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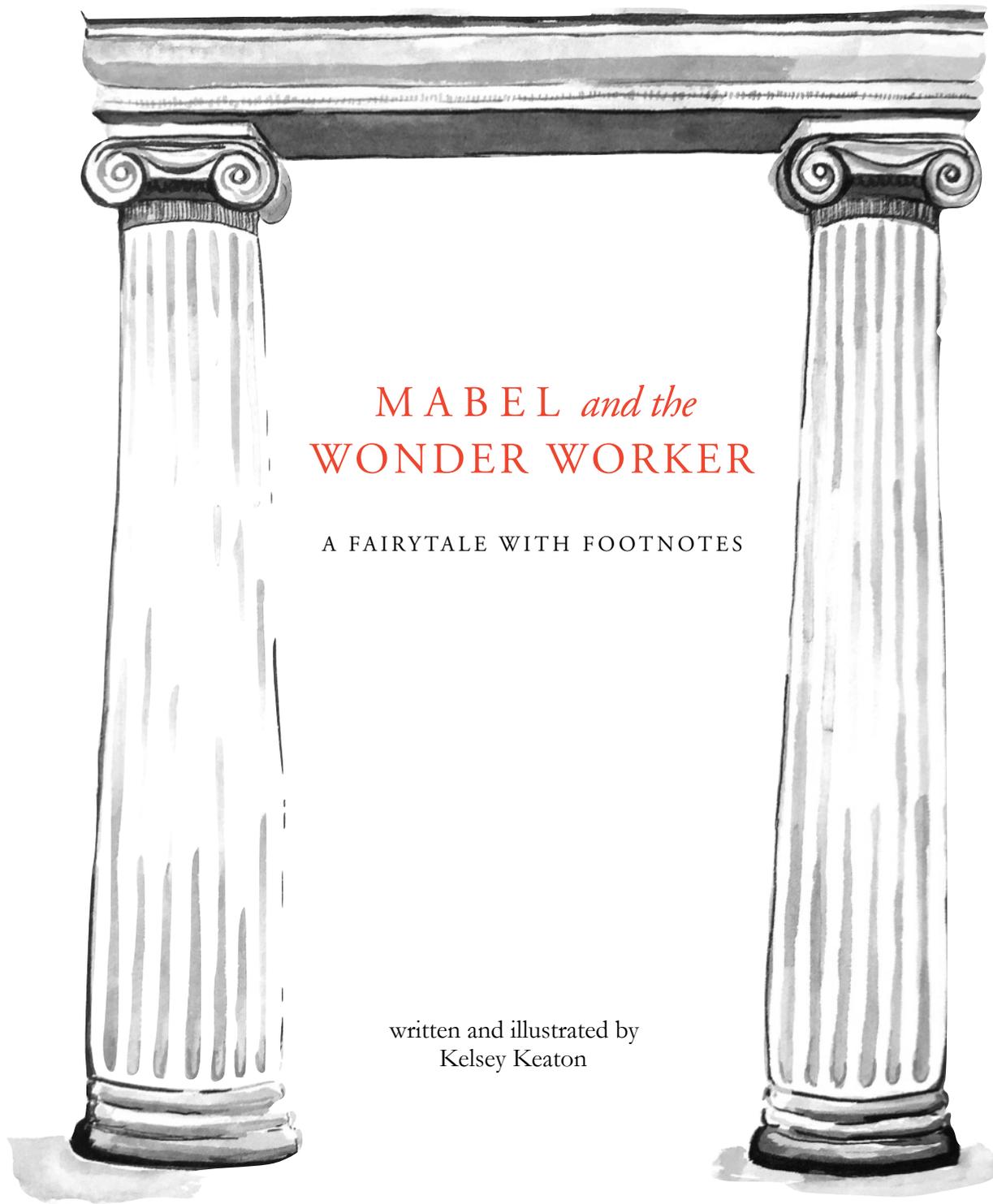
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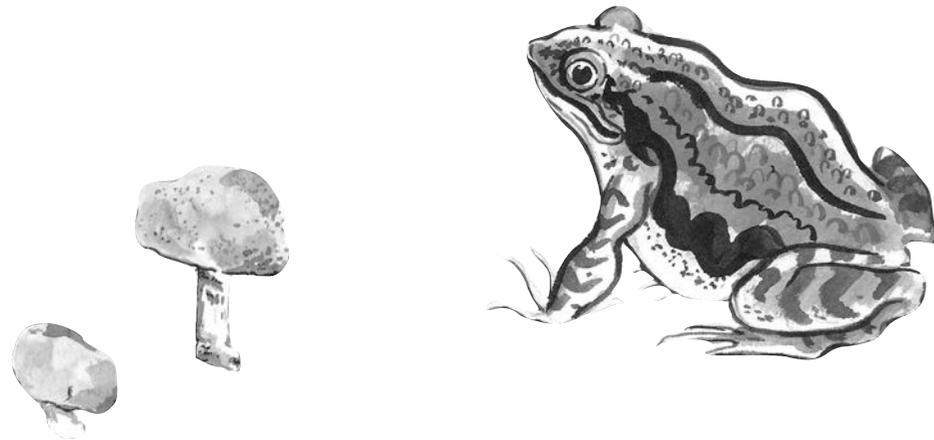
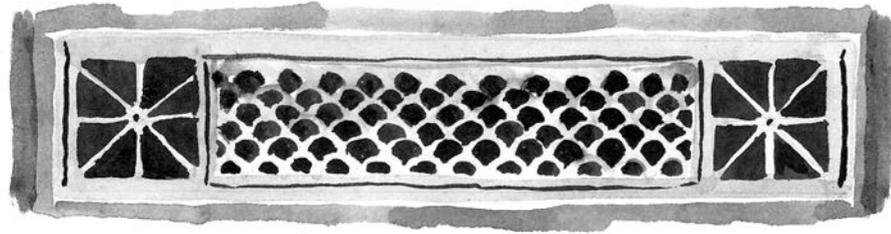
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MABEL *and the*
WONDER WORKER

A FAIRYTALE WITH FOOTNOTES

written and illustrated by
Kelsey Keaton



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Dear Reader,

It's likely you have the same impression of museums that many others have, that they are dull, quiet places where objects slumber peacefully behind glass - but this couldn't be further from the truth.

Beneath the surface, museums are alive.

Stored within those thick marble walls are billions of years and countless adventures of strife and survival recorded in bone and space dust and specks of pollen; all yearning for a chance to be heard.

I try my best to be that voice, I'm a Muse after all, but lurking behind the hollowed eyes of a mask and whispering through the open jaws of a mounted lion, are things with agency, things not content to wait patiently.

All this is to say that the enclosed is but one tale in the clamoring chorus, and from up here in my corner of the hall, it's not always easy to tease them apart.

So in the telling, I may take some wrong turns and proceed along some tangents but I will try to confine these to the margins. Please bear with me dear reader, for as will become evident, stories with a strong desire to be heard will find a way to slip from their cases, one way or another.

