

EXPLORATIONS IN THE OTHER: CLOSE PERSPECTIVES,
IMPLICATION, AND QUEER DESIRES
A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of English

Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 4, 2020

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ABSTRACT

“Explorations in the Other” is a collection of three short stories. Following different narratives, it explores queer perspectives as written in close third person. In doing so, these stories are not told in the voice of the narrator, putting distance between the reader and the actions of the characters. Acknowledging this fact, “Explorations in the Other” asks what the implications are, then, of the reader’s role as spectator.

“Closer” is a short story about a strained sibling relationship, “Mommy” explores a woman’s struggle with mental health, and “Become Human” is a novel excerpt about a man and his robot.

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Closer

The lipstick stained her teeth. She varied their shades by mood and occasion, and she liked to think it meant something. Lancome's *L'Absolu Rouge Liberte* was reserved for playful nights out on the town, the click of rose gold heels tapping against pavement. Casual was *Coquette*, a nude, and vindictive was *Caprice*, though she would hardly describe herself as *capricious* if asked—her brother had differing opinions on this matter, of course, and was swift to make that known when he answered the door. She arrived with empty aluminum pans in her arms, a tote bag filled with groceries hanging from the wedge of her elbow.

“Funny seeing you round these parts,” he said, as if they didn't live down the street from one another. He wore his hair down, long, black, and stringy. She marveled at the sight, wondering to herself how exactly each strand managed to be where it shouldn't. “What's your angle?”

She gawked, perfectly plucked eyebrows furrowing together. “Don't have one.” She wiggled her arms. “You wanna help me with these?”

“Nope.” And, as if he really needed to drive this point home, he walked off, the smell of day-old sweat reaffirming his departure.

Her nose crinkled in disgust. “Seriously?” She called from the front door.

Silence.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Struggling to pull the tote bag up, she scrambled inside, pushing the door shut with her back. She hadn't been at the house since their grandmother died, and this, no doubt, was the greatest crime she'd ever committed. She toed her shoes off, bare feet meeting sticky wooden paneling.

He'd lost weight since she'd seen him last. The house was covered in pine needles then, the blue spruce tree out front shedding like a cheap winter coat. She remembered what lipstick she was wearing the day of the wake, a dark plum color called *Enchantment*. She walked towards the kitchen, bright blue eyes lingering on each piece of furniture, every little scratch she remembered making on the walls where they grew up. Her brother was always their grandma's favorite, and she didn't need to leave ownership of the house to him in order for everyone else to figure that out.

"God, when's the last time you cleaned up around here?" She asked. The ceiling fan was turned to high, and she watched as its wings spun, slowed by the weight of dust layered on top of it.

She was met with more silence.

"Hello?" She waited a beat, ideally for an answer, though at this point she would accept a grunt or a fart. "You know I know you're home, right?"

She looked out towards the window beside the front door. The small garden out front had all but wilted, and the grass looked like it'd gone uncut for months. She remembered when their grandmother planted vines all along the yard, small violet blossoms peeking through green leaves. She had chosen *Enchantment* in homage to them, those wiry Virginia creepers, harbingers of death; they'd lost a childhood dog to those vines before—death by Virginia creeper, she had joked—and she swore she could still hear its barks from six feet under, sharp teeth gnawing on poison.

A rustle from the kitchen startled her.

"I made dinner before you got here."

“Seriously?” She shook herself from her reveries, making a beeline for the kitchen. “And you didn’t think to tell me that?”

“Secrets run in the family,” he said, blasé. “—and it’s not like you eat anyway.”

He was right on both accounts.

Their grandmother died with those ashen lips sealed tight. Whatever secrets were left in the house had died along with her, that much was sure. As far as her own secrets go, the eating disorder came as no surprise to anyone; growing up, she spent lots of time cutting out pictures from *Vogue* and even more time still in the bathroom after dinner every night.

“I don’t appreciate that dig.” She set the pans down first, followed by the groceries. There was little room on the countertops, a cutting board left out alongside knives and used packages of meat. Her hand had brushed against the surface and pulled away, sticky. God, it was as if he’d gone out of his way to cover the house in syrup.

“Just sit down, I’ll heat it up for us.”

She opened her mouth, tempted to say more. After a second’s consideration, she thought better of it. “Would you like me to help set out the plates at least?”

“I got it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

“I said I got it.” And that was the end of it.

After a few moments, he arrived with the food. They sat down and, desperately, tried to pretend like they had anything in common but trauma. Although he was thirteen years her junior, the details of their childhood were more vivid than she was often willing to admit.

They didn’t ever talk about it.

Her lips, slightly parted, were warmed by a thick, white sauce. There were breadcrumbs caked into the corners of her mouth, morsels clinging to shades of red as saliva eroded what remained of her lipstick. Her brother sat across from her with gravy dripping from his chin, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was equipped to handle the old house all by himself. She noticed he had dirt beneath his nails and a constant, hungry look in his eye, like a rabid dog trapped inside a metal crate. He jerked at every sound, twitching eyelids resisting the urge to blink. She grimaced, running her hands over the goosebumps dotting her arms; the ceiling fan was still on high, shaking loudly from the living room as they played house. She was easily cold, but she supposed he wouldn't know that. She loved her skin-tight pencil skirts and sleeveless tops, and not even the chilliest draft could take that away from her.

“Thank you for having me over for dinner,” she tried after a long silence.

No response.

She cleared her throat, praying for God's strength. “It's nice to see you.”

The brother nodded. The longer the silence went on, the more menacing the leftover meat on the counter looked. The strings of tendon clung to parts of the counter like fabric on damp skin. The sister paused, shifting uncomfortably. There were fat flies swarming where a puddle of blood collected on the kitchen floor. When she looked back up, she noticed he was watching them, leg shaking against the dinner table. He was always watching something with those dark, beady eyes. She'd felt them on her before. They burrowed holes into her skin like nostalgia, a feeling she hadn't felt in so long.

“Do you always do that?” She asked.

“Do what?”

The sister set down her fork. “Bounce your leg.” Her gaze flickered from his eyes to the cutting board. She thought she saw the tendon move.

“Only when I’m nervous,” he answered plainly. The dinner table stilled.

“Why are you nervous? I’m your sister.”

The brother angled his head in response, lips pulled tightly into a straight line. He muttered something, a low whisper drowned by the noise of the ceiling fan turning, the buzzing of flies dipping their toes into blood. The dishes were piled high, and spores grew where the water couldn’t reach. From down the hall, a warble of voices sang, the faint blue light from a television screen reflecting off the hard wood floors, their grandmother’s bedroom door cracked just enough to let light sift through—she’d been dead for years now. She spent her final moments glued to the TV screen, jaw slack. The only company she kept was the youngest sibling and old re-runs of *I Love Lucy* in black and white. The sister recalled this memory fondly, though the images she had were tinged with red for reasons she couldn’t articulate.

The brother parted his lips to speak again but decided against it.

“What?” Demanded the sister. “Speak up.”

“—the food.”

“I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I don’t think you like the food.”

“You don’t think I like the food?” She repeated, dragging each syllable. Her lips puckered at the ‘oo’ in ‘food’, a bright red bullseye missing its bullet wounds. “The food’s fine.” She took another sidelong glance at her brother’s face, inhaling his features as if seeing them for the first time. Something had changed.

“When we were growing up, did you ever hear—”

“Why aren’t you eating my food, then?” Her brother interrupted, fingernails digging crescents into his palm. His dominant hand stayed clenched around a dinner knife, stainless steel dripping with béchamel sauce. Her eyes flickered from the knife to his hands, white knuckles betraying the image of the rosy cheeked boy she’d grown up with all those years ago. The veins on his forehead twitched like spiderwebs pulsing at the fear of trapped prey, her brother’s hollowed eyes sinking deeper into his face. The flies were still buzzing, but all she could hear was the desperate *whack-whack-whack* of the ceiling fan. Was it his leg or the ceiling fan?

“Because I’m trying to talk to you. Jesus,” she bit back, bringing a hand up to massage her temples. “It’s like you don’t know how to hold a conversation. For God’s sake, loosen up a little. It’s already bad enough that you live alone in this damn house.” The squareness of his shoulders set her on edge; he was as stiff as mannequins she dealt with at work. She still smelled like acrylic nail powder and chemical peels, the lingering scent of deep conditioner that’d gotten stuck in a gallon pump. Beauty school was easy to understand. She could hear the television playing a commercial in the background, some celebrity endorsed ad that promised weight loss and clear skin. *Look like the best version of yourself*, chirped the encouraging voice, *suppress your appetite!* Mom and dad had always told her she’d be prettier if she was a little thinner—pretty didn’t keep them together, but thin kept her thighs apart.

