



LOW KILL SHELTER

PORPENTINE CHARITY HEARTSCAPE

Unvoiced

Iran knows it has a smell, even if he can't detect it. So after they wrap it in brown paper, he asks for plastic wrap, several layers, and then, as he leaves the deli, he takes out the disinfectant spray he stole from work and sprays it down.

He checks his phone. 10:59 PM. Late night at the lab. Have to get home fast. He has responsibilities.

Someone shouts the next block over and a car squeals. Then the usual sounds commence.

He barely looks up anymore. Your body gets a feeling for how close it is. The gunshots, the clicking of nails. The sounds are a good sign, honestly. If there's a commotion, everyone is drawn to it. There's less chance of something creeping from the overgrown weeds of an abandoned yard, sniffing at the air, confident in the riches of your veins. A yard like this one, leading to a house with boarded windows and red graffiti like a parodic reenactment done in MS Paint spray can. No one wants to live in a place with that kind of history. Except this is the real world, so there's always someone who needs to live there. It's not like a house could ever truly go empty. Someone pragmatically scrubs it down and flips it. Or it gets squatted. Or it's filled with the invisible pressurization of speculation.

But there's a stinking gap between. Waiting for the smell to go down. Waiting for the nebulous edge cases of transmissibility to subside, mostly for the sake of your OCD, peace of mind, whatever. As he walks down the dark street, leaving behind the only working streetlight on the block (a decayed mercury-vapor bulb that won't be replaced after it blows out, dim but the only light he has, like the red light of an anonymous appliance as something drips in the bedroom. you had to clean it up all by yourself. because even if things are kind of back to normal now (hahaha), everyone was on their own that night. and the next night. and the next night. and the smell got so bad and you couldn't use the kitchen and you couldn't use the beds and you especially couldn't use the bathroom, like maybe you could have got the door open if you kicked it hard or used the credit card trick but your mother locked herself in for a reason so you went for the next thing in your hierarchy of needs, crackers from the kitchen, tasteless and dry, and you eat them hunched over in the backyard and you think of getting the tent from the garage so you don't have to go back inside but then you hear something scraping at the fence and you realize every house on your block is the same as yours and you go back inside where at least you know everything has stopped moving forever because you heard every sound that a thing makes to reach that final stillness, even if it's not really still, there's the dripping and when that coagulates there's the gaseous bloating and even when everything is perfectly still you know it's wriggling on a microscopic level with whatever made your family do that to each other and that simple scientific knowledge renders everything superstition.)—

He counts down in his head, that little meditation his body taught him. Get the air back. Get the heartbeat back. That's a healthy heartbeat. And your blood is clean. You know this. You know enough to be bored now.

At the edge of the blighted houses he reaches the commercial district. Not quite. Work-live buildings. The riparian zone. Converted during one tech boom or another.

He types in the code and the door clicks. He climbs the stairs after a customary pause to listen. He likes the wide hallways and concrete floor of the work-live building. It has a sterile feel. Easily cleaned. Imagine living, in the present time, in an apartment with fucking carpets. He almost laughs, but he's trained himself out of voiced laughter. That's what they called it during behavioral therapy as a child. Genuine, unbidden laughter. The kind that emerges at inappropriate times. The kind that echoes down hallways.

Unvoiced laughter. That's it. Deeper in the throat. Perfunctory clicking and grunting. Controlled. Brief. Has a social use. Fills the conversation. Safer, in every arena that exists.

He gets his keys out. Looks up and down the hall. Unlocks the door and goes inside.

His equipment is everywhere. In the open area, kitchen, bathroom, and the loft above them. He should develop a system, but this is a chaotic problem to solve and he needs the whole unit to reflect his mind, to serve as overflow, because he can't keep it all inside—

Well. Not the whole unit. There is a padlocked door. And the closer he gets to it, the more he smells it. That burnt sugar stink, with rancid, urinal notes.

He pulls on the isolation suit, awkward and crinkling. He stole it from work, like most of this equipment. Work is a pretty good gig, for a bad one. They were desperate and unorganized so they failed to recognize his lack of qualifications. He had some classroom experience but he hadn't dedicated to anything yet, treading water, a clear failure of the human organism to specialize. But they hired him, and now he works at an all-in-one institute against the body. A particular body.

He spent the first couple years trying not to get fired, and then, by accident, found himself doing real work. There was still a shared sense of excitement back then. Of course we'll find a cure. It would be unthinkable if we had to live with this fear forever. But funding dwindled and people burnt out and his job became ritualized busy work and he realized. They aren't looking for a cure. A bullet is cheaper.

For most diseases, civilization would demand a cure, or at least the idea of one. But other diseases aren't quite as alienating. They can make you gross and ugly and even unlikable, if you allow senility and addiction to be included under the umbrella. But none of them are so reliably contagious and guaranteed to remove you from your friends. Your family. Yourself.

And the body gets so wrecked. The other workers at the institute have a mentality like, they need to be put out of their misery, we can't keep looking at this shit, there's no fix, we can only contain the chaos. And he gets it. It's so fucking loud and tense that you feel genuine relief

when the euthanasia solution is injected and you can hear yourself think again and there's room for mundane things like what you'll buy from the vending machine and if you really have the time for that complicated new 4x game and all the stupid shit people think about, need to think about, to survive.

He puts on the respirator mask and the rubber gloves and most importantly, the rubber boots, because the floor feels fucking gross in there. He cracks the door and the smell sharpens. Oily salt. Fecal aroma. But that's a good thing. It tells him the respirator isn't sealed properly. He adjusts it until the odor fades.

Okay. He enters and closes the door immediately, and he's in darkness. He hates this moment, which is so brief yet carries so much charge. Primal cave terror. But he has to close the door, because if the wrong sound flits into the ear of a neighbor, he's fucked.

He flips the switch by the door. As always, he has the gruesome notion that the light won't come on, and he's also locked himself inside, somehow, and—

Red light fills the cramped room. Might be another superstition, but he averaged it out over a pretty long time and red ensures the greatest compliance. He walks up to the red tape on the floor. Can't tell under red light, of course, but he knows. Every part of this room was earned with pain and fear and rigorous empirical testing.

"Hey," he says, in a low, reassuring voice. It took practice to sound like that. He doesn't feel the way he sounds. But sound is very important in here.

A clink of metal and a sign of life, generic enough for movie ambiance. A feeling-sound. A stir of breath and body, all blended together, with something coming through the throat, a precursor to actionable sound.

He begins the same way each time.

"Jess."

Each time he expects two things.

Abulia. Listlessness. Something broken and worn out.

Or the other thing. The bad thing.

So he keeps his body tensed, even though there's a chain around its neck. Jess's neck. Remember the psychological aspect. If you believe something is in there, despite outward signs, you have to humanize, even if you get nothing in return, even if it feels, again, superstitious. Because if trust is any component of this, then repetition matters. Because that's how all life acclimates. And this is life. Too much life, too fast, and we know what happens

when life goes too fast.

Drip drip. Sialorrhea. Hypersalivation. He has to replace the water constantly or Jess gets dehydrated. You need water to think straight. Hopefully. Someday. He put a glass in there the first time. He wanted to add dignity to the proceedings, to reduce the unbearable awkwardness of feeding his adult friend. But drinking from a glass was a disaster. Glass breaks, and the fragments break into even smaller pieces, and it gets everywhere, tearing your suit and cutting his feet...

"I'm going to do a bite test, okay?"

"Rrrrrrrrr."

So weird hearing that sound come from that face. The greasy brown hair, mostly covering the eyes (thank god) but not the mouth, those scarred lips indicating an anatomy formed for speech. But that doesn't mean he isn't communicating. Right now Jess is signifying that he wants to bite Iran's face.

"I got you something." Iran puts the brown paper package on the floor.

Jess strains at the limit of the chain, drooling with hunger. Iran holds out his gloved hand. "But first you have to put your mouth on this." Don't say bite. Use constructive nouns. And Jess always bites. That part is implicit. The glove can take it, but his heart still races when those sharp, heavy teeth sink into him, pressure penetrating through layers. Hard enough that he can't pull his hand free.

"Shhh. Shhh." Don't show fear.

Jess's hands paw the floor awkwardly, his bipedal body confused by whatever limb-mapping his brain uses now. It must be so frustrating.

"Good." Iran always emphasizes that word, even if it feels cringe to use on another adult. Fundamentals. The basis of human morality. As if everything he says was imprinting, preciously, into a newborn brain.

"Now open your mouth." He used to say release. Let go. But again. Fundamentals. Abstract concepts don't exist here. But a mouth. That's Jess. That's where his soul resides. He needs to learn what it's for so he can escape through it, slipping free in an afterbirth of language. The shibboleth of being able to say anything at all.

Jess never really lets go, but he loosens enough for Iran to pull the glove out, drool glistening in the rubbery indentations of a bite mark. Iran backs up to the red tape and tears open the package and flings the raw meat across the floor. He watches for a second. It's a good reminder of what Jess's mouth can do.

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Iran sketches the bite mark in his notebook, referencing the chewed glove. He isn't an amazing artist, but he's become proficient at drawing teeth. He should really take pics with his phone, but he's paranoid of having anything incriminatory on a networked device. And something about the physical drawing helps him think.

He flips through pages of teeth, black and white, soothingly devoid of blood and yellowing. Here. The first page. Jess still had most of his human teeth. He was a late grower. Some people present with outrageous canines right around the time they lose their mind. An unfortunate combination.

The nascent fangs look so juvenile compared to the most recent sketch. He's almost proud of Jess. What a pair of grinders. That's what you get with a higher standard of care. The longest they kept a subject at the institute was a few weeks, bound to a bed, aggressively gathering sores, veins practically shattering from how hard they strained at the cuffs. It ended in vivisection. So he doubts anyone else has been caring for a rabid subject like this, for months, with room service, hand and foot. He deserves a beer.

He adds creamer and honey to the can, stirring with a straw. Jess always made fun of him for that. But that mouth can no longer formulate anything so coherent.

Before sleeping, he always watches the padlocked door, as if his observation were the only thing keeping it firm and unchanging. The door is locked. The front door is locked. Everything is compartmentalized. And so is he. And maybe Jess is too. The brain scans at the institute never showed total neural degeneration in any of the subjects. Certainly there were changes, but everyone changes. Every second of their life.

Jess Presents

THEN

Jess worked at the institute too. With traumatized children. Lots of those going around. Someone even invented a fad therapy specifically for kids affected by, uh, witnessing dental trauma leading to graphic violence. A six-step system for re-rooting the child in a normative oral-emotional landscape.

