



 dreams of rabbits  @therabbitdies

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The Rabbit Died - Part Fourteen

WARNING! The Rabbit Died is a horror-fantasy story that contains depictions and mentions of abuse, ableism, body horror, cannibalism, death, gender dysphoria, gore, grooming, incest, parental abandonment, pregnancy, rape, and sexual assault.

CHOOSE ONE: HAZEL OR QUINTANA.

HAZEL

Your name is Hazel Rey. For a time you went by Mama, just Mama. The boy lopping ahead of you, a gangly creature named Champion, calls you that. You do not like that name.

"C'mon, Slim, keep up."

The man at your side is Cody, your former captor. He was dead, and then he came back. Because fuck the rules of life and death, you guess. Pretty boys escape their graves. He steadies you with an arm bracing your back. "Faster, Slim," he urges.

You do not like being called Slim.

And the thing chasing you, the shambling beast in the milkman costume, Robert Hedgenettle, Woundwort, he has a name for you, too. He bellows it as he gains on you, "Hazel-rah! Come back, Hazel-rah!"

Fuck that name most of all.

"You can't leave me, this is our ending. We deserve to be happy, Hazel-rah." Flecks of slobber hit the back of your robe. You flinch and grasp your stomach. "You suffered, you suffered! Stay and rest with me, stop running!"

"Guy's still bugfuck crazy." Cody drags you along faster. You are pregnant, a month or two away from popping. Running is a struggle. Your breasts and belly hang heavy, they ache as they sway and bounce with each hurried step.

You miss being flat.

"Mama, this way!" Champion points to a busted old milk truck parked by the barn.

"Look, Mama! This way!"

"Where are you going to go, Hazel-rah?" Woundwort howls. "You have nowhere to run, stay with me. Love me, fight me, stay with me. Stop running away."

Fight him, you stuck around to fight last time. That is how you ended up here as Bobby Hedgenettle's sweet little wifey. He kicked your ass so hard that you forgot your own name. You forgot yourself.

Your name is Hazel Rey, and you are not a fighter. You are a runner.

"Hazel!"

Woundwort's fingers graze the hem of your robe. You trip and flounder your next few steps until Cody rights you. "I can't keep up," you cry.

"What do you want me to do?" Cody asks.

"Carry me."

"Carry you?"

"Carry me, asshole!"

With a strained grunt, Cody hauls you off your feet. He holds you in his arms like a stolen bride. His grip is cruel, his iron fingers bruising the soft flesh of your thigh and shoulder. You did not expect romance when you asked him to carry you, but you did hope for gentleness.

"This way!"

Campion hurtles onward in a crooked line. Like most of Woundwort's boys, he runs odd, his joints bend at painful angles, his limbs extend beyond human limits. He trips and bounces back to his feet, back arched, and yells at you to follow.

The rest of Woundwort's boys boil forth from the farmhouse and barn. You watch from over Cody's shoulder as they converge behind their master. The mini cop, Vervain, catches up beside Woundwort. Frothing streamers of drool fly from the corners of his panting, open-mouthed grin.

As for Woundwort, Robert, whatever-the-fuck, he no longer even attempts a facsimile of being human. He gallops on white-gloved hands and rabbits' paws, black-shoed feet and stumps of raw meat, his limbs wobbling upon each contact.

His face is the kind of nonsense you used to scribble in the margin of your notes during algebra. Eyes and eyes and teeth and teeth and floppy bunny ears and a big, screaming mouth. In the center is a shiny black bunny nose. It twitches as he screams, "Hazel-rah! Come back!"

"Fuck you, limp dick!" you yell.

Woundwort trips over one of his many forelimbs and faceplants into the dirt. He

somersaults, paws and feet kicking in the air, and crashes on his back. His army ceases their chase to gather around him.

"What are you doing?" he chucks a boy trying to right him. The child sails in a high arc, howling. Your eyes flinch shut when a squishy thump cuts the boy's cry short. "Don't stop, run. Run! Catch that disrespectful woman."

You reach the milk truck. Cody sets you back on your feet and fixes his jacket. "You got the keys, kid?" he asks Champion. Champion shakes his head. "Okay, okay. Fuck."

"Check the visor?" You shrug.

Cody shrugs back. "Sure, why not. Kid, check the visor."

You bounce in place as you wait for Champion to check the interior of the truck. On the side, the mascot for Hedgenettle Farms watches you with a bucktoothed leer. It's a cartoon version of Woundwort with big glossy eyes and rubber hose limbs. Still ugly, you think. Still gross.

You direct your gaze away from the truck to the barn. Cows mill around the side, undisturbed by all the ruckus. Most of them are calving, their bellies swollen with new life. You rub your own. When you escape, will they, or will they fade away?

Cody calls your name.

The barn door cracks ajar and you spot the hindquarters of a black rabbit as it slips inside.

"The truck's a bust. No keys."

You head to the barn.

"Hey, chick. Where are you going?"

The rust caked machinery of the barn door resists you. Cody tries to get your attention by calling you more pet names, Chick, Slim, Honey, and Champion prattles Mama, Mama, Mumma. All these names and none of them yours. You shove hard on the door and it flies open.

Lights flash you, a solid burst of white that startles a scream out of you. There is a car in there, one you know, one you never wanted to see again. Its engine hums. "That's mine," Cody says.

The driver's side window putters down and a man leans out. His left eye, solid black, leaks tears. "Hello, Hazel Bang!" You cover your mouth. The man carries on, conversational, "That's how you pronounce your last name, right? Bang?"

