

# Colby



## Inklings Magazine

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Fall 2016*

Article 14

---

October 2016

## The Mountains are Cold

Michaela Norman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/inklings>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Norman, Michaela (2016) "The Mountains are Cold," *Inklings Magazine*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/inklings/vol3/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Magazine* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact [mfkelly@colby.edu](mailto:mfkelly@colby.edu).

# THE MOUNTAINS ARE COLD

michaela norman

The mountain villages were always cold; even in summer, frost coated the windowpanes and crawled under the doors, and the girls wore thick petticoats beneath their skirts. The people here were cold, too, cold and backwards. My father warned me when we lost all of our money and moved to the mountains that children often wandered out in the cold and never came back, snow covered branches moving like living things to enclose them in heady darkness, heavy chill, sinking mulch. They said in the village that one could get lost in these mountains, devoured by them. They said they heard stories of creatures that could eat your flesh and left your corpse bone dry with nothing but a pair of teeth marks on your throat.

They said a lot of things in this superstitious, highland, dismal village. They still believed in hanging garlic off of their rotting wooden doors until the whole world seemed to smell, and in putting coins under the eyelids of their dead. Last Hallows Eve, they had sacrificed a goat in the square to keep the bad spirits away; I'd watched from the sidelines as its snowy white coat became coated in thick, sticky red.

I had taught myself how to shoot with arrows I whittled from soft oak trees—not that it was much use against anything other than slow animals, heavy bellied rabbits and singing birds. My real skill was the knife, the six inch one I carried hidden beneath my skirts, the ones made from scratchy wool that left red marks on my sallow skin, skin that used to become creamy with pink blushes and soft lotions and now was dry and brittle and hard.

I've become hard, since coming here. I've learned not to flinch at the wail of a dying animal or the tangy, metallic smell of blood. The dirt bothered me in the beginning; the first few weeks I'd scratch my skin red raw with a cleaning brush, trying to pry out the darkness that had embedded itself into my fingernails and the cracks of my hands. Now I ignored the soil that pushed itself at my nail beds and erased my fate lines. When we'd still had money, my father had taken me to a psychic who could read palms; she told me my love line and life line crossed and ended rather abruptly, and to be wary of men with good teeth.

The city had been glittering that winter we'd gone to the psychic, snow white and soft under the street lamps as we'd bundled ourselves into a carriage to another party. Back then, I would wear pearl necklaces, teardrop diamond earrings, pink crinoline dresses. I couldn't stand the hot, engulfing, dampness of it all, though; the way the yellow rooms burned my retinas too bright to see things clearly, and the touch of clammy hands on my bare shoulders felt slimy. The wealth surrounding me seemed endless, in the blue sapphire rings dripping from the women's fingers and the heavy gold coins passing discreetly from hand to hand as bets came and went. That's how my father lost our fortune; betting every coin away until all we had were our bodies and the clothes on our backs, and even then, pink crinoline and silk can't do you much

in the real world.

The man who took my father's fortune and my inheritance had been cold, cold like this village, skin like marble, hardness creasing his features and capturing them in the look of a never-ending scowl. He kept most of his ace shrouded in darkness, the only faint light the flickering flames from a lamp that sat on the far side of the card room. But I remember that frown, the way his lips turned down into an almost snarl of distaste, as my father bet and bet and bet and my heart fell and fell and fell. Now, my father barely leaves the cover of scratchy blankets and won't change his clothes. He's a ghost on that bed, white and ephemeral and a pile of sticking out bones beneath stretched thin skin. He would refuse to eat, too, if I didn't force cabbage broth down his wrinkled, dry throat because I will not be left alone here, in this cold mountain village.

*Fatten yourself up; I don't like the crunch of bones.*

I walk through the forest sometimes even if there is nothing left to hunt; I like the familiar crisp, fresh smell of the snow untouched by footsteps and shining in the few rays of sun that have fought their way through the greyness that shrouds the trees. It is a deep grey, muddy grey, sunlit grey. It is the grey of his skin that seems to shine like a light is blasting outwards from within his bones; it is the dark glimmering of his eyes when he asks what I'd like for breakfast.

He had emerged from the trees that day, by a rock I had claimed as a seat, like a ghost. I had been staring at the still water in a frozen over pond for over an hour, at the sludgy whites and yellows of the fish that moved below its surface. He surprised me. One moment I was alone, and the next he was there, standing by my elbow like some statue I once saw on a trip to Florence, and I could suddenly hear the train we'd taken chugging smoke and smell incense in the distance; but only for a moment. Then it was fresh snow and quiet again.

