

MOTHER OF BEGINNINGS:

There was a young woman whose name was Girl. At least, that is what everyone called her.

When men shouted, when midwives swatted, when stadium announcers jeered or pleaded or exalted in victory, Girl was the name they used. And so Girl accepted it, since there had been no other.

The boy across the hall was watching her again. Had been watching her since the guards threw him in days ago, small and shaking and crying for his mother. He'd stopped crying by the second night, and stopped speaking altogether by the third. Now he just watched. Knees tucked against his chest. Eyes black, quick, and desperate—like a rodent's.

Girl just tuned him out. Turning the sinew and bone and muscles beneath thin skin, beneath her touch, imagining what it was like when it died. Rat poison was cheap, and rats were even cheaper, especially inside of a prison, which is where she now sat. Sat with legs crossed beneath her, starting to cramp and ache, but she didn't move. Just kept on carefully prodding at the dead rat within her hands, examining its eyes, its muscle, its fat, and guiding the scalpel slowly deeper.

She was five. She thought. Maybe six, or whichever one was higher. She'd been caught three times now for doing this. Operating. Each time they'd taken her things, thrown her somewhere new, and told her to stop. But she wouldn't stop. Or maybe couldn't.

Yes, couldn't stop. Because when she slipped into something dead, when she forced its heart to pump and its lungs to fill and its legs to move—she got to begin again. Not as Girl, who had no relatives and no friends and no name worth keeping. But as something else. Something with claws and purpose and a fresh, unfamiliar body. It was to wear freedom in the mind.

She removed the heart, feeling like a giant as she held it, before inserting the new mechanical one—carefully setting the mechanism so that the body wouldn't blow like a grape. She carefully stitched the cavity closed, a blood clotting salve applied over top.

A small incision over one of the rat's major arteries let Girl watch as the pump-heart removed what was left of clotted blood and natural fluids. Corpse still rather fresh, what rigor mortise there was retreating as the oxygen and nutrients from the synthetic blood did their grizzly work of deceit. Of lying. Of whispering to the body, telling it: "You could live again..."

A guard's boots clicked on the corridor beyond the bars—making Girl pretended to be sleeping, tucking the rat and her things against the wall as he stomped past, grumbling and calling her "Girl" and the boy "Boy." Then he was gone, and she was back to work.

The boy looked less scared now. More curious as he watched her. Soundless—all but for the eyes. Eyes alive, eyes dead, always speaking either way in primal tongues.

She knew what he wanted. The same thing everyone in here and out wanted. The same thing the dead rat wanted, even now.

She could feel it, the faint tug of its soul or spirit or whatever scraps remained, pulling against her, trying to reclaim what she'd stolen. Trying to *begin again*.

If Girl had learned one thing in her short lifetime it was that everything wanted to begin again.

She took a breath in her own body, then let go.

She slipped out of Girl and into the rat like liquid filling a dead thing, watering dry bones—drowning and smothering and killing whatever lay like a ghost of what once lived.

The world shrank. Smells sharpening—mold, rust, the salt of human sweat—until they were louder than sight. She felt the mechanical heart clicking in her chest, where the real one used to be, felt the synthetic blood pushing through arteries that didn't want it, felt the ghost of the rat shoving against her like a child trying to reclaim a stolen toy. But she was stronger. She was always stronger. And for one bright, horrible moment, she wasn't Girl anymore. She was something new.

She'd gotten sick once from doing this, but it was worth the pain. Her body hiccuping and kicking and spasming along with the rat's on the floor until finally she had it under control, opening her eyes to see through the rat's. She felt the incisions she'd made giving way and knew she had little time before this body expired and died a second final time.

She forced the body to walk on shaky legs, getting steadier with every second she was in control. Through the bars, squeezing between them. Muscles drinking fuel. Starting to fail and burn.

The rat's ghost fought her. They always fought—not with violence but with a longing, a desperate wanting to return, to have one more chance at the living. Girl understood this. She always understood. That's why she kept doing it, kept getting caught, kept starting over in new

cells in new prisons, in new bodies. Every time she operated, she got to feel what the dead felt: that hunger for another beginning, to not just hunger but to feast. For she was like the dead. Perhaps they all where.

She gritted her teeth in the real body and continued scurrying along, joining the congregation of other rats, going in between walls and cells until she found the guard. Made him scream as she scurried up his leg, nibbling at him to make him jerk and run and hit at her. And before he could do anything Girl was already scampering away, paws pattering almost soundlessly along the stone.

Another sound accompanied her. Metal flipping and clicking as she went—dragged by a rusty ring holding all the cell keys together in one jumble that bounced and galloped along behind the rat body.

She sensed a boot coming down with all the acuity of a rat's brain. Dove into the shadows between broken plaster and missing bricks, scampering as fast as she could and then out into the cell blocks.

Part of her wanted to find a body large enough that she could dig in, could devour from the inside...

That was the rat talking. Its ghost, wanting so badly to live again that it would kill to do it. She had to tune it out. Had to keep going.

Then she was back at her cell just as one of the rat's legs gave out, then the other, and she was clawing the last few feet towards her cell.

In her real body, she felt the rat dying again, felt its true life wrestling with her to take back its body. One more chance. One more beginning. But she couldn't let it. Not yet.

She saw the boy sitting close to his bars. Watching her. Watching the rat. Understanding somehow, what she was offering, could offer.

She'd given no one else a new beginning before. Had always kept them for herself—hoarded them, stolen them from dead things, felt guilty and alive and desperate all at once. But this boy. He reminded her of the rats. Small and trapped and waiting to die of unnatural causes so common they might as well be natural.

She ran towards him, the rat's corpse jerking and spasming through its last death even as it reached him. Keys still in its mouth.

Then it died again. And this time she let the ghost have what remained—let it slip back into the cooling meat and begin whatever came after...

She opened her eyes staring at the boy, shivering, huddled at the edge of her cell. Watching him. Waiting to see what he would do with the keys so close.

The boy stared back. A small, quiet kind of connection. Two children in prison, both nameless, both waiting and hearing the guards yelling in the distance.

Then he reached for the keys.

She wondered what his name was. Knew that—for the first time—Girl was not a good enough name. Not a good enough identity. Perhaps they should have called her Rat. Or perhaps

something else entirely—something she hadn't yet earned. Something that came after you helped someone else begin again instead of just yourself.

The boy unlocked his cell. The guards shouted at the end of the hallway, running, yelling. But too late.

And he ran.

Girl smiled. Tucking her knees against her chest as she closed her eyes.

Now she would get caught. They would move her somewhere new. Take her things. Tell her to stop.

But no matter how hard...she would begin again.