

A DISTURBANCE

There's a certain kind of silence when you wake in the deep of night, in a strange bed, knowing that someone has entered the room.

You don't know how you know. Your eyes are closed, and whoever it is hasn't made a sound.

But the silence is thicker than usual; it weighs more, in the way that a withholding friend is worse than one who's just neglecting you.

With that weight, that knowing on her chest, May opens her eyes and finds a figure at the foot of the carved canopy bed.

At first, she can't make out more than a faint outline, but as her eyes adjust to near darkness, she realizes it's a girl, looking as surprised as May feels.

The intruder's hands rest at her sides, and the folds of an old-fashioned dress or nightgown puddle on the Tuscan tile at her feet. When she steps forward, illuminated by moonlight, May has the urge to clap her hands over her eyes the way you do when you're a kid and think blindness and invisibility are the same thing.

You can't see me.

Me.

Because it's like looking in a mirror. The ghostly stranger might be her identical twin or a nearly transparent version of May, who can't seem to look away or cry out or move.

The girl extends luminous arms and stands with her head tilted, long hair hanging at a severe angle. Her fingers open and close like anemones, and May watches helplessly as the girl reaches down, running a palm over her satiny bedspread, fingertips disappearing into the fabric. She lifts the cloth of her gown to kneel on the bed, working her way up the length of it with hands on either side of May's rigid body. As she parks herself, sits down, weightless, right on May's midsection, a mean, knowing smile blooms on her face. "*Ciao, bella.*"

May tries to squirm free—“Get off!”—but there’s nothing to repel. The girl is present but not, and the truth of this paralyzes May.

“So, you will speak to me in *inglese, bella? Come mia madre?*”

As if to answer her own question, the girl slides a short, savage-looking knife from the folds of her dress and holds it by May’s clenched jaw. “No?” Her hovering hand never touches the milky-translucent blade to May’s skin. “I would show you what Cristofana thinks of *no*”—the knife vanishes the way it appeared, a magician’s trick, and the girl sighs theatrically—“but I cannot. I knew I would find you.” Her voice changes then, dips as with a secret. An expansive gesture takes in what might be the room or the whole world. “Just not where or when.”

May lets out her breath and tries to object, but her voice is useless, gone.

The ghost girl clucks her tongue. “Oh, stop trembling, *sciocco*. I won’t harm you.” That sly smile. “Not today.”

Quick as she appeared, she rolls weightlessly away again, an acrobat springing to her feet. May watches her—it—pass effortlessly through the closed door, dissolving into the wood.

Feeling her limbs unlock, May curls toward the wall and lets her breathing slow to normal. *Breathe.*

May waits for her voice, a sob or a gasp, an ear-splitting scream, anything, but the middle-of-the-night silence wins out, and some sane part of May knows that's best.

Just breathe.

She conjures her mother's voice from childhood, that firm, low, loved voice soothing, *Shhh . . . it's just a dream*, and the room is hushed, gentled, but only for a second, because this dream won't behave like one; it won't wear like dreams do.

Her gaze fixed on the digital clock face, May watches an hour pass, and another. She tracks shadows on the ceiling, naming the shapes they make—*tree, wolf, teeth*—and every time she shuts her eyes, the scene loops through her brain again: a bleached, weightless figure crawling beastlike up the bed and over her; the milky transparency of the knife; but most remarkable of all, the face, her own exactly, as alien as the moon.

So May keeps her eyes open.

AN OLD, DARK HEART

Stifling a succession of yawns over continental breakfast the next morning, May comes to when Gwen starts folding her newspaper. Their summer rental in City Center East opens today, and May knows that Gwen will hustle them out of the B&B they've been staying as till then; she'll want to beat the heat and the lunch crowds.

"Dude," May says, leaning too conspicuously toward Liam, "walk me to my room so I can pack."

He moves to stand, no questions asked, but his mother halts him with a hand on his arm.

Gwen's used to them, but it's been almost a year since Liam and May have really hung out—that is, before he shuttled over on the Volainbus Monday to fetch her at the airport—and now May isn't a part of anything bigger anymore. She's just May, alone in Florence with friends of what-used-to-be the family, and Gwen is overcompensating. “You're not packed yet?” her summer guardian asks.

