

The Walrus Chronicles:  
September 2012, Vol. 3

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She wondered if she was destined to get all the tragic ones. Grace often wondered if there was a reason each of them ended up with the types of transcorporeans they tended to get. She had liked this last one almost as much as she had enjoyed being with the elderly woman. She didn't go by to see Denise as often as she would have liked, but the woman somehow always seemed to know who she was even though her condition was deteriorating with each passing day.

Charity's seemed easy sometimes. High school students. It was easy to deal with kids if you were willing. Charity sometimes seemed skittish about having to deal with others, but she managed just fine. Hope just truly didn't give a damn. She did what she could during a biotransference then usually left it alone when the four days were over.

Faith was the one she liked most. Faith had a little fun with her transcorporeans when they turned out to be dull or assholes. She knew Hope leaned that way, but compassion sometimes got the better of her. She looked at the three of them as they all began to work their way into a familiar ritual that began with a rich meal that very few bothered to eat at that time of day anymore. She helped herself to some bacon and sausage from the platter before looking again at the others.

"Well, this time it's my turn to begin."

### Aileen's High

I had felt this rush before. The sensation I felt running through the body was one that came from that search to get high. Even with my limited experience, I could feel that this was a much more potent dose. I wasn't sure what it was yet, but it came from a needle. It might have just been heroine. I had been in someone who liked to combine a few different things and see what he came up with. He ended up dead about two days after I left his body. This one had a high tolerance for whatever she had taken. I felt elated and down all at once. The high was good, but I already knew it would be too short and too weak. She would be looking to score sooner than she wanted to admit.

She rubbed her arm where the needle had just penetrated her skin. She was already thinking about how she would have to find another vein. I tried not to think about how the rush was making me feel. I know how addicts feel when they get this way, but I was fortunate to not like this feeling. I thought I would have a sickness that would never go away. I never liked being sick, not even getting that feeling some mornings when I stuck the toothbrush too far in my mouth and began to dry heave. Worse, I felt empty.

I realized then why the woman was already craving another hit. She wanted to feel empty, but my presence prevented it. She didn't want to be in herself much less have me there. It was then she realized that she hadn't gotten a bad batch; something else was wrong. She managed to stand up and began looking around the room for me. I let her calm down before I began to try to find the words to tell her that I was inside her. It wasn't the heroin she felt; it was me.

"And here I thought the stuff wasn't working," she said as her strength began to wane again and she let herself drift to the floor. I felt her fatigue, her unwillingness to let her body weigh her down when she wanted so desperately to leave it. I felt her pain. No matter how much of the stuff she took, that pain would not go away. It fought for a place in her consciousness despite the chemically induced attempt to block it out. The pain was strong. The high was slightly stronger. We both managed to fall asleep amidst a haze of disappointment and confusion. I didn't think I would wake up again.

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We were only out for a couple of hours. The night still shone through the window when I convinced her

to make something to eat. She only had a few staples, but I saw the fixings for homemade pancakes. While I helped her cook, I found out her name was Aileen Yang. She had once been a player in the world of business, but that was a very different life. I looked around her rundown home and saw where so many like her perished from a lack of opportunity or options. I knew she wouldn't have ended up here if she had a choice now, but I could see where addiction had taken her.

Technically, Aileen was homeless. Her home was not really one that had an address. She had managed to siphon power off the grid through some useful acquaintances. Every time the electric company shut her down, she could get hooked back up. She was taken to jail once and the house had been boarded, but that just helped Aileen hide the lights when she made it back.

There was no syrup in the house, but there was some old honey. I never liked the taste of honey on pancakes, but I hoped the taste of sweet would knock out another craving Aileen was having. After experiencing life with a couple of addicts already, I knew I wouldn't be able to try to keep her clean for a full four days, so I just had to hope I could keep her occupied as much as possible before the cravings got too strong. I couldn't stand that high when I thought it would literally be the death of me.

Much to my surprise, she took the time to relish her pancakes. I had the feeling Aileen didn't cook a lot. I hadn't been with her long, but I could sense different layers of unhappiness in her. Whatever led her to her addiction had her unhappy. Now her addiction left her unhappy. There wasn't much she could do about either, so she was caught in a pretty vicious cycle.

"That felt good. I haven't had anything homemade in a long time. Forgot I could cook."

"Tends to happen when you have no food around. Tell me something, Aileen. How do you get by?"

She shrugged and searched her mind for an answer. "Just do a little here and there. Sometimes I can find some beads and other materials, put them on a string and sell them as authentic Chinese bracelets. People can't really tell when it comes from me."

I had to laugh. Sometimes I came across a hustle so pure that I couldn't even get mad at it. I always told people that being an addict doesn't make anyone stupid.

She started to laugh with me. I had a feeling that she didn't laugh with other people too often. So much about her felt lighter when she opened up and had a good laugh. The loneliness must have been hell. I didn't have a whole slew of friends around me all the time, but I sometimes had someone when I needed it. The walruses counted for a lot. There were others, but they didn't know about this ability I had. Aileen had the same worries as everyone else and no one to really share them with. I was starting to piece together her story in my head.

"That was part of it, but not the whole story."

"Sorry. I tend to start trying to analyze before I find out all the facts. It keeps me from making assumptions based on the wrong things."

"I noticed. I like that about you. When I'm messed up, people always just say 'oh well that was her choice.' I was never allowed to make a bad decision and be forgiven for it."

"I know how that is."

"I tell you this, though. I never thought I would be the one to end up here. Plus it all happened so fast. I'm too embarrassed to go back to my family. What would they think seeing me like this? I would never hear the end of how I've brought so much shame to them. They would never forgive me."

"What's to be forgiven? I never really understood that. You're not hurting anyone other than yourself, so why do you need someone else's forgiveness.... Sorry. That came out wrong."

Aileen had grown quiet. My casual mention that she was hurting herself struck a nerve she hadn't intended. The thing with addicts was that they knew they were self-destructive. Some didn't care to admit it, but others were of the mind that they had every right to do whatever the hell they felt. Aileen was somewhere in between those two schools of thought at the moment. She knew she had made her own choices, but she still couldn't reconcile it with the pull of the high she needed to get

through her day. Something in her had to believe that she had some control. But that control grew smaller with every passing day. Cigarettes could no longer sustain her between cravings. It was a fix or nothing at all. Grace could feel it trying to bubble in Aileen's system. For some reason, Aileen was fighting it this time.

"I'm a bit starved for company. I'll admit that. You don't seem to like how it feels to be high. I'm sorry. I guess you know I can't help it."

"I know. I wish it were different. I don't really know you and you have no reason to think I have any good intentions toward you, but I want to try to do something to help. I can't detox you or force you to AA, but I feel like I need to do something. I feel what you feel. There is so much unhappiness in you. Have you ever thought about it – the reason you just can't be happy with anything?"

