

## **Carnivorous**

The apartment was small and had a faint odor of urine and mold. The washer and dryer were in the kitchen, making the space airtight, and she had to turn sideways to shimmy between the appliances.

The doors above the countertops could have been nice at one point, surely, made out of a dark oak and sporting burnished black handles, but were now falling off their hinges and in desperate need of re-inspection and redress. Perhaps a granite overlay—a pewter finish--would bring it back to its former glory, but she was afraid if she opened any one of the doors they'd fall off their hinges, clattering everywhere in a debris of termites and splinters. There was an old television in the bedroom, very old, with bunny ear antennas -- standing out in an obscene way-- and a small closet in the back where she could hang clothes and other items. She actually liked the bedroom; she could imagine a bed in the corner, a vanity table or desk on the opposite wall, sunflowers for color - a small, inclusive little space where she could get writing done. A little dusting and she'd have something here. Past the kitchen in the opposite direction was a small living room, carpeted and overlooking main street. The noises of cars and conversations floated in from the crack in the window, reminding her of why she moved here, why she took it. She didn't mind it, it made her feel less alone.

She had designated a small corner of the room to books. Specifically, her favorites. Of which she had about twenty. It made up most of her belongings and she couldn't bear to part with them. Each one had its significance, had made a stamp and impact on her person, and without them she felt like an empty vessel. All the lessons and experiences she had learned through them would be whisked away, and she'd be left as nothing, an empty shell with barely a name. She had no bookshelf, so she set them in stacks on the carpeted floor, like small book stalagmites. They looked good there. Mostly she had classics: *Paradise Lost*, *Odysseus*, *Mansfield Park*. She liked to get lost in the past of things; it was the future she was afraid of.

She rubbed a scar on the top of her foot. Still shiny and red and faintly itchy. She actually liked the look of scar tissue - the way they healed over and formed an interesting design. She could see the

beauty of African tribes with scarification, turning their body into a symmetry of art. Gorgeous, really. She used to look at google images of them when she was younger, studying the scarred maps on their limbs, picking out her favorites to design her own body with. But when she put the tip of the knife against her skin, she couldn't do it. At least not for art. Her body was for something else. The scars she did have were just tabs, tabs to remind her of memories she better not forget. Warnings.

On her phone the messages (3) gleamed in a mocking effulgence. Obnoxious and faintly terrifying. Anxiety provoking. And she put the phone away, back into her pocket, without looking at them. Sometimes she felt that as that number increased, so too did her anxiety, which she had told her therapist about. She knew there was causality there. Influence and insinuation. And she'd like to put a stop to it, if she could. Crush the unwanted feeling in a vice grip, strangle its organs like a coiled snake and swallow it whole, carve a path through the sand of life fat and happy and content. Predatorial. She imagined she could do that, with a little help.

Her therapist was a fine woman, and she felt only faintly bad about going, since the woman was so fine and smart and refined. Someone she would like to be herself when she got older. She dressed (the doctor) in strong, masculine suits, usually a dark blue or black and tailored so that the arms fell to the wrists, and the skirt slightly above the knee. She wore a severe bun, but had a calm, feminine face which reduced the masculinity. She seemed to hold the two well: masculine and feminine, with an innate balance of both, like a statue of justice with the scales at perfect equilibrium. She (the patient) always seemed to swing from one side to another, compensating for an elusive quality that she was never quite certain of. Strength? Confidence? Composure? She was never sure, exactly, of what it was she was missing. All she knew was that it was always a juxtaposition, never a symbiosis or harmonious blend. For example, she felt good about going to therapy since she was sure it would help her resolve

regressions, denials, etc. Yet the other part of her felt bad, since she felt therapy was just another subset of narcissism and she was simply going to appointments to feed some greedy, black hole inside of her that was never satiated until they talked enough about her! her! her! But this particular disorder was harder to combat as one got older. The combat itself seemed to grow weaker and weaker and she wondered if it was a sort of giving up or a sort of slow acceptance, like sliding into mud.

