

Katherine Xiang

“The Girl of a Hill”

Elli June and her grandmother lived in a flat long house on top of a hill. It only had one floor, but made up for its height in length. The structure was built upon 2 acres owned by the Junes since the 1950s. It was being held up from its recent renovation. Elli's parents, Jack and Jill, worked in a small office down the hill in a travel agency, part of the same branch. They were never in the same location for over a month, so they felt it best to leave Elli to Jack's mother for the time being. This arrangement was meant to be temporary, but as the both of them got caught up in planning their next getaway, “the time being” stretched past the girl's first words and first steps. Deep inside, Eli knew that her mother loved her, though knowing was not enough to bridge her absence. Elli didn't mind so much. Her grandmother was better at cooking anyways. She carried a pep and life to her that gave people the impression that she was younger than her age. When Elli's bestest friend Lark didn't come to class for an entire week, she learned that people grew old and went to heaven. They didn't have to be old either. Sometimes it was just so unfortunate that people got very sick, people like Lark's father. She wondered how he was able to climb all those stairs when he was ill, but still she believed that he had made it there. And she believed that it would happen to everyone, just not her grandmother.

When Elli turned 6, she would slip out of the house by herself. There was a new kind of mystery on the other side of the door. It called her through the quiet howl of the wind, a temptation too hard for the child to bear. “Get back before dinner.” her grandmother would say from the kitchen counter. Stirring a meat stew, her back was turned, it was as though she had eyes on the back of her head. And Elli left the house to look for anthills under the mailbox. She ran in circles around the parameter making friends with Mrs. Squirrel and Mr. Crow, who brought her pretty rocks

and buttons. Stuffing her pockets with trinkets and laughter, Elli liked to drag out these moments knowing she had a soft bed waiting for her just inside.

When Elli was 10, she began to have second thoughts of the house she lived in. The once never-ending floors were too flat, they held no character, and creaked under her weight, though she was still quite small. But most of all, the eyes behind her grandmother's head seemed to have grown. They were big enough to feel through walls even when she scrunched the comforter over her head. She began to go farther down the hill. Rolling down, picking up speed, the world seemed to turn faster each time. Sky, grass, sky, grass, heaven, hell. It left her out of breath. Her body was too rattled to think, blood seemingly circulating in every direction. Now through the adrenaline, she hadn't forgotten about her grandmother of course. They were bound by an old kind of love, it was always there, beneath the surface. Elli made a habit of choosing one of the many souvenirs from her trips, and leaving it on the dining table for her grandmother: matches, earrings, and new kinds of pastries from the market. Before she knew it, she had grown into what they called a Collector. This was not something out of the ordinary, in fact most people grew to become Collectors one way or another. It was an accepted reality that a Collector's reputation depended on their potential to become a Creator from their collectibles. Otherwise, they were considered Hoarders, the lowest in the caste. Through her late teenage years, Elli came to see her grandmother as more of a Hoarder than a Creator, and it indeed made her lose the admiration she once had. Her grandmother's spirit had started to muddle, and she more than often needed her granddaughter to help her read small letters and take down the laundry. As they talked less and less, Elli felt as though she was becoming a caretaker before she had the chance to be taken care of herself.

By the time Elli turned 19, she would rarely be found at home. Outside was where she didn't have to count the cracks in the ceiling over and over, wondering if her mother ever thought about giving her a call. Outside, she found herself tumbled in a crowd of Collectors, spending her days with Mr. Crow most of all. His car was often seen parked by her school. And when she got out, he would take her on drives to the city, bringing her to meet his friends all dressed in similar black suits, who brought her sparkly clothes and strange new toys. They became naturally acquainted and added to her collection. Mr. Crow made her feel wanted in a mature way, like he trusted her and expected her to trust him the same. Elli felt like she could run away with him. On a cloudy night, where there was little pressure to adhere to be the way you've always been, Elli laid in her bed while her grandmother laid in hers. It was a momentarily decision that felt like her own, though I can admit, it was indeed first planted by Mr. Crow. Elli stepped carefully to avoid the panels of the floor that made sound, carrying her suitcase with both hands tightly. Her grandmother, asleep in her room that looked unfittingly small for her. The wrinkles from the blanket resembled the ones on her face. Elli had never really observed the details in the cramped shelves and peeling wallpaper, but she figured that there was not enough time to do so. She turned off the stove where a huge pot had been left sizzling and set down a duffel full of coins and bills on the dining table. On top of the bills laid a scribbled note from freshly imprinted graphite. His dim headlights flashed by the window, urging her to hurry out and so she did, out into the fog. And they drove from the hill, past the city, over the bridge and away. This was what she had always wanted, she thought, and let the night wind run its fingers along her baby smooth skin, through her hair.

And then came her first wrinkle. Located on her inner thigh, a delicate fold only about 2 inches long. He noticed immediately. One thing about Mr. Crow was that he always had a way with his

words. He loved her so, he said. She could not live without him, he said. But there would come a day that his wings were meant to leave her. It was her twisted fate he said, though the apartment was hers to have forever. She almost thought she liked the way he made it sound, but in reality it was just painful. To her, his existence was somewhere between a father, a friend, a stranger, and a lover all in one; that sounded unusual only when she said it out loud. Because even after he left, it felt like he had never left. Even when she felt she hated him, she couldn't find a way to hate him either. And so, Elli lived in this purgatory apartment, alone for an extensive portion of her middle age. Though there were rooms filled with colorful stones and rooms filled with elaborate fabrics, Elli only made her way between the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom each day. Months passed by in ways unknown to her. If you asked her what she ate that morning, there was a good chance that she wouldn't be able to recall.

She decided to go for a walk one afternoon, as she had no car. It was a walk where she didn't know where she was headed, but there was no reason to turn back. Though her body sagged, her brain had stood still since adolescence. She could still collect, still be something more, somewhere new. So she wandered, for forty days and forty nights. For a moment, Elli stopped to sniff the air. It's possible she imagined it but she could smell the aroma of carrots and onions from the stew. Dinner would be ready at any moment. By now, the soles of her shoes had been so worn down that Elli tried to stay on the lookout for any sharp stones. But alas, it was not only her shoes, but also her eyesight that had faded with her memory. Elli rubbed her eyes and saw the faint outline of a house, a strangely long house. As she approached, she peeled away the rubber from her feet. They had hardened with calluses from the balls to the soles. I shall have a rest here, she thought. I'm sure they wouldn't mind. Her body was aching, she was just so tired.

And when Elli finally laid herself down in the small bed, she heard a young woman's footsteps outside, dwindling away with dim headlights.