

McCozy

After dark, the town square of Aldegrace settled into a quietude of cool shadowy storefronts. The lights inside blinked out one by one, like individual eyelids succumbing to sleep, as their shopkeepers pulled their doors to, twisting brass keys in their locks and whistling while they strolled home down the empty sidewalks for a roast fresh out of the oven and cooling on the dinner table.

By the time the moon scooped over the roof gables, most of the town was finished and full, as if they had been plumping up on daylight since sunrise that morning and had just finally fattened to capacity. Although the gas lamps of the police station and the prayer candles of the parish burned all night long, the only services that rivalled them for artificial warmth were those that happened to do their best business to the drunkards of the deep purple dark. At dusk, Aldegrace became a nest for nocturnal lovebirds.

The swinging bridge on the far side of town, pitched over a creek velveted royal blue in the moonlight, was a favorite spot for perching. And there was the less-frequented locale in the graveyard out past the grade school. Its sweet cedar silence was reserved for the most dreadful of romantics, where necking against the straight-backed headboard of a tombstone fifty or sixty years old felt reprehensible and strangely solidifying. Afterwards, as the evening seeped into bedtime hours, the square was chosen as the next best place to roost, offering up two neighboring branches at which to prolong a passion: the Red Paradiso movie house, which ran reels of monsters and marauders until midnight, and the Drug & Confection, which ran rivers of fruity cola and thick chocolate malts into crystal glasses once the late showing across the street let out.

Inside the D&C, the marble of the soda fountain glistened like the slopes of a winter mountain. Nestled into the ice peaks was sugary color globed in glass: lemon twizzles and licorice ropes and chewy caramels and candy geodes of sapphire and emerald. Beyond those, the shelves were lined with the household essentials: gauze and bandages, baking soda, hair rollers and tonic, chalky tablets to cure bellyaches, wood varnish to finish a rocking chair with.

The druggist, a Ms. Marlene Eglington, spent the easier hours of the evening polishing this presentation to an adequate sheen, refilling jars or crushing aspirin in the back room or sweeping stray leaves back out onto the sidewalk. The busy slots were spent pulling levers of soda

behind the counter and planting twin straws into root beer floats for the sweethearts that trickled in giggly and doe-eyed from the theater across the street.

She parked her partner in business—her teenaged daughter Adair—behind the counter on a stool nearby, where she would assist the nighttime crowds by bucking back and forth in soundless glee, or punching the air in an inaudible drumbeat, or crying out in hilarity whenever a boy leaned in close to brush ice cream off his date's lip with his thumb.

Generally, Adair was a fixture of the D&C just the same as the colored advertisements plastered to the windows: the adobe-toned Chief How puffing a mouthful of cigars, and the cartoon bumblebee with an icepack for a hat and a thermometer in its mouth that swore by the healing power of Rickett's Honeydrop Cough Suppressants. In the daytime, she would lumber onto the platform behind the window displays and press her forehead to the pane, people-watching with her own restless nonchalance, occasionally flapping her knuckles and bellowing at faces she recognized.

"Oh, isn't Miss Adair looking pretty as a picture today, Marlene!" many a mother had crooned on many an afternoon.

Nudging their baby prams ever so slightly in the opposite direction, they would sometimes be forced to raise their voices over one of Adair's shouts, ejecting their compliments to Marlene through oversized grins. "That girl is a pineapple-peach! She's just got the sweetest heart!"

But the few of these townswomen that had previously required her daughter's services never addressed her directly. Marlene watched them smile and push their frilly carriages to the counter and abruptly glance behind them, as if there were a black cat sitting in the window which they could manage to coo at but were afraid to cross. Very quickly, they would leave with their sleeping babes to return to their hundred-year-old houses, quiet as the grave.

It was their children, set free either by the school bell or a Saturday, that acknowledged Adair Eglington as more than an animatronic behind the glass. They raced in scores down the sidewalk to the front door, wrenching it open so fast that the store bell turned somersaults on its string, and immediately turned to Adair with the subtlest dip of their chins.

