The Heliotrope



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A Vore Novella

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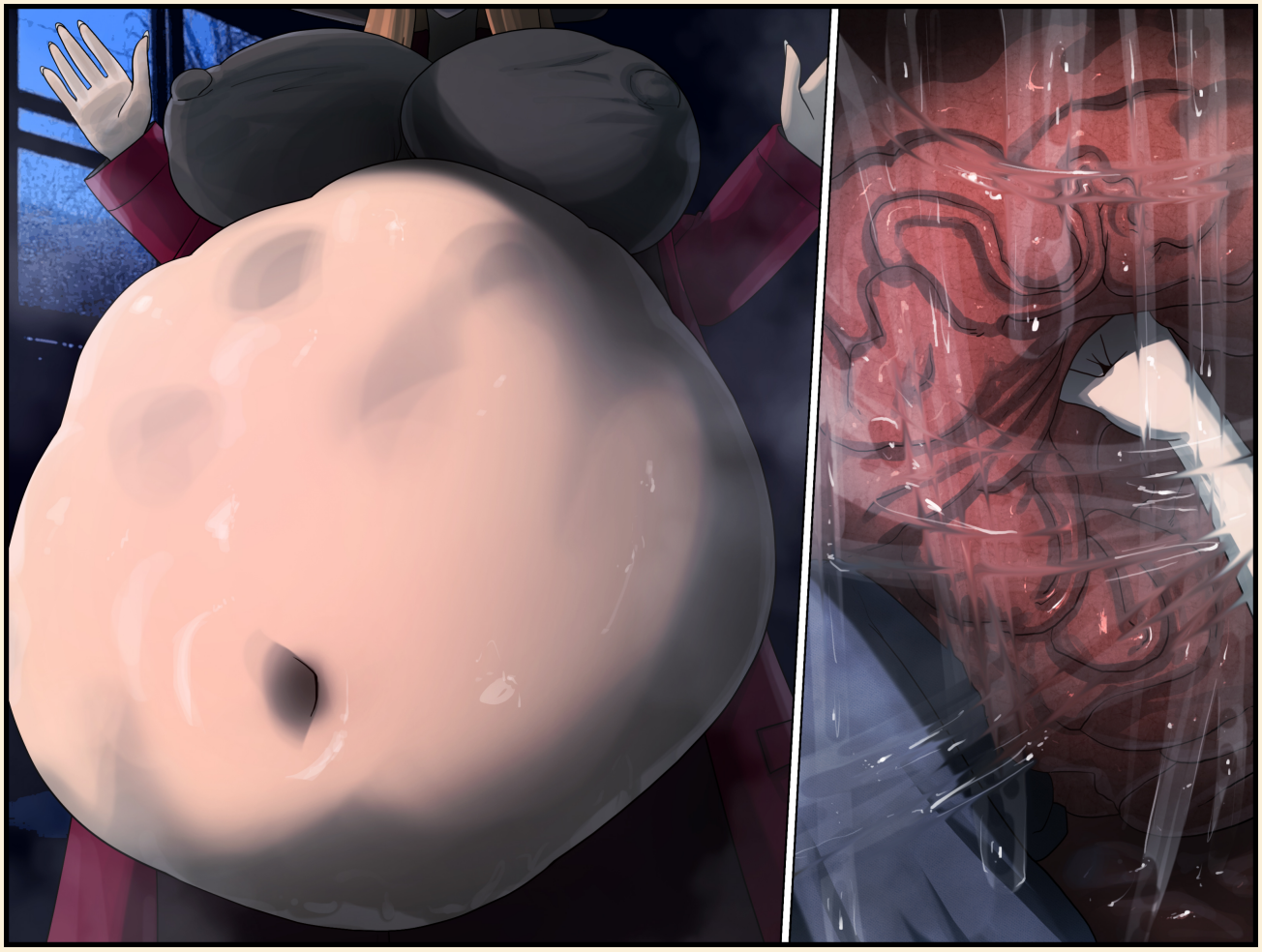
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Content Warning:

This book contains themes of depression, suicidal ideation, suicide, and self-harm. Reader discretion is advised.

You are not alone.

1.



I have been digested by the same woman five times now. I have never seen Her face, nor heard Her speak, but I could draw you a diagram of Her stomach. It would be purely topographical; a landscape of flesh and creases, folds and divots. I know the sound of Her breath, hitching with pleasure, and the beat of Her heart from the steady increase in tempo up to the roaring climax. I know the feeling of Her bed beneath us, nothing between us but stomach lining and skin, and I know the squeeze that precedes the end; the gentle hug that kills me.

I know this woman better than I know myself and yet if I saw Her in a crowd, I would not recognize Her.

And that terrifies me.

***

I wake to the green light of the Reformer blinking overhead. I'm lying naked in the pod; outstretched on a patch of cool, white granite. The rod above me still glows with heat—a sign of my recent printing. The smell of metal is heavy in the air.

Sometimes it takes days for me to wake up. Sometimes it takes minutes.

The night attendant is asleep at his post. We've met twice before. His name is Terrance, he's a student, he has a dog. His presence is my only clue as to the time in the gloom of the Reformation Center. If it was the day attendant, Renata, then I could at least grab breakfast at the diner.

I ignore Terrance as I walk to my locker, working through the memories.

She ate me at a party this time. It's been months since I've left my apartment, but a friend dragged me out noting, accurately, that I had become a bit of a recluse.

"What are you scared of?" he had asked.

"Have you ever been digested?" I had wanted to respond, but instead, I went. As always, She was there.

The time before that was in an alley behind a bar. The time before that was outside of my apartment. The time before that was in my own bed, after which I had moved twice, but She always found me.

The first time was at the bridge.

I shake my head.

My clothes are waiting for me in the locker: a plain, black tee shirt, some boxers, and jeans. I slip into the outfit and glance back at

the attendant. The money for the Return has already been taken out of my account. There's no need to wake him, so I leave.

It's cold outside. The walk from the reformation center to my apartment is only three blocks, but it's the middle of the night. The time on the bank clock says 3:30 and the air is crisp with the smell of winter's approach. I stand under one of the streetlights and look at the sky. Black clouds overhead. It's going to rain.

"Are you here?" I ask.

I don't shout. If She's here, then she'll be close enough to respond. There's an alley to my left that leads behind a block of apartments and park to my right, the trees hidden in shadows. Plenty of places for her to lurk. When there's no answer, I continue walking, jamming my hands in my pockets and hunching my shoulders against the cold.

Of course she isn't here, but I know where she *has* been.

I walk into the lobby of my apartment complex. By some miracle, Frank is awake, but dreary; his eyes drooping almost as much as his handlebar mustache as he inspects me across the desk.

"Late night," he says.

"Mmhmm."

There's a half finished game of solitaire sitting on the desk in front of him. He riffles through the cards, the sound eerily loud in the silence of the lobby. Behind him, an ancient camera watches the front door. Seeing it makes me queasy.

"Anyone stop by tonight?" I ask.

"Hmm?"

"Anyone new? Unusual?"

"You think I let unusual folks just waltz up the stairs?" the security guard snorts. "Nah, usual crowd, usual riffraff."

"Any packages?"

"Not that I know of."

He goes back to his game as I head toward the stairs. I'm sure that as soon as I leave his line of sight he'll draw his cap down over

his eyes, but it doesn't matter, because as soon as I step into the third floor landing, I see the package at my door, same as always.

My clothes from yesterday are tied in a neat bundle. The shirt's been washed and ironed, the pants neatly folded. Only my boxers are missing, dissolved or destroyed, but in their place is a fresh pair from the dollar store along with my phone, my keys, and a single, black heliotrope.

I stare at the flower for a moment then brush it aside. I take the bundle with me as I unlock my door and step into my apartment.

"If you're here, come out," I yell.

Silence. My TV is tuned to a dead channel, the gray and white static illuminating the mess that I left behind. Takeout boxes litter the floor. Discarded clothes lay over the backs of chairs and end tables. There's a pile of dishes in the sink that I never got to and the garbage is starting to stink. I'll burn it tomorrow.

Right now, all I want is my own room and my own bed. My body is new, yet the memory of Her cramped belly makes my neck ache. The light in the bathroom is on, but that's not unusual, nor is the distinct sound of my neighbors having sex next door. I enter my bedroom. The hair on my neck rises.

Have you ever walked into a room and known that someone had been there? Nothing is missing, nothing has moved, but there's an invisible vapor in the air, a whiff of intrusion, or a woman's perfume. I back up into the hall. When nobody jumps out at me, I approach with caution.

Under the bed? Nothing. In my closet? Nothing. The bathroom and the kitchen are clear, though my heart started racing when I swept back the shower curtain. The living room is free of intruders. If She was here, She isn't now, but still I am wide awake. The bundle had been left outside of my door. Why had She come inside?

"I'll have to move again," I mutter. "A different state this time. A different country."

I recheck my bedroom. No boogeyman hiding beneath my mattress, nor ghosts in the linen cupboard. Sighing, I sit down on my bed and jump as Guinevere swipes at me from behind the pillow. The black cat hisses as I put my hand out to her. She's probably mad that I wasn't home to feed her.

"It wasn't my fault," I say, heaving myself back up to fetch her kibble. "I was kidnapped by a-"

The rest of the sentence falls dead on the floor. I had been bending to pick up her bowl when I noticed what was different:

The bowl is full.

She fed my cat.

2.

Miracle Bridge spans the South River between 8th and 9th street. It's a steel monstrosity that was built in the 80's when the South River still had water in it and hadn't yet been filled with garbage. Graffiti of every variety clutters the rusted cables. On the day that I met Her, I was standing between a poorly drawn Cookie Monster and the epitaph that read "both feet in heaven."

The residual heat of the sun warmed the metal under my arms. I was leaning over the railing, watching the rats scurry in the garbage below. It had been a shit day, a shit week, and a shit month.

A shit life.

Cars puttered over the bridge behind me. Hideous music screeched out of rolled down windows, but all I could hear was the bass vibrating the pavement.

"Jump, pussy!" somebody screamed.

A woman's voice laughed as the car sped off, joining the ocean of noise that made up the city. One less voice probably wouldn't matter. I stepped up onto the railing.

It wouldn't be my first time Thunking. Usually the thrill of staring into the abyss set me straight, but twice now I had woken up in the Reformer with the tech standing over me. They were supposed to ask how you died, but both times the tech had just pointed toward the lockers and I walked out without speaking and without learning my lesson.

What's the point of any of it? I thought as I spread my arms. *It's all garbage.*

Footsteps on the bridge behind me made me pause. A passerby, probably, keeping their head down so as to not draw the attention of the crazy man on the railing. A cop, maybe, here to haul me away. That would mean a visit to the psych ward and a new set of pills. Despite my insistence on dying, the thought made me hesitate.

A gentle hand took me by the wrist.

