

## PETAL

### SARAH MARSHALL

Jestyn is canning plums—skins neatly peeled away and pitted halves rawed as scalping—when the pains come. Pulls herself upstairs to the bedroom and wedges a chair under the knob. Lies down on the sugar pine floor so as not to dirty the sheets. And goes to it.

She saw her sisters' children born and knows there is nothing to worry on; your body is big enough and you can stand the hurt. Her body she is worried about—she is 4'8" in her bare feet, and even fit to split weighs no more than a well-fed dog—but standing the hurt she is not. The baby's head presses, presses, presses, her own blood buzzing like a spring-time swarm, and she bites down on the skin of her wrist and presses back for a good long time before she knows she needs not strength but breaking, not to endure but to be pulled apart. She casts a blind hand out under the bed, sweeping over unswept grit until she touches the cool milk handle of a pocketknife and unclasps the blade, clumsy with pain so that her hand was already sliced and bleeding as she lays the sharpness into her softest skin and sets her child free.

The baby slides out. The mother falls back, and lies still until she knows it is time to pull herself forward and see what she has done. Eyes red as rubies and bulging out past the eyelids, barely contained and surely sightless. Hair normal.

Little tongue in its mouth normal. Mouth itself a forced-wide O and in it a full set of teeth. Feet and hands tiny, fingers fused closed. And the body: raw red past the red of bleeding, past the red of insides turned out. Red as roses in a child's story, and red only broken by diamonds of peeling white-as-snow skin. The babe is silent, even if she is not. It is a girl.

She named it Petal. It lived for an hour, moving its legs little and arms only upward, as if reaching. It did not struggle for air, did not seem in pain. It simply breathed in and breathed out and then did not breathe in again. When she knew it was dead for good, Jestyn wrapped the body in her ruined dress, carried it out to the wood behind the house, dug a hole as deep as she could in the place where the ground was softest.

No telling how long before she sees her again. The days crowd the corners of her eyes and the sky lays itself against the ground, and one day Jestyn goes out to the place in the wood where the salmonberries grow and finds a baby girl. Sitting on the mossy ground, eyes like the poisonous red fruit even a dumb Dogrib girl knows not to touch. Eyes on her mama before her mama sees her. Petal.

She does not hesitate. She is a mother, still—or must be now as she picks the baby up, carries her inside and searches for hurts that might have come to her in whatever place she has come from. There is nothing. Her whole body is a hurt, but she does not seem to feel it. She does not cry, does not make any noise at all, but watches Jestyn as she moves around the room, as she covers her own eyes and uncovers them again, then reaches out to stroke her cattail-white hair.

Jestyn takes her to bed and falls asleep, wakes and finds her gone. Every day after that she goes to wait in the woods, and sometimes her daughter comes to her, and sometimes she does not. She knows it would be foolish to ask for more.

Petal grows. Two years, three years, four years old. A perfect girl child, despite her hideousness. Jestyn keeps Puritan marshmallows in her apron pockets, hoping to coax her out with a treat. She does not keep sweets around for herself, but believes there are certain special things a girl deserves, and she is still a girl in the end.

Petal does not slowly learn the sounds of words, does not pick up their meaning in Jestyn's lap, but simply shows up one day full of talk and eager to set some of it loose.

Marsh mallow isn't really white, you know, she says, sitting down and cramming her mouth sweet-full.

Is that so?

Petal nods. They're not white, either.

They're white sometimes, says Jestyn, who truth be told cannot remember the last time she saw a marsh mallow growing up out of the ground.

Not the ones I've seen.

You haven't seen everything, Pet.

I've seen a lot.

A lot of marsh mallow?

A lot of *plenty*.

Come sit on mama's lap, Jestyn says, and Petal obliges: presses her flour-white head against her mother's skinny chest and lets herself be folded up. Jestyn tightens her grip and feels skin flaking away, lowers her head and kisses the places, blood-tasting, that have been uncovered.

