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THE AUNT OF EVERYTHING

In the beginning, no one knew why our little mountain town was overrun with animal life, when most habitats had been bowled-over by concrete, rendered black with pollution. Radiation and fluorocarbons. Excess phosphate sparking algae blooms and a dusting of aldicarb that long ago percolated into the water table. No one knew why our mountain was littered with frogs and snakes, the kind that used to call the desert their home, our peculiar kind of dangerous and marvelous. In the beginning, no one knew, until everyone did.

On that day, I stood out on the patio surrounding the mountaintop cabin, where we sold our cookies to travelers and hikers who pinned their poles beneath their armpits, until my mother peeked out the window to check in on me. I pointed to the sign she had painted before I was born: *This is not a playground. No children at play.*

I always played a game where I broke the rules, even though the sign was a joke. I crawled beneath one of the picnic tables, I straddled a fence like I was riding a horse: a creature I heard about in my mother's stories. I made the patio my playground. My mother wagged two fingers at me and then turned back to her work. Why two? Because they were useful tools in hiding each corner of her smile.

That was when the black helicopter sounded its arrival on the road that separated our little mountain town from the desert metropolis below. The Prime Minister of Everyone had arrived: I knew him by the shape of his suit, which was exactly the way my mother had described. I watched as he was escorted to the front of the line, escorted beyond the counter, escorted into a room alone with my mother. When the speaking was finished, the Prime Minister opened the door and sidestepped through a stockpile of frogs and snakes.

He must have known well before then, somehow—I'm guessing the woman who spoke diamonds was the one who told him. But that was the first time that *everyone* came to know.

Then, we were flying in the helicopter, floating over the mountain that raised me. I worried about my mother's newly-born animals. I worried about the snakes, even the venomous ones.

"I suppose you're my niece, then," the Prime Minister of Everyone said, extending his hand.

"I'm Gaby." I didn't know whether to shake his hand or kiss it, so I did neither. I wished for a snake to brush against my cheek, to help me remember the comfort of scale. For a skin I could trust.

"Yes," he said. "Uncle Prime Minister."

We flew endlessly. Because my mother wasn't allowed to speak in such a small area, I could only listen to Uncle Prime Minister speaking into his headset. I could only hear his half of the conversation—he was skilled at agreeing to whatever the other people were saying—and so I filled the time by imagining the other side.

My pretend other: *Do you agree that you have a terrible haircut?* My Uncle: Yes, naturally. *Do you regret hunting tigers for a million dollars?* I do, yes. *Do you think something can be both beautiful and evil?* Sure, I can see your point. *Do you secretly hate the woman who speaks diamonds?* Unfortunately, yes. *Are you indeed a massive buttface?* Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

In what felt like another lifetime we landed beside a small lake with water that had been recycled so many times it shimmered unreal color. Slippery metal, like it was trying to sound a lie. When I had a quiet moment to look across this lake, I estimated its width at seventy-something cookies laid edge-to-edge.

They were the size of a dinner plate! The cookies we sold from our cabin, that is. I liked to watch how people reacted to them, eyes bright and forgetting.

Well makeup-ed and well-lit and into the swallowing lenses of a hundred cameras the Prime Minister of Everyone explained how my mother would repopulate this newly-built habitat. That it would serve as the genesis for a new era of animals.

Standing next to my mother just off-frame, I pulled on her shirt and asked, "Prime as in first-rate, or prime as in the best time of your life, or like a coat of white paint?"

"That's primer."

"Maybe a prime number?" I asked, mimicking one of the television reporters. *"The Uncle Prime Minister is so prime in his prime that he's just like a prime: only divisible by himself."*

My mother gave me a look. “No one is divisible, Gaby.”

Just then, all the cameras swung in my mother’s direction. What else could she do other than tell a story? In it, there was a frog, and a snake, and me. In it, I was a queen.

A frog and a snake traveled to my throne room to tell me about their plight: they only wanted a place to call home, but everywhere they went, they were driven away. One of my trusted advisors told me there was no more room for things like frogs and snakes. He said, *The space had simply run out.*

Run out? I asked. I knew the world was so vast that even I, as queen, had only seen a small portion of my kingdom. That simply made no sense.

There is room, my queen, but not space, the advisors said. *No space at all.*

I asked them to explain the difference.

There is room for hundreds more people inside this very space, but there is not enough space because we would not want to be so close to one another. We would demand more room.