Aileen was quiet a moment as she rubbed her arm over an area of her arm that was now useless in delivering her the much needed fix. "It was a lot of things I suppose. You don't just start using because you have a single bad experience. Part of it was me experimenting and testing my boundaries. I believe that had that been it, I would have stopped at some point. Then it got to the point where it was more of an escape. Boredom is a hell of a vice."

"Aileen, would you like to talk about it? You don't have to if you don't want, but I would like to hear your story. You already know what I've been guessing, but I think it would be best if you told me from your own experience. Do you trust me, Aileen?"

"No one's asked me that in a long time. No one's asked me for permission for anything in so long. Yes, I think I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, let's get out of here. I know where we can go and get some hot tea. Don't worry. Just mention my name and it will get put on my tab. There are a few people who know me."

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We went to an art center I sometimes frequent. The place was set up as a safe haven to allow those who suffered from mental illnesses to go for art therapy. They could finger paint, sew, write, knit, play music or do whatever it was they wanted. There was even a garden on the outside, which was where I usually sat whenever I visited. I didn't have any illnesses, but the center was open to everyone. I started going when I became a walrus. I couldn't make sense of why it happened to me, so I thought I should try to find a safe space to get my head together. I still went every once in a while even after I found the others, just not as often. I felt like I would have abandoned the one place that took me in when I needed it, so I offered to provide tea, coffee and cocoa for people needing to drop in for a while. Aileen was a tea person, so I told her to go in and ask Paola if she could sit outside for a spot of tea. Paola would know what that meant.

No one else was there at the moment, so Aileen and I checked out the food garden a moment. Some basil and parsley was starting to sprout but not much else. Even though it was fairly warm outside, Aileen sat down and enjoyed the sensation of the warm vanilla chamomile tea soothing her from the inside. There was no telling how long it had been since she had allowed herself to have such a moment, no worries and no demands.

"It's not really an interesting story," Aileen said to me suddenly. "I'm sure it happens to a lot of people. The only difference is this time it was happening to me. I've been a good girl all my life. I was taught that if I were anything other than exemplary and respectable, I would be a failure. I spent all my time making good grades and read in my leisure. I had a few friends but no one I would sustain a lifelong relationship with. I mostly prepared for a career that would make me wealthy, not happy. I took the path that would make me important. I studied business and management in college. I made all the right connections that would get me just the kind of job I needed that would put me on the track to someday be a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. I got my first job before I even entered my MBA program.

Imagine that: being in your early 20s with a good job that's going to get better because it's paying for you to get an advanced degree.

"I was miserable of course. Work was my whole life. I felt like I was working 80 hours a week and my parents are still pressuring me to find a husband and have it all. I couldn't tell them that I didn't want a husband. I could handle the work because I wanted to take care of myself. I liked paying my bills on time, getting groceries and going out for dinner every once in a while. I found a kind of joy in having that independence even if I wasn't really living the life I wanted. The problem was that I really didn't know what I wanted as an alternative. I'm not an artist; I wouldn't be happy in some entry-level work reserved for high school kids either. Do you know what that's like to be pushed to be great when what you really want is to carve out something that fits just you?"

Unfortunately I did. I had been one of those exceptional kids, too. All the advance classes and expectations set upon me. The whole time I was a kid into sci-fi and fantasy, which apparently was not supposed to be my domain, and I just wanted to be normal. Whatever that was. It took me forever to accept those little quirks of mine as quirks. That was an everyday struggle since quirky and black girl never seemed to register in anyone's vocabulary. I wasn't sure if that was how Aileen saw herself, but it wouldn't have been easy for her either.

"I don't think I would necessarily say I was quirky, but I was definitely different. Maybe aware is a better word. I would sit at work in the middle of the day and start daydreaming about spending the day in the park doing nothing but lying in the grass and watching the clouds roll by. That would have been lazy. That wouldn't be productive and I wouldn't be doing anything to advance my position. I got so sick of hearing that. I told you this wasn't very exciting."

"But it makes perfect sense. We're all working when what we really want to do is create. That's one thing I like about this place. I bet some of the people who come here at some point of another cracked just trying to make it in this world we've created. It doesn't work for everyone, so sometimes I feel the sanest thing we can do is make a world of our own. Some of us don't get to do that like you said. I'm supposed to be someone who works four times as hard to get half as much, but I'll catch hell if I ask where is my damn luck dragon."

Aileen smiled although there was no one else around to appreciate the gesture. She got those small lines around her eyes when it happened. I always thought those lines were beautiful. Of course, I didn't have them.

"I was kind of like that. I always wanted to be somewhere else whenever I was supposed to be on the job. I had so much to do, but it still just left me empty inside. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that I ended up trying coke with a coworker. It wasn't really a good feeling. It was more like I couldn't feel anything else. That emptiness that made me hate my life was gone. I could get through it now. Then when I started getting used to it, I couldn't get rid of all the emptiness. I needed more. I wasn't focusing on the job. Everything started to suffer. I got fired eventually. My coworker didn't. I was okay for a while because I had managed to save. Then that ran out and I couldn't get another job. The Old Boy Network is a small world and they tell each other everything. My name was poison after a while. A couple of those guys still thought that maybe they could get a little something from me in exchange for another chance, but I never really was into sucking dick for favors."

Now I laughed. I liked Aileen's sense of humor.

"Well, you can imagine how I got from there to here. I tell myself that I want my old life back, but at least this way, I don't have to feel that emptiness. I don't have to feel like a vessel only meant to fatten someone else's pockets. I never could put a name on whatever it was I felt. So I just keep getting high. I don't have to think about it anymore."

She couldn't put a name on it. I could. She and I had that in common. We knew the problem, but we came from people who did not suffer from what she was going through. We weren't supposed to get depressed. We sure as hell weren't supposed to seek help for it.

"You think it was depression?"

"Yes. When you feel hopeless like that and can't see an end, you aren't just having a simple case of the blues. It might pass, but it might not."

"Is that what happened to you?"

"I was never sure, but listening to you, it just might have been. I may not be living the life I want, whatever that is, but I know it could always be worse. There are so many people who don't even have the kinds of problems I have. I worry about will I still have enough money at the end of the month, but I am still working and I don't think I'll be facing homelessness any time soon. I feel more like..."

"Like you don't have the right to be sad about your life?"

"Yeah. That's exactly it."

A teardrop fell into her tea.

"I'm sorry. Did I make you do that?"

"No. I'm pretty sure I felt like it. I haven't allowed myself to cry in so long. I was so worried about why I wasn't happy that I don't think I ever really took the time to find out what made me sad. I've never had anyone to talk to about this. Perhaps if I had, I wouldn't have..."

"You don't know that, Aileen. People do things all the time for all kinds of reasons. You might have just gotten bored one day and decided to do a line. It might not have led to you losing your job or anything else. Hell, I never did drugs because I was always too afraid. I don't blame you though. At least you didn't let it all build up until one day you come into the office with a rifle and a vendetta against the world. I want to do that sometimes."

"You have this thing called a conscience and common sense telling you not to. I have that too. I hate her sometimes."

