

TAKE TAKE TAKE

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I'm frozen to Tony's front step when he pulls his SUV into the driveway, his brother in the passenger seat. I've sat here long enough for the ice to melt and then refreeze against my ass. Why the hell don't we hibernate in the winter, like ladybugs? Stack ourselves one on top of the other, red and black polka-dot towers. To stay awake all December is to deny biological imperative.

Tony jumps out of the car, leaves it running, scurries over to me. He needs new shoes. Those are ready for the donation bin. Leather peeling from scuffs, seams unstitching.

"Jesus Christ, Angela. Your face. Who did this? How long have you been sitting here?"

Today I was the soccer ball.

He scoops a snowball and holds it against my lips. My face so cold I don't need to recoil, but I do anyway. "Sorry, sorry," he stammers. He pulls his hand back holding pink snow. Not white or yellow or sludge-

grey. Grapefruit pink. Or bubble gum ice cream. Cherry popsicle. Strawberry Slush Puppy while watching the 73's game with the girls and shouting into the din of cawing, cackling, roaring beasts. He says, "Jesus Christ. Jesus H. Christ. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Mary Magdalene, all the saints and martyrs and Jesus."

"That's from a movie. What movie?"

"Angela, God. You must be a popsicle. What happened? Where's your dad's car? Where's your dad?"

"I'm a cherry popsicle."

Tony's brother turns off the Land Rover and gets out, blows steam between his teeth. He looks like Tony except for the smaller nose and the glasses. And perfect teeth. Hair a bit darker, too. Rugged, but clean. Looks like he could play James Bond. Wonder if his Bond girl's been cast. What's his name again? Avery, Emilio, Jameson. No. I blink back tears that aren't there, will never be there.

"Goodness, Tony," says the brother. "Let's get her inside, get some ice on those eyes."

Ice coats the trees, the porch railing, my back pockets. And we're going inside to find more. Tony

hands the bloody snowball to Avery/Emilio, who tosses it to the street. It shatters on the pavement and blossoms pink in the slush. I'd have drop-kicked it over the house on the other side. Tony wraps an arm around me but I knock back his hand and say, "Don't touch me."

"Right," he says, rooting through his keys with his antennae. The lock unclicks, his antennae flick. My coat holds in the scent of beer and pickles. Sweater speckled like a crow's egg, with dry rusts of blood.

NTS: Remind Tony to broom the frozen cobwebs from the porch gable.

Emilio/Jameson holds the door. I kick off my flats and shrug out of my coat. Always too hot at Tony's, like we've tunnelled too close to the earth's core.

"Gum?" the brother asks me.

"Whitening?"

"You know it," he says, holding out a crinkling green packet. I pop out a piece and peck it out of my palm. Mash it between my mandibles. Spit; hurts too much to chew. Tony's brother picks it up with a tissue. He wears his antennae slicked back. As

though he wants to hide them. I touch mine with ginger fingers, feel an extra kink in the left one. So sore. Fuck.

Out of the kitchen buzz Tony's mutterings and ice cubes shattering from their white tray. I ease onto the couch and turn on the television. Champions League standings. Please, anyone but those hyenas of Barcelona or those fucking snakes of Real Madrid this season. Pleeceeeeeease.

"She might've just fell or something," says Avery/Jameson in the other room.

I don't catch Tony's next sentence when he mutters it, but millions of tiny vent-voices repeat it to me: "Don't be a moron, Emery."

Ah, Emery. I was close. I shove my hand between the couch cushions, looking for spare change. None, but I do find sticky Oreo crumbs and a *Trivial Pursuit* wedge. I lean over the couch arm so I can see into the kitchen. Emery's ass is fantastic.

"This is the way of the suburbs," echo the voices, bringing Tony's words to me on platters like morsels of pie, crumbs of pistachio bread and Oreos. "We do backyard barbecues and share gardening seeds and gossip under the hedgeroots and bring each other pecan pie. But everyone's still a fucking animal."

The Christmas tree beside the ottoman fills the room with forest scent. *L'arbre de Noël*, it's called in French. *Examen finale a été il y a quelques jours. Un sapin, des biscuits, du lait, Père Noël, des cadeaux, du papier d'emballage, du sang, un nez cassé, tabernac. Des fourmis* climb the tree and nestle in its needles. They will extract the sap and regurgitate it among our larvae. Emery asks, "Her dad?"