Muse of Dissemination of Knowledge
Northeastern Plinth
Main Hall
Museum of Natural History

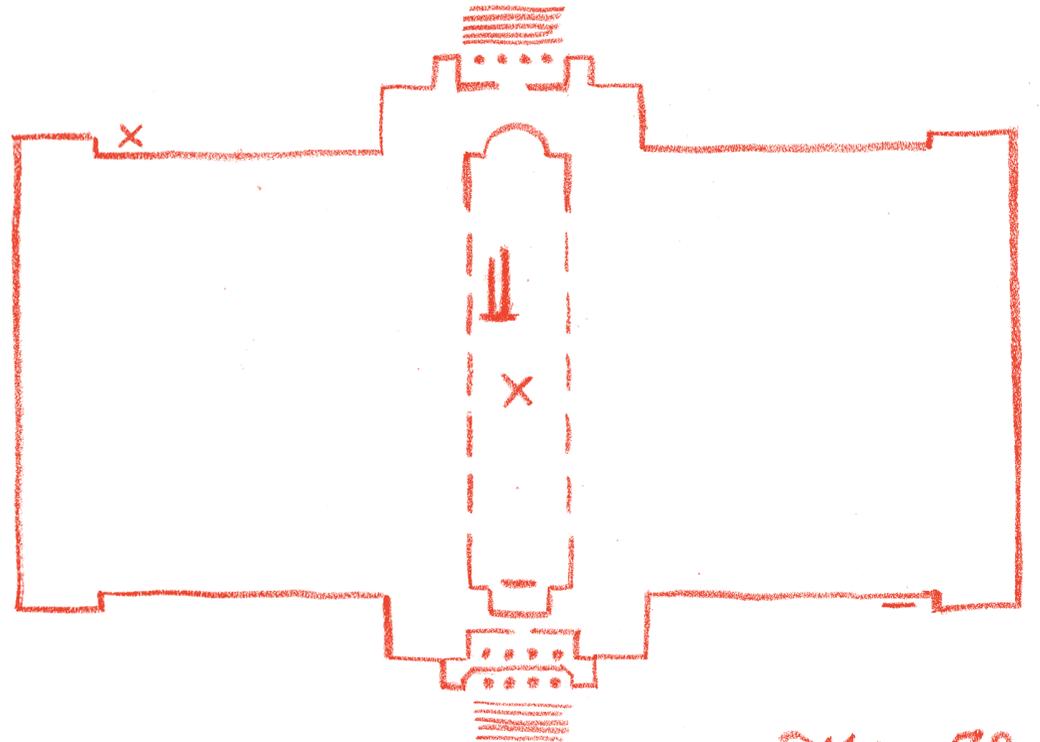
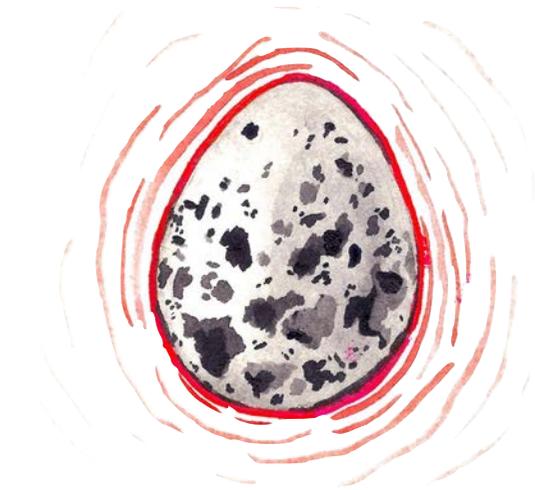


Fig 38.





The Red Egg *(or the Prologue)*

The red egg dreamed of life. Hungered for it in fact; despite never having tasted it before, despite never having tasted anything at all. It was not enough to simply be an idea, a what could be, a what could have been. It wanted to *exist*.

Time crept achingly by and still it waited. Until one day, the air tasted of warm sunlight, active like the buzz of insect wings, and the veil of dust that the red egg had been un-existing in for so long, began to lift. The golden cylinder turned, reacting to the vivid life before it, and it was this sudden surge of *Æther* in the air that left a small but noticeable gap for the thing inside the red egg to slither through into life. Yes, beautiful, delicious life at last.



No I The Moth in the Vestibule

Mabel could see the pale sheet of gray sky from her bedroom window. She pounced out of bed and slipped down the front stairs, eager to confirm her forecast - for as you may or may not know reader, rainy days are the best days for conducting research.

The building, an old victorian house jigsawed into apartments, creaked and sighed around her as she made her way down the front stairs. She felt a sense of anticipation in the air, maybe from the house itself. Still, she found nothing out of the ordinary waiting for her in the vestibule, well besides the moth.

It dashed wildly about the space, crammed as it was with the jackets, and scarves and umbrellas accumulated over the years, many belonging to tenants long since departed. It was a large moth, about the size of her palm; mostly clothed in browns but flashes of bright scarlet could be seen as it dove again and again toward the cold light of the electric bulb.

“Shoo,” Mabel said, opening the door to the chill morning, but the moth paid her no mind. She used a socked foot to nudge an errant boot into better symmetry and then stared at the hall light for a moment, she wondered if the moth could be a sign for something, some signal from the

universe.¹ She thought of conquistadors transfixed by the soft glow of gold and of sunflowers turning their faces up to the bright sky.

Then she switched off the light, extinguishing its power over the small invertebrate. The wings brushed past her into the open air and she stared out into the morning. It was indeed threatening to rain, the still grayness pressing down upon the street.

If the eleven year old girl, with her dark brows knitted together, had been expecting something more exciting, she wasn't going to receive it.

She shut the door, and trooped inside.



It was quiet at the breakfast table. Her mother smiled as Mabel looked up from her cereal but the peace between them was brittle. Yesterday her mother had laid out her father's things on folding tables in the yard - laid them out for all those vultures to gawk over. Her mother had tied on little white tags and sold her father's shoes and tennis rackets and goofy ties; sold those irreplaceable things.

Mabel, I'm sorry. But I can't have it all in the house anymore. It's too hard. I just can't. Will you please understand?

But Mabel hadn't, didn't, wouldn't - and she had blazed in her anger. An anger not quenched, but fueled by furious tears, tears she hadn't know she still had.

This morning however, it was all burnt away and she could see her mother looking sad and hesitant from across the table.

Maybe that's all there was to the feeling she'd had on the stairs, the anticipation, just her mother's need for things to be all right between them. Mabel too, was ready to make up. That look hurt her, and after all, she'd saved the books.

She'd sat in front of the closet door, behind which they were safe in boxes, and refused to move; eaten her dinner there cross legged on the floor

¹ As is happens, *Omens: Medieval to Modern* reveals this entry: Moths are messengers of the spirit world. In different cultures moths have been seen as souls of the recently deceased, harbingers of death and even indications of the evil eye. Moths are nocturnal animals and are attracted to light. They are associated with both mystery and revelations. To see a moth being drawn to flame is an indication that something important will soon be revealed. That is, of course, if you take stock in such things as omens.

and held her vigil late into the night. She'd fallen asleep eventually, and woken past three in the morning, stiff on the wood floor, a quilt draped over her. She'd gone off to her own bed after that, victory evident.

"So how are you going to spend your Sunday then?" her mother asked tentatively.

"It looks like it's going to rain," said Mabel, bringing her bowl to the sink.

"I see," said her mother, knowing what this was code for. Normally she would have insisted Mabel play outside, and no, not alone in the vacant lot next to the building, looking for praying mantids and katydids and those sorts of things, but in the park, with other kids. But today her mother just sighed and said,

"Alright, I'll leave bus fare on the hall table for you then."



The mausoleum like building rose from the mist as the bus neared its destination. Mabel smiled at the immense, calm exterior.

The neoclassical columns and carved grecian figures that decorated the building held themselves with pride, and as she ascended the great stairs of the natural history museum the prescribed rain began to fall in fat drops, staining the pale marble.

She'd come prepared in her favorite yellow rain boots, but still, she didn't want her notebook to get wet. She shoved her backpack under the front of her jacket and pulled up her hood, hurrying up to the large bronze doors, snug beneath their grand overhang.

Once across the threshold, she breathed in the dense, secretive stone. Troubles never followed her here.

The high ceiling, with its squares of glass, let in as much light as it could gather from the grey morning. The rain beat outside, but the scale of the room deafened the sound. In fact everything was strangely muted in the white hall, hushed in a way befitting a temple.

She made her way through the throng of patrons, waving shyly to an aging museum guard as he tipped his navy cap to her. He was a friend of sorts, had always chatted readily with her father. His stories were often

repetitive but sprinkled with weird museum lore; breadcrumbs that she picked out and treasured.

He'd seemed genuinely sad when he'd heard about her father, *Isn't that a tragedy*, but hadn't pried further. She'd been grateful for that.

