

Imagination
Walls
Ash Cook

WHEN AUTUMN WAS LITTLE, SHE OFTEN imagined that the dark, wooden-paneled walls throughout her grandmother's house had faces in them. Whorls of lighter brown were mouths or noses, the darker, more solidified knots – often in pairs close together – were the eyes. Some were right-side up, some upside down, and some were even sideways; all of them came in a vast variety of emotions. Most of them frightened her.

Summers spent at her grandmother's house were almost always an endless struggle to alleviate boredom. Her grandmother was far more protective (or as Autumn called it, paranoid) of her than her mother ever was, and so she was not allowed to ride her bike all over the neighborhood, fish (or swim) in the nearby creek, or lose herself in the woods for hours on a search for the perfect tree to build a tree-house in. All adventurous activities that were common at home, but strictly forbidden at Grandma's. There were only two ways to pass the time at that old house; she could pick blackberries from the canes that grew in the alley, or sit around the house reading and watching the faces in the walls.

She considered it watching because there would be times that she swore if she stared long enough – without blinking – and held real still, the faces would move. It was never drastic movements, or anything with which she could be certain, but the imagination of an eight year old bookworm is vast and she was fond of using it. There were days when she would sprawl out on her back on the floor and watch the walls for hours while her imagination roamed. Faces became friends (or adversaries), monsters and fairies. She'd even make up names and entire realms for them to live in, with stories of their lives and how they came to be imprisoned in the walls.

As the years passed, Autumn grew into an excruciatingly shy teen and an even shier, awkward young adult, yet she returned to that house often. During those years her imagination calmed and

the faces faded into memory, nearly forgotten. If it weren't for the events that transpired one tempestuous night in early June while visiting Grandma to celebrate her graduation from high school, Autumn would certainly have forgotten them entirely.

She knew it was supposed to storm that day, but she wasn't concerned. She'd made the hour long drive often enough over the previous couple of years to know it by heart, but of course her grandmother's paranoia kicked into overdrive after watching the weather forecast. Pregnant, grey clouds were already rolling in to make the late afternoon skies appear almost night-like when Grandma begged her to stay the night. "Look, it'll be a down-pour!" She pleaded, giving Autumn that stern-yet-worried look that she knew she couldn't win against.

"I've driven in worse."

"It would make me feel a lot better if you stayed." Grandma's hand was on her arm, the soft skin of her fingers and palm as cold as Autumn ever remembered them. She sighed and begrudgingly obliged her grandmother, mentally groaning all the while. While Grandma went about getting dinner started, Autumn found herself in her old childhood bedroom preparing the bed for her first stay in nearly five years. The storm started as she was stuffing a pillow into its pillowcase, and by the time dinner was finished and eaten, and she'd said her goodnight to Grandma, it was a raging squall. She climbed in under the

covers – still cursing herself for letting Grandma convince her of staying – and worked on trying to sleep. Bright flashes of lightning lit the room in snap shots through the curtains over the large window beside the bed, causing shadows to dance along the walls, animating those nearly-forgotten twisted faces.

She was practically asleep when the first one pried itself out of the wall. She just happened to notice its tiny brown body scamper across the floor, the overly large head bouncing like some kind of bobble-head. Like any normal person, she blinked her eyes, giving them a quick rub to clear her vision. Then she pinched herself, thinking this was assuredly a dream. The pinch hurt, so she knew she was wide awake. No longer able to see the tiny being, she shrugged and closed her eyes, determined to forget it and sleep. She almost succeeded in doing just that when she heard a distinctive creaking noise like the sound branches make when being tossed by a hard wind. There weren't any trees near enough to the house for such noises to be so easily heard, so she lifted her head from the pillow to let her eyes scan the room.

Nothing seemed out of place at first, but just as she was about to relax back into her pillow, she caught it out of the corner of her eye. The little bobble-headed figure with its unmoving, twisted face was leaning into the opposite wall, its stubby arms reaching *into* the wood paneling halfway

through the process of extracting another face. Already the chubby head of the second creature was clear of the paneling, the rest of its petite body gradually following while the freed one tugged. Autumn had recently seen a Japanese Anime called *Princess Mononoke*, and after taking in the shapes of these strange creatures, she realized they reminded her of the tree spirits in the movie. The only difference was that these things were brown instead of white and looked almost as if they were made of wood.

She wasn't sure if they were cognizant of her watching, but once the second one was clear of its prison, the pair moved along the wall to a third face and set about releasing it. They made much faster work of this one, and within minutes the two became three, then four, then five, until nearly a dozen of them were scuttling about the room, their stubby peg-legs tapping on the hardwood like wooden dowels on a board. Autumn sat watching all of this in stunned silence, shaking her head several times as if she could clear the scene from her mind. After having no success, she resigned herself to the reality of the situation and rigidly kept still while the walls emptied around her.

