

# THE BOOK OF MARTHA

by Lily Hoang

## THE MAKING OF MARTHA

She puts Little Jimmy down and she stops there for a minute. Martha is admiring her beautiful son, his perfection. She is thinking about something, and she's thinking hard, taking her time with it: like, would she hear it or feel it first, those tiny bones breaking?; like, if his fingernails are sharp enough to fray the cotton of her dress; like, would he have the instinct to fight?; like, so much flesh. She wants to—but no. No, she can't.

She closes the door to my little brother's room. She closes the door to all those rushing desires, those nightmares, her fantasies. Little Jimmy is safely in his bed and nothing bad is going to happen to him and she's a good mother.

“Another one,” Kenny calls.

Martha rests for a second. She puts her weight against the hallway closet and it creaks. “Martha, you hear me?”

Nothing in the house is new. Not the furniture, not the washer, not the television, not the goddamn arguments, not even the clothes.

“Because,” Kenny shouts, “I can hear you breathing all the way from here. Go get me another beer, Jesus.”

Martha heaves her body forward. “Coming,” she says. “I’m coming there right now.”

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In three days, everything will be different.

In three days, all of Martha’s curiosities will be fulfilled. She will know everything she has ever wanted to know, she will be content.

In three days, Martha will put down Little Jimmy, just like she does every day, once at ten and once at a quarter to three, and three days from now, Martha will also feel tired, so very tired.

Imagination is a grand thing, but when obsession forces compulsion into action, something else comes out. It’s kind of like a fight between what’s imagined and what’s real, like which one might taste better in the end. And for Martha, the realness of the moment will feel right, transcendent: it will feel like her very first victory. It will feel like the whole of the weight of her body put on top of Little Jimmy and it will feel special, like nothing she’s ever felt before, and her husband will have to get the next beer himself. She will repose her body on top of his for a

while. She will have herself a little nap, with her son's small body lodged between the folds of her back.

In three days' time.

No sooner, no further into the future than anyone might predict. But no one could've predicted this. Even after death, this story is always a surprise.

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Martha's always been fat. When she was a little girl, the nicer ladies called her hefty. A heffer. Some people called her healthy, but there was nothing close to healthy about her. No one thought she was healthy. All the kids at school called her Marge the Barge, but Martha thought they were stupid because Marge is short for Margaret not Martha, but that didn't diminish the hurt of such a nickname.

So she hated it.

She didn't necessarily know she hated it—she was still a kid then. She only knew the effects. She didn't understand its causes. She didn't have names for emotions that swelter and boil—but it made her cry. Some kid, maybe Debbi with her buck teeth and poodle hair, maybe it was Juan with his mean smirk and sinister eyes, maybe it was Ariel, just like the Little Mermaid, only this was long before The Little Mermaid was even a Disney movie, but this Ariel was just as pretty and passionate, would yell out “Marge the Barge! Marge the Barge!” and her eyes would swell up like an allergic reaction and she couldn't breathe. It hurt too much. She didn't even do anything to them. She wasn't trying to talk to

them or bother them. They were just mean. For no reason except to be mean to her, and so she'd have to run to the bathroom. Or, she'd try to run to the bathroom, and for anyone else it might've been running but Martha was fat, she was a barge. She shuffled out of their sight, and her shorts went up like accordions between her thighs. She'd hide behind a stall until her eyes and nose became clear again, but she emerged splotted. She would have to return to the classroom, her pale skin mapped red to signify land, and all the other kids would watch and laugh and judge as the oceans slowly eroded the shores of her fat face until it was all white again, paler than before, and they just kept on mocking her.

It was cruel, but they were children. Children aren't innocent. Don't be fooled by their weightless eyes and laughter. Children are just young, but youth doesn't equate to not knowing any better. They know. They always know.

It wasn't just that she was fat, either. Back in the day when Martha was in elementary school here in southern New Mexico, backwoods even though there weren't any woods around, the borderlands, trashy like trash, Martha understood desire, full-bodied and hungry desire. She wasn't like the other kids around here.

As a girl, Martha knew she was something special. She was good at Math and Reading, had pretty blonde hair that her mama fixed into a bun at the base of her neck, and the cutest goddamn freckles. She didn't care about what the kids at school called her. She would show them—and she would. Later, much later.

And then everything changed because of Janie McDonagall.

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One day, in Math class, Janie McDonagall took a pair of scissors to Martha's bun, just because Martha got an A on her Math quiz and Janie got a D. D minus, actually, barely a hair above failing, and worse than her embarrassment was Martha. She was gross and she was yuck and she didn't deserve to get a better grade. She didn't deserve anything.

Janie did it in stealth, in silence. She'd hidden the scissors inside her desk. It was premeditated. She'd thought about it, planned it, meticulously even. So when the teacher, Missus Rodriguez, handed back the Math quizzes, Janie was ready.

The fact that Janie was so ready would lead anyone to recognize that she would've cut off Martha's hair no matter what—grade or not, nothing would've changed it—and motives are motives and Janie didn't need a motive, not really, for premeditation to be premeditated, but she had one, for sure: Martha's crime was existence. She was so gross she shouldn't even be allowed to be alive. Besides, what does motive matter if the result is the end and the end is always the same? And the end repeats itself no matter the causes—in parallel worlds, worlds on taut strings, in alternative realities like mine now, in every single one—Martha always gets her hair cut off.

A or not, D or not, those grades could've belonged to either girl, really, because Janie was ready. Even if she'd gotten an A and even Martha had been the one who got the D, Janie would've been ready in

every case. She knew what kind of girl Martha was: a kiss ass by any name is still a kiss ass, a nerd by any name is still a nerd, and a fat fucking lesbo kiss ass nerd freak by any name remains exactly who she is: Martha.

And so Janie slid her hand into the desk, quietly, quietly, quickly, and her slim fingers made loops around the scissors' green plastic handle.

Of course Martha didn't want to be a nerd. She liked the attention on some level. It was a new thing to her, praise, something she never learned at home. At least her teachers appreciated her. But what Martha wanted even more was to be cool. Like Janie McDonagall. She wanted boys to hold her hand even though she didn't like boys then, they were gross to her—maybe they still are, maybe they've always been—but she wanted, very badly, for them not to run away from her the minute she got within ten feet of them. She wanted them not to make fun of her. She wanted to mute their angry jabs. Boys were mean to Martha, and it's not just that they were mean. No, they were down-right cruel, and it wasn't all in Martha's brain either. They were cruel, and they didn't need to be so mean to her, she'd done nothing to deserve it. Except be, and her beingness was enough to warrant anything, everything.

Earlier that morning, the very fateful day that Janie McDonagall cut off all of Martha's hair, before the first bell rang for school to begin, this one bully Francisco, who had always been and will remain for the rest of his life a total dope, ran up to Martha and punched her in the gut. It wasn't hard or anything. It was just for effect. The action in this case was less significant than its reaction. His fist's momentum sullied into

Martha's manifold folds of fat. Francisco exaggerated his fist's ascent from the lard. It was an infection of jiggle, a convulsive wiggling, from his clenched hand up his torso and into his shoulders and head and then all the way back down, deep through his thighs and into his feet. All the while he was screaming as loudly as he could, louder than the loudspeaker announcing that the students should hurry into their homeroom classes, "The barge is docking! Run for your lives!" The crowd loved it. They were uproarious. Everyone was late for homeroom that day, and Martha waddled into the bathroom, yet again, lest the other kids see her cry, yet again. Fat girls have feelings, too.

This is what I've learned watching Martha all these years: fat girls grow up to be fat murdering mothers, but even fat murdering mothers have feelings. Even when she's no longer a mother because she's killed all her babies, every single last one of them, until all that remains of her bloodline rolls through her own body and no one else's, even then, Martha's got feelings.

But no one is left behind to notice.

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It took all of homeroom for Martha to stop crying.

She missed half of Reading, too.

By the time Math started, she was almost her normal color again. She looked so ugly. She always looked ugly.

Crying made it worse, but only a little bit.

Sometimes I wonder how things might've been different if Janie McDonagall hadn't been so mean. Maybe if Janie had cared just a little tiny bit about her words and her actions, her behavior, maybe then everything could be fixed. There could still be babies growing into children growing into adults who have themselves some babies too, and I wonder if Little Jimmy would always be known as Little Jimmy or if he'd change it to James when he became a man. But he wouldn't, so it doesn't matter. Wondering is for dreamers, and I never sleep.

But Janie didn't care. She didn't know about Martha's endless sadness, her sorrow, but she wouldn't have cared anyway, so she stuck her bony little purple glitter-painted fingers into her desk and quietly extracted the scissors. She had this sparkling grin on her face, an affect of innocence, and everyone knew, even absent-minded Missus Rodriguez must've known, that something was off, like way off, but she was taught, like all women are, especially good Mexican women, not to pry when there's nothing to be opened, so she sat back in her seat, happy, while all her sweet niños and niñas did their addition and subtraction problems.

