

Sweet Mire

Tal picked at the denim shorts sticking to her skin in the thick, hot Georgia air.

“Mom, hurry up,” she groaned, leaning on her suitcase as her mother fumbled with the key safe at the top of the rickety steps of the summerhouse. For the millionth time during their long drive from Florida, she wished that she had worn a dress. And a gas mask for that matter. Sweet Mire, the swamp that stretched out over the horizon of their little summer tourist village, stank from miles away. Tal drank it in like a familiar medicine.

“Home sweet home!” her father said as he stepped out of the car, closing his eyes and stretching. Tal rolled her eyes.

The Delano family had been visiting Sweetwood every summer since Tal was a toddler, but her dad still made the same jokes every year, as if for the very first time. As a kid she would have grinned, bouncing up and down with glee at the mere sight of the rickety old whitewashed house. She had grown up on the porches of the corner shops in its historical village, hiding under the back steps of their rented cottage, watching bog lights dance in the swamp from her bedroom window at night. Ignoring the sharp warnings papered to the local police station and the ring of reflective signs marking the edge of Sweet Mire and venturing near its muddy tree line felt, as a child, like pulling back the veil to another world.

But at fourteen, all of her other friends were away at summer camp and having their first summer romances. Tal would be starting high school in just under a month, and the tradition was wearing thin.

When her mother finally succeeded in pushing the door open with a creak and a puff of dust, Tal clomped past her and into the cool dark of the house, dragging her suitcase behind her. The house slowly blinked to life as she flipped the light switches, like an old woman awakening from a long nap. The house was exactly how Tal remembered it. All white wood and creaking boards, a kitchen full of cheap, porcelain tchotchkes to the right and a living room full of ancient unraveling crochet work to the left. The stairs straight ahead were as rough and dusty as they had been in her childhood pictures.

“Tal, don’t just run upstairs and leave us to do all the unpacking again!” her mother said as Tal stepped toward the banister, running her fingers over the chipped wood.

“Can I call Paige?” Tal asked, pushing her bag against the wall as her mother lugged in a large box of groceries. Mrs. Delano always brought enough canned vegetables, cold cereal, and Wonder bread to feed the entirety of Sweetwood for a month, certainly more than their family of three could finish in their single week in

Georgia. Not that Tal or her father would ever say anything to her about it. Mrs. Delano was a union lawyer; she worked long days and long weeks and their trip to Sweetwood was the only time off she took all year. The closest to relaxed Tal had ever seen her mother was in this house.

Mrs. Delano heaved a deep sigh as she carefully lowered the box onto the kitchen table.

“Tal, honey, no, we’re not doing this again this year,” she said, peeling the tape from the cardboard in one swift motion.

“Doing what?” Tal demanded, following her mother into the kitchen.

“The past two years you’ve spent the whole trip in your room on the phone talking to Paige or Hannah or Abi,” her mother said, fishing cans out of the box and stacking them on the table. “This is a *family* vacation Tallulah, you’re going to spend time with your *family*.”

Tal puffed out her lower lip in protest, but said nothing, snatching a box of cereal from the counter and slamming it into the proper cupboard, third from the left, just above the old gas stove.

“It’s not like we’re gonna be *doing* anything today,” Tal said. “All we ever do the first day is sit around and watch TV and order pizza.”

“Is that so bad?” her mother teased, arranging a stack of bread loaves beside the toaster. “If we can get all this unpacked quickly, I’ll make us Italian sodas when we’re done. How does that sound?”

Tal said nothing, trying not to think about her parched throat.

“Come on,” Mrs. Delano continued. “I know you’re tired from the drive, but humor us for just this week, okay?”

“The whole week!” Tal cried. “But Paige has her date tomorrow night!”

Mrs. Delano turned away to put a precariously balanced stack of canned fruit into their little pantry, but Tal caught the roll of her eyes before she was able to turn her back completely.

“I’m sure nothing will have changed between then and when we get home,” her mother said, and Tal could not miss the note of terseness behind her mother’s gentle tone.

“Mom, can I go set up my room?” Tal said abruptly, dropping the bag of potatoes in her hand onto the counter.

Her mother turned around, arms full of chips and salsa, and looked her up and down. Tal became suddenly aware of her firmly crossed arms and flushed face, but did nothing to untangle herself. Her mother sighed and waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the stairs.

“Fine,” she said. “Let me know if we need pick up any cleaning supplies this evening. This place is always a mess when we first get here.”

Tal whirled around without another word and, grabbing her oversized suitcase from beside the banister, trotted upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Her bag rattled the frame of the staircase as she went. She flicked on the two stuttering bulbs that marked the staircases’ beginning and end as she went, inhaling the thick smell of old wood and disuse. Cobwebs clung to every corner and the banister was blanketed by a layer of dust. She wondered if there were ever other families who stayed here. Some years she saw kids pattering around the yards of the handful of other mismatched East Coast style houses next door, but she had never found any trace of recent life upon arriving each year. She wiped her grimy fingertips on the hem of her shorts.

