

GIRLMEAT



THREE SHORT STORIES
ABOUT THE BODY

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THE DOLLMAKER'S DAUGHTER

The Dollmaker had no children. He had never married, too busy with his work and much too shy to do anything but look at the fairer sex from afar. All dedication he might have given to a wife, or to a son, or daughter, he instead turned to mastering his craft.

He learned to carve hands so delicate the fingers were almost translucent, resin eyes that sparkled with laughter, the curve of a cheekbone so softly sloped you could almost feel the give of the skin. When he discovered mechanisms of clockwork from a Paduan trader passing through to Vienna, he felt like he had learned the secret to life's blood. A copper cog and wire, positioned correctly, could allow one of his sculpted figures to walk softly, or play the piano, or draw a picture on a writing desk.

His storefront was once a butcher's shop, when he inherited it from his father. He sold his creations in neat shelves that once displayed smoked pork and dried sausages and plucked birds. Now they display pretty figures in finely sewn dresses lined up in the window and along each wall of the shop. It was popular amongst wealthy ladies who wanted to purchase or commission fine gifts for their daughters or granddaughters, although the remaining metal hooks on the ceiling and the rust of the painted-over sign often scared away children who came to peer in the windows from the street.

The Dollmaker built his finest creation over the course of a single winter. Smooth porcelain painted with delicate flowers that spanned elbow to shoulder and hip to knee. Lips and cheeks dusted with pink, and large dark eyes framed by horse hair lashes— flecks of gold leaf in the resin that made them sparkle in the light. He paid the girl who did the cleaning in the shop

fifteen forint for the long braid of her hair, and used a silver needle to plug individual strands into the doll's skull until it had a full head of auburn waves. He strung wires of copper, silver, and gold through its limbs like sinew, and pinned a fine metal disc and comb into its belly from a Rachhausen music box.

When it was done, the doll was nearly as tall as the Dollmaker. It had a pleasant, mellow expression, a thin, androgynous form that looked suitably girlish when dressed in its elaborate costume of Valenciennes lace. The mechanisms in its arms and chest allowed it to play the violin and to turn its head from side to side. The Dollmaker placed it in the front display window just as spring bloomed. People who hadn't noticed the doll at all would often turn their heads, feeling someone was watching them. Children began to give the shop an even wider berth.

#

The doll liked to look out over the main street at night.

During the day, the city's occupants trod the streets— rushing to work, browsing the shops, selling their goods and dragging themselves home at the end of the day. It was vibrant and exciting, but so many people passing by its window made the doll feel stared at and self-conscious. Conversely, it was often the ones who didn't stare that it wanted to look at more closely. At night, it could watch the little birds and dormice too shy to congregate on the streets during the day, scampering around the ornamental trees and the rooftops of the other shops. Sometimes, after the Dollmaker went to sleep, it tapped its fingers against the glass and tried to recreate the tune that the man with the cart of roast nuts whistled every morning.

The doll had several companions in the window, which it privately thought of as its elder sisters. There was the sister with long dark hair, and the many layered ruby dress and little buckled black shoes. She came up to the doll's knee, and had a somber expression. There was

also the sister with the enormous yellow bonnet, and the babydoll sister who had no hair and no legs and was made from soft material everywhere but her head and her hands. The doll also watched them, when customers came in and picked them up, played with their hair, dressed and undressed them, and occasionally bought one of them to take away to their homes.

When the man came to the window, it was night.

When the doll first saw him, he was carrying an umbrella to keep off the summer rain, pale against the night, with a neat swoop of black hair styled away from his face and a black suit that glittered like the rainwater with silver stitching on each cuff and hem. It was beautiful, neat and dark, and so was he. The doll peered at him curiously, watching the way his suit moved as he walked, and suddenly those dark eyes were looking back at it.

The man stopped, and crossed the street to approach the window. He dropped his umbrella, and looked up at the doll from up close. The doll held very still and watched as the man's unhappy expression slowly morphed into a wide smile. It made his whole face incredibly handsome. The doll smiled back, and hoped it was half as pretty.

The man raised a gloved hand to the glass, which the doll mirrored. They touched, through the glass, like putting their hands together for a dance.

#

The man was called Volkov, and he was the richest man in the city. But the Dollmaker did not part easily with his finest creation.

"I never meant to put it up for sale," said the Dollmaker. "It's a showpiece, you see— my masterpiece! Mechanical— well, you've seen—"

"Yes," said Volkov. "It's marvelous, the way she moves."

"So you can see why I'm uninterested in selling it, then."

The man, Volkov, smiled his handsome smile again. He did understand, he said. “It’s just,” he said, “that she looks just like my wife. My Catherine, she had hair that was just like that, and her eyes... It’s like looking into the past. Like she’s come back to life. Like I can...have her again.”

“Well,” the Dollmaker said. And then Volkov offered him a sum of money that allowed him to take the doll home that very day.

#

Volkov lived in a large manor at the edge of the city. It was the only home the doll had ever seen besides the apartments above the stores on the street where the Dollmaker’s shop resided. When he brought it home, he tried to pick it up to carry it over the doorstep, but it was too heavy.

Volkov had maids and a gardener and a cook and an assistant cook who also lived in the house, and he called them all into the front hall to meet the doll.

“She’ll be staying with us from now on,” he said, ushering the doll towards the three maids. “Please make her feel at home.”

The doll was led by the maids to a set of beautiful rooms; there was a balcony with rose vines creeping up the wrought iron rail, a large bed and a wooden vanity with a large silver mirror. When they entered white sheets covered all of the furniture, which the maids took away and then dusted around.

The doll slid open the balcony door. The sun was setting outside, and there was birdsong being carried by the wind. The roses were vibrant red. There was more red, too, the doll saw when it leaned over the edge of the iron rail and looked down at the stone courtyard below— a smear of crimson, like dried roses, against the cobblestones. The courtyard itself looked

overgrown, the gate and fence both rusted, the flowers untended. One of the maids came out quickly to grab the doll by its waist and pull it back inside.

