

Thelma

There had been clanging for several nights down by the river and the sound clambered through the open kitchen window and up the old stairs and down the long hallway into Thelma's drafty bedroom to make the loneliness there that much more palpable. Thelma had grown weary in the past couple years. She had tired of trying. She no longer cared when she caught a student staring at her overhang of midriff beneath her shrunken blouses or when she wore a rather transparent skirt of yellowing white too long after labor day. Thelma Melling simply couldn't be bothered because, after thirty-eight years of caring too much, she was exhausted.

Thelma had never left the river. She could not find it within her to leave the house that had been her father's; the house that her mother had walked in once and sat at its windows staring out. Even after they were both gone, Thelma still felt them sometimes. She could see her mother in the downstairs study. She would feel her father pass behind her in the kitchen, laying his hand briefly on her shoulder. So Thelma stayed in the drafty river house with its toothy floorboards and rough wooden walls, and long hallways to nowhere. Thelma stayed there for thirty-eight years. And, despite the frequent sightings and constant reminders (a note scribbled in her mother's loopy cursive, the tarnished knife her father once carried in his pocket), Thelma began to grow lonely. She began to question her self-inflicted seclusion.

Thelma had grown up knowing water. She knew how it moved and where the current took it and how it sounded in good weather and bad. She loved nights when the wind was sharp and sent the river singing through its earthen canal like a husky whistle whose melody wandered like rabbit trails. When the silence of her parents' fighting became too much, Thelma would leave the drafty river house and go sit down carefully on their dock's splintered edge and dangle her toes in the murky blue-green and she'd watch the way the sun's rays streaked back and forth

and she'd see things in the water. Pretty, forbidden things with long webbed fingers and fishy tales covered in muddy scales. Things that made it easier to stop her mind from wondering things like why her mother cried so much and why her father Jacob never seemed to care. Thelma found solace down by the river. There she could feel things, or the hope of things, that did not exist within the rough wooden walls of the drafty river house, pale grey with dust and loneliness. Once, Thelma saw tendrils of hair riding the current, all deep and black as a lake bottom, shiny with seaweed and twigs, the strands rushing fast between her tiny outstretched toes before they disappeared again into depths where the sun rays could not reach.

Thelma was never scared of the river. Not even after the body of Marcus Shelly was pulled out the summer after eighth grade, all bloody and scratched around the eyes and mouth, and everyone all around was whispering about a large, large fish or something predatory in the dark water. Thelma still came home after art camp every morning that summer and went into the kitchen and made an egg sandwich on rye and twisted her ratty black hair back behind her neck and went down to the river to wait and watch for her elusive, black-haired creature. Thelma still let her toes dangle in the water. She felt a thrill at the idea of being pulled deep down. To be taken, even with such force, would mean that somewhere, she was wanted. And too be wanted, and needed special, just you, was a wonderful thing.

A week after Marcus's funeral, Thelma saw a face in the water. The face of a woman with palest skin, eyes of piney green, black ink hair all around. And the woman asked Thelma what she wanted. Wanted more than anything else in the entire world. And Thelma said, "Love." Because she had never seen it before but she knew that Sal Perkins at school had said love was wanting someone really bad. And Thelma liked the sound of that. She liked the sound of it, because her father had named her Thelma. And that was a problem for his tiny wife.

Because Jacob Melling said Thelma was the name of the only woman he'd ever truly loved. And Thelma's mother had heard him say this so many times since their daughter's birth, under his breath like a whisper to their black-haired baby girl. And Thelma's mother had grown to believe it was true: that Jacob had no love left for her. And Thelma saw that the believing made her mother feel useless, unwanted. Thelma never wanted to feel that way ever. And so she told the rivermaid she wanted love. The rivermaid smiled and promised Thelma would have it. One day she would feel needed special, just her. The way she was.

At the end of that summer, Thelma's mother drowned, although everyone called it suicide. Everyone said she'd been unhappy in the drafty river house with her husband Jacob always off somewhere and a quiet, dark eyed daughter whose favorite pastime was staring at the river. Plus, no one could believe that the little wife of Jacob Melling could live so close to water and really not know how to swim. So Thelma carried that with her, the rumors and the whisperings about death, and she slipped into the skin of Daughter of Suicidal Woman. And she told herself it was ok and that having sad things happen could do more than just make a person sadder. Sad things could also make a person tragically beautiful. So Thelma practiced her tragic mystery in the mirror at night and tried to still feel friendly towards the river.

