

Vampires and the Undead

Science Fiction and Philosophy | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)



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2 INTRODUCTION: A SHORT HISTORY OF VAMPIRES

Vampire stories have often been used to explore philosophical themes and ideas related to sexual desire (especially outside the "boundaries" recognized by society), gender, religion, the desire for immortality, and the "dark" sides of human psychology. While vampires are generally (though certainly not always) depicted as "evil", they have more frequently been portrayed as "anti-heroes" (who readers/viewers can sympathize with or even admire) than as outright "monsters."

- 1748 - Heinrich August Ossenfelder writes a short German poem, "The Vampire," about a man drinking the blood of a woman who rejected his marriage proposal. He attempts to convince her to abandon Christianity and join his evil ways.
- 1813 to 1820 - The Romantic poet Lord Byron discusses vampires in published and unpublished works. His friend John Polidori writes the first English-language vampire short story ("The Vampyre"), in which the main character is based on the (famously seductive and sexually adventurous) Byron.
- 1872 - The Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu publishes the novel "Carmilla", in which the female title character (a vampire) attempts to seduce and prey on the teenage Laura.
- 1897 - Another Irish author, Bram Stoker, publishes "Dracula," which is hugely popular and helps provide the template for many later vampires. Count Dracula is a noble, Transylvanian vampire who seeks to feed almost exclusively on young women. He is defeated by a group led by the vampire hunter Abraham Van Helsing.
- 1922 - The Hungarian author Ferenc Molnár writes "The Paul Street Boys", in which a group of young boys battle a vampire.
- 1979 - Anne Rice's novel "Interview with the Vampire" is published. It tells the story of Louis, a vampire who is interviewed about his life by a young reporter. The novel is the first in Rice's "The Vampire Chronicles" series, which continues through 2002.
- 1994 . "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (a film and then a television series) debuts. The title character is a teenage girl who is chosen to fight vampires and other supernatural creatures.
- 2000. The first "Twilight" by Stephenie Meyer, is published. The book tells the story of a human girl, Bella, who falls in love with a vampire, Edward.
- 2000-present: There have been many vampire-themed TV shows, books, movies, and video games: *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*, *Castlevania*, *What We Do in the Dark*, and many, many others. More recently, shows about "zombies" (traditionally portrayed very differently from vampires!) have adopted much of the same approach.

2.1 SOME PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

1. What shows/books/movies about vampires do you like (or not like)? Why? Who is your favorite “vampire” (or “undead”) character?
2. What distinguishes vampires from other sorts of science-fiction or fantasy “villains”? Why do you think drinking blood has so frequently been tied to (forbidden forms of) sexual desire?
3. The “classic” vampire needs human blood (and usually, the blood of innocents) to live. What is the ethics of this? Do people have a “right” to the resources they need to live, even if they belong to someone else? What is an “ethical” way for vampires to live?
4. The “classic” vampire also turns people into vampires by drinking their blood. Even under minimal assumptions about the amount of blood they need (say, 3 victims a year), this would quickly lead to a world where *everyone* is a vampire. What are some ways that authors/filmmakers can avoid this seeming “paradox”?
5. How would society, art, politics, etc., change if there were a group of powerful, immortal beings that lived alongside normal humans?
6. Do human beings have moral obligations toward vampires (for example, to avoid torturing them)?
7. How do different cultures view vampires? Are they universally feared and reviled? Are there any cultures that see them in a positive light?
8. What are some of the possible psychological effects of being a vampire? Would they be different from the effects of being a human with a very rare blood disorder?
9. Finally: a set up for what’s coming next: Would YOU agree to become a vampire/undead if it promised “eternal life”? Why or why not?

3 READING: TO BITE OR NOT TO BITE: TWILIGHT, IMMORTALITY, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE¹ (BRENDAN SHEA)

[Note: This was the first thing I ever published (and got paid for) 😊. My guess is that this was at least partially because they couldn’t convince other philosophers to read the whole *Twilight* series! In any case, my hope is that the arguments/ideas here should make sense, even if you’ve never read these books. I’ll be interested to see what you think!]

"I can't always be Lois Lane. I want to be Superman, too." -- Bella Swan

Over the course of the *Twilight* series, Bella gradually succeeds at convincing Edward to turn her into a vampire. When Edward questions her about why she wants to become a vampire, she repeatedly says that it is out of love for him. On one level, she might hope that by becoming a vampire she could better understand Edward's emotions and abilities and could thereby love him more fully. On another level, however, Bella's desire is for immortality and her underlying worry is that her human mortality is in conflict with her life goals. As Bella understands it, much of her life's purpose is provided by the love she feels for Edward, Jacob, and her extended “family.” Insofar as her eventual death will prevent her from being there to protect and guide the people she loves, Bella might think that choosing immortality is the best thing for her to do.

¹ Brendan Shea, “To Bite or Not to Bite: *Twilight*, Immortality, and the Meaning of Life,” in *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality*, ed. Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisniewski (Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 79–93.

But is Bella correct in thinking that there is a conflict between love and mortality? Or is there something about love, and about living a meaningful human life, that actually requires her mortality? These questions, while hypothetical, are of real philosophical interest. After all, Bella's love for others, her reason for living, will strike many of us as resembling our own reasons for living. If she's right in choosing to become a vampire, this suggests that our mortality conflicts with the goals of love, and that this is our misfortune. If she's wrong, it would suggest there's something valuable in our mortality. The questions that confront Bella are specific versions of those that confront us all: What constitutes a meaningful human life? What choices should we make to live such a life?

3.1 MORE LOVE AND DEATH

"Though it seems to men that they live by care for themselves, in truth it is love alone by which they live." -- Leo Tolstoyⁱⁱ

Bella first seriously considers becoming a vampire toward the end of Twilight. James attacks and bites Bella, but Edward prevents Bella from becoming a vampire by sucking the venom out of her wound. When Bella wakes up in the hospital, she criticizes Edward's action, and argues that it would've been better to allow her to become a vampire. Bella worries that her mortality will prevent her from genuinely loving Edward. Her concerns are, in fact, expressions of a classic philosophical question: Is it possible to live a meaningful life if one must eventually cease to exist?

While in the hospital, Bella worries that "I may not die now ... but I'm going to die sometime. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I'm going to get old." Later, after the prom, she tells Edward that "mostly, I dream about being with you forever." Bella's love for Edward is expressed in terms of specific desires. She wants to spend time with Edward, to be physically intimate with him, to protect him from harm, and to help him pursue the things he values. These desires show up in Bella's choice of Edward over Jacob, and in her willingness to take risks on Edward's behalf.

Bella believes that love (in particular for Edward) makes her life meaningful—it gives her goals to pursue. Mortality, unfortunately, seems to guarantee that Bella cannot fulfill these goals. As a human, she will one day die, and when she does, everyone she loves will be left to struggle on without her. Thus, mortality might seem to doom Bella to a meaningless existence—to a life with a purpose she can never achieve.