May decides to just come out with it. “My room's haunted.” Her voice is kidding—the morning light has calmed her, settled over the terror of night like a layer of snow—but she still feels it, the heat of fear. “I think.”

Li gives her that measured, bemused look May knows so well but had somehow forgotten until this moment, the brotherly I'm-waiting-for-you-to-start-making-sense look. Li isn't her brother. Technically, he isn't family at all, though they've been more or less best friends since before she can remember. Neither is Gwen, who went out of her way to help Mom and the teachers structure this as an independent study to sub in for May's final exams. But May has known these two all her life, and in a way, they're better than family, now especially.

“I guess I had a nightmare,” she admits, half believ-

ing it. “And I didn’t want to go in there and pack alone.”

Gwen’s smile is tight with concern. “It’s normal, you know, with stress. Bad dreams . . . insomnia . . .”

Oh, *please*. Don’t start. May claps palms over her ears, humming like an angry hive, which prompts Gwen to shrug and look at her watch. “All right. I’m here if you need me. Meanwhile, I should line up a cab. You two need to get cracking.”

There’s no trace in the room to suggest that the girl was there.

“Sleepwalking?” Li posits from the unmade bed while May sits on her backpack to crush down its contents.

He looks hilarious lying with crossed ankles under the antique canopy, at home as can be on a rumpled sea of silky gold-and-salmon covers, like a deposed prince in jeans and Converse. May hides her smile. She must have looked wrong in that bed all week, too, an imposter. The B&B villa is in the hills that circle the city, on the site of what used to be a vineyard, according to its brochure, and before that a medieval nunnery. Staying outside *centro storico* for their transition week allowed for something swishier, Gwen said, so she and Li hadn’t

exactly been exerting themselves while awaiting May's arrival and the rental, despite their proximity to the tourist center. They'd mostly enjoyed the villa's blue, blue pool, the grassy hedges and banks of red flowers, or walked north in search of wine and olive-oil tastings in country farmhouse shops. "Just another typical day in Chicago," Li had boasted as their cab pulled away from the bus station; he had plunked May's bags down by the pool, showing off the pink tan line under his collar.

"Maybe you woke up," he adds, "or half did, and saw yourself in the mirror." They both glance over at the tarnished glass above the dresser, its dark frame carved with sinuous lilies. Their reflections look back, expectant. "That would've scared the crap out of me."

May struggles with the zipper on her pack and nods; as a kid, she was known to sleepwalk. "Yeah. It's been a while, but that makes sense." She feels stupid, the way he's looking at her, pitying her, because if it *was* a dream, she can't seem to wake up from it.

On the other hand, May thinks, stealing a look at her childhood best friend, she doesn't feel invisible anymore, the way she did watching her mother deflate at the airport checkpoint when she thought May was out of range . . . or at the gate, locked in a half lotus on the hard airport chair, flip-flops askew on the carpet,

iPod cranked to vibrate, trying not to meet anyone's eyes because her own were wet. No matter how loud May had thumbed the volume, she still felt mute and vanished, locked in a struggle not to let her mother's tired face, the obvious relief to be sending May away, be her last memory of her family. That invisible feeling was hard to shake even once she touched down in big, busy Florence. But Gwen's kept them so occupied this week with museum stops and walking tours that May's had little time to feel sorry for herself.

But they haven't seen City Center yet, so today will be even busier.

On her knees, May works the zipper closed and rests her head on the overstuffed pack, yawning. She swivels theatrically, rolling flat on the floor. As the intricate mosaic tiles cool her back, she covers her eyes with a forearm.

"You didn't sleep," Li acknowledges, "did you?"

"Guilty as charged."

He heaves himself off the bed and lifts her backpack, giving her a gentle prod with his foot. As he slings the pack onto his shoulder, May props herself up on an elbow. In the ensuing silence, she's tempted to tell Liam what really happened last night, or what she thinks happened, because unlike her parents or Gwen, Li would at least *entertain* that something weird really

did take place (and May still can't convince herself it didn't). He'd joke it to death, sure, and rob it of every hint of strangeness and mystery; he'd make her feel silly, but he'd also make her feel safe.