I didn't realize that I had gotten quiet and retreated to that place my transcorporean couldn't find. I didn't want to do that with her, but I wasn't even aware I was hiding my thoughts from her.

"You're not judging me are you?"

"No, I was actually thinking about something else."

"What?"

"I would really like to hold your hand right now. I think we could both use it."

Her empty mug was still a bit warm. Aileen wrapped her hands around it almost like she was in prayer. When the fingertips of both her hands finally connected, it was almost as if they were from two separate people. We sat there a moment, still. It wasn't exactly lying in the grass watching the clouds roll by, but that moment was something we both needed. At the time, it was perfect.

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Neither of us had realized she was starting a period. She was like me in that she rarely got cramps during PMS. The blood actually had to show itself before we realized it was time for that part of the cycle. She found some paper towels and folded them into a pad, a temporary solution until she could get the proper equipment.

"I learned the hard way that newspaper wouldn't work," I told her. "Then again, I was only about ten at the time and I had the mom who thought I should just automatically know what to do when these kinds of things happened. She never talked to me about anything like this."

"I think my mom blocked words like vagina and uterus from her memory," Aileen said. "Parents get mad when schools want to teach sex ed, but those are also the very parents who won't talk to their kids when they ask. I love my mom, but she could have done better by me in that department."

"I know, right?"

"I never did understand that. It wasn't like I was expecting her to discuss these things with me over the dinner table, but just a polite conversation that my body would go through some changes

whether or not I wanted it. I didn't want to have children, so I didn't see why I should have a period. Oh well."

"So what do you do now?"

"Improvise. I'm a bit short of funds right now, so I have to engage in a little something called retail shrinkage. You would think I was better at this by now, but there are some things I just don't think I'll ever get used to."

"You do what you have to."

"I think I can get away with the drug store across town again. They didn't catch me last time, so I might get in and get out again. If they say anything to me, I can just say they think we all look alike. That usually makes people back off."

"I really don't see how you can remain so droll under these circumstances."

"You cope any way you know how."

At least she was keeping that jones at bay. We took a very long walk to the other side of town since Aileen didn't want to use the few dollars she had for bus fare. She needed ever dollar for her next hit. Her craving wasn't so strong yet, so she was able to keep her mind on taking care of her biological needs for the moment. We got to the drug store. It was one of those old-fashioned places that still looked like something out of the 1950s. This meant the security was a little less obvious than it was in venues like Wal-Greens, CVS and Rite Aid. I still knew it was there though. Aileen knew as well.

I could feel her heart pounding when she walked in, but she remained composed. She picked up a basket and began to walk through the store. She picked up a couple of items here and there, but she had no intention of taking any of it. She casually picked up a package of pads and placed it in the basket. She lingered a bit in the area near the public restroom. Someone came near her and she hastily turned around to run straight into him and sent the basket flying. While she was apologizing and pretending to look for everything that she had lost, she casually kicked the pads near the bathroom door. She then assured the man she was alright and had everything under control. Once he left, she placed the basket down near the aisle then headed toward the bathroom. Aileen got the pads in with no problem and quickly locked herself in the private bathroom.

"That was pretty impressive."

"Sometimes I surprise myself at how good I can be at these things."

She fixed herself up then began hiding the pads on her person. Fortunately, she had pockets and a few other hiding places, so she managed to get the entire supply hidden and secured before heading back out. I almost jumped out of my skin from wherever I was when we stepped out and were met by a couple of employees.

Aileen was scared, but she kept her cool. She listened as the man she ran into accused her of stealing something. They checked the bathroom and found nothing then saw that her basket was still sitting well away from the bathroom well away from the bathroom. That was when Aileen gave a performance worthy of an Academy Award.

"How dare you! I came in here for a few things and had to answer nature's call, then you accuse me of stealing? Is it a crime to have to use the bathroom? Do you treat all your customers this way? Or just the ones who fit a certain description? I'll never set foot in your store again and I'll make sure I tell everyone how poorly you treat your customers!"

It was beautiful really. This little woman making a scene had these people shaking in their boots, doubting what they had probably already seen on their monitors. Yet, Aileen's performance had drawn attention to them and none of them wanted to be seen as the one picking on the slight Asian woman. Apparently, Aileen had watched Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop* a few times.

They were still apologizing to her as she stomped out of the store in mock anger. She had to keep herself from giving herself away with her smile as she made her way out of the neighborhood. That was the best rush I felt with Aileen. Still, I knew very soon that she would be searching for another.

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She waited until the next day. She said she wanted to wait until I left her, but she could not control the craving any longer. That unhappiness that I felt when I first came to her was back. This time, there was a bit of embarrassment and shame as well. I knew she had thought she failed me in some way. Even as she was sinking the needle between her toes, I tried to tell her that she owed me no apologies and that the only person she had to worry about disappointing was herself. I didn't know if any of it managed to get through as the rush began to take over the both of us. There was no escape this time. Aileen would not overcome the unhappiness that drove her to seek a chemically induced euphoria she would never truly find. She had reached her plateau with the heroin. Either she would move on to a new drug or she would increase her already potent dosage next time.

"I'm sorry, Grace. You must think I'm so weak."

*I think you're hurting. I can't take away the hurt, but I can keep you company a moment. I'll have to leave soon.*

"I'll miss you. It's been a long time since I've had a friend to talk to. You probably wouldn't be seen with me like this."

*I don't know. You're trying to make me feel guilty, but I'm not mad about it. Like you said, you do what you have to in order to survive. I guess emotional blackmail comes along with that.*

"I wouldn't blackmail you. I just didn't realize how lonely I was until you got here. If you hadn't come..."

*Aileen, is something wrong?*

Her heart began to pound. That rush she needed was coming to her. Aileen was no longer in her body. She had gone somewhere else that either went beyond me or I just couldn't see. Her heart felt like it would burst right out of her chest. Then it suddenly stopped. There was only darkness and an emptiness with which I wasn't familiar. I couldn't feel Aileen there. It was as if her consciousness had just ceased to exist.

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I wasn't sure how long I was there, but by the time the floating sensation came to me, I knew she was dead. I watched her there alone for a while before I found myself sitting outside my door. I couldn't make myself move to get up and go inside. I must have looked like an idiot sitting outside for no reason, but I didn't care. I couldn't get Aileen out of my head. I wondered if the last thing she had heard from someone was an accusation of blackmail. I felt as if I should have told her something else. I often felt that my words to someone else that she mattered were never taken seriously, so I tended to keep those sentiments to myself. But I regretted not telling it to Aileen. I regretted not telling her to at least try to reconnect with her family and see if they wouldn't want to see her.

Aileen was found after I made an anonymous call to report her body in the abandoned house. A few days after that, it was demolished. I wondered if they had the decency to remove her body first. I hoped so. She might have been an addict and part-time thief, but she didn't deserve to have her remains treated disrespectfully. I couldn't find any information about her, so I couldn't contact her family to let anyone know what happened. I hoped they would find out what happened to her. I hoped someone would claim her and lay her to rest. Lord knows she didn't get the peace she needed when she was here.