In his autobiographical book, *My Confession*, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) recounts his own attempts to reconcile the knowledge of his mortality with his desire to live a meaningful life. Like Bella, Tolstoy worries that if we must die, and if there is no afterlife, then all of our lives are necessarily meaningless. He claims that our situation is analogous to that of a traveler clinging to a twig half way down the side of a deep well. There is a beast waiting to eat him at the top of the well and a dragon at the bottom. His death is assured by two mice that are gnawing on the branch. Tolstoy goes on:

But while he is still hanging there he sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, stretches out his tongue and licks them. In the same way I am clinging to the tree of life, knowing full well the dragon of death inevitably awaits me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand how I have fallen into this torment. And I try licking the honey that once consoled me, but it no longer gives me pleasure. The white mouse and the black mouse – day and night – are gnawing at the branch from which I am hanging. I see the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tastes sweet ... and this is no fable but the truth, the truth that is irrefutable and intelligible to everyone.

The problem, for both Bella and Tolstoy, seems to be that the knowledge that we will one day die prevents us from enjoying the pleasures—the honey—that life has to offer.

Tolstoy considers and rejects several potential solutions to this problem. First, we might ignore the knowledge that we must die, and live as if this is not the case. Tolstoy claims this is impossible, and Bella's experience provides some support for his view. Second, we might live for our family and friends. But Tolstoy thinks this must ultimately fail as well—after all, they will die as well, and so any good we can achieve for them is at best temporary. Finally, we might live for the moment, and enjoy the good things with the knowledge that they will one day be gone. To Tolstoy, and to Bella, this seems a bit hollow, insofar as it involves accepting that nothing one does will ever "really" matter. Tolstoy concludes that life can only be meaningful if the soul is in some sense immortal.

But there are a few reasons for thinking that Bella and Tolstoy might be mistaken. First, their view assumes that any worthwhile life must change the world in some permanent way. Bella's actions, however, suggest that she can't really believe this. She risks her life repeatedly to save her mother, to save Edward, and to save her child. These sacrifices would presumably be worthwhile even if she knew that all the people she risked herself for must eventually die. Imagine that the Volturi manage to kill Bella, the werewolves, and the Cullens at the end of the fourth book; more than this, imagine that Alice tells Bella ahead of time that this would happen. While this would certainly have been tragic, it seems unlikely that Bella would suddenly stop thinking it worthwhile to help her loved ones. So perhaps there's hope for a meaningful mortal life after all.

Even if Bella and Tolstoy are correct in their supposition that a meaningful life must leave a permanent mark, there is no reason to think that a mortal person couldn't lead such a life. Mortals can leave permanent marks on the universe in all sorts of ways. They can have children, write books that inspire others, or pursue careers that help others. They can fight for just causes, as the Cullens do against the Volturi, and try to leave the world a better place for those that come after them. Just as being mortal doesn't prevent us from making a positive difference, being immortal doesn't guarantee that we will make one. If you spend your immortal life eating humans (as most vampires do), this would certainly not leave the world better off.

Bella has a motivation for becoming immortal most of us don't have, of course: Edward is already a powerful and elegant immortal, while she is a clumsy mortal. Even if she recognizes the possibility of other people living meaningful mortal lives, she might think that she can't do so. Her love requires that she be able to help Edward in some meaningful way. So, she says "I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships. But it just seems logical ... a man and woman have to be somewhat equal ... as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally. As a mere mortal, Bella will be unable to do anything for Edward he cannot do for himself. Moreover, her lifespan will be only a fraction of his, and thus she risks becoming a mere footnote in the story of his life. Edward recognizes this worry, of course, but initially refuses her request nevertheless. He worries, of course, that Bella will lose her soul in the process.

[Brendan: How would you describe Tolstoy's argument for the claim "without immortality, our lives are meaningless"? Do you think the argument works?]

3.2 ON LOSING ONE'S SOUL

"Therefore death is nothing to us, nothing // That matters at all, since mind we know is mortal" -- Lucretius ⁱⁱⁱ

If Bella's worry is that she can't properly love Edward as a mortal; his worry is the opposite -- he worries that he has already lost his soul, and that making Bella a vampire will strip her of her soul as well. He tells Bella that "I cannot be without you, but I will not destroy your soul" and later pines "If there were any way for me to become human for you — no matter what the price was, I would pay it." Carlisle explains Edward's fear as a fear that God won't accept him, or that there can be no afterlife for him. But there's another worry too. Both Edward and Rosalie seem at times to regret their immortality, feeling that they've lost something

valuable. Just as Bella's worry about death should strike us as plausible, so should this latter pair's ambiguous attitude toward immortality. If our souls are the things (whatever they are) that make us human, the question becomes: could a vampire have one?

Imagine for a moment that you are Carlisle Cullen. It's morning; you spent the sleepless night listening to music and re-reading your favorite book for the thirtieth time. You go downstairs and say goodbye to your family. You're never tired, so there's no point to picking up coffee on the way to work. You only need to hunt for your food once a month or so, so there's no such thing as a family breakfast. It's cold outside, but you don't notice. You'll never get ill from under-dressing, or not washing your hands, or eating the wrong thing; you'll never be out of shape or be tired after a long day's work. There's no need to give your children a ride to school, or to worry when they are not home on time. The last time one was hit by a car, the vehicle was the victim. You go to the hospital where you've worked for the last several years. Some of your colleagues worry they've wasted the prime of life and that they never can get back the long hours they've dedicated to the hospital. Their children have grown up and moved away. Yours, of course, will remain exactly as they've always been.

Outside of the occasional disagreements with rival vampire clans, there is no real danger in the Cullens' lives. This may sound quite pleasant until we consider how inhuman such a life would be. In particular, it's hard to see how such a life could have the same type of meaning or purpose that a well-structured human life does. Bella's love and sacrifice for others gives meaning to her life. Edward's love for Bella can never quite be the same. His choice to stay in Forks, unlike Bella's, does not involve any real sacrifice. Bella's mother will get older and her Phoenix friends will move away to college. Edward's family remains unchanged, and he always has an infinite amount of time to travel and go to college. Likewise, Edward's risks on Bella's behalf are at first relatively trivial. Edward risks nothing when he saves Bella from being hit by a car, or when he scares away the muggers in Port Angeles. For ordinary humans, these acts would be incredible expressions of love; for Edward, they are no more than we ought to expect.

Contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that the relationships and goals that give human lives meaning and value require that these lives have a permanent end. In an article about the philosopher Lucretius, she argues that "for many, if not all, of the elements of human life that we consider the most valuable, the value they have cannot be fully explained without mentioning the circumstances of finite and mortal existence." Nussbaum specifically argues that immortals could not be courageous insofar as courage "consists in a certain way of acting and reacting in the face of death and the danger of death." This same invulnerability also undercuts the ability of immortals to be genuine lovers or friends. To be a genuine lover or friend is to be prepared to make sacrifices, but immortals simply have no way to sacrifice themselves.

