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Rachel Lyon

**Fruit
of the
Dead**



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A Snare for the Bloom-Like Girl

On the last day of camp the barn is hot and crowded. River Rock's final production, weeks in the prepping, is happening at last, and the casualties so far are minor. At the eleventh hour the old dog stuffy was misplaced, so the role of Toto is played by somebody's plush Pikachu. During the first scene change the butcher paper backdrop ripped clear through the tempera gray farmhouse. But the audience, made up of parents who haven't seen their kids in weeks, is generous. They crouch at the front, filming on their phones. They applaud spontaneously. They laugh. They aww.

Now, Soul Patch Adam strums a guitar accompaniment from the hayloft as eleven-year-old Glinda almost hits her high notes. *Come out, come out, wherever you are:* Cory's cue. Through the barn's side door she ushers a dozen seven- and eight-year-olds. They enter shyly, they enter hammily, some cowering, some twirling, each dressed in their own interpretation of Munchkin couture: stripes on stripes and polka dots on plaid, dandelions wilting behind dirty ears. Towels tied under chins for capes; underwear on heads, leg holes framing eyes like aviator goggles. A charmed murmuring percolates among the audience. First-Act Dorothy, a cushion-faced

redhead with a lateral lisp who does a spot-on Judy Garland, gargles her vowels, and the Munchkins join in, and though a couple of children do leave the stage altogether, opting to sing their parts from their parents' sweaty arms, everything is going fine, until—

A lull. Soul Patch Adam vamps. It is Spenser Picazo's turn to deliver his one line.

We thank you very sweetly, Cory whispers from the first row.

The audience behind her shifts and coughs.

For doing it so neatly, she says with an encouraging smile, but it is no use. River Rock's youngest camper has gone uncharacteristically mute. Below his painted-on mustache his mouth is small and quivering. Behind his silicone strap-on glasses, his eyes are very wide. He stares into the crowd with increasing panic, scanning the strangers' faces. Cory reaches for him, but it's too late, his small mouth crumples and a high-pitched whine escapes. Cory, crouching, guides him offstage. As she leads him out the barn door she hears Glinda's aristocratic trill: *Let the joyous news be spread: the wicked old witch at last is dead!* and Soul Patch Adam launches into "Ding Dong," and the audience claps along.

It is cooler outside than in the thermos of a barn. Ferns clustered by the clapboard buzz with cicadas or whatever, shivering in the blessed breeze. Beyond the trampled hill, punctuated here and there by abandoned sports equipment, clouds rest upon the farthest and bluest of the White Mountains. Cory kneels beside poor Spenser on the grass and rubs his back. He shudders violently.

It's okay, she says. Stage fright is the worst. But sometimes it's good to do what scares you.

He tugs the emergency-orange band of his glasses from his curly head and lets them fall down around his neck. Without

them his wet little eyes are naked and unmagnified. He looks less cartoonish and even more pathetic.

It's *not*—*stage fright*, he snuffles.

What, then?

I want my— His voice cracks, and with renewed despair, he says: I want my *mo-om*.

She's not here?

No. He wipes his nose, smudging his mustache halfway across his face.

Who's picking you up?

My *dad*, he grumbles. My little *sister*.

That's fun, isn't it?

He frowns at her and puts his glasses back on with a sound of disgust.

Won't you see your mom soon?

No.

After a moment, Cory recalls a minor drama. Late one evening, weeks ago—eons ago in camp time—she was in the Red House, half reading a months-old magazine, half listening to the other counselors play poker on the musty carpet, when a phone call jangled the landline. Soul Patch Adam was sent to fetch the boy from bed. A hush fell over the room when Spenser was brought in, bleary-eyed and puny, holding a stuffed animal rendered characterless by years of sweaty nights and laundering. The older counselors made halfhearted attempts to hide their beers as he was led into the kitchen, where the old communal laptop sat beside the Mr. Coffee and the dial-up modem, and they all listened to the blee-blee-bleep of a FaceTime call, holding their breath, afraid that something terrible had happened. And then, the voice of Spenser's mother, loving, exhausted, divine: *Hi, Spense! Hi, big boy! Do you want to meet your baby brother?* The poker game continued.

Oh, Cory says. Your mom's probably with the new baby, huh. Spenser shoves his face into her chest, bereft. It is too much for him.

Okay, she says, gently relocating him from breast to shoulder. Yeah, that's hard, isn't it.

He climbs into her lap to weep. From the barn a new song rises into the afternoon. *Follow the yellow brick road*, the children chant, and chant again. She rocks him in time to the beat—*Follow, follow, follow, follow*—humming along, the sad little seven-year-old perspiring in her arms, but no longer crying. Spenser, young as he is, has a reputation as a high-strung weirdo, given to nightmares, benign groping, and high-decibel freak-outs about minor slights and changes in plan, but she can't bring herself to roll her eyes about him as the other counselors do. They are callous in a way she has never known how to be. She feels for the boy, even or especially when he loses his shit. It's not his fault. He is too young for sleep-away camp. Too young to be away from his mom. And, honestly, Cory can sympathize. She, too, both wants and does not want to go home. To the hot city that smells of bus exhaust and baking trash. To the too-small uptown apartment she shares with her own mother, a verified bitch. Worst of all, to her unknowable future.

