SOFT TISSUE

(A Good Ghoul is Hard to Find)

0: The Knowing Moon

I walked the road to the cemetery under the new moon, shovel in hand. I had four hours until sunrise, meaning I had only four hours to dig up her grave, do what I needed, and re-bury her. I should've given myself more time, but I just wasn't able to. I have broken into cemeteries before; it's not too hard. The most difficult thing was climbing the gate, and this one was particularly high.

I got to the fork in the road. To the right was a neighborhood, and to the left was the cemetery. I went left, of course, and swung the shovel over my shoulder, walking even faster, a bit jauntier. I had surveyed the area earlier that week, and the only way *in* was *over,* so I had stashed a ladder in the nearby woods, leaning it under a tree. After finding it again and propping it against the gate, I threw the shovel between the gate, then pushed on the ladder to make sure it was stable and began climbing.

At the top, I swung my legs over the rail. Carefully, I bent over, grabbed the horizontal bar, and dropped so that I was hanging. Looking down, I realized I was only about four feet from the ground. I let go and fell to the dirt next to the shovel. I smiled, though the *hardest*-hardest part was still ahead of me.

The graveyard has been here as long as the community has, about forty years. Mother and I moved here when the neighborhoods were only a decade old; she stayed until her death, and I stayed afterwards. Two weeks ago, she was buried. Distant relatives sent cards and flowers.

When I found Mother dead in her room that fateful morning, I couldn't get Camus's famous opening line out of my head: *Maman died today.* It swirled around my head like a cyclone until the next afternoon.

Maman died today. Maman died today. Maman died today.

I, like Monsieur Meursault, didn't shed a single tear. My feelings about Mother were and would remain private.

The graves were modern, just upright or flat headstones, no big or baroque monuments or mausoleums, no death dates before 1970, and no angel statues. A boring, boring cemetery, protected by a bizarrely out-of-place gate.

I trekked to her grave– an upright headstone with her full name engraved on it as well as her birth and death dates.

The first shovelful of dirt filled me with a sense of newness. It satisfied something in me to know that what I was doing, I was doing for me and not her. For most of my life, I'd been taking care of Mother. She was sick, or so she said, and I, being the dutiful child I was, made sure she was comfortable, made sure she never had to lift a finger if she didn't want to. That's what she wanted from me. I dug until I hit a hard object with my shovel and uncovered her casket—cherry wood with a keyless latch made to my specifications by a carpenter I was acquainted with. I lowered myself onto the upper half of the box to find the latch. Feeling around the sides of the casket, my hand hit a little

metal tab. Adjusting the angle of my hand, I twisted it while pulling up the inferior half of the casket. Her legs and feet were covered with her favorite dress and shoes.

I thought about opening the half I was kneeling on to see her in full. But I decided against it. I didn't want to see if her face was as decomposed as the rest of her. I rarely minded seeing the faces of the bodies I consume, but…she was still my mother.

I leaned down to look at the open side. I pulled up the dress a little to see the lower leg, lifted it as much as I could, and bit down on her calf. It was squishy, and some substance squirted out of the new wound. I bit down harder and ripped a chunk out like a rabid dog; the flesh came easily. It was in an in-between state: not fresh and firm but not gooey and leaking. It was a welcome sensation that I made a mental note to write about when I got back home. I chewed on the sweet protoplasm like it was a fine cut of pork. I just wish I had come prepared to take some with me; I wanted to cook it—I had never cooked it before. It'd be an interesting experiment, but I think I'd need a fresh one. Recently dead or even still alive while I butcher it.

Plans. Always making plans.

I didn't have much time to savor the moment; I had an hour to put everything back where I found it and go home. It reminded me of the end of playtime when I was in preschool. It was a somber occasion, always leading to a period of boredom—ennui, if you will. But I got to putting away my toys, anyway.

One at a time, I closed the casket, climbed out of the hole, and refilled the dirt. However, I did it all in a hurry, and I wondered if anyone would find the scene in the daylight and put the pieces together. The prospect of getting caught wasn't tantalizing to me like it is to some others who go against the current. I dreaded it; if I wanted to get caught, I'd go into the town square eating fingers off a hand. I *feared* revelation; however, I viewed it as an inevitability. I'd do what I loved for some time, and then I'd be forced to stop.

I pat the semi-compact dirt on the grave with my shovel. It's as good as I could get it. As the sun came over the horizon and the black night turned to gray morning, I knew it was time to run. I retraced my steps, threw the shovel to the other side, pulled the ladder through the gate, and climbed it, pulling it back through the gate before stashing it and walking the road back. I had to walk on the sides as a few (not a lot, but a few) cars were on the road. Back to my community, back among the living.

