

# Portfolio PDF

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A Primer On The Identification Of The Little Folk Of Myth And Legend (HTML)

## DAYS NECROTIC

The night after the funeral he found her knelt in the shower, cold on full, earth and blood clinging to the tiles. Her eyes were closed. She looked like she was trying to be sick, gulping and hacking. The stiff old gown in which they'd buried her, now clung grey against grey skin. She shook. When he said her name she looked at him with white and empty eyes.

"I feel like shit," she said.

Patrick said, "I knew you'd come back."

He carried her downstairs to the treasure-chest freezer in the garage. There she slept, on top of a wad of blankets, surrounded by the bags of frozen peas and chicken chunks and hanks of fish coated in ice, the dial cranked all the way to blue.

That first night Patrick couldn't sleep. He took a chair and watched her through the frosting. She curled on her side, knees to elbows, as in life, hair splayed and stiff with rime, a packet of mixed vegetables hugged to her shoulder like a comforter.

Hours later, he opened the lid of the freezer and climbed inside. So cold, so cold. She shuffled aside to make room, encircled him with frozen arms without ever once opening her eyes. She seemed slow then, sleepy.

"Shut the door, Baby," she murmured. He did, and they were there in the dark, him and her, twined together, a mass of cold and cooling flesh.

*This is death*, thought Patrick as he kissed her. *This isn't so bad*.

\*

It was two weeks before they made love again. Patrick had known it would be different. Had even been scared of hurting her. He woke in the middle of the night and she was on the bed

beside him, leaning over. Stiff strands of hair slid against his chest. Cold goddess. Hard flesh kissed his mouth; she shushed his protest. Dead hands kneaded his abdomen.

"Careful," he mumbled. "Careful."

Her flesh was frozen, clay-like. A little malleable, as if the ice began just beneath the skin. The cold was breathtaking. Patrick bit his tongue. She was hard against him, riven, hairs pulling wetly away on his fingers. Syrupy meltwater damped the sheets. His body numbed, and beneath the numbness there was a dull and thundering pain. She was smaller than he remembered, infinitely more delicate. She whispered something. He held the back of her neck and pulled her stiff body against his. Cold so complete it burned.

When he came the pain was like glass. She held him and he, breathless and sobbing, whispered that he loved her more than he even understood.

\*

The next morning Patrick found his skin cracked and reddened wherever she had touched. Swollen, as if something hot and angry were trying to push through from beneath. Tender, too. The pain was exquisite, like a cigarette burn in newgrown flesh: that bitter, that obscenely sensitive. Patrick peeled away the loosened skin and flushed it down the toilet. When he was done he went down to the freezer and looked inside. She slept.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he said. For breakfast he made pancakes.

\*

Mostly she slept. While he was away at work, or asleep himself, or while he ate his quiet meals at a desk table in the garage. Now that she had iced, her time outside the freezer was limited... and of course there was the risk that she might break herself on sharp edges, or that

neighbours would pry through the windows. Before the accident Patrick had never thought before about how full of danger the world really was.

She came out at night. Colder then, and darker too. At her insistence Patrick had covered all the mirrors with paper, had refrained from touching the scars that stitched her flesh. When he woke sometimes in the middle of the night she lay beside him. Not asleep. Watching. Eyes pale and vacant and shrunken in what little light there was. Those times it was almost like before. He could make-believe, so long as he was careful. So long as he didn't touch her, so long as she didn't speak.

In the morning wet footsteps traced the floor, swimming with scabs. Patrick mopped, and ate his breakfast oatmeal in the garage, and hefted open the lid of the freezer to kiss her sleepy body before he left for work.

\*

She had always liked the deep-fried bricks of apple pie they sold at McDonalds. She couldn't take them straight now, of course; the filling would melt her from the inside out. But Patrick went to the drive-through in the middle of the night and brought home a dozen to freeze for later. Not that she could eat them, either; they'd done something to her at the funeral parlour, something that stopped her insides from working the way they should. But she would chew on frozen chunks of filling and then spit, and that way she could sometimes taste.

"I'm like one of those cancer lungs," she said. "All rotten on the inside."

"I'm sorry," said Patrick.

"Baby," she said. "I've told you enough times not to say that word."

\*

They had their first close call a month after that. He woke one morning to find her asleep beside him, coloured by the grid of sunlight that dusted through the blinds. For a moment nothing connected. He hadn't seen her in good light for ages; how veined and colourless her skin was, how broken her eyelids, how blood-crusting her scars. For a moment all he felt was a sense of pity and wonder... and then when he touched her he found that she was soft.

