

Ash and Earth

The moon is already visible at twilight, a pale crescent slung low over the crossroads. A figure approaches from the East. His gait is as patient as his features. The crinkle in his brow gives the impression of an empathetic listener. It says: This is someone who will scrape every bit of wet turd off the sidewalk and into the doggie bag, who will leave the campsite cleaner than he found it, who will not tap on the aquarium glass.

When he reaches the crossroads, he fishes an ancient pocket watch from his breast. It is worn but immaculate, it still keeps perfect time. He gives it a perfunctory look, but the knowledge is deeper, he knows it is time.

Then she is there. In the darkening air, the moon reflects a mischievous twinkle in her eye, a twinkle that promises to recline an airplane seat into your lap, to withhold a wave when you let her merge, to flush a tampon into your septic system.

"You always make me wait," he says.

"You always make me hurry," she says.

They stare into each other's eyes, studying the faces both familiar and new.

"It's been a long time," he says finally.

"Yes," she responds.

"So much has changed," he says

"Nothing has changed," she says, a little too fiercely.

He arches an eyebrow. The full veil of night settles between them, two figures in the darkness. Dusty roads unspool toward the horizon in all four directions.

"They care about you less," she says.

"They care about each other more," he says.

She smiles. It is more mocking than friendly. "Ha," she says.

"No one believes you're real anymore," he says, a little too fiercely.

"There are few enough who believe you're real," she answers.

A chorus of cicadas fills the silence. She checks the timepiece on her wrist, the fresh platinum luster and emerald finish glowing faintly in the moonlight.

"Have you made your selection?" she asks.

He nods.

She sniffs.

“Will you never learn?” she asks. “They are the weaker sex.”

“He is righteous, humble, loving, devoted,” he says. “He lives for his family, cares nothing for himself.”

“How can you possibly understand them so poorly?” she asks. She waits for a response – he has a habit of answering rhetorical questions – but none comes. “Are you sure?” she says.

The crease in his forehead tightens. He sighs. “Very well,” he says and then nods.

She cocks her head. “Interesting,” she says. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll do them both.”

“Agreed,” he says, spitting in the dirt – he knows she will insist on formality.

“Agreed,” she says, spitting in the dirt.

* * *

The rain was relentless that Spring. Hot damp air blew across the arid plains, gathering into dark thunderheads as it pushed up against the rising slopes. The first few days were a relief. The rocky soil drank it greedily.

“At last,” the father said, the warped floorboards groaning under the improvised steps of a celebratory rain dance.

“It just takes a little faith,” the mother answered, smiling into the sky.

Their joy drew their daughter to the porch. She stripped off her faded work dress and dashed into the yard, raising her arms to the sky, and opened her mouth to the pure clean water from above. She felt the heavy droplets tickle the goose bumps on her naked flesh and run down past her skivvies to the muddy boots on her feet.

“Cover yourself right this minute,” her mother yelled, but with no real bite.

They splurged on red meat that night and collapsed in bed with full bellies and open hearts. The drum of rain on the roof lulled them into a deep sleep. In the morning, the mother made flapjacks and bacon, drenching it all in syrup. The sugar made them giddy.

“This is more than we could have hoped for,” the father said. “As soon as it stops, we’ll sluice the reservoir.”

Five days later the rain was still falling. The father paced from the kitchen to the living room and back again, his uneven footsteps betraying a limp made worse by the dampness. One eye drifted unnervingly across the back wall. His daughter watched him mutely. His wife tried not to.

He’d suffered a hard upbringing, she knew, made more cruel by a bent foot and lazy eye.

“Not lazy, just curious,” he liked to joke when he was in a good mood.

It was one of the things she loved about him. Hardship had not forged him into a diamond, sharp and hard. Instead it had worn him smooth, like an old river rock, gentle to the touch but strong at its core.

After seven days of rain, they began to sleep in troubled fits. Leaks from rotted shingles beat a discordant rhythm into buckets and bowls carefully placed about the house. “A witch’s carol,” his grandmother would have said.

After nine days of rain, the hollows in their daughter’s eyes had grown deep and dark. She had a persistent cough. Black stains of mold crawled outward from the cornices in every room. The air tasted of metallic bathwater and overturned earth.

“Drink,” the mother said, holding a bitter brew to her daughter’s lips. “You need to drink.”

After 11 days, the rain broke, blinding sunlight reflecting from every wet surface. The father stepped outside, ran one hand over the high forehead where his thinning hair had already retreated.

“The damage is bad, but not fatal,” he said. “We can survive this.”

No one answered. He turned to his daughter and wife. They both stood in rigid silence watching the heavy clouds already forming on the horizon.

