

"What's out the window?" demanded the little girl in red as she clambered atop a pile of books to spy through the glass. As she wiped away the film of muddled dew that blurred the world elsewhere, her mother's voice from the other room replied softly: "Nothing that concerns you, my dear. Now step off those books and read them, read them like the good little girl I know you are." And so, obediently, as she always did, the little girl stepped away from the window, off the books, and put them back carefully on the dusty wooden shelf on the wall. And, as always, she chose the blue leather-bound novel to take to her favorite corner with her.

It smelled of almonds and used pages, not of must like the other volumes, which had rarely left the shelf. This one has been well used, the leather dull, the pages folded, dangling from their binds. But the contents of the blue tome never grew old, not for the little girl in red, who loved reading the adventures of a little girl like her, adventures outside the world she knew and bored of: the one bound by windows.

The girl in the story appears to the same soul as the girl in red in almost every possible criterion. They both had brown hair, amber eyes, pale skin (almost gray due to the lack of light), unsightly limbs. The girl in the story must have had red spots on her skin, a dark red, jagged circle on her chest, which her mother said were "beautiful birthmarks for a beautiful little girl." Of course, this was not written anywhere in the story, the story rather pertaining to a journey through seas of monsters, castles, thieves, dragons, all to save a princess in a tower. But the girl in red knew that if she believed it, she would see it in her mind when she closed her eyes, and that would have to be enough.

There was only one difference between them, the girl in red and that girl in the story, and it was that the girl in the story had a name. Her name was Mary, simply, and the girl in red thought the name was pretty. It floated into the air like the chiming of the bells the girl in red heard during the holiday season, coming from outside the walls, from a source she would never know. Mary ran away from dangers, Mary fought against evil, Mary won and Mary had friends to help her. And the girl in red could do all this in her head, looking through the pages of the book into another world as she longed to do with the window. But for all the girl's imagination, she couldn't come up with a name for herself.

She once asked her mother why she didn't have a name, why all the mothers in the world were called "mom". The answer was like all the others: cold, reassuring, veiled by something light, like the thin layer of white dust that the girl in red found on the window during the season when the temperatures became cold and the fireplace was always lit. Her mother had murmured: "My darling, what use are names when we both know each other so well, when there are only two of us? What's the point when you know exactly who the other means, who the other is?" And the girl didn't say anything more, because mom knew better, because mom went to the other side of the windows regularly, and came back with everything they needed to live in their house.

When the girl in red asked to go with her, her mother always scolded her: "Honey, you know there's nothing out there for you." But if that was the case, why did Mom leave every week? Why wasn't everything they needed already there? But of course, the girl in red couldn't disrespect mom like that. She would learn when she was older, of course. If she was a good girl, mom would definitely come back. The girl in red needn't worry, after all, there was nothing for mom in the world outside the windows. All they had was each other.

Time passed in the house, even though the girl in red had no idea how much. She just

that, from time to time, the window would shine as if the sky were made of honey and the pink “cotton candy” her mother had brought home. It was according to these glowing episodes that mom would choose to sleep or wake, but sleep hardly interested the girl in red. She, instead, spent her time the same way, with little variation: reading and imagining, and dreaming. There was a time when she marked each glimmer of the golden window with a line in a notebook, but eventually there were too many to count and too many molten skies forgotten, and the count was abandoned.

But the young girl had noticed that it was after fourteen of these “molten skies” that she called “golden windows”, no more, no less, that her mother was left for “what they needed”. Groceries, she called them. And each time, she came back through the doors a little more nervous, a little more wobbly, with a few more gray hairs and wrinkles than before. But the girl, seeing herself in Mom's mirror, in the shiny pots and pans of the kitchen, looked the same as she had always, with the same amber eyes, the same brown hair and wiry arms. She began to wonder if she would ever be old enough to accompany her mother outside.

For the girl in red, the only other indication of the passage of time was that the numbers The expiration dates for Mom's “groceries” kept growing: 1975, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, all the way to 2020. And, one day, it was while looking at a box of granola bars, “best before 01/17/21”, that she realized that mom wouldn't come home.

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It had been so simple: she was gone, quickly saying goodbye to the girl in red, giving her a peck on the cheek, fixing her coat, and rushing out the door, as she always did. Only this time she didn't stumble back through the door with groceries. She never took more than one golden window to leave and return, and now seven were gone and the girl was starving.

From necessity, she prepared her first meal in front of the eighth bright window. She chose her clothes for the first time on the ninth and washed them on the tenth. And then on the twelfth, the dishes were washed. On the thirteenth, she swept the floor, on the fourteenth, she dusted the shelves. On the fifteenth she cleared the corners of the rooms of cobwebs and on the sixteenth she got rid of spiders. On the seventeenth, she was bored and, finally, on the eighteenth, she decided to go through her mom's things.

The girl in red rarely came into Mom's room, and when she did, it was because she was invited, because she had been good and Mom wanted to compliment her, stroke her cheek and tell her what a good girl she had been. Once, she was even given a gift, after she was so kind to Mom when she fell ill. It was Mary's book, the adventures, her favorite novel. Her only gift from mom.

