Thinner than Air

by Opacity

Summary

"Not that kind of bow. I'm not Katniss," she whispers conspiratorially.

Yes. Yes he can see that.

Notes

AN: Pretty soft M, just to be safe. Unbeta'd. Forgive me.

For Greenwool. If you feel like it's been awhile since you read something meaningful, check out 'Home is in Your Skin'.

See the end of the work for more notes

He's still with Leevy the first time he hears it. He's delivering outrageously over priced strawberries (only the top layer is good, the bottom ones are rotting), when he hears something he's never heard before. Soft and low like a loon and melodious like the wind. He wanders around the back of the big ugly mansion, searching for the sound that comes and goes on the breeze. It's sad and beckoning like a lost child, and pulls at him between his breast bone. He finds himself inching along ledges and climbing scaffolding, trying to find it, whatever the thing is.

That's how he first discovers her window. It's barely cracked open and the curtains are drawn, but
the breeze sends them billowing and all he can see is her back and some kind of stick on her shoulder.

But he hears music. Such music.

He sees her everywhere after that. At the bakery, buying cake. At Iris', purchasing yards of sturdy grey cloth. In the schoolyard, dusting off some random little girl who fell in a game of tag.

Katniss visits her sometimes after school.

"What do you talk about?" he asks incredulously in the woods one Sunday. He looks disdainful, as if his best friend's choice of company is a betrayal, but really he just wants know, what does she say? Why is she friends with a Seam girl hunter?

Katniss is angry and defensive.

"Hey, you don't know Madge. She's different ok?"

He grinds his teeth in frustration. He knows she's different, he just needs to understand why?

He cuts her off in an alley way once. It irritates him that she uses these back roads around town; doesn't she know it can be dangerous?

"What do you do with all the damn strawberries?"

She blinks rapidly at him, her lips trembling. She looks startled and uncertain, both unbecoming emotions marring the soft lines of her face, so he relaxes his shoulders and uncrosses his arms, leaning easily against the wall of the Justice Building. Her shoulders drop and she licks her lips anxiously, catching the bottom one between her teeth.

"They're the only thing that makes my mother smile anymore. I know they're miserable to pick on the vine and I'm sure we don't pay you enough. Thank you."

She touches his arm and flashes him a small smile before she darts down the street.

The next time, he sees her carrying a stick strung up with something. It looks like a completely useless utensil, not sharp enough to be a weapon and he can find no purpose for the strings.

"What is that?" he asks. It's Sunday and he's supposed to be in town trading pelts, then buying roots for dinner, and there was always time for a poker game at the Hob. Instead he is walking next to Madge whose long fingers are touching the stick lovingly.

"It's my bow," she says with such affection that for an instant he's jealous of a piece of wood.

He makes his voice hard. "That's not a bow. You can't hunt with that thing."

She bites her lips again; trapping what he suspects is a laugh behind her teeth. He gets angrier.

"Not that kind of bow. I'm not Katniss," she whispers conspiratorially

Yes. Yes, he can see that.
"It's for my cello," she adds as if that will clarify anything.

His expression must give him away because she murmurs, "Do you have a second? I can show you."

He didn't even realize they were at her house. As they walk up to her room it occurs to him that he's done this before. He knows what it means when town girls ask him upstairs. He scrutinizes her backside as he follows her down the hall, and the long legs that terminate under her soft brown skirt. He's pretty sure this thing with Leevy is casual but all the same he won't let whatever petting session the mayor's daughter has planned go too far. He realizes he's disappointed: this isn't what he expected she'd want.

But before he knows what's happening, he watches her lift, with impressive strength, a large hulking piece of carved wood (beautiful craftsmanship, he could live a thousand lifetimes and never create something like it) that balances on a metal pole and sits between her legs. She fidgets around getting comfortable, then takes her bow and-

Something in him cracks. Her arm saws across the instrument with unfathomable precision. Her whole body changes, all the shyness and uncertainty gone. The tune is quick and happy and he choke on the laughter that threatens to tumble out of his mouth.

