

The Uncertainty of Knowing

Mom dies in a car accident, and we bury her. Right after, Dad sells the old house.

We move into a new development. Cold-Water Lake has two finished houses. Dad chooses the ranch, and soon after, a widow buys the two-story across the road.

Cold-Water Lake is like a prison. The development mushrooms up out of an old quarry with a gravel pit lake at its center. Barbed wire surrounds the entire area, and I'm hemmed in with no way to escape. I'm only eleven, but I know what I know.

Daily, construction noise from hammers and power tools breaks the silence. Men shout to one another, their voices echoing across the twelve-acre lake, bouncing off the rocky cliffs.

Dad shrugs off the commotion. "You're in school, Clayton, and I'm at work, so what do we care? Besides, the noise keeps the ghosts away." He gazes into shadowy corners to see if Mom has followed us here.

Even if she has, Dad's stuff takes precedence. Hooking up the big TV. His tools organized in the built-in cabinet drawers. His prize Winchester .30-30 in its case by the front door.

He watches me take care of the kitchen. I unpack Mom's dishes and her favorite tea pot. The omelet pan and the grill for French toast on weekends. The boxes half-unpacked, I blink to cool my burning eyes.

Again, Dad accuses me. “You called her, and she drove off the road looking for her cell phone.”

I hate it when he points the finger at me. “The cops said it might’ve been a deer.” Tire tracks show she swerved, but more than that the police aren’t sure. A deer seems reasonable.

But my dad has never been a reasonable man. “Not a deer, Clayton. You called. You killed her.”

Dad wants her back. His hateful glares and sighs say so. He detests me, always has, but more than ever since her death. Every time he scowls, he’s thinking, “You’re not my kid.”

He wishes me old enough to drive, puts me in that car, kills me. Even before the accident, he demanded that Mom ignore me, “Otherwise you’ll turn him into a mommy’s boy,” he said. And whenever Mom gave me treats or hugs or attention, he’d ask, “What about me?”

Dad wants Mom alive again, and will do anything for that to happen, especially get rid of me.

I know that much.



Mom painted our old house bright colors that didn’t match. Dad laughed and said, “I love that you’re color-blind.” She refinished the kitchen cabinets in red and purple. Dad

blinked when the family room walls went turquoise and then hugged her, threading his fingers through her paint-spattered hair.

Now she's gone forever, and the new house is gray and white, inside and out, as if frost coats the walls. The furnace blows cold air. No hot showers here, and the water in the kitchen turns my hands blue when I wash up.

I never felt cold in the old house, the one that smelled like cinnamon and oatmeal.

This one smells like kerosene.

Dad gives me the north bedroom over the garage where wind rattles the windows. At night, I shiver under a pile of quilts. Gathering my courage, I confront him. "I'm gonna repaint my room. Red, I think. Like in our old house."

Even though I didn't mention Mom, Dad says, "Don't talk about her. Be glad you *have* a room."

Dad tolerated me while Mom was alive, but now doesn't pretend. And it's true, I called her. I can't remember why.



Dad doesn't cook but the across-the-road neighbor does.

"Her name's Circe Thrinakia. Greek," says Dad, "She's a witch, and her little girl is plain crazy. But she sure can cook."

Circe, dark and short and plump, stops by at least a couple of times a week, her daughter Pia trailing after her. Circe's almost pretty and nothing like a witch, but just in

case, I'm careful what I say to her. She brings us covered casseroles and platters wrapped in foil. We feast on roast lamb stuffed with garlic and pastitsio thick with cheese. She gives us jars of stuffed dolmas and pans of spanakopita and baklava.

I say only, "Thank you," and she grins while Pia half-hides behind her black skirts. The witchiest thing about Circe is she wears only black.

Dad tousles Pia's head as if he likes her, and talks with Circe, a big smile on his face.

When they leave, he says, "What a whore. She's after me for sure."

