

“Would anybody actually believe us if we told them about this?” Max asks her.

Erin is still staring at the trees. Who would believe them? Unless they saw everything Max and Erin saw, who would believe a single word of any of this?

Nobody would believe them. As soon as she thinks it, it’s as clear as anything. If they ran into the nearest town screaming about human sacrifice and monsters in the woods, not a soul would take them seriously. Not unless they saw the Beast for themselves. Not unless they smelled the decades of decay inside its mouth.

LOGAN-ASHLEY KISNER

WOLD WOUNDS

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Author's Note

*For Brandon Teena, Daniel Aston,
Nora Prochaska, Nex Benedict.
For everyone gone. For everyone still going.*

Old Wounds does not solely exist for the sake of “representation”. This is not a book where trans identity is mentioned, pushed aside and forgotten about before the end of the first page. *Old Wounds* is intentionally about gender and trans identity, and the ways in which the horror genre has historically forgotten about us.

On that note, please be aware that this story contains many depictions of transphobia, references to suicidal thoughts and actions, and language that some readers may find upsetting. There are also several references to real murders and/or suicides of trans individuals. I do not invoke these names lightly. You are, of course, not required to finish this book, though I hope that you will see Max and Erin through to the end of their story. No matter how long the darkness seems to stretch for, know that the sun will come up again.

For more information on the content of this book, please visit loganashleykisner.com. Links to advice and support can also be found at the back of the book.



Logan-Ashley Kisner, May 2024

Erin is running away tonight. She's been soaking in the cold, soapy water of her tub for what feels like hours. Her chin rests atop her knees, arms hugging her legs. The tiles on the wall are a shade of blue so deep that it seems almost purple. It creates an effect that makes the room feel impossibly large and yet deeply constrictive. But maybe she's just looking for excuses as to why she feels so nauseated. The weird paint job seems as likely to be the offender as anything else.

Erin finally pulls the drain and grabs her towel, resting her face in it for two long, deep breaths. She wonders if anybody's ever died from anxiety before, or will she be the first?

The mirror is partially fogged up, but Erin can still catch her reflection when she approaches. Her hair is plastered to the sides of her face. Ordinarily, it hangs just above her shoulders, a near-white level of blond. Bluish-green eyes. Her mouth curves downwards naturally, which makes it look like she's always fighting a pout. She definitely is *now*.

A fraught expression keeps forming despite her best attempts to look normal.

The family photos that hang in the hall paint a strange portrait. Erin takes note of them as she treads past. There used to be more, before Erin complicated the adolescent boyhood depicted and her mother packed almost everything into storage boxes. What remains of Erin is a mix of genderless baby pictures and glossy senior pictures. It's rather funny. As if she were born at eighteen, fully conceived.

She knocks gently on her sister's half-open door before she steps inside. Hayley, already covered in summer freckles, lights up at the sight of her. She casts her book to the floor and pulls her covers up to her chin with a toothy, eager grin. Erin smiles and sits at her feet. Despite the decade between them, they get along just as well as if they were twins.

"Did you already brush your teeth?" Erin looks her sister up and down, reaching over and tucking a few wild strands of hair behind her ear.

"Uh-huh."

"*Uh-huh*. Let's see 'em."

They bare their teeth at each other. Hayley's teeth are tiny and perfect.

"Okay. You're good." Erin sighs and looks around the room. "I don't know, are you enjoying summer break?"

Hayley nods. "Are you?"

That depends entirely on how this next week will play out.

Erin still pretends to think about it. "Well, it's not summer break for me any more, it's just summer. Adults have to work."

"You're not gonna be—"

Erin shushes her. Downstairs, she can hear the sound of the front door closing: Mom is home. Hayley's blue eyes get big, and she nods knowingly.

"You remember what we talked about?" Erin whispers, as quiet as she can get. "You're gonna have to be the woman of the house. Can you handle that?"

Hayley nods with deadly seriousness. "Swear to God."

"Do you know what the woman of the house has to look out for?"

Hayley shakes her head.

Erin puts her feet on the ground and leans in. "Ghouls. Ghosts. And tickle monsters."

