

The Woman Who Loved A Bear*

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Let us begin with a lovely woman, Dolorosa, the youngest daughter of a poor family, a girl rumored to be cursed with silence.¹ It starts when she is a silken-haired child, so quiet that her parents have to bend their ears down to the soft mouth talking. One day, Dolorosa stops speaking, and before long she never speaks at all. The villagers began to think then that there is something odd about her.²

Dolorosa lives with her grandmother in a tumbledown cottage on the edge of town. She has a mother and father and two sisters, but when she stops speaking, she is sent to Grandmother. As the oldest crone of the village, Grandmother will sit on a stone by the cottage gate, and tell a story if passers-by will listen, especially if they give her a coin or a cup of ale. Often, they ask for the story of the Dolorosa's curse, and she tells it all. Dolorosa when she was just a baby was left in the pram one hot afternoon. Here, under the summer storm-light, the baby cried, and something grey with wings flew into her mouth. As she tells the story, Grandmother points out the birthmark under Dolorosa's left eye, which is evidence enough for some people, along with her silence.³

"She will never be able to love," says Grandmother. "No man should go near her for if they do, she will only harm them. She will not mean to, but she will." And no man of the village ever does go near her. Dolorosa has never loved a man, so she isn't sure if what Grandmother said was true. "How do you think I have reached my great age?" Grandmother asks. "I'll tell you. By staying away from men." Dolorosa likes living with Grandmother, though the old lady fusses

* fairy tale on the borderline

1 Perhaps you're wondering if Dolorosa is me, and you're right – she could be, if my body was ironed flat into a *lovely woman*, not a person but a cypher.

2 I was silent too, not in a picturesque cottage or country town, but a school where I was too wise to make eye contact, where a boy told me in passing that he'd seen better legs on a table. Would you believe me if I told you that when the words passed his lips, I transformed? I became a table with long, shapely legs.

3 Did you notice it when you kissed me, when my face was bare stepping out of the bathtub? The birthmark like Dolorosa's under my left eye? When I look in the mirror, I'm not sure what I see. Let's say for the sake of ease that I'm her, because at least both of us are cursed. Perhaps you're wondering if Dolorosa is me, and you're right – she could be, if my body was ironed flat into a lovely woman, not a person but a cypher.

and frets when Dolorosa wantscurse, but fate has a way of playing tricks on men, and so it was that even cursed Dolorosa could not stay hidden forever.⁴

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The first suitor is a soldier camped near the town. Dolorosa is outside the church. Dolorosa doesn't attend church services herself but waits outside patiently for Grandmother. The young priest, recently arrived in her village, says that Dolorosa's gazing bothers him, and indeed when she gazes into the far distance like she is somewhere else, people around her shift uncomfortably in their pews. How at once she is so far away but can see through them all. "Why must you embarrass me?" Grandmother asks. "You were sent here to me to live down your shame, but despite your silence, you can't help making a spectacle of yourself. If silence could be speaking, you would be shouting."⁵

But Dolorosa would not stop dreaming, so now she waits outside church, sat on a gravestone in her buttoned-up green dress and shawl. The soldier does not go to church either, because, he tells himself, he does not fear God. When he rides by on his horse, Dolorosa is sat on a gravestone in the churchyard, and he sees her only as a ghostly white face and flaxen hair, her head wrapped in green silk. The face reminds him of an owl in a thicket. He stops to talk to her. She points to her mouth and shakes her head, but he doesn't seem to mind her silence.

He talks incessantly, tells her of all the battles he has won, all the campaigns he has fought in. "I have captured Giants. I have overthrown Ogres." When he finishes his bragging, he tells her that though she is odd, he has taken a fancy to her. "I can't say I under-

⁴ Enter the suitors with the rule of three, the first two fodder for me to skewer, though each tells us something important. These men who both are real and imagined, recognizable and vague.

⁵ My real grandmothers would never have said this. Except this is not a grandmother but a Grandmother, a woman who wields men's power as her own. Like the old lady in the fable whose head is lopped off like a coconut before a monster puts on her clothes.

stand it myself,” he says. “After all the beautiful women I’ve had.”⁶

Dolorosa gazes at the soldier. Of course, she says nothing. He accuses her then of laughing at him, throws her down on the grass among the headstones, shoves his hand up her skirt.

