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Rawblood

Written by Catriona Ward

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CATRIONA WARD

Rawblood

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Iris

1910

This is how I come to kill my father. It begins like this.

I'm eleven. We find the mare shortly after noon. She's not been there long so the foxes haven't come yet. The flies have, though. She is glossy, plump.

'Why?' I say.

Tom's bony shoulder lifts, indifferent. Sometimes things just die. He's learned that well. In recent months.

The mare's mane is black on the parched turf. Kneeling, I reach a finger to her. He pulls me away from the corpse. I expect a scold but all he says is, 'There.'

I don't see it, and then I do, in a clutch of bracken, ten paces beyond. Small and dark in the green shadow. New-born.

'What will you do?' I say.

He pushes a hand through his hair.

'Pest question, Iris. What would you have me do?'

This hurts. 'I'm not a pest,' I say. 'I'm trying to *help*.'

He gives me a gentle shove. 'Pest.' Since his mother died in March Tom's voice has been blank.

We watch the foal as it lies, head tucked into itself. It sighs. Thin cotton sides heave. Its coat is still slick in places. It is too small to live but it doesn't seem to know it.

'We could feed it,' I say.

He gives me a look which means that I live in a big house with floors shiny with beeswax and high ceilings where the air goes up into white silence and the linen is scented with lavender

and tea rose. In the mornings I have porridge with cream, milk from my silver mug if I am good. Tom's knees jut through the worn patches in his trousers. He lives with his silent father in the draughty farmhouse with slates missing from the roof. He is in the fields before dawn each morning. There is no *we*.

I squirm. My boots are tight, my feet bloodless like the flesh of a gutted fish. I shed my stockings somewhere near Bell Tor. Beneath petticoats my bare legs are gorse striped, beaded with blood.

'Never works,' he says at last. 'They won't take it. Or they sicken. There's something not right for them in cow's milk.'

'I don't want it to die.'

'You're a girl,' he says. 'You don't understand.'

So I know he doesn't want it to die, either.

In a March storm Charlotte Gilmore stepped on a fold of her skirt. I see the moment reflected in Tom's eye each day: the buffet of cold air on her face as she falls down twenty steep stairs; her dress, belling about her like a tossed blossom; the thunder which covers the sound when her neck breaks.

'Come on,' he says. When he's upset his voice rattles like a badly fitted drawer.

Our long shadows slide over the turf. The foal raises its head, questing. Tom seizes it. It twists and struggles and bats him with little hooves. Tom lifts the foal onto his shoulders, settles it there. Slender forelegs and hind legs are safely anchored in his fists. The tiny brush tail whisks, indignant. They go like that, back towards the farm.

'They'll be missing you,' he tosses over his shoulder. 'You go off home, now. Pest,' he adds.

'Wait,' I say. '*Wait*!' I run on tight feet.

Henry Gilmore leans on the farm gate. His stare is wide, full of nothing. Tom stands upright before his father. At his shoulder the foal flicks little ears. Tom asks the question once more.

'Maisie's colt weaned two days ago,' says Henry Gilmore.

His words are slow. He gives Tom his flinching glance. Once he looked at you straight. Not anymore. He left his eyes in Tom's mother's grave four months back.

'Will she—' Tom stops.

Henry Gilmore shrugs. 'Could be. Don't fuss her. If she mislikes it. You let her do what she will.' He reaches a hand to the foal's muzzle. Its nostrils tremble, move across his skin, scent his grief.

'It'll die, either way,' he says. 'Better quickly.'

'Might not,' says Tom, and the air between them grows dense.

'You'll not make a farmer,' Henry Gilmore tells his son, touching Tom's shoulder with an absent hand. He leaves us, fades through the gate into the blue. Tom, the foal and I watch him. Distance narrows him as he goes, whittles his figure to a dark drop crawling across the bones of the hill.

In the loose box Maisie peers through a forelock the colour of dirty snow. Clumps of mud cling to her tangled belly. She lifts a broad lip in our direction, shows us her butter-yellow teeth.

'You're not to go in,' says Tom. 'Pest. D'you hear? No matter what.'

He has a twitch above his eye. His eyebrow stutters with distress. The foal's muzzle brushes his cheek. Tom's hands tighten sticky about its legs.

'You'll have to hold it,' he says. 'Can you? If you. Yes.' A flurry of little hooves and the foal shrieks like a cat. At length it subsides in my arms. Its pounding heart, its thin new bones.

Tom says, 'We have to make them smell the same.'

Pressed together, the foal and I shiver under the sun. I can't see where Tom has gone. There's the crack of his boots on the dry earth, the puzzling intricacy of wood, metal, catches, clasps, doors. He is back quickly.

'This'll do.'

The tin is squat and burly. He prises the lid up with his knife,

plunges a hand in. It comes up a shining paw, gloved in treacle. Dark shining loops. He covers the foal's poll and withers. He puts the stuff on its hindquarters, smoothes it over the heaving flanks, over its belly. When he's finished my arms are cross-hatched as if by the path of snails.

'She won't hurt it,' says Tom. His hand cradles the foal's jaw. Its eyes close. Long lashes on sooty lids.

'She won't,' he says again, not to me.

Over the stall door Maisie shakes her massive head, blinks a bashful eye, lifts her rubber lip.

'No,' I say, 'she wouldn't. Good Maisie.'

The surface of the carthorse is vast. Her flanks ripple like a quiet sea. Tom watches. His eyes show the blue iris, ringed with white.

'Won't do to wait,' he tells himself, or me. Maisie offers flared nostrils to his sticky hands. 'Yup,' he says to her. 'All that. Soon.' He slips into the stall, bolts himself in. His hands move to and fro, between light and the straw-scented dark. They coat Maisie's muzzle and mouth with treacle. He works backwards along the colossal sculpture of her, moves out of sight into the dim. She stands but her head follows him, the glassy brown trail.

I pick up the foal. It lies like a sack in my arms. It has given up. Its hooves are no larger than shillings. The thud of its heart on my wrist. It smells of fresh crushed nettles, sharp against the farmyard.

'Will it be all right?' I say.

Tom says nothing. I carry the foal to the stall door. It is quiet, leaden. He reaches, takes it through the crack into the dark. Then he's out. He blinks in the sudden, honeyed day. His dark eyebrow quivers. I put fingertips to my wrist. The flesh there holds the memory of the foal's heartbeat, weaving over my own. We wait, silent.

