

TAPEWORM

George had started to lose weight. At first he was overwhelmingly happy. He had struggled for so long against his own three hundred fifty pounds of flesh, and it had pinned him to the ground both physically and emotionally ever since he had married Alan. Finally, as if it was a plague of locusts departing from a wheat field overnight, the weight started to disappear without George even trying.

During the loss of the first fifty pounds, George would go to the mirror and look at himself and watch his folds and slabs of flesh closely, and he felt that if he looked hard enough he could feel himself shrinking, he could see the fat dispersing into the air like sand being carried away by the wind, like the carving out of a canyon by a Colorado breeze.

He told Alan that he felt like Mother Nature had decided to finally sculpt him. He told Alan that maybe all of his struggles with his weight and all the bullying and missed opportunities he had suffered were because he was a piece of marble, and Mother Nature was letting him get big and round and full so that she would have as much as possible to work with.

Alan started making love to him again. First it was once a week, then once a day, and then it seemed that Alan couldn't keep his hands off George any time he saw him. George didn't even want to some of the time but he couldn't say no because it had been so, so long since he had felt *loved* in any way. He began to feel as if this must be a trick or a joke and that everything would fall apart soon, and so he never said no, and he breathed in every single second of feeling cared for.

They went on walks together and George would catch Alan in the corner of his eye really *looking* at him, drinking in the details of his face, and this made George feel that maybe he really had been chosen for something special. All of the suffering had been *for something*. Everyone else who had gotten to be attractive their entire lives--George pitied them. They were as good as they were ever going to get. He, on the other hand, was finding out his true potential at forty-five years old, and a whole new life was unfolding in front of him. He was experiencing a metamorphosis they never would! The next hundred pounds gone were all the more bliss. George saw the scale hit 200 for the first time in two decades and he fell to his knees and wept in his underwear in their North Carolina bathroom, and Alan heard him weeping and came in from the living room and comforted him, which George could not remember him ever doing.

They kissed next to the bath, feeling the cold of the tile on their skin and the heat of the summer radiating in through the windows. George wept into Alan's shoulder and Alan hugged him tight, which George cried harder at, because usually when he tried to cry on Alan's shoulder he would be pushed off. Alan hated anything getting on his polos, especially tears, which he said left salt stains.

This time Alan did not push him. He held him tight even though he was wearing his best polo, and George wept, and then Alan spoke in a voice that George had never

heard come out of him in their twenty years of marriage. It was a voice that sounded as if it was generated by his bones rubbing together, like a violin made of keratin.

“I think you’re finally ready.”

George stopped crying and shuddered. He realized suddenly how much colder he always was without his extra flesh, and how much more vulnerable he felt. He wished that his bones were hidden like they used to be.

“What do you mean?”

Alan didn’t say anything. George felt the loving embrace that surrounded him become unearthly strong, and he felt Alan’s nails grow suddenly and sink into his back like talons. Alan’s skin became freezing and hard, and the walls of the bathroom were jet-black and they closed in on them, and Alan and George were completely alone and there was no sound from outside anymore.

George looked into Alan’s eyes and he couldn’t help starting to cry again. He hated how easily he cried--whether he was arguing, or frustrated, or waiting in line--his body’s first response was always to cry. Now as he looked into the face of his husband, who held him in place with the strength of 10 men and threatened to crush every bone in his body, whose eyes were now missing and replaced by deep holes that seemed to go entirely through his head and whose mouth was now filled with row after row after row of tiny, serrated teeth--all he could do was cry and sniffle. Alan spoke to him again.

“I’ve always been annoyed by how much you cry.”

“I know you have.”

“On our wedding you were a mess the entire day. You couldn’t even eat or make a speech because you were crying so much. I thought you were going to dry out like a raisin.”

George looked into Alan’s eye pits and tried to find his old humanity in them. His skin was a sickening greenish-white, glistening like the wings of an insect.

“Have you been eating me at night or something? Is that why I’ve lost weight?”