1: Among the Living

Despite the season, the late August morning was cool and dewy. Mother died a month ago, and I had consumed no flesh since I consumed hers. I was abstaining, if only for a short period. After eating her, I had felt a sort of depression, strangely enough. I didn't want to go anywhere or do anything; I thought I'd be happier after she was gone and I *had* finally made peace in my own, admittedly *different* way. But I had to fight myself to go to work, interact with people, and maintain my loose relationships. I laid in a graveyard the past night, not the one Mother was in, but one a little further out of town, hidden by trees. You could drive up to it, but it was a bumpy dirt road. The graves here were older but still not ostentatious. It was the first time I had done that since before July's new moon. I smelled like dirt and grass. That night, I looked up at the stars, searching for constellations to pass the time. I made a note of the names and dates I saw and drew some of the more interesting headstones I found. I slept behind a grave labeled

HENRY MEYERS
JUNE 9, 1902–DECEMBER 27, 1955

I wondered about his life and what he did in his fifty-three years. I thought about how he might have died. Natural causes? Maybe suicide? Maybe he was hit by a train, and there wasn't much of him left to bury.

In the morning, I assessed myself: the depression didn't disappear from my body and mind, but it dissipated slightly. That's all I needed.

I would go out again sometime soon, and would bring some of the meat home to cook. I knew that meant I had to start checking obituaries again, a task I neglected in my melancholy.

When I got home, I stripped off my clothes and took a shower. I had to go to work in four hours, so I had to prepare myself. I decided that after work, I'd run errands and then get to planning.

While in the shower, I realized I had missed the feeling of hot water and soap on my skin. I washed my hair too, just to expel the graveyard smell completely from my body. I stayed there longer than I should have just to soak in the feeling.

Out of the shower, I dried myself off and lay on my bed again. Soon, I fell back asleep, waking up two hours later to my alarm.

I didn't dislike work; I needed to do it for survival, but when I was there, I wished I were anywhere else.

I worked as an office manager at a company that provides IT services for other businesses. It's not much, day-in-day-out, but it puts food on the table, so to speak. I work at a white computer in a white cubicle in a white office with a splash of gray flooring.

My cubicle-mate was a man about my age (maybe a bit older), named Mark. Every day, in the morning, Mark ate a bagel with lox and drank a medium coffee with cream and sugar from the coffee maker in the break room, but occasionally, he'd buy from the coffee shop a block over. Before work, during break, and near the end of the day, my thoughts usually strayed to Mark and what he may be doing. I, however, rarely thought about him outside of work. Mark was the closest thing I could consider to be a "like mind", but I barely spoke to him.

"Hey." We would say to each other, and the niceties don't end there, no, it was usually followed by "how's it going," and "how was your weekend and/or night?"

Today was no different.

Hey.

I'm doing alright.

It was good, but I didn't do much.

Maybe that's how I liked it, barebones and dry. I didn't like the idea of saying too much. But what's too much?

Mark had a wife and a teenage kid. He kept an updated photo of the two together on his desk, along with a paperweight shaped like a wiener dog and an assortment of colored pens. I kept my desk clear.

When I came back after Mother died, the first thing he said when he saw me was, "Hey buddy, I missed ya!"

And I was grateful.

In between my musings over Mark, I worked, took calls, and kept myself from looking at my personal email. Occasionally, I'd catch Mark playing solitaire and, for a moment, I wished I could be like him.

After work, I had to go to the grocery store to get human food. I enjoyed the grocery store since I was about fifteen-years-old, I did most of the shopping for my mom and me. I navigated the grocery store as efficiently as possible, and no time was wasted. I was thinking about making a big batch of potato soup for dinner, then subsequently work lunch. I made sure to get the potatoes, sour cream, onion, garlic, and bacon. The rest of the ingredients, I was sure I had. I got veggies first, then meat, then canned goods, then baked goods. I bought a nice loaf of sourdough and a baguette just for the hell of it. Then I went to the line, which was unfortunately long this time of day, and eventually paid and got out of there.

I kept Mother's obituary. Though when it was first published, I was actively looking for it in the paper. Seeing it still seared my eyes, I felt like I was looking at the sun, but I couldn't look away. I wrote her obituary the day she died; it took me all of half an hour. I didn't know what to say. I picked up today's newspaper at the door as I went inside.

Her death notice read:

Mary Ann Jones, 57, led a fulfilling life as a piano teacher to children up until her untimely death on July 10th, 20—. She is preceded by her loving husband James Jones, who died 30 years previous. She is survived by her son and many friends who hope to see her again soon.

I sat down at the kitchen table and read the new notices.

ALLEN "AL" GREEN…

Al Green, 87, was a valued member of his community. As a firefighter, husband, father, and grandfather, he only wanted what was best for his neighbors and family—

SUSAN ROURKE…

Susan Rourke (neé O'Connor) was a light in the lives of everyone who knew her. She leaves behind her three daughters, husband, and beloved dog, Beethoven—

ALEXANDER MANNING…

Alex was a trailblazer in his community. He was an organizer for the local crisis center and was an advocate for Gay and Lesbian rights. He was a multi-talented artist who wished for his paintings to be auctioned off for—

So on, so forth.

Those people had family, friends, community, all who loved them enough to write something for them through the devastation of their deaths. Maybe someone thought the same about my mother. But I can't help but feel like they all *knew*. They all *knew* I couldn't be bothered to write more than a few lines about my own *mother*. They all knew I lied about her having friends. They all knew I was a poor excuse for a son. They all knew… they all knew…

My hands trembled, and I dropped the open paper down on the table. I stopped myself, I took deep breaths—in through nose, out through mouth—and stayed still for a moment.

