

Finality

*This is fine*, she whispers.

The old house rests on top of the hill; the swallows swoop low over the roof to nest in the exposed rafters of the attic; the bricks of the foundation slowly dissolve into the earth, giving way to the hard, burrowing roots of the oak tree that overhangs half the house. It is lucky there is no rain today to drip down through the house, and the clouds that had reared their ugly heads in the morning had been burnt away by a wrathful sun. Instead, the empty windows stare out onto the special oblivion that can only be found in the barren trees of winter.

Upstairs, the old man sleeps, while his daughter sweeps the floor of his room. He does not see, or hear, but she can pretend. Swish, swish, swish, and 1000 twigs rattle their way across a floor worn down by 1000 footsteps. She can remember the way sunlight had once poured through now grimy windows, pooling on floor, soaking her skin. She can remember how the stuffy house had been filled with uncountable aromas, wafting up through the walls from the kitchen: aromas of fresh baked bread, of crackling bacon, of her mother's perfume. She can remember the way the voice of the old man had once filled the rooms she swept, a mix of music, honey, and thunder. The old man draws in a low, rattling breath.

*This is fine*, she whispers.

The girl doesn't look at him. There is no point. As long as he sleeps, it is enough to hear his breaths to know that he is with her.

Outside, the sun is setting, turning the dirty walls of the house pink, bleeding slowly into red, which, in turn, is destined to fade away to blackness. This is the cue for the swallows to pause their singing. A low wind blows out of the west, causing the branches of the empty trees to

rattle—prisoners dragging a cup across the bars of their cell, waiting for release. There are no crickets to sing the world to sleep in midwinter. Most of the birds have abandoned the north for warmer shores. The only sound in the moldering house is the swish of the broom, and a soft, wet gasp from the old man. Then silence.

*This is fine*, she whispers.

The girl pauses her sweeping, and listens. The house which once was full of honey, thunder, and music stands silent. Overhead, pregnant clouds which can be warded off in daylight return, and underground those slow and silent things filling the earth burrow deep for the coming storm. As the last puddles of sunlight harden into shards of darkness, the girl looks over at the thing that was once her father. There is no movement, and she cannot see in the growing darkness whether he is grimacing or smiling. It is not, however, a thing she needs to know.

Instead, the girl walks over to the dresser which crouches in the corner to gather in her worn woolen gloves and coat. She makes her way cautiously down the stairs, subconsciously skipping the step she knows will creak, as if still afraid of disturbing her father. At long last, she stands outside the kitchen door, looking forward towards the veiled darkness of the forest. She has no need for a candle; she knows where she is going; she knows she can finally leave the swallows and the oak tree to follow those lucky birds who know the way to warmer shores.

As she walks away, she whispers, *this is fine*.