

matchmaker

Scratching out his name in window soot, gathering dirt beneath her fingernail: *Sammy*.

~

When Baby turns fifteen, Mama has a stroke and Roseman totes her to a nursing home to be looked after. Just thirty-six years old. When she hears, Baby crams a fist of Oxycodone down her throat.

Then she takes herself to Mama's house, its cupboards crammed with empty screw-top bottles, each one meticulously sterilized in the dishwasher before storage.

She pries the foil off a yogurt from the fridge and, sucking it from her fingers, glares down all those sparkling bottles filling up the shelves. The only things in Mama's cupboards.

Picks up a bottle from Mama's chair, uncaps and takes a swig, sickly sweet with the familiar bite of cheap alcohol thickening her throat. Counting up the stairs as she goes, *ten, eleven, twelve*, and down the hallway to Mama's bedroom.

She peels back the blood-stained sheets, and dumps them in the hamper even though there is no one around to wash them. Stained through to the mattress, permanently damaged.

"I can't help it," she tells the mirror, and the mirror lips her words right back to her. "I'm sorry," she says. *Sorry*, retorts the mirror.

She tugs at the drawer where Mama keeps her toys, but the whips and cuffs are gone. Someone has already been here. The photo drawer is cleared out too.

All the drawers have been emptied, but the shoe-bag in the closet is intact, Mama's beautiful bright heels in scarlet, grape, and jade, a pair for every outfit, all size eight and much too big for Baby. But Mama's red leather dress fits her like a glove.

~

Sammy. She's scratched his name ten times on the window glass.

Raoul still hasn't seen him. He lights a cigarette and shrugs. "Easy come, easy go," he drawls. "C'est la vie."

Baby sets a lighted candle on her window ledge. In its flame, Mama dances holding a single long-stemmed rose between her teeth. Sammy's in there too. He opens up his hands to Baby but before she can figure how to pull him out, he disappears in a puff of smoke.

Mama waves gaily to her. "Bring him back," demands Baby.

Mama speaks clearly despite the stem. "I can't," she says. "My hands are tied."

"I want those pictures that you took of me. Where are they?"

Mama laughs. "Those pictures are my insurance."

"By rights they're mine," snaps Baby. "Why don't you just die? Just die and get it over with. Put us all out of your misery."

Mama's grin disintegrates. "I need your help," she whimpers, her hands upturned and pleading. "You know I can't do it by myself."

"I've tried," says Baby.

"Not hard enough. Not like I showed you."

Baby bites back her tears. "No," she says. "No, I can't. It isn't fair to ask. Go away and leave me alone!"

She takes a breath to stop her teeth from chattering, and blows out the candle with her mama in it. In the dark, she sits alone and very still, thinking about what her mama taught her.

When Mama was a kid, she didn't have things so good. When Baby was little, her mama dribbled all her horror stories out on her like fairy tales.

Instead of Mother Goose, which Baby learned much later in the library on her own, Mama told her how her mother had looked with a hole where her face should be. Of how her father had tortured her. "Be grateful that you never had one," she told Baby. "There isn't any use to it."

And most likely she was right, just look at Roseman. Look at Billy. Look at Daddy Jack and Uncle Manfred, Leon, Murray, and all the rest. There's Sammy, but he is no one's papa. He had his own to run away from. *Anything is better than that*, he'd told her. *And I mean anything*.

~

It's time again for the hospital but Baby doesn't want to go. Argues with Mama in her head. *All I can do for you is bring you fucking flowers. I can't give you what you want, even though you showed me how. Get Roseman to do your dirty work, he likes that sort of thing*.

She shuts off her phones. All the drugs in Mama's cabinet are not enough, but she takes them anyway.