

The Walrus Chronicles:
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I am not a body snatcher. A body snatcher invades you, takes you over without leaving you anything of yourself. I am not a skinwalker. A skinwalker is someone who can take animal form or vice versa. I remain human though in a different skin in my ability. I become you. I still know I'm me, but I know everything about being you as well. Eventually you come to realize I'm with you. I'm real. Sometimes you can't handle it. Sometimes you accept it. I've had some try to kill themselves rather than acknowledge my presence. It was just too much. I don't make you do anything against your will. I feel your hunger, your pain, your compassion, your lust, your greed, all of it. You feel mine. We become each other. I see your face in the mirror and but you don't see mine. I can become any other race, gender, orientation, religion, class or whatever.

About two years ago, I realized I was not the only one of my kind. I found three other women like me. It took a while for us to come together, each believing we were the only one and no one else would believe us even if we told them. Trust me. Four healthy black women do not want to end up in the nuthouse. Yes, all four of us are black women. Coincidentally, we all share the same period in which we do not shift in biotransference. We have no control over the shifting or to whom we will shift.

Hope was the first one I met. Then there was Faith. The last to join us was Charity. Oh yeah. My name is Grace.

When we finally got together, we formed a small support group where we talked about who we had been in the past biotransference. We had no idea what we were or why we were chosen for this particular task. We thought of calling ourselves shifters, but we ruled that out. It sounded too Stephen King. It hit us one day while we listened to some old music. John Lennon has already said it for us: I am he as you are he... and well you know the rest. At that moment, we knew what we were.

We are the Walrus.

These are our stories.

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It was the end of May this time. They could never control when their jamboree was about to happen just like they could not control when the shifting took place. They could only feel it coming and deal with it through their own terms. It was never painful - at least not the biotransference. Sometimes what came after left its bruises, but they knew it was useless to complain. They just waited to get to a small retro diner near the railroad tracks known for its old fashioned small town values in the middle of modern chaos.

Charity, Faith, Grace and Hope did not fit in with those values. Yet no one asked them to leave every time they made their way to the corner booth that was somehow always unoccupied when they came. This might have been because they always met after midnight when most of the patrons tended to be either stoned 20-somethings or bored stragglers wanting to prolong the night or get it started. The Walrus Women looked like none of them.

This night at the end of May, they gathered in their usual corner booth as they awaited the midnight breakfast they always ordered. Hope was the only one who ever ordered coffee. She preferred the fancier stuff like lattes and cappuccino, but in keeping with the diner's old fashioned values, she took a simple black coffee. Faith always fed her inner child and alternated between apple and grape juice. Charity was the odd one who ordered Coke even though she would soon lose herself in pancakes. Grace just usually helped herself to the water cooler that sometimes also had ice and pieces of lemon floating about, free to customers only.

They always knew whose turn it was. The other three would sit and listen patiently while their sister of the jamboree unburdened herself of the agony and excitement that came with being a Walrus. Grace leaned against the wall as Charity sat as usual to her right, Faith opposite her and Hope kittykornor.

"It's Hope's turn."

### Melodie's Body

Hope hated being a Walrus. She felt like an underpaid and underappreciated teacher constantly forced to put others at ease because she existed. Yes, she was inside their bodies, but she did not know why it happened. If she knew, she would have prevented it by now. It was no easier for her to experience life through someone else's lens even though that perspective had been forced on her all her life.

Now, she had people literally trying to scratch her out of their skin when they felt her presence. She expected no different from this latest transcorporean.

She studied the fear in the woman's dark brown eyes as she looked back at her own reflection in confusion, expecting to see someone else in her place. Hope was used to this. She got a perverse pleasure knowing her hosts could never see her even as she wore their skin. They usually did not learn enough about her to know her when she passed them on the street. That sometimes infuriated her after she invested her time trying to teach them to be more aware, but then again, she sometimes chose not to tell them that they could see her through a water surface if they tried hard enough.

This one was going to be difficult. She ran her hands through her stringy chestnut brown hair as if to assure herself it was still intact.

"I know you're here," the woman said in an annoying, demanding tone. "Where are you? I can feel you here, but I can't see you."

"It doesn't work that way," Hope said with more authority than she needed. "And you don't have to talk out loud. I'm in your body. It only makes sense that I'm in your consciousness as well. Don't want to end up in an institution again even if it is only four days."

"What are you..." the woman began out loud then internalized. "What are you doing to me? Why have you taken over my body?"

Hope did not care for her tone one bit and did not try to hide it. "I haven't taken over your body. As you can see, you have all control over your functions and you can

do whatever you want. But you will be aware of me and what I think just like I'll be for you."

The woman still looked at herself skeptically in the mirror. Hope suddenly became aware of all the mirrors in the room, especially the full-length one standing in front of the scale that measured weight, body water, muscle percentage and body fat percentage. The woman's image filled the room with cutouts from magazines, calendars and other memorabilia.

Fuck. She's a model.

"Of course, I'm a model," the woman said as she tossed her hair back behind her shoulders. "Melodie Kennedy - as if you've never heard of me. No, you're not going to starve. Not every woman who keeps tabs on her figure starves herself. I watch what I eat. I take care of myself. You should be so lucky to be in this body."

Hope studied Melodie through her eyes. She had to be at least 5'9" without heels and maybe 120 pounds. Her legs were long but not as shapely as her own. The breasts were definitely enhanced and felt heavy. Something else felt odd about Melodie's body, but Hope just could not tell what it was. Even Melodie was blocking that part from her consciousness.

"Well, Melodie, I'm hope. I'll be here for the next four days, so prepare yourself."

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Melodie was right. She did eat. Hope remembered when she was 23. She had never been rail thin, but she was also never overweight. Still, by the time she was Melodie's age, her metabolism had begun to slow down. Her tastes in food had also begun to change as well. She no longer had a fascination for fast food. She learned that she was an adult when it occurred to her that she could have cake for breakfast, but it was probably a bad idea. Hope still made sure she enjoyed what she could and whatever weight gain came with it would just have to come.

Now here was Melodie taking for granted the pasta salad and spring vegetable soup she had nearly finished consuming. Hope felt she took it for granted because she was having a leisurely two-hour lunch at one of the most exclusive restaurants in town. Hope had never set foot in Grazie before that day and knew she never would unless she found herself in the body of another wealthy host.

"This is the life," Melodie was telling her. "I love this place. They can fly lobster in straight from Maine and you get it fresh on the same day."

"I've never had lobster," Hope said. "I've never been in this place."

"You've never been in anyone who comes here?"

"Nope. I've also just never taken the initiative to come here myself if I'd felt like it." She was glad Melodie was not speaking out loud. All that expensive food might have fallen from her mouth.

"You're not very nice are you?" Melodie accused as she polished off the soup. "You should be nice to people. Maybe if you were nicer, you could have been in a position to be here by now."

Hope scoffed. "Please. I could play demure, but my eyes and speak softly all I want. It's never going to be the same for me as it is for you. No matter what I do, it will always be read as pathological. You, on the other hand, have taken a notion of what someone thinks you should be and call yourself empowered because you make money off it. You are the last person who needs to tell me I should be nice."

"Jeez, calm down," Melodie said as she finally finished her meal. "I'm just trying to help."

"I didn't ask for help."

"We're going to be together for a couple of days whether or not we like it, so we may as well get to know each other. In a couple of days, I'll be getting some work done, so you can see the payoff in looking like this."

Hope rolled her eyes knowing this was going to be a long four days.

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At least Silas was fine - conceited as all hell but nice to look at. Hope kept wishing he would be struck with an affliction that left him unable to speak so that she could enjoy just looking at him sitting down and being pretty. Yet he had to open his mouth and display what he truly was. With every passing second, he became less attractive to Hope despite his nearly perfectly sculpted body and hundred dollar haircut. His dark brown eyes were constantly in a mirror making sure the past five seconds had not brought a blemish to his pale white face. Hope wondered when Melodie would notice that Silas was not paying her much attention at all. Or perhaps this was how they both liked it - both of them too self-involved with themselves but happy to have a trophy to show off when they stepped outside their walls. She felt Melodie silently evaluating Silas, looking for a single flaw to pick apart while she told him her plans for the next few days. She also felt Hope's envy.

"Gianni said it's a simple procedure. I should be home the same day. You can come by and we can watch movies together or something."

"Yeah, uh, I don't know, Mel. You know how I hate to be around sick people."

"It's not sickness, you dope. I'm going to be recovering from a tummy tuck."

That was it. Hope could not pick up on what felt wrong about Melodie's body, but she figured it out when she discovered Melodie was about to undergo the surgery. Melodie's body felt strange to her because this was not the first time the woman had undergone such a procedure. Hope had no idea how many times she had already had this surgery. She knew the breasts were enhanced; she felt the heavy collagen in the lips; the enhanced backside was also a bit uncomfortable. All Melodie would say was, "Beauty is pain and sometimes it's not pretty." Hope simply did not like this body.

"Yeah, well, I have a shoot that day and I'll probably be pretty tired, so why don't you just call one of your friends."

"What if I don't go through with it?"

Hope managed to bring the thought to the front of Melodie's mind before the model could dismiss it. She did not know how she was sometimes able to make herself speak through them. She just needed Melodie to see what was happening before her. Just as she suspected, the thought got Silas' full attention.

"But you have to, Mel. You said you might get fired because you put on those few extra pounds. Who's gonna hire you if Gianni fires you? You know he's got all kinds of clout here and if he says you're finished, you're finished."

*Listen to what he's saying. He doesn't want you for who you are. He wants you gone that day for a reason. He doesn't care about your recovery. Why are you doing this?*

She could feel the struggle starting in Melodie, but Melodie fought it. She did not want to hear this. Hope kept pushing.

"Gianni's not the only game in town. What if I wasn't even a model?"

Silas finally got up and put his arms around Melodie's waist. "Babe, what would we be if we weren't models? We're the chosen ones. So what if we need to enhance every once in a while? Would you tell a musician not to practice?"

Hope had lost. Those words had soothed Melodie beyond the doubts she tried to cast in the young woman. She remembered what it was like to have someone who looked like Silas to say nice things to her even when they still felt wrong in her heart. She listened to the Silases more than she did her own heart and head sometimes. That was one nasty habit she learned to break.

