

Sarah Braunstein
from *Mayday*

Rhonda finds herself in the backyard. The sky is like strawberry jam. It's not really like strawberry jam, but that's how she decides she should remember it. A few people are huddling around a bonfire no bigger than a goldfish bowl. "Hey!" they say. She gives a wave but doesn't want to join them. She spots an empty hammock where the woods start, a big floral sheet tied to two birches.

The hammock curls around her body. She shuts her eyes. The woods are very quiet. Even the smoke from the campfire is distant, fraudulent, tickles her nostrils less definitely than a memory of a campfire. Then there's a rustling, a silence, a louder rustling. The voice that follows is winded, tart. "Who's there sleeping in my slingshot?"

For a moment, before she opens her eyes, Rhonda is indeed sleeping in someone's slingshot. She takes a breath. At any moment she will be flung upward, cast wildly into the sky. She will drift in the sugary wind of the upper atmosphere, listless and slow and getting bored, before she falls to her death and the sun comes back.

The girl is very skinny, with knees as pale and round as small onions, a rotund, two-chinned face. She's wearing man-sized flip-flops. Her cheeks and shirt are a mess, smeared with dirt or chocolate cake. Her bulbous head and unwavering gaze make Rhonda think of a sea-creature, one of those contemplative-seeming bottom-feeders that hides in tufts of weed.

The child is out of breath. She is huffing, glistening with sweat. Her hair is limp and pigtailed, white-blond. She could be seven. She could be more or less. She looks like a girl but it's almost as likely that she's a fish. Rhonda secretly hopes there's an ocean somewhere, as yet undiscovered, that might be responsible for this kind of thing. She could be a fish but it's just as likely that she's something born from the trunk of a tree; maybe a mushroom-feasting wood-nymph, some wandering goatish creature devoid of manners. Of course it's more likely, Rhonda knows, that she's a girl. Another girl in a world of them. Even the woods are full. You don't have to look hard. It's more than a little disappointing.

"That's my sling-shot. Do you know that or don't you?"

Still, it's a treat to find her here. It's a treat to lay in a makeshift hammock and find yourself with some tart, filthy company.

The girl's hands rest on her hips. Though her tone is proprietary, her stance doesn't suggest indignation. She looks only tired. Her shoulders slouch. She keeps her hands on her waist the way a jogger does, spent, proud of her exertion.

"I didn't know whose it was," says Rhonda. "Though it did strike me that it must belong to a mindful and sympathetic soul. It's placed just right. You can see the sky through that gap in the branches."

"I know that," says the girl, and then, more sharply: "I *know* that."

"You can see the part of the sky that's warmed by the dragon's breath but not scorched."

"Which dragon?"

"I wouldn't know his name. When I was a girl his name was Metro. But he was always threatening to change it, so who knows. Maybe he's married by now. Maybe he's got his wife's name. Anyway, you see the best piece of sky from here."

“I know that.”

“Of course you do,” says Rhonda. “It’s your slingshot.”

“It’s my branches.”

“Is the sky yours as well?”

“Don’t fool me,” she says.

“I couldn’t.”

“The sky’s no ones. The sky’s not yours.” She changes her mind. “The sky’s my father’s.”

Rhonda says, “Is he the one who made it pink?”

The girl ignores this. She says, “I’d like to get in there.”

“With me? Would you might sharing with me? Or do I have to get out? I don’t want to get out.”

“You won’t get out?”

“I don’t want to. I will get out if you ask me to, but I don’t want to.”

“Are you nice or not?”

“I’m resting in your slingshot and appreciating your father’s sky. I’m admiring his work. I’m thinking he has good taste.”

“So?”

“So why on earth should I listen to the suggestion that I’m *un-nice* by some mud-smearing wood-nymph of the homespun variety?”

“You don’t even know my name.”

“True,” says Rhonda. “So can we share? I’ll make room for you in here.”

The girl considers it.

“I’m nice,” says Rhonda. “If that’s what you want to know. I have a daughter.”

“I don’t care about daughters,” says the girl, and climbs in.

They watch the sky together. After a while, the girl closes her eyes. Her breathing turns softer. A few minutes pass, and Rhonda slips her arm around the child. A body is a body. This one is tense and smooth. The girl settles a little into Rhonda’s grasp. Comfort is comfort. The irony is that the people who say which kind of body is best are the people who’ll never try them all.

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