

toothed

} by *Leni Zumas*

She is a hill witch and not young, but young for her station. People say she has no family and that this fact has ensorrowed but improved the witch, building in her the vigor of self-sufficiency. Her house is a mile walk from the river along whose red banks the town is arranged. Shelves buckle with jar and branch and bottle and weed, and a washstand holds a two-ring burner upon which all manner of hill cocktail might heat.

The hills grow into mountains and the mountains into sky. The sky is black until morning. The men drink coffee with their butts in a row at the restaurant. The town has one restaurant and one post office and one hardware and two churches. The witch does not do church or mail but she is often seen at the hardware, and she likes the restaurant's dogwood chutney thick on a cracker. To town she wears denim and wool. For home she likes dresses, and some finery — her pink balsa necklace or the bone whistle on its chain. Some of her hairs are still bird-brown: these she lotions. The gray ones get no lotion, and dirt stands visible upon them.

Witches don't have children. Their bodies, creased and spidery, are not built for them. Children would distract and soften, steal attention from the spells at hand.

A visitor comes to her porch: Gregory from the automotive. Yearly he services the witch's truck.

"Sorry to bother," he says. "I have this scratch," and rolls up his plaid sleeve to a leering purple wound.

"Bad bite," the witch says. "How big is the pain?"

"Big."

"Give me a measure."

"Mastodonic?"

The witch pulls the door wider. Gregory takes a seat and she turns up the

burner under a pan of water. "I haven't yet asked," she says, "what it was bit you."

"No you have not," he says.

"Quiet now," she says and presses a rag piping from the water-pan to his arm. Gregory crosses his legs but does not cry out.

"Next," the witch says, "we have our slippery tonic." Onto the harmed skin she splashes a heathery liquid. This time he yells.

"Sorry," she says.

"Goddammit!"

"Tonic's required, in light of what bit you."

"But I didn't—"

"I know from the gash," she says.

Her walls bloom briefly in the lights of Gregory's truck. The witch hangs the wet rag across the pan. Fingers the bone whistle, kisses its tiny mouth.

"You can come out now," she says.

Gregory lives with his father on a dairy farm that has clung for years to the mountainside. Blood cancer took his mother, the city his sister.

"She fix you?" his father asks. "Let's see that." He unknobs the linen, peels it. "Fuck," he says.

"Doesn't hurt anymore," Gregory says. "She put a tonic."

"You tell her how it happened?"

"No but she knew."

His father lights a cigarette. "The hot hell she did."

Hell is not hot, Gregory knows. "Picture claws," his mother told him, "cold as spoons. They dig and dig and never stop. Death," she said, "will be a pleasure."

He is charged with feeding Wendell and Jessica's dog for the weekend. The glum, pissy dog was bred so pure it is allergic to almost every food.

"Hello, sickness," Gregory says, bending to pet.

Gregory's wife, who is not married to him but acts wifelier than most men's lawful brides, opens drawers. She wants to check the level of their living, this Wendell and Jessica, a couple she barely knows and instinctively dislikes but is trying to keep an open mind about. She sees crumbs in the utensils and is ashamed to be glad. Butter smear on the cutting board, unwiped. Other rooms: They didn't make their bed before leaving. This is information.

Gregory asks his father: "Is the witch from here originally?"

"Doubt it," his father says. "Her eyes."

“You mean how they’re kind of like thin?”

“Almond-shape,” his father says. “Un-round.”

Gregory squints at the rearview. “Mine aren’t round either.”

“The hell they’re not.”

His father wears sunglasses so Gregory can’t check. Plus Gregory is driving and his driving record is not without its moving violations.

When they pull up in front of the hardware his father says, “Have a good one,” and Gregory wishes as he wishes five mornings a week every week of the year that his father did not have to work at this scabbed ass of a place, that he could stay on the farm all day. His father dislikes the hardware but the farm is a money-suck. The world, his father says, does not need farms. It needs people who know how to oil the robots.

Gregory’s wife is northern. Her childhood was free of black-eyed peas and truck-cab windows painted with Confederate flags. She is called Click and has loved Gregory for exactly six months. Their anniversary cake is a bread pudding, which they eat with their faces.

“Did you notice,” she slurps, “how ugly all their lamps were?”

“Can we stop talking about those guys?” Gregory says, tonguing a raisin. He thinks he might be dying from the bite. Poison in him, vein and cell. Mortally wounded, he does not wish to spend his time shit talking.

In a town whose bumper stickers say, We’re here because we’re not all there, Luminy makes sure never to talk except to a foxlet, a grave waiting open-mouthed, a shy bulb moon blown straight down into the stomach of Appalachia. Mouse on back of speeding hearse is not, she knows, lemon in mouth of bleeding nurse; but they are equal in her mind. Her mind is cells pulsing in their helmet who want to find the forest road where lay mole-mother torn open by owl, dead babies like red seeds, but that won’t happen today because Luminy is not in the woods, she is in the house. And if she fell from a black raft, who would save her? No one, and her braids would break in the stony water sucking nightly the red poles.

