

Twelve for a Wicked Curse

One for sorrow.

These shoes aren't good at crunching the fallen leaves on the storm-grey concrete. The soles are too thin, no grip on the school regulation Mary-Janes. He pulls at the straps of his scuffed backpack, slung across graffitied skateparks and buses for years, hesitating, wishing he were made of chlorophyll. He could wither and lie on the footpath until the wind blows him into the clouds and car screens, fragments of rusted boy that will bloom peppermint green buds in the spring. Maybe blossoms could grow in his skin, wrapping him in delicate petals for armour to protect him against confused tornadoes trying to rip him off his tree.

Daylight savings has passed, and the moon is visible above the school gates behind him, a sliver of silver glowing like a torch shining on a newly minted coin. The clock tower echoes four times. Who does it toll for? He can feel every hour in his veins, a heavy pollen that clings to the texts on his phone telling him to hurry the bloody hell up and get here soon. Ignore. Delete. It's a familiar routine, a small ritual he practises on the daily walk from one place that's not his home to another. Brushing his dark fringe out of his eyes, the edges rough from cutting it with blunted scissors in the back of science class, he snaps a creamy jasmine flower off of its stem, placing it to his mouth to suck the drop of nectar out.

If he could measure the juices he's drunk from the flowers outside this house, what would it fill? His mother's vase from China that he's not allowed to touch? The bathtub no-one uses, chipped enamel and copper claws? The swimming pool at his kind-of-sometimes girlfriend Meissa's house, all chlorinated turquoise and smooth tiles?

When he was small, his mother used to sing him nursery rhymes as she dried his fluffy hair after bath, cinnamon softness until he fell asleep. Before everything changed, and she got the son she always wanted until it was him. He wishes he knew how much she loves him. He wishes he cared enough to know. They repeat in his mind now, lines bouncing in black sheep and mice falling off clocks. His favourite one was the magpie song. Thieves of anything shiny, birds of ill omen, a divebombing sign of bad luck if you near their nest. Maybe he's a magpie.

Two for joy.

He's too distracted by the tennis-ball thoughts rattling inside his brain, one foot on the road as a saturated crimson ute blurs past, tires squealing against the tarmac and horn blaring at him. It would be so easy to keep going. The harsh headlights burn into his irises. A blink, and the ute is gone.

The dairy door rings as it opens, a crisp bell that hops off the fridges filled with strawberry milk and Pepsi. It's an old bungalow, chipped beige paint and advertisements for loaves of bread on the windows, the front room converted into a small, sacred marketplace. He breathes in the safe smell of two-day-old newspapers and chicken salt chips. It's funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha, that he feels more at home in the local dairy he spends about fifteen minutes in per week than the actual building he lives in. Mintaka, the owner, already has the melon Vitasoy he always orders on the counter. He hands him a five-dollar note, Edmund Hillary grinning up at them like Mount Everest has avalanched in a decrescendo of ice and prayer wheels.

"Thanks. Keep the change." It used to be a conscious effort to make his voice sound deeper, something he was always aware of, but now it comes naturally.

“Have a good evening, Soph- sorry. Orion.” Taka slides the cents into the cash register, and Orion smiles, silently thanking him again, for using the name he chose for himself, the name that belongs to him.

Three for a girl.

Outside, the stray cat that follows him in this neighbourhood is purring at his heels, golden fur combing the white socks he hates wearing. He pours some of his dangerously neon drink onto his fingers and holds them out for her to lick, rough tongue dragging across the whorls of his fingerprint in chase of the droplets. There’s some kind of beginning in the way the cat leaps onto a mailbox and watches him with gleaming molten lava eyes, something that reminds him of himself. An outsider. An outcast. An outlier in a statistical chart, on the edge and spying, waiting. Caught in the silver, a river curving around moss-covered rocks. He strokes her between her ears one last time, coffee-coloured hand covered in smudged inky scribbles of hearts and albatross feathers.

The park he jogs through now is an empty section with damp mown grass, mutilated jade blades in piles of compressed longing for what it was once. Unfulfilled potential. Just like him. Someone has put in a swing set with splintered wooden seats, chains swaying despite the still air. He swivels and runs backwards, waving goodbye to the cat four houses away, unlocking their eye contact with a corroded key.

It’s the kind of autumn day with no clouds, the sky an infinite wash of bleached-denim blue all the way to the horizon. If he tilts his head up and squints, all he can see is the ocean above him. The sun is fiercely, achingly bright and full of lens flare, etched into his pupils forever, like a compass always swinging towards the north. He wonders how long you would have to stare at the sun to lose your eyesight, how long is necessary to cause a holy blindness, the knowledge that you dared to embrace the bulletproof rays and survived.

Four for a boy.

His binder is corrosively tight across his chest and underneath the crumpled grey shirt. The breeze flattens the fine hairs above the zipper, cold metal against the candyfloss-soft skin on the back of his neck. Orion slams a hand on top of the rimu fencepost, kicking a foot against the wood and leaping over, an executed move that lands him on the other side. He's had enough practise jumping and sprinting on the rooftops of school and his house to do this on autopilot.