I had tried not to start like some frightened animal. My grip went down to the knife that lay by my side. The metal would be warm against his skin, almost like the fire I'd started hours ago in the house for my father that would be burning into embers by now. I could push the blade up through his chest and into his heart in a matter of seconds, if he was unaware enough and I was fast enough; this was always unlikely. The way he looked at me was the way a wolf looks at his prey, eyes alert and mouth nearly salivating at the image of dead meat laid out before him. His eyes always seem to devour my image, even now, hold me hostage in his gaze. When he smiles, his teeth are crooked. I let out a sigh that puffed fog into the cold air.

"I thought you were frozen, at first, sitting as still as that," he told me in tones that sounded prehistoric, ancient, millenniums old. It was the rumble of the planes moving beneath the earth that made this mountain, and the rustle of the wind that had threaded through my hair on my way into the forest.

For a moment I glimpsed flame-light throwing shadows on the wall, and then it was him again, just him. Just me.

"I was just taking a break," I replied, even though I didn't know if it was true. It felt like a lie, scraping itself on the buds of my tongue as it tumbled from my lips. In truth, I didn't know why I had taken a seat by the pond. I wasn't tired; it was getting dark, almost

evening. I should have started walking home ages ago.

"May I sit?" he asked, and crouched without waiting for an answer. He was now my height, face a bare foot from mine, cold breaths mingling in the scant inches between us. He was still smiling, baring those crooked teeth. The canine is stuck almost sideways, folding itself on top of the others, all jagged edges, all sharp angles. Sometimes I like to push at it to see if I can move it straight; it never budes. His face is sharp angles, too, grey and shadows. His mouth is so pale it's almost blue.

I leaned back a bit, braced my hands against the rock behind me. The stone cut my skin, leaving its imprint behind.

"You don't smell like the village," he noted, voice quiet in the stillness of the forest. The birds seemed to have flown away.

"What do I smell like?" I breathed back, hands twitching so that my fingertips scratched against the graphite rock. He brought a hand to my cheek. His fingers were long and pale beneath the dirt. That day, he had soil pressed under his nails and pushed up against his nail beds. And they were cold, I remember, so cold, colder than snow and colder than the wind and colder than Hell. His eyes seemed to be filled with liquid, oil black; they spun within themselves and I grew almost woozy, entranced, swayed closer. His smile stretched wider.

*I'll eat you up, I love you so.*

When he asks what I'd like for breakfast, we smile our crooked smiles and laugh and go hunting. In the few months I've been at his cabin hidden deep within the trees on the edge of the mountain, we've lured in our meals with nothing more than a smile from him and a helpless, wide-eyed plea for help from me. We take turns now; he knows I like the rush of it, the way their eyes pull wide like they never expected it, me, death, so soon, and the way their hearts skip faster, faster than a rabbits in the clutches of a wolf's claws.

Sometimes I ask for names; I write them down in a small book I keep on the table we break bread over, because I think I'd like to be remembered, if it came to that. I know I'm not, in the village; I'm just another nameless girl disappearing in the slew of other nameless girls, one by one walking into the forest and never coming back. On some days, I want to burst out of the trees, bare my teeth at their horror, and burn the whole place down. I want to watch the wooden houses become enveloped by flames, watch them crumble to ash beneath my stomping feet. I want to see if my father is still alive.

But I don't; his cold fingers and dark eyes keep me tethered, to this home in the middle of trees and silence. I've forgotten much of what I used to be—my name seems unimportant even as the girls' ones seem like the end of the world, and my world ends just at the edge of these woods. I don't like the color pink or cabbage broth but I can't exactly remember why. When he frowns, when I've done something wrong like bitten into the artery so that blood sprays all over the house and we have to spend hours scrubbing on our knees to get it out, I get the niggling sense in the back of my mind that I've

seen him before, before he turned me into one of him, before he killed me and started my life anew. It brings back the sound of gold coins rubbing against one another and the pull of creasing discontent in a room lit only by a lantern flame. But it only lasts a moment, before it is gone, just like everything else eventually will be as we watch generations die, change, live.

And when they do eventually find the girls, it will be with two fresh bruises of love-bites on the side of their throats.