Their second floor held a stubby hallway and exactly three rooms, her parents’ on the left, the bathroom straight ahead, and to the left, her own. Hoisting her luggage up the final steps, she turned the round, burnished handle and pushed open the door with a rattle and a long, low creak.

She stood in the doorway for a moment, drinking it in. Sunlight poured in through the window. The round throw rug with its unraveling edges sat comfortably in the middle of the room. She ran her fingers over the back of the door as she pushed it shut, and found that the thumbtack holes from the year she had been unable to part with her favorite posters for even one week were still there. The blue striped, sun bleached wallpaper that had covered the walls as long as she could remember was peeling at the edges slightly more than it had been last time. The little desk with its little silver lamp stood on the far side of the room and to the right, the rickety old bed, blue sheets tucked carefully into the mattress.

Tal went to the window and pulled down the shade before flopping down into the unmade bed. She stared at the whorls in the ceiling boards and sighed. She poked aimlessly around in her conscience, looking for some of the enthusiasm she’d had for this trip in years past.

Her closet was the same closet she’d hidden in for hours as a kid, hoping is she pushed the right board, pulled the right splinter she would be transported into some alternate world. This unfenced yard was the same she had spent her childhood hunting fairies in since she was old enough to walk. But this year the house just

felt...empty. It was like the magic had been drained from the structure of the wood, the wonderment sucked into the depths of the swamp. It felt hollow. The admission of it hurt like a chair back to the funny bone, but she would give almost anything to be back home right now, gushing with Paige over her very first summer romance, a lifeguard at the community pool named Aaron. It was a silly thing, she knew, and it wasn't even happening to her, but still, it felt like living in a story, the kind of book for teenagers that her parents would roll their eyes and click their tongues at. But she would rather be the sidekick in someone else's story than sitting around aimless in her own, boring life.

She sighed and pushed herself off the bed, unzipping her bag and extracting a thin floral sundress. She stepped into it, wiggling her hips to get the neckline up around her waist. She could have sworn it was wider last time...

Still plucking at the dress, pulling it into place, Tal turned to look herself over in the mirror on the closet doors. She peered at the freckles on her shoulders, scratching at them in hopes that just one or two would peel off under her fingernails. The small bulge of her belly pushed out through the fabric and she wrinkled her nose in distaste. She plucked at the hem of the dress, trying to decide whether or not to keep it on. But in those shorts, the heat made her feel like a boiled chicken, and at least this way her legs could breathe.

With one last look at the room, Tal pulled the door open and stepped lightly across the hall and down the stairs. The front door was still swung wide, and her father stepped over the threshold, laden with cardboard boxes.

"Well don't you look nice!" he exclaimed. "Meeting someone?"

Tal jumped down the last few stairs. She leaned against the kitchen entranceway and watched he and her mother squeeze past each other, trying to arrange their stockpile in the tiny space.

"No," she said, "I was just thinking I would go down the store."

"Are you sure sweetie?" her dad asked, sliding the box onto the kitchen table. "I just ordered pizza, it'll be here any minute!"

"I won't be gone long," she said, inching toward the open door. "I promise."

"Well if you're not going to help us unpack," her mom's muffled voice came from across the kitchen, her head deep in a cabinet under the sink, "You could at least get us some coffee creamer while you're out."

Her mother extricated herself from the stacks of aging pots and pans, and stood up, grimacing as her hip cracked back into place. She fished around in the pocket of her jeans and proffered a crumpled wad of one-dollar bills.

“You can keep the rest,” she said to Tal as she crept into the kitchen to retrieve the money.

“Thanks mom,” Tal replied, tentatively taking the bills from her outstretched hand. Her mother turned to continue unpacking, but before she could go, Tal threw her arms around her waist, quickly enveloping her in a tight hug.

“Love you mom.”

“Love you too, Tal,” her mom said, smiling as Tal released her and turned quickly toward the door. “Don’t be back too late!”

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Tal sipped an Italian soda on the porch of the old corner store, sitting in an old rocking chair, watching townsfolk walk up and down the unpaved main road.

The man at the store had recognized her when she walked in, his face lighting up as she came to the counter with coffee creamer, a soda, and a chocolate bar that now melted slowly in the pocket of her dress.

“Welcome back!” he said, grinning like a house with a missing window. “It’s been a while!”

Tal nodded meekly. As a kid, the corner store had been her great freedom. She would save up her pocket change for months to be able to walk down to the store by herself and buy a stockpile of candy that she could never finish. Al had owned this place for as long as she had stayed in Sweetwood he always gave her this wide, gap toothed smile when he worked the counter, like she was his long lost niece, coming home for a visit. It always made her a little jumpy.

“Drinking coffee now, huh?” he said, shaking the bottle of creamer. “Where’s that pile of candy you always get?”

