

Folk Tales



Created March 2026

A Writing Theory Community Zine

A Note From The Editor

Thank you for checking out the first zine for the Writing Theory Discord Community! All the stories you are about to read are inspired by one of three folk tales:

Eyes Recovered From Witch. A youth takes service as a herdsman with a blind man whose eyes have been stolen by one or more dragon(s). The youth is warned not to take his flock to pasture beyond a certain point, but he disobeys. He meets a dragon and defeats it or tricks it. He retrieves the stolen eyes or receives a magic remedy which enables him to cure the blind man.

The Lineage of the King's Three Sons. A captive king interrogates the three sons of the king who has captured him as to how they will treat him. From their answers he learns their real descent. One of the sons is from a family of executioners, the other one from butchers, while only the third son is from the royal family.

The Youth Who Bathed Himself In The Blood of a Dragon. A strong young man slays a dragon and bathes himself in its blood. Thereafter he has a tough skin which no weapon can penetrate. He dies from a wound in the only vulnerable spot on his body - his armpit, which the dragon's blood has not touched.

Thank you to everyone who submitted stories!

Badger, Lynne Klaus, Amie Hussain, Deranged_Handrail_III, Mire and Moon, Margo Margan, Tatai G. Wolfi, SupaTheAuthor, Ruchi Dave, Robin Lamb, Chiky, Lee Rosewood, Mark Sandstorm, Brian Nyborg, Jacob Penrod, J I Mumford, Carrsolo, Aspen Willow, Isabelle Nygren, Boohawk, Demetri Johnson, Blzako, Katie Star, Bernard Rapp

And thank you to the supporters of the Writing Theory Community! Without your support, we wouldn't be able to try cool new things like this.

C.S. Benson, Zenderfall, Isabella Nygren, Mark Sandstorm, Victoria

Much Love,
Carson Long

The whispers from my dream began to layer on top of the dragon's mocking tone, drowning me in sorrow and despair.

I reached the bottom of the cave, bones crunching under my feet as I came to the center. A deep pool of reflective water in the center. Whispers echoing all around me but no dragon.

Screams of anguish come out of me as I rally the dragon to my side, baiting him to fight me face to face. He never comes, though. Only his mocking voice remains.

I drag myself to the pool, to wash the ash from my nose as defeat overcame me.

Upon looking into the mirror-like surface, I was finally greeted with my hideous face. Black scales from my nightmares. Winding body. Snake-eyes.

I blinked.

And the emerald eyes blinked back. Black scales. White teeth. Massive maw.

Memories came crashing back as I stared at the pool. My own hands wrapping around my mother's throat. Fire from my maw consuming the village. Eating my father. Killing the magistrate. Laughing as I watched the village burn underneath my destructive power.

I screamed. Except it wasn't a scream.

With shaking hands, I began to claw at my throat. Tearing and rendering, until blood began to pour out in streams. I didn't stop tearing. Didn't stop clawing. Didn't stop screaming until the world faded to black.

"And now," the voice whispered, "You are mine."

The eyes of my father as the dragon ate him.

On the eve of my 20th birthday, not even three days ago, I awoke to the magistrate's hands around my throat. His eyes were wild as his heart hammered in his chest. The familiar squeeze of fingers interlocking around my trachea as it crushed underneath the relentless pressure of his grip caused me to strain against my chains.

Moonlight blinded me as I struggled. Fragments of my last dream came back as I writhed under his hands. Black scales, red flames, roaring. A terrible roaring. Screams of the magistrate. Screams of the villagers. Screams of my father. And.

Mine. My screams. My screams for blood. My screams for freedom. Mixing and churning with the rumbling of wing beats and that deep, melodious laugh.

I blacked out.

Woke up, covered in blood, at the forest's edge. Clothes torn and the smell of smoke burning the insides of my nose. I turned and looked over my shoulder at the village I called a prison for the last 20 years.

There was nothing.

Burned to cinders. Tiny flecks of ash lilted peacefully in the breeze as tears began to fall down my face. The dragon's laugh echoed across the valley as I grabbed the sword I woke up next to. A large shadow cast overhead as I chased the being up the mountain towards its dwelling.

I swore, on this day, I would do my duty and defeat this beast. Branches tore my skin as I hurdled through the thick undergrowth. Rocks dug into my ankles as I reached the summit of the mountain. The peak's shadow blending with the dragon's mighty one, casting me into complete darkness as the beast lumbered into the cave's opening.

I clawed my way up to the mountains as the dragon's voice taunted me.

"Oh Cassain, come to partake in communion once again? Come to drink deep in the corruption?"