The next day, the gardener came into its room and attached a heavy lock to the balcony door, so it could not look outside again.

#

The doll spent a great deal of time wandering the manor house. Volkov was often busy, or closed in his office, or out of the house entirely. The staff did not speak to it unless Volkov told them to.

There was a portrait of a woman in the main hall. She had cascading auburn hair and large eyes with dark eyelashes, and was wearing a fine blue dress that drew out the red in her hair and cheeks. The doll looked down at the dress it was wearing, which the maids had dressed it in that morning, and found it was the same one.

Volkov liked to dress the doll up. He often came to its rooms with fabric and the local tailor, or left dresses for it to wear. One day, when it had been kept in his home for a few weeks, he called in a new seamstress and had the doll stand still, unclothed, in the center of its rooms where there was a little raised platform in front of a large mirror.

This seamstress was older, with a pinched face, and she carried a large leather bag. While the doll posed, perfectly still, Volkov directed its limbs into his preferred pose, hands clasped delicately, chin down. The seamstress took out a set of silver pins, and pulled on a pair of slim leather gloves.

Volkov was standing close enough to touch, today wearing a pale chocolate colored suit with a teal silk shirt underneath, tie pin and cufflinks polished gold. The doll reached out a hand to tug at his cuff, running its fingers over the fabric. It wanted to dress like that.

Volkov did not respond to it except to put its hand back in place, and instead turned his attention to the seamstress and pointed at several places on the doll's porcelain shell. "Here, here, and here."

The seamstress nodded, then reached into her leather bag and pulled out rounds of something pretty, mottled pink and red with globs of white on the edges. They looked wet, and weighty. She lifted each of them to the doll's chest, and one by one pinned them in place with the silver pins that she hammered into the porcelain with a little rubber mallet, and moved on to its hips and back.

"Good," Volkov said, when the seamstress was done and closing the leather gloves into the leather bag. He paid her in gold. "You look good, darling."

The doll could not frown and did not need to fidget, but it felt the urge to do both. The yielding weight of the pink material bounced uncomfortably when it walked up and down the stairs, and weighed it down even when it barely lifted a limb. But Volkov's eyes gleamed when he looked at it.

#

Volkov often asked the doll to come to him at night.

His own rooms were gloomier than the doll's, furnished with darker wood and finer, less colorful fabrics. He had a study elsewhere in the house, but there was a large desk and set of armchairs in his private rooms as well, and he sometimes positioned the doll on one of these, or sat it atop the desk, or on his bed.

One night he brought the doll to his bed, and tugged at it until they were both half-laying across the bed spread. He brought out two bottles and set them on the bedside table— one wine, and the other a dusty bottle with a stopper that was filled with a similar red liquid. He poured

himself a glass of wine, twisting the bottle to avoid spilling a drop on the bedspread, and did the same with the other bottle. The doll admired the elegant movement of his wrist. He pressed the other glass into the doll's hands.

“Have a drink, darling,” he said.

The doll watched the way he sipped his own wine, and hesitantly it brought the glass to its ceramic lips. It watched the way he tilted the glass, the way his throat bobbed, and tried to imitate the motion without a tongue, or a proper throat. Red liquid spilled out from the hinges in its jaw. It tried to catch the drops with its fingers, and couldn't.

“Here,” said Volkov, and dabbed away the liquid with a cloth. “Try again.”

The doll drank more from one glass, and then another. At first it all spilled out and Volkov had to wipe it away, but eventually it began to slide down the doll's throat the way it did Volkov's. Sensation followed it, sharp and strange. It reminded the doll of metal, the sparks of the soldering iron in the Dollmaker's workshop.

Volkov nursed the same glass of wine as the night went on, although he poured cup after cup for the doll from the other bottle. Eventually the doll felt fuzzy and distant, and overfull of liquid, like it would slosh out through every crack and joint of its shell if it didn't move carefully. When at last Volkov finished his single glass and reached for the bottle of wine, the doll boldly reached out before he could grasp the neck and took it instead. It poured for him, imitated the twist of the bottle, and looked up at him proudly when it was done.

Volkov took the glass and smiled.

#

Even a master like the Dollmaker couldn't create a creature as seamless as a human being out of porcelain and metal alone. The doll had uncovered joints and seams that allowed it

articulated movement— its knees and wrists and ankles, its neck and jaw, and three on every finger.

The doll was sitting in the piano room. The house was dark. When it moved for the first time in some hours, it was to lift a hand and watch the way the dawn light streamed in through the trees outside, which dappled against its carapace.

When it did, it noticed something strange. Where the ball joint on its wrist was usually visible, just a little of the wire underneath the ceramic, there was instead a thin layer of filmy material. The doll poked at it, and felt something it never had before: a strange, shivery tingle. It poked the spot again, found it slightly soft and flexible. It ran its fingers over the film, and they felt cool and hard and elicited another little rush of sensation. The other wrist was the same, the joint now only faintly visible underneath the elastic material. When it pressed down hard on it, there was a strange little thrum, rhythmic like the ticking of a clock.

The doll let its hands fall back into its lap and continued to look out at the window as dawn broke and the birds outside began to sing.

#

The portrait of the woman in the main hall was removed. The doll missed it, and spent more time looking out the closed balcony door, and wandering the house when Volkov wasn't home.

#

Volkov held a dinner party, and brought the doll on his arm. His maids dressed it, wrapping it in white and pink silk and pinning up its hair with silver pins, and dabbing rouge onto its hard cheeks and lips.

When it came down the grand stairs, Volkov was waiting in the foyer, dressed all in black. He grinned widely when he saw the doll, turned and cupped its face in his hands.

“You look lovely,” he said, and kissed it on the jaw, on one of the spots where the porcelain had been covered by what the doll had come to realize was soft flesh, the same shade as the woman in the portrait. “These dinners are so boring, I’m glad you’ll be there with me.”

The doll at once felt a conflicting sensation, the joy of being wanted, and the fear of the same. It wrapped its fingers around Volkov’s wrist, feeling the slide of their skin together.