Dolorosa is mustering courage to find her voice and cry out, when the soldier is lifted up and off her. He is thrown against the wall of the church and knocked out cold. The shadow of a great white bear falls over her. The bear is standing over Dolorosa. It bends its muzzle down to her face where she lies on her back on the wet grass. The stench of bear breath blasts her. Its head is so close that she can look into its small dark eye. Then with a swift movement of its massive body it leaps away. She watches it amble into the forest beyond the churchyard.⁷ She wonders if she will ever see such a magnificent animal again, but soon the days pass, and the bear too is forgotten.

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The second suitor is a scholar visiting the village priest. Because Dolorosa never enters the church, the scholar has never noticed her, nor has he heard the rumors about her, and it comes as a shock to him when on one of his bracing walks in the woods, he finds her bathing naked in a pool.

Grandmother does not approve of Dolorosa’s swimming. “I know where you are stealing off to,” she calls, as Dolorosa runs out into the forest. It used to be her and her sisters, but now her siblings are all married off to prosperous farmers, and they cannot get away anymore. Dolorosa doesn’t want to be like them. Grandmother is cross though.

⁶ No fairy tale this one. In the old stories, there were always three: two bad brothers, and one good. But I have known so many bad. A Jon, a Grant, a Philip and a Bruce, so many Gareths, they’re too hard to count. The ones that desired and shamed you in the same moment. If we were honest, we’d say we all know men like this, even now, and some of them are “nice.”

⁷ If you had known me then, when the soldier came for me, what would you have done? Inside my chest I fold and unfold like a fan just asking the question.

“Will I be saddled with you until I die?” Grandmother asks, though secretly she sounds pleased.

Dolorosa waves Grandmother’s pleas away. Dolorosa does not speak, but with her hands, she is saying: *Oh Grandmother, please. Why waste your time bothering me? I am happy as I am.*

And she is happier still when she has a chance to slip away to the pool. In the deep part of the forest, where the vines twine lazily, past the glade with the hollowed-out tree, she visits the blue pool and lets the cool water lap over her skin like silk.

By some unhappy accident, the scholar stumbles into this place, where Dolorosa stands naked in the pool combing the water from her bronze hair with her fingers. The scholar calls her Venus, Proserpine, Psyche. He calls her his true love. Dolorosa simply climbs onto the bank to retrieve her clothes, puts them on hurriedly, and turns for home.

The scholar starts to follow her through the woods. Dolorosa doesn’t run. She just walks on doggedly while he follows her all the way to the cottage. She enters the garden, and he doesn’t dare go further. All his sweetness turns to bile then. He calls her *cruel, coquettish, sly, bitch*.⁸ He is still standing there speaking this poison when she goes inside and closes the door behind her.

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Grandmother looks up from her knitting. “I said you would get into trouble.”

Dolorosa wonders if the scholar will tell what he saw, expects a dressing down from the priest, but she is worrying needlessly. That

⁸ A fuck you to all the men whose adoration turns on a word or gesture to bile. The swerve from beautiful to bitch. We see you so clearly. We’ll eat you up.

evening the scholar never returns to his quarters. In fact, he is never seen again at all.

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The third suitor comes on a night when it is raining, the wind like a sharp intake of breath around the eaves of the house. Dolorosa is waiting for Grandmother to return home. She is sitting alone at the table with her meager supper when there is a knock at the door. She opens up to find a great white bear stood on its hindlegs, its fur wet and clumped in the storm. It lets out a long growl, and without knowing why, she asks if it would like to come in. It falls down with a thump to all fours to pass through the door, then once inside rears up again, its head brushing the ceiling. The bear has come of course for Dolorosa, as creatures do in stories.⁹

“You do not speak,” says the bear in a low growl, and from about its neck it paws at something glinting and gold on chain. It falls to the ground and the bear pushes it towards her with its paw: a golden pen and notebook on a gold chain for Dolorosa to hang about her neck. “It never runs dry,” growls the bear.

Dolorosa takes the pen, hangs the notebook around her neck, and writes upon the first page: *Thank you. And thank you for that day at the churchyard. That was you, wasn't it?* The bear lowers his head towards the page.

“You are always in my woods.”

Dolorosa replies: *You have seen me there?*

“The world of humans is not safe,” the bear begins and continues slowly as though speaking is painful. “If you were my woman, I'd take

⁹ The bear is love coming to find me. Dangerous and wild, man or werewolf, embodied, insubstantial, slanting like moonlight onto an empty pillow.

you to the high cliffs. You'd be free to do as you pleased. I would stay at night, but I would leave before dawn to hunt. You would have such freedom."