It rained for six more days, and the mother fell ill. The father nursed them both, cutting withered vegetables into thin broth and bathing them with cool rags.

On the seventh day, the wind picked up and thunder began to rattle the house. At dusk, the gales were so fierce that the roof groaned in misery and the wind whistled through the chimney. Thunder struck so close they could feel it in their teeth. A window in the kitchen shattered. The noise of the storm was nearly deafening when the mother jumped from her sick bed.

“What will we do?” she asked. “What will we do?”

“Hush now honey,” her husband said, barely audible over the storm. “Everything will be okay.”

“There’s nothing in the larder!” she screamed over the roaring wind. “There’s nothing in the bank! Look at your daughter. She is not well. She is suffering!” she shrieked. “She is dying!”

Then, a knock at the door. The father took a tentative step toward it but the mother froze.

“Don’t answer it,” she said.

“What?” he asked. “Why? Who is it? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shivering. “It’s. . .nothing,” she stammered. “Just. . .”

“Don’t answer it,” their daughter said. “Please don’t answer it, father.”

But there was nothing else to do. He pulled the knob just as a crack of thunder and flash of lightning exploded outside the front window. The wind stilled, and when their eyes finally adjusted, she was standing in their midst.

Her clothes were tailored from the finest fabrics, her skin glowed with health and vigor. She looked at them with eyes as black and shining as polished obsidian.

“Come with me now if you want to be saved,” she said.

The sheer improbability of the situation struck all three dumb.

“You have one chance,” she said. “You must come now and bring nothing. I promise health, shelter, and food. You will want for no necessities. No work will be required, your time will be your own. All I demand in return is that you follow my rules.”

“I don’t understand,” the father said. “Who are you and what is this?”

“You will learn no more until you make a decision,” she said. “You have 60 seconds.”

“This is madness,” the father said. “What are you on about?”

“Fifty-one seconds,” she said, looking at an exquisite gold watch.

The wind howled and rain poured through the broken window. A dirty puddle threatened their bare feet. Black eyes of mold glared at them from every wall. The father looked at the mother.

“What could be worse than this?” he asked. “What do we have to lose?”

Their daughter covered her hands to stifle a wet cough, which quickly turned into a sob. When she wiped her hands on her frock, they left streaks of crimson.

“Time is up,” the woman said and walked out the front door.

Without a word, the mother took her daughter’s hand and followed the woman outside.

In the yard, a man with eyes as dull as glass shards held a door open. The clean lines of the black vehicle promised both elegance and efficiency. They climbed in and settled into deep cushions. Within moments, the motion had soothed them to sleep.

They awoke to the bright sun. A sprawling estate rose before them. Each of them felt a deep sense of both restfulness and disorientation. They could have been asleep for minutes or weeks.

The daughter drew a long breath of cool air. “My cough is gone, mother,” she said.

Her mother smiled back at her, uneasy.

The woman led them through the estate with two silent men. They wound through long hallways, crossed grand ballrooms, navigated bustling kitchens, climbed up and down narrow staircases. Everywhere were closed doors. Behind some they heard sobs, others, revelry.

They stopped before a heavy oak door fortified by decorative iron. The woman produced a long brass key. The room was divided in two by a dark black line painted across the floor, up the walls, and across the ceiling. On one side, the afternoon sun poured through curtained windows onto a lush carpet and rich wood dining table. A four-post bed in the corner was piled high with blankets and pillows. Atop the table sat a feast. Turkey legs erupted from a silver platter, their golden skin glistening with juice. Beef lay drowning in rich brown gravy. Buttery potatoes overflowed a gilded bowl next to steaming loaves of bread. A tub of ice held fruit bursting with ripeness, grapes as large as tomatoes, strawberries as red as blood.

The other side of the room was cold, dark, and barren. The damp stone floor was empty save one bowl and a metal bucket.

The woman pointed to the father. "You will live here on this side of the room," she said, indicating the lavishly furnished area. "You will have as much to eat and drink as you like and your time is your own. You cannot, however, under any circumstances, so much as look at the other side of the room or address anyone on the other side of the room."

She looked at the mother and daughter. "You will live on this side of the room," she said, pointing to the barren side. "You will share two bowls of dog food every day and use the bucket for your waste. Your time is your own. You may look wherever you want, but you cannot address anyone on the other side of the room."

"What are you talking about?" the father said. "This is madness. Absolutely not."

"Yes, you will," the woman said.

"No, we won't," he said, voice rising in frustration. "I don't even know what you're talking about. You know what? Let's just get out of here."

"That is no longer an option," the woman said.

