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**“PEEL IT BACK SLOWLY” AND “ROLLING RIGHT ALONG”: A
COLLECTION OF BODY HORROR STORIES**

Vincent Manta

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“PEEL IT BACK SLOWLY” AND “ROLLING RIGHT ALONG”: A COLLECTION
OF BODY HORROR STORIES

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VINCENT MANTA

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VINCENT MANTA

GABRIEL BROWNSTEIN

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ABSTRACT

“PEEL IT BACK SLOWLY” AND “ROLLING RIGHT ALONG”: A COLLECTION OF BODY HORROR STORIES

Vincent Manta

Body horror, or any sort of horror story detailing grotesque changes in one's body, has long been considered unworthy of academic discussion and critique. It was not until recently that genres like body horror that fall into the realm of “low culture” have actually been studied seriously. The two stories in this collection enter into dialogue with modern genre, film, and gender studies in an attempt to comment on the current state of body horror and how its tropes function in modern storytelling. Focusing these stories on interpersonal relationships allows the horrors of the body to take front and center as well as commenting on the insecurities facing modern dating. A new level of intricacy is thus added to a genre known by and large for gross-out aesthetics and shock value. Rewrites, multiple drafts, as well as workshop groups all contributed to getting these pieces to where they are. Examinations of critical film essays as well as guidance from faculty constituted most of the research. Stories such as these push the boundaries of mainstream literary discussion while entering into direct dialogue with said boundaries. Body horror becomes a way to not only force extreme reactions from readers, but to comment on cultural nuances other genres don't have the tools for.

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Introduction

“Body horror” or any sort of horror story involving drastic and grotesque changes to the human body has been around since the beginnings of the genre. It came to prominence in the 70s and 80s however through directors like David Cronenberg and John Carpenter. The stories introduced here, “Peel it Back Slowly” and “Rolling Right Along” follow in the tradition of body horror while also attempting to do something different within the framework of the genre. I do this through utilizing influential scholarship, essays, and my five years of study within the St. John’s English Department.

I first encountered Linda Williams’ 1991 essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in my literary theory class Sophomore year through my second reader, Dr. Combs. Williams’ goal with this piece was to critically examine so called “low culture” film genres typically not the subject of scholarly critique. Pornography, melodrama, and horror were the body genres she focused on, as each conjured bodily reactions in both the spectators and participants. Most of these reactions involved the expulsion of bodily fluid. Tears flow in melodrama, people bleed in horror, and orgasms are usually the climax of most pornos. An important thing to remember is that these are stories focusing on “excess.” Their hyperbolic nature is part of the appeal.

The interesting thing about each of these genres is that they encourage viewer participation and engage people in a different way than a typical mainstream drama can. They also all seem female-centric, even if the female at the center is victimized in some way. This poses challenges for feminist film scholars, as the present female bodies serve as objects, instead of active characters. The male viewer is at the center, especially in pornography and horror:

In other words, even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators, as is the case in most traditional heterosexual pornography, it is the female body in the grips of and out of control ecstasy that has offered the most valuable insight (Williams 4).

Body genres appropriate female bodies for the benefit of male viewers.

Historically, horror has been especially guilty of this. Women are often the victims of violence in these stories. Males are by no means spared, but the disparity between how men and women are treated is glaring.

By the time of my first reading of this essay, I had seen numerous horror films and even started writing some of my first stories. This essay however, changed the way I approached horror. I became interested in the idea of not only combining all three of Williams' body genres in my own work, but of making the male body the subject of violence and the female one the main perpetrator.

My stories, "Peel it Back Slowly" and "Rolling Right Along" examine body horror through the lens of dysfunctional heterosexual relationships. I chose bad relationships not only because it was territory I was somewhat familiar with, but because I figured the best way to achieve a synthesis between Williams' body genres was to make interpersonal relationships the center. Bodies, bad relationships, and body genres all came together for me in those two stories.

"Peel it Back Slowly" was written in my senior year and debuted in my creative writing class. Its central character, Robert and Kay, are stuck inside a toxic relationship with one another that only intensifies once they're locked in the same hotel room together

while on vacation. As a genre, I'd say it's firmly a body horror story. It also contains aspects of comedy and of course, pornography and melodrama. This is likely the most complete and polished of my stories as well as one of my best examples of a horror story. Both the male and female bodies in this story are subjected to graphic violence and both are to blame. This was my first take on attempting to revise or expand Williams's ideas about the conventions of the stories I worked in. The revision process consisted of in class workshops as well as constant communication with my instructor, Professor Brownstein.

My other story, "Rolling Right Along" was written specifically for my thesis and came together the summer before I started my final year of graduate school. This is an even more radical vision of an alternative to Williams' thesis; as the female at the center of this story, Alice is a serial killer specifically targeting men for her sexual gratification. Instead of the male killer doing this to a woman, I flipped the script. This story is more explicit than the first in terms of incorporating pornographic and horrific elements. It is also a little less polished. The revision process stretched across two semesters and included numerous rewrites. Once again, Professor Brownstein and I worked closely together and he guided me in terms of clarifying my characters, tightening up the pace, and forming a more cohesive narrative.

Dr. Combs lent his knowledge on gender and horror, allowing me to tighten up aspects of each story. Being grounded in theory and history was as important as attempting to revise and break new ground. He pointed out how my stories work within the intersection of sex and horror, two vital aspects of Williams' area of study.

Going forward, I aim to continue working in body genres and pushing the boundaries of their conventions. These stories are still early examples of my experimentation with this idea. The revision processes were long and difficult, but worthwhile because I was able to execute my vision to the best of my ability. Both of my instructors were instrumental in getting me to that point. Different or expanded versions of both tales are always on the table, but the vision and framework of Williams' body genres remains a constant.

CHAPTER 1

“Peel it Back Slowly”

“What are you doing?”

Kay jumped and turned around. She covered her mouth and stared at Robert from the bathroom. He stood in the doorway with an ice bucket, wearing a loose tank top and board shorts. His shoulders were burnt red and his face was all splotched. He shook his head and stepped into the hotel room.

Baxter, Kay’s shih-tzu barked at him. It was locked in a cage across the room.

Kay rolled her eyes and turned back around. She hunched over, resting her arms on the sink basin, “I think I’m breaking out.” She leaned in to the mirror so her face almost touched the glass. She poked a sore on the corner of her mouth with her index finger. Her back was completely burnt, except for a few tan lines perfectly matching the spaghetti strap top she had on. She stepped back and fluffed her voluminous blonde hair, allowing it to fall over her mouth.

“Well, don’t poke at it,” Robert strolled to the fridge and placed the ice inside.

“You’ll make it worse.”

“Ugh,” Kay moaned, slamming the door shut.

Robert threw his hands up and muttered, “Fine,” under his breath. He plopped on the bed, shaking Kay’s collection of travel animals. She refused going anywhere without them. To his right was the bear he got her last Valentine’s day. He picked it up and made it dance on his chest.

The bathroom faucet ran from behind the door. He looked around the little beach front room he and his love rented to get away from things. A couch sat next to the bed, and next to that were sliding doors that led out to the deck, and then the beach.

He held his hand close to his face and examined his cuticles. His nails were bitten down to the raw meat beneath. His fingertips were all chewed up. They scabbed at the edges. A loose strip of dead skin hung beneath one of the scabs. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and grinded it around his teeth.

Kay burst out from the bathroom and stormed toward the dresser. “Shit! I haven’t had something like this in such a long time.” She opened a drawer and shuffled around. “Damn,” she said, and leaned over to the luggage bag next to her feet. She unzipped it and threw panties, shorts, and a bathing suit top aside, digging to the bottom.

“Is it a cold-” Robert ripped his finger from his mouth.

“Don’t even say that!” Kay whipped around. She held a little tube in her fingers. She made her way back to the bathroom. “And stop picking at your fingers!”

Robert stared at the drop down ceiling. He jumped as Kay slammed the door again. The glass in the light above his head had dead moths and flies nestled in the corners. Robert shivered and looked away.

He turned his attention to his knee. Dead skin collected around the outer edges of the bone. He immediately felt the need to pick at it. After a couple of light scrapes, pain surged through his fingers and up his arm. Robert checked his hand, and realized his nails were too short. Instead, he rubbed his fingertips over the area. Little balls of flesh

collected under his hands. He brushed them away over Kay's side of the bed as the toilet flushed.

Robert's phone vibrated in his pocket. He saw a new message from his Mom. There were also a couple of missed messages from "Taylor." Robert stifled a smile. He shifted his eyes toward the bathroom door.

The door snapped open before Robert finished reading the text. He stuck his phone back in his pocket, and looked up at Kay.

"Does this look any better?" she asked, standing with her hands on her hips. A white wad of cream covered the corner of her mouth.

"It- uh," Robert squinted. "Yeah?"

"I hate this!" Kay shouted, as Robert cringed. "I told you I didn't want to go in that pool. I probably caught something from all those fucking--"

"It probably wasn't the pool," Robert said, getting up and putting the bear aside. He pulled Kay in for a hug. "It's not that bad. Besides, rotting mouth or not, I still...I still--"

Kay wrestled her body away. "So it's bad!"

