia bush and gloated over our future. Thingy would marry the one sitting high in the cab of the Bobcat and I would marry the man driving the truck. We never saw them again, or if we did we didn't recognize them. The next week or month there would be a new batch winding through. Thingy would marry the man who blew her a kiss from the jostling cab window; I, she chose for me, the one in the bed of the pick-up truck, eating a banana, blinking the wind out of his eyes.

Maybe she was right. I've never asked Jacob and I doubt he would remember. Did you see two girls? One silver blond, hair like a spent dandelion drifting up from her head; one small, ill-favored, looking behind her to the window in the ranch house that was always left open to the street? Did you see me? I would have to say.

But back to the story at hand: Alice and Dax and how they met. Really, I have no idea.

There wasn't much left of my mother in the house I grew up in. A photo of her holding my brother Luke just after he was born. The color is super-saturated. My mother's hair looks like varnish, a slick cherry, and her tee-shirt is almost ultra-violet. She is very young and she holds her baby like she might a book, away from her body. She is not smiling and Luke is already looking nowhere in particular. They are standing together in the driveway of the house I would be born into, pocked brick, the azalea beside the front door blooming so white in the over-saturated corner it has lost all definition.

It seems like a lethargic photo, perhaps one that confirms a general suspicion about our poverty or emotional sloth. The azalea appears to stalk my mother and her son, a ravenous void descending, and to get this angle my father must have stood in the steep road where often the logging trucks would pop their brakes only at the bend and squeal in barely contained slides down to the sand-ramp 100 feet past our drive. That was Top Road, named because it went on all the way to the top of the mountain, and that was Alice, named because her older sister Thalia had already taken their mother's name and she was born a little more free.

Other than this photo, which I keep tucked as a place mark inside various books, there was little in my childhood to remember my mother by. A set of garish plates, turquoise glaze patterned with

elephants outlined in rose. Each elephant gripped the tail of the one before so they went around and around the inner face of the plate, around and around the yellow corn, the sliced hot-dog, the smear of ketchup. As a young child I understood they were all mother elephants, though there was not a baby among them. As an older child, Rosellen gave them back to Thalia to keep for my adulthood. They were too nice for me now, she said. She said I was the kind of girl who might be inclined to thoughtlessly, willfully, break.

The rest was detritus, much of it anonymous: an egg-timer, a red, bell-sleeved wool coat. A clock carved from a slab of wood in which an owl swooped and seemed about to snatch a frozen rabbit, though Thingy and I once plotted its trajectory and concluded that each time it would narrowly miss. And Luke, of course. And me.

Once, Alice Luttrell left her house by the back door, but not before packing a little red backpack with a hunk of bread wrapped in foil, a sweating piece of white cheese, a yellow thermos filled to the brim with coffee. She also packed a book—any old thing, *Reader's Digest Condensed* about a mountaineer and his Sherpa, his yak, his perilous victory—and left the door unlatched. The house, which was spare but grand, sat alone at the head of a bald on the mountainside. From behind her now, growing further away as the forest pressed together in her wake. By this point, Alice Luttrell was a motherless child as are so many of us. It had happened quite recently, a lingering illness, one of those events that seemed to belong to a previous century. She did not know what to make of her recovery.

“O mother, my mother,” she said at night in her bed, the quilt pulled over her head for a tent, the room dark around her, spreading low under the roof-beams. No one answered. No star detached itself from the sky and floated through her window, no green light unfurled from between the floorboards. No response but the old wood popping and once the muted thud of an owl landing on the roof. It seemed many stories she had once believed in were false, or at least exaggerated. Alice recognized within herself a sort of relief that this was so. Every day her father went alone from the house to tend to the store, and every day Alice came alone to the house and went out again, with a pack and a book, to a certain clearing she knew of around the side of the mountain.

Here is Alice and her red backpack. And here is Alice with her small meal, unfolding the tinfoil, unscrewing the mug.

Alice with her book at the boulder she uses for her table. The girl is so still two titmice flutter into a nearby puddle and scoop water onto their wings. The foil catches the sunlight and attracts a crow which lands breasty in the near grass and examines her over the top of its heavy beak. The girl is so still the rock under the

mountain yearns for her, reaches toward her, caresses the sole of her little white shoe.

But what is this? A girl alone in the forest? So many place settings at which she could be joined and so little left of her meal. The book's pages turn steadily, hawk's feather ruffling in the index. The sun, too, beginning to turn. Time failing her as time will always fail her. Shadows stretching their long legs out from the forest. What is the use of a book? Alice was trying to remember. What is the use of an empty space? she was thinking when she heard an unusual noise.

You know, let's not overdo it. Alice was a curious girl and the noise was an attractive one. It sounded like suffering, but of a small sort. An animal suffering which can be comforted or, at the last extremity, humanely exterminated by a brave girl with nature in mind. A wise girl who knows the pressing impetus all nature has toward death—red in tooth, the saying goes, displaying its beautiful ruby red claws. In other words, a very young girl.