“Just promise me one thing,” said Volkov, drawing its face up with his thumb under its chin. “These people can be a little sensitive, you understand? They don’t like to be troubled or confused. So I need you to make sure you don’t do anything strange tonight. I want them to appreciate you, as I do.”

The doll nodded. It did not understand.

The men arrived as the sun set, five of them all dressed almost as nicely as Volkov did and came up the steps of the house with silver canes and shiny pipes and loud, booming laughter. They all drank from the sparkling crystal bottles that Volkov kept in his study and in the drawing room on little carts, and then filed into the formal dining room where the doll liked to watch dust motes drift near the chandelier. Music played from a phonograph in the corner.

“What a beauty,” one of the men said, smiling at the doll but looking at Volkov, “Volkov, you’ve outdone yourself again.”

Volkov laughed and wrapped his arm around the doll’s waist, pulling it to his side, and then all of them took seats at the table and the men began to chat and joke.

“Where did you two meet?” another man asked, gesturing between Volkov and the doll with a silver butter knife.

“Oh, you know,” said Volkov, smiling slyly. “It—“

The doll leaned forward to look at the man, reaching over to touch Volkov’s side. It was eager to hear the story of its acquisition.

“— was in one of those little shops, down in town. A quaint place, she was working the counter, and we met when I came by for a delivery.”

The doll turned to him and frowned, and pushed lightly at his side. It didn’t understand why he was lying. It’s throat clicked.

“Quiet, isn’t she?” the man asked.

Volkov laughed and turned to put a hand over the back of the doll’s neck. He winked at the man. “She’s only shy. Never been around so many important men before, have you darling?”

The doll shook its head, and touched him again, insistent. He squeezed the back of its neck, hard, pressing his nails into the new soft parts. It hurt.

Confused, the doll subsided and began to watch the others at the table, ignoring the conversation. Volkov was tense for the rest of dinner, although the other men at the table relaxed back into their conversation and their food. It watched a younger man cut a neat slice of beef, drag it through the dark gravy and potatoes on his plate, and eat it with every appearance of great pleasure. It admired the way his jaw moved as he ate, and watched jealously as he took a sip of dark wine, although the memory of the night with Volkov and the endless cups of red liquid made it feel a little sick.

While Volkov spoke at length about a business venture with the rotund man two seats down from him, the doll reached out a single finger and dabbed it against the side of the carafe of preserves, where a single drop of maroon jam had spilled.

It tried to bring the fingertip to its mouth, but without halting in his speech Volkov reached out and pushed its hand against the table. Censured, the doll stopped moving, and Volkov released its now-lax hand.

It didn't stop the other men at the table from talking to it. The young man with the square jaw leaned over his plate and asked, "Where are you from, miss? Do you like the city?"

The doll pointed in the direction of the city, and nodded.

"A local girl," the young man said. "It must be nice not to be too far from home."

"What's it like staying in this big house, girl?" asked another man, the one seated next to it. "Your husband is a busy man. Are you ever lonely?"

The doll nodded. It was often alone.

The man laughed. His face was very flushed, and sweat beaded along his hairline. When the song playing on the phonograph changed, he stood from his seat and offered the doll his hand.

"We'll see about that. Care to dance?"

Volkov caught the doll's eyes and narrowed his own. He shook his head. The doll understood, but...

It did so many things it wasn't made to do. Dancing, though, that it understood. The clockwork in its limbs was wrought just so for the movements of a waltz, like the little figures in a music box. So it pretended not to see Volkov's unhappy expression and instead it took the man's hand.

The man was not strong enough to lift the doll, but the doll did not make him. It stood smoothly and took the lead, pulling the man flush against it and beginning the steps of the dance.

The man chortled loudly and called it bold, but he followed neatly and by the end he was even more flushed and said he'd need to bow out of another.

The other men at the table seemed to take this acquiescence as a challenge, and one by one they all asked to dance with it. The doll obliged each of them for a song, while Volkov's expression at the head of the table steadily fell.

By the time the doll was allowing the last man to sweep it into an elegant dip, Volkov's eyes had gone flinty. He tapped his fingers against the hard wood of the table and cleared his throat.

"I think," he said, "that's quite enough."

The men subsided and retook their places at the table easily, jostling each other and nodding at the doll and each other. The doll frowned and looked at Volkov. The clockwork metronome that had appeared in its chest of late was ticking faster than usual.

"Now!" Volkov bit out, and the doll retook its seat.

The dinner did not last much longer than that.

Volkov sat silently at the head of the table as his friends filed out of the room. The doll sat to his left, watching as the men said their jovial farewells and took final swigs of the wine or bites of the dishes.

When they were gone, and had been seen out by the staff, Volkov stood and pulled the doll's seat away from the table himself. The doll stood to face him.

Volkov's eyes were narrowed, his mouth set in an unhappy line on his handsome face.

"I thought I told you," he said, "To be good."

In one quick movement, Volkov used his heel to sweep the doll's feet out from under it. The doll was a creation of porcelain and metal, made to play music and to sit neatly, and it was

heavy. It crashed down flat on its back, and there was a resounding crunch of ceramic shattering. The back of the doll's head felt wet. Volkov knelt and straddled it, put a hand over each of its own and pinned it to the ground. His face was a mask of rage, and for the first time there was a shuddering break in his deep, even voice.

"You do not question me," he said. "You do as I say. Didn't I say not to make trouble for me?"

He dug his fingers into the fleshy parts of its wrists. The sensation was unpleasant, the way the skin bent to his pressure and hot sparks shot out from the contact until they hit porcelain and died away.

The doll shook its head side to side. Shards of porcelain dug into the floor.

"You don't touch men besides me," Volkov said, and slapped the doll across the face. It made the doll's neck click and turn to the side, although it did not feel anything. "You don't touch *anyone* besides me. You are mine, my possession, Catherine!"

The doll looked coolly up at the man on top of it. It shook its head again and again, until the movement was almost violent, and made its chest shudder.