Dolorosa writes back: *I had a feeling in the woods that eyes were watching me but not unkindly. There was a man who watched me once, but all he thought of was himself.*

The bear growls angrily.

Dolorosa writes: *Would you ever hurt me?*¹⁰

"Not ever, but you must follow my rules," says the bear. "I don't ask for your love, but I might still tempt you."

Dolorosa writes: *I will come with you.*

She starts to gather up a few belongings. The bear bats the bundle from her hands. "Don't need those," growls the bear. "Climb up now."

She climbs up onto his back, lets him carry her away. Outside in the meadow and into the woods, the great bulk and muscle of him thuds underneath her with every step and leap, and she finds her legs trembling as they grip on tight. "Are you afraid?" asks the bear, and she shakes her head. "Keep your arms around my neck, keep your legs wrapped tight round me," he says, "and there will be nothing to be afraid of."

The bear carries Dolorosa through the greenwood into the dark forest, leaps over a wide river, and climbs a steep cliff to an elegant house with a veranda and views of all the country below. From there, far away below her, Dolorosa sees Grandmother's cottage, the farmlands of her sisters, the squares of ownership small as postage stamps.

10 *No one is going to hurt you. If I look in the mirror, if I turn and turn, if I throw salt over my shoulder, if I repeat it a hundred times, will it make it true?*

The bear drops a silver bell from his mouth that she can ring to call for anything she wants. All she has to do was ring the bell and write down on her notepad what she wants, and as if brought by invisible hands, those things appear. That night she rings the bell, and writes down on the paper: *A bath?* Invisible hands draw her to a great white bathtub with animal feet. The hands appear again to rub her down with towels and sweet-smelling lotions and to slide her naked into bed between crisp sheets. The room is completely dark, but she cannot sleep. She is nervous for her virginity and also for the unknown.¹¹

She knows the bear is there when she hears a gentle sound like a sigh. The bed sinks and groans as he climbs up with his great weight. First it is his fur brushing up against her naked skin, hundreds of soft hairs setting her desire on edge, and then the fur is all around her pulling her in. She finds herself inside the pelt with the naked body of a man. She wants to tell him something, but she cannot write in the dark. She finds words then, the first words for a very long time, and her voice sounds strange in her own mouth:

“Wait,” she says, as he lies his body against hers. He pauses. “I never told you. There’s a curse. If I fall in love with you, you might be harmed.”¹²

“No love,” says the bear. “I don’t expect love. Only pleasure.”

Without delay in the dark, his tongue finds her mouth and sets to work on her body. No part of her is not open to him then, the fur enveloping her. She hadn’t known, never realized love could be like this. She is surprised to find herself speaking again. She tells him: “Don’t stop”; and he laughs a growl of a laugh. After it is finished, she finds one more question: she asks him if she will ever see his face

11 I hesitate at the word “virginity” though probably it’s erotic here. When I lost my own virginity it was terrifying, excruciating. I cringe when the word is said out loud. What does virginity mean anyway except to the old, white kings who inspect the “goods”? My body is not a sealed object. My body can’t be made tamper-proof. But let’s forget all that, say it never happened. Let’s imagine myself with you. Let’s say that I cried with happiness rather than fear.

12 In the old Welsh tale, Llew Skillful Hand was cursed so he could never love a mortal woman, so the magician Gwydion made him a woman of flowers. But what if she was cursed too? Cursed to find it difficult to love, harder still to be loved. She almost killed him. A faulty defense mechanism. But what if she could learn? What if I could let you?

in daylight again.

“No, not ever,” he tells her in the dark, and kisses her tenderly. “Trust me.”

In the morning, she wakes to find blood and white fur on the sheets. But she is happy, perhaps for the first time ever.¹³

The next morning, out on the veranda, Dolorosa looks out at the land below, at Grandmother’s cottage so tiny faraway. Dolorosa left without saying a word, and a thought is nagging at her. Surely, she should have at least written a note. She rings her silver bell and writes down in the notebook: *I need some writing paper, and a desk and chair.* Before long, a wooden writing table appears with a chair, and paper.

