

## Shapeshifters

The doctor was writing a long-delayed letter when she heard the commotion from the rear of the cabin, the sound of people trying hard to be quiet but failing badly, and she thought simply, *Another distraction*. She could feel the cold sweeping across the floor and over her feet, even through the door, closed with the double click of the jam and the heavy iron latch. With more than a bit of disgust she decided to finish her half-completed thought across the middle of the page: an observation about the weather and her own tendency to mirror it, as if she were merely an extension of the difficult season.

How bored she had grown of treating every alcoholic shake, every fist fight's aftermath. Sick of confession without any desire for absolution. She had come from the Salvation Army in Skagway and journeyed north to the Yukon Territory. Everybody in this place had an interesting story to tell and many reasons for not telling it. And yet roll up their sleeves to inspect an open sore, and they'd spill it all with pride, the drunken quarrels, poor business deals, the petty and not so petty crimes. In the absence of priests any learned person would do and a doctor might serve better, especially one with a frail voice and sensitive hands, a person who kept to herself in the priestly way. Sometimes men showed her long-ago injuries—missing fingers, bones healed badly. A man with burns on his face told her he was the only one of a dozen to survive and he was grateful except on certain days when he missed the camaraderie of his friends.

She did not care if they paid up front but she insisted they call her "sir" and not mock her habit of dress. If they had no money then food would be fine, and if no food there was wood to be split in the back. *I am somber in these winter days*. That was her thought, a pedestrian one if ever one existed, but she completed it across the page in neat script and anointed it with a period. What she had wanted to write was, *For a place with such fullness—caribou blotting out a hillside, the sea of white birch—there is an*

*empty space here, one that begs to be read even though it is blank, as if it contains the solution to a mystery. Or, I am sorry for our separation, dearest, but what can be done? Trust me when I say that nothing can be done.* Standing up from the table meant losing all of that. She knew it would return but not in that exact form and not necessarily for days after. But possibly it was best for Theresa to be spared all that, best for both of them.

She barked out to the noise at the back of the cabin, “Hold on now. No need to tear down the place.” She buttoned her shirt and thought of a new line for the letter. *So many have found fault with me and it is best to live alone so that the only enemy will be myself.*

Voices then, musical, and she recognized the speech of the two Nantuck brothers from up on the mountain. She had treated them on several occasions, once for a bad sty and once for a beating from their father, Arie Nantuck, a drunkard who liked to boast that he had been a cowboy in northern Missouri and met both Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill. “Here he comes,” someone whispered from beyond the door.

The sound of the masculine pronoun pleased her.

When she opened the door, she first noticed the youngest, a boy of no more than five who looked past her with such intensity that she wanted to ask him what he saw. There were five children, holding hands as if standing in a storm in the dark of night, a chain ordered from smallest to largest. She wanted to tell them that they were safe, nobody would be getting lost here. Each face was painted with flour paste, and she wondered if they had been playing at some kind of masquerade up there on the mountain, a play or performance. Each small nose tipped with ash, but their expressions solemn.

“There’s been some trouble, sir,” the oldest said. He could not have been more than twelve and he wore some kind of cap on his head, ornamental in design and as bright red as anything she’d seen in weeks.

“It’s our mother,” the girl said.

The youngest made a sound of agreement.

The doctor remembered the mother, a Tlingit woman with that youngest boy's same stare and deep Rubeola scars along her forehead. She had spoken to her once but couldn't remember the nature of the thing. She imagined her now as the victim of some brutality, a body in a dark room. She asked the children, "Has someone been hurt? Has one of you been hurt?"

"Please sir," the oldest said.

The children looked to each other. Evidently they had nothing else to say. They'd come down the mountain through snow and ice, but this last step, passing along these words, seemed the most difficult thing. She said, "Very well. We can go. But take this," and she passed around salmon bark to each of them. They all looked to the oldest, who nodded, and then they began to eat.

