

## BLANKBIRD

Yesterday I went to the secret hole in the woods to read the cards. It was my first time going alone, and the deck felt stiff and out of plumb in my chapped hands. It was cold out. I dropped the cards into my coat pocket and stuffed my hands in, too, pressing my fingertips into their sharp edges and water wrinkles.

I'd found most of the deck myself—the three of spades on a sidewalk in Providence; the ten of clubs in Auntie Sandra's junk drawer; the red joker under the curvy couch at the library; and so on. But then there were the two that I hadn't found—the Jack of Diamonds; the King of Hearts. I was fond of them. I also thought of them as strangers.

The Jack was an enigma with no origin story.

At least I knew where the King had come from—the Smoky Mountains, found wedged between the rafters of a lean-to shelter. I'd skipped that vacation, and the requisite souvenir gift brought back to me was that card. The gesture made me glow. I was no longer alone with my idea to collect a full deck of wayward cards over the course of a lifetime.

The other piece came later—to then use those cards to read the unknown—and that was not my idea at all. But I liked it. That is, I liked it until I tried it. The feeling smudged as soon as I got to the interpretation phase. Nevertheless, I've kept on with it. But not *once* have I gasped upon flipping a card. I suppose it takes time and practice, but hmph.

What I *do* have fun with is the rigmarole that takes place whilst preparing for a read (also not my idea). It's a little different every time, and although I never fully understand what I'm doing, all I have to do is what feels *right*. Oftentimes this is the best part.

Last month, for instance, I was told that preparation would begin with a two-digit number. I was busy, but I sighed and fired up my random number generator. I was going to bow out

after that, but as soon as I saw that the number was 29, I knew just what to do with it. I went to my bookshelf and counted until I reached the 29th book: *The Secret Garden*. I flipped to the 29th page and sensed the next right move was to get my calendar. It was February, and, lo and behold: a leap year! I found a knife and pressed the tip of the blade into the calendar, then dragged the tip along the perimeter of the 29th square. And then—something happened. The square popped out. I passed it off and went blank.

But I'd done my part.

And the blank space was soon filled with familiar handwriting—a passage from the 29th page of the *Secret Garden*. The rest carried on from there.

Yesterday, though, after hemming on the fence, I began the preparation alone. I bundled up two objects to bring along with me, stuffed the bundle into my knapsack, and left for the woods. I crossed the stream and climbed the hill, paused at Shoe Tying Rock, and shuffled east along the southern perimeter of the field.

When I reached the pine grove, I saw a bird perched on a stalk of hay. The bird was a color that made me feel like we were looking at each other. I inched closer. The bird was still until my next step, when it launched off. I lost interest. I thought about my loss of interest. I looked back. Looked around. And soon I found that color, flitting from branch to branch, and now with another. Two birds!

Eventually they flew away, and I carried on toward the old stone foundation on the northeast corner of the field. I stood on the edge, a desire to jump building, when—from nowhere—I heard a voice. I leapt into the foundation and the leaves crunched like thunder beneath my boots. Slowly, carefully, I eased myself onto the rocks, crouched, and waited, listening intently for more.

I didn't move.

I thought: this is what a creature does when it frights instead of flights. I took a breath and peeked over the foundation wall. No one.

But then I heard it again.

Two voices now, and they were getting louder. There was no way that I would go unseen. I opted not to call out, but let them see me first. And first, I saw a young lad, age sixteen or so. He was clean-cut with a pleasing fresh face, and perhaps a pierced ear. Our eyes met, and if I had spooked him at all, he didn't let on. He looked calmly back at me. I said "Hi" with as much cheer as I could muster into a single syllable. Then I saw a woman, who I imagined to be his mother. When she saw me, her whole body seized with a spook-jump. She let out a *woop!* Then laughed a nice laugh. I knew this wouldn't be enough. I would have to explain myself. But she began to tell me how she had seen the foundation's information placard from back on the path, and that's why she came over here to check it out.

I stood up but moved no closer.

"Oh, have you been here before?" I said, rusty at small talk.

The mother told me *he* has but it was her first time. She seemed pleased to chat.

"I live right through the woods," I said. "I come back here all the time for walks. And today, I thought, hey! Why not go down inside that old foundation? Check it out!"

We chatted a bit more, then they continued on their walk. I waited for them to be out of earshot then darted deeper into the foundation, picking my way through snaggy saplings and prickles. When I finally tucked into the northwest corner, I crouched low and reached for a stone in the old wall. I jiggled it loose, and in the cavity behind it, I saw a glass jar with a screw lid. Inside was a handkerchief and a note.

*If you find this, please leave it here. I'll be back for it soon. Thanks!*

The handwriting was mine, of course, but a month had passed since February—since I'd placed the jar there during the last phase of preparation. I took the handkerchief and opened it, curious to examine which treasures had been hidden there last. A scarf tassel. A square of paper cut from a calendar... Oh yes!

I remember this. There's a quote on it. A quote from some book...

I squinted down at the 29th square and read the words that had been written there weeks ago.

*After skipping along her own special walk for a while, she stopped with a little laugh of pleasure, for there, lo and behold, was the robin, swaying on a long branch of ivy. He had followed her, and now he greeted her with a chirp. "You showed me where the key was yesterday," she said. "You ought to show me the door today..."*

I traded the two treasures in the handkerchief with the two I'd brought along—a broken paperclip for the calendar square; a river charm for the scarf tassel. I tucked the jar back into the cavity and escaped the foundation unseen. I took a back trail out of the field to avoid another encounter with the mother son duo, for the sake of preserving the niceness with which we had left off. Then it was time. I was at the hole in the woods.

I knelt in the dirt, dropped the treasures, and shuffled.