

My mother used to tell me about the ocean. She said there was a place where there was nothing but water as far as you could see and that it was always moving, rushing toward you and then away. She once showed me a picture that she said was my great-great-great-grandmother standing in the ocean as a child. It has been years since, and the picture was lost to fire long ago, but I remember it, faded and worn. A little girl surrounded by nothingness.

In my mother's stories, passed down from her many-greats-grandmother, the ocean sounded like the wind through the trees and men used to ride the water. Once, when I was older and our village was suffering through a drought, I asked my mother why, if so much water existed, were there years when our own streams ran almost dry? She told me that the ocean was not for drinking--that the water was filled with salt. That is when I stopped believing her about the ocean. How could there be so much salt in the universe and how could God allow so much water to become useless?

But there are times when I stand at the edge of the Forest of Hands and Teeth and look out at the wilderness that stretches on forever and wonder what it would be like if it were all water. I close my eyes and listen to the wind in the trees and imagine a world of nothing but water closing over my head.

It would be a world without the Unconsecrated, a world without the Forest of Hands and Teeth.

Often, my mother stands next to me holding her hand up over her eyes to block the sun and looking out past the fences and into the trees and brush, waiting to see if her husband will come home to her.

She is the only one who believes that he has not turned--that he might come home the same man he was when he left. I gave up on my father months ago and buried the pain of losing him as deeply as possible so that I could continue with my daily life. Now I sometimes fear coming to the edge of the Forest and looking past the fence. I am afraid I will see him there with the others: tattered clothes, sagging skin, the horrible pleading moan and the fingers scraped raw from pulling at the metal fences.

That no one has seen him gives my mother hope. At night she prays to God that he has found some sort of enclave similar to our village. That somewhere in the dense Forest he has found safety. But no one else has any hope. The Sisters tell us that ours is the only village left in the world.

My brother Jed has taken to volunteering extra shifts for the Guardian patrols that monitor the fence line. I know that, like me, he thinks our father is lost to the Unconsecrated and that he hopes to find him during the patrol of the perimeter and kill him before our mother sees what her husband has become.

People in our village have gone mad from seeing their loved ones as Unconsecrated. It was a woman--a mother--horrified at the sight of her son infected during a patrol, who set

herself on fire and burned half of our town. That was the fire that destroyed my family's heirlooms when I was a child, that obliterated our only ties to who we were as a people before the Return, though most were so corroded by then that they left only wisps of memories.

Jed and I watch our mother closely now and we never allow her to approach the fence line unaccompanied. At times Jed's wife Beth used to join us on these vigils until she was sent to bed rest with her first child. Now it is just us.

And then one day Beth's brother catches up with me while I am dunking our laundry in the stream that branches off the big river. For as long as I can remember Harold has been a friend of mine, one of the few in the village my age. He trades me a handful of wildflowers for my sopping sheets and we sit and watch the water flow over the rocks as he twists the sheets in complicated patterns to dry them out.

"How is your mother?" he asks me, because he is nothing if not polite.

I duck my head and wash my hands in the water. I know I should be getting back to her, that I have already taken too much time for myself today and that she is probably pacing, waiting for me. Jed is off on a long-term patrol of the perimeter, checking the strength of the fences, and my mother likes to spend her afternoons near the Forest looking for my father. I need to be there to comfort her just in case. To hold her back from the fences if she finds him. "She's still holding out hope," I say.

Harry clucks his tongue in sympathy. We both know there is little hope.

His hands seek out and cover mine under the water. I have known this was coming for months. I have seen the way he looks at me now, how his eyes have changed. How tension has crept into our friendship. We are no longer children and haven't been for years.

"Mary, I...\_" He pauses for a second. "I was hoping that you would go with me to the Harvest Celebration next weekend."

I look down at our hands in the water. I can feel my fingertips wrinkling in the cold and his skin feels soft and fleshy. I consider his offer. The Harvest Celebration is the time in the fall when those of marrying age declare themselves to one another. It is the beginning of the courtship, the time during the short winter days when the couple determines whether they will make a suitable match. Almost always the courtship will end in spring with Brethlaw--the weeklong celebration of wedding vows and christenings. It's very rare that a courtship fails. Marriage in our village is not about love--it is about commitment.

Every year I wonder at the couples pairing up around me. At how my former childhood friends suddenly find partners, bond, prepare for the next step. Pledge themselves to one another and begin their courtships. I always assumed the same would happen to me when my time approached. That because of the sickness that wiped out so many of my peers

when I was a child, it would be even more important that those of us of marrying age find a mate. So important that there wouldn't be enough girls to spare for a life with the Sisterhood.

I even hoped that perhaps I would be lucky enough to find more than just a mate, to eventually find love like my mother and father.

And yet, even though I have been one of the few eligible during the past two years, I've been left aside.

I have spent the last weeks dealing with my father's absence beyond the fences. Dealing with my mother's despair and desolation. With my own grief and mourning. Until this moment it hasn't occurred to me that I might be the last one asked to the Harvest Celebration. Or that I might be left unclaimed.

Excerpted from **The Forest of Hands and Teeth** by Carrie Ryan Copyright © 2009 by Carrie Ryan. Excerpted by permission of Delacorte Books for Young Readers, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.