As she found her boots drying on their sides by the potbelly stove she thought of one more line and cradled it in her mind. *If you were here we could share this melancholy together, and you'd find that it's actually quite pleasant, and a better cure than marriage.*

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She chose five of the dogs and dragged them one at a time to the sled. They had not run in more than a week and they were overflowing with desire. She reached for Charlotte, the lead dog, who went calm when the doctor's hand touched her head.

"Not that one," the oldest boy said.

"She's the best of them," the doctor said. Without looking at the boy, she continued fastening each dog to the sled, speaking each name as a litany. The dogs she had not chosen were barking in desperate excitement and the ones she had chosen were jumping and pacing and breathing ice.

"I'm not insulting her," he said. "I just don't think you should take her with us.

But she ignored his words, and he said nothing else about the matter. They progressed out through the legion of snow-heavy trees. This was familiar terrain, land that she loved, and as her heart filled with her own goodwill she was aware of a quick turning away, at least for a moment, from her

thoughts of Theresa. But of course in this awareness Theresa returned to her again, as quickly as she had left.

The youngest boy was still eating his salmon, his sister holding him steady. It was four miles to the ridge and she wondered then if she should have inspected the children for frostbite. Fifty toes and fifty fingers and she could not convince herself that all of them had gone unscathed. The upper curve of the ear, what she considered one of the most beautiful parts of the human body, was also one of its most sensitive and that too needed scrutiny. But they were moving now and it would have to wait.

They reached the edge of the trees and emerged into the open field where last spring, when first arriving here, she had settled down into the damp wildflowers and sprawled to look at the sky. The field had become a flat plane of ice with trees about half a mile in the distance and then a slow rise to the first plateau. The winter made the land seem burned and open, but of course it was all temporary.

“See,” she shouted above the sound of the runners. “There’s never been a better lead.” But the boy would not respond.

Theresa could not be persuaded either, but that would not stop the doctor from recording the nature of her thoughts and sending them to San Francisco. *We are beyond friendship. We are beyond the rules of law and possibly nature and you can choose to live an easy life with that dull man, that is your right, but it’s mine to remind you.*

But remind her of what? That once in a rented room they had lain together and the sunshine around the edges of the drapes had formed an attractive pattern across the carpet and for that short time everything had made sense.

Up ahead the dogs were not doing well and it was only the second mile. It was Charlotte; she was the problem. She lifted one of her front paws and half skipped on the trail.

They stopped and the doctor knelt to find the foot uninjured, but when they started again the dog immediately fell into her strange dance. Could the foot be broken? The dogs circled around and the children did too. The doctor nursed the foot with her thumb and it seemed fine, but she couldn’t be sure. They’d have to bring the dog to the basket, but they were already six there, which meant the doctor would

have to trot the rest of the way, just behind, holding the reins. She picked the dog up and carried it across the snow, her boots crunching through the hard surface, and said to the oldest boy, “You’re going to have to hold her steady,” which he did, gently, a hand on her collar and his legs parted to cradle her length. The oldest girl stroked Charlotte’s scruff. “So you were right,” the doctor said. “How were you right?”

The boy said, “I just had a thought. That’s all.”

She checked the feet of the other dogs and reconfigured them, and when she returned to the sled the boy had taken the hat from his head and placed it on the dog, who accepted the indignity with a dog’s grace. Charlotte seemed so at peace that for a moment the doctor considered hitching her up again, but that would have been cruel to the dog and cruel to the woman waiting for them. She had to keep reminding herself the mother might be in pain, most likely from a drunken beating, and what little light the day had given them would soon withdraw.

They lurched into motion again across the white expanse and she felt the thrumming of her breath in her head as she ran alongside the sled. The four dogs worked harder and she was proud of them and proud of herself for having strong legs and a strong heart. She was only thirty-three and she was proud of most of the things in her head, her knowledge of the body she occupied. There was no place for a person like her in San Francisco, but in Skagway she had thought she could recast herself. The Salvation Army had needed doctors badly, after all, but eventually they too had spat her out because she did not believe in God and she did not believe in romance in the way God constructed it. And what was especially not right about it was that it was easier for two men to do it in secret, or at least that’s the way it seemed to her from the outside. In the mission there had been some of that, glances between men she knew meant more.

