

A low-angle shot of a rabbit's face looking down from a tree branch against a backdrop of bare trees.

the  
Lonely

A I N S L I E H O G A R T H

# The End

Just to warn you, I die at the end of all of this. So don't get too attached to me or anything. I bleed to death, and it's gruesome. So if you're squeamish or don't like to see bad stuff happen to kids, then you should probably just stop now. Because what happens is that I bleed slowly all day long. I get pale and desperate and cry and throw up. And I'm just a kid so I don't deserve any of it. I'm "too young to die." Even though I'm just as susceptible to being crushed by a giant rock as anyone.

Some people, though, they can't handle that kind of thing. Because kids are pure and innocent, full of rarest unicorn blood, and their guts are like pearls or diamonds or some other naturally occurring treasure sliced from Mother Nature.

The bleeding is kind of fun though. As it drains from your brain and out through the place where your legs used to be, you start to feel like you're floating on a million silvery needles, prickling. Like nothing matters anymore because it doesn't because you're stuck under a rock and you're going to die. Which is more of a relief than you're comfortable admitting. So you don't admit it. Instead you carry on to no one about how much you want to live, despite your crushed legs.

Of course you have your low/honest points. Points where you try to hide yourself with leaves, dig yourself deeper into the forest floor with the rotation of your shoulders, smear blood all over your face so you look worse off than you really are, try to convince the cigarette-smoking squirrels to do you in entirely before anyone has the chance to come and find you. But eventually you relax because you know you've got to. Know you've got to let the rock do its work, whatever that work may be. It'll kill you soon enough. Or not. Just a matter of time, says one of the squirrels as it strokes a rope of matted hair off your face, leaving a clean line on your forehead where it's dragged a tiny fingernail.

But maybe none of that really happened. Because you know that there's something not quite right with the way you see things anyway. Even before you started losing all the blood.

Before I moved into the June Room, me and The Mother and The Father and Julia lived in The House together for a very long time and if there's one family on the planet that's truly not worth knowing about, it's us. We're a Real, Live, Genuine Waste of Time. In fact, you could put that in lights above our front door. Soda pop and cotton candy and every face you've never noticed.

So let's see, if you don't like wasting your time and you don't like bad things happening to innocent, unicorn-blooded kids then you should really stop now, I mean it.

Though there is one thing. One juicy piece of family lore worth knowing about. My mom's niece is the kid who threw her fetus in a garbage pail at her high school prom. Her name is Denise and she has no memory of doing it. She doesn't even remember the prom. But some very hungry thing inside her obviously hasn't forgotten. She weighs 700 pounds and counting. She eats and eats and eats, all the time. Last year she officially ate herself immobile and now she's working on eating herself out of her own skin.

So we've got Denise in our family, and I guess she's worth knowing about. That's slightly before my time though. Denise had already embarked on the slowest suicide attempt in history before I was even born. And maybe that was the last interesting thing that would ever happen on The Mother's side of the family. That means The Father's side might be due for something soon.

# The Beginning of the Story

I woke up this morning in dawn's fuzzy in-between. So the June Room was too quiet and paused and gray. Waking up into that still hour felt significant. As though something had fought the sleep drugs Mrs. Bellows insisted I swallow last night, and urged me to get out of bed, get dressed, and escape from her apartment building. So I did.

The lobby cat watched me tiptoe through one open eye, his fat face resting squished between scooped paws. He watched but didn't move, didn't do anything to blow my cover. His compliance in my escape made me feel even more sure that something wanted me to leave this place today. He was usually such a dickhead.

I walked toward The House, where The Mother and Father still lived but I didn't. Because now I lived in the June Room in Mrs. Bellows' Apartment Building with four other girls who'd done things to make their parents think they were a danger; who were deemed unfit to live at home. Four other girls who were having The Lonely or something like it extracted somehow, through hot dinners and crafting and fresh air and vitamins and the same sleep drugs I got last night.

My old key in the lock; the inside of The House bluish and deep-sleep quiet so my every step was a shotgun blast. I opened cupboards and pawed through junk drawers. I took a box of cookies from the pantry and munched and examined how little had changed since I'd left.

Then I crept upstairs, opened the door to my favorite room, and found The Terrible Thing.

The Terrible Thing that was probably my fault that I didn't want to talk about or think about ever again. I wanted to be gone, away from The Terrible Thing. I wanted to erase this morning completely, hit reverse and watch it unravel, re-do it: instead of waking up at dawn I sleep till ten or later, go downstairs for breakfast with the other girls, or actually maybe I don't do that considering what happened last night in the Craft Room. The reason Mrs. Bellows made me take the pills.