Robert threw his arms up. "That's not what I meant. Babe, these things happen," Kay rolled her eyes and turned toward the bathroom. Robert paused and put his head down. He bit his lip and then dabbed at it with his fingers. Convinced he was clean for the time being, he continued, "I don't know, I guess I just figured any boundaries we had would be gone by now, no?"

“It’s not about boundaries!” Kay shouted, staring at her mouth in the mirror.

Robert followed her inside.

“It’s seriously not that bad,” he put a hand on her shoulder and tried to turn her around. Kay resisted his pull, so Robert used both hands and forced her toward him. She stared down at her burnt feet. “And who else are you gonna see this week anyway? We still have a couple days here, right? Maybe it’ll clear up by then.”

Kay nodded without looking up. Robert nudged her chin with his index finger, so her eyes could meet his. Her lip quivered, and her mascara smudged with tears. He pulled her in closer. Kay leaned the side of her face onto Robert’s heart. Her head only came up to his chest, but Robert felt she was the perfect height for him. He was always happy that they looked good together, at the very least.

They swerved from side to side in each other’s arms, like they were dancing. Robert thought of the time they danced together under a bridge in Central Park. There was no music except for the pittering and pattering sounds their feet made on the cobblestone floor. That was when they first started dating.

Kay lifted her face away from Robert’s fluttering heart. “It’s not herpes or anything like that,” she choked, finding Robert’s eyes.

“Well, in that case,” he said, arching his head down and smacking his lips against Kay’s. He held the kiss for a few moments, before leaning back. Remnants of Kay’s lip ointment smeared around his mouth.

“Ew,” Kay said, touching her fingertips to her face.

“Ew?” Robert asked, as Kay turned around and picked the tube up from the sink’s ledge. “I’m the one who just kissed someone whose lip is falling off.” He wiped the residue away with the back of his hand.

Kay stopped dabbing cream for a moment to roll her eyes.

“I saw that,” Robert said, pointing at the mirror. “Is that all you do? Roll your eyes at everything?”

Kay put her middle finger up to the mirror as she swirled another layer of cream over her lip with her pinky.

Robert leaned on the doorframe, and stared at Kay, admiring her burnt ass. Suddenly, a sharp pain shot up from the back of his hand. A burning sensation. He sucked his teeth and looked down. Blood and spots of Kay’s scab mixed in with some of the cream he had just wiped away. He winced, and wiped his hand on his shorts.

“What do you think it is?” Robert asked, staring at his hand. It was clear, except for the sunburns. He stroked his stubble.

Kay shrugged. She picked a cosmetics case out of the sink basin.

She dabbed a brush into foundation and swabbed it around her mouth. Her burns were too dark for the tint. “Ugh,” she groaned, punching the wall. The mirror rattled on its hinges as she brushed even harder.

Robert’s stomach growled as he stifled his gag reflex. He stood straight and gazed Kay’s eyes from the other side of the mirror. “You haven’t been out kissing anyone lately, right?”

Kay suddenly stopped brushing. She turned her head toward Robert, then her body followed. “Really?”

“Not that I *think* you did anything,” Robert added.

“I didn’t” Kay arched her head down.

Robert avoided her eyes. “Well, I can just never know for sure with you,” he said, turning around midway through the sentence.

“What’s that-” Kay shouted. She threw her products into the sink. They rattled around the chrome basin while she screamed, “What’s your problem? Why are you always trying to start shit?”

“I’m not,” Robert said, throwing up his hands.

“Sure sounds like you are,” Kay said, stomping toward him and stopping short just in front. She put her hands on her hips. “We’ve been together in the same room. When do you think I’m stepping out on you?”

Robert shrugged, sorry he even broached the subject. He knew it wasn’t right to throw an accusation like that out. Unfortunately, his temper was short after having interactions such as these regularly while away with Kay.

“Suh- sorry,” Robert mumbled.

Kay rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Wow. That’s a new one.”

Robert shook his head. He caught Kay’s eyes, and instantly regretted giving in. “I’m gonna go on the terrace. Want to sit with me?”

Kay walked back to the bathroom and picked her belongings out of the sink. The plastic casing on the kit cracked. “No. I think I want to work on this.”

Robert flicked at a hang nail on his index finger. “Fine.” He walked over to Baxter and let him out of the cage. His hair stretched in all different directions thanks to Kay’s elastic hair ties.

Robert crouched down to pet him, but Baxter nipped at his hand. His lips shrunk back, revealing teeth. He leaned forward on his paws and growled. Robert smirked. “Looks like everyone’s in a bad mood,” he said, checking the new flesh wound on his wrist.

Kay’s side of the bed was empty when Robert woke up the next morning. She was in the bathroom showering. Her hums mixed with sounds of splashing water. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He stopped while reaching over to the dresser for his phone. His back was itchy and screamed for his attention. He tried scratching his stubby nails against the skin, but it didn’t work. Sweat trickled down his spine as he clenched his jaw.

Robert sat up and scanned the room for something sharp. He looked everywhere, finally reaching for the seashells and rocks Kay took from beach walks and left on the nightstand. Unfortunately, most of the edges were smoothed over and useless for scraping. He threw the stones away. “Kay!” he screamed. “Kay, get out! Help!”

“I’ll be out in a minute! Gosh, be patient and wait your turn.”

“Goddamn,” Robert cried. He stepped off his bed. The sole of his foot sunk into the carpet, giving him an idea.

Robert situated himself face up on the ground, with his knees bent up so his feet could push against the wall. He scraped his body up and down against the fibrous floor. Friction built, sending the aroma of burnt skin up to his smiling face. The rough surface reached every corner he needed.

The bathroom door opened. He stopped. Baxter started barking.

Robert sat up, looking at Kay. She wore a towel around her body. Her shoulders were even redder. Her lips puffed out as her sores multiplied over-night.

A bloody imprint of Robert’s back stamped the carpet. Little bits of skin and blister sunk into its patches. Blood trickled down his shoulder.

“You good?” Kay asked, crouching beside him.

Robert’s eyes were lost on Kay’s mouth. She turned away, blushing through her burns, “I’m working on it.” He got up and went to the bathroom. He stood with his back to the mirror and stared at his reflection.

Hairs, sand, and carpet fibers collected in the exposed sores of Robert’s back. Whatever wasn’t already open blistered over.

“Looks like you got sun poisoning,” Kay said, going to her bags. She took out a tube of Aloe Vera. “This should help,” she brought the bottle to Robert as he stared at his back. “But you should probably clean that out first.”

“It’s really itchy,” he replied as Kay grabbed a washcloth hanging over the towel rack. She dipped it in water and ran it over the afflicted area. He pulled away at first, wincing. She stopped, allowing Robert to collect himself. He closed his eyes and breathed as she removed all the grime.

“Need a cup of coffee?” Kay asked, putting the cloth down and grabbing an old beach towel from the floor. She draped it over Robert’s carpet imprint. “By the way, we still have those reservations.”

“What reservations?” Robert demanded.

“That place on the boardwalk. This is the only day they had available, so get ready,” Kay said, loading the coffee maker.

“You- you actually still want to go outside?” Robert said, motioning his hand around his lips.

“We have reservations. And that’s a great spot for me to get our vacation pictures,” Kay said, taking off her towel. Her body was completely red and her skin blistered. She turned to Robert and ran the towel through her hair. Her tan lines were gone and covered over with burns. Her breasts were covered in dead skin that could flake off at any moment.

Robert nodded. He did a double take at Kay who stood over Baxter’s cage. She grabbed a handful of treats. She opened his cage and let him out. He dug his face in her hand, devouring the treats in a couple bites. He continued licking, swerving his tongue over her reddened skin.

Kay giggled and gazed Robert, who still stood in the doorway. “Hurry,” she said, freeing her hand and waving him away. She wrestled Baxter in his cage as Robert shut the bathroom door.

He stood in front of the mirror and lathered his face in shaving cream. The blisters covering his back came up and wrapped around his shoulders. They came very close to his jawline. The rest of his torso was red.

He dipped the razor in the sink and leaned in to the mirror. He dragged the blade from his sideburn, down to his chin. The hair was gone. Robert smiled and wriggled the razor in water.

He ran it down the other sideburn, before stopping suddenly, “Ow! Fuck!”

Blood droplets fell and melded into the sink water. Robert checked his face and saw a big scratch running down from his ear. “Damn,” he said, turning around for a tissue. He put pressure over the wound and ran the cloth over until the bleeding stopped. Some dripped down and dyed the shaving cream bright red.

He picked the razor up and glided it across his throat. The bleeding on the side of his face stanchied.

Robert slid the blade across his throat once more.

Chik!

Blood pooled out from under Robert’s hand before he could stop it. It fell into the sink, turning the water pink. The wound by Robert’s ear was aggravated, and opened once more.

Robert knelt down and realized he still had his breath. He gasped for air, and then reached into the hamper for an old towel. He picked one out and wrapped it around his neck. His chest puffed in and out, as he thanked God he didn't slash his windpipe. He threw the razor aside. Little bits of flesh collected between the blades.

