

## Shelly Gets The Business

Despite its high points, today will be the worst day of Marvin's life. It begins at 4am with a dream that would drive a reasonable man insane. In this dream he isn't a man, but a fly, buzzing here & there over rotted fruit & piles of putrid trash. Each time he lands, he rubs his fore feet together in anticipation of a rancid feast. It's nearly erotic, the way he gorges himself, spitting to liquify, pumping clumps of shit & scum in his maw. And then gagging on a hot spurt of sudden bile driven upward by his body's confused joy, he jerks awake & tumbles out of bed, dashes to the toilet with his fingers pressed to his lips. Yanks the seat up.

Even after vomiting, he is beautiful, with his cafe au lait skin, his chiseled cheeks & velvet beard. He turns the water on low; brushes his flawless teeth quietly. Finished, he tiptoes back to bed. Slides next to Shelly.

Shelly is Marvin's client. She is single, wealthy, but not very attractive; with a wide body & large, set apart eyes. Marvin doesn't care. He's bought her a ring; it's hidden on his side of her bed. He will propose tonight, after his Business meeting.

*The Business* is what Marvin & his partners call themselves. It's their code. Just like a group of chicks is called a *Clutch* & a group of parrots is a *Company*, a group of flies is called a *Business*. These Businessmen consider themselves flies because they are the flyest individuals, anywhere, ever. In fact you might as well call them *super fly*, with their tailored suits & lyrical talk. Yet, despite folks staring during the day & blowing up their app at night, no one would be caught dead in public with a Businessman. It just isn't done.

Except for Shelly; she is proudly seen with him, day or night. Except she's got the kind of cash that deflects scrutiny. She pays Marvin by the hour & she's reserved him 24 hours a day, for three months

exactly. This is their 2nd to last night together, although they both assume the other has forgotten. As for Marvin, he does not want to leave here & move back to his apartment building where the hallways smell like stir fry. He's tired of the roach race. He hopes Shelly says yes. And if she *does* say yes, he hopes he can someday trust her with his secret.

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Shelly knows Marvin's secret. She finds the ring. When she tucks the duvet properly, it falls out of its hiding place onto her mahogany floor. She picks it up, stares. Then she shuts it quickly & slips it back into its hiding place. Marvin snores away, oblivious. Her heart turns a squirmy little flip. She's enjoyed him but... isn't it time to move on? She has a strong appetite. There is a reason why she seeks out booming little Businesses instead of meeting men organically. Businessmen stick around cash like flies on shit. Shelly is sure Marvin's the one she's been looking for. She also suspects he's only the tip of the iceberg. It's all tremendously exciting.

Still... marriage? *Wow*. Why does she want to cry? Is it happiness from being chosen, the high of finally getting picked after so many years? She's never permitted herself to want this feeling, but here it is, here it is, here it is...

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Upon waking, Marvin immediately notes a change in Shelly. There are none of the normal background sounds- not the running shower, nor the loud playlist. She perches quietly at the foot of the bed, serious as an owl.

He jolts upright. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she assures him. There is a loud pause.

She reaches over & finds the lump of his foot under the covers. Squeezes awkwardly. “No matter what happens,” she says, “it’s been wonderful getting to know you.”

“Hey,” he says, “same here.” This is the closest they’ve come to mentioning the end. More silence. He’s never seen her face so slack, so devoid of expression. For the first time he admits - & not without some disappointment- that she is... well... *ugly*. There is a sinking feeling. He takes a deep breath.

“Come here”, he says, & forces his arms open wide.

She scoots into the circle of his embrace. He holds her, imagining the life he will enjoy.

“Any plans today?” she asks.

“Yes, the meeting,” he reminds.

“Will you be very late?”

“Will you wait up for me? I have something very important I’d like to talk to you about.” His response sounds more enthusiastic than he feels.

Her heartbeat triples. “Yes,” she says breathlessly “I will.”

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Nelson is Marvin’s best friend. They work together in *The Business*. He pulls up to Shelly’s house at 11am, to pick Marvin up for lunch at Gilman’s; then they will head to their monthly meeting with their

fearless leader King Maverick & the rest of the flies. Nelson was supposed to be there by 1045 but when you're this fly, you're right on time even if you're late.