"Who's that?" Cody asks.

"He's a gas station attendant." Your stomach, and your baby, flip inside you. "You killed him."

"Guys, guys, are you going to stand there or are you going to get in?" The attendant slaps the car door for your attention. "Please?"

Another man offering help, another dead man to boot. This will blow up in your face, it always does. Cody, Dr. Adams, and the countless bastards that came before them, they all entrapped you with promises of aid. They all lured you in and hurt you.

You bump against the solid form of Cody as you start your retreat. His hand hovers at the small of your back. "It's up to you," he says. "Not that we have much choice."

Campion climbs into the backseat.

Woundwort screams your name.

Sick as it makes you admit it, Cody is right. You do not have much in the way of choice. Take the ride or stay and pray for what? For Woundwort to bind you in his tentacles and drag you back to the depths of amnesia, where he can fuck and use you as he pleases?

"You ride shotgun, I'm riding in the back with the kid." You join Campion in the back of the car. Getting the seatbelt over your belly proves to be a bitch, the buckle refuses to click.

"Here, Mama," Campion fixes it for you.

"Call me Hazel."

Campion squishes down and frowns up at you. Grumpy toad, he is like a small grumpy toad. Fat cheeks and a downturned mouth. Ugly but cute at the same time.

"Call me Hazel, not Mama."

The two of you are jerked backwards as the car blasts out of the barn. Cody shouts about not having his belt on, and you curse at the sudden force. "I'm pregnant, you asshole," you kick the back of the driver's seat, "careful."

"Sorry." The gas station attendant laughs, sheepish. "No time, really."

"Fucking spare parts," Cody mutters.

He twists in his seat to watch out the rear windshield. You and Campion turn, too, and you scratch your wrist. The car clears the barn, and then the milk truck, the back wheels spitting gravel as you pass. The car jostles and you cling to Campion.

In a careless charge, Woundwort smashes into the side of the milk truck. He breaks over the vehicle, his body roiling, ripping itself asunder. His flesh bubbles and pops as he roars for you. Tentacles unfurl from him, and you see him, the real Woundwort.

"Come back," he moans as he pushes his naked, wrinkled body off the side of the truck. The rest of him, all that flesh, brown fake fur, and white cloth, drags behind him like a wedding train. "Come back."

You spit at the windshield.

The car drives on, and Woundwort grows smaller. Smaller and smaller. He fights at the undertow of his own body, his struggle fruitless. He and his farm, his Dream, became specks in the greying night.

"So," the attendant clears his throat, "to Maine?"

Maine. You have been trying to get there for days? Weeks? Months? Time is a knot within the Dream. Maine, you have no idea what you may find there, but there is an urge to go. It draws you forward with a tug to your navel.

"To Maine," you say.

Cody rests his foot on the dashboard and leans in to play with the radio. Beside you, Champion snuffles. You let him huddle to your side and cry, and you consider joining him for no reason other than for the sake of it.

"Maine, it is," the attendant says.

All the crying reminds you of Quintana. You hope she made it to Maine ahead of you. Maybe, fingers crossed, you will get to meet her there.

SPECIAL CHOICE UNLOCKED: QUINTANA OR THE DREAM?

YOU PICKED [THE DREAM]

The vastness of your body mesmerizes you. From the valley of your vulva to the mountain of your soft belly, you probe and explore, your fingers questing for new parts to learn. You pinch and squeeze at your leisure.

You existed since, well, for lack of a better statement, since you existed. There were others like you once, they mounted and filled you, and then, when spent, left you to lounge on the black membrane between worlds.

You listened to the stories that penetrated the membrane for your comfort and entertainment. Tales of animals, gods, heroes, and great monsters, and you let those stories impregnate you. You birthed those things and carved warrens within your flesh to house them.

You, and what you are, and what you could be, is beautiful.

If only your daughter could see that.

Resentment, you suck on the word and roll it on your tongue. You resented your daughter when she first asked to leave your body. She asked to be real in the sense humans are real, to be a real -woman-, and you, in your anger, granted that wish.

Her brothers tore her down to nothing but her heart and you told her if she wanted to be real, then she must crawl. And crawl she did, on her arteries and veins, through your skin and through the membrane to the world beyond. Her heart became a rabbit, and she hoped to find love.

It did not work out.

Humans are no better than you or your sons, they hunger for her in the same ways. They eat her flesh, suck her blood, and cut grafts off her limbs to create more of her. It makes them sick, but still, they need her. As do you, your precious fool of a daughter, you need her.

You seek a piece of her now. The warrens line your skin like pores. You poke into them with thousands of fingers thin as pins, eager for the bits of your daughter divided that have returned to you. You find one, she wanders an abandoned farm, humming.

"Rabbit."

She walks faster towards a shabby graveyard, her green skirt fluttering. You ate jade to make her, or was it an emerald? Or a ball of hummingbird feathers? You no longer remember.

"Rabbit."

Rabbit kneels beside a broken cairn and digs in the dirt. Her small hands move quick, they scrape and sweep. She uncovers a wad of pink flesh speckled with black soil.

You knock it from her hand.

"It's dead, don't touch it."

Rabbit picks it back up and cups it in her soiled hands. The wad of flesh, you struggle to name it, but from the way Rabbit stares at it, it must have meaning. You stoop beside your daughter.

"It's only dead right now," she says.