'I can't,' Tom says.

So I look.

In the dim light Maisie's nostrils traverse the lineaments of the foal's body. She licks the treacle from its muzzle, eyes. Her tongue sweeps down its length, a thick banner. The foal mews, a high complaint. Maisie levers it upright, nose under its stomach. Her ponderous head is as long as its body, an edifice of teeth and bone. The foal stretches. Its neck elongates beyond possibility, reaches upwards in a graceful line. It can't reach. It makes the high sound again. Maisie bends her legs, collapses groaning into the straw. Her eyes close. The foal feeds, a tiny, resolute shape by her monstrous belly. The tail whisks. Maisie breathes. Hayseed whirls in the slanting light.

'It's all right,' I say. There is no reply.

Tom's lips are moving silently. I shove a finger into his ribs. I fold a damp hand around his thin brown wrist. Tom whips his hands from his ears where they have been painfully pressed. He goes to the stall door.

'Good,' he says in a rush. 'Good. Oh, well done, pest.'

'Don't call me *pest* anymore,' I say. 'I *don't like it*.'

'I know,' he says. 'Sorry. I don't mean it, Iris. You're not a pest. It's just— Remember how you felt when the dogs got your rat?'

Sorrow comes and anger, hot.

Tom nods. 'That's how I feel all the time, now,' he says. 'Every day.'

I think about this. 'All right,' I say. 'You can call me what you want. I don't mind.'

For the first time since his mother died, Tom takes my hand in his. We watch the mare and the foal. Bees hum in the falling afternoon. Sound bleeds back into the day.

'Come on,' Tom says at length. 'Home for you.'

'No.' I am not ready to face Papa.

'We'll catch it if you don't.'

I'll catch it anyway, but I don't tell him that. 'I don't know the way home,' I say, triumphant.

'You always say that.'

'I'll probably end up in *Belgium*.'

'All right, I'll walk you,' he says, as I knew he would. 'Back to the Home of the Difficult Pest!'

'That's not its name.' I leap on him, pummelling. 'Or my name!'

'I thought you didn't mind any more!' he shouts through the blows. 'Pest! No, ow, no biting, pest!' We roll joyous in the dusty yard.

I slip through the hedge. My eyes water from the sunlight, the breeze. But within the yew walls there is stillness. The scent of lavender hangs in the air.

On the green my father dreams. Banks of grey and purple frame him in his black suit. Open on the table beside him lies a mouldering book, spine broken. There's a lime-green jug, where glassy water shines. By the jug a soft leather wallet, half unrolled on the warm wood. I can see the gleam of metal within, sharp, inviting. I look away. I must not go near my father's pouch, I am never to touch it. That is one of the Rules. Behind him, the house rears up, warm and grey.

Rawblood. Home. It sounds like a battle, like grief, but it's a gentle name. 'Raw' from 'Sraw', which means 'flowing', for the Dart River that runs nearby. 'Blood' from 'Bont', a bridge. Old words. The house by the bridge over flowing water. It has been in my family since I don't know when. Rawblood is us and we, the Villarcas, are Rawblood.

It's a bulging, ungainly thing. Windows poke out along its lengths at no set distance from one another. Crazy angles of warm slate roof are purplish in the sunshine. It's old and everyone who has lived here has built something, or taken something away. Like its name, it has shifted through time. But the house has its own sort of will. It has preserved its long U shape quietly, with the minimum of fuss. When I try to think of Rawblood, to draw it with words, a muffling whiteness comes. I can't describe it any more than I can my own bones,

my eyes. It simply is. It hangs in the foreground of everything like blindness.

These are among the first things I recall my father teaching me: that I must keep quiet and may not go among many people or to towns, because of the disease; and that Rawblood is written into us. Sometimes I think Tom knows about the disease. Sometimes he looks at me as if he knows something. Or perhaps I could tell him, and he'd still be my friend, after all. I don't care to test it.

I come near to watch my father sleep. His head nods to inner music. His lids shiver. I am near enough to see the low sun single out each silver whisker like a filament of steel.

A hand uncoils itself into the air between us, grasps my forearm, pulls me close. It happens fast and smooth like the whip of sapling wood.

'What have I caught?' he murmurs, eyes still hidden. 'What can it be? A lion?' He tightens his long fingers and I shriek and say no, no, I am not a lion.

'I don't believe it. You *must* be a lion. I am a famous lion catcher, you know.'

He makes a show of feeling my arm, looking for paws, looking for claws. 'So. Not a lion. How's this?' He hums. 'A badger, then. A striped, snouty badger.'

'No!'

'A fish. A lovely, silvery fish for my supper.' His fingers slide over my ribs, a rapid accordion, and the laughter takes all the wind out of me.

'A person, I am a person!'

He opens his eyes. 'So you are. Well. I must let you go, then.'

But he doesn't. He looks me over, sharp. I had not considered my appearance. I'm covered in treacle, pony hair and dirt. My pinafore is streaked with green, with black. The wind has teased my hair into peaks and horns.

My father says, 'Is it . . . horse that you smell of? What have you been doing, Iris? Where have you been?'

I'm caught. So I tell him. About the foal, about Maisie, about the farm, backwards, words stumbling over themselves.

He dips his handkerchief in the water jug, smoothes the cool wet linen over my arms. The ring on his finger gleams red and white and gold. The imprint of his fingers white ghosts on my wrists.

'Gilmore's boy, who is *not* a farmer,' he says. 'Iris.'

I wait. The hairs on my arms stand to attention.

He says, 'Gilmore's not managing. No. Not at all.' He takes my chin in the white wing of one hand, and looks. His vast eyes shine like varnished wood. Now he'll tell me I'm not to. He'll say I mayn't because of the Rules . . . I can't bear it. The lavender is sooty in the air, my lungs. When Papa and I fight, it is always about Tom.

'Don't say I mustn't have him as my friend,' I say.

'I do say so; but plainly it has no effect,' he says. 'You are heedless, and you are growing. I do not know what to do. Lock you up? We cannot continue to differ on this, we cannot . . .' The handkerchief falls to the table. I am new, damp, clean. I slip from his grasp and sit beside him on the lawn.