Sometimes he thinks that he wants to fly an aeroplane, seatbelt forcing him into the chair as he takes off and escapes into the atmosphere, dandelion seeds whirling in a storm of iceberg fluff. Make a wish if all the seeds soar off in one breath tornado. Make a wish if you can blow all the candles out on the birthday cake, rainbow sprinkles bleeding off the icing. But don't tell anyone, or it won't come true.

The slope towards the creek is steep, lupin and flax bushes masking what's left of a path after the rain last night. Mud the colour of cracked walnut shells trails beneath him, mirroring the iridescent glass wake of a snail next to the track. Ferns curl around a rotting log rolled underneath the eroded shore of the stream. This is the only baptism he will ever have, socks saturated with the love of Poseidon. Draped with silken moss, the stones are washed clean in a single current, gentle caresses at his ankles.

A knot of fear surges up his throat, the fracturing sound of a branch and the snarling susurrations of laughter upstream crawling inside his eardrums. He tries to focus on inhaling deeply, but his lungs choke like scissors sliding through cheap wrapping paper. It's probably a fantail with a strange cry, and he'll look up and see a bird gliding with muted nutmeg plumage. But he can't risk it. Not today. Not again. He rips his feet out of the soaking shoes and drags himself up the bank, collapsing on the clay.

Five for silver.

Threads of panic weave around his tongue. The seeds of splashing and mocking hysteria stitch nearer, needling into his brain, an endless camera clicking and zooming on him. Close-up. Adjust the exposure. His legs slap hollowly on the cascade of dirt, and he pivots, two boys a year above him at school, whipping a rata stick through the oxygen, camel-coloured Nike sweatshirts over their uniform. He knows them, and they know him. Pick your poison and choke on it.

“Hey, it’s that kid who uses the boy’s bathroom. You think you can just decide to be a dude, huh? Fucking faggot.” The way Juice looks at him is vicious. It isn’t his real name, but he insists everyone calls him Juice, and yet can’t understand why using Orion’s true name is so important to him. A thunderbolt boom before the lightning strike. Count the seconds to see how far away it is. He didn’t know that much anger could exist inside someone’s eyes.

“I’m more of a man than you’ll ever be.” He summons his voice, his own storm, roots diving deep into the soil, willing strength into every chamber of his heart. And he walks away from Juice and Rigel, the catastrophic threads binding him to hatred unravelling, his leaves no longer wilting, bare feet and glinting sunrise freckles.

Six for gold.

On the other side of the forest, it’s quieter, more peaceful. Dandelions scatter the field like yellow fireworks crackling on the pitch drape of silken night. He scans the clover, searching for one with four leaves for good luck. Apparently, there’s a single four-leaf clover to every ten thousand with three leaves. Shadows swim around him in iambic pentameter, punching curdled darkness onto his heart, spoiled milk and octopus ink.

Meissa’s ringtone is the first movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. He imagines it swirling in E minor as he calls her, a promise they made together that will never

be broken. They could live forever if she's got the time. Alien light from the phone reflects on his jawline, illuminating him with an otherworldly damson-plum shimmer. She picks up, and her voice is honey spread over wholegrain toast, peaks of melting amber and leftover baubles from the Christmas he celebrated with her family instead of his own mother and younger sisters. Happy holidays indeed.

“Are you okay?” It's the first thing she's said to him since their study period in the Year 12 common room before lunch. “You're not usually this late. Eomma's making rice cakes and bulgogi for dinner; I told her you're coming over.”

Seven for a secret never to be told.

“I'm on the farm now, I missed the bus. Love you.” He ends the call and pretends he answered her question. It's easier that way. Not even a lie. But what is fake and what is true? Who is the real Orion? He doesn't recognise himself, walking past the greenhouses and the tropical fruits inside it. Preaching tangerine to a microphone stand, shards of his fracturing self surround him. He can glue himself together if he wants to, plastering over the fraying fangs of love and fear. He is the window but doesn't know how to explain it without frowning.

You can see through him to his veins, arteries, and beating, breaking heart. You can open him up like a scientific dissection, limbs tied, scalpels sharpened. You can close Orion off, drawing a curtain to hide his history and his story. And you can destroy him, letting his pieces snap into sour hymns and decaying ghosts. Which one is the real him? Which one is the real son, the real lover, the real friend?

The Jeon's garden is a paradise of beans and herbs, pinned in scrolling columns embroidered into the lawn, jewels of vegetables labelled with Meissa's eomma's watercolour pencil sketches. He feels safe here like he does in Taka's dairy and ponders on what these

two locations have in common that makes them the sanctuaries they are to him. If he were the constellation he named himself after, he could draw a celestial bow and arrow and dance through the stars, escaping beyond the solar system to shoot his own galaxy, fire his own haven.

