

SUSAN PALWICKWOOD AND WATERKATERINA, MY LAZY daughter, has just tripped over a tree root. She won't get up. She lies there, sobbing, pinned under her heavy pack like a rat caught in a trap. "Stop sniveling," I tell her, "and stand up. We don't have time for this. We have a lot of ground to cover before evening." "Ground to cover?" she sobs. "You don't even know where we're going!" "We're not going anywhere," says Sofia, my spiteful daughter, fanning herself with her hand while she shifts from one foot to the other. "Nowhere at all, except on a wild goose chase of Mother's." She scowls at me and says, "There's no witch at all, is there? There's no one out here who's going to make us beautiful enough for the prince. Just you, Mother: just a wrinkled, crazy old woman." When they were little girls, they thought I was the most beautiful woman in the world. I feel my eyes filling with tears, but I will not let my children see me cry. Sofia learned her spite from me. She learned it from hearing me mock the other one, my husband's daughter. "So go back," I tell her. I'm an old woman who's traveled as far as they have; my back feels broken in two and my feet are one throbbing mass of blisters and I've fallen too, today, more than once, and forced myself to get up each time. But then, I know what I'm running away from, even if I don't know where I'm going. "If you're so sure I'm crazy, go home." "We can't go home!" Katerina says, raising her head. One cheek is smeared with dirt; twigs and leaves cling to her brown braids, and snot trails from her nose. She wipes her face with a grimy sleeve; the action does little to improve her looks. "We don't even know where we are. How can we go home?" "If you were smarter," I tell the two of them, very glad they aren't, "you'd have trailed rocks behind you, or bread crumbs. As it is, I suppose you'll just have to stay with me. Anyway, you don't want anyone back home to see you like this, do you? As dirty and ragged as Ella's ever been, with a mere day left before the Ball? Ella gathering jewels and satin, and you two wearing mud? That would make a fine picture!" They glare at me; Katerina starts to whimper again. I nod at them, satisfied, and say, "Sofia, help your sister." "You help her," she says. In the end, we both do. I grab one of Katerina's arms and Sofia grabs the other, and we haul her and her pack, two leaden sacks of meal, reluctantly upright again. I had to lie to get them to leave. I woke them at dawn, when I knew they'd still be groggy and less inclined to argue. I'd already packed food and blankets, and fresh water -- safe in its wax-sealed jars -- from the stream outside the cottage. Katerina and Sofia didn't want to get up, of course, much less burden themselves with packs and set out into the forest. That was the kind of work we'd always made Ella do. "When one of you is a Queen," I told them briskly, "none of us will need to carry anything ever again. But for one of you to become a Queen, you must be more beautiful than Ella is. She has magic on her side: very well, we will enlist magic too. There is a witch who lives in the forest. She has promised to help us. But you must come with me now, and you must bear your own burdens, for so the witch has said." My talk of magic roused them. We had all seen the birds fluttering around Ella, bringing her jewels and clothing. Katerina had tried to lure the birds with bread crumbs, but they only took her food and flew away, leaving nothing in return; Sofia had tried to trap them with snares, but her traps always came up empty, the bait eaten. I knew, and did not tell my daughters, why the birds only brought gifts for Ella. I knew -- because Ella had told her father, who told me as we undressed for bed one evening, early in our marriage -- that every day she prayed at her mother's grave. The birds were heaven-sent, surely, for by all accounts, Ella's mother had been a saint. I was not, and my daughters were not. Had they had any inkling that killing me and praying over my grave was the way to get lovely dresses, they might just have clone it. I hardly wanted to take the chance. Nor could I bear to admit that Ella's mother, even in death, had more power to help her daughter than I had to help either of mine. Sofia and Katerina were not loving or obedient children, but they were the only ones I had, and they were my only route back to royalty. I was no longer young and beautiful enough to marry a prince; one of my daughters would have to do so for me. Only then would all three of us be able to return to the ease and luxury we craved, far away from that cramped farmer's cottage at the edge of the forest. How we hated that cottage, all of us! How glad we were that Ella was there, lonely and grieving, hardly able to fight us when we bullied her into service. How we jeered at her

