

Intent of Form and Function

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Cam stands in front of her bedroom mirror, shirt shimmied up to her sternum, hands clawing over the soft pouch of her stomach. It's been less than two months, but her belly seems to be bloating out of her pantyhose, practically popping buttons on her skirt. She's sure she feels a kick.

Take it back undo it get it out get it out—

She rakes nails over her stomach, leaving behind stripes of flushed and swollen skin. As if she could dig clean through sinew and gristle, pluck out the mistake in her gut.

That's when he comes to her.

"Don't be stupid, girl."

He comes from the mirror, hooks one finger around the frame, then another, clicks a nail against the surface.

"We both know there's no getting it out that way."

Two weeks before, she'd thrown away the first test without even looking. Dropped it facedown into the acrid remains of her breakfast curdling at the bottom of the wastebasket between her knees, like the answer couldn't hurt her if only she could hide it well enough. Then the nausea rose again.

The second test, she allowed to wait out its five minutes undisturbed. Tried to ignore it as contemplated. As if it might reconsider if she was very good and didn't peek—but a cheery, pink plus-sign had congratulated her just the same. She threw up again.

That's what he smelled like. That sick in her mouth after. All bile and spoiled milk.

"I could do it for you," he tells her. The long tenure of diaper changing and codependency. The lifetime of what-could-have-beens. Gone in a snap.

"For a price, of course," he adds, picking his teeth with one of those long nails. "I'm an honest man. I would never pretend my work comes free."

She'll do it. Whatever it is. Whatever the price.

He grins, gums gleaming pale behind his lips. "That's what they all say."

She can't imagine how it happened. The day after her first period, she'd marched her mother to the doctor and taken the pill religiously ever since. Insisted on protection with every hookup too, and occasionally wore a diaphragm just to be sure. She was nothing if not conscientious. An expired condom, maybe? A pill taken an hour too soon or too late? A stray grapefruit in her fruit salad? She'd heard as a teenager that they could interfere with medication.

"It will hurt," he says.

Not more than childbirth.

"It may frighten you."

Not more than motherhood.

“No second thoughts,” he insists, teeth sharp and gleeful.

Just do it.

“As you wish.”

He touches her stomach with cold, pale hands, well-practiced and indelicate as a butcher’s. Her belly, swollen with her scraping and scrabbling, grows round under his touch. Months of growth in a moment. His hands slide hungrily over her until a long, knobbly finger finds her belly button, plunges inside.

She bites her cheek bloody to keep from screaming. Her insides writhe in protest until he’s wrist deep and grasping, and the pain is a living thing, raw and tearing.

“Don’t worry about payment now,” he says when he’s finished.

There’s no blood, no bump on her stomach. No evidence of anything at all.

“When the time comes, I’ll find you.”

And he does.

It had nothing to do with the guy, her urgency, her clawing terror. They’d slept together a few times, preceded by drinks and dates. He stayed the night for most of them, even made her pancakes in the morning once. No aggressive drunken pawing, no back-alley debauchery. He was as good a guy as she’d ever been with, and if she told him, she suspected he would do whatever she asked. Hold her hand at the clinic or the agency or the hospital. Take responsibility. He was that kind of man.

The problem was all her.

She takes another test when the man leaves. Then another and another.

Negative. Negative. Negative.

Little pink minuses like clear horizons. Like promises kept. Like reminders of the nothing that was inside her. The relief makes her poetic.

Almost a year into her three-year internship, she's made a name for herself as a model employee. Never taken so much as a sick day. It makes her the target of good-natured ribbing by her coworkers, but as far as architects are concerned, she tells herself, it's better to be a suck-up than a slacker. But she takes a day off to go to the doctor, assures her boss over the phone that everything's fine, just a routine checkup. Nothing to be concerned about.

At the appointment, she marks, with trembling fingers, the box labelled "am not and have never been pregnant," on her intake form. The doctor draws her blood, examines her head to toe, proclaims her healthy and normal in every way, though perhaps a touch dehydrated. She gets a call the next morning with the bloodwork results, claiming much the same.

Hormone levels? she asks. Estrogen? Progesterone?

