

This is How the Fairy Queen Dies

June and I executed a field mouse while playing in the corn one summer.

This was our first secret.

We chased the mouse through the wilted verdant stalks, our cheap but glittering pink sneakers skinning the hardened dirt and removing the first layer of sediment. The fairy queen—a plastic figurine we shared with hard molded lemon curls and painted eyes—needed a steed. June squeezed the doll’s thin waist and wiry purple dress in her plump fingers as she sprinted. Shadows tentacled over our plundering forms, both of us panting and flushed, and the air was hazy, warm, nostalgic like an attic. Just as the mouse dove into a deep gash in the ground, a crevice for seeds, June plunged. Leaped like a coyote onto a rabbit. Elbows and knees skidding. Wisps of dry crinkled hair escaping her braid.

“I got it, Margot,” she said, urgently but still squeaking and girlish. She moved backwards on her shins, pinching the mouse by its hind legs and pulling it into view. I sat on the ground with her and we watched it scramble for a moment. Beady black eyes that seemed to see nothing and tiny, clawing hands. I ran a single finger over its spine, pressing harder than I meant to, flattening it against the ground. Its fur was yellowish but muddy like bruised fruit, and was coarser than I would’ve thought. “It sure is squirming,” June said. Later, I would recognize she liked stating the obvious when my nervousness spread to her, easing everything, like stretching a cramped muscle.

“Doesn’t like being trapped,” I responded.

I thought there must be a certain addiction in watching something be rendered helpless under your weight—a surge of mind-numbing power, because we forgot about the doll and the

reason for the mouse's capture. My cheeks were sunburned and the afternoon heat prickled against them but I relished the pain. Championed it like a warrior or knight.

Then, the quietest of popping. I wasn't sure if I heard it or just saw it: the leg dislocating from the hip, elongating before falling slack as June let the mouse go, startled. The mouse limped for a moment, squeaking. I was possessed by the need to have it again. One of those urges that boils in your chest, growls, demands to be heard. I grabbed the mouse in a fist, held it in the air. It sliced paper cuts into my thumb. Tossed and turned.

"What are you doing, Margot?" June said. Her breath seemed to be waded in her throat, crumpled and balled like a used napkin.

"Nothing," I said, placing the mouse on the ground again, pinning him in place with two fingers pressing into the loose slabs of fur.

He kicked against nothing, grabbed at the air. June moved towards me so we were side by side on our knees. Two praying monks. I looked to her. Up close, her lips were chapped and sticky white spit mossed the corners of her mouth. Her eyes, wide and veiny blue, were still on the mouse. She reached, her soft hand grazing my already calloused one as she pulled on his dislocated leg. He squealed, more frantic now. A constant whirl of sound. Scratching. Screeching.

June's older brother, Mickey, had given her a pocket knife for her tenth birthday. She carried it everywhere. Sharpened her pencils and cut her hair with it. Used it to scare other girls on the playground at school. She took it out, the silver blade and glossy red handle dulled by the shadows so it looked like a toy. It cut through the mouse's fur anyway.

I never told her to stop. Didn't even cross my mind. I just held it down, letting slick blood drown my fingers in warmth and pour over my cuticles. The sand coated the liquid and everything smelled dusty, metallic, slightly sweet.

When we finished, there was only mashed red, a cakey mixture of wet, and dirt, and hair. June wiped blood on her jean shorts before picking up the abandoned doll, careful not to stain the fairy queen's dress. We didn't look at each other until we were out of the cornfield. Until we could see the green paint of her house and everything felt real again. I realized then, with smeared clothes and peeling knees, that both of her canine teeth were missing. White nubs peeked from her gums. For some reason, it seemed crucial that they be there. My heart stuttered in my chest, and my hands tingled, like I'd been sitting on them and they'd fallen asleep.