She stops after a moment, flushed and elated, and throws him a dazzling smile that shatters against the cold blank stare he's leveling her with. He watches her cave, her shoulders rolling inward hugging the thing - cello - in her arms like she's trying to protect it.

He leaves without a word.

That night he breaks up with Leevy.

He tries to be gentle, explains that she deserves someone better than him, that she deserves a host of things he can't give her, but he thinks it would sound more genuine if he weren't in such a rush to get the words out of his mouth. She's sad but there are no histrionics and for that he's grateful.

The next week he startles Madge on her way home from school and asks, "If the strawberries are for your mother, what do you like?"

She jumps and stares at him, clearly baffled. She had started to smile when she saw him in town, but after he stormed out of her room, she's avoided him and all the areas they used to run into each other. Now here he is again and she doesn't know what to say.

"Well?" he prompts, and she stumbles to think of an answer. What does she like?

"Blackberries?" she says hesitantly. It comes out like a question, like she's afraid there's a wrong answer. He nods thoughtful and then waits for her to say more. "And oranges," she adds. "I love the idea of fruit in the winter."

He smiles.

He learns she can play many instruments. The piano, where he watches her fingers fly across the keyboard like lightning, and the harp where the notes wash over him like rain. He knows she can play it, but never hears the clarinet; every time she tries to, he touches her face and she breaks into
a smile. "Stop it," she whispers, completely unable to infuse even an ounce of venom into her voice. "I can't play it unless I have a good seal."

He buries his face in her hair and mutters there are other instruments she can play that he can help her keep a good seal on. She blushes and squirms but doesn't pull away and then she looks at him with those dewy eyes of hers and he thinks it will have to be soon. He's never been with a girl so long without **being** with her and he likes it like this, really. Especially for her, because it will have to be perfect, **so perfect**, but he's dying to feel those quick sure hands and that warm willing mouth on him. Soon. Not yet, but soon.

By far his favorite instrument is her cello that he spends hours examining, trying to find exactly how the trees he hides behind in the forest can become this thing capable of producing such joy. Then one day she sits him in her chair and before he can speak, she settles between his legs, the cello resting against her chest. And then she's playing, and as he wraps his arms around her midsection, he can feel the music surge through her like a river; powerful and cleansing.

He whispers against her neck, begs for permission to taste her skin and she's barely nodded yes before they are tangle of limbs, and the cello is almost broken in the temporary absence of thought.

Soon, he thinks. This one will break him if he's not careful, but he doesn't care. He just wants, badly. Wants her to say he is hers like she does her cello and her bow.

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It's mid summer and the Reaping will be in a few weeks, but he is light. This year will be Madge and Katniss' last and even though he will have to wait another four years for Prim and another decade before Posy is safe, he knows after this Reaping there will be very little to keep him from what he wants. Needs. He wanted to wait till after the Reaping, but last week she had been with him in the meadow ranting spitefully about how much she hated her father's job and hated the Capital for the things they made him do, and that was it for him. It had to be now.

He has on a shirt from his father, clean and not much worn, something that must have been a gift just before he died. His pants are patched, but done nicely and his boots are clean. Not that he's trying to impress her or anything but he wants it to be nice. He has a bucket of blackberries that he braved about a thousand chigger bites to get for her, and a bottle of wine he won in a poker match. He's meeting her in the meadow by the edge of the fence and he thinks, maybe he'll take her to the forest tonight, to watch the sunset.

He runs into Leevy of all people on the way. She's walking by the road leading away from the Hob. He nods to her and tries to think who she's been going around with these days. He thinks it's Thom, which is a good match in his opinion. She looks tired, he thinks, as she gives him a pained smile, and he wonders briefly if she's been ill.

Just to be sure he calls out to her over his shoulder, "How ya been?"

"Fine," she mumbles. Then she bursts into tears.