for living in the past, crying for her mother every evening instead of joining us in our cards and gossip, our sweets and scheming. I hated that dead mother, the woman whose shoes and bed I could never fill, the woman whose widower always loved her more than he loved me. And I hated myself, for marrying him merely to have a roof over my head and food on the table. We've stopped for the night, at last, after stumbling about the forest for hours. Every time I find a path that looks as if it might lead us out of the woods, to some other town or some other castle, it dwindles into thorns and dead branches, and I curse my own fear and foolishness. How could I have left with no idea where we were going? How could I have left without even the simplest map? Sofia and Katerina stumble after me, alternately cursing and whimpering. "There's no witch," Sofia tells me. "You're lying! You don't know where we're going!" "The witch is testing us," I tell them, and Katerina moans. When we finally stop, just before dusk, I give them bread and cheese to eat, build a fire, spread our blankets and pillows on the cold ground. Instead of thanking me for warmth and food, my daughters whine and complain. The ground is too hard and too rocky, and the fire is too smoky, and they want something hot to eat, some soup or some tea. "Be quiet," I tell them, for the thousandth time today. Every time I hear a rustle beyond our fire, my dread of wolves and bears deepens, but I say nothing to my daughters, lest they panic and desert me. "Think about living in a castle again," I tell them. "That will be worth everything, won't it?" The old charm works; they sigh in unison. "I miss the castle," Katerina says longingly. "I never had to lift a hand there, never had to wait for anything, for I had many servants, not just one, and they dared not disobey me. I had music always, without even having to ask for it, and I never had to learn to play, for my servants played for me, every moment that I was awake. Oh, when shall I be a lady of luxury again?" I do not answer. The servants who played music for her were those other two sisters, their eyes pecked out by birds, their toes sacrificed to the knife and the gleaming glass slipper. Unable to see, barely able to walk, they were fit only to play the harpsichord and the flute. Katerina will learn to play music soon enough, if I can find no other place for us. "I miss the castle," Sofia says bitterly, her eyes glittering. "I miss the parties where my gowns were always the most splendid and my jests always the wittiest. I miss dancing and flirting and seeing all the folk of the village pass through our halls. I miss my falcon and my fine steed; I miss the thrill of the chase. Oh, when shall I be a woman of the world again?" I do not answer. The music to which she danced came from the fingers of women once as worldly as Sofia; she will be as blind and lame as they, if I can find no other place for us. And the meat Sofia brought back from her hunts was cooked by the servant they have forgotten, the hag in the kitchen, forever minding the hearth. She is the one who handed her daughters the knife; she is the one who told them to lamethemselves. Thanks to her, I never dressed a roast after leaving my father's house. But I will turn the spit soon enough, if I find no other place for us. MY DAUGHTERS HAVE never known about my childhood, because I never told them. They have never known that I grew up in a cottage like the one we just fled, and that I spent those years doing endless chores. How could I tell them that I spent my girlhood scrubbing floors and peeling potatoes, weeding the garden and tending the fire? How could I tell them that once upon a time I was grimy and had no shoes and wept bitterly at the cruelty of my stepmother and her two daughters? My pride could never bear that my own daughters learn my origins. And so they do not know that, once upon a time, I was the golden-haired girl in the kitchen, waiting and dreaming, rejoicing when love and magic came at last. By the time Katerina and Sofia were old enough to have understood my story, even had I chosen to tell it, I had grown bitter and my prince, now the obscure king of an unimportant realm, had grown bald. No matter: there were music and dancing and visitors, a world for my daughters to conquer, although none left for me. I contented myself with ordering our servants about as I had once been ordered, and with grumbling because no good or faithful servants could be found. All the help left us, except those three: the blind, lame musicians and their mother, who kept our kitchen. Her teeth had rotted and her sight had dimmed, and whenever she saw me she reached out a wrinkled, gnarled hand and mumbled a curse, drool running down her chin. The story circles back