June met my eyes, pocket knife in one hand and the fairy queen in the other. We just stared for seconds, minutes. From the corner of my eye, I could see her white fence, the apple trees, the old wooden swing. She closed her mouth. Swallowed. Folded her knife into her pocket. She held out her hand. I let it hang there for a moment, examining the dried crimson, before taking it. Her skin was cold, clashing against the warmth of the setting sun. We walked to her house that way: silence simmering between us while June pulled me forward.

# # #

After that day, I went to June's house a lot. I didn't like mine. The wallpaper had a layer of age—a musty brown film that darkened the printed tulips—and was pimply in areas like a diseased child. The light wood floors were scarred with cracks and stains.

My dad was fucking a woman in Omaha and rarely came home. To forget this, Mom busied herself with hobbies. Paint-by-numbers. Scrapbooking. Thousand-piece puzzles. She didn't say much to me. Take off your shoes before coming in, Margot. I bought more mac-n-cheese. Would it kill you to brush your hair every now and then?

I think my favorite part about June's house was the predictability. They each played a role like stage actors. Her mom, Cathy, would cook every night at five. Mickey would go hunting on weekends, but showed us movies when he was home, squeezing between us on the small living room couch. Mr. Becker paced the fields until noon and then retreated to his office after eating a ham sandwich. The routine was a comfort, a spectacle I could watch again and again. A spectacle I wanted to be apart of. Cathy cutting vegetables into round coins. Mickey shaving his scruff on Tuesday. Mr. Becker clicking the keys on his computer. June kept bringing me back so we could keep an eye on each other. I knew this.

She kept the fairy queen on the highest shelf in her room. Her cherubic porcelain features watched over us like an angry god. For the first couple of times, we just sat on the velvety pink rug, reading Tiger Beat and charging through sparkly sticker books. We only whispered to each other, as if worried she would hear us.

Eventually, I think we must've forgotten about summer, shed a layer of childhood, when middle school began because we became real friends. With glee, June told me about her first kiss: a boy who'd pressed her against the lockers, jammed his tongue against her teeth, and smelled of sweat and grass. We had a sleepover every Friday and painted our toenails while the pop radio station rattled in the background. We snuck into horror films, a tight white-fingered grip on the others' hand. And yet, there were a few moments that brought us back to our crimes:

when the sunset drowned the cornfield in orange and pomegranate, bloody stains on Mr. Becker's apron after butchering a pig, kid TV programs with giant talking animals. It remained this way for years. It felt like decades or centuries.

Our second secret took place a few summers later. Ninth grade. Mickey had dropped his classes at the community college, again, and asked us if we wanted to go shooting with him.

"It's just about half an hour away. There's old washers and dryers, car parts. Tons of junk to use for target practice. I know June's been wanting to get better," he told Cathy, a slip of dishwater blonde bending over his brow bone. His lip was busted but the red welts were just natural enough to not be appalling. June and I sat at the kitchen table, a slight pocket of fat bulging from the waist line of the bikini I'd borrowed from her. It was striped red and white like a candy cane.

Cathy paused her washing, chopping, walking to look up, her eyes wandering from Mickey to me, an easy smile on her lips. "That sounds fine to me," she said. "But do you think your mom would be okay with you going, Margot?"

She said it to be courteous, to pretend I had a mother who cared. It didn't bother me. I was staring at the ground but I could sense June's gaze, eyes wide and hopeful. They said *please, do this for me. Just this once*. I quickly understood that the first thing you learn about someone is who they love. Whose name fits most comfortably in their mouth. And I knew June adored her brother. The love she had for Mickey was like a disciple worshipping their almighty savior.

I met June's eyes. Sweat slid between our touching thighs and she was so close I could smell her tangy watermelon breath-mint. I wished we stayed. I would've showered, lathering myself in June's pink raspberry shower gel. Watched Jeopardy and ate dinner before walking

home with my flashlight. But if I said all this, June would call me boring and ignore me all next week.

“My mom will be okay with it,” I said. June inhaled sharply and stood to go get dressed, her excitement sputtering like a puppy’s. I followed.