## Tammy's Confidence

This wasn't the usual rush of a high Hope sometimes felt whenever her transcorporean showed signs of a little chemical dependency. This was a different kind of high – one with which Hope had no familiarity. This was a natural and happy high served with a more than a healthy heaping of smug satisfaction. This woman had just had a thrill like none other. This woman had life in her hands just the way she wanted.

At least she did before that moment she realized she wasn't alone. Hope felt the panic seize her body as the woman grew afraid she was somehow not in control. That had to be her biggest fear – not being in control. Hope found that feeling a lot in many of her transcorporeans. She had actually given up that fear long ago when she became a walrus.

The woman was searching around the room to root out the other presence. Hope realized then what was wrong.

"Why are you afraid you've been caught? Steal something."

The woman began to contemplate the notion that she had somehow grown a conscience. She didn't like it.

"I'm not your conscience. I'm just a woman with a weird and special ability. I live inside you for four days then I'm gone. No, there's no reason for it. It just happens. Don't worry. I don't make you do anything you don't want to do and I don't have any control over you. You can hear me though. I may say a few things you don't like, but you can't ignore me. You just may as well get used to me for a little while.

The woman gently sat down on the bed and contemplated what the voice in her head meant. Hope looked around and realized where she was. The hotel suite was an accommodation she could never afford for herself. Her transcorporean seemed completely at home in her surroundings except for the fear that she had been caught at something still held her stiffly. Hope occupied herself by looking at the paintings on the wall knowing that they were not originals. The sheets on the turned down bed were meant to look and feel like silk, but the material was only polyester. The table was not genuine mahogany wood as it was claimed but a clever knock off. The soft plush rug was also not what it appeared. The whole room screamed "illusion," but it was only apparent to those who went looking for it. Anyone else could be very easily fooled because they wanted to believe the illusion. Hope wondered if this woman was one of them.

"Oh, no. I saw through all of this the first time I saw it. I know quality when it's in front of me. The management here knows I know. That's why I never have to pay for a thing when I'm in town. This posh little lie would never survive if it got out how many corners were cut to line the pockets of the owners."

The confidence in her tone told Hope so much about the woman. She had gotten her bearings back and caught on to the game quickly. She knew she was the only one who could hear Hope and that she didn't have to speak out loud to be heard. Hope was simultaneously impressed with and repulsed by the woman's arrogance.

"Honey, Tammy Wilkins hasn't gotten as far as she has by being a fool."

She was one of those types that referred to herself in the third person. Repulsion began to overcome the impressed feeling. Tammy had gotten up and began to preen in the mirror. Hope thought she looked like a villain from a 1980s prime time drama, the vindictive blonde whose sole purpose in life was to wreak havoc and destroy. She knew Tammy had caught that thought when the woman's ruby red lips curved into a wicked smile under her perfectly aligned nose. Her emerald green eyes narrowed into small slits as she began to take pleasure in knowing someone else thought she was a bad girl. Hope couldn't help but notice that the arched eyebrows never lost their shape even as the smile reached her eyes. That perfectly put together head sat atop a body that many would agree was the ideal and Tammy made sure that Hope saw it.

"All this took some work, sweetie pie, but it was necessary. Lookin' like this has its benefits and if anyone tells you any different, you know they're lyin'."

"I wouldn't doubt it. I'm just surprised to hear someone admit it out loud – or well, you know."

"Don't worry. I know how to play modest when it's necessary."

The Southern accent wasn't as strong as a Hollywood creation, but it was there in more than just traces. Something in her head told Tammy that she was Blanche DuBois before her fall. If she was going to be Southern, she was going to be Southern royalty if only in her own mind.

There was a knock on the door. Tammy quickly checked herself and went to answer the door. Room service. The young man with her complimentary dinner was poised and courteous as he knew he was dealing with a player. Hope noticed that Tammy didn't speak with her Southern accent as she told the young man where to place the cart before handing him a more than generous tip. Now she was just showing off.

"You bet I am, darlin'." Tammy set out the lobster feast before her as she prepared to sit down for her dinner. Hope knew she wasn't really a fan of the stuff, but always had it just because it was expensive. Yet, she was going to sit there and enjoy it right along with her transcorporean.

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There was more money on the table than Hope had ever seen in her lifetime. She doubted she would ever see that amount again outside this room. But there it was before her sitting in neat stacks. Tammy took her time as she counted the bills over and over. Hope knew it was for her benefit that Tammy showed off. The woman needed an audience. Hope simply obliged. It wasn't as if she had anywhere else to go.

"I tell you what, darlin'. Everyone may think this is easy money, but a score like this takes a lot of careful plannin'. When you take a chance, you gotta make it big and make it count. This ain't even my biggest score, but it's the biggest one in a while. I'm not worried though. It won't be the last."

Tammy finally grew tired of counting her loot for Hope's benefit and put it away in her bag. She began to look for something to wear that felt a little less restrictive and more suited for fun. She was about to head out on the town to celebrate.

"So are you even going to tell me how you came across such a treasure or do I have to make assumptions about you?"

Tammy continued gathering her toiletries and ran herself a hot bath complete with some upscale bath gel that was so exclusive Hope had never heard of it. She began to tell Hope about her latest score as she prepared to immerse herself in the tub that may as well have been the size of an Olympic pool.

"I worked on this little score for months. I found out everything I could about the bank from the names and birthdays of the night maintenance staff to the CEO's favorite call girl. Nothing was going to get by me on this one. I knew there was a lot of money going through that bank because it was one of those big ones that got money from the government a few years ago, so you know it was never paid back. All I had to do was bide my time and wait for the right fish to fry.

"He came along after a couple of months. His name was Eric – 41, married, three children, a mortgage and a chip on his shoulder. He was one of those guys who felt like life owed him something 'cause he's here, but he didn't get it yet. He was perfect for me. Those disgruntled ones are always looking for a way to stick it to the boss. All I had to do was find him at the right place at the right time and shake my ass at him a bit.

"He was about a stone's throw from a drinkin' problem, so I managed to catch up with him at his favorite bar and let him buy me a drink. By the end of the night, I let him think that takin' me to that hotel room was his idea. It didn't take much to hook him. I did things he didn't think it was proper to

ask his wife to try. That kind is always like that. Give 'em a little of the sweet stuff and listen to all their problems and they are willing to give you anything you want – even the key to gettin' into a bank vault.

“Eric was so easy. He thought he was tellin' me something when he explained to me how to move money from inactive accounts and even take a little bit of the interest and other fees from their regular clients. Of course, I already knew, but he thought it was cute when I suggested that we make a little something for ourselves and run away from here. He hesitated at first because of his family, but when I reminded him of the last time he got passed over for that promotion, well, he just couldn't help himself. I was going to give him everything he wanted in life and a whole lot more.

