

But you have a choice. In how you wanna handle that feeling.

In the underground there's always a steady beat. You can hear it even when the music isn't on. It'll get to be something like your favorite song. Get to where it's like it's in your bones. Do you hear it?

Do you wanna dance?

## Curlew

**There was a woman that died and left behind something important.** Her youngest daughter was sent to bring it to her. To keep it safe it was placed inside of a curlew.

The daughter was picked because she looked the most like her mother. They both had the same patch of discolored skin on their wrist that looked white as an eggshell. The bird was fat with a long curved black beak, and it sat in the crook of her arm as she walked. When it got hungry it leaned its neck forward and nipped the discolored skin on her wrist.

"Feed me," the curlew said.

"Tell me what my mother left behind," the girl replied. But the curlew wouldn't. Instead it offered her a song. She sat down with it in her lap on the side of the road and let it eat seeds from her palm. When it was finished, she took off her shoes and rubbed her feet while the bird sang. All it could manage were two long, stuttering notes that it repeated over and over again. As if someone kept interrupting a tea kettle.

Nearby a lily shook its blossom at them. "There's nothing beautiful about that," it said. "If you're going to see your mother, you should bring her something beautiful."

"You're right," said the girl. She plucked the lily from the ground and fed it to the curlew. After she laid down with the curlew tucked under her head, and she fell asleep. Beneath her ear, she could hear the bird's light and rapid heartbeat. As if someone were flipping through the pages of a book, over and over. When she dreamed, she dreamed of her mother sitting on their stoop, darning socks. Her face was a stone slab; grave, unreadable. She pricked her finger on the needle and blood unfurled from the tip in one long ribbon that kept unraveling. Her mother wove it into the sock. The girl wanted to feel something, but she didn't.

She woke up to the curlew nipping her wrist. She put her shoes back on, placed the curlew back in the crux of her arm, and walked.

They walked far enough that the seams of her shoes began to split, letting little rocks and pebbles slip in and prick her heels. Every few steps she shook them out and they would gleefully roll away covered in a light sheen of her blood. She spat at them and complained each time.

"You'll grow calluses, and it'll hurt less," the curlew said.

"I used to have beautiful feet," she said.

"There were lots of things that used to be this or that and aren't now, and many of those things are better off not being what they were, or even being nothing at all."

"Screw you," she said, and the two lapsed into a sullen silence that was only broken much later by the sound of a hubbubbing brook. The curlew reached its long beak forward and bit the girl's discolored wrist so she would stop.

"I'm thirsty," it said. "Take me to the river so I can drink."

"Tell me what my mother left behind." But the curlew wouldn't. Instead, it offered her a feather.

So the girl sat down by the stream and held the bird so it could dip its curved beak into the water. When it was full it plucked a feather out of its back and gave it to the girl. The moment it touched her palm, a wind blew and carried the feather to the stream. It touched down on the surface of the water, and floated out of sight before the girl could even blink.

"Give me another," the girl said.

"One was the deal," said the curlew.

The girl was about to take the curlew and dump it in the river, when the small bubbles escaping from a pebble in the riverbed caught her eye. She leaned towards them, and as each popped she heard whispering.

"That feather was so fragile. So temporary. If you're going to your mother you should bring her something solid and of substance."

"You're right," said the girl. She reached her arm in and plucked the stone from the riverbed then fed it to the curlew.

Then she settled back against a tree and dipped her bare feet into the river. She placed the curlew in her lap. "When I die, I won't leave anything behind," she said.

"Nothing?" The curlew asked.

"Not a name, nor a memory, not even a scrap of hair. That's how death is supposed to be."

"If you say so," said the curlew.

Then the girl closed her eyes. Against her stomach she could feel the warmth of the curlew, and the churn of the water in its stomach as it breathed in and out. She drifted off to sleep, and in

her dreams she was being carried by the ribbon down a flight of stairs that circled deeper and deeper into the earth with no visible end. The walls were red velvet, and lined with portraits of her mother's face. The face she had when she had been ill. She looked away from them towards her own body and saw the ribbon splitting her wrist where her birthmark had been.

