

Gavage!

It smelled like bratwurst that evening in suburbia. Na-Na binged on the scent, inhaling a string of sausage links through each nostril. And why the hell not? This was pleasure without the pounds she thought, tugging at the flesh under her chin just to make sure it was taut. Across the road, a man dragging his dog around the block stopped to stare at the three of them, at Fatlip planted under the basketball hoop, tall enough to finger the net, at Wartzman who orbited him at low speed, and at Na-Na, black hoodie hanging on her body like a half-closed umbrella. They were in Skrat's driveway; they were waiting for Skrat.

"Do you have any gum?" Wartzman called over to the dog man for Fatlip, whose current wad had long gone bland.

But the man only hurried along.

After a whole summer Na-Na could finally tell when Wartzman was speaking Fatlip's words and when he was speaking his own, a whole summer of days like this, of Skrat marching them to his home from the Taco Bell parking lot, yelping drill commands he had learned from a movie. He'd stop the group at the edge of his driveway, "Parade, halt!" and there they would wait for him to retrieve their booze or pills or sunscreen. They waited, and then they started to wonder.

They began by wondering in unison: How would Skrat prevent the summer from ending in a barely memorable burp? What did he have planned for this, their final night? Next, they wondered in their separate ways, Fatlip and Wartzman contemplating what they usually did while waiting for Skrat. They thought: What could be up in that room, in their creator's private space? And they thought: What did she know? Na-Na had been with Skrat for a few months, they for four years, yet she was the one who had been invited into his home.

Na-Na pointed her thoughts back at them in return: Did Wartzman and Fatlip know somewhere deep down that they were mice in Skrat's lab? She gave a mental shrug and decided screw it, tonight she'd tell them if they asked. She'd tell them what was up there. How

Skrat had an alarm clock with an audible tick stationed next to his pillow, how he kept a strip of graph paper—his very own cardiogram print-out—that he had saved from biology class at the end of the year, and how the screensaver on his computer shone with a single scene: a Scandinavian crusader playing a game of chess at the edge of a rocky shoreline, his opponent, the avatar of Death. Skrat once had a girlfriend up there too, and that girlfriend was Na-Na. She had found the envelope in his desk, confirming his acceptance to a school out East.

Once the house had regurgitated their leader—and Skrat did look like something partially digested in his greasy way—he led them onward over a series of sidewalks without pause. Every so often he would clap a rhythm and the others would mimic the sound with the stomp of their feet, Na-Na halfheartedly. As they walked she filled her stomach with flavorful air and considered a term the doctor had used: nasogastric intubation. At seventeen she didn't have a choice. Tomorrow they were going to start making her fat.

“Parade halt.”

Skrat turned around.

“Wart,” he said.

Wartzman trotted over to receive instructions and a ruffling of the hair. The rituals that Skrat demanded of Fatlip and Wartzman, both the practiced and spontaneous, tightened the screws that bound them together; tighter, tighter until the drives were stripped. Na-Na recalled how earlier in the summer she had found Fatlip lying spread-eagle in the driveway, shirtless, motionless except for his chewing. Under him, she realized, was Wartzman. Skrat led her away, leaving the two of them like that, lying still, Wartzman enveloped in Fatlip's folds, crushed blissfully into the pockmarked gravel.

Na-Na hadn't yet arrived when the two became a tandem. Fatlip and Wartzman were strangers once, and then enemies. Skrat was their only mutual connection and he doted on them individually, cultivating the jealousy they felt toward each other. Fatlip had the honor of hanging a noose from the ceiling of every bathroom stall at school, right above the toilet paper.

Shit before you hang. The next month, Wartzman was arrested during Passover for painting a red stripe over the doors of his Jewish neighbors. The competition ended when Skrat grew bored, Na-Na guessed. It was then that he decided Fatlip and Wartzman were soulmates and arranged what amounted to a marriage. He demanded Wartzman throw away his inhaler and he scorched Fatlip's tongue with a lighter every time he slipped up and spoke. Skrat said one was the voice and the other was the body and they would never have to worry about being alone again, not now that they needed each other.

