

THE STORYTELLER

Jimmy held the warm bundle close to his body as he stepped across the soggy field. The Wilsons had moved off this land long ago, and it hadn't been farmed since. The soil was scarred with deep ruts and pockmarks, some filled with rain from the night before. Jimmy noted the mud that was clinging to his shoes and pant legs, and for a moment he worried about how to explain it. But then he remembered that his mother and father didn't care about that kind of thing. Not anymore.

Up ahead, at the top of a rise, he saw the curved stone wall of the old well. The ground felt a bit drier and firmer as Jimmy made his way up the slope. Mosquitoes and midges buzzed around his face. He shifted the bundle, cradling it in one arm to shoo away the insects with his free hand. He felt the blankets move and twist, and pulled them to his chest again.

As Jimmy reached the well, a slim, rufous, four-legged animal stepped out from behind the stones. The creature's pointed ears twitched once; it raised its angular muzzle and sniffed the air. A light breeze carried the scent of spoiled meat; the animal shook its head, pawed at the ground with one black-socked foot and raised its bushy tail.

"Fox," Jimmy said to the animal, "Are you sure we should do this?"

Fox sat on his haunches, glanced to the right and left, taking in the barren farmland, the broken-down barn, the dirt road that led back toward town. "I've given it a lot of thought, Jimmy," he said. "And I'm certain it's for the best. Don't you trust me?"

"Sure I do." Jimmy stepped to the edge of the well and looked over, down into the darkness. "I think it's waking up," he said suddenly, as the cloth bundle quivered and shook. "I think it wants to come out."

"Hurry, Jimmy," Fox told him. "Hurry. If it wakes and you hear its voice, you won't be able to do it."

Jimmy stared at the swaddled white cloth for another moment. Then, taking a deep breath, he heaved the parcel into the well with an exaggerated grunt. He looked in and watched the bright white shape, lit by the sun, tumble into the black. He felt like he'd thrown a scrap of food into the maw of some hungry giant. At the last moment, before it was swallowed up by inky shadow, the wrappings flew apart and Jimmy could see the infant's stubby arms and legs flailing and waving.

"You did good today, Jimmy," Fox told him that night as he curled up at the end of Jimmy's bed. "So I have another story for you. Do you want to hear it now?"



"Sure," Jimmy said. He didn't bother to whisper, because his parents never checked up on him after bedtime. Not lately, anyway.

"This one's called:

The Bull and the Ants

There once was a large, strong bull who was mightier than any other in his herd. None of the younger, weaker bulls ever dared challenge him. One day the bull decided that life with the herd was boring, and so he decided to see what lay beyond the pasture. All the cows warned him not to go, and said that there were unspeakable dangers out there, and that it was much better to stay safe where they were. The bull just laughed at their fear, convinced that there could be no other animal as strong and powerful as he.

So the bull easily broke through the fence and began walking through the field beyond. He had traveled for a whole day when he heard a small voice call out to him. "Please, mighty one, do not go any further." Looking down, the bull saw a tiny ant. "Please change your direction, O powerful bull," said the ant, "or you may tread on me and my family." The bull laughed. "No one tells me what to do or where to walk!" With that, he deliberately crushed the ant beneath his hoof. The bull kept walking, and every time he saw an ant he crushed it out of spite.

But then, as his powerful hoof crashed to the ground to crush another ant, his hoof broke through the turf. The bull had stepped into an anthill and now his foot was trapped. He tried to pull out, only to find his other three limbs trapped as well. As the bull snorted with rage, hundreds of ants swarmed from their holes and crawled up his legs and flanks and chest and back until his body was covered with the insects. They began to rip away his flesh, carrying bit after bit of him down into their anthills.

With his last ounce of strength, the bull turned his head and saw the broken fence, very far away now. He could just make out all the cows standing behind it, watching. And then the ants carried away his eyes.

"Babykiller!"

