

## Goblin Fruit

There is a certain kind of girl the goblins crave. You could walk across a high school campus and point them out: not her, not her, *her*. The pert, lovely ones with butterfly tattoos in secret places, sitting on their boyfriends' laps? No, not them. The girls *watching* the lovely ones sitting on their boyfriends' laps? Yes.

Them.

The goblins want girls who dream so hard about being pretty their yearning leaves a palpable trail, a scent goblins can follow like sharks on a soft bloom of blood. The girls with hungry eyes who pray each night to wake up as someone else. Urgent, unknissed, wishful girls.

Like Kizzy.

### 1. Fierce With Wanting

Kizzy lived in the weird house outside of town with all the anvils in the yard and the tick-ridden billygoat that rammed the fence whenever anyone walked past. The mailman wouldn't come up to the door, which worked out fine, since no one ever wrote to them. They didn't even get credit card offers and junk mail like normal people did.

Kizzy's family wasn't normal.

They had no TV but knew hundreds of songs — all of them in a language that Kizzy's teachers had never even heard of — and they sat on rickety chairs in the yard and sang them together, their voices as plaintive as wolves howling at the moon. There were a lot of hairy, blue-eyed uncles strumming old, beautiful guitars, and stout aunts who dried flowers to smoke in their pipes. Cousins were numerous. Small and swift, they were always aswirl in the women's skirts, or dodging the goat like wee shrill matadors. Kizzy's mother wore a kerchief like she was some peasant in a foreign film, and her father had lost two fingers to a wolf back in the Old Country. He'd killed it to get his fingers back and he kept the little bones in a pouch around his neck, along with the teeth of the very same wolf who'd swallowed them.

The women of the family were in charge of the garden and the men hunted whatever was in season (or wasn't). They did things in their scattered, crooked sheds that most suburban kids would only ever see in a documentary, or perhaps on a church mission to a third-world country — things involving axes and offal and an intimate understanding of how to turn *an animal* into *a meal*.

Kizzy hated it all, and she kind of hated herself too, by association. She hated mirrors, hated her ankles, hated her hair. She wanted to climb out of her life as if it were a

seashell she could abandon on a shore and walk away from, barefoot. No one else on the whole land mass of North America, she was sure, had such a stupid life.

Besides the anvils and the goat, there were plenty of no-name cats in the yard, always slinking and slipping along the edges of things, and there were chickens, a peacock that screamed “rape” (as peacocks do), and some cars on blocks. Ghosts came from miles around to whisper and mope and feed, and sometimes strangers passed through in big, battered cars filled with all the things they owned and stayed a few days, playing accordians, swigging moonshine, and singing ballads whose words had never known paper but lived only on the rasping edge of their own voices. Kizzy liked the ghosts but not the strangers, because her father made her give up her room for them and they always left it smelling like feet.

She was sixteen, smart but unenthusiastic, a junior at a public high school she referred to as Saint Pock Mark’s Finishing School for Cannibals.

Saint Pock Mark was her nickname for the acne-scarred principal who used any pretext to talk about his time among the cannibals as a missionary in Borneo, where as a younger man he had suffered parasites and bodily mildew in the service of the Lord. His thin lips got thinner whenever Kizzy was brought to his office for skipping school, and she took a wicked pleasure in inventing imaginary religious holidays to explain her absences. She knew he’d sooner grit his teeth and accept her stories than call her parents, who yelled on the phone as if it were a futuristic device, and whose loud exclamations in their own language Kizzy had him half-convinced were gypsy curses.

Even more than most teenagers, Kizzy hated to be seen in public with any member of her family, and she chose to walk to school even in the sleet or the rare skimpy snows. Freezing was preferable to the rusting junk-heap cars and belly-scratching uncles. She was deeply susceptible to mortification: easy to embarrass though hard to disgust. At home she did unsavory chores that ought to have gone extinct with the old days, like rendering lard and chopping the heads off chickens.

She drank too much coffee, smoked, had a thrilling singing voice when she could be persuaded to use it, and was saddled with a terrible nickname at school that she feared would follow her through life. She had two friends: Evie who was fat and Cactus who was sarcastic and whose name wasn’t really Cactus, but Mary.