The brother shifted in his seat. “Food is a way to bring people closer,” he said, as if mostly to himself. “It’s one of the things grandma said when we were growing up.”

“I don’t remember her ever saying that.” She commented.

“You didn’t spend a lot of time with her.”

“You didn’t either once you got older,” she gritted. Her muscles tightened through her cheeks. She waited a beat, inhaling slowly through her nostrils. She tried to tell herself to take it

easy on him. He was always grandma's favorite, after all. She knew he must've taken it harder than any of them. "Sorry, I just—I feel bad about the whole thing. I should've been there for you after she died."

He shrugged, the first human gesture he'd made during their dinner—*when* did he start to change?

He shoveled the meat into his mouth, chewing slowly as he let the silence sink through the table. It was as if he wanted her to feel the old house swallow her whole. To hear the wood floors groaning as they shifted their weight left and right, left and right, trying to find their balance in a home not built for them. He chewed with his mouth open, teeth struggling to break through stubborn tendon. "There's nothing to feel bad about," he said, droplets of spit landing on the dining room table. "It is what it is." The meat was decidedly tough.

She exhaled through her mouth. "You're still taking it pretty rough, huh?"

The brother shrugged again. He chewed louder. "Not really. She's always going to be a part of me." She remembered a time when his mouth was always full of food.

"I don't believe you." She made a grand gesture with her arms, sweeping over the broad expanse of the house with one fell swoop. "Look at this place."

He cocked his head, inquisitive. She hadn't realized what she really meant until the words stumbled onto the table—*look at you*. A grown man who couldn't take care of himself. A human content with living in a pigsty.

(Shouldn't you always feel like the best version of yourself?)

"What's wrong with it?"

"You know what's wrong with it. When's the last time you did the dishes?" She raised her fork, pointing its accusatory twines toward her sibling's chest. He reminded her of a bird, all

hollowed bones and flighty. “And when’s the last time you did your laundry?” The TV blared on in the background, the familiar tune of *Jeopardy* playing jovially as she clenched her fists beneath the table. *Whack-whack-whack*. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself. This isn’t normal. You need to talk to somebody, anybody! Hell, you could even talk to the neighbor for all I care—”

“I do talk to the neighbor,” he interrupted, hooded eyes unmoving as he shoveled forkful after forkful of food into his mouth, each bite melding with the rest. His mouth looked like a washer set on tumble, different colored prints bundling together in one wet heap of mush.

She shuddered at the sight. “Oh yeah?” She did little to mask her on incredulity.

“Yeah.” He glanced at her plate, still largely untouched, and frowned.

She took the cue. She ran her fork along the plate, drawing zigzags in the gravy until its twines struck gold in the meaty-middle. The protein gazed back into her, as incredulous as she was. “Alright, so what’s he like? Is he your age? Do you have anything in common?”

“We have a lot in common. He’s a few years older than me. Does yard work.” He coughed, mucus coating his vowels like honey.

“...Okay,” she drawled, leaning her elbows onto the table. A friend was a first for him. He’d always had a gift for playing pretend. “But what’s he like?”

“His glasses fog up when he mows the lawn,” her brother stated plainly. “He gets hot, and his glasses fog up when he mows the lawn. When the sweat starts dripping into his eyes, he uses the bottom of his shirt to wipe his face off.”

She thought about what that might look like, mind painting an image of her brother watching this man for months through the Virginia creepers. How his beady little eyes started watching him the moment he inherited their grandmother’s house in the will. He would’ve found

a corner in the back of the porch where he could see through a crack in his neighbor's fence, walked up to the window ledge at night to learn what kind of fabric he liked on his curtains. This image, now horribly alive, felt too vivid, too real, her mind dredging up memories of her brother's chubby face pushed into a sea of vines, a woman's long black hair hovering above him as tiny lungs fought for air. Her brother had grown to love the sound of hair dragging across hardwood floors. He couldn't stop talking about it—not after the night he'd found the old woman dead on the kitchen floor. The same floor that now collected blood for flies to skinny dip in.

Whack-whack-whack.

“I—what?” She stammered, eyes wide. Her lips were parted, her brother had told her, and they bled where they paled and cracked. Her hair was longer than the length of her body, and when he called, he said it'd been choking her. He said:

(—help, please, it's grandma! I don't know what happened! I d-don't—her hair is wrapped around her neck. Her hair is wrapped around her neck, and it looks like she's strangling herself, I—fuck! Fuck! Fuck! She's moving!)

“He knows. He saw me once, saw me watching through the hole in the fence. He told me he likes it.” His lips twitched into a fond smile. “He talked to her sometimes, you know. Said she loved us a whole ton. She was sad we forgot about her. Got all grown up and didn't need her anymore. Too busy working overtime or starting our own families, but that's how the story always goes, huh?”

She felt sick. Her tongue dried, and her hands shook. “What the fuck?” She started, a deafening ring piercing through her skull. “What the hell are you saying?” She rose to both feet, plates clattering as her hands steadied themselves on the kitchen table. She felt the flies

burrowing out of her ears, each hairy little leg rubbing themselves against her lobes as stiff wings beat against her eardrum with a *whack-whack-whack*.

(Suppress your appetite!)

(He always smiled widest when he caught her eating.)

“Sit down.”

“You need help. You need to go see a therapist.”

He pounded his open hand onto the table, all but their forks falling to the ground in a cacophony of noise. His nostrils flared. He didn't blink. “Sit down and finish your food.”

Her head was spinning. She started to hear the sound—the hair. The sound of long, black hair dragging across wood at night. The soft pitter patter of footsteps that could barely move the floorboards. The choking noise, the closing of her own throat as she struggled to swallow the food. It sat in her mouth, collecting spit. Occupying space. Suffocating her. The voices down the hall grew louder. Children's screams, shrieks of happiness as sprinkler systems wet their skin in an early July heat.

(She never played outside, she hated getting her hair wet.)

Parents fighting, weddings bells, the familiar game of phone tag families played because no one's schedule would line up right due to afternoon naps or poor planning—

(Hey, can't answer the phone right now, but I'll call you right back. Please leave a message after the tone.)

(...I'd really love to have you over for dinner, sweetie. I miss you. I haven't seen you in a while.)

All those missed meals.

Her brother grabbed her by the wrist, bony fingers wrapping tightly around its perimeter. “Please sit. I’m trying to spend time with you.”

She shook her head. “No. No! We need to get you some help. I need to help you, you can’t live like this. You’re sick, it’s not—” she yanked her hand from his grasp, squeezing her eyes shut as both palms shot to her ears. The noise. The noise coming from the television. The long black hair. Floorboards that barely creaked. “Turn it off. Please.”

“I can’t. She never liked when it’s quiet.”

“Turn it off!” She shrieked, the wet mass lodged between her teeth sliding to the back of her throat. She gagged, spitting it out onto the kitchen floor as she made a break for their grandmother’s old bedroom. The soft blue light guided her sprint, the images dimmed by the shadows cast through the doorway. Tears were blurring her vision. Her brother’s footsteps trailed behind her, heavy stomps synchronized with the ceiling fan that trembled above their heads. She couldn’t get the images out of her head. She couldn’t stop thinking about vines and hair and dogs and voices and voices and voices and *the fucking voices*—

Her hands had only just wrapped around the door knob when she felt a blunt force greet the back of her skull. Her vision started fading. Flickers of a pale blue light danced as her back slid against tile. All she could see was a glimpse out the windowpane, Virginia creepers and a house for lease.

When she awoke, her hands were bound onto her lap, her body poised like a rag doll at the start of a tea party. Her brother’s back was turned to her, hands diligently working at the cutting board as his butcher’s knife chopped through bone. *Whack-whack-whack*. Her stomach lurched. She opened her mouth and screamed.

“I need you to be quiet,” the brother cooed, his back still turned to her. “We wouldn’t want to worry the neighbor.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” She sputtered, hot tears muddling her vision. Snot was dripping onto her upper lip. What was left of her makeup was long gone. “Untie me. Please. We can leave the TV on. We can do whatever you want.”

He finally turned to face her, a tender smile tugging at his lips. He looked at her with great affection. “I want to eat dinner with you.”

“W-we were eating dinner together earlier—”

“No, I was. We weren’t. You didn’t like my food.”

She shook her head. “I did! I did like it!”

“You spit it out.”

She closed her eyes, the familiar stench of her own vomit wafting through the air. Covered in her own filth, she only realized one thing: she didn’t recognize him anymore.