"Oh, hell," he moaned. When he lifted her, her body creaked and thin white serum dribbled from the joints of her shoulders. Breath mumbled around her throat. Eager grey snot spilled from her mouth and nose and eyes. Pinkish stain of blood on the mattress. He carried her back to the freezer and covered her over with packs of frozen peas. She had come awake and was clutching her fingers. "I feel sick," she said. Over and over. "I feel sick. I feel sick. Patrick. I don't feel well." The air around her smelled like a sweet shop.

Patrick shut the lid. He didn't want to – he wanted to be able to hold her – but she needed cold now more than she ever had. More cold than he could give. He watched through the lid. She put her hand on the glass and he put his. Could feel her cold through the glass. If it would only be enough.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He was an idiot. He should have known. Should have been more careful. Her mouth made shapes, but Patrick could not hear the sound. He shut his eyes and knelt against the freezer and said her name, a lot.

It was enough, in the end. Just. She froze again. Most of her, at least.

\*

They were careful after that. Even more than they had been before. Patrick bought thick curtains for the windows and extinguished the boiler altogether. He started sleeping in the garage too. He propped the lid of the freezer open with a shoe so that, lying on the camp bed beside it, he and she were as close as they reasonably could be. When they made love they

did so in the freezer, in the bone-aching chill of it. The ice made his skin break out in sores. He didn't care.

\*

For a few days that winter it snowed. Unexpectedly. With violence. Roads slugged and rivers hard. Thick flecks of it falling like a white fog. They watched through the curtain crack of the garage window. A sideways gale mounted slowly on the sill, on the lawn outside. She held his hand.

"What if someone sees?" he said.

"Nobody's going to see."

"But what if they do?"

"You worry too much."

At three in the morning they stepped outside. She in the same frost-coated t-shirt and shorts she always wore, Patrick swaddled in winter coats, his breath condensing white and bleary. They stood on the back steps a long time, watching the snow fall.

"Come on," she said. "I want to go to the park."

\*

The park was white, caked with snow, deathly in the dark. The trees and the lampposts ripe with thick crusts of white. So cold and so quiet that Patrick could hear his own straining heart. Slow snow still falling. In the very centre, there where anyone could have seen them they lay in the slush and peeled away each other's clothes. Hers frost-stiffened to her flesh, Patrick's gummed against his sores. They kissed, fervently. The lamplight bright enough to

see the pallid translucency of her skin, her scars stitches. Where the snow landed on her face it did not melt.

"Here," she said. "Touch me." He did. She wriggled back into the snow. Patrick on top of her. Her hair cracked and came away in thick layers. It repulsed him only for a moment. And then he was inside her, and the pain was unbelievable. *You could die from this*, he thought. He crushed her against him. She was whispering. She was whispering his name.

Afterwards, they lay together in the snow so long that Patrick went numb all over, and then he couldn't even feel the cold.

\*

The snow melted, of course. The morning that it was gone she sat staring out of the little window in the garage, a look of carefully-controlled serenity on her face. Patrick held her, tentative.

"Next year," he said. "It'll snow again. It will."

"Sure," she said. "Next year."

\*

A night weeks later she climbed from the freezer and sat straddling him. Something about her was different. Harder than before. Patrick tried to sit up, but couldn't. He stared up at her, half-seen, slick and cold like an animal in the dark.

"Look," she said. She raised her t-shirt and Patrick saw that her stomach was faintly rounded, her breasts swollen too. The skin looked stretched thin, shiny as a blister, smooth as the cap of a mushroom. He put his hands on the bump, probing, searching for signs of a life he knew he would not find.

"Oh..." he said.

"You know what this means?" She looked down on him. Those eyeless eyes.

"I think so," he said.

She stayed that way for a minute, and then smoothed her ice-stiff shirt back down. She bent and kissed him, slowly, torturously, one hand running through what remained of his hair.

"This isn't any place to raise a child," she said.

"I know."

"We've got to get away."

"I know."

She kissed him again. "It'll be okay," she said. "One day soon it'll all be okay."

\*

They went in the early morning. Everything packed into suitcases and cool bags in the boot of the car. Supplies of ice and superglue. He lifted her gently out of the freezer. Cold limp swollen arms shrugged around his neck. She was still dozing, half-asleep as he carried her out. The car stood in the drive with the windows open, engine idling. He set her in the passenger seat and buckled her belt. She sat slumped. He turned the fan to the snowflake symbol and piled frozen vegetables in her lap.

"You ready?" he said. She didn't reply. "I love you," he said. He got into his side. When he'd backed out to the middle of the street he saw that the neighbour's lights were on. He stared at the brightened windows, watching for signs of movement. She touched his arm.

"Let's go, Baby." She was grinning, grimly, face in shadow. Her other hand cradled the bump, the precious thing, and Patrick wondered if there would ever be anything more necessary in the world to him, or more in danger. "Long way to go," she said.

