

**All the Voices in Our Heads: Exploring
Female Identity by Reimagining the Fairy
Tale and the Young Adult Novel**

A Novel and Critical Exegesis

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Declaration

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Signed

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Date 29th September 2017

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Abstract

This thesis explores and rethinks female identity across a range of representations and experiences in Young Adult (YA) literature. In understanding female identity as a complex and multifaceted concept, I address enduring social issues that shape or restrict the female experience, including how the female is read, performed, and received. This thesis is comprised of two parts: the exegesis, which offers critical analysis to deconstruct historical and contemporary representations of female identity and experience in YA novels, and the creative work, a YA novel which puts these ideas into practice.

Drawing on the established relationship between fairy tale, gender, and trauma, this thesis posits that the retold fairy tale can be repurposed for trauma recovery in a manner which resonates with female characters/identities in YA literature. Using non-linear modes of storytelling and applying the structure of Indigenous Songlines my creative work responds to literary criticism and a close reading of a range of contemporary YA texts. My research reads the gendered trauma inherent in fairy tale as mirroring, or symbolising, the female experience of trauma stemming from living in a patriarchal world. This is realised in the development of an interrelated, entangled narrative or dialogue that crosses genre and generation to privilege a metafictional sisterhood/sistahood as mode of recovery, forming a map of femaleness by which to navigate and survive.

Female identity is examined through several key areas of focus including female sexuality, control, and trauma. Female sexuality refers to an exploration of the experience and restriction of female pleasure and desire throughout the genre; empowerment and agency; queer desire; and body image and the relationship with the

physical self. This intersects with modes of control, including heteronormative or patriarchal social demands and expectations that shape or restrict identity; enforced silencing; literal and figurative possession; and domination of the body and spirit. I study and later revise these notions through a creative lens that incorporates emerging and recognisable tropes of the paranormal genre and the fairy tale, utilising them as analogies of contemporary social issues. This thesis demonstrates that there are new avenues for female identity and trauma recovery available in YA literature by building on the relationship between fairy tale and YA literature, offering spaces of empowerment and modes of survival.

All the Voices in Our Heads

A Novel

Prologue

There is a demon inside you.

It is that voice that tells you you have failed. The one that suggests all the things that could go wrong, that reminds you of your guilt, your mistakes, your pain; everything that is wrong with you. It paralyses in the night, curls itself around your heart and presses claws tighter, tighter.

It has always been there. When you took your first breath, rolled over in your mother's arms, it was there too, stretching and opening black eyes to all your faults, your darkest thoughts.

The demon is ugly because it sees your heart and knows it completely. It whispers in your ear, pushes its own words past your lips. It wants to break you. A demon thrives off of your torment.

It pushes you to do Bad Things. Sometimes it is a loud, deafening demand, something that could drive you mad if you try not to listen. Other times it's so quiet you might not hear it until later, when everything has unravelled. Then you might remember the voice making the choice you thought was entirely your own.

I don't know if it is me or my demon that makes me bad.

Kate:

We were running late to the Thursday afternoon exorcism.

It was Morgan's fault, I think. Or Lucy's. One of them had suggested we see if the rumour about the new History student-teacher spending his lunch hour in the pub down the road to fortify himself for an afternoon block of Year Sevens was unfounded, and next thing you know, we were climbing over the wall in the beer garden to try to confirm another idealistic teacher's descent into apathy. A few of the Year Nines had sworn to us that they'd seen him still wiping the froth from his rather impressive moustache as he stepped back through the school gates, so things looked promising.

Which had led to our current predicament: sneaking through the back fence of the school grounds, Morgan swearing behind me, Lucy trooping ahead. Lucy had suggested we stay for a beer ourselves—"following the esteemed example set by our teachers," Morgan agreed—and now we were late, trying to slip in unnoticed at the back of the assembly hall.

I had mud on my socks because Lucy had insisted she knew a good shortcut through a creek. We were tantalizingly close to the holidays, but first we had to sit through the last exorcism of the year. If we missed it, I was sure our names would be the first ones to turn up on next year's cleansing schedule.

I check my breath for beer as we approach the assembly hall. If it were anyone else, I'm sure the bartender would've at least hesitated before serving drinks to three girls still dressed in their school uniform, but Morgan was the one who ordered for us, so no one batted an eye.

“That was actually more depressing than I expected,” Morgan says now as we walk down the hall. “That look of defeat. The way he just nibbled at his little packet of peanuts. Like he couldn’t even finish them.” She pauses. “Like he was a tiny, depressed mouse.”

“That’s what teaching Year Sevens does to you,” I say. “Destroys your soul. It’s all their constant questions and unrelenting optimism.”

“It’s probably good for all of them. Like breaking a horse. The teachers and the students need to learn what’s ahead.”

We make our way down the last aisle, unnoticed by anyone. A couple of girls glance up at us, but the focus is mostly on the doctors, therapists, and what looks like a spiritualist setting up at the front. We sit on a bench, and Morgan immediately begins swinging her heels so they smack against the backing every few seconds.

I scan the front of the room. “Anyone know who’s up today?”

“Umm, Beth, I think. I saw her name down for a therapy session this morning,” Lucy says.

“Have you seen her lately? I swear that girl is losing more hair by the minute,” Morgan says. *Thud.*

“Probably nervous.” I eye off the group assembled at the front of the room.

“Understandably.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t imagine this is helping. Look—she’s shedding ranga locks all over the place.” *Thud.*

Beth is being led onto the stage. Even from here I can see her hair is looking far less voluminous than usual. She tucks a lank strand behind her ear, as if she can hear us, fidgeting.

Lucy tugs at her own hair thoughtfully. “You must have to pull very hard to lose that much hair. Unless she uses scissors or something. Kate, do you think she uses scissors?”

I stretch out, rolling my head. “I don’t know. You’re both being a bit harsh, you know. I think we’re meant to be supporting our peers through this trying time.”

Morgan snorts. “Yeah, right. When I had my last session, she spent the whole time on her phone. I’ve got to say, did not feel the support.”

Lucy nods. “Also, I don’t think a quick therapy session and chanting qualifies as a ‘trying time.’ I could certainly see it as traumatising to the uninitiated, but considering this is probably the thirty-fourth time Beth’s had to go through it, I think she’ll be okay.”

On the stage, Beth lies down on the makeshift hospital bed. It is covered in soft-looking sheets but every girl in this room knows exactly how uncomfortable that bed is.

Underneath the sheets lies the cold glint of metal.

“God,” Morgan moans. “Why do we even still do these things?”

“Optimism? Or tradition?” I offer.

“Neither will suddenly make everything better,” Lucy says. “This is how it is. How it’s always been. How it’ll always be.”

“Always love your sunny outlook, Luce,” Morgan says.

Lucy had a point. We've been doing these ceremonies forever, same as our mothers and grandmothers. They were a blend of superstition and finely tuned medical know-how, and they never worked. We wear red every Thursday and we stand around and try to silence our demons, and nothing changes. Girls like Beth still rip at their hair, or try to cut themselves out of the meatbag they find themselves in, and still have to listen to angry little voices yelling at them in their head all day.

They called it preventative parabiotherapy, and we called it an exorcism. It was always different, tweaked to try fall on that perfect combination of psychology, pharmaceuticals, and a dash of spiritualism for good measure, although they tended to gloss over that part. It was too much like admitting that the demons were more supernatural than biological; that they might need something more than psychoanalysis and a handful of pills to fix us. Lucy was sure by the time her next session rolled around they'd be pulling in an old priest and a young one. All to get rid of those voices in our heads that marked us as bad and broken.

The worst was the quiet voice that was indistinct from your own, the friendly one that never left you, that you depended on. That you listened to. By this point, at the end of Year Ten, most of the girls I knew relied on other means of silencing their demons, whether it be drink, drugs, or a lifestyle of yoga and quinoa. Denial was a popular one, too. For the most part, we were good at keeping them under control. We looked normal, and played a mean game of well-adjusted teenager. Really, the only way you'd know about someone's demons was if they told you. Or if you were on your way to imitating a Sphinx cat, like Beth.

“I think she pulls it out strand by strand,” Morgan says. “Her hair,” she clarifies when we look at her. “It’s the same with her eyelashes, I think she’s only just started on them. If you look up close, the right eyelid’s all creepy and smooth.”

“Again, very supportive.”

“I did notice she was blinking more than usual,” Lucy says thoughtfully.

We all watch the stage for a second. Morgan sighs, tucking her feet up under her.

“Anyway. What are we doing after this?”

“I have an assignment I have to hand in,” I say, rifling through my bag as quietly as possible. Up the front, a doctor nods to the spiritualist as the others run their hands over Beth’s body and began to chant and whisper.

“For Robson’s class?” Morgan asks, not lowering her voice at all. I nod. “Luce, didn’t you have something for that, too?”

“Didn’t do it,” Lucy says flatly. “Dad wanted us to go on a camping trip over the weekend. I didn’t have time.”

Morgan sighs. “Lucy, that was a week ago. You can’t just bail out of school entirely—”

“Here,” I interrupt, shoving my assignment forward. “Take this, I’ll rewrite it out.”

Morgan shakes her head as Lucy accepts the paper. “Don’t you come crying to me when you’re living destitute on the streets, unable to find a job, unable to even face your family in shame of what you’ve become...”

“I highly doubt failing a Year Ten Geography class is going to lead to a lifetime of misery and homelessness.”

“You don’t know, it might—”

“I can’t hear it.”

The voice comes from the front of the room, silencing all conversations.

“I can’t hear it,” Beth says again. She looks up at the men that are hesitating above her, hands suspended over her heart. “The thoughts—they’re gone.”

Once upon a time there were three little girls who loved each other more than anything. They were as close as sisters, closer than blood. They grew up together, so close that they were three sides of one girl. They were like the great tree that stood over their village, three smaller trees that had grown together, and had long ago began to weave their branches into one, their roots tangling across each other until they were indistinct. Now, the three trees could no longer be separated by the eye, so deeply were they embedded in one another.

Village folk who saw the three girls playing together could not answer to when their friendship had begun. They simply were, three girls growing into the one.

The girls shared their toys, their food, their gowns. They spent all their time together, mended one another’s woes and tended to their pains. When one wept, the other two felt tears fall on their cheeks. When another laughed, the others found themselves smiling, no matter how far apart they were. Their hearts beat in the others’ chests.

They grew together as one until they couldn't anymore. They had never questioned what would happen when the three trees' tangled roots needed to spread and instead began to choke one another.

Lucy:

There is a body in the bush behind my house.

It hangs suspended over the creek, turning slowly as the rope that holds it up twists and untwists. It is a dead girl's body, her pale arms held above her head, tied together at the wrists. Her feet point at the creek, where she is reflected perfectly, a ballerina about to fall.

She looks calm, unblemished but for a small trickle of long-dried blood smeared across her lips. For all the oddities around the scene, she looks purposeful, like she had always been there, like she is meant to be there. A woven crown of thorns and ivy sits atop her head. She could have been sleeping.

When I touch her ankle, her skin isn't cold.

Not warm, either, but it wasn't cold in the way I'd been expecting. It is just—dull, like room-temperature meat.

I dig my feet into the soil like roots, until I can feel worms pushing against my skin. If I listen hard enough, I can hear the dead girl singing to me.

Above me, she continues to swing.

Kate:

My friends are the best things about me. They make me a better, funnier, prettier person—someone worth noticing. We are good for each other—we soften the other's sharp edges, dilute or strengthen our inner poisons as needed, hold each other up. Of everyone in the world, these two girls are the only ones I know I can rely on without question. With them, I am a shiny person and my demon does not matter.

With them, it doesn't matter that my demon is shrieking at me, because I know their demons are just as loud. We can be imperfect and broken and happy together. Morgan is loud and angry, Lucy is quiet and sad, and I am just... there. It works out okay for us.

We're not perfect but we're not completely messed up either. None of us are off cutting ourselves out of our skin in the bathroom at school, or trying to scrape a nail against the back of our throats. We rarely listen to our demons. Yes, Lucy can be sad, and sometimes she drifts away, and Morgan doesn't know what she wants and that makes her angry, and there's nothing particularly exciting or special about me, but we get by because we have each other. We sleep in each others' beds more than we do in our own, and once when I had a bad day on a Hallmark holiday they smuggled me and a bottle of wine into the cinemas and we spent the whole day running from movie to movie until we'd cobbled together our own stories. Lucy ate too much popcorn and ended up spewing, a cascade of red wine-stained kernels permanently marking row M in Cinema 4. Morgan can make Lucy smile when nothing else can, and I can calm Morgan down. They both teach me how to breathe again when I forget how and my mind is spinning out far away. They are strange, crazy beings, and I wouldn't trade them for anything. I know them better than I know myself.

Lucy used to go barefoot everywhere she went, and she moved like a dancer, walking through the world so lightly you could almost forget she was there. We were all feral little kids, running through the bush and playing out in the street, but Lucy was the one you'd always find up in a tree or deep in the bush somewhere, building a cubbyhouse that we could all fit in. She was quiet, and curious about everything. Now she stomps around in a pair of heavy combat boots, although she still carries the scent of eucalyptus on her skin like a perfume. The last few years she has become someone who's not quite there all of the time, and we'll be talking to her for ages before we realise that she's not listening, that she hasn't been listening for a long time. I want to tie her to us, wrap her around my wrist like she's a balloon that might disappear if I let go for even a moment.

Morgan was a strange looking kid. I've always wondered if her confidence in her body, her comfort in her own skin, came because of the start she had, when people would wince to see her— or in spite of it. Would she have been as comfortable in the body she found herself in now if she'd always been beautiful? Because that's what Morgan is: stupidly, painfully beautiful. The kind of beautiful that people stare at. She hit puberty hard, and well. Morgan is all hair and lips and curves—far out, the *curves*— and she is a little unreal, sometimes. Even to us. Because her beauty isn't exactly chaste—she is sexy. Sometimes she looks so sexy I don't think people notice that she's beautiful.

When it first happened, it was like seeing this kid trapped in a woman's body— not understanding why her daddy's mouth twists when he looks away, disgust mingling on his face, why his friends are either too distant or too friendly. Morgan was a very straight-forward person, and she didn't do well with furtive glances, the blushes of her father's friends, the stammering of our fifth period Maths teacher. See, Morgan loved her body, was comfortable in her skin, but it seemed like no one else was. Collectively,

all the men in her life seemed to make an unspoken pact to avoid eye contact with her until she was eighteen and it was legally less weird. So when Morgan is mad, she wears her tallest stilettos and her shortest, tightest dresses, and her reddest lipstick, and she watches people choke when they see her.

As curvy as she is, the first thing I think of whenever I see Morgan is: knife.

Morgan:

It is a Monday, the third day of the school holidays, and Morgan's mother is missing. Still missing, rather—this is not a new scenario for Morgan. Her mother has been a ghost for most of Morgan's life, since she came home from school one day nine years ago to find out her mother wouldn't be taking her to soccer training that afternoon. Scarlett had opted instead to take off in search of something else—a better life or a new beginning, or simply the chance to become lost.

Morgan likes to imagine that her mother thinks of the daughter she left behind, that she wishes she could return and see her, but can't for some reason outside her control. For a year after her mother left them, Morgan did not speak to her father. She blamed him, because of course it was his fault. He was too quiet, too distracted, too selfish. If her mother had fallen for someone else, it was no wonder. For a while she wondered if he had abused her mother, that she'd had to leave to get away from him, sent running for her life. Maybe she'd changed her name or was in some form of protective program that prevented her from contacting them. Morgan had vetoed this, because her mother would have taken her and her brother too. Of course she would have.

Morgan knows it's far more likely that her mother simply doesn't care, that she may have even started a new family somewhere—a blank slate, new game, try again. She knows that's what's most likely. Morgan is not an idiot. She prides herself on looking at things plainly. Kate is the naïve, hopelessly optimistic one of the trio. But she does give herself this. The idea that her mother is just like her.

Lost.

Kate:

I can't imagine a life without my demon.

I've wanted to. For years, I've tried. I did all the things they advertise on sketchy late-night television, plus invented a few of my own methods. I've tried the conventional, considered the dangerous. Nothing had ever worked. If anything, I think knowing I wanted to get rid of it made my demon cling harder.

I could get rid of it. The possibility makes me shake.

“Hey, weirdo.”

Morgan swings down on one side of me, Lucy on the other. Both of them bump into me, and I would've fallen if I wasn't expecting it. We've been friends for so long that none of us have any sense of personal space or boundaries when it comes to the others. There've been times where I've scratched Morgan's arm looking to get rid of an itch, times when Lucy twirls my hair instead of her own. We don't know where the others start and we end.

“What's on your mind? You look strange,” Morgan declares.

“You don’t look that odd,” Lucy assures me. “Normal levels of oddness only, I swear.” She swats at Morgan.

“I was just thinking about Beth. I can’t believe it worked. Don’t you think this is basically the biggest news ever? What does it mean?”

Morgan shrugs. “Probably means Beth gets dragged in for extensive physicals and testing until they figure out what they finally did right. Lucky girl.”

“She’s faking it,” Lucy mutters. “She always did like the attention.” Her eyes are downcast, but they are as dark as the circles under her eyes. Twin bruises of a crescent moon are purpling on her skin.

Morgan sends a wide-eyed look at me that Lucy pretends not to see. It is one of Lucy’s bad days. Lucy has always been quiet, but in the past few months it’s changed. She is restless; her hands skirt across her lap, pacing out an impatient drumbeat.

Lucy has been sick for both a very long and very short time, which is true of almost anything when you’re sixteen.

“Besides,” she adds now, her voice a little coarse. “They won’t change us with science. You can’t kill demons with chemicals and facts. They only respect their own kind. Try strangle a demon with magic, and see where that gets you.”

Morgan scratches her head. “Yeah, Luce, that may just make things worse.”

“I don’t see why we need to try get rid of the demons in the first place,” Lucy says, her voice rising. “They’re us—they’re part of us. Who says we’d even survive without them? There are far worse magics out there, far darker creatures lurking in the bush... Girls like us die every day, and all we do is blame the demons.”

“Uh,” Morgan says.

Lucy shakes her head, wilting. “Sorry. I’m tired. Drank too much coffee this morning and now I’m wired. Ignore me.”

“We always do,” Morgan says fondly, but her eyes meet mine again and I can see my worry reflected there.

If we really could get rid of demons, the first person I would want to fix is Lucy. I want to say that, and mean it. But sometimes Lucy seems so deep in her own head that I don’t know if I’m talking to her or her demon. They’re so entwined that I can never see where one ends and the other begins. Everyone else I’ve ever met—you can separate the two. Lucy is just—Lucy.

Lucy:

Some days the dead girl talks to me.

The first time, I was lying at the base of her tree, imagining what it would be like to be buried alive. If you chose it, it could be peaceful. That was my theory, anyway, and I quite liked the idea of being returned to the dirt. I could already feel clumps of wet dirt rattling in my chest; it would be soothing to be able to burrow down into the earth’s embrace and sleep. And heal. I would be like a caterpillar, cocooned safely under the ground, waiting patiently while the nutrients worked their way into my blood, while the bugs and creepy crawlies stripped away at my skin to reveal the girl of bone and gristle underneath. I stared up at the dead girl and was so engrossed in my own mind of dirt and calm that it took me a moment to realise the dead girl was staring back.

She opened her mouth and blood came pouring out, one long endless stream, black and thick like oil.

No, I'm just kidding. That's what you'd expect, right? Dead girl is nothing but gore.

The truth is, the dead girl behind my house has a different voice daily. Sometimes she knows who she is, why she's there, what her story is; other times she screams or cries. Most days, though, she simply stays dead like a good dead girl should, silent and very pretty. It's not a choice on her part. Dead girls must be tragically beautiful or disturbingly sexy, depending on what stage of decay they're at. Just discovered, and they can be splayed out in a gossamer dress, hair flowing like a Pantene commercial, maybe a few gentle bruises at the throat. Thighs on display, some tasteful cleavage.

Only pretty girls make the front pages after they've disappeared. Beautiful, tragic girls sell stories. They are worth more dead than alive.

Some days the dead girl is not there. Most days she is, when I check for her swinging feet. Some days she is fresher than others. Other times she is utterly rotten, and you couldn't tell she was a girl at all, not if you didn't know.

I don't tell Kate and Morgan about the dead girl in the bush behind my house.

Morgan:

Morgan's boyfriend is squirming up against her. She has to refrain from rolling her eyes as she guides him into a better position. He clearly wants to make her feel good, which is an important requirement for Morgan's boyfriends, but most of his moves seem to have come straight out of a porno. At one point, he slaps her buttocks—tentatively at

first, but then he does it again, harder. *Ask first, for Christ's sake*, she tells him, and he blushes and apologises. Still, she can't deny she's enjoying his enthusiasm. He's doing good things to her, things that make her relax and tense up all at once, sending a warm rush through her. She wishes he would stop with the constant refrain of 'Oh yeah, baby... you like that, don't you? I know you do,' and makes a note to bring it up later.

Morgan likes to sleep with her boyfriends the same way she likes to swim, or run. It is a physical activity, and Morgan enjoys physical things. She does not necessarily sleep with all of them, though, even though that's what they tell their friends. Morgan doesn't mind. No guy wants to be the only boyfriend of Morgan's that she hasn't slept with, and so she lets them save face and hint at wild times. She doesn't care if people label her *slut*, or call her something she's not. Still, she hasn't found a partner yet that has made her feel the things she's apparently meant to be feeling during sex. Not physically, of course—like all physical activities, Morgan excels in being the best. She is in tune with her body, knows what she likes. She never feels used or bad after sex, but she doesn't feel what she's apparently supposed to—no desire to cuddle or gaze longingly into her partner's eyes. If she asked Kate, Kate would tell her it's because she's not in love.

Kate is sweet, but sometimes she can be a bit of an idiot.

Morgan is hit by a new sense of determination. She licks and bites her boyfriend's neck, and he is spurred on. With a surge of confidence, he plays with the edge of her underwear, tugging them down and easing his hand across her. She is surprised by the warm rush of feeling that starts up, the pleasant tingling. But too soon, uncertainty begins again, and this time she knows why—she is doing nothing but react. Her body is simply having things done to it, and, though pleasurable, that is not the way Morgan works. (Maybe it is also the fact that she wants something more, though she'd never

admit it. Not to herself, and especially not to Kate.) So she rolls away, buttoning up her jeans again and ignoring the sigh her boyfriend doesn't quite suppress. She thinks that soon she will have to break up with him.

Kate:

I've been friends with Morgan and Lucy since we were six years old. We were all in Ms Thompson's Year One class together. This was all long before Morgan became so beautiful it hurt to look at her, before Lucy became haunted or started haunting us; before I grew into a skin that didn't quite fit no matter how I shifted.

Lucy had a box of Faber-Castell pencils, one of those really big packs, which was strong currency in the world of six year olds. I remember going home and begging my mother for a set, and she brought me a plain box that you could get from any Kmart. It didn't have nice names for the colours like Emerald Green and Sky Blue.

I used to watch Lucy colour in every Monday and Wednesday morning during Art Time. She would send the colours flying haphazardly across clean paper, kicking her feet out. When she was done, she would throw them carelessly back into her pencil case, and I would wince. If they were mine, I would take such good care of them—I would stay between the lines, and when I was done I would set them back into their box carefully, in the right order, so they made a little rainbow.

She noticed me staring, of course, because six year olds aren't the most subtle of creatures. I remember her staring straight back at me, her dark eyes unfathomable. The next day, she sat in the little red chair next to mine and silently pushed her pencils across the table so they sat at my elbow.

After that, we played together every day. Lucy shared her pencils with me, and I showed her where to find the really interesting lizards that curled up on speckled rocks at the back of the playground. They were much better than the scurrying black skinks that sometimes crept into the classrooms. The older boys would try catch those ones and their tails would drop clean off, which used to make me cry. The two on the rocks just glanced up at us lazily, then would look away, unperturbed. Lucy loved them, and she used to sit for whole lunchtimes in the sun, watching them flick their tongues in and out.

At the end of the year, she gave me the pencils, wrapped up carefully in their original box with too much sticky tape holding down the edges of the dinosaur paper.

“S’no big deal,” she shrugged when I unwrapped it. “You like them more than I do.”

Morgan we became friends with because she shared a taste for justice with Lucy. Well, for Morgan, it may have been more an enjoyment of violence than a desire to right wrongs. She was the little brute of the playground, and was often found in a whirl of fists and feet, throwing herself into a fight with the kind of full-bodied passion that was admirable. Lucy was slower to anger—she had a good temperament for a six year old—but she held a grudge like no one’s business. And she was a biter.

One lunchtime, Morgan had got into a fight with a couple of older boys. Lucy and I were walking by, when she stopped, considered the scuffle, then jumped in, latching onto one of the boy’s arms. She bit hard enough to draw blood—I remember the boy cried—and after she got out of detention, Morgan came up to us. Covered in dirt, she was holding three Paddle Pops. When she grinned at us, I saw that she was missing her front tooth. I found out years later that it had come out in the fight. She was a funny looking kid, but even then she was completely comfortable in her own skin.

“Thanks,” she said brightly. “That was loads of fun. Want to come around to my place?
I have a pool.”

And that was it.

Lucy:

Her father walked in. “Hi, Princess. How was your day?”

He didn’t knock, never had. He paid for the house, so all the rooms were his; a man shouldn’t have to knock in his own home.

“Hi Daddy,” she said, working to make sure her voice wasn’t flat. It wouldn’t do to sound the way she felt inside. He wouldn’t like that—he didn’t know how to deal with a less than perfect little girl.

“How was school?”

She didn’t tell him that school was over for the year. “Good. Got full marks for my last assignment in Biology.”

She didn’t take Biology, not now that they had started the dissection classes. She didn’t need to see rows of frogs filling a classroom, their tiny grey bodies splayed out and pinned to the tray in front of her like a sacrificial Jesus, white bellies offered up to the dull scalpel.

“Full marks?” he said, eyes still roaming the room. He refocused, smiled. “Good girl,” he said approvingly, and she relaxed. “That’s my girl.

Last year they had been given sheep's eyes, one for each table. The boys had run around trying to squirt anyone who baulked with the clear juice that filled the eyeball. She had turned at the wrong moment and felt it—splat—cold and dribbling down her neck. A trickle slipping into the cotton cup of her bra.

Her father hesitated in the doorway another moment, then gave an awkward smile and left.

There was once a girl who had terrible things happen to her. These terrible things are not for this story; they are shadowy and she has buried them thirteen feet underground until she can unearth them again. These things were dark and twisting and taste like dirt and bloody metal in the mouth. These things had turned the girl's hair of spun gold to thin grey cobwebs, dull gossamer strands that stuck and clung to her hollow cheeks. Stories are caught in the webs but the girl cannot see them yet.

The girl lay on a bed of rose thorns. They weaved around her arms, pressing thick thorns the size of a man's thumb into skin as soft as tissue petals. She did not seem to notice them, nor the thick droplets of blood that fell heavily, painting the ground below her.

She did not know her history, how she got to be here in this dark and silent forest. She did know that she had a job to do. Somewhere out there was a girl who needed saving; who was waiting for a prince who would never come. The girl stood, her cobweb hair trailing behind her. Somehow, she knew that there were monsters in the forest, some as

real as the trees that reached over her and others as insubstantial as a secret carried on the wind.

She turned and there was the first monster, a monster that looked like a lover. But the girl who had buried her past had no lovers and so the creature shed its shape, howling and snarling as it rose up, a beautifully ugly thing that looked like no animal she had seen before. She had to run from it, hide from it—defeat it—because there were girls out there that needed saving, that needed the girl who had stories tangled in her cobweb hair.

The monster reared its head and screamed, and the girl shook in black terror as it bent down to gobble her up. It ripped at her like a ragdoll, shaking her loose until her bones snapped; it sunk teeth down into her skin with a grisly *rip*. The monster tore the girl in half and ate her up.

Kate:

Something I also remember from the year we met: a few months after we became inseparable, a girl in our class stuck one of Lucy's pencils in her eye. They were lying there on the desk when she walked over and picked one up as if she was just curious. When the teachers asked her why she did it, she said that the voice in her head told her to. "It wanted me to do it," she said before they took her away. "I had to."

When Lucy gave me the pack, the Sky Blue was still missing from it, so every time I coloured the sky, I had to use the Indigo pencil, and my skies never turned out the way I

wanted them to. I had to draw the lizards lying under dark purple skies, even though our lizards would never do that.

That girl was unlucky. Even though they're with us from birth, most girls don't really start hearing them until around twelve or so. Six is very young to pay attention to a demon.

I have always heard my demon. I've known it for longer than I've known my friends.

Lucy:

I am not a Good Girl. Good Girls keep their demons trussed up in ribbons and lace, strangling them into silence. Bad Girls want and wish and dream and fight and fuck and bite and fail and then they take another breath and start again. I would quite like to be Bad. I like to picture the Good Girls at school being strangled by their long blonde hair, so silky and similar to my own.

I don't know if those kinds of thoughts come from me or my demon. I don't think there's a difference.

The dead girl giggles and continues to spin above my head. I wonder if she was a Good Girl or a Bad Girl when she was alive. Most Bad Girls were once Good.

I do not think I am a Good Girl or a Bad Girl. Sometimes I think I am barely a girl.

Kate:

There are rules. Of course there are rules. They aren't called rules—officially, they're known as *Recommendations and Requirements for Leading a Life with Minimal Parabiopsychological Interference*. But they're rules all the same. If we keep to them, then our demons won't gobble us up whole or split us in half. They go like this:

1. Focus on healthy social and academic pursuits. Enrich your body and mind.
2. Avoid harmful relationships.
3. Don't be promiscuous.
4. Consume a healthy diet (see: food pyramid) and engage in regular exercise. 30 minutes a day will do you wonders!
5. Avoid extended introspection.
6. Avoid the consumption of drugs and alcohol (excluding medication as prescribed by your doctor).
7. Leave intimate social relationships with the opposite sex until you are a legal adult. (Note: doctors recommend waiting until reaching physical and emotional maturity and stability before commencing such relationships. Studies have shown the brain does not fully develop until the age of 25.)
8. Always use the prescribed Hysteria Modification Pills when engaging in sexual activity.
9. Do not focus on or engage with the parabiopsychological entity. Avoid regular discussion of the entity in day-to-day-life.
10. Report anyone suffering from symptoms of depression or other deficiencies symptomatic of entity. These may include mental or physical health concerns, or paranormal activity (e.g. possession, manic behaviour, speaking in tongues, dispossession, complete rotation of the cervical spine and cranium, levitation, etc.).

11. Maintain a healthy and attractive appearance (if you look good, you'll feel good!).
12. Avoid deviant behaviours.
13. Avoid or minimize traumatic experiences (i.e. death of a relative, sexual assault, physical violence, etc.).

All the way down to 67. *Avoid wearing all black*, just in case, I guess. If we dress sunshiny and happy, surely our insides will start to match our outsides. I like number ten, although aren't we all by default possessed? I mentioned that to my mother once and she sort of screwed up her face a bit and then said *Well, no, not exactly, because there's a difference between active possession and passive possession, and really this is more passive possession and have you seen my glasses, honey?*

And then she skittered off, and I'm not sure if she realised her glasses were on her head the whole time. I don't know if I really agree though, because I might be in control of moving my arms and legs and everything, but what if that's just what the demon wants me to think? And anyway, there's nothing passive about a little voice that sounds all too familiar telling you all the ways you've failed, you *ugly/fat/stupid loser/freak/bitch*.

I tried following the rules for a long time but they never seemed to work for me.

Lucy:

It is going to be a bad day. The light hurts the backs of my eyelids, and there is an oil slick running through the back of my mind. It slides across the bumps of my brain, sinking in. I can feel it the moment I wake up. I blink and something runs hot and wet behind my eyes.

I go to the bathroom. The mirror takes me in for a moment before offering up a suggestion.

The magic mirror is entirely too practical. It never offers any good advice, and only tells me things I don't want to hear or already know. Useless platitudes like *They won't buy the cow if they can get the milk for free* or *Change your skirt, you look like a whore*.

Today, the mirror reveals a message scrawled in dark red lipstick. I don't read it. I swipe at it until the red is smeared all over my hands, my arms.

I crawl back into bed, hide under the covers. It's heavy there, quiet too. There are no back to the womb fantasies for me; I was born like Athena, sprung fully grown from the dirt. If I did come from a skull or a belly, my parents wouldn't tell me. They like to distance themselves as much as possible from me. My mother does not like the thought of me inside of her. She tells new friends that I was adopted from a third world country.

For a moment, I picture hiding for the rest of the day, burying myself under layers and layers of blankets. Avoid everything and everyone. I would too, but Kate and Morgan will be here soon, forcing me out into the day.

They will come in and see me burying myself alive, and their smiles will only falter for a second before they set about gathering my things, talking to me with an extra-cheerful edge to their voices, brushing my hair and getting me ready, but that second will be too much. Their laughter will be too loud for the rest of the day and I will catch them glancing at each other when they think I'm not looking, and worrying. I do not want them to worry, and I do not want to see the hidden disappointment on their faces, so I get up again.

I can't be a real girl for myself, but I will do it for my friends.

Kate:

Only girls have demons. Have I mentioned that?

No one knows why. Religious assholes say it's an original sin thing. More punishment. Others say it's a hysteria thing. I'd like to point out that the people saying these things are not women. You know that the word hysteria comes from the Greek word for uterus? Because that's totally fair. If I so much as raise my voice at home, my dad will call me hysterical.

"I can't reason with you when you're like this," he says, shaking his head sadly. Which, of course, only makes me madder.

Plato knew about the demons. We learnt about it in class. He got a few bits wrong, of course, but he got the key points down. He thought our demon was our uterus, a creature that moved through a woman's body, *blocking passages, obstructing breathing, and causing disease*. If that's not an accurate description of the thing that lives in my heart then I don't know what is.

Demons move from your mind to your heart to your chest to your gut. They push your feet over the ledge. They blow on your heart so it beats faster, grip you by the throat and stop your lungs until you gasp for breath.

Morgan:

Morgan is on the phone to Kate, ignoring her father who calls for dinner below. They are talking about nothing, really, and she is enjoying it. They can talk for hours on the

subject of nothing, meander their way through meaningless conversation far more entertaining than any television show. Kate mentions Beth more than once, and there's a slight hesitancy in her tone each time, a too stilted attempt at being casual.

Kate has always been preoccupied with her demon. Morgan wants to tell her to be grateful, because it could be much worse—it could tell her to slide her palms against ground up glass, drink bleach from under the sink. Morgan doesn't get what the big deal is, anyway. She does not think of her demon; she barely calls it demon. It's just another part of what she is. She drums her fingers against her desk as Kate continues to talk.

“—because, really, Lucy could be right. I guess. But it could be true, couldn't it? Maybe she really did get rid of it.” There is a muffled banging in the background, calls back and forth. Kate comes back on the line. “Sorry. It's just my mum.” She sighs, and Morgan can picture her, lying back on her bed, rolling her eyes. “She wants me to go to the shops with her later, which means I'll just get stuck following her around while she debates between two slightly different shades of plum shirt in Sussan's. Urgh.”

Kate often complains about her mum in that easy-going, slightly annoyed tone. Morgan knows that when Kate is older and no longer contractually obliged to resent her, she and her mum will be close friends. They will talk on the phone most days and they will meet for coffee and cake.

Morgan's father appears in the doorway, irate. “Morgan. Are you going to deign to grant us with your presence tonight? Dinner's getting cold.”

Morgan waves him off and says into the phone, “Hey, I've got to go. Apparently my father cooked the dinner so poorly that it has turned cold in the three minutes since taking it out of the oven.”

Her father rolls his eyes at her, the exact same way her brother does. Morgan shrugs.

“Oh, sure,” Kate says. “I better go anyway, I have to practice standing and nodding thoughtfully at twenty different kinds of three-quarter length pants. Yes mum, that grey pair is heaps nicer than that light black pair. Wow. So flattering.”

Morgan laughs as they say goodbye, but she feels a slight twinge of resentment. Kate is like the main character in a book you hate, who complains and bemoans about her life but doesn’t realise how good she has it. Kate does have her issues, but she has a mum and a dad who would go through hell for her. Morgan has a mum who didn’t want to be a mum so badly that she ran away.

Or she was offered a job with a top secret spy agency, as is Morgan’s current preferred fantasy. She could be a female James Bond, having sex with beautiful, slinky women who ought to consider a name change, or seducing slick men in tuxedos before she assassinates them.

Morgan’s teachers used to say she had an overactive imagination, but these days she only channels it into very specific avenues.

She troops downstairs to where her father and her brother sit at the kitchen table they have always had. It is worn with scratches and stains, a history of Morgan’s family. It is perfectly square, one side for each member of the family. One side is slightly less worn than the other three.

Her brother does not bother glancing up at her. He is deeply committed to his bowl of spaghetti bolognese, because he is a Growing Boy. As a twin, he’s a bit of a disappointment—they don’t share a psychic twin bond, nor clothes for that matter. Morgan is glad she doesn’t have a sister, because girls can be awful, vicious things,

especially ones you're related to, and also because it would be too hard to share herself with anyone but Kate and Lucy. Those girls are her sisters, truthfully.

"Parmesan?" her father offers. He has not noticed that in the last few months, his son has grown more distant, and shuts himself up in his room far more than is entirely normal. When Morgan mentioned this to her father during a rare moment of concern—he could be up there doing God knows what, like setting up a criminal empire or something far less interesting, like suffering severe depression—he just gave a knowing chuckle and patted Morgan on her head kindly, like she was a confused puppy.

"Sometimes teenage boys need some *alone* time," he explained with a wink. Morgan had had to strive not to throw up in her mouth a little.

"Yeah, thanks," she says now, reaching for the parmesan cheese.

When her father leaves the room for another beer, her brother leans in. "Was that Damo I saw leaving your room the other night?"

Morgan shrugs, shovelling more food onto her fork. It needs more salt—her father never uses enough salt—but is otherwise pretty decent. "Maybe."

"Please stop dating my mates," he says. "It gets very uncomfortable for me, very quickly. I don't need to become personally acquainted Damo's moans of rapture. It makes lunch very awkward—he makes the same sounds when he's hoeing into a chicken burger from the canteen."

Morgan snorts. "I'll try get him to tone it down. Maybe you should stop having such hot friends."

Ben sighs. "It's a problem. We men of a certain calibre tend to flock together." He pauses. "I think he really likes you. So maybe, you know, be careful there."

It's the easiest conversation they've had in a while, and Morgan doesn't want to ruin it. She gives a noncommittal nod as her stomach twists a little.

Once, when she was about nine or so, a boy came up to Morgan on the playground and pushed her over. This was as good as a declaration of war for her, but the teacher on playground interceded before she could so much as ball up a fist.

Little balls of red were beading up on her knees when the teacher sighed and told her, "He probably has a little crush on you, Morgan."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully, taking this in. She went up to the boy, who was smirking at her, and punched him in the stomach.

"I don't have a crush on him," she told the spluttering teacher. "Just to be clear."

When she was older and a boy smiled at her, she would always first remember the sharp sting of her scraped hands on the concrete, the feeling of someone liking her.

"What are you guys talking about?" Morgan's dad asks now, coming back into the room. He smiles a little tentatively at the two of them.

"Nothing, nothing."

Her dad ruffles his son's hair. Ben allows a brief, strained smile, before he gets up, leaving for his bedroom where he can shut doors and close his family out.

"I might..." her dad gestures towards the lounge room. "My show's on, so..."

He shrugs, drifts into the next room. The TV shudders into life.

When Morgan visits Kate's house, the walls are covered in a jumble of family photos and her parents are always warm, if busy. They smile a lot, more than they probably

need to, but it's nice, sincere. Kate doesn't seem to notice her easy stability, the warmth that surrounds her, or at least, she takes it for granted as the norm. Her dad bakes all kinds of pastries and cakes, so sweet they melt on your tongue, and her mum does the washing up and always wins when they watch the quiz shows, even the British ones that are a lot harder and use words Morgan hasn't heard of.

When Morgan visits Lucy's house, the floors are colder and cleaner than at Kate's. Her parents are always distracted, although her dad always tries to take the time to sit down and ask what's happening in their lives. Even though he has a Very Important Job, according to Lucy, he does try take those minutes to ask, to relearn his daughter a little bit. Lucy's mother wears lipstick the colour of expensive red wine and goes to fancy dinners in the city a lot. Lucy doesn't talk to her. Lucy's father thinks his daughter is a princess. Lucy's mother doesn't know what to call her daughter.

Lucy looks just like her mother, a little mirrored copy, with a few flaws in the reflection, but she does not hold herself the same way. Lucy curls into herself when no one is looking, holds herself sharp and rigid when they are, a warning—I will cut you if you get too close. Lucy's mother looks at her daughter like she doesn't know who she is.

Kate takes her mother for granted. Lucy pushes her mother away and her mother pushes back.

A mother does not make a daughter, no more than a father does. People without one or the other are not necessarily worse off than those who have two, or three or four.

Morgan knows this.

Above the mantelpiece is a framed photo of her parents holding her and her brother when they were still toddlers. Her mother looks more and more like Morgan each day. Her skin is darker than her daughter's, whose hint of brown already gets her called exotic—which never fails to elicit an eye roll from Morgan and a mimed gag from Lucy and Kate— and her eyes are the wrong colour, but they have the same shape to their hands, the same long black hair that falls in a wave over their shoulders. They stand the same way, although Morgan doesn't know if this is natural or an ingrained mimic on her part.

Morgan studies her mother's eyes under the glass, trying to see if they were already distant or showing signs of regret, but all she can see are her own eyes reflected back at her.

That's when Morgan decides that this will be the year that she finds her mother.

There was once a beautiful young maiden, with skin like moonlight and hair like sunshine. Born on the seventh day of the seventh moon, she was blessed with a quick wit, gracefulness worthy of a princess, and of course, such a fair beauty that it gave all who saw her joy.

As the years wore on, she grew only more beautiful, but remained kind of heart. She longed to go out into the world, which she had only seen from behind her window, but her parents told her the world was a dangerous place, and forbade her from leaving their home.

“It is not a place for a girl as fair as you,” they said, shaking their heads mournfully.

The girl nodded her head and was obedient, but still she longed to see a world outside her walls.

The years passed, and so it came to her sixteenth birthday. When her parents asked her what she wished for, she grasped their hands and asked for the world.

“Please,” she said. “I just want to see it— see the castles and villages and people. Until the next full moon. Then I will return unharmed to you.”

Her parents cried but knew they could stop her no more. They gave her three gold coins and packed her a warm dinner in their best blanket.

With a song in her heart, the fair maiden set out to explore the world, where she was promptly robbed by some ogres, spat on by some fairies, and finally stabbed thirteen times to death by a prince whose ardour she did not return.

Kate:

It’s the holidays, and despite our massive plans—hiking into nowhere, dancing at midnight, kissing mysterious strangers, having epic movie marathons—we’ve fallen into the pattern of lazing by Morgan’s pool, watching the days slip past in sun-dappled stretches. When Morgan goes in to work her shifts at the local grocer we come too, wandering through the shop or perching on the counter when business is slow, which it almost always is when there’s an air conditioned shiny new Woolworths just down the road. Morgan says we should apply to work at the grocer too, given how much we’re there, and how often Lucy sneaks lollies from the jar next to the cash register, but we

just laugh at her fondly. We drink when we can, talk when we can't. One long golden stretch, a waste and a bite out of a young glorious summer. Around lunch on one of our days that seems set to stain Lucy's hair green with chlorine, Morgan lays down the law.

"We're going to a party tonight," she announces, or orders—it's all the same with the Morgan. She stretches out one glorious leg, muscles flexing and relaxing in the aching sun. I can't look away— that arch to her hip, the sweeping locks of raven black-red hair that spills over a shoulder. My own shoulders have a spill of freckles across them, golden brown and sweet. Morgan is sexy; I'm her cute younger sister in pigtails. I rest my sunglasses on my nose and close my eyes.

"Are we," Lucy murmurs. She is floating on an inflatable bed, drink by her side. She trails a hand lazily through the water, but her eyes are wide open and staring at a cloudless sky. They almost seem to absorb it, black soaking up blue until her eyes are stark and empty. Like she can erase the colour from the sky just by looking. She blinks, catches me watching her, and smiles slightly.

"Yes," Morgan says curtly. She arches like a cat, looking over to us, flicking her sunglasses onto her head. "We're going to have fun and do something stupid. Alright?"

"Where?" I ask. In truth, I don't really want to go, but I'm too tired and bored to argue. The idea of rubbing up accidentally against sweaty, drunk teenage boys does not thrill me. But Lucy has perked up at least a little, showing some interest. And Morgan looks too restless, no longer languid but stalking about, needing somewhere to dispense all this energy.

"Jamie Brown's place," she says. "Start at The Set then head over there later. I'll raid some cupboards."

I look over at Luce thoughtfully, still floating aimlessly. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“I’ll lend you something,” they both say, Morgan impatiently, Lucy as an afterthought.

“Okay,” I say, to Morgan, not Lucy. They both raise an eyebrow, all that’s said of this unusual choice. Normally I steer clear of Morgan’s wardrobe, preferring Lucy’s more classic taste than Morgan’s dangerous outfits that bare skin and demand attention.

“Excellent. Luce, will you be needing any fashion assistance?”

“No, I have something.”

“Even better. Now let’s shut up so I can actually enjoy my day off, unlike you lazy bludgers.”

“Life is a day off,” Lucy intones.

Lucy’s parents say she is too sick to work. Mine want me to focus on school first.

Morgan’s dad says he wants her to *learn the value of a dollar*. Her dad works long hours, same as Lucy’s parents, but I think it’s because he has to, rather than he wants to.

Morgan:

Morgan is watching her friends joke by the poolside, smiling at them, when it hits her. *I love you, but sometimes I wish I didn’t.*

Her cheeks flush, unbidden, with the admission that has risen up like hot bile in her throat. She looks around, sure someone would have heard her secret, somehow: but Lucy and Kate are still laughing, comparing colours on their toenails.

She feels nervous for even thinking it; she knows she is lucky to have such close friends, that anyone who knew them would kill to have such a strong relationship. She knows every little thing about Lucy and Kate, but sometimes lately she wishes she didn't. It felt like too much responsibility, almost, like with each secret she knew she was weighed down that little bit more.

Lucy is laughing, but her eyes are blank and dull. Kate's hands flutter nervously, pulling at a lock of hair, tugging at her swimsuit.

There are days when she wants to shake Kate for being so determinedly, blindly optimistic; to shout in Lucy's face until she tells them what's wrong. Morgan knows she is hurting, and it hurts her that she can't help. And that makes her angry. She doesn't want to be around them when she is angry.

She is scared that she will never be able to leave them, not for university, not for anything. They need each other too much—they need *her* too much. She worries she will never find someone who loves her as much as her friends do, or worse—that she won't be able to love another enough. Morgan always pictures her ability to give away love as a limited source, a well that will run dry. She lets her friends drown in it, but there is only a very small puddle left now, drying up.

Lately, she has become aware of how empty she is, and yet how much she wants. She wants everything, all the time. She is never satisfied; her skin itches constantly.

Kate smiles at her. "Are you going to see your boy tonight?" Her eyes are good; they only show a hint of longing. Morgan wants to tell her that she's really not missing out, but she bites her tongue.

"He's not my boy," she says instead. Lucy looks at her then back at her hands.

“Ah. On his way out then, hey?” Kate nods knowingly.

“Not necessarily,” Morgan snaps, even though she’d already made up her mind to do just that a week ago.

“He’s got another few days in him, for sure,” Lucy smirks. “I bet she’s already got the next one lined up.”

Morgan shakes her head. Even though she knows they’re joking, that they’d always teased her about her endless string of boys, she still feels on edge. Is that what they really thought of her?

She remembers something she’d once heard her aunt telling her dad when trying to convince him to start internet dating. *You have to love yourself*, Aunt Laura had said seriously, *before you can love someone else*.

“Whatever,” Morgan mutters, and she dives into the pool. She opens her eyes wide, the stinging chlorine a punishment, and resolves to sink to the bottom and stay there. If she looks up, she will see Kate and Lucy leaning over the edge uncertainly, their figures distorted by the water. She doesn’t look, but folds her legs and grips at the bottom, as if it will stop her from floating back to the surface.

Morgan has very good lungs; she can hold her breath for longer than anyone else in her swim team. She sits and waits, pretending she can see brightly covered fish dance by the corners of her vision. She wonders what would happen if she opened her mouth and gulped down buckets of the water that pressed down on her. Would she get sick? Or would it finally start filling her up?

She hears the voice right as she is about to go back up for air.

Morgan, is all it says, a faint whisper in her ears. She blinks, resurfaces with a gasp.

Lucy and Kate are staring down at her, concerned.

“Did you say something?” she asks. She touches her ear, gently.

“Just reminding you not to drown yourself in the family pool,” Kate says dryly.

“Are you alright?” Lucy asks.

Morgan thinks of the voice and wonders how it can sound so familiar when it wasn’t one of her friends.

A girl in rags who dreams of love and kinder futures goes to a ball and dances by herself. She twirls and moves as lightly as a feather caught on the wind, and those looking at her would be right to be reminded of a swan, of other graceful dancing creatures. Her smile is bright and brilliant.

A prince in regalia who dreams of love and family hosts the ball and sees the girl in rags and screws up his face, because those rags are filthy and having unidentified dark smudges on your cheek isn’t all that charming, actually. He dances with a wealthy princess from a neighbouring county and talks about raising taxes with his advisors for the rest of the night.

Kate:

We're getting ready at Morgan's, sipping on pilfered beers that a boyfriend left, clearly confident that he'd be back to use them. Morgan's boyfriends don't last long. She likes it when everything's passionate and exciting and unsure; the minute things start getting comfortable, she dumps them. It works better that way, anyway. None of us are going to find someone we let in closer than the other two girls.

I'm doing Morgan's hair while Lucy holds up a pair of earrings to me.

"Where did you get *these*, Kate?" she asks, pulling a face at a pair of smiling cats. They dangle low, chiming against one another.

I shrug. "My grandmother saw them at a market and thought of me."

"Does she hate you?" Lucy asks, genuinely concerned.

"Let me see," Morgan demands, twisting in her seat impatiently. "*Ooh*—I want them! Can I wear them?"

"Knock yourself out," I say, and she squeals.

"They're so *ugly*," she says with relish, fitting them through her ears. "I am going to name them. This one is Sir Frederick and this one is Bob. You can tell them apart because Bob has the face that looks like it's melting."

"They don't even *match*," Lucy says woefully.

"Grandma may be partially blind," I admit.

We fall back into an easy pattern of getting ready, moving between one another to grab for makeup, shoes, clothes. An old favourite song comes on and Morgan grabs our hands and for three and a half minutes we dance and sing at the top of our lungs. I opt out when the radio switches to a new hit, leaving them to dance and spin. A glass gets

knocked over and smashes on the floor, but they dance straight over it, crushing it down into slivers as they stomp and shriek. I check to make sure they are wearing shoes. They are both so bright and violently *real*, even on the days where Lucy is more ghost than girl and Morgan's anger is bubbling over. This is what a teenager is: alive and shattering with every emotion under the sun, beautiful even when they're ugly.

As I watch them this sense of hopelessness rises up in me like bile, this one thought no longer a whisper: *This will soon fade*. And like that, I see my own mortality, not measured in decades or heartbeats, but this brief moment of youth and strength that feels like it will last forever, but it won't. At best, we had a few years before this easy freedom, this feeling of endless possibilities and importance, was gone. And all at once, I know this with absolute certainty as I watch my friends dance and laugh and hold up dresses. Soon, we will not be special.

The feeling chokes me for a moment and I picture my demon murmuring, twisting in my gut to see what the problem is. Suddenly I want to be seen, and I'm glad for the dress Morgan has forced on me, a skimpy thing of lace and not much else. I snatch up a lipstick and push it across my lips. It is red red red, and my demon roars in approval.

"Wow, Kate," Morgan says. "Nice."

Lucy has her head to the side, appraising me with those dark eyes. When I meet her gaze, she curls her lips up at the corners and I am struck with the thought of her demon, pulling at her insides like stitches, moving her like a puppeteer.

Standing back, we look at ourselves in the mirror. Alcohol blurs my vision for a moment, and I can't discern one from the other, as if we have morphed into one three-headed creature. I blink, and the girls in the mirror resolve themselves. We stand so

entwined with one another that we do look like one, years of memory and comfort making us as familiar with one another's bodies as our own. Morgan's arm is draped around Lucy, her fingers skimming my arm. Lucy leans into me, and my hair tangles with hers, strands of brown and blonde intermingling. For once, my demon is quiet, comfortable.

We arrive at The Set when the sky is dark and the moon is high. The Set is sort of a tradition for us on nights out or sometimes just for lazy days when there's nothing else to do. It's an old swing set in an empty park that no one bothers with even in the daytime, not since the council built a state-of-the-art plastic monstrosity with slides and seesaws a few streets over. There are no swings there—someone decided swing sets were too much of a risk, kids jumping off and hurting themselves, getting accidentally kicked in the head by an errant foot in flight. Our swing set is one of those older-style ones, all metal and leather and rusting chains. It's more than a little dilapidated, but we love it.

Lucy hops onto a swing and I push her. Morgan is digging through her bag, which clinks ominously. She produces a handful of little bottles and calls us over.

Lucy pushes off and flies into the air, caught in the sky for a moment before she lands. She dusts herself off and goes to sit with Morgan. I follow them. Morgan is setting up an impressive array of miniature bottles for us to peruse. Her dad has a huge collection of those little airline bottles, all these tiny jewelled bottles glinting amber or crystal-clear. It's well-stocked enough that Morgan can pilfer from one of the many cabinets whenever she likes.

We start divvying up the bottles. It's always easy enough because we have such different tastes. Morgan only likes the sweet stuff, which is generally at the weaker end of the spectrum, so she has to drink twice as much to keep up with us. Lucy goes for the really bitter stuff, the ones with a kick, and I take whatever's left. Vodka has always been my favourite, the simple but ever-present tonic that goes with just about anything without ruining its flavour. I take three bottles—all different brands, because Morgan doesn't like to make her thefts too obvious, and it's vodka and I'm sixteen, it's not like I can taste a difference anyway—and tip them into a plastic cup already filled with Coke.

For a moment, we sit back and watch the sky and listen to the crickets and our own breath.

"I've decided that something big is going to happen tonight," Morgan says.

"Like what?" Quietly, I think this is wishful thinking, because nothing ever really happens here. Until Beth, I suppose. I wonder if she will be there tonight.

"Oh, I don't know. Alien invasion. A fight. An epiphany; a *change*. Take your pick."

Lucy tips her cup back, finishing it in one gulp. It's viscous, dark like a witches brew; I can smell it from where I sit. "And if it doesn't, we'll make something happen."

Morgan laughs and I stand up, moving over to the swings a little woozily. I haven't eaten since lunch and my tolerance for alcohol has always been embarrassingly low. I kick my feet up and swing, until I can't hear my friends above the rushing of wind, and every swing sends me spinning further into the sky.

After a while, I notice two spinning objects in the corner of my eye. Morgan is on one side of me, Lucy the other, and without a word they swing with me, kicking hard enough that we might actually make it to the stars.

We collect our bottles, pocketing some for the road and throwing out the empty ones.

Morgan tucks away my empty vodkas; she likes to fill them up with water and replace them for her father to see if he notices. If he has, he's never said anything.

The alcohol has made my friends wild. Lucy and Morgan are alternating between skipping and running, dancing deftly down the street. Morgan avoids the cracks in the pavement, still unable to shake her superstitions. Lucy steps on each one with a careful deliberation.

They call back to me, coaxing me to hurry up, but I'm weighed down by the drinks still, like I'm in a dream and I can't move fast enough, trudging through water. I can't keep up with them today, but it's okay because they keep doubling back to keep me with them.

Lucy twirls Morgan and she giggles, her hair falling back and brushing the ground as Lucy dips her. When they straighten, a light layer of dust coats the ends of Morgan's hair, making her look like she is starting to fade away at the edges. I dust it off for her and she sneezes, one, two, three, a quick succession of sound.

"Did you hear about Gemma?" Lucy asks.

Her voice is sombre. We snap to attention.

"She's pregnant. Or was. Some people are saying she's had an abortion. It was that older guy she was seeing."

Gemma was in my Art class last term. She was nice enough—to me, at least—but kind of wild. Into a lot of bad things. She was the type of person who made snap judgements

on people, deciding instantly if they were worth her time or not. If not, watch out. She could be incredibly nasty. I think she just really didn't care about most other people, and didn't mind being honest about it.

"Jesus." Morgan rolls her wrists with an audible crack. "Pregnant."

I can't imagine the weight of that on me. Not at this age—and at this age, I can't picture it at any age. Maybe some fuzzy future cobbled together from TV, with pearls and matching sweaters in a two-storey house, but I don't know. In this town, even if you get rid of it, it stays with you. People make sure of that. You'll always be that girl who got pregnant. There was this one girl a few years older than us, and she got pregnant when she was sixteen. She had an abortion, and then got pregnant for real a few years later, to her banker husband. She's got two little boys now, but it doesn't matter that this time, she did it properly—she'll always be that kid who got knocked up then killed it. It's not so much a matter of women's rights or foetuses versus babies, nothing so political as that for our little town that sees itself as so progressive—it's just seen as *tacky*. When girls do have their little accidents, everyone acts like it was pleasant and planned. The same women who coo over their neighbour's daughter's expanding bellies are the ones shaking their heads and talking the loudest behind closed doors. The girls push their prams around town with hollow eyes and bright smiles.

"Do you think she'll be there tonight?" I ask. "Aren't she and Jamie cousins?"

"Yeah, I think so. Who knows if she'll be there, though—bet everyone's talking about her. I don't know if I could do it."

I wonder if she means going to the party when everyone's going to be talking about her, or getting rid of a baby. I don't ask.

Morgan tops up our drinks and we give a silent toast. Thanking the gods it wasn't us. Not like it could be, anyway. Morgan is scrupulous in her use of contraception and protection; thanks to her, I was probably better versed in that area than most pharmacists.

It sounds weird, but the idea of a baby inside me fills me with a strange revulsion. I think of something growing and squirming inside me and panic rises in my chest. I used to have nightmares that I was pregnant, and I knew I had to get it out of me. I'd take a knife and cut my belly open into a red grin, and when it was over I'd feel nothing but relief.

The idea of it felt like a physical, visceral parasite, something I was stuck with and had to harbour, making my body not my own. Just another reason why there was something wrong with me. I wondered if other girls had their demons hissing at the thought of a baby. You'd think I'd be used to something else growing under my skin, leeching off my blood and heart and guts.

I mentioned it to a therapist before a cleansing, just once. It was a few years ago—that's the only reason I can give for being so stupid. I didn't know any better then. He was very good—his eyes only widened a little bit. He explained that pregnancy was the most natural, beautiful thing a woman could do. He reminded me that this was my demon talking; it probably didn't want to share my body and mind with anything else.

It was years later that I thought to question that. Surely like any good parasite, my demon wanted to create more vessels for more little demons to poison? That was what we were told in PE when we started the unit on sexual health. It wasn't uncommon for demons to drive girls to have sex, create unnatural desire that made them lose their minds and forget to use protection, to want and want and act on those wants. It wasn't

natural for us to have those particular feelings, they told us, not like it was for boys. Not so intensely. If we had them, we had to remember it was the demon whispering to us.

If that was the case, Morgan's demon must be shouting. I remember she alternated between smirking and rolling her eyes so hard I thought she'd strain something in those classes. She dismissed those particular lessons as "utter dumbass bullshit." "Everyone makes up their own definitions of normal," she said, "and they label it natural."

I wanted to believe her but I liked having something to blame for the thoughts that ran through my mind and low in my stomach. I was pretty sure it *wasn't* that normal to want sex so much, like I was some kind of animal. These days I don't think too much about the why or how, more just that constant *want*. It's only seemed to have got stronger over the years.

Lucy didn't seem to take much notice of that part of our education, nodding vaguely along while she drew aimless swirls in my notebook. She perked up when we got into the physical side of things. She seemed to be the only one in our horrified class with a genuine interest. After he tired of answering her *very* detailed questions, our teacher handed her a weathered textbook, and for the next few months you'd find her immersed in it, looking at the diagrams of cross sections of genitalia with an interest that ranged from clinical to an almost morbid fascination.

Still, despite all our experimenting with the opposite sex, only one of us has actually done the deed. Morgan has had a lot of sex with a lot of people because she likes sex. She's a straightforward girl. Lucy is a virgin, but she's not a capital V virgin like me. She doesn't seem to care much about the whole thing. I don't know how she does it. I may seem the sensible type, but I have the mind of a teenage boy. I think about it all the time. I lie in bed at night and my whole body tingles, and I want everything so much

I'm scared it will split me open. Morgan never laughs and she always answers my questions, even while Lucy rolls her eyes behind us. It's lucky I have beautiful friends to live through vicariously, but it frustrates me because of how much I want to be doing these things myself. Knowing my luck I'll die a virgin. It's hard to meet guys when your two best friends are supermodels. Anyway, I'm just too sweet. Too young. Guys look at me and think *no chance*. Not because I'm ugly, just because I don't look like *that kind of girl*. They assume I'm too sensible for that. I'd be the one who had sex when I was emotionally and physically ready. I haven't had sex, so I won't have sex. A very cruel catch 22. Never mind that sometimes all I can think about is sex, how badly I want to try it. Somehow, this same issue doesn't plague Lucy, probably because she puts across this air of unattainability that only makes people want her more.

Lucy says I should just find someone to sleep with and satisfy my curiosity so I can move onto more interesting topics of conversation. Guys are a dime a dozen, she says, and any one of them would be happy to do me. She tells me not to be drunk the first time and use at least two forms of protection. Morgan always shakes her head and tells me not to listen. I should wait, she says, find someone I care about. Fall in love. And then use two forms of protection and fuck my brains out.

Morgan's never been in love. Neither has Lucy. I can't imagine loving someone as much as I love those two.

By the time we get to the Brown's house, the party is clearly underway. Boys and girls are splayed out on the front lawn or hanging onto one another as they purge their guts.

"I love the smell of vomit in the evening," I murmur, and Lucy snorts.

Lucy takes off her coat and Morgan and I stare. We hadn't even asked why she was wearing a coat in the middle of summer, but what it was hiding... Lucy is dressed to kill. She is all in black, and I realize, it's not even the clothes, a stunning dress even skimpier than my own that shows more of Lucy than I'd ever seen in public, but her. She is angry and regal and she is going to break something tonight, I just know it.

"Huh," Morgan says. She looks down at her own outfit. "For once, I feel the most underdressed here."

Lucy laughs, and the wild, angry queen vanishes for a moment and she is just Lucy, our Lucy. I grab her hand and grin, squeezing too hard because now I can feel it too—something big is going to happen tonight. Alcohol has replaced the blood in my veins but I'm not unfocused or drunk, I'm soaring, buzzing with promise. Tonight, my demon cannot speak.

People turn to look at us as we walk in, pretending they're not. I glance at the other two, seeing what they see.

Lucy is blank and bright and mad. Morgan has a hungry, aching look in her eye that is too familiar to my own heart. And suddenly, I want this, I want to be here, claiming our territory with my beautiful girls who are more than sisters, and with our hunger, we're more than anyone else there, three girls filled with hunger and restlessness and maybe just a little bit of anger, maybe a lot of anger, three girls that are going to take over this little world or tear it down.

Morgan heads straight for the group of boys playing some sort of drinking game in the lounge room, and I know in moments she'll be putting them all to shame. She's an athlete and competitor through and through, whether it's swimming, soccer, or binge

drinking. Sure enough, she produces a six pack of beer and proceeds to crack and down one in the time it takes the boy next to her to find his bottle opener. She kindly accepts it to open her next two drinks.

Lucy glances at me and shrugs. She gestures to the kitchen, making her intention clear, and I nod. We often split up at these things for a few hours, scouting it out and trying out people and things, before meeting up again to discuss.

I grab a beer—lukewarm, of course—and make my way into the party. There is a small crowd gathered around the ornate table in the dining room, so my first impression is that I’ve stumbled into the stoner den. But the air is clear and as I inch to the front I realise Beth—demon-free Beth of the other week’s exorcism—is holding court.

Her eyes are clear and her cheeks are flushed. She is standing on the table, and everyone gazes up at her with awe and wide, hungry eyes. We are all girls here, although a group of boys hover in the corner, looking uncomfortable and squeamish, but still listening.

“It was so sudden,” she tells us. She looks virtually buoyant. “One minute I was like, lying there, bored as and trying not to nod off”—*Yeah right*, I think, remembering the missing eyelashes—“and then—I felt it. It was gone. My head was empty and I was free.”

One of the boys behind me snorts. “When has that girl’s head *not* been empty?”

Beth doesn’t seem to hear them, still smiling beatifically. While some of her act does seem a bit put on, I have to admit she does seem genuinely happy. It’s as though a weight has been lifted off her shoulders.

“What did it? What made it leave?” someone asks.

Beth shakes her head. “I don’t know.” She holds up a hand to ward off the groans. “It could have been the doctors, or the ritual. I’ve been on really good meds lately, I’ll miss those.” She shrugs. “Whatever it was, I don’t care. I’m finally free.”

Someone helps her down and as the crowd begins to disperse, I make my way over to her.

“Beth, hey.”

“Oh, hi Katie. How’s it going?” Up close, I can see that she’s wearing fake eyelashes. One corner has become unstuck, and droops towards her eye.

“Not as good as you, apparently.”

“Yeah,” she smiles. “I still can’t believe it. How good everything feels.”

I feel awkward, but the alcohol spurs me on. “What—what’s it like?”

“Like everything was dulled before. Do you wear glasses?” I shake my head. “Well, it’s sort of like all my senses were shot and I needed, you know, glasses. I put them on and suddenly everything’s so clear. Everything tastes better, everything feels better—and there’s nothing making me feel bad for enjoying it. My head feels empty, and I love it.”

“Wow,” I say. She looks at me knowingly and smiles. I stare at her naked eyelid, so raw and pink.

“Don’t worry, Katie. Maybe it’ll be you next.”

Lucy:

I am in the kitchen, lining up fruit in a row. When I tipped them out of the blue fruit bowl, I was surprised to realise the apples at the bottom were wooden. When I tap them, they sound hollow. I roll them against my palm, one at a time. You wouldn't know they weren't real unless you bit into them and found all that emptiness. On the outside they are all shiny and rich and red. They are good at pretending to be good little apples. The real apples are just the same. You wouldn't know if they're rotten, not til your teeth sunk past the skin and into all that crumbling grey flesh.

A boy is talking to me. He hasn't realised that I am one of the rotten apples, shiny and red on the outside but rotten to the core under the skin. He hasn't realised I'm not talking to him, either. I say nothing, playing with my little bottles instead. My hand looks huge and clumsy wrapped around them, like they're normal sized and I'm the one that's the wrong size for my world. If I found the right one, would I shrink? Down, down, down to Alice's size. I'd quite like to climb inside and watch the on-goings from the safety of a little glass bottle. Morgan or Kate could keep me in their pockets and feed me crumbs. What was that line again? One makes you larger? No, that was it, it was the Caterpillar referring to the mushroom: *One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow smaller*. I tap a nail against the glass in a staccato as my demon whispers to me Alice's first misgiving about bottles that implored people to *Drink me*: beware of poison.

The boy smiles at me hopefully.

Once upon a time three girls went to a ball with monsters at the door and glass on their feet. They danced on knives and smiled at the beasts in the mirror and they still expected not to get cut.

Kate:

The party keeps spiralling on, everyone getting louder and the walls getting closer as the music reverberates under my feet. I'm searching for an empty room to hide out in for a bit to avoid the sweaty hands of a boy from my English class when I spot the open door at the end of the hallway. When I push it open further a sliver of light slices across the room, reminding me of moonlight cutting across an inky lake. Two swans are entwined—two bodies are twisted on the bed, and I shut the door quick, stepping out and flushing.

I am closer to my friends—my sisters—than anything. Closer than blood. We do not lie to one another; we do not hide anything from one another.

I know their bodies as well as—better than, even—my own. All three of us have a thin white scar on our thumbs from when we passed a knife around and promised to become blood brothers at eight years old. Morgan has a splotchy birthmark on her ankle and a burn on the inside of her wrist from when we tried to make pizza in Year 6. Lucy has a smattering of silvery scars across her hip, and a larger, star-shaped scar on the back of her neck. She fell from a tree we were climbing in Year 8, straight onto a particularly nasty shard of rock. Looking back, I can't believe she didn't die. Looking back, I can't remember where she got the scars on her hip.

Actually, I remember why we became blood brothers—sisters. We were racing to meet the ice cream truck, and I tripped and split my thumb open. Morgan and I both burst into tears, but Lucy said “Wait here,” and ran and got a knife and some bandaids from her mother’s kitchen. She dragged the knife across her thumb and pressed it to mine. “There,” she said, looking into my eyes. “Now we’re blood sisters.”

“Me too,” Morgan demanded, rubbing at her eyes. She snatched up the knife and swiped it across her skin, and when blood began to drip onto the pavement, she grabbed our hands and held them together. It stung, but I liked the idea of our blood mixing together until the three of us were connected, sharing the same blood, the same things inside us. Afterwards, we placed identical Barbie Band-Aids over the cuts, Morgan not complaining even though she hated Barbie.

When I got older, I wondered if little bits of our demons had slipped into the others’ bloodstreams as well, another tiny part of ourselves mixing together.

I saw Lucy’s scar shift as someone stroked it—softly, sweetly—and I felt myself slip a little bit further away from my friends.

We keep taking steps away from one another, moving in directions the others can’t follow. We are all liars.