Pinned under Volkov's weight, the doll felt its wrists squish and contract. The thump of the too-soft metronome in its chest and the grating of the silver pins in its hips and chest and back propelled a new sensation wrought by this man and this house. Disgust. It was disgusting. It hated the feeling of the meat and the liquid and the rot of this man and of itself.

"Get off," said the doll. The words came out clear, just loud enough to be heard over Volkov's labored breathing, echoing from its chest and its throat and soft mouth. "Now," It said, louder.

Surprised, Volkov wavered. And when he tried to hit it again, the doll freed one of its hands from his grip and struck him, the gesture a perfect copy of his own.

Unlike its own, Volkov's face crunched. It began to leak fluid down onto the doll's neck.

The doll pushed up and rolled Volkov off of itself. He was making a loud sound, which turned into garbled cursing. The doll got to its feet and took one of Volkov's wrists, pulling him up after it. It took one of the large knives from the table, which it had watched the men at dinner use to carve the beef. It looked down at itself and wondered where to start. Volkov whimpered in its grip.

It began by tearing away the top of its dress, which was awkward with Volkov still dangling from one hand and the knife in the other, but it managed. It sawed first at the meat on its chest, scraping away the pink globs until smooth porcelain was revealed, and tugging out the pins. It pulled the pins from its hair while it was at it, and carved off the meat on its hips and back, and then used the tip of the blade to neatly slit each wrist and knuckle and the curve of its jaw until the skin was gone and it regained the full range of movement of its ball-joints.

The red liquid that Volkov had fed it was pouring out in curdled rivers everywhere that it cut. It was drenching it and Volkov both, making its grip on his arm slick, so it pulled him up closer to itself until it was almost cradling him against its chest.

"Here," it said, and opened the carapace of its abdomen with a click. The beating, ticking, soft thing that had grown amidst its gears was there, now exposed and spurting more of the red drink. It dropped the knife and removed the fluttering little thing with only its fingers.

It placed the thing delicately in Volkov's half-broken mouth.

"Eat," it said, and loved the sound of its voice.

When the doll pushed open the door of the Dollmaker's shop, the dollmaker dropped the porcelain leg he was carving. It shattered against the floor.

"Hello," the doll said.

"Good God," the Dollmaker said. "What happened? Your face—"

The doll looked down at itself. It trailed a hand over its cheek and felt where the porcelain had cracked, where a hole had opened revealing the dark cavity beneath its shell. Its dress was ruined. "I would like pants, please," it said.

The Dollmaker got it pants, and a new shirt, and a scarf and hat with a wide brim. It was not nice like Volkov's suits, but it was better than wearing Catherine's blood-stained clothes. The doll stripped in the middle of the shop and put on the new clothes, which were the Dollmaker's old cast offs.

"You have my mother's nose," said the Dollmaker. His hands were trembling. "And my sister's jaw. If I ever had a daughter, I think..."

"I don't," the doll said, "and I'm not."

It went back to the door, but circled back to lean down and kiss each of its sisters in the window on the crowns of their heads before it left.

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KISS ME, SAUSAGE CASING THING

Anette found the dead body in the mud when she stepped onto its chest and her welly punched through its ribcage with a *crunch*.

She didn't scream. Screaming in the woods was as good as sending a homing signal to anything in the area that might be in want of some apparently frail and shrieking thing. The dead were nothing to fear, anyways. What could they do to the living, besides remind them of uncomfortable truths? No, she didn't fear bodies; this was not the first dead thing she had found mummified by the icy water and saltpeter of the wetlands. Although it was the first one she had seen that seemed, still, to be moving. It twitched around her boot, and she frowned, wondering if it was a trick of the water.

She pulled her rubber boot free. It made a low, suction, *shlock* sound and came out in a gush of pink, decaying fluid. The skin of the dead thing fluttered like onion paper around the new gaping hole in its chest, and it let out a low moan. She winced. Despite its being dead, she didn't like treading on it, making it leak. She dipped her fluid-coated boot back into the thick mud, so that the pink mixed with the greens and browns and as such became a sort of clean.

"Well," she said aloud. She looked up. Through the dark tree-branches, the sun was starting to set. The sky was yellow-orange, which made the leaves and boughs even more black than usual. Despite the suggestion of her boots, her legs were mud all over up to her thighs and already caking and cooling now that she wasn't moving. She waded over until she could haul herself up and out of the brown water, treading hard on the slick rotting log of a fallen tree to

make sure she didn't slip. She got to higher ground, free from the threat of water beetles and little biting mites.

"Uuuuhh," the dead thing in the water said. Anette looked at it from her wooden perch.
"Euuuuhh."

Dead and alive, and left to rot alone here. A sad sort of vampire, perhaps. She had once read the first forty pages of *Carmilla*, and wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or excited that her own brush with the supernatural would be far less romantic.

"Honestly," Anette said.

She lifted her backpack out of the mud and put it on the log beside her. Inside, scavenged things clinked together—turquoise glass insulator cups, chipped brown bottles, a softball, some coins, all damp with mud, waiting for the trip home to be cleaned in the kitchen sink. The drip-drip-drip of the pooled water inside followed her when she splashed back down into the morass.

The body was mostly submerged in moss and vegetation. It was the same color as the rotting wood that surrounded it—dark brown and leathery. Anette reached down, around, and pulled it upwards from its silty bindings. Thinking of how easily her boot had crunched through skin and cartilage and bone and goop, she thought it would break apart when she touched it. Instead, the body floated to the surface of the pool.

It had hair, of a sort. Clumping black strands in a thin tangle, wisping off of its dark head. Its features were worn away entirely save an open, gaping mouth which was filled with dirt and water that had settled inside of it over its time in the marsh. Whatever had created a thing like this, it had clearly been long abandoned in the water. It was disgusting, logically, but Anette couldn't find any fear in herself when she looked at it—only pity.

A minnow swam out of that wide mouth when Anette pulled its head above the surface.

Should I call someone? she thought, followed by: *Who could I call?*

Anette had lived alone for years. Her mother called by landline, once a month, and she rarely spoke to anyone else. There were no other homes for miles. The nearest hospital was nearly an hour away, and anyways, what could a doctor do for a corpse, moving or not?