Thelma didn't see the pine-eyed woman in the murky depths again. No more inky hair or webby fingers. But Thelma remembered what the woman in the river had promised her. And she waited.

IIII

Thelma had never been graceful with male interaction. Even all grown up, her face would flare, her palms would sweat, and she'd find herself at a loss for words, grinning an alarmingly toothy smile at the object of her affection. And yet she could never accept that she

was not appealing. After years of trying with her hair and lips and eyeliner and all black or all white clothes depending on the current trend, Thelma Melling decided enough was enough. And she made an official retirement from making any kind of effort where men were concerned.

When it was announced one blazing September afternoon to the Blackwell High School's faculty that Principal Druther's wife had finally passed, Thelma forgot promptly about her vows to indifference. A week or so later, when Principal Druther's returned to school, Thelma stood in the doorframe of her History 101 class longer than usual, watching Druther's shockingly robust behind make its way down the hallway and back to its creaky desk chair.

From that day on, every afternoon after 4th period, Thelma found her cheeks flushed as she passed by Principal Druthers in the hallway on her way back from the Teacher's Lounge. He was not a particularly handsome man, but there was something tragically beautiful about him. And while Thelma didn't consider herself particularly pretty, she'd always attributed herself with the gift of tragic mystery at the very least. The freshman Biology teacher, Miss Winnie, had already brought Principal Druther's homemade lemon bars twice and this seemed to strengthen Thelma's resolve that she and *Harry*, as she'd begun calling him in her late night fantasies, were destined to be together. Whether as lifetime partners, or merely passionate lovers.

It came to her several months later during Sam Parson's presentation on Anne Boleyn during first period: the forbidden image of being ravaged on the edge of Principal Druthers' squeaky metal desk. Then a week later as she awkwardly tried to hang a chart outlining the chronology of the Tudors, in popped Druthers, a smile hung beneath his woeful eyes. He came with a roll of scotch tape and, before Thelma could even blink, she decided that to wait any longer to act upon her longing would be foolish, wasting precious, God-given time. Despite her

weariness of trying, Thelma had grown far more tired of the loneliness inside her. A woman's self-respect can only last so long. And in her mind thirty-eight years was long enough.

Perhaps if the clanging hadn't been going on for quite so long down by the river, or if she hadn't spent the last few nights wishing her bed were half its size. Perhaps if she hadn't had nearly half a roasted chicken and three bananas go to waste that morning simply due to her inability to get through them a timely fashion all by herself. Perhaps if she hadn't slipped in the shower the night before, pulling the plastic curtain and heavy rod down on her head with a painful thud. Perhaps then she wouldn't have dug through her closet for her most scandalous outfit. And perhaps she would have seen all this as desperation rather than mistaking it as "being ballsy". And perhaps that distant childlike sliver of her brain would have reminded her that love was due her. That she had been promised.

The next morning, Thelma awoke feeling as though nothing could possibly go wrong. She felt a *bit* nauseous, but she told herself that was because intuition was telling her that today, yes today of all days, she was going to get that love she'd been waiting so long for in the form of a good lay. And so she strapped on the too-tight red lace bra and matching lace thong (which was so uncomfortable that she decided she best do her seducing *before* 4th period rather than after). And she shimmied into the second skin of her black pencil skirt and buttoned up the sheer white blouse she'd been saving for her honeymoon in Corsica or something and lathered her mouth with Cherry Tart lipstick and slipped her hair off her neck and her feet into teetering heels.

And off Thelma went to Blackwell High. Happy happy.

