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Stolen Souls

Emily Kudeviz

Clemson University, ekudeviz@gmail.com

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STOLEN SOULS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts
English

by
Emily Kudeviz
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris Committee Chair
Dr. Alma Bennett
Dr. Jillian Weise

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is concerned with the exploration of the stages of grief. “Stolen Souls” utilizes the popular speculative fantasy genre, mixing fantasy monsters with reality to allow the main character a safe way to deal with the grief she faces in her life. “Stolen Souls” borrows Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s theories of denial and acceptance while at the same time drawing from the various models of the fantasy genre.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Carol Kudeviz, my mother, who has read this story now as many times as me. It is also dedicated to Dr. Marilyn Knight who helped my writing grow to what it is today. And, of course, it is dedicated to Louis C. Groff III for putting up with all of my craziness over the thesis writing process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| TITLE PAGE | i |
| ABSTRACT | ii |
| DEDICATION | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. EXAMINING THE MONSTERS WITHIN: UTILIZING SPECULATIVE FICTION AS A MEANS OF DEALING WITH GRIEF IN “STOLEN SOULS” | 1 |
| II. STOLEN SOULS | 8 |
| READING LIST | 35 |

CHAPTER ONE

EXAMINING THE MONSTERS WITHIN: UTILIZING SPECULATIVE FICTION AS A MEANS OF DEALING WITH GRIEF IN “STOLEN SOULS”

The fantastic in literature is not a new phenomenon, though today we see vampires, ghosts, and werewolves in our own world instead of needing to travel to another world to find such magic. We have used the fantastic, primarily in the form of gods, to offer explanations for things which we did not understand, could not understand. We have used it, in the form of fairytales, to provide anecdotes which scare or excite children. We have used it to offer commentary on societal values and actions, disguising our thoughts and feelings in magical worlds which highlight the perceived wrongs of our culture. We have used it to escape into new worlds, to delve into forbidden romances, meet and conquer mythical creatures, and escape whatever keeps us grounded in our daily lives.

While the fantastical has been an almost ever-present segment of literature, the increase in monster stories featuring vampires, werewolves, and fallen angels (to name a few) appears to be relatively new. These monsters populate the bookshelves, drawing the attention of teens and adults alike, but the fascination with them far transcends just a desire to escape. They reside in both the physical landscape and in the internal landscapes, existing in transit. They are a physical force with which to be dealt, the physical embodiment of both attraction and revulsion. These monsters allow us to invest in something which cannot harm us and yet are not so removed that we escape to an entire new world when we read. And yet, they are also internal, allowing us to deal with those forces which ground us to the mundane. Whatever traps us in the real world is

expressed in these novels by these monsters—a creature to overcome or a creature that could be our escape. They are the physical manifestations of our own fears and desires fraught with obstacles and dangers. They allow us to navigate the murky depths of our inner selves in a less detrimental way. These monsters allow readers the luxury of approaching danger, experiencing danger, but remaining unscathed and whole.

This project began as a rumination on monster stories—what draws us to them, why they are so important—but eventually evolved into a project that sought to understand how trauma is experienced, how individuals deal with instances in their lives that are confusing and hurtful. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying*, developed the five stages of grief, and the first stage, the stage of denial, was the one that held the most sway over me when developing this project. In this stage, the individual suffering a loss seeks to deny and fight against what has happened. A wall is erected. Tate Sorrell is in denial. She travels in the wake of an illness, a death, and the long-time disappearance of her friend, a girl who fed her stories of alluring monsters when they were children. She travels in hopes of discovering the truth of her friend's stories, stories that, if true, lend truth to her belief that her friend is not dead.

Despite the death of her significant other, Gabe, and her own impending death via cancer, it is Jenelle's disappearance that keeps Tate struggling in the first stage of grief. Jenelle's disappearance, her extraction from Tate's world without warning, coupled with the fact that her body was never found, leads Tate on a trip to the small fishing village of Whitby in the north of England. It is here that she seeks to come face to face with her demons. Tate's denial is evident throughout the story, evident in the interspersed

snippets of mythology retold as stories from Janelle, evident in the instance when Tate recalls finding Janelle's charm bracelet, evident in her brief tryst with Cavan in the woods, evident in the way she plans to return home, the way she plans for her death. Her struggle with denial throughout the course of the story to exist on two planes.

"Stolen Souls" could be viewed as either a speculative fiction story or a personal metaphorical journey. If we view it as a speculative fiction story, "Stolen Souls" sits firmly in the monster story sphere, drawing from influences such as Jo Walton's *Among Others* and Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. Both Walton and Gaiman situate their tales in worlds where the fantastical is rampant, but not overpowering. The monsters are real. Speculative fiction is an all-encompassing genre of various types of literature that use fantastical elements, and my story draws from the subgenre of contemporary fantasy, very similar to both the aforementioned authors. Tate lives in the real world, operating within contemporary boundaries, experiencing real events. Much like Walton's and Gaiman's main characters, Tate's world is unchanged by fantastical elements although there is the possibility for that change. However, unlike Walton's and Gaiman's novels, which do explicitly contain magical elements in the form of gods and faeries, my story differs from them, containing no specific instances of magic. Magic is relayed through the story of the Kelpie and the constant denial of Tate. She manages to believe in magic to keep Janelle alive, and the story is left open as to the possibility of magic actually existing, whereas there is no real proof of the magic she seeks.

