

ALISSA NUTTING



## The Brother and the Bird

MARLENE'S MOTHER CLEANED CONSTANTLY, BLEARY-EYED IN MULTIPLE hairnets, on her vigilant search for the impure; as she walked she so often rolled an antiquated upright vacuum alongside her that it grew to seem like an exterior organ, an intravenous device that performed dialysis or another lifesaving function. Marlene had no memory of Mother's bare hands, for they were always beneath thick, yellow kitchen gloves and had begun, as the years passed, to seem prosthetic. Fearful that dust might see her coming and scatter, Mother crept from one chore to another, hunched over, skulking around on the tips of her toes and raising each knee skyward with every step. What horrible shadows this cast upon the wall! Young Marlene would often shiver in bed and watch a ghastly outline bend steadily larger as Mother advanced down the hallway, the rubber gloves taking on the shape of oversized claws. Marlene's fright and anticipation usually became so intense that she'd let out an audible gasp when Mother finally appeared in front of the bedroom door. Mother would stop, sniff. "Good girls are asleep by now," she'd whisper, quiet enough to make Marlene wonder whether Mother even meant for this to be heard.

Father was friendlier, bear-like and aloof. When Marlene and Brother were little, they had delighted in running their fingers through the thick black curls on Father's chest and back and riding him like an

animal. He'd obligingly take to all fours and crawl around the yard, giving in to their wishes for a spirit of manufactured danger. "I'm going to eat you!" he'd eventually growl, and their cheeks would glow pink as pigs.

But Father had always stopped their play if they got too close to the juniper tree, their yard's curious landmark. Halfway up, its trunk divided into two distinct sections that grew away from each other toward separate futures. Being children, Marlene and her brother always tested the limit—what was the closest they could get to the tree before Father excused himself and cited fatigue, or claimed to be growing old?

"It's the cremated human remains," Brother explained. He referred to his birth mother, Father's deceased first wife, whose urn was buried in the yard under the tree. Marlene had occasionally spied Mother watering its roots with bleach and kicking the tree, stomping atop the first wife's grave in a peculiar dance. And sometimes Mother picked up the large ax in the basement and spoke kindly to it, as though it were a baby, cradling it in her gloved hands and staring back at her reflection in the blade's clean mirror.

But Mother hated her husband's son even more than she did the tree. She beat him often and cleverly, across the body but never the face, with her heavy Bible and household objects made of wood. "I will clean the sin right out of you," Mother remarked, sweating. "You are not of my loins, wicked thing." Her own fictive brand of religion had curious rules: she'd stopped attending Mass long ago, remarking that the purification of one's household was tantamount to prayer.

Marlene wished for a life away from Mother where she and Brother had the home all to themselves. And Father could float in and out as he pleased, a furry satellite.

As the years passed, Marlene fell deeply in love with Brother. By the time she was twelve and he sixteen, simply thinking about him made her feel as full and sleepy as eating a large meal.

Marlene often snuck into Brother's room after Mother was asleep,

and they would lie on his bed and listen to records. During each song he'd pick out a single line to sing, and Marlene liked to predict which one he was going to choose—when she was right she felt very good at loving. She'd watch Brother's mouth and could almost see his voice spinning into the air like invisible string. "*Bird, moon, fly away soon.*" To keep track of time she thought of the record as an hourglass and the needle as sand, and when she heard its empty scratch she'd rise gently from the bed, take up the needle, and sneak quietly back to her room.

But one night Marlene and Brother drifted off to sleep. They woke to Mother standing overtop them with her large Bible. A broken blood vessel had stained the white of her left eye a deep red.

Brother sleepily lifted his neck. "Mother," he said, startled. "You look very angry."

"A dirty thing," Mother insisted, pointing at the two of them with a shaking rubber finger. The spongy pink curlers beneath her hairnet looked like an inflated brain.

Marlene tried to curl her body against Brother's, but she was quickly flung from the bed as Mother's Bible thrashed down upon Brother. This beating went on longer than Marlene thought possible, and just when Mother seemed to be done, a new wave of fury overtook her like a spell; she lifted her great weight upon Brother's chest, placed a pillow overtop his face, and pushed the heavy Bible down atop it. "A dirty, dirty thing," she hissed. Brother's feet kicked in high convulsions that lifted the sheets, but Mother did not dismount until his legs went still. Then she eased up and turned her smile toward the window and the sun.

"Remove your socks," Mother said.

Mother herself was naked, wearing nothing but an apron. She ordered Marlene to fully undress, then fitted her nude daughter into a smock and a matching pair of yellow kitchen gloves. Marlene sobbed; Mother was gazing upon Brother's corpse with grateful eyes, as though

he were a gift basket of fruit. "Grab his feet," Mother directed. Together they hauled his body down into the basement. Marlene's stomach lurched when they neared the furnace, but Mother led them on farther, over to the laundry sink in the basement's left corner.

