

HALF-BOY



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THE WATER MAY have been rain two weeks or a thousand years ago. It trickled into the dirt, settled around roots, pooled over clay, soaked through pores in the rock, and entered a maze of underground rivers where no weather exists, no wind, no light. After a long separation from the growth and decay of living things, it rises to the surface and becomes the river.

MANATEES TAUGHT ME how to swim. Everyone should have such good teachers. Our bodies aren't dissimilar—round, thick, born with no legs the same as me. Every year they, even the babies, swim from the ocean and up the rivers, one hundred and sixty-two miles of rivers according to my study of Father's brand-new 1932 World Atlas. The manatees use their paddled tails, but my arms reach longer and flex more. It seemed reasonable that I, even with my body, should learn, at the very least, to float in an eddy.

The manatees don't come here in the summer. Right

now they're in the Atlantic Ocean eating kelp and scaring fishermen as they snort to the surface, fishermen who will report that they saw a mermaid. But still, I lie on my back in the water, drop deep into the river, and pretend that I'm resting beside them. White sand puffs into the current wherever I touch the bottom. The eel grass slides into my hair, wraps under my arms, and tickles along my back and into the folds of my body. The trees that hang over the river glaze above me. If I would ever let my breath go, I could stay here forever. But I don't. I never do. My reasons change, but today's reason is that I want a drink. My lungs ache in a final way. I race to the surface and gasp for air.

The rum is in the boat. I swim towards shore until my hands can touch bottom. They pull me through the stalks of pickerel weed going to seed. Dragonflies are disturbed into the air. Black wings with flashes of smoky red and needle-sized sparks of blue dip and soar around me. I flip to sitting in the patch of dry ground beside my boat, and strands of wet plants hang out from my arms as I reach into the stern for the jar. The toffee-brown rum with its flecks of gold coats the side of the glass in slow waves. My usual corn liquor only slaps against the glass. I swirl the jar again before I unscrew the lid. Five quick gulps and my lungs burn until sweat and the smell of clove and burnt wood pushes through my skin from the inside. I drink halfway down the jar. The world goes soft.

It was my twenty-ninth birthday, the night I first watched the manatees. I'd just read the newest Virginia

Woolf, *Orlando*, about the man who woke up one day as a woman, and while my parents sang to me I thought about the Cemetery of the United Hebrews of Ocala. Four years before, my father, mother, and I—what was left of our family—pulled the covering off my brother's tombstone. After that, I never left the boundaries of our garden. Before, as a girl light enough to be carried in my mother's arms, I went with her to shops and civic dedications. We had picnics and listened to the bands that played on the square. Sometimes a hand clamped down on my head, and a white-collared man or lady with glistening eyes, their other hand raised to the sky, cried out to their Jesus for my healing. Nothing worse than that happened.

People's reactions changed once I matured the way women do. I'd follow behind my mother, walking on my gloved hands, my hips tilted just up off the ground. My mother sewed the hems of my skirts closed for modesty, but still they outlined the shape of my waist and bottom. I had a bosom and long eyelashes, and people's pity hardened. They gasped, ran away, or peppered my mother with questions as if I were an unusual breed of dog. One woman screamed. I went out less and less.

But that evening, on my birthday, with the drapes closed over the windows and the lamplight pink against the flowered wallpaper, the ceiling lowered and pressed into my mind. Chairs, sideboards, lace things everywhere crowded too close. I have never screamed, but that's what I felt in my throat. My mother cut the apple cake, and

my father suggested I should give my birthday charity money for the education of Negroes, perhaps to Howard Academy just down the road. My mother agreed with him. My hands went to my face, one on top of the other, and pressed back the swelling inside me. I bit my lip until it was safe to uncover my mouth. But I had to leave. My parents watched, forks poised, as I dropped off my chair and left the dining room.

I went up the stairs and into my dead brother's room where the dust kicked up around my hands. His clothes still hung in the armoire. I pulled a pair of pants off its hanger and unbuttoned my skirt. The pants legs tied into a knot underneath me. My blouse tucked into the waistband. The straw-banded sailor hat that he had thought the elephant's eyebrows of fashion covered my bob. I went down the stairs fast enough that I somersaulted the last few. My mother rushed to me, but I pushed away her concern, resettled my brother's clothes around me, found the hat where it had tumbled ahead of me, and left, really left—through the iron gate and onto Ocklawaha Boulevard. The full moon lit my way. Men's clothes made me brave. I went farther than I ever had, first down paved then dirt roads to a trail that narrowed. The hard sand under my hands softened, changed to forest loam, to mud, and for the first time, I saw the river that had been there all my life.

I had one moon-shined view of tree branches rugged with ferns, of underwater grasses bent by current, before clouds covered the light. I sat in the dark on the edge of

a small bank. Even through the winter air, the plant smell lay thicker and more layered than anything in our garden. Frogs, higher pitched and louder than I'd ever heard, called to each other. Blisters had split open over my palms, and I patted my hands into the warmer-than-air water to soothe them. My eyes relaxed into the night, but I heard and then felt the soft blowing against my palm before I saw the baby. The clouds moved past the moon, and in the creamy light, a mother manatee hovered beyond her child. The baby dropped away from my hands, and they both sank under the water. That night I stayed too scared to touch under the surface again, but I watched the manatees' slow risings and fallings until the first light pulled a mist up out of the water.

I left for home before the roads filled with people. My mother still sat in her parlor chair, asleep with a book open over her lap. I shouldn't have worried her, but I knew I'd do it again. She woke and saw the way the soft Italian leather gloves from my father's store hung in blood-tinged shreds. She bathed my hands in marigolds from the garden while she chatted about her clubs, the food drive she was organizing, and how hard my father worked. She asked me nothing, but the next night I found a pair of her garden gloves laid out on my bed.

That first winter I returned to the river every day and pet the noses that bobbed beside me. I studied our atlas to trace the manatees' voyage. I watched for the long time they could stay on the bottom without breathing

and tried to match it and made my lungs stronger and stronger. Through the next year I read everything I could about swimming. I memorized books with complicated diagrams. I practiced in my bathtub and on my bed. I watched how things work on the river—where alligators choose to feed and where they don't, that turtles mostly scare away, that the silver-backed birds can swim under the water. For my next birthday, my thirtieth, in private celebration, I stripped and slid otter-like down the bank.

Sometimes not having legs is an advantage. The mud was cold against my bare belly and slick enough that I skimmed far out over the water. Then I sank. I hung face down under the surface with my arms spread. The winter sunlight rifled through the water past me and lit up the geometry of a turtle shell in the underwater grasses. When I felt the first pull in my lungs, I arched the middle of my body and vaulted through the water. I was swimming. The babies came from behind their mothers to see me. That day, for the first time, I felt their stiff whiskers on my belly and smelled the spoiled plant smell of their breath when our heads lifted out of the water together. My father saw me come home that evening. He saw my wet hair, the disarray of my clothes, and all he asked me about was the path I took to the river. The next day he left a rowboat on my bank with a backrest nailed into the seat for balance.

I'm in my boat. The bow has wedged into downed branches. It happens sometimes when I'm drinking, this not remembering what I've just done. I'm in the boat and

I'm dressed. The overall straps twist over my shoulders and the shirttail sticks up my back. I check to make sure I've wrapped my breasts flat. The light filters low through the trees, and soon the alligators will rise to hunt. I reach for the oars, but don't manage a firm grip, and they twist out of their sockets. My hands smash against each other. The booze sloshes in the jar, the boat wobbles, and I tilt to the side. The boat takes in a splash of water but rights itself. I jerk backwards, and it floats free into the river. I have no destination or plan. I'm tired. I cross the oars in front of me and drink more. The current turns the boat in slow circles. The late afternoon air is thick with heat. It presses my eyes closed.

“LOOKEE THERE. HALF-BOY is passed out blotto. Hey, half-boy, you row that boat over here and give us some of your moonshine.”

I keep my eyes shut since I've found it best to ignore little boys. The shaft of the oar dents into my forehead where I'm bent over. Cicadas sound like a thousand sewing machines. The clacking rises and falls and pulls through my head from one ear to the other in sheets of sound. Without moving, I'm dizzy. Sweat has stiffened my clothes.

“Hey, freak show. Wake up.”

Clay splatters over my cheek. One of them has a good aim. My eyelids stick as I lift them. I reach into the water and splash it over my face and around my neck. The boat

gives to one side, and I put a hand over each edge to steady. I'm facing the boys and watch while they dig into the bank for more ammunition. My arms have gone numb. I work the sleep out of them until I can grip the side of the boat and swing my body upright and back to center. Still in the air, I shake until the layers of cotton batting my mother sews into the closed-off overalls fall into place underneath me. I drop onto the seat and reattach a buckle that has come loose.

“Whatcha doing?”

The river has moved me too close to shore. The bigger boys reach over the water and can almost touch my boat.