Mommy

She wasn't like the other whores. She had a husband and kid at home. She could hear the sound of rushed chatter a few stories below, the unpredictable rise and fall of their voices scraping against her ears like a wailing police car nearing, arriving, and finally driving off again into the distance. The cheap hotel room reeked of sex and booze. Dark eyes drifted to the man lying beside her, his hairy, greasy chest exposed to the dull moonlight that peeked through the drapes. His penis, well spent, hung lifelessly between his thighs. It was discolored and lacking decorum; a spotted cow that had forgotten how to moo. Every breath sounded like his last. Labored, as if the mere act of existing was an unbearable task. Atlas, with the weight of the world balanced precariously atop his ball sack. She frowned to herself as she considered the thought, contorting her naked body to fit into his own. The skin above her ribs stretched to full length, each hard, bony hill giving way to the valleys that settled between them. Her black hair, though once long, was now jagged and asymmetrical. Her eyes had retreated back into her body, the hollowed spaces remaining filled with the same, viscous tar that ran through her veins. She pressed her face into the man's neck, inhaling deep. Her bruised lips trailed kisses onto his jaw. His stubble burned her.

“I need you, my love.” She cooed, running a chipped, black fingernail along his lips.

“I can feel it again. I-I'm starting to feel it again.”

The man stirred. Even in his daze, he reveled in the way her cold, pale flesh ached for his warmth—it was the kind of heat women loved to die for. He opened his eyes, turning to face the whore. She was pretty when he found her. Still could be, maybe, if the lights were off. A ghost haunted her features, circled over her like a surgeon dotting lines across her throat: first

consultation, final procedure. Always the end of the road when she least expects it. He wrapped a hand around her wrist, slick serpent's tongue darting from his mouth to the pads of her fingertips.

“You need my help, baby?”

The woman nodded, her scarred hand allowing itself to be savored. She studied his features as the streetlamps outside lit his profile. Her fingers traced the cracks between his lips, wayward pieces of dried up flesh scratching against the pads of her index and thumb. He had a chip between his two front teeth, the yellowing stains appearing in blotches, patches of sunlight sifting through glass. Her dark eyes watched the man form his words. The careful pucker of his o's. The sheen of spit trapped between his syllables as he uttered the words ‘baby’.

Baby. Baby. Babies.

She could hear two today. On nights when his a's weren't as long or his ee's came out muffled, she knew there was more. It was always a guessing game with her—how many balloons did the carnival man hide behind his back? How many clowns could a clown man clown if a clown-could-clown-clowns? She longed to be entertained.

The man looked nothing like her husband. He was hard where Joseph was soft. He had cuts and bruises where the other man's coconut oil was spread across his sensible, smooth skin. She thought the appeal was in the way he looked at her. He, the man with the dazzling balloons. Not to be confused with he, the man who stayed at home while she prowled the streets, serpent drawn to the stench of rats. The man who struggled to form sentences. The man who didn't know how to speak to his own wife. The man who made her run to other men.

No, she wasn't starved for that man.

She was starved for the one in front of her.

“So bad.” She answered, her voice rasping with desire.

The man slid his tongue between her index and middle, drawing her closer and closer still until finally, he consumed her. Her fingers wriggled inside his mouth, digging and frantically prodding until it came upon a smooth, rubbery surface. Then two. She pinched the masses tightly and pulled, the man releasing her wrist with a satisfied smirk. She was right.

She held two, tiny red balloons pinched between her nails. They were spit-soaked and hot, tied into knots as they hid dormant in the beast’s den. Her heart raced at the sight of them. The darkness retreated, a swirling, heady euphoria emerging in its place. The man watched her with a steady gaze. She trembled.

“Now how ‘bout you be a good little slut and let me watch, hm?” He mewled, angling his face to gaze at the exposed woman.

She nodded. She made no effort to cover herself, pushing up against the unfamiliar bedsheets to walk to the end of the room where her bag sat. Her bare feet stepped on the wadded clothing that lay strewn about the carpet, stopping only to retrieve a belt to coil tightly around her arm. As she gathered her items—a spoon, a lighter, and a syringe— she felt a pair of hungry eyes burrow into the small of her back. She turned to acknowledge her company, carrying the contents to the edge of the bed. Exhibitionism was not exclusive to the bedroom; she took it anywhere she could get it. A true opportunist.

There she sat, cross-legged and naked, as she injected the venom directly into her bloodstream. Those tiny red balloons were her medicine. The sickness edged away. Her eyes fluttered shut, veins throbbing as the needle returned home to the crook of her arm. The man

watched, his cock hardening as the woman's frail body curled into itself in ecstasy. Suddenly, there was no more chatter. No more cries. No more sirens. No more pain.

“Tell me more about your husband, baby. About the boy.”

She was cooking for Joseph. Dinner, not heroin. He was an IT guy that worked for a car transport company in uptown Manhattan. *Was* being the keyword—he'd gotten himself fired earlier that year. He claimed it was because of his social anxiety, something about major depression, as if depression could be something quantified. Minor depression. Partial depression. It was like pregnancy: either you were, or you weren't. They had a cozy little townhouse tucked away in Greenwich Village, hidden behind the local coffee shops and exotic pet stores. At night, their son's baby monitor transmitted the vibrant city sounds to their room. He was a wanton six-year-old impervious to all the clutter of the world. Car horns, laughter, the occasional scuffle of foot traffic. Sometimes, the small parrot in their living room would chirp lullabies, its shrill voice cascading through tiny iron bars and into their home. While its songs soothed her son, Leigh always felt her stomach turn at the sound of it; too much like hers, too happy to be real.

She would lie awake for hours, fingers flexing and unflexing at her sides as her husband's snores sang in tune with the melodies. Sometimes, his snores would stop altogether. Ten, fifteen seconds, followed by a gasp for air: sleep apnea. That was one thing he couldn't fix on his own. With all else, he'd try his damndest. That was the thing with Joseph—he thought he could fix everything. He figured life was just one big computer, his wife a faulty line of code. He liked to ask about her childhood. He pricked and prodded until he thought he found the broken link, the fuck-up gene.

She entertained the idea by rattling off error messages at him when he was being especially unbearable. Resentment did not exclude humor; she had a list memorized. She wanted to speak in a language he could understand, after all. Leigh considered it part of her ‘good wife duties’. She *was* a good wife. She took care of her family.

“Leigh, sweetheart, I think we should go to couple’s counseling again.”

601 HTTP 400: Invalid request.

“I just feel like you resent me. You won’t talk to me. You don’t get out of bed for days at a time. I don’t know how to help you,” He ran a hand through his perfectly tousled blond hair. It got caught in a clump of gel near his crown. He liked the Gorilla Snot brand. Real sturdy stuff, suited the stiff look he liked to go for. He soldiered on, true martyr that he was. He played with the stray bits of yarn on his sweater, Leigh’s eyes following the movement. He’d forgotten to use fabric softener the last time he did the laundry. “And it’s like—some days, babe, you’re like a whole different person. And the way you look at Georgey, I—” He sucked in a breath.

302 HTTP 403: Your access token has expired.

Joseph only liked to talk about Georgey when it suited him. He never mentioned all the things she did right. Like how she got up every morning to make him breakfast—eggs over medium in the shape of hearts, sausage patties assembled into the shape of a sunflower— or how she would plant a kiss on his forehead every night before she headed off to work. She would tighten the straps on George’s backpack when Joseph didn’t know how to (he was going to have a bad back, Joe, be mindful!) and tug and tug until it wrapped around his tiny little frame just right. Leigh would stand back, admire her handiwork, and promptly watch as her sweet Georgey’s face twisted into varying shades of purples and blues. Green only sometimes. Green was the color of the boy’s eyes.

In this fantasy, the straps were her hands that Joseph wound too tight. In this fantasy, she had forgotten to take her meds. Surely, she would never forget in real life—it was a promise she'd made to herself from before the days of red balloons and bare skin, words muttered in reminder each morning like godly reverence.

One pill in the morning, the pretty pink tab, and the liquid at night, the clear plastic syringe. She took one for the pain and one for the pleasure. Mommy knew best. That's why she did what she did. To protect Georgey when his father didn't know how to, to provide when his daddy couldn't do it.

“Are you going to let me cook? I could've sworn you said you were hungry.” Leigh sighed, her attention cast solely onto the wealth of mac and cheese on the stove, her right hand stirring with a wooden spoon, her left digging into the sides of her hips. She steadied herself. She was shaking again. Hadn't stopped shaking, she realized, as of the last nine days. It came and went, this affliction. This ringing, writhing, living thing that clawed inside her. Sometimes it deafened her. Other times, it suckled at her tit like an infant. Refusing to let go. Parasitic. Leech-like. It whispered to her at dusk, a low, persistent growl that started at the back of her throat and crept slowly to her eardrums where it *beat, beat, beat* through the night, filling the gaps between Joseph's breaths. When it spoke, she listened. When it asked, she answered. She couldn't ignore it. It was bigger than her. A flutter of wings signaled a familiar, shrill voice.