I stood up more suddenly than I could think about it, and the chair squeaked under me. I needed to do something else.

2: Forum

I didn't talk on the forums much. I liked to observe what other people are saying and doing, how they role-play with each other. Sometimes I feel like an ethnographer but for cannibals. Well, cannibals and necrophagists. Some people on the forums like to separate these concepts entirely and break up the site into sides. I always found subculture segregation silly.

That night, I made myself a cup of tea and logged onto the website. My screen name was *SilverSurfer* after my favorite comic book character as a kid. It was the first thing that came to mind, but I truly never liked the name for myself. I clicked on the latest post, just looking to pass the time.

New Here!
Post by Arsenic_Lover

I'm new to PeopleEaters, but I plan to be active, so I thought I might as well introduce myself: My name isn't Arsenic, but that's what you can call me. I'm 37/M/USA, and I've had fantasies about eating people since I was a little kid. Never acted on it though haha. The closest I've come is biting my wife during sex.
Happy to have found like-minded people.

Comments (10):

Solo77:
ever drawn blood?
Arsenic_Lover:
No, I've only bruised her a few times.

VikingWarrior:
Welcome, brother.

Cubeman:
You'll love it here

(Load More Comments)

I almost commented, but I clicked off the post. I was going to comment about how I also had cannibalistic fantasies as a kid. My earliest concrete memory was when I was seven: I was at a sleepover with my best friend. We were next to each other in bed. I watched him sleep for maybe half an hour, and all I could think of was how I wished he

were *dead.* Not because I didn't like him—I loved him, and it was because I loved him I wanted him dead. I wanted to put him on the table and eat him head to toe. The thought scared me. Part of me didn't want him dead at all, but another, more nagging part, wanted to *consume*.

I remember that at that time, I started to cry, and it woke him up.

"Why are you crying?" He asked.

"Because I don't want you to die!"

I looked at the next post:

Any Movie Lovers?
Post by 96Tears96Eyes

Hey, any cinephiles here? Or even just movie enjoyers? Sound off in the comments: what's your favorite? What was the last movie you saw?

Comments (23):

Leatherface:
Texas Chain Saw, if it's not obvious.

Abandoned_Brain:
Paris Blues (1961)

Porttree:
Spinal Tap

SolemnitySorrow:
Sedmikrásky aka Daisies

(Load More Comments)

I clicked off the post.

I scrolled down a little further, and I saw something that caught my eye.

Anyone Near Williamstown?
Post by Necrobabe420
(23/F/VA) Does anyone in or near Williamstown wanna meet up? I need friends, and normies aren't cutting it lol

Comments (0):
No comments here!

There's someone in this town like me? I felt like a teen finding another person who liked the same music as I do. I was so *excited* for the first time outside of my graveyard exploits.

I could comment.

I could do it.

I hovered over the comment bar and clicked it. I started typing…

I'm in|

Then I deleted what I wrote.

I typed it again.

I'm in Williamstown|

I deleted it again.

And I wrote it again.

I'm in Williamstown.|

I sat on the message for a while.

I clicked send.

SilverSurfer:
I'm in Williamstown.

I reloaded the page repeatedly for ten minutes. No response.

I should delete my comment.

No, I should just log off.

So I did. I logged off and left the bit of tea I had left sitting cold on my desk. I turned off the floor lamp next to me and went to bed.

My room was next to my mother's room, and usually, I'd say goodnight to her and would make sure she had water before going to bed myself. Of course, I didn't need to do that anymore, but it got me thinking about how I haven't cleaned out that room. Was it too soon to?

It felt like bad luck to clean it out. But she had been gone for a month. It would behoove me to sort and get rid of things. I thought about it while I drifted off. It triggered a memory in me.

As a child, my mother would often make me sleep in the same bed as her. I would be uncomfortable the entire time and barely get sleep, and I would sneak back to my room when I knew she was in a deep slumber. As I got older, maybe late high school age, I asked her in passing why she would force me to do this, while trying not to make a big deal of it. She had laughed and said I insisted on sleeping with her because I was afraid to sleep alone as a kid. I never said that that wasn't how I remembered it. I let her lie to me. And I regret that now. I wish I had yelled at her.

The next morning, I woke up still ruminating on this memory, shivering at the thought of it. I made my coffee and sat at the kitchen table. It was only seven in the morning, and I had time to be idle, which I didn't like. I thought about going back to sleep, but I knew I was fully awake now. Looking at the sliver of my computer that I could see in the corner of the adjacent room. I didn't have any reason *not* to log on outside of my anxiety.

She probably didn't respond.

Why don't I check?

I got up from my chair and went to my computer. I hesitated to log on. It took me minutes, but I did it.

New Messages (1)

My heart skipped a beat. I clicked on the tab, and it redirected me to Necrobabe420's original post.
She responded to my comment.

SilverSurfer:
I'm in Williamstown.

> *Necrobabe420:*
> What's yr email

I responded again with my personal email. I noticed her response came in at 3:43 A.M., leading me to think she was either working the night shift, she had no job at all, or she was an insomniac. I opened a new tab and went to my email, and waited. I knew it was nonsensical, but I couldn't help it. I waited, refreshing every few minutes until it was eight. I had to get ready for work.