As for tonight, it seemed Skrat had ordered that they lumber along as one. Wartzman mounted the top of Fatlip's shoes and clutched a love handle in each fist. After a few halting steps they both looked over to Skrat like a two-headed toddler and Skrat nodded his approval. Na-Na would have barfed up everything in her stomach if there were anything but acid left.

At Wartzman's they fed themselves straight into the basement without bothering to shed shoes or layers until they were under ground with the door closed behind them. Below, they watched Skrat collect four lidless sippy cups and line them up in front of himself on the floor. Wartzman hooked in his iPod and began playing the soundtrack of their summer, the first album by a band called *Gavage*, titled, *Gavage!*

"The coffers have been emptied," Skrat said. He pulled gin from his pack and splashed an equal measure into the first two cups, poured a triple serving for Fatlip, and had a few drops in the last before Na-Na pulled it away. One hundred and ten calories in a shot after all. She sipped it without bothering to wait for Skrat's command.

"Down the hatch."

The others drained their drinks and Skrat refilled them while Wartzman gave a falsetto "whoop," pounding the ground with his fist. It was another night of forcing down cheerful feelings in hope they might become genuine. They drained their drinks again. Na-Na was not cheerful triumphant in the least.

“Is this it?” she blurted. “The night before they lock me into the clinic, before you skip off for—”

Skrat choked her silent with a glare, his hazy blue eyes the color of polluted sky. Still, Na-Na could see that her question was hiding in the faces of Fatlip and Wartzman as well. Skrat pretended not to notice and supplied more gin, this time sure to pour everyone an equal amount.

“More please?” asked Wartzman for Fatlip.

“Everyone has equal cups this round because it’s time for our game. Our last game of the summer.” From his pocket Skrat drew out a clear sandwich bag. He held it up with one hand and shook the contents into a corner, then flicked it.

“Fifteen minutes ago this powder was five pills in my mother’s purse, fifty milligrams of Ambien.” Skrat deposited it all into one of the cups and stirred it slowly with a nearby screwdriver. He was the magician, they were the toddlers in awe of his act. “Now, it is a roofie.” For the first time that evening everyone felt at ease. “And now,” he continued, “we will play Roofie Roulette.” When Skrat got creative their gatherings became something more, something that drew all of them in despite the absurdity. Not even Na-Na could resist, and she was only addicted to his charisma halfway.

Skrat told them that the cups were to be shuffled until the roofied drink was lost in the mix, then each person would pick one, throw it down the hatch, and wait. He pushed some paper across the carpet, one scrap for each of them.

“Your demand on one side, your name on the other. When we see who got zonked we read his paper after he’s out.” Skrat paused and Fatlip chewed his gum vigorously in the silence. “Everyone has to follow what’s on the scrap. And the demand must involve you, involve your zonked out body.”

“You pick your own punishment?” asked Wartzman.

“You pick your own adventure.” Na-Na said.

“Correct.” Skrat grinned. “You’re zonked, but you’re still in control. As long as we keep to the rules.”

Fatlip was the first to begin writing and when he was finished he passed the pencil to Wartzman, took a drink from Skrat, and placed it solemnly on top of his of paper. Soon they were all sitting in a circle looking into their sippy cups. This was the last night of the summer. “Throw it back.” The liquid stung Na-Na’s esophagus.

The basement was home to a couch and a dog-bed that belonged to an animal buried in the front yard. Fatlip often used it as a midsize floor cushion. A mess of cables snaked out of the cabinet under the television and culminated in a clutter of half-broken Nintendo controllers and potato chip bags, the crumbs from which were mashed into the nappy blue material that carpeted the floor. On the coffee table sat two bowls stained with sticky brown ice cream residue, and when Skrat closed his eyes and began tapping his forehead on the edge of that table the others could tell he was drugged. Wartzman reached for Skrat’s paper.