It's funny. They were never what Iran would have called good friends. But their schedules lined up. That's as good as it gets for most people. They'd get a beer after work. And Jess had a forward impulse that was helpful for Iran's passivity. Did you read that new immunepunk book, let's eat at a random restaurant instead of convenience store sandwiches suffocated under plastic wrap, I got that new console game (feels incredibly frivolous, but everything still exists, every stupid thing, the plastic factories and marketing campaigns and rare earth mines didn't shut down just because a bunch of people went crazy and died).

"Not as good as the first one," Iran says, watching his character stagger from innumerable, poorly-telegraphed attacks.

"At least the co-op is still fun." Jess knocks Iran's character into a pit with a gigantic, chitinous spear.

"Yes. Really fun."

Iran sips his beer through a straw. Jess has that going to make fun of you look but he gets distracted trying to jump up a ledge.

"You can't reach that spot."

"Correction. They don't want me to reach that spot." Jess mashes his controller. "But games are stupid complicated to make. They might have fucked up the collision somewhere."

The more jank the system, the more chance for serendipity. Miracles. Marvelous little surprises. Just like a brain.

NOW

Iran wakes up in a world of dogs.

His clothes are the ones he wore to work, wrinkled and sweaty. No time to change. He fills Jess's water bowl. That should be enough. Jess hasn't even finished the meat. He still has a human body, no matter what his rabid brain demands, with a stomach that can only hold so much, and he pukes it up, but you know what dogs return to.

Iran makes a veggie smoothie. He always had an ascetic tendency, but having Jess in his life pushed him toward even greater efficiency. Shaving the edges from his day. Realizing how much empty space it had.

He checks the loft, where a flexible duct cuts through the floor down into Jess's closet, from a piecemeal ventilation system covered in baffles, with a high-powered fan circulating air and muffling sound. He doesn't sleep up there anymore. Smells bad, despite the filters and odor neutralizers.

He brushes and flosses. Tasting the blood from his cut gums gives him a sympathetic tingle. That thing with Jess. It was bad. But he allows himself to remember, because it means the other teeth-related memories, the old ones, the first ones, can stay buried.

THEN

"I'll be out of town for a few days."

Iran looks up from his work computer. Jess is taking a selfie on the eroded ergonomic couch by the lab window, his brown hair copperized by the sun. He has a healthiness that Iran finds almost offensive, but avoids leveraging it just enough for Iran to tolerate him.

"Where are you going?"

"Need to check on my sister."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"She's my sister."

"True," Iran says, like that detail is irrelevant. He knows all these comforting, familial terms end up in the same puddle of gore.

NOW

Iran takes a cab to work. The plastic dividers block saliva transmission. The idea of getting on a bus or subway fills him with panic. Locked in. Never again.

He stops at the convenience store next to work for a beer and a coffee. He drinks half the coffee to wake himself up, then dumps it out on the yellow grass between buildings. He looks around, then pours the beer into the coffee cup, along with a cup of creamer and a packet of Splenda, detritus fluttering to the ground and joining a decayed yellow pile.

The institute is a dull building, inhabited out of expediency, and no one wants to adorn a monument to an incurable condition. The interior is something between an office and a hospital, with occasional surreal rooms, relics of startup playground culture. A mural of genderless raceless baby people dancing around a united globe, kindercolored pipes spiraling from floor to ceiling, and a giant, squished sculpture, the pseudo-creature of a stillborn logo.

He goes through security:

1. Temperature check.
2. Apathetic prodding of his messenger bag. They never find what he steals.
3. Pass through the ritual archway of a broken metal detector.

He has to see Rache every day. His manager. Jess's ex. She's older than either of them and wears glasses and spends a lot more time in her office since Jess died. They talk about normal things. A new shipment of nitrile gloves. The vending machine is still broken. Did you know I have your boyfriend chained up in a closet?

Part of him aches to tell her that Jess is still alive. It was hardest the first month. Seeing how raw she was ripped open. Maybe she'd understand. She has a pragmatic, medical outlook. She was there, same as him, when you could still hear bullets out back, and you had to invoice each one to the state. Disinfectant thick as riot gas, blood running acrid pink through the halls.

But he doesn't see her today, until coming back from break, where he bumps into her in a room full of deflated beanbags and primary color blobs. He nods and keeps walking, then slows down, realizing she's docked herself near him.

"Hi, Rache."

"Do you know anything about those missing items?"

"Missing items."

"Sorry. I have to ask everyone. They're being assholes about it."

"I have no idea. I just do my work and go home." I must never steal again, he thinks to himself. How terrifying. He must have been sleepwalking to do it. To do any of this for the past months. The incident with Jess must have triggered a trauma response, some disembodied shock in which he became not himself. He has to burn everything. Why did he even do it?

You always had your stubborn, spergy little projects.

Who planted that phrase in his head? Maybe he did, a self-conscious pastiche of every time someone noticed how anal he is. His fasting phase. The time he stopped using electronic devices. That gold farming script he made for a game he didn't even play, for some guy he thought was his friend in high school, teaching himself to code then forgetting a month later,

but once he gets something in his head, it sticks until he's satisfied the invisible parameters of the rhizomatic structure begging to be born, and if it lacks pleasure, then perversely it must be worth doing. Which has been a very helpful impulse in the small matter of taking care of a guy who wants to eat you.

"So you haven't seen anything or anyone doing anything?"

"Maybe it's a database error."

"I suppose anything could be in this modern world of ours," she says, looking bored. "Plausible deniability abounds."

"Well, I should get going," he says, then bumps into a red sculpture like something that escaped from a lava lamp, spilling his so-called coffee.

They stare at the stain on the floor.

"Shit. Sorry."

She sniffs. "Is that booze?"

"Uhh."

She takes his cup from him and has a sip. "What is that? Beer and milk?"

"Creamer. And Splenda."

"Splenda."

"Yup."

"That's actually pretty good. In a shitty weird little way."

"Thank you."

She takes another sip, much longer and deeper. "You need to get some sleep. You look freaked out."

"Sorry. I know. I will."

"Holy shit, I'm addicted now." She drinks more.

"Haha."

She squints. "You sure everything is okay?"

He feels himself unraveling. Maybe she'd understand. Maybe she already knows. She's toying with him. He's so easily fucked with—

She laughs, and he almost jumps out of his work shoes.

"Stop looking so worried."

"Okay."

"C'mon Iran. Who's mommy's little diversity hire?"

He does his own laugh. Minimal. Unvoiced. "Um...I suppose that would be..."

Her phone buzzes in her jeans pocket. She looks at it like she's viewing a particularly unexceptional turd. "I have to take this." She winks and walks away, keeping the cup.

When she's gone, he savors the cold feeling of near-doom, and the lucidity it brings. He can't tell her. He can't tell anyone. They'll never understand how naturally it happened.

THEN

Jess was gone for more than a few days. Texted once to let Iran know he was at a rest stop an hour away from his home town. Then nothing.

Late night. Iran is washing dishes, wondering if he'll masturbate before falling asleep. Probably just fall asleep.

Someone knocks on his door. He checks the peephole and sees Jess and opens the door without thinking. A dark ravine of sweat runs down Jess's shirt and Iran assumes he ran up the stairs, or maybe he was running from one of them.

"What happened?"

Jess pushes past him, straight to the kitchen corner of the open plan apartment. He drinks from the faucet for a long time, arched up on his toes. This is when Iran realizes Jess isn't wearing shoes.

"Can I get you a glass?"

Jess wipes his mouth. "I'm good."

“Okay. How’s your sister?”

Jess opens the fridge. “How do you eat this vegetarian sludge?”

“I like it.”

“Don’t you have any real food? Anything at all?”

“You don’t have to get mad.”

“I’m not mad. I’m just,” he switches to a whisper, “mad.” Then he laughs.

“Sorry?”

“I just want a fucking snack. I think that’s a very reasonable thing to expect when visiting a friend’s house. An acquaintance. A colleague. A fellow human being. I’m just asking for a little human kindness. Is that fucking crazy of me?”

“I suppose not.” Iran finds a lone egg in a carton in the back of the fridge. “I could make you, um...”

Jess grabs the egg. “Fuck yeah. Let’s make this guy.”

Iran gets a pan out. “Do you want that on toast or just...”

Something cracks. He looks over. Jess is staring at the yolk oozing through his fist.

“Sorry. Accident.”

“Maybe you need to lie down.”

“I don’t want to lie down.” Jess sucks the yolk off his fingers. He seems to be drifting closer. Close enough for Iran to hear the egg shell crunching in his mouth. “I just want something fresh, you know?”

“Maybe you should get checked out.”

Jess laughs. “Great idea. I’ll get tested for an incurable disease.”

“Maybe I can explain to them—”

“It ain’t the Taj Mahal in there, you know. Hahaha.”

Iran wants to say something reassuring. But he knows it would be a lie. This isn't an ambiguously or partially fucked situation. They know better than most how it ends. They've heard it through the walls at work. A bullet, or whatever invasive, expedited, terminal testing is trending.

Iran backs away, and Jess's head flicks to follow him. "Seriously? I'm not going to hurt you."

"Even my family couldn't keep that promise."

People who loved each other more than anything. Bonded from birth. Jess doesn't stand a chance against that perfect heat.

Iran points to the corner of Jess's mouth. "You've got something there."

A gob of drool splats to the floor.

"It's not like I thought it would feel, Iran."

In spite of himself, Iran is curious. "Oh?"

"Haha. You want to know. He wants to know. But you know I'm an aspiring novelist. Show, don't tell, you illiterate cunt."

"I read."

"Nonfiction doesn't count."

"Why not?"

"Because it already happened."

"Okay."

"Gghk." Jess sticks a finger inside his mouth like something hurts in there and comes away with a web of saliva, tinged pink. "It honestly feels really good."

"Good how?"

Jess rubs his hand on an analog stick controller, making a jerky plastic sound. "Why's my console here?"

"You left it."

“Oh yeah.”

Something falls from Jess’s mouth. At first Iran thinks it’s more saliva, but it sounds like a breath mint when it hits the floor.

“Fuck,” Jess says. He grabs a carton of milk from the fridge and tears it open, a little too wide. Iran stares at the ruptured orifice of the cardboard, milk spilling through. Then he notices blood pattering into the white puddle from Jess’s mouth, blooming red clouds.

“Wait a fucking second. Does the milk trick work with soy?”

“Probably not.”

“Your autistic, vegan lifestyle has doomed my tooth,” Jess says. He picks it up and cries into it.

“You’ll get more.”

“Fell out. Like a fucking kid. I work with kids.”

“And you’re good at it.”

“Thanks, Iran. I feel like my heart could burst out of my chest, hearing that. I’m not a very appreciated person. Did you know that? Did you know about all my problems?”

“You never really talked about them before.”