"Hi, McCozy, how's business been?" they would ask in small voices, as if they were addressing an elder or a Sunday school teacher. Then they would elbow each other to the soda fountain. "*Hola*, Ms. Eglington! Any coconut flakes today? We're feeling sundaes."

Marlene had started out thinking that it was their own invention for her daughter, a playtime *nom de plume* that was supposed to last for an hour and ended up sticking. *McCozy*. But, after Adair began to acquire a considerable amount of hirings, she began to wonder.

One sunny afternoon during a church picnic, after the parson's son—a white-haired thing of six years old—had asked her if *McCozy* was allowed to drink the mango syrup (a favorite vice of his) straight from the bottle, Marlene asked him about the nickname's origin.

"She told me," he had replied, rolling the hem of his mother's tablecloth into a scroll.

"Now, Jeremiah, you know that Adair doesn't talk like you and I do."

The boy had been earnest. "Yeah, but she *told* me."

A smile had flitted across Marlene's lips. Her daughter's expanding celebrity was a vicious thrill for her, a spectacle of surprises encoded within each miracle gene that she had prayed on her hands and knees for as a newlywed of eighteen.

Suspending her amusement, she had decided to push it further. "But she didn't open up her mouth and speak it to you, surely?"

"No," Jeremiah had said, his attention caught by a butterfly lighted on his fork. "She sent it to me. Like radio in my head. I like it when she talks like that."

Later that same afternoon, while she was helping to gather the folding chairs and card tables from the front lawn of the church, Father Willis himself had drifted her way with a furrowed brow and one of his wife's serving platters wrapped in a tea towel under his arm.

"About Adair, Ms. Eglington," he started. "I've been hearing the children—my own son included—say that she's touched, and I have been careful to correct them on this. *No, she is blessed and a child of the Lord just the same as you and I!*' But their meaning does not seem to be of a derogatory nature." He sighed, digging a finger into his starched collar. "They say, 'McCozy can see things nobody else sees.' They say that she sees spirits on the air. Now what do you make of that? *Spirits on the air?*'"

Marlene only smiled. "My daughter was given to me the way she is by God."

Father Willis shook his head. "Then I suppose it's no wonder she can see the marks of heaven upon Earth."

"The marks of heaven, Father?"

The parson had visibly blanched in the warmth of the sun. Not long after that, he too would begin to enlist Adair's help on several occasions down in the deepest parts of the parish, with midnight tolling overhead in the belfry.

But recently, while business at the D&C had been as booming as ever, Adair's department was experiencing a reprieve. Marlene was almost growing accustomed to sunsets that yoked into slow, crisp evenings, like a summer that was showing nature how long it could last. For a while, she had almost let herself believe that such evenings were only fixtures of a romantic past, perhaps a sweet wine laid up in an old shed to forever ferment. Of course, this also meant that she had to watch Adair all the more closely for the mischievous spirit of boredom which seemed to make its appearance without fail every night around ten. If the young lovers of Aldegrace could clean out a full candy jar on a Saturday night, then, if given the chance, her daughter would make up the difference on a slow midweek evening in autumn.

"Adair!" Marlene called one night from the top rung of a ladder, grabbing a jar as large as a fishbowl from the highest shelf behind the counter. "Sweet, would you go into the back room and get me that box of peppermint sticks on the table? It's right beside the mortar and pestle. A big red and white box!"

She heard Adair hop down from her perch in the window and gallop a wayward route around the room and finally behind the counter and into the back. A racket that insinuated candies being shaken in their box sounded from the doorway.

"And don't you eat any of them!" Marlene added, thumbing her eyeglasses up the bridge of her nose. "You gobble up any more sugar tonight, and you'll be up to see the sunrise tomorrow morning! And that means *I'll* be up too!"

Adair shuffled out of the back room, and, with a moany *hmpf*, thrust the box against her mother's knees.

"Wait, don't tip it, you—!"