Jimmy was in the far corner of the schoolyard, where the asphalt was torn up, when he heard the snickers of the three other boys. They passed him by, then stopped and turned back to look at him.

"I never see this kid in Church," one was saying. "How come you don't go to Church, kid?"

"Maybe he has better things to do."

"Maybe he's out looking for babies to kill. Babykiller."

"How come you call him that?" the runt of the trio asked, his voice ponderous with boredom.

"What are you, stupid? Everybody in town knows the story," their leader answered. "His whole family are babykillers. They took his mom to the plant and they cut out her baby and hung it on a meat hook. Isn't that right, Babykiller?"

"You'll be sorry," Jimmy sighed.

"What did you say? The lead boy stepped closer; his companions scuffled their feet on the macadam as they followed. "You little fuck, what did you —"

Then the three aggressors began shaking their hands in the air, brushing at their arms and legs. Jimmy was surprised at how girlish their shrieks were as he watched the black and yellow blurs of a dozen wasps diving at their faces and hands. The boys fled in a blind panic, not looking back, falling to the ground more than once.

"Jimmy." He already knew Fox was behind him; he didn't turn around. "You don't have to go to school anymore, Jimmy. I told you that. You have more important work to do."

That night Jimmy lay in bed thinking about his parents. Rumors about them had been making the rounds for over a year now. His mother and father assured him there was no truth to them, but their explanations of what had really gone on were unsatisfying. They said he wasn't old enough to understand, that he shouldn't worry about it.

From what Jimmy had pieced together, his mother and father had been in a big argument, bigger than any they'd ever had before, right in front of everyone at the plant. And then his mother had gotten sick somehow. She tried to get to the bathroom but didn't make it in time, and ended up bleeding all over the floor. One schoolmate who'd taunted Jimmy about it said Jimmy's father pushed his mother down, but Jimmy didn't believe that.

To help himself fall asleep, Jimmy muttered one of Fox's stories:

The Leg

Long ago there was a man who became so furious that he tore himself in half. He threw his bottom half down a deep well, where it lay in the cold dark for seven years. Then the man's left leg couldn't stand the loneliness any more, so it ripped itself away from the right leg and wriggled up the side of the well like a snake. Once out of the well, the leg crawled through the countryside for days until it came across the small cottage where the leg used to live. It waited until dark and then slithered into the house.

The next morning, the man rolled over in bed and felt something cold and hairy brush up against his arm. He threw back the bedsheets and there he saw the leg, which had crawled into bed with him during the night.

"What is this thing!" the man shouted.

"I'm your leg!" answered the leg. "Don't you want me?"

"Leg?" the man cried. "I don't know what that is!" He grabbed the leg by the big toe and tossed it into the fire, where the leg was burned to ash.

"What a disgusting and incomprehensible nightmare," the man said to himself, using his arms to crawl into the kitchen for breakfast.

After breakfast, Jimmy was on his way up to his room when he heard his parents' voices.

"What are we going to do with him?" His mother sounded like she was about to cry. "He just won't go to church. People notice. They're talking. He has to come to church with us, he has to."

"I know," his father was saying. "I — well, making him go to church when he doesn't want to, that isn't what Our Lord wants. He wants Jimmy to come to Him of his own free will."

Jimmy gripped the top of the banister with both hands, pulled himself up. He leaned over to see his parents clearly.

"I... I know you're right." His mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "I just... I just hate all the talk."

Jimmy watched his father lean in to kiss his mother on the cheek. But before his lips touched her skin, he stopped, holding his face a few inches from her, his lips pursed. He looked confused, blinking his eyes and taking a sudden breath. He looked like he was trying to remember what it was he was about to do. Jimmy's mother looked equally puzzled, and after a few awkward seconds, she took a step back. His father pulled back as well, and they looked at each other, not upset, not afraid, just uncertain. Jimmy's father shook his head, as if to wake himself from a stupor; his mother gave a little shrug. Then they nodded and went their separate ways.