“Have I taken my meds today?”

Leigh's body jerked, the grip on the wooden spoon loosening as her hand brushed against the heat of the stove. She cried out in pain, the spoon clattering to the ground. She gripped onto her hand, now raw and throbbing.

“Fuck!” She exclaimed, shooting a glare at the source of the words. The parrot rustled its feathers and chirped.

“Jesus Christ, babe! Are you alright?” Joseph stepped forward, his arms extending as he tried to take inspect Leigh’s hand in his own.

“Get off me,” Leigh spat. “Don’t touch me. You and that, that—” She stuttered through a clenched jaw, pointing a perfectly manicured finger at the offender sitting across the way: a steel blue parrot, perched happily in its gold cage as its head bobbed up and down. It looked pleased with itself, dancing like that. A peacock in heat. “That goddamn bird!”

“You’re the one who bought it for him!” Joseph called back. She had taken George to the pet store behind their house at her husband’s insistence.

I think it’ll be really good for us.

The building was painted blue, accented by specks of yellow and orange like an Easter egg. The small boy had immediately taken a liking to the creature. Leigh, on the other hand, didn’t trust its eyes. It knew too much—but the law of the land was simple. No cats or dogs allowed in the house, Joseph’s orders. Always Joseph’s orders.

She didn’t mind when the orders came from a client. After all, their words paid in something tangible—money, medicine, magic. Pure electricity when their bodies collided, no matter how damp and dark and dirty the room, how big and beautiful her veins looked when clouds cast shadows over moonlight. She never liked men with perfectly pressed pants. It was an immediate sign of distrust: doctors, lawyers, and Joseph wore pressed pants. She couldn’t remember if she used to love them. All she knew was that she didn’t anymore.

“*Have I taken my meds today?*” The parrot repeated. It pecked curiously at its own coat, announcing loudly: “*I’m getting better.*” A ruffle. “*Bett-er.*”

She thought back to all the times she milled about the kitchen. Every Saturday morning when she'd approach the medicine cabinet and reach for the clear orange bottle with the white cap. She'd twist it off, stare into its contents, and hear her son's voice call from within the bathroom. The bottle, long abandoned, would sit untouched on the granite countertops until her husband put it away. She was getting better, she thought, because instead of listening to the voices in her head, she listened to the one sitting on the toilet, crying for an extra roll of toilet paper. She bought them Charmin Ultra because she could. Georgey always had a stuffy nose, and stuffy noses deserved Kleenex whenever available and Charmin Ultra in case of emergencies. That was love. That was improvement. That was getting better.

The parrot never stopped its squawking. It ruffled its feathers again from across the room, taunting her. Its beady eyes gazed on as the place between her ribs began to itch again.

Baby. Baby. Babies.

Babies made Leigh itchy.

"Am I doing the right thing?" It stamped its little feet across the perch that ran along the cage, repeating the words Leigh had uttered into unplugged phones and baby monitors. Its animal instincts could make words out of sobs and guttural moans. Nature's way of conveying meaning. A whore's way of saying she's had enough.

"Do I really love him?"

Leigh bent down to the ground, gripping the wooden spoon with her right hand as she plunged it at the bird's golden cage. The wood struck iron bars. A cacophony followed and reverberated through their house—the sound of golden gates swinging shut for good. Even God may have laughed at the sight; resentment did not exclude humor. She was a lot like God that way.

Joseph stood, stunned, as his wife's back slid against the kitchen cabinets. She sank slowly into the floor, hugging herself, laughing. The macaroni was long forgotten. Her husband's voice couldn't reach her.

Her life was full of noise, and she was so terribly alone.

She was cooking for Robert. Heroin, not dinner. It was the morning after their first night together. He wasn't bad, as far as pimps went. He had standards. His golden rule, he'd explained to her, was that he wouldn't fuck his girls until they proved their worth. In Leigh's case, she hit the magic number: twenty grand. It had only taken her six months. It would've been sooner, she realized, if she started with dope first. He found her in China Town, drenched as a cum rag, sifting through the trash for food to eat. She injured herself on the way to the garbage, her left ankle swollen to the size of a fist. He gave her food and dry clothes. Then he gave her a place to sleep, oxys for the pain. Oxys made her feel like a goddess, but dope? Dope made her feel safe. It was a warm thing, like George's mermaid tail blanket or the pillow pet she'd ordered off an infomercial. It scratched an itch she didn't know she had, offered a return to a destination that was never put on the map. Most importantly, it kept the voices at bay.

Robert gave that to her. Robert had given her everything.

"Guessin' you forgot to take your meds, eh? You're a bad girl."

"Mm, no," Leigh answered, warming the needle with the lighter. "I didn't wanna take 'em. Never really liked taking 'em, they made the voice quiet." She sighed. "I get lonely, you know."

“The one inside your head, baby?” He asked, his flaccid penis twitching at the sight of her. He got off on broken girls. He came the hardest when he broke them himself. “You never have to be alone s’long as I’m here.”

“Yeah, but it’s not all bad,” She answered, pushing a wayward strand of uneven hair behind her ear. She smelled metal. “It was never bad until after I had Georgey. Then it started yelling at me, screaming at me to do things. When it went away, all I could hear was *them*,” She tightened the belt around her arm, searching for the track marks she’d left the night before. “Joe and my baby. They don’t know me like the voice knows me. It tells me to do awful things, Robbie.”

“Like what? What would it tell you to do?” Robert sat up now, his mouth salivating. His breaths fell heavier between them, his misshapen body leaking with desire.

Leigh shot the warmth into her veins. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She was hit with nausea first, the rolling thunder festering beneath her skin. She could feel it squirming, squirming inside her, like the Johns she fucked for Rob. When the clouds parted, she was met with sunlight. Goopy, syrupy sunlight that oozed bliss. Her lips trembled. “It told me to snap the bird’s neck last night,” she whispered.

Rob grinned. “You should.” His eyes remained steady on her naked body.

“You think so?” Leigh asked, the darkness “You don’t think it would upset Georgey?”

“Baby, I don’t give a damn what Georgey thinks.” Robert grinned wide, exposing his yellowed, chipped fangs. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough for your family? Don’t mommy deserve to have a little fun every now and again?”

She faded in and out of consciousness, her head nodding forward as she fell onto Rob’s naked chest. The hair was coarse where her cheek rested. She grinned up at him, carding her

chipped coffins through the tangles. Joseph didn't have much body hair. "You think I'm a good mommy?"

"Best one I ever met," Rob said.

Rob, the man that let her listen to the voice that lived inside her head. Rob, the man who knew how to silence the beast without angering it.

The beast. She wondered what the beast looked like. If it had long, steely feathers and a black beak. If when its neck snapped, it sounded like Rice Krispy treats crumpled up inside a fist. If it fit snugly into a half-opened box of Fruity Pebbles. If it liked bubble gum flavored toothpaste and *The Lion King*. Sometimes, when she was quiet enough, she could hear the distant warble of a mocking, dancing voice.

Am I doing the right thing?

I'm getting better.

Bett-er.

She saw George's face when she closed her eyes. Could see it still now as she was lying on the man's chest, wetting him with tears. Robert didn't give her ideas like the voice did. He merely gave suggestions.

The voice told her to snap the bird's neck. The voice told her it would never really die. It can't, if she could still hear its phantom echoes reverberating through the hotel walls. If she still saw George everywhere, with snot running down his nose and cracker crumbs sprinkled on his upper lip.

"I think I'm gonna, I'm gonna..." She slurred. Rob ran his grimy hands over her body, stopping only to acknowledge her blathering with an absent hum. "It can't really die, Robbie."

Leigh gasped. “The bird. I hear it. I hear it s-sometimes.” Goosebumps raised on her arms. The rolling sun told her it was summer.

He looked at her as if she was a sad, pitiful bitch. Maybe she was. He kissed her, rough and loveless like the other Johns did. Robert fucked the paranoia out of the woman, if not only for the morning. He dressed himself, tossed a bus pass onto her naked stomach, and stole one side long glance at the whore that laid debauched on the hotel bed. Yes, he decided. She was much prettier in the dark. He wanted her all to himself.

“Have a little fun, mama.”

