

The Girl under the Mango Tree

She told me our heads looked like beat-in melons – the stage after a Gallagher routine – all strings and seeds and juicy bits. I remembered my father chopping wood, his wax face and his stationary body, only his thick muscled arms moving. They reached back and fell forward in a perfect arc. It was identical every time; a replayed movie clip. When my mother had a vision of our gutted heads, I imagined watching my father chop wood. All I saw were his small hard eyes as he halved my face with the iron axe.

That was Christmas, 2006. I was fifteen. My mother packed me up along with her dog, cat, and bird, leaving our other five pets behind to whatever fate awaited them with my father, the wood splitter. We drove with no plan and no destination, leaving behind the Indiana homestead where I'd grown up. My mother shut off our cell phones and threw away her credit cards so my father couldn't track us. She didn't allow music. She needed silence so she could maintain a strong mental connection with her spirit guide whom she believed would guide us to some promised land, or into the arms of her soul-mate/savior. We drove aimlessly. We stayed with friends in Indianapolis and family in Denver. We slid off the road in South Dakota, where the snow came down so wet and thick that the Black Hills looked like soft, slumbering bodies. We drove for hours, days, weeks. I don't know why we ended up where we did, what invisible thread my mother followed, but we came, dusty and ragged,

through the Beartooth Mountains, landing in a glum gully of a town: Red Lodge, Montana.

The Northwest treated us with more tenderness than the dense snow and abandoned mines suggested. The sun was fuzzy warm and the pines looked soft, like great, roosting birds. The Northwest was a place of crystal heights and low black prairie. And I was tired, so tired and bored with my mother's magic. My mother is a sorceress.

A few years before we left my father, she had started reading. Of course, she'd always read, but this was different. An insatiable hunger burned in her gut, a hunger to know. She would wake up around ten or eleven every morning, meditate, and then read for five or six hours. She told me, "I've gone back to school." I didn't know what she meant, but she stopped minding me, and I did what I wanted. One day she called me into her room. I'd grown so used to my solitude – to the cacophony of silence – that it took her calling several times before I heard. I went to her – creeping into the smoggy den of the exalted shaman. I didn't remember her being so tall. Even sitting in bed she seemed straighter and longer than usual – her dark hair, so soft and heavy, poured down her body. Her eyes were closed.

"Come here, love."

I hesitated. I must have been thirteen. I remember carrying a stuffed animal and holding it firm against my chest, but this memory can't be correct. I sat down lightly on the lip of her bed. She must have seen the fear – transparent as a bird realizing the futility of attempting escape. My mother looked at me with pity.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she hushed but didn't touch me. She tried to explain something to me, something about a shift in her. Mother had voices, beings, a presence in her mind connecting her to the great umbilical cord of the universe. She said she was a fetus, being fed sacred knowledge by her "guides." Mother gave me history. She wove warm folktales about Native American tribes directed by spirit guides.

I couldn't understand. I left. She didn't call me back. I walked out into the dry November field, I lay down under a sepia sky and let the cloud tide ebb and flow over my mind. Gradually, the popping wires of my brain dulled. I sank deeper into the ground and thought, "We all have our god."

That's how it started, how my mother became the woman making her slow and silent ascent up the mountain. She drove around another sharp bend. There our progress stopped. A metal barricade stood in relief against a three-foot wall of snow; a sign bolted to the barrier read *PASS CLOSED FOR SEASON*. The gas gauge slid closer to *E* as my mother turned around. She put the car in park and let her head droop, her forehead resting on the hard, cool plastic of the steering wheel.

"Fuck." The word issued out with quiet defeat. It was the first time she'd exposed any fear, any vulnerability, in a long time. I didn't know whether to be frightened or relieved.

"We'll go to that gas station we saw on the way up. Okay?"

I nodded.

"That can't be the only way in."

"Maybe it's a sign we shouldn't go there."

"Don't try that shit with me. Pretending you believe in me when it's convenient for you. This town is where we're meant to go."

I stayed quiet.

She was right. It wasn't the only way in. The man at the gas station hooked his thumbs under the shoulder straps of his overalls and snapped them as he gave us directions.