ahead of you: Unless you stir yourself, you'll stir the stew. I told myself she was mad, and I did not mourn her when she died of the same illness that claimed her grieving daughters and, mere days later, my husband. Soon after that it claimed the village below the castle, the peasants whose rents had sustained us. Penniless and terrified of plague, I left the castle, setting out into the world with my two girls behind me. Soon enough, and far enough away for health, we met a kind farmer and his meek daughter, and soon enough I married him. When did I realize that I was still living the same story? I awake at dawn, feeling as if I've hardly slept: rocks and sticks poke me in the back and buttocks, and my head has somehow abandoned the small pillow I brought from home in favor of a pile of rotting leaves. My mouth tastes like dust and poison. I moan, raise myself on one elbow to check on Sofia and Katerina -- still fast asleep, Sofia on her back with her mouth gaping open and Katerina on her stomach with her limbs flung out as if in flight -- and gingerly force myself upright. I forgot to bring a trowel, and there is no outhouse here: I will have to make one myself. So I stumble into the undergrowth and find a clear spot and a branch to dig with, and as I crouch, doing what I need to do, I send up a fierce prayer: to God, to the spirit of that toothless hag in the kitchen, to whomever might hear me. I know where not to go. Now show me where to go. Show me what to do, damn you! Even basting the roast would be better than this! As I emerge back into the clearing where we slept, I see Sofia sitting up, her blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair is tangled; a leaf pokes from behind one ear. "Well, Mother," she asks coldly, "have you had a vision? What joyous journey are we taking today, pray tell?" I want to tell her to journey wherever she wants, as long as it is far from me, but I hold my tongue. Sofia is more likely than her sister to marry a prince, since she possesses what passes for wit and looks more shapely in a busk. "We will continue the journey we began," I tell her, and she snorts. "I'm hungry," Katerina says, her voice muffled by the blankets around her face. "Mother, what's for breakfast?" "Dreams and delusions," Sofia says. "Our mother has gone quite mad, Katerina. There is no witch, nor ever has been. Do you know, Mother, I think you don't want us to go to the ball? I think you're jealous. You couldn't stand to see us being courted by noblemen when your husband is only a wretched farmer. What do you say to that?" I want to hit her, but I keep my voice calm. "I say this, Sofia: scoff at witches if you will, but Ella's birds have brought you no gifts, for all your traps and tricks. When you perfect your own magic, you may scorn mine." "Brave words," she says, and laughs, but Katerina, looking grumpy, pokes her head out of the blankets. "Mother? Mother, I'm thirsty, and my water jar is empty." "Well, then, take another," I tell her, but Sofia favors me with a thin smile, and when I check the water-jars I packed so carefully yesterday morning -- years ago, it seems now -- they are broken and empty on the ground, barren shards scattered among rocks, all my hard work with sealing wax gone to waste. "You," I tell Sofia, enraged. Stupid girl! "You did this when I was sleeping --" "Oh, Mother. I wanted you to have less to carry. Surely your witch will give us water -- and if she doesn't, why, we'll just have to go home, back to the stream, won't we? If we start now, we might even get back in time for the ball tonight." When did I realize that I was still living the same story? The day before we left, I ransacked the house, trying to find where Ella had hidden the gifts the birds had brought her, the jewels and fine clothing. I found nothing except Ella herself, chopping vegetables in the kitchen and cringing when she saw me, because she expected to be pinched. I stood there, watching her, smelling onions and carrots, and remembered how much I had loathed the same work when I was her age. And then I remembered my own stepmother, standing in a doorway like this one and glaring at me, just as I glared at Ella now, and quite suddenly I seemed to be standing in both places at once, and then there was a third figure there, too: the crone, the old woman with her singsong voice whispering her curse. The story circles back ahead of you; unless you stir yourself, you'll stir the stew. And at that moment I realized that she was my future, that old woman, just as the girl was my past, and with a shudder -- for I had always hated and feared the crone -- I realized that she had not been cursing me at all. She had been warning me. She had been trying to save me from her own fate. And so the next morning, I ran, and took my daughters with me. But now we

haveno water, and we are lost, and I am afraid. For there is no witch to save us, and if I do not become the crone, what else is left? It should not be so hot in the forest, for hardly any sunlight reaches here, through the thick leaves above us; below them, we are enmired in thorns and branches, through which we have struggled all day. I feel myself burning with thirst and fever, although I should not be so parched so soon; behind me Katerina moans and sobs, and Sofia whispers continually, "Mother, take us home, Mother, there is a stream there. Home, Mother, home to water, home to the Ball. Mother, take us home." But I cannot. I do not know the way. And so we hack through dry branches and tear our skin on thorns, and as we bleed our thirst increases, and I find myself