IIII

Thelma had often speculated her name was an inconsiderate one to give any girl born after 1900, but that thought had never crossed her father's mind. Jacob Melling had grown up listening to his own father tell stories of a woman named Thelma who was so lovely and beguiling that she was the only woman he'd ever truly loved. Young Jacob had heard his father say these things. And young Jacob could see that his mother heard and understood these things too and young Jacob grew to resent the sadness his mother's understanding painted into her eyes. And so, when Jacob's own little wife popped out a girl, he simply couldn't help himself. He thought that surely a girl named Thelma would never have the misfortune of a marriage as loveless as his parents'. And so "Thelma" she was, all 8.6 chubby pounds of her. And, in Jacob's eyes, she was the most precious thing he'd ever seen, lovely as a yellow rose. Of course it was years later that, several weeks before her fourteenth birthday, while helping her father Jacob unpack a dusty storage unit, a teenaged Thelma uncovered a box of her grandfather's old books among which was one entitled *Thelma*. She didn't tell her father. Instead she pushed the book beneath her itchy school skirt and snuck it to her room and read late into the night of her beloved namesake. In those pages she found the story of a mermaid and the men who loved her. And that summer, the summer Marcus Shelly's body was found all bloodied and her mother drowned in the river, Thelma asked her father Jacob that she be put in swim lessons. And her father obliged. Thelma began to associate herself with water in a new way. And no matter how the girls in the school locker room would mock her yellowing name or tease her poof of ink black hair that matched her dark, dark eyes, Thelma imagined herself as the character in her book and remembered the woman of the river, her long webbed fingers that made the waves, and her strands of hair that cleaned between Thelma's toes. And Thelma took on the rivermaid as her own. She was like a spirit animal, only prettier.

IIII

Thelma entered into Blackwell High that morning with a garish pout and a strut dripping in confidence. As her heels clacked on the linoleum and the stressed zipper of her skirt began sliding itself open with the jolt of every step, she felt the last clench of uncertainty fall away and hit the hallway floor with a satisfying thud. When she reached her classroom door, everyone was seated. Being late for the first time in thirteen years had its advantages. She strutted in and watched as their 15-year-old mouths dropped open.

“Class, I have a little business I need to take care of with Principal Druthers. I won’t be but a few minutes.” Thelma made an awkward attempt to bite her lip while she winked at scrawny Sam Parson who had the misfortune of sitting in the front row that day.

Thelma reached Druthers’ door and knocked softly.

“One moment please,” he said from inside.

“Principal Druthers? I need just a minute of your time.”

“Just one moment, please.”

“Harry, it’s me.” Thelma giggled at her scandalous-ness.

The door swung open to reveal an agitated Druthers with the primly assembled Super Intendant Mrs. Cooper sitting in a white pant suit with legs crossed at the ankles.

“Harold? What’s this?” Mrs. Cooper sniffed in distaste. She was that kind of person.

Thelma’s confidence picked up its skirts and ran like hell.

“Miss Melling, would you care to inform Mrs. Cooper and myself why...why your dressed...”

Here, Mr. Druthers got distracted somewhere in the lace of Thelma’s brazier that was plainly visible beneath the gauzy fabric of her blouse.

“What I believe Mr. Druthers is trying to ask, Miss Melling, is why on God’s green earth you’re dressed like a prostitute.” Mrs. Cooper didn’t mince words. It wasn’t her style.

“Uh... I just—”

“Harold, is there something going on between the two of you?”

“What?!” Druthers managed to pull his eyes away from Thelma’s lacey chest for that one. Thelma’s stomach sunk.

“No. No, Mrs. Cooper. It’s. It’s laundry day and I just threw up in the bathroom and was coming to ask if I might go home. Stomach flu or something. Principal Druthers. Might I?” Before Druthers could nod, Thelma had kicked off the heels and was racing towards her classroom where she grabbed her purse and keys and screamed out, “Chapter 6. I want a three page summary by tomorrow,” and as she ran through the front doors and down the cement stairs, the feet of her panty hose snagged and ripped and she prayed that that was her last day at Blackwell High forever.

For two weeks Thelma didn’t answer the phone. During the day she nested in sheets and blankets and read cheap romances and flipped through old Vogues while eating boxed macaroni and cheese, all the while trying to forget the way that red thong had seemed to tighten on her speedy escape from Principal Druthers’ office. At night she lay awake listening to the clanging of metal on metal coming from the river. She refrained from making any calls concerning it. She knew that Sam Parson’s father was the sheriff and she decided she’d rather deal with the unknown quantity of the ominous noise than the rage of an offended parent (especially one enmeshed within the legal system). After several sleepless nights, Thelma had realized that if something bad was coming, moving ever closer, who was she to stop it or tell it that it had no

business bothering her tiny life? Deep down, she longed for an upset. An even greater one than her failed attempt at seduction.