The box whapped against the floor, scattering a hundred and one tiny barber shop poles. As if in harmony with the crash, Adair thundered her hands together, just as the store bell clattered and the front door swished open.

"I'll be right with you!" Marlene huffed as she trundled down the ladder.

"McCozy! Ms. Delilah needs you at the boardinghouse right now!"

Marlene straightened up with a rigid snap right as Adair let out a high warble, mashing away the bangs that had fallen in her face to behold the portrait of Norma Dornicky more clearly.

The rough-and-tumble progeny of the town mechanic was fixed to the doormat with one finger crooked in the door handle behind her, still wearing the same backwards baseball cap and jeans she had been wearing that morning at breakfast while she scarfed down a plate of ketchup-smothered eggs to keep from being late to school. She and Esau “Grease-All” Dornicky occupied an expanded broom closet on the second floor of the house where the other Ms. Eglington (Del to her younger sister and Ms. Delilah to the general public) rented out rooms to long-time residents and the rare event of a tourist. A year younger than Adair and just as wild, Norma had always been a secret favorite of Marlene’s. The girl burned her daylight hours away with the hardest tobaccos that Aldegrace had to offer a kid: a blend of sweat and blood from daily schoolyard scraps, diesel fuel from the last work orders at her father’s garage before dinner, and brown dust kicked up from the ballfield until the evenings became too dark to play. Then, once the moon rounded the sky overhead, her self-imposed graveyard shift took full precedence.

Ever since Adair’s services had gained a popular demand, Norma had taken it upon herself to fulfill the position of messenger, running a route from the boardinghouse to the D&C to facilitate house calls and other summonses. In fact, Marlene had toyed with paying her a small salary, but she felt certain that it not necessarily be wanted. Norma had other more stimulating ways of obtaining pocket money, and the job itself seemed to afford her a superior pride, like she was a ticket-taker at the entrance to a horror show, privy to every rattling bone and ghostly shadow inside.

But this time Marlene knew for a fact that it was the towering house on Lipscomb Lane, their own boardinghouse, that had turned into a haunt. Norma was nodding yes even before the whisper hissed from her teeth: “*The stranger.*”

Adair began to change. Already, she was attuned and angry, flapping her wrists hard, stomping her feet, scrunching and unscrunching the features of her face.

“Mr. Mystique is our winner-winner-hell-sweatin’-sinner!” Norma exclaimed. “I knew something was damned about that guy the day he showed up! And it wasn’t just your average list of peculiarities either. No, *you* remember, I was just about to take off for school, and he was

outside hitching that old bicycle up to the fence post, and the first thing he said to me was, ‘Would you happen to be an October baby?’”

While she was still talking, Marlene hopped over the spilled peppermints into the back room and swiped her cardigan and store keys, falling back into the procedure as if there had never been a hiatus. Along with it came the old fear, transporting her back to the night when her daughter was almost taken over.

It was the public library—the records room, where the newspaper microfilm and yellowed censuses were kept. That night, the librarian had the thing trapped under the reading table and sent an S.O.S. by way of the custodian. Marlene and Adair had come prepared, but it had gotten too brave as the business had gone on. It had shed its skin early, for one. It had climbed up onto the ceiling too. And when Adair’s threatening whoops had stretched out into syllables, Marlene had to force herself to believe that the clear, childlike voice coming out was no miracle of Mary’s and no making of her daughter’s. Ever since then, Adair refused to even venture near the stone elephants guarding the library’s front steps.

Norma was still jabbering even as Marlene ushered she and Adair outside and locked the door hastily behind them.

“And I said that, yeah, I was born in October, and what’s it to him, right? And he looked at me with this really cockeyed grin—really sick and demented—and told me that didn’t I know it was the month of spirits! That my mother must have communed with a black goat to finagle my birth, and that he bet my feet look like cloven hooves inside my shoes! Would you believe—”

“Hold it, Norma!”

