

*the apple too smelled like death*

It used to feel smooth—the skin of the apple. It used to reflect the light from the bulb above; it used to smile with a glaze of wax. It was freckled, before. Taut, red skin imperfect but tantalizing for its imperfections. It was so many years ago that I remember it—when I first felt it in my palm. The apple was larger than my hand. I could cup the bottom, but its waist, the girth of it, swelled beyond the width of my palm. Back then, in that moment staring at the apple in my hand, I believe I may have been eight, maybe nine. Later, when *it* happened, I was thirteen. But the apple, the apple was so red, so lively, so angry, and my skin just below so pale and cold. When my mother placed it my hand, it smelled like insecticide, dirt, and wax. That was the first smell I remember, at least. Later, when I thought about the red apple I would only smell my dead red lining from within—that sickening thick slime sliding between my legs. That smell, it smelled like death and so I felt that the apple, red and undulating, the apple too smelled like death.

She told my sister Gretchen and I to roll it across the splintered wood floor between each other. There, in the center of the living room we would sit and roll the apple back and forth, back and forth, leaving from one palm to the other's and on. Mother made us do it for a few hours at a time at first, then until dinner, then for days.

“Take the apple, take it.” She said. Her hair was long and dark and her eyes even darker. I do not remember a time when she hugged Gretchen and I, but I didn't want her to, wouldn't want her to. Her frame looked sharp; like the dream I once had of falling into a bed of knives. The way she moved, it was almost as if the house were breathing and she was merely riding along its current: unable to sturdy herself or decide for her own which direction she wanted to walk in.

“Take the apple, take it!” She demanded, and spittle flicked from her gums onto the horizon of her dry lower lip. It was busted open on the corner, crusted with dried blood and swollen.

“You will roll this apple until you learn what it means to be good little girls. What it means to be a woman! You are too young to learn yourselves but if you’re going to survive, you need to start young. I will teach you. This is it, this is your lesson, now take it!”

And so, we sat on the wood boards, Gretchen and I. Gretchen looked different than I did. Prettier. I always thought so. Her skin was tanner and her hair ignited with explosions of bright blond curls. I always envied her. She never felt the need to brush her hair in the morning. She didn’t need to. Mother loved her more because Gretchen didn’t speak.

“She’s biologically better at being a woman.” Mother would say. “She just came out better than you. Mute. She’s already a better woman than you’ll ever be.”

Gretchen wasn’t mute, at least not to me. We had designed our own language, her and I, between our glances and the twitches of our pinkies. We made up a code with the pillows on our bed and how we folded our clothes in our dressers. It was our secret story—something we owned together.

Today, this day that I remember, we had been rolling the apple since breakfast at 5 a.m. it was now almost ten at night. The apple’s skin was popped and peeling. Its insides were brown and drooling onto the boards, making a mucky trail between us. My hands were so sticky my fingers clung to one another.

The fireplace beside us had fallen to cinders and the winter cold outside was inhaled by the house. It froze my skin, burned my throat and my lungs when I breathed. My hips ached from

sitting in one position on the hard wood for so long. They panged with sharp, needle-point throbs down to my knees, then flared again in the balls of my crossed ankles. It was an annoying pain and nothing more. There was another pain, one I wasn't familiar with. It rose from some deep pit in my stomach, spreading its talons up through my abdomen. At least all I could think to call it was a pain, but it disguised itself as lesser. It felt like an uncomfortable weight had nestled itself inside below my belly button. It curled up between my intestines, my guts. It felt un-right. I was swollen, as if my body were no longer mine.

Gretchen's eyes were glazed over. They had lost their excitable gleam by now. She stared coldly at the wood floor as if any roll now, she might fall forwards. Normally, mother let us go to bed by now, but the time slowed on. Our rolling grew slower and slower. My limbs felt as if they moved mechanically—like a puppet with wooden joints. Occasionally, we would stop—rest our eyes, let our bodies settle like the frost on the grass and leaves and thorns outside.

Then we would hear her, the woman inside our mother.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!”

Our mother sat in the rocking chair across from the fireplace. She didn't face us. Instead, she faced the empty wall worn from water damage below where the snow made our roof into a hammock. The chair slowly rocked. With every swoop the wooden arches cracked and wailed. Mother's feet didn't touch the ground and still, it rocked. She knitted—sweaters for Gretchen and me, I think. They were our size. She made many of them over the years, since the apple rolling began. They were folded in stacks in the attic; each of them with a rose pattern. I wonder whether those sweaters were cries for help—if they were signs that she still loved us, that she

was doing all she could to love us, but we were just barely out of reach. She couldn't push harder than she was being pulled away.

She sat there, knitting a loop every minute or two or five. When we stopped rolling the apple, she continued to rock, continued to knit, and then we heard the other.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!”

Mother's lips did not move. The voice, it sounded like it came from her stomach. It rumbled. The first few times we heard the voice, back when it all began, we thought perhaps Mother was only hungry. Gretchen would look up, then back down and dismiss the sound, so I did too. Then it got louder. Clearer.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl ThE aPpLe...”