Morgan:

Morgan is lying outside on dew dipped grass, enjoying the spinning sensation that sends her clinging to the ground. She wants to get back inside. Kate and Lucy don’t like that part of parties so much, and when she comes to collect them at the end of a big night

she'll know to pick them up from outside in the garden. Not Morgan. She needs the thumping, bursting thuds of speakers pounding in her ears, thudding until her chest feels like it's going to explode. She's heard of that happening before, people standing too close to too-loud speakers at a concert and their lungs end up exploding from the pressure. She quite likes that idea. Morgan touches her exposed arm, her finger trailing a rivulet of sweat. She loves rubbing up against strangers and classmates, tasting their sweat on her lips. Kate can't stand it. Morgan always comes home smelling like dozens of different people, their sweat a kaleidoscope over her arms and chest.

A glass shatters, very close to her ear, and she jumps up, instantly pissed.

"What the *fuck*?"

"Sorry," a girl mutters. She sits down heavily and Morgan sees it's Gemma, infamous Gemma. She's drinking quite steadily from a bottle of spirits, and doesn't seem concerned that she's just smashed her previous one.

"Don't worry," Gemma says after a bit. "The rumours are true—I'm not going to get foetal alcohol syndrome or whatever the fuck it is. Nothing there anymore."

Morgan raises her hands defensively, fighting the urge to grab back onto the ground to stop from spinning off into the universe. "Hey—not my business." She feels a twist of guilt remembering that she's already dissected it with the girls anyway.

"It's everyone's business," Gemma spits, but she offers Morgan the bottle.

They pass it amicably back and forth for a bit.

"Where are your sisters?" Gemma asks. Morgan shrugs, and something in Gemma's face gives a little. She leans back into the grass, and Morgan follows her.

“I don’t think we’re like real sisters,” Morgan says. “My neighbours—three girls—they hate each other. Drives their mum crazy. I think they’re actually going to kill each other one day.”

“Whereas you three are perfect paragons of love and friendship,” Gemma intones. Morgan is impressed by her articulation, particularly considering the way she’s chugging back that bottle.

“Sometimes,” she allows. “Other times—I need a break.” She feels guilty for even saying it, but then Gemma laughs and she feels a twinge of pride instead.

“I used to be jealous of you three, you know,” Gemma confides. She pushes lank hair out of her face and Morgan realises she’s not as drunk as she seems. “You all seemed so close, even as kids. And shit, you were protective of each other. Like little pit bulls. Do you remember, Lucy once bit me?” She chuckles as if at a fond memory. “I called you ugly and next thing I know, Luce has latched onto my arm. I couldn’t shake her off.”

Morgan does remember. She doesn’t like how comfortably Gemma says Lucy’s name. She doesn’t want to share her.

“Maybe this wouldn’t have happened if I had friends like you,” Gemma murmurs.

Morgan twists to face her. “Do you regret it?”

What she means is, are you okay?

Gemma bites her lip, thinking. “No,” she says at last. “I did the right thing. One day, I’ll be out of this town and it won’t touch me anymore. I won’t always be defined as this. I know that. I just wish this stupid town would realize that too.”

There's no heat behind her words though. She is peaceful, accepting. She has touched something Morgan is far from understanding, and it makes Morgan feel like a kid, skinny and knock-kneed.

"Plus," Gemma adds thoughtfully, "the sex was freaking amazing. So worth it."

They crack up, feeling drunk and mean and young, the third always forgiving the first two.

"I think you're brave," Morgan tells her when they have quieted.

Gemma rolls her eyes. "Nah, I'm just an idiot who won't back down from a fight." She toys with the hem of her shirt for a minute.

"How did your—you know—how did *it* react?"

Gemma knows she's not talking about her boyfriend.

"It was very quiet," she said. "First time I can remember where my demon properly shut up. Maybe because it had to share the space for once. I think because—it knew there was someone there. A tiny baby. Maybe it could sense the even tinier demon there too. I think it even liked them. What do you think that does to a kid? Curled up in there next to a demon for nine months. When I made the decision, that's when it got angry. I thought it was literally going to tear me apart, or send me off of a cliff or something. You'd think it would be encouraging me. Aren't they meant to egg you on towards making bad decisions, things that are going to mess you up for good?"

"Maybe that means you made the right decision," Morgan suggests quietly.

"Or it liked her. The baby. I don't know."

Morgan rubs her head. She is agitated now, can feel a headache coming on.

Gemma is pulling out clumps of grass. She is still looking down when she speaks in a low, furious rush.

“You know what, though? I can’t get past how angry I feel now. All the time. It’s like—I want so much. I’m hungry for everything.” She looks at Morgan and her eyes are huge and fierce. “Food, sex, touch... I can’t stop eating. I had something inside me and now it’s gone and I *want* so much. I just want to consume everything.”

Morgan moves forward and kisses her. The other girl’s skin is hot, like she’s running a fever. Gemma responds, biting her lower lip and breathing into her, and they roll until Morgan is lying on top of the girl so many at the party are calling ruined. They kiss and fight each other. Morgan feels something in her chest rear up and hiss and bite and spur her on, and she knows Gemma is feeling the same way, and they are locked in a lover’s embrace of fuel and hate. They are both so desperate and need so much and so they fight. She wants all of Gemma but the other girl won’t let her. Gemma’s hands are in her hair and she tugs cruelly as she kisses her.

Gemma pulls away roughly. “Bet you can’t do that with your sisters.”

A sudden bolt of rage spirals up in her chest at the mention of her friends. Morgan wants to hit her, slap her across the face or pound her skull into the grass. Gemma reads it in her face and laughs. “Cheers, Morgan. I’m going to get another drink. It was nice talking to you.”

She kisses her before she leaves, gentle for a single moment before she bites down.

Morgan draws back and touches her lower lip. It throbs, and her fingers come away red with blood. Her anger ebbs, disappearing as quickly as it had arrived.

Morgan sits back and closes her eyes. Nearby in some bushes, she can hear a couple calling out to one another, their voices sweet and sure.

Sometime later, after the couple has finished and left, Lucy drops down beside her, resting her head on Morgan's shoulder.

"I fixed it," she says. Morgan does not know what she is talking about and she is too tired to ask. She reaches for Lucy's hand and finds it's already there. One of them grabs hold tight.

They watch the sun rise together.

There was once a broken doll with cobwebs for hair and stories in that hair and secrets in her heart. She woke up in a strange forest with dirt on her knees and an ache in her gut. It took her a few moments to hear the voice that rang in her ears; cries for help from a faraway girl who'd lost her prince and her way. Her legs felt strong even if her heart felt weak and heavy; she would run and find the girl who needed saving.

But before she even took a step, a monster came and tied her down with honeyed words that made her stick fast to the forest floor. He smiled a terrible smile of terrible things, and he told her *You're so beautiful* and *I'm sorry*. Then he cleaved her in two with his teeth. It was a clean cut, and she watched while he devoured her bit by bit. He started with her legs, and he smiled the whole while.

Lucy:

Once I had a dream that I was a girl made of cloth, stitches pulling me this way and that. When I didn't smile they painted a curving line of red across my mouth. I could be pulled at and if I tore open just the slightest bit and stuffing came out, I could be restitched with fresh new wool plumping up my insides. I was softer but the world around me was harder. I could be thrown around because girls who are made from cloth do not break.

My friends are beautiful broken dolls who don't know they're broken. No. Kate doesn't know, or doesn't want to know, but Morgan knows. She can see the cracks, thin little lines snaking over her skin, cracking like porcelain.

We're her sisters, but Morgan also has a twin brother. Does that make him our brother, too? We don't look alike. Our insides are different, too.

Mothers and Brothers and other black holes.

Kate has a younger brother who is relatively harmless, for a boy. He is kind and busy with his own life. I have no one because I am alone, alone, alone. I am an only child because after they had me, my parents screwed up their faces and decided not to risk fate twice. Dad got the snip, Mum had her tubes tied. They rewired their bodies to avoid making any more little Lucys.

I was born broken.

I don't know what I'm capable of anymore.

Kate:

We're back at Morgan's place after the party and the air is charged. No one is speaking about what happened—for once, I don't know how my friends spent their night, when sometimes I know it so well I get it confused with my own memories. Morgan is restless, rubbing at her arms and legs for heat. Her eyes are bright and clear. Lucy lies straight in bed and feigns sleep but her breathing is hitched. Not for the first time, I wonder if I know what I actually saw. She seems less troubled tonight, but I am reminded more strongly than ever that I do not know this girl. It is as if the Lucy I grew up with has left, and this strange, dark girl is all we have left.

I leave Lucy, still pretending to sleep with eyes wide open and staring, to follow Morgan down to the kitchen for popcorn. She twists her neck, and I feel the crack, and I have to stop myself from reaching out to ease it.

“So,” I say as the popcorn thuds to life in the microwave. *Bang. Bang.* “How was the rest of your night?”

She shrugs. “It was alright. The usual.” Her nonchalance throws me off. I wonder if I should bring up Lucy, but it feels like a betrayal.

We don't have secrets from each other.

I don't know what to do. For so long, their pain has been my pain, their joy my joy. When Morgan sprained her ankle, I felt it echoing in my own. When Lucy got the chicken pox, all three of us itched. The other two swore they felt a thudding ache when I fell down the stairs. Our bodies are connected; we are all phantoms of each other. I touch my lips gently, place a hand on my left breast. Can I feel this too? Is that sigh on my cheek a boy brushing Lucy's face, or just my own hair tickling me? I want to cry.

For me, for my friends. For Lucy. Was any of it real? Or is it natural, our bodies finally growing apart after years of being tethered to the same trunk. Three branches spiralling off, slowly but surely. I imagine mine, not growing fast enough to bear its own weight, rot beginning to set in. Until the tree sighs and lets it drop off entirely, so it can grow healthy and strong branches in its place.

When we get back to the room, Lucy is sitting up, dragging her pyjamas from her bag. Morgan drops the bowl of popcorn on the bed and shrugs out of her dress, unconcerned.

I watch my friends undress, tracking each movement carefully. I am an anthropologist, studying their behaviours so that maybe I can understand them again.

Morgan is so beautiful it hurts. She is curvy, but athletic; thin, but full. Her skin is the creamy flesh of an apple—not the colour, but the look of it. Many boys and girls have spent too many restless nights thinking of sinking their teeth into her, of brushing a hand over those hips. Pink buds are dusky on her chest.

Lucy is lean and effortless. She looks delicate, but carries an undercurrent of strength with her. No one would ever mistake either of them for a child. My own body seems trapped in the in-between—not quite a child, but definitely not a woman, either.

The girls drift off quickly but I can't sleep. Under the blankets, I touch my own body uncertainly. My fingers brush the lumpiness at my waist my doctor calls puppy fat. My ribs are hidden under it. I wonder what it must be like to be Lucy, or Morgan. My face is round. I want to be taller. I think it would be easier for men. I wouldn't mind being a guy. I wouldn't mind being me, if only I felt like my body actually belonged to me. I have to fight my demon for control some days. I used to wonder if I was accidentally

placed in the wrong body when I was born, because this one has never felt quite right. It's too tight and too heavy, too slow.

Lucy rolls over to face me. "Are you okay, Kate?"

I flush, but she can't see me. Morgan shut the blinds tight to ward off the dawn light creeping through. "I'm fine. Just had a weird dream, I guess."

Lucy nods. "I have dreams like that all the time. The other night I dreamt a monster bit me in half and ate me. The bottom half first. I had to watch the whole thing but I couldn't move."

"Did it hurt?" My dreams are never that bad. They're very ordinary, visions of showing up to school unprepared for tests. I always know when my demon is shaping my dreams because they're far more vivid than anything I could come up with on my own. I have a flash of me taking a knife to my swollen belly.

She considers. "Not at first."

Morgan:

Before she left, Morgan's mother used to tell her fairy tales. She revelled in them, a new story every night—some from the Brothers Grimm, some from Perrault, some of her own invention. At first there were stories of beautiful girls with flowing hair and handsome princes on horseback. People had adventures, and were brave and kind and sure. When Morgan was little, her mother edited the stories, and she only learnt that the mermaid didn't get the prince and her happy ending was also her death years later.

When she got older, her mother told her different stories, some that were in the old books and some that weren't. There were so many stories that Morgan never knew which ones were her mother's. Some of the stories that Morgan was told when she was older had clear morals; many didn't. Many twisted down shadowed forests and forbidden pathways, and ended with a beautiful dead girl lying broken in the gutter. In these stories, the prince could be the monster, and the princess could be a bitch—or the witch could be the princess—and more often than not they ended with dead or diseased or otherwise broken royalty.

A year before her mother took off, before Morgan got even older and started painting her lips with red and going out and wanting boys like a wrench to her stomach, her mother started telling her fairy tales again. She told her stories about boys and girls who were stolen or locked away, boys and girls who lost something or lost themselves. She told her stories, but Morgan no longer wanted to listen. She was too old for fairy tales, anyway.

There was once a woman who was a mother, and so her womanhood ceased to matter.

Her daughter was more beautiful than her, so she ordered a huntsman to kill her. She told her husband on her deathbed to only marry someone as beautiful as she, and when he took their daughter into their bridal bed, she rolled over in her grave. She stole her own grandchildren and tried to feed them to her daughter-in-law (they had had an argument over where Christmas lunch would be held). She forced her stepdaughter into servitude. She spoke to her daughter as a willow tree. She ordered her husband to

abandon their offspring in the woods. She died in childbirth, over and over and over again. She was a stepmother, wife, mother, wicked witch, but never a daughter.

Lucy:

I've given it a lot of thought and I think I am a parasite. I feed off people, drinking up their secrets, their touch, their emotions to survive. Look at my friends—I picked vibrant ones. Vibrant people don't fade away as fast.

My mother doesn't like me. She doesn't say it, but I can tell. Her demon thinks I'm encroaching on its territory. It can sense others of its kind, you see. Mum treats me like a guest who has overstayed their welcome: polite, but distant and with a definite cold edge when she's tired.

"I used to be scared of you, when you were a kid," she tells me vaguely. One finger circles the wine stem. "You were such a strange little thing... when you weren't screaming or in one of those terrible rages, you were appearing out of nowhere, silent and staring. You drew creepy pictures and your father used to find you playing in the backyard in the middle of the night. You would get so angry with me when I tried to cuddle you..."

She shakes her head quickly, emptying. When she looks at me next, her eyes are guarded and blank once more. "Don't forget to take your medicine, Lucy.

There was once a girl who was made out of hessian and black thread and hope. She had round black buttons for eyes and a sweet little slip of a smile painted on in red. As a final touch, a small heart made of satin was placed inside her chest.

She was a very sweet and very small doll, and her maker loved her very much, as though she was his own daughter. Her stuffing was soft but her hessian was tough and rough, to keep her from getting damaged. Her maker tied thin red ribbons in her hair of wool to match her smile. He made her little patchwork dresses out of bits of cloth, red and white and blue and yellow, and the little hessian girl laughed and spun, feeling like a princess. But still, she heard the laughter of the other children in the town and she felt lonely.

One day, the little hessian girl looked out the window of their home and watched the other children play.

“Maker,” she asked, “Why do the other children change with the seasons? Why can’t I play with them?”

“You are a very special girl,” the maker said. “The other children may not understand you. They may not be kind to you.”

The little hessian girl listened to the sound of the children’s laughter and sighed. She could not believe they wouldn’t let her play with them and be her friends. But she knew the maker loved her and wanted to keep her safe.

The maker looked at his little doll gazing so wistfully out of the window and sighed. He did not like to see her sad. “Would you really like to grow and change like the other children?” he asked.

The hessian girl clasped her rounded hands to her chest. “Oh yes, more than anything!”

And so, each year, her maker restitched her hessian, adding little pieces here and there so she grew and changed with the seasons like a real girl. On her eighth birthday, he brought out a tiny wrapped box for her. Inside were spools of lovely new yellow wool, for her hair. The little hessian girl clapped her hands together with joy. She swung her feet restlessly as the maker patiently unstitched and restitched the wool, tying off the ends of each thread so they wouldn't fray. At the hessian girl's begging, he weaved her hair into a thick braid down her back, to match the style the village girls were currently wearing.

The little hessian girl looked at herself in the back of a spoon and her little red smile seemed to stretch wider than ever before.

Later that evening, as the maker napped and the sun settled into the horizon, the little hessian girl carefully shut the door behind her and snuck out to the village. She had heard the children making plans to meet by the largest oak tree to play after supper, and she was determined to join them. She was wearing her nicest blue dress and red ribbons, with thimbles on her feet to keep her hessian dry.

When the children arrived, they stopped their banter to stare at the little doll who stood smiling at them.

"What are you?" one boy asked, a mixture of bravery and curiosity spurring him on.

"I am a girl," the little hessian girl answered. She was very excited to finally make friends with the children that she'd seen play so many times.

"Don't be silly," said a girl. "That's a doll."

"I think you're right," said another boy. "My sister has plenty of them in her bedroom. They look just like this one."

“Do they talk?” asked another child.

“I *am* a doll,” the little hessian girl said, “but I am also a girl. I’d like to join you in your games today, if that is alright.”

The children looked at each other and shrugged. “Okay,” one said. “I’ve never seen a talking girl doll before. What would you like to play?”

And so they played on and on while the sunset turned into evening. The little hessian girl was not much good at the racing games, but she was very good at hide and seek. Her button eyes did not need the sunlight the way the other children did, so she could spot others quite well when it was her turn to seek. She was wonderful at hiding, for she was very small and so could fit in many little places the seeker would not think to look, and her hessian skin blended well with the dirt and the bark. The children laughed delightedly when she finally came out of a rabbit hole, a little tuft of fur clinging to her cheek.

Soon the children’s parents emerged from their houses and began to call their young back home for bed. They all waved farewell to the little hessian girl, and the brave and curious boy even picked her up and carried her home, so her small legs would not tire. He gave her a quick hug as he placed her gently at her front door.

The little hessian girl was so happy she thought she might snap a stitch. She snuck back through the house where the maker snored on peacefully. She carefully sponged off the bits of mud and grass that covered her legs, replaced her thimbles, and curled up in her bed, smiling her little red smile as she slipped off to sleep.

From then on, every chance she could the hessian girl continued to sneak out to meet her friends, waiting until the maker was fast asleep, or leaving before he woke up in the

mornings. She was always careful to remove the grass and dirt that continued to tangle in her hair and clothes. The other children didn't seem to ever get quite so dirty- while their clothes could stain as quickly as her hessian, mud on their skin was easy to wash off. Maybe sometimes the children weren't as careful with her as they should have been, but the little hessian girl felt this was because they saw her as one of their own, not a doll to be protected. Besides, her hessian was strong and she had no bones to break when she was accidentally dropped from a tree.

Morgan:

Lucy and Kate are both quiet that morning, which is fine by Morgan. Her mind is elsewhere, and she can't notice that Lucy's hands are shaking, and Kate is picking at her skirt hem, pushing food around her plate at breakfast. Normally she would notice; no, normally, Kate would notice, and Kate would fix it. She would see that Morgan was distracted, and Lucy was vanishing, and she would talk at them, to them, until they came back again. But today, Kate is stuck in her own mind, Lucy is blank, and Morgan is not going to notice. Her mind is jumpy, moving from last night to images of shadowy things whispering to tiny figures with unformed fingers to runaway mothers to an unknown voice curling at the corners of her mind, nesting in her throat.

She can feel it, a strangeness that scratches slightly, catching on her throat. It isn't bad, nor entirely unfamiliar, and its presence reminds her of a friendly cat, its weight close to reassuring.

She isn't interested in exploring the cat right now, so she dismisses it as a sore throat. She wants to figure out her mother, wants to get started on this plan to find her. There are no photo albums to drag out and examine, though, because she and her brother had accidentally lit them on fire shortly after their mother had left, during a particularly exciting game of firefighters. Morgan had convinced her brother that it would be much more fun to save the dolls' village from real fire.

There is one photo, the one that sits in pride of place above the mantelpiece. Morgan has looked at it—looked into it, searching for answers, an enigmatic smile perhaps, or a plane ticket and detailed outline for the next twenty years sticking out of her pocket. She wasn't picky. But it is just a man and a woman who looks like Morgan holding two small children. She doesn't look like the daughter she holds in the picture, because Morgan was an ugly child.

She isn't going to mention this to her friends, not yet. Morgan is a practical girl, and she isn't going to approach them for help until she has hard evidence, facts, clues. She doesn't want to risk a pitying look from anyone, especially not the girls who are closer to her than anyone. Not them. They look at each other with annoyance, with sarcasm, with admiration and kindness, and all of these things are called love. They have never looked at each other with pity, not when Lucy's mother didn't show up to the school presentation when Lucy won an award for coming first in their Year Six class, and not when Kate was in the hospital. When Morgan's mother left, the girls crowded in, holding her up and moving her through each day, but not once did they look at her with pity.

As she looks over the picture, thinking about mothers who run away, Gemma inadvertently flashes into her head. She lets her sit there for a moment—what is she doing there?— before she pushes her back out resolutely.

She re-joins Lucy and Kate on the lounge as her father comes in the front door. He is followed by one of his golf buddies.

Her father has a lot of golf buddies. They are invariably loud, large men with flushed faces who have never been told their jokes are not funny.

She has met this particular golf buddy twice before, and already she knows she doesn't like him. He has a daughter in the year below her, and whenever he looks at Morgan he has a funny little smile on his face.

"Hi Morgan. Lucy, Katie—how've you two been? Keeping our girl in line?"

"You know it, Nathaniel," Kate says.

"It's tough, but someone's got to do it," Lucy agrees, patting Morgan on the head. She rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue.

"Hello girls," the golf buddy says. His eyes slide over them, a small smile flickering at the corners of his mouth.

Morgan retracts her tongue.

"We're going to hit the links," her father says. "Just grabbing a quick refresher!" He waves an empty bottle of water, heading into the kitchen.

The golf buddy glances around the room. "Having a little sleepover, are we?" he asks. He leans against the lounge where they are sitting, his eyes lingering on them. Morgan

is still wearing her pyjama shorts with an old shirt that's too small for her. Kate's pyjamas have pink rabbits on them.

"My daughter loves them," he continues. "Always having pillow fights with her friends. Do you girls do that sort of thing? I suppose you'd be too old for that now, hm?" He gives a little chuckle. He is very comfortable, reaching under his shirt to scratch his stomach. Morgan catches a glimpse of gut and dark, bristly hair. She turns to face the front of the room.

"Alright then," her father says, coming back into the room. It has only been a minute.

"We're off. No parties while I'm away!"

Lucy and Kate give an obliging chuckle.

The golf buddy continues to smile at them as he leaves.

"I'm going to have a shower," Morgan says. She has already forgotten about her plans to seek out her mother, at least for today. She thinks she will invite a boy over later.

When she is in the bathroom, the room steaming up around her, she looks at her body in the mirror. It is just a body; one that is tight and hard in some places, and soft and curving in others. Morgan is quite proud of her body, although she knows to be embarrassed at this, because really, what has she done but grown into a skin that fits her well.

She cocks her head, watching the mirror fog up and her body vanish. She cups a breast thoughtfully.

When Morgan was a kid, she was ugly.

She was too scrawny with a little belly and pasty white skin that burnt easily, turning her bright red. She was gangly and tall with too many elbows that were always grazed. Her ears were too big for her head. (*You'll grow into them*, her father said, but he looked doubtful.) Her eyes were too close together. Her voice was high-pitched, high enough to sound like a shriek.

It didn't help that her twin brother was the epitome of sweet, a cute little boy with wavy hair that fell into his big brown eyes. He was the exact same height as Morgan, but it didn't sit right on her the way it did for him.

Morgan had a capital A attitude and too many opinions that she would spout in her shrieky voice, and that, coupled with her unfortunate looks, confirmed her status as an annoying little brat. People were already predisposed to dislike her on sight; when she opened her mouth, it cemented their opinion. She was *too much* of everything, and maybe if she'd been cute she would've been able to get away with it—*that little scamp!*—but instead all she heard was *children should be seen and not heard*, with a slight pause before *seen* as if they were reconsidering that, too.

So like a good little girl Morgan learnt to shut her mouth and keep all her sarcastic comments to herself, tending to them like a festering wound she wanted to cultivate. She liked being ugly. It both forced her to be seen and allowed her to be invisible, as people looked away quickly in horror. She studied hard and always had the right answer in class, until her teachers began to see her for her mind, not her weird nose or ears like Dumbo. She prided herself on her little oddities, that she could pull the strangest faces in her whole year, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue until she looked cartoonish.

And then she hit puberty.

You've heard the story about the Ugly Duckling, maybe even harboured a secret hope that this will be your own tale of aesthetic redemption. What Morgan took from the tale was that looks don't matter (until you're beautiful and then they do), ducks are cruel, and beauty is only skin-deep and it's personality and endurance that really matter (except—we don't see much of the duckling's personality, not really, and then it turns out to be a swan, the prettiest bird of all. And if you know anything about swans, it's that they're incredibly mean and vicious. They were used as guard dogs by the Romans. They growl, and attack without cause. So you can be beautiful, but you'll probably also be a vicious bitch as a trade off. So, not such a great moral to that story, in the end).

Morgan became the swan, except. Except now even though she felt comfortable in her skin, liked her curves, liked the way her body felt: she did not like the way people changed around her. And yes, she was beautiful, but she was also painfully sexy, all curves and red lips and bedroom eyes. She wasn't the Disney Princess that the boys wanted to take home to mother, she was the woman the boys wanted to show photos of to their mates over a beer. Her high school teachers do not call on her the way her primary teachers had.

She liked her body and the way it could make her feel, but she did not necessarily like the expectations and preconceptions that came with it like an overly thick installation manual.

Morgan steps into the shower and feels the hot water rush over her, enjoys the feel of it as it slips across her skin, warming her. She tips her head back, letting the hot water wash it all away.

Morgan.

She is in a pleasurable haze; it takes her a minute to register it.

Morgan, the voice says again, more insistently this time, and now she is shocked out of it, frozen.

Morgan, can you hear me?

Kate:

I wish he looked at me.

He looked at Lucy, and he looked at Morgan. You could tell he thought they were beautiful. When he was glancing about the room, his eyes slid over me but I couldn't hold his interest; I was just another bit of the furniture. An uninteresting armchair, slightly too worn. Not particularly noticeable or noteworthy in any way.

He liked Lucy, and he *really* liked Morgan, but I wasn't there.

When Morgan stomped off to have her shower, we start a new movie, but I can still hear Nate and his friend outside, getting their golf clubs together.

"Would've been nice if the girls joined us," the friend says. "It'd do them good to get out of the house, get some exercise and fresh air."

"Nah, they're fine. My Morgan, she's the fittest kid you'll ever meet. Does every kind of sport." You could almost hear him puffing out his chest with pride.

"Yeah, well, most kids these days don't get enough exercise. Like the other one—the brunette, the heavier one. Sweet face but a bit plain. Poor thing. It's hard at that age, isn't it? And with friends like that..."

I don't hear Nate's response.

Lucy glances at me.

"I'm fine," I say, forcing a smile. "I'm fine, really."

Nate's car starts up. Lucy walks out the front door. Something twists like a growl or a groan in my gut.

My demon is tricky and cruel, and it does not like me. But sometimes I find myself agreeing with it. Sometimes, we have a lot in common.

I'm used to hearing my voice—my demon's—in my head, critiquing me, shaming me. I've wondered about other people think when they look at me—of course I have, who hasn't? I've walked by as a group of girls have started laughing and I've blushed, sure that they were laughing at me. But I haven't seen inside someone's head, heard exactly what people—strangers—think when they see me, the first impression I encourage.

Now I know. So that's good, I guess.

Lucy comes back in, tossing something from hand to hand.

"What were you doing?" I ask, trying to make my voice sound normal.

"I keyed his car. Do you think it's too much to slash his tyres?" She sees my expression and sighs. "Just the one? Please?"

I laugh. Lucy comes over and puts her arm around me.

"He's an asshole," she tells me fiercely. "You get that, right?"

"Yeah, seriously, I'm okay." I pause for a moment. "Was it an expensive car?"

“Very. All shiny and silver. And now it has racing stripes, so it’ll go faster.”

“You’re the best.”

“Mm, I know. Pass me the juice?”

I hand it over, watching her closely. Lucy seems the same as ever, like she didn’t sleep with someone last night, or like that was a normal thing to do.

Maybe it *was*. Maybe she’d been doing this for ages, slipping off at parties. Or maybe this was the first time. Surely it was. And the first time—well, it seemed like a big deal. Why wouldn’t she tell me, though? We could’ve talked about it for ages; I wouldn’t have judged her, I would’ve been impressed. Maybe a little jealous. But she could tell me about it, tell us his name, what it was like. Morgan would want to know, if only to compare. Was that it? Maybe they thought I wouldn’t understand, or she didn’t want to rub my face in it. Or she just didn’t want to tell me.

“Luce? Are you okay?”

She turns her head to look at me, and I can *see* it—the mask she slides into as she replies. Her face is blank and small and then a placid expression of confusion emerges, an *I don’t know what you mean* written across her questioning smile.

Lucy smiles at me, big and bright.

“I’m perfect,” she tells me.

“To have the gift of beauty is a dangerous and costly thing,” the old hag murmured. “I can bestow it upon you, but it will cost you what you love most in this world- your younger brother.”

The girl glanced down at her younger brother, who blinked at her innocently. She looked back at the hag.

“Yeah, alright then.”

Kate:

After breakfast, after Lucy leaves, I head upstairs for a shower. The day feels like it's fallen off kilter, and it's not even midday yet. I want to scrub myself clean.

I don't look in the mirror as I disrobe.

I do.

A girl watches me. She has my hair—too plain, too brown, only slightly wavy—and my face— a nice enough face, kind of sweet, but too round with plain features; not ugly, but not special, not striking—and worst of all, she has my body.

I'm not crazy. I know I'm not *fat*. Not badly fat, grotesque or even unhealthy, really. I weigh less than Morgan does. But. I'm not right. I have too much weight piled onto these bones than is good for them. My skin is stretched too tight over glistening yellow fat, until it's shiny and red, like an infection setting in. I'm not fat, but I'm not *right*.

When I see myself—lumpy in the wrong places, flat in the wrong places—I can't

believe this is me. *I was born in the wrong body*, I want to tell people when I meet them, *don't judge me by this one*. But there are people who actually were born in the wrong form—boys who should be girls, girls who are really boys—so my claim feels stupid and whiny and small.

I shower quickly, shuddering slightly as the steam sinks into my skin.

Lucy:

Beauty is entirely subjective, and a social construct to boot, the mirror informs me when I get home and lock myself in the bathroom. *But still, couldn't you make a little effort?*

Not too much effort though, because that's what got you into this mess in the first place. You know this is all your fault, right?

Kate:

Morgan's brother Ben is in his bedroom, the door slightly ajar. When I pass by, he looks up from his computer screen.

"Hey, Katie. I think Morgan's got company. Of the, uh, male, variety." He is awkward and flushes, although he should be long used to Morgan's suitors. She must've called her latest over while I was in the shower. He'll be out in a few minutes—Morgan is very efficient when she wants to be.

Ben is watching me stand in the doorway. I wonder if he's pitying me, *poor awkward Katie, stuck out here while Morgan has her fun*. Boys don't lock themselves in bedrooms with me.

"Do you want to come hang out in here for a bit?" he offers. He nods towards the bed.

Ben's room smells like *boy*. I haven't been in here for years.

When we were little, before we learnt that Boys and Girls are different and shouldn't play together, when we knew him as Benny and not Ben, Ben would join us sometimes while we ran around the neighbourhood. He was a very sweet boy, always a little overshadowed by Morgan's—well, by Morgan.

"What are you watching?" I ask, nodding towards the screen. Three grey slips are frozen there, something of fur and bone in flight. I cross my legs and sit back against the wall. Ben's bed is made up so well I wouldn't have thought he'd slept in it. I glance at him quickly, taking in the dark circles under his eyes. Maybe he hadn't. When we were little, Ben was fascinated with dinosaurs and baking cupcakes. I don't know what he does these days. Morgan throws up her hands in exasperation whenever the topic of her brother comes up, and if I see him at parties—which is rare enough in itself—he'll be hovering at the edges, but somehow not looking as awkward as I would.

His ears go red but he perks up, swivelling the screen around so I can see it better.

"Wolves. It's one of those nature videos, they're hunting. It's so cool. They have such clever instincts when it comes to the hunt—watch, you can see them circling around and cornering the deer."

He clicks play and the grey fur springs to life, blurring across the scene as the wolves dart forward. Muscle slides across bone and fur shimmers as they move. Lips pull back

and shining teeth are bared. They are lean, strong; not scary, but incredibly beautiful, with clear eyes that glance around, preparing to move in for the kill.

“They’re amazing,” Ben says reverently and I nod, transfixed. “Watch that one on the left, he’s my favourite. They kill only to eat, you know. All that meat goes into energy and warmth, making the pack grow stronger. They look out for their own.”

“You’ve watched this before?”

“It’s part of an ongoing series. I sort of love nature documentaries. Morgan walked in on me once when I was watching one about dolphins. I think she would’ve rather I’d been firing up a crack pipe, the way she looked at me.” He winced. “It is a bit of a weird hobby, right?”

“No way,” I said. On the screen, the wolves had begun darting forward, nipping at the deer’s flank. “It’s kind of cool... So, from wolves to dolphins, hey?”

“There’s no discrimination in the animal kingdom. Plus, you’d be surprised how much they have in common.” Ben points at the screen. “It’s almost done.”

The wolves are surprisingly calm, slow in their approach. It reminds me of a game of carefully calculated chess, or a cautious dance, one step forward and then back, balancing out their approach, closing the space between them and their prey incrementally.

“So what are you up to today?”

I blink; Ben is looking at me now as the wolves dance forward and back, forward and back.

“Don’t know. I guess I should head home, seeing how Morgan is otherwise occupied.”

“Do you want to hang out here? I’ll even put on a normal movie, where you will be guaranteed not to learn anything about the natural world. In fact, you may leave knowing even less than before.”

If I go home my mother will ask me questions and my father will be too loud and I will think about Lucy’s scar being stroked, about Morgan in a locked room down the hall, all while I sit alone in my room. “Sure. If you don’t mind me crashing your day.”

“I really don’t,” he says.

Ben smiles at me. I smile at him. My stomach starts to ache.

On the screen, the deer is dead.

Once upon a time, a girl met a boy.

Lucy:

I need to talk to the dead girl.

My thoughts jumble and run across each other, singing nonsensical phrases to me, but my hands are still. My body is calm, even if my mind isn’t.

Today, she is wearing my face.

It isn’t unusual. The dead girl often changes her face, on a whim.

We talk in whispers and shouts, but never open our mouths. Hers is sewn shut today with barbed wire.

They are coming for you, she tells me, You do not belong with them. You belong with us.

There are too many pronouns slipping into my ears. They wiggle like fat little worms.

No one is coming for me, I tell her, lecturing my own face like it's a disobedient child. I belong to no one but myself.

She gives a trilling giggle, like birds screaming in death. *You belong to everything and everyone but yourself, little girl.* She shakes her head sadly. Her mind is often schizophrenic on bad days, switching from gentle and hurt to toxic shrieks. Sometimes she speaks in languages I'm sure are long dead, firing out words that curl around the tongue, that are guttural or slippery or just raw sound. She tears her hair out almost absentmindedly, hunks of blonde and brown and black and so much red falling to the ground in clumps. Her next words are almost kind. *You can't run forever.*

Many years passed and the other children continued to grow, while the little hessian girl stayed little. Despite the patches the maker added every year, she was no bigger than a common housecat, and she worried the children were outgrowing her. Sixteen year olds have no time for dolls, and her friends now preferred sitting and talking by the trees to running races and games of hide and seek. And, while her body might not grow, her heart had, and she had fallen deeply in love with the brave and curious boy, who was now a handsome young man, still brave and still curious, with hair as dark as midnight.

He was kind to her, and she longed for him to touch her wool hair and profess his love the way she'd seen other men do to those they cared for.

On her sixteenth birthday she went to her maker and asked him for a new dress. He looked at her sadly.

“You are growing up, my little girl,” he said, “and I would be a fool not to realize that. I think I must give you something greater than a dress, even though my every instinct tells me not to. But I am an old man who has grown cynical, so perhaps my fears are unfounded. Regardless- I must let you forge your own future, as girl or doll.”

He handed her a package wrapped in brown paper with string. Carefully, the little hessian girl unwrapped it, which took time, as her hands were round and soft, and did not have fingers.

Inside lay a warm red heart, half flesh and half satin. Thick black stitches criss-crossed down the middle to join the two sides together.

“This is a very magical heart,” the maker said. “It took me many years to make. It has the power to transform you from doll to girl, if that is what you wish. But please, my girl— keep in mind that your wishes may not work out as you'd hoped.”

The little hessian girl could not picture a more perfect present. She could not see any way it could go wrong. She threw her scratchy hessian arms around the maker.

“Thank you! Oh, thank you! Please, can we put it in right away?”

And so they got to work. The little hessian girl lay very still as the maker unstitched his careful black stitches and replaced the original satin heart for the flesh and cloth one.

His hands shook as he restitched the doll back up, for he was very old by now.

The heart began to grow and grow until it was bigger than her last one, and with it, the little hessian girl began to grow too. She stretched and stretched until she was the size of a real girl. Her glassy black buttons changed into glassy black eyes, and her yellow locks of wool tumbled down into soft waves of hair. Her hessian cloth softened into skin, and her red slip of a smile turned into a real one, rosy and warm and truly happy.

She adjusted her blue and white checked dress, which had grown with her, and stared into the back of a spoon. She looked beautiful, soft and warm and real. She hugged the maker tightly, marvelling at her own height.

“Be careful, my dear,” he said, but the girl did not notice his worried eyes or his sad mouth.

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly. “Now— I must go. But I will be back shortly— and I will be bringing with me someone I want you to meet!”

She danced out the door and down to the old oak tree where she always met her friends. They looked up at her when she arrived, not recognising her. Boys and girls alike were awed by her beauty, her shy smile.

She called out the name of her man with hair of midnight, and he came to greet her, cautious and a little awed. She wanted to laugh—now *she* was the brave one!

“My lady,” he said, smiling at her and giving her a neat little bow, the same he gave the girls in town. “Do we know each other? Your face is familiar, but I’m not sure if I can place it.”

At first the girl was disheartened to realize her love did not recognise her, but she did not fault him—after all, she could barely recognise herself!

A thought came to her, borne on the stories of princesses and knights that her maker had read to her.

“We met in a dream, once,” she said impulsively, and was rewarded when he smiled again, laughter in his eyes.

They began to walk together, close but not quite touching.

The girl felt her face grow warm when he smiled at her, and she touched a hand to her cheek, amazed. They spoke easily, laughing as they always did, but still the boy did not realise who she was. He kept asking her where she was from and when she had moved to town, and took her silence to be an air of mystery.

For hours they laughed and spoke and even danced together. The girl felt so happy she could fly. The boy was looking at her with such love that she was sure he would ask for her hand soon enough— and she would give it, fingers and all!

Finally, he took her aside, back under the old oak tree where they had first met. “You are very mysterious,” he said, “and very beautiful, but most of all you have a kind heart. My lady— please, you must tell me your name, so I can ask you to be mine forever.”

He leant in, brushing a curl of golden hair aside, and kissed her gently on the corner of her mouth. The girl’s warm satin and flesh heart grew even bigger. She had never felt so happy. Now was the time to tell him who she truly was.

“My friend,” she said, smiling, “but you already know me. You have been my friend for years, and now we can finally be together. For I am the little hessian girl you played with all these years, and now I am a real girl.”

The boy's face contorted in shock. He drew back from her, staring. He didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before," she said quickly, searching his eyes. Something twisted uncomfortably in her stomach.

"You tricked me?" he whispered.

The girl shook her head. "No..." She reached for him and he let her take his hand but he was too still. His hands felt cold in hers. Her heart began to beat faster, aching a little.

The boy—the man—looked deep into her eyes, searching. When he spoke, his voice was gentle and kind.

"I'm sorry, little doll," he said, "But I can't do this. I cannot marry a doll—I must be with a real girl, a girl of flesh and warmth." He touched her cheek, brushing back a lock of hair, and his eyes were genuinely sorrowful. "I'm so sorry."

I am a real girl, she tried to say, *I am warm*.

"Please," she said. Her heart was racing so fast she thought it might take off. "Please."

He drew her to him, and for a moment, the girl was held and loved by a boy she had loved before she had a beating heart. But then, too soon, he stepped away, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry," he said again. He turned away from her. "I have to go."

He moved quickly, huddled in on himself, vanishing quickly in the growing dusk. The girl tried to follow him, but her new eyes couldn't see well in the dimming light, and soon he had vanished completely, gone.

She ran, stumbling over suddenly heavy feet. She tripped, and fell against the trunk of the old oak tree with a soft bump, folding in on herself. Her hessian skin didn't bruise.

Her heart of satin and flesh broke, and the little hessian girl began to unravel.

Her hessian tore and white pillowy stuffing began to spill free. Her hair fell into black button eyes, thick yellow wool clouding her vision. Her soft skin, her clear dark eyes, her soft golden hair- it was all gone. The little hessian girl pressed a hand to her face, but it remained dry. No matter how much her satin heart ached, tears did not come to her black button eyes, and her little red smile continued to pull resiliently upwards.

From where she lay slumped against the tree, she watched the man turn and leave, not looking back once.

Slowly, the little hessian girl rose to her feet and began to walk towards home. She had left her thimbles behind, and now her legs were growing heavy as mud sunk into the hessian. Her button eyes shone. She pulled on a tuft of stuffing and let it go, watching it float away on the breeze.

Morgan:

Technically, Morgan's mother never should have been born.

She was the last child in a family of six daughters. This, Morgan knew, even if she did not know her aunts' names. Her grandparents wanted six kids. That's what it was like back then. Six was a good number; anymore and they'd start having to turn kids out into the bush, leave them to find their way home with crumbs. Seven would be one too many

mouths to feed. Six was a good number; six was a respectable number that meant they were doing their godly duty. Except, the first child, the only son, the firstborn, he died. Seven days after he entered the world, he was gone again. If he'd lived, they would've stopped at six, one before Morgan's mother. Morgan's mother never would have been a mother, never would have been Morgan's mother, because there wouldn't be a Morgan.

If her brother hadn't have died, she wouldn't have been born. Morgan wonders if he watches her. If she feels that weight on her back, what could have been.

Is that what she ran away from? All that responsibility, all that pressure to lead a good life, a strong one. Morgan obsesses over it. Had her parents wanted two kids? The twins were a surprise—she was a surprise. If they'd have known, would they have chosen not to have them both, spaced out their child bearing, or just stuck with the one? How terrible, to be quietly relieved at the stoppered breath of a tiny baby because it meant she got to live.

Sometimes Morgan feels like her mother's life, her life, by extension, is a precious, delicate gift, something fragile and carved in crystal or glass. The thought makes Morgan tremble. She has never been good at small, fragile, important things; she is good at smashing and fighting and living very loudly.

Lucy:

My mother does not like to look at me directly. She hands me a scattering of pills, white and grey and yellow and red and blue, all different shapes and sizes, but uniform in their chalky, choking taste that catches at the back of my throat.

There was once a girl who had a pretty decent upbringing. She lived with her adopted mothers, and enjoyed her life well enough. But then, as these things happen, she accidentally fulfilled a sixteen year old curse and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

When she next stirred, there was a tongue probing hopefully in the corners of her mouth. The owner of the tongue was a young guy, leaning over her and kissing her.

“Woah,” the girl said, sitting up abruptly. “What the actual hell, dude?”

The guy blinked at her. “Oh hey. You’re up.”

“Were you just *kissing* me?”

He smiled. “Yeah. You looked so cute lying there, and I thought-“

“You thought you’d stick your tongue down my throat to revive me? While I was unconscious? How would you like it if some random was slobbering all over you without your permission?”

He looked a little confused, scratching his head. “Uh... is she hot?”

“Oh my *God*.” The girl looked around, as though seeking someone with reason. “How long have I been out? What year is it? Dude, I could be as old as your *grandmother*. Pro tip: don’t go sticking tongues down people’s throats without clear consent. And what if I had, I don’t know, *mouth herpes* or something?”

Now the guy was looking startled. “You—you don’t, right?” He tried to rub at his mouth surreptitiously, and the girl rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah, haha. Good one.” He swung his arms back and forth. “So... do we get married now, or what?”

The girl smiled sweetly. “Piss off,” she suggested.

“Alrighty then.”

The girl went on to create a successful start-up business specialising in organic soaps after suing the fairy who’d enchanted her in the first place, and the guy never did learn his lesson. He never contracted mouth herpes, but he did get slapped with several sexual harassment lawsuits, so there’s that.

And they never saw each other again.

Lucy:

“I used to think you would suck me dry,” my mother tells me another day. We are separated by a door of wood. There are so many potential splinters in this house. My mother’s voice crawls between the slivers of wood and white paint. I will not let her in, not even if she wants to. “When you were little. You got so hungry. You wouldn’t let go of my breast—you would scream and howl until I let you latch on, and then you would suck and suck, and it would hurt so badly, like everything was getting ripped from me. I used to cry, sometimes; I thought you were sucking the life out of me. You were never full; you drank me dry and still wanted more. Sometimes you would bite. When I cried, the thing on my breast would look up at me and smile...”

She and her demon shudder. *Get out*, her demon whispers to me.

Kate:

Despite the fact that they've been around forever, infecting half the population, we don't know much about demons. You can't quite quantify them by science, because there's too much magic in them for that. They live in the guts of a girl, but if you cut open a girl's gut you won't find anything. But they're there. One per girl. I think they're twined in our marrow, dug in to our very last rattling breath.

Although older women don't seem to have them. Maybe they outgrow them. Maybe they just get good at hiding them, at ignoring the voices or pretending they can't hear them anymore. No one asks.

Demons don't fit the criteria for a parasite/host relationship either, because most parasites don't want to kill their host. They may make them crazy or eat the lining of their stomach but they don't necessarily want to kill them unless they have another host to jump into next, if it aids them on their path to parasite mecca. Why kill a free meal? Most humans aren't inclined to burn down their homes or bite the hands that feed them; parasites are the same way.

Demons, however, seem to thrive on driving their host to the edge, even if they can't always get us over it. It just doesn't make sense. Surely, if we die, then they do too. And yet every demon's ultimate goal seems to be breaking their girl down so thoroughly that she doesn't want to breathe anymore. And they enjoy the journey there.

Lucy:

I don't remember meeting Kate and Morgan. For so long I thought we'd met as babies, before birth even. Like we were talking in the womb, whispering secrets and reaching out to one another. They've always been in my life—that's always been clear to me when nothing else is.

When Kate brought up a story of the two of us bonding over coloured pencils in a Year One classroom, I didn't know what she was talking about. I couldn't remember it at all.

"You remember," she said, surprised. "We used to colour together. You gave me your pencils—they were my favourites, you know, so it was like my birthday. It was really special."

"It was just a box of pencils," I told her. I thought, I probably had plenty of them. My father always gave me things he thought I'd like, presents stacked high on my Disney princess bedspread.

I remember her face fell a little when I said that. For one moment, I was almost glad, because she took my history away from me and gave me a new one I didn't want. And then I gave her a hug and she stitched her smile back on.

I have always known my friends, and I don't remember otherwise. I don't particularly *want* to know otherwise.

Morgan:

Morgan is in her bedroom with a boy underneath her and she can't stop shaking.

There is a voice in her head and she doesn't know how it got there. She certainly didn't have anything to do with it. Morgan is much too responsible for that kind of thing. But now she feels haunted.

I am being haunted, she thinks to herself, and she hears the voice recede politely. It is still there, but it has decided to hold off for now. She can sense it though, a quiet little voice hiding in her head.

I am going crazy, she decides instead.

No, you're not, the voice (person?) insists, like it can't help itself. Her voice is not entirely unlike Morgan's own, like what she hears when she plays back a recording of herself, but less cringe-worthy. When did Morgan decide the voice in her head has a gender, anyway? It. It was an it. And Morgan was mad and she was going to ignore this for now.

She focuses on the warmth of the boy beneath her, the warmth their bodies made together. He has chocolate brown hair that curls sweetly at the nape of his neck; she runs her hands through his hair, kisses him. Morgan likes to do the kissing; she likes to make that first move, rather than wondering if a boy wants to kiss you, hoping he does, and waiting for him.

But she can't focus today and she doesn't believe in using sex as a salve or a distraction for Big Things. It is Morgan's great goal to never follow her mother down that winding, vanishing path, of running away from anything. Morgan faces up to things, so she kisses the boy on his lips that are strangely square shaped, and she sends him on his way.

“Do you want to hang out again later?” the boy asks. His voice is hopeful, but his eyes are resigned and maybe a little sad. Morgan, who makes a point not to notice these things, notices this.

“Maybe,” she says, but she says it with a smile. She goes to hand him his jeans, but they fall to the ground in a heap between them; Morgan’s right hand has gone cold and heavy. She can’t move it.

“Okay,” the boy says, scooping up his jeans. He hasn’t noticed anything unusual. He slips into his clothes a little self-consciously and kisses Morgan swiftly before leaving.

Morgan goes to the full-length mirror. Her hand is tingling, feeling returning to it, but her pinkie remains cold and immobile. As she watches, it curls and unfurls, flexing happily, like it has only just discovered it can do this.

Lucy:

I don’t think all the pills work, anyway. I think sometimes my mother slips in little coloured lollies encased in crisp shells instead. Just for the fun of it, or to balance out the rainbow I have to swallow down. I am tempted to bite down and see if chocolate fills my mouth.

(I am not good at predicting *when* she might swap them out, however. Every time I think I’ve got her, she seems to know, and my mouth will fill with chalk that gags me. She is always one step ahead in our game.)

Kate:

I get home in the late afternoon, when the sun has already begun to set. I've barely seen the sun today, sleeping through the morning then spending most of the day with Ben. We watched a movie together, something stupid and easy. Later, Ben showed me more documentaries. I liked them all but the wolves were the most interesting. I could've watched them for hours, these elegant creatures that were so lean and so powerful. What was it about them that incited so much fear in humans?

And why had I looked at Ben like he was a real guy, not just Morgan's twin? He'd been a friend when we were kids, but that was before we realised girls and boys can't be friends, and by the time we realized that we could be, Ben was Morgan's brother, which was something else entirely.

They didn't look that alike, for twins. Morgan took after her mum, and Ben was just Ben. He shared her dark hair and her smile, but that was about it in terms of family resemblance. They were so different; I couldn't imagine Morgan being content watching animals all day. Morgan *was* an animal, all energy and constantly in flight. She was an athlete, and she had to use her body.

"Dinner's ready, guys! Kate, can you get your brother in here, please?"

Sam is already on his way down to the kitchen. He smiles at me—Sam's a good kid. We get along well enough, probably because he's still a kid and doesn't think about much besides his games and whatever topic is currently fascinating him. Sam tends to fixate on things, and he'll devote months to learning everything he can about a topic. It's interesting, but it can get boring fast. The mythology of Ancient Greece is not so enthralling at six in the morning over breakfast.

"Hey, Katie," he says. "How is your demon?"

Lately Sam has become obsessed with the demons, even more so than I am (as Morgan or Lucy would probably say. I don't think I'm obsessed, no more than the average girl). He just went through a unit at school about it, and he's developed a rather annoying habit of asking me about my demon's wellbeing every time he sees me. Mum tried to explain to him that it's a bit rude—*it's private women's business, Sammy, it's not polite to ask women about it*—but he continues on undeterred.

I wonder if my demon likes it. Maybe that's why I feel so fondly towards Sam. How much of me is controlled by my demon? Directly or indirectly? I followed those stupid rules for so long, trying to be a good girl who locks her demon away, but you can't do it forever, and it doesn't work. They want us to be good girls but those rules just make it harder. They cut off all your air until everything gets harder and tighter and you can hear the demon louder than ever, in every drop of moisture in your body.

"Fine, thanks," I say, trying not to grit my teeth. Rule 21: *Avoid confrontation or conflict*, and Rule 47: *Do not act or react in an antagonistic manner*.

"Any contact? Any unusual urges?" he pressed.

"Wait, I'm getting something... it's a voice... it's telling me to kick my little brother."

His face falls. "Katie..."

"I'm kidding, Sam. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Okay, but keep me updated, okay? I've got a diary and I'm recording all your mood swings in it."

Count to ten. Remember Rule 47. I breathe in and out. "Thanks, Sam."

"Anytime, Katie."

The table is already set, warm candlelight bouncing around the room. My parents like to put effort into our family dinners. There is a tablecloth and brightly coloured salt and pepper shakers that may or may not be lobsters. There are too many scented candles lit, and they're mingling with the smells coming from the covered dishes, lavender and frangipani and eucalyptus mixing with medium rare steak and hot chips. I feel sick. I can feel another roll of fat shifting when I sit down.

"How was everyone's day?" my father booms. Both my parents are skinny, especially for their age. My dad will eat anything. He even eats the mouldy yoghurt that's been left too long in the fridge. "The bacteria is good for you," he'll say.

"I hung out at Morgan's," I offer. I play with my fork, watching it catch the candlelight. No one else seems to mind the sickly smells.

"That's different for you, Katie," Dad says cheerfully, and Sam giggles.

I roll my eyes and poke at the slab of meat Mum has dropped onto my plate. It looks tender, all red and glistening. When I jab at the centre of the steak with my knife, pink juices begin to leak out onto my plate, mixing with the vegetables.

"It's too rare, Mum."

My mother looks up. "What? You like rare. Medium rare is too well-done for you."

"You're thinking of Sam. I like mine cooked to the point of bad taste." I stare at the plate. It could be a chunk of my own flesh, red and raw. Exposed on white china.

Mum frowns. "Oh."

"It's okay, I'll eat it."

Dad starts telling Mum about his day while Sam wriggles in his chair. He is munching down on his steak with pure glee. I cut into a piece tentatively, bring it to my lips.

When the wolves in the documentary caught the deer, they tore into it without hesitating. Hot flesh steamed as they ripped the body apart. It was very quick.

“Are you alright, Katie? You look a little weird.” Sam talks around his food and pieces of mashed up meat and potato spray out across the table. My parents don’t seem to notice, so engrossed are they in Dad’s tale of the problems with the copier in office 2B that led to Gary from accounting being drenched in toner.

“I’m not very hungry,” I say quietly. My stomach feels tight and small. Maybe I should become a vegetarian. “I might just make a peanut butter sandwich and take it up to my room.”

That gets my parents’ attention, even though they’ve just reached the climax of the Gary vs toner story.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want dinner?”

“Yeah, I just have a headache. Can I take something up to my room?”

My parents exchange very quick glances before Mum nods.

They watch as I make the sandwich. Peanut butter has never been so fascinating. Sam slurps at his drink, oblivious.

The bread looks a little stale and I can already picture the peanut butter sticking to the roof of my mouth, closing up my throat. I hate peanut butter. I wish I was allergic so we never bought the stuff. I don’t know why I even took it out of the cupboard.

My parents are looking from me to the sandwich and back again. The dreaded question is coming.

“You’re eating, aren’t you, Kate? How’s your stomach?”

“Of course I am, and it’s absolutely fine. I’m just feeling a little sick.” Inspiration strikes. “That time of the month, you know.”

Dad and Sam look duly horrified, quickly clearing their throats and looking away. Mum offers me a tampon and some Panadol.

When I get up to my room, I pause for a second before dropping the sandwich in the bin.

Morgan:

Morgan has never given much thought to demons. She knows Kate gives far too much thought to them, and does not know what Lucy thinks of them. It is the one subject that they can’t talk about. Many people treat demons as taboo, but it’s not that—it’s that for the first time in their lives, the three girls can’t relate to something. When Kate talks about it, Morgan cannot understand what she means. The demon Kate mentions is alien and angry, sending controlling tentacles out. It’s always *there* for Kate, but also seems intangible, like it’s hiding at the back of her mind, just out of sight. When Kate tries to explain it, Lucy looks politely blank—she doesn’t understand, either.

Morgan doesn’t particularly care why they all have three such different experiences of their so-called demons. She doesn’t really believe in them. Sure, she knows they exist,

but they have about as much impact on her life as the histories written in her school textbooks. She knows they happened, knows they caused pain, but she just can't feel them or picture them in *her* life.

She wonders now; is the voice in her head what others call demon?

It does not suit her to simplify everything so much. It doesn't fit, and so she leaves the thought behind entirely.

Lucy:

When I was five, I was stolen and a changeling was placed in my bed.

My parents were upset at first, but they soon realised that this new, quiet creature with neat clean ringlets who didn't scream or thud her little fists into the soft flesh of their thighs, was easier. They kept her and kept quiet until I was put back into my bed a year and a day later. Then they cried. Begged them not to take their little girl. They loved her. But the fey that kept me in a room of silver had grown tired of my screams and my sticky palms and decided it would be altogether nicer to swap me back for the quiet little changeling.

A nice person might say my parents didn't know which was which. Maybe they thought I was the changeling, and the changeling was the real girl. (I don't know how to be a girl.) But here are the facts. She had blue eyes. Mine are black. They weren't even trying.

Sometimes I lie in bed and wait for the earth to take me back, cool red dirt unfolding across my chest and pressing me into the dust. If I breathe in deep enough, I could feel the soil rattling around against my lungs, wet and thick.

Kate:

Something I haven't told you: A few years ago, I got really sick. Dangerous sick, where doctors had to watch me carefully, and hundreds of tests beeped out the patterns of my breathing, my heart, my blood. I was in a hospital bed for months. The good news: I became proficient in the language of soap operas. The bad news: I missed a lot of school. Too much. It was hard to catch up, understand what we were studying.

I didn't get to see the outside of that room for months. But my friends visited me. Lucy and Morgan came every single day. Not for the first month, but every day after that. They sat next to me and watched the dramas unfolding on the crackly screen above my bed, and they filled me in on what I was missing.

The first time it happened, I thought I was dying. I don't mean that as hyperbole; it is just a simple, cold fact. The pain was so extreme, so violent, that I lay on the bathroom floor and just knew: I was dying. There was no way I could feel like this and survive. I thought I was being cleaved in two from the inside out. It was literally as though something in my gut was tearing, like my stomach was being shredded, ripped violently in half. When I could finally scream, I did, but then there was another problem because I couldn't stop. It just hurt *so much*. My parents took me to the emergency room and I felt myself tearing the whole way there.

I had something very wrong with my stomach. At first, I thought it was a parasite, and the doctors concurred, moving me around for scan after scan. I was waking up in the night, feeling like I was being torn apart. One time, I woke up from a nightmare still screaming, because I was sure a huge, clawed monster was tearing out my belly. I couldn't eat—everything tore straight through me. The cool ceramic touch of the toilet became familiar to me as I pressed my forehead against it day and night, slumped over. Food had become the enemy, something that wanted to kill me and shred my insides. They put me on an IV, and I could feel the cold nutrients sluicing slowly through my veins. Morgan and Lucy used to distract me when feeding time came, clutching at my good hand and flashing bright magazines with shiny people in their pages.

Even though I knew it was impossible, I wondered if another demon had got inside me. Maybe it had lost its way and was panicking, trying to tear its way out. Neither of us belonged in the hospital, with its off-white walls, the heavy smells of shit and bleach mingling, the hand sanitizer that the nurses carried with them everywhere and kept under lock and key because sometimes people would try drink it. High alcohol content, or maybe they were just trying to clean out the sickness. After two months confined to that bed, I was just about willing to try it myself.

Four months after my body first started trying to rip itself apart, it stopped. Everything went back to normal. The doctors tested cautiously, gave me a colourful array of little pills to take, a new warning for each one.

Between the demon and the disease I'm used to my body not belonging to me.

Morgan:

Morgan wishes there was a party she could go to, somewhere loud and noisy and angry, where she could dance and stand close to speakers until she was sure the beating music would split her head open until everything was blank and still. But no one is doing anything and she doesn't want to call her friends and have her strangeness spill onto them.

A secret little part of Morgan is ashamed. Her friends have always been the ones to dip in and out of reality; Lucy has always been a little bit mad, even on her good days, and Kate obsesses over her demon, not to mention her problems a few years ago. All Morgan has ever had is a missing mother, and now she has a voice in her head. She has always prided herself on being far too practical, too no-nonsense to get caught up in things and voices that might not be real; she never walks into the dark bush behind Lucy's house because everyone knows there are Dark Things and Dark Stories in there. When they are in Lucy's bedroom at night, Morgan makes sure she's facing the window so she can see any funny business going on in those dark, silent trees, or maybe so she can convince herself that there isn't.

There is a voice in her head. It is all so impractical and ridiculous, so very not Morgan, that she almost wants to laugh. Maybe she really is her mother's daughter after all, a crazy woman chasing echoes of voices across the land. Maybe what happened to her mother was at once far more normal and far more paranormal than she'd ever guessed. Maybe her voices had come and taken her away. Maybe—Morgan looks at her hand, still and innocent at her side—maybe there was never a choice at all. Maybe this was like a disease, something ordinary and terrible like cancer, creeping in and crawling through her body, starting with her hand and spreading until every corner and blood cell was listening to this voice and Morgan was trapped and silent in her own skin. Maybe

her mother hadn't run away; maybe this sickness had taken over her body too and walked her like a puppet, away from her family. And then she'd passed it on to Morgan, coded in her DNA.

Morgan looks at her skin, her body, her legs and arms, and then she shakes her head. This is *her* body; not any boy's, not her mother's, and certainly not any weird voice's that trickles through her mind. Morgan is going to find her mother and she will find some answers. She will bring her home if she can, and she will leave her behind if she can't, but she will find her and she will finally *know*.

She finds her father in the lounge room, flicking through a newspaper, squinting at the headlines and throwing in the odd "this bloody government" for good measure. Morgan takes a seat opposite him, glancing over at the picture of her family on the mantelpiece. Her mother smiles back at her mildly, offering nothing.

Morgan nods at the paper. "Anything good in there?"

Her father sighs dramatically. "Of course not. Just a lot of death and taxes. One celebrity had a baby and a different one forgot to wear underwear. Five pages after that there's a report on an earthquake. What's up, hon?"

Morgan presses her hands together. "I was just thinking about Scarlett, actually."

Her father stiffens. Morgan's mother doesn't come up much in their household; occasionally her father will mention something about her, a story from when they were young and in love, and then he will go quiet and they will all pretend he never said anything in the first place. Sometimes his face will twist a little, and sometimes it will droop, like he is having a stroke. "What were you thinking? Do you, uh, have any questions?" He glances up at the picture over the mantle, quickly.

“Sort of,” Morgan says slowly. She’s already regretting her decision—her father has a panicked look in his eyes and she feels more than a little guilty for putting it there. She pushes it down and presses on.

“I just wanted to know what she was like, when she was younger. Did she want to travel? What was she like before she, you know, left us?”

Her father’s face does that familiar twisty thing before he smooths it out.

“Well,” he says slowly, “I suppose she was...bright. When she was happy, it was like there was a light behind her smile. A bit like you, actually.” He glances at Morgan as if to see if this is upsetting her. She sits still, not letting her face show anything.

“She was so bright, and so beautiful. And confident when she wanted to be—did I ever tell you she was the one to ask me out?” He gives a little chuckle. “I was terrified of the girl—of all girls at that age, actually—and she walked straight up to me and told me in no uncertain terms that we were going out that Friday night.”

“How old were you?”

“Only a year or so older than you, actually.” A look of horror passes over her father’s face. “But that doesn’t mean you should feel like you should start dating, young lady. You don’t need to worry about boys for a long time. You can start dating after uni.”

“Oh, don’t worry Dad, I’m not even interested in boys yet,” Morgan assures him kindly.

“I prefer focusing on my studies.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, relaxing. “We were too young, really... Sometimes I wonder if that’s why... well.” He clears his throat. “She was a great mother. A great one. It’s all

she wanted, to be a parent—it made her so happy to be at home with you kids.” He nods to himself.

Morgan shifts in her chair. She opens and closes her mouth a few times but can’t focus on anything but the *sadness* that is pressing into the room. Her dad looks lost, small.

“Well,” she says.

“She loved you and your brother.,” her father says suddenly. “She loved you both *so much*, Morgan. More than anything.”

Then why did she leave, Morgan thinks, but she squeezes her lips together tight and stands up.

“Great. Thanks, Dad.”

“Of course, hon. Remember you can talk to me about your mum anytime, ok?”

“Sure,” she says, before escaping upstairs. She doubts she will ask him about Scarlett again; it’s unlikely he has any useful information for her, anyway. The girl he loved is not the woman Morgan is looking for.

Don’t you think any of that was useful?

“Shut up,” Morgan hisses. “I am going to the doctor’s for some powerful anti-psychotics on Monday and then you can *leave me alone*.”

Now, now, drugs are never the answer. Didn’t any of that ‘Just say no’ business sink in?

“That was in PE, when they were peddling abstinence as the magical cure-all.”

And clearly you took that deeply to heart, the voice says dryly. It sounds like it is smirking. Can voices smirk?

“Yeah, well, I discovered these things called condoms. They let me have my cake and eat it too, etcetera. Can you go away now, please?”

The voice shrugs and Morgan’s shoulders lift up and down. She swallows. Quite suddenly, her body is not her body anymore.

Sorry.

Morgan ignores it, and lies back on her bed. *Had* she learnt anything from her dad? Maybe her mum had just wandered off on a pressing errand and forgotten to come home and be a mother. Even though, according to her dad, that was what made her happiest. It just didn’t make *sense*.

She hears the familiar *thump-thump* in the hallway that means Ben is home and headed to his bedroom. On an impulse, she jumps up and intercepts him.

“Hey, Ben, you got a minute?”

Her brother shrugs. “Sure.” He follows her into her bedroom, and Morgan is struck by how out of place he looks there. He is so tall; Morgan is tall, too, but Ben is taller. He slouches a bit where he stands, as if to hide this.

“So,” Morgan says. “Uh. I was just thinking about some stuff, and wanted to ask you about it.”

“Is this why Dad was looking so freaked out downstairs?” Ben asks. He glances around the room, coming to rest on a photo of Morgan and her friends she’d wedged into the mirror.

“Yeah. I was sort of curious about Scarlett.”

Ben stiffens, looking at her sharply. “Why?”

“I don’t know, because she’s our mother? I think that’s only natural, right?”

“You haven’t spoken about Mum in years,” Ben says. “Not since we burnt all those photos after she left us.”

“Yeah, that was sorta bad. We came up with the weirdest games as kids, hey?”

Ben gives Morgan a strange look but doesn’t say anything.

“Look, I just want to figure out some things. What do you remember about her?”

He shrugs, not looking at her. “I don’t know. Mum stuff. We were only kids when she left us. Her tucking us into bed, making dinner, that kind of thing.” He hesitates. “I don’t think she was very happy, though.”

Morgan’s heart leaps. “Why?”

“She always had this wistful look on her face. I remember coming home from school early one day and she was just staring out the window. She had this cold cup of tea next to her— I don’t think she’d moved from where we’d left her for school that morning. She didn’t even hear me when I came in. It was like she was always dreaming of being somewhere else, you know? Like she wanted something more that she couldn’t find with us. I hope she found what she was looking for.”

He isn’t bitter, just disinterested, quiet. Accepting. Morgan wonders how much he’s thought about their mother since she left them. He has a much healthier attitude towards it than her, and this annoys her. She wants to be the one who is calm and accepting in the face of their mother’s abandonment. He seems to remember more than she does.

Morgan remembers her mother, but not the woman who was Scarlett. At that age, their mother had just been their mother, as constant and sure as the furniture in the house. It had always been there, and it always would. Morgan had never considered at that age if the furniture might have its own personality, or hopes and dreams.

We should've been her dreams, she thinks furiously, and she hears the voice in her head agree quietly.

Ben is flushed. He doesn't like talking about their mother, Morgan realises; it isn't much of a surprise. They never discuss Scarlett.

"Well, thanks," she offers, when she realises he's not going to say anything else. Ben shrugs, going to leave and then hesitating in the doorway.

"So, ah... Are you hanging out with Lucy and Kate this week?"

"It's possible," Morgan says dryly.

"Oh, well, I just thought, because, uh, I found this book I thought Kate might like, and, uh, yeah."

Morgan eyes him off. "Right."

So. What are you going to do, Morgan? Your mother was unhappy; is it really fair to any of you to drag her back to a world where she doesn't want to be?

Morgan blanches. Ben looks at her. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she says, too brightly. "You can leave my room now."

Ben shrugs and leaves. A few moments later, she hears his door shut.

“Please get out of my head now.” She keeps her voice low; first bringing up Scarlett, then talking to herself—she doesn’t want her family thinking she’s any crazier than they already must.

It’s my head too. Or haven’t you noticed? Morgan’s hand tingles.

And that’s it. Morgan is done. She is not going to lie there and let something else take her. She is going to fight and scream until this voice is dead. She will get electric shock therapy or she will tell her friends and the voice in her head will be gone.

She thinks all this loudly, shouting it into her own head, so she knows the voice can hear her.

Morgan. I’m not trying to take over your body. This isn’t Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Morgan frowns. “I never saw that movie.”

Well, yeah, me neither. I just figured, you know, the title. It made sense in context. The voice pauses. *Although it could’ve been another Trainspotting-style incident.*

“There was no trainspotting at *all* in that one,” Morgan says sadly.

Yeah, I think Kate was scarred for life after that.

They both pause for a moment, measuring each other out.

I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to be like this. I just wanted to talk to you. To be heard, for once.

Morgan bites her lip. “Are you real?” she asks, lowering her voice. “Did I make you up?”

You and I both know you'd be more unusual without me, Morgan. You've just never listened before. And... I don't think I'm—that we're—like the other girls. You want so much more than this.

Inexplicably, Morgan thinks of Gemma. She wants to feel like she did on that night—angry, yes, but different and strong and *alive*, most of all. She wants to track down her mother and talk to her, and she wants to leave this town. She doesn't want to have to think about being born with a demon just because she is a girl; she wants to travel and watch her friends grow up. She wants so much and she doesn't even know half of what it is yet. It is the act of *wanting* that consumes Morgan, the simple desperation that hasn't even found its way into words yet.

