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Claire Dean, “Is-And”

Darcie Little Badger, “Kelsey and the Burdened Breath”

CLAIRE DEAN

## IS-AND

SHE WAS THE only one watching – nose against glass – as the ferry navigated the turbines. They swooped noiselessly, churning sea and sky. They looked more delicate and awkward close up, like gargantuan flowers, and they went on for as far as she could see.

Gareth was sitting four rows back flicking through something on his phone. He'd made it clear she was irritating him, making a show of herself for a pointless view. Other passengers watched the news on big screens or dozed. The ordinary breakfast news felt incongruous in this place between places. The island was only sixty miles from the coast she'd lived on all her life, but she'd never seen it. The guidebook talked of the mists of a great magician that kept it hidden.

As they left the turbines behind, the sea and sky settled into mute bands of grey, but she still couldn't see the island. She returned to her seat and rested her head against Gareth's shoulder. He remained intent on his phone. Hers had lost signal and wouldn't get it back until they got home. Gareth had forgotten to tell her before they set off that he used another sim card on the island.

She reached for the guidebook and started to reread the section of walks.

CLAIRE DEAN – *Is-and*

'You don't need that,' Gareth said without looking up from his phone.

'I like reading it,' she said. 'I just like it. I haven't been before. I'm allowed to enjoy it.'

'I'll show you everything.'

She let the book fall closed on her lap and rested her head against him again. 'I'm lucky to have my own walking, talking guidebook.' She took hold of his hand. He continued to thumb his phone.

She dozed and when she opened her eyes again the sky had cleared to a startling blue. People were lined up against the front window. The island was there and she'd missed it appearing. She tried to sidle in between an elderly woman and a couple of middle-aged bikers. The island was small at first but it quickly became too big to be contained by the window. The view shifted with an accelerated zoom. She hadn't taken in everything about one image of the island before it grew closer and there was more to see.

The table filled the back of the room and she caught herself on a corner as she squeezed into the place that had been laid for her. The tablecloth was crocheted and there were napkins in heavy metal rings. There were only two places set. 'Isn't your mum...'

'No.' Gareth piled his plate high with potatoes and peas from china dishes. Gareth's plate held three slices of anaemic-looking ham. She had been given one. There was a bottle of lemonade on the table. No wine. She needed a drink. She could hear the radio from the kitchen, where his mum had hidden herself away.



'If it was a problem us eating here . . . I mean we could have eaten out.'

'No, Mum wanted to cook for us.' He unscrewed the lemonade. There was no hiss of air. No bubbles in her glass. It must have been at the back of a cupboard for years.

The Anaglypta walls were cluttered with paintings. Each was a swirl of garish colours formed into a landscape. They glinted from some angles, but looked rutted and gouged from others. There were more of them, clearly by the same amateur hand, in Gareth's room. 'Are they places on the island?' she'd asked as they unpacked their bags. 'Did your mum do them?' He'd just shrugged.

His room was frustratingly bland. She'd expected posters, old CDs, plastic figurines, some traces of him having grown up here. There were just the paintings, more crochet and a crooked twig and wool cross above the bed. She'd read about the crosses, cross cuirns they were called, in the guidebook. They used to be put up as protection against fairies. His mum obviously had a thing for them because they were all over the house. On the living room mantelpiece there was a line-up of family photos including several of his brother and him as children, and also his wedding photo. His ex looked young and elegant. They looked happy. Next to it was one of a newborn baby in a blue hat. 'He's beautiful,' she said. 'Why didn't you tell me you're an uncle?' He'd clattered the plates on to the table and gestured for her to sit.

The lemonade left an acidic coating on her tongue. Gareth dissected his ham into long, thin strips before eating them one by one. The meat was cold and left a film of grease on their plates. The potatoes were still hard beneath their roasted edges. 'We'll go for a long walk tomorrow,' he said.

Perched in a wing-back chair by the window she leafed through an old tourist magazine. She was desperate to get out and start exploring, but not comfortable enough to interrupt them talking in the kitchen, or to wander round the house to find where his mum had put her boots. She fiddled with her phone, but there was nothing she could do on it. They were talking too quietly for her to be able to separate many words from the murmur of voices and cooking sounds. She heard him say something about an exchange. 'Way it's done,' his mum said, ' . . . if you want . . . returned.'

The knock at the door made her jump. She half-stood, but Gareth came through to answer it.

'This one must be for you,' a man's voice said. 'I've been keeping it for you.'

'Thanks,' Gareth said, reaching out for it.

'It came in unaddressed. Jack wanted to put it in the back with all the other dead letters. People forget a stamp, or get the wrong address, but I said to myself it's a funny business someone forgetting the address all together. I had a feeling about it so I checked it. I think it must be for you.'

Gareth took the parcel without speaking.

'It took you long enough to come back.'

Gareth pushed the door shut a little too hard. The paintings on the wall quivered. He put the parcel down on the dresser without looking at it and went upstairs. The bathroom door slammed.

The bus was full of locals. The only tourists were a middle-aged couple. They kept passing between them the same

guidebook that she had brought. They sat right at the front and almost jumped up at every stop. On a wooded stretch of road the man dropped the guidebook, spilling leaflets everywhere.

'That's what they get,' muttered an elderly woman in front of them.

She nudged Gareth and raised her eyebrows in question.

'They didn't say hello,' he said.

'We went over the fairy bridge? I read about that. You should have told me. I wanted to see it, to get a picture of the sign.'

'Sorry.' He went back to his phone.

'What was that parcel this morning?'

'I didn't get chance to open it. Won't be anything important.'

'It was good of them to keep it for you.' She cuddled into him and glanced at his phone screen.

'Who?'

'The post office. All that stuff the postman said, it sounded like they waited for you to come back. You wouldn't get service like that at home.'

He turned to look out of the window. 'Things are different here.'