"Normal. Normal."

HCG?

"Zero. Do you have reason to expect otherwise?"

As if she had never been pregnant at all.

That weekend she breaks things off with the guy. Invites him to

the café where they'd first met a few months before. They order Americanos and split an everything bagel. She gives him both plastic pots of schmear.

He enjoyed their time together while it lasted, he tells her after she breaks the news. He is regretful but kind, the very picture of understanding. He wishes her the best, hopes they can still be friends. She smiles and shakes his hand as they part. Accepts a hug, even. Once he's down the street, she deletes his number.

When her classmates were collecting pictures of boy bands and movie stars, Cam was arranging collages of Frank Lloyd Wright and Zaha Hadid on her ceiling. The centerfolds she collected were of archways and mid-century modern design, buttressing and balustrades in all their enticing curves and angles. These had to be carefully disassembled every few months, as her mother chased a new job, a new man, a new whim, and hauled her along for the ensuing adventure and inevitable disappointment. But disassembled they were, and dutifully replaced wherever she was staying.

By eleven she had the dream and by twelve she had the plan, laid out year by year. Volunteering after school to bolster her applications. AP classes and online college courses. Applying for scholarship after scholarship so that she could go straight to an accredited program for her degree in architecture, without having to hope against hope for enough financial aid. She would be applying only to schools in California, where the cost of living, she knew, would be higher. But anything else was out of the question.

She'd gone there one summer with her mother. Been left to wait in various crummy motels while her mother hunted down a man

she'd met online. For weeks, she took the bus from their motel up to San Simeon where she'd heard once there was a castle on a hill. Scrounged quarters out of vending machines to pay for the tram ride up the mountains until the bus driver recognized her, pretending not to notice as she slipped in with the tourists. It was there, on the sprawling grounds of Hearst Castle, she learned about Julia Morgan, one of the country's first female architects and designer of the palace on the coast. Precise, pristine, perfect in its construction, the place had an air of almost divine intent. Every component interlocked to the larger whole of the space, like it had come into being all at once.

The man her mother was chasing, it turned out, was married. But Cam, at least, left California with a more lasting love. She had it all laid out: she would spend five years on this coast getting her degree, studying Morgan's work, learning her craft. Then a three-year internship, which she could begin, with the right grades and connections, before graduating. Less than eight years and she would be designing things just like this. As precise and detailed, as permanent and lasting.

Then, of course, there were detours. Her scholarships had failed to add up to enough to pay for her top schools, and before she could secure a place at her fourth choice, her mother had become voluntarily bedridden. Heartsick at her latest breakup and unwilling to do anything but drink vodka and weep, until the landlord threatened to put her on the street.

So Cam turned down her acceptances. Made rent. Put food on the table. Pushed off her plans for a year and then another until her mother vanished one night without warning, leaving only a note that she had found a job as a live-in maid two states away, and that she'd send money when she could. She never did.

Cam got into a program at a nearby school that fall. Not in

California. Not from her original list of dream schools, but it was accredited at least. Would put her back on the path. She had imagined that college would be something of an equalizer. That it would put her on the same footing as everyone else, not having to move around, change schools, miss classes with her mother's shifting whims. But she was a "returning student" now, a chasm of two years between herself and the other freshmen who leapt right in from high school. What was more, the firms nearby didn't take interns pre-graduation, punting her goal even further down the road. So she put her head down. Revised the dreams she'd scrawled out in her mind at twelve and got to work.

No more deviations, she decided. No more missed opportunities. Not for anything or anyone. And for a long time, she kept her promise.

Cam almost forgets about it after a while. The pregnancy, or lack thereof.

Nothing happened, after all. Or, rather, whatever happened was undone so completely as to leave no mark on her body, on her life. She goes to work as usual. Takes on projects, runs errands, excels. She's started clocking in early mornings too, even though she's paid a flat (and dismal) stipend for her time, just to get an extra eye on every draft, double check every number. She overhears the head architect talking to a manager one morning—something about their policy on hiring interns, if ever the rules might be bent for a promotion ahead of the requisite three years—and starts staying late in the evenings too.