Hayley's eyes go wide again, but she's not fast enough to stop Erin's hands from rushing to her sides. She shrieks, and Erin takes a wild kick to the ribs, but they're both laughing so hard that they're out of breath within seconds. Tickle monsters don't often manage lasting attacks around this house.

The light above them turns off, then on again. Erin and Hayley look up to find their mother watching them. She's still in her scrubs, and most of her hair is poking out of its bun.

"Get some sleep, you two." She takes her hand off the switch.

"Goodnight, Mom!" Hayley grins, flopping back against her pillow, audibly out of breath.

Their mom lingers. Her eyes shift to Erin.

Erin smiles bashfully. “You might’ve just missed a tickle monster breach,” she admits.

As quickly as it comes, her concern melts away. “I thought we agreed, no more tickle monsters at bedtime.”

“That’s why I said *breach*.”

“Uh-huh. Hayley, if you can’t sleep, I want you to bug your sister, not me. Got it?”

Hayley shoots her a thumbs up.

Both girls listen as the footsteps grow softer and softer, until they’re no longer able to be heard at all. Erin realizes that might’ve been the last thing she’ll say to her mother for the foreseeable future. Her stomach rolls with too many emotions to neatly sort out.

“Are you ready?” Hayley’s hands are cupped around her mouth.

Erin returns to the present moment and nods.

“Promise you’ll be safe?” Hayley asks.

“Yeah. I’ll send you guys a postcard.”

“*Promise?*”

Erin sighs and puts her hand out, pinkie up. Hayley does the same and intertwines their fingers. She gives Erin a good, firm shake with her whole arm.

Then Hayley pulls herself out from under the covers and wraps her arms around Erin’s neck. Erin’s face twists up as she hugs her back, holding Hayley’s tiny body against her own.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Erin breathes.

“I’ll have an extra good summer, just for you,” Hayley whispers, “so when you come home, I can tell you and Max all about it.”

Guilt knots up in Erin’s throat. She forces a laugh.

Yes, Erin told Hayley that she’s leaving. Hayley is good at keeping secrets. Even still, Erin omitted a few crucial details. Like where she’s headed, and the fact that she’s not coming back.

Erin hates the way lying weighs on her shoulders, pressing down on her until it feels like she can’t breathe. She carefully takes Hayley’s arms from around her neck and lays her back down. She tucks the covers snugly underneath her chin.

Eventually, Erin will tell her everything eventually. Now is just too fragile of a moment. Too many things could still go wrong. Erin only hopes that, unlike their father, she’ll get the chance to explain herself to Hayley one day.

“Tell Max I said hi?” Hayley smiles with all of her teeth.

Erin tries to smile back, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

Downstairs is so quiet that it makes the whole house feel brittle. Erin tiptoes across the hardwood, as if the slightest noise will bring it all crashing down on top of her. This is a familiar routine. Like she does every night, she checks that the back door and all the windows are locked. The fire alarms are set. It’s a nice neighbourhood, and they’re a careful family, and neither fact is related to why she does this. It’s about

feeling the control that comes with her fingers sliding against the deadbolt. The knowledge that *she* is responsible for this house. She needs that feeling of control on a normal day. It is especially vital tonight.

The front door comes last. On the wall beside the door are two things: a mounted rack, which holds a variety of lanyards, coats and bags. And then there's the family photo.

Erin's always thought it was strange. Her parents divorced when she was twelve. The family that greets her at the door hasn't existed in six years. And yet it hangs there anyway, at her mother's insistence. It's supposed to be a reminder of what they've come from. Erin struggles to see it as anything more than a marker of what they've lost.

In the photo, Hayley is two, nothing but a head full of blond hair and their dad's smile crowded onto the left side of her face. Erin is twelve, wearing this horrible plaid shirt that makes it even worse that this is the only non-girl photo still hanging in the house. Mom is holding Hayley on her lap; Dad has his arm around Erin's shoulder. He looks like Franco Nero, face dominated by a thick moustache and a laid-back swagger that hangs in the air even now.

Her parents divorced only a few months after the photo was taken. Last fall, her dad died.

Erin stares at the photo for a long time before she jiggles the doorknob and turns away.

