

I know you are brave: you of the many faces and the one; you who have crossed mountains and seas in the search that always follows the bite.

Your story is ready now: steeped in brine and dried upon stones, its many parts sung together again for you.

Hear it like wolves calling down the moon, like waves caressing a ship on a fine day. See it like a table repaired, each leg guided back into its joint and a place set for all.

Believe in a sacred place that's yours, waiting to receive all that you have set out to become.

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ONE AFTERNOON, JUST OUTSIDE A VILLAGE QUITE LIKE THIS, a child was swallowed whole by a serpent. The young girl's parents were unaware, mere paces from where she played, of what slid through their budding orchard. While her father stacked wood near the barn and while her mother kneaded dough in the kitchen, the unthinkable happened to their only child.

The snake, enormous and black, had been roused from a deep, century-old slumber. It woke to the tremor of silver charms sewn into the hem of the little girl's dress and nosed up, up, up through a crevice, urged by a terrible hunger to eat that song. It curled against a sunbaked stone in the orchard, and waited. Still as a fallen tree, the serpent watched. Tiny, twin reflections of the child hovered on the polished night of those eyes.

Of course, the child had been warned about many dangers in the woods. By the time she was seven, her father had schooled her on snares and how to read the land. Her mother gathered wild herbs and showed her which caused illness, which cured them, and how often the two grew side by side. At school, the teachers taught that wolves were for shooting and never to speak to hunters she didn't know.

But no one discussed great serpents. No one had ever seen anything more than a rat snake lolling in the barn or a corn snake in the orchard, its pattern so ornate, it may have been mistaken for a discarded bracelet; snakes so harmless, even horses ignored them. No one worried about big snakes here. They lived far away, in godless,

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forbidden places; in unforgiving deserts or alien swamps. Anywhere but here.

Squatting with her dress pinched between her knees, the little girl sang. She wasn't particularly gifted but she kept a tune and breathed her music in that faraway voice a child has when she thinks she's all alone. She swept her long, dark hair behind her ears and drew shapes in the dirt as the serpent, still as a slab of granite half-buried in the earth, watched.

Balanced on her heels, she kept her dusty fingers far from her hem. Her mother had made the dress for tomorrow's spring festival—when all the children her age walked from church to a bandstand and a feast in the town square. The dress was adorned with tiny silver bells her father had scored and looped on his workbench, making extra so his horses also jingled with each step.

The girl badgered her mother for days to let her wear that dress, touching the little rosewood box that stored baker's yeast. A pattern of roses and thorns curled around the lid.

'Not yet,' was the answer, the scent of rosemary drifted from a chopping board. Fat, braided loaves cooled all over the kitchen.

'Aww, Mama.' Then, 'Is this really magic?' The girl opened the rosewood box and poked the cotton sack inside it.

'Makes dough rise like the sun,' her mother said, sifting. 'Always, anywhere.'

'Anywhere?'

'Yes. It's very old. It never dies. Your great-grandmother said we will never run out.'

'Can it make dough rise in a wind?'

'Mm-hm.' Her mother poured flour in a great circle.

'On a boat?'

'Mm-hm.'

'Can I please wear the dress now?'

'No.'

In her room, the girl slipped into the dress.

As her mother pulled loaves from the oven, the girl appeared. 'It's so beautiful, Mama!' A tinkle of footfalls: outside, swallows answered.

'Oh, all right.' Her mother smiled. 'But keep it spotless and don't let me catch you hanging from a tree.'

‘I promise.’

‘Gimmie kiss.’ Her mother bent to offer a cheek and the child planted a wet kiss.

The woman touched her face. ‘Is it sparkling?’

‘It’s sparkling,’ her daughter laughed in spinning turns. ‘My dress is sparkling too!’

So through the trees, where apple blossoms hung in clutches of white, the girl heard her father stacking wood and her mother clapping flour from her hands. She drew in the soil with her fingers—a man with a cap, a woman with hair to her feet, a barking dog, a leaping horse, a ship like the one on the postcard her father tacked to a beam in the barn. The sun warmed her hair and the birds sang and she was thinking that of all the seasons, she loved spring the most.

But, in the orchard, when the birds fell silent, the girl’s song ceased. A dank scent swept across the ground. Stillness unfolded as a great shadow rose, obscuring the sun. She looked up into a face of terrible symmetry, its eyes inhaling the light from all around them.

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

She opened her mouth and felt her breath pulled from her like a fine thread spun and stolen from her lips. Her arms went numb as her fingers held star-points in the soil. The hem of her dress slid into the dirt.

She could not move. She stared into lacquer and saw twin selves reflected in those eyes, insects adrift in dark liquor.

Then, a stroke of lightning!

The snake lashed once, knocking her sideways. Her chest flooded with heat. Her heart scrambled: so fast, it felt slow; so hard, it churned into liquid. Flames spread, searing everything. Dust swarmed her mouth, speckled her eyes. Her breath startled the air in thin washes. Askew on the ground, she no longer saw the serpent but felt its cold heat. The sky shimmered—light on oil. A light rain surprised her.

In a moment, the beast seized her. It looped her expertly in its coils and swallowed her whole.

Very much alive, the girl drifted and watched as if from some distance. Sometimes she peered from behind one of the apple trees at this thing, as it happened to someone else. Then a curtain parted and pain speared her again.

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She waited for it to be over.
A rippling blackness enclosed her.
A warm stasis followed.
She was gone.
And back for a stammering heartbeat.
And gone once again.

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Rushing water woke her.
The child's cheeks were wet. Water poured. She coughed.
Assessing her condition, she was in the dark and pulled along by this darkness as if carried by some mean current.

Then, a heave of memory.

She realized she was curled up inside the snake, her dress clinging about her, silver bells stabbing her face. She tried to right herself but her body was limp, swept up in a tide turning against its own private moon.

She could not move, could not weep: the darkness absolute.

She wondered: *Do the dead think they're dead?*

God save me! she cried.

Nothing.

This close, sticky dark held her taut as wet rope.

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A shudder.

She gasped.

Her parents. She heard them. She heard horses. Bells sang on a bridle. She heard the engine of a truck. She imagined flour on her mother's apron; sawdust on her father's sleeves. She strained to turn her head, an exhausting effort. Her torso was in flames.

She heard them again: her father, angry; her mother, frantic.

Their voices drew closer, coupled with another sound she hadn't noticed before.

Tha-dump.

It confused her.

Tha-dump.