Most of the shaving cream was still on his face, but Robert shuddered to think about trying to do any more. He unwrapped the towel and inspected the wound. The bleeding stopped. Drying blood clumped and clogged his open throat. He wiped his face and decided to stop.

Kay stood by the sliding windows, peeking between the shades. She wore a headscarf and sunglasses that hid most of her face. Loose, tie-dyed clothing covered her body. Almost every inch of her flesh was concealed. Bright red lipstick did little to obscure the numerous sores covering her lips. The lesion from the night before spread so her entire mouth and chin were covered in similar abnormalities.

“What are you dressed like that for? It must be at least eighty-”

She took off her sunglasses and removed the scarf. Robert shrank back, tripping over the bathroom threshold. She mushed her lips together and took cream out of her purse. Bags filled beneath her eyes, sagging and exposing muscle. “Cut yourself shaving?” she asked, sitting on the bed. Her hair was greasy and slightly thinned out.

Robert stared at Kay's mouth, averting eye contact. He patted the bloody scraps of toilet paper spread around his cheeks. “A little bit,” he said, staring as Kay applied her ointment. He took a seat next to her. “About these plans today-”

“Yes! I was thinking about the pictures. We’re on such similar wavelengths. There are some filters we can definitely use to cover those things on your face,” she dabbed at her lip, puckering it every so often.

Robert put his head down, “I’m- I don’t know if I really feel up to going out today.”

Kay stopped playing with her mouth and shifted her head toward him. “You never want to take any pictures with me! What? Are you ashamed of me?”

“What? No? Where does that even come-”

Kay groaned and sank into the bed, stuffing her face into Robert’s pillow. He slapped his hands on his thighs and looked around. Muffled whimpers filled the room. She sat up and looked at him. Her lips puffed out, swelled to the furthest limit.

Robert hid his hands behind his back as he flicked a hangnail on his thumb. “I just don’t feel up to it right now,” he said. He swirled his finger around the nail. “I think I need to rest. I don’t want to irritate my back anymore.”

“It’s nothing,” Kay said. “Just looks like sun poisoning.”

“*Just* sun poisoning still’s pretty fucking bad, Kay,” Robert said, rolling his eyes and running his hand over his shoulder to assuage the itching. He reached over the nightstand and grabbed his phone. He held his thumb over the sensor, but it couldn’t read his print. He looked at his fingers and realized how chewed up they were. He typed the passcode in with his knuckles. Kay leaned in.

“What are you typing-”

“See?” Robert said. “It says I need to rest and stay out of the heat. Looks like I’m out of commission the next couple days.”

“Fine, trust that thing and not your girlfriend,” Kay pouted. She turned away from Robert, as he kept scrolling.

“Wanna look what it says for you,” he said, angling the phone in her direction.

“I don’t self-diagnose,” Kay said, looking at Robert.

“You’re just afraid it will say you have herpes,” he said, placing his phone back, face up on the nightstand. His home screen glowed.

“Still better than what you have.”

“Yeah, you think so?”

She ran her hand over Robert’s back. “It feels like lizard skin.”

Robert stared into Kay’s face. Since it was the only part of her he could see, he only imagined how much worse the rest of her body was. He ran a hand through her hair.

“Ow,” Kay swatted his hand away. He recoiled, hurt. “That really stings,” she said, nursing her temple. A deep burn ran along the part in her hair. Patches of dandruff littered her hairline.

He looked down, and several strands of hair lodged in the lacerations covering his fingers. He winced and shook his hand in the air.

“We had reservations though,” Kay said, putting her head back down.

Robert ripped his index finger across his cuticle, dislodging a hang nail from his body. It flew through the air and onto Kay's lap.

She hopped up immediately, patting her thighs, "I thought I told you to stop doing that!" It landed in the bedsheets.

Robert jumped up and faced her. He looked at his finger, as blood collected in the inner corner by the jagged remnants of his nail. Kay shrank back as he stuck his finger in his mouth and rushed toward the bathroom. "I'll be right back," he muttered, locking the door behind him.

He ran cold water over his hand. A flap of skin dangled from the outer side of his thumb. Robert pulled it back, allowing it to glide along. The further he pulled, the deeper it went. Finally, the strip ended at the bottom of his wrist; where it hurt to go any further. He draped the skin back over, attempting to cover newly exposed bone and muscle. It wouldn't hold.

He bit the strip but it felt like biting a rubber belt. Sawing his teeth against the flesh finally caused it to tear away. He spat the scrap into the toilet and stared at his reflection. The cuts from earlier seemed to multiply, spreading all along his face. He leaned in closer, bending along the fault line exposed on his neck. Blood suddenly gushed from the wound, spurting out over the mirror and over his reflection. He grabbed and unrolled toilet paper, pressing it over his wounds and whimpering. The bleeding stopped as he put shreds of toilet paper over his open cuts. He stepped out of the bathroom.

Kay sat on the edge of the bed sobbing and staring through him. Anger filled her droopy eyes. Only stray patches of her once ample head of hair remained. "What?"

Robert asked. He looked down and realized she had a phone in her hands. His wasn't on the dresser anymore. "You're going through my phone?"

Kay held it close to her face and swiped her fingers over the screen, "Who the fuck is Taylor?"

"I can't believe you," Robert put his head down and sighed. "Kay, Taylor is my cousin. Is that okay with you? Can I text my cousin?"

Kay's eyes widened, exposing more pink flesh from underneath. She smiled, tearing her mouth into a bloody rictus grin, "Yeah? Then who the fuck is Sarah?" she held the phone in front of Robert's face. A nude girl, posing for a bathroom mirror selfie took up the entirety of the screen.

"Oh?" Robert said, clicking his teeth. "Yeah. She's a uh- she's a second cousin."

Kay scowled and threw Robert's phone across the room. It smacked against the wall and shattered into pieces. "Bitch, that's my phone!" he screamed, stooping over. Sarah's picture cracked and pixelated before the screen went black. "What did you have to do that for?"

"Try texting those bitches, now," Kay roared, getting down from the bed. Robert tried turning the phone on. "Have you been cheating on me?"

"What?" he asked, looking up. "Not really."

Kay's eyes welled. "What does 'not really' mean? When were you going to tell me?" she fell to her knees. The loose-fitting pants clung to her skin like leggings as puddles of pus and blood formed underneath the cloth.

Robert gave up on his phone. He moved in to hold Kay, but she nudged away. “I wasn’t.”

“You were just gonna keep playing me?” tears of blood spilled out of the bags from under her eyes. “Oh my God!” she sobbed, swatting Robert away.

“No!” he said, putting his hand up and blocking Kay’s slaps. Cuts covered her wrists. “I just- I didn’t see the point. I wasn’t sure how much longer we were even gonna last. And I knew it would just hurt you if you found out-”

“Not sure how much longer we were gonna last?” she blubbered, as strands of saliva clung to her sores. “What are you saying? You don’t want to be together?”

“Honestly,” Robert looked down. “A big part of me has wanted to be single for a while. You’re too- too constricting. I can’t do anything without you suffocating me.”

Kay grinded her nails down her cheeks, leaving long red slashes behind.

“Everything I do has to include you. Then if I don’t want to take you the accusations start. It’s fucking exhausting already and I don’t know if I want to do it anymore.”

“Why?” Kay sobbed, rubbing her arms. “Why’s it such a crime for me to want to go places with you. Don’t you love me? I don’t care if you want to be with your friends for a little. I just like being anywhere you are.”

Robert bit his lip and blood trickled down his chin, “Like I can take you out and even leave you alone to do my own thing. Because I just know as soon as I turn around twenty dudes are gonna be grinding up on you.”

“Is that what this was about?” Kay looked up. “Some sort of payback for what happened?”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

Gnats floated around the room. Baxter wrapped his teeth around the bars of his cage and growled.

“Because, look,” Kay said. “It’s fine. Either way, we’re even. I don’t care about them. Just stop talking to them and it’s fine. I don’t even care.”

Robert couldn’t believe what he just heard. He realized he had the upper hand. “I don’t really know,” relishing in how he made her squirm. “I’m not sure about us anymore.”

“No!” she screamed. “How could you even say that? You can’t leave. I won’t let you.”

“Fuck that,” Robert said, as something gurgled from within the bathroom. “I’m done letting you decide things for me in this relationship.”

Kay stomped up to him. She pulled her sleeves down, revealing rows of parallel gashes running up and down her arms. Just as his eyes focused, she lifted her hands so her palms faced him. Blood clotted and dried underneath each of her artificial claws. “See what I do? See what I do for you? So, I don’t care. Do anything you want. I love you.”

Robert stumbled backward and fell into the bathroom. He sat by the toilet and gagged into the bowl. The gash on his neck opened wider, stretching from ear to ear.

“If you even try leaving me,” she said, balling her fists tight enough to dig her nails deep within her palms. Blood dripped to the ground as she continued, “If you even dare- I won’t- I won’t go on living.”

Robert’s chest tightened. He steadied himself up and said, “Don’t you even try to put that on me.” His eyes beamed rage down upon her. The gurgling sound continued, coming from the shower. He peeked behind the curtain. Water stalled on the shower floor, clogged by a clump of Kay’s hair still tangled in the drain. He stepped out of the bathroom and walked toward her.