Later, Fox told Jimmy he'd be away for several hours. But before he left, he shared a new story:

Grandpa's Favourite

There was an old man who lived in a house near the edge of the world, and he had four grandchildren. Every morning they would walk to the great glass wall that separated the world from what was beyond. One day, the eldest grandchild said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child began to climb. The watched him for a while, until he was just a small dot, and then was gone.

The next day the child returned, and they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Light," the child said. "But I have no eyes, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the second oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Music," the child said. "But I have no ears, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the third oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Time," the child said. "But I have no clock, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the youngest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"Wait," said the old man. He went into the house and returned with an iron box. "You are my favorite, grandchild," he said, "so before you climb, take these." He opened the box. "These are eyes, and these are ears, and this is a clock."

The child took the eyes, the ears, and the clock. And then, for the first time, he saw his grandfather, and heard his grandfather's voice, and knew how long they had been living in the house at the edge of the world. And he screamed in horror and tore himself to shreds.

"Is someone there?"

The voice was so soft that Jimmy wondered, at first, if he'd imagined it. He stood still for a minute, listening. The room was dim, even with the sunlight that found its way through the narrow basement window he'd pushed open. The voice did not repeat itself, but it seemed to Jimmy that the voice waited behind the only door in the room.

He knew that Fox wouldn't like him coming here to see the Magician. Fox seemed to regret ever mentioning the Magician. But Fox had let enough details slip for Jimmy to find this place, a long-abandoned farmhouse across the road from the plant. "You can't trust a magician, Jimmy," Fox had told him. "All magicians are liars. And when magicians lie, their lies become real."

Jimmy considered turning back, but he didn't relish the thought of going outside so soon, smelling that carrion stink, or hearing the awful shrieks and the insect noises that drifted on the wind. So he approached the door and reminded himself of Fox's warnings concerning magicians. Not to trust them, not to tell them your name, not to give them anything of yours, not to let them look into your eyes or touch you.

The door made no sound as Jimmy pushed it open. A few flies whirled around his head and sped off. The cage that the Magician was lying in looked just like the large dog kennels Jimmy had seen once at the state fair. This room had a light on, a bare bulb that hung from the ceiling and made shadows along the walls and floor. Jimmy stepped into the room and squinted at the figure lying in the cage. The Magician's form was mostly covered by a dark blanket or sheet. Jimmy could only see was the vague outlines of a body beneath, and a thin-fingered hand jutting past the blanket's edge.

Jimmy cleared his throat.

"Is... someone... there?" The Magician's voice was faint, and not as deep as Jimmy had expected. He took one step closer, just as the Magician rolled over and the sheet fell away to reveal a face.

"Come closer," the voice said. Jimmy didn't move. He was staring at the Magician's narrow chin and pale cheeks. It was a woman's face, he realized, and a woman's voice.

"Who..." the Magician whispered, sitting up slowly, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. "Who is it?"

"I'm... I'm..." Jimmy wasn't sure what to say. He'd been looking into her eyes, contrary to Fox's warning. But it didn't seem to matter; the lady's eyes were half-closed and distant, as if she were in a trance.

"Don't be afraid," she said to him. She was young, Jimmy realized, younger than his mother, younger than some of his teachers. Her hair was brown and reached to the bottom of her ears and was very messy, as if she'd been sick in bed for a week. Her lips looked dry and cracked. She stared at Jimmy as if she couldn't see him properly.

Then her eyes widened a bit.

"I need help," she said, not quite looking at him.

Jimmy considered this for a moment. Then he said, "Fox says it wants to eat you."

"Fox... something attacked me. It looked like a fox."

"Why don't you just magic yourself out of here?" Jimmy glanced back at the door, making sure it was still open. He'd forgotten the questions he'd been planning to ask, the questions about his parents and how to get them back to normal.