“Is that some sort of cripple dance like in the circus? Hey, you got any man parts left under there?” The boy's voice has been show-off deep, but it cracks high. His friends turn to poke and tease him, and while they do, I slip the oars into the water, brace against the backrest, and paddle away.

“Half-boy, come back here. Come on, we'll show you ours.”

The line of them have unbuttoned their pants. They waggle small penises and laugh. I'm on my second generation of little boys. It seems that any of their parents who remember that I'm a woman haven't told them. No one's yelling Mockie or Jew boy, so this particular batch doesn't know about that either. They might not be local. Last year just men arrived here, dusty and hungry, and settled in Hooverville shanties near the railroad, but the paper said more and more boys travel on their own and

they've become packs. I row until I'm out of sight.

My head still hurts. During all this, the jar has rolled into the bow. I don't remember any sound of glass breaking, but I lean over to make certain. My copy of *A Room of One's Own* kicks out of my bib pocket, and it falls into the puddle along the keel line. I grab it up before the cover soaks through and shove it back deeper. The river lifts over a fallen log, and the jar clatters out of the bow and rolls back to me. I take a sip, and another, and my head improves. There's very little left. A business friend of my father's came for dinner and after, when he had gone, I came out of my room and found the rum bottle on the china buffet. I poured half of it into a jar. But now I'll need money to buy more.

Only liquor helps with how my shoulders and arms hurt. It works as a salve deep in my joints. I started by watering down the stock my father kept for company, but one day I looked up, nervous, from pouring, and saw our gardener watching through the window. The next time we passed in the yard, he offered to supply me, for a price. I'll tell my father I need the money for books. Last time, I hinted at new undergarments, and he blushed and almost threw money at me. I'm becoming more skilled at this. I suppose stealing is the honest word for it. One time, early on, I told him I needed new pens. That was a mistake, because he sells them in his stores. He brought a set home made of orangewood and carved with the shapes of alligators playing violins. Before the alcohol, before I needed so

much of it, I would have been enchanted. Nevertheless, I pretended well enough to please the both of us.

One more sip, a last-for-now sip, and one more sip. I screw the lid back on. The boys are two river curves out of hearing. I find an eddy to rest in and boat the oars. Virginia Woolf waits. The river water warped the cover, but the pages stayed dry. Still, my eyes blur the letters into wavering doubles. I squint and blink and can make out words, but sentences elude me. Besides, Virginia Woolf doesn't understand my life. I already have a room—on the ground floor, behind the kitchen, away from the rest of the house, and with a separate door to the garden. My father had a downstairs water closet and bath combined built next to it. "So the stairs, they're not a bother," he said, even though he knows I lift up the porch steps with no effort. On generous days I think they just want me to have an adult privacy. But I don't need a room of my own. I need the rest of the world.

Sometimes in summer, like today when it hasn't stormed, the heat holds on into the evening. Soaking my wrists in the spring water cools my blood. I lift up handfuls to drink and splash on my face. I loosen one button of my shirt and slap a wet hand against my chest. Water drips down and under my breast bindings. I dip my hands in the water one more time, shake them dry, and pull men's work gloves out of my pocket. I found them and a man's broadcloth shirt in the back shed where my father keeps his grandfather's old tinker's wagon. The "source of our

family fortune” he says. The boat drifts into the woods where the river has overflowed its banks, and the evening swarms of mosquitoes descend from the shadows. They sting along the pulses in my wrists, and I pull the gloves as far up as they can go. I flip the shirt collar and set my work cap low. I unscrew the jar’s lid for another sip.

Mosquitoes I can guard against, but people, mostly I avoid them. I roam at night. My parents never say anything, but a Rayovac light appeared in my room, and then overalls, and then, outside my door, a board with wheels, like a flatbed rail car, only just big enough for me to sit on. My father keeps talking about getting me a wheelchair. “So light, they fold, these new ones, you can push yourself even.” I don’t argue with him, but the board works better. I think he just wants me up higher. As if having my head level with people’s chests rather than their privates will make me normal.

I only use the flashlight during the new moon. I don’t like being visible. In the dark I’ve seen night riders, packed six to a car with rifles sticking out the side, wind over the dirt roads looking for coloreds too far from home. I hide from them in the palmettos and sometimes there’s the rattle of someone else doing the same. Once, I saw a woman in a green silk dress dance with a man in the headlight beams of their car. A portable phonograph on the seat of the convertible played a smooth voice singing about his sweetheart. Breezers, my brother used to call those cars. He wanted one. I watched the man’s hands

slide over and under the silk and understood more about my brother. A lot of sex happens. I've heard sounds from the inside of everything from broken-down flivvers to Cadillacs. Around bonfires, men on their own smoke herb and talk about bitch kitties and vamps. Other nights, dogs and wild pigs chase after me.

The mosquitoes swarm around the uncovered space under my ears and where the material pulls tight over the back of my arms. It hurts, but in a distant way. Ossified, embalmed, owled, plastered—that's what my brother called it when he'd visit with me in my room after a night out jiving. Mosquitoes fly into the corners of my eyes and others try to catch my breath before it even leaves my nose. I brush along my face, but hit myself more than them. They won't follow me to open water. I row out from the forest and towards the other bank.

“Great arms, boy.”

A white man's voice, unfamiliar, and not from around here, comes from behind me, from the far shore. I button my shirt to the top and backwater the boat until it faces and stays away from the bank. Two young men stand at ease with their long legs and a sureness of their place in the world, in this forest, on the river. They both have hair brilliantined back from their faces in a long black shine. One has a shirt banded in purple and red with white diamonds patched into the pattern. The colors glow in the low light, and a scarf flows down his front. He's a Seminole Indian. I've only read about them; he's a picture

in a book come alive except he's not wearing a skirt, just pants same as the other man. I really want to see if he's wearing regular boots or moccasins, but he's not a picture in a book, so I try to look away. But it's hard not to stare at the sacks both men hold down away from their bodies. The bags squirm, and I know snakes when I see them. The white man has the widest chest I've ever seen. This must be who's setting up a reptile show near the headsprings. The paper said they're going to have Indians wrestle alligators. That made Mother talk again about how it used to be that only the finest people, royalty even, visited Silver Springs. She says they came from Europe to escape their wars and their coal-tainted air and find a sublime experience with nature. Mother always lets her eyelashes flutter when she says "sublime."

"Hey, boy. Do you need a job? I could use a good snake wrangler and you sure have the strength for it."

Of course I've never had a job. These days even able-bodied men don't have jobs. He's missing a few things about me. I'll start with the no legs part. I let the boat drift closer, so they can see over the edge. I fish the Lucky Strikes and my lighter out from a pocket. This way I'll not watch them while they figure things out, and they'll have a little privacy to rearrange their faces. I tap a fag out of the pack and bend my head to light it. I cup a hand around my face to protect the flame from a nonexistent wind.

"Share a coffin nail?" The white man's voice sounds regular. The Indian isn't saying anything, but in the

westerns I've read, they don't talk much, so his silence might not be shock, just his way. I snap the lighter shut and look at them. I can tell they haven't seen, so I row close enough to offer them both cigarettes. They loop their sacks over a tree limb and come sit on the bank. Behind them, the snakes struggle and stretch the cloth to its limits, and the bags spin in the air. The white man sees me looking.

"Rattlesnakes. I've got this idea to milk them and make an antidote. I'll ship it to doctors. And then I'll can the meat and sell it to fancy food stores in the cities, even over to Europe. No matter what, even now, rich people want their special stuff and have the money to pay for it."

His resentment makes me lower my eyes.

"In the meantime, there's my show. Have you heard about it?"

I nod.

"Just this week my anaconda arrived from Venezuela. She's twenty feet long and a real bear cat. And no dumb oil can of a female, either. I can tell she's thinking, all the time, of how to best kill me. A young buck like you could get in the pool and wrestle her. I mean I'll do it most days, but you could be my relief. Those tin can tourists would go ape over it, and you'd get paid decent. And Joe Jimmie here says best thing is to train them young. He wrestled alligators from when he was a bitty thing. Not that you'll get that sort of training. They keep it in the family. Don't you, friend?"

I hold out the lighter, and the Indian leans into the boat.

Our eyes meet and he rolls his as the other man keeps batting his gums about snakes and how their venom is orange and thick like orange juice. So, maybe this isn't so much an Indian thing. Maybe this Joe Jimmie just never gets the chance to talk. He smiles at me. They don't do that in the stories. He lowers his head to light his cigarette and sees into my boat. Now his face goes the stoic way they describe it. He sits back on the bank. I need to say something.

“A woman in town has a cooperative canning factory. I'm sure she can accommodate your rattlesnake meat.” I shouldn't have said this. She and my mother were suffragettes together, and she knows who I am, that I'm from wealth, that I'm a woman. This is getting complicated, but it doesn't matter. In the next few minutes, he's going to figure out the body stuff and take back the job. But I'm already ahead of anything I've ever done just talking to an Indian who wrestles alligators and this guy who's snake crazy.