Okay, never mind, unravel that too. I eat breakfast in my room. Alone, quietly dragging my elbows along the table's sharp corners, then sitting with Mrs. Bellows while she talks about loving myself, finding peace in this world. Later I put on my Sunday Dinner clothes, wave goodbye to Mrs. Bellows and she lets me go, hop on the side-of-the-house-bike, and ride it to The Parents' house. I hear the monotonous hum of the early news when I walk through the door. I see The Mother in the kitchen making dinner but she doesn't know I'm here yet. She glances at the clock and mutters, "Where is that girl" and I tuck myself further behind the doorframe. She presses her knuckles into her eye sockets and then walks to the basement door, knocks quietly, and whispers through the crack that dinner's nearly ready. The Father would have to emerge from the basement, which he hates to do. And she would feel like a disgusting nuisance, keeping her chin down, smiling, a rehearsed face, still wondering where I might be.

She liked to watch the news while she cooked. Associate all of the murders and rapes with the sensation of her hands heeling into a wad of premature pizza dough, feeling safe and warm and protected over our electric hearth as she knuckled into the edges of the undeveloped crust against the pan. Red tomato sauce ladled on top, slices of meat arranged neatly.

The Mother does care about me in her own selfish, over the top way. She told me once that God brought me to her. "God brought you to me" she said. "He wrapped you up in peach skin, inside out so the fuzzy stuff was touching you and the slimy stuff was on the outside. He delivered you personally, Easter. That's how special you are." Before, I had been immersed in my doughy little room; soft, wet, warm. Arms in legs up. Then he evicted me to life. Snatched me up and stuck a long, ruddy finger in my mouth, scooping the things out that would keep me from breathing and not bothering to close me up when he left. I wonder if he brought his flat hands down onto my chest, forearms stiff, pounding, pounding, pounding life into me. I wonder if I resisted—limp in his arms, splayed out in the unpredictable pattern of a burst water balloon. I excel at withholding. Resisting. Denying satisfaction. I bet it felt good.

Anyway.

After I saw The Terrible Thing all I wanted was Julia.

So I went into The Woods and started looking.

By anyone else's standards, The Woods wasn't really a woods at all. More like a leftover nail or nut or hinge that was supposed to have fit somewhere but never really did; it was a scrap that might have been snipped off like a bit of extra paper hanging over the perforated line.

Shaved on one side by a long, lazy highway and thinned out along the other into the backyards of neighboring houses, it was always filled with launched baseballs, the odd tire, bits of fast food garbage tossed from roaring cars.

It disturbed the neighbors that no one could really do anything with The Woods: buy it, dig up the trees and put a fence around the bare property. The neighbor told me that it was "a waste of space for anyone who wasn't looking to do nasty things like have sex or hide a body." Then I asked her if any bodies had actually been discovered there and she waved her thin-fingered hand in my face and told me not to be morbid.

I'd developed some of my own theories: buried treasure or a tunnel to Eloi. Perhaps it contained a pocket of earth in which a rare species of daffodil or insect or rodent had made its home. An endangered type of very sensitive squirrel that could only tolerate the excruciatingly bland conditions of the not-too-anything midsection of North America.

I hoped no one ever bought these woods, or turned them into anything other than what they were. Because to me they were precious. One spot, one little moment, a slice in the universe just big enough for a girl my age to slip soundlessly into. A scar, a sliver, a sore, an accident. A blip. An extra bit of world where a person could hide from everything, including parts of their own head. And the trees made everything quiet down there. Like padding or insulation, carved into the shape of woods.

The creek path ran straight through The Woods, seared into it like a brand, presumably from end to end though I'd only really explored a length of the middle. It swelled in nice places and the pulse of the water rubbed a miniature sprawl of cliffs into the earth, good places to sit and look out over the water. Some sections of the creek were bright, quiet, warm places, where sunlight bounced off shallow rocks, furried in places with nearly invisible moss like baby body hair slickened by just-born gooeyness or soapy water. Other parts of the creek were darker, cold, wrapped up by trees all through the leafy months, the rocks as thoroughly chilled as frozen dinner rolls.

As I walked along the creek, I removed a green lighter from my pocket with a holographic hula girl on it jerking from side to side like a malfunctioning robot. Knowing how to smoke without looking like a jerk was a skill I had yet to master. And I had to master it before I saw Lev again, otherwise he might not think I was wonderful anymore. Lev is a boy who's got film over his eyes, milky and swirling; he's a sheer-skinned cave dweller, a subterranean humanoid who told me I was wonderful. He's also a smoker.