Magical realism stories, such as "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, infuse the real world with the magical in such a way that these

magical aspects seem natural. Magic is woven into the very fold of the mundane. Magic is accepted. In Marquez's short story, the old man and his large wings are accepted, even if puzzled over. The puzzlement comes however from whether or not he is an angel, not over some confusion relating to how he could even exist at all. While I ultimately do not subscribe to this idea in "Stolen Souls," the idea of an accepted and unquestioned magic is important to the locale of my story. The story could have, conceivably, been set in any locale around the world, because, as we see with various contemporary fantasy fiction, gods and magic transcend borders. But, Tate is not supposed to be crazy, she is not supposed to come across as a completely unreliable narrator. Instead, in order to accent her grief and her need to discover the truth, setting the locale of the story where the idea of magic is not completely foreign or misunderstood was imperative. And the coast of England, the very town where Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* based on a large collection of strange magic stories, seemed like a location where Tate could undertake this process without appearing as crazy.

However, this story does not utilize any of the traditional magical elements. While it draws on concepts of magical realism and contemporary fantasy, magic is never fully integrated into the story, and this aspect allows Tate's journey to be metaphorical. Because there is no actual magic happening within the story, nothing that firmly situates this story within the realm of fantasy, it could be viewed as an internal journey. The journey is synonymous with the cycle of grief, even if this story only exhibits a segment of that journey. If Tate is in the denial stage of overcoming loss, then the horse and the magic she transposes onto Cavan are merely extensions of her disbelief. She takes the

horse and man out of the realm of reality and transfers her own emotional desire onto them, turning them into monsters that could be her salvation. They become personal monsters instead of actual ones. Contemporary fantasy author Kelly Link's story "Travels with the Snow Queen" could be viewed as a metaphorical journey in which the character has finally accepted her loss, but the elaborate voyage serves to overcome the stage of acceptance.

In Link's short story, the main character is journeying to find Kay, the man she loved. Kay has been stolen by the Snow Queen and the main character, Gerda, wants to confront him after he left her. In many ways she struggles with grief, with the loss of her lover, but unlike Tate, she appears to be in the acceptance stage. Gerda's journey, while it happens within the sphere of the story, carries with it implications of the internal. Gerda speaks of fairytales explicitly, as though comparing her own personal journal to that of a fairytale, saying close to the beginning of the story that "fairy tales aren't easy on the feet" (100). The story is also filled with some archetypal fairytale characters such as the Snow Queen, Briar Rose, and one who could be considered the witch from Hansel and Gretel. What further aligns Link's fantasy with a metaphorical journey is the story within the story. Throughout Link's story, the reader gets snippets of what seems to be a tour guide imparting details of a tour, implying that though we get Gerda's journey, we are also getting other women's journeys through break ups. Gerda is both traveler and tour guide, making the trip more of a process than an actual excursion. I take this idea, this external and internal play, and transpose it into a less fantastically driven story.

The need to drive “Stolen Souls” in a less fantastical way grew from Roland Barthe’s idea of the *punctum*. The *punctum*, while an idea which speaks most directly to photography and imagery, can be created in literature, and while it affects readers differently (or maybe will not affect some at all), I wrote with that in mind. The *punctum* highlights upon some internal disaster of the reader and it is up to the reader to draw the lines of connection. However, with Barthe’s idea in mind, I purposefully left the remainder of the story open. By leaving the end of the story hazy as to what actually happens, I hoped to elicit a reaction from the reader that would allow them to connect with Tate’s experience, her desire to believe in something that would make the traumas in her life bearable.

This decision is intricately tied in with my interest in faith. I purposefully leave the story without a definitive ending, much the way religious faith has no definitive answers. The ending is not resolved, the reader is not supposed to know if the Kelpie exists or if Tate has merely imagined these things because of her desire to deal with and understand the changes that have occurred in her life.

In this sense, I deviate from other authors who utilize fantastical elements. While some of the authors I have used as guides in this project, and much of my writing, employ the fantastical as a solid fixture, in this particular story, I want to challenge that. Nothing in life is certain, nothing is necessarily known, and each person deals with his or her trials and tribulations in various ways. I seek to involve the reader, to allow the reader to experience something within this story, to feel the *punctum* Barthes speaks of in *Camera Lucida*. The magic may or may not be real, but the desire to believe in the magic

(in whatever form you choose to believe) is something that I believe can speak to most people.

CHAPTER TWO

STOLEN SOULS

She had seen the horse for weeks. Ever since she settled into the small rental in Whitby, England, in the middle of the summer, she had seen the horse every morning around dawn and every evening just after the sun had turned the sky into cotton candy. Every day she would stand at her window overlooking the rocky shore, overlooking the black stallion trotting in the sand. And every day she would watch the horse and each time she saw him turn his circuit she would drop the curtain and push the story from her head.

“Do you believe in magic?” The blonde-headed girl leaned forward, smiling, voice steady. There was no room for humor.

Tate shrugged, turning her eyes down. No, she didn’t believe in magic. Magic was silly, even if it was exciting. It existed in movies and plays but never in real life. After all, how could magic exist when no one loved you? When Tate was sent by Child Protective Services to the girls’ home three years earlier, she had been alone. Her mother, the only person she had, died of a drug overdose, and she had stayed with her mom in the apartment for three days before anyone noticed. No, Tate reasoned, magic was not real.

Jenelle, just two years older than Tate, grasped Tate’s hand, squeezing it. “It’s real. Trust me.” She seemed so sure, so exact, that Tate nodded willingly, closing her eyes against the dark. It was always dark when they spoke, Jenelle climbing down to Tate’s bed, chattering like a bird. Nonstop. And Tate did not question, did not mind. The

stories were fun, mindless. They let her forget. “Can I tell you a story my mom had told me before she went away?”

“Mhmm.”

Jenelle giggled.