“Well, that changes tonight. Tonight is all about me, Iran.”

“Okay, Jess.”

“Are you being sarcastic? I can’t tell. You have the closed face of a foreigner.”

Iran winces. “I wasn’t being sarcastic. I really do think this is your night.”

“Thank you, Iran. I’m sorry for um. Whatever I said. You have a great face. Kind of depressing to look at, but that’s just a personality problem. Your face itself is great. You could be off-brand hot if you ever used your actual facial muscles.”

“Thanks.”

Jess spins around, hands slapping against the walls. “Okay. Problem one. I give all fucking day to these kids and no one gives a shit and it’s a waste of time. They’re going to take twenty

fucking years to even acknowledge the shit that happened to them and they're not going to remember some state-appointed cuck like me."

"It does sound frustrating."

"Where's my fucking reward? No one ever says, Jess, you're doing an amazing job."

"You really do a great job with them. I wish you'd been my therapist."

"Stop humoring me."

"I'm serious."

"But I'm not good anymore, right? I'm crazy now. I'm a bad guy."

"I never said that."

"It's a little thing called body language. You should learn it sometime."

Saliva sprays from Jess's mouth with each syllable. Iran rummages through a cluttered table, grabbing a used flu mask from when he had to wear them to work.

Jess paces distraughtly. "I see what you're doing. That really hurts, Iran."

Iran finds a pair of sunglasses and puts them on.

"Fuck you, Iran. You piece of shit. Mongrel. Fucking, fuck—"

"You're terrible at this."

"I know. I'm drawing a blank. I can't think of any good slurs. I wasn't raised like that. I was denied an education, Iran."

"If it's any consolation, I think nowadays it's mostly about an atomization of power into unspoken social structures or something..."

"Thanks, Iran. Anyways. Hhh. In absence of that, I need you to know, I want to eat your face."

"Noted."

Iran runs away, feeling vaguely foolish. Jess laughs and darts sideways, blocking the door.

"Please, Jess."

“The magic word, Iran. But magic isn’t real. Because this shit can happen to me, very scientifically, all because I tried to be a good person. How does that make sense? You try to be a good person and you become a bad person.”

“It’s a cruel thing, Jess. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Jess cries. “Hhh. Hhh. Hahaha.” He runs at Iran.

“Stop,” Iran says, hiding behind the table.

Jess crosses the distance with an unpredictable lope. It doesn’t feel right for the human body to move like that, or a face to cycle through so many emotions per second. The virus must be triggering adrenaline to a painful extent—

“I don’t think I should let you bite me,” Iran says, apologetically. He picks up Jess’s console and throws it. Have to minimize spatter, for both their sakes. Blunt weapons, like a religious oath not to spill blood. It shatters into plastic fragments and computer parts. Jess laughs like something funny happened, then trips, tangled in controller cables. Iran backs up until he hits the wall. He grips the long black lamp pole that lights that corner of the room and swings it hard. Jess grabs it and Iran’s jaw drops at the force in those arms, undiluted and animal, pulling him right into that frothing face. His eyelashes flutter in panic, but part of him says, *remember*. No matter how much you repress it, this isn’t your first time facing down those jaws. And you don’t even love Jess.

They tug up, down, up, down, up, and on the next down, Iran leans into it, smashing the bulb on the floor, and Jess steps on it and cries out but doesn’t stop coming but he stumbles because he still feels pain, stupid animal, leaving bloody footprints, there’s a reason shoes were invented.

Jess growls and Iran wonders if he’s lost speech already. Such rapid degeneration. Iran grabs a ceramic plate, he never bought proper dishes before, just paper, but his ex got these for him and he always appreciated it, but never more than when the plate hits Jess in the face and he drops, showing the glass-shredded soles of his feet.

But then Jess is up again, slowed, but up, and Iran barely catches a breath, Jess heading him off from the front door, forcing them into a loop around the apartment. They pass the closet twice. Iran calls it the subconscious, because he puts things in there that are a headache to organize, promising himself he’ll deal with it later, but he never does. A sudden lunge from Jess, skidding on those bleeding feet. Iran leaps to the side and bangs hard against the kitchen counter. He grabs the dish-drying rack and catches Jess’s face with it, the guy drooling blood through the bars like a muzzle. Iran kicks Jess in the stomach repeatedly until he folds up, bloody saliva fountaining across the floor.

Iran leans back against the counter, panting. Jess looks up at him through the dish rack,

teething on the metal rods. "Aghaghagh."

"Fuck," Iran says. He grabs his phone off the counter.

Jess unsticks his jaw from the rack and says, "Please don't let them hurt me, Iran." And even as he says it, he's trying to get at Iran, but he's crying at the same time, and that's when Iran decides.

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He leans against the closet door as something bangs on the other side. He'll have to do this all night. Until Jess falls asleep. And then he'll race for the padlock.

He takes the sunglasses off. A single drop of blood covers one of the lenses. He hopes it's from one of the wounds Jess sustained below the neck, untainted by saliva. Not that it matters, if one of those subtle droplets hit Iran during the chaos. Time to burn in superstition. See what tomorrow brings.

But for now, Jess can stay in the closet.

Full Nelson

He gets back from work and someone is in the hallway. Their posture is directed at him. He tenses, wondering if it's better to rush for his apartment or break for the open space outside.

He forces himself to look. He'd feel like an idiot if he sprinted from a healthy person.

Pink-white skin, flushed in the face. Iran steps back at that. Then he sees the carton of beer bottles clutched in the man's hand.

"Oh, shit. Iran. Iran the man with the plan. I did not know you lived here."

At first he struggles to place the guy, but there's only one place it can be, because there's only one place he goes. Work. "Hello."

"I just moved in."

"Cool. Good to see you, uh..."

"Nelson."

"Sorry."

"Zero worries. Not like we talked much at work."

"Right."

"Mind if I say hi?"

"Sure." Nothing wrong with saying hi. But it looks like hi means following Iran inside his apartment.

He listens for the scrape of nails. For a human throat approximating a growl. Waiting to be outed by a single criminal sound. He moves quickly to the speaker, playing white noise 24/7. It works between the walls, but it's probably not enough inside the apartment. He switches to a black metal playlist his ex sent him, and turns it up.

"You like loud music?"

"I do."

"You're so shy at work, I never would have guessed."

Think of something casual and empty to say. "Guess you never know about a person."

"Funny that you say that."

Why isn't Nelson passing through the emptiness? Why does he continue to cohere, with strange mass and density, in this vicinity?

"It's funny?"

"Yeah, sure. Just thinking about the other day."

"The other day?"

"I'm not the kind of guy who watches people. But I have eyes, right?"

You do have eyes, yes. Wait, what are you saying?

"Hey. I'm sure you had a good reason. Some pressing necessity for a magnetic mixer."

Iran remains silent.

"Now I'm curious. Are you angling for a better job, doing thesis work on the side, or..."

"Look. I'm tired. Maybe we can—"

"I'm not here to make your life more difficult."

But you are. So very much.

"Want some?"

Nelson holds out a green bottle, dripping with condensation. Iran shakes his head. He can't tell if Nelson was threatening him or just has a big mouth, but he can't take anything from this man.

Change the subject. You have the right. You're a grown adult.

"So why did you move?"

Nelson leans against the wall and tries to pry the cap off with his bare hands. A tired crease slices through his permanent grin. "It was this house next to mine. They kept fighting. And I'd wake up thinking it was, you know, the other thing."

"Yeah."

“Logically I knew it was, you know, but tell yourself that when you’re already asleep.”

“I know exactly how it is,” Iran says, heart beating fast.

“I can tell you do, Iran. You have the look of a man who has seen things. And maybe is still seeing things.”

“Seeing what?” Iran is surprised at his own directness, when all he ever does is nod along, change the subject, avoid conflict. But he needs to know what Nelson knows or his pulse won’t go down. Was it just a figure of speech, does Nelson think he’s insane, does he know something else, like he knew about the work theft—

“Hey. I’m drunk. Sorry, man. I can tell you want nothing better than to relax at the end of a hard day.”

“Mhm.”

Nelson stops at the doorway. “Feels great to actually know a neighbor. Modern society is so compartmentalized, you know?”

Iran looks at the padlocked door. “I hear that.”

“He hears it. Loud and clear, captain.”

“Haha.”

Nelson leaves. The door is still open. Iran swings it, then grabs it as he realizes it was about to bang loudly.

Almost lost control. That’s Jess’s job. The padlocked room is the id. Iran is the ego. And everything else is just super.

Best Practices

He can't work with Jess anymore. The guy is wasting away, won't eat, knocks his water over, and his teeth flash closer each time, testing the limits of neck elasticity. Without this ritual of experimentation, this rationale for captivity, it's just weird and hopeless. Stuck with the care of someone who does not improve, who barely seems to have a life of their own, yet saps the life of someone who could live. Iran wonders if his parents felt the same way about him, the late blooming speaker.

"Please. I just need a blood sample."

Jess's feet slip in place, both hands held out like extensions of his teeth, straining so hard the collar keeps him upright in a parody of bipedalism, saliva hitting every inch of the closet. Iran holds the syringe impotently, trying to find a way into this insane puzzle. Fix Jess. Do what he couldn't do with his family. Then everything will make sense. Everything he lost. Nice sunk cost fallacy.

There's something sticky on the floor. Iran shines his penlight on it.

White-yellow stains.

Taking care of someone means being aware of every single part of them. The things people normally hide from even their partners. A constant stream of byproducts, the invisible work of being alive painstakingly hidden by a hygiene construct that seems indistinguishable from the human itself, until you see it stripped away.

"Jess?"

Jess humps concrete, already hard again, crawling closer. Iran pushes Jess back and his gloved hand brushes the tip of Jess's cock. It springs up, flushed brilliant purple-red, then spurts across the floor, a strand hitting Iran's glove and swaying in the air.

*

"Jess. I'm so close. Please."

Blood wells around Jess's collar, freshening the reddish-brown encrustation around it. He's going to snap his own neck if he doesn't stop with the attempted rape, cannibalism, and other common symptoms.

"Just one blood test. That's all."

It's been a few hours and Jess is already hard again, cock taut against his malnourished stomach, pearling down the shaft.

Frustration builds. "You knew you were infectious, but you came here."

Growling.

"Why not your girlfriend's place?"

Growling.

"Because you care about her? And I'm just an acquaintance, my life doesn't have value?"

Growling.

"Or because you thought I'd understand?"

Growling.

"You knew I would. You knew my family history."

Whining. Both of them, in their respective ways. His family didn't listen to him either, at the end. Their illogical compulsion to--no. Their logic was merely replaced with a different kind of logic. He has to respect it, so he can respect Jess's logic. The violent switch in telos.

