

*This story has some disturbing imagery. To read this [#longread](#) at your leisure, use one of the options at the [bottom of the page](#).*

I'm on my third steak feeling hollow. The white dinner plate is a reservoir of watery blood. Scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, and hamburger stroganoff soak in the liquid. Everything is soggy with it. The floor, heat lamps, the other people, all saturated by watered down blood. But with the itch advancing past the subcutaneous layer I barely notice. To avoid scratching my eyelids I concentrate on chewing. Focus on working marshy lumps down an irritated esophagus. During these times I sympathize with snakes about to shed their skin. Soft meat mocks my dull knife, grappling with it and winning.

I scratch the top of my head and come away with a tuft of my hazelnut hair. Long sleeved cotton hides the network of scars I have all over my upper body. Sweat pants do the same for my legs. With all the scars it's hard to shave my legs and they look rather odd if left uncovered. The last bites of my stroganoff go down largely untasted. I scrape the plate and lick the fork.

The frantic speed of my eating matched with the sheer amount of it has already become a whispered conversation amongst the staff. As the transformation begins so does the hunger. Animal protein is necessary. Otherwise I risk a substantial weakness, then capture, then dissection by curious scientists. If I was rich I could buy a support staff. Cops could be paid to stop certain investigations. They could be shown I only eat to survive. If I didn't transform I wouldn't need to eat whole families. But I do. So...I do.

It's a busy night for the small restaurant. The place sits on the edge of town feeding passing truckers and families sick of cooking. In terms of location it couldn't be better for getting constant business. One side spreads out into the industrial districts. This gives them a hearty lunch rush of shippers and receivers. Another side has a hill and half mile of forest which shields a good sized housing development. This gives a decent dinner crowd. And due to the industrial sector and it's placement on one of the roads leading out of town, truckers show up at all hours. There are about twenty tables in the place and all but a few are occupied. Early yet, sun on the decline. Dinner rush. Elderly folks sipping coffee, spooning mashed potatoes. Nuclear families corralling their children into high chairs. The hour of good tips has arrived and energized the two waitresses.

One table over, a young girl pokes at a half-eaten sirloin. The man who sits with her stabs and rakes through his meal periodically squealing blade on ceramic. Sandy blonde hair buzzed short fades into his stubble. A wide smile stretches his face despite the obvious anger his body projects. He is wearing a well-worn, brown leather jacket at the table. It makes me think of hot body temperatures, itching, all that will soon come to pass. For my sanity I must look away. Instinct insists that I mistrust this man.

"Finish yur fucking food," no tentacles, just bent teeth and juices. The young girl wipes her tears. My credit card returns declined, defeated. There's money enough in my checking account to cover the feast, but when the rent check clears there will be issues. Things my landlord will remember. Can't have that. I stand abruptly and turn to leave.

"I gotta get out, it's my time of the month," my feet are sore, filling up the end of my running shoes. None of the waitresses know what to do. Rick, the manager, doesn't answer his phone. They make no moves to stop me. My stomach and intestines attempt to switch places, diaphragm be damned. I make it to the glass double doors before they scream for me to stop. Two long haulers pull into the lot. A sudden jolt of pain makes me lean on the door frame. Everybody in the place is watching me, except the smiling man. They have my credit card they yell.

Closed for the night shipping depots pass by as the bone pain begins. Engine exhaust and road grime seeped into the street, and the buildings, and seems to coat all the landscaped bushes. Everything looks shaped from the same dirty clay. Abruptly the city ends and a wooded slope takes over. I climb it heading toward the shack I found a few days before. Halfway up the hill I look back and memorize the path back to the diner. I think about how I'll probably never get that credit card

back. Have to call for a replacement and hear about the balance and lack of payments from somebody I can't track down. If that diner wants to ruin my credit the divorce beat them to it. That and the bankruptcy. And the leases I abandoned. Fortunately for me this is a small town and they will probably be dead by tomorrow. Tossed around in pieces. Eaten.

Alan DuPont woke with a fat tongue smearing his face. He pushed at the muzzle with his newly six-year-old arms. Unable to hold the mutt back he yelled for his mom. On his face sat a bland smile. His mom came in and pulled the dog back by the collar. Above his bed hung a poster of a gorilla holding a book open and looking at the viewer over the top of reading glasses. It used to have the word 'read' in fat white letters on the bottom but that part had been ruined by juice in a move and so Alan tore off that part.

"Happy birthday Mr. Alan!"

Having forgotten today was his birthday the realization brings spontaneous joy. A scowl carves itself into his face. He bounces out of bed. Jumping around the room he hoots and yays. The dog barked but was too old to join in the frolic. The room is small and Alan has just enough room to circle his mom and the dog.

"That means I don't have to go to school today! You said I wasn't going on my birthday because you had a surprise for me." The positivity furrowed his brow. He wore Transformers pajamas.

"That's right. No school today. Get dressed and have some breakfast and then we are going on a little trip to get your surprise."

Alan scarfed Lucky Charms, practically flipped into shorts and a football jersey, and had his oversized sunglasses on in the front seat of their car faster than his mom would have believed. They drove an hour with Alan staring out the window at the overcast sky. The journey ended at a two story building with several long, one story buildings arranged behind it. Inside his mom talked with an old woman and from back rooms came the sounds of dogs of all sizes. After the grown-up talk had gone on for an eternity the old woman took them out a back door and into the second long building. The building was one long room with a cement floor. It smelled like dog, and pee, and hay. Lined up on each side of a long corridor were cages of canines. Schnauzers, Labradors, Pitbulls, Pomeranians, splotchy colored mutts all yelped, and wagged tails, and pawed the chain link doors. Their enthusiasm acted as a magnetic field and repulsed all of Alan's positive feelings. He began to smile wider as he made his way down the corridor. The old woman accompanying misread this sign.

