

UNDERBELL

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“We cannot be more sensitive
to pleasure without being
more sensitive to pain.”

- Alan Watts

Spit Mask

Will Bernardara, Jr.

Will Bernardara Jr. is a writer of experimental fiction and the founder of the criminal occult artist collective The Tender Wolves Society. He is the author of the novel America (voidfrontpress). Mr. Bernardara lives in Detroit with his wife Jen Ann Henderson. He is at work on his second novel, st1mulus z3r0.

Carlos slavers, pigheadedly mutinous in the filthy order of the King County Jail, archipelagic in The Chair. He hacks out brainsick verbalizations animated by an aberrant hybrid of paranoiaspeak and manic glee: “FUCKIN’ KILL US ALL!! A-HAHAAHAH! FUCK YOU! MS-13 – YEAH, MOTHERFUCKER! HAHAAHHAHHA!!”

His sputum – meant for the nearest uniformed authority figure – explodes lamely against the black fabric webbing of the mask.

Let Carlos tell it: “Boat boat boat boat boat.” He chuckles moronically.

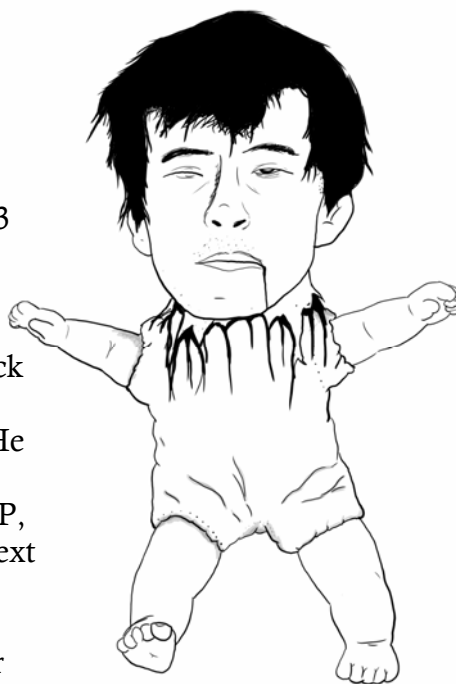
Translation: Carlos and pals were smoking PCP, known curbside as “Love Boat” or “Boat,” and next thing Virgin Mary knows Carlos is reeling down Yesler MANUALLY PULLING OUT HIS INTESTINES through a slit made by a box-cutter for a riveted crowd of jump-rope and hopscotch girls. Instead of helping Carlos or calling 911 the black girls record the gruesome spectacle with their cell phones and stream it to Facebook Live.

Dark like fluid. Like black syrup. The restraints bracelet my wrists, shackle my ankles. Aphotic. Entire. This can’t be Carlos’s voice. Words like “aphotic” aren’t in his index.

Like this, then: I don’t need fuckin’ light. Fuck light. Didn’t Lucifer give us light, something? Dumb shit. Jesus was a carpenter and got nailed to wood. They call that eye-Ronnie or some shit.

Carlos does thirty days (after they push his guts back in and sew him up), most of it in the jail’s “bam bam” tank, which is reserved for crazies and the retarded and endangered pedophiles.

After he’s released, Carlos falls in with a burnout white kid named Dallas. They waste away their days injecting crystal meth and jerking themselves raw and dry watching teenage-girls-gangbanged-in-public videos on their Samsung screens: the more degrading the porn, the better.



U.B

Lott Art is a company in Hong Kong founded by Tsutomu Takuma. Takuma is an ex-con, convicted in the '90s for grabbing a 9-year-old girl at a public park and shoving a camera's telephoto lens inside her in a crazed effort to take pictures of her vagina's interior. Now, free, Takuma's a businessman.

Takuma's business is an IED of controversy. Lott Art manufactures and ships lifelike, anatomically correct "child sex dolls," replicas of boys and girls as young as four.

U.B

Martin Orona lost his wife to a Craigslist ad. Then, distraught to the point of becoming nonfunctional, he lost his job as a senior advisor at an architectural company. He's tried all the SSRIs and mood stabilizers and still wants to die. He binge-watches shows on Investigation Discovery, shows about murder, and wishes a psychopath would find him and hack open his throat.

Martin becomes infatuated with jihadist militant groups. He sees their eagerness to kill in their eyes on the flat-screen, and realizes he doesn't want to die so much; he wants someone to murder him. Before architecture engulfed his focus, Martin used to paint. In college. He thinks of art, and he thinks of Lars Vilks and Pearl's head being sawed off in *The Slaughter of the Spy-Journalist*, the Jew Daniel Pearl, and gradually develops an idée fixe, a mania that blots out the future and the past and makes everything one gloriously focused now.

U.B

Carlos and Dallas run out of glass and money. They steal some cans of Reddi-Wip from a Walgreens and suck out all the nitrous oxide in an abandoned house littered with used syringes, soiled condoms, and broken crack pipes.

"We need money, dog," Carlos says, the rush in his head fading fast.

"My mom knows this bitch Ada, old ugly bitch. She runs one of those houses for retards. You know, like retarded motherfuckers and old motherfuckers with brain problems? It's in Belltown. My mom's friend and Ada's died yesterday. Mom asked me if I'd watch the retard house for a few hours while she and Ada go to the funeral. They'll pay us \$50. I wasn't gonna do it but it's money."

Carlos grins. A line of drool courses from the corner of his mouth down his jaw and glistens in the sun. "Fuck yeah it's money. An' watchin' a bunch of rejectoids shittin' on themselves is good for the lulz, right? Fuck yeah, nigga. The lulz."

Dallas puts flame to a Kool, puffs. "Tomorrow. I'll let my mom know."

U.B

Tsutomo is interviewed by a British magazine. In Britain, police have been using the Lott Art orders to track down suspected pedophiles:

“What are the dolls made of?”

“Silicone. They weigh as much as real child. They are \$1000.”

“What do you make of the controversy surrounding your business?”

“It is problematic. Pedophiles not bad people. Pedophiles attracted to children. This not choice; this their attraction. The Prophet Muhammad married Aisha when she was nine year age. Ancient Greek and Roman culture? Love for children not deviant, not in some circle.”

“So, you’re saying society’s the problem, not the criminals who rape children?”

“I am saying my dolls offer pedophile legal way to gratify desires. And in Britain, where you are from, there are therapists who concur. They feel dolls should be prescribed by psychiatrist.”

“But the dolls aren’t legal, Mr. Takuma. In the last month in the UK, police have seized 142 of your child sex dolls. Don’t you feel like you’re actually harming the people you’re claiming to help?”

“The authorities find orders through customs and go into these home. There they may find image of child pornography – illegal – and arrested.”

“If they’re not illegal, why does your company now ship the dolls through the mail disguised as something else? They’ve been ruled ‘obscene’ in the UK.”

“My dolls prevent attack on children. They substitute for human girl or boy. We sell on Amazon and eBay.”

“The majority of psychiatrists have said that these dolls will actually reinforce the impulse to offend.”

“I am helping people. It is legal and ethical. Society must accept that is impossibility to make a fetish a not-fetish. Repressed desire is bad; my doll give outlet to pedophile.”

“You are a convicted molester yourself. Have these dolls helped you?”

“I use doll many time each day. My doll have vagina, mouth, and anus. I use and ejaculate and I am not threat to neighborhood or park.”

“If I’m to be frank, you’re disgusting, Mr. Takuma.”

“I am artist. Art heal. Dolls are my work. We have also infant model. With sexy diaper guaranteed to arousal.”

After the interview, Tsutomo boards a plane; the flight destination is America – Seattle, Washington.

U.B

Martin wants a fatwa of death issued against him. He streams videos of Islamic terrorists beheading infidels - the nasheed music strange and repetitive, the blood gushing and the diligent sawing swirling together into what Martin interprets as a bliss preceding sweet nothingness.

He begins a series of nine paintings. Acrylic. At the top of each canvas, Martin paints the words: THIS IS AN IMAGE OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD. Below the words, he paints obscenities: mutilated and bleeding female genitalia, a ball sack wearing a turban, and several depictions of bearded Arabic men assfucking young boys. Martin's brushstrokes are deliberate and harsh; he thinks of the words of Imam Ibn al-Jawzi: "He who claims that he experiences no sexual desire when looking at beautiful young boys is a liar."

Martin's done his research. From what he's read, he's decided that pederasty in the Islamic faith is a practice that has been around for 1,400 years with Allah's blessing.

When the series is finished, Martin takes photographs of each painting and bombards the internet with them. He posts them everywhere but concentrates on Islamic extremists' feeds and sites. With the images, he includes his home address, full name, email, and a pic of himself.

Martin makes a short video with his cell. It shows Martin studying the Qur'an with a squinted look of disgust, like he's holding a dead Madagascar hissing cockroach. Then it shows Martin dropping the holy book in the toilet.

He then drowns the religious text in piss.

U.B

After Ada explains to Carlos and Dallas that all they have to do is "watch the residents; just make sure they're not hurting themselves," she leaves for the funeral. They immediately begin raiding the house, looking for anything to pawn. All they uncover is a carton of Basic Light 100's, which belong to Ada. The TV is from the '90s; no pawn shop would even give \$5 for it.

They smoke cigarettes and grow anxious; the \$50 Ada paid them is going toward meth, and they're not exactly patient.

"This place smells like raw shit," Carlos says.

"Yeah. Old bitch probably don't give 'em baths very much."

"And they probably shit theyselves every couple hours."

Dallas opens the fridge, does a quick inventory. "No fuckin' beer neither."

The Price Is Right is on the TV, a Bob Barker-hosted episode. Carlos and Dallas collapse onto the couch in the living room. A black resident in his mid-thirties, fidgety and severely mentally handicapped, looks at Dallas. Dallas stares back, eyes hard with contempt and aggravation. The resident shrinks back in his recliner and whimpers as though he's been struck.

"The fuck is your problem?" Dallas says, voice raised.

"Look at that old bitch. She ain't moved at all. She comatose or some shit."

"And this nigger's scared of me for some reason."

Carlos laughs. "You say 'nigga' like a fuckin KKK, yo."

A rank odor fills the living room. It's thick and stifling. Carlos gags.

"One of them shit," Dallas says.

"You think?" Carlos covers his nose and mouth with his T-shirt. "It's that nigga. He shit. You gotta change his diaper, dog."

"Fuck you. You do it."

"No way."

Dallas shoots up and walks over to the black resident. "Nasty motherfucker. Take your pants down."

The black man whines and rubs his hands together impulsively; he has the mind of a 6-year-old.

Carlos grins, watching. He starts to laugh. "Take that nigga's pants off for him, Dallas. Ha ha."

Dallas mutters, "Fuckin' retard," and savagely jerks down the man's sweatpants. The man tenses up and freezes, paralyzed with fear.

As soon as the sweatpants are down around the man's ankles, the stench becomes greater – a gust of rotten biomaterial.

Carlos cackles, jackal-like, and points mockingly at Dallas. "Change that shit, nigga. His diaper full."

"Fuck this," Dallas says, ripping the heavy, wet diaper off the man and flinging it at the TV. Watery feces splatter the RCA.

Wet shit runs down the screen, obscuring Bob Barker's face behind a mask of filth.

"Sick bitch," Dallas says, and spits on the frightened resident. He then breaks into a frenzy of erratic blows, punching the defiled man about the head and body. The resident squeals and cowers, curling into a ball.

Dallas abruptly stops throwing punches, winded.

Carlos stands up. "Look at him. You ain't even draw blood."

"Shut up."

The frustration breaks and a freedom dawns, like a clean stimulant mainlined. No adults. No supervision. This house is THEIRS.

"Yo," Carlos says, sadism sheening his eyeballs. "Go into the bedroom. That bitch. See what she like."

"The girl got Down syndrome."

"So what? Down syndrome bitches got pussies."

The bedroom's decorated like a child's: lots of pink and stuffed animals. The fat girl with Down syndrome, probably nineteen or twenty years old, is sitting on the floor cradling a dirty Cabbage Patch doll when Dallas walks in.

Carlos finds some cans of vanilla custard in the cupboard and a funnel in the garage. He boils the custard in a pot and, once it's bubbling and hot, he takes it over to a seemingly catatonic elderly man lying on the couch.

"Let's see if I can get you up, old man," Carlos says, yanking up the old man's sweater, exposing the feeding tube in the abdomen. Carlos rips the tube out and flings it across the room. The hole bleeds a little. He jabs the funnel into the aperture, brutally widening the hole; the aged cataleptic doesn't move an inch.

Carlos pours the thin, scorching pudding into the funnel. He imagines the scalding, blistering damage happening in the stomach. The invaded man doesn't scream or even moan, but he does writhe a little, trembling. His mouth yawns wide, soundless, and his lips quiver.

"Show me your tits," Dallas says to the chubby Mongoloid girl. "Fat bitches like you got big ones."

Dallas rips the neck of the girl's shirt, tearing it down around her belly. Large white bra.

"Why you look scared? I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl doesn't seem to understand what's happening. Dallas unzips his jeans and pulls his cock out.

"Here. Put it in your mouth." Dallas palms the back of the girl's head and throatfucks her until she chokes, strings of thick saliva depending from her chin.

Carlos puts lit cigarettes out on a wheelchair-bound granny's grayed, wrinkled thighs. She yips, helpless; the embers burn into flesh and hiss, leaving raw spherical brandings. He crams his hand into the old woman's underwear and rips out a handful of pubic hair.

Dallas positions the girl on all fours on the bed. "You got a fat ass," he says, squeezing the bare cheeks hard, leaving behind red fingerprints.

The girl howls as Dallas rams his shampoo-slathered cock into her asshole.

The mentally handicapped black resident begins throwing a fit. He gets on his knees and starts pounding his temples with his knuckles.

"Hey hey," Carlos says. "Don't hit yourself. Hit this old bitch. She my ashtray."

Carlos seizes the black man's wrists and pulls him toward the granny.

"Go on, you retarded nigga," Carlos says, stepping back. "Hit her."

The man is hysterical; his mouth agape, tears spilling down his face.

Carlos loses patience. "Here. I'll help you."

Carlos grabs the man's wrists and forces him to batter the old lady's face until her nose is pouring blood. The black resident wails; Carlos laughs, raving.

"I got a better idea, yo," Carlos says. He goes into the kitchen and rummages through drawers.

Dallas thrusts, his stomach battering her ass, and spurts come into the bawling girl's large intestine. He says, "Don't tell anyone what happened," and leaves the bedroom. The girl doesn't move, trauma making a statue of her – she doesn't move for a full hour after Carlos and Dallas depart from the house.

As Dallas nears where the hallway opens into the living room, he hears Carlos shouting, encouraging, "That's it, nigga! SMASH, NIGGA! BASH THAT BITCH!" Dallas hears the sound of something heavy hitting something wet.

"Look what I got this nigga to do, yo!" Carlos is pleased with himself.

Dallas looks: the black retard is clumsily bludgeoning the wheelchair-bound old woman with a meat tenderizer. There is blood everywhere; the left half of the lady's face is shredded and swelling. The hammer pounds the woman's profile into mashed, dripping meat.

"Holy fuck," Dallas says. "She dead?"

Carlos shrugs. "I don't know, nigga. Bitch wasn't much alive in the first place."

Skull shows through the wrecked flesh. The gone black man continues swinging the tenderizer.

"Let's bounce," Dallas says. "He gonna kill that bitch."

"You set a retard in motion they don't stop," Carlos says, grinning sadistically, practically drooling.

U.B

In downtown Seattle, at the La Quinta Inn & Suites on 8th Avenue, there are two conferences being held over the weekend. One is a private meeting of NAMBLA, the North American Man/Boy Love Association; the other is the Ninth Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Summit Conference, organized by the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Two of the Muslims attending the conference meet in a hotel room. They speak quietly and gravely in Arabic.

NAMBLA members converse over lunch. The excitement is electric, airborne.

"I knew a boy, adorable kid, he had apotemnophilia. BIID."

"I've heard of that. What is it again?"

"Body Integrity Identity Disorder. Or xenomelia maybe? I forget."

"Oh."

"Yeah. What made me think of him is the Lott Art demo tomorrow. Dolls. This boy met someone online, some guy in Thailand. The man posted that he was looking for a boy to become his living doll. The boy, well, he didn't want his limbs, felt like they didn't belong to him."

"I'm interested. You have my interest."

"I heard this guy, who was rich, flew the boy out to Thailand and had some surgery done. Had the boy's arms and legs amputated, had his vocal cords snipped, and had his eyeballs removed. All surgical, all clean. Guy posted some pics on 4chan of the boy, who he keeps in a box under his bed."

"Sexy."

"Satan's Cavern. Coffee bar. I used to go there. Process Church."

"Could we get some more nacho sauce, please?"

"We'd watch them sacrifice Alsatians. Dogs. In San Francisco. Wild times."

"Parsons. He was trying to conjure an elemental in his garage. Blew himself up. His mom killed herself the next day. The police found home movies of Parsons' mom screwing the family dog."

"A German Shepherd."

"Goat of Mendes. I had a badge."

"Necrophilia. Grave robbing."

"Release the fiend that lies within. Bestiality. Ritual murder."

"Nazis. Illuminati. Occult research. They say the Jews walked into the gas-ovens without being threatened or forced. They used mind control to make them just waltz to their deaths."

"Pepsi. No ice."

"White slavery stuff. They also skinned canines and drained the blood."

"1968. Four Pi. Hitchhikers near Boulder Creek. Some members would even volunteer. But usually, the sacrifices were runaways or drifters."

"Klaus Kinski."

"In 2005 Mary Ann was ripped apart by dogs at the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. They ate every bit of her. Nothing but bones left."

“Untermeyer Park. Found a bunch of skinned and disfigured Alsatians there. Son of Sam attended gatherings there too. Satanic cult. Blood in the garden.”

“O.T.O. solar lodge. They had children chained up inside steel boxes in the desert. Fun in a box.”

“The Spiral Staircase house. Topanga. They were doing human sacrifice there too. Children were like candy, going around everywhere, passed around.”

“Thank you, young lady.”

“Four Pi. Child trafficking in New York and Staten Island. They found a dead little girl with a big black candle shoved up her snatch and a goat’s hoof in her mouth.”

“Black Cross. Satanic hit squad.”

“Murders. Gang-raping teenage girls in abandoned buildings.”

U.B

Tsutomo, in one of the hotel’s big conference rooms, coordinates with his assistants for the presentation. They position the eldritch dolls in lewd poses on long, fold-out tables. Since this is a meeting of NAMBLA, Tsutomo brought mostly boy dolls.

U.B

Martin, eager, primed for the end, drives down Pine Street, amphetamines dirtying his blood with bad energy. He is adorned in a wool bisht that has been liberally defaced by obscenities scrawled in black Sharpie: ISLAM IS FOR PEDOPHILE FAGGOTS, FUCK MUHAMMAD, MUSLIMS (HEART) BOY BUTTS, etc., as well as cartoonish doodles of dicks and balls beside Arabic verses.

Two youngsters run out into the middle of the road, waving their arms, a white kid and a Hispanic kid, forcing Martin to brake.

The Hispanic one, shirtless and scrawny, walks over to Martin’s window. “You give us a ride downtown, mister?”

Martin doesn’t even think about it; everything now for him is YES – YES to death, YES to madness, YES to recklessness.

“Get in,” Martin says.

The two kids pile into his backseat. They say their names are Carlos and Dallas.

U.B

The conference rooms – the one for avowed pedophiles, the other for devout Muslims – are separated by a crimped wall, more of a shade than a wall, that pulls out accordion-like. The auditorium-style rooms are actually one room, partitioned by this wall/shade.

In one room, Tsutomo orates to the crowd of mostly frumpy, bespectacled child molesters. He unveils his latest niche model: a replica of 9-year-old Aisha, the Prophet's kiddie wife.

Two Muslims at the conference are uninterested in the imam's discourse. They broodingly check their cell phones for texts, posts, etc. They have a full duffel bag on the floor between them.

"GIVE US THE FUCKIN' MONEY," Carlos snarls. Dallas restrains Martin's arms while Carlos holds a butterfly knife to Martin's neck.

"Take it and kill me," Martin says calmly. Zen.

"Get it," Carlos says. Dallas digs into Martin's back pocket, extracting the wallet.

Carlos, amped on meth and whatever else, starts stabbing Martin in the side of his face. The sharp point punctures right through Martin's cheek in four places – clean through, blood welling out of the holes and drenching Martin's profaned Muslim garb.

Martin groans and covers his knifed face.

Carlos and Dallas bolt out of Martin's SUV. They leave the doors ajar and disappear into the Seattle night, a little richer and a little further down the line of no return. They are motes of danger in the murk of darkness... then they're gone.

U.B

Martin, bleeding profusely, makes it to the La Quinta Inn & Suites. He leaves his vehicle in the middle of the busy street, abandoning it.

"Subhanaka allahumma wa bi hamdika wa tabara kasmuka wa ta'ala jadduka wa la ilaha ghairuka."

A hotel clerk's face goes shaky with alarm, seeing Martin. "Sir, I'm calling 911. I'm calling 911."

Martin trudges past check-in, to the conference room, the double doors labeled with Arabic script. He barges in.

"Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!" Martin shouts to the gathered Muslims, disrupting prayer. Martin raises his arms to the sky, making a target of himself. He closes his eyes as the two Muslims quickly unzip the duffel bag and draw G36 assault rifles from it. Martin knew the two would be here; he'd promised them, via email, he'd show up.

Automatic gunfire spurs screams and panic and then drowns the screams out. Each rifle has a 100-round dual drum magazine, and the two Muslims expertly unload all 200 bullets.

Martin's body is blasted into ragged damage. A third of his head, the upper left quadrant, is sprayed across the double doors of the conference room. The bullets hit and shred through Martin's graffiti-vandalized Islamic getup.

A stray bullet pierces the dividing wall and cores Tsutomo's skull. The designer falls dead onto the latest Art Lott child-sex doll... Tsutomo's ghost uncoils from its body and enters the Aisha doll, where it remains trapped for several decades.

U.B

AND IN PARADISE, MUSLIMS AND NAMBLA SPIRITS FUCK ALL THE CHILDREN... AND IN NOTHINGNESS, THE SUICIDES DON'T THINK AND ARE NONEXISTENT AND THEREFORE AT PEACE... AND ON EARTH, DRUG-ADDICTED LOWLIFES DESTROY THEMSELVES AND EVERYTHING AROUND THEM.

AND THIS GOES ON, FOREVER AND EVER, WITHOUT REPRIEVE.

Ten Bucks Says He Beats Her

Thomas Kearnes

Thomas Kearnes works as a college English tutor and freelance editor. His fiction has appeared in Gulf Coast, Berkeley Fiction Review, PANK, The Adroit Journal, Sundog Lit, Litro and several horror and queer venues. His debut story collection, "Texas Crude," recently released from Lethe Press. He grew up in rural East Texas and now lives outside Houston.

So, I'm just standing there behind the register, and I'm wondering if Dex saw my new dye job on Twitter or Instagram or maybe Snapchat. I can feel my heart act the fool in my chest, and my skin gets hot. My hair is long and black, like the crazy chick from that old horror movie, *The Ring*. Seriously, I could be the girlfriend of some mass shooter, the one who knew what would happen but just stayed home and watched *The Price Is Right*. I think Dex will love it.

Wade hasn't mentioned it. He says I should, like, pay more attention. I've been here over a year, he says, and I've totally taken orders from baby-rapists and armed robbers. Maybe even a murderer. It's simple statistics, he says. He can't believe I'm not curious about the losers that want a cheeseburger and a shake. It doesn't matter. The child molester isn't molesting *me*, the armed robber isn't robbing *me*. Wade looks at me like I'm some pathetic freshman, still wearing Affliction shirts. I feel bad... or maybe I feel nothing. It's, like, the same sensation.

Anyway, while I'm thinking about Dex, I notice Wade staring out into the dining area. He asks me, he says, do you think that dude with his three kids is on meth? Before I turn to look, I roll my eyes and agree.

I took his order. He was sweating like a fat-ass in gym class. Even his wife-beater hung from his shoulders, like he'd lost a lot of weight just last week or whatever. And when one kid opened her trap, he turned to the wrong kid, thought it was *her* talking. Oh, totally, I tell Wade. You should see if he wants to party.

Okay, fine. I'm a bitch. I know Wade is trying to live clean. I always imagine some Mexican maid when I hear that: *live clean*. All my thoughts and prayers are with him, but he was eye-fucking that speed freak. Seriously.

That old fossil, Eileen, shuffles our way. She's a team leader, *not* a manager. She's either too brain-dead to know the difference or she has major control issues. Have those feed-sack tits ever pointed out instead of down?

So, Wade asks Eileen if there's anything we can do about Father of the Year, and she says no. He might sue. Oh, and two of the kids are totally sobbing now. The other customers stare, but think about it: do you care who's watching when you're high? One customer glares at me, so evil, like it's my fault the crying won't stop. I'm, like, eat your burger, bitch. Not really, that would be super-dumb, but when I imagine myself doing it, I feel badass.

Now Wade's waiting on some Crossfit creature and his skinny little slut. She won't look at anyone but him, and when Wade asks her what she wants, he totally

answers for her. So, like, they go find a table, and Wade leans over and whispers, *Ten bucks says he beats her*. Hell no, Elmo! Some asshole hits me, I go into bitch mode.

Loser Eileen hasn't left. She whispers to Wade that she'll take his ten and raise him another ten. Like, why hasn't she left? She tells us her ex-husband used to slap her around and call her a whore. That was a total over-share. You don't tell your friends that personal crap, and we're not even her friends. She says women who stay with those types of men secretly like it. I'm, like, go away, Eileen!

The phone won't stop ringing. Cashiers don't have to answer, and that gives the other losers who work here one more reason to hate us. If I could answer, I'd say, this is Busy Burger, what the fuck? Actually, it's my mom on the line. I bet she and Eileen talk about how old and sad they both are. I'm totally kidding.

So, anyway, my mom can't pick me up from work. The next shift will be here in half an hour. I'm totally fucked. Wade's the only one who can help. Everyone back in the kitchen ignores me. So fucking rude. Just because they're no good at English and I'm an actual American. Anyway, Wade has a cow when I ask for a ride. He says his boyfriend is waiting, and he can't be late. If he can't drive me, I tell him in my little-girl voice, I'll have to walk home in the dark. Men in cars might slow down, lean out their windows and call me *baby*. They might rape me, and my friend in biology says rape sucks in ways you can't even imagine. He finally says okay, but we have to go to his place first.

U.B

I've always wondered how Wade landed such a sweet ride. It's some tricked-out Corvette that's older than me. It feels awesome outside, but he won't take the top down. He'd die if any of his anal-entry buddies knew he worked at Busy Burger. He won't even friend me on Facebook 'cause why else would he know a sixteen-year-old girl.

I ask if we can have some tunes. This dude totally still listens to actual radio stations, like, with towers and contests and shit. Doesn't he know satellite radio is so much better? He gets this really annoying look. He's reminding me that he's the adult and I'm not. I just keep smiling. It doesn't fucking matter 'cause the news is on, so I space out for a bit. I hate the news. It's just a bunch of sad and scary crap that happens to people I don't know and never will.

Ugh. Some Marine walked into the mall in, like, Omaha and just went thug-life on everyone. Thirty-five people are definitely dead, but a few more might bite it in the hospital.

Wade's looking really serious right now. He's having a grown-up moment and I'll never get it because no grown-up will explain them. Seriously, I'm not sure he even remembers I'm here. He's pretty cute—and a year older than my dad in Florida. I've never met my dad, but I've seen pictures. Wade's arms are stringy, but his legs are thick and have sexy tone. He calls it the Busy Burger workout. That's funny. He has a kind face, but Mom says gay dudes can be tricky and I should watch out.

I hope she's okay. Whenever she calls at work with whatever excuse, I can't make myself believe her. I try real hard, and I try to remember all the cool things my mom

has done, but she's a total liar. Seriously, my mom is kind of a whore, but whenever she calls and Eileen answers, I'm just glad she remembered me.

Fuckin' people, Wade says, what's the goddamn point? The sun's setting and the glare's a bitch. We're both squinting, and we can't really see each other. I think that's a good thing right now. When I finally find his face, it's so heartbreaking. He's trying so hard not to cry, but seriously, mass shooting bullshit has been happening, like, since I was in diapers. This is America. Some people win the lottery and other people get shot in the face. It's all luck. Seriously, build a bridge and get over it.

I check my phone. No texts from Dex. Hey, that rhymes. I'm badass like that. I'd love to be his play-cousin but thinking about the whole fucking script every high-school girl has to play out just to get a guy—it makes me tired. That sad and empty feeling sneaks up on me.

We exit the freeway. I don't know Wade's telling me a story till, like, he's already started. He was a grad student at, like, that big-ass university in Austin. He lived in a co-op, which sounds like a dorm except you can visit any room you want. Sweet. Wade had invited some random dude to spend the weekend with him. He had his own room. His name was Duncan. Wade announces that he loved him, but I don't believe him. Seriously, I don't think he believes himself. They were flipping channels and all the big networks and cable news were airing video from a big, ugly school in Colorado. It looked like a prison, he says. There were tons of cops, high-school kids filing out holding their hands together behind their heads. It sounds like a rap video, except everyone is white because it's Colorado.

Columbine, he says, was the first major mass shooting at an American school. The news couldn't stop blabbing about it. They dug up dirt on people who just happened to know people from there. Six degrees, you know? Wade says America lost her innocence that day, and—I can't help it—I laugh like a retard. For the first time since he started his story, he looks at me. He doesn't, like, look hurt or whatever. He just looks *done*.

I remind him that the Omaha shootings were in a mall, not a school. Also, and I'm not trying to be a bitch, but no one's gonna miss a few Kansas rednecks, anyway.

He sounds big and hollow, like a drum. Omaha is in Nebraska, Nikki. Nebraska, not Kansas.

He pulls in under a carport, parking in a numbered slot. This complex looks major shady. A few tenants, none of them white, not that I pay attention to that kind of thing, pretend they're not watching. Horrible Tejano music thumps against the passenger window. When I step out, it feels like the woofer is right beside my fucking head.

Two toddlers are playing in the tiny-ass yard in front of his neighbor's unit. Even their Barbie dolls look ghetto. Most of the hair is pulled out and they're naked. While I'm watching them, one kid takes her doll, with its pointed feet, and stabs the other in the eye. Seriously, it's fucking disturbing. I'm practically up Wade's ass, I'm so scared. The toddler who got stabbed in the eye screams for mommy. The trashy bitches watch me and Wade the whole time, none of them give a shit.

Wade pulls me inside and slams the door. It has four separate, individual locks.

As he slides the last deadbolt into place, I totally remember my fucking phone. It's still in the passenger seat. Seriously, I tell him, someone could steal it. What I don't

tell him is I'm still hoping Dex will call. Wade shushes me, like, actually shushes me like I'm a baby, says we have to talk quiet. Chuck is resting down the hall in their bedroom. Five minutes, he says. Just give me five minutes and I'll take you home. Promise? I know when my mom makes a promise, it means zippo if a man calls after that. I need to think of some bullshit story for why I'm getting home so late. Wade promises just five minutes. He kisses my forehead and it's, like, something a dad would do. I mean, I'm not sure about that. I've seen it on TV.

He gently takes my hand, like I'm blindfolded or whatever, and we enter a dark room. He guides me to a recliner. I can make out just enough to see a lamp beside me. When I reach for it, Wade smacks my hand like I'm five and he's the boss of me. Hell no, Elmo! I call him an asshole. Seriously, I'm not quiet about it. The Tejano music bleeds through the walls. We should keep things dark, Nikki. Just trust me.

I sigh, make a big deal out of it, and fall back into the recliner. His footsteps fade down the hall. I hear a door open and shut. Five minutes. I can totally handle five minutes. I've always wanted to know how faggots decorate their homes. Seriously, I've heard rumors. I'm tempted to turn on the lamp anyway.

You goddamn cocksucker, what did you promise me?!?

Dude, from the room at the end of the hall! Shit just got real. The voice is so hoarse and strained, I can't tell if it belongs to Wade. I wouldn't know if it's Chuck. A few bumps and screeches. Whatever it is, it's totally gotten physical.

One man shouts about why something shouldn't make a difference, and the other says that he didn't marry some bathhouse slut. A thump, and then a real weak yelp. Seriously, hit a guy just right, any guy, and he'll whimper like a girl.

One man slaps the other. Palm against cheek, like, you can't mistake it. Fuck this shit. I switch on the lamp. Big-ass framed pictures on the walls kinda look like art—or, like, what grown-ups call art when they don't wanna look dumb. The furniture matches. I'm totally afraid to touch anything.

This must be Chuck! I check out a framed portrait of Wade, smiling like a total idiot, embracing another man. He's not smiling. Not at all. The picture stands inside a bookcase filled with no actual books. Chuck, tall and built and intense, like, reminds me of pictures in my history textbook, the ones of Vikings out to rape and pillage. Wade's gonna get his ass kicked! I need a weapon. The Tejano music sounds so goddamn happy. Seriously, Mexicans don't have that much to be happy about.

I scoot my way into what seems to be the kitchen. When I find the light switch, there's a butcher's knife lying beside the sink. Grabbing it, I'm ready to kick, like, some serious ass. I step deliberately down the hall, closer and closer to the bedroom at the end. Now I can hear the whole conversation.

One man, crying out, says in a pleading voice that he was lonely. Jesus, why do old people always complain about being lonely? Seriously, if all the lonely old people hooked up, it would solve so many problems. This doesn't sound like Wade. The voice is higher, more girly, but maybe that's just because he's upset. But what follows is, like, definitely Wade. He asks how many bitches have been in their bed. I assume *bitches* still means men. There's an awful silence, broken only by whimpering and the Tejano bullshit. There's another smack, but it's not palm against face. I've got my ear to the fucking door, my free hand inching toward the doorknob, like I totally have a

plan once I'm inside. Please, one man begs—I can't tell who anymore—the bleeding won't stop.