He's not sure what he's supposed to do. Clearly she's not fine, but Madge is waiting for him and really where is Thom? Isn't it his job now, to comfort his forlorn girlfriend?

"What's wrong, Leevy? Should I get Thom?" he asks, hoping she says no. He doesn't want to look for Thom, but he doesn't want Leevy crying on his shoulder either.
"Thom and I broke up," she sobs.

Ah, he thinks. There were no tears when he broke up with her, so perhaps she was a little more invested this time. It would make sense. Thom has less siblings to provide for and could give her a better home. Poor Leevy. It's a shame it didn't work out.

He opens his mouth to say something sympathetic when she blurts out, "I'm pregnant!"

His mouth shuts with a snap. He can't believe Thom would leave her in this condition. He'll have to have a talk with him.

"Leevy, don't worry. Thom may be freaking out but he's not gonna leave you high and dry, not once I've knocked some sense-"

"It's not-we- I was never...like that...with him."

Oh.

OH.

"Leevy?"

He chokes on her name. She's sobbing and babbling and he's trying to make sense of what she's saying.

"I found out after you left and I was already with Thom and I thought it was for the best, but Thom wanted to take things slow - and I was starting to show and Thom found out and he said he likes you, but not enough to raise your kid, and my dad kicked me out and I don't know what to do! What do I do, Gale? What are we going to do?!"

She wailing now and he should be concerned about people hearing her, but he's numb, numb inside and all he can think is Madge is waiting for him and he's going to be late.

"You were gonna try and pass off my baby as Thom's?" he says coldly.

But she's inconsolable now and finally he puts his arms around her thin shaking shoulders.

"Sh...Leevy...just go to my house. Tell my Ma I told you to wait for me. I'll be home-- soon. I gotta do something, but I'll be back. And, I'll...I'll take care of you. Both of you. Just - just wait for me."

She nods frantically and wipes her eyes. He stares after her while she walks towards his home, looking back every few steps to see if he's still watching her.

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He doesn't know how he makes it to the meadow. There was always something deep and awful inside him, something he's tried to ignore over the years, but now it swells up and engulfs him in a way that paints everything mercilessly ugly. She's nothing he tells himself. She's just a passing fancy, just a talented fucking merchant girl and the only reason she's so fucking talented is because she's never had to work a day in her life. He's gonna find her in his meadow wearing a pretty pink dress with ribbons in her hair and it's gonna be ridiculous. This is so much better. Leevy is a hard worker and she's Seam and she understands him like no daughter of a mayor possibly could. This
is for the best.

When he sees her, his jaw locks.

She's wearing trousers.

Ill fitted soft gray trousers that are held up on her hips with an old leather belt. Her shirt is light blue and pulls just a little across her chest. Her hair is in a messy bun with no hint of a ribbon.

She looks…

She looks like…

"Where's your dress?" he says. His voice sounds like an echo. She flushes and comes over to him chewing on her lips.

"I thought, since you said we might go for a walk, I'd be ready. Can't climb trees in a dress, right?"

Her eyes are wide and hopeful; her face is free of paint. She doesn't even smell like soap. He has nothing to make her one of them, an other he can push away. He turns her around carefully, following the column of her neck, the sway of her back and the curve of her hips, memorizing her.

I wish I could freeze this moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.

"Gale, what's wrong," she says suddenly her eyes stretched with fear. Huh. Did he say that out loud?

She's standing so close their feet are touching. He traces a finger across her chin, down her neck to her breastbone. He pops open a button revealing her collarbone that he thrums back and forth. He sees a tiny scar right at the juncture between her neck and her shoulder. How did she get a scar in such an intimate place?

"Gale?"

He can't take his eyes off the scar. It's what he's staring at when he says, "Leevy's pregnant."

Madge blinks at him.