I pondered this for a moment, both in the story and in myself. And then, as queen, I said, *Let there be a decree: every person in this land must make a choice. They can either give up their home and move in with another, or they can welcome into their home something they are afraid of or don’t understand.* When my advisors seemed uncertain about my decree, I tried to repeat myself in more certain terms: *They may either give up their rooms to create space for others, or make room for others in their spaces.*

With this, the word dispersed. In the days and weeks after, my people chose to abandon their homes, move closer together, and, finally, build taller and taller structures. In the end, they gave up both their rooms and their space, although they never did see it that way.

Out in the land that was suddenly abandoned, the frog and snake, who were neighbors, you see, and friends—that part came at the beginning—woke up to find themselves alone. They had their rooms, the snake burrowed underground and the frog tucked beneath a healthy schedule of fern, but no one else to share the space. No one else to admire it alongside them.

“Look at all this room we have,” the snake said. “Plenty of rocks to curl up on.”

“I wouldn’t get too excited,” the frog said, wrinkled and wizened.

“Why not?”

The frog sighed. “For us, there will always be room, but never space.”

With the story finished, the lake was churning with frogs. The grass waved with threading snakes. They chirped, they hissed, they shook their rattle tails. A duck soared overhead from some other place, landed in the water, and promptly died, as though it had been flying for years in search of a place to call home. Everyone applauded.

After another black helicopter dropped us off at home, I couldn't stop thinking about what my mother had said, that no person was divisible. Of course they were: she was part woman, part creation myth. Ninety-nine parts human and one part curse. Every day we spent together I picked her apart a thousand times, and then, quite carefully and with love, put her back together again.

After that day, when the Prime Minister of Everyone came on the news to speak about the future of our dying world, my mother would often remind me that she could read my thoughts.

"Do you remember what the Prime Minister of Everyone was doing when he was a young man, and had just met my sister?"

"He was hunting tigers," I said.

"How much did he pay to hunt those tigers? Do you remember that?"

"A million dollars?"

"Far more than that, Gaby," my mother said, sounding sad for once. She was hardly ever sad when she spoke, when the frogs and snakes peeled their lives from between her teeth and scattered out into our little mountain town. "Do you remember what sound a tiger made?"

"*Murph! Murph! Murph!*" I said, each noise sharp and guttural.

"Exactly," my mother said, kissing the top of my head. "Exactly right." Three frogs popped out of her mouth like triplets coming into the world kicking.

Looking back, I think my mother would have praised me for any tigersound I might have made. I didn't know the difference, I had forgotten from my picture books, and I think, even by then, she had forgotten the truth herself. But it was less about the sound and more about the fact that someone bothered to try to remember.

In the evenings, I helped my mother in the kitchen to make hundreds of cookies to sell to the endless queue of tourists that came to wander our mountain, to wander our streets in search of creatures they had only seen rarely before. We buried ourselves in flour. It was in those together moments, when we focused on the mixing and the scraping and the heat, that I asked her about her own story.

“Why frogs and snakes?” I asked.

“Those creatures were thought of very differently when I first thought of that story,” my mother said.

“Not nearly as good,” I said.

“Right. You’ll learn, as you get older, that most things in this world survive or die depending on the stories we used to tell about them.”

On that last word came out a wide and dark-colored frog, who lumbered onto the patio and refused to leave. On the first night it stood guard, even when frost tickled the patio’s always-unevening stone. On the second night it lingered heavy-limbed and not-singing, and I tried to warm it with some rice and a sock and the microwave. On the third night I said to my mother, “Something is wrong with that one.”

My mother said, “No, no. He’s just being patient.”

Another frog rode out on *patient* and as newly-formed pair they slipped into the pond. They sang for three days and three nights, and after that I had to take care where I stepped among the mossy rocks, because they were laced with things that didn’t yet know they would soon be alive.

As my mother grew in fame, our constituency changed: instead of only hikers seeking calories, we were greeted with protests and prayers. Some people cursed her *witch*, others called her a *monster*, and others still debated her goddessness. The line became a contentious place.

One man, I remember: he waited, without issue, for an hour. He seemed happy, even—I watched him from one of the picnic tables. At the front of the line, he ordered a Marjorie—chocolate batter with sea salted, caramelized pistachios and—even though never knew how it got its name. When he shook hands with my mother, his overwhelmed hers and he pulled her halfway across the counter.

Your *frog-tongue* is going to kill us all, he said. Why is it so difficult for you to understand natural selection? First them, then you.

From the doorway, I held back raw. I corralled myself from being uncontained. Instead of saying what I wanted, I pretended to be my mother, and I showed only my best words.