When the man returns, Cam is slipping into bed, sun still pinking the sky out her window.

“Well, isn’t someone responsible?” He clicks his heels and drops down from the mirror ledge. “Couldn’t keep a respectable sleep schedule like this with a squalling newborn around.”

The first time she saw him, he’d seemed otherworldly, terrifying. In the light of early evening and her flickering fluorescents, he looks more like an old doll: rumped and squat, pale eyes and a little snub nose, the tip of his head hardly up to her knee. His face hangs with loose skin.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he says. “I did tell you I’d come to collect.”

She’s sorry, she tells him, and she means it. She has nothing to give. Yes, she’d promised, but she’s an intern. No savings, no valuables: all she has is a studio apartment with a view of the alley. There’s nothing for him here.

He laughs.

“I’m not here for your things, girl. What I want is something you’ve got plenty of: elbow grease.”

The man hands her a neat, blue folder full of sketches and measurements, sheafs of clean-printed paper covered in post-its. She flips through descriptions of rooms and functions and layouts. It’s a workup for a house. Modestly sized but comfortable. A master bedroom, two spares, a nursery. Spacious kitchen and adjacent spaces for dining and living. The sketches are rough, like a child’s: specific in detail and vague in practical application.

“I’ll be back in a week for your blueprints.”

But that won’t be possible. It’s not enough time. It’s too much, too complex, not to mention her responsibilities at work. She’ll need a month at least.

“Best get cracking,” is all he says, and with a snap, he’s gone.

For five days, she spends her nights craned over her own rickety drafting table. Cam’s firm specializes in government work: blocky office buildings, community centers, libraries. Residential architecture is a relic from her undergrad days, and she digs out old textbooks for reference. But she can do this, she tells herself. She can design a house for a little old man. One week and she’s done forever. A fair trade for her foolishness. For the gift of keeping her sense of herself intact.

When he returns, she’s tired but proud. Spreads out the sketches of a humble bungalow with all the features she likes best in a house: wide windows, open spaces, symmetrical hallways. There’s a gabled front and a cottage roof, after the fairy tales he reminds her of. It’s nice, she thinks. The kind of place she herself might want to live in one day.

He takes one look at the blueprints and crumples them in his tiny fist.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” he says.

At first, she’s shamed. Then she’s enraged. What does this little man know about architecture? She’ll show him. She’ll do it again. Better this time, whatever that means. She starts over. Makes each angle more precise, each room more thoughtfully arranged, each feature more convenient. She adds a sunroom, just because, and a craft room in the attic with a spinning wheel. He seems like the type who would know how to use one.

He returns a week later and sniffs with disdain.

The third attempt makes him laugh and the fourth makes him frown. The fifth he rolls his eyes and the sixth he spits.

Too much, too little, too big, too small, too baroque, too austere.

“Our contract,” he reminds her, with a *snk* of his nails in the crevices of his teeth, “is contingent on you holding up your end of the bargain. Fail to do so, and my end is also void. And we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

She doesn’t ask what that would mean. She can work. She will work. She can do it. If he can just tell her, maybe, what he’s looking for?

He laughs. “Where’s your imagination?”

She’s late for work for the first time that Tuesday, and her coworkers think it’s funny. They ask if she was kidnapped; if someone was taking hostages in the subway.

Cam works in a frenzy every night, staying up later and later, equal parts frustration and focus. She tosses out most of what she makes, preempting the critiques she can already hear in his thin little voice.

What she has always loved about architecture is its concreteness. The possibility of perfection in every line, the promise of a touchable reality in each sketch. When she was young, she’d draw houses she’d like to live in: big, beautiful spaces full of all the things she didn’t have. Each could become as real to her as the dingy hotel carpets, the peeling wallpaper of their latest rental. But now, as she draws, each successive iteration seems more and more improbable. A world she can no more touch or travel to than she can spread her arms and fly. Her lines are straight and

clean, but the shapes they delineate become arcane, unaccountable. She finds herself placing the master bedroom in a tower, the kitchen underground. She's added a dungeon too, and long, looping hallways to nowhere.