I reached the cave, clambering into the darkness as hatred surged through my heart.

"The little boy, raised to kill me, has no one to protect. Come drink in my dark revelry, Cassain. You are nothing without your purpose."

I slid down the cave, noticing the sharp stones of the cave bounce off my skin.

"Cassain. Worthless Cassain. Protector Cassain."



Gloria

By Bernard Rapp

"Can you check another name?"

The secretary gave her an ugly look, but a glare put her back into place.

"What other name?"

"Blortwood. Gloria." The purple-haired girl replied. "But she wouldn't be from Timmy's class. I'm thinking about five to ten years ago?"

"Miss, we purge records every decade. How am I supposed to find a student from ten years ago?"

"Try. I'm not holding my breath, anyway."

The grey-haired woman looked back at her giant, cubic computer screen and typed out the name with increasing frustration.

"Can I ask her relation to you? Is she part of the case?"

"No, she isn't." Gloria replied. "She's me."

The secretary stopped. She eyed Gloria, up and down, from the leather boots and jacket to the eyebrow piercing.

"Why am I looking for you?"

"Honestly, it's a long story. And I'm planning on finding the kid before they kill him, not after. Can you hurry?"

"I can't believe Samantha hired someone as rude as you." The secretary replied. "No records for any Glorias in the past ten years. Neither any Blortwoods."

"Figures." Gloria shrugged, turning to leave.

"That's it? Not even a thank you?" The secretary asked.

Emotion boiled out of her like red steam. Gloria turned around, walking back slowly, letting it simmer more and more until the woman was red in the face.

With a touch on the shoulder, she siphoned the emotion into herself. Slowly, her face returned to the same indifference she had when Gloria first walked into the room.

"Thank you, Miss Ellinger. You helped me save Timmy's life. If I have any other issues, can I come to you again?"

The woman held back a tear as Gloria's thankful tone overwhelmed her.

"Of course, Miss Blortwood. Anything for that kid."

Gloria nodded. She couldn't force herself to smile, not after that, but there was satisfaction both in a job well done, and a belly full of energy. She left the office, returning to the school grounds. The dried-out playground and the lone dead tree greeted her again.

Dumbfuck kid had her running halfway across Briarwood and Edge Harbor looking for him. Never heard of "Never make deals with the fae", most likely. Twenty-twenty-six and these idiots were still falling for the same "Can I have your attention, please?" nonsense. Now she had to stop her whole life to find his stupid ass and bring him back to his mother.

The cash helped. Living with no identity in Newcastle was nearly impossible without some less-than-legal money source, and helping reunite mothers with their kids was much better than finding out whose husband was cheating with whose wife.

She pulled her looking glass from the front pocket of her pants and stared at it.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who's the dumbest fuck of all?"

Her reflection changed into the boy's, eyes wide, but completely lost. A little bit of the secretary's anger boiled up inside Gloria when she noticed the small gash on his forehead, just above his right eyebrow. Kid was twelve, desperate, and the goblins had hurt him and abandoned him alone in some cave. But if he had really been taken directly from the school, then that

They brought me before the town magistrate to have me atone for my sins. Before they stoned me, I finally learned my father proclaimed my ability to defeat the dragon to the town.

He touted me as some indestructible savior from the monster.

Me, a 15 year-old boy. To save adults. Policemen. Soldiers.

I'd defeat the dragon that no man had been able to for 100 years.

The first stone nailed my forehead. I didn't flinch. Rocks began to rain down, striking all parts of my body. I felt nothing. I looked for my father but couldn't find him. To appease the crowd's blood lust, I collapsed to the ground and waited until they threw me into the corpse pile.

I walked back to my childhood home only to find nothing but a smoldering pile of ash.

My father screamed one final time as a black mass rose from the smoke, impaling his fail body on one of its claws before flying off towards the mountains. Green eyes glancing at me briefly before the shadows morphed across the ground; the creature's body arched over the rising sun. The dragon threw his head back. Jaws opened wide. And snapped them close with a crack.

My breath escaped from my lungs and didn't return. I passed out once again.

Chained, I came to in the magistrate's prison. I'd call this home until my final day. My jailer sat off in one corner as the shadows smothered his face, leaving only his eyes visible. Blue and glittering with hatred. He stood up, keeping my gaze as he picked up switch. He walked over, raising his hand above his head before striking me.

Once on the head. Felt nothing. Twice on the ribs. I felt nothing. Three times on the throat. I spat blood.

"Well, I see why your father decided to choak you to stop your screams, abomination."

The training became more brutal.

The nightmares were worse too.

