

*West Africa*

Dick is dead. Seena knows this, of course: her husband is dead. Yet she keeps expecting him to barrel in, his enormous, gangling self plodding along, a spectacle unaware that he is one. *Was one*, she thinks. *Was one*. Still, she finds herself waiting for him to call out, make some pointless point, make it clear to everyone that he just doesn't get it. She anticipates the annoyance she so often would feel around him. She almost longs for it—this longing he'd disappear, shut up, let her be. Because he has disappeared, shut up, let her be. He is dust from dust. Ashes from ashes. As dead as a doornail.

And she has the devil to pay.

Like Dick would say, "The devil take the hindmost."

Dick's moved on, and she's left to pay. Alone.

Because he did get it, more than she did—she knows this. But the recognition came only after the trigger was pulled, so to speak, after the poison went flying, when it pierced his pale chest, when it was long past too late. Now she understands she was the spectacle unaware: she was the fool.

And she wonders, How can you live with someone for years—know the softening ring around his still-thin waist, the changed

texture of his graying stubble, the scent in the hollow beneath his Adam's apple—and see only your imagination reflected?

Seena is on trial in a village in West Africa, in a “customary court.” The courthouse is the schoolhouse, transformed. The village elders—one a witch doctor, one a queen—are her accusers, judge and jury. She was indignant when she learned this, sure it couldn't be. She's an American, she'd said. She's entitled to due process. “These customary courts, they must be illegal. There are laws—aren't there?—even here, even in this hell?”

But she's a murderer, the elders said: she's entitled to nothing. “Our courts are based on our traditions, which are different from yours. Americans think they alone make laws, but we have our own rule.”

They have their own rule.

“Christina Slep?” the witch doctor, this so called “wise man,” says. He speaks to Seena, and watches her. Every person in the crowded room watches her; she feels this. And she knows if she were to look up at them, she would see only the whites of their eyes, and perhaps a shock of color from clothes that now seem mocking. They've told her the reasons women kill, and they've told her no matter her reason, she had no right. Still, they demand to know her reason, and she wonders which to choose. Which would they believe, or not? Which would solicit less loathing?

Even as she ponders these questions, she is aware she has no idea what they would believe, or not—no idea of the seed of their loathing, the fruit of their pity, whether they ever would feel pity for her. This is a world of rules turned inside out, a world where all she took for granted has been stripped away.

She is a carcass, ripped clean of flesh. A skeleton of holes. No longer can her mind set her apart, give her that private space where the real world could seem a dream. No longer can she fill her holes with assumptions: that rationality wins in the end, that humans have rights, that *white* humans have rights. She never appreciated this distinction before—appreciated that she made this distinction. She never thought of herself as racist. Dick was a racist, she knew. Not a malicious racist. A do-good kind of racist. A feel-sorry-for kind of racist. A thank-God-I'm-white kind of racist: there but for the grace of God go I. But not her. Not her. How could she be racist, given the only man she'd ever loved?

Yet she set foot in this dusty African world never believing its dust and rules would apply to her, her children, her mind. But why wouldn't they apply? Because she's white, she thought, that's why. Only, she didn't really think this, she *knew* this. It was in her flesh—what made her feel whole. She never had to think it; it just was. She never had to come to terms with being racist; she just was. As she sits here condemned, she knows this. And she knows she should be condemned, if for this reason alone—especially given her child of light.

“Do you have anything to say?” asks the elder, who is not even old. He is forty perhaps. At max. And Seena thinks, He is neither wise nor old, yet he has the power of Zeus, here. He and the queen of this village—Avone—are the gods of this universe, painting this African sky. Painting me, the African version of Clytemnestra.


“What don't I have to say?” she would like to say. “You want me to admit guilt? I'll admit it. I came here having little respect

for your beliefs and laws and I flouted them willingly. You want me to say I hated my husband—that I wanted him dead so I could be free to love my lover? I'll say it. You want me to tell you I committed adultery and squandered the welfare of my children for the sake of lust while I spit in God's face. It's all true."

"No," she says. "I have nothing to say."

