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Hermit

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KIRA GREGORY

Hermit

It's been raining. I'm deep in the woods, far from home. The sun just emerged from under a massive cloud bank, lighting up the sparkling glade. Green ferns lurk by the forest's edge, and apple trees huddle near the stronger maples. I stand in the shade, listening. Watching for danger. The field is rutted with fresh ATV tracks, and I am startled at how recently the grass has been mashed down by rugged tires. I survey the prints warily. When I hike in the woods, I am like an animal: fearful of humans.

Nine years ago I came to this place. I was twelve, my brother ten, my sister seven. The old house had been shrinking. As our father oversaw the building of the new house on Bell Hill, he sometimes drove us the four miles from Forest Street to Bell Hill Road to see the progress.

We watched the house grow in the summer of 2006. We listened to it sing in the western wind—the hollow Styrofoam blocks, before they were filled with concrete and became the solid first-floor wall, caught the evening breeze like a giant whistle. Dad brought me up one day after a summer rain, before the roof went on, and I carefully balanced atop haphazard planks, trying not to fall into the inches-deep pond that was the kitchen floor. In August, when the roof was up and my brother was still a foot shorter than me, a photo was taken of the two of us playing who can lean the farthest out the nonexistent window. In September, carpet and plastic wood began to overlay the plywood floor, muffling out visual memories of snow and rainwater in the kitchen, and open sky for a roof.

One crisp October night, the same month we made the move, I remember sitting in my new room, the aqua blue carpet stretching out before me to the opalescent sea green blinds. I was huddled in the closet, sliding door

open and fluorescent light bright above me, knitting. So comfortable. I had decided this new place was home.

Water. So soft I can barely hear it, calling to me from the shadows beyond the far edge of the field. I hesitate, unwilling to enter the open space—but I cannot resist the sound.

It's March, and my well-loved hill is a place sadly devoid of the joys of water, the places where fish and frogs and cattails grow in the sun. The delicious gurgle whispers on the wind, drawing me forward, enticing my explorer's heart. I reach the far side of the glade, pause to listen, then duck under the branches into the shade.

Beyond the wall of shade lies a world of caves, ditches dug by the water, all ups and downs and no straight path for me to cross over. I try not to muss the leaves as I slide down into the ditch, my hardy steel toed men's hiking boots grasping at the soft natural soil. I avoid the water, yet plunge into a river of chilly air that flows down the ditch, invisible.

Nine years since I came to this place. Since my father's desk, bought used in the 70s, was assembled in this corner of my aqua-carpeted room.

At the far end of this desk grows an aloe plant in a ceramic pot, decorated in lively green and pink. Its twin resides out in the laundry room where southern sunlight floods my indoor garden. Both pots are full of aloe. Both are gifts from a friend.

Anna lived by a stream, and I was jealous of that. She was like an only child; her brother was grown and had moved away. Her mother had the house decorated with all types of things that fascinated me. There were fossils everywhere, lustrous plants, hummingbird feeders that attracted winged jewels. I wanted to watch them forever. We'd go exploring in the stream, looking for fossils and salamanders, trying to sweep up the little fish in our nets and place them in the orange bucket to take back and show our mothers and my siblings. We were so proud when we caught the crayfish. Anna was shy of the waving claws and wouldn't touch it, but I was comfortable and practiced with crustaceans. I knew how to hold him around the back where his segmented legs couldn't reach. The claws waved and waved, but never found my fingers.

Opposite the desk, beside the opalescent blinds, is a white plastic folding table. Beneath the table rest three aquariums, full of bone-dry brown sand. Strong with memories of shells on the move, climbing crustacean feet, nighttime watches to observe the battles, to interfere in the raucous lives if necessary.

I'd wanted a pet, many pets, long before the move. But my mother was allergic to fur. I settled on hermit crabs after years of hopeful research, and my

parents agreed, but made sure to specify that the crabs could come only once we moved to the larger house. The months passed slowly.

One week after we moved, my patience ran out again and I went to plead my case. That weekend, we went crab shopping. I picked out three beautiful little creatures from an exotic pet store, settled them in the Dominoes sugar container with gravel on the bottom, and carried them on my lap all the way home, sometimes peeking in to see what they were up to. This same habit of enthusiastic peeking would lead to the demise of one of the precious pets, and hence one of the most tragic periods of my life.

I named them Curly, Larry, and Moe, and loved them to make up for all those years of wishing for something to love. Their first substrate was neon-painted fish gravel, before I knew that paint was harmful to the crabs. Before I knew that gravel could be harmful to the crabs. I learned over the years. But it wasn't enough.

Information on this species is limited, and misinformation common. Some sources claim the crabs are easy to care for, beginner's pets. Others go into more depth and proclaim them to be difficult exotics. I have experience now. I can tell you that they're easy to care for—until they die without reason. If a crab is sick, death is imminent. Who knows what causes the sickness? But there's nothing to be done. It's difficult to know how to keep the creature comfortable, and so it suffers in silence.

