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Rune Story of a Wicked Queen

I Daeg

BEGIN WITH THE HEAT OF THE SUN, the heat of the summer, and a cottage set standing in the middle of a meadow only a stone's throw from the lake, and a girl and a boy playing in the field, green butterfly nets twirling in the air, orange monarchs, tiger swallowtails. The nets come down and Rudy is trudging through the wheat; he is wearing swim shorts that show the bony knobs of his knees, deeper and deeper into the long blades, just as if he were gilding into lake water, wading beneath waves, until all that is visible is his head, his face, his sandy bouncing curls, his lips blue from popsicles.

Rudy's stepmother's hair is long and dark. She watches him disappear from behind the sliding glass doors. "Go outside!" she'd told him, "You're always under my feet!" She watches his body vanish like a small neat burlap sack, the kind that binds the roots of a tree, the kind you bury underground. "Get out of here."

When the girl sees him surfacing from the wheat, she pulls at her sundress that sticks to her flesh, her face is as red as the red apples on Rudy's stepmother's trees. "You eat my apples, and I'll kill you!" This is what Rudy's stepmother said to her once—this is what she said to the girl who doesn't even like red apples. "Okay, Mrs. Windish," the girl whispered back.

Rudy stops at the maple tree, a jar once used for pickles is set against its trunk. Its glass still emits garlic. Four monarch butterflies flutter and bump over the scraps of milkweed the boy and girl have dropped in the bottom of the jar. Later the boy will drench cotton with nail polish remover. He'll carefully open the jar's lid and drop the cotton in. The butterflies will stop fluttering. One by one their bodies will come to rest, their damp feet will stick to the sides of the jar as if they were coated with honey, their wings will sluggishly heave, two tired lungs rattling out the remnants of memories, or hearts collapsing in upon themselves. The butterflies will look as if

they're sweating, as if the work of staying glued to the glass has suddenly become burdensome. Their wings will fold shut and they will tumble like flat triangles upon the cotton.

Rudy's stepmother locks the door and draws the curtains, turns the newspaper into a fan, goes to the kitchen for ice. She has never known a day so hot, never felt sweat cling to her flesh so ubiquitously. It is like a moist aura, preventing her melting body's collapse, insisting upon her upright posture. She draws the kitchen curtains, splashes two shots of rye into her glass, unbuttons the small pearl buttons of her dress. The buttons extend like a vertical horizon, and as she lets the dress fall, she thinks of the lake, of the sails on a boat, of the taste of a kiss. The ice is already melting. She swallows two mouthfuls of rye, then lies on the cool kitchen floor and closes her eyes. In her dreams, she is beginning again. Hanging a mirror on a wall.

The girl and boy lead Rudy through stripes of long dry snake grass that cuts their ankles; they lead him past the old rusty tractor that has slept like an enchanted princess for years under the shade of a mulberry tree. They take his hands and pull him over the powdery glaring road that explodes tiny landmines of dust at their footfalls, a place he is forbidden to pass, the outskirts of his kingdom—a boundary beyond which there is no protection from worldly danger.

The girl and boy drag him to the top of the rickety stairs. Shreds of paint, emerald green, curl from aged wood. The stairs are cracked, wobbly, in some instances missing altogether. The girl and boy drag Rudy over sandy bumps, perilous protruding planks, rusty spikes, rocks. They pull him along, allowing his resistance to amuse them, a game which, in the end, Rudy himself can not stop playing. His laughter is swallowed by the susurrations of waves, their white-tongued lapping, their timid growl. Sweat drips from his forehead, runs down his cheeks like tears, drops into the scorching sand where in an instant it vanishes.

The girl and boy are slick with sweat, their hands slide over Rudy's arms; before long they can not hold him. He breaks free from their grasp, gallops off in the opposite direction, gallops off towards the pink sun. The water laps around his running shoes, saturates them, makes them loose and ponderous, makes every step he takes a chore.

The boy and girl catch him before their thirsty shoes drink in the lake, and then the three march back and forth, two wardens and their prisoner. Rudy kicks sticky sand from his shoe; his shoes fly over the lake like small falcons. The boy and girl, red-faced, glistening, kick their shoes off, too. They all laugh so hard that they fall in the sand; so hard, that they don't

know where they roll. Dead carp, charcoal, weed, bone, everything sticks to their dripping flesh, and they are transformed to human mosaics.

Rudy's stepmother slides her fingers over her damp breasts, then down towards her naval.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, a voice inside her chants, never let it crack or fall.