Adair had begun to drift down the sidewalk, moaning softly as if to ward off the darkness that was already clinging to her pinafore, and her mother clamored to catch her before she could break into a run. Norma followed beside them, tightrope-walking the curb. At times like these, Marlene’s first instinct was of a comparison of relief. Her child was no different from one shifting from foot to foot in the wings, waiting for her cue to enter from stage right. Her girl was antsy. But she always had to scold herself: *No, don’t try to take this there! This is too lofty for that! This is too great!* She had to remind herself that, every time Adair went into business, she was being favored enough to see the soul of her daughter come forth before her eyes.

They passed the Red Paradiso, the ruby lights of its double marquee blinking above its darkened ticket booth, and Norma started her report.

“We locked him in the Wooden Room. All we could find that was big enough was this headless tentacle sculpture that Mr. Lettum was working on for the winter community pageant. He let us break off one of the legs so it would look more like a crucifix. Ms. Delilah barred the door with it, and, by God, he can feel it there! He knows it, and he’s not happy about it! Neither is that bird of his. You could hear it above the ceiling in Ms. McCarchen’s room; it was pecking the floor like mad when I left out.”

They were off of the square now, down one of the side streets lined with dark and dozy houses on both sides. Marlene stiffened, just as Adair groped at her arm in anticipation. She felt both herself and her daughter breathe in, and, for an instant, it was like they were the same voice: “How did he reveal himself, Norma?”

Not even four days before, a man had come into Aldegrace on a wiry black bicycle with nothing but a canvas case and a birdcage strapped to the back of it. Apparently, he had bypassed all the usual stops for a stranger to town: City Hall for inquiries about the area, the Blue Rose Diner for replenishment from the road, the shotgun abode of an aunt or brother for lemonade and visitation before heading homeward again. Instead, he had glided through the streets with a tight smirk, the crow in the cage at his back squawking at suspicious passerby like a guard dog on alert.

He had been quaint but not altogether far from winsome at the boardinghouse, where he had met Delilah Eglington in the foyer and slid his slender hands into his trouser pockets to withdraw fistfuls of crumpled bills so old that their greenness had rusted over. The request was for a room, and the stay indefinite. Delilah had put he and his crow up in the attic, christened the Wooden Room after she had had it furbished it into a living space some years before.

When Marlene and Adair had returned from the D&C for dinner that evening, he had been lounging horizontally across the railing of the front porch and pulling on a cigarette, the smoke vortexing above his sharp nose. His crow had been perched on the point of his shoe, its eyes orange and bulging like twin Jupiters in its oily head. They should have known then, but they hadn’t. Why not? If what usually came were truly the helpmates of hell, they had never manifested human before. But why hadn’t she sensed it?

Norma hesitated before she answered, as if the mystery of it scared her too. “He wrote a message on the bathroom mirror. It’s in some kind of black goo. It said, **HARDY SENDS WARMTH**. I guess it really spooked Ms. Delilah. But what’s that supposed to mean anyway?”

Marlene's heart leapt against her chest as she struggled to keep a hold on Adair, who was steadily writhing out of her grip. There had been another place, before Aldegrace. A winter place where men would hike out into the drifts for months at a time and send back telegrams of fire, descriptions of earthen flame welded into miniscule nuggets that could thaw the imagination but not the body. In that place, there could be no home-shepherding husband. There could be no un-son at all, no daughter who could not be as sharp as a sled dog as well. And there could be no anointed child that was not a frostbitten finger needing to be lopped off on the trail from one encampment to another. That was what Hardy had said.

The slap of Adair's hand against the streetlamps that they passed broke Marlene from her thoughts. Under their white glow, her daughter resembled some kind of wizard swinging from magic staff to magic staff. She didn't look scared at all, although she too had once felt the scarred breath of a wolf-man on her face.

*I need you*, she thought suddenly, as if her fear could be strong enough to gain access into the universe that must turn within Adair's head. *I need you more than I want to live.*

They reached Lipscomb Lane lined with poplars shedding their embered leaves, and Adair began to buck for the ninth house down and its peaked tower jutting up against the moonless sky. In front of the boardinghouse, a neighborhood boy stood zinging a yoyo up and down towards a toad stuck to the middle of the street, trying to make it hop. When the three of them approached, he looked up and grinned through the gaps in his teeth.