“That's swell news. Hey, Joe Jimmie, this boy is already earning his clams, and he's well-spoken to boot. Now, an anaconda is a constrictor. Not that they won't bite you and it hurts like piss, but there's no poison. And as long as she doesn't get more than one coil around a leg, you're okay. And I'd be right there to help if she got away from us. How about it? Want to give it a bash?”

He leans into the boat for his light and sees me all over. His eyes stop as they reach where my legs should be. He

drops his cigarette, and in the last light of the day, in the perfect, clear water, we both watch the white paper go translucent and show the flakes of tobacco underneath. We watch fish poke it from side to side as it drifts to the bottom. He sits back onto the bank.

“Sorry, son. I can’t hire you. I know the freak shows are popular, and there’s even that movie about y’all they just made, but, no disrespect, that’s not the direction I want to go in. We’re trying to be as educational as we are entertaining. Like Joe Jimmie and me, we’re going to do a study of alligators in the wild. No one really knows much about them. Anyway, sorry again. So, are you visiting up from Tampa way? What’s that town where y’all circus people live? I went there once to fish and met the Giant on the river. He and his wife are good folk. She’s only half, same as you. I saw her do that show where she climbs ladders upside down. Hey, are you related?”

“No, I live locally.” I gulp, hold my breath, press my tongue into the roof of my mouth, but still, I’m about to cry. To be fired, I can’t believe how bad it feels. And, for me, it was only for two minutes of my life that I was a person with a job. I lower my head and pretend to reset an oar in its lock. I make myself think about everything he said after he fired me. What movie is he talking about? And there’s another woman like me just a few hours away? I’ve never left this place, but I could. On the maps, Tampa isn’t far. My father could hire someone to drive me. My ex-employer keeps talking about lobster boys and midgets,

and I arrange my face to look as if I'm listening. Maybe my father can find the movie and set up a showing at our house the way he did for my last birthday when he handed me the newspaper's theatre listing and said to pick one. I chose the Marx Brothers, even though I really wanted *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I thought it might explain what happened to my brother in the war. But it would have been too hard on my parents. Instead, we watched *Animal Crackers* twice through and laughed all night. My ex-employer has come closer and holds onto my bowline. I pay attention.

“But, if I think about it, I need someone to strip skins and chop the meat for canning. All you'd need different is a table with its legs cut down.” He slaps the bow and the bottle of rum rolls down the length of the boat. I snatch it back. Now I have to offer some to him. Men do this. I tilt the jar towards him, and our fingers cross over each other as he reaches. I've touched men before—my father, my brother. Doctors have touched me. In books, characters say their skin melted into his. I never understood that. I've never wanted to hold on. I stretch my arm toward him to keep our fingers together for as long as I can. He tilts the jar and closes his eyes in appreciation. I watch all the small movements of his face. His temples flatten, his cheeks suck in. I follow the rum down his throat and see the cording of his neck.

“Whew. That's fine panther sweat. And smoother than anything I've been getting around here.”

“Rum from the West Indies. They have speedboats that come across to Jacksonville and then all the way up the rivers. This could have come from Jamaica or Trinidad. Or the Bahamas.” Now, I’m talking too much and my voice sounds too high. Is he giving me some sort of job back? I offer the jar to the Indian. He shakes his head. I think maybe he knows that I’m a woman. And I shouldn’t have said that about the booze. West Indies rum is expensive. He’s only offering me a job because he thinks I need one. And that I’m male.

“How about you come by my place midmorning, and we’ll see about it all. That is unless you make a habit of this giggle water here.”

I shake my head and wedge the jar behind me.

“I hear say that they’re going to repeal that law pretty soon, and we’ll be buying it in stores again. Who are your people around here?”

I don’t want to answer any more questions. I slide the oars through the water.

“So, tomorrow. I’ll be there. Thanks for the job. Much appreciated.” I need to row away. These days, at thirty-three, I’m losing my boyish good looks to wrinkles and a womanly softening around the neck. I see it whenever I look into the river. He’d have noticed in full daylight, which it will be at some point tomorrow. Although people just see what they want to see. I’m not going to think ahead. Even if he fires me at first look, it doesn’t matter. Tonight, I’m an employed person. I leave the men sitting

on the bank and only paddle around the next curve. I can still hear them.

“Life sure took that boy for a ride.” The white man’s voice is matter-of-fact. “Now, how about your mother? Do you think she’ll agree to y’all moving the village here for the winter? I’d have chickee lumber already cut. And I’d throw in a couple of pole barns for her sewing machines. You know it’d be a good situation.”

Two owls chatter to each other for a while before the Indian answers.

“I’ve heard it gets colder here in the winter than in Big Cypress. She might not like that.”

“Okay, blankets. I’ll promise blankets.”

Another pause. There’s the long splash of an alligator sliding into the water.

“She always says that children need meat to stay healthy.”

The white man, my boss, replies right away.

“Hey, the newspaper this week had an article about the over four thousand deer around here, more than in a long time. And loads of turkeys. That will do you, don’t you think?”

“My mother says this is unfamiliar land and not friendly to Indians. And she mentioned many times how much the tourists like our palmetto dolls and carved canoes and how fast her children can make them. And that this would be the most north our family has traveled since the wars.”

“Oh, man, your mother sure knows how to jew a deal. Let’s see. I can provide a meat serving a week, but wild pig

mostly. And I'll go fifty-fifty on the craft sales. And I'm hiring a bunch of her men for the show. Now don't tell me that's not the best deal of any of the exhibition places."

This pause is the longest. The river stays quiet.

"Did you know that my great-grandfather fought with your American Army right here at the Springs? When we ran out of ammunition, we hung water moccasins from the trees with deer hide straps."

"Is that a yes?"

"My mother will say. But you've answered all her questions. We need to get those snakes back."

I let the river pull me farther downstream. If I'm too close to the headsprings, the glass-bottom boats pass by with all their tourists crowded around the edges. One of them always notices me, and then come the whispers and suddenly their boat lists to one side from me having become another oddity to stare at. Some days I just think of myself as a wonder of nature like an alligator covered in her babies or a scarlet hibiscus rising eight feet out of the swamp and festooned with butterflies. Tonight I row under an ash tree until I'm hidden. There's no hiding from the mosquitoes, but I'm covered except for around my face, and the cigarette smoke will take care of that. I'll wait here until the moon rises to light my way home. In the meantime, there's a jar of good rum to finish.

What would Virginia Woolf think about all this? Or my friend, the one who sends me my books? I've always been tutored at home, privately, except for one year when a

colleague of my father's—they were much more observant than my family, anyone is more observant than we are—had his daughter study with me. They didn't want her around boys. I gave her the heebie-jeebies at first, but we started talking. Neither of us had ever been to the movies or to a dance, but she shopped in stores and had picnics by the river and wore a dress with a zipper on the side. I'd never seen a zipper before. In return, I impressed her with the books I'd read and that I'd voted once. I told her all about it. How my mother made them let me that first year women were allowed. The poll workers tried to stop me the way they did the coloreds, with the poll tax and the reading test, and they said the booths were too high for me. I didn't want to be there, but they spoke rudely to my mother, so I read everything they wanted me to and then translated it into Latin and Greek. I pulled a chair over to a booth, flipped up into it, and voted. My mother cried. I don't think it was about me. She never marched with a gold banner across her chest, but my mother opened her home for meetings and gave money. And then, less than a year before the amendment passed, so many of her suffragist friends died from the flu. The paper filled first with obituaries and then, later, because there wasn't enough space, just lists of names. We don't talk about it. I've never read about it in any book or magazine. You might not know it ever happened.

That story made us friends. It was strange to be the worldlier one in some ways. Our favorite book is still

Kristin Lavransdatter. We read all three volumes together. We gave each other pet names from the story and still use them in our letters to each other as if we were both women in medieval Norway. Only, even at my age, I'm stuck before *The Bridal Wreath*, and she's deep into *The Mistress of Husaby* with her children and estate to run. Her family moved to New York where there were more like them, and they found her a man almost the same as in the old days when my grandmother came from Lithuania to marry someone she'd never met. My friend says she's happy. Her husband works at a publishing house and provides her with books to send to me. My whole family, including the cook, loves the mysteries. If one is wrapped separately in brown paper, I know to open it in my room. Once it was *Ulysses*, and right here, on this little river, in this row boat, over an entire winter, I read a proscribed book. She told me she promised her husband not to read it, just to wrap it for me. She's fierce with him about my books, and it seems that if she stays in certain limits she always gets her way. Emma Goldman's autobiography is why I always carry a book with me everywhere. Not that I expect to need something to pass the time while I'm in jail, the way she does. The last brown paper book was *The Well of Loneliness*. Neither of us said anything to each other about that one.