The voices of the villagers joined the nightly taunts of the dragon. Screaming in agony as the flames licked up their essence, crying out for my help, for me to save them, as their lives were choked out. The dragon wrapping itself around the outskirts of these scenes, saying nothing as the screams consumed my entire being.

The magistrate wouldn't strangle me in the throes of my nightmares, though. He never heard me scream. However, the townsfolk living near me would throw stones and dump water into my cell as my dreams would torture me in fear.

No new visions came. Only the image of a dragon slowly coiling around the village, flames ever consuming, screams of agony.

Meanwhile, the whispers and dreams continued. Sometimes, the dream of my mother losing her head would play. Sometimes, it was visions of the town burning down. Voices, screams, blood. Always waking up to my father choking me. Begging me to cease my cries.

He called me selfish at the breakfast table the morning it happened.

When the dragon came for the first time.

I saw the dragon's full face in my dreams the night before. Black scales rolled over a powerful body which stretched across the ground. At least two times the size of me. The razor sharp white teeth, stained with blood, protruded from its closed mouth in a haphazard manner.

"Empty vessel. It's time I eased your suffering. I shall light the way to freedom."

Agony and smoke followed me into the waking world as I opened my eyes. The familiar squeeze of my father's hands on my neck. Smothering the air out of my lungs.

"Enough," he shouted as tears poured down his face, "Just fucking die already. Your mother was right. The baptism cursed you."

The last thing I saw before I passed out were a pair of deep gashes on his face.

Heat woke me up this time. Fire, reaching towards the sky, engulfed the thatch house around me as I rub my eyes. Skin starting to blister and pop as I struggle to my feet. Sweat poured across my body. My heart pounded in my chest.

And screams. So many screams. Endless screams.

I stumbled outside, seeing a wall of flames as far as the eye can see. Thatch consumed ravenously, people running from fire which consumed their very flesh. More screams.

"Help us, Cassain!"

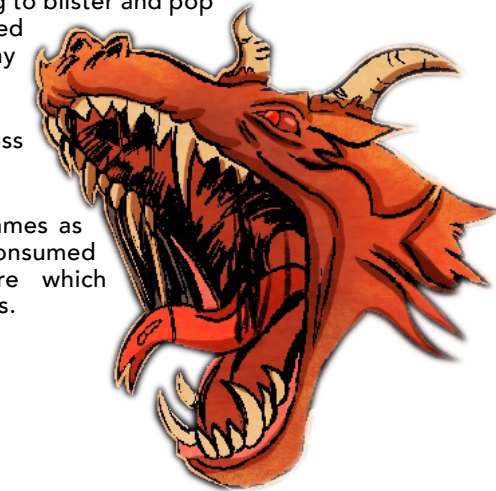
"Saved us!"

"Why won't you do anything?"

"Where did the dragon go?"

I ran around the village, helping the men bail buckets of water from the well. I pulled countless people from burning buildings as they screamed in agony. My skin peeled off the heat exposure, but I kept pressing forward. For although it melted, I felt no pain.

Mothers, children, pets. I tried to save them all. But, I was just a boy.



meant there'd be a door somewhere she could use to slip right to him.

Flaring her own emotions out, Gloria released what little energy she had inside. It flowed off from her, scattering like purple and orange glitter in the wind. Slowly, some seeped forward, into the dried-up playground, and its large dead tree.

She tracked the flow into the hollow trunk, where it met soil and became roots. Someone had placed a wooden plank over it, accidentally creating a door. Just enough for the goblins to reach through.

She followed the stream into it, and gravity changed as she plummeted an inch, face-first, then landed on her feet on the other side. The transition nearly made her vomit. Flipping realities was still not something she could do easily.

Like waves, the smells of damp mold, thorny vines, and fruits collapsed against her. She looked around, trying to find the kid. Behind her, a small opening, two-feet wide, had been covered with a leathery flap. Surrounding it, shelves filled with jars, each holding a small constellation of glittering dots, vaguely resembling fireflies, or tiny jellyfish, or fungal spores.

A pantry. Well stocked, richly diverse.

Gloria followed the maze-like shelves until she found herself in a living room.

"Oy, another stinking glubber?" The goblin barked, ears up like a dog. "Am I hosting a party?"

"You tell me." She replied. "Why did you take the kid?"

"I didn't take no kid." He said. "Glubber found his way into my supplies. Tried to nab some of my tonics, he did."

She looked at Timmy. His eyes were unfocused, his mouth open. He didn't react to her approach, or blink when she waved a hand in front of his face.

"So you hollowed him out like a jack-o'-lantern and set him down on your couch?"

"That's my bed. And yeah. Figured he owned me something for stealing, don't you?"