The route described so neatly in the guide book didn't seem to relate to the landscape at all. Gareth took the lead on barely visible paths that skirted wild grass on one side and sheer drops into glistening bays on the other. Grey rocks erupted from the sea and she tried to attach them to names. 'Is that one Sugar Loaf Rock?' Her voice was snatched away by the wind. She stuffed the guidebook into her rucksack and tried

to match his pace. She hadn't anticipated the astonishing blue of the sea, or the violence of movement frozen in the rocks. Grey cliff faces tilted at savage angles and looked as if they might shift again. She wanted to take photo after photo but she wasn't sure Gareth would wait. Besides, she thought, it was better to look with her eyes, not her phone, and try and hold the views in her head.

When they reached the Chasms, he strode out among them.

'The book said we have to keep to the wall here,' she called. 'It's not safe.'

'I could walk the Chasms with my eyes closed.' He shut his eyes and jumped to his left.

The uneven ground was riddled with what looked like rabbit holes, but instead of a fall into the earth there was a vertical drop into the roiling sea. She edged out a little in his direction, but kept one hand on the wall.

'You can't see them properly from there. Come here.'

She hesitated.

'Don't you trust me?' There was worry in his expression, and something else she couldn't quite read. He could be quiet and moody, but she could tell he was carrying a weight of hurt. He hadn't talked much about how his wife had left him, but she could feel the sadness in him. She took his outstretched hand and with her eyes on the ground she wound her way after him on the narrow path between the Chasms.

They stopped to eat the packed lunch his mum had made them at a high point on what Gareth said translated as Raven's Hill, looking down at the Calf of Man.

'There's another island off to the left in the painting in your mum's living room,' she said, 'but it isn't there.'

He shrugged, his mouth full. She needed a dictionary for his shrugs.

As they continued on the thin earth path she tried to keep hold of his hand. There was a deep quiet between the sounds of sea and the wind. She no longer tried to fill it with words, but collected images: bluebells unexpected on the high cliffs, blackened thorns with feathers caught in them, a sleek hare that crossed their path in an instant.

His gaze kept falling not on the path, or out to sea, but inwards towards the fields and a row of small whitewashed houses.

'What is it?' she said.

'I . . . someone I knew lived there.'

'Do they still?'

'No.'

He looked lost. She reached up and smoothed his hair that was rucked up by the wind. 'I love you,' she said. The words felt heavier once they'd left her mouth. She wasn't even sure if she did yet, or if she'd said it to test what was between them, to call it into being.

He turned back to the path and led the way on.

Light seeped through the loose brown weave of the curtains. He wasn't beside her in bed. She pulled a cardigan over her pyjamas and crept downstairs. The package remained unopened on the dresser. She'd almost pointed it out to him before they went to bed, but suspected that would mean he wouldn't open it. Perhaps he'd opened it when she'd been out of the room, replaced the contents and resealed it. She checked the kitchen, and peered out of the windows at the front and back of the house. There was no sign of him. The house was

in a row tucked between narrow lanes. No one passed by. A lot of the houses were holiday lets. She hadn't seen anyone else on the street since they'd arrived.

The padded envelope looked like it had been reused many times. The paper was worn thin in places, battered and crumpled, but as the postman had said there was no address on it. How had the postman known it was for Gareth? There was no sound of movement upstairs. His mum must still be asleep. The weight and solidity of the parcel, the straight edges, told her she was holding a book with hard covers. As she turned it over music started playing, a tinny, lilting tune she didn't recognise. She dropped the parcel on the dresser and stood holding her breath. There was no movement upstairs; the sound mustn't have carried. She picked it up again. The flap lifted easily – so he had checked the contents, or his mum had. She eased the book out. It was a baby's board book of nursery rhymes. There was a panel with three shapes to press for different tunes – 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star', 'Mary Had a Little Lamb', 'Three Blind Mice' – but the tune she'd heard hadn't belonged to one of those. She turned the stiff pages. There were letters that had been blacked out of words here and there. Footsteps on the landing forced her to slip the book carefully back into the envelope. She rushed across the room and picked up the magazine she'd read cover to cover the day before.

His mum just nodded at her as she came down the stairs and then crossed into the kitchen. She could see where he got his communication skills.

He didn't return until mid-afternoon. She flicked through the magazine again and again and again, and drank the weak tea his mum kept placing on the coffee table for her. 'Gareth

had to nip out to sort something out. He'll be back soon,' was all she'd say about his whereabouts, and then she sat in silence working on her crochet.

Feeling the day slipping away, she considered going out, but with her phone not working he wouldn't be able to contact her. She kept thinking about the baby book. Why had someone sent it to Gareth? The postman must have been wrong. It was meant for someone else. It had to be, but why were the letters blacked out?

She waited until his mum was making the lunch and then eased the book from the envelope again, taking care not to touch the buttons. She looked for a pattern in the letters that were missing, and tried to make them into words: w . . . e . . . w . . . a . . . n . . . t . . . t . . . o. The kettle had boiled. Plates clinked against a work surface. She put the book back and sat down just in time.

'Did you do the paintings?' she asked as they both ate their salmon spread sandwiches.

'I was taken away after I had Gareth. It wasn't unpleasant where they took me, but I wanted to come home.' His mum clung to the tiny cross at her neck as she spoke.

Unsure how to respond, she nodded and pushed more of the sandwich into her mouth. It must have been some kind of art therapy. Gareth hadn't mentioned his mum had ever been unwell like that, but then there was more she didn't know about him than she did.

'Gareth's father took so long about sorting it out I thought he was going to leave me there for good.'

'They're nice paintings,' she said. 'Very vivid.'

'Have you ever held a changeling? They have a cry that could scour the heart from your chest.'

Wishing she'd never mentioned the paintings, she looked down at the magazine as though concentrating on an article about the island's kipper industry.

His mum collected their plates and left the room, but her voice came through from the kitchen. 'Just because a thing's happened once, folk think you'll be safe from it happening again, but life isn't like that. There are old patterns to follow.' She returned with more tea. 'Kaye's such a lovely woman. She knew what she had to do.' Cold, milky water sloshed from the cup as she set it on the table, her hand shaking. 'I'm sorry, I'm not supposed to speak to you. He's a good boy, though, my Gareth, I won't have you thinking otherwise.'