“Fuck off, lady,” I growled. Her grip was surprisingly firm. I remember looking down at her fingers, dainty, and getting hot beneath the collar. She hadn’t said a word, but I could feel her presence.

Maybe she could save me.

“I was just kidding,” I said, cursing myself for my cowardice. Why did I care what she thought? “I was trying to freak out a friend of mine. He’s standing below, see? Besides, I’ve still got credits at the Reformation Center, so even if I fell, it wouldn’t matter.”

The hand moved up to my elbow. She was turning me.

Oh, what the hell, I thought as I turned to face my savior. *Let’s meet my-*

SHLORP!



At first I didn’t know what was happening. My vision was blurred by a wet, pink object sliding up and around my face. I moved

back instinctively, hitting the railing, as the woman followed my movement, stepping forward so that her chest was pressed against my own. Her grip on my wrist was iron. I took one look at her spreading gullet and screamed into the void, but by that point, her throat was around me, and the journey into her stomach was short and sweet and painful.

3.

Knock, knock, knock!

I jolt awake, scaring Guinevere. She springs off the bed as I rub my eyes, not sure if the pounding is real or in my head. My back is drenched with sweat. Had I been dreaming?

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Three insistent bangs shake my front door. I take a hazy look at the clock. It's 10am. Was there something I was supposed to do today? Was I delinquent on my rent?

"Open the fucking door, Cory!"

That wakes me up.

Only my parents and my exes call me Cory and it wasn't my parents at the door. I look down and see that I've slept in my clothes. Good. That saves me the trouble of throwing on a dirty pair as I stumble into the living room.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"God damn it, Judy, the neighbors are gonna call the cops," I yell. There's an open jug of orange juice on the coffee table. I pick it up on the way past and take a swig.

"ACK!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Open! The! Door!"

I throw back the lock and step away as the door comes flying open. Judy is standing in the hallway, fist raised, her cheeks pink from exertion.

"Hello, Judy," is as far as I get before she's on me.

A few things to mention about Judy:

>She's about 6'1".

>I am 5'10".

>She's a black belt in Jiu Jitsu.

>I haven't lifted a weight once in my life.

>She weighs 210 pounds, rock solid.

>I am a wet paper bag.

I'm lucky that there's a pile of dirty clothes to break my fall as her forearm jams down on my neck. One knee pins my leg and the other digs painfully into my side. She's wearing her long, brown hair in braids today. It would look nicer if I wasn't also blinking away black dots due to the pressure on my windpipe.

"Whazzup?" I choke.

"You know what's up, asshole," she spits. When she curses, her nose wrinkles, disturbing the constellation of freckles that make up her face. "Why did you leave that flower at my door? My girlfriend could have seen it. I'll kick your fucking ass if it was some kind of poetic attempt to get back with me."

"I dunno. What you're talking about."

Judy eases up and I gasp, rubbing my throat. She doesn't get off of me, though. Her breath smells like hamburgers.

"I should fucking eat you," she says, licking her chops for emphasis. "I could do it, you know, and nobody would give a shit. Huh, the only downside is that your rich fucking family is still paying the tab on your Returns. Figures that it's the one thing they're still paying for after you squandered your allowance."

That's the worst thing about exes. They know just what to say to hurt you.

"I don't know anything about flowers," I manage. Judy lets me get an elbow up underneath me, but her knee stays on my ribs. "Jesus, Judy, did you gain weight?"

The knee comes down hard. I'm seeing stars.

"You're fucked in the head," Judy says, but I notice that when she stands up, her hand goes self consciously to her belt. She's wearing a pair of tight jeans that she must have bought recently because I know for a fact that they would *not* have fit a year ago when we stopped dating. "I can't believe I skimmed your address from Niles."

Niles, you fucking rat. I only gave him the address because someone needed to feed Gwen when I was away—a job that had apparently been taken over by a psychopath. Judy waited for me to sit up before kicking me back down on the laundry. Her carnivorous gaze scanned my apartment.

"You live like a pig," she said.

"My life hasn't been the same since we broke up," I said. "I was devastated."

"I'll actually fucking eat you."

Right, I had been the one to break up with her. Sometimes you forget things when you've been tormented by a faceless entity hellbent on digesting you. I get up and move to the kitchen. Judy follows me.

Unfortunately.

"What do you want?" I ask.

There's coffee left in the machine. After the orange juice, I'm hesitant to drink it, but the niggling thirst for caffeine wins out in the end and I pour myself a cup. It's bitter, but I guess that's how coffee is supposed to be, so I down it. Judy raps her knuckles on the countertop.

"Dipshit," she says. "The flowers?"

"I'm not leaving you flowers," I say.

Gods, it was easier to talk to her when she was fat. Most of the weight had been lost in the gym, but the weight that stuck around is currently jiggling on her chest and it's making it hard not to stare at the plunging neckline of her shirt. Judy's eyes follow mine, but while she purses her lips, she doesn't hit me. Her stance changes somewhat.

"Jill likes these," she says, dipping her nose toward her boobs.

"Congrats," I say.

"She's a much better lover than you."

"Yeah, well, it was hard to get the whole way in," I say, "on account of your fat thighs."

A cereal box comes flying at my head. I duck and Cheerios explode across the kitchen. I'd worry about roaches if I didn't already know I had roaches.

“Asshole!” she screams.

She’s right, so I say nothing back.

I truly do wish that I was a better person. I have all of the usual excuses—emotionally absent parents, bullying—but I know people who grew up way worse who seem to have it all together. Why do I say the things that I say? Why do I do the things that I do? These were questions that a number of shrinks had wisely nodded their heads over while telling me jack shit about what was wrong.

Judy’s not leaving the apartment until I hear her out, so I clear off a space on the counter and set my coffee down. I gesture to a chair. Judy frowns, expecting a trap, but when I don’t move, she sits. My neighbors start screaming across the hall.

“This place is the worst,” she says. “You can’t afford anything better?”

“Nope.”

“I really should eat you and put you out of your misery.”

“You mention that a lot.”

Judy blushes. Right, that was always something that she wanted to try when we were together. She’d suggest it in a joking way, but I suspected that it was more of a fetish. I’d have given it a shot if I weren’t such a pussy about, you know, dying.

“Whatever,” she says. “Seriously, though, what the fuck are you doing with your life? Are you still in school?”

“Technically,” I say, shrugging. “I mean, it’s all online classes nowadays, but I visit the campus from time to time.”

“Oh yeah? When was the last time, Cory?”

My name stirs something inside of me. It’s been a long time since someone called me anything but ‘hey you’. The couple across the hall has stopped screaming at each other and have started having sex. I don’t meet Judy’s eyes.

“A few month ago,” I answer truthfully.

Judy shakes her head. Her disappointment is somehow worse than her anger.

“Shit, Cory,” she says, “it’s always like this with you, you know? You get down in the dumps and then it’s you, you, you. One time you didn’t say a word to me for a whole week. You just drifted around the apartment like a ghost. I considered calling your parents.”

“They’d love that.”

“They aren’t the enemy, Cory.”

She’s right. It’s funny how often that’s the case and yet it still pisses me off. I begin to sweep away the crumbs on the counter. The trash bag is full, so I dump them in the already crowded sink. Judy’s seen me in enough of my black moods to know when the conversation is over. She gets up and dusts her pants off.

“You look good,” I say on a whim.

She stares at me, waiting for the punchline, but when there is none she sighs.

“Thanks,” she says, reaching into her pocket. She pulls out a scrap of paper and a pen and scribbles something down. She sets the paper on the counter. “My address. I guess you didn’t know about the flowers. Someone must have gotten them delivered to the wrong apartment. Let me know if you need anything. You seem…”

She lingered on the thought.

“...out of it.”

Her concern is so earnest that I almost tell her about the intruder, but something stops me at the last second. I swallow hard and nod. My face is getting hot. Judy watches me carefully. That’s something I didn’t miss: her X-ray eyes.

“See you around,” I say.

She’s heading for the door. The opportunity to ask for help is past.

I don’t even know what she could do about it, I think as the lock clicks back. *You can’t fight a phantom and I don’t need my ex-girlfriend getting involved in something that she has no business getting involved in.*

It was good to see her, though. I didn't realize how much I missed having someone to talk to.

"Oh, by the way," I say as she enters the hall. Judy looks over her shoulder. "What kind of flowers did they leave?"

Judy thinks for a second.

"Black heliotropes," she says. "Why?"

4.

I'm standing on top of the parking garage looking down into Judy's apartment. The blinds are drawn back and the lights are on. It doesn't look like Judy cares much about privacy on the fourth floor.

At the moment there's a girl lounging on the couch in pajamas. She's small—Asian, maybe?—with a too-wide smile and a slight limp. Judy hands her a cup of something steaming and settles down to watch a movie. I shiver in the cold, feeling like an idiot.

"I'm sorry, Officer," I mutter under my breath. The binoculars in my hand make any excuses I could make for being on the top of the parking garage moot. "You see, my ex-girlfriend received a mysterious gift the other day and now I'm worried that someone might try to eat her. A bomb? No, no, a flower. Why are you arresting me?"

Talking to myself isn't helping the crazy allegations. I retrain my focus.

Jill is sitting in Judy's lap. She whispers something in her ear and Judy laughs. Seeing her smile makes my stomach knot into pieces. She looks happy. She deserves to be happy. I sweep the binoculars back and forth across the sidewalk, but there's no one in sight, and besides, even if there were, how would I know if it was Her?

I'm just about to walk away when movement in the apartment catches my attention. Judy and Jill are making out on the couch.

"Now that's interesting," I say.

Ah, creeped even myself out with that one. To be fair, I have been single for a long time and seeing my ex getting hot and heavy is calling up some memories, though don't worry, there is also a heavy dollop of shame weighing down on me as I train my binoculars back on the couch. Judy pushes Jill down on the cushions. She's taking her shirt off.

Fuck, her boobs are huge.



“Alright, pervert,” I say as Jill unhooks her bra. “Enough of this. She’s with someone else, in her apartment, behind three locked

doors.”

Then again, when She broke into my apartment, I also thought I was safe.

I keep my binoculars trained on their window for a minute longer. Jill’s head is cradled in Judy’s arms. They kiss hungrily, passionately, with a desperation that only new lovers can muster. When Judy and I broke up, it was familiarity that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Once you’re together for long enough, even the sex bleeds into mundanity, or so I thought. Watching Judy and Jill rekindles something inside of me.

It’s uncomfortable. I should leave.

I pull the binoculars away from my face and am surprised to see a new figure standing on the sidewalk. They’ve got their back turned to me, a black umbrella blocking their torso. I can see the fringe of a red coat against the gray of the pavement. It isn’t their presence itself that is odd; anyone can use the sidewalk after all. It’s their stillness that bothers me. They’re standing in front of Judy’s building like a shadow cast from the stone and I’ve got the weirdest feeling that they’re looking up.

Right at Judy’s window.