My father does not reprove me, or mention my dress. He puts his hand to my head again, light and sweet. It strokes, gently picks bracken and straw and burrs from my indignant hair. 'Ragamuffin,' he says, to himself. Cushioned turf tickles my unstockinged calves. Nearby, sparrows quarrel in a rhododendron. Against the hedge, lying in shadow, a single daisy breaks the immaculate green of the lawn. It will be gone tomorrow.

I pick up the collapsed book. A ledger, really, like the one I have seen for the household accounts. It falls open in my hand. Some sharp scent rises from the spoiled pages. They are damp, oily to my touch. Faint lines of copperplate. *She does not trouble me; the fact being so plain, perhaps, that I am already damned. Other things haunt my dreams. A small blessing, given to a fiend.*

'What does it mean?' I say.

Papa's fingers drum the paper, a soft tattoo. He says, 'Highly

unsuitable.' He takes the book, puts it from me on the table. Something is frightening. I wipe my fingers on my dress.

My father says, 'So.'

I look up, enquiring. He is giant against the sun.

'If he is good with horses it is settled. We need another groom, Shakes is getting on. We will have the young not-farmer. And,' his hand cups my neck, 'Miller's wolfhound has six pups. I will take you down to choose one in the morning. He will sleep at the foot of your bed. How do you like that?'

Light fingers in my hair. Inattentive, sun-dazed, the words will not at first connect with meaning. Why would Tom sleep at the foot of my bed? Then I understand. I scrub my hand across my eyes, across the grass.

'No,' I say.

'No?' he says, 'I have given you two presents; all you have for me is, *no*?'

'Thank you, Papa. I don't want the presents.' I know this will upset everything, though the reasons are just out of my reach.

He regards me mildly. 'Iris, I am surprised at you. It will be good for the boy, and the Gilmores have mouths to feed, whether you like it or not. But you need not have the puppy, if you do not want it.'

'He's my friend,' I say.

'Now he will be your groom,' Papa says. 'And you will treat him as such.'

'Yes,' I say, because that is what one says to Papa. I'm dazed, ears ringing. 'But I will have no one. It will be hard to remember that we're not friends anymore . . .'

'You will accustom yourself to it,' he says. 'We are adaptable animals. When you have called him "Gilmore" a few times it will come more naturally. When he has been your groom for a year or so you won't remember he was ever anything but.'

'Papa . . .'

'You are disobedient, Iris, and you force me to act. You will not stay quiet, you will not stay under my roof or my eye. You

court the disease and will not abide by the Rules.' His hand strokes the soft leather case. His eyes have found the middle distance.

I rise to leave Papa there, warm and solid on the bench, silver head already nodding. I know my love for him. I am surprised by my hate. It comes like the shaft of a splinter on the smooth grain of wood.

Horror autotoxicus. The disease. Papa does not say but I think it kills us, the Villarcas, and that is why we two are the last.

1908

I meet Tom the day that Papa tells me of the disease, and makes the Rules.

I'm nine. I've never been away from Rawblood alone before. Papa wouldn't like it. But he's asleep in the garden, one hand swinging heavy in the sunlit air, pince-nez clinging to the end of his shining nose. I slip away like water. The lane to Manaton is quiet, dappled, hot with the last of the day. The hedgerows are high, filled with green and secret light.

My hands are crammed with two large, fragile pieces of apple tart, stolen from the kitchen table. The sweet, warm scent. I am alone in the world. Beyond Rawblood, the reach of Papa's stare. My arms swing long and free. Summer light. Sleepy birdsong clear as glass. The sandy shale good under my boots. Distant voices from the neighbouring fields. Harvest is nearly over.

I walk slowly, digging each toe in, dragging it behind me as an injured bird drags a wing. I kick a cloud of fine grit into the air and squeeze my eyes closed. The rhythm of my feet, drag, shhh, kick . . . I have a strong sensation of dreaming, though I know I'm awake. Under my breath I sing a song I have made up, about badgers. It has no set tune. When the time comes, I will find a stone to sit on, or climb a tree, and then I will eat

my two pieces of tart, but not yet . . . The rhythm of my feet on the road.

I stop. I am no longer alone. Behind me there's a girl, as if from nowhere. She stands in the bend. I think she's been following. She's thin, bigger than me but with a worried face, as if she's left something at home. Two brown buck teeth peep between white lips. We stare.

'Hello,' I say.

She makes a noise and sticks her hands in her pinny pockets.

'Do you want some?' I say. I offer a fist. Apple slides between my fingers. Perhaps she will be my friend.

The girl looks at the pastry in my hand. Her teeth pull on her lower lip. She keeps worried eyes on me and points up the lane. 'Where you from?' she says. 'You from there?'

'Rawblood,' I say. I try not to say it *too* proud. I look at the two pieces of tart in my two hands. 'One each,' I say with some regret.

'From there,' she says. 'It's probably poison.' Her eyes are on the tart. 'Does it have poison in?'

'No,' I say, offended. I raise a hand to my mouth. Sweet crumbling crust. Sharp, green, sugar.

The girl bites her lip and stares. Then she bends quickly, fumbles in the sand. Something curves through the air. The sharp edge of the flint strikes the corner of my eye, everything bursts. Something else hits my temple with a crack. The world swings backwards out of balance. The girl throws and bends and throws with perfect concentration, loading her hands quickly from the road. They all land. Some are small, and sting. Some are large and make thuds on my flesh, sharp sounds on bone. I show the girl my back and hunch up small. Stones strike fiery on my kidneys, ribs, spine. Something hits the base of my skull and splashes white across my mind and eyes. Everything tastes of tin.

My cheek strikes the road with a thump. It stretches before me like a landscape. Through the pulsing in my ears I hear the

soft give, the crunch of road as she comes. I try to get up. My arms and legs are buckets of damp sand. She comes on with soft steps. Hot stuff trickles from my scalp to my chin, warm red drops. The sounds I make, kittens drowning.

Her shadow. Her feet are before me, tight bound with rags. No shoes. She bends. Her grubby shaking fingers uncurl my fist, lift the remains of the tart from one hand, and then the other. I try to bite her, my teeth graze her arm. She turns quickly, the hedge quakes and she's gone.

