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Black Juice

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Extract

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singing my sister down

We all went down to the tar-pit, with mats to spread our weight.

Ikky was standing on the bank, her hands in a metal twin-loop behind her. She'd stopped sulking; now she looked, more, stare-y and puzzled.

Chief Barnarndra pointed to the pit. 'Out you go then, girl. You must walk on out there to the middle and stand. When you picked a spot, your people can join you.'

So Ik stepped out, very ordinary. She walked out. I thought – hoped, even – she might walk right across and into the thorns the other side; at the same time, I knew she wouldn't do that.

She walked the way you walk on the tar, except without the arms balancing. She nearly fell from a stumble once, but Mumma hulloo'd to her, and she straightened and walked upright out to the very middle, where she slowed and stopped.

Mumma didn't look to the chief, but all us kids and the rest did. 'Right, then,' he said.

Mumma stepped out as if she'd just herself that moment happened to decide to. We went after her – only us, Ik's

family, which was like us being punished, too, everyone watching us walk out to that girl who was our shame.

In the winter you come to the pit to warm your feet in the tar. You stand long enough to sink as far as your ankles – the littler you are, the longer you can stand. You soak the heat in for as long as the tar doesn't close over your feet and grip, and it's as good as warmed boots wrapping your feet. But in summer, like this day, you keep away from the tar, because it makes the air hotter and you mind about the stink.

But today we had to go out, and everyone had to see us go.

Ikky was tall, but she was thin and light from all the worry and prison; she was going to take a long time about sinking. We got our mats down, all the food parcels and ice-baskets and instruments and such spread out evenly on the broad planks Dash and Felly had carried out.

'You start, Dash,' said Mumma, and Dash got up and put his drum-ette to his hip and began with 'Fork-Tail Trio', and it did feel a bit like a party. It stirred Ikky awake from her hung-headed shame; she lifted up and even laughed, and I saw her hips move in the last chorus, side to side.

Then Mumma got out one of the ice-baskets, which was already black on the bottom from meltwater.

Ikky gasped. 'Ha! What! Crab! Where'd that come from?'

'Never you mind, sweet-thing.' Mumma lifted some meat to Ikky's mouth, and rubbed some of the crush-ice into her hair.

'Oh, Mumma!' Ik said with her mouth full.

'May as well have the best of this world while you're here,' said Mumma. She stood there and fed Ikky like a baby, like a pet guinea-bird.

'I thought Auntie Mai would come,' said Ik.

'Auntie Mai, she's useless,' said Dash. 'She's sitting at home with her handkerchief.'

'I wouldn't've cared, her crying,' said Ik. 'I would've thought she'd say goodbye to me.'

'Her heart's too hurt,' said Mumma. 'You frightened her. And she's such a straight lady – she sees shame where some of us just see people. Here, inside the big claw, that's the sweetest meat.'

'Ooh, *yes*! Is anyone else feasting with me?'

'No, darlin', this is your day only. Well, okay, I'll give some to this little sad-eyes here, huh? Felly never had crab but the once. Is it yum? Ooh, it's yum! Look at him!'

Next she called me to do my flute – the flashiest, hardest music I knew. And Ik listened; Ik who usually screamed at me to stop pushing spikes into her brain, she watched my fingers on the flute-holes and my sweating face and my straining, bowing body and, for the first time, I didn't feel like just the nuisance-brother. I played well, out of the surprise of her not minding. I couldn't've played better. I heard everyone else being surprised, too, at the end of those tunes that they must've known, too well from all my practising.

I sat down, very hungry. Mumma passed me the water cup and a damp-roll.

'I'm stuck now,' said Ik, and it was true – the tar had her by the feet, closed in a gleaming line like that pair of zipper-slippers I saw once in the shoemaster's vitrine.

'Oh yeah, well and truly stuck,' said Mumma. 'But then, you knew when you picked up that axe-handle you were sticking yourself.'

'I did know.'

'No coming unstuck from this one. You could've let that handle lie.'

That was some serious teasing.

'No, I couldn't, Mumma, and *you* know.'

'I do, baby chicken. I always knew you'd be too angry, once the wedding-glitter rubbed off your skin. It was a good party, though, wasn't it?' And they laughed at each other, Mumma having to steady Ikky or her ankles would've snapped over. And when their laughter started going strange Mumma said, 'Well, *this* party's going to be almost as good, 'cause it's got children. And look what else!' And she reached for the next ice-basket.