I can remember some things you might not be able to, Morgan. So much of it is cloudy... hidden... but I can get glimpses. Memories you may have forgotten. I could help you remember her—we could figure it out together.

Morgan doesn't hesitate.

“Okay.”

Lucy:

“Hey, Princess.” It's my father, propped up in my doorway. “How was your day?”

Good. Fine. The dead girl keeps wearing my face.

“Fine.”

My father calls himself a good man, and maybe he is. I don't know—I'm not the best judge of these things. He doesn't know how to talk to strange little girls who may or may not be the same strange little girl he took home from the hospital. He doesn't know how to talk to his silent wife, either. My parents don't talk to each other much. I think my mother doesn't like that my father likes me. She likes him at least, a lot more than she likes me, even if she doesn't talk to him. I hear them having sex sometimes. They both moan a lot.

“And how are things with your friends? Kate and Morgan?”

My father loves Kate and Morgan because they are sweet girls who smile nicely and know how to act. He can't see the little cracks in their skin.

“Yeah, they're great, Dad.”

I would talk to him and try to care, but I can't. It's all so tiring. My body is wearing out on me, my lifelong disease finally creeping into every cell. It wouldn't show up on a scan, but it's there. I can feel it. It tastes like dirt and metal. I can't waste energy on talking to this man when poison crawls through my veins.

“Lucy...” He swings his hands, rocking back on his heels a little. Speaks gently.

“Sweetheart, would you tell your mum if there was something wrong?”

A happy, well-adjusted girl looks up and rolls her eyes with a smile, indulging her dear old Dad. “Dad, nothing's wrong. Don't be weird.”

He chuckles. “Okay then.” He ruffles my hair and turns to go. “Oh— your medicine.”

He brings me the plastic container that holds my meds, numbered one day at a time.

There are some colours missing from my rainbow. I look up at my father and he winks, putting his finger to his lips.

Well. He thinks I'm better, then. Getting better. I roll the remaining pills between my fingers. Father knows best, and all that, I suppose.

My mother always returns and checks my mouth to see if I've swallowed. My father never thinks to, because I am a good girl.

"Hey, Dad?"

He turns. "Yes, Princess?"

I hesitate, shut my mouth. "Nothing."

I want to keep it my own secret. Not just the girl in the bush, but all of it. I want to keep it hidden.

Some days I want to punch myself senseless, pummel and claw at my body until big, nasty welts rise up, bruises blossoming across my skin. I want to destroy something and feel it in my gut. If I was braver, I'd have angry sex with strangers, but I don't want their poison leaking inside of me. I can barely handle my own.

It is not normal to be this angry all the time.

Some days I wake up and my body is an alien to me. My arms and legs feel sluggish and fat, useless slabs of someone else's meat sewn onto a torso. My stomach is distended and sick. My chest has fractures running through it.

Somewhere, a father steals and promises his firstborn as repayment.

Somewhere, a father turns his daughter to solid gold with a touch.

Somewhere, a father abandons his children in a forest because he can't afford to feed them anymore.

Somewhere, a father turns out his daughter when she likens her love for him to salt.

Somewhere, a father creeps into his daughter's bedroom at night, thinking of her mother. He promises dresses of sunlight, of moonlight, as he destroys her, marries her. The girl wears a skin of donkey and escapes.

Somewhere, a father creeps into his daughter's bedroom at night, thinking of her. The girl has no skin to wear but her own. The girl escapes inside her own head.

Somewhere, a father does not know his daughter, and he does not realise that he does not know his daughter. He thinks he has another daughter, and he does not know how to talk to her. Some fathers are distanced from their daughters in small little ways; they only speak in platitudes.

Somewhere, a thousand fathers are cutting apart their daughters piece by piece. Fathers are selling their daughters to forgive their own sins. Many more fathers are loving their daughters, purely and powerfully; but these fathers are unknown to too many daughters.

Somewhere, a father tells his daughter a bedtime story.

Morgan:

Her father is on the phone to Aunt Laura. He waves at her when she comes in, rolling his eyes and pointing at the phone, which Morgan takes to mean he could be awhile. He and his sister don't see each other much, but she has been a constant presence on the phone throughout Morgan's life, especially since her mother had moved out. From her own conversations with Laura, she had gathered her aunt had been quite close to her mother.

Her mother doesn't have any family, although she must have had them at some point. The five siblings, all girls. Morgan is sure she'd heard her mother speaking about her own mother before, but whenever she tries to grasp onto the memory it slips through her fingers like water. She had to have had a mother of her own, but Morgan has never met any grandparents on her mother's side. She knows her mother is one of six, but the only aunt she's ever heard of is her father's sister.

Can a woman have no family at all? Is Morgan just the latest in a line of motherless daughters? She doesn't know why she's never questioned this before. Her mother had spoken about ancestors as people to listen to, to learn from—like they were something to tie themselves to, but her mother herself was adrift, untethered to anyone but her own small family, and then she'd cut herself free of them too.

It is like a riddle. How can a woman have five sisters but no family? How can she exist, but have no parents of her own?

How can she herself, being motherless, choose to cast her daughter the same way?

Morgan thinks, *I am a daughter in a family where the women are ghosts.*

“I think we’ve actually done it,” Lucy says. “We’ve found the world’s worst movie. Ever.”

“I don’t know, I think it’s got that escapist fantasy thing going for it.” I stretch out on the lounge, accidentally kicking Lucy. We’re up to the third film in our bad movie marathon.

Morgan shrugs, dismissive. “Urgh. I don’t understand why anyone enjoys that sort of stuff. Reality is weird enough, thank you very much.”

She flicks her hand out, once, twice.

“Had enough coffee today?” I ask her, nodding at her hand.

Morgan starts, then gives a half smile. “Not enough, actually. I’ll be right back, bearing caffeinated goods for all. You’re welcome.”

“She’s very jittery today,” Lucy comments.

“Mm. Still, it’s not like she’ll stunt her growth if she overdoses on coffee.”

“What are you guys watching?”

Ben is leaning against the door, a few books under his arm.

“Something that involves vampires and a love that cannot be realised. Trust us, you don’t want to know.” I glance over the books he’s holding—one stands out, looking suspiciously like a non-fiction book about whales. Ben sees me staring and he draws it out, grinning.

“It’s a new edition,” he stage-whispers. “Has all this stuff on their social behaviour... I trust you’ll keep this to yourself?”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, and he grins at me.

“So, I just downloaded this new documentary—maybe you’d like to see it later? If it doesn’t get in the way of the vampires.”

“Yeah, that would be great, actually,” I say.

Lucy is looking between us, back and forth.

“I’m not that interested in whales, myself,” she says loudly. “I might skip that one.”

Ben flushes a little bit.

“Well...” he says. “I might get started on some reading. I’ll see you guys later.”

I keep my eyes on the screen as he climbs the stairs, studiously trying to avoid meeting Lucy’s gaze.

“Interesting,” she says. “Ben, huh?” She looks far more alert now.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

“Just... be careful, Katie, okay?”

I keep my eyes trained on the screen and nod.

When Morgan comes back into the room laden down with drinks and popcorn, Lucy unpauses the movie. When it finishes, she suggests we watch the sequel. Morgan shrugs, rolling her wrist out again and again. I try not to think of Ben upstairs.

Morgan:

Late in the afternoon, after Kate and Lucy have gone home, Morgan invites her boyfriend over. He is excited, ready to get straight to business, and Morgan—and the voice, for that matter— aren't complaining.

He is kissing up and down her left leg, trailing fingers across her thigh. He is nervous— she can hear him swallow, the sound catching in his throat, like the emotion is a little too big for him. She closes her eyes and focuses on the sensation. She reaches down, bumping his shoulder so he comes up to join her. Morgan is all about fairness when it comes to sex—she likes to know all parties are enjoying themselves. She does not cater to fragile egos, either—she learnt early on that prompting or faking enthusiastic moans only taught boys that they could do no wrong, and yes, she *would* love him to continue that weird grinding thing that didn't hurt at all.

Soon, the boyfriend is tugging at his jeans. Morgan helps him strip them off. He shifts on top of her, his weight heavier than she expected.

They are kissing now, both doing very interesting things to each other. Morgan likes the way this boy can make her feel, although she's not particularly in favour of how practised he feels, like this is his standard set of moves that he assumes all his partners will adore equally. She tries to cut him some slack, though—he's a sweet guy, sensitive and always kind, and she figures maybe he's still a little nervous— and she relaxes into him, encouraging him to respond to her movements.

“Hey,” he whispers. “Is this okay?”

Morgan nods, dipping to kiss his neck. She pulls his hips against her, enjoying the flush of warmth, but he jerks away.

She stops immediately. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, yeah, definitely! It’s just... don’t you need to, you know, take your pill?”

Morgan blinks in confusion, feels the voice echoing it in her head. “I’m covered with my birth control, thanks.” She takes her pill at 7am every day, not a minute late. She nods to her bedside table. “And if we need more condoms, I have us covered, if you’ll excuse the terrible pun.”

He smiles. “No, I mean the HMP. I haven’t seen you take them, so I figured I’d pick some up.” He digs in his jeans pocket on the floor, and Morgan catches a flash of purple. “Got to keep you safe and healthy, in body and mind.” He sounds proud.

“Nope,” Morgan says flatly. “I don’t take them.”

“But...” he looks lost. “Aren’t you... isn’t that dangerous?” He was the kind of boy who written down all the health tips taught in the Year 9 PE class, and studied them obediently, Morgan realises. “So—you haven’t been taking anything this whole time?” His voice rises a little, panicking.

“I don’t like them,” she says, trying to be patient. “They’re not necessary.”

“Okay,” he says, very slowly, like he’s trying to understand. “But—”

“Can we get back to more important matters, please?”

She dips down to kiss him, reaching into his boxers. He responds as she knew he would, squirming out of them eagerly and reaching for her, shifting his weight until they are flush against each other—

“Condom,” she reminds him.

The boyfriend pulls a face she assumes is meant to be endearing. “Couldn’t we... you know... go without one? Just this once? I’ll pull out, it’ll be okay, and it’d feel so good...”

Morgan stares at him and laughs.

Afterwards, as she cleans up, Morgan sees the small purple pills where they’d spilt onto the floor. The boyfriend had bought a whole pack, enough for months of sex—someone was feeling confident— and the packaging beams up at her.

Hysteria Modification Pills! A necessity for sexually active women. HMP offers a clear, calm mind, minimising potential emotional distress in those possessing a parabiopsychological entity. For women only. Do not take in excess of three in a 12 hour period in case of overdose. No prescription necessary.

She throws the pills and package in the bin, and goes to the bathroom to wash her hands until there’s no trace of purple staining her skin.

Kate:

I didn’t end up seeing Ben again that day. He was in his room with the door shut tight when we finally finished watching movies and I felt weirdly shy about knocking. Every so often, I felt Lucy watching me.

It wasn’t like I’d fallen deeply in love with him after one proper conversation, like the sad-eyed girl in the vampire movies. What was startling me was that old familiar feeling sliding around low in my belly. I was attracted to Ben. He was nice, too, yes, and I

genuinely liked him, but it's not like we really knew each other. Sure, we'd played together as kids, but I'd also thought Play-Doh was a delicacy when I was a kid. I didn't really know grown-up Ben, but I'd like to. But my main drive for this wasn't romance, it was that rushing feeling in my gut that made me just want to... grab him.

My mother pokes her head around the door. "Can you cook dinner, sweetheart? Your father's still at the office and I have to call a client. And you know I don't trust your brother in the kitchen."

"Ok. Sure."

The ingredients are already laid out neatly on the counter, all lined up like patient soldiers. I start with the vegetables, washing and rewashing them. I grind them into little bits and I chop them finely but I leave big chunks here and there. If Mum thinks I'm too good at cooking, she'll ask me to do it more often. She loves it when I'm in the kitchen.

The pan is on the stovetop. Oil is slicked across the bottom, waiting for me.

It's chicken. I hate raw chicken. I mean, I really, really hate raw chicken. I can't touch it—it's so fleshy and cold and slimy. I hate seeing the indentations of my fingers in it.

Cutting into it is the worst. It's the way it moves. I don't have this problem with red meat. Red meat looks the way it should, but raw chicken makes me think about human flesh. I'm pretty sure humans are red meat, but something about the way the meat feels... It makes me feel like I'm cutting into someone's belly, or a breast. The skin's been peeled off and this is all just flesh, someone's body, my body. I'm slicing up my own belly.

I gag and let the knife clatter into the sink. I vomit, but there's nothing in my stomach to throw up, so I spit hot bile out again and again, until I feel empty.

A mirror's advice:

It's very easy to be a good girl.

Be kind, be quiet, be gentle and loving. Be demure, have long hair that never tangles and smooth skin that never blemishes.

Be beautiful (*whether it be through the luck of genetics or a dump-truck's worth of makeup, or surgery. Make it happen*) but don't be conceited about it.

Be chaste (*don't fuck around you little whore*) but don't be a tease (*don't be unavailable, don't you dare lead him on because if he keeps going you deserved it*).

Be easygoing (*don't ask questions, don't raise your voice, don't protest*).

Be brave (*try a new lipstick colour but don't speak out, don't rock the boat*).

Be yourself (*don't*).

Lucy:

My father is in my bedroom again. My father is always in my bedroom. Or maybe I just think he is and this is the one and the same day. Maybe I'm confused. He just wants to help, wants to make sure I'm okay. He can't see inside me the way I suspect my mother can. That's why she hates me so much.

I think my mother did not want to be a mother, and if she did, she changed her mind when she met me. I think it's not fair to her that all I can think of her is mother, rather than woman, person. If I could see her as a girl, then I could understand her more.

She does not like to touch me.

"Did you take your medicine?" my father asks, pausing at the door.

"Yes."

But I won't, I won't, I won't.

I'm not being stupid. I'm curious. I want to know what happens if I let the demon wake up. I feel full and slow and hateful—I need to bruise my insides, get hit with something sharp to wake myself up. I don't like all those colourful little pills that slow me down and try to plant themselves in my brain, in my belly. They grow dull roots that are already dead but continue to grow and grow.

I do not want to hurt all the time.

Kate:

Something strange happened to me once: I forgot how to eat.

Nothing special, nothing otherworldly. I just—forgot. I couldn't do it. I sat down one day and everything in front of me looked alien. Not just the utensils, all that silver and metal gleaming at my fingertips, but the food. All those colours. Everything was bright and so solid. I watched my family load up a shining fork with chunks and force it into their mouths, jaws working it into mush. Their throats flexed and fell as they worked the

lumps down; it was like watching a snake swallow a rat. Everything about the process looked wrong. It *felt* wrong, on an instinctual level. How did little children do it, I wondered, how did they know to put things behind their lips and chew?

My fingers itched. I speared a piece of meat and brought it to my lips, but I couldn't force it further. It would be like chewing on a piece of my own tongue.

So I stopped eating. My parents thought I was dieting at first, or being difficult. They didn't understand that I just couldn't do it. I knew, if they managed to get all that heaviness into my stomach, my body wouldn't digest it, and it would sit, rotting away in my gut. My body was as confused as my mind—we didn't know what to make of it all.

My parents tried to force me to eat, threatened to hold me down and shovel lumps down my throat. I screamed and cried and begged them, and I think that's when they started to believe me. They cried too, and my father promised me *anything, any present you could want, if you would just eat, darling*. But I couldn't. Food made me gag; I didn't know to use my teeth, how to move my throat to swallow. It's meant to be a reflex, but it seemed all my instincts, all my reflexes had abandoned me. I thought otherwise—I'd learned all those behaviours, artificial actions, and now I'd forgotten them. I would have to relearn them, but it was worse than trying to learn a new language in a different tongue, when you've never heard the sounds before.

They couldn't make me eat, no more than you can force a snake to fly. I couldn't do it. I wouldn't.

Morgan:

When Morgan was younger, she liked to imagine that her mother was a princess in a quest. She wouldn't dress up like a boy to disguise herself—Morgan hated those stories—but she would wear whatever she wanted and send her long hair flying free. She would fight dragons and rip out the heart of a chimera with her bare hands. She would stare down bears and wizards and she would travel into the Underworld, all to fulfil her quest and find what it was that she was looking for.

In the most secret parts of Morgan's fantasies, her mother would come to the end of her quest, this wild, fierce woman, and when the king or the god or the wise witch offered her the prize she had been seeking, Morgan's mother would raise a hand and shake her head.

"No thanks," she'd say. "I have to get home to my real prize—to my daughter." She'd shake their hand or talon and she would march off briskly, ready to tuck Morgan in, even if she was too old for it.

It was more than a little trite and certainly needed work, but Morgan still liked this fantasy. It had always soothed her to picture her mother riding across strange lands and fighting immortal beasts. Now, though, she knew. Her mother wasn't going to return from this quest; her mother was not the hero of this story. Morgan was.

There was once a young girl, born to a fine, upstanding family of wealth and success. She had a delightful childhood, with everything she could ever want for provided to her. Her family loved her dearly; her parents doted on her. She grew into a kind, beautiful young woman, one who would one day make a fine wife and mother. But as she grew

older, she began to long for something more, something outside the ivory walls of her home. She wanted adventure, to fight dragons and see the real world, to eat fruit she had grown herself.

Her parents were worried and they discussed it at length in their bedchambers. Her father was against the idea but his wife convinced him. She recognised the longing in her daughter's eyes, and she remembered what it had been like to be a young girl, so excited to see the world. And so, not wanting to trap their daughter, and as always, wanting desperately for her to have everything her heart desired, they kissed her brow and sent her out into the world.

The girl set off at dawn, brimming with excitement. The narrator decided to come along too and offer some useful advice, because sometimes they got really bloody sick of just watching these same old stories, you know?

It wasn't long until they came across a wizened old woman, begging at the steps of the church in the town centre.

"Ah, the locals are about," said the narrator. "Quick question before you run over there and demonstrate your ridiculously kind and trusting nature: have you been betrothed to any princes, lately?"

"No," said the girl.

"Carry on, then."

At once the girl fell to her knees in front of the old woman, clasping her hands.

"You poor thing! What fate has befallen you to leave you so?"

“My dear child, it is nothing but life; I am grateful to be able to sit in the sun, and be blessed by the kindness of passersby. I am fortunate; there is no need to cry for me so.”

The girl drew out a loaf of bread, still warm and fresh from that morning. She pressed it into the woman’s hands along with a gold coin, enough to buy a hundred more loaves.

“How are you with today’s exchange rate?” the narrator enquired, but the girl didn’t appear to hear them.

“Oh, thank you, sweet child,” the woman cried. She waved to the girl and the narrator as they set off again.

“Why did you ask if I was betrothed, before?” the girl asked.

“Oh, it’s no big deal. If you had been, the wizened old woman would have been a jealous stepmother or even a witch, come to poison or maim you to prevent you marrying her son and taking over the throne. As you’re not, she’s just your garden-variety beautiful wise witch disguised as a beggar woman. You showed her kindness, so I’m sure we’ll run into her again when you’re in a jam and she’ll reward you, yada yada yada.”

The girl had gone quite pale. “A stepmother—a w-witch?”

“Yes, well, it was pretty obvious, wasn’t it? I even described her as wizened. If you’re wizened, you’re either a good or bad witch in disguise— or you’re a rotting apple.”

They continued on their way, the girl considering the narrator’s clever words.

“What if I’d overlooked her completely, or been cruel?”

“Well, then you would’ve been looking at your stock standard vengeance/teaching curse. I mean, most of them *say* it’s to teach you young upstarts a lesson, but we all know that it’s more about the vengeance than anything else, don’t we.”

As they walked further into town, they began to garner more stares. Well, the girl did, anyway, what with her rich clothes and long skirts and hair that had little to no lice in it.

A young boy, no more than five, ran up to the girl. He stared at her shyly, one thumb in his mouth and the other hand behind his back.

“Why hello,” the girl said with a smile, crouching down to meet him. “How do you—oh!”

For the boy had thrown a handful of mud at her and snatched her ruby necklace from around her throat, then sprinted off.

The girl blinked up at the narrator.

“To be fair, you *were* wearing rubies,” they reminded her. “Do you normally adorn yourself with fine jewels for hiking trips?”

“It was from my mother,” the girl said sadly, and the narrator patted her hand.

“Never mind, I’m sure you’ll come across it again at some point through some series of contrived coincidences. Speaking of, I suggest you start running.”

The little boy had clearly fetched his older brothers to alert them of the rich lady in town; they entered the town square with eager eyes.

The two ran, darting around corners and narrow laneways. As they passed an almost hidden doorway, a hand shot out and grabbed the girl’s arm, dragging her inside. The narrator followed her in cheerfully.

“I’m sorry for startling you, young lady,” their rescuer said. “I heard those boys chasing you, and I wanted to help.”

“Oh, thank you ever so much!” the girl cried, wringing his hand. “You are a good man, sir.”

“I am just a lowly shoemaker,” the shoemaker said modestly. “Perhaps you have seen my work—your own father often commissions my services for your family.”

“Of course!” the girl said warmly. “Why, you must be the finest shoemaker in all the land, and a hero to boot!”

“I love puns. I must try include them more often,” the narrator said thoughtfully. “I do find it hard to slip them in, though.” The other two ignored this.

“If you don’t mind me asking, my lady, what are you doing outside of your castle walls?”

“I wanted to seek my fortune,” the girl confided. Her eyes lit up. “I wanted to see the real world, to seek adventure.” She wilted for a moment. “I suppose you must think this is all rather silly.”

“Not at all!” the shoemaker cried warmly. The narrator sneezed. “In fact, my lady, let me help you on your way!”

“Oh, thank you, good shoemaker. I must say, I knew I was slightly naïve, but I wasn’t expecting all that out there.”

“Not to worry,” said the shoemaker, rummaging through a closet. “We shall soon have you sorted. Here—some of my finest walking boots. Even if your body grows tired, your shoes will never weaken.”

The girl thanked him and slipped her feet into the boots.

“Also,” the shoemaker said. “Ah, well, you had better disguise yourself in these clothes of my son, and hide those locks under this cap. My wife will help you bind your chest, and we will smear ashes from the fireplace across your face to better hide your true nature.”

Our lovely heroine blinked in confusion. “But why must I pretend to be a boy? Can I not dress as a peasant girl?”

The shoemaker shifted, looking uncomfortable. “Ah, well, my dear... we don’t want to cause any unwanted attention, you see. A young girl, wandering the countryside by herself? You could be set on by thieves or vagabonds!”

“HE MEANS YOU’LL TOTALLY GET RAPED,” the narrator explained helpfully.

“No, no, it’s not that,” the shoemaker hastened to say, glaring at the narrator when he thought the girl wasn’t looking. “It’s a safety precaution, yes, but it’s also a grand tradition! Princesses and girls of noble stature have been coming through these parts for years, and they always dress up as boys to have adventures.”

The girl frowned. “Why? Can’t I head out and have an adventure on my own, without cross-dressing? Are you saying girls can’t have adventures?”

“No,” said the shoemaker.

“Yes,” said the narrator.

“So what about when your wife goes out for a walk in the afternoons? Do you make her dress up in your clothes, as a ‘safety precaution’?”

“No, not at all, my lady. For one thing, my wife would never take such a risk—walking around on her own through public spaces, indeed! You’re a fanciful little thing, aren’t you? What I mean to say is, only the silliest of girls would do such a thing on their own. They would have no one to blame but themselves if they were to be set upon!”

“I can’t help but feel that your logic is flawed,” said the narrator.

“And anyway,” the shoemaker added reassuringly, “My wife is far too ugly and old to be attacked. Men only attack pretty young girls.”

“Again, I don’t think your logic checks out,” the narrator said.

The girl frowned prettily. “And what do you mean, princesses and girls of noble stature? Don’t girls from other classes go on adventures through here?”

“Well, not really, my lady. Exciting whims such as yours simply do not occur to those from simpler backgrounds. Simple backgrounds, simple minds, you know.”

“They’re generally too busy milking cows and supporting their families,” explained the narrator.

The shoemaker barely suppressed a growl. “Do you *mind*?” he snapped at the narrator.

“I am *trying* to uphold a grand tradition and help this lovely maiden on her way, and you are being really bloody annoying.”

“Oh, shut up,” the narrator said cheerfully, “or I’ll write one of your appendages into a toad.”

Looking greatly offended, the shoemaker pressed his lips together tightly.

“Well,” the girl said. “I suppose we best be on our way. Thank you for your hospitality.”

The shoemaker glanced at the narrator before speaking. “Of course, my lady. Best wishes to you, from a humble shoemaker.” He brightened. “I must warn you, before you go. On the edge of town, there are two roads that lead out into the country. One is longer, but it is safe. The other is far shorter, but on an abandoned path through a forest that is said to be haunted. Do not take that road—only death awaits you there.”

The narrator looked at the girl. “Guess which road we’re going to take. Go on. Take a guess.”

“And watch out for devious creatures,” the shoemaker said, ignoring the narrator. “They may try trick you and lure you into their traps. It’s ogre season, too, and they’d just love a chance to gobble up a pretty little thing like you.”

“Thank you for your advice,” the girl said, “But I’m quite sure I can manage.”

The narrator wisely refrained from pointing out that until two hours ago, she’d never even seen a rat. She’d thought it was some kind of malnourished rabbit and had tried to feed and sing to it. Luckily, there was no such thing as rabies in this story.

The shoemaker led them to the door. “Are you *quite* sure you don’t want to wear the boys’ clothes?” he asked sadly.

“Very sure,” the girl said.

“But what about the vagabonds and thieves?” the shoemaker wheedled. He looked very disappointed at her refusal.

The narrator clapped. “Alright, that’s it. You’ve got a toad. Toads for you.”

The shoemaker turned an especially striking shade of puce and slammed the door. They could hear him cursing as they walked down the road.

“I didn’t see any toad,” the girl said, puzzled.

“Oh, don’t worry, it was there,” the narrator said brightly. “Just not anywhere you could see.”

They set off towards the edge of town. As they walked, the buildings began to fall away, leading to more and more fields where sheep, horses, and the occasional unicorn grazed.

“These shoes are actually quite comfortable,” the girl commented.

At last they came to a fork in the road. The road that veered off to the left was paved with golden bricks, and looked wide and clear. The road to the right had broken cobblestones twisting along its path, and quickly disappeared out of sight into a dark forest that loomed over their heads ominously. Whispers came from the blackened, gnarled trees.

“Hm,” said the girl.

“It’s a bit much, isn’t it?” the narrator mused, a critical eye surveying the forest. “The glowing, sunlit path, and the creepy forest one with the sign that says DO NOT ENTER at the entrance. Might have gone a bit overboard there.”

A lone crow screeched.

“I do think the crow’s a nice touch. I deliberated between crow and raven—which one is creepier, do you think?”

“I want to go through there,” the girl said.

The narrator grinned. “Course you do. You don’t want to try the easy-but-longer path first before something outside of your control steers you onto the shortcut?”

“Nope,” the girl said. “Wait—give us a minute.”

She strode over to the warning sign and snapped off the post, leaving the sign still propped up so all could see it. She hefted the stick into her hands: now she had a sharpened spear, ready to go.

“Resourceful,” the narrator said. “I like that. Much more preferable than the idiotic ones who blindly decide to wander into the death-forest because it’s shorter, and they think the little woodland animals will protect them, or the boring ones who decide to go on the nice, shiny path.”

“I read a lot of books while I was safe in my family castle,” the girl explained. “The characters never did what I wanted them to do. If I do this, I want to do things the way I want, because I choose them. And if I’m supposed to end up on this path anyway, I may as well do it of my own volition.”

“Fair enough,” the narrator said, nodding. “I should probably warn you then, that the chances of you encountering a malevolent forest spirit are high. You’ll be confronted with thinly veiled metaphors so that you can grow as a person and ultimately become a well-rounded heroine, although really, it’s a cookie-cutter set of attributes. And you’re already so sweet and thoughtful that you don’t have far to go.”

The girl considered this for a moment. “Will I get to fight a dragon?”

“Most likely, yes, although you may defeat it with, you know, the power of words.”

“Or a sword.”

“Yes, or with a sword.”

“Okay then,” the girl said, smiling at the narrator. “Let’s go.”

And so, with the heroine swinging her spear and the clever narrator whistling merrily, they set off into the forest, ready to start a new story.

Lucy:

One day I wake up and my hair has been replaced with cobwebs. Tiny little black balls with too many legs spin out from the sticky strands, weaving their stories in and out. I take great care not to unseat them when I take my shower, but when I look into the mirror again—*if you wear a skirt that short, you're really just asking for it*—my head is once more framed by a matted blonde halo. If I lived where I belonged I could trade strands in for goods, or weave it into gold, or climb from it out of an ivory tower and let the spiders weave me a new crown, but I live here where it needs a good wash with Pantene. I scrape it back into a ponytail instead. The mirror reminds me—it's talkative today—that *ponytails make your cheekbones look too pointy and the shadows under your eyes too dark and maybe you should just invest in a paper bag?*

Kate:

“Let’s go to a party,” Morgan says, and I’m brought back to that last party, where things started unwinding in different ways. It wasn’t so long ago, but it feels like a year has passed in the meantime.

Lucy isn't talking much today so I speak for the both of us. "Where?" I won't let Lucy out of my sight this time. I will follow her like a goddamn bloodhound because I'm decided, I'm not going to let either of my friends slip any further away.

"Ben mentioned something about a friend of a friend. And you know that if *Ben's* going to something, everyone's going."

I start. It's the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, frequency illusion drilling funny little connections in my mind. Suddenly Ben is everywhere, despite the fact that when he was Morgan's twin brother only weeks ago, he was quite safe and invisible hidden away in his bedroom.

"Okay," I say.

Lucy tucks her hair up under a beanie and says nothing.

Morgan:

Now that they're standing in the doorway, Morgan isn't sure that this was such a great idea. They had to drive right out of town to get here; the house is built on farming land, so there are no neighbours around for kilometres. The inhabitants of the party seem to be taking full advantage of this: the music is turned up so loud that it pounds the wall, and Morgan can't make out any lyrics.

Dark purple wine is in a bowl at the entrance, and chalices—there's no other word for them—stand nearby, waiting to be filled. Morgan thinks of poison and potions staining the guests' lips.

Morgan and Kate avoid the bowl, although Lucy takes a chalice and fills it to the brim.

Kate stares at her.

“You can’t be serious.”

Lucy shrugs.

“Luce—” Kate looks to Morgan as if for help—“Anything could be in there. You have no idea.”

Lucy sighs, takes a mouthful, then pours the rest back into the bowl. “You guys would have looked after me anyway,” she points out.

Morgan is struck for a moment at how much Kate must do for them. Lucy and Morgan are always happy to run off and do this kind of thing, not so much because they think they’re immortal, but to test things. Morgan has always been reckless, and in the past year Lucy has taken this side of her personality on as well. Still, Morgan was always safe, which took an edge off the very concept of being reckless, but she wasn’t an idiot. She only drank too much when she knew her friends were there to look after her, and she didn’t climb into backseats with boys she’d just met. Of course, she knew almost everyone in their small town, so this wasn’t hard to maintain, and Morgan had spent her fair share of time in backseats anyway.

Kate was always there to watch them, though. She drank too, but always made sure the three of them were safe so Morgan and Lucy could run off and do whatever they saw fit. A part of Morgan has resented this at times, but right now she just feels grateful. She slings an arm around Kate and hugs her.

“Love you, Katie.”

Kate sticks her tongue out in response. Lucy is smiling softly, happy watching them. They are caught in their little bubble, right before it bursts and they break off to explore the party.

“See you guys soon?” Morgan asks. “I’m going to find something to drink that won’t turn my teeth bright purple.”

Lucy and Kate nod and Morgan watches them go with a rush of affection. Her girls—they are the only good things about this town.

Morgan goes into the kitchen and grabs a beer. She smiles unenthusiastically at some hopeful boys, hugs an old boyfriend, and makes her way outside. She wants to be alone, to regroup and plan.

“So,” she says. “How are you going to help me find my mother?”

This is interesting. We’re at a party at eleven at night, and you’re not drunk.

“Give me time,” Morgan mutters, but she doesn’t feel like drinking tonight. She wants to strategize.

I’m not sure. I just know that I can help. There are...pieces that I can see. In your mind. They’re fractured, forgotten, but... they’re there.

Morgan hesitates. “What *are* you?”

The voice takes awhile to answer. *You know what I am, Morgan.*

Morgan sighs. “Yeah.”

Or... I don't even know what I am, to be honest. I see everything you see, and I feel what you feel. I'm a part of you—I'm you—but I'm not you. I don't know. Does that make any sense?

“No,” Morgan says. “Yes,” she decides, a second later.

I feel like I was only just born. I've been here your whole life, but I've never understood. I've never had a voice. I've been trying to speak for over a year.

Morgan chews on her lower lip. “I never heard you.”

Well, you're very loud, Morgan. Speaking of, someone's coming, so you should probably stop talking to yourself.

Morgan looks up. Beth, she of the demonless, the voiceless, is coming towards her. Or more accurately, Beth is wandering in a loose circle, tugging at her hair. Her eyes are dull and vacant.

Shit.

Morgan's not sure if this thought comes from her or the voice, but she agrees, either way.

“Are you okay?” she asks, walking over to Beth.

The other girl looks up at her, surprised. She makes a discernible effort to pull herself together, and it's like watching someone try slip on a mask. Morgan recognises it immediately; she's seen Lucy do it around strangers too many times to count.

“Oh... yes. Fine. I was just thinking, you know. Getting some fresh air.”

“Right,” says Morgan slowly. Beth is clearly not okay, but is this really Morgan’s problem? She might be acting a little, well, unusual, but Morgan has never really known or particularly liked the girl. For all she knows, maybe this is normal behaviour for Beth. The girl is cured, for fuck’s sake.

A clump of hair comes out of Beth’s scalp. They both stare at it. The lock of red curls up in the palm of Beth’s hand, like a little pet snake.

“You might want to swap your shampoo provider,” Morgan says.

Beth smiles. Her face is quite blank.

“It’s nice,” she says. “Being normal. Being the special one. I was never the special one before, you know, not even in primary school where they give you ribbons and certificates for drawing a straight line. You should try it sometime,” she adds. Her eyes are unfocused; Morgan wonders how much the other girl had had to drink. “They don’t make you take all the pills anymore. I didn’t even realise that that taste in the back of my mouth, like chalk, that it wasn’t normal.”

“Erm,” Morgan says. “Okay...” She glances around, unsure if she should get someone more responsible than herself. Kate would be much more useful in this situation.

“Listen, maybe you should go have a water or something. Or a tea, I could make you a tea?”

“I wanted it all to stop, you know? You get so tired of the pills, and the rules... It’s over now. I’m finally free of it.”

“Beth,” Morgan says. “Seriously. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Beth says. She is already walking off. “How can I not be? I’m special now. Being normal makes you special.”

She shrugs, and then she is gone, leaving Morgan standing there, alone but for the voice in her head.

Lucy:

There are monsters at this party, beasts at the door and clawing at each other. They are all wearing human skins, but I can see them slipping, the hollow eyes behind the skin. I avoid all the mirrors, because I don’t want to see what I look like.

Kate is following me very closely while pretending not to, and I pretend I don’t notice.

The monsters cling to each other. When they pull away, they leave rivulets of blood running down the other’s arms. I watch them all carefully: I am an anthropologist, studying the habits of monsters.

When I look at Katie, so close behind me she keeps stepping on my heels, I am relieved to see she looks like a girl. There are humans here, plenty of them, even more than the monsters, but they can’t seem to see the way I can. Kate is smiling, relaxed, so I know she can’t see the monsters, just the human skins they wear.

The mouthful of purple wine I took is ice cold in my gut. I stare straight ahead.

Monsters don’t scare me.

From behind me, I hear Kate speak.

“Hi!” she says, sounding surprised. “I didn’t realise you were here already—are you having fun?”

I spin around and see it, the very worst monster-beast. He is vicious and venomous and he wears his human skin well. But how can it be here? Kate doesn’t know the monster, she will never know him... I blink, and the image dissolves. The monster vanishes and Ben stands in its place. Ben is not a monster, not the monster. I got confused—I’m seeing things where they shouldn’t be, superimposing monsters over friends.

Just to be sure, I eye Ben carefully. There are no cracks at the seams; this is his skin. He is safe.

It takes me a moment to realise that Kate and Ben are both staring at *me*, now. Ben looks a little frightened, which only confirms my assessment. The monster-beast doesn’t get frightened.

“Uh, yes, I’m having fun,” Ben says, remembering Kate. He tears his gaze away.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt...”

“You didn’t,” Kate says. “Actually, give us one second, will you?” She grabs my arm and drags me away. When we are suitably out of range, she turns to me.

“Luce, why are you staring at Ben like he just murdered a kitten?”

“Was I?” I can’t really explain that I thought he was a monster, the king of the monster-beasts. Or can I? “No, it was mistaken identity. I thought he was someone else.”

“Who?” Kate asks. She looks a little exasperated. Ben has long since vanished into the crowd.

“I don’t know. Sorry. I’m being weird, aren’t I?” I rub my arms. My head is so much clearer since I stopped taking my medicine, but maybe that’s the problem. I can see all the missing stories.

“No, you’re just being Lucy,” Kate says, but she grins at me. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Just, maybe stop scaring Morgan’s brother?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t you mean, stop scaring Morgan’s brother *off*?”

Kate turns a very satisfying shade of red.

“It’s fine,” I tell her, patting her hand. “Anyway, he’ll come back before the night is over. You two keep looking at each other with, like... googly eyes.”

Kate screws up her nose. “Googly eyes?”

I shrug. “I’m not judging, Katie. Look, I’m going to head home. I don’t feel like all this tonight.” I gesture at the party around me, taking care not to look at any of the monsters. If I react, Kate will see and she will follow me home to tuck me into bed. I don’t want that.

Kate still hesitates. “Are you sure? We only just got here. Do you want me to come?”

“Nope,” I say. I kiss her on the cheek, pretending that that can offer her some protection from the monsters. I think she’ll be okay. The monsters aren’t after her. The monster-beast isn’t here.

I head out into the night, walking towards the bush.

Kate:

Lucy is gone before I can say anything else. I throw up my hands. At least she won't be getting into any trouble. Morgan has vanished, too. I debate looking for her, but I think Lucy had the better idea. It's so crowded here, bodies pressing up against each other, and there's nothing really discernible happening—it's a lot of loud noise and yelling.

There is something growling in my stomach. My skin is prickling, and I feel flushed, like I'm burning up.

I want to kiss Ben.

The thought is not entirely a surprise, but I'm still taken back. The want surges to life, hot flames licking at my gut.

I want to kiss Ben, and I don't want to wait around for him to notice. I want to be the one to kiss him, to pull him down and press myself against him. I want to kiss him until he kisses me back and I want it to be messy and stupid. I want our teeth to clash and there to be awkward neck pain from leaning in for too long. I want us to turn our heads the wrong way at the same time, and feel confused by it all but keep doing it anyway. I don't want it to be perfect. I want it to be real.

I think of the wolves in the video Ben showed me. Wolves are brave. Wolves are determined. They find partners and they don't worry about inconsequential things. And female wolves are the more assertive when it comes to finding a mate. She is in charge.

"I'm doing it for the wolves," I mutter. A nearby boy blinks at me.

"Did you just say you're going to do a wolf?" he asks blearily.

"Shut up," I say absently.

I scan the room. Ben is in the corner with his friends, talking and laughing and sipping from bottles of beer. If I kissed him right now, he would taste like beer, sour and bland. I don't think I would mind that.

I march over there. Ben looks up as I walk up, and I don't think I'm imagining it but when he sees me his face brightens. His friends nod at me, not breaking from their conversation.

"Hey," he says, smiling. "Everything okay? Sorry I took off before, my mate dragged me off to show me a chip that was the exact profile of our Biology teacher. I'd show you, but I accidentally ate it."

"Yeah. Yes. And sorry about, uh, Lucy back there. She thought you were someone else and I think it spooked her."

"No problem," Ben says. His hair is slightly messier than normal. He must've put in extra effort to make it look this casually careless. He stretches, and his shirt rides up a little. I catch a glimpse of a flat pane of stomach. There is a light scattering of freckles over the hard skin.

"So," Ben says. "Are you guys here with Morgan, or..."

"We came together," I say. "I don't know where she's gone now, though. I guess... I might go look for her."

I am disappointed in myself and in Ben. I don't know if I want to take the risk and make a move, because it's Ben. If it was any random boy I could kiss him and not worry about what happened afterwards. But Ben matters, even if it's just because he's connected to one of my best friends.

“Yeah,” Ben says. Is he disappointed, too? He gives me a quick, one-armed hug.

“See you later,” I say, and I walk off.

I make it exactly twelve steps before I change my mind. Screw it.

I march back over to Ben and his friends.

Ben grins jokingly. “Did you forget something? I know Morgan and I are twins, but I didn’t think we looked that alike. If you want, I could help you look for—”

I kiss him.

The group of guys he was standing with begin to whoop and cheer. I ignore them, and pull Ben down closer, feeling him react and kiss me back. His hands are in my hair and I’m standing on tiptoes to reach him and it is messy and it is uncomfortably public but it is also everything I wanted it to be.

“Maybe we should move somewhere else,” Ben says against my lips after a few minutes, still not breaking the kiss. His friends have finished cheering and have since subsided into awkward murmurs. We are still standing almost directly in the middle of their group, after all, and they seem unsure of whether they should leave or not.

“Okay,” I say.

He grabs my hand and pulls me into a corner and suddenly there we are, standing a breath apart and trying to be normal.

“So,” Ben says.

“So,” I agree.

He touches my hair, a slight question.

I just grin and drag him down to meet me.

Once upon a time there was a little girl who forgot how to eat.

She had always loved her treats and her warm supper, and she never turned down a fresh baked pie. But one day, whether by curse or trick or a simple quirk of her own mind, the young girl simply could not eat a bite without great distress.

Her parents grew worried, and called for the greatest bakers and cooks in the land to come forth to create tasty dishes to tempt their daughter.

Rich, succulent lamb was prepared, laid across a lush spread of the most flavoursome vegetables available. The darkest of chocolate was drizzled across sweet pastries of the ripest berries. There were sweets that melted in one's mouth, revealing delicious bursts of sugar. There was bread so warm and soft it was a pleasure to feel on the lips of those lucky enough to taste it, with the slightest hint of butter and rich jam. There were little squares of caramel that unfurled sweetly across the tongue.

But none passed the lips of the little girl; she gagged and sobbed as she caught their scents, smells that had brought tears of desire to the eyes of others.

More cooks were brought; more bakers and chefs, the elderly with a talent for pastry, the ambitious who prepared meals no one could pronounce. Richer, more particular meals were brought: fat white worms taken from the earth and the trees, that boasted flavours of chicken and nut and egg all at once; strange, brightly coloured fruits that revealed a yellow flesh like the sun when peeled, that dripped the sweetest of juices;

shelled creatures from far away oceans that still carried the salt and songs of their home. The girl tried, she did try, but nothing made its way down her throat, and she coughed and had to spit out the delicacies before her.

Her parents were not ones to waste, despite their despair, and the town ate richly that night. While the cooks and chefs and bakers and amateur dabblers broke their bread with the town folk and cheered, the girl and her parents sat alone, trying to coax something, anything past her lips. She could take water, but nothing else. She continued to waste away until she was bone-thin, a waif of a child.

At last, when it seemed like there was no hope, a large woman entered the revelry. She was a peculiar sight, as wide as she was tall and perfectly round. She did not pause to sample the delicacies lay before her; instead, she made her way over to the small, sad family.

She did not speak. She knelt by their side, and dug her hands into the dirt. She offered it to the girl, the dark, damp soil tumbling from her fingers.

The girl looked to her parents, who were lost. She looked into the woman's eyes, and only saw kindness there. She bent her head to the woman's hands and bit down, filling her mouth with the dirt, feeling pebbles crunch against her back teeth, tiny seeds roll across her tongue. She held it there for a moment, and swallowed.

Her parents waited with bated breath. The strange woman simply sat patiently, watching the sky above them.

The girl smiled, and took another mouthful of the rich, damp soil.

She filled her belly with dirt and pebbles and stones; roots and leaves and rocks as big as her fists. Colour flowed into her cheeks, and light danced behind her eyes. Her

parents wept tears of joy and thanked the woman who had saved their daughter. She nodded once and pressed her warm hands against the girl's cheeks.

The woman left the village, never to be seen or heard from again, but the young girl never had a problem with food again. She ate anything that was put in front of her, and if she ever found it difficult to press morsels past her lips, she would go out to the garden and fill her belly with dirt and rocks and roots and leaves.

Lucy:

Out in the cold night, things are swirling past me, too quickly to grasp. I can hear whispers on the wind.

The bush is singing to me. I follow it, and it takes me to the dead girl. She is rotting, and her eyes have turned white. She is far more comforting than the monsters at the party.

I sit at the base of her hanging tree, and I listen. Beneath me, I can feel the earth shifting. There are stories down there, voices buried with the worms and the roots.

I sit there, and then I begin to talk to the girl. I need to tell her things.

I wish I was born dead. Not having taken a breath yet. My parents would mourn for a child they would never know, and the nurses would have to turn away, even the hardened ones who'd seen it all feeling a pang. Later, they'd go home and hug their children. Forget about it over a glass of red. My parents would cry and it would hurt them so deeply, but it would be better. I would stay a perfect, untouched baby forever. Remembered with a heart-aching fondness because I may have never smiled or laughed

or said “I love you,” but I also never cried through the night or screamed or hated or grew up to become a rapist.

The dead girl looks at me sadly.

I feel like I am unravelling.

Morgan:

“Where should we start?”

They are sitting outside, a block away from the party. Morgan needs to think, needs to be doing something, fixing something—she can’t sit around, waiting for her mother to change her mind and come home.

The voice is watching the bush just behind the row of houses. It is thinking things that Morgan chooses to ignore right now, thinking about how agitated she is, how her fingers won’t stop moving.

There was a story she used to tell us—you, I mean, the voice says, slowly. *I can show you, if you want.*

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Fine.” She can’t imagine how a story will help, but maybe this one will contain a hint. Maybe it could help.

Once upon a time, the voice began, and Morgan could feel her body relaxing, her heart slowing as she listened.

Once upon a time a woman went into a forest and made a bargain with the folk she found there. She was a young woman, wiser than her years, and she had spent her whole life in the town by the woods, knowing never to enter, never to deal with or offend the creatures to be found there, in the darkest of the darkest places. She grew up sensible and smart and curious, never letting her eyes stay on the forest for too long lest the creatures sense her attention. She was not like the foolish girls and boys of her schoolyard who entered on dares, wishes not thought through. They faced the folk for silly reasons, impulsive desires that if left untouched, would have withered away in time with no harm done. The woman, even as a girl, knew that their desires were foolish, dangerous impulses, and she made herself a promise that she would never go into the forest, unless it was truly for her heart's desire. She allowed herself this little caveat, for she was a reasonable child, and did not long for things outside of her reach. She knew if she kept herself from the possibility of the forest and its creatures she would lose herself to it entirely, her curiosity choking her like a ribbon wound too tight around her neck. Her bargain with herself was fair, and employed its own series of loopholes and tricks that would keep her away—she knew her heart, and it was as sensible and clever as her head. It would never choose to place its favour on something so unattainable it may need the interference of the folk of the forest.

Unfortunately, while a child's heart is simple and sensible, a grown-up's heart is not.

The adult heart and child heart are similar in shape, varying in size, and vastly different in the wants and make up of the thing. Where a child's heart is sensible and simple, the adult's heart is demanding and so complicated it often confuses itself. Many esteemed scientists and doctors and all sorts of intelligent people have argued that children are in fact not born with a heart, and instead begin to grow one at adolescence—what forms is

a very raw, very hopeful heart, one that is pure and therefore going to undergo a great deal of pain before it reaches maturity. After such a tumultuous birth, the adult heart is thorny and passionate and fierce—all things good and bad when it comes to love. The adult heart wants things in ways a child heart couldn't, and its experience in the world has helped it grow and open up to new desires.

When the woman was a child, though, of course she did not know this; her heart, whether it existed or not, was untouched by the complications that a grown woman knows. She was able to continue for a few more years, untroubled by the thorns that would soon prick her heart.

The years passed and the child grew into the woman. For many years, she was blessed by good fortune and good health; she met a young man who was kind and loving, who treated her like a queen and always made sure she had warm fresh bread in the mornings. They married under an old oak tree in the summer, and lived in a little house with a blue roof the colour of a stone the woman had once kept under her pillow. When the woman looked out of the window in the bare second bedroom, she could see an edge of the forest, dark and curious like the growing corner of her heart.

For many years, the woman and her husband lived together in their lovely house, and apart from an occasional peculiar stirring in the hidden corners of her heart, the woman thought little of the forest on the edge of town and the creatures that lived inside. She was happy, more so than she ever thought she could be, and didn't think she'd ever want for anything.

As time will often do, it continued to pass and prove her wrong.

The second bedroom continued to be spare and bare, the wooden floorboards growing dusty and lonely. The woman bled every month without fail, until the red on her legs made something rise up, hard and angry, in her chest. Twice she thought she felt something stir in her stomach and her heart would lighten; but time would pass and she would stop growing and the blood would always come. Matters of the heart are often cruel; the woman's life had been untouched by pain and despite their simple life, she had wanted for nothing. Now something huge and painful had taken over her heart and body, the thorns of need pressing themselves deep. She found herself standing in the second bedroom in the night, staring out the window, one hand pressed against her flat belly. Her husband came in one night, taking her into his arms. He gazed down at her and smiled. She could see the sadness etched into the lines of his face, but still he smiled.

Your eyes show the stars, he told her. Even when we are inside, even during the day, I can see them, so long as I look at you. You are magic, love; I know that magic will lead us to our happiness. He kissed her brow, her hands. You will make it happen.

The next month, the blood did not come. Neither did it the next month, or the next. The woman began to let herself hope again, and her husband began to touch her belly wonderingly. One day, he brought a pot of fresh paint home with the morning bread, and spent the rest of the day painting the second bedroom. When he was done the walls were warm with a buttery yellow, as if they had taken a piece of the sun itself into their home.

Six months after her last blood, the baby inside her that had been so active—moving and kicking out in her stomach, shaking in a way that made the woman sure she—and she was sure it was a she—was laughing—grew still in her belly. At first, she thought

her happy, laughing baby was resting, and she welcomed the break. As the day wore on, something cold gripped the woman's heart. Her daughter did not move. Would not move, or could not. The woman felt heavy in a way she never had before.

When the blood began to drip down her legs, she left for the forest.

She had lived by the edge of the forest her entire life, yet never stepped inside it. Even visitors to the town knew to avoid the forest, knew that it was no normal forest. This forest was always dark, no matter how bright the day; if one looked closely, and one never should, they might see glimpses of a light like moonlight moving between the trees. The trees reached black fingers into the sky, gnarled and twisted and always beckoning. Every leaf within the forest was the same dark green, the colour of emeralds, yet far more valuable. No animals lived within the trees, but the forest did harbour its own Sound, a heavy silence that sung out to the villagers, coaxing them in. It was said that the Sound was different to everyone who heard it: where the baker heard the sound of his childhood love calling to him, the shoemaker heard a simple whisper. It was their own silence, in the town, and if they ever left its borders, the villagers found themselves deafened by the noise that met them, the loudness of other silences.

The woman heard many things in the Sound. Whispers and laughter, wind chimes, and threaded through it all, the low, slow song of a man. She strained to hear his voice the most, but it always slipped away from her, leaving her breathless and wanting for something she did not know how to ask for.

The further she went into the forest, the more the Sound filled her ears, but for once, she wasn't focused on the man's song. A new sound had entered her refrain; a child's heartbeat, faint and uncertain. She wove her way through the paths, certain of her steps though they led her in circles for what felt like many hours—despite the trickery of the

forest folk, she never grew scared, never wavered. This was her town, and her forest—if not for her single-minded focus on the fading heartbeat, she would have registered a small thrill shocking through her.

She entered a clearing as the Sound reached a crescendo. Her feet were spotted with blood, the soles of them raw and shredded, yet she did not register her pain.

A creature that could be a man, or as close to it as the forest folk came—they were known to change their mind on such matters with ease—stood in the clearing, waiting for her. He had the look of the forest, his form dark and twisted like the trees. His eyes were as black as the night sky, and while he looked vaguely human, it would be most foolish to assume he was anything like the villagers of the woman's town. Despite her sensible nature, her clever mind, the woman was not afraid; she even felt as though this figure was familiar, not a friend but not foe.

There was a rustling in the trees, more creatures making their presence known. The woman did not waver.

She looked at him, ignoring the weight that pressed on her from the trees, that pulled at her belly.

I need you to start her heart again. To keep her healthy, let no harm come to her. I want her to be happy, and live a strong life.

The woman chose her words carefully, knowing not to trust the folk of the forest. She did not ask for eternal life, just health, just the beating of a heart. She wanted nothing but her child to live.

The man continued to watch her, silent but for a slight rustling like the winter winds brushing through tree tops. He watched her like he knew her, and though she did not know it then, the secret corners of her heart grew a little more.

Are you sure? was all he asked. His voice was melodic and sad, and it made the woman want to weep, to fall to the grass below and cry until the earth took her. He reached out a single finger, a skeleton's hand dipped in the blackest ink, and brushed her cheek. When he drew away, a single tear lay balanced on his fingertip.

She did not speak.

The man watched her with dark, dark eyes. He pressed the droplet to his lips. *I can do this for you*, he told her, *but I require a price*.

The woman looked up at him and thought of all the promises she had made herself over the years, all the vows she had taken. She thought of her simple, uncomplicated life in the little house with the blue roof and the kind husband. She thought many sensible things, and then she held out her hand.

Anything, she said.

Lucy:

Everyone's been lying. There are no demons in our bellies. Just guts and food churning emptily, tangling round and round uncertainly.

It makes everything a little bit nicer to picture dark angry monsters taking the blame for what we do. It gives answers. Susan down the road didn't slit her wrists because she was depressed and her cousin used to touch her; no, Susan's demon slid into her hands and made her pick up the blade, forced her. No, even better: the demon simply willed it and her wrists slipped open like an unstuck envelope. Jane doesn't throw up after meals because she doesn't like the fat oozing from her skin; her demon likes to climb into her throat after biting and stomping on her stomach. Lucy doesn't hate herself because her demon told her to, Lucy is just sad and stupid and a dumb bitch.

So many problems, not enough demons to go round.

I'm the only one with a real demon. The truth cuddles up to me, nestling into my side like a content, purring cat.

A girl is born and she is a princess.

At dawn, her mother dies in childbirth.

In the morning, her beloved is blinded by rose thorns when he falls from a tower she was kept in.

At midday, her father cuts off her hands to barter for his own life with the devil.

In the afternoon, her father vows to kill her twelve brothers so she can rule the kingdom. They vow to kill every woman they meet in vengeance.

At dusk, her stepmother tries to have her heart cut out, before poisoning her instead.

In the evening, a king finds her unconscious body and rapes her, before leaving to return home to his wife and forgetting about her completely.

And then she wakes up the next morning for it to all start again, until it is her turn to die while giving birth to another girl who will be prettier than her.

Lucy:

I was the one who lied.

I am the changeling, quiet and unchanging. I think my memories are a cruel joke I don't find funny because they took my sense of humour too.

My eyes are black. Who has black eyes?

That time I pulled a blade over white skin and beetles crawled out in a swarm instead of blood. That my demons are not demons but my own unechoing voice in my own head looking for an excuse to feel this way. That I don't bleed like the other girls do every month but vomit moths instead.

Sometimes I can look at my arm and see bleached bone and titanium.

(I don't know how to be a girl. How do you make a girl? Spice and sugar. Bravery and bone. No pink, please.)

I have always been a monster in a girl's stolen skin. My mother knew. She looked at me, and she knew the creatures of the forest never returned her daughter to her. They gave her me instead. The pills she forces down my throat are to keep my mind intact—

human. So I don't fracture into the monster. So they—my real family—can't find me and drag me back down under the soil. To live with the other dead girls and monsters.

I think they are coming to get me. I don't know how they think. If they love me or if they're not happy with me. I don't care anymore. I just want them to come.

I don't have a demon because I *am* the demon.

There was once a girl who woke up at seventeen and didn't know her name, her people, or her heart. She did know that she was lost.

When she rose to her feet, she felt something start behind her. A stirring in the tall pale trees that rose up around her; a great breathing in, as though something had taken notice of her.

She spun and saw nothing, but felt it; a thousand eyes staring out at her. She could feel herself reflected in each pair of glassy eyes, her very self cut into a thousand different mirrors that tried to capture her and tie her down. They were dark things made of nightmares and shadows and teeth. They called out to her, whispering and shouting silently. When she opened her mouth to reply, she felt her voice tear its way out of her throat. They stole it, and soon she could feel them reaching for her. They would consume her, rip her apart, split her in two and gobble her up. They would sink their unseen teeth into her heart, and they would tear it out. They would crunch her bones between their teeth, and they would sip at her mind and marrow like wine. They had already taken her voice, her memories; they would not stop until they had taken all of her.

She turned and ran.

She ran, and she closed off her ears, but she could still hear them behind her, their silent whispers slipping past her ankles, as if to trip her. She ran, and she walked, and she dragged herself through a strange fractured world, in a strange, fractured body. No matter how far or fast she walked, she could always feel them following her.

Sometimes, when she rested for too long, she could feel them like a hot hand on the back of her neck, fingertips just brushing skin. She did not turn around, not once, but walked faster. They could not get her if she didn't pause to think, if she walked with her eyes on the path ahead of her and never let her thoughts stray to dark, hidden places where the things that chased her revelled.

She saw much as she continued to run from her relentless pursuers. She passed tiny villages and huge castles, endless acres of pale trees and crashing waters. She rarely stopped, for those who followed her never seemed to tire, and gained energy when she had to rest. At first, she knocked on doors, hoping for a warm hearth to lay her head beside, a small meal, or a kind voice, but all answered the door with closed faces that made the warm room beyond seem as far away as the skies above. The people could sense that there was something wrong with a girl who did not know her own name, and perhaps they sensed the darkness that followed her everywhere she went.

Sometimes, she thought her strange pursuers were taunting her—letting her rest when they could catch her easily, letting her continue to run even though she was already lost. After a time she came to wonder if they were waiting for her to give up before they claimed her. They were always there, only a step or breath behind her, ready to consume her. She did not stop.

She started gaining space between them, here and there. One day, when she was walking through a small village in the shadow of a grand stone castle, she allowed herself to rest for a few hours by the riverside. She judged there to be about half a day between her and her pursuers.

While she rested, a prince happened to ride by in a fine carriage. He wasn't particularly handsome, as far as princes went, but he had a kind heart. He ordered his knights to gather up the nameless girl and take her to his castle.

She slept for seven days and seven nights until at last she awoke, warm and safe. The things that chased her could not seem to enter the warmth of the prince's castle. They whispered at her windows at night, calling for her. When she slept, she dreamt of blood and teeth cutting her open from the inside.

The prince's family welcomed her warmly into their home; if they found it strange that she could not speak and had no name, they didn't mention it. It was not uncommon for mysterious mute girls to wander through the kingdom; the queen herself had begun her courtship with the king this very way.

The prince began to speak hopefully of a betrothal. He was kind to the girl, bringing her a rose from the garden when she refused to step outside the castle walls. He gave her gifts in threes, fine dresses and small kittens and heavy jewellery. One morning, he kissed her, hoping it would be enough to break whatever spell she was under, but the girl stepped away. She did not speak even when he proposed on bended knee, simply shook her head, and the prince flushed in embarrassment. He grew frustrated; she was not acting the way she should be at all. He complained to his parents fitfully.

That night, the king came to the girl's bedchamber while she slept.

She awoke to him leaning over her, his hand covering her mouth. His other hand held her down, and he was smiling.

“Don’t you think it is time,” he said, not unkindly, “to end this nonsense? My son has been nothing but kind to you; he has given you everything you could desire. And still, you resist him. You resist us all.”

At the window, the creatures began to rattle harder. The king did not hear them.

“Perhaps you need something more magical than the kiss of a prince,” he mused. “A king’s kiss, it goes, is far more powerful.”

He leant down, pressing his lips to hers. She stared up, unseeing. He smelt like the lavender that filled the baths, and beneath that, sweat. He pressed her further into the bed. The voices screamed at the window. They would break through, the girl thought, break through and tear them both apart. They would strip off her skin and send it sliding down their throats.

“Speak,” he said to her, but she would not.

“Kiss me,” he said to her, but she would not.

“You will marry my son,” he told her. “You will be my daughter, and you will be grateful.”

As he left the room, he turned to her. “This is not a matter of you giving yourself to him; you are already his.”

After he had left, the girl crossed to the window. She opened it wide, and leant out.

Her pursuers filled her, and her voice found her again. They gave her her memories. She remembered a man like the king. She’d run from him too. Her pursuers called to her,

held her and stroked her. They slipped around her, soothed her and sung to her, and when they filled her she went to the king's own bedroom and tore his throat out.

She ripped him apart. She sunk her teeth into his heart, and she tore it out. She crunched his bones between her teeth, and she sipped at his mind and his marrow like wine.

When she was done, she left the castle, and began to make her way home. She carried her people with her.

Kate:

Morgan scratches her head. "Uh, Luce, I don't think I've ever heard that one before."

I raise a hand. "Yeah, me either. It was kind of dark. Did your parents used to tell you this? Geez."

"It's a classic," Lucy snaps. "And all the real stories are dark. What, you want a happy ending? Bed time stories are never realistic. If those stories were in the real world, they'd turn out very differently. The princes are idiots and the princesses are pathetic. If those couples stayed together, the prince would've been out banging one of his cousins within the week, and after he and the princess engaged in true love's screw she would've ended up with a suspect rash. Then they all would've probably died of the plague. The end."

Morgan clasps her hands to her chest. "How romantic."

“You do have a way with words, Lucy,” I say. We’re at her house, lying in bed talking. Lucy and Morgan keep looking at me, like they know what is happening in my head, and sometimes they talk to me carefully, like I’m sick. My mind is full of Ben and strange things I can’t quite get a hold of and I am feeling restless. I’ve spent a night and a day imagining I can still taste Ben on my lips. I want to get away from stories and fantasies and do something real.

Morgan is restless too. She drums her fingers on my thigh. “What should we do now?”

“Let’s make a pact,” I say. “Like when we were kids.”

They eye me in that careful way again. “What about?”

I open my mouth to say something like *to be together forever*, before closing it again. I can’t help but picture the three of us bound together, thorns wrapping around our wrists. One another’s blood dripping through our veins, tying us together, tying us down like roots. Until none of us can leave.

“That we’ll always be there for one another,” I say instead.

“I think that goes without saying,” Lucy says. Her eyes roam the room.

Morgan leans forward, clasping my hand. “Katie. I love you, but I don’t think we should get any blood on Lucy’s carpet.”

“Fine, fine.” But I have too much nervous energy running under my skin. I would almost welcome a little bloodletting.

“We could hold a séance,” Morgan suggests. “If you wanted to get into the occult.” I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or not.

“Mattel makes Ouija boards,” Lucy murmurs. “Buy a Barbie and commune with the undead.”

I sigh. “Let’s just watch a movie, then.”

We put something on Lucy’s laptop and curl up together. I try to focus on lying still, but my mind is full of Ben and blood pacts and rattling windows.

Lucy:

I am excited. There are strange things pounding in my ears, but for once I feel awake. I can’t feel the pills in my system anymore, moving through my veins like thick grey sludge. I am clean and clear and ready to consume the world. I like Morgan’s idea, even if she was joking. This is what we need—this will disperse or focus the dark, twisting energy that moves about the room, that dances just out of reach. I will wait until they are asleep, and then I will try it by myself. I want to see what happens when I call for them. When they call for me to come home. It would be an exorcism of sorts, calling dark things forth and casting them away. I wonder if I’d exorcise myself accidentally. Rid the world of evil.

We are all three being eaten from the inside out.

I do not need to do much. No complicated chanting, no ring of candles. It is just like it is in the stories.

I wait until the other two are asleep, tangled together under the covers, and then I go to the window and open it wide.

They just need to be invited in. To be listened to, and understood.

I go back to bed, and I wait.

Morgan:

Morgan is dreaming of the bush behind Lucy's house. She knows she is dreaming, because normally she never spares a glance at it if she can help it, and now she is standing inside of it, deep enough that she can't see the harsh light of the streetlights or the softer light of the moon filtering through the leaves. She does not like the bush that borders Lucy's house; when she avoids cutting through it for a shortcut, she tells herself it is because she'd rather take a less scenic route. But the truth is, it unnerves her. It does not feel like the same bush they used to play in as children. It is like it is something entirely alive, not just an ecosystem of plants and insects and animals but a thriving, breathing creature.

The ground opens up in front of her, and she walks down into the earth.

It is cool and quiet, damp pressing in on her. She is sure now that she is in a dream, because she would never go into the bush if she were awake, and she would certainly never walk down into the centre of the earth as easily as though it was an escalator at the shops, and so she remains calm, somewhat sated by this logic. She passes roots and squirmy bugs, even some bones; the steps are cut straight into the earth, so as she walks she feels like she is peeling back layers of time. The further down she goes, the more interesting it becomes. At one point, she passes some stones; as she walks further down, she realises they were gravestones, that there must have been a cemetery here, once, before the bush reclaimed the land, because there are bones here, so many bones.

Morgan shivers but she continues to walk.

An unfamiliar voice, not her own, whispers to her. She reminds herself firmly that this is a dream, and she should not be startled. Even so, the singing in her ear makes her jump a little. *That place is not for you, it murmurs. Down there, if you continue, it is dangerous. These steps lead to where unfinished or stolen stories lay; where those who had their voices stolen from them find themselves. If you take a wrong step down there, you may find your voice—your story—stolen from you until you are left to wander, confused and lost, until your end of days.*

This was certainly a departure from her usual dreams. Morgan begins to hope, somewhat futilely, that one of her normal staples, like her kindergarten teacher doing the salsa, would emerge from behind a tree root. Then she'd be sure it was a dream. Which it was. She knows that. Even though she can taste the heavy, earthy air on her tongue. Even though she can feel the hot breath of the whisperer against her neck.

The voice continues. *Those down there are not cruel, but they are lost themselves. When they sense someone with something they no longer have, they cannot help themselves. The stolen stories are worse than the voiceless. They would pour into you if they could, desperate for you to play out their particular lines of destiny.*

Morgan swallows. The movement feels very real in her throat.

Not to worry, the voice says reassuringly. There are far worse, and far better in here. Sometimes both at once. So many stories to seek...

"I'm seeking my mother," Morgan says. Her voice is swallowed up by the earth around them; it is very quiet.

Don't, said the voice. That's not for you to find. These things are dangerous, too. I would tear apart the world to find my daughter. I misplaced her... it was foolish. You would destroy much if you found her.

Before she can respond, her own voice speaks at last, and if she was less startled to realise how much she missed it, she may have noticed the warning shaking through its tone.

Time to wake up now, Morgan.

Kate:

I wake up abruptly from a too-vivid dream a few hours later. Someone has opened the window, and moonlight casts long shadows over the ceiling. It is surprisingly cold. I turn my head at a sound next to me. Morgan is sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes and staring around the room.

“Lucy’s not here,” she says.

Lucy is standing at the edge of her backyard, her back to us. There’s no fence at the borderline to their property, so it spills into the bush. Lucy has her head tilted, like she’s listening for something. Another step forward, and she’d vanish into the dark of the trees.

“Luce? What’re you doing?”

When she turns around, her eyes are so blank that for a moment I think she’s sleepwalking. “Nothing,” she says at last. “I thought I heard something out here.”

Morgan:

When Morgan wakes up, it's as though something is sitting on her chest, weighing her down. For a moment she can't move, and she starts to panic. Her voice—their voice—slips into an ear, a voice that is calmer than the rest of Morgan.

It's okay. You're okay. We're fine; just a dream.

Morgan nods once.

Her heart is still heavy and racing, uncomfortable in her chest. The voice continues on, trying to distract her. *So were you serious before? Who were you going to contact if you had had a séance?*

'Elvis,' she admits. 'I wanted to see if I could do him.' She is rewarded by a small smile that hovers at the corners of her own mouth for a moment.

Morgan drums her left hand on her leg. Quietly, her right one sneaks around to stop it, holding it until the twitches slow to a stop. Morgan sighs, but lets herself hold her own hand.

She can hear Kate stirring next to her, and she sits up, looking around, noticing what's wrong. Lucy is gone from the bed.

Lucy:

When I open my eyes again, I can *see*.

The room is the same as before, but when I look out the window, I can see little rivulets of light running across the glass. The bush is *thriving*—there's so much movement it stops my heart for a minute. I can see it all, threads creeping up the trees, branching out and curling up in the leaves.

I turn to my friends to show them, but their eyes are shut tight.

I can see my friends now. They have secrets and demons in their hearts, but now I can see all of it. I can taste it on the air that passes their lips.

I look at Morgan, and there is something so warm and bright starting in her that I don't want to look away. It is Morgan, and it is not Morgan, but it is happy and beautiful in a way no one has ever called Morgan before. She smells like earth, clean and cool.

When I look away, when I pull my gaze over to sleeping Kate, I wish I hadn't.

Kate has something dark and shadowy nestled in her throat. It spreads its tendrils down into her stomach.

The shadows look as though they are choking my friend Kate, but she breathes in and out easily enough. I wonder if she knows that they're there. I wonder why we haven't noticed them before.

I go into the bathroom. The world feels very still inside this house; outside, in the bush I can feel things tugging at me, whispering and yelling. It is very busy out there.

When I look in the mirror, there is a message painted in white for me.

When I look in the mirror, I can't see any movement or colour under my skin. I do not glow.

Come home, the mirror tells me.

I don't know if I can't see the things I see in my friends in my body because the warm glow that nestles in Morgan is not there for me, or because the dark shadows that begin to hold Kate have completely wrapped around me, leaving no room for light or movement. You can't see shadows swirling if they have nothing light to swirl against.

I follow the whispers out the window.