I sit in the warm road. I don't know what to do. I can't go home; Papa will see blood and cuts and know I disobeyed. I should never, ever have left . . . A tooth is loose. I cry in hitching sobs.

Around the bend, footfalls. I push into the hedge, through the hawthorn, the bramble, to the grey cold stone wall at the heart of it. Sharp, unkind branches tear my dress. Something living crawls in my ear. I hold my breath. It's quiet. The wood pigeon murmurs. Breeze moves, brings the first scent of evening.

The footsteps stop just by.

'Bit of blood,' says a voice to itself. It stutters a little on the consonants, like a badly fitted drawer. 'All right in there?' Something brushes through the leaves like a monster. I bite. 'Ow,' the voice says. It withdraws. 'No, ow.' I feel a bit sorry. And I hate and fear the dark hedge. So I come out.

The boy stands in the road, clutching the red place on his arm where I bit him. He's about my height with bare brown feet and a fishing pole. 'You bite pretty nicely,' he says. 'Why you all bloody?'

'Girl came and took my tart,' I say. 'It was apple.' I show him my hands, fragrant with crumbs.

He nods, serious. 'Oh, yup,' he says. 'That's a stinker.'

'Stinker,' I say, enraptured. 'What's your name?'

'Tom,' he says. 'You?'

'Iris.' It's the first time I've told it. It's strange and a little powerful.

'There'll be some taste left,' he says. So we sit on the verge and lick my gummy fingers. There's earth and little bits of bark mixed in but it still tastes like apples. I've never shared anything before. His tongue tickles. I laugh. It hurts.

He sees. 'Took a right pasting, you did,' he says.

I say, 'I don't want Papa to see the blood.'

'All right,' he says. 'Come with.' He takes my hand.

The stream runs shining over fat stones into a small pool of deep green. Rowan trees lean across it. The banks are covered with blackberry bushes. Midges dance in the cooling air.

The cold water shocks our bodies. We scream and paddle. Tadpoles and minnows flee from our white feet, corpse-like in the river water. The blood spirals off me away into the stream. We eat shiny blackberries until we're stained purple. We wash it from us. My dress dries crumpled in the sun while Tom fishes. He doesn't catch anything.

'Should have a trout to show for it,' he says. 'Might not get it *too* bad if I have a trout.'

'You ran off,' I say. 'So did I.'

'Meant to be getting the hay in,' he says. He tells me about his dad, his ma, where they live, which is a farm with cows.

'I love cows,' I say. 'Big eyes and eyelashes.'

'They kick,' he says. 'Lots.'

When the midges have risen all about us and the skyline has cooled to a milky grey, Tom says, 'Home, I suppose.'

I say. 'Come home with me!'

'Can't,' he says, and I catch his apprehension.

'With me, with me,' I sing, 'come home with me . . .' I dance around him and pull tufts of his dark hair. I dance and sing loudly because I don't want to be alone in the dark lane.

'Pest,' he says. 'Well, I'll walk you.'

Papa sees us as we come down the hill in the last of the light. He comes out of the door like a bull. 'Iris, what were you thinking,

to leave me so? Do not go off, do not! The mist could come down!' He trembles.

'There is no mist, Papa! I promise.' He is always thinking there will be a mist and it is very frightening for him.

Papa looks at me, the cuts and bruises, the dirty dress. He takes Tom by the scruff, lifts him clear off the ground. Buttons spring from Tom's shirt as Papa shakes him.

'What was done to her?' Papa says. 'Speak. What hurt?'

'I didn't,' Tom is saying as Papa shakes and I shout, 'No, no, it wasn't him!'

'Who are your people?' Papa says. 'They will hear of this. And now a hiding, the worst of your life.'

'Tom Gilmore,' he says, teeth clicking as he's shaken. 'Trubb's Farm.'

I tug at Papa's sleeve. 'He helped me,' I say. 'Papa! It was the *other* one who threw the stones . . .'

Papa drops Tom like a sack of wheat. Tom sits surprised on the ground. Papa covers his face with his hands. 'Tom Gilmore,' he says. Tom says nothing. Trying to guess which answer means trouble.

I say, 'Papa, please leave him alone.'

Papa makes a noise. 'I forgot,' he says. 'I promised, and I forgot.' He stares at Tom. 'You may feed him, Iris. But out here. Not in the house.' He turns and goes back towards Rawblood, his back shaking up and down.

Tom and I stare after him. 'He's crying,' Tom says.

'I know.' There seems little else to say. It's no more or less peculiar than the other things that have happened today.

'Might be some tart left,' I say, and that thought eclipses all others.

Papa dresses me with tincture of iodine. The scent is strong and red. My bedroom is very snug. The fire is lit, as if I am not well. It leaps busily and crackles in the grate, warm on our faces. The night is outside. We are inside.

'Why were you crying, Papa?'

'I was reminded of a promise I made once,' he says. 'To your mother. I had forgotten, which is very bad as one must keep promises. But not only that – I was angry, Iris, because I fear for you. I have always been careful to guard you, have I not? I have tried to teach you right, as a father should?'

'Yes,' I say, stricken. 'Why, Papa? Why did the girl throw the stones? Why did she think the tart was poison?'

'Others fear us,' Papa says. 'Our family. Dear heart, they will hurt you if they can. We have . . . a disease. Like Rawblood, it has run in our family for ever. It lies dormant within us like a sleeping foe. It is named *horror autotoxicus*. Servants do not like to work at Rawblood, because of it. So we have Shakes, only. Even he does not stay at Rawblood, but lives above the stable. No servants sleep in the house.' For a moment his face is far-away and blank and then he goes on, '*Horror autotoxicus* is unusual; it is not caused by contagion, or by a virus. It is caused by feeling.'

'That is strange,' I say, thinking of a cold I had last summer. 'What does it do?'

'It makes you very ill,' Papa says. 'It makes you hot with fever, and visions come to you of terrible things. You slip into a dream, where monsters roam. In the end you lose your mind, so that you no longer know the places that you love, or the faces of your family. Sometimes it causes you to harm others.'

'No! I will always know your face, Papa, I will always know Rawblood . . .'

'I wish it were so, Iris. You must keep very calm and live quietly, because *horror autotoxicus* can come on if you are excited or upset. If you have a strong feeling which you cannot control, you must tell Papa at once. It could be the first sign.'