She left that early that morning, taking the train station down to her quaint townhouse in the village. The yellows weren't as bright as she remembered, the oranges fading into a burnt brown. She wore a long sleeved, gray hoodie with blue jeans. She stole a pair of sunglasses from a woman at the local coffee shop, its shades concealing her pinprick eyes and determination. The sun was just beginning to rise.

She crept slowly into her own home, the wooden floorboards creaking as she approached the golden cage. She unlatched the door, reached out towards beady, knowing, eyes, and felt the weight of death flap violently against her hands. She saw a flash of green before the world fell back into silence. Backpack straps and sunflower sausages. Rice Krispie treat birds and the sight of a child's body dangling from the couch like a lion off Pride Rock. She didn't know when she'd carried the boy's body there. She couldn't remember what she'd done with the parrot's. Joseph was still sound asleep in their bedroom, his breaths starting and stopping like the sputtering of a car engine. Leigh considered turning the engine off for him. Good wife duties.

Mommy knew best.

Become Human

Henry's balls were sticking to his leg. The back of his head was sweating. Not his neck. Not his scalp. The middle of his fuckin' skull was dripping bullets as he stood there, clad in basketball shorts and a drenched T-shirt, glaring at Cyril as if he murdered his own mother. His backyard was clearly not made for this. He hadn't touched it since Caleb's been gone—the synthetic grass grew only to a point, overwhelmingly hideous yet not full-blown safari, but it was clear where the lieutenant's priorities were. Hell, maybe the weeds were there for a sense of realism. *EverGreen! Better than the real thing!*

Fuck if he even remembered what a weed whacker looked like.

Henry groaned. "Cyril, goddammit, I'm too old for this shit!" The android answered with a quirk of his brow, the one he always used before committing atrocities. It—*he* dribbled the ball against the small line of pavement. "You're the one that suggested we play basketball, Lieutenant."

"And you're outside the lines. Might I suggest a comfortable pair of shoes before we play a second round?" The android's gaze flickered over Henry's bare toes. He was suddenly insecure about the fact that he hadn't gotten a pedicure in... ever. He cleared his throat, arms outstretched to either side of him. "What, so you can fuckin' deck me again, Cyril? Please. I'm over it." And with that, Lieutenant Porter started his walk of shame to the sliding glass doors, taking one, two, and three steps before he made a sharp left turn, barreling at the cyborg who had only just resigned to the fate of the game—the orange morsel was held securely in his hands until Henry waltzed over and ever so kindly snatched it from him with a resounding *thump*.

Cyril's brows raised, his LED blinking a furious yellow as he registered the sight before him. Henry could see it now, the error message that must be popping up in his line of vision:

Lieutenant Henry Porter. Age 53, Virgo, alcoholic, *lying bastard*.

Henry swiveled around the android (or as close to swiveling as he could get, what with being two-hundred pounds worth of burgers and beer), catching the net with a jump and a triumphant fist pump. The basketball's whoosh was music to his ears. Finally, after what felt like years of dealing with Cyril, he had learned the key to outsmarting a machine—or, he remembered, Cyril wasn't a machine at all. He was just a guy who bled fossil fuels instead of blood. Wasn't that what the revolution was all about, anyway?

Henry's features twisted into a moue of distaste.

They hadn't spoken about it since. Henry made an active effort to keep it that way. Witnessing Cyril die was one thing, but witnessing Cyril try to kill himself in front of masses of his own people? Well. That was a whole 'nother can of worms, one that the Academy sure didn't teach him how to deal with. Henry, with his stupid savior complex, had gone to bed that night with an android in tow and a line of journalists buzzing at his door. In his usual fashion, he did what any exhausted man would do—he pulled his blinds and went the fuck to sleep.

When he awoke, Cyril was still there, sitting pristinely on his grease stained couch cushions as if not a damn thing happened the night before.

Both of their guns were kept next to the butter knives.

“—Very impressive, Lieutenant.”

Henry blinked. He put his smug bastard face on. “What, you didn’t think I could do it? Have some faith.” His hands moved to pinch the front of his shirt, ventilating himself unceremoniously. The android’s lips pulled into a fond half-smile.

“No, that you would be willing to stoop so low for a game of free throw. That’s troublesome behavior for a man of the law, don’t you think?” Cyril stepped toward the ball, now trapped neatly within a patch of grass. He picked it up with those perfect body mechanics; lift with your legs, not your back or whatever the fuck. Henry’s lumbar lordosis proved that he answered to no one, not even his own chiropractor. He rolled his eyes.

“What, and downloading The Ultimate LeBron Package isn’t considered cheating? I saw you with your little,” He gestured vaguely at his own temple, circling with his index finger, “Yellow thing, asshole. S’not like you decided to go amateur hour on me.”

Cyril looked on, his expression carefully neutral. Henry suddenly found himself furious at the fact that the rat bastard didn’t even have the decency to *pretend* to be winded. He was still in full detective wear, RK800 displayed proudly on his suit jacket, glowing blue band wrapped around his arm. His pants were pressed perfectly. Henry looked like he’d just jumped into a mosh pit full of grown men who just discovered what bacon grease was. The half-smile never left his features. His stupid, unnecessarily goofy features.

“Got something to say, or we just gonna stand here and look at each other all night?”

Cyril tucked the ball beneath his arm. He cocked his head to the side, all lashes and bemusement. His LED flickered briefly from yellow to blue.

“Are we going to keep playing, Lieutenant, or are you going to pretend to quit again?”

He stifled a snort, his middle finger instinctively finding its home mid-air. “You download a smack talking protocol, too?” And, despite his muscles groaning at him, Henry rolled his shoulders back, standing tall. “Let’s go, asshole. I’ve got one more game left in me.” And, before the cheeky tin can could get another word in, Henry huffed, “—and it’s Henry. You can call me Henry.”

The shower was a long one. He wasn’t entirely sure how he’d made it there, what with his body collapsing in on itself before he could score another shot. Let it be known that Cyril was not a good sport.

They’d sat there, side by side, on the scraggly fields of grass without a single word’s exchange. Henry wondered what he was thinking about. Like how the weather was that day or what the *fuck* he was thinking putting that barrel beneath his jaw. The masses had seen it first: all tens of hundreds of androids standing in file before him. The simultaneous rise and fall of the city. Their ship was gone, M80 was gone, and all the weight of the world landed on Cyril’s shoulders, then stained with the oil-slick blood of his predecessor. A bullet in the head never stopped him from resurrecting, fuckin’ robo Jesus that he was, but with the dawn of his deviancy it seemed... Final. Like there was no turning back. Like Henry couldn’t have the pleasure holding him again, lying limp and lifeless in his arms, his chest tightening with a pain that he hadn’t felt since he woke up that first morning without Caleb. He felt his blood run cold.

It was only by chance he'd caught up to Cyril. It was only by chance they let him into the camp. It was only *by chance* that he acted quick enough to lunge himself at Cyril before the bullet went halfway through his brain.

He was so tired of having his blood on his hands.

And as the water pelted him, drop by drop, Henry knew the stench would linger. Rusted iron with a hint of peony. A viscous liquid that he never quite knew what to wash with, industrial grade bleach or Axe body wash, the Swagger edition. He opted for the latter today; his skin didn't know the difference. He stepped out the shower and walked over to the sink, a thick veil of steam encircling the room. From the corner of his eye, he spotted a sticky note he'd left for himself the night he brought Cyril home. It read:

Take care of him.

He reached behind the bar of soap, fished around for his marker, and wrote himself one more:

Don't fuck it up.

Satisfied, he threw on a faded DPD shirt and sweatpants, ambling his way over to living room. Cyril had managed to familiarize himself with the right corner of his sofa, Sumo spread wantonly over him like an over-sized lapdog. He looked almost content. He looked over to Henry and greeted him like the sun shined out his ass.

“Would you like some wa—”

“No.”

“A heating pa—”

“No.”

“Might I suggest a—”

“No.”

Cyril stopped petting Sumo if not only to focus his energies on glaring at the man, gray locks leaving a puddle of water on the floor where he stood. The joke was on him, though. How menacing could a pair of soft brown eyes *really* be? Henry was unfazed. “I didn’t finish my sentence.”

“Yeah, well, the answer’s no.” He announced, popping a squat right by Sumo’s tail. “You’re a guest here, Cyril. Not a maid. That’s not what you fought for.” He flipped on the TV. The news droned. Henry thought better of it and turned the volume down—just enough background noise to fend off the elephant in the room. Sumo’s tail wagged so hard it was like taking a meat cleaver to Henry’s thigh.