"Damn 'em somethin' bad, McCozy!" he cheered.

Norma growled back, "Go hit the sack!"

She smirked at Marlene, hoping for a laugh, but Marlene was staring wide-eyed at the house as if it were a treacherous mountain, while Adair tucked her chin against her chest and yowled, shadowboxing the air in her mother's tight grip.

Inside the house, every single border was crammed into the entryway. A congress of wary eyes met the three of them in knowing dread—the women in their curlers with their dime novels under their arms, and the men in their robes with the burn of their pipe tobacco still clinging to their mustaches. They parted down the middle to let Delilah Eglington slip through, her dressing gown flapping like pale pink swan wings.

"Oh, Marl!" she cried as she squeezed her younger sister's shoulders. "I made sure every room was evacuated! It's all I knew to do! He's up there in the Wooden Room. We trapped him,



he and that bird.” She was breathing through tears, trying to push her words out. “Sweetie—did he—do you know—*what happened*—to Hardy?”

The fingers on Marlene’s right hand tingled numbly, but she shook her head with a slow dread and whispered, “We left. We left. That’s all.”

“I’m starting to not know about this one, huh?” Norma twittered nervously beside them.

Adair was already dragging herself toward the stairwell, and Marlene had to catch her in a bear hug and pin her against her breast to keep her from bolting. Like never before, her daughter was fire in her arms, snorting air in and out like a cornered mare as she hurled her head back to let Marlene glimpse holy hornets in her eyes.

*Do you know?* her mother pleaded in her mind, testing. *Darling. Adair. McCozy! Do you know who’s waiting up there for us?*

Adair only whined to be freed.

They started up the stairs: Delilah in the lead, Marlene clutching Adair like precious cargo in the middle, and Norma bringing up the rear. First floor to second, and Marlene tried to remember the other men that had been on the tundra, the ones sitting stoic in the taverns with their beards frosted and their eyes purpled from months in the black cold. Their wives were either in thawed ground somewhere, or not existent at all. Had the stranger that was now up above her head been one of them, slicking in the shadows? Was he still buried in the banks out there, his real bones calcified into diamond? Had his bones seen and told his soul?

The attic was atop the final flight of stairs. Dante Lettum’s sculpture sat guarding the door. Behind it was a metronomic tapping, like a visitor knocking on the wrong side of the door. *The crow*, Marlene thought. She remembered venturing out for the dwindling supply of firewood beside the cabin, and seeing a vulture perched atop the roof, like a weathervane.

Delilah wrapped her hands around two star-legs of the sculpture and steeled herself. Norma wove her way to the door and squeezed the knob, waiting for the go-ahead. Marlene faced her daughter and gathered her squirming hands into a bundle. She said the same thing she always did before she released Adair from her, but this time there was something else.

“I love you. I love you. I love you. You don’t remember it, but—” She breathed. “I thought I fought. I thought I got us out.”

With her eyes swimming between Marlene and the door, Adair pawed her hand over her mother's lips—so gently, like a kiss from three fingers—and Marlene could almost feel the warmth of that birth-night, the ripping stretch, the ruined sheets, such hot blood.

The entry happened fast and forcefully, like stabbing at a spider with a shoe. Delilah hauled the sculpture to one side while Norma threw open the door, and Marlene and McCozy barged into the room where the stranger was sitting stretched out against the back wall, pointing the glinting iron of a revolver at the doorway.

Delilah slammed the door behind them. Norma gasped and became a stationary target, paralyzed with fear. Marlene's only power was to snatch Adair out of the air and swaddle her up, stretch out all the skin that she had to take the cooked spell of a bullet. But the shot never fired, and the stranger began to laugh—a yucking, throaty snicker. Never, in all the times, had any of them ever produced a weapon. Marlene let her daughter's unpeaceable body wriggle out of her arms, feeling a terror that she did not know how to resolve: fear of man.

