

Under the Skin

By Michelle West

The rain that fell in the city was the color of her eyes, clear and gray where it blanketed the traffic-strewn streets with the persistence of its fall.

The river that ran between roads, set into a valley that nestled between forked branches of highway, was swollen with April movement. She came out of that river, like the first shoots of spring, into air redolent with the speech of cars, strange and terrible and now, to her alone, ordinary-as ordinary as rain, as snow, as the movement of leaves in their season.

She had chosen her form, had slept in it, and now, awakened, she tested the air. And then, at last, she called forth a glimmer of power-power older than even the valley in which she stood-and fashioned for herself a seeming, a glamour, beneath which she might do her work.

For in this diminished time, work was all that was left her; she had no court, no politics, nothing but magic stripped of place, of any context which was not hers.

Hard, to learn the ways of trees. She remembered her youth, and their voices which were now so very muted. Harder, to learn the ways of squirrels, bears, foxes, of stags, for their speech traveled with them, died and was born again, was perturbed in all things by the short bursts of their life.

It was easy-she remembered it clearly-to learn the speech of man. Easy to think that she understood it, that creatures that barely lived longer than animals could be understood.

Had she but known.

"Janie, come downstairs now and take the garbage out! How many times do I have to tell you?"

About as many times, Jane thought, as she shut her book and rolled off the bed, as you say everything else. "I'm coming!"

"That's what you said fifteen minutes ago, young lady!"

Jane Thornton was not a stupid girl, so she didn't correct her mother. Instead, she swung the thin door wide, ran out into the hall, pivoted on the banister and practically sailed down the stairs, all in one continuous motion that ended with the wall in the vestibule. Her fingers left smudge marks.

Jane's mother was standing, arms folded, beside the microwave in the kitchen. "I don't know what's gotten into you lately," she said, as Jane lifted the two twist-tied garbage bags. "All you do anymore is sit up in your room doing God knows what."

She mumbled a "Yes, mother" under her breath and refused to meet her mother's eyes. They were dark, those eyes, where they'd once been bright. Jane couldn't remember the last time her mother had smiled, although a cynical grimace was pretty commonplace these days. Not much to be happy about, really.

It was probably her father's fault, and her father was, damn him anyway, quite happy in his new life with his lovely new wife and his bright new home. No room there for either Jane or her mother, although he called Jane regularly and had even sent an idiotic pink sweater for her last birthday.

On the other hand, it was hard not to understand his choice when her mother was

like this. She dragged the garbage to the can at the side of the house, and then, after stuffing the two bags into the can, headed down to the curb with it. As she trudged back up the walk to the house, it began to rain. Warm drops hit her upturned face as she studied the roiling clouds above without the slightest interest in shelter.

Rain.

Beneath it, a stirring. She finished her work and waited, thinking it odd to have traveled this far. She had no kin. And perhaps it was time, after all.

It wasn't that Jane didn't have friends; she had them. It was just the only two that she'd ever really given a damn about were now living in Arizona and Quebec. They wrote, and she wrote; after her father left, she wasn't allowed to make long distance calls anymore because it was too expensive. But it didn't matter. The letters had become few and far between, and she knew that Tracy and Corinne had gone on with their lives, meeting new people and learning to fit into the new places that had called them away.

Rain fell, unbroken; the air rumbled as if the skyscape of cloud were the victim of a quake; white light illuminated the sky above, and she tried to catch sight of the heavens in the fading afterimage.

It was hard to believe that at some time in the early 1900s Arundel Avenue and the streets that surrounded it were considered the very outskirts of the city. Now, buried beneath the network of parkettes and parking lots that paralleled the Danforth, the subway trains rumbled like living metal worms, and a mere fifteen minutes took you right to the heart of the city.

The trees that lined the streets here towered over the rooftops; they were huge old maples for the most part, and they had always been huge and old. Their roots were sunk well past people's basements, just as the leaves were well above their bedrooms; they twisted and broke old pipes as they grew, and every so often-in a storm like this-they dropped the heavy burden of their branches on the power lines.

Still, the city hadn't seen fit to cut them down or rid the neighborhood of them, and Jane walked beneath leaves which were lit on the underside by street lamps, and above by lightning's occasional flashes.

Where do you go when you have nowhere to go?