As Marlene held open the garbage bag, her hands began to shake. "Hail Mary," Mother started. A rosary dangled from the ax's handle like a beaded tail.

The blade hit into the corpse with a great thwack and Marlene saw Mother's flat buttocks clench tightly. This image placed Marlene into a catatonic state; she stopped blinking and errant blood began to dot the whites of her eyes.

They divided Brother's pieces into twelve bags of different shapes and sizes, then scattered him throughout the basement's deep freeze. Mother told Marlene to go take a long shower, and as Marlene climbed the stairs she spied a piece of Brother's flesh still lying beside the sink. Twice she stopped and stared, thinking that she'd seen it move; she cried each time she realized she was mistaken.

Father came home to a large sauerbraten flavored with dried juniper berries and a sauce crisped with gingersnap and honey-cake crumbs. He ate heartily, large tufts of hair spilling from his collar and shirt cuffs, their ends curling up from the dinner's steam. It wasn't until his plate was almost empty that he asked where Brother had gone off to.

Marlene's eyes moved to the Bible sitting in the living room. Mother had hidden its bloodstains beneath a quilted cover that bore an appliqué of a stitched cat face. The feline's whiskers were long strokes of thread; lace bordered its edges. Due to its size, the Bible now resembled a pillow.

"He's visiting a friend for a bit," Mother said, smiling. Her grin was fixed and still; she looked like a wicked doll that should never have come to life.

"Did he say when he'd be back?" Father asked. Marlene began to weep as Mother shook her head and adjusted her hairnet. Her yellow

gloved hand moved a spoonful of gravy very slowly toward her husband's mouth, teasing.

The weeks that followed were a parade of heavy soups, sweetbreads, and full stews. Disgusted, Marlene resolved to rescue what was left of Brother's remains at any cost. Only nine bags were left in the freezer. One of these had been torn open, and when she peeked inside she saw butcher-like excisions on a shank of Brother's torso.

"I'll bury you with your mother under the tree," Marlene promised, "and no more of you will ever be eaten!"

It took Marlene several trips to get all the bags outside; she could carry only a few at a time. On each return to the basement she carefully checked to see if Mother was hiding beneath the stairs, if the ax was still hanging on the wall.

Marlene dropped to her knees beneath the tree and opened the bags, reaching her arm inside to search their contents for Brother's head. He looked quite different now. His cheeks and mouth had been pushed up against the freezer's wall and had frozen at an upward angle. Brother's iced flesh was as white-blond as his hair, and its heavy cold burned at her skin. When Marlene kissed him her wet lips stuck painfully to his; she tasted a bit of blood after she pulled herself free.

For what seemed like hours, Marlene dutifully struggled with the hard earth and the shovel. She feared that when the sun came up the hole would still be no bigger than a shoe box and she'd have no place to hide Brother's thawed parts. When the fluttering sound began, she dismissed it at first; it was buzzing and internal, like an insect too close to her ears. Then all the berries fell from the juniper tree at once.

Marlene's breath left her lungs as she eyed the now-covered ground around her—a blanket of berries inches thick. "I'll be caught for sure." She panicked, and her panic only grew as the berries began to shake and toss on the ground like roasting coffee beans, then cleared to reveal a soft gray circle in their center. Curious, Marlene reached over the berries and placed her hand onto its surface. "Ash," she gasped, but wouldn't say aloud what she was thinking: *cremated human remains*.

The fluttering sound loudened and the berries began to organize themselves like ants. They surrounded the pile of garbage bags, lifting them onto their backs and rolling them into the ash like an assembly line, the bags sinking down into its powder with the ease of rocks into a lake. When all the bags were gone, the berries formed a single line. They drained down into the ash like marbles. Finally a bird dived down from the tree and soundlessly followed the last berry into the ash.

Marlene was very tempted to jump inside and escape as well. But as she approached the gray surface she cried out in disappointment; the ground had set like a thick pudding, hardened into soil before her very eyes.

The next morning Marlene awoke to the horrible sensation of being watched. A thin stream of urine began to warm under her bottom.

"No one would ever have found him in the basement, frozen and quiet in little pieces," Mother whispered. She was seated on the edge of Marlene's bed, inching closer to her daughter's face. "But where is he now?" The grayish-black pockets beneath her eyes seemed full of tiny dark stones.

Her hands gripped Marlene's cheeks, their fingernails digging into Marlene's skin even through the rubber of the gloves. For a moment Mother stared into her eyes, searching; then she gave a full smile and left. Marlene watched the indentation Mother had left on the bed raise up and fill, but she did not move until she heard the faraway wail of the vacuum begin to heave in heavy sucks.