She edged her way past some of the more notable attractions in the main hall, like the much prized "fighting African elephants," whose large display took up much of the floor. Behind them, towering above the second floor balconies, stood her favorite - the two totem poles from the Pacific Northwest. The carved, curious faces that covered almost every inch of wood surface regarded her with eyes that were still fierce despite the faded paint.

After a chilling moment she broke eye contact, ending her ritual. She was off then, skirting round the swaths of umbrella toting and trench coat laden patrons. She ducked into the corridor to her right. Once entrenched in the dark halls, she wandered with no real direction, slipping in and out of the patches of eerie yellow light from the backlit cases.



She peered in at the animals they contained, their stuffed stillness transformed to something almost real in the dim lighting and painted scenery. An eagle feeding a struggling rabbit to its babies, two musk oxen locking horns... She liked those arrangements best, compared to the stoic animals arranged on shelves. Someone had been trying to tell a story.

Mabel collected stories - with the same magpie sort of impulse that she collected postcards and pressed plants and interesting stones. Arranging them in her notebook or on the shelves her father had built her, with their numerous cubby holes and secret spaces. But lately she had started to think of it as research, research she would use to write her own story someday.

She lingered in front of the tiger case as usual. She was very fond of the one on the left, the one that looked scared of his own shadow and was watching on anxiously as the other tiger mauled some sort of boar. She stared in, getting as close as she could to minimize the reflection, but careful to not touch the glass.

He reminded her of the neurotic tabby cat who belonged to the downstairs neighbors. Sometimes she thought that he could be the hero of her story, perhaps a cowardly knight who found the strength to become a champion like in an Arthurian legend. She took a little sketch of the tiger's expression in her notebook.

Soon however, the area began to get crowded with groups of younger children screaming and pulling their parents about. She scowled and scurried off to find a comparatively deserted wing to haunt.

She climbed the wide worn staircase to the second level and turned into the botany hall, which was usually more quiet. This hall held a whole array of wax replicas handcrafted in painstaking detail by artisans decades and decades ago. All sorts of amazing and useful plant species were laid out, dissected and explained.

She spent some time drawing a few leaves and then an interesting mushroom. One of those nice red ones with the white spots that gnomes were always depicted sitting on. *Amanita muscaria*, also known as the Fly agaric. She was content until she heard people. Their voices echoed off the high ceilings and slick floors.

She frowned. All that burnt out emotion from yesterday was still there in her chest and she wanted the museum to work its calming balm. She felt the people as intruders.

She started walking. In fact she kept walking until the galleries stopped looking so familiar and so welcoming. She wasn't quite noticing that though, or at least, only in the back of her mind. Before she quite realized what she was doing, she'd dashed up the nearest stairway which had appeared just to her left. One of those small narrow set of stairs that had white, neatly painted letters below one of the steps saying, STAFF ONLY. When she finally looked up, she was face to face with a door of dark wood.

Surrounding the doorframe was a pattern of neat geometric lines in aged green bronze. A pale light was shining in through a skylight and in it, the door shivered, the way the surface of a pond does when a stone is thrown in. It called to her somehow, the way that light calls to a moth or truth calls to a philosopher.

Most children her age had entirely grown out of their believe in magic, but Mabel still retained a seed of a hope that somewhere, somehow, the fantasy lands that she read about in books really did exist, that she might be able to find her way there someday. She always checked the backs of wardrobes and thoroughly inspected rabbit holes, though she wouldn't have admitted that to a soul.

She reached for the knob; hope and excitement and doubt all rolling about inside her like loose change.

At first it seemed to lead to nowhere, just a thick slice of darkness, but when she stepped through the door it was just a normal, narrow hallway.

A rather musty hallway in fact, with walls that were once egg-shell but now nearing yellow. The floor was the dark wood of the older parts of the museum and she wondered if she had stumbled upon a back collection area. The idea of trespassing made her hesitate but there didn't seem to be anyone around, and that sly magpie self emerged with its greed for knowledge, seeking to explore. So she moved forward, the blood pumping loudly in her ears.

A little ways down the hall, she came to a turn. She walked, scanning the broken and discarded objects that were crowded in the corners, likely leftover bits of exhibits. Despite the many places for her eyes to rest, it didn't take long for her to notice the open door.

She hovered in the entry way. It was doused in darkness so she felt along the wall and found a switch.



When she flipped it up there was a resounding “whoosh” of stale air and a streak of white drifted across her line of sight. She stood there blinking, trying to decide if it had been real.

She was in a cramped little office, full of a stale mothball smell. An entire wall was occupied by bookshelves and the dark wood desk was crowded with all the tools of a turn of the century naturalist, complete with an ancient looking microscope and a framed beetle on the wall. There were glass slides scattered about the desk, though most were stacked neatly in wooden cases. It gave the impression that someone had just left abruptly, mid-project, never to return.

She felt as if she had discovered a dragon hoard of treasure, she could feel her own smile, warm on her face.

Eagerly she edged closer. A thick layer of dust coated every surface and papers lay in stacks all over the desk. Next to the microscope was a very old photograph framed in gold edged matting and heavy wood. She picked it up gingerly and stared into the tiny faces. It depicted a seated woman in a white dress with a man standing behind her, hand on her shoulder.

She put the photo back, examining the leather lined tray beside it, where lay a little gold fountain pen and a heavy looking magnifying glass, with a rosy wood handle. She reached for the pen, brushing off the dust that coated it. It was heavier than she'd expected, but a nice kind of heavy. It felt substantial in her hand. She held it up to the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The metal glinted, but it was just a simple pen.

Just then, a white gleam of movement caught the corner of her eye. She turned sharply with a beating heart. In the corner of the room, half hidden by large cabinet full of tiny handled drawers, an albino raven² sat calmly on its perch.

It was deadly still, for after all, it *was* dead. Dead and perched on a withered branch. She observed it narrowly. Had been a trick of the light? In

² White ravens are extremely rare, the lack of pigment being caused by a genetic defect. However, many folktales tell of white being the original color of the raven. In the greek myth, Apollo wrongfully turns the raven black in revenge for the bird delivering bad news. For the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest Coast, the raven was also originally white, but when he stole the Sun and Moon from their captors and escaped with them through the smoke hole at the end of the lodge, he turned black from all the soot. This was the sacrifice he made to bring the light back to the world.

the pit of her stomach she felt her excitement growing - wasn't this how adventures began?

She tried various experiments; closing one eye and then the other, turning her back to it and walking a couple of paces before whipping round to face the bird warily. When she turned her head slowly to the left and glanced at the raven, it *almost* seemed to giving her a meaning look; but then, after all, not really. She sighed.

She got out her notebook and tried to sketch the bird but gave up soon after and went to examine the book spines instead. Most of them were about plants and insects but there were a few vaguely titled electrical and mechanical books that she could just make out on high shelf. A familiar title embossed in gold on lowest shelf caught her eye and she knelt down.

She shoved her notebook and the pen into her backpack to free her hands and pulled the book out. It was *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*.

She had the same one at home, albeit a much newer addition, it was her father's copy. She flipped through it gently and then put it back, noticing that there were a number of other books on mythology, along with some hefty tomes on folk beliefs and other such things.

She stepped back out into the hall with mounting curiosity. Before she'd gone more than a couple paces, a harsh voice boomed.

“You really shouldn't be here.”

She froze and then deflated, knowing the voice must belong to a guard. With a guilty expression she slowly turned, but found no one there. She stared and the emptiness expanded around her. For the first time in the lonely hall, she felt frightened.

“Hello?”

No one answered. She took a deep breath and tried to reason that she had merely imagined the voice, to turn back now would be a waste. She straightened her spine and continued down the hall, it stretched on further then she could make out in the dim light. Although there were small electric bulbs hanging bare at even intervals, their yellow light did little to dispel the gloom and neglect that hung about the place like cobwebs. There were real cobwebs too, coating the corners of the low ceiling.

There was also a strange humming that seemed to be coming from the antique bulbs. Why hadn't she noticed that before? She let her eyes wander around the walls; glancing at odd topographical maps in shadow

boxes and old, hand colored prints that depicted strange animal species. All were slightly monstrous or the perspective off. It made her head spin to look at them for too long.