'All my feelings are strong,' I say. 'I cannot possibly tell you *all* of them!'

'You must try,' he says. He tuts and dries my face. 'But do not despair. We can prevent it. You are in no danger as long as

you live quietly at Rawblood, and do not run off. It is a rational thing, which we can approach with reason. I see that I have expected too much of you, Iris. Your disobedience shows me that you cannot be trusted to apply your own judgement. So I have made Rules, which you will follow, and which will keep you safe.'

Papa takes a piece of paper from his pocket. He reads it aloud to me, then pins it to my bedroom door.

1. Other children: not friends.
2. Servants: not friends.
3. The disease: a secret.
4. Papa's medicine pouch: forbidden. When Papa takes medicine: leave room.
5. Eight o'clock to noon: reading with Papa.
6. Afternoons: play in the garden. Not out of the garden.
7. Bed: at seven.
8. Books: as good as people.
9. Tell Papa everything.

'These are like promises, Iris, do you understand?'

I nod. The loveliness of the sun and the water and Tom have dissolved into tiredness and I hurt everywhere. I had not known my body could hurt so. I am no longer eager to see the world. I am not sure it's a friendly place. *Horror autotoxicus* . . . Even the name is horrible. But I will be all right. Papa will make sure of it.

'I will obey all the Rules,' I say. 'But I will keep Tom! It's called a bargain, Papa.'

Papa looks at me long. 'You are your mother's daughter,' he says. 'It is not possible, Iris.' He cradles my head in a long white hand. He holds me in a gentle vice and looks into my eyes. 'Say them after me,' he says. 'The Rules.'

I squirm, 'Papa, too tight . . .'

'Say them, Iris. I must be sure that you understand.'

'Other children,' I say. 'Not friends . . .' I say the Rules, again and again.

Eventually Papa releases me, puts a hand on my head, and I know I am forgiven. He says, 'Very well. We will read.'

'Hervor!' I say.

'Always Hervor. Such violent tastes. Very well.' He takes the book from where it's open by the bed. We read.

It is not really called Hervor, but the *Waking of Angantyr*. It goes like this. Hervor's father, Angantyr, dies and he is buried with a famous sword called Tyrfing. It means 'Measurer of Fate' or sometimes it is called 'Bane of Swords'. Hervor is a fighter. She wants the sword. She is quite bad-tempered about it. I like this because it seems to me people are often too good, in stories.

Hervor goes to her father's grave and opens it like a door. She goes into the underworld which is a dark place full of bonfires. She wakes Angantyr from his sleep. This is another reason it's my favourite. If my Papa died I would go and wake him. Angantyr is angry at being woken. He says that Tyrfing is a terrible sword which is cursed. It will perform evil deeds. And both sides of the blade are poisoned so if you touch it you die. Hervor says, 'I am your only daughter. I am heir to the sword. I'll take it and cut myself on the edges. I will walk through all these fires. I'll risk the curse. I'm not afraid.' So her father is very impressed with her bravery. He gives it to her, and tells her she must go back to the living world before daylight. If the door to the land of the dead is left open at dawn, the dead vanish for ever. Where to? No one knows.

She runs back with Tyrfing through the raging fires, across the black land. She reaches the door as the sun is casting its first rays across the ground. She slams the door shut. Her father is safe. She has the sword. All is well.

After that she travels all over the world dressed as a man, riding the horses of the sea. She has many adventures. I have longed for adventures.

Papa's voice, the warm fire. I still love the story but I have understood, today, that I am not Hervor, and that books and life are not the same.

1912

I'm thirteen.

In the pink light of the closed curtains Henry Gilmore's skin is grey birch bark, his cracked lips tremble over yellow teeth. Constant sound comes from him, like a kettle nearly boiled. It's called farmer's lung, or hay catarrh. The land's repayment for a life's work. There's no doubt that he's dying.

I look to my father where he stands by the bed. He gives me no sign. I don't know what comes next.

'I hope you are better soon,' I say to Tom's father and put the basket of plums on the bed. It lands with a soft thump. Henry Gilmore winces and breathes, a bubbling sound. He lies back on the pillow. Strands of yellowing hair cling to his brow like waterweed. A narrow bar of sunlight falls across his sunken cheek. Breath moves through his parted lips, effortful. He turns his clouded blue eyes on me. There's something stony and seeking in his look. For an instant I can trace his younger face, buried deep beneath the old, a dark reflection on water. His bones are fine and beautiful in the afternoon light. Henry Gilmore and I see one another, and the air stretches thin between us, time narrows and draws out.

'Do you know,' says Henry Gilmore, 'that you have the devil for a father? Your father is the devil in the night.'

Something touches me once between the shoulder blades, light. Papa is at my back. 'You go now,' he says.

I go down through the house's dusty innards, down the breakneck stairs. I go fast, eyes squeezed shut, listening for Charlotte Gilmore's ghost.

*

I wait, kicking at the fat white ducks that wobble across the yard. My skin prickles. *The devil in the night*.

I go round the corner of the house to the livestock stalls. At the end, past the milkers, the tip of a velvet muzzle crests the stable door. The pony makes a soft sound. She thinks I'm Henry Gilmore.

When I come close she lays her ears flat down on her skull. She backs into the far wall, trembling. She's grown, now. Sleek and stout. But she's never liked me, since the day we took her from her dead mother's side. So actually she's hated me since the day she was born. I have a grudging respect for it; the strength, the consistency of her dislike.

I put out my hand to her and chirrup. 'I *saved* your life,' I tell her. 'Tom and I did. *He,* Mr Gilmore, would have left you.' The filly stares, nostrils flared. I think about Tom and smarting wells in the rims of my eyes.

As I cry I feel the velvet of the pony's muzzle on my arm. She is delicate, her lips fondle my sleeve. I feel the warm kindness of her breath, the comfort, the solid strangeness of her presence. Her silken face. I have enough time to feel all this before her blunt mouth seizes my forearm in a bruising vice. I feel every one of her narrow columns of teeth. She shakes me, watching my pain. I punch her on the poll, hard between the ears. She smiles and tightens her jaws. Her dark horse eyes are bright as I beat her about the head.