Her hair was a wasp's nest of tangles and her glasses were unsightly on her nose. A film of chapstick shone on her skin from where she had missed her lips. Missus Rodriguez looked up all too briefly and said, "Now do your work, children. No more peeps, nada." They were angels, all of them, and she returned to her gossip magazine.

Missus Rodriguez lowered her eyes, and Janie was paying close attention. Even though she was very bad at Math, she was cunning. She

had smarts. She understood that one should never have witnesses, even if she's clearly the guilty one, no one should ever see. This is something Martha would learn more than a decade later. Now, however, there was only Janie and her green plastic scissors and her purple glitter-nails. She pulled one perfectly manicured finger along the clean lines of Martha's bun, just to see if she'd get a reaction and she didn't. Martha felt the finger, sure, but the yearn for touch made her embrace it. If anything, she wished it would stay with her forever.

Then, almost without thinking, almost automatically—the way one might retreat a hand from an open flame—she snapped the bun right off. One quick pump of the scissors and Janie was holding a big ball of Martha's hair, her hair that her mama would never let her cut no matter how much she'd begged.

Janie held it up, high and higher into the air, what victory.

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Martha never wanted to wear her hair long.

Before Janie went and did it for her, she used to beg her mama Bernice—my grandmother Bernice—all the time to let her cut her hair. Her hair was always so full of knots that it could've earned a whole Boy Scouts' troop worth of badges. A head full of split ends and knots.

"Mama," she said, "please let me cut my hair."

"Martha baby girl," Bernice said in response. Every single time she said the same thing. "You've got nothing."

The muted wallpaper was inconsistent and lumpy. It was old and peeling and worn thin in patches.

Bernice went on, “You’re ugly and fat and you’re just as dumb as a plate. Do you know how dumb a plate is?” She made her hands into a circle and her face was in the middle of it. She shook her head like she’d tasted something gross and made the plate disappear. “It’s like you ain’t got no brain in there at all. That’s you, Martha baby. That’s you.” Bernice turned away from Martha. She lowered her head and her shoulders rounded over. “Please baby girl. Give me this. Give your mama this one little thing to be proud of, OK? I want to be proud of you.” Bernice looked up and right at Martha. Her eyes were dolor sequins. “Please baby girl. You got nothing. Just your hair. Please. I’m begging you. Just give me this. Give me something to be proud of.”

And Martha said, “But mama, I’m not dumb. I’m not dumb at all.” And Martha said, “I’m the smartest girl in my class, maybe even the whole school.”

“No one gives three fucks about school smart. School smart won’t get you shit. Not here, not anywhere. You’re just dumb, Martha,” Bernice said. “Just dumb as a goddamn plate, only at least plates are flat and pretty. You’re like a pound of used bacon great, you get me? Jesus, get out of here.” She shoved Martha’s face away. She had her eyes closed because she didn’t want to see this monster she had made.

This was the relationship Martha had with her mama. So the truth of it was that Martha hated her hair.

She resented it.

Because her mama loved it, without loving her.

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On the inside, in those moments right after Janie cut off all of Martha's hair, she felt jubilant. Bully or not, Janie had metaphorically cut the strings that bound and bonded Martha to her mama. She was—felt—free. Inside.

But on the outside, well, that was a whole different play.

On the inside she felt a stand-up comedy routine, full of dirty jokes and primal laughter, but what she showed on the outside to strangers and teachers and all the kids in the school and to her family was a Shakespearean tragedy. The kind where there are no survivors or hope.

Inside and outside were so antipodal they couldn't fit on the same earth.

Outside, Martha had to perform anger. She had to pretend the whole world was over because she understood, fully understood, that Janie had to be held accountable for her actions. Even though Martha didn't have a single friend, not even one, she knew that Janie had to show some remorse, something at all resembling an apology, or else Martha would forever and always be dismissed as weak: a loser, an easily bullied fat girl, a whaled flop, a dud. If Janie wasn't punished, her mama would be right that she was as dumb as a plate and she wasn't. She really wasn't.

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My grandmother Bernice had good parents. Even though they hated Martha, they were honest, hard-working Catholic people. My great-

grandfather worked very hard, no doubt, and his wife worked even harder at her faith. If there's a truth about my great-grandparents, it's that they were hard workers. They saved. They wanted the good life for their little Bernice, one that would make God proud. They said Martha ruined my grandmother's life, and it's true. She did.

Martha is a destroyer, a warrior, a beast.

She is the monster who doesn't even bother hiding in your closet.

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Bernice had good parents, but she made Martha under the bleachers all the same. Isn't that just a hoot?

One day, in Algebra, Bernice passed the secretest of secret notes to Johnny Blainscoat, who she had the biggest crush on—of all time. Like during sleepless nights, she'd practice her new name: Bernice Blainscoat. She practiced her initials. She practiced in print and in cursive, for checks and the like. She had entire notebooks filled with signatures and hearts, signatures in hearts, hearts around everything. She imagined their future lives together, the way he would wake in the mornings with sleep still in his eyes and terrible breath and still she would kiss him with rapture. She imagined making him a fresh pot of coffee and squeezing oranges to make juice. She imagined their quiet evenings after supper, he'd read a book, curtailing silence to recite a particularly beautiful passage, one that might take her to the verge of tears, its elegance. She imagined the nights he'd take her out and the nice gowns he would buy her. She imagined him in a tuxedo with his hair slicked back, so handsome. She imagined the way

he would curl his body around hers when they slept, his bare skin silky against her back, his cock standing high and proud against her ass. This would be their future. It's perfect.

He was a dreamboat, Johnny Blainscoat: tall, exceedingly handsome, articulate, and goodness gracious he even played soccer. He was the goalie, of course, state champion and MVP for three years running and just a stud.

The only problem was that he never got the note because Joey Barrera got it first. It wasn't his fault. Either he.

Bernice, being so clever, had folded the note first in half and then diagonally and then in half again and then diagonally again. Then, she tucked some mysterious flap that manifested from nowhere like magic to secure the note into a pretty triangular pocket, and on the top of it, in an attempt to be extra clever, she wrote, "To JB. From BJ." Because that was her name—is, still—Bernice Jelinski.

It was an easy mistake, especially because Joey sat two seats away from Bernice to the left, whereas Johnny sat five seats to her left and three back, and so it only made sense that when she passed the note behind her, it reached another boy first. Another boy with the initials "JB" got the note and thought it was for him. How could he not? It was addressed to him after all. He thought it was fate. Destiny and fate can make such simple mistakes, so when they make one, it may as well be bold—and underlined and italicized.

Bernice didn't like Joey and certainly had no attraction to him. Despite his fair skin, he was, for one, a Mexican, and she could never have a half-breed baby, no way. Bernice wanted a baby girl. She'd always wanted one. And she'd always wanted that baby girl to be pretty and blonde, just like her, with skin as pale as paper.

Her letter detailed the many things she wanted to do with Johnny, to him and with him, whom she addressed as either "J" or "you," both of which aptly applied to both Johnny and Joey, and the letter itself? She'd composed it over the course of two weeks in Biology, drafted it many times in Social Studies, correcting this and that, moving over a comma one space just for looks and then removing it entirely. She borrowed from the most pornographic books she could find at the public library. The letter was hot, very.

Joey desired her instantly and without regret. Any sixteen year old boy would've.

Something as blunt as, "Want a BJ?" and he probably would've risen, shall we say, to her awakening. But her letter wasn't so indiscreet. It was written in cursive without a single error. It was lyrical and warm and honest. And dirty. It was very dirty.

At the appointed time, Bernice made herself available under the bleachers in the gym, a location she had devised herself. There was no need for romance or memories. Bernice didn't need sentimentalities. She just wanted a baby, Johnny's baby to be precise. It was an old gym, even back then, way back in the day, built decades before without any

renovations or repairs. The bleachers had been replaced once, but no one bothered refinishing—or even cleaning—the area beneath it. It was damp and littered. Mold and moss were everywhere. It stank of discarded sex.

Bernice had put on cherry lip gloss and brushed her hair until it floated and she wore a fluffy skirt with little blue eyelets embroidered into the flowers, daffodils without fragrance. Below all that sweetness, however, she wore a black thong, silk, with fine lace trim, and she smiled when she felt her pubic hair sift along its edges. She thought it was sexy and it was. Her pale skin was luminous against the blackness of her panties, hiding her virgin cunt, anxious and still obscure.

But, of course, Johnny didn't show.

Joey did. Joseph Fernandez Barrera did, and he was about to become a man.