Marvin, who's even more fly than Nelson, isn't ready until 1115. When he does appear, he's digging in his pocket. He leans his head into Nelson's open window.

"Park this thing, " he says, patting Nelson's door. He dangles the keys to Shelly's new BMW. "Shelly said we should take her car. "

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Riding in Shelly's passenger seat annoys Nelson. Marvin immediately connects his blue tooth to the stereo; before they are even out of the cul-de-sac, the bass vibrates in Nelson's chest. Personally, Nelson prefers to drive - and ride- in silence. And how is it fair that Marvin has access to a car *this* nice? Judging by the way Marvin shook the keys in his face, he *wants* him to be jealous.

And who can blame him? Nelson gets more matches on the app than anyone else in the business, including the King. Marvin has (or *had*, before Shelly) his loyal regulars, but nothing like Nelson's steady stream of curious ladies longing to be expertly laid. As a result, Nelson is more paid. He doesn't have to budget for the dry patches between dates because for Nelson, it's all wet patches, all the time.

He should feel happy for his friend's stroke of luck. Nelson thinks back to when Shelly requested him on the app (he *always* gets the first requests) but... gross. Nelson is picky because he can afford to be picky. So Nelson understands why Marvin accepted the first date. At first, he felt a little sorry for his friend, needing money so badly. But never in a million years did he expect to feel disgruntled about it. Nelson doesn't know how Shelly has so much cash, but he can't stop kicking himself for assuming she didn't.

The music stops without warning. "What's wrong, bro?" Marvin asks. Nelson is embarrassed; his inner monologue has gone on so long he's wearing a full blown scowl. He lies to save face. "I just... really hate that song."

" My bad," Marvin says, & switches the track. The next song isn't terrible. Despite himself, Nelson relaxes into the ride. The tightness in his chest loosens. After a beat, he uncrosses his arms.

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They are seated quickly at the restaurant, tucked onto the garden patio. For now they are the only two customers here. The smell of garlic & onion frying in butter hits Marvin's nose & his mouth waters. This is their routine; first Gilman's, then the meeting. It's always the same: seafood soup to dine in, fried frog legs with roasted potatoes to go. All the Business members bring their favorite foods to the meeting; its an important part of their ritual.

The waitress watches them through the glass that separates the indoor from the outdoor seating. She recognizes them in the same heart-skip way one might notice a celebrity on the street. She reflexively smooths her hair, licks her lips. She can't help but think about the nature of their Business, & wonder. Everyone thinks about it, everyone wonders. When she sets down their waters & menus, they smile into her eyes. She plays it cool but is inwardly thrilled. Electrified.

She enters their order & sits on a stool tucked near the kitchen. This spot is an intentional bottleneck meant to catch all the patio's whispers & sounds. That way if customers grumble for extra rolls or drink refills, the wait staff appears before being called. It gives the aura of magical service & translates to repeat business & bigger tips. This makes the servers extraordinarily adept at minding their business- which they have to be- since they hear most of what the customers say. Private conversations are most assuredly not.

She can always tell what kind of mood people are in by how soon they start talking. Happy people get to clucking right away, forgetting to even look at the menu. But the ones avoiding something order immediately & then make small talk before the food arrives, needing a buildup to the big reveal. The waitress knows, from their quick order & feigned interest in the new growth of ivy creeping the exposed brick wall, that one of them is holding back something serious.

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Finally, after a few slurps of steaming stew, Marvin finds the point.

“I bought Shelly a ring,” he says. He doesn’t mention that the ring cost his rent for the month.

Nelson’s eyes widen. “Why?”

Marvin puts his spoon down. “Because I’m going to ask her to marry me.” It’s the first time he’s said that out loud.

Back in the bottleneck, the waitress overhears Marvin’s confession. There is a single eyebrow raise.

Nelson swallows his soup dramatically. “Nigga, you crazy?”

“Maybe?” Marvin matches Nelson’s tone. “I could look a hundred years & never find another woman like her.”

“She’s just so... unfortunate looking,” Nelson says.

Marvin knows exactly what Nelson’s problem is. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” he says.