It's a contradictory thought, but as she looks, she can find

all the spots where life was once lived so much. The corner of the couch where her dad used to fall asleep on Saturday afternoons, halfway through one of his Westerns. The patch of carpet that's still indented from Hayley's baby stroller. The half window in the front door; Erin can remember the sight of Max's hair through it, his eyes peering inside before his thumb jammed against the doorbell.

There's so much that isn't here any more. Within a matter of hours, Erin won't be, either.

Back in her room, Erin gets dressed for real: a pair of jeans, a hoodie that goes over her tank top, and her most comfortable sneakers. Two half-packed suitcases take up her bed. Once she's sure that the rest of the house is asleep, she goes about filling the bags with whatever fits.

Inevitably, Erin finds herself at her desk. She put it together with her mom, one of those early efforts at bonding as mother and daughter. It's white and bubblegum pink, with a vanity mirror as its centerpiece, where several photos are taped around its rim. Her and Miranda, the day after graduation. Hayley's kindergarten portrait. In the corner, there's a photo of Max.

His face is obscured by wind-blown bangs, and he's not smiling so much as baring his teeth to the camera. It's been years since Erin has seen him look this happy.

Erin checks her phone. Max lives ten minutes away, and the *on my way* text illuminating her screen is already seven

minutes old. So she tops off her suitcase with her bottle of Estradiol, her Monday-through-Sunday pre-made pill case, and a disposable camera she bought for the hell of it, then zips both suitcases up and drags them across the room.

She opens the window and sticks her head out. There's a stretch of flat roof underneath, which is directly above the front porch. The perfect launching pad. Erin takes a deep breath before she ducks back inside and pushes her bags through the window.

It occurs to her, briefly, that this might be the most dangerous thing she's ever done, though the night is still young. On her hands and knees, she crawls to the edge of the roof and looks out.

Her vision warbles with vertigo for a few scary seconds, and Erin shuts her eyes until the spinning feeling stops. When she can breathe again, she looks out, not down. The house across from hers is another two-storey, with bushes along its porch. It's dark in the windows except for the upstairs bedroom, where, judging from the time, Martha and Jakob are ready to settle in for the night. Erin remembers going through the neighbourhood with her dad to clear out driveways in the winter, how Martha would always reward her with five dollars and a candy cane. That all stopped once her dad left, but the couple was still very nice. Very Polish. They never fussed about Erin's whole *thing*.

Erin carefully drops each suitcase over the edge. They fall

with firm, muted *thuds*. She turns and grips the edge of the roof and lowers herself as much as she can, until her fingers ache, but there's still a good five or six feet between her shoes and the ground.

She means to do a countdown, from three to zero to letting go, but her grip fails at *two*. Which means she falls silently and lands on her back. It knocks the wind out of her, but it also probably spares her one or two broken ankles.

Still. Erin lies there for a minute. Her breath comes back to her in gasps, each one less shallow than the last. Somehow this is all still easier than sneaking through the inside of the house. Her mom wakes if a pin falls on the carpet. The stairs creak and the front door squeals. Nobody, in all her years of being alive, has been able to sneak out like a normal human being. Nobody's really tried before, either, but that's beside the point.

She sits up. Her back hurts, but nothing seems broken. For a moment, while she's still getting her breath back, she looks around. It's eerily silent. So much so that her own breathing seems heavy and awkward to her ears. She seems so *loud*. She almost expects people to start poking their heads out from behind their curtains: *just look at that girl disturbing the peace of their neighbourhood. Again.*

Tyres crunch on street gravel. She can hear it before she finally looks over her shoulder. At some point, the Impala may have been white. But now, in its age, its colour has faded into a horrible-looking rust-tinted cream.

She takes a deep breath and, with a bag in each hand, pushes herself to her feet and walks up to the car. The passenger window is already down. Erin bends forwards and looks inside.

Despite the fact that it's June, he's dressed in layers; a shirt over a shirt under a jacket. But Max might be the happiest he's ever been. His hair, dark brown, has been freshly cut, uneven ends hanging just past his jawline. His face is marked by acne and lingering baby fat. If they didn't know him, people might assume he was a tween boy. In reality, he turned eighteen last week. It's hardly passing, but Erin knows it's better than not passing at all.