# Yllis

*Danish Landing, Michigan*

 Mama said I was born in a blueberry field—that she was squatting, not to birth me, just to pick. Her hands were stained that purple-blue, and her lips were ringed black-blue, and a once-plump blueberry teetered on her tongue, staining her teeth as gray as a November sky. But it wasn't November, it was steamy July, Independence Day. And in the distance Mama could hear the sizzle on the Landing, where long-legged Mary Grace, always-obedient Mary Catherine, and troublemaker-in-training Mary Tessa swirled their sparklers, their sun-streaked hair dancing so close to the ephemeral glow that three-year-old Tessa singed her golden tips a crispy black.

“What in God’s name?” Mama asked, as if she didn’t know. She’d birthed the Marys in a steady succession like they were part of a fugue. Every two years a new one appeared, almost to the day: their bald heads glistened like the harvest moon and their dark lashes crept down their faces, giving them that startled look they have to this day. Even so, when Mama felt that wrenching tug, what she later described as her “rearrangement” (for she swears her internal makeup was never the same), and when she realized she was pushing whether she wanted to

or not, she asked that very question, “What in God’s name?”

I expect the question was a bit of an omen, as Mama seemed certain from the start I was going to be far more different from my sisters than they were from each other. While the Marys all came “as civilized children should” (Papa said) in the sterile world of white walls and white floors and white-clad, rubber-gloved professionals, I splattered down into a blueberry bush, wasting a full morning of Mama’s toil. (No one would eat the berries she’d picked, convinced I’d splattered myself into her bucket as well.)

My mop of black hair was so tangled in the scrawny bush, and Mama’s hands so slippery with blueberry juice and the mess of me, she couldn’t free me, so she pulled a pair of pruning shears from her skirt and gave me my first haircut right then and there, while I wailed like a robbed jay. When she’d finished I appeared a shrunken old man, a bald sun on the tiptop of my head with a halo of greasy hair matted about it, and a forehead so furrowed in fury, the lines didn’t soften for days. “With the way you carried on,” Mama said, “there was no need to phone the doctor. Anyone within earshot knew you were in this world for the long haul.”

Before traipsing back to the Landing, Mama clipped the cord with those same shears then swabbed me with her skirt in attempt to make me presentable to Papa and the Marys. Papa was fuming at the eldest Mary, leggy Grace, over tiny Mary Tessa’s singed hair, and all the Marys were weeping. Mama had to tap Papa thrice and knee him once just to get his attention. When he did turn toward her and saw my sticky skin and haloed hair and the partial blueberry that dangled from my left ear, he

screached as if a Mary, then bellowed, “Mary, Mother of God!” And the Marys cried louder, and I wailed again.

“Your daughter,” Mama shouted, to be heard over the racket.

“But what about her hair?” Papa said.

“She came when I was picking,” Mama said. As if that explained it.

My hair has always had a touch of blue when struck by morning light, and my skin is nearly as dark as my sisters’ is light. And my eyes are that pale, just-ripe-blueberry blue. When I asked Papa as I grew why I look the way I do, all swarthy skinned and swarthy haired and icy eyed, so different from he and Mama and the Marys, he asked me what exactly did I expect given the way I came crashing into the world?

Mama named me Amaryllis, right out there in the blueberry field, and when Papa’s mustache quivered after she told him the name, and his eyes took on the glassy, stunned gaze, Mama straightened her long back and stretched her giraffe’s neck and flounced that Mary-hued hair as she pointedly turned away, and Papa knew the name was not negotiable.

Mama told me this story at least a hundred times as I grew up—claimed she’d named me Amaryllis after a shepherdess in her favorite Virgil poem. “You seemed partial to fields,” she said, and she didn’t even crack a smile. The name Amaryllis comes from the Greek *amarysso*, meaning “to sparkle,” Mama said, “to shed light.” She was wont to remind Papa there is in fact a “Mary” in the name. Mama insists she’d intended to call me Marylla for short, or maybe even just plain Mary, but these nicknames never stuck. I was Yllis from the start. “I’m Yllis,”

I'd say, when I'd meet new people. "Phyllis?" they'd say. Sometimes, "Willis?"—as if even my sex was a mystery.

Papa's deceased mother had been christened Mary Ann, and until that moment of truth in the blueberry field, Mary Ann was to be my "blessing," as Papa would say. But I've no doubt Mama knew it would have been a sort of sacrilege to name me after dead Grandma Slepy, let alone the Mother of God.

