



Cate Desens

Among the churned mud we walked and it was spring and we were aware of each other. I was feeling good about my hip-length denim jacket that I had patched myself, the hair on my arms felt injected with warmth and I got great pleasure in watching Meri's long red ponytail swing back and forth, back and forth.

Mandy walked beside me and that brought me pleasure also. We had not spoken for some minutes, despite the excitement of our mission, and I knew it was because she was turning her attention outward, to the spring birds, their spring hypnosis. I looked outward from myself too, like I was collecting seashells to show her later: hoping to see a deer or a haunted goose. Before I knew it, we had fallen behind Meri. I wanted to take Mandy's hand, but it didn't seem like the moment.

Around a bend in the path we found Meri waiting for us, twirling her long hair around her finger, the girl's favorite whirligig. I think we should turn around, she said. Why, demanded Mandy, instantly on the offensive with her bossy twin sister. But Meri refused to take the bait. Look, she said, and we looked.

From beyond where Meri sat, the path went down into a ravine, and the air was wet, and we could not make much out, except that beyond this point, the mud was extreme. Bria doesn't have hiking boots, Meri pointed out. Neither do you, Mandy practically snarled, but all the same, I appreciated her defending me. Meri wore fun, red, impractical red rainboots. I, the fool, wore tennis shoes. Only Mandy had on the appropriate hiking boots. I don't want to turn around now, I said. Who knows when we'll get another chance to look for the fountain?

I'm already worn out from walking this far. We should have brought water with us. So, we need to go back, Meri countered.

Let's just drink the fountain water, I joked, and instantly regretted it.

We agreed we wouldn't, Mandy said.

We can't, said Meri.

But we have to keep going, said Mandy, Because there are people who do need that water.

What about us? Said Meri, bitterly, because she hated to lose face. We'll drink the dew on the plants, if it comes to that, said Mandy, and so we continued down the path, even though we had been warned of the danger.



We walked in single file into the shade, keeping close together. Spring had left its wet whiskery kiss on this ravine. The eager moss grew in green spears, and the air tasted mineral. Mandy and I were quiet, as before, but not an amiable silence. I always felt out of place when she fought with her sister. Their history was more fraught than ours. Instead I found myself zoned out, thinking of my grandpa, may you all remember him fondly, my grandpa who was at that time in the process of dying, and I pictured him with a bar glass and wetting his turtle lips with the water of the fountain, and becoming well again.

My ankles ached, even though I work as a messenger in the comm four days a week. I'm used to going long distances. The twins, not so much: they were holding up much better than I would have anticipated. Mandy walked just ahead of me, and I was careful to put my feet exactly in her footprints. I couldn't see Meri at the front, but I could hear the squelch of her steps. And still the path descended. No trees could cling to the high rock walls of the ravine: they were carpeted with blueberry bushes and kudzu vine. When Mandy whipped around, her face inches from mine, it caught me by surprise. Do you hear that? She demanded, her eyes intense with excitement.

In between Meri's squelching steps, I heard it now. A forever crashing: running water. We picked up speed, high-stepping down and down, and rounding the curve to the left- out from under those gloomy walls at last! And in the sunshine that struck sudden as clarity, we saw the path dead-end directly into a broad, plain, low swamp. On the right the rock bluffs continued, and there was our waterfall, only a few yards away, flowing into the swamp.

Now what are we supposed to do, complained Meri, who I reckon was too smart to have struggled with much of anything before. Our way is blocked by cattails.

It's late in the day, I said before I could help it.

We rest and we go on, Mandy said firmly.

Meri started to protest. But Mandy went on. Once these cattails get taller, this swamp is going to be totally impassable. This is the only time of year that we can get through: the water's low and the plants are young.

I saw that Mandy wasn't backing down, and I wondered again who would get her share of fountain water. I just knew she wouldn't take it for herself.

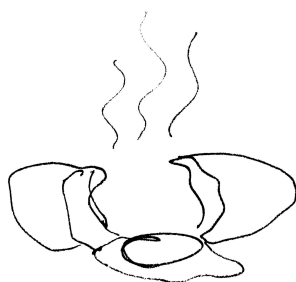
Let's drink from the stream, fresh good water, it'll wake us up. And so we did and it was the sweetest water I ever tasted. And then we faced the swamp.

I'll go first, she said. Holy shit, I love this girl, I thought.

We held each other by the shoulders and walked into the swamp. At first the water was shallow and the mud was deep. The mud covered our shoes. Then our shins. I was very grateful to be in the middle of the group. I began to think unpleasantly of fishy things slapping against my legs.

A fly landed on Mandy's shaved head and without thinking I swatted at it, leaving a gob of mud in her buzzed hair. Then we walked into a cloud of bugs. They swam in my nose and Meri tightened her vice grip on my shoulder. Are we going the right way? She yelled in my ear, panicked, but I didn't dare

open my mouth, in fear of bug penetration. It felt like Mandy was straining to break free of me, leaning like a sled dog, and the mud was so thick, up to my hips now, that each step felt like I was throwing myself against an ocean wave. Mandy! I said, horrified at the fear in my own voice, and she said Shhh! I can see the fountain!



