

Ultimately it was the scratching that woke Gillian up. Long, deep gouges, like somebody was carving their name into a tree.

She had been rising for a long while from dark black to indigo, eventually floating to the light blue of half-awake. It was several minutes before she even began to register the noises from outside. It always took her a little bit to shake off her dream.

It had been a real nice dream. Something about a bird, a bird she could only hear. An old Carolina pigeon. It had a low, mournful call.

Like easing out of a pool, the dream-noise had faded into rustling and then chuffing. It was the chuffing, the frantic animal breathing that began to really stir her. Her eyelids twitched.

But the scratching made her jump awake. It was more forceful now. *Oh, shit.* Yes, somebody was carving on wood outside of her window.

The stripe of light from the window dappled as something moved in front of it. She held perfectly still as the agonizing *krrrrr, krrrrich*, stopped. Then, gingerly, she turned her body over to face the source of the noise.

The window was cleverly hidden in the side of the mountain. If she did nothing to draw attention to herself—

And then from outside came sobbing. Gillian let out a breath. It was a wet, ugly noise. Then she heard pounding, hard like a hammer, and the sob cracked into a wail.

“—the fuck up,” said a voice. *A voice.*

Gillian moved with supreme care. The confirmation that these visitors were, in fact, other human beings finally pushed her to stand up. She’d been almost sure she was the last one. Almost sure.

*The window.* She imagined herself as a ninja stalking across the room. There was a sluggish difficulty in remembering where she had discarded everything the previous day. The art of organization remained, as always, elusive. It seemed there was nothing for it.

It was so close, but she side-stepped the bag of paint tubes, danced around the useless seed packets. Deft, heroic, she maneuvered the landmine of the open first aid box. It was a sure thing when, unthinking, she kicked a coat.

It rustled like a cat. Her heart exploded in her chest. Holy God.

Paralyzed, her breath held itself. One moment ticked by, agonizing, then the next. When nothing continued but the sound outside, which she resolutely ignored, it escaped the corner of her mouth.

The window at last. Her knees fizzed uncertainly, but bent. She drew the makeshift curtain – carefully now! – and darkness swallowed the room.

Her body unfolded, the tension flooding from her all at once. There would be no way to see the window from the outside like this. Yes, the unknowns would take their business down the road and she would never see them. So they would never realize how close they were to

her home. How close they were to *her*. And— how close she was to them in return. Just how close they were to *each other*. How each other implied multiple, implied more than one.

Numbers bouncing around and hitting each other inside her skull, she went back to sleep.

The next morning was slow. Gillian usually woke to the gray light from the window, but of course there was no light today. She floundered awake in total darkness. The stumble to the window was much less graceful this time.

Thank God, there was no sign of any person outside. It was almost as if nothing had happened.

She noticed a tree by her window was missing. It was as dead as the rest of them, but big and old. They'd taken everything but the wormy stump.

That made her hum. Maybe she could draw it. It was a good image. And today was nice, the clouds seemed less thick today than yesterday, the frost patterns on the window especially intricate.

It was as beautiful as any day, and she already had breakfast, and even had a rare cup of water left to enjoy with it. The utter perfection of the moment struck her, as it often did.

She'd left the cockroaches alive in a little jar. Sometimes she hoped they would breed in the night and she would have a little extra protein the next day. Of course, it never happened.

Breakfast was only as difficult as pulling forward the two-legged table and pushing aside the shotgun on her bed to sit. The bugs squirmed as she grabbed them, but the bodies stiffened and relaxed as she wrenched the heads off with satisfaction.

She salted them a little before crunching down. Good eatin', as her ma would say.

*More water, today*, she mused, swirling around the fluid left in the tin cup. She would want a bit of kindling, too, to burn into charcoal. *And some red clay*. She had just started a new painting that needed it. It was a whirlwind of old flowers, extinct ones. Her personal favorite was chrysanthemum, because of the kid's book.

She almost tripped over a box of toilet paper, but caught herself. She kicked it for good measure. *Fucker*.

