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Hey Sister

The End of the Beginning

I'll say it right off the bat--I gave myself willingly. You didn't do anything I didn't let you do. You didn't take anything I didn't give. I was no hapless victim. No. I may have been blindfolded, but I was responsible for tying the knot, no one else.

We started out together in the windy city, such beautiful gothic girls, so other worldly, floating in crushed velvet, with skirts that brushed the ground. We had carnelian and jingling bells strung on leather, bumping up against our bellybuttons. Swaying all seductive in our finery and smells. We had all the goddess trappings, didn't we? Her shiny stones, her elixirs, brass lizards tangled up in hair, silver spiders, so much dripping wax.

The window beside the back door was broken, it made us cold and nervous. When we couldn't sleep, we would come out of our bedrooms and meet in the kitchen at three or four a.m., with a pot of steaming peppermint tea. Restlessness skulked around the house. A single lamp glowed hollow against the green flowered wallpaper, and we talked until drowsiness pushed us down the hallway, back into our beds.

Before we moved away to dip our feet in the Pacific, there was talk of damp rainforest air in our hair, our skin glowing with moisture. I said, 'Get your wings ready butterfly,' and we moved out to the temperate zone, where things stay green all year. I can't really say we didn't fly together. At least for a little while, we were cruising through a lush world of possibility.

A House by the Sea

A green, salt breeze whips through the open windows, ghosting the curtains in and out. Frances and Emma live in a house with 13 rooms. The perfect number for a couple of witchy girls. They're high up on a hill overlooking the city. This is the promised land. Moisture pushes up through every surface, making things fluid. This is a place where nothing is fixed, where the sense of constant shifting pervades everything and everyone.

It's your 30th birthday and we are surrounded by women. Flowers and presents fill the room. Julia gives you a magic wand like the one she gave me for my birthday last year. Twin magic. You are delighted.

We're all taking turns massaging your feet with cornmeal and talking about what you mean to us. I surprise myself by being overwhelmed by tears when it's my turn to speak. I hug you and your upper body feels spare and delicate like a bird. It's nothing like your legs, which are solid and strong as oak.

Later we're at an after hours club. You're in your blackest black, your dark curls long and loose around you, dancing carefully, set to seduce the world. I'm slouched in a plush corner, smoking and drinking rum and coke, watching you. My own hair is red and shiny, I glisten in the dark like a fox, my body filled with the heavy pulse, the drone of drum.

She walks into the kitchen casually, says good morning to Frances as she passes the table. Frances looks up and sees Emma wearing the same dress as she is. It's made of a deep red silky material that rides all over Frances' skin like hands.

-Nice dress.

-Thanks, that's why I got it. It looked so great on you. Does it bug you?

Emma is half smiling at Frances as she fills the kettle. She has lipstick on one of her front teeth.

-Well, yeah. Sort of. I mean we do everything together already. I don't want to have to check with you each morning to make sure we're not wearing the same thing.

Emma turns on the gas and rummages through a box of tea. The even hiss of blue flames fills the space between them. There is a faint smell of peppermint mixed with the smell of Emma, something sharp, mixed with the patchouli oil she always wears.

-Whatever. Just forget it, it's not a big deal. I'm going to go change.

Emma's gaze follows Frances down the hallway until there is the sound of a door closing and the muffled hum of music. She slowly starts twirling around in a circle, watching the smooth fabric float out around her hips as she spins. She closes her eyes, going faster and faster, her arms outstretched, her hair catching in her wide smiling mouth.

I remember this:

Old blood trapped in sanitary napkins, wrapped in toilet paper, left in the bathroom wastepaper basket to rot until someone gets fed up and empties the garbage. If my sense of smell were less acute, maybe it would have been fine, but it always made me gag. It was as if your body was everywhere, coming in through all my openings.

Frances finds herself distractedly walking the halls of the big house in the middle of the afternoon. She stops at Emma's room and pauses a moment before pushing at the closed door with her foot. It swings open easily and she walks in. Dust motes swirl in a shaft of sunlight filtering in through the dirty window, and Frances stands there, looking.

What are all these things in here? Things like hers. A painting on an easel. The rows of necklaces on the walls. Coloured lights on the ceiling. The patchwork coat flung across the bed. Emma never had these things before.

Frances leans against the wall, dizzy.

Whose room is she in? Whose things is she looking at?

The house is stifling, the air so thick with incense that it's hard to breathe.

The heavy, sweet smell mixes with the smell of cat shit from the unemptied litter boxes. Emma loves cats, but isn't the most fastidious owner. Often she'll run out of food and it will be a day or two before she buys more. The cats will moon around the house, climbing on forbidden tables and counters, until they finally give up, and head outside for mice.

Your teeth make your smile huge and engulfing. I can easily imagine what your skeleton looks like under that tent of muscle and skin.

It's night and they're out. Frances has gone off drunk and dancing with her artist friend Theo. He has the saucer eyes of a madman and the tongue of a poet. Emma watches them kissing for ten minutes before she comes over and pulls Frances into the bathroom.

-Do you really want to do this? You said the thing with Theo was over. Are you going to regret this in the morning?

Frances starts to cry.

-No. I know he's not good for me. You're right. And it's really been over for a long time. Thank you, Emma.

