

THE PLUMBER

Those early days on the island whiffed of the perfume of rotting blackberries. Fruit was loosening all around me, their grip on trees in the backyard more and more tenuous, which meant ripe. Alone I rubbed a perfect apple against the thigh of my jeans. I bit into it, and half the apple's flesh tore crisply away from its body. I spat the hunk out in horror: its flesh had been impregnated with fuchsia dye, as if dipped in a cartoon cauldron of noxious goo. I swear I could taste it, and trembled in the conspiracy. I had just buried a witch's bottle, waited weeks to be alone and menstruate, collected herbs and broken glass. I had dragged boulders against every entrance at dusk, placed bells on every door. Borrowed a dog. And here I was, poisoned. It must've been the shadow figure who spied on me at night, who could see in when I couldn't see out.

Days waded in the paranoia of solitude and the null effects of enchanted mystery flesh, and so betrayed me as the city slicker I surely am.

A month later, I was still afraid of the unremitting darkness of countryside night, and all the trickster reflections my glass fortress made. Dawn carried safety, but carrion still circled the sky above me as I read under the apple tree in the afternoon. I startled whenever a pine cone fell on the roof, or eagles squabbled, or a car passed at night. Silence became an impossible screaming white noise, its absence as menacing as its deafening presence. And then I was afraid, too, of the easy kindness my neighbours showed me. Everyone was so *nice*: stopping to say hello, asking me where I live—*which house? Oh yeah*. In the city, nobody knows where you live, and there are safeguards: street lights, night buses, deadbolts, peep holes. On the island, nobody even locks their doors.

So it was that I was sitting on the couch that morning, feet up and taking an online practice test for my driver's licence, when I first noticed the rumble of an engine and a glint of metal in the flailing post-storm sun. A man's voice carried from within the house: *Hello-oo?* I paused in complete stillness, rabbit heart thumping.

It's the plumber, he warbled melodically, to which my mind defiantly responded with sinister thoughts. What pointless armour I was wearing to battle his unassuming smile. I showed him the broken faucet in my roundest tone. I'd forgotten that he said he'd come in the morning. I had preemptively jogged through the garden in my mother's bathrobe and Crocs at dawn to knock over the boulder that blocked the gate. I couldn't let him notice my fortifications, but then, I hadn't noticed that the gate swings both ways.

Small talk. I told him I've always wanted to be a plumber, attempting to imitate his unrushed manner. *Why?* his voice trickled. *Well, I love seeing things be de-gunked*, I told him. His reply was a no-smile smirk and tiny head bob. I had anticipated a silent morning, but I couldn't leave his side. Seeing him take apart the faucet was like watching a dinosaur skeleton be knocked over just to see if the bones really do fit together again. He narrated every problem, and every step, out loud to me as he worked. It was a beautiful score. I imagined an empty stage, furnished with an Allen wrench, a small circular side-view mirror for a bicycle, a can of WD-40, and a few sheets of paper towel. A dance of deconstruction and observance.

As I handed him tools, I asked him how long he'd been a plumber. *Oh, about 40 years*. He hadn't been sure what to do after school, so he came here with some

friends who knew that rent was cheap in the winter months. He had never planned on becoming the island's go-to plumber, but at that moment I thought of my island neighbours as the luckiest people in the world.

I startled when, all at once, he announced that he'd figured it out. *I know your problem.* I wasn't sure I wanted it to end with a solution. Not this fast.

It was the end of their shift.

We leaned against the countertop in consideration, eyes lowered. He spoke in furtive tones.

Someone had had other things on their mind when they put this faucet together. That's why it's never worked the way it is supposed to. Oh, they were thinking about picking up their kids from school, whether they had something to cook for dinner at home, what time the market opens in the morning, whether that's a bite or a rash on their leg, whether they're pregnant. The faucet was as good as new, better than new.

As I walked him to his car he asked, *do you wanna see my plunger?* It was lying in his trunk. It weighed about 5 pounds more than your average toilet plunger because the handle was made of solid copper pipe. Remnants of other toilet bowls clung to it. I gripped the plunger confidently, rotating it in my hand with professional airs: a dabbler showing off to a consummate professional. I noticed then that the hood ornament on his car had been replaced long ago by a faucet, three sun-worn pearls dangling down from its spout.

Later on, I ate many fuschia-fleshed apples.

Bitsy Knox