"Let's just say you come over and keep me company when it's all over. I'm going to need the company."

Sorry, but you know how I am after a shoot. Just call a friend and have her come over with you. Look, babe, I've gotta go. I'll have somebody check on you after you get it done."

She felt Melodie's disappointment as she watched Silas take off out the door.

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The room was cold and sterile, bright lights everywhere. Melodie adjusted her designer gown, refusing to wear anything hospital issued.

"Those gowns just don't do anything for my figure."

"You're about to have body altering surgery and you're worried about how you look in a hospital gown? Seriously, does your head ever hurt from having to keep up with all your illogic?"

"I'm not illogic. I'm just being real. There are so many people who would love to see me out of sorts just once. I'd never give them the satisfaction."

Hope sighed in exasperation. Her head had already begun to spin with the pre-surgery preparations. This was old business to Melodie. She had barely listened to the surgeon going through the possible risks of the surgery. Hope was afraid for her: blood clots, bad reaction to the anesthesia, respiratory complications, heart complications,

infection, slow healing. Death. Hope knew her fear was getting to Melodie, but Melodie was good at blocking out what she didn't like.

"You never completely healed from your last surgery did you?" Hope asked. Melodie was quiet a moment before answering defensively.

"I'm just a little slow to heal. My skin is kind of sensitive. I'll be fine after this."

"You're not sure. You have some doubts you're trying to suppress. That last surgery scared you, but you're afraid to tell Gianni. Why are you going through with this when you know it can hurt you?"

"It's my job." Melodie had spoken aloud and checked to see that she was still alone. "You wouldn't understand. I bet you never took a risk in your life."

"My very life is a risk, sweetheart. Do you have people reminding you they wish you didn't exist every damn day of your life? Do you know what it's like to walk down the street and have to keep one eye on the road and the other on the people who pass you by because you have no idea if they may decide that today is the day they show you just who owns you? I don't think so. And if you learn one thing after this it had better be that not everything revolves around you and you had better learn to start considering others outside your little bubble here. You'll be sorry when it bursts."

Something had gotten through to Melodie. Hope wasn't sure what it was, but her words had stung.

"Why do you hate me? I haven't done anything to you. I don't even know you. You tell me I don't know what it's like to go through what you do, but that doesn't mean I don't have my own problems. I have to go through all this to maintain a standard that doesn't really exist. This procedure costs money. I have to do all this so I don't get knocked off some fake pedestal. You should think about it from a woman's point of view."

"Oh-my-fucking-God. Did you really just tell me to think about this from a woman's point of view? What the fuck do you think I am?"

Melodie started to tear up. "You don't have to get nasty with me. I didn't know."

"Please, just shut the fuck up and get ready for your damn surgery. I'll be glad when this is over. You are by far the most irritating transcorporean I have ever had the displeasure of meeting."

"Oh, like you've never met a real racist or something. How dare you compare me to those monsters?"

"Are you okay, Ms. Kennedie?"

Neither of them had noticed the doctor had re-entered the room. Melodie had actually begun to shed tears. "I'm fine. I guess I just realized what you said about the infection and got a little shaken up. Who wants that to happen in their bodies?"

"You know if you have any doubts..."

"No, I'm ready. I definitely want to do this. I'll be the envy of the fashion world... and beyond."

Hope knew that last addition was directed at her, but she decided to force a thought on Melodie. She could have humiliated her in front of this picture perfect

doctor, but she was too exhausted to even give it a thought. She just went along for the ride to the operating room.

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I wish I could feel like this all the time. No pain, no worries, nothing else in the world.

*You already do. You just create problems like this for yourself so you don't have to acknowledge you're not as bad off as you want to be. It's hard to feel oppressed if you know you're the oppressor.*

You're mean. You should be nicer.

*I'm human. Just because I have a superhuman ability doesn't mean I'm suddenly without feeling. We all have those. You just don't like to think about anyone else's if it makes you uncomfortable.*

I'm going to be in pain when this is over and you still want to talk to me like that. How can you be so insensitive?

*I have absolutely no obligation to be nice to you. I don't owe you a thing.*

You're invading my space. You're in my head and I didn't ask you to be. You know everything about me without my permission and you have this advantage over me. Well, I'll tell you this. You don't really know me if you think I'm some privileged princess that gets her way every time. Things don't always go my way.... I feel funny.

*It started a few minutes ago while you were feeling high. You'll stop in a minute when they give you more drugs before you wake. They know something's wrong, but they haven't been able to stop it yet. When you wake up, they'll have some bad news. I can feel it. This perfect life you wanted to put a dent in, it's about to get a lot more complicated. Hope you're happy.*

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Melodie's head felt like heavy air. It felt as if it was weighted down and floating at the same time. Melodie's body felt like a cage. Hope needed to escape it. Despite the painkillers in Melodie's system, Hope still felt the pain of her body. The pain was only on one side. She could feel nothing on other side. For the first time since the biotransference, Hope felt sorry for Melodie. Melodie finally opened her eyes and looked at the nurse standing over her.

"Ms. Kennedie, can you hear me? Can you say anything? The doctor will be here in the moment to explain it to you."

Hope knew what he would say before the words came out. There had been complications during the surgery. The blood clots had traveled to her brain before they spotted it and caused a stroke. She was showing signs of mobility problems on one side of her body. Hope did not need to see that one side of Melodie's face had fallen and could feel the tightness in her throat. If she did speak again, it would not be with the same arrogance and vibrancy that she had only a few hours before.

The depression set in immediately as Melodie could not imagine living a life other than the one to which she had been accustomed most of her life. She did not try to speak. She tried to hide her asymmetrical face from the doctors and nurses to no avail. She was embarrassed to be seen as anything less than perfect.

"It's a good thing your friends didn't show up here. And Silas. I wonder how hard he fought to get in here after he found out you wanted no visitors."

"You know goddamn well he didn't come and how dare you make fun of me now."

"So it's okay for you to swear when you feel hurt but not okay for anyone to do it to you? I think I see how this works now."

"You really think you can compare someone hurting your feelings to me having a disability? You don't know what it feels like to have to be confined to this body for the rest of your life."

"That's what you think I go through? Hurt feelings on a daily basis? No sweetheart, I'm afraid it's much more than that. You think you have it worse than me now because a surgery you didn't need but chose to have left you with a medical condition that everyone sympathizes with because it happened to you. Guess what? This is happening to someone else somewhere else and that person won't be getting sympathy cards and websites devoted to him because he's not famous like you and deserving of sympathy. He won't be made into a martyr to teach little girls everywhere a lesson in what happens to women who fall victim to the beauty myth. Yeah, that's right. Everyone is telling you that you have a right to be a victim and you get to wallow in that. I'm sure none of you will be concerned about the guy who has no one to wipe his ass when he needs it like you do."

"I don't believe you. You don't get off your high horse for one second to stop judging me when I clearly don't need to be treated this way right now. I was right about you. You are not a nice person."

"Maybe I'm not nice, but I'm also not a liar or a fake. We all don't have the luxury of thinking the world owes us something because we're here. If you think for a second I'm going to adjust myself because you suddenly feel like the world has come down on you, I'm afraid you are sadly mistaken."

Melodie made a voluntary move nearly for the first time since she had lost the ability to move one side of her body. She wiped the tear that had rolled down her face and began to weakly hit herself in the face.

"I hate you so much! Get out of me. Get away from me!"

"Don't worry. Tomorrow I'll be gone and you will never again hear from me or even have to acknowledge my existence."

"What?"

Hope was a bit taken aback with Melodie's alarm. She definitely hadn't expected it.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I told you that this would only last four days. You will never hear from me again. It's just you and your shallow little world again."

“But can’t you come back?”

Melodie was desperate. She was clinging to something, afraid to let go of Hope for some reason.

“What type of masochist are you? You know I don’t like you and will never have anything nice to say to you. Why the hell would you want me to stay around here?”

“You’re the only one who can still hear me as I was. If I open my mouth to anyone else, I’ll not only look like a freak but sound like one, too. I sound clear to you and we can talk like normal people. If everyone else has to see me like this, I don’t know how I’ll make it.”

“You know the sad thing, Melodie? You truly don’t hear yourself. You can’t get out of being self-involved for one second to realize that I owe you nothing. Even if I could control this, there is no way that I would stay here with you. I thought I was going to hate being in you because you would clearly be this thin-obsessed model, but it’s been much worse. You are incapable of seeing past your own life to consider anyone or anything else and get upset when you are not the center of anyone else’s world. I bet you have to announce to people on Facebook that you’re unfriending them because you think it’s going to have some kind of impact. Guess what? You are not the center of the universe. You’ll feel like it again when some sect of feminists decides to take up your cause against the beauty industry and that will get you feeling like somebody again. I will still not give a shit.”

Melodie did not call her mean or tell her she should be nice again. They both felt the weight of the body that could no longer control itself as it once had. She knew Melodie’s thoughts had gone on to other matters such as would she now gain weight because she was unable to work out as she once had or would she be safe from that since she had trouble swallowing. She had begun to wonder if Silas had already moved on knowing he would never be seen with her looking less than perfect much less with half her face sinking like a basset hound’s. She thought about anything except Hope’s words.

Melodie struggled with herself a moment and sat up in the bed. She looked around a moment then found her purse sitting at her bedside. Her muscles were weak from inactivity, but she fumbled around and managed to extend her reach far enough to drag her purse to her side. She was exhausted by the time she fished around and found the mirror. Fortunately, it was an easy open design that she could open with one hand. She flicked open the compact and brought it to her eye level. Hope knew at that moment that Melodie would never be at peace with what had happened to her. She knew what it felt like when someone wanted to die rather than live with something they could not face. Melodie’s concern was not that she would not have to live with the complications caused by her stroke. Melodie was destroyed to have to live with being ugly.

Hope was not surprised when Melodie brought all the strength she could muster to throw the compact away. Although not a particularly strong toss, it broke into

several pieces when it hit the floor. Hope began to count the remaining hours before the biotransference would send her out of Melodie Kennedy's body forever.