Dear Grandmother, she begins. *I am so sorry that I did not leave you a note. You needn’t worry. I have come away to be the wife of a bear. He is, I suppose, an unusual lover, but I have so much freedom here. Don’t worry about me, Grandmother. I am happy and safe, and I don’t suppose that a woman like me who is cursed can hope for better.*

The letter is carried by a mourning dove, which flies away making the gentlest of cooing that only a mourning dove can. Dolorosa waits all day with no reply. Something is fluttering deep in her chest. Perhaps it is shame. She wonders what Grandmother will write.

The dove returns before sunset. It drops the letter in her lap with a mournful sound.

Dear Dolorosa, reads the letter, *it is beyond my understanding that you should treat your old grandmother this way. I came home to find you missing, and not a word. I have taken care of you all these years despite your curse and willful ways. You could never love a bear at least, so I suppose he*

13 My hymen broke long before I had sex. About twelve and I’d been riding, then pain and a dark red flowering. I thought it was my period, but nothing for two years. On the night I first had sex, nothing at all: just blankness and suspicion from the man who forced me.

will be safe. A bear was certainly not the husband I imagined for you and I am sure that this bear is not to be trusted. Only a monster would take a cursed creature like you. Write back soon and tell me everything about your life there.

Dolorosa is used to being thought of as a monster. The stares of the villagers, the way she can walk around town without a single person approaching her: all these things tell her that she is not like other people, but she worries over what grandmother said. She hopes that the bear does not think her monstrous. ¹⁴

Every night, she waits eagerly in the bed, wants the darkness to bring her lover, longing sharp and demanding in the deepest part of her stomach. She waits for the rough tingle of bear fur. She knows now that there is nothing like being pulled into that white pelt, feeling her lover against her own naked skin. Before long a fortnight passes, and she feels the same delight night after night. They don't talk much at first, but slowly he coaxes the words out of her.

"Why do I never see you in daylight, Bear?" she asks. "I have seen you before in the day, like that time in the churchyard. Why not anymore?"

"Now, we are tied, it is different," says the bear. "There are rules. But aren't you happy?"

"I am," she tells the bear. "I would not trade this life for anything. What pleasure you give me. But should I call you a bear or a man? You feel at least half-man to me at night."

"I might be both," he replies, pulling her gently against him.

"Whatever you are, I think you are wonderful," she says. "Dear Bear,

14 I began to think that I might be a monster. Remember that song I used to love. *My beloved monster and me...* Monstrosity under the skin until that Christmas when everything was too shiny and too loud. Then there was a label. QBPD. Quiet Borderline Personality Disorder. Quiet Borderline. No, not a bunny boiler. Just someone who had been hurt, who had turned their skin inside out. Just someone who had lived.

you make me so happy.”

And she is well for a time, but before long without trying to, she finds that Grandmother is wrong. Dolorosa is beginning to love the bear, and so the trouble starts.¹⁵

She spends her days alone in the house. She rings the bell, and invisibly whatever she wants will appear: an apple, a chair, a song quivering on the air. She finds herself thinking too much and distracts herself by writing another letter to Grandmother.

Dear Grandmother, she writes, I have the run of the house in the day, and I only see my bear at night, though I never actually see him because the room has no windows and is kept as dark as a tomb. Something happens at night – I can't explain it. It's like he changes, and he feels more man to me than than bear. These days I never see him in daylight at all, and he tells me that he is out hunting. In the day, I am alone, but whatever I want is brought to me by magic.

Again, the dove picks up her letter and carries it away. Again, it returns cooing a reproach and drops Grandmother's letter in her lap.

Dear Dolorosa, This bear sounds to me like a were-creature, one of those that devour their wives after a time. I remember I heard tell of a nobleman in the city of Paris who was bitten on the face by a bear cub he kept as a pet. Whether he knew the poison that was in him or not, I don't know, but the trouble came on his wedding night. After the nuptial supper, he carried the virgin bride to the wedding chamber, and closed the door behind them. Out in the hall, the young bride's parents and kin heard her cries and screams but took them to be joy for the marriage bed. But the cries soon turned to howls, and they began to wonder. At last they broke down the door, they found the husband standing over the bride having

15 I thought that everyone was just like me, but now I know that's not true. I'm not even like others with BPD. Quiet BPD is contained, insular, controlled, pain hidden from view. But like all the borderlines, I feel more than other people. "Borderlines have floods of emotions... It's like a hemophiliac bleeding" (Janet Cauchon-Wirth). If I gave you this glass to look through, you'd see it: blood falling in dark red drops upon the ground, opening like gorgeous buds.