You talk, I said, and then you have even less than what you started with.

The man turned toward me, stepped closer, raised his hand as though he would strike me. My mother spoke out a venomous snake and it nipped at the man’s ankle, and then I had to call 911, and then I got the rare pleasure of watching

a helicopter other than the Prime Minister of Everyone's paddle its way across the desert to our little mountain town.

After all the delays, when our customers got their cookies, they weren't as joyous as they had been. Instead of smiles wide as half a cookie, they were a quarter at best. After that, my mother made an addendum to the *no children at play* sign which read *Please keep cookies pure, not political.*

My mother wasn't even mad. She believed that if you live your life expecting to suffer, you end up feeling mostly anything else. And, sometimes, that happens to be joy.

While doing our kneading at night, I asked her about her less-than-joyous past. I probed deeper into the tale she was told me, the one where she was cursed.

"Tell me again about the old woman who came to your door," I said.

"Well, my sister answered the first time. She gave the woman a glass of water right from our kitchen sink," my mother said, "and let the woman inside to cool herself."

A snake had crawled into our chandelier like it would a shrub, and began rattling its tail joyously to the heat of my mother's heartbeat.

"And you told the woman to go to the well down the road. You told her there was a bucket that she could pull up from the bottom, even though you had never used it yourself. You didn't know if it worked," I said, "and you didn't know what was in the well."

"You know the story, Gaby," my mother said. "Why ask me to tell it again?"

"It seems different," I said, my feet tickled by the toes of my mother's other children, "now that your curse is being used for good."

"Do you think my sister would rather speak frogs and snakes than diamonds? Do you think she would trade places with me?" my mother asked, angry now, her lap overrun with venomous snakes. "Don't you know that I think about it every day? Don't you know that I wish I could trade places with anyone?"

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"I was just about your age when it happened. You never thought part of the reason I had you is that I could pretend to know what a normal life feels like again?"

That was when I finally understood what it meant to not love all of your children. It was when I understood the shape of the story she told in front of all those cameras: it was her attempt to ensure that I became something so unlike

herself. And it was when I thought I learned the difference between a witch and a woman and an unknown.

Not long after, the changes began. Frogs and snakes coming out with patches of dead-looking skin, eyes gone gray. One frog had its legs on backwards. These broken little animals arrived mostly on our longest days, and her most stressful, with customers making demands of her time and her curse. At the end of the day, I carried them into the backyard, where I killed them, painlessly as I could, with a shovel. I dug them little graves, used rocks to remember them. Big ones, so not even the monsoons could let me forget.

My mother would speak them, too, on days the Prime Minister of Everyone carried her away inside another black helicopter. I would see her on the television those very same nights, at some newly-built wildlife preserve, some ditch where rainwater collects in the springtime, where cameras would pull in tight on the frogs and snakes falling from her lips, as if they needed to understand a curse's biology. I could see her half-broken children through the television, wondering if anyone else saw what was happening, or if they had all forgotten what a frog was supposed to look like.

I would watch her smile casually as the Prime Minister of Everyone promised were once the basis of all life on land and they would be again. I would watch her grow a little grayer, a little more frayed around the edges. I would point at her parts through the broadcast screens, saying, *This is the part that breathes, this is the part that kneads, this is the part that is dying, this is the part that loves me, this is the part that makes the living.*

When winter came, my mother said, "Gaby, I'm thinking about saying goodbye to my voice."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't think I can be something for everyone any more," she said, tending to the woodburning stove, which held an audience of frogs and snakes for the beauty of its heat. "I'm getting so tired."

"I could take over making all the cookies," I said. "That would give you some time off."

"That's kind of you," she said. *"Say, goodbye, voice."*

"Goodbye, voice."

My mother pulled me in for a hug, and that was the last I heard her speak.

She left to go snowshoe around the empty and snow-filled streets of our little mountain town, and I tended to her final children. Their skins were sickly and their eyes had fallen into the wrong places. I held them close to my chest and told them my favorite story, aside from my mother's: the story about the lonely frog calling for three days and three nights, followed by a flood of children. Once that was over, I led them into the snow to become cold again, and into the quiet that was good for sleeping.

The Prime Minister of Everyone came back only once, much later. My mother's sister, too. They saw her silence. They saw the graveyard that had been made of our backyard. They tried to apologize, and my mother's sister cried quietly in the corner, her sobs little diamonds tinkling across the floor.