In any event, she followed the noise, her book forgotten, feather blown away, and found at the base of the rock a hole, perfectly round, very deep, such as the one a snake might make. Needless to say, down she went.

After a long and varied time, much travail, some confusion, some tears, Alice came to large lake in the world that was under her world at the other end of the very deep hole. In the center of that lake was an island, tiered like a pyramid of petit-fours and as variously colored. It rose to a jeweled height above the lake's still, black waters, ascending in steps which sucked at the light that was in that place as if they were made from slabs of sponge and the light itself a thin, blue milk being sopped. From that island, clearly from the pyramid, clearly from the pinnacle—a murky box barely visible atop the fantasy steps of madder rose, curded lemon, stale, ladyfinger green—continued to come such gentle, sorrowful moans that Alice's heart was mostly wrung from her. She spotted a little boat, folded tight as an oak leaf, bobbing at the edge of a splintered green dock. Without any more thought than that, she was rowing for the further shore.

As Alice drew closer to its source, the sound changed its timber. Now it was reedy and granular—like sand gritting against the sides of a tumbler, like sugar soaking up an egg in the slurry of the whisk. "This whole dream has the sound of a dessert coming together," thought Alice even as she looked for toeholds in the sides of the lowest level, the rose one, its fondant shell crumbling away in her hands to reveal the core which was indeed a cake, though one brittle with age.

Up, Alice went, up and up. She climbed a coralline layer rubbed with candied violets. She climbed a sulfurous layer of frangipane studded here and there with ancient, dolorous pralines. Up Alice went, punching determined fists through layers of gingerbread, red velvet, lemon curd, devil's food.

"In a way," Alice thought, "it's lucky I don't have a sweet tooth." Her paltry meal in the meadow far above was a long time ago and as she climbed the layers grew fresher—an airy tuft of angel's food that was almost appealing, a moist wedge of Lady Baltimore delicately scented with orange instead of mold. She was very hungry. Indeed, Alice had seen all along evidence of the appetites come before her scalloping the edges of the fondant. The climbers, children it seemed by the size of their leavings, had burrowed a series of tunnels that turned past her sight as if the mountaineer himself, pushed past extremity, abandoned by both Sherpa and yak, had used his frozen mitts to fashion a last shelter. In fact, she believed it was getting colder. And wasn't that she saw misted before her the ragged vestments of her breath?

Again she heard the sound, a sob at the end of human anguish, and up Alice climbed to the top of the last level.

Before her stood what she took, with a pang of disappointment, to be a hut of some sort, bleak and squat. Then, squinting through the strange air—which had grown thicker as she climbed, milky as glacial water—she determined it was a hive, conical and many-layered. Finally, scrubbing a rind of sugar from her wrists and adjusting the little red backpack on her shoulders, she realized she was looking at a bundt cake: perfectly fluted, dusted on top with a drift of powdered sugar as fine as new-fallen snow.

Alice looked about, but there was nothing else to see. She walked to the edge of the pyramid and looked over. Below her the white air swirled. Here and there, immense firs pierced the cloud layer. The air ebbed around their bristling, dark crowns as if the trees rose from water. As if they and their brethren grew below the waters of the lake that floated still and black in the world underneath the world along the edges of whose own streams Alice had lain to consider the blonde murk of pebble and sand, translucent fry and the nymphs, dark against the dark weeds, lazily extending their jaws.

"A little much," said Alice, but behind her came again the sound—faint now, ragged,—and, as there was nowhere left to go, Alice turned and entered the bundt-cake through its single arched door.

She found herself in a round room paved with closely laid slabs of slate. The walls were waxy, fashioned of ascending cells that rose above her head to a much greater height than seemed possible from the outside. In the middle of the room a sullen fire and beyond the fire—how to describe it?...a cane chair upon which coiled the

largest snake Alice had ever dreamed, and beside the snake a roiling shape, a ball, so hard to see as its parts lifted and seethed, separated into here a tail-tip, tensile ribs, here a wedge head, eyes glittering, another lifting to rap the first below the chin—a battle then? a slow luxury?...the dry shift of their scales rubbing, the cream bellies and white throats turned to the firelight, and then again the moan—so low it is now just a whisper—and again the compacting shift, here a tail-tip, there the arch of a foot, a wet mouth, a rolling eye, the head of a man.

“Hello, Alice,” said the Queen of the Tie-Snakes, for it was she, “What a long time we’ve waited to have you here.”

“You have?” said Alice. She edged around the fire and stood just out of reach of the Queen’s whip tail. “How did you know it was me?”

“And because you have been brave,” said the Queen of the Tie-Snakes, who was not listening, “and we reward bravery, but also because you have sometimes been cruel, and we reward honesty; because you have said the right incantations and sang the right songs, eaten the right fruits and drank the right waters; because, in short, you have done all the things a girl should do if she wants to survive in an unexpected world, we reward you with your choice of one of our alters.” The Queen bowed her head and gestured with a regal sweep of her tail to the edges of the room.

