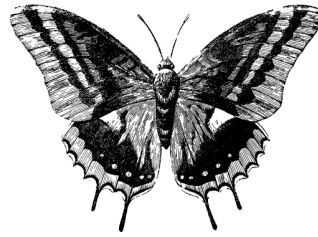


A black and white line drawing of a decorative vine border. The vine is thick and curved, with several large, deeply lobed leaves. The leaves have a serrated or toothed edge and are filled with fine, parallel lines. The vine and leaves are arranged in a repeating pattern around the central text.

# Part 1



## OFF TO AN AUSPICIOUS START

A girl is murdered at the corner of Chestnut and Hope. That particular intersection is bitter injustice. Chestnut, the symbolic representation of foresight and prevention in early folklore, and hope—well, hope is hope and clearly there wasn't any for this girl. Her throat is gored out, her fluffy pink cardigan made tacky with blood, legs splayed and eyes vacant.

This is the end for her.

Wednesday starts like any other day. Saoirse gets out of bed at the last moment, fights with her sisters for shower time, and just barely manages to grab a piece of wheat toast for breakfast and then she's out the door. Her mom's on her to start taking the bus to school instead of riding her skateboard, especially after all of the calls home from the principal complaining about her skateboarding down the halls between classes, but, she's not taking the fucking bus.

There's some hullabaloo on Chestnut on her way to school, caution tape and police vehicles. That's pretty weird, but she figures it's that one crazy crackhead that's been going around the neighborhood. A few weeks back there was a similar scene when he broke into somebody's house, looking for change. She doesn't stop to rubberneck, which is good, because she's still five minutes late to history.

Saoirse doesn't like her history class—for one, US history is boring. They learned all this bullshit in the 8th grade. Somehow the country is still standing. She doesn't really give a shit how or why. For two, Mr. Dugan is a dickhead. Every year when schedules are assigned, there's a line a mile long of kids trying to get out of his class. He gives way too much homework. There are quizzes every week, exams every two weeks, and on some of them, he demands a 100% to pass, which means if you didn't get every answer right the first time, you have to take it again until you do, and each successive time is a hit to your grade. She shouldn't even be in this class, but because Saoirse's good in math and science and they want her AP scores to bump up the school's averages, the administration put her in the senior history class and her parents are all proud, so she's stuck.

But. There are some positives. Jess Charpentier is also in this class. Saoirse hasn't really spoken to her, but by god does she have a crush. Of course it's ridiculous. She's a popular senior, plays on the soccer team, always dating some new boy. For the homecoming dance, she got asked by three guys as a trio. She's beautiful. Or well, Saoirse thinks so. She spends



a lot of time drawing her in study hall, in her soccer uniform, out of her soccer uniform. Whatever, it's just a stupid crush, but it kind of makes the class worth it.

Except for this mortifying moment right here.

Saoirse had raced into the classroom at top speed, trying to get into his desk before Mr. Dugan noticed and said something shitty or assigned more homework. With an almost comical tearing noise, her bag split, papers going everywhere, skateboard skidding across the floor as she bent to get everything together. She couldn't pick her stuff up fast enough. Mr. Dugan definitely noticed. Now he's standing above Saoirse, his hands on Saoirse's sketches while Saoirse stares up at him, sick dread welling in the pit of her stomach.

Mr. Dugan doesn't disappoint. "Well, well, well," he says, walking down the row between the desk. He eyes Jess. "Ms. Charpentier, it appears you have an admirer."

He dumps the sheaf of papers out on Jess's desk, fanning the pages wide. Fuck. Oh. Fuck. Jess picks up a page and blinks at it, before her own cheeks go a bit pink. The students sitting around her crane out of their seats to take a look. Saoirse's a competent enough artist that she knows it'll be clear who it is. This might actually be the worst thing that's ever happened to her. She puts her head in her hands, hiding her flaming face.

For a brief moment she still hopes the ones on top are the ones where Jess's wearing clothes. It's quickly dashed when Mr. Dugan returns to the front of the class and announces, "Drawing smutty pictures of your fellow students, Ms. McBride, that'll be detention."

The rest of the class passes in a horrifying daze. When the bell finally rings, she packs her stuff up slowly, careful not to meet anybody's eyes. Somebody at her elbow coughs just as she's slinging his skateboard up.