It was during this eighteenth sunrise, or perhaps sunset, that the young girl in red discovered what exactly a sunrise and sunset were. It was on this eighteenth day, when looking through the old photos of her mother, a younger, warmer version of her, that the girl learned the outside world was not only the invention of the leather-bound blue book world. That was what was through the window, and the only thing separating it was a few inches of wood and glass. And that, ultimately, her only chances of survival lay there.

Her mother also wrote, she wrote notebooks full of poems, all addressed to her, her little

girl in red, her little darling. How she loved her, how she wanted to keep her close to her. But the girl in red had always been there, by her side. And now her mother was gone. Now it was the girl in red who wanted to keep mommy close. However, mom was no longer there to take care of her. Maybe she had grown up after all. Maybe the mirrors were lying.

The swerving and looping calligraphy of the manuscripts was familiar to her, and the young girl in red placed it immediately, in that blue book she adored. Knowing that Mom had written to her about Mary's adventures inspired her. Maybe Mom was trapped, like the princess. Maybe Mom needed her. The girl in red was definitely old enough to act.

On the ninth sunrise, yes, sunrise, because the girl in red saw clearly the sun emerging, from her place, atop a pile of books, looking out the window for the first time, she learned that the sky was blue, that the ground could be green and the things towering over them were "trees" and "buildings", that there were other people outside like her and her mother. She saw everything, from what she knew to be her "apartment". It was above a "park" and girls, little girls like her and Mary, were playing games with stones and squares of chalk on the ground. And grown women like her mother walked, alone, with their friends, their family, with animals she had only heard about in stories.

It was at the twenty-first light of the window, at the tenth sunrise, that the young girl in red opened the door as she had always seen her mother do, watched the others walk down the "stairwell", copied what they were doing, holding on to the railing, and walked through the doors of the apartment complex, to the world outside.

It was beautiful: the girl in red was breathing air, fresh, crisp, wonderful air. She felt the breeze on her skin and she ran for the first time, stumbling through the hills of the park and falling to her knees, smelling grass for the first time as she laughed. The headache the colors and sounds gave her was delicious. But really she wanted nothing more than to make a friend to help her find Mom. Mary had friends who helped her in her quests. But, as far as the girl in red could recall, her only friends were Mary and her mother. However, Mary was only imaginary, and her mother had disappeared and left her life. She would search until she had new friends and her old best friend, Mom, back by her side. She would become her own Mary.

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It was the fiftieth day that the girl in red realized that she was utterly alone. She spoke to people, to little girls like her, to boys, to teenagers, to adults, to elderly people, to teachers, to police officers, she even went straight into the mayor's office. She went to every store that sold the brands of products that Mom carried at home. But there was neither acknowledgment of receipt nor response. No one could see or hear her. She learned everything about life, but was unable to live in society, or find the slightest trace of her mother.

Finally, it was on this clear and windy night, where the stars freckled the canvas of the dark night that the girl entered a cemetery. "What could it be?" the girl in red wondered. She saw numbers on the headstones: a date, a dash, another date. Like dates on food, she thought. She hadn't realized that people had expiration dates. Could humans rot? Was this what happened to Mom when she left? And where did they go?

Many names were engraved on the tombstones. Sometimes the stones were in groups,

sometimes alone. Sometimes they carried flowers, sometimes the stone was chipped and moldy. But one of them caught the girl's eye. It read "Mary Khalid", and next to it there was a hole: a big, gaping, dark abyss. Above, suspended using metal bars, was a decorated wooden box, a bit taller than, say, her mother's height, surrounded by people. There were not many of them, and some were crying. There were sniffles, they held each other, they said, choked and anguished: "I would have liked to reach out when she was all alone, I should've been a little louder, she was looking so close to us and we didn't even realize it." They dropped flowers as the wooden crate descended, white roses. An older woman whispered, "Bless her soul, now she can be with her daughter again, she is in a better place now, with her little Mary." Two men in suits brought out the tombstone, on which was written "Anne Khalid, beloved mother."

Perplexed, determined to go to the "library" to find out what this ceremony was all about exactly, the girl in red took the path towards the lights of the city center. She hoped that libraries often stayed open after dark.

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She found her answer there. Death, that's what had happened, and what she had attended was a funeral. She kept reading about how humans could die: heart attacks, strokes, old age, bleeding out.

She took her hand and gingerly placed it on the place where her wrist met her palm.

She waited.

One heartbeat.

How long was a heartbeat?

She felt no heartbeat.

She felt no pulse.

The girl in red did not feel a thing.

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It was at sunrise that the girl in red realized that the red splashes on her body were not just her complexion, and that the birthmark on her chest was not quite a stain of birth.

Oh my God, those weren't birthmarks. The girl in red collapsed crying for the first time. Or was it the first time? My God, she was too young, she was very small. What was she before nine years old? Too young. And very, very small.

She fit perfectly in the arms of her mother as she embraced her in a cold, cold embrace: "Shh, shh, Mary, my darling. Everything is fine, mom is here. I told you there was nothing for you here, my darling, not in all this violence. I told you there was nothing for you outside the window. But we are bound by curiosity no more, now we are bound by death, now we are together."

No one saw mother and daughter embrace for the first time in decades at the dawn of a world outside of windows, too terrible for Anne and Mary Khalid.