"Fuck you." Softly.

It's okay. Their skin isn't touching. He jerks his glove up and down the filthy, rashy hardness. Saliva is no longer dispersing annoyingly into the air. It's dripping down Jess's chin, down his dirty ribs, back to the very thing that feeds it, lubricating Iran's gloved grip.

"That's the difference between you and me, Jess. I'm here processing my traumatic backstory and you're getting jerked off and having rabies."

Iran starts to relax in spite of himself. His head is somehow clearer in this squalid closet than it is under the open sky. Jerking someone off isn't like doing dubious medical research, it has a clear end point. The one thing he can do today that isn't doomed. He's never jerked another person off before, but he knows how he likes it. Toward a reproducible best practices of rabid subject rapport...

He looks shyly at Jess's eyes. They can't judge him, rolled back at the ceiling with pure animal heat, mouth hanging idiotically. An odd comfort, not to be looked back at. This must be why people keep pets. A safe amount of intimacy. He finally understands.

The idiot mouth bites at Iran's respirator. Emotionally safe, but not physically. Got too

complacent, lulled by the rhythm of the stroke. Iran grabs the chain and jerks Jess's head back, flashing teeth just out of range. Saliva covers the clear plastic of the eye protector and he rubs faster, barely able to see what he's doing, desperate to finish before one of them gets hurt. His grip on the chain moves at the same cadence as his jerking hand, punctuating Jess's air supply, pant, pant, gurgle. Something changes about Jess's cock, an ominous finality to the hardness. Iran tightens his grip and Jess arches back, drooling upside-down until saliva clogs his nostrils and makes him gasp for air.

There it is. Splat on the opposite wall. Amazing cumshot, Jess. Impotence sufferers nationwide will be clamoring for this big dick rabies. And the best part? It's free.

Jess curls up, only growling a little as Iran finds a vein.

"Good. Almost there."

Iran gently slides the needle in. The syringe fills with blood, heavy and diseased.

The Cutting Edge of Medicine

He reaches to the back of the fridge for a bag of leftover delivery. His hand brushes cold glass. A vial of clear liquid. He made that solution two days ago. He gets a bad feeling each time he looks at it. It means abandoning his routine (which was gross and awkward but it was a routine, and it held him together) and finding out if he's been crazy this entire time.

*

Jess vibrates on the floor, his entire frame revolting against the sedatives that Iran put in his water an hour ago.

"I have to accelerate, Jess. I think someone is going to find out about us."

And the only way out is a cure. Which won't happen. Because an actual lab would have figured it out first.

"Sorry in advance if this kills you."

He slips the needle inside Jess, leaning back to avoid the wild spray of saliva.

*

Time's up. He opens the closet and catches a wave of heat like he was cooking something wet in the microwave.

He never considered the terrifying burden of getting rid of a body in an urban setting. He could have done that in the first week. Called the city and said, there's this guy with rabies. No questions asked, they would have come over and shot Jess.

But now he's got this elaborate interior world that he can't explain. Scientific equipment, padlocked closet, buying raw meat at odd hours. And a problem called Nelson.

Not sure if Jess is actually dead. But he's unusually still. Either way it violates the pet codes. And felonies are scattered everywhere. Biohazardous waste. Criminal transmission. He tried to keep Jess clothed for awhile, but what can you do when someone pisses without thinking about it, and even if Jess didn't get an infection the sheer discomfort of that itching would prevent all therapeutic progress (Iran wonders if other people would understand, or if his sensory processing issues give him a dermal intuition, as if Jess's skin were his own, a sympathy ingrained from the earliest sensations of infancy where he was unable to control his own exposure to moisture, heat, light, sound—), and there's nails to clip, hair to trim—

That's the thing about losing your mind. Your body keeps growing. You continue moving forward into time. Your outline detaches. And those differences can split you apart.

He takes a step into the dark. Smells awful without the mask. But even when the door is shut, the earthy, ammonia reek inserts itself unexpectedly. When he's doing the laundry, when he's frying seitan burgers on the stove, when he's trying to masturbate before falling asleep in bed. But he's used to it now. A familiar barnyard smell.

He's about to shut off the light when Jess blinks.

"Jess?"

No hint of recognition. So he gets his suit and mask on and starts cleaning. He can't help but smile miserably. "I'm a germaphobe. That's what makes this so funny." And so unpleasant. But it's not all bad. Jess is an amazing listener. Iran spent most of his life unable to get a word in, everyone else more quick and confident with their interjections. Now he can unspool his thoughts at length, get them in the proper order, preamble and annotate every facet of his topic...

He freezes, then shuts off the hose. Something is etched into the floor, next to those long nails. A distorted letter? Or mere scratches.

"Jess?"

"Hnnnnnn."

"That's a good start. That's so good, Jess."

"Hggghhh."

What must it be like for Jess to see this isolation suit instead of his friend? Every day, like a fucking astronaut. Iran puts his gloved hand on Jess's leg. "Don't give up, okay?"

Jess growls, but his eyes have something trapped in them. Or maybe Iran is editorializing. That's what a dog is though. The ultimate projection organism.

Don't give up. What the fuck is that supposed to mean to a dog? Tone counts for a lot though. But Jess isn't a dog. It's just a metaphor. A model for understanding.

Another growl, louder and longer.

"Jess. It's me."

Jess lunges and Iran falls on his ass. He has to get out, but not for his own sake. That collar is going to cut through Jess's neck.

“I have one more thing I can try. Stay, uh, stay here.”

*

He sucks liquid into the syringe. A slight modification of the last dose. Maybe it'll kill Jess, but it won't feel as bad as euthanization. For Iran at least. Because he has the best of intentions.

But if it doesn't work, he needs it to fail, hard. Because something has to change. In those early optimistic days, settling into a routine, the fear almost seemed manageable. But now he's scared again. Nelson broke their private world.

Fear turns to anger, then back again. It's terrifying to be angry in this closet. Worrying the saliva got to him somehow. Feels like a righteous enough anger, though. But anger always does.

If he, just one man, kept Jess safe all these months, why couldn't the labs? You can't save everyone, but they could have done better. Everyone was so paranoid after that cascade infection in the facility on the East Coast. One of those things that really made people feel like they were living in a horror novel.

But since then, life has been mostly boring, with a constant, uninteresting tension, no good pacing, no skillful plotting, just stretching on and on.

He strokes Jess gently, praying the sedative still holds. Jess's back is smooth under his glove, except for the occasional bump of a scar. Jess was really tearing himself apart. But he still has a face. That counts for a lot, when it comes to being human.

He finds a vein and slides the needle in.

*

He waits for the cure to fail. He flips through his notes, back to early days, when people were still trying to explain the origins of the disease.

The data is a mess. Most of the accounts read like creepypasta, bot propaganda, conspiracy theory, or shitposts.

He remembers a certain detail that kept recurring. Hard to know if statistic significance or virality. Correlation or cospypasta. So much fucking Italian food. But something about this one post stuck with him. It was unassuming, in an obscure forum, with no attempt to craft a resolution.

They said someone smiled at them. And that's when it happened.

The post no longer exists. He should have archived it.

Most memes about the disease reference it as a type of rage. LOL rage. U mad? So does everyone he works with. Us vs them. The careful vs the incontinent. They must have gotten high, drunk, went on vacation, tried to hook up, been *weak*. And now they're another frenzied statistic that we have to clean up, because they couldn't control their tantrum.

It's not rage. He saw everything run through Jess that night. Terror. Despair. Pleasure. Maybe they'd have flawless wellbeing if we just let them eat our faces. There's considerable psychology here, and what a wonderful and easy thing for a non-expert to dabble in. He's been learning his whole life by the mere fact of having to manually teach himself the many esoteric rules of society, and he owned a dog when he was 13. He's qualified.

And even if someone else is more clever than him, more insightful, more steeped in the neurological disciplines, he's the only one who fucking cares.

Something's been nagging at him through the white noise. And only now does he realize what it is. Someone is crying in his closet.

The Pain of Being a Man

It's so weird when Jess starts talking again. He keeps saying sorry, over and over, and Iran almost responds, it wasn't your fault. It's a disease. It hijacked your body. Because that's Iran's impulse. Analyze. Contain the problem. Solve it. Move on.

He watches Jess press himself into the corner of the closet, shuddering like he's trying to escape his own skin. Words alone can't fix this.

The isolation suit crinkles as he puts his arms around Jess. "You're safe." He considers the double meaning of that phrase. He hopes both are true. Physical touch seems to help, because Jess relaxes in his arms and takes a deep breath. "Smells. Fucking bad in here." His voice is rusty.

"Mmhm." Now Iran is the one having trouble speaking. He can't believe it worked. He can't believe he's communicating with someone who was beyond communication. A fugue-beast.

Jess pulls away, the suit plastic sticking to his sweaty skin. "Did I kill someone?"

Iran pauses. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Yeah."

Iran always wondered what happened with the sister. Or maybe Jess got infected on the way. Some guy preaching spittle on the sidewalk.

But when Jess returned, he was still in control. Just barely.

"You didn't have any blood on you. When you came back."

"Good."

*

Jess sits on the kitchen floor, sunlight flooding through his face. He touches his mouth, as if feeling it for the first time, then gasps. A drop of blood swells on his fingertip.

"I feel like I was drugged. Like I did something really bad. It's everywhere. It's in my mouth. I can feel the sounds I was making." Growl scars. "I was awake. But I couldn't see clearly. I don't know how to remember it. But it still hurts."

"Do you remember anything before that?"

“Oh, fuck.” Jess covers his mouth with his hand.

Iran feels like he gave Jess the forbidden fruit. The curse of sin and memory. It’s like that quote at the start of a bunch of horror films, how does it go, he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man? Except in reverse.

He can’t think of anything to say, so he puts a glass of water on the floor. Jess’s posture is still fucked up, no tables and chairs, just leaning against the wall like he needs the whole thing to prop him up. It’s for the best though. Have to establish a quarantine and test his viral load. Asymptomatic transmission is still a possibility.

Jess picks up the water with a shaky hand. “Thanks.” He sips it painfully, hiding his bloodshot brown eyes under that oily hair that grew so long.

Iran sits at a distance he hopes will split the difference between humanizing and safe. Questions build in his throat. Unprecedented access to rabid qualia, but also the ominous, meaningless, foregone thing he’s wondered since the first day.

“What happened to you?”

THEN

A taxi drops Jess off at his sister’s house, leaving him alone on the quiet street as the sun fades on the horizon.

A window is broken. He gets out his pepper spray, knowing if something comes for him, he should probably just run. Because spraying distance cuts both ways.

He tries the door. Unlocked. The foyer is empty. He steps inside, legs tensed to dart right back out.