Saoirse looks up and finds Jess standing in front of her, stack of sketches outstretched. "Here," she says, "thought you should have these back."

"Thanks," Saoirse says, red with shame as she takes them.

"They're uh—really good?" Jess tells her.

Saoirse can feel her face flame up even more. She can't believe this is happening to her. Jess Charpentier sees the naked pictures Saoirse drew of her and now she's telling Saoirse how good she thinks they are? She doesn't even know what to say. "Thank you," she squeaks out again, sure she must look as mortified as it is possible for a human to look.

Jess smiles and claps her on the shoulder. "See you around, Saoirse."

She heads out the door leaving Saoirse behind.

Yes. That was definitely the worst moment of her life.

That afternoon he gets stuck cleaning Mr. Dugan's whiteboards for her detention. She's there until 5 PM and by then it's starting to go dark



outside. Saoirse hates that him. She thinks about the many spectacular ways Mr. Dugan could die. Choked to death by his own necktie. Falling down the stairs. Drowning in the bath. Having the bookcases full of his stupid textbooks fall on him in a freak accident.

And of course, across the parking lot, there Jess Charpentier is again, dressed in sweats and flip-flops, her hair up in a loose ponytail. She must've just come from practice. Saoirse watches her saying goodbye to a couple of guys on the boy's team. Great, if she continues to linger, Saoirse will have to pass her to leave school grounds. Maybe she can just go hide out behind the library for the foreseeable future. Luckily Jess gets into her car and drives off before it becomes a thing.

She puts her headphones on and hops on her skateboard. If there's any justice in the universe her parents will agree to let her transfer to another high school after this.

She's rocking out to Deadmau5, coasting along home, when she sees Jess's car pulled over at a weird angle. The front tires are half on the curb and the engine is still running. Taking a closer look, she notices there's nobody in the driver's seat.

There comes a horrible shrieking noise that makes Saoirse's ears ache. She tumbles down off of his board, hitting the pavement hard.

"Saoirse, Saoirse, get up!"

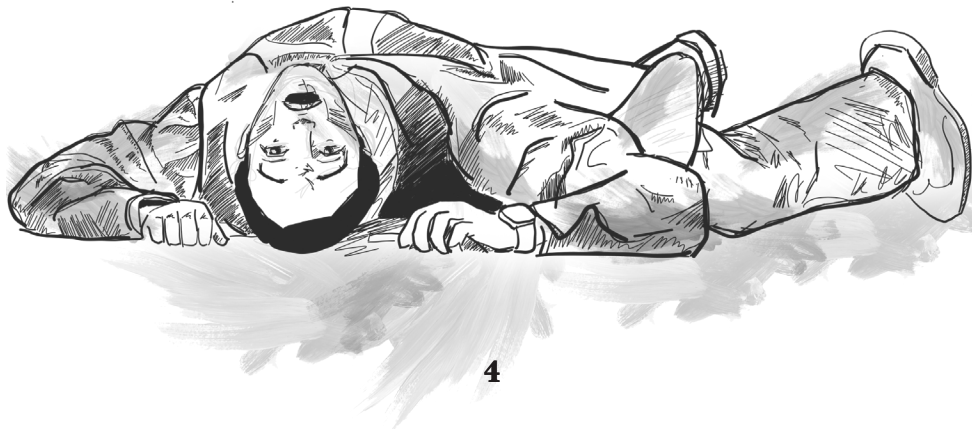
She looks up and Jess's there.

"What is it?" she asks ignoring Jess's attempts to help her up to her feet.

"There's a body," Jess tells her. She grips Saoirse's shoulder, fingernails biting in hard. "Don't look."

"What?" Saoirse says, trying to look past her anyway. "What was that sound?"

"Don't look!" Jess repeats, firm. But it's too late, Saoirse's walked to the front of the car. The headlights are shining, lighting up a sprawled form. The guy stares up at the sky, mouth open, but Saoirse's pretty sure that's



his shoulder blades and not his chest lying face up.

“Did you—did you hit him?”

“No!” Jess protests. “Of course not! I saw him like that—”

She never gets to finish the sentence because this white blur comes out of the trees. It hits Jess, letting out a terrifying inhuman screech. Saoirse watches, frozen, as Jess’s pitched back against her car.