Lying Theresa. First one thing and then another. Theresa who tucked her hair behind her ear whenever she laughed. Theresa who did not belong in this cold place, except that maybe she did. The memory of her had become a slippery fish. Lord, she was fed up with trying to hold the pretty wriggling thing. She wanted to drop it along the way except that would be like throwing away nourishment, wouldn’t it?

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Just as they reached the next stretch of trees the new lead dog began to skip and then hop. The others grew confused and irritated by its hesitation. She was winded anyway and they stopped again. The world had gone dark except for the slightest yellow haze covering everything, including her hands as she untied the rig. Her fingers ached but she forced them to move.

“There’s that one too,” the boy said.

The same paw even. She moved it up and down like a lever. “I’m not sure what to do,” she said. She spoke to the dog as much as the children, but none seemed to understand. The dogs had become part of the game too, even Charlotte, and it made her feel like the one standing outside the circle. Perhaps she had always felt that way.

“I’ll hold her,” the girl said, and she picked the dog up gingerly and carried it up close to her chest. A difficult bundle, but it was the runt of the litter and manageable even for someone her age. It wanted to be held and went limp in her arms like a tired child.

“These dogs aren’t no dogs,” the boy said. He motioned to the five-year-old with a slight nod of his chin. “My brother is a fox. And these dogs aren’t what they seem to be.”

They were playing with her. Their mother might be dying and they were continuing whatever game of pretend they had started on the mountain. Except the world seemed to be playing along. How else to explain the strange alignment of coincidence? Even her past suddenly arranged on that axis: God playing at existence, Theresa pretending so well she convinced herself for a little while.

The doctor said, “I don’t believe in God. The one I was raised to believe in. So don’t be insulted when I say I don’t believe you either. Spirits. Whatever you want to call them.” She waved her hand as if shooing it all away.

“The names for things don’t matter much,” the boy said.

“We need to go,” she said, turning back to survey the sled. In the girl’s lap, the injured dog raised its front paw in a dainty motion that reminded the doctor of her mother holding a teacup and looking out the window, describing the day as *luminous* or *golden* or *full of great promise*.

Her family had given two brothers to the war, and as she pushed through her books she began to wear the clothes they had left behind: heavy coats, button shirts, loose-fitting pants. She had never been one to move quietly through a house but now she cultivated a strong footstep and a louder voice. She liked to look her father square in the eye and say something like, "You're wrong on that count."

The men with the worst of the facial injuries sometimes wore masks to cover the deformities. They reminded her of a costume one might wear to a masquerade. The insufficiency of this was comedic. Possibly her first step in wanting to be a man was feeling sorry for them, although she sometimes remembered names she had given herself as a child, masculine names like Grant or Howard, the names of presidents. She winced when her mother called her by her given name. Finally she cut her hair short and told her father that he might as well lose the last of his children. Her mother she felt horribly for, but what was there to say?

Perhaps once she completed the letter to Theresa she would write another and send it back east to her family, but the one to Theresa had taken weeks of difficult labor already and was not close to being finished. Pages had been torn up and others scratched out. Much of it passed through her mind like a muddy creek. And it was getting more complicated the further she moved up the mountain. How could she tell Theresa any of this?

"Sir," the boy said. "Is this the right way?"

"Of course," she said. "Look. There. There's your home."

She pointed toward what they called the mountain. It was more of a hill but with the foreboding attitude of a mountain, all craggy and misshapen. A few lived there. The lesson in that? There was always some more remote place to hide oneself. She let her voice crack out through the permafrost-stunted trees and the dogs dug in harder, three good dogs, but still only three, and she leapt from the sled again to give them some relief. She could turn and see her own place across the valley now, modest, with a plume of smoke still rising from the chimney. The letter on the desk. The fire would be dead by the time she returned, the letter a foreign thing. Possibly she'd have to start over. Was there still a chance for them and

how could kind words bring such a thing about? Entertaining the possibility made her want to spit against the rocks.