Mama herself was named Christina, after God himself according to Pa. Perhaps that's why the name made her itch. Whenever Papa introduced her as such, she'd claw behind her ear and up her right side and correct him. "Seena," she'd say. "Call me Seena."

"What kind of name is Seena Slepy?" Papa would mutter to himself. Then he'd go on to introduce himself, Dick, and the Marys. And me, Yllis.

I myself have an affinity for the name Seena, perhaps because it contains the word "see." Long before I had any understanding of who I am—what I am—I could see Mama's instincts were right: I was different, and not just on the surface. I didn't fit in my family, I didn't fit in at school. Classmates and teachers (and Mary Tessa) so ridiculed me for my "wild imagination," I wasn't sure I belonged on earth. Yet I knew things about earth—about people on earth. I often knew what people would say before they spoke. I knew whom people loved, whom they despised. I knew what gave others joy and fury and envy, even when they didn't seem to know themselves.

Just to set the record straight, envy is not green. And rage isn't red hot, and the blues have nothing to do with blue. Envy is more dust colored, a transparent sort of gray. It quivers, like



heat rising. Rage itself is not any shade of red—it's not any color at all. It's a smell, like fried-up fish. Melancholy? The blues? Melancholy's more of a shimmer than any color. And it creeps: blues on the move.

People say joy is infectious, but that's a myth. It's melancholy that's infectious. And sneaky. It skulks about, climbing legs, mounting skirts. It's particularly active when joy is in the room. Joy shows up, a sort of humming, and melancholy gets the jitters. I've seen it time and again. While joy bathes one person—who purrs almost, like she's been plugged in—melancholy makes the rounds. And those closest in proximity to joy are melancholy's most likely targets. That's not to say joy's humming doesn't sometimes spread—it does—but melancholy is crafty and determined, while joy spreads mostly when it tries not to. At least when it doesn't try too hard.

Guilt, in contrast, is tricky to see, smell, hear, because guilt is a mush—a combination of envy and anger, joy and melancholy. And love. But I know guilt. I know the taste of its quivering, shimmering, cloudy, smelly, buzzing self.

I met guilt first in the time BEFORE—before Africa, before Papa's death, before my love for Mama took on a taste I couldn't recognize—when envy may as well have been green, and anger could have been Papa's flush, and joy might have been quiet, not a hummer. And sadness? As far as I was concerned then, it was my mother. Snug in the world of her mind, Seena was the goddess of deception, Apate herself, ensnared in Pandora's storage jar. But at the time, I mistook her cunning for sadness.

It was the day of my eleventh birthday and the bicentennial and we were summering on the Danish Landing, a hodge-

podge of cottages owned by Rasmussons and Sorensons and Jorgensons and Eihlersons. And Slepys. When Mama convinced Papa to buy the cottage we'd been renting in a probate sale, he said, "At least we all look Danish." Then his eyes dashed to me, and the skin beneath his pale mustache went pink, and his ears looked hot to the touch.

The cottage is on a lake named Margrethe, in a mite of a town named Grayling. The prior owners named the cottage "Deezeezdaplas." Papa left the name hanging near the front door as a "welcome" sign. (Mama said it was more of an unwelcome sign.) And he painted the cottage the Danish-flag red and white "to fit in." But Grayling sits nearly two hours' drive north of our hometown of Midland, so there was no fitting in for Papa. While Mama and the Marys and I spent the whole summer at the Danish Landing, and some long weekends in the spring and fall, Papa was purely a weekender, and what the locals called a half blood—making ill-reference, Mama said, to the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians who'd inhabited the area long before the Danes arrived. And making Papa's pure Polish blood boil.

But it was a weekend, and fourteen-year-old Tessa—by then a seasoned troublemaker—and I had headed down the Old Trail to gather kindling for the campfire Papa was determined to build, even though the wind had blown the lake to foam and was spitting acorns from the trees, and the moss beneath our feet felt more like moist flesh, and the kindling we'd gathered was as wet as the towels dripping on the line and as likely to start a fire as a mound of tomatoes.