“He pilfered everything he could into an account in my name for the next few months. I just sat back and watched it grow. I kept tellin' him to be patient. It would be enough soon. Then we could get away to the Cayman Islands like we planned. The other day, I finally saw that it was time to pull out. He wasn't sayin' it, but I could tell he was nervous about his boss gettin' suspicious. I told him I would withdraw everything and we could be on our way tonight.

“Just this afternoon, I closed the account and called to tell him to say goodbye to his boss. I picked him up about an hour before the flight and told just felt so bad about leaving my bag in my hotel. I offered to let him keep the money with him while I went to get it. He was supposed to go ahead and get on the plane and I would be there in time. I gave him the bag, the one I showed him that had the money in it and sent him in. He actually should be there by now, but he probably already figured out that I only left him about a thousand. Wonder if he's gonna try to explain that to his wife if he has the nerve to come back.”

Hope thought things like that happened only in books or movies. Here she was inside a real life confidence artist. This woman was no joke. She knew her game inside and out. Now here she was with an obscene amount of money that most people couldn't earn after a lifetime of minimum wage.

Tammy got out of the tub and began fixing herself up. She was in the mood to celebrate another successful job. She told Hope that she always treated herself and never waited on a man to do it for her. She was the child who got her own.

*Great. Now she's appropriating Billie Holiday.*

~\*~

Tammy's celebration consisted of a night of gambling in a riverboat casino. While Hope had to admit that there was a fun excitement to the lights, noises and thrill of winning, she could not believe that Tammy had gambled away more than half of all that money she had stolen from the bank. She didn't even drink much or lose her head. She was just too cocky to think she could lose. Tammy thought that she was smarter than everyone else and that all the charm and suaveness she showed in her schemes would somehow help her beat the house. Not even batting her eyes and shaking her ass at the dealers could sway them to help her make up for her losses. They knew better than to tangle with casino bosses.

They were both tired when they got back to the hotel. Hope was glad when Tammy just took enough time to take off her makeup before crawling under those faux silk sheets and sleeping until the next afternoon.

Tammy seemed to be back to her old self as she had brunch and made plans on where to go next so that she could begin her next scam. She had already been working out the scheme in her head but had no mark or financial goal yet.

“A lot of people don't know just how important it is to know the mark before setting your sights on a money amount,” she explained. “He may not be worth as much as you think if he can't get you the right kind of access. I knew Eric could get me more than even he knew.”

“So are all your marks men?”

“Most of them. Sometimes women are a little smarter about these things because they aren’t too worried about how I’m going to repay them for their kindness. Then again, there are a few that can be had because they want in. I hooked more than a few that way. Man, woman, honey, it doesn’t matter. You get ‘em where you can.”

“You’re not even worried about all you lost last night, are you? You lost more than half that money already, but it doesn’t even faze you.”

“Sugar, if I spent all my time frettin’ over every little thing, I wouldn’t have nearly as much as I have now. There’ll be more. I just have to get on the next job a little sooner than I plan. That was only a small monkey wrench. I always land on me feet.”

Hope knew that she was right. People like Tammy always did land on their feet because they always had a safety net even if they jumped blindly.

“I guess it’s not really your money, right. That’s how you manage to take such chances. If you lose, you can always get it somewhere else from somebody else. You can afford to be reckless because you never take a chance with something that’s truly yours. Never mind that real people get hurt with your scams. Not just the people you bilk but others who get caught up in a system that’s stacked against them then find themselves with no opportunities because people like you snatch the same safety net you have out from under them.”

Tammy was stunned to silence for a moment, not being used to someone being so bluntly honest with her. It didn’t take her long to remember who the blonde was in this relationship.

“That’s not my problem, sweetie pie. Everyone out there has the same chance and if they don’t know how to compete, then that’s not my fault. You have to do what you can to make it and I’m not going to sit around and weep for someone who’s too weak to survive on their own.”

“So you survive on your own? You do all this by yourself with no help from anyone?”

“You bet I do.”

“So Eric was...”

“Look. He took his chances the same as I did. If he was too stupid to see he was way out of my league, then he deserved to be used.”

“You actually believe that, too. Sad thing is there are a hell of a lot more people who would agree with you than me, so you think you’re in the right.”

“Ugh. You’re one of them bleedin’ heart liberals, aren’t ya? Your type is always so self-righteous and Communist. You’re afraid to admit you just aren’t willin’ to get out there and do what it takes to make yourself successful.”

“Coming from a thief, because that’s what you are, I really can’t take any offense at that.”

Hope was a bit surprised that that shut her up. She expected Tammy to put up more of a fight, but her words were already escaping from one side of her ears and out the other. Tammy was better at shutting out what she didn’t like than most people Hope knew. That was when Hope remembered she had no conscience. Her worry that she was developing one when Hope first entered her had been long buried since she realized she was only being invaded by another being in her mind. Hope assumed her relief stemmed from her belief that at least that voice would be gone after a couple of days. A conscience might have stayed with her.

“Now if you don’t mind gettin’ out of my head for a while, I need to start planning the next job. I can’t do that with your jabberin’ on and on about things that don’t matter to me.”

“Don’t worry. You can pretend I’m not here all you like. It doesn’t escape me though that you hadn’t planned on working out your next job for some time now. I guess last night’s celebration took more out of you than you thought. For someone who preaches personal responsibility so much, you sure did lose a lot of money.”

That got her just like Hope thought it would. Her composure actually started to come undone as she began her performance. First, she had to gather the tears. Next, she had to choke up. Then she

had to let the tears overwhelm her because she just couldn't hold them back anymore. It reminded Hope of a baby who let out one long cry then had to take a deep breath before continuing to cry – except this was strictly a performance. Hope wasn't in the mood for it.

“So you're not going to plan your next heist, Ms. Wilkins?”

Suddenly, Tammy didn't want to cry anymore. “I'll show you. I'll make a score so big you'll eat your mean little words.”

“Unless you can plan it and execute it in the next two days, I don't give a damn. I won't be here after that.”

“Sounds like a challenge. I'll show you why people like you always finish last. I can think on my feet and come out of here with a hell of a lot more than I came with. You see, darlin', there is an art to the con. You always have to look for a good mark where you can find it. I see the way that blackjack dealer looks at me. I also see that he has ties to the high stakes poker game that they only let the high rollers in on. I can get into that game and work my magic. You'll see then.”

If there was one thing Hope liked about Tammy, it was her confidence. She could see no limits to what she was allowed to do. The world was open to her and she could not only pick a pearl from any oyster, but she could also have someone personally dive into the ocean to get the oyster for her. Hope almost envied the willful ignorance that made sure she remained blind to all the privileges she had in the world. She wore the perfect camouflage that left her undetected to those who should have kept her under surveillance so that she couldn't get away with her game. She told Hope herself that it was there, but as soon as Hope reminded her of it, she denied she had it. Being in Tammy's head was exhausting from all the backpedaling she had to do to maintain her illusion of why she was powerful. The real reason was buried so far in the recesses of her mind that even she forgot it was there.