Jess crumples under its weight, legs folding underneath her, and then it turns on Saoirse. She trips back, unable to make her legs cooperate. She doesn’t even know what she’s looking at. That thing couldn’t possibly be a person. It looks like a corpse, all pale long limbs—too long, Saoirse notes, and disjointed. It’s got a great gaping maw for a mouth and dark hollows for eyes. It’s standing, poised, just outside of the high beams and she doesn’t realize just how far it’s moved towards her until it’s gotten much too close.

Saoirse’s terrified. She scrambles back and away. It shrieks and runs at her, blurring out again, and all Saoirse thinks is, damn it. She’s gonna die next to Jess Charpentier and she didn’t even get to do anything fun with her. The monstrous thing is almost on her and Saoirse throws up a futile arm to ward it off.

Everything goes bright, a prickly sensation threading outward from her fingers, a funny heat in her fingertips and then the thing shrieks again. The sound is worse than the ones before—piercing. It’s thrown back away from her, toppling over. He hears the sounds of bones breaking—horrible snapping and popping like dry wood. It’s weird, elongated limbs bend as no person should bend. She watches the thing writhe on the ground in jerky movements, like a marionette on tangled strings. Horrified, she can’t look away as it reassembles itself back into the simulacrum of a human. It makes that horrible wrenching noise one last time, great gash of a mouth gaping wide, and then blurs out again, disappearing into the woods.

Saoirse sinks back to the pavement, heart going a thousand miles a minute. She doesn’t understand what happened. There are scorch marks up and down her sleeve, but the skin underneath is healthy and unmarred. Jess groans, shifting weakly against the side of his car.

Saoirse remembers himself. “Are you okay?” she says, crawling over to him.

Jess blinks up at him and groans again. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Saoirse babbles. “Nothing. I don’t know what that thing was. It was here. Now it’s gone. That guy’s head is spun all the way around. His head. How is that even possible? And my shirt is messed up and my mom is going to yell at me. But I didn’t do anything. Oh god, this is the worst day of my life.”

Jess makes a noise of protest and palms at her eyes, leaning her head back against her car door. “Shit, calm down,” she says, laying a hand on Saoirse’s knee. She goes to get up and then cries out, letting herself col-

lapse back against the car.

“Oh my god are you alright?” Jess nods her head, warding Saoirse off with an arm and gingerly getting to her feet. Saoirse clears her throat and asks, “What happened? I don’t understand what’s going on!”

“I don’t know, man,” Jess says, shaking her head. “I don’t know. I just saw the bo—him,” she gestures at the person who’s wearing his back as his front, “and I pulled over and then I saw you and there was that thing.”

That thing. That white corpse thing. The way it meandered so close to her almost without her noticing before falling apart, like it was just a bag of bones inside a useless sack of flesh, no muscle to hold it together. Saoirse shivers. It’s still out there.

“Should we call the cops?” Saoirse asks, very carefully not looking over his shoulder at the lifeless body.

“How are we gonna explain it?” Jess whispers. “Do you wanna—do you wanna stick around for the police to come out here?”

The thing is. The sane thing to do would be to wait—explain everything. There’s a reasonable explanation for everything of course, nobody would think they murdered that guy. But it doesn’t matter. There’s cold sweat all along her spine and her heart has only just returned to a normal rhythm. Saoirse shakes her head. She’s not waiting here if that thing is still out there.

“Did you touch anything?” she asks, voice hoarse. He’s seen enough CSI. If they’re gonna abandon a murder scene, they’re gonna do it right.

Jess shakes her head. “Let’s just get out of here, man.”

“Gimme your keys,” Saoirse says, holding her hand out. “You’re in no shape to drive.

“Do you even have your license?” Jess asks, giving Saoirse a wary up-down.

Saoirse laughs nervously. There’s a dead body hanging out not five feet from them and Jess wants to know if she’s legal to drive. “I’ve got a learner’s permit.”

Jess snorts. “Jesus.”

She drives Jess back to her house and then because Jess Charpentier, soccer star, player, and all around goddess, is apparently a mother hen, Saoirse calls her mom and waits for her to pick her up rather than skateboarding home like she planned.

