

# Anixi

by Andriana Taratsas

There's an itch behind my knee. I can feel it nag, prickling and lingering, waiting to be touched. Still, I don't stop. Hands in hair, tendrils between my fingers, I work the scalp, washing, scrubbing. Dust and oil rinse away, turning black locks brown, and still I scrub, scrub, scrub, hands on head, away from my knee and the itch that nags.

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The air smells like smoke and herbs, and the window is too dirty for peeking. Loula leans against the wall, shoulder to stone, before reaching for the knob and claiming it with a child's grip. The hinges are rusted; the door hums as it opens. Shifting closer, Loula presses her nose and palms against the doorframe, one eye open and gazing through the gap, the other scrunched shut. She keeps her balance on bony knees, spine straight and neck poised, sitting in a voyeur's perch.

One, two, three, four, five. And there's a sixth in the back. Six women and the seventh that lay on the table in the middle, the body splayed and naked against the marble. The dirty feet face Loula, cracked and calloused, unwashed. Loula counts every crease running from the toes to the heel. One, two, three, four, five. Her eyes strain, reigning over the senses, and she doesn't hear it when a fly buzzes by her braid, doesn't feel it when the wood kisses a splinter into her thumb.

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It always starts with the priest. He comes in the evenings, wearing the black cloth of the occupationally devout, and slips inside. I offer something to eat, but he only asks for tea. I make tea. I bring him tea. He sips in slurps. I sit. There has been a death, he says. Whose death, I ask. A parishioner. A neighbor. A stranger. The body. Someone must care for the body. The family is making arrangements. But in the meantime, someone must care for the body. He says. Each time, I agree. I will care for it. I will undress it. I will wash it. I will make it look nice, so that it doesn't scare the children. But I won't do it alone. I don't keep company with the dead in solitude.

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Her mother, Loula knows, is many things to the dead: cleanser, caretaker, companion. As she watches the six women work on the seventh, Loula remembers stories borne by loud voices with hiccuping laughs. They are stories of past cleansings, told between news of daughters whose suitors had been found and whose dowries had been arranged. Always, the newborn Loula looms in the background, placed in a basket and perched on the pew, crying with the protest of fragile life in the vicinity of death. She had been christened an accessory to the dead, made play of their funerals and friends of their bodies.

Loula watches twelve hands work. Her eyes wander to the two immobile, their fingers splayed like veins on swollen stomach. Since infancy, Loula knows, she has been a ghost in her own right.

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Loula didn't breathe when she was born. Inundated with the sounds of my own cries, I had forgotten to listen for hers. For a moment, they didn't come, and I didn't notice. But when it happened, I heard it. Her first noise was a whimper, and then she was screaming. My hands, slippery with sweat, found my ears.

Rising from the floor to the wall and all the way up, my eyes passed bloody towels and the blanket and the baby. Then: a spider, crawling along a crack in the ceiling. There. I watched eight legs walk and thought of new skin, splotched, coating the body of an *it*—a something that belonged to someone who wasn't me.

My hands found my ears. I covered them, and I wished for silence.

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Her mother's hands begin right where scalp becomes skin unhidden by hair. Loula sees her hands separate, watches her fingers press in as they move from the center of the head to the sides, behind the ears. She knows her mother's hands won't be gentle; her nails will scratch, right where the lobe meets the jaw, to pry dirt from flesh. Loula sees her hands move downward, inward, toward the base of the scalp, right where the skull sits on the neck. Her mother supports the head with one hand and uses her other to wash, the hair mingling and tangling right where her fingers meet.

Loula watches her work. Quickly. Methodically. Carefully yet lovelessly. She feels an itch, right at the border of her temple. Loula doesn't lift her hands. Her mother once washed her hair as if it grew from the scalp of a dead woman.

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I heard that she'd been found a mile from the sheep and a mile from the house; she was somewhere in between, beneath a tree, on the side of the road.

Her pains must have come earlier. Maybe while waking that morning, maybe in her sleep the night before, maybe she felt something and thought it was nothing.