"Are you having trouble deciding? They are all so happy to see you."

"I don't like them."

"Oh. Well...we only have a few more dogs in the next building. Perhaps you'll like one of those ones." The old woman led them back outside and as she put her hand on the knob of the next entrance Alan pointed at the next one down.

"What's in that building?"

"That's the cats. Your mother said you were wanting a dog."

"Mom? Can I see the cats?"

His mom frowned, which meant exactly what it usually does. It could scratch the couch up. Will have to clean the litter box. Two different bags of food. She looked at her scrawny, freckled son. His smile faded into a something that looked close to constipation. She recognized it as a hopeful plea. He will not have an easy life later on. I should give him any chance for happiness that I can.

"Sure. Let's give them a look."

The cat lodge was infinitely quieter but not quiet. Many of the felines meowed and rubbed their sides against the cage doors. Some of them remained in the same aloof position they had been in, others gaped for a second before curling as far back into a corner as they could squeeze.

Alan ignored the eager yowling ones and stopped first at an imperious long haired gray. He stuck two fingers through the grating and the cat sniffed cautiously before rubbing its head against the fingers. Alan pulled back and smiled. He bypassed a calico, two black short hairs, and a brown tabby. In the second to last cage on the right side a white cat with two black patches down its back

hunched mid cage. It was wide-eyed and ready to bolt. When he put his fingers through the grating the cat hissed and swatted him. Before he turned around his mom told the old woman they would take it.

The next day Alan's mom heard the cat growling in the other room. She found the cat on its back. Alan was tweaking its belly and all four legs raked his skin. Beads of blood grew from the scratches. The cat's white fur became smeared with pink. When his mom entered Alan wore an expression of deep, vacant depression. She couldn't remember ever seeing him this happy.

Hot coals in my teeth where the soft nerves should be. They feel rigged to explode, digging enamel shrapnel into my taut cheeks and swelling tongue. Each little white grinder repelled the others torturing their pink foundations. Face creaks from expanding bone. Every cell suffers, and I itch. I couldn't tell you exactly how the hair comes up. Not with agony clamping my sight, threatening me with unconsciousness. Fistfuls of morphine help, but not much. My skin is inflated with hard tumors. Each foot is a flesh zeppelin warping slow inside. There is no way to scratch with hands of stretching ligaments, filled purple with blood.

I cut it a little too close in the diner. Should've got the steaks to go. Barely made it to this little shack despite the fact I scouted it days before. When I feel the first twinges of change I take the next few days planning the feeding. The change starts in my digestion. I eat a full meal and get hungry again two hours later. This is about a week prior to the big day. Usually my skin has just finished healing. Back in the shack the dark blue carpet rubs my skin so thin it splits, and I mash pus into the fibers with my writhing. Imagine being burned from your feet upwards, lashed to a pole by the people you go to church with. Once my fur is thick enough, it gets pushed into the cuts and sticks. I force a short peek and my nose is black and wet capping off four inches of upper mandible. The pain abates slightly. But this pain will never truly be gone. Imagine your lover smashing all your bones with a hammer, then twisting your body into an S shaped cast.

Vision, blurry. Wooden plank walls just a chocolaty mass. Dark rectangle is the door. Bones aren't sturdy yet, more like peanut brittle. I wait. Sudden relaxing makes me urinate. Something in my throat changed, only rumbling hurt, growling in breaths. They become solid slowly. I stand. Joints seem to be a series of sharp rocks on nerves.

After that first spike in hunger the bones start to itch near the joints. Not all the time, and not all at once, but with increasing frequency. Most of my money is spent on healing salves, bills, and enough food for a family of four. I eat to sustain the transformation. All I can do during the transformation is eat. When it's over I've learned to force myself to eat even though I'm not hungry. This cuts days from the healing process. I'm caught in a cycle of violence with no point other than to sustain itself. When I'm able to stop and think, all life seems to follow this same pattern. A violence that begets more violence. During the times of healing all I want to do is sleep.

Right now, I want to kill. My muscles clench like a seizure that hits and doesn't go away, but I still move. The cracks between the wall boards fade in, pinstripes. Past trails of ants innumerable, they radiate a horrid pine-vomit odor.

Prickling restlessness in my core, the same place that creates life telling me to shred it. Natural, organic impulses. Cool, smooth night air only gets through on my nose, and palms. A field of yellow halogen flowers, below me, down the hill. Then it hits and I'm angry, and hungry. If I don't want to move again, there can't be any survivors.

"Not tonight ok?" Candy canes decorate Shari's sleep pants, and they dance impassively as she inches backwards. "If that's what you call loving somebody, I don't think I want to be a part of it." "God damnit! I barely broke even at work, then you have me take the kid out for dinner. Don't get me wrong I think you have a great daughter but there's a reason I haven't had kids of my own. I can't handle them very good. On top of that some lady a table over is just shovelin' food into her face making it really awkward then runs out on the check. Now you ain't gonna let me even touch ya?" An unfinished puzzle spans the kitchen table. The borders are done, and in the middle three horse

heads float around a pool of fake wood. Shari's heel finds the burnt orange carpet, and the gold colored metal strip that divides the kitchen from the living room. To her right, the couch smiles with a mouth of duct tape holding together the front seam on the middle cushion, curved from the weight of so many asses. She continues to step into the living room towards her fish tank.

Most women think Alan is in the military when they first see him. A six foot one inch white man, buzz cut leaning back with both elbows on the bar. He would be holding a beer casually in one hand with the stare of someone fresh from getting yelled at. They imagine a uniform on him and it seems to fit so well they almost believe it before they even speak to him. Instead of the uniform Alan will be wearing cargo shorts, a white t-shirt, and his brown leather jacket. When he came back to Shari's place tonight Alan kept his jacket on.