She's the only person I've ever kissed. It had been in August, and we lay across my bed almost in a faint from the heat building in advance of the afternoon thunderstorms.

When lightning glared through the room we startled and turned to each other. Her lips tasted of sweat and the mint tea we'd been sipping to keep cool. Maybe that's why I've never told her about dressing like a man or about drinking and smoking and staying out all night on the river. I tip the rum and drain the last drops. I reach into my overalls and think about the kiss, about the small twists of hair on the snake man's knuckles, about how men, close up, have a smell that catches in the throat. I finger down into the places that feel good, but I've drunk too much. I light another cigarette off the one that's almost gone.

The moon is high enough that light scatters through the branches screening me from the river. Pig frogs grunt near the shore. The muscles in my face fall lax until the cigarette droops, and my eyes close to slits. I could sleep now, just for a while, before going home. The frogs hold their breath for a moment, and I hear a low growl. I think alligator until I hear the slow rhythm of an engine, and a speedboat sneaks around the curve. The polished wood of the hull shines slick in the moonlight, and the white stripe painted along the waterline reflects and wavers in the river. The men behind the wheel are the darkest-skinned of Negroes. The boat slips back into shadow. The engine shuts off. The frogs stay quiet. A cigarette butt glows with each inhalation like the single eye of an alligator, and I smell its foreign perfume. I let mine hiss into the water.

I've heard of these rum runners. Grenada, Montserrat, Jamaica, and the Saints—Kitts, Lucia, and Vincent—Cuba,

Haiti, Tobago. . . . The names from the atlas circle my mind in their miniscule script. I duck behind more branches. Wood scrapes against wood, water splashes, and men speak in whispered French. I can read French and speak a little. "Pardon me." "Nice night." "I mean no harm." I should know how to say all this in French. I hold my jaw tight, press my fingers into my cheeks, my temples, but not a word comes to mind. Their boat drifts back into the moonlight. There are guns. One is held loosely at a thigh, and the other wedges into a belt while the man tries to pole the boat upstream. I'm thinking clearly again. I remember *bonsoir* and *excusez-moi*. I understand that they've planned on coming up the rest of the way silent, but they don't know about the river being high. The boat slips backwards in the current. The second man puts his gun in a pocket in order to lift another pole over the side. They'll have to get closer to shore to find a bottom to push against. They must have figured it out, because the engine starts. The boat heads right for me.

I close my eyes like I did as a child to make myself invisible. I hear a pole finally scrape bottom and a grunt as the man leans into it. The engine shuts down, and the weight of their boat moves the water under mine. I rock and brace for the touch of our bows, for the yelling. I should at least open my eyes and take whatever comes like a man. That's funny. I work hard not to giggle out loud. The French words for "don't shoot, I'm a woman" stick on my lips. I open my eyes just as a pole reaches through

the branches and scrapes against the side of my boat. The man hesitates. A frog sounds like a finger running across a comb. The man lifts his pole. I close my eyes again.

The gun is louder than close thunder. I wait for it to hurt. I wait for hands to grab my boat. I wait for the next shot. It comes, as I now realize the first one did, from behind me. It sounds far away, but is close enough that air pushes against my cheek the same as when a flock of ibis fly past. I don't hurt anywhere. I open my eyes, and a man on the boat is flung backwards and tumbles over the side. I don't hear the splash, and I didn't hear the shot. Something half smothers my hearing. But I can see. A long line of moonlight follows his body down into the thicket of underwater grasses and glows orange against the plume of blood that spreads downstream.

The other man is nothing but a gun tilted up from behind the hull and pointed at me. His fingernails press white around the grip. Gunfire passes around me in waves of burnt air and brown smoke. I can hear again as a voice shouts for me to get down, but I can't stop watching. Bullets hit over and over into the side of the speedboat. It spins from their impact and jerks back into the flow of the river. The boat moves downstream as fast as if the motor had caught. It rounds a corner. The shooting stops. A great rush of movement sounds along the bank behind me. And the final boat man must still be alive because I hear the motor start.

“Clovis. Big Al. Go get the skiff and pinch him between

our boys waiting downstream. Don't sink the boat until we get the load off it." The bushes snap and crush. The voice is familiar.

"What about the ofay girl there?" This voice is unknown to me.

"I'll take care of her."

Our gardener, in a tone harsher than I've ever heard, has said these words. He wouldn't hurt me. He and my father are friends—best that white and black can manage. Both their boys fought in the Great War, both made it back, and both died sort of because of it. His son got shot outside a jive joint mostly because he came home from fighting and didn't remember the way things work around here. Or he did remember and just kept pushing until he got someone to kill him. He wasn't much different than my brother who came home half-dead in his mind and then finally hung himself. The gardener cut my brother down from the attic rafter and kept the secret from outsiders. And my father paid for his son's funeral. He wouldn't hurt me. But I should row out of here.

I put the oars in the water, but he grabs the stern and slides me close. He speaks over my shoulder in that same voice, like he's the boss.

"Miss. Those there were bad men and these be bad times. There's no allowing strangers to jack business away from hard-working locals. You're drunk. You can't be sure of anything. Best for you if you just go on and unremember all this. And your father would want you

to forget. Do you understand what I mean?"

His breath heats my neck. It smells of cigar and bacon. No one colored has ever spoken to me in this manner. What does he mean about my father? I nod my head.

"All right, then, miss. Now get on home and bury your head in those books. Your mother is a kind lady. You shouldn't worry her so much." He gives my boat a hard shove, and branches scrape around my head and shoulders until I'm in the open.

I'm free. I row against the current as hard as I can and slide backwards through the moon shadows of trees. Fish jump and silver through the air. Before, I would have thought that I was the only person on the river. The lightning-scarred cypress, the one too damaged for loggers, marks the edge of my landing. I turn the boat until it scrapes onto the narrow curve of sand. The jar rolls under my seat, and I lean down to it. I unscrew the lid and lick inside the rim for the last drops before I rinse it in the river until it doesn't smell of anything. Sometimes my father uses the boat to fish, and I tell him the jar is for bailing. He's already had too much pain from his children. What did the gardener mean that my father would want me to forget?

My board is where I left it. I settle on top, drop my hands to the ground, and roll my shoulders forward for leverage. My body slides through my arms, and I lean forward again and push again until the wheels underneath spin into a steady hum. Usually I rest many times during the trip home, but tonight I pump my arms until the casters flutter

and skid the board over the road as if it could fly. I don't stop until I reach the front gate. I lean against the wrought iron pickets and look through the vines that wrap around them. A light still shows from the living room. The gate is well oiled and quiet, and I slip into the shadow of my father's Studebaker and slow until my wheels are noiseless on the macadam path he had laid around the house to my back door.

I can see just their heads through the window. If they're up this late, it means my mother is almost to the end of her mystery, Dashiell Hammett this time, and won't stop until she finishes. My father will never go to bed without her. He has the newspaper or a ledger book open over his lap and pretends to read. His head drops against the back of the chair. Like that, with his mouth open and his face slack, he looks old. I count up the years. Sixty. The almanac says on average men don't live past their early fifties. His head drops to the side, and I feel sick all over. I rush to a far corner of the yard to throw up behind the hedge of yellow anise. The smell of licorice from the leaves calms my stomach. Average means half, which means many men live much longer. I go back to the path and look one more time through the window. My mother stands over my father. She kisses his forehead. I move past the window, around the corner, and pause on the top step of my door. An owl sounds from the chinaberry tree, and I moan and pull at my clothes as if my father were already gone.

When I know anything again, I'm leaning against the

door in the deep night. I open the latch and fall into the room. A light has been left on, and newly altered clothes perch at the end of my bed. I take off my gloves and hat and touch the vase of fresh-cut red and purple salvia on the dresser. I imagine my mother and the gardener, companionable and talking about mulch and soil and aphids, cutting them for the house—our gardener who bosses a gang. I slide the bar until it locks into place on the outside door. A gang of thieves. I roll into bed and push the new dresses to the side. I loosen the binder around my breasts. The bedside light has an orange tinge this time of night, a brighter orange than the hue of blood under water. Thieves and murderers. I turn off the light. And my father might be involved.

I CAN SMELL coffee from the kitchen. I'm still in my clothes from last night. It doesn't bother me anymore how my mouth feels after drinking or how thirsty I get, and without fully waking up, I know to rush to the bathroom. I manage not to vomit, but I sit surrounded by white porcelain and rock to the beat of pain inside my head. All the small bones in my hands ache and my shoulders hurt enough to make me whimper. I'll stay in my room today. I'll finish Virginia Woolf and then read my father's Tarzan novel while he's at work. I wish we had stronger vines in our trees. Mid-imaginary-swing, I remember. I have a job. How could that not have been my first thought this morning? I need a bath.