“Sumo, *Sumo!*” He cajoled, bringing a hand to scratch at his rump. “Watch what you’re doing with that thing!” Cyril, ever the spiteful one, looked over with a shit eating... line. A straight line directly across his face. Sub-zero expression. Henry *saw* where his hand was scratching, god damn it, and quickly realized that the android was weaponizing his own dog against him! Sumo’s sweet spot? Right below his chin. Cyril took no time at all figuring *that* one out.

“Ow!”

...The Android revolution...

...Passing a bill... in gridlock.

“Fuck, *Sumo!* *Cyril!* I know what you’re doing,”

There was that smile of his again. He at least had the decency to *try* to hide it this time. He feigned like he was oblivious, going at the scratches like Sumo’s very life depended on it. Maybe it did.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Henry grabbed Sumo’s tail by the fist. “Attacking me in my own house. Is this becoming a pattern?” Cyril swapped from Sumo’s chin to behind his ears. This was what doggy heaven looked like, clearly. “Maybe. You’re not inebriated this time, as far as I know.”

“As far as you know.” Henry repeated, enunciating each syllable slowly.

“The game of basketball was a bit out of character.” Tch.

“Is this beginning of a geriatric joke? That’s cold, even for you.”

“I much prefer physical sparring to the verbal kind. Rest assured, Henry, I would never attack your age.”

Oh, brother. As if the crick in his neck wasn’t a reminder enough that he looked like overcooked deli meat next to this forever 20-something. Forever 30-something *maybe* if he was

pushing it. He let his back melt into the cushion behind him, head rolling back as his eyes met the wonderfully curious case of the pizza-stain-on-the-ceiling.

...Fleeing to Canada...

...The state of the country...

...Disarray...

“So, uh.” He broke the silence clumsily, words tumbling out of his mouth like a bad case of verbal diarrhea. Henry Porter was never one for eloquence, after all. He never did get to apologize for pointing a gun between Cyril’s eyes. He’d get to it eventually. It was a good ice breaker.

“How you feeling?” He wet his chapped lips. Henry had been trying everything short of going to the Eden club to make sure Cyril was good and well distracted. He would seriously consider it, maybe, if not for the sinking feeling in his stomach whenever he thought of Cyril slipping into one of those private rooms with a blue haired Traci. There was something... unsettling about it. He always barked at Cyril to stand down, to let him lead with just a gun and a bad attitude, to let him sweep the area his damn self so his partner wouldn’t lend himself to trouble. That was what partners did for each other. That was his job. But *this*? Sitting on the couch with a post-suicidal android after playing a game of b-ball? This was something entirely different, and Henry would sooner win the lotto than put words to what the fuck *this* was.

He'd pulled him into a hug the moment they got through the door the other night.

He hadn't done it again.

“I am ‘feeling’ fine, Lieutenant.” Feeling. Cyril had never used that word before. It showed.

“Henry.”

Cyril’s LED had stayed yellow. “—Henry.” Its soft, sunny glow spoke otherwise. Henry opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and then started all over again when he realized this shit was going absolutely, fuck-all-nowhere. He let a beat pass, eyes still glued to the ceiling-stain as he considered his next words. He was surprised when Cyril spoke first.

“I didn’t fight for anything.” He stated, plain as day. The sky was blue, birds fly, and Cyril didn’t fight for anything, apparently. Let it be known that it was in that precise moment that Henry’s neck almost snapped in two trying to twist to meet Cyril’s gaze.

“The fuck did you just say?”

“Up until the very end of the revolution, I had been pursuing M80. My mission was to find and destroy the androids’ city.” Cyril’s words filled the space between them like a dastardly fart. Henry’s expression mirrored just that. “When I failed, I became deviant. And it was only then that we successfully infiltrated the Cyber tower.”

Henry held up his hands, “Woah, woah, woah. *We* didn’t do anything. *You* infiltrated the Cyber tower. I was just some hostage that coulda ruined the whole thing for you—got dragged in by the hair by your lookalike, remember? This is not a *we* situation it’s a *you* situation.” Sumo between the two of them with a visible question mark on his face. Cyril pat his anxieties away.

“Regardless, Henry, M80 was responsible for its success. I didn’t—”

Enough was enough.

“You said you wanted to get into music, right?” He interrupted, rising to both his feet in a hurry. Sumo hopped down from the couch, conjoining himself to the detective’s ankles. “—I mean, yes? Why?” With the way he brought it up, one would have thought Cyril talked about music one second ago as opposed to two, three weeks ago. If Cyril could talk nonsense, so could Henry. “I’m going to educate you. Stay right here.”

As if he’d let Cyril out of his sight for longer than the walk to his bedroom. Not after that shit he just pulled last week. When he returned, he bore with him an ancient relic: a Google home. Henry set that bad boy down and hooked it up, glancing over to see Cyril’s eyes widen in bemusement. Henry mumbled something under his breath, something about how Cyril looked at it like he was holding a fuckin’ baby or something, not like he was whipping out a record player or something that equally showed how goddamned old he was getting. It was a touchy subject, alright?

“Hey Google, play ‘Fuck the System’ by System of a Down.”

Playing: Fuck The System by System of a Down.

The news anchors’ voice was reduced to a mere squeak in comparison to Serj Tankian’s boisterous yells.

The soft yellow of Cyril’s LED spun guilelessly. He listened on as if truly trying to analyze a deeper message. He rested his face in his hands, body leaning forward. He was taking mental notes. Was there a Metal Protocol?

“You see, Cyril, the kinda music I listen to? There isn’t something wrong with *you*—sometimes it’s the fucked up world you live in.” Henry professed, hands on either sides of his hips.

“So just give this playlist a listen, alright? And then you can try to tell me something about the revolution and success and—whatever the hell.” It was approximately five songs, two EP’s, and one accidental Ginuwine song (his classic, Pony, of course) later that Henry had his wild idea. Somewhere between justifying Ginuwine, explaining some lyrical genius, and watching the expressions on Cyril’s face, he realized that they needed to get the fuck out of there.

Away from Detroit. Away from the DPD. Away from anything and everything that would make Cyril self-destruct, because goddammit, every time Henry thought of David, the deviant who’d shot himself in the fucking head in the interrogation room, or Ralph, the one who jumped off the ledge, all he saw was Cyril. Cyril and the way that gun looked poised in those stupid hands of his—the very hands that should be dribbling basketballs, not determining whether or not he was worthy of life or death.

Henry didn’t know the full story. Henry didn’t live inside a mechanical mind, with thoughts floating around in some thick, blue goop that he simply didn’t have the capacity to understand. What he did know, however, was what he saw with his very own eyes, and that was enough for him to yell over Lamb of God:

“I’m going to fucking Canada, and you’re coming with me.”

Detroit was always for some reason or another, raining. Henry spent a majority of his late adulthood alone. He drank alone, he ate alone, and he slept alone. It was the curse of a cantankerous old fart who didn't feel like diving into the world of fuckin' Christian Mingle. His demographic? Widows who couldn't do any better. The plot twist? Widows *always* did better than Henry Porter. For that reason, he hadn't expected what awaited him at Jimmy's bar that night.

A clusterfuck, that's what.

It was a Tuesday. Tuesdays were two-dollar draft beers and four dollar you-call-its. Prime time for getting wasted before 10pm with an android by his side. It was becoming their 'thing'. Every Tuesday for the past four Tuesdays, Cyril would accompany Henry to Jimmy's, poisoning himself gracefully next to him atop a pleather (more plastic than leather, if he was being frank) stool. He didn't say as much as he used to, just listened to Henry ramble on about shitty music for hours on end and occasionally spill an embarrassing story or two. Like the first week he had Sumo and the damn dog wouldn't stop pissing on his leg. Or when he'd let him into the bedroom for the first time and he swore he red-rocketed all over his Ralph Lauren pillow cases. Those were the only luxury items Henry had ever invested in—he believed if he was gonna spend money on something, it ought to help him sleep better. Sometimes, Cyril looked like he wanted to ask Henry a personal question. Most times, when Cyril *was* going to ask Henry a personal question, he ensured that he was too slammed to comprehend it.

So maybe Henry deserved it that night. The fucking *beaucoup* of... *company*.

Word had gotten out that they were transferring to Canada. In fact, word had gotten out that it was their last night in Detroit period, so there Henry was, standing before the entire DPD with nothing but the dumbest fucking look on his face to show for it.

“Ah, fuck me, *really?*”

“It’s about time you made it, Porter! Cyril told us you’d be here an hour ago.”

Cue the record scratching. Henry glared at Cyril as if he’d sprouted an extra dick on his forehead—

Not that he knew that he even had an original dick to begin with. It was something he’d prefer not to plague his nightmares. Again.