When we recognized the sound as a voice—as alien woman's voice—we stopped rolling. Gretchen looked up at me. Her eyes were glossy, her pupils quivering. I saw her, then looked down at her hand. Her pinky was tapping against a soft bruise on the apple. I nodded. I heard it too. Then there was a loud crack. Gretchen started and sucked in a sharp bundle of frozen air. It must have hurt because she slapped her hands on the floor after, bending over to cough. I turned to where the sound came from. Protruding from the wall in front of mother's face was her knitting needle. Cracks sprawled out like fingers around the penetrated wall. Then it bled. The wall began to leak a thick crimson stream.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!”

Although my throat was dry, the last of my saliva moistened a cry.

I rolled the apple.

That was the first time we heard the voice. Between then, and this moment I tell you now, was the span of about five years. Between then, and what I recollect in this moment, it was repetitions much the same. There was a schedule to it before: wake, make the beds, do the laundry, clean the floors, eat breakfast, bathe, roll the apple, dinner, brush teeth, then bed. But now, this time, the hour felt closer to three in the morning.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!” The other woman demanded, and so Gretchen and I sharpened our backs, gathered our energy and rolled again.

The pain in my lower abdomen got worse. It felt like I had been chosen for dinner; like someone tucked a napkin into their collar, lit a soothing candle on the counter, picked up a silver knife and a silver fork, then dug right into me. They twirled my lower intestines around their fork like spaghetti—stretching it out to see how long the noodles ran, twirling it some more to wrap them around the prongs, then took a bite and with their front molars severed the noodles in half. It makes for digestible bites.

As the early morning pulled along, the house fell dark. I could only make out Gretchen and mother from the streamline highlights of moonlight on their frames. The natural light of night flit graciously through our windows. What little it allowed me to see was a blessing. I was concerned for Gretchen. She was coughing more now, and her shivering never ceased. She shook like a dead goose that a dog had got its jaws around. Still, I thought, ‘mother will let us stop soon. Soon she will let us stop, and we will be warm in bed together under the blankets until dawn.’

But then dawn came. Light swelled in through our windows, warmed our limbs degree by gracious degree. About an hour after the sun had risen (it’s hard to say for sure, there were no

clocks; all my perceptions of time are guess-work) but about an hour after the sun rose, it came. I was confused at first. It started off with a damp feeling. I pushed the pulped apple away from my palm once, twice, once more, and the dampness began to nag at me. At first, I thought the floorboards themselves were wet. I thought that the morning dew had found itself inside because the fireplace had extinguished hours ago. Then it was more than merely damp. I was sitting in *wet*.

Gretchen noticed it before I did. I sent the apple away, and this time it did not return. Feeling that our rhythm had broken, I looked up. My eyes traced the long sticky road we had painted on the wood with the apple's nourishing innards, up Gretchen's trembling hands, and finally to her gaze. She was aghast. She stared at me with a sense of horror stronger than the one conjured from the woman inside our mother. With reluctance, I followed her gaze to my lap. Swelling from my vagina was a deep, velvety pool of red. It tore through my white night gown and the floor boards below drank it like liquor. I felt my heart freeze—cold consuming me. Suddenly, all I could think about was my many discomforts. My hair was unkept and poking defiantly around my face, my hands were sticky and matted with dust and apple residue, my mouth tasted sour, my lap soaked everything on me, around me, and the smell of something rotten rose from it. I was disgusting, and from that realization, desolate and ashamed.

It was then, when I felt the full breadth of my filthiness, that the creaking from the rocking chair stopped. I was too entranced staring at the red to notice it at first. The red felt like it stared back at me with malicious intent. I noticed the footsteps instead; quick, padded, demanding as they sped towards me.

“How could you?”

I felt a hand grab my hair, another my arm and yank me to my feet. It hurt—my legs mostly. They were stiff, and my joints were sore, and I stumbled as if I had never learned how to walk in the first place. My legs were weak appendages incapable of stability.

“You’re staining the wood! You become a woman and the first thing you do is muck up everything? Dirty girl!”

It was mother’s voice lecturing me, not the other. I looked up at her and she appeared nearly dead. She looked exhausted and on the brink of collapse, and yet the strength she used to pull me away was remarkable and dangerous.

“Gretchen, go run some hot rags!”

My sister looked at me, her eyes welling with worry for me, and pity. She stumbled just as I had when trying to stand back up again. She had to claw and scrape any furniture nearby to pull herself up and keep her there. Mother stared down at the stain I had made, and the other woman’s voice steamed up from her stomach.

“DiRtY! DiRtY! DiRtY! FiLtH! WhAt A LiTtLe wHoRe oF SIN!”

Gretchen had not run off for the rags yet. She stared on, petrified. The other woman’s voice bellowed, guttural out of our mother’s stomach.

“SsSsssSerpent’s WhOrE! FiLtHy cHiLd, mOtHeR oF SIN!”

The voice echoed through my ears, but I grew distracted, something dripping on my face. When I looked up at my mother, I saw that she was crying. She looked down at me and her eyes were the kindest I had ever known them to be. Spit worked the muscles in her throat and I thought the words ‘I’m sorry’ may be stuck inside.