She doesn't even look up when the man arrives, already beginning the next, inevitable draft.

"Better," he says, "much better," and she nearly buckles in relief. "I always knew you had it in you."

He gives her notes this time. Directives on what to add and where. He wants a banquet hall and a balcony off the upper bedroom. She nods, looks closely at his notes. She can do that.

She pulls out the dining room lengthwise, adds a dais, a swooping ceiling. Gives the bedroom an alcove, divides it into sections with great arches—the sitting area, the dressing room, the lavatory. She hasn't drawn a structure like it since she was still using crayons.

"Wonderful, it's wonderful!" he says when he returns. "Just a few more additions"

A ballroom now, and a courtyard. A rectory and an armory and quarters for cooks and maids. Parapets, portcullises, barbicans, and drawbridges. A new wing unfurls, then another, then a garden between them, all without reason or rhyme.

Cam doesn't sleep, but when she does, she dreams in crenellations. In columns and vaults and flying buttresses. Gold minarets steeple at her fingertips and stone viaducts unfurl at her feet. She's fenced in by courtyards of stained glass. On the train to work, houses become cottages, the office compounds give way to menageries and watchtowers. She dozes and misses her stop more than once.

“Closer each time, my girl, you’ve almost got it now.”

Her coworkers think it’s funny, still, when she’s late a second and third time. The fourth they ask, brows furrowed, eyes concerned, if she’s well. After the fifth, they stop remarking, except to each other in hushed tones. She has a voicemail from her mother, buried in the dwindling texts and calls from friendly coworkers. She deletes it, unheard. Returns to work.

“The house needs a bakery,” he says. A cobbler, a tailor, a blacksmith. A jeweler, a stable, an abattoir. She didn’t learn to design those things in school. Her architecture courses neglected to offer units on medieval design.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” he thumbs the pink tip of his nose, “clever girl like you.”

Every new wing of the building curls and shifts. The rooms stretch and slink, chimaeras that cannot quite be pinned to one style, one function, one purpose or another, and it’s become something between a palace and a city.

She mixes up her sketches for work with the latest addition to the palace’s entertainment wing. Doesn’t realize until she turns over her sketches to the man and finds plans for the new city sanitation department inside, instead of the combination bowling alley and candy shop he’d requested. The head architect stops by her desk the next morning, drawings in hand, and exchanges them for Cam’s apologies, gently suggests that she take leave for the rest of the week.

“This internship is a demanding one,” she says kindly. “There’s no shame in needing to step back and reassess. You can always reapply next year.”

She'd told herself no more deviations. No more straying from the plan, no more missed chances at greatness, at happiness. This was supposed to save her from all that.

From the pains and failures of parenthood, from the shame of forever being someone who made an unfixable mistake. From delaying her future again and again.

But more than that, from being the sort of person sitting, desperate, in a Planned Parenthood clinic. From being a person who made mistakes that left marks. Marks like the one on the doctor's form. Like walking past churches protesting on street corners and knowing that she was the one they hated. Like spending the rest of her life pretending not to remember an anniversary, not to remember that there could have been.

When she gets home, she slams the door so hard it rattles in its fixture. A mandatory sabbatical, her boss had said. For her health. One week to work out whatever has been going on. Cam peels the mirror off the wall and throws it to the ground, shards spraying her ankles.

Let me go let me go let me go—

“Always the dramatics with you, isn't it?”

He's perched on her windowsill, hands folded neatly over his knee, leaning back on the glass.

“What, did you think I *lived* in there?” He gestures to the shattered mirror. “Would be a bit crowded, what with all your hard work.”

Glass crunches under Cam's bare toes and she feels the skin of her heel split.

She can't do it anymore. She needs it over. She wants out.

The man just hops down onto her bedspread, gets comfortable. "Out? After all I've done for you?"

She'll lose her job. Her future, all her plans. She can't live like this.

"Ah, but you couldn't live like *that* either."

She'll stop, she threatens. She'll quit, she'll give it all up. Leave him with the iterations and iterations of designs she's churned out, let him make something of them himself. She's fulfilled her end. She's finished.