She slices her finger on her teeth and squeezes out a bead of precious fluid. Her blood, your blood, you grab her wrist and suck at the wound. Honeyed milk and spiced apples, her taste remains the same as the day she was born.

Infinitesimal, you almost missed her in the afterbirth, and then you heard her cry. You could hold her in the tip of your smallest finger. You shrunk down to lave and swaddle her. Intoxicated by her infant scent, you licked and kissed and nuzzled her for centuries.

"Stop it." Rabbit strikes you with a small fist.

Jade arrowhead through your throat, that might be the source of her conception. Or an apple, or old broken bones, or a thousand bad thoughts. You love her, even when she shuns you.

Rabbit smears blood on the wad of flesh.

It stirs.

"What is it?"

A downy coat of feathers the color of charcoal spreads over the lump. It kicks its thin legs. It flaps wings no bigger than nubs. You croak with disgust when it opens its beak to let out a single startled peep.

"What is it?"

"It's a chick," Rabbit says.

She kisses the chick on the top of its head.

You do not like this creature.

"Get rid of it."

Rabbit turns her shoulder to you. "No, she's still growing. She's only a baby."

"It's meaningless."

"To you, maybe, but to the people that buried her, she meant something." She strokes the chick's head with her thumb. "They even said a prayer for it."

None of Rabbit's hold meaning to you. Prayers, burials, you understood them, but you do not care about them. Those things are for the birds and the humans that mourn them. You perch a piece of your mass, your head, chin, on Rabbit's arm. "Get rid of it or I will."

"Let her finish growing first, please," Rabbit whispers, defeated. The chick sheds its fuzz for thicker feathers. "Let me finish something."

"Let you finish something?" You grow plush limbs to ensnare your daughter. Fragile things need protection, a gentle hand. Hold them too firmly and they break. "No, silly Rabbit. No, I say. I don't like this chick."

"Don't!" Rabbit stamps at the root of you. "Don't! Stop!"

Sweet, silly Rabbit. Heart shattered and torn up, if you could, you would gather all the pieces she lost and seal them back together with gold. Then into the vault of your womb, she would stay, locked in tight.

tw animal death

You slide your hands over her wrists. "Can you not end it yourself?" you ask. "Here, my love, let me help you."

The chick squawks as Rabbit's hands, guided by yours, close down around it. Rabbit screams for you to stop. Be gentle, show mercy. Don't do this!

This is mercy.

This is you being gentle.

And no one tells you what to do.

You crush Rabbit's hands together and the chick silences. New sounds start, a sticky plop, thick trickling. Rabbit swallows at a mouth full of nothing.

You set her down.

"There, all better."

Rabbit stares down at her bloodied hands. "What you just did was awful and I wish, I wish, I could get you to understand why."

You bend to clean her palms, lapping up guts and feathers with your many tongues. The chick's hollow bones get caught in your teeth. They rip the inside of your cheeks. You gulp them down and purr.

"All better, all clean."

"You make me want to die," Rabbit says.

She flees you without bothering to explain.

She wants to die?

You wipe your lips and spread out your limbs. Away you sweep, carried on a gust of your own breath, and soar elsewhere. That fragment of your daughter no longer interests you after that tantrum, onto the others.

She wants to die.

The farm under your dissolves to a shallow lake dotted with primroses. You thread through the silver hoop of an elegant swing and find new fields waiting for you. Primrose, the Rabbit with hair that shines like fresh dew, resides in these fields. The mature part of your daughter.

How can Rabbit want to die? Has she not died many deaths already? Has she grown addicted to the sensation? Humans enjoy suffering, they dedicate so many stories to failure and pain. Their yearnings must have infected that piece of your child. It has nothing to do with you.

Cows with shaggy ginger coats and long, curved horns cease their grazing long enough to cast worried glances above. Primrose loves these rough creatures. You tolerate them--sometimes. For Primrose's sake, you try.

You should have tried tolerating the chick.

Primrose leads a boy to her cottage in the verdant fields. He halts and raises a fleshless hand to peer up at the sky. You grind your teeth, a human, purged of your blessings. This scentless, ugly child squares his shoulders in an offensive stance.

He sees you.

"Come," says Primrose.

She rushes him into the cottage.

You pass Primrose's warren, rumbling with thunder and threats of rain, and head for the next warren, or rather, what remains of one.

Woundwort did a number on poor Clover's clearing in the woods. Her cabin lies in cinders, the payphone melted, the trees charred. They gutter in and out of your vision. Gutter and flicker and crackle, there but not. You hear the stairwell whimper as its life nears its end.

Rabbit can not want to die. You refuse to let her die for good.

The apple orchard comes next.

You touch down at the grove's edge. You pour your flesh into a new shape, two legs, two arms, a torso stuffed ripe with organs, and a knot of clouds for your head. Butterflies serve as your eyes. They spread out to survey the grounds.

There are cows here as well, and rabbits, not your daughter, the animal. And butterflies, not the sour green ones you use, but monarchs, bright and burning orange. They fly at a distance as if to avoid your gaze.

You find the owner of this orchard at her cabin, which sits at the center of the trees. Rabbit, a young Rabbit, dressed in jean shorts and a band t-shirt two sizes too big. She ignores your approach, too engrossed is she by a shiny silver revolver.

You make her want to die.

Rabbit sucks on her lower lip as she cleans the gun.

"Whose gun is that?"