His sister walks from the kitchen, a dead look on her face.

“Hey,” he says. Then he shuts up. Because it feels like she’s the only person with something to say here.

“You came to check on me?”

“Yeah.”

Her hand drops from her back. From her waistband.

“What happened?”

"I don't have a boyfriend anymore."

"Shit."

"He came back from his business trip. Came back wrong."

She looks at the broken window.

"I had time to grab that little gun of mine."

Blood on the floor. But no body. So emergency services was already here.

"I gave him until the minimum social distance."

*

He stays the night by accident, falling asleep next to her bed. He was reading her some dumb shitpost like he used to, trying to get her mind off things. But it's not in her mind anymore, it's in her body, the hypothetical become actual, and he's waiting to see what it makes her. Like she's one of his therapy kids, cast into a river of trauma.

She's strong. She'll be fine. He dozes off to that refrain.

In the morning she rolls over and grabs his hand. Looks down and says she has to go in for testing. Mandatory after possible exposure. But she used a gun. So she'll be fine. Like a condom.

I love you, sis.

On the way back to his hotel, he stops at a bar. The bouncer barely waves the temperature gun at him.

Fuck he needed a drink, so that all this could dissolve, this miserable careful life, and the fear for his sister, the only living relative he still really talks to, besides the one-sided phone calls to his mom in the nursing home. Dissolve into ethanol. Into safe heat.

Is that Drea? They knew each other in high school. But she won't remember him. He's been away for years, and they started running in different circles, weird little hamsters of adulthood —

"Jess?"

“Drea. Holy shit.”

“Still kicking.”

“I can see that.”

“You look good. Real healthy.”

“Haha.”

“Something wrong?”

“Nah. You just used to be so shy. Shit. Sorry. That was rude—”

“High school was a long time ago.”

She’s smiling though. That’s good. He doesn’t want to be alone tonight.

They talk about Rache. They were all mutuals back then, and he kind of dated Drea, then he dated Rache, and then he moved west with her for that great job opportunity—

“Is she still a bitch?”

He laughs like he isn’t sure how to answer that, then finishes his rose hip cocktail. “The thing is.”

“Here Jess goes. Speechifying.” She mimics that thing he does with his hands.

“Haha. The thing is. She knows she’s a horrible person. And maybe, deep down inside, I think most people are, so the most annoying thing to me is people who don’t acknowledge it. Just admit we’re fucking animals.”

“We are, Jess. We really are.”

“Haha. Um. I have to, uh,” he jerks his finger at the bathroom.

*

The door opens and karaoke spills in for a second.

“Drea?”

“It’s boring out there.”

He zips up and starts washing his hands. He's suddenly tired of the alcohol-lubricated, cheap movie dialog, "Hey. I've had a really good time hanging out."

"But?"

"Don't make me say it." Because that'll make you seem like a bad person.

"Say it."

"I'm not, uh, cheating on Rache."

She kisses him and he doesn't pull away. But he's going to. He has to be the one to stop first, so it won't count. Just a movie style kiss of passion, the kind the hero is surprised by, then refuses. And he was surprised by it. And he's going to stop. Because he's a good guy.

Such a warm, wet kiss. Did she shotgun her drink into his mouth?

He feels something hard rolling around on his tongue. He spits her tooth into the sink. It rattles around and falls down the drain, followed by bloody saliva, veining down the porcelain rim.

He pushes her away and she trips on her high heels, collapsing in a urinal. She looks up at him with blood bubbling from the sides of her mouth.

"Too late. Might as well enjoy it." Her voice is soft, almost scared or apologetic.

He sees it now. The sadness under her bravado. The sadness of burning.

He runs, but there's nothing to run from anymore.

NOW

Jess stares out the window. The memory seems like a bad horror movie he saw as a kid.

"We have to tell my sister I'm okay."

"Hmm."

"I can't let her think I'm dead. She lost her boyfriend, then me, what if she kills herself?"

"Do you think she would do that?"

"I don't know. It's just what I worry about. After my dad."

“Mhm.”

“It’s crazy how people get used to things. Pandemic after pandemic, then the, this—” He points to his mouth. “—and you think, how can people stand this? We’re not living like humans. But people trick each other into living.”

The sound of gulls on the rooftop. A distant train.

“Hey,” Jess says.

“Yes?”

“Thanks for watching out for me.”

*

Jess takes the loft. A rabid stylite, renouncing the sins of viral transmission. They usually converse between floors like an upsized version of talking to another kid in a bunk bed, but he comes down to use the bathroom and get food and he lingers, covering his mouth contritely, and they talk, Jess is hungry for talking, even if the shape of his voice has changed and he gets embarrassed about it.

“I’m going to give you a little Scopolamine. That should help you drool less. And maybe do something for the nausea.”

“Where’d you get this?”

“Work.”

Jess surveys the lab equipment. “You stole all this?”

“Most of it.”

“Holy shit, Iran. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I think that’s the general theme of this decade.”

“Hahaha.” Drooling.

Iran picks up a flu mask, then tosses it away. “We need something that can tolerate fluids.”

He orders a restaurant spit guard and it arrives the next day. Jess puts it on and stares at

the bathroom mirror. "I look like a zombie who works at Subway."

"Looks chic."

"Haha." The plastic spatters with saliva.

*

Every time Jess moves a little too fast, Iran flinches.

"You're still afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of the virus in your saliva."

"Thought you cured me."

"I don't know yet. Maybe. Or you might need regular therapeutic dosing."

"Are you talking about the rest of my life?"

"Seems like an improvement on shitting in the closet."

"Nnnn." Frustration condenses inside the mouth guard. "I'm a fucking fountain, when does it end?"

"I don't know. But do you understand how monumental it is that you can even talk at all—"

Jess grabs an orange and eats it messily over the trash, juice spurting onto the black plastic bag. "Ow! Fuck!"

"What happened?"

Jess spits out bloody peel. "My teeth are still fucked, it's all fucked—"

Iran doubts the dental formation will reverse itself. That would feel a little too neat, a little too magic. All Jess can do now is survive his own body.

"They're forcing my mouth open, it looks stupid—"

"I don't know what will happen with your teeth, but they fit in your mouth, and they did for months. You just have to learn a different way."

Jess gives him a hopeless, pathetic smile, like he was trying to conceal it or modulate it into a

quick flash of irony. But his teeth don't let him get away with it.

The Hand That Feeds

On the couch waiting for a blood test. Dark outside. Stuck in the stink of this apartment, listening to Jess fuck around in the bathroom, probably drawing on the mirror again. Can't blame him, kenneled up for so long.

Jess comes out, shaved down to his lonely naked jaw, a careless cut on the neck. He comes over, touching his teeth compulsively. Touch touch touch.

"Iran."

"Yeah?"

Iran pulls back but Jess has already knelt by the couch, looking up with wet brown eyes, and a palpable viral heat.

"What are you doing?"

He puts his hand on Jess's head, trying to keep the saliva emission away from his face. But the reality of that touch takes him by surprise, reminding him of the first time he wrestled with his brother, the difficulty of keeping back the disorganized rolling mass of a human head with its many flurrying strands that poke and tangle and slide under the fingers, and under it, soft rubbery clefts to sink into, eyes, nostrils, lips, until your defense becomes more of a threat to the other person, and you stop so you don't tear their hair or worse.

Jess's hair feels like the saltwater caught in sun-scorched plastic bottles in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

"Jess. Please."

Now he's stupidly sniffing Iran's armpit. "What?"

"You're not wearing your guard."

"I'm not keeping that shit on my face."

"Then go somewhere safe."

Jess crawls up the couch, each inch burning another heartbeat to cinders.

"Why are you touching me?"

"You're so fucking controlled. And you think I'm weak."

“I don’t—“

Something breaks the skin on Iran’s hand. He inhales stiffly. Jess’s saliva squirts down his wrist, running clear, then red.

“You’re so sharp, Jess.” It really is remarkable. Knives in the mouth.

Jess unlocks his jaw and Iran pulls his hand out slowly. It weeps from bloody holes.

“You hurt me.”

Jess laps at the punctures and Iran almost pulls away. But the wound is already there. It doesn’t matter. And he looks so sorry for what he did. Lick lick, cleaning the wound, with viral saliva that feels like normal saliva.

Iran was right. He didn’t find a cure. It was too implausible. He found a compromise. An expensive, temporary compromise. That’s not very sexy. They already let old people get eaten by maggots in nursing homes, so what happens to difficult, hungry, ambulatory people who can contribute nothing but an honest and raging heartbeat? It’s like a world where an animal eats an animal of the same kind. Can’t recall the species.

He goes to the bathroom and rinses the holes in his hand. Then he looks at his face, while he can still recognize it. Shining wet under the bathroom light. Red veins in his eyes. Like he’s already infected. But he knows better. It’s just from how stressed he is. Maybe it would be good to get a break. Cross the Rabiescon. He must be really tired if he’s entertaining that thought. Just a thought. An illogical thought. The first nip of a rival telos.

Have to get back to work. Every hour that passes, he’ll trust it less.

*

Jess seems a little calmer after dinner. He even tried to use a fork to eat the steak tartare Iran made, although he ended up shoving his face in it anyways. Now he stares at Iran with those big, some kind of animal, can’t quite place it, eyes.

“I figure with your autism, you have, uh, twenty percent extra time to fight this thing.”

“Shut up.” Iran scribbles rapidly in his notebook, past a drop of raw pink meat juice.

“Losing it already?”

“I’m not losing it.” Not an undisciplined normie like you. I’ve had years of repression to prepare

me for this.

“Sorry. Haha. Sorry. Really. I just didn’t want you to leave me.”

“I know.”

“If you can't handle me at my...uh. Fuck.”

Iran flips the page and keeps writing.

“Sorry. Sorry.”

“That is an interesting thought, though. My brain insulating me from the emotional swings. It’s not like anyone really studies that sort of thing. Not for adults. So I might as well treat it like magic. I earned that right.”

“Yeah. After my kids stopped being kids, there was nothing for them. I’d sit in that room, you remember that room, the cozy room, with all the beanbags, all those kids would be looking at me, or looking at nothing, or looking at me and seeing nothing, and I’d look back, and I’d just see future adults. But I couldn’t tell them there wasn’t anything out there. Because that would make it worse. They need hope to move forward. To have any chance at all. Or you develop a complex.”

“Yeah.”

“Like a time traveler, you know? That’s what an adult is. But you can’t share what you know. Or the kids will explode, or your job will. No one wants to hear it. Fuck.”

Jess’s fingers are bleeding. He bit through the nails and now he’s starting on the skin. It really bothers Iran. The risk of dermatophagic infection, and the preview of an appetite he doesn’t want to acknowledge yet, that he can’t accept from a time traveler, because he has serious work to do before he enters the fever-future.

