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## Beneath the Pew

by

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What she liked most about her world beneath the pew was the sense of walls, without there being any real walls at all. She fit inside the space both snugly and loosely, both safely and with room to roam.

Townfolk remarked that it was the child's size, her condensed two-foot stature, her remarkable bird-like frame that made what was to others so uncomfortable a place to be held up, so comfortable for the girl. But there was more to it than that, they said. For while their own children, stuffed in scratchy Sunday attire would drop down off the hard pew benches to explore the underworld, they would eventually grow weary and return to the stiff bench and the looming grasp of mother or father.

No, there was something more that made this particular child so suited to life beneath the pew. Something dreadful, the town's people warned. For it is at this point that their faces would creep closer, so that each might see the whites of the other's eyes, the red lines that tricked and petered out behind glossy globes of blue and green and brown. Over candles lit low in the wee hours of the night, around roughly hewn wooden tables, jowls hovering over cups of coffee gone still and cold, they would gather and discuss. The child fit, they said in hushed voices and with nodding heads of agreement, with the twitching of fingertips and the grounding of bare soles into the powdery dust of

grey dirt floors; the child fit, they said, so comfortably, they said, because the child had no bones within its tiny body. Not a single, solitary one.

Atop the hill, the sun shone. Crocus bulbs, packed beneath the soil, shook. It was rumored the birds might return.

“What does ‘condensed’ mean, Mother?” Gillian sat on the ground beneath her mother’s rotary clothesline, the girl’s thin, attenuated arms only barely holding her up. Being so small, she wore dungarees once owned by an actual doll. Her shirtless torso (for she reeled at the restriction of sleeves) gleamed a translucent white so pure it not only reflected the world around her, it absorbed it as well. Had a rainbow been present, Gillian would have donned a skin of every color. Her red hair blew, like fire in the wind.

“Well,” Marigold, said. “Condensed?” Marigold said. She had to think. But Marigold was a good thinker. Had won awards well into the eighth grade for the act of thinking, before her schooling stopped and her work at the iron mill began. “I suppose it’s like soup, Gillian – soup in a can. That’s what condensed is.” She smiled at her daughter, her eyes crinkling in the corners, and then she gave a pair of soggy red capris, the color in them more a rose now than their original cardinal red, a sharp flap.

A powerful gust tore across the hilltop causing Gillian’s arms to give way. Her body flopped to the ground.

“When something is condensed, you add water,” Marigold continued, noticing but not dwelling on the defeat of her daughter at the hands of the wind. “It loosens up. Becomes, well, what it’s meant to be I suppose. What it’s always been meant to be.” The strength in Gillian’s arms was fleeting. The doctors had no cure.

Gillian gazed at Marigold, her mother tall as the clothesline's metal pole, her whole body busy and fluid with the work of the wash. Marigold's eyes shone a blue that rivaled the cloudless sky. It was Sunday. The factories were closed and the town was at rest. The perpetual brown haze that hung about like an undesired guest, was gone, banished it seemed, by the wind.

Marigold gave the pentagonal clothesline a spin and Gillian laughed. No sound. Just the pinking of cheeks and the stretching wide of a grin. Another unexplainable aspect of her case, the doctors said. The clothesline slowed and Marigold secured the capris beside Gillian's bed sheets, sheets the size of Marigold's pillow case, all of it now flapping in the wind.

Yes, it was a clever answer Marigold provided, this answer of condensed soup. For in her daughter's mind the word condensed took on immediate importance, and it would have gained in importance as Gillian grew, if Gillian grew, but Gillian would not grow. The doctors proclaimed it. She was done growing. Two feet she had reached and two feet she would remain all the days of her life, which they added, would be equally limited.

Gillian spotted a lone acorn and matched its color to her mother's hair. As Marigold worked, her nut-colored hair galloped atop her shoulders. The sun glinted and Gillian slid catlike into her mother's wicker laundry basket, curling inside as if she herself were clean sheets.

Marigold sprinkled her remaining clothespins into the wicker basket and Gillian laughed her silent laugh, fending them off with the flapping of her bird-like arms. When Marigold picked up the basket containing her daughter, it was with the greatest of ease.

