

from *The Glass House*
by Brynne Rebele-Henry

EVERYTHING I AM NOT:

There once was a girl with two heads and a mouth that squirted milk, honey puncture, sad village. She cut jeans with her tongue and bled tequila. She cleaved men in whole and begged for more. Gorgeous. But I'm still living in a one-room apartment with a bottle of cheap vodka. She was the girl you could never forget, the one who could put a knife against your neck. She held the river in her sternum and sang Leonard Cohen unironically. She bound her breasts with the American flag and cigarettes were her tide. Smoke, oyster my lungs, please. Exhale.

I put this in my box full of broken leg stories. (I fell three years ago from a twisted maple, a branch gouged my leg and snapped it like a river, but before it snapped, a protruding nail tore a two-inch slash in my calf. On the way to the hospital the blood made seeds against my skin). Afterward I eat raspberries and think of drowning in fat: exotic, my girth overflowing thick and sweet, walking would be like fucking my own flesh, whaled by my girth I would leave imprints on couches and wouldn't be able to fit through doorways. A self-imposed hermitism, suffocated by my limbs. Stuffing my elbow down my throat, the jiggle obliterating my gag reflex. Stunning.

As if. If I wasn't still trying to fit in a zero and shriveling against scales at the doctors. When I die I will be survived only by lipstick nubs and a trail of science textbooks. The coroners will lose interest. Not gruesome or beautiful, my body will fall somewhere in between and I will always be the case closed too early. I tell my reflection this. "But you're only fifteen." No.

Mother is wearing a pantsuit today and lifting weights. I realize I don't remember the last time she ate so I burn frozen spaghetti and meatballs and shove it in our respective mouths.

Genus: Mother

Status: Widow

Distinctive Behavioral Patterns: A steady denial of deaths, a confusion of time zones

I look at her mouth. She's left the pasta dangling through her bird lips instead of chewing it. I move her jaws around and knead her throat: swallow. Her eyes are the blank of fire hydrants, a desire only to quell.

"Do you know who I am?"

“Yes, Sandy’s daughter Claudia.”

“No, I’m your daughter Natalie.”

She shrugs and stabs a red plastic fork into the oak of our kitchen table.

Tragedies and births are reserved for the kitchen, everything else is a chaise or bedroom. She taught me this when I was ten, the summer when I tried to sew myself a new skin, crouched in the corner of a room so filled with dust and fabric my body had to contort to fit in my head. Needles were everywhere that year, emerging from the ocean of my pillow and into my fingers, the folds of the carpet, sticking out of my pocket and into my thigh. I would stitch the calluses of my fingers together until they resembled some new kind of flower, organic, red or periwinkle thread protruding from the skin too rough to bleed, too young to heal. I would crouch on the floor my eyes too sore to see, eating my scabs and hair, pushing pins like roots into my hands and feet. I once tried using a knife but it wouldn’t cut, my skin was too thick for the blade. I told her it was an accident.

The years I tried to disappear, I would cover my body in wool sweaters. In the summer the fabric would stick to my skin and make me smell like a wet dog. I would go to sleepovers, sit quietly, and wait for one of the pretty girls who was the man my father worked with’s daughter, to ask me if I wanted to pretend to be a boy while she rubbed herself on me. We would try to put our tongues in each other’s mouths. I would watch these girls like I watched butterflies: in awe, waiting for the light touch of an antennae on my skin, afraid they would come apart upon contact with my flesh, afraid that their shiny blonde curls and pale skin would give way under my fingers like a butterfly’s wing.

Then they got older and left for a summer in The Hamptons and came back with new noses and a rotating set of boyfriends, and I didn’t grow breasts but I got four inches taller and learned how to swear in Yiddish and how to classify insects based on their thoraxes alone.

Mother’s in the kitchen now, baking cake from a box mix that expired two years ago. Vanilla and strawberry.

I think about getting pierced in strange but expected places—nipples, septum, the space of neck below my throat. In the end I just put on fleece pajama pants and watch a movie in a language I don’t understand. I go to sleep with a kitchen knife under the crochet pillow and wake with the edge pressing against my cheek. I think that’s all it takes and contemplate a form of mutilation but make too bitter coffee and wash my hair in the sink with detergent.