"My dear, the contract is fulfilled at my discretion. Unless you want me to undo my end? I can return it, you know. And not as that grain of rice it was when we first met."

He hops down and steps lightly over the mirror shards. "Do you know how long it's been since then? Nine months. Your mistake is alive now: a living child. And with a snap of my fingers, it could be yours again. Sure you could give it away, but could you really live all your life, knowing that child is out there? That it may arrive on your doorstep someday, reminding you of your failures? With hurts and harms of its own? Could you bear that, my dear girl?"

She drops to the floor among the shards, blood smeared across every reflection. What does he want? Her life? Her money? To watch her spin straw into gold?

"I see you're unhappy," he says, surveying her thoughtfully. "I suppose we could make another deal."

Anything. Anything.

“Oh, sweet girl,” he smiles. “Haven’t you learned your lesson?”

He hops onto the windowsill. His weight rattles the casement. “I want its name.”

Its name?

“The child’s. The one you’ll never have. I want you to tell me its name.”

A name? That’s it?

“That’s it.”

She laughs. That’s easy. She can come up with a hundred hundred names in no time. Richard. June. Everett. Nicole.

He laughs. “Not that easy, I’m afraid. The deal isn’t to invent a name. Tell me the name the child already has.”

How could it have a name? It doesn’t exist, you undid it.

“Undoing and unmaking are never quite the same, I’m sorry to say.”

William? Julia? There had been a time, as a child, when she imagined she would name any children she had after the builders of the Castle. Hearst, she later learned, was a real bastard, of course, but Julia might still have been on the table in another life.

“No dice. I told you, it wouldn’t be a good deal if it was easy.” He’s half in the glass of the window and half out. “In three days’ time, you must tell me its name and I’ll consider our deal fulfilled. If you can’t, you’ll be back to work—unless you’d prefer your bundle of joy instead.”

By the next evening, she's printed every database of baby names she can find.

"Any ideas?" he asks. And after she spends until dawn reading every one: "Not quite, my dear. Try again."

The next day, she turns to myths and fairy tales. Names no one has given a child for centuries, save for hippie communes and moon children. Her mother calls again while she studies, and she turns the phone on its face.

Prometheus, she offers. Sisyphus. Bastet, Anubis. Erzulie, Yemōja, Hecate, Merlin. Gawain, Ceridwen, the Big Bad Wolf.

"You'll have to dig deeper." He winks. "One more day, my dear. Make it count."

Cam wakes early. Expects ideas to come to her. But she finds herself empty, drained. There's nothing left that he hasn't taken.

So she rises, dresses, and gets on the train.

Buildings her firm has worked on rattle past the windows, all from long before her time: a post office, a courthouse, one of the more recent libraries. She has always been fond of the latter, a domed structure of prismatic glass melting down the slope of the hill it had been built on. It was one of the buildings that drew her to the firm, in fact. Julia Morgan had loved structures that respected the land they were built on. This one was adaptable in a way she would have liked. Like something alive.

Cam disembarks there. It's warm inside, a relief from the autumn chill, and the glass roof lets in a dazzle of light. She'd never noticed from outside, but the broad crosshatching of steel

girders and triangular panes high above gives the impression of being inside a giant ribcage. A great whale, washed up in the city. She walks along the spine of it, past kids and their mothers reading picture books and college students deep in focus, taking the stairs to the upper levels. From the top floor, she can see the whole city. Neighborhoods roiling out through the grit-stained windows, the twisted bodies of half-made buildings downtown. She's worked on a dozen projects since the start of her internship, and from here, she can't see a single one. She realizes that she doesn't even know who designed this library. That she could be walking by them every day without even knowing their name.

Cam walks home, skull itching and empty handed. It's nearly dark by the time she reaches home, hands in her pockets, watching her boots scuff along the dirty stairs.

"Cam?"

She looks up.

Her mother is at her apartment door. Smiling like they see each other every week. Her mother's eyes are smudged with mascara, her lined face tired.

"I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd check in," her mother says. "I hadn't heard from you in a while."