Nussbaum suggests that, on reflection, one can see that nearly every human value is incompatible with immortality. As the Volturi "government" shows, there is little need for social justice between vampires, in the sense of creating a society that helps the worst off. Thrift, as demonstrated by the Cullens' enormous wealth, is meaningless to those who have an infinite amount of time to gather money. The same point holds for virtues such as moderation or dedication to a craft. For a person like Edward, who wants to dedicate his life to loving Bella, immortality might thus be a curse rather than a blessing.

Twilight's vampires are not Greek gods, of course, and the Cullens are capable of being killed. The Volturi, in particular, introduce an element of real danger that allows for the Cullens to demonstrate the human virtues of courage, love, and loyalty. But Nussbaum's argument need not entail an absolute distinction between those who are capable of love or courage, and those who aren't. Instead, we should recognize that love and courage come in various degrees, and that the capacity to realize these virtues is linked to one's invulnerability to death or pain. On this view, it is simply more difficult for creatures like vampires to be loving or courageous, though it might not be impossible.

The world described in the Twilight books supports Nussbaum's claim. The vampires are to a large extent as Nussbaum describes the Greek gods -- they pursue their own pleasure, have few close friends, and value preserving their own lives above everything else. They, like other immortals described in literature, simply have no reason to value things like friendship, justice, or courage. In the absence of such human values, they devote their lives to the pursuit of more immediate bodily pleasures. Nussbaum's general point is also supported by Twilight's stories of old werewolves, who chose to age and die normally once the vampiric threat receded.

The Cullens, and in particular Carlisle Cullen, provide a partial answer to Edward's and Nussbaum's worries about immortality. Carlisle, unlike many of the other vampires, does not seem to need the threat of danger to motivate him to acts of love or compassion. In fact, his life seems to be the paradigm of meaningful life. He spends his days working at a hospital and his nights with his family. He has saved many of his family members from premature death and still serves as something like a "father" to his immortal "children." The attraction of Carlisle's "alternative" life-style is clearly recognized by others of his kind—Alice seeks him out, and both Jasper and Emmet seem to take him as a role model. While the actions of the amoral Volturi feed Edward's fear that he has no soul, Carlisle represents the possibility of living a meaningful immortal existence.

The possibility of Carlisle living this meaningful life requires that other people be mortal, however. Carlisle's work in a hospital, for example, only makes sense if there are creatures capable of sickness and death. If everyone in the world were a vampire, there would certainly be far less need for such work. Even Carlisle's role as father depends upon his saving the children from sure death and helping them to adjust to their new life. If everyone were guaranteed immortality, there would simply be no one Carlisle could help. This does not show, of course, that immortals must live meaningless lives. Instead, they must find new values to give structure to their lives. And these new values may be quite different than the type one might expect.

[Brendan: What do you think? If there were immortal beings (such as vampires or demi-gods), how what kinds of values would they have? How would these compare to the values of ordinary humans?]

3.3 I'M BORED...

"I guess things are going to be kind of boring now, aren't they?" -- Jacob Black^{iv}

At the close of Breaking Dawn, Bella and her allies appear to be well on their way to "happily ever after." One might imagine how the years after the close of the book might go. Renesmee grows quickly to adulthood and moves away with Jacob. Charlie and Renee grow old and die; alternatively, they become vampires and move in with the rest of the clan. Bella travels the world, attends a variety of famous colleges, and writes a novel of her own. But what then? What will Bella and Edward do 200 years from now? Or 2000 years from now? Eventually, they will have seen every sight and read every book. If they devote themselves to the task, they may succeed in ridding the world of the Volturi, or even in converting all vampires to their brand of "vegetarianism." There will, at some point, be nothing left to interest them. After thousands of years, they may even lose any need or desire to speak to one another—each knows what the other will say, and without the person saying it. The problem, it seems, is one of boredom.

The philosopher Bernard Williams (1929-2003) considers the problem of boredom by analyzing a character named Elina Makropulos, who appears in a play by Karel Capek. Three hundred years before the play's action begins, Elina drank a potion that gave her immortality. This has not worked out well for Elina, however, since her unending life "has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. Everything is joyless." Williams argues that this is a necessary consequence of her immortality since there is no way a meaningful human life could go on forever. According to Williams, our lives are directed at the fulfillment of certain categorical desires—desires whose fulfillment is not conditioned on our being around to see them fulfilled.

Hunger and lust, for example, are not categorical desires, since we only care about fulfilling such desires on the condition that we are alive to fulfill them. Categorical desires, such as the desire that one's children do well after one dies, are not conditional in this sense and can thus provide a "purpose" to human lives. Elina's problem is that she has fulfilled all the categorical desires that gave her life meaning and can find no new ones to take their place. It is simply that "everything that could happen to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her."

The problem with categorical desires, according to Williams, is that they eventually "dry up." The desire to successfully raise four or five (or ten or twenty) children might well provide meaning and purpose to a person's life. But what happens when one has raised hundreds of children over the course of thousands of years? It seems likely that, over an infinite expanse of time, many of us would find it difficult to hold onto the same attitude of hope and caring that we originally had. Nothing would be new or surprising. The same thing holds true for almost any categorical desire. One can only write so many books or compete in so many sporting events before one ceases to find such activities worthy of pursuit.

Aside from the Cullens, the lives of the Twilight vampires provide examples of a life without categorical desires. The vampires live for the gratification of immediate hungers and lusts; they rarely seem to care about things outside themselves. Even when they "love" one another, as Victoria and James apparently do, this seems to be a mere desire to be in one another's company and not a genuine concern for one another. Moreover, this feature of immortals is not unique to the Twilight saga. Vampires generally are described as self-interested creatures driven by rage, lust, and hunger. The same holds true for the Greek and Roman gods, for Milton's rebellious angels, and for faeries and goblins throughout folklore. Immortals, with rare exceptions such as the Cullens, are regularly described as short-sighted and self-interested, with little interest in the values that shape human life.

[Brendan: What are some categorical desires that give shape to your life? What would your life be like if you didn't have any such desires?]

3.4 IT'S COMPLICATED

"You don't get to be human again, Bella. This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot."

— Alice Cullen^c

Now consider Bella's choice again. She is being offered immortal life with the promise that she can spend it with other immortals she loves. If Williams is right, Bella has every reason to expect that one day (perhaps thousands of years from now) she will have lost her categorical desires and have become bored with her new life. When this day comes, it's unclear whether it will still be Bella making the choice to commit suicide or to continue on—after all, we are defined by those things that truly matter to us. Someone else in Bella's body, someone with the same memories but with none of Bella's categorical desires for the well-being of others wouldn't be recognizable as Bella. Bella has no reason to expect that this creature will make the right choice; in fact, she has every reason to think that it will behave as badly as most vampires with similar desires do. This provides Bella with at least some reason to think that immortality might not be the right choice for her, even if the Volturi and others are perfectly content with it.

In the end, it's impossible to say whether Bella's love for Edward and others will be capable of providing meaning to her immortal existence. If Nussbaum and Williams are correct, however, it will be very difficult for an immortal creature to be capable of anything like a meaningful human life for an indefinite period of time. Our lives are given meaning by the people and causes we choose to sacrifice our time and effort to. Immortals, even in the limited sense in which vampires are immortal, might not have the same capacity to "sacrifice" anything. Even if Bella's love does survive the change unscathed, as it seems to, this ability may

diminish with time, as the sheer repetitiveness of immortal life begins to take its toll. There is simply no way of telling for sure what such a life would be like.