Alan smiled, an absolutely ghastly sight that threatened to make George cry once more. He felt his floating rib pop from Alan’s death hug.

“I used to do it at night, when you were repulsive to me. Now I eat you when we make love.”

George decided he would shut off his brain and just let whatever happen to him here happen. His ability to process this and form emotions relating to it was depleted.

“So you were just fattening me up for this. You made me miserable for 20 years, and then I got to be happy for four months, and now you’re gonna eat me and I’ll be gone.”

Alan thought for a minute.

“Yes.”

George decided he was actually done being emotionless about this, and that instead he was going to try being very dramatic. Alan had always called him a drama queen and so George figured that if he couldn’t stop Alan from killing him, he would at least be very annoying to him as he died.

“Well then go on and do it. Just let it be known that I was always good, and kind, and fair to you. Let it be carved on my headstone: Loving Husband, Passionate Artist, Unfairly Consumed by his ungrateful lover who shall NOT be named.”

Alan didn’t respond. Instead, his mouth extended into a long tube like a worm and latched onto George’s face, surrounding it completely, and all George could see were darkness and teeth. He was too shocked to scream. He could smell Alan’s foul, sulfurous breath, and hear the inner workings of Alan’s body and stomach, churning, sucking, rattling, turning his body into nutrients or energy or whatever he was being processed into.

George squirmed around valiantly in Alan’s grip and broke a few more of his own ribs, and he started to have a very difficult time breathing, half because of the stomach gases that were traveling up through Alan and corroding his face, half because of the broken ribs poking into his lungs.

Alan’s voice traveled up from his stomach and echoed around the tube-mouth, seemingly produced only by the acid in his intestines. The voice sizzled and popped and hissed.

“I did love you very much, George. You really were wonderful in many ways. This is just what I was made to do. You understand.”

George felt himself getting smaller and smaller, his mass somehow disappearing into Alan. He felt that he must be something like 125 pounds now.

He began to yell down Alan’s throat.

“Just get me fat again and then eat me, and then do it again--I’ll be your food source, baby. Without me you’ll have to find somebody else.”

George felt Alan’s grip loosen slightly. He felt like he was losing weight a bit less fast.

“It...feels so incredible all at once...”

George, through tears, yelled down the worm’s mouth again.

“I’ll get big for you again. You can do it all at once every couple of months. It’ll be so much nicer that way--you never know if you’ll find someone who tastes like me again--you’ll never find someone who’ll get big for you like I will. I--I get to eat whatever I want and then lose it all, and you’re fed for life.”

Slowly, the rate of consumption decreased, Alan’s mouth un-suctioned from George’s face, and his grip released.

George looked up at Alan and he looked human again, brown-eyed and pale with his greyish-blond hair flopping onto his forehead. He smiled sheepishly.

George looked down at himself. He was smaller than he had perhaps ever been. Slowly he stood and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like he did when he was 12, his ribs protruding, his arms thin and wiry, his skin stretched like a drum over his cheekbones, which he realized were quite nice. This had been his dream when he was heavy and now when he looked at himself he realized how alien he looked.

He stepped on the scale.

110.

Alan came up behind him and hugged him gently. George winced a little. Alan kissed him on the neck and began to massage his shoulders. George felt Alan’s fingers touch his collarbones, his shoulder blades. He felt like if he wanted to he could squeeze his fingers together right through him. Alan was so much stronger than him now.

“Why did you wait 20 years to start eating me? I’ve been heavy for a long while.”

Alan breathed and thought, and George felt his breath on his back. Even the breath felt like a threat, like it could take all his warmth from him if it wanted to.

“I planned to start a lot sooner. But I loved you too much.”

“And you don’t love me now?”

“We have something stronger than love now, George. We have a deal.”

George looked in the mirror again as Alan continued to massage him and kiss him up and down his neck, and after a few seconds trying to figure out how he felt he decided he would just stop thinking about anything at all for a long while.

He asked Alan what they were going to have for dinner, Alan smiled and told him, and George did his very best not to cry.