"It's just that you were nice the first few times we hung out but then when it started to get serious you changed. It was too rough. I'm afraid it'll get worse."

"Seemed like you enjoyed it at the time. I thought you understood me."

Next to the toaster Shari had set her shower radio to a Christian Evangelist, combating Satan from 7:00 p.m. to midnight. As Alan joined her on the recently vacuumed carpet the radio was heard to say, 'But this did not please the Lord!' Alan turned off the radio.

"You don't even go to church. I don't know why you listen to this crap."

The fish bowl stand poked Shari's lumbar. In reflex she grabbed the edge, causing the fish bowl to list precariously. Fish swim in circles, watching their universe tip and plummet. Everything sloshes onto the ground and Shari knelt, gasping. She doesn't know what kind of fish they are, but the little creatures are more like family than the man bending towards her, more than the girl crying under her blankets. One of the fish is pointed and slender, metallic green-yellow. His name is Ritz. The other she calls Finnigan, and it's the kind of fish that resembles a slice of cheese with eyes. It didn't flop or fight. It just opened its mouth. Then closed it.

"Jesus bitch," Alan sank his hand into her hair and shoved her face down among the wet pebbles, on top of Finnigan. He put his weight on her head, and yanked her pants down around her thighs.

Shari senses the delicate bones crush beneath her eye socket. Salty slime and blood seeps up the corner of her mouth. Pebbles grind against her jaw. She hates herself for moaning. For pounding harder against his fingers. For spreading her own cheeks when his stubble hurts. For a second her internal self pulls back and takes a good look at the scene. It is disgusted. Shari moves away trying to get her legs into soaked pajama pants.

"I can't do this. Please leave. Don't come back."

Alan looks down at the remains of Finnigan and realizes what he has done. He's ruined another one. Every time he opens himself up pain comes out and covers the one he loves. He looks up at Shari and beams.

"Should have known better. This happens every time. I get it. I'm a fucking monster. This is just the only way that feels right to show people my feelings."

He wipes pebbles off his jeans and strides back through the kitchen.

From the other room he calls, "By the way, I fixed your shower earlier today." The front door slams, and it's quiet.

Ritz isn't flopping, and Finnigan is a smear of poorly blended oil paints: yellow, black, red, and white. Shari goes into the bathroom and sees a new shower head and fresh caulking around the bottom of the tub. She turns on the water and it shoots out better than when she moved in. Without turning it off she sits on the edge of the tub and weeps.

He opened up and I rejected him, she thinks. Why can't I find a normal guy?

Reinforced fingernails push through the skin above this woman's collarbone. I use her skeleton as leverage against her pushing struggles. My extended jaw closes around her neck and thrashes. Skin tears away in ragged strips. Lunge again. Stretchy veins stuck between my teeth. Tender muscle grips the bone with tendon.

Someone hits me with a chair. My barely healed wounds open up, making wet stripes in my fur. I lift

the limp woman by her clavicles, and use her to swat Rick, the diner manager. He flies backward. As people try to break for the door I toss them away. Their fear goes desperate. Somebody had ordered pork chops slightly before my entrance. They sizzle on the unwatched skillet. The coffee is stale. The place uses pledge on the tables. Smells bombard me, I sift through them. Frustration. Anger grows. The front door bursts open on the behest of an officer's shiny black shoe.

"Holy shit!" he says.

Waitress with my credit card number becomes a riot shield, and I bound towards the cop. He doesn't shoot. The body contacts the gun, pushing it to the side and my teeth find his skull. Trenches appear in rows down his face, like a field of flesh recently plowed. When my teeth meet they confiscate his upper lip. Swallow that first exquisite morsel, the hunger gives a tingle to my chest and arms, like they're waking up. Drug addicts should imagine giving in to the symptoms, only to feel them strengthen, even as the eyedropper empties.

I drop the woman. She thuds once for her hips, and again for her head. Claws raking and raking, taking the policeman apart in gouged chunks. Kevlar blocks my efforts on his torso, so it takes a little longer. His arms are twin bones, covered with raspberry jam. Face unrecognizable to any who knew him. Rick stirs from beneath an upturned table. The napkin dispenser once proudly in the table's center is nowhere to be found. He's first.

Tearing muscle with teeth, several yanks before it detaches. Trapezius, gluteus maximus, erector spinae, slick with blood, being devoured. Fur clumps together, sticky red. Since I'm blocking the door the rest of the diners scurry about in confusion. The smell of fear, like rancid sour cream, wafts through the door held open by a bullet proof skeleton. External and internal obliques, rectus abdominis, Rick's once prized six pack released from its mask of fat, prized again, eaten.

By the time I finish with Mr. Manager and start on the waitress the furnace inside is blaring. Sweat moves hair to hair down my back, gathers in my knee pit. A trucker throws a chair through a window and climbs out. Witnesses cannot be allowed.

In the morning the relatives will be asking: Why them? What kind of psycho would inflict such violence? What did they do to deserve this? They don't understand that's not how it works. It wasn't their threats on my credit. I picked the place for its proximity to the woods and the shack. They die because of the natural law of un-luck. Death is necessary and violence is its engine.

I let them hear me growling before launching through the doorway. Jowls and arms soaked with their friend's juices, membranes dangling from my gums. Middle aged parents, blocking their children. Older folks in slippers, teenagers in slippers. Seemingly pleasant people. Some scream. Some run. . Reconstructed ankles spring my tortured body in pursuit. I kill them all. When I've eaten my fill I bound down 4th Street, out of town. Everything hurts, and yet I am complete.