Bella's choice is a version of the choice we all make in deciding how we ought to live our lives. It is tempting to think, as Bella initially seems to, that love is somehow “more than human” or that our mortality is an unfortunate accident that prevents us from fulfilling our duty to love one another. But actually our ability to love is closely tied to our mortality and vulnerability. We can love one another only so far as we are capable of sacrificing ourselves, and only when the person loved can in some way be helped by our sacrifice. Moreover, the desires and purposes that shape our lives may themselves necessarily be limited, incapable of being stretched out over an infinite existence. Bella's choice to become a vampire is not necessarily the wrong one for her to make, but it is not one that we should envy.

[Brendan: What do you think—is our being mortal a “good” thing? Or would it be better for us if we could somehow live forever (either as vampires or in some other way?)]

4 STORY: HUNGRY DAUGHTERS OF STARVING MOTHERS (ALYSSA WONG)²

About the Author. *Alyssa Wong writes award-winning fiction, comics, and games. Their stories have won the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Locus Award. Alyssa was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and their fiction has been shortlisted for the Hugo, Bram Stoker, and Shirley Jackson Awards.*

Alyssa's comics credits include Star Wars: Doctor Aphra, Marvel (Shang-Chi, Iron Fist, Alligator Loki, Extreme Carnage), DC (Batwoman, Wonder Woman), and Adventure Time. Alyssa has also written for Overwatch and Blizzard Entertainment's Story and Franchise Development.

As my date—Harvey? Harvard?—brags about his alma mater and Manhattan penthouse, I take a bite of overpriced kale and watch his ugly thoughts swirl overhead. It's hard to pay attention to him with my stomach growling and my body ajitter, for all he's easy on the eyes. Harvey doesn't look much older than I am, but his thoughts, covered in spines and centipede feet, glisten with ancient grudges and carry an entitled, Ivy League stink.

“My apartment has the most amazing view of the city,” he's saying, his thoughts sliding long over each other like dark, bristling snakes. Each one is as thick around as his Rolex-draped wrist. “I just installed a Jacuzzi along the west wall so that I can watch the sun set while I relax after getting back from the gym.”

I nod, half-listening to the words coming out of his mouth. I'm much more interested in the ones hissing through the teeth of the thoughts above him.

She's got perfect tits, lil' handfuls just waiting to be squeezed. I love me some perky tits.

I'm gonna fuck this bitch so hard she'll never walk straight again.

Gross. “That sounds wonderful,” I say as I sip champagne and gaze at him through my false eyelashes, hoping the dimmed screen of my iPhone isn't visible through the tablecloth below. This dude is boring as hell, and I'm already back on Tindr, thumbing through next week's prospective dinner dates.

² ALYSSA WONG, “Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers,” *Nightmare Magazine* (blog), October 14, 2015, <https://www.nightmare-magazine.com/fiction/hungry-daughters-of-starving-mothers/>.

She's so into me, she'll be begging for it by the end of the night.

I can't wait to cut her up.

My eyes flick up sharply. "I'm sorry?" I say.

Harvey blinks. "I said, Argentina is a beautiful country."

Pretty little thing. She'll look so good spread out all over the floor.

"Right," I say. "Of course." Blood's pulsing through my head so hard it probably looks like I've got a wicked blush.

I'm so excited, I'm half hard already.

You and me both, I think, turning my iPhone off and smiling my prettiest smile.

The waiter swings by with another bottle of champagne and a dessert menu burned into a wooden card, but I wave him off. "Dinner's been lovely," I whisper to Harvey, leaning in and kissing his cheek, "but I've got a different kind of dessert in mind."

Abbb, go the ugly thoughts, settling into a gentle, rippling wave across his shoulders. *I'm going to take her home and split her all the way from top to bottom. Like a fucking fruit tart.*

That is not the way I normally eat fruit tarts, but who am I to judge? I passed on dessert, after all.

When he pays the bill, he can't stop grinning at me. Neither can the ugly thoughts hissing and cackling behind his ear.

"What's got you so happy?" I ask coyly.

"I'm just excited to spend the rest of the evening with you," he replies.

• • • •

The fucker has his own parking spot! No taxis for us; he's even brought the Tesla. The leather seats smell buttery and sweet, and as I slide in and make myself comfortable, the rankness of his thoughts leaves a stain in the air. It's enough to leave me light-headed, almost purring. As we cruise uptown toward his fancy-ass penthouse, I ask him to pull over near the Queensboro Bridge for a second.

Annoyance flashes across his face, but he parks the Tesla in a side street. I lurch into an alley, tottering over empty cans and discarded cigarettes in my four-inch heels, and puke a trail of champagne and kale over to the dumpster shoved up against the apartment building.

"Are you all right?" Harvey calls.

"I'm fine," I slur. Not a single curious window opens overhead.

His steps echo down the alley. He's gotten out of the car, and he's walking toward me like I'm an animal that he needs to approach carefully.

Maybe I should do it now.

Yes! Now, now, while the bitch is occupied.

But what about the method? I won't get to see her insides all pretty everywhere—

I launch myself at him, fingers digging sharp into his body, and bite down hard on his mouth. He tries to shout, but I swallow the sound and shove my tongue inside. There, just behind his teeth, is what I'm looking for: ugly thoughts, viscous as boiled tendon. I suck them howling and fighting into my throat as Harvey's body shudders, little mewling noises escaping from his nose.

I feel decadent and filthy, swollen with the cruelest dreams I've ever tasted. I can barely feel Harvey's feeble struggles; in this state, with the darkest parts of himself drained from his mouth into mine, he's no match for me.

They're never as strong as they think they are.

By the time he finally goes limp, the last of the thoughts disappearing down my throat, my body's already changing. My limbs elongate, growing thicker, and my dress feels too tight as my ribs expand. I'll have to work quickly. I strip off my clothes with practiced ease, struggling a little to work the bodice free of the gym-toned musculature swelling under my skin.

It doesn't take much time to wrestle Harvey out of his clothes, either. My hands are shaking but strong, and as I button up his shirt around me and shrug on his jacket, my jaw has creaked into an approximation of his and the ridges of my fingerprints have reshaped themselves completely. Harvey is so much bigger than me, and the expansion of space eases the pressure on my boiling belly, stuffed with ugly thoughts as it is. I stuff my discarded outfit into my purse, my high heels clicking against the empty glass jar at its bottom, and sling the strap over my now-broad shoulder.

I kneel to check Harvey's pulse—slow but steady—before rolling his unconscious body up against the dumpster, covering him with trash bags. Maybe he'll wake up, maybe he won't. Not my problem, as long as he doesn't wake in the next ten seconds to see his doppelganger strolling out of the alley, wearing his clothes and fingering his wallet and the keys to his Tesla.