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Hope was the one to always wake up in her own bed. Charity found herself on her couch while Faith ended up in her kitchen. Grace was always outside her door no matter the weather.

Hope looked at herself from the bird's eye view that always came when they were being sent back into their own bodies. The sensation of floating sometimes made her a bit uneasy, but she was grateful for it this time knowing it meant she was away from Melodie Kennedy forever. She read somewhere that some people came into her life as blessings and others as lessons. She had definitely been the one taught a lesson this time.

The next meeting would be hers to start. She would have to tell the rest about this experience with Melodie and contemplate along with the rest of them what it meant. They never really found answers, but it felt good to unburden herself of the grief Melodie had caused her. Only the others would understand how it felt. She was grateful for the day Grace found her. She needed the others to ground her again, remind her that she was complete and keep her from losing her own mind in another's.

### Annie's Film

The one thing that scared Charity the most about being a Walrus was her belief that she might somehow not be able to shake off the traits of her transcorporean. She feared that someday she would find herself in the body of a drug addict and would not be able to break the jones she felt from her experience as the biotran. So far it had not happened, but that fear never went away just as children who were afraid of the dark grow to still have some fear of the unknown in their mature years. Charity knew her cowardice and often felt shame that she lived in fear. Yet she had not gotten this far in her life taking chances when they were unnecessary - not even as a walrus.

The body was voluptuous the kind that were always valued from the neck down with no notice to anything above the chin offered. Charity had no idea how women with this kind of body coped with the attention they inevitably received. She might not have had all the curves anymore, but she still remembered what it was like to try to make herself invisible when she walked down the street to stop the catcalls and other unnecessary comments she inevitably received from strangers and those she thought she knew. Bodies like this always got the worst kind of notice.

This transcorporean did not seem to mind as she lovingly ran her hands over the formfitting outfit that barely covered more than what was legally required. Charity

fought the urge to roll her body into a ball and make it as small as possible. The fight was not entirely hers. Her transcorporean relinquished no control.

“Why are you so stiff? You feel like you’re trying to make me into a corpse.”

“Sorry. I’m just not used to being so exposed. Well, I guess I’m not, but you know. This feels strange.”

“Not to me.” The woman gave herself another once over then turned her attention to the mirror as if expecting to see something else. “Why can’t I see you? I know you’re there, but you don’t show yourself.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Mirrors don’t work, but a water surface might. It usually depends on the transcorporean.”

“Oh?”

“Some people really don’t want to see, so they can’t.”

“Oh. Well, my name is Annie, Annie Weeks. Actually, you may know me as Jansen La Flame. I was in that Young Thugness video “That’s the Life” a couple of years back. I got my own line of calendars now and I do a lot of shoots for some of the hip-hop oriented magazines. Not a bad way to make a living.”

“Oh.”

Charity looked around Annie’s place. She had a modest home with all the latest required in technology. She also had a few nice things scattered here and there with Afrocentric art adorning her walls and Annie Lee products making cute keepsakes everywhere. Charity would have never expected this from this young woman.

“Pretty nice, huh?” Annie smiled as if Charity were standing right in front of her. “Some of it comes from my mom and aunt because they know I like art like this. I collect some of it myself. I know it’s a luxury, but I do like nice things. Hell, I guess if my last name was Lee, I would have ended up with my art on *The Cosby Show* instead of turning tricks.”

Annie laughed gaily, but Charity again froze inside her latest transcorporean. *Annie was a prostitute. Oh my God, Annie was a prostitute.*

“I prefer the term sex worker.”

Charity could feel herself blush even though this was not her body. She always felt like a child caught stealing whenever she passed judgment on someone, but women who sold their bodies for money were unequivocally bad girls. And she was taught never to be a bad girl.

“Wow. You come with so many hang ups.”

“There not hang ups. These are just the values I grew up with. They really don’t seem so bad.”

“Values. Yeah. That word.”

Annie laughed, having obviously heard that word more times than she could count. Charity felt her rolling it off her shoulders. However, she also felt a small twinge of pain, brief but noticeable. She could feel Annie suppressing the hurt she must have felt at knowing what Charity already thought of her without truly knowing her.

“I’m not saying that you don’t have values, but I know they’re different than mine. I don’t believe that’s a bad thing. I just know I couldn’t do what you do.”

"How do you know that?"

Annie smiled, but Charity didn't feel like the woman was mocking her.

"I don't know, but sex has always been different for me. I like knowing that the person that I'm with is with me because of an emotional connection we share. I've never been one who could handle having sex just to do it. He needs to mean something to me. That may make me boring to some, but I gotta protect myself the ways I know how."

"Yeah, that's true. I get what you say though, but there can be something in just getting down with somebody just because. You never know how somebody might surprise you. Hell, when I'm getting paid for it, I gotta be the expert. I see what you mean about the connection though. That can be nice when you get it. Are you smiling?"

"Yeah, I think I am."

"Well, I hate to tell you, but I have an appointment. I have to work if I hope to get my rent paid and food in the fridge, so you may as well prepare yourself for non-connected, strictly physical and detached sex. It won't be so bad. I've had this john before and he's nice. Nothing weird's going to happen, so you don't have to worry about anything like that."

"I'm sorry. I still don't know how much control I have over a body or what I do to get it, so don't be upset if I get in your way. I promise it's not intentional."

"Honey, I'm sure if I can keep control when I'm tied up, bound or anything else, you won't be a problem."

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"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Annie took a drag of her cigarette while she mentally answered Charity. "Nah, go 'head."

"What was it like the first time you... did it?"

Annie didn't smile like she usually did. Charity hadn't upset her or made her mad despite the obvious discomfort Charity felt while Annie serviced her client. Annie was a professional and managed just fine. Her hesitancy in answering the question came more from her choosing her words, searching for a memory so that she could answer honestly. Charity liked that about Annie - she was always so damn honest and hid nothing. Still, her voice became unexpectedly quiet, even gentler than her normal timbre.

"Actually, it wasn't easy. I'd had sex before. I knew that part. I just didn't know what was going to be expected of me. He was a much older man. Old hat at hired girls because he could get exactly what he wanted from him. That's the reality with most men who want to hire somebody. They think there are two kinds of women in the world and they don't want the ones that are supposed to be suitable to marry to do the things they really want. Makes no fucking sense, but that's how they think. Anyway, I found out what he wanted and just went with it. It was over pretty soon because they

pay for your time. Sometimes they just pay for an act or two, mostly blow jobs. This one wanted a fantasy, so I gave it to him. After that, I started to make sure I talked to my johns and asked them why they wanted this particular thing or that. I started to learn about them. I hate to say it, but most of them are pretty pathetic. I get a few that are decent, but they want to do something that most people frown on you know. Why would a guy want to be tied up and hit with a whip by a thick black woman? Why would a guy want to fuck one except for getting a woman who was born knowing how to fuck? I get that a lot, but, hell, it's their money. He may think he got the best of me, but I always know when I turn 'em out. Women, too."

"Oh."

"Is that all you say?"

"No, I was just... I don't know. I really don't know what to think. This is what you do because you like it, but I know it's not that way for all of you. Pimps and madams and whoever else makes money off you. That's the part that doesn't seem right."

"Yeah, that's true. I see some girls that shouldn't be out there, underage and whatnot. This isn't exactly how I saw my life either, but I'm playing the hand I was dealt and so far I haven't had to fold."

Annie put out the rest of her cigarette and Charity breathed deeply in relief. Annie gave her trademark laugh then suddenly got up and headed to her kitchen. She got a big mixing bowl and began to fill it with water. She then set in on her small counter and began to study it. The smile began to slowly spread across her face.

"You've got such a cute face. Remind me of my niece."

Charity felt herself blush again. It had been a while since anyone had complimented her for any reason. Annie could see her. There had been many transcorporeans who simply could not. She knew they didn't want to see her. Annie did not just want to see her; she wanted to acknowledge her presence and share a connection with her. Charity didn't get this from a lot of transcorporeans who only wanted her out of their bodies so that they could go back to an existence before they were made aware of hers. Annie had never been uncomfortable with Charity's presence. She seemed to enjoy having someone else in her body even in an extracorporeal sense. Charity rarely felt at home in another, but Annie made her welcome.

Their moment was interrupted with a ring tone - "I Know What Boys Like." It was Charity's turn to laugh. Still, she felt like she was eavesdropping on the conversation, especially since she knew to stay silent.

"How are you, Luther?"

"Good, Jansen. I got some good news for you. One of our regular girls had to drop out of our little film we're doing tomorrow. I told my boys about you and they want to give you a shot. If you can do what you do in front of the camera, it could be a lot of money in it for you."

"Well, what time? I got most of my day free tomorrow, but I need to know if I have to change around some things."

"You know how folks are. We'll need you around one, so you should try to get here before then."

"Okay, I'll make sure I get my schedule straight. Thanks, Luther."

"See you later, sugar."

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"You got stiff again."

"Sorry, I was trying not to react."

"Why?"

"Well, I didn't want you to get the wrong idea or think that I was judging you again."

"I don't think you are, but what's wrong?"

"That Luther guy doesn't seem a little wrong to you? I know I just heard his voice, but something about him isn't right."

"Oh, I know Luther comes off that way, but I've known him for a while. Look. I've been thinking about doing films for a while. The one thing you can say about porn is that it's regulated. At least I'd get tested on a regular basis and not have to pay for it out of my own pocket. Plus, this could be some really good money and I wouldn't have to work as often. I can get noticed here. A lot of people go to this site and if enough people vote for my film, I could make it big."

Annie went to her laptop and typed in the URL. Charity's vision was greeted with a few sights she tended to avoid as much as possible. Some she didn't even know were possible. Others were so ridiculous that she couldn't suppress the childish laughter bubbling through her.

"I know right! Don't worry. I already know my body can't get into that position. I got my own tricks though."

"It just kind of makes me mad sometimes though. We're supposed to be contortionist and know how to do all this stuff whether or not we really do. I never see men having to go through all this."

Annie didn't answer, but her smile stayed intact. She checked her calendar and arranged her schedule to fit her new plans.