"A hop, skip, an' a jump," he'd said. We drove for an hour. It was near midnight when we finally entered Red Lodge. My mother saw the Super 8 hotel and didn't bother to find an alternative. A pimply kid sat on the front desk watching a *Scrubs* rerun on the lobby TV.

"We need a room," my mother said, rousing him from his television trance.

The hotel looked like a ski lodge. The walls were painted in muted earth tones and all the furniture was made from those sandy cedar logs that are supposed to look rustic and untreated. There was a line of thick pegs made from these logs in our room for hanging coats and jackets. The last occupant had stretched a condom over one of the pegs. The bulbous white tip sagged with fluid. My mother pinched it off and dropped it in the trash.

"We'll find someplace better tomorrow."

The next day we ate breakfast in a diner with greasy plastic table cloths. We left smelling like burnt hash browns. We walked Main Street. The

sun shone, but a thick white coating of snow held out and patches of sidewalk were still slick with gray ice. For the most part it looked like a stereotypical Western town, wood clapboard storefronts and hanging signs that creaked on their metal chains. There was only one building that broke the aesthetic: a small stucco shotgun house set up off the street and painted an ugly mint green with a matching sign. *BOOMERANG BEADS*.

A slight girl in a thick black coat mounted the stairs to the shop. Her long, straight brown hair shone with reflected sunlight. She unlocked the door and went in without noticing us watching her. Or at least she didn't let on. I had the feeling she was used to people watching her. Beauty can alienate people that way.

"We have to go there." My mother said, still staring at the mint green house.

"Let's go." I wanted to meet the girl in the black coat.

"Not now. I'll know when it's the right time."

As we walked, Mother ran her long fingers across brick siding, light posts, feeling the place. She found a sign she liked, thick and wooden, *MAGGIE'S* painted in a pink Western font. We went in. I don't think my mother was looking for a job. She was looking for a connection, someone to house her, feed her, and direct her to the right trail. Maggie liked my mother's height, her hair, her smile. Like many before and after her, Maggie's curiosity got the better of her.

There, on our second day in town, surrounded by cowgirl boots sparkling with rhinestones and cheap silver, Norah Jones buzzing low through the speakers, Maggie asked, "So, ya'll here on vacation," even though she knew we weren't.

Maggie's pudgy face barely hid a glow, a blush, the subdued light some women get when they're presented with new gossip. My mother smiled in a subtle, dim way, a sad, almost self-righteous smile. She looked at me as if to say, "Should I tell her, this woman we've only just met, of the terror of our past?" I looked down at the worn hardwood floor. That look of dejection, the shame of the victim, served my mother well, so I stuck to it.

"We're actually sort of on the run."

Maggie's big eyes widened, eyes the color of dark silver creek stones.

“Not from the law or anything. My husband, actually. He’s an alcoholic. This past Christmas we were afraid for our lives, so we left. It took me a long time to get up the courage to leave. Now we’re looking for a place to settle down. Somewhere he won’t find us.”

Maggie’s face turned soft. Her smooth, dark eyes clouded. “Is he looking for you?”

My mother stilled, let her face fill with silence. “Yes.” It was a low, long sound. I smelled the mortal danger it suggested – metallic and warm like blood.

Maggie nodded. I’ve noticed that when my mother tells other women this story they get this look of understanding, as if abuse is something every woman deals with, like their period. It was bullshit. I felt nauseous.

“God,” Maggie sighed, her voice soaked in saccharine sympathy, “you poor little souls.”

Just like that we were saved. Maggie put us in a hotel for a few days, gave my mother a job, and let her wear anything from the shop she wanted.

That first night in the new hotel room, I came down with a fever. My skin felt prickly and sore to the touch. I couldn’t eat. My mother put a heap of blankets over me and turned the thermostat up to eighty. Drowning in my own sweat, with the radiator humming by my head and snow padding at the tiny window, I had a dream.