'What if we booked into a hotel as a treat for our last night?' His mum was in the kitchen, but she wasn't trying to keep her voice down.

'What about Mum? She would be devastated.'

'I'm sorry, it's just . . . This is our first time away together. We've hardly done anything. I've spent most of it in your mum's living room...'

'I told you I'm sorry, the errands took longer than I expected. And you know what, Mum's done everything she can to make you feel welcome.'

'There are photographs of you with your ex all over the place.'

He lowered his voice at the sound of pans clattering in the kitchen. 'You know I was married. I've never hidden that from you.'

'Kaye's your ex. Your mum talks like she's . . . and where is she anyway? Does she live on the island?'

'She's away.'

'Were you seeing her today? Is that what you were doing?'  
 'No.' He headed for the kitchen and his mum, forcing her into silence.

He was asleep with his back to her, or feigning sleep. The light through the curtains woke her at dawn. She waited as it brightened a little in intensity and then slipped out of bed. She dressed in yesterday's clothes without washing for fear she'd wake either him or his mum. Taking an apple from the bowl in the kitchen for breakfast she crept out into the empty lane. Giddy with the sudden sense of freedom she half-ran down the street into the next. He would wake and find her gone, just like she had with him the day before. He'd realise how out of order he'd been. He'd try and make it up to her. He'd explain what on earth was going on with his mum. She'd stay out just long enough to make him worry, but return in time for them to spend the afternoon together before the ferry home.

In the window of a grimy-looking cottage a cròsh cuirn leaned against the glass. There were leaves caught in the old wool that had been used to tie it. She passed an antique shop and a pretty little café, but both were closed. The thick dust on the vases in the antique shop window made her wonder when it had last been open. She wandered the long lanes until the early morning damp started to make her bones ache. Another café she passed was closed, but the door to a quaint-looking bookshop stood ajar.

Inside, the shelves were dense with browning books. An elderly man was half-hidden behind piles of books on the counter. He didn't seem to notice her come in. The titles on the spines of many of the books were too faded to read. She

picked out a slim book that was the blue of the sea, *Fairy Tales of Mann*.

'Have you a special interest in...' the man looked up and nodded at her, 'because if so I've a number of titles you might like.'

'Do you mean fairy stories? No, thanks, I'm just looking.' She flicked through the volume and stopped halfway. There was a story with blacked-out letters, *he wh-stled a soft tune, and touched her shoulder, so that she would look round -t him, but she knew if she did that he would have powe- over her ever after*.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'I've seen another book with letters blacked out like this. Is it some kind of traditional thing?'

'No, I've only seen it twice before.' He held out his hand to take the book. 'It's a story about a lhiannan shee too, apt choice...' Her expression must have shown her ignorance because he went on as if telling a story to a child. 'If you so much as glance at one of Themselves you're under their spell for good. They'll have you dancing off into their fine halls under the hill.' He looked up at her as if considering whether to carry on or not. 'From time to time some of their things turn up. I think they let them slip through for mischief. They look just like our books, our paintings, our records even, but there's always an extra story, or a curve in the hill that you'd swear isn't actually there, or a tune you've never heard before - something not quite as it should be.' He shut the book and put it beside the till. 'I've gone on too much. Forgive me, they're old tales, and I'm an old man who spends far too much time shut up with only books for company. Are you with us on holiday?'

'My partner's from the island. It's the first time I've visited.'

'And have we treated you well?'

'Yes, thanks.' She pulled her coat around herself, readying to go.

'Have you been to see the Laxey Wheel?'

'No. I've not seen as much as I'd wanted to and we leave this evening.'

'Well we'll see you again, I'm sure.' He picked up the book.

'Would you like this wrapping?'

There was no sign of Gareth back at the house. His mum was in the kitchen baking. The parcel remained in place on the dresser. She pulled the book out and worked her way through the pages: w . . . e . . . w . . . a . . . n . . . t . . . t . . . o . . . c . . . o . . . m . . . e . . . h . . . o . . . m . . . e. She shoved the book back into the envelope and dropped it on the dresser, setting off the tune for 'Three Blind Mice'. It had to be some weird trick his wife was playing. And that's where he kept sneaking off to: he was seeing her. She headed upstairs to pack. She pulled open the top drawer. Her clothes had gone. Her bag wasn't under the bed. Her washbag wasn't on the windowsill. His stuff was all still there. His rucksack was in the wardrobe. Had he packed for her?

She ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. 'Where's Gareth?'

His mum didn't look up from her mixing. 'He's just nipped out to finish sorting something.' She stirred faster and faster. The bowl was full of broken eggshells.

Out in the lane there was no sign of him. She didn't know where to begin looking. At the end of the street, just as she was about to turn into the next, she heard whistling behind her. She'd never heard Gareth whistle. It was the same lilting

tune she'd heard from the book the first time she'd opened the parcel. She turned, furious, ready to yell at him, but everything within her stopped. The stranger held her there with his gaze. She took his outstretched hand and let him lead her away.



from *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Colour*. Ed. Nisi Shawl. Oxford: Solaris, 2019. 287-305.

## KELSEY AND THE BURDENED BREATH

### Darcie Little Badger

HAND STRETCHED TOWARD the bedroom ceiling, Kelsey climbed on her wooden footstool. “Here, Pal,” she called. A shimmer—a tiny Fata Morgana, light bent through not-quite emptiness—flowed across the ceiling, down her arm, and around her shoulders. Pal’s weight lessened hers; an alien gravity drew all last breaths from Earth.

“Good boy,” she said. “It’s work time.”

She hopped down from the stool and used her bare foot to push it against her bed, a twin-sized, twenty-year-old mattress on the wooden floor. If repairs to the farm and the three-story white elephant of a house hadn’t bled her of every cent she earned, Kelsey might have bought a proper bed, something with memory foam instead of metal springs. She didn’t need a frame. Never had. But with every passing year, it became more difficult to sleep on a creaky, lumpy, tilted beast with steel bones and two hundred generations of dust mites woven through its skin.