Kate:

When we wake up again, it is to bright sunshine and Lucy holding a huge plate of pancakes about an inch away from my face.

Morgan is rousing too. "What's that smell?"

"Pancakes," I mumble, throwing an arm over my face. "Lucy's making amends for giving us a heart attack last night."

Lucy smiles brightly. "Some have chocolate chips."

I groan, rolling over. "Not hungry."

Morgan claims the plate and starts digging in happily. Downstairs, the phone rings, adding a shrill sound to accompany her enthusiastic chewing.

"Lucy?" It's her father. "Can you come down here for a minute, princess?"

Lucy shrugs, and heads downstairs. I can hear quick, quiet talking, voices rising and falling.

Lucy comes back up the stairs. Her father is with her, one arm over her shoulder.

Her eyes have gone very dark. She glances at Morgan, but won't look at me.

"That was Jamie Brown's mother," Lucy's father says. "They're calling everyone in your year." He hesitates, clears his throat. "Maybe I should call your parents—"

"Beth's dead," Lucy says. "She died last night."

I blink. My chest is feeling weirdly tight and panicky, like I'm sitting at the bottom of a pool and I forgot to take a breath.

"But she was better," I say. "She was better. She didn't have her demon, she—she was better. She couldn't have *died*." I laugh, but Lucy and Morgan are staring at me, at their hands. They are so solemn and still.

But she was *better*, I say again, but nothing comes out.

Morgan:

"She drowned," Lucy says. "At the beach. They think she slipped and hit her head."

Kate is still but for the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her breath seems to be coming very quickly. Morgan is beginning to worry. Could she be going into shock?

"I'm sorry," Lucy's father says. He wrings his hands a little. "I'll go call your parents, maybe they can come pick you up... This is awful, so awful. That poor little girl. Her poor parents."

Once he leaves, Kate speaks. Her voice is even, with only the slightest fracture running through it. "So do you think it was an accident?"

Lucy hesitates.

“No,” Morgan says. She clears her throat, swallows, tries again. “I saw her at the party the other day. She was acting strangely. I didn’t think...”

You couldn’t have known.

“I don’t think she was cured,” Morgan says, as softly as she can. Kate blinks in rapid succession. “She said... she wanted it all to stop. I don’t think it ever went away. She just wanted to pretend it had.”

Morgan feels her hand move of its own accord—the voice is guiding it to Kate. It holds her hand, tightly.

Kate:

I wish I could lash out, put my fist through a wall. Hurt someone or something other than myself. But when you have a demon in your belly, you can’t do that sort of thing. Girls may think about that fist and that wall for a moment or even several moments, but they will not finish that thought in action. Instead we lie paralysed, while a thousand mirrors are sent crashing and shattering until the only thing holding the girl together is the skin that has been cut from the inside.

We are not fragile beings of glass, but filled with mirrors that reflect every part of us and every part of you. When we shatter, we are still strong, we are not useless. When a mirror breaks, it makes more mirrors, not less. Sift through the pieces and you will find the reflection of that moment we learnt we could not punch walls to let out our hurt.

It is probably not always good for the boys who do punch walls. We are trained to freeze, to keep everything inside and deal with it in a ladylike fashion—but don’t be

hysterical, the other womanly trait. Boys are taught that you can be angry, you can be violent, but does that only make the hurt worse?

I can feel myself shattering in very small, very quiet ways.

Morgan:

She should've said something.

Is it her fault? That she didn't speak up?

The only person who could've stopped Beth was Beth. Morgan believes that, she really does, but it doesn't help the twisting in her gut.

She needs to focus on helping Kate. Kate will need them to get through this; this will hurt her more than them, this loss of hope. So she pushes Beth out of her head with a quiet apology.

Lucy:

We take Kate home. I hug her close, and feel her grip me back—she will be okay. I don't quite understand why she is taking the news of Beth's death so badly, but I do know Kate. She'll bounce back. She will.

I get home, alone again, and I can't sit still. Everything that happened, what I did—everything is very clear and sharp. I have a taste for it now. Electric blood fills my mouth, copper dancing a pounding beat in my ears. I go into the bathroom and the light

switches off. I want to summon more, do more. I call for Bloody Mary, once, twice, three times, and she winks at me with my own eyes.

I could feel it tugging at me when they spoke, drawing me out. I wanted to go hide in the bush, tangle my limbs in amongst lazy, drooping trees that hide skinny little lizards and secrets equally well. I wanted to watch myself in the mirror, to see if I could see anything moving behind my eyes, behind my reflection. I dare the magic mirror to offer me advice now. I want to go find the dead girl in the bush.

Morgan went into the bush, the special bush that is in the spaces between, where the dead girl lives. I can smell it on her.

It is so hard to drag myself out of this. I don't know if I even want to. Everything feels electric.

Kate:

That night, I dream of wolves.

They are running behind me, chasing me. I don't know how many there are; I don't know how they haven't caught up with me yet. I picture them, long knives jutting from their paws as they tear into me, passing out red ribbons of steaming hot flesh to tip down their throats, while I lie there waiting for white teeth to dip into me once again. I run faster. *You will not have me*, I call back to them, but they do not reply.

My legs are too slow, my body simply too human to keep away. Every step I run I feel my flesh pound against my bones, sagging and bouncing, useless weight that slows me. My shame is written on my skin. I look back at the wolves again, watch them run,

powerful and fierce. Their muscles shift and pull them forwards; their bodies do not betray them.

I realise, all this time they were running alongside me, not chasing me.

The wolf looks into my eyes, its warm flank pressed against my body. *Please*, I say.

When it finally dips its head to my throat, it feels like a kiss, a caress. Benediction.

For a moment, I think I catch a glimpse of Beth standing there at the edge of the group, watching.

The wolf tears my throat open. When I wake, I go to the mirror. I know it must be the aftereffects of the dream, images still with me, but when I look into my reflection I don't see an untouched pale throat or even one torn open and gaping red. I see a wolf.

Morgan:

She can't remember her mother's voice. A week ago, she could picture it, still hear it faintly, until one day she wakes up and can't catch it at all. It is gone, and her mother has been lost to her again. Her mother's voice has been stolen from her.

Lucy:

The pills are gone and her system is clear. When she blinks, she can see everything in vivid colour. Movement tracks differently without the pills; the medication slowed it down, dulled it. Now when she moves, everything around her shifts and blurs ever so

slightly. She can see the corners of other worlds peeking into this one, little moments of magic slipping through.

When she dreams, the monster still comes to bite her in two, but sometimes she chokes him on the way down.

She can feel them coming for her, now.

Kate:

Sometimes, I don't believe in the demons.

I've never told anybody that. I can't. They'd call me crazy. Of course the demons are real. As real as any supernatural entity can be.

Except sometimes it's hard to remember that when it just sounds like my own voice, day in and day out. I'll say something stupid, and cringe immediately while I berate myself. *God, that was dumb, I can't believe I just said that. Fuck. You idiot.* Except it's my demon telling me this, pretending to be me. I have to remember that. It's not me.

I don't think I could hate myself as much as my demon does.

Beth is gone and so is my last chance at escaping my demon. Beth was a liar, although I can see why she did it.

I lock myself in the bathroom and turn the shower on, until the room is filled with steam. I wipe the mirror and stare at myself.

My throat is pale and untouched, smooth skin. I half expected it to be torn open. But it was just a dream, and I am a girl, not a wolf.

I step into the shower and scrub myself clean. My nails catch on my skin—I've let them get too long, too ragged, and they scratch a thin pink line down my arm. Blood starts to trickle out, running faster and with the water. I feel dizzy, and I lean against the shower wall. There is a pounding in my ears, and I close my eyes.

When I open them again, the water has turned red, pooling thickly around my feet.

I blink again and it turns clear. I'm going mad, or my demon is making me hallucinate. But, strangely, I feel completely calm.

I look in the mirror again at my naked body, wiping and wiping at the glass to clear the steam. What I see is *girl*: lumpy, lanky, fleshy girl. There is a layer of fat surrounding my body, suffocating me like a heavy blanket. If I breathe in deep enough, I can almost taste it, feel that yellowing fat squelching along my bones. My breasts and curves are small and completely diminished by the skin that surrounds them. I am a lump of a girl.

If I look, though—if I really look—I can see the hint of muscle underneath the fat. If I tilt my head just right, I can picture a girl who is lean and strong and maybe even a little beautiful. I can see something better waiting beneath my skin.

At the very base of my throat there is a mess of white scars. You can only see them if the light hits them in a very particular way. They glint silver, and it is clear that they are very old scars. They weren't there yesterday.

Lucy:

Sometimes she got so angry she was surprised by the sheer force of it. It couldn't be normal to feel this furious all the time, to the point where hot tears would burn in the

corners of her eyes and she would feel like punching something and vomiting at the same time. The anger she felt was too big for her, and it never let up. She thought she might be choked by it. It was always there, but sometimes it would spring up unexpectedly, so mid-conversation she would halt abruptly, hands curling into claws as she remembered. She had to swallow hard and force her face into something resembling normalcy to continue.

Morgan:

“What happens next in that story?”

I can tell you if you'd like.

Morgan is rifling through old notebooks that were stacked up in the study. She is searching for her mother's handwriting. She quickly realises she wouldn't recognise it anyway, so instead she scans for handwriting that is unfamiliar, something other than her father's untidy scrawl.

“I don't know why I can't remember it. It's familiar, but... Do you think everyone was actually serious when they talked about booze wrecking your brain cells? Maybe I did do some damage. Shit.”

Mm, I think Lucy and Kate would be in a similar boat if that was the case. Your brains should rightfully all be riddled through by now.

“Ah well.” Morgan squints at an aged page that is signed *Scarlett*, but it's just a thank you note for a birthday present for Ben that she must have forgotten to send. She sighs, and continues to dig through the papers, letting the voice fill her mind.

When the woman was a young girl, she had heard stories of the forest. Everyone knew the same stories of what happened to those who went into the forest. Other girls and boys—foolish ones, silly ones, impulsive ones—had gone into the forest before. They asked for things like beauty, riches, or love, and they were given them, but their wishes always came with a catch and never worked out the way they wanted. Though most of those who entered the forest left it again, their desires never worked out the way they wanted and their wishes were granted in peculiar ways. One boy asked for the strength of an ox—his legs split and grew into hairy, muscly things, contorting his body he could no longer walk upright. He was bowed under the weight of his own strength, unable to move, and his family had not strength enough themselves to push his newly acquired mass around town. But whenever someone thought of bargains made in the forest, no one could look past the tale of Janie Brewer.

Little Janie Brewer from down the road had six older sisters all more beautiful than the next. Janie was born with a birthmark that disfigured her face, twisting it into a permanent scowl. She asked the forest folk for everlasting beauty, to be more beautiful than all her sisters combined, and the folk gave her a dark red ribbon to wear around her neck. They promised her the beauty she sought, and told her to wear the ribbon every day. *However, they said, You must remove it on the night of the waxing moon, and place it around each of your sisters' necks. Then, and only then, will our gift of eternal beauty to you be complete.*

Janie wore the ribbon proudly, and as she stepped out of the forest, her birthmark faded, leaving only a healthy glow and a beautiful girl. Men smiled at her as she walked the street to her home; girls complimented her. Only the older men and women whose own

looks had long left them looked away from Janie's sweet face, knowing it bore the mark of the folk, knowing what that meant. Janie was unconcerned, revelling in the attention of her admirers. But her beauty, while lovely to behold, was by no means superior to that of her six sisters.

On the night of the waxing moon, Janie stole into each of her sisters' rooms and placed the ribbon around their necks in turn, taking care not to tie it too tight. She brushed a fond kiss over each of their brows, generous in her love now that she knew she would be equal—better, even—than her sisters. Now she would be able to join their gossip of the boys who mooned after them, who left flowers at their windows and grew tongue-tied if they saw them face-to-face. Now she would laugh sympathetically when a sister mentioned the envious looks of others that followed her through town; now she could be generous, now that people would envy her and love her. She went to bed that night with a smile etched on her pretty face, ready to wake up the most beautiful Brewer sister.

Six of the seven Brewer sisters did not wake up beautiful the next day. One of the seven sisters would come to wish she did not wake up the next day at all.

When their mother entered their bedrooms the next day, she found six girls with plain figures and twisted, grotesque features, as though she had stepped into a carnival of horrors. Each girl's most distinctive feature was warped beyond recognition—the eldest sister's large doe eyes, so stunning, were now the size of dinner plates, rolling manically in their sockets. The middle sister's soft skin had grown so delicate it drooped off her bones and tore, falling to the floor in clumps of warm flesh. Another sister, with hair as fair as hay, awoke to find herself bald, and the family cow leaning in through the window to continue munching on the bed of straw she had left behind. Each sister's

affliction was different, and each was more grotesque than the next, but they all bore the same vivid purple streaks across their faces, as though they had been burnt hideously in the night.

On the night of the next waxing moon, the prettiest of the Brewer sisters was found drowned in the river. The men who dragged her waterlogged body from the river, all the time wondering *why, why*, were caught anew by grief upon seeing her lovely visage—her skin made paler by death, eyes as deep and as blue as the river that claimed her, dark hair tangling over her shoulders; a porcelain doll preserved perfectly. So glorious was she to behold that the town decided against burying her. They encased the body in a glass coffin at the edge of the forest, and there she lay, lovely and perfect for all eternity, a blood-red ribbon around her neck.

Kate:

We had to go to Beth's funeral. It was held on a Tuesday, in unremarkable weather, which seemed a little unfair. You imagine funerals either being held in a cold, grim downpour, mourners under a sea of black umbrellas. Miserable, gothic weather, appropriate for the mood of the thing, so a relative can fall to their knees in the mud and beg the heavens *why*. Or an offensively bright summer's day, hot sunshine beating down and getting in everyone's eyes. It could provide interesting symbolism, a comment on the futility of life, or just a meaningful moment for Beth's mother to look into the sky and know life would go on.

Instead, it was a mild day, some clouds, a bit of sun. A cool breeze that stirred at the hems of our dresses. It was all a bit of a disappointment.

Beth's parents stood next to the casket. Her father was sobbing, awful silent gasps that wracked his body. Her mother was dry-eyed and quiet. She kept her hand on the coffin the entire time, and didn't seem to hear anyone when they spoke to her.

We all had to wear red, like it was a Thursday exorcism. I'd been to a few funerals; most people didn't see the point in wearing red to them. It was too late by then for the superstition to do any good.

I wore red to my first funeral. I stood next to Morgan and Lucy then too, and we held hands as tight as we could. Morgan left nail marks in my palm that stayed for days.

Morgan brushes her hand against mine, reminding me she's there. Lucy has her arms wrapped around herself, but she stands as close to us as possible. Or we're standing close to her, boxing her in; the distinction is small but it matters. I don't want either of them out of my sight today.

We stand through the service, as the right people say the right things. A girl behind me yawns loudly. The spiritualists chant and move around. One of them waves some kind of burning incense.

"That's new," a girl behind me murmurs.

"I heard they reckon now that the demons can transfer after death," the yawner says.

"And no one wants to have a suicidal voice in their heads. Particularly such a successful one."

The other girl snorts, then cuts herself off as Morgan turns to glare at them.

“Have a little respect,” she says, and there’s an edge to her voice. Lucy glances at me, brushes my arm.

One girl blushes, but the yawner stares Morgan down defiantly.

“Why? Not our fault she was weak, and a liar to boot.”

Morgan just shakes her head, turning back around. She tightens her grip on Lucy’s hand, and takes my hand with her free one, tethering us to her.

Maybe I had it wrong. They are boxing me in, keeping me here. I was the one who believed, who had hope, so I am the breakable one today.

At the front, the speaker is winding up. Someone puts an arm around Beth’s mother’s shoulder, starting to guide her away. Her hair slips out from beneath her hat, and I see it is the same bright red as Beth’s. Her father is still crying soundlessly.

“Christ,” the yawner says behind us. She does not lower her voice. “I mean, you’d think they would’ve been expecting it.”

Without blinking, Morgan slides her foot back and kicks the girl in the shin.

We hear muffled swearing, and then the girl quickly limps off. She wouldn’t want to be caught angry in such an environment, not with doctors and spiritualists and all kinds of concerned adults about looking for any kind of questionable behaviour. Too many fragile, impressionable little girls around, so they’re making sure no one will pull a copycat move. Dead girls are dangerous. Death can be contagious.

We go to the wake very briefly, enough time to take a stale biscuit and drink some tea.

There is too much red in this room, too many different shades. Lucy fumbles with a pair

of sunglasses, and Morgan has a permanent frown etched on her face. They keep looking over at me, watching for something. I don't know what my face reads.

We all stay over at my place that night, pile in and sleep in the one bed. We tangle our limbs together and it is only with them next to me that I can sleep.

We all have to meet with a therapist at the local primary school the next day, make sure our minds are happy and healthy. They always do this after a suicide, although they tend to let it slide with attempted ones. It's easy enough to call them accidents, when there's no body.

I have a morning meeting, and I walk in to see a row of girls I know from school lined up and waiting. They glance up at me briefly, then look away again. Many of them wear small smiles, or whisper to themselves. Coaching themselves for the judgement ahead. Look happy, tell them you can't hear the voices.

If they don't think you're well enough, you can get taken away for extended sessions and exorcisms. Some girls wind up sick and stranded in a hospital somewhere, places where they strap you down and try force the demon out. I don't know anyone who's come back from those places.

I am empty, and angry, and betrayed, and many many more emotions I haven't yet learnt how to name. But they won't see any of that.

My name is called by a woman who works in the school office. I follow her in to the room, keeping my eyes trained on her cardigan, which has little pugs embroidered on it. They look like they're dancing.

“Katherine, hello, take a seat.”

We’re in what I think is the principal’s office, although they’ve hastily moved things around and added comforting things—a thick blanket draped over the seat, a few too many plants than what fits in this small room. A box of tissues has been placed inconspicuously on the low coffee table, just near enough me that I won’t have to reach. I wonder if anyone’s been dumb enough to use one.

A man and a woman sit in front of me. They both have warm smiles planted on their faces. One is definitely a spiritualist, just in case my head starts spinning around or my spine becomes little more than a gentle suggestion. The other one’s got to be a therapist of some sort. They must be really worried this time, no doubt because they thought they had a success story with Beth. Bet their faces were red.

“Hi Kate, I’m Jen. I’m a parapsychologist,” the woman says. She pushes her smile up a notch, and tilts her head in a way that is clearly meant to be warm and encouraging. I feel very encouraged. She clearly feels like she’s top of her game, using my name properly. I bet they teach that at university. *Use the subject’s name, show an awareness of their interests. Make them feel like you’re a friend, not a medical professional who has eight years of schooling separating you.*

The man doesn’t introduce himself, just offers up another bland smile.

“So, Katherine,” he says. He mustn’t have gone to the same school as Jen. “I suppose you know why we’re here.”

I nod.

“I see you went to Elizabeth’s funeral yesterday,” the man says.

“That must have been very hard on you,” Jen says gently.

“We all went. Everyone from our year at school.” I hesitate. “It was good to say goodbye, I guess.”

It was a closed casket. We didn’t go anywhere near it. It seems like the right thing to say, though. You’ve got to tick the right boxes.

“Good, good. Now, Katherine, can you please tell me if you have experienced any of the following symptoms?”

He lists off a bunch of things ranging from itchy skin to the random dislocation of limbs. I say no to all of them. When he gets to suicidal thoughts, both he and the parapsychologist lean in expectantly.

I wonder if anyone ever answers *yes* to this one.

“No,” I say, and they both relax immediately. Stellar protectors of our youth, these ones. The man makes a note on his clipboard, nodding.

Jen moves closer to me. “How do you feel about Beth’s passing?”

It’s a euphemistic way of putting things, but I suppose these things always are. It would be weird to say it outright, and maybe they worry if they say it, it’ll become contagious, worming its way into my head.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I mean, I didn’t know her that well.”

The man nods, looking satisfied, but Jen continues to look at me. I have to give her something.

I open my mouth and a sliver of the truth slips out accidentally. “I’m a little upset, I guess. Not just about her dying, but... I believed her when she said she was cured. I thought there was, you know, hope.”

Jen considers me. “Kate. You should know that we were never convinced that Beth had been cleared of her entity. It’s not about curing anything; it’s about managing risks and minimizing their effect. But there’s always hope. To be a better, stronger member of society. One with limited influence from parabiopsychological entities.”

I drum my fingers along the arm of the chair. “Oh.”

Oh. Right.

The man looks over his clipboard. “Let’s move on, shall we? Katherine, are you sexually active?”

I cough. “Uh, I’m sorry, what?”

“Are you currently engaging in sexual activity?” he repeats. He looks up at me, waiting.

“N— No.” *Christ.*

“Good, good,” he murmurs, marking off something on his clipboard. “It’s always good when girls are sensible. Sexual activity can lead to severe emotional trauma. It’s good you’re being so responsible—so many girls aren’t.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It’s not like it’s entirely by my own design.

“Okay, Katherine, we need to ask you a few more questions.”

I try not to sigh, and shrug. “Fire away.”

Lucy:

I wonder what kind of woman becomes a parapsychologist. Did she want to pull her stitches apart, peer inside her own head and start dissecting? Help others pull themselves into line, or was it purely for selfish reasons?

I used to want to study something like that as well, so I could understand myself better. Control myself. I changed my mind though. I didn't like what I was finding out.

I am very good at playing pretend. My father has never once noticed that his daughter is not what he ordered. The only people I let my guard down around are Kate and Morgan, and even they don't know the full extent of how I feel. If they did, they'd never let me out of their sight.

Or they'd be horrified, disgusted. If they really knew.

I don't smile. That's what the girls out there don't understand. Smiling is just as dangerous as crying. Most people wouldn't grin after a tragedy. They'd be a little downcast, a little introspective. Saddened for the girl, but still strong, still persevering. The girls who walk in here with beaming, manic grins on their face will be getting written up as psychotic, having demon-induced mood swings. Or they'll worry about full possession, because who else but a demon would be smiling so cheerfully at a time like this?

"So, Lucy," the man says. His tie is lopsided. I bet he's unnerved by all these sad, smiling girls. "How are you feeling?"

“A little upset,” I say, all my bits and pieces sliding into place. I am a piece of fine machinery, all the cogs turning as they should. “It’s always scary, when things like this happen. If only she’d reached out for help.”

“You know to reach out if you need help, don’t you Lucy?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How did you find the funeral?”

“I felt bad for her parents. I cried a little—we all did. I wish I could have known her better.”

“It’s perfectly normal to feel depressed or emotional after a death,” the man says. “Now, have you had any of these symptoms?” He brings out a list.

I confess to a sore throat and slight headache. Can’t look too perfect. I don’t mention talking to dead girls, the sudden overwhelming anger, or seeing things in the in-between places.

The woman with a fancy title is watching me. Her eyes are very clear, like mirrors. I can’t see myself reflected in them, though.

She looks at me like she is uncertain of something. Like she’s trying to figure something out.

I wonder how loud her demon is. If it rumbles in her gut. She was a teenager once, and the demon would have been too loud to block out. Did she pull out her hair, too? Did she see things that couldn’t possibly be there?

“Okay then, Lucy. You seem perfectly healthy to me; some emotional stress, but as I said, that’s perfectly normal.”

I smile at the man. He is not very good at his job. He is scared of us, scared of the demons. I can smell it on him. What a perfect choice of profession, then. Learn how to control them, fight them, and you'll start to feel safe, like you're stronger than us. He must feel so powerful every day he wakes up, so right. Going in to help poor afflicted girls with problems he's never had to have. To fix us, silence all the parts of us that he says are wrong.

"Okay, Lucy, we just have a few more questions for you."

Morgan:

Morgan has her arms crossed. She is glaring at the people in front of her. They seem a bit startled by her, which pleases Morgan greatly. Probably they've seen an endless line of happy smiling faces trooping through here, desperate to prove their sanity. They weren't expecting the girl in front of them, slumped in her chair and glaring hard.

"How are you feeling, Morgan?"

Morgan frowns. She doesn't trust this woman. "Bored, mainly."

Behave.

"Well, that's very unfortunate, but we have to make sure you're happy and healthy. Did you know Beth very well? Did she ever say anything to you about how she was feeling?"

Morgan stiffens. "I know a lot of people. I'm a very friendly person."

She glares at them both, daring them to contradict her.

The woman looks as though she's trying to stifle a sigh. "Morgan, you're not under trial here. We just want to make sure you're okay."

Just talk to her, Morgan. Let's get it over with so we can get out of here.

Morgan sighs. "I knew Beth, but not well. And yeah, we talked before it happened. She wasn't well, but I didn't realise how bad. I would have said something if I knew."

"I'm sure you would have," the woman says. Morgan glances up sharply, but the woman's tone doesn't give anything away. She looks at Morgan steadily.

"Okay, well then." The man is blushing. "Are you, uh..." He clears his throat. "Are you sexually active?" His face is bright red.

The woman throws him a dirty look, and for the first time since she entered the room, Morgan could almost like her.

Morgan crosses her legs slowly, staring at him. She smiles. "And how?"

The man chokes, coughing hastily. The woman rolls her eyes, hiding a smile.

"Just a few more questions, then," the man says, studiously looking down.

Kate:

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. Mostly. Um. Yes."

"And you said you had no suicidal impulses or general emotional trauma?"

"No."

“How is your control over your entity?”

“Fine.”

Morgan:

“Are you happy?”

“As a bunny hopping through fields of sun dappled wildflowers.”

“Any suicidal impulses or general emotional trauma?”

“Nope.”

“How is your control over your entity?”

Awkward question, right?

“Excellent, like all my endeavours.”

Lucy:

“Are you happy?”

“... Of course.”

“Any suicidal impulses or general emotional trauma?”

“No.”

“How is your control over your entity?”

“Better than ever. I’m in complete control.”

Kate:

It won. The demon will always win in the end. There is no way of getting rid of it.

My demon should be revelling, punishing me for believing, but for once my gasps are all me, panic setting in and choking off my oxygen.

I can’t live like this. I can’t. I can’t have all this inside me forever, always have that voice in my head, laughing at me. Or worse, when it’s kind, pointing out all the ways I am trapped, that I have done wrong.

How do Morgan and Lucy do it? Morgan doesn’t care, she has never struggled against her demon. Not like me. Lucy—Lucy is even more damaged than me, but she seems to invite her demon in. Neither of my friends fight with themselves the way I have to.

Lucy:

I don’t want to be inside my own head anymore. Sometimes I find myself outside a body that looks like mine, watching it move, listening to it talk with my voice. I don’t really think it is my body. But then again, it never was. Not really.

Once upon a time a dark and twisted thing curled up inside a baby girl and made its home there. It sung to her when she was happy, soothed her when she cried. It reached out black inky fingers and coaxed its way into her heart and it would never leave.

Morgan:

“I think my friends are falling apart,” Morgan says.

She is lying on her bed with the voice of the girl that lives in her head. She lets her hands roam without paying them much attention. The voice is drawing quick sketches on paper. Morgan has never been able to draw before. The voice makes her hands flow, sweeping across the paper easily. She marvels at how they can make something so beautiful.

“They’ve struggled with how things are before, but... I’ve never seen Kate taking something so hard. And Lucy... you know, Lucy has always been different. But lately she’s been... we’ve been losing her. I know that. I don’t want to lose her. But I can’t help but think that things might be... easier, maybe, if they both had other things going on. Healthy things.”

She rolls over, careful not to shift the paper. The hands pause, as if listening.

“The thing is,” she continues, “we’re going to be finishing high school soon. It’ll be time for uni, or work, or... whatever. I want to go somewhere else. I can’t live here forever, but I can’t leave them. And in the meantime... I can’t be here, waiting. I have to find her. I need to know where she went.”

Your mother. That desire, that wanting—needing—to find more; you shared that with her, I think.

Morgan frowns. She didn't know if she liked the idea of sharing traits with the woman who'd abandoned her.

So you're decided? You have a plan?

"Yes and no. I think I have to leave if I want to find her. I'll go to the ends of the earth and find her. I have to bring her home."

The hands slow. *Are you sure she wants to be found?*

Morgan shrugs. "Don't know. Don't particularly care. I have to find her."

When?

"Soon? I have to think it all through. Do more research. I have to make sure Katie and Lucy are okay."

I can tell you the rest of that story, if you'd like. It might help.

The baby was born in the spring, a smiling, squirming thing. When she cried, the woman could hear a soft lullaby weaving its way through the Sound.

I can't see the stars in your eyes anymore, her husband said once. Just the dark.

The Sound was louder now, singing sweetly in her ears. The woman heard her daughter's life in that Sound, the sweet cries of a babe, the lilting tones of a child, the

soft sighs of a loved woman. While her daughter slept in her bassinet, the woman would close her eyes and listen.

She took her daughter by the forest often; the child had inherited her mother's curiosity. On warm days, the woman packed a blanket and a basket and they set out, picnicking at the forest's edge. Her daughter would sleep or roll about or call out sweetly, and the woman would feel the curious approach of the folk. She never took her daughter into the forest, and they never ventured out, but both parties were content in each other's presence.

The town folk noticed the woman's excursions by the forest, and they began to talk. Many a villager had been seduced by the forest, until the day they vanished into its depths, never to be heard from again. If the woman was to suffer this fate, that was her undoing; but to risk a child, especially one as healthy and happy as that one, well, it wasn't to be done.

Still, as the years went on, the villagers began to notice that this particular child was an odd one. She was a quiet girl, with one blue eye and one black. She was thoughtful and sweet, but all who met her had to admit that she was peculiar, unsettling, almost. She carried a heaviness with her, a sadness that many mistook for darkness or malevolence.

Those who still subscribed to the old tales said she was a girl divided, a mirror girl. She had been split in the womb, two girls, twins—but only one had been born into the world. She still carried her twin with her, they whispered, the girl with the black eye.

One old woman, older than anyone in town knew, whispered a different story. The girl carried her twin with her, but these were not sisters with the same father, nor where they

both necessarily human. Something had been placed inside her heart before she had been born, and it wove through her.

In the world the girl grew up in, her mother disappeared into the forest for days at a time, leaving her alone with her father. They told the villagers that she was bedridden with an illness.

The woman returned, time and time again, to the forest. The man she met there looked at her and said the same thing each time.

You have come back. For the forest.

The woman gave the same answer every time. *Yes*, she said. *For the forest.*

They walked together, exploring the forest. Often, they spoke of the woman's daily life: her daughter, the town, the villagers. They didn't speak of her husband in the little house with the blue roof.

The strange man looked at her with his unfathomable eyes and he touched her cheek with more tenderness than she could bear. She always wept when she left him; but she also wept when she was apart from her daughter for too long.

The longer she spent in the forest, the more she felt her heart change. At home, she caught glimpses of herself in looking glasses, and she thought for a brief moment that she was still in the forest, seeing forest folk staring back at her.

Morgan:

The voice stops.

“And then what happens?” Morgan asks.

The voice is hesitant, confused. *I can't remember any more of it. I can't—I can't find it.*

It's not there. I'm sorry.

It is gone, just another part of Morgan's mother that is lost. She closes her eyes for a minute, sighs.

They fall into silence. Morgan's hand starts sketching again aimlessly.

Do you mind me doing this? the voice asks.

“Using my hand? No.”

You really don't, do you, the voice marvels. It hesitates.

“Ask what you're going to ask,” Morgan says, rolling her eyes.

The voice shakes its head, and Morgan feels strands of her own hair brush her cheeks.

Go to the mirror.

Morgan obliges, going to sit cross-legged in front of her full-length mirror.

Look.

She sighs but looks into the mirror. For a moment, all she can see is herself, long limbs and dark hair and red lips. And then—

She sees a girl, Morgan and Not-Morgan. It's her, and it's the voice of the girl in her head, both of them separately and together at once. She can see it, the fine lines between

them that separates them and ties them together. It doesn't divide her; it makes them whole.

Morgan's hand reaches out to touch the reflection. On the other side of the glass, the girl moves her hand as well.

Do you mind? Does this bother you? I don't want to take something that's not mine to use.

"No, I don't mind," Morgan says, and she means it. "This is... right. We can both use it. I don't mind sharing."

Their lips curl up into a smile. A hand reaches up to touch it, and Morgan sees an expression of wonder cross the face in the mirror.

Can I...?

Morgan nods.

Something rushes into her limbs, warm and soothing, like slipping into a hot bath. Morgan feels herself shifting slightly; still there, still present, but off to the side. She feels strangely connected to everything around her, noticing how the draft that curls under the door fills her lungs and leaves again. She can sense greater movement all around her, like there are people standing nearby and she is sensing their warmth. With a start, she realises she is sensing the trees outside her window. She can see the same shifting lines that bound and separated her and the girl in her head—her body, now—around *everything*. Morgan remembers dirt and endless earth, as if she is moving below the ground, down into different histories, down towards something—but it is not enough, and Morgan is drawn back to the here and now.

She watches behind her own eyes as her body—their body?—moves.

They rise to their feet in one fluid movement, arching and stretching. Morgan can feel every little part of her body, and she marvels at how much of it she has taken for granted before. She can feel every groove of her fingertips, each individual fine hair rising on her arms. And her hair—she can feel it growing, so, so slowly, out of her scalp. And sharing the body—it's not as though Morgan has been compressed or otherwise made less to make room for the voice—it's that she has grown to accommodate it. No, not quite grown; the space was always there, but Morgan had never realised it before now.

Their hands brush over her body tentatively, touching her neck, her wrists, her thighs. Her hands are cool and they slip over her hips, her breasts, resting at their collarbone. Morgan shivers. The girl smiles.

Morgan is a she and an I and a them all at once, and suddenly it makes complete sense to her.

The girl withdraws and Morgan slides back into her skin. They can share it now, and it feels right—this is *their* body, not just Morgan's.

Their lips move, and it's the two of them speaking, agreeing.

We can both be Morgan.

Kate:

I can't sleep. It's morning—late morning—and all night I lay awake. Every time I closed my eyes, I'd see flashes of shining white teeth and gleaming yellow eyes, watching me. My throat itches.

I sit up, throwing on a t-shirt and shorts. I need to go out—to stretch my legs and run. I feel anxious in my own skin.

I'm quiet on the stairs but Mum still hears me. She pokes her head out, watching me as I lace up my shoes.

"Morning, sweetheart. Are you going out?"

I mumble a *yes*. My muscles feel coiled, like they've been wound far too tight. They're going to snap if I don't move soon.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" She is watching me closely.

"I'll have something later. I want to go for a run."

"Katie..."

"Mum, I *will*. I'm just not hungry yet, alright?"

She sighs. "Okay. Give me a hug before you go?"

She holds her arms out and I fold myself into them. I'm getting taller; we're almost the exact same height now. Her skin is warm. I can feel her pulse thrumming in her throat.

I pull away from her. "Love you. I'll be back later."

"Alright. Have fun, sweetie. I'll have some pancakes ready for you when you get back. Sound good?"

Pancakes sound sugary and thick and fluffy. They would choke me on the way down and fill me up. They sound the opposite of good.

“Sure thing,” I call out, already jogging backwards. “See you later!”

I take off, not looking back to see if she’s watching me. I’m sure that she is.

I run to Morgan’s house. With each step my body shakes and shifts, like everything is coming loose from my bones.

I let myself in and head upstairs but her room is empty.

“She went out,” someone says from behind me. Ben is leaning against the doorframe.

His hair is mussed, like he just got up, and his cheeks are flushed.

I am suddenly acutely aware of two things: the distance between us, and the grubby shirt I’m wearing, which has a picture of a dancing burrito on it and reads *Yes! I ate the WHOLE thing!* It’s an old one of my dad’s. I find myself wishing he’d been a triathlete competitor instead.

“Before midday? That’s unusual for Morgan.”

Ben laughs. I have a sudden flashback of him groaning as we kissed, his hands in my hair and tugging me closer.

“Well,” I say brightly. “I’ll head on, then.”

“Or,” Ben says, very casually, “We could hang out here. Go get a coffee somewhere.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Ben sighs. “Because of Morgan?”

It is and it isn't. It's one thing to hook up with Ben at a party; it's another thing entirely to keep doing it without saying anything to Morgan. We don't keep secrets from each other.

Do I really still believe that?

"Maybe a little bit," I admit to Ben. "It feels wrong to keep, you know, without telling her."

Ben shrugs. "Well, then we'll tell her."

"That sounds like a fun conversation," I murmur.

"The thing is, Kate... I'd like to keep doing what we did the other night. Interspersed with other stuff. In public."

I blanch. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with doing that stuff in public, Ben."

He turns bright red. "No! I meant *other* stuff. Like, you know, coffee. Dinner, movies, stuff like that. Not, like, kinky exhibitionist sex. So I'd want to tell my sister."

"About the kinky exhibitionist sex we wouldn't be having?"

"Oh my god, stop making this difficult for me. Do you want to hang out today or not?"

I walk right up to Ben until I'm directly in front of him. He waits. "Okay," I say.

"Sounds good."

"Okay," he agrees, and he leans down and I rise up on my toes and we meet in the middle to kiss.

Lucy:

I am always dreaming. Trapped in thorns and hanging ropes and shattered mirrors and girls with stolen voices. One night, I dream of princesses and dragons.

What if Sleeping Beauty was a lying whore? Maybe she liked the attention. Pretending to sleep while the prince fucked her brains out.

I am all thorns and blood and heat. If I was in a fairy tale, I'd be the evil stepmother. Or the huntsman. I'd like to be the huntsman. I'd do it right. No pity on a pretty little white girl for me. I bet the huntsman would've had smashed her brains in without pause if she was ugly. Lucky you weren't born with a massive snoz and a monobrow, Snowy! Looks are just looks. We're all rotting on the inside. I picture a row of princesses with dirt and ugly worms filling up their lungs, thick and wet and squirming.

If I was the huntsman I'd take the axe to her chest and say, sorry kid, but I'm on contract. BAM. No bias towards beauty for me.

Sometimes I hear what I'm thinking, really hear it, and I wonder if I should be scared. I don't think it's normal to have this much hate. But I think it's all I have left. If I let the hate go then I might crumble into dust. My organs and bones are ink black and made of hate. They don't break easily.

I died but then I was born again, the demon inside stretching like a newborn child. My anger gave me life again, has made me strong. It is a friend, and it is in my marrow, and it is a thousand other metaphors that all show how screwed up I am, how angry.

I can feel my mind falling apart, bit by bit. The pills kept it pasted together and now it is coming unstuck. Soon I will sneeze and bits will come dribbling out my ears.

I woke up and I wished I didn't and I wasn't sure that I did. I woke up and there is blood and dirt underneath my nails.

Morgan:

Morgan has been walking through town since dawn, thinking. Her voice has been taking turns steering them when Morgan gets distracted. As caught up in her own thoughts as she is, she still can't help but notice the little thrill that runs through them both when the voice is guiding them. She is giddy with the ability to move herself, to feel everything that Morgan takes for granted. Morgan can't help but smile a little.

She has been trying to think things through. She needs to leave town to find her mother, that much she's gathered, but the world is a very big place and she still doesn't know where to start. She needs to take care of Lucy and Kate first, to make sure they'll be safe and happy when she's gone. She'd ask them to come with her, but the problem is, they would, without hesitation. Even though Kate needs stability and Lucy needs to be near the bush, they would do anything for her. And they need her. The three of them need each other, help each other, but sometimes it is as much a trap as it is protection.

If Lucy was healthier—if she would just talk to them... If Kate had someone to help look after her... then Morgan could go. She could leave them, just for awhile.

Morgan. Kate and Lucy are as much a part of us as I am. You know that. Talk to them. Let them help you.

Sometimes, now, when she speaks, she speaks out loud, and sometimes when Morgan replies, it is inside their head. It is a funny quirk of theirs. Morgan has found that she is surprisingly comfortable with this.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll talk to them.” She hesitates for a moment. “I remembered the end of the story, you know. About the woman in the forest.”

The voice sounds a little surprised. *Really? When?*

“Last night. I dreamt it, and suddenly I could almost hear her saying it, like she was right there in my room...” Morgan swallows.

Will you tell it to me?

The longer she spent in the forest, the more she felt her heart change. At home, she caught glimpses of herself in looking glasses, and she thought for a brief moment that she was still in the forest, seeing forest folk staring back at her.

The man always waited for her at the edge of the forest, the farthest he could go. He was a silent man, but the woman could see everything in his bottomless eyes. He looked at her and she saw hope, and sadness, and woven through it all, a thousand different futures.

Her husband did not speak to her when she was home anymore. Their daughter sat between them, growing up in a silent house. She withdrew into herself when her mother was gone, and her father would worry. She had no friends but herself; and yet her imaginary friends seemed so real that her father felt wary as he watched over her. She

often appeared to be caught up in a conversation in her own mind, and her moods seemed to change day to day. Her father learnt to judge her by which eye shone more on each given day; the gleam of the black, or the bright of the blue. More than anything, the girl wished she could go with her mother into the forest, and whenever she had that desperate thought, both eyes would shine brightly.

One day, after her mother had tucked her into bed, whispering stories in her ear, she heard her father shouting.

I do not know who you have become, he cried. I did not want this life—a wife who is in a dream half the time, and in that damned forest the rest of the time. Your daughter needs you.

Don't you mean our daughter? her mother murmured. Her voice was soft and gentle, and the girl closed her eyes.

I don't even know if that child is of my own blood, the man snarled. *There is something in her that is wrong, that is just as dark and twisted as your own soul.*

There is nothing wrong with her, the woman said, and her voice was now ice cold and regal. *Nothing.*

She listened, and the door slammed shut; her father had left.

The next day, the woman returned to the forest with her daughter. The man was waiting for her with his dark eyes, as he always was. He looked down upon the girl, and they gazed into each others eyes, and he saw the truth in them, one blue, one black. The girl smiled, and clutched at his hand, and he held her to him.

He kissed her brow, and she ran off to play.

The man of the forest and the woman stood in front of one another, close as they dared.

They were the same height now, and the man rested his head against hers. He touched her hand with his inky black fingers as carefully as he always touched her.

You have come back, he said. *For the forest.*

She took his hand.

No, she said. *I have come back for you.*

And they lived happily ever after.

Lucy:

I went in the bathroom and looked in the mirror and I swear my skin was peeling off. At first it was like when you've had a bad sunburn, you know, and you can peel thin layers off like glue off your palms. But it wasn't enough, and it kept coming, more layers of skin peeling off, my nails catching under flakes and then thin warm layers, catching hold and tugging at them until wet chunks fell to the floor, until I could see all the rotting, ruined flesh, filled with gaping holes and tears. And my face was caves of bone, dark shadows and old blood with white eyes staring out—

—*beautiful*—

—and even my bones were grey and full of holes, like whoever made them did not know what they should be, like the moths could fly out from, like they were rattling around in there.

When I got up the next day the rotting pieces of skin were gone from the bathroom floor and my skin must have looked normal because my father still hugged me good morning and smiled, and my mother looked straight through me, and in the mirror my skin was smooth again. I could still feel the holes though, the rotting under my skin, in my bones.

The girl in the mirror smiles at me.

Kate:

Ben is an excellent kisser.

That has pretty much been the extent of my thought process since we went into his room. We were just going to watch a movie but I couldn't stop thinking about him, how he tasted, and then he stretched and I saw that flat pane of skin above his jeans and next thing I knew I had straddled him and we were kissing madly.

He didn't seem too put out by it, though.

I'm not used to this. I've kissed guys before, plenty of them. Many of them have been wonderful.

Kissing Ben is different. He makes my blood heat up and rush under my skin. He touches me and I can't think.

I like how I am with him. I take charge—I kiss him. I can make him sigh, make him want me. It's a dizzying prospect, and almost too strange when I remember that this is Ben (Ben, who I played with as a kid, Ben who once helped me find my tooth after it fell out in their backyard) but honestly, the whole thing is too much *fun* for me to really think about, and that in itself is amazing.

We stop when we hear a door opening and closing downstairs.

"It's okay," Ben says, "It's just my dad."

"Yeah, but we should probably put our shirts back on, just in case." I look around for mine, before spotting the dancing burrito at the bottom of the bed. Ben tosses it to me, slipping into his own shirt.

"You really ate the whole thing?" he asks as I shrug into it. "I'm impressed."

"It's a hand-me-down." I run my hands through my hair, trying to smooth it down. "My dad is the one with the steel gut, not me."

Ben tugs me back down to him. He kisses me, trailing kisses down my throat. He doesn't seem to notice the ruined skin at my neck.

I flip him over, pushing him down. He groans as I kiss his throat, and at that sound something starts burning in my gut. My skin is heating up. I feel like I'm coming down with the flu, except I'm not sick at all—I feel strong, sharp. Everything is shifting in and out of focus.

I can hear Ben's heartbeat. I can smell the blood pulsing in his throat. It makes me shudder.

Another door opens and slams shut. Morgan.

“I’m going to go and talk to her,” I say. I lean in, kiss him, avoiding his neck. “I guess I’ll see you later?”

“Yes please,” he says. As I go to leave, he calls out again. “You know, Kate, I always had a bit of a crush on you.”

I poke my tongue out at him, trying not to smile. “Really?”

“Really. I always thought you were the cutest of Morgan’s friends.”

I roll my eyes. “You know Morgan basically only has one other friend, right?”

He smirks. “Yeah, but you were still the cutest.”

Morgan:

Morgan is in her room, silently talking to herself, when Kate comes in. The voice steps aside tactfully.

“Hey,” Kate says. She looks a little nervous.

“Hi,” Morgan says. “Have you been here long?” She frowns, staring at Kate, taking her in. Her friend’s hair is mussed, and her cheeks are a feverish red. Morgan grins triumphantly. “You’ve been kissing someone!”

“You have the weirdest sixth sense about these things,” Kate says, flopping down onto the bed. “How do you always know?”

“Years of practical experience in the field,” Morgan says, and the voice snorts.

Kate raises an eyebrow. “Did you just laugh at your own joke?”

Morgan grins. “Technically, yes.” She doesn’t explain further. “So, who is it? And at this time of morning, my oh my.”

“Actually,” Kate says slowly, “it’s... well, it’s Ben. Your Ben.”

It takes Morgan a moment to grasp what she meant. “Ben? As in, my brother, Ben?”

Kate nods miserably. “It only just happened last week. And, er, this morning.”

“Oh my god,” Morgan says. “My brother had his hand in your bra this morning. In my own house.”

“How did you *know*? Okay, whatever. It was a bit unexpected, and I think I actually *like* him, which is weird in itself, but the thing is, I won’t do anything else if it’s not okay with you. That goes without saying.”

“No,” Morgan says slowly. “No, this is great!” Her eyes lit up. “You and my brother—I can totally see it. You have great taste, of course, so I commend you on that.”

Kate rolls her eyes but Morgan is running over this unexpected news in her mind. This was perfect—Kate would be looked after by someone who was as biologically as close to Morgan as possible. Ben was a great kid—this would be good for him, too. Kate would bring him out of his depression—she was warm, and good, and everything her brother needed. Morgan couldn’t have planned it better herself.

“You do realise you can’t tell me the fine details about your relationship, though,” she continues. “My innocent mind may be traumatised forever if I hear anything about my brother’s genitalia.”

“I’m really happy you’re okay with this,” Kate says, “but please, please stop talking.”

Morgan smiles at her. “No, really, this is so great. You guys are going to be nauseatingly adorable together.”

Kate pulls a face. “Uh, we’ve just made out a few times, that’s all. You can put away the wedding invites.”

“Yeah, but he asked you out, didn’t he?”

Kate sighs, crossing her arms, but a small smile plays at the corners of her lips.

“Maybe.”

Morgan beams. “Ha! I knew it. I can’t wait to tell Lucy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kate surveys her more closely. “And what about you?”

Morgan arches an eyebrow. “What *about* me? I’m not the one getting felt up before lunchtime.”

“You may as well be. You look... different, Morgan. Happier. More... complete.”

The voice and Morgan smile.

“See? You’ve met someone. Except you don’t normally act like this about people you’re sleeping with.”

Morgan shrugs. “Well, this isn’t about someone else, so I don’t know what to tell you.

Maybe I’m just happier being me lately.”

“Yeah, whatever. Okay, I’m heading home. See you later.”

Morgan and the voice wave her off. It is getting harder to separate the two of them, but in the funny conflicting way their connection seems to work, it’s easier as well. Morgan is Morgan and the voice is the voice and they are both Morgan.

“Come round next week,” Morgan says impulsively. “You and Lucy—we’ll hang out. Just us.”

That’s an oxymoron.

Kate smiles. “Yeah, okay. It’d be good to do something normal.”

They don’t mention their concern for Lucy, that keeping an eye on her might be more of an impetus than simply spending time together. Morgan wonders if Kate knows how much their friend has been slipping away lately. She wonders why they never talk about it.

Because then it’ll be real, the voice suggests quietly.

Morgan thinks, *Be quiet, you.*

There once was a young mermaid who was born into the wrong body. She knew this from the first day she opened her eyes and unfurled her tail, no bigger than an undersized seahorse. You may think this was an extraordinarily early time for a child to feel so sure about how unsure she felt in her own skin; but the fact is, mermaids are incredibly clever when they’re not distracted by particularly shiny sea-shells, so it was not unusual for such a little mermaid to be pondering such big things. She wondered if the currents had got confused and brought her a tail instead of the legs she was meant to have been born with.

She loved her family and the oceans she called her home deeply. As she grew, the mermaid was blessed with beauty, riches, and the most extraordinary voice in all the

oceans. Merfolk, crustaceans, and all manner of sea creatures would travel across seas and oceans just to hear her sing. Her voice was known to carry across the waves, to coax pearls from oysters and to ease the most frantic storms. And yet the mermaid was unhappy. She wanted things with a desperation that sent her heart aching. She often hovered just below the surface of the water, as close as she dared, and listened. But she heard little but the caw of a seagull passing overhead, the lap of waves moving slowly.

One night, there was a terrible storm. The mermaid hovered near the surface while it thundered on, avoiding the falling pieces of a ship that began to crash into the waves. At first, it was just odd bits of debris, nothing of real interest—but then a body plunged into the churning seas.

The mermaid did not hesitate. She dove after the body, and grabbed it round the middle, holding tight. She dragged it up and away, feeding small pockets of oxygen into the body and keeping it safe while the storm passed.

At last, when it was over, she lay next to the body on a sandy shore, exhausted. It was a man, she noted with surprise, and a handsome one at that. He breathed steadily, and his heart still beat in his chest—she had saved him. She could hear a sound stirring in his throat—he was waking up.

She gazed upon him a moment more before diving back into the sea.

The mermaid was swept up in thoughts of him for weeks. For once, her need to be something else was eclipsed by a new feeling. She heard that he had been found, and returned to his home; that he was a prince, in fact, one who was rumoured to be searching for the woman who had saved him.

She felt as though she knew him, and the more she thought about him, the more she became caught up in the fantasy of being with him. She was in love, she realised, and the thought sent her heart aching. This was what she'd been searching for for so long—she had never felt right with her tail because she was destined to fall in love with a human, to be with him.

The mermaid knew she had to follow her heart and forge a new life for herself, out of the sea. She kissed her father on the brow as he slept, and she went to speak with her grandmother.

The old woman had been quite a sea witch back in her day, renowned across the seas for her magic. She listened as her granddaughter wept and begged for her help; she stroked her hair and nodded as the girl's voice wore thin.

“I will give you what you wish,” she said at last. “But, my darling girl... please take care, and protect your heart. These things are never what they seem.”

The mermaid laughed and promised she would be careful. Her grandmother sighed, but put aside her reservations, for it warmed her own heart to see her granddaughter so happy.

She gathered the necessary elements and prepared the spell, slipping and coaxing it inside a shell. She threaded it onto a string and placed it carefully around her granddaughter's neck.

“Now, dear girl, you must pay a price, as is always the case with magics such as these. You will go to your prince, and you can try find your happy ending with him, but every step you take will be as though you are walking on knives, as though they are piercing your feet through.”

“Oh, no,” the mermaid breathed. She had been prepared to give anything for her prince and her legs, but to have something she wanted for so long be twisted so—it wasn’t right. She clutched her grandmother’s hand.

“Please—anything but that. It would be a cruel existence to go through life tortured by one body, only to be cursed upon finally finding my rightful self. Please, grandmother—I would give anything else.”

Her grandmother surveyed her, her face troubled. “There is one other thing. I can take your voice, and give it to the spell instead. It is sacrifice, but it is also strength, power. You must give it to the spell for it to work. Do you understand?”

The mermaid nodded eagerly. “Of course,” she said.

“When you first step onto land, your voice will vanish from your throat. Do not be afraid of the silence, lest it choke you. Go. Find your true love, if he is to be so. Find yourself.”

The mermaid kissed her grandmother and left, clutching at the shell around her neck. She swam as quickly as she could towards land, so eager to find her new life that she barely noticed the sting of the colder waters on her scales.

When she reached the shallows where the sand brushed her tail, she felt something start, low and hot in her belly. It was not an unpleasant feeling, but something that thrilled her, a creeping heat that stretched warmth luxuriously down her body, curling around her tail. The mermaid ran trembling fingers over her skin as she closed her eyes and waited.

When she next opened them wide, her tail was gone, replaced by a set of human legs. The mermaid stared and stared, and could barely catch her breath from joy. She felt

strong, and sure, and for the first time in her life, completely right. She gathered herself to her feet, testing her weight and how to move forward.

The moment her new feet landed on the hot, dry sand, she felt her voice fly out from her throat and she pressed a hand against her mouth, shocked. Its absence was a visceral thing, but she couldn't be sorry to see it go if it meant she could have her legs.

She gazed down at her body. There were new, strange things below her waist, things that she supposed came with legs, but she wasn't entirely sure of. A friendly seagull passed by as she looked over herself curiously; recognising her as from the sea, it landed and explained what exactly the purpose was of all her new parts. However, seagull anatomy and human girl anatomy don't necessarily have a lot in common, and so the seagull could only offer her the basics. She thanked the seagull with a kiss, and made her way up the beach. She was close to the port of the prince's kingdom; she would find him, and begin her new life.

The mermaid—the girl, now, at last—found a sheet drying on a line towards the edge of the kingdom, where small houses began to crop up. From what she knew of humans, they liked to drape themselves in strange fabrics and cover their wonderful bodies. She wasn't sure why—she'd only just got her legs, and couldn't imagine not being wanting to be able to glance down and see them whenever she wanted. Indeed, if she wasn't on a path of destiny, she would have quite happily sat and simply stared at her knees all day.

She arrived at the door to the palace just as the prince was leaving for his daily ride about the kingdom to see if he could recognise his mystery saviour. Naturally, he was rather startled to see the very woman beaming up at him, clad in only a sheet and smelling faintly of shrimp.

He immediately embraced her, welcoming her into his home. He was momentarily surprised to realise that she was mute, but quickly moved on, so excited was he to see her.

“You will make a fine bride,” he told her warmly, giving her a tour through his house. “If it is amenable to yourself, we will be wedded by the next full moon, before the harvest season. If I appear forward, I do apologise; it’s just that I fell in love with you the moment I first saw you. Now that you’ve found me, I don’t wish to be apart a moment longer.”

The girl smiled, delighted, although a small part of her wished she could speak so she could learn more about her true love. She had always enjoyed the philosophical discussions she would have with her grandmother, and she would’ve quite liked to continue them in her married life.

The prince escorted her up to the hall full of guest chambers.

“You will stay here until our wedding,” he told her. “Unfortunately, in two days’ time I must leave for a neighbouring kingdom to settle some matters; but rest assured, you will not be lonely. My sister will keep you company day and night. I’m sure she will be delighted to have a new friend. She may appear shy, but she has a problem with her speech, and rarely manages to talk.”

He knocked on a door, and a girl opened it.

She looked a little older than the girl, with a friendly, open face. Her skin was covered in freckles that reminded the girl of constellations reflected onto inky water in the night. She nodded at the girl, who gave a quick wave back.

“This is the woman who saved me,” the prince said. “My soon-to-be wife. Darling, this is my sister, Aurora.”

Aurora smiled at the girl. She whispered something to her brother.

“Of course,” he said. “I will leave you two to get to know one another. I’ll see you in the morning—we’ll tour the kingdom together.”

He kissed them both on the cheek, and bowed before he exited, closing the door behind him.

The two girls looked at each other a little uncertainly. The girl had never noticed silence so acutely before. The shell around her neck felt warm, as though her voice wanted to break through and shatter the silence.

Aurora offered the girl a dress to change into, and then pulled some thick books from her shelves, filled with pictures with every kind of colour. She offered one to the girl, and they settled in together, looking through the books in companionable silence. The girl had never learnt to read, as paper tends to get soggy under water and ink is simply washed away, but she enjoyed looking over the detailed, beautiful pictures. She marvelled at the colours, and wept at the tragic scenes of lost lovers. Aurora offered her a handkerchief and a small smile.

“Those ones make me cry, too,” she whispered.

The girl was caught by the sound of the other girl’s voice. It was soft and careful, and swept across the words she spoke in a peculiar way, stuttering and cracking, flowing with a unique rhythm. The girl thought it was beautiful.

Aurora clearly did not agree; she flushed and looked away. When she met the girl's gaze again, she looked sad. *Sorry*, she mouthed. She gestured at her throat and shook her head helplessly.

The girl flipped through pages of the book she'd been looking through until she found what she was searching for. It was a jarring image of a stained glass window, filled with overlapping colours and patterns, but somehow it all worked together in the loveliest harmony. She showed it to Aurora, pointing at the page, then at the other girl.

Aurora stared at the picture for a moment. A slow smile unfurled across her mouth.

The girls barely slept. Instead, they stayed up late into the evening, Aurora teaching the girl a way of speaking with just her hands. By morning's light, they were having rapid-fire conversations that carved pictures from the air, their hands soaring and twisting as they laughed silently together.

The prince arrived early that morning to take them out on a tour of the kingdom. Aurora joined them, and they three had a wonderful day together. The girl couldn't help but notice that even if she could speak, she had far more to say to Aurora than her one true love. The prince was kind and thoughtful, but his mind was always on royal matters, distracted slightly. Still, he seemed delighted to see the girls' friendship; he clearly adored his sister and wanted nothing but the best for her.

The girl was having the time of her life. Midway through the day, she convinced the others to leave the horses behind and walk through the towns and meadows. She slipped off the shoes which Aurora had had to help her lace that morning, and ran and walked and danced. She loved the feeling of everything beneath her feet, from the hard stones to the soft but itchy grass to the dusty dirt roads that coloured her toes a vivid orange.

The prince looked on, smiling, as the girls ran and danced together, spinning out stories with their whole bodies.

The girls spent another night telling stories and sharing secrets. While the girl could not tell Aurora the whole truth of her past, she still told her of her childhood, of the games she'd play and her love for her family. Aurora, in return, told the girl of her fears and hopes. She was older than her brother, the prince, but would never be able to rule.

A queen, she explained to the girl, hands flying, needs to be able to speak to her subjects, to give orders and offer pardons. If I were to marry a king, as you are intended to, it wouldn't be so bad, because no one would expect me to have a thought in my head, let alone a voice in my throat; but I cannot rule on my own. The Stuttering Princess, they call me.

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders. The girl held her hand.

Aurora smiled at her. *I am glad you found my brother*, she signed. Her hands shook only a little. *It will be wonderful to have you as my friend and sister for always.*

I am glad I found you both, the girl replied shyly.

When the girl looked at Aurora, she was reminded of that feeling on the beach, the warm, pleasant burn low in her belly.

Morgan:

“Okay. Where do we go from here? Where do we start?”

With memories, I suppose. If we look back at what we can remember about her, it should give you some answers, or at least somewhere to start.

Morgan tugs at her hair, ignoring the wince that came from her voice. “I don’t really have any memories. Like, generic, stuff, sure, but I doubt knowing that my mother really liked Vegemite and tuna on her toast is going to help me find her.”

Ew. She hesitates for a moment. Do you ever think it’s strange that you can’t remember her that well? Whenever I look back, it’s just... gone. I don’t like it.

Morgan frowns. “I guess... But kids are pretty self-absorbed, aren’t they—you don’t really think of your parents as people until you’re a teenager.”

I just mean... Morgan, what if you don’t like what you find? You can’t just forget about it once you know; you can’t escape your own mind if you don’t like these memories.

“Look, I’m not delusional. I don’t think we’re going to see each other and run into each other’s arms and spin around singing songs from the *Sound of Music*, or something. I just want to see her. I need to *know* her. I want to ask her why she did this to us—to Ben, and to Dad, and to me. What makes a person just take off and leave her family?”

You’re not like her, Morgan.

“Aren’t I? I’m planning to leave everyone I care about to find her. Someone who doesn’t even want me, apparently. And even after that—I don’t want to be here forever. I can’t. This town will kill me if I let it; it’ll choke the life out of me. So no matter what, one day I might be just that selfish to leave.”

The voice sighs.

“Anyway. This will be for the best. You know what I do remember? I remember my dad not leaving his room for weeks after she left. Every time we saw him, he had these circles under his eyes and his hands were shaking. Our grandmother had to come and watch us until he was fit to be a parent again, unlike my mother who simply gave up on that idea. I remember that Ben wouldn’t play with me anymore, and that Lucy and Kate would come over every morning and stay all day, just to keep me company. So how can I leave them? For a woman who doesn’t care if I’m alive or dead. I want to say I’m doing this for someone else, that I could bring her home to my dad, or for Ben, but really I just want to finally know *why*. So I can make sure I’m never like her.”

Morgan finds that she is breathing hard, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. She closes her eyes and lets the voice slip in, calming her down and filling her. Fingertips brush at her eyes, stroking her arm.

Ok. I'll help you remember. We'll get you your answers.

“Thank you,” she breathes, and they curl up together, holding tight as one.

The next morning, the prince came in to wish them both goodbye.

“I’ll be back in two weeks,” he promised, “and we will be married immediately. Please, look after one another and have a grand time while I am gone. I expect to hear many stories of fun to alleviate my pains of sitting through meetings on taxes and the like.”

The girls kissed him goodbye and waved him off. They had another wonderful day planned, where they would go and visit the local artists' workshops to see their latest paintings.

As they walked through the streets, the girl overheard the townsfolk talking about them. They did not speak with any particular malice in their voices. They called Aurora the *Stuttering Princess*. They said *dumb* and *mute*, and they were matter-of-fact as they did so. Aurora grew quieter as the murmurs continued, her hands falling into silence.

That afternoon, the girl took Aurora aside and gave the other girl the necklace that held her voice. She thought of what her grandmother had told her, of sacrifice and power and strength, and she tied the string around Aurora's neck and hoped and hoped.

Aurora clutched at her throat in amazement. *What is this?* she signed.

The girl smiled. *Try speak.*

Aurora opened her mouth, and the mermaid's voice came out, sweet and as beautiful as ever. Aurora laughed disbelievingly, and sung out. The girl thought she still preferred Aurora's own voice, but if this gave her such happiness, then all was well.

The girls spent all their time together over the next two weeks. Aurora grew more confident, and far happier; the girl thought her voice suited the girl far better than it ever had herself. They shared all their secrets, but one. The girl wanted to tell her friend, but she feared doing so would cause the spell to break. Deep down, she also worried Aurora would reject her, and her fear of losing her closest friend was tied up in her fear of losing her new body. She had never felt more comfortable, or happier, than she had since stepping out of the water.

The morning of her wedding to the prince arrived all too quickly. When the girl awoke that morning, she did not know why, at first, she felt so nervous; it was only when she sat up and saw the wedding gown waiting for her that she remembered.

Aurora was also subdued that morning as they began to get ready. Since the girl had given her the shell and new voice, she had barely stopped talking, or singing, or laughing just for the pure pleasure of it. Now she kept opening her mouth to speak, and then falling silent. The girl felt sick.

The prince was to arrive that afternoon. Silently, the girls dressed and prepared themselves for the day amid a flurry of maids. Hands were flying everywhere; if either girl chose to speak in their silent language, the other would not have caught it.

Aurora insisted on fixing the girl's hair herself, weaving it into a complex braid. The girl closed her eyes as her friend gently tugged strands of hair this way and that; it was rather like being rocked by the currents.

When they were ready, and the call came for the wedding to begin, the girls simply looked at each other. The girl had everything she'd ever wanted—her rightful body, a handsome fiancé, and a dear friend—so why was her throat so tight? Why did her legs ache so, weighing her down so heavily that she couldn't imagine making it down the aisle?

"You're trembling," Aurora said softly. She kissed the girl lightly. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "It's time to go."

The girl nodded shakily, and took a step. She was almost to the door when she stopped.

Wait, she signed. I have to tell you something. And her story spilt out in the silence between them.

Aurora did not speak or raise a hand when the girl finished, whose own hands were aching from signing so quickly. She did not meet the girl's eye. Desperate, the girl spun and ran out of the room, her legs strong and sure beneath her while her heart ached. She walked up the aisle blindly to where the prince waited for her.

A voice sung out, echoing against the palace walls. "Wait!"

Aurora came hurrying up the aisle towards them, and the girl went to meet her halfway. The prince followed a little bemusedly as surprised murmurs started up about the princess's voice, which still echoed around the huge room, beautiful and determined.

Aurora looked at the girl and took her hand. "You are you," she said simply. She spoke aloud and signed with her spare hand. "You have always been who you are and who you always will be. I know that from the bottom of my heart."

The girl embraced her. She turned to the prince and began to sign to him, with Aurora translating.

"I know now that I have found everything I was looking for," they said, "and I would be complete without love. But I have found it, here in your palace, and I would like to follow it. I want to have adventures together, and explore everything about myself and my love over the course of a long and happy life. I am sorry, your highness. But I cannot marry you today."

Aurora slipped her hand into the girl's.

The prince looked at them thoughtfully. "I thought I knew true love," he mused, "but I think I was hasty, and entirely too romantic, a boy caught up in a fantasy. I am not the type of man who would ever want to stand in the way of those I hold dearest to my heart—I love you both, and wish you only happiness."

The girls hugged him, and at last embraced each other, and all those who saw them that day could have sworn that a thousand words passed between them in a single touch. The palace erupted into cheers and rejoicing, and so great was their revelry that no one noticed the two girls slipping silently out the palace doors.

And so the girl who had once been a mermaid did not marry the prince, but ran away that very night with his sister. They had many adventures together, and lived a fulfilling life rich with love. Indeed, you can still see them today, running through the land, one singing and the other dancing, and both painting beautiful stories into the silence with their hands.

Morgan

“I don’t feel lonely anymore, you know. I never even realised I could feel lonely, not with Kate and Lucy around. But I think I’ve been feeling like this for a long time. Lonely and trapped. I don’t, anymore. Not with you.”

Me either.

“Goodnight, me.”

Goodnight, you. Hope we sleep well.

Kate:

We go a whole week without seeing each other before we meet at Morgan's, sleeping bags under our arms. I call Lucy every night, just to make sure she's still there. Halfway through the week, I change my mind and start calling Morgan every morning, as well. I like hearing their voices travelling down the phone. Lucy is getting quieter. Sometimes we just sit on the phone and I listen to her breathe. She tells me she's still there.

I think my friends are keeping secrets from me.

Lucy is drumming her fingers in a staccato pattern, eyes locked on the window. Morgan's eyes keep going in and out of focus and she'll smile at odd points in the conversation. For once, I am the most normal one in the room. It's an unfamiliar feeling.

"So," Morgan says abruptly. "Kate and Ben, hey?"

It's the right thing to say. Lucy gives a genuine smile, and we all relax.

"How is that going?" Lucy asks. "Are you in *lurve* yet?"

"More importantly, have you got naked yet?" Morgan asks.

"No and no," I reply. "We've hung out a few times." I've seen him almost every day. Ben and I have had a picnic, hung out at each other's places, and gone to the movies. We shared popcorn and he held my hand the whole way through. He had a nice grip—cool and firm, and not at all sweaty.

At night, I find myself thinking about him a lot.

"But you'd like to," Lucy says, watching me. "Get naked, I mean."

Morgan holds up her hands. "Fair warning: I'm happy to discuss Kate's sex life, so long as it doesn't include details of what a gentle lover Ben is. Actually, can we not call him

Ben at all for this? He can just be Kate's boyfriend. He needs a code name so I can exist in denial and not projectile vomit at the thought of you two kids."

"Aw," Lucy says. "You should say that at the wedding."

I throw a pillow at her. "There's really not much to tell. And he's really not my boyfriend. Geez. We've been going out for a week."

"But to Morgan, a week with one guy is like a year," Lucy points out, giggling. Morgan hurls the pillow at her.

"Why is everyone throwing pillows at me?" Lucy grumbles.

"Because we can't stand to look at your rapturous beauty," Morgan explains.

Lucy ignores her. "Really, though, Katie. You guys already know each other. You seem kind of keen. Why not just go ahead with it?"

My stomach is twisting. "Again, I'm going to emphasise the whole 'one week together' thing. Look: maybe. I guess I want it to happen. But not yet."

I don't even know if that's true or not. Part of me desperately wants to know, to just go ahead and sleep with Ben. When we're alone together sometimes it's all I can do to stop myself from climbing on him. I don't think he's even realised. He's enjoying himself, obviously, but he's clearly in no rush. It's me who's torn between attacking the boy or running in the opposite direction. Suddenly everything I want seems so *real*. There's so much I don't know about—like protection. HMPs, which I've taken before to moderate my moods, to keep me from getting too worked up—who hasn't? When we were thirteen, it felt like every girl in our year was unpacking those little purple pills with their lunches and a note from their mothers.

Morgan keeps her bedside table stocked with her favourite brands of condoms but she doesn't take HMPs, even though they're basically mandatory. They give them out in PE to the senior students. Years ago, I heard they used to make sure girls were taking them every day, just to be safe, same as how they checked their skirt length at school, but I'm not sure if that's true or not.

"I don't like them," Morgan explained to us once. "They numb you down and everything feels slow and thick. It's like you're asleep the whole time. I need to feel it all."