A braver version of myself would call to them. The words stick in my throat as hesitation binds me to silence. What if they’re a resident? How am I supposed to explain the binoculars? I look back toward Judy’s window and see that things have progressed. Jill’s face is between Judy’s legs and by my ex’s expression, she’s doing well. A twinge of jealousy makes my lips pucker. I could never make Judy twitch like that.

I look back down at the street, half expecting the stranger to have disappeared, but they’re still standing there. Now, however, they’ve turned slightly. Their head is tilted toward the parking garage. I cannot see their eyes beneath their wide-brimmed hat, but I can sense their gaze.

“Shit!”

I duck beneath the concrete bannister. Did they see me? A peek over the bannister shows that they've returned their attention to the building, but they were definitely looking in my direction.

Maybe it's Her.

The idea infects me at the same time that a peal of thunder booms overhead. The sky, having threatened to rain for the last hour, finally unloads its burden in a torrential downpour. The stranger continues to stare at Judy's window. Wet and shivering, I look as well.

Judy is kneeling on the floor at the edge of the couch. Her cheeks are red and she's playing with her braid—a nervous tick she's had since childhood. Jill is sitting with her knees to her chest. She's excited about something. Even across the street, I can feel the charge of apprehension.

Then, slowly, Jill lowers her feet into Judy's mouth.

I nearly fumble the binoculars off of the parking garage. When I retrain them to my eyes, Jill is halfway up to her hips in Judy's throat, wiggling and giggling, working her way down. Judy, damn her, is in ecstasy. She's cupping her breasts, groaning, slurping down Jill with such gusto that one might have thought she was starving.

My insides burn.

An alternate history plays out in my mind. One in which I took Judy up on her dare to swallow me and willingly fed myself to her. One in which I was compacted in her stomach, much fatter then, but comfortable and endearing.

Maybe it would have rekindled our relationship. Maybe it would have spiced up the sex. Maybe it would have done all the above, but like everything else in my life, the regularity of it would have eventually grown tiresome.

I continue to watch.

Jill is almost entirely inside of Judy. Judy's stomach is propped against the couch. Jill is tilting her head back, moaning. Judy is touching herself with great enthusiasm. She has employed a vibrator. What the fuck am I doing?

I stand up. The rain drenches me as I put my binoculars away in my bag, but I don’t care. All I want is to be back in my apartment with



my cat and some takeout, fapping away the loneliness until I pass out on the couch. I even (briefly) consider taking a picture; a souvenir of my time as a stalker and a fun new incident to report to my therapist on Monday. It isn't until I am already at the stairwell that I remember the stranger with the umbrella.

They're gone.

Rationally, I know that they probably just went inside. Their friend, who they were waiting for, came and opened the door, and they were upstairs doing who-knows-what with who-cares-who. Still, something inside of me makes me reach for my binoculars away, wiping the smudged lenses off so that I can train them on Judy's apartment.

She's still got the vibrator in her pussy. Good for her. She's still leaning on the couch, one hand between her legs and the other fondling her tit while her stomach jolts and jostles. My cheeks burn as she buries her face in the cushions, hips spasming in orgasm. The door behind her is open.

It… wasn't open before.

My neck tingles. There's nobody else in the apartment, but I'm positive that the door was closed just a minute ago. Judy has her back turned, busy. There's movement in the doorway.

"Judy," I say.

My phone is in my pocket. The screen is damp and takes a few seconds to boot up as I swipe my finger over it. I try to click on my contacts, but it doesn't fucking work.

"Come on, come on!"

There's someone standing in the doorway now. They're wearing a red overcoat and carrying a black umbrella. Their face is obscured by a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over their eyes. Unhurried, they set the umbrella down. Judy still hasn't noticed.

"Fuck!"

I hold the side button until the voice assist pops up.

"Call Judy."

“Calling Mom.”

“What?!”

I pound on the phone, managing to end the call just as my mother’s concerned voice begins to bleed through the speakers. By some miracle, the contact page has popped up on the screen. I slam on Judy’s name.

Ringing. Ringing.

Judy looks up. The figure in the overcoat is standing behind her, perfectly still, but Judy curses and fishes through the couch cushions. Her stomach is constantly moving, causing her hips to ride up and down like a wave. When she finds her phone, she stares at the screen, frowns, and puts the phone back down.

“**JUDY!**”

My legs are frozen. Should I cross the street? Should I call her again? There’s no time to call the police. I have to do something!

There is a chunk of brick that’s come away from the wall of the parking garage roof. I grab it, praying to every god of athleticism that my body will remember its Little League days as I whip the brick at Judy’s window.

CRASH!

I wasn’t even fucking close. The brick sails in a pathetic arc before smashing through a parked car.

WHOOP! WHOOP! WHOOP!

Judy looks up at the car alarm. By some miracle, her eyes go up instead of down and she sees me standing on the garage. I watch her mouth form into a dozen different curse words as she covers her breasts. All I can do is jump and point, waving my arms like a madman.

“Behind you! BEHIND YOU!”

But it’s far too late.

I start running for the stairs just as Judy’s head disappears into Her mouth. The sound of my footfalls follows me in a spiral, echoing

against the concrete. My breath comes in panicked drags and my visions blurs.



The street is empty when I sprint across it. There is nobody in this rain which beats against the pavement, dredging up the sour smell of the city. I run past the smashed car with its blaring alarm and nearly slam into someone coming out of Judy's building.

"Hey, do you know—"

Their voice vanishes into the night as I enter the lobby.

Only when I am confronted with the alarmed face of the doorman do I realize that I'm not sure which floor Judy lives on. I dash into the elevator anyway, slamming on the top floor button just as the doorman starts toward me.

"Hey!"

The doors slide shut and I sag, shivering, against the mirrored wall. My pathetic face is reflected back at me a dozen times over. I haven't combed my hair. I am soaked to the bone. I am wearing yesterday's clothes and I haven't taken a shower since my Return. Tinny muzak plays over the speakers as the elevator dings out the floor numbers. I close my eyes and try to force my panicked brain to recall what I saw from the garage roof.

Three floors from the top. Second window on the left.

I don't know what I am going to do if I find Her, for at this point, I am sure that it is Her. All I know is that I can't do nothing.

I tap on the button third from the top and wait. The doorman has probably already called the police, which is good. If they get here soon, then they can rescue us all from the pit of the Heliotrope's belly, for I am sure that even if I do manage to stall Her, she will simply swallow me along with Judy and Jill.

The elevator dings and the doors open into a hall that smells of dust and mildew. I step onto the faded red carpet as the doors slide shut, looking left and right.

If Judy's apartment was second on the left facing the elevator, then it was to the right. The carpet devours the sound of my footsteps as I walk on heavy legs deeper and deeper into the unfamiliar landscape. The closer I get to the end of the hall, the more it seems to

stretch. My heart is beating so hard that I can feel it in my throat. When I reach the second door, I pause and listen.

I hear the sound of heavy breathing.

She is standing on the other side of the door. She is waiting for me to open it.

I take an involuntary step back. I'm starting to get dizzy. I can smell her perfume, made from the same heliotropes she leaves as her calling card, and its sweetness sickens me to my core.

I could run. I could wait for the police. If I was the only one in danger, then I would never have had the guts to confront my tormenter, but Judy… for all of the qualms that I had ever had with Judy, she did not deserve this. She deserves to live a normal, happy life with her girlfriend, free from me and my bullshit.

My palm is sweating as I raise my knuckles to the door. I knock three times and the lock clicks. The door does not open so, sucking in a breath, I open it.

And there She is.

Her overcoat is unbuttoned, Her stomach spilling out against the fabric of a black tank top stretched to its limits. The shape of Judy's back fits snugly between Her breasts, Jill cradled in her arms, a bulge within a bulge. I cannot see Her eyes beneath the brim of Her hat, but I can see Her mouth drawn back in a smile. Her lips are huge and red. The familiar smell of Her breath washes over me as I stand, paralyzed before Her.

She's holding something. She hands it to me.

A bouquet of heliotropes.

"T-the police are on their way," I say.

The woman cocks Her head. Her fingers drum idly against her stomach, dragging along the sumptuous flesh beneath the fabric. A slow gurgle makes Her grin. She takes a step toward me.

"Let her go," I say.

Heat radiates from Her stomach. It's almost touching me.

"Let her go," I repeat. "She has nothing to do with this."

Slowly, the woman shakes Her head. I still can’t see Her eyes beneath the hat.



“Please! You can eat me all you want! I probably deserve it! But Judy? We hadn’t even spoken in a month before *you* left flowers at her door. She has *nothing* to do with you, or me, or whatever this fucked up game it is that we’re playing. Let her go.”

The woman pulls something from the pocket of Her overcoat. It’s a cell phone. Judy’s cell phone. The screen is open to her messages app. The woman hands me the phone and, feeling cold, I look at it.

“It’s a message from… my mom,” I say. My voice sounds distant, even to my ears. “Asking her to check up on me. She says that I’ve been using lots of Returns and that she’s concerned that I’m… that I’m… hurting myself.”

I might as well be walking on the moon. Everything—the apartment, the woman, the cell phone—it all falls away leaving me floating in space. I knew on some level that my parents could see the bill, but I guessed… I supposed that I would explain the situation to them at some point. That I wasn’t… that I had never…

My mom had texted Judy. And Judy, despite how poorly I treated her, had agreed to check in on me. The flowers were just a pretext for a wellness visit.

Tears are rolling down my cheeks. I stand there, numb, as the woman walks past me into the hall. She pauses to look at me, but I can’t bring myself to turn, to see Her face. For a moment, I think she is going to speak, but it’s only the muffled voice of Judy inside of Her, calling out for freedom.

5.

The door to the Reformation Center is locked when I arrive.

“Terrance!” I scream. “Terrance, open the door!”

My feet are drenched from running through the flooded streets. I am shivering, but I can’t tell if it’s from the cold or the adrenaline. There’s no movement in the Reformation Center. All I can see is the blinking green light of the Reformer through the high window in the lobby.

“Terrance!”

“Fuck, man, I’m right here.”

I jump, whirling to see the attendant standing behind me. His sunken eyes are dark from lack of sleep and there’s a coffee in his hand from the shop on the corner.

“Don’t usually see you on this side,” Terrance mumbles as he pulls his key from his pocket. I dance from side to side as he unlocks the door. “Usually you’re sliding out of the tank looking… Well, it’s not my place to ask questions.”

I nearly push past him as he saunters into the building. The kiosk is to the left. With shaking hands, I punch in Judy’s phone number.

PING!

Her name shows up on the kiosk.

“Can I pay for someone else’s return?” I ask, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“Of course,” Terrance sighs. He sets the coffee down and sags into his chair behind the desk. There’s an imprint of his body in the cracked leather. “That’s how most people do it, anyhow. Just look up the name and click ‘add credits.’”