Kelsey shut off her bedroom light and stepped into the hallway. As her pupils expanded, she navigated by floorboard creaks. Twenty footsteps to the staircase. Thirteen steps to the ground floor. Her father had constructed the house by hand; there were no coincidences. He built the number thirteen into the foundation thirteen different ways as a monument to

his patience with the superstitions of the seventh-generation settlers who once employed him.

It had been a modest farm. Just a vegetable garden, one acre of corn, and thirteen bleating sheep. Enough for two new farmers, both retired from early-life careers, to manage. Now, all that remained was the last breath of the sheepdog Pal.

And, of course, the farmers' daughter.

After breakfast, a bowl of joyless shredded wheat and almond milk, Kelsey left the house; her car was parked across a grassy acre once used for grazing. "Nearly a full moon," she said, as if Pal could appreciate the view. When Pal was alive, he used to bound across the countryside, free, and then sprawl belly-up on the ground, panting. He couldn't do that anymore. He couldn't even see the sky.

Outside, Kelsey always carried Pal in a backpack to protect him from falling into the void. She secured the backpack in the trunk of her car before slipping into the driver's seat. It was a twenty minute drive to work with no traffic, one benefit of a very early morning. Because the hospital never closed, the best time for herding was that sweet spot between late night and early morning: 4:00 a.m. Despite the red-eye hour, a thirty-person crowd waited outside Maria Medical Center, filling the long rectangle of grass between the parking lot and street. Some sat on picnic blankets or collapsible lawn chairs. Others stood. All watched the marble, chimney-like chute jutting from the hospital dome. As Kelsey parked in front of the vigil keepers, she recognized several regulars who enjoyed witnessing last breaths rising, like smoke from a pyre, into the vestiges of starlight.

The new faces might be mourners, waiting to say goodbye. Last breaths rarely lingered near their cooling bodies; if they weren't captured immediately, they drifted away, indistinguishable from other shimmers trapped in the labyrinth of medical departments.

That's why hospitals were Kelsey's biggest clients. Hospitals and slaughterhouses.

She entered the clinic through a discrete side door. The security guy, Philip, smiled at Kelsey in recognition; he didn't even take a cursory glance at her badge. "I saw a couple on the second floor," he said. "One followed me around like a duckling chasing after its mama."

"Huh! Maybe they recognized you."

"How?" He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Can they see? Maybe you don't need the dog. If I was a shimmer, I'd follow a beautiful woman."

"You will be a shimmer," Kelsey said. "Sooner or later."

"Christ." The flirty smirk dropped off his face, and she couldn't be more pleased. Philip's hints were tiresome, and he never gave her the chance—the courtesy, really—to reject him outright. It wasn't that Kelsey enjoyed telling people, "I'm not into you," but she had thirty years of practice under her belt and much preferred one direct, cathartic "no" to the awkwardness that had been happening twice a week at 4:00 a.m. for the past six months. It had been a mistake to confide that she wasn't married during a bout of friendly rapport with Philip. That's when his behavior switched from friendly to interested, and with every interaction Kelsey felt a little lonelier.

"It's the human condition," she said. "With that last exhale, you soar." Of course, that was only partially true. Fish released shimmers, too, and they sucked fluid life through their gills. Without giving Philip another thought, Kelsey unzipped her backpack, and Pal floated upward like a bubble in a lava lamp. Once his shimmery body hit the paneling, he zipped across the hallway ceiling and took the first left, so familiar with the hospital layout he anticipated Kelsey's directions.

Floor by floor, through sterile corridors and above sleeping patients, Pal ushered last breaths like he'd once herded sheep. He encouraged them into a huddle and up the stairs, where they gathered in the sixth-floor departure chamber, a hexagonal room with a white dome ceiling. Kelsey pressed a red button embedded in the wall, and the grate separating the marble

chute from the dome slipped aside with a whirl, converting the room into an inverted funnel.

"You're free," she said, peering at the nine last breaths that clung to the ceiling perimeter. "Just let go." Kelsey used a yard stick to guide Pal into his backpack. "Good boy," she said. Her bag shivered as he wagged a remembered tail. His work was done. After all, they weren't actually the breaths of sheep. Each one of those shimmers had carried a human through life, whatever that entailed, from the first gasp and scream to this. Kelsey needed the fall upward to be their choice.

One by one, the shimmers slid up the dome and through the chute until just one breath remained. The straggler clung to the concave ceiling so tightly their body was flat and wide like a quaking, gelatinous puddle. The poor thing seemed afraid to fall. In Kelsey's experience, many shimmers were reluctant, and she often wondered where that reluctance came from and why other shimmers—like her parents—left without hesitation. Some might fear the cosmic unknown or have unfinished business, she supposed. Others might be unwilling to let go.

"Hi there," Kelsey said. She checked her phone clock. "Six thirty. A beautiful time to fly. The sun has risen, and it's warm."

The shimmer sluggishly inched down the wall, fighting the pull of the sky.

"You can't stay here." She lowered her voice and continued, "I'm not supposed to ..."

Her phone rang, and for a panicked instant, Kelsey felt a rush of guilt, always her first reaction when the outside burst into private moments. She stared at the bright screen in wide-eyed confusion until the caller—unknown number—went to voicemail. It was barely past dawn. Who called so early? Even scammers had a better sense of timing.

"Sorry," she continued. "I'm not supposed to go until the room is empty." In the United States, it was illegal for shimmers to be contained by anyone but family or specific conservators, and the practice, even done legally, was generally considered

tasteless. Sensibilities had changed since the Victorian era; back then, last breaths were often sealed in urns. There must be thousands of imprisoned shimmers still languishing in museums, catacombs, and tombs.

Kelsey sat against the closed door, her legs crossed at the ankles under her long, traditional camp skirt, homemade from yellow fabric with a pink flower print. "How about a story?"