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But instead is the only language I know

Ailia calls and we both don't speak, just listen to our mutual exhalation against the grimy plastic. Her earrings that she made out of old soda cans rattle against the earpiece and I try to fit my finger in the space between my teeth and gums without gagging.

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Sadness is a language too complex to understand but I speak it anyway

I roll it in my mouth like a piece of bitter candy. I walk to the Italian bakery and watch a young couple spooning cake into each other's mouths like birds. My collarbone sticks out through my t-shirt and the Italian woman who makes the cannoli tells me to eat two. The smile I give her is a pissed off question. I walk home with a bag full of small cakes. The paint on the door to our apartment is nonexistent, and when I walk into the kitchen Mother is standing on the table with a macramé turkey dishtowel turban.

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Ailia is my only friend

"Get over here, I'm eating cake!" She comes over and we shove icing into our chapped lips and don't speak.

Soon I will go back to high school where everyone is a slut-hyena, prude-giraffe, or death-head, and I don't fall into any category so I tramp the outskirts in clothes that don't fit and are all black or gray. Sometimes there are boys in shirts that don't quite make sense and necks that stick out. I let them carry my books and, sometimes, let them kiss me while I think about girls with shiny eyes but I don't really give the boys much thought, just map their pimples with my fingers and attend their family meals where I don't talk and shove fish and rice into my rusty mouth.

I always pick the boys with the necks that are too thick, or the loud ones, the ones who think they can't get uglier. I date them until they expect more than a kiss and then I leave, pretend it's the way they called me baby, or their acne spotted double chins or the bleached tips on their hair that turned orange. Go back to watching the other girls in the hallway and gulping down my coffee trying to quell the parched feeling that rises up my throat when I see them.

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I am a cartographer of attraction

I map my waning or nonexistent attraction to the boyfriends who are interested in only fucking or the mating dance leading up to the fucks that I don't give them. I chart the pimples and blotches of their skin, the lumps of throat and caves that make their chests.

My favorite was Thomas, who played clarinet badly and compared himself to Bach, demanded I call him The Clarinet Picasso, he recited his own name as I tried to pull the worm of his dick through his too big pants in the basement of his father's house. He collected CDs with titles like "*Romance of Wind Instruments*" and would play them as we sat on his couch and didn't talk.

Once, when his sister was home from college I'd stopped by to return a CD, get out of the brownstone that my father was permeating with his sadness. She answered the door and something tightened in my throat and we went into the living room and she played me a song the punk rock band she formed when she was thirteen had been working on for five years. I tried to find rhythm in the screaming that was coming out of their CD player and started swaying with her to the cacophony. We played it ten times and on the tenth time right when it was about to stop she kissed me and my body flooded warm. After that, I stopped returning his calls and said it was because he called me his baby after I got my braces off and brushed my hair for the first time in three months.

It's raining and the city turns into a sleet of pocked faces and neon. Fuzzy boots on college students and women who don't remember the last time they've eaten. I curl onto our couch like a fossil in sand, flip through a book of twentieth-century art left on my coffee table.

There is a canvas covered with opaque glass. All you can see of the painting is a blur of red and purple jewel tones. It has the harsh stroke of a longing that you just realized you have, a love that you only knew three years or minutes or hours later. My hands brush the book's surface and my skin smells like bitter vanilla. The practical font is a scrawl: *The Glass House*, 1971, artist unknown. The ridges of the canvas pressed against the glass, it says in a footnote on the page that the painting itself has never been seen by anyone except the artist.

I try to sleep, but think instead of how the glass fits into the canvas like my fathers coffin fit into the ground.

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The curious case of the shrinking patriarch

My father grew in reverse. By the time he was twenty he was five seven and barely a hundred pounds. By fifty he was five nine and a half and two hundred pounds of mint mouthwash and pillied suits. After he died, we had no body to bury so instead we stuffed rocks into his casket like a medieval penance.

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My mother is more of a teenager than I will ever be

She wakes me up at eight in the morning wearing a monogrammed high school sweater she bought me in a fit for anticipation of my popular cheerleader life. It stretches web-like across her breasts and sunken shoulders. She's put her hair in pigtails and sings Britney Spears while burning pancakes. I try to put on either makeup or a new face, but my features become indefinable and I break dark pink lipstick in the toothpaste-speckled sink.

