

## Whose Daughter

It matters to no one: what is happening in that room.

Perhaps they haven't seen her. Maybe they don't understand what it means. I am standing in the doorway, and they are passing through me, there and gone, paper in the wind. And I am saying, *how could you, how could you*, and she is swallowing a mouthful of foam.

Before this, I have a picnic with my mother and father at Strawberry Fields. My mother has six more weeks before she collapses in our kitchen and dies in my arms. This is dusk over New York City. It is mid-September, and the sidewalks exhale the heat of the day. The setting sun drags vestigial ribbons of light, unfolding like a bloodstained blanket over the Hudson River. There is a smell of hot pennies and ladybug wings on a stillborn evening. We carry damp paper bags of cherry red chicken and warm pita bread, rice and spiced sauces spilling with each step. The entrance to Central Park is choked with tourists; they take pictures of the moribund flowers and the gothic spires that crown the Dakota. There are rose petals strewn over the oily, brown mosaic that reads *Imagine*. People who don't listen to the Beatles are weeping. A man with pigeons at his feet, shiny and swift as holographs, plays "Blackbird" on a guitar with three strings. This is a temporary space that lives only between the skins of Indian summers, in the dreams of small sunburnt children.

Left over are six pieces of chicken, fireflies in an old, milky mason jar, my mother's cold, dry fingers on my hot skin, and the summer words we shared. When we come here, I am not fourteen years and three days old. I am not smoking pot beneath my blankets and holding ice to secret piercings. I am not wanting my mother to die, to disappear, to leave me alone forever.

When we come here, I am my mother's child. I am barefoot, pulling flakes of mica from the sandy earth. I am using chopsticks held together by a rubber band. I am asking for permission instead of forgiveness.

My mother says, "*Maman revient toujours*" when she goes to relieve herself behind a bush. This is our tradition. She will never leave me. I will never be alone.

She is happy that I'm playing at being a child. It's Saturday and high school has just begun. The world has become very big to me, and I want to see it all.

My father wants to know where I'm going tonight. The moonlight rising behind him makes him look very powerful. He is still very powerful to me. I still answer his questions and take his advice. Soon, he will stop asking, he will stop caring, and I will remember this night.

"I'm going to a party. There won't be any drinking."

"*Minuit, Camille, minuit,*" says Maman.

I dig sickles into my palms and nod.

I am already gone.

I watch them walk away, arm in arm, without me.

The taxi cab driver tells me that I am beautiful. He watches me walk around the car with heavy-lidded eyes. *Have fun*, he mouths from behind the bug-stained windshield. I'm sweating. My stockings melt into my skin, kohl the color of smoke and rubber leaks into my eyes. I feel like a bunch of loose ends, bits of me flying in every direction like the sparks of a firecracker. I feel like people are looking at me all time, wanting to take something from me. I am tormented by the possibility that they humiliate me in their daydreams, debase and degrade me, grind me

into dust. I want to disappear. I try to make myself as narrow as possible trying to fit into corners. I want them to forget I am there,

I am standing before The Carlyle, a tall and beautiful building. A girl I hardly know is having a party. Inexplicably, she lives here alone. Her father visits when he isn't traveling in Egypt, in Iran, on the rivieras of Spain and South America. He is the kind of very serious and powerful man whose absence is recognized as respite. Tonight, he is in Atlantic City, and Elena is having a party.

No one here looks like me. The girls are pale and thin as paper, cascades of blonde hair piled on their heads, rolling down their backs. The boys wear penny loafers and make shapes with cigarette smoke: little circles and long plumes like dragons' tails.

A boy named Henry says: "hey, girl." He once picked up my phone at school and refused to give it back until I kissed him.

"Hi." I look past him, trying to catch someone's eye. I don't want to talk to him.

Elena wobbles over on legs like little branches. The rumor is she doesn't eat- she drinks vegetable juice and Peach Schnapps- and I think that she is lucky to be so close to invisible.

"Come dance with me, Camille."