But May isn't sure safety's the best thing for her anymore. All her life she's felt safe, more or less sure of herself and her place in the world, and now the people who gave her that are back in Vermont, breaking up, dismantling home, taking that certainty away.

The idea that May's freak twin might be more than a dream is a lot like the fact that her parents are getting divorced and forcing her to choose between them. It fits no known pattern of security.

Li's still waiting, towering over her with her heavy pack on and a hand gripping the handle of her suitcase, so she offers one of her hands like a hook, and he hauls her up.

Gwen's rented a small, airy third-floor apartment in City Center East. By the time they cab over and settle in, opening doors and drawers, calling dibs on rooms, napping awhile, then devouring the biscotti and mandarin soda their landlord left them in a care basket while enjoying the river view from their small terrace, the sunlight has turned everything gold, and the temperature has dipped to bearable. So they head outdoors

and walk north toward the historic heart of the city, some half dozen crowded blocks away.

Crossing to Piazza della Signoria is like parting the Red Sea. There are people everywhere, streaming in the same direction or trying to chisel a path in the opposite one. The narrow, shaded streets echo with the bleating toy horns of Fiats and the wasping drone of mopeds.

As they enter the piazza, May sees dozens, possibly hundreds, of people milling around in bright summer outfits. They chatter and squint up at carvings tucked in niches, pursue restless children pursuing pigeons, back into one another while framing photographs, and line up at carts to buy trinkets and Limonata. High above them all, the sun-gilded tower of Palazzo Vecchio casts its long, welcome shadow over parched plaza stones.

As soon as she spots it, Gwen makes a beeline for Michelangelo's *David*, lingering until Liam and May jar themselves out of whatever sensory stupor they're in and sidle up beside her. She explains at length that it's only a copy; the real statue was moved indoors to the Accademia long ago, and May dutifully takes in David's furrowed brow and blank eyes. But she can't help it; her gaze soon slips down the famous torso to the statue's nether regions. She clears her throat and turns to Li, who's pursing his lips with a considering nod. They shrug at exactly the same moment and start

steering Gwen away, marching her past the surging horses in the Fountain of Neptune in search of gelato.

The fountain's spray cools May's cheek as they pass, and as they wander, she tries not to let the flags swaying high in a still-hot breeze or the writhing bodies and muscled lions and screaming women on tall marble pedestals in the loggia unnerve her. Instead, she focuses on the crop of solitary art students sketching side by side on the stone base of a nearby building: heavy-lidded boys; urbane, fashionable girls; a middle-aged woman in a plaid beret. They seem so content there, alone but together.

May follows a few more blocks north, content to wait out on the street while Gwen and Liam duck into a narrow gelato shop. They find her sitting on unoccupied steps within view of the cathedral and hand hers over — chocolate, always — and after digging in, Gwen points out Giotto's campanile and Brunelleschi's dome, *il Duomo*, in the near distance.

"The last time I was in Florence," she tells them, "a friend brought me to a department store somewhere near here. *Rinascete*, I think. There's a rooftop café there I'll take you to. Seeing all this from on high is amazing, but on the other hand, you know that already. I think we'll be right at home in the apartment, don't you? We lucked out with our views."

May and Liam nod vigorously but go right on excavating with their little shovel-shaped plastic spoons, eyes downcast, devoted. They would develop a pretty successful work pattern in the days to come. They'd take in another mosaic or waxwork or painting of the Virgin and Child; Gwen would buy them ice cream.

"You learn so much about a place through its art," she's rhapsodizing between dainty bites of lavender-fig gelato as they stand in unison and start to walk north again. Looking at May, she asks, "Did you know your mother was studying art history when we met at school?"

Mom likes to paint — every few years she drags out her easel and buys fresh tubes of acrylic — but May had no idea she'd studied art formally. She shrugs and looks away when something flickers in Gwen's eyes. Does she know something May doesn't? Maybe everyone knows — everyone but May — the whole story. Like, for starters, how Dad persuaded Mom to move to the wilds of Vermont in the first place, when she was obviously more suited to living in some busy, cultured city like Florence. She would appreciate it here — all these frescoes and gap-eyed statues — all these people bustling around in nice shoes, way more than May does.

