

Candlewick

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Now, don't go supposing I'm messed in the head like the others. I may be blind, but I'm not stupid. I know there are plenty of us who are a bit cracked, but I'm not one of them.

They first made themselves known when I was four, maybe five. *Candlewicking*, my mother called it. The way they'd come pilling up through my skin: a pretty arrangement of bumps in the skin of my belly, or winding up the inside of my arm. First, they learned to write my name. Then they asked questions: *What is color? Who is sky?*

I did my best to say.

Ma thought it was me tricksing. She tried to scrub them away, but they were in me. Of me, even. Then she read in the paper that a sightless boy was showing the signs too. His family had thought him blessed and taken him to see a priest, but Wicking was no blessing from an old-world god. It was a virus, they said, riding the gene waves of the afflicted.

They had written on him what they wrote on me: *We walk by faith not by sight*. Over and over. Down his spine and round his throat. A bracelet incantation.

When he was 12, he set out walking. And I did too.

There were those in parliament who said further testing should be done, and those who said you could not test for Star-born madness. Funding was given and taken away every time the scabbled remnants of the people voted someone in or out. Wicking was an issue that divided people: barely understood, only partly real. Besides, it wasn't killing us, they said, only marking us out as special.

And the walking? Well, that was unrelated, wasn't it? What virus could make a man leave his wife and child and land? That was only the strangeness of the blind, seeing what couldn't be seen and walking toward it night and day. We'd always been queer and troublesome, hadn't we, even before The End came? Wasn't it better now? And (this

last whispered only, in dark corners of half-emptied towns) wasn't it better to have us get up and walk out of our homes on our own? Not have to be starved or Banished? Not have to be driven away?

Where are they going? Some asked.

Nobody could say. Not even the blind.

Once a young man came alongside me, matched my stride, asked where I was headed. I slowed a little and held out my arm so that he could touch or see the words Wicked in there.

Are you mute, too? He puffed.

I shook my head.

He leaned close. I could smell his skin and hair. Clean they were, and strange; he smelled of apples and soap—not, as I did, of rain and roads. *How long you been walking?* He said, and I tried to recall.

A year, I thought. No, 10. And shrugged.

They're calling you ghosts, he said. *Saying you walk till your feet bleed and your teeth fall out. Saying you walk till you fall dead in your tracks. Saying you're mad, all of you. Not worth saving.*

I nodded. Remembered my mother saying that a penny earned was a penny saved, and smiled to remember my sister—whose name was Penny—tilting her head and frowning in an effort to understand.

He came in close. I could smell his teeth, his clean, sweet breath. *We're doing tests,* he said.

For what?

It's the virus, we think, what has set you all walking. Not God, or the stars, or some divine stranger. The virus they made to make you cast yourselves out. Save them the trouble.

Them?

Government researchers. It's called WT-4ZG. We call it the Vision Virus.

We?

He was getting tired. Asked me to slow myself a little, but I'd been walking too long for that. *My mother was blind,* he said, trying to catch my eye.

I nodded. *Went walking?*

Twelve years ago now, he said.

Miss her?

Never knew her, he said. But yes. What's a boy without his mother to raise him?

Sure, I said.

We can help you, he said.

I don't need help.

We can settle you. He laid a hand on me, like a question. Asking me to stop.

Oh, how the fury rose up inside me. My heart beat faster, my throat burned. I was raging inside. Raging like a wedding fire. I picked up my pace, pulled away. How old was he, I wondered? How strong? Could he hold me? He couldn't, surely. Just the thought of it made me ill. I would bite him, I thought. I would kick and bite and thrash until he let me go. Until I could walk. Sweet and wild and free.



Kay was one of those they'd Banished. Like prisoners in the old days, or the mad or the homeless, the Banished were as good as dead. In the eyes of the law, anyhow. They had no right to worldly goods, nor to food or love. They had no right to speak (in public or in private places), no right to what they'd earned or grown or given birth to. Less than prisoners they were, less than slaves. They stood mute and blinking in the fields, like cows.