There's a cluster of drunk college kids gawking at Harvey's car. I level an arrogant stare at them—oh, but do I wear this body so much better than he did!—and they scatter.

I might not have a license, but Harvey's body remembers how to drive.

[Brendan's Questions:

- 1. Why does the protagonist want to drink Harvey's thoughts?**
- 2. How does the protagonist feel after she changes into Harvey's body?**

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The Tesla revs sweetly under me, but I ditch it in a parking garage in Bedford, stripping in the relative privacy of the second-to-highest level, edged behind a pillar. After laying the keys on the driver's seat over Harvey's neatly folded clothes and shutting the car door, I pull the glass jar from my purse and vomit into it as quietly as I can. Black liquid, thick and viscous, hits the bottom of the jar, hissing and snarling Harvey's words. My body shudders, limbs retracting, spine reshaping itself, as I empty myself of him.

It takes a few more minutes to ease back into an approximation of myself, at least enough to slip my dress and heels back on, pocket the jar, and comb my tangled hair out with my fingers. The parking attendant nods at me as I walk out of the garage, his eyes sliding disinterested over me, his thoughts a gray, indistinct murmur.

The L train takes me back home to Bushwick, and when I push open the apartment door, Aiko is in the kitchen, rolling mochi paste out on the counter.

“You’re here,” I say stupidly. I’m still a little foggy from shaking off Harvey’s form, and strains of his thoughts linger in me, setting my blood humming uncomfortably hot.

“I’d hope so. You invited me over.” She hasn’t changed out of her catering company clothes, and her short, sleek hair frames her face, aglow in the kitchen light. Not a single ugly thought casts its shadow across the stove behind her. “Did you forget again?”

“No,” I lie, kicking my shoes off at the door. “I totally would never do something like that. Have you been here long?”

“About an hour, nothing unusual. The doorman let me in, and I kept your spare key.” She smiles briefly, soft compared to the brusque movements of her hands. She’s got flour on her rolled-up sleeves, and my heart flutters the way it never does when I’m out hunting. “I’m guessing your date was pretty shit. You probably wouldn’t have come home at all if it had gone well.”

“You could say that.” I reach into my purse and stash the snarling jar in the fridge, where it clatters against the others, nearly a dozen bottles of malignant leftovers labeled as health drinks.

Aiko nods to her right. “I brought you some pastries from the event tonight. They’re in the paper bag on the counter.”

“You’re an angel.” I edge past her so I don’t make bodily contact. Aiko thinks I have touch issues, but the truth is, she smells like everything good in the world, solid and familiar, both light and heavy at the same time, and it’s enough to drive a person mad.

“He should have bought you a cab back, at least,” says Aiko, reaching for a bowl of red bean paste. I fiddle with the bag of pastries, pretending to select something from its contents. “I swear, it’s like you’re a magnet for terrible dates.”

She’s not wrong; I’m very careful about who I court. After all, that’s how I stay fed. But no one in the past has been as delicious, as hideously depraved as Harvey. No one else has been a killer.

I’m going to take her home and split her all the way from top to bottom.

“Maybe I’m too weird,” I say.

“You’re probably too normal. Only socially maladjusted creeps use Tinder.”

“Gee, thanks,” I complain.

She grins, flicking a bit of red bean paste at me. I lick it off of my arm. “You know what I mean. Come visit my church with me sometime, yeah? There are plenty of nice boys there.”

“The dating scene in this city depresses me,” I mutter, flicking open my Tinder app with my thumb. “I’ll pass.”

“Come on, Jen, put that away.” Aiko hesitates. “Your mom called while you were out. She wants you to move back to Flushing.”

I bark out a short, sharp laugh, my good mood evaporating. “What else is new?”

“She’s getting old,” Aiko says. “And she’s lonely.”

"I bet. All her mahjong partners are dead, pretty much." I can imagine her in her little apartment in Flushing, huddled over her laptop, floral curtains pulled tight over the windows to shut out the rest of the world. My ma, whose apartment walls are alive with hissing, covered in the ugly, bottled remains of her paramours.

Aiko sighs, joining me at the counter and leaning back against me. For once, I don't move away. Every muscle in my body is tense, straining. I'm afraid I might catch fire, but I don't want her to leave. "Would it kill you to be kind to her?"

I think about my baba evaporating into thin air when I was five years old, what was left of him coiled in my ma's stomach. "Are you telling me to go back?"

She doesn't say anything for a bit. "No," she says at last. "That place isn't good for you. That house isn't good for anyone."

Just a few inches away, an army of jars full of black, viscous liquid wait in the fridge, their contents muttering to themselves. Aiko can't hear them, but each slosh against the glass is a low, nasty hiss:

who does she think she is, the fucking cunt

should've got her when I had the chance

I can still feel Harvey, his malice and ugly joy, on my tongue. I'm already full of things my ma gave me. "I'm glad we agree."

[Brendan: How would you initially characterize the protagonist's relationship with Aiko? With her mother?]

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Over the next few weeks, I gorge myself on the pickup artists and grad students populating the St. Marks hipster bars, but nothing tastes good after Harvey. Their watery essences, squeezed from their owners with barely a whimper of protest, barely coat my stomach. Sometimes I take too much. I scrape them dry and leave them empty, shaking their forms off like rainwater when I'm done.

I tell Aiko I've been partying when she says I look haggard. She tells me to quit drinking so much, her face impassive, her thoughts clouded with concern. She starts coming over more often, even cooking dinner for me, and her presence both grounds me and drives me mad.

"I'm worried about you," she says as I lie on the floor, flipping listlessly through pages of online dating profiles, looking for the emptiness, the rot, that made Harvey so appealing. She's cooking my mom's lo mien recipe, the oily smell making my skin itch. "You've lost so much weight and there's nothing in your fridge, just a bunch of empty jam jars."

I don't tell her that Harvey's lies under my bed, that I lick its remnants every night to send my nerves back into euphoria. I don't tell her how often I dream about my ma's place, the shelves of jars she never let me touch. "Is it really okay for you to spend so much time away from your catering business?" I say instead. "Time is money, and Jimmy gets pissy when he has to make all the desserts without you."

Aiko sets a bowl of lo mein in front of me and joins me on the ground. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than here," she says, and a dangerous, luminous sweetness blooms in my chest.

But the hunger grows worse every day, and soon I can't trust myself around her. I deadbolt the door, and when she stops by my apartment to check on me, I refuse to let her in. Texts light up my phone like a fleet of

fireworks as I huddle under a blanket on the other side, my face pressed against the wood, my fingers twitching.

“Please, Jen, I don’t understand,” she says from behind the door. “Did I do something wrong?”

I can’t wait to cut her up, I think, and hate myself even more.

By the time Aiko leaves, her footsteps echoing down the hallway, I’ve dug deep gouges in the door’s paint with my nails and teeth, my mouth full of her intoxicating scent.