“Shut up, Kizzy. You have *not* chopped the head off a swan,” Evie declared as the girls walked home from school on a Friday, smoking.

“Um. *Yes*. I have,” Kizzy replied. “We needed one of its wings to put in my nana’s coffin.”

“Uh! Guh! *Horrible!*”

“Please. That swan was a total bastard.”

“But you cut off its head? That’s totally cruel.”

“Cruel? I cut off chickens’ heads all the time. It’s not cruel. It’s, like, *food*, Evie. You do know food isn’t born wrapped in plastic, right?”

“You *ate* it? I am so telling Mick Crespain you’re a swan-eater.”

“I didn’t eat it! And I’m sure you’d walk up to Mick Crespain and start telling him about my eating habits. He’d be like, *um, who are you?*”

“No, he’d be like, *um, what’s a kizzy?*”

“He knows my name! I sit right behind him in Trig. I’ve totally memorized the back of his neck. I could pick him out of a neck lineup.”

Cactus had been silently exhaling long plumes of smoke but she interrupted now and said, “Hell with Crespain’s neck. What I want to know is, why would you put a swan’s wing in your grandmother’s coffin?”

Kizzy replied as if the answer was obvious. “So her soul could fly. *Duh.*”

Cactus laughed and choked on smoke. “So what’d you do with the other wing?”

“We’re saving it for whoever dies next,” said Kizzy, laughing too. “Swan wings don’t grow on trees, you know. Or,” she added, with a glance at Evie, “maybe you *don’t* know.”

“Maybe I don’t *care.*”

Cactus was still coughing. She managed to say, “God, Kizzy. If I had your freak-ass family I’d totally get an eye patch and write pathetic books about my childhood and go on Oprah to tell about how I had to behead a swan so I could put its wing in my grandmother’s coffin.”

“So her soul could fly,” added Evie.

“*Obviously.*”

“Shut up!” Kizzy said, swatting at them half-heartedly with her fists. “Cactus, you can *have* my family. Take them all. Just give me your tiny little mother with her tiny little haircut and your snoring-ass dad on the couch, and nothing to behead ever again. I bequeath you my axe.”

“Thank you. I accept your offer of weaponry,” Cactus said formally. “I doubt I could kill a swan, though. Even a big bastard one. I just don’t have your rage, Kiz.”

“Believe me, if you had my family, you’d have my rage. You know what my dad did last night? He was cleaning an elk carcass in the yard and he came in and stuck his big bloody hand right in my popcorn bowl!”

Evie and Cactus both shrieked in disgust. “Okay, I take it back,” Cactus said with a grimace. “You can keep your family.”

“What, over a little bloody popcorn?” asked Kizzy. Shaking her head, she muttered, “*Wuss.*”

The girls parted ways at the edge of the normal houses and Kizzy kept walking into the straggling edge of the countryside, past a cemetery, a water tower, and a Christmas tree farm with a little trailer near the road, where a fat dog lying on the porch

picked up his head and belched as she passed. A gutsy little bird chased a crow out of a tree, and a squirrel miscalculated his leap and fell stunned into a pile of rotting leaves. It was autumn. The sky was white and the trees black. Kizzy saw herself in a puddle and looked away.

The goblins didn't look away. Their mouths filled up with saliva as they watched her. There was scant cover for them in the leafless hawthornes along the main road, and Kizzy should have seen them. Of all the girls in this unremarkable town, she should have been the one they couldn't get, the one who knew better. She had Old World blood, after all. Her family *believed in things*: in vampires and the evil eye, in witch soldiers and curses and even talking foxes. They believed that black roosters are the devil in costume and that fruit grown out of season should never be trusted or tasted.

And of course they believed in goblins.

They'd have said there was no "believing" involved. They *knew*, because Kizzy's grandmother had saved her sister from them once in the Old Country and lived to tell. She'd never tired of telling the story, how the goblins had tried to force open her mouth and cram in their unnatural fruit, how she'd kept her jaw clamped tight against them.