"What did he steal?" Gloria asked. "I need him back, whole."

"Some o' my sightseeing juice. Irreplaceable, I'm afraid. And the way the stinkhorns' behaving this season, I reckon you won't see any more of it anytime soon."

"Then give him back his mind, so he can give you your potion back. Easy."

"Not so much, Miss" He replied.



"We faeries got to eat. Kid's full of nutrients."

She stared into the goblin's large seal-like eyes.

"You won't eat this kid. You'll give him back what you took, and by your heart you will never take another child again. Are we clear?"

"Sorry, Miss, but I just can't agree to that. Plump little glubber could last me a winter. And he still hasn't given me my tonic back."

"He can't give you anything in this state." She replied, shoving her hands into his school jacket's pockets. She fished the vial, hourglass-shaped, and looked at it in the little light of the cave. Swirling constellations of tiny eyes, the size of grains of sand, floating in liquid metal.

"Ye, that's it." The goblin said, stretching out a raccoon paw. "Give it back."

"No." Gloria replied. "Reckon he stole it from you, and I stole it from him. And if you have the right to punish him, then.."

The goblin stopped, adjusting his ragged tuxedo like he had been offended.

"Aye, that'd be fair." That was his angle. Fairness. "But he can't, not while he's ballooning out."

"Reckon he wouldn't be able to punish anyone without his... What was it?"

"Attention and name, yeah." The goblin completed. "No sense o' self, to even feel injured."

She looked at the creature.

"Return them, so he may punish me for stealing. Then, you take them right back again. Everyone's happy."

He thought for a few seconds.

"No, where does my tonic go, then? I'm no fool, Miss. Don't insult my intelligence."

Shit.

"Fine, I'll trade for it." His seal eyes opened wider as she spoke. Almost adorable, despite the otter teeth. "My looking glass for your looking tonic. Fair and square."

She pulled it out. The magic around the goblin flared, checking it.

"Deal." The goblin spoke. "Mighty good mirror you have, Miss. I'll take good care of it, you can rest assured."

"What the..." The kid's voice whispered from behind her, before exploding into a full-lung scream of terror.

She thought about it. Felt his fear flare out like a cascade of sweat beads. She could eat it all up, leave him right and calm and relaxed.

"Listen, Timmy. You need to shut the fuck up and lock in skibidi style or whatever the kids your age think is appropriate." Gloria started. "You got kidnapped by a goblin and he's going to eat you."

final days. "You'll pour yourself out until there's nothing left. I wonder, then, will you finally realize that was there even a real you to begin with? There's only me."

It isn't until now, as I hold a knife in my shaking hands, that I finally understood what the voice meant.

My father named me as he shoved my head under the blood. "Cassain, you will save us all."

If only he had listened to my mother. And if only I hadn't let everyone down.

My combat training began when I could lift a sword. I think was about five. My mother would guide me gently through my forms, singing songs about my ancestors who valiantly hunted down dragons. I remember her gentle smile in the afternoon sunlight as she gazed approvingly upon me. How I felt loved.

My dreams began to prophecy of her death the day she found out about my baptism. She watched in horror as I ran into a stone pillar. It crumbled down upon me but I popped out of the rubble, brushing off specks before screaming and cashing after my father once again.

Their fight lasted four days before she died.

I became restless and delirious. Mother screamed about curses while my father countered with destiny. Screams of "blood of the dragon will end" or "save us all" lulled me into a fitful sleep. Darkness overtook me as a familiar whisper snaked its way through my dream.

"Oh, little empty vessel." A mocking voice came out of the darkness as black coils wound tightly around me. I looked down, noticing that I was cradled in my mother's arms as the scales constricted around her body. "Let me bleed you dry."

The words "how could you" echoed in my mind.

Coils squeezed tighter as white teeth and emerald eyes broke through the shadow. A gaping maw, fiery red, opened wide and tore the head off my mother. Her scream cut into a short gurgle as red hot liquid splashed across my face.

I woke up screaming with hands wrapped around my neck.

My father, with sheer terror pouring from his eyes, squeezed and squeezed on my neck as I writhed, unable to get free of his grip. I felt my trachea crunching underneath his grip as the smell of death filled the air.

We told the town, when I finally came to, that mother was attacked by a rabid dog. Her throat was torn when we found her the next morning. My father, who refused to look me in the eye, put my sword back into my hands.

I had a village to protect.

My blood should've bathed that training room in red. All cuts were impervious to me. My father could punch and kick me whenever he wanted to.



Empty Vessel

By Katie Star

The blood of the dragon invades my mind late at night. Singing songs of discord and anguish as continuous droplets stain my skin red. Thousands of souls, millions of voices, layering and rolling over each other in ceaseless whispers which take my peace.