II Ansur

Words pour through her mind, familiar words, meaningless words, disconnected from their speakers. It has always been this way for her.

Sometimes it is her own thoughts speaking, but never in her own voice.

"What made you think you wanted this? What made you think you could ever be happy?"

Sometimes the voice is her mother's voice. Sometimes it's the voice of a childhood friend.

"Look what you've gone and gotten yourself into."

And what has she gotten herself into? Lying drunk and naked on a kitchen floor in the middle of the afternoon?

"Where in hell is he, anyway?" Whose voice was that, she wonders.

The voices are all talking about the same things; they're all talking about her and her life and the mess she's made of it.

"Love, led, you'll wish you were dead," a voice whispers.

And she does wish she were dead. She would give anything to be dead right now. Her hands drag back and forth over her stomach.

"You made your bed, now you're going to have to lie in it." Another voice tells her, *"You're always looking for the easy way out."*

In her mind, she sees her red car, speeding over a hill, speeding away from this place she's come back to. She sees herself, eight summers ago, younger than she ever remembers being, with open boxes spilling her girlhood out over the wide back seat: stuffed animals, dolls, fashion magazines.

"You'll be sorry," her mother said when she left. It was a curse. But she wasn't sorry; she wasn't sorry at all at first, with the top of the car down and the radio blaring CKLW. She wasn't sorry at all, chewing Wrigley's spearmint gum, listening to Michael Jackson sing love songs, stirring the ember on her cigarette with her excited inhalations.

Something opened to her in that moment. Suddenly everything became possible. It was like a magician had lifted a trick cloth and where

there'd been nothing, there were suddenly worlds. Dozens of beautiful worlds lying before her, strewn over velvet. Which one would she pick? What life would she make for herself? It was that simple, with the music weaving webs in her hair and the sun gleaming its warm promises. How could she have guessed that the curse had taken? That all the beautiful worlds would turn.

The car stripped the blackness of the highway white; it tugged at the sky; it sucked in the curse. The city extended its sparkling arms. It spoke in a voice all its own. "We've been waiting for you," it said.

At first, she did not think its words were ominous. At first, she heard those words as if they were spoken from a good parent's mouth. "I love you, city!" she called from her car, shimmering under its street lamps. "I love you, city!" she called, and the lights that twinkled in the city's river, whispered back. "We love you, too."

"*Mirror, mirror on the wall, never let it crack or fall.*" It wasn't the city that said that. But now she sees the mirror, the large oval white-framed mirror that she packaged in cardboard and twine and carefully placed behind the passenger seat. This is the mirror she inherited, the mirror her grandmother bequeathed, the mirror her mother insists she stole. But she didn't steal it. It really had always belonged to her. Just like this city.

The apartment she'd rented was not bright and new; light did not pour into its kitchen; there was no balcony on which she could stand and watch the boats breaking their trails over the river. She unpacked the mirror and hung it on her wall and when she looked into it, the person who looked back was someone she had never seen.

She thinks about the unfurled leaf of a morning glory, and the way a twig becomes a tree. How one thing, that at first looks odd and separate, becomes imperceptible in its merging with a larger design. But here she was, in the city, looking as if she'd grown in reverse, the larger design cast from her, like so many demons, all the family affinities stripped away. How different she became as she stepped from under the awning of their bodies, the shadow of her mother lifting from her face. She had somehow grown smaller and lighter in this dark apartment, and it would take her years to get to know herself. But she didn't have years; she barely had three months before she would begin to blend, again, in a different design. Her mother's curse had taken. She looked at the mirror on the wall in vain. She could not see herself any more. What she saw instead was love's sarcophagus.

III Feoh

The boy and girl and Rudy wade out into the lake to retrieve their shoes. The water smells of fish. The sand is soft and squishy, and slippery. Weed strings itself over their ankles as they proceed. Their shoes float like little catamarans; they wag up and down on the waves; both wind and current tow them towards the wide horizon, and the boy and girl and Rudy follow where they lead.

They are like little trudging feet, these shoes, marching over small grey hills of water, heading out to the place where it seems the world ends, where the lake concludes.

These shoes elude the children, who bounce and splash after them, who reach with thin arms and small fists; the shoes tease them, stepping in directions unexpected, sliding suddenly beneath shelves of water, bobbing up in unlikely places.

These shoes are playing a game. They are calling “here I am, come and get me!” And the children immersed in play have lost the voices of their parents, their words of caution, the memories of punishment and rebuke. Right now, for these children, it is as if nothing else exists in the world.