“Not yet,” said Skrat without opening his eyes. He was smiling. He began banging his forehead a little harder, hitting different spots around the table like a hen pecking at feed. “Not yet, don’t read it yet. Do not disobey. Do *not* disobey.” None of them had seen Skrat this kind of loopy, not even Na-Na, and suddenly he was bleeding. Skrat had caught a corner of the table with his upper lip.

“Shit,” said Wartzman.

“Get him on the couch,” said Na-Na on her way to the bathroom. When she returned with a ball of loose toilet paper Skrat was out. She let Wartzman press the toilet paper to his wound, still bleeding, until Fatlip found some masking tape to hold the makeshift bandage in place. Na-Na reached for Skrat’s paper.

“Wait,” said Wartzman. “Let’s read the others first.”

“That’s not part of the game,” said Na-Na. Fatlip put his own paper in his mouth and began chewing. Na-Na handed hers over and he popped that in as well. Wartzman shrugged

and relinquished his own. The toilet paper was more red than white. Na-Na flipped Skrat's paper over and read the words out loud:

"Don't let me wake up."

For a time everyone looked at Skrat breathing deeply on the couch. Toilet paper was plastered to his mouth and chin, pimples dotted his shaved scalp. And at that moment Na-Na had the urge to give sleeping Skrat a massage. She felt that if she only had the time, if it were just she and him alone, she could knead the poison out of him and that he would wake up, cured.

"An honor," Wartzman finally said for himself, eyes watering.

"This night will live on," Wartzman said for Fatlip. He continued alternating, a sentence for each of them:

"How should we do it?"

"Will he just bleed out?"

"I've trapped a mouse before."

"I drove Scribbles to the vet the day they put him down."

"But this is a bigger thing."

Wartzman continued talking to himself, or to Fatlip, whichever it was, and Na-Na stood, feeling dizzy from the gin. But then, she was dizzy most of the time. Out of habit, Na-Na did her best to figure what Skrat wanted from this game. She did her best to think about what would please him most. And she decided to do what would please herself instead.

"What's on the paper is not what he wants," she said.

"He told us what's in his room," Wartzman said. "There is a clock so the tick tick can remind him how time is always killing." Skrat had told Na-Na this as well. "He keeps a cardiogram print-out so he can see how fragile he is." Skrat had told her the same thing. "And he keeps a letter on his desk as proof that he's not afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

“He’s leaving for basic training next week. He told us on the way here.” Na-Na laughed, despite herself. “It’s what he wants, for him and for all of us,” Wartzman said. “He’s decided he doesn’t need to wait to die.”

Skrat had told them about his room, but he hadn’t told them about Na-Na at all. She had been pleased to be part of his collection, for a while.

“Your heart is beating quickly.” Skrat had said, the night she had walked out.

They had just finished with part one of their routine, intercouring for two rounds with a long spoon in the middle so Na-Na could catch her breath. She required an unusual amount of rest, but at least there was no need for birth control.

“I can feel it shudder against my back. Press against me harder.” And she did, crush her heart to Skrat’s back, for one half of one summer.

Skrat won her trust with the gift of his lighter.

“Make sure you sterilize,” he whispered in class, “the last thing you want is an infection.”

Later he kissed the cuts on her shoulder, and began kissing her other places too. Skrat liked the way she looked. He played on her marimba ribs and licked her chopstick thighs clean. He stared past her bones to the bulge of organs beneath her skin, and named them aloud. Afterwards, they played Taste and Waste, a game Skrat had made just for her. Some burgers at Carvell, some hotdogs at Target, and a bag filled up with soggy Taco Bell. They’d bring it all to Skrat’s room where he would eat and she would chew, chew, and spit without swallowing into the trash can. Skrat liked her the way she was and Na-Na liked pleasure without the pounds.

That summer he would whisper to her during round two. “My little skeleton,” he would run his fingers through her thinning hair, “my *scheletro*, *skelett*, *esqueletita*.”