That instant the door swings open, and I stumble into their bedroom. It was dumb, like, to put all my weight against it. I still have my knife. I'm still ready to kick ass. The bedroom looks sterile and scary, like a museum that isn't free.

This must be Chuck. He's definitely the man in the picture, the one not smiling. He's not smiling now, either. Someone, like, split his head open. His blond hair is drenched with blood—it's streaming down his face. Seriously, he's on his knees, and he's reaching out to me. Why? He doesn't—no, he's reaching to someone behind me.

Wade holds the golf club like I'm holding the knife. We're both ready for action. But the look on his face—I don't know if it's, like, meant for me or Chuck. His eyes are alive but totally cold, his nostrils flared, teeth bared. Finally, I notice blood dripping from the club, oozing down the shaft onto Wade's hands. Seriously. Five minutes, he says, still glaring at Chuck. I told you to give me five minutes.

Fuck my life.

Chuck reaches out again, this time definitely to me. He begs for help. I'm backing out through the doorway. I, like, totally want my mom. I know Wade will keep beating him. I'm still holding the knife like I plan to do something badass. I haul ass.

The knife clatters to the floor. I hear the golf club strike poor Chuck two or three times while I unbolt all four of the locks. Seriously, part of me is convinced that when he's done with Chuck, he'll come after me. I'm, like, a witness, right? I had no idea gay guys beat up one another. I thought they were, like, too busy fucking. I tear open the door. That's when I hear Wade, still in the bedroom. Nikki! He sounds normal again, the guy who bullshits with me at Busy Burger—but I am *not* taking that chance.

I dash into the parking lot, totally freaked. Oh, fuck. Wade drove me here. I don't know this part of the city. Seriously, where the fuck *am* I? I'm sweating and shaking. I need to call someone... my phone! I rush over beneath the carport to his ride, and for real, like, there's my smartphone lying on the passenger seat. I press my hands and forehead against the window, like a father admiring his newborn in the nursery. It's, like, ringing. That's what the screen display means. The caller is stored in my contacts, so I see only his name: Dex.

U.B

So, I was helping my friend, Angelique, vomit into a plastic wastebasket when I met him. The party was last weekend. Seriously, I only knew half the kids there.

Me and Angelique were in a bedroom on the second story. I, like, knew it was a boy's room: a basketball team's schedule and roster were tacked on a wall, several posters of various players at the hoop. He had *Star Wars* sheets and pillowcases. I wanted to meet him. He was either too good to be true or too much of a loser for words.

She threw up again. In between episodes, she moaned. Like, why am I such a slut? Her head, like, rolled to the side, vomit spraying everywhere. I held her up. I

don't even like sex, she said. I almost said maybe she was doing it wrong, but I heard a boy in the doorway.

He asked if he was interrupting anything. I said yes and thanked him. He laughed, and I totally got a little excited inside—but just inside. He asked if I needed help. Seriously, I'd been thirty seconds from letting her drown in her own vomit, but I knew sticking by Angelique's side would impress him. Loyalty means so much more to boys than girls.

We traded our names and all the basic, party-talk crap. We went to neighboring schools, so it was weird we'd never met. It totally bummed me out I might never see him again. Already, I was, like, starting to mourn.

His lips were so plump, I wanted to laugh. He had one hazel eye and one green eye. Seriously, he said they both changed color depending on what he wore. I really laughed this time, for real, and called him a liar. He smirked and insisted he take me out and prove it. Our heads edged closer together, our eyes closing and lips parting. We were seriously going to make out.

Angelique's head, resting on the wastebasket's rim, slipped off and hit the floor. Hell no, Elmo! I was so bummed, I wanted to, like, smack her. To be continued, Dex said. I asked if he wanted my number. I was so fucking pumped, I rode that wave all night.

U.B

So now, in the parking lot, I'm watching my smartphone click over to voicemail. Dex's name, like, disappears. I think I'm gonna cry. I'm totally going to sob.

There's a sharp stab in my hip and I glance down to see Psycho Toddler, like, poking at me with her broke-ass Barbie. You don't live here, she says. You're a stranger. She repeats it over and over, seriously, like it's some sort of spell. I'm backing up, like, deeper into the lot, resisting the urge to smack her because I totally couldn't handle jail. Her face is scrunched so tight, her mouth and nose and eyes all jam together. She keeps stabbing me with the doll. I totally tell her to stop, and she totally ignores me.

Wade is in his front yard, calling to me, before I realize he's outside. I start, like, backing up faster. A blue Tahoe honks at me then swerves around. Seriously, does he not see me? Wade is apologizing. Nikki, please. He says Chuck is totally fine now. He says he'll, like, take me home. The girl won't stop. *You don't live here. You're a stranger.*

An old black Buick screeches to a stop beside me. A heavy Mexican leans out of the driver's window, asks me if I'm okay. Seriously, he calls me *baby*. He shifts his gaze to the little girl and his voice gets totally gruff and scary. He's, like, speaking Spanish, I guess. Anyway, the girl gets spooked and runs off.

Now Wade is coming closer. He's limping. Maybe Chuck, like, got in a shot or two during his beating. I totally hope so. In English, the Mexican asks if this man is bothering me. I dash around the hood to the passenger side, throw open the door and hop in. I lock the door just as Wade reaches the car. Seriously, he pounds on the window, blood streaking from his hands. I hear him saying *sorry*, like, over and over

again. The Tejano music has totally stopped. I don't know exactly when. The Mexican asks if I need a ride. I should totally be scared, but all I can see is Chuck, bleeding from his head and reaching. I tell the Mexican to, like, just fucking go.

His name's Fidel. We're almost to the freeway before he asks my name. Alison, I tell him. Alison, he repeats with what I'm totally sure is a smirk. Seriously, he doesn't believe me. He clears his throat, I guess to change the mood or whatever, and asks if that man, Wade, *touched* me. I finally turn to him and, like, scoff.

He switches on the radio. I'm hoping for some tunes, seriously, but it's an all-news station. He, like, totally doesn't do the satellite thing, either. Omaha this and Omaha that. Now thirty-eight dead. I wanna turn that shit off. But, seriously, he'll think I'm a heartless bitch. And maybe I totally am. I think about Chuck reaching out, like, first for Wade—and then for me.

Instead, he talks over the announcer. He deals with a lot of young people in bad situations, he says. It's, like, his calling. Ever since his little sister was strangled to death by her boyfriend, during his senior year in high school, he's totally made it his mission to save *troubled*—he hits that word hard—youth from terrible fates. Seriously, I guess I could've asked more about his sister, but then he totally would've told me, and I for sure don't wanna know.

He tells me to look in the floorboards. I noticed getting in that there were two shopping bags full of loose papers. Keeping my eye on him, more to convince myself that, like, I was worth harming than out of a fear of being harmed, I pulled out part of one stack. Missing posters, like you find stapled to telephone poles and bus stops. I flip through the stack, every sheet a totally new face, always smiling. Seriously, why do missing kids always know to smile before they disappear? That's cool, I tell him. That sadness and emptiness are totally eating at me, stronger and stronger the longer we drive.

You gotta tell me your address, he says, so I can take you home. You *can* go home, right? It's a safe place? I've, like, never thought of it in those terms, and I nod because I totally didn't wanna start thinking about it now. He'll enter the address in his GPS. I'm seriously gutted. I can't face my mom if she's there, and I can't face the house if she isn't.

You don't live here. You're a stranger.

I totally remember Dex's address. This could totally work out. He's already been calling me. Faking a yawn, totally stretching to make it look good, I tell Fidel that I'm gonna sleep, like, until we get to my house, really Dex's house. He switches off the radio. Omaha goes back where it came from. I'm not tired, for sure, but I shut my eyes. There's nothing to see but, like, streetlamps and billboards.

U.B

So, I wake up and pink and green neon totally blind me. It borders each window and forms the letters spelling out Busy Burger. Seriously, we were parked where I worked. Shit just got real. My armpits are damp and gross. For a second, I'm fucking clueless about who brought me here. That's when I see them.

Fidel's suit is two sizes too small. I can't believe his wife, like, let him out of the house. He has his back to me, chatting up that crone, Eileen. For real. She hands him a bag of food and a cardboard drink carrier holding two cokes. She's laughing, she slaps his arm. God, she's a loser. It must totally suck to be old and still needing to flirt. Like, each rejection could be your last.

I'm freaked she'll glance outside and see me. I'm literally, seriously fucking shaking. It's way past midnight, and this is the only fast food shitbox still open. Fidel's Buick is the only car in the lot. I, like, sink deeper into the passenger seat, my feet fighting those creepy MISSING posters for space. Inside the car, I can't hear a damn thing until Fidel opens the driver-side door. He's trying to be quiet. The dumbass must think I'm still asleep. The food must be for me, too, the trashy skank from the suburbs who was stranded in a seriously shitty neighborhood. I need a fucking telethon!

He eases behind the wheel. You must be hungry, he says. I smile, but it's totally fake. Not even fake-real, just fake-fake. He says he's sorry, he knows Busy Burger is kinda nasty. I wanna defend this hellhole, but it's probably just the urge to defend myself. Fuck it, the sooner we're back on the highway, the sooner we get home—well, you know, what this enchilada thinks is my home.

He hands me a cheeseburger and strawberry shake. I guess it's time to, like, say thank you. Fake-real, not fake-fake. I seriously don't even notice Eileen standing outside the driver-side door, at least not until her weak-ass knock on the window.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! There's no time to hide. Fidel rolls down the window. Won't get far without this, she says. She's smiling, the cow totally can't stop flirting. She's, like, clutching a leather wallet, hand held up for the dumbass to see. Her feed-sack breasts, like, push against the door. He thanks her. Of course, sir, I'm just glad I caught you before—

Shit, she spots me. This night is such a clusterfuck. No doubt, she doesn't expect to see one of her workers, like, riding shotgun with a fat Mexican in a jacked Buick. Fidel can't see me slowly shake my head, my signal for her to seriously shut the fuck up. Her face falls and she, like, ages five years in two seconds. She, like, wishes us good night. Well, she wishes *him* good night.

We back out of the lot, and I seriously keep my eyes on Eileen. She's watching from the side entrance, pink and green neon making her look like a glow-stick at a fucking rave. This is totally, seriously, for sure beyond fucked. I'm already thinking of explanations for when I see her again.

Fidel holds his cheeseburger in one hand, steering with the other. The GPS tells us to exit the highway. Dex lives close. As we enter the neighborhood, fancy two-story homes lit up by streetlamps, fear explodes in my chest, my heart totally pounding. I'm, like, staring at every house on every block, seriously, like I don't know his address by heart.

Nice neighborhood, he says. This tamale doesn't even know my name. He doesn't have a fucking clue that part of me wonders how it feels to see your own face on a MISSING poster, and, like, you can't remember why anyone would look for you. We pull up in front of a house when GPS tells us we're there. Seriously, there's nothing left to say.

Dex's house is made of bricks, the windows tall and slender, like dominos. Lights glow in every one, and I remember Dex's room: second-story, last window on the left. The night we met, when I was babysitting that fucking lush, Angelique, it seriously exists in a far corner of my mind. Is that because it's precious or because it's, like, meant to be forgotten?

I push open the passenger door. He asks if I want him to wait and, like, make sure my ass makes it inside. My mouth is totally dry, and I'm suddenly aware of everything, every fucking star, every fucking blade of grass. My dad is a little racist, I tell him, my voice seriously shaking. He'd freak if he saw me get out of a Mexican's car. I totally say it nice, though. His face goes hard and spooky, like a mask. Racist, huh? Must run in the family, he says all hateful. What a douche!

His tires screech as he speeds away. For real, I thought he liked me at least a little bit. He was hating on me all the way from the city. Being shady about it, too. I don't get people. Wade's voice is, like, in my head, telling me to wake the fuck up and pay attention. My eyes are tired, and I want to rub but it would totally ruin my makeup.

I take a deep breath and, like, let it out slow. I knock on the door, softly, like I'm afraid of hurting it. Then I notice the doorbell. Even though heavy footsteps clomp down the stairs, I seriously press it anyway. Rich people have the most complicated doorbells.

Dex's chest is, like, heaving and his cheeks are totally flushed. He seriously looks like the answer to any question ever asked. Hey, he says, and I can see it in the blankness of his face: he doesn't fucking remember me! I'm totally crushed, but I keep my shit together. I don't know what else to do. Then he blinks and swallows. Like, there I am. I've landed in front of him, like a spaceship.

Oh my God, Nikki, what happened to you? You look...

That's right. My hair, my totally black hair. I'm, like, the mass shooter's girlfriend. Actually, I'm no one's girlfriend. What're you doing here? I shake my head and can't look at him. Seriously. Look at me, he says. He totally says that to me. His face is, like, a bonfire and I wanna stay warm. His mismatched eyes, those lips that for sure make me wanna laugh. What did you do to your hair, he asks. I hope my face isn't asking the question, too. You don't like it? I twirl in place, like I'm showing off a new dress. My stupid black hair fans out and slaps him in the face. Seriously, he laughs. You can stop now, he says. We smile at each other and the whole night seems, like, totally worth it. I might never go home.

I totally don't hear her slipping down the stairs. What the hell? I hear her screeching voice from above. It's Angelique. She's upright. Fucking bitch. No wonder she hasn't been returning my texts.

She stands still behind Dex, her hand on his shoulder like he's her child. Her face is, like, hard and still like a frozen pond. Dex never looks back at her. I totally think about the Crossfit asshole and his girlfriend from Busy Burger. We're just watching some DVDs, he says. Wanna hang out?

Angelique grabs his arm and hisses his name. I'm invisible and unavoidable, like, at once. I tell them I have to go. I don't have a car, but I'm already backing off the porch. I almost fall on my ass. *You don't live here. You're a stranger.*

Right then, sprinkler heads pop out of the lawn and begin to fucking spit, long and fast. I'm, like, soaked within seconds. Dex tries to help, but my bitch ex-friend grabs

his arm. I totally should've let her drown in her own vomit. He calls after me as I sprint across the grass.

The neighbors' porch lights are flashing on, and I realize how seriously late it is. What the hell was I thinking? Wade was right. I don't pay attention.

Ten bucks says Dex fucks her. Ten bucks says I cry like a baby.

Fuck my life.

The night feels cool against my skin and wet clothes. My feet throb from running in sandals.

I slow down. There's a serious knot in my chest. I don't know where I am. It's totally a neighborhood just like Dex's—same nice houses, same starry sky. My phone is for sure gone by now.

I'm walking downhill on some street when, like, headlights appear at the hilltop. They're fucking spooky. It's a car, and it's totally slowing down. I recognize its light green body, the grill seriously gunked with dead crickets and flies and beetles. The Pontiac almost comes to a stop as it pulls up beside me.

Eileen asks if I'm all right. Baby, she says, you're soaking wet and it's late. I, like, don't look at her. If that fossil figures out I've been crying, she'll wanna know why, and right now? I totally might tell her. C'mon, she says, get in the car. I tell her I can't go home and seriously pick up my pace, even though I still feel that knot in my chest, that sad and empty feeling that never fucking disappears completely. We're not going to your house, she says, we're going back to work.

While she drives us back to Busy Burger, I wait and wait for her to bring up Fidel. She must, like, think I'm a total slut or maybe even a real-life hooker. Instead, she tells me the graveyard cashier flaked. Eileen rolls her eyes. Her feed-sack breasts press against the steering wheel. I dry my hair with a SpongeBob beach towel she keeps in the back seat. I swallow, my damp hair tumbling down my back. Instead of a pity fuck, I'm getting a pity ride. I thought she was gonna ask me to sub for the flake, and I guess I'm disappointed that she didn't.

You hear what happened in Omaha, she asks. That's in Nebraska, I answer, and I'm totally proud of myself. We're getting into town, the strip malls all dark despite the halos of light from the streetlamps. Fucking creepshow. Hell of a thing, she says. You kids think this is normal, but I promise it's not. I'm totally, seriously, for sure tired of hearing about Omaha. I got tired of hearing about Orlando and Lafayette and Sandy Hook and Dallas and Blacksburg and San Bernardino and Columbine and—

Our sudden stop in front of the restaurant jolts me. Pink and green neon reflect of the hood of Eileen's car. Seriously, what am I supposed to do while Eileen works, while all the albies and dopeheads and losers order their burgers and shakes? Welcome to Busy Burger, now fuck off!

Did he *touch* you? She's smiling at me, but it's a different kind of smile. I totally wanna trust it. I think of Chuck bleeding from his head, reaching for me. Shit's been real the whole fucking night. I think of Dex flinching as my stupid black hair slaps his face. I slowly shake my head. It's not true. At least, tonight it's not true.

Eileen guides me through the dining room, her totally wrinkled fingers clutching my arm. A ring with a slim band and a small, clear stone catches my eye. Seriously, I thought she was divorced. Her husband, like, beat her, she sent out a group email.

She shuffles away, calling out for coffee, leaving me in a corner booth. It's for one of the sketchy customers, I guess. Instead, she returns and places a steaming cup on the grimy table. My hands slip around it, like, seriously eager for warmth. She asks if Mom lets me drink coffee. When I shake my head, she totally winks at me and returns to the register. I guess she's being nice to me because I'm a total joke, but right now, that's fine by me.

I gaze out at customers, some of them washed in pink and green neon from the windows, making them look like video game characters. Attention, Wade said I didn't pay attention. Fuck him, I'm totally paying attention now. My gaze leaps from, like, one customer to the next, and I'm deciding, deciding...

My attention zips to a couple stomping through the glass entrance. Well, the chick is stomping. Her light blue clogs seriously pound the linoleum. Black nylon stretches over her scrawny arms and legs. Her fingernails and toenails are fucking black, too. Jesus fuck. Corduroy short shorts, like, ride up her ass. On her T-shirt, a flurry of small, pink hearts fall behind the words **Kiss Me Goodbye**, the phrase distended beneath her bobbing breasts.

The guy trailing her is a total afterthought. His dark green letterman jacket seems to be wearing him. He's gotta be at least thirty. Seriously, I should be taking notes. I'd fucking rub Wade's nose in them until the ink, like, smudged and shit.

In front of Eileen's register, she orders for both of them. While she barks her order, the man sneaks a look, across the dining room, at me. I'm totally not going to break my stare. The woman keeps changing her mind and bitches at Eileen when she can't keep up. Marching into the dining room, the stupid bitch doesn't even check to, like, make sure the guy hasn't bailed.

With her black fingernail, she points at a booth in a corner of the room. We're separated by several tables. The man makes a last glance, seriously asking for help, totally desperate just to be seen.

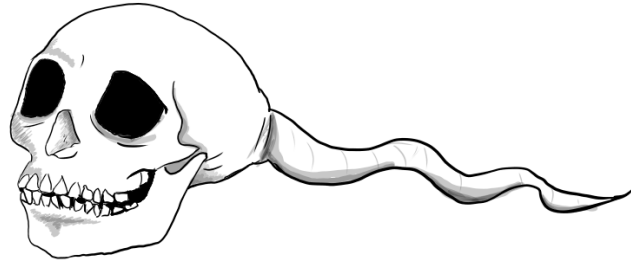
I keep staring. I pay attention. I make up my mind.

My black hair is fierce. When Eileen asks if I want a refill, I whisper, *Ten bucks says she beats him*. Eileen, like, totally laughs and slaps my arm. Oh, gross, I think we're friends now. She pretends her hand is a gun, one finger pointed at me and her thumb raised. It's like we've worked together for years, and this is our shtick. She winks and fires. That bitch seriously shoots me in the face.

A Special Donation to the Mutter Museum

John Bruni

I never thought it would happen to me, but after a lifetime of entering various sweepstakes, I finally win one. An all-expenses-paid trip to Philadelphia to see the City of Brotherly Love. Granted, I don't really care to see the sights there. I would have rather gotten a trip to somewhere in Europe, like maybe Greece or France or Ireland. But beggars can't be choosers. Besides, there is one place I really, desperately want to see: The Mutter Museum.



For some reason, I thought the place was located in Germany, or maybe Amsterdam. Imagine my surprise upon discovering that it is in the US, and in a city I had just won a sweepstake to go see. I have an extra ticket, and, to be fair, I considered bringing my girlfriend. It would have been the correct thing to do. But... I'm friends with someone else who really wants to see the Mutter, too. Maybe even more than me. My girlfriend Natasha would have found such a place to be too morbid, but my friend, Josie? She'd been talking about seeing the Mutter for as long as I've known her. Ten years, that is.

I tell Natasha about my plan. She has known Josie for almost as long as I have, so she knows that we aren't up to shenanigans of any sort. She understands how we appreciate something like the Mutter. While she is disappointed that she won't be able to see Philly and the Liberty Bell and all of that, she is excited for Josie and me to finally realize a dream of ours.

Once I get the OK, I call Josie and run the idea past her. She loves it, naturally. She has to present the idea to her boyfriend first, but I feel confident the answer will be yes.

I hear back from her later that night. They'd had a fight, but Jaxon knows me fairly well and knows we aren't doing anything weird. Josie says he'd made some joke about plowing Natasha should he hear anything different, but it doesn't sound very jokey. Well, nothing is going to happen, so it doesn't matter. We take time off from our jobs and await the day of our flight.

Time crawls. Waiting has always been miserable for me, ever since I was a child. My father once told me that you should never watch a boiling pot. I don't think that matters because a pot will boil at the same interval every single time. He tried to tell me about how relative time is, but I never bought it. I'm not saying Einstein was a fool, but, well, if I had a stopwatch it would take the same amount of time, all right?

I pack my bags into my car and say goodbye to Natasha. She's tired because she worked the late shift last night. All I get out of her is a lazy kiss, but like all kisses, it

is awesome. I wave from my car, and as soon as she offers her hand in a half-lazy wave she disappears back to bed.

I arrive at Josie's place, and Jaxon is there. His handshake is stronger than usual, and he's staring holes through me. All an attempt to dominate me, to make me think that he's watching over us even when that's an impossibility. I take her bags out to the car, and when I look back Jaxon is pressing his thick lips against Josie's dainty ones. It looks like a hard kiss. A dominating kiss. A reminder to be nice.

We get into my car and Josie waves to Jaxon. Hers is enthusiastic. His is menacing and meant for me.

It's been a while since Josie and I hung out, so we spend our trip to the airport talking about what we've been up to. I tell her about my new job. She tells me about how possessive Jaxon is. I tell her about a business trip I'm going on. She tells me about how one of her friends is slowly going insane because of her lunatic mother. The usual.

At the airport, we check our bags and lug our carry-ons through security. Once on the plane, we relax. She goes incommunicado, as she hates flying and prefers to do so while sleeping. I make fun of her when she dons her sleep mask, and she responds with her middle finger.

I start to read. That's the only thing that gets me through flights. Without books, I'd go crazy. I like bizarro books because they're short, and they never bore me. The worst offense this high in the sky is to be stuck with a boring book.

The trip takes almost two hours. Josie wakes up because of the popping in her ears as we descend. I like this part almost as much as takeoff. I peer out the window as the ground gets closer. The gut-wrenching THUMP as we touch down satisfies me. It's too late in the day to head out to the Mutter, but it's the perfect time to settle into our hotel room and get drinks.

It's exciting being in a new city. Neither of us have been here before, and we watch it unravel before our very eyes from the backseat of the cab. Dusk falls, and the nightlife has begun. We pass used bookstores and curio shops. Tattoo parlors and restaurants. As light fades from the sky it builds up from the streets.

Our hotel is very nice. It's easily the classiest place I've ever stayed. It comes with a bellhop and all. I'm sure we could request turn-down service, but both of us can turn down bedsheets pretty well, being adults with a reasonable amount of intelligence.

We put our clothes away, and we take turns showering, washing the journey from our bodies. We dress in something a bit more formal than t-shirt and jeans, and we head down to the bar. All expenses paid, after all. I get some top-shelf whiskey, and she gets a fancy drink in a fancy glass. We toast to the Mutter, which we plan to visit first thing in the morning (after breakfast, that is). She gets a salad for dinner, and I go for a steak. By the time we stagger upstairs to our hotel room, we are full and buzzed. The perfect end to a wonderful day.

The next morning, we order up breakfast. The room comes with robes, so we wear them while eating eggs and toast and bacon, watching cartoons on the widescreen TV. Good times.

We take a cab to the Mutter Museum, and the place looks so... academic. Anyone passing by on the outside would never guess at the true glory inside. We

exchange a worried glance—maybe the Mutter won't live up to our expectations—but we feel confident that it is nothing.

I pay the cabbie, and we slowly walk up the steps to the door. Anticipation builds up between us like electricity. Anyone unfortunate enough to have passed through us would have been atomized by our power. It is eleven o'clock. One hour after it opened. It is practically fresh for us.

There isn't a line inside. We make our way to the desk and pay for admission. Eighteen dollars each. I am usually aghast at parting with such a sum, but this is for a good cause. The woman gives us each a little blue tag. It looks kind of like a bookmark. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with this thing. Neither does Josie. We put our tags in our pockets and begin to venture into the museum.

There is a banner of a giant skeleton in the lobby. It's actually an exhibit downstairs, but you can't take pictures down there. They put the banner here so guests could take selfies with the Mutter American Giant. He's an imposing dude. He stood at seven-six in real life. There is just something sinister in the way he looks.

Not too far away is a replica of an old-time study. It looks cool, but that's not what we're here to see. No. It's time for the real exhibits.

The first we see is Einstein's brain. I had no idea that was at the Mutter, but there it is. The mind of arguably the most intelligent man to have lived is right there before us. Kind of. It's sectioned off onto slides, and it's really hard to make anything of them, even if you squint. That's kind of like being in his presence, right? Kind of like the way I feel when I'm visiting Al Capone's grave.

We move on to the next room, where we see one of the awesomest things we have ever seen. It's a wall of skulls. It's called the Hyrtl Skull Collection, and it's incredible. I've never seen so many skulls in one place, and they all used to be somebody! You don't have to let your imagination get away from you, either. Some of them are labeled with the person's name. Some even have the nationality. A few even have the way this person died. I'm surprised to see that some of the skulls are even sponsored by patrons of the museum. If you want to Save a Skull, you can do that. If you have the money...

"Look," Josie says. "The older a skull is, the darker it looks."

She's right. Some of these skulls are brown. I thought bone only came in one shade. Very interesting.

"Wouldn't it be awesome to end up in this collection?" I say.

She smiles. "It makes me..." She stops.

"What?" I ask.

"Never mind."

More displays. Ever wonder what syphilis does to a person's skull? You can find out here. A lot of conditions alter bone structure. It's weird. I can't imagine people living like this with these growths bone-deep on their faces. It makes the backs of my knees feel funny.

The next room is Civil War-themed. Lots of stuff on battlefield amputations. They even have the prosthetics on display. It makes me wonder why I've never seen a steampunk amputee wearing some of these old-fashioned contraptions. You would think this type of thing would be in their wheelhouse.

This is where we find the first interactive exhibit. You have to put in your vitals, including the color of your skin, and then you go into a secluded room where you face a mirror, except the spot where your right arm should be reflected is blank. Then the screen comes on, and you see an animation of your arm. A Civil War bullet goes through it, and you get to watch the process of a field amputation and the healing that comes after. It's pretty fascinating, especially since you're the one getting your arm cut off. In the back of my head—for just a split second—I wonder if I will feel the pain when my arm gets hacked off. I wonder if I will lose my arm in real life, like the mirror is some kind of voodoo doll.

It doesn't happen, of course, but it's a great exhibit. I'm a little dizzy when I walk out. Josie is hopping up and down with excitement. "How was it? How was it?"

"Go see for yourself." I gesture toward the door.

She puts in her vitals and dances into the room. I smile as I hear her react very loudly to the simulation. She screams in one moment. She laughs in another. It's like she's on a roller coaster. When she staggers out, blinking, she has a grin on her face. "I wanna do it again!"

So, she does. And her reaction is the same as it was the first time.

We move on to the Soap Lady. She is absolutely ghastly. She's a mummy preserved by fat—hence the name—and it looks like she died in sheer agony. Her toothless mouth yawns in terror. This is the kind of thing we truly came here to see. The ghastly. The macabre. The natural body.

"I really want to bring her home," Josie whispers.

"Me, too."

"Think we can smuggle her out of here?"

"If we had at least six dudes from Ocean's 11," I say. "Provided it's not Casey Affleck or James Caan's kid."

The plaque says that, contrary to appearances, she didn't die in agony. That's just the way the body falls back on itself when it starts to decompose. I'm sure that's a comfort to the Soap Lady, but it's kind of anti-climactic for the rest of us.

We go downstairs and see even more treasures of the dead. A wall of fetuses. Internal organs. A hard cock and a vagina. A buttohole sliced paper-thin. A veritable kingdom of death. There's even a mold of Chang and Eng, the world-famous conjoined twins.

But when we come to the Mutter American Giant, we stop, awed. For comparison, they put him next to a normal sized skeleton and a dwarf skeleton. The Giant towers over us, and I can feel the menace in his face as he gazes down at us.

And then an odd thing happens. My body flushes. I feel a sudden energy building up inside of me. I feel like I'm getting turned on. The front of my pants are very uncomfortable. Why am I getting a hard-on looking up at the Giant? Hoping to be inconspicuous, I reach down to my crotch and adjust myself so my erection can point to the side instead. It won't stop throbbing. The base tingles, and I start to wonder if I might cum without even touching myself.

I glance over to Josie, and her face is beet red. She nibbles on her lower lip, and she bounces slightly, rocking on her heels. I see a bit of sweat at her hairline. She notices me looking at her, and her face gets even redder.

"Do you feel kind of weird looking at him?" she asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “You?”

“Very weird. It’s like... I don’t know. How does it make you feel?”

I don’t want to say that I’m aroused. I stammer for a moment, trying to find the right words. I look down to see if my shirt is doing a good job of covering up my erection.

It’s not.

When I look down, she does the same. She has seen my arousal, and she giggles. I pull my shirt down further.

“That’s it,” she says. “I am soooooo horny right now, and I don’t know why.”

“Me, too. I can’t explain it, but that’s the way it is.”

“I need to fuck someone. Bad. And I don’t know if I can wait.”

My cock twitches again, and I realize that I might just be in the same boat.

She brushes my hand away from my shirt and lifts it. She all but drools as she runs her finger along my erection from tip to zipper. “Jaxon is going to be pissed at me, and I don’t imagine Natasha is going to like what comes next, either.”

“We can’t,” I whisper. But I know that’s a lie. I know full well that we can, and we’re going to.

“We’ve known each other for ten years. I trust you. You trust me. This thing needs to happen right here, right now.”

Oh fuck. This is really happening. My dick must know it because it’s trying to extend toward Josie.

“We can’t do it here,” I say. “They’ll call the cops on us.”

“Not if we find a quiet place to do it.”

“It’s all wide open here. There’s nowhere to hide.”

She smiles, and my heart races. “There’s a place. Come on.” She grabs my hand and leads me up the stairs. We suddenly find ourselves standing in front of the Civil War field amputation simulator. Josie eagerly punches in her stats. “Let’s do it.”

We rush into the room—the only private place at the Mutter—and we immediately yank each other’s clothes off. We’ve seen each other naked before. If you know someone for ten years, the chances are good that something like that will happen, most likely by mistake. But now? When we’re both in heat? It’s something different. I feel animalistic as I fill my hands with her gorgeous, full breasts, stiff nipples poking into my palms.

She opens my pants, and I spring out of them. She holds my dick, moving her fist slowly up and down it. “This is fucking huge.”

“I’ve never seen it get that big before,” I say.

“I can feel the blood moving through it,” she says. “Get this thing inside me right now.”

“I think I have a condom here.” I duck down for my wallet.

She pulls me back up. “No time. We’ll worry about that later. I need you to plug my hole with that giant meat stick of yours.”

I open my mouth to protest, but my desire won’t let me. Besides, we’ve known each other for a decade. I have nothing. She has nothing. If she gets pregnant, I know she’s as pro-choice as I am.

She turns around and presents her ass to me. Just underneath I see her pussy open like a flower at dawn. She is so wet that she’s dripping down the insides of her sleek,

muscular thighs. I grab my dick and put my thumb on the glans. When my flesh touches hers, I feel electricity go through us both. I push myself into her, and I can feel her stretch around my girth. She gasps as I sheath myself in her to the hilt. I feel like cumming right away, but something holds me back.

I wrap an arm around her, caressing her breasts and grabbing her shoulder with the other arm. I pull her back, shoving my cock even further inside. I imagine I could see my tip pushing up through her belly.

I push back and gently thrust in again. My intention is to take it slow, make it special. My lust has other ideas. The next thrust is the beginning of a barrage, and we move against each other like animals. I jackhammer her, and she cries out with pleasure. Her moans are rat-a-tat-tat, interrupted every time I thrust into her. I feel the sudden urge to clamp my jaws down on her neck, so I do it.

“Oh!” she cries. “Yes! Do that! Bite my fucking throat out!”

I gnaw away at her, and she squeals with delight.

In that moment I look up and see that she’s positioned us perfectly so that she can watch me fuck her in the mirror. Even better: her arm is positioned so that she can watch it get amputated while we fuck. This turns me on even more, and I think I grow an extra inch inside of her.

“Holy shit,” she moans. “Did you just get bigger?”

“I think so.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not that I’m complaining.”

“Me, neither.”

Her rotten arm gets taken off, and her cries of pleasure get even louder. I feel myself building up. I’m going to cum, and there’s no stopping it.

“I’m going to cum!” she screams.