Nelson let's that bullshit fall off the table. He knows Marvin is only thinking about marrying Shelly for money & Nelson doesn't think it's a good idea. Not because he's jealous (although he is obviously jealous), but because of Marvin's secret. He shouldn't marry *anyone* with a secret like that. It's the kind of secret that is easy to keep from clients but would be much harder to keep from a wife.

"At least tell her the truth," Nelson says. "Before you propose."

Marvin looks at Nelson like he's lost his mind.

"It's the right thing to do," Nelson says. "She should know what you are."

"What WE are," Marvin corrects him.

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That night, after scarcely five minutes of matrimonial moans, the waitress's husband falls inconsiderately asleep. She is shocked at how quickly she thinks of the Businessmen. Suddenly she's unlocking her phone, downloading their app. She uploads her photo & then scrolls the profiles of members offering discounted mid-day rates. After ten minutes, a confirmation for her appointment appears in her email, scheduled for two weeks away. After it is said & done, she lies in the dark reasoning with herself. She works hard; she deserves nice things. It will be a treat, she decides. Like getting her nails done.

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Here's the real reason they call themselves *The Business*: because real, flesh & blood flies make love for 90 minutes at a time. They don't fuck, they have *sessions*. With that kind of consistency, satisfaction is guaranteed. This ability is the main condition upon which the Business recruits its members. There is also an inch requirement. It's advertised on their black-label app that they're able to satisfy their clients deeply & thoroughly, for no less than one hour & 45 minutes per session; at a rate of one-pump-per-second.

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After lunch, Nelson's envy is replaced with thrill, because Marvin lets him drive. With the pedal to the floor they make it to headquarters in less than an hour. Nelson zooms into the last spot & shuts off the engine. It's a short walk across the parking lot; then Marvin presses the secret code on the keypad entrance. When it buzzes to unlock, Nelson pushes the door open. They cross the jet black carpet of the plush lobby & Nelson presses the elevator call button. They step inside. Marvin pushes #3.

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The first floor of the Business is filled with offices & free standing work stations, used to run the app & manage their appointments. The second floor is for aesthetics; there are barber chairs, wardrobe rooms, accessory walls, a photo studio. The third floor is an exercise space with a locker room, shower, sauna.

The pair step off the elevator, remove their shoes & pad across the lush carpeting. Standing at their lockers, they take off all their clothes. Every Businessman strips before the meeting, otherwise the stains would be incalculable. Naked now, they grab their food & head back to the elevators, this time pressing B, for Basement. The Basement is the best part, down low where the brethren come together to relax. Let the false world fade away.

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This time when the elevator opens, the carpet is gone. The floors are made of hard concrete. They are faced with a towering set of double doors, carved from the darkest ebony wood. Engraved across them in delicate lettering is a line from Mary Oliver poem "Wild Geese": *You only have to let the soft animal of your body/ love what it loves.*



But it's not time yet to go behind those doors. Instead they make a sharp right & go to the mess hall, where all 55 Business members are seated around a massive, mahogany round table. Here are the town's most beautiful men, all of them naked. All of them fly.

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Everyone has brought takeout. In the center of the table, a mouth-watering collection of overripe bananas, bruised melons & brown, dented apples. Most of them haven't eaten solid foods in weeks. This is because the Business members only eat solid foods *together*, at these very special meetings. Other than that, they live on a strict liquid diet of soups, broths, teas- because of their teeth, which are very white, but weak.

Then their OG leader King Maverick stands to speak. Behind him hangs a huge framed collage of professionally shot dung piles from all walks of life, each clump & squidge sporting a business of black flies eating their fill.

"Welcome!" he booms. The room breaks into applause. There is a tribal whoop, a few whistles. He savors the sound. Dramatically raises three fingers.

"Three," he says.

Scores of bare feet slap the concrete floor. He lets it go on a few moments. Then he puts one finger down.

"Two," he says.

They rock back & forth in their chairs, their calves flexing & unflexing. They are frothy & wilde eyed. He puts another finger down.

“One,” he says. He pumps his fist.

This is the moment. This is *their* moment. They are ready.

“NOW!” he urges. He slowly takes his seat. In unison, they place their palms on the table. *Sweet release.*

Marvin’s entire body flexes with joy. His eyes roll back. There is a hitching noise, a thick rattle click from deep in his throat. All the flies made similar sounds. One by one, they spit.