In his room she felt comfortable, desirable as she shimmied out of her hoodie and dropped it into a dark pool on the floor. She was skinny, with Skrat.

But the night she walked out, as she pressed up against him, Na-Na felt fat. She looked at the scissors on his desk, wishing she could trim herself like a paper doll, knowing exactly where she would cut. Na-Na had seen Skrat swallowing a blue pill, the kind pornstars use to keep it up. She suspected Skrat did this every time.

“You can’t get it up for me on your own.”

Skrat fidgeted and wriggled himself free.

“It’s because I have a double chin. Flabby fucking arms. I’ve seen you with the pills.”

“No, Na-Na.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s because you look like a Holocaust survivor,” blurted Skrat.

Na-Na laughed. “Liar. You get off on that shit. If that were true you wouldn’t need any help at all.”

Skrat made to say something but paused. A faint tick tick filled the silence as Na-Na climbed into her sweatshirt and fled.

Fatlip positioned himself belly down over Skrat and then lowered his body weight slowly, pressing Skrat in place on the couch. He dropped a pillow gently on top of Skrat’s face, cradled his head in his hands, and then jammed the head and pillow into his chest. He lay there. For a moment, nothing. Then Skrat stirred and started slapping at his friend, the crack, crack of skin on skin sounding in the room. Meanwhile, Wartzman shuffled around and around the couch, slowly, cheering his partner on with unintelligible mutterings. Na-Na rushed forward, throwing herself at Fatlip, trying to knock him away, but bounced off his bulk onto the floor. The rug burns cut right to her bone.

“Na-Na, no,” said Wartzman, still circling.

She raised herself and started clawing at Fatlip, at his eyes, but he only clutched Skrat's head harder, making him eat the pillow, pushing it further into his mouth. Dropping her hands, Na-Na took a step back and noticed Skrat's slaps were growing weaker. Moving quick, she grabbed the screwdriver from the floor and came at Wartzman from behind, wrapped a spindly arm around his neck, and pointed the metal toward his face.

"I'll put your eye on the end of this thing," she whispered. Wartzman made to struggle but Na-Na had the tip so close to his face that his left lid was fluttering reflexively. Still, Fatlip did not let up. Wartzman started to panic, which caused him to wheeze, and he patted his pockets for the inhaler that he had not carried in years. Fatlip hesitated, the wheezing grew worse, and finally, Fatlip rolled off the couch and calmed Wartzman in the corner. Air rushed in and out of Skrat's lungs without waiting for his consent.

"What did you do?" he gasped, barely coherent. Some time passed before he spoke again. "Get out."

"But she--"

"I gave you so much. I gave you each other." Wartzman began to blubber softly and Skrat gave a hoarse laugh. "I'm done with the disappointment. Do you know what Na-Na calls you behind your back? Beaver Brains. The two of you are a couple of Beaver Brains because it's so easy to fuck your heads. So easy to thrust around in there that I'm tired of it." Na-Na knew that if she did not intervene, Skrat would grow more ruthless. This was his favorite part.

"You have your shit packed for college yet, Skrat?" Na-Na watched Fatlip and Wartzman twitch like video game characters in a glitch as they realized that boot camp was a lie. Skrat did not defend himself and Na-Na bounced the screwdriver on her chin. Then Fatlip turned his back to them both, offering it to Wartzman in a crouch. They walked up the stairs without a word, afraid to hear anything else.

"You stopped them," Skrat said. The drug was still swirling around his brain. Na-Na wondered how much of this he would remember tomorrow.

“You knew you would get the roofie, you knew how this would end. You forced them to let you down. Your hard-on for death is bullshit.”

Skrat did not respond. Na-Na pulled up her hood, thinking she wasn't as sure about Skrat as she sounded. She didn't know what he wanted. Maybe he really was upset to still be alive. But Na-Na felt sure about herself, about her own desire. She'd show up tomorrow on her own terms. She wanted the doctors to force life down her throat, one calorie at a time.