It doesn't hurt, says Petal, muffled, as if anticipating her worry.

Does anything hurt?

She nods, but does not look up when she says, You do.

Only when Jestyn walks down to the garage and hears her husband talking to strangers—bargaining, bantering, buying and selling—does she remember why she followed him down from Great Slave Lake. It was that mouth he had used to kiss

the soles of her feet as they sat on the bed she shared with her four sisters, that mouth he had taken her whole hand into and, tongue working furiously as the fingers of a lockpick, loosed her wedding ring and displayed it between his teeth.

Blackstone. Big as a picture book illustration of a man and near as old as her father, but a father's opposite. A husband stands between a girl and the wideness of the world, and a father pushes her out in it, gives her a heel of bread and a box of lard and her sister's half-split dress and tells her to walk around town until a rich man comes along and offers to mend it with money. A husband does not tell you that you're too old to grow thick at the family tit and too girl to work in the uranium mines like your brothers. A husband takes you to an inside, gentles the air that comes through the door and gives you your own daughters to be kind to, even if he asks you only for sons.

We need to fatten you up, Stone says one afternoon.

That so.

I got coveralls weigh more than you do, Jes. You haint a flyweight bigger since I got you.

I thought you liked me little.

You can't be that little and make a whole baby. Eat. You fatten up you'll give me a baby in a year.

Jestyn eats. Jestyn eats slices of bread spread with oleo, oleo further whitened by sugar and then crushed between tongue and roof of mouth. Jestyn eats sugar by the spoonful—one in the morning and one before bed—and savors its sharpness, hard enough to cut before the heat of her body turns it tame. Jestyn stirs sugar into eggs, into glasses of warm sweet milk, into water. Jestyn eats the jars of clover honey Blackstone brings her from the garage, then sucks the honey from the frayed royal clover that grows in the yard. Jestyn eats raw rice and red plums and handfuls of sweet black dirt. Jestyn picks

bowlful of chokeberries and mashes them with sugar until they are whiter than red, until she is sure sweetness will overtake the bitter. Jestyn eats.

But every time she begins to grow she is only left lighter a few weeks later, her baby leaving her at night, though she sleeps careful. She leaves the stains on her legs and hands until time wears them away, and it is only after she is clean and hopeless that Petal shows up again, rests her head on her mother's stomach and listens for the silence within.

Jestyn never tells Stone about her sisters and their children. Roana whose first boy was born eyeless, yes eyeless she said and no one believed her until they had all gathered around and pressed their fingers gently against his lids and felt the nothing pressing back until Roana pulled him away. His brain was normal, his body normal apart from the one thing forgot, and in that way he was better off than all her other children would be. Their father went off to the tavern and the brothers and sisters left and Roana stayed on the bed, rocking and singing until she believed she loved him, and Jestyn sat outside the window and listened to Roana's high green voice drift out: *I'll sing to him each spring to him and long for the day when I'll cling to him.* Nothing much to see anyhow, Roana said later, and it was easy to agree with that.

But his brothers, his cousins: there was no loving them. Not Ket's children, either, too small or too mangled or too turned around to even say boy or girl. One just a head and a mess of limbs, some moving and some already dead. It lived for a day and then they put it in the ground. Another perfectly formed but with no features on its face: mouth, nose, eyes, all gone. Stillborn as it should be, Ket said. After that she stopped eating, grew thin, talked about nothing but movie stars, and one day caught a bus to Toronto and left all her babies behind.

Petal has taken to crawling into bed with her. Only the nights

when Jestyn is alone, Stone gone off to work on his engines, or into town to lose himself in a softer body. Then she feels the sheet tightening over her, Pet's weight settling into the mattress, clammy arms settling around her and carbuncle eyes glowing near.