He navigated his way under the bleachers like a hero, and upon seeing her all made up like that, he sprang the cruelest hard-on he'd ever had. "Hey," he said. He was immediately angry at his own banality, wishing he could've come up with anything more clever, more alluring, more magnetic.

"What are you doing here? You've gotta go. Now." Bernice stomped her foot onto the ground, hard.

"What am I doing here?" He became flustered, shot a hand up to his hair and smoothed it down to cover his embarrassed eyes. It was too dark to see, but that didn't matter. "You invited me!"

The ground was an unfinished cement. Pacing back and forth, twice he'd stepped on something with the unmistakable slippery texture of a rubber with viscous semen sealed inside, but he didn't have the temper or inclination to look down, to verify if they were indeed miniature aquariums of other boys' completed desire. He didn't allow his eyes to focus on his own inexperience in this situation, which was great, to be sure.

Bernice came to epiphany slowly, but at least she arrived. "My note," she muttered. "Yes." And just as quickly as she understood, she decided, being one without sentimentalities, that Joey was just as good as Johnny Blainscoat. In the dark and the dank, a cock of any stripe is good enough to make a baby girl in her belly. That's all she's ever wanted, a little baby girl to call her own. "Right." She whipped her foot back onto the bleacher and let her hand follow her curves, from her cleavage down her belly and right on down further. She used a finger to snag the silk of her panties, pulling them aside to reveal her pink and glistening goods. "Want a taste?"

Joey dropped to his knees, dragged his way over, and not knowing any better, not knowing what he was supposed to do, put his mouth straight on her panties and bit, but gently.

Bernice didn't know what she was supposed to do either, having only read the line in some dirty book she'd scanned too quickly from the library, so she did what they the women in the books did: she moaned.

“Do you like that?” he asked. His mouth was slivered with lace. She moaned, again. This time with more vibrancy.

She laid herself flat while he awkwardly fingered her and she took his semen in her mouth. The taste was as gross as all the rot around her. And Joey, being a virgin, didn’t understand the necessary lag time between orgasms. He demanded to have sex with her, like legit sex. That was, after all, what she promised. In the letter—to him.

He said, “You said I’d get more than just some easy blowjob.” He said, “You promised me everything.”

And Bernice, who knows why, maybe out of some sort of misguided ethics, acquiesced. Pushed vertical against a fake brick wall underneath the bleachers in the gymnasium, standing shamefully, Bernice lost her virginity. It took him forever to cum again and he kept on losing his hard-on, and her whimpering about the pain, her tears, her lack of moaning, just gritted teeth and struggling breath, well, all that only made it more difficult. But he did, eventually, ejaculate his semen into her vagina, which may, eventually, or may not have become Martha.

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By third period the next day, Joey wanted nothing to do with her, wouldn’t hold her hand or call her his girl. He wouldn’t even look her in face, declared her the worst lay ever and made sure everyone in school heard it.

A fly making its way to an abandoned feast might’ve heard him tell strangers—the cool kids who couldn’t otherwise take five minutes

to bother beating him up; the drama kids who were too busy smoking cigarettes and being deep; etcetera—all about his escapades with Bernice, the tramp, the cheap ho, didn't even know how to suck him off right. A fly might've heard him call her more terrible names, too, flat-ironed lies, how she begged for it in the ass, how she was so loose up in there that he could've thrown the wide end of a Coca-Cola bottle through and scored a motherfucking touchdown. She was filthy.

And she couldn't even make him spill his load.

"Would've been better to jack off with my left hand," he said. "At least then I could've got off, if you know what I mean." He started laughing, ribbing with his new friends to laugh along with him at his super funny joke, and they did, but they didn't mean it.

Yes, Joey talked big and loud, made himself prince of the school for a day, but fast forward twenty-four hours and the cool kids still didn't like him and he still didn't matter a lick to the athletes or the cheerleaders or the drama kids or the band nerds, even the Gifted and Talented kids didn't care. He didn't matter to anyone.

One day, that's all he got.

One day of talk and then he was forgotten, more irrelevant than ever.

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Lucky for Bernice not everyone believes every rumor that taints a teenager's lips, because not three days after she'd had sex for the very first time, Johnny Blainscoat walked right up to her in Algebra—right in the

middle of a lecture about the Pythagorean theorem, which to this day Bernice finds a mystery—and asked her to meet him under the bleachers for a real anatomy lesson. “I know all about anatomy.” He winked. “Got an A plus if you know what I mean.”

She fluttered her eyes.

Johnny leaned close, whispered into her ear, “It means I’m good at sex.” He stood up tall.

His eyes were shallow pools reflecting the sun. “Very good.”

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Johnny didn’t stick around either, but at least he didn’t make all the pomp and circumstance out of their fucking. It wouldn’t have mattered to Bernice either way because even though she had the crushiest crush on him, she didn’t enjoy sex with him any more than she had with Joey—and that was a big disappointment.

Bernice had always thought it was something one ought to enjoy, sex, and two for two, it was terrible.

The second time wasn’t quiet as dreadful, but it wasn’t ecstasy either, and that’s what she expected. That’s what she wanted. She wanted to be forced into uncontrollable, uncontainable, moaning and writhing.

She wanted to be launched all the way to Venus. Obviously, she wasn’t.

Not even close.

Later, by the time Martha’s in junior high, Bernice will be the most sought-after escort in the county.

Later, by the time Martha's nineteen and on her second husband Jimbo and second baby Little Jimmy, Bernice will be the most expensive whore in all of New Mexico.

Bernice always became younger and trimmer, not a wrinkle in sight. If anything, her skin firmed with age. Whereas Martha learned to accept her fate as a fat girl, a fatty, a slob, as undesirable—a fat girl turned fat teenager turned fat mother turned fat woman. Each progressive year just added more mass to her thighs and waist. Her breasts weighed so heavily they dragged her chest and shoulders to the ground. She looked like a fat hunchback and Bernice was a hotrod.

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Hers was a tautology of irrationality and insecurity, each begetting more of the other.

Its cycle is vicious.

\*

Martha never learned love from her own mama.

Bernice wasn't a bad mother, per se.

But Bernice wasn't a good mother, either.

She took care of her daughter—her love, her love, her joy—the way any mother who always wanted a daughter would.

And to any other baby girl, any other daughter, someone who wasn't Martha, Bernice might've been a good mother, but she was cursed. They were.

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Despite all the heartless things Bernice might've said—or didn't say, the act of withholding is more often more telling and more damaging than that which is spoken straight, like the silences between words and the breaths between notes in a sonata—Martha didn't hate her. No one would've blamed her if she had, not that she had anyone on her side to rally for her. Martha's diligent devotion to such a neglectful mother might be seen as foolish. But she loved her mama something fierce, as all little girls are wont to do.

But all that changed the day Janie McDonagall cut off her hair. The day Janie McDonagall cut off her hair, Martha learned—hate. To hate.

How to hate.

Whom to hate: everyone, spare no one, not a soul, not a body, not family or friends or enemies.

But more importantly, she gained a new emotion: the ache for revenge.

Revenge was immune to her hate, an indiscriminating hate, a hate fueled only by feelings, a hate without thought.

Ultimately, that's what Martha's story is all about: her urge for revenge and her inability to repress it. She shoves it down and down, but up it comes again.

Martha learned that she had to provide her own justice. No one else bothered to care about her or for her. No one would sacrifice a yawn to help her.

She was all alone.

It's an unjust world Martha lives in, one where she is the perpetual victim, especially when she's the guilty one.

Martha will never know guilt though. She'll never accept it as her own. Not for what she did to Janie McDonagall. Not for what she did to anyone else, either.

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Minutes move forward because that's all they know how to do. It's not their fault they are so fleeting, not their fault they cannot provide Martha rest from her hate and her anger and her need for revenge, that they cannot clone themselves into days. No, a minute remains always and forever just one lonely minute.

And Janie didn't even need a minute.

And so Martha hated, everyone and everything. She hated teachers for making her do work.

She hated them for grading her work.

She hated them for giving her good grades.

She hated them even more when they didn't give her the most perfect grades. She hated people for being mean.

She hated them for being nice.

But no one was ever nice to her, so she hated them twice as hard. She hated the sun for shining and the clouds for obscuring.

She hated the rain for dropping and the sleet and the monsoons and the budding of prickly pears and azaleas.

The wind she was OK with, but only in principle, because when the winds really hit the open New Mexico valley, she hated that, too.

And it all started because of Janie McDonagall.

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“Jesus, Kenny,” Martha says, and she uses the butt end of a lighter to pop open his beer. “It’s not even noon.”

He grabs the beer from her and doesn’t bother looking at her. He doesn’t see her scowling or her wrath. Instead, he flips between a documentary on aliens and porn. He doesn’t bother masturbating anymore. Sometimes, just looking for a few seconds is enough for him.

