

LAST NIGHT

I stand rock steady on their hands. It's not that hard really; we've practiced. Neither of them will start drinking until their part is over, and their part is holding me above the heads of the rest of the crowd, above the highest reach of the flames from the bonfire. The men have become my legs, and I'm a twelve-foot-tall, four-legged girl because that's what I need to be. Because that's what they need me to be.

Wolf says, "Tell us, what do you see?"

"I see my mother and my father, waiting for me," I say, but I see nothing like that. I see the chopped path of moonlight on the black lake water. My father, my mother, I do not see. I can't remember my mother's arms. I can't remember

my father's eyes. I cannot walk into the past any more than I can walk across the lake on moonlight.

The men lower me until I can rest my hands on their shoulders. They lift me up again when Wolf says, "Tell us, what do you see?"

"I see a green world, and you all are there," I say, but what I really see is how the sparks from the fire rise up when the logs collapse. They float into the sky and disappear. They are only sparks. The stars are only sparks too, I guess. They will blink out some day. They will be swallowed by a ravenous wolf. With each star's passing, the cold and the dark will be more absolute. It will be so cold that snow will not fall. Even the snow will be dead. I've seen the future.

They lower me, and this time, I feel a hand on the inside of my thigh. To steady me? I'm steady. Maybe just to touch me because he can. Then I'm lifted again. Wolf is almost shouting now. "Tell us, what do you see."

"I see Valhalla," I say. "Hel has parted the curtains between the worlds, and I see where she sleeps. She welcomes me."

I see Wolf's face, and he is not happy. I was supposed to see him, not Hel. I see the frame of birch saplings lashed together to be a window to the next world, and I see those silly girls, Stormy and Sky, Wolf's daughters, holding it. They have already lost interest in the ceremony, so the frame is wobbling a little bit. It doesn't matter to them. They don't

need to see through it to the other side. This is the present. They lower me to the ground, and then the two men walk me away from the fire, away from the lakeshore, to the place where precious and dangerous things are kept. Precious and dangerous things like me.

The door to the Quonset is locked from the outside. There is one little window; during the day, light sneaks through the wire-reinforced glass and dirt. Now all the light is inside, galvanized and grey, bouncing off the curved walls. It's locked in here with me.

I've got nothing to do until Wolf and Eva show up. I could sit on my cot. I could strip naked and wait under my wool blanket. Both of those things seem like too much trouble. Pretty soon, I'm not going to have any kind of trouble ever again.

Wolf and Eva are at the door. I can hear the keys in the locks. The door amplifies every sound, but that is no surprise to me. I've lived here long enough. The door scrapes open. Wolf is carrying the computer. Eva is carrying my new clothes.

Wolf has rigged a tripod to hold the laptop camera steady. Now he needs to be sure that the picture is framed just right. He drags a box in front of it and then pulls the blanket off the cot and folds it. It will be a comfortable

place to sit. The flags hang from a wire behind me. They are hanging flat so they will be easy to see. They are part of the message.

Eva brings the big metal washtub from the corner where I keep it. We had one like it at home. I was so little then, I could curl up under it and hide safe as a turtle. I stand up and pull off my hoodie, my T-shirt. I bend over to unlace my boot, but Eva is kneeling to help me, so I just wait while she loosens the laces. She lifts one foot at a time and pulls my boots off. I'm not rock steady now; I have to reach out and brace myself against her. She takes off my wool socks. Bo taught me I should always keep my socks dry. My socks are dry.

"Can I see Bo?"

"No, honey. You can see him in the morning. You both have other work to do right now," says Eva.

I haven't seen Bo for days. I don't know how many days.

I can hear Stormy and Sky coming up the path. Those two are always noisy as squirrels. They carry white plastic buckets full of hot water for my bath. I need to smell like an ordinary girl tomorrow. I need to wash the wood smoke out of my hair. I step into the tub and Eva uses a coffee can to pour water over my head. Then she squirts soap on my hair. My scalp tingles. I smell like peppermint now, because it is peppermint soap. She washes my hair and my ears.

"Close your eyes, honey," says Eva, so I do. If I get soap

in my eyes, it will make me cry. I need to be clear-eyed. Eva washes my arms from my shoulders to my hands. She washes my breasts and between my legs. Then she washes my legs all the way down to my feet. Then she rinses me, once, twice, three times, and wraps a rough towel around my shoulders.

“She should wait until her hair dries.” Eva is talking to Wolf. “Your hair looks so pretty and white.” Eva is talking to me.

“We got all night,” says Wolf.

“She needs to sleep, too,” says Eva. “Go get the food now, girls. Get a move on.” Stormy and Sky move slower than usual, if that’s possible.

“Well, we can get her dressed and make sure everything is set up right. She can do it after she eats—or whenever,” says Wolf.