Lucy didn't say anything. I have more questions, but I don't know how to ask them. I've never taken them before, but I think when the time comes (please let it come) I will. I want to be completely safe, and it's just another compromise you have to make, right? Guys lose a little sensation when wearing a condom. Girls lose a little feeling when they take HMPs, but it keeps their minds calm and healthy. Stops the demon from getting too overexcited, from you losing too much control, and the demon slipping in.

Morgan would snort very loudly if I said this out loud, so I tend to keep it to myself. I don't know if Lucy has ever really used HMPs. Surely she used them that first time, even if she was drinking. I can't imagine having sex for the first time without taking that extra precaution. I can't imagine lying there with someone, completely naked and waiting, nothing there to keep me calm and sane. I think my demon would consume me.

Although sometimes I think of brief moments when I've been with a guy at a party, and I'm kissing him, and he's touching me in a way that is just—and it's fierce and bright, and sometimes a little clumsy with too much saliva, and it sends a thrill low down in my stomach. It never goes any further, although it could. I could let it, let myself get carried away. Is that what happened to Lucy? She was caught up in a bright moment like that?

That's probably why they have HMPs in the first place, so you can take them to avoid letting yourself get carried away in the moment.

(Is it getting carried away, though, or is it just existing from one beat to the next—*enjoying* one beat to the next, not losing control but gaining it? Giving in to the waves of pleasure and desire, riding them and not drowning? I don't know. I think I'm confusing my metaphors.)

(I can picture all that with Ben, though. It makes me wonder.)

"Good," Morgan says, and I shake myself back into the present. "You should take your time. You're not missing out on much, anyway." She sighs. "Still, I can't wait 'til you two have done the deed and we can talk about it already."

"Mm," Lucy says. I look at her but her face is politely blank.

"So Lucy," I say, keeping my voice casual. "What about you? Run into anyone interesting lately?"

She shrugs easily. "Not really, no."

I wasn't expecting a heartfelt confession and promise to never hide things from us again, but it's like it never happened. Is she always this good at lying? I don't want to know.

"I figure, it'll happen when it happens," Lucy continues. "It's like Morgan says. It's really not a big deal."

"Well, it *can* be," Morgan says quickly. "Sometimes. You guys shouldn't take dating advice from me, I'm super jaded."

Lucy arches an eyebrow. "Has it ever been a big deal for you?"

“No,” Morgan says. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t ever be, one day.” She clears her throat. “I wanted to talk to you guys about something. I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“Shoot,” I say. Lucy is silent.

“I’m trying to find out about my mother,” Morgan says. Her voice is barely above a whisper, and she looks defensive even as she speaks. “What she was like, before she left us. I need—I *want* to know why.”

Lucy and I exchange glances.

“Oh,” Lucy says slowly. “Are you sure that’s the best idea?”

“Why not?” Morgan asks. She seems surprised.

We’ve never really talked about Morgan’s mother. When it first happened, Morgan just shut down. We tried to talk to her then, but she would cover her ears, or change the subject, or simply refuse to listen. Once, she started crying, sobbing so hard she couldn’t breathe, and after that Lucy and I swore we wouldn’t force her to discuss it anymore.

Maybe that was the wrong idea, but we were kids. I’ve known Morgan since we were six, and that was the only time I can remember seeing her cry.

“We don’t want to see you get hurt,” I say.

“I know what I’m doing. I just want to understand her. Find out what she’s like.”

I remember that Morgan’s mother often had a far-off look in her eye, and sometimes when you tried to talk to her she would take a while to answer, like she was still in

someone else's story. I don't think Morgan would want to remember those sorts of details.

"I remember that she was fun," Lucy says suddenly. "She let us paint inside the house—remember that time she brought us all those teapots to paint? She would always help us if we wanted to make something in the kitchen." She chews on her lip for a minute.

"Morgan—are you sure this is what she'd want?"

"You think you knew her better than I did?" Morgan snaps, and then all at once she deflates. "Sorry. Sorry, I'm being a shit. It's so frustrating, you know? There's so much I don't remember. I asked Ben about her and he knew way more than me."

"I get it," Lucy says. "You want to know more about her. About who you are, your history. It's completely understandable."

She and Morgan share a long look. I try not to fidget. I don't think this is a good idea. It can't end well for Morgan; she'll only be disappointed.

My throat is itching.

Lucy:

I keep finding myself in the bush. Sometimes I wake up there and I don't remember how I got there. The dead girl just shrugs and spins around and round. Some days she can't talk because her mouth has been sewn shut with thick black thread; other days someone has simply stolen her voice. These times, though, she isn't speaking because she has nothing to tell me about how I got here.

She wears variations of my face more and more these days. Sometimes she alters it enough that it looks like an almost me; the girl I could have been, perhaps, or a sister. I like watching it change, like I'm looking into different possible futures. Everything that could happen, or has. Mostly she just looks angry or sad. She only laughs sometimes, and it's always at things that are strange, that no one in their right mind would smile at.

Today she tells me, *It's time. You can't keep going back. You need to stay here with me, with us... Let me take you to where you belong.*

It's everything I want but it's not right. Not yet. I'm too angry and too sad, and I can't leave Morgan and Kate. It would kill them.

Even if it kills me to stay, I have to do it. For them.

The dead girl shifts, and now she is wearing Beth's face, speaking with Beth's voice. Just another dead girl.

They're going to leave you anyway. You've already seen it, haven't you? They're slipping away in little ways and big ones. Let them go. They can let you go; you'll all be the better for it.

I don't say anything.

You don't need to be plagued by the monsters of these people. You're like me. You're what they call monster.

The girl clears her throat and begins to tell me a story.

She speaks and speaks until her throat runs dry. When she loses her voice, she borrows mine. At last, she stops. She holds out her hand.

The same stories of my past run in your blood. Come with us. It's time.

Even while I fracture, all I can think about is Kate and Morgan. “Not yet. Soon. But... not yet.”

The dead girl looks at me, long and hard. She almost looks regretful. *I don't think they're going to be patient much longer.*

She is not talking about my friends.

Kate:

Despite my parents' best efforts, they remain unable to corner Ben when he's hanging out at my place. This is mostly due to my years of experience of sneaking out of the house to go see Lucy or Morgan, and it keeps us both safe—and sane—for a few weeks. Eventually, however, Mum manages to nab Ben as he's leaving my room, and moments later has invited him over for dinner later that night. My mother can look very innocent when she wants to, so I don't blame Ben for agreeing to come. He doesn't know that the next time he walks through the front door, it'll be as a lamb strolling nonchalantly into a lion's den. They will slaughter him with well-meaning but probing questions.

Mum pops her head in my room when there's only an hour to go. “Sweetheart, would you mind preparing dinner tonight? Your father and I still have a million things left to clean.”

The house is, of course, spotless. “Mum, Ben was here this afternoon. I'm pretty sure he's not going to notice if you leave that single pillow out of place.”

She places a hand over her mouth. “Oh, the *horror*.”

“I honestly can't tell if you're kidding or not. Fine, I'll get started now.”

“I thought you could make your grandmother’s special beef stew. The recipe’s on the benchtop for you.”

The kitchen is very bright. I wonder if my father has replaced the bulbs. A peculiar drumming starts up in my chest.

All the ingredients are laid out in front of me, brightly coloured vegetables lined up like neat little soldiers. Everything in its rightful, plastic-wrapped place.

I don’t know if I can do this.

Everything in my body is twisting away and towards the food. A slab of raw, red meat is laid out on the chopping board. My mouth fills with saliva. I could bite into it right here, feel the juices fill my mouth and stomach. I am *so hungry*. I want to snatch up handfuls of raw mince and steak and dry pasta and vegetables and ice cream and shovel it all into my mouth. I feel like I could eat the world. That’s the problem. I want *so much*, and if I start I won’t be able to stop. I have no sense of self control. I would start like the woman who lived in a shoe and swallowed a fly, and next minute there are spiders and crows and rabbits and horses and bears tipping their way down my throat because I am just so damn hungry and if I start I won’t be able to stop. I could destroy the world with my hunger, I just know it. My hunger is a very dangerous thing. So I won’t start. I’ll be strong, and I will resist a bite, a nibble, a crunch. I will arrange my food in patterns around my plate and I will take it to my lips but I will never bite down. I will fill my belly with water until I feel like I’m drowning, and all of this will be better than that alternative.

If I start, it will never stop.

“This is delicious, Katie,” Dad mumbles around a mouthful of food. “Very nice.” He swallows. “I guess we’ll have to have Ben over for dinner more often, hey?”

Ben pales. The interrogation started as soon as he walked in the door.

I pat his hand under the table. “We’ll see.”

It is a good dinner; everyone has wiped their bowls clean. They don’t seem to have that same appetite I do. They can go back for seconds and not worry about what will happen if they continue to eat.

My bowl is empty, too, or almost. I cut up everything finely, pushed it around the bowl. On an excursion to the kitchen for more, my hand had a spasm and I accidentally tipped almost everything down the garbage disposal. Something is wrong with my stomach tonight anyway. It’s twisting and churning. I think I might be coming down with something. My throat keeps itching. My palms, too.

“Well, that was great,” Mum says. She nods at my brother. “Sam, will you start clearing the plates? Kate, you two can go watch some TV or something if you’d like.”

A reprieve. I grab Ben’s hand and yank him up. “Great. Come on, Ben, let’s go to my room.”

“Where the door will be left fully open,” my mother adds.

I roll my eyes and tug Ben up the stairs.

“That was a little intense,” Ben says, as he slowly sinks down onto my bed. He looks a little shell-shocked. “Your parents ask a lot of questions.”

“Sorry. They really wanted to get to know you. I think they got a little overexcited.”

Ben shakes his head. “I think they now know more about me than my own father does. Or than I do, come to think of it.”

“Yeah, are you really going to study robotics at uni?”

Ben looks wild-eyed. “I panicked! I don’t know the first thing about robots. I mean, I had one of those robot dogs as a kid, the ones that bark and do backflips, but that was about the extent of it. I wanted to impress them..” He shook his head. “Do you think they’re going to ask me about that next time they see me?”

“Mum’s probably online buying *Robots for Dummies* as we speak.” I pat his hand consolingly. “What are you really going to do?”

“I always thought something like zoology would be interesting, you know? There are some great programs these days. I could study overseas—there’s even this one where you go on field observations and see these studies that have been going on for generations. There’s one in the U.S. that looks at grey wolves. They had clips of them in that documentary I showed you.” Ben’s eyes have lit up. He moves his hands around a lot when he talks, and I find myself smiling, watching them shape pictures in the air.

“That sounds pretty cool,” I say. “Wolves again, huh?”

Ben grins. “They’re some of my favourite animals. And, of course, dolphins. What about you? What’s your favourite animal?”

I shrug. “I can see the appeal of wolves, I guess.”

Ben grins at me again. I like how he doesn’t ever hold back his smiles; when he’s happy, you can see it right there on his face.

“And what about after school? Are you going to come join me to study wolves?”

“Of course.” I lie back on the bed. “I really don’t know. I want to study—I’m just not sure *what* to study yet.”

“At least you don’t seem to have parents who’ll pressure you to do something.”

“Is your dad like that?”

Ben considers. “Not really. I mean, I think he’d prefer if I did something sensible, like a Business degree, but he wants me to be happy.”

“Yeah, my parents have always been like that. They’re firm believers in the whole ‘follow your passions and the money will come’ kind of thing. As long as my passions don’t involve the circus. Or prostitution.”

Ben laughs. “Yeah, your family’s pretty decent like that.”

“Actually, speaking of families... Morgan was talking about your mum the other day,” I say. I hesitate—I don’t want to betray Morgan’s trust, and I don’t know if this particular topic will upset Ben. “Sorry—I don’t know if that’s weird for you to talk about.”

Ben plays with my hand. “No, it’s okay. I think I’m better with all of it than Morgan ever was. I made my peace. She’s gone—she’s been gone for so long now. We can’t bring her back, no matter what Morgan seems to think. I’m okay with it.”

“Do you miss her?”

Ben chews on his lip. “I don’t really know. Sometimes, I guess. But I was so young when it happened, and in the end it was her decision to leave us. I’m not going to obsess over it. I had a mum, now I don’t. You must get what that’s like.”

I blanch. “I have a mother.”

“Yeah, but she’s your stepmother, right?” Ben looks at me expectantly. “Sam’s your half-brother, isn’t he?”

“Brother,” I correct him. “Sam’s my brother. I understand what you mean, and yeah, technically she’s my stepmother, but—she’s my mother. My mother died when I was a baby, and this mother raised me. She’s all I’ve ever known.” Something is churning in my gut, anger rising up like a growl in my throat. I shift slightly.

Ben sits up. “I’ve offended you, haven’t I? Crap.”

“She’s my mother,” I repeat. “Sam is my brother. That’s all there is.”

“I didn’t mean that they weren’t, Kate. I only meant that you’d understand. We both lost our mothers, even though mine chose to bail.” Ben is distressed. He rubs a hand over his forehead.

I sigh, relenting. “It’s okay. I can have a tendency to get a bit defensive about my family.”

“I get it, Kate. Seriously, I only thought that you’d understand where I was coming from.”

“I don’t know if I do,” I say slowly. “I never knew my first mother; I love her, but I love my mother as well.”

Ben lifts my chin. “Kate,” he says. “I didn’t mean to upset you. In case you haven’t noticed, I sort of really like you.”

“I like you too,” I say. “Even though you are a bit tactless.”

“Oh yeah, Morgan got all the tact in the womb,” Ben agrees. “I had to settle for the looks.”

I roll my eyes and he laughs, kissing me. We curl back up on the bed together.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” he murmurs.

I look at Ben and for a moment I think of the wolves on his computer. After the pack took down the deer, two of them nuzzled each other. Their muzzles were covered in blood, but they licked at each other quite sweetly, leaning their heads against each other, and there was so much tenderness there I had to catch my breath.

“Yes,” I say.

The red was very bright against the snowy white backdrop.

I dream about Ben that night. Ben and Not-Ben, in that funny way dreams are. My dreams have been a lot more vivid lately, the colours bright and the tastes fierce.

The dream Ben—no more substantial than a ghost—leans down to kiss me. I can’t taste him, but I close my eyes and imagine I can. He would taste of pomegranates and apples. I open my eyes to see myself reflected in his. He places two fingers down low, resting on the heat of me. He doesn’t move them, and it’s neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just hot, like those two fingers are pressing heat further into my body. If it keeps going, I will catch alight, or burn away entirely.

He moves away and I am left feeling full enough to tip over. I scratch at my skin, leaving long streaks of colour down my arms.

Lucy:

Sometimes I wonder about the real girl whose life I took. The one I slipped into like a second skin.

I wonder how it happened. Did my mother plan it? Did my human family anger her, and so she swapped their child for her own in an act of vengeance? Or was she simply walking by when she heard a cry through the window? Maybe she looked in at the tiny baby, bright and giggling, playing with its toes, and she took it with her, leaving me in its place as payment. Who would want a child so grey, so ugly and twisted, when she could have a happy one with clear eyes, one that babbled and stretched out plump little arms, begging to be picked up.

Would she have been a better Lucy? She would not have walked the paths that I chose; she would not see dead girls all around her. She would not seek them out. No, she would undoubtedly be the better Lucy. I wonder if she resents me. If she would like to smother me and step into my place—her place, where she belonged. And I could slip away, lose myself the way I was meant to.

I would consider it too, but for one reason: I am selfish, and while I could let her have all of my life, I would not let her have my friends. I picture a girl wearing my face, walking with Morgan and Kate, a girl who is not me, and my hands clench into fists.

Morgan:

Her voice gives her memories long forgotten, and Morgan devours them. The voice looks at them differently than Morgan does, and her thoughts colour the recollection.

She'd heard once that memories are not recalled, but constructed fresh each time they are thought of. Memory is fallible; it lies to you while convincing you that you are utterly right. Memory is more story than history.

Morgan's memory is full of clouds, The voice helps her see past them to catch glimpses of her own past.

Once, when she and her brother were still in primary school, before her mother left them, Morgan's family had gone on a holiday along the coast. They visited her father's parents, and stayed in a caravan park for a week, somewhere that had mangroves sinking into the water. Morgan remembers the mangroves clearly: the way they filled the air with their particular smell, the way they looked like old ladies stepping gingerly into the water, dipping their toes in at the water's edge like they couldn't quite make up their minds if they wanted to be in or out.

On the way home, they pulled over at a run-down building. It was set back on a wide stretch of land, dusty yellow grass brushing at their ankles.

It wasn't very interesting, but they'd been stuck in the car for what felt like forever, so Morgan and Ben took off, racing to the tree that shadowed the building and back.

When her father called them back to the car, Morgan twisted around, looking for her mother. She was standing in the shadow of the building, looking dwarfed by it, somehow. When Morgan ran up to her and began talking, telling her something, it took her a moment to realise her mother wasn't listening. She was staring at the building, and her eyes were wet.

The next year, Morgan would learn about buildings like that in school—they were institutional homes. She was never able to ask her mother about it, though—her mother was gone by then.

She wonders about her mother, and all the sisters she had, yet that Morgan had never had an aunt or uncle on her mother's side. She wonders about all the little girls and boys that must have lived by the tree that cast its shadow over that house.

Kate:

Something is happening to my body.

I can't ignore it anymore. I can actually feel it changing, my organs twisting and shifting to make room as I grow, my bones cracking as they lengthen. Something in me has woken up and now it's like I am finally coming alive, finally knowing what to do with my body, finally starting to feel okay in my skin. All because my skin is changing into something else. I don't know if I was born this way, or if I contracted it, like supernatural syphilis, or if the dreams were real. I certainly have the scars to show for it, that silvery mess at the base of my throat. Do wolves live in the bush? Or the space between the bush, like the edges of my dreams, and they slip through the cracks when the time is right. Maybe they sensed me as kin, or they wanted to save me—I don't know. I do know I'm not crazy, although very understandably, it might seem that way. But I live in a town where magic is real. I wasn't born cursed, despite the demon that nestled in my gut. It might sound like an oxymoron, but demons were a fact of science that we still called magic. Real magic, though... real curses... anyone could tell you they were real. Rare, but real. And I have the physical changes to prove it. This is more

than a simple growth spurt; I am thinner, longer, leaner. I am so much *hungrier*. I don't have the appetite of a mere girl, I have the needs of a wolf. It feels like one of those basic logic puzzle, where everything suddenly makes sense and all of the facts click into place once you touch on the answer. A girl simply cannot *want* this much, so she must be a wolf. I have to keep reining it in, though, because to be honest, the hunger scares me a little. I could destroy the whole world with my hunger. Luckily, the wolf is patient, used to making sustenance last a long time. The wolf can turn hunger into strength—it needs that hunger to grow, and it grows stronger every day that I am strong enough to resist a meal.

When it comes to magic, Morgan ignores it and Lucy knows it too well. I've never really thought about it; my demon is more than enough for me to handle without having to worry about curses and charms. Something, then, that I never considered before: that sometimes, just sometimes, a curse can be a blessing.

Something—everything— is happening to my body. I can feel it shifting. I'm becoming more alert. Sometimes my vision blurs in and out but when I do see, everything is icy clear and sharp. If I listen hard enough I can hear my bones grinding as they grow, my muscles twitching. When I'm tired and slow, the creature under my skin is thrumming with life.

There is a wolf in my belly, in my heart. I can feel it when I sit down to dinner, when I look at Ben. When he touches me. It holds everything in place so I don't lose control. The wolf is much more careful, much smarter than the girl was. The scars on my throat only itch sometimes.

I'm not even a little scared. My demon is scared. It knows something much stronger is growing under my skin. There's not enough room in me for a monster and a demon.

Morgan:

“I feel guilty.”

Why?

“Because I think my friends are breaking down and I should be searching for my mother and everything is going wrong in a hundred different ways and I’m still happy. I’m happy being with you. Being you.”

I don’t think that’s something we need to feel guilty about.

“Yeah. But I probably will anyway.”

Okay. I’ll just keep reminding you why it’s okay to be happy, too.

Lucy:

How to be a girl: A survival guide.

Be pretty, but not too pretty. Do not be too aware of your appearance but never abandon it. It will legitimize you and it will discredit you. Do not take the apple or the candy or the hand of a man who does not know your soul. Wear a dress. Don’t make it too short. Make it shorter. Show us your tits. You were asking for it, wearing that. Skinny jeans don’t just come off on their own. Protection is the girl’s responsibility. Girls are pure. Girls are sluts. Don’t be too thin. Don’t be fat. Be thin, but have curves. Don’t be too emotional. Don’t be too cold. Don’t be too confident.

Girls are poisonous and venomous and will destroy their own as quickly as they will love them. If you cut a girl open, you will find: lovely coloured ribbons and bile and toxic little swarming spiders and red red lipstick and dolls and firetrucks and shiny buttons and dreams and nightmares and ugly twisted things and broken wings.

Sugar and spice and all things nice, that's what little girls are made of.

Kate:

Ben does not notice the wolf growing in me. He looks at me and sees only Kate.

I don't know if my parents know. I catch them looking at me with worry in their eyes sometimes, but I can't tell them yet. When it's all over, and the change is complete—then I'll tell them, and they won't have to worry. I think they'd be quite okay with having a werewolf for a daughter. They're pretty progressive.

My demon knows. My demon is getting smaller and smaller every day that the wolf grows. When it snarls, I can feel the demon shudder away.

Lucy:

I am slipping into the spaces in-between more and more. I can't keep my own story, my own history straight anymore.

Maybe the changeling is lying again. (Can changelings lie? I feel like all I do is lie, sometimes. And other times I am too truthful inside my own head.) Maybe I was only

ever a sad little doll, girl, monster, and maybe everything happened differently, maybe it happened like it was a boy, a man, a monster, just a boy, just a boy, just a monster...

No.

Stop. Rewrite it until it fits and it doesn't hurt.

But the girl in the bush won't let me. She tells me stories, so many stories until I feel I may spill over with them. They hurt too much to listen to, and I tell her this.

I can't keep up with everything anymore, and I tell her this too, something aching inside me, but she is staring past me. She looks sad, resigned.

The monster is standing behind me.

I thought it would be bigger than this, this moment. I thought it would come screaming in, large and loud, not creeping in so slowly I didn't realise it was happening until it was all around me. Until it was choking me.

He—It— is in the shadows of the trees, but I can see the glint of those sharp white teeth, see the claws, see the hunger that rumbles through its body. It is like it has stepped straight out of my nightmares, that beautifully ugly creature that belongs pressed in the darkness of a storybook.

It is smiling straight at me.

The dead girl screams. *Run*, she tells me, *run, girl, run*, and the monster hisses. It slides forward, its body moving like oil. Its claws are outstretched eagerly.

The dead girl closes her eyes.

And then the monster has reached her, has wrapped itself around her and I can hear a terrible tearing sound. It rips her in half, and it is so much worse than in my nightmares, because it's not a clean quick tear, it is wet chunks being torn from her body. The monster touches her almost lovingly, but it is grinning, it is smiling as it strokes a finger over her belly and so much red wetness comes pouring out of her, through this thin slit (*this crack in the wall like a smile*), and she is crying, and the monster *hushes* her. He reaches down and touches her crotch, and he is smiling at me, and there's an awful sound filling the air, a wet, ripping sound.

He eats her in front of me, one half at a time.

And *finally* I remember to run, stumbling into the bush, and I trip. And I'm falling, and there is a darkness rushing up around me, and so many—so fucking many—voices filling my head. They are calling out to me, and maybe some of them are trying to help, but so many are crying or screaming, demanding me to hear them, to help them— and I reach out, and I do the only thing that makes sense. I make myself listen, even if it's just for a moment. I reach out, and I grab a voice, a story, the one that rushes into my hands and my heart and fills me and it is truth, it is my truth.

And it is awful, and it hurts so much, but it fills up my emptiness. I have been running from it for so long, and now it feels a little off, like it doesn't quite fit, its edges forcing in to my misshapen gaps. It wiggles and claws at me until it almost fits. Until it fills me, pushing against the back of my eyeballs, pressing on my bones, pushing my veins out of the way.

When I open my eyes again, I am still in the clearing where the dead girl hangs.

There is no blood. There is no monster. The dead girl is back in her tree, hanging from her rope of red.

You can't run anymore, she says, and her voice is my mother's. Her lips don't move—she is looking very convincingly dead, but she is whole. She looks a thousand girls away from the one who was torn apart in front of my eyes. *Your demons have found you. Let me tell you your story. Stop running.* She is talking right into my head, lips sewn together but a voice echoing round and round.

The dead girl is talking and talking and talking and I can't bear it anymore.

"No more stories," I say. "I can't hear any more of your stories. I can't hear them all, keep them all."

The dead girl swings silently from the tree. Her empty eyes look through me.

The stories are still there, she says. *Even when you refuse to hear them. They are woven into the earth; even those that are buried can still be found, must be heard. I know you can feel them. They are in your blood. They need you to hear them.*

I can feel it rustling inside me, the story I claimed. My truth.

Once upon a time, she says, and I let myself listen.

The night It happened, the dead girl said, *I was not there.*

When the monsterboy touched the body I was not there. I was in the bush, running through the trees and searching for the stories of the other lost girls.

He put his hand on the knee while I stepped across roots painted a ghost-grey in the moonlight. I heard the possums calling out to one another while the body had worms put inside its ears, a leeching whisper. “Come on, please relax... God, you’re so beautiful.”

God

you’re

so.

Beautiful.

You’re

So.

God.

I was not there when it happened, although I should have been. I was a world away, falling through the cracks and off the edges into other lives and other places, stories slipping over my bare skin. While legs were pushed aside and heat was pressed (and pressed, and pressed) (God, you’re so beautiful) pressed so hard and the monsterboy gasped and clutched at the skin, stroked a lock of hair behind its ear with sweaty fingers. His eyes rolled back and he bucked and he writhed and he pushed when he shouldn’t and he murmured a name.

I wasn’t there. When the body turned its head and stared at a wall with a crack sliding across it like a smile, and the monsterboy above it sighed in a wet, hot rush and cried, I was already gone.

“Why, love is the most powerful magic in all the land,” the good fairy said. “True love’s kiss can break any curse. Always remember that, my child, because love is pure and free and good. Nothing bad can come of love, and kisses will always break curses. It is the strongest truth we know.”

Lucy met the boy when she was fifteen years old, although it felt like she had known him for far longer than that. He had lovely velvety brown eyes, wide shoulders and a crooked smile. His teeth were crooked too, but in charming, self-aware way—without that slight flaw, he would look too perfect. The flaw made him real.

He found her walking in the bush one day. He smiled at her, and asked her if he could join her. His smile was shy, and he was gentle. He was everything she’d ever dreamt of.

On a day long ago, a girl met a prince and they fell in love. The prince was kind and loving, and he cared deeply for the girl, as she did for him. He promised to protect her and love her for all his life, and he gave her his heart and a ring. They were wed, and soon moved to a castle in the mountains, where they were alone but for their love and happiness.

She kept him a secret. It had something to do with the fact that for as long as she could remember, she’d had to share things with Kate and Morgan. For once, she wanted something that was just hers. And telling them would make it all too real, and she worried he would vanish, fade away into nothing if he was looked at too closely. A tiny

part of her asked if it was that she also wanted a secret, all her own, because Lucy had never had a secret from her friends before, and she liked it. The boy was hers.

When Lucy was with the boy, she felt herself moving further and further away from dark hidden things and unknowable secrets that lived in her bedroom. She didn't feel like a mistake, a thing pretending to be a girl, but a real girl. She still read her fairy tales and fantasy stories but now she put the book down before reaching the completion, ending it when the characters were happy and alive and Real Girls and Boys. He called her *princess* or *my little girl*, special names just for her and him, and she felt herself growing lighter and lighter.

Most of the time, it was like a scene straight out of a storybook. He planned elaborate dates, gave her roses and danced with her under the moonlight. He called her beautiful and he looked at her with awe in his eyes. He shook his head, and asked the world how he'd been so lucky to meet her. He spoke in clichés and half-remembered song-lyrics, but she didn't mind.

He was her dream-boy, a creature concocted out of clouds and sunlight, and yet he was as real as she wasn't. He told her he loved her; he kept her grounded, kept her away from the cracks and the hands that grabbed and pushed.

They kissed and held each other but they didn't have sex. They didn't come close to it. He didn't want to rush her.

On a day long ago, a beast met a girl and fell in love. Although he pursued her tirelessly, she did not return his affections, and his heart began to turn black with hate. Being a beast, he did not think like men do, and he cursed her. For all her life, she would love him. She would stay with him always, and even when her heart would break, it would beat only for him.

“Lucy, I love you. Don’t cry. Please be quiet—can’t you see what you do to me? God, I need you so much, my beautiful girl. My little girl.”

Sometimes she had to concentrate when she was around him, so she didn’t make a mistake. She didn’t want to lose him. When he yelled at her, when she could feel his sweat on her thighs, she had to close her eyes and concentrate to keep him in focus.

At first, every time after he raged and shouted at her, the princess went to the gates of the castle and tried to make herself leave. She placed a hand on the gates and remembered all the cruel, angry things the beast who loved her had told her until her heart ached. She cried and she shook and she felt as though she would collapse with the pain of it, but still she could not leave. The curse tugged at her heart- she didn’t want to leave the beast she loved. He broke her heart, but he also made it shine brighter than it ever had before. She was dependant on him like the air she breathed, and she knew he was the same. No, there was no question of leaving. She simply could not do it- she could sooner cut out her own heart.

He was so passionate that sometimes she had to stop herself from crying out. He covered her mouth with his hand. Sometimes, she found little purple bruises on her arms. She left her mark on him, too.

His eyes changed when he was angry. Like magic. They went from the beautiful soft brown she so loved to the black not unlike Lucy's own. She could see herself reflected in them. They would not let her hide.

The girl knew that something was terribly wrong with her lover. She wondered if he had been cursed himself—many beasts were once princes. She suspected that a tainted piece of fruit had passed his lips, or perhaps a sliver of ice had entered his heart. These things were not terribly uncommon in her land, and she sought out a witch for help.

The witch listened without interruption to the girl's description of the beast. Speaking of it out loud for the first time, she felt tears spring to her eyes, but also a wave of relief—here, she would find help. She wouldn't have to leave him, him who she loved so much—she could fix this, save them both.

He came to her when the moon was full. His eyes were wide and brown and full of horror; he was her boy in those moments, the boy she'd dreamed of, the one who wanted to save her. "I'm sorry," he whispered, and she held him when he cried for them both.

She looked to the witch hopefully once she had finished her story. The witch's face had turned grave, and she took the girl's hand.

"I am sorry, child," she said. "But there is no curse on your beast."

He would be kissing her, and suddenly his weight was pressing down on her, suffocating her. She couldn't move. His hands were bruising her wrists and she cried out but he couldn't hear her.

The girl took to finding a little corner in her mind, and when the beast raged she curled up there, small and quiet. Sometimes, though, words still slid through her defences, and huddled over her like a soft blanket. When they did, she tried to shake them off, but they burrowed into her heart like a truth. Sometimes at random moments during the day when she was happy, they whispered to her unexpectedly. They were always there to remind the girl of her failings, of her faults, because really, all of this was her fault, didn't she know that? The voices weren't cruel, but sympathetic, kind. She was stupid and selfish and crazy, there was something fundamentally wrong with her. It was the truth. The beast was cruel and angry, but it was her fault. She couldn't leave him. She couldn't stay. She was trapped in her castle and in her mind, and all this was made much worse by the moments of happiness she did have with her beast. He loved her, he truly did—and it was his nature as a beast to lash out the way he did. When she apologised, he thanked her, and he looked after her and treated her like something very precious. They did have wonderful times together, and she would remind herself of that

over and over again when he looked at her with cold eyes and cut her deeply down to her soul.

It was her fault, because she *was* stupid, she was a stupid fucking moron who couldn't do anything right, a sad little bitch who was a waste of fucking space sometimes and was a cocktease, tempting him, and didn't she care what she was doing to him?

Over time, Lucy learnt that she was: useless, ruined, *his little girl*, a slut, a tease, broken, not normal, and sometimes beautiful.

She filed all those words away carefully because she knew he was right. This wouldn't be happening to her if she wasn't already broken. She wasn't normal. And yet. He knew everything that was wrong with her, could see it as plainly as she'd always feared people could. And he still loved her.

He held her to him and he whispered *I love you I love you I love you I love you I'm so sorry* in her ears until she fell asleep.

The girl took to pressing her palms against broken glass.

He was waiting for her in her room when she got home. He told her that he loved her as he stroked her hair. He said it to her three times, like he was casting a spell, and she closed her eyes and wondered if her mother could hear him.

The girl began to let her hair grow long. She would escape him—she had heard of many tales where girls escaped curses through clever little tricks, and so she began to devise a plan of her own. She had never heard a tale where the girl didn't want to escape her curse or her captor, where they would rather cut out their own heart than hurt their captor.

Her hair grew quickly and thickly, a rope of red that she wove into a plait. She delayed her escape, again and again, as the curse still held her fast, and even while her heart broke, she still yearned for her beast. He was kind to her, and he loved her as deeply and purely as a beast can, all without an enchantment. When they lay together, he was tender and careful and loving. He never struck her—not once. (Sometimes she wished he would.) It was only rage, only words, only so much hate that she was being torn up inside.

She would rather cut out her own heart than hurt his. They both knew this.

And then there was the night that she couldn't remember, wouldn't remember, that terrible night when It happened, *God, you're so beautiful*, all those nights, and the body must've left in the night or her family must've finally come for her, bringing her back into the bush because when Lucy woke up the next morning she was curled up in the bush behind her house, dirt all over her knees and cobwebs in her hair and something dark and hurtful rattling in her lungs. And he was gone, vanished like the dream-boy she'd always known he was, back into the pages of some dark story book and leaving

her alone again with blood and dirt on her thighs and the truth ringing through her mind until she shut it off and started it all again.

When her red hair, so like thick yarn, was long enough to reach the ground from a window on the second floor, the girl woke. She kissed her beast while he slept, and she climbed to the top floor of the north-most tower. She gazed out the window at the ground below, covered in thorns. She strung up her hair—so thick and red and long—to the rafters until it held fast.

When the beast entered the tower not long after, he found the girl swinging from a noose of red.

I can't run from it anymore. There are holes in my head but the glass is cracking, the monsters are coming, but they're just boys, just one boy, just a man in my room, the monster in my bed...

I can't, I can't, I can't.

Kate:

I can't keep track of the days anymore. Another night I dream of Ben again but this time I am chasing him and I am wolf. There is a burning in my gut and in my throat, and I want him so badly. It begins as the same want that burns low in my belly when we are alone in his room together and he is touching me softly and sometimes urgently. But as the dream continues, things start to get confused. I start to want him in a different way. I think about his flesh, the warmth and rushing blood beneath his skin, the soft skin at his throat. The faster I run, the more everything gets tangled up together, until I can't separate the different wants that burn in me. Maybe they are not so different. In the end, I want to consume him.

Lucy:

So now I know.

I can't know this. I can't. I wish I didn't.

It can't be me. Some of the details don't make sense. They blur around the edges like a dream and I still can't find them all.

I don't want this to be my truth but it has to be. It hurts in a way that is all-too familiar.

Kate:

The wolf is snarling. It wants to rip everything apart, to feast on hot flesh, but it knows the danger. It snarls at me, reminding me to hold strong. I'm doing this for the wolf, for

us. Everyone knows wolves are dangerous. If I let it start to eat, it could well tear apart everything I know until it is done. But wolves are wild creatures, and they know how to survive long winters with barely a scrap of meat. It makes them stronger, more resilient.

Wolves are survivors. They are stronger than girls.

I am cold a lot. When I am a wolf, I will have a thick coat to keep me warm. At the moment, I have to make do with layers and gloves and thick socks.

A girl visits her grandmother. Her grandmother is ill in bed. She invites her in, bids her to take off her clothes.

“Cast them into the fire,” she says. “You won’t need them anymore.”

The girl climbs into bed with her grandmother. Her arms are warm, covered with downy hair.

“What thick hair you have,” the girl says.

“The better to keep us warm with, my dear.”

“What long fingers you have,” the girl says.

“The better to hold you with, my dear.”

“What a large mouth you have,” the girl whispers.

“The better to keep secrets with, my dear.”

And her grandmother consumes her.

Lucy:

The dead girl in the bush is gone. I can't find her, no matter how hard I look. I can't tell if she's hiding from me or if she was never there in the first place. I saw her in the puddles made by the rain, the reflection watching me clearly. As many times as she wore my face, I never thought I was just talking to myself. Two little dead girls. Maybe she changed her mind about me. Maybe I was wrong. Am I a changeling, or just a sad, broken little girl?

She saw my truth, made me see my truth—the monsters in my bed—and then she left me all alone.

I feel like I am vanishing. There are too many secrets in my head, too many stories. They will eat us all alive.

What big hips you have, the girl said.

What a big belly you have, the girl said.

What fat arms you have, the girl said, and the wolf ate her whole just to shut her up.

Kate:

There's a wolf in my bed, wearing my clothes, wearing my skin. It's pretending to be me, and even though it growls through my mouth and has claws instead of fingers, no one seems to notice. They smile at the wolf grin, laugh appreciatively at its growls, walk alongside it as it pads down the street on all fours. They call it by my name.

There's a wolf in my bed and no one can tell.

Morgan:

Tell me a story.

“Okay. Once upon a time there was a girl who looked into a mirror she'd looked into a thousand times before, and for the first time, she saw another girl look back at her. She fell in love with her, but they couldn't be together. The glass was in the way.”

That's sad.

“No, because their love was so strong that the girl broke the glass and they climbed through to be together.”

Ah. I like this story.

“Me too.”

Kate:

I spend more and more time with Ben. There, I don't need to worry about being girl or wolf; I can just be Kate. It is warm in his arms, and I like the way he looks at me, the things we talk about. Ben is sweet and a world away from everything in my head.

It's not just in my head. I can feel my body changing. It's not only everything shifting, the bones grinding and the marrow boiling, but my skin tightening, shrinking to fit me better. I can almost look at myself in the mirror now.

The more the wolf stretches, easing into my skin, the more in control I feel. When I'm wolf, my body becomes mine in a way it never has before.

I want to run through the bush and scream at the sky. I feel complete, or close to it—I am strong and sure and right.

Sometimes, when I am kissing Ben, leaning down into him, a thought flashes across my mind, nothing more than a quick little flutter.

I could break him if I wanted to. I could rip out his heart.

I am stronger than him.

“Did you hear about her?”

“With the thing in the forest? *Yes.*”

“It's a bit weird, isn't it? I mean, of course that stuff happens, but, well...”

“No, I totally get what you mean. Something about the whole thing seems a bit fishy, yeah? Like, she went there, alone with him... I mean, it was just the two of them in

there, we've only got her word on what happened. She's clearly fine now, and it's pretty convenient, all that stuff about a huntsmen. Plus there was that thing where she said she thought it was her grandma at first, but—"

"Is she effing kidding? Who would even believe she could mistake her grandmother for a wolf?"

"I know, right? And like, he's so nice. I mean, sure he's a wolf, and sometimes, sure, wolves might try take a nip at you or eat you, but that's their nature. He can't help it."

"And he's so sweet, too. Like a little puppy dog. *I've* never seen him try to bite anybody."

"And she was dressed in that red hood she always wears! Honestly, doesn't she have any sense? What did she think would happen? Everyone knows that wolves are attracted to the colour red. She was totally asking to get eaten."

"If it even happened, which I doubt. She just wants attention. Wants to ruin his life, probably. Everyone knows she went wandering off that path."

"Did you hear that she was actually talking to him beforehand? In the forest? She ran into him on her little walk and apparently, they were getting along just fine then."

"I think she just got in too far and then panicked."

"She was acting like bait. She wanted it."

Kate:

My hands always feel disconnected from my body. They sit awkwardly at my sides, fumble with things. They do not know how to look natural, and I hate them. I'm always sure people are staring at them. Everyone else knows what to do with their hands.

With the wolf, I am strong, and fierce; I can breathe evenly. I am not trapped by anything; not even my skin or my body stands in my way. When I feel the wolf fill me, I am not clumsy or confused in my skin. The wolf is strong and steady, in complete control. The wolf does not doubt, does not hunger for things it can't have, shouldn't want. It does not falter, and when it takes to the bush and runs, every step is deliberate, powerful, carrying us away.

When I wake up, and I am still stuck in my changing girl-skin, sometimes I cry.

Morgan:

“Now you tell me a story.”

Once upon a time there was a girl. She was strong, and good, and kind, but her heart was split in two, and one piece was lost. This made her sad. The sadder she got, the further away her lost piece of heart flew.

She searched and searched, and eventually she found other sad girls who'd lost pieces of their hearts too. The three of them discovered that their broken pieces of heart could be stitched together to make one warm, whole heart that could beat for all three of them.

Kate:

If I don't eat, the wolf gets stronger. The smaller my body gets, the larger the wolf becomes as we trade, giving myself to its strength. My body is becoming harder, leaner... my collarbones stand out. If I reached around, I could feel each individual bone on my spine, bones threatening to break through... maybe I was a bird instead, and huge wings were about to burst free from my back. It's not like they make it look in the movies, one quick, brutal, violent transformation. It is slow, and lovely, and painful. My body is preparing for the change, stretching out into what it was always meant to be. My bones are growing stronger, pressing against paper-thin skin. When I move, I can see the bones shifting and rubbing underneath translucent skin, preparing for the change to my stronger, better body. I touch the points of my collarbones, stroking them gently. Every day I am getting stronger, harder.

I have more strange dreams. The colours are more vibrant, so bright that they hurt. Red covers everything.

The girl, a bud of a red blossom, goes into the woods, to visit her grandmother, a withered flower whose petals have faded to dust. A wolf strips the grandmother of her clothes until she lies in front of it, naked and helpless. The wolf eats the grandmother. The wolf dresses itself in her clothes. The red child visits. Ears, eyes, teeth. The wolf eats the girl.

A woodcutter hears and comes to save the girl and her grandmother. He sees the wolf's insatiable hunger. It will eat and eat, endlessly consuming. He wraps up great heavy stones in cloth, and the wolf cannot help itself but gorge, swallowing each stone down

down down. Even when it is weighed down, its belly grotesque, twisted and bloated, it continues to swallow the stones.

The woodcutter strikes his axe down on the wolf, slicing its belly from tail to top. Out climbs girl and grandmother, warm and wet as if from the womb. The wolf lies there, watching, too weighed down by the stones, too heavy to move, but wanting more.

Morgan:

Are you sure?

“Yes. Please.”

I close my eyes and she sings me to sleep, threading gentle fingers through my hair. I picture her inside me, stretching out my legs and flitting between my bones, but what I really think is that she is curled around my heart, keeping it warm and beating.

Every breath we take together is an *I love you*. I touch her and she reaches for me and I pull myself closer to her, press warm skin to cool sheets. Our heart is beating hard and if I close my eyes I can feel her tracing soft fingertips down my spine. We trail down each other, my hands in hair, her hands cupping my face, her face, our skin. I trace her breast and she whispers in my ear and I can hear singing, like crystal shattering again and again, endless chiming breaking the silence and my face is wet and she touches my heart and we fix each other, we are fixed, I am right and I am everything with this girl when she touches me and she shatters me and sends me flying and ties me to her and she touches her face where my tears fall and kisses me. I move my hand down our body

And I breathe

And I breathe

And when she touches me and sends me spiralling all I can think is: *this is truth*

and for some reason I think of a time when I was very little and I was at the playground with my mother and she spun me around and around on the swing until the chain clinked and choked and then she smiled into my face and asked, *ready?* And I nodded and she let go and sent me spinning in tight, dizzying circles and I was sure I was flying. I was scared for a moment, watching the world move past me like I could reach out and send it rippling, but then I tilted my head back and all I could see was sky, blue blue sky. It stretched out and spun across my eyes and everything was so perfect for that moment chains clinking mum laughing world spinning and I knew I could live in this moment for ever, that I could feel pure and strong and happy, that I could change the world or watch it spin into something new around me.

And I think, this is what she makes me.

Lucy:

My father is watching me. I think he is worried about me, and I want to laugh. I could reassure him—it's okay, you're not my real father anyway, I'm not the girl you tucked into bed those nights so many years ago—but I don't think he'd believe me. He is not the kind of man to believe in changelings and monsters and demons, let alone understand that they could be bundled up in one little girl.

He suggests we go camping together soon, like we used to. He knows how much I love the bush behind our house.

Kate:

I start to wear winter clothes, jumpers and jeans. Long clothes to keep me warm, to hide the changes, to hide the wolf. I'm not ashamed, but fiercely proud. I don't want anyone to see until I'm finished. They might not understand while I'm still a wolf-girl; they might want to break the curse. When they see the wolf, they'll know.

I am dizzy a lot. I get headaches. The change hurts, but in the best possible way.

And so I hide my first ever secret from my friends. It tastes warm and heavy in my mouth, a stone I keep under my tongue.

A girl went to visit her grandmother, who was sick in bed. She wore a red hood that her grandmother had stitched for her, even though it really wasn't to her taste, but her mother insisted she wear it to show her grandmother how much she appreciated the gift.

"Now, remember not to stray from the path, even to smell the flowers. Go straight to your grandmother's, so no harm can come to you," her mother said, who had strayed from many a path in her lifetime.

"But keeping to the path does not guarantee safety," the girl said. "Danger could find me even if my feet never left the paved stones of the pathway. Wouldn't it be better to

give me mace, or teach me self-defence, instead of vague warnings or barely disguised symbolism?”

“Oh, you,” said her mother.

But a tricky wolf had overheard the girl’s conversation with her mother, and ran ahead to the grandmother’s sensible flat. The wolf had planned to gobble her up, but it turned out the old lady had begun feeling better that morning, so had caught the bus to the local RSL. No matter—the wolf had its sights set on the little girl in the red hood, and so it dressed itself in the grandmother’s clothes and settled into her bed to wait.

It wasn’t long until there was a knock at the door, and the girl let herself in.

“Hello, my child. Do come in, and leave your hood by the door. You won’t need it in here, not with the fire and my arms to keep you warm.”

“Uh,” said the girl. She looked around the room. “This is a joke, right?”

“Do come over, my dear—”

“Are you seriously trying to pass yourself off as my grandmother?”

“Whatever do you mean, child? I *am* your grandmother.”

“You’re kidding, right? You are literally a hairy, talking wolf wearing a bonnet. I mean, I know I don’t visit my grandmother enough, but I do know what she looks like. And to be honest, you have made absolutely no effort of disguising yourself. You are covered in fur. You look like when someone’s dressed up their dog.”

The wolf laughed merrily. “Silly granddaughter. Why don’t you come warm yourself by my side?”

“This is actually pretty depressing.”

“See, I’m doing grandmotherly things. I’m knitting! Soon I’ll berate you to eat more.”

The girl sighed and shook her head. She patted the wolf on its bonneted head, and went on her way, wondering how she’d break the news to her mother that her own mother had most likely been eaten by a rather useless wolf.

She didn’t step on the path once on her way home.

Morgan:

When it’s over, and they come back into themselves, Morgan curls up in bed and traces her lips slowly. The voice sighs, smiles.

She feels complete. Happy.

“It’s never been like that for me before,” she murmurs. “Like there was so much of everything, all at once. But in a good way.”

I know what you mean. Morgan—do you think we should tell Luce and Katie about us? About who you are?

“I don’t know,” Morgan says slowly. “I don’t even know how to explain it. You’re you and you’re me. And I’m you, too.”

Makes sense to me.

Morgan touches her hand gently. "It's just... I want to keep you as mine," she tells her finally. "Since we met, I've shared everything and anything with my friends. I love it, but... Just for once, I'd like to keep something that's mine, and only mine. Sometimes I feel like I give them bits of me I can't get back."

She curls up in Morgan, tucking her feet underneath her. *Okay. I'm only yours.*

And she loves her so achingly then that she wants to cry.

Kate:

One day I accidentally swallow a small stone. I don't know how it happens. One moment, I am holding the heavy stone, a perfect oval, in my palm; the next, it is pressed to my lips and is down my wretched throat, slipping as smoothly as milk into my gut.

Now that I know how to listen for it, I know the wolf has always been in me, a sleeping creature curled around my heart, and now it is pacing around in my chest, stepping across my bones. It rattles at my ribcage and sings to my blood, a crooning that rises up in my throat and causes my hands to shake. It is a truth I know better than any demon.

I have stopped getting my period. Every day I am getting closer to losing the girl and becoming the wolf.

Lucy:

I stay over at Morgan and Kate's houses a lot, because the monsters that hunt for me at night can't find me there. The friends I had only a few months ago are not the same

friends I have now. Morgan is happy and whole, like something in her has stitched itself back up, and Kate is all hard edges that could splinter if you touch them, and there is something empty and echoing in her eyes. But the same could be true of me, I suppose. A year ago I was a happy, bright (*beautiful—God, you're so beautiful, my little girl*), confused and sometimes sick thing, and then I fell and started to shatter. My changeling skin couldn't hold me together anymore, and all the oily darkness began to leak through, making me sicker and sicker.

I think I am getting very tired of being something I'm not. I'm getting very tired of being broken.

Kate:

I am finally rid of my demon. Here I was, ready to go on a great quest to quell its demands, when I should have realised— the wolf is stronger. Not because it is a monster itself, but because it is strength, strength in its purest form. The wolf does not have hunger like the demon did, ready to destroy and scream and feast; it doesn't even have human hunger, not really, no need for food or the endless pounding desire for sex that once pulsed between my legs. The wolf is stronger than all that, and it helps me move away from those desires that once consumed me. It is at its strongest when I am emptiest. When I take a bite less of dinner, it stirs. When I place a meal in the bin instead of down my throat, it stretches. The leaner I get, the more it approves, a gentle nudging against my beating heart like a mother encouraging her child. My body loses its womanly shape, and I itch to run on all fours, to feel the dirt beneath my palms.

The less I allow past my lips, the more in control I start to feel. After having a demon try control me my whole life, it is a relief to take my body back so completely.

A fine fur is beginning to grow over my body.

Lucy:

The dead girl in the bush is gone and the monster is coming to get me. I can hear it behind me, pounding on my heels. I have been running and running but it is waiting for me, about to grab hold, and I will never be ready for it. I don't want to know. I can't think about *him*. I don't want to remember.

I just want to keep running.

Morgan:

It's strange. The more divided she feels, the more whole she is within herself. Half of her is calm, peaceful, even happy. The other half is agitated, focused on the edge of truth that she can almost grasp. It hovers tantalisingly close, the brass ring just out of reach.

They can't give in to the calm side until she finishes what she's started.

But there's nothing, nothing useful.

She sits in front of her father, peppers him with questions. Small things, inconsequential things, big things, but there's nothing, nothing.

“What about my aunts?” she presses. “How come we’ve never met them? Doesn’t she have, like, five sisters?”

Her father hesitates. “She never really knew them herself, sweetheart. She didn’t get to grow up with them.”

It seems easier for him to discuss his wife this time—sadness is still etched into the lines of his face, but when Morgan looks closer, she realises that crinkles of warmth are there, too, slipping in and softening the weariness.

He’s at peace, the voice whispers. *He’s forgiven her*.

“I haven’t,” Morgan says out loud, and her father glances up. She shakes her head at him. “Nothing. Thanks, Dad.”

She keeps researching, searching with her mother’s maiden name, but it comes up blank. There is no trail; it’s as though her mother has no family of her own at all, no history. She tries more outlandish possibilities, moving away from more sensible ideas, because if Scarlett wanted to get lost, she wouldn’t end up somewhere her husband could find her easily. (Did he ever look for her? Morgan is distracted by this but brushes it away.) In a fit of frustration, she almost packs a bag to take off and start looking somewhere—anywhere—but the voice talks her down. *Find more proof. Be sure. Don’t lose yourself to this*.

Morgan takes to searching through the study late at night, but there’s barely any trace of her mother. She only exists in the photo on the mantelpiece. They have exorcised her from their lives a little too well.

“I can’t do this,” she says, and it’s a shock—this abrupt realisation, this surety. “I can’t find her. She doesn’t want to be found. She’s like a ghost.”

The voice is silent.

There is something empty echoing in her chest. She wraps her arms around herself, whether by her own decision or the voice's, she doesn't know.

Her eyes fall on a piece of paper, kicked under the desk.

Her father is very bad at keeping things in order. That's why all her research has been so slow—half of the things her father has let accumulate in the study are random, worthless scraps of paper, receipts from odd purchases and old magazines from twenty years ago mixed in with Morgan and Ben's baby photos.

It's a newspaper clipping, something old and weathered. She holds it carefully, squinting at the photo.

For a moment, she thinks she is looking at a picture of herself as a child—those are her ears, her eyes—before she notices just how old it is. It is a black and white photo of eight young girls. They stand in two rows, like a class picture, but the text surrounding the picture reminds Morgan more of an advertisement. *Homes are sought for these half-caste girls*, it reads, before giving information on their heights and weights.

One girl—the one Morgan had thought was herself— has been circled in black pen. Morgan flips the paper over—there is a note on the back, with handwriting she has learnt to recognise as her mother's. Her heart begins to drum harder.

Mum(?), at Home for Girls, it reads. Second from left ~~could be~~ is her. Records say taken by family in next town. Check further records at Civic Hall?

Morgan stares at the writing and it's like her mother is smiling back at her.

"This is it," she breathes.

The voice stirs. *What?*

“She *was* like me. She was trying to find her family, to track them down—see, this is her mother!”

And it’s enough, it’s finally enough, so she leaps up, running to her room, grabbing things, shoving clothes into a bag, switching her laptop on and looking up train times on her phone, because she has something real now, a proper place to start, and she ignores the hesitancy that is trying to slip its way through her mind, all the unanswered questions that the voice is trying to show her, because her heart is pounding harder, because she has this, she can find her. She can follow her..

Her mother has been just like her this whole time, searching for her own mother.

Morgan, the voice says, insisting now, and Morgan growls in frustration.

“Stop it,” she snaps, but her voice is softened, nervous. “Please—you know I have to at least *try*.”

The voice listens. Nods. *Just—tell your family first. Tell Lucy and Kate.*

Morgan stares out her window. When she speaks again, she hears her voice and the one in her head speaking together as one, and it gives her strength, holds her in place, and for that, she is grateful. She holds her hand and she lets the voice hold her and she smiles.

“I can bring my mother home.”

Lucy:

We are at the Set, sitting and spinning on creaking swings. The metal chains try catch my fingers again and again, hungry little monsters nipping at flesh. I ignore them, kicking off and rushing towards the sky. I have to push away from the dirt beneath me, but it keeps dragging me back down—*come home, come back to us, it's time to stop running, run to us instead*. It wants me, and I want it, but not yet, not yet, not ever. Not while I have Kate and Morgan beside me talking about nothing, sending their voices out into the sky.

I feel like we're three skinny little mosquitoes, stuck in amber, while time spills on around us. And the amber, always so thick and heavy, is starting to crack. Nothing will be able to protect us once we're out, the monsters and demons will get us and they will eat up my beautiful friends while I watch...

No. I'm kin to the monsters and the demons; I'm strong, even though I'm broken. I can protect my friends, keep them safe. I can, I can, I can.

Morgan:

Morgan is swinging as hard as she can. When she tires, the voice takes over, sends them soaring giddily. They both laugh, and the voice sends them leaping from the swing when it reaches its highest point, and they land deftly on the fat wood chips that carpet the Set.

Lucy is swinging like she has a purpose, determination etched into her face. Like she's going to swing into the sky and refuse to come back down again.

"Did you hear about Gemma?" Kate asks, rubbing her arms.

Morgan glances up. “What? No.”

This town has eaten her alive, she thinks, sure of it, and for a moment she feels trapped in despair.

“She left. Took off across the country. Left a note for her family that said she was going to see the world, and she didn’t want to wait any longer to start. Jamie Brown was telling everyone about it.”

Kate keeps talking but Morgan grins and grins. She pictures Gemma, hard, angry Gemma, stomping through Australia and unfamiliar countries and changing her world and her destiny, and Morgan can’t stop smiling. *She did it. She got out.*

And I’m going to see my mother, she thinks, giddy, because she can do this too, she is actually going to do this.

“Pretty awesome,” is all she says, and that’s when she knows she is going to go home and tell her dad where she’s going, that she’s going to find her mother. Morgan grabs Lucy and Kate and pulls them into a hug.

“I love you guys,” she tells them, ignoring their squirms and protests. “I love you two crazy humans, and I am so grateful I have you.”

Kate rolls her eyes. “Duh, Morgan. Like you have any choice in the matter.” But she smiles and squeezes their hands, tight, and maybe some of the hardness in her eyes has left.

Lucy leans her head against Morgan’s shoulder. “You two,” she says, eyes closed, “are the best things I have.” She looks at Morgan and her eyes are so sad and so peaceful,

and Morgan wants to keep her close and protect her forever. Kate puts her arm around Lucy's shoulders, and Morgan knows she is thinking the same thing.

Morgan needs to go home, needs to tell her father, but right now she wants a few minutes more. Just a few more moments like this, of leaning into her friends on a worn-out old swing, chains twisting and clinking together, knees bumping together.

"Sometimes I think this is the only town in the world," Lucy says. Her voice is very soft. "Like this is all there is. This is all we'll ever see."

"We'll take you overseas, then," Morgan says. "All across Australia, and then every country in the world. We'll see polar bears in Antarctica."

"There are no polar bears in Antarctica," Kate murmurs. "They live in the Arctic. You're thinking of penguins."

"Okay, so we'll go to the Arctic first, and then we'll go see the bloody penguins in Antarctica." Morgan leans into them. "We'll go everywhere."

Kate grins and Lucy smiles, not quite meeting their eyes. Morgan clutches her hand tighter, because lately she feels like everything Lucy does is a goodbye, one way or another.

"Deal," Kate says. She releases their hands, tugs at her sleeves. "I want to see mountains, run through valleys. I want space to run in."

Lucy smiles again, warmer this time, and Morgan wishes she could capture it. She wants more of this, wants to do whatever she can to keep her friends smiling like that. To keep them getting from one moment to the next.

They may not know what happened to Lucy, why she became so sad and quiet, holding herself like she wanted to shrink from the world, but one day Morgan hoped she would tell them. Even if she never did, it would be okay. They would come together and hold each other up and they would heal, like they always did. Even if Morgan never found her mother, she would come back to these two girls and it would be okay.

One day, she thought, she would tell them about the voice in her head that shared her body. Or maybe they knew already. She suspected Lucy did; she caught her smiling at them sometimes, like she could see the girl behind Morgan's eyes too.

"Okay then," Morgan says. She kisses them both. "I've got to run—I have to talk to my dad about something. I'll tell you guys—I have to talk to him first, but—it's good news."

Kate and Lucy are clearly curious, but they wave her off.

"Go," Kate says. "I might see you a bit later—Ben's asked me over to hang out. What are you up to, Luce? Want to do something in the meantime?"

"I think I might head home," Lucy says. "I have that thing with my dad—he wants us to go camping for a couple of nights, remember? In the bush." She looks better than Morgan had seen her for a long time, and she wishes she had pulled her close sooner, reminded her of everything they do for each other. They will look after each other, and they will survive. It's what they do.

"I'll see you," Lucy says.

Lucy:

For the first time, I start to feel okay. As okay as I can be. No matter what I am—a broken girl slipped into the wrong skin, maybe a demon, maybe not, always fucking up—I have my friends, and they have me. I have seen my secrets, the monsters that tried to claim me, and I have survived them. I have faced them. Tomorrow might not be okay, and things might continue to spill and I'll keep shattering, but in this moment, I am okay. In this moment, things are clear. I know what to do, now.

Morgan waves, and begins to hurry off, a spring in her step. I look at her, our lovely Morgan, so beautiful and so strong. She has grown whole these past few months, and it is the loveliest change; she is sure and calm in her own skin. I look at her and I think: *beloved*, and I'm not sure why, but this suits her so perfectly that I know I'm right. I'm so happy for her. She has not liked the circumstances of her life, the dollhouse she has been placed in and the outfits she was forced to wear, but she has stripped herself down and built herself back up and now she shines differently, like she's finally become who she needs to be.

Kate and I start to walk together. The sun hangs low in the sky, sunset streaking dim colours over the horizon.

I watch Kate out of the corner of my eye as we walk. She's changed too, or is in the process of changing, but I'm not sure what she's going to be when she comes out the other end. I don't know if this is the same as what's happening with Morgan. I wonder if Ben notices. Does he see her the way we do?

Is he kind to her? Does he know who she is?

What she is?

“This is my stop,” Katie says, and I can see it in her eyes, something amber and hard. We’re all keeping secrets from each other, then. Did I do that? I started keeping secrets, buried them down deep deep deep, and now they’re contagious. I only ever kept the big secrets from my friends—what happened last year (*all those years*), what happened at the party, that I’m not even a real girl—and now the disease has crept in and claimed them too. I can only hope Kate’s secrets are closer to Morgan’s in nature than my own.

“Be careful,” I say and she looks at me. “On your way home,” I add, because she’s not ready to finish it, not yet. If I’ve learnt anything this year, it’s that sometimes we have to find our own way out of the darkness we sow for ourselves.

“Course,” Kate says, but her hands tremble. They shake so often now that you only notice when they still.

Once or twice I’ve caught a glimpse of them out of the corner of my eye and I could’ve sworn they were curved into claws, the light making it look as though there is something soft and fine covering them in patches. Little bits of the space in-between creeping through again, or just my mind fracturing without the pills I used to drip down my dry throat.

One or the other.

“Have fun camping with your dad, okay?” She smiles at me. “You guys haven’t done that for ages—you used to go all the time when we were kids.”

“It got too cold for him,” I explained. “He didn’t like it out there.”

I look at her, Kate, my Kate. I love her so much. I want to tell her that, tell her all of it, but the sounds get stuck in my throat. So I reach out and hold on to her and for a moment she clutches me back and it’s like we’re both saying goodbye.

“I’ll see you later,” we say instead. Only one of us says it like a promise.

Kate vanishes quickly. She moves fast and smooth these days, despite the shaking. One day soon she may shake right out of that body into a different skin.

We’ll be okay. They will be okay. In this moment, no matter what is happening to all of us, even if the amber is about to crack and send us spilling out—we are okay in this moment, and will be okay in the moment after.

My father is waiting for me at the space where our backyard becomes bush when I get home. He has all our camping supplies in a pile at his feet, the tent dismantled in its bag, slung over his shoulder like a dead body.

I can keep going for just a little while longer. I’m almost there.

“Are you ready?” he asks me.

I will be okay.

There is a demon inside you.

That is what they will tell you. They will take something they do not understand, something that scares them, and they will label it demon, monster. They will not listen. They cannot listen.

They are afraid of you.

They will make you afraid, too. They will make you resent every secret thing, make you want to hide from the voices that fill your head. They will fill your head with different voices—their own. They will tell you everything, label you completely, good and bad, and then they will step back and let you destroy yourself.

You may not understand these parts of you. You may not want to know, not want to understand what it is, this thing inside of you, in your secret heart.

It will know you, though. It will take a thousand and one different forms. Demon, voice, monster, hater, destroyer, seducer, friend, beast, lover. It will be silent or it will speak in your voice or one entirely unfamiliar to you, but one thing is for sure.

There is a demon inside you, and they tell you it makes you bad. It makes you want, and need, and hurt.

It makes you.

Lucy:

We are deep, deep in the bush. Monsters could be everywhere.

My people are coming for me. It is almost time.

My father looks at me.

“It’s getting late,” he says. “Looks like a cold night. You should probably get into the tent.”

I can hear them creeping up, their steps hidden in the wind.

I stand up, walk into the tent. I don't bother to zip it up behind me.

My father packs away the food and follows me in.

It's almost time. They will come for me. I know it.

They will save me.

Morgan:

"Dad?"

There was once a brave girl who went on a journey and found what was lost.

Morgan ran in the front door, slamming it behind her.

"Dad? Are you here?"

"I'm in the kitchen, sweetheart," he calls back, and she rushes in.

Morgan—

Ben and her father are cooking dinner. Ben glances up when she comes in, notes there's no Kate, and loses interest. Her father smiles at her. "What's up? How's everything?"

There was once a princess whose mother was stolen from her by an evil dragon.

"Great," Morgan says breathlessly. "I think so, at least. I figured something out."

The princess took her sword and she set out to rescue her mother. She would bring her home.

“I’ve been thinking about it for awhile—all year—and I’ve been researching and trying to find, I don’t know, clues, and the thing is, I think I’m close. But I’m realising I can’t do this on my own. I need help on this, your help.”

The princess travelled on winding, abandoned roads. She did not sleep, did not pause. She thought only of her quest.

She fought creatures that clawed at her, cut her way through enchanted forests. It took a very long time, and was very difficult, but the princess never wavered. She shook off the spells that tried to trap her, closed her mind to the whispers of the treacherous forest folk. She grew stronger, and she continued on.

“Okay,” her dad says, putting the pan aside. He wears a serious expression—he understands how important this is. “Go for it.”

“It’s kind of a big thing,” Morgan says, and she has to push the voice away now, because it is calling in her ears, it is pulling at her and saying *Morgan, wait—*

At long last, the princess came across the castle where the dragon that had taken her mother from her lived. She marched in, and spoke to the fearsome creature that guarded a chamber.

“I am here to take back my mother,” she said, and her voice did not waver.

“She is mine,” the dragon said, “and I will eat you where you stand.”

The princess lifted her sword. “Try.”

“I think I found her,” Morgan says. “I found Mum.”

The princess defeated the evil dragon quickly, her blade sliding through its hide with ease. Her aim was strong and true.

Her father stares at her blankly. Ben looks up.

The princess burst into the room, holding her sword high. A beautiful older woman lay still on a dais, peaceful in her sleep.

“Mother,” the princess breathed.

“What?”

“I mean, I found somewhere to start. I found this photo of these kids, and she’s written on it, right, and it says one of them was her mother. So I think she went off to try track her down, her and the rest of her family, maybe, you know, try to find her sisters too. And maybe we could go there, or just me, and we can try talk to her. It makes sense, doesn’t it, of course she’d want to go back there and try figure it all out from there...”

Morgan realises she is babbling, but she can’t seem to stop. There’s so much important information she needs to tell them, and it’s all coming out at once, and judging by their faces, it’s not making sense. She almost growls in frustration. She needs them to understand. So she takes a deep breath, willing herself to calm, to explain.

“It’s a start, at least, but we can bring her home, Dad. I think I figured it all out, but I don’t want to do it alone anymore. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier, but now I need your help. We can bring her home.”

Ben drops the wooden spoon he’d been stirring with. It falls to the floor with a clatter.

The princess kissed her mother gently on the brow.

The woman slowly opened her eyes. She gazed at the princess, hope and wonder filling her eyes.

“My girl,” she said. “Oh, my darling girl—you have lifted the curse!”

“Morgan,” her dad says.

“Look, I know you probably don’t think it’s a good idea, and the last thing I wanted to do was upset you. But I have to meet her. I don’t remember her, Dad, and then she left, and I think I sort of hate her for that, but I still need to know. I need to talk to her.”

“Fuck,” Ben says, and he walks out of the room.

Oh, Morgan.

“Honey,” her father says, and he has tears in his eyes. “Morgan, baby, I’m so sorry. Your mum—she’s not looking for her family.”

Morgan stares at him.

I’m so sorry.

“I don’t understand.”

Mother and daughter embraced, crying with joy.

“She wasn’t well, Morgan. Not for a long time. You know this. You do.”

“I knew you’d find me, my darling,” she whispered. “I never gave up hope.”

Morgan shakes her head, trying to clear it. Something doesn’t make sense. “What?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” her father says, tears in his eyes. “Your mother... she was very sick.”

“You waited for me, all this time?”

“Of course, my girl. We will always find each other.”

“Sick? She’s not sick. She left—she’s searching for her own mother, or okay, maybe she’s overseas, I don’t know. She’s...”

Ben walks back in then. He can’t look at her.

“Oh mother—I’m so happy!”

“She wasn’t happy, Morgan. She was very sick, for a very long time, and I didn’t realise, or if I did, I pretended it wasn’t as bad as it was. She loved you very much. But she couldn’t fight her demons.”

“Demon,” Morgan whispers. “She only had one demon.” She shakes her head, pressing her hands against her ears. “I don’t understand.”

“Is this why you never come to the cemetery?” Ben asks.

“She loved you both very much,” her father says.

“You saved me,” the queen said, embracing her daughter. “You saved me. And now we can be together forever.”

Her mother isn’t with her family, or overseas, or living under an assumed identity or working in a circus. Her mother is dead, has been dead for nine years and she has been rotting under the ground for nine long years all while Morgan looked and searched and forgot.

I tried to show you, Morgan. You didn’t want to know—you buried it, changed it. I’m so sorry. I only realised it myself recently, when things started to come apart, but you only clung to it harder...

“Which cemetery?”

“Ashwood,” Ben says. He looks very tired.

Ashwood. Ashwood is only twenty minutes away. Her mother has been only twenty minutes away this whole time.

Her dad is crying. She can smell something burning in the abandoned pan. Their food will be ruined now. “Morgan, how long have you been thinking this? Why didn’t you say something?” When she looks at Ben, she has a flash of a memory, something she’d misremembered as a game—the two of them, just kids, dragging out photo album after photo album to the backyard and setting them alight.

Their dad cried when he saw what they’d done.

It was never just a game, Morgan.

“You said she was happy,” Morgan says. “You said she was bright.” She turns and runs upstairs to her room.

I’m so sorry—

“Please don’t,” she whispers. “Please, just leave me alone, please, please...”

More memories are resurfacing now, coloured in different meanings. She remembers that that was the year that Ben stopped talking and started locking himself away in his bedroom. She remembers Lucy and Kate coming around every night and staying with her.

She needs to scream and break things and scream some more. She needs to run away.

She needs to break, because all of this is too much, too painful—

She'd got the end to her mother's story wrong. The mother left the daughter in the little house with the blue roof, and she followed her desires into the forest. Of course she did.

She said goodbye to her daughter, asleep in her bed in a room of sunshine yellow. She kissed her husband on his brow. She looked at her daughter, and how her heart ached, but the pull of the forest, of her heart, was too strong to stay.