Petal makes up songs when Jestyn has swallowed too much hopelessness in the day, strokes her cheeks with chalky fingers and hums. Shh, shh. You're the mama. Don't be sad now. Don't be cry. When Jestyn stops crying, it is still the song she sings.

It is on one of these nights that Petal touches her mother's stomach and finds a hardness there, presses and cannot make it go away, and then silent as the cloudless night peels the sheets back, walks out of the bedroom and down the hall.

Jestyn waits to lose it, but it grows. She imagines blind babies, dead babies, babies rot-black in the womb. She tries to imagine something worse than worst can be, but can never quite convince herself that worst is in her reckoning, or that she has any right to not be surprised.

On September 7th, 70 AD—according to the encyclopedia that is the only book Stone keeps in the house—the Roman army plunders Jerusalem. On September 7th, 1695, the pirate Henry Every captures the Indian Grand Mughal ship *Ganj-i-Sawai*, making off with £50,000 worth of treasure. In 1864, Atlanta is evacuated on orders of General William Tecumseh Sherman. In 1921, the first Miss America Pageant is held in Atlantic City, the winner Miss Margaret Gorman of Washington, DC. In 1927, the first fully functioning prototype of the television set is built by its inventor, Philo Farnsworth. In 1936, the last known Tasmanian Tiger, a female named Benjamin, dies alone in her cage. In 1942, 8,700 Jews are sent to Belzec extermination camp.

On September 7th, 1948, a baby girl is born in the highest

room of a dirty white house in a dirty white town called Rose. She lives and dies in the breadth of a breath, and when she has gone for good her mother buries her. Still and all she is the only child the mother has to love for the next five years, and the only face, aside from her husband's, that she sees outside of dreaming. She has been the doted-on daughter for a full five years when, on September 7th, 1953, her mother gives birth to a baby boy: Aloysius Norther. Hair gold as a rich man's tooth, skin smooth and pale as soap. He cries strong as a lion, no slapping needed. He lives.

But there's something wrong with his *eyes*, Petal says, peering in at her baby brother as he sleeps later that day.

They're closed, Pet, Jestyn says as gently as she can. She does not know if her daughter is familiar with sleeping, if she has to close her own eyes at night, or even if she can.

No, says Petal, impatient. I mean his eyes when they're *open*.

What's the matter with them?

They don't have any colors in them, she says. Girl voice growing thick. He can't *see*.

You don't have to have color in your eyes to see things. And besides, they might change yet. Most babies are born with gray eyes, and then one day you look down and they're another color.

Petal leans against the bassinet, reaches one flaking finger down and rests it on her brother's forehead, and it is not the pressure that scares Jestyn but the idea that she might rub off somehow, leave a mark that will never come away. She snatches Petal's hand away and pulls it behind her back.

Petal turns to her, whiteless eyes narrowed to slits. To keep back the tears, Jestyn thinks, though later she will wonder if it is anger she has seen, for there is something stoic and pig iron-heavy in the little girl's voice, and she has never known her to cry before.

Did my eyes change? Petal asks.

Jestyn looks back at her son. What do you mean?

Did my eyes change, like the other baby's will? Did they used to be another color? Did they used to be like his?

Jestyn kneels and takes Petal in her arms, but the girl stays limp. No, Pet.

Why?

Because you're meant to look this way.

They said I look like a rabbit.

Who said?

But Petal is not listening. Head resting now in the crook of Jestyn's neck, her worm-warm hand working its way into her mother's dark hair. They said I looked like a red-eyed rabbit half dead by dogs. They said I looked like I was inside out. They said—

Shh, Jestyn interrupts, stroking the girl's back, thinking: Who would say such things? And how?

Petal twists Jestyn's hair around her fingers and presses her face against her mother's breast, those two red eyes burning into her, hot as anger fresh-skinned.