Eva hands me underpants, and I put them on. She helps me adjust the straps on the bra. I don’t usually wear one, but I need to have one on tomorrow. She slides a pale blue T-shirt over my head. Eva picked it out to match my eyes. She hands me some jeans. The denim is new and dark. Then she leads me to the box and I sit down.

“Do you want your shoes on now, honey?” Eva asks.

I usually wear my boots day and night unless I’m wading through water and I need to keep them dry. I don’t know if I want to wear these little silver shoes or go barefoot.

I stick out my foot and Eva pushes a shoe into place. It pinches my toes. I shake my head, and Eva takes it off.

“You have to wear them tomorrow,” Eva says.

I know what I have to do tomorrow. When the time comes, I’ll wear the pinchy silver shoes.

“And this,” says Eva, and she drapes a hoodie over the end of the cot. It has a camo pattern, but the colors are turquoise, white, and baby blue. I can’t imagine any place where those colors would help a person hide, but Eva says I will blend right in with other people if I wear it. It is part of my disguise.

Stormy and Sky are back. Stormy is carrying a drinking horn and a quart box of milk. Sky has a wooden tray holding a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios and dishes of smoked salmon, black cherries, and chocolate. These are the things I like to eat.

“Let’s get you set up,” says Wolf. So I turn to face the computer. He thumbs the clicker, and I can see myself on screen. The flags behind me are bright: red, white, and black; red, white, and blue; yellow, black, and green. The flags are always there. They will be there tomorrow.

“Let’s get this on you now,” says Wolf, and he wraps my black vest around me. The weight settles on my shoulders. It is a comfort to me. “The detonator isn’t rigged. We’ll do that in the morning. You can even take it off after you get done recording. I won’t rivet up the straps.”

Eva steps forward and rubs my hair between her fingers. “Almost dry already!” She brings me the drinking horn. “Just a sip now. You need to be real clear when you tell your story.” The mead tastes funny tonight, but every batch is different, because the honey is always different. It depends on the flowers the bees find. I don’t know the taste of these flowers, that’s all.

“You just go ahead and talk as long as you like. Don’t worry about making mistakes. We can edit it down and have it ready by the time you finish your job. So you just go ahead and say whatever you need to say — the battery is charged up and there is plenty of memory,” says Wolf.

“Can I have the kerosene lantern?” I ask. I like the yellow light. It doesn’t glare as hard as the LEDs. The shadows cast by the live fire are softer. It throws a little heat, too. I shouldn’t feel cold — the night isn’t cold — but I do. I want the comfort of the kerosene. We used kerosene most nights at home, at least during dinner. When I remember my home, I remember being in that warm light.

“Sure, honey,” says Eva. She lights the lamp suspended from the arching metal ceiling. “Anything else you need, you just knock on the door. We’ll have a man out there all night. Anything you need.”

I stare at the screen. The girl I see there might as well be a picture in a book; she is so still. I never see her blink,

because my own eyes close when that happens. I stare at her and it seems we have nothing to do with each other.

I swallow and take a deep breath.

“I’m Valkyrie White. I’m fifteen. Your government killed my family.”

ELEVEN YEARS AGO

We are sitting at the table. I am eating peanut butter and jam. Da is teaching Bo some numbers. We all hear the helicopter. Pock-a-pock-pock-POCK-A-POCK! Pock-pock-pock. It is right over the house where we sit at the table. I am eating peanut butter and jam.

Mabby is outside, in the garden, picking beans. The sun is high, and it is the best time to pick them. I am going to help. I must pick them carefully, each bean. I must not tug and tear the vines. I must leave the tiny beans to grow until the-day-after-tomorrow.

First, I must eat my peanut butter and jam and show Da how I can read: “He, me, be, we,” I can read, “my, try, sky, fly.”

Now Mabby, the garden, the beans — the tiny beans for the-day-after-tomorrow.

But the-day-after-tomorrow doesn't come.

Mabby is sleeping in the dirt.

Da runs to Mabby in the garden. He turns her face to the sky, but her eyes don't blink. He puts his finger on her throat. He pulls his hand back like Mabby is a stove full of fire. There isn't a mark on her — no blood — no cuts. The beans spill out of the colander. The vines are mashed and broken where she fell. When she wakes up she is going to be angry about the beans.

"Git to the house," Da says. Then he picks up Mabby and carries her to the truck.

When it is dark, Bo makes me drink some milk and go to bed.

In the morning, Da is there, but Mabby isn't. Mabby never again.

When a piece is gone from the game, the whole game changes. That's how it is for us.

Mabby was a really important piece.

