

Unnecessary

by Tim Jones-Yelvington

I reached my mother's doorstep with an important message, written in advance and practiced in front of a mirror. She answered in a purple kimono, her lips and cheeks rouged. She stretched across the doorframe, steel-eyed and implacable.

"I balanced my checkbook," I told her. "I wanted to tell you. I've been recording all my purchases in my register. I'm adding and subtracting."

She arched her brow.

"But I suspect even this will not be enough for you. You will expect more, you will expect me to categorize these expenses, assign colors and make pie charts. You set unreachable expectations because you want me to fail you, because then you remain necessary. Well I'm here to tell you — you are not necessary. I love you, but you are not necessary."

"Come in," my mother said, extending the storm door. "Your sister will want to see you."

"My sister?"

In the foyer, a tiny blond tornado whirled by.

"Say hello to your brother," my mother said.

"Hello," she said. Her skin was pale, her cheeks patched with red. She looked maybe eight years old.

"She must be a great deal taller than the last time you saw her?"

I said, "I do not have a sister."

"Of course," my mother said. "I'd forgotten. Your sister must not have been around much when you were growing up. The demands of one child are overwhelming enough, and you were an especially demanding child. Still, it's rather cruel to deny her existence, wouldn't you say?"

"I do not have a sister," I repeated.

"I will make us some hot chocolate," my mother said.

I sat on the couch and watched the small blond girl yank plush squirrels from a columnar tree trunk sewn from fabric scraps. The

squirrels were stuffed with tiny horns that squeaked. These were my Woodsy family. The small blond girl was playing with my Woodsies.

She lined up the Woodsies in a row. She said, "they're going to the opera. They're going to see Das Rheingold."

They're squirrels, I thought. They can't go to the opera. There's no opera in the forest.

"A new flavor," my mother said, wielding a tray of steaming mugs. "Dulce de leche. White chocolate with caramel."

"I have to poop," said the small blond girl, and disappeared into the hallway.

I sipped.

"Did you take an eight-year-old girl to see Wagner?" I said.

The small blond girl came back and reached for a mug.

"Did you wash your hands?" said my mother, holding back the tray.

The small blond girl shook her head, shame-faced, and turned in the other direction.

"Make sure you count to fifty," my mother called behind her.

"They say twenty seconds," she said, addressing me. "But young children count quickly."

Later, on my way out the door, my mother placed her hand on my upper back.

"I'm glad you're finally taking care of yourself, darling," she said.

"But I will always be necessary."