He finds some bandages. Jess whines as they squeeze around his tender fingertips.

“Hold still.”

By the time the last bandage is applied, Jess is leaning close and dizzy, and Iran isn’t sure if it’s from crying or hunger or both or everything.

“This must. This must be really traumatizing for you. With what happened to your family—”

What a thing it is for a family to lose their teeth together. Gathered in the bedroom, around a

bloody puddle of teeth. Crying. Louder and louder.

That's the sound that stays with him. The horrible keening. And his voice, like a traitor, absent from it.

"I'm not one of your kids, Jess."

Jess holds him, trembling from trying not to bite him. "I know you're emotional too. Even if you don't show it the same way. They just weren't looking for it."

The fever that Iran thought was isolated to his own body is now all around him. He can't find the compact shape he made so long ago, squeezed under the sink, in the house his family lost their teeth in, and squeezing ever since so he could fit in the world of people who don't want to think about what it means to lose your teeth, together, or alone, and grow new ones, alone, or together.

"You don't really feel this way about me."

"Why not?"

"It's just the disease. It's lowering your inhibitions."

Jess scratches the collar scarring around his neck, concentrating very hard on getting his human words in order. "Listen. You stupid, serious guy. Life is everything that happens to you. Minerals, pollen, microplastics, drugs, not doing drugs, music, not listening to music, how much sugar is inside you, it's all life, it's all flipping your variables, billions of little knobs, in ways you can't even understand. We're made of all this shit and you don't get to separate it all out and label it and make your perfect Iran decision. So tell me to fuck off and I'll fuck off, or—"

Iran kisses him, then goes prey still at how Jess's teeth cover his like a rockslide, like Jess could bite Iran's mouth out like a scoop of ice cream, drooling so thickly that Iran has to swallow so he doesn't choke, and then shocking clicks of enamel like cracks in a frozen lake, but he's not dead, and he's still not dead, and he's still not dead, and now he's alive, and someone cuts their tongue, he's not sure who, they're burning up together, this guy on top of him with hair like he was trapped in a closet for months, the guy trying not to chew his face off.

The Hand That Does Other Stuff

He gets up early and goes over his notes. Mostly OCD rechecking. Severe self-doubt. His reverie is broken by the sound of Jess running over, almost knocking Iran off his chair.

"Good morning," Iran says.

"Sorry."

"I didn't fall. I'm fine."

"I mean. For other things."

"Like what?"

"Why aren't you mad at me for biting you?"

"I was."

"Didn't seem like it."

Iran doesn't raise his voice. "Do you want me to be mad? I can argue if that would satisfy you."

"I didn't—"

"We're not special. We are the same disease waiting to face itself and recombine into a mess of biomass on the floor of this apartment. We're going to kill each other."

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Making a doomer wall around your feelings."

"I just don't feel like either of us has a moral high ground."

"What? I'm glad you experimented on me. I would have died out there."

"Not that."

"Then what?"

Silence.

"Did something happen?"

"At a certain point I had to pacify you."

"Pacify?"

"See the scarring on your neck? You were putting too much pressure on the restraint."

"I get that. But pacify feels like a pretty big euphemism."

"Um."

"Why are you turning red?"

"I'm not."

"Come on, tell me."

"You got excited. In there."

"Oh."

Iran focuses on his laptop screen.

"So you were, like. Jerking me off."

"I was doing my work."

"You really were."

"Jess—"

"I'm serious. I know you. You were trying to make things less chaotic."

"Yes."

"Knowing your sensory shit, everything you did is even more impressive." Is Jess crying? This is an embarrassing disease. "It goes against your entire nature. And you did it for the guy who tried to eat you."

"I needed a project."

“Haha. I’m being too emotional for you, aren’t I?”

Iran wipes away the sweat of his growing fever. “I just. Never made close friends. I cared about my ex. But I couldn’t see what she needed. And I’m not an animal person. But I feel comfortable around someone with a disease that reduces their humanity. Which seems a little dysfunctional.”

“Being functional didn’t seem to make you happy.”

Mere functioning. Neat as machinery. “Remember when companies started advertising for autistic tech workers? Look what good workers they make.”

“Uh huh.”

“I think I neglected my feelings because they didn’t resemble what people see as feelings.”

“Like when people beat their dogs and their kids for crying without trying to figure out why.”

“Yes.”

Jess rubs his face into Iran’s shoulder. “There’s a lot I don’t remember. But when I’m right here, I can feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“How careful you were with me.”

“I was the only person you were around for months. I could have been anyone.”

“No. I don’t think so. If it were me, I’d have ran.”

“They’re coming for us,” Iran says suddenly. It’s too much, everything, he needs Jess to shut up, he can’t process—

“Look,” Jess says, muffled by the compulsive rubbing. “I know everything is fucked, broken, bad, you’re right, we’re all doomed, I get it. But this feels less broken.”

“You’re really selling me.”

“Does this sell you?”

Iran squirms, almost dropping a vial.

“Is that like, a real science vial?”

“Yes, Jess. It’s a real science vial. I’m trying to keep our brains from, uhh, exploding.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Iran places the vial carefully in its stand and lays his head on the table, palms flat. He stares at the sky through the wide windows. A seagull (bird) and a crane (mechanical). Purple clouds, combed by morning breeze.

“Um.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmhm.”

“Uh huh.”

“Please don’t make a mess.”

“Why?”

“It’s a long walk to the laundromat. And I don’t like sticky sensations.”

“Hahaha.”

“I said, don’t make a mess—” Iran’s palms rattle on the table, fingers stretched, the sky blurring.

Jess doesn’t make a mess. His mouth moves fast, switching for his hand, just the slightest touch of teeth, making Iran shoot even harder, emptying out with fear, every drop catching in Jess’s mouth. When he smiles, his tightly interlocked fangs seem to be melting, white slime oozing between.

Normothermia

Iran gets out of the cab. Feels like a hot day, but he can't really tell at this point.

He walks up to the entrance of the institute then turns with a sudden terror, pretending to check his phone. Co-workers flow past, door swinging as he stares at his lock screen. They're going to wave that temperature gun over his sweaty face, and it might turn into a real gun—

Can't face this right now. He slinks down the sidewalk, into the corner store, to the freezer room in the back where he used to buy beer. Need to get colder. No idea if this will work, but it makes him feel better.

He dials a number. Feels weird. He never talks to people on the phone. Text, email, or nothing. He doesn't expect her to pick up. How can anything real intrude into the absolute nothingness of this mixed commercial-industrial zoning where he works, on the edge of the mixed commercial-residential zoning where he lives.

"Iran?" Mild surprise in her voice. Because he's calling on the phone, or because he's calling at all? Probably both.

"Hey, Nain."

"Everything okay?"

He presses his body into the freezer glass. Maximum surface area. "Mmhm."

"Cool."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Back with my folks. Burnt out, I guess. Pretty hard."

"I understand how you feel."

"Yeah. I worry about you sometimes."

"You don't need to worry." Or rather, the amount of worry he's packing is too big to ethically shift to another brain.

"You make any new friends after, um..." After Jess disappeared?

"Mmhm. I made a really good friend." He bites me and everything.

“Good. I’m really glad you have someone out there.”

“It’s nice to hear your voice,” he says, a little too quickly.

She laughs, tinny and small over the phone. “It’s good to hear you too.”

“So. Um. What have you been up to?”

“Honestly? For the last two months I’ve just been playing the Sims in the same unwashed hoodie.”

He laughs, fogging up the freezer door.

“It’s hard, you know, to feel excited about things. After everything.”

“Yeah.” He gets what she means, so bad it hurts. He wishes he could tell her everything.

“You got any new hobbies?”

Maybe he can say a little. If he’s subtle. “I’m studying the, you know. The big thing. In an amateur way.”

“Why amateur? You still work at that place, right?”

He pulls his face off the glass and wipes drool away with his sleeve. Have to remember to swallow more. “I don’t think they’re interested in the same thing.”

“Yeah. Academia wasn’t good for me either. It doesn’t really have anything to do with the thing it’s studying.”

“Right. They don’t care about a cure.”

“Wait. You’re working on...?”

“Just dabbling. I don’t think they fully explored the possibilities.”

“Well. I hope it’s good for you. You know?”

“Mhm.” She means, don’t get obsessed. But it’s probably too late, once you lock a feral guy in your closet.

“You have to move forward. Even if it hurts. Don’t get too sucked in, okay?”

"I'll try."

"I should go. My parents made lasagna."

"Wish I was there."

"You should visit sometime. I know getting on the plane is scary, with how things are, but. I think it would be good for you. I can tell you're not sleeping."

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Sleep is kind of an important concept, Iran."

"Sometimes I fall asleep listening to that black metal playlist you made."

"Oh shit. I forgot I made that."

"Thank you."

"It's cool you still have it. Would be nice to listen sometime. See what my past self was into."

"Mhm."

"Did you like that one track with the dark elf stuff—"

He shivers.

"Are you sick?"

"No. It's just cold."

"Really? Out there?"

"The wind from the sea is very cold. Sometimes."

He looks at the soft drinks. Thirsty. But he's not in the mood for something sweet. Maybe if they had a special beverage designed to unfuck yourself.

He shouldn't have called. He's going to be a missing person soon. Or a *treatment-resistant subject*, quickly cremated, as if to fully realize his fever. And then he'll be gone from her life again, whiplash.

But while he still has a brain, he needs to be there for Jess.

"You should get that lasagna."

"Okay, Iran."

"Bye." But he doesn't hang up.

"Hey. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"You too, Nain."

The phone hums. She's still on the line.

He swallows, clearing his throat of the constant drip. "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Mhm."

"You always go mmhm when you think your voice is going to crack."

Silence.

"Sorry. That was weird of me to say."

"No. I'm glad you know me so well."

Her turn for silence.

"I'll be okay. I just need to get more sleep."

"Yeah. I hope you can be more than okay, sometimes."

"You too. I'm sorry for. Um. I'm going to try very hard to be okay."

"Good." Her parents are audible in the background. The comforting sound of older people who've grown comfortable with the wrinkles in their voices. "I have to go now. But you can always call, okay?"

“Thank you, Nain.”

He walks out of the freezer room, past the weird glance of the cashier.

*

The stale air in the security hallway feels like it’s been trapped here since the pandemic started, thick with panic.

He doesn’t realize what he’s doing wrong until he’s second in line. He didn’t do anything about the big bandage on his hand. But it’s too hot to wear gloves or a jacket with long sleeves. He shoves his hand deep in his pocket just as security waves the next person through.