• • • •

My ma’s apartment in Flushing still smells the same. She’s never been a clean person, and the sheer amount of junk stacked up everywhere has increased since I left home for good. Piles of newspapers, old food containers, and stuffed toys make it hard to push the door open, and the stench makes me cough. Her hoard is up to my shoulders, even higher in some places, and as I pick my way through it, the sounds that colored my childhood grow louder: the constant whine of a Taiwanese soap opera bleeding past mountains of trash, and the cruel cacophony of many familiar voices:

Touch me again and I swear I’ll kill you—

How many times have I told you not to wash the clothes like that, open your mouth—

Hope her ugly chink daughter isn’t home tonight—

Under the refuse she’s hoarded the walls are honeycombed with shelves, lined with what’s left of my ma’s lovers. She keeps them like disgusting, mouthwatering trophies, desires pickling in stomach acid and bile. I could probably call them by name if I wanted to; when I was a kid, I used to lie on the couch and watch my baba’s ghost flicker across their surfaces.

My ma’s huddled in the kitchen, the screen of her laptop casting a sickly blue glow on her face. Her thoughts cover her quietly like a blanket. “I made some niu ro mien,” she says. “It’s on the stove. Your baba’s in there.”

My stomach curls, but whether it’s from revulsion or hunger I can’t tell. “Thanks, ma,” I say. I find a bowl that’s almost clean and wash it out, ladling a generous portion of thick noodles for myself. The broth smells faintly of hongtashan tobacco, and as I force it down almost faster than I can swallow, someone else’s memories of my childhood flash before my eyes: pushing a small girl on a swing set at the park; laughing as she chases pigeons down the street; raising a hand for a second blow as her mother launches herself toward us, between us, teeth bared—

“How is it?” she says.

Foul. “Great,” I say. It settles my stomach, at least for a little while. But my baba was no Harvey, and I can already feel the hunger creeping back, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

“You ate something you shouldn’t have, didn’t you, Meimei.” My ma looks up at me for the first time since I walked in, and she looks almost as tired as I feel. “Why didn’t you learn from me? I taught you to stick to petty criminals. I taught you to stay invisible.”

She’d tried to teach me to disappear into myself, the way she’d disappeared into this apartment. “I know I messed up,” I tell her. “Nothing tastes good any more, and I’m always hungry. But I don’t know what to do.”

My ma sighs. “Once you’ve tasted a killer, there’s no turning back. You’ll crave that intensity until you die. And it can take a long time for someone like us to die, Meimei.”

It occurs to me that I don't actually know how old my ma is. Her thoughts are old and covered in knots, stitched together from the remnants of other people's experiences. How long has she been fighting this condition, these overwhelming, gnawing desires?

"Move back in," she's saying. "There's so much tong activity here, the streets leak with food. You barely even have to go outside, just crack open a window and you can smell it brewing. The malice, the knives and bullets . . ."

The picture she paints makes me shudder, my mouth itching. "I can't just leave everything, Ma," I say. "I have my own life now." And I can't live in this apartment, with its lack of sunlight and fresh air, its thick stench of regret and malice.

"So what happens if you go back? You lose control, you take a bite out of Aiko?" She sees me stiffen. "That girl cares about you so much. The best thing you can do for her is keep away. Don't let what happened to your father happen to Aiko." She reaches for my hand, and I pull away. "Stay here, Meimei. We only have each other."

"This isn't what I want." I'm backing up, and my shoulder bumps into the trash, threatening to bury us both in rotting stuffed animals. "This isn't *safe*, Ma. You shouldn't even stay here."

My ma coughs, her eyes glinting in the dark. The cackling from her jar collection swells in a vicious tide, former lovers rocking back and forth on their shelves. "Someday you'll learn that there's more to life than being selfish, Meimei."

That's when I turn my back on her, pushing past the debris and bullshit her apartment's stuffed with. I don't want to die, but as far as I'm concerned, living like my ma, sequestered away from the rest of the world, her doors barricaded with heaps of useless trinkets and soured memories, is worse than being dead.

The jars leer and cackle as I go, and she doesn't try to follow me.

The scent of Flushing clings to my skin, and I can't wait to shake it off. I get on the train as soon as I can, and I'm back on Tindr as soon as the M passes above ground. Tears blur my eyes, rattling free with the movement of the train. I scrub them away angrily, and when my vision clears, I glance back at the screen. A woman with sleek, dark hair, slim tortoiseshell glasses, and a smile that seems a little shy, but strangely handsome, glows up at me. In the picture, she's framed by the downtown cityscape. She has rounded cheeks, but there's a strange flat quality to her face. And then, of course, there are the dreams shadowing her, so strong they leak from the screen in a thick, heady miasma. Every one of those myriad eyes is staring straight at me, and my skin prickles.

I scan the information on her profile page, my blood beating so hard I can feel my fingertips pulsing: relatively young-looking, but old enough to be my mother's cousin. Likes: exploring good food, spending rainy days at the Cloisters, browsing used book stores. Location: Manhattan.

She looks a little like Aiko.

She's quick to message me back. As we flirt, cold sweat and adrenaline send uncomfortable shivers through my body. Everything is sharper, and I can almost hear Harvey's jar laughing. Finally, the words I'm waiting for pop up:

I'd love to meet you. Are you free tonight?

I make a quick stop-off back home, and my heart hammers as I get on the train bound for the Lower East Side, red lipstick immaculate and arms shaking beneath my crisp designer coat, a pair of Mom's glass jars tucked in my purse.

[Brendan: What do you make of the mother, and her relationship to the main character?]

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Her name is Seo-yun, and as she watches me eat, her eyes flickering from my mouth to my throat, her smile is so sharp I could cut myself on it. "I love places like this," she says. "Little authentic spots with only twelve seats. Have you been to Haru before?"

"I haven't," I murmur. My fingers are clumsy with my chopsticks, tremors clicking them together, making it hard to pick up my food. God, she smells delectable. I've never met someone whose mind is so twisted, so rich; a malignancy as well developed and finely crafted as the most elegant dessert.

I'm going to take her home and split her open like a—

I can already taste her on my tongue, the best meal I've never had.

"You're in for a treat," Seo-yun says as the waiter—the only other staff beside the chef behind the counter—brings us another pot of tea. "This restaurant started as a stall in a subway station back in Japan."

"Oh wow," I say. "That's . . . amazing."

"I think so, too. I'm glad they expanded into Manhattan."

Behind her kind eyes, a gnarled mess of ancient, ugly thoughts writhes like the tails of a rat king. I've never seen so many in one place. They crawl from her mouth and ears, creeping through the air on deep-scaled legs, their voices like the drone of descending locusts.

I'm not her first. I can tell that already. But then, she isn't mine, either.

I spend the evening sweating through my dress, nearly dropping my chopsticks. I can't stop staring at the ugly thoughts, dropping from her lips like swollen beetles. They skitter over the tablecloth toward me, whispering obscenities at odds with Seo-yun's gentle voice, hissing what they'd like to do to me. It takes everything in me not to pluck them from the table and crunch them deep between my teeth right then and there, to pour into her lap and rip her mind clean.

Seo-yun is too much for me, but I'm in too far, too hard; I *need* to have her.

She smiles at me. "Not hungry?"