The Magician didn't answer right away. She seemed to sag a bit beneath the sheet; her shoulders slumped and she wasn't sitting up as straight. "What's your name?" she asked.

Jimmy just shook his head, slowly.

"Look... there's something you should know. There's something around here. From... somewhere else." She rubbed her eyes. "I can't concentrate..." For a moment she seemed to shake off her stupor.

"Listen," she said, more urgently now, "you have to listen to me."

"I already know all about it," Jimmy said to her. "And it's too late for you to do anything." He'd made a mistake, he realized. He'd come to ask for some way to fix things, a way that didn't involve doing what Fox wanted him to do. But the Magician couldn't help him. She couldn't do anything. Jimmy sat down on the floor. Despite his disappointment, he felt like he should do something for her. So he began to recite one of Fox's stories:

The Mannequin in the Closet

There was a girl whose parents died when she was young, so she was sent to live with her aunt, who was a dressmaker, and her uncle, who was a tailor. The girl spent every day alone in the house while her aunt and uncle were working in their shop. They had told her that she was welcome to play anywhere in the whole house, but that she was never to open the closet door next to the big chest of drawers, up in the highest room of the attic.

Soon enough she'd explored every nook and cranny in the house several times over, and her curiosity got the best of her. She decided that she had to see what was in that attic closet. She climbed three flights of stairs, entered the attic, stood in front of the door, closed her eyes tight and then turned the knob. When the door was open, she opened her eyes and saw two eyes looking right back at her. Leaning inside the closet was a mannequin, the same size as her, with glass eyes as blue as hers and blond hair as gold as hers and wearing a pretty dress just like hers. The little girl shrieked and turned and dashed for the attic staircase.

As she ran, she could hear the steady patter of footsteps following after. She ran down the stairs, and behind her she could hear each step creak in turn. She ran into the parlor, closing the door behind her, and as she reached the kitchen she could hear the parlor door opening again, and as she exited the kitchen she heard behind her the slapping of feet against the kitchen tiles. She ran around to the back stairway and up to the second floor hall. She ran into her bedroom and slid beneath the big four-poster bed.

From her hiding place, she heard the kitchen door fly open, and then the sound of footsteps coming up the back stairway, and then the pitter-patter of footfalls coming toward the bedroom. Then she had an idea. She fled the bedroom and ran up the attic stairs and dashed into the closet and slammed the door closed. She crouched down in the darkness and gripped the doorknob with both hands and pulled the door as tight as she could. She heard the attic door open, and heard footsteps coming closer to her, and closer and closer. And then they stopped.

Then the girl heard a voice, and it said:

"You nasty mannequin. You won't get out of that closet ever again."

And then she heard the sound of the big chest of drawers being pushed tight against the closet door, and the attic door closing, and footsteps fading away down the attic stairs.

After the story, Jimmy rose. "You can tell me a story if you want to."

"What... would you like to hear?"

"Tell me about the day you came to town."

He didn't expect her to comply, but she began talking. "I was exploring. With my mind, with my senses, with my body. I explored in every way I knew how. First I heard the cry of an infant, echoing through time. So I retrieved it from the bottom of a well, but it wasn't an infant. Not anymore. It was just... flesh. Shaped like a baby, wearing its clothing... animate, but not alive. Its head was like a mass of ground beef, squirming like worms...

"Then I went into the school. All the classrooms were empty. All the children and teachers were gathered in the cafeteria, sitting at the long tables, silent, staring. There were... heaps of bloody, butchered meat, piled on the tables. Every so often, someone reached over and ripped off a piece. They'd put it in their mouth and chew, not even brushing the flies and maggots off first. At three o'clock a bell rings, everyone springs to life, running and laughing and unaware of what they'd been doing...

