

The house upon Blackridge Hill looked upon a man, barrel chested and heaving, chopping wood for the winter.

Splinters were scattered like snow as the axe rose and plunged downwards again. The snow would come quietly as it always did and always would, the dark pungent clouds would swell over withered trees, lame puppets spread and held the dead.

From the window watched Abraham-May, so named because her father was sure that his first wife had borne him two sons- but that was true now. As she watched him swing the axe far above his head, she heard the faint cries of her younger brother, Oliver. This would be his first winter, his first season, hardened by northern winds and walking upon white that ripped into weak skin much like the dogs under the church tore into each other.

It would be another two years before Abby-May could help Oliver in the ways that he needed but he would be in her place, watching as her father chopped wood for the winter. Or maybe he'd be in school because God would will these winters away from the town as the church men promised.

The axe was beaten against the stump; her father lurched forward and screamed. His mouth hung open, and he fell to his knees, as he did in church on the cold ground.

But why wouldn't he be this way? Her gaze fell away from the window to the door behind. So fresh, the wood yet to settle and if Abi-May ran her hand along its edge, she would pull away pale, painted palms, but she was hesitant to approach. She could feel the heat, the feverish breath drew over her spine as the clouds above the house darkened.

Winter was coming and her mother was sick.

In school that afternoon, she hid her pain behind clenched teeth as Claire- May's comb caught a turgid brown mass of her hair. Claire apologised and her dark eyes were sincere to both her and to Henry Castor, their teacher, a younger man with sunken eyes. Though he wasn't watching, he wasn't suited to, instead his unending brow was tightened, the knot in the

middle of his neck plucked as he drew a dull silver blade across a block of wood. He had already created the first legs of the town's scared symbol and was fervently working to complete his splintering piece.

Claire continued the brushing with haste; this was the last time they would see each other before spring. She had only met Claire two springs ago. They were both tumbling through the bluegrass that grew under the school steps. Claire had dug tiny fingers into her shoulder and wrestled her to the ground, but Abi-May was quick to respond. Two blows from tiny feet sent Claire on to her back and Abi-May running.

Barking with laughter, they had darted between the wooden support beams until one of the men of the village had to remove them. Their old teacher was more forgiving, but he had ascended to sainthood last winter. That day he had guided them inside and hurriedly cleaned their feet and hair. Henry Castor would have given them both ten lashes each.

It was not as if her mother was lacking in her duties. Abi-May just preferred Claire's gentle pale fingers to her mother's claws. It was another year before they would find husband.

Whispers affirming and soft left Claire-May as she worked. Though it was not proper for the girls' hair is to be down in the classroom, lessons had been over long ago. They had written. They had prayed. Abi-May's knuckles still pulsed. She had passed a note to a girl, Louise- June, a younger girl with short, fiery hair. Henry Castor had slapped her hands into the table.

Now they waited for their mothers to pick them up.

By next time they saw each, Abi-May looked forward to towering over Claire-May, because she was born at the start of May, Claire had to taken to height much easier then Abi-May and her brother. Then the unfortunate thought scraped the back of her head- Claire-May would grow as well. They would both grow into their womanhood and by next spring they would meet their husbands.

She frowned at the thought. Abi-May usually found these hours most welcoming. Claire would brush her hair and she would tease together and braid Claire's neatly pulled blonde locks. It was their secret, but she couldn't spend her last day in this room, staring at her friend- the only other girl her exact age.

She hoped they would continue this when they both had husbands and families. The girls in the class above them had already been taken to houses and Abi-May haven't seen them since.

Claire faltered just as the teeth of her brush dug into a stubborn clump at the base of Abi-May's neck, though her quick relief was lost when she followed Claire's gaze.

Henry shifted up, saluting as a group of men dragged dogs through the town. Two men per dog, the beasts pulled on ropes, matted and slovenly, big enough that that they could have been the kin of the hunting dogs the settlers first brought to the forest.

Those dogs had betrayed their masters, had become untamed in the forest, destroying all deer and rabbits then moving on the settlers' livestock. So hungry. The forest used to be pregnant with them, but now the men had been correcting that issue.

The men were constant to the dogs' struggling and thus they were dragged to the centre of town.

