

Mommy Scorpion
Cate Desens

Once upon a time, and early enough that the morning was yet innocent of heat, Franny summoned two brothers to visit us at home. These men had a problem: one of them had been compelled to take the shape of a giant tortoise.

From my post on the porch I freely observed the approach of the giant tortoise. Movement was not his preferred state of being. The tortoise dragged his toes through the trough of dirt that constitutes our driveway. With each pathetic lurch his bald head waved back and forth like a cat who's been hypnotized by a silly fleck of anchovy.

I sat up straight on the loveseat, my heart agitating the lumpy fibers of my sweater. I even yawned a bit, for my own benefit, yet it was impossible to fake nonchalance in the situation. The giant tortoise was taller than our house, which he relentlessly approached. Fine dust clouds preceded his fe-fi-fo footsteps. My stomach flipped but I forced myself to wait some seconds before I greeted the visitors.

Finally I wiped my lips and shouted, Ahoy there!

I received no reptilian acknowledgement. He was close enough I could make out the fat folds in his neck: and there clung his presumably unafflicted brother, about as comfortable as a log in rapids. Ahoy, up there!

To which the human man made no answer, or perhaps he inclined his head ever closer to the tortoise's eye? It seemed silly to ride the neck rather than the more natural seat, the domed shell.

Franny appeared, seeking my assessment of the situation. I noted our impending visitors. She corroborated.

I have prepared live crickets and water. Do you see their bonds?

I had not seen.

She said, These men are brothers, and the younger brother is bound to the neck of the older.

Oh. And the older brother is a tortoise?

Aye.

I once again wondered how Franny sensed and summoned these afflicted people, her clients.

And his brother bound?

Like a necklace.

Well, that explains his terrible posture, I said.

They came for help, she reiterated, and went back inside. There she hovered, inside the threshold, where the sun could not touch her face, nor the kitchen knife she carried.

By now the giant tortoise was in front of our house and making questions of us with his doleful eyes. It was hard to find the pupil of an eye so crusty; I looked at his unforgiving turtle lips, which said nothing. The younger brother is not breathing, said Franny, and so I saw, up there, his lips were blue.

I left my post and got a pitcher of Franny's water and glasses for us all. When I came back, Franny had climbed up and cut down the younger brother with her kitchen knife and he lay prostrate on the ground. I assume she had to climb the neck of the tortoise with the knife between her teeth.

I gave Franny the water and she sprinkled crickets into a glass and wet them and forced the drink into the lips of the brother. Then she rubbed his wrists and ankles where the skin was chafed.

Why did you force him to travel like that, I scolded the tortoise, and he looked at Franny with a look that could wither lettuce. It wasn't just the compulsive summoning. Repulsion, admonition, fear: that is how everybody reacted to Franny.

Franny carries the mark of the scorpion on her face. Proud hemispheres are demarcated by a tattooed scorpion. Scorpion tail illustrates her forehead, scorpion carapace encircles her right eye, and its two claws chase each other round her right cheek.

I'm her apprentice, and even I am scared to meet her gaze. The twitching tail is too off-putting; but those who know Franny accept the mark, because it is a visible reminder that she is not quite just human. She has received terrible gifts.

Even with two of us, the younger brother was a burden to move. If you want your brother to heal, you must join us on the inside, Franny said to the giant tortoise as we dragged him inside. The

giant tortoise looked at our home, the cozy place where we live. His shell would not fit through the front door.

Leave your shell, said Franny, and we went inside.

Franny got to work healing the younger brother, whose lips were blue. First she relieved his body of gravity and laid him down in blankets on the duvan. She laid a quilt over his belly and two pillows under his head.

Then to my surprise the older brother left his pride and his shell and tiptoed inside, sheepish and naked. He loitered in the antechamber until I saw him.

I don't understand, he said by way of greeting. That seemed reasonable to me: I understand very little. But I knew it would be best to allow him to rest away from his brother while Franny worked and I led him away from the duvan, into the guest bedroom where the heather incense burns and I brought him some clothes.