Today was no different. Tate Sorrell kept her fingertips curled around the doily curtains—old lady curtains that came with the house—clutching them as her eyes followed each step of the four-gaited movement. She waited for five minutes, until the stallion slowed, pivoted. “I’m running out of time,” she muttered into the glass of the window before smoothing the curtain back into place and turning back into the kitchen.

Her visa was almost up. Would be in two weeks, and she had begun the process of cleaning, packing, wrapping everything up. Soon she would be boarding a bus to head back to London and then a plane to Atlanta, where no one would pick her up, and no one would even care that she had returned. Maybe she would skip her flight, go into hiding, travel the world, and live until her insides were finally eaten away. Maybe.

Tate opened the fridge, scanning the contents. “I need more milk,” she grumbled as she shook a carton, listening to the heavy slosh of maybe half a cup worth of liquid. She had been avoiding going out, had been closing up in her small rental, with lights dimmed, a revolving bottle of wine gracing the table, and documents spread out over the floor. Going outside seemed futile. At least it had been until she needed sustenance again. Opening the milk carton she took a large swig, finishing up the contents before tossing it in the trash. Or rubbish bin, as they called it here. She chuckled.

Gabe would have loved it here, would have loved the funny words, the crisp salty breeze, and the ability to walk everywhere. He would have loved it, but they never would have come. Ever. Tate didn't like to fly, didn't feel comfortable in tight, closed-in spaces, and he had never forced her. So, when he died, when she got the news from the doctor in the waiting room that he had "moved on," she started planning a trip. They had been dating for two years, the closest person to her aside from Jenelle, and when he died she had felt the loss.

Tate mulled over these thoughts, bandied them around in her head while she slipped on a light jacket, tugged the boots over her pants, and grabbed her Monet umbrella for good measure. She resisted the urge to look at the horse again, to turn her gaze out over the sea as she locked the door and began the walk into town.

Tate did not, however, head to the grocer right away, instead she made her way down the old streets, through a back alley, and out onto the other side where a large square opened before a row of neatly-kept shops and eateries. She had acquaintances here. In the nearly six months that she had been living in Whitby, she had made cautious friendships with the locals. She would see them and they would chat, always about different things, always pointless. Sometimes one would give her advice and another would try to dress her up and take her out, but usually it was comforting, distanced conversation. No one had been invited over to her house, no one had ever eaten a meal with her, and no one would miss her when she left. It hurt though, wrapping tendrils around her chest, squeezing just a bit before loosening its hold. She would miss them. She had not had many friends other than Gabe and Jenelle, but both were gone—Gabe

dead, Jenelle missing. No one knew what happened to her. No one cared to look, except Tate.

Jenelle and Tate had been close during their adolescent and teen years at the girls' home. They had shared everything, forming a friendship that had woven itself so finely together that they were often confused when getting disciplined or praised. Jenelle would become Tate and Tate, Jenelle. They were inseparable.

But, like many friends, they drifted slightly as they got older. Jenelle ran with a tough group of girls and when she turned eighteen, she was booted from the system, leaving Tate on her own for two years. There were letters, of course, and occasional phone calls. A few clandestine meetings behind the school portables when Tate would skip classes. But, Jenelle lived between the worlds of lost children and normal society. Tate had no way of reaching her friend. Nothing could be planned

So, when Jenelle had disappeared, and Tate filed a missing person's report, the police performed a cursory look. Half hearted and swift, they did not spend much time on a girl who lived on the fringe of society. It wasn't important. She had no family, had been out of the system, and never been dragged into the courts for any reason. Basically, to them, she was a ghost. Tate looked though, for weeks, for months. Sometimes, she thought she had evidence that Jenelle was alive, that Jenelle was merely playing elaborate games of hunt and catch—a game they played in the Home.

Once, Tate had found Jenelle's bracelet with the horse charm underneath some bushes where she worked. Glinting in the sunlight, Tate had spotted it and kept it, knowing it had to belong to Jenelle. Jenelle was alive. Another time, when Tate was

hiking a trail an hour away from her apartment, she swore she heard Jenelle's laugh—languid and smooth. And when she called out to her friend, there was the laugh again. A whisper in the wind, beckoning Tate. Jenelle was alive, had to be alive. And, suddenly, Tate knew the stories, the myths that Jenelle said her mother told her when she was a child, were real. And so Tate stopped looking, really looking for her friend. She knew the time would come. She knew she would find Jenelle when she needed her the most—when she needed the stories.

Tate was lost in her thoughts, completely cut off from what was happening around her, though it wasn't much. It was nearly seven on Saturday morning with a sharp breeze that cut through her light jacket and the only other people around seemed to be workers and a few drunkards lying on benches. So when she heard the voice behind her wishing her a good morning, she jumped.

"I did not disturb you, did I?" It was a deep voice, cultured, elegant. It sounded concerned but also vaguely amused as if her reaction were comical. She tried to offer a smile, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"No, no. Well, yes, you did, but it's my own fault. I shouldn't have been standing around not paying attention." Rushed, Tate fluttered her hands when she spoke, making small gestures meant to help portray her thoughts. Always a nervous habit, she had it from childhood, and this man brought it out instantly.

"I apologize. I merely wanted to see if you were okay." Again the whispers of culture in his voice. A brocade voice, a velvet voice. Tate wanted to wrap herself up in that voice. And he smiled.

“I’m sorry. Thank you though, I’m fine. I was just thinking.” She relaxed ever so slightly, breathing in deeply, focusing on her thoughts, on the man before her fully, instead of merely his voice. He was tall, broad-shouldered but slender. His hair was brown, waving down to his chin, and his eyes seemed to be star-speckled sapphire. They were easy eyes, calming, debonair, and she refused to meet them. *Never meet their eyes. They can steal your soul.* Unbidden, Jenelle’s voice rose in her head, warning her. Magic is not real, Tate affirmed, mentally chastising herself for allowing the eyes to throw her off so thoroughly. Magic is not real. *But it is. You know it.* Again, Jenelle’s words forced their way into her thoughts. Tate forced herself to maintain eye contact.