Then she realized the gun. Stashed in Hardy's overcoat in case of brown bears near the river and kept in the bottom drawer of his grandmother's armoire when he returned to the cabin. Resurrected from oceans under the earth, from the fishing hole in which she had sunk it. Stolen from the past, she would know it in her nightmares forever. The gun held to her baby's temple.

"What do you want from us?" she demanded in a savage voice.

Adair lunged backwards suddenly, and Marlene wrenched her back in a panic, her mind screaming, *No, baby, no! Don't move! Don't you understand he could shoot you?*

"Cherry phosphate," the stranger drawled in a dissimilar sound but a perfect impression of the one that had charmed her out of the Eglington family drugstore and into the expanse. "Butterscotch milkshake. Make me one 'a them banana splits you said you was so famous for. Gimme som'n sweet, sugar."

Marlene gaped at him, trying to hold onto Adair, as a shiver juttled up her spine and across her shoulders. "I don't know who you've been talking to, or if he sent you here or not! But he's *gone!* And so are we! He can't get us, and he can't hurt us—!"

She heard Norma yelp behind them, and she spun around to see the crow perched on the handle of a single candleholder on the ground. It was then that she felt the emptiness of the rest of the room, all the furniture swallowed up save for this one nightlight. For some terrible reason, she pictured them skeletonized in the snow somewhere, swapped out in time.

The crow squawked, glowering straight at her with its citrine eyes. Then it took flight with the candleholder clutched in its tiny talons. It flapped around the rafters above their heads while the stranger cackled, trailing it with the barrel of the gun: “Gimme a first date! All’s I need’s a first date! Give an old dog a bone, won’t ‘cha? He been sad for so long!”

Norma had pulled off her sneakers and was pitching them at the bird, missing it, as Adair’s arms flailed over her head, trying to swat it down. Marlene fought to hold her limbs down, forgetting to speak in her mind what she cried out loud: “Stop! Baby, stop! This is his trap!”

The crow swooped low under Adair’s upstretched arms, and Marlene had only enough time to watch the stranger level the gun at her and shoot as the candleholder clattered to the floor at her feet. She screamed. The bullet exploded a flame at the wick of the candle, sending the rest of the room into darkness.

The first thing Marlene felt was the return of the cold—sharp and leaking, a ghostly pain. Then, it was the absence of her daughter in her hands.

She snatched the candle up from the floor and felt the floorboards crunch under her pumps, packed solid and crystal. The reflection of the thin flame mottled in the ceiling, which glistened tunnel-like just above her head, where she could see her breath run out from her and then smoke away. The attic had become a house of ice, a glacier cave plunged into many days of night.

Marlene bumbled forward through the snow, her fingers desperately swiping the frozen air for any touch of Adair. She thrust the candle ahead of her and saw the remains of the stranger in its glow. He was only a bone cage now, hung upright by the icicles needling through his ribs and the empty sockets of his skull. Dead for longer than he was alive. She found herself trying to wrap old furs around herself—animal skins that she had left behind at one of the countless train stations on the escape back to mild, golden country.

Her voice was like knives in her throat, as if she was calling to the past: “ADAIR!”

From somewhere in the cavern, she heard the crow caw out with an odd, glassy echo and then something else, something rustling, something moving. It would be him. He would be like a bear lurking, snuffing out the firelight to hunt her in the dark that the world had turned to.

“Adair, come back to me *right now!*”

What if he had made her not even a thought anymore, not even a dream in heaven? What if he had unthreaded her from the world to somewhere else, to a before place that would never reach realness?

She turned sharply and almost collided with one of the walls of the tunnel and the fossil preserved inside. Norma was frozen within an ice block, mid-toss. She looked like a baseball card. Not even her eyes could blink. Marlene suddenly produced a sick image of her on display at a wound-back museum as an artifact of the future.

The crow was calling close. “*Haw—haw—haw—haw—ny—hawny—honey—now, honey.*”

It was the voice, the one that he made smooth and sugary for a reason. Marlene stopped moving. Terrified, she raised the candle and saw the bird roosting on a spike of ice directly above her in the wall.