I unbuckle my overall straps and feel the grit of gunpowder under my fingers. The gardener's voice is in my ear, as stern as a white man's, and I remember the rest of it. I wish I knew more about the world. I'd know more of what to do, how to feel. Will this make getting liquor easier or harder? I feel immoral thinking this way. That I have a job is more real to me than seeing someone shot. I can't make that be more than a story in a book. The gun becomes a piece, the liquor, tarantula juice, and death is the big one. The dead man is a stiff, and no more than one of the minor characters that the author added just for a little excitement. We're not supposed to care about him. And besides, they were criminals. Is it even illegal to steal illegal goods?

I strip down and run the hottest water I can, even though the summer heat has held on through the night. It will soak the booze smell out of me. It will make me clean. I ease into the water, and it burns into the scraped and bruised places. My mother has lined the edges of the tub with jars of perfumed salts and oils, but I can't risk smelling that sweet today. The lavender soap is unavoidable. It lifts the dirt from my body. The grime floats into the water and grips the edge of the tub in a gray line. The steam fills with the smell of lavender from the soap, alcohol sweat, and gunfire, and my head spins until I'm too dizzy to lift out of the tub. I open the drain. I run the cold faucet even though I know the water will stay lukewarm and have a musty smell. Still, I splash it over my body until my head clears.

The air hangs almost as wet as the tub water, and I can't get dry even sitting in front of the fan. I open the outside door for ventilation and there, on the top step, a whole gallon jug waits, one of my mother's zinnias wrapped around the handle. I reach a bare arm out and bring it inside. I've seen men in the night, around a fire, twist a jug until its weight rests on their shoulder while they drink. I brace against the pull of my muscles and, with an awkward tilt of a forearm, the liquid pours into my mouth. It smells like a doctor's office, but my body eases.

With the door open a handbreadth, I sit in the narrow breeze and sliver of sun until I'm dry. I put cream under my breasts where the fungus gets them in the summer and wrap them in a fresh, tight binder. Flattening isn't the style anymore, but they still offer them in the ladies' catalogues. I put on a blue silk blouse with a gathered bodice and bunched sleeves that hide my arm muscles. Today, before I leave for my job, I want to spend time as the daughter of my family, to sit at the breakfast table with my parents and talk about the day to come, the world, the neighbors. I walk to the dining parlor in ladies' gloves, blue to match my blouse. From the hall I can hear them discussing the morning paper with each other as they always do, but their voices weigh heavy with an odd formality. My father speaks as I enter.

"Sholtz might win. If you don't mind, the butter please. Imagine, a landsman as governor."

"I've read that he's in tight with gambling interests, dear."

“Wife, they all get their money somewhere. The difference is what they do with it. I’d think you’d be for him since he’s strong for education.”

I lower my body. Moving is easier if I tilt it up behind me, but it bothers them. Not proper, my mother says. And I walk around the table rather than under it to get to my seat. They both go quiet and avert their eyes until after I’ve climbed into the chair. I used to think they looked away because I repulsed them, but now I think, in their minds, they are always considerate of me. I take off my gloves and fold them fingertips to fingertips.

“Some coffee, Daughter?” Her voice is more tender than usual. I worry that she knows something she couldn’t possibly know.

“Yes, Mother.”

I avoid her eyes and reach for a piece of the newspaper that they’ve folded and put to the side. For weeks, each of us reading silently, then putting the paper down silently, we’ve followed the story of the Great War veterans camping out in the Capitol demanding payment of their bonuses. The pictures of those tired, aged men—is that how my brother would look now, if he had lived? Today, there’s a photograph of a tank with the White House in the background. General MacArthur keeps threatening that he’s going to “clean out” the camps. What’s he going to do, shoot them?

I flip open the paper to the article below the picture and skim through it. This can’t be right. I go back to the top

and read every word and still it says that American soldiers gassed and shot and rolled tanks over American veterans. The edge of the paper crumbles in my fist.

“Here you are, dear.” My mother pours the coffee and adds three spoonfuls of sugar without a comment about my teeth. We look at each other, each through our own gauze of tears. My mother turns away and smooths her page of newsprint flat.

“Parker’s is closing their store. ‘No other way out’ they say. Every week another one. I’m so glad you didn’t get caught up in all that land speculation, dear. But be honest with your family, do we need to conserve a bit?”

While she chats, Mother reaches around the table and weighs down a plate with eggs, fried turkey, mayonnaise muffins, and a dollop of smoked whitefish that she taught the cook to make from the flounder shipped here from Tampa. Maybe I could take the fish truck to Tampa and find those people like me. Mother has set the plate under my nose. I crumble off an edge of muffin with my fingers. I know from experience that if I can eat this, I’ll feel better. My father reaches over and pats my mother’s hand.

“We shouldn’t be ostentatious. Just not to attract attention. But we’re not to worry. Think of what we’ve already survived—the big fire, the freezes, the phosphate mine bust. This is nothing. Here in the paper, look. The new commerce secretary says the depression has run its course.” He lifts his hand away from my mother’s and fingers through the gap in his vest to fiddle with a button.

This particular gesture means he's lying.

Mother and I look at each other. Her eyes glaze, and I know she's trimming the house budget in her head. I'll do my part. To begin with, I'll suggest that she tell him to hold off on the wheelchair. I smile and eat a piece of fried turkey. We divide the rest of the paper between us. My sheet has three Olympic swimmers, women, with their arms around each other—breaststroke, one-hundred-meter freestyle, and springboard diver. I'd be good at the breaststroke.

"Tell me, Wife. Do you think Roosevelt will save us? I'm not sure about all the handouts he proposes. Maybe I'll vote Republican this year."

My mother bristles and shakes her knife at him before she realizes that he's teasing.

"Applesauce. You, who give credit to every family in Ocala and have hired so many extra servants that I don't know what you do with them all, and I know you send food down to the shanty town by the railroad. Don't talk to me about handouts."

"People will do anything necessary for their families no matter what the law. So best give them food or a job. It protects us. Even with the patrollers at the Georgia border, more sneak by every day. I met a man from Idaho and another from Rhode Island and another from Oregon. And sometimes, women on their own with children. Don't get that look. You are not to go there. The danger is too great. Even I only go with the gardener and a few of his friends."

My fork stops mid-arc between my plate and my mouth, and fried egg fills the view of my half-lidded eyes. I picture my father at the lead of the group of coloreds. My hand shakes and eggs drip onto the tablecloth. Through the daze of leftover alcohol, last night is not just a story. My throat closes against a sudden nausea.

“Daughter, are you ill?”

“No, Mother. Just hot.” Did a man really get killed in front of me? Does my father know?

“Cook, bring some cold water from the Frigidaire. And here, have some iced pickles.” My mother can be loud when needed. Although, right now I’d prefer quiet more than a cool cloth. “You must take care, my dear. Remember what the doctor said about having fewer sweat glands, and this is a terribly hot summer.”

My father pays a lot of attention to buttering his muffin. Both he and I would always prefer it if she didn’t talk about my sweat glands. Without raising his head, my father shifts the conversation.

“Here’s some good news from Germany. Remember that man Hitler who ranted about ‘national honor’? He didn’t get enough votes to be Chancellor. I worry when politicians become nationalists. But this one has had a setback.”

“Cook, the ice.” My mother yells again. My father calls this her Baltic fishwife voice. I sip water to settle my stomach, but everything smells of gunfire.

“Mother, I’ll just go lie down.”

“Wait.”

“Yes, Mother?” Can she tell what I’m thinking? She used to be able to.

“Don’t forget your gloves. A woman needs to keep her hands soft.”

Sometimes all I can do is stare at her. We both suffer when the fantasy daughter she holds in her mind leaks through. But I take the gloves that she’s handing down to me, put them on, and scurry under the table and into the hall before she can say anything else. I do go to my room, but only to change clothes. I won’t think about last night. I have a job. It won’t last. I know this. But I might not be found out for a while. People prefer not to acknowledge me. And it sounds as if he’s going to keep me hidden from view. I wonder how long I can pass as a boy young enough that his voice hasn’t changed. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. I fill my hip flask from the jug and hide the jug in the hole under the steps. The flask is pretty, scrolled silver, with a cap that flips open, but it holds less than the jar. That doesn’t matter either. I’ll be drinking less today. I have a taste before I screw on the cap. My joints need it. I say “hello,” “good day,” and “sure, boss” in lower and lower voices. It doesn’t matter because whatever happens, it will happen out there in the world. Remembering Emma Goldman, I put Edgar Rice Burroughs in my breast pocket alongside the flask in case he fires me right away or was joking about the job or I find out he’s the unmentionable type of man that my mother worries

about. And if he catches me reading, *Tarzan* is more a boy novel than Virginia Woolf. I pull the jug back out and refill the flask up to the top. Now, I'm ready.