On screen, there is a wide-pan view of a cornfield and unrecognizable symbols look like they were branded into the ground. Kenny likes to watch TV on mute, so both husband and wife follow the camera as it moves closer and closer into the field.

Kenny looks towards Martha without acknowledging her face. “What?”

Now the camera is inside the cornfield, from inside the flatted corn. The camera shoots down and around and the rest of the cornfield is high with stalks of wispy blonde hair. A breeze blows through and it looks like dancing.

Kenny shakes the empty beer bottle at his wife. “I’ll take another one, since you’re just standing there doing nothing but staring over me anyway.”

He flips to the porn. The girl has no pubic hair and she still looks like a virgin. Her face is twisted like it hurts, but her mouth looks like it's shouting delight.

He turns back to the alien show. The camera offers an aerial view, and the cornfield looks like a beautiful maze.

Martha goes back into the kitchen to bake a cake.

## MARTHA SEEKS REVENGE

Martha cuts open the bag and dumps the ingredients into a mixing bowl and then she goes to get Kenny his beer.

“Here,” she says. She opens the top for him and goes back into the kitchen to finish making the cake. Her favorite part is cracking open the egg and watching how the whites move in relation to the yolk, how some of it wanders off and others of it remain to protect. Her least favorite part is mixing the damn thing up.

But she loves to hoist the mixing bowl over the aluminum pan and watch the batter drip down.

But no, her real favorite part is eating it. It is, after all, by her and for her.

It is, after all, my birthday.

Martha knows her daughter’s favorite cake: chocolate on chocolate.

She knows I prefer Betty Crocker over the imitation store brand, and the same goes for icing. “Some things are worth it,” I once said, tipping the cake mix into the basket.

Martha had, at the time, noted that I picked confetti with white whipped vanilla icing, but she must’ve forgotten about that when she was at the market this time. It was such an insignificant detail, a useless memory.

Martha sets the timer to make sure the cake doesn't burn. She sits on the sturdy chair and thinks about how big a thing must be to make those corn engravings. She wonders if aliens are the size of dinosaurs, the enormous ones.

\*

It's not like Martha doesn't know that the only man she's ever really loved is dipping out on her every chance he gets. Kenny's too good for her, she knows that. He hasn't said it, not explicitly, but Martha knows that he knows it, too, and that he capitalizes on it every time a hot girl walks by. Sometimes, he'd go right up to her and ask for her number. With Martha standing right there. And the dip-head girl couldn't reckon a world where a man this fine would be a woman like that. She's such a fat sloppy dump. No, Kenny belongs in the world of the pretty and athletic, people with careers and happiness.

"That couldn't wait," said flatly.

Kenny watches the girl's small ass flounce. Then he looks at Martha.

He makes a noise somewhere between a balk and a sigh.

Then he flips the channel. A faint white light rushes across the dark sky. The recording repeats. This time, the light is circled in red. The image is grainy. It just looks like a star, jiving away up there in the night.

\*

Little Jimmy and I belonged to different fathers, different husbands to Martha, but Kenny cared for us well enough. The tooth fairy only popped

into existence if Kenny were spending the night. Then, we all moved into Kenny's house.

I had only lived in a trailer my whole life. I'd never lived in a real house before, and that's how I knew something bad was about to happen. I didn't know what it'd look like or what would happen or anything. I didn't know if I'd survive it even. I just knew it was coming and fast.

\*

For my birthday, Kenny gets me a microscope set.

That night at dinner, Kenny looks all happy. He can't wait to watch me tear open the wrapping paper. He wonders if I'll be careful about it or not, if I'll peel each piece of tape, if I will roll the tape into a ball between my fingers and secure it onto my palm or stick it under the table like gum. Or if I'll slaughter it like a hungry monster because the revelation of what's inside the box would be so great that I'd shred the paper in havoc and joy.

"Martha," he calls out even though she's right there at the kitchen table with us.

She goes up next to him, and he smacks her on the ass, hard. "Go get me another one." He smacks her other ass cheek. "Baby." Maybe next year he'll save up better and get me a telescope to match. He thinks about me looking into space through that little lens and all the big things I might discover one day, by telescope or by microscope, and he knows it'll all start here, with him. "Please," he says.

The wrapping paper is solid purple, imperial purple to be precise, but Kenny doesn't know or care anything about colors, but he'd wrapped the gift himself.

\*

Martha met Kenny when she was twenty-two. She'd already had two babies with two different men. I was nearly six and Little Jimmy was still a baby. He'll always going to be a little baby, no matter what. My mother always thought she'd bond best with me, but I wasn't like her. Not at all. I looked nothing like her. I was only bones. And, although I talked to myself endlessly, Martha couldn't ever seem to talk to me, like our languages were came from different families and our gestures didn't convey anything at all. It wasn't that she didn't love me—and love me very, very much—but there wasn't any bond there.

Not unlike Martha and her own mother.

When Martha met Kenny, she was already living off the State because childcare alone would've guzzled up the bulk of any paycheck she could earn and she didn't know what she could do for work anyway. She didn't get her GED and she didn't want it. She didn't care enough. Or, she did it to spite Bernice. "You're just dumb as a plate," her mother used to say. "Don't be like me. Finish high school. Get a real job. You don't want to be like me."

And Martha didn't want to be like her mama, but she also hated Bernice enough to not do what she wanted, just because that's what her mama wanted her to do. It was her attempt at betrayal.

Besides, Martha didn't need some high school diploma to prove anything to anyone, least of all Bernice.

Besides, she had to drop out of school when she got pregnant with me, school policy.

Besides, she wasn't Kenny's type. For one, he had a job, like a real one. He worked at a doctor's office doing something. Martha never knew what, but she diligently washed his scrubs and hung them out of dry in the desert sun. She was sure to iron them every night and put them on a hanger by the shower so it would be convenient for him in the morning. She made a pot of coffee while he was getting ready so it would be freshest it could be. No question that she loved him and loved him desperately—because she wasn't good enough for him and there was nothing she could do about it except treat him like the best husband in the world.

And of course he was older than her, which is how she liked her men, thirty-four with a bald spot that he didn't try to hide, as if it were a sign of distinction, as if his lack of hair demanded respect. It worked on Martha, too, and lately, Martha was sure it worked on every slut on campus, not that Kenny went to the university or anything, just that he liked to kick a few back after a long day at work. "Give my head a rest," he'd say, and it took her too long to translate those words. She'd ignored all the signs, and it was mostly an enforced ignorance, one that endures.

After a while, though, she figured everything out, and nothing changed. She didn't even bother mentioning it.

\*

Martha pushes all the chocolate icing on the top of the cake and uses a spatula to evenly distribute the gloss. Then, she covers the whole thing with chocolate sprinkles.

She hadn't bought any candles. Didn't even think about it.

\*

Martha and Kenny met at the bowling alley that doubled as a pool hall that doubled as a metal bar. It was one of Martha's few nights out alone—one when her mother actually decided to be a grandmother and take care of Little Jimmy and me as if we belonged to her blood, too—and she was playing pool by herself. She looked up after sinking a shot and it was just like in the movies. There was a spotlight on Kenny and everything. Their eyes darted into each other's and it was destiny, Martha knew it.

And then a tall blonde skinny thing grabbed his crotch from behind.

Martha watched them walk away from the bar, stopping every few steps to make out and grope, but Kenny never lost eye contact with Martha. He kept his side-glance on her, and she openly stared at him.

After she banked the eight ball, he said, "Hey."

Martha wasn't expecting this. She hadn't even heard him come near. She had focused too much on her game that she stopped looking at its prize, just for a second, and then—poof!—there's Kenny, standing very close to her, and she said, "Hey."

\*

What Martha didn't know was that she was precisely Kenny's type. Oh, for the show of it he made out like he was into bombshells—and they were most certainly into him—and for sure he cheated on Martha all the time, but it was with fat Mexican hookers in Ciudad Juarez in motels that rent by the hour.

Because he was cheap, he rarely fucked them.

Blow jobs cost less, and he always cums in the end, in her mouth, on her face, on her tits, on her ass, in her hair. Doesn't matter because it's all just plain satisfaction and then he pays them for a job well done.

\*

After our dinner of no-name frozen chicken nuggets and frozen French fries and frozen broccoli, all microwaved to perfection, except for the fries, which were still icy in the middle, Martha turns off all the lights and brings out the cake. She flips on the lights and they all sing the birthday song and I start crying. That's how moved I am. Last year, Martha had forgotten about my birthday and none of my friends knew so I kicked it with them for a few hours after school and then biked back to the trailer. I knew Martha would be passed out and Little Jimmy would be crying, and that's exactly how it was.

Martha says, "Happy birthday," kisses me on the forehead, and places the cake in front of me.