The dead thing gurgled past the sediment, little bubbles rising and drowning. Was it that different from the other things she scavenged from the muck? It was in need of a wash, and a place to dry, and then... she could decide what to do with it from there.

As if the creature sensed her hesitation, it lifted a desiccated hand out of the water.

Anette touched it, surprised that the hand still felt like flesh. Grabbing both its arms, she pulled the body the rest of the way out of the mud. It was heavier than she expected, but not unmanageable, weighing about as much as four grocery bags filled with boxes and bags not bottles.

On the bank, the creature blinked open one eye, brown, a bit bloodshot and watery but curious.

She decided to take it home.

#

Anette's backpack sat out front of the house, drying in the last remnants of evening sun. Anette's dead thing, however, if only because it was so large, needed its own place to dry. The house she lived in was small and had only four rooms: a kitchen, where she cooked and ate, a small bathroom with a tub and shower nozzle that pumped water from the marsh, a sitting room, and a bedroom.

Limited in options and hoping to have the sofa to watch television in the evenings, she dragged the body into her bedroom and laid it out on the bed. It seemed cruel to place it on the floor. On top of her clean check quilt, the body was more person-shaped, if a certain artistic eye was taken to it. Anette decided not to cover it, lest the dead thing believe it was being buried again and truly die. It smeared green and brown slime over the sheets. She grimaced at the sight.

“What a mess,” she muttered. She imagined that the creature’s face might be apologetic. “Don’t worry,” she assured it, and gestured to her coveralls. “I’m coated anyways.”

She stripped out of them by the mirror and dropped them into the wicker hamper at the foot of the bed. The body lifted its head just slightly and she and it observed each other, both bare now and ready to fully examine one another. Anette wiped the remaining bits of leaf litter and mud off her arms and calves and went to shower. She was aware suddenly that she did not feel at all self-conscious with the body.

The water in the shower still smelled like decomposing plant life, even after being filtered in the pipes and bins under the house. It was cold too, and washed away the worst of the grime while leaving new residue behind. Even though it rarely got hot enough to steam in the bathroom, little dark specks of mold still lined each tile of the wall and the grout around the tub, and brownish water stains stared down from the ceiling. These stains didn't bother her any more than her own eyes did, or the eyeless face of her guest

Anette emerged, tracking wet steps over the cottage floor.

“Hhhhhuh, oh,” the dead body greeted her in the bedroom.

She turned off the light, and gave it one last long look. It laid still in the bed, soaking the sheets.

“Goodnight,” she said, and padded into the living room still thinking about the feeling of its paper-thin skin under her hands.

#

The body was a polite houseguest.

During the day, Anette went about her routine as usual. She worked at her computer in the morning, went out to walk and explore the land around her house in the late afternoon, and the evenings she spent with the body.

It was too fragile to move from the bed, so she left it there undisturbed for the most part. Sometimes she spoke to it, hesitantly at first, but soon at great length about whatever crossed her mind. It was freeing to be able to speak without hesitation or shame on any subject, as long and honestly as she wanted to. She talked about her day, her life, anything that crossed her mind. The body was a good listener, silent and attentive.

On the third night since she’d brought it home, when she went to say goodnight to it, something strange stole over her. Rather than retreating to the nest on the couch where she had been sleeping, Anette slipped under the covers with the body. The bedspread was soggy with marshwater. The blanket stuck to the sheets when Anette pulled it up, and it felt heavy and binding over her bare skin when she tugged it up over her shoulders.

It had been so long since she had shared her bed with anyone. She had missed the feeling of being close with another person. The bed was just big enough for them to lay there together, breaths apart.

“Is this alright?” she whispered.

The body could not respond. But, as she lay, counting her own breaths, something shifted on the bed spread. The body reached out its fragile hand towards her. She caught it with her own, and fell asleep clasping its hand to her chest.

#

Anette started to shower twice a day; once at night to wash away the mud from her ventures through the wetlands and vernal pools, and once in the morning to wash away the fluids that the body leaked into her bed in the night.

When it became solid enough to move, she started out dragging them both into the tub and laying them both down under the cool spray. It was for the first time very good that the water came out so cold, because she discovered hot water spread the body's smell of rotting through the whole house on steam clouds and it was difficult to air out when it was so wet outside too. Cold water seemed to help the body find its shape, stripping away the strip-stitch papery exterior of the thing tiny bit by bit until a wet and red and healthier sort of casing became visible. Anette discovered that if she washed its limbs carefully, let her palms run over the patches of skin without using her nails, and then set it out in the sun in the afternoons, the pink skin would dry and seal by nightfall. Gradually, their bed began to dry.

When a week had passed, the body began to stand on stick-thin and shaky legs when they showered. It wrapped its arms around Anette's neck for balance, and she gently swayed them while the water ran over their heads and backs. Once, the body reached up and pulled so hard on Anette's hair that it bent her head back and water filled her eyes and nose. After that, she started to pour her castile soap over both their heads and massage it into the corpse's scalp the same way she did her own. Slowly, its stringy black hair began to grow while thick disks of scalp and skull shards fell away down the drain. Conveniently, this required very little additional cleaning as she

was already so used to declogging the drains of her home from rotting leaves and mud and swamp-plant clumps. Peeling skin was barely an additional hardship.

The body didn't accompany Anette on her outings to the marsh. She missed its company during those times, and she was glad when it did join her for her other work. She sat at the little desk in her sitting room sorting through commissions and revisions, and the body slumped against her legs and put its head on her thigh. No one had ever sat with her while she worked before. When its eyes began to re-emerge, little black jelly-lights, it peered up at her face rather than at the clumsy designs on her clunky desktop.

It was quickly becoming the closest companion Anette had ever had. She had never before had someone to share mornings and evenings with, to touch casually and affectionately, to come back to when she left the house and to miss when she was gone.

#

The body was hungry, but did not eat. Anette offered it canned broths and raw meats and bites of boxed macaroni and cheese and roots foraged in the forest, and it refused them all.