They've been a part of me. Since the day of my birth. Whether it was the Fates or the Soul King himself, someone swore an oath on my behalf, binding a new born to the fate of the world.

Such an unfair fate.

Stolen from my mother's breast, I was brought to the altar at midnight. In a mockery of baptismal rights and against his wife's warnings, my earthly father poured the cursed blood into the basin, lining the granite with torturous expectations. I remember how the liquid sloshed as I was dipped in, the voice whispering,

"Oh, Cassain, what have you done?"

I knew no language. And yet those words are etched into my memory.

Mocking. Laughing. The thing I was destined to kill sang to me the prophecy of my

He didn't stop screaming. She slapped the twelve-year-old across the face. The fear grew, instead of shrinking.

"Pay attention! You took his potion. You've been here for a day, now. The longer you spend here, the worse your odds get. You need to get out now. Do you hear me?"

The kid seemed to react enough, trying to get up and run away from her. The deal's magic held him in place, however. He had unfinished business to attend to.

"No, you can't just walk out. You're bound by some rules. You stole from him, and I stole from you. He punished you by taking some of your mind away. That's why you were feeling weird before. Now, you get to punish me. Do you understand?"

He shook his head in a wide arc, but the fear was disappearing.

"You can punish me with anything. You could take my attention, just like he took yours. Or my identity, though I feel that one's been eaten away too much. Or something I own, like the tonic I just bought."

His eyes locked onto the vial.

"Or you could punish me with some order of service. Do you understand? You could say, 'Hey Gloria, do this for me as punishment.' And I'd have to do it. Do you get it?"

"Objection. Leading."

Gloria took a sharp breath in.

"Are you a lawyer?" She asked, glancing his way.

"Potion crafter." The goblin replied. "But I know my rights."

"Why don't you drink a silence potion while I explain the terms of the deal to the kid?"

"Anything?" The kid asked. She looked at him, hoping he had figured it out.

"Almost anything. As long as you're not doing anything crazy. As long as it only affects us, and not others around us."

He thought for a second.

"Hey, Gloria, do this for me as punishment." The kid copied her wording. "Take me home, to my mother, safe and sound."

Yes.

"No." The goblin grumbled like a dog. "That's unfair. How am I supposed to



take my share back if he's gone?"

"Guess you'll have to wait until he visits you again." Gloria replied. "Let's go, Timmy. Your wish is my command."

The kid got up, and Gloria took him by his hand. The raccoon feet tippy-tapped behind her, a sound too adorable for the fate the creature would impose the kid.

She helped him up, holding the flap as he flipped dimensions. A paw grabbed her wrist before she left.

"You're one of the Changed, aren't you?" The potion crafter asked. "They took you when you were young?"

She looked at him, wary of whatever trick he could pull.

"Not so young, no." She replied. "You know anything I don't?"

"No. But if I see that kid again..." He started. "I'll let him go after I've taken what I'm owed. As a favour to you."

"Thank you." She said. "That's... Very kind."

The dog ears flopped as he nodded. With a touch to the inside of the cave, she flipped right out of the pantry, and back into the playground. Timmy was waiting, on the floor, eyes staring into the clouds. She dropped the vial on top of his stomach.

"Obviously, no one will ever believe this. So don't even bother." She said, putting her hands into her pockets. "I'm calling your parents."

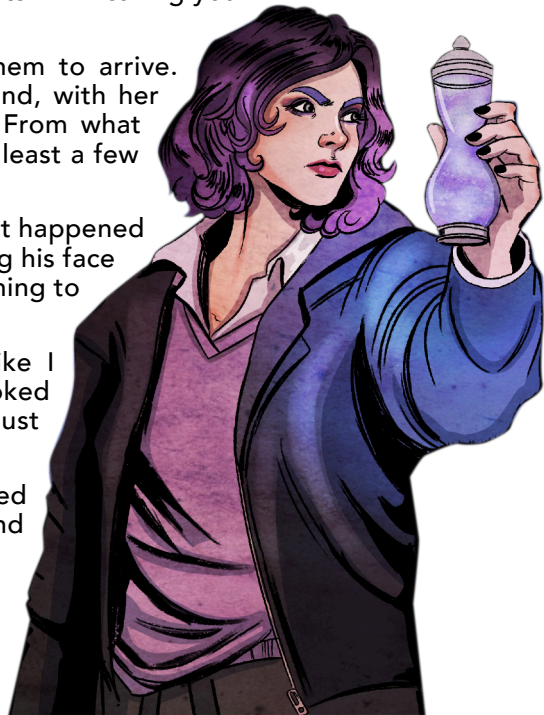
It only took half an hour for them to arrive. Samantha ran into the playground, with her cane still folded on her hands. From what Gloria had gathered, she had at least a few months left.