Does Jessica know that Click went through their things? That she roamed and rifled? At the restaurant, where you always run into people because where else are they going to go, Click keeps her sweatshirt hood up.

“She’s not here,” Gregory points out.

Click bites into a dome of white lettuce.

“And it’s not like you stole anything.” Gregory wipes his mouth. “Right?”

“How is your arm feeling?” she says.

“Aches, but tolerable.”

“You might need more of that toner.”

“Tonic.” He nods.

Click doesn't like to be corrected on words, and especially not by someone who only did two years of college. “Why do you call her a witch anyway? It's rather offensive.”

“Because that's what she's called,” Gregory says.

The world does not need farms but this farm is so beautiful, the steep woods and cinder barns and fields swollen green, the heifer licking, goats galloping. His father wouldn't say beautiful, a girl word; he says decent little place. They want to keep living on their decent little place.

At night they stand at the door with their chests to the cold and smell smoke on the air and are happy.

At morning, still dark, they feed and water. Cow-mouth is black and soft. Split hooves kick at the scent of grain. They find the youngest goat with his leg broken, little bone sticking up raw. Gregory's father says, “Cunt,” and tells him to call the vet.

“Don't kill her,” Gregory says, remembering last year's calf, wolf-bitten, shot.

The vet says he's been seeing a lot of maimed livestock lately.

“Nefarious,” Gregory's father says.

Gregory squats on the hay and holds the trembling thing.

“Does it bug you,” Click says, “that I'm older?”

“Why would it bug me?”

She pinches his thin thigh.

“No. You?”

“I don't give a fuck,” she says. “But I want you not to give a fuck.”

“Well, I sure do not.” Gregory keeps his eyes on the road. He can't afford another reckless-operating citation. That last one, Christ it bled him to bone.

The witch braids slowly. The hair is too fine and makes mistakes. Luminy won't stand to be cut; the plaits go to her thighs. “Pretty,” says the witch because Luminy loves a lot, and always has, that word.

Click was first Clarice; a small brother couldn't pronounce it. A year ago she owed nine thousand dollars to her credit card and her rent in the city was so high there was nothing left over to pay the credit card with. Then a mountain newspaper needed a writer. She is a writer. She can write, at least, clean and well-

proportioned sentences that earned her A's on college essays. Another reason she moved was loneliness. To be lonely in a city of millions felt like failure.

Gregory's father shakes her hand. "How're you keeping?"

"Good, thanks. Two goats save man from burning home."

"The headline girl."

"Headline woman," Click says.

"Is that seriously the only thing you do there?" the father asks. "Make up captions?"

"It's actually," she says, "only a small part of the job."

Gregory gives her, as she was afraid he might, the look that means Really?

The dog down the mountain is sicker than anyone except Luminy knows. His dumb and laughing owners think it's natural he can't eat right, like his stomach had been made that way. Truth is he gnaws poison off the feeding barrel of an old fungicider, getting his little dose regular. She won't stand it, will she? She will bite that neck herself.

A great obsession of the nineteenth century was the overload of dead people who scattered contagions in fuming remains in booths under slabs in the garden, dead right next to the houses. Click and Gregory are alive today in a dark booth under a slab in a small city forty miles from the town. They are both pretty sure — separately and not out loud — that their days of mutual moviegoing are coming to an end.

"That girl had an unnatural nose," Click says when they come blinking into the afternoon.

"Wasn't just the nose."

"Well, I mean, yeah — ," Click re-shoulders her purse, " — those are a given. But the nose struck me as ominously ideal."

Gregory puts facial feature envy on the mushrooming list of reasons.

She says, "Want to get some Indian?"

"Ner — I think better just head back."

Words are plates of water. Their waves lick the poles. One word is "careful," which is given often to Luminy. Be careful. Keep out of the way. She is the daughter of a mother who has no daughter. She swims in careful.

On the road between the highway and the river, where after a bend the lights of the town can first be seen, Gregory makes a hum of pain. He doesn't know he is making it until Click asks, "Your arm? I really don't understand," she adds, "why you haven't gone to the emergency room."

Gregory hasn't the patience to explain how many doctors were rude to his mother, and how many nurses forgot to support her head when they were

changing her position on the bed, and how many times she asked Gregory to take her away from the hospital. Instead he lights a cigarette, or intends to — the pack is wedged tight in a slit on the dash, and in the act of reaching he lets the steering wheel slip ever so gently too far to the left, and before Click (who is hunting in her purse for gloss) can notice, Gregory's truck has floated across the yellow line and hit Luminy (who is on her way home from ending the life of Wendell and Jessica's dog) at fifty-eight miles an hour.