I jab the button and wait. The loading wheel turns and turns, tempting me to shake the machine. When She ate me, it took me agonizing hours to digest, but there was no guarantee. Once, She had

belched so hard that I had gone dizzy, and it wasn't until I woke up in the Reformer that I realized that I had suffocated in Her stomach.

A prompt on the screen finally pops up.

>**ADD CREDITS?**

I click it. The screen loads for another minute, then asks for my account number. I punch it in, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

The screen flashes red.

Account Closed.

I stare. That can't be right. I enter the account number again, taking the time to check every digit. The loading wheel turns, only for the same message to appear on the screen. Account closed.

"Terrance," I say, trying to keep my voice even. "Could you look up my account for me?"

Terrance sighs and sets down his coffee.

"Number?" he asks.

I give it to him and he begins to type it into the ancient logging system. For the first time since I was a child, I close my eyes and whisper a prayer. The clacking of keys seems to go on endlessly, until, with another, heavy sigh, Terrance turns in his chair.

"The account was closed yesterday," he says. "Seems like your parents cut you off."

No, no, no, no, no, no, no….

"That, um, can't be right," I say. My vision swims. "It was open… they wouldn't…"

"I suggest you call them," I hear Terrance say, but my phone is already in my hand and I am running out into the street.

The line rings twice before my mother picks up. I didn't even notice until I dialed that it is two in the morning.

"Mom," I say.

"Cory? Honey? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

There's a lump in my throat. I swallow hard, taking a shuddering breath.

“Mom, there’s been a… there’s been a mistake at the Reformation Center. They said that my account was closed yesterday.”

Silence on the other line.

A heavy sigh.

“Your father and I—”

“It’s not that,” I say, cutting her off. I’m aware that I sound desperate, but I *am* desperate. She needs to hear me. She needs to understand. “I haven’t been Thunking. I would never…”

My mother is crying. I can hear my dad grumble, his voice gravelly from sleep.

“Who is that?” he asks.

“Cory.”

“Is he asking for money?”

The audio goes silent. My mom’s put her phone on mute. I want to scream into the night, but all that will do is draw attention to myself. I feel like I’m melting. I feel like I’m floating away.

“Honey.”

The audio cuts back in.

“Your father and I have decided that… The thing is that we’ve been going to therapy and our therapist says—”

“I say,” my father snorts, followed by another mute, then my mother again.

“*Our therapist says* that it is unhealthy to enable… I mean, after the first time that we cut off the account… to enable it again…”

“You’re not enabling me!” I shout. “I haven’t done anything! There’s this woman, this *stalker*, that’s been fucking eating me and now she’s swallowed Judy and I need you to reactivate the account or she’s *going to die!*”

Another silence, this one unmuted.

“Honey… have you taken anything tonight?”

I throw my phone into the overflowing gutter and scream. Somewhere, in an apartment far above, a light flicks on.

I run back into the Reformation Center.

Terrance watches me nervously as I punch my name into the kiosk. My face pops up right away, along with my credits.

>**1 CREDIT REMAINING**

"Terrance," I say, startling him. "Is there any way to transfer a credit from myself to someone else."

"I'm not sure," he said, scratching his curly hair. "I could—"

"Please!"

He rolls his eyes, but then he bends and retrieves a dusty manual from beneath his desk. The thing is a behemoth of laminated pages. Terrance opens to the glossary and thumbs through it as I pace.

"Transfers… transfers… oh yes, here it is! Tap the credit in your account and then put your thumb on the scanner. It will ask you who you want to transfer the credit to, yada yada, just click yes."

I blaze through the prompts. When it asks if I want to transfer my final credit to Judy Monroe, I click yes with no hesitation.

This is my fault. This is all my fault.

>**CREDIT TRANSFERED**

I stare dumbly at the screen. Is that… it? Judy's name now shows a credit in her account, but there's no way to know when she'll use it or *if* she'll use it. If she's already been digested—

A green light flicks on in the room behind the desk. The familiar whir of a Reformer rumbles through the doorway.

"Hey!" Terrance yells as I push open the door. "You can't go in there!"

Either he called the police or he didn't care enough to stop me, because he doesn't join me in the room. One of the pods is glowing, the glass fogged from the heat of the printing. I cannot see the figure inside, only the outline of their body as the machine works from the feet up, reproducing them onto white, marble slab.

"Please," I whisper, touching the glass. "Please."

My heart begins to sink as I see the torso take shape. The woman inside of the pod is huskier than Judy, more akin to how she used to

look than the Amazonian she is now. It's going to take a few minutes for the machine to do its job and even longer for whoever is in the pod to regain consciousness. I sit with my legs against my chest, waiting to see if my ex is alive. All of the shivering has left me exhausted.

"Please…"

6.

The machine clicks. I open my eyes, jolting awake to the sound of the glass lifting away from the marble.

"Judy?" I ask.

Whoever is in the pod doesn't answer. The only sound is the faint, mechanical whir of the Reformer powering down and the snores coming from the lobby.

Then there's a sob.

I stand up. There's a woman, naked, curled up in the middle of the pod. She's laying on her side with her back toward me, but through the tangle of brown hair draped across her spine, I see the tiny tattoo of a hummingbird on her left shoulder. Judy continues to cry as I put my hand on her hip.

"Judy," I say. "Hey, it's okay. You're—"

I stop myself right before saying *'alive'*, because despite how obvious it should have been, I just now realize why she's sobbing her heart out.

And why she's returned to her previous girth.

"Jill," Judy sobs. "Jill."

My hand is frozen on Judy's hip. Her stomach is a bulbous mass overflowing out onto the marble slab. All of the weight that she'd spent the last year working off hangs heavy on her figure, reminding me of when we first started dating the night that I had approached her in a bar. And it all came from Jill.

"How?" I ask.

It's a stupid, stupid question. So stupid, in fact, that Judy looks over her shoulder to glare at me. Her eyes are red. All of the makeup that she usually wears is gone, leaving her pale and fragile.

"How?" she hisses. "*How*?!"

I back away. Judy sits up, swinging her legs over the edge of the table. Her anger seems to have given her the will to move, which is

something, but I've known Judy long enough to take another three steps toward the locker room. Her stomach jiggles as she marches toward me. I blush at the sight of her boobs, even as she winds up a punch.

"Why were you watching me?" Judy asks. Her fist is still locked and loaded, ready to rock my shit. "What were you doing on the roof? Who was that woman? What the fuck *happened*, Cory?"

Her shouting has woken up Terrance. He sticks his head into the room, sees us, then ducks out. Not his business. Not when his shift is about to end.

"The flowers," I blurt. "I was worried because of the flowers."

Judy lowers her fist.

"What?"

I take a deep breath and explain what has been happening to me for the last month of my life. I start from the beginning and leave nothing out, not even the bridge, and Judy listens silently, folding her arms across her chest. Once I am finished, she raises a hand.

"So what you're saying is that you've been stalked and eaten for a period of a *month* by a total stranger and in all of that time, you've told absolutely *nobody*—not even the police—that this was happening to you?"

I nod.

"Idiot!"

She really does hit me then, punching me square in the stomach hard enough to knock me double. I gag, gasping for air, as she pulls me up by my shirt collar. Then she wraps her arms around me and holds me tight. Hot tears fall on the back of my neck.

"Idiot," she says. "We could have helped you."

Now I feel the tears welling in my eyes. How long has it been since I've been hugged? How long has it been since somebody has cried over me? I don't… I don't…

"I don't deserve it," I say. "Your help."

Judy gives me a shake.

“Of fucking course you do, you selfish dipshit. Even if I didn’t care about you, even if I didn’t *know you at all*, I would still help you. This is so fucked up, Cory. You are being *stalked* and *murdered*. No wonder your mom was freaked out about all of those Returns. Jesus!”

I’m shaking so hard that Judy holds me at arm’s length. Only then does she look down at her naked body and blush.

“I have a locker here,” I say. “You can borrow some clothes.”

“Right,” Judy says. “Let me get dressed and we’ll go back to your apartment. I don’t think I want to go back to mine right now.”

***

Judy doesn’t talk about it on the way back to my apartment, but her hands hover over the bottom of my too-small shirt, under which her stomach hangs. The seams on my shorts strain against her hips and her ass is fully visible, which turns many heads. The doorman lets us in without a word, but even he stares as we make our way into the elevator.

There’s a package on my doorstep, of course, along with a single, black heliotrope.

“This is *fucked*,” Judy yells.

She kicks the wall, putting her foot straight through the cheap plaster. Nobody in the building comes to check on the noise. Everybody knows to stay out of each other’s business.

“Come on,” I say, picking up the box. “I’ll make us some coffee.”

The sense of anti-gravity that I had earlier has worn off. I feel heavy, but not tired. My feet fall strangely on the kitchen tiles as I set the box down on the counter. A roach skitters away when I open the cupboard. There’s a bag of ground coffee there, thankfully sealed.

Judy has retreated to the sofa. It sags beneath her weight, the shredded upholstery groaning as she bundles herself in blankets. She watches me keenly as I clean the coffee machine. I am aware of her,

her presence magnetic. Once the coffee is done, I come and sit across from her. She put the mug to her lip and blanches.

"I know," I say. "It's awful."

"I just burned my lip, jackass."

For some reason that is funny. I laugh. Judy glares sharply at me, her mouth covered with her hand, but between her fingers I see her crack a smile. She sets the mug down on the coffee table.

"I need to sleep," she says.

I murmur my assent, something about going to get a pillow, but I don't move. Judy's foot is resting on my ankle. This position, this pattern is so familiar, yet I know that it is imbued with tragedy. For all of the catharsis I felt tonight, Judy has been cursed with grief. I don't know how to comfort her; where to even start.

"I'm sorry," I say. "For everything."

Judy shakes her head. Over the years, I have apologized to her a hundred times, but now, when I finally mean it, the words are impotent. She wraps the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

For a while she doesn't speak. She keeps opening her mouth, looking up at the ceiling. Her brown hair frames her face, her freckles. I remember kissing those freckles as we giggled on her bed. The memory only fills me with guilt for Jill. I sit in the silence, a penitent waiting for penance. When she finally talks, it's to the ceiling.

"I met Jill at the gym. I was doing squats, feeling unattractive, when she came up behind me. I thought she was going to ask when I'd be finished and I had just started and I was already annoyed at being stared at, so I snapped at her. I asked her what the fuck she wanted and she said that she didn't know how to squat. She has a bad back. Cory, I felt like such an asshole.

"We started talking after that. Gym stuff, then life stuff. She wanted to be a dancer, but after she hurt her back, she became a receptionist. And she actually likes it! Like, it's kind of the generic dead-end job, right? But she loves… she loved it. She loved people.

“I was guarded from the start. Nobody’s that fucking nice, but she was. And you know what, Cory? I kind of hated it. Whenever she’d go out of her way to open a door for a granny or chase after a lost puppy, I thought: *God, who is she putting on a show for?* I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did. I was working on myself and it was rough and Jill was there for me during all of the ugliness. Only after seven months did I finally realize that maybe, *maybe*, I was a jackass, and then came all of the guilt and self-loathing and… well shit, Cory, you know.”