When at last they could no longer conceivably wrench any more from the walls, the crowd of miniscule bodies gathered around the first one as if regarding their leader. This one's face was one of those that frightened Autumn as a child, with large eyes that

were set in haunted ovals, and a mouth that seemed frozen in a slanted frown. It made a sweeping gesture with one of its diminutive arms, and quickly turned to face her while all of the other creatures jumbled into an upside down pyramid formation behind it, reminding her of a flock of geese. With every movement their unwieldy heads bobbed on their pintsize bodies; no two exactly the same in face or appearance, but all of them analogous in movement. Without a word they marched to the foot of the bed.

At this point, screaming seemed a very natural reaction. And yet Autumn couldn't even will herself to open her mouth. She'd say she was frozen by fear, by that didn't seem to be it. If frozen by curiosity is a thing, then perhaps that was it, as she sat there wrapped in an old hand-sewn quilt – perspiring – with her heart hammering in her throat. Okay, maybe there was some panic there too, but more than anything she felt drawn to observe these peculiar creatures as they climbed up over the edge of the bed and settled – still in formation – just a few inches from her feet. Other than the occasional twist or bob of a head from one or another of them, they all simply stood there staring at her silently while she gaped back.

Several minutes went by with Autumn frozen in silence, while they stayed at the foot of the bed, their inert bodies smaller than her palm, with heads nearly proportionate in size. Each time one of those heads would

kink or dip she'd feel a nervous shudder in her neck and would have to force herself to not look away. And then she felt it, a strange tingle in her head as if a tiny bug had found a way in and was crawling along her meninges. Just as she started to worry about it, the first wave of their thoughts filled her head. *You have no need to fear us.* She blinked and gasped out loud, nearly giving in to the urge to pull the quilt over her head like a terrified child hiding from a monster under the bed.

We mean you no harm. You are safe. Their voice in her head was profound yet quiet, reminiscent of people reciting verses together in a church congregation. It had a sort of calming effect, and Autumn found herself relaxing after a minute or two as the group of creatures serenely stared her down, unmoving.

"Wh-what are you?" It came out as a whisper. Her lips were parched from anxiety and licking them did little good with as dry as her mouth was. The leader cocked its head, those large eyes stoic and vacant, yet she could tell it was mulling her question over.

We are your creations. Born from your imagination years ago.

"Why?" She could feel her curiosity taking over, recognizing that these inexplicable creatures were in fact her childhood dreams given life. The leader's head creaked as it twisted to the opposite side, still considering.

To help you, and ourselves. We are fading. Your memories of us were nearly extinct. Your imagina-

tion is not what it was, and without it we cannot exist. Several of the other creatures began bobbing their heads, the gesture both grotesque and somehow endearing. She gave their words a minute to sink in, willing herself to remember her childhood dreams of them. Slowly she nodded along with them.

"Okay, how will you help?"

We shall return to you, so that we are with you everywhere you go. We will inspire your imagination and ignite it when we feel that it has grown dim.

"Return to me?" She blinked, confused. The entire group of them bobbed their heads vigorously, as if in answer to her question. The leader took several steps toward her, its head still tilted at an odd angle, indifferent eyes impossible to read. She suddenly felt the cold chill of fear slither up her spine, but had no time to react as the entire mass of wooden figures surged forward. Just as she opened her mouth to scream, the leader leapt at her, slamming into her mouth.

Its body was softer than she'd imagined it might be – not much tougher than bread – and as she worked to scream around it, it wedged its way down her throat. Before she could close her mouth, the next creature flew at her, and then the next, each of them filing into her body one after the other while she fell back onto the bed, grasping at her invaded throat and chest. There was no pain, just the discomfort of something soft being

forced down her esophagus for several long minutes without reprieve. Finally the last of them took its turn, squeezing down her throat and putting an end to the nightmarish foray. She collapsed into the bed with exhaustion, rubbing her throat and staring at the ceiling in shock.

Although unsure of how long the incident took from start to finish, Autumn did know that it took her mind and body twice as long to calm down; for her heart to stop racing and her chest to quit heaving in desperate attempts at catching her breath. She let her hands search herself over, feeling for any changes to her body. As far as she could tell, there were none, but she got up and went to the mirrored dresser anyway. Flipping on the light, she examined herself in the mirror, once again searching for any physical evidence of her ordeal. Still nothing. She sighed softly and was about to flip the lights back off when she noticed something strange in the mirror. The walls were empty. Smooth, grainless wood stretched around the room, unmarred by any dark knots or whorls. Quickly she flipped the light switch off and climbed back into bed, shuddering.

Unable to simply shrug everything off and find sleep, she allowed her mind to replay all of what had happened. Over and over the scene repeated, until she slowly started to relax and even managed to convince herself it had all been a really bad dream that she would wake up from in the morning. Just as she started to drift into

sleep, she felt that peculiar tingle in her head again, followed instantly by their voice. *It was not a dream. We are still here. We will always be here.* Δ