And so the whole long day went, in treats and songs, in ice and stink and joke-stories and gossip and party-pieces. On the banks, people came and went, and the chief sat in his chair and was fanned and fed, and the family of Ikky's husband sat around the chief, being served, too, all in purple-cloth with flashing edging, very prideful.

She went down so slowly.

'Isn't it hot?' Felly asked her.

'It's like a big warm hug up my legs,' said Ik. 'Come here and give me a hug, little stick-arms, and let me check. Oof, yes, it's just like that, only lower down.'

'You're coming down to me,' said Fel, pleased.

'Yeah, soon I'll be able to bite your ankles like you bite mine.'

Around midafternoon, Ikky couldn't move her arms any more and had a panic, just quiet, not so the bank-people would've noticed.

'What'm I going to do, Mumma?' she said. 'When it comes up over my face? When it closes my nose?'

'Don't you worry. You won't be awake for that.' And Mumma cooled her hands in the ice, dried them on her dress, and rubbed them over Ik's shoulders, down Ik's arms to where the tar had locked her wrists.

'You better not give me any teas, or herbs, or anything,' said Ik. 'They'll get you, too, if you help me. They'll come out to make sure.'

Mumma put her hands over Felly's ears. 'Tristem gave me a gun,' she whispered.

Ikky's eyes went wide. 'But you can't! Everyone'll hear!'

'It's got a thing on it, quietens it. I can slip it in a tar-wrinkle, get you in the head when your head is part sunk, fold back the wrinkle, tell 'em your heart stopped, the tar pressed it stopped.'

Felly shook his head free. Ikky was looking at Mumma, quietening. There was only the sound of Dash tearing bread with his teeth, and the breeze whistling in the thorn-galls away over on the shore. I was watching Mumma and Ikky closely – I'd wondered about that last part, too. But now this girl up to her waist in the pit didn't even look like our Ikky. Her face was changing like a cloud, or like a masque-lizard's colours; you don't see them move but they *become* something else, then something else again.

'No,' she said, still looking at Mumma. 'You won't do that. You won't have to.' Her face had a smile on it that touched off one on Mumma's, too, so that they were both quiet, smiling at something in each other that I couldn't see.

And then their eyes ran over and they were crying *and*

smiling, and then Mumma was kneeling on the wood, her arms around Ikky, and Ikky was ugly against her shoulder, crying in a way that we couldn't interrupt them.

That was when I realised how many people were watching, when they set up a big, spooky oolooling and stamping on the banks, to see Mumma grieve.

'Fo!' I said to Dash, to stop the hair creeping around on my head from that noise. 'There never was such a crowd when Chep's daddy went down.'

'Ah, but he was old and crazy,' said Dash through a mouthful of bread, 'and only killed other olds and crazies.'

'Are those fish-people? And look at the yellow-cloths – they're from up among the caves, all that way!'

'Well, it's nearly Langasday, too,' said Dash. 'Lots of people on the move, just happening by.'

'Maybe. Is that an honour, or a greater shame?'

Dash shrugged. 'This whole thing is upended. Who would have a party in the tar, and with family going down?'

'It's what Mumma wanted.'

'Better than having her and Ik be like this *all day*.' Dash's hand slipped into the nearest ice-basket and brought out a crumb of gilded macaroon. He ate it as if he had a perfect right.

Everything went slippery in my mind, after that. We were being watched so hard! Even though it was quiet out here, the pothering wind brought crowd-mumble and scraps of music and smoke our way, so often that we couldn't be private and ourselves. Besides, there was Ikky with the sun on her face, but the rest of her from the rib-peaks down gloved in tar, never to see sun again. Time seemed to just have *gone*, in big

clumps, or all the day was happening at once or something, I was wondering so hard about what was to come, I was watching so hard the differences from our normal days. I wished I had more time to think, before she went right down; my mind was going breathless, trying to get all its thinking done.

But evening came and Ik was a head and shoulders, singing along with us in the lamplight, all the old songs – 'A Flower for You', 'Hen and Chicken Bay', 'Walking the Tracks with Beejum Singh', 'Dollarberries'. She sang all Felly's little-kid songs that normally she'd sneer at; she got Dash to teach her his new one, 'The Careless Wanderer', with the tricky chorus. She made us work on that one like she was trying to stop us noticing the monster bonfires around the shore, the other singing, of fishing songs and forest songs, the stomp and clatter of dancing in the gathering darkness. But they were there, however well we sang, and no other singing in our lives had had all this going on behind it.

When the tar began to tip Ik's chin up, Mumma sent me for the wreath. 'Mai will have brought it, over by the chief's chair.'