I was in a flat copper desert. The sky, a pulsating electric blue, pressed down from above. I sat cross-legged on the cracked earth as the red sand sea and blue ceiling pressed me between them – a cosmic vise. I watched myself from above. My eyes were closed. I, the camera, zoomed in on myself until only my eyes were visible. The lids opened and white slime gazed back the color of a frog’s belly or a body at the bottom of a creek, rubbed smooth and alien from the current. Deep terror seized me.

I woke up. Already, the dream was fading. I had trouble recalling what had terrified me. I remembered desert, my dead jelly eyes. They were my mother’s eyes. Dense, shallow color. Illusion of insight, centered calm masking the degeneration of a warm flawed humanity. Someone had better fetch my grizzled heart soon, I thought, before time and sorrow dry it completely, as they had my mother’s.

I got up. Outside, a denser darkness held the earth. A diaphanous veil of snow covered the window. The furnace clicked, prickled. I was drenched

everywhere with sweat. My hair, twisted and damp, strangled my head like some awful black ivy – it felt heavy, constraining. My mother wasn’t back from work. That was fine. I wanted solitude, bleakness, oppression. I stepped out the door. The room was at ground level and opened onto a raised deck leading down into a cedar-fringed parking lot. Snow hushed the earth – a lullaby sent by God that purred so soft I didn’t feel when it invaded me. My sweat crystallized, my breath thickened, forming a dense cumulous cloud. This whiteness was different from the whiteness I’d just seen in my dream eyes. This whiteness contained time, dimension, grace.

I went back inside knowing what I had to fight for. My fever was gone.



I met a boy with soft white hair. Olyver didn’t do much. He walked from school to home and from home to school. He played basketball. He listened to The Red Hot Chili Peppers. He thought often about abstract things. Eventually, he thought about me. I saw him my third day in Red Lodge.

My sickness gone and my mother at work, I went out to put my tracks in the new snow. That’s how I spent days. I trudged through snow, through books, through hours of silence. I noticed him right away because there weren’t many boys my age in town. I liked how he walked, as if he thought through every step. His handsome face had the same look of awareness, his small blue eyes darted everywhere, struggling to take it all in, eyes that inflated as they absorbed the newness of the world. As I watched him disappear into the brick high school, I thought he saw me...thought he looked through me. For the first time, I wished my parents had sent me to school. Then I could enroll here. See him every day. Now it was too late. At the same time I saw Olyver, my mother saw the girl in the black coat.

The third day was right; my mother went into the bead shop on her lunch break. The girl in the black coat was there. Her name was Brenna, “dark-haired beauty.” She’d chosen the name herself when she was fourteen. Nicole didn’t suit her, she’d said. It was too common, too demure. To this day I don’t know what initial phrases, what hushes or peals of mirth, formed their connection, but that night, Mother came home and Brenna was there with her.

I fell in love so quickly it surprised me. Brenna wore glitter in her hair. She wore green crochet sweater dresses and applied Egyptian musk behind her tiny pixie ears. She had cats named “Tybalt,” “Fern,” and, “Garden Yew.” She subscribed to *Vogue* and painted ethereal oil paintings of lanky fairies languishing in hibiscus patches or stretched out, supine, on mossy logs. I felt for Brenna the same pregnant emotions I felt for the woods and fields. I wanted to feel her, smell her, discern the intonations of her sultry voice. I wanted to inhabit her.

Brenna wanted to inhabit my mother. Many people do. I can’t say what draws them, what draws me. My whole life I’ve loved her and hated her for the power she exerts over people.

Her honey spells coax werewolves into civilization. So Brenna came in from the night. A drinker and chain smoker repairing from a recent break-up, Brenna was a cat looking for a puddle to lap from. My mother is the Tigris – her current nourishes the husks of men, reinvigorating the entire race. I watched as Brenna came back to life, a little more each day, as her friendship with my mother grew stronger. Soon we were spending every evening with Brenna. We’d cook chicken korma in her tiny basement apartment, or we would indulge in coffee and crème brûlée in the restaurant of the Pollard Hotel. Brenna gave me clothes. She had suitcases, closets full. She shrouded me in bolts of muslin the color of dried blood, in seashell necklaces and ruby crowns. She led me into hibiscus groves and bathed naked with me in creeks cold and edged with fleshy moss. It went on this way for weeks.



