

# SKIN FOLK

*Stories*

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"I feel like I've been dragged five miles behind a runaway horse," Cleve told her. "You all right?"

"Yeah, whered that thing go, the ganger?"

"Shit, Issy, I'm so sorry. Should have drained the suits like you said."

"Chuh. Don't dig nothing. I could have done it too."

"I think we neutralized it. Touched each other, touched it: We canceled it out. I think."

"Touched each other. That simple." Issy gave a little rueful laugh.

"Cleve, I . . . you're my honey, you know? You sweet me for days. I won't forget anymore to tell you," she said, "and keep telling you."

His smile brimmed over with joy. He replied, "You, you're my live wire. You keep us both juiced up, make my heart sing in my chest." He hesitated, spoke bashfully, "And my dick leap in my pants when I see you."

A warmth flooded Issy at his sweet, hot talk. She felt her eyelashes dampen. She smiled. "See, the dirty words not so hard to say. And the anger not so hard to show?"

Tailor-sat on the floor, beautiful Buddha-body, he frowned at her. "I 'fraid to use harsh words, Issy, you know that. Look at the size of me, the blackness of me. You know what it is to see people cringe for fear when you shout?"

She was dropping down with fatigue. She leaned and softly touched his face. "I don't know what that is like. But I know you. I know you would never hurt me. You must say what on your mind, Cleve. To me, at least." She closed her eyes, dragged herself exhaustedly into his embrace.

He said, "You know, I dream of the way you full up my arms."

"You're sticky," she murmured. "Like candy?" And fell asleep, touching him.

## PRECIOUS



*The ending of the folktale goes that when the old woman gives the peasant girl the gift of jewels that fall out of her mouth every time she speaks, the prince decides to marry the girl because she's so sweet and beautiful. Of course, the fact that she had just become a walking treasury can't have hurt her prospects either. I keep mixing that tale up with the one about the goose that laid the golden eggs and that ended up as dinner. That wasn't a happy ending either.*

I stopped singing in the shower. I kept having to call the plumber to remove flakes of gold and rotted lilies from the clogged drain. On the phone I would say that I was calling for my poor darling cousin, the one struck dumb by a stroke at an early age. As I spoke, I would hold a cup to my chin to catch the pennies that rolled off my tongue. I would give my own address. If the plumber thought it odd that anyone could manage to spill her jewelry box into the bathtub, and more than once, he was too embarrassed to try to speak to the mute lady. I'm not sure what he thought about the lilies. When he was done, I would scribble my thanks onto a scrap of paper and tip him with a gold nugget.

I used to have the habit of talking to myself when I was alone, until the day I slipped on an opal that had tumbled from my lips, and fractured my elbow in the fall. At the impact, my cry of pain

spat a diamond the size of an egg across the room, where it rolled under the couch. I pulled myself to my feet and called an ambulance. My sobs fell as bitter milkweed blossoms. I always hated to let the flowers die. Holding my injured arm close to my body, I clumsily filled a drinking glass with water from the kitchen and struck the pink clusters into it.

The pain in my elbow made me whimper. Quartz crystals formed on my tongue with each sound, soft as pudding in the first instance, but gems always hardened before I could spit them out. The facets abraded my gums as they slipped past my teeth. By the time the ambulance arrived, I had collected hundreds of agonized whimpers into a bowl I had fetched from the kitchen.

During the jolting ride to the hospital, I bit nearly through my lip with the effort of making no sound. The few grunts that escaped me rolled onto the pillow as silver coins. "Ma'am," said a paramedic, "you've dropped your change. I'll just put it into your purse for you, okay?"

The anaesthetic in the emergency room was a greater mercy than the doctors could imagine. I went home as soon as they would allow.

My father had always told me that a soft answer would turn away wrath. As a young woman, I took his words to heart, tried to lull my stepmother with agreeableness, dull the edge of her taunts with a soft reply. I went cheerfully about my chores, and smiled till my teeth ached when she had me do her daughter Cass's work too. I pretended that it didn't burn at my gut to see mother and daughter smirking as I scrubbed. I always tried to be pleasant, and so of course I was pleasant when Cass and I met the old woman in the mall that day. She was thirsty, she said, so I fetched her the drink of water, though she seemed spy enough to run her own errands. Cass told her as much, scorn in her voice as she derided my instant obedience.