"No longer an option? Who do you think you are?" the father said, incredulous. "You can't just keep us here."

One of the men slapped the mother across the face, hard. She staggered and righted herself, a welt the shape of his handprint already rising on her cheek. The father lunged at him but the second man grasped his arms with two massive hands. The father bucked against his grip, but it was steel.

"Don't touch my wife," he raged. "Get your hands off me! You can't do to this people."

The man then struck his daughter's chin with the hard butt of his hand. She collapsed on the stone floor. The mother howled in protest, swept down to cradle her daughter's head in her arms. "Stop, please stop," she begged.

The woman looked at the father. "Any disobedience will be punished immediately with a blow to your wife or daughter."

"Let me go," the father yelled, then tried to calm himself. "Please, I don't know what this is," he said more evenly. "This is not fair. You have the wrong people. Please don't do this."

"You had a choice," the woman said.

"But you lied," the mother said. "This was not what we chose. You said we would want for nothing."

"I said you would want for no necessities," the woman replied. "That you would have health, shelter, and food. And so you shall."

"You said we would have a life of leisure," the father said.

The woman looked at each of them in turn. Her expression was stoic but for a tiny crinkle at the corners of her sparkling dark eyes, a crinkle that seemed to betray the barest hint of amusement. "I said no work would be required. I said your time would be your own, and so it shall," she said. "To your sides of the room now. In one week you will be reunited for one hour."

The mother and daughter shuffled across the line, but it was all too much for the father.

"You can't do this," he raged.

Another hard slap, and blood began dripping down the mother's nose.

"Don't touch her," he yelled.

A hard fist to the temple made the mother's knees buckle. The father writhed against his captor, eye's bulging, mouth frothing, poised to shout again.

"Stop, father," his daughter shrieked, sobbing. "Please! Stop! They're killing mother."

It was not daughter's plea that stilled him. It was the clinical coldness with which each blow was delivered, precise and without malice. It froze him, seeing this emotionless violence.

"We will follow your rules for a week," he said.

The mother and daughter retreated to their corner and huddled together for warmth. The daughter wept silently as they watched the father pace about avoiding their eyes.

He tried to swallow a few grapes but everything he put in his mouth tasted of ash. When darkness fell outside, he approached the line and crouched low.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’ll find a way out of this.”

Promptly a man entered and punched his daughter in the throat. She fought for air in sick mewling gasps while both the father and mother wept.

In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, he listened to the ragged breathing of his family. He turned toward them, cracking one eyelid ever so slightly to squint at them through his lashes.

A man entered the room and stomped on his wife’s hand, the bones crunching beneath the sole.

“Stop it, father,” his daughter cried. “Please, stop it.”

The mother and daughter watched the father stalk the room each day looking everywhere but at them. Twice a day, gray gruel with indistinguishable lumps was heaped into their bowl. It smelled of armpit. They would not eat. The bucket of their filth was emptied only once every morning. Water was available from a rusty tap. They slept in turns using each other as pillows.

By the third day, their hunger was too much. They used their hands to scoop thin gruel into their mouths and chewed on the mounds of gristle. It tasted as bad as it smelled, but they licked the bowl clean. At the end of a week, the woman returned to their room, tapped on the jeweled face of her watch.

“One hour,” she said.

Husband and wife fell upon each other, crushing their weeping daughter between them. The father rained kisses upon their brows, trying not to wrinkle his nose at their smell, and ran his fingers through their greasy hair. They professed their love over and over, offered competing apologies, fought for the blame.

“I see you starving yourself,” the mother said. “There is no use. It pains us more to see you make yourself suffer for no reason.”

“How can I enjoy steak while you suck on gruel? How can I lay content on a feathered mattress with you on the cold stone floor?”

“You must,” she answered. “You must for us. We are strong. We can survive. You must make yourself strong if we are ever to escape. Guilt is a poison that will ruin us.”

“Okay, my love,” he said.

“And please, I beg you, no more breaking the rules,” she said. “I know you fight out of love, but we suffer. Your daughter suffers. You must promise me.”

The daughter looked up at her father with big wet eyes and then buried her face in his chest.

“I promise,” he said.

The woman returned precisely on the hour. "You will return to your sides of the room for six months, after which, you will be reunited for one hour," she said.

The father gasped, but remembering his promise, said nothing, sat down at the table. Replaying his wife's words, he cracked a lobster and smeared the insides with liquid butter, popping the white meat between his lips. Soon he was gorging himself on shrimp and oysters, taking thinly fried potatoes by the fistful and washing them down with cool sparkling water. Later, he savored a cheese tart with shaved strawberries and a glass of milk. It was the best meal of his life, and he slept as if dead.