Some people went to cafes, and some to dance clubs; some to bars and some to parks, some to the islands in the harbor and some to bookstores along the Danforth others with cars went to stretches of empty wilderness where one could be alone by one's own choice and not the choice of everyone else around you. Alone, rather than lonely.

Jane Thornton had no car. She had a license, it was fairly recent, but her dad had taken the car because her mother lived close to a subway. And besides, really, her mother didn't have money for anything that was comfort: alcohol, food.

The city had wild patches, but no wilderness, no wildness.

Except in storms like this. Jane looked down and realized that the streets were empty; even the headlights of cars were gone. She closed her eyes and the rain hit her face. Thunder roared, and she roared back; the roar held no words, but then, words were not needed.

"Where were you?" Her mother's voice, slurred only a little. Later in the evening, it would probably be slurred a whole lot more, Jane gave it fifty-fifty. Her friends

wondered why she didn't drink. Well, they had; she didn't see much of them now.

She didn't bother to answer the question, but her mother didn't expect an answer by now; it wasn't so late that she'd been worried. "Your father called."

"So?"

"So call him back or he'll blame me for not delivering his message."

She mounted the stairs two at a time as the rain's momentary clarity was destroyed by her life.

"...anyway, Pat and I were wondering if you'd like to come over for Sunday dinner this week."

"No."

"Janie, I haven't seen you in almost six months."

"School's been keeping me busy."

"Which is why you're failing."

Mom told you that?

"My grades are none of your business," she said, biting back words, holding them in.

"You're still my daughter, Janie. Your grades are very much my business. Especially if you aren't listening to your mother." He fought the words back too, his temper and hers were not so different when they were angry. But he was older, better at it. "Janie, we'd really like to see you. I'd really like to see you."

She was angry at them both, and her anger was sudden, like the storm had been; the words in her throat were a rumble, and then a roar. "Dad, you just don't get it do you?" He didn't have the chance to reply. "I don't come to dinner because I can't stand the sight of Pat, or you for that matter."

"Janie, don't you-"

"Don't you tell me what to do! You lost that right when you lied to us, cheated on us, and took off on us!"

"If your mother-"

"My mother doesn't have anything to do with this! Do you think I'm too stupid to figure it out on my own? Where do you get off telling me I'm selfish or I'm spoiled? I didn't promise to love and honor Mom until death do us part, you did!"

Silence, then. Her hands were shaking as she pressed the receiver to her ear, to her lips. She was waiting for his anger to flood back along the wires that bound them together in this conversation.

But that wasn't what he offered her, smug bastard. He never gave her what she needed. "Janie, try to understand. Life with your mother wasn't ever very easy."

"And living with you was better?"

"No, probably not for her." His words were so calm and so measured; she hated them.

"Is that you speaking, Dad, or is that the fancy therapist you're seeing?"

Silence was better than patience, and he was silent for another thirty seconds. She counted them. Then, "When you fall in love for the first time, you'll understand it better. You've never been in love, Janie."

"You mean I've never been in lust," she snapped back. "And you're wrong. But at least I knew it for what it was."

"That's enough, Janie. You've never been with anyone that's as good for you, as

good to you, as Pat is to me."

"Is she? Is she really that good?"

She heard an intake of breath so sharp it made her smile. But then he said, "I'm sorry that we can't talk right now. I never meant to hurt either of you. I didn't do this to hurt you, and I hope one day you'll understand that. But I deserved that chance to be happy, and I won't listen to you cut down my wife."

He hung up before she could.

What about us, you bastard? What about our happiness?

She was strong, was Jane Thornton; she didn't even start to cry.

There was a resonance about anger and grief that had its own feel, stripped of words and expression and humanity. In the valley she had chosen for her awakening, she stirred, stood, lifted her chin. Testing something that was not just air, but the scent of approach. Her own.

The sky's burden was shed by rain's work; sun cast a shadow, long and thin into the straggly grasses. That shadow was unmoving in a way that nothing but the great metal bridge above her was. She waited, as if she were not part of life, of the living.

The next morning, Jane cut school. School was a waste of time, anyway. A bunch of teachers tried to "help" you in your "difficult" situation. Jane wanted nothing from them but to be left alone.

The only way to be left alone was not to be there. So she walked the quiet streets, beneath the towering trees. Followed them, stepping over the cracks in the sidewalk because of the old childhood rhymes. She made a point of hitting all the lines, though.