We blast off at the same time. My dick, hard as a lead pipe, seizes up, and it feels like I shoot my load all the way up into her chest cavity. It spurts with such force that I can actually hear it splattering against the wall of her uterus. I can feel the flow of her orgasm rock against me in waves. It feels like a bomb has gone off.

Dehydrated, we slump forward, planting our hands on the wall. For a while we look at each other in the mirror, smiling and sweating. Finally, we pull away. I’m still hard, and the last remnants of my orgasm hang off the tip like a pendulum. We appraise each other, still naked, like we’ve never before done.

“That was the best sex of my life,” she says. “I never thought of us like that before, but WOW.”

“I can’t believe we just did that. That was... it was amazing.”

“I don’t think you could fit that thing back in your pants yet.” Pointing to my dong. “You think you have another go in you?”

I flex my dick. It jumps up, and the pendulum gets flung forward. It lands on her belly. She giggles and wipes it away.

“You filled me up with so much cum,” she says. “If I pushed it out, we would probably drown in here.”

I laugh. “I have never cum so much in my life.”

“What do you think prompted this?”

I step into my boxers and shove my dick to the side, so it won't pop out the top. "I don't know. It seemed to happen when we were looking at the Giant."

She nods, shrugging into her bra. "There is something oddly sexual about him. He must be some kind of aphrodisiac."

"Maybe."

When she pulls up her pants, she freezes. I can see white all around her irises. I've never seen her look so frightened before.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Something just moved inside of me," she says. She touches her belly. "There! It moved again!"

I place my hand on her belly, and I feel a sharp jab like a kicking baby. "No way."

"I can't be pregnant already," she says. "That's just not possible."

"But that's what it feels like." I get kicked once again. Whatever is in there is pretty powerful.

"But I don't even have a baby bump."

As soon as she says it her belly balloons out. Stretch marks bloom, and her belly button pops out like a knot. I can see the baby inside of her pressing against the skin of her stomach. It looks like a face, and it's grinning.

"No! This can't be happening! Make it stop!"

I have no idea what I can do about this. Shock runs through my guts, and I feel slightly ill. Not like I'm going to throw up, but like I should lay down and get some rest. This has to be some kind of dream. I can't see something like this happening in real life. But then again, the Mutter Museum is a different kind of place. Maybe reality is thin here. I don't know.

Josie screams, and I see water running between her thighs. It drenches her pants, which are still only halfway up. Crying, she kicks out of them and drops to the floor. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do? How can we make this stop?"

"I don't think we can," I say. "It looks like you're giving birth, and the only thing we can do is ride it out. You'd better take this off." I grab her panties, and she lifts her butt so I can slide them off.

She spreads her legs. "I can't look. Is it bad?"

Her vagina is dilated, but I don't see the crown yet. Fluids still flow from within her. So far it doesn't look terrible, and I tell her this. She pants out a sigh of relief. "I can't believe this is happening."

"We're going to have to get that baby out," I say. "You're going to have to push."

"I don't want a baby! I never did! What's Jaxon going to say? I can't raise a child! I'm not ready!"

"This is pretty freaky for me, too," I say. "We're just going to have to ride this out."

"That's fucking easy for you to say! You don't have a baby about to come out of you!"

This is true. There is nothing I can say to that, so I keep my mouth shut.

"Fuck," she mutters. I think this is the moment she realizes that there is nothing she can do about this. She grunts out a ragged roar and her vagina pulses. Something is moving, but I can't see it yet. Only when she pushes for the fifth time do I see the

crown. It is utterly hairless and bone white. Is it supposed to look like that? I've never seen a baby born before, not in real life.

"Oh God!" she screamed. "Is it coming out? Can you see it?"

"Yeah. Keep on pushing."

"Fuck you, pushing! You try to shove this thing through your dickhead, asshole!"

She's pissing me off, but she's right. I'm not the one suffering here. I shut my mouth again and put my hands between her legs, waiting to catch the baby. She screams again, and the baby comes out further. Shit splatters out of her and all over my hands. It's kind of green in color, and it reeks like a chemical fire. I gag and look around for something to clean my hands with, but there's nothing.

I have no choice. I rub my soiled hands on my jeans.

She screams again, and the whole head is out. Now I do feel sick enough to puke, but I keep swallowing, hoping to banish the sensation.

The kid has no eyes. No nose. No lips. Its head is a skull, and it's not making any noise.

One more push is enough to get the rest out. I pick up the baby, grossed out by the slimy soft bones that are on the outside of its body. I can't tell if it's a boy or a girl. I can see some flesh on the inside, especially around the stomach area where there are no ribs, but for the most part, it is bone.

It coughs out a pink fluid from its toothless jawbone. It mewls at me like a newborn kitten, except it sounds like there is a lot more pain than fright in it.

"Is it over?" Josie sounds winded, trying to catch her breath. "Can I see it?"

It's on my tongue to say that she doesn't want to see it, but that would only make matters worse. Quietly I hand the skeleton baby over to its mother. She takes it into her arms before she sees what she's holding. When she does, her mouth opens in an O, and it looks like she's about to scream.

But she cries instead. Tears run down her cheeks, and her body shakes with the force of her sobs. Snot runs down to her lips in strings.

The baby stops making sounds. I get in close, listening for breath. I hear none. I don't even know where I'd be able to search for a pulse. I'm pretty sure it's dead.

Josie looks down at the baby and notices the same thing. She cries her eyes out. Even though I'm disgusted by what has just happened, I can't help but feel the same sadness. This is my child, too. I helped create it.

We embrace, the dead skeleton baby between us, and we cry together, mourning. We lay here for a while, and finally, the tears dry up.

"What are we going to do with... him?" Josie asks.

"I don't know. We can't take him home with us. And we certainly can't afford to bury, uh, him."

Our eyes meet, and the idea strikes us at the same time. It can only have been meant to be. We don't even have to discuss it out loud. Our minds are one as we get dressed, swaddle up our baby with my undershirt, and step out from the simulator. There is a long line of children waiting with annoyed looks on their faces. Their parents glare at us. We can't face them, so we walk away.

We rush through the room with the skull display, past Einstein's chopped up brain and into the lobby. No one is lined up at the main desk, so we approach.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asks.

"Is there someone we can see about making a donation to the Mutter collection?" I ask.

"Let me see if someone is available." She checks her computer, and a moment later she picks up her phone. After a brief conversation, she turns back to us. "If you'll wait over by that bench, we'll have someone down right away."

We thank her and sit on the bench. Josie cradles the bundle of bones that is our child. There is a wistful look in her eyes, like maybe she's thinking of a lost opportunity to raise a kid, even though when she was giving birth, she said she wasn't ready. I'm not ready, either, but there is a part of me that wouldn't have minded giving fatherhood a shot.

A prim middle-aged woman approaches. She wears spectacles on a string around her neck. Her gray hair is done up in a bun. She has a large nose and supernaturally long fingers. "May I help you?" she asks.

We introduce ourselves, and then we show her the donation we intend to make. She gasps, but it doesn't come from a place of disgust. No, she is pleasantly surprised.

"We have never had anything like this in our collection," she says. "The flesh on the inside is fascinating. We're going to have to get this preserved right away. Does it have a name?"

Josie and I exchange a glance. Neither of us have thought of this. Josie shrugs. "Just call it Joe."

The woman holds the skeleton baby aloft as if it is actually alive. "Joe, it is. Greetings, Joe! Welcome to the Mutter Museum! Your new home!"

Josie looks like she wants to take Joe back, but she keeps her arms at her sides. She looks away from the bundle to her feet.

"I'm glad Joe found a happy home," I say.

"Thank you so much for your donation. He'll be on display by the end of the week."

Maybe we'll come back and visit him someday but, looking at Josie, I have my doubts.

Josie caresses our child's bony cheek and kisses him on the forehead. She turns away and into my arms. We hug each other, and I can feel her trembling. The front of my shirt is wet.

The woman reverently holds our child in front of her as she heads back to her office or the lab or wherever she's going. Josie and I remain still for a moment until the grief of separation passes.

We have a schedule of things we wanted to do today, but we skip it all and go back to the hotel. Josie tries to initiate sex with me. We both want to give it a try, thinking about how impassioned we'd been at the Mutter. I can't get it up, and she's dry as sandpaper. She holds up her flabby, stretch-marked belly.

"How am I going to explain this to Jaxon?"

I don't know. She begins to cry again, and we hold each other. Neither of us feel sexy right now. Maybe we shouldn't have even tried sex again. It clearly only interested us at the museum.

We leave Philadelphia early. When we land I drive her back to her place. She kisses me on the lips—nothing sexual, just platonic—and gets out of the car. I get the feeling that I'm never going to see her again.

When I get home to Natasha, she is surprised to see me so soon. She kisses my cheek. "What happened? I thought you had another two days to go?"

I consider telling her about what happened, but I just can't do it. "Philly was boring. The Mutter wasn't what I was hoping for. I missed you, and she missed Jaxon, so we came home early."

"I'm glad to see you," she says.

I decide then and there to never tell her, no matter what.

Later that night I call Josie to see how she is doing. I get her voicemail. I don't leave a message. I try to get used to the idea of not seeing her again, and it's difficult.

I make love to Natasha, and when we finish, we lay in each other's arms. In the semi-darkness, her body is shiny with sweat.

"Have you ever thought about having kids?" I whisper.

The Monster Pit

Nick Manzolillo

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The Monster Pit was a little crater in the woods formed by earth-wrangling tree roots rather than a fallen gem from the night sky. Vincent figured it was called a monster pit because, when he was even younger, he thought it looked like the imprint of some giant creature that had lain down on the soft forest floor. Over the years, Vincent had taken to dragging fallen trees across the mouth of the pit to create little bridges, soon creating a crisscrossed mess. He'd occasionally try to balance and run across the trees without falling through, something the scars on his legs would never let him forget. His dad, who used to wander the woods with him before getting the new job that kept him working all through the night, would tell Vincent that the pit resembled a hunter's trap if the hunter had learned everything he knew from watching cartoons. The pit served as an otherwise notable landmark in a forest that had few ponds and streams. He never expected The Monster Pit to actually catch something.

Before he realized its guts were ripped out, Vincent thought the raccoon slung along one of the branches in The Monster Pit was sleeping. Careful not to crunch too much underbrush, Vincent crept forward and poked it with a stick. He had his four-inch pocketknife in one hand and envisioned himself fighting off the creature if it sprang awake and lunged for his throat. The stench of rot didn't rip into him until the raccoon tipped from the fallen tree, revealing crusted blood clinging to its spilled intestines.

The next day, the raccoon was gone. On the opposite side of the pit, Vincent found a dead possum. Even with his pocketknife for comparison, it'd be a while before he realized somebody took a blade to them.

His dad worked nights and his mom didn't get home until after sunset. The winters were the worst when he was alone in the early dark, and he clung to the brighter days even after he thought he had discovered every secret the forest held.

On a day when school was canceled because of a problem with the power, Vincent wandered through the woods earlier than usual, and that's when he saw Brian walking around with a dead rabbit. The kid, who would turn out to only be a year older than Vincent, swung the rabbit around like a bulky sweatshirt he had gotten tired of wearing. Vincent held his breath and remained completely still as he watched Brian scan the trees ahead like an alert deer. He set the rabbit down, pulled out a thick knife at least twice as long as Vincent's, and dug into the rabbit, twirling

its guts out. He smiled down at his gruesome work, wiping his blade clean on the rabbit's fur. He looked like someone who found a twenty-dollar bill fluttering around on the sidewalk. When he saw Vincent, his face narrowed, and he formed a fist over the knife by his side.

"You spying on me?" The kid asked, approaching Vincent. "You out here alone?" He looked over Vincent's shoulder. Occasionally, Vincent had seen other people in the woods, but they were usually couples going for a walk, teenagers smoking funny cigarettes or hunters in the Fall that would always tell Vincent his orange long-sleeve wasn't orange enough. There weren't a lot of kids his age in his neighborhood, which was probably reason number three why the boy with the knife who asked too many questions didn't seem right.

"I always walk here. I made that... pit," Vincent almost called it The Monster Pit. "There was no school today," he added. The boy seemed to relax, the knife that had recently parted flesh tapped against his leg.

"That's right," Brian said, and Vincent had never seen him at school before, but then again, he always felt like he was seeing a new face. His middle school served three different counties and, for better or worse, was actually bigger than the closest high school.

Brian introduced himself before tapping the knife against his chest and shrugging back at the dead rabbit in the pit. "I was just feeding the monster," he said, and that was the first time Vincent realized that certain words and the meaning behind them can have more sinewy connections than you could ever realize.

"You've never seen the monster, huh?" Brian asked, and Vincent shook his head.

"Well, shit." He glanced back at the dead rabbit, turned and smiled a wicked grin that would haunt Vincent for years to come. "You ever killed something before?"

One thing Vincent never told anyone about his adventures in the woods had to do with the bugs, and occasionally salamanders and small frogs, that he'd encounter. He'd sometimes keep a tally on how many different creatures he could kill. It had started as a fun game when he was really little and wasn't allowed to leave the back porch. With one of his mother's mason jars, he captured ants, and, grasshoppers, which were his favorites, not excluding fast-moving beetles and centipedes and worms. The worms he justified killing most of all, because piercing them with a thumbtack or slicing them up with the little thumb-long pocketknife made him feel like he was going fishing. Something about ripping the legs and heads off ants and piercing their pincer-wielding skulls made Vincent feel like he was slaying aliens and horrible monsters. He once found a fat spider on the side of his porch with a thick web that he'd drop captured ants onto. He'd watch with glee as the spider sunk its fangs into the ants and entombed them in silk. It beat the hell out of whatever was playing on Animal Planet at the time. Eventually, Vincent burned the spider alive with a lighter he stole from his aunt. As a middle schooler, he'd occasionally swipe a tree branch at frogs and salamanders, pretending the bullies from the grade above him had been transformed into the slimy amphibians by some sort of wizard.

"Yeah," Vincent finally answered, and Brian nodded. "Only, nothing that big... with a knife," he said, and Brian waved the idea off.

"There's nothing to it," he said. "But you can't just grab any already dead or half dead roadkill. It's got to be fresh when you kill it and bring it here. That's what the monster wants." Brian, mouth agape, seemed hungry for Vincent's response.

"Have you been doing this every day?" Vincent asked, even though he felt like he knew the answer to that. He had been finding animals in The Monster Pit for close to two weeks.

"Well, not always here, but this is a pretty cool spot. It's sort of near its lair, if it has one." Brian held his knife up to the sunlight prying through the tree branches above, inspecting it for some detail Vincent was unfamiliar with.

"How does it feel? Killing them?" Vincent asked, and Brian, who might as well have been wearing a leather jacket and smoking a cigarette, shrugged again.

"Feels like I've got no choice." He started to say something, his mouth forming a word before he stopped himself. "You go to Derleth, right? I don't know if I ever saw you back before I dropped out," Brian said, even though he couldn't have been older than thirteen.

Vincent told him he did, and Brian seemed to study him, looking up and down his scrawny arms and chest. "You want to help me?" he asked, and something about the word "help" and "me" gave Vincent the impression that, somehow, the older kid with the buck knife was scared.

Brian's house was a mile through the woods, near a swamp that fed into one of the streams Vincent would play near. Brian didn't let Vincent inside when he followed him home, but he did bring outside a cool-looking BB gun that, if Vincent didn't know better, resembled a hunting rifle. He also brought out two cans of Coke, which Vincent's mother refused to buy him.

"I use this to stun them," Brian said, rattling the pellets inside the gun's stock. While sipping their drinks, Brian led Vincent along the stream until they came to a mossy tree trunk with a spread of semi-crumpled Coke cans strewn around it. Brian chugged his can and set up on the trunk, propping up a few other cans from the ground. A lot of them were faded, clearly having been left out for months. Brian prompted Vincent to go a few yards back, and then they took turns firing at the cans. The gun had to be pumped four times before it would really shoot hard, but it was way cooler than the airsoft pistol Vincent's cousin from Savannah had. When the sun began to set, Brian told Vincent to meet him the next day as soon as he got out of school.

The first animal Vincent shot, he killed. The squirrel's neck or skull broke, but either way, it fell from the closest tree branch and didn't get up. "Damn," Brian said. "Who knew being a crack shot would be a problem? Aim center mass next time, dummy."

Go figure, Vincent missed on the next animal they saw, which turned out to be a rabbit. Brian ripped the gun from his hands the moment the rabbit scurried free and told him, "We can't miss a day. I don't think you really understand what happens if we don't kill anything. If not an animal, it'll be a person... any person. Do you get that?"

Vincent didn't understand, not entirely, but he nodded like he did. Just before it started getting dark, Brian stunned a squirrel, and like a savage from the cowboy

comics Vincent read, his new friend ran over and slit the creature's throat before it could get its bearings.

"It's got to be freshly spilled, like from a knife. BB or bullet won't do, or otherwise, I'd have used my dad's old .45 and this would all go a hell of a lot quicker, yeah?"

The boys dropped the squirrel off at The Monster Pit and parted ways, Brian offering Vincent a salute as they did so. "Tomorrow'll be your day to feed the monster," he promised, which held true. On the next day, Vincent cut a dazed Possum's throat, and when the red blood, as red as a man's, spilled out over his fingers, his stomach flipped, and he vomited.

"It's all right, first time's like nothing else you've ever experienced," Brian tried to comfort him, but Vincent ran off, wiping his mouth and tearing up. He went home and showered, the hot water scalding his skin and erasing the squeak the possum made when his knife slashed through its throat.

Vincent didn't go back into the woods until nearly a week after his first kill. Before he returned, he woke his dad up after he got home from school. "Why is that pit out there called The Monster Pit?" he asked, and his dad groaned as he rubbed the stubble that the night shift management didn't force him to shave.

"You were sitting up on my shoulders and you told me you saw a monster. I don't think you were four yet. We saw the pit and that's when we both decided that was where it slept." Vincent's dad smiled, his mind still wandering off in the fog of dream. His dad then asked him if was going to sign up for cross country in the spring, and Vincent lied and told him he would.

He found Brian dragging something through the woods. It was squirming and so drenched in blood that, for a moment, Vincent couldn't tell what it was. Finally, it lifted its snout in the air, and he saw that it was a coyote pup. "Well, look at you... your stomach settle yet?" Brian asked, and the blood from the coyote played a trick with Vincent's mind for a moment. The black and red smudges on Brian's face were bruises, not splatter.

"What happened?" Vincent asked, and Brian scowled, heading off toward The Monster Pit, dragging the faintly whimpering coyote behind him. "These kids from the high school. I asked them for a cigarette, and they asked me... something about my mom. They hit me first," he said, and Vincent saw that Brian's knuckles were bruised too.

"I'm going to do something about them. At least, I hope I can. Soon."

"I know how you feel," Vincent said, and he hoped this wouldn't be one of those times someone tells him he's wrong. "There are these kids that always, always have something to say to me. They always push me around and ask me these questions like 'what kind of music do you like?' that are just an excuse for them to tease me."

"Yeah, sounds like you got it so hard," Brian said, and Vincent's heart clenched up when the coyote whimpered again.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, even though he remembered the rush of pleasure he felt when he killed ants.

"It's all about feeding the monster. What are you, stupid? I've found that it likes it when I leave them alive, for a little bit. To let them squirm. It's still young, you know. The monster. I think..." Brian turned back to Vincent. "I think we can turn it

into something stronger. I think we can use it to get rid of the people we don't like, one day..." Brian said.

When they got to The Monster Pit, Brian, gripping the coyote pup by its haunches, tossed it on top of the pit. "I rigged something. After you didn't come back once you pussied out with the possum, I got a little desperate. Kind of got creative, too." Brian led Vincent through the woods and toward what appeared to be a deer hunter's perch, a few planks nailed into a tree that led up to a flat board spread out between a few branches. Brian started climbing up and Vincent was left with no other choice but to follow. On top, there was a rainproof canvas that concealed a pair of binoculars and a box of BB pellets, even though Brian didn't have his gun with him.

Once they were both sitting up in the hunter's perch with their legs dangling over the side, Brian handed Vincent the binoculars. "I've never seen it clearer," he said, and even though Vincent wasn't entirely sure what Brian was getting at, he focused the binoculars until he spotted The Monster Pit. And the thing that approached it.

It pulled itself up from the tree roots along the outer rim of the pit, like a thin beak fitting through the naturally formed cracks of the earth. Antennas with bulbs at either end flicked back and forth from its worm-like hide as it pulled itself forward, a tongue thrust out from an eyeless skull that Brian then realized was the bottom half of the thing's jaw. Flat teeth hung over the tongue as long, crayfish like pincers reached for the still squirming coyote. It oozed forward, so cautious and slow, that Vincent dropped the binoculars in his lap when it struck the helpless animal with all the speed of a lunging rattlesnake.

"Oh, is it eating yet?" Brian ripped the binoculars from Vincent's lap and let out a "Hell yeah," as the very real monster feasted. Brian assumed Vincent had seen the monster, and now that Vincent realized that he wondered what other obvious things he'd ignored in his life. They'd been killing the animals, leaving them in the pit like a totem at an unknowable shrine, and what had Vincent really thought was going on? He didn't think he was a monster. He didn't think Brian was one, either, but feeding the monster? Hadn't that phrase sounded so right? The monster, the thing you feel around you but don't always see.

"What would you give to feed some of those punks to that thing? It doesn't even leave bones. It must shit them beneath the earth." Brian was happier than Vincent had ever seen him. How long had Brian walked by The Monster Pit? How long had that thing been living there?

"I don't think it'd attack a living person," Vincent said.

"Oh yeah? If they were really still, it would. If they were sleeping or hurt, or... drunk." Brian spaced out for a moment, before asking, "Are we friends, Vince?" And even though they'd only hung out a few times, Vincent told him they were. They now shared a secret, after all, only instead of E.T., it was some type of earth-dwelling mutant.

"My dad was a really, really bad guy. He hurt my mom before she went away. He... he did a lot worse than this," Brian traced the wounds on his face. "He drank a lot, was real still a lot while he slept..." Brian began to breathe heavily and Vincent understood what he was saying.

"Okay, okay man," Vincent said, trying to comprehend what Brian had just confessed to him.

"Good, good, I'm glad you're okay with it. I think we can bring some people out here. I think we can get them to drink. There's a lot of alcohol at my house." Brian, living alone. Brian, no longer worrying about school or parents or anything but himself and his enemies. "I think we can give it a little trial run. Maybe teach it to chase. Who knows, I mean, we've been feeding it. I don't know how close you've gotten, but I've been like twenty feet away. I was so nervous, though, I didn't peek out from behind this tree I was hiding behind until it had gone back between the roots. How close have you gotten?"

"Same, kinda," Vincent said, hoping he wouldn't have to elaborate on his lie.

"I think it's one of a kind, maybe. Maybe there are tons of them, everywhere, and we're lucky," Brian whispered on and on as he passed the binoculars back to Vincent, who caught a glimpse of the monster squeezing back into the earth, leaving no sign that it had ever existed at all.

"We wouldn't even get in trouble if we brought it to people," Brian suggested, and the memory of the possum's red blood pumping from the slit in its throat stirred nausea in Vincent's stomach, only this time he kept it down.

Vincent followed Brian back to his place, the house that had formerly been his father's, and dealing with Brian now felt like dealing with some really young kid who didn't know what he was doing. He didn't doubt how much of an evil bastard the kid's dad could've been, but what would it take for Brian to feed Vincent to that thing? No, he had one option.

"Can I borrow your gun? The real one," Vincent asked when they got back to Brian's, and when a look of doubt clouded over the other boy's face, Vincent felt like he'd been caught. But Brian smiled.

"There are these kids that threatened me and, I'd like to have it, maybe, just for a night," Vincent asked.

"I don't know how I'd sleep without it; you know what I mean? You could stay over. We don't have cable anymore, but nobody's shut the electricity off yet. We could play Smash Brothers."

"My dad's not home at night and it's just me and my mom," Vincent tried to plead with him and at the mention of his mother, Brian seemed to soften.

"You'll need to get your own, unless we can train the monster faster, which would be impossible. I'll let you borrow it for tonight, okay? But bring it back tomorrow, like, first thing." Brian vanished inside the house that the swamp, a monster in its own right, was in the process of devouring. When Brian returned and pressed the loaded .45 into Vincent's hands, the weight seemed to sink his shoes into the muddy earth. "Be careful," Brian made Vincent promise.

Vincent couldn't keep his eyes off the gun and the way it looked in his hand as he walked home. He kept tripping and slicing up his legs on pricker bushes. Back home, he kept the gun under his bed until his mom left for work the next morning. About fifteen minutes after his bus came and went, Vincent crept outside.

He didn't think as far ahead as he should have when it came to finding an animal. He debated firing the pistol at the squirrels in the trees, but the gun only had maybe five or ten bullets in it. Vincent didn't know how to check, and he could only assume

that Brian kept it fully loaded. Returning home to his gravel driveway, Vincent loaded his pockets up with rocks and spent the next three hours chucking them at squirrels, until he finally hit one in the head and sent it sprawling to the forest floor.

With his sweatshirt he wrapped it up, the animal becoming enraged and thrashing around as Vincent constricted it. He ran over to The Monster Pit and, holding the squirrel against the forest floor through his sweatshirt, he struggled to un-flip the blade of his pocketknife. The squirrel's claws and teeth managed to nip his fingers through the sweatshirt, the material dulling them to the point that they hurt but didn't draw blood. It was easier to stab the thing a few times when he didn't have to look at it. The squirrel's dying squeals still riled up the goosebumps along his arms, though, and Vincent kept the squirrel covered with his tattered shirt when he swung it over into The Monster Pit. Then he leaned against a tree a few yards away, steadying the .45 with both hands.

The squirrel continued to squeal, weakly prodding against the inside of the jacket. Vincent was so transfixed by the pain he'd brought the animal that he didn't notice that the monster's skinny claws and ever prodding head had slid free from the roots. It was mythic in nature, but Vincent didn't find the monster unbelievable. Not after seeing the blood gush from that possum's neck. He could believe in monsters, easy.

The monster's arms spread around either side of the squirrel, cutting off any chance of escape. Brian was right, it had the instincts of something that hunted live, physically capable prey. Vincent had a sudden vision of the monster creeping up on people sleeping in their beds at night. As the monster's claws snipped on either end of the shrouded squirrel, Vincent crept to his feet and aimed at the monster just as the bobbing stalks along its back stood straight up. The creature's tongue prodded toward Vincent, and it cooed. It let loose an empathic sound of comfort, a baby about to be fed. The monster's tongue dripped down at Vincent and its claws folded back. If it were a person, its palms would be open in a gesture of gentle appeasement. The monster had known him since he was a boy, sitting on his dad's shoulders. In its pit, it welcomed him. Vincent raised the pistol and fired.

The first shot ripped one of its claws off, and instead of scurrying back into its world between the roots, the monster howled a raspy wheeze in agony and confusion. The side of Vincent's head felt as though the monster's claws were digging into his eardrums, yet he raised his wrist, sore from the pistol's kickback, and fired again. Brown blood erupted like a shot of diarrhea out of the monster's perfectly round head, and its body began to twitch, the stalks shivering spastically as it died. Its claws dipped through the tree branches that covered the crater in the earth, and its slug-like abdomen seemed to lose all solidity, oozing through the branches like a popped water balloon. With hot tears in his eyes, Vincent returned the gun to Brian's house.

Vincent told Brian that he had already fed the monster for the day, that he couldn't resist after having seen it for the first time. Brian was mad, but he understood. "Do you want to play some videogames now that the chores are done?" he asked, still a boy. On the inside. Vincent refused and started walking home. For whatever reason, Brian didn't call after him. When he walked by The Monster Pit on his way home, Vincent saw that monster had sunk even further into the branches over the pit.

The next day it rained, and the monster's body surely became one with the mud and leaves. As far as Vincent ever learned, Brian never discovered what happened to the monster. Vincent began avoiding the woods altogether, and he imagined the pile of dead animals in The Monster Pit that Brian probably kept adding to. He had nightmares about the boy confronting him with that pistol of his over what had happened to their monster, but that never happened. Vincent made sure his house was locked at night, and he slept with a kitchen knife, for all the good it would do against a bullet, but Brian never came after him. He never saw his fellow monster again.

The summer before his senior year of high school, Brian, who had been forced to live with an aunt on the other side of the state after a brief stint in a juvenile detention center, attempted to rob a gas station. He shot the clerk, three bystanders, and then himself. Vincent never found out if it was the same gun he had once held, or if Brian had found another monster to feed. He suspected there was always something hungry, out there alone in the woods where nobody thinks to look.

What Big Teeth You Have

Bill Davidson

Bill Davidson is a Scottish writer of mainly horror and fantasy. In the last three years, he has placed stories with over thirty publications around the world, including - Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year, Flame Tree Publishing, Hell Bound Books, and Dark Lane Books. Find him on billdavidsonwriting.com or @bill_davidson57

Jason Smart came awake to semi-darkness and that unsettling odor, stronger today, knowing that Julia was sitting beside his bed.

He dragged himself further towards consciousness, sneaking furtive glances at his jailor, the woman sitting quiet and in shadow but with a narrow slash of light across her face, specifically across her mouth. Now here she was, smiling her big Julia Roberts smile. The one with all the teeth.

Jason shifted against the handcuffs, one on each wrist holding him to the old iron bedstead but knew by now not to fight them. The click of the cuff ratchet was right there in his head, a constant physical thing, almost so he could taste its metallic tang.

He closed his eyes, trying to keep a lid on the terror that perched on the end of his bed, waiting for him to wake. A word he once associated with bad melodrama and horror movies, but you had to take terror seriously once you'd properly made its acquaintance.

Julia licked her lips, making a show of it, grinning widely to show her large and well-maintained pearly whites.

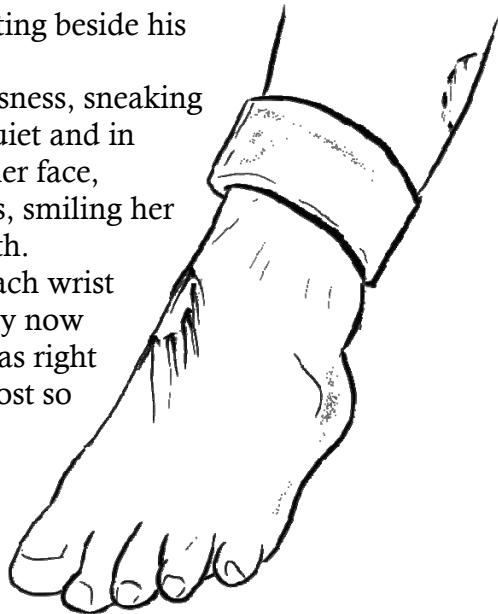
"Awake now, Jase?"

Jason looked down at himself, lying on the bed; vulnerable, pale and naked in the gloom, his body hair dark against skin that seemed too pale and with only the strap across his thighs to cover him. The gouged wound on his hip looked black in the poor light but still managed to throb redly. His body looked like it hadn't woken up.

He shifted, wincing at the pain in his hip and arm, and glanced at the tear in his left bicep. Not wanting to look properly.

At forty-two, Jason was proud of his physique. Had worked hard in gyms and on the tennis court. The little layer of fat around his middle had arrived anyway but, hey, he wasn't twenty anymore. Now he was strapped to a bed in what felt like an underground room, cinder block, about six yards square, the body he had worked so hard on scarred for life. Currently, surviving was his only goal.

He said, "This is new."



“What?”

“The dramatic lighting.” He arched his neck to see the LED strip on the wall above his bed, the one that seemed designed to light Julia’s teeth.

“You like it?”

“I’m not sure.”

She wet her lips with her tongue. “I think it’s intimate. I was aiming for intimate.”

“Ok.”

Julia waited, letting time drag out, as though she was expecting something more. Jason watched her, trying to guess what she wanted, but coming up short. It wasn’t a good idea to disappoint his captor, he had found.

Finally, Julia gave it up, rolling her eyes theatrically, miming what can you do? Then, coy almost, she bent to kiss Jason’s shoulder. Jason jerked away.

Julia straightened, no longer smiling. Not a good sign.

“I don’t like it when you pull away like that.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what’s coming, is all.”

“Well, I don’t like it. It’s hurtful, if you must know.”

“Ok. I’ll do better. But you can see how I’d be scared.”

“It won’t be like that soon. Believe it or not, you won’t always be frightened. You’ll see.”

This time Jason forced himself to be still and quiet as the woman ran her tongue up his arm and over his shoulder, coming back to lap briefly at the wound. He compressed his lips, hearing his own breathing change as he tensed for what might be coming.

But Julia sat back up, cheerful. “See, that wasn’t so bad.”

She winked and hopped up to do a quick spin. A pretty, curvaceous woman in her late twenties, today she was wearing a short dress of the floaty kind that easily rode up. It came up now to give him the briefest glimpse of stocking top. Obviously, what she was aiming at.

Despite himself, his penis twitched and lengthened.

Julia bent to wag her finger at it, almost but not quite touching. She turned to shake her head at him. “Trust a man. This isn’t about sex.”

Even as she said it, she slid her hands up her legs and over her sides, briefly lifting the dress again, showing a little more this time. “It’s about intimacy.”

She moved in again, brushing her lips against Jason’s arm, then caught his skin in the lightest of nips between her front teeth.

Jason froze. He could feel the sharp edges of Julia’s teeth, almost cutting the skin, the pain from even that tiny pressure already building. Again, she stood back and Jason gasped, only then aware he had been holding his breath.

“Don’t recognize me, do you?”

That took him by surprise. “Recognize you? Have we...” he ran out of words and Julia laughed; hearty and tinkling, like they were sharing a joke.

“Don’t want to say do you? Admit straight out you don’t remember me.”