Harder work now through snow thrown up in odd shapes, rocks, trees shattered and uprooted. She pushed and the dogs pulled. Now the sled was moving downward and she held to the runner, breathing hard. Yet another lead dog began to limp. It settled down into the snow as if to sleep and didn't even look in the direction of her voice. She pushed to the front and yelled at the dogs and grabbed one by its harness and sought to drag the lot of them by sheer force of will. It might have been easier for her to continue on alone but that meant leaving the sled and dogs and the children. She had a feeling the children could take care of themselves, even the youngest, but the dogs were dear to her, especially Charlotte.

She asked the oldest boy, "If it's not a dog then why do you stroke it like a dog? Why are you holding it like a dog?"

"I'm not," he said. "I'm stroking it like you should stroke a crying person. And I'm holding it like you should hold a child."

"What ails her?" she asked.

"You saw yourself," the boy said.

"Your mother, I mean," she said.

"I think she would want to explain in person," the boy said, and she realized then, looking from the boy to the dog on his lap, that, yes, the black mark on his nose was supposed to be a dog's nose. His face was as white as a husky. And the tips of his fingers were dotted with black, possibly coal, to make them look like the pads of a dog. For a moment he seemed ready to say something else but he pushed his fists against his coat and turned away to review the others.

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The camp consisted of two buildings on opposite ends of a snow- blasted field, the smaller obviously in disuse, its roof splintered as if something had fallen through it. The filthiest chickens she had ever seen moved around the building and each one seemed to radiate a false pride that repelled her as they marched



in circles, chests pushed out. She traced a line across the trees to find their coop at the edge of the forest. It was cracked open, obviously recently, for otherwise the chickens would be frozen tight as stones, dead, and not prideful at all.

She held the smallest child and the smallest dog, the child on her shoulders with his hands on her head, the dog in her arms. Each other child held a dog by the collar. The sled remained a good mile back, and she'd have to get it in the morning because her legs were weak. "Is this your home?" she asked the boy on her shoulders.

"You don't believe in God," he said, "but you will believe in us."

"Even if I didn't, your weight on my back would convince me," she said, "and I said I didn't believe your brother. Of course I believe in you. The fact of you."

But some small doubt remained.

She went to the larger of the buildings. It wasn't inviting but was at least whole and warm. When she came around the corner she saw the door open. All the heat had been sucked out. Snow had even blown into the rooms. "Is this your home?" she asked again, with more irritation.

"No," the boy on her back said, although for a moment, in her tiredness, it seemed as if it was the dog who answered her. "Not no more," he said. "Where is my mother? My legs are gone on me. It's just my upper part I feel."

She saw the body on its stomach at the far end of the cabin, its legs covered in a snow drift and one hand holding a skillet. She could not see the face but it was surely Arie Nantuck, who was probably as stone-solid as the chickens would be soon. He had shared their mindless confidence too. He wore expensive deerskin boots with embellished trim. One poked out of the snow. She turned from him with the boy above her and said, "Nothing to see."

"I already seen it," the boy said. "Now and yesterday too."

The others had come up around the house holding the dogs and they all stood there waiting for her to do something.

“I can’t bring him back,” she said.

She didn’t know what made her say that, but immediately she felt like a fool. The oldest laughed in a way that made her embarrassment double. The one on her shoulders had begun to stroke her cheek with his mittened hand, and she wondered if that was what he had been staring at all along, all the way back there at the cabin: the sight of his father face down on the floor. She reached up and disentangled the boy and then went to look at the body. He was frozen hard to the floorboards and she couldn’t even extricate the pan from his grip. She said, “There’s no helping your father. We should think about helping ourselves now.”

“It’s momma who needs the help,” one of the girls said.

“If what I believe is true then your mother is going to jail,” the doctor said. “Beatings or no, you can’t just shoot a person.” Because she noticed now that it was the blood from the chest that had frozen the body to the floor. The man’s shirt and jacket were expensive too, most likely purchased in Anchorage in a fit of extravagance.