“And what was so strong a thought that you felt compelled to stop in the middle of the street?” He was teasing her, of that she was sure, and she shook her head.

“You wouldn’t want to know. Besides, it’s not technically the middle of the road. No cars are here.”

His eyebrow arched and he laughed, the lines around his eyes crinkling. She watched, looking up at him, sneaking glances at his eyes that she realized, when he turned his head out of direct light, were only a bright blue. Normal. And she couldn’t help but feel disappointment wash over her.

“They are hard to find, Tate, very hard, and you should never go looking for them. They will trap you if you do.” Jenelle curled up next to Tate, two little girls twined around each other in the bottom shelf of the bunk bed, in a room with other girls and

other beds. Everyone else was sleeping. "They have two forms, that of a man and that of a horse."

"I'm Tate." She extended her hand, mustering up a strong appearance of bravado, remembering her manners. Despite her thoughts, her feelings, on the existence of magic, the words echoed in her mind, unaided. And she struggled to meet his gaze. "You are?"

"Cavan McNeil." He grasped her hand, curling his fingers around hers. She shivered at the clamminess. They felt as if they were bathed in ocean foam.

"A pleasure."

"I should say the same." He paused, sliding his hands into his pockets, adopting a slouched stance. She watched him, shifting her weight from her left to her right foot.

"Well—"

"You're not from here, are you?" He interrupted, his voice causing her to smile.

"That obvious, yeah?" She wrapped her arms around her body. If the circumstances were different, she'd be happy. She was the thinnest she had ever been in her life, with clothes nearly falling off her, drowning her. She was thin—bordering dangerously thin—but the thinner she got, the closer to the end she knew she was. Tate could enjoy it, sometimes, like those evenings she would get drunk and wake up in someone's bed the next morning. And, stretching out in the sun, on drenched sheets, she would run her fingers up and down her torso, feeling the ridges of her ribs. Then, then she appreciated her newfound slenderness. But now, standing in the chilly ocean breeze, her body lacking warmth, she hated it.

“Indeed.” A charismatic smile, a note of amusement in his voice. He tilted his head, and she looked up to meet his eyes.

“I’m visiting. I’ll be leaving soon, though.” She was amazed at how sturdy her voice sounded, how strong and sure of itself, while in her head she was walking slowly across a tightrope strung too high.

“And did you find what you were looking for? Most people who come here are looking for something.”

“No. But I didn’t expect to.” A bitter smile. No, Tate didn’t find it. She had hoped, throughout the long months in this sea-side town, that she would find it—find Jenelle and the horse. She had not necessarily expected to however.

“Maybe I can help.” The man, Cavan, extended his hand, offering it to her. She took it without hesitation, ignoring any prudent hesitation she felt. Maybe he could help, because she didn’t want to give up on magic. Not quite. Not yet. It was too soon, too late, to give up on those stories which fed her through her years with Jenelle.

“Oh, really now?” She arched an eyebrow, mimicking his earlier movement, slipping into the mode of comfortable banter perhaps, or, at the very least, friendly conversation.

“Of course. Tell me what it is.” He laughed. “I know everything.” He looped her hand through his arm, and pivoted on his heel, forcing her to move with him.

“Faeries. I want to see faeries.” It wasn’t far off the mark—not really. Faeries, magic, God, it was all similar, and she was looking for something, grasping for anything to pull her up.

“Ah, well, that’s an easy one. I thought you were going to ask for something like vampires.” Cavan kept a straight face as he led her through the narrow streets, twisting and turning easily, indicating his knowledge of the area. But she had not seen him in the nearly six months she had been here, had never even bumped into him accidentally. And his was a face, she was sure, that would not easily be forgotten.

Jenelle rested her head on Tate’s shoulder, and Tate felt the gentle rise and fall of easy breathing. They had school in the morning, and, because the older girls woke early for their classes, the younger ones often found themselves woken as well. Tate wanted to sleep, but she wanted to hear more of the story. “Well, what happens?”

“Nothing happens. It’s just...this creature. It’s dangerous.” Jenelle breathed deeply.

“That’s a horrible story.”

“No it’s not.” Jenelle waited a moment, and Tate closed her eyes. “This man is beautiful. He’s beautiful and so very tricky.” She paused. “You can never be too careful around him. He isn’t the one that hurts you, though. That’s the horse.”

“So why is he important?”

“He is the horse, but he can’t hurt you that way. He can steal your soul, though.”

“You’re bad at stories.” Tate turned over, lying on her side.

“I am not. You just don’t believe anything.” A soft touch to Tate’s cheek before she withdrew herself from the entanglement.

“I’m sorry, Jen. It’s just...hard.”

“I know. But in this world, this place where the horse can take you, everything is better.” Her voice dropped low, deeper than a whisper, settling like a blanket over Tate.

“He can make everything better for you, for us. We need to find him.”

“Why? If he’s evil?”

“Because Tate, he may be evil, but he can save us from this. And if we go together, maybe we can out trick him,” Jenelle said, snuggling closer to Tate.

“Tell me.” Half whispered, drugged with sleep, Tate kept her eyes closed, hoping.