Kenny gives me a wrapped box while Martha serves cake to everyone else. Her slice is very large.

I'd never gotten a wrapped present before. I don't even know what to do with it.

I pick at the tape and remove it fatally, taking part of the paper with it. Since the paper was already torn, I claw through the rest of it to reveal a microscope set, exactly what I wanted, exactly what I've always wanted. I don't really know what it is, but it's perfect. It's the most perfect thing anyone has ever given me, in my whole life.

I hug Kenny hard, whisper, "Thank you so much," and he gives my body a little squeeze, and much more softly, I say, "I love you."

\*

Kenny had sweet-talked me into watching Little Jimmy and took Martha to the Olive Garden. Not even six and caring for a two-year old: it was nothing new to me.

He put the ring inside a break stick, and he really meant it when he asked her. It's only later that he would regret his decision.

Not too much later, but still, later. Later, there is only penitence.

\*

After dinner, we women are clearing the table, and, "You didn't eat all your cake," Martha says. "What?" Martha looks at me fiercely. "Didn't like it or something? I made that shit for you."

I look down at the slice of cake that I've only take one bite out of—to be polite. Just for the show of it.

"You're such a little shit."

And Kenny's there all of a sudden. "Hey what's going on?" He saves the day.

"I was just going to my room is all." I put my head down to avoid Martha's eyes. I crumple up the wrapping paper and throw it into the trash. I tuck the microscope under my arm and go away.

I hate chocolate. My mother knows I hate chocolate. The cake is a punishment—but for what?

I go to the bathroom and gag, but nothing digested comes out.

\*

Martha knocked on Bernice's door. They are meeting her mother for the first time. Bernice opened the door, said, "Come on in, Number 'Three."

"Jesus," Martha said. "Please mama be nice, can't you?"

Her voice was not sly. She wasn't trying to hide her disdain.

"OK, fine," Bernice said. She nodded her head towards the living room.

Martha and Kenny sat on the loveseat and Bernice sat across from them in the easy chair. The table was covered in ashtrays and QVC was playing on the TV. The woman was smiling while furiously chopping something red, presumably tomatoes, and Bernice turned the channel before Martha could find out what it was for sure. Maybe they were bell peppers. Or chiles.

"Name's Kenny, ma'am," and Kenny made to stand to shake her hand.

Bernice lowered her hand to tell him to sit the fuck down. “No need for that shit,” she said.

She said, “We’re past the need for stupid formalities, ain’t we?”

Kenny finished standing up because he couldn’t sit back down fast enough because an object in motion has to stay in motion. He wiped his hands on his jeans, maybe to smooth them down—why didn’t he wear slacks? He’s so stupid—maybe to clear off the sweat. “I work at a doctor’s office, ma’am.”

“I didn’t ask you about that yet.”

“This is fucking stupid.” Bernice had put up new curtains. “You don’t matter.” But the wallpaper was starting to yellow at the corners. “You’re a goddamn bitch, mama, you know that?” Martha can barely count the empty glass bottles, each one large and expensive. Her mama loved whiskey and gin and vodka and everything else, too. “Let’s go.”

And Kenny followed Martha’s lead out of the door.

He knew he wasn’t the first, but he didn’t think it’d go down like this. There’s so much Kenny didn’t know and doesn’t, still.

There’s so much Kenny chooses not to know, oh Kenny.

\*

Outside of her mother’s house that day, Martha cried so hard she nearly toppled over. Kenny had to use the whole of his core strength to keep them both upright. He lowered Martha onto a curb and listened to her litany against her mother, one so filled with violence that he was, just for a second, scared, as if he saw Martha for the first time.

And just as quickly, “There, there,” and Kenny’s ephemeral feeling chased after an invisible little bunny rabbit like a greyhound around an oval track. Everyone is safe for just a while longer, except for that bunny, who is dead, already so dead it’s evaporated into its corpse into the air— and, “Breathe, baby.” He rubbed her back and pushed her hair behind her ears and her green eyes shone like scales under such a big moon. “Breathe it out, baby. It’s all going to be OK, just you wait and see, OK? Kenny’s gonna make everything OK for his baby.”

\*

I only found out about birthdays when I was four. Martha was showing me photographs and I pointed to one and Martha said, “That’s the day you turned one. Look at you. You were so perfect then.”

“But how’d you know?” “Know what?”

“That I was one?”

“You stupid, Arlene?” Martha slammed the album shut. She swung her body forward to gain enough momentum to get off the futon. We were still living in the trailer then, and whole thing shifted underneath us.

\*

Now, I don’t want to open the box just as much as I want to know what’s inside. Magic is in there, I know it. Magic and knowledge and everything great is inside there, but I resist and leave the box unopened.

Later, Kenny will ask me why he doesn’t see me using my new microscope set and I will stumble out some obvious excuse and Kenny’s

feelings will be hurt and it's all because I don't want to destroy something so perfect. But how could I explain that in words enough for Kenny to understand? "I have math homework," I will say, and the sign on my door says, "Arlene's Room," in purple glitter bubble letters.

\*

From my room, I hear a fight rev its engine. I push my fingers into my ears, but I can hear every word, even the intentionally quiet ones. Oh, a fight is nothing new for me, but this one is different. I could just feel that it is. The words are paced the same, the same script is being used, but something is wrong, and all I can do is wait to see what demons are coming forth. All I can do is wait.

\*

Things weren't always this way. In this one, Martha and me and Little Jimmy were still living in the trailer, so it must've been early in their relationship. Kenny took the family to Peter Piper Pizza for dinner, and he gave me a whole twenty dollars worth of tokens. Little Jimmy was too much of a baby to play, so I got all the spoils to myself, except for this stuffed purple monkey that I won from the claw machine. I'd wanted to keep it, but I got tons of toys and fun that day and Little Jimmy got nothing. That stupid monkey would become Little Jimmy's item, his safety, for the rest of his life, but there wasn't much left to that anyway, so it doesn't matter. None of this matters, in the end.

While I was out playing in the ball pit, Martha asked, "How was your day?"

“Long,” Kenny said. He yawned and stretched his arm around Martha and pulled her closer to him. “But it feels better now that I’m with you, babe.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that, and don’t you go pretending you ain’t know what I’m talking about.”

Kenny made a funny face and clownishly shrugged. Martha, too, started laughing, and even Little Jimmy in his baby seat shared in the good laugh.

A week before, I was watching the news and the anchor lady said there’s been an outbreak of water moccasins in ball pits across the country. The anchor lady said to be careful. The anchor lady said the employees did it because they weren’t being paid enough and even when they worked a lot, no one ever gave them over-time.

Everyone out there was laughing, and I watched from inside the ball pit, ready for a viper to strike.

I didn’t think death by snake bite was a half bad way to go. Maybe it would hurt, but maybe snake poison worked fast, I didn’t know. Maybe if that had happened, I wouldn’t be stuck here, caught between life and death, forced to keep on watching Martha for murdering me—and all my siblings, too.

\*

The smallest things on the inside. That’s what Kenny wants me to find with the microscope.

He wants me to find all the things that make a person sick, the things that can fix us, too.

\*

Nobody is laughing now and I inspect a swatch of earwax on my pinky finger.

The microscope set is a temptation. It's knowledge that I don't know that I don't know yet.

Martha screams mean things and Kenny goes even wilder back at her and everything becomes very loud.

\*

In this one, Kenny brought me noodle soup in bed. "There's my girl," he said. "How's the fever?" "I'm sorry."

"Oh, Arlene, what can you be sorry for?"

"I dunno," I said. "For being sick I guess. For being a bother."

He put his hand on my forehead and quickly lashed it back. "Too hot," he said, and then he laughed. "Almost burned me there."

"Can you leave the light on?" I asked. "I'm scared." "Course I can," he said. "Anything else my little princess?"

"No," I said. "This is perfect."

He'd spilled some soup on the blue Care Bear on my sheets, but that one was I didn't like so I didn't say anything. I just closed my eyes because they burned real bad and went on back to sleep.

\*

Outside it is night and the desert sky opens itself for the stars to make themselves be seen. These glorious fires, so bright even space can't hide them.

\*

Meanwhile, inside the house, the volume that been turned way up. I know the whole neighborhood can hear.

Meanwhile, inside the house, Kenny goes, "Fuck's your problem?" And Martha goes, "Fuck you. You're a shit and so is she."

And Kenny goes, "You know what your problem is?"

And Kenny goes, "You're a rack of shit. You're a shit and your mama's a shit and the only fucking thing good about you is Arlene and Little Jimmy."

There's a star inside me, ready to burst.

And Kenny goes, "But you? Forget about you." He makes to turn around and leave but then he stops. He goes right up to Martha's face and goes, "You're a bitch. I wish I'd never—"

Martha doesn't look at him. Her eyes are fixed on a bag of flour.