As I am very short, and the mud forbade any unnecessary movement, I had to wait until we got to dry land to see what Mandy could see, but I think Meri was able to see the fountain almost as soon as Mandy did. That's what would make her actions make the most sense, anyway. First Mandy began straining against me: I honestly thought she was trying to shake me off: but a moment later I understood, she was straining uphill, and my thighs were burning, my legs had never been so heavy, and my breath was coming in little gasps, bouncing against my stomach and back out again.

With your respect and patience, I will now relate the unbelievable portion of our story, as it happened, even though it doesn't make any sense. But I do not lie.

First, Mandy walked out of the swamp and in watching her I finally understood how disgustingly muddy we three were. The backs of our legs and thighs were smeary and dank and the mud hung to our clothes like daubed paint. It felt like I had gained fifty or so pounds or so, but all over my body, not just in my belly. As I was taking in our immediate condition, however, Meri strode forward to the fountain.

I had expected a circular basin, with a stone dolphin, or else a chism deep into the the breathing earth, but the fountain appeared to us as magic does to children: as an intricate dollhouse, complete with three levels and tiny beds and it stood solemnly atop a flat stone, like one of those piles of rocks that hikers make, open to us like a cut-open cake. I recognized it: it was the dollhouse my grandpa had made for my mother when she was younger than I am now. From the kitchen sink in the middle level, a faucet slowly dripped. Meri strode forward, stuck her finger under the drip, and tasted it. Neither of us did anything to stop her, even though we had agreed that water wasn't for us. It's one thing to make a promise, it's another to enforce it.

Meri turned back around. She tossed her hair as she did so. But even as we watched her something went wrong with her mud-streaked face. She looked like she had tasted something very bad. Then her face cracked: there's no other way to put it: one second her skin was taut, then spiderwebbed, cracked. Then her eyes sunk into her head, and shoots of moldy white shot from her scalp through her hair, and shadows danced across her face like figures around a campfire, and then all at once the light went out. Mandy was screaming, I think.

As we watched, she slumped to the muddy ground like someone had tapped the crown of her head with a hammer.

Mandy placed a cool hand on Meri's forehead. I am no doctor, but even I could tell Meri had been cursed. *If I take what I don't need, I'll never find out what it is I do need*, I thought to myself. One of my

mottos that I stole from a book. Before I could really process what had happened to Meri, though, it started to get warmer, and then hot. Mandy bent over her sister and whispered to her. Even if I had known what she was saying, I wouldn't have understood: the intimacy between them predated words. Besides, something else had caught my attention. The swamp was on fire.



I knew from when my brother got bit by a rattlesnake when we were miles from home, that it would take all our strength to get Meri out, if she couldn't walk for herself. As I watched the fire as it rose up from the wet swamp, which should have been impossible: and it really was rose, pink and blush and orange and white, like flowers: and there was no smoke, or crackle of burning reeds: the fire was soundless and smellless. Not just the absence of smell or sound: but the eradication of it, like anti-sound, anti-smell.

I must have watched the fire for a long time, because Mandy had to work to get my attention. It should have been unbearably hot by then, but it was no warmer than a spring rain. And the impossible fire, that was brighter than any fire I had ever seen, before or since, had left the swamp, and came tiptoeing up to us.

Mandy and I supported Meri between us and prepared to get her away from the fire, but it was no use: we might as well have been trying to outrun the rising sun. The flames were twenty feet away, and then five. And then they were licking our boots. Meri moaned, but she might have done that anyway: we weren't in any danger. The mud peeled off our clothing in long, pleasing strips. The fire got in our eyes and our ears and our noses: it was like eating something with a pleasant tickle of spice: but simultaneously eating it through every pore in our bodies. And we couldn't see more than a foot in front of our faces. Everything was orange and shot through with gold and umber and blue.

We didn't say anything. We didn't need to. We just started walking. The waters of the swamp had solidified into a floor of flames. Mandy held up Meri on one side, and I held her up on the other.

It's selfish, but I found myself thinking of my grandpa again. He was surely dead. Why did I think he was any different? That I was any different, and could save him with a magic spell? Nobody figures out the pattern. We just repeat the same mistakes. Forgive me for my cynicism, but it's all I can do now to talk to you all here and now. Let me quickly explain the rest. We walked all the way home, the flames escorting us. Mandy and I, in discussing it afterward, figured that the fire is the guardian of the fountain of youth, and that if anybody went to look for it where we found it (which they shouldn't), they wouldn't be able to find it.

Then we walked into what was our home, and you all are having a party, and breaking open the rockets and the wine, and we ask you, What are you having a party for? And you say, it's a party for the three lost women, that they might see the rockets and come home, And when were those women lost? We

ask, Three weeks ago, you reply, and forgive me for not knowing what to make of this, it has been a very, very long day.

And we never did get Meredith to tell us why she drank the water of the fountain of youth: it took her all summer to get young again.