Last week she had sat in her therapist's office. The sun was shining through the blinds and hurting her eyes, but she hadn't said anything since she felt that would be rude. There was a comforting potted plant and a necessary tissue box and pillows on the couch she had been sitting on. The one shelf in the room contained purely psychological tomes - names like Freud, and Jung, and Erikson in a pageant of psychological academia. She cringed to look at them. She had missed the comfort of her books at home—the boats, and romances, the forests and Vikings--the fiction, not the reality.

"You're projecting your own issues on other people," the good doctor had said when she told her about her problems with her partner: negligent, disrespectful, the usual criteria. "You're projecting your unresolved issues with your father onto him." The doctor had worn earrings that day to accompany the suit, and she (the patient) had admired them solicitously, and covetously. Wondering where she had gotten them, and knowing she could never pull them off.

"It's quite common. But you must realize, just because your father was negligent and barely there doesn't mean your boyfriend is too."

She had been told this before—the projection thing. How it was a bad wrong thing. How easy it was to turn one person into another person, to transpose a personality onto another's, like some strange sort of palimpsest. It was a coping mechanism people used to survive, she had been told. But she didn't think really, that what she was doing was projection. Her boyfriend had his set of issues and

transgressions, and although similar, were separate from her father's. Individual and singular. And she despised the idea that her father held any such sway over her—continued to affect her life in such an adverse way.

“But I don't know how else to live,” she had said. “And I don't think that's exactly it, anyhow.”

“What is it about the relationship that makes you feel this discomfort? This disconnect?” Her therapist had asked, putting a pen to paper and looking at her inquisitively. Her skin was a pleasant olive and she longed to touch it, wondering if it would be slick and smooth, or dry and porous like the skin of an orange.

She rubbed her arm, fingers tracing over old, memorized blemishes. She hadn't known exactly what was wrong about the relationship, and therein lay the problem. For she knew there was something wrong, she *felt* it, but could not give a definition, could not deduce the *why*. Which is perhaps why she felt in could all be in her head, entirely delusional—symptomatic and psychosomatic-- a three-headed dog beast of anxiety and paranoia, Cerberus, who was munching on all the rational bits of her brain like a chew toy. A window workers sponge had made a loud squeaking noise then and she had jumped, turning to see a dark-haired man cleaning the window adjacent their room, moving the brush in a rhythmic up and down motion.

“Give some examples of what makes you feel this ‘wrongness’,” her therapist had repeated.

“What are the scenarios?”

She hadn't known really. It was more of a pervasive feeling, than an isolated event, or singular circumstance. It was like a big hanging miasma, engulfing her state of mind, like the hanging smog perpetually engulfing her hometown. She dug and rummaged through the memories, sorting and filtering through the miscellanea and unimportant, bypassing snippets of conversation that held no

meaning now. She thought perhaps it started early on, when they first started dating and he had showed her videos on his phone from his childhood-- his high school days.

In the video, he sits in class with a group of boys, they are laughing like hooligans. She doesn't know why she uses that word initially, *hooligan*, she just knows subconsciously by the timbre of their laughter that what they are doing is wrong, and they are laughing to cover up both shame and an adrenaline spiked dose of *getting away with something*. They are sitting on top of the desks and not in chairs, their legs are dangling. They are wearing jeans and t-shirts and converse on almost all of their feet. There is a corrugated white wall in the background, the rough-hewn pockmarks reminding her of prepubescent acne. The setting is Chicago, in the Private Christian High School he has told her about, but she has never seen in person. She expects to see crosses hanging, maybe from the rafters, at least one on the wall, but there are none. Bibles, maybe, on all of the shelves. But there are none. He sits in the middle of the frame, his feet hanging off the desk, and his knees are encircling the head and neck of an asian boy. He is laughing. The kid wears a striped shirt and jeans, vans on his feet, and makes a pathetic mewling noise, like a kitten, and struggles around a bit, but not much. The camera zooms closer on the kid's face, whose features and eyes screw up real tight, as if they are about to swirl in on themselves—a soft serve of pain and humiliation. The other boys laugh the hooligan laugh and the video ends. *Fin*. She can still hear the boisterous laughter of the boys and see his long unkempt hair in his face.