Rudy’s stepmother considers the mirror. She considers her obsession. Her hands trace outlines of seashells and flowers over her thighs. The mirror is broken. It has been broken now for more than six years.

She recalls the small silver spikes and daggers sparkling over the linoleum of her apartment floor when it happened and how she thought the design it created looked like a picture of snow. She recalls the scrape of broom bristles on glass, the bulk of the sparkling dustpan, the way the ink from the newspaper stained her hands as she wrapped up the fragments, and how the plastic garbage bag stretched like a balloon when she tossed them in.

And then she recalls the blood, a single drop at first, round and red as the sun, falling from her fingers. She didn’t know she’d cut herself; she hadn’t felt a thing, didn’t even realize she’d touched the glass. Yet her hands suddenly surged bright red.

At the hospital, glittering glass splinters were removed from the lines in her palms. She was asked what she’d done to herself. The question was overtly suspicious. What she’d done was accidentally drop a mirror. It slipped through her fingers before she’d had the chance to rest it on the floor.

“You must know what happened!” A voice jabs her. *“Look what you’ve done to yourself.”*

Warm tears slip from the grooves of her eyes, and like the constellation of tiny scars on her hands, she cannot account for them.

Waves roll in from the lake. In turbulent weather, they grow taller than giants, but today the heat has subdued their force. Still, they rise to kiss Rudy's blue lips, the girl's sweaty throat, and the boy's slumping shoulders. They rise to swell clouds of brown silt from the lake's depths, to spit up fish who expire in their journey home, to expose plastic cups, toilet seats, mufflers, and hosts of other vestiges, orphaned to their care.

The children maneuver themselves over the waves' small crests; they dip down in the valleys and rise up on the peaks; they pretend they are turtles and seals and dogs, and swim out further, fearing nothing, where their feet no longer touch the sand. They do summersaults and back flips while their shoes stoically march on, past the point of retrieval, past the point of return.

Scarred palms turned upward, she thinks of him. How when they first met, she could not stop thinking of him; how now she is obsessed in a different way.

She imagines him driving in darkness, rain sheeting his windshield. He would go out into that weather, say he was going to meet a client, a farmer with a busted tractor, a company with a stalled truck.

"See you soon." He'd kiss her forehead.

"Do you have to go?"

She looked after his son. Fed the boy dinner. Put him to bed. She watched rain cascading over the glass patio doors and the forks of lightning splitting the sky. She listened to the thunder drumming an echo over the lake, the creak of wind in the fruit trees, the choke of water struggling to drain from the eaves.

IV Is

In the winter, the lake hardens. Its top becomes a polished mirror of ice. Everything living slows to inactivity. Even the cold hearts of the mol-lusks freeze. Fish, unable to find their way to warmer climes, turn board stiff and sleeted. Like bookmarks, they hold a place in solid water, waiting for the spring.

It is Rudy who remembers winter first, with the cold fingers of the ice queen, snatching at his cherubic toes. He remembers the flatness of the ice, how he thought he could slide all the way to Michigan. How he skated over swirls of snow. The ice queen has caught his feet. This little piggy, just like his mother used to play. Her long fingers have twined around his ankles.

"I've been waiting for you, Rudy," she whispers on the wind's breath.

He'd walked out on the ice so far that from the shore he looked like a little dark speck, nothing more. He'd walked out so far that it was a

miracle, when it happened, that a farmer and his dog saw. The ice, thin as a wafer and the dark speck dropping through, and the border collie, Max barking, and the farmer reflexively moving, and the ice cracking and cracking, and Rudy calling, and the Ice Queen snatching and *"You're mine now, Rudy. You're mine."* And the farmer heaving him back into the cold winter light after he had already stopped breathing, and Max licking his face and whining, and the farmer twisting Rudy onto his belly with no thought at all for his own safety, and the farmer forcing Rudy back into this world.

In Rudy's house, his stepmother fishes the frail clear circles of ice from her whisky glass and sets them on her breasts. Cold water trickles into a small indentation above her heart. It pools in the curve of her belly. She thinks of stone, worn and hollowed out. This afternoon, he has gone to see a client. It is the same every Wednesday at noon. There are other times and days as well, other moments she could set her watch by. Times she is supposed to pretend that have no consistency, no patterns. Times which she is told only coincidentally seem contrived.

Yet, she recalls her times. The light she would leave on and off in her apartment window. The ways she would meet him discreetly, like a stranger, on his evening strolls. What longing had entered her? What strange spirits had rushed through? She couldn't explain it. The magician's black cloth sparkled with bright worlds and she was caught by the illusion.