She woke to someone touching her face.

He was a simple kind of man. There was nothing great nor nothing horrible about him. He had a horse, and some bread, and he offered her a ride as far as he was going. She rode behind him with the curlew tucked between her legs, and her arms wrapped around his chest. When they got to his house he dismounted and looked up at her.

"You look like you could use a hot meal," he said.

The curlew reached its beak up and nipped her wrist but she brushed it off and took the bird up in her arms. Then she dismounted and followed the man inside. He fed her, he drew her a bath, and all the while she carried the bird either in her arms or on her lap. All the while it nipped at her and she brushed its beak away. Then, when night had set in, she followed him into his bed, and set the curlew on the floor.

After a few days, he offered to make a cage.

The curlew's cage was hung from a brass pole in his room, next to the window. During the night she kept a sheet draped over it, but when the moon was out the light would seep through and she could see its silhouette through the thin fabric. Then she dreamed of ribbons, her mother's lined face, a thin-lipped scowl, calloused

feet, pricked fingers on wrinkled hands. In the morning she took the sheet down, and the curlew reached its beak through the bars to nip her wrist.

"Open the cage," it said.

"Tell me what my mother left behind," she replied. Each time it refused, and offered her something else. An egg. Its eye. Its tongue. Each time she walked away without accepting.

Autumn came, and she grew fatter. Her hands and feet grew swollen. The man came home later and later into the night, and she would sit on the bed, folding clothes and watching the silhouette of the curlew. She started feeding it less and less, and yet it remained as plump and round as the day she started carrying it. In fact, it looked even bigger.

Night crept towards early morning. She ran out of clothes to fold and put away. She went to the curlew's cage and took the sheet down to shake the dust out of the creases and the bird opened one eye to watch her. She ran the sheet through her hands and waited for the curlew to ask for its freedom.

"Do you want to know what your mother left behind?" it asked. She let the sheet slip through her hands, and turned to the bird. It eased its beaks through the bars of the cage and she knelt to put her ear near it.

"Sorrow," the curlew said. "And it will be yours until you bring it back to her."

"You're a liar," the girl said.

"My dear, do you know that you're pregnant?"

She picked the sheet back off the floor and draped it over the curlew's cage.

She woke when the man crawled into the bed with her. The sun was up, but he had taken the sheet from the curlew's cage and draped it over the window, so that the light in the room was still dim. She reached out and touched a hand to his chest.

"I have a headache," he said, rolling away.

"I'm pregnant," she said back. She moved towards him and pressed the lump of her belly against his back. He sat up and looked down at her.

"You can't be pregnant," he said. "You have to be married to be pregnant."

"Isn't this a sort of marriage?" She asked.

"You're just a girl I found on the road," he said. "How do I know it's not some other man's you married and bedded before?"

"You know because you know," she said, sitting up. She tried to take his hand and press it to her stomach, but he pushed her away and got out of the bed.

"I don't know. I don't know you, I don't know why you have that bird, and I don't know who put that filthy seed in your belly. But I know I want you gone by tomorrow." He left the room, and before she could untangle herself from the sheets, he was gone again out the front door. She pulled herself to her feet, and went to the window in time to see him riding off on the horse that had carried her there.

The curlew watched her watch him go.

"I used to move so easily, but now my body is a stranger to me." She went to the cage and placed her hand on the door. "I don't want my mother's sorrow."

"If you open the cage, I can fix it," the curlew said.

She lifted the bar locking the curlew in, and opened the door.

The curlew came into her arms.

"Lay down on the bed, and close your eyes" the curlew said. The girl did as she was told, with the curlew on her breast. It stood and made its way over the growing mound of her stomach. It dipped its long beak into her navel. It burrowed beneath her skin, then further.

She fed the fetus to the curlew.