When Anette put her own mouth to the dead thing's skin, it was evening and the air outside was warm. She'd taken to leaving fans on and windows closed and leaving the freezer in the kitchen and in the cellar open to cool the house, headless of how this made melting brown liquid pool in the bottoms of both. They were sitting on the floor just inside the doorway of the cottage, with the door open to feel the night air. The body was leaned up against her, its head resting on her shoulder under her chin, its own shoulders digging in with new pressure against her sternum.

The body was more pink than brown-green now, and only raw and wet on the pads of its palms and feet and the sensitive spots under the chin and in the armpits and the joints of the

groin. Its hair was getting softer, fuller, and although its eyes were always closed now to protect their healing skin Anette knew there was white creeping into the black pebbles under its eyelids. Anette was whittling with a good piece of petrified wood she pulled from the mud two days before, and the body didn't move away from the wood shavings that fell onto its lap and breasts.

Anette leaned down and pressed her lips softly to the top of its head. The body's skin was hot, and its hair was the texture of wet straw. She inhaled, and the warm night air mixed with raw wood and raw wounds and earthy moss.

The body put its hands to the wooden floor and pushed itself up, into her mouth. It ran its nose under her jaw. It let its weight fall onto her, and although it was still light and brittle as a cat-tail stem she let it push her over and onto the cold wood planks. It opened its eyes just a sliver, and although it had no pupil any more than it did an iris, Anette knew it was looking at her. Anette knew it was, for the first time, hungry for something.

She thought of the giant water beetle, which sometimes played dead in the silt of vernal pools to lure in prey. She thought of the sticky, spiny sundew plants which caught the little bugs which flew and skimmed over water and held them until they should be digested. She brought her face up, fast and hard, and grasped onto the body's mouth with her own. She choked on the marsh water that gushed out and didn't release, swallowing it down so she could remain another moment in communion with this dead, rotting thing.

Its body was soft and warm and weighty over hers. Its back curved pleasantly under her hands. Its chest pressed against her own. Its long black hair whispered over Anette's neck. Its lips were spongy, porous. It ran a hand over her face, soft and wet. It touched without nails, the same way Anette scrubbed at its skin with eucalyptus soap twice a day.

“Beautiful,” it said melodiously and bit down, and tore a chunk of her lip and cheek away with its teeth.

Anette lay still, and so did the body above her. She reached a free hand up and touched the new, gaping place on her cheek. Her hand came away slick with blood.

She started to cry. She took rapid, shaky, inhalations that brought in very little oxygen, but also very little scent of rot. She gulped more air and let it out as a long whine. Salty tears bubbled up from the pool inside her and she let her head fall back and slam into the floor and she cried with hard, body-shaking sobs. Above her, the body leaked green water out of its mouth and onto her chest and the floor.

Anette pushed the body off. It was easy to get it off her but its pink skin came apart meltingly like wet paper. Anette did not stop to see in what way it had been again wounded. She ran through the door in the kitchen, down the steep wooden stairs, and felt her bare feet hit the soft, exposed dirt of the cellar.

She lay down in the dirt, throwing herself to the driest spot in the center of the room. She didn't pause long enough to crouch or kneel. She let the dust soak up and into the places the body had touched and where she had touched herself with mire-wet hands. She laid down on her back and folded her hands over her chest, hugging herself the way a corpse does in its coffin, if it is lucky enough to rest in one.

Anette looked up at the wooden beams above her, and saw more dark mold in the beams and bedrock. The house was rotting from the ground up. She thought of Leviticus, and cleansing something by removing every stone of it, and of how something which sleeps in a place infected by decay is made unclean by entering there. She lay still, and quiet, and tried to become dry.

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Approx. 2800 words

ASCENSION

AN END TO SICKNESS, blared the tram sign, vivid blue and purple on soft yellow, transmitting a little jingle into Lapis' earbuds. She tapped at them, disappointed that the ad-blocker her cousin installed wasn't working. The tram stopped, and she swayed along with the other passengers as a few people stepped off.

SLICE OUT YOUR DISGUSTING FLESH AND REPLACE IT WITH THE DIVINE BEAUTY OF THE MACHINE, the sign said, and played an animation of a cartoon woman dumping pills in the trash. Lapis snorted.

SIGN UP FOR A FREE TRIAL NOW!

It was her stop. Lapis fiddled with her watch and tried to drown out the ad's thrumming instrumentals with her own music.

ASCENSION, the ad concluded. Below the text was the pulsing blue point of a data-beacon. The doors of the tram opened, and Lapis pushed around the other passengers to reach the door. Half-heartedly, she tapped her watch against the beacon as she shuffled off and tried to keep the tube of her ox-pac from getting tangled with someone else's backpack.

#

The doors of the MEDCOXP office swished as they opened, and cool filtered air breezed out into the street. The change in temperature made her breathing hitch. She clicked the settings on her ox-pac up two notches and settled into one of the chairs in the waiting room. The far wall was playing news at one end of the glass display, and some sort of documentary on the other

side, with ads in between. She tuned her earbuds into the documentary while she waited, and idly watched ads for other MEDCOXP products flash by the overlay.

There was a soft clatter, and she looked away from the ad and the digital canyon-landscape to see a woman picking up an e-pad off the floor. She had curious prosthetics on one arm, going all the way up to her neck and disappearing under her shirt— a fully articulated mechanical replacement, soft gray and black and purple, with clear segments around the joints. The woman saw her looking and smiled.

“Sorry,” she said, “I’m still getting used to it.” She picked the pad back up with care in her mechanical hand.

“No, I didn’t mean to stare,” Lapis said. “I’m sorry, how long has it been?”

The woman’s smile grew. “Oh, no! There was no accident. Actually, this is the cure.” She held out the mechanical arm, flexed it, and they both watched the smooth way it moved. “I’m a pianist. I’ve had horrible carpal tunnel and back pain for years. My doctor told me I should just quit, but I couldn’t do that. And now I won’t have to! It’s just the arm and shoulder for now, but I want my whole back done next.”

“Wow,” Lapis said, for lack of anything else to say, “That’s amazing.”