“Now, honey, honey, honey. Why’d you have ‘ta up and go on me like you did?”

The crow changed. The orange eyes burst big with the loony fire of peering intensely through the dark. The beak lengthened into his crooked nose, broken too many times as a teenager. The feathers roughed into the brambly beard that he had adopted from the other winter boys. The head of the bird started to swell, started to take his shape, and Marlene began to tremble so badly that the candle flame bounced.

“Hardy! Don’t come back here!” Her voice sounded bottled to her, capped in glass. “You don’t have to come back here, sweetie! You don’t have to make yourself!”

The crow splayed one wing out and let it stretch until it was the length of an arm. “You knew I’d find ‘ja, didn’t ‘ja? You know I got friends in the business. I got the foresight on the prospects of the future.”

“*Hardy*,” Marlene whispered.

The feathers separated into fingers, calloused and cut up. “A few more months, and I would’a made my fortune, Marls! We would’a come back to hee-haw nowhere rich as raiders! You would’a seen that I had been *truthful* to you!”

The fingers were frozen to the shape of the recovered revolver, crystallized with deep, deep ice. Marlene watched in horror as he aimed it at her head, lowering to her throat, her chest, her belly.

“Where’s my son, hmm? Where’s that boy you promised me? Pray to the sky, why don’t ‘ja? Pray me a namesake out of that unforgivin’ snow! I don’t damn well care what you want! Do it right this time! Do it better! You give me what we need!”

She could see a phantom fire stoking in the chamber of the gun, as if it had turned transparent—and his finger crooked around the trigger. Ahead of her was her bones burning for someone else’s warmth. Then, in her head only, it seemed, there was a whisper. Like a change of wind whisking through pine nettles, it murmured out of her own mind and grazed her ear across the cold to Hardy’s leathered face.

“You had a girl,” it reminded him. “You didn’t kill her; *she* killed *you*.”

Marlene gasped, knowing the voice from a dream perhaps, or some angel answering a prayer.

The fire clotted in the gun, and Hardy lost his face, feathers growing up back, a beak jutting back out, eyes beading into small harvest moons. The voice said the words again, and they seemed to reach out like invisible hands and turn the gun to the wall of ice. The crow tried to wrestle it back, but the whisper was too strong. The last word pulled the trigger, and a hole pierced through the white glass where a wood-boarded wall showed through like a hard scab. Marlene watched two hands reach through and expand it, swallowing up the cave with the attic.

The ice block that imprisoned Norma melted off of her, leaving her stumbling to regain her footing. The bones of the stranger rattled away, gulped down whole. The ice rolled up like wallpaper as the Wooden Room returned, and the bed and the wardrobe and the dressing table that had been in it, and Adair swaying in the middle of the floor as if she was gearing up to throw a wild haymaker.

The crow barked furiously, taking flight to try and abandon its disappearing arctic, but McCozy caught it by its tail feathers like it was nothing more than a stuffed animal. This was her power. She tugged on the very air, and a pocket opened up alight with a strange green glow, like unhealthy fire. With a heaving force, she hurled the crow down into it, leaning over to watch it plummet. Marlene had never seen her daughter look past what she did each time, looking on as her enemy was damned into the depths. But this time, she looked far down, before she took hold of both sides of the air and pinched them back together again, closing up the sour wound.

“He damn near froze me to death!” Norma raged through the chattering of her teeth. “I was a human ice-cube! Nobody’s ever gonna believe this! I was a living popsicle!”

Marlene dropped the candleholder, the flame now only a thin wisp of smoke. She could hear her sister calling from the other side of the door, “What happened?! What happened?! Is he gone? Did you get him?”

But she said nothing as she took her daughter in her arms again—calmed now, resettled in body. And Adair made herself still, allowing her mother to cradle her as in the times she surely couldn’t remember, as a sleeping babe on a train car barreling through white mountains turning green again.