"Snake!" Mary Tessa said. Her braided hair jerked as if lopped as she sprang back. The kindling rolled down her legs.

Tessa—the closest Mary to my age, but still three years my senior—was no rookie when it came to snakes. She and I had kept a box of garters on more than one occasion. But her voice was high pitched, her body stiff.

“Where?” I said. “What? Is it a rattler?”

I knew there were rattlers in these woods. Papa had told us of them. “The eastern massasauga rattlesnake lives in these woods, girls.”

“What kind of name is massasauga?” I’d asked. But Papa ignored me.

“It’s the only venomous snake in Michigan,” he’d said. “And it’s rare. But it’s out there. Make noise when you head onto the Old Trail. Scare those snakes away. Clap your hands. Bang sticks together.” Then he’d sent us off to carry back loads of kindling, reminding us to never talk to strangers, “especially those red-skinned natives.” I assumed at the time he was referring to the Rasmusson boys, whose sun-fried Danish skin was a peeling hot pink. I’d seen Papa watching them watch bikini-wearing Grace—who was eighteen going on eight, as far as Papa was concerned.

I tried to push past Tessa to see the snake, but she spread her own sunburnt arms wide. “No, Yllis,” she said. “No. Go back.”

“I’m not going back,” I said. “I want to eye that snake.” I slipped under her outstretched arm, but she caught me by the hair.

“Hey,” I said. I dropped my kindling, swatted at her, but my efforts were fruitless. At just three years older, Tessa was twice my size. “You can’t do that. You let me go.”

“I said go back.” And she dragged me by my hair, but she couldn’t stop my looking, she couldn’t stop my *seeing*. The

snake was a rattlesnake. But it was dead. Not just dead. Someone had sliced off its flat triangle head and carefully slit its body wide, pinned it flat. Its entrails lay exposed there, in all their completeness—and the rattle, too. And I saw there was an amazing beauty about those entrails, that hollowed-out rattle and that decapitated head with its cat-pupil eyes. Yes, there was a beautiful, remarkable mystery in how perfect it all was. How smart. As if someone had sketched out those innards again and again before getting it just right. The plump blob of heart beneath the elongated left lung, and the right lung snaking thin between the stretched stomach and liver, ending alongside the coil of small intestine. The greenish gallbladder ball hugged by the darker pancreas ball. The kidneys like worms, one chasing the other. I knew these body parts—I'd found Mary Catherine's *Sophomore Anatomy* discarded in the trash, and I'd hidden the book beneath my bed. But there lay what I thought were human parts, all thinned out as snake parts.

It wasn't the similarities between humans and snakes that surprised me, though, it was the crispness—the clean, clear crispness. With the snake dead, it wasn't smelling sweet with fear, it wasn't colored with emotion. It wasn't hazy or shimmering or buzzing.

It just was.

“You didn't touch that snake, did you, girls?”

I rotated my seeing from the snake to one of those ill-referenced Indians. He stood on the Old Trail with midnightlike hair streaking down his sides. But he had these blueberry eyes.

“You an Indian?” I asked.

“That's one way to put it.”

“What do you mean?” I thought of his eyes. “You a half blood?”

“Hush, Yllis.” Mary Tessa tightened her grip on my hair.

“Even dead rattlesnakes can bite,” the Indian-man said. “Even when they’ve been decapitated. Pick up that chopped-off head, and it just might bite you.”

“That was sick,” Tessa said, after we’d left the Indian and the rattler.

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t. It was beautiful.”

Tessa was moving along at such speed, she nearly yanked the hair from my head when she skidded to a stop. “What did you say, Yllis?” Her startled expression contorted some, and I saw she truly was startled. “You thought that snake was beautiful? Someone killed it. You know that, right? Cut it open. Pinned it there. I mean, that’s really sick. It was a rattler, but still . . .”

Coming from Tessa, that meant something. Tessa was good at sick. And cruel. And killing that snake—pinning it and such—was cruel. I’d give her that. I wouldn’t have had the stomach for it. Yet it seemed to me in that moment there is a painful sort of beauty in seeing things for what they really are.