They gave Kay's children to her husband and his new wife. Gave them her clothes, even, and what goodly things she had: two rings and a silver bell she'd worn at her ankle when she was wed.

I met her walking. Found her loping at my side and felt her reach for me, pull my hand onto her belly to feel the bumps on her skin. She was Candlewicked, like me. One of the damaged: one of the damned. I slowed and held her hand to my own marks: the same strange phrase circling my wrist, like an earthworm swallowing its own tail.

They Banish you? She said, and I said nay, there'd been no need and laughed.

I had nothing to claim, and nothing to relinquish, I said. *Was just a child when all that started*. Even as I said it, I thought of Penny. My little sister. She and I had shared a bed when we were small. Had shared a bowl and a stool. When our mother said I'd got the Wicking 'cause I couldn't see, Penny said she'd share her eyes with me. She'd make me see. And make me stay. At night, afraid I'd wake and set off walking while she slept, she'd tie me to the headboard with her skipping rope. Sleep with one fist clenched around my wrist. But the walking was inside me. Rocking and growing. Like an itch that burrows into every bone.

Where you walking to? Kay said, and I said nothing. Who knew where we were headed, or when we'd each arrive? Only the nubbins in our skin. Only the Candlewick could say.

Kay was sensible and straight-talking and strong. When we were set upon she'd put up a good fight. She carried no weapons, but threw a good right hook and was strong and wiry enough to best almost any man. She knew which roads to take—the roads where the seeing rarely travelled. Our roads, they were. The Corpse Roads, she called them.

She was a gambler. There were still those who'd throw dice with us. Who thought we were an easy touch: so restless, we wouldn't wait to know the way things fell. So set on walking, we wouldn't stay to settle a bet. But Kay was never easy. There were two different people in her skin: the woman and the gambler. Whoever wanted to walk away from meeting her in good health had to understand the difference. A shrug and a pulling out of empty pockets—a promise to pay up when she next passed through—were enough to convert the grinning lady into a mortal enemy.

Kay's duality was reflected in her body. One of her breasts had been removed because she had breast cancer back before *The End*, before her family cast her out. She wore a kind of corset under her man's shirt, which was so firmly shaped that, when she took it off to wash, it stood on the riverbank looking for all the world as if she were still in it. When she was clothed, she kept the few things she treasured wrapped in a small velvet bag stuffed into the cavity where her left breast had once been. Many fools lost their bets to Kay, and tried to expunge themselves by driving a dagger through her breast and into her heart, which caused

her no pain at all. Her heart, like her chest, was only half-flesh. Who knew what the other half was made of? Drawn close in the attack, she would enfold her debtor in her arms and invite him to dance. I would hear the smile in her invitation. Hear his indrawn, startled breath and wonder where she'd learned to dance so swiftly, and with such deathly skill.



I wouldn't have known her for my sister. But she knew me. Had I changed so little in all those years? I heard her coming up behind me on her cycle. The wheels turning slow, the gears click-clacking. It was laboring, and so was she. You could hear it had a load on it. Must have been an old thing, in need of oil and greasing. When she drew alongside, I took her for a trader, said I wanted for nothing and had nothing to trade in any case.

"Luce," she said, then firmer, "Lucy."

I hadn't paused for six good years. Hadn't stood with two feet flat. We were like whales or sharks, finning through the world even when we slept. But I stopped then. *One Mississippi*, I counted inside my head. *Two Mississippi*.

She took hold of me—not like a stranger does. One hand on your arm, or just an extended finger, reading your Wicking like you're nothing. Like you're nobody. Took me in both her arms, wrapped them around me and held on. *Four Mississippi. Five Mississippi. Six Mississippi. Seven.*

I started to rock.

"We can walk," she said, and I heard her lift the bike from wherever it was leaning, bringing it alongside. Boots, she was wearing. Good ones. Thick, honest, hardwearing things.

"Mother's gone," she said, and for a moment I wondered where to, and then figured it out without needing to ask. Mother had a sign when we were little, fixed it to the door some days.

"Gone Fishing," I said, and Penny laughed a little and said she guessed so.

“You marry yet?” I said.