Trees welcome me with clean air, and up the hill, a herd of deer. They hear me, in the brush, but don't leap away until they see me. The sloping ground has a layer of moss and pine needles, and a couple of them slip flinging organics. I catch an old one by the leg, and latch my jaws to its throat. When the sun comes up, not a single deer will ask a question.

To: The Avenger, (jsservant@yahoo.com)

From: (thebeast3031@hotmail.com)

Subject: RE: Do I bring justice?

Greetings Avenger! It's Vanessa.

I've been thinking about your question regarding justice through violence and I've come to the keystone. Essentially we have one side arguing that violence only begets more violence and so using it to try and defeat it is like trying to wash dirt off your clothes with mud. Unfortunately, I find myself caught in such a cycle. The other side feels that our current "humane" forms of punishment do nothing to rehabilitate and if anything cause dependence in which violent offenders commit acts just to return to their place of comfort. You know, that whole spiel Morgan Freeman gave in the Shawshank Redemption. Same thing with the old guy that got out and hung himself.

What you got to understand is that there will always be violence. The universe will keep itself balanced no matter what our insignificant race does. If we squashed all the forms of violence that we know new forms would emerge. Killing to eat is a natural instinct and is essential for the survival of life, but a man beating his wife is a symptom of bored intellect. This planet needs to prioritize our battles. If we allowed the least damaging forms of violence to survive then there would be no reason for violence to evolve.

So in terms of whether violence can be justice, of course it can! But you must be sure it is deserved and that what you do isn't worse than what they have done. Otherwise someone might come looking to give you the justice you deserve. And around and around we go. . .

Hope that helped,

V.

After Shari kicked him out Alan walked around the city until he got too cold and gave in. He paid for a night in a motel. He churned in the hard, smelly bed for an hour before succumbing. Cleaning service woke him with their knocks. Still sore from last night's trek he put on his jacket which, although heavy, made him feel ready for the day. He bought a coffee and honey roasted peanuts from a gas station. Eating these he strolled some three miles and into the large parking lot of Rudolph's pawn shop, known to certain crowds as Capone's. The doorbell tinkled and Al Hendrick stepped behind the counter from the back.

"How's it hanging Grins?"

"Halfway down the thigh. Sorry I'm showing up so early."

"Don't you worry your prim, little ass. You'll mess up that mug. Go ahead and go down. Still got a few all-nighters down there shootin' shit."

Al Hendrick, the reason for the shop's nickname and also claiming the moniker of Capone, stood at basketball player height. His silver hair was always combed. Every day he wore blue jeans, and a band shirt with a leather vest open over it. Today the band was Anthrax.

"Thanks. I had a bad night."

"You look like somethin' swallowed ya and shit ya back out on my welcome mat."

Alan frowned and laughed. Due to the inevitable frown present during his good moods Alan's laugh carried a sarcastic tone, even in the case of genuine laughter. Stepping behind the counter he passed shelves of knives, microwaves, televisions, guitars, and incomplete tool sets. In the back he opened a narrow door and went down stairs to an expansive basement that hid beneath the parking lot. Rows of long folding tables leaned against one wall and plastic chairs were stacked along the other. The one table that was never put away was solid wood, round, and sat off to the side of the stairs. During events Capone and his chosen company oversaw all from it. Right now the table had two twelve packs as a centerpiece. Four women and a man sat around it. The man laughed from his depths. The woman to his left giggled along. The others sipped beer and tried to have a separate conversation.

Alan strode up to the table, "You guys up for some Hold 'em?"

The man stops laughing, "Sure are. You bring me some money?"

"If you can take it."

"Heh heh hee. Another fool approaches." The man turns to the girl who giggled, "Would you be a dear and fetch us a pack of cards from Capone. Thanks darlin'." As she gets up he smacks her ass. Alan picks one of the other women as his favorite and puts his chair next to her. Each of the women is beautiful but this one's raven hair falling onto pale shoulders, and the mischievous crook of her eyebrow when she looks at him takes the strongest hold. The cards arrive. The swish and flutter of shuffling. Alan helps them finish the beer and orders another from the group. By that time he has already won more than enough to pay for the tremendous upcharge Capone adds.

Over the years Alan discovered his backward expressions worked perfectly to confuse drunken poker players. They misread his expressions for the first few big losses. Then if they got wise he stone faced which confused them all the more. When his coffers had grown by two hundred dollars his

worries about Shari were gone, and his interest in the woman beside him had grown. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and bet ten dollars. Everyone called. The river came down. He had a pair. Alan bet another ten. The man and his giggling girl folded. Hamiltons flew in from the others. Another card. No help. He bluffed with a twenty. One of the other women folded. The other called. His lady raised him another ten.

As he gazed at her face trying to delve past its beauty. He lost all cognition. For half a minute he stared at her.

"Hey shuggah, you still in?" Her mischievous smile mixed with her southern accent to create pure temptation.

Alan snapped back and without thinking he called. The hand ended with his pair unimproved and her full house pulling the cash to her purse. Not long after, the group got up to leave. The woman wrote her number on a paper coaster and leaned into Alan's ear.

"I've got plans during the day, but you give me a call tonight shuggah."

He sat at the table dumbstruck for the next few hours.

The bank teller's face smiled sheer granite. Currently my checking balance was \$-147.38. Hands and feet groan like an old rope bridge threatening to snap. A customer pumps coffee into a paper cup. The repetitive skoosh sound grates nerves. The smell enflames my hunger; and I notice the dispenser sputters its last drop. Cubicles line the edges of the room with fellow predators selling money. Well pressed suits beckon me. The management throne beckons me; and yet here I stand. I'm on the wrong side of the bulletproof glass.