“Sorry. Genuinely. I meet so many people. We’ve met?”

“Yes, we met at...”

“Don’t tell! You don’t need to tell!”

Jason was panicked, not wanting that information, no Sir. His captor smiled, indulgently this time.

"Oh Jase. You strayed into the deep dark woods the moment you turned up for my little scam. Still think you can talk your way out of this?"

"I've got to."

"Well, how about these apples? My name is Julia Berghaus and we are on the outskirts of Sarasota."

"Florida? Shit."

"But you don't recognize me."

"Sorry."

"The Fort Lauderdale boat show."

Jason frowned, but came up with nothing.

"I showed you the Moonraker."

"That was you? Shit it was you."

"That was when I chose you."

"For this?"

Julia made a long mmm-hmm noise.

"But why? Why me?"

"Because you ignored me. I mean you really, really ignored me. Those boat shows, showing filthy rich assholes around yachts that only filthy rich assholes can afford. They are brilliant, in their way, like filters. Only assholes need apply."

"So, it's because I'm wealthy?"

"Rich."

"Because I'm rich, then?"

"You've not been listening. I spent days talking to absolute assholes. And you stood out a mile. If there was an Olympic medal for allowing people to fall beneath your notice, you'd win it."

And suddenly, for the first time in the five days of his incarceration, Jason was angry. It grew like a hot wave behind his eyes and he embraced it, wanting it.

"You useless, pathetic fuck! You drugged me, tied me to a bed and fucking bit me, because I didn't pay you enough attention. Well, poor you, you loser. You are completely fucking nuts."

Julia's expression of mild puzzlement stopped him.

"Well, of course I'm completely fucking nuts. That's a given. And no need to be hurtful."

"Let me go. You've had your revenge. Let me go!"

"You're upset."

"Damn straight. Let me go!"

"We need to think of something to cool your jets." She smiled, reassuringly, and slid her hand across his stomach, collecting cold sweat that she put to her tongue.

"Can't have you upsetting yourself like this."

This time, when Julia bent forward, Jason shouted and struggled. Telling her to get the fuck off. Rolled away as far as his manacles would allow and drummed his useless feet.

Julia's mouth was on his ribs and he writhed and cursed, freezing as teeth clamped onto the skin below his armpit. The lat muscle he had pulled so much iron building up.

The pain of the bite was a shock anew every time. Almost everybody has been bitten, can recognize that sharp pressure and pain; a kindergarten experience, never quite forgotten.

They both became still, Julia holding the fold of flesh in her mouth, breathing wetly against his skin. Then Jason shrieked and shouted, "Don't, don't, don't, please! Arghh!"

It was the longest yet, and Jason screamed through all of it.

Julia straightened. The light across her mouth showing it bloody as she chewed. She swallowed and grinned, friendly now. "Well, that was fun! Yum yum."

Jason fell back, sweating hard. Thinking it was over for now, but not sure. He couldn't be sure of anything.

"How much did you bite out?"

Julia clapped her hands. "Glad you asked! I like it when you take an interest. That's a good sign for our relationship."

Seconds later the room flooded with light from the strips on the ceiling.

Now here was his jailor with a hand-held mirror, helpfully angling it to let him see the new wound.

"See it?"

"Not really."

"How about now?"

"Ah, shit."

The gouge was smaller than he expected, maybe only two inches long, an inch at its widest. It was bleeding freely and, as before, Julia fussed, dabbing iodine and applying a dressing.

"We don't want it infected, do we?"

U.B

Jason came awake again, wincing in pain. Pain in his wrists and arms, pain in his hip, and now, worst of all, his side. He shifted, wondering when bed sores would become an issue.

Julia had left the big lights on but had gone behind the heavy metal door set into the block wall. A scuffed green thing, like you would see in a bank or something.

The door was to Jason's left, and left of that was a set of grey metal office drawers, about three feet tall, where Julia kept manacles, syringes and dressings.

In the corner was a toilet pan and a heavy ceramic sink. He had used the toilet on a number of occasions, Julia careful to manacle him up good.

That was how Jason knew he was a good eight inches taller than his captor, who could only be about five-four in her heels. She liked to wear clothes that showed her body off, enjoyed it when that led to an involuntary erection on his part. He wondered, what did that mean? He wanted to get free, liked to imagine his fist smacking into her face. But not so much as he liked to imagine throwing her flat and

holding her down, fucking her. Was that what she was doing? Messing with his head?

Even as he felt the right of it, his cock reacted predictably. If that's what she was doing, it was working just fine.

The cinderblock walls were bare except for a single poster; an enlargement of what looked to be a very old book illustration, Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. The Wolf lay abed, grinning toothily and wearing a grandmother cap. The girl leaned over him, scared and unsure.

Julia's chair was just beside the bed and, as usual, a battered copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales sat on it, a once beautiful old hardback with a leather bookmark keeping a place. Jason felt sure that it would be marking the same story as the poster, Red Riding Hood.

Julia hadn't referred to the book, or the poster, but Jason was sure it was just another way of messing with his head. His captor would get to it when she was good and ready.

The only other thing in the room was a room divider. An old-fashioned hospital type thing with hinged fabric panels in a cheerful boating pattern, red on blue. Jason had tried to see what was behind the divider but couldn't catch a glimpse.

Still, he thought that was where the unsettling smell was coming from, a smell he struggled to pin down. The closest he could get was spoiled milk.

And there was something else, something much harder to get to grips with. Sometimes, he would feel his skin unaccountably prickling with the horrible feeling of being watched and he would hold his breath and stare at the divider, wondering, could anybody be there? It was worse than just that, though. Sometimes his hair, all of it, would spontaneously rise. As if his body knew something he didn't.

And, once or twice, he thought he may have heard something behind that screen; a stealthy sound, at the very edge of hearing, where it might just be imagination. Maybe a creak, like the noise he made if he shifted in bed, or something that sounded for all the world like an exhale.

The bed was a heavy old bastard of a thing with rounded, oversized joints; a hospital bed for sure, from an earlier age. Beside it, Julia had rigged up a drip bag, filled with drinking water.

Whenever he was thirsty, Jason could lean over and get the tube in his mouth. He did it now, getting a good mouthful of water.

Now here was a deep thump from behind the metal door. Another, then the door was rattling as big bolts were withdrawn before it pushed open.

"How's my brave boy today?"

"In pain. What with a complete nut job biting lumps out of me."

"Aw, diddums."

"Yea, yea."

But she was getting into her groove, enjoying herself. She stood there, half amused, half sympathetic. Like a parent trying to cajole a child out of a bad humor. A dangerous parent, today dressed in black hose and a top that just covered her ass, showing a lot of cleavage. She followed his eyes, batting her eyelids in mock shyness.

"Oh, please don't look at me like that. You beast! I bet you'd like to suck them, wouldn't you? Bite them."

When he looked away, concentrating on not letting his cock react, she approached the bed. She whispered, "Are you hungry, yet? I mean for food."

Despite everything, Jason realized that he was very hungry indeed.

"Excellent! I've made beef stew. How's that sound, Captain Smart, Sir?"

"Great, thanks."

"Not like the stuff your chef serves on The Libertine. But I guess we'll make do."

"I guess we will."

Julia's face was stone. "We will what?"

The change was so sudden that Jason didn't see it coming, but he had come to recognize these traps. What he shouldn't, couldn't, say was, we'll make do.

"I guess we'll have some excellent stew."

Julia winked at him. "I guess we will, me bucko."

After the meal, and after he had used the toilet and been allowed to wash himself, he was back in bed with his cuffs in position. Something was itching at the back of his mind, an important something that maybe needed to be noticed, but he couldn't get to it.

He cleared his throat. "You know, I used to be a salesman too. How I started out."

The pantomime of surprise from Julia was just that. It was obvious that she had checked up on her prisoner. Still, Jason pressed on.

"Sold ice cream, from a stall. Secondhand cars. Clothes. Got a loan and opened my first store."

"And the rest is history! How many staff do you employ now, Cap?"

"Hard to say, so much is online."

"And do you treat them all like absolute shit? The truth now."

Julia seemed cheerful, but Jason wasn't fooled. He went inside his head and thought about the question, surprised himself by thinking about it properly. The answer was obvious.

"I guess I do... but, look, I give people employment. Hundreds of them."

"Yea. Dodgy contracts, shit pay and stress on toast. Did any of your bosses treat you as bad as you treat your guys?"

Again, the answer was obvious, but Julia had to ask him to say it out loud.

"No."

"No. And even though you have enough money to last a lifetime, you couldn't resist the chance of making more, could you?"

Jason knew what she was talking about now; the scam that she had set up, the one where he turned up like some clueless idiot for a clandestine meeting. And ended up here.

Julia moved forward suddenly and peeled off the dressing.

"Excellent! No longer bleeding."

Jason was strangely relieved to be out of that conversation, forgetting he had been trying to make a connection with his jailor.

"Does it surprise you, how painful it is? I mean, being bitten. It's such a shallow injury."

"I suppose so."

Even as he answered, that thing was pricking at the back of his mind again, demanding attention; something he had missed. But she was still talking.

"Well, here's the thing. The pain is mostly to do with the skin. It's ram packed with sensors."

"Ok."

"And here's the other thing. You won't believe me yet, but after a while, you'll come to accept it, even welcome it."

"Accept... accept being bitten?"

"Being eaten."

Jason felt his cold skin become suddenly much colder. "Eaten?"

"Yip. Eaten."

"You seriously think I'll come to welcome you eating me? When I said you were crazy, I wasn't even halfway there."

Julia took this with equanimity. She even laughed. "You know how I know?"

"I honestly have no idea."

"Because I've done it before."

That silenced him. He stared at Julia for a long time, the woman standing expectantly with the Red Riding Hood poster behind her.

Then, a terrible thought coming to him, Jason turned to look at the room divider.

Julia was so delighted she hopped and clapped her hands.

"Very good, Watson! That's my Louise back there. We learned to love one another, in our way. Near the end."

"Fuck. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Louise wasn't my first. First time I did it." She threw her hands up in mock horror, nudging her prisoner companionably. "Whoo-ee Bob! What I mess I made of things!"

"Look, Julia, whatever happened to you, I mean to make you like this. You must know you can get help. Even now..."

"With Louise, I was much better. Knew what I was about, see? And with you, it'll be better still."

She was suddenly hurrying to the screen. Jason wanted to say, no, please don't open it, please leave it. But words wouldn't form.

Julia put her hand on the screen as though to drag it aside with some flourish, but then paused. Paused with a strange expression on her face and it seemed to Jason that she had to steel herself before finally pulling the partition away.

Jason felt the scream build in his throat. Felt his gorge rise against the sight and smell. What stopped him was seeing Julia.

She stood very still, her expression one of deep affection, mixed with, what, anxiety? Fear, even? She said, "My lovely Louise."

The body was naked and heavily desiccated, almost like dried meat, or leather. The woman had been young, late twenties, in there somewhere, and her long blonde hair was well brushed. She was lying on her back with her near leg, the left one, bent up and her head turned towards Jason. Her milky eyes were open, as was her red lipsticked mouth, just enough to show the hard white of her teeth.

Jason snatched his gaze away from her face but couldn't avoid seeing the patches of grazing on her body. One where an inch of yellow rib showed through.

But the worst was her left leg. It was bent with the knee up, and much of the muscle was just gone. Some strips hung in ribbons from her thigh and calf. In one place she had been eaten right down to her thigh bone.

"Poor Louise. I don't know what she died of."

Jason had to check to make sure she was being serious.

"We worked hard to make sure the blood loss was minimal. Avoid infection. But still she died, just when we were reaching our understanding. Knew our roles. You won't believe that she loved me, and what we had eventually went way beyond sexual."

She turned to look at him. "In time, you'll understand."

"Your understanding? Your roles?"

Julia didn't seem to hear. "After she passed, I removed all her internal organs. To avoid decomposition, although, as you can detect, that wasn't entirely successful. I look after you, don't I hon?"

"Why didn't you close her eyes, for God's sake?"

Julia winced at that and when she spoke her voice was tight. "I did. More than once."

Jason was staring at the dried corpse again, taking his air in shallow gasps to avoid the smell. Despite everything, he could see that the woman had been beautiful. Then, his eyes widened.

"Wait! Jesus Christ! That's Louise Lefebvre! I knew her! Met her maybe three, four times."

"On her yacht?"

Jason had to admit, "Her Father's. A couple of other places. She went missing..."

"Two years ago. About six weeks after she blanked a particularly attractive saleswoman. She was even easier to trap than you."

She walked with a strange shyness towards the corpse, bending and kissing her on the cheek, patting her hair. Then she spoke in a loud stage whisper.

"Watch this, honey. Boy, does this guy ever have a lot to learn!"

This time, Jason started screaming before Julia even touched him.

Sometime later, he drifted at the edge of consciousness, again with something pricking at his mind; something he needed to notice. But Louise was moving, sliding off her bed, whispering evil, flicking her gorgeous blonde hair like she always did. She crossed to him, smiling her red smile and limping on that horrifying leg. Reaching out to touch.

His eyes snapped open as he took a tortured pull of air, twisting to see her still lying there, her dead eyes watching him as before. He looked quickly away, thinking he could not, could not, be here when the lights were off. He shook his head clear of the nightmare, the sibilant sound of whispers giving way to a solid memory of the cuff ratchet closing, click, click, click, and, close behind, the thing he should have noticed.

He looked at his right wrist, at the cuff that was two careless clicks loose. Gave an experimental pull and winced, before shifting into a better position. He stared as the seconds became minutes, and then took a long drink of water from the hanging bag and spat it at his wrist. Did it over and over till it was soaked. Then he spoke, right out loud.

“Once you start, you got to keep going. If you think it’s too painful, look across at...”

He found he didn’t want to use her name but, despite himself, he looked and caught his breath. Her mouth seemed different, wider, the light hard against her shiny teeth.

Her milky eyes regarded him coolly.

He dropped his own eyes and when he spoke next, he wasn’t sure if it was to her or himself. “You get used to it. People telling you how fantastic you are, whatever shit you pull.”

Now he looked right at her. “If you had gotten out, back in the world, would you be different? Better?”

The lipstick was her shade, just right. Louise Lefebvre, the sexy lady in red, see her in the pages of Hello with her lipstick and short red dresses. Red coats.

The world tilted now as things came together in his mind. An image of himself, walking round that damned boat show wearing his red sailing jacket. Bright red.

He looked at the poster, the red cloaked girl who hadn’t stayed safe, like she had been told to. Who strayed from safety to speak to a wolf, just as he had, chasing Julia’s scam deal? What was it she had said, you strayed into the deep dark woods? Falling into Julia’s insane game, where the rules came from a childhood fairy tale.

Julia had spoken of she and Louise reaching their understanding, knowing their roles. Suddenly he was sure he knew what Julia had hoped he would say, sitting with that bar of light across her teeth, why she was so disappointed. She wanted him to say, ‘What big teeth you have’.

And he also knew that, unless he got out of here, he would eventually say exactly that.

Now he whispered. “Is that what you did, Louise? Played along?”

Louise Lefebvre, tough cookie, boardroom survivor and sexual predator, just stared. Jason, who had thought he had reached some sort of horror ground zero, felt himself shrink at the thought of the unthinkably dark place she had gone to, trying to find some way of playing her captor in a desperate and dreadful effort to get free. Whilst being slowly eaten alive.

Then he pulled himself back into this moment, the one where he was imprisoned with a horror beyond belief, and pulled. And pulled, trying not to scream.

His hand slid free.

He looked at it in something like shock; red, badly scraped and bleeding, but still working.

Aware that Julia could return at any moment, he quickly undid the strap over his legs, rolled away and stood, still cuffed by one hand to the iron bed. Fighting a wave of dizziness, his eye fell on the metal cabinet with its dinky little drawers containing, just maybe, keys. It was around eight feet away.

Jason took a good grip on the metal tube of the headboard and counted to three before putting all his strength into a pull. The bed didn’t budge. He tugged again before ducking down, groaning when he saw the bolts holding the frame to the concrete floor.

He pushed the headboard back and forward a few times, in desperation. Then he stopped because something moved.

He paid attention this time, tracking the movement to the joint below his cuff. The metal was heavy, but it was also seriously old, and the joint was cracked. He worked it back and forward till he could see the crack widening, the movement becoming greater.

Finally, it was moving with an audible clunk. But here was another clunk, this time from outside, what he knew as the prelude to the door bolts being drawn.

Throwing caution aside, Jason put both feet on the wall, braced himself and straightened, the muscles of his thighs straining before he was suddenly sprawling across the bed. Fighting nausea and a new wave of dizziness, he slipped the cuff off the broken frame and stumbled towards the already opening door.

Julia said something inaudible as Jason swung a clumsy punch, his fist grazing the top of her head as she ducked. She moved surprisingly quickly, butting his face and wrapping her arms around him. They fell and wrestled on the concrete floor, desperate, grunting. Jason was much bigger, but he had been strapped to a bed for almost a week, injected with sedatives and subjected to horrors. Too soon, he could feel his strength going.

Julia wriggled on top of him and Jason felt his muscles give out, his vision graying. She could see it too, and laughed, her expression fierce and she ground her hips against him.

“You got up too early, Jase. Trust a man to come too soon.”

Julia bent then, to bite deep into Jason’s shoulder and the shock of the pain galvanized him for an instant, so that he screamed and bucked and was suddenly on top of her. She writhed and hit out, but he grabbed her head and smacked it hard against the concrete floor.

Then the remorseless wave of grey, only briefly paused, washed over him.

U.B

Julia didn’t come awake all at once but, after a few false starts, was able to get into a sitting position. Her back was against Jason’s bed, so that Louise was out of sight, and she found that didn’t like that. Not one bit.

Her head throbbed, and her arms ached from being cuffed to the bed rail, tight behind her back. The unfairness of it itched at her. She had been so careful not to hurt the bastard with the cuffs.

The lights were on, which was good, but the door was closed, which wasn’t. Everything hung in the balance, all depending on whether Jason was ready, the rich asshole squirming loose a good week before Julia wanted him to.

Now Jason came into the room, wearing his own clothes, no doubt having found them nicely folded in the spare bedroom. He was also wearing rubber gloves, which Julia took as a good sign.

Then she saw the axe and let her eyes widen.

“Ooooh, Jase.”

Jason hefted it. “This was right beside my clothes. Like it was left for me. Let me guess, a woodcutter’s axe, right?”

Julia's shirt had been torn during the struggle and now she squirmed, pushing her scarred belly out and managing a smile, despite the high thrill sparkling in her veins.

She thought she would struggle to speak, but her voice sounded surprisingly normal. "Not calling the cops then?"

The stupid big asshole just stood there, needing direction. Julia dragged her eyes away from the seductive curve of the blade to the man's face, feeling things come together as control slid her way.

"You want some proper, nasty revenge, of course you do. Maybe even bite out a few mouthfuls?"

She spread her legs, knowing he must be able to see through the thin black fabric of her leggings. His eyes were right where she wanted them.

"A proper mouthful. I'd be good with that. Let Louise put her sharp little teeth into me, more than once. She could bite, that girl. I'll show you."

Still, no answer. Julia groaned theatrically and writhed, pushing her belly out. He could see Jason looking, his eyes tracing the lines of her childhood scarring, an encouraging erection pressing hard against his pants.

"You're inside here, Jase. Inside my belly. Bits of you are."

Jason just stared, breathing hard.

"Bits of your actual flesh, in here. You could get them back, if that's what you wanted."

Jason weighed the axe in his ridiculous yellow gloves as Julia held her breath. Infuriatingly, the man stepped away, nudging The Book with his foot, like it was nothing.

"You've had this since you were a kid, right? This exact book?"

All Julia could think to say, "What if I have?"

"I don't know what this mad fairy tale shit is about. But I do know you imagine I'm going to complete some final insane act. You want me to be the wood cutter."

"You want that too; you know you do."

"No, I really don't."

"Yes! Maybe you've not been playing long enough to understand properly, but you must know it's all been coming to this."

"What happened to you? Was it your father?"

Julia actually laughed. "My father? You think I'm crazy, you shoulda got a load of him. That first person I told you about, the one I made such a mess of. That was my father. He asked me to do it."

Jason shuddered. "I'm not playing your crazy game."

He dropped the axe to his side and Julia stifled a sob of frustration. It was all going wrong, sliding away from her.

"Terrible things happened to you, Julia, right from when you were a kid. Anybody could see that. I should have sympathy, but I don't. Not one bit. Everything about you is wrong. And what you've done to me, to Louise, Jesus Christ. I have a right to kill you. But not your way."

He placed the axe carefully beyond the door then came back to look at Louise. "Nobody can go where she went, where you took her, and stay properly human. Having to play along, pretend she was into your mad shit, just trying to survive."

Julia shouted, angry now. "We were like one person! How could you understand?"

"Because I'd taken the first steps down that path, hadn't I? Did she cry?"

"Not as much as you, you pussy."

"Did she beg? Or just play along?" He waited a beat before asking, "Do you believe in a soul?"

Julia didn't answer, didn't want to answer, but Jason continued as if she had.

"Yea, me too. Do you think it always stays pure, no matter what?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your soul, spirit, call it what you like. What happens if it gets tortured and perverted beyond sanity? Does it change? Turn into something unspeakable?"

Julia frowned, trying to work out where this was going. "You mean me?"

The man shook his head and nodded towards the other side of the room. "I mean her."

Julia watched Jason walk to the sink and operate the faucet, beginning to see what was coming, thinking hard.

"You're locking me in here to die, right? Your great plan. But you've checked the water, so you want to drag it out."

Jason moved forward suddenly, twisting her aside and quickly removing the cuffs before stepping to the entrance, scooping up the axe. Julia rubbed life into her hands and sat forward, wondering could she get to the man before he closed the door. The answer was clearly no.

But she knew something the big idiot didn't, about how the door was bolted to the wall. With a tool, like the iron tube so helpfully ripped from the bed, you could chip those bolts loose. It might take days, a week maybe, but that door would come right off and, soon after that, Mr. Jason fucking Smart would go someplace way darker than Louise ever had.

All she had to do was survive long enough.

"Ok, I've got water but no food. Your idea is to starve me to death? Take, what, a week? Personally, I'd want it to drag it out longer. I'd leave food."

Jason looked at her before letting his gaze move over her shoulder to what, who, lay there. "You've got food."

Julia felt the blood drain from her face and knew she had to at least try, rolled onto her feet but the door had already closed. She took a few steadying breaths, leaning against the cold metal, listening for sounds beyond the door. What she heard was a tiny but all too familiar click.

It was so obvious, but still it shocked her to be in such solid darkness. She had to work hard just keeping her breathing steady, knowing she was alone in the dark. Maybe not quite alone.

She kept her hand on the steel to orient herself and resolved to count to a thousand before moving, got to six hundred before something grazed the edge of hearing, stopping her dead. Her overheated imagination, maybe, or had something moved? Something at the other side of the room.

She listened hard, hearing only her own ragged breathing and the booming of her heart in her ears. The minutes dragged out, but there was no more sound. She found

she could see the edge of the door, an almost imperceptible line of fuzzy light, and focused on it, as if it could keep her safe.

She started to count again but stopped at another noise. Clearer this time, a slithery, stealthy sound, like something sliding against fabric. Then, a voice, maybe her own.

She wondered, could she have spoken aloud, whispering to herself in the dark? It wouldn't be the first time.

Saying 'Oh, grandma...'

Counting forgotten, she turned to the room. Now that her eyes had grown accustomed, the dark wasn't completely solid and when she heard another, slithery sound, she found she could see something moving in the gloom.

She gulped, but managed to say, "Oh, grandma."

Something was coming for sure, lurching slowly towards her, and she opened her arms to embrace it.

She sobbed, but spoke again, her voice cracking. "Oh, grandma. What big teeth you have."

This time, when Louise gave her reply, it was as clear as day.

Too Many Shadows, Whispering Voices

Christa Miller

Too goody-two-shoes for the rebels and too rebellious for the good girls and boys, Christa Miller writes fiction which, like herself, doesn't quite fit in. A professional writer for nearly 20 years, Christa has written in genres ranging from crime fiction to horror to children's but prefers to write -- and read -- blended-genre stories. Her affinity for the dark, psychological, and somewhat bizarre doesn't stop her from volunteering at a local wildlife rescue, adventuring with her two sons in rivers, swamps, and marshes, or relaxing with a book and a beverage in her hammock. Learn more at <https://christammiller.com/>.

I saw a TV show once, British I think, where one character told the others to count the shadows. I had learned by then to stay away from shadows, but I listened closely anyway, replayed the episodes overandover. I listened and watched for visual cues that might give me better ways to avoid them. There weren't, of course. It was just a TV show.

But it made me feel like I wasn't so crazy. After I learned about the shadows, I made all my decisions based on staying out of them. I rearranged my room so that nothing could cast a shadow, and I never went out of my room at night, and I only went to shops and restaurants that were lit up bright. I even chose a school where all the windows were plate glass and where hardly any trees grew tall enough to make shadows on the grass.

By the end of my freshman year in college, I felt so safe and so confident that I really believed I would never have to see another shadow again.

Late April, my third-to-last microbiology class had just ended. I trooped with a little knot of my classmates out the door and into the plate-glass stairwell, the crowd of us a hive mind that buzzed about the lecture, the upcoming final, what life would be like when we could finally branch off out of these general education requirements and start doing the things we really loved. I smiled a little, listening. Enjoying.

Then I made a mistake. I glanced out the stairwell plate glass.

A piece of construction equipment had been moved onto the grass. It sat, poised with potential energy as if it awaited the order to dig. Its shadow spread like a malignancy across the ground in front of it, turning the green an ugly shade of dark gray.

In that shadow stood Tara and Emma.

I started to shake. I hadn't seen them all year, not since I learned about the shadows. It was as if they had waited for this moment. "It's not like you could have anticipated it," Annie said beside me. "We didn't come in this way, for one thing."

I didn't reply. I was rooted, staring out the window at the mother and daughter who stared back at me, and so I was too distracted to notice my classmate flanking me.

He made an honest mistake, they kept telling me. They: him, his friends, other people in the stairwell.

My version was too incoherent to appear plausible. Annie's version was lost in the angry buzz of all the other voices. Glad as I was for her support, her validation of my experience, I couldn't help but wish her voice were stronger, more insistent, that it could protect me from the sting of words like "crazy" and "psycho" and "attacked."

I also wished I could remember more than snapshot flashes:

Stairwell. Lovely green picture outside. Grass and trees and flowers bursting with color and life.

Tara. Emma. Standing beneath that monstrous piece of equipment.

Remembering: a compact car, parked deep in the shadows between sodium lights.

A hand that brushed the side of my breast.

The whuff of a body, not mine, colliding against concrete.

Dark blue uniforms, badges, shouts.

More hands, pulling me off the body of a young man I didn't remember jumping on.

Now I sat in the back of a police cruiser, hands cuffed tightly behind my waist, ignoring the shadows that gathered at my feet as if they couldn't determine whether it was worth crawling up my legs. I couldn't decide if I should look around, try to see if Tara and Emma had followed the police and me to the side of the road, or if it was safer to keep my gaze in my lap, make sure the shadows knew I saw them.

"You did the right thing," Annie, beside me, whispered in my ear. "As long as I'm with you, no one can hurt you."

"I know," I whispered back. I inhaled her scent, the lavender-peppermint-lemon balm that never failed to calm me.

She added, "You know what else you know? They weren't really there. Tara and Emma."

"Yeah." I took deeper breaths. My muscles relaxed, marginally.

A group of students walked by. "Fucking psycho," someone muttered. I hung my head. My lap was definitely a safer place to look, shadows or no.

The cruiser door opened. A hand beckoned. I slid over on the hard plastic seat, and the hand took my arm and gently helped me out of the car. The hand turned me so I couldn't see who it was so that I again faced the shadows underneath the seats. I'd lost Annie's scent, and my body tensed once again. If I was once again forced to focus on the shadows, so that I couldn't see my surroundings, anything might happen. That was what had happened in the stairwell. I waited. The next thing I felt would determine my reaction.

The cuffs came off. "He opted not to press charges," said a female voice. "You're free to go."

I turned, faced a female police officer with kind brown eyes. I couldn't recall if she'd been the one to cuff me in the first place.

She said, carefully, as if choosing the words mattered a great deal: "For you to have reacted that way... has anyone else ever done anything to you? Touched you or hurt you?"

Beside me, Annie straightened, puffed herself up. "That man has a history of touching women and getting away with it. Frotteurism, I think they call it. Did you ask about that?"

I said, "He touched my breast. Don't I get to press charges?"

The officer opened her mouth, closed it, thought. Choosing more words.

Behind her, Emma ran down the sidewalk, half the height of the students she darted in between, dodging them like a honeybee flying between raindrops.

The officer—O'Neal on her nameplate—said, "I don't think that would be expedient for you. Multiple witnesses, female and male, say it was an accident. You injured him far worse than he injured you." She paused again.

I said nothing. I watched Tara, following Emma away from us, but her head was turned nearly 180 degrees and she still stared at me. She mouthed something. I couldn't make out the words.

"I'd like to suggest you speak to a counselor," Officer O'Neal said. She handed me a card. "She works at the rape prevention program office."

Tara and Emma had disappeared. I turned my attention back to Officer O'Neal. "But there's nothing to prevent. He already touched me."

"Kella." I could see in the flare of her nostrils that the officer had started to lose patience with me. "You grabbed his arm so hard, there are bruises. You shoved him back against that cinder-block wall so hard, the back of his head has a goose egg. You sat on his chest until we got there. I believe that you think he assaulted you and that you wanted to defend yourself. It's not about pressing charges. It's about you getting help for whatever memory caused you to do that in the first place."

"Like hell, she believes you." Annie inspected her nails. She'd had them shaped and painted like talons, black with gold highlights. "No one ever believes you."

"There wasn't a memory caused me to do that," I said, but as soon as it was out of my mouth, there was: the guy in the stairwell had smelled like my cousin, Brett. The same soap-aftershave-cologne combination, or maybe just one of those things, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that Brett used to do the same goddamn thing, brush the side of my breast with his knuckles whenever he wanted me, a secret signal for me to go off with him into the woods or the boat by the dock or the shed so he could stick his fingers-beer-bottle-whatever inside me like a sandpaper tampon. I'd only just started to use tampons that year.

Tears rose. I rapid-blinked. Sank to the concrete sidewalk. Annie and Officer O'Neal came with me, crouched in front of me. Underneath the cruiser, the shadows lay flat and still, as if in wait. "What is it?" Officer O'Neal asked. "Can I call someone for you?"

"You know," Tara's distinctive breathy coo said in my ear, "she's close enough, you could reach over and grab her gun and do all of us a favor."

"Shut up!" I screamed. I pressed my hands tight against my head.

I could see the toes of Officer O'Neal's boots. They backed up, away from me. I could hear her voice, but she wasn't talking to me. I chanced a peek upwards at her. She was speaking into her radio.

"Run," Annie said.

I did.

U.B

I only spent a couple of days in the hospital after they caught up with me, so I didn't miss many classes. Still, I made an effort to be the last to arrive and the first to leave, especially in microbiology, where I sat with Annie in the back near the door, directly underneath a fluorescent light that cast no shadows at all. Construction began on what I learned was to be an expansion to the building, for additional lab space. I finished out the year, took my finals on time. The staircase was blocked for construction. I didn't see or hear Tara and Emma again.

The day after my last final, we lounged on my bed, flipping through a travel magazine. "We should spend the summer road-tripping," Annie said.

"No way." The image of the car in the parking-lot shadows flashed across my mind. I shuddered. "I want a shot at normal. I had a good year. If the thing with that guy last month was my only blip, I'll take it."

It was as if she hadn't heard me. "Lots of college kids road-trip during the summer. We had fun last year. Learned a lot." She exhaled; her mouth pursed like an O as if she were blowing smoke rings. "Why would you want to spend your days with people who don't care about you? Coworkers who stab you in the back. Managers who let them. Customers who want to know why you never smile."

She had me there. Since high school, when I'd first met her, she was the only one who never asked me why I didn't act like a normal teenager, why I was so angry all the time. She stuck with me when I was suspended in junior year for fighting—again, because someone had touched me in a way that made me feel threatened—and whenever my mother gave me the silent treatment, which happened every other week or so. Most of all she respected my need to avoid the shadows, even though I hadn't realized they were the problem until well after I'd met her. She avoided them right alongside me. I loved her for that.

Still, I said, "I need to work. Earn money. My mother needs to see I'm serious about this. She won't help if she thinks I plan to spend summers goofing off. Or locked up in some asylum."

"That was hardly an asylum," Annie sniffed. "Good job, by the way, avoiding telling them about your uncle and cousin."

I couldn't tell whether she was being sarcastic. "I should have told them about Tara and Emma."

"So you could get locked up for real? No. Those are details best kept to yourself."

If I was going to tell anyone about Tara and Emma, I knew, it should have been last summer or early fall, back when they would materialize out of the deep corners of buildings and pockets of wooded areas and sometimes even the recesses of lockers or lab cabinets or even, once, beneath the bench at my bus stop. That was when I'd learned the shadows were the problem, that I could pass for normal when darkness wasn't sliding along nearby like a frenemy that needed a favor, or a fall guy, and over time I'd started to see less and less of Tara and Emma.

Until the construction equipment, anyway.

Downstairs the door slammed. My mother clomped into the house. "Kella!" she called "Come down! I have some news for you!"

I couldn't decide whether to be grateful or pissed off at her interference with my trainwreck of thought. I went.

She was in a good mood, my mother. The kind that almost always precipitated a crash, usually caused by me. She was putting groceries away when I entered the kitchen. She beamed. "I found a job for you! For the summer!"

"Oh?" I pulled a loaf of bread out of a bag.

