

## THE MOMENT OF GOOD DECISION

The year I was ten we lived with my grandmother, and that was the only house I have ever lived in that had elves. They were the size and shape of large lobsters and they scuttled across the floors. At night they slept in my grandmother's closet, drawn there by the spicy sweet aroma of cedar chips (which elves love.)

As far as I can piece together in memory we had moved there because my mother had just attempted suicide in St. Luis and they were threatening to give me to the state when Grandmother stepped in and became our guardian.

All day long my grandmother and my mother played cards and drank gin in her stifling apartment at a low wooden table beneath the cuckoo clock. When the hour came, Dutch boys marched and the cuckoo bird stuck its head out and screamed like a mental patient.

The elves were not very friendly and the first few weeks we spent there were miserable for me. The floor, normally where I spent most of my time, was constantly in use by the elves, and they left streaky wet stains behind them as they moved from room to room. I tried to talk to one once, in the beginning, saying, "Little creature, what are you?" But it bit me.

So mostly I curled up in my mother's bed, which smelt of mentholatum, and read spy stories. My interaction with the elves was limited to their laughing at me or pinching me with their large claws. They always thought it was very funny when I stubbed my toe and crouched holding it in silent pain, or when I knocked my head on the underside of a table. They were medieval in many of their sensibilities.

Such was my boredom that one day I got the notion to fiddle with opening my mother's locked trunk to see what was inside. I rattled the cheap lock. I found a bobby pin and stuck it in the hole and jammed it around. I sat back to give up on my idea when I saw that there was an elf beside me. His dark shell glistened and he reached up with his massive claw, gave a few taps, and I heard the lock disengage. I flipped the trunk open. Several more elves were at my side and together we sifted through the meager contents.

There was a box of hair ribbons and jewelry, all of which was cheap and falling apart. Elves love treasure and so to thank them for their help, I gave them one fake pearl earring that had no mate, a horrid purple broach, and a tangled silver chain. They rushed off to hide these things in my grandmother's closet, all the while whispering among themselves, "Treasure, treasure. Treasure, treasure."

My mother's wedding dress was also folded inside the trunk, though the fabric had not been protected and had turned yellow and starchy so that it made a powdery sound when you touched it and left your hands feeling unclean.

There was also a metal cookie tin with a red leather diary stuffed inside. This I removed, replacing everything else carefully in the trunk and closing the lid very softly so that it just rested there, without locking. I lay in my mother's bed, and did not worry

she would catch me there—it would be many hours before she and my grandmother rose from the card table—and commenced my reading.

I wept all afternoon. I read in her diary many contradictory things: that she loved me more than she had thought she could love anyone; that she regretted having me and cursed the day I had been born; that she was proud of my shiny brown hair and almond eyes; that she despised me for growing more beautiful and conspired to push me overboard on a boat if we were ever on one. I had known before that I was both loved and pushed away, but it was different to hear it in her own voice, expressed so clearly, so eloquently. As I wept, I discovered to my surprise that the elves had come to comfort me and lay beside me on the bed, worrying the blankets with their claws and twitching their antennae in sympathy. Finally one grew brave enough to ask if he could try my tears (for elves love the taste of tears) and as soon as I discovered I could do them this favor, I let each one in turn drink from my burning cheeks, their hard crustaceous lips gently nibbling against my skin.

“Perhaps you should come to the throne room,” they finally said, and so I snuck out of the bedroom with them and down to the bathroom. I could hear my mother and grandmother playing cards. Their cigarette smoke drifted down the hall like ghosts.

In the bathroom, an elf bigger than all the others, perhaps two feet in length, not even including the extensions of his massive claws, lay in the bowl of the toilet, his face angled up toward me on the rim.

He said, “We have been thinking about killing your mother, but we need your consent.”

“You cannot have it,” I said.

“She gives you no love and plays cards all day,” the lobster king said.

“I know it,” I told him.

“We hate people who use mentholatum,” he said.

“That is no concern of mine.”

The elves conferred a moment among themselves. They could speak silently to each other when they wished. Finally the lobster king said, “We are confused. She has never been anything but awful to you. Why don’t you wish to discard her and find a new mother?”

If he had asked me just a day ago, or just that morning, perhaps I would have answered differently. Just then I said: “Once when I was eight she took me to a carnival and bought me a delicious cake all for myself and played games with me and rode the rides. Her eyes were shining and everything she said made me laugh. I have always hoped it could be like that again. And even though it can never be and will never be, I still can’t help but think she is the most beautiful woman that ever lived. Even if she doesn’t love me. Even if she never will.”

The elves were so moved that they began to sing—a song so sad humans cannot make music anything like it. I have heard once a blind man playing on a steel guitar and in moments he attained the sound of the least accomplished lobster in my grandmother’s house. Low horrible moaning and melody that went ploddingly on, led by the crazy logic of grief.

That day was perhaps the greatest in my life. Even better than the day at the carnival, the day my mother had liked me. To be sang to in the bathroom by the elves, their low voices echoing off the tile. To have the lobster king cry for me in his toilet-tub, redolent of cedar. Always I moved forward in life having these things behind me.

Always I knew that someone had offered me help. And that I had been too good to accept it.