The weight of Gillian, at her now six years of age, was no more than that of a few bars of laundering soap.

“Someday you will grow big and strong,” Marigold said to her daughter.

“Yes, I will, Mother,” and Gillian hung her pearly shoulders over the edge of the basket as Marigold whooshed her about like an airplane, and the wind blew, and the branches squealed and the early grass, tinged with gold and far more fragile than in years past, bent its collective head. With two fingertips, Gillian touched the blue number inked into place upon the inside skin her mother’s wrist. The number pulsed atop the throb of Marigold’s veins.

“Will it ever rain again, Mother?” said Gillian.

“Someday, my dear,” and Marigold cast her eyes to the parched earth and turned her wrist inward such that Gillian could no longer see nor touch her in that place.

Marigold baked rutabaga pie in their solitary stone cottage that sat upon the hill. Their home filled with the sugary scent. With Marigold’s saved rations, she made three such pies. She allowed them to cool then packed them carefully in a crate, swaddling them in a few towels.

Through a transom window, she watched a single cloud slide across the plane of the sky. Marigold opened the window. The cloud was changing, becoming grayer as it neared the factories, expanding as it moved behind the high wire fence of the slaughterhouse toward the blast furnaces of the iron mill. A sound was growing in the distance. A rumbling, like deep, muffled voices, the pounding of a stampede. Then, just as the sound hovered upon the hillside, it retreated, and a profound silence took hold.

The silence was followed by an unchaperoned squeal of branches jousting in the mounting breeze.

Upon the kitchen floor, atop a pillow beside a cabinet, Gillian ate her breakfast of milk soaked toast. No pie for Gillian today or any day, her wind-pipe thin as a reed.

Marigold dressed. Marigold dressed Gillian. Gillian tugged at the sleeves of her blouse. There was no choice.

Marigold hoisted Gillian upon their mule, the animal's mane tinging Gillian's reddening cheek as she liked most to rest her cheek there on the animal's mane, feeling its wispieness, watching the world on a slant. As they rode, Marigold skillfully managed both Gillian and the pies.

The wind found the church. It whistled through cracks, rattled shutters. In the back-most row, Gillian lay beneath her pew.

“And in conclusion, my fine people, we all sin.” Preacher-man's sermon was nearing its end. “We sin without even knowing it.” His voice was soft, placating. “We sin when we try to do good in the world. Am I right?” The people nodded. “Lying about our trysts to preserve peace in a marriage, for example. Or stuffing money under our mattress for a rainy day when we know our neighbor, plum out of work, could use it more.” The Preacher-man chuckled. Middlebrow though he was, he had been elevated in the eyes of his congregation. It was by their supposition of the cosmopolitan in him. He had come from someplace, someplace else, someplace other than here, and as such, he was glamorous. He glanced at his notes. Then, as if for effect, he shoved the papers to the ground. From beneath her pew, Gillian watched the final moments of the floating

cascade. “But the goodness remains, I tell you.” The wind whistled. Preacher-man raised up his voice. “It’s in there. After all, are these sins? Are they? Are they *really*?” There was a shininess to the Preacher-man. Though no longer young, he remained virulent in appearance, his hair shaggy about his ears and a pale color, a yellowish tint that had not yet given way to his advancing age. Preacher-man cocked his head. “I love all of you,” he shouted, and a baby cried. Its wail challenged the pounding wind. “Even you,” he said and the wind quieted. “Even this crying baby, I love.” But quickly the wind was back, howling, stinging. The Preacher-man huffed, frustrated by the wind’s uncertainty. “Because you love me, right? Right baby?” The preacher-man swiped and pressed at his eyebrows, bushy and red, like brushfires – a much more powerful color than the hair upon his head - but they would not submit. His hands, as it had been noted in the town newspaper when the Preacher-man first arrived, were oddly shaped, appearing almost claw-like and they were large, even for a man of his substantial size. Had something happened when he was born? This bothered the Preacher-man, the noting of this feature, and so he shut down the press. The library and schools were the next to go. Information, it was explained by the Preacher-man, was best and truest coming from he alone.