It took forty minutes, but in the middle of an anecdote about her grandmother's tortilla-eating longhorns, the shimmer finally slid up the dome and through the chute. Maybe they missed their own grandmother.

As she left the departure room, Kelsey checked the voicemail. A deep voice rasped:

*Good morning, Miss Bride. Jennie Smith—you clear her poultry farm—gave me your number. Sorry for the hour. I need help. Desperately. Can you banish burdened breaths? The one in my neighborhood has killed*

*A pause.*

*so many people.*

He recited his name, Clint Abbott, and phone number.

*Please call back. I'm acting on behalf of the Sunny Honeycomb Salt Pond Homeowner's Association.*

Philip must have noticed something haunted in Kelsey's face, because he asked, "Everything all right?"

"It's a prospective client." She lowered the phone from her twice-pierced right ear. Kelsey wore a silver squash blossom through the lobe, but her cartilage piercing was half-closed from disuse.

"Is the city trying to poach you again?"

"Nah." She shook her head. "I don't know what this is."

Kelsey replayed the message as she crossed the parking lot, still shocked by the request. The repetition did not numb her dismay. Sure, her business card read: Kelsey Bride, Shimmer Finder and Guide. But that didn't make her a detective. She'd only searched for the burdened, murderous dead once, and that

was a decade ago. They weren't exactly common. The act that made a last breath burdened was so terrible the word "murder" didn't do it justice.

She cradled Pal's backpack. "I'm sorry."

Kelsey returned Clint's call.

THE VICTIMS, ACCORDING TO Clint:

*Peter. Twenty-eight years old. Murdered six months ago during a recreational dive in the Honeycomb Sea Caves with several other scuba enthusiasts. His last words: "I'm stuck. All tangled up." Body never recovered.*

*Spencer. Forty-one years old. Murdered four months ago. A seasoned diver exploring the Honeycomb Sea Caves for the ninth time. Footage and audio were recorded by his GoPro camera. On Spencer's guide rope-assisted exit from the caves, he stopped moving forward. Audio includes: "Somebody got me." No abnormalities, including other divers or obstructions, were captured by the GoPro. However, visibility during Spencer's death was low, since he disturbed silt.*

*Kylie. Nineteen years old. Murdered two months ago. She had been swimming in the brackish pond over the sea caves. Nobody witnessed her drowning. Kylie's body was discovered by two divers inside the cave system.*

*The caves and pond were closed after Kylie's death.*

*Patricia. Sixty-one years old. Murdered this week. Crushed in her bed between 3:00 a.m and 9:00 a.m. Patricia was Clint Abbott's neighbor. Their community surrounded the brackish pond, which connected to the Atlantic Ocean through a narrow, marsh-straddled channel. On the night Patricia died, two outdoor cameras recorded evidence of burdened breath activity. Police investigation ongoing.*

"Burdened breaths are rare," Kelsey said. She and Clint shared a booth in Sprinkle's Donut Diner, reviewing his notes. She ate a cinnamon bear claw and drank coffee with cream; he

ate nothing but was finishing his third cup of oil-black coffee. They made an unusual pair: Clint, six-foot-three, stout and reddened by the Atlantic sun and Kelsey, four-foot-eleven, her round face a rich tan surrounded by a home-cut bob; her hair a mix of white and black strands which from afar resembled metallic silver. "They've never been observed in a controlled setting."

"What does that mean?" Clint asked. "Controlled?"

"A laboratory. All mice float." Kelsey glanced at Pal's bag. "Personally," she said, "I doubt that nonhuman breaths can become burdened. Well. Perhaps chimpanzees. They hunt monkeys for sport. Kinda messed up."

"Is it true that..." His jaw tightened, as if something innate resisted the question.

"Yes." Kelsey took a bite of her bear claw and immediately regretted it. "Dead that eat the dead get pushed against the Earth. In a curious way, it's like losing weight. The pull of that alien gravity weakens, and then it shoves the cannibal shimmers away. Crushes them against the land. That's why all the burdened breaths in historical records co-occur with disasters like coal mine accidents, earthquakes, and train derailments. Mass deaths trapping normal, buoyant last breaths in an enclosed space, providing the cannibal with ample time and opportunity. So my next question, Clint: has there been a recent catastrophe in town?"

"No," he said. "Not until Patricia and... and the rest, anyway. Can you help?"

"Maybe," she said. "You're staying with friends, right?"

"Yes," he said. "In Cape Cod. It's a commute, but it's less expensive than a hotel."

"Distance is good. Don't return home yet. In fact, avoid the pond. The murderer will kill again to maintain its reverse weight and stay tethered on Earth."

Who knew what waited *up there* for cannibals: a reckoning? Nothingness? Paradise? A larger, hungrier mouth?

"Have you handled one before?" he asked.

She nodded. "Once. About ten years ago. I travelled a lot back then. Life was fifty percent gardening and sheep-shearing at the farm, and fifty percent wandering. It was fun. Kind of perfect, actually. I had this '99 gold Monte Carlo, and when the urge struck, I bundled Pal into a fine silk bag and drove all the way to California. We made pit stops in every big city; when populations are high and buildings are like beehives, there's never a lack of work for people like me."

"You said you had a farm?"

"My parents did," she said. "Just a little one. They sold yarn and veggies at the farmer's market."

"A labor of love?"

"Yes," Kelsey said. "Exactly that." Heartache was always inside her, like the bile in her stomach, and now it swelled. All that remained of their love and labor were weeds around an empty house.

"And the encounter?" Clint asked. He seemed eager to change the subject.

"The job was at an abandoned high school in Houston," she said. "The kind for thousands of students. Imagine this massive brick building, seriously damaged by Hurricane Andrea, with broken windows and chained doors. It was fenced up for months before they started renovations. Apparently, the crew had only been working a couple hours when they found a pair of bodies in one of the classrooms. Two adults. The city contracted me to sweep the building and make sure their last breaths had escaped. The police had already checked and didn't find anything. But the glass kept breaking, and the renovation crew kept getting goosebumps. So they figured the police missed one or both breaths; in a building that size, it's understandable. I agreed. Figured it would be a quick and interesting job. Pal has keen ears, for lack of a better word. And the building was scary looking, but I had backup in the form of two police escorts. They gave me a face mask and a hard hat, too."