# # #

Here’s what I liked about Mickey: he was unapologetic in his assholeishness. Some boys tried to hide it. Played pretend. Mickey wasn’t like that. He knew who he was and wore it like an obnoxious leather jacket—he stole tips off of greasy tables and flirted with fat girls before giving them his number, which turned out to be for WeightWatchers. He fucked girls in his truck parked in the front yard. If you got close enough, you could see the slight shaking of the beaten red exterior, and hear the whiny panting from inside, the gruff *you like that cunt, huh?* as it dripped from his mouth.

Now, as we drove to the junkyard, I searched the beaten nylon seat for evidence of the girls he brought there but found none. Everything was swampy: hot musky puffs from the broken air conditioner, some twangy country song blaring, the reek of empty chip bags and sweat sculpted t-shirts. June sat in the front but Mickey looked at me in the rearview mirror when he spoke. His eyes were bluer than June’s. The color of morning glories.

June slurped soda out of a styrofoam cup, stiff leather boots on the dashboard and strands of damp hair stuck to her cheeks. “Do you think I could go hunting with you too, Mickey? Just after I get good enough.”

Sometimes I hated June. I pulled at the fabric of the seat, extending it upward to watch it slowly deflate back into place.

Mickey laughed, hearty but plucked, fake. “Take it one step at a time. I know you’ve shot at targets before. Animals, though, are a whole other wheelhouse.” He drifted off the road into the gravel and parked. “We’re here.”

It was an expanse of dead grass. A setting for the apocalypse. The blue sky had thinned so it was nearly white, and giant chunks of metal and crumbs of plastic riddled the ground. I slid to the edge of the seat and opened the door. June had already sprung out, rearranging blankets and beer bottles and tool boxes from the bed to find what she was looking for. Mickey came around, putting a hand on her shoulder to lightly push her away before doing his own rummaging. He pulled out a silver handgun and gave it to her.

“Make sure you use both hands. It’s small but it’ll give a nasty kick.”

June rolled her eyes but maintained the smile. “I know. I learned from the best.” She turned to face me, faltering for a moment, like she’d forgotten I was there. “What gun do you want, Margot?”

“I got one picked out for her already,” Mickey said, dragging a shotgun from a cloth case. He handed it to me, nodding, his eyebrows raised. Isn’t it impressive? His expression said. You should be thankful.

“Not bad,” I said, feeling the weight. It was lighter than I had expected.

“Not bad?” he said, taking a step closer. His breath smelled saccharin and stale, like leftover soda had crystallized over his gums. “Is there another one that’d be a better fit?”

I didn't answer, but June did. "She's just joking, Mickey. She can use that one. Come on, Margot."

It took a second more for the moment to dissipate. For us to back away so I couldn't see the grey tint in the whites of his eyes. I think we must've had a conversation there.

You shouldn't be here.

June's my best friend.

Is she?

I just want to belong somewhere.

"Calm down, Junie. We're both just joking. Let's go," Mickey said, gravel crushing under his boots as he went toward the junkyard. I moved with him, smiling at June even though my throat ached like I needed to cry or punch something. She smiled back, thin lips smashed against each other. I passed her. She caressed my arm—giving me goosebumps—before falling in step with me. For a fleeting second, we were back in her room and all was felt how it was supposed to.

Mickey walked ahead of us. There was only plains, making the junkyard expand for eternity. Brittle, yellowed grass clung to everything and antholes rose from the dirt. June kicked lost sofas and abandoned stuffed animals, watching as the dust scattered from the cotton. Mickey shot first, hitting a gleaming car door. The shot rang, echoed, then he spoke, voice coated in an easy sternness.

"Would you stop playing around, June? If you keep kicking things, you're going to irritate your allergies."



# # #

There was a time where I thought about leaving June. It was during one of our sleepovers. We'd built a fort in the living room, sheltered from the ceiling fan's cool sighs and the moonlight sliding between the curtains. We were facing each other, June's back pressed against the couch and mine exposed to the rest of the room. Neither of us were asleep. We were still breathing too hard, clenching our lids shut but opening them again with every creak or grumble of the house.