"Who's Leevy?" she asks. Her voice is small and wounded, and Gale sees a way to make her hate him. He knows the kind thing would be to let Madge think everything between them was meaningless, but he can't bear to lie to her, so he says, "Someone, a girl before you. Before this, any of it. But she's pregnant and she almost let someone else raise my child and I can't-"

"Alright," she says quickly. She tries to step away from him, but for some reason he holds on to her. He doesn't know why. He needs to let her go.

"Madge-"

"I said, alright!" she gasps, and the edge of her voice is laced with so much pain she can barely get the words out.

"Just let me ex-"

"No. I understand. You're doing the right thing and I would never ask you to do different, but I cannot hear you tell me why you have to be with the mother of your child. I can't. I know. I understand. But please, please let me go."
He has never once refused a request from her. He supposes he can't start now.

Once she's gone he realizes he never gave her the blackberries.

They decide to wait and announce their engagement after the Reaping. It will be wonderful because Katniss will have aged out and they will have so much to celebrate, Leevy claims. She has settled into his house with ease. She helps his mom with the laundry, teases his brothers and braids Posy’s hair. This is good, he thinks. This is what he always wanted.

He takes up smoking.

He drinks too, but that's only at night when he needs to sleep. Sleep without dreams of her music. Not the cello, but the soft little sigh she released at the end of each kiss, the half moan she tried so hard to swallow when he lathed her neck, or the gasp that slipped from her lips when he thumbed her nipples. If he could just not hear her in his head, every fucking moment of every fucking day, he'd be all right.

He's never felt so indifferent during a Reaping, never been so numb while Effie Trinket garbles her way through her practiced brittle lines. He misses his anger desperately, hopes it comes back soon, but it's hard because Leevy is openly terrified of his dissident thoughts and he doesn't want to upset her in her condition. So numb is better, he supposes.

He hates himself for the moment of relief he feels when the girl who is Reaped is a name he's unfamiliar with, hates that he can feel anything but rage when someone's helpless child will die to keep his girls safe. But now Katniss is free and Madge is-

"I volunteer as tribute."

He blinks.

He's hallucinating. It's not really surprising because he hears her fucking everywhere, but it's so odd that all of the words he'd hear in her voice it would be those.

But then the crowd parts and Madge, in her pale pink dress and hair ribbons, pulls that other girl (a Seam girl maybe 14 years old) aside and there she is on stage while Effie stutters and stumbles with glee at the mayor's daughter being District Twelve's first volunteer.

There is no way this is real. The boy is called next and he doesn't hear who it is, doesn't hear anything, but the pounding of his heart. The Reaping is over and Leevy is pulling him gently towards home, so they can celebrate!

It's not until he sees Katniss, her face contorted into something cartoonish, running towards the Justice Building that he realizes this is indeed real. He cracks further, splinters in a thousand directions, but it doesn't matter because those seams are filled with a rage so intense it propels him. How dare she? How dare she just quit like that? She's a rat, a cockroach, a fucking coward. He - he would never do that to her, no matter what she did. He would have stood by and watched her fall in love with someone else, get married and have children, grow old without him - it might have killed him but he would never just leave her.

And it's a relief because now he doesn't fucking care.
He doesn't take Leevy home, he takes her to the meadow because he doesn't want to see her anywhere anymore. This is his present and his future and she's already dead and he doesn't have another second to waste on a corpse.

It's jarring to see her on the platform. She looks taller than he remembers. And fierce. But he isn't fooled. He figures she'll step off the platform before the countdown is complete and then it really will all be over.

He can't wait.

But no explosion happens and then she's running into woods that look like his, and for a moment he wishes he had taken her just once, so she would know- he shakes his head. Whatever. She's dead and he doesn't care. He pulls Leevy close to him and pretends not to watch.

But of course he watches. It's mandatory viewing.

Jasper, the other District Twelve tribute dies on the first day. There is a particularly vicious Career pack this year and they hunt down a third of the arena in a week. Madge is mostly hiding (coward), sometimes protecting the little girl from Eleven (stupid).

The day of his toasting she's caught by the psychopath from Two and immediately offers him sex in exchange for one more night alive.