“I’ll uh...see you tomorrow...” she says, when her mother honks from the sidewalk.

“Yeah,” Jess replies, ice-pack pressed to her forehead. “Be safe out there.”

She eyes Saoirse’s singed shirt sleeve. She’d tried to talk about it in the car, but Saoirse didn’t have anything to say. She didn’t even want to think about it. The further she got away from what happened, the less it seemed

real. All the burned holes in her sleeve did was say otherwise. She just had to believe that that was the last they were going to see of that creature. That it wasn't going to turn up in her bedroom and spin her head around like that guy in the grass. She wouldn't know how to stop it a second time. She can't deal. So she forcibly pushes all of that away. None of it can be real.

When she gets home that night, craving normalcy, she starts in on the homework she usually procrastinates on. After everything that happened even Mr. Dugan's homework seems like a good entertainment. The crumpled sketches of Jess lay on top of her books. Drawing naked pictures of the girl seems like the last of her worries now.

# SPELL FOR HEALING ACHES AND PAINS

## INGREDIENTS

3 Cups of Water Left Out Under the Moon

1 Cup of Sugar

1 Dried Valerian Root

3 Sprigs of Fresh Mint

Bark of Willow

Mortar and Pestle

Copper Mixing Bowl With Lid

Grind the first sprig of mint in with about a third of the valerian root. Mint should be well pulped.

Whisper one shimshim over the mixture. Repeat until all the mint and valerian has been ground fine.

Pour water into copper mixing bowl. Stir widdershins once before adding in mint valerian mixture. Stir widdershins twice.

Carefully add the sugar into water,. By now the spell should be partially primed and bubbling. Gently stir sunwise to dissolve sugar completely.

Once sugar is dissolved, add in the bark of willow, and and cover loosely with the lid. Do not secure the lid, as pressure from the spell may build up.

Let the spell coalesce for three hours. Once the time is up, you can remove the lid. If done correctly, the mixture should now be pearlescent green. If mixture is black or gray or bright green, do not use!





## THE PLAYGROUND

“Yo, we need to talk about this,” Jess says, catching up to her as she blows out of Mr. Dugan’s class.

“Talk about what?” Saoirse asks, popping her gum, trying not to let her cheeks heat over the fact that Jess sought her out. It’s not any reason she should be getting excited. Jess likes girls. That’s abundantly clear and they’re not even friends. It feels weird even standing next to her—Jess’s wearing a soft expensive-looking wool peacoat and well-fitting jeans while Saoirse’s in her skate shoes and ratty plaid.

Jess stares at her. “I drove by there this morning and the body is gone, but there hasn’t been anything on the news.”

Saoirse shrugs. “Isn’t that what we want?” She drops her voice low. “I mean, we abandoned the scene, so?”

“So?” What do you mean, so?” Jess stares at her like he’s got a screw loose. It’s actually the way Saoirse would’ve expected her to stare at her after she saw those drawings.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do, huh?” Saoirse asks. It comes out unexpectedly harsh, but she doesn’t know how to dial it back. “Call the national guard if you’re so worried.”

Jess laughs, but it’s mirthless. She shakes her head and turns on her heel, tossing over her shoulder at the last moment, “Didn’t take you for a coward.”

She’s not. That’s the thing. Saoirse’s not. She’s been out since the beginning of freshman year and it hasn’t been an easy road. It’s been all over the map and sometimes it’s sucked and sometimes she wished she’d never opened her fat fucking mouth and told anybody. Girls acting weird in the locker room, asking her if she was going to hit on them. But she’d steeled her spine and mostly it’s been worth it not to have to lie every single day. It’s weird though, to hear Jess say that—’never took you for a coward’—it makes her wonder a little about Jess. It’s probably just projection though, hoping her desperate crush could possibly have feelings back.

She’s still a little shell-shocked when she joins her friends at their table for lunch.

“What was that about?” Sam asks as Saoirse throws her stuff down.

“I don’t know,” Saoirse replies, dazed.

“You don’t know?” Sam grins and makes an obscene gesture with his index and middle finger. “The object of all your jerkoff fantasies came to talk to you and you don’t know?”

Saoirse chucks a balled-up napkin at him. “Shut up.”

Sam bats it aside and shakes his head. "You're such a dipshit."