"Pal is faster than human breaths, but I still worried about his safety, you know? I asked the escorts, 'Are the shimmers dangerous?' I was worried they'd shove Pal out a broken window somehow and I'd lose him to the sky."

"This gruff police guy said, 'One of them is. Google it sometime.' So I did, right there in front of the brick building, with these storm clouds gathering overhead. I don't think the gruff guy expected me to own a phone that could Google stuff. Joke's on him. The first article that popped up characterized the deaths as a murder-suicide, which made me start shivering, like the realization ripped a hole in my jacket and let the chill of the city inside. I work with last breaths, but most...well, they go easy after a long life. Or they're chickens, pigs, and cows. Those poor animals don't go easy, but they aren't murderers."

"I didn't read beyond the title... didn't want to scroll down and see faces..."

Kelsey paused. The waitress, a brunette white woman wearing orange lipstick and black-framed glasses, was idling near their table, a carafe of coffee in one hand. "Can I top you up, Ma'am?" she asked. Kelsey glanced at her cup of coffee; it was only half empty.

"Maybe in ten minutes," she said. "Thanks."

Kelsey resumed her story, eager for the chance to talk. It was nice to reminisce about her life, even the dark parts. "Pal found them in a drama classroom, of all places. The far wall was set up like a mini-Broadway stage, red curtains and everything. I whipped those curtains aside and looked up. There they were. The two breaths. They went in circles. One chased, and the other ran—or maybe they were *both* chasing—embroiled in an unending game of tag." She bit her lip. "No. It ended."

"The two breaths must have started arguing, because a window in the classroom shattered. In swept the winter. I shouted, 'Hey! Hey! You can escape now!' I should have known, though. I should have known they never wanted to escape. There were plenty of broken windows in that school."

"One of the breaths paused, like I'd startled it. And in that moment of stillness, the game ended. Two became one, and the one sank languidly, resembling this partially deflated helium balloon. Burdened. I remember thinking, 'I have to protect Pal.' So I threw my jacket over the burdened breath and pushed them through the broken window. A gust of wind blew them over the weedy strip of grass between the building and the basketball court. That's when I lost sight of them. They probably drifted over Houston a couple days before flying off. You know, Clint, I often wonder: had the cannibal been the wrathful victim or the violent murderer?"

"Does it matter?" he asked. "That's... terrible either way."

"Yes," Kelsey said. "For my own peace of mind, it does."

"Guess so."

She sighed. "I hate to talk business, but I'm going to need an advance," she said. "Unfortunately, home is three hours away, so I'm overnighing in a motel."

"Local one?" he asked.

"Uh huh. The one with a mermaid on the sign."

He smiled. "Good choice. I know the owner. Be sure to have their breakfast. Everything's local. You can order an omelet with wild mushrooms from the heath."

In addition to the advance, Clint gave Kelsey three files on a thumb drive before he left. The file names were MARTHA GIBBERT FRONT PORCH SECURITY, MARSH BIRD CAM, and PATRICIA LAWN PHOTOS. Kelsey used her tablet to view the pictures and videos. The waitress lingered nearby, sneaking glances at the screen with unconcealed interest.

*MARTHA GIBBERT FRONT PORCH SECURITY: In a black and white video that was filmed between 2:34 a.m. and 2:39 a.m., the porch door shakes. Moments later, its lower glass panel shatters. Inside the house, Martha's golden retriever barks. No further disturbances occur.*

*PATRICIA LAWN PHOTOS: Clint photographed Patricia's property after her body was discovered. Most of the thirty*

*pictures show damage to the potted flowers and ornamental bushes outside her bedroom window. The plants are crushed, as if somebody had flattened them under a boulder. A photograph snapped through her open window shows her bedroom floor. A tube of lipstick has been flattened, its red, waxy stick pressed into the carpet like a spray of blood.*

*MARSH BIRD CAM: The green and black night-vision video, captured between 1:43 a.m. and 1:47 a.m., shows a stretch of marsh outside the brackish pond. In the right-hand corner, grasses shake and bend, as if something unseen is rolling from the water to higher ground, crushing the vegetation beneath it.*

As the waitress refilled Kelsey's mug, a tear slipped down her pale cheek, made gray by mascara and chalky foundation.

"Are you okay?" Kelsey asked.

"Sorry. Clint has such a loud voice. I heard... it's just... they used to eat here."

"Who?"

"All of them," she said.

"My condolences."

"What happens to a soul when it's eaten?" The question, whispered, seemed afraid to be heard. So Kelsey pretended that she hadn't.

After finishing her coffee, Kelsey drove to the coast and parked on Clint's driveway. He lived in a typical upper-middle-class New England home. It was painted pastel blue; every house along the street was some variety of pastel, no doubt coordinated by a strict homeowner's association. Kelsey wondered if the neighbors knew that Clint had hired her. Maybe it had been a collective decision. One discussed during an emergency homeowners' meeting. As she unloaded supplies from the trunk, a wind that smelled like the sea tousled her hair. She inhaled deeply and slipped into thigh-high wading boots.

"We're going on a walk, boy." Kelsey lifted Pal from the truck where he rode in his backpack, surrounded by pillows. Together, they hiked to the marsh; Kelsey located the two-foot-

wide trail over the mud, grasses, and pickleweed. The plants were bent inland, their blades matted by sticky earth. "If you sense it, bark. Detect, boy. Detect." Last breaths sensed their fellows and communicated with them through a language that, although unheard by the living, raised goosebumps and broke glass.

The route became messy fast. Halfway to the pond, one misplaced step sent Kelsey's left foot calf-deep into the mud, which clutched her boot in a vacuum-tight grip; she leaned back with all her weight and twisted. The earth held fast.

"Shoot."

The hair on Kelsey's arms prickled. Was Pal barking? Perhaps her distress had upset him.