The next day, a birthday cake. Water, sugar, baking soda. A few small eggs, yolks summer sun-hard, from the chickens who have eluded coyotes and the restless jaws of Stone's dogs. Flour from the big white bag, a few minutes standing at the counter to sort the weevils out, watch them squirm in the glassy sunlight, lift one to lips without thinking and feel it struggle under the tongue. Bite down and swallow.

You have birthed a son, but already your milk is piss-thin and souring. Never could keep a child alive, could you? Meat growing rancid and the hunting trip coming, but when he is away how will you eat? You married so you would not chew the heel of your hand, the ends of your hair, the knotweed and yellowcress that grew by the side of the road. Now, surrounded by a sweeter green, you do not like to leave the house.

Another weevil. Pocket them behind your teeth and suck



their juices. Feel them wilt and wither. Can such a small thing even die?

Hands at your apron, face pressed against your hip. For the baby? Pet asks.

For you.

Lift her up. Let her hold the big spoon. Grease the pan with oleo and do not scold her for the flecks of her own dead whiteness she leaves behind. Slide the batter into the oven and let her stir the frosting too. When it is all done let her lick your smooth finger—who knows what the taste will be if she licks her own—and say, Sweets to the sweet. Ask her how she likes it. Ask her how it feels to be five.

I was five yesterday, she says, with all the obstinacy of a living child.

Say, That's right. You've had time to get used to it. So what do you think: you like it better than being four?

Petal shakes her head. I'm not getting any older.

I don't think you have a choice, Pet.

Yes I do.

How?

She has picked up the other weevils, and is crushing them between her fingertips, red on red.

Don't do that.

Why?

It's not nice.

You were eating them just now.

That's different. Eating is something I need to do. It's not nice to kill for no reason.

She turns away, drops the weevils' crushed bodies into the icing bowl and stirs the whole thing with her hands.

Pink, she says. For a girl. Then scoops a dollop onto her forefinger and licks away the icing, and a layer of skin.

The older you get, you say, the more girl you'll be.

No, says Petal, reaching back into the bowl. This is as girl as I'm getting. This is as old as I want.

You can't stop it.

I can do whatever I want, she says. I'll just stop getting bigger. That's all.

And so she does. From that day on, Petal does not grow an inch or gain an ounce. Ever her thin white hair does not grow longer. Jestyn plies her with food at first, food that would fatten even a real girl: thick mealy pancakes fried in bear grease, bread spread thick with oleo and gritty with sugar. Puritan marshmallows by the handful. Milk instead of water and cream instead of milk. She feeds Petal the things Stone buys for her, and more often than not forgets to feed herself. There is a clutch of tender green miner's lettuce that grows in the shadows beneath the porch, and in the morning she rises early and feeds herself leaf by leaf, biting down hard to feel the surge of its sun-thin juices, the taste of green. She does not give suck to Ally anymore, and has, for the first time that she can remember, nothing for which her thin body can be blamed. But Petal only wants one thing: to get between Jestyn and the baby, and if not to get back inside her mother than to get as close as she can. She climbs into the bed now more than ever, presses her angry hot body against her mother's thin skin, tugs at her nightgown in slow search for a way inside, and finally puts her thick hard lips to Jestyn's nipple. One night, Jestyn pushes her away.

You're too old for it, Pet.

I said I wouldn't get older.

You're already too old. You've been too old for a while.

I can go back.

Don't you want to be older?

No, she says. I want to be with you.

So you have spoiled her. Can you really be blamed? God gives you two children, one living and one dead. The live one will grow and change and learn and one day leave this place, and

the dead will do none of these things. The dead has only you, while the living can be seen and touched and loved by anyone—loved even more, for his boyness. So you give the dead extra, until your love starts to sour, and sleep lies thin on you at night, even when she is not beside you.