"Cody's." Rabbit works a bore brush through the barrel. "I take care of it whenever he stashes it in his inventory." She cleans the chambers next, one by one. "Make sure it's polished and loaded for the next time he needs it."

Cody, the man, the Dog. You scratch rivets into your bare thighs. This Rabbit and her preoccupation with that man boils at you. Even after you laced his bones with poison and cold iron, she still cares for him. Still protects him.

Rabbit sets the brush down in a simple wooden box and takes out a pack of cigarettes. "I'm still upset I lost his knife. That could have helped him more than this gun."

You can at least take comfort in this Rabbit's foolish obsession. Permanent death would mean abandoning her ugly mutt of a man. Yes, speaks your worries, but the pieces of your daughter do not always agree. And while she loves Cody, this Rabbit may crave death still.

"What knife?"

Rabbit sticks cigarette between her lips. She lets it hang unlit from her mouth as she soaks patches of cloth with solvent. "After Tsukiko killed me, I went for dive into the Deeper parts of you and fished out shards of cold iron. I made him a knife with them."

Your Deeper parts, your frigid, black parts, you explore them on occasion, but you never stay for long. Confronting that bleak lake of ice exhausts you. You tried draining it once, but centuries later, it was brimming once more. The waters seem eternal.

And Rabbit went there to help Cody.

"It cost me my ears, you remember those?" Rabbit traces the outline of long ears above her head. "They froze right off. Thankfully, the Deer lent me back my antlers so I could keep my balance."

Antlers you let the Deer take when Rabbit made her traitorous request to be real.

"The Cats showed me how to make a knife."

The Cats used a knife to cut off Rabbit's long tail.

"That cost me a few things."

Rabbit clenches her teeth. You brush her cheeks with butterfly kisses, and she, ungrateful daughter, swats you away. Her siblings did cruel things to her upon your orders, but that was in the past. You are offering her comfort now.

Maybe she does want to die.

"I was going to stick the knife in Cody's inventory, but I got paranoid. I hid it in a book." Rabbit talks as if you are not there. A monologue, you never liked those. "But someone stole the book."

You go to embrace her. Flick, click, she slams the cylinder back in place and aims the revolver at your head. You sigh, your gut deflating, the organs migrating to your feet.

"Silly Rabbit, you know that won't work on me," you say.

"Try it and find out."

"Do you want to die?"

"I die all the time." She rises. "Your landscape is populated by my dead clones and the poor surrogates that bore them. I've died thousands of deaths. I'm dead and dying right now."

Her words are true, your daughter and her pieces die and die and die. You watch them run and drop and rise again in a spiraling waltz. They die and die and die and yet, they live and live and live. You love them. Your daughter, you love them.

You make her want to die.

"But a permanent death, do you wish for that?"

A hole opens on Rabbit's brow. She wipes at it and it becomes the imprint of a kiss.
"There are pieces of me that want it to stop forever. And sometimes, God, I want you to move onto one of those knockoffs you made to replace me."

You billow with a flashing rage. The clouds that form your head spread out to the sky and the butterflies rise in a raid. They slaughter the poor monarchs caught in the flood, rip them up, and pass them down to your bivouac heart.

"You dare bring that up?" you thunder.

Undeterred, Rabbit pulls back the hammer on her useless weapon. "Shut up and listen. Just listen to me, listen," she whispers. "I don't care about things like that anymore. Many of the other Me's want to die forever, but I don't. I have a reason to stick around."

"What reason?"

"Someone has to be around to load the last save."

"Load the last save?" You lean back and curl your hands up at your chest, your fingers tied in knots. "What does that mean? To load the last save?"

With a shrug and an apologetic smile, Rabbit says, "I would explain it to you, but I doubt you'd care to listen."

You recall your clouds and butterfly-eyes and they return to you in haste. You suck them into your throat. Down, down they spiral, back to the depths of your body. And with them, they carry Rabbit's words, load the last save.

"You could try explaining," you say.

Rabbit starts to gather her things.

"I might listen if you try."

She bends down, whistling, and closes up the gun cleaning kit. You scoot a few steps closer, your confidence and anger going, draining down your throat with everything else. You are left with confusion.

"Please try."

Rabbit stands upright, the kit tucked under her arm.

"Rabbit."

"Goodnight, mada." She heads inside her cabin, spinning the gun. "Just be happy that -I- don't want to die."

"Rabbit!"

She shuts the door.

Alone, you struggle to find comfort in the knowledge that this piece of Rabbit wants to live. Her reason, however, you do not understand. You are used to secret meanings and nonsense, you are the Dream, secrets and nonsense vein your flesh.

Wing gusts over your thinning body.

"What does it mean?"

You let it catch and carry you away.

HAZEL

The dead attendant parks Cody's car under the sagging canopy of a decrepit gas station. Announcing a pit stop, he hurries out of the vehicle and into the building. Crumbs of brain matter tumble loose from the back of his skull as he goes.

"Stay here," Cody says.

You wave for him to go, leave. The less time you have to spend with him, the better. He exits the car and shuts the door, and then, like an asshole, pats the roof and the hood as he passes it. You unbuckle your seat belt as he enters the station.

"Hazel?" Champion rocks side to side, his feet swinging. "What are you doing?"

"This seat's killing my ass, I need to stand." And to escape the suffocating miasma of cologne and cigarettes. You step out and stretch and stretch until the knots in your back pop. "That's it."

"Mama, the man said to stay."

You flash Champion a glare and leave the car behind to go look around and explore.

He crawls out to follow you. "I'm sorry, Hazel."