The next morning when they arrived at the designated site, Charity took in the antiseptic setting all around her. The whole thing was weirdly clinical with white walls all around and various stations for cleaning and other tasks pertaining to the job ahead. It occurred to her how all middle class it was, wealthy even. They were in a rented mansion where acts such as theirs were supposed to be forbidden, not becoming of those who managed to find themselves permanently in such surroundings. Yet here they were there to defile the sanctuary of the moral majority who publicly denounced the source of their riches and other gains they claimed from "righteous" living. Charity may have been a bit square, but she knew better.

"This place is nice." Annie looked around as if she were already plotting where she would start and where she would end.

"There doesn't seem to be a bed in this place."

"Honey, in this line of work, you'd be surprised at how rarely a bed is involved."

"Jansen!"

She turned to see a tall and somewhat stout man headed her way.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Nobody. I was just looking at this place."

Charity noted the lingering look as they shook hands. The uneasy feeling she got the day before returned. She knew this had to be Luther. He took the liberties of running his hands around Annie while she seemed unfazed, but Charity's own absent skin began to crawl. She tried not to let her own reflexive responses get in Annie's way, but she just did not like the way Luther's hands felt on her temporary skin, Annie's skin.

*"Just relax. He'll be done in a minute. He gets a few jollies because he's the producer, but he won't be involved with anything else."*

*"Sorry, but this guy just bothers me."*

Charity steeled herself while Luther explained the scene - one man and three women. Charity never understood group sex. There was only so much you could do with one person let alone two. It just seemed like so much work.

"Yeah, it is."

Charity tried to resign herself to what was about to happen as Annie was prepped for her big scene. At least this was something that was supposed to have a story. Annie had told her already that there were a lot of scenes that simply called for getting naked and talking to the camera. So much Internet porn was either point of view or driven by perceived audience fantasy that the "actors" really seemed to hold no interest for each other anymore. There was truly something empty about it even though it was all so obviously fake anyway.

The sights, smells and touches were all a bit too much for Charity. Worse, she could feel when Annie's body grew tired but had to keep going until her male co-star needed a break. But she handled it. Annie played the part like a true professional and never complained. Charity was right about one thing: this was a lot of work for little pay out. She could feel when Annie got sexual satisfaction, but it seemed like such a small reward.

It was finally over. There were few re-takes, if any, and practically no direction. Annie was told she was done for the day, so she went to go get herself cleaned up.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Are you kidding? That was an ordeal. 'Do this while you do this. Make sure he stays hard. Okay fluff him now. Make him come now.' Jesus, you wouldn't have even thought there were three women there at all."

"Listen to you getting all pro-female sex."

"Don't laugh at me. Just because there are some things I don't want to do doesn't mean I think no one should. But you gotta see my point. This is what I don't like about porn. I just don't see anything that has to do with the woman getting off."

That just wasn't even a concern. The stuff you do with the other girls wasn't even about you. It was about that guy behind the camera touching himself."

"True, but hell I'm getting paid for it. I should introduce you to some friends of mine sometime. They make some really good stuff that puts us at the center of it all. Only thing is it doesn't pay very well and people are so quick to judge it. You put our bodies in anything sexual and we get judged. After today, you might like it just a little more."

"I don't know. I'll probably still be a little square."

"The word is vanilla. Nothing wrong with that either. Let's go see Luther. I got to get my money."

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It took a good moment to finally find Luther. He didn't seem happy to see them. Charity saw a look thrown to the young camera operator who led them in circles before they happened to come across Luther sitting in a study having himself serviced by a young hopeful. Annie thought he was angry at having his audition interrupted, but Charity knew it was something else. He hastily dismissed the young woman and stuffed himself back in his pants. Annie remained cordial.

"I was just on my way out, so I wanted to pick up my money."

Something dark passed over Luther's face. Even Annie became unsettled. She hadn't expected this reaction. Charity knew then what was about to happen.

"Money. I just said you were going to get a shot at a film. You get paid if I want to pay you. Right now, I need to see how well you do for the site. Nobody might not even look at yo' ass. You better hope somebody want to see you before you get paid."

Charity could feel the wheels turn in Annie's head. She wasn't sure where to head since she wasn't expecting this reaction. Charity suddenly had an idea.

"Annie, did you sign a release form?"

"What?"

"He can't legally use anything with you in it until you sign a statement that gives him permission to use your image. Tell him you won't sign a release form until he gives you your money."

"I didn't sign a release form."

Luther froze a moment, not exactly sure whether or not he was bent over a barrel. It didn't take him long to start to understand.

"As a matter of fact, did anyone here sign a release form because this could get real ugly if you've just shot a bunch of footage you can't use. Then you have to pay for this mansion and all the equipment you used. Don't get me started on court fees..."

"You wouldn't. You really want to take this public with everybody knowing what you do."

Charity felt Annie take control again. She knew she had Luther right where she wanted him. They were both about to enjoy this.

"Everybody already knows what I do. I don't have any shame about that. If I did, men you like you would never find anybody to get off with. Now, you can give me my money or I can lawyer up."

"Jaded ass bitch." He mumbled it under his breath but was still loud enough to hear. He took a book from the shelf and opened it to reveal a small safe. He counted out the cash and practically threw it at Annie. "That's to keep you from coming back again. I can get ten girls younger and better looking to do what you do. I'll tell Tommy to come around later for you to sign the papers, but you won't be working for me anymore."

"I look forward to it."

Annie daintily took the cash and walked out the door like she owned the place. Charity could feel the pride swell through her as well. Annie's momentary fluster could have ended much differently, but Charity had not sat idle and quiet as she was prone to do. She thought on her feet and made sure Annie remembered she had other options. For this headstrong and confident woman, Charity had made herself useful.

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"It always kind of hurts when someone you thought you knew shows their true colors, but at least you know now."

"Yeah, I thought Luther was alright, but I'm more disappointed about not keeping the job. The money would have been really good."

"Put the herbs directly on the potatoes instead of combining them and add Cajun seasoning and chili powder for extra heat. After that, you can drizzle the olive oil directly on them."

Charity and Annie decided to celebrate by introducing each other to some of their favorite foods. So far their menu included spicy potato wedges, chicken with pesto sauce, spinach patties and corn on the cob. They both decided to hold off on dessert until they knew they could hold it down, but tiramisu was about to make it to the top of the list of possibilities.

"You mentioned something about a different kind of porn. I know you said it doesn't pay as much, but you still have so much other stuff you do. Hell, you might sell more calendars."

"True. I didn't really want to get into that because I didn't want to step on the toes of those women who are really into doing something different. It would be just about the money for me and they don't need that."

"How do you know? It took me a long time to get to the point where I just wouldn't shake my head at sisters who didn't live exactly the same way I do because I thought I was better than them. I still catch myself doing it sometimes, but you know what? When this started to happen to me, the biotransference, I found out that so many more of those people I tended to judge were more accepting of me than I ever was of them. You know my fears and I try not to let that get in the way of whatever I have to go through here. I learned a lot from you these past few days and I know I'm not going

to end up just wanting sex at every moment. You don't either, but that might have been a fear before I got to know you. You opened yourself to me just because you knew I was here and made me feel welcome. I can't imagine someone not doing the same for you."

"Charity, when this is over, will you take part of me with you?"

"What?"

"I've had others in my body before but never like this. I wouldn't have even believed it possible if it wasn't happening to me, but it is. When you leave me, will you take part of me with you? Will I still be a part of you? My body has always been valuable on one level because it's been my livelihood, but no one has ever really made me feel like I could have taught them something."

Charity mulled it over a moment. She was somewhat surprised since Annie never really let on that she had such insecurities. She felt a bit flattered that her opinion could mean so much to someone she had come to admire.

"Annie, I don't think I could tell you how much of an impact you've truly had on me. I won't be the last. You shine way too brightly not to touch anyone else."

The tears came as a complete shock to Charity. With all Annie's strength and integrity, she had forgotten to remember that her latest transcorporean could also sometimes become overwhelmed in a good way. Charity felt those tears coming down warm and freely on Annie's smooth face. Neither of them tried to make a motion to wipe them away.

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Sometimes the sensation of flight made her feel dizzy before she found herself in the comfort of her own home on her own couch. This time when she looked at herself, Charity tried to imagine how Annie had seen her through the water. She had said she was cute, a compliment she had not gotten in some time. She liked it.

Charity sometimes felt ill when she returned to her own body, but she was oddly at ease this time. She actually already missed being with Annie. It felt good to share her love of food and have someone understand her fears rather than judge them as childish and unfounded just because they did not have the same ones. Of course, she felt a sense of relief with the other walrus because they all had the same ability, but this was different. She felt a kind of kinship with Annie.

Charity contemplated how much of her experience she could share with the others. She began to wonder exactly why this connection she felt with Annie was so strong. Deep down, she knew this was the type of connection she wanted with a partner, the kind she had told Annie about while they shared the same body. Charity didn't want to think about the possibility that her attraction to Annie could in any way be sexual because that just was not her. As much as Annie stimulated her intellectually, she had to ask herself if that stimulation went beyond the mental satisfaction she got from their interactions.

She knew Annie had no attraction like that toward her, at least none that she noticed. However, Charity was disappointed in herself because she felt like she was being unwilling to explore a possibility even though it was not truly there. She felt bad because she didn't want it to be there. She felt as if she were betraying Annie in some way.

Charity didn't know what it meant, but she knew what she wanted to tell the others at the next gathering of the walrus. She might feel differently by the time it came around since she knew the other walrus were the only ones she could trust with her feelings and experiences. For now, she simply wanted to roll over on her couch and fall asleep. Her body needed the rest.

Jackson's Guitar

Damn. I got a dick this time. I hated having a dick. My primary thoughts would always begin to revolve around what these few extra inches wanted rather than what I overall needed. Then they never wanted to acknowledge that they always felt they were entitled to it just because they had a couple of extra inches dangling from that position. I expected this one to be no different. Something about testosterone seemed to kill a few brain cells. The only thing I hated more than having a dick was that the entire culture of permissiveness that surrounded me when I had one disappeared as soon as it was gone. The dick wasn't what held the magic - just the illusion of its power.