How swollen her lips had been after.

"As bruised as windfall plums! I could smell that sweet nectar all over my skin but I never tasted it," she had told Kizzy many times. "You never want to taste their fruit, Sunshine."

"It's not like there are goblins *here*, Nana," Kizzy had replied one time, bored of the story, and bored of this town with its soulless mall and soccer fields, its houses all alike as cookies in a bakery box. "Goblins probably get to live in Prague and Barcelona where they have, like, coffee houses and absinthe and. . ." She trailed off, groping through her daydreams for the many coveted things to be had in other cities, in other people's better lives. "Blind street musicians," was what she came up with. "And mean little nuns carrying long bread under their arms. And cathedrals with gargoyles. And catacombs."

"You know so much?" Her grandmother had chuffed at her. "Goblins living in Prague? Silly girl! Goblins live in Hell! I need to tell you that? They only come *here* to hunt."

If Kizzy's grandmother were alive, she would have seen the goblins crouched behind the trees. She would have heard the smack and gluck of their juicy mouths, and kept Kizzy safe. But she wasn't alive. She had gone into the unknowable last summer. Besides the swan's wing, they'd buried her with other things she'd need: her pockets full of almonds to eat, a compass for finding her path, and coins for bribes along the way — silver coins, minted in one of the sheds and inscribed with runes. And of course, the dainty stiletto blade she'd always carried in her pocket, that went into her coffin too.

When Kizzy was a little girl she had asked once if she could have that knife when her grandmother died, and her grandmother had answered, “Sunshine, I’ll need it where I’m going. Get your own damn knife.”

Kizzy knew other families didn’t bury their grandmothers with knives and dried-out swan wings, and she suspected other grandmothers didn’t slip out of their graves to dance deasil round the living either — that meant circling clockwise and it was powerful magic, especially when the dead did it. Kizzy had felt her grandmother’s ghost go thrice around her at the graveside as her father and uncles shoveled dirt clods onto her coffin. She’d been glad to know her soul wasn’t down there where the rain of dirt must have sounded like thunder. The knife was, though; she’d seen her father put it in and she’d mourned it. She had never stopped coveting it with its sweet mother-of-pearl handle, and her grandmother must have known because on her deathbed she’d motioned Kizzy close and whispered, “Remember my knife, Sunshine?”

Kizzy had thought she was going to give it to her and she’d nodded, smiling. But the old lady had whispered, “Don’t you dare steal it out of my coffin,” and then she’d died.

Sometimes Kizzy imagined her grandmother knife-fighting her way down the long tunnel of death, but mostly her daydreams were of a very different nature. She daydreamed of slow-dancing with Mick Crespain and of sitting on his lap at lunch while he hugged *her* around the waist instead of Sarah Ferris, his knuckles resting lightly against the underside of *her* breasts instead of Sarah’s. She daydreamed about having slim ankles like Jenny Glass, instead of peasant ankles like the fetlocks of a draft horse. About smooth hair instead of coarse hair, sleek hips instead of belly dancer’s hips. About a tinkling laugh, and a butterfly tattoo, and a boy who would tuck his hand into her back jeans pocket while they walked, and press her up against a fence to suck her lower lip like a globe of fruit.

Kizzy wanted it all so bad her soul leaned half out of her body hungering after it, and that was what drove the goblins wild, her soul hanging out there like an untucked shirt. No amount of grandmother-ghosts dancing deasil would keep them from trying for so raw a soul. They just wanted her that bad. She’d probably have been flattered to learn someone wanted her so much, even if that someone was a goblin.

“Some of the goblins have tails and whiskers,” went her grandmother’s story. “Antlers and snail shells and gills. Hooves, claws, beaks! Creatures, they are, each as different from the next as God’s creatures in a zoo — but they aren’t God’s! They work for Old Scratch and catch his souls for him, and they almost had my sister’s. She was ready to give it for just one more taste of their fruit.