Ailia's mom, who wears business suits but doesn't actually work, arrives and takes us to the mall. We walk around and pretend to consider buying things but instead end up sitting in the food court watching people holding hands and eating oversized pretzels.

"What did you guys get?"

"Nothing."

"Oh."

"Sorry, Ms. Colleen."

We climb into her white SUV with the Victoria's Secret and Juicy Couture catalogs in the back seat. She mouths along to "Loving You" and switches her ponytail. I wiggle my fingers into Ailia's thighs and she makes a cat claw at me. We laugh then remember our mutual sadness and are silent the rest of the way home.

I spend the night at her house and we watch Buffy and horror movies whose only virtue is the amount of sex and muscle tone. She shovels handfuls of popcorn in her mouth and something shifts inside of me and I gasp and then pretend that I'm just admiring the buff man on the TV screen. When the blonde virgin is getting chased I slip my hand into hers and it feels so good I don't breath for three minutes and then my chest hurts and I let go of her hand and inhale the air that suddenly feels shiny and new. I watch her and something swells inside of me and I know then everything I haven't put into words before now.

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Life underwater

We braid our hair together, our skulls knocking into each other in a new osmosis. I think this is how it will always begin, and wait ten minutes after she closes her eyes and then I put my hand on the small of her back. I feel her stir and she shifts her thighs towards me. In the morning I wake up and she is hunched over the dresser holding her wrists, the cuts are small and clean I think "this is how it ends" but it doesn't because she is shaking me and holding scorched coffee.

"What's wrong?"

“Bad fucking dream.”

“You were cradling your wrists.”

“I’m hungry. Let’s make breakfast.”

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My existence is measured in egg yolks

Ailia cracks the eggs like dying moons into the pan, a red streak shoots through the whites of the yolks. An omen I don’t need a fortune teller to know. The triangle of her jaw is a shape I want to trace. The lilted black of her hair, and swell of her lips, a beckoning. We don’t talk, just shove our eggs around the family china with the blue birds on it. Upstairs her mother hums to “Let Me Blow Ya Mind.”

I walk home. My mother has brushed her hair and is wearing jeans and eyeliner. She’s put away the weeks of mail that was becoming a tidal of paper on our kitchen table. She’s made her usual scorched cookies. I go upstairs and Google “How to tell if you’re a lesbian” then decide I don’t want to know and turn off my laptop. I prod the possibilities like a broken tooth.

When I walk into the kitchen, Mother is standing in front of the oak coffee table staring at *The Glass House*. “Natalie, what does this remind you of?”

“When you find the answer to a question that you only now realize you never will know.”

Her black winged eyes loom together. “What do you think it means?”

“I think it means you can live with someone and never truly know them.” I eat the black-bottomed cookies and smile too brightly at her.

I go to sleep with a photo of Ailia under my pillow: beginner’s magic. In the morning I call her and she doesn’t answer the phone so I count sixty rings until I decide not to leave a message.

I write down tactics for love, a battle plan.

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Maybe smog will be my coffin

1. Wear red lipstick, put my hair up the way she taught me.

2. Buy dark-smelling perfume, or maybe cologne.
3. Tilt my neck against hers, my body language saying “bite me.”
4. Touch her collarbone and the space between ear and hair and pretend it didn’t happen.
5. Touch her for too long to be a coincidence.
6. Put my hands in the pockets of her jeans with the specks of sharpie on them.
7. Chew on my lips like a coked-up vampire until they are as inflamed as meat, a bruise impossible not to touch.
8. Kiss her (the right way).
9. Learn to kiss the right way.
10. Kiss enough people to know the right way. Training.
11. Think about getting a tongue piercing.

I make a salad and sit at my now-clean kitchen table. Next week I’m going back to school. I think about dyeing my hair or getting a tattoo and showing up a stranger, all of the people I wish I didn’t know. I try not to think about the man who was barely my father. He was always more or less a ghost, a person so insubstantial that knowing him meant disappearing, his nonexistent needs or incapability for human emotions. I only saw him once a month over pristine table settings as he shoveled steak into his mouth and didn’t talk.

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My father was the first corporeal ghost

He was a furniture-man, without a voice. The last time I remember him speaking was a deranged script about not feeding pigeons when I was six. After that he became a shadow, a mime without reasons. I pack up all of his things except for the white suit and a shoebox full of photos of Her. Peroxide blonde, legs a train track of tendon, naked on satin sheets with his favorite tie in her mouth. And then. She’s wearing a burgundy thong, her breasts draped across the leather chair in his office. I fold them up and put them in my underwear drawer, a shitty cliché.