Frances gives Emma a quick hug and then goes to the sink and peers at herself in the mirror, wiping her eyes. One of her contact lenses pops out. They look everywhere for it, but they can't find it. For the rest of the night, Emma has to be Frances' eyes.

In the spare room Frances lies on her back on the bed. Under her is a soft white bedspread. Emma bends over, runs a finger down the front of Frances' shirt, down her middle to her navel. She takes a pair of scissors and cuts down the line her finger just travelled. Opens the shirt up wide. Cuts down the length of the sleeves, and gently slides the waistband of Frances' skirt down to her pubic bone. Frances lies still, half-naked on the bed, her eyes watching Emma, never leaving her face. Not saying anything. Trusting.

-This won't hurt if you take a deep breath and look the other way.

Frances inhales and feels a long cool sensation in her abdomen as Emma cuts the skin. Warmth trickles down her side and soaks into the bedspread. She starts to hum softly, a single low note that resonates behind her ribs, moving her attention up high, into her chest and head. There is a feeling of pressure and then a jingling sound as Emma lifts a bloodied silver charm bracelet up into the air and drops it into a bowl of water beside her.

-Remember this? It's got all the charms your mother and grandmothers gave you on it. You swallowed it so you would never lose it. You're lucky it didn't kill you.

-To help you heal faster and to build your strength, says Emma, to explain the diet she is recommending to Frances.

-Rice cakes, steamed spinach, blackstrap molasses and licorice tea. To keep your blood red, full of iron. You've got to stay strong.

Emma has tied Frances' hands and shoulders down with her palms facing up.

Using a razor, she makes a fine slit into the smooth skin of Frances' left forearm.

Slowly she lowers her head and places her lips around the opening, and Frances feels the gentle suction of her mouth.

Frances' green eyes flash up at the ceiling. Her thoughts are racing, like mantras in her head, tumbling over each other.

Of course. This is how it was meant to be. She's doing this because she loves me. This is her way of showing me how much she loves me. She wouldn't hurt me intentionally. Never. Like a sister to me, loves me that much. Her own flesh. Her own. And blood. Her own blood too.

You wouldn't like this, all choppy, all chopped up.
So many fragments.
You liked everything all smooth and conciliatory.
All fine on the surface.
But even now there is so much that cannot be remembered or spoken.
So much subterranean.
So much still in the vein, deep in tissue, miles from lips or tongue.

Frances is outside, standing on the hill that overlooks the water. Her hair dirty and crazy wind-whipped. She's spending a lot of time outdoors, becoming elemental, growing thin and wild. The air in the house has gotten quite bad. She has to be outside, talking loudly, yelling into the wind, where no one can hear her. Letting it take all of the incense smoke out of her hair.

She carries a tarnished silver cup in her hands, full of thick greenish brown liquid. She kneels and pours the bile out onto the ground, pours until it is empty and she lets the cup fall.

She raggedly claws through dirt, her fingers scratching, digging a hole the size of her head, the size of her voice. She tears through the earth, smells damp and worms all around, lies face-first in the hole, screaming, face wet with tears. Inside her a voice is chanting: *the earth absorbs everything, the earth absorbs everything.*

You can't have the things that are mine.
You can't have the things that are mine.
You can't have the things that are mine.

Frances stands naked in the centre of her room. She looks at herself in a full-length mirror, tracing her index finger along her belly where the scar is. She holds her arms above her head, watching the skin stretch taut over her ribs, her small breasts. Her body is full of so many more lines than it used to be: bones, scars. She's paring down. Becoming quite essential.

She dreams, her body still and exhausted. A wolf in sheep's clothing. A wolf tearing at her flesh. She dreams, the gentleness of lambs, the wolves the lambs all mixed in together, so nobody knows who's who anymore.

I'm listening to Elvis Costello and I become his Allison:
I know this world is killing you, oh, my aim is true.
It is true. The way my body is falling apart, I can't be long for this world.

You said you were in love with me once. Really. Would like to come and show your great big love now? Would you like to come and try fucking me now? Or have you tired of that?

Emma looks at the heart of Frances, watches it beat. It's the final thing, the last favourite. Taking her embroidery scissors with the bird handles, she snips it out, and pops it in her mouth. The membranes slide soft over her tongue, and there's a slick wet sound as she swallows it down, making it part of her body.

Before the final cut, Frances rises up and out, becoming the lightest filament, a vapour, a snowflake, something pure and very far away. An ash, floating on air.

The Beginning of the Future

Bad witch, you've been a very bad witch. You've gone and broken all the rules to fill your cup. Your cauldron up.

Too bad you forgot to take my liver. Too bad you gave me what I wanted all along. I'm free now.

And now you're lying flat, weighed down by your new house, your feet with their sparkling red shoes useless on your thieving legs.

The ocean isn't big enough to share with you. I feel the pull of your finger when you dip it in the water miles away. Bitter green.

Things I can't abide:
immodest teeth
smoothing hands
sharing.

The world is full of acorns, colour-changed leaves, creamy pints of ale, singing people, sleeping cats, weather vanes. There are still so many good things.

You don't know me anymore. You wouldn't recognize me if I blew past you on the street. I won't go so far as to thank you, but I will say that my favourite colour is the green of limes. It's fresh and tart. New.