Was this one of the guys who was out back with the invoiced bullets? Muh. Name started with an M. M points the temperature gun at him. He tries to look vacant. That’s what he’s good at. They called him robot in middle school, and most other things.

M looks down at the scanner. “Running a little hot.”

Iran smiles weakly, swallowing saliva before speaking. “Bit of a hangover.”

He thinks he sees commiseration in Madoc’s face. That’s what it was. Madoc. Not Maddox, but sometimes, Madoc’s, sometimes he has something. A sandwich from Subway, or a non-alcoholic coffee. Maybe he should tell Madoc how great it is to drink at work. Maybe not.

“Take it easy.”

“Will do.”

And then he’s through.

Of course he’s through. How many times has Nelson or Rache gone through here stinking of booze?

He realizes he skipped breakfast. He was full of something else. A warmth that proxies for all his other senses. He stares into the patheticness of the staff fridge. This bland processed carrion. It smells wrong. This sawdust won’t do.

Fast forward through the facility. Pretending to perform his job like a little spaceman. Bite holes itching under his clothes. Winding closer to the room with the shit he needs. No need for background descriptions, this is all about Iran and his feelings, his victory, his glory, but, but, he doesn’t want to become a universal generic manic man, he likes his quiet, pathetic dignity. Jess needs someone to contrast with. What did Tolstoy say? All rabid guys are alike; each beta cuck

is cringe in his own way. Rararara—

Record scratch. Rache, standing unreasonably near to the cabinet with the boring McGuffin he needs to do his stupid science shit.

“You don’t have your little cup.”

“I guess not.”

“Did you learn to pregame, Iran?”

“Only way to survive this job.”

“As your manager, I can’t condone that statement. But,” she laughs a little unevenly, “I certainly can’t deny it.”

He laughs with her. An easy laugh. Voiced, even though he doesn’t think what she said is funny. It feels good to go with the flow. We all want to be friends here, and if not friends, we certainly want something so adjacent to it that there’s barely any difference to the casual observer. Why couldn’t he understand that before?

“Is that a workplace-related injury?”

Rache is looking at his hand. Big sexy bandage. Covering up the holes her boyfriend put there.

“I’ll be honest with you.”

“Alright.”

“This injury.”

She listens carefully.

“To be specific.”

“Yes?”

“Took place in a non-workplace environment.”

“Thank Jesus.”

The second she leaves the room, he opens the cabinet and grabs what he was looking for, then spins and heads down the hall. Surveillance cameras are up ahead like animal eyes in the

canopy. He tucks the item into his messenger bag just before he enters their gaze.

Splashing his face in the bathroom. It's a hot fucking day. That's objective. Come on.

"Sup, Iran."

Nelson. Stay the fuck away from my apartment, Nelson. But Iran doesn't say that. "What's up."

Nelson parks at a urinal. "Something happen to your hand?"

"I had a workplace-related injury."

"Sucks."

"Mmhm."

"There's something about you today."

Is it the felony in my bag, or the felony in my blood?

"You're looking healthy."

Can't say the same. You've got a drinking problem. You make it easy for infected scum like me to get in here. You're throwing off the temperature norm. "Thanks." Really. Thank you.

"Taking off?"

"Taking off." Just repeat the words. Nothing matters. Echoing meat. We're all taking off, Nelson, flapping into the sky.

He walks away, even though he can tell Nelson was trying to have a conversation with him. He feels like the quintessential walker, easy and archetypal, no need to think about any of his movements. In fact, his feet are taking him toward the exit, and his fingers are ordering him a cab. He was going to stick around so he didn't deviate from his normal habits, but fuck that. Take the day off. Because soon, it won't matter. He'll fix everything.

He walks past the guard, muh, Madoc, here's a casual nod, between guys, as guys do, how's that work going, that fucking work we do every day, in this fucking machine, oh, it feels good to get a nod back, he could have been nodding at people all this time and no one told him how good it feels to perform a simple acknowledgment of each other's mutual existence, and then he bangs through the swinging doors and he's out in the sunshine and it's a scorcher.

Waiting on the street. He wishes someone would walk past so he could say hi. What could be

more beautiful than interacting with strangers? He feels like he could tell someone his whole life story right now.

The cab is thirty seconds away.

Shit.

He retreats into the alley, past the pile of used Splenda packets, past the creamer cups. He looks around. A seagull stares at him. He grins at it and a tooth falls out of his mouth and he flicks it in a dumpster. He wipes his lips with a paper napkin that was fluttering on the ground, brilliant white in the sun.

The First Smile

Iran gets home and it's quiet. He enters the bathroom, not flicking the switch, enjoying the soft indirect light passing through the cracked door.

The door opens, letting in more light, then dark again, dark like an invisible fire, leaning over him. Iran smiles, then doesn't.

"Not now." Now is fine, actually, but it comes out like a test. He doesn't want to start if he can't stop.

"Come on."

"I thought we were on the same side."

"We will be."

Iran tries to squeeze between Jess and the bathroom door, too fast, too late, you're supposed to move slow around animals. His hand flies up and catches in Jess's jaw. His skin breaks in great wailing punctures like he's made of small animals, how did he not see all the kittens, hamsters, stoats, ferrets, mink he was made of?

Something is off about the pain, a dreadful tolerance, like he could lose track, a leper in the wolf den. Like he could lose some fingers to Jess. Bleeding across the white of the sink, the toilet, it hurts how far those eyes have fled from this morning.

"I preferred you with high-functioning rabies."

Jess grins like he's about to get in on the joke, but it doesn't take, but he does. Skin snaps. Iran retreats to the bathtub and more white becomes red. Each bite bends his spine like a bow, hot wet air bursting from his mouth, returning to him, choking on himself, unable to catch a breath, nerves blown.

Your mania has subdued and cowed my mania. Your heat has become a shock. That killing snap and whine of hypervoltage, the kind that fuses your hand with the conducting medium, unable to pull away as your skin chars. You are a heart attack. A disease with a face. A thin layer of tissue that compromises me utterly.

"I don't like when you forget me. When it makes you mean—"

Someone smiled
and teeth sprang from the flesh
spilling from the trees
bark with bite
chewing from the grass
from within all life

from the mineral gradient
You cannot find anything that is not alive
in its own way.
Who was the first smiler?
A smile can change your life.
A life can change your smile.
Red.

Iran weakly strokes that hounding hair, that sated head. Drunk enough to let Iran take him by the neck, woozy and tractable, blood stupid. Iran leads him to the closet, then collapses. He pulls off his jeans and inspects the holes. Top of the thigh, through the clothes. It might be okay. And he can still move his arms. Or maybe his fever is fooling him, dread, dread again, that he's bleeding out without awareness. For a moment he wonders if Jess needs water after exerting so hard, then laughs silently in disbelief in himself.

Care is the way out. Care is death. Care is the way out. Care is death. Are you worth my time? My time has no value, yet I value it greatly. So maybe it does. It must, if medicine costs money, and medicine comes from blood tests, bone marrow, stolen cells, buying ourselves back in extruded, unnatural pill form, I've seen it all ground, distilled, centrifuged, extracted—

He cleans his wounds in the bathroom. He never used to notice how empty it was. The closest to any kind of decoration, aesthetic, superfluity, is locked inside the sterile black and silver of his computer, tablet, phone. More compartmentalization.

The house he grew up in was so cluttered. He forgot that. All those ordinary annoyances, the hormesis due a child, stolen from him by the big thing, the tyrant of memory. His mother's pungent cooking smells, heirlooms, tchotchkes, his brother's Pokemon cards trampled underfoot—even the somberness of his father's office had traces of his father's interests; aeronautics and cricket and backgammon, and an unexpected pivot from aircraft models to mecha models once he saw Iran putting one together (he forgot that too, another stolen memory, all interest in mechas and animation vanished), setting aside the sprues in careful gray rows.

This apartment had nothing, until now, as if bursting after suppression, brilliant blinding red everywhere, and Jess's smell, ripe with hunger, no, violence, no, none of these horror tropes suffice. Rabid reek of life irreducible. Jess is just being generous with his blood. No, really, he is a generous person. Iran remembers a little feeling he had when Jess would go hang out with Rache after work instead of him, or when Rache would enter the living room while they were playing games and the energy would shift, a man and a woman, their home, and Iran in the background, back to high school again, never a vital part of the group, just a lingering presence people would occasionally notice like a smell.

He could never articulate it before, but he wanted to be the subject of Jess's generosity. That warm and plentiful attention, that easy desire to please. But now Jess wants to give him things he can't survive. He knows it's part of the same spectrum that makes Jess so likable, turned up

to unbearable levels. That's why it's so sad.

Still. He knows what a body looks like when it endures rabid attention. Part of Jess was holding back. He was giving those bites like kisses. But they won't be for long. Because every mouth grows out here, clean or dirty, one closing to open the other.

Half Nelson

The music is loud but it's not just for drowning out sounds anymore. Iran drums along to it, Jess slapping the inside of the closet wall in response, communicating through vibrations, unless you count the hysterical half-laugh, half-cry.

He cleaned his holes, all the new ones Jess made in him. He wiped up the blood. He's tight with bandages. He can work now.

God, he's outdone himself. There's nothing like being infected with the disease itself for motivation. All virologists should be similarly afflicted. Why stop there? A controlled cut to surgeons before they enter the operating theater, bleeding out slowly into a designated basin, reminding them of the fragility of life, harmonizing them with the universal pulse. And then a neat stitch on successful completion.

He bangs on the table as the song climaxes, then picks up the dose. Such a boring clear liquid. Why did he need this again?

No. Look at all this equipment. There was a reason for this. If you lose control, people will hurt you, then hurt Jess. You need to be an adult. You need to protect the dogs.

A knock on the door. Iran sits up straight. No one visits him. So it must be something bad.

He calms himself. That isn't how a cop knocks. Not how it sounded in his parent's house. He could barely get up to unlock the door, thinking they'd blame him for the mess in the bedroom, and the bathroom, and most of the other rooms. Or write him off as a vector, punctuated with a bullet. But they didn't start doing that clean sweep stuff until a little later, when they knew they could get away with it.

He looks through the peephole and sees Nelson's face. He inspects the fisheye for dog eyes, then stops. He keeps forgetting that it's already in him.

*

"Didn't catch you at work today. You feeling okay?"

"I feel great."

"You sure?"

"I said I'm fine. Can't you take a hint?"

"Jeez. I thought you were a gentleman, Iran."

"I never said I was anything."

"Hey. I'm just worried about a colleague. About you."

"Why?"

"You keep brushing me off."

"I'm busy."

"With all this stolen equipment that I haven't told anyone about?"

"You're threatening me again." He's scared, he doesn't like being scared, why is Nelson scaring him?