I told him that I smoked too. So I had to practice. Otherwise those frosted eyes would locate some other wonderful thing to harass at work instead of me.

I lit one of my stolen cigarettes. Nothing to it.

The smoke seemed to pry into my posture, lengthening my spine, straightening my back, moving my head up the way an elderly aunt might, trapping your chin in a cold finger and thumb, pushing her knobbled fist into your lower back. Elderly aunts find poor posture as offensive and disgusting as I might find a smear of snot in an old man's beard.

I found myself momentarily entranced, either by the smoke or the gushing of the creek, lulling me from myself, from thoughts of The Terrible Thing. I made my way through a few thin branches to a smooth patch of shaded rock along the very edge of the water.

Across the creek, the sun seared branched patterns of light onto the forest floor, forcing its way through in the shape of solid beams all filled with the magic of reflected dust, throwing unprepared patches of land on display. One particular section had a pair of boots on it, which I quickly realized were attached to a body, standing kitty-corner from me across the creek. Julia. Twenty feet away. Staring at me.

The sun had her fully by the feet, the rest of her body brushed over with leopard spots: a distorted, shadowy reflection of the twittering leaves overhead. She wore a black-and-red flannel shirt that she'd buttoned almost all the way to the top and didn't bother tucking into her stiff blue jeans. Julia the older sister is seventeen, and she got The Mother's genes. The long face, the delicate features, the nose squared at the end and small like a dice. Her skin glows, her limbs move edgeless like cooked green beans, and her hair is long and thick and red and beautiful. Her lips are full and pink and whenever we were apart I dreamed about spreading them on toast and eating them.

Her eyes were narrow and angry and I knew why. She'd been stuck in The Woods since The Fire and I was the one who'd done it. Abandoned her, scared and alone. All so that everything could just be normal and uncomplicated for me.

I knew I probably should have come down to see her, at least explain myself a little better, and a few times I almost did. But I just couldn't bear to see the look on her face, to see what being stuck in The Woods had done to her, to risk her following me back out and making me weird all over again.

That is, until I found The Terrible Thing. Once I found The Terrible Thing it was all I could do to stop myself from running into these woods, my woods, praying that she'd let me find her. Hers was the only face I could see right now, the only voice I could bear to hear.

"Hi Julia," I said.

I held the cigarette behind my back. I wanted to spring across the creek and grab her and never let go.

"Easter. Well. What a surprise. Sorry the place is such a mess, didn't get a chance to spruce it up before you came. Get it? Spruce? Because I live in The Woods now. You've banished me to The Woods."

"Oh stop, Julia."

"You stop! You stick me in these woods, you don't tell me how long I'll be here, you leave me alone with the strange sounds and the freezing cold with only the squirrels to keep me company—" She cut herself off, swallowed a mouthful of calm, and continued. "I didn't want to explode on you like that right away. I was really planning on giving you the cold shoulder until you cried. That would have been so much better."

"You must be pretty mad. The cold shoulder is your specialty."

"I am pretty mad, Easter."

I rolled my eyes and rubbed a sneaker against the rock as lightly as I could. I thought I could feel every individual grain of dirt rolling around beneath my sole.

Julia squinted at me.

"What's the matter?" she said.

“Nothing,” I replied.

“Can you just tell me what’s wrong? It’s obviously something.”

And she took a step toward me, crushing a big berry with her foot. It splattered into the creek. I don’t know why I was being so annoying. I wanted very badly to tell her everything; sharing with her used to be the only thing that made me happy. But somehow I was scared to tell her. Like to say The Terrible Thing out loud would be to make it undeniable. So instead I shook my head “no” and sniffed loudly.

“Well it looks like Mrs. Bellows has done wonders for you. You look great, really. Much better than when I was around.”

“Don’t be mean,” I muttered.

“No really.” She made a little box with her fingers, centered it on me, and said, “You’re the picture of sanity.”

I could see how I must have looked between her squared fingers, hunched shoulders and droop-faced. I wouldn’t speak until she put them away. After another long moment she finally took her fingers down.

“When did you start smoking?”

“I’m not smoking.”

“Easter, I can see the smoke behind you. If you’re not smoking then you should be more concerned about your pants being on fire.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Is this because of Lev? Does the wonderful Lev smoke?”

And I turned quiet again, and tried to put my face into an expression of The Terrible Thing, so she could read it there without my having to breathe the words to life. But instead she looked confused and more annoyed.