"Timmy, oh my God, Timmy, what happened to you?" The woman cried, taking his face in her hands, squinting and straining to see him.

"Just a little accident, Miss. Like I told you." Gloria replied. She looked at Timmy. "Morning coffee. Mix just twice."

He nodded, silent. Gloria cleared her throat, extending a hand towards his mom.

"I only take cash, by the way."



Stitches added, "I'll pay for cabs." Upstairs will be satisfied. But I'm gonna need a word with Stitches.

I sampled the first pot. Good all around. A generically executed chicken stock. The second was less restrained. Grease clung to my spoon. I rolled it around my tongue. It screamed 'beef' louder than any shop broth I'd ever had. I considered taking some home.

The third, man, that was something. One spoon, then another, and another. Each sip revealed something new. A fullness, bite, zing...I can't do it justice, don't have the words. I drained the bowl, refilled it. The kitchen ceased to exist. The broth took me to Boston, to my Nonna's hands, back to her home in Italy, stirring in some family magic to her sauces.

I started the second bowl. The world felt the right size again; because I forgot the sadness over and over.

I grabbed a takeaway box and filled it.

A low rumble announced the day crew, rolling in with carts and buckets, grumbling about washing up, counting trays.

I straightened, wiped my mouth, and walked away.

I'd got all the way to the exterior door before the screaming started.

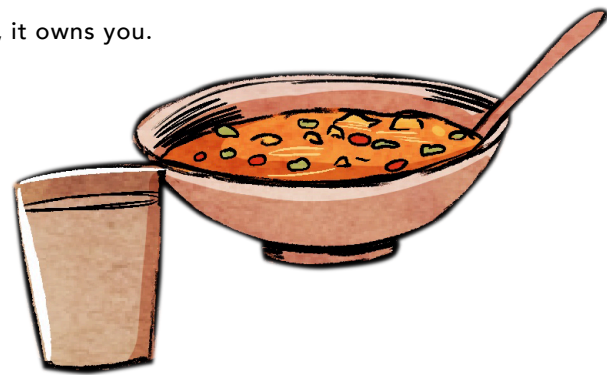
I understand now what my Nonna knew. What the redhead knew. What Chef King experienced: Grief. Love. Loss. The shit that breaks people. You render it down, trap it, and suddenly you got something that fills a hole you didn't even know you'd been carrying.

The Tupperware in my fridge? Something I'd been chasing since I was six. Every morning. Just a drip on the spoon, that's the rule I set. Tastes like Nonna's kitchen: the one in Boston, though she never lived in Boston. Tastes like Vinnie's last breath, his room, though I can't remember what his room looked like. Can't remember his face unless I close my eyes and taste first. The broth shows me. Fills it in. And I know it's filling in wrong. But the knowing don't stop the wanting.

The wife's been asking questions. I give her the work line. She don't push it, not yet. But really, it's because I know, deep down, both my grans are from Lithuania.

And I never had a brother.

You taste something like that, it owns you.



Chef King and I watched the girl strain her stock. Egg whites were whipped and dumped in,

cooked, then plucked out. Then again and again. Her broth never fully clarified.

When the Chef tasted it, grease clung to his lips. "You see weights," he said.

She opened her mouth to respond. I shook my head. Some evaluations aren't arguments. She went upstairs to the bar without prompting.

The room smelled heavy, sharp, sweet, unmistakably tasty. Everything from the redhead's oven was scraped into a pressure cooker, burnt bits and bone and gravy. Water added, lid locked, fire on. The redhead threw away the butcher paper and played with a piece of red-and-white twine, tying it in a loop and spinning it. Then he started eating his porkchop. He chewed slow, eyes off somewhere else.

"You done this before?" I asked.

"My mom used to make something like this," he said pointing his fork at the pressure cooker, "after my dad..." He swallowed. "Said it helped her sleep." He went back to his chewing.

Chef shrugged off the wool sweater. The stumps looked clean, factory-precise. I fed him a few crackers when he saw me going for seconds, then he wanted water.

Two and a half hours later, the redhead shut down the heat and slowly released the pressure on the pressure cooker, letting it sit for an episode of Law and Order. He watched over my shoulder.

Sleeves rolled, he popped the cooker open and ladled a bowl-worth of stock into a sieve and filter. The redhead continued fishing for something. His fingers closed around a small, circular object in the ladle. It caught the kitchen light as he wiped it off and slipped it into his pocket. He shook his head like a little cringe attack, like he'd done something real dumb.