NTS: Look up "regurgitate" *en français*.

"Or her boyfriend. I'll kill him. Either one."

"Who is she? Why is she coming to you?"

"Let's make sure she's okay."

Emery crosses his legs on the loveseat. Tony curls his legs under himself on the edge of the coffee table, hands me ice wrapped in a taupe tea towel. I don't know how many times I've told him to get new linens. These things look like they're straight off

the dollar store rack. It's his nature to use scraps, I guess. Decomposing shoes, 1950s tea towels, discarded newspapers.

NTS: Buy him new linens with my Naples Pizza paycheck, kick the old ones directly to the curb.

"Lie down and put this over your eyes," he says.

"I'm fine sitting." I hold out the pink *Trivial Pursuit* wedge. Thousands of voices whisper from the vents as I drop it into Tony's tarsal claw. I thumb the edge of my mouth, feel drying blood binding my lips together. "You're blocking the TV."

Emery clears his throat, says, "I can leave."

Tony nods. His solemnity is melodramatic, annoying as fuck. I want to paint a bloody red hourglass between my breasts and drink him dry. But that's not my nature, Brian would say. I'd drain Brian, too. Emery escapes into the bathroom. Gargling sounds and the scraping of bristles against enamel. Emery, the smile of the sun: something Tony once said.

NTS: Go home and lock the door. You idiot.

"It was Brian," I say. I want my bottom lip to quiver, my jaw to clench, or my eyes to well up and spill over. Some-thing to crack this exoskeleton. But I just watch the scores roll across the bottom of the television screen, praying for a Barcelona concession. "He's here visiting his parents. And me, I guess. Came over drunk and calling me a skank. He had a smell on him: pickles and beer and Lysol. Like he'd sprayed himself. He pushed inside and the door hit me in the mouth, here. Then he hit me. Punched me in the nose, broke it, I think. I fell against the wall. Then I grabbed the umbrella by the door – my dad's big green golf one – and speared him in the nuts with it. Fuck! Fuck Barcelona, honestly. Pack of buzzard-fuckers. He held a present for me in one hand the whole time. He'd done that thing where you curl the ribbon with scissors. The ribbon was brownish red. *Tabernac*, I think I forgot to lock my front door."

"I'm going to kill him."

I put the ugly towel of ice over my eyes. “No. Tony. He was drunk. It’s his nature to fly off the handle. He’s never hit me before, but he’s hit so many people he should have a Guinness world record. That’s why he gets all these bartending jobs; he can fight. He’s a damn spider. You know, those black spindly ones with the yellow splotches. Corn. Corn spiders. They used to spin their webs underneath the porch when we lived on Talbot Street. They taunted me. Told me one day they’d eat me whole. They had the prettiest zigzags in the centre of their webs. Like red lightning in the summer. You smell like bread and pistachios.”

The coffee table creaks as Tony stands up. “Emery and I bake a different loaf from our mom’s recipe cards every year.” He scratches his nose, licks his mandibles. “On the twenty-third, then scatter it around her grave.” He sits back down on the coffee table, stands, sits next to me, stands. “They pronounced her dead on the twenty-third.”

“You’re just attracting crows to her grave.” The ice soothes my swelling skin. Better than calamine lotion. Feels swell.

“Brian came over to your house specifically to beat the hell out of you,” says Tony. No question mark.

“He was drunk. And he had a present.”

The voices murmur louder in the vents. They crave bloody vengeance, the taste of veins and tendons tearing between their teeth. They want to swarm Brian’s face and dissect it from his skull. They want to make his eye sockets their nest.

Tony pulls at his lip and says, “Are all the ant-traps still at every entrance? The clear plastic containers of baking soda and icing sugar?”

“It’s winter. I’m pretty sure the ants are hibernating in warm tunnels.”

“Not the insomniacs. Or, you know, the ones scavenging other people’s houses and restaurants that don’t clean their floors properly.”

I lock my fingers behind my head and lie back. “You and Emery can go check. This feels good, right here. Lock the door behind you.”