On the way by the kitchen garden, I snap a mint stem. It will mask the smell. My teeth grind the mint into a pulp while my eyes jump from side to side until the muscles around them ache. I'm watching for the gardener. I'm uncertain of whether I'm hiding from him or looking for him. Either way, he isn't here. I spit out the pulp and head towards the gate.

At the side of the house are the orange trees. My father told us that before all these tall, sprawling houses were built, before the big freezes, acres of orange groves grew farther than a person could see. My brother and I would lie on the grasses under our small, remnant orchard and imagine ourselves back in a mixed-up time of Indians, confederate soldiers, Spaniards in shiny armor, and lonely frontiersmen with long rifles. We felt washed by the smell of the blossoms.

Through my memories, interrupting them, is movement and the sound of humming. The gardener comes into view swinging a scythe and half sings, half grunts in time with the snick of the blade. The metal shines into my eyes with every lift. I'm breathing to match its rhythm. The blade stops mid-arc, and the gardener looks up as if someone called him. He catches me watching. I see my father come out the side door and approach him. I can't hear what they're saying, but my father's face flushes. The gardener

lifts his head in my direction. My father pivots and stares, and now he waves at me, once. He leaves the gardener, and I wonder where I'll tell him I'm going, but he veers away from me and goes into the house. The gardener turns his back and hums again as his arm lifts and falls and the blade cuts the summer growth of grass between the trees.

Many stories could make sense of what has just happened, including that my father is angry about how high the limbs on the magnolia tree were pruned. I heard my mother complaining. It could be anything. I turn my back to the orange grove. My breathing has become my own again, and I have a job waiting.

The way to the river looks different in the daytime. Sunlight blurs through the weight of the air, and I can't open my eyes more than a squint without the glare making them sting. The humidity runs like oil over my skin. And people use the road. Cars jerk and swerve even though there's plenty of room for them to pass. I don't know that I've ever gone out during the day without a parent. At least the depression means that no one drops spare change down on me anymore.

I reach the path and the cold river smell meets me halfway down. On the other side of the water I have a job. I tuck my board under a thicket of beauty berries, lift my body high behind me, and run fast enough that I make my own breeze. I hand over hand into the boat and row upstream and to the far bank with long, efficient strokes. The high water has spilled over the landing, but I weave

through the cypress knees until I find a place to tie up. I secure the boat and pull my gloves tight around my wrists. I'm ready.

I can hear little kids yelling to each other. Women squeal and men make that half laugh, half yell they do. I copy it under my breath. The Indian must be wrestling the alligator. I'd like to see that. Maybe he has to practice when there's no one around, and I'll watch. And maybe, well, all sorts of maybes are possible. But this won't last. Too many people around here know me and my family. Even if they don't tell the snake guy, my boss—I enjoy saying it, my boss—they'll tell my father. And that will be that. I have to take everything in as if it was only for today. Only this next hour, maybe. Even if he already knows, I have this moment, now. The tourists go silent. I hear a mockingbird copy a phoebe's trill, a cardinal's peep, a jay's caw. The tourists yell and clap. He must have put his head in the alligator's jaws.

I circle away from the people until I get to a batch of outlying sheds set up on piers. One of them has its door shut, but inside I can hear my boss talking to someone. I wait for a pause, but he keeps talking. I climb the steps and knock.

“Come in, but get a wiggle on and shut the door behind you.”

I pivot inside on one hand, shut the door with the other, and finish off facing forward.

“Oh, here you are. Sorry, I didn't mean anything personal

by the wiggle part. And don't be worried. She won't bite."

He's staring at the pine floor between us. I hear something like the sound of a quick broom over sawdust before the snake slides all around me. The body gathers and expands as it looks for somewhere away from me, away from him. Black scales flicker blue whenever it passes through the light from a window.

"Look at her. Nine feet, don't you think? And these indigos tamed up really nice. We'll drape her around the breasts of some pretty girl in a bathing suit and have them walk through the crowds. Those tourists will think you're the bee's knees, won't they? Calm down, darling. How about we find a nice frog for you?"

No one else is in the shed. He's been talking to the snake for a while.

"You're not scared, right? I mean, that snake must look even bigger from your point of view."

Alcohol sweat pops out my skin, but the fear smell, the one that makes wild pigs charge, disguises it. I hope.

"I'm fine. Do you want me to catch it?" I remember to lower my voice.

"That a boy. What a trooper. No, we'll let her get tired, and then I want you to handle her as much as possible. Be her friend. Get her used to this new life. Tell her she'll have food and someone to help scratch whenever she's ready to shed, and a heat lamp in the winter. And she'll do a service for her own kind by getting people not to kill every snake they can."

The head rises to the height of mine as it goes by another time. A black tongue stabs into the air like a split claw, and I see the red along her chin and throat. She is beautiful and fierce, and I don't see any sign of friendliness on her part.

“Come on. Let me show you the setup.”

I keep my body tucked down and close as I move farther into the shed. The blue snake twists on itself and comes at me, and I startle and bump into a barrel, and the barrel tips, and the man jumps and reaches over me to steady it. From inside the barrel are thumps and a thousand rattles.

“Oh, man, oh, man. We don't want all these angry rattlesnakes let loose on the floor.”

I look around me and plan. That cane-bottom chair will take me up onto the table with all the glass jars and, if needed, the cabinet beside it has enough clearance between the top and the ceiling—I have an escape route.

“Sorry.” I don't remember to lower my voice, but I think he'll put the pitch off to the circumstances. It occurs to me that he might fire me now. I've heard my father talk about having to fire people, but I never paid much attention. When do you have to be fired? Are there set rules? How many mistakes do you get? Sometimes I don't know the simplest things. Watson bumbles things all the time, and Sherlock Holmes still works with him.

“No problem. I got all excited about my new sweetie here.” The indigo makes another flailing search for a way out. She gives up and finds a shadowed corner. “I should have given you the tour right off.”

Half an hour later I know to feed the green snake her crickets and to keep plenty of water in with the mud snake, and have watched a bright orange snake eat a mouse slowly and whole.

“Okay, then. Almost time for another alligator show, and I’m going to spot Joe Jimmie just in case. Take care of all my sweethearts, and I’ll send over some grub for you later.”

He slips out the door, shuts it, gives it a test shake, and now I’m alone. The barrel rattles. There’s a thump from behind the table. I’m not exactly alone, and I can’t remember a single thing he told me. I go around the room touching things. Water snakes, especially cottonmouths, are the only snakes I know much about. Cottonmouths don’t back down, so on the river I’ve gotten a long look at them. I reach the bucket with frogs in it and remember that he said to feed them to the garter snake. I slide the board off the top, snatch a frog out, and put it in my bib pocket alongside the book. It kicks its legs against my chest and pushes its head up past the snap. I shove it down again and drag a chair close to the table and climb. On the table, inside a glass box, is a snake that could make me fall in love with snakes. Four feet of gold and turquoise ribbons ripple over a side swath of spring-water blue, and the colors shift depending on which stripe touches another and where the light falls. Here are the colors of river water contained inside a skin. I drop the frog in. I don’t watch and am back on the floor before I hear the first alarmed croak.

The frog continues to protest as it dies. My hands go

over my ears. The orange stain of blood in moonlit water hazes over my vision. I work it in my mind until the image flattens into a story. It becomes just another article in this morning's paper, set in smeared black type the same as "Negress found guilty for selling liquor" or "a smartly dressed girl taken for a ride and dragged into a clump of bushes" or the results of the baseball game between the Limerocks and the Phosphate City Lads. I drop my hands away from my head and look around the shed. In front of me are cages of crickets. They jump, hit the sides, jump again. Mice scramble in a box. A toad grunts once. I don't know what to do next. I'm sure someone with a job isn't just supposed to sit around. I hear feet on the steps and understand for the first time what it means to try to look busy. The door opens a finger width, and a voice asks, "Safe?"

"If you're quick."

The smell of beans comes through the door first, and then a young Indian holding a plate. The light falls over her features, and I think Negro, but she has one of their skirts on so an Indian for sure. She looks into the room past my head and searches. I clear my throat, and she goes on tiptoe and backs up before she sees that I'm not a snake. She hands down the plate.

Now she's going to look me over. I'd do the same. Like everyone else, she starts at my hands and follows my arms up. I've always found it easier to look away, remove myself, let them just have their time with my body, but today I

feel too real in the world to be erased. Her eyes flick up and down, especially down, along my skin and clothes as if she can only take it in small doses. I decide not to make it easier for either of us and stare at her right back. Her skirt is striped with reds, yellows, and blacks like a coral snake. Her poncho is a solid brown, and the strands of beads around her neck pile up on top of each other until they rise almost to her chin. Her hair hangs Indian straight, not wiry like a colored person's or even my Aunt Raket's. The bangs lie flat on her forehead and the rest is pulled into a smooth bun. And now we both look into each other's faces. I recognize the careful blankness of expecting to be stared at. I think she does as well because her head tilts and her lips go sideways into a crooked smile. I smile back. She sits on a box nearby.