Sometimes I wonder whether that old woman wasn't having a cruel game with both of us, my sister and I. I got a blessing in return for a kind word, Cassie a curse as payment for a harsh one. That's

how it seemed, but did the old lady know that I would come to fear attention almost as much as Cass feared sithering things? I believe I would rather taste the muscled length and cool scales of a snake shape themselves in my mouth, then slide headfirst from my lips, than look once more into the greedy gaze of my banker as I bring him another shoebox crammed with jeweled phrases, silver sentences, and the rare pearl of laughter.

Jude used to make a game of surprising different sounds from me, to see what wealth would leap from my mouth. He was playful then, and kind, the husband who rescued me from my stepmother's greed and wrath. My father's eyes were sad when we drove away, but he only waved.

Jude could make me smile, but he preferred it when I laughed out loud, raining him with wealth. A game of tickle would summon strings of pearly chuckles that gleamed as they fell at our feet. Once, a pinch on my bottom rewarded him with a turquoise nugget when I yelped. He had it strung on a leather thong, which he wore around his neck.

But it was the cries and groans of our lovemaking that he liked best. He would stroke and tongue me for hours, lick and kiss me where I enjoyed it most, thrust into me deeper with each wail of pleasure, until, covered in the fragrance of crushed lily petals, we had no strength for more. Afterwards, he would collect sapphires and jade, silver love knots and gold doubloons from the folds of the sheets. "I don't even need to bring you flowers," he would joke. "You speak better blossoms for yourself than I can ever buy."

It seemed as though only weeks had passed when my marriage began to sour. Jude's love-bites became painful nips that broke my skin and forced diamonds from my teeth. He often tried to scare me, hiding in the closet so I shrieked when he leapt out, grains of white gold spilling from my mouth. One night he put a dead rat in the kitchen sink. I found it in the morning, and platinum rods clattered to the ground as I screamed. I begged him to be kind, be pleasant, but he only growled that we needed more money, that our

investments weren't doing well. I could hear him on the phone late at night, pleading for more time to pay his debts. He became sullen, and often came home with the smell of liquor on his breath. I grew nervous and quiet. Once he chided me for keeping too silent, not holding up my part of the marriage. I began to sob, withered tulips plummeting down. "Bitch!" he shouted. "Quit it with the damned flowers. More gold!" The backhand across my mouth drew blood, but along with two cracked teeth, I spat out sapphires. That pacified him for a short time.

From then on, the beatings happened often. It was eight months later—when Jude broke my arm—that I left, taking nothing with me. I moved to a different city. My phone number is unlisted. I pay all my bills through my bank, not through the mail. A high fence surrounds my house. The gate is always locked.

Since I have no need to work, my time is my own. I search the folklore databases of libraries all over the world, looking for a spell that will reach the old woman, beg her to take back her gift, her curse.

My stepmother will not say it, but Cassie is mad, driven to it by leathery bats and the wriggling legs of spiders uttering forth from her mouth. It's good that her mother loves her, cares for her out on that farm, because she sits and rocks now, her constant muttered curses birthing an endless stream of lizards and greasy toads. "It keeps the snakes fed," my stepmother says when she calls with sour thanks for her monthly cheque. "That way, they're not biting us." The mother and father that loved me are both long dead, but my stepmother still lives.

When the phone rang, I thought it was her, calling to complain about slugs in her lettuce.

"Hello?" I spat out a nasturtium.

"Precious. It is you." Jude's voice was honey dripped over steel. "Why have you been hiding, love?"

I clamped my lips together. I would not give him my words. I listened, though. I had always listened very carefully to Jude.

"You don't have to answer, Princess. I can see you quite clearly from here. You must have wanted me to find you, leaving the back curtains open like that. And the lock on that gate wouldn't keep an imbecile out!"

"Jude, go away, or I'll call the police." Deadly nightshade fell from my lips. I paused to spit out the poisonous sap.

There was a crash in the living room as Jude came through the back sliding doors. He casually dropped the cell phone when he stepped through the ruined glass. He had a heavy mallet in the other hand. He let it fall too, to crunch on a shard of glass. Petrified, struck dumb as a stone, I made it to the front door before he slammed me against the wall, wrenching my arm behind my back. From years of habitual silence, my only sound was a hiss of pain. A copper coin rolled over my tongue, a metallic taste of fear.