She even paused in front of her house, thought about going in; her mother was at work at the office. No one would be there. She made it as far as the front door. Turned the knob. Walked away.

Home was the last place she wanted to be.

I'd be Happy, she thought, if I never had to see this place again.

Done, someone said, and she turned at once. A small child, trying to escape the grip of his mother's hand for an excursion into the sparse traffic, was the only thing in sight that was talking.

Never mind. She shoved her hands into her pockets and began to walk.

She made her way from Arundel to the Danforth, and from the Danforth down Broadview and into the Don Valley, following the bike paths beside the river that nestled between the two sides of the highway. The trees here were green, when they were alive, and the weeds were colorful enough, but the river was a dead one, and if there was animal life other than the dogs that people walked, it hid very well.

As Jane maneuvered her way beneath the day branch of a stunted tree, light caught her eye, flashing like reflected sun over rippling water. It came again as she lifted her head, and she began to slowly wend her way toward it, leaving behind the smooth asphalt of the newly paved bike path. Only when she was halfway there did Jane wonder what she was doing, but by then she had no intention of going back until she found the source of the light itself. She bet that it was probably the window of some abandoned old wreck.

Good damned thing she didn't have two cents to rub together. She lost.

The trees seemed to grow darker and rougher as she approached the light; they

were tightly packed and harder to move around. There were thorny plants that caught the hem of her pants-tearing it twice; there were burrs that caught her hair, pulling at it rather than joining it.

I get it, I'm Prince Charming, and this is the forest of thorns. She had no intention of kissing any sleeping woman, wasn't as if she didn't get abused enough by moronic idiots passing themselves off as human beings, but she was damned if she was going to give up before she managed to clear the trees.

And she forgot it all as she managed to peer between the forked trunk of a gnarled old tree whose leaves she wouldn't have recognized had she carried an encyclopedia with her. Because framed by the vee of that split trunk was a woman who was shining with a hazy luminescence.

Her hair was a spill of silver that seemed to catch particles of the sun and reflect them, wayward, back; her eyes were wide and dark and perfect, and her lashes, like her hair, were silver. She wore a sleeveless summer dress that caught the breeze and defined its passage. Her skin was white as ivory, and her arms were long and slender; her fingers were smooth and perfect as she lifted her hands in greeting.

"Welcome," she said. If lightning had a voice, this was it; a flash of brilliance that lingered in the air long after the actual light had passed.

Jane opened her mouth to speak, and nothing came out, although if a toad or a frog had climbed out of her lips, it wouldn't have surprised her much. Compared to the silver-haired woman, Jane was everything ugly and awkward.

"Come, Jane Thornton. You found me for a reason. I am not a danger to you, nor you to me. Come."

Jane scraped her way through the fork of the tree and landed with a clumsy thump on her knees. The woman offered her a hand, and after a moment, Jane took it; she looked down and saw her bleeding and scraped skin against the perfect whiteness of light.

"W-who are you?"

"I am a companion, of sorts. Come, walk a while with me in my forest."

Jane looked over her shoulder, seeing the highway and the bridge that towered overhead.

The woman laughed, and her voice was the brook that trickled in silence. "It has taken me many years to understand it, Jane, it is more difficult than I or my distant kin realized it could be. But wilderness is more than isolated forest, and a forest is more than trees." She turned and started to walk and Jane began to amble awkwardly behind her, stubbing her toes and hurting her knees when she fell. Finally, the woman stopped.

"You are Jane Thornton. I have been waiting, I think, for you. It is our, my, way, to wait; to be sought rather than to seek. I am hidden, always, to those who will not look, who don't know how to look. They are many." Her smile was distant for a moment, cool as the winter white of her hair. Sun caught both.

"You are the first to find me in many years, and it means what it means, Jane Thornton. You could not see me if you did not seek a new life, a new beginning." She held out a hand and pulled Jane up from the ground; her hand was cool and strong. "You do not walk well here, but this is only the first time that you've come. It will get easier, I promise you that. Until then, let me aid you." She reached into the

swirling folds of her skirts and from them pulled a glorious silver pelt. "You are too large for this walk. Put this on. You will have to remove your old clothing and set it aside."

What'll get easier, Jane wanted to ask, her suspicion struggling to assert control over the little-girl awe that she knew she was in the grip of, but couldn't quite shake. She even opened her mouth but the pelt seemed so perfectly made, so warm and so soft, that she reached for it as if she had never wanted anything else in her life. And as she picked it up, her hands and feet began to tingle.