She has never spoken to me before. She has eyes like a sand-swept sphinx, her skin glows like the other side of a shadow. I know that she is fifteen- one year older than me. I also know that her friends are much older, that she goes clubbing with them on the weekends in the Meatpacking District, and that this is definitely the first time she has ever noticed me.

"Come closer."

Her hands are warm and damp on my shoulders. She guides me with the sharp tips of her peach-colored fingernails. She smiles. Up close, I can see the patterns in her skin, the

bumps, and wrinkles beneath the thick silt of makeup. I wonder what she will look like when she gets old. *Does she know I'm looking at her face?* I wonder if she will remember me tomorrow.

She stops, suspended in step, head tossed back towards the blue skylight. Her eyes whirl in their sockets, she holds her arms up and wiggles her hands. I've seen this before. She is grasping for a dream that escapes her. She is catching at the feeling that slips away too soon. She is on something.

"Are you ok?"

I need to know. She spins away from me in uneven circles like a penny on the ground.

She delivers me back to the crowd. I watch her walk away, slim figure dissipating into thick curtains of smoke.

Elena dances all the time. She dances because she knows she's beautiful; she loves looking at her little limbs moving through the blue skylight. And everyone else loves to look at her too. She has many friends, and many people who say they are friends with her. She has admirers, suitors, stalkers. She writes purple love notes with glittering gel pens and passes them to the boys in school. They pay attention to her, but not in the way they pay attention to me.

I am not the good friend. I am not the girl who peels hair from swollen, tear-stained faces, I am not the one who remembers birthdays, the one who tells the truth about sartorial choices. I am the girl who keeps quiet. I am the one who wears heavy eye makeup, clothes that conceal. I drink when other people aren't looking. But tonight, Elena needs me to be her friend. She needs me to see her, and to pay attention because everyone else is busy.

"Have you seen Elena?"

No one has seen Elena.

I am determined to find her, to ask her how she does it, but she is missing from the spotlight, from the sidelines.

I wander the house, from room to room, until I see her there, stretched out on the bed, eyes white as guilt, mouth open. I sit on her nightstand and ask: “do you ever get sick of people looking at you?”

She doesn't answer. I feel stupid. My neck is hot and itchy.

And then, I hear it. The ragged breath, suspended somewhere shallow in her throat. A seashell sound. I've never heard it before, but I know what it is. Maybe I've seen it on TV, or maybe it's instinctive. The death rattle.

I reach for her hand, and it is wet and pale blue. At last, I find the courage to look into her eyes. They are filmy and hollow. Her mouth is frothing with yellow foam, the long stringy veins straining and pulsing against her temples, along her jaw. Her eyes roll back, as if pulled deeper into their sockets by a string. Currents flicker through her body. She jerks and starts like a marionette. Blood, clotted with white powder, begins to leak thickly from her nose. Elena, who passes notes and dances all night, is having a seizure. Elena is dying. She needs me to do something. But all I can do is cry.

People are walking past the open bedroom door. Someone has seen her and is telling everyone else to “go home.”

*No. Don't leave me.*

But I don't say anything.

“Hurry,” someone says.

A boy peers into the room. “Do you need me to call an ambulance?”

“Please.”

“Okay, but I can't stick around. My Dad owns a bunch of hotels...”

“That's fine.” He hands me the phone.

Whatever their reasons- whether they are afraid of her, or afraid of me, or afraid of who will come and what they will do- they clamber down the emergency staircase, pile into the elevator, and are gone.

Sometimes, when I hear a siren howl, I remember picking up the phone and sitting very still. Waiting.

I forget what the paramedics told me. I forget what her hands and the bleached white sheets smelled like. But I remember the sound of people laughing on the staircase, laughing the whole way down.

There are moments that linger in me still: the melodic beat of monitors, the rush of liquids pumping out of her bloated body, the seashell sound.

When her father shows up, he says, "never tell or else." Later, I learn that they were his drugs.

I will forget most of these details eventually. When it comes my time to dance, I won't think of the sights and sounds of death. The smell. Only later, when I find myself again, will I remember Elena, and wonder if she remembers me.