May suddenly feels overwhelmed by it all, not least the exquisite bulk of the domed cathedral they're now

approaching. With its dizzying stripes and bold arches, its geometric intricacy of white-and-pink-and-green marble, the structure Gwen formally identifies as the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore seems to take up several city blocks. They sit down on another set of stone steps to take in the view.

May has never seen anything like it.

The only stillness on these swarming streets, it seems, is the architecture: stone and stucco and salmon tiles, shuttered windows and ancient, crowding towers. Even the sun is moving, May knows, casting longer and longer shadows, marking time. She feels ashamed of her own indifference, of how little she deserves this.

When May doesn't comment, Gwen stands up with a fleeting glance at Liam. "I'm off in search of a cup of coffee. Meet you back here in twenty?"

May nods up at her, heartsick somehow. The strangeness of her surroundings has really taken hold, and with it a sadness she wasn't ready for. Because it's over now: the mindless quiet of a Vermont morning; waking to the smell of Dad's coffee and a fuzz of green in the window, to Mom's old radio playing softly in her home office, barely audible under the mounting chorus of the birds; all that ease and sweetness. "What are we doing here?" she asks aloud.

“Here on these steps?” asks Liam. “In Florence? On Earth? Can you be more specific?”

“Gwen never should have let you take that philosophy class,” May complains, landing a soft knuckle-punch to his hard forearm. She doesn’t want to be lousy company. Not here. But before she can explain herself, the ghost girl from the B&B creeps into her thoughts again.

“You know why we’re here,” Liam replies lazily. “To help Mom with her book.”

May’s gaze lights on a glowing figure in the shade at the edge of the cathedral, which turns out to be a little girl in a gauzy sundress, blowing bubbles with a wand. “Remind me?”

“Historical travel guide for eggheads . . . like the one she did about London? You know, what composer’s buried in what tomb in what cemetery, and where do all the bohemians drink their coffee, where were all the queens beheaded, and so on.”

Gwen teaches medieval literature to grad students and publishes seriously wonky papers in her area of expertise, May knows, but also moonlights under a pen name as a popular travel writer.

“My tuition’s coming due, so she signed on to write two more guidebooks in that series. So you heard it

here: it's all tombs and dungeons from now on. . . . Evidently everyone thought this would really cheer you up." When she doesn't respond, he adds, "Did you think you were here to soak up the Tuscan sun and eat ice cream?"

May tries to play along, but it's more of an effort than usual. "And we're really too old for camp?"

"I've been thus informed."

"Why didn't you stay home and work?" she asks seriously. "You're moving out in the fall anyway."

"Mom's on sabbatical. You know what that means. She sublet the house. Home's on wheels with her, always has been." He meets her eyes intently for the first time all day. "Are you OK?"

She's never thought much about Liam's eyes, which would be like thinking about a zebra's stripes. It's inconvenient, in a way, to notice them now, but they're a shocking blue, it seems.

She glares at him.

"OK. It's dorky and sentimental, but"—circling back now, aware that he's pushed too hard, that May isn't ready to talk about her family or the lack thereof—"I guess I came because this may be the last time I really get to hang with my mom . . . and now you . . . before college. Even if it means I have to spend all summer in cathedrals." They both look up at the vast

structure in front of them, awed a moment. “You’re getting a stipend, at least. I’m doing this for free.”

“Sucker,” she jokes, because that’s what they do when they get together—joke, soothe, smooth it over, whatever it happens to be—but as the silence looms and the seed of something unspoken sprouts imposingly between them, May’s relieved when Gwen turns up again, jittery with excitement.

“I’ve found something.” Gwen waves them off the steps, and her voice is soft, urgent. “Come, come. Quickly.”

Liam groans, heaving himself up and startling a pigeon pecking on the curb nearby.