“She was a lot like you, Sunshine. Mairenni was always fierce with wanting something, a new scarf or our brother’s guitar or a wink from the handsome blacksmith. And when the goblin men came through the glen, calling out soft like doves cooing,

‘Come buy our orchard fruits, come buy!’ she wanted that too and she had it, handfuls and mouthfuls of that witched fruit. Pears, pomegranates, dates, figs. And the pineapples! We’d never seen pineapples before. Mairenni was a fool to trust their fruit — where in our mountains did she think such things grew?

“She said it was sweeter than honey and richer than wine, and maybe it was but it near carved her hollow, because it’s all she wanted after and all she thought of, day after day, like it was a drug that shrunk her mind to a little nub of *want*, and she wanted and wanted and wanted after it, but she couldn’t have any more.

“She haunted that glen looking for the goblin men, but she couldn’t see them, even when they were there! I could hear their cooing coaxing voices and see their ugly shadows tramping up the hill and so could our cousin Peneli, but not Mairenni. It was how they did, torment a girl with wanting and lure out her soul like a snail from its shell, until she can barely feel it anymore and it seems like a skimpy, worthless thing to trade away.

“A girl from the next village had died already. Wasted away. I saw her near the end. Her eyes were huge in her face and all the juice looked wrung out of her. She died on the full moon and they buried her in the churchyard, but they dug her back out the next year because nothing would grow by her grave, not even grass, and that’s how they knew she was damned. Mairenni started to look like that poor girl and I knew she’d die too. She was my sister even if she was a fool. I had to do something.”

At this point in the story Kizzy’s grandmother used to shiver over her memories and touch her lips, remembering how the crowd of goblins had turned on her, their creature eyes flashing in the gloom as they jumped on her and held her down, mashing grapes and figs against her prim, clenched mouth.

“The goblins can’t just *take* your soul, Sunshine,” she had said in her thick accent. “You have to *give* it. It’s an old agreement between God and Old Scratch. Older than eggs! A soul that’s taken unwilling spoils like milk and then it’s no good to anyone, not even Old Scratch. That’s why he grows his evil orchards, because once you’ve tasted his fruit you’ll give anything to taste it again, and there’s only one thing he wants.”

Mairenni had been ready to give up that one thing. But instead, her sister had braved the goblins and come home bruised and bleeding, with the pulp of that evil fruit still clinging to her skin, and Mairenni, wasted and white, had clung to her and wept. She had kissed her and tasted the juice on her skin — the juice she was supposed to give her soul for, sipped for free from her sister’s skin — and the spell had been broken. Mairenni had lived.

Kizzy had never met her — Mairenni had stayed behind in the Old Country — but her grandmother told her she looked like her. There was a single sepia photograph of a girl in a doorway, full-lipped, with eyes that seemed to sparkle with secrets. Kizzy had

always been fascinated by her — truth be told, she had always identified more with that wild girl who almost sold her soul for the taste of figs, than with her grandmother who kept her lips tight shut and never hungered for forbidden things. But though she stared at that photo, and even saw the shape of her own eyes and lips mirrored back at her, Kizzy just couldn't see herself in that long-ago girl, ripe and thrilling and flush with a weird species of beauty the young have no vocabulary for.

Kizzy was so busy wishing she was Sarah Ferris or Jenny Glass that she could scarcely see herself at all, and she was certainly blind to her own weird beauty: her heavy, spell-casting eyes, too-wide mouth, wild hair and hips that could be wild, too, if they learned how. No one else in town looked anything like her, and if she lived to womanhood, she was the one artists would want to draw, not the Sarahs and Jennies. She was the one who would some day know a dozen ways to wear a silk scarf, how to read the sky for rain and coax feral animals near, how to purr throaty love songs in Portuguese and Basque, how to lay a vampire to rest, how to light a cigar, how to light a man's imagination on fire.

If she lived to womanhood.

If she remembered her grandmother's stories and believed them, and if none of the host of other things befell her that are always out there on the fringes of worry, like drunk drivers or lightning or zombies or a million other things. But Kizzy was ripe for goblins, and if anything got her, it would probably be them. Already one had tracked the perfume of her longing past the surly billygoat to peer in her bedroom window. Already it was studying her every move and perfecting its disguise.