

## WRETCHED CREATURES

You must understand, I had lived a life of unspeakable shame. Nothing I tell you will make sense unless you understand this. Otherwise how could you believe, for instance, that my own reflection could climb out of a pool of glacial meltwater and greet me?

I say she greeted me, but all she really did was smile weakly and tilt her head to one side expectantly. I stood motionless, eyes wide, pebbles digging into my feet.

“Hello,” I said finally, voice cracking.

“Hello.”

She was wearing nothing but a grey nightgown and an ornate white shawl. They looked old—Victorian perhaps?—but somehow felt much, much older. It was as though she was wearing a piece of the valley around her shoulders.

“Why are you here?”

“I’ve always been here,” she replied effortlessly. “Why are *you* here?”

“I work—or, um, research here. I’m here for research, I mean.”

“Re-search,” she repeated, swirling the word around her mouth like whisky. “How... impersonal. To be honest, I had hoped that you’d come to join me.”

“Join you where?”

“Under the glacier, of course.”

I glanced over her shoulder at the greyish-white cliff of ice looming at the top of the valley. Without hesitation, she turned and began walking towards it, her long slender legs and bare feet moving with an arachnoid sort of grace. I followed obediently.

“*Under* the glacier?”

“Don’t worry, there’s room.”

“There’s a cave? Or—?”

She laughed, lightly yet abrasively, like a wave breaking on a shingle beach.

“You can dig yourself a little cave if you like, I suppose, but that would rather be missing the point, wouldn’t it? It’s so much nicer and neater to be completely encased. There’s something so... *intimate* about it; I really think it would do you a lot of good. All you need to do is lie down in a comfortable spot in front of the glacier, wait, and let it pass over you.”

“But I would be crushed. Or suffocate, or starve, or—you know. I would die.”

“Well, I’ve been down there for years, and I’m not dead, am I?”

“You look like a ghost.”

“I look like *you*, sweetheart.”

She did. Everything about her was a perfect reflection of me, from her wispy hair, to the mole under her eye, to the crescent shaped scar just above her left wrist. But—did I really look that pale?

“I can’t just drop everything to lie under a glacier. I have to work, and people would worry about me.”

“My, my. Isn’t this what they call ‘bad faith’? Pretending that you have fewer options than you truly do, I mean. You do not *have to* work; you *can* just lie under a glacier.”

“I can’t!”

She stopped on a rocky outcropping and looked down at me with an expression of what seemed like genuine pity on her face—or perhaps just sadness? I don’t know, the sun was in my eyes. Maybe she didn’t have any expression at all.

The breath caught in my throat, and I had a visceral feeling that whatever word she was about to say would split me open like a pomegranate. But her lips remained closed. She just stared at me for another few seconds, then continued towards the glacier. It wasn’t until we were about a hundred metres from it that she spoke again.

“Do you remember the time when you were seven, when you tried to help that fox caught in a chain link fence?”

I nodded.

“You remember the way it writhed and flinched from your touch? And—well, I don’t need to remind you how that ended.”

I held my right hand to my chest self-consciously.

“I wouldn’t want to disturb any painful memories, but... you remember how things were before you came here? The people around you, the things you did?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“We’re all like wounded animals; that’s just what it is to be human. A dog with an injured paw, given a few weeks, will be back to normal, but we never truly heal. We will forever be cowering from or snapping at the hand that would help us.”

While she was saying this, I was watching my feet, trying to avoid losing my footing on the bank of scree we were crossing. When I looked up again, we were already at the base of the glacier.

Obviously, I had seen hundreds of glaciers before, but there was something different about this one; some monolithic sense of finality. I was inexplicably reminded of a story I had heard as a child from my Japanese teacher. Her cousin had lived her whole life in a secluded mountain village. On seeing the ocean for the first time, at the age of twenty-five, she was so shocked by the sight that she immediately fainted. It felt like this glacier might have the same effect on me.

At its base, there was a small, horizontal, shelf-like gap, just big enough for me to lie down in.

“I know why you came here. You don’t want to be wounded any more; you want to heal.” She smiled—a smile performed, not shared—and spread her arms. “I am here to help you. This is where you belong.”

My vision narrowed, sucked into that body-shaped depression under the glacier. Vertigo washed through my head. I felt like I was going to throw up.

“No,” I yelped, stumbling backwards.

There was a bright flash of scorn in her face, instantly replaced by an expression of probing concern.

“It’s okay if you feel scared,” she said melodically. “Just take a deep breath and lie down here whenever you’re ready. Trust me, you’ll feel *so* much better once the ice encases you.”

I felt so hot—feverish. My body was crying out to lay down, to be still, to sleep. But some unrelenting vital tide was pulling me away with all its strength.

“No, I... can’t. This is wrong. I have to go.”

“Please, don’t do this,” she pleaded. “You’re so close.”

I turned and began walking away. Not in the cautious, measured way in which I had approached the glacier, but with the quiet desperation of a hunted animal.

“You’re trying to trick me,” I asserted, barely able to get the words out.

“Am I now? I didn’t bring you here, I would remind you. You made your way to this blighted continent all on your own. You then sought out the one hypersaline lake with liquid water in which you could see your reflection. And even then, I didn’t drag you up to this glacier; you came here of your own volition.”

There was something sickly sweet in her voice, like the smell of rotting fruit.

“Nonetheless, I see you’ve already decided how our story will go: you, the righteous protagonist; I, the seductive villain. But aren’t there some holes in your narrative? For instance, pray tell, what *research* were you planning on conducting up here without any equipment—with nothing more than the coat on your back? And wasn’t it terribly out of character of you to leave the base without informing any of your dear colleagues? Just imagine their faces when you show up again after being AWOL for ten hours. What *will* you say to them?”

The thought tightened around my throat.

“I... don’t know. But that’s where I belong—among other people, however much it hurts.”

We had reached the lake again. I stopped on the shore while she continued into the water, gazing piercingly into me over her shoulder.

“So be it. You can walk away now, but know that I shan’t give up on you that easily. In every mirror, in every draining bathtub, at the bottom of every glass of wine, I’ll be there to remind you that my invitation is still open.”

She passed into the tranquil water without the slightest ripple. Her lips parted in a silent, knowing smile, as her head finally sank beneath the surface.

Lit from behind by the setting sun, I cast an impossibly long shadow down the valley. It was going to be a long walk home.