3: Fresh Meat

On the way home, I didn't bother with my weekly routine like groceries (though this is the day I usually do it), I rushed home and hurried to open my email. I was holding off on logging into it at work just to give her time. I realized that I didn't know if they were really a female and twenty-three. I realize it's a cliche that people lie about their sex and age on the internet, but it was a genuine worry. Not that I had much to worry about, I was an adult male of average build and, if I'm talking to another man in actuality, what did it matter? It's not like I'm looking for a girlfriend, so unless this person wanted to kill me, whatever they were didn't matter.

I had a new email:

Subject: *I'm Necrobabe from People Eaters*
From: *evildragon@aol.com at 9:22 A.M.*

Hey SilverSurfer, we should meet up. It's good to meet another cannibal freak in the area. I thought I was all alone lol.

I responded that I'd love to meet up and that I wasn't a cannibal but a necrophagist. They emailed back ten minutes later:

RE: *I'm Necrobabe from People Eaters*
From: *evildragon@aol.com at 6:17 PM*

Same shit. Where do u want to meet?

I said to them, maybe we should meet at the fountain in Wilshire Park on Saturday, and they agreed to it.

I felt relentlessly enthusiastic about the meeting, a feeling I hadn't had since I was a teenager. I was *actually* giddy about something that wasn't eating flesh. Though I suppose it's tangentially related.

The rest of the week went by quickly as my anticipation built. I had moments alone in my house where I would laugh to myself or even jitter with happiness.

I emailed them the night before to see if we were still on for tomorrow, and they responded in the affirmative. I went to bed happy and had no dreams that night.
I awoke two hours before my alarm the next morning and picked out my clothes.

I got online and opened AOL, and no new mail. I took initiative and sent a message to them. I told them I'd be by the fountain in a blue shirt and jeans. They responded soon after, saying they'd most likely be a sweater.

I drove out to Wilshire at 11:30 on the dot. It only took about ten minutes to get there, but I wasn't taking any chances. I wouldn't want to be late and make a bad first impression.

I arrived at 11:42 and walked to the fountain and sat on the bench around it…then quickly switched to sitting on the ledge of the fountain itself. The statue in the middle was four cherubs stacked on one another, and the one at the top held up a basin of water that spilled down on all sides. Pennies littered the bottom of the pool below. And I considered throwing in a penny myself—to wish for what exactly? I don't know. Perhaps for this meeting to go well.

At 12:12, they arrived.

Upon finally seeing her…him…them, I wasn't sure what they were. They were about 5'7 and all skin and bone. They wore a consuming brown sweater and olive slacks held up by a belt. They had stringy, wet-looking red hair and green eyes. Hard facial features: high cheekbones and a pointed nose. I suppose they would be handsome—or pretty if they had more meat on them. I went up to them, about to ask who they were, just in case I got it wrong, "Hey, are you—"

"Your hookup? Yeah." They smiled wryly. Their voice was slightly raspy but high. I guessed she was a girl, like she said she was.

"Uh…"

"It was a joke."

"How old are you?" I asked, genuinely unable to tell her age just by looking.

"Twenty-three. It was on my post."

"You look younger."

"Sure." She rolled her eyes. "You?"

"Thirty-five."

"What's your name?"

I told her and asked, "And yours?"

"Just call me Carter." She ran her hands through her hair.

"Okay, Carter, what do you want to do first?"

"Why don't we walk and talk?"

"Alright."

We chose a path in the park and started down it. We ended up being flanked by trees.

She started off the conversation because I had no idea how. "How'd you fall into this world?"

"What do you mean?"

"Of perversion and cannibalism, duh."

"Oh, uh, it was just something that was always in the back of my mind, and when I finally identified it, I needed to know I wasn't alone."

“Hm.” She nodded, “I got into it in high school, I wasn’t eating consistently, I mean, I basically stopped doing it altogether, and I read a book about cannibals, and it awakened something in me, I guess.”

“Did you ever feel isolated by it?”

“Yeah, of course. But I knew that there *had* to be other freaks out there. But people in my real life, yeah, it totally isolated me from them.”

“What about your parents, do you talk to them?”

“What kind of fucking question is that?”

“A simple one.”

She laughed, “It’s none of your business.”

We made a turn and came across a busy play-place. Children on swings, slides, and teeter-totters, parents watched from benches. The sudden activity took me aback for a moment, but Carter pressed on down the paved trail, ignoring the kids with a purpose.

We strolled around some more, talking about our likes, dislikes, pet peeves... I hung on her every word.

She liked thunderstorms, movies, and coffee.

She disliked cops, enclosed spaces, and being photographed.

Her pet peeves were people in denial and being interrupted.

We came back around to the cherub fountain and ended our walk.

“Alright, see ya’ later, dude.”

“Bye, Carter.”

“Email me whenever. I’d like to talk to you again.”

“Sure, absolutely.”