Around Easter the three of us went for breakfast at the same diner we’d gone to the second day. That’s where I met her. I felt as though I must have seen her before, known her before. Her name tag read ANNABELLE.

She sat behind the counter balancing a plate of mangoes on her knees, slicing them, laughing at something I’d missed. Her teeth, so big and round, trapped all the light and reflected it back, a beacon sent over miles of empty sea. I ordered the mango pancakes. I wanted something she had touched. When I went up to pay, she stood, rubbing her mango-juice-covered fingers on her thigh.

“Did you like them?”

“The best mangoes I’ve ever tasted.”

Annabelle smiled without showing any teeth and tallied up our bill.

“Mmmhmm, when I was little my family would go to Mexico for a few weeks in summer. Not far from the sea there was a little rocky hill with a mango tree. Every year my brother and I looked forward to that tree.” Annabelle fidgeted with the corner of her apron, her eyes on her hands. “We’d sleep under it and it was never quiet, from the bugs,” she continued. “It was always so heavy with the sweet fruit the bugs never left it. It seemed like they were always swarming on it. I ate so many mangoes back then that I’m tired of them now.” She laughed and met my eyes. “I dunno why I told you that.”

When she handed me the bill there was mango juice on the bottom-left corner.

After breakfast, Brenna, my mother, and I went for a drive out of town. We climbed the Beartooth Highway for a few miles and then pulled into the Palisades – a trailhead leading into the Custer National Forest. The snow was thick, bright, and wet. Brenna’s Ford Focus managed the even gravel drive, but once she turned onto the decline leading to the trail her tires spun out. My mother and I got out to push. It was forty-five minutes, maybe an hour, before we were in the clear. We gave up on the hike since my mother and Brenna had to be at work. On the drive back, I had the fleeting thought: *if dad were here it wouldn’t have taken so long. We could’ve hiked.* It was the first time I’d thought about my father since we had left, over two months before.

I remembered watching him out the kitchen window as he crossed the yard, midday Christmas Eve. I’d been washing dishes. He looked small in the distance, just outside the horse stalls in that yellow sweatshirt he’d had as long as I could remember, frayed around the hood, splattered and stained with oil. How long I stared, I don’t know. Then we were gone. I forgot him as one forgets a stranger. That’s how my mother wanted it. Together we forgot Christmases, soccer games, movies, sledding. We remembered beatings, the sour odor in the morning, the sweet pungent smell of alcohol. Even now, his identity eludes me. Beginning with my father, men became demi-gods to me, full of mystery and intrigue, but ultimately unknowable.

The next time I saw Olyver he was playing basketball. He played for the Red Lodge Redskins and the game was against the Braves, the reservation team. We were there because Maggie invited us. Maggie said games against the reservation were unmatched in grit. The boys came out and lined up facing each other on opposite sides of the court. The National Anthem played. The Braves stood motionless, hands at their sides. The Redskins cupped their hearts, mouths turned up in expressions of smug pride. Except Olyver; his arms were lank and his face was red and his heart was uncovered. When the anthem finished, the Braves' cheerleaders danced to tribal drums. I tried to listen through the din of innumerable voices, but it was useless. Instead, I hunted through the red and yellow jerseys for Olyver, number seven. He was pressed against a wall, intently watching the Braves' dancers. Olyver looked smaller. Not because I was at a distance, but because he had diminished himself. His broad shoulders hung, his baggy clothes consumed him – only his curls maintained their brilliance.

The game began. The Redskins were vicious. They were big, wan boys of Norwegian descent, raised on grass-fed bison and mother's milk. They made the waxy floor tremble. The Braves, stringy and brown, played with sharp agility and terrifying silence; even when they ran, fell, collided with a Redskin, their mouths remained closed. There was only the animal squeal of rubber soles, the wind of loose yellow clothes. The Redskins were winning. A palpable rage propelled them. Olyver, in a struggle to catch the ball, was knocked down by a teammate. A Brave stopped and lifted him to his feet in one swift movement. Their hands lingered in a small embrace, eyes met. I hope in that moment they realized the absurdity of all of it. The competition, the generations of culture war, all that wasted time.

