

**PERSEPHONE**

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**M**y father first told me that we were aliens when I asked him about my teeth. I'd just come back from the dentist, who had puzzled at the strange locations of my cavities. "On the buckle side, don't see that one very often," he'd mumbled to the hygienist as his sharp, curved tool clicked against my molars. I cringed, scared that they knew I lied about flossing every day.

At our rectangular kitchen table, my father and I sat side by side in white chairs with flat vinyl cushions. He pulled an envelope from the stack of junk mail and began to draw on the back of it. He drew a diagram of a tooth and explained that, normally, enamel covered the entire surface of the tooth, but we were not normal. He set down his pen and looked at me. You and I are aliens, he told me. We were not born to live here, we were not meant to eat their food; that is why our teeth are different. He picked up the pen and drew a crevasse in the diagram of the tooth. A thin "V" that bled deep into the tooth, that seemed to leave its insides exposed.

I was confused by this revelation. Was I really so different from everyone around me? I tried to ask my mother, but she only snickered, "He said you two are aliens, not me." I opened my mouth to ask more, but she had already turned her attention back to the microscope that she kept in her bedroom. I paused in the doorway and watched her click another glass slide into place before turning to leave.

That Halloween I dressed up as a fairy princess. I had a satiny pink gown with poufy sleeves and a matching scepter made from a stick-on bow attached to a chopstick. The Halloween before that, I had been a black cat with construction paper ears and a slick black triangle painted onto the tip of my nose. Every year, I got my mother to drive me up to the most expensive neighborhoods because they had Reese's cups and Kit Kat bars and never gave away Tootsie Rolls or the dreaded pennies. I

always trotted down driveways and skipped onto porches with imagined efficiency, and sometimes after I shouted “trick-or-treat,” the nice human who opened the door would grin and ask me what I was. I knew that had I not worn a costume, they would have never guessed that I was an alien.

In fact, no one seemed to suspect that I was an alien. Maybe it was because there weren't very many of us in Wauwautosa, the small Wisconsin suburb where we'd landed. All of my friends were human. With them, I ate human food and listened to human music, and in the summer before middle school, we'd sneak into the basements of boys to play human games like Spin the Bottle and Seven Minutes in Heaven. In those dim basements, beneath the exposed wooden slats, cocooned between muffled giggles and sweaty palms, I began to forget my father's warning.

Eventually, I fell in love with a human. I don't remember how we met—it doesn't seem important. With him, only the slow whirl of the present seemed to matter. It was as if we were locked in a dance, and like jealous suitors, the past and the future could only waltz and weave against the peripheral. If they got too close, I'd simply close my eyes and lean into the broadness of his shoulders. Often, mid-twirl, I'd catch a glimpse of how his almost too-wide smile framed his perfect teeth. When we kissed, he would gently scrape my bottom lip, and behind my eyelids, I'd see a flash of the snowy rows that had been pressed long ago into two flawless U's.

After a while, my parents began to ask questions, incessantly shouting them from the sidelines. I tried my best to avoid them, but one night, we ran into them at a restaurant. We were paying the check as they arrived. As my human introduced himself, my father wore a silent frown, and my mother chattered nervously. Soon the already faltering conversation died, and my human mercifully left to retrieve the car. I tried to maintain a steady glare at my parents, but as my mother began to speak, the emotion wringing her voice caught me by surprise. She quietly explained in our alien language that she worried that humans were fickle, that their love was shallow and, like dandelions, spread and wilted with the seasons. “Remember how much you used to like blowing on dandelions? They bloom faster than other flowers because they have roots that eat the earth beneath them, shallow roots that wilt at the first frost. They will consume you during the warmest stretches of summer

then leave you barren when the cold comes.”

He was mostly silent on our drive home that night. I strained to listen to the rhythm of his breathing, but it was drowned out by the hum of the engine. The night was clear and through the window, the moonlight glinted off the sheet of silvery sequins on my dress. I shifted in my seat, and I thought I could hear them shimmy against one another. Looking down, I imagined the sequins morphing into the long scales of a mermaid.

“You know, once my dad told me that we were aliens,” I said it jokingly, half-expecting him to laugh. “You should have seen his face, he was so serious about it. I almost think he really believed it.”

He kept looking straight ahead, and spoke after a long pause had settled between us, “I guess I could see that.”

As he pulled into the parking lot of our apartment complex, I noticed that our breaths had gathered into a fog that clung to the entire windshield.

“It’s getting colder,” I whispered.

“It always does this time of year,” he said.

In our living room, I watched as he sat down on the couch and rubbed his hands through his hair before he opened his laptop. I’d watched these motions a thousand times before, but this time they looked different. I couldn’t pinpoint how, but something seemed off, it was as if someone had missed a cue, or maybe while we were gone, all of the furniture had been moved a centimeter in a certain direction.

I stood at the entrance of the hallway and stared into the scene. My eyes squinted with effort, but I couldn’t figure out what had changed. Without noticing it, I had memorized every movement, every gesture of our life together, and as I recalled each of them, nothing seemed to quite match up, but nothing seemed quite out of place. Everything was the same, but the sameness gave the impression of being deceptive, that beneath the still surface, something important had changed. I couldn’t rest until I found it, the ripple that would give away the illusion. I scanned each piece of furniture in the room: the tan microfiber sofa topped with useless clusters of expensive pillows that I’d insisted on buying, the floor lamp and the soft yellow light filtering through its geometric paper shade, the matte black screen of the plasma TV that he’d gotten himself

for his birthday, the two empty wine glasses from the night before that stood near a stack of rented DVD's on the flimsy coffee table with pull-out trays, the low bookshelf cluttered with textbooks, translations from his Russian literature class, Christopher Pike novels bought in a fit of nostalgia, and thick volumes on astrology, which I consulted secretly and often. Everything was as we had left it. I looked down at the carpet. It was still the same shade of apartment beige. I followed the familiar zigzag pattern left by my vacuum from the bookcase to the small strip of metal beneath the front door and back across the room to a pair of feet in ribbed grey socks. One foot was planted flat on the carpet while the other curled around it at the ankle. I stared at those feet, at the socks I'd probably washed the week before. My eyes hesitated before tracing up the seam of his jeans to his left knee, which I knew was pointy and fine-boned beneath the denim. I stared at the angle of the laptop propped on his thighs, at the arches of his fingers, the soft spray of freckles on his forearms. All of these things should have been familiar to me. I knew them so well that I would have been able to retrace each detail in a dream. I didn't want to look up at his face. I told myself that I already knew what I'd see.

“Trying to figure something out?”

His question rippled through me. I felt a tremor radiate from deep inside the curved brackets of my ribcage. It began to vibrate, the frequency higher then still higher, until I felt like I was oscillating between realities. I began to fall. I could hear rushing past my ears a noise, a distant drone like something from childhood.

His hands were gripping my arms. He was yelling something. My eyes popped open, and I saw the face of the alien before me. I saw it in the length of his nose, the curve of his eyelashes—his entire being screamed in the pitch of something foreign.

“It's the premise, the premise. It's you—you you you, not me, no—you're the alien!” I shriek, but I knew he could not understand. The axis of my world had shifted. Something had awakened and retched at the contradiction that I had allowed this alien land to brand me as alien. Something had already set in motion my return home. ■