wondering if my daughters could be any worse off having their eyes torn out by birds than they are now, here, with me. Katerina plucks at my arm with a burning hand, begging me to stop, begging me to lie down and let her die, and Sofia says hoarsely, "We must have water. Mother, we must. Mama, I'm thirsty!" And even though she is the one who spilled the water out, something stirs within my ribcage when she calls me Mama, for she has not called me that for years, not since she was tiny and I sang lullabies while cradling her in my arms. "Mama, I'm thirsty too," Katerina moans, and I remember her voice waking me at night, although my husband the king always snored on soundly. Mama, I had a bad dream. Mama, I'm thirsty. I want water. My daughters. My babies. I must find water for them. I take another step and another, pushing aside dead branches, fighting for my daughters' lives and my own. And at last the thorns clear away; we stand in a circle of grass now, and there, look, across the grass: berries. I drag myself to them, pick a handful, and squeeze half the juice into Sofia's mouth, half into Katerina's. Their mouths gape and they beg wordlessly for more, and I pick handfuls and handfuls of berries until my daughters are sated. And now I must have juice too: but there is none left. I have picked all the berries for my children, and surely I will die. I shudder and begin to weep, the first tears I have cried in front of my daughters since their father's death. "Mother," Katerina says, plucking at my sleeve, "Mother, I hear water!" And Sofia pushes me, urging, "Just a few steps. Here is the stream. A few more steps and you can drink, Mother, Mama --" I stumble forward in a daze, peering ahead. Yes: here is a stream at last, a stream like the one we left behind, a stream like the one we crossed to get away from the cottage, to get into the wood. I know this place. They have tricked me. They have led me back to the cottage, and we will go to the Ball tonight after all, and nothing will change. I will hand them the knife, and the birds will peck their eyes out. They will become lame and blind, musicians for the king's daughters, and I will become the hag in the kitchen, and all three of us will die, unshriven, of fever. And now they are pulling me into the water, my two girls. They are pushing my face down and they are going to drown me, I know it; but I am not drowning, I am drinking instead, drinking and drinking until I must burst. When at last I raise my head, I see that Katerina and Sofia have crossed the stream; they are on the other side now, walking away from the banks, toward that place that looks so familiar. "Come back!" They must not go there. They must not go back to Ella and her father. I do not want them to be blind and lame; I do not want them to suffer. That is not why I dragged them through thorns and squeezed berries for them; that is not why I braved the darkness and the beasts that live within it. "Come back!" I call again, but they do not even turn. And I realize, stricken, that I must tell them the truth: I have no other weapons now. If I tell them the story, maybe they will come back. If I tell them the story, maybe I will be able to save them. "Look at me," I shout at their retreating backs. "Look at me, your ugly mother: do you know who I am? Look at me." And at last they turn, wide-eyed, astonished by my violence. "I'm Ella," I shout at them, "I was Ella, forty years ago I was beautiful too, oh, damn you --" I can't tell if I'm shouting at myself now or at them, at Ella scrubbing pots in her father's kitchen or at the crone, stirring the stew by my husband's hearth. Tears blind me as I wade across the stream, desperate to rescue them, desperate for some sign that everything I have done, everything I have lived through, has not been in vain. But when I set foot on the opposite bank, emerging onto this place where I know I have stood before, it is not the cottage I see, but a grassy mound, surrounded by fruit trees and topped with a simple cross. I hear birdsong, and I hear

Sofia saying, "Mother, whose grave is that?" And I remember. I came here every day after she died, because I hated my father's new wife. I came here every day, and every day the birds brought me gifts: flowers, fruit, small things that cheered me. Every day I prayed: Mother, Mother, help me get away from the cottage. Help me get away from that mean woman and her daughters. Oh, Mother, I miss you. And so the birds began to bring me jewels, and stuff for a fine gown, and indeed I got away, all the way to the castle. I got away, and I buried my memories as deeply as my own mother was buried, nay, more deeply even than that. Fleeing the bad, I left the good behind as well. I fall to my knees. I remember her voice now, before she died. "Your eyes are more beautiful than dancing flames," she told me, "and your heart is more precious than ruby or pearl. You are my own treasure, no matter what you wear and no matter what you become." And I believed her, and with that spell I enchanted both myself and the prince. "Thank you," I