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When we arrived at the cottage, Mama sat coiled on the couch, her white peasant blouse a pillow about her and her ever-present pearl necklace snug as a noose. Even standing at the door, I could smell her Primitif tainted by Noxzema. Hesiod’s *Theogony* lay on her lap and her face hovered above the Greek dictionary she held in one hand. Mama had wanted to be a classics scholar. “But I dropped out of college in fifty-seven to get married,”

she'd recently told us girls. "That means Grace is a bastard," Tessa had whispered to me, which had confused me. Based on previous comments Grace had made, I'd thought Papa was the bastard. (Tessa later set me straight.)

My birthday cupcakes sat uneaten on the table. Their fingered-over frosting had grown rock hard—as hard as the cupcakes themselves. Mama had used blueberries when making the batter—in honor of my birth—and they had turned the batter into blue soup, the burnt cupcakes into blue-gray rocks. Mama had frosted them red and white, in honor of Independence Day. We'd all tried to eat the cupcakes: a futile effort to protect Mama's feelings. But even during the singing of "Happy Birthday"—before any of us had tried to take a bite—I'd smelled that faint sweet scent of trepidation: the Marys' and Papa's and mine. And I'd smelled Mama's fear, too—only hers was not faint but powerful, longing as she did to celebrate my life yet suspecting she'd failed. Again. Surprisingly, Tessa had made the best effort to look after Mama's feelings: she'd managed to dent the rock by chiseling it with her incisors.

But after meeting that snake, Tessa was in no such generous mood. "Apparently your cupcakes are better than dog food," she whispered. She motioned toward Lint, our colorless mutt, who crouched beneath the table, lopping up the shards of red, white and blue that speckled the floor. "Well, I guess that's something."

HAPPY BIRTHDAY YLISS!!! hung lopsided on the wall behind Mama, the banner speckled with poster-painted *x*'s and *o*'s and blobbed with what sixteen-year-old Mary Catherine insisted were fireworks—although similar "fireworks" decorated the

seat of her well-pleated shorts. Captain and Tennille spun on Mama's old phonograph, insisting love would keep us together. Grace and Mary Catherine lay stomachs flat on the floor, their knees bent, their bare feet dangling over their rears. A game of Scrabble sprawled before them like a sadistic maze: no way out.

Papa circled the game like a parched horsefly, but his eyes were on Mama. He and Mama often joked about Mama's "interests," as Papa called them. (Always the same joke.) She would spout off some poem, and Papa would say, "What is that, Greek?" Mama would confirm that it was in fact Greek, and they'd both guffaw; they'd squeeze their sides and swab their eyes. But behind their swabbing, their eyes weren't laughing. That was obvious enough to me.

"Some say Pandora is the story of the first woman," Mama said, in response to a question from Papa, I guessed—even though she wasn't looking at him—because Papa squinted at Mama, like she was blurry or too bright. "Some say it's the story of the birth of all evil."

"Arguably the same," Papa said, but barely. Unlike Mama, I saw—and read—Papa's lips.

"Hmmm?" Mama said.

Papa added, "I thought it was about a box—about a woman opening a box."

"It was a jar, actually," Mama said, although still she didn't look up. "There are various versions of the story, but it essentially goes something like this. Zeus went to Hephaestus, the god of artisans and fire, and asked him to create a woman." She flipped a page in the Greek dictionary, scanned the words on the page with her index finger. "Zeus wanted to use the woman

as a means of revenge against mortals. So, Hephaestus molded the woman, gave her form. Athena taught the woman how to weave. Aphrodite gave the woman beauty. Apollo gave her a gift for healing. Poseidon gave the woman the security she'd never drown. Hermes gave boldness. Hera, curiosity."

Mama shifted her gaze from the dictionary back to Hesiod, then. She didn't notice no one was listening to her—no one, that is, but me. Papa had opened the newspaper, and he read while he paced. Tessa had nabbed Papa's camera off the kitchen counter and zoomed in to spy on Old Lady Clara, who lived in the cottage across the way. Mary Catherine alternated between studying her Scrabble letters and examining her rosary beads, all while chewing her nails. Grace yawned audibly, rolled onto her back, stretched her long legs skyward and closed her eyes—clearly intending to make the point Mary Catherine's turn was taking far too long.