"I don't want to die a virgin," she says.

Gale thought he was angry before, thought he hated her already, but now the betrayal he feels is astronomical (a word she taught him). It engulfs him completely and he thinks if someone gave him a match, he'd set the world on fire.

His rage is unfounded. In a move he taught her (because if she was going to wander down dark alleys, she better know how to defend herself) she head butts the Career that night and knocks him out cold, then stabs him in the groin before she sneaks out into the night not taking a single weapon, only canteen after canteen of water.

By mid morning, all the Careers are dead. She poisoned their water supply.

After that there are mutts that she saves the little girl from and then a raging forest fire. And suddenly it's just her and Rue in a tree (she learned how to climb one without him), the flames beneath them and Madge takes Rue's face in her hands.

It occurs to him that she'd be a good mother.

"Rue."

The little girl is trying to pull away but Madge won't let her

"Rue. I need you to remember something."

All of Panem watches Madge Undersee say, "The strongest don't always win."

And then-
Katniss punches him in the stomach.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" he screams, but the canon has already sounded and Caesar Flickerman chokingly announces Rue Marlina the Victor of the 76th Hunger Games.

"I'm sorry," Katniss says, backing away from him. "I promised her I wouldn't let you watch."

It's only days later that the country explodes.

Haymitch sneaks out of the Capitol and rallies the District. They overcome the peacekeepers and are already fleeing when the firebombs arrive. As Haymitch calls for volunteers to fight in the upcoming war, Gale's assent is in his throat when Leevy puts his hand on her growing midsection and begs him not to go.

The strongest don't always win.

He holds back when Katniss and some boy he remembers in the bakery from Twelve volunteer with a bunch of others.

But later when they are squirreled away in the snake pit of District Thirteen, Haymitch finds him.

"She said she wanted a world where your baby would be safe."

Gale attacks him, ready to beat him within an inch of his life, but soldiers appear out of nowhere and tear them apart.

"Think about it," Haymitch slurs from his swollen jaw.

He and Leevy argue bitterly for hours, days. Finally they agree he won't fight but he can strategize. He's good at setting traps, and armies he finds, are not that much different from wild animals.

It's work that makes him happy, though the long hours are strenuous. He channels his anger at Snow and the Capitol because it's harder and harder to hate Madge anymore. He finds out later that she took nightlock, that her body slid off the branch and fell into the raging inferno beneath her. That people are calling her 'the girl on fire'.

He doesn't watch the footage.

She's born in winter. They tell him she comes with the first snow, though no one can see any weather in these tunnels that are choking the life out of him (that and the two packs of cigarettes a day). Leevy suggests Daisy or Pennyress, but as he holds his precious pink wailing daughter, he say "Valencia. My fruit in the winter."

Leevy looks at him confused. It's not a name she's heard before.
His face falls. "We could call her Val? or Valley? Think about it, Leevy and Valley?"

The corners of her mouth curve up. Valley it is.

Fighting a war with a baby to protect is the worst kind of torture. He worries constantly that the Capitol will find them and make these tunnels their tomb. When Valencia first smiles it's as if he never knew joy before her, but that's followed by a terror so insanely deep that his paranoia becomes pathological. It makes Leevy crazy, but he is the most valued strategist Coin has. More than anything, he needs this war to end, needs his daughter to know air and sunlight and music.

Then it does.

They starve the Capitol of electricity, running water and supplies. Their soldiers capture most of those trying to flee. By the time the Star Squad, lead by Finnick and Johanna, make their debut, the city is mostly a ghost town.

Coin makes a now thirteen-year-old Rue kill Snow. The country cheers, but Gale vomits in his bathroom repeatedly.

He becomes very influential after the war. Leevy is happy in Two, asks for another baby, but he says no. Living through a war terrified that every day could put Valley in danger has aged him; he couldn't do it with two. And even though he's a part of the new government, after Rue he's not so sure about Coin. Peeta Mellark protested the plan so much he was incarcerated, and Katniss quit on the spot. Gale vied to get both of them shipped back to Twelve but now he doesn't trust his contribution to winning the war will keep his daughter safe.