"It really is safe," the woman said, smiling.

So Jane put it over her head, matching the tip of her nose with the tip of its nose; she touched the edge of its forepaws with the tips of her fingers, and the edges of its hind paws with the balls of her toes. The light in front of her eyes blurred; she cried out in surprise; there was no pain. And the woman smiled and knelt before her. "Do you see what you've become?" She pulled a silvered glass from the swirl of her skirts, just as she had pulled the pelt.

Jane looked into it and saw the reflection of a beautiful silver fox.

"You see?"

"Yes," Jane said, and found that her voice, too, was changed. She fell silent immediately as she saw that the mouth, with its white sharpness of teeth-that had moved with the words she tried to speak were the fox's.

The woman rose, taking the reflection with her. Jane thought her tall and fair, and stopped to wonder why she, at a good foot taller than Jane herself, could navigate dense branches and burrs without pause.

"I am," the woman said softly, her eyes on some distant spot, "alone, Jane. The last of my kind. I am understanding, slowly, yours. I ... miss my kin, Jane, but I will not see them again until I face what mortals face. And even then, I do not know, our lives are so different. What happens when the mountains are worn away by sand and sea in the course of time? Are they reborn in their glory in any afterlife of mortal making? I think not. I think perhaps it is merely truth that I will never see them again.

"The fox," she said, turning to the young girl, "is a form that I learned in my youth, but although I understand it well, I do not often wear it." Her smile was quiet. "It is a mortal form. The world is bounded by mortal forms.

"For that reason, the pelt is yours to keep, Jane, if you will but leave the life you so dislike now and explore my world with me in the days and years to come. I have much to teach you, and you have much to learn; you are not happy as you are, and I, I have much to teach, I think. Will you accept this?"

Why not? Jane thought. Any life had to be better than the one she was living.

"Where are you going?"

"As I said, to tour my forest. Come."

"But-but that leads to the city."

"Does it indeed?" The woman smiled. "Then you must learn to see your city with the eyes I have lent you."

It was still hard to look at the silver-haired woman, but it was also hard to look away. Jane had never seen anything so close to perfect, no, so perfect, in her life. "Who are you?" Her voice was a tickle that came from a tiny fox's chest as she walked slowly, getting use to four light feet.

The woman smiled almost sadly. "I was called many things. There are stories that survive that still hold grains of truth, although they change to fit their time and their place, as I have done. I ruled, and I served, in my time; I played my game of iron and steel, I stood in shadow while the bells of man tolled; perhaps I even-" and here, her smile was momentarily sly, "carried away their children to realms that do not age them so." She turned toward the east and stared at the sky as if she could see beyond it. "But that was in a different land, and a different time. They are gone now."

There was a quiet longing in the words that made Jane's throat tighten. "Why-why are you here? I mean, why didn't you stay?"

"We do not always have the choice," she replied gravely. "I gave my word, long before your birth, to travel the wise man's road. I have been learning about human forests, about human people." She smiled. "But I have also been searching the forests of the world for others of my kind."

"Did you ever find them?" Jane asked, cocking her head to one side.

"Come. Let us explore the wilds while we have the time."

Jane thought there would be magic, but there wasn't; there were houses and storefronts and cars and pedestrians.

"Yes, there are those," the woman said softly, as if she could hear every thought. "But there is magic as well. You expect magic to feel a certain way, to look a certain way, to taste a certain way. You expect light and sound, a movement of mountains, some gout of fire. I'm not sure why, but it is the way of your kind. Magic is subtle, Jane, and it takes the context of the form it touches. If you wish fire, you must be fire; if you wish light, you must be light. If you wish the wildness, then you must be the wildness; there is no magic that does not take what is within and use it. Do you understand this?" They walked toward the neighborhood that Jane called home, and it was only once they arrived there that Jane realized that she, and not the woman, was leading. Show me, she thought. Where's the magic here, besides you?

"You."

"But you gave me that."

"Did I? Very well. Do you see that house? That house was planted in 1916."

"Houses aren't planted."

"Ah, but they are. And they grow as the people who live in them grow, developing a sense for romance and bereavement, for happiness and tragedy, for life. Your house will remember you long after you've passed by it." She began to walk toward Arundel, and Jane followed, until they stood at the foot of her house.