"—and you stink and you're fucking gross. I mean, do you even shower? Ugh, have you even looked at yourself lately? Jesus, and do you even hear yourself talk? You hear the stupid shit that comes outta that mouth of—"

Martha measures out a cup and a half of flour, sifts in a third cup of Hershey's cocoa powder, add a big pinch of baking soda, just a little one of salt.

“—eat and eat and eat? What am I even doing with you? I mean, Jesus, I—”

In another bowl, one and a half sticks butter, softened in the microwave, and a cup of sugar. Then, two eggs until it creams together, a medium pour of vanilla extract, and two-thirds cup sour cream.

“—shoulda known from the two men before me. I shoulda known. Your mama told me all about you. She sure as fuck did. Told me how you done ruined her life. Told me about those loser men before me. Told me I was too good for the likes—”

She adds the wet ingredients to the dry, gently mixing.

“—and you’re selfish and you’re stupid. You ain’t even finished high school. You’re useless. Can’t get a job. Who’s gonna hire you anyways? No one. Ain’t no one in this town gonna hire you. Everyone knows you’re—”

She greases two spring-form pans, delicately pours the batter in, picks up the pan and drops it flat on the counter spread the mix out evenly.

“—the stupid one, not you. I’m the stupid one cause I’m the one who married you. Me and half this town already more like it. Don’t matter. Yeah, I’m the stupid one. What was I thinking? I wasn’t thinking, marrying—”

She pops it into the oven, easy. “—mistake of my—”

Thirty minutes and like magic, it’s done.

“—have to pretend, you hear me? Shit, like I can get it up for you, you gotta be kidding me. Have you looked in the goddamn mirror lately—shit, you probably don’t even fit in the fucking mirror, do you? I can’t—”

In a saucepan, six ounces semi-sweet chocolate broken into chunks, three-quarters stick of butter, all on low until it bubbles. Martha removes it from the heat, lets it cool; she whisks in a tablespoon of simple corn syrup, half a cup of sour cream, and one short pour of vanilla extract. She quickly whips in two and half cups of powdered sugar until it stiffens. Until it hardens. She puts it into the refrigerator to cool and set.

“—couldn’t fuck you if I tried. I have to pretend you’re some other bitch, you hear me? Forget about something as sweet as love making, forget about it. No way. Ain’t happening. Most I can do is to do it in the dark so I can’t see—”

The cake cools on the rack for thirty minutes. Martha pops the spring latches and releases the two cakes. She spoons a thick layer of icing and spreads it out. She lays one cake atop the other and slathers more icing everywhere. It’s very creamy.

“—and you know, thank fucking God I ain’t have no kids with you. It’d be better for those kids if you just died cause even the State’d take better to them than—”

Martha eats the cake right there, standing over the stove. The oven’s still going so it’s warm on her belly. It makes her sweat. She doesn’t look at Kenny. She doesn’t bother dividing it into slices, just fork after for into and out of—

“—your mouth, your crude and ugly and stupid mouth. What have I done with my life?

What have you done to me?” And on and on he goes.

“You’re such a selfish bitch. That’s what you are.”

He sacks town after town, burning everything along the way, insult after insult, right on the sweet spot.

He goes on like that for hours. Martha never looks at him. Her face is serene, contemplative, baking cake after cake, making each one disappear into her crude and ugly and stupid mouth. Kenny pauses sometimes like he’s about to let up, but then he just starts going again. He’s an object in motion, and nothing wants to stop him.

She is the culprit. She is to blame.

Everything is because of her.

She’s a pig, a cunt, and who is she to disagree? Who is she to say he’s wrong?

Martha never speaks, says not a single word. No sound comes from her mouth, except chewing and swallowing, chewing and swallowing. Yes, she was swallowing everything Kenny was saying, every last crumb. Her eyes are composed. She is looking away to a distant land, to a time long, long ago.

\*

Meanwhile, Jupiter is out tonight. Jupiter, I learned in school, is huge. I know all about the planets, like how Jupiter’s gravitational field is what protects the Earth from meteors and comets.

Even if I were outside tonight, looking up at the sky, I doubt I'd be able to tell Jupiter from any other ordinary thing sparkling way up there.

I wonder if their shouting can be heard from the moon or any of the stars or the sun or if it's only the neighbors who will be woken and disturbed.

\*

And then, in an instant, everything changes.

A door is slammed. An engine turns over.

The suddenness of quiet: its reckoning.

\*

Just another lonely birthday for me.

\*

In the morning, Kenny takes a shower but Martha hasn't bothered to set out his scrubs and the coffee in the pot is tepid and too strong.

Martha is frying bacon in the microwave.

"Babe," Kenny says. His hair is still wet. "You know I'm sorry. Martha turns to him, crying, and says, "I know."

She opens her arms to her husband and he falls into her.

He nestles his face into the cotton of her housedress. It smells exactly like her, the woman that he loves.

\* Three days later, Martha just can't help it anymore.

She puts Little Jimmy down for a nap, and suddenly, Martha feels tired, too. Maybe she should take herself a little snooze.

She lifts herself onto the bed.

She cuddles around Little Jimmy. Her love, her love. He smiles and grabs his feet. Her joy.

He laughs that laugh of his and puts his purple monkey into his mouth.

So Martha adjusts herself.

By placing her body on top of his.

And she rolls, back and forth and back again, until he is dead.

## MARTHA, CONFINED

Mothers are not always cruel to their daughters, and Bernice once told a story to Martha and Martha told me one too, my butterfly lids flitting into sleep.

\*

“Once upon a time,” telephoning down the generations, matrilineal imagination.

\*

How to understand femininity, one story at a time.

\*

Variations on a theme: of abandonment and hope, of a happiness that blinds.

\*

“Once upon a time,” had said Bernice to Martha. Martha was living in her grandparents’ attic then, and the ceilings fell sharply down at an angle.

“Once upon a time,” said Martha to me. We’re almost a family. Kenny’s snoring in the living room.

When the house is full of screaming, “Once upon a time,” I say to Little Jimmy. He coos because he is still alive. Martha has not yet killed him.

\*

Bernice had said, “There was a beautiful girl and she was a princess, only no one knew it because it was a secret. She didn’t want anyone to know. She wanted to be just anybody else, except that she was so pretty that everyone said she was the prettiest in the whole kingdom.”

“Did she know she was pretty?” Martha asked.

“Of course she did.”

“But, what if the princess isn’t pretty? What happens if she’s ugly and fat?”

“Shush up,” Bernice said. “All princesses are pretty. None of them are ugly and fat.” “None of them?” Martha asked.

“Not even one,” her mother said in response.

\*

Martha said to me, “There was an old woman that everyone hated because they called her a witch because that’s what she was.”

“Is this a scary one, mama?” I asked. “I don’t like the scary ones.”

“Shush up and listen,” she said. She turned off the lamp beside my bed and the whole room became a shadow.

I pulled myself closer to Martha.

She said, “But she wasn’t a bad witch, not really. It’s just that everyone thought she was that way, but she wasn’t. Or she didn’t want to be. She even grew pretty flowers in her garden to share with all the people but none of them wanted any so she closed off the garden so no one could go in.

“Then one morning she noticed a whole patch of flowers were missing. She didn’t think nothing of it, but then the next morning, another patch went gone too.”

“Who took it?”

“Shut it. I’m gonna tell if you just wait. Jesus, you got no manners, girl. You got no manners at all.”

“I’m sorry mama.”

“Just listen cause then the next night she didn’t go to sleep. She was gonna find out who done run off with her flowers. They were real pretty ones. You’d like them. They’re called rampions, the flowers, but most people know them as rapunzels and they look like upside-down purple spiders.”

“Oh I know this one!”

“Damn it, girl. If I gotta tell you just one more time to shut it, you’re gonna be in real sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So the old woman was waiting behind a large pecan tree and then she saw the thief. He was wearing all black and he looked like a leopard on the hunt. He opened up the sack he had slung on his back and pulled up as many flowers as he could and threw them in there.

“The old woman got pissed like she’s never been pissed before.”

\*

“I gotta warn you,” I say to Little Jimmy. “This one is only a little bit scary.”

Little Jimmy stuffs his monkey's tail into his mouth. He reaches for his feet with his free hand.

“There's a real pretty lady named Maria. She had black hair and powerful eyes. People said her eyes were like nets because she could catch anybody with them.”

Little Jimmy is wearing overalls, and I had put a stone in his pocket so he could find a treasure in there later, like a surprise.

“She ended up marrying the richest man in town, and they moved into his big house and he even had a car even though this was a long time ago. They had four babies together and they were very happy.”