Working at River Rock was hardly Cory's ideal way to spend the summer after her senior year of high school. Had she gotten into her first- or second- or even third-choice college—had she gotten into even one of her so-called safety schools—she might soon be leaving the city for a college-sponsored bonding trip, five nights of camping in canyons under the Utah stars, say; community service in Flint, Michigan. Her mother might have rewarded her by letting her tag along with the coven of classmates currently gallivanting

around Europe on what looks on social like a wild and glamorous backpacking tour. They have eaten pot pastries in Amsterdam, they have clubbed in Berlin, they have sunned on a beach in Crete. They have taken selfies with waxed-chested European men signing *peace* with their feminine fingers, cigarettes hanging limply from unsmiling lips. Such trips would be a reach for her, socially and financially, at the best of times, but given that she lost her scholarship and landed herself on academic probation, given that she got into, count them, zero colleges, these times are literally the worst. Her mother, always unlikely to shell out for frivolous expenses, has limited ability and no interest in sponsoring *fun*.

I will find a way to pay for classes, she told Cory in May. I will find a way to pay for summer school. I will shell out for another round of SATs and APs. I will support you while you do an internship. I will even help you get an internship. You know I know people. You could fetch coffee, learn the ropes, at, I don't know, Condé Nast—or, hey, Google. What about Google? I could call Radha.

Oh my god, Mom.

Don't Oh-my-god-Mom me. Plenty of kids your age would die for an internship at Google.

You don't know shit about what kids my age would die for.

Fine, Cory. What would you die for. Tell me. I'm all ears.

For money. For a driver's license and a car. For a future like an open road; for freedom. For a life that tastes like that feeling she used to have nowhere but at summer camp, lying on the big flat rock at the top of the hill with her hand in the damp hand of a friend as the Perseids came unraveled from the sky, silver threads pulled quick from the infinite embroidery above them.

But a sustained feeling of awe at the glory of infinity is not among the benefits of the dull and unimaginative summer occupations her mother suggested. There was some discussion of taking

intro-level classes at NYU or CUNY, but one look at a course catalog brought on a paralysis of indecision. *What interests you?* her mother asked. *What do you want to do?* These were questions she could not answer. As far as she can tell she has no interests, no desires except to spend time outdoors, far away from home, to lose herself in the intricacies of a landscape, to bliss out under the ever-changing sun. So in the heady humid days of early June she watched the rest of her graduating class leave town to run their victory laps around the globe, and descended into a fog of sleep and phone and fighting with and avoiding fighting with her mother. For a month they lived together like anxious strangers, extending some semblance of détente as long as they both could, only to erupt with sudden rage into vigorous, nonsensical arguments.

It was after one of these that Cory called up her old summer camp director and begged for a job. Because she was a minor and had no experience, and because it was mere weeks before Junior Camp was to commence, they stuck her with the little ones, the sevens, eights, and nines. Here she has spent the bulk of the summer in a kind of apprenticeship to Vermont Jen, tight of lip and plentiful of body hair, who's been a counselor at River Rock since at least the nineties, playing diplomat, comforting the bullied, tending to cuts, bruises, and bites, laundering pee-soaked sheets, cleaning vomit from the crevices between floorboards, and getting increasingly sunburned, lonely, and discouraged.

Applause from the barn. The sounds of conversation and metal folding chairs creaking and scraping on the wood floor: intermission. She is still singing quietly to the child in her lap. He is totally relaxed, as if hypnotized by the minor key, the cyclical tune

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that has somehow segued out of her sing-along. It is a slow and simple song her mother used to sing, Medieval in melody, Gothic in content. She has not heard it in at least a decade, but it is coming back to her now, phrase by mysterious phrase, through the years and miles. She is not sure of every word—some information has been damaged in recovery—but for the most part it seems to have been securely encoded:

*Good my mother, whence are you
of folk born long ago?*

*Why are you gone away from all
you ever seemed to know?*

*For while you linger here among
the olive trees, old maid,
the women here would welcome you
in halls of stone and shade.*

As the campers' parents make their way outside to stretch their legs, Cory lowers her voice, self-conscious, and lets the words of the song become a hum. At the top of the hill, a figure stands apart. He is tall and broad, big-bellied but elegant, dressed in white and beige, and rippling subtly in the heat, as if appearing to her through liquid. He is watching her. How long has he been watching her? Her humming fades.

After a moment her view of him is blocked and she feels a hand on her shoulder.

Want me to take him to his dad? Soul Patch Adam juts his decorated chin at the boy in her lap, glancing not unnoticeably at her tits.

Oh, she says, pulling up her shirt. Sure, yeah.