"The account should have had \$780, and the only check I've written was for \$778. It shouldn't be overdrawn."

"Well you also had two remote withdrawals of \$20.00. One on the 2nd and another on the 16th of last month. Then with the returned check fee, and the overdrafts, and the interest on. . ."

I interjected, "All the years I've had this account and never overdrafted. Then my direct deposit stalls for two days and you can't reimburse the fees that happened because of your network outage?"

Faces skim by. Blood flows down wrinkles. Jaws, my jaws close around them. Vibrations from the screams tickle my tongue, annoying. I thrash. This bitch's face beneath my claws, helpless and contorted.

"I'll waive the fees! Oh please no, the fees!"

Despite my annoyance the thought makes me grin. I mash the left thumb into the opposite palm. Massage what palmists call the mound of Venus. If they are correct, and each substantial line are lovers destined to be lost, for me it's more likely lost job opportunities.

True vision takes over. Back comes the teller's youthful cheeks, close to flawless with no makeup. Safe behind the glass she maintains a friendly countenance.

"Actually," the teller squints at her screen. "Ms. Dekko. May I call you Vanessa?"

"Ms. Dekko will be fine."

"Vanessa I'm looking back at your account and see two overdrafts just within the past year. Would you care to look for yourself?" She motions to turn her privacy shaded monitor.

Outside, glossy paper cups lay smashed along the gray curb. The sidewalk is narrow from the plastic green and yellow newspaper dispenser, and telephone poles, and wide stone cylinders guarding the city's trashcans. On the way I buy a newspaper. My apartment claims a third floor position in a complex called Sunset Hills. A series of one-story houses make a gauntlet of Sherry Rd, the back entrance used by maintenance trucks. I prefer this one to the main entrance which is well manicured and wide open. Elongated puddles dark with exhaust dot the gravel road as acne. Each is topped by a psychedelic film of oil.

As I enter the complex I find the story I was looking for. Five days ago a small town called Myrtle started an investigation of a diner massacre. The article gave the name of the officer killed onsite and said the investigation was ongoing. No mention of the bizarre nature of the crime. Excellent. To

find Myrtle one travels west from Feedleton through fifteen miles of forest. The diner is on the north side of the town where highway 17 cuts through the industrial section into suburbia. Thankfully they have a bus running between so I didn't have to walk it in the hours directly before the change. Convalescence remains active in my face, hands, and feet. Swelling is mostly gone. Bruises have faded into yellow. Each leg and arm wear tiger stripe stretch marks. The splits are closed with rust colored scabs as remembrance. The bone pain never dissipates completely. Wads of promotional coupons fill my mail cube. I drop them in the recycle bin unopened. They land atop cloned brethren along with advertisements, insurance solicitations, and credit card offers. I keep three letter-sized envelopes from publishers. I thought I could make extra cash with freelance writing, but so far, no takers.

In my living room sits an old mattress shaped like a peanut butter sandwich. Sheets and comforter smooth the grand dip in the middle. Beside the bed sits my laptop. Email yields another rejection, third strike for my short story "Wisdom from Entrails". I did get a buyer for a microwave, and a computer monitor. The bedroom is almost entirely filled with stacks of stuff waiting to be sold. I try to focus on electronics as they are usually small and easy to ship. I find the sold items and set them by the door.

Walls textured white, no pictures or posters. Opposite the bed five stackable plastic drawers store shirts, jeans, a dress I never wear, socks, and underwear. I step on the heel of each shoe and step out of them, padding into the bathroom. To remove shirt and shoes is relatively painless. Cranking my wrists to unclasp my jeans and bra however feels like someone taking a power drill to each joint. Stretched ligaments leave me to fumble as a marionette. When the garments surrender and retreat to the linoleum I collapse sideways onto the toilet and rub the metacarpophalangeals. Peripheral vision notices a small white box on the back of the toilet: floss. Why the hell is the floss on the toilet? Command my weight back onto my ankles. Change of plans, I sit back down. Grab the tube of ScarZone from beside the toothpaste. Squeeze the cream onto my shaky index finger and trace the keloids along my jaw. A chemical smell that penetrates like ammonia jags into my nose. I spread it evenly along my jaw, and around my mouth and nose, but cap it before moving up to the ones on my hairline. Those can be covered with my bangs. I don't have another \$9.85 to get any more.

Door pounding interrupts my introspection. The act of getting up to answer the door is at the bottom of a long list of other activities such as not doing it, rubbing my victimized knuckles, and possibly taking a piss since I'm here already. Knocking persists.

"Vanessa, I know you're there. I saw you in the mailroom. Open up!"

Ankles half numb from their respite jolt with clean pain for an instant as I stand. I throw my shirt and pants back on without buttoning the denim. The bedroom floor is layered with bloody newspaper and two black garbage bags filled with fur stinking of bile and decay. I close this door before opening the noisy one.

"Hey Mr. Chikodi how's the dog?" Bhikaji, Mr. Chikodi's beloved Pomeranian, struts around the main office yipping at any pale skinned visitor. All of the dog's fluffy fur is shaved short except around the head and tail giving the thing a prissy mane and an ass afro. Usually it wears a blue knit sweater, sometimes a sailor jacket. It was named after an Indian national figure that supposedly stayed with Mr. Chikodi's parents in London for two days during her travels.

"Bhikaji is perfect as ever, but the same cannot be said for your rent payment." Mr. Chikodi's accent rolled the 'R' in rent. His tone ascended through the 'EN' emphasizing, and the 'T' was a harsh killing blow. rrent! "You have two weeks to vacate." Another killing blow in 'vacate'. I could be making enough to buy this whole place... Rage.