Rudy's real mother, if she had been living, would have felt icicles penetrate her heart the day Rudy left home. She would have gone after him, followed him down the snowy wooden steps, collected him up in her arms. She would have made him hot chocolate and told him stories; later she would have gone outside with him, built a snow fort, found the old toboggan in the shed. Rudy and his real mother used to sing songs together. They used to play together with his building blocks and his matchbox cars. When the girl and boy would come in the summer, Rudy's mother would invite them into his house. She'd make lemonade for everyone. She'd give everyone thick pink wedges of sweet melon or slices of homemade pie.

The girl and the boy are never invited into Rudy's house anymore. They don't talk to Rudy about this. They don't know what to say. This is because this unfriendly mother just suddenly appeared one summer, looking so much like the friendly one, looking so much like Rudy, that the girl and boy aren't even sure if this mother is a different one.

"Hi, Mrs. Windish," they shout through the raspberry hedge whenever they come looking for Rudy. But she never calls back. Her spade stabs the dark patch of soil, readying it for tomato plants or endive or crocuses. It is the scarf she wraps around her head that makes it impossible for her

to hear. At least this is what the children say. This is the only explanation they can find.

Rudy feels the cold fingers of the Ice Queen snatch his toes. He is dog paddling, panting, as the water's support abandons him. How strange to suddenly find a memory here. Was he two? Three? His mother said he swam just like a little duckling. Bright orange water wings held him afloat. One day, in his hurry to enter the water, he left his wings behind. And now this memory has become something more, for as he struggles to turn, to carry himself back to the beach, he sees his mother standing there. The dark colours of her swimsuit, a sand bucket dropping on a castle, the details of her stricken face.

V Othel

What did she know of the other woman? Of the soon to be Mrs. Windish? Did the thought ever once cross her mind? Rudy has inherited both trust and blindness from his mother. He has inherited the same curl in his hair, the same earnest jaw line, the same ability to forget, to wipe clean anything that causes discomfort. In his genetic make-up there is the anesthetic of denial, and as the Ice Queen drags him into her castle, as his mother's face becomes a cloud in the sky, he is only aware of his body's growing numbness.

"An empty vessel" was how the woman lying naked on the kitchen floor saw her—a woman whose womb would split to fill the world with children, while she herself would remain everlastingly intact. From the moment they'd first met, she'd decided against liking her. The woman was a bore, a millstone, choking the life out of this man. What had he seen in her? What had he hoped for? This woman had given birth to his child and tended his house. She tried to imagine arguments they might have. She tried to invent stories to fuel her hate, but this woman was too vacuous for sullenness and resentment; ultimately, this woman was too vacuous to speak.

"Come and live with me," she told this woman's husband, wrapping him in her sky blue sheets. "She won't even notice you're missing."

And if she did notice, she never said. Her life revolved around the boy. The boy was her beacon. Everything else in her world was insignificant. Everything else in her life may as well not have existed at all. How she loved her boy. How she loved him on her lap in the rocking chair Saturday mornings. How she loved to nurse him, even after the Public Health nurse told her she needed to stop. Would she ever have stopped on her own? Would she ever have stopped baring her breasts to him and feeling the pleasure of his lips and tongue on her nipples? She kissed, then licked, his milky lips.

He made it so that she could taste the sweetness of her own breasts, so that she could become small again, so that she could see in him everything she had ever lost.

Did she ignore her husband's affair, raging around her like a hurricane? The blatant insistence of "the other woman" coming to dinner and then not even helping with the washing up? Laughing, instead, with him in the living room, sitting right next to him while she scrubbed pots and pans. But the boy was with her, standing beside her on a kitchen chair, too small still to reach the taps, his hands plunging in the soapy water. Together they had named his fingers and toes, just like his Bible story told him Adam and Eve had named the animals and trees in their garden.

He would speak to his hands. He would have them speak to each other. "This little piggy is named Joey. This little piggy is named Bert." When he looked at his fingers, he saw distinct faces. Little round piggy faces. Soap suds-snow collecting at their feet. He imagined them making snowmen and forts. He imagined them skating over ponds of ice.

Out here in the country there weren't many children for him to play with, but he talked to his fingers, and he never felt lonely. He never felt scared. His fingers would speak to him in the darkness of his room. The nightlight by his bedside was their moon. They would build tents under his blankets and sheets; they would sing him camp fire songs.