"I just want you to know," the Prime Minister of Everyone said, "that the habitats are growing. More and more animals every spring. You did well. You did more than anyone should have been asked to do."

They decided to leave behind the stockpile of my aunt's diamonds, like a gift. Something we could use to retire on. My mother gave me half, and we spent the afternoon laughing while we swallowed them, while we tossed them into the pond never to be found again. While we baked them into cookies for others to find. While we tried to make them worth every little bit less than they already were. I'm not sure if we succeeded, but we sure took joy in this small private vandalism.

We traveled to one of my mother's habitats once. She wanted to see, for herself, the results of her curse. Together we crafted a disguise: a straight-haired blonde wig I had bought from a store in the desert city's downtown after skipping school, a businesslike outfit she would have never worn otherwise. We drove to the airport, and that was the first time I flew in a plane. We rented a car, escaped this other city like it was aiming to swallow us, drove out into a land dominated by farmland and lakes blooming with emerald algae. I helped point out the cows while my mother tried not to laugh. We paid our admission fees and wandered the preserve, reading weathered signs about different species of crane, wondering where they had all gone. A docent found us and led us around the habitat, clearly unable to see through the disguise my mother and I had made, explaining the species we already knew so well. They tried, blandly, to retell the story in which my mother was cursed, followed by the story in which I, as queen, gave my decree. It's funny how, once my mother stopped talking, our everyday started to read like stories.

Have you heard someone talk about *frog-tongue* before, the docent asked.

I nodded my head, remembering the man from a long time ago.

We then listened, for a very long time, as the docent talked about *frog-tongue* like it was hieroglyphics: ancient and forever respected.

We stayed there for a little while longer, taking pictures. I tried to remember the shape of the land. Its many inhabitants, the sounds they made. I tried to remember how the air tasted: like cows, my mother informed me by signing, and their many wastes. I managed to catch one frog, and I wondered, aloud, how many greats it was my mother's grandchild. How many *greats* I was its aunt.

After that trip, we took down the signs my mother had handwritten—*The Cookie Cabin is currently closed, as we are finally making our first attempt at seeing the world.*—and waited for customers to return. On the first few days, we sold only a few cookies, and then, one afternoon, there was a single woman who bought two dozen cookies. I watched her carry them out to the road. When I followed, I saw that she had brought them to the rest of her group.

“Why just you?” I asked.

“We weren't sure what to expect, and we didn't want to intrude too much,” the woman said. “I drew the shortest straw.”

“Let me show you,” I said, and like a docent I led this group around our property. The pond where the frogs made more of themselves, the gravestones where others went quiet. I showed them the chicken coop where we keep our lovely eggmakers. Oh, yes, we had chickens all this time.

I showed them the ovens, the cabinets where we keep our flour, our sugar, our vanilla extract, a vat of shortening. I showed them our dining room, our pink-tiled bathroom from another era, the television where we once watched the Prime Minister of Everyone pronounce my mother's name. They all found space to sit in the living room, all two dozen of them, among the one sofa and two chairs. In time, my mother emerged from her bedroom, stood in the threshold looking down on two dozen-and-one people sitting inside of one small room. All the people gave her full cookie-wide smiles.

She motioned toward the kitchen, and we all followed. My mother gave them each a wedge of dough and taught them to knead. They clucked to each other happily at the dream of being a part of my mother's story.

As I kneaded, I wondered why my shoulders had never muscled-up to make stretching gluten any easier. Why this particular work hadn't gotten easier. Why I

had still not fully grown into this cursed life of mine. The sound of our guests screaming and hurling their bodies onto elevated surfaces clued me into the venomous snake that thrilled its red-yellow-black warning between my feet.

I dizzied and toppled and fell forward, landed facefirst into a pile of dough wide as ten cookies. I turned into a storm of flour. My mother did everything she could to keep her laughter silent, and still the snake slithered into her arms, remembering the tattoo of her heart. She wagged her fingers at me, crying and hiding her smile, and I thought: What evil do I have to do to be cursed with such a gift? Where is my thirsty woman, my fairy in disguise?

Silently, my mother began showing our visitors how to form cookies from the dough we had made, using a dinner plate as her guide. I reached up and picked at a thin roll of dough that had formed between the flour and tears on my mother's face. I put it into my mouth, held it with my tongue, tasted sweet, and then salt, and then something else. Someone jokingly referred to me as *my queen* as they handed me more dough. The room was me and her and them and the sounds of me and the sounds of them, this odd metropolis elbow-to-elbow in a space much too small, all coated in the ghost of tomorrow's joy.