“It’s...for my parents,” Tal said, focusing on the yellowing cuffs of his old-timey dress shirt rather than looking at his face. All the local shopkeepers dressed like they had been plucked from a late 19th century farm town. She never quite understood it, but she accepted it as part of the town’s unique oddity. Sweetwood billed itself as a historical landmark, though what its historical significance was, Tal was never quite able to discern. “And I guess I’m not that hungry.”

“You’re growin’ up Tally!” he said, putting her things in a white, plastic grocery bag. “Just don’t forget about your Uncle Al!”

“Yeah, I, uh...” Tal tugged her plastic bag from the counter. “I have to get home. Bye.”

But it had been too hot to walk all the way back to the house, so Tal curled up on a seat on the porch of the shop, sipped her soda, and watched.

About half the people walking by were in regular clothes, jeans, shorts, short dresses like her own, but the other half were decked out in floor length skirts and dirty coveralls. They could have been time travelers but for the scuffed Converse she caught occasional flashes of. It was all part of the town's tourist economy, their status as historical landmark amounting to little more in reality than a strange mish mash of old timey facades stuck onto otherwise normal businesses, nineteenth century costumewear, and a series of educational historical buildings that taught bored tourists how to do things like darn socks and play old children's games. Tal sipped her Italian soda. She hoped her parents wouldn't force her to go to the Sweetwood Museum *again* for the hundredth time.

"She's *gone*, Jules!"

A voice shook Tal out of her reverie. Her straw slipped from between her lips as a girl who looked about her age, maybe a year or two younger, ran down the road. She was barefoot, with floral patterned, cotton shorts and white-blonde hair that streamed out behind her as she ran. She stumbled to a stop beside a young woman, not older than twenty, one of the ones in dirty, floor length skirts. Her eyes went wide as the girl caught hold of her arm.

"Virva, what are you *doing*?" the young woman named Jules hissed, whipping her head around guiltily and pulling the girl off to the side of the road. Tal leaned forward as the pair slipped past the shop and into the shadow of the laundromat next door. She couldn't see them without obviously hanging over the rail, but if she shifted her chair just right, she could hear snatches of their conversation.

"*Are you crazy? What if someone hears you?*"

"*Nana is gone, Jules, really gone this time!*"

"*I told you, she's probably just at the pool hall with Hector. You know she likes to...*"

"*I checked!*"

The girl's voice was becoming strained, growing louder with panic, and the older girl shushed her.

"*I'm sure Nana is fine,*" Jules hissed. "*Now will you please calm down? You know we're not supposed to...*"

"She's not fine!" Virva cried. Jules frantically hushed her, but Virva's voice was loud enough now that Tal could hear it without even having to strain. "You know she hasn't been fine for months. I've checked everywhere, she's *gone!* She could be anywhere, she could have wandered into the —"

The sharp, wet sound of skin against skin muffled Virva's words. Tal sat, frozen in the tense silence for a long moment.

"Go home," came Jules' voice. *"I have to get back to work. I'll deal with this later. Do not let me hear you talking about this again."*

Tal waited for something to happen, her whole body tense. After a long silence, a small shape marched out from the alley. Virva's cotton shorts were covered in dirt and her blonde hair hung like curtains over her face. Tal tried not to stare, but before she could tear her eyes away, the girl's face turned and her eyes fell on her. She froze in the girl's tear stained glare. The girl's pale eyes were broken glass, and each shard dug in and held her there. Her face, flushed with anger, turned suddenly away, shattering the connection as quickly as it had formed, leaving Tal reeling in its wake.

The figure marched back down the road from where it came, and Tal did not leave the porch until it had safely vanished around a corner.

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Dear Paige, This vacation is bullshit.

Tal wrinkled her nose at the page and sighed. Her desk was covered in crumpled up drafts of letters and stale pizza crusts. She wadded up yet another sheet and pushed it aside before pulling out another clean page and starting again.

It was such a little thing, but all day she felt this burning need to explain what she had seen to Paige. Tal had spent enough of her evenings huddled in Paige's room, listening to the latest on Dreamy Aaron, it seemed only fair that she be willing to listen to the one interesting, mysterious thing in Tal's life, no matter how incidental. That girl's face, Virva's face, had stuck with her all day. The desperation, the pure *anger*...she couldn't put it out of her mind.

Dear Paige, she wrote. Something really weird happened to me and I don't know how to explain it. My parents won't let me call you and I know you're getting ready for your date and I know your date will have already happened by the time you get this and I know this isn't going to make any sense anyway so I don't know why I'm even bothering to-

"Knock, knock," her mother's voice came from the doorway behind her. Tal jumped involuntarily, then hunched over her desk, scribbling furiously as if she had not heard.

“Hungry, huh?” her mother remarked awkwardly as one hand came to rest on Tal’s shoulder. She could feel her eyes resting on the pile of crusts.