Another laugh, her head turned away. Some ache inside it she couldn't shift. “Come home,” she said, and it was my turn to smile. Shake my head.

“Can't,” I said.

“Won't,” goes she.

“This is my home,” I said.

“Then it's my home, too,” says she.



“Is it dark?” she asks me.

“I don't know,” I say. “Darkness and light are things I've never seen. Can't touch them. Can't smell them. Don't know whether they're sweet or rough, cold or smooth.”

“Stop,” she says.

I shake my head. “Can't,” I say.

She takes my hand. I know she's weary. The weight of the road is in her bones. “I need to rest,” she says. There's a box at the front of her bike. The kind we used to ride in together. Our mother behind, pedalling. Groceries in our laps. Sweets in our mouths. When it rained, our mother would put the plastic cover over us. The close, cold smell. The pitter-patter sound of rain. Penny would blow on the plastic and write her name in the condensation. *Mine too*, she said, though I couldn't see it.

She beds down in the box and I take the handles, walk my sister through the night.

“Why can't you?” she says. “Stop?” Too tired for proper talking.

The night air is cool. I can feel the road in front and behind. Like it's part of my body. Like I'm *in* her, breathing up stones and soil. And if I stop, she'll leave me. How do I explain to someone the loneliness, the grief that whelms me at the thought?

“You remember when Old Skyler died?” I say.

“HMMMM,” she says, barely awake now.

“You remember how you sat in the corner all day? All night. Knees drawn up, arms round your shins, rocking. Mother tried to stop you.

So did I. But there was something in you, something passing through. Skyler's ghost, perhaps. Or grief."

"Hummmmm," she moans, turning, warm.

"Like that it is, only bigger. Wilder. No rocking will soothe it. It's like. . . like you're part of the ocean. Pulled by the moon, thrown on the shore, pulling back and turning, and thrown again. Seeking a river. Seeking a pond. Some stillness, some silence. Some true and quiet place where you can rest."

As soon as I say it I know it's not right. It's bigger than that. And stranger. But no matter how hard I fossick in my head, there are no words to tell her what it's like. She'd have to feel it inside her. Moving through. Towing her in its wake. And though it's a gift and a blessing, I wouldn't wish that on her. On anyone, really.

"It's bad," I whisper.

"It's strange," I say.

But she's sleeping sound now, deaf as a lake.



"Who's that?" says Kay, and I tell her it's my sister.

"She Wicked?" Kay asks, and my sister says she isn't and we wait, all three, to see if any of us will say what we're thinking.

An hour later Kay says she can smell something on the wind, and asks if we do too. I take in a lungful of air and so does Penny. "Nothing," I say, then realize it isn't true and try again. "Something," I say.

"Something sweet," Penny says.

"Something burnt," says Kay.

Penny mounts her cycle and says she'll ride on ahead a little, see what's happening and Kay says fine, and I say nothing, thinking *don't go*. Feeling anxious that she won't return. Penny cups her hand around the top of my arm, kisses my cheek before she goes.

Kay waits till we can't hear the crunch of my sister's tires any more before she asks what's going on. "Your sister?" she says. "How'd she find you?"

"My little sister. And I don't know."

“It makes me uneasy,” she says. “Their kind, mixing with ours. Bad things happen.”

“What kind of things?”

“You hear rumors. Blind folk raped, robbed. Worse things. . .”

“She’s my sister.”

“She’s one of them.”

“She loves me.”

“She loved you. When you were babies. Before you were Wicked. Before you became a walker. Who knows how she feels now. Or what she wants.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kay pulls away. I hear her sniff the air. Turn my head toward the scent of grass burning, of meat.

“She can’t be trusted,” Kay says, and though I say nothing I shake my head. Kay comes closer, whispers though there’s no one near. “I’ve heard of people taken off the road. Tied down. Cut open.”

Is that my sister I hear, riding back toward us?

“Drained of all their blood. Hearts cut open, lungs removed.”

“Penny?” I call out. Kay moves away a little, but I swing against her and say, “She’s my sister,” one last time.

“Sure, and it’s your funeral, too,” Kay says, and laughs.