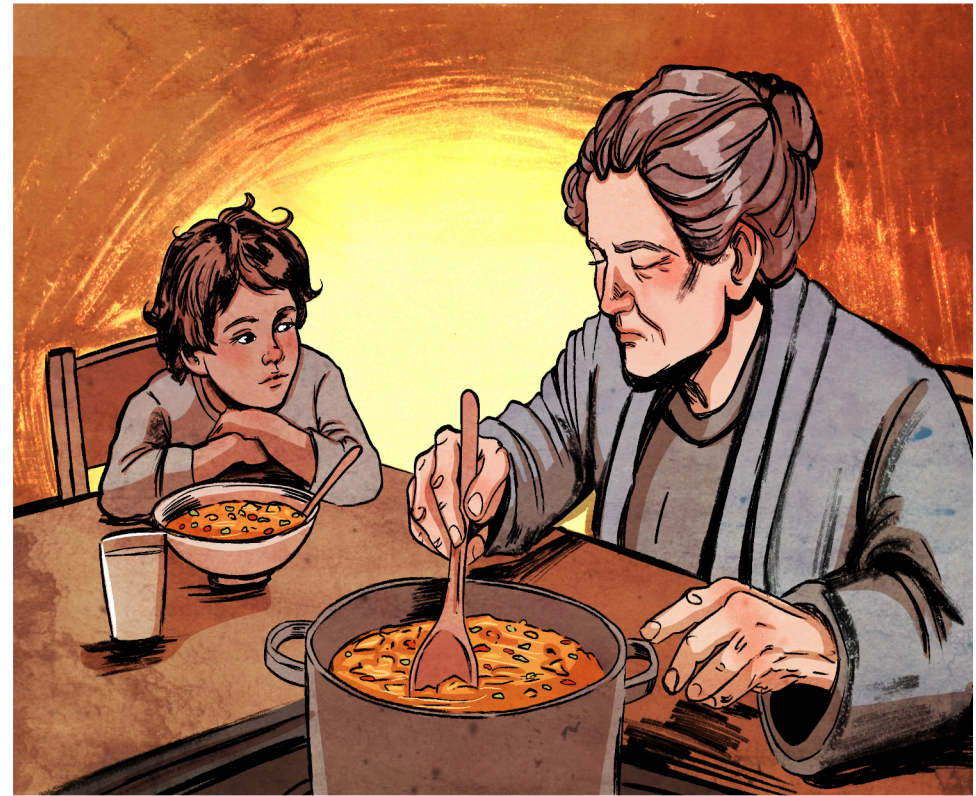
He placed the bowl of broth in front of Chef King and stepped behind him and moved forward till his shoulders met the older man's and put his palms flat on the table and tapped his fingers on both sides. Then he lifted the spoon, guiding it to the Chef's mouth.

The Chef tasted. His eyes rolled back. A faint shiver passed through his shoulders.

When the redhead stood, he let the too-large ring slide from his left ring finger. He threaded it onto the butcher string, draped it around the chef's neck. The redhead whispered something like, "You didn't need them." I didn't get what happened but Chef's shoulders dropped. The redhead stepped back. Hands folded lightly, he nodded once.

I was annoyed, it was a bit after two a.m. and we coulda gone home hours ago, this nasty business concluded - if the boy had skipped his nap. The redhead moved to the far wall, calm. On the other hand, Chef's breathing evened out. The shaking stopped. His eyes tracked the redhead, different than before. And it made me real curious. Anyway, it's already late, an extra hour won't make no difference.

Stitches brought down the other two. Chef made a slight nod toward the redhead. "Chef's choice is final," I said. "You two are not to mention this event, ever. Do not apply for a job here. You no longer exist."



Master of Broth

By J I Mumford

The first time I tasted my grandmother's soup, I was six and Vinnie was dead.

She made it for the wake. I sat at the kitchen table while she worked, watching her thick, scarred hands. She peeled, chopped, stirred. The pot simmered for hours. The smell was rich, heavy.

One spoonful and something in my chest loosened. Vinnie's chair stayed empty, but I stopped looking at it. I watched Nonna's hands instead—thick fingers, the scar across her thumb, the way she tapped the spoon on the pot's edge twice before she served.

Everyone said it brought comfort. All I knew was, I wanted more.

I didn't taste anything like it until I was forty, standing in a restaurant kitchen at three a.m., licking a spoon, chasing that same comfort.

The chef had been cooling off in the walk-in freezer for the last few hours. I was describing mischief I'd gotten up to with spoons. He coughed, throwing me off. "Get it over with," he said.