"Zeus named the woman Pandora," Mama continued. "He sent her as a gift to Epimetheus, who married her. At the wedding, Zeus gave Pandora a storage jar as a gift. Epimetheus, wary of Zeus, told Pandora to never open the jar. Because Hera had given Pandora curiosity, however, one day Pandora slightly lifted the jar's lid. Before she realized what was happening, she'd released Apeate, the spirit of deceit; Geras, the spirit of old age; Moros, the spirit of doom; Eris, the spirit of strife; Momos, the spirit of blame; Oizys, the spirit of suffering; Nemesis, the spirit of hatred; and Ker, the spirit of carnage and death. When Pandora again sealed the jar, only hope remained."

"Would you look at this, Seena?" Papa said, apropos of nothing. He held the newspaper in one fisted hand as he circled and



he waved it about as if swiping his way through a horde. “The Supreme Court agrees with me, even if Pope Paul doesn’t. Says here the court decided Friday. There’s nothing cruel or unusual about killing a killer.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Mama said. She turned another page. She was no more listening to Papa than Papa had been listening to her.

“Is it like dominoes, Papa?” I said, trying to dodge his noticing Mama’s obvious lack of interest.

Papa was fairly adept at failing to see the obvious, actually. Neither he nor Mama had noticed Tessa and I had arrived. He jerked toward us, startled. “Dominoes?”

“You said there’s nothing cruel about killing a killer.” I was thinking about that snake. “You have to be a killer to kill a killer, right? Doesn’t it just keep going?”

“What are you talking about, Yllis? Human beings are not like dominoes. Killing is not fun and games.” And then: “Tessa. Hey. What are you doing? You put my camera down. Now.”

Tessa turned from the window, slid the camera down the counter just as the wind threw a branch against the window to Papa’s left.

“Where’s the kindling?” Papa said.

“We found a snake,” I said.

“Where’s the kindling?” Papa said again, and louder, as if somehow we’d failed to hear, although the entire cottage is the size of a two-car garage. You might be able to choose to not listen while in the cottage, but you pretty much couldn’t choose to not hear—the Marys and I had learned that well enough when Papa had rushed us to bed so he and Mama could “sleep.”

A storm was brewing. I could see through the front windows on to the lake, where the waves had been stirred into such commotion, it was hard to be certain the lake was water at all. I imagined it rising up, some humongous animal with mounds of white fur and dark, wet eyes.

Another branch smashed the side window. And then another. “That’ll do for you,” Tessa said. She pointed to the window just as a large something hit the roof. “There’s your kindling.”

“Did you hear that, Seena?” Papa said. He looked first at Tessa then at me. Then he looked at Mama. But Mama (true to form) wasn’t listening. The Greek dictionary sprawled her lap; she pressed her face into Hesiod. “Seena!” Papa said. He raised his voice louder than I expect he intended. Lint whimpered. Still Mama didn’t budge. Papa ripped *Theogony* from Mama’s hands and shook it to the floor, like one might shake off a leech. In so doing, he slid across Scrabble, scattering the maze.

“I was winning!” Mary Catherine said as she snatched up letters. Her rosary beads, made of olive seeds from the Garden of Gethsemane, swung like clinging seaweed from her wrist. She was quivering gray with envy, as was usual, but her mood ring was dark blue. According to the mood chart, which I’d studied that morning, she was “very happy, full of love, passion and romance,” which served to confirm Tessa’s claim the ring was nothing but liquid crystal, a temperature gauge.

“You weren’t winning,” Grace said. “I thought saints didn’t lie.” Then she turned her attention to adjusting her chain belt, as if to say, “I really couldn’t care less.”

“What’s happened?” Mama said. She grabbed *Theogony* and

dusted it, then she looked at Papa like she'd just watched him murder a babe. "Who's hurt?"

"Mary Tessa and Yllis are being disrespectful," Papa said.

"And Papa ruined our fun," Mary Catherine said.

"What's new?" Grace said.

Papa zipped around to face Mary Grace and the newspaper grazed her golden head.

"I was talking about Tessa. And Yllis," Grace said.

"Pants on fire," I said.

"We saw a rattler," Tessa said.

"A dead one," I added, "with its insides all laid out and its head chopped off."

"And Yllis said it was beautiful."