I move away. “Penny?” I call, and hear my sister halloo in reply. Something wrong in her voice. Something breathless and afraid. “What is it?”

“We should take another path,” she says, cycling round me, dismounting, coming alongside. She smells like smoke and sweat and fear.

“What did you see?”

“Please,” she says, “let’s just take another road. There’s a turnoff a little way back.”

“Not one of our paths,” says Kay.

“Please?” says Penny.

I search the aches and pulleys inside me, feel the wrongness of the path she wants us to take. A half-mile back and veering west. The earth too soft. The grass too tall. Something uncanny knifing along it,

breathing darkness. Breathing death.

“We can’t go that way,” I say.

“We can’t go this one,” Penny says.

“Why?” says Kay. “What’re they burning?”

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. I can almost hear my sister shake her head.

“Walkers,” she whispers. “You,” she says.



Once, when we were small, my sister brought me a bird with a broken wing.

“It can’t fly,” she said, and put it in my hands. I don’t know what a bird looks like, but I know how one feels when it’s lying broken in your hands. A bird is a riddle you can never answer. A piece of the sky that has broken away.

We took it into our bedroom and put it in the warm space between our pillows, in a nest made of our old jumpers. We fed it water with a dropper that our mother had used to give us medicine. Penny snuck worms and caterpillars and other bugs into our room. She would put them in my hands before she offered them to the bird. The things that lived in the earth were wet and boneless. We wanted to keep it safe until it was well enough to fly, but one morning we woke to find it had died in the night.

It would be truer to say that Penny woke and found that the bird had died. That she put it in her pocket and took it outside and buried it somewhere. Then came back and told me it had flown out the window while we were sleeping. She was younger than me, but this is what blindness does to those who love you: it makes them afraid to let you feel.

Penny refused to talk about the years between when I’d started walking and now. She would say only that our mother had died. Not how or where or why. She had such a way of talking—such a gentle, antique way of saying things—that she seemed older than me. She had beautiful manners, but there was steel in them, too.

I worried about the roads ahead. How Penny would fit into our Walker's life. I could not feel her in the roads—could sense no place for her. We were walking a sea road when I felt a shadow pass over us—a great flock of birds—and heard them crying out. My sister gasped and stood still. I tried to imagine what they would look like, these birds that blotted out the sun—what it would be like to see that blanket of living things move above you. I tilted my head up as I walked, but saw and felt nothing. Only heard them moving farther away.

When she caught up with us again she tucked her arm around my waist and walked that way for a while, her head on my shoulder. I felt tears, but she said nothing and neither did I, until later that night, when Kay had wandered off.

“How did she die?” I said.

“I don't really know,” she said finally. “She was fine one day. Or . . . not fine. . . but herself. And then she wasn't, quite. She lied down and wouldn't get up. Wouldn't eat. Held a scrap of cloth in her hands and worried at it a little, but that was all.”

She said that our mother had lain on a narrow bed in the front room with one eye on the road that passed by our door, and that as her mind skittered away, she'd sometimes coo a little, sometimes weep.

“Our mother's heart had frozen solid in her chest,” my sister said. “She could not put her longing for you to return aside. She could not be content.”

She came then to the final moments and her voice dropped, and I could feel the darkness leaning in around us. The trees creaked and the wind stopped. Worms and beetles turned in the earth beneath our feet.

“She got up while I was sleeping,” my sister said, “and put a rope around her neck.”



That night, I could not sleep. I walked slowly along a seaside path, hearing the ocean hush, hush. Feeling the weight of my sister in the cycle I pushed along at my side. There were paths in the sea, but they

weren't ours. Airless, they were, and deep and strange. Things floated along them: enormous, sinewed worms.

The path veered upward. I could sense the cliffs at my side, the long drop onto wet stones. Kay was there, just as I'd known she'd be, and I was glad of it. Glad not to be alone with my thoughts any longer. I called out to her, and she called out, too. Soon we drew alongside each other and fell into step, as we'd always done.