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The first is the only number I like

I decide to go back-to-school shopping, binders and pencils that break more than write. I ask Mother if she wants to take me to get my hair done. Her smile is relieved and rigid. She won’t have to look at my snaggly dry ends, won’t have to cut the knots out with kitchen shears. I ask her to stop at the first salon we pass. Inside, a woman with a Bettie Page tattoo drapes me with a plastic cape.

“What do you want?”

“Something green.” I realize I don’t remember my face, the shape of my lips. I spend the next hour watching the peaks of bones and skin change.

After, my hair is in a forest-colored bob that reminds me of the grief I don’t have. A eulogy for a man I never knew, only inhabited space with. Breathed oxygen together, a thread from nostril to lungs.

I go into the first boutique I find and buy leather pants, a red sweater, and a bra that doesn’t fit. I go to the piercing booth with the picture of a woman’s breasts in the window, have Mother sign the papers. My tongue is extended and clamped like a sacrifice. I think of sage and oils and ceremonial robes. A cold needle is pushed through my tongue, and then a silver stud is inserted. My gums feel it first, then my teeth. I spend the rest of the evening alternating between juice, prodding, and antiseptic.

My head hurts when I sleep for more than five hours. I realize how distant I am from my body. I make strong coffee and put on the leather pants and sweater. I think of her and put my hair up the way she likes, add lipstick and my father’s old cologne.

The fog is hanging over the city like a sheet, like a child trying to dress up like a ghost. I walk to the school bus with my head down, avoiding eye contact, sad attempts at conveying mourning or sympathy. I prod the metal in my tongue against the roof of my mouth, and think that there are a million ways to die: blow dryer and a bathtub, a beauty magazine on the bath mat, strangulation: a scarf tied the wrong way. The first time I died I was nine. I crawled under the bed with the lace hanging from it and ceased to exist.

I shuffle down the bleached halls of the school. The faces are a question I don’t want to answer so I go find Ailia and say, “let’s get out of here.” She looks at the pants and hair and tongue and laughs like a growl, then she smiles and says she’s supposed to meet up with someone. When I ask who, she says Marcus.

We call him Marcus The Jesus Fucker because of the way he fingers his rosaries. The way he dreams of a muscular Jesus descending from heaven and spanking him then bending him over and swirling holy water spit over his asshole and chicken thighs.

“But he’s gay?”

“At least he has taste.”

“Ailia, he’s worn the same sweatshirt and khakis in different sizes for the past two years.”

She smiles like a reverse Holly Golightly. “You see, taste.”

I walk into Algebra shaking my head. At this point the game isn’t conquests or sending her subliminal messages, it’s just keeping my body from falling apart. Keeping my head from rattling and my mouth from foaming like I have rabies. I decide that feelings are

trite and that I should probably become a sociopath, harmless, a swan with a thorn in its wing. I would glide for the rest of my life with the same expression: mouth parted, eyes that can't quite meet another's.

I go through the rest of the day ignoring the stares directed at my mouth and hair, the fake sad faces aimed in my direction, the murmurings when I pass the hordes of not-quite-children in the halls. I take the bus home and try to talk as little as possible. Ailia follows me off the bus. "What's your problem?" I want to say "you" and "fucking love" but instead I just smile and ask if she wants to come over and do our homework together.

We eat apples with cinnamon, and I ask her if she knows that Mr. Ross keeps porn in his desk. Her teeth glimmer like sharks in the pink water of her mouth when she laughs. I ask if she wants to see something, and we go into my room and I get out the pictures. "He wasn't a father, we just shared the same rooms when he came home once a month. Everyone thinks I'm devastated over a man that I don't know." I tell her about how I'm wearing his cologne. "Which is the only thing he left here. He had four bottles, one for his office, one for the apartment, one for his business suitcase, and one for travel. But that's all I fucking know." The sobs are glimmers in my throat that I can't push down and start spitting them up like blood. She pushes my head into her lap and rubs my shoulders, and I try not to inhale. I mouth her name then close my eyes and we stay there for half an hour. Later, I push my head up and look at the trees of her face and our eyes make forests.