“Mhm!” the woman said. “And the best part is, it costs barely anything. Everything at MEDCOXP is expensive, and my insurance wasn’t going to cover surgery. Honestly, I hope I never have to come here again. This is the last appointment I’m making.” She waved her mechanical hand around the office.

Lapis frowned. “How can it be that cheap?”

“Look, I’ll give you a code!” the woman said. “There’s this whole online system, and you just pay for the starting materials. Once you’ve gotten into the program you’ll even get your own

discounts for inviting other people. Here, it'll give you an extra twenty percent off if you go all in."

She held out her pad to Lapis' bracelet without waiting for an answer, and Lapis felt the buzz of the data transfer against her skin.

An automated voice said an unfamiliar name over the waiting room speakers. The woman rose, and waved goodbye with her plastic and metal hand.

"Think about it," she said, "you could get out of here too."

The wait was long, and boring. Eventually, the same voice called her name, and a stout white robot came to lead her into the back. It weighed her, took her blood pressure, and delivered her into the care of two identically dressed med-techs.

They made the same recommendations they always made: eat a high fiber, low-fat diet, exercise every day, get some sun. Most importantly, take her pills every day. Use her inhalers twice a day. Be back in six weeks.

After the appointment, she stopped to get a doughnut and a cup of tea, and ate it standing up against the hard plastic counter of the shop. It was soothing. It made her feel sick. She needed to eat less sugar.

#

"What do you *mean* she's out of town?" Lapis asked.

The face on the digital display was bland. "She'll be on vacation till next week, and then it's Labor Day. The earliest she'll be back in the office is the sixth."

"Can't someone else at the office fill it?" she asked. She poked at the display, closing the visual of the receptionist and opening up a web browser. "I've been on the same treatment for years. You can't even get high on it!"

“I’m sorry, only the attending physician is able to sign off on the treatment,” the receptionist said.

“I need it to *breathe*. What am I supposed to do for a week, not breathe?”

“I could give you the number of one of our other offices, there might be someone there who could set you up with a quick appointment?”

Lapis thought of another train ride to *another* MEDCOXP facility and groaned. She closed a chain of recipes she was planning to try and hadn’t. At the end of the line of low fat lasagnas and instructional videos on pureeing your own chickpeas, a cheery blue webpage greeted her with an animated graphic.

ASCENSION, it said, and then, 20% OFF NOW!

Lapis tuned back into the video call on a dial tone, sighed, and closed it. She clicked on INFO on the website, and read.

#

The package that arrived was larger than Lapis expected it to be. She slit open the masking tape and soft packing beads spilled out and over her hands and lap. The whole package had a pleasant, mild smell, like rosemary and sage. She pulled out the parts of the kit one by one and laid them out on her tea-table while the television played a drama on mute.

There was a mint-green box of soft disinfectant-soaked pads, a rose-pink box of opaque plastic pouches that each zipped with a neat seal, three lilac star-shaped cold packs, and a flexible periwinkle plastic case of tools. Three prefilled injectable pens, tongs, and a hand-held laser -cutter with two custom crystal heads with soft rubber grips. A pamphlet fluttered out of the bottom of the box, and she looked over it quickly. She reached out and turned the volume on the

drama up, letting the chatter of the characters on screen fill the apartment with noise as she rose to go and get some towels.

There was something attractive, she thought, about taking a drastic action like this. Normally, anything medical made her squeamish. It made her deeply, uncomfortably aware that her consciousness was extant as long as her body was, and that her body was a fragile thing. This felt different. It was cute, and clean, and it was in her hands. She was entirely in control. It was extreme in a way that sounded cathartic. She had been chipping away little pieces of herself for years with every medication that made her nauseous and dizzy, every outing she had to avoid because her lungs wouldn't draw enough air to support her, every friend she lost because there was always another flare-up keeping her from making plans, every time her heart raced too fast and she wondered if this was it, this was the end. Could ascension be any worse?

NO FUSS, NO MESS, said the little pamphlet in cheery script.

DO AWAY WITH ALL THE BANDAGES AND CREAMS; OUR CUTTERS DON'T DISTURB THE SKIN. But it was better to be prepared, just in case.

She returned to the couch, laid out the towels, and pulled the tea-table over until it was flush with the couch, and all the parts would be in reach.

GATHER SUPPLIES, the first section of the instructions read, with sub-headings like REMOVE, PREPARE, CHECK, and INSPECT.

Lapis pulled off her shirt. She got comfortable on the couch, then laid back and lifted the pamphlet up over her head to read.

PREP THE SITE, the next section was called. It helpfully suggested the best places—spots with lots of muscle or fat. The thighs, the flank, the belly.

Without giving herself time to doubt, but also telling herself she could still back out after this, she swiped an alcohol wipe over the fat around her belly. *I would want this gone anyways*, she thought, and pressed the pen into the skin, and felt the pinch when she clicked the top.

While she waited, she read through the last section of the pamphlet several times. Soon the liquid in the pen had done its job, and her stomach was numb and tingling.

She delicately picked up the laser-cutter in one hand and the tongs in the other. The diaphanous blade of light that emerged from the tip could be adjusted for depth, and she adjusted it to be just as long as a butter knife. When she pinched the skin of her belly with the tongs and slid the blade through, it felt just the same. She watched the way the skin peeled back and away from itself, and although she expected blood there really was none. Just a clean absence of flesh, un-painful. The chunk of meat in the tong's grip was fatty, half white and half red. She squished it idly, and it oozed.

The tongs delivered the chunk into one of the pre-prepared plastic packages neatly. She cracked one of the purple cold-packs, slid it into its own pocket, and sealed the whole thing.

It already had its delivery address neatly stamped on the outside. She kept it in her fridge that night and dropped it off in the mail room on her way to work the next morning.

#

The replacement arrived promptly. It was small, since the bit of meat she'd sent hadn't been very large. It looked a little like a bandage itself, with adhesive sides, and was made of opalescent chrome metal and plastic. She clicked it into place on her stomach, and it filled in the gap perfectly. There was a little note with it that read, THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATION! ONE STEP CLOSER TO *ASCENSION*.