She began to go through the designer dresses she happened to have with her at the time. Her business attire wouldn't do for this game. She needed something that would be much more distracting knowing already that her opponents would be male. Hope had to admit that she did seem well prepared. It was as if she had a backup plan in place just in case things with Eric took a turn for the worse. Hmph.

Tammy put herself together for the night with the perfect little black dress. She expertly did her own makeup and even matched her eyeliner to her shoes. She wasn't just planning to play the coquette. Any woman who meticulously paid attention to her appearance like that was definitely not mentally equipped to play in a man's game – or so that was what she wanted them to think. Hope was actually kind of looking forward to watching her work. It had nothing to do with any female solidarity or girl power. Hope was simply fascinated being on this side of the con for once. So many people had gotten over on me in one way or another that she thought it might be rather satisfying to at least get a vicarious win through this woman. She probably wouldn't get the chance otherwise.

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Tammy managed to get a few good pots, but the guys caught on rather quickly. They might have liked to look at her sitting pretty at the table, but none of them appreciated her actually winning and taking cash from their inside circle. The blackjack dealer that got her in the game was probably going to have to take a loss from his cut in order to cover Tammy's winnings. Of course, she didn't care.

In fact, she slept well into the afternoon on the next day. Hope really didn't like the hours she kept. She wasn't quite nocturnal, but she had no use for mornings. Somewhere in her mind, she fancied herself living the life of that model who said she wouldn't get out of bed for less than \$10,000 a day. She really thought she was that important.

Hope knew the rich food she ordered was more for her benefit than Tammy's. She couldn't even allow herself to enjoy it like she should have. She couldn't keep the disappointment from only

getting a fraction of what she said she would. She was embarrassed. She talked big and didn't deliver. She had failed in front of someone, in front of someone she felt was beneath her. Hope wasn't in the mood to be compassionate, so she teased Tammy about it until she got tired of it. Yeah, sometimes Hope could be a real pain, but she usually chose not to be. Something about Tammy irked her, though, so she couldn't help herself.

"Okay, so maybe I underestimated those guys a bit. That sometimes happens. That was just one time and I still made up for some of my losses the other night."

"Oh, please. The only reason you won as much as you did is because they know who you are and they don't want you blowing their scam. Those guys in the game last night didn't know about your arrangement with the hotel, so they weren't about to let you get over on them. Face it. You can't really outsmart anyone. You get everything you have through deception and blackmail. Smart has nothing to do with it. The only thing that separates you from most people is that you are willing to be slimy enough that no one wants to touch you. That's why you win. That's why you can make people bend to do what you want them to do. Smart my ass."

"You are such a...!" She couldn't think of an insult clever enough.

"Oh, darlin', please don't pass out from a case of the vapors!"

She couldn't help herself on that one either.

"You know for a con artist, you're not very fun. I really did expect you to be much more clever. I expected you to at least outsmart one person. Instead, you just use the same old tricks people use all the time. Granted they work for you, but, hell, I could do that if I came wrapped in the right package, too."

"Shut up! Just shut up! I can't wait 'til you get out of my head. You have been nothing but a rude little disrespectful pest since you got here. I have never in my life been treated this way..."

"That explains a lot."

"Shut up. I told you to shut and that's what you need to do..."

"Oh, I need to shut up just because you told me to? Seriously, what makes you think you get to tell me what to do? Ask yourself, 'Am I fucking up right now?' This is your conscience."

She had always wanted to try that Jamie Foxx line on somebody. Tammy was just as good for it as anyone else. Hope usually tried to hold off laughing at someone while she was part of their consciousness because she had a belief that somebody could get really scarred with another voice laughing in their head. She might not have cared much for these folks, but that didn't mean she wanted to see one of them end up in the nuthouse for no good reason. Then there were the ones like Tammy. Getting her out of circulation of decent society might have been worth a medal or something.

Tammy stayed busy planning her next con after that. She desperately wanted to block Hope out. Hope decided to leave her be and fought the urge to pipe up every once in a while saying "I'm your conscience." She hated having to check her mean streak like that, but she did have a transcorporean who once tried to find her after she left because she pissed her off. Tammy seemed that obsessive. Her drive to show up Hope actually got stronger than her need to survive. That was how Hope knew her reasons for even being in the con were totally selfish. She could have gotten a legitimate job and put her skills to good use if she wanted – but that wouldn't have been exciting enough. The stakes were just not enough to motivate her to get out of bed.

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By the time, Hope left Tammy's body, she had decided what she would do. It went against all her rules, but her contempt for Tammy was more than a strong dislike. The woman had to be stopped. When she found herself back in her own bed, she didn't get to sleep. She got up and contacted the FBI. She gave information on the whereabouts of an Eric Bradford who would probably be willing to help them catch a

con artist named Tammy Wilkins who had bilked millions from banks and businesses over the years. If there was one thing Hope had figured out over the past few years, the government would stop at no ends to protect the banks and businesses.

A couple of days passed before she finally heard the news about the capture of a female scam artist and the hotel that allowed her to operate out of its base. It was one of the largest local scandals to happen in quite some time. Hope wondered if any of the other Walruses would believe she had something to do with it. They had all been caught up in things that usually would not have anything to do with them if they were not transferred into a different body, so they might not find it too farfetched.

She smiled to herself as she settled down with a cup of coffee. Hope had run into various versions of Tammy all her life, but she had never felt she could do anything about it since the odds were always stacked out of her favor. But she had won this time. She looked forward to the drama that would play out when the mild-mannered bank executive returned to the country having received immunity for his part in helping a conniving spider woman cheat a bank out of thousands of dollars. The wife would probably forgive him since his new status as a hero would grant her celebrity as well. Old friends from both sides would come out of the woodwork to explain how they would have never guessed the two key players ended up in this situation while others would claim they had seen it coming all the time. The trial would be little more than a circus with everyone in the town remembering to mark in their social networking where they were the minute they heard the Wilkins verdict. Hope was practically writing the script in her head already.

Even though she felt she owed her transcorporeans nothing, Hope still wished a part of her had stayed with Tammy – that part telling her “I’m your conscience.” That would make things even. Hope did not like to admit that part of Tammy had stayed with her. A new fear was growing in her. What if she were now beginning to take on parts of her transcorporeans? Just as she could not control when and where she entered, what if she could not control which parts of the transcorporeans became a part of her? Hope could not wait until the next gathering of the Walruses.

### Joanne’s Faith

I could always tell a Catholic for some reason. There was something about them that was similar in essence, but I could never quite put my finger on it. They all sipped the same Kool-Aid and it sat festering on the brain just getting bigger and more dominant. I felt that most Catholics had a cult mentality, but I never told them that. I learned to never get into an argument with a religious fanatic because they already knew everything. Furthermore, you knew nothing. Never mind that I never asked and didn’t give a shit. You could have a religion as long as you kept it away from me.