“How many are loose right now?”

“Only the indigo.”

“Oh, she's as sweet as a fawn.” The girl pats her hand on the box in a complicated rhythm, and I hold my breath as the snake sticks its head out of the shadows, licks at the air, and moves past me. It slides onto the girl's lap. She lifts it around her shoulders and soothes it with her hands.

“Why does he think this snake isn't tame yet?”

“Oh, I come in at night. My grandmother would never let me perform. Sewing, making fry bread, and letting people stare at me while I do it—that's what I'm allowed. I tell her, well not directly, I just say it into the air or tell one of the children when I know my grandmother

can hear, that our whole lives are an exhibition. And I wouldn't put on a bathing suit like the white ladies. It would be dignified and respectful. But she ignores me. I think she doesn't trust me because I'm white educated. It took everything just to get to come on this trip with my uncle."

The snake circles down her arm and puts its head on her wrist.

"Have you ever seen a bathing suit, you know, to hold it in your hands?" She's whispering.

"My father sells them in his stores." I try to bite back the words. I've said too much. She keeps talking.

"How is it sewn? And they seem thinner than wool these days. Are they cotton now? And how do they fit so well?" The snake is bothered by her inattention and leaves for another corner. "And the colors. Do you know where the dyes come from?"

She's talking darts and support and width of straps, and I know I could help out since my mother once thought that sewing was something I could do. I was terrible, but still, I know things. But a man wouldn't. I just stare at this young woman with her wide nose and skin the color of leather on good books. Every time she gestures her skirt ripples all its colors.

The door opens quietly, and I watch my boss watching her. She keeps talking until a breeze from the outside reaches us. She shifts to look over her shoulder. He smiles at her. She stops talking, lowers her head, and slides past

him and out the door. She shuts it, and I hear her test the latch.

“Was she talking to you?”

“Yes, sir. Brought me some food.” I remember to lower my voice, but the effort makes my words slur. Now he’ll think I’m drinking again.

“These girls aren’t supposed to talk to men they don’t know. Well, more the other way around since men they don’t know shouldn’t talk to them. It shows disrespect.”

“Sorry, sir. I didn’t know.”

“This is not your fault, boy. I’ve never heard her say a word. I’ve known the family for years, and only every now and then her grandmother will say something directly to me instead of passing on her orders through her sons. That’s how they do. The women run business things. People don’t know that, and it gets them into trouble. I can’t believe she talked like that. What did she say?”

“We talked about snakes, sir.”

“Well, after lunch try to clean the place. I want it nice in case the Hollywood people look in. Don’t tell anyone, but I think they’re going to make a Tarzan movie here. I’d be great for the stunts, don’t you think? They say they’re going to bring in monkeys and elephants. Hey, have you made any progress with the indigo?”

I put down my plate and tap the floor in the best imitation of the girl as I can remember. My hand shakes from the drinking last night, but I think it helps. I let my palm tremor against the floorboards, and the snake moves

towards me. It stops. I reach out a finger, and we have a whisper of contact before it flings itself into the mess of potato sacks at the other edge of the shed. Only the snout shows. I wonder what its weight would feel like over my breasts.

“Fantastic. You’re a natural. After you clean don’t do anything but work with that snake. We could have her in a show by the end of the week. Good job, boy.”

Each time he calls me boy, I’m aware of the afternoon sun. It has filled the building and taken away all the shadows. It lights up each wrinkle on the back of the hand I have stretched out towards the snake. It makes a mockery of the word boy. I lift the plate and bend my head. I scoop up beans. I hunch even more and feel the flask press into my chest bindings. I wish I’d had a nip before he got here.

“I’m still curious about the girl talking to you. Maybe there’s an age rule. Maybe you’re young enough that it doesn’t matter.”

The indigo rattles something under its table, and we both look. Or I do. He’s staring at me straight on, in the face, for the first time since he saw that I didn’t have any legs.

“But you’re not that young, are you?”

I keep my head up. I watch him put the pieces together.

“I asked around about you. No one said much but that you went around at night on that cart, and that kids tell stories and scare each other by making the sound of your wheels screeching. They looked at me funny when I said

I'd hired you, but I just thought they were being ignorant about the crippled. But they knew."

He will fire me, but I will still have touched a snake and talked to an Indian maiden about bathing suits. I'm ahead of anything I've ever had before. But I want more. I hold on to my breath and to hope. Maybe he'll hire a woman.

"Miss." He looks ashamed.

My job is over.

"I'll be going." I don't alter my voice. "Thank you for this opportunity." I want to plead. To say that I'm a good worker.

"Boy. I mean, Miss. You know I have to let you go. Too many men need jobs just to eat and support their families."

"Of course. Again, thanks."

I'm already at the door. I balance on the top outside step and make sure the latch catches. I'm going to sit on the river and read and drink and swat at mosquitoes until dark. And I'll scare as many children as I can on the way home.

I walk hand over hand through the hammock and down the slow incline to the water. The oaks and maples and sweet bays give way to the cypress knees and the old, flat stumps of the logged trees that must have grown bigger than anything I've ever seen. I swing up onto one and sit on its edge. The center collapses into decay, and cinnamon ferns unfurl from the muck. I take off my gloves to lay my bare hands on the wood. Cypress trees, spindly, short, with feathered branchlets and gray scaled trunks, lift up out of the swamp forest. They lean over the giant stumps of their

former selves and sprinkle the sun over me.

A voice comes off the river. Through the trees, I see one of the glass-bottomed boats. They use an electric engine now and can sneak up on you—or could except for the tour guide. In a loud and singsong voice, he tells the story of the old trees and the railroads built to haul them out and the rafts that floated down the river to the Ocklawaha to the St. Johns and then to the saw mills in Palatka. He tells them to look around their houses when they get home. That almost everyone east of the Mississippi has furniture made from cypress trees, maybe even from this very river. He shows them the split hull of an old dinghy rotting in the underwater sands and, in a made-up story, proclaims it one of the steamboats that used to come up the river.

Once, my father took my brother with him on a business trip, and they traveled to Jacksonville by steamboat. My brother told me about the bad smells inside and how men stayed up all night playing poker, how the fire pan on top of the boat lit the way during the night, and how, from the top deck, he could see through the tops of trees and almost touch the stars. He made us laugh at the dining table for years, until he left for the war, by copying the accents of tourists from England and Germany and New York when he asked for more potatoes or butter. My brother could tell stories better than any novel. And the real wreck of a riverboat is down near the mouth of the Ocklawaha. I've seen it.

The boat captain's voice fades as he turns back upstream

to the park where his passengers will buy celery trays made in Japan that say Silver Springs, or tin alligators made in Germany, or soon, if that girl's grandmother agrees, corn husk dolls and tiny replicas of ancient canoes. That was the last run of the day. I can go now.

But I'm crying. I brace my arms against the cypress stump while my chest shakes against its bindings. Tears pool in the cracked seams of the wood. I don't drink or light a cigarette or cover my mouth with my hand, and sobs pour out of my throat. I cry out for my job, my brother, the old veterans, the forest that used to exist here, for all the times that have passed. I grieve for things I don't remember, the things I've never known. Inside me, in the air around me, I'm many women, women mourning. The broken bark scrapes against my skin as I shake. My arm flails into the spider-webbed, mossed center of the trunk. The women cry with me until I empty. I think I will lie here forever, but they press against me, into me, become me, help me take one shuddering breath and now another and another until I fill with the peppered smell of the young cypress.

I exist. My strong lungs gather air from around the trees and return it to them replenished. I exist in this world. I sit up from where I've lain over the rotting trunk and drop down onto the lattice of cypress roots layered over the muck. The messy, mixed smell of life and death rises around me. It feels good on my skin. I walk along the roots as if they were a tightrope and I was a world-famed and beloved performer. I balance with one hand on top of a

cypress knee and swing to the next. That Indian girl didn't seem beat down by working as an exhibit. I could work in a circus. I somersault along a downed trunk and lift my hands high and wide and smile for imaginary applause. All that crying, and now I'm silly like a girl. I scurry the rest of the way to the boat and don't stop until I'm back out in the center of the river. I reach for the hip flask.

The spout touches my lower lip, and I see my life the way it will be forever if I take this sip. Tomorrow I'll wake up to thirst and the comfort of a stack of books to read and an almost full jug under my back steps. My mother will keep altering my clothes, and my father will bring me stories about customers from his stores and fresh gloves whenever he notes I need them. We will exist in our delicate place of unspokenness until they die, and then I will stay in the house forever. I have a choice. I can know what will happen, or I can not drink and not know everything. I put the flask in my pocket. It warms against my chest. I pull it out, flip the top, and pour the booze into the river. Its weight swirls like clear oil over the river's surface. My fingers feel along the flowered scrolls one last time before I drop the flask into the water.