I glance down at my plate. I've barely managed a couple of nigiri. "I'm on a diet," I mutter.

"I understand," she says earnestly. The ugly thoughts crawl over the tops of her hands, iridescent drops spilling into her soy sauce dish.

When the waiter finally disappears into the kitchen, I move in to kiss her across the table. She makes a startled noise, gentle pink spreading across her face, but she doesn't pull away. My elbow sinks into the exoskeleton of one of the thought-beetles, crushing it into black, moist paste against my skin.

I open my mouth to take the first bite.

"So, I'm curious," murmurs Seo-yun, her breath brushing my lips. "Who's Aiko?"

My eyes snap open. Seo-yun smiles, her voice warm and tender, all her edges dark. “She seems sweet, that’s all. I’m surprised you haven’t had a taste of her yet.”

I back up so fast that I knock over my teacup, spilling scalding tea over everything. But Seo-yun doesn’t move, just keeps smiling that kind, gentle smile as her monstrous thoughts lap delicately at the tablecloth.

“She smells so ripe,” she whispers. “But you’re afraid you’ll ruin her, aren’t you? Eat her up, and for what? Just like your mum did your dad.”

No, no, no. I’ve miscalculated so badly. But I’m so hungry, and I’m too young, and she smells like ancient power. There’s no way I’ll be able to outrun her. “Get out of my head,” I manage to say.

“I’m not in your head, love. Your thoughts are spilling out everywhere around you, for everyone to see.” She leans in, propping her chin on her hand. The thoughts twisted around her head like a living crown let out a dry, rattling laugh. “I like you, Jenny. You’re ambitious. A little careless, but we can fix that.” Seo-yun taps on the table, and the waiter reappears, folding up the tablecloth deftly and sliding a single dish onto the now-bare table. An array of thin, translucent slices fan out across the plate, pale and glistening with malice. Bisected eyes glint, mouths caught mid-snarl, from every piece. “All it takes is a little practice and discipline, and no one will know what you’re really thinking.”

“On the house, of course, Ma’am,” the waiter murmurs. Before he disappears again, I catch a glimpse of dark, many-legged thoughts braided like a bracelet around his wrist.

Seo-yun takes the first bite, glancing up at me from behind her glasses. “Your mum was wrong,” she says. “She thought you were alone, just the two of you. So she taught you to only eat when you needed to, so you didn’t get caught, biding your time between meals like a snake.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I say. The heady, rotten perfume from the dish in front of me makes my head spin with hunger.

“My mum was much the same. Eat for survival, not for pleasure.” She gestures at the plate with her chopsticks. “Please, have some.”

As the food disappears, I can only hold out for a few more slices before my chopsticks dart out, catching a piece for myself. It’s so acidic it makes my tongue burn and eyes itch, the aftertaste strangely sweet.

“Do you like it?”

I respond by wolfing down another two slices, and Seo-yun chuckles. Harvey is bland compared to this, this strangely distilled pairing of emotions—

I gasp as my body starts to warp, hands withering, burn scars twisting their way around my arms. Gasoline, malice, childish joy rush through me, a heady mix of memory and sensory overstimulation. And then Seo-yun’s lips are on mine, teeth tugging gently, swallowing, drawing it out of me. The burns fade, but the tingle of cruel euphoria lingers.

She wipes her mouth delicately. “Ate a little too fast, I think, dear,” she says. “My point, Jenny, is that I believe in eating for pleasure, not just survival. And communally, of course. There are a number of us who get together for dinner or drinks at my place, every so often, and I would love it if you would join us tonight. An eating club, of sorts.”

My gaze flickers up at her thoughts, but they’re sitting still as stones, just watching me with unblinking eyes. My mouth stings with the imprint of hers.

“Let me introduce you soon. You don’t have to be alone anymore.” As the waiter clears the plate and nods at her—no check, no receipt, nothing—Seo-yun adds, “And tonight doesn’t have to be over until we want it to be.” She offers me her hand. After a moment’s hesitation, I take it. It’s smaller than mine, and warm.

“Yes, please,” I say, watching her thoughts instead of her face.

As we leave the restaurant, she presses her lips to my forehead. Her lips sear into my skin, nerves singing white-hot with ecstasy. “They’re going to love you,” she says.

We’ll have so much fun, say the thoughts curling through her dark hair.

She hails a cab from the fleet circling the street like wolves, and we get inside.

[Brendan: What sort of “life” does Seo-yun offer Jenny? How does this differ from her life so far?]

• • • •

I run into Aiko two months later in front of my apartment, as I’m carrying the last box of my stuff out. She’s got a startled look on her face, and she’s carrying a bag stuffed with ramps, kaffir lime, heart of palm—all ingredients I wouldn’t have known two months ago, before meeting Seo-yun. “You’re moving?”

I shrug, staring over her head, avoiding her eyes. “Yeah, uh. I’m seeing someone now, and she’s got a really nice place.”

“Oh.” She swallows, shifts the bag of groceries higher on her hip. “That’s great. I didn’t know you were dating anybody.” I can hear her shaky smile. “She must be feeding you well. You look healthier.”

“Thanks,” I say, though I wonder. It’s true, I’m sleeker, more confident now. I’m barely home any more, spending most of my time in Seo-yun’s Chelsea apartment, learning to cook with the array of salts and spices infused with ugly dreams, drinking wine distilled from deathbed confessions. My time stalking the streets for small-time criminals is done. But why has my confidence evaporated the moment I see Aiko? And if that ravenous hunger from Harvey is gone, why am I holding my breath to keep from breathing in her scent?

“So what’s she like?”

“Older, kind of—” *kind of looks like you* “—short. Likes to cook, right.” I start to edge past her. “Listen, this box is heavy and the van’s waiting for me downstairs. I should go.”

“Wait,” Aiko says, grabbing my arm. “Your mom keeps calling me. She still has my number from . . . before. She’s worried about you. Plus I haven’t seen you in ages, and you’re just gonna take off?”

Aiko, small and humble. Her hands smell like home, like rice flour and bad memories. How could I ever have found that appealing?

“We don’t need to say goodbye. I’m sure I’ll see you later,” I lie, shrugging her off.

“Let’s get dinner sometime,” says Aiko, but I’m already walking away.

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Caterers flit like blackbirds through the apartment, dark uniforms neatly pressed, their own ugly thoughts braided and pinned out of the way. It’s a two-story affair, and well-dressed people flock together everywhere there’s space, Seo-yun’s library upstairs to the living room on ground floor. She’s even asked the caterers to prepare some of my recipes, which makes my heart glow. “You’re the best,” I say, kneeling on the bed beside her and pecking her on the cheek.

Seo-yun smiles, fixing my hair. She wears a sleek, deep blue dress, and today, her murderous thoughts are draped over her shoulders like a stole, a living, writhing cape. Their teeth glitter like tiny diamonds. I've never seen her so beautiful. "They're good recipes. My friends will be so excited to taste them."

I've already met many of them, all much older than I am. They make me nervous. "I'll go check on the food," I say.

She brushes her thumb over my cheek. "Whatever you'd like, love."