We used to eat vegetables from the garden and eggs from the chickens. We used to drink milk from the goats. But the garden, the chickens, the goats — those were Mabby's

deal. She took care of all that. She planted and weeded and picked. She fed the chickens and gathered the eggs and butchered the chickens that didn't lay eggs. She milked the goats, morning and evening. Now Mabby's gone, those things don't happen.

Da can't do that stuff, because he has to go to work sometimes.

The goats go first. Da loads them in the back of the truck and they go away. After that, we drink milk out of cans. That milk isn't good. It is gloopy and yellow and smells funny. Da says we have to drink it anyway or our bones will get soft.

Bo and I tried to help with the chickens, but we let them get out. That's OK for a while, but then they wandered away or coyotes stole them. No eggs. Da said that didn't matter. Meat is as good as eggs. Meat makes muscles.

Then the snow comes and covers the garden. We still have jars of food that Mabby made, but when they are emptied, we never filled them up again. Da just throws them out into the place where the garden used to be. Sometimes the jars break. Da says we should never go in Mabby's garden, because we might get hurt on the broken glass.

After a while, we never eat Mabby food anymore. We eat survival food and MREs. Da lets us put ketchup and syrup on it. That makes it better.

. . .

“Come out here,” yells Da.

I wonder what we did wrong. I don’t want to get hit. When Da yells, sometimes he hits too. I hope it was Bo, not me. But if Bo did it, I probably did it too.

Da dumps a lump and rag of blood and fur out of a bag. It’s a coyote. It was a coyote. Now it’s an empty body, a tail, paws pacing without moving. It has teeth, a tongue, and a bullet hole in the gut.

Da picks up the coyote and hangs it over the wide, black post by the gate to our property. “Get me the hammer and a big nail,” says Da. We run. Bo carries the hammer. I carry the nail. “Hold this here,” Da says to Bo. He means the dead body of the coyote. I hold out the big nail before Da asks.

Da adjusts the coyote so the head is right on top the post and says, “Keep it right there.” I step up to help Bo, but I’m careful not to get in the way. I grab the fur on the coyote’s shoulder and push it hard against the fence post. I’m doing my part. Da shoves the spike into one of the coyote’s eyes. When he brings the hammer down, bone crunches and blood spatters. I turn my head and shut my eyes. I don’t want coyote blood in my eyes.

“It’s done,” says Da. “When you see this, I want you to remember: Those People will kill us like coyotes. We are nothing to them but coyotes.”

That is why we must stay in the den when he is away working.

Otherwise, Those People will kill us like coyotes.

“What do you do if black helicopters come?” Da asks.

“Hide,” I say.

“Hide where?” Da asks.

“In the den,” I say.

“What do you do if you hear a helicopter while you’re outside?” Da asks.

“Hide,” I say.

“Hide where?” Da asks.

“I hide in mineral,” I say.

“Be specific,” says Da.

“Under truck, metal roof, cut bank, big rock.”

Da falls silent. I know he’s thinking about Mabby. He will never forget about Mabby. He reaches out and pets my hair. “Good girl, Valley. Good girl.”

The den is a safe place Da made for us under the floor. It is big enough for one bunk. Bo and I have to sleep heads to tails, but we each have our own sleeping bag. I say Bo’s feet smell. He says mine do too. Sometimes, we have kickfights, but that isn’t fun for very long.

. . .

I am surprised sometimes that Bo isn't me. I'm the girl. He's the boy. I *know* that. Different bodies. I *know* that. *We* know that. We sleep in the same bunk. We know.

Da gives us books and clocks to make the time go faster when he is away. We read the books: fox, socks, box. And the clocks? While he is gone, we use tiny screwdrivers and tweezers to take them apart. Sometimes we work together, four hands on one clock.

"Put this together again," says Da. "See if you can make the pieces fit and make it tick." So then that is what we want to do. We take them apart to see how they tick. We put them together and listen to them tock. Da is very proud of us.

Tick, tick, tick.

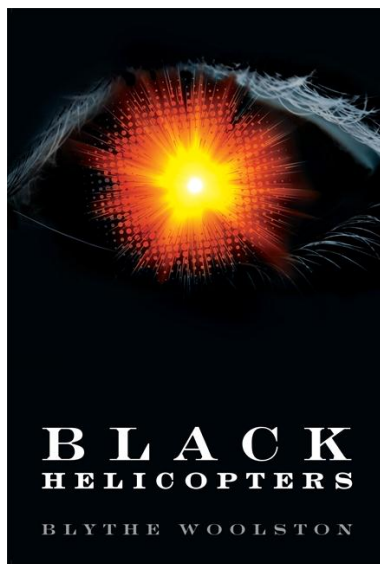
Tock, tock, tock.

Bo is Bo. I am me. And together we are we.

We fix clocks. We wear socks. We fix clocks while we wear socks.

Black Helicopters

Blythe Woolston



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