“John Farthing,” the Preacher-man said.

A boy of twelve wriggled in his seat. He sat beside his father and his little sister who swung her sandaled feet back and forth, hands gripped firmly to the pew’s edge. Her name was Boo Farthing. Spotting something down on the floor, Boo slipped off to investigate.

“You, young John for example,” Preacher-man said. “Why, just the other day you killed Mrs. McCartwright’s cat when you hit it in the head with that stone. But you didn’t mean to do it, right? Am I right?” Young Farthing, stiff with surprise at having been called out, shook his head back and forth. “No,” Preacher-man continued. “You were just trying to keep the cat out of your mother’s vegetable garden. You were simply trying to keep the garden clean.” A quiet fell on the townsfolk, an uncertainty as to where to pledge their allegiance, upon stone-thrower or the dead. After all, the cat had served the town well with its catching of mice. Its boastful walk had been a welcomed amusement.

“Why, ah, yessir, Preacher-man,” said the boy. “I was, ah, helping Ma.” His words rose into the air of the overfilled church untethered, eventually floating away.

Boo Farthing reemerged from beneath the pew. She held in her hand a dusty peppermint. She unwrapped the goody, crinkling the cellophane. Preacher-man glared. With disquiet eyes, Boo opened her mouth and placed the candy inside, sealing her lips around it. Once again upon the pew, her legs swung lightly and she tapped her clasps in the softest possible fashion.

“The, ah, the cat shat there just last Tuesday. Right by my wife’s cabbage.” It was John Farthing Sr., who until this moment had chosen silence as his best response to the Preacher Man’s pointed inquiry. “Nearly wound up in our soup, that poo.” The man’s face was a purplish-red, and its birthmark-like coloring was spreading across the bare skin of his head where barely-there hair was slicked as if providing an insufficient roof. He wore a blue wool jacket and a deep green tie, knotted well, but his boots, the soles nearly worn through, belied his attempt at decorum. Encouraged perhaps by her

father's bravery, Little Boo swung her legs harder, defiantly swishing the melting peppermint to the opposite cheek.

"Where's your wife?" said the Preacher-man.

"Ah, sick, sir. Might sick today."

"But she was working in that very garden when I walked past your yard this morning. Pretty sure that was her. Fine looking woman. My Number Six." Preacher-man's top lip rose then and seemed to enflame as if stung. Senior Farthing blinked hard. Preacher-man pulled his lip inward and returned his gaze to the boy.

"You're a good sinner, young John Jr. Sin away," and Preacher-man threw his hands up in the air. "God forgives you," he said and he flashed the boy a smile of bright white teeth, and the boy managed a smile of his own, awkward at first but then more and more proud though his teeth not as white. Someone sneezed. The Preacher-man diverted. It was then that John Jr. made a tight fist, and he pound, repeatedly and with great force at his sister's small thighs, until tears welled in the little girl's eyes and her legs no longer swung.

Gillian's coin-sized cheek had been resting against the top of Marigold's shoe. She was listening~ to the wind, to the Preacher-man. It was Gillian who rolled that peppermint to little Boo. Boo had waved back and smiled. They'd shared a silent laugh.

Gillian was now looking curiously at the back of the pew that was in front of her. She could see just below the basket-like shelf that contained both rusty red Bible and the faded and frayed blue-grey hymnal. There were words carved there in the wood. Words she'd never noticed before. She wondered if they were new. She did not recognize the words, though they too this shape: "warmonger", "unconscionable", "fool". Gillian slid



her body forward and traced the letters with her fingertips, the whole width of her digits sinking within their depths. “They are like scars,” she thought. “They have damaged the wood.” And she pressed her palm against them as if to imprint the words on her skin, but they would not take.