I say, "But Mom—"

He whirls on me with a roar and knocks me over with a slap. "Never ever mention her again. That's the rule."

I press my cold hand against my cheek. It burns like dry ice. I don't want Mom resting in peace. She should haunt Dad in a bad way—the way I know he deserves.



Pia follows me everywhere.

In the school where I'm the new kid, one of the boys asks, "That your sister?"

"Neighbor."

"*That's* Pia Thrinakia? Better watch it," the kid says. "Her mother's a witch."

But I'm not sure. Circe is nice to me. She always asks how I'm doing and gives me hugs when I return her dishes. Dad gobbles down her food without a thank you. I clean her platters as best I can in icy water.

“You’re a good boy for trying,” she says, even though I don’t tell who washed her plates.

She stacks them in her sink where steam rises from the faucet. “Tell that father to be nicer, or I’ll turn him into a pig.”

“Can you do that?” My fingers twitch with the notion that she really can. Dad as a pig is something I’d like to see.

She smiles and crosses her arms. “Of course. Didn’t you learn about me at your school?”

I go to the library and google Circe. Yes, she’s a witch. Immortal daughter of Titans. Sons by Ulysses. Three thousand years ago.

But no one lives for three thousand years. My Circe must be named for the first Circe. But is she a witch? And can she turn dad into a pig? Her cooking is like magic—even Mom’s food didn’t taste that good.

The facts from books make me think. Even if she can turn Dad into a pig, she can’t bring Mom back from the dead. I know that, and I’m only eleven.



The lake is large and looks inviting, but has no-swim warnings posted everywhere. Chemically treated turquoise water sparkles, especially at dawn and twilight when sunlight glints off the lapping waves.

“They made the lake from a gravel pit pond,” Dad says. “It goes from shallow to deep. No warning. Not even a rocky shelf. Whirlpools will drag you down.” He looks at me, his expression hopeful. I’ll never swim in that lake.

Most mornings, I leave the house and its frozen loneliness, and go to the gravel beach. Rough and grey, it circles the lake in a wide band, hard to walk on.

I skip stones. I study how other new houses are going up and wonder if boys my age will move in and be my new friends.

Pia watches from her front window, then runs to catch up. She wears a bathing suit despite the March chill.

She kicks off her sandals and wades in. I yank her out of the water. “The sign says no swimming. Dad says it’s dangerous.”

“*Mitera* says I can swim if I want.” She steps back in. “Stupid rules.”

“Rules keep you safe.” It’s what Mom used to say. She was right. I broke the *don’t call Mom while she’s driving* rule and look what happened. I try and explain to Pia, but she doesn’t listen.

“*Mitera* says we’ll keep chickens. And maybe we’ll have a pig.”

The development has all sorts of rules. No swimming, yes, but also no fences or weird paint colors or shrubs more than eight feet high. No aggressive dogs. No farm animals. No clucking chickens. No nasty pigs.

But I don’t argue with Pia. I want to find out about her brothers. The books say Circe has sons, and no mention of a daughter. “Where are your brothers?” I ask.

“Who?” Pia is in waist-deep, and she dunks her head. Steam rises off her little body. “Never heard of them.” She isn’t shivering as she comes toward me, and stands, two pink feet still in water.

This Circe can't be *that* Circe, and I shake my head for asking a dumb question.

Pia misunderstands. She stomps her foot, splashing me, and says, "We *will* have chickens and a pig. Your father is a pig. *Mitera* says. She'll turn him, and he'll be our pig. We'll feast on him. Wait and see."

She scrambles up the berm.

I watch her go. I'm shivering but she's warm like her house. My house is colder than a morgue. So what if she misread my head shake? Pia's what? Six years old? Seven? Stupid girl.

If Circe *can* turn my dad into a pig, why didn't she do it before now? But I'll never eat my dad. I know that much.



On the last day of March, the sun disappears behind dark clouds just as I get home from school. Circe sits at my kitchen table, talking to Dad, their voices soft, their heads close together. They don't look up when I come in.