I expected this one to be no different. It took him a good while to realize I was there. When he finally realized he wasn't still just high, he freaked. A lot of them usually do. I can understand that. I know I might just check myself into a mental ward if I felt a whole 'nother person in my consciousness and bodily being, dick or not. I've actually been in people before who were high. Sometimes they could tell something was amiss, but others needed a little time. This guy was coming down and still wasn't sure whether or not he was okay just yet.

He gave us both a jolt when he stuck his head under the cold water. What is it with white people and cold? I don't care if it's the hottest day of the year in Death Valley. I'm going to submerge myself one toe at a time. This dude just went in all at once. Hell, maybe he needed to because his head started to clear for the first time since I got in him.

"The fuck is happening to me?"

"Don't worry. This happens to me all the time. You're okay, but I'm going to be here for a few days."

"Huh?"

"I'm in you. I'll be in you for four days. No, this isn't because of something you smoked last night. I'm sure that was some good shit, so you don't have to go fire your

weed man. Look. I can't explain to you why this happens. It just does. The sooner you accept that then we can get on with our day. Okay?"

He stood there looking in the mirror wondering exactly where his mind had gone because he was sure he must have gotten some acid mixed with his California gold. This man had the wildest, longest frizzy hair I had ever seen. Some kind of off blond color. Skinny, too. He was probably a vegetarian, but I didn't mind. I actually found some good side dishes from some of the vegetarians I had inhabited. I was too picky of an eater to actually go full vegetarian. I liked tomato paste and sauces, not tomatoes. I liked peanut butter, not peanuts. Onion and garlic powder were okay, too. Actual onions and garlic - no.

He was finally starting to come around. He couldn't find that cloud around his head he thought would be there, so he figured out I was more than just a voice in his head. I hoped I didn't put him off the weed because that would have been a damn shame.

"Why don't we start again? What's your name?"

"Jackson. Jackson Dunne." He spoke in a low whisper like he was afraid someone would find him talking to himself. I didn't blame him. Who the fuck was going to believe you if you told them there was an actual person sharing your body?

"It's okay, Jackson. You don't have to speak out loud. I'm in your body. I'm in your mind. You still have control. I'm just along for the ride. You know what I'm thinking and I know your thoughts as well, but it's still your body. I may try to engage in conversation if it gets too boring, but otherwise I'll let you be. You don't try to do me any harm and I won't do any to you. That sound like a deal?"

"Why can't I see you?"

He stared in the mirror expecting to see his reflection morph into what he thought the voice inside his head looked like. He had the wrong the picture. Interestingly, he pictured a black girl, but she looked like Rashida Jones. I got that a lot. Whenever they found out I was black, they immediately went to somebody that looked like her as if I couldn't look like Michelle Obama or Rita Marley. I couldn't, but still...

"Oh, you're dark."

Oh, he heard that. "Somewhat, yeah. More so in the summer than winter. Yes, we 'tan' or as my folks would say get dark."

"I don't spend much time out in the sun, so I'm kinda pale all year 'round. I might sit outside and practice sometimes, but I usually stay in."

I looked around and saw it. He had an old acoustic guitar sitting by the bed. It looked like he slept with it. I could tell it was something vintage. He took good care of it though because it was in great condition. I never saw guitars like that anymore. It was the kind those old school country singers used to play. At least that's what I thought. I'd seen *Coal Miner's Daughter* a few times in my life, so I know a little something about country. Just a little.

"So you're a musician?"

"Yeah!" He had a huge Cheshire cat grin as he walked over to pick up the guitar. That was the kind of grin that got me in trouble a few too many times in my life.

I must be a good girl at heart because I just couldn't resist something that looked like a bad boy and Jackson had something of a mischievous ne'er-do-well vibe about him. Not malicious but unconcerned. I could see right away that he had a serious crush on that guitar. He picked it up and held it like it would be the last time.

"I've had this baby since I was 16. It's an actual vintage 1956 Martin & Co. Dreadnaught D-28. First and last thing my dad ever got for me."

"Really. What happened to him?"

I thought he would tell me his father died or something like that by the way he suddenly stopped smiling and got quiet. "I don't know." He put the guitar back down and fidgeted. "I guess I need to shower and have a little bite to eat. I guess you're coming with me?"

"Afraid so, honey."

~~~

I was right. Jackson was a vegetarian. He had some of the most delicious and sweetest fruit after breakfast. He was planning on making savory crepes later in the day. He told me more about himself while he showered. He was 31, not as young as I thought, and still a local musician. He worked nights on the third shift at a 24-hour grocery store part time. He could read and write music, but he was mostly self-taught as a guitarist. He had lived with his mother until recently. He got caught up in the economy like the rest of us but managed to save up a little something to get his own place. He had been planning on making a demo for quite some time now, a couple of years to be exact. For now, he was making his name on the local scene.

Jackson wasted no time after eating to start practicing his guitar. He may have been slow to make his name, but he was serious about his playing. I loved being inside a musician. On my own, I could never get my own hands to make music. I couldn't get them to cooperate with each other so that they could make chords. It came easy for him. I both admired and envied him at that moment while his hands effortlessly plucked one string after another and made it euphonious. Nothing brought out the green-eyed monster in me than having to see someone else with an ability I would kill to have. Too bad I couldn't kill Jackson and keep his body. I'd fuck up so much shit...

"Are you seriously thinking about killing me and taking me over?"

"I can't actually do that. Be glad."

That grin came back. He was laughing at me. He enjoyed the fact that I loved his playing as much as I did. I guess that would be validating for any artist. How else would you know how good you were if no one else validated you?

He was at his practice for the next three hours straight. Then he had rehearsal later with a couple of guys who were playing a gig the next day. He was right. Jackson was no joke when it came to that guitar. I kind of felt bad that he wasn't more well-known outside the city. He came across as a bit lazy, but I felt like he would be willing to do the work once he was discovered. Then again, he came across as a bit lazy even though he practiced like 12 hours a day.

He smoked, too. I hated being inside a smoker. I could handle a little weed every now and then, but I could still feel cigarette smoke after I returned to my own body and it felt toxic. Jackson said he tried to quit, but it was an addiction. I still wanted to smack him around.

Despite the smoking, it was still somewhat pleasant to be in Jackson. I didn't get to experience enough musicians. I didn't feel the need to talk to him as much or make conversation. I got lost with him in his head while he played. The only other time that happened was when I went for walks alone with my headphones shutting out the rest of the world. It was a little different since I could actually feel his hands on the guitar rather than just randomly hitting imaginary bad notes in my brain. I could feel the vibrations of the strings. The music was coming from me. I was the creator. I never wanted to admit that no matter what happened with Jackson, I was going to miss him because of moments like this. For a while, I got to feel that talent I never developed when I should have. It was mine for a short while.

"It's time to go to rehearsal."

Sometimes I needed to remember that I need to watch what I say in someone else's head. It's a sin to make someone see yourself through your own eyes. At least it was that way for me. I tended to get heavy. That was one of the reasons I could never maintain a relationship. No one wanted me and my feelings. Now I was weighing on Jackson and he didn't like it. I tried to keep it in check while he rehearsed with the guys. He needed this gig.

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"You caught me during a bad weekend - or maybe a good one. I got the show Friday night, I work Saturday night and I got a date Sunday evening. If all goes well, it'll last until Monday morning."

"You already got your mind made up that you want to have sex with her? How well do you know her?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't met her in person yet, but I'm going to take her to dinner and see how well we click. If she's feeling me, we can take it further."

Yep, the dick. Hadn't even discussed sex with the woman yet and he already knew that was part of the date. Just when I was about to like this fool, he had to go and remind me that he was not above thinking with his dick when it suited him. Sure, they were both adults, but it just irritated me that fucking was such a given for the guy. He had given absolutely no indication that he liked her or would be willing to commit to her if she wanted.

I had tried to let go of my dislike of noncommittal fucking because I knew it worked for both sides. Still, I wondered how the woman he had already planned on nailing felt about it and wondered if it was in him to care about that. And what if she didn't want to fuck him? How would he react then?

“Look. If she doesn’t want to, then fuck it. There are plenty of other girls who do. Anyway, I know how to work my way in. The trick is to make her want it, too. You don’t even want ‘no’ to come across her mind.”

Fuck. Sneaky bastard. I usually tried not to get involved in the lives of the people I inhabit, but I totally wanted to warn this woman. Jackson might have thought it was none of my business, but she might have been getting herself involved in something that wouldn’t turn out the way she wanted.

“You’re taking her out to dinner and you expect sex afterward. What if she expects something in return like a commitment?”

Jackson just shook his head. It wasn’t his concern. He wasn’t intending to make any promises and it was her fault if she assumed any.

“You do know that I heard that thought, right?”

“Why are you so worried about it? You say you don’t care, but you quietly chastise everything I do when you think I’m not paying attention. You’re in my body and my mind, remember. I didn’t ask you to be here.”

I didn’t know how I managed to do it, but I threw his hands up in surrender, my surrender. He was right. I had absolutely no stake in his life or who he did, but I was still concerned about her. Yet, I would just have to let this be.

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I understood why some people gave everything they had to be on stage for a few minutes. There was nothing like that rush of being on stage with an audience even if that stage was a dive in a hole in the wall. Some people continued with their inane conversation. Jackson was just background noise to them. Others listened though – really listened. Those were the ones he played for. I knew he felt good just to know one person was listening. That was all he needed. I felt something inside him that could only come from creating something with your own hands then connecting with a stranger in a way that never happens face to face, something only art can bring out. That was what I envied, not being able to connect with others on that level because of something I created. Every time I wanted to hate Jackson, I was reminded of what he could do. Then he was back in my good graces.

His show went well. At least that was what he felt in his mind. It was a bar that was half full at first then half of them left. Jackson didn’t phone it in though. I had to give him that. It kind of amazed me that someone who approached the rest of his life like it would take care of itself would put so much effort into doing just one thing well. I never had that privilege. I always had to overanalyze my every move and make sure it had the results intended; otherwise, I never got a second chance. I found it wasn’t that way for everyone when I became a Walrus. The Jackson Dunnes of the world would always get an infinite amount of chances to play the same old dive week after week because “everybody” deserved a chance to grow. That was what they told us.

I enjoyed the show, but I didn’t feel much like getting to know Jackson any more that night. I let him be for the rest of the night while he smoked, worked his night job

and wrote. A couple of the others had gotten good at projecting their thoughts out of their transcorporeans, but I had become good at closing off a part of myself to my transcorporean. I didn't want to share those insecurities with Jackson. His kind never understood. Like I said, if there is one thing Little Miss Grace learned a long time ago, it was that it was a sin to make others see me through my own eyes.