\*

“One day it was raining,” Bernice had told Martha, “and the beautiful girl was outside reading a book in an orchard nearby but she could not run fast enough to avoid the monsoon. It came down hard. Her clothes were heavy and her feet were soiled with mud. And her hair—” Bernice reached down to pet Martha's head. She let her fingers dive into a cloud of sunflower curls. “Well, her hair was just a disaster. Worse than yours baby girl. Worse than yours has ever been, if you can imagine that.”

“Oh, it must've been real bad then.”

Martha's room always smelled like piss. She didn't notice it after a while of being up there.

It just became normal.

“Oh baby girl, you couldn’t even imagine what a mess it was, because the wind was blowing all around her and the rain fell in sleeves, but by the time she reached the palace door—”

“Woah! There’s a palace door? Where’d that come from?”

“Shut it. I’m getting there, OK?” Bernice said. “The princess was running towards the palace door the whole time but she didn’t know it because she had to run with her eyes closed so the rain didn’t make her blind. That good enough for you? There’s always a palace and there’s always a palace door. That’s it.”

“I’m sorry, mama.”

“Like I was saying, by the time she got to the palace door, her hair was swirl going straight up to the sky. No one had ever seen hair done up like that. There were butterflies and all sorts of flowers tangled up in there. It made her even more beautiful, and her skin must’ve just eaten up all the rain because it was glowing. Her skin looked like there was a river under it. She was so pretty.”

“Was it still raining, mama?” Martha asked. “And who lives on the inside of the castle? Are they good guys or bad guys?”

Bernice slapped Martha’s face. “I’m sorry.”

Martha’s face became hot like a furnace. Even in the dark, it was burning. “I’m real sorry.”

Martha felt a sting in her eyes, like a thousand atomic pinches.

\*

I will never tell my own children any stories.

Martha will kill me before I even get my period for the first time.

\*

“The witch was ready to kill the man, this thief,” Martha said to me. “Oh mama, please say she didn’t!”

“Course she didn’t! What kind of shit story do you think I’m telling you?” “I’m sorry.”

“Good, now shut it. The witch was getting ready to kill the man with a lightning bolt she had inside her magic wand, but then the man fell onto his knees and begged her not to. He said he’d only been stealing flowers because his wife was very sick and she needed them or else she would die.

“Now the witch wasn’t stupid. Not at all. She saw something in this man, something like a wager.

“She said, ‘All right. I’ll let you go, but your wife has a baby inside her and I want it. I’ll take good care of it. I’ve always wanted a baby girl of my own. That’s what I’ve always wanted.’ And so the man agreed and then he went away.”

\*

I never expected to survive. I knew mine would not be a happy ending. It would be an ending that’s just an ending, nothing after, just an end. I knew this long before Little Jimmy died.

But even back then, I understood my mother’s lack of self-control, her wrath. I knew there was a monster masquerading as a mother.

\*

“The witch collected the baby, and she loved it very much. She didn’t want anybody to hurt her, the baby, who she named Rampion after the flower, so she made a high tower appear out of a pile of rocks and she put Rampion in there to keep her safe.”

\*

I didn’t think my ending would last forever, but it does. It just goes on even after I’m dead.

\*

“One day Maria and her husband got into a bad fight.”

Martha, yelling at Kenny again.

Kenny, throwing it all right back at her.

\*

“Every day at noon, the witch would call for Rampion to let down her hair, and she’d climb up it and bring her a chicken sandwich for lunch and some casserole for dinner.

“They were a happy family,” Martha said to me. “There wasn’t anything wrong. The witch was real nice to the girl. She was a good mama to her.”

Late at night, after Bernice and her grandparents had already gone to sleep, Martha uncoiled her bun. “I’m strong enough,” she said to the moon outside, “but you have to come save me. Please.”

\*

Bernice said, “It took the princess a long time to get to the castle because it was raining the whole time.”

“Why didn’t she just—”

“What’d I tell you? Fuck’s wrong with you? You stupid or something?” Martha pulled the comforter over her face.

Bernice swiped it back.

Martha was crying, and her mama softened.

“The crown prince and his mama just happened to be home. See, the queen was ready for her one and only son to get married, but it wasn’t like he could just go marrying anyone. She had to be worthy. She had to be special. Princesses sailed through the seas and other clopped in their horse carriages across many lands, but the queen didn’t think any of them were good enough. They’d been looking for a long time, and the king was getting tired of this whole thing, but he wasn’t one to cross his wife.

“And then here comes our princess, knocking on the palace door.

“She was totally drenched, but when she curtsied before the queen and the prince, a silver halo glowed all around her. The mother and her son had to hold up a hand to shield their eyes from such a genuine marvel.”

\*

“Save me,” she whispered.

“The fight was the worst one they ever had, and Maria’s husband was so mad he went away. “Maria cried all night but he didn’t come back.”

Little Jimmy grabs my pinky finger and puts it in his mouth. He’s teething and grumpy. It feels like there are knives coming out of his gums.

\*

“They take the princess into a bedroom that’s going to be hers for the night, and everything in the room is gold. The princess has a nice room in her castle, but this one is much nicer.

“In the middle of the room is a bed, but it’s not like any bed she’s ever seen before. Do you want to guess what it looked like?” Bernice asked.

“No, ma’am,” Martha whispered.

“That’s a good girl,” she said. “It was huge. The tallest bed the princess had ever seen in her whole life. It must’ve had fifty mattresses laid one on top of the other, and there was a gold and emerald ladder for her to climb up.”

\*

“She cried and she cried and she thought her husband was never going to come back again.”

\*

“Please,” she said.

\*

“Twice she lost her footing and nearly fell. The queen and her son laughed, but it wasn’t mean. They weren’t being bullies.

“Because the princess was a beauty, all glitter and shine, and although she struggled in her ascension up all those mattresses, her feet were miniature clouds, guiding her up without any danger, only grace.

“From down below, her dress looked like the sun.”

\*

Martha said to me, “The old witch wasn’t bad to her, but Rampion was all alone. She never had a friend, not even one, except for the old witch whom she called mama.

“You wouldn’t know anything about though, would you, Arlene? You got all the friends anyone could want.”

I pulled the sheet to cover my mouth. “What’s that?”

“No, ma’am,” I said. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“No? You ain’t got friends? Shit, girl, you don’t know what lonely means. But I get this girl. I get Rampion. No one gets her like I get her.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All you do is talk, Arlene. Don’t know how to shut it.” “I’m sorry. I’m real sorry.”

“Whatever. What was I saying?” “Rampion. She gets lonely, just like you.”

“I ain’t in this story. Do go getting confused on me,” Martha said. And then Martha said, “Rampion’s got no human friends but she likes to sing to the song birds and they like to sing back. It’s real beautiful and gentle, like the wind blowing but not too hard, just perfect.

“And so this one day there’s a prince and he hears her singing and he falls in love, just like that. Doesn’t need to see her or nothing, just her singing is enough for him.

“Now that’s love, Arlene, and don’t you forget it. That’s what real love is like, just like that.”

\*

“She went to the river to cry,” I say to Little Jimmy, “and the Rio Grande held all her sorrows and kept on flowing until it reached the ocean.

“She could feel all the waves, breaking across her face.”

\*

“But remember this, Arlene. Listen up,” Martha said. “You can’t go hiding things from your mama. She always knows what’s up.

“Rampion got to thinking she was all smart and she was gonna trick her mama the witch, but the witch knew about the prince all along. She wanted them to meet.

“Turns out she wasn’t such a nice witch after all, because she only wanted them to meet so that they could fall in love and then you know what she did?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t.”

“Damn right you don’t,” she said. “She let the prince climb up Rampion’s hair one day and when he got to the top, the witch took a pair of shears to her daughter’s hair. The prince fell all the way to the bottom of the tower. There were roses down there and they cut up his eyes until he couldn’t see anything anymore.

“Then, the witch flew away and left Rampion up there all alone.”

\*

“She took her babies, Little Jimmy. She took all her babies down to the river, and she let it hold them, too.

“They floated in the water like fishing bobblies. Their clothes got dark in the river.

“Soon it was night, and her husband still didn’t come back. She felt the deepest sadness and sang a saraband, and everything around her wept. And so she went into the river too and held her babies tight.”

\*

“All those mattresses,” said Bernice, “but the princess couldn’t get a lick of sleep. All night long, she rolled this way and that. She couldn’t get comfortable. Something hard was underneath her, but she couldn’t tell what it was.

“That,” said Bernice, “and she was scared she’d fall off the bed!”

Martha didn’t laugh the way Bernice thought she would. The girl had fallen asleep. Bernice pinched her daughter. “I’m telling a story here. Listen up.”

\*

“Finally her husband came back, but he couldn’t find his family anywhere,” I say.

The front door slams, and I know Kenny’s gone again. “Arlene! Get in here,” Martha calls.