She'd been back to the field we'd gone so far to avoid, to the paths that wound around it, and spoken to a man she met there. Someone she'd known before, who'd been a doctor at the clinic where she delivered her last child. It was the walkers they'd been burning, he said. The bodies that piled up by the side of the roads had to be dealt with somehow. The military drove along collecting the dead each week, piling them up in barren fields and burning them.

Her friend had been part of a team working on a cure for the virus, and they were close, he said. So close. He'd gone to the military camp hoping to convince them to let him do autopsies on the bodies in exchange for giving the walkers decent graves, but was told that nobody wanted to see what they'd seen at H----- and O-----: fields of graves wider and broader than any field of wheat. A crop of the dead.

They'd offered to arrest him if he didn't leave. Use him for testing the next batch of WT viruses. Told him he was lucky to be walking away. A week later there was a raid on his lab—men in unmarked, masked military gear. Men without names or nations. He was on the run, Kay said. He was leaving the country with the latest batch of untested antivirals tucked into the pockets of his coat.

I turned my head and felt the ocean tease me with her breath. So cool and clean and strange. "Antivirals," I said.

"Yes," says Kay.

"To cure us of walking?"

"Of all of it," says Kay. "Of the Wicking and the walking. Of the blindness, too."

Then she leaned close, took my hand and raised it to her breast. "He only wagered one," she whispered. "But I stole another while he slept."



Of course, any gambler knows you can't win every time, no matter how smart or quick or strong you might be. So when Kay and I held hands and tossed back those antivirals as if we were tossing back shots of tequila in some pre-Ending bar, I guess we knew that there were only three possible outcomes: win, lose, or draw.

After a few hours, I felt nauseated. My heart started racing, then skipping. My head was light. By the afternoon of the day after we started taking them, I was vomiting. Kay too. We tried to make Penny believe we were just hungover, but by the second day she wasn't buying that.

"What have you done?" she said.

I felt myself bristle. What had I ever done, but what I was told? Stand here. Wait there. Even the walking was a thing my body told me to do. No, not even my own body, but some false motion put inside me by a goddamn virus. "Nothing," I said, sulky as a child.

She said my name. In that exact same tone as our mother used to. Plaintive. Impatient. Insistent.

"Kay got a cure from some guy she met on the road."

"A researcher," Kay said. "Fleeing for his life."

"Jesus Christ," Penny said. "And you took what he gave you? Without question?"

"Won what he wouldn't give freely," Kay said, her voice plagued by breathlessness. "Won the damn shit fair and square."

"What is it?" Penny said. "How much of it did you take? When?"

"Antivirals," I said, "and all of it."

"Night before last," Kay said.

I could hear that Penny was shaking her head. Swearing under her breath. "You don't look good," she said, and I shrugged. What had looking ever been to me? She put her hand on my arm, on my forehead, then the back of her hand on my neck. "Antivirals," she said, "you idiot."

I hated her then, for being like all the rest. Thinking Kay and I had no right to make decisions about our own lives. Our own bodies. Who cared if we walked? Who cared if we fell? If we took risks, and set out on

our own path to live our own lives. It was nobody's business but our own.

Clouds had blocked the warmth of the sun. We walked. Penny got on her cycle and went ahead, and I was glad to feel her leaving. The paths were tangled and unclear. Crossing over and over each other. Narrow and dark. My head was swimming. For the first time since I began walking, I felt myself lost.

I counted on Kay to walk beside me, keeping pace as she always had.

I believe I kept going for a day and a night after Penny rode off. It rained twice during the night: once softly, and once so heavy it was like being beaten by a thousand pin-armed devils. The green smell of the ocean changed.

Kay slowed. I heard her coughing and spitting and came in close, put my hand on her back. She was thin and hot and damp. Her heart raced and rocketed. "My legs ache," she said. "My joints are so stiff I can barely move."

I put an arm around her and we kept going. We had lost whatever path there might be. We tripped several times over vines or roots or stones. The path was steep—we were headed down into a valley of some kind—and sometimes it slid out from under us.

I was less angry with Penny than I had been. My shoulder and wrist and finger-joints ached. When I tried to hold of a bit of tree to steady my descent, my hand wouldn't grip. Instead, a strange stinging shot up through the back of my arm, all the way to my elbow. Kay was getting weaker. She couldn't throw up anymore, even though her body still retched every now and then.

