

Skinny

"You're almost there," I said, pinching her loose skin between by thumb and forefinger. I pecked her on the cheek. It was cold and sweet like a porcelain doll's.

"Really? You think so?" Her eyes lit up. She was so delightful when her eyes lit up like that. I wanted to squeeze her whole body, almost to break her.

"Yes, darling. I love you more than anything, and I would not lie." She was nearly squirming where she stood, wagging her tiny little butt like a rabbit's. "How much did you run today?" I said.

"Four thousand calories!" she exclaimed. She bit her pale lip with almost sexual fervor. But I was not thinking of sex. Almost everything about her was nonsexual, and that was preferable to the crass alternative, which was everywhere, literally hanging down from building tops thirty stories tall in a glitzy parade of advertisements, all screaming the same thing, *Sex!*, in red, bleeding letters. But here she sat in her hanging shirt that doubled as a dress, as graceful and unassuming as a mannequin or lounging doe in a plush field of green.

"Do you remember when you were--"

"Please," she strained, "don't say it." She looked down at her hands in shame. Her nails were bitten and sore. She'd been at it this morning. I chastised her, but in truth, I liked it. It gave her a sweet, juvenile air.

"I won't," I said. But the threat always lingered.

We had met in the gym three years before. She had just graduated college and was feeling lost. She was working furiously on the elliptical, trying to sweat out a lifetime of bullying and ridicule. Yes, she was overweight, but not so much that I couldn't see the beauty underneath. But I knew her method would never turn her bloated sack of flesh into the

glimmering physique of talk shows and magazines. Luckily for her, I had exquisite insight into the female psyche and how it could be harnessed for a greater purpose.

Her journey was hard, but I was there by her side the whole way. I left issues of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* lying about inconspicuously. Even though she was too embarrassed to touch them in front of me, I saw they had been moved ever so slightly or the page edges darkened with her busy fingers. I never said anything, but I saw the effect of my interventions. Gradually she dressed better, in clothes from Neiman Marcus or Saks rather than Target. She even began to prioritize shopping for clothes over eating meals.

In the beginning, when she struggled to lose a pound or two a week, she had to restrain herself from gorging on sugary treats. Her eyes lit up as they danced over the dessert section of the menu while pretending to look at the drinks. I once even found a plastic bag filled with candy bars floating in the toilet tank. I was very disappointed and confronted her about it. I had to explain to her how some things in society are good, like farmer's markets and beauty magazines, but most are bad. In a way, our fight was greater than that against her stubborn, languorous cells. It was against all of society.

On our first anniversary, she wore a dress I had bought her six months prior. At that time it was three sizes too small. It was a tiny black dress that you see on models walking the red carpet. I hung it on a hook I had installed just next to the full body mirror. Every day she glanced anxiously at it and then back at the mirror, fixing herself without showing her intentions too plainly. From my chair in the corner of the room, I watched this whole drama play out in her head with glee.

The night of our anniversary, I knew without a doubt that ours was a propitious pairing. She barely fit into the black dress, not because it was too small, but because it was too big! I

grabbed her and kissed her all over, and her cheeks flushed. She brought her fingers with their short, jagged fingernails to her mouth, trying to smother her obvious elation.

"You're almost there," I said. "You're almost there."

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"Anywhere. Anywhere you like. The Perennial Vegan, Forest for the Trees, In Bloom. You pick." She was ecstatic, and she had earned it.

So we went, and her eyes did not so much as sweep the dessert section. I marveled at her prominent collar bones and limp wrists. Her eyes had even started to look bigger in her head. She was transforming into a paragon of femininity. Everything was coming into place.

The following year sailed by. Her new habits were so ingrained that I barely had to nudge her at all. There were no more candy bars in the toilet tank or secret trips to run-of-the-mill grocery stores chock full of preservatives and added sugar. But there was a terrible, unanticipated consequence to her progress. More and more when we went out, men eyed her, their eyes lingering like wolves'. They dragged their thick, rugged tongues across their lips, just imagining the taste of her.

There is the female body that people consider sexy and delightful--that of movie stars and pornographic actresses. Then there is that which people consider divine, untouchable. Achieving the divine puts you in a class apart. You are de-sexed. You wear clothes, not to accentuate the figure, but to demonstrate how clothes should look. Men stare, not to satisfy a base urge, but because you are titillating in some strange way. You are envied but not desired. This was what she needed to achieve.