She did a final wave goodbye, and my stomach twisted up in a way that wasn’t bad. It felt like I just came off a roller coaster. I watched her disappear around a corner, and I stayed by the fountain a bit longer. I thought for a moment, pulled my wallet from my pocket, and checked my coins. A few pennies clanked around there, and I took one out. I held it in my fist for a second and thought intently about one thing (*I hope that Carter will talk to me again),* then tossed it into the pool.

It wasn’t until that night, while trying to fall asleep, that I realized something: She was exactly who I wanted to be.

4: Courtship

I couldn't stop thinking about her. Whenever I had a free moment, my thoughts strayed to her. I needed to talk to her again. Immediately. I was in the middle of a workday, and Mark was regaling me with something funny his dog did the day before, when suddenly I couldn't take it anymore. I stopped whatever I was doing and, throwing caution to the wind, logged on to my personal email.

Nothing from her.

I refreshed the page obsessively, waiting for her to make another move. And, when she didn't, I got up the courage to.

Subject: *Hi*
To: *evildragon@aol.com at 1:48 P.M.*

Hey, Carter. When do you want to hang out again?

Send.

It was embarrassing how many times I wrote and rewrote that. At first being passive, then choosing to be forward.

RE: *Hi*
From: *evildragon@aol.com at 2:03 P.M.*

We can do it again this weekend. We should go to Heaven&Hell.

RE: *Hi*
To: *evildragon@aol.com at 2:07 P.M.*

What's that?

RE: *Hi*
From: *evildragon@aol.com at 2:08 P.M.*

A club I haunt.

I emailed back one more time just to say okay and closed the tab, hoping to evade detection.

Mark was still talking.

I kept myself from logging back on until the next day. I didn't even log on after work. I wanted to keep the anticipation up. When I finally did check my email, I got a message from her. It was the address to the club and directions on how to get there. It was in the city, so I had a bit of a drive ahead of me this weekend.

The week went by fast. I gave Carter my number, and we chatted a few times over the phone. She still wouldn't tell me what she did for work, and I didn't know much about her personal life, but we got along talking about interests besides cannibalism and our wants for the future. She let it slip that she wants to move out of Williamstown and go to the West Coast. I said the idea was romantic in the classical sense, but she disagreed.

I hadn't told her about my mother's death, mostly because I didn't want to be questioned about it. I thought about it whenever I spoke to her, though. I wanted to blurt it out and hear what she had to say—if she would even care!

But, I didn't.

On Wednesday, I got big boxes from the hardware store and started packing my mother's stuff away. The first day, I got through the things on top of her dresser and in her nightstand. I uncovered a Bible from before I was born, and a photo of my father when they were dating. I decided to save those things. My mother never talked about my father outside of the occasional "I miss him." No stories, no records, nothing.

The next day, I put most of her clothes into garbage bags to donate.

The day after that, I tackled washing and changing her bedding as well as going through her jewelry. She was buried in her wedding ring and favorite necklace, but there were tons of other barely worn bracelets, watches, earrings, anything you could name that I had to sort.

By the end of the week, I had her room done, and I just had to figure out what to do with her extraneous things.

Saturday, I was supposed to meet Carter. But in the morning, I took the bags of clothes to the Salvation Army and just stalked message boards until I had to leave.

I got to the club an hour after it opened, the time Carter and I set to meet each other. I stood outside, feeling like a creep. There wasn't a line to get in, but I felt strange just standing there.

She arrived fifteen minutes late in a short purple velvet dress layered with tights and a leather jacket. How wasn't she sweltering in that?

"Hey, man, sorry I'm late, I took the train."

"It's fine. You look nice."

She smiled, "Why, thank you."

Inside, the first thing I noticed was the sculpted devil's head hanging above the stage, its features grotesque and exaggerated. It looked like it'd serve better in a haunted house than a nightclub.

The dance floor had a white light illuminating the section from the ceiling. Despite it, it was still dark. Red lights lined the bar and seating areas.

My first instinct was to get a drink, but then I thought about the drive back. Carter, however, ordered a vodka soda and sat at the bar. I sat down next to her and ordered a regular soda.

"So," she sipped her drink, "How do you like it here?"

"It's good so far."

"Just good?"

"Yeah, I mean, I haven't really done anything."

She smiled a mischievous smile, "Hold on."

She downed half of her drink, got up, and pulled me out to the dance floor against my will.

"What're you doing?" I shouted over the music

"I want to dance!"

"I don't know how to dance!"

She laughed, shook her head, and pulled me further into the maze of undulating bodies and heat. We halted, and she pressed her body close to mine, putting her lips close to my ear, "Feel the music."

She quickly pulled away from me, unlocking our hands. I missed her body.

The music was bass-heavy and black, but the lilting voice that traveled through the depths was a clear blue. A sharp red 'tss' sound came from the sides. She moved to the beat with ease, swaying her hips, moving her arms, rolling her head. I felt high just looking at her.

I moved with her and, despite wanting to, I didn't touch her until she came closer to me and put my hands on her hips.

"Do you want to go to my place?" I blurted out.

"What?"

"Do you want to—"

"Yes!"