Or perhaps...

She slipped out of her trapped boot and hop-sprinted from the marsh. The mud seeped through her cotton sock, gritty and cold. A sharp edge poked her heel; no time to investigate, but she glimpsed feathers and cracked bones woven between grass blades, as if a plover had been crushed when the burdened breath rolled to land.

It must be fast.

She abandoned her second boot and sprinted.

Safe in the car, Pal's bag buckled to the passenger seat, Kelsey pressed her forehead against the steering wheel and waited for her heart to calm, her stomach to settle. She felt silly for visiting the marsh alone, like a real private investigator with the know-how and mettle to escape death. Now, she probably owed the wildlife center thirty bucks for the loaner boots.

At least the trip hadn't been fruitless. Clint said there was just one fresh path between the pond and neighborhood. Kelsey had not found evidence—such as grasses bent toward the water—that the burdened breath had retraced its figurative steps after killing Patricia.

It did not return to the sea caves.

Where was the murderer hiding?

Not in Patricia's house. The police scoured crime scenes for breaths, in case the victim or other dead witnesses remained.

Maybe the murderer had fled the neighborhood, a wanderer, traveling along the coast, drowning divers, feeding and leaving before people recognized its *modus operandi*.

That theory did not accommodate Patricia's suspicious death, however. Instead of moving when the pond closed, the burdened breath had lingered until desperation compelled it to murder a woman in her bed.

So it had a motive more complex than "eat and hide." But what? Why would it remain in quaint, unremarkable Sunny, with a population so small everyone knew everyone, except for the steady stream of tourists who were making a pit stop on the way to Cape Cod?

At a loss for answers and afraid to leave her car, Kelsey decided to drive around town. Pal was trained to search for other last breaths, and although that usually involved herding, he could detect noisy ones from inside his backpack.

She started in Clint's neighborhood. There were very few signs of life and no signs of afterlife. In the distance, a cloud of gulls flew in circles, occasionally swooping, their bodies bright against the graying sky; she thought of buzzards and endless games of chase and the Ouroboros consuming its own tail. She took a right, delving inland.

Most tourists passed through the town of Sunny, Maine in a day. They played a round at Mermaid Mini-Golf, viewed the nautical museum, and ate lobster for 3 p.m. dinner. Kelsey drove down Main Street twice, once going east and once going west, to check the storefronts on each side of the two-lane street. The candy shop advertised fresh fudge and seawater taffy. There were oil paintings of the sea in the art gallery window. She didn't notice any cracked glass, however. "Detect," Kelsey reiterated. "Detect, Pal!"

Nothing as they passed the nautical museum, which promised a wealth of REGIONAL MARITIME HISTORY

and AUTHENTIC VICTORIAN TREASURES for just FIVE DOLLARS & FREE FOR CHILDREN, based on the sandwich board outside its door. The shop that sold beach supplies, postcards, and keychains had an orange "Closed" sign over its door. The coffee shop was also closed.

"Hear anything?" Kelsey asked.

Pal didn't make a peep.

"Well, then..." On the curb, a seagull nibbled salt from a french fry bag. It occurred to Kelsey that buzzards weren't the only feathered scavengers on earth. Gulls could eat meat, too.

She made a U-turn and returned to the street that passed the brackish pond. Kelsey continued along the coast, heading toward the swarm of gulls. Most of the birds were huddled near the roadside, although they scattered upward as her car approached. Kelsey parked and rolled down her window. From the awkward vantage point, she couldn't tell whether the dark smear on the pavement was an animal or garbage.

"Detect," she reminded Pal, slinging his bag over her shoulder. "We'll be fast." Outside, she could feel every grain of sand beneath her feet, a reminder that she wore mud-drenched, threadbare socks. It only took a moment for Kelsey to confirm that the shape used to be a racoon. The poor thing could be the casualty of a sports car. She hoped that was the case.

Kelsey called Clint.

"Did you find the bastard?" he asked.

"Not yet." She considered the street. "I did find evidence that it's still in town. Can I ask a favor?"

"What do you need?"

"Spread the word to watch out for fresh roadkill. It's probably too smart to hunker down near a meal, but any pattern we find may help pinpoint its location."

"He's consuming animal breaths?"

"Most likely. This burdened breath is an opportunist."

"I'll spread the word," Clint said. "What are your plans?"

"Widen my search." Her stomach rumbled. "After a late lunch."

After Kelsey ate lobster bisque in a café on Main Street, she took Pal on a walk, ostensibly to get a closer look at the storefront glass but actually to buy a bag of taffy. Along the way, she noticed the museum display window. Much like the sandwich board, it advertised:

REGIONAL MARITIME HISTORY!

OVER ONE HUNDRED DETAILED SHIP MODELS!

NEW! TREASURES FROM THE DAMNED QUEEN MARY!

"A *shipwreck*," Kelsey said. "That's a disaster. What do you think, Pal?"

"Were you talking to me?" An elder drifted behind them, her steps long and moonwalk-light. A yellow canvas balloon, easily large enough to cradle six human last breaths, was strapped to her back.

"Sorry, no. Just thinking out loud. I've never heard about the *Queen Mary*."

"Sad exhibit," the woman said. "All the *things* they left behind. Mary drowned six hundred people." A breeze snagged her balloon, and the woman nearly stumbled. "It used to be easier," she said, "when I weighed more, and they... and they were fewer."

"Who?"

"My family. I carry them."

"Me too."

"In that little backpack?"

"It's just my dog."

Her parents hadn't lingered. When the time came, they slipped out the eastward-facing window. Although Kelsey had not been there—in fact, she had been a thousand miles away, sleeping in a motel room with old timey circus posters on the wall—she knew they fell up together, as if holding hands.

Sometimes, the heartache in her chest demanded to know:



why didn't they wait to say goodbye?

"Enjoy the exhibit," the woman said, waving as a gust of wind pulled her down the sidewalk.