“Easter, would you just tell me what’s wrong? This is so irritating!”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well then why did you come down here? Why did you even bother! Get out of here Easter! Scram! You’re nothing but an intruder. A germ. A piece of sand agitating my oyster. But you’re not a pearl; you’re a tumor or a wart or a cyst. Get out!”

And just then, the glowing red cigarette that had been burning down behind my back seared my thumb, causing me to react: jump back and look down at my freshly reddened appendage. As soon as I looked back up, Julia was gone. The creek gushed cold and lonely in front of me.

The Terrible Thing, The Terrible Thing, The Terrible Thing. There it was. In the bathroom. In The Tooth House. Just waiting for me. The Father wouldn't find it. He might not notice for days because he never, *ever* used *our* bathroom. Our cluttered, too-warm torture chamber.

“Julia?”

I knew she wouldn't respond.

“Julia, it was terrible. A terrible, terrible thing.”

But she was gone.

I maneuvered my way back onto the path, brushed a few burrs off my sweater, and let the branches close up behind me. After a few minutes walking I wouldn't even know where to find that sunny spot again.

Before I could move much further, another distraction caught my eye, the sun reflecting off a glimmering something lodged between two rocks, deeper into the highway side of The Woods. I left the path and moved closer and saw that the glimmering something was a piece of metal, attached to a strip of leather wedged between two giant boulders. As I pulled and I gouged and I scraped around the intriguing item, the rocks which had seemed as stuck still as tiles shifted suddenly with a growl. I jumped and let out a little yelp, then looked around hotly. Julia probably heard that.

I pulled on it again angrily, revenge on an inanimate object, and this time it slipped right out, causing me to lose my balance and fall backward. I was so furious with the little item that I needed a moment of silence to compose myself properly, after which I recognized what it was: a horse bridle. With an ornately embellished *E* embossed into the side.

Elizabeth's bridle.

What the hell was Elizabeth's bridle doing out here? Elizabeth's bridle was supposed to be buried somewhere deep in Phyllis's basement, wedged between a crocheted photo album and a ring of mink pelts, not stuck between two rocks, two rocks that'd probably been wedged together since some

Lonely woman gave birth to a Lonely girl, and that Lonely girl gave birth to Phyllis and Phyllis had The Mother and The Mother had me.

Then there was a low rumble in what sounded like the stomach of The Woods, a growling from somewhere far away. A pair of squawking birds flew from the treetops, startled. I was startled too. I'd never heard anything like it before. Then another growl, louder, and in a split second a giant boulder was tumbling over the rocks, about to splatter me into tomato paste.

# Then

After the boulder came crashing down on me I passed out and became just a bleeding ornament in The Woods. As still and broken as a stone cherub, pushed over and cracked open.

*Then.* I remembered a cascading white tablecloth, like whipping cream stopped in its tracks. I'm under a banquet table at a wedding that I barely remember but have seen pictures of myself at. Friends of The Parents who they never see anymore. Both of my dimpled fists submerged in frosty metal dishes of melted ice cream like I was at the manicurist, listening to my name screamed, starting off as a yell then dissolving into a sob. I wanted to cry out to them but Julia said, "Shhhhh." That was the first time she got me in really big trouble.

I think about that tablecloth. A paused videotape. It's odd the way that things tend to stop looking like themselves when you take their motion away.

And suddenly I became very aware of my bleeding. A dark red pool, throbbing with awkwardly spreading growth over and under the leaves on the ground. Speckles of gore caught light all the way to the path.

It didn't really hurt, but I could feel it, the blood escaping my body, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It slipped from me smooth. Effortlessly. Like coins from an undiscovered hole in a pocket.

I looked up and saw the shape of Julia's head looking down at me over the side of the rock wall. Her hair hung around her face in ringlets of uncoiled snake skin.

"Julia!" I barely rasped. The effort caused me to cough uncontrollably.

"Can you move that thing?" she asked.

I squirmed a bit and tried to push it, but it was no use. My legs were mush, the boulder was halfway into the ground, and every effort to move on my part was exhausting. Just lying there, not moving, was ecstasy by comparison.

With effort, I shook my head no.

"Good," she said. "Now I'm going to go to The House to see what this terrible thing is."

“Wait, wait!” I growled.

“What?”

“How did you get Elizabeth’s bridle down here?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Easter.”

And with that she was off. I tried to call again but all that came out of my mouth was a whisper of rattled phlegm.

What an asshole. Knowing Julia, she probably wouldn’t be coming back. She would leave me here to die because that’s what I was going to do to her. She was very vengeful, that sister of mine. I suppose I couldn’t blame her though. Dying on a forest floor is exactly what I deserved.