She left them there, a man with love that felt like towering walls and no door, a daughter with too many stories kept in her heart, too many voices behind those eyes. She walked into the arms of the man from the forest and her daughter grew up without a mother.

She looks at the newspaper clipping. There are so many uncertainties, so many questions. She hadn't even noticed before. She'd seen what she'd wanted to see. She always had.

And she is alone.

Lucy:

The monster was in the bush. She could hear it.

He was in their tent. He was on her, breathing on her skin, and he was whispering, and she was a monster too, kin of monsters, and he was crying, and she was closing her eyes, *it'll be over soon, please stop, just wait, just hold on and it'll be over—*

No. Stop. Go back. And do it again until it fits.

It was a terrifying monster, a beast that wanted to tear her apart with his sharp white teeth and his red red grin, a creature that goes boo in the night, that eats you whole and gobbles you up and drags you down.

No—

It was her boy, her dream boy who loved her and would never hurt her, the boy who called her beautiful—but he wasn't real, she knew that, she'd always known that. He was just a picture in a children's book, a child's dream, her prince projected onto another man's face, her memories painted with brighter colours—

Please just let it be over, please just make it stop, close your eyes—

The boy was a story she told herself at night to go to sleep, but even he got poisoned, her prince coming in to save her. Little details creeping in against her will. Someone else's words in his mouth, the image fading, the dream twisting. But he was a boy, and a monster, whatever she needed him to be, until he got away from her and the story started changing without her. It made more sense to her the way she told it, even if he had never existed, because it was better—it had to be better—because then it wasn't—

She couldn't keep the stories straight anymore and now they were crashing down around her, trying to drag her in. She did not know her own story, her own mind.

No. Stop. Go back. Rewrite it so it hurts less.

She wasn't there when it kept happening, night after night, because it wasn't just one night, it was *so many nights* of a voice whispering in her ear, years and years of nights tumbling over one another, too many nights of leaving her body behind and escaping to the bush that she could thought she could see sometimes through the crack in the wall.

And there were so many tears, none of them hers, that dripped dripped dripped down over her body, leaving her thighs salty and cold. So many apologies, his voice whispering in her ear.

But she could stop—stop, no, go back, rewrite it until it doesn't hurt anymore. Make him a monster, make him a boy, just don't look too closely, *don't open your eyes sweetheart, my little girl, my princess, I'm so sorry, why do you do this to me, God, you're so beautiful, my little girl...*

Because her dream-boy was never real, he was just another escape conjured from her stories and her mind and the cracks in the bush; he was just another way for her to try to understand the monster and rewrite it so it hurt less. And even in her stories, no different than the stories she used to tell Kate and Morgan when they were young, even they started to shatter and end with her being broken down and yelled at, but at least she got to go to the ball and be a normal girl for a while first.

Once, he toyed with the hem of her favourite dress, the one her friends had given her for her last birthday, and told her she looked beautiful—*God, you're so beautiful*—while her mother was in the next room. Later, he came into her bedroom. He made her keep the dress on. She threw it out afterward and dreamed up a night between her and her boy where they'd danced and he'd spun her about the bush until her dress flared out in an array of colour and light.

When she asked her mother for a lock on her door, she refused.

"I don't think that's healthy," she said, clear blue eyes staring straight through Lucy. "I don't think you should be hiding in there, keeping secrets."

It *was* like they had a secret between them. He winked at Lucy and when she was younger, he would bring her presents, for being such a good girl. He brought her a tiara. “Because you’re my little princess,” he said, and she would stare out her window, thinking. Because she wasn’t trapped in a tower like the girls in her books, she had a door and a set of carpeted stairs *right there*, so really, she wasn’t trapped, was she? So really, maybe it was a little bit her fault. Maybe she liked it.

He fed her her medicine, and sometimes he gave her all of the pills so she felt nothing and sometimes he didn’t so she felt everything. She wasn’t sure if it was worse to lie numb and distant inside her own body, watching everything happen as if through clouds; or if it hurt more to feel everything so crystal clear and sharp it cut her through.

Once, when her mother was away, he took her into their room. He held her and he cried as he told her she looked just like her mother did at her age. He always cried after, enough for both of them, and Lucy stared into space and waited. She touched the pillow that her mother lay her head on every night and she breathed in her perfume on the sheets.

Once, she thought she saw a girl in the bush, watching her.

Sometimes, she imagined slitting his throat in his sleep.

Her mother stopped looking at her not long after her father started coming into her room. That was when her mother had stopped loving her. It became harder to disappear into her stories with her dream-boy then.

And she kept rewriting the story because that made it easier.

And she still preferred this version, because at least here she had a boy who'd loved her, a boy who cared. Sometimes her father's voice slipped under his but she could still make him into a normal boy, one who took her out, who loved her, who held her and she didn't want to squirm away, didn't want to cry. In this version, she could be normal. In this version, maybe it wasn't her fault.

And in this version, she escaped.

It was all just stories. Stories used to hide the truth and to show it; to survive. There were so many unheard voices, and her own voice had been vanishing away, hers and the real Lucy's.

She'd fallen too far into the story until she couldn't find her way back out again.

Lucy lies underneath him, listening to his heavy breathing. She closes her eyes.

When it is over, he gets up, leaves their tent. He is going for a walk, he tells her. She waits for the rustles he makes as he moves, the sounds that mean he has left, before she opens her eyes again.

He has gone deeper into the bush. She wonders if he can hear the voices in there. She wonders if they are mad at him. He took her voice years ago.

She needs to run. She needs her real mother to come take her away.

(Do you think she sees? Do you think she's ashamed of me, disgusted—is that why she won't come? Please, mum, I'm sorry, just please come for me, I want to go home.)

In all the stories, they tell you— don't step into the fairies' ring of mushrooms or you'll be trapped forever. Don't turn around or you will lose your lost love forever. Don't tell

anyone, Lucy, don't say anything, it's okay, you're my little girl and I'll look after you forever.

Don't eat the fruit of the creatures in the woods or they'll take you away and keep you forever.

Lucy takes out the bag of pills and tips them into her palms. She looks at them for a minute, so the heat of her hands starts to melt their colouring. They stain her skin a deep purple, like the berries from her neighbour's blackberry bush she would eat when she was a little kid.

Mum, please, it hurts so much. Mum, I need you.

She puts them into her mouth and swallows them, one by one. There are so many of them. She wonders how many it will take to work. Laura needed just one from the goblin men before she needed them all, before she was lost to them, and Persephone only had six pomegranate seeds pass her lips before she was trapped for winters evermore.

Lucy does not want the chance to escape or half a year of freedom. She wants forever. She wants to finally go home. She takes the pills and swallows them down, continuing even when everything begins to slow, even when she can't talk and breathing is hard.

Before her eyes close, she thinks she catches a glimpse of a woman among the trees, waiting for her.

Once upon a time a girl woke up and knew too much, so she had to run. She ran from the monster that tried to tear her apart, and she ran from the truth, and she ran and ran until she reached the bush in the in-between where a dead girl who wears her face is waiting for her, and finally, *finally* the earth beneath her opened, and took her. Until all she could breathe was the wet soil and the dark quiet, and cool arms embrace her to guide her down.

And she

was

gone.

Morgan:

When the sky has turned dark and the streetlights are shining into her room, Kate finds her. She doesn't knock; she bursts straight in, stares Morgan in the face.

"Morgan. I'm so sorry. I am. I know you're going through something terrible and I know it hurts."

"Please," Morgan says. "Please, just leave me alone."

"I can't," Kate says, and something in her voice makes Morgan's blood run cold.

Things are worse. Things are going to keep getting worse. "I need you. It's Lucy."

Once upon a time a dark and twisted thing curled up inside a baby girl and made its home there. It sung to her when she was happy, soothed her when she cried. It reached out black inky fingers and coaxed its way into her heart and it would never leave.

Kate:

We run towards Lucy's place, as fast as we can. Morgan is asking me for answers I can't provide, and my legs are aching and my skin is as cold as ice and my chest is so damn *tight*—I have to get through this.

My hands haven't shaken since I heard Lucy's mother's voice on the phone, asking me to come quick.

When I got there, she was standing in the driveway.

What had shaken me was the look of resignation on her face. Resignation, and... relief, maybe? Guilt? She wasn't shocked. She had been waiting for this to happen, a part of her expecting it for years, even.

She knew Lucy was going to leave us, and she never said a word.

In that moment, I wished more than I ever had before that the change was complete and I was wolf. I could make her hurt like she'd made Lucy hurt in so many little ways over her life. I could sink my claws into her throat, smooth as butter, hold my paws over her mouth until she stopped breathing.

But revenge is human. Wolves don't need revenge.

My head is aching and aching. I force it away, because right now, the wolf has to wait.

Lucy is all that matters.

I called Morgan and Ben answered the phone, told me what had happened.

"We didn't know," he said, over and over again. "We didn't know that she had been thinking this all along—that Mum was *alive*—she's freaking out, Kate, she needs you, I need you, please—"

And I ran there, the wolf in my legs pushing me on and on, but I don't know why it *hurts* so much...

I try to fill Morgan in while we run back to Lucy's.

"Her mum—" Morgan winces, but I press on "—her mum said she can't find them. Lucy and her dad. They didn't tell her they were going camping, but she guessed. She went looking for them in the bush when she realised, but she couldn't find them, so she called me. She sounded panicked. Scared."

"I doubt she looked very hard," Morgan mutters, and I know for once the venom in her voice is not directed at her own mother. Neither of us have ever liked Lucy's mother all that much; a strange, cold woman who looks at her daughter as if she's a stranger. "But she's with her father, right? They should be fine. They go camping all the time."

It takes me a moment to respond, even though my heart is racing and racing, and time is getting away from us.

“The thing is,” I say slowly, “when she couldn’t find them, she went looking in Lucy’s room, in her bathroom. And... there were medications missing. A lot of pills. And her mirror was smashed. She’d torn the room apart.” I swallow. “Her mother called the police.”

Morgan is frozen. I don’t think she is even breathing. She closes her eyes, and it’s like she’s having an internal battle with herself.

“We’ll find her,” I say. “We *will*.”

Morgan grabs my hand and we start to run again, faster.

Now is the time where I should be grateful to my wolf, but the change isn’t complete, it’s too in-between—I’m not fast enough, and my clumsy human legs stumble as they try to match the pace of the wolf in my heart. My chest is so, so tight. I have to be strong. I have to be strong until we find Lucy, and then I can rest, finally rest.

We have reached Lucy’s house, the bush rising up behind it. There are no emergency vehicles here yet, and the street is eerily silent. I feel eyes on me, and when I look up Lucy’s mother is watching from a window. Away from us, from her daughter.

Morgan and I stare into the bush. There is no movement.

Morgan:

Morgan? Do you think—do you think she wants to be found?

It takes Morgan a moment to realise the question does not come from Kate, but her own mind. *We’ve been losing her for a long time, now.*

“I don’t know what you mean,” she snaps, because she doesn’t care how much of what she says is true, that they’ve always known Lucy is special and maybe not quite from the same places that they are, because she is still their Lucy and Morgan is not letting go of her.

Kate touches her shoulder lightly.

“I guess we’ve got to go in,” she says.

“I think I know the way,” Morgan says. “Follow me.”

Lucy:

When she was at that party, when she was so mad and so trapped in her own skin, she could barely think. Her friends were demanding too much of her, and she didn’t fit into her own body, and her body was a lie, anyway. She was in stolen skin, wearing another girl’s life. No wonder her mother couldn’t look at her. No wonder she could only see darkness in her own heart. No wonder he came into her room. She tipped another drink down her throat but still couldn’t feel it. She may as well have been drinking water. Her head was too clear.

An hour later, and an eager boy is talking to her. He doesn’t see what she really is, everything that’s wrong with her. He doesn’t realise he’s talking to a dead girl.

He kisses her. Smiles at her shyly, and suddenly she thinks, why not? Why can’t this be it, having your first time the same as a million other girls, drunk and clumsy but sweet, at a party in someone else’s bedroom, in someone else’s house. She can still do it,

rewrite the story until it fits better, nicer, so she still goes to the ball like the normal princesses. She doesn't have to stay buried in ashes.

She feels reckless and angry, like she could bite him, but she wants him to kiss her, drag her down to the floor with him. She doesn't need walls, privacy; if she could, she would pull him down here, straddle him in front of everyone while they stand around oblivious. She doesn't want to take off the dress that she wears as a second skin tonight—if she removes it she might lose this frank, confident girl who knows what she's doing and wants to do it. What has she got to lose? (Once, a teacher held up a napkin in front of their class. *This is you*, she told the girls. She passed it around the room from boy to boy, telling them to crumple it up, to drop it. When it got back to the front of the classroom, she held it up, dirty and ripped. *This is you if you have sex with a lot of people. If you let them use you. Does anyone still want this napkin now?*)

(They were twelve years old.)

She doesn't remember the first time she had sex. She can't remember when he first started coming into her bedroom.

But she could rewrite it, change it. Make new memories, force them over old ones until they stitched together, until years later she could tell a new boyfriend, *Oh, my first time was forgettable, really, a bit of a stupid mistake*, or no, *It was with my high school boyfriend, we knew we wouldn't be together forever but we wanted to be each other's firsts. We loved each other very much.*

She could give herself a nicer story.

(*Come on, please relax... God, you're so beautiful.*)

(Hands pressing, pressing, pressing... That damn crack in the wall like a wink, a smile...)

She kisses him back, pulling him into her. When they part for air, she nods towards the staircase and his eyes widen. He nods, and his enthusiasm is so cute it almost disarms her.

She thinks of Alice again, the order or plea or suggestion on her bottle: *Drink me*. It won't leave her head as he kisses her, burying himself in her. He kisses her throat, the creases in her elbows, and all the while she sings silently *drink me, drink me, drink me*.

Drink me up until there's no poison left. Drink me up until there's nothing left.

Once upon a time, three little girls ran through a forest of lost stories and broken wings. One little girl ran ahead of the others and found her way. The other two followed, and got very lost.

Once upon a time there were three girls who were cursed from birth simply by being born female. They lived a million lives in a thousand different skins, and they did it hand in hand.

These girls had walked into hell to save their sister from a god who tasted of pomegranate. They had rescued their own from the underground with a song, not once looking back until all three were safe. They had travelled across the seas on a doomed boat made of fracturing ice, and they had been dragged apart by lies and rules and

people who thought they were helping. They were silenced, their tongues cut from their mouths, made to dance like a marionette on a string, and still, they lived. They cut their strings and made do without tongues, or grew them again like lizards. They had lived and died and lived again through each other, through stories long since passed, and always, they woke again to save each other. They had saved each other from grabby hands, whether they belonged to gods of hell or teenage boys, and they told their stories in whispers and shouts, so they'd never be forgotten, so their voices would weave themselves into the stories of old.

They collected the voices of the fallen, those who died and those who lived on. Some did not know that their stories had been stolen; others felt it with every breath. The girls simply followed the lost, taking back what was stolen. Some were buried deep, running in rich veins through the earth that fed the roots of trees, and still people could not hear their songs. Some were crudely taken, sliced apart and hacked into, dumped in plain sight or hidden cleverly.

The girls found them all, and they listened.

They unravelled the stories that had become hopelessly tangled; they coaxed out the unfinished voices. They held onto every voice they found, keeping it close, and still they lived out their own stories, becoming lost and finding each other again and again. Saving each other in different skins and different lives.

Kate:

We crash through the undergrowth, calling out for Lucy over and over again. It is cool and quiet and yet frenetically busy in here, chaos hidden beneath the calm. For the first time, I push the wolf away, focus on the part of me that is Lucy, and I run and I listen.

Morgan has sprinted off to search, and I cover the early paths made by man or animal. I force myself to look slowly, to not miss anything. But it all looks so entirely different, this entire bush breathing together as one, and if Lucy is in here, her breath is indistinguishable from the rest.

Morgan stumbles back out. "I can't find her. I don't know how deep in there she is. And... she's not answering. When I call her."

We look at each other. Lucy would never ignore us. Lucy has never hid from us. If we called, she would answer. Unless she can't.

"We'll go in together," I say. "We'll find her."

We speed up, jogging until we're in thick enough that we can't hear the cars on the street, can't hear anything but the bush around us. It's like falling into a different world, stepping on cool, damp earth, then a moment later, kicking up dusty red dirt. It is quiet and still and frantic and thriving all at once, a chaotic harmony that slips around us.

We keep calling out for Lucy as our voices turn hoarse and the sky overhead grows darker.

In one lifetime, one of the girls began to feel trapped and sick. There were too many voices crowding her mind, too many destinies itching to be played out. She did not fit

this skin the way she'd fit a thousand others, and the voices she collected were too busy, too loud; she could not listen to them all, and they began to consume her, drowning her out until her own voice vanished.

She did not tell her friends. She could feel herself shattering and she did not want them to see it. She followed the voices when she could, and tried to help, tried to listen. She wandered through the woods, trying to hear the stories she'd listened to for so long, but if they were there she couldn't make them out amongst the cries that filled her.

She kept on until she couldn't anymore, and then she let them take her away.

Morgan:

Morgan doesn't realise she is crying until her hand comes up to wipe her face. Her feet ache and the night is getting colder, and all she can think about is Lucy out here somewhere, alone.

"Why did she do this?" Kate whispers as they jog, still scanning, still listening. "Why would she leave us?" She sounds disbelieving, like she thinks—hopes— Lucy's mother was orchestrating one big joke.

But the missing pills...

"We'll find her soon," Morgan says eventually. "We've been looking for ages—it's so dark already. The police should be here by now, right? Or the SES people? But you'd think we'd have heard them, right?"

“Morgan,” Kate says. “What if she doesn’t want to be found?”

Morgan keeps walking. She won’t listen.

What if it’s already too late?

The two girls searched for their lost friend, scouring the earth for her. They listened to the voices and followed the land and still they could not find her. At last, they came across a single, solitary voice that whispered where their friend had gone; where she had been taken.

The girls held their heads high and they set off on a journey they’d taken so many times before; a quest to find strength, to find what was lost.

Morgan:

The voice inside her head is silent, but its presence alone calms Morgan, gives her strength. Everything hurts, and if she thinks about her mother or Lucy a second too long she will surely collapse, but she continues on, walking and searching, walking and searching.

Sometimes she thinks she hears another voice calling to her, whispering her name, a voice that’s almost familiar, but she ignores it, because it is not Lucy’s voice. She does

not turn around once. She walks, and she looks ahead, and she searches for her friend. She is strong enough to do this, to find her and bring her home. She will not look back.

Kate:

I want to look up and find myself in a lush dark forest, all wet and heavy with green, but here the bush is a thousand shades of greens and browns, all dusty and dry and wet at once. When I walk, I step on brown leaves that crunch underfoot. I want to shake off this skin and run. I want this to be like a story, so it makes sense, so there is a happy ending, but it remains stubbornly normal. Somewhere, a kookaburra lets out its shotgun laugh.

I touch pale grey trees in the hopes that they will whisper where Lucy has gone, but if they talk, I can't hear them.

They walked past a gatekeeper without a face who asked them three questions. They walked down through the earth, feeling it opening up around them, breathing slowly, and they almost had to cover their ears, because down here the stories were the loudest, buried and singing, millions of voices telling a history. Instead they opened themselves up and listened, because they had learnt long ago that to ignore the silenced, the lost, was only to hurt them more. Some grew louder when ignored, and others simply faded away, truly forgotten, or trapped forever.

They followed the roots of ancient trees into the earth where everything was cool and damp. They saw their friend's face woven into the leaves, glimpsed her drifting ahead of them, but they couldn't catch up, couldn't grab a hold of her. So they continued to follow her into a land of the lost.

Morgan:

It is getting late now, and they should have gone back for help a while ago, but they can't. Somehow, she knows if anyone is to find Lucy, it will be them. And right now, running beneath ancient trees that sigh in the wind, with each breath pulling cool, damp air that tastes like soil into their lungs, the world outside the bush feels unreal. It is just the three of them (and maybe a million others), looking and searching for each other. Trying to rescue each other.

They came for the second girl in the dead of the night. They knew her secrets and they whispered to her. They told her that she wouldn't hurt anymore, but she needed to leave everything she knew behind, slip away to the places she dreamed of. They told her that she needed to forget, to rid herself of the stories that consumed her, that burnt her up, that turned her mind until she didn't know who she was. A broken doll, a lost little girl, a brave princess, a girl trapped in a mirror. They showed her the woman she loved, the

one who was lost to her, her deepest wish, and they took her hand and they led her away, promising oblivion.

Kate:

I tell myself we are on a quest. Two heroes searching for a lost princess. We are bright and strong and we will prevail because our hearts are brave and our souls pure.

But there is no magic here. There are wet leaves curling up slightly at their corners, and there is the smell of the bush, eucalyptus and life, the scents Lucy wears like a perfume. There is nothing here but the ordinary, the breathing of creatures in the trees, under the ground. They watch us as we crash through the bush, calling out. Things do not always work out like they do in the stories.

I can't see Morgan anymore. She has vanished into the trees, still searching. I wonder—who will find us if all three of us are lost? If we can't find each other?

The wolf has made me strong but now it falters. It cannot smell her, cannot hear her breathing. I long for paws to run on, but I worry that if I let the wolf take over, especially in this space, it will start to run and it won't come back. It wants me to give ourselves over and leave.

But the part of me that holds Lucy is stronger than the wolf, and I bring myself down into my human skin to search, to call out, to fight back the terror that is building heavy and hard in my chest. I only have to hang on for a little longer.

I hear Morgan's voice, closer than I'd thought. She wasn't lost after all, just slightly ahead of me.

"Kate—over here. I think—I think I've found her."

And I run, giving myself over to the wolf so I will be fast and strong, so I will have the heart of the wolf that silenced a demon when I have to face whatever is ahead of me.

I crash into Morgan. She grabs my hand automatically.

And there is our Lucy, lying still and small, curled in on herself, one arm wrapped protectively around herself. The other splays out on the ground as though she is reaching out for something. She looks peaceful, as though she's sleeping, but Lucy is never at peace when she sleeps. She frowns, or she twitches and spasms. She is not restful.

She is very cold when we reach her.

Morgan:

Lucy isn't moving. She is so small.

"Lucy—"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Look for anything. Pills, anything she might have taken. We have to get her out of here."

Morgan touches her, takes her hand and flips it, checking for a pulse. Kate is frozen but for the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

A slight fluttering meets her fingertips; Lucy's heartbeat, quiet and unsteady, but there. Still there.

Kate:

We carry her out, holding her between us. Her breathing is too soft, and her skin is the grey-blue of the eucalyptus trees, but it doesn't carry the same look of life they do. On her, it just looks grey.

There are flashing lights outside the bush. It doesn't take as long to find our way out. I wonder how long we've been stumbling around in there, lost but refusing to give up.

Suddenly there are people pulling her out of our arms, moving in swift, practised movements. They drag her away from us. They speak in a language I don't understand, all numbers and words that fall over themselves, that jar and crash around my ears.

"What are you doing?" Morgan demands, hands curling into fists, because Lucy is vanishing behind a crowd of people in uniforms. I catch a glimpse of equipment being wheeled out, shiny silver instruments glinting through the air.

"We're taking care of her," one of the faceless people tell us, and I wonder if I catch a glimpse of accusation among all that blankness. All their movements are cold and quick, and watching them work over Lucy reminds me of a many legged spider, or maybe a machine. A silver cold spider made of metal, one that probes and slices and hurts.

Next to me, another worker peppers Morgan with questions.

“Where did you find her? We’ve been in there for hours. We were ready to send in an SES team for the three of you.”

We hadn’t seen them or heard them once. They may as well have been in a different world. They could not have found her.

“Did you see anyone else? Her father?”

She was alone. There was no sign of anyone else. The bush had swallowed him up, and I couldn’t care about him right now.

“What did she take? You have to be honest, girls.”

“Has the subject mentioned increased engagement with her parabiopsychological entity? Has she shown any warning signs?”

Someone in the crowd shifts, and for a second I see them, pressing their hands to her chest as she arches up—

“Suspected overdose on hysteria modification pills—”

“Has the subject expressed suicidal ideation?”

“If you just let us—she needs us, I swear, she was waking up when she was with us, you lot are making it *worse*—Lucy—”

A door slams shut and voices rush past, and suddenly the crowd is gone and Lucy has disappeared—for a moment, I look around, certain she has returned to the bush, that I’ll catch her slipping between the trees—but the ambulance is driving off, doors shut tight.

“Why don’t you put the lights on?” I hear myself say. “You have to put the lights on... the siren...”

The worker looks at me, expressionless.

Morgan hisses and shoves at them, knocking into them hard enough that they stumble.

“Where are they taking her?”

As if he’s been summoned, another worker appears by our side. He brings out a small penlight and flicks it across Morgan’s eyes.

“How are you feeling, hm? A bit overwhelmed by all this, I’d imagine, maybe you need a bit of a rest, a little lie-down... Tell me, are you feeling overemotional or at risk? We don’t want this to escalate... girls your age are often prone to hysterics in emotional situations. Here—”

He offers her a purple pill still in its packaging and I stare blankly, thinking of the vivid purple that stained Lucy’s palms.

Morgan stares at him with utter contempt.

“If you don’t tell us where to find our friend,” she says, very evenly, “I will take that stethoscope and shove it so far up your—”

“They’re taking her to Mercy,” a voice says. Lucy’s mother, her hands still at her sides.

“Emergency. I’ll take you now.”

Morgan:

Morgan is caught up in a conversation with the voice in her head.

‘Things were meant to be better now. We found her.’

It doesn’t always work like that.

When they get to the hospital, they aren't allowed in to see Lucy. Not even Lucy's mother. They are pumping her stomach. They are running tests, trying to wake her. Trying to keep her alive. Trying to fix her.

She won't wake up.

Kate:

We take to camping out at the hospital. The wolf stirs, restless; it wants to run, to scream. When they make us go home, I give in to it, because it is easier to be wolf than girl, and the girl is becoming so weak. I am only holding on for Lucy at this point. To see her.

When I'm not with Morgan or waiting outside Lucy's room, I am running through the bush. I think I am, at least. Because sometimes things aren't entirely clear, and more than once I think I have spent a night beating myself into the ground, screaming at the moon, only to wake up from a dream with clean feet.

It is getting harder and harder to be a girl. I want to close my eyes and let the wolf take over.

No one can find Lucy's father. Eventually they stop looking, reduce the search. "It's as though it's swallowed him up," a frustrated police officer says to a colleague when they think we can't hear. "There's no trace of him. It's like it's taken him."

"He's probably just taken off," the other officer says. "Wouldn't be that unlikely."

After a week of careful monitoring, of intrusive tests and endless prodding, the doctors say we can see her. They want us to say goodbye. Not because Lucy is dying, but

because she is lost. There are no more drugs in her system, no physical trauma to explain her state. She is sleeping, but she won't wake. The doctors are baffled, and I can read the hopelessness that edges into their voices. They think she is gone.

Lucy is in a bed that could fit the three of us. Machines are plugged into her, and they beep constantly and softly. Her hair has been brushed, and she is as still and silent as she was in the bush.

"Hey Luce," Morgan says softly.

We sit on either side of her, resting on the bed. We talk to her, tell her stories. Talk about when we were kids. Discuss stupid gossip. Sometimes we tell her the important things, but she doesn't stir.

"I miss her," I say. Morgan nods.

After everything we've been through together, after seeing each other most days of our lives—after Morgan's mother, Beth, after the bush—it doesn't seem fair that we lose Lucy like this. That she can just slip away from us.

I didn't leave. I wanted to show them, let them see the wolf. Even as I left the girl behind, I stayed for them.

"They're talking about what to do with her, you know," Morgan says softly. "I heard her mum talking about it with the doctor. They think she might be brain-dead, because she took so many HMPs, because she hasn't woken up. They might need to make a decision." She plays with Lucy's hand, entwining their fingers together.

"Oh."

Because even though Lucy belongs to us, even though her history is written all over us, she has other family too. When it comes down to these things, their decisions hold more weight than two seventeen year old girls.

“Please wake up, Luce,” Morgan says, her voice strained.

“You probably should,” I add. “Morgan’s getting testy. You know how impatient she is.” Morgan laughs.

“Why won’t she, though?” she asks after a while. “It doesn’t make sense. There’s nothing wrong with her, but it’s like she’s left.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think something happened, and she had to go away.”

“But we were right there,” Morgan says, frustrated. “We could have helped, if she just *told* us.”

“Some secrets are hard to tell,” I say, and Morgan falls silent. “Even between us.”

“I think we should go,” she says after a while. “It’s too hard to see her like this.”

I look at Lucy, resting between us. “I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“Then we won’t,” Morgan says.

We talk to her, telling stories that overlap and sometimes contradict. We tell her about three little girls who grew up together and who fought for each other, who kept each other safe and grew up together. Three girls who were family. We tell her our history and when we finish that, we tell her our future, pulling stories out of the air and stringing them together until they lie across us, streamers of colour weaving together.

And when we finish, we lean in and we kiss her. Not goodbye, not an ending, but a pause for now.

“Love you, Luce.”

At last, there was only one girl left. She shouldered her burdens, and felt the ache of the loss of her friends, and she continued on.

For seven more days, she walked on, searching out the stolen voices of her friends in vain. She grew weary; without her friends by her side, she felt the cold on her skin, the weight of the stories she carried. She began to wonder what would happen if she fell, if she faltered. Who would hear her story? Would her voice be lost like so many before it, silenced and forced away, until it was forgotten?

The last girl gathered the voices around her. She drew out the threads of story that wove through the ground beneath her and trailed through the trees so high above her, and she leaned on them and listened. And she spoke to them.

The last girl straightened her shoulders, and she closed her eyes, and she rewrote the story.

Her friends were not paper-doll cut outs, meant to serve as a warning against those who stray off the path, who do not see the evil amongst the flowers, who lose their way.

They may have become lost, but they were not lost to her. Her friends had experienced those stories, and those stories were a part of them, but they had not made them. They would not be their only stories.

And so she went back, and she rewrote the story, teasing it out until she could hear one of her friends calling out to her among the lost. She went to her and this time the girl embraced the woman she loved and said goodbye, and she walked away from oblivion. She looks into herself and she starts to understand.

The two friends left to change another story. They found their friend, the one too broken to continue, and they held her together. They waited for her, and they listened to her silences and her stories.

They began again, listening to the unfinished stories of the girls who came before them, and this time they shared them. They took one another by the hand and listened to the voices of the lost, gathered the songs of the sad girls and mad girls and bad girls. They found the silences amongst the stories.

When it is too much to share between the three of them, they begin to place a story, a voice, in each baby girl born. They hope the girls, the dead ones of the past and the waking ones of the future, will understand, will listen. They hope they can hear the stories and find their own.

And then there was a spark of something that was a beginning that was an ending, that was a middle, that was an unfinished story yet to be told.

Somewhere in a hospital room, in a world that is not quite magic and not quite normal, a girl stirs. She sits up and looks around, blinking bemusedly. “Love you too. Why is everyone crying?”

And so the story started again.

Lucy:

It takes a long time before things settle down again. Doctors have to see me, have to talk to me and check me over. They can't understand how I've just woken up.

My mother has to spend time with me too, and all kinds of professionals come in to speak to me, probe my brain. Morgan and Kate wait, not entirely patiently, but eventually they are let in to see me again.

And finally, we start to talk.

There are a lot of tears, a lot of pain and confusion. We have to feel their way through it, learn each other again.

We talk for hours, until we can start circling the truth.

"I couldn't do it anymore," I whisper. "I didn't belong there. I was so tired of trying. So sick of everything *hurting*. And I didn't want to tell you guys, because I didn't want to think about it—and after a while I started to think maybe it wasn't real, because *I* wasn't real."

"Lucy," Kate murmurs. "What happened?"

"He hurt me," I say. "My father." And that's all I can say for now, because if I keep talking tendrils of darkness will come up to claim me, but I survived that moment. I will survive more.

Morgan goes completely still next to me. Kate turns white, digging her nails into her skin like she's trying to hold something at bay.

I shake my head. “But it’s not just that. It’s me. I’m not right. I never have been, you guys know that. I shouldn’t be here.” I stare at my hands. “I’m wrong. I’m not human. I’m everything that’s dark and ugly and hateful.”

“I thought my mother was still alive,” Morgan blurts out, and it’s so unexpected that I look up.

“What?”

“Apparently, I have a real talent at repressing stuff I don’t like. Can you imagine the field day my inevitable future therapist will have with me? I really believed it. I thought I knew where she’d gone. I was going to find her, and bring her home. Or at least, get some answers. So, you know, you’re not the only one who’s a little fucked up.”

I am staring at her. “Your mother? But—”

“She died, yeah. Don’t worry, I got that.” Morgan hugs herself. “I’ll be okay. But I sort of need you guys to help me with that. All of this—it’s hard, but we need to do it together.”

And there’s the rub. Because as much as I want to run away, as much as all three of us are struggling, we can’t leave one another behind. We are linked together as surely as anything has ever been. Even if it hurts, I have to be there for them, and maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

But I have to be here for myself, too.

It is hard, in this skin. Most days I am focusing on not falling apart, on making it from one moment to the next. My heart feels fresh and tender in my chest, but maybe I am starting to feel like it’s all *mine* again— my lungs, my aching heart—not some

monster's, not my father's, and not the stolen skin of another girl. I explain all this to my friends, and they listen. Morgan nods, says that sounds like a good idea, focusing on one moment at a time.

"There's no rush," she says. "We have all the time in the world."

I will learn my history and I will speak it. I will not let myself be a changeling child, stolen and forgotten. I will not be a girl hurt by a monster or a man. I will chase my monsters down, and I will start eating them whole.

One time, we are out in the grounds when I see movement out of the corner of my eye. The dead girl is there, and she looks happy to see me; she grins, no stitches weaving her mouth shut, no decay at all on her face, except for maybe a small mark starting under her left eye. She waves to me, and I wave back. The others don't see her.

Kate:

When the visiting hours end and I'm not with Lucy and Morgan, I spend time with Ben. I curl up into his side, and for a few moments I can be warm, and I can hold on.

We sleep together, one night. It is not magical or wonderful, and it is not terrible or awkward. It is another ordinary moment in thousands of others that is a little bit extraordinary.

I do not devour him.

Lucy:

My mother spends a lot of time hovering in the doorway to my room. She does not seem to know how to enter it, but after a while she takes to sitting next to my bed. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we don't. She doesn't cry, or reprimand me for my actions, or ask what happened, but she does stay with me.

She is sleeping at the moment. I look at my mother, at her bowed head, and I think maybe one day I will be able to forgive her.

I don't know if she'll be able to do the same, to me or herself. I don't know how much she knows of her husband or how much she suspects, but she hasn't said a word of his disappearance. I think a small part of her misses him, sometimes.

They are still searching for him in the bush, but I think the rescue mission, already diminished, is losing its momentum. They think he has run away, but I know what happened. The bush is a big place, after all, the bush and its in-between spaces and all the voices that fill it.

My mother mentions moving to a different town, still near the girls and school, but maybe a little distance from the bush. For a while.

I don't know if we will ever be able to forgive each other, but maybe we can survive. Maybe we can start again.

Kate:

One night, we are curled up on Lucy's bed. The nurses have long since given up on trying to kick us out, especially because Morgan is very talented at breaking us back in. They leave us alone for the most part, pretending they can't see us when they come in to check on Lucy. She is getting better. Soon she will be allowed to go home.

Lucy smiles at us tiredly. "I dreamt of you two," she says, and her voice is musical.

"When I was gone."

Morgan tugs on her hair. "What did you dream about?"

"I was lost. I was falling, and they came to take me home, but it wasn't any better there. It wasn't easier. But you came, and you found me. You walked right down into the earth, past the histories and the lost secrets buried for anyone to find, and you followed the roots until you found me. And you saved me. You called me home."

She smiles at us. "You'll always find me."

Lucy:

I have a lot of dreams. Dreams and nightmares. Sometimes it is hard to tell them apart. Something I yearn for calls me away, tries to take me back to where I was. Each time I wake up and pull myself away from the lost voices and the strange creatures that are my kin. Sometimes I miss my dream-boy more than I thought possible, and I have to remind myself he was never real.

I don't know if everything is going to be okay. I don't know if I can stay away from where I ran to, if I can live in this world; if any of it is possible.

The truth is, I am different. I was once a little thing that should have been placed inside a little girl, but instead I was swapped for her. I was once a girl named Lucy who was the daughter of a man who was broken in his own way, and who could have broken me. Daughter, victim, and survivor—the words are inseparable for me now. And I ran and got lost in the bush, inside my own raging mind. Finally letting myself remember what he did, remember everything that has happened—that doesn't make everything okay. I still want to run; I still have strange dark thoughts slipping through my veins, rotting my insides.

But.

I might be okay. We might be okay. Because my friends came down down down into my secret truth and they did not shy away; they came and they looked me in the face and they smiled. They picked me up and they dragged me home, or to the closest home I could know. And maybe I will start trying to find my voice again; maybe I will try talk to people and find a way to live that lets my mind rest and grow without dulling the spaces in between.

Morgan:

“I have to tell you something,” Lucy says one afternoon. It is just the two of them. They have been watching reruns of soap operas on the television that is bolted to the wall.

“You'd think they would have moved away from that damn street,” Morgan says, frowning at the screen. “Surely only so many houses can burn down and neighbours be involved in horrific car accidents before you decide it's time to sell. Must be a

nightmare on their insurance.” She squints. “Wasn’t that guy in a wheelchair last week?”

“Morgan.”

Lucy and the voice say it in unison. Morgan looks up.

“I saw her,” Lucy whispers. “When I was gone.”

“Saw her? Where? What do you mean, Lucy?”

Lucy taps her head, closes her eyes for a moment. “In here.” She opens them. “And out there. In the other spaces, the place I went. Where you saved me from.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She was so beautiful, Morgan. She looked so much like you.”

Morgan’s hands are shaking.

“I spoke to her,” Lucy whispers. “She wanted me to tell you... she’s sorry. She misses you. She wishes she could see you, but... she’s so proud of you. Of who you are. Who you’re going to become.”

The voice is smiling. Morgan can barely breathe. “Really?” she whispers. She thinks of the almost-familiar voice that called her name in the bush.

Lucy nods.

Morgan climbs into bed next to her, who shifts over to make room. Morgan rests her head on Lucy’s shoulder, and they watch the inhabitants of Ramsay Street discuss the recent arrival of a mysterious newcomer. They both cry a little, and they don’t have to

pretend it's over the discovery of an affair between the school teacher and local café owner.

Lucy:

I did see Morgan's mother. Where I was. I saw many of them—the lost, the forgotten, the stolen. Those like me. They were like ghosts, even here, where they'd escaped to. But not all had chosen to come here. Many had been forced, buried here to be forgotten. Others had simply slipped away one day.

They hadn't found whatever they were searching for there. It was not a good place. Too much loss, too much desperation. Some of it turned to anger, a wound festering, rotting away at them. They reached out, calling for their stories to be heard, to be lived out—but they could not speak. Everywhere was silence, and the pain that followed it was like drowning.

I didn't speak to her. She didn't tell me that she regretted her decision, that she was happier now, or sadder. She didn't tell me she was proud of Morgan, that she missed her. She couldn't tell me her story. She couldn't tell me anything.

She just drifted like the rest of them. Lost, unseeing. Sometimes her mouth would wrench open in a silent scream, mouthing something I couldn't hear, but her eyes were blank.

She didn't say anything. She couldn't even see me.

Kate:

The wolf is as strong as it's ever been. The demon is silent. I can't hear it anymore.

Sometimes I even miss it, this voice that has been with me longer than I can remember.

When I can remember things. My mind is scattered lately, like bits of me have been falling away. My skin smells of wolf. My hands tremble, and I can see the mess of veins and bones beneath skin that has turned translucent. But I suppose that was the deal I made. The wolf is strong, and it is time to leave this body of mine behind. And yet.

The thing is, I don't know if I want this anymore.

The wolf made me strong. It gave me control, complete control. Becoming wolf made everything make sense, at least for a while. It was easier, watching the girl fall away, and more than anything, I liked that control. To finally know what I was, what I was doing—it was like having power.

And the feel of it—to run through the streets, creep through the bush, moonlight on my back. To be connected.

But I am getting tired of being so tired.

And I can't help but think of Lucy, who is getting through each day even though it is harder to be here than run away. And Morgan, who has lost her mother all over again, but who keeps us both going, without knowing we need it.

And Ben. When I think of him, something opens up in me that I don't understand. I care about him, and when I'm with him, I don't need to be wolf. When the wolf is near him, I lose a part of me that I don't think I want to lose. But sometimes, when he touches me, I worry I will shake right out of my skin and he will finally see me.

I think I would like to try to be a girl again.

And so I start to take everything a day at a time, and I try slip between girl and wolf. I do not think there is as much of a difference as I thought, in the end. Sometimes I wonder if I can live in both, wolf girl and girl wolf. If I can keep my girl skin and my wolf heart. I spend time with Morgan and Lucy, learning them again, and I spend time with Ben until I can't anymore.

I need to figure out this skin I'm in once and for all, and it's too hard to learn to walk when all I do is lean on others. It is not fair to fall into Ben, to try and lose or find myself in him, in us. Ben is wonderful and kind and curious, but I do not think he can handle the secrets in my heart or the wolf under my skin or the girl in my mind. I need to find my own way first, find a skin I can live in. I need to learn to live without Lucy and Morgan, and to live with myself.

Maybe I will destroy the world with my hunger, with my wanting. But maybe that is not the worst thing.

I look down at the bones that jab and throb through papery skin, still yearning to turn wolf. *I am a shadow girl*, Lucy told us once, and now I understand her. I'm caught between two bodies and a thousand different wants. Not quite girl, and too much wolf.

Maybe I could let my skin turn soft again, knowing that underneath my blood is hard. The wolf could return to its place in my chest, rattling my bones but not changing them, and slipping out when I need it.

I am so tired. I am so hungry.

Still, the demon hasn't come back yet either, even when the smell of wolf fades from my skin. Maybe it's tired, too.

There is a plate of meat in front of me, tender and medium rare. I cooked it myself. I hold a slice of the hot flesh in front of me and consider it.

There are a thousand maybes in the steps before me, and they all balance on the choice I make next.

The wolf looks one way. The girl looks another.

And I decide, because I finally understand that I can.

Lucy:

Things are not wonderful. There is no magic fix here. I am still hurting in too many ways, too confused by the world around me that still doesn't feel like my own. I still want to run, to hide and bury myself in the darkness that waits so patiently. I still cry at night and want to claw my way out of my own skin. I think of my father and razor wire slices up my insides.

But.

But.

But.

We take our small steps and we ease towards something manageable. I spend my time, my happy hours, with Kate and Morgan in the grey hospital rooms and every day we are a little bit brighter. I watch Morgan smile at something inside herself, and I watch her shine. I watch Kate take steps towards something uncertain, something new, and I watch her start again. One day soon I will start telling someone about all those nights,

someone who can help. I will go with my friends to a different country, and we will dip our toes into cold water that laps at the shores of our home.

And maybe I will keep getting better in these little ways, until I like my skin again, until I have myself completely together.

When the leaves are bright and the sun is low in the sky, I leave the hospital. I go to visit the dead girl in the bush one last time. I ask her to tell me her stories, and she does, her eyes bright and her face changing through a million lost girls who all want to tell their stories, who all need to be heard.

When she is done, I take her hand and lead her out of the bush, into the warm bright sunlight. She laughs once, and when I turn around again, she is gone.

Morgan:

Lucy, Kate, and Morgan are at The Set. Morgan and the voice are taking turns swinging their legs out together, pushing higher and higher into the sky. They speak to each other in their head and out loud to the other girls—they've barely stopped since Lucy woke up. They plan future travels, and talk about Kate and Lucy, and when it's quiet, they talk about Morgan's mother. She's started talking to her father and brother about it too, sharing memories, finding old ones long buried. It's hard, and it hurts more often than not, but it's a start. One day, they have decided, they will go to the place where Morgan's grandmother may have lived and try find out about Scarlett's family.

Morgan and Lucy and Kate talk and they swing, soaring back and forth. They talk about their future, all the plans and paths ahead of them. Morgan strokes her wrist; the voice touches her hair.

Morgan tips her head back, feels the wind rush past her. She closes her eyes, and she smiles.

We are all haunted. This country is haunted, by ghosts, by horrors of the past; by stolen voices and stolen stories that can never play out.

We are not haunted. We are not demons. We are the lost voices, the stolen stories, desperate to live out our lifelines. We need to be listened to, to be heard. Some of us do not take well to being silenced. We lash out, in the only way we know how. Desperate to be heard, to finally play out our stories, we go mad.

We are the voices of the silenced, the unfinished stories of our ancestors.

We are etched into all corners of the land, running through it like rivers. We spark to life every time a girl is born, and we grow in her, with her. We whisper our warnings to her, and we find ourselves in the stories she reads, in the rules she resents.

If you listen to us, we can be your sisters, your mothers, your aunts, your friends. If you can't hear us, can't listen, won't listen, we might burn you up.

Hear us. Read our stories. Don't silence us and don't forget. Listen to our stories, but don't forget to live your own.

Once upon a time there was a girl in a mirror, a girl on a quest, a girl in love, a girl with monsters in her heart. Once upon a time there were a thousand girls walking a thousand different stories, living and dying and getting lost and finding their way.

You know this story. You've heard it a thousand times. You will tell it to your daughters with your fear and your love and your hope. Warnings and wishes and stories and truths.

Go on. Say it with us. Once upon a time there was a girl.

Exegesis

All the Voices in Our Heads: Exploring Female Identity by Reimagining the Fairy Tale and the Young Adult Novel

Demons, Girls, and Fairy Tales: An Introduction

My thesis explores femininity and female sexuality in Young Adult (YA) literature, with a key focus on female trauma. This examines female pleasure, desire, autonomy, agency, and the experience of sexual violence, and is realised through the construction of a metafictional sisterhood. Femininity is a multifaceted and complex subject relating to identity, with contradictory and complex experiences. In my approach, I acknowledge and consider the presence of trauma for women negotiating largely patriarchal or misogynistic spaces. This has manifested in my creative work as a struggle between the individual and society as well as the difficulty in navigating the intangible concepts that shape idealised femininity. At its core, the project is a study of the experience of being female—the good, the bad, the ugly, and everything in between.

My exploration of gendered trauma crosses genres, finding fairy tale as an alternative space to deconstruct narrative and social constructions of gender. I found strength in revising the fairy tale, building on established trends of repurposing these narratives to offer resilience, survival, and empowerment. Fairy tales are influential and enduring social agents that reflect values of their culture, and continue to be significant inspiration for authors and creators. The fairy tale is often integrated into contemporary YA literature, whether through textual allusions, key themes, or as a retelling. Here, authors are able to revise and essentially reclaim narratives that previously depicted significant trauma. These traumas are often indicative of social and cultural conditions of the time; as such, it is not uncommon to see women as passive victims, the princess locked in a tower. In combining the fairy tale with YA literature, authors can re-examine old narratives and tropes that continue to influence gender norms, and repurpose them to find opportunities for trauma recovery, reinscribing codes of

resistance and survival for women. This still acknowledges the underlying traumas of each genre, and understands the sociocultural context of the fairy tale world as part of the infliction, but also explicitly utilises fairy tale tropes and spaces alongside the YA narrative to create opportunities for trauma recovery. The formation of this space also maps codes of survival, developing the expanded metafictional sisterhood that is the culmination of my thesis.

My work utilises non-linear variations of story, privileging female voices and relationships, and reconstructing limiting patriarchal spaces to places of empowerment and support, reclaiming the fairy tale. I draw on the conceptual structure of Indigenous Australian Songlines to shape my critical ideas and research, manifesting in creative practice, where songlines contribute to the mapping intent of my project: forming an interactive, metafictional mapping of femaleness and sisterhood found in both the creative and critical components of my work. This is found in interweaving and contrasting narratives of identity and experience through a non-linear structure that combined the genre of YA and fairy tale to find new spaces of a metaphorical/metafictional sisterhood. I also identify the roots of the emergence of trauma recovery in the retold YA fairy tale, further developing it in my critical work to then demonstrate in my creative practice. This emerged as a mapping of story, voice, and experience, creating a structure that flowed through different stories and different lives, weaving the female experience across time and genre. My approach mirrored the fairy tale, working *with* and *alongside* common conventions and ideals rather than contesting or outright challenging them.

Ultimately, it was my intent to construct the creative thesis through an interweaving, entangled structure influenced by Indigenous Australian Songlines that

formed or transformed into a rhizomatic, multi-layered depiction of sisterhood: a repository of voices, story, and lived experiences that offers support and maps femaleness, itself a map of survival.

My corpus of texts offered a diverse sample of the central issues and their representation in Young Adult literature. These were selected for their popularity and dominance in the YA market; their pertinence to key themes and trends; their affirmation or subversion of these trends and tropes; their strong influence over my critical thinking and creative practice. A full list of texts, including those I reference briefly but that held significant influence over my work, is found in the bibliography. Major texts I discuss include *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* by Allyse Near; “Sharper Than a Serpent’s Tongue”, a short story by Christine Johnson; *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold* by Francesca Lia Block; *Swoon* by Nina Malkin; *Hush, Hush* by Becca Fitzpatrick; *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson; *The Demon’s Covenant* and *The Demon’s Lexicon* by Sarah Rees Brennan; *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer; *Seven Little Australians* by Ethel Turner; *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier; “Boobs”, a short story by Suzy McKee Charnas; and, *Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray.

After establishing my methodology, I begin the main body of my exegesis. In the first section, “Control”, I extend the metaphor of the mirror as theoretical approach, to look at the larger social context in which YA texts are created. Then, I explore the representation of sex, desire, pleasure, and agency; paranormal literature and the rising trend and meaning behind the rape/possession narrative; and, finally, I examine the perceived intersection of the werewolf and anorexia narrative. In the next section, “Fairy Tales: Trauma, Silencing, and Sisterhood”, I discuss how these issues can be answered in the retold or revised fairy tale, before turning to a discussion on

“Reclaiming Voice and Sisterhood” and sharing my final thoughts on realising this in my creative work.

Methodology

Transplanting and Adapting Fairy Tale

It is necessary to acknowledge the space in which I work, particularly when creating Australian literature that interacts with European story and bears influence from American YA. I am aware of the formative influence colonial texts and ideals have had in shaping the larger canon of Australian literature, and the trends and tropes within it. I am writing from a space that has been shaped by colonial/postcolonial/neo-colonial traditions and paradigms, and these frames invariably influence my own position within the genre¹. I reframe this slightly to maintain a focus on female representation² and YA literature, where I am working from a space that is shaped by patriarchal tradition and ideology; one that, like the postcolonial, influences even minor social constructions and beliefs.

While my critical examination explores texts from a wide range of cultural and geographic backgrounds, my creative project is established in a contemporary Australian setting. However, the structuring of the main plot with parallel fairy tale

¹ One particular theme that reflects this influence is the lost child in the bush trope, which my creative project engages with at its periphery, while restructuring to maintain a focus on female identity and sexuality. The lost child appears throughout fairy tale, but the trope itself as a reflection of “Australian anxiety” (Pierce) has been argued to represent the angst of not belonging to Australia, a symbol of the troubled negotiation between integrating European ideals onto an Indigenous landscape (Pierce xii). Kim Torney argues that the act of vanishing for the lost child “somehow renders them part of the actual country” (270), validating pioneer mythology as “white settlers had earned the right to live in the land by experiencing its harshness and surviving its threat” (270-1). I place this theme as parallel to the reaction and intent felt in the geographic anxiety posited by Masson and Hale in relation to transposing European fairy tale to Indigenous land. Fairy tale academics have noted the manifestation of this anxiety as a clear disconnection to the landscape (Fiander 160; Masson and Hale 45-6).

² As seen in the prevailing influence of traditional gendered values and roles established in colonial texts, discussed in the chapter “Let’s Talk About Sex (Or Not)”.

narratives also acknowledges a clear primary influence of European fairy tales. In transplanting fairy tale to an Australian landscape, a shift in the discourse becomes necessary. Much has been written about early writers' attempts to essentially colonise and claim fairy stories and fairy tales under an Australian context; Sophie Masson and Elizabeth Hale highlight the "geographic anxiety" felt by authors in "not belonging in a land whose ancient Aboriginal roots are not truly accessible to a settler society" (45) as they navigate their "mixed heritage (European and Australian) as they transpose European fairy tale frameworks, creatures, and tropes onto an Australian bushland setting" (46). Clare Bradford cites Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conception of 'worlding' in Australian authors' attempts to establish a European narrative tradition in an Australian landscape, transposing story to a 'new' (and of course, very old) landscape, ignoring or writing over Indigenous traditions. Speaking in regard to the image of the European fairy, Bradford writes,

The introduction of European fairies into Australian landscapes in colonial texts simultaneously empties and fills the landscape, invoking ancient European pasts which do not merely replace Indigenous traditions but assert their insufficiency, their incapacity to impart meaning to an empty land... Fairies introduced into the Australian landscape thus reassure readers about their status as inheritors of ancient (European) traditions of fantasy transposed into a new land (117).

While Bradford is commenting on the fairy itself rather than the fairy tale, I argue her point can be applied to the fairy tale,³ as writers attempt to assert a claim to narrative and identity. My awareness of this aids me in my critical approach and creative practice as I write in the changing space of fairy tale in a modern Australian YA landscape, acknowledging and exploring themes and ideological structures evolved

³ As well as the evolution of the lost child trope.

from their initial appearance in Australian fiction. Here, rather than transplanting the fairy tale, I focus on *adapting* fairy tale. Jack Zipes defines the retold fairy tale as either duplicate, or revision (*Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* 8): it is the latter of the two that I privilege here. In this space, the negotiations of land, story, and tradition are not forced to conform to another; instead, each narrative exists alongside each other to form new opportunities for story. I enact my own version of adaptation in the parallel narratives of fairy tale and realism/urban fantasy. This acknowledges the earlier translations of fairy tale across country, and finds an Australian reimagining of fairy tales of largely European origin. This is realised in the structuring of rhizomatic parallel stories adapted to a more contemporary Australian context, and inspired by the structure and concept of Indigenous songlines.

Songlines, Silence, and Setting

The thematic structure of my creative work intertextually and interculturally utilises Indigenous Australian conceptual structures. I do not appropriate Aboriginal knowledge or content but respectfully follow the powerful intersectional and more than three-dimensional patterns of Aboriginal ways of knowing, weaving through the silences and soil of the land, guiding theory and narrative. That these voices and knowledge are there, but not always listened to (Carnes 2), also speaks to the continuing relationship postcolonial Australia navigates with Aboriginal Australia, both in literature and everyday life. Silencing and trauma appear as central interconnected themes of this project, relating to fairy tale, femininity, and Australia's identity, particularly as seen in the colonial narrative trend of the child lost in the bush. This connects to the imposed

silencing of marginalised voices, in effect allowing the dominant discourse to shape story, and contributing to an ongoing trauma of voicelessness.

The concept of silence/s was of great significance in my consideration of the setting of my novel. The creative piece is set in contemporary Australia, with the bush appearing on the periphery of the narrative but no less a key feature. Its positioning at the edges of the world, its narratives trickling in to the main story and parallel fairy tale, is key to my approach in integrating a colonised Australian setting, nodding to the voices and stories that have been buried, and that continue to be silenced in Australia's colonial history and present. This is echoed in the plotline and background of Morgan's mother, who hints at a connection to the Stolen Generation, but the links are never made explicit. This plotline, and the initial depiction of bush as a deceptively minor setting, allows for a quiet presence that gradually expands beyond the margins of the story and central themes. Setting and story become entangled, casting the setting—the bush, in particular—as a character itself, or repository of story. It is a non-linear space where voices and story, history and future, intersect with one another.

In discussing silence as institutional, harmful, or repressive traumatic forces or experiences in an Australian contemporary text, it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal Australia. Scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (of Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou iwi), and Sally Morgan⁴ (of the Bailgu people of the Pilbara region) have argued that silence can also be a form of protection rather than only a mode of repression; Ahmed notes, "Sometimes silence is a strategic

⁴ Ahmed acknowledges Morgan's autoethnography *My Place* as instrumental to her understanding of choosing silence as a mode of protection (Ahmed xix). Ahmed writes, "We have to learn how much to reveal or not (it is not just a question of *whether* to keep or not keep a secret, or to choose or not choose silence but it is a question of *how much*. I learnt this from Sally Morgan's autoethnography, *My Place*... Aboriginality had been kept secret: Sally and her siblings were told they were Indian in order to protect them from the consequences of being Aboriginal in Australia" (Ahmed xix).

response to oppression; one that allows subjects to persist in their own way” (xvi). The act of listening is a powerful decolonising strategy in colonial discourses; Roslyn Carnes notes the significance of enacting silence in order to listen and privilege Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing in her article, “Changing listening frequency to minimise white noise and hear Indigenous voices”. The voices of the silenced, stolen, or buried in my creative work could speak of colonial Australia’s relationship with Aboriginal Australia, the past, present, and ongoing trauma and silencing that has woven itself into the fabric of the country—but also the opportunity to re-examine silence and relearn how to listen. This draws on Carnes’ approach to “tun[e] into a new frequency” (Carnes 5) and become aware of the existence of “white noise”, the term she designates to describe the colonising silence of Indigenous voices by non-Indigenous people through white privilege. Thematically, I apply this by privileging the act of listening to the embedded narrative and demonised voices in my creative text. As Morgan walks deeper into the earth in a dream, she hears these buried voices and bones, both physical and metaphysical. The text allows the reader to draw their own connections to Australian trauma and silencing, writing sisterhood as intersectional, and casting it as firmly influenced by Indigenous paradigms, particularly in the structure of the overall concept of sisterhood—or sistahood—as it relates to the fairy tale.

This appears not only in the thematic elements of the piece, but the structure itself. My approach to acknowledging Australian Indigenous paradigms draws from Shawn Wilson’s understanding of engaging with Indigenous knowledges. This acknowledges Indigenous knowledges as valid and holding a legitimate place in critical theory, rather than placing it as entirely separate or other. Wilson believes anyone may employ an Indigenist paradigm:

It is my belief that an Indigenist paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets. It cannot and should not be claimed to belong only to people with “Aboriginal” heritage. To use an analogy, one does not need to be female to be a feminist. Researchers do not have to be Indigenous to use an Indigenist paradigm, just as researchers do not have to be “white” to use a Western paradigm. Nor do Indigenous researchers have to use an Indigenist paradigm. It is the use of an Indigenist paradigm that creates Indigenous knowledge. This knowledge cannot be advanced from a mainstream paradigm. That would simply be mainstream knowledge about Indigenous peoples or topics. It is the philosophy behind our search for knowledge that makes this new knowledge a part of us, part of who and what we are. And it is then the choice to follow this paradigm, philosophy, or world view that makes research Indigenist, not the ethnic or racial identity of the researcher. (193-194)

I integrate this theory into my structural and thematic approach. I am focusing on Indigenist structures rather than story or content, positioning Indigenist paradigms as valid theory and methodology.

Aboriginal Australia’s concept of songlines was a central inspiration for structuring my creative thesis, and in forming the conceptions for ‘mapping’ sisterhood. Indigenous songlines form a map or structure demonstrating an interconnected network of multi-layered knowledges, stories, and narratives that allows navigation through such concepts and the land (Norris and Harney [of the Yubulyawan clan of the Wardaman nation] 6-7, 11; Malnic and Mowaljarlai [Brrejirad clan of Ngarinyin people] 5). It is a

lateral, non-linear mapping through time and space, with non-hierarchal structures, flowing from a foundation of life and the path of the ancestors. It offers knowledge of navigating survival, and is rhizomatic in both epistemology and structure. This is found not only in the construction of sisterhood as mapping recovery and survival, but in the very structure of the creative thesis itself. The fairy tales that run alongside, in between, and across the central narrative can be seen as branches, stemming off from and weaving back into the trunk of the story. Alternatively, it is just as valid to read the fairy tales as the trunk, and Kate, Morgan, and Lucy's narratives as branching off. Nevertheless, it is crucial to read the stories and the overall structure of the narrative as rhizomatic, as the stories interweave with one another to reinforce the body of the narrative tree of sisterhood they are forming, and to continue to expand on it. Likewise, thematically, the voices or demons could be seen as further branches and leaves—or, perhaps more aptly, roots. They offer life, history, and connection to this conception of sisterhood/mapping, linking it back to the land. That the perception of this map as tree can be pictured under multiple angles is part of its strength; the reader contributes to its construction by the addition of their own lived experiences through their personal interpretation.

My exploration of female silence within patriarchal paradigms reveals sociocultural expectations and demands that shape a text and frame gendered behaviour as 'good' or 'bad'. Jennifer L. Gyuris notes that "Scholars have long recognized the silence of women in fairy tale literature. Such silencing not only eliminates narrative viewpoints, but it also easily establishes hierarchies wherein speech is equated with power" (47). Ruth Bottigheimer writes, "Muteness clearly exists on two levels in Grimm's Fairy Tales: first, muteness which grows out of the narrative itself, when a character is cursed with or is condemned to silence for a period of time; and second, a

silence within the text which results from the author's or editor's choice in distributing direct and indirect discourse" (118). There is a powerful connection across genre here; silence in fairy tale whether as an indication of a female character's disempowerment, or muteness enacted through supernatural means, resonates with the real-life presence of silence in trauma.

It is important, too, to note here the distinction between silence and muteness. Enforced silence or muteness is a loss of control; the choice of silence can be empowering or a type of active resistance, or, as mentioned above, an act of protection. Wilful silence as an empowering action allows this dynamic, to reach a representation that in fact draws strength from an action that had previously been an indication of subservience and disempowerment. Silence also has real-world links to trauma; sexual trauma in particular may often result in muteness, as a clinical reaction, an inability or unwillingness to articulate the experience, or even read as an extension of society's perception of sexual abuse, where victims may feel unable to tell their story for fear, shame,⁵ or simply risk not being believed or heard⁶ (Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr; H. Johnson 37). Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* is a prime example of the retreat from trauma to silence. Her protagonist is a victim of enforced silence, from the event which precipitated her muteness, where her rapist covered her mouth so she couldn't speak or cry out, and clinical muteness, when she finds she cannot speak in the months afterwards.

⁵ An anonymous writer for *ABC News* article, "How the justice system lets sexual assault victims down", writes, "The stigma surrounding sexual assault is suffocating— our rampant culture of victim blaming and shaming makes it harder for victims to speak about, let alone report their experience. This culture implies women are responsible for men raping them— perhaps they'd been drinking, or maybe they wore the 'wrong' clothes and were 'asking for it'." She also notes, "Defendants of sexual assault charges are three times more likely to be acquitted than those accused of any other offence" (1).

⁶ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey, only an estimated 20-25 percent of all sexual assault cases are reported to police in Australia. Approximately 85 percent of offences are never brought before the criminal justice system.

Silence is common, too, in fairy tale; stories such as “The Wild Swans”, “The Little Mermaid”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “The Silent Princess”, and “The Goose Girl”⁷ all contain a silenced female character, often by curse or as an indication of her innate ‘goodness’. The evil woman has far more agency to speak, and the innate message is that silence and its associated passivity is indicative of a ‘good’ girl—and if she does not confine herself to this, she may be forced to. It is well worth noting that the most commonly referenced versions of these tales, tales that feature a silenced woman at the centre of their respective narratives, were written, recorded, or edited by male authors and editors. In the retold tale, the author is careful to negotiate spaces of silence, using it to reveal repression or trauma, and examining its presence contextually or for a specific purpose, as will be seen in my analysis of Christine Johnson’s short story “Sharper Than a Serpent’s Tongue”. In my own story, silencing is deconstructed and repurposed alongside fairy tale motifs, while bearing significant connections to Australia’s history and present as a colonised nation on ancient land, and the experience of being female in a patriarchal society.

Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall

I draw on the significance of the mirror as a fairy tale motif, and symbol and machination, of constructed femininity (Melchior-Bonnet; Schanoes) to place it as a guiding model to introduce critical and creative practices. The mirror acts as a reflection of story and experience; as Veronica L. Schanoes writes, “a piece of writing is both a communication with a larger world and a reflection of the mind that created it. A similar

⁷ For specificity of narrative, I refer to the Hans Christian Andersen version of “The Wild Swans” (1993) and “The Little Mermaid” (1993); the Charles Perrault version of “Sleeping Beauty” (2008); the Andrew Lang version of “The Silent Princess” (2009); the Brothers Grimm version of “The Goose Girl” (2014) and “Sleeping Beauty” with “Briar Rose” (2014); and the Giambattista Basile version of “Sleeping Beauty”, with “Sun, Moon, and Talia” (2009).

dynamic is in play for the reader” (97). Schanoes reads the mirror as story, where the reader’s role in engaging with feminist ideals in a text is dependent on their own experiences. This lends itself to my overall approach in forming a metafictional sisterhood, and in the depiction of femininity as at once a deeply personal and unique experience, and a universal one.

The mirror as story also styles itself, like the fairy tale, as reflection. The fairy tale is a reflection of the society and culture it was formed in, reinforcing the values and norms of that time. This is why it is, and should be, understood as malleable and changing, rather than static. The themes of my creative work explore how change and challenge is needed for survival, lest the girls continue repeating and reliving the traumas of the girls who came before them.

The concept of reflection, of doubling, emerges in the construction of the retold fairy tale. Alternative realities are constructed when different versions of the same tale play out. Schanoes acknowledges the potential that authors may find in engaging with the retold fairy tale: “The mirror’s—and fantasy’s—illusion of another world, identical and yet opposite to ours, creates a space for expressing the lived experiences of women and envisioning the feminist change necessary to improve those experiences” (9). It could be argued that the additions of these adapted stories keep their source fresh; they are off-shoots that allow a story to continue growing and maintain relevance in the eyes of its readers. They act as a reflection of the main text, a converse image that allows an as yet unseen corner of the story to be glimpsed. As Schanoes writes, “Revision pulls a story into the present, changing it in order that the old story can be experienced once again as fresh and immediate, allowing it to shuck some of the layers of mediation that come with the weight of history. Revision becomes a way of revealing a prior truth and

clarifying meaning” (64). This too speaks to the conception of adaptation that I will expand on in the chapter “Fairy Tales: Trauma, Silencing, and Sisterhood”, using adaptation and revision to reimagine and re-examine older texts to find hidden value and messages of hope and resistance that read as warnings or restrictions.

Different versions of a story form reflections or doubles, revisions. This expanding web of story and experience relates to the sisterhood I am creating—a map of survival through reading these stories. Kelly Link writes in “Travels with the Snow Queen”, “The map that you are using is a mirror... You read your map with your foot, and behind you somewhere there must be another traveller whose map is the bloody footprints that you are leaving behind you... Sometimes mirrors are maps, and sometimes maps are mirrors.” (114-139). Readers and characters directly interact with these stories as a form of mapping and survival; in reacting and interacting with them, they cement their purpose. Readers may see themselves in the reflections cast by these mirror-stories. The metaphor of mirror as story—as mapping story—is particularly powerful given the implication of a direct personal connection to its viewer. The viewer engages with the story or mirror, where reflection is created—a reflection of the reader’s own interpretation, and the author’s construction.

Schanoes writes:

It is no accident that feminist writers are attracted to the genre of fantasy; similarly it is no accident that the field of feminist revisions of fairy tales and classical myth continues to grow at a seemingly exponential rate. *Revisions of fairy tales and myth allow feminist writers to reaffirm a connection with their foremothers*, and to advocate an understanding of self that does not turn those who are non-self into objects; both aspects of the field, revision and fantasy,

deny the legitimacy of a zero-sum understanding of relation, be it literary or psychological, and so counter the rhetoric of objectification that has confined women in the past. (143, emphasis mine)

This can be read as the core of my approach to revisioning not only the fairy tale, but the bush and the lost child of colonial Australian literature. The mirror is no longer a tool for objectification and self-judgement, but one of self-reflection. We may look into it to see new stories reflected alongside the old, stories that interact to create a metatextual dialogue.

In reading the mirror as story, the reflection it creates offers insight to social values surrounding gender and identity. Conventional and dominant narratives, themes, and tropes are re-envisioned to uncover opportunities for feminine strength and empowerment in spaces that previously inflicted trauma and repression.

My approach is built on the foundation of the texts and narrative tradition that came before, as the new and old interact to discover—and rediscover—opportunities for female empowerment in YA literature. As Schanoes writes, “Doubling... is not a threat... but rather a resurrection, a reunion” (138). I draw on the doubling and reflections formed by the revision to reunite the old and new in a space of empowerment and potential.

Control

In her foundational work, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites states, “Young Adult novels are about power” (3). Power, she writes, “is even more fundamental to adolescent literature than growth” (x). Trites posits that an unstable balance of power exists between the teenager and adult in Young Adult Literature, as the teenager stands to unseat holders of power, or otherwise clash with institutions that wield it. Under this reading, teenagers are still outside of those systems, at times challenging them rather than supporting their existence—their liminal status places them as outsiders, others: threats.

While I concur that power does appear to be an essential thematic facet of YA literature, I would argue that this could be redirected to explore a more complex concept: control, as it emerges from negotiations of power. Furthermore, I suggest that the struggle that Trites discusses can be read as not between teenager and adult, but between the individual and social construction. Power is an instigator or catalyst, but control is invariably what shapes these stories and conventions, from iterations of the fairy tale across time and country, to early Australian colonial fiction, to the contemporary YA literature that bears influence of its literary predecessors. In examining the intersection of power and control, through themes such as the power of a national consciousness, of collective memory, of a sister/sisterhood, binary structures are revealed and prewritten boundaries broadened.

