

MATTHEW

He boards the Red Line at Thorndale, carrying a plastic bag. It's his second bag: the first had a hole he hadn't noticed when he filled it, and blood had escaped onto the floor before he'd even gotten it out of the bathroom. The second bag wasn't quite as big as the first, and the tips of her fingers peeped out as he tied it. He'd pushed them gently back inside as he tightened the yellow strings.

"No, no," he'd murmured, "not yet. Stay in there where it's safe."

He'd left her head in the sink. She'd be waiting for him when he got home, and the idea fills him with a happiness that spreads through his chest and his cheeks like a blush.

On the train, a pretty girl sits next to him, texting on her cell phone. He makes sure his thigh doesn't brush hers. It's a nice thigh, he sees, tapering down into a slim ankle, but he doesn't want to be rude.

"Excuse me," he says when the train reaches his stop and he hefts the bag. She smiles and stands to let him pass, not minding when the bag brushes against her knees. "So sorry," he says, lying.

"It's okay!" Her smile is warm and unforced. "Oh," she says, "don't forget your gloves!"

They're sitting on the seat he vacated, and she grabs them, putting them right into his hand.

"Oh, thank you so much," he says, remembering to open his eyes wide to show he's grateful; to show that forgetting the gloves would have been the worst possible event. This is actually true; it would have been. He smiles politely at the pretty girl once more before leaving the train. She is back to texting again before the door closes, at which he feels a little prick of anger in his belly. But he doesn't have time, he thinks, he has things to do.

Outside, it's spring and he smiles to feel the new air snaking up his shirtsleeves. It's chilly still but this is good. No one will look twice at his gloves, although they might wonder briefly at their thickness. He breathes in deeply. He's strong—for his size, he's strong: something he likes to tell himself—but the bag is heavy.

“Might have considered a diet, Martha,” he whispers, smiling a little.

She is not the first Martha, Martha 3 in fact, but he knows she wouldn't mind, not now. She might have minded before, before he'd shown her. But not now. He wonders if she'll remember, at home in the sink. She will. He thinks of his favorite movie, *Wild Wild West*. He could have done without Will Smith, but Salma Hayek was so lovely. A woman in a corset earned a special place in his heart—earned it.

His favorite part of the movie was when the scientist—he doesn't remember the character having a name—took the disembodied head and hooked it to the contraption that showed, like an old movie reel flickering on a screen, the last few moments of the head's life, before a spinning metal blade had separated head from body.

He relishes this. Sometimes he'll watch just this scene, not bothering with the preface. Sometimes he masturbates to it. Not to it, exactly, but about it. He puts Martha 1 and 2 in the place of the head on the screen. He closes his eyes, straightening his legs in the blue tweed armchair—a chair he replaces every six months—and thinks of the tape the heads of the Marthas would play. What movies would those be? What glimmering images would he see there, dancing on the wall like shadows in a cave? He knows what he would see. He would see himself. Him, leaning down over them, unmasked and unafraid. He would be the spinning steel blade, the perfect circle. The thought leaves him writhing in the rough blue chair, his eyes open and taking in the vast whiteness of the ceiling.

Now he puts on the gloves. He wishes these could also be white—like him, like his ceiling, like the Marthas—but they must be black. He hasn't been able to find a red pair that would mask the blood perfectly in shade. It always shows. The black hides all.

He checks the outside of the bag for any of that red before hoisting it over his shoulder; Fulton Market is long and carrying the bag by his side will tax him too quickly. Carrying it over his shoulder lets him feel strong. He had done the same thing with a bag of toys when he was eight and had resolved to run away. His mother had punished him for some childish crime and his father had refused to reverse her decision, so Matthew had packed his favorite things and set off. That had been when they lived in the suburbs, in the house with the yellow door. He'd loved that house and had returned by dark, hungry and lonely, like generations of runaways before him. He'll return to his own home tonight, but glows again with the knowledge that, for him, it will not be lonely. Martha 3 will be waiting for him, eyes open. Even her mouth is open. He can imagine in it a smile.

He arrives and must put the bag down to pat out his keys. The street is dark. The factory is dark. Chicago is dark. But he is not. He is full of light.

Inside, he doesn't need a flashlight. He knows the way, he knows the combinations and the mazes and the levers. He knows where she'll go, where he'll put her. He puts her there, a safe place with other pieces, other divided forms, other reds and bones. He eases her in gently, gentler than he'd been before. When he returns to her in the sink, he'll tell her how gentle he'd been. She'll be grateful.

When he's through, he stands there in the dark, his back against her place. He wants his blue chair. He wants his white ceiling. But he'll wait. For now, he clutches the crinkling bag in his black-cotton hands, gripping it hard. He could leave it here for the first shift to discover. They'd throw it away without looking: probably Mark or Javier, people who cared nothing for order. They wouldn't notice—everything is bloody here. This would be just one more bloody thing. But he's gripping it

tightly, thinking of his white ceiling, and so he carries it out with him when he leaves, folding it gently into a square like a shroud.

Outside, the sky is black and thick like the bag in his pocket, stars plucking out holes in the darkness, some bright thing seeping through. Walking, he passes no one, but he doesn't need to remind himself to smile in case he happens upon someone, anyone. He's already smiling. He will be for weeks; at least until Martha 3 begins withering, until her eyes are no longer eyes. He'll need company after that. But tonight his loneliness is a book on a shelf, its spine uncracked, its pages crisp and unworn. His feet take him back toward the train, his soles solid against concrete the same color as stars.

He removes the gloves. He wants to see his hands, white and blue, in the streetlights. Later, when he imagines Martha 3's final tape, her flickering thirty seconds, these hands will be in the frame. He looks at them, loving each finger.

He boards the train again, pushing the bag deeper into his pocket with the gloves. A woman with distracted eyes brushes past him for a seat.

"Excuse me," he says lightly, reminding his mouth to smile in a way that covers his teeth. "Excuse me, so sorry," he says. She ignores him and he's hating her, already naming her.

"Excuse me," he says quietly, and at home Martha 3 waits like a queen, and he owns her eyes; he'll show her where to look. If she's a lady he'll save her skull, keep it like an urn containing all the precious thing she hadn't been; the things he'd made her.

The train rocks north and he watches the city smear alongside him. He holds the headrest of the seat in front of him, his hands whiter and whiter the more tightly he grips.

Home. Home. Home. He is the perfect circle, made of steel.

"Excuse me," he says, holding the train's door open for a woman with headphones, unseeing. His stomach growls with rage. "So sorry."