"Look at this house," the woman said, and her tone was completely different. "It is not a well-cared for house at the moment. There is anger and loss and things darker besides."

Jane said nothing.

"And there was no magic at all in it, no belief in magic." She turned then, and looked at Jane with her dark eyes, her light eyes. "Do you understand why you found me, Jane?"

"No."

"Because for you there was no magic, and no life exists in the end without it."

"Most people live without magic," Jane replied, feeling prickles up and down her

spine.

"Do they?" She reached down and stroked the top of Jane's head. "Jane, your father left your mother, and you have nothing but pain and anger to give him for it. Why?"

"Because he lied to us. And he hurt us."

"You are hurting him greatly."

"He deserves it."

"Why?"

"Because he lied! Because he cheated on my mother for months before he told her, and because he-he married my mother. He promised to love her forever."

"That," she said gravely, "is magic."

"What?"

"That belief. Your mother believed your father, and your father believed in himself. That was years ago, but the house remembers."

"Well, if that was magic, then magic isn't worth shit."

"Let it go, Jane. Let it go, if it is worth so little."

Jane's snort came out a growl; it stopped her for a moment. "He can't just get away with it," she said at last.

"No, I suppose he can't. But think: If you will have magic, then you must create it and understand what its value is."

"I had no choice in anything either of them did."

The silver-haired woman did not answer, but instead began to walk away.

"Where are you going?"

"Into your yard."

"Why?"

"Because your mother is there."

"What the hell, my mother is supposed to be at work!" She hesitated at the gate, and the woman opened it. "I don't want to see my mother."

"You may never see her again, Jane; you are being born, and what you will be when you are finished, I cannot say. Will you not at least say your good-byes in some fashion? For your mother has hurt you, but she has been hurt as well, and you will leave her just as your father has done."

"I didn't promise her anything."

"No. Of course not."

Jane didn't argue anymore. Instead, she almost meekly crossed the line between the driveway and the patio of the backyard. Her mother sat sprawled in a lawn chair, a magazine over her face and a glass by her side. It was full; not a bad sign. Jane leaped up on the table just as a cat might, gathering her hind muscles and pushing hard against the ground as if she had done it all her life. Then, on impulse, she knocked the glass over.

The magazine fell to the ground in a noisy spill of glossy paper as her mother sat bolt upright. Jane had never seen her mother's mouth open so wide with so little noise coming out of it. The thought made her laugh, but the sound that she made was like a tickle across the air. And then she realized that her mother was staring right at her, and she fell silent, returning her mother's regard through a set of silver fox eyes.

"She can see me," she said, to the woman who stood at her side.

"Yes. But she cannot hear you, alas. It has been a long time." And then the woman did the strangest thing; she walked up to Jane's mother and very gently touched her cheek, the way someone might touch a sleeping infant's. "She cannot see me. Remember what you can, Maria. Remember."

But the Maria to whom the woman spoke didn't need the reminder. She stared at the fox for a long time, and then she began to cry. Jane had seen her mother cry several times, but she had never seen tears like this, a mixture of joy and loss that made her angry, cynical mother seem, for a moment, vulnerable.

The older woman reached out and touched the fox's whiskers. Her hands were shaking. "Did you come here just to knock the glass over?" Whiskey dripped down from the table to the cement, and spread into the cracks between the stones- "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Jane started to speak, but the woman gestured her into silence. "Just listen, Jane."

"I should have listened to you years ago. Am I drunk now? Are you real? Do you remember the last time I saw you?"

"What last time?" Jane whispered,

"When she was a girl only a little older than you are," her companion replied.

"She saw me?"

The woman smiled. "She saw me." The smile dimmed. "She had no magic in her life, and a great deal of yearning. I came to her as a little fox for three winter days."

"Then what happened?"

"Do you mean, what did I do next or what did she do next?"

"I mean, why did you stop coming?"

"I? Because she found something else that she thought she could believe in; some other magic, and some other miracle into which to put heart and hope and effort."

"What?"

"Your father."

Jane growled, and her mother drew back, speaking in low, soothing tones.

"It was winter. Don't you remember? I wanted proof that magic existed - that life could get better than what I had. I might've even prayed; I've forgotten. But you came then. And you're here now." Her mother's tears got worse.

"You judge your father harshly, little one. He, too, sought magic and faith. But he could not build that with your mother; they have hurt each other too much."