Steam wafts from the counter where Circe's covered casserole sits, redolent of roast meat and mint. I grin, glad we'll eat something that's not lukewarm pizza for supper.

"A sacrifice," my dad is saying. "Him for her. Even exchange."

He means me, and maybe she can make it happen. I hold my breath.

Circe shakes her head. "To bring the wife back... no. You must not exchange young life for the dead."

I breathe again.

Dad slams his fist on the table. "I'll pay whatever price is asked," he says, and she answers, "You have no conception... none."

They still haven't noticed me. "Hey," I say, and get a glass of water from the sink.

Dad jerks. "Clayton. Go to your room. Do your homework."

Circe holds up her hand with a smile. "Pia is by the lake. Will you check?" She turns to Dad. "Is all right?"

He snaps, "Hop to."

I drop my backpack and head outside. A warm, south wind blows dust devils from the open construction sites. Clouds hang low over the lake. The sky's greenish cast threatens tornado weather.

From the front stoop, I see the back of Pia's head bobbing in the lake. She's already in deeper than she can handle. She's little and can't be a strong enough swimmer for what's building in the water.

My heart pounds as I take off at a run.

"Pia, come back." I shout, hoping she hears me, even while the wind takes my words and scatters them. Running faster, I see when she goes under.

I scream for help, toe off my shoes, trip over them, stumbling, crawling on gravel, scraping my knees. I pull off my shirt and jump into the biting cold.

Dad and Circe come running. He's got the rifle like he's going hunting. She's shrieking Pia's name.

Lightning strikes the lake with a sizzle and the crack of thunder. I thrash beyond the shallow end and dive into the deep. My body aches with cold and fear. I'm cursing Pia's stubbornness.

Now is Dad's chance to be rid of me. I can drown or he can shoot me.

I stroke down into the chemical-clear water that burns my eyes and nose, and I hold my breath for a long time until it's gone on too long. Where's Pia?

I can't find her. I'm numb and breathless, my arms heavier than iron bars and when I can't stay under another second, one little hand fumbles behind me.

She's in trouble or will be if she doesn't get air. I reach back and grab an arm or maybe a leg. Her head flops against my chest, and I hug her close, arms around her waist. Pushing with frog legs, I break the surface.

Dad's standing at the water's edge, rifle pointed straight at us.

I lift Pia up above the water line.

Dad shouts, "Oh Jesus," and "Look out." Then fires three times, pop-pop-boom, like the machine guns on Xbox.

Circe screeches some gibberish that must be Greek, and Dad stops shooting, and yells, "Didn't you see it?"

I stumble closer to the water's edge. Pia's unconscious in my arms. Her head rolls against my shoulder. Circe's there, her arms outstretched to grab Pia's limp little body.

"Pia, Pia. My baby." She pounds on Pia's back and wipes her face with the edge of her black skirt.

I kneel at the waterline, stuck between icy water and sharp gravel. My chest heaves to get enough air.

Dad raises the rifle again, points it at me, and he's chanting, "Your life for hers."

The water already froze all the fear out of me. I'm only eleven and want to live, but know I'm about to die.

Instead, Circe holds Pia in one arm and raises the other. She stands tall, her dark hair blowing in the gale, and again speaks words I don't understand.

The wind dies away, the sun burns a hole in the green clouds, and Circe says, "You saved my Pia and now the idiot father can't harm you."

I turn my head to look for Dad, but he's disappeared with his rifle. I crawl to where Circe is setting Pia on the gravel.

"Sit, Clayton. Head down. Now."

She lays Pia against me, and lets out a ululation, long and shrill. Back and forth she goes, pounding me, then Pia. We both spit water.

A huge pig comes rushing toward us, snuffling in the gravel. It squeals at me and growls the way a dog might. It's brown with a white snout and white circles around its eyes like a bank robber's mask. It charges and I'm sure it will eat me.