He licked his lips, tasting blood from the scabs there. His legs ached. His groin ached. He was shuddering, heavily. For the first time since the funeral he did not know what was going to happen. "Sure," he said. They pulled out of the street, and out of the city, and drove on towards the north.

## DEPTHS

In the immediate aftermath of orgasm you are surprised to find that you've shrunk down to the size of a pin and fallen into her vagina. You land, ankle-deep, and gasp upright, the last tremors of your climax still shivering your skin. The vast muscular walls of her heave above you, ribbed and glistening like the roof of a mouth.

"Hello?" you call. "Sarah?" Your voice echoes in the empty space.

You gather yourself, naked except for socks (now sodden) and digital watch. It's warm here at least. You climb uphill, over and around mysterious folds, crenulations of flesh, uvulous and musky pink. There is light here, just barely, flickering against the walls.

Her ex-lovers are waiting at the entrance to her cervix. More of them than you'd reckoned. A dozen maybe, at first count, lurking in the shadows: a rugged, Germanic man with a sour expression; a girl in high school uniform; a hipsterish boy you recognise from a photo on her dressing table mirror.

"I was here first." His voice is small and thirsty. "Go home. Go back. You leave her alone."

The walls contract and shudder around you. Her ex-lovers all stare, a menacing crowd of shadowy figures. Ghosts, all of them.

"You don't know her," says the hipsterish boy.

"She's dangerous," says the German, deadly serious, eyes like moats.

"You can't have her. We have her," says the girl in the uniform.

They press in, sleepy and insubstantial, to seize handfuls of your hair, snap at your legs. You push them away, bull through the crowd of reaching limbs and haul yourself up to the mouth of the cervix, the narrow, sturdy orifice. Like squeezing through the shell of a grapefruit. Pushing yourself forward with the tips of your toes, trying not to scratch, slipping. Deaf to the following whispers. You'll need to breathe soon... and then at last you can. The tunnel opens out. The walls here are soft and muddy, and Sarah is waiting for you, lying there couched in blood.

"You took your time," she says.

"I'm here now."

"You'll stay?"

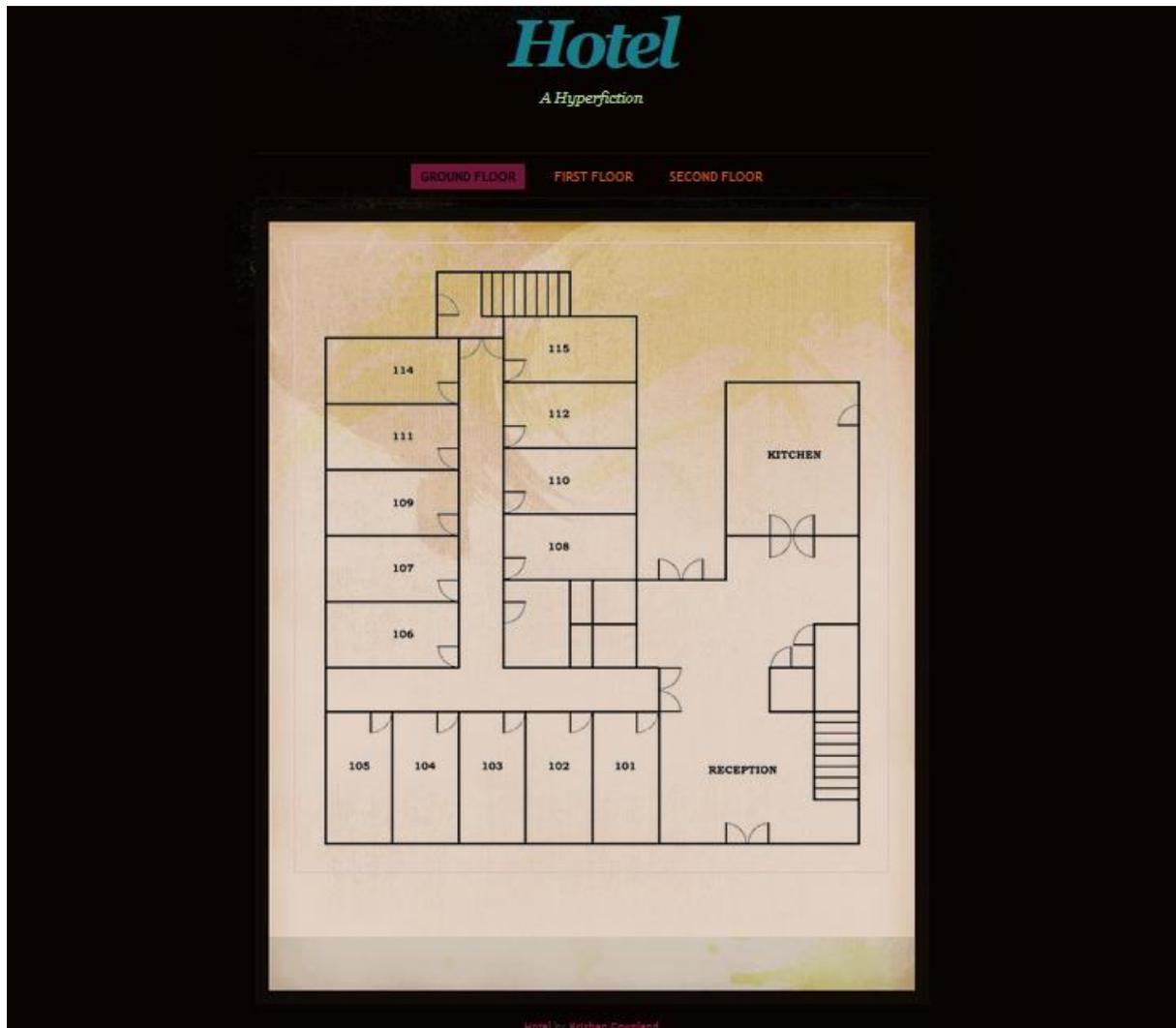
"For a while." You lie down beside her. It should be dark in here but there is red and wavering light. You feel like you're underwater, looking up. "Can they get to us here? The others?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Tell me about them."