The gas station stands alone in a flat field of bluish-white. There is no concrete under your feet or black asphalt, the ground is smooth, cold. You tap it with your heel. It fizzes.

"Sure," you sigh.

You scratch your ankle with your bare toe, arms crossed under your bust, and check out the front of the station. Old brick front, cracked in some places, faded in others. The windows are smudged, so much so that you have to squint to read the poster ads.

HOT CHILI. CHILI! CHILI!! CHILI!!! The woman in the poster holds a bowl of red goop topped with cheese. Spoon stuck in her smile, she stares, her giant eyes popping

wide. The girl in the ad beside hers chokes down on something called FRESH CHORPS.

Other things offered in the store are FRESH FLAVORS, MEATY-SWEETIES, FROZEN CREAMIES, and ass, just ass. The poster is of a donkey paleta with crooked gumball eyes.

You miss when you couldn't read things in the Dream.

There is a blue vending machine offering COLD DRINKS and a payphone standing at the left corner of the station. The receiver swings by its silver cord. Campion hangs it up.

"You want a soda, kid?"

You shriek at the sudden sound of Cody's voice. He winks as he walks by you, the corner of his mouth cracked by a grin. His teeth are sharper. That is all you fucking need, Cody with fangs.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fuck you, asshole."

"I told you to stay in the car." He picks up Campion and holds him on his hip. The boy accepts being held without protest. He sucks his thumb, enthralled by all the buttons.

"Pick whatever you want, I'll get it."

Don't eat the meat, don't drink the milk, your daughter warned you. She kicks in your belly, little bubbles of movement, of life. You soothe her with a hum and a rub. "Are the sodas safe?"

"They're safe for him," Cody says.

Campion pushes at the top button, labeled COLD, and sticks his fingers back in his mouth. Cody feeds quarters into the machine. It slurps them down, rattles, gurgles, and belches out a blue can. Cody grabs it.

"The more we feed him the better if we're taking him back to the Real World." Cody juggles both the boy and can, holding him steady while he cracks open the drink. "If he gets hungry out there, it'll trigger a case of Starvation. And we don't want that."

"Starvation?"

Cody feeds Campion sips of cola from the can. "Humans that eat Dream stuff react in different ways. Some, like you, get knocked up. Kids get addicted. Food from the Real World no longer fills them up, if anything, it makes their hunger worse."

Campion holds onto Cody's hand as he drinks, his features set in deep concentration. He huffs through his nose when Cody pulls the can away, his cheeks full of soda. You, for whatever reason, smile and wipe at a smudge on his chin. Pouting, he swallows.

"I want more," he says.

"You'll get more in a sec," Cody says. "Gotta pace yourself, you'll puke if you drink it too fast."

The smudge does not budge. You lick your thumb and scrub at it. Champion leans back, whining your name. Cody gives him the can.

"When these kids get hungry, they eat everything." Cody shoves more change into the machine. Its guts slosh and churn and out slides a small brown glass bottle labeled RX. "Plants, animals, people--everything. Whatever it takes to stop the hunger."

"Can it be fixed?"

"Depends upon how soon you catch it and how much of the Dream the victim ate. A drop, you've got time, years of it. A bite, week, maybe a month. A whole meal?" Cody pockets the bottle and pays for another. "Hours."

Champion ate three squares a day plus snacks for weeks within the Dream. He and the other boys gobbled raw eggs and dead bugs and licked grease from the pans after you cooked. They ate and under Woundwort's instruction, you fed them. Under his instruction, you poisoned them.

[it's not your fault.]

"Is there no going back once time's up?" you ask.

Cody shuts his good eye, the other still clogged with soil, and counts his fingers. He whispers things about ammo, drinks, and slots, and how much space he needs.

"Want some soda?" Champion offers his can. You take it and sniff. Root beer, but not, but close enough that you decline and pass it back. "Cody, soda?"

"No, thank you." Cody buys an additional bottle. He passes it to you. "Open that for me? I'm gonna drink it now."

"You didn't answer me. Once time's up, is there any way to fix it?"

Cody puts Champion down and instructs him to go into the gas station. "Get yourself some goodies." He shoves a wad of cash into his hands. "Ice cream or something."

"Don't get ASS," you tell Champion.

The disapproval on Cody's face, the pained scowl of a tired father trying to manage his rowdy children, tickles you. You laugh through an open-mouthed smile. "Don't swear in front of the kid," he chuckles. "It's fucking rude."

You crack up.

This man stuck a gun in your mouth.

"Answer the question."

Back to pumping the vending machine with coins, Cody snorts and clears his throat. "There's no 'fixing' the condition, you are either cured in time or you're stuck up shit's creek."

"There has to be a way." A splash of backwash burns your throat and there is a kick, a quick, little thump in your belly. "Come on, there has to be a fucking way."

"There's no feasible way. Once you hit that point of no return, the Dream has you and the Dream's a possessive bitch. It digs its fucking talons in."

Cody opens his new bottle of RX and flicks the cap at the vending machine. The metal disk ricochets off the blue surface. He lets it land past him, his head bowed. From where you stand beside him, the rotten side of his profile faces you. The scar, the open grave for a socket.

"All you can do is manage the condition from then on," he says. "Or you come here and live in the Dream. If you're lucky, it'll fuck you nicely. If you're not, it'll fuck you wrong."