She sat on the bed, crying. She ran her hands through whatever was left of her hair and said, “You can’t leave me.”

“I think we better check out early,” Robert said, stepping closer to her.

“No!” Kay screamed, picking up one of the shells from next to the bed and chucking it at him. It missed, shattering against the wall. She picked up a rock and threw it at his knee, hitting the burn from the night before.

“Damn!” Robert screamed, limping toward the door. “You crazy fucking-” A shell clipped the back of his head. He got to the door and fumbled with the lock. He turned around as Kay unplugged a desk lamp and got ready to bash it into his head. He threw his arms up and struggled with her. The lamp dropped to the floor and broke. He pushed her across the room and she hit the wall with a thud.

Kay hopped up immediately and ran back for more. She slapped and punched Robert as he opened the door and escaped the room. She screamed, “Fine! Then fucking go! Find someone else who’ll put up with your shit!”

Outside, Robert leaned his back against the door and caught his breath. The setting sun cast an orange glow on the hotel's white paneling. He turned around and punched the door, leaving a red indentation in its wood. He looked around and saw no one. He was about to step away when he realized all his things were still in the room, including his clothes. The incoming breeze tickled his exposed flesh.

"Dammit," he muttered. He knocked on the door and said, "Kay? Kay, would you- would you please let me just get my stuff?" He turned around and stared at the sun. Shadows fell from the surrounding palm trees and sunlight glared off the car windows in the parking lot below. He turned around and pounded on the door. "Please, I'm sorry. I just want to get my stuff." He put his ear to the door. The sounds of things being thrown and glass shattering reverberated back. "Oh, what did I do?" he murmured, wiping tears off his face.

He took his ear away and went around the hotel. He planned to try and see if the sliding doors were open. Perhaps he could get back in and find his stuff that way. Gravel and sand adhered to his soles as he walked the path toward the back entrance. He found the deck that corresponded to his room and walked up the steps. When he got to the top, he ran his hands over his feet, doing his best to remove some of the dirt.

He slid the door open, and he peeked inside. He stepped into the room. Clothes littered the floor and the furniture was toppled over.

Kay was outside the front door, rapidly turning her head from side to side and crying.

"Hey," Robert said, startling her. "I just- just want to-"

Kay ran toward him and jumped into his arms. She padded his face with kisses and said, "Oh, thank God. I thought you were serious. I thought you were actually gone." His face stung every time her lips made contact. He smiled, liking the show of affection. He hadn't felt this physically connected with her in a while.

"I'm- I'm not sure where to go from here," Robert said, finding his way on the bed. "This- this just wasn't how I pictured it," he said as Kay wrapped her arms around his neck. He looked at her, studying the wounds covering her face.

"We'll figure it out. We found our way last time," she said, kissing him on the mouth. "I just- I don't want to live in a world where we know we're out there for each other but can't be together," she said, bringing his face closer and kissing him again.

Robert shook his head and leaned in for a kiss of his own. He ran his hands up and down her legs as she leaned back for him to pull her pants off. He tore at her skin, ripping the pants away. He relished her particular flavor, never forgetting why he was so addicted to the taste. The sun was down and the room was dark.

They pressed their sores together, causing them to ooze. Pus and blood flowed out and over the covers. They leaned back and everything felt natural.

Something pecked the side of Robert's head. Flies buzzed around the room. A moist substance ran repeatedly along the sole of his foot. He swatted his head, crushing whatever hovered above. It mushed into his temple and stung. A putrid smell, that of fermented fish and open wounds permeated the air.

His foot tickled. He kicked and something growled from the edge of the bed. Teeth chomped down on Robert's toes. "Ah!" he exclaimed, kicking part of the blanket aside. His feet were almost completely chewed up and raw. Baxter rushed back over, licking the gash along his calf. He swatted the dog away.

Robert rolled over, taking his sheets with him. They tangled around his body. Yellow and red stains covered the once white blankets. He peeled the sheets from his body, arching his legs and separating cloth from flesh. "Fuck, Kay?" he shook her.

Her body lay face down on the bed. She didn't move. He shook her again, swatting away more flies. He turned her over and winced in horror.

Kay's face was a mass of rotten flesh. Her lips peeled back, revealing her teeth. The skin around her mouth was dried and colored like linen. Her eyelids twitched as maggots squirmed around in her eye sockets. Bones, muscles, and tendons replaced areas once covered by skin. Ants swarmed her raw areas from all directions. Baxter came over and nibbled on her fingers. His collar jingled as he ran his tongue along her hand.

"Get away from her!" Robert yelled, pushing Baxter off. He leaned over the bed and vomited. The force of his retches tore the right side of his ribcage open. Blood pooled from the open wound, which spread over his body the way a droplet soaks a napkin. He turned back toward Kay.

Clumps of hair scattered her scalp. Bone and flaking skin took up the rest of her head.

Robert rolled off the bed, but couldn't walk. He shimmied toward the glass doors on raw elbows and knees. He swung the door open and his body tumbled off the deck and

into the sand. His skin melted in the sun. It curled up from his nails and rapidly decayed. Bubbles formed on his chest.

He screamed, “AHHHH!” as he struggled to stand. The bottom of his jaw squeaked loose. His mouth gaped open as his mandible drooped lower. The skin tore apart, revealing tendons stretched to their furthest limit. They immediately snapped and his jaw fell sideways in the sand. His tongue flailed around as he gurgled and stared at the deck.

Kay limped from behind the door. She lurched forward, shaking insects from her naked and mutilated body with every step. Baxter raced to keep pace with her, licking and nipping at her ankles with every step. She stopped at the edge of the deck and tilted her head. Blood leaked from her wounds and pooled by her feet.

Robert’s eyes rolled back in his head at the sight of her. They came loose and popped out. He fell to his hands and knees, patting the ground. Bits of sand collected in the wounds covering his hands.

“Baby” Kay moaned. “Are you coming back to bed? You’re not leaving again, are you?”

CHAPTER 2

“Rolling Right Along”

Alice and I know each other so well and for so long, we're pretty much obliged to hang out every now and again.

Our yearly meetings are always just that- regular meetings. Just a chance to catch up. Platonic friends in committed relationships checking in on each other. It got harder to do this after she left the city for college while I stayed home, but we always kept in touch.

As we exchange vodka-tinged saliva in an elevator up to her top floor Williamsburg apartment; I realize this was inevitable. We had to fuck at some point. Sure, all the alcohol in our systems helps. So does the fact there's always been a tension between us. And all that tension finally comes to a head tonight.

She stares deep in my eyes, rubbing her hand over my dick. I close my eyes as she clenches her fingers. I do my best to hold back laughter. Can't wait to get to her apartment. Dogging her down's been the only thing I could think of since getting on the L train.

I'm so lost in her ball-squeezing and lip biting, it barely registers that the elevator's stopped.

“We're here,” she whispers into my neck before gnawing my earlobe. Some of her sweat sticks to me. Her breath on my skin gets me even harder. I think I'm growing a third leg.

“Ah-hem,” an old man coughs in the doorway. I cover my boner. Alice stifles a giggle and drags me out by the hand as the old man leads his old lady into the elevator. They plug their noses walking by.

He huffs and puffs his way inside and clamors a bit more as the door slides shut.

Alice laughs. I’ve never heard her laugh this much, or at all for that matter. I guess she’s different after liquor.

“It’s not funny,” the old man croaks. Alice stops and swivels around on her heels. The elevator dings and the door clunks back open.

“A lady would never act like that when I was younger,” his wife adds. I picture her powdering her nose and saying this to a mirror. But, I’m drunk. A lot of funny shit is running through my mind right now. I bend over laughing so hard tears cluster in the corners of my eyes.

“Yeah,” Alice says, “when was that? Like a million years ago?” She takes both my hands and tilts her body forward, giving me an excellent view of those legs I always fantasized wrapping around my head. Shameful these thoughts occur.

This is a side of Alice I never noticed before tonight. Girl’s a wild card. But I like it.

As the elevator door shuts, the geezer shouts, “Don’t stink up our floor again!”

Alice tilts back into me, pressing her ass right where I want it. “Is that why he holds his nose around you? He thinks you’re stinky?” I nip her neck.

“No,” she says, pinching her fingers together by her lush lips and blowing an imaginary smoke cloud in my face. “But what I smoke is.”

She grabs my hand before I can even say, “Lead the way,” and drags me down the hall.

Alice passes another joint as I top off an already obscene amount of liquor with another shot of tequila. I lean back puffing, sliding back on her couch’s slick plastic covering. We keep the windows shut and the air conditioning on. It’s still a little humid.

She takes off her red headband and tosses it on the table. Her dark brown hair drops to her shoulders, curling around her tiny face. She smiles at me. She wants the joint.

I pick up my bowl of insta-ramen and guzzle some of the soup.

“You look shy all of a sudden,” she re-lights the jay, looking at me and blowing a little smoke in my face.