I didn’t know what to think of this one just yet. She was on her knees bedside, thanking God for waking her up to see another morning. She was considerate enough to include those less fortunate and faithful than she in her prayers. How kind of her. That thought must have gotten through because she abruptly stopped. I realized then that she actually thought God had answered her. Then she thought that couldn’t be possible because God was the father and couldn’t be a woman.

“Wow, you really are old school with that belief aren’t you?”

I felt her heart began to thump. I hated this part, the part where they thought they must have been going crazy. An explanation seemed silly, but I knew the routine. I went through my normal spiel about who I was, how long I would be there and no there was nothing either of us could do about it. I made sure to mention I would be gone within a few days. Yes, I was sure I wasn’t God. If I was God, why the hell hadn’t done anything about all the horrible crap that occurred every day. What kind of God would I be?

“A just God, devoted to those of us who are faithful at heart.”

*Christ.*

"I see for sure now that you definitely aren't God."

"Definitely not."

"Well, maybe there's a reason you're here. You don't seem to be a believer, but I can help you. With a good Christian name like Faith, it's probably fate that you came to me."

*Christ.*

~\*~

I wanted to ask Joanne who her people were. I thought maybe she would say Lakota or Navajo. I knew my own people had been Cherokee once like so many others, but several generations and laws of nature and man had taken away that particular heritage from my current state of being. I later found out her people were Ojibwe from Canada. She had only been in the States for a few years now.

I wanted to get her talking about herself because she almost immediately began to drive me crazy with the excitement over the glory of God and all that Christ had done for her since she found Him. I could find that happiness, too, if only I would just let Him in.

"And if I don't?"

"Then God loves you anyway."

"So then why do I have to open my heart and let him in as you say? If I'm already accepted, why would I need to do anything else?"

I couldn't believe that actually stumped her for a moment. It was as if no one had ever asked her that before. Sometimes simple logic worked best.

"The acceptance is for you. You'll be so much happier when you let Jesus fill your heart..."

"If I'm already accepted, shouldn't that make me happy?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Okay, so then why would I have to do anything? I'm already supposed to be happy by default."

"You just don't understand. The acceptance isn't just for your immediate happiness. Your salvation will make you happy for all eternity even after your turn in this world is over. You have to accept Christ into your heart so that you can make it to the next world."

"Yeah, that's nice, but I have to survive this world while I'm here. If accepting Christ would magically put food on the table or get my rent paid, I'd be all for it. Last time I checked, I had to do that myself."

That was going to shut her up for a while. I think a lot of religious devotees found out a long time ago that the line about the Lord helping those who helped themselves lost its relevance long ago. That particular tautology only made them look foolish. Joanne was not a fool by any means. She was actually quite intelligent if I read her thought processes correctly. She knew how to think on her own and use logic and reason when she wanted. Sometimes those emotions came to the forefront and she had to remember her logical brain, but she was overall a sensible person. That logic was telling her that I was going to be a lost cause because I had just as much faith in my beliefs as she did hers.

"Well, Faith, I have some very important plans today. I hope you don't interfere with my work. I don't do what I do for a paycheck. I work for a higher cause and I can wait for my reward. That's what's wrong with so many of you. You're too busy looking for instant gratification that you don't think about a greater reward waiting for you at the finish line. I know mine will be there. I've earned it."

"That's all fine and good but remember this: your husband works and provides everything for you, so you have time to pursue this higher cause. Not everyone can say the same. When you're ready to go out and provide everyone else with all the things you have so they don't have to worry about it, then I'll agree that we can all join hands and sing all praises to God, Jesus, Yahweh and whoever else you want. Until then, there's nothing you can say that will convince me that you're right."

Joanne just shook her head as she gathered her purse and other necessary belongings. “Just a waste of such a good Christian name.”

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I should have known it was one of those anti-gay demonstrations. They were always anti-gay. A bunch of people who didn't have enough going on in their own bedrooms so they had to occupy themselves with what other people did in theirs. Why else would they be so worried about gay sex when they weren't gay? Here I thought I was pathetic for having a dry spell.

These demonstrators were actually outside a church where a couple were getting married. They were actually disrupting someone's happy ceremony because they were upset about it. I felt entitled to some answers.

“So how exactly is this offensive to you?”

“They're an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. It's a sin for man to lie with another man.”

“But these are two women.”

“It means the same thing.”

“So does that mean every time there's something in the Bible about a woman being submissive to or less than a man this means men, too? I mean if man is supposed to speak for everyone...”

“Look. There are distinctions. Please just shut up. I need to focus.”

Someone was looking out the front door, presumably to think of an escape plan for the happy couple who didn't deserve to have their day ruined. I wondered if there would be a way out of another exit from the church. These protesters seemed like the dangerous type.

“Okay, I just want to get this straight. Two people who have nothing to do with you are hurting you how? They're not supposed to be happy because they're different than you?”

I could feel that irritation rising up in her. Good. I wanted to make her uncomfortable. No matter what arguments I'd ever heard against people being gay, none of them could ever come up with a satisfactory answer to that question without sounding as petty and ignorant as they truly were. Joanne here was no different. She was racking her brain for an answer that would not make her look like a bigot, but she could find none. She then did something that many transcorporeans did when I started asking questions like I was 5 – she just told herself I never asked it. She literally began to tell herself that she had imagined the question and she didn't have to have an answer. That level of denial always fascinated me. I couldn't imagine the level of brain power it took to close off all logic and reason when it became obvious it would hurt to rethink something that had been ingrained so deeply into the psyche. It was like Joanne was part of a cult that successfully rooted out all independent thought.

I became a little alarmed when I noticed that something seemed to be wrong. The minister who had just performed the ceremony came out the front door – alone. He walked up to the protesters and began to speak with them. Of course, the good folks with the protest signs reading “God Hates Fags” drowned him out and didn't listen to a word he said. Joanne saw it at the same time I did. The brides had gotten out of a side door. She didn't say anything to the others as she slipped away to confront the two sinners on her own. No one even noticed her until she began shouting.

“Shame on you! You're contributing to the decline of our society, the corruption of our children. You need to make yourselves right with the Lord. You don't have to be this way!”

Joanne had gotten close to one of the brides. I tried to bring her hand over her eyes before the mace hit, but the burning began to overwhelm the both of us. Joanne's screaming caught the attention of everyone, but fortunately many in the wedding party including the brides managed to get away before the melee began to get any worse. I couldn't see any of it because Joanne couldn't keep her eyes opened. When she could, the tears blinded her.

“They assaulted me! I could have them arrested.”

“You threatened her. She was just trying to defend herself.”

“How could I possibly be a threat?”

“Yes, how could some strange woman yelling that she’s a sinner and less than human be perceived as posing a threat against her? I wonder why she even had to carry mace to her own wedding.”

Joanne began to choke on her tears again, glad to have a distraction so she wouldn’t have to think about the obvious. It seemed like forever before her eyes began to clear and she would be able to drive home. Even though the mace had already washed out of her eyes, Joanne still kept her eyes closed as she showered off the grime from the rest of her adventure.