“I don’t think I understand,” said Alice, looking around her. The room was hemmed with a wide array of junk. There were pop-bead bracelets and telescoping camp cups, plastic spoons that changed color when dipped in cold water, x-ray spectacles, false moustaches, one jelly slipper snapped at the strap. There were decoder rings and rusted slinky coils, an etch-a-sketch blacked in a mad labyrinth of lines, a red whistle, a cantering pony with a frayed, tangled tail. A miniature car. A miniature barn. A miniature cock doodle-dooing from on top of the weather vane. All manner of things, all manner of trash; some it, if she squinted, she might even recognize as once belonging to her. A doll’s head, a doll’s hand, a doll’s dress in yellowed pink sateen matted to the doll’s soft body.

“I don’t think that’s what I came here for,” she said.

“Yes,” said the Queen of the Tie-Snakes. Her voice was dry and stealthy, the sound of something moving with economy beneath a season of dead leaves. “Anything you want, dear Alice.” She thrust forward, uncoiling from her throne, and stretched to impossible tension so her head hovered right beside Alice’s own. Her tongue flickered as if in approval of her generosity, her vast, incomparable wealth.

“Ok,” said Alice, who saw nothing there she wanted, “I’ll take him then,” and she pointed to the man in his lover’s wreath of snakes. As soon as she said it, Alice felt something within her settle.

It was a fleshy weight, like a bull-frog squatting to fill its hole, and she wished for a moment she had chosen the doll's hand—so cunning with its half-moon nails and the hole in the ring finger into which one could insert a gem—or the disheveled pony caught in permanent flight.

“Yes?” said the Queen of the Tie-Snakes, turning to face Alice, her tongue playing unpleasantly about Alice's cheeks, “My newest husband is what you choose?” The Queen returned to her chair, propping her chin on her top coil in consternation. “He owes us a terrible debt, Alice dear. I'm afraid you can't have him for free.”

But Alice had not come empty handed. First, she offered the ball of tinfoil—so faceted, so bright at its peaks—but the Queen gestured with great disdain to a drift of just such spheres rolling loose behind her throne. Next, she offered the yellow thermos, still damp with traces of coffee, but the Queen sighed as if bored and some of her husbands who had lifted their heads from the brood-nest to watch made a sound like laughter, high and strange. Finally, Alice pulled the book from her bag—she had almost forgotten it, the story so sharply told, its pictures so brief and unshaded—and laid it before the Queen with little hope. A small sorrow pricked within her for the man who was now only loosely wrapped by the Queen's curious husbands, but who lay so still, limp and exposed on the floor.

“Ah,” said the Queen, whispering down to the floor to turn the pages with her chin. “Dear Alice, are you sure?”

“Sure,” said Alice, “why not?”

And this offering the Queen accepted with great celebration and mounted at the top of her tallest pile. The book sat open to an illustration of the mountaineer bidding his Sherpa farewell, their hands almost meeting through the tangle of the yak's rank pelt, before turning to face his last fatal ascent. Around them the mountain's permanent clouds were sketched in childish puffs. Under their feet the mountain's rock mounted into a brute vanishing point at the page's far right corner.

‘A Brave Parting’ the picture was titled, and the Queen and her consorts hissed their delight.

So, Alice came to her prize and took him by the hand. Out they went from the Queen of the Tie-Snakes' castle. Down from the pyramid and over the lake, across the meadow, through the forest, up the passage and out again to the world they had come from whose sky they saw was now burnished gold with the coming evening. In the softer shadows where the tree shade touched the viridian stems of clover and vetch the world was cool and deep, plush, inviting. They lay down.

“My name is Alice,” said my mother to my father and my father told my mother, “My name is Dax.”

What else they said there, I don't know. I imagine many questions were asked as my father, who was a beautiful man, saw my mother who had read about many things, whose eyes were weak behind her glasses, who chewed the side of her finger with small sharp teeth like the petulant teeth of a kitten or a mink. Or maybe there were none—my mother satisfied with her endings, my father satisfied with the feel of her corduroy skirt and the pull of her buttons against their strings. Instead my father gave my mother a ring of keys.

“These are yours,” he might have said to her, “and they open all the doors in all my castles.”

And what my mother said, his hand at her throat, pinching the ridge of her collarbone...

“You may use all of them, but this one,” my father said, sliding a small key off the ring and holding it up so she could see it in the failing light. “This key is the only thing forbidden to you, and if you use it, I will...” my father said, and my mother said...her hand on the small of his back...his hand...his leg...the key under her tongue, thick, a taste like blood...and then ...when she swallowed it...the key down her throat, past her breasts and her heart, the key past her belly and the place where my brother was being made...lost for awhile...for a long while lost in my mother...the key...little blue key...forbidden...“I will kill you,” he said...until finally, one day, she found it again...lost so long she had forgotten...and used it...a stain like blood unwashable from her hands...and made me.