Circe throws up her hands. "Where are you going? Even stupid as a pig." She calls, "Hi-ya," and strikes the pig with a thick stick until it changes direction, away from me, and pants as it waddles toward her house.

Only witchery turned my father into a pig, and only magic turned the rifle into a stick. Circe has to be *that* Circe from three thousand years ago, and the knowing is too much. I can't stop shivering. I struggle up and take Pia's hand as we walk home.



Circe tells us what to say if the police ask us any questions. It's a bare bones story, simple, truthful—unless the police believe in magic.

She stares straight into the detective's eyes. "He jumped in to help Clayton save my girl when a monstrous whirlpool sucked him under, into the gravel pit." One plump hand on his arm, tears run down her cheeks.

She's amazing, and I struggle not to smile.

The detective assures us that such an occurrence is possible in gravel pit lakes like Cold-Water, where it's much too deep to search for Dad's remains. So sorry for your loss.

Pia and I sit on her living room floor in front of a roaring fire.

"A terrible accident, you understand," says Circe while feeding me *fasolada*—hot bean soup—to build my strength.

I'm warm for the first time since Mom died, but I have to ask, "Where'd the pig come from?"

Pia rolls her eyes. Circe narrows her gaze and shrugs. "We always planned on having a pig."

Circe calls my dad's mother. I don't want to live with her, but if she offers, what choice do I have? Lucky for me, she says she's too old to take me in. But if I don't live with her, where will I go?

"Never mind," Circe says. "I will take care of all the stupid legalities, and you will stay with Pia and me. *We* want you."

A for-sale sign goes up on the lawn in front of Dad's house. Circe has a pen built to keep the smelly pig, and no one complains about farm animals.

"That's your dad." Pia delights in telling me.

It scowls at me, its little piggy eyes so full of disgust, I drop my gaze.

For Easter—the first Sunday in April—Circe cooks a feast of Greek dishes. The windows rattle as freezing rain deluges the brown lawn, but inside, we stay toasty.

“When are we butchering that nasty pig?” Pia asks, her eyes alight with laughter.

Circe sips a wine she calls *Athiri*, fragrant with the scent of nectarines, watching Pia over the rim of her glass. “Have some respect,” she says, her tone a warning. She takes grilled pita bread from a platter and slathers it with hummus and tsaziki. “Here, Clayton.” She hands it to me. “Try. For now, better than roasted swine.”

“I’m not sure I like pork.” I imagine Dad, naked in Circe’s big oven, lying on a roasting rack, skin pricked and stuffed with garlic, basted with browned butter, eyes glowering daggers at me, and I want to heave.

Circe’s gaze softens. “It’s just *a* pig. You understand? But *this* pig, maybe we butcher and sell. Or time will sweeten his meat.” She shrugs. “Time is about forgetting, and I have a honey sauce to take the bitter hate out of that one.”

I nod, wiping sweat off my upper lip. The furnace rumbles on. The flames in the fireplace crackle. Hot and reassured, I say, “Thanks, *Mitera*.”

We live together, a family of three and a pig that I still believe is my magic-transformed father.

“I’m fed up with the noise and the dust,” Circe says in September. “I hate the cold and miss the ocean.”

That makes two houses for sale, and when the weather turns in October, both sell. We move west to a cottage on the Pacific Ocean. The pig comes with us.

Circe eyes the pig and feeds me pork and ham. She teaches me to speak Greek and my parents’ faces fade until I barely remember them. I have a birthday.

I look at the pig and see a pig.

On winter nights, I stand on the deck with my little sister, watching the ocean waves roll, our eyes gleaming in the moonlight and the pigpen stinking when the wind blows just right.

“Do you think his body floated to the surface?” I gaze at the water and wonder, “What if he’s still at the bottom of Cold-Water Lake?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Pia says. “*Mitera* says we’re eating that pig for Christmas.”

I swallow hard. Will I have to eat that pig if it’s really my father? But it can’t be.

I’m twelve now, and not so sure if I know.

END