My father casts pitying looks at the broken fences, strides delicately through the cow dung which covers the cobbles, dark and pungent. He goes to the trap, and places a box under the back seat, calls me to him as if not quite sure of my name. Eyes dark and occupied with something.

'What's in the box?' I say to him. 'That you put away.'

'Money,' my father says.

'Why?'

'To settle his debts.'

'Why should you?' I am indignant. 'What he said . . .'

'Pay it no mind, Iris. He is dying. And I have wronged him, in my time. It is good,' he says but not to me, 'to make peace if one can.'

I saw the quick shift in Henry Gilmore's wasted face. I know that look, that blue contempt. I've seen it before, in another pair of eyes. Henry Gilmore found no peace from us.

In the trap we're quiet. My arm sings with the dark rich bruise left by the pony's mouth. I open my mouth to the wind. It rushes in, cold and dry. It takes away the taste of the hot sick-room and Mr Gilmore's words. Fear is all through me. *Disease*.

'It will not harm you, Iris,' Papa says. He sees my thoughts, as always. 'It will not harm as long as you obey the Rules.'

In the black, my feet find the narrow ledge beneath my window. Light snow patterns my hands and face. I crawl across the slate. In the stable block ahead, one window throws out a weak guiding light.

Fingers dug into crevices, I move across. Below is the long drop and then the flagstones. It pulls at me like the tide. The world is peculiar, pitched at a slant.

At the second gable I grasp the ridge and throw a leg over. Something skates away from my foot and I'm sliding at great speed towards the drop. The night land rushes up. Cold streams run down my spine.

My boots meet a yielding surface. I come to rest. Needling pain in my fingertips which are rough, wet. The shaky gutter creaks. I'm ankle-deep in old mulch and the bones of dead birds.

At the window his hands reach to catch me. I scrape over the sill, in. Something drums wetly in my ear. A heart.

Tom says under his breath, 'Made such a clatter, you did.'

We are still. I think of Shakes, at the other end of the stables. I think of my father and the Rules. A board groans under my soaked feet. The stables sigh beneath. Warm movements in straw, patient horse breath. Mice rattle lightly in the eaves. A

spiral of snow puffs gently through the window. No one comes.

'Getting too big for that,' says Tom at length.

'No fear,' I say. I am still loose, weak. 'Fine talk from you, anyhow.' Tom overtops me by a head, now. His wrists shoot out of his sleeves like vines.

'Blood,' he says, uneasy. 'Smell it.'

'The roof. Scraped a bit.'

He takes my hands in his.

'Just fingers,' I say. 'It's—' He pinches my arm for quiet, and I stop. He goes to the corner and does something. Soft sounds. Presently a cool sliding on my hands. His fingers slip around mine. The cut-grass smell of horse liniment.

Tom lives above the stables at Rawblood. Our friendship has slipped from day into night. Crossing the roof is crossing into another country. I break the Rules every night, like this.

I want to ask him, *Does it make you sad? Do you wish you were at home still?* But I don't. What would be the use? Tom has no mother and I have no mother. Soon his father will be gone and he will have no one. I don't know much about the world and so on but I do know this: that the scales are already heavily weighted in my favour and this will tip them further.

Too much goes unspoken between us, lately. There's too much untruth. My father, the disease . . . I am pulled in opposing directions. Strong, complex bonds. I don't know what to do so I test them all. I defy my father. I lie to Tom. I flout the Rules and court the disease. One day something will give, but what?

Tom says, 'Stink.'

I say, 'What?'

'Wait.'

Now he's said it I can smell it. The scent of decay. My boots are thick with mud and gutter rot.

There's rustling. He hands me straw in a musty clump, takes a rag. I stand like a heron, one-legged. He crouches at my feet. I bend and we scrub, wrinkling our noses. I sway, my hands clutch for balance. I seize Tom's hair in fistfuls. 'Let me, leave it,

pest, we'll both go down, leave it.' We tip slowly to the floor in silent, shaky laughter. My fingers curl weakly through his hair.

There's no trouble on the way out. We move through the dark stable, into the open air. When we're clear, at the foot of Sheepstor, we shout. Our voices are high and silly. The air is fine needles. The last of the cloud is clearing. The stars are out, the moon is up. It shows the bowl of white dusted land.

'Trout?' I say. 'Be rising.'

Tom says, 'Didn't bring the line.' His chilly fingers find mine. They flutter then hold. 'Come on,' he says. 'Show you something.' We climb. Above us, the rocks are flat and black against the sky.

'Here.' Tom pulls me down into a shallow defile between the boulders. A narrow strip of turf snakes away, a path through the bulbous granite. The world is far overhead. It's clammy, frozen, the rock closes in like teeth.

'What?' I say.

'Down here,' he says, and vanishes. I follow but he's gone as if into air. My hand slides along the lines of the slick rock passage. I turn and stumble, crack my shin on hard cold stone. My breath hovers white before me. I think, *I'm alone, he's gone*, my heart hammers, fit to burst.

A black slit hovers ahead, dark against the jumble. An arm emerges from the crevice. 'That's it,' he says, guides me in.

Inside the cave the match gutters far up above to where the walls taper to a point like a tiny steeple. The air smells of turned earth and the faint old tang of fox. The walls are bright green, covered in moss that shines and moves under the light as if under a caress. The chamber is wide enough for five men to lie full length on the pale floor. Near the back, in the shadows, a tall crooked stone like an altar. On the dark stone lies a small button, bright red. A child's shoe worn thin. A wooden spoon. A horseshoe and something old and mouldy that may have been bread. Behind, something gleams in the slanting shadow, something white and misshapen. It shivers. My heart is cold.

It's a trick of the light, of course. A lump of old quartz bathed in candlelight. But for a moment it looks like bone and dead flesh. A corpse curled at the foot of the altar.

Tom's face is branded with shadow, dancing. He grins. The match fizzes. He says, 'Listen.'

Behind the walls, within the rock, shrill voices rage in unknown tongues, hammers ring on steel, the sound of distant slaughter. Thin sobbing; a whistling shriek then whispers soft as breath. The sounds enclose us.

'It's the river,' Tom says, 'running through the ground. It won't harm.' It sounds like all the harm in the world. The match flares and spits.