Long ropes of viscous fluid, yellow in color & thicker than phlegm, roll laboriously, gloriously up from their throats to coat their tongues. A few gag; but most sick it up, mute from strain, until it covers each one’s food, like honey.

Soon their lunches resemble stews of what they had been, loose & juicy enough to lick it up & slurp it down. They lower their heads & gorge. For twenty minutes, the room is an orchestra of guzzles & quaffs. Then they stand, bellies drum tight, eyelids heavy with satisfaction. Food is everywhere; in their hair, smeared on their skin. It cannot be helped. King Maverick points their way with a skeleton key; a wizard guiding initiates to the grail. They line up single file in front of the double doors & wait patiently for him to let them in.

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Devouring their meal was number one. They have to go behind the wooden doors for number two.

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The gilded doors open: the interior is dim & deep. There are a few low watt bulbs hanging from the ceiling. These are strategically placed among the metal hooks dangling in a grid pattern, 5 rows of 11 hooks each, for a total of 55. There is a personalized privy positioned under each hook, with each fly's name engraved on his lid.

Now each member sits in a trance of anticipation. They are listed in alphabetical order, so Marvin & Nelson's toilets are nearly beside each other, except for King Maverick situated between. Their faces are tight with control; they hold themselves closed until the King gives the word. He grunts with an orgasmic faraway gaze. There is a liquid squish & soft splat. *Relax...my...sonssss*, he says.

It has begun. Soon the air is filled with farts & sighs, plunks & plops, sporadic utterings of euphoric praise for their functioning bodies. When they are finished, each one stands & turns to admire his handiwork. Some have made mud piles; others squeezed logs stacked like sticks.

All of them are art but more importantly, sustenance. Which brings us to number three.

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Remember the hooks, hanging on bungee cords above each toilet? Now Marvin & the other men lower them, until each hook is level with his head. They open their jaws as wide as they will go, connecting it to a hole hidden in the roof of their mouths. Click. Then the light goes out of each man's eyes; bodies swing in midair, puppets on a string. Large black flies emerge eagerly from every body's nose, liberated.

For a time.

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This marks the culmination of the meeting, when the flies relish in being exactly how God made them. Of course they enjoy the pleasures (and pains) afforded by wearing the clonebot suits. But there is nothing, *no thing*, that compares to being one's shiny black, 360 degree self. With a lover's urgency, they dive into their toilets, coldly focused on a delicacy packed with every nutrient thriving flies need. With every landing, they spurt the erotic jet of digestive proteins necessary to lubricate each bite. This is ten times better than mastication.

It's a fly thing, you wouldn't understand.

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After their feast, ready to put away (until next time) his divine design, the flies return through the noses of their clonebot suits, & re-settle into their seats of control. Animate receptors rejoin; eyes illuminate. Now it's just a room full of naked brown bodies, pulling hooks from their mouths.

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Later in the steam room, Nelson asks Marvin a bold question. Taking off the body is like a near death experience; after reanimation it's hard to hold anything back.

"What will you do if she finds out?"

It's an important question: on one hand the flies must convincingly emulate men, yet in order to maintain the central essence of their attractiveness (& therefore their livelihood), they have to ooze as much of their essential flyness as possible. So they have to be fly; but not *too* fly. It's not surprising they get exhausted from the whole charade. If their clients knew what they really were- despite the obvious benefit they brought to their lives- they would hate them. Perhaps even harm them. Imagine? If husbands found out what their wives had *really* lain down with?

What else could explain the frequent disappearances? The flies that go missing, never to return?  
Considering their line of work & social status, it's not like they can go to the police. They are at the bottom of every list, yet at the top of every fantasy. The most desired & yet the most despised.

Just then, King Maverick steps into the sauna with a towel wrapped around his waist. There are three rows of cedar benches; Marvin's on the bottom row & Nelson's on the top. King Mav settles in the middle.

"What to do if *who* finds out?" he asks.

"I was going to tell you..." Marvin begins. And then he does tell him- about Shelly's three-month reservation; about buying the ring.

Nelson grabs his phone, clicks on their Business app, scrolls through his rejection archives. He turns the screen around toward King Mav. "There she is," Nelson says pointedly.