“Yeah, thanks for the pizza mom,” Tal said, without looking up.

“I’m going to bed,” she said, squeezing Tal’s shoulder. “Try to get some sleep.”

“I will.”

Her mother did not reply for a long moment, but Tal could almost hear her thinking.

“I know...” Tal felt her mother suck in a deep breath behind her. “I know you would much rather be anywhere but here right now, but try to have some fun, okay? When you’re older, believe it or not, you’re gonna miss this place, and you’re gonna wish you made the most of your time here.”

Tal’s pen slowed, hovering over the end of a long line of scribbles.

“I’ll try, mom,” she said, her eyes still fixed on the wood grain of the table. “Thanks.”

Her mother’s arms wrapped quickly around her, and then she was gone, the door creaking shut behind her.

Tal leaned back and sighed, balling up another letter and tossing it at the wall in front of her. It bounced down onto the desk and rolled away, right out the tiny crevice of window she had left open, slipping into the darkness.

“Oh my *god*,” she said to the room at large, and plunked her head down into the table, her cheek sticking to the clean sheet of paper underneath. She could see the swamp from here, the vague shadowy outline of the trees about a football-field’s length away from her back steps. The faint orbs of the bog lights bubbled just beyond the trees, like the faeries she had always imagined when she was little. During their many trips to the Sweetwood Museum, costumed tour guides had solemnly explained that the lights in Sweet Mire were just natural gases emerging from the swamp. A few times, when she was younger and more confident, she had asked tour guides if any tours went into the swamp to see the bog lights. Such requests were always met with such firm no’s, such frantic explanations of alligators and deep mud and danger, that she had eventually stopped asking.

Tal lifted her head suddenly and squinted. Another light had flickered to life in the bog. Not quite like its faint, ethereal sisters, but darker, lower, stronger. A fire?

She pushed back her chair and went to the window, pulling it open wide and peering out in the direction of the mire. It was a fire for sure, but without the distortion of the glass the shape of a campfire came to view. The sound of laughter drifted like a siren call across the marshy lawn from the tree line.

Before she knew what she was doing, boots were on Tal's feet, a flashlight in her hand, and a sweater being pulled over her tank top pajamas.

She wasn't entirely sure what she was hoping to find as she crept down the hall past her sleeping parents, down the painfully creaky steps, and through the kitchen and to the back door. But electricity crackled in her skin as she stared out into the abyss. There was the darkness, just as she had remembered it, and the light too. She stomped out into the yard, rubbing her arms for warmth as she went. Even the cooler nighttime air clung to her skin. She traversed the twisting meadow grass until she reached the bright yellow sign at the edge of the property.

DANGER: Keep out of swamp.

She had never been this close to it before, she thought as she trampled past the sign. The trees overhead keeping the shade in during the day and the damp earth below made the air practically swimmable and colder than any of the air outside. Crickets chirped and not a single bog light bloomed nearby her. But she could still see, dimly, the flickering outline of a campfire just past the outer layer of trees.

Her boots sank into the sludgy earth as she crept closer to the source of the voices. There was no more laughter now, the voices had stilled to a soft murmur. Careful to stay hidden, Tal crept around the little clearing, finally settling behind a thick live oak. As she looked around the clearing, she saw that the gathering consisted of a gaggle of five or six teenagers.

"She had to stay home tonight," one said. "Her Nan wandered off again and her sister is freaking out."

"If she had any decency she'd put that woman in a home," said another. "I love Old Lady Johnson as much as anyone, but she's slipping. She ain't gonna last long out here with no one but Jules and Virva to look after her."

"You sure we should be out here tonight?" said a quiet, tremulous voice. "After Old Lady Johnson...?"

"Oh come on," someone on the other side of the fire laughed. "She's old and senile, she gets lost all the time. What do you think's gonna happen to us? What, you afraid of the *ghooooosts*?"

Laughter bubbled up from the group again.

"Hey, there's gotta be some reason we're not allowed to talk about this shit," the first voice said, defensively. "Laugh all you want, but that's four people vanished already this year."

There was a moment of silence.

"Fourth one this year..." said a different voice. "You don't think they're—"

“Connected?” interjected another. “Turk, don’t get started on that again. Do you really believe those old fairy tales? A witch snatching people up from her floating house in the mud? Tree branches coming alive?”

“Shut up Dixon, you know what I mean.”

“There’s nothing similar about them. An old lady who’s losin’ her marbles, a spinster with cancer, and some messed up little kid who didn’t know how to swim.”

“And Ada,” said another voice.

The fire crackled and flared.

“Her days were numbered anyway, and we all knew it.”

Tal shivered. Just like that, the electricity that had filled her as she stepped out of her room just minutes ago had gone. The magic had fallen away from the night. She had heard enough.