Two hopefuls entered, a narrow boy and a broad-shouldered girl. "Where's the redheaded one?" I asked.

"Got past me," said Stitches. "Said he needed the shitter."

"Check the bar first then sweep everywhere, remind him what he's here for." I turned to the young chefs and took a deep breath while Stitches made himself scarce.

"You two, this is Chef King, Head of this establishment. He is on the market for a successor." I turned to Chef King. "What are we doing, broth?"

Chef nodded.

"You have four hours—"

Chef rasped, "Eight."

"That's all fucking night," I said. The chef's glare was solid. He'd been through a lot, so I turned to the two hopefuls. "As I was saying, eight hours to make a most beautiful broth worthy of the bosses upstairs."

The sweater slipped off Chef King's shoulder, exposing his newly empty sleeves.

"Get started...use whatever." I rolled the chef back into the freezer and helped him onto a throne made of frozen crates of Grade-A wagyu, his lips already blue, his breath slowing. He laid his stumps on bags of petit pois.

Yesterday they took his hands. Today they take his future. Tomorrow, someone else will take his place. The cuts were clean work. Professional. He's been nearly mute since. It's all part of the Wheel of Life, I say. Sometimes you're in the wheelwell, sometimes you're under the tire, but in between - that's living. That's the sunsets smooching your girl on the side, or those times you're using tire irons on the company dime.

The narrow boy checked the clock, took a chicken from a tray, set it down. When he raised his knife, he aimed for the joint at the base of the neck and brought the blade down.

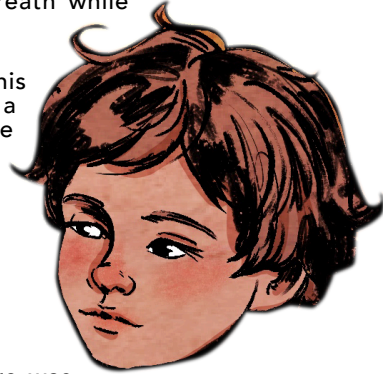
Thwack.

He had dead eyes, and just got on with business. I tend to get on with his type. I have many cruel friends. Violent ones. He hummed as he worked.

He broke the carcass fast, bone cracking under practiced blows. Then, carrot, celery, onion. My wife calls that the 'three sisters' or something.

Everything went into the pot at once.

He used the same knife and board for the vegetables. I thought, good thing we pay off the health inspector, 'cause that boy is a salmonella factory.



The boil came fast. Fat foamed up, yellow and furious.

The second contestant moved like a linebacker, bumping into everything at shoulder height. Broad hands. Strong wrists. She tore into a beef carcass with a sharp cleaver, separating offal, tossing the best cuts aside without looking at them. Meat piled up in gorgeous, useful chunks.

Vegetables were chopped roughly, then bones and vegetables thrown into a deep pan and into the oven.

The narrow boy said, "Gonna take forever."

She flipped him off.

Stitches came back in. "Sorry Bruiser, the kid must've chickened out." I shrugged, he shrugged, the two young chefs looked pleased.

An hour passed. The narrow boy skimmed his broth. The girl kept the lid on her heavy pot. They chitter-chattered while I watched videos on my phone till my battery conked out. I found a power bank for my phone on a cleaner, he wasn't using it. On the way back I found the redhead stretched across some flour sacks. His shoes were off. One sock damp.

"You're late," I said.

"I arrived early," he said.

"Get into the kitchen. Time's moving."

"Skinny is chicken. Broad is beef. You said eight hours."

My timer for pulling out the Chef-popsicle rang. So, I let the redhead be. There's only so much supervision a dead man needs.

Soon after, the narrow boy announced his stock was ready.

I held up a spoonful. Chef was shivering, a lot. He leaned forward too far, missed, and corrected. I'm a patient man. He tasted it. "Copper," he said.

I said to Narrow boy, "Go wait in the bar, there's a couch."

I noticed the redhead missing when the ice machine rattled out a flood of fresh ice for the next day's Long Island Ice Teas. He was in the freezer, digging through crates. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Balance." He returned with a small bundle wrapped in butcher paper. Chef watched him. His cheek muscles pulsed. The boy bowed to the table, then to the meat he'd laid out. He separated a porkchop with almost embarrassing care, sliding a paring knife under the skin, lifting it away in a single peel. The rest he reduced brutally with a cleaver. Bones cracked. Skin tore. Powdered milk dusted over meat and all.

Chef made a whistle with his nose.

Milk powder burned under high flame, onions blackened while the redhead braised the pork chop. Sliced it thin. Let it rest.