

The Shifters

Part One

The Door Jamb

A shy little girl with golden pig tails and a blue dress creeps up the stairs to her grandmother's bedroom. She was cautioned sternly to stay in the living room and watch television while her mother went upstairs to help Grandma change but the advertisements were too long and too boring. She started to wonder why it was so important she stay downstairs. Carefully, stepping on the edges of the treads, she makes her way to the door and finds it ajar. She peeks between the hinges and can see her grandmother laying prone on the bed, elbows bent, struggling to push her face off the pillow and moaning with the strain of it. She tries to see further into the room. Where is her mother and why isn't she helping Grandma?

There's a sound in the attached bathroom, like a glass being placed on the marble countertop. She strains her eyes to see if her mother will come help her grandmother but fails. The gap between the door and the wall too small to offer anything but a straight view of the bed. Her grandmother moans again and she turns her attention back to Grandma, muscled coiled to leap in there and help her but restrained by the severity of the warning to stay downstairs.

Grandma still lies face down on the bed but now her head is turned and the girl can see a small red mark on her neck, almost like a tear in the skin, revealing the marbled red and white glistening tissue beneath. She holds her breath and watches as the horrible thing enlarges and contracts like a pupil as her grandmother strains and moans.

"Let me help you, Mom," her mother says sounding calm but annoyed as she enters the room. She pokes a finger into the hole and pulls on it. The hole stretches and threatens to rip wide open. The girl watches in silence, wondering why her mother would be so cruel as to stick her finger into a wound. Her mother continues to pull on the skin, then suddenly turns around and looks at the door like she heard something. The girl pulls back and squeezes her eyes shut, hoping she wasn't seen. After a moment there is a wet sound and she puts her eye back to the gap to see. Her grandmother is gone and in her place is a shiny red and white marbled, human-shaped figure writhing on the bed. It rolls over with a cat-like fluidity and sits up.

The little girl watches, shocked by the thing and wondering why her mother doesn't scream or run from the room. Then the thing shrugs like its pulling on a sweater and her grandmother is back on the bed.

The girl waits for a moment, frozen in disbelief, as her mother helps her grandmother slip a dress over her head.

"Feel better?" her mother asks.

"I'm getting to old for this," her grandmother gestures at herself and they both laugh.

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The girl tiptoes back downstairs as fast she dares and plants herself in front of the television as if she'd been there the whole time. After a few moments her mother and grandmother come down the stairs. Her grandmother looks healthy and strong. There must be something wrong with me, the girl thinks, something wrong with my head.

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Part Two

The Countertop

The shy little girl with pig tails has become a brazen tweener with a pony tail who desperately wants to wear makeup and a bra but isn't allowed one and doesn't need the other. She reads thick hard cover books with grownup sounding names like 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'The Fountainhead' in the living room but secretly checks chapter books out of the library and hides them under her bed. At school she walks with her best friend, Margaret, around the playground at lunch and they give condescending looks to the silly children actually using the equipment. Later, when everyone has gone home and they've walked to the park a mile from the school, Margaret becomes Meggie and they climb, giggling, to the top of the jungle gym where the wind makes them feel like they could fly.

On Friday nights she babysits the Perot boy from down the street for two hours. His parents drop him off at her house and she plays with him in the finished basement because they aren't allowed to bother her father. The boy is five years old and has a brilliant imagination. They pretend to be dragon fighters or cow boys or werewolves. Sometimes he tells her tall tales about what he's done since he saw her last and she wonders if he can tell the difference between what he imagines and what really happened and how different that makes her from him.

Today is Saturday and she sits on the bathroom counter to watch her mother getting ready to go out for the evening, taking fancy and mysterious creams out of an elaborate case full of colors and tubes and brushes. Her mother delicately squeezes a single tiny drop of cream from a small tube and smoothes it under her eyes with her pinkies held high. My mother is not old, she thinks, but neither is she young. She knows the cream is to hide the lines beneath her mother's eyes. She also observes the creases and loosening of the skin on her mother's throat. It's a bit like old leather, she thinks, and creams won't make a difference.

Her mother selects a brown base for her eyelids and brushes the powder on before applying a shimmering gold to the outside of her lids. Then she opens a tube of mascara and brushes the upper lashes on her right eye. Long, even strokes until she has the thick and full lashes of a model in a magazine. The girl watches, still perched on the countertop, enchanted by the transformation and memorizing every movement for when it's her turn to become the swan. Her mother flutters the lashes and checks them carefully in the mirror before moving on to the left eye. She opens wide and begins to apply to the mascara to the upper lashes, the same way as on the right eye but she slips and the brush touches her eye. She curses and drops it to the counter. The girl watches and tries not to laugh out loud but it's difficult when her mother is doing what she herself is forbidden to. Besides, she thinks, it's not like mascara in your eye is a big deal.