“Mary Lou Barton,” said the Preacher-man. Gillian listened. “Mary Lou Barton,” Preacher-man repeated. “So beautiful. So beautiful. Am I right?” His congregation did not answer. He was staring at a young woman of twenty or so. “A little on the dark side,” he said, “but nonetheless. Number Eight, as I recall.” Mary Lou Barton lifted her head. Her dark eyes were cast in shadow and if one could have pulled back her sleeve at the wrist, they would have seen on the papery flesh a small number corresponding to the Preacher’s words. She wore a soft, white scarf decorated with daisies as a headdress. “Do I need to remind you we do not wear scarves here?” The young woman’s eyes bounced from neighbor to neighbor, but all pairs of eyes looked away. A woman tucked an aluminum-wrapped tea-bread closer to her body. A man fiddled with his tie and two children dropped down beneath the pew. Mary Lou Barton softly fingered the edges of her scarf. Her jaw unclenched, but closed again. No words escaped. She unwrapped the scarf laced about her head and held it in two shaking hands upon her lap. Her black hair was held tight in a bun. “Now let your hair down. Are you a man?” Mary Lou Barton hesitated, but did as she was told.

Her hair fell in soft waves, and it looked very much like the hair of all the other women in the church, at least in length and style. Preacher-man nodded. “Now, this I like,” he said, and he winked at her, pursed his lips tightly, causing their wet, membranous insides to show, and then he lifted his head high to address the whole of his

congregation, inhaling deeply through his nose as he did so. “Good and decent people of this cherished town.” He exhaled. “As you know, I always forgive you both your arrogance and your ignorance, especially you, ladies. And men. The men too.” There was charisma in his voice and while some in the congregation chuckled, more remained motionless, eyes cast to the floor.

Gillian, from her place beneath the pew, pulled at her mother’s leg. Marigold looked down and Gillian watched as a single tear, almost in slow motion, fell from the inside corner of her mother’s eye, down Marigold’s cheek, landing upon Gillian’s own eyelashes and causing the tiny girl to blink. But then Marigold smiled broadly at Gillian, as only Marigold could, and it reassured the girl, at least in some regard, and Gillian hugged her mother’s leg and rested her face back upon the warmth of Marigold’s shoe.

At the pulpit, Preacher-man’s gaze fell again upon Mary Lou Barton and he patted the lectern searching for something. Not finding it, he swept madly at the lectern’s empty surface as if removing a layer of thick dust. There was something hawkish about his appearance now, as if at any moment, he might transform into such a creature and take to the rafters of the church, swooping down at alarming speeds, snatching from the unsuspecting crowd, perhaps their bread, or jewels (if there were any to be had) or smallest children. Or maybe simply to pluck and pull at their hair. Preacher-man worked again at his eyebrows. “God has placed this burden on me, you, which again as you know, or maybe not but you should, you definitely should.” He was speaking to all of them again, but also to the space above them as if it contained some nebulous choir he needed to reach, his tone rising with agitation. “God gave you to me and I humbly accepted the assignment when I took over this church, rescued this town. I injected

money, money,” he said shaking his reptilian fist in the air. “That was not so many years ago.” His voice drifted, remembering, but then switched back, returning forceful and committed, his gaze once again concrete. “It was in terrible shape, as you will recall. This is of course what happens when you place the unfit in charge. Weak. Very, very weak. You call that a leader? Why, she should have drowned herself in the river when she had the chance.” The Preacher-man laughed at this, as if it had just dawned on him, the thought, and he found it quite amusing. His left eye squinted, and he poked at it with his pointy finger as if to stab out some irritant. “But, of course the river has near run dry. And she wanders now somewhere beyond The Mark.” He imitated a weary person walking, stumbling, chuckling as he did so, and then he stopped and cleared his throat. “You don’t want to go beyond The Mark, do you people?” The audience shuddered. “No. I didn’t think so.” He built up steam again. “The walls of our church were crumbling, remember? In need of mortar and stone; the inside derelict, in need of plaster and paint.” The townspeople stirred in their seats. “Look around you now, people. Look how far we’ve come and in such a short time. Look,” he ordered. The townsfolk craned their necks and took note of the fresh white paint of the alter, (the back of the church had yet to be corrected), and noted the marvelous, gleaming wood of the Preacher-man’s podium. Perhaps they had in fact earned something very good in the Preacher-man’s arrival. They had chosen him, after all. They had asked him to lead. They had needed a leader. A real leader, to make things right again in the town. “To make it shine,” he said. “And God said I must lead you to the light. Lead you to the light, God said. Well, my good and cherished people, here I am.”