savaged with his teeth her face, her shoulders, breasts, and arms. Any place he could sink his teeth into was bleeding, torn and ragged, and he did not stop his savagery when the family entered. They seized him and struck him dead, but the bride died that very same day. Take my advice. One night, take a candle and a sharp knife. Keep them close by where you sleep. When your lover sleeps, light the candle, and see what it is that loves that you. If it is a monster, don't hesitate but cut off its head. ¹⁶

Dolorosa wonders about the intentions of this letter. Is it envy or spite? But still it bothers her. The dark thing that flew into her years before starts up its fluttering.

Why, it asks, must we always make love in the dark?

It beats its wings stubbornly, and she finds herself doubled over in pain.

Perhaps, it says slyly, you should remember what the soldier told you. He never thought you were pretty. Perhaps you are so hideous that the bear cannot bear to see you in the light.

It is so excruciating that she can't sit or read or bathe or do any of the things she normally would do to pass the time in the empty house.

Perhaps he just likes fucking you, says the winged creature.

She thinks of the soldier, his hand like a claw under her skirt, of all the vile things the scholar said.

Perhaps he is just like them, poses the creature. Perhaps he is a monster.

She is in such terrible pain then that she wants to destroy herself, finds her eyes wandering desperately to the veranda's edge and the cliff beyond, and the creature keeps whispering.

16 I don't know how else to explain it except that Grandmother is in my head. Her voice traps me in a white room. "The room has no lights or windows. The room is hot and humid, and boiling heat of the floor ... is excruciatingly painful. Praying to God and all the saints one knows brings no salvation. The room is so painful that enduring it even for a moment longer appears impossible; any exit will do" (Marsha Linehan). The only way out will be hurtful either for me or you, and because I could never hurt anyone, especially not you, all that is left is me.

*Only a monster could love a creature like you.*¹⁷

Dolorosa runs inside to her bedroom, throws herself down on the bed, tears at her clothes and hair, scratches the backs of her hands until they are bleeding. She does not eat or sleep but waits for night to come. When the bear comes, he does not know of her distress, cannot see her ruined face in the dark. He pulls her into himself as always, cloaks her in fur, kisses her lips and her eyes, and finds her crying.

“This is not what you promised,” he says. “What am I to expect now?” “Please, can I not see you in the light?” she asks.

“Trust me. It cannot be. I cannot tell you why.”

She can tell from his voice that he is hurt. He loves her quickly, leaves her. She lies with her distress in the dark. *He is hiding something from you*, whispers the small winged creature inside her ribcage. *You have opened yourself up to him, and he will hurt you and use you.*

All night she turns and turns on the bed. She stays there through the morning, but in the afternoon, she walks out onto the veranda and gazes wearily at the world below. She wonders if it is fair of her to have suspicions. “Trust me,” the bear has said to her many times, and often wrapped in the deep white down, she feels no doubt at all. Sometimes the winged creature is nowhere to be found, but on the long days in the house alone, she finds herself growing thin and weary with pain from the claws inside her.

Now, the creature is awake again, and it has ideas. She rings the bell and writes down in the notebook around her neck: *Bring me a sharp knife, a candle, and matches.*¹⁸

17 Something monstrous under the skin. *Why with hollow voice cries she, / ‘Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—/ Though thou her guardian spirit be, / Off, woman, off! ‘tis given to me.’*

18 I find it hard to remember that you’re not him. Something monstrous under the skin. “You can often feel as though you are living in a dream, nightmare, or altered reality. It can feel as though you’re floating through a dreamscape, detached from reality” (E.B. Johnson).

That night the bear comes to Dolorosa, and he seems to have forgotten their conversation the night before, He pulls her into him, and their lovemaking is urgent, makes a bright arc of pleasure inside her. He falls asleep with his head on her breast. She slides out from under him, out of the cocoon they rest in. She grasps for the knife, takes the candle, lights it.

She is standing holding the knife and candle over a man, his face innocent in sleep, a mouth sensuous and kind, his body wrapped in a thick, white fur. The knife falls from her hand onto the bed. She slides towards him both of them naked, and her desire is so strong that she finds herself trembling. The candle tips in her hand. Hot wax falls upon his chest, and he opens his eyes. She is struck by fear then.