Her mother lives three states and countless neighborhoods away. They rarely hear from one another. They stare at each other for a moment. Like animals of the same species from different herds.

Cam clears her throat finally, asks if her mother would like to come inside.

“Please, it’s cold as all hell up here, I don’t know how you stand it.”

The place is a mess. Cam hasn’t opened the windows or done laundry in weeks. She hasn’t swept the mirror glass. Cam watches her mother eyeing the glimmer of red-brown stained shards before stepping delicately around them. She ignores the little wooden chairs and matching table where Cam eats dinner and sits instead at the end of the bed.

“Got any wine?”

Cam doesn’t keep alcohol at the house. Can’t afford the hangover.

“So responsible! Any tea then? Or coffee?”

Coffee, she has. She puts on a pot without a word, pulls out the sugar and sniffs the cream. Her mother is already talking.

“They work you too hard at that place. What, you don’t even have time to answer a call from your mom?”

How has she been? Cam asks, to change the subject. How’s her art? Her cat? The little place she’d been living by the lake?

“Amazing,” her mother says. “We’re really starting to make it a home, you know? I think I might even stay there a while; can you believe that?”

We?

“Jim and I,” she says airily. “I’m sure I told you about Jim.”

Cam lets the coffee brew in silence a moment, then pours them each a mismatched mug—yellow and pink with cherry blossoms for her mother, and her favorite blue-glazed terra cotta for

herself. When she brings them to the bed, her mother reaches for the terra cotta. Cam gives it to her.

Cam is tired. So, what *really* brings her out here?

Her mother's face furrows in hurt. "Honey, don't be like that. Can't we be pleasant for once?"

Cam remembers the last time her mother showed up unannounced. At her dorm her third year of college, drunk and weeping, begging for a place to stay. The apologies to her roommate, the way Cam had tucked her mother into her own bed and slept on the floor. By the time she woke in the morning, her mother was already gone.

"But since you ask," her mother takes a swig of coffee, "I've been heading west on a personal trip, and as I was passing through, I thought, 'Hey! Why not make it a mother-daughter adventure for old time's sake?' Doesn't that sound fun? Road trip with your momma?"

Cam's chest goes tight. She can't, she tells her. She has a job, nearly a career. She has responsibilities and rent. She can't just take off.

"Oh, come on, where's your sense of fun? Even fancy working professionals get vacations. When did you get such a stick up your ass?"

Probably the year she graduated high school, if she had to guess.

Cam doesn't mean to say it, but she does anyway. Her mother stops the coffee an inch from her lips.

"That was a long time ago and I was in a bad place," she says coolly, recovering to take a sip. "There's no need to bring up ancient history."

Not that ancient.

“Look, sweetie, I know you have plenty of reason to be mad at me, but that’s the past. I’m doing much better now. I’ve even got an offer at a gallery not too far from here, just a few hundred miles. Think of that, a real chance to get my art out there! Only problem is I’ve been taking buses and trains, and I need a car to get the last leg of the trip.”

There it is.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nothing. Well Cam doesn’t have a car. And she doesn’t have time for an adventure. Looks like she wasted a trip.

“No car? What are you talking about, what about the one Henry got you?”

That was ten years ago. Artie had stolen the car a year later and totaled it within a week.

“That can’t be right, I’m sure I would have remembered that.”

Cam sips her coffee and doesn’t reply.

“What’s wrong with you? Is it PMS or something? You’re not pregnant, are you?” Her mother laughs. “After all that protesting that I’d never ever be a grandmother?”

Bile burns Cam’s tongue. Cam stands up. You need to get out, she tells her mother. You need to leave.

“Sweetie?” Her mother sets down her mug on the floor. “What are you—oh...”

Cam feels tears burning her cheeks and her throat. She wipes them furiously with her sleeve.

“What’s happening? Sweet girl, what’s—”

It’s nothing. You need to go now.

“Camilla, what happened?” Her mother sets down her mug, opens her arms. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Cam wants to believe that’s true. She’s heard it all before—between bouts of sobriety and shitty boyfriends, when her mother’s tears had dried, and she couldn’t understand where her daughter had gone.

