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Iryna Klishch
Denison University

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The Feathers of an Addict

by Iryna Klishch

The murders were sultry, red. At least I'd imagined them to be. I first heard of them while standing half naked in mama's tomato garden. The wind was heavy, swollen with rain and pressing itself hard against my thighs, intrusive, like fat leather. The fire had eaten my wrists like a roach so they were decorated with slices of burn scars and were constantly stung with mosquito bites. Mama always said the reason for our tragedies was because I had swallowed feathers as a child, and although I was never quite sure what she meant by this, I always laughed.

But it wasn't always like this. When we were children, Marie and I would swim in the green pond, eat strawberries that tasted like hot nectar and rain, caught fish with broken glass bottles—we were loud. Our laughs staining air, our hair boiled with salt and sand and something that tasted like gasoline, but was never quite gasoline. And on days where it was too grey to go outside, we slept late and spent afternoons baking lemon bars and poppy seed cake, always using too much egg yolk and vanilla extract. During summer nights, we looked at a garden of fire and watched the flames escape into space, churn into stars then burn up and bounce back into our earth. Once, Marie and I set up a yellow tent in the garden and spent the afternoon dizzily watching bees float around pepper-red dahlias. Once, mama took us to the circus and as the darkness swallowed us, I thought about all the ways there were to skin an animal, and all the ways there were to love one.

I often imagined Marie's lungs to be an orchestra. A devil-like, hard orchestra where the notes were scattered and cold, long and low, stretching, metal, blue. She gotten sick somewhere around Easter and spent the next two years between white sheets and floral wallpaper, eating pills and yolk. I bought her a pair of stockings for her seventeenth birthday and she tried suffocating herself with them. For her eighteenth, I let her pierce my right earlobe. I had read somewhere that you were supposed to hold a cold apple against the back of the ear, but Marie convinced me otherwise.

"You won't even feel it." She said. But she went slow, slower than I thought was necessarily, the hot needle like wax, and when we'd discovered we had lost the small diamond stud from mama's jewelry box, Marie insisted we leave the needle inside my ear so the hole wouldn't close.

The house burned down in late October. It was loud. And afterwards, the sky looked as if someone had painted it with orange gauze. Mama pressed me against her neck and I all I could think about was how oddly she smelled of onions while everything else was red and hot and swollen. Later in the investigation, men with big mouths would ask if I thought Marie was capable of starting the fire. I always said no even though I could feel the organs inside of me turn to black sugar.

Things were different after. Every time I was around Marie, I thought my teeth were going to fall out. One Saturday morning in particular, mama made us pull weeds from the

yard and Marie asked to see my scars. Hesitantly I showed her: she lingered her fingers on their moss brown spines for a while, before digging her nails into me with full force.

After the fire, mama made a lot of visits to jail. To see a father Marie and I had no recollection of. We were never really sure what he was in for, but Marie was convinced it had something to do with killing two women. I asked to go with mama once, mostly because the idea of being left alone with Marie kept frightening me, but a part me of was curious to meet a man I only heard so often about, who gave me honey eyes—no, syrup eyes, whose lips I wore on my face like velvet.

"You can't go," Mama had said, the kettle so loud I kept wincing, "Someone has to stay with Marie." She was getting better. It was slow, her skin the color of paprika now, her tongue a darker shade of white. After school, when mama was at work at the deli, I was in charge of filling the tub for Marie's bath. Afterwards, I would drain the water to find clumps of skin she'd shed, ripe, the color of rust. I was scared that eventually she'd be only bone and teeth. But I always found her, in lace garments, prompted on her elbows, chewing mangoes, watching some documentary on the television. Sometimes I'd linger in the doorway to watch her. Because she didn't know I was there and that felt powerful. And that felt good.

Somewhere in late December, we got a letter from our father. He was out and living in Kentucky, working at a gas station, taking classes at the community college. He asked for money. Mama laughed and threw the letter in the trash, but later that night I saw Marie, grease stains on her nightgown, hair mangled with different soaps and scents, a small mouth the color of birch, pressing her palms against the beige envelope.

The months to come were strange. I stopped biting my nails. Marie was healthy. She had gotten herself a boy: mama and I didn't like him because when we asked where they had met, he shrugged and helped himself to a cold beer from the fridge. The only things he had told us was the he was twenty-two and wanted to write war novels. I had started spending most of my days volunteering, I ran with a blind boy, him tightly gripping my upper elbow as we ran in sync. I would awaken with bruises, yellow-sawdust sprinkled against milk. Some of them would deepen into shades of magenta, I never said anything.

It was after one of our runs where I'd decided to half-strip in mama's garden. I liked sitting in between the tomatoes, buried between the red, the green, the earth.

"Where are you?" Marie shouted. But she saw me before I could answer, "Someone murdered pops."

It's a very strange thing, losing someone. The next few days were quiet. Mama cried and I brewed plum tea for everyone: neighbors and old friends wearing black, wearing lipstick, swallowing words, handing me plates of small caviar sandwiches, making our entire house smell of sage and paint fumes. Marie did not eat for three days. I did not know why we were grieving. But I was too tired to ask.

There were two bodies found. Both in a sea-weed colored swimming pool, both with their teeth missing. The other body, was said to be our father's girlfriend, a large woman with brass hair and no family.

Two weeks later, there was a knock on the door, they asked for Marie, I couldn't stop staring at the flies circling the fluorescent light bulb. I heard a high-belly pitched cry that had to have belonged to mama. Marie had hung herself in the upstairs attic, matches in her overalls, feathers by the window.

The flies did not stop circling the bulb that night, even when I had turned off the lights.