“This is an end to things. You must love me then?”¹⁹

She finds she cannot speak, that her voice is lost to her, so she picks up the notebook and golden pen, and writes: *I do, dear Bear. Please, forgive me. I only wanted to look at you.*

“Then why that knife?” he gestures to the blade on the bed.

She writes again: *Please, Bear, I was afraid you might be a monster.*

“Why would you think that?” he asks. “Why did you wish to look at me? Have I not been kind and loving to you? Is there anything you have wanted that I have denied you? If you love me, could you not have trusted me?” His voice becomes louder and louder until it breaks into a roar. He shakes his head roughly. His whole body shakes, a trembling of fur and skin, and once again he is a hulking bear, no more of the man.

¹⁹ Would you punish me for not trusting you? Would you understand why I am afraid, or would you close, snap shut?

It was my grandmother, she writes, and the bear leans over her fixing his black bear-eye on the words. She told me a terrible story of a bear creature that ate its bride. I was frightened. Do not leave me, Bear.

“It is you who must go,” he says, with a growl, his voice deeper now. “Now all ties are broken. You are not the only one who is cursed. You have been here nearly a month. If we had seen that time out, I would have been a man forever and you could have looked at me then whenever you wanted.”²⁰

She feels his words like a blow then, falls to the ground with the sheets wrapped around her. He leaps up, lifts her with his jaws, and tosses her onto his back. She puts her arms around his neck. The sheets stream out behind them as he runs out carrying her, out of the house, down the cliff, over the river, into the forest and on to the edge of the village to her grandmother’s house. He throws her from his back by the garden gate. From her knees, she holds out the notebook and pen which were still hanging around her neck.

“Keep those,” says the bear. “I must go back.” He shakes his head towards the mountain. She follows the gesture, looks up to the sheer face of the cliff, and there where the bear’s palace must be is a glint of light, too high and faraway for any villager to make out. She throws her arms around the bear’s neck as if she would keep him there, but he throws her off again. He ambles away into the forest again, and this time, it is unbearable to see him go.

Her grandmother finds her by the garden gate, wrapped in the sheet. It has begun to snow but she has not moved. Her grandmother drags her inside.

When she next wakes, a long time has passed. She is back in her old

20 “Living with Quiet BPD is like living a paradox in every possible way” (Emily Woodhouse). When I bend down to the stream to drink, the water slips away from me. When I put on my silk dress, I find it turned to cloth. The more I reach for you, how you dance away, always away.

room, in her old bed, the sky is blue, and there are spring flowers in the garden through the window. She could believe herself waking from a terrible dream, but her eyes fall on the pen and notebook and their golden chain lain on the table beside the bed.

It was my fault, she writes to her grandmother in the notebook. It was the curse, and I will never forgive myself. I will never be well. I will never love. Never, never, never. As soon as I have a chance, I must destroy myself before I hurt anyone else. ²¹

“Now, my girl,” says Grandmother, “you don’t know what you are saying.”

I do know what I am saying, and I am telling you that as soon as I can, I have to destroy myself. I cannot hurt anyone else.

Grandmother tries to calm her, but nothing works. At last, in frustration, Grandmother snaps.

“Alright, I’ll admit it if you stop writing these things,” says Grandmother. “There is no need to hurt yourself, because there never was any curse. It was never real. It was just a way to keep you with me. Your mother already had her other two daughters. I had no one, so I made up this story of a creature that flew into your mouth, and I persuaded your father to let me look after you. I was so lonely.” ²²

But it was real. I felt it, Dolorosa writes.

“No, what you felt was your fear and doubt.”

It was you who put fear and doubt into my mind. ²³

“For that, I am sorry, but I didn’t know that you would fall in love

21 Borderline people at their most vulnerable would give up everything for love. “I really did want to be a saint, but when I confided this to a friend many years later she said, ‘Marsha, you’re no saint.’... I thought it was weird for many years. That changed when I read ... that mystical experiences, which can be found in every religion, perhaps can be understood as the state of being in love” (Marsha Linnehan). Does love make me a monster or a saint?

22 No safety, perhaps not ever, and what strange things we do to convince ourselves otherwise. What elaborate dances to hold a space that was never safe to begin with. Anything but fear.

23 What would happen if I decided that I’m not a monster? “Unity is a sense of reality that has always been there though it has been unperceived” (Bruno Borchert).

with a bear. Strange though you are, I could not have expected that.”