The black spire of the burned wood church was seen clearly from the school as it was from all buildings. God had saved it and cast its shadow boldly over the village. When Abi-May descended into God's house, she would sometimes hear the crackling of the fire, though her mother's firm grip on her wrist reminded her not to speak of it. She could only pray it would still stand by the end of the service.

She didn't like the church. The very thought burned her head because it wasn't true. She liked the stained-glass windows, the proud men that first stepped foot upon the land and their woman who not long after, ascended to saint-hood.

What she didn't like was the noises below the church, when the dogs would fight and cry. The service would hold her father's head, but she knew her brother Ethan heard them as well. But they were good, they stayed still. The devil feeds off excitement.

Amongst the men that fought the dogs, she hoped to not find her father. Without her mother, her hair wasn't fair and she didn't want what the others thought of his unkempt daughter, to affect him even more.

But if her father was there, dragging the dogs into the church? Abi-May twirled her hair, catching her tangles between her small fingers. Her mother must be most sick.

Another girl, tidy Rebecca- February, walked proper to her mother who waited fairly outside the class. Claire hesitated. Her mother would come next. She closed her arms around Abi-May who lost herself in sweet smell of Claire's new clothes, the calming scent of the river and its crisp water not like the clothes of her father, old and wood brown with worn scratchy edges.

Rebecca- February's mother like all mothers, was short, long armed and yellowed eyed. She was a dull and large wearing a faded red and grey dress, so oversized that a protective crust of mud had built around the rim, fully concealing her feet. Her eyes as Henry's, were on the dogs being dragged through town. One reared its head, the ropes snapping and flung itself at the nearest man.

At once, the surrounding men rushed to his aid. The dog was pinned, writhing as the men tightened bonds around the beast. Its head twisted violently, launching poisonous flicks of yellow foam onto the men and the dirt.

Sympathy was not to be felt for the animal though, Abi grimaced as one man pulled the dog's leg backwards. The dogs were to be used at church for a better purpose. The

preacher told them all that all lesser beasts were not created in God's image. They were his creation corrupted by black magic.

The church closed and the dogs accepted inside, although one was dragged by its hind up the stairs.

Claire-May's fingers caught the edge of her elbows and the mother of Rebecca-February raked white lines down her forearm in a practiced move that Abi-May recognized. Her mother would dig her nails into her own skin. The last time her mother did that, Abi-May had been helping her skin a rabbit.

Her father didn't like it when her mother brought food to the house, but he allowed a good meeting inside, as long as her mother pulled all the fur off of it outside of the house. Her nails already covered in the rabbit's blood when suddenly she stilled. Before she had left that morning Abi-May had heard her mother vomit and as she stood unsteadily, Abi-May readied to fetch the damp cloth from the clothesline they had hung together. Her mother's chest convulsed, and a long string of spit escaped her lips. Her mother drew across her arms, the red from the rabbit through deep red lines across her forearms, as she scratched feverishly.

Abi-May rushed inside, finding her father slumped over his desk. He smelled like the machines at their church. The ones that pumped liquid into the preacher's cup and between the men, the foul black liquid was passed between them.

The liquid never smelled like anything but the machines that birthed them would create an ache in her nose if she stood too close. It would stay with her even long after she and her family returned from church. For the rest of the day, a cloud of rotting leaves and wet shoes would swim through her senses.

Abi-May had shaken her father. He didn't need to ask what was wrong. He had pushed past her and run outside. Abi-May watched as he gathered up what her mother had torn from her arms. He avoided her gaze, saying her mother was sick.

Abi-May could only hope that Claire-May's mother wouldn't get sick as well.

That night her father left house, other men flanked him. Under his arm, her father held blood-stained butcher wrapping like a new-born. Abi-May and Ethan stared from the window though their father was shadowed closely. He was not heading for the forest; worse, he turned for the village.

There was no conversation between Abi-May and Ethan as they watched the first trails of snow drift into their garden.

It was her second winter, yet she wasn't sure she liked the snow. The preacher compared the snow to the women, beautiful, fragile and quickly melting. He had said so when he visited the school. Ethan was lucky that he didn't have to go to school. Boys didn't have to learn. They could join the men in prayer and hunting. Ethan could come home with the scent of the forest following him. When he would pass her his clothes, muddy and torn, she would squirm with jealousy.