King Mav looks from the picture, to Marvin, then back to Nelson. "She must be really, really rich."

Nelson snorts.

"Which must piss you off," King Mav says to Nelson.

"So what's it like?" King Mav wonders.

"What?" Marvin asks.

"You know-" he raises his right hand "-the high life. It's nice?"

Marvin exhales. "You have no idea."

"Then good for you," says King Mav. "Enjoy it. But why *marry* her?"

Marvin lists his reasons. "She's single; she's rich. She's not ashamed to be seen with me. She's basically my unicorn."

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You have to understand- flies exist in clusters. They are not independent creatures. Their thoughts aren't necessarily group think, but it's close. Having a consensus keeps them calm. It's too risky to do your own thing. King Maverick has never had a unicorn. Which is to say he doesn't want Marvin to have one either.

"Do you hear yourself?" King Maverick asks. "Unicorns are a fantasy. Nigga this is the *real world*." He nods toward Nelson, indicating the picture of Shelly on his phone. He shudders. "Couldn't *pay* me enough."

Marvin closes his eyes. Flies always gotta shit on each other. It's just the way it is. His conviction spoils, like milk.

"But you go 'head & do what you want," Maverick says.

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While Marvin drives distractedly back to Shelly's, Nelson has a realization. He's been looking at this all wrong! Instead of being jealous, he should just enjoy the ride. If he ever gets another shot with Shelly- or anyone like her- he will *not* mess it up being picky. You can't ask for pearls if you aren't willing to stick your hand up a clam's ass.

As for Marvin, a line leftover from the tail end of their talk loops a figure 8 between his ears: “You can do better,” King Mav had said. *You’re* the main character, not her.”

“I don’t know about that,” Nelson had said.

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Shelly waits up for Marvin, wanting everything perfect for tonight. She spent all morning fantasizing about how he’d pop the question, then shelled out spent a small fortune, leaping here & there about town: new hair, new nails, new outfit, new lingerie, emergency teeth cleaning. She returned just as pretty & smooth as can be. Which is to say that she’s done her best.

She’s still surprised at Marvin’s apparent attachment. Being with a fly is like accepting an invitation to a mediocre buffet; at least you don’t have to cook it yourself, it’ll do. It’s an easy catch. Of course the flies have their reputation, but beyond the pump requirement (in Shelly’s opinion), they work just hard enough to get paid. She’s been with lots of flies & they’re clever as hell (look at their *Businesses*, for example), but most of them are plain lazy, that’s the truth.

Still, they represent the best situation a girl like her can get. She’s been going over the logistics; she’ll have to liquidate her business once they’re married. Marvin will have to quit his job. She has more than enough cash, they’ll be fine. For the first time, she could be in a relationship that *means* something. Which means that *she* will mean something. What’s the phrase...? *You’re nobody till somebody loves you?* It’s like that.

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Marvin’s key finally turns in the lock at 2am. Shelly is deeply asleep, face down in a pool of drool which has smeared her makeup & ruined her hair. Two glasses of wine (to calm her nerves) have stained her

lips. Hearing him, her head snaps up from anxious dreams. A few of her dress buttons have popped open; one shoe is strewn under the coffee table, the other clings loyally to her foot. Yet she confidently gives him her sultriest bedroom eye. "I tried to wait up for you baby," she says, reaching for him.

But Marvin recoils, takes a step back. Fakes a yawn. "I just want to get to bed." Turns toward Shelly's stairs.

Wide awake now, her eyes narrow in the darkness. Her stomach grumbles. "I waited up for you," she says, "like you asked. Wasn't there something you wanted to talk about?"

Marvin stumbles mid-step but does not turn around. Forces another yawn. Keeps climbing. "Did I?" he calls down. "I don't remember..." Above her, she hears the bed springs squeak as he sits, then lies down.

Shelly's dead heart flops like a fish.

Fine. She will get her money's worth tonight, it's as simple as that. Going back to the original plan feels a bit like revenge, & she's never wanted that. Shame on him for making this personal. She's got nothing against flies. And before today, she hadn't cared about marriage at all.

She stands, rolls her neck in a slow circle until there is a satisfying pop. She links her palms & cracks all her knuckles at once. Then she sits down in the gloom to wait awhile. The rest happens so quickly you might wonder why this story's gone on as long as it has.