"And I'm just supposed to forgive him?"

"No; every magic has its price. He knew what that price would be, and he must pay it, whether it hurts him or no. Now come; stop standing in the whiskey and let us continue our walk."

Jane looked at her mother. "Can I - can I come home tonight?"

"You may do as you desire, Jane."

Jane went home after school and found her mother in the kitchen on her knees. Her left hand was bandaged, and her right was covered by a rubber glove; she was scrubbing the floor clean.

"Hi, Mom," she said, awkward although she tried not to be.

"Hi, Janie. I just - I dropped a couple of bottles when I was cleaning the shelves."

"You okay?" Jane said, looking at her mother's hand.

"It's just a sliver. Are you home for dinner tonight?"

"In a couple of hours, then. Took me longer to clean up the mess than I thought."

Jane went up to her room. And as she crossed the threshold she heard whispers, felt the brush of old cotton and then some stiffer fabric, against her hands. She felt feathers beneath her cheek, and heard a man's voice humming a lullaby. It was not her father's voice.

It was the house speaking.

She walked over to the bed, her bed, and lay down stiffly against it, feeling her arms and legs as if they were far too heavy. And then she listened to the memories of the house, sinking into them enough to almost see her mother.

She'd never done this before. Had never thought to do it, to question what a house might see, might be touched by, might explain in its peculiar, observant way. But now that she knew, she could hear voices that were not her own, see images that were outside of her day-dreams, her hopes, her fears.

Her mother hadn't dropped those bottles, she threw them. And she'd taken them all out, for however long it lasted. Emptied them, rinsed them out so they wouldn't smell, shuffled them under the Pepsi cans in the recycling bin where they might vanish without remark. Except, of course, Janie took out the recycling boxes. Sometimes her mother could be so stupid.

God, it was all so stupid. Her mother set eyes on a little white fox, a stupid white fox, and suddenly she was trying to do all this cleaning up that she'd never have done for Jane or her father.

Don't be angry with her, a voice said. She does it because she remembers what it's like to be a girl who can dream. Whether she's strong enough to continue to dream depends on her, but every time you mock her, you strip away her strength. It was the silver-haired woman. But come, Jane. Tonight you must leave if you are to continue your journey with me. She beckoned, and Jane sat up. The house was empty, the room darkened by sunfall. She wanted to be angry at her mother.

She wanted to be angry.

"Janie! Dinner!"

Dinner was quiet. Jane was aware of her mother as if for the first time; she was seeing beyond what she looked like to what she was at the moment. It was strange. She always felt stung if her mother laughed at her-but she'd never realized that her mother could be hurt, too. It was odd. She was almost afraid to say anything.

But her mother was quiet as well, very introspective. It was only when they were gathering up the dishes that she spoke.

"Janie, I know that things have been pretty awful around here lately. I'm sorry. But I was thinking today that maybe I've been looking at things the wrong way. I wasn't, I wasn't always easy to live with. I'm not-

"You don't have to say this, Mom."

"I do have to say it." Her mother drank air, a heave of chest and lung, a grasp for more than breath. "I'm not easy to live with. I think, I think my mother must've been like me, when I was like you. I don't think you deserve that, I don't deserve it myself. I'm going to do better. I promise."

"I know you will, Mom," Jane said, and for just a moment she allowed herself to

believe it.

She came that night, and Janie followed her, sliding out of her room and past her mother's door. On impulse she stopped, peered in between the crack left between open door and frame. Her mother was sleeping on her side, curled around a pillow as if it were her father's back.

She did hate her father, sort of, and that was good. She turned away and crept down the stairs, like a thief or worse. Like that father, meeting the woman of his dreams.

"You are quiet, Jane."

Jane's silver whiskers bobbed in the field of her vision as she shook her head. They traveled the crowded walks of the still-trendy Queen West Village, avoiding the authoritative steps of people who had places to be but no time to get there.

"Do you not find the forest night interesting? There are lights here, made by man, and they change constantly over the years. I have always found these lights fascinating for what they reveal and what they conceal. There is a heart to them that is divided."

Jane Thornton said nothing.

"And here, there will be music, and it will be fine and lively; there, there will be poverty, and around it, like broken rivers, riches will pass without stopping."

"Panhandlers," Jane said.

"They have their own stories, Jane. They have a pathos to them that can be both revolting and compelling."

The fox wrinkled its nose.