Eventually another door took shape ahead and she quickened her pace. The handle rattled as she turned it and just for a moment she paused - should she turn back? Maybe that voice had been her conscience after all.

But her curiosity twisted and tumbled inside her, ravenous to see more, and she wasn't doing anyone any harm after all.

As she pushed the door inward, she was struck with the smell, the same pervasive mothball odor but with an undertone of harsh chemicals, it made her nose itch. The space was lit dimly by a handful of the bare bulbs, and she could not make out the contents of the cluttered shelves that dominated in the room. But her roving eyes caught a metallic object sitting on the large worktable set against the far wall. She crossed the room, like a magnet pulled to its opposite pole.

It looked like the phonograph at her grandmother's house, but much prettier. It's finely crafted metal gears and fixtures gleamed up at her in a toothy smile, and it wasn't coated in the thick layer of dust that covered rest of table's surfaces, almost as if it had some sort of electromagnetic charge that rejected such particles instead of attracting them.

She wanted to see it work, but it had no chords nor a plug. Her curiosity was like a hunger pang now, low and hollow, her fingers felt along the polished wood sides for a handle to wind it, but only found a small hole. That's when she noticed it didn't have the thin black disk she was used to seeing. Instead it was fitted with a thick cylinder of a gold colored metal, ringed with hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny grooves.

Her eyes ran the length of the table, looking for the tool or missing piece that would unlock the bizarre contraption. There, tucked into one of the cubby holes above the work table, was a small key, like the ones used in music boxes.

It fit perfectly. She gave it a few turns and waited, breath held tight, and very slowly the golden cylinder began to turn. Long moments past but it was silent. She began to feel very warm and soft, like a cat lounging in a patch of sun. She might have been there a long while, she wasn't sure, but then a small noise brought her out of her stupor. Her ears had been straining for something, but what she was hearing seemed all wrong.

It was a faint tapping and she realized with a jolt that it was coming from behind her. As she turned round she saw there was a reddish light emanating from a large shipping crate near the middle of the room. The lid was lying on the floor.

Bewildered, she walked over to it.

Inside, lying almost innocently in the straw was an egg - an extremely large egg. Had it been laid by a dinosaur? It was the size of a small watermelon³ and stranger still, it was the source of the light.

Something like excitement slithered around inside her and her mouth grew dry. Moving on impulse, she reached forward to touch it's slightly mottled surface.

Just like the eggs she'd helped her great uncle collect early mornings from his chickens, it was slightly warm. But unlike any egg she'd ever seen, it was a deep blood-colored red and, of course, glowing. She gazed at it, entranced.

She supposed it was possible that it could be employing some sort of bioluminescence like fireflies used, but what would a live egg be doing tucked away in such a place?

For it was certainly alive...it almost seemed to be breathing, and the noise, the tapping, was coming from inside. She stared at it for some time, filled with a tingling brightness on her scalp. Then her brows furrowed as her brain was suddenly aware of an innate *wrongness*. It came flooding into every cell of her body. Why was she touching it?

She tore her hand away and backed up.

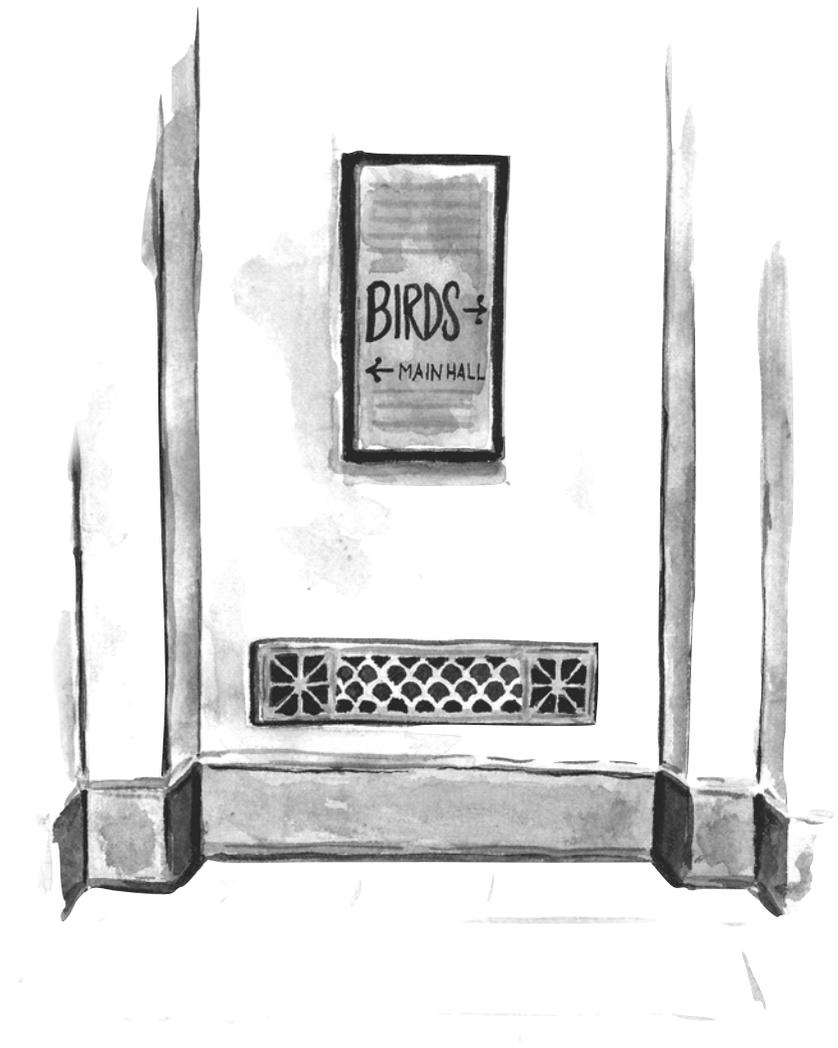
Trying to control her rising panic, she looked down at the side of the crate. It was plastered with a plethora of old shipping labels with long foreign names; many consonants pushed together in beautiful scrolling type. FRAGILE was stamped across several times in red, like a warning.

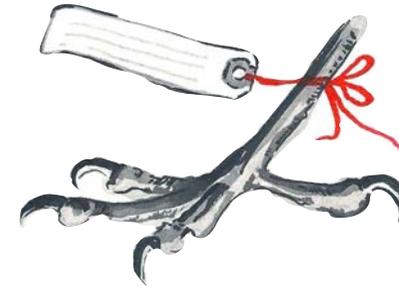
She looked back at the egg, only to find it growing brighter and more lurid by the moment, like a pool of blood spreading across the floor. As the egg gained solidity, the crate and everything else around it grew faint

³ In fact it was roughly the size of an egg from the extinct Elephant Bird, or *Aepyornis maximus*. An extremely large flightless bird that once lived in Madagascar. This bird was roughly ten feet tall and weighed close to 880 pounds, they appear to have gone extinct somewhere between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

as if it was a sponge soaking up all the color. The silky, slithery, excited feeling was gone, replaced with coldness.

A visible line formed on the surface of the egg but her body felt heavy with fear. When the second crack appeared, she began to run. She ran as fast as she could go.





No II

The Raven in the Passage

She was through the door in a flash, shutting it firmly behind her. Frantic, she looked about for something to jam up against it. The wood paneled case down the hall was much too large, so she settled with taking the nearest painting, in its heavy gold frame off the wall and laying it across the door like a barricade. It wasn't much, but it was something. All she could think of was putting as many obstacles between her and the egg. Or rather, whatever was emerging from the egg. No matter how newborn or defenseless - something was deeply wrong with it.

Just as she rounded the corner, she heard the voice ring out.

"I told you, you shouldn't have come here. Don't you see? You're waking things up."

Her heart gave a sideways jerk as a white phantom glided over her head. She skidded to a stop as the albino raven landed in front of her, blocking the door.