Tony and Emery have driven over to my house to pest-proof it.

I stand in Tony’s living room, surrounded by ants that pour up from the vents and surge. They rise from the ground, a black jelly of gripping teeth and wiggling legs. Coat the drapes. Flood the tile floor. The couch sags under their weight.

“Those traps,” they clamour. “We couldn’t get in.”

My fists would be magnifying glasses.

Their antennae twitch. Legs stroke my socks. “Tony’s fault. We’re your sisters, for God’s sake. *His* sisters. What gives?”

My fists would sear tiny holes through any exoskeleton. Leave smoking wounds to cool under blue and white icicle lights.

They swell up and mould themselves into one massive ant. The woman-size ant made of ant-size ants lays a tarsal claw on my shoulder. Which is just a shoulder. “Get rid of the baking soda and icing sugar,” they sing. “No sister should be isolated from the family. We never abandon anything that’s ours.”

“We never abandon our own,” I say. The woman-size ant dissolves and my colony swarms over me, through me, as me.

My fists would crash the sun into the wet snow, roll it across colonies and leave every sinful body siz-zling and twitching in the melt.



Brian smears The Grand Central Tavern’s bartop with a rag dirtier than the stinkhole’s kitchen. He doesn’t turn away from the television when I walk in. Game’s on: Jets and Pens. Crows caw caw caw outside, having long devoured the bits of the body of Christ that Emery and Tony scattered this afternoon. I envision the body of Brian, scattered in the same way. Flavoured with pistachio and thyme and oregano, strewn amid icy headstones. Tithing paid over Tony and Emery’s mother’s empty grave. Her

coffin offers no oblation to tunnelling worms, millipedes, and carpenter ants.

Still mesmerised by Evgeni Malkin’s stickhandling and absently wiping the bar, Brian slurs, “Wuddletbee?”

Still drunk.

Behind me, crawling over the pool table and the windows and the ketchup bottles, millions of colony-mates whisper and giggle and rub their legs together. I reply, “A stinger, please. You fucking fuckweed.”

NTS: Come up with better insults.

They surge around me and over the bar, scrambling over each other to reach him. The room becomes a squirming foam of black bodies, ready to be scraped flat and served. I drop to all sixes and join the swarm. We avenge bruises as well as all our cousins this inebriated jerkoff has dissected in his studies. Claw our way up his body to his face. The pupil of one wide black eye dilates. I sink my jaws into its vitreous gel. He’d scream, but we’re already tearing at his throat and licking the taste of barley and hops from his oesophagus.

A rum bottle smashes. Steel caps spill over the floor. Brian’s flesh smells of golden nugget corn on the cob and pickled beer. We carry pieces of his skin, tendons, and teeth down the vents to observe under microscopes and distribute to the crows, but leave him alive and panting on the tile. His blood mixes with the spreading rum.

“My face,” he sobs. Like a fucking larva. “Whaddid ya dooda my face?”

My fists would scatter the Sacrament of Brian unto the crowing masses. Caw, caw, caw.

The lightbulb above the bar flickers and goes bzzt bzzt through its blackening filament. Brian chokes and snivels. Crickets wring their hands outside the windows, warming chilly tarsi. The last of my sisters scurry down the vents.

I wipe my bloody tarsi on Brian’s dirty cloth. Drop it and punt it into the bin behind the bar. Coach convinced me I could kick any item into a wastebasket within thirty metres. He told me I’m a



shoo-in for the Canadian U20. I once tied Tony’s sneakers together and kicked them into the back of a moving garbage truck from my open living room window and made him walk home in his socks. I told Tony, “If you think you’re the saviour of the world, you won’t need shoes. Jesus himself wore sandals. And no socks with them, Captain Italiano. You should grow a Jesus beard. You’d look hot.”

I bend down over this weeping excuse for an entomologist and say, “Now everyone’s going to know you, the guy with these papercut scars all over his face, the one who beat up his ex-girlfriend. You think we won’t tell? You complain to anyone, I don’t just tell my friends – I go to my father. I go to the entire fucking soccer team. You think this beating is bad? Wait till you’ve had fourteen. And the cops. Assault charge not going to look too good beside that grad school transcript, is it?”