Unfortunately, while Sam will never get a girlfriend if he continues to call ladies dipshits, Saoirse is not entirely certain she disagrees.

So, yesterday sucked. But today wins the 'worst day ever' award.

Later it's hard to put together what happened. Her head is fuzzy, and it feels like she just woke up from the worst sort of nightmare, heart pumping hard, but the world so empty.

She'd gone to the skatepark to blow off steam after school and dicked around there for a couple of hours until she felt pleasantly sore and then as she was leaving, passing the playground just as the streetlights were coming on, right there, horrifically draped on the swing, was a little girl. She stopped, frozen, unable to move. She hadn't even seen any little kids playing out there. It was cold out and a school night, Saoirse had been the only person out for hours. She didn't understand how there could be—how this little girl could be—

Dead.

Her body sagged and the swing creaked back and forth, swaying in the wind. Her fingertips were bloody, all ten of them, and when a particular gust rocked her hard enough that her head lolled, Saoirse realized her eyes were empty sockets. She screamed, horrified. Backing up, she tripped over her own feet in the attempt to get away.

The horrible unending high-pitched shriek started up. Her blood turned to ice. The corpse thing. The corpse thing had killed a little girl—taken her eyes and fingernails and propped her on the fucking swing like a doll. Well. She wasn't really sure how to explain what happened next. Only now she's frantically texting the only senior she knows well enough—Scott Steele who played on her mixed-gender hockey team back in grade school—to give her Jess's number right the fuck now.

why? you planning to ask her to prom? is what he gets back.

Saoirse calls him up.

"Fucking motherfucker, Steely. Give me her goddamn number or I will beat you to death with one of your own damn lacrosse sticks," she says as soon as Steeley picks up.

"Whoa. Are you planning to take her out to the fields and murder her?" Steely asks.

"Steely," Saoirse says, pleading, and she must sound terrible, because Steely awkwardly clears his throat.

"Okay, okay," Steely tells him, "I'll text you her number, just...like, settle down. Do some yoga or something. This is starting to sound like Bale Out."

Saoirse takes a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose. She's not going to cry on the phone to the kid she'd pantsed during practice once

because he wouldn't pass to her. "Steely—it's just—can you just—" she gives up, and leaves it at a simple 'thanks' before hanging up. The number beeps up onto her phone a few moments later. She's barely holding it together and when Jess answers with a distracted hello after the first two rings, Saoirse has to take a moment just to breathe.

"Hello?" Jess repeats. "Who is this?"

Saoirse pulls it together. "I need—I need your help."

"Saoirse?"

The way that Jess says her name nearly makes her lose it for real.

"Yeah, it's me. The corpse thing. It killed a little girl and I don't know." It all comes out in a rush. "It came at me. There's blood everywhere. All over me."

There's a long pause and then finally, Jess lets out a breath.

"Saoirse, fuck, I'm coming to get you," Jess replies. "Stay right where you are."

Saoirse really doesn't want to do that. The little girl's tiny doll body is still there swaying. And that corpse thing touched Saoirse and for some reason the most indescribable pain had gone through her, but the thing had just fallen apart, flesh peeling off, unspooling almost, glistening wet bones clattering to the ground. She doesn't even want to turn her head in case she catches sight of it.

When Jess shows up, Saoirse is huddled into a ball, head buried between her knees. Somehow she gets Saoirse into her car and back to her house while Saoirse stares blankly into space. Jess's family isn't home and she carefully leads Saoirse up to his room, setting down a glass of water on her nightstand and telling Saoirse to drink it. Just as Saoirse's starting to wonder how the hell she can be so calm, Jess walks into the bathroom and proceeds to loudly regurgitate the entire contents of her stomach.

She walks out after brushing her teeth, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, somehow still managing to look put together despite yarfing. It's truly unfair.

"We have to talk about this," she says.

"Yeah," Saoirse replies numbly.

"You can—you can like fight it."

"But I don't know how," she replies, eyes prickling again with those impending tears. She swipes at them miserably.

"I want to like, call the national guard or something. Like why doesn't anybody ever do that in the movies?"

Saoirse laughs weakly. "Because they don't want to end up locked up in an insane asylum?"

"We saw what we saw," Jess insists.

"They're just going to think we're some stupid teenagers trying to prank them."