Her brother's breath allowed for a white sheet to form on the window. With father gone, he drew. An angry face glared back at Abi-May and Ethan grinned, creating a wiggling tongue.

The man looked most like the preacher, a wrinkly twisting face, his tongue worming between a strip of knobby teeth and sharp wrinkled eyes.

The window was nearly broken, dendrite cracks spread under a sallow palm. Light hair tumbled over Abi-May, a feverish breath licked the nape of her neck. Her mother growled, her breathe rattled inside her chest in much the same way the church bell swung.

The steps of her mother were howls amongst the hall and by the time Abi-May was brave enough to look to her twin, her mother was retreating down the stairs.

Ethan's eyes were wide, a fresh sweat colouring him from the shadows of their unlit house. Abi-May knew she must have looked much the same.

Again and again, nails were dug into the side of the cradle. Her mother pushed the bar trying to release her baby Oliver from his cradle. In the shadows he moved and whimpered but did not cry. Abi-May did not approach her mother. It was Ethan who crept down the stairs. With ease, he parted the bars, gathering Oliver into his arms.

Her mother moved then as a ghost, through sitting room and the kitchen. Abi-May felt the cold breeze of the night before she tasted the chill on her tongue. Ethan was following but Abi-May hung back.

Quietly her mother stood in the doorway, a white dress soiled from her sickness, the wind found her tangled hair, the dress clung to her ribs, her hips where the pieces of her had fallen away, a sharp line of bone was all that remained.

"It's time. Your father thinks we are sick," she growled, her neck tightening, the words rising from her like smoke from her cracked lips, "We are not."

"They brought in dogs from the forest." The words escaped uncarefully, Abi-May risked looking into her mother's eyes, "Father left with your parts."

Her mother didn't respond. Instead, she extended her hand to her children. One whole and pale to Ethan and Oliver, the other, the bone bright through the torn, blackened flesh to Abi-May.

*Come.* Abi-May shivered as the word rang through her ears.

"But... we can't again." Ethan said slowly.

Last spring her mother had tried the same, though her body was whole, Abi-May and Ethan had been awoken by the warm spring air and their mother guiding them to the open

back door. The flowers had been in bloom, in the trees were full of whispers and flutters, the forest welcoming.

She had stood, as she did now, neck strained skyward eyes half closed.

The sky was clear, dark blue and endless over the trees, the animal cries rang out for them and through the door that her mother had left open.

Their father had stopped it, with a heavy hand to all of them especially to her mother. He dragged her screaming back into their home. She had dug her nails into the threshold, ragged grooves like blackberry vines. The door had been locked after that and Abi-May had to sand down the marks scratched into the kitchen floor.

The door was wide open now. They had all seen what the men dragged out of the forest; they'd have a new mother by sunrise.

"The forest is where we are supposed to be." Her mother insisted.

Abi-May pulled her hand back to herself. She did not want to be met with the hot palm of her father. Her mother's hand reached, broken and bloody, when Abi-May stepped back, she was followed. Her mother's teeth reached for her and fastened around her neck.

Hot iron filled her mouth as Abi-May was held like a puppet, sharp iron nails digging through the skin of her scruff, she was dragged through the kitchen. Her throat gave way before her mother struggled outside.

Black quickly soaked through the remains of the ruined dress as did the remaining skin around their mother's jaw. She looked back to her sons, her eldest, his mouth torn open in a quiet scream. He ran back into the house, and she followed.

Her shoulder was ripped off by the sharp turn, caught by the kitchen door frame and her wrists broke when she fell onto the stairs. A wet trail followed her onto the second floor to the door her sons hid behind.

The forest waited.

The forest called.

Her bones created claws, the flakes of white paint fluttered as she dug into the new wood. The hinges buckled and the door fell, her intestines were caught by the splintered remains of the wood, the remains of her dress keeping them from pouring out.

The room was empty, but her youngest son whimpers called to her from the closet door. She was caught by the light of the window, deep bright squares trapping her in place. The forest stared at her, the home they needed to go back to. She stumbled as her body that wasn't hers, tightened. It boiled her very bones, stirred her muscles, her blood black as any river, any night sky, cold and yawning.

But she saw someone else from the window.

Abi-May's throat was torn, she couldn't cry, she couldn't call for her father. Why would she want him when she knew what he would do.