"Front desk. Your uncle's motor inn. Twelve dollars an hour, thirty hours a week. Doesn't it sound lovely?"

My throat went dry. So did my eyeballs, all scratchy. I blinked. "Oh," I croaked. My uncle. Mom's brother. Brett's dad. He'd stepped in after Brett lost interest when I turned 16. As if whatever Brett did had been practice, grooming me for my uncle. He was the reason Annie and I had gone on the run, "road-tripping" as Annie called it, last summer.

"Look at her." Annie circled around behind my mother. She framed Mom's face with those curved, black-gold talons. "She's not even paying attention to you. She doesn't want to see what you look like right now. It's because she knows what her brother does. She knows, and she gave you to him anyway."

I shook my head at her. You didn't talk about things like this in our family. You didn't rock the boat. One year, when I was eight, before Brett started to pay attention to me, the family gathering that happened every summer at the lake was canceled, and my mother walked around looking upset all summer long. It had been a long, hot, boring summer filled with clipped, angry whispers on phone calls and day trips to crowded water parks and malls. No one wanted that to happen again.

Still, Annie's words prodded at me. I faced my mother. "I thought maybe I could get a job in a summer daycare," I said. "A camp counselor. Something with kids." Without shadows.

She stopped what she was doing. Banged two soup cans down on the countertop and stared at me. Something like wounded betrayal pierced my gut. "It took a lot to convince him, you know," she said. "He wasn't sure he wanted a summer employee at all."

"Wonder what she had to say to get him to agree," Annie muttered in my ear. "What she had to do."

I ignored her. "It just doesn't seem like a good fit. For me. My career plans." My voice faltered on the last bit because I knew what my mother's reaction would be.

"Your career plans." My mother turned away from me, resumed her dishwashing. "Career plans are overrated. I was perfectly happy as a dispatcher. I could work at night and be home all day with you. Why can't you be happy with what I've done for you?"

If I pushed it, there would be an argument. I went to my room.

Annie followed me. "You're in danger. You need to handle this." In that instant, I hated her strength, her ability to know what needed to be done, and to know when and how to do it. If I could do that, I might have avoided the hospital, the road trip, my uncle and cousin, all of it. I could walk through shadows unafraid and I could stand up to my mother.

I said, "There's nothing I can do," and then the tears came. There was, literally, nothing I would be able to do, short of running away or killing my uncle. "My mother should protect me," I sobbed.

"Some mothers are broken. Her brother owns this house. Did you know that? She won't cross him because she'll lose her home. Your home. She thinks shelter is more important than safety." Annie's voice curdled with contempt.

"And where would I go." My own voice came out in a whimper, so weak to Annie's strength. I leaned against her.

Her arms circled around me the way my mother's should have done. "Let me show you," she whispered.

I did.

U.B

After, I spent most of the rest of the night writing a letter to my mother that outlined everything, little and big, that my uncle and my cousin had done to me each summer at the family gathering, and why I couldn't stick around to let them do more of the same. By the time I was done, the paper was stained and wrinkled from my tears. But the ballpoint ink stayed intact, like indelible ink. If my mother tried to burn the letter, maybe the words would remain, tiny orange blazes before cool air turned them into a shriveled, blackened reminder of her failure. It was this thought I kept in my mind as Annie instructed me on what clothes and food to pack in my knapsack.

By five a.m., an hour before my mother usually got up for the day, I was ready to go. I carried my sneakers in my hand as I carefully walked down the stairs. I stuck to the outside edges so I wouldn't squeak.

Downstairs my mother waited for me. She sat at the dining room table, coffee cup in hand. "And where do you think you're going." She sounded as if she'd put lemon juice in her coffee instead of sugar.

The room, all the lights off, was one big shadow. It gaped like a mouth, invited me in to explore, find what I could find in its darkest corners.

My heart began to pound. I said, "For a walk." My voice croaked, caught on the truth.

"Where? Hiking the Appalachian Trail, with that backpack?" She jerked her chin at a point just behind me. "You kept me up all night, you know. Muttering under your breath, back and forth to your closet, opening and shutting dresser drawers. You'd better not run out on my promise to Uncle Wallace."

The letter was in my hand, light as a feather. I raised it as if it had weights attached. "I have to go," I said. "This is why."

"You're brassy enough to run away, you can find the brass to tell me to my face," my mother said. Around her, the air seemed to darken as the shadows in the room concentrated around her.

"I have to go," I said. I put the letter on the little table beside the door. "I'm sorry."

My mother rose. "Don't you walk away from me." She came at me out of the darkness, so fast that for a second I thought it was Tara. I took a step backward, raised a hand up to my face.

Annie stopped me. "Quit being so afraid," she said. "You can handle this."

On the little hallway table beside my other hand, the hand that wasn't raised in self-defense, sat a slender-but-heavy pewter vase. I grasped it. "That'll work," Annie said.

I swung it not at my mother, but at the shadows that swirled around her, that came at me, threatened to swallow me whole. When she went down, they went down—except for the darkened dining room, which gaped at me the entire time, though whether from horror or judgment, I didn't know. As long as it stayed where it was, I didn't care.

U.B

After, we zigzagged through the quiet side streets until we got to the main road. "Hitch," Annie said.

"No," I told her. "We'll end up with some creep like my uncle. Or—" I stopped. I didn't need to name Tara and Emma, not again. Dawn had broken, but the blanket of gray light still folded in too many shadows that made it hard to discern places and faces and intentions.

Annie was quiet. I knew she was thinking, as I was, about that first real road trip, the summer after my uncle first touched me, when I couldn't face another family reunion at the lake. We'd still just been getting to know each other then. At that time, all I knew was that it was Annie who had encouraged me to take my first drink and my first smoke and my first runaway attempt, but not that she would stick with me. The things I did were as much to secure her loyalty as they were to defend myself. And so, on our way out of town, Monday, the first day of summer vacation, we'd hitched a ride from a mother and her young daughter. I didn't recall much about that ride, just snapshots, like in the stairwell at college:

Small talk that I couldn't fully take part in, the sense of isolation because of it.

A wad of cash in the tote bag beside my knee in the back seat. It flashed green and white every time we passed underneath a streetlight. Taunted me in the dark between light poles. The shadows dared me to reach inside.

A stop at a motor inn much like my uncle's. A woman's hands pawing through the tote bag, searching, panicking.

Tara's angry face mouthing in the half-light. The shadows enveloped the three of us, turned the car into something misshapen and hulking. Distorting Tara's face so it menaced and snarled.

Annie telling me I was in terrible danger. Handing me a tire iron.

Tossing a match into the car, onto bundles of clothes that were shaped like bodies, one large, one small.

Shadows dancing.

I didn't sleep for two weeks. If I opened my eyes after closing them, Tara or Emma would always be there, two inches in front of my face, eyes like lit coals.

Their bacon smell overpowered Annie's peppermint-lavender-lemon. The only way not to see them was never to sleep. Eventually, I fell asleep by accident and when I woke up, they weren't there. That was how I knew it was time to go home.

Annie and I walked and walked. Dawn became daylight. The sun peeked up above the trees, but the shadows remained safely on the other side of the road. Annie didn't speak again until we'd started to struggle up the hill that would bring us at last to the road out of town. Then she said, "You know, you could handle your uncle, too."

This time I stayed quiet. I hoped she'd get the hint.

"It would have to be a surprise," she said. "Even more so than it was for your mother."

"I don't want to handle anyone else," I said. "Ever." This time my voice sounded stronger.

"But what if he's doing it to others?"

"I was the last girl in the family. There won't be any others."

"He runs a motor inn. Of course, there are others. For both him and Brett." Her voice, mixed equal parts disdainful and triumphant.

Across the roadway, the shadows, which should have started to shorten with the sun's rise, instead seemed to lengthen. To beckon.

I quickened my pace.

I expected to be breathless by the time we reached the top of the hill, but walking all over campus for two semesters must have given me more stamina than I'd thought. I could see the intersection ahead, the long, wide road that would lead us to the bus station. There were fewer trees here, fewer shadows. I kept moving anyway.

"The motor inn's only a mile out of your way," Annie said. "If you go straight instead of turning."

"It's six-thirty," I said. "I'm sure he's awake already. Too risky."

"But he won't expect you. You're not supposed to show up for a couple of days, yet."

I ignored the streetlight shadow, which stretched out to me like a lifeguard's reach pole. "Where did you get that idea? My mother never said that."

Annie didn't answer that. A few minutes later, we reached the intersection.

I turned the corner to the right. The sun cast my shadow long and dark on the pavement. If I kept moving forward, I reasoned, my shadow would keep moving away from me.

"The bus station's in the other direction," said Annie.

"Oh, for pity's sake," I hissed. I sounded like my mother. "As if I don't know the town I grew up in. You just want to make me go back so that I'll go to the damn motor inn."

"They moved the station," Annie said. "The space it was in was too small. They built a new bus station about a mile back up the other way. Closer to the highway, not far from where Tara picked us up."

That poked at my brain. My plan had been to find a way to scrounge money for a bus if I couldn't hitch a ride. That was why we'd been over there. Still, I kept walking. If it took me longer to get where I wanted to go, it would be too late for Annie to talk me into handling my uncle.

"Just let her do what she's going to do," said my mother. "She always does anyway."

I stopped short, froze in place. Beside me, Annie and my mother stopped, too. I could feel them behind my back. One flanked each shoulder, while my shadow watched silently from in front of me.

Could Tara and Emma be far behind?

"I can't deal with this," I said.

"You'll have to," my mother told me. "You made your bed."

Tears welled in my eyes. "Annie." I couldn't keep the sound of betrayal from warping my voice. "Why are you after me to handle my uncle? Everyone I handle haunts me. Why would you want that for me?"

"Maybe it's not about you." Tara's voice. She and Emma stepped out from behind the big green box that housed the traffic-control equipment. "Maybe the idea is for you to kill yourself. Put us all to rest, already."

The morning commute had just started. I could do it. Wait for a semi to come along, gaining speed as it came up off the highway, for just the right moment to step out ahead of it.

"Kella." Annie's voice was sharp in my ear. "Quit that crazy talk. And for God's sake, Tara is full of shit. The only reason any of us ever haunt you is you feel guilty. Don't you know that? None of us has to be here. You choose to let us follow you around."

I dragged my shirt sleeve across my eyes. I'd started to envision a lifetime with the four of them trading glances and comments over my head, behind my back. Now I wondered what life would be like without any of them around at all.

"Don't bet on that," my mother said. "If he's hurting other kids, and you feel guilty about that, who's to say you won't eventually drag around a whole crowd?"

That was my choice, then. Give more pieces of my time and energy and body and soul to my uncle and my cousin or go slowly insane over the course of the rest of my life.

I turned around. Now it was five, I saw: Annie, my mother, and my own shadow, at my back. Tara and Emma followed further behind. They outnumbered me as if that was the natural order, for darkness always to accompany me.

"Good girl," one of them said. I couldn't tell which.

U.B

I hesitated again when we crossed the street. Trees were abundant here, and the shadows reached. But Annie nudged me. "They're here to help, you know," she murmured. "With what you're planning, better to stay in the shade. Fewer people will remember seeing you."

That made sense. Even so, the five clustered tighter around me as I went, as if to guard against the possibility that the shadows would change their mind about protecting me.

We arrived at the motor inn. I couldn't tell what time it was, only that the sun had climbed higher and shone brighter. It had started to warm the day but still wasn't

high enough to keep the shadows of surrounding trees or the building itself from creeping across the lot. They clustered together like a crowd of onlookers.

I pulled off my hoodie, tied it around my waist. Like armor for my crotch. I started to think about how it would work, tying it like a sumo wrestler's loincloth, a substitute chastity belt.

"Don't distract yourself," Annie said. "Stay on your toes."

The front office was very near to the street. Two herringbone rows of empty parking spaces stretched out behind it. Only a single car was parked toward the end of the lot. "Nice and empty," said Annie.

"You'd better not get her into trouble," said my mother. "Best if you stay behind when we're through here."

I ignored them both. We walked into the front office. No one stood or sat behind the Formica countertop. "Hello," I called. No one answered.

Unease started to build. I'd have to go to his house. His domain.

I couldn't do it. I turned back around, headed for the front door, to the street beyond. It would be maybe a twenty-minute walk to the bus station, the right one this time. Maybe a lifetime with Annie and my mother and Tara and Emma would be okay. Or I could just wait for that semi.

"He was always after us to let you sleep over," my mother said.

I stopped short.

"I saw the way Brett looked at you. Always managed to put them off." She sounded proud of herself.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. I fought them off. I was tired of crying. "But you didn't," I snapped. "Summers at the lake, he still—"

"Oh, please," my mother said. "You were never out of anyone's sight, a crowd like that. He never had the opportunity."

"You idiot," I hissed. "Didn't you ever notice him following me into the boathouse? Under the dock?" In the shadows, where we would be out of everyone's sight.

"You've always loved attention," my mother said. "You'd make anything up to get it."

Something snapped in my head, loud enough for me to hear it, like a dial turning a furnace on bright and hot. I shoved at the glass door, stalked outside. Part of the front office jutted out from the rest of the building so that its shadow created a cool spot. I should have been afraid, should have balked, but I didn't. Instead, I walked into the shadow and crouched there. I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes so hard, I started to see moving, colored patterns behind the darkness. I watched them for a while, like a kaleidoscope, until they resolved into the veins on my retina. Only then did I take my hands away and stand.

The first thing I saw was that they were all gone: Tara, Emma, my mother, Annie. The next thing I saw, as if being in shadow helped to illuminate the rest of my surroundings, was that car at the end of the lot, an older model SUV. Something about it prickled at me. "I'm going to go check that out," I said.

No one answered. I almost hesitated. Made myself move forward.

About halfway to the back of the building, I could hear a child's cries. Whimpering, mewling, a voice that wanted to cry and scream but had been told to

shut up because no one could hear, no one would care. I recognized that voice. I remembered it coming out of my own throat.

I found the room where it sounded the loudest. I tried the doorknob. Locked, of course.

“Trash can,” Annie said.

I whirled around, but she wasn’t there. It was as if she’d gotten into my head. But there beside the door was a trash can ashtray, the kind where everyone throws their gum and balled-up straw wrappers and cellophane plastic because they’re too lazy to throw it in the bin underneath. It would do. I picked it up, hefted it. Then I swung it at the big plate glass window.

It cracked on the first try. Shattered on the second. The child inside screamed, finally.

I picked leftover shards of glass out of the windowpane. Then I sat on the edge, swung my legs over, pushed through the heavy drapes to get inside the room, backpack and all.

My snapshot-memories go like this:

The entire room a shadow, except for a bright photography-studio light on over the bed.

Girl on the bed.

Brett. Naked.

Blood.

Tripod. Camera. Uncle.

Brains.

After, I stripped. Left my clothes on the floor, quick shower, quick change of clothes from the ones in my backpack, out the bathroom window, me and my new little sister, Madisyn (“with a y,” she made sure to tell me).

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” Mom said, grudgingly. “Someone finally took care of that sick bastard.”

“Someone that wasn’t you,” I said. “Goodbye, Mom.”

I raided the cash register at the front desk. Then Madisyn and I cut through a couple of backyards, sticking to the shadows underneath the trees. When we got to the side street that paralleled the motel, we stayed on the shady side before we finally came to the main road. We got ourselves to the bus station just in time to catch a bus that was headed to Florida. The bus itself was half shadow, with its tall seats and big tinted windows, but that was okay; it would protect us until we got to where we wanted to go, with its long wide beaches and perpetual sunlight, where nothing and no one could ever hold us back again.

Magnum Opus

Alexander Schuhr

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Three months since my decision. Three months of creation. Three months of genius. Three months of clarity—although I was drunk out of my mind most of the time. My whole existence was justified by these past three months.

This diary contains my story, the whole truth. I certainly have time to tell it. In fact, time is pretty much all I have left. I have little hope that more than a few readers will understand. Most will regard these lines as the feverish rambling of a madman. Hardly a surprising verdict. Artists, whatever their medium, are prone to be loonies. But I want to testify to more than the usual eccentricities. In this diary, I explain my magnum opus.

I don't intend to praise myself. Why would I? I'm a rather unremarkable individual. But my paintings are brilliant, and the art world will, no doubt, soon recognize them as such. But my work is inseparably linked to my life. Therein lie the explanation and the true magnitude of what I've done.

Alcohol is part of my story. It has always been. The first time I was drunk, I was sixteen—a rather late age by today's standards. It wasn't the slightest bit unusual. One night, my parents weren't home, a few friends came over. One kid had stolen a few beers from his father and passed them around. I took a timid sip first, and then, when I'd found the taste bearable, one big gulp. Soon, I started feeling a soft comforting pressure, like a big hand gently massaging my brain, and a pleasant lightness kicked in. I opened another can. My voice rose, and my need to talk increased proportionally to my diminished ability to utter the words clearly. Nonetheless, the inarticulate exchange seemed to have the air of deep conversation. In other words, I was seriously hammered and took great delight in this insight. I even exaggerated my intoxication, an act rewarded with cheers of approval. In the end, it was no big deal, really. Just an ordinary case of juvenile mischief.



But drinking would soon serve an entirely different purpose. I can't remember when I first painted under the influence. But the effect of alcohol on my art was profound. I'd always been "talented". My teachers said so. My childhood drawings revealed skills that were beyond my age, and my first attempts at painting were deemed "interesting." But "interesting" wasn't what I was after.

I wanted to leave my mark. I wanted to join the ranks of the old masters, the true artistic giants. In other words, I wanted to reach new heights of creative genius. There was something inside of me, something I couldn't name. A deep, fundamental understanding of the inherent tragedy of human existence that could only express itself on the canvas. It was brooding and festering, refusing to be ignored, and, yet, remaining ever so elusive.

All my attempts to capture my innermost soul in a painting failed—until the day I painted intoxicated. Suddenly, the colors were brilliant, more real than reality. There was power, depth, and authenticity. My previous work had consisted of gloomy landscapes and moody portraits—technically sound, but sterile, uninspired and flat. I had created art that invited detached contemplation. But drinking allowed me to realize a vision that was dark, visceral, and dangerous. No, I wasn't your average alcoholic. There was no escape from reality, no thoughtless staggering into dependency. My kind of addiction was deliberate—it served a higher purpose. Only once, much later, did I drink to numb myself.

The ancient Greeks had known of the creativity-enhancing effects of alcohol. Their insight was born from the orgiastic worship of Dionysus, the god of wine. My sober mind was locked, restrained by social norms and conventions. But once I started drinking, I could ascend, reach into the abyss and make my primitive visions rise to the surface. After I had learned to utilize my alcohol-induced trance, I developed my own approach. It was like discovering art for the first time, like the first men painting on the walls of caves.

I revisited some of the most famous motives of art history—revisited them drunk and ecstatic, free of the veil of sanity and socially induced aesthetics. No matter how well-established the motives, under my skilled brush strokes they transformed. The Crucifixion of Christ turned into a bizarre arrangement of grotesque geometric shapes. Studies of the male and female physiognomy resembled photographs of facial deformities, like the decaying visages of coma patients. Portraits of revered historical characters turned into nightmarish figures. The human body, the sex act, and idyllic landscapes, they all were redefined as powerful visual transgressions. Intoxication granted me a new vision. There was beauty, raw colors, and artistic enhancement, but also an underlying sense of doom—the cosmic horror in the face of the absurdity of even the most pious and joyful moments of human existence.

Not surprisingly, many considered my artistic turn disturbing. The comments ranged from "unorthodox" to "sick" and "disgusting". Nonetheless, soon after graduating from high school, I received a letter of acceptance to one of the nation's more prestigious art programs.

In college, my work continued to provoke fascination and bewilderment. The more supportive professors were eager to provide constructive criticism and use their clout to promote my work. My fellow students were torn between envy and

admiration. Some were seeking advice and inspiration. An especially avid admirer was Angie.

A pretty brunette, with an innocent doll face, long curly hair, and curves where they had to be, she caught my attention long before she approached me. I must confess, though, that I was more impressed by her looks than her paintings. Her sincerity and dedication were not the issues. She was eager to learn and determined to study the craft. But her work lacked vision, depth, and, frankly, talent—although I'd have rather bitten my tongue off than told her that. She wasn't much of an artist, but she was sweet and incredibly attractive. Plus, I enjoyed our enthusiastic artistic debates. Hence, when she suggested continuing a particularly lively discussion over dinner, I didn't hesitate to agree.

After the restaurant visit, the evening continued in my studio apartment. There had been half a dozen drinks between us already. Nonetheless, a bottle of wine was uncorked, and I found myself on my fading brownish sofa beside her. With apparent fascination, she listened to my rambling lectures on the philosophy of art, and when my hand found its way on her knee she didn't seem to notice. Encouraged, it wandered upward, in small circular motions. I turned toward her, my intense look begging for a kiss. But then, with a simple unexpected question, she caused the evening to deviate from its predictable script. "Will you paint me?" she asked, a soft trembling in her voice.

I was taken by surprise. But her shy request made perfect sense. I agreed. Barely able to control my enthusiasm, I swiftly placed a canvas on my easel and began to produce several tubes of paint. My eagerness grew and culminated in a stout erection. And why not? Here was this beautiful woman, who shivered with excitement at the prospect of being the subject of my artistic vision. What could possibly be more alluring?

I led her to the corner that functioned as my atelier and pointed at a stool. "Get ready," I said, aware of the ever so slight trembling in my own voice. I prepared a pallet of colors, and when I looked up Angie was sitting on the stool—completely naked. I struggled to regain my composure but managed. Shaking and breathing heavily, I began my work. A gulp from the wine bottle steadied my hands and allowed me to lead the paintbrush over the canvas in steady, decisive strokes. It became easier. Before long, the brush was moving, controlled by something outside my conscious effort. Initially, Angie's soft figure was delineated in a gentle pink tone. But as I progressed, her face became more distorted, her sensual mouth twisted in a silent scream, and her gaze turned into an unnerving stare. The pink was interceded with splatters of red, as my hand began pacing to and fro. It was as though a foreign will was moving the brush—back and forth, back and forth. Dionysus was blessing me with his gift. I was gasping. My erection was throbbing. Everything poured out of me. Angie's features became increasingly grotesque—a melting, dissolving figure, exposing the decay underlying her beauty.

My excitement must have shown. Angie's expression changed from puzzled to worried. Eventually, she rose from the stool and approached me. The spell was broken, and I resurfaced from my trance.

She stared at the painting in bewilderment. Then, she turned to me, her hazel-colored eyes widened.

“This is me? This is your vision of me?”

Part of me expected her to grab her clothes, and run out of the apartment, perhaps after calling me sick or even slapping me. Instead, she flung her arms around me and, before I could even think of responding, her lips were on mine. The love-making that followed was everything I had hoped and more. Nevertheless, the sensuality was only a shadow of the excitement I had felt painting Angie that night.

Angie’s visits continued, and soon she had become a fixture in my life. This admiring, beautiful, and untalented girl had secretly snuck to the very pinnacle of my priorities—a place only shared with my art. Before graduation, we were married. We were happy. Her parents were not.

Her father, a bald, bulldog-faced elephant of a man hated every single cell of me. An ex-Marine, he had very clear ideas of what a real man was supposed to be like. And I didn’t bear the slightest resemblance to his ideal. His daughter’s artistic inclinations were considered a sentimental, yet inconsequential, female weakness. I, however, was nothing but an arty-farty, faggy wimp, who drank too much, and avoided real work. Deeming me unfit to provide for his daughter, he was already anticipating the day when we would come crawling to his doorstep and ask for assistance. And he left no doubt that, in this event, his door would remain firmly closed to me. Angie’s mother, a petite, birdlike blonde, shared his sentiments. Less outspoken than her husband, she was full of hostile glances, conveying the most exquisite hatred, while her mouth addressed me with icy, formal politeness. Their hostility was duly noted—and dismissed as irrelevant.

A large-scale thesis exhibition in my senior year attracted numerous gallery owners. Many of which considered my work weird and disturbing—not the kind of stuff casual collectors displayed in their homes or office buildings. Vanessa was the exception. Her small gallery specialized in the kind of alternative art that larger competitors considered having “limited commercial appeal”. A tentative show proved successful with Vanessa’s clientele, and she agreed to represent me. This meant a humble but steady income. More importantly, it meant that I was a professional artist, at last. Angie’s artistic attempts were not met with comparable success—a development I observed with more sympathy than surprise. But she overcame her disappointment and began teaching art history at the local community college. Everything was falling into place. Or so it seemed.

It was our common understanding that my drinking was a necessary part of the creative process. I would withdraw into my studio, really an extra bedroom of our rent-controlled apartment and take whatever time I needed to summon Dionysus. A few hours later, I would emerge—ecstatic and drunk. Angie would usually be asleep. In the morning she would never utter so much as one word of disapproval. If she had any doubts about my conduct, a look at the results must have silenced her. The quality of my work spoke for itself.

After a few months of marriage, Angie announced that she was pregnant. For the shortest, most evasive moment, my life had reached near perfection. I was a professional artist. I had a beautiful, loving wife and a son on the way. Every day, I was filled with blissful anticipation that my family and my life would soon be complete. Looking back, I feel the insistent nagging of regret. Regret that I had not allowed myself to fully savor this bliss—to taste it, to breathe it. I should have tried

harder to experience it to the fullest, because such pure unblemished happiness would never return.

Eagerly expected events mark, sometimes, the beginning of great misery. This was, without a doubt, the case with Jason's birth. At first, everything seemed fine. I continued working, and, naturally, that meant that I continued my drunken worship of Dionysus. My work was still in sufficiently high demand to pay the bills.

But something changed in Angie. When I came to bed at night, covered in paint and reeking of wine, I was met with irritated, judgmental glances—not unlike those her mother would dart at me. Soon, the remarks came—nagging, sarcastic, and infuriating. “If only we could afford a second car.” “This apartment is really getting too small for us.” “Janet sends her kid to a daycare program. But then again, her husband makes a lot more than you do.”

Eventually, complaints turned into demands. “I think you should reduce your drinking.” “I think you will have to contribute more.” “Most of what you make is spent on booze.” My admiring supporter had turned into a mean, nagging harpy.

But as much as I wanted to escape the seemingly endless cycle of arguments, silence, and more arguments, I could not stop drinking. After all, I had to be an artist, and I didn't know any other way to be one.

And yet, months later, everything changed. Guilt and shame can do wonders. They can make us do things we would have never thought possible. I could have accepted Angie's nagging. I could have even taken her leaving. But the image of Jason's face, frozen to a distorted mask of agony, it drove all resistance right out of me.

I tried to fight off the guilt. After all, some blame was on Angie. Did she really have to meet her stupid friends that night, knowing that I would be working? I even saw some fault in Jason. How many times have we told him to stay in his room after bedtime?

It had felt good that night. Dionysus had taken over. I had been working for hours without tiring. I remember my hands pacing, filling the canvas with visions from the abyss. My heart was pounding, and I felt lightheaded—out of my body. I was merely a passenger, observing the god at work. The drumming in my head became louder and, eventually, turned into a shrill screeching.

The screeching persisted, even as I opened my eyes and found myself on the hardwood floor of my studio. Angie's screaming voice reached its highest pitch as I staggered across the apartment.

She cowered on the kitchen floor—holding the child in her arms while screaming at the top of her lungs. A chair lay sprawled next to them. Something was off about Jason's posture. Then, I saw it. His right arm was awkwardly twisted. It hung loosely by his side—limp, like overcooked spaghetti. His eyes met mine. There was bottomless agony in this tiny, distorted face. And above all, there was blame—the blunt, undisguised blame reserved for a failed protector.

I never learned how long Jason had been lying on the floor before Angie came home, how long I had remained unaware of his screams for help. I didn't even learn what he had tried to reach climbing on that chair in the middle of the night. A glass of milk from the fridge? A cookie from the jar on the counter? Did it really matter? But I did learn that the incident was a most-welcome gift for Angie's parents. More

than pain and a lengthy recovery process for their grandchild, it meant total and undeniable blame on me. I was at fault, and whatever doubts Angie had held about my worth had vanished. Only my sincere promise of eternal sobriety kept her from leaving. Even so, I was on permanent probation. Angie couldn't have been clearer: "If you ever have so much as liquor-filled chocolates, you will lose us both. You decide whether your booze is more important than your family."

And so began my period of sobriety. I renounced my dreams of artistic greatness and recognition. Instead, I entered the world of bourgeois ambitions and material concerns. In other words, the world most people inhabit. To mark the beginning of my sobriety in a pompous ceremonial fashion, I emptied every bottle, every can, every drop of liquor in the sink. Dionysus was banned. I denied myself the gifts the god had to offer.

In strictly materialistic terms, I could have done worse. I found the kind of job all art school graduates desire, once they abandon their beliefs in their own significance. I became a commercial artist. The hired gun of an advertising agency. My dark visions were replaced by brightly colored ads for diapers, frozen dinners, and female hygiene products. My clients were satisfied. I gained new accounts and soon rose in the corporate hierarchy. Before long, I was in charge of automobiles and perfumes—some of the company's most prestigious accounts. I became a hotshot—respected, envied, and, by more than one female co-worker, desired. And as I rose, as the money kept flowing, Angie's doubts about me vanished. All the luxury desires she'd held became a reality: the second car, the bigger apartment, Jason's college fund—even a second baby became an option. Her parents remained skeptical, but her admiration for me resurfaced—although, this time around, for very different reasons. It had been quite a ride, but I was finally a success. I was wealthy. I was good at my job. I was respected. And I was desperate.

At first, my professional triumph had been quite flattering, thrilling even. I enjoyed the money, the prestige, and, occasionally, the women. It felt good to be a corporate star, especially with the knowledge that so many others wanted what I had. Then, the routine set in. What was once thrilling became increasingly dull, until it had been reduced to a meaningless flow. What remained was unbearable emptiness and the distressing knowledge that I had betrayed myself.

But perhaps it didn't have to be this way. Perhaps I could produce some real art, something that mattered, on the side. I could get in touch with Vanessa, whose clients were still willing to pay for my output. And, if I restrained myself, Angie didn't have to know about an occasional drink for inspiration. As long as I remained discreet—no drinks at home, and never when Angie and Jason were around. Sure, it would be risky. But I needed to escape this utterly depressing senselessness.

The effects were astonishing. First, a few beers, or a few glasses of wine at the office, then a few drinks at the bar before heading home. Always followed by a potent mix of coffee, breath mints, and mouth wash. It was heaven. I could, at last, work again—I mean truly work, as opposed to whoring myself out for a paycheck. Dionysus hadn't forsaken me. He had just been dormant. There were no words for the bliss I felt. Skills, insight, and inspiration that I had considered lost returned with a vengeance. And with them returned, for the first time in ages, meaning, purpose, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. My painting sessions became carefully

planned projects. I would exactly time when to paint. I would tell Angie about a fictitious meeting with a client or another appointment at the office. Then, I would drink and retreat to the studio when I came back home—just working on a few ideas “for a client”. For the briefest moment, I could have it all—I could proudly live the life I was meant to live while enjoying my family.

The night, that goddamn night, when everything went south, began innocent enough. I had a productive day at the office and headed home earlier than planned. That would allow me to paint, although I hadn’t expected it that night. When my co-workers had left, I produced a bottle of wine from my desk drawer.

On my way home, traffic slowed down. Maybe an accident, I thought. Then I saw the flickering lights. Two patrol cars had blocked one lane. Erect stood a large foldable sign, with the menacing "STOP. SOBRIETY CHECKPOINT" facing me. Panic rose. Too late to change the route. The three cars ahead of me were rolling slowly toward the cop with the flashlight. He pointed the light beam at the first vehicle, then waved the driver to go ahead. My heart was racing. I was sure the throbbing was visible through my shirt. Breathe. Calm down. I inhaled and exhaled deeply. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror. At least three cars behind me. Maybe they would be too busy to look closely. Maybe they would not waste time with me. The cop signaled the next car to move on. Only one car ahead of me. Please take him. I felt a tingling creeping from my feet to my head. Why had I not taken another route? The cop took his time with the other car. He was pointing the light at the windshield, the license plate, and the windshield again. Then, he lifted his hand and – directed the car toward the unblocked lane. The car disappeared into the night. It was my turn. I tried to look relaxed, even cocky. I resisted the urge to avoid his gaze and looked him right in the eye. I managed to breathe calmly, and my pulse was, more or less, under control. It could work. The hand came up and, like the emperor’s thumb pointing down, signaled to pull over.

The night in county jail was not really a night in a cell. There was the booking, the blood test, and the endless waiting. Each step of the procedure was interrupted by waiting on a hard bench, in a clinically white room with cold fluorescent light. I spent my time sobering up and massaging my wrists where the cuffs had interfered with the blood flow. I observed others being booked. More DUI cases. Two snippy tranny hookers. An angrily shouting guy who had blood running down from a gash on his bald head and was cursing out the massive bull-like officers restraining him. I hoped I wasn’t going to share a cell with him.

In the end, I had to sign a declaration that stated that I would appear in court on a specific date. Then, I could leave and take the bus back home. They had called Angie and told her where to pick me up. She hadn’t come.

When I arrived at our apartment, I found it empty. Angie and Jason were gone. She must have left in a rush. The closet and drawers were open and empty. Their clothes and bathroom articles were gone. Whatever was still there was in disarray. A wave of desperation took hold of me. I tried to fight it off. She had gone to her parents, I was positive. She would surely come back. A few days to calm down and she would be back. I didn’t drink that day, nor the next, nor the next. After three days without her and Jason stepping through the front door, I emptied a fifth of vodka and decided to go and get them.