I got up and started across the tar, and it was as if I cast magic ahead of me, silence-making magic, for as I walked – and it was good to be walking, not sitting – musics petered out, and laughter stopped, and dancers stood still, and there were eyes at me, all along the dark banks, strange eyes and familiar both.

The wreath showed up in the crowd ahead, a big, pale ring trailing spirals of whisper-vine, the beautifullest thing. I climbed up the low bank there, and the ground felt hard and cold after a day on the squishy tar. My ankles shivered as I

took the wreath from Mai. It was heavy; it was fat with heavenly scents.

'You'll have to carry those,' I said to Mai, as someone handed her the other garlands. 'You should come out, anyway. Ik wants you there.'

She shook her head. 'She's cloven my heart in two with that axe of hers.'

'What, so you'll chop hers as well, this last hour?'

We glared at each other in the bonfire light, all loaded down with the fine, pale flowers.

'I never heard this boy speak with a voice before, Mai,' said someone behind her.

'He's very sure,' said someone else. 'This is Ikky's Last Things we're talking about, Mai. If she wants you to be one of them . . .'

'She shouldn't have shamed us, then,' Mai said, but weakly.

'You going to look back on this and think yourself a po-face,' said the first someone.

'But it's like—' Mai sagged and clicked her tongue. 'She should have *cared* what she did to this family,' she said with her last fight. 'It's more than just herself.'

'Take the flowers, Mai. Don't make the boy do this twice over. Time is short.'

'Yeah, *everybody's* time is short,' said the first someone. Mai stood, pulling her mouth to one side.

I turned and propped the top of the wreath on my forehead, so that I was like a little boy-bride, trailing a head of flowers down my back to the ground. I set off over the tar, leaving the magic silence in the crowd. There was only the rub and squeak of flower stalks in my ears; in my eyes, instead of the

flourishes of bonfires, there were only the lamps in a ring around Mumma, Felly, Dash, and Ikky's head. Mumma was kneeling bonty-up on the wood, talking to Ikky; in the time it had taken me to get the wreath, Ikky's head had been locked still.

'Oh, the baby,' Mai whimpered behind me. 'The little darling.'

Bit late for darling-ing now, I almost said. I felt cross and frightened and too grown-up for Mai's silliness.

'Here, Ik, we'll make you beautiful now,' said Mumma, laying the wreath around Ik's head. 'We'll come out here to these flowers when you're gone, and know you're here.'

'They'll die pretty quick – I've seen it.' Ik's voice was getting squashed, coming out through closed jaws. 'The heat wilts 'em.'

'They'll always look beautiful to you,' said Mumma. 'You'll carry down this beautiful wreath, and your family singing.'

I trailed the vines out from the wreath like flares from the edge of the sun.

'Is that Mai?' said Ik. Mai looked up, startled, from laying the garlands between the vines. 'Show me the extras, Mai.'

Mai held up a garland. 'Aren't they good? Trumpets from Low Swamp, Auntie Patti's whisper-vine, and star-weed to bind. You never thought ordinary old stars could look so good, I'll bet.'

'I never did.'

It was all set out right, now. It went in the order: head, half-ring of lamps behind (so as not to glare in her eyes), wreath, half-ring of garlands behind, leaving space in front of her for us.

'Okay, we're going to sing you down now,' said Mumma. 'Everybody get in and say a proper goodbye.' And she knelt inside the wreath a moment herself, murmured something in Ikky's ear and kissed her on the forehead.

We kids all went one by one. Felly got clingy and made Ikky cry; Dash dashed in and planted a quick kiss while she was still upset and would hardly have noticed him; Mumma gave me a cloth and I crouched down and wiped Ik's eyes and nose – and then could not speak to her bare, blinking face.

'You're getting good at that flute,' she said.

But this isn't about me, Ik. This is *not at all* about me.

'Will you come out here some time, and play over me, when no one else's around?'

I nodded. Then I had to say some words, of some kind, I knew. I wouldn't get away without speaking. 'If you want.'

'I want, okay? Now give me a kiss.'

I gave her a kid's kiss, on the mouth. Last time I kissed her, it was carefully on the cheek as she was leaving for her wedding. Some of her glitter had come off on my lips. Now I patted her hair and backed away over the wreath.

Mai came in last. 'Fairy doll,' I heard her say sobbingly. 'Only-one.'

And Ik, 'It's all right, Auntie. It'll be over so soon, you'll see. And I want to hear your voice nice and strong in the singing.'

We readied ourselves, Felly in Mumma's lap, then Dash, then me next to Mai. I tried to stay attentive to Mumma,

so Mai wouldn't mess me up with her weeping. It was quiet except for the distant flubber and snap of the bonfires.