As if on cue, the doors at the back of the church swung open. Daylight poured in. Marigold turned and a ray of light hit her square in the face, causing her to wince, and a small scrape bounced off, finding Gillian beneath the pew. Gillian turned curiously toward it, the etched words behind her remaining hidden in the shadows. The light hurt, and Gillian closed her eyes.

“And here we go,” said the Preacher-man. “Let us celebrate. Let us celebrate my arrival in this place of God.” The Preacher-man lifted his arms way up and the faces of the congregation, men, women and children, smooth and ruddy, pale and sun-scorched, lit like the candles of an ancient chandelier. Perhaps it was good. It was all good. The Preacher-Man had been the right choice. Cheering burst forth from the crowd. “Here we go,” the Preacher-man said again. The cheers got louder and the people stood and the Preacher-man, his face red with rapture, bowed his powerful body deep and long, and then straightened and looked about his people with the satisfaction that comes with such approbation; he stood still, one might even say, with a certain sense of self-deification, as if he were standing in the glorious confines of an imaginary spotlight that he alone could see.

Outside, the wind had been waiting. It ripped at checkered tablecloths. Men placed heavy stones on the corners to hold them down. There was mingling, the exchanging of pleasantries and gossip, the holding of hats and the eating of pie.

“It’s a good pie,” a man told Marigold. She smiled and thanked the man with another slice.

The Preacher-man did not go to his people but instead sat off at a distance on a stone wall. He did not eat the pie but brought his own lunch of lean meats and root vegetables which he cut with a small pocketknife. It was the smell of his own people that bothered him most. *Who are you*, he often thought. *Now that I have you, what do I do with you?*

A rock hit the wall at his feet and Preacher-man turned to see who threw it. It was Gillian, three feet off behind him on the other side, the outer side of the wall. It had taken all her strength to throw it.

“Little girl, what are you doing there? And above that, why would you throw a rock at me?”

“Because I don’t like you.”

The Preacher-man chortled. “Everyone likes me,” he said and he was charming, his underlying rancor subsided.

“I don’t,” said Gillian.

“Come. Sit here,” he said and he gestured with his raven-like hand to the wall, at a spot beside him where there were bramble barbs and prickly leaves.

“I will not,” she said.

Again, the Preacher-man laughed.

“You are an unwise little girl.”

“You are a hateful, cruel man.”

The Preacher-man was now done being patient. He stood and his nostrils flared.

“Where are your parents?”

“I only have one. I have a mother.”

“Why does that not surprise me. Go get her.”

“I can’t. I don’t walk.”

“Then crawl,” he said. His voice was low with the return of his anger. And that’s just what Gillian did. She crawled.

She crawled toward the wall and ascended. It was a process that brought both horror and amazement to the Preacher-man for her body slid this way and that in avoidance of thorns and stickers. She scaled the wall and descended unscathed. The Preacher-man was not amused. “Get your mother,” he repeated and he followed as Gillian made her way through the scorched grass like a slithering snake toward the churchyard and Marigold.

It seemed the whole town had turned out that day, which of course was the requirement. Though Mrs. Farthing had stated illness, her absence would be marked in a book, the accumulation of absences resulting in the docking of pay, the pay controlled by the town, the town controlled by the Preacher-man. It was the seventh year of his command. It was the first picnic in as many.

Marigold stood alone. She was leaning against a wall of the church, beside the entrance to the church, standing beside the large, black placard that announced the sermon’s title. In bright, white letters the placard read, “Sin is for Sinners. Join me in the Light.” She was gazing off to the factories in the distance and was thinking, without the dark smoke pouring from their stacks, that they looked almost like castles. Perhaps, had things been different, they could have been universities like the woman promised so many years ago. But the people had grown weary of waiting. It no longer mattered that their grass was green and their sky was blue.

“Mother,” said Gillian. Marigold looked down.