Dolorosa is out of bed and pulling on her dress. She puts on her boots and coat and shoves her way past Grandmother and out of the cottage. Out in the garden, she hears a familiar cooing sound, the very same mourning dove, her messenger, has made a nest in the birch tree.

She tears a page out of her notebook, writes on it: *Dear Bear, I am coming*, and she places it carefully on the edge of the dove’s nest. It looks at her reproachfully but picks up the paper with its beak and flies away.

What had passed so quickly on the back of the bear is slow and painful on foot. As she moves deeper and deeper into the woods, the thickets and trees grow closer and closer together. Branches snap and tear at her skirts. Her coat catches on the brambles, and she cannot pull it away. At last, she shrugs herself out of it, leaves it behind hanging on a thorn bush. The branches and sharp edges are tearing at her skin now. She has almost given up when she finds a piece of coarse white hair caught on a thicket, and she knows that the bear has been by here. She puts the fur in the bosom of her dress.

Before long she passes through the woods and comes to the river, ripe with snow melt and raging in its rapids. She knows that she could walk along looking for a bridge, but she is not sure how long that would take, and the bear is waiting for her up high on the cliff. So, she plunges in.

The waters pick her up easily and carry her along. Her dress and skirts, her boots are so heavy that she feels herself sinking. Quickly she kicks and levers her boots off. She rips open the stays of her

dress and slips out of it in her petticoat like a slippery fish. She is still carried along but thrusts herself towards the other bank, catches hold of a branch to pull herself out. Her sunken dress glides by, a shadow underwater.²⁴

From the river, it is not far to the base of the cliff, and she is so small under its vastness, shivering in her slip. Her boots are gone, her soaked socks discarded, but better to climb in bare feet, she thinks. She is not strong, and the climbing is hard even at the bottom of the cliff. When she rams her fingers into crevices, they start to bleed. Her legs and arms are trembling. She climbs to an overhang, and there is a beating of wings in her chest like her heart is about to jump out. But, she tells herself, there is nothing inside me but my own fear, and if it is my fear, I can master it. She puts everything she has into that last climb, pulls herself painfully over the overhang, clambers up and collapses on the veranda. She rests on her side for a moment, every part of her body throbbing, but the golden light of sunset covers her.

She knows the bear is present by that gentle sound like a sigh. She sits up at once, and the bear ambles over, sits before her mournfully.

“You should not have come,” says the bear. “I will have to take you home again. I told you all ties are broken.”

“Bear,” she says, speaking in a voice she has never known before, “I am never going home again. I will stay here, just to be near you, and you cannot make me go. I have been torn by brambles, half-drowned by the river, and climbed most painfully the immense cliff below us. Do you not see how powerful I am and how much I love you? Because I love you in a way that no other woman would: I love you no matter if you are man or bear. Either way, I adore you, and I would

24 I don't know how to get better except by living with doubt. If I took off my clothes, let them float away on the water, if I stood before you naked, would you be drawn to me or repulsed? *Her gentle limbs did she undress, / And lay down in her loveliness.*

never hurt you again or harm you. Nor would I take away your freedom, or try to trap you indoors, or ask you to be anything other than what you are. I should have trusted you, but we were both afraid. I know now that there is nothing wicked inside me, and nothing to stop me from being happy and powerful except my own fear. Bear, I do not ask you to fall in love me, but do I not tempt you?"

The bear says nothing. It is quiet for a moment, the only sound the mourning dove cooing painfully. At last, the bear sinks down, lies placidly on his side, lets his head fall on the veranda slabs, his black eyes soft and watchful. She stands up then on trembling legs and goes to him, caresses his rough white head, kisses his muzzle, runs her hands over his ribcage and belly that heaves and rumbles huge sighs as he breathes. When the sun disappears at last, he is still a bear, but she loves him nonetheless. She pulls off her damp and dirty petticoat so there is nothing left but her nakedness, her body silver, her hair bronze in the moonlight. Her arms are circling his neck when the coarse, white fur folds around her.²⁵

25 "I don't have to be sick anymore. Dr. O'Brien, I don't have to do anything I don't want to. It is happiness inside. Yes, I get depressed, I cry, I get mad, but underneath when it passes there is happiness." (Marsha Linehan). I carry a tiny flame over the dark water.