My vision was getting misty.

I did know.

“But she stuck with me,” Judy continued, wiping her eyes. “She stuck with me and the totally fucked up thing is that as nice as she was, I’m still not sure if I loved her. I mean *fuck*, Cory, she was a saint. It was just… I don’t know, I wanted her to have a *flaw*. I wanted her to get angry at me or throw something or have a *bad fucking hair day*. Something. And then, one day, I mentioned that I might like to try eating her.

“Oh, and that *scared* her, Cory. Not like you. I always thought that you might say yes or dare me one day and I don’t know what would have happened, but Jill was vehemently against it. And I was like a dog with a bone. *This was it,* I thought. *This was the flaw.* So I begged and wheedled and insinuated and she finally said yes and I jumped at the opportunity.

“It was… so hot having her inside of me. I mean, mind-numbingly hot. I came just from the taste of her and that was just the start. And she was… she was smiling, but I could tell she was nervous, and *that* was hot.

“I wasn’t going to digest her.”

Judy’s voice breaks. She turns her head toward the kitchen, shoulders heaving, and I sit there, unable to move, unable to provide her with even a modicum of comfort. What could I even say?

“She waited for me to digest her.”



“I wasn’t going to digest her...”

Anger levels Judy’s voice.

“She *waited* for me to digest her before She did me in. I could feel Jill… squirming. She didn’t know what was happening. I was yelling and it was dark and wet and claustrophobic and she had no clue what was happening. She was panicking because I was panicking and her squirms felt *so fucking good, Cory.* And I could feel my stomach filling, becoming heavier, and I knew that it was acid and Jill was pounding and I came. ***FUCK!***”

She slams her fist down so hard on the side of the couch that I hear a crunch. Thankfully it’s the shitty couch and not Judy’s hand. I

yelp as she grabs me by the front of my shirt, lunging across the couch as her warm breath breaks over my nose.

"Am I a bad person, Cory?"

I shake my head. Judy is trembling, her whole body shaking beneath the blankets. I reach out to her and place my hands on her shoulders. It does not stop the trembling, but it helps.

"You didn't mean to digest her," I say. "This is not your fault."

Useless words.

Empty words.

I summon my courage.

"Judy," I say, pulling her back just enough so that I can look her in the eyes. "Everything that you said about Jill? About her being too nice, too put-together, too sincere? Everything that you said about Jill, I've thought about you."

Judy snorts.

"Fuck you, Cory."

"I'm serious," I say so forcefully that it startles her. "I'm a fucking mess, Judy, you know that. When we started dating, I was a total asshole and yet you were so fucking patient with me right until the end. I didn't appreciate it then, but I appreciated it later. You're a good person, Judy, because of your actions. Having fucked-up thoughts doesn't make you a bad person."

Judy stares at me for so long that I start to get embarrassed. Only as I am about to pull away does she lean forward and kiss my cheek.

"Thanks," she says. "For everything."

We stay there for a moment, foreheads touching, listening to the din of the apartment complex. Everything feels far away from us now, but She is still out there, maybe closer than we think. When Judy pulls away, she lets the blankets fall and I can't help but sneak a glance at her cleavage.

For old times' sake.

"I always assumed you dated me because I was fat," Judy says, picking up her coffee. The joviality of her voice is forced, but

appreciated. I wipe my own eyes and lean back on the couch. “Maybe because you thought a fat girl would put up with your bullshit.”

“My reason is just as shallow,” I admit.

“Oh?”

“I thought you were hot.”

Judy chokes on her coffee. I pat her back, ignoring the spills on the carpet. They only add to the tapestry of stains.

“Fuck you,” Judy coughs. “You did not.”

“I did. I do.”

“You think *this* is hot?”

She heaves herself up into the deep cushions and squeezes her belly. Soft skin jiggles between her fingers, slick with a tantalizing sheen of sweat.

“Sure.”

“Liar.”

But she doesn’t put her stomach away. Some of her old posture has returned as well. The Judy that I dated was always hunched, like she was expecting a blow from above, but this Judy was strong and confident. I found that I like this version better, chub and all.

However morbidly acquired.

“Some guys are into that,” I insist.

“Chubby chasers,” Judy counters. “Men who fetishize fat women.”

“Can’t someone be attracted to something without ‘fetishizing’ it? Like, everyone has their preferences. I just happen to like girls that look like my Kindergarten teacher.”

“You’re so gross. Is that why you dumped me? Because I was losing weight?”

“Honest answer?”

Judy folds her arms across her chest and raises an eyebrow. I know that it’s a trap, but fuck it, I’m in a confessional mood.

“You were bettering yourself,” I say. “We were both… kind of in a fucked-up place when we started dating. We bonded over parental

trauma and stories about school bullies and we were both stuck. But then you began to get unstuck and I… didn't."

"Cory…"

"I'm not saying this to be self-pitying," I hastily amend. "Or to make excuses. I was super proud of you when you decided to shed the weight, but I was also… I don't think jealous is the right word? Maybe self-pitying *is* the correct term in this context. All that I'm trying to say is that you have always, *always* been beautiful to me, and none of it was your fault whatsoever. Oh shit, Judy, I'm sorry."

She's crying again. I panic, looking around for tissues, but there's only a pile of dirty clothes on the floor. I'm about to take off my own shirt to hand to her when I see that she's smiling. She's crying and smiling.

"You're such a dumbass," she choke-laughs. "Such a fucking dumbass."

Right, she's tired. Slap happy. Returning is a drain on both the physical and the mental reserves and we both should get some sleep. I stand up to get her a blanket and she grabs my arm.

"Where are you going?"

"Just getting you a blanket," I say.

She nods, but her eyes are glazed over.

"Okay," she says, "but Cory?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you sleep out here tonight?"

I tell her that I will and return a few minutes later with blankets, sheets, and an extra toothbrush that I'd kept in my closet. Judy uses the bathroom while I make up the couch. I try to ignore the number of flushes.

When Judy comes back into the living room, she's lumbering like a bear. I guide her to the couch and she lets me, grunting as I pull the blankets to her chin. Again, when I go to leave, she grabs my arm.

"I'm just moving to the chair," I say.

She shakes her head sleepily. I sigh as she scoots back, giving me just enough room to lie down beside her.

"Fine," I say.

The smell of her fills my lungs. Pulling up the blanket, I lie down on the musty cushions. Her heat envelopes mine as she pulls the blanket back up. For a while, only my hip touches her thigh, but then she throws her arms and her leg over me and holds me close.

I ignore the warmth in my chest. I ignore the fluttering and the spreading tingles and focus on her breathing, soft and steady. The kitchen light is still on, buzzing faintly. For the first time since moving to this apartment, I feel myself relaxing, my eyelids fluttering, safe in Judy's arms.

Then she kisses my cheek.

It's a tiny peck, barely perceptible, but it fills my body with static. Her eyes are closed when I open mine, so for a second, I convince myself that I imagined it.

She kisses me again when I close my eyes. Her mouth grazes the corner of my lips.

"Are you awake?"

"Mmhmm."

"Did you mean what you said earlier?"

"About?"

Her body shifts slightly on top of me so that her stomach encroaches upon my hips. Its buttery weight grinds against my abdomen, her leg sliding between mine. If I move, if I turn to look at her, our lips will meet.

"Finding this attractive."

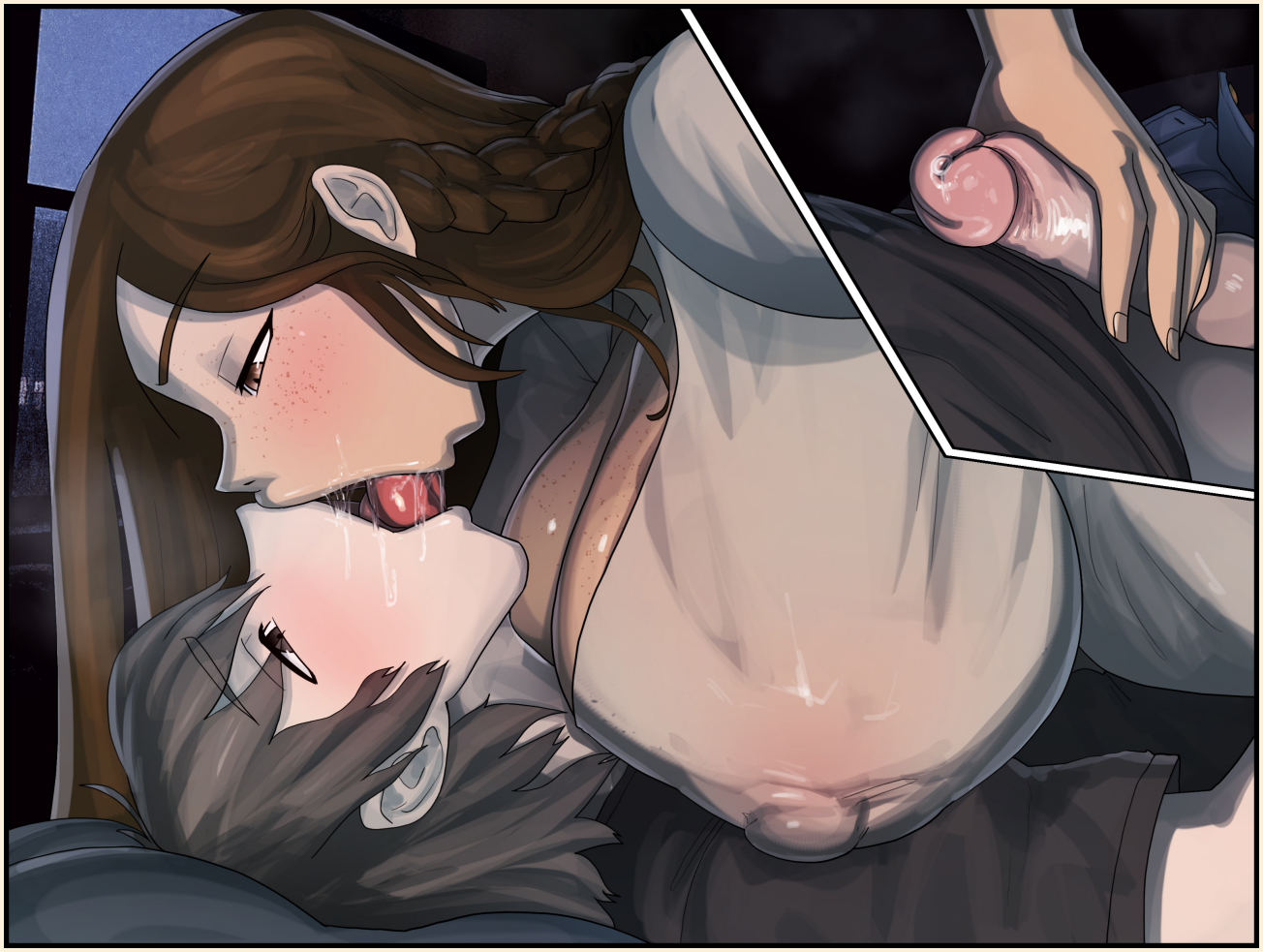
Judy lets her stomach thump down on me.