In the wild, the crabs will grow to ripe old age. Giant, gnarly old things as big as baseballs, twenty years old or more.

Mine lasted six months. Six perfect, joyous, glowing months.

There are more ditches ahead, some of them deeper. I haul myself up, holding on to a hemlock's roots, flattening myself as I slide down the near-vertical walls. And then, the land begins to flatten out. The trees are bigger here, taller. There are odd little evergreen plants clustered on the floor, like relics from the age of the dinosaurs. Later, I would learn to call them club mosses.

There's no land up ahead. I wonder why I can see trees beyond, why there's an open space in the air. As I step closer, I begin to hear a faint rushing noise.

Like wind in the treetops, but steadier. Like the call of ocean waves, far away.

I step up to the edge as the land opens wide before me. There's a stream gushing far below, roaring in the rapids from spring's snow melt. A slate black stream bed is visible where the water is quiet. I'm thirty feet up. Ancient trees grow down below and up above, towering higher into the sky than any I've seen.

There's water. There's water here, on my desert hill. I can only stare and listen.

It was simple uncontrolled excitement and enthusiasm that killed the first. When the crabs molt, shed their skin, they bury themselves for cover. The process can take over a month. I knew as much, but I couldn't stand the separation. I was only twelve. I dug up the molting crab, his process unfinished. A sick crab is a dead crab. He never recovered.

The other two were also lost in molting problems. Gravel is unfit for molting, since it doesn't hold moisture. I learned this over the years, with different crabs, but even those later creatures did not live to ripe old age.

I had various crabs over the years until recently. But life hasn't had the same feel to it, since my first pets were alive.

I can't get rid of those three aquariums, not yet, maybe not ever.

I can't help but wonder if I will ever fill those aquariums again. That's why I can't get rid of them. But I made a pact with myself, not to buy more crabs. Not to support the trade that kills them. But more than that, not to support the trade that cages a free creature that had hatched in the ancient sea.

The summer when my last crabs were dying, I tromped barefoot to a nearby field, watching and feeling carefully for rusty barbed wire, hiding in the leaf-covered soil. The evening before, I was taking photos of a striking chokecherry bush, its red fruit glowing in the sunset light. Only after scrutinizing that bush for many minutes did I notice the caterpillar.

It was huge. As large as a chokecherry leaf and as thick as my thumb, and camouflaged so exquisitely. Tiny pink and blue dots adorned its sides, which were themselves the color of a leaf in the sun. I forgot the berries and turned my camera on the leaf-worm.

It was the beginning of a luna moth.

Scrunching my face at the prick of last summer's goldenrods on the toughened soles of my feet, I approached the chokecherry bush. I searched for the caterpillar in the only way I knew how—letting my eyes unfocus and looking for a patch of sunlight in the bush. That patch of sunlight was actually the caterpillar's green, just a tad lighter than the surrounding leaves. It always took a minute or two before I found it. I'd begin to worry I'd lost it. And then, there it would be, right in front of me.

I almost reached for it. I may have poked it. I wanted to keep it and see it morph into its majestic final form, the rare pale moth. But it was a hermit crab. I'd never cared for a luna moth before, didn't know exactly what it needed from its wild world to live well. I restrained my hands, forced them to remain clasped behind me, and I explored only with my eyes.

I checked on it every other day. I watched the leaves disappear from the bush as it ate. And one day I couldn't find it.

It was gone. There were plenty more leaves to eat, so why would it leave? Had the sharp eyes of a predator caught sight of the leaf in the sun? Oh, how I wished I'd caught it when I had the chance!

And at the same time, I knew it might have died in my aquarium. In the dark, in stale air, away from the sky and living things.

I stood beside the bush with the red berries, breathing the wild air, feeling the sun and the ambient life and sounds of the field. No one should be kept from this place.

I can't remember if I went down that day, following the deer's footsteps just as they walk along my own footpaths, their dainty hooves leaving hearts in the mud. I can't remember how many times I returned to this valley.

What I do remember are flashes of light on the water, shade below the great earthen walls, joy in the dancing water and in the flickering glimmer of fish in the shallows. Giant, giant hemlocks, two hundred years old, and one great fallen trident that I'd climb up and sit on, gazing down the stream bed. Massive red-white fungi, cool and smooth to the touch, glued to the rotting flesh of standing trees. The sting on the backs of my knees from a nettle plant, its poison an indignant protest against being so rudely brushed aside. A crayfish, caught with much splashing and a hunter's concentration, waving its tiny claws dramatically. A tiny dace fish swimming frantically in my neon hunter's cap, then resting as if it had given up, only breathing. The high wild call of the woodpewee, a little bird seldom seen, that haunts the deep woods and sings with a voice that is like the silence itself.