In tears, Marlene ran into Brother's room. When she looked at his shirts hanging up in the closet, she felt the same affection for their cloth as for his skin. She buried her face in them, ran to his bed and ruffled his sheets, begged him to appear, appear. She did notice his guitar was missing. Had Mother cut it up as well?

Winter came and Father seemed to retreat into his woolly skin. He never pressed for further answers about where Brother was staying, but he often wished aloud for his son's return.

After dinner, as Mother and Marlene sat by the fire, it became

common for Father to excuse himself and take his pipe outdoors. All the while he would stare at the juniper tree, whose branches were growing new berries despite the cold.

Mother peeked out the curtains and watched his every move.

"How I think I'll take the ax to that tree," she'd remark, "so that Father might stay with us by the fire." Whenever she passed a window that looked out upon the tree, Mother made an upside-down cross with her gloved fingers and extended it toward the glass.

One night, right before she fell asleep, Marlene rolled over to find a feather on her pillow. The moment she touched it a deep dream began.

At first she saw nothing, and when she was able to see she realized the eyes were not her own but the eyes of a bird. She looked through them like two holes of a mask, the bird's long beak jutting up into her line of vision.

Underground, in a hollow space made of earth, she and the bird were pecking Brother's parts back together. The beak came down in small strikes that were a form of stitching. Occasionally it would stop and grab berries from a stockpile, using them to fill in holes where Mother had taken away meat. Pieces of pecked-through garbage bags were scattered everywhere like tissue paper. When finished, the bird cried out until Brother's body started moving.

The bird jumped ahead, leading Brother through a tunnel up into the juniper tree. Marlene watched as its trunk cracked open like an egg filled with light.

She and the bird flew up while Brother crawled out, and the tree closed up behind them.

Marlene then saw the sky and the roof of their home, and occasionally caught glimpses of Brother, naked far below, his flesh white and cloudy like a ridge of ice. Even from the air, she could make out the violet grafts on his arms where berries had patched his skin. When Brother walked into the house, the bird flew to Brother's bedroom window and waited.

Brother appeared in his room minutes later, gaunt and confused. He dressed in the dark, lifted his guitar, and left.

The bird flew very high until Brother became a silver-blond dot on the road below. A truck stopped and he entered it; the bird flew for quite a distance to follow him. There was the familiar sound of fluttering; the sound Marlene heard on the night she buried him, and there were long stretches of darkness that told of passing time. When the bird's eyes went black, Marlene heard a flapping noise, like musical paper, as the sound of wings sped up into an echo.

Finally the bird perched above a small tavern. Marlene could hear music and see Brother inside, a blanched shape performing a song on his guitar. She saw flashes of him in many towns, on many stages, and could feel his confusion as he wandered; his memory had been reduced to a vague longing, and this came and went spontaneously like strange desire. Just before she woke she saw him standing at a sidewalk storefront, eyeing a pair of red shoes that resembled the ones she wore every day.

When Marlene woke again she was in her room; the feather was floating in the air just inches above her pillow. Her hand reached out, but at the slightest touch it turned to ash in her fingers.

The dream caused Marlene to feel weary and flu-like. Even the next night, she was still shaky when she sat down to dinner with Mother and Father. Light organ music played on the radio, and Father was cutting his meal into tinier and tinier bits. "Can't you make the sauerbraten again?" he asked Mother, looking down at his plate with distant eyes.

Just then, the music on the radio abruptly stopped. Marlene's hand froze around her fork; a fluttering noise poured through the speakers. After a brief minute of static, a very peculiar song came on. "*My mother, she killed me,*" the voice sang. "*My father, he ate me. My sister, she saved my bones, tweet, tweet...*"

Mother crept over and turned down the radio's knob with her rubber fingers.

"Some quiet," she snipped. She then scowled at the radio and began to examine it carefully, as if it might be something more than it seemed.

The very next night Mother did indeed make sauerbraten, but this time it was not to Father's liking. He excused himself to go outside and smoke, and Marlene turned on the radio as Mother made a fire. They sat and listened to an organ's cheery song as flames seared the logs a deep white.

Just as Father came back inside the house, the radio's song turned to static. This slowly gave way to the sound of wings, then music.

*"Mother killed her little son; what a beautiful bird am I. Father ate 'til meat was gone; what a beautiful bird am I. Sister saved my bones; now I sing and fly..."*

Mother's eyes stared straight forward, wide with terror. "Looking at this fire," she remarked in a flat and breathy voice, "I feel like I am burning up."

Marlene awoke the next morning to a loud and constant wailing. Neither Mother nor Father seemed able to hear it; Father went away to work as usual and Mother spent her day on the patio killing bugs. Marlene desperately searched for the source of the noise, but she couldn't tell where it stopped or started. Was it Brother's room? The juniper tree? The basement?