Its taxidermy carriage was now curiously animated and the red glass marbles it had for eyes were regarding her with a cold expression. It fidgeted in the way of birds, sharp hasty moves. Then it spoke again. "Me included."

She was so shocked, so bewildered, that her desperate flight from the creature in the egg got shoved somewhere into the back of her mind. The bird, the same one she'd most definitely seen dead and stuffed, was now alive, and talking.

"Excuse me," she said politely, knowing from fairytales that it was best to give potentially magical beings the utmost respect. "Were you um... well... you weren't speaking to me were you?"

Her mind raced through the possibilities; perhaps a witch's familiar⁴ or a man transformed by a curse; the voice sounded male to her.

"I don't see anyone else here do you?" it cackled.

"There's no need to be rude," Mabel said curtly before she could stop herself; so much for politeness. The raven threw its head back and gave a series of short, robust crows that she suspected was a laugh.

"I was just trying to warn you, child," the bird countered. "At least I think that's what I was meant to do..." he shook his head as if to readjust some of the cotton occupying his taxidermy head, "but it's far too late for that now anyhow."

Mabel quickly glanced around the empty hall, the red egg re-surfacing in her mind. The bird seemed to have caught the drift of her thoughts, he looked at her sharply.

"Its like I said, you've already woken things up. The fact that I am here talking to you says as much."

"But I didn't do anything!" she protested. Then the raven gave her one of those X-ray looks her mother was so good at giving.

"Oh really? Snooping around behind closed doors, turning on machines you know nothing about, never thinking of the consequences... that counts as nothing then does it?"

"Well, no. Not exactly nothing..."

"As long as you admit it," he responded wryly.

"I was just...curious..." she persisted, but the words hung feebly in the air and all at once she was angry.

⁴ A *familiar* or *familiar spirit* is a helpful supernatural deity that assists a witch and often takes the form of an animal. In Norse mythology there is a similar creature called a Fylgja who is intricately linked with an individual's fate and will appear to them in dreams in animal form.

"Who are you anyway?" she pushed in before the raven had a chance to scold her more. "And how can you talk?"

He cocked his head to the left as if considering.

"Well, in life I was the chief of my flock..." the bird paused, "but who I am now, well I can hardly say...something else, certainly. As far as how I learnt human speech? I've been here a very long time my dear. One begins to pick up things after a hundred odd years or so.⁵ I've been listening and waiting for a long time. This isn't the first time I've been woken up. The better question is, who are you my girl?"

"I'm Mabel... but what are you going to do to me?"

She hadn't meant to say that second part but it had slithered out. The raven regarded her intently.

"I'm not sure if there is anything that can be done *now*. At least not for the moment..."

Mabel frowned slightly.

"And what does that mean?"

The bird shifted on his talons, Mabel found it hard to read his expression. The slightly parted beak and wide eyes could be jeering excitement or mounting apprehension. Just as she was trying to decide which emotion boded worse for her, she heard it.

A low, sort of spectral whispering was echoing from down the hall...and there was a clack, clack, clack of sharp claws on the floor. For the moment the strange pair of girl and bird stood still, listening as the noise grew louder and louder. Then all at once the raven jumped up.

"Run!" he screeched, and without a moment more of hesitation, she ran.

Through doors, down steps, past corridors and between crowds she ran. She ran until the stitch on her side was crying out too loudly to continue, but she was outside at last. She slowed to a halting walk down the last few marble steps. She paused then and looked back at the looming building. Its facade was as cold and white and calm as ever.

⁵ Ravens are of course, wildly intelligent creatures. Brain to body weight ratios of Corvids (the genus to which the raven belongs) is among the largest in birds, equal to that of most great apes.



It was no longer raining but there wasn't one reassuring ray of sunlight poking through the dark swath of clouds that choked the city's skyline. As she looked around and breathed the open air deeply she noticed three large crows sitting on a low marble wall. She watched them for moment, brows furrowed, until she realized that they were staring back. All three of them cocked their heads and stared, their sharp scavenger gaze penetrating.

She shivered, and distractedly made her way to the bus stop. The whole ride home she could feel her body trembling slightly, a leaf struggling to hang on to its branch. She sketched the mysterious egg in its crate, trying to draw out every detail from the recesses of her mind. When she finally made her way up the stairs of her home, she was exhausted.

She told her mother that she might have caught a cold being out in the damp and wanted to go straight to bed. That little crease appeared on her mother's forehead.

"This isn't a Jane Austen novel, Mabel," she said hand on hip, but didn't argue any further.

Mabel hurried to her room, ready to curl up under her blankets and let sleep take over. The gold pen on the other hand, lay in the bottom of her bag, forgotten.





№ III

The Tiger at the Door

At school the next day, Mabel turned the strange events over and over in her mind, unable to focus on her classes. By dinner time she was almost convinced the whole thing had been a dream. She wasn't even sure if she *wanted* it to be real or not.

But there was her mother, looking concernedly at her over the untouched plate of Shakshouka (eggs poached in a tomato sauce with fresh herbs and crusty bread on the side - usually a favorite). So she worked up a decently convincing smile and ate.

That night Mabel slept fitfully. Her dreams were full of phantom white birds soaring overhead, their screeches echoing madly in the night. She stood in a clearing in a wood, the dark night opening up above of her. The sound of the birds was blood-curdling; high pitched and immense,

filling the space until she thought the very sound of it would lift her up into the black sky, joining the ghostly flock on its wild hunt.⁶

When the sound was so full that it had nowhere else to go, she woke with a start, the call still echoing in her ears. Or was it? She lay staring at the shadows on her ceiling and the sound, though softer, didn't evaporate into the night. A low sort of yowling, followed by a scratching.

She wondered if the neighbors' cat had been locked out again and then buried her head under the covers, part of her longing to go back to sleep, another part afraid to sink into the same frightening dream. Still the noise didn't stop. The distant, now assuredly feline whining, nagged at her. Slowly she dragged herself from bed.

She opened the back door of the apartment into the night air and walked down the stairs, with only the moonlight streaming before her feet to keep her from stumbling. She was jolted fully awake when she saw what was really pawing at the back door of the downstairs apartment. She gulped and then spoke, because she wasn't sure what else to do.

"Hey - stop that!"

The words came out clear and bright, surprising even Mabel with their force. As the animal turned its head to look at her, she found herself looking straight into the eyes of her very own tiger. The one from the diorama, the one she'd lavished so many daydreams on.

A wave of panic flooded through her, firstly because the barred canines were thick and sharp, nearly the size of her finger, and secondly because animal seemed much larger with no glass in between them.

Then all at once, the fear dissipated.

The tiger had begun to weep. At least that's what it seemed to be doing. His ears were laid flat and tears rolled down the large round face. She stared, bewildered.

⁶ The wild hunt is an ancient folk story permeating much of Northern and Western Europe. It is usually described as a group of spectral huntsman in mad pursuit across the skies. The hunt may be composed of fairies, or the dead, and is led by various characters depending on the region. Odin or the Germanic version, Wotan is the most common. In the British Isles the Fairy King is said to lead the hunt or King Arthur. The hunt signals changing weather or a time of unrest; from the *Encyclopedia of Germanic Folk Beliefs*.

Cat couldn't cry could they? Besides, this tiger had marble eyes anyway... She tried desperately to clear her head, the fact that the tiger was crying was possibly the least impossible thing that was happening.

"Please, could you put that down?" the tiger finally said in an unsteady but deep voice. Mabel blinked and realized she'd picked up the large broom leaning nearby against the wall. She was holding it out in front of her, ready to jab, instinctively mimicking the big cat trainer she'd once seen at the circus. Slowly she placed it on the ground and stared dumbstruck at the cowardly tiger.

"Sorry," she mumbled, not sure why she was apologizing.

"Much better," sighed the tiger. "Thank you. I don't like sticks pointing at me. I always come over very badly. Can't help it. When I was young I was taken from my forest and kept in a bad, hungry place. Men there were always jabbing sharp things at me, and throwing little burning sticks they had been eating smoke from. Later I was somewhere better but..."