He chugs the bottles until it's drained empty. Gagging, he scrubs his mouth on the crook of his elbow and looks to you. Threads of fresh skin stitch across his socket. He is in pain. The way he trembles, the way he sweats, that must be from pain. Regrowing flesh has to hurt.

Please let it hurt.

"What about an infeasible way?" you ask.

Cody turns his head to clear his nostril of dirt. You gag into your robe. Could he not go snot rocket in the bathroom, or out back behind the store? Anywhere else other than around you.

He gestures for you to wait for a second and then punches the machine. Mucus swells from his socket. Green bright as neon, and laced with blood, it bursts and jets forth in ropes. The hole in his throat ejaculates more of the gunk and even more shoots from his chest.

You keep your robe up over your nose, your gag reflex disarmed by your fascination. A new eye spins into being like cotton candy. Scars form. Cody spits and stumbles back, head tilted to the sky.

"An infeasible way?" he asks.

"Yeah, that."

"The fuck you mean an infeasible way?"

"You said there was no feasible way, so, what about an infeasible one?" You shrug. "What impossible thing would need to happen to cure Champion?"

"The Dream would have to release him or--" Cody frowns in thought. With his new eye, he is almost as beautiful to you as he was when he was dead. "--fuck. We find one

of its children, one strong enough to carve the Dream out of him."

"Like a Rabbit?"

"Yeah, like a Rabbit." He buys his fourth (fifth?) bottle of RX. This one joins the others in his jacket. "What made you think of that?"

"I don't know. Thought just came to me."

As thoughts sometimes do ever since you have been trapped here in the Dream. Ideas and random pieces of information, most related to Woundwort. You knew his favorite dish, baked beans and franks, without being told. You knew he liked his coffee white as winter.

That he liked to have his back rubbed after dinner, and that he loved when you kissed him while he made you orgasm. Creepy old fuck. He better be dead.

Cody takes back his bottle. "A Rabbit might be able to help the kid, but she would need to be strong. My Rabbit could've, but she's dead. Shot in the head."

"Who killed her?"

"This surrogate named Tsukiko Rey."

Your mother?

"She killed her along with one of her daughters and me." He leans back, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. "She tried to kill the Rabbit she birthed, and my aunt, but somehow, they survived."

Your mom killed her daughter? But you are alive. You repeat his words in a whisper and wait for your baby to react. Kick you, nauseate you, anything.

The baby remains inactive.

Inlé is your sister, you think, and she is alive. Then, your mother had another daughter and she killed her. You have two long lost sisters, one a Rabbit, the other dead, murdered by your mother.

This is way too much to process right now. You need a break.

You seek distraction in the vending machine. You push a button, AQUACURE, the plastic clicking like a fingernail on wood. Cody sinks a few coins into the slot and buys it for you. "She disappeared after, vanished into the fucking void," he says. "I thought she died, too."

"She died eventually."

And left you alone with a stranger of a father. Hazel looks nothing like me, you caught him saying to his sister over the phone. Her looks are all Tsukiko's. They are so alike they could be twins. He laughed then, he was throwing a quince for his dead wife's clone.

You stared at your father during your first dance. The hazel eyes you thought you shared with him were not a match, his were bluer, while yours are greener. His eyes were foreign and barren of a father's love.

You were, are, Tsukiko's daughter. The clone of his dead wife.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Cody places a white can, the AQUACURE, in your hand.
"You're hers, right? You look like her."

"Even the eyes are the same, right?" you say.

"The color's an exact match, but they're different. They're brighter. Hers were--" He goes a beat, thinks. Then he lets out a weak laugh. "It's like how the Rabbits look the same but don't."

"What's funny?" you ask.

"You look exactly like Tsukiko but you don't at the same time. Like the Rabbits." He sniffs at your neck, his breath a cold kiss to your pulse point. "That's weird."

"Cut it the fuck out."

You press the can to Cody's unblemished cheek. He yelps-- yelps!-- and leans far back. Far, far back, his long legs supporting him in spite of the difficult angle.

"Stop fucking around." You brandish the can at him. "Tell me what you're getting at or I'm knocking your teeth out and shoving this up your ass."

"Fuck me, okay."

Cody gives you space, a smile, vile in its charm, bright in his eyes. Good looking men piss you off, you realize this now as Cody settles down. He should be ugly. He is ugly. A hideous living thing wearing the skin of your beautiful dead man. You hate him.

"Your scent is wrong," he says. "I wonder if I noticed it before I died, too bad I can't remember if I did. It's like a complex perfume, notes of surrogate and Rabbit and Tsukiko; which makes sense, you're her kid and you're knocked up."

You press the can to his scarred cheek.

"Fuck!" He steps back. "You're missing something, though. I should be able to smell your sire's scent."

"My sire? You fucking serious?"

"You know what I mean, your dad. Tu papá. Under everything, your scent is pure Tsukiko."

"Oh my fuck, say it! Spit it out!"

"You don't have a father."

You drop the can. It cracks open on the white ground and foams over, the fizz sizzling like a live wire. Your laughter much the same as you throw your head back. What a bullshit joke, fatherless? You? That makes no sense.

"I have a dad." You shove at Cody. "He married Mom because of me."

You become queasy.

"He's your dad, but he ain't your father. When people are born, the scent of their parents goes into making that person's unique scent. Their unique soul."

Cody lays his hands on your trembling shoulders. You do not know when, but you have started shaking along with laughing. And, fuck, you grow tired. Utterly exhausted and ready to burst open like the can at your feet.