The weeks passed slowly for the mother and the daughter. They scratched out games in the stone and took turns doing sums to keep their minds sharp. The mother seemed to have an endless supply of riddles. They braided each other's hair until it became too thin.

Mostly they watched the father. When he read in a comfortable armchair by the fire, they would whisper long fanciful stories both remembered and invented to pretend they were reading too. He often played music, but the room's acoustics turned it into tuneless noise for them. The mother tried not to resent the relish with which her husband ate, the contented belches that sounded clearer than any music.

After several months, the woman appeared at the door accompanied by a beautiful woman in a sheer dress. The thin fabric clung to every curve.

"You will bed her," the woman said. "Or your wife and daughter will be beaten."

"Never," the father said. "Beat me instead."

One of the men pulled the daughter to her feet by her hair and punched her so hard in the kidney that she vomited. He dropped her in the puddle and raised his foot to stomp on her elbow.

"No!" the mother screamed. "Please stop," she begged.

"I will bed her, I will bed her," the father yelled.

The mother watched as the woman lowered herself onto her husband. She swallowed a sob and willed it to be over quickly, gave thanks to the small mercy that their daughter was unconscious.

The father closed his eyes and tried to think his body to stone. The woman took his hands and placed them against her breasts, ran his fingers across her hard nipples and rocked her hips back and forth until his back arched. He tried to hold his breath, but when it happened finally, so much pleasure after so much suffering, he moaned in bliss.

The mother sobbed then, looked down at her daughter, who lay unmoving, gazing upon her father with eyes wide open.

The next day, the mother cursed his weakness, not for the act, but for how we would try to console them afterward, how he would get them beaten. The whole day passed, however, without even a stolen glance. Good, she thought, he has saved us the pain.

The ritual was repeated weekly, and the daughter soon stopped speaking altogether. She would not eat unless the mother fingered the slop into her mouth and plugged her nose to force her to swallow. Long days became endless weeks became tortuous months, and finally the woman returned.

"You have one hour together, after which, you will not reunite for one year," she said.

The mother cried out then, the sound of desperation distilled into its purest form.

"However," the woman continued. "He may now leave the room and walk about the estate."

The reunion was tentative. The mother and daughter were covered in filth, bald patches dotting their scalps. The father begged for forgiveness.

"I don't know what else to do," he said. "If I resist, you are beaten."

"I can't go on like this," she said. "What's the point? I'd rather get it over with. Let them beat me to death."

"No, don't you see," he said. "They're letting me out now. I can look for a way out. I can finally have us rescued. Let me try."

"Please hurry," she said.

The next day, as he looked into the mirror on his way out the door, he was astonished to find that his wandering eye no longer wandered and his hairline had advanced after years of retreat. As he stalked the halls outside, he marveled at his painless strides. There was no hint of a limp.

He followed the sounds of laughter onto a large patio, where the handsomest people he had ever seen danced, drank, ate, laughed, and played. A woman with a row of glistening white teeth held out a gloved hand.

"My, who is this new face?" she asked. "Come dance with me."

"Please, miss," he said. "Help me. What is this place? How do you leave?"

"Why would you ever want to?" she laughed, letting the party carry her away.

He approached a dapper gentleman tapping his foot to the beat and sipping champagne from a crystal flute.

"Sir, please, you have to help me," he said. "We're trapped, my wife and daughter and I are being held against our will."

"But of course you are," the man said amiably.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“What you see is what you get!”

They were all like this, a party full of gorgeous people who seemed perfectly clever, endlessly polite, unfailingly jovial, and criminally obtuse.

The father left, walked in a straight line as far as he could until he reached the edge of the estate, where every few feet a man in black stood guard, impassive and menacing. He continued to walk all day and most of the night, circling the whole perimeter, knocking on doors, following hidden passages, begging everyone for help. No one would give him a straight answer, nowhere was there any hope of escape.

Near midnight, he was back where he started, the party still raging. He sat to catch his breath and heard the band strike his favorite tune. The same woman grabbed his hand.

“Come dance,” she said. “You handsome devil.”

“I don’t know the steps,” he said, but she had already pulled him close.

He placed his hand on the small of her waist and she brought her face to his cheek, laughing. She smelled of lavender and blueberries. His resistance wavered and then broke. He danced away the despair until his feet ached, drank himself into a stupor. When he staggered back, he could hear his wife’s breathing, expectant, desperate for a sign, some hope of escape. But what could he do? All he could offer her was anguish and a beating.