The sun peaked through the leaves, toying with the foliage, the moss, and they walked in silence. Tate was soaking in the warmth, the break from ocean air. It had been a while since she had left the heart of the sea-side town, and even longer since she had considered going for a walk in the forest. It had been too long, she decided, as the sun warmed her shoulders. She had missed the feel of so many things, but she knew it didn't matter. When the doctors told her there was little to be done, that she had not more than a year to live before the cancer consumed her, before the very end which would destroy her body with a terrifying swiftness, that the best thing to do was enjoy her time and take the strong pain killers, she had withdrawn. She had embraced death as a way to be with Gabe, with her family. With Jenelle. And, in that embrace she stopped enjoying. Why enjoy when you are just going to die, she wondered. But this walk, feeling the crunch of leaves under her feet, the warmth prickling right between her shoulder blades through the jacket, made her want to enjoy.

“It’s beautiful out here.” Unprompted she spoke, more to herself than to the man escorting her, the man who played with her memories of stories and daydreams.

“The woods are always beautiful. Fae live here,” he offered in response, leading her through a cluster of trees and out into a glen. A storybook clearing, the space was surrounded by trees, quiet sentinels, their leaves blocking out the tinkling sound of water. So different from the rush of waves, this brook was subtle, cautious. Never one for the overstated, this quiet space, secluded space, appealed to Tate, and she broke away from his hold to walk out onto the green plush, treading carefully.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” she said. Again she spoke more to herself, but he advanced toward her.

“I’m not surprised.” Cavan walked past her and sat on a boulder covered in moss. “It is exceptional. And special.” Mysteries lurked in his voice, obscured by congeniality and humor. Those same mysteries had lurked in her friend’s voice, the voice that had started to appear more and more frequently as she counted down the days.

“Why special?”

“This is their home. This is where they dance.” He didn’t specify who they were, but she didn’t need him to. Instead she merely nodded. “They don’t appear on cue, Tate, but they do live here. Magic is always here.” He smiled, and she turned toward him fully, eyeing him closely. The way he said her name, the soft thickness which cocooned her, allowed Tate to believe, allowed her to open up and accept in a way nothing else had.

“How do you know so much?” In the same way Jenelle had known, Cavan knew, and suspicion lurked in her voice. “How do you know?”

“How do people believe in God? In Heaven? In Hell? How do people believe in love?” Questions answering questions. She sighed. Because, while she could wholeheartedly say she did not believe in God, Heaven, or Hell, she did believe in love. Very much so.

“They just do. It’s feeling. It’s emotion,” she said. Tate sat on the grass, absorbing the feel of dew-soaked underbrush making its mark on her jeans. She’d regret it when she stood, but for now she focused on the sensation.

“Exactly. It’s belief.” He paused, picking a daisy and handing it to her. “Tell me, Tate, why does that scare you so much?”

Her tone wavered, dropped down an octave. “It doesn’t scare me. I just don’t see how belief helps anyone. At least not in this world.” She hesitated before taking the flower, raising it to her nose. *He can take you away, Tate. Just be careful.* She shook her head, attempting to obliterate the girlish voice—Jenelle’s voice. She wanted to believe, wanted to surrender. But she couldn’t.

He nodded and stood, extending a hand to her, waiting. “I understand.”

Cavan didn’t, though, she could tell as she allowed him to help her up, allowed him to lift her from the ground and embrace her. She could tell he didn’t understand her as she considered his breathing, his light eyes which seemed to morph into fathomless sapphire pools. Pools flecked with stars, with everything she had been told over the years. But, he did not understand as they turned to leave the glen.

“So, why the horse?”

“The horse is the final step, Tate. The man, the man can steal your soul, but that’s the price for magic, isn’t it? To lose who you are. The man, the Faery, he digs into your mind and lays the idea.” Jenelle sat up in the bed, leaning against the headboard and Tate curled up next to her, resting her head on the blonde girl’s lap.

“And?”

“And, you have the chance to follow him. But the only way to follow him is to get on the horse.”

“Why is that so bad?”

“Because no one knows what that means. The horse kills you, or brings you to Faery.”

Tate laughed, balancing herself between sleep and wake. “That doesn’t sound good. If it kills you then how do you get there?”

“I don’t know. But the horse—it can be found near the ocean. It is always found near the ocean. It’s big, bigger than the race horses, bigger than the horses in the Christmas parade. And it’s black.”

They parted ways back in town, Tate promising to meet him the next day. She couldn’t deny him, allowing instead his voice to wash over her, bathe her in velvet, and she nodded at his request. Now, standing alone, her stomach growled, convulsing. She hadn’t eaten all morning and now, though she wasn’t sure what time it was, her body had had enough neglect. Over the past year the medicine had diminished her desire to eat. It had reduced the desire until she ate only out of necessity, never for pleasure. But that was

a good thing, wasn't it? Tate had thought so, happy at first. A disease couldn't be that bad if it caused her to be less hungry. Over the months, though, it progressed and she wouldn't eat for a few days or so. And then the next thing she'd remember would be waking up in a hospital bed.

But now, since living here, she had kept on a strict schedule. No hospitals. This was a vacation, a chance to break away from the stigma of sickness, of death. She still had time before hospitals would be required constantly. She was a woman here, a woman perhaps a little malnourished, a little strange, a little too tired all the time, but a woman. Just that. Today broke that schedule and she felt her body slowing. She needed food, and, while not completely aware of the time, it had to be past noon. Everything would be open.

Most people in town ignored her, the way they do with other locals, and it made her feel good. Having first arrived in Whitby she was looked at, sometimes spoken to, 'helped.' Now, as she made her way through the winding street toward Whetherspoon's she was unencumbered—left to her thoughts. That man, Cavan, stirred something within her, nothing terribly sexual, nothing too strongly mimicking the flame of desire, but something equally strong. Perhaps stronger.