The curlew came back into her arms, and laid its head on her collarbone. Together, they slept, and she dreamed her mother was a giant. She dreamed the blood trickling from her navel was the red ribbon leading up her mother's legs, curving around her thighs, pouring from a wound hidden under her mother's dress. She was climbing it. Above her the curlew landed, its beak sharpened thin as scissors. It took the ribbon in its mouth.

Its beak closed and she fell.

She woke at dusk and the curlew was waiting by the bedroom door. Her navel was twisted closed in a tight black scab, encircled by dried blood. The swelling of her stomach had gone down. She put on the clothes she had come in. She picked the curlew up off the floor and tucked it under her arm. She left, and made her way back into the forest.

She kept walking. The curlew never nipped her wrist to ask for food, or for water, or for rest. It never slept, but kept its head angled up so that its long beak would rest against her breast. She walked for days, until her shoes came apart completely. The rocks came, and pricked her feet, and rolled away, but she took no notice.

Soon the trees shed their leaves, and all around her they looked

like torched skeletons lifting their splintered bones towards the sky. Then snow fell and coated their limbs, and the whole world looked like a silhouette beneath a great hung sheet. Snow coated her hair, her shoulders, and the curlew, and still she kept walking.

She came to a place where the snow gave way to a patch of hard stone that stretched a mile long and wide. When she came to the center, she found a red door sunk into the rock. She clutched the curlew to her breast and bent over to open it.

Behind it were the stairs.

There was only darkness once the door swung closed behind her. She had to feel the edge of each step with her foot, and brace her hand against the wall. It felt warm and soft, as if she were brushing up against a living animal. Every now and then she would misstep and the curlew would rustle in the crook of her arm.

"Why are you so afraid? You can fly, can't you?" She said.

"I don't think I can anymore."

She shifted it in her arm and realized how heavy it had become. Like a stone. She reached her hand up to touch its body. Beneath its feathers, it felt hard and bloated. She closed her eyes and it made no difference, the dark was so complete. She pressed forward, her hand massaging the curlew's back.

After a long time, there were no more stairs, and she was walking along a long corridor towards a dim light. When she reached it, the hallway opened up to a cavern of stone that stretched so far above her she couldn't see the ceiling. There were small cottages, and tracks worn in the rock by the passing of feet. People were there, some who had the same patch of egg-white skin on their necks, their faces, their breasts and arms, as her and her mother.

She had come to the hall of her ancestors.

She looked to the curlew, whose eyes were half-lidded, and whose beak hung open. She put the bird to her ear and could hear something whistling inside.

She went to a woman and asked after her mother. She pointed her onward. After some time, she asked a man, and he too pointed her on. She kept asking, and each person looked at her with the same set of eyes, the same worn face, that her mother had worn all her life. Any could have been her, but they kept waving her on.

Eventually one pointed to a young woman nearby, laying on the stone floor with her hands folded under her head. The woman was whistling tunelessly. The girl asked the woman her name, and she received her mother's in reply. But this woman was young, and smooth skinned, and smiling like an idiot up at nothing.

"I'm your daughter," the girl said. The woman tilted her head back and looked at the girl and blinked. The girl held the curlew out. Its breath was faint and whistling. She could see patches of skin through its feathers. "This is for you."

The woman blinked again. "A daughter? There's some mistake. I don't have a daughter. And I don't want your bird. It looks sick."

"The bird is mine. It's the thing inside that's yours."

"What's that?"

"Something important."

"What is it?" The woman sat up and unfolded her arms, and on her wrist the girl saw the same patch of milky white skin.

"It's yours."

"But what?" The woman narrowed her eyes. In between the girl's fingers, the bird gave one shuddering breath, and then began heaving. Out of its beak poured tar. It splattered on the cave floor

and congealed into a ball. The curlew went limp. The girl put the bird to her ear and heard nothing. She put her mouth around its beak and blew breath into it, pumped its chest, but the bird stayed limp. She bit her tongue and held the bird to her chest.