It occurred to Kelsey that last breaths had little use for things. But family? Friends? Enemies? Those were eternally meaningful. Maybe the burdened breath was desperate to remain on Earth because somebody they loved *couldn't* leave.

Kelsey pushed her way into the museum—the door resisted her, dragging against a thick mat—and stepped into a small lobby; there was an unoccupied reception counter to her left and a laminated poster on the wall to her right. Navy blue text across the poster read:

*Beyond this point, you will witness the following artifacts from the damned Queen Mary on display in the Sunny Nautical Museum:*

*Ornate pocket watch*

*Tobacco tins*

*Child's boots*

*Reading glasses*

*Jewelry and jewelry box*

*Multicolored vials*

*Paper money, playing cards, cutlery, keys, clothing, sealed urn, suitcases and purses*

*A cherub's head*

*Binoculars, boarding passes, hand mirror, hats, toys, a toilet*

*Stained glass from the ballroom dome, a thousand pieces splintered by the screams of six hundred last breaths.*

After reading the poster, Kelsey was *certain* that she knew how to find the murderer. She strode into the dim exhibit room beyond the lobby. There, a young man in a tartan vest and a matching checkered bowtie guarded the cherub head, which had its own display case. A tag with the name "Billy"

was pinned over his heart, but Kelsey would have guessed that the guy worked in the museum based on his professorial outfit alone.

"Hi there," she said.

"Hello. Did you pay for admission?"

"Nobody was at the front desk."

"Huh." He leaned to the right, making a show of checking the lobby for himself. "Mr. Kay must be on a break. You can buy a ticket on the way out. Unfortunately, I'm a guide, not a money-taker guy."

"Actually, that's great," Kelsey said. "Because I have questions. How long have the *Queen Mary* artifacts been here?"

"Six months," he said.

"Do you know where they came from?"

"The Iowa City Natural History Museum."

"Just a minute." She took her phone from her pant pocket, ignoring Billy's disapproving eye roll, and searched for "Iowa City accident" on her phone. Ten months ago, a child drowned in a drainage pipe. Thirteen and sixteen months ago, two unrelated people drove into the Iowa River, where they perished in their cars. And those were just the unusual deaths reported by a cursory internet research. "What's in the urn, Billy?" She pointed to the display case across the room; a three-foot-high crematorium urn shaped like a blooming lily dominated the collection. "Better yet: who's in the urn?"

"The urn? If I recall, imaging tech found ashes. They couldn't identify the person."

"Did they also screen for last breaths?" She recalled how a hundred years ago, it had been in vogue to carry the deceased with their ashes.

"Imaging tech *always* screens for breaths. It just has ashes."

"In that big thing?"

"Sometimes, a vessel is commissioned before the family knows whether the breath will linger."

"I think you should open it."

"The lid is soldered shut."

"Shimmer screens are unreliable. They just detect noisy last breaths. By the way, how often do you get goosebumps here?"

Billy crossed his arms and glanced at the display case. "I mean, in the evening, I guess I... but goosebumps aren't compelling enough of a reason to damage a relic. It's been five hundred meters under the sea."

"Have you heard about the murders in town?" she asked.

"Obviously," he said. "Are you implying that there's a shimmer in the urn, and it's... somehow... escaping? And killing people? That's impossible."

"No," Kelsey said. "I suspect that about one hundred years ago, a mysterious person—let's call him Frank—boarded the *Queen Mary* with that urn because he took it with him everywhere. He couldn't leave it behind; it carried the last breath of his beloved wife or child. And when the boat sank, Frank drowned—but instead of drifting up, he stayed with the urn. Frank dwelled down there, cannibalizing other stragglers and the breaths of crushed squid and fish. That was his existence, decades spent in the black and heavy water, until divers found the urn and stuck it in this exhibit, which forced Frank into the light. He won't let go of the person he loved."

"He'd rather be a monster."

Kelsey took a plain glass microscope slide from her pocket; during work, slides were her miner's canary. "Take this, Billy," she said. "Humor me." She crossed the room and knelt outside the Plexiglas display case with the cherub head, urn, and silverware. Kelsey shouted, "Who is he? Who follows you? Who carried you onto the *Queen Mary*? Who do you call at night?"

"Nothing happened," Billy said. He delicately held the slide between forefinger and thumb.

"Don't want to be found?" she asked. "It's too late. I found you, and I'll find your burdened breath. Tell him it's over! Say something, or you'll never be together again!"

The slide snapped in half.

\* \* \*

LATER, AFTER SCRUBBING mud from under her toenails, Kelsey ate pizza in her motel room and watched Pal herd dust motes around the lumpy-paint ceiling. His shimmering body spun in wide and tight circles, clockwise, counterclockwise, bouncing wall-to-wall, dizzying. He never slowed. Boredom did not seem to survive death.

"Goodnight, Pal," she said.

She didn't need to spend the night in a motel with a mermaid on its sign—police had captured the burdened breath that afternoon, after the dreadful thing turned itself in for the sake of the shimmer in the urn—but when Kelsey thought about returning to the farmhouse, she was filled with a sense of dread. Like that husk of a home was actually *her* urn, and maybe that's the way her parents had felt when they escaped through an open window and fell into the sky.

For a few minutes longer, Kelsey continued watching Pal, her thoughts residing in memories of green fields and vast blue skies. Then, she walked across the room, unlocked the window, raised it high, and removed the protective screen.

Now, he had a choice.

Upon returning to bed, Kelsey tugged the cotton comforter up to her chin and closed her eyes, afraid she'd peek before sunrise. She wondered if Pal would be waiting for her in the morning. If so, she'd tuck him in the backpack, eat an omelet, leave Sunny, and sell the house her father built, sell it to somebody who loved the number thirteen. Somebody who'd cultivate the earth with the same care as her mother. That done, Kelsey would cram all her belongings in the back of her car, buckle Pal into the passenger's seat, and go west.

Or Kelsey might wake up to an empty room. She'd still buy an omelet, leave Sunny, sell the farmhouse, and go west. She'd just do it alone.

"It's all so mysterious, isn't it?" Kelsey asked the night.