Across the room lay her book of blank paper. It was one of her most ultimate victories. All her supplies were hard-won, of course, nothing came easy in life, but real paper was one of the *true* luxuries.

Gillian had learned to make her own, mashing up cardboard cereal boxes and paper towels and binding it with industrial wire. It was a slow birth, and she had labored for many years. And at the end of it, gloriously, finally, she had the document that would hold everything she had seen.

For posterity, she copied the things she witnessed down as quickly as she could, right in the moment. Then she would take them home and paint them as best as she could. She was not a skilled painter, but that had never even crossed her mind. Finding all the tubes of paint and solvent had also been the work of many years. Everything had been.

The final bag check was performed to satisfaction, and she clipped her knife on her belt.

Then she began to wrap herself, painstakingly, ensuring not one piece of skin touched air. First, the thin cotton underlayer. Then a long sleeve shirt. Then the ragged canvas jacket and knit scarves, gloves, wrapping her ankles above the boots.

Finally was the glorious coat. She'd pilfered it from some model's closet she'd found in her twenties. Thick fur lined the collar and sleeves, stained from the years but warm, so warm.

With the requisite ceremony, she unwrapped her final piece of armor so she could equip. She was very gentle. It was the most valuable item on Planet Earth.

Of course, she had to take a moment to turn it over in her hands, admiring her treasure as she had so many times before. It was a Kodak Brownie 127. Probably even older than Gillian, although the thought was hysterical.

She had come across it, pristine and waiting, in the basement of a two-story house. She still vividly remembered the rotten feeling of walking down the stairs. By then it had been more than three decades since she'd seen anybody. Even so, she called out as she made her way down.

"Hello? Anyone?" The complete darkness of the space frightened her, until she realized its purpose. Then it delighted her beyond measure.

It had been the home of an old man. He had used his basement as a darkroom to develop photography. Real photography! As far as she could tell, he had opened the manuals explaining everything, and placed the camera on the table. He set out the bottles of developer and rolls of film, made sure it all was just so, and simply sat and starved on the spot.

Perhaps *he* had been an artist. Gillian had longed for many years to meet an artist.

It was hilarious to her that she worked so hard for so long to be able to create paper, to write down and illustrate the beauties of the world around her, only to stumble onto the camera so easily. A perfect, functioning old camera, just laid out like a gift. The film cans, the instructions. She hadn't had to work for it at all.

Even after all this time, she had taken very few photos with it. There weren't so many rolls of film, so she saved them. It felt proper to turn to the Kodak only in moments of such wonder that it overtook her completely, so much so that she couldn't even move her hand to draw.

But the watery images she had developed were sacred, yes, even more sacred than her shaky paintings or the stacks of charcoals. They were sacred because they were unmarred by her view. They were exactly how things had been, not just how she had seen them.

She brought it with her today. She always did. "Gillian," she said to herself, stuffing the camera box in her pack. "You're a first-class genius."

The journey to the water source was hard and rocky, and Gillian was panting by the time she got there. She decided to give in and take the road back. Even though it was in obvious view, it was just so much *flatter*. And her knees were like two pools of tension. And her *back*.

It was still slow going. Her eyes were trained on the treeline around her. She tried to imagine she was a dog, her ears perked, observant.

She heard no one and saw no one, until she saw the woman. They had placed her on a cross in the center of the road. There was no way to *not* see her.

Gillian approached from behind, but she could see the woman's fingers were already blackening with frostbite, the circulation cut off by the nails driven through her wrists. They had lashed together a crucifix from the now-missing tree by her window. Gillian had thought it was weak timber, but it had obviously held as she walked around to face the woman.

The woman was naked, trembling hard. She had been gutted, and her intestines steamed in the frosty air. Gillian was disappointed to see how young she was.

The woman couldn't see her, so Gillian cleared her throat to announce herself and sighed. She found herself sighing often these days. She checked around her. The bare, dead trees offered no feasible shelter to anybody who could be hiding. She supposed the coast was clear enough.

She found a rock to step on and elevated herself so she could be head level with the poor thing. The woman was almost lowing, like a cow would, shaking all over, stiff.