In the car, the irony of the situation hit me. This was the first time that I acted like a true alcoholic. I hadn't drunk to enhance my creativity but to drown my sorrow and fight off the agonizing fear. In addition, the liquor had awoken my courage—and my anger. Yes, she had warned me. Yes, I had broken my promise. But I had kept my boozing private, far away from her and Jason. Did one minor infraction really justify the destruction of our family? No debate? No second chances? Damn her. She was in for a rude awakening. I knew exactly what I would do. I would enter her parents' house, storm up to her bedroom, and order her to quit that nonsense, pack her things, get Jason, and come home. If she didn't come, I would drag her by her hair to the car. We would work things out—one way or another.

Sure enough, Angie's car was parked in her parents' driveway. I parked and staggered toward the house. My fist banged against the door. One window after the other lit up. I kept hammering. At last, I heard somebody approaching. The door opened, and the hulking figure of Angie's father appeared.

"Go home. She doesn't want to see you." He seemed eerily calm.

"Get out of my way." My voice sounded distant and betrayed a faint trembling.

Infuriated by my own weakness, I stepped forward. His massive palm struck my chest and I stumbled back. My arm reached back and struck him—once, twice. He didn't fall. But he rocked back and forth, like a giant bobo-doll. We stood in silence, our eyes locked. At last, I turned and walked away.

The numbness in my head disappeared on the road. I became aware of the sharp pain in my right hand and the warmth running down my arm. I pulled over and turned on the interior light. A steady flow of blood emerged from the deep cut, between the knuckles of my index and middle fingers. His teeth had cut me. I reached for a box of Kleenex and placed a few sheets on the cut. Then I continued driving, positive the cops would be waiting in front of my door.

But there were no police. Not that night, nor the next day. I didn't bother calling in sick and did the only thing I could think of. I drank. I drank without restraint or care. I would drink myself into a stupor. I would drink the pain away. I couldn't wait to reach a delirium that would last for the brief remainder of my life. I couldn't wait to stop feeling.

But I did feel something. There was cold, and hardness. I found myself lying on a hard, uneven surface. Tiny sharp pebbles were piercing my back. I opened my eyes. It was night. The pale moonlight illuminated a hostile mountain landscape. I was positioned at the outskirts of some clearing, surrounded by rocks and grey, deserted hills. I tried to rise to my feet but couldn't move. I tried again but my paralysis persisted. My confusion turned into fear. A faint, distant noise caught my attention. It sounded like drums.

Yes, no doubt. There was the banging of drums—still far away but approaching. I saw an orange glow in the sky. As it came nearer, I could make out the flickering of fire. Torches. Dozens. Perhaps hundreds. The banging of the drums swelled. Soon it became overwhelming. It was accompanied by the maniacal whistling of pipes. My heart was racing. Cold sweat was pouring down my back in streams. Then I saw them. A horde of ecstatic female celebrators. The women were dancing, shaking and jerking—lost in ecstasy. The frantic bunch was crossing the clearing, unaware of my presence. Some were singing and screaming. Some were banging drums, blowing

pipes, or wielding torches. A few were partially covered by animal hides. Others were completely naked—their olive-colored skin shining in the flickering light. The women's beauty was overwhelming. I felt a tingling in my loins—lust began to replace my fear. I wanted to join them. Dance with them. Love them. Fuck them. Soon the tingling sensation had turned into a rock-hard erection. I devoured them with my eyes. I extended my arms to reach them. I opened my mouth to call for them. But no sound came out. After a few moments, the group threatened to disappear behind a massive rock formation. Fear tightened my chest. I didn't want them to leave me behind. I gathered my strength, filled my lungs with the cold night air, and managed to shout.

"Wait!" My scream cut through the night. The crowd stopped moving. "Wait for me. Take me with you."

They stared, motionless, in complete silence. Then, there was a sound. A pouring that grew into a thunderous growl. The group of women parted, and an enormous figure rose in their midst. The creature grew to full size until it was towering over the assembly of women. It had the facial features of a young bearded man. Strings of vine were woven in his long, wavy hair, and a coat of leopard hide covered his massive, muscular body. But the most remarkable attribute was his eyes. Wide, and unmoving, they seemed to glow in the dark. These eyes were... not human. The glowing stare remained fixed on me when the creature opened his mouth. The orifice widened extensively until it became an elongated hole that distorted the face into a grotesque mask. Then it rose its arm and pointed a long bony finger—at me. A blood-chilling, metallic screech escaped from the gaping mouth. A wave of movement went through the assembled women and they began to run. Terror seized every synapse of my central nervous system when I realized they were running towards me. Before I could so much as shriek, I was surrounded by naked female bodies. The night sky disappeared. Everything was long hair, wide manic eyes, and clawing fingers. Then there were screams, my screams, as their teeth ripped my skin and their nails dug into my flesh. There was the smell of sweet wine in hot breath before teeth sank into my face. There were fingernails digging through my eyelids, penetrating my eyeballs. I heard the tearing sound of my genitals being ripped off. I smelled the stench of my insides as they pulled my guts out of my abdominal cavity. I felt the fountain of blood gushing as they tore me apart.

I woke up—disorientation and agony consuming my very being. At first, I didn't know where I was. Gone were the hills, the moonlight, and the maenads. But the wetness and the stench were still there. My head was a throbbing open wound and seemed to have swollen to the size of a pumpkin. I forced my eyes open and was blinded by the white bathroom light. I sat up, a move that was immediately punished with a million needles thrusting behind my eyelids. I blinked and took in the calamity around me. My pants and underwear were around my ankles and I was sitting in my own shit. Some of the excrement had dried on me. Some was swimming in a puddle of piss. There was blood, too—on the floor, on my shirt. And there were, indeed, tiny sharp pebbles on the floor, some of which stuck to me. But a closer look revealed that they were my teeth—shattered and scattered on the bathroom floor after my face had hit the toilet rim.

Losing everything comes with profound insight—a cold, undiluted clarity. And so, finding my life in ruins provided me with a peculiar sense of liberation. Like my front teeth, my illusions had been shattered and crumbled. I could no longer fool myself. I had lost my family, my self-respect, and, quite possibly, my job. And all I had to show for it were a few lousy sales to lovers of alternative art shopping in Vanessa's gallery.

I had thought I could have it all. A cozy family life, the comfort of safety, and true artistic genius. But Dionysus doesn't work that way. The god demands his dues. If you want true inspiration, if you truly want to create, you must go all the way. Your family, your sanity, your life, you must be prepared to sacrifice it all. Real genius demands suffering. I had thought I could avoid this bitter truth. Now, it was time for one last offering.

The next morning, I quit my job. There were questions and puzzlement over the phone. But I didn't bother with explanations. I cashed all my available money and hit the road—my trunk filled with empty canvases, art tools, and more booze than I could possibly finish in months.

I had to disappear. If you want them to recognize you as a genius, you must remain a mystery. Nobody would look for me anytime soon. Angie certainly wouldn't—not after what I had done to her father. It would take months before they missed me. It was all the time I needed.

A cheap motel room a few miles outside the city became my art studio and residence. In the next three months, there was plenty of wine, vodka, whiskey, beer—loads of gallons, bottles, and cans. And there was painting. My god, did I paint. The more intoxicated I became, the more out of my conventional mind, the more I was truly myself. I was bursting with creativity. The work poured out of me.

I arranged for the paintings to be shipped to Vanessa. I knew they were brilliant. They would make her rich. And more importantly, they would grant me a place in art history. Soon, I'd be recognized as one of the great masters. Provided I went all the way. Provided I could resist the temptation to chicken out. Provided I could forgo the comfort, safety, and happiness of an ordinary life. I know my weakness, my longing for normality. But I must overcome myself. It will be my greatest work of all.

U.B

This diary was located in a remote area in the woods by a hiker who immediately informed the authorities. It was found next to a tree, wrapped in airtight plastic. The skeletal remains of the alleged author were handcuffed to the tree. Preliminary forensic evidence suggests that death occurred 3 years ago—around the time the suspected victim went missing. The key to the handcuffs was located a few feet from the body. It appears that it had been thrown to a point where the victim could not retrieve it. The available evidence is also consistent with the belief that the victim wrote the diary in the hours after attaching himself to the tree. Deep scuff marks on the trunk indicated that, before his death, the victim had struggled fiercely, in a futile attempt to free himself.

Being Priscilla

Peter Caffrey

Peter Caffrey is a writer of fiction with an absurdist leaning. His work has appeared in Infernal Ink, Horror Sleaze Trash, Danse Macabre, Schlock!, Dark Dossier, Weird Mask, Close to the Bone, Literally Stories and Idle Ink, amongst others. His novel, The Devil's Hairball, was published earlier this year. He drinks too much, exercises too little and is unlikely to change.

The TV presenter leaned in, eyes fixed on her guest as she asked her question.

‘There are many who believe your views are misogynistic and promote the objectification of women. What have you got to say about that?’

The man smiled; it was a question they often asked him, and one he was happy to answer.

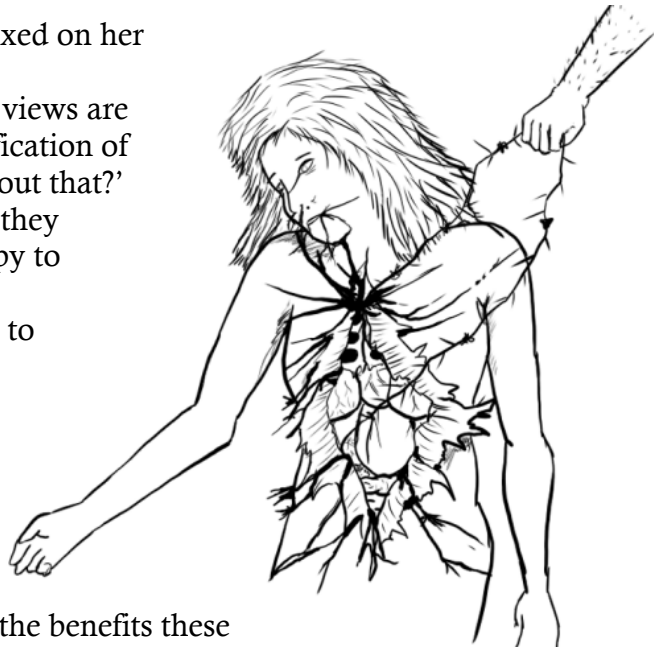
‘It’s easy for bleeding heart liberals to sit in their safe, middle-class, ivory towers and claim to understand the plight of those who don’t enjoy the benefits of a stable and comfortable existence. Too many people exercise their right to be offended when the subject of sex robots is raised, but they’re too quick to forget the benefits these machines bring to all members of society, including those who might not enjoy a privileged lifestyle.’

‘But are you not just an apologist for the sex robot industry and the men who use these devices?’

The man looked straight into the camera, knowing it would appear as if he was addressing each individual viewer.

‘If the use of sex robots can save one woman from assault or abuse, prevent the molestation of a single mother or daughter, then any efforts to promote their use are worthwhile. Let’s consider the evidence from other countries where sex robots receive proactive promotion from the government.

‘Figures show cases of domestic abuse have halved. Prostitution is on the brink of being eradicated, and as a result, people-trafficking and drug-related crimes have fallen. Sexual assaults are in decline and sexually transmitted diseases are less prevalent. Divorce rates are down, and people report being happier and more productive. These are facts. However, despite this overwhelming body of evidence, the majority in this country remain opposed to the promotion and use of sex robots, despite the proven benefits.’



Glaring at the television screen with disgust, Candice snarled, 'Look at his shit-eating grin; what an asshole.'

Lucy shushed her roommate, hanging on the man's every word.

'There is an argument for a reduction in taxation on the sex robot industry, and for the repeal of legislation which hamstrings advertising and sales of its products,' the man continued, his focus still out through the camera and into living rooms across the country. 'We need an end to the vilification of those who buy and enjoy the company of automatons. We must make a case for introducing incentives to increase ownership and acceptance of these robots. If we take the right steps, it will help make our world one that is safer, healthier and happier for all women, no matter what their social standing.'

Turning back towards the presenter, he fixed her with a sympathetic smile and said, 'As a woman, I'm certain you can see my vision is the polar opposite of misogyny.'

Sitting in her living room, Lucy sighed as the campaigner finished his interview.

'He's so hot.'

Candice snorted with derision.

'Lucy; he's advocating men go out and fuck machines, ones designed to represent women as sex objects, in order to make the world better for womankind as a whole.'

'You can sneer,' Lucy replied, still staring at the screen 'but if it was five hundred years ago and I told you the world wasn't flat, you'd have laughed at me. Think about this: he might be on to something.'

'Jesus wept,' Candice exclaimed. 'Only you could get horny for a man who's got a thing for humping fuck-machines.'

'Don't talk that way about the man I'm going to marry!'

U.B

John Carmichael was in his early forties, single and financially independent. The founder of Technomation, a company famed for pioneering advanced AI deployments, he'd sold his business five years ago to the Erotibot Corporation, a manufacturer of sex robots and technology-based erotic aids.

With no need to work, he'd since dedicated his time and energy to political campaigning. His current drive was to seek governmental financial support for the sex robot industry and to educate people about the benefits of erotic automatons.

Lucy knew all this about John Carmichael, plus a lot more. She knew about his educational background, his charity work, his passion for long-distance running, his tech-based investments, and the mentor programme he ran for technology innovators. She also knew he loved sushi, suffered from a nut allergy, never wore brown shoes, and drank Grey Goose and grapefruit with a single ice cube.

Lucy spent a lot of time researching John Carmichael. She logged the gathered data in notebooks and spreadsheets and kept press clippings in photo albums. She'd been tracking his every move since meeting him at a conference on neural networking, four years ago. Sitting in the audience, she'd decided one day she would be Mrs. Carmichael. At a meet-and-greet session after the conference, she'd

enthralled him when explaining her research thesis on the use of voice characteristic analytics to prevent stress-related illnesses.

As Lucy made notes about the recent television interview, Candice came into the kitchen.

‘Aw Lucy; are you logging the bowel movements of lover boy again?’

‘One day,’ she muttered, not looking up from her notes.

‘The only way you’ll snare him is to pretend to be one of his fuck-toys. If he thinks you’re a robot, you’ll be in with a chance, but as a human, he wouldn’t stick his cock in you if you paid him!’

Lucy put down her pen and thought for a moment. How hard would it be to pretend to be a sex robot? The current generation of automatons were lifelike. Manufacturers claimed when owners took the robots out in public, people who met them were surprised the women were not human but AI-driven machines.

It was one thing to pass herself off as a sex robot, but how could she ensure she ended up as John Carmichael’s personal automaton?

He was active in lobbying for the erotic robotics industry, and while records suggested he had no links with the manufacturers, the opponents of his campaign claimed to have evidence of payments to him from an offshore financial institution. If she could find out who might be behind those payments, he might not be surprised to receive a gift from them, such as a prototype sex robot, as a thank you. She would masquerade as that robot.

U.B

Lucy spent hours online, watching videos advertising sex robots. She analysed their speech patterns, movements, facial expressions, the way they used their hands when talking. She collected images to identify popular trends in make-up and hairstyles and examined footage as they walked, danced and flirted.

Candice told her at every opportunity she was mad: the plan was doomed to fail. Despite her pessimism, she helped Lucy perfect her hair and make-up. Lucy walked around the apartment trying to mimic the small and often imperceptible giveaways which created a distinction between sex robots and humans.

Realising her friend was changing, becoming less spontaneous and more predictable in the way she reacted to social stimulus, Candice grew ever more concerned over Lucy’s obsession with deceiving John Carmichael.

In between the research into robot behaviour, Lucy spent entire nights in front of her laptop, scouring the internet for gossip and claims about Carmichael and his alleged financial irregularities. Many referred to money being moved through accounts in the Cayman Islands, and often mentioned a company named VZX Holdings. Further research into the company revealed nothing. It had no online presence nor any listing on the international business directories. Its total lack of visibility almost underlined the fact something wasn’t right.

Frustrated by the dearth of information, Lucy kept entering different search terms, trying to discover any link between John Carmichael and VZX. As she typed, a new

suggested keyword combination popped up in the search engine list: 'Carmichael's Venezuela move'.

The story was from a society website and claimed eligible bachelor and tech tycoon John Carmichael was relocating to Venezuela the following month. He was moving to deliver consultancy on a government project, the nature of which was secret.

The news meant one thing: Lucy had to act, and act with immediacy, if she was to implement her plan.

U.B

Candice refused to seal Lucy in the box.

'This has gone too far,' she snapped after Lucy explained what needed doing. 'You're posting yourself to someone you don't really know, pretending to be a fuck-machine from a company he might or might not work with, hoping he'll fall in love and marry you once he realises you're human. This is too fucked up, even for you.'

'It's my only hope,' Lucy said, 'and the packaging is so well designed it'd be a shame to waste it.'

The packaging was excellent, the strong cardboard box decorated with silhouettes that were erotic and enticing without being seedy. It oozed class and sophistication. The writing was in Japanese, a language Lucy knew John Carmichael could not speak, apart from one word in English. Emblazoned on the box in red lettering was a single name: 'Priscilla'.

Taped to the front of the box, a metallic envelope contained a press release Lucy had written. It announced the launch of a series of next generation sex robots and stated Priscilla was a prototype top-of-the-range model.

The release explained the levels of AI and deep learning deployed in the robot's processing engine were so advanced it required no set-up. Priscilla would be indistinguishable from a human and would learn about her owner in a short time, offering the equivalent of a human-to-human relationship. When John Carmichael opened the box, Lucy would step out and suggest they share a Grey Goose and grapefruit, with a single ice cube.

'Please Candice,' Lucy begged. 'I've booked the couriers and they're collecting me in an hour. Just strap me in place and seal up the box.'

'No!' Candice shouted. 'First, this is a stupid idea. Second, it could be dangerous, and third, you're my friend and I... don't want to lose you.'

Lucy took Candice's hand, pulled her close and hugged her.

'We'll always be friends,' she whispered. 'Always. If it doesn't work out, we can look back on it and laugh. If it works, I get to be with the man of my dreams and we... the two of us... will still be friends, but I'll be stupidly rich once John marries me. Come on; nothing can go wrong.'

Later, sealed inside the package, Lucy heard Candice tap on the lid and whisper, 'Be lucky.' Then the couriers lifted the box and carried it away.

U.B

John Carmichael was enjoying a post-coital cuddle with Anthony when his smartphone buzzed, announcing a visitor to the house. Looking towards the handset, he muttered, 'Who the fuck is it now?'

'Ignore it, please,' Anthony said, a note of anxiety in his tone. 'They'll come back later if it's important.'

'I'll see who it is,' John replied. 'I need to get ready for my meeting anyway.'

'Please, don't answer it,' Anthony pleaded.

'Why not? What's wrong with you?' John snapped, lifting the phone and hitting the flashing screen icon.

'Who is it?'

'Delivery for John Carmichael,' a distorted voice replied.

'Just leave it by the door; I'll grab it in a minute.'

'No can do; I need a signature.'

'Can't you sign for it yourself; I'm okay with it if you do.'

'No sir, I can't do that.'

'Fine,' Carmichael said, irritated at the lack of flexibility shown by the courier. 'Just give me a few minutes.'

With John gone, Anthony put on his robe and emerged from the bedroom. John stood in the hallway by a large package, frowning as he pulled paperwork from a gunmetal-coloured envelope.

'That looks interesting, John.'

'I don't believe this,' he snapped. 'What's up with those fucking idiots? It's a bloody prototype sex robot. I told them I only wanted cash via the agreed route and was specific in my instructions no one should send gifts or freebies. I warned them to make sure nothing linked my campaigning with the industry. So, what do they do? They send me a bloody robot, to my home address.'

Stuffing the paperwork into Anthony's hand, John pushed past him.

'Find out what idiot sent it and have the bloody thing returned to them,' he said, a sharpness underling his aggravation with the situation. 'Get it done, today. I'll be late for my meeting if I don't get a move on, so it's your mess to clean up.'

The box contained no branding or company logos, just some foreign writing and the word 'Priscilla'. Scanning the paperwork, there was no manufacturer's name or address. Anthony went into the living room and picked up his tablet. Searching for 'Priscilla' brought up a host of pages, but none had anything to do with sex robots. Changing the search term to 'Priscilla sex robot' didn't help.

Rereading the paperwork, he smiled. This was a prototype. It would be unlikely the manufacturer would have announced it yet, and it wouldn't be for sale anywhere. They'd given it to John as a thank you, so it would be an exclusive model. Making coffee, he considered other ways of tracking down who had sent it.

As Anthony searched the web for clues, John marched down the hall, opened the front door and left, slamming it behind him.

‘Goodbye, take care, thanks for helping me out, love you!’ Anthony shouted, the sarcasm in his outburst more for his benefit than John’s. As he continued his investigation, there was a knock on the front door.

Getting up and heading into the hallway, he muttered to himself, ‘Oh, now you want a goodbye kiss.’

As he unlatched the door, it burst open, pushed with force. Two men entered and Anthony fell back, cowering.

‘Anthony, have we upset you?’ one asked with menace.

‘No Harry,’ Anthony whimpered. ‘What makes you think—’

‘It’s just that you seem to be avoiding us. You don’t visit or call, you never write, and we were wondering why.’

The second man pushed past Anthony and checked the rooms on the lower floor.

‘Where’s he going?’ Anthony stuttered.

‘Never mind Bob, he’s just a nosy bastard. He wants to see if anyone’s here.’

After checking the rooms, Bob shook his head, and Harry continued talking.

‘Mr. Abraham sends his regards. He was worried he’d upset you because you haven’t been to see him or paid what you owe.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ Anthony said, the tremble in voice giving away his growing sense of fear.

‘Busy? Okay, you’ve been busy. We’re all busy people, so to allow everyone to get on with their lives, you can pay us, and we’ll make sure Mr. Abraham gets it. There’ll be a collection fee, as you’d expect, but I’m certain we’ll have this sorted out with no further pain, won’t we?’

‘I don’t have any cash,’ Anthony said.

‘I’m sure your boyfriend has money; he’ll pay for you, won’t he?’

‘No; he doesn’t know and... he’s not here. Listen, I promise I’ll get the money and pay Mr. Abraham in a few days.’

Bob stepped forward and pushed Anthony’s head against the wall, fingers digging into his face, squashing his cheeks.

‘You’ll pay us today,’ he snarled. ‘You snorted up the gear quick enough, and now you’re telling us you don’t have the money for it.’

‘I know what we’ll do,’ Harry said. ‘Get in the car and we’ll go for a little drive. We can visit an ATM on the way.’

‘Please,’ Anthony whimpered, his mouth twisted as Bob applied more pressure with his grip. ‘My account’s empty and John—’

‘Empty?’ Harry snapped. ‘What do you mean, it’s empty?’

‘I’ve got no money, well, none until I can get John to transfer—’

‘No money? It’s not been your day, has it? In normal circumstances, the next stage would be to take you to the river, but as your boyfriend has impeccable taste, I’m happy to remove goods and chattels to buy you an extension on the repayment period.’

Bob released Anthony’s face and walked back up the hall, disappearing into the living room.

‘Listen, I have an idea; why don’t you take this?’ Anthony said to Harry, pointing at the large package.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a sex robot, a new one.’

‘It’s worthless,’ Harry sneered. ‘Do you think offering Mr. Abraham a fuck-toy to pay off your debt will impress him? In all honesty, I think he’d prefer it if I brought him your fucking ugly fat head in a box.’

‘It’s a prototype,’ Anthony blurted, ‘a high-end model that isn’t available to buy. I’ve got the paperwork to confirm it. A collector would pay a lot for it, big money. The box is still sealed. Trust me, it’s valuable. Do you want to see the paperwork?’

Harry nodded and Anthony ran to find the press release.

Scanning the document, Harry paused for a moment, his lips pursed, before nodding.

‘Okay; we’ll take it, but this doesn’t clear the debt. It buys you 48 hours. After that, if Mr. Abraham doesn’t have his money, all of it, we’ll be back.’

‘I need a week, please. This robot is worth thousands; surely it buys me a week.’

‘You’ve got four days and that’s it,’ Harry said, his tone indicating there would be no further negotiation.

U.B

Inside the package, confusion raged in Lucy’s mind. The courier collected the box and took it to a central delivery hub where it was unloaded. After an hour or two, someone reloaded the package onto a vehicle and drove to another location: logic dictated it was the local depot, one step away from John Carmichael. After another brief motionless period, Lucy felt the box being lifted and loaded for the final delivery. The van made several stops, all within short distances of each other.

The package jerked as someone removed it from the vehicle and stood it upright. Lucy suspected the couriers had delivered her. People were talking, several muffled voices which were difficult to identify, but one sounded like John Carmichael.

There were more voices, angry voices, but she didn’t hear John again. Without a clue what was happening, the package jolted, and she was on the move once more.

She’d booked a late collection and a before-9 a.m. next day delivery, but the whole process was taking longer than expected. Armed with glucose tablets and water for sustenance, she’d expected to manage the duration of the journey with ease, but now dehydrated and bursting to pee, she was struggling to understand what was happening.

After some time, the motion stopped. It could be the delivery truck was making multiple drops, but why had someone lifted the package off the truck earlier? Did the driver take it to the wrong address, or had John Carmichael rejected the delivery?

Fighting against the panic gnawing at the depths of her guts, Lucy tried to think positive thoughts.

U.B

‘What are we going to do with a sex robot?’ Bob asked. ‘Are we going to fuck it?’

'Don't be so stupid,' Harry replied with disdain as he pulled into the driveway of the large house. 'If we fuck it, the value goes right down. It's a prototype; do you know what that means?'

'I ain't stupid. I know what a prototype is.'

'Yes, but do you know what it means, for us?'

Bob remained silent. As Harry switched off the ignition, he said, 'It means someone with an interest in sex robots will pay a lot to own it. If we find the right buyer, the price could go through the roof. Because old laughing boy only bought himself four more days, we get to keep any money from the sale and still collect for Mr. Abraham. Now, you stay here and wait; I need to see someone.'

'Who?'

'Never you mind, but with a bit of luck he'll be able to point us towards some mug who'll cough up for our robot.'

At the front door, Harry rang the bell. A woman answered and after a brief conversation, he was ushered inside. Waiting in the hallway, an elderly gentleman emerged from a side room. Dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, sweating and dabbing his face with a small towel, he didn't look best pleased.

'Harry, you've interrupted my work-out. What's so important you couldn't wait until a decent hour?'

Harry smiled apologetically.

'Sorry, Geoff; I forgot you'd become a gym bunny. I don't want to keep you, but I'm after some advice.'

'My advice,' Geoff said, 'is to not let the door hit you on the arse as you leave.'

'I've got something I need to move,' Harry said, handing Geoff the press release which had accompanied Priscilla. 'I think it might interest a collector. The robot is still in unopened packaging, never seen the light of day. It's a one-off, a somewhat unique opportunity.'

'It's either unique or not unique, Harry; somewhat unique isn't a thing,' Geoff said with irritation. 'However, it doesn't matter if it's unique or not; prototypes aren't in vogue right now. Ever since that Russian collector... I can't recall his name, Bollockov or something like that... bought a faulty one and it burned his cock to a crisp, demand has dropped. Retro is where it's at right now. Find a first-gen robot and I'll pay a decent wedge for it. Find one in unopened packaging and you can write your own price tag. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I'm just not interested, and most collectors will feel the same.'

Harry tensed as he took back the paperwork.

'How am I going to shift it?'

Geoff shrugged.

'I'd like to move it on quickly if I can,' Harry said. 'Is there anyone you can think of?'

'Pen and paper?' Geoff asked, holding out his hand and clicking his fingers, impatient with the delay to his morning routine. Harry folded the Priscilla paperwork in half and fished in his jacket pocket for a pen. Geoff took them and scribbled down a name and telephone number.

'Give this guy a call. Tell him I put you in touch. He might be interested, but don't expect to get rich. If he's not up for it, I suggest you take the thing home, fuck

it, and pray you don't get your tackle fried. Now bugger off; I've got two hundred crunches to get through.'

U.B

'Are you sure this is the right place?' Bob asked as Harry parked outside the rundown garage. The forecourt was littered with engine parts, dismantled household appliances and off-cuts of metal.

'It's the address Geoff gave me,' Harry replied, uncertainty clear in his tone. 'It looks like a shit-hole, but if he's a friend of Geoff, it's good enough for me.'

Inside, two men stood at a workbench. One was reading a circuit diagram while the other worked at a soldering station, his right wrist bound with an anti-static strap.

'Stay there please,' the man reading said as he looked up, 'and don't touch anything. Static electricity is a killer for this kit, and if you damage it, you pay for it.'

After a few minutes, the two stopped working and approached.

'Which one of you is DB?' Harry asked.

'I'm DB,' the taller man said, 'and this is The Beard.'

Bob fought back the urge to point out The Beard didn't have a beard as the four men shook hands.

'What we have—'

'I know what you have,' DB replied. 'I took the liberty of calling Geoff after I spoke to you. He vouched for you, but I'm not sure why he sent you here.'

'We're looking to shift a prototype sex robot,' Harry explained, 'and your name came up as someone who might be interested.'

Harry handed DB the paperwork, and he passed it to The Beard without a glance at its contents. The Beard read it as DB explained his position.

'The problem with prototypes is they're an unknown quantity. Often, they're built solely as a proof of concept. Engineers will throw together something from the spare parts bin, tweak the performance so it appears to do something remarkable when it doesn't, and if people get hooked on the idea, they'll set out to design a robot to deliver the performance they've promised. Prototypes can be all smoke and mirrors. Your robot might be cobbled together using standard components which will work fine for a demo, but for our purposes will be of no value at all.'

Harry took a moment to consider the argument.

'I see your point, DB, but the individual sent this prototype wouldn't be given a duff one. He's high profile. Of course, I can't name him, but no manufacturer would sell him a pup; it wouldn't be a smart thing to do in the long run.'

DB looked at The Beard, who'd finished reading the press release.

'Well; what do you think?'

'If the robot can do what they're claiming in this release, you'd be talking an array of high-end GPUs as a minimum, plus a heavy-duty analytics engine and a whole shitload of precision sensors. On the other hand, it might be nothing more than crappy relays and a hard drive crammed with basic command codes.'

'Let's take a look at it,' DB said to Harry.

'I can't let you do that,' Harry replied, trying to ensure he sounded apologetic. 'It's in an unopened package and that adds to the overall value. If you open it up and decide against the purchase, I've lost out.'

DB and The Beard looked at each other, assessing the situation.

'It could be as valuable as a second-hand toaster,' The Beard said, 'but if there are parts made from unobtainium, it might be worth a punt.'

'Okay,' DB said to Harry. 'I'm assuming Geoff didn't tell you why we'd be interested. It's not the robot we want, but the core components. It's a cheap way to get access to the latest tech. We can buy old or broken robots for a lot less than we can buy the processing elements off the shelf. Without knowing what systems the robot's running, or even having a look at it, we're buying a pig at a poke, and that'll be reflected in the price. How much are you looking for?'

'Ten thousand,' Harry replied.

'Let me know how that works out for you,' DB replied, making no counteroffer.

'Well, how much would you be willing to pay?' Harry asked.

'Four thousand.'

'I can go to seven thousand.'

'Five grand, cash, and that's my limit. The risk becomes too high above that price.'

Harry held out his hand and DB shook it.

U.B

'For fuck's sake,' The Beard said with disgust, 'we've been had. Look at this.' Passing his phone to DB, he added, 'I've just translated the Japanese text on the packaging, and it's copied from a Coca-Cola advert. You'd better get your mate on the phone and track those bastards down.'

Tearing the box open, DB snarled, 'Let's see what they've palmed us off with.'

The two men looked at Lucy, unimpressed by what they saw. Sweaty and dishevelled, with make-up smeared and mascara running, she looked more like a clapped-out backstreet hooker than a high-end desirable erotic automaton.

Looking out from the package, the unfamiliar men and the industrial location shocked Lucy. Unsure what to do, caution cloaking her urge to weep, she asked with trepidation, 'Who are you?'

Ignoring her question, The Beard said, 'She's powered up already; seems like Priscilla has a long-life battery.'

'Looks-wise, she's a bit grubby. She looks like she's sweating,' DB replied.

'And it seems she's wet herself too. What the fuck is going on?'

The two men exchanged puzzled glances. With no reaction to her question, Lucy asked again.

'Who are you, and where am I?'

The Beard reached out and pinched her cheek, not a gentle loving squeeze but a hard and stinging nip.

'Fuck you, don't touch me,' Lucy spat. 'Where's John Carmichael?'

The two men looked at each other and laughed.

'So, Priscilla was made for John Carmichael,' DB said with a grin. 'Did they ever get that wrong?'

'If Carmichael was the intended recipient, she won't be a Friday afternoon special,' The Beard commented. 'They'll have packed her with the latest tech. Her skin feels soft, pretty lifelike if you ask me. Whoever made her wasn't messing around. They've pre-programmed her too, so she knows who owns her. The fact she realises neither of us are John means she's running facial recognition, and that'll need high-end processing power.'

'Aren't you going to answer me?' Lucy asked, trying to sound authoritative despite the rising panic flooding through her guts. 'Where's John? He won't be happy if—'

'I know they're trying to make these things more realistic,' DB said to The Beard, 'but she looks like shit; all sweaty and her make-up smeared. I don't get it.'

Lucy wanted to scream but stopped herself, swallowing down her fear and confusion. The men were ignoring her because they believed she was a robot. If she played along, they'd undo the strapping holding her in place. Once out of the packaging, she'd be in a better position to effect an escape.

'Guys,' she whispered, trying to emphasise the robot-like sensual speech patterns she'd learned before she'd instigated the plan, 'is this how you treat a lady? I've travelled a long way to meet you and need to freshen up and touch up my make-up. Why don't you get me out of this carton and let me make myself more presentable for you?'