The sound grew so loud that Marlene began to see small gray dots; occasionally it seemed as if birds were flying just beyond the corners of her vision.

For most of the afternoon, she lay in Brother's room listening to records and getting sick into a bag.

When her parents insisted she come down for dinner that evening, Marlene did not think she'd be able to accept the smell of food. But as she sat down, the deafening static leaped from the inside of her head onto the radio. *"My mother forced me quick to die."* Brother's voice rang out inside the kitchen. *"My father ate me in a pie."*

Mother leaped up and started her bony fingers toward the dial. "Some quiet," she said, but Father interrupted.

"Some music might be nice tonight."

"Perhaps a different tune, then," Mother suggested. But as she flipped the knob, she found that the song was on every station. *"Only my sister began to cry."*

Father stood up and squinted his eyes toward the window.

"Is someone walking toward the house?" Grabbing his pipe, he excused himself from the table to have a better look.

Mother slowly backed away from the radio, her eyes fixed upon the fireplace, her hands twisting. "When I look at the fire," she stammered, "I feel as if I'm being burned alive." Her smile grew lopsided; she began to unbutton her dress.

"But there isn't any fire, Mother."

Mother's gloved hands grabbed the radio and threw it to the floor. It split into as many pieces as Brother, but the song kept playing. Her gloves started ripping at her clothes; she buried her head beneath the faucet of the sink and began to shriek.

Panicked, Marlene ran outside to Father. But when she saw the pale figure coming down the path, her heart leaped. "Is it Brother?" she cried aloud. Hopeful, Father began to wave a hairy hand, and Mother burst from the house topless with soaked hair. Marlene's eyes flew to the ax Mother clutched in one yellow, gloved hand and the large Bible she held in the other. "I'll chop them all down." Mother screamed, her torn dress blowing off her body. "The tree and our visitor as well!"

But as Mother arrived beneath the tree, all its new berries rained down upon her and she halted in shock. The berries shook and spun on the ground, and as they cleared a hole around Mother, she and her ax dropped down right through the earth. Father and Marlene ran over just in time to see the white line of Mother's scalp disappear into a thick powder of ash, to see the ash harden back to soil, to see Mother's Bible fall to the ground. Its pages flew open and fluttered, then

turned into white birds that sailed away. The berries lifted from the ground like a swarm of bees.

Their mass moved toward Brother as if to attack him; they landed everywhere upon his body and face and guitar until he was fully covered. Then, as if giving him juice to use as blood, the berries deflated and fell from his skin one by one, like dried scabs, flatter than onion-skin. Marlene ran to him, breathless. "Look Father," she cried, "Brother is pink and new!"

But Father loomed quiet beneath the tree. He was bent over, running his fingers along the ground, searching for some trace of either wife below.



*As a child, what fascinated me most about Grimm's tale of "The Juniper Tree" was that the father could not detect that he was eating his sons; it seemed that such a bond would somehow be— dare I say—tastable. Perhaps this is why I was so impressed years later when I discovered Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," a story where the young woman's life is saved through her mother's devoted attention and sharp instinct. I find the primary modern relevance of Grimm's "The Juniper Tree" as having a great deal to do not only with the perils of mentally or emotionally absent parents but also with ignorance in general and the various ways that being uninformed can open a space for danger: Where are the things we buy coming from? Who is making them? How are they making them? What are our tax dollars funding? Which companies control our food? Hyperbolized as it may be, the original version of "The Juniper Tree" makes a great case for Knowing, for being vigilantly present and aware.*

*In my rewriting of the tale, I wanted to retain not only the father's ignorance but also the original source of hope for the murdered brother: his sister, Marlene. "Hansel and Gretel," a*

*similar story of child abandonment, movingly describes a brother and sister who rely on each other for survival after their father's wife has convinced him to abandon the children. Most versions of "Hansel and Gretel" describe the pair returning to live with their father after their stepmother has died in the same way that "The Juniper Tree" ends, with the trinity of a father and his daughter and son. I am not a fan of giving these fathers a second chance, although I accept that the children, in their goodness, would grant it. So I wanted my retelling to emphasize that although the children accept their father, his emotional distance has rendered him unnecessary in their lives: the children's devotion to each other is what allows for their ultimate safety, and their happiness is not dependent upon him.*

*Although I altered the lyrics of the song, the plot structure of my story and the original tale of "The Juniper Tree" both rely on the transcendental and sorcerous power of music. The line "Bird, moon, fly away soon" is inspired by Bob Dylan's song "Jokerman," which is, like so much of Dylan's music, a fairy tale in itself.*

—AN