He was a short man, bearded and young. I gave him a long shirt (that on me was one of those shirt-dresses) and loose pants. He made no move to conceal himself and I witnessed his passive nudity without the betrayal of emotion and we exchanged no words, but as I turned to leave, he quickly finished dressing and followed me. From this I inferred he was a man afraid to be alone and afraid to lose control.

When we returned, Franny had left the younger brother to rest, flung open the windows, tended the kitchen herbs, and composed a letter to a faraway friend. She was just now tuning her guitar to play for the younger brother.

Seeing this, the older brother felt useless and outraged. I thought you would heal him, You are just enjoying yourself while he suffocates, he accused, and as sometimes happens, the scorpion tail on Franny's forehead seemed to twitch, or maybe shudder.

I am making it good for him when he returns, she said, Look, and the older brother looked into the face of his younger brother, and the doubt of affection passed across his face like a cloud. He is already getting better, said Franny, and so we saw, his breath in little mountains. I don't understand why you're helping us, he said in protest.

Then the older brother became afraid that someone would steal his shell and he went outside to check on it. I could have told him, you are a miser attempting to squeeze blood from a rock, or in this case from a shell, but to keep the peace I said nothing. In any case he came back enraged.

My shell is gone!

Are you shell-shocked?

He ignored my digs and Franny took over. Your shell is what was making your brother sick, and incidentally you, too, She soothed. In any case you are a man, not a tortoise.

He comes home and rails me, begs me to live freely like him, which he knows I can not do, the older brother raged, He pushed me, he made me become a tortoise, Which you did out of spite, said Franny firmly. It was wrong to keep him up there in the clouds. Did he bind himself up there?

The older brother, I realized, had more pride than was justified. With his hands on his back, he protested another's fault.

My brother lives for danger, the exhilaration of thin air. Franny said, He was lonely and suffocating.

I moved then away from the draining conversation to the younger brother, because he was making snuffle noises on the duvan. It turned out to be a false alarm. Mature afternoon shadows treaded across the room and the brother tossed but still didn't speak.

This worried Franny. She processed the data in the atmosphere of the room. There was the duvan, us, the guitar and the two brothers. Her tail shuddered, or maybe shivered. This room is full of stress and distrust, she said at last. We must reach a higher threshold, she said.

You two, make love, she said, and indicated to me and the older brother, who was still moping the loss of his shell in the corner. He ignored me. He said to Franny, Will you teach me your ways of knowing, and she said, You must not know much about love. Finally I caught his eye, and I found him not unwilling.

About three seconds of eye contact was enough lovemaking for me, and it was for him too, but we both blinked and turned away feeling that we liked it and would do it again soon. I was grateful for Franny. One of the best feelings of my apprenticeship was consensually giving up control: Somehow, I felt most in control only once I had given it up and regained it.

There was talk between the three of us now as the last sunlight simmered in orange scuzz on the duvan. The afternoon sparrows bleated their goodbyes, and switched places with the bats. As talk settled Franny hummed and it made me sad, though I couldn't explain why.

Surrounded by health, the younger brother regained his strength at last.

Brother, he said, realizing perhaps for the first time that his brother had changed, Where is your skull? He laughed. I mean, shell?

It's out there somewhere, said the older brother, with the vague expansiveness of someone who doesn't know, and the younger brother frowned, because he was not quite conscious and not yet quite grateful. Go look, said Franny, and he tottered out the doorway and she slammed the door behind him.

It's the best thing for him now, she said, dusting her hands, Although it might seem cruel. And besides, she nodded to the older brother, we have made a friend. And the worthy man said, But who will teach me how to heal and the ways of knowing, My apprentice will, said Franny, nodding to me, I don't have time, I am a scorpion woman and scorpions have very short lifespans.

You don't seem like a woman at all, the man said to Franny, and that's when I jumped in to defend her, No woman is just a woman. Franny is responsible to herself and to others, I am responsible to myself and to her and to you: a nexus: look what you witnessed today: Franny heals by gauging, processing and regulating emotions, she is cybernetic, and decisive as a scorpion, which anyone can learn to be.