

THE DESCENT OF TESS

(CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT)

By Tiffany Chaney

Her hair is the field of the countryside as it waits for spring, strangely vibrant under the sun-like lamp overhead. It is wound up tightly and pinned at the base of her skull. The black dress neither absorbs nor reflects any color, but seems to sashay up her hips and over her arm where one shoulder is exposed: This is her invitation.

This is the dress my father gave her. The last present. This is the dress she wore to his funeral.

How dare she. And, oh, how she dares.

It is the first party we have hosted since his death, on the day of his death no less.

There is the tinkle of glasses. Reds. Whites. Cheese. Out of season fruit. There is the hint of laughter that begins as a revered hum between the tongue and teeth. It builds, as if my mother has command over joy.

Wherever she is, Peri is the still point of the ever-turning Earth. She must always be the True North. My father used to have a little joke that she and technology didn't go well together, and my mother laughed off her own "klutziness" as a charming little thing. Indeed, devices literally went awry around her. According to my father, she was such a beauty that time quite literally stopped when she entered the room.

As my mother moves across the room, every bit of furniture, every person, and every remark seems timed to the dance of her pace. She is coming for me.

"Green suits your eyes," she says, fluidly stopping in place as her forefinger tilts my head up to the light.

"This was his favorite dress."

"So it was," she says. "Come. Stand by me. We should say something nice, in remembrance."

She takes my hand and pulls. As we ease into the crowd, she interlaces my arm into hers, slowing her walk.

A tap of her hand on a shoulder. A glinting smile. "May I?" Someone pours her a glass of white wine. She is all smiles and elbows, part of the crowd until her face finds mine.

"Another," she says looking into my eyes. What is this? Some sort of acknowledgment that this is fucking hard? There is no expression aside from the light glistening across her eyes and cheeks. She is made of benign smiles as she accepts the second glass, passing me the first.

"How is everything?" I hear her ask, with her hand on the gentleman's shoulder. The men are all wrapped in black or navy jackets. One shoulder is the same as another to me; not to her. "Good, good. Glad to hear of it."

She captures my hand in hers. There is a clear spot between the dining room and the living room. We clear the distance in no time.

Time is still when they notice the hostess is no longer gliding among them.

"Friends," she begins. The ruffling of clothes settle as if they are down feathers, the stilling of glasses against lips, and the placement of half-eaten relics of fruit on small plates. "Family," she continues. Oh, you mean the ones we haven't shut out? Those wavering sticks of

people in black at his funeral? “We are gathered here today...” Mom, no one is getting married! “to remember my husband and loving father of Tess, who passed one year ago today. She clinches my hand. He always provided for our family and this community, always had a kind word or laugh. We remember you, in joy, today.” She allows silence. And, all is yet still. “Let us toast: To Jack.”

“Jack.” The response is unanimous but flavored with grief, envy, and longing. They take their sips of wine before returning to shifting in place, polishing off the odd glass, or finishing off the fruit before going back for more.

“Dad,” I whisper, against my glass. The wine touches my lips. A small sip slips down my tongue and throat, while the rest cascades back into the glass. A dry Riesling. She interlaces her fingers with mine, and her grip is gentler.

“Most of them are not here for him,” my mother observes. “Or for us,” she adds. She is right. “We only have each other now.” My mother clinks her glass against mine.

I am fully hers now.

In seconds she finishes her glass of wine and places it on a nearby surface. Then, she takes my other hand hers. “TessS.” My name sizzles out of her, enlivening the atmosphere. “You should play something. Your father would have wanted it.”

I simply nod.

It’s true that he would have liked me to play. He would have wanted nothing sad; he would have wanted something to dance to. My mother would have obliged dancing with him; she was great at taking sudden dips and turns. I have rarely touched the grand piano these days, but as I go to lift the hood, I notice no dust. The keys fit my fingertips as though they are my fingerprints.