For months she waited. Her husband left every morning and came home after dark stinking of wine. She tried to keep faith, tried to remember that escape would be delicate, that he needed to be secretive, that he wanted to spare them a beating. But finally one morning as he whistled at his reflection in the mirror, straightening his ascot and admiring his new hairline, she cracked.

“You coward,” she screeched at him. “Where is our escape? Have you forgotten your wife? Have you forgotten your daughter?”

“I’m trying,” he said quickly as two men rushed into the room. “I need time. I can’t just ask to leave, I have to trick them.”

“Liar!” she shrieked. “Liar! Liar! Liar!”

She yelled and wept and yelled as they beat her, kept screeching until she was beaten unconscious. Her daughter sat next to her body rocking back and forth, mute.

He was startled and unnerved by the outburst and committed to renewing his efforts. But every thought led to a dead-end, every effort was futile. In time it was clear the only escape was for him, and

only from the misery of that room. As the week turned into months, it became easier and easier to forget his wife and daughter. He couldn't look at them, couldn't talk to them, they were nothing but absence, a hole where pain once was, just some sounds at night easily ignored, sounds he could no longer hear.

After one year, a man came to fetch him from the lawn. He lay on his back with dark shades on his eyes, a drink in each hand and a beautiful woman on his arm.

"It's time for your reunion," the man said.

"But there's an eclipse," the father said. "It's once in a generation. I can't miss it."

"You will come now," the man said.

"I'd rather not," he replied.

He was plucked from ground by that steel grip and thrown over the man's shoulder.

"I'll walk," he said. "I'll walk."

It was a long and dreadful march, and that awful woman was waiting for him with his wife and daughter. The woman tapped her watch and grinned.

"The time has come for another choice," she said looking only at him. "I can free you all today and place you back where I found you, reunited, to live out your lives as you wish. Or you may stay here and live this life, and I will remove your wife and daughter to live their current lives out of your sight."

He looked at these two women now, a mother and daughter, and recognized almost nothing. They didn't look like anyone he knew or had ever known. The mother attempted a smile, revealing a smattering of black teeth protruding from rotten gums. Bald patches dotted her scalp, and her sallow skin had the texture of melted wax.

The daughter was frail, her thin skin pulled tight across her skull. She rocked on her heels, glassy eyes roving wildly and seeing nothing. A steady stream of wordless murmuring brought with it the smell of pickled cabbage and latrine.

He tried to imagine the life he had before, the place he lived before. A barren patch of rock where he would starve to death with two ghouls he no longer knew. He looked away from the mother and her large pleading eyes.

"I will stay," he said.

The mother collapsed. "Please let me die," she begged. "Just let us die."

The woman reached down and pulled her to her feet.

"Fear not, dear woman, you will have your own choice to make," she said. "I have never lied to you, and I never will. I have lied to your husband, but only because he earned it. It is you who has the true choice."

A grin danced on the woman's lips as she spoke and her eyes blazed with the darkness of night.

"You may leave here free and be returned to where you began, but you must leave your husband here to enjoy his life of finery and leisure," she said. "Or you may kill him with your own hand and take his place."

A metallic thud rang out as the father collapsed onto the hard floor. Standing above him, his daughter clasped a silver goblet in her right hand.

A wet hiccup escaped his open mouth before his daughter crouched low, holding the goblet high. She brought it down in a precise arc, and then hit him again and again, droplets of blood spraying as the bones in his face collapsed. The spatter left bright ruby stains in the white carpet and maroon spackle on the dark stone.

When his head was reduced to a pile of pink mush and hair, she stood up. She ran her tongue across the blood on her lips and smiled, revealing rotten yellow teeth turned pink.

"I would like some turkey now," she said.

* * *

Dawn breaks over the crossroads with a splash of crimson and gold. A figure approaches from the West, squinting into the glare of the rising sun. Her walk is calm, almost laconic, her posture emanates coiled rage. Here is someone who will steal the package off your porch, who will laugh at a paper cut between your toes, who will poke a finger into your bruise.

When she reaches the crossroads, he is already there.

"Next time will be different," he says.

"Yes, yes, of course," she says. She will not gloat but has no patience for this hurt bluster.

She holds out her wrist, the encrusted diamonds on her watch blazing like suns.

He reaches for the old pocket watch with hands both sturdy and lithe, hands that promise a gentle strength. These are hands that will cradle eggshells until the yolk is safely discarded, that will clap just as hard for the loser as the winner, that will always leave a penny and never take a penny.

He holds his timepiece next to hers. They are already synchronized, but tradition is tradition.

"Until next time," he says.

“Until next time,” she answers.

The last of the sun clears the horizon, casting the world into streaks of yellow light and soft pink shadows. The crossroads are still. The travelers are gone.