A long brown hair floats amongst my noodles. I redirect my attention at Alice as I fish it out with my chopstick, “I’m just a little surprised we ended up back here.” I pick the hair off my chopstick and rub it on her couch as she turns away to pour more wine.

“What do you mean? We always come back and hang out,” she smiles. “Why would this time be any different?”

“I guess because the boundary of our friendship is kind of fucked now,” I stuff a few noodles in my mouth to fill the ensuing silence.

Alice shrugs and smiles. She sips her glass. "Do you work tomorrow?"

"No," I smile back.

"Good."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Early," she stares at my thigh.

I smile and look down, realize she's staring at the hair. I look up and say, "Is that you saying I should-"

"No," she refocuses on my eyes. "I can do both."

"Really, your boss likes you coming in all hungover to cut hair?" I laugh, and she laughs back.

"You don't know how fucked up I've gotten to do that job. I don't know how else to deal with these people. You know I fantasize about killing just about everyone who walks in there on a daily basis? Clients. Coworkers. Everyone," she takes back up and washes it back with the rest of her wine. It's a couple more seconds till she exhales.

Her smoke rests a while in the air before dissipating. I smile, "How do you plan on doing it?"

"Lots of ways," she winks and passes back the joint. "Like you don't need to get totally fucked up before dealing with children all day? And you don't fantasize about at least slapping the stupid ones? The disrespectful ones?"

"They're college students, Alice. Barely even children."

“Do you give them homework?”

“Yes?”

“Then they’re children, honey,” she puts her hand on my shoulder, leans in and kisses my neck. She’s gone before I can reciprocate.

“Homicidal fantasies aside, that’s a separate issue,” I drag a hit, “I don’t see how you cut and style people’s hair in any condition less than sober.”

“You do your job sober?”

“Sober?” I scratch my head, “I get paid shit to stand in front of a room of ‘adults’ and spew bullshit about Kafka for an hour and a half! What do you think?” I cough an “O” at her pounding stereo system and lose my shit laughing, “The weed kind of smells funny. It’s fine, but is it stale?”

I pass back. Alice puckers her lips around the filter and pulls so long I forget what I asked.

“Nah. It must be the patchouli,” Alice exhales.

Our ash tray sits past her foot on the coffee table. A burning incense is to the right. I pick up my ramen.

Looking over, smiling wide enough to show my teeth. My eyes so squinted, Alice is in widescreen. “What did I ask again?” I pinch my chopsticks and lift them from the bowl. I stoop over to bring my mouth to my hands. A tuft of hair’s tangled between the sticks. All different colors, long and knotted.

My mouth drops and stomach growls. The chopsticks fall from my fingers as I set the bowl on her table and lean back. I see black for a second, and then light. My stomach growls. Alice sets the joint on the ash tray and leans into me.

“Are you okay?” she whispers. I nod as she presses her body into mine. I look up and swallow back vomit as she jams her face into mine. Her swirls around my gums. I go with it, cupping her breast as she undoes my belt.

One blink later and my pants are around my ankles and Alice is at work. The air conditioner cools each and every spot she left kisses on. There are so many flower pots and buckets around her apartment. They line her shelves and a few are grouped together in the corner of the room.

My eyes shut and refuse to open back up. I never blacked out before, but guess tonight’s my night.

The left side of my face stings. A second later, so does the right. Something whacks my ear. My eyes are ripped open.

Alice stares me straight in the face, not blinking. Her thumbs prop my eyelids up.

“You never came!” she blurts out three times before I realize she means sexually.

“I- I didn’t feel anything,” I mumble as my head rolls to the side. My limp dick rests against my thigh. Alice flicks it back and forth with her index finger. Can’t feel, just see. No way I’m getting hard again tonight. It’s time to go to sleep.

Her eyes crinkle and she smiles, “Good!”

She beams, rolling me over on my stomach with surprising ease for a girl this tiny.

My cock slips between her plastic couch cushions. I turn to make eye contact with the tips of my ass cheeks. Alice scampers down the hall.

I lift my head and survey the room. A puddle of spit leaks from my lower lip. I cough up my insides. Brandy and tequila don't mix well. A smoky taste fills my rancid mouth. Noodles and stray hairs drift through my puddle of barf.

I can't control my hand. I've no way to wipe drool off my cheek so I laugh.

Alice skips back in the room wearing black lingerie. She holds a pair of handcuffs, a ball gag, and rope. The patchouli's stopped burning and the room still stinks. She unfolds the handcuffs and licks the outer edge, demonstrating how the inner area, the one meant to bind my wrists, is serrated. An acrid stench hangs above my head.

"I'm not into that," I mumble, struggling to roll on my side. Anything to keep my bare ass from her. She plays with the cuffs a bit more, running them up and down her white tongue. Jagged spikes line the inner edge. Streaks of rust...or blood line the uneven spurs. "Alice, I don't think I'm good anymore tonight-"

She drives her knee into my back and squishes me still. She bears down, pressing into my tailbone. My arms are twisted into pretzels as she mounts me. All the times she beat me in wrestling when we were kids flash through my mind. Before I even remember how fucked I am, my hands are shackled together.

"Come on," I mutter. "These feel real," I struggle as their edges dig in my wrists.

Her cool breath soothes the sweat pooling on my neck. “I just want to fuck around,” she whispers. “Don’t squirm too much. You might get cut,” she plants a kiss on my forehead. It stings.

I want to scream but my mouth is so smoked out my tongue swelled up. Mushing my lips to my teeth tells me how bad the cotton mouth really is.

She tilts my head back and spins rope around my neck. I attempt turning but she repositions my head and continues tying.

“Alice? Alice, I’m not cool with this-” I choke.

“Yuck,” she waves her hand in front of her nose. “Need to cover that up,” she stuffs the gag in my mouth. The tastes of lipstick and Listerine fill my mouth. My tongue moistens long enough for me to manage a half-hearted scream, but that’s all. She fastens the buckle at the back of my head.

Alice walks around the living room, switching off the lights. She puts on a couple of candles by the coffee table and mounts me.

The knot around my neck gets tighter as she leans back. My body arches whichever way she turns, forcing my wrists apart. The cuffs stop them from straying too far from each other. My skin tears from the stress.

My neck tilts back far enough for me to see her upside down. Her body’s painted in glistening red. She rubs herself with my blood as it squirts down on my back and upper thighs. She drops the rope and claws her nails through my back.

“Let’s play haircut,” she whispers into my neck and plants a kiss. Alice disappears down the hallway. I can barely turn my head. Tears run down my face, getting stuck between the gag’s leather strap and my cheek.

Alice returns with a leather purse. She empties it over the table. A pair of hedge clippers drops out, followed by an assortment of scissors, a roll of duct tape, combs, and finally an electronic hair clipper. She sits me up on the couch, facing her so I’m eye-level with her tits. She bends down and spreads my legs apart. My ankles are then taped to the legs of her couch. She binds my thighs next.

“What is it?” Alice puts her thumb on her chin and looks up toward the light. “What’s your usual again?” she picks up a scissor and pokes its point to her tongue. “Right, a little off the top!” she giggles and stoops over, digging the scissor into my scalp.

“HMMMMMM,” I wheeze, as she plucks clumps of hair out in a few swift pinches.

“Oops,” Alice, pouts. “Looks like another botched job. You’re right, I really shouldn’t work when I’m fucked up and hot like this,” she picks up a mirror. “I don’t know, tell me what you think?”

Blood from the bald spots ripped across the top of my scalp drips down my forehead; making its way toward my eye. Some of it has already mixed in so well with the sweat and tears I can barely tell which is which. My lips curl around the gag, chapped and purple.

“I think I can still fix it though,” the buzzer hums. “I just need you to hold still a little longer, I am handling a bladed instrument.”

I squirm as she drives the clippers through the back of my head. It grinds through my neck on the way up to the crown of my head. She does the same to my temple. This time, the blood spraying from the blades showers the side of her couch. When I try turning away, the cuffs dig back in and the tape takes some hairs of its own.

“I think that does it,” she smiles and puts down the clipper. “Now I can’t let you see yet, not until I go over things one more time,” she grabs the scissors and starts snipping cuts up and down my arms.

My legs are next. She slashes them until I weep. The tape has gotten too moist to glue me in place. I’m slipping from side to side on the plastic it’s gotten so slick.

“So you’re a bleeder, huh?” Alice smiles. She touches herself a little and giggles. She picks up the hedge clippers. “After this, the hot towel,” she measures the blades along my neck, before opening them across my throat. Blood fills my mouth and rushes straight back down my throat and through my lips as the blades separate my head from my body. The shears strip away more obstructions with each swipe. She slashes over and over, cutting through all the flesh, muscle, and bone. They only start squeaking near the end.

Something warm covers my face when it all goes black. I think that’s the hot towel.

It’s suddenly dark and cold. I can’t tell if my eyes are open or not. My teeth chatter against the plastic gag still wedged in my mouth.

Can't feel anything except my hangover. Think I'm still a little fucked up. My vision's still spinning. Not sure where she's keeping me, but it's cramped and freezing. My eyes burn long enough to tell me they're open. I shut them and re-trace my steps.