It’s fine, is what she means to say, I’m fine.

Instead she collapses, lets her head rest on her mother’s shoulder and weeps.

I’m so tired, is what comes out at last.

The truth is, when the test had come out positive, before her quibbles about abortion and adoption, the first, terrifying image she’d had was of keeping it. Of what it would be like to tell her mother. The rejoicing she’d endure, the celebration of their new-found sameness. She thought, of course, of the plans slowed and indefinitely postponed, the perpetual uncertainties. She’d envisioned, with horrific clarity, the reality of someone who had no choice but to need her, and to whom her failures would be an unhealing wound. But first, Cam had thought of her mother, and she could not bear it.

Her mother wraps her arms around Cam, uncertainly, petting fingers through her hair.

“I never did give you much time to rest, did I,” her mother says finally, and she doesn’t say it as a question. As close to an apology as she’s heard from her mother’s mouth.

I just don't want to end up like you.

It's another thing she doesn't mean to say, but it slips out anyway. She thinks her mother will stand up. Cast her off, leave her, finally, to whatever awaits her at the end of this.

Instead, her mother laughs.

"You always were judgmental. Even as a kid. I suppose you had a right to be, when it came to me at least."

Her mother's nails comb carefully through her hair.

"I don't know what you're going through right now," she says, "but whatever it is, I can promise you don't have to worry about turning out like me."

Cam starts to protest, but her mother keeps talking.

"I saw it the moment you were born, how different we were. You were always determined to be your own little person, no matter what I said or did. Annoying as hell when you were little, but admirable too." She laughs again. "I remember, when you were little, I'd come home from work and you'd have made a whole house you made of popsicle sticks and glue. Or drawn up a kingdom across the whole newspaper in purple crayon. You were always this little beast of creative energy. Every place we ever lived, you turned it into a home. You'd take some dumpy motel or an RV or whatever piece of crap place I had us in and you'd *make* it home. Put up pictures and make breakfast and clean, so even when I didn't get my ass out of bed, things were comfortable. Safe." Her mother hesitates. "I should have done that for you."

Cam wipes her nose.

"But you don't need to work so hard. You don't need to keep pushing. It's okay to let yourself *be* sometimes, you know?"

She feels her mother's hand in her hair. The same mother who let her down a hundred hundred times.

But the same one who brought her chocolate after her first period, too. Pulled her out of school to go to the beach when her friends ditched her over some petty squabble. Shouted down an English teacher who had called her essays dull and pointless, though, truthfully, they probably were.

Was it enough, now? Her half-apologies? Would it ever be enough?

"And if anyone tells you otherwise," her mother grins, "fuck 'em."

Cam sniffs and sits up, leaving a snot stain on her mother's sweater. She nods and hugs her mother for the first time in what feels like years.

They finish their coffees. Say their goodbyes. Her mother has a motel booked. She doesn't ask to stay, and Cam doesn't offer. But she gives her daughter a kiss on the cheek on the doorstep and turns to go.

Mom, Cam says before she takes a step. If I ever did have a kid, what would you have wanted me to name them?

Her mother laughs.

"I know better than to tell you that," she says. "I may have made my share of mistakes, dear girl, but I learned a long time ago not to compete with your plans."

Cam calls on him then, once her mother has vanished into the dark. She's never done that before. But she asks in her head, prays

the way she did that first night. She isn't sure it'll work until he's sitting on her windowsill, eyes glittering with anticipation.

"You're early," he says. "That confident, are we? Let's hear it then, last chances."

She's ready, she says. She'll give her final guess. But first, she wants to see it.

"See it?"

The palace. The city she's made. Just once before it's gone.

He hums. "Well, it's not finished quite yet, as you well know. But I suppose . . ." he taps a finger thoughtfully. "I suppose just this once. To show you what you're so intent on leaving behind."

He reaches out with his pale, knobbly hand.

"Come on then."

She takes it.

The walls around her invert and the carpet drops away. The glass surfaces—windows, cups, the dusty light bulb hanging from the ceiling—melt together, become huge enough to swallow her. She squeezes her eyes shut.