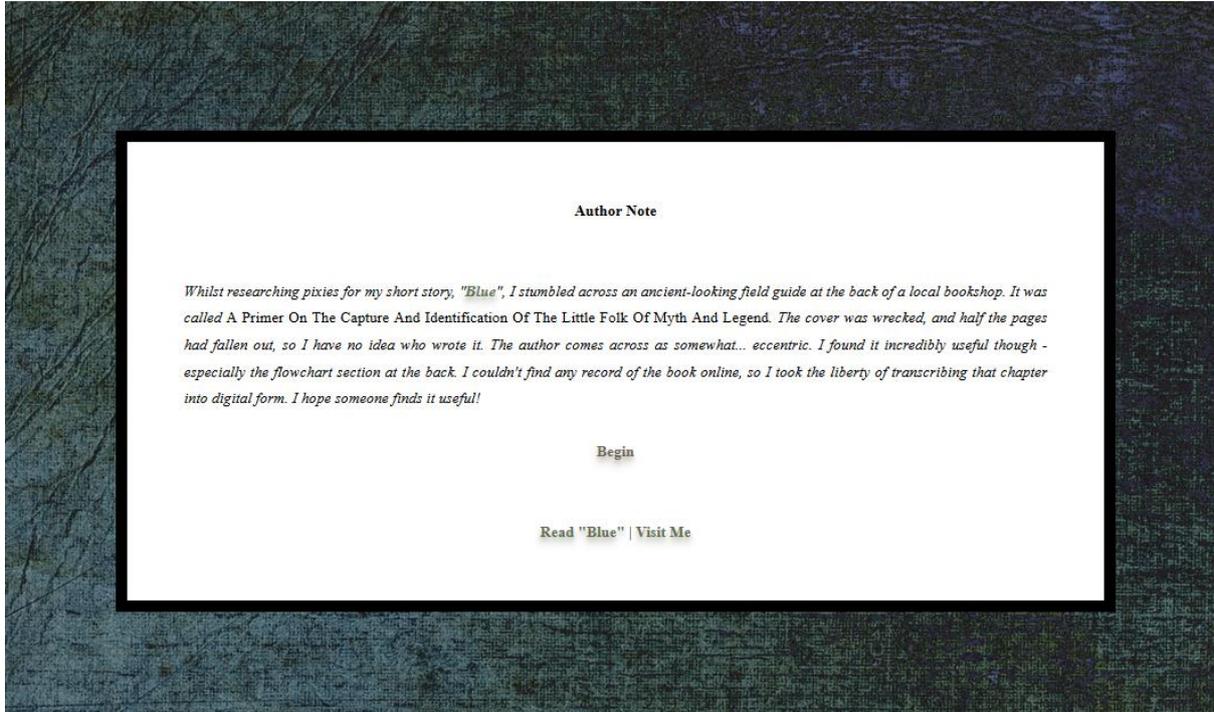
"One day," she says. You lie there beside each other. Distantly you can still hear the ghosts whispering, straining, pushing to get in.

## HOTEL



A hyperfiction anthology of tiny stories, each set within a single hotel room:  
<http://www.krishancoupland.co.uk/hotel/index.html>

## A PRIMER ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE LITTLE FOLK OF MYTH AND LEGEND



A piece of interactive fiction concerning tiny mythical creatures – written as a companion piece to a published short story: <http://krishancoupland.co.uk/APOTCAIOTLFOMAL/>.