Since the emergence of colonial Australian fiction, the desire to control—the land, the inhabitants, the construction of a national identity—has meant that these texts have had to negotiate European literary traditions within Aboriginal Australia. We see this in the struggle to carve a new path into the Australian landscape that allowed for fairy tale in Aboriginal Australian land, yet would remain distinctive in its own right from its predecessors. The nature of colonial Australia called for control over story and land, and, consequently, identity; yet by denying Indigenous presence and history through tools of a European society, the negotiation of control became conflicted. The land, its history, and future, became a character of its own, one that resisted repression.

Socialised and expected gender binaries, behaviour, and traditions regularly engage with themes of control, particularly when normative gendered behaviour is disrupted or threatened. Control and power intermingle at the root of social disruption, as conflicts of control arise—the desire to exert or rebel against it, acknowledging an overriding fear on both sides of the struggle of a loss of control, or of being controlled. In YA literature, girls struggle with control, be it self-control, or the control exerted over them by others.⁸ Others enforce levels of control over them, meant to instruct and position them within the expected parameters of gendered behaviour. In YA literature, this power dynamic most commonly emerges in the main form of interaction between the genders, the heterosexual romance.⁹ Dominant patriarchal ideals are symbolised and instilled through the male lover, and the negotiation of power within the heterosexual relationship stands in for the female experience in interacting with the larger patriarchal

⁸ This trend crosses all subgenres of YA literature. Novels that demonstrate this range from realistic trauma fiction such as *Cut* by Patricia McCormick, *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson, and *Mercy, Unbound* by Kim Antieau (the latter of which follows a girl who develops an eating disorder in direct response to a need to exert control in a world full of war and starvation), to dystopian novels such as *Only Ever Yours* by Louise O'Neill, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and the *Partials* series by Dan Wells.

⁹ Later, I discuss the novels *Hush, Hush*, *Twilight*, and *Swoon*, each of which demonstrate this dynamic.

world. However, we also see it in the character's interactions with a larger society, in their relationships with friends and family, and common narrative tropes and conventions that both influence and show influence from social ideals.

Reflecting a Bigger Picture

When approaching these trends, I consider the mirror again. The trends that emerge in literature can be seen as a reflection of the society they were created for, rather than a construction independent of a larger context. YA literature can both reflect and disrupt expected notions of power and control for the teenage reader (Kokkola, Miller, and Donnelly). It is important to acknowledge that these trends are not being formed in a vacuum; so is the mirror simply reflecting and reinforcing what is already there?

Particularly stubborn trends include the lover appearing as a paternal figure, where the gender roles became particularly rigid; the valorisation of virginity; and, probably as a result of the latter, the presence of rape fantasy. These emerged in key paranormal romance YA texts that proved commercially successful—quite notably so in the *Twilight* series, whose success arguably has had a shaping influence over the genre and texts that followed in its wake. Meyer's series particularly focuses on constructing the male love interest as a controlling and protective paternal force and presenting abstinence as not only preferential, but necessary. Edward Cullen is explicitly depicted as acting as Bella's father throughout the series. The paternal figure's role traditionally entails physical and spiritual protection over his ward, a constant and regularly acknowledged behaviour of Edward throughout the *Twilight* series. While it largely avoids romanticising the rape fantasy, *Twilight* creates a foundation on which others have built to do just that, culminating in the scenarios presented in the succeeding texts.

Hush, Hush, Swoon, and the *Mortal Instruments* series, among several others, each present scenarios where the paranormal male love interest must protect his vulnerable human paramour, again with consistent, explicit links to the father-daughter relationship as enacted through the central heterosexual relationship. This trend dictates that women need protecting, placing men as firmly dominant in their relationships, and needed to control key aspects of their partner's lives, including their bodies and minds.¹⁰

The trend of the lover acting in the role of father is probably the culmination of fears over female virginity, and the subsequent policing of female sexuality, and conventional gender roles in the heterosexual relationship. Conventions of this trend include an absent biological father, the valorisation of the nuclear family, traditional values, and abstinence. The emphasis on the biological father's failure to uphold the expectations of masculinity extends the idealisation of gender roles to the feminine and masculine. The woman protagonist is able to experience sexual desire, but her surrogate father's intervention reinforces the conventional narrative of female sexuality as dangerous. It may only exist within appropriate confines—more often than not in this context, marriage—and it must be carefully regulated, lest it have life-threatening consequences.

Trends such as these invite connections back to the fairy tale. “Donkeyskin”¹¹ (ATU 510B¹²), in particular, appears between the lines of several of YA novels, only here, the princess has been rewritten to run into her father's grasping arms. The embedded threads of power and control contribute to shaping perceptions on gender and relationships. As Silver titles her article on gender, sexuality, and the family in

¹⁰ Seen literally with the act of supernatural possession, which appears in each of these series.

¹¹ For specificity of narrative, I refer to Charles Perrault's version of the tale, “Donkey-Skin” as translated by Angela Carter (2008), and the Brothers Grimm version “All Fur” as translated by Jack Zipes (2014).

¹² ATU: Aarne-Thompson-Uther index for classifying fairy tale story types.

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, in an allusion to Christina Rossetti, "*Twilight* is not good for maidens". However, there are multiple ways to read and engage with these constructions and the ideologies they may appear to reinforce. Texts such as *Hush*, *Hush* and *Swoon* represent rape culture¹³ in their ideologies, and are highly problematic in their depiction of sexual relations for women; but they may also be reflecting the world that has formed them. In doing so, such texts can mirror to the reader the powerful implicit discourses around them, doubling as covert critiques of social ideals. The reader is afforded a degree of control as they construct their own assessments of behaviours and paradigms, navigating dichotomous paradigms.

When I approached the fairy tale, I found that reimagining key concepts of gender in the retold tale offered the most impact in framing effective stories. I drew on the latent power of the fairy tale and then worked from within this genre to find opportunities that may have always been there, to offer spaces of empowerment and strength. I achieved this through reliance on the dominance of earlier stories. The successful retold fairy tale does not criticise its predecessors—it could not exist without them—but works with them, drawing out established ideas, narrative tropes, and traditions in order to reframe them, and offer an underlying subversion that ultimately strengthens the fairy tale and its reader.

Let's Talk About Sex (Or Not)

To return briefly to power's role in the construction of control, Trites acknowledges sexuality as a form of significant power held by teenage characters, as their sexual

¹³ Rape culture can be defined as the social and environmental conditioning influences, commonly stemming from patriarchal or misogynistic ideologies, that contribute to creating a culture of normalising, trivialising, and enabling sexual assault.

activity marks a shift out of the liminal space and development into adulthood. She writes, “adolescent novels that deal with sex, whether they are obviously ideological, usually contain within them some form of power dynamic wherein the character’s sexuality provides him or her with a locus of power. That power **needs to be controlled** before the narrative can achieve resolution” (85, emphasis my own). I would extend this to the concern held over the need to control female sexuality in order to suit the idealisation of appropriate femininity—the pure, virginal good girl. The presence of female sexuality is a transgression to social constructs of appropriate gendered behaviour; as C.J. Bott notes, “sex is always a controversial topic in young adult literature” (26). Critics such as Caroline McKinley and Amy Pattee argue that YA literature is a crucial and safe source for teenagers to ascertain information about sex. Visible sexual relationships remain relatively uncommon in YA literature, where representations of sex may involve moments of warning, censorship,¹⁴ or freedom. As Pattee notes, YA literature “has the potential to inform the sexual identity development of young people. Unfortunately, much of what may be considered erotic or sexually explicit in adolescent literature has been challenged by censors and is often passed over for less controversial material in school and library materials selection” (30). The intended readership of the genre means that when sexual relationships do appear, they are often didactic, establishing moral codes that affirm the expected social behaviour of women. There is a contested balance between didactic texts¹⁵ and mirror texts, where some present idealised social values while others reflect more realistic social

¹⁴ Some YA publishers include ratings or warnings on texts with explicit sexual content. One glaring example is Sarah J Maas’s novel *Empire of Storms*; despite the series focusing on the exploits of a female assassin and thus featuring significant bloodshed and violence, the 2016 novel was the first to include a warning on the cover due to ‘explicit content’: sex scenes that feature a female character demonstrating agency and pleasure in a consensual sexual relationship.

¹⁵ We could read the didactic text that depicts an idealised treatment of teenage sexuality as a window text, under Epstein’s interpretation of the window and mirror texts: an insight into another, alternate world/view (111).

conventions. Ed Sullivan emphasises a need for didacticism in YA literature, writing, “Teens should see sex as both an emotional and physical experience, and one that is special and unique. To do otherwise is to trivialize it. In the fiction they read, teens should see that sex is a serious business” (463). Trites concurs, believing the purpose in depicting sex in YA is largely if not wholly didactic, enforcing conventional boundaries surrounding gender. Thus, it is common to see the sexual relationships that do appear in YA ending in emotional or physical distress. This is most overt when studying texts that feature LGBTQIA characters or themes, which challenge social ideals of relationships by their presence in a homonormative context. We see this from the first YA novel to feature a gay relationship (Cart and Jenkins xv), John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), which, while allowing the two characters to remain together by the novel’s completion, does show the protagonist Davy’s beloved dog being killed shortly after Davy is caught in bed with male classmate Altschuler. This set the tone that, while diluted, carries through to contemporary literature¹⁶ in the fears of teenagers breaching socialised gender expectations and behaviour through sex. For texts that coach socialised behaviours, teenagers who have sex are faced with a plethora of negative repercussions, from acquiring a bad reputation, to break down of a relationship, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, rape, or even, in extreme cases, death. Sarah Dessen’s novel *Someone Like You* (2004) notably features several of these conventions. The protagonist’s best friend Scarlett has sex *once* with boyfriend Michael before he dies in a horrific car accident the very next day, leaving her pregnant and deeply traumatised. When Halley, the protagonist, discusses losing her virginity with

¹⁶ While novels with LGBTQIA content are far more free from the limitations of their predecessors, and are able to be openly positive, even those that deviate from the convention of the ‘problem’ novel narrative do still acknowledge an adversity that tallies with real-life experiences. Becky Albertalli’s *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), an uplifting and upbeat novel with a gay protagonist who is comfortable with his sexuality, still features Simon being blackmailed by another student threatening to out his sexuality to the whole school. When he is exposed, Simon does receive support, but is bullied by many students.

her boyfriend, they immediately get into a car accident due to the distracting conversation, and she is hospitalised. Dessen consistently paints sex as dangerous and negative for teenagers.

The treatment of sex and idealised gender roles and behaviours under a patriarchal lens can be seen throughout the Australian literary tradition. Traditional values established in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, such as Mary Grant Bruce's *A Little Bush Maid* (1910), still harbour influence over the depiction of the Australian woman. Characters such as Judy and Meg Woolcot from Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894)—which largely opposes conventional colonial texts—offer an interesting benchmark for young women under a patriarchy that cannot make room for them.

Widely acknowledged to embody the hopes and dreams of a 'young', nationalistic Australia, but also its fear and uncertainties (White 75; Smith; Pearce), Judy regularly challenges socially approved femininities. We can align Judy's representation and resistance of social norms with not only resistance and oppression of the patriarchy, but of a national colonial image. Sharyn Pearce calls Judy "brimful of promise and life" (13); she is the child her father Captain Woolcot understands the least (Turner 30). Her father's uncertainty over how to understand his daughter or what to do with her speaks to the patriarchal problem of how to find a place for characters like Judy, whose existence and forthcoming growth into womanhood would challenge the ideal domestic woman. Michelle J. Smith notes that as colonial heroines mature, they are unable to balance the two conflicting sets of ideologies of the ideal Australian girl, and the domestic wife (76). As a child, Judy's deviance serves her well as the embodiment of a 'young', nationalistic Australia, but comes into conflict with perceived

ideals of appropriate womanhood. Pearce claims, “Judy is ousted because girls only have a limited time to share the nationalist space with their brothers” (13); that is, the time of childhood, before they must enter an appropriate womanhood. The qualities for which Judy is praised as a child could be seen to challenge as an adult, and so she cannot be allowed to enter womanhood. Her existence as an adult woman would undermine and disprove social constructions of gender. Pearce writes, “Judy can be portrayed as a victim of a patriarchal society which ultimately punishes her (in the strictest possible way, it has to be said) for her unconventionality, her wilful disregard for the niceties of the traditional female role, her refusal to be typecast as a submissive female, forever following in the lead of her wiser, protective, brothers” (13).

Smith writes that colonial novels such as Turner’s “are unable to accommodate the bracing figure of the Australian Girl, postulating ambiguous or tragic outcomes at best for heroines who deviate from, or at least have desires that exceed, the domestic ideal” (76). The conflict in idealised girlhood and womanhood is acknowledged or resolved in the death of the heroine,¹⁷ yet the need to silence her suggests a latent power and lack of resolution.

Judy’s character and death acknowledges the unstable identity of the country; she is at once lauded for her mischievous and rebellious behaviour, and destroyed for it. As Smith writes, “While the [white] Australian Girl associated with freedom and independence was proudly seen as a superior ‘type’ of femininity, these novels show not the triumph of these qualities, but rather their erasure” (76).

¹⁷Curiously, while Judy is punished for refusing to or being unable to conform to a conventional femininity in womanhood, and thus is killed as a child before she can become an adult, her final act that precipitates her death marks her as ideally feminine—one of self-sacrifice that affirms the maternal and sacrificing nature of women.

Transgressions of social boundaries lead to punishment and silencing, and allow others to be inducted into appropriate womanhood, as with Judy's older sister Meg, who is described at different times as foolish and "a stupid child" (Turner 59) as she attempts to enact the role of sophisticated woman. Judy's death is the impetus for Meg to develop a newfound maturity, gaining her the admiration and friendship of the previously contemptuous Alan Courtney.

While never explicitly referring to sexual activity, Meg's narrative skirts the sexualisation of young women as she is coached and reprimanded toward an idealised femininity. Social femininity can be understood to extend to sexual behaviour. Meg—and the reader—are lectured indirectly by Turner throughout the novel for the character's behaviour, and twice are lectured directly by male characters intent on coaching the girl to an appropriate social femininity. In one scene, Alan intercepts Meg to mock, scold, and instruct her for allowing herself to be "spoilt" by "that horrid MacCarthy girl" (Turner 87) in her interest in beautifying herself and encouraging the interest of boys. He mocks and appears to threaten her until she is in tears, and by the end of their meeting she is promising never to flirt again while she lives, to which he responds "encouragingly, 'No, I am quite sure you won't—leave it to girls like Aldith, won't you? You only wanted to be set straight. Goodbye, little Miss Meg.'" (Turner 88) Meg is established as foolish and naïve; despite her error in judgement, Turner asserts that she is not one of those immoral girls, as Meg does not realise her request to meet with a man after dark could be seen as "questionable" (Turner 76). Alan lectures her despite her innocent intentions; his coaching, and Turner's construction of Meg's naivety, allow her to remain a "good" girl. This is repeated in a later scene where Meg is again brought to tears by an older man coaching her about good feminine social behaviour, specifically toward men, and culminates in Judy's death.

Regulated or virginal sexuality is still closely tied to the idealised female. Characters such as Judy, who may come to challenge these conventions, continue to be silenced or erased. The roots planted in these earlier texts continue to grow and influence contemporary Australian—and Western—YA literature's representation. This finds varying reactions, from texts that disrupt or challenge these conventions, to those that repeat it, policing female sexuality.

Teenagers—particularly female ones—in a Western context (namely, Australian, American, and British) who experience pleasurable, consensual sexual relationships actively challenge social conventions. Their agency affords them control in a situation that generally focuses on a loss of self-control. Texts that resist these central discourses where sex is entirely absent, or used as a vehicle to coach moral attitudes, can approach sexual activity as potential for freedom and pleasure, or even the mundane, where sex becomes an ordinary part of the *Bildungsroman* journey. While many contemporary Western texts do attempt to challenge or resist dominant social ideals, undercurrents of these powerful ideologies can remain, and in fact appear so naturalised that they may be unnoticeable to reader or author. These instil and reinforce modes of control that extend beyond the relationships within the text to contributing to framing the reader's perspective. As such, a trend has emerged where individual relationships and experiments with sexual activity symbolise a dialogue between patriarchal society and women. The female protagonist's lover is instructor, parent, guardian of her virtue—even, in some texts, protector of her eternal soul as he prevents her from having premarital sex—and a vehicle to instil dominant societal values.

In YA literature then, conventions dictate that “sex is more to be feared than celebrated” (Trites 85), and the genre “is as often an ideological tool used to curb

teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is" (Trites 85). This concern pervades the critical field, as seen in C.J. Bott's article, "Why We Must Read Young Adult Books that Deal with Sexual Content". Bott aligns her approach with Trites' suggestion that "Some YA novels seem more preoccupied with influencing how adolescent readers will behave when they are not reading than with describing human sexuality honestly" (85). Bott assesses a range of texts that she believes may offer value to teenage readers in a litany of negative repercussions for engaging in sexual activity. In her analysis, she affirms certain gender stereotypes and behaviours, praising texts that show punishment for such characters, despite advocating for realistic sexual content in YA to inform and assist teenage readers. Bott is representative of the concern that led to the valorisation of didactic and moralising texts above those with a more celebratory or normalising tone.

Approaches such as Bott's highlight the fact that females who experience or seek sexual pleasure challenge Western gender norms, and thus need to be controlled or repressed in order to maintain dominant social constructions and ideals. Many contemporary texts make a concerted effort to depict girls with realistic sexual desires, coming into conflict with the overarching patriarchal notions that dictate girls be responsible, virginal to the point of abstinence, and chaste in their desires. Authors must negotiate this space, superficially acknowledging female desire but ultimately relegating their female characters to traditional gender roles. This is seen in dominant trends that populate commercially successful YA literature. Relationship dynamics that reflected rape culture or strict gender roles have been normalised; stalking is now sexy. Stalking itself is intrinsically linked to power and control. The romantic hero of Becca Fitzpatrick's *Hush, Hush* (2009), Patch (who later states that his ideal woman is "vulnerable" [34]), begins his relationship with the protagonist by outright stating that

he has been stalking her: “I take pictures... I’ve got quite a collection going of an eZine columnist who believes there’s truth in eating organic, who writes poetry in secret, and who shudders at the thought of having to choose between Stanford and Yale” (13). Our protagonist Nora is intrigued, which Fitzpatrick establishes as a normative reaction, rather than an unusual one. It appears that stalking is now acceptably represented as an expression of romantic interest rather than cause for concern or a restraining order.

Possession, and the Paranormal as Normal

Initially, my critical research focused primarily on urban fantasy and paranormal literature. The creative thesis was also intended to be based within this same space, examining the trends dominating the field and working with or against them. Ultimately, I realised that the fairy tale was a far better vehicle for my exploration of key ideas, emerging quite organically as a crucial narrative frame, but elements of the paranormal still remain. In the reader’s initial introduction to the demons, the text draws on elements of the supernatural, adhering to common tropes of paranormal fiction.

While urban fantasy or paranormal literature may not appear as definitively as first expected in the final creative thesis, I would be remiss without acknowledging their significance in the formative process of exploring and developing major themes such as the supernatural in/human, possession, magic realism, and the standard narrative devices found within the genres. Texts such as Sarah Rees Brennan’s *The Demon’s Lexicon* trilogy, Sarah McCarry’s *Metamorphoses* series, Holly Black’s *Modern Faerie Tale* series, and Laini Taylor’s *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* trilogy were key creative influences, their styling, tone, and interpretation of the genre shaping my work.

Elements of both genres emerge in certain plot elements, bridging the space between the fairy tale and reality.

Paranormal tropes and narratives regularly mimic or parallel the everyday experiences of teenagers, where paranormal creatures come to symbolise an emotion or experience. Parallels are often drawn between the first experience of intense desire to the seductive and often taboo attraction of the vampire, which is evident in *Twilight*. The indestructible feeling of being a teenager mirrors the strength of an immortal creature, although the meeting of the two may cause the human to question their vulnerability. The werewolf is often representative of or catalysed by puberty (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver 16)—as I read it, specifically male puberty, the change or development to an almost alien new body, complete with increased body hair, increased aggression, or intense desire. Rees Brennan offers a fresh take on these parallels, deconstructing the archetype of the bad boy in YA fiction by revealing her protagonist's traits as dark and brooding, prone to violence, and a difficulty in managing or comprehending his emotions to be a result of his true demonic nature.

Joni Richards Bodart explores the role of the supernatural in YA literature, addressing both the paranormal and urban fantasy sub-genres in *They Suck, They Bite, They Eat, They Kill: The Psychological Meaning of Supernatural Monsters in Young Adult Fiction* (2012). Bodart discusses the parallels between adolescence and the supernatural monster, noting their shared existence in a liminal space:

They [adolescents] live in the same kind of space that vampires, zombies, shapeshifters, and all the other monsters live in—between the categories, at the boundaries, on the threshold, never completely in one world or another... Teens are standing at the boundary between childhood and adulthood, part of them in

each world... Meeting these monsters and recognizing their similar situation allows adolescents to identify with them, and perhaps learn how to be comfortable on the borderlines until they are ready to step into the adult world. (Bodart xxvii)

As a genre and thematic construct, urban fantasy can be read as a symbol of the intersection between the real world and fictional, the same liminality that the teen experiences. The genre is stylised on the edge of each world, the steel and grit of the city meeting the fantasy world. Taylor, McCarry, Black, and Rees Brennan's manipulation of setting in urban fantasy influenced my approach to navigating a setting that balances and blurs the distinctions between worlds, particularly the world-building of folklore and myth blended with contemporary reality that McCarry depicts in the first novel of the *Metamorphoses* series, *All Our Pretty Songs*. My creative thesis draws on elements of the urban fantasy, but is set in suburban Australia, and as such could be cast as (sub)urban fantasy. The bush becomes a pivotal setting, a liminal space between the 'real' world experienced by Lucy, Kate, and Morgan, and the fairy tale stories that run parallel to them. The bush is the space where the two can meet, and co-exist, as mostly seen through Lucy's interactions with the dead girl in the bush. This girl is the repository of stories; as Lucy's relationship with her develops, the bush begins to bleed over, with the fairy tale excerpts interweaving with the main storyline. In its construction, the bush acts as a bridging space, connecting past, present, and future, and cycles of stories and voices. This extends to the demons: lost, denied, or stolen voices and stories manifesting in the girls, voices coming from the bush.

The demons in my novel are multi-faceted in their construction, offering multiple readings and developing alongside the girls' maturation and engagement with a

wider world. At first, they appear as harmful, violent entities that possess all girls, a literal interpretation or manifestation of the voice in your head. They symbolise the pressures, social constructs, and expectations surrounding girlhood, a toxic internal voice turned against them. Ultimately, it is revealed that they are the voices of the women before them, silenced, repressed, buried, or lost women desperate to be heard. The demons allow me to explore control in YA literature.¹⁸ In this section, I look to several key paranormal texts that engage with this trend of control in heteronormative relationships, and explore how I have approached it in my own work.

Following the trend of heterosexual relationship structures popularised by the *Twilight* series, many texts have presented a supernatural male love interest courting a mortal human female. This dynamic of male/superhuman, female/human is fundamental to understanding the power balance at play—the male is always superhumanly superior, strong, immortal, and otherwise ‘special’. Each enacts extreme binaries of gendered behaviour, made acceptable by the life-or-death world of paranormal fiction—being physically weaker and often the target of the superhuman’s enemies casts the woman as the ultimate damsel in distress and her partner as protector and rescuer. His being equipped to protect her means he must protect her from all aspects of danger, even her own bad choices. Thus, he is given authority, and the female welcomes the relinquishment of her autonomy and agency. This is romanticised and eroticised—male dominance and control becomes a point of desire for the female, to the extent where several texts enact rape fantasies or non-consensual sex acts as thrilling to the protagonist, and, presumably, the reader.

¹⁸ I drew on Rees Brennan’s manipulation of the conventional depiction and understanding of demons in urban fantasy, not for her particular rendition but her approach and intent in repurposing conventions to offer a critique of the genre, here a deconstruction of the ‘bad boy’ in YA fiction.

In paranormal and urban fantasy literature, themes of power and control manifest as supernatural possession, where possession culminates as the pinnacle of control within the genres. It becomes a literal enactment of intangible forms of control, and a form of rape. The genre allows the reader to see how all-encompassing these modes of control can be. That this is so commonly sexualised, a loss of control of mind, body, and soul presented as desirable, perhaps indicates the particular influence shaping these ideals. Invariably, this appears as a male—often a love interest of the protagonist—possessing the female protagonist. Possession is a common trope of the paranormal and urban fantasy genres, and regularly intersects with sexual desire and intention. *Swoon* (2009), *The Mortal Instruments* (2007), *Ink Exchange* (2008), and *Hush, Hush* (2009) all feature a male possessing a female, more often than not his love interest. I focus on two major texts, *Hush, Hush* and *Swoon*, as case studies, and refer to *The Demon's Covenant* for an alternative depiction.

There is irony inherent in constructing scenarios of sexual desire under these paradigms of appropriate feminine desire and control, that in order for these acts to be thrilling when they do occur, it must be first set up that the girl does not want or consent to these invasions of her body and mind. The desire is constructed in the refusal, the forcible nature of the act. Desire and pleasure are taboo for women under this construction; in experiencing a further loss of control as a man forcibly initiates a sexual or physical encounter, she is able to experience it through the thrill of the taboo, while remaining a 'good' girl¹⁹ in her passive resistance. It is in this space that the author is able to negotiate sites of female sexual desire. The girl adheres to appropriate and expected behaviours, despite any desire or interest; it is her partner's forceful invasion

¹⁹ It is no coincidence that the female protagonists I focus on in this chapter, Nora and Dice, remain virgins; Nora until her wedding night three novels later. Despite Sin wreaking havoc through the town with his sexual exploits, he continually refuses to have consensual sex with Dice—she alone must remain the unsullied 'good girl', held above all others.

and dominance that grants her permission to feel pleasure, precisely because she *hasn't* given permission. It is outside of her control, and so she cannot be blamed for any loss of self-control.²⁰ Female characters are able to escape repression and experience physical pleasure only if they do not consent or if it is not their choice—and thus the rape fantasy becomes a necessity in these contexts for female character to explore their sexuality whilst remaining 'good' girls. These narratives suggest that a lack of consent is negated by the experience of pleasure.

Swoon, by Nina Malkin, presents possession as form of rape, as well as literal acts of rape, although the narrator never recognises these cases for what they are, mirroring the dynamic constructed in *Hush, Hush*. The protagonist Dice's cousin Pen is possessed by male ghost Sin, who is out for vengeance against the descendants of those who killed him; later, he takes a physical form as a golem. Sin supernaturally drives the townsfolk to extreme lust in the hopes that it will bring about their destruction, invading their minds and effectively forcing them to give in to their unspoken, heightened desires. Sin orchestrates much of this through Pen, possessing her and using his complete control over the virginal teenager to perform explicit sex acts. This is entirely against her will, yet is never commented on—instead, the protagonist only displays jealousy at the loss of Sin's attention. Sin mentally and physically rapes Pen throughout the novel in a manner that is romanticised. Malkin constructs possession as directly related to sex and pleasure, as Sin regularly possesses women, invading their minds and stimulating them to orgasm against their will.

²⁰ Under the conventional reading of the text *Hush, Hush*, by refusing Patch's advances and being forced to endure them against her will, Nora is able to experience pleasure and desire while remaining 'good', awarding her the moral superiority to shame her romantic rival for her alleged promiscuity. The text places pleasure as a result of passive resistance as acceptable; pleasure experienced by females demonstrating agency and autonomy is vilified.

Despite presenting several scenes of female sexual activity, desire, and pleasure, the text always places Sin as the controller and instigator. In an early scene, shortly after being possessed, Pen tells Dice about how empowered she felt by taking charge sexually after engaging in oral sex with a partner in a lake: “I remember... I took off my top—I took it off, not him. And I felt so free...and then, when I reached for him, too big and swollen for one hand, I thought: *I did that, I made him like that*, and it flooded me with power. I wanted to lead... you know, not just follow” (31-2). This scene suggests the subversion of conventional power structures surrounding sex, where Pen realises her own power over men, reverting the act to a power dynamic rather than a consensually empowering and fulfilling act. However, Malkin constructs female dominance or sexual agency as dangerous and unnatural: the moment the girls discuss ended with Pen attempting to drown her partner.

In keeping to the mythology of the golem, Dice, as the creator of Sin’s physical form, has complete power and control over him. However, this proves to be superficial, as Sin tells Dice there are “limitations to your dominion over me” (194), and she rarely attempts to exert this power. Under the confines of the text and its paradigms, power and control can only be experienced under strict conditions that reinforce the dominant ideals. Similarly, female characters are allowed to be sexual, but they are villainised and punished for it. While Pen is seemingly shown to revel in her newfound sexuality, Malkin reminds the reader that she is only feeling pleasure and desire through Sin’s will. As such, the only way Dice can wield power is by keeping to the paradigm constrictions of the text.

The novel is marketed as titillating, described on the book jacket as “Sexy and deeply seductive... *Swoon* will make your every sense tingle!” With its graphic, regular

descriptions of sexual desire and acts, *Swoon* could be considered a liberating text for female YA readers. Sin's actions allow female characters to step outside of repressive gender roles, and explore active sexual behaviour and empowerment, but this depiction is only superficial. Malkin reminds the reader that only men can be the instigators or controllers of sex, and that the only way women can experience sexual pleasure is through what is essentially rape. This can be read as a reflection of the wider social perspective that denies women pleasure and agency in sexual relationships, and drives the rape fantasy.

In Becca Fitzpatrick's *Hush, Hush*, Nora Grey, the protagonist, falls in love with her attempted murderer, Patch, a fallen angel. He and the antagonist of the novel, Jules, both have the ability to possess Nora in body and mind, and each uses it to torment her. The physical and mental possession is described in terms that invoke sexual assault, an act of forcible, unwanted penetration: "Without warning, a rush of power coursed into me. The foreign force expanded to fill me. My body was completely vulnerable to Patch, all my strength and freedom forfeited as he took possession of me. Before I had time to realize just how much this loss of control terrified me..." (Fitzpatrick 373). Nora demonstrates significant fear and an implied lack of consent—she is not prepared for this complete invasion of her body, and her vulnerability is emphasised. It is telling that Nora also mentions a loss of freedom in the act, emphasising she has completely lost control over her body, and, in part, her mind. In an earlier scene, the antagonist—who it should be noted, acts in ways that directly parallel those of Patch, the supposed love interest—mocks Nora's weakness and the ease he had in controlling her. The dialogue evokes rape and victim-blaming, making her complicit in her own loss of control: "Do you want to know the best part? You could have blocked me out. I couldn't have touched your mind without your permission. I reached in, and you never resisted. You

were weak. You were easy” (363). This also alludes to the rape fantasy that is constructed throughout the text—that secretly, Nora desires control to be taken from her, as she cannot give it up herself due to her status as a ‘good’ girl.

The text could appear as problematic in that while these themes appear overt throughout the text, they are not commented on, with Fitzpatrick refraining from an authorial intrusion to place them as negative. Neglecting to define these behaviours as evidence of unhealthy relationship dynamics may appear a crucial oversight, particularly in a post-*Twilight* world, where when men kiss women against their will, the act is applauded by the victim’s father. While these behaviours appear to be overly romanticised by Fitzpatrick, I propose a reading that places the text as a commentary and critique on an insidious rape culture. By reading the actions of the love interest and antagonist as similar, and acknowledging the constant sub-textual discomfort and social conditioning Nora experiences but does not seem to recognise herself, the reader takes an active role in recognising and dismantling toxic romance conventions. At times, Patch and the villain could be one and the same, the language used in scenes of violent distress mirroring that of scenes of romantic or sexual attraction; by allowing the reader to infer this themselves, didacticism is removed, and the reader becomes complicit in understanding these relationships and seeming romanticism as reflective of common societal ideals.

In *Hush, Hush*, an overt and unchallenged rape culture is a paramount feature of the text as Fitzpatrick constructs a fantasy based in the reality of the world as she sees it, inadvertently or intentionally²¹ depicting an active process that attempts to normalise

²¹ While I personally understand Fitzpatrick as reading the characters and actions in her series as romantic and desirable, I have chosen to separate the author from the text. I see it, regardless of author intention, as ultimately offering an alternative—or even dominant—reading of the text as a critique or commentary of the insidious process of constructing and reinforcing rape culture. Perhaps this is made

rape culture. Not only is male aggression and physical and sexual violence commonplace in the text, it is also trivialised. The main love interest, Patch—who struggles throughout the book with his desires to murder Nora for his own gain—is verbally aggressive to Nora from their first encounter. He makes sexually lewd remarks that clearly upset her, and implies that he is stalking her. Patch continues to sexually harass Nora, and she approaches her teacher three times to ask him for intervention: in response, she is told she is overreacting. Even when placed in situations that feel instinctually uncomfortable or threatening, Nora still feels obligated to be the ‘good girl’, to avoid hurting her—one of two—stalker’s feelings.

Even when Nora does speak out, expressing her discomfort over Patch’s consistent harassment, her community of teachers, friends, caregivers, and family all coach her that Patch’s behaviour is normal, romantic, and sexually attractive. There is no one there to hear her, presenting a society where this behaviour is normalised. This stark realisation that no one is able to help Nora—or understand that they should—and Nora’s subsequent capitulation, brings the reader to recognise the pervasive dominance of rape culture, and perhaps see it mirrored in their own society. The characters in the story may not hear her, but the reader does. *Hush, Hush* follows one girl being indoctrinated into a patriarchal society that demonstrates a rape culture, and it is in all the little, everyday moments that are instantly recognisable to the reader that the text truly exposes this systematic, cultural ideology as a reflection of the reader’s own world. The construction of a rape culture does not come in overwhelming acts of violent rape and total possession, but rather, slowly leads Nora there by a dismissal by her teachers; a fond laugh from her mother as she explains it is normal to be afraid of your

even more powerful if we consider it as unintentional by the author, reflective of just how pervasive certain societal ideals can become.

partner; envy from her friends over her romantic interest's admitted obsession with her. By the time Patch is violently pinning her against a bed in a "whorehouse" (Fitzpatrick 298) of a motel and threatening to kill her, she has been led to understand his actions as passionate and thrilling.

The romanticisation of rape culture culminates in a scene of rape in *Hush, Hush* that, under these structures, is presented as titillating. When Nora's physical safety is threatened, she is depicted as aroused and fearful, implying a correlation between the two. The social conditioning Nora has experienced throughout the novel causes her to rationalise the experience, despite having serious reservations about staying there: "It wasn't the smartest or safest arrangement... What choice did I have, right?" (284) When she tells Patch he can't "force" her to stay there, he indicates that he can, and will. It emerges here that his intention has been to kill her. He "wrestled me into the bed in an instant. He pinned my arms above my head... There was controlled anger in his face, dark and simmering" (297). Nora tries to escape, but finds herself trapped. Her cries for Patch to let her go are ignored; he is described as "lethal", and she as "fighting back tears. My whole body thrummed with an emotion so foreign I couldn't name it" (298). This emotion could be read as either intense fear or arousal, suggesting a natural or expected connection between the pair already demonstrated throughout the bulk of Nora and Patch's interactions. The scene indicates that Patch's actions and Nora's responses are sexually charged, with the language used connotative of fear, aggression, and desire, positioning the scene as rape fantasy without actual consent. Patch positions Nora's body, "wrestles" and "pins" her down against her will (297) to her great distress, threatening to "take over" (300). The scene is startling in its stark violence, and in its intended stylisation of simultaneous sexual tension arising from this very aggression. *Swoon* also features numerous scenes of sexual assault and rape, yet they are never

acknowledged as such, so pervasive is the lens that frames a clear lack of consent as titillating. The reader can acknowledge the embedded violence in the language and structure of the scene, dismantling this problematic lens.

These themes of possession, control, and sexual harassment appear to be presenting overwhelming evidence of a pervasive rape culture in the text, one that touches upon the smallest factors of conditioning to the most overt. Fitzpatrick has created a text that can be read as a powerful commentary on the invasiveness of rape culture, depicting how complicit various structures of society are in working to normalise harmful modes of behaviour. By never commenting on these scenarios as dangerous, distressing, or even uncommon, Fitzpatrick presents a context where girls struggle to have their voices heard and ultimately capitulate to what they are told is the norm. The reader becomes an active agent in deconstructing the subtext and values of the text, gaining an informed degree of control as they understand *Hush, Hush* and texts like it to be narratives of sustained abuse masquerading as romance.

The characters are restricted within the text's paradigms; as in *Swoon*, their actions in relation to and against these paradigms are in part metered by their existence. There is only so much space for the character to move, resist, or change their landscape. This may appear disheartening; but it is realistic, and in turn allows the reader to reflect and consider their own larger scope of paradigms they operate against and with daily. Dice never speaks out against or reports Sin; perhaps because she does not know how to, or even think to—who will hear her? *Hush, Hush* shows a girl being coached into submission throughout the novel; *Swoon* shows a girl already there as the novel begins. However, I would also like to introduce alongside this argument the possibility of a quiet resistance, or sort of survival. These characters cannot speak out or defeat the

paradigms that permeate their societies on their own, but they can work within them to resist and survive, a strength in itself.

When it comes to their sexuality, fiction of this kind indicates these characters never had control in the first place, or if they did, it must be taken from them. However, while these texts actively construct sexual violence as exciting and thrilling, there is still space for the reader to question and challenge this. This is seen in *The Demon's Covenant* by Sarah Rees Brennan, which directly addresses the flaws of possession in a romantic relationship. During this text, Nick and Mae make the mutual decision to have Nick, a demon, mark her for possession in order to protect her. The nature of possession in the text means a close connection is formed between figures, where the possessed wishes to please her possessor, and to be near them. Mae then makes the decision to abstain from a sexual or romantic relationship with Nick while he has the power to control her, as her desires become clouded and she can no longer differentiate between what she wants and what he does:

Her mark wanted her to do what Nick wanted, whatever that was, to be close to him. This was the way demons possessed you. They made you want to give in. If there had ever been a possibility of her being with Nick...it was gone now. She could never be sure if she wanted to be with him or if the mark was drawing her to him. She could never let herself be controlled like that. (Brennan 326)

Mae constantly questions the level of emotional and physical control Nick holds over her and actively attempts to assert her own identity as separate from him. Rees Brennan still draws on the sexual attraction commonly linked to possession, but positions it as necessary to be questioned, as Mae acknowledges the potential loss of agency she may face and chooses not to continue pursuing her feelings for Nick while

marked. Mae also chooses to be marked for possession: “‘I asked you to do it,’ she said, her voice hoarse. ‘I chose to do it. That makes a difference.’” (Brennan 306)

Rees Brennan constructs possession as consuming and dangerous, acknowledging a loss of control and power. When Nick marks Mae as “his” for possession, the act is violent and painful, strongly reminiscent of the acts of rape seen in other texts. It also bears similarities to earlier moments of sexual tension in the text in its construction. Despite the relationship being initially consensual, Rees Brennan acknowledges possession as an inherently violent, controlling act.

Nick dealt her a clean, swift blow, shoved her right off the bed and into the wall. He held her there with his arm hard against her throat, cutting off half her air supply. She was trapped between the wall and his body; he’d moved after her without giving her a second’s chance to escape, and she struggled suddenly, wild and hopeless. [...]

The pain was blinding: she couldn’t see, it pulsed through her in waves, and each wave shuddered through her whole body, each wave was worse than the last. And the pain still wasn’t as bad as the wild animal panic. She knew now why animals chewed off their legs trying to get out of traps. She would have done anything to escape.

And it wasn’t all pain. It wasn’t all fear. And she was helpless against that, too. (Brennan 304-5)

In this scene, Mae experiences extreme fear, panic, and pain—as well as potential arousal in the final line. The scene mimics earlier scenes of desire between the pair, merging conflicting conceptions of pain, fear, and pleasure while using language

with connotations to rape. Here we may draw again on the notion of the taboo or denial creating desire. Rees Brennan also acknowledges that sexual desire can be complex; that despite her experience of extreme fear and pain, or even because of it, Mae can still feel pleasure and desire. Sexuality is not a black and white concept, and Rees Brennan presents the reader with a message that it is natural or understandable to experience simultaneous, seemingly conflicting emotions—or that pleasure and desire may in fact be constructed by fear and pain. This also speaks to the larger appeal of the ‘bad boy’ love interest across YA literature, a figure who is all the more enticing for his illicit or dangerous persona.

Despite the fact that Mae chooses this, the scene is still constructed as being performed against her will as Rees Brennan acknowledges possession—or more specifically, a loss of agency or control—as inherently dangerous and harmful. Mae is trapped and terrified, and later works doggedly to resist the effects of being marked, reclaiming her agency where possible. It is significant that Mae is never actually possessed by Nick, and the one time he forces her to do something against her will, it nearly destroys their relationship. Rees Brennan constructs possession as threatening to one’s personal agency and life, yet allows her characters spaces for agency and resistance—in choosing to be marked, and in actively working to maintain their own sense of control.

Possession versus Self-Possession

My approach with the demons in my novel was intended, in part, to work within these paradigms and subvert them, focusing on the ideals and variances behind the concepts of possession and self-possession. Possession, we have seen, is a violent, dominating,

and controlling act. It invariably occurs as males possessing females, often for their own protection. The act itself connotes penetration and invasion, with strong textual links made to rape. Control, or a lack of control, naturally emerges alongside stories of possession, and each of these characters often express fear over their lack of self-control. As with my work with retold fairy tales, I work from the bones of what has come before, acknowledging the conventions and messages of the trend and working within that same space. In my creative work, I strive to uncover and explore the guiding paradigms behind these depictions, and offer an alternative construction.

The demons in my novel are initially intended to reflect the conventional narrative of possession in YA literature: they are harmful supernatural creatures that have some level of control over the girls. The demons are an intangible internal force that must be repressed and controlled, much like female sexuality—they are seen as a threat, rather than something that could in fact strengthen them or offer value. Each girl has a different relationship with the demons: Lucy sees herself as a demon herself, a changeling; Kate struggles to control her demon, and herself; and Morgan's demon develops as an entity that is a part of her, separate but linked.

As the text continues, these separate plotlines are developed, becoming more distinct. Kate is the most preoccupied with her demon, internalising self-hate. I chose to use first-person narration for Kate so as to give a detailed insight into her mind, and to mark her as easily relatable for the reader. While her narrative is the most focused on the conventional representation of the demons, I made the active choice to never actually show the demon's voice speaking to Kate, clouding her reliability. Despite her growing obsession with the demon, Kate never directly interacts with it, and it could be interpreted as Kate's own mind or thoughts. She says she has always heard her demon,

rather than hearing it from puberty like most girls, and it speaks in her voice, sounding like her own thoughts: “The worst thing about my demon is that when it speaks to me, it uses my voice. Whisper or shout, or reasonable thought, it is always in my voice. If I’m not paying enough attention, I might not notice which is which, where my thoughts started. My demon is tricky and cruel, and it does not like me. But sometimes I find myself agreeing with it. Sometimes, we have a lot in common” (56).

Kate’s development and growing distance from the reader can potentially act as a betrayal. Kate is initially set up as the primary focaliser and protagonist of the three girls; the most rational, acting as the everyman for the reader to connect with as guide to the narrative. She struggles with her demon, and as she becomes ‘wolf’ to combat this, she moves away from the reader. Her narration becomes less rational and reliable. Alternatively, she can be read as a sympathetic character, as the reader may empathise and share in her conflicted experience of femininity. The reader can begin to question Kate’s unrelenting belief in what she has been taught about demons, the details she repeats throughout the text yet rarely questions.

While establishing a solid mythology or foundation for the demons in the text, they were also intended to be somewhat inconsistent to the reader, as each girl has a different relationship with their particular demon. Lucy and Morgan offer the most insight here; indeed, it could be argued that Kate has never had a demon at all: that “the demon” is just a name for that insidious voice of self-doubt. Lucy implicitly reveals the demons’ true mythology in her interactions with the girl in the bush and the girl in the mirror: a girl with a changing face with a million stories to be told, that need to be heard. For Morgan, the voice is a force of love and understanding, and by being ‘possessed’ by it, so to speak, she is able to completely self-possess herself. Again,

much of this construction is dependent on the reader's interpretation. The text is designed to slowly reveal alternative understandings of the voices Kate calls demons, changing the expected narrative and revealing it to be more complex. This culminates in one of the final sections of the text, as the demons speak in a contradictory chorus.

The demons follow the traditional narrative of possession in paranormal fiction, but entirely subvert it. Their existence relates to self-control, the power a repressed minority can carry, rather than a sexualised struggle for power and dominance between genders. In embracing and understanding the demons as silenced voices, the girls can see them not as an enemy, but as a sort of sisterhood. Again, this crucially links to self-possession—power and control over one's own mind and body. While the girls are initially taught that the voices in their minds are demons, they come to resist this message, one that has coached them to hate their bodies and to act in particular ways. Here, a trope that traditionally harms is reconfigured into a sign of strength and growth.

Morgan, in particular, acts as a vehicle to explore themes of possession and self-possession. Her demon allows her the opportunity to understand and claim her own identity. She rejects it, before coming to depend on it and even love it. She is not controlled by the voice, but comes into a degree of self-possession instead. Here I shift away from possession as a stimulant for sexual desire in a heterosexual relationship, or as an aggressive and dominating act of control. Morgan's relationship with her demon or voice most relates to the trend of possession, actively subverting it. The narrative approaches the connections of possession to sexual activity and rape, culminating in a scene that also serves as a response to sexual taboos for women in YA literature.

Female masturbation, and female pleasure, are largely absent from YA literature. Katy Stein notes that “female masturbation—and especially teen female

masturbation—still inspires anxiety and even fear... depictions of female teen masturbation remain rarities within the genre. When it does appear, it generally remains situated within traditional, adult-centered values intended to contain and ultimately control teenage sexuality” (415). If sexuality holds power, then masturbation must be a significant form of power in its own right, one that accumulates power through its transgressive nature. Female desire threatens larger social codes (that a female could feel sexual pleasure at all; that she could achieve satisfaction without the aid of or even for a male partner; that female masturbation could be normalised), and so it must be restricted. Stein also notes that when female masturbation is present in YA, it is a case of experimentation to prepare for a male lover; to please him, or to appear more experienced. Rarely, if ever, is it normalised or celebrated as a healthy expression of sexuality the way it is in texts with a male protagonist.

Swoon, for instance, presents a scene of female masturbation and orgasm off-screen, but this is established as Sin’s actions. Even the initial mention of the act is reinforced as a masculine pursuit: “I swear, I was convinced it was strictly a guy thing. Only now...” (Malkin 92). At first, Pen’s experience and Dice’s subsequent reaction to her cousin’s gleeful admission could be construed as a moment of enjoyment; there is no indication of shame in this scene, although Malkin does draw on the taboo implications to cast Pen’s actions as out-of-character and scandalous. Later, this moment is revealed to be Sin’s doing as he possesses Pen; not only that, but he is awarded responsibility for Pen achieving her first orgasm (Malkin 124).

Morgan’s storyline was developed to approach this theme of possession, and its sexual connotations, but represent it in an affirmative light, reclaiming it. Morgan’s experience is self-driven; while she shares a body and mind with a voice, their decisions

are entirely consensual and pleasurable. The voice is both Morgan, and not-Morgan, a distinctive entity of its own; likewise, Morgan is both the voice, and not the voice, simultaneously. As Morgan comes to accept the presence, the connection and comfort in her own skin develops until Morgan is essentially 'whole'. The concept of possession is altered to become a site of self-possession instead, extending to the issue of sexual activity. Rather than be forcibly controlled in an act of male dominance or an extension of rape culture or fantasy, Morgan engages with a self-possessive approach of self-pleasure. The act is both a homosexual relationship and an act of masturbation—both transgressive actions under the general scope of YA, and celebrated here.

The representation of possession shifts to a depiction of self-possession while affirming the central themes of sisterhood and mapping. When they hear and understand the stories of those who went before them, they gain a better understanding of themselves and others, and their place in the world. A network of support is formed in this understanding, as cross-generational—and cross-genre—voices merge to form a tapestry of experiences for characters and readers to navigate and contribute to. Lucy gains comfort from knowing other girls have experienced her story, and from finding an escape in theirs; she uses this space of story to finally face her own. Morgan experiences an increased sense of self, portraying perhaps a more openly healthy example of this dynamic. The narrative expands beyond the space of the self-contained text to reach the reader themselves, as they mirror the moment of realisation the girls experience as they recognise the demons as sisters, aunts, mothers, and grandmothers, not enemies. The possession the girls are taught to reject is in fact self-possession, as they listen to the stories of silenced women; as they embrace this, they step outside of patriarchal means of control and reject shame and self-hatred, finding new forms of empowerment.

A Wolf in a Girl's Clothing

Kate's dual narratives were an opportunity to navigate the relationship between control and self-control in more detail. In utilising and manipulating genre conventions and tropes across paranormal literature, contemporary realism, and the fairy tale, I explored alternate readings of identity and experience that were conventionally placed as oppositional binaries to the dominant narrative.

The traditional werewolf narrative casts the werewolf as inherently masculine.²² Werewolves are, by and large, men (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver 41), the savagery of the wolf symbolising the animalistic core of hyper-masculinity. Lycanthropy is a form of power, and ties the man back to his more primitive side, connecting to and valorising male power and dominance. It is often linked to the onset of puberty—the appearance of body hair, a rise in aggression, an increase in appetite and virility. Embracing his werewolf self allows the man to not only gain significant power under a patriarchal model, where strength, anger, and excessive body hair are signifiers of masculinity, but to celebrate hyper-masculinity.

Writing the female werewolf, then, immediately casts the character as the monstrous Other²³; monstrous and deviant not only for her lupine nature, but in that her

²² The etymology of the word 'werewolf' itself excludes women from the narrative, as the prefix 'were' stems from the Old English male qualifier 'wer' (Santos; Guilford).

²³ See *Breaking Dawn* and *Ginger Snaps*. It is notable that this Othering does not necessarily occur as a direct comparison between the male and female werewolf when they appear together as seen in *Breaking Dawn*, but as a reflection of the larger corpus and conventions of the narrative. The female

supernatural disposition does not align with traditional perceptions of either the beast or femininity.²⁴ Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver note that while some popular contemporary texts do feature the female werewolf, “they are more usually characterized as rare or aberrant” (41). Women are incompatible with lycanthropy; idealised femininity dictates that a woman be delicate, passive, controlled, and certainly not hirsute. June Pulliam notes in *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction*, “While the male werewolf typically exhibits behaviors that are well within the parameters of normative masculinity, the female werewolf represents heightened monstrosity because her lupine body puts her outside of conventional femininity, confirming patriarchy’s worst fears about women’s relationship to nature” (73).

Those texts that have explored the female werewolf present a unifying narrative, drawing on this connection to nature and femininity. In film and literature, the female werewolf has continually been used as a metaphor for puberty, menstruation, and sexual desire. The wild violence of the untamed animal reflects the dangerous nature of female desire, the potential risk if they do not control their deviant urges. The waxing and waning of the moon reflects the monthly cycle or “curse”. Texts such as *Beauty Queens*²⁵ (2011) by Libba Bray, *Liar* (2009) by Justine Larbalestier, the short story “Boobs” (1989) by Suzy McKee Charnas, and director John Fawcett’s film *Ginger*

werewolf is often, if only initially, depicted as far more monstrous and abhorrent than the male werewolf in their distinct narratives.

²⁴ Meyer epitomises this gendered dynamic through the character of Leah Clearwater in the *Twilight* series, who appears as “the only female werewolf in the history of forever” (Meyer *Breaking Dawn* 318). The series focuses on her status as aberrant, ‘freakish’, as the mythology dictates only men can shift. Within the series, motherhood and reproduction are depicted as the essence of femininity; after her first change, Leah becomes menopausal, and she reads her body as monstrous, defective: “The horror—what *was* she now? Had her body changed because she’d become a werewolf? Or had she become a werewolf because her body was *wrong*? The only female werewolf in the history of forever. Was that because she wasn’t as female as she should be?” (Meyer *Breaking Dawn* 318).

²⁵ While Bray does not directly refer to Mary Lou as a werewolf, her storyline and characterisation uses language and tropes connotative of the conventional werewolf narrative, implying an interpretation of the wolf in her ‘wild-woman’, and as such, I include her as a representation of the female werewolf.

Snaps (2000) all directly connect lycanthropy to female puberty and sexuality. A girl is bitten, violently attacked, or comes into her genetic right as wolf in her early teenage years, in a situation often directly linked to menarche. The wolf is immediately connected to either puberty or sexual experience—the violence and blood of the act is often depicted in a glorified, sexual manner, a transition from one stage to the next. It is a shocking, primal act of bloodletting that demonises the female body. Her body, once menstruating, is quite literally monstrous. Menstruation is positioned as inherently unnatural to idealised femininity, and yet entirely animalistic, somewhat of a contradiction in terms. As Pulliam writes, “the female werewolf is incapable of suppressing the feelings and physical traits that are considered incompatible with conventional femininity” (73). Lycanthropy thus creates opportunity for women to redefine femininity, placing themselves outside normative conventions and gaining power or revelling in their outsider status.

As Pulliam notes, the existence of the female werewolf “confirm[s] patriarchy’s worst fears about women’s relationship to nature” (73). The supposed wildness of the werewolf is mirrored in the wildness of nature—both natural, undomesticated states that threaten to overrun their man-made controlled submission. There are long held stereotypes regarding women’s connection to nature, which are embodied in the female werewolf (Pulliam 73-4) as she becomes the literal wild woman, uncontrollable by man.²⁶ Not only is the pre-existing connection of menstruation to the lunar cycle and the earth reinforced through the physical transformation into an animal, but the concept itself plays into man’s fear of nature (Bodart 77-8), mirroring a fear of subversive or

²⁶ Bodart posits that society’s fascination with the werewolf relates to its embodiment of “our oldest fears: separation from nature, fear of the wild places...” (77). She notes that man’s fear of the wolf is a rejection and fear of the wild and primitive that may exist inside the average man, “behind the reasoned, civilised face with which we face daily life” (77). Bodart also refers to the werewolf as a manifestation of “our fear of the unknown... in the world” (78). The werewolf is a forced reversion into nature, which is equally “ancient and savage” (Bodart 77) in the face of civilised society.

sexual women. As seen already, a fear of women acting outside of expected boundaries results in the perceived need to exert control over them; the wild woman is dangerous, her bestial side heightened or symbolised in the werewolf. Likewise, nature, while beautiful, carries elements of fear and danger in its uncontrollable state. Wild women and wild nature must be tamed for men to exert control over each, making them manageable and dominatable. In the werewolf, this connection reaches a natural climax, as woman and nature become one. Their connection allows them to completely step outside of man's restrictive boundaries, refusing to be tamed. From a certain ontological lens, nature is unknowable, as is the subversive woman; in the alliance of the two, man loses his sense of control over each, in turn threatening to disrupt social structures and ideals.

I find a connection between Australian narratives of the child lost in the bush and the many Western werewolf narratives here. In my revision of the lost child narrative, the female child navigates patriarchal social structures and ideals through the protective space of the bush. I invert the lost child trope so that the bush becomes a place of sanctuary, a physical and mental landscape females can survive in. To a patriarchal perspective, it retains its threatening nature of the unknown/unknowable, as here it has become women's space. Girls may escape or learn to navigate patriarchal landscapes by finding sanctuary in the bush, and hearing the stories of the other girls who survive there, no longer lost. Girls are able to escape the demands placed on a performative femininity, forging a new degree of control and completing the shift from deviant female child to deviant woman. It is in this space that Kate completes the ongoing theme of the lost child narrative already established by Morgan and Lucy; she is the lost child struggling against the demands placed upon her femininity. Her conflicting desire to both resist and conform to dominant ideologies places her at risk of

enacting a deviant femininity, ironically through her extreme interpretation of female beauty and power as found through thinness, which comes to border on the grotesque. Her werewolf state offers a new possibility for the lost child—she is not refused entry to womanhood and kept the perpetual child through premature death, although both readings indicate this possibility. The wolf figuratively threatens a literal humanity; the eating disorder is literally life-threatening. Here, the lost child doesn't have to ascribe to a socially appropriate femininity. As wolf, she is able to exist in and alongside the bush, a liminal being who can be both adult and child simultaneously without punishment or sacrifice. This too draws upon the nature of transplanting and adapting fairy tale, as the wolf is not native to Australia, yet in my work finds opportunities to exist alongside its adopted land. The transplanted wolf is at odds with narrative tradition and landscape, an introduced predator. The adapted wolf may draw out elements of magical realism, acknowledging its history while finding new roots in its introduced land. It may find itself out of place in the dominant landscape, much as Kate does with dominant modes of femininity, but still coexisting in the bush.

Initially, lycanthropy is presented as a curse, or infection in the female werewolf narrative: inherently negative, despite the wild joy she may take from it. Once placed outside of traditional femininity due to her status as wolf, the female is able to access alternative experiences previously thought impossible, finding power, strength, desire, and anger. It is significant that such a core part of the werewolf's mythology dictates anger imbuing power and strength; a female can not only experience rage, but gain power from a transgressive emotion.

While these texts do engage with notions that place female sexual desire alongside violence and death, implying that if uncontrolled, the three become

interconnected, there is still potential to read these scenarios as revolutionary. Lycanthropy can become a space for women to gain power through their sexuality, which actually aligns well with the dominant dichotomies of power. Women who step outside of their constrained roles are regarded as deviant and Other, a threat to main structures of power. This is often represented through their heterosexual relationships and sexual activity that occurs after their transformation, where they risk killing or consuming their male partner. The very fact that these women are seen as a threat acknowledges their latent power—they can unseat the system by writing themselves as powerful, sexual, and outside of man's control. These stories dictate that the female werewolf must be destroyed or controlled to restore order, tacitly confirming their potential for disruptive power by trying to deny it.

Rather than be forced to control their physical desires, these wolf-women can emerge into a distinct space where patriarchal power is acknowledged, but where they can still claim their own form of power. They reject conventional strictures of femininity, and gain power through acting against assumptions that place them as weak, passive, and controlled. This narrative is found in *Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray, *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier, and “Boobs” by Suzy McKee Charnas.²⁷

That their power comes from their sexuality affirms the patriarchal system while allowing women to both rebel against and confirm it. Female sexuality poses a threat to men, and thus, the woman who seeks consuming pleasures for her own purpose becomes monstrous, a risk to all men who encounter her. The loss of control—its presence indicating idealised feminine behaviour—is positioned as violent, dangerous,

²⁷ *Blood and Chocolate* (1999) by Annette Curtis Klause offers a less subversive, more conventional interpretation of this narrative, with a focus on patriarchal and heteronormative relationships, yet it is important to note that her werewolf protagonist Vivian is a confident, sexually assertive, and strong young woman who revels in her wolf skin.

and titillating. In all of these scenarios, the female werewolf is free from guilt, and the pleasure inherent in these actions can be read as joyful or freeing; the respective protagonists from *Liar*, *Beauty Queens*, and “Boobs” derive great pleasure from ‘giving in’ to the wolf, despite the warnings they have been given. Sexual desire, violence, and consumption are all linked to lustful pleasure, the three often represented as one and the same in a gory display: as Micah, the protagonist of *Liar* notes, “Sex is beastly, animal, out of control. The feeling I get from fucking is not so far from how I feel when I hunt, when I bring down prey. The two are too close” (Larbalestier 243). Sexuality, pleasure, and desire may be positioned as unfeminine initially, yet these women are able to gain power and experience pleasure through their status as werewolf and Other. Many texts celebrate this, even if they ultimately end in the woman’s literal or figurative demise: see *Ginger Snaps* and *Liar*.

While control remains at the heart of these narratives, it is worth considering different degrees of control. Some texts present self-control as necessary, lest women destroy the world with their carnivorous desires; others use the werewolf narrative as an allegory to explore the fearful restrictions placed on women’s sexuality before ultimately revealing them to be ill-founded or a tool of maintaining power, as in Bray’s text *Beauty Queens*. It is significant that what is seen as a *loss* of control by a patriarchal institution of power can also be read as complete and satisfying control over the self by the female individual, as she transgresses social norms and finds that she likes it. What’s more, her deviance offers her power, the chance to revel in her own sexuality and gain power from it, rather than be controlled for it.

Patriarchal institutions of power dictate that female sexuality, desire, and pleasure is either absent—naturally diminished compared to men—or a dangerous force

that will harm the woman and those around her if she cannot control herself. This constructs female sexuality as deviant, a risk to the holders of power, and thus powerful in itself. By depicting female sexuality as something that needs to be controlled unwittingly affords it the power to disrupt, and so these same institutions simultaneously limit and empower women through their construction.

Mary Lou in *Beauty Queens* embodies this notion of disruptive power through sexuality in a depiction of the relationship between the wild woman and nature. After experiencing sexual desire and pleasure for the first time, her mother explains to her that she carries the curse “that had plagued the women in her family for generations. Wild girls, they were called. Temptresses. Witches. Girls of fearless sexual appetite, who needed to run wild under the moon” (Bray 161). Her physical changes into one of these creatures evoke the werewolf.²⁸ Her narrative is centered around control and sexual desire, as her mother coaches her to “numb [her]self” (Bray 161) to her desires and Mary Lou strives to be one of the “good girls” (Bray 161), wearing a symbolic purity ring to contain the transformation. When Mary Lou experiences pleasure, it is naturalised, competing with dominant themes of demonisation of explicit female desire: “An intense pleasure rippled through her. How alive she felt! How good and right it was that her body could do this!” Pleasure and desire are connected to nature through the symbolic wolf: Mary Lou describes herself as “a caged beast finally allowed to hunt” (Bray 167), with Bray writing, “In this state, she was not afraid of the jungle, but part of it” (167) and “I paw at the ground and run under the moon” (Bray 169).

“Boobs”, a short story by Suzy McKee Charnas (1989), parallels menstruation and puberty with the werewolf narrative in a tale of revenge. McKee Charnas writes

²⁸ “Her teeth seemed longer and sharper, her lips as full as cabbage roses and just as red. Her hair was a corona of curls. A light growl-purr clawed its way out of her mouth from somewhere deep within, startling Mary Lou with its insistence” (Bray 159-60).

Kelsey as wolf and Kelsey as menstruating teenager as equally monstrously grotesque; yet the text is ultimately a tale of female empowerment against patriarchal confines. Kelsey reads her period as monstrous, repulsed by the changes to her body; reactions consistent with the messages from her social surroundings. She sees it as a betrayal by her body, a severe inconvenience, but by the story's completion gains physical and emotional power and satisfaction from the changes to her body.

When the protagonist begins the school year after becoming well-endowed over the summer, classmate Billy Linden begins to bully her relentlessly, calling her "Boobs". Kelsey resents the changes she is experiencing through puberty, feeling as though she is becoming weaker:

I mean, I always used to wrestle and fight with the boys, being that I was strong for a girl. All of a sudden it was different. He hit me hard, to really hurt, and the shock sort of got me in the pit of my stomach and made me feel nauseous, too, as well as mad and embarrassed to death.

... Hilda sat on the couch next to me and patted me. She goes, "I'm sorry about this, honey, but really, you have to learn it sometime. You're all growing up and the boys are getting stronger than you'll ever be. If you fight with boys, you're bound to get hurt. You have to find other ways to handle them."²⁹ (McKee Charnas 479-80)

Kelsey hates her experience of puberty, and the bullying she endures; on the first night of her period, she transforms herself into a wolf. McKee Charnas positions

²⁹ This final line invokes the notion of working within paradigm constraints to resist or gain power. There are implications of using one's sexuality as a device of manipulation; Kelsey later enacts this in a subversive manner as she promises Billy he can do "whatever he wanted" to her breasts if he stops bullying her at school. After luring him out to a park, she devours him in her werewolf form.

this as something Kelsey has done, that she is responsible for the change, deviating from the conventional myth of lycanthropy being imposed on the character through an attack and infection.

The physicality of the transformation to wolf can be connected to trauma. Girls are made monstrous in a transformation that breaks bones, warps the body, engaging the grotesque. This acts as an extension to the trauma felt by the changing body through puberty, but here it is inverted to be a process of vitality and ecstasy.³⁰ The female werewolf may then inflict trauma on others, as we see in “Boobs”. For Kelsey, menstruation is tied to violence and pain, a physical and emotional trauma. Her period comes the day after the school bully hits her, leaving her with a bloody nose. She views each appearance of blood as humiliating and repulsive:

I had to go home with a bloody nose and lie with my head back and ice wrapped in a towel on my face and dripping down into my hair [...]

The whole thing was so messy and disgusting, worse than she said, worse than I could imagine, with these black clots of gunk coming out in a smear of pink blood—I thought I would throw up. That’s just the lining of your uterus, Hilda said. Big deal. It was still gross.

And plus, the *smell*. (McKee Charnas 480)

Blood later becomes cathartic for Kelsey, as she kills and eats Billy. She is in complete control of herself as she does so, again averting the standard werewolf narrative, where the wolf and man are somewhat distinct from one another. In a stark contrast from her earlier repulsion, she consumes blood and flesh, stating, “The blood

³⁰ *Blood and Chocolate* inverts the physical trauma of transformation: for Vivian, the change to wolf is sensual and pleasurable, bordering on orgasmic.

gave me this rush like you wouldn't believe" (489). Consumption and desire become a source of joy, rather than self-restraint and repression.

The werewolf as a metaphor for uncontrolled female sexual desire is explored in Larbalestier's *Liar*. Protagonist Micah is an unreliable narrator and compulsive liar. As the novel begins, Zach, the boy she has been secretly dating, is killed, seemingly by a pack of wild dogs in New York City. Throughout the text, Micah consistently tells and retracts lies; it is entirely up to the reader to judge the truth. Midway through the text, Micah tells the reader she is a werewolf. Larbalestier constructs Micah as compulsive, deviant, and potentially dangerous, aligning her representation of sexuality, pleasure, and desire along these same boundaries.

Micah initially denies having slept with Zach, before briefly adding, "I didn't kill him either" (Larbalestier 116). Sex and murder are linked, merging pleasure and consumption through carnal desire. Micah later reveals she and Zach did have a sexual relationship,³¹ and her discussions surrounding sex acknowledge shame and binaries of expected feminine behaviours. For Micah, sex and murder are the simultaneous loci of pleasure and shame; due to the emphasis on violence and subsequent link to sex, desire becomes more taboo. That her first sexual relationship is a secret from her family and schoolmates, and ends in Micah being implicated in Zach's gruesome death, casts her sexuality as dangerous. One reading of the text indicates Micah being responsible for Zach's death as a direct result of the entanglement of her carnal desires.

Like Kelsey's, Micah's menstruation is linked to her change into a wolf. She controls the change by taking birth-control pills. She explains that the change can come on rarely by "going into heat, rutting" (Larbalestier 185). For this reason, her parents

³¹ The text never confirms which version of events is real.

ban her from having a boyfriend; sexual desire is too closely linked to the desires of the wolf. Micah finds her period painful and repulsive: “I hate the whole thing: menstruation, pills, blood. So. Much. Blood... They [her periods] used to be awful. Lie-in-bed-sobbing-with-pain awful and an ocean of blood: instant anemia once a month” (57). As menstruation signifies lycanthropy, a girl’s period becomes monstrous, again casting her as animalistic and the Other.

While she resents the change, and being different from her schoolmates, Micah revels in being a wolf. It affords her the chance to engage in the taboo, embracing her desires. Being a wolf makes her strong and brave; like Kelsey and Mary Lou, she becomes the thing to be feared, rather than be fearful. It allows them all to transgress social boundaries surrounding femininity, a necessity for Micah, who rebels against normative femininity.³² As a girl, she is further Othered by her refusal—or inability—to present as or act stereotypically feminine. Being a werewolf allows her to shift gender and engage in masculine behaviours, enjoying them.

Power is inherent in the wolf, but it can only be accessed when she understands her own desires and body, giving in and revelling in the wolf instead of repressing it. Despite the messages that surround her that shriek of containment and self-control, the female werewolf ultimately finds joy outside of these confines. A loss of self-control finds freedom from repressive gender binaries, realised in the ecstasy of the hunt.

Pulliam writes, “The contemporary trope of the werewolf as a feminist repositioning of woman as man’s Other is also uniquely able to elucidate how teen girls

³² SJ Miller reads Micah as gender nonconforming, an argument that certainly holds validity. Micah appears more comfortable as a male, and at one point tells her classmates she is a “hermaphrodite”. This reading denies the Micah as werewolf narrative—here, it is a symptom of extreme denial and desperation to answer her gender dysphoria. It potentially reinforces stereotypes of transgenderism or gender nonconformity as a sign of mental illness, instability, and violence.

struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal culture” (75). This applies to each of the characters discussed here, and could be read as a key motif of Kate’s narrative. She shifts into the werewolf narrative as a means of control; control over her own body and mind, her demon, and her desires. Kate sees the wolf as a way to destroy the monster that is her demon, not acknowledging their similarities. Like the demons, the werewolf is commonly feared and misunderstood within its own context. Each of these texts presents the female werewolf as wild and free, unchecked and potentially sexually dangerous (whether to society for her deviant desires, or to others if based within the horror genre). Kate’s narrative explores the control implicit in the genre while subverting the conventional discourse.

Kate is constructed to explore two narratives: that of the female werewolf, and an eating disorder narrative. I found that the two storylines overlapped significantly, particularly with their focus on menstruation, female identity, desire, and the female body. From a biological standpoint, the narratives offer several parallels. The connection to menstruation, already established in female werewolf texts, is developed in the change to the physical body; like Kelsey’s, Kate’s periods cease as she moves into the dual narratives of wolf and anorexia. Many of the symptoms and effects of eating disorders are reflected in the werewolf: an increased focus or obsession with food, disordered eating, and physical changes. As Kate continues her journey, she becomes leaner, or stronger, as she reads it. She begins to wear long or heavy clothing, hiding her changing body. She develops a fine fur over her body, which could be read as a sign of lycanthropy, or as lanugo, the excess hair that begins to grow over the body in the late stages of anorexia as the body attempts to keep itself warm without fat. The cessation of her periods could stand in as symptomatic of her as a werewolf, drawing on the lunar month that reflects menstruation, and signifying her nearing completion into

wolf—or they could be a result of her starving herself, a common change during anorexia.