The drive back wasn't bad. Carter turned the radio up as soon as we got into the car; it was the "All Out 80s" station, which I didn't mind. Hall and Oates' harmonizing voices came out of the speaker and sang about how out of touch I was. There was little to no traffic, and having Carter with me made me feel like I was buzzing out of my body. The feeling couldn't have been sustainable, but it only took 20 minutes to get to my home, so I didn't have to find out if it was or not.

I pulled into my driveway and turned off the car. I got out before Carter, whose demeanor seemed to shift a bit.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

I unlocked the door and let her inside in front of me. As soon as I closed it behind me, she was on me, kissing me all over. When she finally reached my lips, I cupped her face in my hand, then pulled away, "Let's go to the bedroom."

She nodded.

I led her to my room and closed the door behind me as if there was someone else in the house. But in the room, we stood apart. She was closer to the door while I was closer to the bed. She looked apprehensive and…*nervous.* I never imagined her feeling nervous before.

"Is—is everything alright?"

"There's something I should tell you."

It put me off how all her confidence was gone.

"What is it?"

"I mean, I didn't think we'd actually fuck. I didn't think our relationship was like that. I want to have sex but…"

"Carter, what is it?"

"I have a dick."

"What?"

"I have a dick." Her voice cracked.

"Oh."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"No."

Carter then told me she was a woman, despite this, and I didn't argue with her. I wasn't apathetic, but it didn't affect me in the way she thought it would. I wasn't overcome with uncontrollable rage or lust; it was simply another factor in our relationship. *Relationship*— what a word to use.

She stepped closer to me, and I didn't move. I didn't want to scare her. She closed the gap between us and kissed me. She put her tongue in my mouth, and that was enough for me to lean her onto the bed and deepen the kiss. I lifted her dress and pulled down her tights. Her underwear was light green, and her skin under her clothes was even whiter than her skin showing. I grabbed her hips; it was like touching soft bone.

I took the opportunity to put my hands around her waist and pull her up to the head of the bed. She gasped in surprise. And I smiled at her.

I had never kissed anyone like I kissed her.

5: Itch

I woke up next to her, and I felt at peace. Her deep breaths made me realize how nice it is to wake up next to someone you truly like. I lingered, just listening to her, watching the back of her head as she slept.

I got the bright idea that I should make us breakfast. So, I carefully got out of bed so to not wake her and went to the kitchen. I made a pot of coffee, put some bread in the toaster, and started on the eggs and bacon.

"Do you live here with someone else?"

I jumped out of my skin; I didn't hear her come in. She was in her underwear and a sweater she fished out of my hamper.

"Yes— I mean, no, not anymore."

"What does that mean?" She sat down at the table.

"I used to live here with my mother. She… died almost two months ago."

"Oh." A pause, "No wonder it looks like an old lady decorated in here."

Her response caught me so off guard that I actually *laughed.* She snickered, too.

"Do you want coffee?" I preemptively reached for a mug out of the cabinet.

"Yes, please."

I got the pot from under the Mr. Coffee and poured her some, "Cream and—"

"No, black is fine."

"So," I sat down across from her, "how was, you know, last night?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I—it was good." She didn't look at me directly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't say it was good if it wasn't."

"Okay," I almost told her she should eat something because I had never seen her *eat,* but I decided against it. She doesn't want me to nag her, I know that for sure.

"Do you need me to drive you home?" I asked.

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"No, I was just wondering."

"Well, no, I like walking."

I wondered where she lived in town. She finished her coffee and stared down at the food in front of her. "Have you ever had human flesh before, like, for real?"

I hesitated; I didn't want to answer truthfully, but it was hard to lie to her. "Yes."

Her lips parted slightly, her eyes widened, "What's it like?"

"Chewy… tangy."

"How'd you get it?"

"I dig it up myself."

"I never imagined you were the type to get your hands dirty."

"You're not put off?"

“What? No! Compared to you, everyone else is a fucking *poser*. You’re the real deal, man.”

“So… you haven’t eaten it?”

“No. Haven’t had the chance.”

“I can get you some. Make you a nice meal one day.” I blurted out.

“How sweet.” She laughed. She still didn’t touch her food. “Look,” she said, getting up, “I should go.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She went back into my room and changed back into her clothes from last night. She said she’d call me soon, and left.

I didn’t hear from Carter for a while after that. Every time I emailed her, she seldom answered, and whenever I called, she let it go to voicemail. I probably left about five messages on her machine before I gave up for the time being.

I lingered in bed when I woke up, often daydreaming about her being next to me again. I felt pathetic, but then I thought maybe that was what love felt like.
Without her, I was aimless, listless, and meaningless in ways I hadn’t felt before her. I craved every aspect of her to my core. Maybe I did something wrong to drive her away, but she seemed fine when I last saw her in person.

I must’ve done *something*.

I stayed up to date on the obituaries, but nagging my mind was the idea that I needed something *fresh*. But *fresh* was dangerous, my more rational side insisted.

It meant I needed to kill, and I didn’t know if I was able to do that.

Maybe I could dig something up that would be good enough.

Maybe.

I saw a death notice that seemed promising: Uriah Hollis, 30.

He died by suicide, and his burial wasn’t that far off from his death date. It’s only a week’s difference, which is a quick turnaround for anyone who died unexpectedly. His wake was yesterday, so I could go check it out.