His mother had not considered his going to school. She had not even thought for a moment about the cruelty of children or the insensitivity of teachers. In fact, she had not considered anything, beyond this enchanted time. Perhaps, if she didn't think about the future, it wouldn't have to happen. Perhaps her boy would never have to go to school. Perhaps he would never have to grow up. Right now, his standing beside her on the kitchen chair was as far as she wished to think. But the following year, he would have to go to school. He would have to stand outside on the dusty gravel waiting for a bus. He cried when his mother left him. He cried all the way to school. The teacher tried to console him. She was older than his mother, plump and red-haired. Her breath smelled like mothballs. He didn't like her.

"Come on now, Rudy," she said, "you're not a baby, are you?" It was frustration that drove her to humiliate him. Her feeling of powerless at his grief. "Only babies cry like that!" she said. The children giggled. They sat straight and tall in their chairs. "Rudy's a baby!" the teacher told them. Did he really have to go to school? He was still so very small.

VI Lagu

The new Mrs. Windish, before she was the new Mrs. Windish, did not tell Rudy's father what she thought of his son. She smiled at the boy when she visited. She bought him a glider made of balsa wood and a steel pistol from the corner store. She gave him quarters to put in his glass bank and lime green suckers that tasted like cream soda.

He carried these offerings to his mother. He made her take them into her hands. "The lady gave me this," he'd say, wrapping his mother's fingers around an object, getting her to feel it as if she were blind.

He didn't know how to work the glider. He used the pistol as a horse for his piggy people. "Bert and Joey are riding away," he told his mother.

"Where are they going?" she asked him.

"Away," he said, and made the pistol gallop off between his hands.

When the old Mrs. Windish died, the new Mrs. Windish would not let him turn the pistol into a horse, would not let him play with his piggy people. She started saying things to his father. "I think there's something wrong with your kid."

She said "your kid" not "our son," though Rudy's father would have liked for her to say this. Still, she fed him tins of spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs. She made him sit at the table until he had cleaned his plate; she made him take his bath and tidy his room; she made him say please and thank you, and she put him to bed on time. She did his laundry, packed his lunch for school, bought him shoes and socks and underwear, took him to the dentist. Yet only vaguely was Rudy aware of her.

Since his mother's death, something had happened to him. It was like emerging from the water on a starless night. Everything above him had suddenly become vast, and there was no point in the darkness where he could fix his eyes. He saw this woman only dimly, as if she were surrounded by a poisonous haze, a fog that made his eyes water and his throat close, a fog that sent his brain reeling, just as if he were a cartoon character who'd been hit on the head with a hammer.

Joey and Burt did not like the lady. They talked about her under Rudy's bedclothes late at night. They said, "When we grow up, we'll fix that lady. We'll fix her for not letting us play with Rudy. For stopping our fun." They liked the old Mrs. Windish and didn't understand why she had to go away. "Will she come back?" they asked Rudy. "Some day," Rudy said.

Now there was water swirling around Rudy, sucking him down into an envelope of sand. Above him, he could see through the turbid water. There was exuberant sunlight, and for a moment he felt completely warm

and good. Then, the creeping cold snagged at his ankles and traveled up his knees to his chest. He could no longer feel Joey and Burt or make them move; he could no longer fight the voice that drank him in, that filled his ears, "*You're mine!*" The other children swam away. They didn't belong to her. "*You're mine,*" she said to Rudy, alone.

Wasn't this what his mother had said to him when she hugged him? He belonged to her. He was part of her. He would never be anything else. How could he not hug her back? Even as dead and cold as she was? How could he not want her to love him forever?

The new Mrs. Windish keeps a stash of sleeping pills on her bedside table. She uses them because she cannot get to sleep at night, because thoughts of her past keep her mind racing and her body weak.

"It serves you right!" Her mother's voice tells her. The voice comes upon her, when she most wishes to be deaf. "It serves you right! You home wrecker!" It finds her in her sleep and shakes her to consciousness.

And she knows she was a home wrecker, but she also knows this is nothing compared to the guilt that truly makes her wake. Did she really just dream it? Or had some evil demon actually crawled into her body. It wasn't her, was it? She could never do anything like that. She could never kill another person.

She staggers to the bedroom where she sleeps with Rudy's father, and takes two sleeping pills from a pill box. She really does not want to die, she decides. She does not want to be the second dead wife. She only wishes to sleep. She only wishes not to remember.

The Ice Queen is holding Rudy in her strong arms. She is holding him, and her breasts, full of milky lake water, have filled his mouth and lungs. Strands of emerald weed are weaving in his hair, and the sun, the bright exuberant sun, is finally setting.