“Yes, my love.”

“Preacher-man wants you.”

And there he stood. Marigold smiled faintly. It was not the smile Gillian knew.

“Your daughter is a disgrace. She is banished.” Marigold’s face went white.

“She is to join the others.” He pointed a finger toward the far-off field that lay beyond the stonewall.

There, in a cage of iron, stood three townspeople: Mary Lou Barton, John Farthing Sr. and Little Boo. Boo was holding tight to her father’s hand. Her mouth an upside-down u. Beside them was a truck to which the cage on wheels was hitched.

“Bale,” said the Preacher-man to a younger man over his shoulder. “Take her away.”

And Bale grabbed Gillian who fought but to no avail. And Marigold screamed.

“No!” she cried. “I beg you. Please,” she cried. She cried such that her heart placed itself outside of her body. And the townspeople watched and some snickered, and others nodded and a few stood expressionless but no one moved.

With the help of others dressed in the same uniform as Bale, Gillian was wrapped in a blanket of burlap, marched across the field and slipped into the cage and its door clanged closed behind her. “No. No, no no!”

Marigold’s lips formed this word but the movement of her lips only caused the Preacher-man to laugh harder. The truck’s engine groaned and then turned over and the truck pulled away, the cage wobbling along in acquiescence. The original three in the cage held fast to the bars as dust from the parched earth kicked up behind them. Gillian,

secured in her blanket of burlap, was lashed with leather belts to the floor. There were no screams. All tongues had been removed.

The Preacher-man turned to Marigold, and with the same hardened fingers he used for so many purposes he wiped at her torrent of tears. “You are very beautiful,” he said moving his fingers all about her face. He grabbed hold her wrist and checked her number. “Of course,” he said, his eyes sharpening at the memory. Marigold’s cheeks and eyes burned and she spit in the preacher-man’s face and he slapped her and he slipped his hand beneath her dress. And she fought and the townspeople watched. And some snickered, and some sneered and some cried. But no one, not a single one, moved.

Marigold was thrown out of the Preacher-man’s dark blue car and left on the straw matt of her cottage. The sky had grown dark, though not because of the hour. It was just after three in the afternoon. Overhead, clouds of the blackest kind amassed and hung so low you could reach out and touch them, pull them in close. Marigold lifted her body from the ground, straightened her tattered dress, wiped dust from her face. She stumbled, then climbed to the top of the hill, where her clothesline quaked in the wind.

The wind had become so fierce that the morning’s wash had been blown off and scattered and was gone. Only her faded red capris remained, flying sideways like a windsock, or the sail of a small ship. She took hold of them, thrusting them up to the sky. “Gillian,” she said. The earth shuddered in response. Then, a miraculous thing occurred. A raindrop fell, tinging the clothesline’s metal pole. Another fell. And another. Soon the raindrops fell in batches. Marigold held out her hands to catch them. Her eyes opened wide. Her mouth fell open, it too absorbing the rain, inhaling its existence. “Ha,”



she said, a delirium in her voice, a crazed look in her eye. “Gillian,” she repeated, and she pulled her hands in toward herself and stared at the number there upon her wrist. She recalled how all the women received their numbers when the Preacher-man first came to town. How he lined them up and decided. How the needle entered, and poked in and penetrated in an endless stream, prodding at the skin, burning, emblazoning the number. As she looked upon the branding, the sky unleashed. Raindrop after raindrop fell, in such multitude and with such force upon the barren land and upon Marigold’s raw and marked wrist, that little by little, the ink ran.

Years have passed. The Preacher-man is long gone, but the town and the church remain, its graveyard fuller with each passing generation, names fading on older head stones, fresher on the new. The crocuses are blossoming, and the birds have returned. Sometimes they sit upon Marigold’s headstone, a place visited often when lessons of the uprising are taught and its leader’s name invoked. And if one is very quiet and still, the birds will offer a song. The schoolchildren say they sing these words: “Thank you. I am grown. Thank you. I am strong.”

Beneath the pew, the words endure: “warmonger,” “unconscionable” and the greatest of all, “fool.”