She turned away from the clearing and trudged through the underbrush as quietly as she could. The grasses twisted around her ankles and the mud sucked her boots down, but she managed to keep upright. The teenager’s voices whispered in her head until it spun. She thought of Virva’s tear stained, rage reddened face glaring at her in the street. She thought of the bog lights she had admired from her window every night since she was a kid.

You shouldn’t be here, child.

Tal whirled around as a voice, soft and gentle, whispered inches from her head. She clapped a hand over her damp ear, heart pounding, eyes wide, searching for the source of it.

You should go home.

She snapped her head around as the voice murmured to her from her other side. As she stumbled back, her boot caught on something, a root, a bush, a tuft of meadow fescue...and Tal felt herself collide with the soft, mushy earth. Everything spun as she blinked up at the leaf-shrouded night sky.

It’s not your time yet, little girl. Go home.

A pale blur crept over her, shrouding her from the rest of the night. A curtain of white, pale and stringy, hovered around her, and though her vision would not focus, she swore for a moment that two clear, blue eyes peered out from its depths.

“Tal? Tallulah?”

Mr. Delano's face swam over Tal's own as she blinked awake. She couldn't miss the wash of relief that crossed his face as she sat up and blinked away the white spots dotting her vision.

"What time is it?" she asked, rubbing her head. She was outside and it was sunny and warm.

"It's about 10 A.M. sweetie," Mr. Delano said, pushing her hair out of her face. "What were you doing outside? You just about gave your mother and I a heart attack!"

Tal looked around. She was only steps away from the back door of the house. Her back was damp and her head was foggy but otherwise, she felt completely fine.

"Sorry," she said, pushing herself to her feet. "Sorry, I uh...I came outside to look at the stars last night and I guess I fell asleep. I didn't mean to scare you guys."

"It's okay sweetie," he said, laughing nervously and eyeing her up and down like she was a strange, wild beast. "Next time just...invite your old man out with you or something. You can't be too safe out here! This is gator country, you know."

Tal just gave her dad a weak smile and nodded. He had never been the type to chide her – he left that job to her mother. But the look in his eye told her everything he wouldn't say.

"Breakfast is ready in the kitchen if you're hungry," he said, guiding her anxiously up the steps, as if she might collapse at any moment. "Might be a little cold by now but..."

"Yeah," she said, with one last glance over her shoulder toward the swamp, still and silent in the morning air. "Breakfast sounds nice."

Dear Paige, I think I saw a witch in Sweet Mire the other night.

Dear Paige, I think I inhaled some swamp gas and experienced vivid hallucinations.

Dear Paige, send help.

Tal sighed and put down her pen for the thousandth time. She looked around the living room. It was Monday and she had spent her whole weekend writing letter after letter to Paige and flipping through the handful of channels their fuzzy little television received. She hadn't so much as gone outside for more than the time it took to grab the newspaper for her parents since Friday. When her mother had finished halfheartedly leafing through the weekend edition of *The Morning Mire*, Tal had snuck it off the kitchen counter and skimmed its pages. Not a single headline about a missing grandmother in their little town of less than a thousand.

This morning her father was deeply immersed in a crumbling novel he must have found in the bookshelf beside the TV, and her mother was wrapped up in a sprawling game of solitaire.

“Let’s go somewhere,” her mother said suddenly, looking up from her game as if reading Tal’s mind. “We’ve been cooped up here for days.”

Her father peered over the top of his book. “Where do you want to go?”

“The museum is always fun,” she said, pushing herself to her feet. “And we haven’t been in ages. We could burn an afternoon...I don’t know, learning leatherworking in the village or something.”

Tal stifled a groan.

“Can we at least get pizza while we’re there?” Tal asked when her mom shot her a look.

“If you can keep that attitude in check, I’ll consider it.”

“Though building a town beside a swamp may seem a strange idea at first,” a slack faced, spotty young woman rattled off to the sparsely populated crowd sweating in the open barn of the Sweetwood Museum, “In fact, the abundance of ground water made the land ideal for early settlers.”

“Was this before or after murdering all its original inhabitants...” Tal grumbled, earning herself a smack on the arm.

“Pay attention,” her mother hissed, and Tal huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Today, flooding and soil erosion have made the swamp too dangerous to enter,” said the young woman, like she was reading a list of groceries. A small bump was visible just above the waistline of her long, grey dress, and she ran her palm over it once or twice, absentmindedly, as she recited. “But for the early settlers, the swamp provided a natural barrier from flooding and a picturesque landscape for—”

“Mom, I’m going up the street to get a soda,” Tal whispered, turning quickly out of her mother’s grabbing range, not looking back to see her expression. She could imagine it well enough.

The young man’s voice droned on behind her as she tried to slip away, unnoticed through the crowd of shifting, coughing tourists. She had nearly reached the exit when a hand came down on her shoulder. She looked up at him, wincing at the disapproval she expected to find here. But instead, his eyes were fixed on the presentation, and wordlessly, he proffered a five-dollar bill with his free hand. Tal took it.