"You won't call anyone, my treasure. You know it would ruin your life if people found out. Think of the tabloid media following you everywhere, the kidnapping attempts. You'd have every bleeding heart charity in the book breathing down your neck for donations. Let me protect you from all that, Jewel. I'm your husband, and I love you, except when you anger me. I only want my fair share."

Pressed against mine, Jude's body was tall as I remembered, and cruelly thin, driven by the strength of rage. He would have his due. Maybe I could talk my way out of this, be agreeable. "Let me go, Jude. I won't fight you anymore." I had to mouth the words around the petals of a dead rose. I carefully tongued the thorny stem past my teeth.

"You're sure?" He pushed my elbow higher up along my back, until I whimpered, grinding my teeth on more dry thorns. "I'm sure! Let go!" He did. I almost fainted as the wrenched muscles in my arm cramped. Jude grabbed my sore shoulder and pushed me ahead of him into the living room. He stopped and turned me to face him. Hatred glared back at me from his eyes.

"Okay, darling, you owe me. Left me in one hell of a mess back there, you know? They need to be paid, and soon. So, come on, make the magic. Spit it out!"

"Jude, I'm sorry I ran away like that, but I was frightened." Two silver coins rolled to the ground.

"You can do better than that, Precious." Jude raised his fist level with my face. My jaw still ached where he dislocated it the first time he ever hit me. I forced a rush of words from my mouth, anything to make the wealth fall:

"I mean, I love you, darling, and I hope that we can work this out, because I know you were the one who rescued me from my **stepmother**, I'm grateful that you took care of me, so I didn't have to worry about anything . . ." A rain of silver was piling up around Jude's feet: bars, sheets, rods, wire. He grinned, reached down to touch the gleaming pile. I felt a little nudge of an emotion I didn't recognize, but no time to think about that; I had to placate him. I kept talking.

"It was so wonderful living with you, not like at my stepmother's, where I had to do all the cooking and cleaning, and my father never spoke up for me . . ." Semiprecious stones started piling up with the silver: rose quartz, jade, hematite. The mound reached Jude's knees, and the delight on his face made him look like the playful man I had married. He sat on the hillock of treasure, started shoveling it up over his lap. I had to keep the words flowing:

"If Daddy were a fair man, if he really loved me, he could have said something, and wouldn't it have been easier if the four of us had split the chores?" I couldn't stop, even if I dared. All those years of resentment gouted forth: emeralds green with jealousy; seething red garnets, cold blue chunks of lapis. The stones were larger now, the size of plums. I ejected them from my mouth with the force of thrown rocks. They struck Jude's chest, his chin. "Hey!" he cried. He tried to stand, but the bounty piled up over his shoulders, slamming him back down to the floor. My words were flying faster.

"So I fetched and I carried and I smiled and I simpered, while Daddy let it all wash over him and told me to be nicer, even nicer, and now he's dead and I can't tell him how mad I am at him, and the only thanks I got was that jealous, lazy hussy telling me it's *my* fault her daughter's spitting slugs, and then you come riding to my rescue

so that I can spend the next year of my life trying to make you happy too, and you have the gall to lay hands on me, and to tell me that you have the right? Well, just listen to me, Jude: I am not your treasure trove, and I will not run anymore, and I shall be nice if and when it pleases me, and stop calling me Precious; my name is Isobel!"

As I shouted my name, a final stone formed on my tongue, soft at first, as a hen's egg forms in her body. It swelled, pushing my jaws apart until I gagged. I forced it out. It flew from my mouth, a ruby as big as a human heart, that struck Jude in the head, then fell onto the pile of treasure. He collapsed unconscious amidst the bounty, blood trickling from a dent in his temple. The red ruby gleamed as though a coal lit its core. I felt light-headed, exhilarated. I didn't bother to check whether Jude was still breathing. I stepped around him to the living room, saw the cell phone on the floor. I picked it up and dialled emergency. "Police? There's an intruder in my home."

It was when I was standing outside waiting for the police that I realised that nothing had fallen from my mouth when I made the telephone call. I chuckled first, then I laughed. Just sounds, only sounds.