Petal has taken to pulling Ally out of his crib and dragging him down the stairs—his plum-plump body unsteady in her arms—then setting him down on the porch, sometimes staying with him, but mostly getting bored and wandering off. You move Ally into your room, but the dead girl with her silent tread will only wake you if she wants. She pulls white scales of skin loose from her face and arranges them on his forehead, his cheeks. She spits into his mouth. She lifts up his nightgown and pulls at his pizzle, says quieter than ever: Cry now, baby, crybaby, if you can.

Without a sound you get up and pull her from the bed, drag her downstairs and slap her hard. She does not cry but stands still, barefoot and burn-eyed, staring at you.

Do you want to be your own mother? you ask.

She says nothing.

Do you know where my mother was when I was your age?

She pulls out a strand of her thin white hair and watches it fall to the floor.

You take her to the kitchen table and feed her bread and lard until she vomits. She will grow big. She will grow bigger. She will grow.

She does not grow but hotter. Her hands and feet have always been swollen, tender, warm to the touch, but now as she holds her growing in it seems to try its hardest to push out through her skin. One day she takes your hand in hers and you feel as if you have plunged your fingers into a dog's mouth, even her nails tooth-sharp. Another day she stands by the bed as you are sleeping and presses a hand against the back of your neck, leaving a scald-red stain that lingers all day. The next

morning she does not even need to touch you to make you feel her presence. She holds her hands before your face, palms out and fingers spread wide. You dream of a hot poker pushed into your mouth, of the skin taken off your throat and tongue, of your lips sealed shut, and then your eyes and then the rest of you swallowed by your own flesh, like Ket's baby. When you wake up, Petal is gone, and does not come back the next day, or the next day. The bed stays cold.

Meanwhile, Aloysius grows. One day he opens his mouth to show a tooth pushing its way through the gum, translucent as your useless milk but strong enough. One day he will open his hand for you if you touch the backs of his fingers, and one day he will open and close it if you have something he wants. One day he will reach forward. One day he will lift his head from the ground, and all that effort only to look at you. One day you slide him onto your hip and take him out into the woods, to the place where his sister came to find you not so long ago, and where—somewhere in the ground, beneath the layers of white pine needles and insect carapaces and owl pellets and mulch—her body lies.

The trees are sweetening. You see barberries and bearberries bright and firm as a girl's nipples, chokeberries bitter enough for you to guiltlessly chew, raspberries still tart enough that when you place one on Ally's tongue he sucks, drools, closes his eyes, then spits out its pulpy remains and hands them back to you. You slip them into your mouth to sweeten away the choke juice, then kneel so you can reach the salmonberries warm with sun, pick a handful, and feed them one by one to your good boy.

You like that? you say.

He sucks, swallows.

That's the sweetest thing here, you know. Hold onto it, Ally. Hold onto it and remember it good.

The boy smiles at you. He has the gift of not-hearing that

only boys have. He wraps his hands in your hair and pulls it, hard, and you let your neck bend and press your forehead against the hot dome of his skull.

You think Petal might be waiting when you get back—jealous or angry or tired of being alone—but she is nowhere to be found, even after you put Ally down for his nap. It is hard to take yourself away from him, his warm breathing and cooing, the sounds of his body the sounds that milk makes. But it will be a long time before he opens his eyes, looks around the room and sees you are missing. It will be a long time before he wants you again.

You go downstairs and listen to the house settling around you. The newspaper taped to the windows is yellow as old bone, yellower still with the sun pressed against it. You stand for a long time in the center of the room, listening, half-hoping the baby will cry. You feel the grit beneath your feet, feel each grain of tracked-in dirt and know it must have once belonged somewhere, done something. A shard of flywing. A piece of claw. The dust of wood long rotted and the waste of all the animals that once lived near it. Powdery spores from childless ferns and chaff chewed over by field mice. A fragment of fine white hair.

The silence stretches wider and deeper, and you know you cannot outlast it. The trees sleep around you. Your husband is gone. Your body is empty. You have poured out all the goodness it can do. There will be no healthy girls, no growing daughters. You go out onto the porch, and wait for your Petal to return.