7-Up, he mouthed. She grinned and slipped from his grasp, pushing past the handful of other attendants and into the blessedly breezy road leading to the corner shop.

The door chimed gently as Tal walked in.

“-runnin’ all up and down the damn street,” said an unfamiliar from the side of the store by the register. Tal turned down the aisle toward the soda, sheltered on both sides by rows of cracker boxes as high as she was tall.

Al made a clicking sound with his tongue.

“Germaine was a good woman, but it was gettin’ to be about her time,” his voice said from across the store. “That girl’s gotta let her go. Poor woman probably got caught on a branch, sucked into the mud. That can happen pretty easily to weaker-bodied folk, so I hear. Another one lost to that Mistress of Death...”

Tal picked out a cream soda from the shelf, unchilled, just how she liked them. She made her way through the neon bags of plasticky candies that begged to be eaten, to the little mini fridge by the front counter that held their handful of cool drinks. Her dad would give her hell if she came back with a warm 7-Up.

“It would be a hell of a sight easier if they *did* just die,” said the other man as Tal turned into view of the counter. “All this carrying on about the damned swamp is—”

“He-ey little lady!” Al said loudly as Tal knelt opened the fridge and plucked a clear, green bottle from its depths. The other man fell silent. Tal stood and looked between them, clutching the bottles to her chest, but before she could get a good look, the man tipped his hat to her before quickly returning it to his head and turning on his heel.

“How are ya?” Al continued, taking the bottles from her hands as the man scurried from the store. “You and you parents getting your fill of the town?”

“Yeah, we’re...yeah,” she said, her eyes fixed on the other man’s retreating back. “What was he talking about?”

Al’s eyes clouded over.

“Nothin’ you need to worry about,” he said solemnly. “Just some kid runnin’ around causing trouble. Some of the gals in this town...”

He let out a forced chuckle and handed over her change.

As she stepped back outside, the man was long gone, but another familiar sight caught her attention. A bright blonde head of hair bobbed across the street, by the entrance to the town post office. Tal peered down the

road. Every building was papered with white posters, the content of which she could not quite discern. But the head, there was no doubt, belonged to Virva.

Tal stepped out into the road, dust and pebbles filling her sandals. She stepped curiously closer. Virva had a handful of identical pages in one hand and a roll of blue tape in the other, which she seemed to be struggling to rip with her teeth. Tal took another step toward the post office. Her stomach dropped.

Bright, clear eyes stared out of the poster, and though it was printed in black and white, Tal could tell that they were pale blue like Virva's. A wide, gentle smile stretched across an elderly face, curtained by long tangles of white hair.

"Hey," Tal head herself say, trotting across the road as the blonde girl turned to tape up another poster on the other side of the door. "Hey! Virva!"

The girl turned around and fixed Tal in her sights, her icy blue glare as fiery as it had been last time.

"What." It was not a question.

"I think..." Tal said breathlessly, stumbling up to the steps of the post office. "I think I saw your grandmother. Friday night. In the swamp."

All at once the lines of Virva's face came undone. Her arm fell to her side and her mouth went slightly slack.

"What?"

But it lasted just a moment. Only a moment.

Her eyebrows tensed again and she gave Tal a hard look.

"If you're screwin' with me I swear..."

Tal crossed her heart, pretending to be unfazed. She had to will herself not to turn away. Looking into Virva's eyes was like staring into the sun.

"Believe me," Tal said, her heart pounding. "I don't care enough to lie."

—

"What's the deal with Sweet Mire?"

Tal and Virva sat across from one another in the sunlit kitchen of the Delano's cottage, cheese sticks in hand. Tal's legs were pulled up onto the rickety wooden seat, one knee up by her chin. Virva sat sideways, kicking her feet up onto the chair beside her, facing out toward the screen door. The house was empty and quiet, save for the

occasional crinkle of plastic wrap. They had munched in silence for a while, all action and adrenaline as they had raced down the road toward the Delano house, before falling prey to inertia the moment they began trying to form a plan.

Virva didn't turn to look at her.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Tal said, putting down her cheese stick impatiently. "What's the *deal* with it. Everyone in this town acts like it's a bad word or like...like an omen or something."

Virva snorted, taking a bite straight out of the cheese stick, unpeeled.

"Folks in this town are superstitious," she said, not taking her eyes off the crosshatched view of the backyard through the screen. "They get themselves all worked up over nothin' but they can't even be bothered to help find my Nana."

Virva turned suddenly, smacking the empty cheese wrapper onto the kitchen table.

"That's why we gotta take this into our own hands, Tal," she said, furrowing her brow. "We gotta take the initiative, because sure as hell no one else is gonna."

Tal hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"You said you saw my Nana in the swamp, right?" Virva demanded.