"Judy…"

Up until this point, I have been able to suppress my hunger for her. Even now, if I squeeze my eyes shut hard enough, I can resist the appetite that I am on the verge of gratifying, but then Judy pushes her knee up between my legs and I feel the hard tip of her nipple press

into my arm and I realize that I have been starving since the day we broke up.

Our first kiss connects, exploratory, then desperate as I turn into her and wrap my arm around her waist. Someone—Jill—has taught her in the last year and they've taught her well.



Judy quickly pins me. I lose ground beneath her kisses, battered into the cushion where she breaks my defenses. I feel the incursion of her tongue and welcome it, letting her fill me as she weaves her fingers through mine.

Grrrggllrrrrrt…

The rumble of her stomach breaks us apart. Judy pulls away, panting, her neck and cheeks red, but I slide my fingers down to cup her stomach in my palm and press until I feel it gurgle. Judy moans.

"Still hungry?" I ask.

I freeze, the implication hanging in the air, but Judy, ever magnanimous, just shakes her head and brushes her hair over her shoulder.

"I really am going to eat you, Cory."

From then on, I score no points. I win no battles. When Judy's lips return to my neck, she draws the moan I took from her with interest and then some, leaving me panting, only to cover my mouth with her own. Our shirts come off and the heat of her becomes the heat of me and her body is growing, spreading, but really she is simply lifting herself up to hover over my face; her huge, jiggling stomach presenting itself for inspection.

I trace the freckles of it with my tongue. Each ravenous swirl indents the skin until it glistens against my lips. I push deeper into the sweltering depths, her stomach bending, quivering, until Judy puts her full weight on me and I am buried.

I don't stop kissing her, forcing my lips into that gurgling mass. My hips buck against her knee and my cock, already sensitive, twitches after each eager vibration. I know that I am pushing my face into what is left of Jill, but the sound of Judy's moans trades guilt for lust and I grab her pudgy sides and squeeze.

"Eep!"

Judy pulls away from me. She's kneeling between my arms and my ribs, panting, the bottom of her stomach glazed by my kisses. I had forgotten how ticklish she was. Before I can open my mouth to apologize, she slides her hips forward.

The crotch of my borrowed shorts are soaked through with her. She grinds herself against my mouth, quivering slightly with every brush of my lips. My nose is pressed into the smell of her and I've missed it so much that I nearly tear at the fabric with my teeth, whimpering as she slowly works the waistband of the shorts over her enlarged ass. Standing, she slips them off. I see her in her full glory—every supple inch of her—and then she comes back down and I am smothered in her, lapping like a dog.

I use no techniques, no subtlety. The only impression that I hope to give is that I need her and she responds in kind, slipping her fingers beneath my head to pull me tight against her folds. Juices pour down my chin as I bring her to a shuddering climax, then another. When she releases me, I gasp. Her hand slides down to my cock and squeezes it through my pants.

"Judy!"

That gets a grin.

"Remember when you moaned the wrong name during sex?" Judy asks, kneading me. I buck into her palm, moments from orgasm. "Seems like you have no problem remembering now."

"I did that… to annoy you…"

"Right."

She squeezes harder. I nearly lose consciousness.

"You're about to burst, aren't you," Judy says. "Yeah, you are. Your left leg is twitching like a rabbit's. If I ride you now, you'll blow the second I slip you in, and it's been a while since I've been on birth control. Got any condoms?"

I shake my head. I do, but I have no clue where they are and her hand grip is driving me crazy. Judy seems to think for a moment, then slides down my pants. My cock pops into her warm palm. It twitches as she gives it one last squeeze.

Then she stands up and turns around.

"See this?" she says, pointing at her ass. "Just this once, I'm going to let you cum in here."

I'm dreaming. I actually fell asleep in Judy's arms and this is all a dream. Or maybe She ate me and I'm reforming, my consciousness playing out this erotic scenario as some kind of coping mechanism. But when Judy lowers herself again onto my hips and guides my cock between her cheeks, I know that I am not dreaming. I nearly ruin it for myself as a spurt of precum leaks into her fist. She rubs it against her hole.

"Ready?" Judy asks.



I nod.
“Alright. One… two… *three!*”

She slides me into her with a wet *shluck.* I am barely inside of her tight, molten bowels when I blow my load, filling her ass with my seed.

As I spasm beneath her, Judy leans forward. Her face is shadowed; her tits and stomach hogging the light. She clenches around my cock so that I am trapped inside of her, and I shudder, unable to speak.

"This means nothing," she says.

I nod.

"Once I kill that bitch, *this* is over, you hear me?"

She clenches again and a guttural sound escapes my throat. If she holds me inside of her long enough, I am going to get hard again. She's gyrating her hips as if she's hoping to make it happen.

"But I'm going to need your help."

I'm stiffening.

"*You're* going to need *my* help."

I nod again, hitting my head against the bottom of her stomach.

"That's all this is."

I'm hard in her ass. She's riding me.

"Us helping each other."

I prick again.

"Until *She* is dead."

I cum.

7.

I wake up in Judy's arms.

Sunlight sprinkles through the window. I watch the dots of it play against the cracks in the ceiling as Judy's chest rises and falls against my arm. My pelvis aches from all of the *helping* we did for each other last night.

For a moment I allow myself to fantasize. The last year of my life never happened. Judy and I never broke up. I never went to the bridge and there is not a psychopath that keeps breaking into my house and eating me. I am content.

But I wasn't content then, was I?

I rub my eyes with the heel of my palm. The small shift causes Judy to snuffle, ever the light sleeper. She mumbles something into my neck that sounds suspiciously like "Jill". I wait for a pang of jealousy that never comes.

There's something missing that I cannot place. Noticing the absence of something old is always harder than noticing the presence of something new. It takes me a while to realize that, for the first time in possibly months, I have gotten a full night of sleep. The low-hanging exhaustion that normally clouds my brain has lifted, leaving me room to think.

To think about Judy.

To think about Her.

I scan as much of the room as I can without craning my neck. She might have been here last night, but I cannot sense Her lingering scent. Is She lying in wait in the hallway to finish off Judy? Might She disappear for a day, a month, a year, only to pop up again in the some distant future to haunt me all over again?

If only I could see her face, I could avoid her, but no, that's a lie. Because even if I do see her face, all it will allow me to do is confront her, and how am I supposed to confront her? I don't know what she

wants. I don't know why she chose me. Even if Judy does somehow kill her, there is no guarantee that she won't Return.

And Judy…

Last night was not nothing, no matter how many times she had made me say the phrase. Maybe it was too soon and the feelings were too raw, but if I am to be honest with myself, it felt *nice*. It would be selfish of me to ask Judy for anything at this point. I am the reason she just lost her girlfriend, after all, and if I am to be even more *brutally* honest with myself, one good night does not make a trend. The darkness will return, and Her shortly after.

But…

"'Morning."

Judy's morning hair makes her look like a mop. I smile as I brush the stray curls over her ear, though I have the good sense not to kiss her, as much as I want to.

"Good morning," I say. "Want breakfast?"

"Mmm."

"We'll have to go and get it. I've got nothing in the apartment. And you're paying."

"You suck," Judy groans as she stretches.

***

The silence that hangs over us on the way to the diner is less awkward than I expected. After feeding Guinevere and making sure that She didn't visit us in the night, we stumble down the stairs arm in arm, sharing the one umbrella I could find. It began to drizzle shortly after we woke up and has continued to drizzle ever since. The warm glow of the diner reflects in deep, garbage-filled puddles.

"Maybe we should get out of the city," I say as we slide into a booth. The table is sticky and Judy wipes it with the sleeves of my sweater. At least I found a pair of sweatpants that were big enough to fit her.

“And do what?” Judy asks, irritated. “Hide?”

“I meant in general.”

Judy shakes her head, but doesn’t disagree. A waiter comes and takes our orders in a bored monotone. We are the only patrons in the diner.

“We have to find Her,” Judy says when the waiter leaves. She clenches her fists. “We have to find Her today.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

She hisses the words loud enough to startle the waiter. He throws a withering look over his shoulder as he continues to converse with the waitress behind the counter. I have no clue if he’s put in our order, nor does he look like he’s returning with our coffee anytime soon.

“I figured you would have some idea,” Judy says. “Being an expert and all.”

I shrug. That’s fair. I stare out the window at the people passing in raincoats, keeping their heads low. Any of them could be Her.

“I wonder,” I say without looking up. “If she knows that I used my last Return.”

“What?”

A woman with an umbrella stopped on the opposite side of the street. My heart skipped as she turned toward the diner, but she was only hailing a taxi. Judy was waiting for me to finish the thought.

“I mean she always seems to know,” I say, tearing my eyes away from the window. “That I have Returns.”

“I’m going to call your parents and get them to reactivate the account,” Judy says, reaching for her pockets, then stopping. “Do you have my phone?”

“No.”

“Can I use your phone?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Chucked it in the gutter.”

“Cory, what the fuck?”

“Judy, listen to me for a second!”

Judy sits back and crosses her arms. My outburst is enough to remind our waiter of our existence. He comes back with a pot of coffee and two mugs, then recedes into the kitchen. I pour myself a mug, aware that Judy is glaring at me as I douse it in creamer.

“Okay,” I say, “so—”

I outline my plan in halting increments. Judy listens, her eyebrows raising with every utterance, but she stays silent until I am finished. By then, our food has arrived. It sits untouched on the dirty table, along with our empty coffee mugs.

“That’s insane,” she says once I stop talking.

“Uh huh.”

“You could die.”

“Uh huh.”

“I mean like actually fucking die. You have no Returns left and if you think that I can pay for one on my salary, you’re out of your—”

“Judy.”

“Cory,” she snaps back. “It’s too fucking risky! And I don’t even know if I can *do* what you’re asking me to do. If this backfires, we are *fucked*.”

“I know.”

Judy throws her hands in the air and leaves them there. I have seen the expression on her face a hundred times before, and yet I have never had such affection for that look of complete exasperation. She lowers her hands into her lap and clears her throat.

“Where would we even do it?” she asks.

***

The park is a block away from Judy’s apartment. It’s still raining when we arrive, mud running in rivulets down the sidewalk to pool in

the clogged storm drain. A mist has started to rise from the warm earth, turning the sparse pedestrians into fleeting phantoms.

"Twenty minutes," Judy says as I push open the rusted gate. There is a pile of woodchips in the center of the park that provides safe harbor from the rain. A picnic bench, long gone, used to sit beneath the rusted metal awning that covers the woodchips, but now it's just a patch of land. A lone swing creeks in the breeze. "You get twenty minutes and if she doesn't show, then I'm pulling you out."