"Smell me," he holds his wrist to your nose, "my scent is fucked up thanks to the Dream, but under all the shit you should catch cempasúchil, that's my mom, and applewood for my dad."

You take a timid sniff, bizarre as the request is, you do it, and you choke. Iron, poison, gunpowder, and the musky odor of Dog. Dog, with a capital D, the same as Rabbit with a capital R. Under all those scents, you catch it, cempasúchil and applewood.

"Now, smell yourself. Tell me what you get."

"Like sniff my pits?"

Cody forces your arm up and bends it so your wrist is under your nose. "It's your turn to cut the shit," he says. "Sniff."

Being difficult was your last remaining defense against this uncomfortable conversation, and since that appears to have failed, you do as told. Which is for the best. Cody does not remember shoving a gun in your mouth, but it happened and you want to avoid a repeat performance.

What did your mom smell like? During the holidays, she wore Chanel No. 5. Your father bought her a bottle of it for Christmas each year and each time she wore it until New Years'. Then the bottle went into a box she kept in her closet for safekeeping.

The rest of the year she wore nothing remarkable. Ivory soap and clean clothes, when her brain settled enough to allow her to shower. Toothpaste and mouthwash when she remembered to brush her teeth. Food, almost always. She never forgot to feed you.

None of these things are unique to her.

You snuff your skin. Woundwort's residue lingers on you, green grass and spoiled milk, and so does Campion's stink. Fresh cream and apples, that must be the baby, and Cody's awful cologne. What about you, and your mother?

Where you?

Then you find it, snow and smoke. Your mother smelled of the bitter cold of falling snow and the warmth of pine smoke. You never understood why, your mother grew up in Texas, far from those things. But that was her scent.

And that is all you can detect. You have reached the end, and there are no other scents to be found.

"This means nothing."

Cramp, cramp, cramp. You sway, awash in pain. You scrunch your toes, digging them into the ground for purchase as you grit and bear it. Cody lays a hand on your shoulder. "Don't touch me." You shove him. "It means nothing."

"Stop lying, you're hurting yourself."

"Fuck you. Fuck you!"

"Fuck, chick." The affection in the way he looks you over, the appreciation, turns your stomach. "You're stubborn."

The payphone rings.

"Shit." Cody throws an arm in your way. "Don't touch it."

You seize the phone and with it the opportunity to drop the subject of your mother. As your fingers curl around the receiver, you grow dizzy. Bad choice, you realize, your thoughts crackling. This is what you get for always trying to run away instead of facing your problems.

The invisible cord, the one you felt pulling you towards Maine, yanks you backward. Rips you from your form. You crash, sizzling, into new flesh. You blink foreign eyes and stare at a stranger's glove clad hands.

You are in someone else's body.

"Help me! Help me, please help me!"

Quintana. You hear Quintana.

On their own, your host lifts their head. Across the stark plain, a massive beast of meat holds a tiny figure captive. Clusters of parasites, their white shells tinted pink, swarm the thin, glistening silver skin encasing the beast's red flesh. Crabs? Lice? Ticks?

"Lousy Lucy." Your host sighs in a familiar voice. "How disgusting." They tug at their sleeves and fix their gloves. Bracelets of scar tissue decorate their wrists. You know those scars, and you now know your host.

You are in your mother's body.

The beast speaks. "What are you doing?"

Your mother inclines her head, calm. You know the beast's voice, Nurse Lucy. But she is dead, like your mom, like Cody, like the stupid asshole gas station worker. Do all the dead roam the Dream freely?

"Help me, please! Please! Please!" The beast's captive calls through cupped hands. Quintana, that is her. That thing has Quintana.

Do something, you scream, a hostage in your mother's body. That is Quintana, rescue her. Save your friend. Stop standing there, watching. You kick inside your mother hoping to goad her into action, but it proves futile. She does not move.

Lucy locks on your mother with thousands of film-coated eyes. She mocks Quintana. How many people do you have in your brain damaged little head, she asks. Your mother turns to leave as Quintana sobs her reply.

Where are you going? You kick hard against the confines of your prison. Fucking go back right now, you drive your foot down with each word. The walls of your mother's flesh and bone crack and echo thunk, thunk.

"Oh, Hazel," your mother holds her head, "I thought I felt you."

"Where the fuck are you going, go save Quintana." You dig your fingers into the growing fissure. The walls dress upon you. "Mom, go back."

Your mother goes, "No, I don't think I will," and rolls her shoulders. Yours shift in unison. "She's not my daughter. She's not family."

"She's family to me," you say.

Your mother draws an I.V. tube from her jacket sleeve. The wires, the tubes, the doctors stuck dozens of them into your mother during her final days. Your father said they looked natural on her. He was right. They do.

"I'm your mother," she says. "For better or for worse, I'm you're family. Not her."

"She might be for all I know." A needle stabs your hand, the I.V.--you're being hunted. "When were you going to tell me about Inlé? Or the other one? The Rabbits? Or, fuck, my real dad?"

Tubes tangle around your throat. Your mother shushes you with a hiss of your name and pulls you to heel. Away, away, she drags you away from the crack in her shell. "Your real father?" she asks. "Who have you been talking to?"

"What about helping me? You said you were scared and that you wanted to help me but you couldn't." You knock off a chunk of the wall with your foot. "You can help me now."

Your vision splits, you can see out of the opening in the wall and through your mother's eyes. The beast lifts Quintana. Your mom approaches a motorcycle with a sidecar. The scenes fight for your attention.