"Then something took hold of my mind, and it pulled me... down a long, steel-plated hallway, marked with rust-colored handprints. It became narrower and narrower, and at the end... hooks and chains, the smell of rot, flies crawling on lips and eyelids. Decapitated cows wandering listlessly, the stumps of their severed necks opening and closing like mouths, vomiting clouds of horseflies and hornets. And the kill floor, strewn with fingers and toes. And... a faceless mound, marbled pink, white. The fleshy pile, ragged, raw muscle and gristle and grease... it rears and unfolds itself into a vast maw... and

the people walk in... a soft lipless mouth, rows of maggots hanging like teeth, a long throat that stretches into infinity..."

"Tell what you did then." It was Fox's voice. Jimmy jumped to his feet, opened his mouth to explain what he was doing there, but Fox interrupted. "Go ahead, Juna. Tell what you did then."

"It was horrible... I..."

"You offered yourself to It, didn't you? Offered yourself to the Meat God, the King of Flies, the Flesh That Devours. Begged it for power in exchange for service. Am I wrong?" It was the first time Jimmy had ever heard Fox sound angry.

"I..."

"Admit it." Fox paced around the cage as he spoke. "You expected this entity to be something you could bargain with. Something you could outwit. Something you could trade favors with, a fast track to knowledge and strength if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty."

"All right. Yes. But it's different now." The Magician's voice was stronger, steadier. She didn't seem half-asleep anymore.

"Is it?"

"Yes! I saw the thing, I felt its... its breath on my soul. My God... I fouled myself and maybe I'll always be tainted, but all I want now is to send that abortion back where it came from. I'll fight it to the end. I'll fight it. Just give me a chance." She staggered to her feet, gripped the mesh of the cage.

Fox looked at Jimmy. "I put her here because this place is so close to the Meat God that magic is difficult to make," he said, "but she can't stay for much longer, or the thing will sense her presence." Jimmy nodded, not sure he understood. "Our options are few and we could use the help. This is your town, Jimmy. Your people. What do you think? Can we trust her?"

He wanted to say he didn't know. No adult had ever invited him to participate in one of their arguments before. He looked at the Magician, barely able to hold herself upright. Humbled, defeated, eyes downcast. And she reminded him of himself. Of how beaten he felt after the local bullies had their fun with him, how shamed he felt when his mother and father brushed his fears and aspirations aside like crumbs. How foolish he felt when his teachers sent him back to his desk after he'd failed miserably to solve some math problem at the blackboard. He knew that feeling, and he knew it came with a determination to never make the same mistake again.

"Yes. I think... yes."

Fox stared at Jimmy for what seemed like a long while. Then Fox's left ear twitched. "All right then," he said. "She and I need to talk. I'll see you at home."

When he got to the house, Jimmy hopped off his bike before it came to a full stop. He slowed down as he entered, catching the screen door so it wouldn't slam shut behind him. He didn't expect his mother to be waiting in the living room. He'd imagined that he would slip inside, grab a few important things and slip out again. But when he saw her he couldn't keep himself from approaching.

"Mom," he said, his voice cracking, "I need to tell you something..."

His mother looked at him quizzically. She was holding bag of trash; something was leaking out of the bottom and creating a dark stain on the carpet. She didn't seem to notice.

"Mom," Jimmy said. "I have to go away. I have to leave town because Fox wants me to do something that I don't want to and... well, I wanted to say... remember last year when you

and Dad said I'd be having a little brother or sister soon? Remember? And I got mad and said I didn't want it and I ran put of the house? Well I..." He sniffed. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really am. I —"

She dropped the bag, crossed her arms. "You're the one they talk about in the hotbox," she said. "Aren't you? The boy who won't go to Meat Church? What was your name again? No, names don't matter any more."

"Mom?" He rubbed the tears from his eyes.

His father entered the room. "Oh. Have we met? Are you — you live here, too?"

She blinked at him. "Yes. It doesn't matter. Today's the day. We all become It."

"That's the boy." His father stood next to his mother. They didn't look at each other, they looked only at him. "That's the one we need to bring. The one that Our Lord of Butchered Flesh has been waiting for."