After the game, on the drive back to the cabin we were renting from Maggie, I leaned my head against the cool window and imagined Olyver's strong arm slung around me. I thought I'd seen his reflection in the rearview mirror. I didn't sleep that night. I wrapped twine around nails, creating a great pentagram – forming connections, creating destiny where none existed.

The next time we met we were both wandering the empty football field. We spoke. I stood still as his shadowed form grew larger as he neared. The familiar white curls hid under a knit hat.

"Hi. I'm Olyver. I've noticed you around and thought I'd introduce myself."

"I'm Madison."

He shook my hand with a level of formality that seemed comical, like we were kids playing grown-ups.

"You just moved here, right? Your mom works at Maggie's?"

"Yeah."

"Everyone's talking about you. And your mom."

"Oh yeah? What are they saying?"

"That you guys are different. Because you like, don't go to school and stuff." Olyver thrust his fists into the pockets of his jeans. His voice came out nervous, full of stutters and fumbles. I knew he was filtering out what bits of truth were least likely to hurt my feelings.

"I bet they say a lot worse than that." He let out a nervous laugh and looked at his sneakers. "It's fine. I like being a freak."

"Yeah? It's cool. I'm weird too."

We stood there, nudging the grass with our shoes. His eyes outlined my contours – pausing on certain features, adding me up. We walked out of town, up a gravelly trail to the top of a knoll where the snow held out in stubborn patches. Yellow flowers bobbed and rubbed together. He maintained communication with the rough fields and sea above through his silence, his stillness which belied a spirit separate from all the meaningless things that keep us too busy to see.

Evening pooled in the quiet town as we sat on the hill – a sudden chill wind found the soft, vulnerable spots of flesh. I led him back to the cabin. The lights were on. My mother and Brenna sat with tomes and mugs of cold tea. Danger was immediately evident in the full blossom of my mother's face, in the warm cheeks and the watery eyes, all priestess. I knew Olyver was lost to me.

By the end of the night, his fair skull lay nestled in Brenna's velvet skirt. My mother's long, manly hands became claws. Their faces were all superimposed, a kaleidoscope of eyes and snarling mouths. Brenna ran her fingers through Olyver's hair and looked at me. I saw a flicker in her

eyes, a winner's pompous flame. She smiled. Olyver didn't see me anymore. He stared into nothing, transfixed. His cheeks turned pink in the lush warmth of Brenna's lap. I thought we could escape it all together, but he was just another lost boy finding something in someone who wasn't me. I thought we'd be alone to make love on the rough crocheted throw that covered my bed. And then, waking after a deep sleep, we'd wander out into the moonglow, the sticky coating of our love growing cool. Instead, Brenna laughed loudly, smoked her pink, imported cigarettes, and ran her nails through his soft hair. My mother too, seemed pleased. He was an easy sell.

He sat at their feet and my mother predicted for him. She predicted a future full of music and a woman that wasn't me. A woman with green eyes. He didn't know, but I saw when his eyes darted quickly to Brenna's, reassuring himself of their shade. I had to leave.

Buckled over and clasp my gut, I ran into the fuzzy woods, into the glassy water, into the rock bed, into the clay flesh, into the center, the gurgling heart of my broken mother. There, numbed by the cold, I knew they wouldn't look for me. Eventually everyone is taken in by my mother. How long they remain differs by soul. But they all want it, need the pipeline to the black gold of universal truth – they need the map, the clean words leading them from the tarnished wasteland.

I don't know what happened that night while I stumbled over rocks, through tributaries, but afterward, Brenna avoided us, stopped returning my mother's phone calls. Olyver seemed to pass into another dimension – back into the bog. Somehow, after that night, he dimmed, became distant, detached. He reminded me of that small man alone in the field in his yellow sweatshirt. I saw them in my head as fat protozoans, bumping along, floating. My mother and I were alone. Around this time I met Annabelle again.