In this light I decide the piss is a good idea. Squatting mid living room I move one foot then the other creating a warm liquid trail on the carpet. It smells like buttered popcorn. A large hiking backpack and a heavy black wool p-coat have the closet to themselves. I snag both. Clothes into the pack wrapped around my computer. Toss the bloody bedroom newspapers along with the black bags into the communal dumpsters overflowing. These filthy metal hulks have an aura of broken plastic toys. I turn my back on them and walk through the parking lot towards Sherry Rd.



I take two buses to Capone's pawn shop. The bell tinkles overhead. Capone has a bouquet of samurai swords in one arm and is placing them on display behind the counter. He glances back then goes about the business of sword placement.

"Miss Vanessa. Haven't seen ya near two weeks. How's life?"

"Sorry about that. I was under the weather and focused on online sales for a bit. I stopped in to inform you I may be leaving town soon."

"Sad to hear it. You weren't really here long. Never got to come by for one of my shindigs." Capone finished putting away the swords, stalked into the back and came back out with a box of watches. He unlocked his glass display counter. The watches lined up diagonally pushing a pair of binoculars down to a lower shelf.

"That's not really my thing but thank you for the offer. You wouldn't want an eye sore like me around anyway."

"Nonsense. You're good people. Speaking of which..."

Alan and the poker beauty walk out from the back. The woman grabs his ass which makes him jump. They say goodbye to Capone and Alan wraps his arms around the woman as they trip together through the front door. The man looks familiar to Vanessa but she can't remember why. She stares after them thinking. Capone slides the counter shut hitting the brakes on her thought train. "You may have liked Alan, he's a bit odd as well. Him and Felicia are regulars. Anyways, I'm guessing you didn't stop by just to tell me you're leaving. You got some stuff to unload?"

"When I first heard they call you Capone I rolled my eyes, but you keep giving me reasons to accept it. Yeah, I got a bedroom full of merchandise, mostly electronics. Phones and mp3s. Some appliances, and a few other odds and ends. If you can handle transport I'll give you my whole stock for two thousand."

"You run into some trouble or somethin'?"

"No more than usual. I just prefer to travel light."

"I want to see the goods before I settle on a price but we can work something out."

Just then the memory surfaced. That was the guy in the diner! With the crying girl. He must have left before I came back. That means he's seen my face, my real face. And with the credit card fiasco and with how I look he's bound to remember me if the authorities ask. I turn and dash out of the door.

"Hey! Where ya goin'?"

"Sorry, I'll come back tomorrow!"

The couple is nowhere in sight, but their smell lingers. I got just enough nose left to keep the trail. The next meal is taken care of.

Alan awakes with a slender, pale forearm across his hairy pecs. He lifts the arm away slowly pulling the sheet off his body an inch and shimmying out of bed. Exploring the right pocket of his paint splotted jeans Alan retrieves his cell phone. Six missed calls from an unknown number and a voicemail. He dials for voicemail and listens.

"Mr. DuPont, this is Detective Lupine. I'd like to ask a few questions about an incident on..." Alan hangs up.

Oh shit, the bitch went to the cops. Guess I'll have to lay low here as long as possible.

His poker beauty groans within sleep and rolls away from him onto her side. Baby feet tattooed into her left shoulder blade, a drab green shape of indistinct shading. A path of four purple bruises extends below the tattoo traversing the ribs. The other side has a matching set caused by his fingertips digging in. Bruises dot his chest from her latching on with teeth. Alan frowns his contentedness. This one might just be as crazy as I am. Calloused hands notice nothing of softness as they ski a creamy, bruised hillside. The girl brushes his hand away with an elbowing motion her body determined to keep her mind in dreams. Maybe one part of the mind protecting another. The past couple days had blurred in his head. He remembered the first day when they met at Capone's and he got her number. Then that night they had met back there and bet on kickboxing

matches. Beer flowed into his cup, then down the gullet. At some point...tequila shots. Then memory loses distinction. That was two, three days ago. They came back to her place with a case of beer and a bottle of gin. The bed, the bathroom, the fridge were the only things he'd seen since then. Alan pulled a scraggly blanket up to the poker beauty's shoulder and searched for his pants. He stepped between dissected corpses of past outfits. A metallic blue electric guitar leaned beside the door to the laundry room. A coffee table book about Stonehenge lay on the ground with the empty bottle of gin and three shot glasses next to it. Who was the third one for? Around the book: a semicircle of beanbag chairs facing a TV. He frowned at all these, and at all the pictures of sisters, brothers, parties, vacations, birthdays; all those times deserving remembrance void of any boyfriend or husband. Alan's face held ultimate distaste for his lucky new beginning. Inside, hopeful. Outside, weathered and sour.

The pants splayed their legs on the kitchen floor with his underwear still inside them. He put them on. He sat down on one of the bean bags and inspected the bottle and glasses for any traces. A lump in his back pocket was uncomfortable. His wallet. Inside he was surprised to find a substantial cache. Upon counting it came out to four hundred and thirty-two dollars. This revelation made the booze no longer necessary. He settled back into the leather squish and closed his eyes.

Sounds of kitchen industry awoke him.

"Heh heh, I came out here to find my pants and must've fallen asleep again."

The woman peaks from the kitchen wrapped in a blanket, "Well I'll be! When you weren't in bed I expect you had run off. That case you want some coffee?"

"Sure." Alan approaches her from behind and rakes fingernails down the back of her neck. He bites on the meat of her shoulder.

She moans and wriggles back against him, "Shuggah don't start with that again. I gotta get to work in an hour."

He frowns and moves back to lean against the opposite counter.

"Don't be upset darlin'. You can stay here if you want. I got soup in the cabinet up there and I'll come back as soon as I'm off."