The axe caught her eyes. She tried to swallow, the warmth invading her mouth as it overwhelmed her tongue and teeth.

Writhing, clawing at the ground, she couldn't stand. Instead, she crawled, her head hung forward. Her fingers hooked around the snow-covered grass, and she pulled. Her hands dug into splinters, and she reached for the long wooden handle.

She choked, each pull of her muscle, the axe loosened as she retched. It was too heavy, the metal hissed against the dead ground. When Abi-May looked to the house, the yellow eyes of her mother were already upon her. She reached desperately for the weapon.

The axe found its home in the heated flesh of the creature. Blood erupted from between the neck and shoulder of her mother, the last of her pale skin bubbled and sloughed. Twisting bones grabbed the head of the axe and pulled it out of place.

Abi-May slumped to the ground, the handle slipping between her fingers. The form above her shivered, many legs had burst out of the dripping black body, blunt and clawed and angular. In many shuddering steps, it was over her.

Teeth grazed her scalp and dug into her hair. The forest around her was a blur of sharp, splintering black and soft swirling white.

This would be the last memory Ethan would have of her.

The forest surrounded Abi-May, the blood had reached her nose. She gasped, warmth filled her lungs. She couldn't see anything clean until she met the water.

The cold river took her between its teeth and two paws on her chest allowed it to swallow her. Blood surrounded her, as weighted claws dug into Abi-May's chest. She writhed. She pushed forward but was brought into the sand and swallowed again.

Her mother held her caring and forceful, even as she clawed her mother's leg, the weight she tore desperately. Until her fingers broke.

The beast was forced into the water suddenly, bones raked across its muzzle and her front legs buckled. Teeth found the soft skin of its nose and sunk in, one paw was raised to push Abi-May back under the water but from beneath it she rolled. She crawled into the stomach that eagerly accepted her and pulling until her head pierced the water again.

She retreated to the shore panting, until she was able to empty her lungs of her blood and the dark swirling water.

A pair of yellow eyes challenged her from the opposite shore.

The clothes of the girl were caught in the waves. They would be frozen before winter's peak.

Another dog bared her fangs, raised her hackles. The freedom in her new form was yet to sink in.

Andrew John, first son of Jedediah, led a woman home by her wrists. Her skin was warm and pliable, but still porous. He ran his thumb over her fingers. She stank, his throat was raw and hardly soothed by the preacher's blessings.

While his first was large, this woman was smaller, her skin was more sallow yellow then ghostly pale. This one wasn't cold.

Her gaze was fixed on the ground, unblinking.

His first and last of the longest. The other men at first tried rats to stave off the emptiness of their households. The vermin had spines that would twist out like roots, the lungs would swell to the size of pregnancies, the mouths could breathe but only for moments.

The sound stuck with him the first time he heard it, none of them had ever been rich, but the raspy breaths were like the sound of coins rattling.

However, despite the men's efforts, no body could ever form even though they had sacrificed so much. But still they were tempted further.

Ethan watched his father as he silently acknowledged the state of his home. He did not look to his eldest son nor the youngest in his arms. Andrew followed the trail of black into the garden until the snivelling on the stair completely faded.

There had been two ship cats, the last ones left were used after. There are only able to raise a head, with two eyes swollen white and blind. The bones calcified quickly and sprouted quickly as blades, tendons could only pool around the spikes and the nerves. After what they created had finally died, one of them had reached for it and as soon as his fingers had pinched the thin red strings, the bones had started growing again, into his hand splitting it in two.

Finally, they had stepped away from science into madness.

His new wife, safely in the house, Andrew found the axe, and the black scalp of furs that twitched and grew. It hissed and shrunk and he saw the beginnings of an eye form. First an octave nerve sprouted, then bubbled into a retina that swirled with white.

With the cats gone, the plagues came, and they flourished with the starvation. They had come for progress, for the glory of their nation but they'd stepped into a new world of nothing but cruelty and survival.

After the dead, the sickness, and the fire, only the worst of them were left. The settlement would have been a stagnant pool, and within would be a garden of bones. He would rather bones than the gore of their nation and God. He closed his eyes and brought himself back overseas, the new land still a horrific possibility.

Andrew had tightened his grip on the handle of the axe and swung down on the reforming creature.

There were no goats, there were no cows, there were no deer.

There were only dogs and there needed to be a lineage.