"Gross," Mary Catherine said.

"We met an Indian, too," I said. "A real one. Well, he probably was a half blood."

"We didn't talk to him, though," Tessa said.

"Yeah we did . . .," I started, but I stopped myself, remembering Papa's instructions about strangers.

I knew I should change the subject when I realized everyone but Mama was looking at me. It seemed Mama's Pandora story was a sure way to lose their attention. "Where was truth in that story you told about Pandora, Mama?" After that experience with the snake, truth was on my mind. "You told me before there's a goddess of truth. What did you say her name is? Aletheia? Why didn't Aletheia give Pandora truthfulness? Why wasn't truth still in the jar, along with hope?"

Up until that point, Mama still had been thinking in Greek—I'd seen the distance in her eyes. But my words

yanked her back in a way Papa's hands hadn't. She looked at me, then—only me. Not at sassy Tessa. Not at dusty Mary Catherine. Not at hot-pants Grace. Not even at Papa. Still, she didn't say a word.

“Maybe Aletheia couldn't be found to give Pandora truthfulness.” I answered my own question, as it seemed Mama had no intention of answering. “Maybe, unlike hope, truth couldn't be contained in the jar.”

It was at that very moment that BEFORE passed away. For a second or so I thought I was seeing Mama like Papa had minutes before: she seemed both blurry and bright. She looked dusty, yet the dust had a white-yellow shimmer. And she waved, not with her hands. Her body waved, undulated, but barely. Just barely. And the smell. It was stronger than Papa's, as if Papa had dragged in his bucket of fish guts, and fish heads with their bulging fish eyes, and cooked them up. I looked toward Papa, away from Mama, and the smell faded, as if it blew away. Then I looked at her again. Wham. It blew back. Like someone had cut the cheese. The phonograph needle lifted, the room fell silent. Then the hum began: the monotonous chorus. It started out softly then picked up volume. I looked toward Tessa, wondering whether the joy I heard was hers, but while looking at Tessa, I heard only silence. So I looked again at Mama. The hum began softly then picked up volume.

The taste came then. Sort of an aftertaste. It was the first time I'd ever experienced this taste. It wasn't sour or salty, yet it made me pucker. Even though I didn't like the taste, I felt myself relishing it. So later, when the taste became an afterthought, I longed for it.

“You thought that dead snake was beautiful, Yllis?” Mama said.

I nodded my head. I wasn’t sure what I was sensing—I didn’t know it was guilt. But I knew the experience was real. I wondered why I hadn’t sensed it before. And I thought about the painful, beautiful truths that hover about like gnats—about how so often we just swat them away: Papa wasn’t my papa, that blue-eyed half blood was. It wasn’t Papa who was the bastard. It wasn’t Grace.

It was me.

All the emotion swirling around this fact had distorted it for me before. But there it was, spread out before me on my birthday, just like that snake.

“Did you kill that snake, Yllis?” Mama said, although she knew I wouldn’t do such a thing: I’m no killer.

“Nuh-uh.”

Our dog Lint moseyed over and lay on my feet, as if trying to back me, as if to say, “How could you ask her that?” Given all I’d seen and heard and smelled, I thought I might look down and find that colorless Lint had a color after all. But Lint was hued as always, that color that was no color and every color, like lint.

“Well, at least it can’t bite anybody now,” Papa said.

“Even dead rattlers can bite,” I said. “Even a rattler with its head chopped off can bite.”

“Stop being contradictory, Yllis,” Papa said. “Show your father some respect.”

“You’re not my father. That Indian we saw? He’s my father. I know for sure he is.”

“Your father?” Tessa said. “Hah. I knew it. I always figured you were adopted.”

“What?” Mama said. “Why would you say that, Yllis?”

“Stop that, Yllis,” Papa said. “You stop that right now.”

“That’s ridiculous, Yllis,” Mary Catherine said, but she strangled her wrist with her rosary beads.

“Now whose pants are burning?” Grace said.

Somebody needs to tell Aletheia’s story, I thought: truth should have her day. As far as I could tell, I was the only one whose pants weren’t burning—that is, until Papa gave me the paddling.

But now? Now I know Aletheia didn’t need my help. She was perfectly capable of telling her own story.