Gwen’s long gray-white hair swings with her purposeful stride, and they follow past the office of the Misericordia to a narrow alley leading away from Piazza del Duomo toward Via dei Calzaioli. The fleeting daylight barely touches it. “It’s called Via della Morte,” she says, stopping short. “Way of Death.” Gwen runs her finger over a plaque, paraphrasing in that clipped, breathless way that pays homage to their joint minuscule attention span. “Around 1343, Ginevra, a daughter of the noble house of Amieri, fell in love with a young man from an unsuitable family in an opposing order. Her father forbade their marriage and made her marry one Francesco Agolanti instead, who

was of equal birth. During a rash of plague, she sickened and seemed dead, so her husband buried her in the family vault in the cemetery between the cathedral and campanile. In the middle of the night, Ginevra came to in a panic, terrified. She managed to unwind her bandages, raise the stone slab, flee from the vault, and return to her husband's home along this alleyway."

Gwen regards them with wide eyes, turning to the plaque again. "When Ginevra knocked, Agolanti was understandably shocked and took her for a tormenting spirit, barring the way, so she hurried to her father's house in the Mercato Vecchio, where she was also rejected. Finally she tried the home of her true love, young Rondinelli, and was received by his parents. Her marriage to Agolanti was annulled, and she was able to marry Rondinelli at last."

This is the kind of morbid-romantic anecdote that excites Gwen beyond all reason. She already has her camera out and is trying to get an atmospheric shot of the alleyway before the light goes.

Unimpressed, May and Liam linger with their backs to stone.

"Yay for plague," Liam offers. "I love a happy ending."

"True," Gwen agrees absently, framing another

shot. “It’s a bit like *Romeo and Juliet* — only with a better outcome.”

Intervention is the trick with her, so after conferring behind her back, May and Liam wait for Gwen to let the camera rest on its strap around her neck; then they link arms with her, steering her gently out of the alley and into the waning sunlight of the piazza.

“You guys really cramp my style sometimes,” she complains, laughing. “Listen. You haven’t exactly worked hard yet, but why don’t you take tomorrow off? We’ll give each other a break. But only if you track down those photo permissions I asked for. This week. And, May, I’ll need at least an outline for one of the three papers you’re writing this summer. Also this week. Time management, dearest.”

May nods.

“What’ll you be up to?” Liam asks as they walk. It’s sweet, in a way, how he’s so protective of his mom. May supposes he’s always been that way, at least since his dad left. It’s just more noticeable here.

“I have an appointment at U-Florence. An old friend was on a team that recently exhumed a skeleton from a mass grave in Venice. They’re claiming it’s the first evidence of the vampires mentioned in contemporary documents.”

“This is related to our friend Ginerva,” Gwen continues, “in a way. The focus of the dig was mass graves of plague victims on Lazzaretto Nuovo Island. Around the time this woman died, in the Middle Ages, people believed plague was spread by what they called vampires. Not the bloodsucking kind. These spread disease by chewing their way out of their shrouds after they died, so grave diggers muzzled suspects with a brick of sorts. The skeleton my friend found had a stone slab in its mouth.”

“How’d they get that idea?”

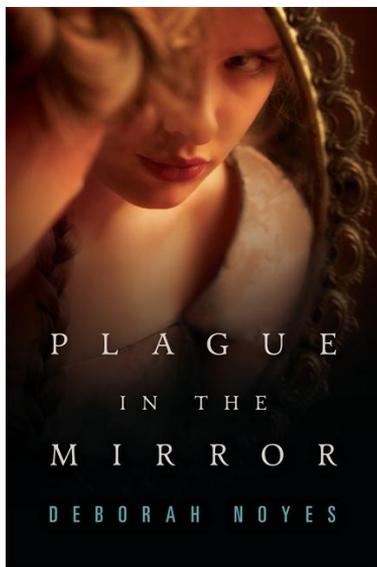
“I guess blood sometimes leaked from a corpse’s mouth, causing the shroud to sink in and tear. U-Florence says this is the first forensic example of these so-called vampires. It’s being contested, of course. Another archaeologist claims to have made a similar find in Poland.”

“Battle of the archaeologists,” quips Liam, rolling his eyes, and May smiles back mechanically.

Glancing vaguely down another twisting alleyway of stone and shadows, she thinks how strange it is that such a sunny country, with more tourists and flavors of ice cream than seem possible in one universe, has such an old, dark heart.

Plague in the Mirror

Deborah Noyes



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