Max beams up at her. "Hi! Are you ready?"

After a moment, Erin nods. "Uh-huh."

One lone suitcase sits in the back. Erin stares at it for a moment, the knot in her stomach twisting again, before she hoists her own bags inside.

After she settles in the passenger seat, Max sits there for a moment. His fingers drum against the wheel. "Sure you didn't forget anything?"

"Yeah, let's go," Erin answers tightly.

Despite the lingering awkward silence, a grin returns to Max's face before they peel out of the neighbourhood.

Four days, Erin reminds herself. That was the amount of time Max told her it would take to drive from Columbus to Berkeley. Four days with a boy who broke up with her almost

two years ago. A boy who hasn't really spoken to her since. Until now.

Although dread still clings to the back of her throat, Erin can't deny that it is tinted with some bit of exhilaration.

Max's evening began just after midnight, listening to his mom and stepdad move around their bedroom. As soon as the light went out, he started the stopwatch on his phone. Once twenty minutes had gone by without any sign of consciousness, Max got up, tiptoed to the bathroom, and sheared off most of his hair.

This only took a few minutes, first to hack away at the length that had built up over the last few months, then to clean up the edges so it looked a *little* less crazed. He could still feel some jagged edges at the back of his neck, but it was fine. It didn't need to look perfect, so long as he stopped looking so much like a girl. Once this was accomplished, it was packing time.

His first binder went missing from his dresser drawer way back when he was fifteen. The second had been openly disposed of in ribbons. And then he lost a whole lot more, shirts and underwear and the ability to get his own hair cut,

but it was really the loss of the binder that started the snowball.

Not much had been rebuilt in the last eight months. Altogether, everything he was taking fitted into one suitcase. Max had shelled out for his fourth binder (shipped to and from his friend Alex's house, an awkward exchange that marked the last time they'd spoken) and he slept with the damned thing shoved down his pants, or tucked into the side of his sports bra. He got good at lying about the things people seemed to want him to lie about.

Although his parents' room remained dark, Max took care to be especially quiet as he slipped out of his room and crept down the long, dark hallway to the kitchen. He imagined having to explain this, if he were to be caught – dressed in men's clothes, hair cut, grabbing the sack lunch he'd prepared for himself a few hours earlier under the guise of needing to bring lunch to work the next day.

Halfway back to his room, Max bumped his hip against a side table. The sound was brief, but so sudden that it felt like it should've brought the whole house down. Max froze and held his breath. His parents' room was still.

Max kept one hand on his dinner while he pulled his phone out with the other, revealing a house plant he'd nudged to the very edge of the table, as well as a picture frame that was face up on the carpet. He carefully pushed the plant back into the centre of the table before he looked down at the photo.

It was his graduation portrait. Still glossy and new. It was almost funny how little you could see the make-up, considering how it'd felt like his mother *caked* him with it. He would've put good money on it being bolder. Real overcompensation to make him worthy of his grandparents' fridge.

But he just looked like a normal girl.

It took a second for Max to realize he was grinding his molars. He reached out with his foot and turned the frame over, until his picture was no longer leering up at him. And then he stared at his parents' door as he slowly brought his foot down, pressing until the carpet muffled the sound of the glass cracking under his weight.

Harder still. He glared at the door and ground his heel. Something *snapped*.

Max looked down. The backing board was twisted off, and he could hear the jingle of broken glass as he moved his foot. Maybe now it wouldn't take so long for his parents to realize he was gone, but Max suddenly cared less. He wanted them to feel his absence. He wanted it to weigh on them. Even if he knew it wouldn't.

It was almost two in the morning when Max pushed his bag through his window and threw it into his car. He texted Erin – *on my way* – and then winced at the roar of the engine sputtering to life. But the car rolled down the street without incident, and Max took the long way out of the neighbourhood. He devoured his sandwich before he hit the freeway.

He knew the clock was ticking now. In just a few hours, his parents would be awake, and they would check the apps on their phones to see where Max was. Life360 and OurPact, which were just the ones he knew about, would create a beat-by-beat map to his exact location, so long as his phone was in hand. It was imperative that he throw the trail cold as soon as he could.