"I mean—I don't..." Tal stammered, crumbling a bit under the weight of Virva's stare. "I think so, yeah."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I mean, it was dark and I hit my head, but I swear it looked just like her," Tal said

Virva gave her a look that made Tal think of the first time she had seen her. Tal shuddered.

"That'll have to do I guess. It's better than anything I've got," Virva said bitterly. "So we'll go tonight then."

"Wait...what? Tonight?"

"Well yeah," Virva said. "Nana's already been gone three days now. Long enough to be a missing person if we had a half competent police department around here. Too busy drunk-tanking tourists to worry about an old woman going missing," she spat. "If there's any chance she's still in there, we gotta go and find her before..."

She stopped, looking down at the table.

“We gotta find her,” she finished, picking a splinter from the tabletop. “And we’ll...we’ll cover more ground between the two of us.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“I heard people disappear in there...” Tal said quietly.

Virva scoffed.

“What, you believe those old fairy tales?” she said, pushing herself up from the table. “Don’t be a baby. As long as there’s two of us, we’ll be fine.”

When Tal said did not reply, Virva continued. “I’ll come by at midnight. Your parents will be asleep by then, right?”

“Um, probably.”

“Cool, see you then. Bring a flashlight.”

And with that she was gone, the back door swinging shut behind her as she slipped out into the sunlight, letting a waft of afternoon heat in after her. Tal sat at the table a long time, nibbling first at the stub of her cheese stick, then at the dry skin of her nail beds.

Eventually, inevitably, after what felt like a very long time, the front door crashed open, followed by her parents’ loud, frantic voices.

“Tal? Tal? Tallulah?”

She heard them turn into the kitchen and sigh audibly with relief.

“Where have you been?” her father stormed over to the table where Tal was silently perched. He reached out to grab her chair, but her mother got there first. Mrs. Delano’s hand flew out from behind her, grabbed hold of the chair, and yanked it around, its legs squealing against the linoleum. Tal recoiled as she found herself suddenly face-to-face with her red-faced, fuming mother.

“What the *hell* did you think you were doing?” she demanded, spittle flying from her lips and landing on Tal’s face. She blinked rapidly and wiped the drops from her face. “Disappearing on us like that? We waited for you for an hour there, Tal, we had *no* idea where you had gone! You could have been anywhere! You could have been lost or hurt or...or kidnapped for all we knew!”

“But I wasn’t,” Tal said, drawing her knees in close. “I’m fine mom, I just got tired and went home. What’s the big deal?”

“*What’s the big deal?*” Mrs. Delano’s repeated, eyes popping with rage. “The *big deal* is that you told us you would be somewhere and you weren’t! You lied to us and you have scared us nearly half to death for the second time this week! You can’t just wander off and do whatever you want, Tal! You’re fourteen, you are not an adult, as much as you might think you are, and we are still your parents.”

Tal hugged herself tightly, scowling and avoiding her mother’s gaze.

“I can’t even walk home by myself? What am I, five? God, I’m so sick of this shit.”

Tal’s mother blinked, her mouth falling open.

“*What* did you just say to me?” she asked. Behind her, Mr. Delano’s eyes went wide and he took a step back, leaning against the counter as if bracing himself for a storm.

“I said,” Tal snapped her head around, facing her mother dead on, sliding her feet off the chair and slamming them into the ground. “I’m *sick* of this *shitty goddamn house* and of being treated like a *goddamn child!*”

She hadn’t meant to shout, but the kitchen rattled with her words, the hanging kitchen lamp swung overhead. Both her parents were still for a moment, staring at her in disbelief. Then her mother stood up suddenly, her face blank.

“Go to your room,” she said, her eyes fixed on a point over Tal’s left shoulder. “Right now. And don’t come out until tomorrow morning.”

“Gladly,” Tal said, sliding off the chair. She slipped past both parents, still as statues, and stomped up the stairs. Just before she pulled her bedroom door shut, she heard her mother let out a single, choked sob.

Tal stayed in bed, not even bothering to remove her mud-caked shoes before pulling the blankets up over her head. She watched the chunk of sunlight from her window slide over the edge of her desk before disappearing completely. After the sunlight disappeared, slowly, the rest of her room went with it, the outlines of her chair, her coat rack, the piles of clothes draped over them both and scattered across the floor, gave way to roiling shadow.

She tried to feel guilty. She tried to regret speaking to her mother like that. She tried to feel bad about her anxious father, so eager to keep her happy. She couldn’t. The pounding of her heart would not settle even as the minutes, hours ticked by, anger and excitement boiling together in her stomach for so long that she could no longer pull them apart. She was grown. It was time for her to prove it.

The door creaked open and she quickly closed her eyes. She could hear a figure move into her room. She could feel its presence move from the door to her bedside in the darkness, and willed herself not to move, not to

reach out as a pair of lips planted a quick kiss on her forehead. She waited in stillness and silence until the figure moved away, out of her room, pulling the door shut after it.