Both narratives are concerned with control, or more specifically, self-control, which acts as the central theme. Starving herself affords Kate a clarity and control she had never experienced before. Each scenario deviates from or inverts the conventional narrative, which implies a loss of control that would cast Kate as a slave to her illness or the pull of the wolf. Instead, Kate is arguably able to gain and wield complete control over her body.

The inversion of control in an eating disorder narrative was in part inspired by Susan Terris's *Nell's Quilt*, and Beth Younger's discussion on female body image in eating disorder texts in *Learning Curves*. Younger argues that, unusually, the titular character of *Nell's Quilt* is able to gain strength, power, and agency from her eating disorder. This does play into the general rhetoric that surrounds perceptions of the female body in YA literature, where thinness is privileged and assumed as the idealised norm. Younger notes that as white is assumed as the default race for characters when nothing else is specified, so is thinness for body type: "If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a 'normal'—read 'thin'—weight" (Younger 5). Likewise, while thinness may not be overtly specified but will be assumed, Younger notes that "Women and girls who are heavy are *always* identified as such" (5). Thinness is a locus of power for young women in YA literature; as Younger notes, "Female power, sexual and otherwise, is connected to a thin, lean body" (15). Kate gains significant power from the control she exerts and gains from a thin body, and her physical changes are integral to the dual narratives of werewolf and anorexia. Kate

finds these experiences as expressively positive; whether the reader agrees is dependent on their personal interpretation of the dual narratives.

Like several texts that feature a female werewolf, the story maintains a degree of ambiguity. Kate's status as anorexic is never made explicit in the text; her plot line is kept intentionally ambiguous. She is in a liminal space—both simultaneously werewolf and starving girl, entirely one and the other. The audience can read her story as symbolic, absolute, or ambiguous, as was intended. This liminality extends to werewolf itself—both animal and human, beast and (wo)man. The ambiguity that surrounds Kate's storyline allowed me to deconstruct ideals on female body image, power, and physicality. She feels empowered by her choice, yet it appears to be influenced by her preoccupation with body image, arguably in part formed through socialised conceptions of female beauty. Under the model argued by Younger, Kate must be thin to experience power and control, yet she potentially faces a loss of each through her very *need* to change, and the way she chooses to do so, as wolf or girl.

Interestingly, if we choose to focus on the werewolf narrative as the sole reality for Kate, her agency in the matter is diminished. For werewolves of both genders, their supernatural shift is largely out of their control: the female werewolf's origin is far more often connected to the onset of puberty over the violent attacks that precipitate the male werewolf's change. For each, the change is either inevitable, or by another's choice; entirely out of the victim's hands. Kate's shift to wolf is somewhat placed upon her, but it is important to note that she does recognise it, and chooses to pursue it. This structure makes the reader complicit in dismantling conventions of agency, choice, and control to decide for themselves how and where Kate fits within the genre and normative femininity, given the established preoccupation with her body image.

Conventional approaches to eating disorders naturally explore control. The girls who have eating disorders are exerting extreme control over their bodies, but these texts ultimately present them as a slave to their illness, their self-control an illusion.³³ We can certainly read Kate as maintaining this narrative—or we may see her story through an alternative lens, heightened by the opportunity to read dual narratives.

Kathleen Restifo notes in her analysis of the portrayal of anorexia in YA literature that it is common for anorectic characters to connect food to other physical desires, stating “food has become symbolic of wants and desires which they feel ashamed of or guilty about, and which they have given up hoping for” (214). She places these desires as wild, animalistic, describing characters as “like a starved animal” (Restifo 213), her language constructing connotations to the werewolf. As seen from Judy Blume’s formative 1975 novel *Forever...* to *Hush, Hush*, physical appearance and weight often appear as reflective or indicative of a character’s sexuality and personality. Female characters who are overweight are consistently portrayed as promiscuous, and are implied to be out of control; they cannot self-regulate their desire for food nor sex. Characters and readers are coached to repress and restrict their desires, keeping their appetites in check lest they transgress social boundaries of beauty and acceptable behaviour and become ‘monstrous’ in their sexuality and appearance. Restifo also draws parallels to the seeming risk of losing control that would place a female outside of a normative (read: acceptable) femininity as a werewolf or anorexic, writing that in several texts, “The author implies that the eruption of one impulse—rage—leads to the eruption of another—hunger. Loss of control in one area leads to loss of control in the other” (213). These emotions and desires are not feminine according to a dominant

³³ See *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson; *Mercy, Unbound* by Kim Antieau; *Just Listen* by Sarah Dessen; *Cut* by Patricia McCormick.

patriarchal narrative, yet they demand to be felt. It is the intersection between the fear of loss of control, the perceived need for control, and the joyfulness in abandoning a restrictive control and embracing the manifestation of transgressive desires that guides my work.

Kate's experience with lycanthropy and anorexia link body image to sexual desire. Her dreams as a wolf are routinely connected to acts of violence, but also of sexual desire. Kate does not know if she can resist consuming Ben entirely; the thought thrills and terrifies her. Much of the language used in scenes of sexual desire is inspired by or comes from the rhetoric used in eating disorder narratives and memoirs, the concepts mirroring and merging almost inextricably. Her thoughts of consumption create parallels between food, power, and sexual appetite, as well as a fear of her own inert power: that she could destroy the world with her hunger, her wants and desires. Desire is made physical, tied to the body and externalised as much as it is usually internalised. This too reflects the patriarchal concern that female desire must be contained and controlled, lest it become destructive; characters are coached to fear their own desires. This physicalised desire manifests in the werewolf, and the misunderstood fear that follows it in conventional horror narratives mirrors the fear that accompanies female sexuality. When characters finally cross this threshold, they find the potential of newly-discovered power exhilarating, an opportunity to embrace rather than reject.

Pulliam notes, "YA werewolf fiction exposes the pressure that teen girls face to be conventionally feminine, a subject position that necessitates they eschew their desires for sex, and sometimes even food, while simultaneously stifling the resulting justifiable anger" (73). Being a wolf allows Kate the opportunity for not only control, but anger, hunger, and rage, all traits she had been denied and self-denied to ascribe to

appropriate gendered behaviour. The fantastical domain of the werewolf allows her to take on a grotesque femininity, and to revel in it. For the first time in her life, she can find a source of complete self-control, and somewhat conversely, she can embrace hunger—the desire to devour a lover, that she will consume the world. The threat of that is a buried thrill, the acknowledgement of the latent power, the possibility that she could. Accessing the wolf allows her to access parts of herself thought forbidden—physical sexual desire, a sort of freedom.

Pulliam writes that the female werewolf is marked as monstrous for her desire for sex and meat, which are “antithetical to normative femininity” (74). She may be the pursuer in sexual encounters, and may have an aggressive appetite; as Mary Lou says, “I feel *so much*—it’s like I want to eat up the world” (161). Kate’s association with the werewolf allows her to acknowledge her desires, although she still fears them. It also offers her complete control and autonomy over her body; she recognises her strong sexual attraction to Ben, and is able to limit the influence of her demon. At times, her journey through the werewolf narrative is the reverse of the standard mythos, as her sense of self-control only increases as the text continues. She is able to simultaneously be in complete self-control, and experience the rush of letting go, in a parallel to her psyche as a girl with an eating disorder.

While several fictional eating disorder narratives were studied, including *Mercy*, *Unbound* (2006) by Kim Antieau, *Cut* (2000) by Patricia McCormick, *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson, and *Just Listen* (2006) by Sarah Dessen, Anderson’s 2009 novel *Wintergirls* had the most influence in approaching the eating disorder narrative. *Wintergirls* tells the story of eighteen-year-old Lia, an anorexic who, years previously, made a pact with her best friend Cassie to be the “skinniest”. Cassie dies alone in a

motel room as a complication from bulimia as the novel begins, and the subsequent story follows Lia's struggle to deal with her former best friend's death and her own continued descent into anorexia.

The novel is stark, and deeply confronting; Anderson does not shy away from the brutal reality of anorexia and bulimia. Lia's actions are harmful and compulsive, and she suffers great mental anguish, self-harming in order to "let the badness and the pain leak out" (Anderson 166). Lia sees her starvation as a sign of great strength, believing that she is brave for denying herself food. This perspective is echoed in both of Kate's stories, as sick girl or wolf: that starving herself affords her power, and is an indication of her strength and self-control.

Like the female werewolf, puberty marks a time of drastic change for Lia, invoking repulsion of and betrayal by her body. It is a painful experience for her: "Puberty stretched me on the rack until my arms and legs popped out of their sockets and my neck almost snapped. This new body smelled damp. The butt jiggled, the thighs looked a mile wide in tights, and a soft double chin bubbled up [...] The growth spurt ripped my internal organs to shreds. The pain woke me, screaming, almost every night" (165). Anderson connects puberty to torture, in language reminiscent of the werewolf's transformation. The human body is pathologised and made grotesque; Lia regularly describes her body as oozing or bubbling yellow fat, demonstrating an extreme distortion of her sense of her body. The text is structured to emphasise this pathologisation, with chapter headings designed to look like medical clipboards and the chapter number formatted as a measurement of weight. Lia identifies herself by her body: "I am the space between my thighs, daylight shining through" (19). While Kate's narratives are meant to be ambiguous and equally possible as truth, I did intentionally

establish an early focus on her body image. No matter how the reader interprets her story, it is clear that Kate does value herself by her body. She assesses her friends' bodies and struggles with notions of feminine beauty. As she stops eating and grows thinner—curiously, moving away from that same idealised feminine beauty—she feels more in control, which is ultimately the core of her desire to change. In reading her as a female werewolf, we see Kate's changing form as a further shift away from the feminine; in a way, she is able to leave concerns over not adhering to an idealised femininity behind as she effectively abandons restrictive femininity in favour of an identity that allows freedom and strength in its healthy posthuman form. Rather than be judged for her body by the opposite sex, Kate is unable to be assessed at all, and obtains power from this shift in the discourse. In keeping to the traditional werewolf narrative, she may access the joy of destruction, being able to destroy or consume others—and is mirrored in the eating disorder narrative in self-destruction.

It is only as Lia and Kate shift away from the healthy human body into a different space—one that is placed in a supernatural sphere, as wintergirl or werewolf—that they are able to escape pathologisation. It is not uncommon for eating disorder narratives to cross into magic realism; both *Mercy*, *Unbound* and *Wintergirls* demonstrate this, blending contemporary realism with elements of increasing fantasy, potentially to indicate the sense of unreality that the girls experience. It allows the reader to experience the characters' mindset and eating disorder in a structure that imitates the disjointed reality of the illness. *Wintergirls* also features a strong fairy tale motif woven throughout the narrative. Allusions are drawn repeatedly to fairy tale imagery, stories, characters, or themes by Lia. Her fractured mental state and grief over Cassie's death manifests in her references to the fairy tale, which itself is emphasised as a space of liminality. Lia is caught on the threshold between two worlds. As Cassie tells

her, “You’re not dead, but you’re not alive, either. You’re a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You’re a ghost with a beating heart” (Anderson 195-6).

Lia describes her eating disorder as a form of fairy tale: “We held hands when we walked down the gingerbread path into the forest, blood dripping from our fingers. We danced with witches and kissed monsters. We turned us into wintergirls” (Anderson 99). The imagery is simple but effective, drawing on the darker side to fairy tales. This more grim reading of the fairy tale mimics Lia’s shift from child to teenager, or “real girl” (29) to wintergirl: the sanitised fairy tales that bear happy endings are revealed to be dark and twisted as Lia loses her childhood naiveté. When Lia sees Cassie in her coffin, the passage describing her reaction blends the contemporary reality and the fairy tale. She calls Cassie “Sleeping Beauty”, before mentioning her acne scars and nose piercing. Anderson avoids romanticising the image of Sleeping Beauty in death that so many contemporary texts do³⁴; the preceding line of this passage is “My turn to stare. My turn to rape the dead” (86). This not only refers to the sense of invasion Lia feels is being forced upon Cassie’s body, but refers to the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale, where the titular character was raped while in her cursed sleep. Early on in the text, Anderson even makes a direct connection between eating disorders, fairy tales, and the werewolf: “She offered herself to the big, bad wolf and didn’t scream when he took the first bite” (22). The eating disorder is turned into a wolf, a masculine aggressor that could be read as reflective of the societal (and thus patriarchal) pressures that contribute to poor body image in women. The line also bears reference to a scene of sexuality and consent, as Cassie “offers” herself, body and soul. I also drew connections between Kate and the “Red Riding Hood” (ATU 333) story; as she moves further into her dual narratives of wolf and sick girl, several versions of the “Red Riding Hood” tale are told, interspersed

³⁴ See *Rosebush* (2010) by Michelle Jaffe.

between Kate's narration, casting Kate as both the girl in the red hood, and the wolf. This could play into Anderson's representation of an eating disorder as the big, bad wolf: for Kate, she arguably *becomes* her eating disorder, embodying the wolf and the disorder simultaneously.

McInally calls the feminine body in YA "a site of conflict, oppression, transgression and desire" (169). Younger notes that many of these ideologies surrounding weight and body image issues are "deeply embedded and barely acknowledged" (2) in YA literature. The exploration of the dual narratives of anorexia and the female werewolf allowed me to approach, challenge, and redefine this, concurring with McInally's statement but exploring alternatives, where this becomes a site, too, of resistance and empowerment in the transgressing boundaries of normative femininity. The act of being a female werewolf or anorectic is conventionally read as an act of simultaneous transgression and punishment for that transgression, often resulting in death of humanity, the spirit, or mind. By re-examining and reconfiguring them, deviant femininities are no longer shameful, but powerful,³⁵ as characters and readers find opportunities for female empowerment outside of the norm, and against it. They forge entirely new spaces of femaleness, redefining it as complex and contradictory while destroying binaries.

³⁵ This is not to say that anorectic tropes or narratives are positive, but that deviant femininities can be. In depicting anorexia in this manner, the stigma associated with the disorder is lessened. It exposes the structures and demands that can lead to the development of similar disorders, and challenges conventional demands on femininity.

Fairy Tales: Trauma, Silencing, and Sisterhood

Once upon a time is a misnomer. There is no such thing as once upon a time when it comes to the telling of fairy tales, not least because each tale has countless variations. I argue that the fairy tale occurs across time and throughout time due to its inherently transmutable nature, and in the act of telling inherited, learned, and adapted stories, where each version may differ slightly from the next. Despite the agelessness this narrative trope signals, the fairy tale is often as modern as it is ancient as it constantly adapts to meet the demands of the reader and teller. Fairy tales do not occur in any *one* particular time, but constantly across mediums and households. Fairy tales are by no means universal, although they hold a significant place in the popular public consciousness. The continuing power of the fairy tale may be attributed to its ability to interweave through different societies and cultures, thus speaking to many readers and providing a relatable foundation of story and experience. Different variations of tales appear across cultures, some entirely unique to a country or region.

I argue that each time we begin a ‘once upon a time’ we are drawing on these experiences—a tapestry of lives, voices, histories, and stories—just as much as we are weaving our own narratives back into them. The fairy tale could be read as the voices of our ancestors. As such, the idea of time becomes flexible when it comes to the fairy tale, a circular ouroboros rather than a straight linear path from Once Upon a Time to Happily Ever After.

Early stories offered an overt moral lesson at their completion. Angela Carter offers secondary, counter narratives in her translation of Perrault’s fairy tales; her

particular translation adds layers of meaning and alternative interpretations of old tales. These stories can form a sort of map with which to navigate, a series of lessons to live by. The reader learns ways to navigate a certain set of social rules—arguably those formed by a European patriarchal world, given the intent of many morals inscribed in older variants. We could read this as controlling or repressive, inscribing binaries of gendered behaviour—or, potentially as an act of survival and recovery, assisting women in how to negotiate these spaces and survive, or even possibly thrive.

It is these notions—that the fairy tale occurs across time and outside of time, stories of survival being passed on—that guided the approach I took in integrating the fairy tale throughout a contemporary YA text. In merging the fairy tale with contemporary YA fiction, authors find potential to reclaim and reinscribe fairy tales with gender-positive practices. I explore this through the representation of trauma and a subsequent recovery system made possible by the inclusion of fairy tale motifs in these hybridised texts. The discourse between genres allows an entirely new space to be formed—not only as an opportunity for trauma recovery, but in mapping out codes of surviving, and the development of the time/space narrative.

Adaptation in Fairy Tale

Fairy tales have long been some of the most influential texts in the childhoods experienced across many cultures; they are often the first stories a child is exposed to (Zipes, Kuykendal and Sturm). Kuykendal and Sturm write “These tales, many hundreds of years old and found in countless incarnations all over the world, are a basic part of the intricate layering of stories and influences that perpetuate and inform the cultural norms surrounding the world the child lives in” (38). The fairy tale remains a

central influence and root of narratives across genre and medium, shaping stories and characters. This is particularly evident in YA literature.

Adaptation is a natural part of the fairy tale; as Angela Smith notes, the fairy tale “did not remain static. Each generation and nation has reshaped and retold these tales to reinforce the dominant beliefs of their time and place” (1). Producers manipulate the narrative style or plot elements of a fairy tale, or use old tales as inspiration for new stories, where recognisable plot elements come into play. Many academics have used key fairy tale characters or stories as metaphor: Sleeping Beauty is often woken up when discussing feminist theory. Authors of YA literature have regularly experimented with fairy tale tropes, characters, and narrative devices to varying degrees of success, such as with the retold tale where the text is essentially contemporised while maintaining the overall narrative (see Alex Flinn; Marissa Meyer) or with an alternative narrator to present the ‘true’ version of the story (see Donna Jo Napoli; Robin McKinley; Gregory Maguire; Neil Gaiman). Jack Zipes categorises the retold tale as either duplicate or revision (*Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* 8); many of these texts, while offering a complex narrative, still play out the expected plot faithfully, and would thus be classed as duplicates. I find interest in the revised text, one that manipulates or subverts common fairy tale motifs in order to extract an entirely new take on an old tale.

Given its almost immediate and lasting influence on readers, it is important to acknowledge that the fairy tale has been widely accepted by scholars to be a moralising agent, intended to coach and instil the values of the dominant ideological positioning of a society (Tatar; Lieberman; Zipes; Dworkin). Fairy tales reflect the values and attitudes of their sociocultural context; while a wide variety of fairy tales offer a diversity of

voices and experiences, the texts that survive tend to be the ones that engage with and repeat the values of a society, forming a closed circle that perpetuates these attitudes until they become normalised in the public consciousness. Zipes notes, “the most telling or catchy tales were reprinted and reproduced in multiple forms and entered into cultural discursive practices in diverse ways so that they became almost ‘mythicized’ as natural stories” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 1). The representation of gender in the fairy tale, once something dictated by context, has become quite ingrained as a norm in contemporary imaginings. While fairy tales do not universally repress and denigrate women, it is undeniable that gender norms have been perpetuated by the notion of the damsel in distress, the prince as the active hero. There are many texts from a range of contexts that do depict a more equal standing between genders; however, the influence of this closed circle of perpetuating social ideals means that the overriding perception of gender in fairy tale casts women as the passive, vulnerable damsel,³⁶ and men as dominating hero.

Marcia Lieberman has famously stated:

millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales... We must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of ‘femininity’ found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. (385-95)

It is undeniable that the fairy tale holds enormous significance in shaping perceptions of gender, as well as influencing social behaviour. The retold or adapted

³⁶ Or, if she transcends accepted boundaries of age or beauty, she will be the malevolent witch or stepmother envious of a younger, prettier version of herself.

tale, therefore, has great potential in working with this influence to challenge these gender norms or social conventions.

Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm note that simply reversing gender in a fairy tale, as was popular in the 1970s, does not afford agency or empowerment to women; that this practice “does not result in a feminist fairy tale, but a fractured one” (40). Retold fairy tales achieve a feminist reading by engaging with, rather than rejecting, the tropes of the fairy tale and deconstructing or subverting them to offer alternative meaning.

This has evolved into the adaptation and integration of fairy tale into YA literature. Authors draw on the nostalgic power of the fairy tale to create new stories, or retell old ones. Gail Carson Levine, Robin McKinley, and Margo Lanagan are a few among many authors who have consistently engaged with the fairy tale in their writing, reimagining the tropes and manipulating the genre in order to continue the evolution of the fairy tale.

Luthi believes teenager readers reach “a realistic stage during which one is ill-disposed toward fairy tales” (21-2). Yet many YA texts would disprove his statement. The fairy tale, true to its evolving form, has adapted and been adapted to form the inspiration or core of many commercially and critically successful YA texts. The teenage readership still wants to engage with the fairy tales of their childhood, albeit through a different lens.³⁷

³⁷ It appears that with its maturation in audience, the fairy tale has found its way back to its sexualised past, as authors produce texts that reincorporate sexuality into the genre. The story reaches full circle as sanitisation is stripped from these stories.

Trauma and Silence in the Fairy Tale

Fairy tales and trauma have always gone hand in hand, as perhaps is the nature of a genre that offers stories of children abandoned in the woods by their parents to starve. Physical and emotional violence is common, whether as punishment for immoral acts, a simple visceral enjoyment of violence, or as a by-product of a cultural context, particularly in regard to gender. Males also undergo trauma—Gretel is not alone in the woods—but while occasionally senseless, the enacted trauma often appears as highly gendered. Many variants of older texts depict girls being tortured, repressed, sexually assaulted, trapped, and killed for the sake of narrative development or as punishment for challenging a social contract for feminine behaviour: consider Bluebeard's wife, who almost loses her life for her curiosity, or the sister who is cursed for her laziness and rudeness to spill toads and snakes from her mouth when she speaks. At times, their punishment will result from an action not even their own, from a paternal figure: see Beauty traded or sacrificing herself to the Beast, Rapunzel trapped in a tower,³⁸ or the girl without hands from the eponymous tale. Even later sanitised versions of these texts still depict girls and women under siege, faced with grief, sexual violence, and a myriad of other traumas, and placed under strict binaries of gender. It seems that to be female in a fairy tale is to expect trauma of a physical, emotional, or psychological nature.

The traditional traumas seen in fairy tale texts can be read as indicative of the social status and contextual attitude toward women. By acknowledging these traumas in

³⁸ Later revisions of these tales transfer the blame from the father to his wife or daughter. In later versions of "Donkeyskin", it becomes the dying wife's fault for telling her husband to only remarry a woman as beautiful as she—her wish and his grief culminates in his incestuous pursuit of his daughter. Likewise, it is the wife's unreasonable cravings for a certain plant that leads the husband to be caught stealing from a witch's garden and promise his firstborn in repayment. Angela Smith details the deliberate shift in narrative through linguistics to place blame on the mother over the father, acknowledging it as a move to reinforce dominant ideologies of traditional gender roles in reaction to changes governed by gender politics (425).

their own retellings, rather than sanitising the text, authors are provided with a powerful platform to explore femininities, trauma, and their relationship with one another across modern and historical contexts. They can take previously repressive elements of a well-known tale, and redirect them to create spaces of empowerment, recovery, and progression.

In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth writes, “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). She notes in contemporary usage, the term trauma “is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). Trauma may be a lasting state of harm stemming from a physical, emotional, social, or psychological event; it may be a single moment or a lifetime of experience. In my engagement with trauma, I draw on Caruth’s discussion of trauma as not simply the act of experiencing a threatening event, but the ongoing act of surviving it (Caruth 7).

Many academics have noted the connections between trauma, YA literature, and the fairy tale. Cheryl Cowdy discusses self-mutilation as a reaction or coping mechanism from trauma, theorising that the YA genre’s depiction of the act is a direct result of its earlier consistent presence in fairy tales, acknowledging the ongoing influence the fairy tale has in shaping the YA genre. Moving outside of a literary critique, Armelle Hours discusses a psychoanalytical study where abused children were able to engage in healing practices by interacting with fairy tales. Steven Walker also highlights the use of fairy tales in aiding children’s recovery from trauma. Gyurisin notes that while trauma appears regularly and accurately in the YA genre, a subsequent

healing process is rarely depicted alongside it. She attributes this disregard of the healing process to the influence of the fairy tale on YA texts. Gyurisin also touches upon the benefits of bibliotherapy. Given that it has been widely acknowledged that children and teenagers read to not only experience stories different from their own, but more significantly, to see themselves and seek out answers in the texts they consume, it is important to recognise literature for young adults as therapeutic, and add to this corpus.

While several academics have noted the connections between trauma, YA literature, and the fairy tale, few have articulated the rising trend of reclaiming the fairy tale to offer respite and healing from trauma in YA. Zipes labels the fairy tale as “universal, ageless, **therapeutic**, miraculous, and beautiful” (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 1; emphasis my own). In acknowledging the potential the fairy tale has in encoding values and morals, as well as its history of depicting trauma, the genre and its interaction with YA literature can be engaged with as a site for subversion, to challenge ingrained or socialised values, and shape opportunities to recover from personal or social experiences of trauma.

The texts I discuss—the short story “Sharper than a Serpent’s Tongue” by Christine Johnson, the novel *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* by Alysse Near, and the short story “Bones” by Francesca Lia Block—all engage with fairy tale and ultimately create spaces through the revision of fairy tale motifs in a contemporary text to recover from inflicted trauma and source empowerment from structures previously seen as repressive.

In the YA fairy tale, common tropes of the fairy tale appear in a reimagined context, where the damaging impact of perpetuating certain values regarding gender is highlighted and deconstructed. The fairy tale has been noted for its punitive treatment of

girls who step outside their social bounds; the retold tale offers an opportunity for characters and readers to source empowerment. In these texts, a new liminal space is written where girls can acknowledge the patriarchal world they live in—but they can challenge it, and in fact live in spite of it. The retold, revised, or reimagined fairy tale allows these narratives of symbolic and literal trauma to play out in a manner where the same tools used to repress women are instead agents of empowerment.

Thematically, in the retold text, the fairy tale first acts as an opportunity to escape, a form of idealised nostalgia made physical. Characters and readers escape to these fantasy worlds in a form of denial, either to a literal world as in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*, or where the introduction of fairy tale motifs serve as protection or allow empowerment, as with “Sharper than a Serpent’s Tongue”. Characters—and readers—retreat into an urban fairy tale to recover from trauma: personal trauma, and the incidental social trauma of femaleness in a toxic patriarchal world, which often informs or leads to the personal trauma. The characters’ experiences with trauma, however, extend to the fairy tale, where it may appear as a symbolic means of exploring social issues. The character must decide to react within the fairy tale—they are still confined by the text’s limitations, but they can acknowledge and work against them until spaces for empowerment are exposed. At times under this structure, these limitations can be altered to offer freedom.

Acknowledging the varied and complex representations of women in fairy tale, these retold and revised tales use the wonder tale and its connotations to explore the connections between genres and contexts. They are able to use the cultural strength of the fairy tale as not only a platform on which to explore representations and experiences of gender, but a means in which to highlight and overcome embedded sociocultural

limitations and restrictions. Rather than be regarded as a solely regressive state, the fairy tale world offers new potential to recover from trauma and find the embedded strength. Its modernised hybrid state contributes to this new space, where the traditional story's potential to retrospectively apply empowerment, or suggest new reconsiderations to old tales, can be re-examined.

Johnson approaches this in "Sharper Than a Serpent's Tongue", a revision of "Toads and Diamonds" (ATU 480). The story follows two sisters, Clara and Dina, who live with their abusive, alcoholic mother. The stereotypical 'good girl', Clara, is sexually assaulted by her neighbour's grandson; the grandmother, in her role as witch/fairy, entreats her to silence, before 'rewarding' her submission. When Dina challenges this, seeking retribution for her sister's assault, her refusal to acquiesce to 'good' (read: passive and/or submissive) behaviour leads to her curse as punishment. Johnson uses the traditional structure of the text, a version of the good sister/bad sister tale, to explore how enduring cultural ideologies have contributed to shaping certain perceptions of female social behaviour, and how these beliefs can be manipulated to expose embedded expectations of femaleness. Her inversion of the good/bad dynamic and the introduction of fairy tale motifs allow the text to challenge social norms and overcome trauma, which takes the form here of sexual assault and a problematic home life. Johnson plays on the ingrained expectations the audience has of fairy tale, and the magical elements of the text are what aids escape from a traumatic situation. The text explores the patriarchal control that instigates gendered trauma and female silencing. "Sharper than a Serpent's Tongue" follows its predecessor "Toads and Diamonds" in structure and plot, and initially reads as a close retelling of the original text. The traditionally 'good' sister is rewarded by a witch with jewels and flowers falling from her mouth each time she speaks; the 'bad' one is cursed with toads and snakes.

On first read through, the reader is encouraged to sympathise with the “long-suffering” (C. Johnson 332) Clara over her sister’s lazy and selfish attitude. There is a clear inferring of behaviours here; Dina is presented as subversive, which is all the more heightened when juxtaposed with Clara’s archetypal wholesomeness. While outsiders describe Clara as “a sweet, optimistic good girl”, they label Dina “just like her mother. It wasn’t a compliment, since her mother was a drunk bitch who’d been born to fail” (332). One scene describes Clara as follows: “The light tangled in Clara’s blond hair, making her look like the perfect, shining angel everyone said she was” (332). From its onset, the text focuses on a larger social perception of character. These figures are not innately or organically good, as accepted by the reader in the traditional fairy tale, but their reputation as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is directly related to how others perceive them and continue to perpetuate this image. This indicates an unyielding social pressure controlling ideal feminine behaviour, which in turn can be read as an underlying cause of gendered trauma.

The main strength of “*Sharper than a Serpent’s Tongue*” is its revisiting of the original tale’s understanding of curse and reward, of good girl and bad girl. Johnson relies on the readers’ assumed sociocultural knowledge to manipulate expectations and fairy tale tropes to offer a discussion on the designation of the ‘good girl’ and ‘bad girl’, making the audience complicit in creating new possibilities and understandings, both retrospective and for the future. By using the template of a fairy tale, and relying on cultural familiarity, Johnson is able to create a new space out of the old to provide girls with the opportunity to experiment with identities that resist the norm. She demonstrates the potential harm of enforcing submissive behaviour, while exploring expectations of socially approved gendered behaviour, questioning the authenticity of the “good girl” archetype.

The original story presents the mistreated younger daughter as rewarded for her innate goodness and her passive obedience. This passive obedience is echoed in Johnson's tale: throughout the text, Clara, the 'good' sister, does what she is told, regardless of her own comfort with each scenario: "Clara did as she was told" (334). Clara's actions are not her own, as she obediently follows instructions. From the introduction, Dina is shown refusing requests and demands, resisting the passive obedience that Clara so powerfully demonstrates. Her actions are dictated by her own choices, rather than attempts to please others or meet expectations of female behaviour. Clara is initially positioned as 'good' for her behaviour, as it matches the model of the 'good' feminine, although the text alludes to her buried unease. She goes to work for her elderly neighbour, despite it interrupting her homework; she doesn't "dare ask" her mother about how she paid for liquor (332); she does not want to work in close proximity to Nick, who makes her feel uncomfortable and threatened, yet forces herself to; she asks him passively and politely—"please don't"—not to sexually assault her; when begged, she agrees not to say anything about the assault. Unlike in "Toads and Diamonds", however, Clara's passive obedience does not reward her nor imbue her with the strength to assert her own desires, and she is forced to follow the wishes of those who surround her, all of which are harmful in some way or another, signifying the larger sociocultural pressures of a repressive patriarchal society. She is ostensibly rewarded for minding her silence and keeping to the 'good girl' trope appropriate to the fairy tale by Mrs Swanson's 'blessing' (C. Johnson 336)—yet the traditional reward of jewels and roses falling from her mouth, much like her status as the good girl, seems to operate as a curse instead. After leaving Mrs Swanson's house, she becomes more and more unwilling to speak; the jewels chip her teeth, nearly choke her, and cut her mouth

until she bleeds. Her mother, alight with greed, refuses to let her leave, and it is implied that she will be trapped there for the rest of her life thanks to her new ‘gift’.

Dina, however, does not care about public perception of herself, or idealised feminine behaviour. Because she has placed herself outside of this lens, others automatically label her a threat. While Clara is often described as “whispering” or “choking out” phrases, Dina swears, speaks loudly, and makes demands. Her actions, too, are active and confrontational: she “storms” across the yard, “step[s] forward, her hands on her hips” (337). She confronts Mrs Swanson and Nick. Mrs Swanson, who acts as the protector and symbol of regressive gender norms and values, condoning male control, calls Clara a ‘good girl’ for being passive and submissive, keeping her silence and not challenging traditional ideals. She reacts against Dina’s subversive behaviour; despite knowing her grandson has just committed sexual assault, she displays more distaste and shock when Dina swears at him than over the actual assault. It is not ladylike for a young woman to swear, or speak loudly, or to challenge being used against her will, and so she attempts to punish Dina for her “nasty attitude” (339).

Unlike Clara, Dina is able to use her ‘curse’ as armour, gaining comfort from the creatures that fall from her mouth. They act as the catalyst for her to finally escape from her abusive mother, and her rebellious attitude allows her to not only fight for and protect her sister, but empower herself. She later uses her curse to get revenge on Nick, by pouring a bucket of toads and snakes into his car. Dina’s relationship with her curse is presented as far more peaceful and harmonious than Clara’s with her blessing; Dina finds the creatures that fall from her mouth soothing, and speaks to them, indicating a connection. Curiously, it is here that Dina most fulfils the traditional role of the Disney princess, as she befriends the creatures that would be traditionally read as perverse or

negative, symbolic of her own subversive representation revealed to be empowered and positive.

Clara is unable to voice her discomfort due to her characterisation as the passive good girl, even when placed in a dangerous or traumatic experience, and her ability to speak lessens as the text continues. She is regularly described as “whispering” as articulation even before being literally and figuratively silenced. She finds it difficult, even painful to speak when jewels and roses fall from her mouth.³⁹ Initially, this could be read as commentary on the harmful and disempowering expectations of coded feminine behaviour, particularly pertinent given the engagement with fairy tale, a warning against passivity; however, Johnson expands beyond this to a more complex reading that addresses idealised gendered behaviour and trauma.

Literal and figurative silencing are often deeply embedded in these narratives that intersect with gender and trauma in a patriarchal setting. Passive silence is expected of the good girl, and if she speaks out, she may face an enforced silence evocative of her continued disempowerment. When silence is inflicted on the character, she risks losing strength and resistance. The act itself acts as both a symptom and cause of further trauma. The silences that run through these stories are not always overt; often they are the underlying silences of the things left out or ignored that reflect a deeper social conditioning and trauma. Sometimes, these silences can speak louder than any words.

Mrs Swanson wilfully reinforces female silence, by pleading with Clara to remain silent, and furthered by the intent and physical execution of the curses, where

³⁹ “The words half gagged her” (336); “she was half-afraid to speak again” (336-7); “she’d agreed not to tell, and truth be told, she was a little afraid of what would happen if she did” (337); “Clara didn’t say anything—couldn’t say anything—” (337); “Clara winced, but she kept her mouth shut, for any number of reasons” (338); “‘Clara is not talking to the police,’ her mother insisted. ‘She can’t.’” (341); “Clara bit her lip, as though she couldn’t bear to say anything” (342).

she literally covers the girls' mouths with her hand as she enacts her spell. Mrs Swanson acts as symbol and enforcer of regressive gender norms, embodying the stereotypical traditional fairy tale and its sociocultural context in a modern setting. She protects her grandson and dismisses his behaviour—boys will be boys—knowingly reinforcing female silence both literally and symbolically.

Curiously, villainous women are afforded significant vocal agency in the fairy tale. As Gyurisin notes, speech is equated with power. The female villain demonstrates this power in her increased ability to speak and act as a catalyst for narrative development. Her speech here is not only the ability to physically orate, but be *vocal*—to say what she pleases, be an active figure with agency, and most significantly, to be heard. This paradigm demands that if a female character is to speak, and be active and determined in her speech, she will be villainous, as she can only access this ability by transgressing social expectations and boundaries. As a female, she becomes villainous within the genre by her speech, yet here this offers her a degree of power in her social disruption. To speak is to be villainous; to be villainous is to speak.

The ingrained nature of the expectations in the traditional fairy tale means that certain conceptions remain difficult to dismantle or resist entirely. As Tatar notes, “defenders of fairy tales often fall into the trap of elevating these stories into repositories of higher truths and moralities” (11). A superficial examination of Johnson's approach suggests there has simply been a reversal of the good/bad girl archetype, where the good girl's attributes and actions are negative, and the bad girl's are positive, thus swapping them in the readers' regard. However, the text succeeds rather in demonstrating how each of these traits can be viewed from an alternative

perspective, and that following the path of passive obedience may not necessarily result in a happy ending.

The difficulty in entirely resisting or negotiating such ingrained understandings can be seen in the depiction of the girls' mother, who is written as a cruel, abusive alcoholic, who cares far more for herself than her daughters, breaking from traditional perceptions of motherhood. In creating a villain to serve as a difficult personal background, Johnson has inadvertently contributed to perpetuating regressive gender norms, where a woman who consumes alcohol and neglects her teenage children in favour of her own well-being appears as cartoonishly evil. The mother is described as engaging in traditionally masculine pursuits such as smoking and drinking to the point of excess; she is a "drunk bitch who'd been born to fail" (C. Johnson 332).

Gyurisín states "'good' females are undermined and silenced while 'bad' females and males are given free rein to speak and ultimately control family situations" (47). I apply this to Johnson's text, where the daughter who proves to be deviant or 'bad' is ultimately given a voice, where the other sister is virtually silenced; but it is important to note that while Johnson offers a subversion of this trope in the form of Dina, she reinforces speech as a negative through the mother, again placing the preferred woman in fairy tale as silent. Bottigheimer also notes that female villains in fairy tale are granted a voice, which the mother demonstrates—but hers is one that is presented in an abrasive and abusive manner. While her daughters can question and exist outside of ingrained dichotomies of female behaviour, she is firmly entrenched within codes that write her as a failure for drinking and being vocal while being a woman. Dina's ability to speak up is praised, as it is both an act of protection as well as self-empowerment; when the act is presented as entirely self-centred, it is abrasive, outside the confines of appropriate feminine behaviour. The mother can act as reflective

of how powerfully ingrained these perceptions can be, to the point they may appear unconsciously, but also opens up opportunities to consider the possibilities for power in villainous women.

Here, Johnson has used the retold fairy tale in order to not only offer potential for recovery and strength in the engagement of fairy tale motifs, but challenge regressive representations of expectations of gendered behaviour. We begin to see the potential for essentially reclaiming and redirecting the fairy tale to allow for female empowerment and trauma recovery in hybridised spaces. Alysse Near's *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* also represents this developing trend.

Near's *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* presents a straightforward interpretation of this trend, where a character retreats into the fairy tale world as protection from trauma, in a form of denial. Aptly described as “a dark bubblegum-gothic fairytale”, *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* is layered with intertextuality, drawing connections to the real world, and various levels of fairy tale stories. The story itself is stylistically a fairy tale, both contemporary and traditional, a twisting tale that unravels across multiple levels of fiction as protagonist Isola Wilde moves deeper into a fairy tale world that mirrors her favourite book, ‘The Pardieu Fables and Fairytales’. Isola retreats to a literal fairy tale space after an unspecified trauma that she herself has completely denied and which is not revealed to the reader until the text's climax—the suicide of her mother. She surrounds herself with fairy tale motifs, in her protectors, brother-princes, and finds sanctuary in a literal fairy tale space, Vivien's Wood. While initially denial serves as protection against Isola experiencing trauma, the fairy tale space that surrounds her becomes toxic in order to force her to face her trauma. The forest rejects her, “barricade[ing] her out” (271), and one by one, she loses her brother-princes. The

combination of the real world and fantasy world, and existence in the liminal space formed between them, is what allows Isola to truly begin healing and find space to exist as a female in a world that seems primed to harm. Her retreat into a fairy tale world offers her respite from trauma and the pain that accompanies it; however, her favouring of the fairy tale over reality becomes dangerous, and to fully heal from her trauma she must find a balance between the two worlds, rather than being lost to one. The liminal space between these two worlds, then, is what becomes a space of empowerment and safety. As her mother tells her in one of her final stories, in an act that echoes the tradition of guidance and women's handing down of coded meaning through the fairy tale, the liminal space is the only true opportunity to thrive, the only way to be happy or live: "Keep your tread light on the edge of the woods—don't stray too deep into either territory—that is the only place where Children of Nimue can find happiness" (398). Isola only truly begins to heal when existing in the self-made liminal space, rather than struggling between the two.

Isola is aware of the trauma that comes hand in hand with being a woman in a fairy tale; she knows that the fairy tales she reads:

were overwhelming reminders that evil begot evil, bad things often happened to good people and that villains often triumphed. And, above all, that being a girl in a terrible world was akin to being a princess, wicked queen, heroine, ugly stepdaughter, witch and fairy and child and mother in one fiery package, a bomb beribboned like a beautiful gift and left to tick tock tick tock behind high castle walls. (49)

The very act of being a woman is embedded in trauma, and while Isola notes the possible infliction of trauma and thus power that women in these stories can wield, the

depiction returns to the experience ultimately being destructive. The tropes, expectations, and demands of the fairy tale place womanhood as toxic and dangerous; Block's marked awareness of these and intersections between the real world and fantasy allow her characters to resist and challenge them in a liminal space, where they may survive.

Francesca Lia Block's short story "Bones", from the collection *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold*, also depicts a protagonist who retreats into a fairy tale world or fantasy to escape from trauma. Like Isola, the unnamed protagonist of "Bones" is aware of the roles women hold in the fairy tale as she states: "I dreamed of being a part of the stories—even terrifying ones, even horror stories—because at least the girls in stories were alive before they died" (340). This self-awareness contributes to the revisioning of the fairy tale, the potential to use its bones for good, to map out codes of survival between women.

The protagonist in "Bones" is also silenced from the text's onset. She is not given a name, thereby denying her a link to an identity and further disempowering her. She willingly follows the mysterious and dangerous Blue as he leads her deeper into the narrative of Bluebeard; he draws her in by telling her the fairy tales she is so entranced by. Blue, the man who wishes to silence her and bury her bones with the other lost girls under his home, claims the stories she is so connected to. She finds herself silenced by Blue's ownership of the tales she so loves: "I tried to speak but the enchantment had seeped into my mouth like choking electric blue frosting from a cake" (345).

As in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*, it is the interaction between genres and the adaptation or manipulation of fairy tale motifs that enables recovery and space for new female identities, rather than the iteration of traditional fairy tale narratives. In "Bones",

Block similarly creates a space in the rewritten fairy tale that offers sanctuary, by essentially reclaiming the story for feminine strength in the face of trauma. The unnamed narrator of “Bones” retreats into a longing for the fantastic, specifically a fairy tale world. She views the fairy tale as an idealised space, despite acknowledging its dangers, and her journey to recovery is staged directly through her relationship to the fairy tale. Initially, she longs to be a part of the stories, accepting the trade-off of pain, fear, or even death for a chance to feel alive: “I dreamed of being a part of the stories—even terrifying ones, even horror stories—because at least the girls in stories were alive before they died” (341). She appears to have undergone a life of trauma, leading her to appear depressed, apathetic, and self-destructive. She is attracted to the fairy tale as a fantasy and form of escape, and it offers her relief. When she meets Blue, who models himself off the fairy tale character of Bluebeard, they begin to play out the original story. The text itself takes on a simplistic prose highly reminiscent of the fairy tale, and the protagonist simultaneously rejects and embraces the fantasy of the fairy tale—her world is far too grim to be Grimm—yet she still craves immersion in those same tales.

Significantly, it is both her previous trauma and reclamation of fairy tales that allows her to survive: it is when she is most immersed in the fairy tale that she is able to find a space to heal and save herself. Her past trauma provides her with survival skills, the ability to run: “That is one thing about her—she has always been able to run. Fast. Not because she is strong or is running towards something but because she has learned how to run away” (346). As her relationship to the fairy tale changes throughout the text—from longing, as a form of escape, to a seducer, to a deadly trap, to finally, a reclaimed tale of survival—so does her experience with the healing process. Initially trapped and silenced by the stories she loved so much, she is able to at last rewrite and reclaim them, where the retold fairy tale appears as both a catalyst and safe space for

healing and empowerment, the plot and structure mirroring one another. As with “Sharper”, the introduction of fairy tale elements and creation of a liminal space between contemporary realism and fairy tale catalyses healing from trauma, as well as female empowerment. The protagonist hears the voices of the bones of the dead women Blue has buried calling to her; it is their voices, the need to tell their story, that inspires her to fight and escape. It is when she is most immersed in the fairy tale that she is able to find a space to heal and save herself. She acknowledges that no brothers or sisters will be coming to save her—no one can save her but herself. And so, rather than doom herself, she decides to run, changing the story and thus reclaiming it, and gaining a voice: “I will rewrite the story of Bluebeard” (346).

Caruth writes, “Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). The demons and Morgan’s voice in my creative text can represent Caruth’s notion of the burning child, the voice that cries out, reflecting my overall approach and response to embedded social trauma:

[the] plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken (to awaken, indeed, to a burning), [...] [that] constitutes the new mode of reading and listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand (Caruth 9).

The demons in my text address silence in fairy tale alongside gendered trauma. Thematically, they align closely with the bones of the dead girls in “Bones”. Institutional and sociocultural conditioning demands they be silenced—they pose too

much of a risk, a threat to power structures of a patriarchal society and so must be repressed and tightly controlled. There are many structures in place to assist with this control, which is highly normalised, in an exaggeration of the pressures to conform to an ‘appropriate’, idealised femininity in contemporary Western society. The girls themselves are made complicit in this silencing; they do not realise they are essentially silencing themselves, and their foremothers, as they obey the rules that they have been told were put into place for their own safety. Many of these rules are concerned with coaching appropriate feminine behaviour, to the extent where the girls’ own thoughts and desires are regulated. Kate’s struggles stem from a societal and self-imposed need to maintain control; by trying to destroy her demon, she is unknowingly destroying a part of herself, the process ultimately proving harmful and destructive. Many of these imposed restrictions surround female behaviour, and are mirrored in the more brutal epithets from the mirror, the dead girl in the bush, the fairy tales, and the girls’ own minds. The thoughts on how to be a ‘good girl’ are harsh and far more honest than the clinical rules found in the “Recommendations and Requirements for Leading a Life with Minimal Parabiopsychological Interference” (Herb 23). Here, enforced silencing proves harmful in an examination of social expectations and trauma in women. If, as Caruth writes, trauma is the voice that is released through the wound—“the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound” (2)—then listening to this voice is integral to my engagement with systematic and personal trauma. The girls in my creative work and the reader become entangled in dismantling silence as they “[bear] witness to some forgotten wound” (Caruth 5).

While there is space to read silence in fairy tale as a wilful choice of strength, it by and large appears as an act of forceful silencing symptomatic of a patriarchal culture that informs expectations of gender and trauma. There is value in reconsidering the role

of silence, and in working within the enduring space that frames silence as a result of gendered trauma. In keeping to my overall approach, rather than working against these paradigms, I work within them to expose and expand on spaces of resistance and strength. The fairy tale threads that emerge with the adaptation into contemporary YA literature offer the potential for transformative notions of healing that often appear within the intertextual and metafictional spaces between YA literature and fairy tale. These liminal collaborative spaces offer ways of engaging with trauma through the fantastical, metaphoric, and literal that can reshape female strength and offer representations of diverse female identities. The inclusion of fairy tale threads and the adaptation of fairy tale motifs offers a way of voicing trauma and, in doing so, recovery from it.

Reclaiming Voice and Sisterhood

Voices, then, and the telling of stories, answer to this pervasive silence, where the act of storytelling or reclaiming the story and voice becomes the antithesis to enforced silence, and can signify empowerment or healing from previously repressed characters. When Melinda of *Speak* is able to begin to heal, it is signalled through a moment of stark articulation, as she finally speaks out to protect herself from her attacker, who is attempting to rape her again. The action is described as, “A sound explodes from me. ‘NNNOOO!!!’” (194). She finds power in silencing her rapist as he had done to her. The novel ends on the hope of healing, as Melinda tells a trusted teacher, “Let me tell you about it” (198), one of the few times she speaks in the novel.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Halse Anderson signs this novel with the phrase, ‘Keep Speaking Out!’; the novel has been featured in high school curricula worldwide and has been acknowledged as an important resource of support for readers who might have experienced sexual assault.

In my creative thesis, voice is reclaimed by the girls who do not deny or try to repress their demons. This appears in an act of both speaking and listening—as they listen to the voices in their heads, to the girls in the bush, they give a voice to the silenced, and are able to claim one for their own as they develop their identity and understanding. The voice in Morgan’s head appears invasive initially, a sign of weakness or insanity; in listening to it, she discovers love and strength as she grows into her own identity alongside the voice in her head. Lucy believes she is the demon, the voice inside her own head; she enacts the experience of listening to the demon by hearing the stories of the dead girl in the bush. Experiencing them allows her to escape and protect herself from her own mind, before allowing her to finally face the truth of her past and speak out. The girls who do not listen—Kate and Beth—and try to aggressively silence their demons, are effectively silencing themselves. The demons may appear malignant or villainous for their voice that whispers and screams to their hosts, but in a patriarchal context, any girl who is actively vocal is automatically cast as villainous. Perhaps, then, there is strength in being the villain.

Block and Near also offer the act of reclaiming the voice—here framed through the act of storytelling, of passing the story forward—as a form of personal empowerment and healing that extends to a greater community of women. Finding a voice in a space of enforced silence that signified trauma or repression is a powerful moment of strength and endurance, but it does not only stand to offer empowerment to one individual. When framed alongside storytelling, the voice becomes not only about personal survival but contributes to mapping out codes of survival to women. This shared community of intertextual storytelling forms a sisterhood, which is reflected back in the narratives of the texts themselves, where this same sisterhood is what enables survival. We see sisterhood and storytelling play out simultaneously in order to

finally form this mapping of stories and experiences, a universal and deeply personal understanding of what it means to be female. The formation of a sisterhood of survival and story is strengthened by the aid of women writers such as Block and Near.

While Clara's portrayal of the 'good' girl leads to her enforced silence, we can nonetheless read her final stance as one of survival. Despite her vulnerability, her final act is to demonstrate agency over her own fate, telling her sister when she asks her to call if she ever wants to leave, "I will" (C. Johnson 345), and giving her sister a bag of jewels. Dina's empowerment is the clearest in the text, but Clara's quiet survival may hold far more significance to a reader on the same healing journey: "Mrs Swanson made me promise not to say—something bad happened with her grandson" (C. Johnson 336). Clara mentions the women's demand for silence and rejects it in the same sentence. Perhaps her greatest strength as a sexual assault victim, despite the overwhelming social pressure to be silent, is that she *does* tell her story, and she *does* survive, fracturing her enforced silence in the safe space with her sister as she chooses to voice the assault. The literal expression of sisterhood presents a space of safety, understanding, and protection. The dialogue created within a supportive sisterhood allows hope, recovery from trauma, and strength, and a symbiotic relationship is constructed between reclaiming voice and sisterhood, all feeding into the construction of mapping these stories.

Sisterhood comes to be a significant example of how the fairy tale can be reworked to offer new and retrospective readings of female empowerment. Numerous older variants of fairy tale texts and contemporary literature follow a pattern where sisterhood is indeed lacking, where women compete and are positioned as rivals. Sisters may come to represent binaries of behavioural patterns, where the good sister is rewarded for her passivity and obedience; and her lazy or deviant sister is punished.

Ann Wan-lih Chang notes that the “troubled sister” plot pattern has “ancient roots in western literature constructed within a patriarchal framework” (2). She refers to Nina Auerbach and Amy K. Levin, citing their explanation that “female power is expressed in fairy tales and mythology through solidarity within female communities, and sisterhood is routinely suppressed in such sources in order that heroism and heterosexuality may flourish” (Wan-lih Chang 2). Where women are supportive of one another, their friendship must support domesticity and heterosexual marriage, or else be dismantled; as Wan-lih Chang notes, “before a ‘happy ending’, typically marriage, can be achieved, sisters must be separated from or abandon or betray one another” (2). The retold fairy tale rewrites this positioning of female relationships, shaping a sisterhood of supportive voices that extends beyond the text itself. The focus on coaching domesticity or marriage is entirely shifted, with import instead placed on survival and reclamation. Rather than be confined to expectations of competitiveness or dislike, women instead challenge patriarchal limitations, where the focus lies instead on support and care. This reclaims the earlier tradition of fairy tales as a repository for women’s voices and experiences, a means by which to pass down coded messages of survival and behaviour.

Near also engages with the reclamation and distribution of story as an act of personal and communal empowerment or survival. Sisterhood, then, is integral to this process, and in offering the opportunity to recover in the first place. Near’s text combines sisterhood and fairy tale motifs, keeping Isola’s space for recovery within the liminal space of fairy tale and reality, as her brother-princes, half of whom are women and only one of the six human, offer her protection. Themes of sisterhood come to symbolise a positive interaction between contemporary and older tales that in turn references or creates the liminal space of the retold tale. While initially this relationship is written as highly gendered—as her first brother Alejandro defines it, “A brother is

someone who protects” whereas a sister (Isola) is “a little princess who needs protecting” (88)—over the course of the novel the relationships develop to demonstrate a dynamic that reflects the symbolic notion of sisterhood far more than brotherhood. When attempting to enact their masculine role as “protectors”, the brother-princes each fail and are forced to leave Isola. When they return, it is in a symbolic sense of sisterhood, a sharing of stories and voices as support, rather than patriarchal protection. This change offers Isola the strength to survive and “kill Loneliness” (388). Their voices and experiences could stand in for a community of women, the collective sharing of their stories. An individual on her own may struggle, but held up by the voices of others, she can endure:

I may be small... and I may be the last. I may not be the most kind, the most loving, the most steadfast—but I have a little of all those things, and while I have those qualities, and the memories of the people who gave them to me, why, then Loneliness can never hurt me! (Near 388)

Isola’s whole life is framed around fairy tales that create a direct dialogue of coded messages between her and her mother, echoing the oral tradition of the fairy tale among women. Her mother offers her warnings, rules to live by in a world that is against her, that has no space for her. Isola’s mother Lileo is revealed to be the author of her favourite book, “The Pardieu Fables and Fairytales”, the stories within meant to be messages to Isola, fractured warnings encoded in tales of survival and womanhood in a world that condemns a girl from birth. Here, again, sisterhood becomes crucial for developing spaces for hope and recovery. By the text’s end, Isola is working on her mother’s collection, rewriting the in-text version of *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* and “giving a few more girls their happy endings” (414). She works within the liminal space of the fairy tale and real world, reclaiming the power of story and expanding this space

to others. In extending the text to help other girls who “maybe... needed a fairytale or two” (415), Isola reaffirms sisterhood within and beyond the text in a metafictional space, drawing girls together as stories and voices are shared to help and heal, much as her mother’s were intended to be. Both versions of *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* contribute to the polyphonic discourse shaped by storytelling and its connection to sisterhood.

In “Bones”, sisterhood, storytelling, and reclaiming voice are inextricably linked. Storytelling serves to counteract the themes of enforced silencing and its links to trauma. The protagonist finds great comfort in the act of storytelling, and the stories being told, as the fairy tale offers her escape. Blue is able to lure her to a dangerous end by telling her “all the tales”, and she tells the reader “You know, I am still grateful to him for that. I haven’t heard them since I was little. They made me feel safe. Enchanted. Alive. Charms” (345). Sisterhood is what ultimately saves her, as she hears the voices of the bones calling to her, the dead girls left behind, a literal example of mapping played out. Like her predecessor, the protagonist in “Bones” discovers the bodies of the women Blue killed before her; here, however, the dead women’s roles are central to the text. They serve to drive the storyline, becoming the catalyst for the protagonist’s survival. She has resigned herself to her fate, until she hears the voices of the buried bones: “Part of me wanted to swoon into nothing, but the other women’s bones were talking” (346). At first alienated in her traumatised state, the development of faith in these voices drives the protagonist to fight back and survive. “But I thought of the bones; I could hear them singing. They needed me to write their song” (347). Hearing their story saves the protagonist, as does the motivation to tell their story. She chooses to survive, to “rewrite the story of Bluebeard”, a choice that is emphasised in Block’s titling of the piece. Block names her stories in the collection for a central motif; it is significant here that she furthers the act of reclamation by naming the retold tale for the

women whose bones sing their story, rather than the man who killed them. This moves the focus from the enactor of violence to the victims, asserting their significance.

Their sisterhood of shared traumatic experiences is what supports the protagonist, encouraging her to survive. The voices, and the need to tell their stories, come to symbolise a greater community of lost or silenced girls. These girls have faced the darkest impact of a toxic patriarchal society, and by living on and making others hear their voices, the protagonist enacts a powerful position. As in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*, the character extends the voices of the women before her to others, increasing the circle of sisterhood and helping other lost girls reclaim or write their own stories. Women, who were often the storytellers under oral tradition, reclaim the fairy tale from Andersen, Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm.

The reclaimed, transformative representation of sisterhood is the natural result of the retold tale offering opportunity to recover from trauma. This space has been repurposed, as the same motifs that earlier offered harm are instead the catalyst and cause for their survival and empowerment. The recovery from trauma is realised in the retold fairy tale, which in turn develops this through themes of silence and voice, enacted through storytelling; and this act of storytelling contributes to expanding a sense of sisterhood—which in turn creates a metafictional, intertextual polyphony of voices and experiences that serve as a map for survival and empowerment.

Writing Trauma, Voice, and Sisterhood

The development of the intersections between fairy tale, trauma, silencing, and sisterhood culminates in my own creative thesis. I wanted to use the power of the fairy

tale and its connotations as not only a stylistic narrative choice, but to expand on and develop the trend of the retold fairy tale creating spaces for trauma recovery, and in doing so, form a sort of sisterhood. These texts, I found, reclaimed the fairy tale in affirmative narratives, allowing girls to become, if not their own heroes, the narrators of their own stories, and the heroes to others. I then developed this through the process of the entangled songline and mapping to form an interweaving dialogue that interacts with a larger social and political environment, where a sisterhood stands in for this notion of mapping.

This thesis does not exist in a vacuum; it is dependent on the texts and stories that have preceded it, and will follow. The text approaches the fairy tale with the ongoing acknowledgement of the fairy tale canon and its significance in the cultural consciousness; as seen in Johnson's text, this immediately provides opportunity to produce a greater effect on the reader as the fairy tale is manipulated and subverted in a way that in fact is an extension of the malleability of the genre. These interconnected stories form a tapestry of shared stories, stories of lived experience that reshape the landscape of both contemporary YA and the fairy tale in an Australian context. The end result is an interactive mapping of story, realised and symbolised in the development of sisterhood as concept.

I have used the fairy tale to mirror, support, and contradict the girls' distinct narratives; it serves a myriad of purposes. Largely, it is to be read as interweaving with the girls' stories, opening up to a larger dialogue. Kate's narrative of a possible eating disorder or lycanthropy, for instance, is interspersed with versions of "Red Riding Hood", where Kate is both Red Riding Hood and the wolf. These pieces are original writing and retold tales; all were inspired by pre-existing fairy tales, and the style of the

genre. Some were designed to mimic the style and tone of the fairy tale narrative in order to play with underlying themes or explore the social issues that drive the thesis. The basis of the implementation/integration of fairy tale stories alongside a central narrative stems from the concepts evidenced throughout this chapter, placing this into practice and expanding it further to achieve the ultimate intention of exploring the representation and lived experience of femininities and providing new opportunities within YA literature for survival of voice, story, and the self. Adaptation of European story to the southern hemisphere is considered, and its potential in merging fairy tale and YA literature, that which shapes space for exploring and challenging social constructions and its impact on gender, largely depicted through the acknowledgement of a personal and intergenerational trauma. The tapestry of stories that is created results in the mapping that can be read simultaneously as sisterhood; a way for readers and characters to navigate.

Scenes or stories that subverted fairy tale motifs were placed early on to immediately frame the text's approach to fairy tale. Like Johnson's approach, these short stories manipulate or subvert the fairy tale narrative and the embedded expectations it carries. One story details a girl longing to explore the world, and it is written in a style reminiscent of the 'classic' fairy tale, following the expected narrative. This builds to the climax, where the young lady is promptly horribly mistreated and murdered as she naively ventures out into the world. This tale offers a comedic take on fairy tale and fantasy tropes, as the story abruptly veers off into a more 'realistic' ending. Another story offers a brief take on the Cinderella tale, where Prince Charming overlooks the girl entirely due to her presumed low socio-economic status. Many of these stories are written in a darker style, ironically more true to the nature of the fairy

tale—the sanitisation or ‘Disneyfication’ of the fairy tale has led to a far kinder interpretation of the genre in contemporary audiences.

Polyphonic discourse frames the story, as the three girls each act as narrator while the fairy tale stories add to the narrative of voice and story. Emblematic of the social conditioning and the ingrained influence of the fairy tale on a cultural consciousness, these stories are designed to build an immersive context while depicting a varying, contrasting, and correlating host of voices that support the main narrative. I build on this polyphony of voices through acknowledgment of those that came before—in the stories of girls like Miranda, Edith, Irma, Marion, and Sara from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Norah from *The Little Bush Maid*, Ryl from *Pastures of the Blue Crane*, Lexie from *Tangara*, and Judy from *Seven Little Australians*—girls who played in the bush, lived there, survived there, and died there.

This multiplicity of voices and stories was integral to the framing of the narrative, which was realised in the representation of the ‘demons’ in my creative thesis. They initially stand in for the repressive gender binaries and expectations held to women; later, they are revealed to be the same voices heard throughout the text in the excerpts of fairy tale. These are the forgotten, traumatised, or silenced voices, the girl in the bush and the girl in the mirror. The demons are arguably at the core of my exploration of silence and enforced silence in my creative thesis. They come to explore the essence of the intersections between gender, trauma, and silence, demonstrating the mapping of survival and story. While the girls are told to resist and ignore the voices of the so-called demons, contributing to their silencing, I ultimately place their voices and stories as too important to ignore, so that they will come out. Caruth notes that those who experience trauma live it twice (7), that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself,

exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (Caruth 2). I envision this notion by depicting trauma through the demons. Their existence—their reason for existing, and their earlier experience of trauma—can be read as the first act of traumatic harm. The girls’ relationship with the demons represents the experience of trauma as the recurring event that must be relived. The girls experience inherited trauma through their demons, living it twice—but this act, and the act of listening to the voice of the burning child as it cries out, revises the notion of trauma as defined by Caruth to privilege survival and transformation. Like the protagonist in “Bones”, the girls in my creative work must hear the bones of the dead girls—the bones of their land and their lives—in order to learn how to survive themselves, and to help those before them live on. The characters learn together to navigate their lives in an often harmful world, acknowledging the need to listen and experience to these voices. In hearing and privileging these stories, and in the telling of them, this rhizomatic, metafictional sisterhood is formed, a mapping of story, voice, and survival.

Retold, reimagined, and new stories inspired by fairy tale conventions and structures were threaded alongside the central narrative, interweaving with the plot to form a polyphony of experiences. These voices culminate in a tapestry of stories to be read as intermingling and coexisting. They form a map in which to navigate living as a girl in a patriarchal world, on ancient land, one that expands across time and space. If they are overlooked or further repressed they only offer harm; when they are openly engaged with as furthering the notion of mapping ways of survival between women, they present growth, empowerment, healing, and joy. It was important to depict the girls living alongside and against these voices; the layering of polyphonic stories was increased with the implication that these stories are not completely separate from the

girls' stories. These voices, and those of the fairy tale excerpts throughout, create a sisterhood across an intertextual context. While engaging with and ultimately benefiting from this map, Lucy, Kate, and Morgan also serve as extensions of this mapping.

Lucy reads as the most literal example of this process, as her story interacts with and is dependent on the lost, silenced, or forgotten stories that the dead girl in the bush holds. This is also closely entwined with the trauma narrative; as she seeks to escape the reality of her situation, a story out of a fairy tale, she grasps another girl's story as her own. She also becomes more and more connected to the fairy tale world as the narrative progresses, and her interaction with fairy tale—as the character who is undeniably most connected to it, where the contemporary world she lives in blurs into the fairy tale stories—is one that mirrors the trauma recovery process. Lucy retreats into the fairy tale world, while also highlighting the connecting thread to voice and story. Her denial harms her. I intended that while Lucy is the character who most closely exists in the liminal space between fantasy and reality, her driving trauma is an unyieldingly grim reality.

Sisterhood is clearly reflected in the friendship between the three girls, the central relationship of the thesis. It is the girl in the mirror, or the dead girl in the bush; the demons that whisper in the girls' heads, and most of all, all those voices that come together to explore a way—not only forward, but backward, sideways and slantways, a thousand voices reflecting a thousand different paths. It is found in the entirety of the text itself, the mapping of story and survival.

Like the discrepancies in the notion of the *Once upon a time* that heralds the supposed beginning of so many fairy tales, *Happily ever after* also proves itself flawed in its phrasing. I speak not of the promise of happiness (although much could be said of

the persistent link to marriage) but the ‘ever after’. Curiously, this phrase implies fixed stagnancy as much as the ongoing, unfixed potential of the fairy tale. It is only fitting that I focus on the latter of the two, where the fairy tale does not end concretely on three words and matrimonial bliss, and it does not end in the space of the telling, but goes on, changing and growing as the fairy tale always has done best. As I have discussed throughout this chapter, the fairy tale should not be read as a linear story, with an absolute beginning and ending; under my construction of the fairy tale contributing to this mapping process, there is no ending, but an ongoing, rhizomatic stream of story spiralling off over the horizon. When reading *ever after* as acknowledgement for that potential for the ongoing perpetuation and malleability of story—seeing the phrase as reference to forever onwards and the expectation of change held within rather than as fixed forever—it in fact perfectly encompasses the approach of fairy tale adaptations in my thesis, and the potential to continue expanding on this space. It would be hopelessly optimistic or even saccharine to presume these characters, standing in for contemporary young women, will achieve a happy ever after—but perhaps it holds far more weight to have an ever after, a promise for the future and for story to survive and live on.

Conclusion: Endings and Beginnings

As we see narratives that repeatedly depict restrictive control of feminine identities, simultaneously normalising this process, we can see the oppositional need to expose these practices. In YA conventions, tropes, trends, and relationship dynamics—in the ideologies that shape and drive these texts—social constructions of gender are found. Control is not necessarily a wholly negative or positive concept. It is more aptly classed as neutral; it is only the dominance of a certain aspect that marks it as negative, and creates the space for the positive. Control leads to the formation of boundaries; but it also creates the women who step over them. This emerges across multiple levels, in the social, the personal, and political. Characters negotiate control across all levels, even struggling with self-control, and understanding it. Control is a powerful topic, and there is value in engaging with the trends and tropes it creates, exposing the underlying forces that shape conventions that have long been normalised, in working with them rather than against them.

We can see control filtering through texts throughout the Australian literary canon: from the colonial settler texts that struggled to harness an Indigenous landscape and identity, to the transplanted fairy tales that took a life of their own, to the contemporary YA texts that demonstrate modes of control operating across all levels. The power is in exploring and manipulating narratives of control, exposing them for what they are and repurposing them to modes of control over the self. When we deconstruct the narrative, we realise the active processes at play in and around the text in normalising these practices. In doing so, we regain control.

When I first started this thesis, I assumed it would be about love. Love stories dominated the YA genre, some more problematic than others. I planned to address these in my creative work, reworking them to expose their construction, and offer alternative revisions. I knew the novel was going to be about three girls, friends bound closely together, and deeply in love with one another. They would each explore their own tidy narrative, hopefully addressing these key trends and tropes that had become more prevalent after the success of the *Twilight* series. As I continued writing, however, my girls resisted; they did not want to have all-consuming romances with boys, simple duplicates of stories already told. These girls and their stories were messy, and bloody, and passionate. They had teeth. Through everything, their love for one another—confusing, frustrating, but always, always present—was there. And so the text kept focus on these major themes, but it shifted; it grew deeper, peeling back the layers to find the causes, the enduring values and ideals behind them—seeing these stories as mirrors, not windows into alternative worlds. In exploring the root of these trends and themes, my focus shifted away from the heterosexual romance to the larger underlying sociocultural ideals that shaped these relationships, and the day-to-day lives of young women reflected in YA literature and the fairy tale. I continued to refine my thesis until young women and their negotiation of their relationship with a patriarchal world became the central focus. Other stories and voices crept in to add to the chorus—girls who had been silenced, locked in towers or buried deep underground, their bones emerging in the paths my girls walked. For a text that was originally planned to be set within the conventional paranormal YA genre, it was quickly overtaken by fairy tale, intersecting and conflicting stories that cast a foreground that my girls were tied to. Their voices became the demons in their heads, restrictions and limitations and too much passion to live quietly. The demons were the girls who came before them,

continuing the bloody love story that emerged in the sisterhood developed throughout the text.

Love, and love stories, remained a creative theme, but rather than examining the disempowerment of women through their relationship with men in patriarchal societies, I looked instead to the empowerment of women through their relationships with one another, forming alternative spaces of resistance in an intertextual dialogue. Love shifted and was redefined to mean a sense of strength, empowerment, and sisterhood. It is this love story between three girls and all those who came before and after them that drives the story, allowing me to access and explore social constructions of gender, and the lived experience of being female across lives and generations.

Embedded in the act of trying to speak, finding a voice, or uttering experiences of trauma, is the act of listening. Hearing and reading other voices and stories is at the core of the concept of mapping sisterhood and engaging with trauma. Listening to another's voice in turn gives a voice to the listener, extending the mapping outward again. The map itself can only be formed by listening, by experiencing and privileging the stories of those who came before us; this act of listening imbues the navigator with a voice that can be heard. In my creation of this text, and in the act of reading it, voices are formed, heard, and created beyond it. Perhaps, then, the concluding words from my creative thesis are far more apt here to end on than any happily ever after: "Hear us. Read our stories. Don't silence us and don't forget. Listen to our stories, but don't forget to live your own."

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