He had spoken of magic, spoken of dreams, spoken of belief. Tate laughed slightly, focusing her eyes on the destination. No, she didn't believe him. Couldn't. After all of this time, all the death and disappointment, she had no reason to believe. Once, when her friend had told her stories, tales, of magic, myth, she had been skeptical, but

open. She did not know if that were fully possible again. But, she wanted to explore his stories the way she had explored Jenelle's stories all those nights.

Opening the door to Whetherspoon's, Tate spotted Vlad, a goth boy around her age, sitting in a corner table, an empty plate before him, a half glass of beer in his hand. Despite all the time she had been living here, she didn't know what he did, or what his real name was, but it didn't matter. She smiled at him. "Hey, Vlad." He turned, waved her over.

"I have a question for you." No pleasantries, not today. Something was building inside of her, something hurried, dark, persistent. Jenelle was on her mind, her stories, her disappearance. The man, Cavan, was on her mind. She had no time to chat.

"Shoot," he said.

"Do you know someone named Cavan? I think he said Cavan McNeil?"

"Naw, never heard of him. Why?" Vlad shifted in his seat, turning to her fully.

Tate turned away slightly, signaling a waitress. "May I please have the curry sampler?" The waitress nodded and walked away and Tate refocused on the black-clothed man sitting across from her. "Just curious. You've lived here your whole life, so I thought maybe you'd know him. I met someone earlier with that name. He was odd. We went on a walk." Saying it, she realized how odd it sounded, how silly and dangerous.

"You're fucking crazy." He shook his head, taking a swig of his beer.

"Maybe...but it was nice. Like a date." Tate paused, thinking of a way to proceed. She wanted to ask him about magic. She couldn't get the idea out of her head. It seemed

to fill her fully, bury down deep within her and pull upwards, flowing to the extremities, but she refrained.

“Awesome.” He paused. “I don’t know him, but he could be from here. Outskirts of town maybe,” Vlad said doubtfully. Shrugging.

Tate nodded, unconvinced. She wasn’t sure if the man was real. Vlad would know, of that she was sure. Vlad should know, but here he was, sitting across from her, unable to confirm if this man lived in the area or not. His voice assured her that he was doubtful. Tate sighed and looked away for a moment, swallowing the doubt running through her thoughts. She turned back to him and said, “Yeah, perhaps. Just thought I’d ask.”

Tate grinned and stopped talking to him, focusing instead on the carved up table. Jilly <3 Ron was engraved right before her, and her heart ached for a moment. Despite their relationship being nothing more than dating, it was better that Gabe was dead, better that the fall from the motorcycle snapped his neck, better that he didn’t have to deal with her while she was sick. Yes, much better. Tate allowed herself that one moment, that one feeling before focusing on Vlad.

“Think nothing of it.” Vlad finished the last of his light-colored beer.

She was glad that her food arrived and looked at it, her feelings of hunger warring with her body’s rejection of food in general. Pushing a fork around the plate, Tate finally selected a piece of curried chicken and speared it. She ate in silence while he fiddled with his cell. They had nothing to say for the moment, nothing to relate to. Nothing at all.

The following day Tate stood sentinel at the window, watching for the horse, curtains pulled aside, watercolor eyes drifting over the shore below the small house. It was calming, watching the waves lap at the sand, whisking away loose granules. She waited, sipping at a mug of tea. In a few short hours she had promised to meet Cavan at the edge of town. Part of her didn't want to show up. Part of her wanted to stay, instead, in her house, watching the ocean, reading, drinking, packing. It did not matter which activity per se, but she would be ensconced within the safety of her home. The doubt from Vlad's voice remained a constant reel playing in her head. Perhaps Cavan wasn't real and she had imagined him the other day, had imagined their conversation. Perhaps she heard what she wanted to hear—a fanciful name, a beautiful voice.

Tate sighed, about to turn away from the window when the large black stallion pranced onto the sand, neck arched. It slowed to a stop, trumpeting regally before half rearing and taking off in a break-neck pace across the sand. She watched, mesmerized as always, as he stretched out along the shore, digging in and challenging the wind. Her lips curled up in a smile. When he slowed his self-possessed parade to a stop, she let the curtain drop.

She was tired, her body dragging. Everything seemed slow, surreal, and Tate hoped the tea would wake her up. She needed to be alert, needed to focus on things other than her past. Over the past few days it had swelled in her thoughts, driven out almost everything else. Consuming her. And yesterday. Yesterday had made things worse. Jenelle's voice surfaced in her mind, prompting her memories of stories told while in the

Home when they were younger. The memories were unwanted, but they were there anyway. Tate couldn't get rid of them.

Struggling to turn her thoughts back to Cavan, to solidify in her logical mind that he was real, that he was not a manifestation of her longing, Tate shook her head and placed the mug in the sink. "Vlad doesn't know everyone," she said to the empty kitchen. "He doesn't." Again. Firmly.

That thought stayed with her while she walked into town and past the square with the shops. It stayed with her until she reached the edge of town, when it faltered and slipped from her mind. Tate had dressed nicely, a simple pair of jeans coupled with a black button down, in anticipation of this meeting. Cavan intrigued her. Tate waited, attempting to be patient, attempting nonchalance. *He's not going to show*, she thought, shoving her hands in her pockets. *He's not going to show*.

"You came," he said, approaching Tate. He was walking down the road from the direction of the Whitby Township— not from out of town. "I wasn't sure." He smiled easily, a grin ready on his lips and she responded in kind.