Graveyards at night were typically my favorite places, but tonight it seemed to me as if there was no reason to be there. I was going to Uriah Hollis’s grave, but I didn’t feel much joy in doing it. I trudged up the hill to the freshly buried dirt and began to dig.

After a long while, I hit something hard.

I pried the casket with my shovel and, with some force, I got both ends opened. I saw his face: pallid-white, peaceful-looking, dead.

I knew it wouldn’t do. I shouldn’t have even bothered with it, but I pulled down his pants and got out my knife. I slowly sawed into the skin, watching as it went deeper and deeper. Then I cut down the leg, taking a sliver off and trying him for myself.

It was passable. Only passable. But I took more of his body anyway. I put the pieces in Tupperware and reburied him.

I started noticing dead birds near my home when walking. Mangled things; twisted, headless, or with bones showing, being eaten by flies, crawled on by ants, and devoured by stray cats in the night. When I saw them, I thought of Carter, though she resembled the malnourished cat more than the dead bird. But there's something about them, the freeness of a bird cut short by something only known to *it*–maybe it was preyed upon, maybe it was its own stupidity that got it killed. Either way, it's dead.

I arrived home from work one day and checked my voicemail. Suddenly, her voice filled the room like a sweet aroma, "Hey, dude, I'm sorry for ignoring you." Her voice was weak, like she had just been crying. "Everything's just been a little crazy for me for a while. I, uh, don't know how to talk about it."

I said out loud, "It's okay!" As if she could hear.

"Maybe I'll try to explain it at some point," She continued, "but not now, not over the phone. Anyway, I think we should get together again soon. Call me back sometime. Bye."

My heart ached for her. I needed to make our next meeting special. I needed *meat*, and it needed to be *fresh*.

6: Kill

I had a plan in place. I knew what I was going to do, and went along my work day like normal.

Mark talked to me about how his wife was thinking about going back to school for her Master's—he was not going to make this easy for me, was he?

"Hey, Mark, are you doing anything after work?"

"No, why? You wanna get drinks?" He laughed.

I chuckled politely, "No, it's not that. I just have this old loveseat I need to move from my basement, and–" I shook my head. "It'd just be easier with some help. I don't have many people I could ask."

"Oh, sure, buddy. Why not? Get a chance to see what you're like outside of our cozy little cubicle."

I reached over to jovially pat him on the back.

I didn't feel good about this, but I was going to do it for my love.

After work, I caught up with Mark, "Thanks again for helping me out. I won't keep you long, I promise."

"No problem." He smiled. He had a radiant smile, sort of infectious.

"Just follow me in my car, I only live about 10 minutes away."

He nodded. We walked to the elevator together, and when it opened, I let him in first.

Mark followed me as planned. I didn't know if he had called his wife and told her where he was going or not, but I hoped to God he hadn't. I didn't give him an address, so maybe that would help me in the long run. We got out of our respective cars, and I led him into my home.

"Nice place."

"Thanks, the basement is just over here."

The basement door was in the kitchen, and I led him there slowly. He got a good look at all the photos on the wall that I haven't taken down yet. He didn't comment on them.

He took his jacket off and placed it on the back of a kitchen chair.

I opened the door, and we went down.

It was dark, but not impossible to see down there. I set up a plastic tarp earlier to catch any blood.

He hadn't known what was coming, and in a way that made me sad for him. I mean, who was I to play God in his life? Well, maybe it's not playing God but exerting one's will over someone else. After picking up the well-placed hammer off an old dresser, I asked him if he could pick up his side of the couch. He bent down to pick it up and, as soon as he said "Yep!" I brought the hammer down onto his head. Mark spasmed and relinquished the end of the couch, dropping onto the concrete floor. He jolted again; this

time, his eyes were open: he was still alive. I hit him again and again with the hammer until his face was almost caved in, but he finally stopped twitching.

I never…*killed* somebody before. I had never hurt a living thing. There was blood. Much of it. A large pool of it spread on the ground. I had to keep focused. I couldn't take it back now. If I wanted to salvage meat from him, I'd have to strip him.

God, his last thoughts must've been him wondering if I hated him.

I started with his shirt. I unbuttoned it and pulled his arms out. I unclasped his belt and unzipped his pants, pulling them down until—*his shoes*. I quickly took them off but left his socks on. Then I fully took off his pants but left him with the dignity of keeping his underwear on.

I hurried back upstairs to get my carving set and to put his jacket with the rest of his clothes. I had to deal with his car soon, but I needed to carve the meat before decomposition really started.

I quickly grabbed the set and Tupperware I kept ready from the kitchen table and almost fell back down the stairs.

I stuck the carving fork in the thigh and started to slice away big slabs of the leg and put it in the container. I lamented that I didn't have time to drain the body of blood because, as it was, it was messy work. I harvested the meat I wanted off of him for now and wrapped him in the plastic tarp.

Now for the car.

I checked his clothes for his keys and found them in his right pants pocket. I went back upstairs and out the door, unlocked his car, and got into the front seat.

I would drive it to the graveyard and hide it in the forest there.