“So he’s a bully,” said the doctor, “Clear as day.” She looked at her with concern in her eyes. Pity? Maybe. That look is hard to deduce in a therapist, which she liked. She hated to see pity. Yes, she wanted to say, that’s right--he liked to make people feel bad, to see them hurt. But was that it, really? Because she had seen evidence of otherwise. She had seen him offer people a ride in his car when they were walking to get gas, canister in arm. She had seen him get protective of his sister, when she was

with a guy that seemed no good. People could be so many things at once, it made her head spin. Better to be in a novel, where you had characters you could count on. Who did not have the whole breadth of life before them—had stories you knew the endings to, or knew the ending was coming soon, at least.

“What else?” Asked her therapist. The man continued to clean the window outside, and she felt startlingly envious of it—the window. Wishing she could be wiped clean too—like a tabula rasa-- a blank slate to write new things upon, to start over. She would rather not have these memories she must sort and analyze, review and assess.

She thinks of another time when they are having sex. The sex they have is good. He touches her in ways she likes, holds her tight, like she likes to be held. And she can tell by the noises he makes that he likes what she does too. They are in their apartment they share and the blinds are open, just slightly, and the moon shines in on them and she sees him watching her, and she feels beautiful: luminous and ethereal by the moon’s admission. His hair is dark and his cheeks are strong, and she is incredibly attracted to him—that physical strength, that hardness that is so different from hers. The tan skin and dark hair that screams masculinity in a loud, entitled voice: worthy of everything. He flips her over on her stomach, pauses for a moment, and pushes inch by painful inch into her. She jerks, and cries a little in pain, moving her body to keep him away, but he holds her still and continues, slowly. She lets him do it after a while, not wanting to fight anymore, not with the moon’s light still engulfing her.

“That is abuse,” her therapist had said after she told her, writing something furiously onto her notepad, making the corners of her blazer crinkle in an obtuse way so that she knew the doctor would have to iron them out later. The doctor had looked at her with a fierce sort of look in her eye, like a bird of prey. “That is rape. If you made a noise, if you cried and moved away, and he still forced it on you. That. Is. Rape. And you need to report it.”

She had looked at her therapist for a while, studying her knotted hair. Should she have gone to the police that night? The next morning? Because was it really rape if she had never said the word 'no', had even enjoyed it for a little, after the initial penetration. But she had not been able to use the bathroom for two days afterwards and she bled a little and she told him never to do it again. And he hadn't. So who was wrong, then? Him or her?

There was an uncomfortable pause. Neither of them saying anything and there was only the slight, insectile sound of the clock ticking in the background. She had stared at the doctor, daring her to say something. Daring her to contradict or challenge her choices. To *judge* her for being weak, for being imbecilic. To have an epiphany of *she is a beautiful, young strong woman who doesn't deserve this*. To be strong.

But life wasn't so simple as 'epiphany', was it? Wasn't so simple as having a sudden realization or insight that forces one with its power to change the course of one's life, to change one's own personality, one's own demeanor. To *change* one's mind. Because were minds anything other than immutable? Did they possess the ability to change so succinctly? Do they ever really? Or was that something one just told oneself in a silly delusion of transformation?

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Said her therapist, still scribbling fiercely on her yellow notepad. The window worker's sponge squeaked and cried in a way that sent shivers down her spine.

There was another occurrence that had been the motif of their relationship since they had started dating three years ago—that was an interminable knocking hand against the back of her mind's door, forever knocking--forever mocking.

They are sitting in a restaurant in Los Angeles. They are eating breakfast. He orders an omelette and she orders juice and yogurt and granola. They are happy, relatively. The relationship is very new. He seems so handsome in the light: dark hair and green eyes, and a smile that she imagines a child would wear. That their child would wear. She tells herself not to think these things though, at least not yet. He seems distracted, staring at the artwork on the walls. There is green carpet shag rug on the floor. A girl with writing on her arms is being eaten by black crows. "I enlisted in the military," he says. Not looking at her and eating his food. People chatter about their classes next to them. "I think we should consider taking a break or calling it off. It'll be too distracting if we're together during all of this and I can't have a Plan B." The smell of potatoes and eggs infiltrate her nose, the saltiness of it making her eyes water. It is the first time she has felt such intense fear. Such utter uncertainty for her future. She is twenty-three and she needs him. She pleads with him, impassioned. "You don't know anything, we could make this work. It would be good! I could come visit you, and there's holidays... We could each pursue our own thing, live our own lives, but still be together. We could do it!" He looks at her, scans her face and body and says, "I don't know. I won't be around a lot and it will be long distance for a while." "I'll come see you when you graduate though," she says, "When you get out of boot camp, we can see each other for holidays, it wouldn't be so far. I can do this." And in her heart, she believes this is true. And when that word—distraction— comes up, she believes he is right, believes she is weak, for missing him.