You were wrong. He's real. Relief flooded her now that he was standing before her. She wasn't crazy. He wasn't make believe. "I thought the same of you, sir." The inclination to refer to him as 'sir' gripped her and she did so seamlessly. The way he spoke, the way he acted, she couldn't help but feel the air of nobility surround him.

Cavan laughed, drawing to a stop before her, and she moved her eyes up to his, examining the color. Disappointment snaked through her at their mild blue hue—much like the day before. Tate had hoped to catch a glimmer of the sapphire. *Take care, Tate.*

He's not what he seems. Jenelle's voice was the one she heard, issuing the warning that had come, like the one yesterday, without prompting.

"I'm glad you could meet me today," Cavan said, stretching out a hand towards Tate, waiting for her to take it. And she did, after a moment's hesitation. She settled her hand into his, entwining her fingers with his long ones, feeling the cool flesh against her warmed skin. "I want to show you the waterfall that leads into the glen."

And she nodded, allowing him to lead her through the trees. They walked in silence and she allowed herself to melt into the feelings, to succumb to the pleasure of being outside, being with someone. It had been so long since she had allowed these feelings, and now, to feel them as the sun speckled through the trees, lighting a path, seemed right. Tate didn't wish to disturb the silence.

When they finally broke through the trees, they stopped. He let go of her hand, turning to face her, but she didn't look at him. Instead, Tate's eyes traveled the course of the fall, a long slip of crystalline water ending in a pool just a few feet from them. "It's beautiful, Cavan." She spoke distractedly, keeping her eyes on the water, the rocks it tore over to reach the base, and then the calmness it became further into the pool.

"It is." Cavan stepped away from her, moving towards the pool, and kneeling down, dipping his fingers into the water. "Not many people from Whitby come here." His words were slow leaving his mouth, each one seemingly carefully selected, and they caught Tate's attention. Breaking from the spell of the waterfall, Tate approached Cavan, head tilted, chocolate hair catching a ray of light, glinting.

"Why not?"

“Many fear it. Lots of stories.”

“Magic? Fae?” she questioned, hoping to get some answers, hoping to discover more. She wanted to believe, to accept the stories, because that way Jenelle was not dead. If Fae existed, Jenelle could still be alive. She could find her. And she could save herself. Tate held her breath.

“Of course.” Cavan smiled, standing, turning his full attention on Tate. “Why are you so curious, though?”

His eyes had changed, become fathomless. They spiraled in on themselves as Tate watched, mesmerized, and she exhaled slowly, deeply. “I want to see it. I want to experience it. A friend told me stories once,” she said. Hushed, quiet, as though they were standing in a sanctuary that demanded respect.

Cavan seized her hand, gently encasing it in his own, drawing her close. “Would you even know it if you were looking it in the face?” He had lowered his voice to match hers.

A bird called out nearby and the tumble of water continued, creating a backdrop to their voices, punctuating Cavan’s question. Would she? No. Maybe. Tate wasn’t sure, didn’t know how she would recognize it, respond to it. Because, wasn’t that horse magic? And, if Jen’s stories were right, the man before her was magic. And, if Jen were still alive, did somehow manage to cross to Faery, wasn’t she magic? Tate wasn’t sure and so all she could do was shrug.

Cavan smiled, shaking his head. “You wouldn’t know. It would be difficult to tell, difficult to see. You would feel it, though.” He lowered his head, brushing his lips against

her ear, cutting out any interference from their surroundings. “You would feel it entering you, filling you. It would embody you when you face it.” Velvet tendrils from his voice tightened on her, creating chains around her thoughts.

“Maybe,” Tate whispered, ducking her head. She closed her eyes, focusing on the feelings that coursed through her. Static electricity raced up her back, jolting her. “Maybe I would. Maybe I do.”

She could feel Cavan smiling against her ear, could feel him nuzzling against her hair, could feel him start to envelop her. He stepped backward, pushing her along until her back was up against a tree, until she was pinned. *Stopstopstopstop!* Tate screamed. *He’ll steal your soul.* Jenelle’s story rose in her mind, warning her, willing her to stop, and Tate considered it. She could stop, could break away and save her soul—if she believed in the story. If magic were real, and this man was the creature from the story, she was doomed. But, if he were just a man, just a man who believed in magic, made her feel electric and alive, she was fine. Tate closed her eyes tightly against all of the thoughts and raised her head to meet his eyes.

They were sapphire.

They spent the rest of the day together, talking until dusk fell, until the water darkened and it was difficult to see beyond a few feet from their faces. For the first time in months she didn’t feel the impending death, didn’t think about the loss of her former lover Gabe, didn’t wonder about Jenelle and magic. She relaxed, accepting the surge of

power rushing through her. It raced along her veins and she felt, in those hours, that she was far from death—far from being alone.

Cavan reclined on the grass, his body stretched out, his eyes lightened. Tate watched them curiously, finally dredging up the courage to ask him. To question. “Why do your eyes change color?”

“Why do you think?” he responded. Questions with questions, as before, as the other day. She sighed and shrugged. “What if I told you it was magic?” A smile played on his lips, a quiver of the corners, tilting upwards slightly. Daring her.

“I’d say it was possible.” Tate grinned cautiously. *You’ve lost your soul. He owns it now.* Jenelle’s voice echoed through her body, reverberating. Tate didn’t want to believe it, but now, now as the evening encroached upon them, and her body returned to its normal state, Tate began to question, to wonder.

“Well, then, Miss Tate, it is because of magic.” He kept his voice low, humor filling the fibers and strands weaving around her body. They never loosened their hold on her, never let up their constant tug. She nodded, not trusting her voice.

You’re his.