They moved toward him, calmly, patiently, and a pink, watery liquid was dripping from their hands. Even as Jimmy ran out the door, climbed shakily onto his bike, he was wondering if he could ever forget the putrid stink of the juices dribbling from his parents' fingers.

The metal hallway leading into the Processing Center was very long, and its plated walls made sounds bounce around at odd angles. There was a faint humming that sounded almost like music.

"Wait," Jimmy said.

Fox stopped walking. "Do you want one more story, then, before you do what has to be done?"

"Yes. Yeah, just one more, please."

"All right then. This one is called:

The Whispers in the Alley

Once there was a boy named Jimmy. Jimmy's father was the manager at a meatpacking plant, and his mother was in charge of the plant's finances. Jimmy was very unhappy because it seemed as if his mother and father didn't like each other anymore, and didn't like him, either. After school Jimmy would ride his bike to the edge of town where his parents worked, and try to imagine what his parents were doing inside.

One day Jimmy was coasting alongside the chain link fence in the back of the plant, when he thought he heard someone calling his name. He stopped his bike and walked up to the fence. And then he heard it again: "Jimmy..." It was a faint voice, not much more than a whisper. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the fence, where there was an alley between two of the plant's larger buildings.

"Jimmy..."

There was a gap in the fence where someone had once cut through some of the links. Jimmy was able to separate the edges and slip through.

"Jimmy..."

Jimmy followed the sound of the voice, walking slowly down the alley, holding his hand over his nose and mouth because of the stink. At the far end was a kind of loading dock, and a long row of Dumpsters and a huge pile of sagging trash bags. Jimmy walked closer, following the whispers. He found a small green trash bag toward the bottom of the pile, with grease and blood spots all over it.

"In here, Jimmy," whispered the voice, and Jimmy could see the bag move as the thing inside it spoke. "Help me."

"Where did you come from?" Jimmy asked the bag, crouching down to hear it more clearly.

"I was born, same as you," said the thing. But I was born alone, with no one to talk to. If you'll be my friend, and tell me stories, I'll do great favors for you."

So Jimmy brought the bag home. The thing asked many questions, and Jimmy told it how unhappy he was. The thing in the bag said it could make Jimmy happy again, that it could make his parents forget about being mad all the time. It told Jimmy to untie the bag and reach inside, and he did. He only put the tips of his fingers in, and immediately Jimmy felt something cold and wet. He yanked his hand out and saw, stuck to his little finger, the tiniest bit of raw, greasy meat.

"Feed this to your parents," the thing in the bag told him, "And they won't be angry anymore."

Jimmy thought and thought about this, and decided he would bury the meat, and then take the thing to the river and throw it in. But when his father got home he shouted at Jimmy for not putting away his bike, and when his mother got home she yelled at his father for something Jimmy couldn't understand, and the two of them began their usual argument about someone called "Miss Carey" and Jimmy decided he'd do what the thing in the bag said after all. So he dropped the little bit of meat into the Crock-Pot where dinner was simmering. Neither his mother nor father seemed to notice anything different about the meal. Jimmy wasn't hungry, so he threw away his food when nobody was looking.

The next morning Jimmy came down to breakfast to see his mother and father sitting at the table. For the first time in as long as he could remember, they were talking to each other in calm, polite tones. This seemed like a miracle to him. But then he noticed that every so often his mother would look at his father with a strange expression on her face, as if she wasn't sure who he was. And he caught his father, now and again, with the same expression. This scared Jimmy. So that night he took the bag back to the alley at the meatpacking plant and tossed it into one of the Dumpsters. And as the bag fell, it kept whispering, "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy..."