He looked off into the distance for a moment then turned back, his amber eyes focused on her. "But, you must be the girl-child I've been sent to find."

"Me?" Mabel stammered, but of course he was here for her. She shook her head and blundered on as her brain tried to catch up with her words. "But why? and how? How is any of this is even happening?"

The tiger blinked and shuffled his paws uncomfortably at the barrage of questions. She knew that she needed to calm herself but she was electric with something more than just excitement. First that egg, and then that bird and now this. But wasn't this what she'd wanted?

She tried again.

"H did you find me? I mean, how did you even know where I lived?"

The tiger looked bashful as if this were a delicate subject. He was sitting upright on his haunches now but looking steadily down at his paws.

"Well, from the Chief of course."

When Mabel continued to stare blankly at him, he elaborated.

"He had his subordinates follow you. The crows. There's a flock at the museum, they answer to him."

Mabel's brows knitted together as she remembered that little group she'd seen outside the museum. The Chief was obviously the bossy white raven.

"Well, alright. But why are you here then?"

The tiger didn't reply right away, his eyes narrowed into slits, clearly trying to puzzle something out.

"It is hard to explain or at least I don't quite understand it all, but I was to bring you this."

She watched as the he shifted slightly and held out his chest of rich fur. Hanging there on a thick gold chain was a magnifying glass. It was much larger and heavier seeming than the one that Mabel herself kept on her desk, and it took her a minute to recognize it as one she'd seen in the strange office. She reached for it slowly, but drew her hand back sharply, finding it warm to the touch.

Simultaneously she'd realized something else. The night air was chill, and soft clouds were following each of her own breaths into the darkness but no such evidence of warm blood was being issued from the tiger.

"They are a set," the tiger was saying. "They have an *electromagnetic connection* to each other. The Chief explained it. He said you need to hold on to them both, for safe keeping. Which is why-"

She held up her hand. "Wait, sorry, back up please. What is a set?"

"The fountain pen and the magnifying glass," replied the tiger carefully, like a child repeating something he's memorized. "The gold fountain pen. You have it don't you?"

Mabel hesitated as she thought of the pen, realizing it was probably still in her backpack. She'd completely forgotten about it.

"What makes you think I have it?" she asked, not willing to give herself up quite yet.

"The Chief" said the tiger. "He saw you take it."



She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair, all tangled with nightmares. The tiger was still talking, so she tried to focus.

"...And so I came here to get you, the Chief's orders. We need your help."

"You're going to have to explain all that to me again," she said distractedly. "You should probably, well, come up. This isn't where I live, we're up the stairs."

"I apologize," the tiger said, backing off from the door. Mabel nodded.

"You'll have to be quiet," she warned in a whisper as she led him up the stairs and through the door. "We don't want to wake my mom."

She led the tiger to the kitchen, filled the kettle and put in on the stove. The carnivore stalked in behind her, the slats of moonlight that were filtering through the blinds fell across the his taunt body, making him seem more alive than ever.

He hovered close behind her but she tried to ignore this. She wanted to take the kettle off the stove before it actually started whistling.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a very quiet rumble.

"Boiling some water for tea."

The steam was rolling softly from the spout now.

She deftly took it off from the burner and climbed a step stool to reach the above cabinet and rummaged for the tea boxes.

"Would you like some?"

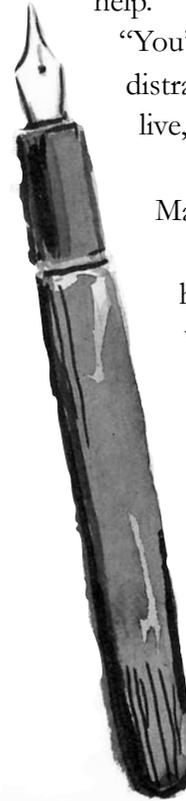
She'd pulled out the Darjeeling thinking that it might be the most palatable to him. He looked at her blankly.

"Milk?" she asked, again thinking of the neighbor's cat. The tiger seemed to think about this second suggestion but then finally shook his head.

"I do not think I can drink or eat anymore."

He spoke slowly as if pondering his curious condition for the first time. His tail swished dangerously back and forth like an anxious cat.

"Raw meat is more my taste anyway."



She nodded and fixed her own cup of tea; with plenty of milk and honey. Holding the hot mug carefully, she led the tiger through the hall and up the half flight of steps to her little room. It felt close and warm even though the darkness muted the bright colors and patterns it was composed of; a jigsaw of books and little papered boxes and old tins full of tiny, cast off treasures.

Once safely inside, door locked, she settled herself crossed legged on the woven rug with her tea. She let it warm her hands, savoring the feeling of security it gave her.

The tiger sat on his haunches directly in front of her, his large eyes glinting. Mabel suddenly felt very small and breakable. She stared down at her tea, squinting through the murkiness to try and read the tealeaves but no shape or omen seemed to rise out of the dark liquid.

“So, explain,” she commanded.

“The museum is waking up,” said the tiger matter of factly.

Mabel waited for more, but the tiger just stared at her patiently.

“But how?” she burst out. “How does it work? How is this even possible? *That’s* what I need to know,” she had to pause for breath.

The tiger twitched his whiskers uneasily, then bent his head, placating.

“You will have to ask the Chief. I don’t really understand it myself. He rounded up those of us who were *re-animated* and explained the situation. But I cannot say that I really...”

But Mabel’s mind was already on a track and she plowed on.

“How many other animals in the museum are alive, awake, re-animated, whatever you call it? Or wait; is it just animals or other objects? I suppose it must just be animals right? Can they all speak?”

The tiger’s tail moved back and forth.

“We are not alive” he said, the low grumble in his words stoppered the flow of Mabel’s questions. “Not as we were before. We have not been *resurrected*, but *re-animated*.”

These must have been more memorized phrases because he sounded out the words carefully and slowly.

“But please listen,” he continued, still gruff. “Just sit still girl-child and listen for a moment.”

Mabel nodded, her lips set in a severe line.

“Something *else* has woken up. The museum is not just a place of stuffed animals and artifacts. There are many levels used for study and for storage and even more hidden places for even more dangerous things, things meant to be left alone. Something that was never supposed to exist is now awake too. The Chief says it is something unnatural.”

She felt a chill down her spine. The red egg and its ominous glow kept floating up in her mind and to her utter dismay, she found herself hesitating.

“And what does it all have to do with me?” came her small voice.

“You were the one that woke us up,” the tiger replied in confusion. “The Chief says you must find out how stop this creature. We will help you, but this must be done. Soon it will be hunting people and will become stronger, and more deranged too, like other man-eaters. Then it will unstoppable.”

“But...but what exactly is it?” she asked, her throat dry.

The tiger gave another one his long, thinking pauses.

“The Chief doesn’t know for sure,” he confessed. “It’s something older than him, much older. It certainly has power, and it smells of rot and greed. I have only ever smelled that in humans.”

He bared his long canines as he said this, clearly in disgust.

“It hasn’t been seen up close, but it marks its smell about, and has a back long and scaled like a serpent. The Chief said it was a member of the tribe *chimera*...”

This was another word he tasted slowly, clearly unsure of the exact meaning. Mabel however recognized it from her mythology books.

“A creature half one animal and half another? Those don’t exist! They’re just in stories.”

Then she realized how ridiculous that sounded when she was sitting there talking to a taxidermy tiger. He took her exclamation very seriously however.

“Yes, girl-child, that is correct. In the right way of things, they should not. That is why we need you to stop it. A creature like that will do great harm. It eats very strangely, taking the life out of other animals without tearing their bodies. I have seen the mice and rats it has eaten, grey and twisted and shriveled but intact. The Chief says soon it will begin *petrifying* larger animals...”

“Petrify? As in fossilization? But that means it’s turning creatures into stone doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” confirmed the tiger softly. “Well, something that appears like stone but is not stone.”

The blood was pumping loudly in Mabel’s ears now.

