

Uncertain Alchemy

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She was most of the time asleep and the rest of the time pretending. Voices around her mixed with kitchen sounds, with patterns of light and dark beyond her eyelids and the smells of soap and wood smoke and old grease. She slept.

She awoke to footsteps coming close. A hand behind her head lifted it, a spoon pressed against her bottom lip, bringing with it the smell of earth. "Come on girlie, have some of this." She gagged on warm and bitter liquid. Her hand throbbed. She slept.

Her eyes opened to a small window with faded red curtains and a wood plank ceiling. She followed wood grain to a knot, watched the square of light from the window tick along the wall. She slept between sheets as thin and soft as rain.

A voice interrupted her darkness. "You sit up."

"She don't have the strength" badgered a higher nasal voice.

"Shush." The voice got louder. "Get yourself sitting now."

She opened her eyes. Two old Indian ladies sat in chairs practically on top of the bed, looking right back at her. She closed her eyes.

"See." The first voice chuckled. "Stay up now. Take a spoonful." With some grunting the smell and breath of old lady

came closer, hands wedged a pillow under her head. Dishes rattled, another spoon was forced upon her. This time the liquid was salty with a smell of moldy leaves. She slept.

Daylight burned red into her eyelids. When she opened them she saw clothing and dried leaves, baskets, tools and bits of rope on pegs, a table with a kerosene lantern, a cookstove, a few cans of food. Her left hand had rags wrapped around it, burying its low throbbing heat. She slept.

The women talked more when they thought she was sleeping. Or maybe they knew she was beginning to listen. They were sisters. They didn't like each other's cooking. They had one garden but grew separate patches of most things.

The littler one with the big voice, Vernita, slept on the couch under a mound of quilts and crocheted throws, and moaned in her sleep. Doris slept on the bench. She had rough hands and a problem with her digestion. The two of them took turns feeding her, helping her use the bucket under the bed.

Doris propped her upright and washed her not so gently, with a rag and a pan of water and a bar of soap. Wiped her and rinsed her inch by inch, changed the poultice on her hand, changed the sheets as she fell asleep to the smell of sun and soap and grass.

Sometimes when she woke the cabin was empty. She would stretch, or take a deep breath, or try to prop her head up so

she could see out the window. The bandage was gone from her hand, her thumb was swollen and mottled purple but it didn't hurt. She slept.

One afternoon she pushed herself upright. She could see the garden, small and full of weeds and dry grass and tomatoes and beans. The screen door banged wide open and a different woman stomped in, skinny in the legs but big-shouldered, dressed in men's clothing. Asking things before the screen shut. "What are you doing here sleeping all the time? You got no family or anything? When are you going back where you came?"

Vernita and Doris were right behind her.

The young woman fell back on her pillow and pretended to sleep.

That dinnertime Doris set a place for her. The three sisters sat down and turned to her. "Come on now, we're waiting" said the big one, named Smyrna.

It took a long time to get her feet to the floor and her head upright. Vernita half-carried her over to a chair. She gnawed on a piece of cornbread, sipped tea until she was suddenly not very hungry and maybe a little sick. Smyrna helped her over to the bucket and then into bed.

When she woke it was daytime. The house was empty. A blouse and a skirt and a pair of shoes lay at the foot of the bed.

She dressed and made her way outside, onto the porch, and

sat where there was a little shade. The first stars were popping out when Doris and Vernita trudged home. They looked her up and down as they approached, nodded as they put down their loads and sat on either side of her. The crickets slowed. When the sky was black and the stars bright Doris took the young woman's hand and her arm at the elbow. They helped each other inside.