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Shelly creeps up the stairs, mysteriously nimble for a woman of her size. The bedroom is dark & crisp; the windows are open. Marvin's on his back, on top of the covers. His breaths are slow & deep. Good. He's asleep.



She shuts the door with a click, tiptoes toward the windows, slides each pane down until they're sealed firmly in their grooves. She reaches on the top of her dresser for a scrunchie; gathers her hair, drops to her knees.

She begins at his toes. Tiny swift kisses that get longer & more intense the higher up his body she moves. Up his leg to the knee, up his other leg. She kisses & licks the space where his boxers meet his thigh. He moans, his fingers clutch her hair. *What's happening?* he asks groggily. Ahh, but he knows very well what's happening. He smiles in the dark, a chicle gleam. He feels so lucky to be himself, to be alive. For the next several minutes, the walls reverberate with the moans of Marvin's gratitude.

Shelly peeks quickly up at Marvin's face; his head is thrown back & his mouth is open, just as she knew it would be. Suddenly she stops, certain she has his full attention. "Wanna hear something silly?" she coyly asks.

"Sure," he says, trying not to sound annoyed.

"I thought you were going to propose to me today." Laying half on top of him she feels his muscles tense. Hears his heartbeat go *tic, tic, tic*.

Her forced laugh breaks the glass wall of tension. He forces himself to join. She squeals, "I mean could you just *imagine??*" They titter together like maniacs. His mouth is wide open. Now is her chance.

Shelly pounces upwards. Her wide bottom smacks his stomach; his eyes pop open. She is a pile of bricks on his ribs. Her thighs are steel traps.

"Shelly, WHA-?!"

She shoves two fingers as hard as she can into the hatch hidden in the roof of his mouth. His face freezes in a mask of confused terror, then the lights in his eyes go out. *Darn*, Shelly thinks. *The facial expression will have to be reset*. If there is a pleasant way to do this, Shelly doesn't know what it is. An angry black fly fumbles from the mouth of the clone suit; buzzes a panicked little circle around the room. There is no escape.

Yayyy!!! Shelly squeals. She claps her hands together, which turns on the light. This is her favorite part. She uses her thumb to press hard into the roof of her own mouth. Her body goes limp; her clonebot suit falls ungainly on top of his, like soldiers felled at war. Marvin's frenzied buzzing crescendos as Shelly's cheeks bulge, ripple into an unnatural shape. An eerily *intelligent* looking toad, with mottled skin & spattering of warts, spills out of her mouth & perches- hungry & dead-eyed- on her cheek. It trembles with hunger. Before he can flutter a single panicked wing, Shelly-the-Toad's lick-sticks him, swallows him up.

In a mili-second, Marvin-the-Fly is gone.

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In a little while Shelly will hop back into her suit & reanimate. She'll open the windows, & roll Marvin's body from the bed to the floor. Then she'll drag him (*gently*) down to the basement to store with her secret stash of clonebot suits. It's a sweet deal she's got going for herself; she relieves the suits of their current owners, then she sells the empty vessels back to the original manufacturers. They refurbish & resell the suits in less pristine markets; in other words, markets that attract flies. These markets exist in every city, in every country, on every continent in the cosmos. The business has made her a very rich toad. Nor is it illegal; the authorities could give a shit about one less fly. Anyway they breed like crazy, with at least 10 replacing each one lost.

Also, the flies could never get suits at such cheap prices in the first place, if it wasn't for hard working hustlers like Shelly who make sure supply stays high. The body that Marvin wore? This is Shelly's third time trapping, emptying & re-selling it. It's a popular model.

Shelly's model on the other hand, is tailor made. She's got a designer wardrobe of bodies customized to meet her needs. She uses the frumpier bodies to attract the more desperate flies; once they're picked off, she puts on the tiny blondes to close in on the more exclusive picks, like Nelson. She will need to wear her most expensive suit- a fit, feminine melanated queen- to catch the King. For him, she will have to be friendly. Soft spoken.

In any case, that's what happens next. For now, Shelly savors the last of Marvin as he slides smackingly down her throat. He is extraordinarily flavorful; her blackest fly yet.

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