

The Distance Between Two Skins

She remembered the hard pavement wedged against the base of her skull. She remembered choking on copper-tinted gasoline, the smell pooling into the back of her throat and that made no sense, she had ordered pasta. In her peripheral vision she thought she saw a flickering light, but when she tried to turn her head she felt a wetness behind her ear. It must be sweat. It was hot, the news had said it would be hot, Paavo had worked out shirtless because— and then there were voices and a screeching noise like a broken violin. She felt herself lifted onto something soft, and she remembered she looked up at a black heavens and was surprised by the stars. Just like the lights on the freeway, she thought. Just like Paavo's eyes.

Marion arrived before the first snowfall. Her feet creaked on the soil, and ice splintered off the front railing at the touch of her bare fingertip. Olga opened the door with a warm *'ello*. Marion carried her boxes to the second bedroom, and when dinnertime rolled around there was hot soup and a cherry pie. Marion ate the soup, but when she looked at the pie she saw trees at the pinnacle of spring, the ground frosted by pale pink petals. Paavo had been careful not to step on them. She put her fork down and tried not to remember his high cheekbones, his blush under a setting sun, his hair soft against her cheek.

Instead she remembered her mother in Olga's handsome face. Twice a day there was a knock at her bedroom door, and Olga offered Marion a glass of milk. *It makes you strong*, Marion remembered each time she put the glass to her lips. Her mother had said so every

morning at breakfast. Marion dreamed one night of the wooden church, clutching at her mother's hand during the homily and peering curiously at Mr. Fred in the first row. Mother had never talked to Mr. Fred—no one ever talked to Mr. Fred. But Marion remembered him because he always had a gallon of milk in his lap and a *Vietnam Vet* cap on his head. All through the homily he went *glug, glug, glug*. He seemed the strongest man in the world, drinking milk beneath the eyes of God.

Marion unpacked her last box halfway through February. For a long moment she stared at the cardboard bottom and wondered when she'd decided to move into her new room. The house was deathly quiet; Olga had gone to the grocery store. Marion put her head in the box and listened to the way the air staled around her ears, her pulse thrumming against her eardrum. *Pa-dum, pa-dum, pa-dum*. Only in the maddening quiet the noise sounded wrong, like the last *dum* sputtered out into an *oh*, and suddenly Marion was sure her heart was whispering *Paa-vo, Paa-vo, Paa-vo*.

Olga found her curled up on the floor of the bedroom, laughing hysterically into the empty box. With a *tsk*, she chivvied Marion off the floor and tossed the boxes to the side of the road for pick-up the next morning. Marion apologized and, embarrassed, she volunteered to make the salad. But Olga shooed her away and told her to sit by the fireplace. As Marion watched the flames flicker in the grate, a tightness grew at the base of her skull. Had there been flames at the accident? She couldn't remember. She went to bed early that evening, but once she was under the covers she found herself staring restlessly at the ceiling. *Were there flames? Did I burn?* At midnight she got up and let herself out of the house, retrieving a box that hadn't disintegrated in the slush. She carried it up the steps and placed it at the end of her bed, where she sat across from it in the dark and stared into its maw by the scant moonlight. *That is not me,*

Marion told herself as she peered into the box's depths. In the silence her heart replied: *Paa-vo, Paa-vo, Paa-vo*.

The soil thawed as leaves crept back to the treetops. Marion refused to open her window, for fear the scent of a new flower would upend her daily routine. Each morning she cooked breakfast, wiped the counters, and set off with Olga to the bakery. Hour after hour she filled a plastic tube with white frosting and inserted it into a steaming cupcake. The frosting entered the cake with a wet *squelch*, the hollow center bulging until it nearly burst. *Don't overfill the cakes*, Olga constantly reminded her. But to Marion, they never seemed full enough.

In early April Marion stopped by the carpenter's shop. The moment she stepped through the door, she knew she'd made a mistake. Her shopping list fluttered to the floor as the man at the counter offered her a discount on figurines. He had dark hair and broad palms, the skin around his nails toughened by labor, and dizzily Marion remembered Paavo promising her *the kid won't have to work like I do*. She had wanted a sailboat for the baby's room, she told the shopkeeper in a trembling voice. He grinned and offered her congratulations, insisting she pay half price. Before she understood what she was doing she had put cash on the counter, and then the wooden ship was safe in her palm; it had cotton sails and a tiny anchor on a blue string. It occurred to Marion that she would never know what color to paint the baby's room. That's what she told Olga when she stumbled through the front door. She would never know.

It got worse after that. The ship stayed on her windowsill, and Marion started to wish she had a second room. Rain swept in with the spring, and the house creaked under the onslaught. Some days Marion thought it must have its own ghosts, a skeleton mourning a half-baked family. She had never asked about Olga's children; she didn't know if they had lived here, if any child had slept in her bed. The roof leaked even in the lightest downpour. Marion often watched, dry-

eyed, as the water splashed into a rusted bucket. *Plip, plip, plip.* Sometimes she thought the house was in tears.

Sometimes at night she saw her—or maybe it was him—or maybe it was a her, she'd always secretly hoped for a girl—sitting at the wooden table. Standing next to Olga in the kitchen. Crawling into the bed that Marion slept in. Leaping into the arms of her father, who must know her, somewhere, wherever dead fathers could hold dead babies. In these moments Marion would simply put her hands against her belly and walk outside.

The due date had been April thirtieth. When the day dawned, Marion accidentally knocked the sailboat off her windowsill while trying to open the curtains. She picked the boat up with trembling fingers and discovered that the wooden anchor had wrenched free of the blue string. *Stupid,* Marion thought to herself wildly. *I should have worn the seatbelt.*

There was an odd, tight feeling in her ribcage, so Marion let herself out of the house and began to walk.

And walk.

And walk.

She kept going for a long time, through the uniform fields of corn. When the sun went down she looked up at the dark sky, and even here, where the city could be nothing but a blood-washed memory, the stars looked like gravestones—lighted rafts in an eternal ocean, too stubborn to accept that one day they would impale on the rocks of time, blink into supernovas, and disappear.

They were separated by nothing but space—space the width of Marion's thumb. She held up her hand and placed it carefully between two bright lights. *You have no right,* Marion thought, glaring at the black abyss between the stars. But of course the sky would go on being as the sky

had always been, the lights separated by a distance that seemed trivial at a glance. Only Marion knew better now. The stars seemed close enough to touch one another—they could see and be seen, but they would implode alone, surrounded by a distance impossible to comprehend, the distance between two skins.

She made it back to the house by midnight. The living room windows waited for her, beckoning her out of the gloom. Marion put her hand to the doorknob, but it twisted beneath her grasp and opened, the light bleeding from the doorway into the dark night. *Come in*, Olga said gently as she ushered Marion inside, *and have a glass of milk*.