say aloud. I thank my mother for showing me what I could become and I thank that other mother, the crone, for showing me what I did not want to be. "Thank you." "Is this the witch?" Sofia asks, puzzled. "The witch who'll make us beautiful?" "She's dead," Katerina says, frowning. "This is a grave. I don't understand." "Yes," I tell them. I am more tired than I have ever been in my life. "This is the witch. And she's still alive. Everything is going to be all right." And as I speak there is a flutter of wings overhead, and something falls into my lap: a feather, brown and soft. All three of us look at it. When I touch it, it becomes a small pile of seeds. "They aren't jewels," Katerina says. "No," I answer. Sofia grunts. "What are they for? What does the witch want us to do with them?" "She wants us to plant," I say quietly, and above us, the birds break into a jubilation of song. We eat from the fruit trees and drink from the stream, and then we sleep. I wake at dusk to find Sofia and Katerina plucking at me. "Mother," Katerina says, her voice hopeless, "we're missing the Ball. And we aren't beautiful yet." "You're missing nothing," I tell her, shaking myself awake. "Mother," Sofia says sadly, "are we ever going home?" "We are home. We're home now. Come, help me build a fire." They help me, although I know it is only because they are afraid of the dark. They are both weeping now, grieving their lost chances. They huddle around the fire, and I let them cry. "I'm ugly," Katerina keens, rocking herself by the fire, "ugly, ugly, I have no beautiful clothing and my feet have blisters and I'm scratched and dirty, and oh Mother, I'm too fat, my hair's too brown, no one will ever love me, Mother, Mother." "I love you," I tell her, and take her in my arms and stroke her rough brown hair, that hair she hates so. "When you were born, my sweet first baby, you were as red and wrinkled as a raisin. You were bloody and howling and hungry. You weren't lovely, but you were alive and you wanted to live, and to me you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And you still are. Only your sister is as beautiful to me as you are, of all the creatures in the great wide world. Your brown hair is the color of ale, of nuts, of solid sheltering wood: you are all healthy, merry, sturdy things. I love your strong body because it will carry you through all trouble and illness, through hardship, through the birth of your own babes." "What of me," wails Sofia, as she rocks herself, sobbing, "what of me, I'm not fat and healthy, Mother, Mother, I'm as skinny as a pole and my knees are two knobs and my hair is coarse and black, Mother, Mother, no one will ever love me." "I love you," I tell her, and take her in my arms and stroke her thick dark hair. "When you were born, my sweet second baby, I thanked God for you, because I had been ill when I carried you and I was afraid you would be born ill too. You were red and wrinkled as a raisin, and much smaller than your sister had been, but you howled hungrily because you were alive and wanted to live. I knew then that you were tough and strong, for all that you were little, and that your strength would carry you through any trial life could offer. Only your sister is as beautiful to me as you are, of all the creatures in the great wide world. Your black hair is the color of the plucky crow, of deep midnight which always contains within it the promise of dawn, of the pitch that holds homes together: all tough, tenacious, surviving things." And as I speak, I find that I believe my words, as fully as my own mother believed in my own beauty. My daughters stop crying and shiver, gazing into the flames. "Mama," Sofia says, "how can we be home? How can we live here? What prince will have us?" "We will build a house," I tell her, "and we will have each other and ourselves." I

know she doesn't understand me, but I also know that if we give ourselves to princes, we will find ourselves living their lives, not our own. "Mama," Katerina says, "what will we eat, and how will we cook it? We will die of hunger, Mama!" "We will garden and hunt," I tell her. "The forest will sustain us, and we will work to sustain ourselves. I will learn how to work again, and I will teach you, for work is not such a terrible thing, my Katerina." I know she doesn't understand me; she still dreads struggle. But I also know that when we cease our efforts, we give away our lives. And I will not teach them to do that. I will not watch their eyes be pecked out, and I will not hand them the knife and tell them to cut off their toes. My daughters are not expendable: not for this story, or any other. And neither am I. At length they fall asleep again, embracing each other as they have not done since they were babies. I look toward my mother's grave, toward the cross dimly glimmering there in the firelight. I am still afraid, for now we are well and truly lost, although we are home at last. Tomorrow we must begin to chart a new wilderness, a place without paths: the unknown regions of a story that has never yet been told.