Playing through the night's events builds bile in the back of my throat. How could I have let this happen? I wonder if I mentioned my meeting with Alice to any of my friends? Someone has to come looking at some point.

Alice. My on and off crush almost all my life. Someone I considered a good friend. I thought I knew her. How could she be so sick? I always figured she had a real dark sense of humor. That's usually harmless. She was just one of those people "passively" into the occult. Joking about death all the time, laughing at national tragedies and cracking dead baby jokes is kind of her aesthetic.

I squint my eyes and curl my lips. I can wriggle my eyebrows up and down. I have no idea how I'm tied. If only it wasn't so dark.

Footsteps vibrate through the casing. They bounce up the base of my neck. I'm vertical somehow. They get closer as I struggle to shake my head and make noise. My ear scrapes something sharp and pointy. I crunch my head around on something I immediately recognize as snow.

A door opens and I'm eye-level with Alice. Her kitchen's in the background. The lights from outside converge with ones that switched on overhead. I shut my eyes before she notices they're open.

What the fuck is going on?

“Aw, Kyle,” she says. Her footsteps fade away. “You know, I always did think you were so precious. I only thought it a matter of time before things got...physical.” Her voice trails away.

I open my left eye a slit and see her back turned. I open both and scan the room. She’s wearing the white shirt I came wearing. Just the shirt. It looks like a tent on her. I’m pretty high up. She’s in front of her sink pulling knives from the rack.

A mechanical hum drones behind me. There are white walls covered in patches of frost to my left and right. I’m so cold and this bitch is gonna kill me. Does she have me in some sort of cooler? I can’t even move.

I shut my eyes as soon as she turns her head back in my direction.

“You were a good guy. I’m glad we were friends. You really saved the day for me a couple times,” she says as her voice fades.

I wish I could move. I open my eyes a bit and look around the kitchen once more. I bite down on the gag and it sends chills through my teeth. Pain soars through my lower jaw. I shut my eyes and try staunching it.

“That’s strange,” Alice says, suddenly back in front of me. “The cold shouldn’t make you squint like that. It should make you smile,” she digs her fingers in the corners of my mouth and rips a grin on my face. My frost bitten cheeks hold it in place as my eyes peek open a bit.

She bends out of view and pops up a second later holding a foot. My foot. Jagged flesh circles the bone protruding from the top. That's why I can't fucking feel anything. There can't be much left.

She fumbles below me, shuffling things around till she has enough room to stash it there. She dips back down and returns with a calf. She rests the limb in place and stares at me a moment, rubbing her chin. She tilts her head and frames me in her fingers. A smile creeps across her face.

"Nope," Alice slaps her hips. "That's not gonna work. I can barely see it," she tilts my head forward and ice crunches beneath my neck. She straightens something next to me. How am I tied?

She reaches behind my neck and unbuckles the gag. Before I have time to scream, she grips my head by the hair with both hands and pulls me toward her face. Strands rip between her fingers as the sides of the room zoom past me. I sneak a glance at the floor and can't find my legs. Her lips pucker and she forces her tongue in my mouth. She jams it all around, licking my teeth and slobbering my gums.

I hold my breath and squeeze my eyes shut. "Hmmm," Alice moans, as she digs her teeth into my lower lip. Tears gather at the sides of my eyes as she pulls her head away. My lip stretches a few inches before snapping off. Her teeth easily tear through my icy flesh.

Alice puts me back in the freezer and sets my head on the ice bucket. I rest unevenly in the cold. Blood trickles down her chin as she finishes chewing the bit of lip

she took off. I close my eyes as she licks some of the blood of her chin; smearing it around her mouth.

I guess overpowering her and running out of here isn't an option anymore.

"This is what I want," Alice says, reaching somewhere under me. She tears my eyelids open, waving at me with my own arm. Black and blues scatter it up and down. Numerous cuts are collected around the wrist. The rest of it is pale white.

"Say hi," she waves my arm around before spanking herself with it. "I'm gonna have fun with you," she says, leaving the room and slapping the fridge shut with my dead appendage.

Burst of breath escape my mouth. Tears stream down my face. Steam floats past my eyes as I look around the ice box. A sliver of light shines through a crack in the door, highlighting the vapor rushing from my trap.

She didn't shut it all the way. Maybe I can shift myself and find a way out of here.

Oh, God. How the fuck am I going to do that? My mind races. I wonder what she did with the rest of my clothes? Did she throw my wallet out? How will she cover up the fact she has me trapped in here?

I can move my eyebrows. Gradually, I move them faster and faster. The skin at the back of my head follows. I shake from side to side, doing my best to master the functions I still have. The freezer stops humming as warm air works its way through the crack in the door.

Water pools beneath my head as the ice melts. Finally, it gives a little and I tip forward. I head bang like I'm back at a Slayer concert, doing my best to work my head toward the light.

If I can manage to somehow roll, it's possible to get out of here. I repeatedly knock the tip of my tongue against my front teeth, building any forward momentum I can.

I haven't heard Alice in a bit. If she's occupied with God knows what, I need to take my opportunity now and get out.

I wriggle my head and contort my face in all sorts of wicked manners until the bucket tips and sends me crashing down.

The fall is a chrome blur.

Stars fill my eyes as soon as the tip of my head smacks the kitchen tiles. My eyelids get heavy and everything around me is momentarily cast in a dull black.

After the lights come back, I realize I'm staring up at Alice's ceiling. Her freezer door's wide open.

"Oh..." she murmurs from the next room. Still no footsteps. She must not have heard anything. My first miracle.

I arch my neck and prop myself up. Twitching my nose and mouth gets some feeling back into my frozen nerves. Wriggling my nose and inching my head forward repeatedly allows me to spin a couple inches. I work all my strength into the front of my face, stretching out my tongue until I finally build enough momentum to start rolling.

I meet the threshold between the living room and kitchen. The stench of rotting flesh works its way into my nostrils. I'd plug my nose if I still had hands.

I hold my breath and roll forward as quietly as I can. Steam flows from the tops of Alice's flower pots. Whatever's in there is boiling.

Alice is still out of sight. Did she go out?

I work my way to within ten feet of her door. Maybe if I wait here, I can slip out when somebody opens up. From there, I'll either wake up or die some other way; even though I think I might be invincible at this point.

"Oh...mmm," Alice moans directly behind me. I stop.

"Don't stop. Oh yeah. I always thought you were so- I always wanted...yeah...yeah right there."

Who the fuck is she talking to? I cringe thinking I could swing around and see her with some man. If I do, I scream.

I swivel toward the couch.

Alice is flat on her back with her legs spread far apart and my severed arm jammed halfway up her cooch. I gag, averting my eyes. She still has on my shirt. I work my way back to the door as she stays absorbed in masturbating.

"Ah...Ah...AH!" she climaxes and her shrill screams fill the apartment. I stare up at the locks and gold chain keeping the door shut and me stuck.

The buzzer rings.

My face goes numb.

Alice stirs from the couch and grunts, “Who the fuck?” She gets up from the couch carrying my arm into the kitchen.

“Fuck!” she shouts as I roll under a desk by the door. Busted, I think to myself. I peek out as Alice returns from the kitchen, checking crevices and frantically running her hands through her hair.

Someone raps on the door.

“Okay,” Alice yells. She buttons my shirt as she strides to the door. “One second.”

She darts her head around the room. I tuck myself in as far in as I can, worried I may lose control of my new form of locomotion and give my position away. Alice rubs crusted blood off her chin, licks her lips, and unlocks the door.

“Hey, how you been?” a girl says from the doorway. I tilt forward for a better angle.

Alice pecks the girl on the lips and they hug. Alice attempts pulling back, but the new girl’s much bigger and holds her too tight. She kisses Alice again, only this time a little longer. I wince.

“I’ve missed you,” the girl says licking her lips. “Is that a new lipstick? It tastes kind of...metallic?”

Alice rubs her mouth, “Uh, no it’s-”

“What do you want to get away so fast for?” the girl steps closer to Alice and kisses her forehead.

“Because I’m stressed, Michelle,” Alice says, walking toward the couch. Michelle closes the door and follows her in a couple long strides with a pair of legs that don’t stop. The door was shut before escape even crosses my mind. I got...distracted. Trapped again.

Michelle is basically the opposite of Alice. A tall, bubbly-looking blonde I think I recognize from an Instagram post. And I thought she was pretty on the Internet...At least having my head separated from my body hasn’t completely killed my sex drive.

“Is this a bad time?” Michelle asks, taking a seat next to Alice on the couch. She pinches her nose. “Did I catch you during cooking?”

“Sort of,” Alice grunts, craning her head toward the kitchen.

“Ooh. Something yummy, I hope.”

“Uh-huh,” Alice says, and keeps looking.

I roll a couple inches from my corner and scan the room for some sort of exit.

Michelle follows Alice’s gaze, “What are you looking at?”

I shrink back.

“Me? Nothing. Can I get you a drink?”

“Okay,” Michelle pouts, and gets up. She kicks her flats on. “I was just in the area and I guess this is a bad time. I know it’s still a little early for us and I know how this

comes off.” I stay still, poised and ready to roll out as soon as she opens the door. Even if I don’t get away, I’m sure to make a scene.