I nod, scanning our surroundings. No women in umbrellas appear in the mist, but that doesn't mean that she isn't out there, watching.

She's always watching.

"Cory."

Judy is bouncing on the balls of her feet. I haven't seen her look this nervous since she went in to get her wisdom teeth pulled.

"She made you digest your girlfriend, Judy," I say. "I don't think She'll ever stop unless we do this."

Judy brushes a wet strand of hair from her face. Her jaw is set. Even in my oversized sweatshirt, I can see the band of fat Jill left on her stomach. She knows that we can't go to the police.

"You're assuming a lot," Judy says.

"I know Her."

"She's a fucking psychopath, Cory. You don't know Her."

"I know Her, Judy."

For a while, there's only the sound of rain pinging on the aluminum awning. From down the street, a pair of headlights vanishes into the mist.

"Is this because of last night?"

I look up at Judy. She's frowning, but there's a wrinkle in her brow. She's worried about me. For once, it doesn't sting, nor does what follows.

"No," I say. "Last night was nice, Judy, but I know that I was just a warm body. I'm not doing this to punish you. I really think that

it's our only chance of catching Her and until we do, nobody that I care about is safe."

Suddenly she is there and I am in her arms and she is holding me close to her, her heartbeat solid against my chest. The hug is affectionate, but not romantic. When we break apart, I know that we are over.

"My, how you've grown," she says.

"Not as much as you," I say, poking her belly.

"God, you're such an asshole. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Judy holds me at arms length. I stare up into her eyes and I consider what might come next if this succeeds. Will I go back to college? Make up with my parents? Join a fucking pickle ball league or something? For so long, I had no future, and now, just as I was about to risk my life, I suddenly have something worth risking.

Life's a bitch sometimes, yeah?

Judy smiles, then opens her mouth wide.

For as many times as I have been swallowed, I have never gotten used to that initial sense of claustrophobia. The frame of the world narrows in reverse. First the awning we are standing under disappears, then the park and the woodchips. Then the street and the houses; blobs of grey on the periphery all yielding to the sweltering pink void of Judy's throat.

As my face passes between her lips, I fight the urge to pull back. Her tongue spreads against my neck, pushing, invading the collar of my shirt to lap against my chest while her hands lock tight around my biceps. Then I am being lifted, gravity steering, and the pink void becomes a pulsing black hole into which I am being fed. All sound cuts the moment her throat closes around my ears. For a moment, there is only muffled thudding, then a:

GULP!

To avoid the panic, I try to imagine what I looked like from the outside. My head, between Judy's breasts. My head, moving slowly



past her ribcage. My head, starting to pad the top of her belly, resting on the pile of fat left behind by her former lover whom she has

digested. I open my eyes and gasp, but there is no air. The confines of her throat ripple around me, guiding me down into the rancid, gurgling pit of Judy's stomach.

GULP! GULP!

GULP!



Just as I am about to pass out, the space beneath my head opens and I catch a breath of noxious air. My lungs scream in gratitude, only to be crushed as Judy feeds them into her throat, the cold of the autumn air replaced by fetid heat.

Judy's stomach is larger than Hers. When my head hits the bottom, the walls do not immediately collapse on me, instead widening to allow my neck and shoulders to join me in the coffee and slime. Only then do they cinch, slathering me in the remains of Judy's breakfast while she continues to pour me into her stomach. When my knees hit her teeth, she leans back. The weight of her body shifts and

carries me with her, heaps of fat contouring to the shape I make against her midsection; the sentient lump I am from the outside.

SLURP!

I have to twist to help her pack me down. My shoulders rub against the walls, my abs flexing to pull my legs into the dark, jiggling space. Judy heaves a sigh of relief, then takes a sharp breath. There's a rumble around me.

BUuuUUUUuuUUURRP!

"Sorry," Judy says, pounding her chest. I can feel every thump as it loosens the air inside of her. "You're bigger than Jill."

"Any sign of Her?" I ask.

"Nothing. Just rain."

There is no comfortable position inside of a stomach. The best that I can do is turn slightly so that my spine and shoulders are mushed into her abdomen while my knees press cramped into her back. When Judy moves, a complex series of muscles clench and unclench, keeping me tucked against her. She belches again, louder this time.

"Oof. Yeah, I'm not sure how long I can keep you in there, but I'm not sure how I'm going to get you out."

That is… a hiccup in the plan for sure. I remain silent so as not to freak out Judy. For this to work, there needs to be a real chance that she'll digest me.

"Are you okay?"

"No need to be nice," I say, leaning my head back against the dripping wall. A glob of something gets on my nose and sizzles there. I wipe it off with my hand, but it barely makes a difference. "We should have pretended to fight before you swallowed me."

"It wouldn't be hard to pretend."

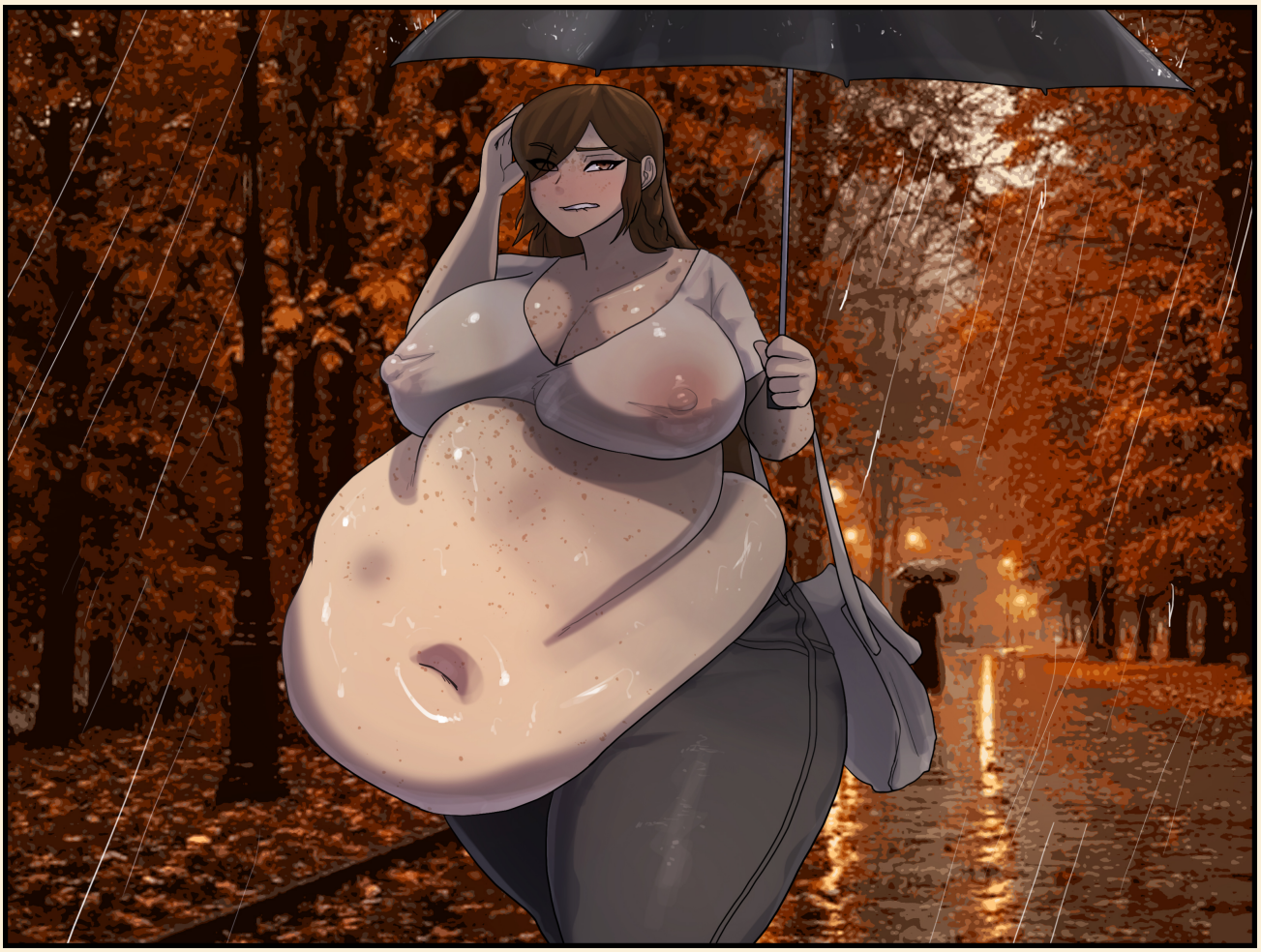
Judy chuckles, but her abdomen is tense and she's bouncing on her feet. Her torso swivels left and right, checking the perimeter.

"Don't look around too much," I say. "In fact, we should probably start walking to your apartment."

"Oh, *'we'* should? You're not lugging around, ***urp***, 200 pounds of meat."

"I'm like, 150."

"God, I hate you."



I wonder how much Judy weighs now. Probably somewhere in the realm of 280. She was tall to begin with, and muscular. How much of Jill is jiggling on her chest and how much of her is floating in the sewers?

I stop thinking about it. It's an exercise in futility.

Judy walks in silence for a block. She's caressing her stomach nervously, constantly turning to check her blind spots. Her abdomen remains clenched, but in the few moments where she relaxes mid-turn, I swing against her hips with a tantalizing clap. On one such occasion, I let out a grunt.

"You better not be touching yourself in there," Judy says.

The muffled plink of the rain stops. I hear the sliding of doors.

“Stop projecting,” I say. “I can tell you’ve already ruined your panties.”

WHUMP!

She slaps her belly. The damage is minimal, but the sound is so vivid that I cover my ears. Her stomach tightens in embarrassment. Someone probably saw her hit herself.

“Alright,” she whispers. “Okay, yeah, I think we were followed.”

The hair on my arms raises. Judy has gone still, looking toward the doors.

“Don’t stare,” I say.

“She’s on the other side of the street. Just a shadow. She’s waiting.”

“Stick to the plan.”

Judy goes stiff. I can tell that she wants to charge through the door, to assault the shadow on the other side of the street, but she is carrying me inside of her and if she gives away that she’s waiting for Her, then She might take drastic measures. To my great relief, Judy turns. I hear the ding of the elevator.

She continues to knead me as the elevator whirs. It’s a nervous tic, but comforting, and I am lulled by her hand on my shoulder. The smell of her is vile (does any stomach smell good?), but it’s also hers and there’s merit to that. Her legs are shaking, whether from fear or arousal, I cannot tell.

“Okay,” she keeps saying. “Okay.”

We get out on her floor, but then slip back into the elevator. Voices are coming down the hall. Judy presses the button a dozen times until the doors close and we go up a level. It’s strange to feel the gravity shifting in her stomach; momentum from the outside pressing me down.