“It’s best to avoid the horse if you’re alone.” Jenelle stroked Tate’s hair, hooking it behind her ears, pulling it loose again. “Don’t ever go down to the ocean if the black horse is there. He is tame, he will come right up to you, bend down, let you get on. And you will, of course, because he’s irresistible. Magic. But don’t get on him. Don’t go down to the ocean. Never alone.”

Cavan and Tate had parted with a kiss to her forehead, a soft lying of chilled lips to her skin. She felt the ocean on his lips, his breath. There had been no words, but as he walked her back towards the town, his hand stayed on her lower back possessively, leading her through the streets in the gathering darkness.

And now, Tate stared at the ocean, watching the lapping of the waves against the beach, against the rocks. Most of the shoreline was rocks, large jutting extensions promising a bad end to anyone who thought it fun to play around. Sometimes she wished she were more adventurous, like she was today, meeting up with a mysterious man, enjoying herself. Mostly she was happy to be a bystander. And tonight, she wanted to merely relax.

The ocean was calm, the breeze had died, and Tate collapsed into a cross-legged style of sitting, again focusing on the sensation of touch, shifting in the sand, digging her fingers into the rough rock salt granules. They buried under her fingernails. She left them there.

The moon had risen, hours ago, and she watched it, humming a song long since buried in her mind. A lullaby about Winkin, Blinkin, and Nod, a lullaby meant to lure. It was sufficient. Tate felt herself relax. She had missed the horse tonight, arriving after it was dark, and she was disappointed. In the past six months, she had not missed watching the solitary dance of the stallion. She had grown to love it, to love horses again. And tonight she had missed it.

Bracing her hands behind her, Tate leaned back, tipping her face up to the moon, remembering the shooting star eyes of Cavan, the stories of going to another world from Jenelle. Was it possible that Jenelle had managed to get to that other world? Was it possible that she had managed to find herself on the other side? To not be dead, but alive with others who believed in magic? Tate didn't think so. Not quite, but maybe it was the sickness, maybe it was the desire, maybe it was the illusion of a stolen soul and magic eyes, that allowed her to entertain those thoughts. A loud neigh broke through the lulling sound of ocean and Tate's eyes snapped open. The horse, the horse whom she had only ever seen at dawn and dusk stood not twenty feet away, outlined by the moon, framed by two huge rocks. She struggled to a sitting position, not able to move. Her pale lips formed a silent "Oh" as she sized up the stallion.

He pawed the ground and lowered his head. And she stood, brushing sand from her legs and back, inching towards him. It had been years since she had gone near a horse. Years, but for the past six months she had watched this creature with desire. "Shh, it's okay, boy." Deep and husky, her voice never rose above a guarded whisper, and she stretched out a hand.

The stallion pawed the ground again and blew breath through his nostrils, misting her hand as she came within touching distance. Carefully, Tate reached her hands up to his face, placing one hand on his cheek, the other on the velvety center of his muzzle, fingertips working the center. Slowly, carefully, all of her movements were protected, reserved. It had been a long time and stories settled in her mind, completely uncovered. She was vulnerable.

“If you are alone and you see him, run, Tate. Always run. Because you will touch him, pet him. And he’ll love you, lick you, and look for treats. He can kill you, Tate. He can bring you somewhere new or he can kill you.”

Tate hummed the lullaby and rested her forehead against his, breathing deeply, inhaling his scent. Her hands explored the silken pelt, running along his neck, feeling the muscles bunch and retract beneath her touch as he bobbed his head. He whickered and she laughed. “Don’t worry, boy. I’m not going to hurt you.” *I could never hurt you*, she added silently.

With hands firmly on either side of his tea cup muzzle, she lifted his head, placing her lips against the velvet skin. She looked into his eyes—sapphire eyes speckled with stars. Eyes which threw her off guard, reminded her of the man in the woods. “I know what you are,” again she whispered, her voice bedroom deep, the voice of pillow talk, of secrets.

The stallion eyed her, his head tilted to the side, neck arched. He whuffed and she smiled ruefully. “I know old boy, I know. You’re just a beautiful horse. But I’ve been watching you.” Tate had no desire to disturb the fragile peace between them, and she kept all of her movements slow, deliberate. He bobbed his head anxiously and nudged her upper arm. And then her chest. And then her hip. She kissed his ear, reaching a hand up to massage the tip of it. “I know, boy. I know.”

And then he knelt, lowering his body for easy access. Grasping his mane, she pulled herself up with an ease she hadn't felt around these animals in years. Tate entwined her fingers about his withers, locking her legs around his side.

"Once you're on him, you're his. There is no escape, Tate."

"He's a horse, Jenelle. Just a horse."

Jenelle turned her head away. "He is not just a horse."

As soon as she was settled the stallion took off along the shore, flying over the sand, his gait smooth, wild. She held on, lowering herself over his withers, stretching her hands up higher in his mane. "I know what you are!" she yelled into the air, her voice whipping up and away from her, trailing backwards, caught on an errant wisp of air. It was lost to the cliffs.

And she held on tight as the stallion pivoted, spinning on his back legs, stretching out his gallop in the other direction. And she closed her eyes, knowing, remembering the story.

"What does he do?"

"He becomes a monster."

Sand kicked up around them, a tunnel, a tornado in which they moved, her legs weakening from the grip. And slowly, her legs seemed to adhere to his body, no longer

slipper silk, and she felt the need to hold on slip away. There was no need to cling as he stretched out into his full stride.

“And?”

“He turns toward the ocean.”

Tate opened her mouth as the horse pivoted again, drawing in a deep breath, closing her eyes against the oncoming wind. *You were right, Jen. You were right.* And she closed her mouth again, prepared, feeling the jolt as the stallion’s hooves touched salt water for the first time since she mounted.

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