But that wasn't the end of the story. Because the thing in the bag had grown stronger on what it had taken from Jimmy's parents. It found others, and tricked them, and when they fed on its flesh, it fed on their spirits. Soon it had emptied several people of their memories, their stories, the things that made them who they were. And then it had slaves that carried it deep into the plant, and they brought more people to taste its offerings; any who were able to resist got chopped to pieces and fed raw to the Meat. And it grew stronger and bigger, and soon everyone in town was feeding on it, and it was feeding on everyone.

Everyone except Jimmy. Because Jimmy's friend Fox had come to town. And he protected Jimmy from the Meat. In the end it would be up to Jimmy, who had been first to feed the Meat, to kill the thing. Fox had figured out a way to do it. But they had to do it soon, because the Meat had found a way grow little bits of itself inside the people whose minds it had hollowed out. The Meat had first tried it with the body of a little baby, changing it into something the Meat could understand. Soon it would do the same to all its slaves. And then the Meat would have hundreds of bodies and would be unstoppable.

"And now the time has come," Fox finished.

"Are you really the same Fox I used to talk to when I was a little kid?"

"Does that matter?"

"I guess not." The echoing chorus of flies and flying insects was louder now. "I think I'm ready."

"I would do it if I could," Fox said. "But I'm a magician. My stories are too strong, they would make that thing too powerful, make it unbeatable."



"Sure," Jimmy replied. They had reached the end of the line. Jimmy stopped at the door. "Will I see my parents again?"

"I'm not certain," Fox said. "But everything that made your parents who they were is inside the Meat." Fox didn't look like a fox any more; he was a tall man with red hair, dressed something like a cowboy, in a long, reddish-brown duster coat and wide-brimmed hat. He had a pistol holstered on each hip. The lady magician walked next to him, alert and self-assured now, looking something like a nurse because she was dressed all in white.

Jimmy said, "I can feel them in there." He bent down to grab the handle, then stood up, raising the gate. It slid upwards like a garage door. "Can you come in the room with me?"

Fox shook his head. "Once things get going, the Meat will call on its servants to defend it," Fox said. "Juna and I will have to stay out here to keep them from getting to you."

"Oh. All right." Jimmy raised the door until it was just higher than his head.

Juna knelt next to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. "Jimmy," she said, "I'll go in with you if you want me to." Behind her, Fox crossed his arms and frowned.

Jimmy looked into her eyes. "No," he said. "I didn't think I could do this. I was going to run away today."

"Why didn't you?" she asked him.

He licked his lips. "I thought... I thought if I run, I'll never be able to stop running. And I'll always... in my head I'll always carry everything that happened here, without knowing how it all ends."

"That's my boy," Fox whispered. He laid a hand on Jimmy's other shoulder, gave it a squeeze. Then the two adults stepped back. "Good luck, Jimmy," Fox said. "I know you can do it. I'm proud of you."

Jimmy walked through gateway. The door slid closed, softly, after he passed.

He didn't hear what they said next.

"Does he stand a chance?" Juna retrieved a palm-sized mirror from her pocket as she asked.

"Of surviving? No. The thing will swallow him whole. That's what I'm counting on."

"You are?"

"I've been preparing him for weeks. Seeding his mind with stories. Special stories, carrying subliminal engrams to traumatize the creature with conflicting accounts of its own existence. I crafted them as best I could, based on what I've learned about its nature. It's the best hope we've got. You can't fight a thing like this conventionally..."

"Maybe," she answered sharply. "Or maybe the time you've spent in this thing's sphere of influence has warped your judgment, and you just gave it exactly what it wanted." She held the mirror in her left hand and moved it in a slow figure-eight, frowning. "Something's not right..."

Fox shrugged, drew his guns and cocked the triggers. "The world is just information, Juna. Stories. When you eat something, you're making its story part of your story. When you work magic, you substitute one story for another. But we'll have to debate all that later, if there is a later." He handed one of the guns to Juna.

"With luck, spells will come easier once the Meat is distracted. If not..." He shrugged again. "They're coming. It will be the housewife flies who arrive first. Ignore their eyes and aim for the thorax."

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Sample file

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