It was day fifteen of self-inflicted lockdown and Thelma felt that she was beginning to smell things growing on her skin. As she considered whether or not saving her nostrils was worth the effort of making her way to the bathroom down the hall, the telephone across her drafty bedroom rang. She lay very still and let it go to the answering machine.

“Hi Thelma! It’s Karen. From the front desk. I was calling one last time to see whether or not you’ll be returning to class sometime soon. It’s been over two weeks now, and we need to know how long the sub will need to continue covering your classes. I hope that you’re beginning to feel better! Stomach flus are the worst. Although, if Miss Winnie brings in one more batch of her lemon bars I think we’ll all be joining you. Mr. Druthers seems to like them well enough, but I find them nauseatingly sweet, to be perfectly honest. Anyways, please try to get back to me sometime this afternoon or early tomorrow. Thank you! Byeeee!”

Thelma buried her face in a handful of bed sheet and recoiled. It smelled thick and musty. Anxious at the prospect of having to call Karen back, Thelma decided a shower wasn’t going to cut it. So she pulled on her only bathing suit, a pale yellow one piece of threadbare spandex, and made her way toward the river.

As she walked, she noticed the clanging had stopped. She’d become so used to it, she noticed it’s absence more than its continuation. The path to the dock was slick. Had it rained?

Thelma saw the water like it was the first time. It shimmered in the late morning sun. It was May now. Preparation for finals would begin soon and in a month, three weeks, and two days Thelma would be sitting down to a bowl of homemade lemon cake with buttercream frosting to celebrate her thirty-ninth birthday. Alone.

It was early enough in the morning yet and early enough in the season that no one was floating the river. Thelma had it all to herself. She thought of her mother briefly. Thelma thought of her mother's inky hair and piney eyes. And she thought, *How long has it been since I missed her?* And that thought made her sad a little.

Thelma flung the old blue towel around her neck like a scarf and watched as her unpainted toes made squishy marks in the dust-turned-mud. She tried again to remember rain and couldn't.

The dock was weathered down to peeling grey wood. Gaps between planks gave small glimpses of the damp world beneath and threatened to trip careless feet. Thelma still remembered how she used to hop over each one in order to make it to her sitting spot at the end. She laid out the blue towel and sat her 38-year-old behind down on it. Her knees felt stiff and she felt her hip pop uncomfortably. This made the strained zipper of the black pencil skirt seem somehow trivial.

Thelma stuck her toes in and the water was surprisingly warm for May. She watched the sunrays pierce the surface and create a flower of light inside the murky depths. Then the wind began to blow through the trees and the river began caressing the earthy skin of its canal, singing wildly and Thelma leaned forward to hear just a little better. To try and make out a word or two. Then there were strands of inky black hair and seaweed between her toes, tickling as they cleaned. Webbed fingers followed by pale arms hovered just beneath the surface.

Thelma opened her mouth and shut it again. The face of the river's woman stared at her, eyes filled with reserve and desire. Their piney green was tinged with sadness. Their sadness brought a pang of emptiness to Thelma's chest.

The rivermaid asked Thelma if she had ever found love. And Thelma said no. Love had never found her. Not even when she tried to seek it out. The rivermaid smiled and said *Perhaps you've been looking in the wrong place.* But Thelma couldn't hear her. So she untangled her feet from the tendrils of hair and weed and perched on the dockside on her stiff knees so she could lean closer and the webbed fingers reached out for her and Thelma shyly reached back and said "Where have you been?" and the rivermaid said *I've been waiting for something I need.* Then Thelma understood what the rivermaid needed. She saw it in those piney eyes. Thelma saw that she was needed special, just her, and that was a wonderful thing. And, aside from smacking her knee on the edge of the dock, Thelma slipped quietly into the river, tragically beautiful in her yellow suit.