"I ain't upset. I'm just a bit different. My mom always said that inside me love had been reversed. If you aren't a 'fraidy bitch and run away then you'll understand after a while."

An unidentifiable darkness came into her eyes. The soft contrast between her pale skin and dark hair sharpened giving her a corpselike aspect. Although she didn't look angry Alan felt a spike of fear.

"Nothing frightens me anymore shugh. Least of all men like you."

"Far as I know there aren't any men exactly like me."

She tilts her head and peers at him for a second. "Most men are like you. They just fool their own heads into thinkin' they ain't."

Tonight I planned for the change to happen near the place the diner guy is staying. In the last few weeks he hadn't gone to the police, but eventually they will come to him. The woman he shacked up with lived near the diner in a small group of houses beside a shipping depot for car parts. Still relatively isolated.

Blue tarp crinkles a stiff paper melody as the pain sets in. It starts in the jaw, gums pull away from teeth that burn and work their way out of the bone. Mandible stretches gradually. My whole face is a fuchsia balloon, with an alien inside warping its elastic prison. Rain trickles down pine needles without conviction. The drops accumulate and make the tarp slick. Creases are valleys, and wrinkles are mountain ranges—shifting with my toss and turn, flooding and rising again.

The molten orange orb drops away and its silvery rival shines triumphant by the time shape returns to my extremities. Splits alleviated by the marshy tarp. Normal teeth scattered in the pink puddles; canine ones emerge. Extending claws shred the tarp, another \$16.79 destroyed. Vocal cords loosen into deep gravel anger. Then, I'm the predator once again. I stalk out of the small grove of pines and sniff.

Traveling scents act as menus. Pockets of pungent cologne and body lotion. Burnt coffee, exhaust,

and sweat. French fries. Baby wipes. The whole town leeched away, molecule by molecule on leisurely northwest winds. I head towards an area represented by cut grass, cedar siding, garbage, and the unmistakable musk of diner guy.

Trees give way to shrubs, which are stopped outright by asphalt. Dark gray wastelands with stoic, lonely warehouses extend out to the right. To the left, a row of one story houses shine light onto back porches. Backyards portioned with waist high chain link. The sky swirls with extremes. Hordes of clouds in dark cloaks lumber by dropping burst fire rain. Lightning and aliens dance inside. When one passes, the troubled blue takes over allowing only the strongest stars to shine through. The moon is full but remains a devout Muslim behind its cloud sari. Despite the floating moisture behemoths the night is bright, with the steely blue-gray atmosphere of mushroom trips. Beetles crawl in through the fence and eventually back out again. The house I'm looking for is the second in from the edge of warehouseland.

The rain has softened the battered lawn into a marsh. Thick, curved toenails sink into the mud. Rusting items sit around the plot beside the wire fence border. Tonka trucks, a charcoal barbecue, a 1981 Buick. Five plastic chairs stacked next to the back door. Along the edges the grass survives but most of the lawn is a shallow crater of mud. Demolition derbies happened here. Car one hits car two. Car two hits car one. Repeat. Boxing matches were decided. Steaks and hot dogs carried on paper plates from grill to chair, then back for seconds. Repeat. Nightcrawlers bask in the soggy coliseum. Tire tracks large and small crisscross each other. Footprints of sex fiends, and teenagers, and aunts, and policemen now filled as puddles.

On one side of the lawn an ancient cherry tree sips through its roots. Beneath it where the grass lives one could still see pits from years before. Cherries hang like drops of unoxygenated blood. Its fruit clog the gutter but where the fruit fell into the crater no one can tell. They are already swallowed. The trunk is dark gray with bark that seems to be attempting escape. On the branches brown, knobby elbows denote past injuries and buds to come. The Buick sits in the back of the marshland, hood wide open yawning. Cedar siding mixes with engine grease creating the new Tommy Hilfiger cologne. Sitting at the edge this smell mixes with rust and grass-next year's fragrance.

Having not yet partaken tonight my control is strong enough to wrap my long, hideous fingers around the back door knob and turn it.

Inside, electric guitars and bass drums fill every inch with heavy vibrations. The only life in the kitchen is growing in the stagnant dishes littering the sink, counter, and circular dinner table. Two cabinets are open displaying a can of Dinty Moore beef stew, and two shot glasses.

A woman's voice, not in the music but present says, ". . .conjoin our souls with the dark nature." Carpet invites my padded feet onto it down a short hallway that opens into the living room. Five red candles burn in a circle around four naked teenagers, two girls, two boys. Their hands and mouths move freely among the group, to all parts of the body. Furniture hugs the walls, and the dimples their normal position created are visible outside the candle ring. A boy slips a finger inside a girl and she leans back, moans. Above them all is a woman clad in a black silk bathrobe. Right arm extended holds a gray and white splotched cat by the scruff. Its skinny as a POW and looks recently dunked in water. Her other hand brandishes a plastic handled filet knife.

The same voice, coming from this woman continues, "Release us from false morality. Give us the strength to Do What We Will." Emphasis on the last words, then here she bows her head and drags the blade vertically down the cat's belly. The feline screams and struggles in her grip, intestines poke out the slit and thick, red blood flows out. She walks around the circle dribbling the liquid on the teens who are undulating on top of one another, smearing the blood with their tongues.

My eyes dilate fully becoming all pupil. Both hands flat against each side of the hall dig five holes in the cheap, fake wood paneling. Stomach muscles grow slack and my guts seem to drop away like I'm the victim cat that the woman drops into a five-gallon bucket by her electric fireplace. It no longer seems that I have a heart but instead that every muscle I have contracts and loosens spreading the deep thump through my legs raking up carpet confetti, and arms tearing away chunks of paneling,

into my brain flash frozen by the violence. I have become a heart.