So I just lay there. Coming to terms with the fact that I’d be bleeding to death for the rest of the day. I wish I could say that I was upset or worried or even scared, but I wasn’t. I was almost looking forward to relaxing for a good long while. I just didn’t want to spend the last few hours of my life lying in the dirt beneath a huge rock, enduring a long, slow death as opposed to the quick one I’d always dreamed of for myself.

The Terrible Thing. The Terrible Thing is ultimately what put me here. And The Parents were mostly responsible for The Terrible Thing. I started thinking that my slow and uncomfortable end was really all their fault and how, in that way, parents are just as responsible for your death as they are for your birth. They set you on the tangent along which you inevitably die. I wonder if thinking about this tangent is what it means to have your life flash before your eyes. It probably is, though I bet most people’s life-flash tangents are populated with happier things: memories of barbequed hotdogs over checkerboard tablecloths or the smell of a loved one’s shoulder. Not just spite for negligent parents.

I should come clean about one thing first though: I don’t have a fat cousin named Denise who threw her fetus in a garbage can. I lied. Sorry.

# Babydom

I was born fourteen years ago in a big hospital in Canada. This is because The Parents were visiting Niagara Falls while The Mother was dangerously pregnant with me. When her water broke they were on the Maid of the Mist and no one noticed. I quickly became an emergency and The Mother had to be rushed to a hospital right there in Niagara Falls. From day one I was an inconvenience. But apparently I was a very cute baby so that helped my case a bit. According to The Mother anyway, I was very cute. And even Phyllis my Evil Grandmother says so. Of course when The Mother says the words, “You really were such a cute baby,” she is exploding with pride and falling in love with me all over again, recalling memory-warmed images of my gummy smile and button nose. When The Evil Grandmother says it, she seems to be mourning the loss of my good looks.

What I always find disturbing about this story is that Julia had to endure a five-hour car ride with The Evil Grandmother to come and pick us all up at the hospital in Niagara Falls. The Mother didn’t want to fly with such fresh meat. Julia would often torment me with horror stories about this car ride, tales of her having to watch The Evil Grandmother’s barely there lips wrap greasy around a fast-food cup straw, listen to her complain about the “peon food” so fiercely that bits of French fry shot from her mouth with a flat splat on the dashboard, tales of Julia’s misery told with the covers up to our chins in the dark, causing me to howl and twist with guilt. I’d never stop feeling bad about it.

Julia always told me stories this way: her cheeks washed in the cool glow of moonlight, she trapped her whispers between two cupped hands against my head and I would get to see up close how perfect her ears were, imagine that spot just behind the lobe as soft as a bud. She taught me everything I know about us this way.

She explained to me that my memories were implants. Formed by years and years of listening to the telling and retelling of stories about me (*Easter where on earth did you ever get that word anyway?*), the stories becoming virile little tadpoles, squiggling their way into the folds of my brain (*I remember the teacher told me that you were the youngest kid she’d ever known to make a*

*racial slur*). These implants made themselves indistinguishable from the real memories (*I'm sure you didn't know what it meant. My god, can you imagine how embarrassing?*) My "memories."

There are some I generated myself, because I was there and I saw it and I knew for sure. I remembered pouring five or six Pixie Sticks onto a plate and then lapping up the tiny pyramid of sugar like a dog. The Evil Grandmother thought it was disgusting, which made me like it even more. I sneezed in threes and caught the chicken pox so bad that blisters were erupting in my mouth and underneath my eyelids. I remember hearing The Father fall down the stairs, the sound of him yelping when he broke his ankle. I remember the first time I touched his scar, all purple and angry and hard and raised; there was bounce to it, unlike normal skin, spongy and resistant. I felt it whenever he'd let me.

But the idea of these pesky little tadpole memories, disguised, hiding, polluting my brain, made me feel unsure of everything. I really should have tagged them before they wriggled in, snapped a serialized marker onto their tails. Or draped them in bells so they would unwittingly announce themselves as fakes, but I didn't think of it then. I was too young.

So Julia tried to help me see what was real and what was fake. She told me that there were ways of distinguishing and that she always knew for sure. You see, Julia had a special talent with brains. She could tell right away if a memory was an implant. She could even tell me who'd implanted it. She said that she had this special ability because she was sort of like a memory herself, squiggling her way through the folds of my brain with the rest of them and drawing out the fakes. Julia the Memory. She said that, just like a regular memory, she worked to serve me, help me make sense of myself in the world. But I had to laugh at that; nod my head of course, but on the inside laugh and disagree. Because Julia was the *reason* I didn't make sense in the world. And we always did everything she wanted to do.

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