Getting it there wasn't difficult, but finding enough of a clearing in the woods to drive a car into was different. When I realized I was running out of time, I just parked it on the far end of the cemetery and hoped it'd be inconspicuous, at least until tomorrow.

Earlier, before work, I called Carter, and she actually answered. I told her I wanted to make us a meal tonight, and she should come over around 7:30. She agreed and asked if she should get dressed up, I told her to wear anything she wants. It was 6:45, and it took 15 minutes to walk home. I barely had time to do everything I needed, so I hurried back as quickly as I could.

7: The Meal

I arrived home at 6:55. As soon as I got through the door, I put on rice, peeled off my dirty clothes, and took a brief shower. During it, I wondered if I should expect Carter to be on time or fashionably late, like she has been. I didn't want to chance it; I wanted everything perfect and ready for when she came. Seven minutes later, I was out of the shower, and pulled the meat and the rest of the ingredients out of the fridge, and started on prep work.

I was making steak garlic rice with the steak, of course, being Mark. I started by trimming off the fat of the meat and cutting it into manageable chunks, then I seasoned it with salt and pepper. I went on to make the sauce and garlic butter. The rice cooker tab flipped up, indicating the rice was done. I shoveled the rice into another pan and poured the garlic butter onto it, and put it on a low heat. I cooked the meat on high for a few minutes, then cut it into smaller cubes to put them in the steak sauce. While waiting for that to soak, I stirred the rice and nearly forgot to cut up a green onion to top it off.

It all took about 40 minutes.

Just as I was sitting down, the doorbell rang.

It was Carter, standing there in a long, silky, black slip, holding a bottle of red wine. She looked gorgeous.

"Are you going to invite me in or just stare?"

"Oh, right, come in."

She smiled at me, "Thank you, darling. I didn't know what we were having, so I just brought the fanciest cheap wine I could find."

I led her to the kitchen. I realized I had left the basement door open, so I closed it so she doesn't go looking down there. I didn't want her to find Mark's body. I didn't want her to know what I did. She sat down, and I handed her a corkscrew from the drawer. I tried not to stare as she opened the wine and poured us both a glass.

"So, what'd you make? It smells great."

"Beef garlic rice. But the meat is *special*."

Her green eyes shone at me, "You didn't!"

"I did. Just for you."

"How'd you get it?"

"Fresh grave." I felt so bad lying to her.

"You amaze me." She shook her head. I made plates for us, and I finally sat down. I sipped my wine. But I couldn't relax. Not with Mark rotting below our feet. What would she think if she knew? If she knew I killed someone just for her to enjoy. Would she be happy? Appreciative? Or would she be afraid?

She was a cannibal, too! How could she judge? She—

"Hey! Are you listening to me?"

"Huh?"

"I said how—" I realized I forgot to put on music—"long did you store the flesh for?"

“Oh, about two days.”

“It tastes good. Better than I thought it would be.”

“Yep.”

Her brow furrowed. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course. I just wanted everything to be perfect.”

“It is!”

I smiled weakly and finished my glass. She grimaced briefly at me.

“Something’s wrong. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying to me. You can tell me.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Does it have to do with your mother?”

“No!” *Why would she think that?*

“Did something happen at work?”

“No, nothing exciting happens at work— good or bad.” My heart raced, I tried not to look past her and at the basement door.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I do, Carter, I—I love you.” I meant it, but I also used it to change the subject.

“Y…You what?”

“I love you.”

“You don’t even know what I do for a living.”

“It doesn’t matter! I love you!”

She sighed and got up from her chair, coming over to me. She put her hand under my chin and held it, locking eyes with me until she kissed me. It wasn’t a peck; it was a deep kiss with all the passion and some of the fervor of when we spent our first night together. I wanted her. I *needed* her.

She pulled away, still holding my chin, “I think you're more than amazing. I want to tell you I love you too—“

“Then do it.”

“I’m not there yet, baby.”

My face fell, but I didn’t know how much of it I meant or not.

“I’m sorry,” she let go of me, “Maybe I should go.”

“No…” I didn’t want her to leave; I just wanted to distract her.

“I’m sorry, baby. I just think it’s best.” She downed the rest of her wine, leaving a red lipstick mark on the glass.

“I’ll walk you out.” True shame fell over me. I’ve felt it so much in my life, but none as vivid as now.

“I’ll call you, I promise.” She said at the door.

“I know.”

I thought about pouring myself another glass. But ended up taking the bottle to bed with me. I stared around my bland room as I drank, remembering her touch, her skin, her smell. I couldn't fall asleep. I was waiting for her call. I was waiting to be found out.

I knew I had only a few hours until they figured out what I did. Mark's wife and his kid, they must still be awake, worried sick about him. And I lay in bed, longing to be next to the girl I loved the most. But I couldn't involve her in this mess. I took Mark away from them. Away from everyone, and I could spend hours waxing poetic about the…the murder, but it won't change the fact that I did it.

I should call the police.

I should turn myself in.

Put his family out of their misery.

No.

Let them find me.

I knew I wouldn't see her for a while, if ever again. I loved her, and I did it for her. It didn't matter the consequence. I made her happy. I did it for her.