She felt no disgust, just caution. At the mission she had worked on the hardest cases: broken bones emerging from the skin, a rib cage crushed by a rockslide, feet blackened by cold and needing the mercy of clean amputation. She kept her hair short and spoke in short, curt sentences. The other men seemed more than happy to let her care for those shattered people but not so pleased when she cursed or threw instruments. She tried to speak to the oldest boy in a voice flattened by her own measured will. “You need to start telling me everything you’ve kept from me now. Who did this to your father?”

“Sir,” he said, and this time she detected just a bit of mockery in the word. “Our mother did it but she had reasons.”

“I’m not doubting that,” she said. “I know your father’s reputation.”

The youngest boy had sat down in the snow.

“Stand up!” she barked. “Get some wood together and light a fire,” she told the lot of them.

“We’re spending the night here.”

“Do as he tells you,” a new voice said. “Don’t be rude.”

She turned. The mother stood in the threshold with a rifle, but she held it all wrong, butt down, as if she might lift and fire from the wrong end. Her chin was painted black and a ring of beads and thorns circled her head, but she wore a military parka unbuttoned at the chest, below that a white undershirt.

She remembered her more clearly now. They had spoken once in town, very briefly, about Governor George Alexander Parks, who had visited a few weeks before on his tour of the Yukon Territory and made a speech to a crowd of a few hundred. The woman said he was a great man and he would do great things for the Tlingit people. When he spoke to a crowd he had a way of making it seem like he was speaking to you and you alone, that he had a cure for your specific problem. She had said she had almost shaken his hand, but he glanced away and found someone else in the throng. She had almost shaken the governor’s hand and now here she was: she had killed her husband with a shot through his chest.

The doctor glanced around at the little ones and she looked to be counting them, making sure each one was present and accounted for before looking up past them to the threshold, the body beyond that. “You’re a good man,” the woman said, “to come all this way and bring them all safe back to me. I’ve been shot too. I shot myself.” “I see,” the doctor said and she wondered if she should just reach out and take the gun. The dogs, she realized, with a rush of blood to her head, were off killing the chickens. Let them have them, she decided.

The oldest boy and the oldest girl were picking up kindling. The woman took the sticks and said, “That’s good. That’s enough. Now me and this good gentleman need to talk. Why don’t you go off to the back room and finish your play. We’ll light the fire. Don’t worry at all. Everything is going to be fine. Remember to speak loud so the trees can hear you.”

The letter had been too small a vessel already, and now, how could it contain all of this? They sat across from each other with the fire going in the stove and the floor had turned wet and the doctor knew she should touch the body, turn it over and see, but that other body, the woman across from her, held her like a counterweight, the two a perfect balance. The voices came from the next room, sometimes words and sometimes pretend barking, howling, the sounds of hunting and fighting.

“You shot yourself in the neck,” she said.

“I was aiming for the head,” the woman said.

No gesture needed to be made toward the man on the floor. “Should I look at the wound?” the doctor asked.

“It’s nothing,” the woman said. “My hands were shaking bad. I hardly scratched myself.” She seemed ready to sleep. Her head occasionally nodded forward and back as if in agreement to a question that had not been asked. And yet her confidence—the siren quality to her story—called the doctor deeper. She considered those other stories, the otter spirits appearing at the edge of the forest and asking for help, calling you inside, telling you, *Come with me*.

“Are you a Kushtaka?” the doctor said.

Of all the questions she could have asked, to ask that one. Her own words perplexed her.

The woman was silent for a moment. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” she said. “It’s not him kicking me around. That I handled pretty well. He was gone a lot of the time anyway and my father had done the same. You just have to brace yourself for it. But those boots and that shirt. That money could have been spent on fishing gear, a new roof, anything but what he did spend it on. You understand?”

In the other room where the children played, salmon hung from ropes criss-crossed at the ceiling. The doctor watched the children from where she sat. The oldest held the youngest up on his shoulders, just as she had done, and they walked like a single beast with four arms. The others curled back, retreated, surged forward again.

The woman said, “Let me tell you, mister. We had a way of talking. He’d knock me down and then he’d say, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I did that. Why did you make me do such a nasty thing in front of our children?”