“No!” Alice pushes Michelle back on the couch. “Please, just let me get you a drink. I’d like you to stay.”

Michelle hesitates and says, “A drink would be nice.” She giggles as Alice gets up and scampers into the kitchen.

I roll forward a little. Michelle pulls out her phone. She smiles a little and lounges back. Damn, I need to get my head straight.

“Psst,” I spit from my corner. She’s too distracted. She doesn’t even look up. My mouth is so dry and I have to swirl my tongue around for several seconds before I can even get another “Psst” out.

This time, her head snaps to my position. She leans forward.

“Here,” Alice emerges from the kitchen with a couple glass cups and a tin tray. She puts them on the table and grabs a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet. She poses with it and asks, “This work?”

“You know what I like,” Michelle winks. She bites her thumb and flutters her eyes in my direction as Alice empties the bottle. “I thought I heard something.”

“What?” Alice demands, averting her eyes from the stream of liquor. “Where?”

“There,” Michelle points. “Something I should be worried about?”

“No,” Alice says. “Probably just my pet.”

“I thought you said you hated animals?”

“I do,” Alice says, stomping in my direction, sending shock waves up my exposed nerves.

I roll back as far as I can so I only see the tops of her ankles. She kicks the wall and I stifle a scream. Sweat trickles down my face as fresh blood leaks from my neck stump. I’m ready to bleed a puddle.

“While you’re doing that, I’m gonna get some ice,” Michelle’s voice echoes down the hall. “I want to drink mine on the rocks.”

“Uh-huh,” Alice says before suddenly sprinting down the hall. I roll out over the slick wood flooring. It’s warm under my cheek.

Alice cuts in front of the kitchen door. “I’ll get it, hon,” she says, with a wide lemon peel smile. “Let me make it.”

“Oh, are you sure?” Michelle asks. “You’ve already been so hospitable and sweet for letting me stay over and-”

“I’ll be right back,” Alice says, shutting Michelle up with a fat smooch. She turns into the kitchen as Michelle strides back to the couch smiling with her face flushed red. Redder than the floor under my head.

I’m panicked because I can’t linger here much longer. Alice will check again and when she does, she’ll find me. If I’m not dead now, I certainly am then.

I’ll have to get Michelle’s attention. Going by her looks, I’d guess she isn’t a killer and might even be...sympathetic to my position? But, I was way off with Alice and

she was someone I considered a good friend. Michelle is a complete stranger. It's still the best chance I got.

If only my mouth wasn't so dry, I'd call out. I'll have to get over to her. That's my only option.

I look for some sort of solution to the maze I trapped myself in. Alice's rapid footfalls tell me she's in the vicinity and ready for some exploring.

Working my muscles in ways I never thought possible, I roll down the hall. Of course, Michelle's too wrapped up in her phone to notice a severed head rolling in her direction. I wonder if she'll pick me up in her Snapchat?

Alice returns from the kitchen as I tuck myself next to one of her putrid flower pots. It's the closest I can get to the couch without being seen. The closer my ear gets to the pot, the louder the sounds of fizzing and boiling get. Alice set an ice bucket, the same one that held my head about twenty minutes earlier, in the center of the table. She walks back toward the door.

"No, you just come back," Michelle tugs Alice's hand, pulling her back to the couch. Back to her. "Don't worry about it," Michelle picks up her drink and sips, "Do you have any Febreze or anything? It stinks in here. That summer air really traps in odors," she plugs her nose and giggles.

"I'll put on an incense," Alice says leaning forward. She picks up a box of rosewood incense and sticks one in the tray. She flicks her lighter and smoke soon leaks from the tip of the stick.

It does nothing for the smell. Maybe that's because I'm right next to whatever's causing it.

"Why do you keep looking back there?" Michelle asks, gulping down her drink and refilling it in one swooping motion.

"No reason," Alice says, leaning over the side of the couch and examining the dust bunnies. "Top me off?"

"Sure..." Michelle purrs under the sound of clanking ice cubes. "What are you doing? I thought we were hanging out?"

Alice turns back to Michelle and picks up her glass. I roll out a little, inching myself closer to the couch.

"We are," Alice says. "I just want to know where my- where that little shit is."

"You call your dog names like that?"

"It's not a dog," Alice says, leaning far away enough for me to roll closer to the kitchen unseen.

"Your cat?" Michelle sips, squinting her eyes and facing Alice.

I move a little further. I'm almost within eyeshot of Michelle. All she needs to do is turn around.

"No cat," Alice says, beating Michelle and turning my way first. We lock eyes as she faces Michelle once more. Something leaks from the bottom of my throat.

“Then what the hell are you running-” Alice traps Michelle in a kiss. She keeps her eyes open and focused on me. Her hands cover Michelle’s ears, holding her firmly in place. If Alice twitched, she could disconnect Michelle’s head from her body.

I roll toward the kitchen, but can’t pick up enough speed. Pins and needles rattle under my cheeks.

Alice doesn’t take her eyes off me. My muscles freeze and I don’t know where to go. Waiting in vain for Alice to break this kiss off won’t help. Her eyes lock me in place. They follow my every twitch. Her irises are bright against her bloodshot eyes.

She ends the kiss and draws Michelle into a hug. Holding Michelle’s head close to her chest, Alice whispers, “Can you stay still?”

“Why?” Michelle lifts her head, but Alice pushes it back down.

“I see a bug,” Alice says, her eyes still fixed on me. Michelle twitches but Alice keeps her arms wrapped tightly around her. “Don’t worry. I’m gonna kill it. I just wanted to tell you so you don’t freak out.”

Michelle shivers, “Just do it.”

“Don’t look,” Alice says, laying Michelle down and resting her face in a pillow. She gets up and comes over.

I set my sights on the kitchen and roll. Alice trips as I barrel my way down. She cuts me off inches from the threshold and punts me across the room. I slam against the opposite wall. My face flattens on the floor as my nose crunches on the ground. I roll

back to my side and barely have my sights back a second when Alice fills my gaze. She storms over, grimacing with her arms outstretched. She's not looking at me.

To my right, an oversized flower pot teeters over and tips right, shattering its contents on the ground.

Droplets burst from the impact, searing the side of my face. Green liquid spreads over the floor. I roll backwards as the muck oozes my way. Clumps of stuff that looks like oatmeal and rice pudding bubble next to shards of clay. Yellowed bones stick out in the rubbish. Soon, I find myself navigating an expanding puddle filled with small appendages spread about like landmines.

"What the hell's going on?" Michelle asks. Alice steps in front of me and kicks me behind her.

"Nothing!" Alice shouts, gathering the loose body parts. "It's almost dead, just stay put."

Alice stoops over on one knee and collects all the stray bones, ears, and fingers. Her heel whacks my nose as she shifts.

"I think it knocked over whatever's been stinking so badly," Michelle says, lifting her head.

"Don't!"

"Shit," Michelle points. "What the fuck is on your floor?"

The steaming acid expands. Alice holds her hands behind her back, hiding all her stray limbs.

“Can you grab a towel?” Alice laughs.

“Sure thing!” Michelle beams. She scampers out of the room.

Alice turns. She smothers my mouth with her bloody hands and plugs my nose. My tongue runs along her calloused palms. “How the hell are you-”

“And where’s the Febreze while I’m at it?” Michelle calls. Alice whips around, shifting her heel next to my mouth.

“In- in the cabinet,” Alice says as Michelle steps out once more. I lean forward as far as I can and chomp down on her Achilles. I dig my teeth in until something crunches and then I dig even further.

Blood fills my mouth like water as Alice raises me up in the air, flailing and kicking in attempt to shake me off. She screams into her arm, muffling her cries. I bite down even harder, doing my best impersonation of a pit-bull.

Alice kicks me into the wall and the impact loosens my grip. Then she swings her leg into the air and sends me flying through the room. Everything zooms by before I scrunch my face and prepare for impact.

“What the hell is going on in there?” Michelle calls from the next room. I open my eyes and wait for things to come back into focus. I blink rapidly, trying to make sense of new surroundings.

“Nothing! Did you bring a towel?” Alice asks, as soon as I realize I’m in her bedroom.

“Gosh, your ankle!”

“It’s nothing!” Alice snaps.

I roll in a little further and the voices outside blur. A suitcase hangs open on the far side of the room. Shouts filter in from the living room.

I get close enough to peek the contents of the suitcase. Wallets, keys, phones, and assorted items of jewelry pack it to the brim.

My open wallet sits at the very top of the pile along with my driver’s license. Her bookshelf looms over me.

A skull sits on the top shelf. A red candle sticks out from the top and some of the wax has melted over the cracked bone. Jars with murky liquid line the rest of the shelf. The contents are so blurry it’s almost impossible to tell what’s being preserved. They look like antique hot dogs for a second. I lean in and realize she has an assortment of pickled penises on her shelves.

My eyes focus on the jar next to the skull; the one with the clearest liquid. Mine is the latest addition to her collection.

Backing away from the shelf only brings me closer to the voices.