"Mom, you can do more than watch. Please, save Quintana, she's right there."

"Hazel, sweetie, you didn't answer my question. Have you already learned some of the Rabbits' tricks? How to lie without lying?"

"Help her, damn it."

"Who told you? Richard?"

The beast splits its jaw and sticks out a white tongue shaped like a person. Segmented at the joints like a marionette, or a crab, it holds Quintana's face.

"Mom, fuck you, we don't have the time for this."

"Richard was the only one who knew. It's his fault you even exist."

"Mom!"

The beast swallows Quintana.

"And that," your mother says, "is that."

That is that.

The tubes close around your neck, their plastic lengths throbbing with saline, and weave together. You go limp. And that is that, Quintana is gone and you are trapped, the two of you swallowed whole.

"I'm glad you came to me, Hazel." Your mother begins to hum old songs, ones you sang together during the hour drive from Corpus to Kingsville. "I'm going to bring you to my Dream. I can keep you safe there, away from men like Richard and Hedgenettle."

The beast crawls forward and rises, and rises, and rises, the size of it blocking out the overcast sky. A giant woman. The surface of her skin rolls in waves crested with parasites, and when they break, you see them, people. Hundreds of them.

"I can keep you safe from Lucy Driscoll."

Mothers, men, and Rabbits, with their heads adorned with broken antlers, flail in the tossing flesh. The giant stands, head tilted back, and inhales through uneven nostrils. She runs her hands along her body.

"Where is it going?" you ask as the giant turns to march north, or what you assume is north. Your mother clucks her tongue. "Maine. She's heading to Maine, most likely to collect on Hedgenettle's estate since he's gone. She isn't going to like what she finds."

You dangle, helpless. Quintana is lost inside that thing and you are being dragged off to another Dream. This is unfair, you only escaped Woundwort today.

"I think I'll make sweet potatoes when we get there." Your mother sits on the bike.

"For you and Inlé once I get her."

That is that, you guess. You lost again.

"We can have a nice meal together before it all ends. As a family."

"Fuck you."

"What was that, Hazel? Did you say something?"

You wind up your right fist, shrieking, "fuck you!" as you throw your whole body into the punch. Your mother spasms, crying, and you strike with your left. The blows shatter the shell, and your knuckles, and your prison crumbles.

Anger turns your curses to a roar, it numbs your pain, and fuels your escape. You shred the tubes. You smash bone and blood and shed your mother like a chick does its shell. The world burns white with your rage, and your mind blanks.

You wake in Cody's arms back at the gas station. A dream within a Dream, sure. You should have expected that. "Slim," Cody pats your face, "you okay? I told you not to touch that phone."

You sock him across the jaw.

He drops you. "What the fuck?"

"Lucy has Quintana."

Cody massages the hinge of his jaw and then works it back and forth, his new eye squinted shut. "Quintana, who's that?"

He forgot her as he forgot you and the kidnapping. You grab his shoulder. The nail of your thumb punctures through his jacket. You rasp, your throat sore from the snare. "Quintana is the other girl you took, she's my friend. Lucy Driscoll has her, I saw her swallow her."

"Lucy Driscoll?"

Fear steals the color from Cody's face. He helps you to the car and sits you down in the back seat, his body humming like a generator. He kneels, one hand on his knee, and asks you to tell him everything. What you saw, what you felt, what you heard, everything.

And you do it, you tell him everything, sparing no small detail. From being trapped inside your mother to the ocean of red that is Lucy Driscoll. Cody listens, head cocked. You break down during your tale.

"Quintana was screaming for help, and I couldn't do anything. Mom just stood there. I couldn't do anything!"

Cody lays his head on your lap, staining your nightgown green and red. Like a Dog, you laugh. You pet him for comfort.

"Good thing we're already heading to Maine," he says.

You stroke his scar.

"You still want to go, right?"

"Fuck right, I do. I have to save Quintana, it's what she would do for me."

You should run, screams the craven part of your brain, run back home to Texas. Maybe take up your mother on her offer. You do miss her food.

Campion and the gas station attendant, what's-his-name, exit the station, carrying bags of snacks, drinks, and cheap, hot sandwiches. The attendant makes a face.

"Everything all right?" he asks.

"I got this." Cody gives your thigh a pat and stands. "What took you so long?" He takes the bags from the two of them, gathering the handles all in one hand. "I was beginning to think you died in there."

"You shouldn't make that joke, that's insensitive," the attendant says.

"Are you okay?" Campion crawls across your lap to get inside the car. "You look sad."

"I am," you say.

"I died, too, pal." Cody places the bags with the hot food in the front and finds places for the others with you in the back. "I've died a whole lot, it's okay. We're both okay now."

"But you killed me," the gas station attendant replies.

Cody hesitates by your door. An expression you never expected to see him wear sets upon his features: shame. "I'm sorry I did that."

He shuts the door and goes to take his seat in the front. The gas station attendant settles behind the wheel. You pick an elastic band off one of the sandwiches and pull it around your wrist. Snapping it, you wait for the hum of the engine and the crunch of rolling tires.

To Maine, you do not even have to say it. Cody reconfirms your destination for the attendant when he asks. The car leaves the station with its weird signs and even weirder payphone behind.

"Hazel." Campion offers you round orange and white swirled candies from a tube. "Don't be sad. Have a treat!"

The candy smells like your mother's sweet potatoes.

You decline.

END PART FOURTEEN