I rush the room. The woman in the robe jumps and her robe falls open. Pierced nipples, healthy layer of tummy fat, a horizontal scar beneath her belly button. I rake at her breasts attempting to remove the piercings. She puts her arms in the way and falls into the pile of followers. Bite, rip, bite. I get mouthfuls of adipose tissue and skin. The blood hides a chemical zang taste. Opening up the other bodies I find that same clinical smell in their system.

Claws slice through tattoo and the ink swirls into the blood. Color intensifies in waves. The red of the blood and meat sing into my eyes while the bland hues of the carpet, and walls, and furniture fade into grays. My nerves, already strung taught as piano wire are strummed as I tear through one girl's tendo calcaneus. Her calf muscle breaks free on one side and bunches up by her knee and I take it whole with a single chomp. Flailing free from the group one guy wobbles toward the door. I pounce. He bounces off the window into my claws. I pick him up and gnash at his deltoids. Squeeze my fingers through three layers of stomach muscle.

Toss the body. Another crawls toward kitchen. Gouge through hamstrings, triceps, latissimus dorsai. The meat machine she inhabits no longer functions. Whimpers. Eat back muscles. Whimpers stop. As I eat I am fulfilled. I do not get to have a stable home. Career ambitions are not an option. In this society I have no place but to thin the herd. Keep my belly full. By killing if I need to. The only law that's older than the book.

Whole body thumps against the empty space around it. The walls churn in spirals like the tattoo ink blood. Thinking this I look down at the prey feebly living and they mold down into the floor. I wonder how long I've been standing here. My feet root to the ground and no longer grow fur but carpet fiber. We are all one; predator and prey, saints and monsters. Since my killing carries no hate I sense the direct life-death-life tapestry and my part in its construction.

Damn, whatever they took has me deep in its grasp.

The door opens. The man from the diner steps in and shuts the door. His lips pull back and reveal his teeth. He speaks but all I hear is growling. He advances slowly. As he walks I realize he isn't a man. Fur thick as mine poked out from his shirt. Another monster, like me, threatening facial expression, a rival. Direct eye contact, more growling. I'm back inside myself, encapsulated. Uprooted from the world I feel a sudden fear and exhilaration.

All alone in my tortured frame again.

Survive.

I lunge.

"You aren't ready to see this side of me," Felicia said.

She was naked in her silk bathrobe and the inference of taut nipple beneath the fabric compelled him to punch her teeth, but he didn't. Alan figured she was trying to protect him from a too girly pastime. Then the kids came in, dropped tired backpacks and slipped a small square of paper on their tongues. The damn things might be sixteen. Not going through that hell again.

"Look, just give me a hint. You should know by now that I don't scare easy."

"It's not about scaring you shuggah. Not exactly. I just need to work you slowly into this part of my life. I don't want to lose you. Please just trust me."

"Let me borrow the car then."

Out to the car, he jumped in and drove to a convenience store. Fluorescent lights created a boxed piece of daytime lined with hanging, colorful bags of licorice, and peanuts, and gum. Alan selects a 40 of Old English, nacho cheese corn chips, and a Maxim. Looking again at the cover of his mag, a skinny brunette holding a white sheet to her half open lips effectively concealing what clothes are not, he snags a couple napkins from the microwave area. He pays and takes the brown crinkly bag back to Felicia's driveway. Just in case she changes her mind.

The curtains are thin, dark green. Through them float fluid shadows in candlelight, what Alan perceives as sensual stroking, and the playful flicker. He swigs the cold beer and fortifies his attention on an article about an Austrian man who is attempting to invent robotic bartenders. Nude

girl on the cover returns on the next page wearing a jacket with no shirt but holding the zippers barely over the center of each breast, short skirt, and fishnet leggings. Alan goes for the napkins. As his zipper parts at the top a massive roar explodes inside the house. The sound finds tiny, shrill screams and swallows them like impatient quicksand. Alan watched the flowing ghosts behind the curtain change into something loving. Rapid, savage movements. Loud thuds as body met furniture or wall. Entranced like a yokel staring up the beam of light dragging him into the sky, Alan steps slowly from the car and towards the window. Something smacked against the curtain, Alan twitched almost slipping in the squishy lawn. Whatever hit left a dark spot on the cloth, a darkness that slowly spreads down.

Alan grabbed the doorknob with unconscious force, unable to turn it and unable to let go. Looking down he was surprised that the knob didn't collapse in his grip. Resisting his instinct for cowardice he opens the door. As gap between door and frame expanded a massacre unveiled. Three red candles observed a human body covered in fur with the hands, feet, and head of a wolf tearing meat from a pile of bodies. Lungs and intestines were scattered about—apparently unsatisfactory. The beast tugged on a deltoid still attached to a teenage boy's clavicle. His blank face jiggled on every jerk. Finally teeth sank through and the wolf head looked up at Alan.

Two wires deep inside Alan connected. All his life feeling a monster inside him, one that whispered: love is violence. All the pain he had caused. The crush of guilt afterwards. Now he had found someone more like himself than he thought he would ever find. For the first time in his life he smiled out of happiness.

"I love you Felicia," Alan said, holding his arms out. He walked towards the beast. It growled and tossed the boy's body behind. "We're the same honey. You don't have to hide this from me. We can be monsters together."

The wolf launched over the mess of human, knocking Alan to his back.


"We can be together, I'll help you. It'll be you and me, forever."

Alan's skin peeled from his stomach and thighs at the behest of claws. The beast bit onto his ribs, bending the floaters and tweaking his diaphragm. He reached up and gently rubbed one of the creature's ears between his thumb and forefingers. The smile was still on his face.

"So soft," he said. "So soft."

[Back to top.](#)

0

 Send to Kindle

- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Tumblr](#)