Theresa with hair so long it touched her tailbone and if you said, *You are beautiful*, she glared at you as if you called her ugly. Theresa feeding her oranges she could still almost taste. The decadence of such a thing. The decadence of her pain too. The luxury disgusted her.

“Enough,” the doctor said. “Stop.”

And she stopped, although her head started up with its ever so slight yes, yes, yes motion again.

“You asked if I was a Kushtaka,” she finally said. “Not when I killed him. Then I was just a woman. But now, yes, now I believe I am.” She looked herself over, her chest, the slope of her big body, her squat thighs and feet. “I think you are one too, mister. And if you are one then you must be here to trick me.”

“I’m not here to trick you,” the doctor said. “I’m here to help.”

Except that was just what a Kushtaka would say as it whispered to you from behind your locked door, speaking in the friendliest of voices. She had heard about them from the oldest of the old-timers: spirits who appeared with a smile and an offer of assistance. *Come with me*, they’d tell you, *I want to show you something*. Sometimes they wore the skin of people you knew, people you trusted, until you found yourself in the middle of nowhere and then the skin would peel back, the mouth open into jaws.

“I don’t know. There’s something about you,” the woman said.

“There is nothing about me,” the doctor said. She wasn’t sure what she meant but it seemed the exact right thing to say. The woman still held her rifle and the doctor inched forward, put her hand around the barrel, and guided it out of her grasp. In the other room one of the children said, “We need somebody to be raven. Who wants to be raven?”

A chorus of voices emanated from the next room: *me, me, me*. “So what now?” the woman said. “One Kushtaka to another?” “Women’s prison for you,” the doctor said. “An orphanage for your children. For me, I don’t know. Life as normal.”

“Don’t you want them?” the woman asked. “Each one is perfect. You opened your door to them.”

The doctor made a noise of disbelief, a throaty grunt that was as close to a laugh as she could come with a dead man on the floor.

The woman leaned in. “When did you become a man?”

She would not answer that. She thought of herself heading out into the woods and returning, crossing back into the world of people. In the other room the children were barking again, all but the youngest, who made a high-pitched keening wail. He was the bird, soaring above their jealous heads. His lamp-lit shadow stretched across the wall, two arms extended and moving as wings and he stretched upward and the shadow bent where the wall met the ceiling and then continued on its way. On the ground the others made noises of amazement but the doctor couldn't see what they saw, what they pretended to see.

"Where's my gun?" the woman asked.

"I have it now," the doctor said. "I'm sorry." She held it up for scrutiny, the length of it in both hands.

The great bird danced across the far wall and then back again as a clock keeps time, moving in a circle but also always forward. The children were chasing it now, or following it in a slow parade, lifting their legs and shaking their fists. Something important was happening but she didn't know what or why except that it was full of great solemnity and it seemed to be only beginning.

She finished the letter in her own way, by reducing it to a single page, throwing out the rest the way she might splash dishwater out behind the cabin.

The men came to her still, occasionally, with gashes across their foreheads, tales of betrayal and bad deals bursting out before they had even taken a seat and continuing in one long story told by many in a chain that linked them and weighed them down. They sat wide-legged and described the stupidity of the dead and boasted about their own survival, their own gumption and shrewdness and yes, their luck. They had to travel further now because she lived on the mountain, but they didn't seem to mind. The challenge of it buoyed their stories, made them true.

The doctor did not tell them about the Kushtaka, the shapeshifter who took your soul but sometimes, very occasionally, performed some kindness for you too, a small token, the saving of a life or the gift of a pretty stone at your feet while you slept. Possibly to keep you guessing, to hurt you more the next time, or maybe because it had taken a fickle liking to you. She did not believe it, of course, she was an

educated person, but in the end anything was possible, at least here in a place still unclaimed by reason. She watched the world with an eye to putting it down on the page. And letters came back to her, from the women's prison in Anchorage, asking about the children, the homestead—all the normal questions that might be asked between a husband and wife if one were on a long journey, the other at home.

The dogs barked whenever one of the wounded came calling and sometimes the children joined it and made the most magnificent noise.