Gillian reached forward, gently scratched a few flakes of dried blood from the woman's lips. She rubbed the pad of her thumb over her lips. The feeling of another person's skin on hers was strange. Surely it wasn't always this cold.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. She hoped the woman wouldn't try to say anything. When her jaw lolled open, Gillian saw that she could not.

Clucking her tongue, she ran a hand through the woman's hair. "I'm sorry, sweet girl." Those were the most recent words she'd heard from another person. Her own mother. Gillian had kept them tucked inside of herself for comfort. It felt appropriate to pass them on.

"A-ba," the woman said. "A-ba-ba, buh— buh, buhhhh."

Gillian fumbled for a moment at her belt, reaching for the canteen. She knew there was no point to it, but she couldn't stop herself from talking to the woman. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, pouring a small trickle of her new water down into the woman's mouth, where it flowed over the oozing stump of her tongue. The woman choked a little. Gillian soothed her. "It's alright. It's alright, honey. It's alright."

"Hnn," the woman strained, the blood dripping faster from her wrists as she worked them against the nails. "Hnngh."

"I know, baby, I know." Gillian sighed, deeper still. "Oh, you're just a little girl." The woman could have been her own daughter. She let her fingers wrap around the hilt of her knife.

She ran her other hand across the woman's hair and face, twining strands around her fingers, noting the sense-memory of the woman's cheekbones. There was a spot right in the temple where the bone was almost eggshell thin. It would just take one push. And it did.

She let the woman's head hang down into her palm and rubbed her cheek, gently, humming under her breath. "I'll come back and bury you tomorrow," she promised the woman, the child, really. "But I'm old, and I get tired."

Then she stepped off the rock and backwards, surveying it all one more time before she pulled out her book. Her own hand shaking slightly, she started to record what she had seen.

She added the woman into the field of flowers. This was something she did often to the corpses she found. Then she would tack them up on the walls like banners, like they were portraits of friends. She never had money, before everything, but now she sometimes felt like Cleopatra, surrounded by tapestries and riches.

Of course, the woman had not been a corpse. The woman had been alive. That was the strangest thing. It was evidence, perhaps, that Gillian was not the sole inheritor left to the privilege of life. Evidence that Gillian was still a member of the species. How odd. It was like realizing she could walk on water. But of course, there was nothing for it now. No, there was nothing for it.

The woman in the painting smiled at her. Gillian added a bright yellow sun, so she would be warm. She had been shaking so much.

The next day, Gillian made sure to thoroughly check that the rest of the strangers had gone. It wouldn't do to be caught burying the woman. No, it would *not* do.

She dug a grave within the treeline. The ground was frozen nearly solid, and Gillian had to pick at it and war with it and yank at it before it finally surrendered itself in cold clumps. Sweating, she stared at the pit she had created. It didn't seem so bad to her.

It took some work, but she managed to wrench out the nails. The woman collapsed forward into her arms. Gillian clucked her tongue when the blood stained her coat, but there was nothing for it. She left the cross there in the road. She could break it down for firewood later, maybe, or carve something.

Dragging the woman off the road and across the dirt was undignified. Her head bumped upwards at every rock, like she was suddenly jolting awake, surprised by something.

When Gillian reached the edge of the grave, she knelt and gathered the woman into her arms. She had to brush the woman's hair back from her ruined face so she could kiss her forehead, rock there for a moment. The woman was very small. "I wish I had some coins for your eyes," she told her.

She buried the woman who could have been her daughter under one of her best blankets, to be sure she would stay warm. She was disappointed that the clods of earth were still frozen. It made it difficult, making sure not one piece of skin touched the air, but she did it. When she stood back to survey, the quietness of the moment struck her, as it often did.

She felt she should say something. Something nice. Something like her ma would say. "Well," she said, hesitant. "It was nice meeting you."

Gillian stood back from the grave. There was no marker, but she knew she'd find it again easily. And there was nobody else who would come for the girl. It would be nice if there was just some bird singing or something. Anything to break the quiet.

She reached into her bag and pulled out the Brownie. Aiming it precisely, so the grave and the dead trees behind it were in frame, she took a picture.