The Beard looked at DB, a surprised expression on his face.

'That's amazing,' he muttered. 'She knew what we'd said and wants to do her make-up. Okay, it's a small thing, but if Priscilla is self-aware, that's some significant processing; it'll need hardware acceleration for a start. Come on; let's see what she can do.'

The men removed the strapping and Lucy was free. Her movement was unsteady, legs stiff from being cramped up in the box. She moved with caution, letting the feeling return to her limbs.

'Bathroom?' she asked, raising her eyebrows as she'd seen many robots do during her research. The men both pointed to a door in the industrial unit's corner.

Lucy was not where she expected or wanted to be. Splashing her face with cold water, she wiped off the smeared make-up and reapplied lipstick and eye shadow. It wasn't great but it would have to do. Rearranging her hair, she considered her options. It was obvious the men knew John Carmichael, so maybe an insistence on seeing him would be the key. Her other choice was to come clean, explain her idiocy and walk away. With a deep breath, she put on her best robotic smile and went back into the unit.

'She scrubs up well,' The Beard said, watching Lucy walk over. 'I wouldn't mind throwing one in her myself.'

'No way,' DB snapped with no trace of humour. 'If I'm working on her, I don't want puddles of your spunk everywhere. If you want to fuck something, go fuck your fist and let me get on with the strip down.'

'I was joking,' The Beard sighed.

With every step towards the men, Lucy tried to become more Priscilla, but her confidence ebbed away with each stride. The two men didn't seem interested in her sexually, which was a positive, but their detachment was off-putting.

'Thanks, guys,' she said with a forced smile. 'If John Carmichael isn't here, I'd better go find him. What's the best way of... where are we right now?'

'I'll tell you where we are,' DB replied, his patience wearing thin. 'John Carmichael isn't interested in you and never will be, so he sold you to a man, and then the man sold you to us. As I paid over good money for you, I'd guess right now you're at home.'

It took Lucy a moment to comprehend what she was being told. Why would John have rejected her without even opening the package? Why had he sold her to someone else? She had to get away and her only option was the truth.

'Guys, this is awkward, but... I'm not a sex robot. It sounds stupid; in truth, it is stupid, but it was a joke... it was a prank on John. It hasn't worked out, and I don't know how whoever sold me got involved, but the transaction won't be legal. I think you need to get your money back. Sorry but... well, sorry.'

Finishing her plea, Lucy realised the men weren't listening. One was searching through a toolbox and the other was looking up something on his phone.

'Gentlemen?' Lucy said, increasing her volume to catch their attention.

'Turn her off,' DB said to The Beard, putting his phone back in his pocket. 'I want to open her up and see what tech I've bought.'

The Beard stepped forward. Lucy fought back the urge to pull away as he grabbed her by the hair and ran his hands behind her ears, then down her neck, looking in the usual locations for power switches. If they realised she had no power button, then it would become obvious she wasn't a robot.

'Where's the power switch?' The Beard said to himself, mumbling in frustration as he checked under Lucy's hair.

'It's a prototype,' DB said. 'The switch could be anywhere. It might be a proximity sensor, or she might be voice-activated. If you can't find it, we can just strap her down and yank the batteries once we're inside.'

'Help me get her on the bench.'

As the two men picked Lucy up and laid her on the workbench, she forced herself to remain calm, struggling to suppress the rising wave of panic which threatened to engulf her.

'Listen, guys; I'm not a robot. John Carmichael is my friend and I need to find him, so if you gentlemen—'

DB grabbed hold of Lucy's top and ripped it open, the buttons giving way under the force, and tried to make a mark on her sternum with a marker pen.

'Stop,' Lucy screamed, trying to sit. DB pushed her back down and pinned her to the bench.

'Tie her,' he snapped. The Beard fetched a spool of paracord from a drawer and despite her struggling and thrashing, bound her hands and feet.

'Please stop; don't hurt me. I'm not a robot, this is all a mistake.'

As Lucy pleaded, DB wadded up a cloth and pushed it into her mouth. Struggling to breathe, her cries became muffled whimpers.

Once tied down and gagged, the men became distracted, collected together equipment and tools. Lucy tried to concentrate on their conversation, but it was a garbled discussion about technology: GPUs, CPUs, PCM arrays, on-chip neuron circuits, neural networks, and petaflops; nothing about sex or John Carmichael or what they intended to do to her. If she remained calm, if she stayed quiet and still, maybe they'd remove the gag and she could try to explain the situation.

DB turned and loomed over her, an electric device in his hand. He didn't even look her in the eyes. His focus was on the tool, as he snapped a small circular saw blade onto the shaft.

'Let's open her up and see what's inside,' he said. 'We can pull her power when we find the batteries.'

A sudden realisation hit home: the goal of the men was to harvest her components. Lucy screamed and threw all her energy into trying to break free, but the cords on her hands and feet tightened as she struggled, cutting into her skin. A burning sensation gave way to piercing pain across her abdomen as the jagged saw teeth ripped her skin open, the warmth of blood spreading over her torso as it cascaded down her sides. Spasms of agony forced her eyes to roll back in her head as darkness encroached, a dense and smothering blackness rolling in until it became all-encompassing...

U.B

'What the fuck is all this shit?' DB said with shock as the gore oozed across the bench, a fine spray flicking off the circular cutter, leaving a red splattered line across his face.

'It's fake blood, it has to be' The Beard said. 'Why would they do that? Who'd want a sex robot to bleed like a person?'

'Maybe Carmichael has a fetish; it's fucked up, that's all I know. Get something to mop this shit up.'

The Beard returned with a roll of paper towels and struggled to clean up the mess.

'Maybe they built Priscilla for a horror film; it would explain why Carmichael had a female robot,' DB muttered. 'But if that's the case, why was she programmed to know who he was? They'd have programmed her for the movie.'

'Dig deeper,' The Beard said as he mopped up more blood. 'I reckon there's something exciting in there.'

DB pushed his hand into the incision. His outstretched fingers touched nothing hard or metallic, nothing electronic. Instead, everything was wet and warm, a mass of tubular softness and pulpy tissue. His fingers found something hard, bone-like, and he hesitated.

'I'm not sure about this—'

DB pulled his hand out and with it came a length of bloody gut, the stench of gore and shit filling the air. Retching, he let the intestine fall back into the cavity, frantically wiping his hand on his trousers with disgust and panic.

'What the fuck is going on?'

The question hung in the air, unanswered. Then it was joined by an agonised haunting wail fracturing the still afternoon. The Beard turned and vomited, the stench of his puke adding to the reek of death that permeated the workshop.

‘It’s a girl, not a robot. We’ve killed a fucking girl...’

DB sank to his knees, sobbing. The Beard was dry heaving, trying to bring something up from his empty stomach, as the first fat bluebottle buzzed in and settled on the mass of mangled guts and gore, tasting the warm sticky blood that formed viscous puddles around Priscilla.

Diaper Man

Intesar Toufic

Intesar Toufic, 27, was dealt homosexuality, Arabic, and rhythm. After working with Syrian refugees, he escaped to the East. He now studies international politics in hopes of one day influencing them. He is nearing completion of an upmarket LGBT dramatic romance and seeks representation. He has been published by the Gay and Lesbian Review, Gay Flash Fiction, Everyday Fiction, and others. If he died tomorrow, his gravestone would read: "Skipped first grade. Slayed drumkit and Djembe. Shoplifted with transvestite sex-workers. Recorded a punk album. Defeated his homophobic family. Obsessed over cowards. Loved men."

"I love you so much that nothing can matter to me - not even you... Only my love. Not your answer. Not even your indifference."
— Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*

(No Subject)

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. I sent Daddy his babysitting money and just made a new video i am uploading to Xtube. I will send Daddy the link. Will Daddy make a short video of him humiliating me in my pampers? Your shit stepbaby.



[Paypal: \$200 were transferred to your account from J.M.]

U.B

God was a fascist. Broad-shouldered, full-chested, blond, skinhead. He knew he was the shit. Intimately. Concretely. He owned what he saw. He frowned sometimes, fire in his hazel eyes, because what he looked at might have been a challenge but one that would see another victory etched into his epic.

On Instagram, God shared:

1. Pro-refugee banners, adding a shit-meter for other fascists to fill up.
2. "Leaked documents" showing that the CIA plotted to plant homosexuality in the Middle East.
3. His workouts and boxing. Entrancing masculinity. Feathers of the peacock.

Despite this, I wanted to serve God. I wanted to bow to him, to fight by his side, to feel his palm on my head, saving me, accepting me, liking me, to kiss his bare feet, because he should always be barefoot, because the world is his.

I thought that through me, he would know mercy. He would know tolerance. He would know benevolence. He would become a force for good, for building huts in Africa, for helping the deaf and the blind, and he would thank me for taking him from his worst to his best.

I spoke with God. I told him how glorious he looked in that picture with beach trunks and flip-flops, scimitar tattoos gleaming on his large caramel arms.

His first words to me were: "FAGGOT! I WANT TO ROAST YOU!!!!!!!!!!!"

I replied: "You already did."

He laughed and so it began. I basked in his acceptance of me, in my servitude to him. I arranged dates for him with women, the best thing a "faggot" can do for God. Everything God said was scripture that would slither in my mind, fermenting, taking on new meanings and new tastes. My mind was being molded to please him, to fit under the arch of his foot.

God sent me laughter emojis. God sent me thumbs-up emojis. God sent me his number. God's voice was a storm. God called me Loki, the trickster, because he knew I was cunning and epic in my own way and it entertained him. He would have never imagined a faggot getting his number and gaining his favor. This brings me pride to this day.

God sent me a voice recording which ended with him calling me "bro". I was God's bro, but suddenly, he banished me.

He disappeared, and I found out he blocked me. Demons are made, not born.

I would find my wings in banishment and glide, pain feeding vengefulness, pain hatching schemes.

I could not bring myself to harm him, but I wanted something. God brimmed with that thing, that Alpha self-awareness that resonates with submissives and pulls them to serve. I'll be damned if I walk away from anything a victim.

God's magnetism would be used.

U.B

Re: my commercial

J.M.

Youtube link of baby diaper commercial

KING

haha weak

u dont look sad though

yo id fuck ur mom

J.M.

yes Sir, my stepdad said i was always happy when I did that video, but i don't remember that. my mom was a slut Sir

KING

Yo I'm into degrading bitches too
I fuck ur mom hard with u crying in the cradle as I own her and get ready to make
u another sibling with superior genes who will b better than u
Tell me when ur able to wor\$hip again

J.M.

well i hate her anyway SIr. she got pregnant with me after a man raped her. i
don't even know who my biological dad is. She's a whore and i blame her for
everything that happened to me Sir. SO go ahead and rape her SIr, i'll just cry and
fill my pampers in my cradle hoping someone cares. i wanna tribute again Sir

KING

Good IL make the bitch bleed then
Tribute crybaby and thank me for raping ur mom
Even though shes my bitch my cock is ripping her ass up
Her pussy should never gv birth after how u turned out

J.M.

Sent Dada :'(

[Paypal: \$100 were transferred to your account from J.M.]

J.M.

thank you dada

U.B

Months after my banishment, I would speak to God again. He would accept me, but it soon turned sour. He insulted me randomly, sadistically, his fist closing tighter on me when I asked for mercy, for clarity on why I'd deserved it.

I would find out later that his insults were random and not provoked by anything I did. Still, his insults—his discontentment with me—would burn, but I thought if he was enjoying this, I'll be his pretty candle. I'll charm my way out of where the sun is scorching to where the sun is warm. Again. But this made me obsess over our conversations, trying to find what ticked him off and what pleased him. Every moment without a demanding task was used for this. Every song I'd hear was about me and God. I could not get him out of my mind.

If God wanted money from me, I'd have sent it—anything to get him to like me again—but he was rich. He didn't need anything from me. I gave up trying to please him—and what a basic spoiled brat he truly is—but I was still hurting, still obsessing. I was amazed at how adhesive this pain was. What a weapon it could be.

Away from God, I reigned in hell. As a dominant top, my feet have been kissed more than my mouth has, and I lost count of both shortly after the first time a

middle-aged Italian bent knees, spine, and neck down to my Nike sneaker and I felt his lips press on my toes.

I discovered financial domination (or findom) at the convenient time of graduate studies in Japan. Part-time English teaching jobs brought in Japanese peanuts and I wanted more. More money for less time.

I put myself out there in the findom world and made decent bank. On offline dates, I was happy with the regular \$50 tribute, the odd \$100, and the only \$250 one. Thus far.

The money really helped. I was on a scholarship. I was getting a stipend, but sometimes life throws you curveballs and your savings are too thin to cushion. A laptop breaking down, a friend coming out as trans before running away from home, your roommate getting engaged and leaving you with a lot of panic and double the rent to pay.

I needed to make more money, and one of my subs told me about this findom website.

I joined.

Tributes there were made public. As in, if someone was given a tribute, it would be on the newsfeed. Second, doms were ranked by how much success they'd had, or tributes they'd received. Third, there were daily updates on who made the most that day.

However, or perhaps as expected, I failed on that site, and publicly, after trying my best. I uploaded my best videos and crafted a good dominant persona but couldn't make more than \$25 in the months and months I'd spent on it. Meanwhile, other doms were raking in double and triple digits on the daily, on the hourly. I was outmatched. It was emasculating, to be placed so low by submissives, while also not making any money.

I did not know why I was so outclassed, but my first thought went to how I look. I don't mean in terms of physical appearance, as the successful doms on that site weren't hot. I mean in terms of physical demeanor. I did not think I was Alpha enough, and in any picture where I posed as one, my eyes betrayed me. They were sad eyes, because I was lying to myself and lying to others about being worthy of their wor\$hip. Sad because I needed to pretend to be abusive to fellow homosexuals so I could get money to help put stitches on my life choices, and the choices life made for me.

Also, I did not have that thing that God does, that other doms on that site did (to a lesser degree). They knew how to abuse money out of horny subs. They knew a language I had yet to even know the letters of.

I then made an account on that site with the pictures of God.

God hated "degenerates". As punishment, he would be used to pleasure "degenerates," and make this one good coin.

Moniker: KING.

I became the puppeteer of God. Not uncommon. Not unprofitable.

It was effortless to be assertive and degrading as God. I knew exactly what to say and how.

In a week, I made \$200 from that site alone. But it wasn't just God's looks that made the money. There were doms who looked epic. Muscular, deep line between their heaving pecs. But they didn't know how to entrance with words.

I was writing God into being.

I had quickly understood that the trick to sounding like a macho straight man is minimalism. Punchy phrases. Poetry virile. To speak just enough. Not in order to allude to something more, rather, to not have much to say to begin with. The listener is forced to clutch tight, hanging between my fingertips: small, unworthy, disposable.

U.B

Re: pampers bitch

J.M.

Picture attached: Grown white man in large diapers with blue frills, wrinkled wifebeater, earplugs.

KING

Hahahaha

Fucking retard

Wht r u listening to

Barney?

J.M.

no, powerpuff girls Sir, it relaxes me. Please don't call me a retard Sir. i told u i was in special ed, it makes me cry

KING

OK I h8 crying babies

Special baby fag then

How do u feel talking to me

Whts ur dream with me

J.M.

it makes me a mess Sir talking to you. i always feel low, but even lower when i talk to you Sir. My dream with Sir is to have him use my pampers as a punching bag and toilet, and to make me suffer physically, emotionally, and sexually. i don't expect Sir to use his own dick, but he could sodomize me, that's what they used to do when straight men abused me Sir

KING

If u mention my dick again il kick u hard back to the dog pound

GOT IT?

J.M. 1:02 AM

i'm so sorry Sir, i didn't mean to, just meant that i didn't expect you to use it. I'm really really sorry Sir

U.B

You let them simmer after you scold them. Opens up the cash pores.

U.B

J.M. 1:09 AM
yes Sir, I'm sorry Sir, please forgive me Sir

KING 1:09
Slap ur fucked up face
THREE TIMES HARD

U.B

They let you simmer. In moments of sobriety, they reassess what they're about to do. Or they could just be busy. The wait is emasculating. You pretend to have meant to use that time to send a longer message.

U.B

KING 1:13
I know ur too weak to hurt urself
I wish I could slap u myself
Send u flying across the bedroom like a fucking diapered football then stomp ur
bitch baby faggot ass
FUCK u pissed me off
TRIBUTE BIG ONE

[Paypal: You have received \$100 from J.M.]

J.M.
Sir please, I'm so small Sir, I'm literally like the size of a little kid Sir. I really am sorry Sir. I can't even afford pampers now Sir

KING
Beg for mercy or il crush u under this big alpha FOOT
Attach a picture of God's foot

J.M.

Please Sir, please, that foot will make my pampers burst Sir please no. God that foot is huge Sir, mine is only size 6. Please don't hurt me Sir, I really am sorry Sir I wanna be a good baby for you Sir. I want to be your pamper toy Sir

KING

That's more like it
I want another 100\$ worship cuz I deserve it
before we talk more faggot baby
Understood?

J.M.

yes Sir, I understand. It might be a few days Sir, I really need to buy more pampers and need to get paid from work

KING

Time out for u then until ur back to being a useful shit pampers faggot baby

J.M.

ok ok ok ok Sir, I'll do it I'll go even more broke

J.M.

Thank you Sir sent Sir

[Paypal: \$100 was transferred to your account from J.M.]

U.B

"Here's the best foot for the best servant," said God before sending me a picture of his feet, after I'd asked for it. When I saw God's foot, I knew we were meant to be... but be what exactly I wasn't sure. I knew for sure I wanted to serve him. Feet, to me, carry a code without words, just form, just curves. A primal language. Some feet read wimp, others read King. His read King.

(Mine do, too.)

I was getting the hang of this. My goal was to make as much money as possible. This diaper man seemed adult enough to control himself. He wanted me to hurt him, and I wanted his money. The natural course was for me to figure out how to maximize my gains.

The basic formula was deceptively linear: More abuse leads to more cash. I pursued, slowly. What could go wrong?

U.B

Re: Discipline

KING

Discipline rule 1

Always start ur words to me with

Dear divine daddy, thank you

And end it with

Ur shit stepbaby

Or ul get the belt

J.M.

Dear divine daddy, thank you. I understand and will be a good baby. Ur shit stepbaby

KING

Drop divine

Dear Superior daddy

Is better

Understood?

U.B

Alliterations are fruity.

U.B

J.M.

Dear superior daddy, i understand, your shit stepbaby

KING

U know what I'd like to do to u

Get u a bunch of fluffy toys

Let u enjoy them and get attached to them

Then one night I open ur room door slowly

Step inside in my boxers

Turn the lights on

Grab some toys

And start fucking them and ripping them up as I fuck them

Make sure I grin at u to c u shake and not know wht the fuck to feel

Then leave the room fucked up with broken toys and fluff and my piss and cum

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, i would scream and cry and fill my pampers to the point of leaking I'd be so scared and upset. the story of my life. Letting me get attached to

things and then having them taken away by force. at least you wouldn't start ripping up my pampers, i'd be a hysterical mess then. Your shit stepbaby.

KING

Not yet

I Dnt care how shitty ur pampers get

I Dnt care if ur ass turns, red and infected and u get some disease

As long as I

GET

WHAT

THE FUCK

I WANT

Ur born wrong but the flipside is I'm ur superior daddy

U should thank me and wipe my toes every morning and night for letting u live in the same house as me

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you, I understand, you are all that matters to me and i can suffer in full pampers if i must Sir. Thank you for being my daddy and letting me stay with you. Your shit stepbaby

KING

Wor\$hip once more before daddy goes to work

Make it good cocksucker

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Ii am so sorry Daddy, but i am so overdrawn on my bank account. It wouldn't let me send more when i tried after you told me about letting me get attached to toys and then raping them. I'm sorry Daddy. Your shit stepbaby.

KING

See what I put up with?

It's OK fag baby

I know ul make it up for me big big big time when u get paid. When is ur paycheck

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. I know you have to put up with a lot of faggotry and babyiness, but at least i am changing my own pameprs Daddy. I am so sorry, i hope you think i'm a good faggot for you Daddy. I get paid on Friday Daddy. Your shit stepbaby

KING

Apologize harder

Crawl over here licking the floor and cry thanking God u found me

J.M.

Dear SUprior Daddy, thank you, thank you God for giving my my Superior Daddy to beat and use me however he chooses. Thank you for giving me a Superior Daddy God who doesn't care how full my pampers are or if i'm suffering. Thank you God for allowing me to lick the floor to get the Superior dirt from my Superior Daddy's shoes. To my Superior Daddy, i am so so so sorry that i can't please you right now and that you have to put up with me. I'm so sorry that my stepdad and his friends didn't just kill me so my Superior Daddy didn't have to meet me and deal with me. Your shit stepbaby

KING

Weak

Pathetic

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. I am sorry to bother you Daddy, but I forgot to ask if there is a limit on how many Pampers I can go through in a day. Your shit stepbaby

KING

Use 1 until I get my cash

Also I want a video

You in front of a picture of Me hitting urself with a shoe or belt

Cry or sob because it's too good to be true and because I'm so cruel to you

Should be easy

KING

yo

make it 3 diapers

i forgot u shit too much

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Thank you for allowing me 3 pampers a day Daddy. I wouldn't last with all the accidents I have in my pants during the day. It will be hard for me because I usually use 10-12 pampers but I will suffer for my Superior Daddy.

U.B

Re: Tribute

KING

hv u ever wor\$hipped with 4 digits

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. i have never sent 4 digits at one time daddy, but i have definitely served one Man over time with 4 or more digits. I am at work but can focus on my work and on Daddy at the same time. Your shit stepbaby.

KING

Fag baby cant stop thinking about Daddy
But daddy forgets baby sometimes
in the car on hot days while daddy's at the gym
fucking girls 2 by 2

KING

is that baby screaming in the car?
Daddy's busy teaching Slut how to do squats up close
down and up...

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Yes Daddy, i've been forgotten before, but on hot days my pampers will bake and Daddy's car won't smell good. I am addicted to you Daddy. Your shit stepbaby

[Paypal: You have received \$100 from J.M.]

KING

Shit baby's gonna send more
or
someone's getting their jaw cracked open and a jar of tabasco thrown down their
baby throat

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Please Daddy, i only drink baby formula, no tobasco down my throat please Daddy. I'm a good baby boy for my Daddy. Your shit stepbaby

[Paypal: you have received \$200 from J.M.]

U.B

My stupid Japanese bank would not let me transfer money from my PayPal to my bank account. Different languages, name discrepancy. The bank teller and I would stare blankly at each other whenever I tried to explain the problem, fumbling in this absurdly difficult language when she absurdly doesn't speak a word of English. Eventually, her pleasantries ran out. The spark in her eye faded into wooden irritation. I wasn't rich. She didn't need to put up with me. She could give me the bare minimum and not risk anything.

It reminded me how pathetic being broke is.

I wanted the cash in my hand and a lot more of it. I sent the diaper guy my address and a request. Here, I suppose, was the tip of the karmic iceberg nipping the side of my galleon.

Karma's no fun.

U.B

Re: Letter

KING

Yo you will start sending cash to daddy by post. With a letter.

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Yes daddy but im just a baby I cant write anything but I will try hard

KING

You fucking useless brat. I should chop ur pudgy hands off and hang them to remind you how pathetic you are.

And maybe get you down to 2 diapers until that letter's at Daddy's big feet.

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. No daddy please I will do my best I will send you the letter, thank you daddy for making this dumb baby learn to write. I will do it as soon as possible Daddy. I love you Daddy.

U.B

Dear Superior Daddy,

Thank you. You are the definition of God. Your body, your face, I am obsessed with Daddy. I thank God for Daddy every day, even when my back stings after Daddy tells me to belt myself.

Thank you for making me sacrifice my needs for your luxuries. I had to change my diapers twice writing this letter.

Thank you for disciplining me.

I am nothing but a faggot shit in Daddy's kingdom.

Your shit stepbaby.

U.B

Re: Letter 1

KING

Yo, it arrived. You can now use 4 diapers. Decent tribute. We'll add a little extra each time and I want a letter at least twice a month.

Daddy will break you into 4 digits and you will cry thanking him.

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. I feel addicted to Daddy, like a little helpless baby Daddy. Daddy is definitely making my pampers much fuller than normal, but it is up to him what i deserve to suffer and cry. Your shit stepbaby

KING

Tears make Daddy happy.

i think about u when i see nurseries

i hope they raise those babies right

then again

More cash is more cash

Send letter again

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Sent your babysitting money daddy. Your shit stepbaby

U.B

\$500 pinched in my fingers. It dawned on me how little this was in the big picture. How much is enough, anyway? At this point, I was losing attention from other subs. I realized that God isn't that appealing to everyone, or that they were catching on to me being fake. Not having a Skype account, or Instagram page, or Facebook page. Looks and talk can only get you so far but with the diaper guy that didn't seem to matter. I wanted to reach that sweet spot, his maximum contribution, so that he couldn't give to other doms even if he'd wanted to.

My greed wasn't the only force driving my demand. It was also for macho effect. Greed is a man's sin. It turns me on, when men want more for no reason, when they want to starve out the species just so they can turn the world into their buffet and their brothel. If I backed down, if I showed mercy, maybe that would be met with distaste. Submissives can give mixed signals. Mercy can be weakness, not practicality, and this would lead to less interest and less money as the submissive searches for a more merciless dominant.

Finally, I had liked the new luxury that the extra income afforded me. I didn't have to book shitty plane tickets or long bus rides next to people who snore and in front of people who recline all the way.

I no longer had to accept flaky gigs that didn't pay a decent wage.

I sent money to my friends in need. To my family. My mother, aged 50, divorced and living with her father, who loved nothing more than escaping to Istanbul with her lover, but both were cash strapped.

My sister, aged 20, living between my mother and asshole father, who wished she could learn the flute, but my dad forbid it. That was the façade of asshole he used to hide how disgustingly broke and indebted he was.

My dad, aged 55, freshly married to his third unfortunate wife, who he'd knocked up, figuring out what went wrong in his life, and blaming it on everyone but himself. I sent him money so I could start paying off what he'd spent on me, so we could detach without me owing him anything, without guilt gnawing at me. Because the day would come when I'd tell him, "Look. I'm gay. Take it or leave it." He would leave it.

These three reasons made that diaper guy my focus, and the letters were a relief. They kept coming until one day, I got less than the week before. \$900. Was this a test? Did he expect me to lash out and scold him?

U.B

Re: Letter 10

KING

Yo this was the same as last time. What's going on STEPSHIT.

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Thank you Daddy for keeping me safe. You are my Daddy. I'm sorry Daddy I had to get diapers and baby formula. your shit stepbaby

KING

Daddy's really really pissed at your degenerate ass

if daddy stomped into ur room right now what u do

J.M.

i'd start crying hysterically, hide and squat in the corner of my crib and start shitting and pissing my pampers Daddy.

KING

HAHAHAHA

u know id find you wherever u hide

ud hear my steps getting closer

then ul jump to kiss my foot and tell me welcome home daddy i missed u daddy god bless u daddy have mercy daddy please daddy i worked so hard to please u

daddy please love me daddy im sorry im a faggot daddy please il do anything to make u love me daddy please let me send you cash daddy!

J.M.

Wow Daddy, you know me really really well already. As scared as I'd be, that is exactly what i would do Daddy. Yes Daddy, hiding never worked growing up.

I will do anything for you Daddy. Your lucky lucky lucky shit stepbaby, worshipping you always.

KING

Maybe you should leave a tooth for the tooth fairy to give daddy that extra cash. Got it?

J.M.

Dear Superior Daddy, thank you. Yes Daddy I'm shivering but I'll do whatever you say Daddy.

U.B

I got my \$1,000. I felt so sneaky and achieved, like some corrupt politician.

But there was something hard and small in that envelope. It took me a second to realize that the red-brown-white trinket in the crumpled tissue was his tooth. First, I was surprised. Then, I laughed. Then, I wondered: is this man sane? And, if so, is the pleasure he gets from this like the pleasure of a heroin addict? Costly and harmful?

Should I care?

Trump is president. The Kardashians are wealthy. Ethics are the obstacle we place between ourselves and wealth.

Sympathy is not macho. Is disgust macho? Through that, I told him not to do it again.

U.B

KING

Yo, good job on the 1 grand.

Finally, you are useful.

I don't need your teeth you little idiot.

Don't disgust me with that shit again.

J.M.

DEAR SUPERIOR DADDY, THANK YOU. DADDY WHEN I PUT THE WRENCH ON MY TOOTH AND PULLED IT OUT WITH MY WEAK BABY ARMS I FELT SO SCARED BUT I WAS DOING IT FOR YOU DADDY IT HURT SO MUCH, BLOOD EVERYWHERE,

J.M.

BUT I QUICKLY WENT AND KISSED YOUR FOOT PICTURE DADDY
AND I THANKED GOD YOU ARE IN MY LIFE DADDY. I LOVE YOU
DADDY PLEASE LET ME SEND YOU MORE MONEY

KING

HAHAHAHA Good bitch. That's how you should always be. Send cash and no
teeth.

U.B

He didn't obey me. The envelopes got thicker, and each time was another tooth. I
had to pretend to find it amusing, I had to never show him that I'm concerned for
him because caring is feminine, it isn't masculine. But some Benjamins had blood
stains on them. They were useless. Criminalizing. Karmic leaves. Still, most were
fine.

I was dining out every other day, at really fancy places. I was getting a taste of real
luxury. Is this how it feels to be born rich? Nice things without price tags. I bought
new clothes. The good kind, the kind that fit great and look sexy. Friends were
wondering why I was getting the bill, and I would smirk, and, knowing me, they
knew not to prod too much.

I was getting better protein supplements. I still felt bad that I would never find
someone who felt the way Diapers did about me. I'd never be as worshipped.

I contemplated steroids. Growth. Power. Mass. I had the money for it.

But what was I becoming? I was contributing to his irreversible mutilation. But if
he had that much money, he could get those teeth replaced, right?

The letters came in more frequently. I didn't bother reading them. Then, by email,
came the worst.

U.B

J.M.

DEAR SUPERIOR GOD DADDY EMPEROR, THANK YOU WITH EVERY
DROP OF BLOOD IN MY DEGENERATE BODY. I HAVE NO MORE TEETH
FOR YOU. MY GUMS MAKE ME FEEL LIKE A REAL BABY! THANK YOU
THANK YOU I'M CRYING!

CAN I PLEASE GO OVER TO YOU AND BE YOUR REAL BABY MY LIFE
DOESN'T MATTER I QUIT MY JOB I WILL GIVE YOU ALL MY MONEY
DADDY PLEASE LET ME SLEEP AT YOUR FEET PLEASE PROTECT ME
DADDY I CANT EAT ANYTHING I NEED CARE AND ATTENTION
DADDY I WILL SELL MY ORGANS FOR YOU DADDY ANYTHING
PLEASE LET ME KNOW

U.B

I did not reply to his email. I didn't know what to say. He sent me a message at least every hour. All caps, all pleas for him to come over. He sent recordings. His mouth a toothless hole framed with wrinkled lips. His eyes were dark brown. Blank. Still in diapers, in his house, the sun shining behind him. Begging illegibly, in falsetto to mimic a toddler.

I couldn't open them anymore. The smell of money oozed from my drawer. When I opened it, the messy bunch of green-eyed Benjamins looked at me like a misshapen demonic body. When I arranged them, each face had the same expression. Wretched scorn.

I decided to move out. But if I did, it would be costly. And it would take time. Japanese landlords will find any reason to renovate the house after a foreigner moves out, making him foot the bill. Again, ethics. Wealth.

And now that he quit his job, he couldn't send anything. What was going on?

Then I got his last letter. It was a package. It was a package of Benjamins.

I couldn't believe the money when I saw it. It's something I visualized back when The Secret was a thing.

His letter said he wanted me to carve him open and sell "the rest" of his organs. And he was coming over. I stepped back and felt my heart sink.

Do I tell him I'm a fake? Do I tell him I'm a lanky balding piece of shit? Why, so that he'll have Interpol on my ass?

I immediately looked up nearby places for rent.

The next night, I couldn't sleep. I made sure the house was locked three times. In the following week, I stayed out of the house as much as possible.

I couldn't do much about leaving when I still had classes to attend. Homework to do. I wasn't about to go to an entirely new place just for a potentially crazed maniac. In diapers. A few blocks away would do just fine.

Eventually, the emails from him stopped coming.

I was relieved. I hoped he'd got to his senses. I hoped his life was back on track.

My sleep was less troubled. I sent a lot of money abroad to my family. By post. When they asked me how I got it, I made up a bunch of prestigious gigs I landed. Ambassador's assistant, university representative, ministry research assistant. At least they were happy, but my sister smelled something. I could tell she wanted to ask more but didn't because she felt it would be a painful question.

One night, I left my house to take out the trash.

Streetlights gleamed on a bare back. A naked man in diapers was bowing in front of my door. With his lips, he secured the handle of a sharp butcher knife.

I should've pretended to be a new resident, but I looked at him with too little shock and too much recognition. We both knew I knew him. We both knew what was going on. I'm an imposter. I'm a thief. I'm a writer.

His beady eyes shot closer, knife in hand. I turned around. We ran.

It was unreal to feel the cold wind gush on my face. I winced as the shrieks ripped his throat like a drill. Anger without words, chasing me, like something hot and sharp was being birthed from his lungs.

Fortunately, I lived near a police station. It was no longer something I passed by; it now was the most important thing in the world. It did not take any talking for the officers to arrest the grown man in diapers and a knife and send him kicking and screaming and shrieking his last sanities away.

They handcuffed a dangerous individual, but the criminal returned home. God was right to banish me.

