

## Perennial Spring

Never have I loved the colour of my bedroom walls more than I do in this moment. They curl around me now, a warm embrace in contrast to the cold distant rooms in the rest of my parents' house. The floorboards creak and groan under my feet. They're getting used to the idea of bearing my weight once more. The rest of the house is tight-lipped and unforgiving. I wrap these four walls around myself like a blanket pulled over my head to keep the monsters out. It's only been a few months but it feels like years since I was in this sacred space of childhood.

I need to go to the bathroom but the long dark corridor looms in my mind. The weighty wood door to my parent's room breaths heavily, keeping careful watch for passing shadows and restless feet. *Go back to bed, it commands, haven't you done enough damage to this family by leaving that room?*

I want to crack open a window, I crave fresh air, but it won't budge, sealing me in. Its sills have been beaten, bearing punishment for aiding me. It will not give in to my desires anymore. It gazes back on me, eyes resting on the consequences of my actions. Somewhere in the house the ancient clock chimes, marking my solitary confinement and reminding me of the ancestry I've let down. *As if they never did anything wrong.*

I step towards the door and place my hand on the knob. Pipes rattle and bang in the walls, warning me that, though silent, the enemy lurks on the other side of the smooth brown wood. Instead, I turn to the rocking chair, hurriedly stuffed in the corner between a bookcase and my old dresser. It was once a great source of shelter to me, the place where my mother held me close. Now its arms look hard and cold, its back rigid like a school mistress. I'm tempted to sit in it but don't.

Finally, I sigh and slip into bed. It's too small now. It felt giant when dad first made it. I rest in its soft familiarity and find shelter. Outside my door demons prowl.

I'm woken in the morning by a fluttering against my belly button. Slowly, so as not to disturb it and frighten it away, I creep my hand up through the bed covers and press my fingers lightly on my warm skin. Outside my door, heavy footsteps mark sentry duty, up and down the passage wearing grooves in the carpet. Objects clink in a faraway kitchen and tantalising smells slip in from the battlefield trying to entice a wary soldier.

The fluttering stills and I hold my breath. Has it stopped? This is the first time I've experienced this and I never want it to end. I tap out the rhythm of an old familiar nursery rhyme on my abdomen trying to coax it back. The wall behind my head knocks its pipes together— its intention is to disrupt. The shower starts and the droplets of water shatter against an unforgiving tile floor. The fluttering is still absent as I rub tiny circles on my belly. I croon quietly beneath my covers.

“Come on, don’t be shy little one.”

Outside something breaks and a loud silence envelops the house forcing stillness from all its inhabitants. The shower stops, the pipes cease their staccato chorus and faintly the sound of upset penetrates my room until it sits in my ears, declaring my effect on the emotions of the occupants. I ignore it. Let them worry about fine china and appearances. I have something far more precious and permanent on my mind. I press harder against the firm lump that rounds me between my breasts and legs. An acknowledging flicker responds briefly before shying away.

Now there are angry noises all over the house. Doors show their displeasure with angry slams and hallways carry sharp words and dash them against my door. But I am safe, cocooned in my own little world: hidden away from blank stares and cold glassy eyes. I find warmth in the presence of my belly.

“Don’t worry,” I whisper, just the two of us. “You are safe in here with me.”

The door stands guard against the hostile hallways that twist and turn against me. My presence is a shadow that clings to the corner of each ceiling. My name is a groan in each floorboard. The house remembers once, long ago, that I was an innocent child, one that played in its gardens and skipped down its halls. It can remember happiness here, though that has now been all emptied out—swept out the door like a dead cockroach. Here in my room with my dusty pink walls, the roof shelters me, reproachfully reminding me that this is home.

There is a knock on my door. I lie still, my covers the last layer of defence but I know they still reveal my crime to the eyes that peep in. A voice mumbles something, its tone round and heavy like a bowling ball careening down the alley before it clashes with the tall thin pins. It’s so quiet that I almost miss the invitation to breakfast and the reassurance that the opposition has retreated to the outside world for the morning. I turn in my bed, slowly rolling over but when I raise my eyes to the doorway there is nothing but empty space and the impression of welcome.

My feet press neatly against the soft carpet searching for armour to wear as I venture into enemy territory. I remember that my slippers are gone, swept into a bag hastily in the deep dark of the night years ago. I shiver as a cool draft hits my bare skin. I have nothing here for protection against the chill, all my belongings were left behind on a different night, one where the rush was too great to stop and gather myself. The memory is fresh in my mind, so are the reasons behind my late night return. They linger on my skin, purple and yellow, flowers that I never asked for blooming slowly. I’m still not sure which battlefield is worse. The roiling muck of emotional turmoil that at any moment could explode or the cold deadly, expertly placed wounds that follow me around here. Silence or violence, those are my options.