Eight for a wish.

He drops his sodden shoes at the front door, stained glass in frosted lapis lazuli blue. The Velcro is transformed into hooked spiny candyfloss, the black leather a haze of thawing liquorice pulp. Raising a fist to drum on the marigold-painted wood, it unlatches in front of him, circle seats at an opera house, waiting for the curtain to rise. She grins at him, dimple like a dent in butter, kaleidoscope eyes sparkling at the world. Emerald city. Downtown girl.

Meissa met him when he wasn't Orion yet, in the first weeks of high school, where everyone is pretending to be someone they're not. Especially him. Friendship wasn't even a choice, really. Just something they naturally fell into, a rhythm of sitting together at lunch on the library balcony to eat watermelon slices, swooping across smooth concrete on squeaking skateboard wheels, playing retro video games on the spearmint faux fur rug in her bedroom.

And sometimes, when the lights are dimmed, their pulses evolve into staccato, electrostatic, slow motion. She tastes like burnt sugar and starlight, and he can't tell if the salt on her lips is from her tears or his own. When he was younger, he would draw tiny flames around the borders of his schoolwork, layers of red, orange, yellow. What he didn't realise, was that the hottest part of the fire is a blinding, purifying, white, like thousand-year-old ice beneath the surface of Antarctica, imprisoned air bubbles. White heat, white touch, white lies.

Nine for a kiss.

Loving her makes him feel like he can love himself. Someone who can strengthen him like hollow bamboo poles supporting feathered chartreuse tomato stems, telescopes and

observatories into each other's soul, counting every blood cell like he can tie their hearts together chamber by chamber. He'd give her everything that he is. Everything that he was. He'd open up a vein. She touches him like he's made of butterfly wings and could break any moment. The torn shirt and plaid skirt are slipped off, remainders of the simmering rage and ignorance by the river, composted with graceful flicks into the washing machine.

"You're an absolute tragedy, Orion. You literally couldn't be a bigger mess." Mei throws an egg-yolk towel at him and turns off the lightbulb in the bathroom, knowing he can only shower in darkness so as not to see the body that doesn't belong to him, and the indescribable loss is his home.

"You like it, though." He laughs as steam decorates the panels, smudging a smiley face onto the shower.

"I love it."

"Why?" Pouring coconut shampoo onto his hand, he pivots to see her disappear into the acidic corridor. He doesn't quite hear what she says next, but he can feel it, incandescent and wicked.

"Because we match."

He's underwater, curled shreds of rippling sun, pressure surging and popping from the currents, aquamarine and midnight blue. It's drowning, but without the dying. Swimming with the sharks until he sinks. Coral reefs going extinct. Kelp and colossal squids shooting ink at him, a masquerade of ebony. He used to love the beach, spending days building sandcastles and diving into the plunging crests of foam, chasing the seagulls as they stole pesto-salted chips. He still does. Or maybe he doesn't.

Everything has changed. The world does not wait for you as it rotates, and you'll plummet off the axis if you can't keep up. What can he keep? What on this planet truly is possessed by him? He's the one possessing himself. Watch out demons, it's Orion

Māra. No exorcism could save his parchment chemicals now, even if he wanted to be saved.

Ten for a bird, you must not miss.

Wordlessly, a clean and cat-fur soft jersey and indigo jeans are hung on the towel rail for him. It reminds him of the nameless feline he's adopted when he exits Mintaka's dairy. Turn the pages, read between the ribboning lines, spools of typewriter letters. This is storytelling. He's the prologue and the epilogue at the same time, the beginning and end of his existence. If he believes in reincarnation, he wants to come back as a flower, or a tree. Something green. Something alive. An honest, yearning resurrection of leaves and linen. He needs that certainty like the oxygen he inhales, a chandelier of resurrected atmosphere.

Fern fronds hurl dusky pigtailed onto the walls. He helps Mei set the table with jacquard chopsticks and shallow pearl-pink bowls. Dinner is strips of grilled pork, crispy noodles, baby spinach, and spiced tteokbokki. The curtains are open, distant skylines and turnstiles buzzing chrome, surrendering to heaven. Ms Jeon insists she'll wash the dishes so Mei can drive him home in their retro turquoise Volkswagen.

Every house is identical on these streets, Nirvana on the radio, fireworks that exploded too soon. Wrists draped over the steering wheel; pulses can drive from here. Meissa pulls over by the excuse for a park with the still-swaying swing set, allowing him to walk the last block. He opens the door and leans over to kiss her vampirically as an afterthought.

"Message me when you get home, ok?" She's blurred through the window, looking at him on the footpath through the wing mirror. He tilts his head to look at the stars, reaching

towards the solar system with extended caramel-latte palms. Liquidly blending with the lunar night, this is Orion Māra. Blossoming, withering, and blooming like his brightest star again.

The gem-stained moon is waxing into full, and so is he.

“I think I’m already there.”

Eleven is worse.

He can’t remember the rest.