She awoke with a start to the sound of stone on glass. Tal blinked and pushed herself blearily up from the bed. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the blinking light of the clock beside her bed. Midnight.

Shaking herself awake, she got up and moved across the pitch-black room to the window. A tangle of blonde hair was visible in the lawn down below. A hand reached out and waved to her. She waved back, before tiptoeing over to her closet and grabbing a coat and the big, industrial sized flashlight that had been in its upper shelf for emergencies as long as she could remember. Her heart pounded. She hoped it still worked.

Carefully, she opened her door and slipped out. She couldn't afford to wake up her parents. Not now. Pulling her jacket tightly around herself, Tal crept down the stairs, stepping over the creaky step halfway down the staircase and silently through the kitchen. When she pulled the back door open, Virva was there waiting for her.

"What took ya so long?" she whispered. "Come on, let's go."

They trudged together through the back yard and toward Sweet Mire, Virva leading the way. Tal looked up at the sky and shivered. A new moon.

Virva stomped past the warning sign at the swamp's edge as if she had done it a thousand times before. Maybe she had. Tal struggled to keep up, her flashlight bouncing at her side as she jogged. Crickets chirped in the thickening grass and something yowled in the distance. Whether it was a coyote or a house cat, Tal couldn't tell.

"Nana," Virva hissed up ahead. Her body was only visible in the brief patches of starlight that flashed between tree branches, but her hair flashed like a lantern in the night. "*Nana!*"

"Shhh!" Tal said as Virva's voice cracked through the night. "Be careful! We don't know what's out here!"

"I do," Virva snapped. "And I'm not letting it get my grandma."

Tal's heart quickened pace, but Virva was out of range again before she could say another word. Pools of murky water caught the light on either side of them as they passed. They were passing the treeline now. They were nearly in the mire.

"Virva, stop!" Tal hissed. "This is way further than I was when I saw her! We should move horizontal, not deeper into the swamp."

"That was four days ago," Virva said without slowing. "Who knows how far she could have gotten now?"

“*VIRVA!*”

Another voice came out of the trees. They both froze, nearly knocking into each other. Was it...

“*VIRVA!*”

The voice was decidedly human now.

“Virva, come back!”

Another voice joined in. Tal realized, suddenly, that she had heard these voices before, in this same swamp.

“Virva!”

Virva wheeled around, her wide eyes gleaming even in the darkness.

“You told my sister?” she hissed.

“No!” Tal said, stumbling back. “I didn’t tell anyone! Why would I have—”

“Because you don’t care about finding Nana!” Virva choked. Even in the dark, Tal could see tears glittering in her eyes. “No one does, not even Jules! Everyone in this town is perfectly happy letting her just vanish into the swamp like anyone else. But not me. I’m gonna find her, and I’m gonna bring her home.”

Virva coughed out the last words like they were phlegm in her throat, and took off running.

“Why don’t you just go to my sister you...you bitch!” she called over her shoulder.

Tal stood rooted to the spot as Virva’s footsteps faded into the night. Light from the search party flashed on the tree trunks around her, their gravity competing with Virva’s, pulling Tal in two.

Don’t go after her, said a familiar voice in her ear. Tal yelped and stumbled forward. She could feel the voice’s breath in her ear.

The flashlights went still at her shriek.

“Virva, is that you?” someone yelled from far away.

“Who are you?” Tal whispered, peering through the trees. There was nothing, nothing but the battery powered beams of light by the tree line, and the dark of the swamp bearing down around them.

I am all of us, said the voice, with a laugh like running water. Tal noticed then that it echoed in her ears. A chorus. *And she will be too.*

Tal turned quickly, trying to catch the owner of the voice before it misted away, tripped, and landed hard on her knees. She stuck out her hand to catch her fall, landing with a squelch into a pool of murky water, ripples

quivering out over its dark surface. She struggled to catch her breath, hand shaking as it supported her weight. As she moved to push herself up, something stopped her.

Don't worry, said the voice, still just over her shoulder. *We will take care of her.*

The rippling water was catching light, reflecting it back in a chaotic, formless shape. Tal held very still, hand still sunk into the mud as the ripples slowed, revealing first her own face little by little, then the light behind her. Large and luminous over her shoulder, was a bog light. It bloomed in slow motion, tendrils of light curling up around itself, seeming to hover in place, and Tal could not move. To look at it, she knew with a sudden, instinctive certainty, would be to dispel it. When it spoke, she saw that the tendrils formed many faces with many mouths that moved at once, like water. One face shimmered to the front, long-haired, with piercing eyes.

Better than anyone, we know how.

It burst, light and gases fleeing their form, absorbed back into the night. Flashlight beams crisscrossed in the distance and the voices of half a dozen teenagers rattled the trees, only to drown in the fetid waters that pooled near their roots, and Tal sat sightless in the dark, the mud sucking her fingers gently, insistently into the water.