They must have come fast. At sunrise, she is a wife, walking to the fields; by noon, she was a mother, was a mother, was, lying somewhere where she had to be found.

It must have been lonely, because no one heard—she must have screamed—and no one came.

If there was pain, and there must have been, I hope there was enough to make her numb. I hope that she was numb, and that she felt nothing.

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She thinks that her mother won't notice the tears in the knees of her tights. Loula thinks that she won't smell the sweat coating her arms and face and chest. Her mother, she thinks, won't wonder why Loula's shoes have turned black, or why there is dust at the seam of her dress, or why the skin on the back of her neck is burnt pink and peeling. Her absorption in the tabletop body is unwavering, Loula thinks, and so her mother, she thinks, won't see the signs of a daughter who has spent the day kneeling.

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We buried the baby, born Saturday morning, on Sunday afternoon. Shovel to soil, the ground opened for her, the born-dead daughter, and swallowed. No time for a casket, no time for a headstone. There was only a plot and a name for the baby born Saturday morning and buried by Sunday night.

I am not the one who gave her blood or bones or flesh. I am not the one who screamed for her beneath a roadside cypress. I am not the one who wanted her. I am not the one who loved her, and I am not the one who died with her. I am not hers, though I could have been.

To the daughter with the name of spring—may she be planted in the earth. May she rise amongst flowers, and may she be lovely.

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Loula tastes honey on her tongue. From her spot on the ground, she can see her mother shift from the front of the table to the side, finished washing hair, about to wash skin. The afternoon light spills into the room, and the sun catches her mother's eye on its way down, down, down, out of the sky. As her mother reaches for the hand, Loula sees mouthside movement: sadness spilling from her eyes, falling from face to finger and dampening two sets of skin. She stands against the sun, crying.

Loula tastes honey on her tongue. When she was younger, very young, still carried more than walking, her mother would place drops of bitter sweetness onto the waiting toddler's gums. For sorrow, for fever, for any bit of badness, honey was the cure.

Loula tastes honey on her tongue. She sees her mother standing against the sun and wishes that she could taste it, too.

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I use my own nails to clean beneath hers. The blood and dirt that are unearthed betray last moments of grabbing at grass and clawing at mud until the fingers were black and bleeding. I am washing the extremities of the three-days dead; the blood should be brown, the mud dry and cracking. But the elements seem new and wet.

Hers could be a living hand.

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The early evening sun makes her mother's hair auburn. When the sky is the same color as the candles by the altar, Loula watches the women leave. One, two, three, four, five. Only her mother remains, rubbing oil into the palm of the right hand. Her eyes, no longer visible, are veiled by shadows that pool beneath her sockets.

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When the wrist tenses and the fingers curl, I look up. I see brown eyes, blinking eyes, beautiful eyes. Her skin maintains its shade. She doesn't speak; her breaths are clear and quiet. It could be the most natural thing in the world: the dead were once the living and the living once the dead.

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The room is dark and silent, save for the breaths of her mother. And then: in and out, in and out. There. When the twin breath sounds, Loula watches two heads tilt, facing each other, hands clasped, quiet.

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For my daughter: I made a home of my body, a vessel for my blood, a sake to my name. I do love her. I do.

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By Loula's braid, a fly, buzzing. Her hands find her ears.

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*"Anixi" by Andriana Taratsas*

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Loula doesn't know:

That she was born breathless.

That I covered my ears against her cries.

That I couldn't look at her while undressing the mother of the born-dead daughter.

That I couldn't do it, couldn't do it, couldn't, and so I left her, my baby born breathless, to peek through a humming door with rusted hinges.

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She is buried at sunrise on Wednesday. Loula remains graveside while the body, free of dust and death, descends into the ground. The air smells like smoke and herbs; everything is quiet. As the sun settles into the sky, it catches Loula's eye, and she feels an itch, right at the border of her temple. Very still, she stands.

From behind her, a pair of hands reaches out, grazing the top of her scalp. Hair lies flat, pulled back, as practiced fingers weave the strands in and out, in and out. Calloused and careful, they bring the hair into a braid. Loula leans back.

In and out. In and out. In and out.