I peek down the hallway making sure that the path to the kitchen is safe. I’m not sure who is

friend and who is foe anymore, though I used to think this place housed allies. I can no longer hear the beating of war drums in the wall, or the steps weighted by disapproval that echo through the house. I drag on the only clothes I have with me, ones that I know would have earned silent glares until they burned right through to my skin and the hidden treasure beneath.

“I’ve made toast.” The owner of the bowling ball is now standing by the bench buttering something. I watch the knife flash in the morning sun straining in through the window. He is silent as he works, unsure of this once familiar person that stands behind him as I used to on mornings that seem like a lifetime ago. “Is that okay?”

Though flesh and blood, we are like strangers, hesitant to open ourselves even as the lingering disapproval is leaching out of the house. My posture shifts; so different from when I was a child.

“Yes,” I reply. My feet move along the familiar path to the table and I sink into the worn chairs that cluster around it. The man at the bench turns and suddenly I see my father, peeking out from underneath the layers of hurt and suspicion.

“There’s more where that came from.” The gruffness of his voice is undermined by his hand lingering on the plate and the two blue eyes that watch over me afraid I will disappear again.

It’s not the toast he is talking about; he was never good at saying the words that I needed to hear. I sit there at the table, one leg tucked under the other, and wish that he would come out and say it. To say the words, to know that he is on my side. I stare right back at him, daring him in my mind, but like always he turns away silently.

“Thanks.” We both know that my words are carried over from last night, from the cold doorstep that I appeared on with no warning. Outside a car door slams and suddenly I am four years old again needing my daddy to protect me from the monsters. “Dad...”

He shakes his head and I hunch over the table trying to make myself smaller, less threatening, to protect myself from what is to come. The door opens and closes signalling the start of the battle and I can hear the steady march of footsteps down the hall. When my mother walks into the room she brings winter inside with her. I shiver against the frosty chill and try to pull myself in even tighter. Her nostrils flare and her mouth pinches. It looks wrong on such a soft face.

*You made her into this* a voice in my head prompts and the memory of raised voices and slammed doors nail the thought to my chest. In her hands are shopping bags, she strides to the table and puts them down— they sound like cannon balls crashing into the wood. I see the logos and turn to her unable to take the insult without retaliation.

“What is this?” There are bottles, onesies, bibs and nappies, all in neutral colours, all neatly packed in those bags. They sit there disguised as unassuming gifts but I can feel the smug intent

radiating off them.

“I thought I would do some shopping.”

She starts to make herself a cup of tea, not the teabag-in-mug kind but the loose-leaf-in-pot kind, the kind that said many things, the kind that told me right then and there what she was thinking.

“This is my baby, mother.” I watch as she put precisely one-point-seven teaspoons of sugar into her cup and stirred counter-clockwise four times and clockwise twice. Her disapproval was almost audible as she poured hot water into the teapot to brew; it marched from her eyebrows down her nose and straight to my swollen belly.

“I don’t work anymore so I can look after the baby while you are out.”

“I’m not going to *be* out.” My teeth grind against each other as the implication flushes me with rage. Dad turns and places a hand on his wife’s arm and she lets go of the words she was about to throw at me. From the look in their eyes, I know that they have already argued about this, about me, about my baby. My mother deflates and pours herself some tea. It throws me that the next person to speak is my father.

“Emily, your mother just wants to help.”

“Why?” I ask bluntly, “She’s never wanted to help before.”

“Because she loves you.”

He states it so simply I almost believe him. My chest squeezes and my heart flutters remembering too many years of disappointment, but before I can reply he’s gone, leaving me with my mother and her pot of brewing tea. She looks at me, eyes roaming over my face that is not so different to the one she used to inspect with pursed lips before allowing me out of the house. There is a fleeting moment of awkwardness that presses itself down on the both of us demanding to be felt, demanding to be brought to life in words, but it deflates and slinks back into the background. Where to start? It can’t be from the threads I left behind. They were cut off with such force that to grasp them would reopen wounds that would bleed out over the floor and stain the tiles red for the rest of time.

No, it must be a new beginning, like spring after winter when things that were dead come back to life. Slowly at first. You don’t really notice the days getting less cold, or the sun lingering just a little bit longer. Then suddenly there are leaves on the trees again and flowers pushing up fresh from the dark damp soil. Yes, it must be like spring. Cautious in the early days, unsure if the harsh unforgiving cold of winter is really over, then it can bloom and drive its roots in deep, trusting in the kindness of the sun.

“Do you think you could pour me a cup?”