Then it stops, quickly as it started. The man's hand is still clasped firmly into hers. For a moment, his smallness, his wide, delighted eyes make him seem almost childlike. She lets his long fingers fall and looks up.

They're in the courtyard. The great, round plaza she designed to lead out to everything else, awash with fountains and lined with stone arches. The roof stretches out from it in every direction,

broken occasionally by minarets and lookout points or the gabled fronts of new wings.

“I’d say it’s really coming together,” he tells her, pride clear in his voice. “Of course, there are still some adjustments to be made.”

He leads her through the corridors she’s only ever seen on paper. He points out little details—crown molding; a well-placed window; the pool room, iridescent blue, the spitting image of Hearst’s. She knows this place like the inside of her own mind. But even though she’s sketched every component part a hundred times over, she’d never quite imagined how they’d all fit together, complete.

He’s gesturing toward something ahead and she makes a noise of agreement but lags ever so slightly behind. When he passes through a doorway, she slips out. Passes into a connecting corridor before he can see she’s gone.

Hallways spill into rooms unfold into foyers and atriums and all seem to double back on each other as she moves. She finds that she knows where she’s going. She’s walked this labyrinth before, after all. Over and over again in her dreams. She reaches a great spiral staircase she remembers from an early draft, when the place first started to become the castle it was. She begins to climb.

At the top is a door, inlaid with brass and so huge she has to stand on tiptoes to reach the handle—far higher than the man can reach. The knob is gleaming, untouched. She turns it.

Inside is a room. Round, with a bed and a dresser and a desk and a mirror, shattered. A window too, at which stands a small creature. A person, a child, facing outside. It does not move when she enters, as if it cannot hear her.

I thought you might be here, Cam says.

On its face is a soft, unseeing expression. Blank as a baby's and with features that look at once very young and very old.

Do you know? Cam asks. Has he told you?

The child-thing opens its mouth and makes a noise like no living creature. It speaks in every sound Cam has ever heard—a holler, a hiss, a symphony of broken instruments. She tries again.

I'm sorry, she says. You must be afraid.

The child-thing answers in a sound like bricks grinding, like the screeching of metal girders. A thin dust curls from its mouth and settles in its long hair.

It's my fault you're here. I'm sorry for that too.

It looks at her and Cam sees her mother's eyes. Her own snub nose.

But I know what you are. You're not mine, are you?

Cam thinks she can almost hear a voice underneath the sound it makes. She takes the child-thing in her arms, and it does not resist.

You're not his either. He lied. To both of us. You're not anyone's.

She presses it to her chest and she thinks she feels its long-limbed arms twitch in response.

You can be more than he makes you. You can leave this place. I can leave this place—

All at once, the walls start to rattle. The floor quakes and somewhere she can hear the man howling with fury as the foundations beneath them crack.

The ceilings above them split and Cam buries her face in the child-thing as the stone crumbles and says I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—

It's morning when she wakes.

The mirror is still smashed. Shredded blueprints on the floor, and a mug on the windowsill, ringed with her mother's lipstick.

Cam goes to the bathroom and rips open the last test in the little box stuffed under her sink. Pees on the end and lets it sit on the counter. As she waits, she sweeps up the glass. Puts shredded paper in the bin and cleans some of the dishes piling high in the kitchen. When she checks the test, she finds a pink plus-sign beaming back at her.

It's maybe twenty minutes to the clinic by bus. When she gets there, it's easier than she anticipated. The women behind the desk smile without pretense as she hands over the forms. The others in the waiting room mind their business. Bored, busy people like she'd see at the store or the train station. The doctor asks questions, but only a few, and in a neutral, placid sort of tone that tells her she's little more than a checkmark on his day's schedule. She comes out afterwards a little shaky on her feet, with a care-package of ibuprofen and pads for any residual bleeding, but otherwise fine. Still herself.

She buys a bottle of wine on the way home, the mid-priced kind she likes but never usually lets herself indulge in. Laying on her freshly made bed, windows open and letting in the evening breeze, Cam sips rosé from her best glass. Rests a hand on the softness of her belly and doesn't feel a thing under her fingertips.