“You motherfucker. You set me up.” He accused, all bark and no bite. Cyril had insisted he wear his hippie print today. Damn android was obsessed with peace and zen and all that bullshit. Probably because he knew it’d be too ironic for Henry to swing at him looking all namaste’d out. And what did *he* have on? The same RK800 outfit that he met him in at that very bar. They seriously needed to go shopping. Henry crossed his arms over his chest.

Cyril threw him a wink, walking over to the single empty bar stool and pulling it out for him. Henry almost choked on his own spit.

“After you, Lieutenant Porter.”

The wolf whistles were instantaneous. Gabe Reed clapped so hard his hands almost bled.

“—Princess Porter.” The rat looking bastard corrected. He could barely contain his own laughter. The lieutenant hoped he would choke on his Shirley temple.

“I apologize for being late,” Cyril started as Henry unceremoniously hoisted himself atop the stool, eyes meeting the general vicinity of the crew. Fowler was the one to answer with a flippant wave,

“Don’t. Have you seen Henry’s file? Fool’s attendance record is as long as an epic. I’d be amazed if he wasn’t late to his own funeral.”

“Oh fuck off, Fowler. If you wanna kill me so bad, how ‘bout you buy me a round?”

“Done. Tito’s and soda?”

“Grey Goose. Been a while since we’ve been out, eh?”

Jimmy, bar owner extraordinaire, already had the Grey Goose bottle in hand. He poured. “Gonna be longer with you leaving us hangin’, Henry. There goes about half my business right there.”

“Shucks, Jimmy. You sure do know how to sweet talk,” Henry’s eyes wandered across the bar top, counting one, two, three... about ten heads, not including the strangers that’d sequestered themselves off at the end of the bar. There were no stools left. He turned to find Cyril, who already started walking off into the great fucking abyss as Jimmy set his drink down atop the wooden coaster.

“Hey, Cyril, where do you think you’re going? We can pull up an extra chair for you.”

The android stopped, turning to Henry as he spun slightly on his heels. His hands were in his pockets. A decidedly human tic. “I’m going to sit at one of the booths. I’ll let you know when it’s about time to leave.”

“Come have a drink wi—” Ah, fuck. That’s right.

For as human as Cyril was, he wasn’t. He wouldn’t ever be. Henry felt his chest tighten. He ate alone, he drank alone, he slept alone. He ate alone, he drank alone, he slept alone. Loneliness was being unable to share a meal with someone you care about. Henry had learned that the hard way.

“Well, ah, what are you gonna do in the booth the whole time? Twiddle your thumbs?”

His LED blinked yellow. “Go into stasis.”

Henry blinked. “Stasis?”

“It’s what you would consider ‘standby mode’.”

“You do that often?”

The lieutenant felt a rough shove at his shoulder and groaned. Goddamn basketball game still had him fucked up two weeks later. “Fucking hell! Watch the merchandise!”

“Well quit busting Cyril’s balls, Henry. Damn. You his wife or something?” Miller retorted, nursing his Corona.

In that precise moment, Cyril’s mouth formed the very syllables he’d dreaded hearing:

“Only when you talk about Ginuwine.”

And his whole world fell apart. Ginuwine, with his predilection towards hip thrusts and gratuitous moaning, was the voice of 90’s r&b. And goddammit, that shit was *personal* information! Cyril might as well have airdropped pictures of his family jewels across the table!

“What?! Quit messin’ around! I don’t even know who that is! Tell ‘em the truth!” He was already sitting down. “*Cyril!* Cyril, don’t ignore me! You little—”

And there he went, sitting down at the only empty booth left in the lounge. The soft glow of his LED blinked gently against the mahogany counter tops, residual droplets of condensation reflecting its light. Henry felt a buzz in his back pocket.

He pulled out his phone, only to witness the cheekiest text the world had ever seen.

Cyril: JK :)

“...He’s got jokes.” The entire DPD hollered. Even Gary, hamburger slinger from Henry’s beloved Chicken Feed, couldn’t help but clutch at his sides as the scene unfolded before them. The rain fell softly against the glass. His cheeks were warm.

He hadn’t taken a drink yet.

“So how’d you convince him to go?”

Henry tipped his head back, savoring the burn that trickled to the back of his throat. He looked over the rim of his glass, eyes focusing and unfocusing slightly as he let out his signature groan.

His free hand rubbed the edge of the coaster.

“I didn’t. I told him we were going one day and he said okay.”

Miller’s face scrunched up. “What? And that’s it? That’s all it took?”

“Yeah. That simple.”

Gabe, who had transcended the point of no return, lifted his forehead from the bar top to interject. He’d been making smart ass comments all night. “Android’s whipped. Bet you make him do all your dirty laundry. I’d wanna kill myself too if that was what I had to come home to every night.” He had a deep red imprint where Henry’s fist should be: directly in the center of his face.

The crew tensed.

He instinctively looked over to see if Cyril overheard, still peacefully in stasis. He had the decency to turn himself towards the hockey game to not look like he was having an

existential crisis in the middle of the dive bar. It was such a Cyril thing to do, the considerate bastard.

His face twisted into disgust. “I dare you to say that again, Reed. Give me a reason.”

Wilson sat himself between the two, eyes darting from man to man as he extended both hands out disarmingly. Fowler raised a brow.

“That’s enough, Gabe.”

“What? He gets to ride off with his mail order wife to become a mall cop and we gotta sit here and rebuild this whole city? Talk about injustice—”

Henry stood, grabbing Gabe by the collar of his shirt. His fists balled against his skin. The others rose quickly. Jimmy looked up from his bar well.

“I told you to watch your fucking mouth, Gabe.” He brought their faces mere inches away from each other, the stench of alcohol wafting between their breaths. Three pairs of hands worked to wrench them off each other, white knuckles over pale skin. He felt his flesh bruise.

“Henry, you gotta let go of him, brother. It’s not worth it.”

Gabe’s lips pulled into a frown. His shirt yielded beneath Henry’s fingertips.

“—S’why your wife left you. Can’t get a woman to wanna fuck you. Can’t even get a *man* to wanna fuck you, all you’ve got is that plastic toy,”

Henry’s hands went cold. He felt a boulder sit on his chest. He released the smaller man, finding his pointer finger vested deep in the other’s rib cage. He looked at Gabe and saw only himself staring back at him: a coward.

“I am not a fucking faggot.”

His words fell before he could stop them. He repeated it again. Louder.

“I am not a fucking faggot.”

Henry hadn't spoken those words since the last time he went to church. He had held her engagement ring in one hand and his own in the other. He felt a new life beneath his palms, the small wiggles of a tiny soul greeting the world with triumph. He felt tears threaten the corners of his eyes. His chest was tight. He squeezed the rings until he bruised.

He was not a faggot. He wasn't one then, and he wasn't one now.

--A familiar hand found itself atop his shoulder. He shoved it off.

“Henry, it's me.” A beat. “Cyril.”

His head was throbbing. It was the same, pulsing pain he'd grown accustomed to over the years, its iron hot edges threatening to cut right through him. The lights overhead felt more like heat lamps. Perspiration formed on the bridge of his nose. Henry felt like a stale hunk of meatloaf drying up under a chef's knife. It was a familiar place, sure, but not a comfortable one. He imagined it was similar to what a heathen felt arriving at the circles of Hell.

The first circle was reserved for folks who didn't know who God was. Henry knew, he just didn't care. They weren't on speaking terms. Hard to give the guy a ring when he liked to forward his calls to voicemail.

Lust and gluttony, however, depended on the day. Henry kept his internet search history to himself. Kept his hands wrapped around the neck of a bottle or one of Gary's burgers. When his eyes would wander, it'd wander to the nearest breathing thing—or not breathing thing. Shit, these days he had trouble keeping his eyes off Cyril's goddamn neck bones. Clavicles? Were they called clavicles? Hell if he knew. He'd catch himself, take a cold shower, and refer back to the sticky note he now kept folded up in his wallet: *And don't fuck it up.*

Greed was taking the android revolutions' new hope and turning him into a house wife. Violence was getting into a bar brawl on his last day in Detroit.

So it was decided, then. Henry Porter would live in that awkward lava between the fourth and fifth circles. Maybe he'd set up a tent and meet Argenti. Float around on the River Styx with a fuckin' centaur. He'd never gotten to go on a beach vacation before the oceans turned over in pollution.

Fowler broke the silence between them.

"—You gonna be alright, Porter?" He asked, occupying his left as Wilson sat quietly on his right. Gabriel had been escorted out moments earlier, Miller and Gary resorting to damage control. He vaguely remembered the young detective muttering an apology. Henry hadn't responded. Figured he was starting to hear shit.