I do know some things. I won't ever live in a circus. I will never ask my father about the gardener and look for a lie in his gestures. But there will come a day that I make us talk about my brother. I'll read every day and learn. My friend will love me with her letters and packages of books. The river is mine with its alligators and snapping turtles,

and each winter the manatees will let me swim among them. Others should be so lucky. I have a life. And I will find work to do. As I've had pointed out, I don't need a salary. I could write for the paper. Or talk on the radio. No one would have to know who I am. I could sign off as Orlando.

Another rowboat floats into view, low in the water. The man has on fashionable clothes and a bowler hat, but they're frayed. Even sitting, he's terribly tall and thin. He's bailing water out with his hands.

"Evening." I touch the brim of my cap.

"And a fine day to you, young sir." His voice isn't from around here. "Do you know where I might best catch a fish?"

He waves a stick of bamboo that dangles a too-short, unraveling piece of string with the end tied onto a nail. An impaled worm writhes around it.

"In the shadows, under some branches, is your best bet. And watch for snags." I keep my voice low. I'm getting better with practice. "And here, this might help you bail."

I throw him the jar from under my seat, and he catches it.

He smiles at me.

"The gods will bless you and this river and the ones that come after as they have the ones who came before." His voice has a tender music in its accent. His oars bump and angle too high as he tries to row closer to the shore. The boat tips, but the man sits straight and true in its center, as if he floated in air. He whistles a slow tune as he rides the

current around the next bend in the river. Over his head, three swallowtail kites veer and dip in wide circles.

The day has lasted long enough for a final swim before the alligators come out to hunt. I could have told my boss a lot about alligators. Maybe I'll write my own book about them before he can get his done. It wouldn't just be about alligators. I'd share everything I've seen on the river in these years of watching. I'd have a chapter on manatees, of course. And one about limpkins. How they knock snails out of their shells. Their shyness. How the soft spots along their neck and back help disguise them as dappled shadows along a river bank. How in the spring they become bold and flap from tree to tree and scream in metallic voices.

A palm tree has fallen in a long stretch over the river. I wrap the bow line around the trunk, unbuckle my straps, and let the denim fall around me. I set my cap on the front seat and scratch through my hair into mats of sweat and shake my head until everything tingles. I loosen my bindings, and they drop away. With a hand on each side of the boat, I lift up out of my clothes and, in what I imagine is circus fashion, flip from boat to tree trunk and end with a belly flop on the water. The cold always hurts at first, especially on my breasts and through my underneath parts where they've been blanketed by cotton. I take a breath and somersault into and through the river. The light runs gold over the grasses. I follow it as far down as my breath will allow. A small spring pushes out through a rock ledge, and it blurs the water upwards as if it were smoke from

a chimney. I pirouette inside it and coil and release my center until I'm flying up to the light. I launch through the surface and into the air like a mullet.

"It's a sea monster come up from the ocean."

"Stupid, look at the face. She's a mermaid. With bosoms. And see the tail."

"Where?"

"Look under her. See the blue and green with gold shines in it?"

"I see it. I see it."

The boys are taking the river colors and inventing a tail. For a moment, I am their mermaid, and I feel my fringed and graceful tail.

The boys are a line of dazzled spots in my vision until I blink the water away. The number and size of them look the same as yesterday's group. They stand along the palm trunk and teeter back and forth as they point. The palm dips under the weight. One of them gets in my boat.

"Come on. Let's go get her. She'll be ours to keep."

"We could play with her."

"Even better, we could put her in a show and make money. We'd get rich."

"Or we could . . ." The biggest boy makes squeezing motions over his chest and the rest of them laugh. I drop under clear-as-air water that won't protect me. They're fumbling with the bow line.

It takes my strongest, Olympic-level breaststroke to swim upstream and to the bottom. My hands dig into the

sand over and over until a cloud of white rises around me and sweeps downriver. I swim within it until I'm under my boat, hidden in the curve of the keel. I gasp as quietly as I can. Most of them are in the boat, but not all. When they all get in, I'll reach up, tip the boat, and be gone into the woods before they can swim to shore.

"I can't see her anymore. What's that stuff in the water?"

"I'll bet she can change shapes. See that long fish over there? Maybe that's her."

The boys' images throw out over the water in the long, late-day light. Like shadow puppets, elbows crook up out of the sides, heads bob, arms rise until they reach halfway over the river. The palm fronds at the end of the trunk shake and dip into the water, and the smallest shadow collapses in on itself.

"Hey, pipsqueak. Why are you hugging the tree?"

"I can't swim. I never even saw this much water before." His voice is skinny and breathless.

"Me neither, nancy boy. And I'll bet none of us can swim. But don't worry. Look how close the bottom is."

This is an optical illusion. I still sometimes reach for things that seem right at my fingertips. The boat rocks and sinks lower as another one gets in. The water reaches almost to the gunwale. I give up on the plan. I can't drown them on purpose. Even my brother probably tormented strange things when he was young. I swim to the bow of the boat. I'll go under the tree, get behind them, and disappear into the woods. The palm fronds shake again, but

sideways, and a snake slides out onto the trunk. It raises its head and the mouth opens. I can't see the cottonmouth white from my angle below it, but the boys can.

"A snake." The boy's voice screeches high enough that the "k" sound is lost. The bow smacks my head as the last boy vaults into the boat. It lurches and water bursts over the side. I grab the bow and try to keep it trim, but the boys are stupid about boats. Arms and half bodies lean over one side and now the other in movements awkward with fear. I stay low and move between the palm trunk and boat, brace my back on the tree, and try to hold the boat steady from underneath. Up above me, the boys yell.

"Untie that rope."

"I'm not reaching close to the snake."

"Here, let me up there. I'll cut it with my knife."

The boat lurches, and a boy jolts over the side face down. Our noses touch. Even red from the sun, his skin is perfect, his lips smooth and full. His eyes go big, and no wrinkles spread into his temples. Who could think I was a boy? This is a real boy. He's recovered enough now to scream and fall back into the boat.

"She's here, the mermaid. Right there. She touched me."

The boat tilts up away from me as they all scurry to the far side. They're going to capsize. I scramble until I can just get my fingers over the edge of the boat. I hang and hope my weight is enough to stop the boat's roll. They're all screaming now.

"She's rocking the boat."

“She’s coming in.”

“Do something. She’ll eat us.”

The current pushes the boat against the palm trunk with me pinned in between. Maybe I can twist and get up on the tree. I turn my head, and the snake is closer.

“Look, it wants to help her. She’s a witch mermaid.”

“Give me that knife.”

The bravest of them all comes to my and the snake’s side of the boat. The boat lowers and scrapes my back against the palm. My face rises into their view. I’m pressed even tighter between the tree and the boat. The boy holds the knife up. His fingers go tight, but he hesitates. Another boy yells at him.

“Quick, before it speaks. They can hypnotize you with their voice.”

The boy slices the back of my wrist, but almost carefully. Still, blood drips down to my elbow and into the water. He cuts again, one wrist and now the other. He does it again, one and the other, each time deeper. Blood sprays into the air. I try to let go, but my fingers have locked around the edge. The boys’ voices change from screams to the cheering I’ve heard coming from ball fields, only wilder. They all move closer. Blood slicks under my hands, and my fingers go loose just as the boat rocks away from the tree far enough for me to drop into the water.

The river pulls me under the palm and out into its center. I float, faceup, away from the voices. My arms cross over me as I sink. In sunlight, blood plumes red rather than

orange. Sometimes I rise to the surface, but more and more and for longer I stay under the water. My skin dissolves, becomes liquid, but my eyes see everything. The fish they thought I had changed into swims alongside, longer than I am. Grasses brush down my back. A minnow fills my vision. It passes and becomes small again. My face breaks into the air another time. I breathe. I drop again. The snake swims over me, at the surface, her belly dark and water rippling around it. She swims with her head raised into the sky. Above her, past her, I see the low branches of trees and stacks of clouds, their bottoms tinged gray and pink. From under the water their edges bulge and distort like the view through my mother's magnifying glass. She will be sad that I've gone. Bereft. I used to think they'd be relieved somehow. That's not true. They'll grieve that both their children are dead before them. And if they find me, with my wrists cut like this, they'll think I killed myself as well. It will break their hearts beyond healing. This must not happen.

The snake has veered off towards the muddy edges that she prefers. With the strength that is left to me, I follow her under a tangle of downed oak branches. I touch into the underside of the bank and pin myself between the roots and limbs where alligators store their food. Should he have kept me on, I could have told my boss this. I will never be found. The mud stirred up from my efforts clears. There is no more blood. I become one thin line of sunlight shining into the river. ☹️🐍☹️



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