The piece comes to me out of nowhere. My fingers have chosen the music. A ragtime kind of sound begins in starts and stops, hands tripping over one another. A third of the way into the piece, I realize I am playing “Jelly Roll” Morton’s Finger Buster. It plays true to its name.

I do not look to my mother for approval. I do not desire nor seek approval. There is no time for any of that with this piece. My hands have a life of their own.

The music fills the empty-feeling room, relieves the weight in my shoulders, and penetrates the false tribute party like a shot aimed true. Sometimes when I play, I am elsewhere. Light vivifies in an amber haze as the keys, and my fingertips focus in and out.

Human shapes blur around me as few dare dance to this, and so my fingers dance with them, faster and faster. They pass over the glass in the window, colorful tinges of springtime flowers against the black and blue bruised suits satiating the somber mood required of us here.

My fingers bang on the keys as if I were a child. In the glass, adjacent to the piano, the green of my dress stands out from the trees, black of my hair satin as the night, and on my lips, I wear an unusual thing for the last year—a smile.

My ears muffle the babel of party voices, single out the solitary. The space between notes as I play decreases. The space between the sounding of voices and sashaying dresses lengthens. A high-pitched ringing, like the resonance of a thousand crickets, keys its own rhythm within my ear—when you can hear an awake television though the screen is black. You know what you are hearing is real. Your hearing is only a bit sharper, especially keen to the tuning of an instrument, but when the screen is black, and you know the television is on—There is something in you which says, “Do not look into the glass.”

But you look.

You may look a little to the left or the right, but you look, letting your peripheral vision take in the reflection. So it remains half-seen, half-unseen. Not real enough to let into the every day.

Hair rises from your skin which becomes pickled from the winter chill pressing against the window. Do not look into the glass.

So, I watch my hands. The whorls of wrinkles knotted on the knees of my fingers as they bend into the banging and sliding. A storm brews beneath my hands, and these hands are merely caught up in it. Fine freckles dapple against the back of the hand as it tapers to wrist. Bones move beneath the skin in natural union with the hammers inside the open piano as I play.

The deep vibration of the bass grounds. My attention turns to the sound of the notes playing against one another. My eyes close.

Colors dissipate against the private quiet within. All is the amber of my eyelids. There is laughter, heels toasting the hardwood floor in twirls and steps, and my smile. Time is still inside.

My mother can bring time to a halt within a room, but I can still time in my own way. The laughter hums. The music jilts and jives. I am aware of the rising and falling of my chest. Of the air on my skin. Of breath on my ear. Perhaps she will tell me to stop soon for an announcement. I don't care.

Another small puff, more distinctive than the last, into my ear. I want to dig a finger in to clear the air out. I can't. The music is not done.

It's like a sizzle, air slicing in different intonations. SsS against my earlobe. Static electricity, nearly. What is that?

TessS.

Static breaks. My name is clear. Sizzle up my spine. My posture is precise in this moment.

The keys seem miles from my fingertips, as my eyes focus in to my reflection in the window. It is only me, only me who stares back at myself. I breathe. Just caught up in the moment.

That's all.

"Tess. Tess, sweetheart." My mother's hand is on my shoulder, her fingernails clean and manicured. The youth of her hands defy time. I look up to her and cinch the corners of my lips into a reassuring smile. "We lost you."

"I'm here." This answer strangely satisfies her more than it should. Something in her face. One might call it over-protectiveness. It's creepy.

Her lips are moving. She is speaking, but the hallway has my attention. Still caught up in a lengthened sense of space between breath, speech, and being; I see the details clearly: the staircase leading to the second floor, the red rug with its Victorian pattern and cream fringe, and suddenly Jolly's black fur streaks across the open door frame, down the hall, his tongue out, tail down.

I am pulled from the conversation, without regard to whether she has finished speaking or not. Into the hallway, eerily quiet and empty. A dash of Jolly's tail disappears to the right, into the kitchen. There's a sound like something is being torn, or scratched.