#

After that, it was easy. The replacement part didn't hurt at all, a spot of unfeeling coolness when the rest of her stomach cramped or burned. The process of getting rid of the meat even felt good, ritualistic and cathartic. She now understood that woman, in the waiting room, with her entirely mechanical arms— free from pain, from wear, from overuse or damage.

She tried just meat a few more times before she moved on to anything more vital. It was like instant weight-loss, just slicing off rounds of fat from her stomach, her rear, the soft backs of her thighs, the flabby backs of her arms. As long as she sent back the meat that she was carving away, *ASCENSION* sent her back the mechanical parts. She didn't even have to pay for them— just for the tools of removing it, refills of the numbing injections and cold packs and disinfectant swabs. She felt lighter, with only the weight of thin metal and plastic and none of the fat that made her jiggle when she walked or laughed too vigorously. She bought new pants, a pair of nice jeans that she could now wear without the irritation of her thighs rubbing together.

It was her hands she decided to progress to. The smooth cut of the laser-knife made her think of how much she missed sewing and quilting, hobbies she gave up when the inflammation and stiffness in her hands made doing anything delicate or repetitive painful. The prospect of being able to do these things again, to be able to do them better than before even because she would not have to worry about overuse injuries, was thrilling.

The next time a refill of her supplies arrived in its herbal-scented packaging, she sliced off the pinkie finger of her left hand. It was distressing to lose it for the two days that it took for the replacement to come, but once it did she marveled at the clean movement of the new, mechanical finger. The next month she did her whole left hand, and then her right. For the first time in years, she could draw and sculpt and sew neat, even stitches into soft material, even if she could no longer feel the slide of the fabric under her palms. She sewed a new dress, a

sleeveless one, so she could look at the glimmering sight of her new hands. The next month, she shaved her arms down to the elbow, and was amazingly, wonderfully, free of pain.

#

To have her lungs fixed, she wore the sleeveless dress to *ASCENSION*'s only in-person location in the city. It was the original headquarters, the founding place. Her ox-pac was a heavy weight against her side, the mask hard against her mouth. She leaned her head back against the tram wall. The ridge of the digital ad's border dug into the soft layer of skin at the back of her skull. She imagined the tram's maglev tracks snagging, the tram shaking and bumping, and the back of her skull snacking into the metal ridge. The strike could cause cells to bruise and blood to clot, causing a stroke.

Maybe that could go next.

The office had that same sweet, herbal smell that all the packages did. The attendants were all young women, pretty and clear skinned, with mechanical parts of their own on full display. They made her a coffee in the lobby, and it was only a fifteen minute wait to go to the back.

The doctor who was going to perform the operation was kind, well-dressed. He shook her mechanical hand.

"Lapis! I thought I recognized that name," he said.

"You did?"

"Of course!" He smiled and adjusted his glasses. "You've been one of our best donors, I've seen it personally. Really fantastic stuff. We're so glad you decided to come in today."

At the end of the procedure, she watched as he packed away her lungs in a white styrofoam container. She'd given him some more meat too, from her calves, as part of the payment. That he wrapped separately, in wax paper.

#

Lapis noticed it first on her stomach, and on her thighs, where she'd first cut away the meat.

The edges of the metal had turned from soft gray to a dark sort of orange. She poked at it with a plastic finger, and a few particles flaked away.

Soon, all of the mechanical parts started to rust at the edges. She oiled them and scrubbed at them, started carrying vaseline with her everywhere she went and smeared it over the ports at the top of every hour. The skin next to the ports started to pucker and redden, and then began to weep clear fluid. She cut it away and sent it off in plastic packages, and tried to cover the patches with more cool machinery. But the red and swollen areas kept growing.

When ASCENSION dropped her call for the third time—the first time contacting them had been less than seamless—she decided she would have to go in person.

#

She still had the address of the office saved, but that wasn't good enough. Lapis remembered the name of the... doctor? The man, who'd done her lungs. She had his name, and with some research, his address in the city.

When she rode the tram this time, she didn't need to carry her ox-pac. But her chest felt heavy, the way it had before, and she'd started coughing up the same clear liquid that seeped from the wounds in her skin.

He lived in a nice building. It was stunning chrome, and shot up into the sky like an arrow. The doorman gave her a dubious look when she entered, but when she smiled at him and flashed her mechanical arm, the rusting, wet ports hidden, and said she was here to see the Doctor, it turned knowing, amused.

“Oh,” he said, “he has girls up there all the time. Guess I won’t worry about checking you out.”

She left him and rode the elevator up.

The first thing she noticed, on his floor, was the smell.

It started sweet. She thought maybe it was the same mix of herbs that permeated the office and the packages, but it only got sweeter until she reached the door. Then it was so overwhelming she wanted to gag on it.

She knocked on the door, and heard no response. She waited, then pressed her ear to the door. The scent was so thick it made her eyes water. All she could hear was a soft, off-tempo buzzing. Like a thousand flies.

“Excuse me?” called a voice.

She turned and saw a man there, coming up from the stairwell. He was dressed in just a white button down and jeans this time. He held a wax paper parcel, a handful of napkins bundled in his hands. His face was damp and shiny with sweat.

She looked at him, and at the napkins, and the tiny stains on his white shirt.

“Sorry,” she said, “wrong place.”

#

When she stepped into the office, her face was red and scrunched up, her eyes watering.

“I—” she started, “I need to make an appointment?”

“Have you been to our facility before?” the woman behind the desk asked.

“Yes?”

They took her name, and her phone number, and her insurance card twice.

When the techs came to see her, she was sitting on one of the hard plastic chairs and idly peeling the skin away from the port of the machinery in her hand. They took her back into an exam room, and weighed her.

“We’ll have to start her on 75mg of—” said one of them. They picked up her arm and swiped a disinfectant pad over the rusted skin, looked at what came away.

“I’m allergic to that,” she said softly. The two white-scrubbed MEDCOXP techs talking over her didn’t meet her gaze.