Two years later Coin is impeached for war crimes when they find she used child armies in Districts Ten and Eleven. As ten year old after ten year old stands witness to being trained to use machine guns, shooting anything that moved, including each other during the war, Gale holds his squirming toddler to his chest and breathes a sigh of relief when she's sentenced to execution.

He starts a National Disarmament Program. He doesn't let Valencia ever see his gun.

When she's nine, Valley comes to him with a paper called 'Girl on Fire, the story of Madge Undersee'. Something she has to write for Social Studies.

"It says she's from Twelve, Papa, just like you! Did you know her?"

He gives her Katniss' phone number and downs half a bottle of whiskey.

He starts smoking more.
Her twelfth birthday is a masterpiece. There is a cake (courtesy of Peeta Mellark) that is sky blue, covered with birds and layered with candles. Leevy tries to get her into a lacy yellow dress but she insists on jeans though she allows her hair to be braided. She receives a ton of gifts, store bought from her mom and homemade from her aunts and uncles. She plays with her cousins and sings at the top of her lungs all afternoon.

She walks in on her dad hugging a crying Aunt Katniss while Uncle Peeta has a grin the size of the moon on his face. Her papa says, "About goddamn time!" in his scratchy voice.

She loves her papa's voice. It’s rough like he is and there's something comforting about it that's better than her mama's softness. She worries sometimes because he coughs so much first thing in the morning, but mostly she loves feeling him laugh when he holds her tight, the scratchy rumbling in his chest vibrating through her whole body.

And he has a special present for her today he told her, and she can't wait to see what it is.

Finally, all the guests are gone and her mama lies down because the day has been exhausting.

It's time.

He can't remember the last time he felt this way. Maybe not since she was born. Maybe not ever. But he's proud of himself.

It's not perfect of course, but he's had it inspected and they all say it's good. Maybe he got lucky. Or maybe he's just lived a thousand lifetimes.

She jumps into his arms, a squirming mess of gangly limbs. She'll be tall, he realizes with satisfaction. Strong and sweet. His perfect orange in the winter.

He hands her the first part and she unwraps it eagerly, though her face scrunches up in confusion when she opens the package.

"What is this?" she asks, though she's already holding it possessively.

"A bow," he answers and laughs when she immediately starts shaking her head.

"I know what a bow is Papa, that's not a bow," she says condescendingly. At twelve Valencia thinks everything her parents say is dumb, a feature that drives Leevy insane, but he secretly (or not so secretly) adores. He wants her to question everything.

"Not that kind of bow, Val. Now open the next one."

She tears through the wrapping, pulls apart the cardboard box. And then she gasps.

"Oh Papa! It's so beautiful!"

She runs her fingers over the smooth planes of wood, thrumming the strings longingly. Since she could first smile, nothing ever made her so happy as music. Still, for a long time he kept this instrument from her. Until now.

"Is it mine? My very own?" she whispers.
He nods, shocked that he has tears in his eyes. He was sure he had no tears left to cry.

"Can you show me? Show me what to do," she asks.

He sits in the chair and she scrambles in front of him as he helps position the cello against her shoulder, and aligns her hands against the fingerboard. She drags the bow across the strings and a deep low sound bursts forth, sending a shudder through them both, tugging at the cracks inside him, opening a yawning chasm in his chest. He's used to chest pain these days, but this ache he suspects won't go away with nitroglycerin.

"Papa!" she whispers in awe. "It's so...what am I going to do!?

He kisses her dark curly head and murmurs, "Anything. Change the world if you want."

~Fin.

End Notes

I love Gale, but in lieu of a psychiatrist to address some of his issues, Wooly and I decided the only way to make him reach his full potential as a human being was to break him. Hence the series "Breaking Gale".

We break him to make him better.

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