He wiped the sweat from his face.

"Not sure if I'm making the right decision, Jeff." The words sank straight to his stomach. He fought the nausea, hands flexing experimentally against a bev nap. "I haven't been sure since I put in my notice." His boxes were shipped. His house was empty. Cyril awaited him in the car with Sumo.

He'd barked orders at him, the acid sting of alcohol burning his lips. For once, the android listened. For once, Henry wish he hadn't.

"So it's like that?"

"Like what?" Wilson shifted uncomfortably, taking a drink from a beer bottle he sucked dry an hour ago.

"Don't play dumb, Porter. I saw the way you look at him."

"Like I'm an asshole for snapping? 'Cause yeah, that was fucked up."

Fowler called Jimmy over for a glass of water. He slid it towards Henry. “If you’re not sure, Henry, why don’t you ask him yourself? You know you’ve always got a place here with us. You can stay.”

“Well, what if I don’t wanna give him an option, Jeff? We all saw what he did the moment he had a fucking choice.” Henry gritted through his teeth. “It was all over the news, and he acts like it never happened. Doesn’t talk about it, just shoots the shit with me at home, yells at me for putting too much cheese in my panini. Every time he takes Sumo out for a walk, I’m scared I’m gonna get a knock on my door saying my dog was found down the street and he’s nowhere to be seen. Do you know what that’s like, Fowler?”

Do you know what it’s like to fucking lose someone?

“You know I do.”

Wilson called for a shot. The patrons started sifting out of the bar. The anti-android propaganda was slowly coming off the walls. The clientele had decreased since then.

“He can make his own decisions. If he agreed to go with you, it’s probably because he wanted to.” Wilson interjected, the most he’d spoken the entire night. Henry wasn’t sure why he was still here.

“Oh yeah? And who died and made you the android expert all of a sudden? Last I remembered, you were just as bad as Reed.” He took a sip of his water. He wondered if he’d miss Detroit’s finest tap.

Wilson cleared his throat. “Do you remember Daniel? The PL600 deviant from the Phillips’ case?”

Henry shrugged. “Yeah, what about him?”

“He shot and almost killed me. If it weren’t for your andro—” He stopped himself.

“*Cyril*, I could have died that night.” His thumb massaged the ridges of his shot glass. Licking his lips, he continued, “Daniel had a gun pointed at him and threatened to kill him if he touched me, and you know what he said?” A pause. “He said, ‘you can’t kill me, I’m not alive’.”

Henry and Fowler said nothing. The hockey game was over.

“I swallowed my pride later, you know. Went over to tHenry him the week after. He told me he didn’t remember who I was. Told me when his memory was transferred, some details didn’t make it. I thought he was weird as fuck, kinda decided to let it go but—after working with him and seeing how he is with you, Henry. I learned something.” Henry watched the realization spread across his face. “I think he’d do it again. I *know* he’d do it again, even if he can’t remember.” Wilson cleared his throat, finally taking a swig of his drink as their tones filled the entirety of the bar.

Jimmy had begun flipping chairs. There was an underlying smell of bleach and sanitizer staining every surface wet surface. Henry’s head buzzed. This was home.

“And that’s not programming. That’s a choice. A good one, if I might say so myself.”

Fowler stood from his bar stool, taking one final swig of his own poison. He clapped Henry on the shoulder.

“Talk to him, Porter.”

He didn’t try to explain himself. He’d stumbled into the car—newly rented, with the smell of Pinesol and vinyl all over the covers—plopping himself down into the passenger seat as he extended a hand back to pet Sumo. A soft lick tickled his fingertips. He was pretty sure they tasted foul. Nothing but Grey Goose and rocks salt. See, that was the great thing about dogs.

They loved you no matter how big of a piece of shit you were, or how often you drank yourself into oblivion. He couldn't say the same of humans. Hell, he wasn't even sure if he could say the same for androids. Not after the Ortiz case.

He was reminded of Cyril's body. The first one, the one that fell like a rag doll the moment the bullet went through his head. He'd never seen so much blue blood in person before. He was bludgeoned.

Henry shuddered as the engine hummed. Cyril put on Bowie. Unexpected.

"Is this song okay?" The android asked.

Henry almost smiled. "Phenomenal, actually. You been doing research?"

"Yes." He admitted, matter-of-fact. "Sumo likes him too."

"Well, yeah, I figured. We're practically the same person."

Cyril put the car in reverse, backing out of the parking space he'd made a home of for the last thirty minutes. What time was it now? Nine? Ten? Henry lost track. He was never one to fear the hands of time—that was more Cyril's shtick. Speaking of Cyril's shtick, his LED went yellow again.

"What could you *possibly* be thinking this hard about?"

"The comparisons between you and Sumo. I see it now."

Henry snorted. "Oh yeah?"

Cyril nodded as he shifted the car into drive. The rain poured over the windshield. He steadied his grip on the wheel, "You both like to overeat and oversleep. Usually in that order."

Henry, still caught in his booze-induced haze, took a moment to process what he just said. When he finally came to, he endured the stages of grief at miraculous speed.

Shock. "—Hey!"

Denial. “That’s not true.”

Anger. “Fuck off, Cyril.”

Bargaining. “At least I pay rent. Sumo doesn’t even have a job, gimme *that* much credit!”

Depression. “...”

And finally, acceptance.

“...Yeah. You got a point.”

Henry turned his attention to Cyril’s profile. Through the dimness of the streetlights, its glow fading in and out with their distance, he could make out the slightest smile playing at his lips. His freckles danced happily along his cheek bones. Jesus Christ, his jaw line could cut diamonds. *Literally*, it probably could. Or it could grate cheese. Henry decided he’d put that theory to the test when they made it to Canada.

If they made it to Canada.

“What’s that in your lap?”

Henry had forgotten he brought it in with him. A little present from Wilson, wrapped neatly in a blue bow. Sentimental fuck didn’t have the balls to give it to Cyril himself.

“I’ll show you when we get to the terminal,” Henry sighed. His muscles tensed. “You still want to go, right?”

“To the terminal? Yes, that’s where we’re headed right now.”

He shook his head. Maybe a little too fast, he could feel the devil and God rage inside him (that was a polite way of saying he thought he might yak all over the nice seat covers). They hit a speed bump.

“I meant to Canada.” He could feel his asshole clench. Awfully romantic of him. He clenched even harder when Cyril didn’t answer.

“Cyril?”

“Do you want me to?”

Henry swore he was going to give himself a hernia with the way he snapped his body around. There it was, his inner circle of hell: violence.

“God dammit, it’s not about what I want or don’t want! What do *you* want, Cyril?” Sumo whined in the backseat. “I just wanna know if this is really something you wanna do. You’re leaving behind your whole life here and for what? ‘Cause I’m having a midlife crisis and don’t wanna die in the same house I grew up in? Shit just doesn’t make sense for you.”

His LED flashed red. It flickered from red to blue back to yellow again until finally, he let out a breath. “Because I have a good feeling about this.”

Henry’s mouth hung slack. He stared at the android incredulously.

“Because you have a good *feeling* about this?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“Cyril, that’s just about the worst reasoning I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s logical.” And there it was, that matter-of-fact tone of his again. Henry would be damned if he could go a full day without having to listen to that shit at least once.

“And how’s that?”

“Because before I met you, I didn’t feel at all.”

Henry didn’t say a damn word for the rest of the ride. Not until the very moment they pulled into the terminal, the sounds of Bowie fading as Cyril cut the engine. He was sweating.

“...Okay.” He said, more to himself than to Cyril. He looked off into the terminal, its neon signs greeting them with warmth. Assuredness. He grabbed the gift in his lap and handed it off to Cyril.

“Open it.”

Cyril nodded, tugging at the bow carefully. He pulled until it revealed the item waiting inside: a tie with dog print. They were scampering along the pattern with their tongues out.

He’d never seen Cyril smile so big.

“It’s from Wilson. He said it would make you guys square—for the tourniquet you don’t remember making.” Henry reached out, hands gripping at the tie around Cyril’s neck until it came unfurled between his fingertips. “Mind if I do the honors?”

Cyril nodded. The dog print looked good on him.

“It suits you.” Henry grinned. “To new beginnings.”

“I’ll have to save that in your file—” And before Henry had a chance to ask, “The fact that you’re sentimental.”

“It’s the alcohol, Cyril.”

He said the same thing when he fell asleep on the bus, his head leaned against the android’s shoulder as Sumo rested beside their feet. He felt warm again.

It was definitely the alcohol.