"Do you not like the gift you've been given?"

"Yes I do. I like it."

"Do you not desire your freedom?"

"Yes."

"Was it not magic you sought?"

"Yes."

"Ah."

Her mother was up before her alarm went off. Jane knew this because it wasn't the insistent sound of her mother's droning alarm, ignored, that finally pulled her out of bed; it was her mother's voice.

"Janie! Breakfast!"

She went downstairs in a state of shock. "Mom?"

"You aren't dressed yet."

"I'm not even awake," Jane said, and pinched her arm theatrically.

Her mother laughed. "There's too much cholesterol here," she said apologetically. "But I thought, first breakfast in a while."

Pancakes. Bacon. Scrambled eggs. Butter. Way too much cholesterol.

Jane set the table while her mother finished cooking. Set it for two, remembering when she'd last set it for three in the morning. Then, her dad had done the cooking, and it had been Sunday.

He was gone now. He was free.

She ate with her mother, and even helped her clean up afterward.

What about magic, Jane thought, and school passed by her in a blur of voices and

actions and people.

Magic, the woman had said, was a thing that existed in context. If you wanted fire, you had to be fire. If you wanted lightning, you had to be a storm.

If you wanted freedom, did you have to be free?

And if you wanted love?

What the hell was magic, anyway?

Night was dark, but the stars were out. The air was hazy, so they weren't clear, but they were there, and Jane could feel each one as if they were right beside her. She sat on the porch, on an old lawn chair whose plastic strips had almost all fallen off.

Waiting.

"Jane."

She looked up to see the silver-haired woman. Her hair, like rays of light, touched the porch railing, illuminating everything. Making it beautiful. It almost hurt to look at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Listening to the house," Jane said softly. "I can hear my mother. I didn't know how young she was."

"And look how she turned out."

"That's not all her fault!"

The woman smiled gently. "No and yes. But come. We have an agreement, I believe." She held out a perfect hand.

Jane reached for it and then let her own hand, calluses and all, drop back to her dirt-stained knee. "I can't come with you."

"No?"

"No. You know why."

"But isn't this what you wanted, Jane? Freedom? Did you not say that you would be happy if you never saw this house again?"

"Yeah, right. And if I leave, my mother forgets about the stupid fox and remembers that everyone deserts her. I bet she even thinks she deserves it. You said yourself that everyone needs magic, and that magic is all context."

She thought the woman would be angry, but the woman only nodded her head.

"Yes. But what will your magic be if you stay?"

"Mine? I don't know. You."

"Not me," she replied with a smile.

"Maybe my mother then. Maybe I can believe in her and she can believe in her, and we can both hold on for long enough that it'll be true."

"Then stay, Jane. But you will not see me again in this life."

"Yeah, I figured," Jane said, but her throat was tight.

"Let me leave you with a gift." And so saying, she drew out of her robe the silver pelt that she had given to Jane once before.

"But-but I don't understand. Didn't you hear me? I'm not going with you."

"Yes. You will not be able to wear it, Jane. You will not be able to don it without my aid, and I will not be here to grant that to you. Because you have made the hardest decision, you've started a new life. You are not the Jane Thornton that you were. I have enjoyed your company, Jane, and I have learned a little from you. Take the pelt, which is a thing of mortals, and when you need to remember what you are

capable of, look at it."

Jane's smile was strained. "You know what'll happen if I try to put it up anywhere in the house, don't you?"

"No," the woman said gravely.

"My mother will think I've gone out and skinned her dreams."

The woman did not laugh; Jane did.

And then she scooped up fur that no longer made her hands and feet tingle, and turned away from the woman. Because she was strong, Jane Thornton, and didn't need to cry.

And then, because she was stronger, and didn't need to hide, she turned and the woman was watching her, as if tears were a salute, some gesture of greatness that only Jane could grant.

She bowed, then, left, then.

This was the hardest thing to understand, and she thought, in the dell of her choosing, that she could see a glimmer of it every time someone made a choice like Jane's, a choice of magic over freedom, a thing of grace and beauty.

What, after all, was this humanity, but a huddled desire for companionship, for love? Who had she loved in her life as they loved in theirs, short and brief? She thought, if she understood it truly, she might find her mortality and lose her fear of it.

Could she but accept it, she knew that she might be free. The mountains, she thought, and she turned toward the east, and watched them as the sun rose.