I didn't propose the idea as much as weave my intentions throughout our existence until they became her own. It was not easy work, but I was determined. I replaced our soft, cushiony furniture with hard, utilitarian pieces, having read somewhere in *Elle* or *Vanity Fair* that

uncomfortable surfaces expend more calories. At first she was shocked, but as her mouth drew down into a limp smile I knew she had put her absolute faith in me. When I installed a crunches machine in the middle of the floor or replaced our dim lighting with white, cold lights that revealed all bodily imperfections, she went along with without hesitation.

At some point in the midst of all this restructuring, I realized that we didn't know each other very well. With all of our hard work there never seemed to be time to breathe and really get to know the other. I took her out to a new vegan restaurant that opened to rave reviews in a hip part of town.

"So tell me," I said, and left it there.

"About?"

"You."

"Well, this is strange." She laughed. I couldn't recall whether I'd ever heard her laugh before. "Okay, well, when I was thirteen, my best friend Sarah and I--"

"Wait," I said, feeling my heart speed up. "Is this when you were...you know?"

She nodded shamefully.

"Don't tell me, then. I don't want--I can't. Please, just don't."

"Okay. Well, when would you like me to tell you about?"

"College? Wait, no. How about we stick to something less...personal. How do you feel about that new show? *Companions*, I think it is?" Her eyes lit up.

"It's wonderful! I really feel like I can relate. There are six of them, and they all live together. And they're so funny! They laugh all the time, and they have the same friends, and they have money, and people love them!" None of that sounded like her, but I let it go. I smiled automatically and placed my hand on hers.

"It sounds nice," I said. I stared deeply into her large eyes set into bony orbits. "You are just so...beautiful." She dipped her chin to the side and flashed her eyelashes in embarrassment.

"So, I was thinking. Why don't we try something new?" I saw from the corner of my eye our waiter on his way over with a salad in one hand and a plate of meat in the other. "I read this article that talked about the benefits of a starvation diet. You see, starvation is really humans' most natural state. Our ancestors, when they ran around with spears and pelts and lived in caves, had no reliable source of food. And it was not in spite of this, but *because* of this, that they thrived under the harshest circumstances. It was their starvation that kept them alert, active, and ambitious. It was their starvation that got us to where we are now." My speech had come out better than I'd anticipated, so much so that I wished I could give it again and again. She was silent, and the silence weighed on the whole table like a wet tarp.

The waiter brought our food. "Salad for madame, steak for monsieur." As he turned to leave I caught him by the belt loop and waved the salad away. He looked at me and then at her in horror but took it away nonetheless.

"And it's important," I said, readying my cloth on my lap, "that you get used to refraining while people around you indulge. Think of this, here, as practice for a world that will be much less forgiving."

We spent the rest of the evening talking about *Companions* while I ate, though all I could do was admire her waxy skin, hollowed eyes, and protruding ribs. None of it would be without me.

Apart from having to miss a few days of work, she handled the new regimen quite well. The first week was difficult, and her eyes and body gravitated towards the kitchen cabinets throughout the day (though I had emptied them completely). I had to snap my fingers to get her

back to what she was doing. I had to watch her 24 hours a day. But then she was back to the gym, running and doing calisthenics, and catwalking exquisite dresses up and down the floors of Alexander Wang, Saint Laurent, and Versace while the staff of young women in minimalist black suits tried to hide their envy.

Then one day something terrible happened. A friend from college was having an engagement party and invited her. I warned against it, saying the temptations would be too great. She agreed but then suggested it might be good for her to see a friend since she hadn't for several years now, if only, she emphasized, to show off her new look. I couldn't argue with that, so I let her go.

That night I waited up in the living room like a father for his daughter on prom night. She was over an hour late, and my gut twisted with dread. I was flipping through an old issue of *Cosmopolitan*, not absorbing any of it, when the door opened slowly, reluctantly. She shuffled in with her head down and a residue of wiped away tears.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"Tell me." I walked to her and took her by the arms.

"I don't--I can't...do this anymore."

"What? What can't you do?" But I knew. I knew in my gut with the certainty of a dog panting towards death.

"Any of this."

She went to bed. I watched over her from the chair in the corner the entire night, praying that she would be back to herself by morning.

But she wasn't. The next day was worse.

When I awoke the bed was empty. I crept downstairs, expecting to catch her in the act of something. But she was just standing and swaying in front of the kitchen cabinets. Her unbroken rhythm told me she'd been there since the early morning.