~~~

Saturday with Jackson came and went. I almost felt bad for him since most people his age would be out having a good time on a Saturday night. He saw a couple of friends for a moment then spent the night at his job. Nocturnal creature by the way. He never went to bed before four a.m. and managed to get out of bed by about one the next afternoon. At least that was what he did on Sunday. He spent his day practicing then decided to call his date to set up a time and place to meet. At least he had the courtesy to do it before five.

"Why didn't you try to set this up before then? You're meeting her in a couple of hours."

"She didn't call me either."

"You do know that even the most progressive women still have some expectations of how to be treated. Did it occur to you that she may be waiting for a sign that you're interested? Not talking to her for two days really isn't a way to show it."

"Then why's she going out with me tonight?"

"Some people are just better at giving a second chance. I rarely give people a second chance to fuck up on me. I just don't need that kind of aggravation."

"I bet you're still alone in life, too."

"I'm also not dealing with some shady fool who has to prove his worth by trying to make a woman chase after him."

"I didn't ask her to chase after me."

"No, but what's going to happen if you decide to try to make something with her? Are you going to contact her every once in a while to make sure she's still breathing or do you only want to see her whenever you want to screw? Are you going to be up front with her if it's the latter?"

"Why are you so concerned with how I treat her anyway? This isn't about you."

"No, it's about you. I know your kind, Jackson. You honestly think you're a feminist because you tell yourself a woman has a right to her own sexuality, especially if she's sharing it with you. I bet you probably even had sex with a man at least once just to tell yourself you could handle it. Guys like you are the worst kinds of misogynists. You act like you don't think a woman owes you anything if you treat her to dinner or something else, but you know how to get it anyway. Then if she makes one move to show that she wants to be respected on her own terms, then you put up a steel wall. Guess what? Showing a little bit of courtesy like asking how was your day just to listen to her can be a good thing."

He looked at himself in the mirror like he could see me, but I knew he couldn't. He didn't say it out loud, but he forgot I could still hear him.

"Whatever."

"And that is exactly why I care about what happens with this woman. You don't."

He tried to shut me out after that, but I was done with him anyway. He picked up that guitar and began composing in his head. I noticed that he did that whenever he tried to shut out the world. That was one thing we had in common. Except while he brought something forth from within himself, I had to let someone else in to speak to me because there was someone else who knew how I felt. That was how it worked. I tried not to let my envy get the best of me. As long as I envied anything he did, he won. I couldn't help it though. It irritated me that he was in so much denial about who he was and then didn't appreciate being called on it after he laid claim to being so enlightened. They always did it that way. At that moment, I just let him lose himself inside his head and be content with his belief that he was a standup guy.

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She was cute. I had to give him that. I knew she was the shy type around men. That was how they ended up on this rather blind date. He mentioned to her that she didn't look like he expected, but she reminded him of someone. They had more in common than he thought they would. Over dinner, they mostly talked about music. She told him how she felt about music: she wished she could play but had to settle for admiring those who had the talent she never developed. He was so nice about it, too. I noticed he didn't try to put his hands on her without asking. He didn't touch her at all during dinner. They actually spent the time getting to know each other, conversing about Hendrix, God and what they both did for a living.

If he saw that she was just a bit not 100 percent when they started out for her place, he never let on. That was when I realized why I was so concerned about this date of his. She did not see this guy coming. She was sure of herself in all other aspects of her life except this one when it came to the opposite sex that had somehow remained a mystery to her at her age. I knew she was having a good time and didn't want the date to end, so she said nothing when he invited himself back to her place. Then there was the music. She acquainted him with some good stuff he didn't know and he tried to return the favor. While she didn't see where he was headed for the night, Jackson couldn't see the bigger picture. They were compatible.

She saw it, but she was still a little hesitant when Jackson finally made his move a couple of hours later. Seriously, he was an old expert at this. He let her come for him. He gave the sign and she had to agree. I had never seen a dude play it so smoothly as this. He was good. Really good. Then he got better. Seriously, I had only encountered a few guys who would lick pussy like they liked it and he was one. He might have been trying to get his, but he gave her hers first - a few times. I didn't try to stop him.

Hell, she needed to get something out of this because I had a feeling she wouldn't be getting much else she wanted out of this dude.

They had their fun for a couple of hours. I couldn't begrudge either one of them that. I just had to wait until it was over. They even talked some more afterward before he asked to spend the night. She had to work in the morning, but she wasn't sending him home at four in the morning. The woman thought he was worth letting sleep in her bed and he wasn't seeing any further than the next morning when he had to get up and leave to start his day again.

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She likes you. Doesn't that count for something?

"Of course it does, but that doesn't mean she's expecting me to be her boyfriend or anything."

She slept with you on the first date. She told you she really doesn't date. Believe me. She wouldn't have gone to bed with you if she didn't think this couldn't go anywhere. She thinks you feel the same way about her.

"You don't know that. You keep telling me things about her and you don't even know her."

Fine. I'm glad to know that you really have no conscience when it comes to other people's feelings. As long as you get what you want, you'll be fine, right? She and I are one.

He said nothing. His mind became blank.

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I never told Jackson how I knew his date so well. I saw myself through his eyes. He liked what he saw, but his semi-blind date Grace was only a body to be fucked. I couldn't tell myself this. I never really knew what happened to my body when I entered a transcorporeans, but there I was about to meet a guy I had met through a friend of a friend. I gave him a chance thinking I might be attracted to a fellow poetic soul. I was. Despite myself, I liked this guy.

It was different for me this time. Even though I knew what was coming, I never tried to get in head to make him stop. I never did believe in that saying "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Hell, I had never been hit by a Mack truck, but I still know I don't want to be. That was how I looked at it.

I didn't share the same consciousness with myself that I shared with Jackson, so the me standing before him was unaware of what the me inside Jackson's head knew. Yet, I didn't even give the warning to myself that he wasn't in this game for keeps. I let him play it out. Perhaps I had some damn fool notion that I would be the one who got into his head and made him rethink how he treated the women he slept with. I even managed to speak to him in his dream, so I imagined he would still hear my voice when he least expected it. I usually didn't care, but I wanted to teach this one a lesson.

I still couldn't tell how I ended up outside my door when I was already home. That was where I always ended up, but I thought it would be different this time. I always thought it would be different. Silly me. I let the sensation of floating take its time to pass then looked in the direction he had gone when he said goodbye earlier. He was never going to figure out I had been the one inside him all that time. I would make sure of that.

When something like this happened to me, I sometimes tried to find at least one thing good about the experience. This time, though, great sex just was not enough. I never expected to have a huge impact on anyone because they tend to dismiss me pretty easily. I just thought it should be different once a person opened themselves to you. That was what some guys just did not get. Sometimes there was an implied promise. Still, when he left and returned to my body, I knew already that he was clueless to anything I might have expected and had no intention of taking me seriously as a partner. At this point in my life, I was too old for anything less than what I really wanted. Besides, I was too mad at myself for setting myself up again. I allowed myself to hold out some hope against all odds that somehow this would work out. I wasn't just mad that Jackson played me; I was mad for playing myself.

I wasn't going to tell the others that I let myself have hope. I would leave that part to myself. The most they would get was Jackson's guitar.

### Leilei's Husband

Why did I already know this one was going to leave me bored to tears? I looked through her eyes as she shut off the alarm clock, looked at her husband who miraculously slept through that raucous then looked for her slippers. Her brain wasn't awake yet. She had no idea I was there. Usually when it took them a long time to sense me, I would scare the hell out of them. This time around was different. I needed her to wake up. She didn't look like she had gotten quite enough rest.

The water was still too cold when she tested it, but it gave her enough of her senses to realize something was amiss. She didn't think about it when she stuck her hand under again because the water was warmer. She let it get a little hotter before stepping in the shower. It was just what she needed. She had one of those massage shower heads. If I had one of those, I'd never get out of the shower. She didn't seem to want to, but she made herself. It was only then did she look in the mirror as if expecting something different, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She began to examine herself meticulously. She couldn't find a gray in the light brown hair; she couldn't find a wrinkle, fine line or crow's foot on her light brown skin. Still, she knew something was wrong.

"It's okay. You're not crazy. Something is different, but everything will be back to normal before you know it. It's just best we ride out the next few days. Don't try to speak out loud. Don't want your husband to think you've lost it."

"I'm not sure I haven't."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Leilei. Leilei Gomez."

"Leilei, I'm Faith. As you can see, I have an ability. I can't control it and I never know when it's going to happen. But I'm here now and we both just have to wait until it's over. You'll be able to hear me and I'll be able to hear you. I don't have any influence over you that you don't let me have, so don't worry about that. I may not know why I'm here, but I don't ever intentionally cause anyone harm. If you're nice to me then I won't be a bitch to you."

"Well, I didn't say you were a bitch, but I have to wake my kids now."

"Go right ahead."

I had to admit her home was the kind most people dream about having: three bedrooms with all the usual bells and whistles plus some more. The kids definitely had more than they needed. I had never seen all game consoles located in one house. These kids had large widescreen TVs in their rooms. Her daughter had more clothes in her closet than I'd probably owned in the past three years. Must have been really damn nice.

The boy also had his nice clothes and his smartphone and his notebook and a whole lot of other stuff unfamiliar to me. These kids were spoiled. Leilei didn't seem to know that, but they were. I had to roll out of bed my damn self every morning because my mom was too tired from working the night shift. I was lucky to see her on the weekends.