“And what exactly does this Chief think I’m supposed to do? I don’t even know what this thing is! What could I possibly do against something... something that hunts people, that turns them to stone!?”

She trembled and the tiger looked at her with large, sad eyes of amber glass.

“I do not know. I am just telling you - as I was told.”

“So you’ve come to take me back to the museum with you? To face down this monster or whatever it is?”

She said it softly, the trembling in her voice gone. The discovery of her own fear made her feel sick. It was a heavy reality that she might not be like the heroines in her novels. She looked up mournfully at the tiger.

“Only if you if you will come,” he said softly. He nuzzled next to her.

“But school tomorrow,” she pleaded, despising the words as they came out. “And my mother... you don’t know what it’ll do to her if she wakes up and finds me just gone.”

The tiger said nothing and Mabel clung to him, waves of exhaustion finally overtaking her.

“Not, right now,” she said. “I can’t leave, just like that. I need to think about it, I need a plan first.” But before that, she needed sleep, her head was aching.

The luminous eyes of the tiger just bored into her. His steady gaze made her feel as if he could see straight into her soul.⁷

⁷ Coincidentally there was famous tiger tamer named Mabel. Mabel Stark was known as the first lady tiger tamer, best known for her acts with the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. She worked with big cats for nearly 60 years. In the last pages of her autobiography she writes: “The chute door opens as I crack my whip and shout, ‘Let them come,’ out slink the striped cats, snarling and roaring, leaping at each other or at me. It’s a matchless thrill, and life without it is not worth while to me.” from *Hold That Tiger* by Mabel Stark

Her weary mind went through the various ways to destroy creatures like vampires and werewolves; in folklore it was simply about finding the right method. She just didn’t know the method for this.

“I’ll need to do some research...there isn’t anything else you know about it?” she asked as she climbed into bed. She didn’t protest when the tiger experimentally climbed in with her. She even gave a sleepy smile at the kitten-like jolt of surprise he gave as the iron bed frame creaked loudly.

“Chief thinks it might have wings,” said the tiger as he made himself comfortable. “We found some feathers by the petrified rats...”

“Oh lovely, so it can fly too...” she mumbled as she fell into a deep slumber.



No IV

The Bearcat Under the Bed

The next morning Mabel woke groggily. The only evidence that the tiger had been there was a dusting of orange fur on her comforter and the magnifying glass clutched tightly in her hand. This she tucked in a small box along with the golden pen and shoved it to the back of her desk drawer. In the kitchen, she eyed her mother making coffee and wondered if the dark liquid would help counteract the tiredness that clung to her.

“What is it?” her mother asked with a smirk, “Got the Mondays?”

“It’s Tuesday” Mabel said, trying to smile but somehow it ended up as a grimace. She’d just noticed the crow sitting in the tree outside the kitchen window. How long had it been there? The tiger’s words came back to her and her frown deepened.

“Mabel?” her mother asked, the smile sliding off her face.

“I’m just tired,” said Mabel trying her best to ignore the second bird that had landed. “I didn’t sleep very well.”

At once her mother was standing beside her, the cool back of her hand on Mabel’s forehead. “You do feel a bit feverish...”

She looked up to see her mother's face crumple into the harassed, worried expression that was becoming all too common. Mabel re-attempted the smile, and noticed the clock.

"Really, I'm okay, but I'm going to be late!"

She rushed from the room. Catching her tightly knitted brow in the hall mirror she stopped and tried to smooth it, but her face seemed stuck that way.

At school she kept slipping into day dreams. It had been real after all, she had the golden artifacts to prove it. She thought again and again of the strange study, the white raven, the tiger... but it was the red egg that tugged at her thoughts the most. Absentmindedly she sketched in the margins of her papers. Eggs and bird eyes emerged in the red ink of her correcting pen.

"Hello?" the voice came. "Mabel. Hello! Anyone home? I'm collecting the worksheets for Ms. Applebaum."

She looked up bewildered to see the pinched expression of Amelia Wallace, whose long blonde braids swung in agitation.

Mabel grimaced unintentionally as she offered up her sheet. Amelia glanced down as she added it to the top of her pile and as she did, her haughty expression quickly turned to one of... confusion? Disgust? Mabel couldn't quite read it.

"What *is* this?" Amelia asked. "The evil eye?"

A small laugh escaped Mabel's lips, she couldn't help it. Amelia's glare deepened.

"They are, aren't they? Are you a witch or something? Are you trying to hex me?"

She did *almost* look frightened. Mabel watched Amelia's eyes dart up to the front of the classroom...to call for help from the teacher? And say what exactly?

The seconds seemed to stretch on as Amelia just stood there, seeming unsure of her next move, they were both aware that the whole class was now watching them.

Then a tall black boy was at Amelia's elbow, and both girls blinked in surprise. It was Grant. Though that was his last name, Mabel couldn't remember what his first name was, Charles or something equally unfitting and grown up sounding.

She knew he was generally the class peace keeper, but boys didn't interfere with affairs that were strictly between the girls, and vice versa. Everyone knew this. She could feel the tension wafting from the rest of the room.

"I don't think anyone is trying to hex anyone," he said, kindly. Far more kindly than she would've been able to muster. She eyed him. His open, handsome face conveyed no guile, no ulterior motive. He reached for the stack of papers.

"I'll take these up to Ms. Applebaum's desk for you. You can grab the last few worksheets. I think the bell is about to ring."

Amelia was flustered. Finally she blushed and handed them over but not without giving a quick glare in Mabel's direction. Mabel wasn't concerned about this in the slightest, instead her eyes narrowed as she watched Grant closely examining her worksheet at the front of the room as he put the other pages down on the desk.

At lunch she was greeted by jeers of *witch* in the cafeteria. She flushed but held her head high as she strode outside and plopped down on a patch of grass. After eating her sandwich and apple, she lay back. She shaded her eyes with one hand and traced the paths of migrating geese with the other.

This reminded her of a fairytale. A princess's brothers had been turned into geese by a witch and she had to knit them shirts with stinging nettles and take a vow of silence in order to lift the curse. Or had they been swans...? She squeezed her eyes shut and then sat up, blinking furiously.

Later that afternoon, her English class was reading out a chapter of *A Wrinkle in Time*. This bored her somewhat. Not because she didn't like the book but because she'd liked it so much that she'd finished it weeks ago.

Her teacher had not been pleased to learn this. They still had several weeks of reading and discussion, and next time, it was *recommended* that Mabel follow along at the set reading schedule. She was still required to fill out the weekly worksheets with the rest of the students and if she didn't remember those parts of the book, well then frankly, it was her own fault for reading ahead.

Mabel spent the class period writing down what the tiger had said and making a plan. When the bell rang she felt resolved. She slipped out of

school and boarded a bus to the Natural History Museum, entirely skipping her last class for the day. This wasn't like her in the slightest, playing hooky, but she felt ungrateful at the way she had treated the tiger. The museum was probably the one place in the whole world where she felt at home, she couldn't just abandon it. She would be brave.

She spent nearly an hour looking for the mysterious door, but something had gone all wrong since the other day. Hard as she tried, she could not remember where it had been. It was growing late and she needed to be home, and so defeated, she made her way towards the grand front doors.

She walked by the tiger diorama on her way out; it now featured only one tiger. Stranger still, no one else seemed to notice the difference. She stood in front of the glass, half wondering if the remaining tiger would suddenly spring to life as well, but it was as rigid as ever.

Sighing she continued to the front door, assembling a list of books in her head to find in the library, when a voice pulled her out from her cloud.

“What's got you down little one?”

Mabel looked up to see Mr. Roberts, her security guard friend. He smiled down at her, his forehead dotted with perspiration.

“You look like you got the world on your shoulders. Come on, what's bothering you then? You can tell me you know.”

She was suddenly very aware that she should have been in school.

“Everything is fine - really.”

He gave her a highly skeptical look but then his eyes crinkled up and he laughed.

“It's just hard to explain,” she confessed.

“You could always try.”

She bit her lip.