I heard something nearby. Some living thing, about the size of a small child. And then I thought I saw it.

A round burn opened in my head, and inside the circle of it I saw something that would have felt like warm, dry moss, moving. If I had had a gun I would have shot it just to know that I could. Just to prove that I had seen it. It turned around and lifted part of itself up: its head. There were two wet stones in its head. Were they its eyes? Did it look at me, before it leapt away and was gone?

Then I heard Penny calling, and whipped my head as if I really could look back the way we'd come, but the burn went away. Penny came running toward us, and fell on her knees at my side. "Oh God," she said. "Oh God."

"Where did you go?" I said, which came out petulant, though I'd meant to let her know I missed her. Meant to say how much she was needed.

She hesitated. I heard her take a deep, sad breath. "I'm sorry," she said. "So sorry for your loss."

Which is how I knew that Kay was really dead.



I recovered. The Wicking faded—like an old tattoo, my sister said. Or a scar that's only visible when you're tanned. And I learned to stand still—to sit, and lie down. We found somewhere to live, in a small place far from anywhere we knew. Penny took in mending, and I did whatever I could. We had a small, unremarkable life.

The antivirals worked on some, but not others. There were antiretrovirals later, but the side effects were. . . hard. Some chose to keep walking, knowing it had no deep purpose. Knowing they would one day fall down dead by some unknown path. Be buried in a roadside grave.

What difference, they said, to die while working in a field? While lying in a bed?

Every now and then, I'd ask Penny what she'd seen in that field, and she would snap at me, saying if I cared so much I should have gone and looked myself. That I could go back there now, if I cared so much, and dig around in the goddamn earth for my lover's bones.

Later, she woke up crying, and when I went to her she put her wet face against my breast and whispered. "It was awful," she said. "I was so worried for you, and for Kay. I saw your body burning. Saw you in the cages waiting to burn. I thought I'd get caught. Thought someone would see I was horrified, so when someone looked at me I took hold of the nearest boy, and someone took the other end, and we hoisted it up."

“Him. Up.”

“Swung him into the flames. And we kept going, that woman and I, walking back and forth from the cages. And I hurried the others along.”

“You had to,” I said. “They would have caught you if you hadn’t played along.”

She pulled back. Her voice hard. “No,” she said. “I didn’t have to.”

In the morning, while we were kneading bread, I tried talking to her again, but she only talked about the bread. I heard her stop and lift the dough she was working from the board. “Look,” she said. “Do you think it’s ready?”

“It’s okay,” I said. “You did what you had to do.”

“That’s bullshit,” she said. She threw the dough down hard on the counter and started working it again. Grunting with effort. “Don’t you get it,” she said. “I wanted them to burn. All of them. You too. And Kay. I wanted it over. I wanted to be free of all this. . . all this shit.”

Pulling, stretching, throwing.

“I wanted things to go back to how they were. Before you were born. Before you went blind.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I forgive you.”

“Fuck you,” she said. “Fuck you, and fuck your forgiveness.”



Penny died a few years later. I had told her about the animal in the forest. I think perhaps she thought I could still see, but wouldn’t admit it for some reason. She kept asking me questions, or making comments on things she saw as if I might be seeing them, too. “Look at that bird,” she’d say, “how strange to think something so large can fly.”

I wish Kay had survived, if only so that I could ask her if she still felt the urgent pathways of the earth passing through her at the end. I’ve outlived any others I might have asked. The ones like us: walkers who survived the cure. There was that woman over the other side of town—and a man I heard of living in a hut on a mountain. But there’s just me left now—who walked and was Wicked. Who slowed and didn’t die.

I'll be dead soon, I'm sure. The Candlewicks know it. They itch and burn beneath my skin. Reappearing sometimes, like the ghosts of old wounds. When I touch them, I feel the earth's paths rising through me, singing, but at so very great a distance. So very far. So very faint. I feel the stones and soil and miles. I feel the strangeness of my sister's world, and mine; how blind it is, how little it can see.