'Don't let it go out,' I say. 'Tom—'

'Wait,' he says. 'I've a . . . wait.' He fumbles in his pocket, and the little flame dances, dims. Shadows lick up, the dark is coming. What happens to the white stone in the dark? Perhaps it is not always a white stone.

'*Tom*,' I say, but flame rears up from the little candle stub, brave, scattering light. The walls leap into being, green and shining. He makes to put the candle on the altar.

'No!' I say, 'not there.' We sit side by side on the cave floor. It's sandy, and friendlier than expected.

'Who would make this?' I ask.

'No one made it – it's here, that's all.'

'People come here,' I say. The small shoe lies quiet on the stone beyond.

'Old folk,' Tom says. He rolls the vowels, lengthens the Devon in them. 'Turn your coats inside out to keep Saint Nick away. Walk three times widdershins round Bexley Tor under moonlight.' He sniffs, shrugs, draws his finger in a circle on the sandy floor around the candle. '*Lo*,' he says, in a high pinching voice like Mrs Brewer who's married to the butcher in Dartmeet. 'For I have drawn the line in the sand, and no one shall touch this candle now, lest they die.' He looks at me and grins. 'No one can put it out, now. See, pest? *Magic*.'

'What's that noise?' A scratching, a faint sound in the distance, like stone rubbing against stone.

'The river,' says Tom. 'Told you already.'

But it's different. Stealthy. I look up, around. Shadows flicker. 'What does it do?' I say, looking at the crooked altar stone, the glistening quartz behind. I don't like to take my eye from them, somehow.

'Now, you may give gifts here, pest, that the one you love mayn't ever die.' Tom's still in Mrs Brewer's voice. He takes a brown glass bottle from his coat pocket and drinks, grimacing, then stands and goes to the altar. He puts something crumpled on it. We sit and look at his father's glove where it lies dirty, limp-fingered on the granite.

Tom says, 'Just in case.' He rubs his face hard. His cheek flushes red under his palm. 'It's nonsense,' he says, 'like all those things.' But he leaves the glove where it is.

I say, 'We go to see him once a fortnight.'

'I know,' says Tom. 'Tom the stable boy harnesses the horses, shoves old Shakes up on the box of the trap. I know everything you do, pest.'

'Don't call me that,' I say, automatic. There's a strange thin bite to his words. The line between our day and night time selves blurs and wavers. I have the beginning of a headache. It's so mournful, the sound. Stone grinding against stone.

'What is it,' Tom says, 'between them? Between your father and mine?' The bottle chinks on the floor.

'I don't know,' I say.

'Bad blood,' Tom says. 'Mystery! Intrigue!'

'Curses,' I say, 'Ancient Wrongs.' Our hilarity is brittle and raucous, the joke a feather's breadth from truth. It's thrilling, like walking on the clear ice where it's thinnest over the pond.

'They say things in the village,' Tom says. 'About him, you. Rawblood.'

'What?' I say. The clear ice, and beneath – what? Cold, deep dark.

'There's a murdered girl buried at Rawblood.' He runs light fingers up the back of my arm. It gives me shivers, not entirely unpleasant.

I bat him off. 'Stop. Where? It's not true.'

'Some say she's under the cellar floor,' Tom says. '*Some* say she's in an attic, the pieces of her, anyhow, in a chest bound with iron . . . But most likely she's under the cedar tree. Buried beneath. The roots feed on her corpse.' The hairs on my arm rise to his light fingers. 'It can be seen from a certain window of Rawblood. Her grave. It's always freshly dug. Wet earth. You see it if you're about to die.'

'Ugh,' I say. His fingers stroke; they raise delicate chills.

'Yup, it's all rubbish,' says Tom. He shifts away a little on the sandy floor. I rub my prickling arms. 'I know of someone who really—' he says, stops and starts again. 'My Uncle Rob was a butler. The butler at Rawblood, as it happens.'

'We don't have a butler,' I say.

'No,' says Tom, with intonation I cannot place. 'Not now. My dad was older than Rob, by nearly twenty years. He took care of him. More like a father than a brother, I suppose. He doesn't talk to me much, Dad. But he'll tell stories about Uncle Rob. Anyhow, one morning Rob'd not come down to servants' breakfast. And when they went up into the eaves of Rawblood to look for him he was there, cold, dead in his bed. Eyes wide like pebbles, like he'd seen something. My dad sets a store of anger on it. Daft ideas. Says it was Rawblood that killed him. That Rob's life was taken, because he did something, something to displease your father . . .' Tom starts, recollects himself, looks at me wide-eyed. I shrug, my heart beating fast.

Tom says, 'I look like him. Like Uncle Rob.' The drink's in his voice, now, a little. 'Apart from his red hair. And now you're thinking, "Oh, that's why they can't get on: makes the old man sad to see his son look so like the brother, I understand, now." But you'd be *wrong*, pest. That's not why he hates me. It's worse, because there's no reason to it. "Rawblood's ill luck for the

Gilmores." How many times have I heard it from him? But he sent me off there, all right.' The bottle chinks soft in the sand. 'Sold me like a pony.'

I take his hand. The candle flickers. The shadows move. Tom's words hang in the dark between us, mingling with others I have heard. *He did something to displease your father. The devil in the night.* I see him in my mind: Robert Gilmore, who I never set eyes on. Quick one moment and dead the next. Perhaps it was the disease. Perhaps it killed him. The ice is thin, thin . . .

Tom clips me over the head. 'Thought you might turn tail, pest,' he says, 'when you first came in here.' He's strained, light. 'Eyes like a barn owl.' His hand holds mine tight.

'Didn't though,' I say, flooded with relief. The world shivers and rights itself. The dark tide retreats.

'No,' he says. 'Too right. You didn't. Here.' The liquid catches in my throat. It's like drinking gas lamps. I cough and drink again. Candlelight falls, beautiful and restless, on everything.

'I like it,' I say. I mean the cave, the drink, the moor outside, the light within. I mean the warmth at my side where he sits. His messy head haloed in the candlelight. I am giddy with the reprieve – from what? I play with Tom's bootlace and imagine his foot within. Shapes dance on the shining green walls. The dim roof above is infinite.

'What would it be,' I say, 'not to die, ever, anyhow? If by putting a glove on a stone, you could do it? Might be awful.'