"I enjoy doing things for my family," Leilei said while she prepared breakfast for the family. Homemade pancakes, bacon and sausage, English muffins, scrambled eggs, toast and a choice of orange or grape juice. Of course, there was coffee for the adults, but I saw that little grown ass daughter sneak some as well. At least she was the only one to sit at the table and enjoy a meal like she appreciated it. The boy took breakfast to his room so he could text his buddies and use Facebook in private. Her husband grabbed an English muffin, jellied it up and threw a couple of pieces of sausage on it. That taste was on his tongue when Leilei reminded him to give her a goodbye kiss. I could see from his confusion that this was not a usual thing. It was for my benefit.

"You don't even know who I am and yet you feel compelled to put on a show for me."

The husband and kids were gone. This was the time of day when Leilei was left to herself. She went through each room of the house dusting and making sure everything was perfect. It was scary. It was like she was afraid to live in her own home.

"Leilei, you spend an awful lot of time making sure nothing got out of place since the last time you checked on it 20 seconds ago. Worried your husband might get upset if the towels aren't folded in perfect quarters?"

"Gary isn't abusive," she said with as much disdain as she could muster. I like to keep things looking nice. We used to have the maid come in twice a week, but we had

to let her go. Gary said some of his things were disappearing. We haven't replaced her yet because he wants to choose the next one himself."

"And here I was thinking this place was your domain."

"There's no shame in me being a housewife. I get to stay home and take care of my family. I like being here for my husband when he gets home. I can go to my kids at school if they need me. I have time to do the shopping, get the laundry done and rest my feet for a spell."

"Who said you should be ashamed? Revolve your life around your family all you want. I really don't give a damn. But the fact that you feel like you have to justify yourself to me just tells me you really aren't all as happy as you want me to think. The only thing worse is having to tell yourself that."

She sat down in one of the soft recliners situated in the family room that rarely had a family in it. "I really do like my life. Sometimes it does get a little boring. I'm actually glad to have you here. It's nice to have the company."

"Girl, you lonely as hell if you think I'm good company."

At least that made her laugh. I wasn't a hard ass all the time, but I wasn't exactly impressed with being a Walrus. Yeah, I was glad to find the others and know that there were others with the same ability as mine, but I really could have done without this life.

"Well, you better go check those towels again."

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Everything was still exactly as it had been when the kids arrived home from school. Leilei would have picked them up, but they were getting to an age where they were a bit embarrassed to be seen with Mom. I would have loved my mom to pick me up from school because I wouldn't have had to walk or take the bus with a bunch of folks I just did not like. But that would have meant she would be late for work and that was a no-no.

She asked them about their days and got the usual grumbles and grunts that kids substituted for words whenever they thought someone would make them say something beyond four words. I found them to be a couple of ungrateful little urchins. The truth was Leilei was a good mother to them. She really tried. They just didn't want to notice. I could feel her hurt. I hated when that happened. I didn't want to care, but there was a small part of Leilei that I liked. She wasn't like a lot of people who found themselves in a privileged position. Not only was she well aware of that privilege, but she also knew part of her function in this equation was to see that her family kept it. No matter what I felt about a person's position in life, I always had to respect those who honest about who they were.

Leilei was honest about that part of her life even if she did bury her feelings so deeply that she was even becoming less aware of them. She liked her life so much that she had buried something in herself so that she could continue the charade that was her life. She started to see that when she explained herself away to me. Whatever it was got buried again. I couldn't get to it, but I usually never got involved anyway.

“What are you going to make for dinner?”

“Oh, tonight’s the night we all just have fun with dinner. I don’t want to force them to the dinner table every night. They won’t think it’s so special if they have to do it every night, so we have nights when we eat together and others when we take a break from each other. The kids will probably just have pizza in their rooms. I’ll make myself a little something.”

“You’re not expecting Gary for dinner, are you?”

She was taken aback by the question, but she maintained her composure. I had to admire her unwillingness to let that perfect façade crumble at any moment. Being perfect every day all day was hard as hell.

“He has to work longer a couple of days a week these days. He was glad when the company kept him after laying off so many. He still has a job when so many don’t. Yeah, I miss him sometimes, but we’re giving our kids the life they deserve. We’ll spend time together when we can.”

Gary came home by then. I heard Leilei ask herself what he was doing home so early since she wasn’t expecting him. I felt her steeling herself, putting on her battle armor. Strange because she was preparing to be kind.

“Gary, honey, I didn’t know you’d be home tonight. If I’d known, I would have made plans for all of us to have dinner together.”

“I’m not here for dinner. I forgot a... file this morning and I need to get it. I’ll still be at the office the rest of the night.”

“Well, you can sit for a minute...”

“No, I can’t.”

He was immediately sorry for being so short with her. That hot flash that goes through the chest when I knew something was wrong or I anticipated bad news shot through the both of us. We had both heard his hesitation and now he was angry for no reason.

“I’m sorry. I’ll just grab the file and I have to go. We’ll do dinner as usual.”

Leilei stared at her hands as she listened to him head to the bedroom and shuffle about in the closet. The feelings she tried to bury deep outside of her reach fought to come up to the surface. They formed as tears in her eyes when she heard the back door open and close with the departure of her husband. I knew then what was wrong and why Leilei liked to present this picture of the perfect suburban housewife. At that moment, she wasn’t afraid of losing her material wealth or her possessions. She was desperately trying to hold on to something she had had with Gary when they were first married that she feared was no longer there.

“Oh, you’re worried he’s having an affair, aren’t you? You don’t believe he really has long evenings at work. You think he’s with another woman.”

She didn’t answer. Even with the truth staring her in the face, she couldn’t admit her fears. “He didn’t come in for a file. There was a bag of clothes tucked away in the closet. They looked like a uniform. That isn’t something he would usually wear. I don’t know why else he would be trying to dress like that unless he was... I think he’s

lost interest in me. We barely see each other anymore and when we do, he just wants to sleep. He doesn't even look at me anymore, especially not like he used to."

I hated drama with a passion. This was what she was about to give me - drama. Yeah, I felt sorry for her and all, but she chose to bury it and deny what was happening all around her. She was bored being a housewife, but didn't want to rock the boat lest she shook the foundations of the perfect lie she made of her life. Then again, I had to be with her for the next three days and there was no way I was going to be subjected to her wallowing.

"I got an idea."

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The plan was simple. Leilei should have done this long ago. We were going to follow Gary and see where he spent his time when he said he was "working." At least this might be fun. I swear. Leilei was harmless but her life was boring as hell. I needed some excitement if I was going to be stuck with her for four days. Anyway, I never really had much sympathy for people with relationship woes. You really that damn unhappy then get out of it. That was what I always wanted to say, but people just won't behave rationally like that. So I thought maybe I would get a little something out of this. People always said I was unsympathetic. I just felt I was too practical and had no time for bullshit. This thing with Leilei and her husband was bullshit in my mind, but it was important to her. I just wanted to know why.

Her kids were settled and clueless as usual. We took her car and went down to the office where Gary worked. I didn't know what he did there and Leilei couldn't tell me. People who worked in offices could actually spend their day making paperclips and we wouldn't even know it. Yet, we would still pay them a lot of money to do just because they did it in a nice high-rise building. Business was the most brilliant invention of the industrial age: make money by not doing anything at all.

Anyway, we sat there staked outside one of many big office buildings I had never been in before. I tried to talk to Leilei, but she had someone with her to witness her self-pity, so she sulked. Fuck it. I'll let us both sit here in silence.

About fifteen minutes after his normal shift ended, Gary emerged from the building. Damn. She was right. He definitely wasn't planning on working the rest of the day in that place and he'd told her that was where he would be. I almost felt sorry for Leilei at that moment. No matter what I thought about her life, I did know this: she loved Gary. His aloofness and unresponsiveness was eating at her. Then she got frustrated with me because she knew I didn't care. So I suggested we follow him and we ended up here looking at her husband drive off in a nice car to go God knew where.

He seemed to go clear on the other side of town. Amazing where white men were willing to go for what they didn't want other people to know they liked. Still, there was something wrong about the whole thing.

"Leilei, why would he be meeting a woman around here? Usually when a well-off man is having an affair, he'll take the woman out of this place to... I don't know... some place nicer?"

"He could be picking her up."

At least I had gotten through. She wanted to believe that her suspicions were wrong, but she had no other explanations. Neither did I, but something told me it wasn't what she thought.

He got out the car after parking it in a lot next to a convenience store. I noticed then we were in an area that had a lot of government buildings, municipal places with public housing not too far away. A man going to meet another woman definitely would not bring her here. He might take her out since that was the incentive for going out with him in the first place, but he was parked here a moment. He went into the convenience store's men's room then later re-emerged wearing a completely different set of work clothes. I also noticed the hat and sunglasses as well. It was amazing how he suddenly blended into his environment.

He put his bag in the truck and took out another. It was starting to make sense to me, but Leilei was still not sure.

"Let's follow him. We need to see where he's going."

We got out of the car and headed toward the building where he seemed to be headed. Leilei was right about one thing - he was meeting someone. I was right about something else - it wasn't an affair. Gary was meeting a man dressed in identical clothing who expected him.

They talked a moment then set off in opposite directions. The other man began to trim the bushes near the municipal building. Gary began to tend the gardening on the opposite end.

"I don't understand. Why would he be doing this? He's got two degrees in business and works a high-paying job downtown. What is he doing here?"

It was all making sense to me: Gary was never hungry, he never wanted to eat with his family, he couldn't look his wife in the eye. He wasn't guilty; he was ashamed.

Leilei stood locked in place long enough for Gary to spot her. Fortunately, he didn't have any heavy or dangerous equipment in his hand right then. He would have surely dropped something on his foot at the unexpected sight of his wife. They stood there frozen for a moment, neither of them sure of what to say. Gary's partner finally noticed the unexpected disruption and stopped his hedge trimmer. He seemed pissed.

"Hey, what you doing here?" he called out. He was starting to approach, but Gary stopped him. They had a quiet exchange and the man nodded in understanding. Gary obviously told him who Leilei was. Gary then headed over to face Leilei. He had a mixture of fear and relief in his eyes. His secret was out. Now he had to explain why.

"Leilei, I can't talk right now, but I promise I can explain later. I'll be home late as usual, but we can talk about this then, okay?"

"I don't understand," she said. "Gary, I just don't..."

"Just wait for me tonight and we'll talk."