Mickey came home late and as we heard his socks slither across the wood floor, we became statues. We waited to hear him walk up the stairs but he never did. Then, there was a thump, a shift of light, and he was next to me. I knew from the cologne, the way June moved closer so she could be seen.

He laid down behind me. It was just that for a moment—warmth seeping off of him, his chest swelling and falling. June's eyes flickered. Opened and closed and opened and closed. He must not have noticed because his fingers crawled up my side. He did it slowly, seeing if I'd react. It was like I'd been drenched in molasses, limbs tarred to the floor, as he went under my shirt. His touch was like sandpaper but I didn't move. Moving would force speaking. And I felt the need to apologize. Sorry, Mickey. Am I in the way? Do you need more room?

There was a line of sweat between my breasts. It cooled as he gripped one of them, kneading it like a baker with raw dough. He had more hand than I had flesh so he covered me. June stared at me. She had that same pleading look. The same one that got us here. The same one she gave me after the field mouse. *Please just help me out. This is what you're here for.*

Something twisted in my throat, a parasite trying to break free. It dawned on me that I wasn't really upset with Mickey. June was the reason for my teeth gritting, my breath holding. She knew this was bad, that Mickey was bad, and she was asking me to accept it.

Mickey got bored after a while. Thumbed my nipple for a few seconds, waiting for it to harden. Trailed his hand down my stomach. Wedged his pinkie under my waistband, inching it back and forth.

I moved, shifting closer to him, pressing my back to his stomach, so he knew I was aware. I wanted him to know I had the power, wanted him to quiver with dread. I wanted June to feel it too. She still stared at me, now mouthing something in the dark. He paused before rolling over. The fort was too humid, too crowded and Mickey did everything too leisurely. He sat on the wood floor before finally standing, He remained in place for a minute or so, and walked up the stairs one step at a time, as if trying to remember something he'd forgotten on the bottom floor before reaching the top.

I didn't say anything to June. Only pushed myself up from the pile of stuffed bears and fleece blankets and picked up my backpack. I closed the front door softly, so as not to disturb the routine.

I started for home at a sprint but eventually, after I could feel my heartbeat in my ears, it dwindled to an exhausted trudging. I pointed my flashlight at the grasshoppers on the trail and frowned as they retreated further into the night. At the third grasshopper, I was crying. It was a miserable, silent sob. The kind that burns the eye sockets and drips warm salty tears into your mouth. The kind that comes no matter how hard you try to keep it in. When I got to my house, I went straight to my mother's room like it was the destination I'd intended this entire time. She

was asleep, sprawled in the middle of her bed. Her nightgown bunched at her waist revealing pink cotton underwear. A strand of hair was plastered to her forehead.

She woke up before I had to be the whiny child. Before I had to say “mom” in that urgent whisper and shake her shoulder.

“What is it, Margot? Are you hurt?” She asked, pushing herself up on her elbows.

I shook my head as the tears kept leaking. Our house was more stagnant. Without the cool, spinning air, the liquid became hot, sticking to my cheeks. She took my wrist, squeezing it a little too hard and bringing me to the bed and I blurted the story in messy fragments. I gazed at where her skin met mine. She rubbed circles onto my forearm. Her nails were chalky—ripped off and white. After I finished, she spoke.

“Maybe it’s not such a terrible thing to be trusted, to be wanted.”

# # #

“Would you look at that? I found you a target, Margot,” Mickey said, walking back from the trail he’d departed on. He held a grey rabbit, dangling him by the scruff. The rabbit’s giant feet kicked, batting frantically, nose twitching. I hadn’t shot at anything yet. Just observed, noting dolls with their heads smashed in and appliances missing pieces.

June laughed; she laughed how all her family did—nasally, heavy. “Put the poor thing down, will you? He didn’t do nothing, Mickey.” There she was, stating the obvious, however, she seemed calm, indifferent almost. I searched for the tinge of fear. She readjusted her grip on the handgun. I didn’t see what she hit but the shot rang.

