

# —SKIN

by Kim Despina

This thing wearing his sister's skin stands at the foot of Jeremy's bed, just as she has every night since he moved back into his father's house. When Jeremy asked Lisa to help care for their father in his last days, she hung up on him. Instead, this thing visits in her place. She whips the covers from his bed, and Jeremy's skin puckers in the cool rush of air.

He thinks she's changed her mind about helping with their father, but when he touches her, the skin slides over the thing underneath and he knows this can't be his sister. He tries to scream but nothing emerges except a soft moan. He pushes her away, but his hands caress that pale skin while something else pulsates just beneath its surface. His body refuses every command his mind issues. He's come to accept these visits, even enjoys them in some unnatural way. There's always penance.

His entire adult life has been penance. In the Peace Corps he taught English in a tiny cinderblock room to children who asked only the English words for food. After failing to feed anything more than their minds, Jeremy joined the seminary. His room there had a wood floor, plaster walls, and no starving children. As a priest, he enjoyed the overgrown garden behind the rectory. The trees hung low, denying the herbs sun and stunting their growth, but the air tasted fresh.

The priesthood had been his escape. The children, their minds hungrier than their bellies, arrived at Sunday school eager to learn. His parishioners responded to his counseling with appreciation. After almost thirty years of searching, Jeremy finally found a community, a family.

His father's illness has ripped him away from that family, and he aches to return. Jeremy waits for his father to die so he can return to his life in the church. His life with no starving children. His life without this thing wearing his sister's skin, and its unnatural hunger.

Lying rigid on his mattress, Jeremy promises when he returns to the church, he'll trim the trees and feed the herbs with sunlight. He can't confess something this unsavory, but he vows to pray every prayer he knows a dozen times. *Anything*, he pleads with God, *just make this thing go away*.

Every door is bolted, every window shut tight. Yet here she stands wearing the skin of someone he loves. This caricature of a woman is not his sister. Lisa lives thirty minutes away in Boston. Her partner and his religion are two of the many things they never speak about on the rare occasions they talk at all. During those conversations,

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Jeremy does the talking, and Lisa provides vague answers to his questions. Calling her his sister seems wrong, invasive. He barely knows her.

Would she notice, he wonders, that he replaced the Farrah Fawcett poster from his boyhood with a framed photograph of a pale yellow crocus, opening among the crystals of melting snow? The photo was a gift from a parishioner. Jeremy tried to tell Lisa that he'd burned the cache of dirty magazines he'd found piled in his dresser drawers, forgotten since high school. Her response had been a dial tone.

Jeremy called her three times the first week he spent in his father's house. Twice she hung up on him, and the third time her partner claimed Lisa was out even though he heard her voice in the background.

"Wait," Jeremy said, struggling to remember this woman's name.

"What?"

"Does she still like to catch lightning bugs?"

Lisa's voice came through the background. Jeremy pictured her standing next to her partner, one hand on her shoulder. "Tell him not now. I can't talk to him now."

"Don't call back." The partner hung up the phone.

The thing that looks like his sister unties her robe and lets it fall to the floor. Her skin glows in the moonlight. He wishes for the false safety of blankets, to curl up under the covers and pretend there's not a monster in the room. But his body disagrees. She climbs atop him, pausing to kiss his erection much the way Jeremy hopes to kiss the rings of the pope. Every night is the same, down to the hopes, regrets, and memories as she takes his willing body, and his mind pretends to fight from its cage.

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At 13, Jeremy developed a painful crush on Missy Salinger when she pushed her bathing suit bottoms to her knees and showed him *hers* behind the boathouse. Jeremy put his family jewels on display for her, but she gasped and ran away, leaving him alone with his swim trunks around his ankles.

Thinking about the freckles on Missy's pale thighs and where they led, Jeremy hiked through the woods between his family's vacation house and the Salingers' cottage. Her voice reached his ears before he got to the edge of the woods. Crouched behind a lilac bush, he listened to Missy and Toni Wilson chatter about girl stuff while baking their skin in the sun. He ignored their words and drank Missy in with his eyes.

Her red hair, barely contained in a pony tail, shone in the sun. Jeremy imagined weaving his fingers through those curls. He untied his swim trunks and slipped his hand inside. Jeremy massaged his erection until Toni's words stopped him cold. The flesh in his right hand softened.

"You saw it?" Toni asked. "You really saw it?"

"Yeah, it was all shriveled and gross."

"So it was small? Where did he show you?"

Jeremy's skin burned to the tips of his ears.

"Behind the boathouse. I can't believe he really did it."

"Did you—"

"Ew! Of course not."

Jeremy sucked in deep breaths, but it didn't calm the anger flooding him. The