Gary leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead. It was a sweet gesture and I could tell just as she could that he wanted it to be reassuring. I was starting to like Gary. Leilei still had her doubts when she went home and made sure her kids had eaten and everything was still in the same place she had left it less than an hour earlier. Her thoughts were no longer consumed with the fear that her husband was seeing another woman. She was now starting to see the life she loved and wanted more than anything else starting to crumble around her.

"So he's not seeing another woman. He's working a second job and you're afraid it's beneath him. If that's true, then he has a damn good reason for thinking he would have to do manual labor like the majority of the world."

"I'm not worried about the majority of the world. I'm worried about mine."

She practically snapped it even though she only thought it. She was embarrassed when it happened. She didn't like me cracking that perfect little veneer she spent so much time constructing. We kind of had that in common. Neither of us liked to be exposed. I just didn't try to hide it so much to the point where I was going to end up with ulcers.

Leilei managed to get through the rest of the evening with her nerves so frayed. She wanted to read a book, but she couldn't stay into it. Good thing since it was some very badly written soft core porn. I might have tried to kill her myself if she'd kept it up. She turned on one of the televisions and called herself putting on PBS. I had to get her to admit she really wanted to watch something a little less highbrow: *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Gary finally made it home after what seemed like an eternity. She didn't have the same worries this time when she listened to him shower after getting in. She just made him something nice to eat and had it ready by the time he was dry and in his boxers. She remembered I was there and began to worry about someone else seeing her husband so unpresentable. Did she forget I was in bed with both her and her husband a couple of hours ago?

Anyway, she watched him eat while she sipped some tea like it wasn't going to keep her up peeing the rest of the night. I knew they were both just hesitating. He still didn't want to tell her about the new job and she was afraid to find out it was worse than she thought. He finally explained to her that he almost lost his other job at the office. He had to make a really big compromise in order to keep it: damn near 40% of a pay cut. He wasn't bringing in as much as he had been and he knew how much her life and all their possessions meant to her. He managed to find some other work part time working on landscaping and maintenance for the city.

It was hard leading a double life, but it was necessary to keep up with the mortgage, car payments, stuff the kids wanted and everything Leilei bought whenever she fancied. He was calm about it. He was ashamed to tell her that his important job no longer paid what it had before. Rather than ask her and the children to make sacrifices, he found himself a second job to supplement some of what he had lost.

Leilei just would not allow herself to feel guilt. She refused to think that anything she had done had brought on this need in her husband. Sure he was proud to

be able to provide for his family just as she was to have the means to stay home and take care of that domain. However, she did not want to think that Gary had read something selfish in her that would rather see him work himself to an early grave rather than have to give up a few of her creature comforts so that they could live within their means.

“I could get a job.”

She bit her lip so hard it almost bled. I made her say it. I couldn't help it. I never knew how I could do that, but sometimes it came in handy. I just needed her to be unselfish for a second. She would not let the thought of getting a job or cutting back come to the front of her brain. She might have been sweet, but in the long run she was lazy. I couldn't stand that sometimes.

“Well, the kids are old enough to be on their own,” Gary said. “You wouldn't have to be here all the time. You could even find some work at home. Hell, the kids need to start learning to pick up after themselves anyway. With the both of us working together, we can definitely keep the house and cars. That's what you want right?”

I tried to help her get that look of shock out of her eyes before Gary saw it. She could not believe he was suggesting that she do some actual work that would get her an actual paycheck. She got some control over herself.

“Why don't we talk about all this later? I say we should spend some alone time tomorrow since it's your day off. You can sleep late. I can get rid of the kids and we can do something with just the two of us. How does that sound?”

Leilei was so relieved when Gary took her hand and remembered how he felt the day he realized he was in love with this woman. She stopped thinking about what would happen to her nails if she had to work. She remembered how much she loved Gary, too, and how hurt she was when she thought he had another woman. I wanted to say something again to remind him about the work thing, but I just let them have that private moment uninterrupted.

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The kids were just a bit confused when they were awakened and rushed out of bed bright and early on a Saturday morning. Leilei called a friend and asked if it was okay if her kids spent the day with the friend's kids. Despite having to respond at nearly seven in the morning, her friend was cool with it. I might not have been.

Gary slept until nearly eleven that morning. I knew his body must have been tired. I got that way with mental exhaustion, so I didn't even know how he handled the physical exhaustion as well. He was happy to be having a day with his wife, so I didn't want to ruin it for either of them. Leilei had prepared a nice breakfast that turned into brunch by the time Gary was showered and dressed. She had even dressed for the occasion with one of the nicest sundresses I'd ever seen. I was a bit surprised because it was a simple design that she didn't even accent with designer shoes.

The date was pleasant. They took a drive to the country about an hour outside of town and had a little picnic in the town park. Leilei was glad to be with Gary, but I

knew what she felt when she watched the younger kids outside; she was remembering how things were when her kids were that age. She was remembering how she felt when she thought this was the life she would have all the time. She didn't know how it had gotten to this: having to settle for a few blissful moments while trying to forget the troubles ahead.

At least you still have that nice house and two cars. If your kids don't understand that you all have to make sacrifices then that's your fault. You're the one that spoiled them.

"They're not spoiled. It's not we haven't worked hard to get everything they have and make sure they have a future. I don't know why people like you always try to judge those of us who managed to have it better than others."

Who says I'm judging? You're sitting here thinking about how horrible it would be to not have that big house and eight TVs even though there are only four of you living there. You don't see that you are nowhere near homeless or hungry. Hell, you aren't even near broke. Let me tell you something. There are a lot of people who would kill to have your kind of problems. Actually they do, but that's beside the point. The point is it would be too much for you to ask you to stop thinking you're entitled to something because you happened to marry a man willing to take care of you. You act like that's the solution to everybody's problems.

"Solution to mine. It's not my fault if other people don't have what I have. I'm not responsible for that. I only need to make sure my family is taken care of."

Thank you.

"Why?"

"For finally being honest with yourself."

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The entire time with Leilei wasn't an overbearing bore. I enjoyed playing detective for a minute. Truth be told, I was also happy that it worked and Gary wasn't cheating on her. I also knew that by the last day I was there, Leilei had kind of hoped it had been another woman. At least she wouldn't be worrying about getting a job herself and having to narrow her options from eight kinds of steak to four. By this time, that one smattering of like I had for Leilei was gone. I hated being in a transcorporean who had those kinds of problems. They truly were oblivious to the rest of us. Worst thing was they tried to be. It physically hurt them to think about other folks and what they went through every day. Then they demanded I teach them. I was supposed to exhaust myself to give them something to think about just so they could search for something in themselves to dismiss it. I told them as soon as they deposited a few hundred thousand in my hands, I would give them as much time as they needed. Interestingly, none of them had yet to take me up on that offer. I guess actual knowledge wasn't worth paying for.

I knew the others would probably have better stories than mine the next time we met. It was probably just me because I went into the whole thing with low expectations anyway. The rest of them at least tried to learn something. There was not a damn thing Leilei taught me except it was possible to be so far in denial that you could convince

yourself of an alternate universe if you tried. She probably forgot about me as soon as I left her and went back to telling herself everything would be back to normal soon. I was glad when I found myself back in my kitchen with my head on the table like an offering for Christmas dinner hoping that the next time I left my body I would end up in someone who at least tried to stay aware of what happened outside her own domain.

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“Good for you helping Annie remember about that release form.”

Charity knew Grace’s compliment was sincere, but she sometimes felt Grace was mocking her. She knew she came off as prudish and old-fashioned to the more worldly woman, so she always took some things Grace said with a grain of salt. However, sitting there sipping on her lemon water, Grace gave no indication that she was making fun of Charity.

“Thanks. I don’t know why I thought of it. Seemed like the right thing to do after she put all that work into it. Really, I didn’t know porn was so much work. I mean the acting is so bad and everything I thought it had to be easy.”

Faith laughed out loud. There was amusement in Hope’s eyes as well. Charity finally got into the spirit and laughed at the situation. Grace played it cool as always.

“I tell you this much though,” Faith said. “I would much rather be a porn star than have to go back to being a damn housewife who thinks she’s actually doing something when she barely talks to her kids or her husband. Seriously, if you’re going to be a stay at home mom, then be a stay at home mom. Don’t pretend. God, that woman was so annoying.”

“You think your transcorporean was annoying,” Hope chimed in. “At least you weren’t in the world’s most self-centered heifer ever. I couldn’t even feel sorry for her. She had a stroke and still managed to make me hate her. That takes some special bitchery.”

“What about you, Grace?” Faith asked. “How did you like your guy?”

Grace shrugged nonchalantly. “It was okay. He was a musician, so he had that kind of talent I would love to have, right. But he was just some guy after all. Nothing to throw a parade over. I wish him well, but I wouldn’t really be disappointed if I never saw him again.”

“Man,” Hope said. “You really don’t like anyone. Whose turn is it to get the check?”

“Mine,” Faith said. “I already consulted the list. Charity got us last time and I do it this time.”

“Glad I ain’t got to work in the morning,” Grace said to no one in particular. “I am seriously getting too old to stay up all night like this.”

“I know right,” Faith agreed as she settled the bill. “Well, until next time ladies, don’t lose yourselves.”

They all got up to leave. They were almost out of the door when Charity remembered something she wanted to ask.

“Oh, Grace, how did your date with that guy go?”

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About the Author

Inda Lauryn is constantly changing the soundtrack of her life. She is the author of three books *In Time*, *The People in My Head* and *One Last Dance, Little Sister?* with the latest novella collection *The Innocence of Others*. She will be releasing her next novel, the paranormal tale *Blood Tastes Sweet* very soon. Although she has been writing since her childhood, she only recently decided to pursue her first love as a professional endeavor. A lifelong music and movie lover, she frequently cites her favorite artists and films in her work, drawing inspiration as well as exploring their effect on society. She is currently working on a an afro-gothic novel, two fantasy series, a screenplay and two sequels featuring characters found in the work *In Time*, hoping to contribute to the ever-expanding representations of African-American women in literature. Feel free to visit the website <http://conceding2kismet.weebly.com> and <http://c2kfantasy.yolasite.com> to find samples of her work, leave feedback and get to know the Kismet experience.