“It’s just a bunny,” Mickey said, tickling his feet so he kicked harder. Mickey was wearing a grey wife-beater. Crescent moons of sweat stained the underarms. Dark needles of hair sprouted from his chin. He must’ve forgotten to shave. “No one’s going to notice if he’s gone.”

June shrugged. “I guess you’re right.”

She retreated so easily. It was odd to think how a person was never just one person. How June could be both bold leader or faithful disciple. How her frame could look either overbearing or frail depending on who she was speaking to.

Mickey already had a rope ready. It snaked around his fist and dangled. He’d already made the decision, regardless of what we would have answered: the rabbit was to die.

“So, what’d you say, Margot?” He said, tying the frayed string around the animal’s neck. “I can get it so he doesn’t move much. It’ll be easy.”

I inhaled, sucking gritty warmth into my lungs. I wondered how much more blood a rabbit had than a mouse. If the bone structure was the same. Mickey nodded to me, eyebrows raised. A challenge.

“I’m no hunter,” I said. I could feel June’s stare. Her irritation simmering.

“No?” Mickey responded, gesturing to the gun. He put the rabbit on the ground, holding the end of the rope and laughing a little as he tried to run away, raising tiny clouds of dirt that dusted our shoes.

“Just do it, ‘Go,” June said. She hardly ever used that nickname. “Or, if she won’t, I will.”

Clicking, and then the gun was pointed again. This time, toward the rabbit. The muscles in June’s arms were pulled, bulging.

“Now wait a second, Junie. I think Margot should have a chance to try.”

Mickey drug the rabbit to a lone tire. Tied him to the thick charcoal rubber. His arms were pink and dotted like a strawberry. He didn't tan like June did. The rabbit continued scuffling, jerking the tire a centimeter or two. Mickey backed away from it, then looked at me expectantly. Anger grew like a fungus until it consumed me.

“Why are we doing this, June?” I asked, facing her, again.

I knew June understood because she was shocked, like she'd been that night, flickering eyes and open mouthed. She had heard every unasked question. Why are we following Mickey? Why can't we just go? Why won't you forget him, just for me?

The sun was going down and everything swelled with color like a ripe apricot. If we were home right now, Cathy would have just gone upstairs. Mr. Becker would be spread on his recliner.

“What do you mean, Margot?” She said, fury ascending with every word. “My brother brings us out to do something fun and you're getting upset over a rabbit?”

“You know that's not what this is about. He's destroying everything,” I said, taking a step closer to her.

“It seems like you're the one whose doing that.”

Everything became louder. It seemed I could hear the herds of ants stampeding over our feet. The tire crawling over the rocks and debris. The squealing of the field mouse echoing over years. The light breeze tickled like someone whispering into my ear, and I ground my teeth together. This—June, the fairy queen, Mickey, the house—was never going to be what I needed it to be. It was always going to end.

“Give her a break, June. I was just messin’ around,” Mickey said, coming closer to sling a pale meaty arm around her.

My hands were cold. I brought the stock of the gun to where my shoulder met my arm, rested my finger on the trigger. “No. I’ll do it.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Margot,” Mickey said, crossing his arms and smiling. June cheered, a lofty whooping, like the last minute hadn’t happened. I let my gaze wander to her again. Her hair hung flat. No longer tied in a braid or curly like she used to wear it.

The rabbit had moved a foot or two in its attempt to escape, so Mickey slid him back so he was in clear view, again, before standing to the side. His movements had slowed, as if he’d accepted his helplessness, his death.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Mickey barely finished his sentence before my shotgun shell pierced his chest. He let out a throaty gasp and collapsed backwards. Ruby spurts stained his shirt. June launched herself to his body. Sitting on her knees. Speaking. Hands darting from shoulder to chest to face. The rabbit still struggled, coating them both in sand.