The window worker had finished his task, and she found she missed the strange squeaking noise, the squealing of sponge against window. Now, there was nothing to distract her from the intense stare of the doctor, whose hair has become undone in places, fly-aways streaming around her face in the form of a messy halo.

“This sounds like codependency. Like Narcissus and Echo,” said her therapist. She had heard the story before, knew the lore and mythology. A beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection. And Echo who could only echo back at him all of the self-indulgent flatteries he told himself. When Echo didn’t mimic him successfully, she was banished to the forest, to think about what she had done. She detested her therapist then. For turning her life into some stupid sort of metaphor or symbolism. Some fated allusion that she was destined to follow. Had been following. Because was life ever how it was in the stories? Ever so clear cut?

“That isn’t us,” she had said to the doctor. She wanted to strike out at her then—hit her across the face, kick her once she was down. Expose teeth and gums and snarl, bite down. Hackles raised and let out a roar that would freeze and paralyze anything living that was nearby. Become drunk and heady and alive with the feeling of it—the danger she exuded. The violence. But she had excused herself from the appointment then, without an answer to the question, navigating the winding hallways that she had gotten lost in the first day, and entered her car. She Turned the key and blared the radio so any attempt at thought would be drowned out by the noise. Driving soothed her. She had headed towards their apartment, through the historic district and state park she had never taken the time to explore.

She had wanted to get out of the car then. Scream out into the distance, a wordless sort of scream. Demanding God or life why she didn’t have the answers. Why her whole existence was such a stupid joke, such a back and forth, such a pendulum from one extreme to the other. A hopeless cycle or rut she couldn’t get out of. Such a cliché—her life. She saw that life of hers before her, fated in a cliché way to be exactly as it was now, forever. The two of them, getting married. Her, being a dutiful, supportive housewife, happy and proud, and yet now, to let his military career put before everything else. The will and desire to be *the most extreme*, rendering everything else null and void—a distraction

to be done away with. And she could never be a distraction, lest she be banished to the forest. So support, a smile, were her only options. Children she would have who would consider joining too, who would admire their rarely home father, for his resilience, his bravery and fortitude. And resent and despise their mother for staying at home, for *not going out into the world*. The remnants of a broken thing.

She left the car and went out into the water, wetting her clothes and shoes and not caring. Looked at her reflection and wondering how anyone could ever love what was you. When that was something you must constantly protect, knowing how fragile it was. How could you love a thing so fragile, so easily broken?

That night she had stayed in a hotel, and the next few days scouted out a single room apartment, picked the cheapest one she could find and moved into it, with only the belongings she carried in her small backpack. Back in their old apartment, that the two had shared together, she had placed a small vanity mirror. "To replace me", she had written on it.

In her own apartment there are heaps of clothes and books and shoes everywhere. The corners all occupied. She ignores the smell of mildew and breathes in the night air out the window. It is a cleansing breath. She takes a journal she had written in when she was younger. A journal filled with memories of her childhood, and her fantasies of him, his name and hers written in so many ways across the pages and she tears it out. And then eats it. A cannibalism of herself. And she feels stronger for it. Here, she can put up pictures of her art if she wants them, she can stack her books on the floor and leave them in piles on a blanket when she's working, there's no medals or tags to twinkle or chime in a way that makes her think she's going insane. And sometimes as the chatter filters in through the window, as she tears up more pages of her journal, she's not certain that she's not. She wonders if this is

her epiphany, if this is her *change*, if her life will be better and different now. If now, like in the stories, she can emerge from the chrysalis anew, beautiful and ethereal, and dance in the wind with her new found glory. She knows, at least, that Cerberus is on a leash, and that means certain parts of her brain still have a way of staying intact, and even, dare she hope for it, healing.