“I’ll take the stairs,” Judy says.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

It takes us nearly five minutes to get down one flight. Judy goes down one stair at a time, wincing as I smack against her hips. Or no, not wincing. Her fingers are twitching against the base of her belly, fingering the waistband of her shorts.

"You can do that when you get to your apartment," I say.

"I am NOT masturbating with you inside of me."

"I wouldn't mind."

That gets me a slap and a severe shaking. When we get to her door, I am thoroughly covered in her juices.

"Still good?" Judy asks as she unlocks her apartment.

"Might have a concussion, but no stinging yet."

"Darn."

With one last, heavy belch, Judy opens the door.

She stiffens.

"What?" I ask, but I know what she's seeing.

The aftermath of her clash with the faceless woman. A couch knocked askew. Upturned chairs. A muddy splotch where She left Her umbrella and a few discarded pieces of clothing, stewed in Her stomach juices.

Judy remains there, trembling, for a full minute. Then she takes a deep breath and closes the door. She does not lock it.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine," Judy says tersely. "Are you ready?"

I press my head against her chest from the inside.

"Let's do this."

8.

She arrives an hour later and when She does, She knocks.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Judy has moved to the couch to conserve her strength. I am doing my best to breathe shadow breaths. When we hear the knock, we both freeze.

"Would any of your neighbors knock?" I ask.

"I don't know any of my neighbors," Judy says.

"The front desk?"

"They'd buzz."

"Okay."

The knocking comes again, louder.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Judy is shivering. She's a full-on black belt in a martial art and she's shivering like a dog. I can't blame her. Even in the pit of her stomach, covered in sweat and slime, I quiver.

Judy is getting up. Judy is moving toward the door.

"She's saying something," Judy whispers.

"What?" I ask.

"'*You have something that belongs to me.*"

The knocking stops the moment Judy reaches the door. Her breathing is ragged. Only an inch and a half of wood separates her from the woman who killed her; who forced her to digest her girlfriend. I have the added protection of organ, muscle, and skin—not that it will do me any good if Judy is swallowed whole.

I tap her stomach three times. That's the signal.

Judy throws open the door.

The plan hinged on a couple of guesses:

The first was that She knew how many Returns I had at any given time.

This turned out to be correct.

- The second was that she would not allow me to die, at least not by my own hand or anyone else's.

This turned out to be correct.

- The third was that she would be unarmed.

Oops.

I know that the plan has gone sour the moment that Judy takes a step back into the room instead of lunging forward. The door closes and locks.

"She's got a gun," Judy whispers.

Her heart is beating so hard that I *feel* it hammering against her ribs. She takes another step backwards, then another. There is a slow shuffle of advancing footsteps. A muted voice.

"You killed my girlfriend," Judy says.

The voice says something else. I push my ear into Judy's stomach, but her heart is too loud and her stomach is too tight. I can only hear Judy's end of the conversation while I am trapped within her, unable to help.

"I don't believe you."

Judy stumbles against something. The carpet, probably. She clenches and I cry out in pain, which is followed by a harsh command.

“I can’t!”

The gun clicks.

All goes still. Judy freezes and chokes back a breath. Her body is rigid, completely paralyzed. Even her stomach slows its clenching; all of the blood in her body spiked into her limbs; the adrenaline trembles urging her to move and yet she can’t and so I, inside of her, tremble with her.

It’s so quiet that I actually hear the woman this time.

“Open your mouth.”

Her voice is low and sensual. She knows that She has the upper hand and there is no ambiguity to Her statement. She intends to pluck me from Judy, after which She will digest me, and if She is cruel, which I know She is, She will Reform me as many times as it takes to satiate Her.

“Do as she says, Judy,” I say.

“No.”

Judy jerks back. I scream, but I hear no gunshot, just the sound of panicked breathing. Judy’s heart is a mere thrum.

“Please, Judy, do as She says.”

The woman is menacing Judy with a gun. There is no winning move. Even if Judy manages to grab the weapon and struggle ensues, it will only result in someone getting shot. We need to concede.

“Judy, please.”

Judy’s right side is tensing again. She’s going to throw a punch. She’s going to throw a punch and she’s going to get shot and it’s going to be all my fault.

I slide my fingers into her stomach and squeeze. The outside of Judy’s belly is sensitive, but the inside? The inside is downright erogenous.

Judy moans.

There’s a choked gurgle as the woman shoves Her arm into Judy’s mouth before she can close it. Judy gulps on instinct,

swallowing Her fingers. By the way that she's shaking, the woman has the gun to Judy's head.



“Easy,” She says. “Easy. It will all be over soon.”

I wait to feel the brush of Her fingers. I wait to feel their familiar grasp as they arrive, cold, in the pit of Judy’s stomach. I wait until they brush me, tensing in satisfaction upon knowing that I am still solid.

And then I do something so incredibly stupid.

I grab Her wrist and yank it.

The woman’s cry is cut short by Judy swallowing Her head. There’s a thud on the carpet—the gun. I grab Her wrist with both hands and yank like I’m trying to pull Her arm out of its socket and this time, Her cry is muffled by smothering flesh as Judy gulps and gulps and gulps while I hold on tight.

“Come on in!” I shout hysterically. “The water is fine!”

First comes a forearm, then an elbow, then a bicep still soft from Her previous meal. Then, pushing through the sphincter that separates the throat from the stomach, comes the face of my tormenter, and with Her, the scent of Her heliotrope perfume.

I expect Her to scream, or to curse, or grab me in return. Her head is upside-down, Her neck still enveloped by the pulsing esophagus. I feel Her breath upon my face, as I’m sure She feels mine, which is why I gasp in shock as Her lips find me in the dark.

She holds the kiss for a second, two seconds, before breaking with a moan.

“There you are,” she says.

The kiss stuns me into silence. I felt a jolt; a shock of chemical familiarity; a crossed wire in the brain. Maybe it is all the time I’ve spent inside of Her, but the recognition of Her physical form is as intimate as a new lover’s. The softness of Her skin, the coldness of it. I want to bury myself in my tormentor.

Her body is joining me in Judy’s stomach. It’s larger than mine; larger than perhaps Judy herself, but Judy is persistent. The smell of Her fills the space as She cups my face in her hands and holds me, allowing the rest of Her chest to spread across mine, then Her

stomach, then Her legs. She continues to hold me as Judy swallows Her feet, tilting them down into her stuffed torso.

Only once She is completely swallowed does my breath return to me, as well as my senses.

Part of me wants to strangle Her. Part of me wants to wrap my hands around Her throat and squeeze until something pops. I remember *every* second of melting inside of Her and how much it fucking hurt, but now that She was here, now that She was stradling me like a lover in Judy's stomach… I couldn't bring myself to do anything but choke out the one thing that I have been wanting to ask since the beginning.

"Why?"

She kisses me again, softer this time. I accept it, even lean into it as she runs her fingers through my hair. She tastes like flowers and spices and something metallic. There's something beneath the smell of heliotropes that is all too familiar, but my addled mind cannot place it. Her lips travel over my cheek, then my neck. She is wearing a dress that had grown sodden in Judy's stomach.

"Why?" I ask again.

Judy is shaking, triumphant. She staggers forward and catches herself on something, flipping me onto my back.

"I did it," she says. "Cory, I did it!"

The plan is for me to evacuate the stomach now. I am supposed to find her esophagus and shove my fist into it, escaping while leaving Her to digest. I can even feel the opening above my head, still stretched from admitting two meals in quick succession.

I don't move.

"Why?" I ask a third time.

She giggles.

"Guess."

Something clicks in my brain: I *know* where that sour, metallic odor comes from. I smell it every time I wake up after Reforming; the scent left behind by the printing coils.

And then the rest of it clicks into place. How She always knew when I had Returns, how She always got my new address. How She knew that I was going to be on the bridge that day and what I intended to do there. It was not my first time Thunking, after all.

"Renata?" I whisper.

Renata, the Reformation Center attendant, was The Heliotrope.

"You—" I say, but before I can finish, Renata removes something from the pocket of her dress and jabs it into Judy's stomach lining. Judy gives a yelp of pain, then drops to her knees. Her stomach hits the floor and rolls to the side as she starts to spasm.

"What did you do?!"

"It's a paralytic," Renata says, stuffing my face into her breasts to keep me from moving. "The spasms will stop soon. Just wait."

After a few seconds, Judy stops moving. Her heartbeat slows, but does not cease, and her chest continues to rise and fall. Renata removes my head from her breasts, but not before planting a kiss on my skull. All around us, Judy's stomach gurgles. The puddle of acids has grown into a small lake, covering our legs and thighs.

"Why!" I cry for the fourth time. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I just gave you what you wanted."

My indignation dies on my tongue. My face is burning and it has nothing to do with the acids.

"No," I say.

"You wanted to die."

"No."

"You wanted to escape."

"I'm not listening."

"You didn't have any credits left."

I shake my head, but the tears are already rolling down my face. Renata wipes them away with her thumb, even though she can't see me. The thought of Judy, paralyzed, hearing this… something that I have never admitted, not even to myself.

“You didn’t have any credits left,” Renata repeats. Her voice is soft with the poison of pity. If I could bury my head in the acids not to hear it, I would, but she was holding me aloft. “That day on the bridge. Your mother had called to discontinue the account.

“I asked her not to. I warned her that you were in a fragile place, but it was her choice to make. I had seen you just that morning, walking past the Center. You always paced in front of the Center before you decided to jump.”

“I wasn’t going to jump,” I say.

That day, that day on the bridge. Cars below, rats scurrying through the garbage. My palms sweating as I let go of the railing. I had just gotten off the phone with my parents. They were cutting me off.

Life was garbage. I was garbage.

And then She came.

“I was terrified,” I say.

“I know,” Renata whispers, stroking my hair.

“I thought I was going to die.”

“I know.”

“That day on the bridge—you paid for my Return?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

Judy’s stomach is churning now. The acids slosh between the cracks and crevices, preparing us for the eventual squeeze. The air was already thin with one person taking up the oxygen. Our time is almost up.

Renata hugs me tight. She gives me a kiss on the cheek. Even knowing who she is, I can’t recall what her face looks like, only that I thought she was kind. How wrong I was, or how right. Certainly her methods were cruel. And I know that she will not give me an answer; that there *is* no answer that could ever satiate me, or explain in adequate terms why, for the last year in time, she has swallowed me over and over again.



“Are we going to Return?” I ask instead. “Are we going to Return this time?

My head is spinning. It feels like I am falling from a great height, falling and falling, with nothing below to catch me. But Renata continues to hold on, even as the acids lap at our necks.

"It depends," she says. "Do you want to?"

I think about my parents, college, and diners. I think about my cat and my shitty apartment. I think about the bills waiting for me in my mailbox. I think about rats and bridges. I think about Judy, and how she smiled before she swallowed me.

I think about the past and I think about the future.

And I answer the question.

Fin.



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