“They’re in the river, Little Jimmy. They’re all in the river.” I give him a fast kiss and run out to help Martha.

\*

“The prince wandered off into the woods but he couldn’t see anything because he was blind so he kept on walking. He walked all the way to the ocean, and then he just kept going.”

“Did he die?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s what happens when you try to trick a witch.”

\*

Little Jimmy is crying, and I go back in to change him. “It’s OK, Little Jimmy, I’m right here,” I say. “Maria’s husband is right there, too, standing right at the river and he sees what he’s done. He sees what a terrible mistake he’s made.”

\*

“But what about Rampion?” I asked.

“She rotted in that tower until she died. It was a prison up there, and the witch never let her free.”

“And what about the witch? Was she sad?”

“Course she was. She was very sad, but just then she was walking in the woods and she saw another girl, one even prettier than Rampion, so she scooped her up and flew her up to the high tower. She named her Rapunzel, and all day long she played with bones. They lived happily ever after. Now go to sleep already.”

\*

“They say she still walks along the river, singing late at night. Singing a song to her babies, singing them back to life.”

\*

“The prince and the queen are waiting for the princess in the morning. She slides down the ladder. They ask her how she slept and she didn’t

want to be rude so she didn't say anything was wrong. They asked her again, just to be sure, and she said, 'Like an angel.'

"They had to do it," Bernice told Martha. "She was just so pretty, they had to cut off her head.

"And as for the prince, he never got married. Turns out he's a faggot anyway. No one gets a happy ending, Martha. No one."

\*

"Is that what she deserved, mama?"

"There is no such thing as justice. Remember that, OK? Promise me you'll remember that.

The closest we can ever come is revenge." Martha closed her eyes.

\*

We fall asleep together, me and Little Jimmy. I crawl into his cradle, and together, we sleep until the sun slides our eyes with light.

## MARTHA, IN LOVE

To understand Little Jimmy's death—all of our deaths—this is Martha in love.

Martha is always in love. No matter what kind of monster she is, the men fall in line and the children fall dead.

But all the while, she is in love. Her love, her love: her joys.

\*

What can monsters know of love?

\*

Martha loves being in love. Nothing feels better than it. It's the feeling that's best of them all.

But Martha is a monster. Riddle me that one.

\*

Who are these fools who fall in love with a monster?

These men named Martha their wife. It's profane.

\*

These husbands made simple mistakes, one after another, mistakes that might otherwise be forgotten, but not with Martha. Martha is always the victim—and so she murdered us her children, for revenge, all in the spirit of justice.



HUSBAND No. 1: ARLEN

This is in the day before cell phones and apps. This is in the day when people still used maps to navigate, the stars having been abandoned long ago.

\*

Martha picks up the phone and dials for pizza. It's just Martha and Bernice now. Now that Bernice makes all her money from sex, they have their own place. They don't need to stay with her grandparents anymore. They have their own house and Martha has her own room inside it. Who knows what sucker Bernice is fucking tonight, but Martha knows the guy is rich, like filthy.

"Yeah," Martha says into the telephone. "I want some pizzas."

"Yes, ma'am. Go ahead when you're ready please."

"I need a large, no two—"

"Just one second, ma'am. I've got another call. Can you—" "You told me to go ahead when I'm ready. I'm ready."

"I asked you to hold just one second. Didn't you hear me?" The voice stops for a minute, breathes a few times. "Did I say that out loud or did I just think I did?"

"Stop calling me ma'am."

"Apologies, ma'am, but I really gotta take this other call. Can I put you on hold? I'll be right back with you."

Abandonment is silent. It never makes a big show. “Sorry about that ma’am. You wanted a—”

“I told you not to call me ma’am.”

“I’m sorry there ma’am, but it’s company policy. Gots to be polite.” “Call me Martha, and bring the pizzas yourself.”

“Shit, Martha from school? Yeah, it’s Arlen.”

Bernice’s cigarette butts are falling over and out of all the empties on the coffee table. If a crime happened here, it would be a fingerprint paradise.

“And what can I get for you?”

“Give me five large pepperoni and Italian sausage pizzas. Throw on some olives too while you’re at it.”

“You having a party there without me, Miss Martha?”

\*

Nine months later I am born, and who knows where Arlen went. I never knew him. Martha didn’t keep any pictures of him or anything, but if I had to guess, I’d say I look a lot like Martha because I, too, am hideous.

## HUSBAND No. 2: JIMBO

At least Arlen had offered something close to a proposal. Jimbo didn't care shit about shit, expected his woman in her place, where it's right for her to be.

\*

“You're such a fucking loser.”

Martha isn't crying but she's close, right on the dangerous edge of vulnerability, of weakness.

Martha should be showing by now, but she's so fat that she just looks normal. She's seven months along with Little Jimmy.

“Stupid bitch, I ain't got time for your shit today.” Jimbo grabs his keys.

Martha knocks his hand, hard, and he drops his keys onto the parts of his feet that the flip-flops don't cover.

“What do you even do, Jimbo?”

“What do I do?” Jimbo points at his chest. Then he makes a circle with his finger so he's pointing it right at Martha. “What the fuck do you do?”

“You just sit on your ass all day long. Don't do shit.” “I make more money sitting on my ass than you do.” “Whatever,” Martha says. “I get my money just fine.”

“Yeah, from the government and from that whore of a mama you got. Yeah, go ahead a peacock about that shit.”

“Then why you always broke?”

“You’re fucking dumb, Martha,” he says. “You don’t get business. Money’s got to go out before money can come in. It ain’t hard thinking. You just not smart enough to get it.”

“Don’t take some astronaut to do simple math.”

“That’s a good one.” He spits out a mean laugh. “You ain’t smart enough for that shit.” “You’re the stupid one.” She props her hands on her hips.

“Just get the fuck out. Go back to your trash mama. I ain’t want to look at your face no more.”

“No.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said no. I’m staying right here. Ain’t going nowhere else.” “You think you’re talking to me like that?”

Martha slides her hand down the front of Jimbo’s sweatpants.

“This is where I belong.

Can’t make me leave if you wanted.”

“OK, I hear you.” Jimbo pulls at the knot of lace and the elastic gives. His pants fall to the ground. “Open up.”

“And if I don’t?” “Well if you do—”

\*

They get married the next morning at the county clerk’s office.

\*

Two weeks later, Jimbo gets busted with a pound of Mexican dirt weed. He finds God in Narcotics Anonymous and divorces Martha quick.

Little Jimmy isn't yet born.

Jimbo's not half bad though. Even though he doesn't have to, he still throws Martha a little money here and there, for the baby.

Until there is no Little Jimmy left to support.

HUSBAND No. 3: KENNY

Already, Kenny and Martha have met. Already, he has proposed. These stories have already been told, there's nothing new to change or add: history's stubborn and resolute stability, its stagnation muddy in what has happened and a refusal to amend itself.

\*

The day of the wedding is perfect. Sunlight opens up every possibility for this day of celebration, covers the entire party with warmth, holding us tightly. I am the flower girl and no one says anything about Martha's wedding dress, which is black and way too tight. Her folds drape and turn.

Everything about the day is really quite ugly, especially when it portends a future filled with such nastiness. It's revolting, the future. It's disgusting, and everything begins here, with a march to Fate's end, with me throwing rings of white daisies and Martha stomping her way down the aisle.

She's smiling because she's happy. Kenny's smiling because he's nervous.

I'm smiling because everyone is looking at me.

He doesn't know what's going to happen next, no one does. Not Martha, not me, definitely not Little Jimmy. And that, in the least, is something we all ought to be grateful for: our naïveté is a blessing on this day of blessings, Amen.

Fiction

Someone is about to kiss the bride. I turn away from the contract.

This Man and his Wife run down the carpet and away.

Rice falls and bubbles rise up. There is cracking and release.

Martha smiles and it is revolting.

## AN AFTERMATH

Afterwards, Kenny says, “I’m sorry, babe. I love you.” He puts his arms through Martha’s arms and kisses the back of her head.

Martha says, “Oh Kenny.”

\*

Their apologies are empty. Babies die. My brothers and sister, and then, later, me.

Our mother rolls over our bodies with her body. She squeezes air out of us.

She doesn’t break our bones. She doesn’t need to.

We die because our hearts are not strong enough to withstand the weight of Martha, all 250 pounds of her, mounting us one by one. Five years, and all four children are torpid piles of dead.

Dead as beats. Dead as doornails.

Without spark, without life, without futures. Kenny is still apologizing, to this very day.

Why? Who cares. The end is always the same. An object in motion can only stay in motion. Planets maintain their rotations.

Stars continue to beat light against the starkness of a moonless night.

\*

In death, I shrug.

Fiction

Nothing new here.

History is rolling and the future is gone.



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