“Well, you know when you've been wanting something for a really long time, dreaming of it. But then, when you have it, it's not really what you expect? They warn you about that in stories, careful what you wish for, but it's different when it really happens and the worst of it is I get the feeling that's exactly what being a grown up is like...except, you know, all the time.”

The guard gave a chuckle.

“Gosh, you're an old soul aren't you?”

He laughed again, took off his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

“All I can say to that is this; I've found that life never does turn out the way you think it will. Maybe it won't ever turn out how you want it to either, but don't mistake that for a bad thing. Even things that seem bad at first can get turned on their head. But you have to be open to, be ready to see things from the right angle.”

She wasn't sure that this made her feel better, but she thanked him.





She got off the bus several blocks from her house so she could join the rest of the children walking home from school. She tried to fade into the group, but almost immediately someone tapped her shoulder. She whirled around quickly, and met the gleam of Grant's seamless smile.

"You / weren't / in / class / this / afternoon" he said in a singsong voice.

"Yes / I / was" she retorted in the same manner, quickly reasoning all she could do was lie. She just wished this was something she was good at.

"No, no you weren't."

She fixed him with her most vicious glare, but he didn't flinch. This surprised her. In fact he simply stood there, relaxed, hands in the pockets of his jeans.

Grant was *popular* - good at sports, and easy going. In fact, he was everything that she wasn't.

Her grades were good, but she was often out of favor with the teachers for being taciturn and not participating in discussions. All in all, most adults would believe him over her. So she stood there, lips pressed together, concentrating on keeping her brows relaxed and her expression neutral. Clearly it wasn't working.

"Don't give me that face!" he protested with a laugh. "I covered for you, ok?"

"Thank you," she said.

"Not at all," Grant said giving a low, overly grand bow. "But you should really tell me what you were up to - as payment for my services."

She rolled her eyes and walked away.

"Hey, wait! Seriously though, what's this all about anyway? I mean... come on, you're not gonna tell me?"

He was walking beside her now, keeping up with her rapid pace. She shrugged.

"I was playing hooky, that's all."

"Ahh I see..." he paused. "Thing is, I don't believe you. You're definitely up to something."

"Well, prove it then."

"Oh, I can't. Not yet at least. But I have my eye on you."

He was frustratingly self-assured. She glared at him but he returned it with a warm grin.

"Just make sure you stay for all your classes tomorrow cause I may not feel generous enough to cover for you again."

He turned and dashed down a side street. Mabel stared at his retreating form, feeling unsettled. Mostly she was angry, but she couldn't quite decide if it was at Grant or at herself. After all, he *had* done her a favor.

He may, and probably did, have his own reasons for doing so but there was a chance he was just trying to be nice.

Later, as she sat at her desk, biting the end of her pencil and putting off her homework, she thought this over. Maybe part of the problem was that she didn't even know how to begin explaining 'what she'd been up to.' He would likely think she was crazy if she tried to explain, and then, what would be the point? He couldn't possibly be of any help, even if he did believe her.

That night when she'd finally fallen asleep, she had another strange dream. She was walking in a field with a boy. It might have been Grant but she couldn't see his face clearly. He had a red kite under one arm and they were both laughing. She was talking about bees for some reason.

Then, suddenly she realized she'd been talking about them because there were bees everywhere. Buzzing and buzzing. She looked up and the bright day had turned into night and there was a big swollen yellow moon above her, nearly full. It was dripping with honey, and bees were swarming around it.

Mabel awoke with a start and found that yet again, the sounds of the real world had worked their way into her sleeping thoughts. There was a scratching noise loud in her ears and she slowly realized it was coming from beneath her bed.

She sat very still and listened with every fiber of her body, hoping that she'd been imagining the noise.

But no, there was indeed a faint scratching from beneath the bed frame. Trying to swallow down her uneasiness, she crawled to the side of the bed. Her hands were white in the moonlight as they gripped the edge. Cautiously she peered over.

There they were, staring at her, a pair of glowing yellow eyes, large and round. They bounced back the light in that sheeny way of an animal caught in headlights. Though this pair of eyes didn't look the least bit frightened.

Unashamed and unblinking they stared back at Mabel; then the creature's long claws tapped against the floor.

"You found me..." it snickered.

Mabel gave a small cry and scrambled back onto her bed. She could hear a scratching on the wood floor, then all at once there it was, a bizarre animal pulling itself up the side of the bed. It wasn't quite the size of golden retriever but it felt large and menacing with its shaggy black fur and a thick tail that was nearly twice the length of the rest of its body. It brought with it a thick musky smell like rising bread, and its eyes were somewhat murderous, mostly due to the foggy grey look in the left one.

As soon as she noticed the eye, Mabel immediately recognized the creature as the binturong⁸ from the museum, she even knew the exact case that it typically resided in.

"You scared me!" she blurted out, instantly relieved. Though she was dimly aware that just because the tiger was friendly didn't mean that this newest reanimated mammal would be. In fact, it was still gazing at her threateningly. Her comment didn't seem to faze it in the least.

"You have work to do little one," the bearcat said in its coarse voice. Like a witch from a fairytale.

"I've come to hurry you along, much is at stake and much needs to be done. We can't dill dally here all night."

Mabel gulped.

"That's just it, I don't know what I can do... I don't even know what this thing is, only that its dangerous and evil and turning rats to stone...I mean what am I supposed to do against something like that?"

Her face felt hot. Guilt was coiled heavily in the pit of her stomach.

"Well, you'll have to figure it out then and quick! What kind of silly child are you?"

⁸ *Arctictis binturong* or the Asian Bearcat, is a mammal in the order Carnivora. They have half-retractile claws and a bushy prehensile tail. They've been noted for their intelligence and curiosity but are often bad tempered. See *Civets of Southeast Asia (And Relatives)*.



Backed up against the headboard, Mabel found her temper simmering again. She glowered at the wiry creature, all bone and ragged fur; it had clearly been stuffed a very long time ago.

“Have you just come here just to blame me? I don’t know how you all expect me to get on like this! I mean with so little information...and...all on my own too.”

With a thudding heart she glared at the animal. In response, the creature displayed her carnivorous teeth.

“Better. That’s much better,” the bearcat said smiling. “No, I didn’t come here to simply pester you child, but to see if you had any fight in you, and well, if one required the other...then all the better for me. You’ll need all the spirit you can gather in order to tackle what’s ahead. I grew concerned when the tiger returned dejected. Silly beast.”

The disdain in her voice seemed to be directed at Mabel and the tiger alike

“You have all the clues in front of you, if you only choose to look. You simply need to apply yourself. Do some research, scour the bestiaries, think! Use your head child! You have a general description of the blasted thing. The only thing left is to find the force that opposes it.”

“Oh well, if it’s that simple.....you don’t really need me then do you?” Mabel said sarcastically. The awful creature had woken her up in the middle of the night, given her a fright and followed it all up with insults.

The bearcat hissed and in a fluid motion bit Mabel at her elbow. It was quick and sharp, intended to startle not harm. Even so, two beads of bright red blood blossomed. She stared wide eyed at the bearcat.

“Silly child!” spat the binturong. “That is how one deals with cubs who do not show respect. And you...” her voice softened suddenly. “And you are but a very young cub, I know.”

“I’m not that young...” Mabel said sulkily, holding her arm close, trying to get a better look at her elbow which was stinging slightly. The bearcat gave her a sharp toothed smile and chuckled.

“Well, perhaps you are not that young. It’s hard to say. Either way you are old enough to take responsibility.”

Mabel could sense that in her own, twisted way that bearcat was trying to be kind.

“I’ll...I’ll look into it okay? I promise. I’ll try my best.”

“You do that. We cannot wait much longer, or the effects might be irreversible.”

Silent as a shadow, the bearcat made a graceful leap towards the window. Mabel hadn’t even realized it was open. She tiptoed across the cool wood floor to latch it closed behind the last wisp of black tail.

She sighed. The animals were growing insistent, and it all felt out of her control. Maybe it would be better once she had some books in front her. That usually helped things.

