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She

“On a planet where for thousands of years, even today, a woman's worth has been judged exclusively by the productivity of her womb, what the hell is the point of a barren woman?”

— Elissa Stein and Susan Kim

She awoke to the smell of fresh mango. And light. Yes, light everywhere as if the walls of her bedroom had been torn off completely and she inhabited the sun. The air, lily white and velvet and cool tickled her from her ankles to her lungs. She could not help thinking to herself, eyes still shut, that this was to be a wonderful birthday. Not just of her own, she shared it with several other girls in school. She wondered if any of them had bled yet, for She hadn't, and She had begun to think she might not. Not ever. Today was her last chance. She let the thought settle in her stomach, which She realized might always be as empty as it was in that very moment. She swelled at the cheeks and flared her nostrils wide, welcoming the aroma of perspiration and ripe fruit. A smile crept across her face, tainted only by the uncertainty of sixteen.

This generation of bleeders is going to be a good one, She thought. No chubs in this bunch, no, and hardly any bonies either. “Healthy as horses” said the school teacher, a man with five daughters, two of them bleeders. She pictured their faces while She combed through ruby strands of her slipshod hair. Pretty girls, both of them. And so lucky, to bleed. They went away to The City last year but their pictures were still featured in the books they read in school. She wondered about them often. *How many men had loved them? How many had each of them produced? Four? Five?* She envied them. She tucked her face into the neck of her nightgown so as to sneak a better peek at her own lithe middle. She'd always thought her belly too small.

Sometimes, when She had eaten too many slices of bread, it would bloat a little and She could use her abdominal muscles to make it stick out. *Much better*, She'd think, *much prettier that way*. She tried it then, but on an empty stomach her gut appeared more concave than convex. Like a turtle, She emerged from the secret spot beneath her shirt and decided to try again after a breakfast of biscuits and mangoes.

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She did not notice the bleeding at first. There had been no warning signs, no indicators that it was coming. She'd been too busy hoping, as had the others, to feel the warmth of the blood on her freckled legs. A girl with mousy hair and a fragile frame who sat next to her in her food service class had seen it first.

"I think it's going to happen today," She had overheard them all chirping, "I can feel it," and She began to doubt herself even more. Until-

"Look!" the bone thin girl's voice beside her cut through that of the instructor, and the room was still. All had paused at the sight of scarlet running down the side of her thigh. A drop of crimson fell to the white linoleum underneath her seat. Almost instantaneously, a storm of congratulations replaced the silence and, overcome with elation, She began to weep.

The school teacher applauded and knelt down beside her trembling legs. With the edge of a crisp white sleeve he pressed lightly on the stream of blood- it had made it's way down to her knee- and let it stain his cuff red.

"What an honor to be able to bleed."

"Yes. An honor." She said. His hand lingered.

"Most girls never do, you know. Down to fifteen percent." The man's sleeve was soaked in her blood, and by his quickened breath She could tell she had become something quite new.

“Get up,” the man spat at her. “They’ll want you on a train immediately.”

The chub who sat behind her shot back a reassuring, cherry-cheeked smile.

“It’ll be wonderful. The closest you can ever come to magic, that’s what the books all say.”

The bony girl who had seen first could not mask her jealousy. She smiled and extended a skeletal hand in congratulations. “They’ll love you in The City. So many will love you.”

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She sat straighter on the train. Everything was steel and the cabin felt overwhelmingly cold to her. Not like the air in her bedroom, no, this air was a still, frigid, foreign sort of cold. The corset around her waist kept her spine at ninety degrees and, though She couldn’t see them through the net veil over her eyes, She could smell the garlands of pungent daisies that bound her wrists together. There were no windows, none could see how beautiful She was sure She looked. Not even She could see, for there were no mirrors there either. But by the way the conductor and his men spoke to her She knew for certain that She looked like a blushing bride. “Woman,” that’s what the conductor had called her. Not a girl anymore. She’d only dreamt of this.

The train had been moving at a steady pace for what might have been hours or days or seconds, She wasn’t quite sure. She only noticed it slowing down by the way her body lurched forward ever so slightly in her seat. She had arrived. The City was so close, so close she could hear the hustle and bustle of it. It sounded mechanical, and in the distance there seemed to be the dull thud of a thousand metronomes... marching, maybe? A parade? *What could it be?* She wondered, *What will it all look like?*

Two pairs of burly hands took hold of each arm and lead her through what felt to her like a long, steel cabin. The hem of her ceremonial gown had been sewn to perfection and,

despite her worries that She might trip, She floated like a blind queen down the metal corridor to a sliding door made of thick, foggy glass. Behind the barrier, She heard the muffled voices of men and women. *Celebrating my arrival, of course*, She assumed, but something about the undecipherable voices felt less than celebratory *What could it be?*

The glass slid open and a burst of muggy wind swallowed her body. She saw nothing through the veil, but could hear perfectly. She stood in the doorframe of the train and listened. The muffled noises became crystalline clear. The men barked and snarled, their calls nearly indistinguishable from those of rapacious wolves. The only indication that they were at all human were their words,

“Come back here, beautiful.” they laughed. It was sport to them. “Don’t you want me to love you?”

She could hear the women the loudest.

They were not celebrating.

They were screaming.

The same two pairs of hands forced her out of the train and onto a hunting ground.