'People shouldn't die,' Tom says. 'Just *shouldn't*.' When I look I see something is happening. He's stiff, pale, arms locked around himself. He shakes with something violent. 'Put out the light, Iris.' The whites of his eyes gleam.

'Magic,' I say. 'Remember? Can't put it out.' I don't want the dark. I am strange of a sudden. As though my mind is growing, pushing gently at my skull. The sound. It's like the earth is moving. Readying itself to bury us. Or as if the stone is breathing. I don't like it.

'Just – put it out.' His voice thick and cottony, his mouth

awry like a child's. The candle hisses on my licked thumb. The dark drops down on us like a weight. He's gone, the cave is gone, am I gone? Behind us, within the rock, the battle rages; gurgling voices speak long incantations. Beneath it Tom is crying, small sounds.

He says, 'I should be minding the farm.' He doesn't say *home.* 'I should have been there, these years, learning to mind it. But I wasn't and now all I know is horses, so I'm no good.'

I put my hand into the dark. It comes to rest on his face which is hot and wet. Shifting closer I find odd bits of him to hold – a collar, an elbow – and take them tightly.

Sadness comes from him like breath.

Tom folds his arms around me. He breathes by my ear. He smells of drink, thick and acid, filled with juniper. His hand on my back is large and flat, then small and insistent. 'No point in it, he's done,' Tom says into my hair. 'It's as good as finished.'

I think of Henry Gilmore's drawn, translucent face. The afternoon light on his dying skin. 'I know,' I say. I cannot say, *it will be all right.*

His heart thumps hot against my collarbone. I want to climb inside his flesh and pluck the suffering from him. I fumble for his hand. His warm palm closes on mine. Around us the river rises in a torrent, burbling mad. Voices like stone grinding on stone. I don't mind it now. Something good moves between us like a living thing. Tom starts. He says, 'Look, look.'

The cave is full of moonlight. Juddering, shivering. Bars of silver scatter as if we're underwater – across the cave entrance, Tom's spiky head; his face, his ear, his shoulder, caught in moments of clarity. Light glances off the corner of the altar, chases across the walls. Shadows of far-above clouds scud across the white floor. 'Oh,' I say. It is insane, it is beautiful.

Slippery light plays about the altar stone. I squint. The white stone at the base, half in shadow. I edge closer to Tom. His cheek on mine. His voice warms the air. 'Iris? You could tell me your secrets. They'd be safe. I wouldn't ever, ever tell.'

'What a shame,' I say with sympathy. 'He's touched in the head.' I punch him. To break the strangeness. He punches me back, hard.

'All right, I suppose you won't.' Tom's finger slides light on my throat; it comes to rest in the notch of my collarbone. That punch didn't work, the strangeness is everywhere. He says, 'I do feel a bit . . . touched.' We shake, laughing, gripped tight to one another. I breathe the soft place under his ear.

The moonlight plays about the cave. It glances over the pale stone at the foot of the altar. In the shifting light and dark it could almost, almost be a very thin pale person, curled on the floor. Glimpses of things that could be bony fingers, spread wide; a bare skull peeping through baby-fine hair. The blink of a black mad eye. The white stone uncurls. The white thing stands slowly upright. The cave goes dark.

It's all right, Tom is saying. *The moon went in. Iris, it's all right.* But he's wrong. The rock and the river, high and terrible. Beneath, stealthy sounds of someone coming. Padding soft across the sand, across the cave floor, coming closer in the dark. Desire.

I seize Tom's calloused, puzzled hand in mine; I drag him roughly up and go, bent double, stumbling. Something groans like stone collapsing. The cave shudders. Something cracks and bursts underfoot – the bottle? A white bone? – and flattens into crushed shards. The sound of the river rises, harsh and rusted. Tom calls out and I pull him faster, we're clattering and slipping in the dark. Something grazes my back. Light and thin like a finger. Traces the length of my spine. We're out. Behind, in the cave, something moves.

On the hill I haul the clear night into my lungs and vomit. Tom is anxious, fond. I can't answer him. His hand is on my brow; I shiver at his touch. The warmth that suffused our bones and flesh, which drew us together, is gone. What is he to me, anyhow? I see with dreary clarity that everything lovely has been stripped from the world.

'There was someone,' I say. 'In there.' My breath is still too fast. The world tilts.

'Iris,' he says. 'I don't think there was. My fault, I was telling tales. Trying to frighten you.' But he's frightened now. I hear it. His hand is on my brow. 'You're very hot,' he says. 'You're ill . . . Iris . . .'

Diseased.

'Keep away,' I say. 'You'll die.'

'Don't shout,' Tom says. 'And I doubt it.'

'Don't touch me.' I'm hot and cold by turns. The fever dream is all around. White shapes drift across the gauzy sky. I thought something horrible was in the cave. But the horrible thing is inside me. Here it is at last. *Horror autotoxicus*. The disease.

At his window, in the poor, ill-lit room above the stables.

Tom's the same. The room is the same. The straw, the cloth we used to clean my boots; both lie in the corner by the door. Vague scents of gutter muck and a trace of liniment still touch the air. But nothing is as it was. The world is a slippery, raw place, stranger than I knew. No one's laughing now.

Tom's puzzled. But he tries again. He trusts me. 'Iris. You look bad. Let me . . .'

He must be kept away. Even in my feverish state I know the thing to say. It's been waiting to be said between us all these years. 'You were right, before,' I tell him. 'I'm getting too big for this. Too old to play with the stable boy.'

I don't wait to see his face. I go back across the roof, head ringing.

In my room I lock the door. I close the shutters. I lie in lavender-scented sheets and spin. I am cold, cold. Moonlight lies cold across the floor. The curtains are cold. The lines of the furniture are cold against the dark. Rawblood sighs around me.

I think of Tom's stutter, which comes when he's unnerved. The dark line of his brow like a swallow in flight. These things are what they are but they are now also something else. Lightly

I touch the notch of my collarbone – my flesh remembers his finger, resting there. *Horror autotoxicus* is woken by strong feeling. I hadn't understood. I have broken the Rules. I have risked our lives.

The fever is very high, now. The world whitens and broadens until everything is a flat white soup. White shapes dance before my eyes. I seem to hear a gong somewhere. The white is deep and welcoming and I sink in. By the time they break down the door I don't know names or anything else. Cold, cold.