"Dear?" I called, shuffling hesitantly towards her. She didn't reply, just simply swayed. I looked to the cabinets. I didn't understand. When I was a few feet away from her, I heard it: a soft moan coming from her, almost a growl. I'd never heard it before. It didn't sound human. I touched her shoulder, and she turned on me with wide eyes and a snarl and then turned back to the cabinets. Her hands drifted towards them. I watched, transfixed, as her bony, knotted fingers lifted up the boards, one by one, and placed them on the counter, then fumbled in the back at something I couldn't see. Then there was the sound of splintering wood. She was pulling apart the backing like a rodent until a truly horrific sight was revealed. Candies! All sorts of them. KitKats, Snickers, Almond Joys, everything! She scooped up as many as she could and sprinted to the bedroom. I ran after her, but she slammed the door. I heard the lock click.

"Please open," I said. There was no response. I imagined she was plowing through her treats with chocolate smeared all over her face. I debated for a while saying what I said next. My head pulsed and my vision brightened as though I were jumping off a hundred foot cliff into the water. Then I said it. "You're going to get *fat*." I had vowed from the beginning of our relationship to never say the word, but finally I used it. It didn't feel right, but it was necessary.

I didn't bang on the door or try to break it down. I'm not a violent person. What was to happen would happen, and I just needed some time to sort through it. I slept in a nearby hotel to gain some clarity, but it was two nights of sweat-drenched sheets and nonsensical nightmares about polygons and snakes. I was glad to come home and determined to forgive her and make up a plan together.

When I returned, the apartment had the rank, settled air of a tomb. I went to the bedroom door and tried the knob. It was still locked. I first knocked then after a minute began banging. I pressed my ear to the door. There was nothing. Not a sound. I panicked, and the only thing I could think to do was hurl my body at the door again and again until the wood split and I could reach through and unlock it from the inside. My hand bleeding and shoulder sore, I flung open the door, ready to find her in a pathetic mess of torn wrappers and twisted blankets. But all of the candy was on the floor, unopened, and she was there, fast asleep. I slid in the bed next to her and placed my hand on her shoulder. It was cold, much colder than normal and much colder than I liked. I felt her neck. It too was cold, and her pulse was thready. I shook her but she didn't respond.

The EMTs came and took her to the hospital. I followed the ambulance and, inside the hospital, watched as they shot fluids through her collapsed veins. Doctors and nurses kept filing in and out, some shaking their heads and sighing. Most avoided my eye contact.

They transferred her to the ICU where everything beeped and shuddered with morbid anticipation. She was in something like a coma but could likely still hear. Luckily, I had last month's issue of *Cosmopolitan*, and I intended to read it from cover to cover until she snapped awake.

"200 ways to please your m--" I began but stopped and flipped to a page more relevant to her situation. "8 weight loss tips from the pros! One, cut out the carbs! Two, intermittent fasting! Three, food diary! Four, exercise, exercise, exercise!" I wanted to continue but a nurse came in and told me to move. She clicked her tongue and said, "Poor thing," hung a new bag, and left. Then there was some chatter outside the room I didn't recognize. It was three voices, two male and one female. They all sounded very concerned.

"Mr. and Mrs. Zanger?" asked one, probably the doctor. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't be sure.

As they walked in, I instinctively pressed myself against the far wall and stared at my shoes.

"Who's this?" demanded the man, presumably Mr. Zanger. I looked up. He had gray hair and his hands were bunched into fists.

"The husband, I believe," said the doctor. Mrs. Zanger clutched balloons, flowers, and photos to her chest. Her bony hands tremored.

"She's not married," she whined.

"It's true, but--" I began, but Mr. Zanger cut me off.

"Shut up!"

"I don't know where this vitriol is coming from, but--" I started, but he wasn't having any of it.

"Get the hell out! You're the one who did this to her!"

"Me? But I--she's beautiful!" I pleaded, stretching out my arm to present her. "I made her beautiful!"

Before being escorted out, I heard them talk about getting her back to a "healthy weight." It made me sick. The security guard left me in the lobby and followed me with his eyes as I walked out.

But, as luck would have it, a few blocks down there was a young woman sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette and crying. She looked terrible in her cheap blouse, and her plump cheeks hid a lovely bone structure beneath. We talked, and it turned out that her boyfriend had broken up with her that night. I walked her home and on the way we talked about all sorts of things, but mostly food. She went on and on about her favorite recipes, restaurants, and snacks.

I bit my cheek during most of it but at one point, when she told me her favorite fruit was grapes, added, "You know, grapes have a lot of sugar, and very little fiber to counteract it."

"Really?" she said, leaning in for more.

"Oh yes. It's better to go with apples, which also have sugar, but much more fiber.

Everything in nature, and society, is about balance."

She fluttered her eyelashes up at me, and I smiled down at her. Light from the moon streamed down on us like we were the only two people alive. I knew right then that there could be no better start to our journey.