It was at the library. I held *Madame Bovary*. I had her white spine cupped in my thick, moist palms. I knew Annabelle was watching me. Eventually she thrust a small piece of paper at me.

"If you ever want to hang out, call me. You seem nice."

Days passed. I read Flaubert.

For her, life was as cold as an attic with a window looking to the north, and ennui, like a spider, was silently spinning its shadowy web in every cranny of her heart...

I never finished the novel. I left Emma Bovary with Leon in their shy intimacy – a better fate. I called Annabelle.

She answered on the first ring. Her voice sounded thick and musky through tinny background noises of dishes, dogs yipping, babies crying, and the general scrape and clang of life.

"Madison?"

My throat stuck – wax paper. I somehow managed a sentence or two. We agreed on a date, a time, a meeting place. When I hung up, my hands were sweating. In the days leading up to our meeting, I recalled her voice – it's heavy richness. Everything about her seemed made of earth, of dirt, of goodness, a papery bulb pregnant with anxious life.

The morning we met was sunny, balmy; a sense of good fortune pervaded me, which is why the trail of police cars coming down the driveway was a shock. The sun glinting off the lumbering Escalades and smooth patrol car was not a munificent light – it would not titillate the aching thighs of spring into stirring.

I don't know who made the call to Child Protective Services, but I can imagine Brenna's smooth lacquered fingers pressing the buttons, her cool mossy voice carrying the conversation with political concern. They didn't explain why they were taking me. I couldn't understand what I had done wrong, what my mother had done. We had told the same story so many times. "Came home to kill us...", "history of violence, substance abuse...", "pain...", "anger...", "pain." *Pain, pain, pain.* I'd even begun to feel the pain.

Back in Indiana and faced with a very real pain, my father had done everything he could to get the hounds on my mother. He'd reported the car stolen, only to be informed that it couldn't be stolen if it was in her name, too. He'd tried again and again to get her charged with kidnapping, a difficult crime to prove if you've taken your own child. Eventually, he found his lead. The year before my mother and I left, my parents had decided to divorce. They'd drawn up an agreement mapping

out how the custody and finances would be split up; however, before the documentation was finalized, my parents decided they would try once more to make this life together work. Though I don't understand how it was possible from a legal perspective, based on this divorce my father was able to schedule a court hearing regarding the custody agreement. When my mother failed to show up for that hearing and for subsequent ones, a federal warrant was placed for her arrest for contempt of court. Even with the facts against her, my mother played her part to the end; she stayed true to the drama that was our life. It took three men to force the silver hoops on to her bony wrists while she buckled and wailed.

"He'll kill her! He'll kill her!"

I kept my face angled to the dirt. I knew that this time my performance wouldn't work. They saw us, saw through it all. What was the cauldron of universal lore my mother possessed compared to metal and the law? Nothing. Less than nothing. Dust, insanity scattered and dissolved in a piney patch of earth.

I climbed quietly into the patrol car. I could tell the officer climbing into the driver's seat was relieved at having to deal with me instead of my mother. Once we were on the highway, safely out of Red Lodge, he called in on his radio with the message "minor in transit." So that's what I was. I knew I was going back. Down the mountains, across wide plains, into the kitchen with the man in the stained yellow sweatshirt. Those people thought they knew the truth. But I didn't know this man they called "father." My mother erased him long ago. My mother erased so much.

It was half an hour past my scheduled coffee date with Annabelle. I knew she would still be there, waiting. Her tea would be cold now. She would peer out the window, not really looking. Her face would remain beautifully serene – the bulb's oniony paper all peeled away to reveal a glistening pearl...

Perhaps she knows I won't come. I hope so. I hope she can forgive me. I hope she knows how beautiful she is to me, how much I wanted to hear more about those mangoes, about anything sweet or honest or real. I hope I mean something to her. I like to think that even if she tried, she wouldn't remember the first time she saw me. I will seem always that light that edges the periphery of her vision. If she knows

me as I have known her – whole, human, and alive – then some part of me is elemental, pure and separate from the forces that formed me. And without those it doesn't matter what happens. I'm free. Free like the girl under the mango tree. 🌿