I escape into the kitchen, murmuring brief greetings to the guests I encounter on the way. Their hideous dreams adorn them like jewels, glimmering and snatching at me as I slip past. As I walk past some of the cooks, I notice a man who looks vaguely familiar. "Hey," I say.

"Yes, ma'am?" The caterer turns around, and I realize where I've seen him; there's a picture of him and Aiko on her cellphone, the pair of them posing in front of a display at a big event they'd cooked for. My heartbeat slows.

"Aren't you Aiko's coworker?"

He grins and nods. "Yes, I'm Jimmy. Aiko's my business partner. Are you looking for her?"

"Wait, she's here?"

He frowns. "She should be. She never misses one of Ms. Sun's parties." He smiles. "Ms. Sun lets us take home whatever's left when the party winds down. She's so generous."

I turn abruptly and head for the staircase to the bedroom, shouldering my way through the crowd. Thoughts pelt me as I go: Has Aiko known about me, my ma, what we can do? How long has she known? And worse—Seo-yun's known all along about Aiko, and played me for a fool.

I bang the bedroom door open to find Aiko sprawled out across the carpet, her jacket torn open. Seo-yun crouches on the floor above her in her glorious dress, her mouth dark and glittering. She doesn't look at all surprised to see me.

"Jenny, love. I hope you don't mind we started without you." Seo-yun smiles. Her lipstick is smeared over her chin, over Aiko's blank face. I can't tell if Aiko's still breathing.

"Get away from her," I say in a low voice.

"As you wish." She rises gracefully, crossing the room in fluid strides. "I was done with that particular morsel, anyway." The sounds of the party leak into the room behind me, and I know I can't run and grab Aiko at the same time.

So I shut the door, locking it, and mellow my voice to a sweet purr. "Why didn't you tell me about Aiko? We could have shared her together."

But Seo-yun just laughs at me. "You can't fool me, Jenny. I can smell your rage from across the room." She reaches out, catches my face, and I recoil into the door. "It makes you so beautiful. The last seasoning in a dish almost ready."

"You're insane, and I'm going to kill you," I say. She kisses my neck, her teeth scraping my throat, and the scent of her is so heady my knees almost bend.

“I saw you in her head, delicious as anything,” she whispers. Her ugly thoughts hiss up my arms, twining around my waist. There’s a sharp sting at my wrist, and I look down to discover that one of them is already gnawing at my skin. “And I knew I just had to have you.”

There’s a crash, and Seo-yun screams as a porcelain lamp shatters against the back of her head. Aiko’s on her feet, swaying unsteadily, face grim. “Back the fuck away from her,” she growls, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You little bitch—” snarls Seo-yun.

But I seize my chance and pounce, fastening my teeth into the hollow of Seo-yun’s throat, right where her mantle of thoughts gathers and folds inward. I chew and swallow, chew and swallow, gorging myself on this woman. Her thoughts are mine now, thrashing as I seize them from her, and I catch glimpses of myself, of Aiko, and of many others just like us, in various states of disarray, of preparation.

Ma once told me that this was how Baba went; she’d accidentally drained him until he’d faded completely out of existence. For the first time in my life, I understand her completely.

Seo-yun’s bracelets clatter to the floor, her empty gown fluttering soundlessly after. Aiko collapses too, folding like paper.

It hurts to take in that much. My stomach hurts so bad, my entire body swollen with hideous thoughts. At the same time, I’ve never felt so alive, abuzz with possibility and untamable rage.

I lurch over to Aiko on the floor, malice leaking from her mouth, staining the carpet. “Aiko, wake up!” But she feels hollow, lighter, empty. She doesn’t even smell like herself any more.

A knock at the door jolts me. “Ma’am,” says a voice I recognize as the head caterer. “The first of the main courses is ready. Mr. Goldberg wants to know if you’ll come down and give a toast.”

Fuck. “I—” I start to say, but the voice isn’t mine. I glance over at the mirror; sure enough, it’s Seo-yun staring back at me, her dark, terrible dreams tangled around her body in a knotted mess. “I’ll be right there,” I say, and lay Aiko gently on the bed. Then I dress and leave, my heart pounding in my mouth.

I walk Seo-yun’s shape down the stairs to the dining room, where guests are milling about, plates in hand, and smile Seo-yun’s smile. And if I look a little too much like myself, well—according to what I’d seen while swallowing Seo-yun’s thoughts, I wouldn’t be the first would-be inductee to disappear at a party like this. Someone hands me a glass of wine, and when I take it, my hand doesn’t tremble, even though I’m screaming inside.

Fifty pairs of eyes on me, the caterers’ glittering cold in the shadows. Do any of them know? Can any of them tell?

“To your continued health, and to a fabulous dinner,” I say, raising my glass. As one, they drink.

[Brendan: This scene is something like the “climax”. What happens? How does Jenny change as a result?]

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Seo-yun’s apartment is dark, cleared of guests and wait staff alike. Every door is locked, every curtain yanked closed.

I've pulled every jar, every container, every pot and pan out of the kitchen, and now they cover the floor of the bedroom, trailing into the hallway, down the stairs. Many are full, their malignant contents hissing and whispering hideous promises at me as I stuff my hand in my mouth, retching into the pot in my lap.

Aiko lies on the bed, pale and still. There's flour and bile on the front of her jacket. "Hang in there," I whisper, but she doesn't respond. I swirl the pot, searching its contents for any hint of Aiko, but Seo-yun's face grins out at me from the patterns of light glimmering across the liquid's surface. I shove it away from me, spilling some on the carpet.

I grab another one of the myriad crawling thoughts tangled about me, sinking my teeth into its body, tearing it into pieces as it screams and howls terrible promises, promises it won't be able to keep. I eat it raw, its scales scraping the roof of my mouth, chewing it thoroughly. The more broken down it is, the easier it will be to sort through the pieces that are left when it comes back up.

How long did you know? Did you always know?

I'll find her, I think as viscous black liquid pours from my mouth, over my hands, burning my throat. The field of containers pools around me like a storm of malicious stars, all whispering my name. She's in here somewhere, I can see her reflection darting across their surfaces. If I have to rip through every piece of Seo-yun I have, from her dreams to the soft, freckled skin wrapped around my body, I will. I'll wring every vile drop of Seo-yun out of me until I find Aiko, and then I'll fill her back up, pour her mouth full of herself.

How could I ever forget her? How could I forget her taste, her scent, something as awful and beautiful as home?

[Brendan: What do you make of the end of the story? Will Jenny ever "find" Aiko? Why do you think this?]

i Meyer, Stephanie. 2005. *Twilight*. Little, Brown and Company. p. 474

ii Tolstoy, Leo. 1918. "What Men Live by" in *What Men Live by and Other Tales*. A. Maude (trans.) and L. Maude (trans.). The Stratford Company. p. 33

iii Lucretius. 2009. *On the Nature of the Universe*. R. Melville (trans.). Oxford University Press. Pt. 3, lines 830-831

iv Meyer, Stephanie. 2008. Little, Brown and Company. p. 749

v Meyer 2007, p. 311