We started up, all the ordinary evening songs for putting babies to sleep, for farewelling, for soothing broke-hearted people – all the ones everyone knew so well that they'd long ago made rude versions and joke-songs of them. We sang them plain, following Mumma's lead; we sang them straight, into Ikky's glistening eyes, as the tar climbed her chin. We stood tall, so as to see her, and she us, as her face became the sunken centre of that giant flower, the wreath. Dash's little drum held us together and kept us singing, as Ik's eyes rolled and she struggled for breath against the pressing tar, as the chief and the husband's family came and stood across from us, shifting from foot to foot, with torches raised to watch her sink away.

Mai began to crumble and falter beside me as the tar closed in on Ik's face, a slow, sticky, rolling oval. I sang good and strong – I didn't want to hear any last whimper, any stopped breath. I took Mai's arm and tried to hold her together that way, but she only swayed worse, and wept louder. I listened for Mumma under the noise, pressed my eyes shut and made my voice follow hers. By the time I'd steadied myself that way, Ik's eyes were closing.

Through our singing, I thought I heard her cry for Mumma; I tried not to, yet my ears went on hearing. *This will happen only the once – you can't do it over again if ever you feel like remembering.* And Mumma went to her, and I could not tell whether Ik was crying and babbling, or whether it was a trick of our voices, or whether the people on the banks of the tar had started up again. I watched Mumma, because Mumma

knew what to do; she knew to lie there on the matting, and dip her cloth in the last water with the little fading fish-scales of ice in it, and squeeze the cloth out and cool the shrinking face in the hole.

And the voice of Ik must have been ours or others' voices, because the hole Mumma was dampening with her cloth was, by her hand movements, only the size of a brassboy now. And by a certain shake of her shoulders I could tell: Mumma knew it was all right to be weeping now, now that Ik was surely gone, was just a nose or just a mouth with the breath crushed out of it, just an eye seeing nothing. And very suddenly it was too much – the flowers nodding in the lamplight, our own sister hanging in tar, going slowly, slowly down like Vanderberg's truck that time, like Jappity's cabin with the old man still inside it, or any old villain or scofflaw of around these parts – and I had a big sicking-up of tears, and they tell me I made an awful noise that frightened everybody right up to the chief, and that the husband's parents thought I was a very ill-brought-up boy for upsetting them instead of allowing them to serenely and superiorly watch justice be done for their lost son.

I don't remember a lot about that part. I came back to myself walking dully across the tar between Mai and Mumma, hand-in-hand, carrying nothing, when I had come out here laden, when we had all had to help. *We must have eaten everything*, I thought. *But what about the mats and pans and planks?* Then I heard a screeking clanking behind me, which was Dash hoisting up too heavy a load of pots.

And Mumma was talking, wearily, as if she'd been going on a long time, and soothingly, which was like a beautiful guide-

rope out of my sickness, which my brain was following hand over hand. *It's what they do to people, what they have to do, and all you can do about it is watch out who you go loving, right? Make sure it's not someone who'll rouse that killing-anger in you, if you've got that rage, if you're like our Ik—*

Then the bank came up high in front of us, topped with grass that was white in Mumma's lamp's light. Beyond it were all the eyes, and attached to the eyes the bodies, flat and black against bonfire or starry sky. They shuffled aside for us.

I knew we had to leave Ik behind, and I didn't make a fuss, not now. I had done my fussing, all at once; I had blown myself to bits out on the tar, and now several monstrous things, several gaping mouths of truth, were rattling pieces of me around their teeth. I would be all right, if Mai stayed quiet, if Mumma kept murmuring, if both their hands held me as we passed through this forest of people, these flitting firefly eyes.

They got me up the bank, Mumma and Auntie; I paused and they stumped up and then lifted me, and I walked up the impossible slope like a demon, horizontal for a moment and then stiffly over the top—

—and into my Mumma, whose arms were ready. She couldn't've carried me out on the tar. We'd both have sunk, with me grown so big now. But here on the hard ground she took me up, too big as I was for it. And, too big as I was, I held myself onto her, crossing my feet around her back, my arms behind her neck. And she carried me like Jappity's wife used to carry Jappity's idiot son, and I felt just like that boy, as if the thoughts that were all right for everyone else weren't coming now, and never would come, to me. As if all I could

do was watch, but not ever know anything, not ever understand. I pushed my face into Mumma's warm neck; I sealed my eyes shut against her skin; I let her strong warm arms carry me away in the dark.