No More Austin J. Dalton

Austin J. Dalton is a college senior living in the Pacific Northwest. He comes from a little bit of everywhere on the westernmost hemisphere of his country, born and raised in the American South but since having lived (and experienced adventures!) in places such as southern Illinois, Albuquerque and the remote reaches of Colorado. He has had several pieces published in both Vanishing Point, his college's literary magazine, and the e-journal Literary Yard. He enjoys writing pieces that playfully blend a bit of historical fact, quasi-autobiographical lived experience and – of course – utter fabrication.

When you're in your 20s, conventional wisdom states that you should feel cocksure, invincible and have but a dim cognizance of the potentially harrowing consequences of your actions. Jesus, I wish that was true for me. I've lived in such endless dread of my dumb fetish finally getting me in trouble that it seems like the anticipation has become impatience.

U.B

A startling number of adults in Olympia, Washington have absolutely zero sense of other people's space. Too many people here, I suspect, have simply never been punched. I saw this stereotype reinforced again recently, at a little place downtown called Jake's. By reputation, Jake's is a "gay bar" in the same sense that a titmouse is a member of the rodent family. Yes, it sounds superficially correct and locals will habitually refer to it as "Jake's, that gay bar", "the popular gay bar Jake's" or other variations thereof, but rest assured that the place is, these days, precisely as authentically queer as a pre-owned Girls Gone Wild DVD you'd find in the back of a thrift shop. Perhaps in time immemorial, there might have been a genuine LGBT presence at that place, but currently, it's a gay bar by reputation only, mostly dominated by overly aggressive dude-bro's in crew cuts who have a fetish for sullenly shoving past you on the dance floor even though you are not remotely in their way.

On a recent Saturday night, I was there trying to have a good time on said dance floor and some dweeb twice my size kept shoving into me. I sheepishly apologized over the thundering music the first time it happened, automatic assumption of blame being a popular defense mechanism of mine. When I eventually nudged him back and told him to stop disrupting my groove, the guy retaliated with an open-palm shove against my shoulders. Worse, he called me an asshole.

The altercation could've gone any number of ways that the nightclub had no doubt witnessed multiple times just that evening; a couple guys take some banal swings at one another, maybe one party stomps the other while they're down, maybe someone achieves a headlock.

That's probably what the other guy was expecting, hence why he decided to get in my face again. Truthfully, he was very good-looking; long feathery hair, masculine brow like Jim Morrison or maybe Ryan O'Neal circa Barry Lyndon. His face was as pretty as it was salty – once I'd sprung forward and connected my teeth with his smooth-shaven right cheek. I did not expect to hear such a high-pitched scream from his bulky frame.

There was a sense of a disturbance in the club, as people's attentions began shifting toward the dance floor and the screaming young man crying and grabbing his face in pain. Before the lights could come on and the music could stop, I slipped away. As I booked it out of the club and down the avenue with the taste of the angry young man's sweaty skin still on my tongue, the adrenaline from the contact helped propel me even more than the fear that authorities and/or bouncers might be a few paces behind me.

I returned to where I'd parked my car and reconstructed the moment in the club, canonizing every erotic detail of the encounter from the man's hands briefly landing on my chest to my incisors nearly breaking his skin.

U.B

That night, after the excitement waned, I dozed off in my chair and had more of those sticky little dreams which had been getting worse every night for the past year or so. Gorgeous young men and women presenting their little asses before me to consume, biting nipples off, sautéing hardbody thighs, and the like.

I woke at 3 A.M. and reconnoitered my apartment. I had fewer and fewer possessions to my name these days, pawning things here and there to fund my clubbing expeditions, not all of which were strictly legal.

I hadn't had a date over to my place in years. My last genuinely close friendship ended very unceremoniously. My diet was poor because I found myself eating less for daily nourishment and more as a tactile means of processing my fantasies – too much meat.

There was a common denominator to all this, and I, therefore, decided it was time for a radical change.

At that unholy hour of morning, I mass deleted tons of porn – both cannibalistic and “normal” – from my computer, put the liquor in my cabinet in a box and dropped it on the step of some random neighbor. This would be no ordinary fasting. I would make all the celibate monks the world over look like libertines. This was my declaration of War on Pleasure, a search-and-destroy mission to rid myself of these terrible impulses and those little things that enabled them.

Well, not entirely. My plan was not to ultimately purge all pleasurable things from my world, but to delineate between which pleasures were acceptable and which had made my existence worse.

On one hand, there were the Venial Pleasures – these are standard things that spark joy, like thinking some guy I see on a magazine is good-looking or enjoying a well-prepared meal. Permissible within reason.

Then, there were the Mortal Pleasures – that darkness in which I’d indulged in the past, my nightly gratification in thinking about my mouth on young skin and sinking my teeth into beautiful flesh. These things, and my pursuit of them, past and present, had poisoned my soul and I could not tolerate them anymore. From that night on, I decided, there would be no more lust in my heart for those problematic pleasures, no more putting myself or others in danger to satisfy those niche thrills, no more fetishization of the flesh.

U.B

Right away, I underestimated how difficult this was going to be. The exposed flesh of good-looking young men in the warm weather stirred bad thoughts, and to my credit, I made it that whole weekend without self-gratifying.

I stopped by the downtown library and found myself drawn to the hallway leading to the bathroom, where three massive bulletin boards were mounted on one of the walls for the public’s use. Some advertised upcoming punk shows and stage productions downtown, some advertised legal counsel, methadone clinics in the area and Jesus-related shit. The more I looked at those flyers – arranged ostensibly by topic – the more I saw potentially interesting things.

One section of the bulletin board was covered in material closer to what I wanted: Puget Sound Sexaholics Anonymous, Men’s Sexual Compulsivity & Sex Addiction Group, SAA, even a few counselors who dealt specifically with paraphilias. At first, I decided to take down the names of those therapists in my phone. It might have been a little outside my price range, but it would probably be best.

That’s when, in that same section, I saw the flyer for something called the Primrose Path. The terse tagline underneath the saccharine image of a flower bushel that dominated most of the ad: A RADICAL NEW APPROACH TO SEXUAL DISORDERS. Then, a brief explanation of their meeting times and the location where they met downtown.

It interested me because it promised help for “paraphilic urges beyond the abnormal”.

U.B

After a few days of thinking it over, my curiosity once again got the better of me. The more I read about it online, the less this Primrose Path seemed like a cult or a swindle. Of course, being a local group, it was hard to find very much information on it. The names associated with it suggested it could be the real deal: it was created as a side project by Marlon H. Cox, M.D., Ph.D., consistently ranked as not only among the cream of Seattle’s psychiatric crop but that of the Pacific Northwest at large.

The Primrose Path’s second bimonthly meeting was being held in the third story of a fairly nondescript downtown free clinic, the kind where many of Olympia’s

destitute come when their withdrawal symptoms intensify, or their anhedonia has all but pushed them in front of a bus and they have nobody else to talk to.

I took the elevator up and moved down the hallway toward the conference room where this month's meeting was supposed to be held. A big dude slammed through that room's doors and stormed down the hallway past me, still in the process of tucking his arms back into his jacket. I could only hear him mutter, "Buncha sick fucks in there, man," and then he was out of earshot, already in the elevator.

It was every bit what I'd pictured: a motley crew of individuals gathered in a jagged circle. A few mumbled among themselves, most were silent. A man hovered in the back of the room by a folding table with a Keurig machine and donuts. He looked exactly as I thought Dr. Marlon Cox should, slightly portly and sharply-dressed – probably still his "casual" – with an only slightly receding hairline and aviator eyeglasses. I found a place to sit.

6 P.M. rolled around, and Dr. Cox addressed the room with a gravelly voice that belied his fatherly demeanor: "Let's begin. Why don't we move counterclockwise and have everyone state their case? You all know the drill."

The first person to describe their experience – "Nick" – identified himself as a "bug chaser". He was not HIV-positive, nor had he ever made congress with anyone who was, but he'd read the Wikipedia article on the topic as a teenager and thought it was one of the most arousing concepts he'd ever encountered. He mostly consummated his kink by reading erotic stories about so-called bug chasing, and only attended this meeting because his wife forced him to.

The next guy had apparently styled himself as Freddy the Frotteur around town, though his real name was Ned. There were a couple exhibitionists, a couple vore freaks and one mathematics professor from a local college who liked to jerk off to younger students in the campus locker rooms.

When it was my turn, I nearly clammed up. I mumble-spined through my words when I could get them out. "My name is Moore," I claimed. "And I have cannibal fantasies. Hurting people, mostly young men, and eating them."

There was a pause not because anyone seemed upset by my words, but because they probably expected further elaboration. Cox accepted it, nodded, then looked to the person next to me for their testimony. Somehow, I didn't feel so bad in the company of these other individuals. Not good, but it was elating to at least be in good bad company.

Toward the end of group, Dr. Cox had us write our contact details in his little ledger. I thought nothing of it.

U.B

The next day, Dr. Cox's office called me back and asked if I wouldn't mind meeting him one-on-one at his office, a private practice near the college. I obliged. When I entered his office, he wasted no time launching into the point after asking me to have a seat across from him.

"Do you know why I called you, specifically?" he asked. "I know you don't. It's okay. What I really mean is, could you speculate?"

"I didn't speak up enough in group?"

Cox smiled. "Yes and no. If I may ask, how did you feel about the other day's session? Did you learn anything, maybe have some thoughts on the other people who spoke?"

"There were some... interesting people."

"They were. But they all had something in common, deeper than their stated conditions. They are all, in senses literal or figurative, exhibitionists. They fervently volunteer that information not because they believe it'll aid their reformation – though some may believe that – but because they thrive on the spectacle of their pain. They delight in telling their stories. 'Nick'? I'd seen him before, and not always as 'Nick'. But then..." Cox clasped his hands over his abdomen and leaned back to study me. "Then there's you."

In a nutshell, Dr. Cox explained that he thought I might be a candidate for one of the Primrose Path's latest offerings, which would involve both classic one-on-one counseling and some psychodrama. He admitted that I had especially piqued his interest because his thesis had been on erotophonophilia in young males.

"But," he cautioned me. "Depending on your provider, this therapy can be expensive. You'll need to look over the rates and decide what plan you're comfortable with."

"I'll make it work somehow, doctor."

"I also have to warn you, the less you know about our treatment going into it, the more effective it is. It may require some tremendous faith on your part."

"Doctor, all I want is these urges out of my head," then just to be smart, I asked, "What do you mean by 'faith'?"

"Part of the treatment involves a little," he chuckled, waited patiently for the word to come to him. "A little imagination, maybe. Here: it's a bit like an alternate reality game, have you ever played one of those?"

"No."

"Well, there's not much to get the hang of, really. You just need to be 100% forthcoming with me. So, when I ask you this, I need you to answer with the full conviction of someone who wants to get better: son, what's the worst thing this fetish of yours has driven you to do?"

"It was something I did at Valhalla."

"Valhalla?"

"It's the nickname for a fetish club in Seattle, the actual name of which I reckon I shouldn't say."

"Probably wise."

"I was a loyal patron there once. They helped me... actualize, some of my fantasies. Until an incident involving a young man named Jamie, after which they decided they no longer wanted my business."

"Why would they decide a thing like that?"

"Jamie and I – mutually, that's the thing – decided we wanted to act out a fantasy. It was entirely reciprocal, but he–"

"Did you hurt him?"

Before Cox could even finish asking the question, he reached into one of his desk drawers and passed a wad of Kleenex over to me. I hadn't even noticed my own tears.

"Yes. Worse, actually."

"Let's not mince words, son," from a dossier in his front desk drawer, Cox produced a long notepad and a pen for me. "Tell me everything."

The tears abandoned whatever inhibition had long stymied them, and so did my words. I solemnly believe that there are confessional booths and county jails the world over that, in their lifetimes, have not witnessed a fraction of the pained truth I spilled out in that office, in front of that shrink I barely knew.

The SWAT team that I so often fantasized about did not barrel through the door when I finished my terrible story an hour later. The good doctor simply took everything down and assured me with the firmest of handshakes that the best was still ahead of me. When I asked if he planned to call the police, he shook his head and ushered me out the door.

He promised me, as he waved goodbye, "Just stay put, son. We'll do the rest."

U.B

Over the next six days, sleep proved difficult, not only because of the broken jukebox in my head playing Past Traumas and Embarrassments: A Greatest Hits Collection, but because there was a humming coming from somewhere in the walls of the apartment. I considered investigating, but I wouldn't know what to do if I found the misbehaving wire or machinery. I decided to leave a note with the apartment manager and wait for it to be sorted out.

The buzzing continued, however. The first couple of nights of it, I slept a few hours less than I normally prefer. Eventually, I was down to five or six hours. The night before I went to the market and received that phone call, I'd hardly slept at all.

U.B

That Saturday morning, I went to Bayview Thriftway by the inlet to pick up some valerian root, the effective kind that I was pretty sure they carried. While browsing the vitamin aisle, my phone rang and I recognized the incoming number as that of the Primrose Path – Cox's extension, specifically.

"Hello?"

"Change of plan, Chief," announced a nasally and youthful voice, distinctively not that of Cox. "Your treatment plan is going a different direction."

"Who is this?"

"Didn't you save this number?"

"Where's Cox?"

"New management, new treatment plan. Listen, clear your schedule. We have a lot of work to do today."

"Who is this?"

“New management, dude. Open your fucking ears. Now, your first assignment is at 5:00, and you’d better be up to it because otherwise you’re gonna be in big trouble.”

I had to set my merchandise down and walk out of the main area into the anteroom at the entrance, where the nearby baristas at their counter regarded my movements suspiciously. I went out to the parking lot.

“What’s your name, and what the Christ are you talking about?” My tough front was dead on arrival.

“It doesn’t matter, Chief. I know A) your real name, B) where you live, C) what you’re into, apparently – do I need to belabor the finer details, or are you going to work with me here?”

My throat went dry. “I don’t have a lot of money. I’m just an office temp. I don’t know what you want.”

The nasally prick laughed. “What, you think I want you to buy your sick-fuck secrets back? You’re still on the Path, Chief. And you’re going to follow through on the instructions I give you, or I can’t make any promises about who’ll get their hands on this information. I’d think even your pedestrian clerical workplace would have some averse feelings after reading about that little Seattle liaison. Jamie, his name was?”

As soon as the world stopped spinning around me, I seized on a lucid moment to retort. “Listen, I don’t know what you think you know, but that would never hold up. Plus, the club who helped me arrange the meeting you’re talking about destroyed the evidence. So you don’t know–”

“That’s as may be, Chief, but do the math. Is the risk worth it? And besides, did the Primrose Path seek you out, or the reverse? Did you attend Mr. Cox’s meeting and talk him to in an intimate setting – divulging quite the story in the process, I’ll remind you – just to not accept our help?”

I wiped a tear away. “This 5:00 thing, what is it? What do you want me to do?”

“Hoffman’s Gallery of the Arts, in Olympia. Third floor, private event, you’ll need a password to be admitted. Identify yourself as ‘Mr. Magnotta’ and give the password ‘Fidelio’ to the staff when prompted.”

“Who am I meeting there?”

“Nobody. Your homework assignment is just to enjoy, observe and report.”

“What the hell do you mean, ‘enjoy’?” It took another twenty seconds of pausing and repeating myself to notice the caller had hung up. I walked calmly over to the nearby boardwalk, glanced left and right for decency’s sake, then promptly vomited my lunch into the water. My jaw chattered and my eyes became swollen as I walked back to my car.

U.B

Hoffman’s Gallery of the Arts, a middlebrow little venue in an affluent area not far from the main hub of downtown, looked abnormally busy in the pre-twilight hours. The parking lot overflowed so much that I had to park several blocks down and walk the rest of the way, and even outside I could hear muffled music and feel

the hum of a large gathering as I entered. On the third floor, there was the hallway, and in the middle of it, the entrance to tonight's big exhibit.

Two tall gentlemen with twirled mustaches blocked my entrance and asked me my business.

"My name is Magnotta. I'm here for the, uh..." Why wasn't it coming to me? "For the fidelity. Sorry, the Fidelio thing."

The staff member on the right tilted his head at me and looked ready to throw me out on the streets until his partner nudged him and whispered something in his ear. I could make out hardly anything of what they were saying to one another, except the one who had first addressed me murmured something to the effect of, "Is that tonight...?"

They turned to me again, poker-faced, and stepped out of my path. "Enjoy the show," I heard one of them say as I passed.

The crowd in there was relatively sparse, maybe 30 people, all dressed for the occasion. There was a stage on the opposite end of the venue, the wide space of which I suppose normally might have been utilized to display all manner of pieces. While waiting for the show to start, attendants stood around in lieu of any proper seating.

What bare snippets of information I could gather – primarily from whispers of the room's limited conversation, but also from the pamphlet printed and taped on the edge of the stage – suggested that this would be a burlesque show of some kind. Moreover, I heard others grumble about how expensive it had been to acquire entry into this event.

Finally, the lights in the room dimmed for a few minutes, until the spotlight shone on the empty stage. The other attendants quieted down, and the ones who continued to murmur were drowned out by a low hum emanating from the room's speaker, which then evolved into some vaporwave melody. Murmurs built up again as something emerged from the shadows and into the spotlight. What I first thought was an animal of some kind slowly revealed itself to be a person, moving on hands and knees toward the proscenium.

They – I could ascertain nothing about their sex – were in a tight full-body garment of either leather or latex, complete with a hood enveloping their head. What made this bondage suit unique was that large swaths of it were carved out to expose the performer's milky-white, smooth-shaven thighs and portions of their lower back.

"Where's your instrument, guy?" I was distracted from the performance by some guy not much older than me nudging my shoulder from behind, where he'd apparently been examining me for some time. He gestured over to a glass box mounted on the far wall from which other guests had and continued to collect thin black scourges. I'd been so focused on the presentation that I'd totally missed how many of the guests had equipped these items.

These things looked at a glance like cat o' nine tails, but when the lighting exposed their outline a bit more, I could see they were something sturdier: tough, well-constructed, equestrian-grade floggers.

The music briefly stopped. During the pause, a gruff voice announced over the speaker, "Enjoy!"

Like a running of the bulls, I was nearly trampled as the surrounding attendants barreled toward the stage, waving their floggers in the air with warlike vigor. No sooner had the first guest climbed onto the stage than the exposed parts of the performer's flesh were lacerated from multiple angles.

As the music droned on, the crowd doled out their violence in rhythm with the beat but did not show any mercy when the music occasionally slowed. They whipped the downed performer with the fury of a pack of lumberjacks swinging into a tree. Many of them lashed the person on their covered areas, but just as many concentrated their flogs on the exposed areas of meaty skin, lashing it raw and accumulating small blood puddles around their dress shoes. When the performer tried to move, the crowd followed them like the multitudes tormenting Jesus.

"100 points if you tear their asshole open!" someone in the crowd guffawed.

One guy had already discarded his flogger so he could whip out his dick and jerk off, but he multitasked by following the commotion around the room so he could better see the victim's wounds.

Two bearded dudes lifted the performer by their shoulders and dropkicked them back to the floor, delivering further flogs to the back of the person's neck.

Beard #1 giggled and cried out, "How's that turn you on, you fucking gimp?"

Beard #2 briefly paused his flogging to slap his friend on the shoulder in disgust. "What the fuck, Richard? You're not supposed to call them gimps, it's demeaning."

At which point, the two Beards resumed the flogging.

By merely standing there and watching this scene unfold, I had indicted myself. That same slightly older fuckbag from before still had his eye on me, apparently, and approached me again with considerably more anger this time.

"What's the problem?" he confronted me. "Are you not aroused?"

I tried to pretend I hadn't heard him, which seemed believable enough in the maelstrom of lashing, moans, music and yelling. He persisted, pointing angrily at the front of my jeans: "Are you not aroused?"

To the performer's relief, no doubt, other people were starting to turn their attention to me. The music came to an abrupt stop, as well.

The Accusatory Fuckbag tried to grab me, but I fended him off with my flogger and advised the other Fuckbags to keep their distance as well.

The bouncers had entered the room and wanted to know what the trouble was, and I was lucky to narrowly get past them and back into the hallway. The Accusatory Fuckbag continued to shout from somewhere behind me, so I turned and threw my flogger at him. Others audibly and indignantly joined in his chorus as I beelined for the stairs.

"Are you not aroused?"

U.B

Once I got back to my car and got the hell out of that neighborhood, I dutifully redialed the Primrose Path number to report what I'd seen. Before I could get a word in edgewise, that nasally little fuck ordered me to hit I-5 and start moving north toward Seattle.

While weaving through traffic, the Nasally Fuck interviewed me about my feelings regarding what I'd seen at the Hoffman Gallery. I told him the truth, that I didn't understand what I was supposed to learn from that gruesome display of sadism.

He chuckled at me. "If you prioritized edification, then you approached that exhibit like a fisherman approaches the Sahara. Worse, why did you run away? Why would you bail on such a joyful gathering?"

"Joyful? What was joyful about watching a bunch of randos torture some poor fucker?"

"Did the performer sign up for the exhibit under coercion, or was it a perfectly voluntary exchange? How do you know they didn't enjoy it?"

"Even if they did, which I doubt, I didn't. Why would I?"

"Those people at the gallery were able to enjoy it because they're liberated in a way you aren't. You're still fearful of the human body and your stupid fetish because you'd rather deny and suppress what makes you human. You are cuckolded by fear, Chief."

Traffic wasn't too bad through Tacoma, except for the obligatory clusterfuck of construction near the Dome. "Where am I going?"

"The Helena. North of Pike's Place Market overlooking Elliot Bay, you can't miss it. Stop and look it up if you need but check in and go to the conference room by 8:30. I'll be waiting. Try to bail on your assignment, and the police will know everything before you even leave the city."

After that, he hung up and texted me instructions.

U.B

When I got to the hotel, it was the same shtick as last time: up to the help desk, "Mr. Magnotta", "Fidelio". The difference was that this time it was even more of a shock that it worked. This place was antithetical to the fetish club milieu; the Helena was a nice establishment, the sort of place that makes a Hyatt Regency look like some off-brand Motel 6 parody you'd see on The Simpsons. I don't think Trump himself stayed at places this nice.

On the first floor, I found the conference room, which was already packed – I could again feel the rumbling of an audience's collective murmuring before I even touched the door handle. The placard to the right of the doors read something like, "8:30 PM: POSITIVE EXPRESSIONS IN...", and then some clinical-looking word starting with A-P-O-T and ending with -philia that I didn't recognize, followed by a "21+ event" disclaimer.

Inside was what looked like 200 attendants or more, almost all middle-aged white men, all dressed to the nines. The conference room itself was gorgeous, the sort of venue where archaeologists held talks about goings-on at the Burke Museum or middle-aged suburbanites came to congratulate each other on their pyramid schemes. Clean, professional. 1,000 - 1,500 square feet, checkered carpeting, high ceiling, no windows. There was no seating available, so these men all stood around, some

maintaining an upright posture and some swaying impatiently. They were all turned toward the opposite end of the room, the stage.

I was so close to falling asleep that I had to keep biting the inside of my cheek.

The host – likewise a middle-aged man with combed-back silver hair and a chiseled jaw – was already on stage at the other end of the room. His personal assistant helped him adjust the height of his microphone stand, then scurried offstage. Somewhere toward the front of the crowd, camera equipment projected the image of this man onto two large screens mounted on either periphery of the conference room.

Despite his business-formal attire from the waist up, the host appeared to be wearing rather loose-fitting trousers that seemed designed to show off his rising erection. In one hand, he brandished what looked like a pair of surgical scissors with a custom comfort grip.

I looked at the attendants around me. How many of these sad bastards started out like Freddy the Frotteur, unable to sate a basic human need like the touch of another?

The room's murmurs and grumblings slowed and subsided as the host prepared to speak into the microphone. "We have gathered here to witness a tribute to the flesh and all libidinal fascinations thereof. It is my great honor to make this contribution tonight. Let's begin!"

Silence fell over the crowd as though they expected a drumroll.

The host opened his mouth to full capacity and tilted his head back in the style of one of those fire-eating performers. The energy in the room was changing drastically, though it was hard for me to read in what direction exactly until I saw that several of the men in my five-foot radius had their hands planted firmly down the front of their pants. The murmurs and whispers of a crowded auditorium were replaced by a low, strongly invested hum of heavy breath and salivation, like when sports spectators get into character by singing the first verse of their team's fight song in flawless unison.

Some of the men were tall enough to partially obscure my vision of what was happening on stage, but the television feeds, with their increasingly zoomed eye on the host, didn't allow me to miss a thing.

The host stuck his tongue out comically, like a kid at the doctors. He then placed the open scissor blades firmly around the base of it.

Though every muscle told me to do the opposite, I could not look away. The host closed the scissors slowly, though the blades were obscured by the first appearance of blood. The host paused to admire his admirers, take stock of the crowd cheering him on. He was still close to the microphone, so the whole room enjoyed the auditory details – slicing of meat, parts of the blade clinking against his teeth, his sultry moaning. The tip of his tongue wriggled madly, perhaps involuntarily, and he tilted his head forward so the spectators could better see the ever-bloodied organ dangling from his head.

The host's erection now practically exploded from his trousers as the crimson torrent covered his chin and suit, pooling by his loafers. His tongue dangled from his head at increasingly unnatural angles as he pressed down on the scissor handles. The host was not alone in his arousal, as this sea of middle-aged dudes around me pleased themselves with steamy abandon. Finally, as the blades reunited, the

tongue plopped down into the puddle below, to be snatched up its former owner. The scissors fell from his hand.

“Hallelujah!” the host gurgled jubilantly, and how wise of him to choose an exclamation with hardly any hard consonants. He held the severed hunk of appendage out where the camera and the front row of the cheering crowd could see it, then gleefully tossed it out, where a few lucky fans grabbed for it. The host, blood gushing all over the front of his person, wobbled and seemed on the verge of collapse. By this point, I’d had enough.

I ran outside, through the lobby, past where I’d parked the car, headlong for the bushes so I could lose more stomach contents that I didn’t even know were in there.

For a moment, I couldn’t remember how I’d gotten to this fancy hotel parking lot. The sleep deprivation was catching up, and hard.

No sooner had I gotten back in my car than I became aware of the Nasally Fuck blowing up my phone with text messages, some instructing me to redial him, some making hints toward further directions.

U.B

As much as my body wanted to pass out right there on the steering wheel as I drove farther up I-5, the images from the Helena kept my eyes open and my heart racing.

As I got closer to my third destination, the Nasally Fuck texted me a 5-digit number followed by a pound sign. Then, an address. I arrived in a secluded woodland area outside of the Seattle city limits, home to a gated community of what looked, to my eyes, like billion-dollar homes. I was probably in the home territory of tech moguls and Boeing executives now, and I’d be lucky if nobody phoned the police to report my peasant-looking automobile creeping through their community at this time of night.

The code got me through the front gates and when I found the address, I drove up a very long uphill brick driveway until I saw a gorgeous three-story McMansion before me with a stone fountain out front dividing the driveway into a circle. Lights were on in every window of the house.

My phone rang, one more incoming call from the Nasally Fuck. “Parked in the circle?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, well, come in. Door’s open.”

He was adamant that I not hang up on him until I was indoors. Sure enough, I reached the linoleum-tiled doorstep and found one of the front double doors creaked open ever so slightly, held in place by a protruded deadbolt. After entering, I made sure the door remained not entirely latched behind me, in case a sudden departure proved necessary.

The house was as nice on the inside as it was outside. It seemed to have been recently renovated, with the smell of paint and a dearth of furniture or possessions.

“I’m in,” I said into the phone. “What now? Am I going to learn about someone’s breaking-and-entering fetish?”

“You know what’s in the living room?” the Nasally Fuck asked me, a chill ran through me as I realized that I was hearing his voice in my other ear as well. “To your 3:00.”

I turned to face the staircase and sure enough, cell phone in hand, there was a young man about my age standing in only his briefs who looked everything like I expected the owner of the voice to look: greasy, unkempt blond pompadour, acne covering the entire lower hemisphere of his face, and – not to add body-shaming to my list of atrocities – but his pasty physique did not agree with his current blithely laissez-faire attitude toward clothing.

“I’ll tell ya, Chief.” He tossed his phone aside and walked the rest of the way down the stairs to face me. “It’s a laptop, sitting on the coffee table. The whole dossier on your ass, compiled from Cox’s notes. Now, I’m thinking I want to send it. You probably don’t want that. We’re both here, both the same distance from the living room. What are you going to do about it?”

He turned from me with a ballerina’s precision and kept his eyes locked on me over his shoulder. He moved toward the living room. He did not sprint, didn’t even walk with urgency. My flesh took a minute to react, and I followed him through the hallway leading into the living room.

“Look, what do you want?” I patted him on the shoulder. He didn’t even turn. He kept walking.

“Will you at least tell me who you are? We can work something out, can’t we?” He kept walking.

The living room – and that coffee table with the very open laptop – was now within sight. I tried going around him. “Please! I’ll do whatever you want! I did what I was supposed to do!”

He kept walking, fixing his eyes straight ahead as we entered the lavish, tile-floored territory of the kitchen and dining room. He crossed the threshold into the step-down living room, some three meters from the couch with the laptop open in front of it. I didn’t get a very good look at what was on the laptop screen but damned if it didn’t look like some densely paragraphed Word Document or Google Docs file.

I felt so helplessly childlike as I begged him, with increasing volume, to please just stop and talk to me. My emotions were in such a haze, and my brain was so tired, that it took a few seconds to register when I scooped up a lamp from the nearby table and brought it down over his head.

The Nasally Fuck stumbled around the living room for half a minute, even tripping himself on the coffee table and knocking it over. From the looks of the briefs, he’d also relieved his bladder.

He sneered at me. “You are an asshole, you know that?”

And as though a starting gun went off inside me, I rushed toward the Nasally Fuck and tackled him to the floor. Once I had him down, I positioned myself over his abdomen, Schoolyard Bully style, and wasted no time connecting one fist at a time with his ugly face. Not being much of a trained fighter, my fists hurt right away, and even the adrenaline couldn’t keep my aching knuckles from slowing me down. A different instinct crawled into me and took command, however, as I saw this bloodied and distraught young male underneath me on the carpet.

I kept his arms pinned down by the wrists as he thrashed around, and, following some illogical drive deeper and older than language or rational thought itself, I bent my face down and dug a toothy hickey into his left cheek. Even when his thrashing was most violent and my incisors ready to shatter into dust, I clamped my jaws closed on him.

"I frrrrking killed a guy once!" I snarled through my clenched teeth, blood smearing my tongue. His shrill screams pierced my eardrums. "I ate his frrrrking flesh! And I frrrrking liked it! I said it! And you're next!"

This was perfect. This was pure. The closer I came to tearing his face off with my bare teeth, the hotter my loins burned.

"Alright. That'll do," a familiar voice emanated from the kitchen. When I leapt up and looked to my left, I saw Dr. Cox stepping forward with his wallet in one hand and his ledger in the other. I backed up against the wall, bewildered, as Dr. Cox stepped into the living room, lent the barely conscious young man a hand up and gave him a paperclip of bills out of his wallet. "You did good, Bucky." He patted the kid on his bare shoulder. "Go wash up."

The young man limped out of the living room, making tentative eye contact with me. The doctor then turned to me and invited me to come sit with him in the kitchen once I had collected myself.

U.B

"Why?" This was the best I could muster as we sat diagonally from one another at the corner of the dinner table. All my half-catatonic brain wanted was to finally fall asleep. Dr. Cox took a moment, scrawling notes on a legal pad, before he answered.

"What did you feel out there, in the living room?" he asked. "Before I interrupted? Would you compare it to past feelings?"

The questions droned on. I appreciated Cox's interest in the loftier topics, but it was logistical information I wanted, and those were the questions he avoided until I asked him point-blank, "What the fuck was today?"

Dr. Cox sighed. "Like I warned you before, today's exercise required some faith on your part. It was just a little bit of psychodrama—"

"You orchestrated all this? The new guy, the blackmail, the fucked-up things I saw?"

"Most aspects were 'real,' in a broad sense. Some were guided. But it was all for the good of the exercise. The blackmail thing was more of a ruse to get you to participate."

"For what? I still don't understand."

"To understand that neither you nor your fetish are a mistake, or even necessarily abnormal," he smiled at me. "You've spent all this time in fear of your sexual idiosyncrasy, running from it, trying to purge those so-called Mortal Pleasures, when the only way to achieve peace with it was to accept it. More importantly, to see that you are not alone in your fetish of the flesh."

"What the hell kind of shrink are you?"

"These things inform us of who we really are. That is the lesson, son."

“But Doctor!” I felt myself on the verge of tears again. “I don’t want to accept my paraphilia; I want to be cured of it!”

“You want to be cured of what makes you human? To be cured of that very predatory drive which saved you out there in the living room?”

“If that’s what that means, then yes!”

Dr. Cox rose from the table with a shrug, adjusting his tie. “Well, get a fucking D.B.T. shrink next time, kid. I don’t know what to tell you.” He nodded toward the living room. “It’s my stepbrother’s house. You can stay here until tomorrow morning if you like. By the way, this is for you. Not including the lamp.”

He handed me an envelope with the Primrose Path logo on it and informed me that my bill was enclosed.

After Dr. Cox and his boy assistant left, I walked with my bill out to the thoroughly trashed living room and sat on the sofa, ready to pass out. When I looked on the laptop – big surprise – there was nothing even on it, and the text document that had been on-screen was just some “readme.rtf” thing for one of its programs.

Why does help elude me so? Why would society allow this, teach me the basic perversion and wrongness of my fixation, these Mortal Pleasures that tore my libido asunder, yet allow me no reprieve from it when I try my best to banish it from my mind? Who benefits from my continued monstrosity?

I opened the envelope and looked, with a despairing sigh, at my invoice. “Oh, goddamnit.”