The woman took one look at the ball of tar at the girl's feet, then the girl and her dead bird.

"I don't want that," she said. She got to her feet and walked away.

The girl tucked the curlew under her shirt so that it laid against her breast, and then she picked up the ball of tar and followed after the woman. The woman ran, so the girl ran. The woman's body was light, and she bounced easily from foot to foot, but the floor was hard, and sharp, and the girl's feet were more suited to the stone. Soon the woman stopped running and started to limp. The girl grabbed her by her hair and pulled her head back.

"Take it," she said, shoving the tar towards the woman's face. The woman turned away from it and shook her head. She spoke through clamped teeth.

"A good daughter would carry her mother's sorrow for her."

"A good mother would never ask her daughter to do that."

The woman writhed and the girl reinforced her grip on her. They fell to the floor together, the ball of tar wedged between them.

"Just take it," the girl hissed. "It's yours to keep. Yours, and it has nothing to do with me."

"How do I know you're my daughter anyway? I don't remember having any children. You think you can show up here and just shove your bird's puke down my throat?"

The girl reached back and curled her fist. She punched her

mother in the jaw. For a moment the woman stilled and the girl climbed on top of her.

"This is what you gave me," she said, pointing to her birthmark. "And this is why they gave me your sorrow. But I don't want it. I have enough of my own."

The woman opened her mouth to protest and the girl took the ball of tar and shoved it deep down the woman's throat. She pulled her hand out and held the woman's mouth closed as she thrashed. Eventually she stilled, gave in and swallowed. Beneath the girl she aged into the mother she had known.

The girl stood up and took the curlew out of her shirt. She held its limp body in her hands, cupping its head in one palm. On the floor her mother wept and clawed the rock as if trying to bury herself all over.

She knelt down, cradling the bird in one arm, and touched her mother's face. "I'm sorry," she said. "I had to."

"Stay with me," her mother asked. "Don't leave me alone with this."

The girl shook her head, and her mother clutched onto her. "Here," the girl said. She placed the nail of her finger to the curlew's chest. She split it down the middle and pried it apart with her hands. She tipped the curlew over, and out poured pebbles. They scattered on the stone floor and rolled together into a small, roofless cottage.

Then came the lilies. They grew out of the slit and up along the cottage. They curled inward and circled along the stone to make a carpet of vines and flowers. Then a bed, a table, a chair. They continued growing and blossoming, until it was fully furnished with tulips of every color. Then they grew outward into a small

roof, and their roots twisted out of the curlew and embedded themselves into the stone.

From out of the curlew's belly the girl pulled a babe, small and smooth, with a perfect patch of egg white skin on her wrist. She passed the babe to her mother.

"Take these," she said. "They'll make it lighter."

Her mother took the babe and looked to her daughter. "But what will you keep?" She asked.

The girl tucked the curlew in her mouth and closed it. She stood up and gave her mother, the cottage, and the babe one last look. She turned and she swallowed.

## I'll Tell You a Love Story

You'll have to forgive me for waiting to tell this to you when you're sleeping, but it's the only way I can do it. If you could see yourself stretched out on the floor, laying in the pool of light from the streetlamp right outside our window—how it very nearly looks like moonlight, and how very nearly beautiful you are—you'd understand why. Or maybe you wouldn't. But I'm going to go ahead and do it anyway.

This story is about a pair of lovers, which makes it not so different from our own. Only they didn't meet outside of a bar while one smoked a cigarette, and the other tried to fix her broken pump. They also weren't in their late twenties, a little bit angry, and a little bit bored, trapped in a shitty city while the world's economy tanked. They lived in the once upon a time days, on a small island, the kind with palm trees and small little monkeys that would look good in bell boy caps. It was like paradise, probably. And they met when they were very young. Just kids, even. The way people who are in love are supposed to.

He was a kind man with a broad chest, and just the right length of hair and the right amount of stubble. He had a mole over one of his eyebrows, but not the gross kind. It was the kind people fin