Her mother continues to hold her eye and wince. "Damn. I really got myself," she says, one hand supporting her slumped body on the counter, the other clamped hard over her left eye.

"Can I help?" The girl asks, no longer in danger of laughing. She is watching her mother closely for any sign of what she should do. Her mother doesn't answer but puts her other hand over the eye as well.

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The girl notices her cheeks are very red and she's sweating a little on her upper lip and chin. Her shirt has slipped off one shoulder and a small red mark appears there, just above the collar bone. It moves and stretches itself until it appears to be a tear in the skin. The color drains from the girl's face as she remembers what she thought she saw so many years ago in her grandmother's house. The marble red and white living under the flesh.

Her mother shifts and pulls her shirt back over her shoulder. She straightens and looks at her daughter with one eye red, streaming tears run a black streak down her cheek, mascara in the eye forgotten.

"Are you alright, Mom?" she asks. Her mother doesn't answer but stares at her with a cold, animal keenness the girl hasn't noticed in her before.

"Let me help you," the girl says, again the shy, little girl. She takes a tissue from the box and hands it to her mother. They regard each other suspiciously for a moment and then her mother removes her ruined make up so she can start over.

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Part Three

The Mirror

The girl walks back to her dormitory from her freshman psych class alone in the dusky twilight. Her head is still filled with the advice of her father about never walking alone after dark and the stabbing stalker from the horror movie she watched last night with her boyfriend, Derek. She knows her father is just paranoid because of how they lost her mother a few years ago and that the movie was fiction, but still her heart beats a little more quickly than usual.

The street is fairly well lit and lined by thick, old trees like you'd imagine along the streets of an Ivy League College. The trees cast shadows behind them and every so often there's dark sections because of a street light out. She knows she could have asked campus security to take her home in their golf cart but it seemed silly in the florescent light of the building's lobby. She quickens her steps to try to beat the darkness. As she passes a particularly curvy tree something moves right behind her. She gasps and starts to run but it's too late. She's grabbed from behind and pulled off the ground. Before she can scream a hand is clamped over her mouth. "I'm your stalker and I have a knife," her boyfriend whispers in her ear. She shoves him away as hard as she can. "Oh my god. You are a freakin' a-hole," she says as she shoves him again. He laughs a contagious laugh so hard he can barely apologize and against her will she laughs with him. They joke about it the rest of the way to her dorm room.

When they get inside he pulls a bottle from his jacket. "Let me make it up to you." She gets the shot glasses from the cabinet.

A couple hours later her dorm mate texts that she isn't coming back tonight and the bottle is mostly gone. Derek grabs her and pulls her on top of him as he falls backwards onto the couch. She is giddy and lightheaded and the fall makes her laugh. He kisses her and she squeezes him. The alcohol is making her feel warm and safe. Derek is making her feel like taking off her jeans. He kisses her again and a hot feeling spreads over her. She squeezes him towards her and turns her head away. The hot feeling is strange but not unpleasant. He kisses her neck and she feels fluid, like she could slip away from him and become something else if she wanted to. She feels like her skin is a sweatshirt on a hot day.

"Give me a second," she says as she pulls away to gather herself. She peels herself from him then closes and locks the bathroom door. She leans over the sink and runs the cold water, splashing it onto her face. The water feels good. Everything feels natural. She touches the cold edge for the porcelain sink and feels like she's touching it through a glove. Her skin feels loose and a bit restraining. The heat is giving me strength, she thinks, and she wonders why she's never felt it before. She embraces the heat and starts to shrug off the sweatshirt her skin feels like.

She looks up and sees her reflection. Normal looking except for the tear in her skin revealing the real her. She curses and steps back as if to get away from the ugly thing in the mirror. She tries to push the heat away but she can't. For a moment she is the thing she saw on her grandmother's bed and she knows she is the same as them. Then she shrugs and she's back. The same girl Derek is waiting for. I'm

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the same as my mother and my grandmother, she thinks, disgusted, that thing is inside me, too. *I am that thing.*

She stares at herself in the mirror and the disgust fades. I am the same as I always have been, she thinks. Disgust disappears and turns to pride. *I am next in a line of many, handed down mother to daughter.* Not knowing what it is she is proud to be or how she will find answers, she leaves the bathroom with a new sense of self and walks into the living room with a strength and intent that could be viewed as animal coldness.