“What’s your problem tonight?” Michelle cries. She’s stooped over on the couch in tears. Alice pets her back, staring at me as I loom in the doorway. A bloody rag is tied around her ankle. The red splotch is dark and growing.

“Look, let’s talk,” Alice strokes Michelle’s hair. “You don’t need to cry.” She uses her other hand to tighten her grip on Michelle’s shoulder.

“I’ve tried talking all night! I don’t get it. You make this big deal out of sleeping with me then just completely blow me off afterwards? What’s your problem?”

“Things have been...busy. Alright?” Alice wraps her arms around Michelle’s shoulder and pulls her in. I edge forward. “It’s nothing about you.”

“It feels like it is. You seem like you’re in a different place when we’re together. Like you’re distracted.”

“I have been. There’s a lot on my mind lately. I just don’t always think I’m the best person.”

My teeth grind together so hard tears moisten my eyes. I jerk slightly forward. Carpet fibers dig into the slit gashes across my temple. My newest injury, probably courtesy of my latest fall.

I turn away a moment and shut my eyes. It’s the only thing I can do to regain my composure. As soon as I open them, I realize I’m in front of a mirror. It takes a moment to make sense of my reflection.

My bottom lip is half chewed off. Cuts and bruises layer my gray skin. All that’s left of my hair is a few clumps. The rest of my scalp is littered with scabbed over bald spots. Multiple cuts and gashes mark the base of my neck. Alice didn’t decapitate me cleanly.

I turn away because the longer I look, the worse I feel. The less I want to live. I turn back to the living room.

“You’re a wonderful person,” Michelle looks up. “The first one I’ve actually enjoyed being with in a long time.”

Alice pulls her in closer. Michelle rests her head on Alice’s shoulder. “Same here. So, let’s start the night over.”

“Okay,” Michelle mumbles. “No more secrets?”

“No more secrets,” Alice whispers, stroking Michelle’s forehead.

“No more lies?” Michelle gazes up. Alice nods her head. “What happened to your ankle?”

Alice lifts her leg and examines the bleeding wound. “I cut myself stepping around the broken flower pot.”

Michelle smiles, “And where’s your pet?”

Alice laughs, “Around here somewhere.” She turns her head, looking the room over.

I lean to the side, tipping my weight into Alice’s door. It creaks open.

Michelle lifts her head from Alice’s chest and looks over. We make eye contact.

“AHHHH!” Michelle screams, pointing straight at me. “What the fuck is that-gahhhh,” she’s cut off, gagging. Alice locks her arm around Michelle’s throat in a chokehold and squeezes. She stares at me, smiling.

I force myself forward. Michelle’s face turns red, then purple, as she dangles her arms at her sides.

“No you don’t,” Alice says, releasing Michelle to stand and throw erratic kicks my way. Michelle collapses on the sofa in a heap, gasping for breath.

Alice kicks repeatedly, grazing me here and there as Michelle comes to her senses on the other side of the room.

I sweep under an errant kick and slip behind Alice. She attempts to back kick me with her bad leg so I block it with my forehead.

“Ouch!” Alice cries, collapsing on one knee. I back away as Michelle pounces on Alice, wailing down on her with erratic slaps and punches.

“What. The. Fuck. Are. You. Doing?” Michelle cries with each blow.

Alice whips around, smacking her fist into Michelle’s ear. Michelle collapses to her side as Alice regains her composure. She stands up, seething and retreating into the kitchen.

I roll forward far enough to spy in as Alice removes a butcher’s knife from the drawer. I spring toward the bedroom, nudging Michelle on the way.

She looks at me as I rest between the two rooms. Right as Michelle stands, Alice charges in, stabbing and grazing Michelle’s back.

“Ah!” Michelle cries, lunging toward me with her arm held out. Alice swipes again but misses, tripping as Michelle sidesteps her.

Michelle spills into the bedroom and slams the door behind her, panting. Blood runs down her shorts, staining them purple.

Alice pounds the door from the other side. She stabs the knife in, but it doesn't break through. Michelle backs away and turns.

“What did she do to you?” she asks.

The pounding at the door ceases. Footsteps tap down the hall. Michelle glances at the door, then back to me. She leans down on one knee and gazes in my eyes.

I let out a dry hiss. Wedging my beat-up jaw open allows me to stick out my tongue. Michelle grimaces and turns away. She walks up to Alice's nightstand and returns with a half empty glass of water.

Michelle points at it and shrugs. I wag my eyebrows and smile. Even if it drains through, the only thing on Earth I want right now is a glass of water.

She tips it in my mouth and I drain the cup in less than half a second. Before I'm even done smiling, a pool's formed at the base of my neck.

“Oh, shit,” I croak, looking down. I stare up at Michelle.

“You can talk?” she asks.

“Guess so,” I clear my throat.

“What the fuck happened in here?” Michelle bites her thumb and looks around.

“Not really sure,” I motion toward the suitcase in the corner. “But I'm not the only one.”

Michelle steps over and shuffles through its contents.

“Oh my God,” she whispers under her breath, covering her mouth.

The doorknob jingles behind me. I whip around and Alice takes up the doorway. She holds a skeleton key in one hand and her knife in the other.

“No more lies means no snooping,” Alice whispers.

Michelle turns. Her hands are filled with wallets and newspaper clippings. She drops them to the floor. She kicks over the bag. More licenses, phones, and pictures fall. Photos depicting bodies in various stages of dismemberment stick out within the pile. Some pictures even show Alice posed with and engaged in...acts with them.

“Were you gonna do this to me too?”

“Oh, no, honey,” Alice smiles, stepping forward.

“No!” Michelle sticks her hand out to halt Alice. “You already tried killing me.”

“Oh, baby,” Alice giggles. “If I was wanted to kill you, I’d have more fun with you first. I just needed you out of the way,” she says, pointing the knife at me. I shrink backwards, closer to Michelle. She steps in front of me, shaking her head at Alice.

“This has to stop. Now.”

Alice puts her head down and slouches her shoulders. “No,” she stares at the floor. Her knuckles whiten as her fingers squeeze the knife handle. “Nothing stops. Ever.”

She raises the knife and charges forward. Michelle shrieks and ducks under Alice’s wild swings, scooping me up in the process. Alice loses her balance as Michelle slides past her.

Michelle cradles me in her arms like a football and runs toward the door.

“Get over here, you fucking-”

Michelle trips as she gets into the living room. I tumble out of her arms and roll across the room.

“Aah!” Michelle screams with the knife sticking out her thigh.

She reaches her fingertips out to me as Alice rips the blade out. Blood spurts in the air, streaking half her face like the war paint in *Braveheart*. She raises her arm again, ready to plunge the blade back down. Michelle swings her fist backwards and connects with Alice’s temple, tossing her off balance.

Michelle kicks her feet up as Alice shakes out the cobwebs. I roll toward a flower pot.

“This way!” I shout as Michelle limps over. Tears stream down her face. She holds her hand to her thigh, doing her best to staunch the gushing blood.

Alice stands and raises the knife, ready to charge.

Michelle gets close enough to pick me up but I stop her, “No. Use this,” I turn toward the flower pit as Alice pounds forward. Michelle bugs her eyes and nods.

She picks up the pot and spins around. Liquid swishes and spills from the brim as she does.

“You both get to die now you-”

Michelle tosses the liquid in Alice’s face, stopping her advance.

Alice screams and drops the knife. Acid bubbles through her face, staining it red and sending smoke in the air as it eats through her skin.

My eyes dart to the knife, but Michelle has it in her hand and sticks it in Alice's shoulder before I can say anything. Alice collapses as Michelle rips the blade out and jams it into Alice's chest for good measure.

She gurgles on the floor before shutting her eyes.

Michelle falls to one knee as blood courses down her thigh. We stare at Alice.

"You should cover that up," I say, noticing the pool of blood slowly forming under Michelle's foot.

She looks at me and smiles, "You should talk." She picks me up and says, "What the fuck happened here tonight?"

"No idea. But, let's get that covered. Or else you'll bleed out." She carried me to the kitchen and sets me on the counter as she wraps a tourniquet around her thigh.

"Why did she?"

"No idea. I thought we were friends," I say, as Michelle picks me back up.

"I did too," she says, sniffing.

"Die, you two!" Alice screams, suddenly in the doorway. Blood drenches my old shirt. Open sores and burns cover her face.

Michelle jumps and throws me at Alice. I fly through the air, scared but mad. Mad at what she's put me through. Mad at what she's done.

I open my mouth in mid-air and land on her neck. I bite and find much less resistance than I did with her ankle. She falls, choking and flailing until I can't feel a pulse pounding between my teeth anymore.

“Is she dead?” Michelle asks. “For real?”

“I don't know. Am I?”

Michelle picks me back up. “We have to go.”

I look in her eyes and ask, “Please?”

She cradles me in her arms and walks me out of the apartment. We get to the end of the hall and wait for the elevator.

When it finally opens, the old couple from earlier is there.

I smile as they scream.

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Vita

Name:

Vincent Manta

Baccalaureate Degree:

Bachelor of Arts, St. John's
University, New York, Major:
English

Date Graduated:

May, 2019