

Kate Stacey

In Misery Men Grow Old Quickly¹

EVA AND I SAT OPPOSITE EACH OTHER on the floor of our mother's bedroom. Eva was pulling on a thread at one of the corners of the worn rug. My legs stretched out in front of me as I leant against the bed where our mother's body had been found two weeks ago. An aneurysm, the doctors said. Unknowable and lethal. Swift, we hope. We both stared at the box sitting in between us.

From a distance, the intricately carved wooden lid was beautiful. It had been made by a true craftsman, the patterns flowing seamlessly in and around each other. But close up, its beauty dissolved. Flames, bodies twisted into unnatural shapes, into vines, into serpents writhing around the edge of each corner. It had always lived in a locked dresser drawer, with strict instructions to never be touched.

I spoke first. "We have to open it. One of us has to take it, or it goes to the auction house and they'll want to know what's in it." "It was the one rule she had," Eva said. "We can't ignore that just because she's not here, Elias. It's not right."



That night, I couldn't sleep. The sheets scratching at my skin, I thought about the things said of our mother at her funeral. Fiercely intelligent, a talented sculptor. A loving mother. And incredibly beautiful, a beauty that seemed to be enhanced rather than diminished by the passing of time.

There were also things not said. She was a secret keeper. She was a loving mother but not a devoted one. Her art came first above all else, including her children. She once left us with an aunt without an explanation or a goodbye and returned two years later, simply collecting us as though we had been for a sleepover.

As I grew older, I became more aware of the versions of herself my mother had shaped. Others knew the artist, I knew the mother. But these weren't her. There was another, deeper version in the shadows, behind the green of her eyes. This was the one Eva knew.

My thoughts were interrupted by voices coming from the kitchen. But when I walked in, Eva was the only one there, tucked into the large wooden chair at the end of the old farmhouse table. The only light source was the moonlight through the large bay window. Eva's pale skin glowed from it, the beams casting a crown around her dark hair.

"I thought I heard voices," I said to her. "Then you might need to get your head checked," she said with a wry smile, bringing the mug in her hands to her lips. I leant against the door of the kitchen. "Did she ever tell you why she went away?" I asked. Eva looked startled, by the break in the silence or the question, I wasn't sure. Eva carefully placed the mug on the table. "No, she never talked about it."



1 From Works and Days by Hesiod

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By the morning, I was resolved. "This is ridiculous," I said to Eva as I walked past the kitchen. She was in the same chair as last night, I couldn't tell if she had been to bed. "I'm opening it."

Ignoring Eva's protestations, I went upstairs, her footsteps echoing mine. When I reached the room, I knelt in front of the box. As I went to pick it up, I heard Eva cry out before the weight of her body hit me from the side. We both tumbled onto the carpet, equally surprised. We hadn't physically fought since we were kids. Standing up, something in me seethed.

I turned to her. Without a thought, I whipped the palm of my hand across her cheek. I should have been shocked by the naturalness of it, but there was nothing. She flew against the door, slumping to the carpet. It gave me the moment I needed. I turned back to the box and levered the carved lid with my thumbs. It came off easily, especially for something that wasn't meant to be open.

Eva had unfolded herself and crawled over to the box. We both peered into the darkness, before looking up at each other. Eva thumbed at a smear of blood in the corner of her mouth, a terrible look in her eyes. I started to laugh.