“Jesus Christ, Angela. You’re insane.”

“Have a nice flight to Toronto, prickwick.” I grab a bottle of Tequila Rose from the rack. On second thought, “fuckweed” sounds more badass.

I answer the door in a pink bathrobe. Tony. I leave the door open and head back to the kitchen. Lean against the counter and thumb the booze’s label. Call my cat, Fievel, with kissy sounds. NTS: Wash the pot of mac and cheese you just scarfed.

Tony sits on the porch. I blow him a kiss through the kitchen doorway. “Thanks for taking care of me. You and your brother.”

“You took off.”

I scratch a dry red spot on the side of my hand. Missed it in the shower. Tony moves to get up, but I say, “Brian’s, not mine. No one else at the bar.”

“That was my job, Angela.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. You wouldn’t have, anyway.”

The Tequila Rose label peels in my hands. Tony nods toward it and asks, “You want me to pour you some?”

“No. I want you to pour it down the drain.”

“I can’t come in until you move the baking soda and icing sugar.”

I do. “I don’t ever want to drink again. Not even beer. I can still smell his breath. Fucking pickles and lager and salted butter.” Before he can get up from the porch and into the house, I open the bottle over the sink myself. The alcohol swirls around and down the drain, gargling like Emery in Tony’s bathroom. “I wanted to kill him. I wanted to cut the face right off his skull and hang it up like a trophy, right between my dad’s buck and moose. Is that weird? That probably sounds weird.”

“But you didn’t?”

I put the empty bottle on the counter, pull a plum from the fridge and sink my teeth into it. A stream of juice runs from the corner of my mouth to my chin. Tony reaches out to wipe, but I smack his hand away. “Don’t touch me. I may not be drinking age across the border, but I’m not a fucking toddler.”

Fievel meows and walks around the corner, rubs against Tony’s leg. Tony crosses his arms, kisses at the cat. Fievel meows again, purrs, sits, licks the pads of his paws.

“I got the cat last week. His name is Fievel and he’s Jewish.”

Tony blinks. “Your cat is Jewish?”

“Yeah. That’s why my dad and I put up Hanukkah lights instead of Christmas lights this year, before he left. Blue and white. For Fievel. I’m actually glad he’s gone.”

Tony picks the cat up, cradling him and scratching under his chin. “Your dad?”

“No. Brian. I mean, he’s still in Essex. But he’ll go back to Toronto and I’ll never talk to him again. I have to focus on soccer this year, anyway. The women’s under-twenty club is scouting me, did you know that?”

“You play soccer?”

I laugh. It hurts my lips and my ribs. “Shut up, it’s a big deal.”

“You’ve told me two hundred thousand million times. But congrats. Did you know Emery was drafted into the NHL? I joked that he’d have the nicest teeth in the league. Because, you know, he’d actually have teeth. Then he tore that knee ligament.”

“Yeah, he told me. His ACL. That blows.”

“When did you talk to Emery?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Ah, that would’ve been when I was grocery shopping, then. Picked up some more baking soda, by the way. Anyway, took him too long to get laced up again, so they told him to hit the showers. Permanently. What happens if you make the team?”

I drop the plum pit and punt it into the trash can. It rattles inside against aluminum foil and shrink wrap. Fievel leaps from Tony’s arms and darts to the garbage, swishing his tail. I pump my fist in the air. “I get out of this place. Spread my wings, and all that jazz. Pray like a mantis I don’t pull an Emery.”

Before Tony leaves, he checks the baking soda traps. The clear plastic containers are all in the right spots, all full. When he’s gone, I empty them all into the trash and rinse them. I pull the baking soda out of the cupboard and drop-kick it out the back patio door, into the tarp covering the pool two houses down. Goooooooooal by Hölldobler, first of her campaign, and certainly not the last. Such a talented left winger, she’s Gareth Bale with ovaries. She has no fear. She has no mercy. She has no icing sugar left. It’s all in the trash. No way my sisters are ever barred from my house again. No fucking way. We never abandon our own. NTS: Need more mac and cheese, bread, butter, Oreos, pie crumbs, pistachio shells.