"You're getting paranoid, Iran. You've been alone in your apartment too long."

"I'm not alone."

"Yeah?"

"I have friends."

"They must be invisible, because I haven't seen anyone go inside your apartment."

Is this how people talk to each other? Nelson is more than drunk. He is transcendently a problem.

A hundred easy, angry things come to mind. None of your business. Fuck off. Dick. But the scared half of his brain wins out. "It's not a crime to be shy."

"Maybe if you spent more time with me you'd get that socialization." Nelson smiles like they weren't even arguing.

"Get out." The angry part just won. Or the scared part is trying to keep the angry part away from all this kindling.

"Sorry. I was just trying to be a friend."

"I already have a friend."

"Why can't you have two friends?"

"I do. Her name is Nain and she's staying with her parents and she plays the Sims. She told me about this music we're listening to right now. She was so nice to me even though I didn't deserve it. I wish I'd been a better friend. But we needed different things. And I didn't know what that thing was until recently. But now I think do."

"Okay. Maybe I could be that thing—" Nelson stops talking. Sniffs the air. Iran wonders what it smells like now. He can't tell anymore. "I thought because you're shy, maybe you'd appreciate me making an effort with you."

Maybe. If you hadn't threatened our thing.

"Come on. Can you at least tell me why?"

"Maybe because you don't have four letters in your name."

"What?"

"A name that would fit on a dog tag. That's the kind of person who cares about me. Apparently."

"Well. There's always pet names."

Iran can't help but laugh. Voiced laughter, a surprise from within himself.

"What's so funny?"

"It's all pet names from here on out. Inescapable."

"Look. I know I'm not on your level. But is there anything I can say—"

Nelson shuts his mouth. What did he see? A suspicious annotation in red marker, a skid of blood from the bathroom...

"Something wrong?"

"Nah. Just remembering how late it is." Nelson's fingers brush the pocket where his phone is, a brief subconscious movement.

Iran looks at the vial. He was so close. But now it doesn't matter. Pain pours through the holes in his hand, sudden and throbbing, and in his legs, and his back, and his heart—

"You okay, Iran? You want me to call someone or...?"

Maybe Nelson could help. If only out of his selfish fixation. It's really hard doing this alone. All for a dose that will only prolong the inevitable. He's so tired. And the part of him that isn't tired, is burning his brain to the ground. The immolation that made Jess a prisoner in his own skull, that forced him into a fetid closet.

But this time, there's no one to catch Iran.

He sniffs Nelson.

"What are you doing?"

"You're not going to help me."

"Come on. You haven't given me a chance."

"You can't help yourself. That's why you're here. And not with any of the other people you met in your life, before you met me."

Nelson flinches. "What are you talking about?"

"You can't help people."

"How can you say that about me?"

"Because you don't know how."

Iran unwraps the bandage. That gets a reaction.

"Is that a bite?"

"This is what I'll do for someone I care about."

Nelson moves toward the door, a smile frozen on his face. His teeth are so small.

"Leaving?"

"Yeah, I should really—"

"Don't you want to meet Jess?"

"Jess?" Nelson pauses.

"You know Jess."

“Sure. The guy who died. Or something.”

“Or something.”

“Is he back in town?”

“Yeah.” Iran turns the music up, loud enough to make Nelson cringe.

“Sorry if I came off weird. I’m drunk.”

“You said that last time.”

Iran picks a key off the kitchen counter.

“Well, it’s true. I am drunk. And I gotta go.”

“I think so too.” Iran smiles with all his teeth, old and new.

“What the fuck.”

Iran unlocks the padlock on the closet door, but it opens from the inside.

“Shit shit shit.”

Jess’s nails click on the floor and Nelson is really moving now, tripping over shit, he wants out, but Iran gets in front of him. Nelson rushes like he’s going to knock Iran down, and he can, he’s taller, stronger, but he sees the saliva glistening on Iran’s mouth and he stops, paralyzed by the promise of those delicate drops.

Nelson backs up, looking at the windows. Not a bad idea. The roof adjoins them, flat and open. Iran’s considered it many times, in his fantasies of escape, wondering what he’d do if the cops raided his apartment. But the windows are locked, and you don’t want to fumble with rusty latches as a guy with dogbrain scrambles at you.

“Fuck fuck fuck.”

Blast beats pound as Nelson edges along the wall. Have to tell Nain about this. She’d be happy to know someone was appreciating her music, in high-fidelity, Dog Boy Surround Sound.

There it is. Nelson’s going to bolt for the door again. Iran can tell so easily that it seems like a joke. He steps back into Nelson’s path.

Nelson pulls his shirt over his mouth and nose, somewhat ridiculously, and charges Iran, banging him into a table. Saliva sprays from Iran's mouth with the impact, catching on the shirt. A porous, permeable material, but maybe Nelson will be okay if he doesn't let it snap back on his face.

Jess leaps at Nelson but gets a kick in the head that sends him rolling across the floor. He may have dogbrain, but his muscles are atrophied and his body isn't actually designed to go on all fours. Iran isn't that strong either, so when Nelson grabs his neck and squeezes hard, he can only fountain saliva and squeeze Nelson's wrists. Maybe in a few days he'll get his revenge. Droplet dispersion.

Nelson's hand comes loose, just for a second, groping for a grip again, grabbing that chin, slipping just a few inches on the drool. A hot compulsion flashes through Iran's jaw, something like that occasional, pleasurable receptivity to the mineral taste of water. Biting feels like bunching rubber between his teeth, sparks in his brain as he snaps through the neural failsafes of breaking another person's skin. An incomplete, infantile bite, but enough for the baby fang to puncture. Nelson screams, a horrible, doomed scream, the scream of someone who works in a lab for a highly infectious, incurable disease. He punches Iran hard, over and over, knocking teeth out, the destruction of a face. All the teeth that come out are small and weak, paving the way for sharpness, white seeds in pink loam.

Hahahaha, adrenaline, but Iran is still scared, because Nelson is cocking back for a real skull-cruncher of a punch, he's in his own frenzy, his lifeforce humiliated on a level both surface and immunological.

Jess bites Nelson's leg and that's a full set of teeth, more than an annoyance, an electric wild animal bite sensation that transmits through all of them, from biter to choker to chokee, and they get Nelson on the floor and their mouths are chewing and his is open and empty, except for that sound you make when you're devoured by wild animals, meaningless in this atemporal canine fugue of panting and gnawing.

Tearing, slurping, coughing it up, vomitorium. Their mouths find each other in the red maze, Jess shotgunning blood into Iran. There's nothing clean and vampiric about the exchange, it's full of flesh pulp and bitter byproducts, a peasant's stew of gore.

Their jaws slip free of each other and Iran catches his breath, surveying the tableaux. Jess is on all fours, shoulder blades flexing as he chews. The body spasms below them, converted to twitching machinery. Nelson is trying to say something but why listen to those shitty little words when you can commune through the slightest gasp and nuzzle? Don't let him reinvent abacuses and pottery and gunpowder.

But words have some use, when you want to be specific.

"Hey, this is a good part," Jess says, holding up a strip of something red.

“Spicy sashimi.”

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t eat the liver. This man is an alcoholic.”

“What about this part?”

“That should be fine.”

“I got him good, right? I saved you?”

“You did so good.”

Nelson’s mouth has stopped working, but his eyes flick around, catching Jess’s attention. “Was it worth it, Nelson? Was it worth fucking with the dog boys?”

“You bit off more than you could chew, Nelson.” Hysterical laughing.

“Good one,” Jess says. “Holy shit.”

“Actually, I think that’s me.” Iran spits out a finger. “I could not chew that. But I bit it. And it was more.”

“More than?”

“More than!”

“You could chew!”

“Hahaha. I’m going to lose my mind.” Iran scratches Jess behind the ears. He suddenly feels sad, sad like a dog cursed with a human knowledge.

Jess wipes his mouth, painting his arm with a long red streak. “What’s wrong?”

“We need a face.”

“There’s still some left. I saved the tongue for you—”

“I was the face. So the world wouldn’t get you.”

“Oh, like they’d shoot me if I went outside.”

“Mmhm. But I need to make that not happen.”

Iran crawls over to the table and forces himself to stand upright. Feels weird, putting all this weight on his feet, which should be gripping the earth and propelling him in wonderful flexible motions. He picks up the syringe, getting bloody fingerprints on it. Jess licks his other hand, even bloodier, a tasty treat. It tickles but feels good. Why aren't people licking each other all day? Their temperature isn't high enough. They lack the sauna mouth style. This comforting heat. He can barely remember why he wanted to inject this medicine. His madly baying brain wants to smash it against the wall and join Jess on the floor, in that wet bonfire of arterial joy.

Cauda

Iran is at a cafe, reading a menu. It's a pleasant day outside, just the right temperature, and the windows are open.

LOW

He wears a flu mask. Always a good idea when traveling. Not really that common anymore, everyone's kind of resigned themselves to disease the way one tunes out car crash statistics, but it doesn't particularly stand out either.

A car speeds past and his head snaps to look at it. The mask captures humidity, irritating his face. It reminds him of abnormal, distant times. But now he is restored to society. He even has a friend.

Jess returns from the bathroom and slides onto the bench. Iran feels the half-life heat emanating from him, gently pyrogenic.

"Figure out what you want?"

"Yeah."

The waiter swings by and they order their food.

KILL

It's a slow day for the cafe. The staff are hanging out in the back. Jess lowers his mask, and after some hesitation, Iran does too.

Jess spits a mouthful of salivary buildup into an empty cup of water, the ice at the bottom flowing with warm bacterial drool like permafrost microbes released by global heating. He holds it out and Iran empties his mouth too. When the waiter returns, he's able to say thanks in a clear voice, careful to keep his teeth tucked away.

They eat rare pink burgers and cold pink ice cream (always refreshing now, no matter the season) and milkshakes buried under extra chocolate syrup. They'll burn it off in a day.

Iran works out the next dose date on a napkin. He's getting better at prolonging the effect. But they'll need to cook before the month is out, and make extra this time. Because they're not the

only ones keeping exotic animals.

Nain's family has a shed they don't use, where their sprawling backyard meets the trees. It isn't far to the hiking trails, where people can quietly wander, and sometimes loudly, disappearing and emerging in slippery configurations, immune gradients managed according to artisanal standards.

He looks up for a moment, studying the disease lensed through a guy that is Jess. This smile that leapt from nature, denying compartmentalization, denying separation.

The waiter comes back to ask how they're doing.

"Great," Iran says, enjoying the simple interaction. Jess looks the other way, self-conscious of his lip scars. But they're more careful now, at fitting their teeth around each other. When your teeth are very sharp, you need to be careful with all that lives.

SHELTER

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