Long. Methodical. Metallic. It echoes.

Those few seconds of hesitance wring nervously in my chest. As I enter the kitchen, it's completely dark, aside from the moonlight tracing the outline of the window on the floor. There it is. The metallic cringing of the hinges. The door is shut. Jolly is there, tail down, braver than I am as he sniffs at the doggy door, deviating between a hesitant flick of his tail and a whimper.

Turn back, my gut is saying.

Since when do most of us listen to common sense?

“Hey, there.” I kneel down next to Jolly, entangle my fingers in his hair, scratching him behind the ear; something to do with my hands. The slow bangs of the screen door, the creaking turn of the ungreased hinges, ajar this cold night.

And something barely noticeable against the door itself. A shadow between the hinge and frame. This methodical noise, neither metallic nor echoing: Scratching.

SssS. Teh. SssS.

Though the serpentine hissing was consistent with the squeaking hinges, something about the cadence was too similar to my name.

Suddenly, it’s not just the scratching at the door, or my scratching at Jolly’s head to comfort him. It’s Jolly barking wildly at the door, lunging and scratching to get out.

I repeat his name gently.

A small shadow. Probably a possum. The scratching. The hissing. It makes sense.

They’re pretty common out here in the Blue Ridge. You’ll find all kinds of life.

I nudge Jolly back with my foot and he heeds me, though with a low growl, ears back, and head near the ground. This isn’t like him. When on the trail, he’s quiet before pursuit.

I undo the deadbolt, and as soon as the door opens, Jolly bolts into the night.

“Fu-uck.” I look to the loose, squeaking screen door and my dog streaking across the field. Something scissors in front of him, knocking the reeds of browned field grass in the moonlight. I don’t want to call out everyone from the party when my dog’s just probably chasing a possum; so, chilled in my green dress, in flats, I give chase.

We’ve run through these reeds since I was a girl. I know this field. I know this land.

He’s nearing the trees. Closing in on the eldritch tree where we’d found that girl’s jawbone when I was just a girl myself.

The house becomes a faint outline between land and stars. Jolly stops barking. I can still see him ahead, but this worries me. I peel the restrictive flats from my feet. Twigs hurt less than scrunched up toes. Jolly stops short of the tree.

I emerge from the reeds, and though I now stand still... I still hear the scraping.

I look for Jolly. There, to my right: Ears low, nose to the ground, tail between his legs.

Something dark against the tree. I come around to Jolly, kneeling on one knee, placing my hand between his ears. Something bigger than a possum: digging.

Teh. The shadow claws voraciously at earth.

No fucking way.

Teh. A puff in my ear. *SssS.* The shadow is still. Goosebumps prickle my arms and I am bone cold. A shrill silence vibrates from its hollow blackness. It turns, and I close my eyes.

Jolly whimpers. I feel his nose against my leg, the bite of winter on my skin, my heartbeat in my veins...

The puff of my ears popping.

TehhssS. My name.

169 days until Harvest, it’s hollow voice intonates, the end of my name mere static, *SssS,* crackling like the last embers of a dying fire.

Fuck. This. Shit. I make a break for the field. Halfway there, when the run has warmed the blood in my veins, I open my eyes. The moon is high in the sky, round and luminous.

Turn back, I tell myself when I should have never left.

Jolly is beside me. For a moment, I think there is movement in the reeds, but I know

better than to look. The screen door is ajar, still. The doorknob is in my hand. My shoulder connects to the kitchen door, which often sticks, and I throw myself inside. Jolly makes his way in, and two inches from his tail, I shove the door shut, securing the deadbolt.

I sink down beside Jolly. “What the actual fuck?” I manage, nose to Jolly’s fur. Until Jolly begins to make a hacking noise like he’s going to vomit. I don’t blame him.

I pet his back and inch away as he coughs it up. It’s hair. Long, wild black hair, almost... Almost like mine.