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Joanne’s husband seemed pleasant enough although he had to be at least 20 years older than she was. That whole cult theory came back to mind when I saw the graying and thinning hair on the big head supported by a wiry frame. Joanne was a pretty healthy size, so they seemed to balance each other out in that way. Otherwise, I just didn’t see it. I couldn’t get it through my head how these two fit. I didn’t like her beliefs, but even I could see that Joanne was pretty with her dark hair and flat brown face.

She contemplated telling him about me while they said grace over dinner. As much as she hated to keep a secret from her husband, she decided not to say anything about it to him. I wondered if perhaps she had been put away before. That would have explained her devotion to a man who looked far out of his league when it came to her. She silently chastised me for being so quick to judge someone’s outer shell. Apparently, she didn’t know the meaning of the word ironic.

As the evening slowly wore on, I actually began to pray that it would soon come to an end. As much as Joanne told herself she was happy, I had never seen two people so close to each other in the same room so far apart. They were sitting right next to each other, but they might as well have been in two separate solar systems.

“Seriously, is this all your marriage is?”

“It’s not such a bad life. I have everything I need here. He takes care of the both of us so I can be where I’m most needed.”

“You haven’t been religious long, have you? You are way too devoted and close-minded to any other way of thinking to not be a recent convert.”

“I found Christ more than three years ago! Once I found Him, I found my way to Smitty. He and I knew we would be in it together to fight the good fight. My life has been full ever since then.”

“Of course, it has. There are so many people out there who have decided to live life on their own terms that need harassing.”

“I’m not harassing them. I’m trying to save them.”

“But, Joanne, they didn’t ask to be saved. How can you save the ones who already know who they are?”

I was starting to question Joanne’s true devotion to her beliefs because I had an easier time than I would have thought shutting her down. She would completely stop in her tracks and go back over familiar terrain. It was as if she felt she didn’t have to justify why she believed what she did because she was right. No matter what argument was thrown at her, her rightness was the only thing she needed. Her kind scared me more than any other.

She and Smitty finally went to bed. There was no sex involved, not even a peck on the cheek goodnight. How the hell could you marry someone and not even feel the slightest bit of attraction to him? Didn’t that defeat the purpose of marriage?

Joanne quieted my voice and drifted off into a heavy sleep. She dreamed of blood – lots of blood. The blood consumed her, overwhelmed her until she was nearly drowning in it. She even bled

tears. With all the blood, she didn't die. Something died, but she was still alive in a whirlpool of blood. By the time she awoke the next morning, those bloody tears were regular saline water.

Smitty was gone, but Joanne didn't seem a bit surprised. She began her morning ablutions but forgot to close her eyes to block my view. I could tell she was freaked out about her bloody dreams. She tried to block out the cause. Her will to push things to the back of her mind was as great as her ability to block out reason that contradicted her own thoughts. I was a bit impressed with all the mental gymnastics she had to perform at every second of the day.

"You know I'm just going to bug you about it until you tell me. I've been in a lot of people and rarely do they have dreams like that with no reason. There's some trauma there. You're trying to repress it and block it out. It's only going to get worse until it becomes a physical pain, so you may as well deal with it."

"I'll deal with what I need to the way I see fit. I don't need you to tell me how to run my life."

I couldn't argue with her, but I also still had to note the irony.

Joanne was gearing herself up for today's protest. I figured she had at least one for every day of the week. Probably no meeting or strategizing, just showed up where she thought she could smell sin. I might have admired that kind of devotion except I was sane. Still, something was bothering her about this next target. Something was a bit too close to home.

I should have known. The local women's clinic had to hire security guards and take all these extra precautions from the protesters who were determined to have at least one person standing outside shaming everyone who entered whether or not they were there to have an abortion. They just assumed that was why anyone was there. I never understood why people who called themselves virtuous or religious were so preoccupied with sex.

Apparently, Joanne was standing guard alone today. Her fellow protester thanked her for picking up the shift before leaving. If I hadn't been there, she would have been alone. For a moment, she thought she was. She forgot all about me as she turned around and looked hatefully at the building behind her. Her gaze caught the eye of the receptionist inside who sent the security guard outside. Joanne snapped out of her gaze and picked up the picket sign and gave two patients headed inside an equally hard look. They both ignored her.

"Wow. You really do hate people just living their lives don't you?"

"If they lived in the right way, they wouldn't need places like this."

"So if everyone were like you, they wouldn't need to get breast exams or pap smears? Living like you is going to keep them from getting help for domestic abuse and other bad situations? That's interesting. I didn't know I could keep bad stuff from happening to me just by telling other people their lives are wrong."

"Would you just shut up!"

Joanne had yelled that out loud. The security guard was about to approach her, probably to see if she was okay, but she ran back to her car. She began to drive. She didn't seem to have any notion of where she wanted to go, but she wanted to be away from that clinic. She wanted to be away from me. She could only have one of those things.

I wasn't really familiar with the part of town Joanne ended up in by the time she stopped. Apparently, she knew where she was. She got out of the car and began to walk toward a small lake. I thought about how nice it must be to be able to just take some time out in the middle of the day to enjoy the lake. Not surprisingly, the fact that she was enjoying a very specific privilege never crossed her mind.

"I used to be like you. I had all those live and let live peace, love and understanding ideas just like you. I thought I was free. I thought the ones who went around spouting ideas about everyone should just do what they wanted because they weren't hurting anyone. You see the so-called liberal types have their own hypocrisies and contradictions. They tell us that we're all connected and have to

take care of each other, but none of you wants to be responsible for your own actions. As soon as you get in trouble, you go looking to blame someone else and expect someone to get you out of it.”

“I thought we were talking about you.”

“Oh you insolent little... Yeah, I was like that. I swore. I thought of myself as some kind of rebel. I disrespected my parents. The white boys loved me. I was the brown woman of their dreams. I wasn't too brown, though. They didn't want a woman who was too dark, just someone who was almost like them but not. They expected me to be close to nature and teach them the ways of 'my people.' I was happy to oblige some. Others not so much. It didn't matter. I let too many of them in my bed. I thought I was showing my parents that they didn't own me. I thought I was showing everyone that I was the one in control.

“Then I found out I was pregnant. Here I was a grown woman with an unexpected guest trying to come into my party. I've been in this country long enough to know that doctors have been sterilizing us and trying to kill us off. That's what a lot of the anti-abortion people among us tell us. We have to give birth to every life so that our people don't die. I told myself that was male rhetoric for male ears. None of them had the right to tell me what to do with my body. I thought I didn't want that child, so I made an appointment at a place just like that clinic. Oh, they were all so nice. They discussed the situation with me and told me I could change my mind. I told them I wouldn't.

“The day came and I had a friend to be with me. Of course, I was a little nervous. I don't take to pain very well, so I was going to be out during the procedure. It didn't seem like that long, but when I came to, I knew something was wrong. The doctor explained to me that there had been some unexpected trouble during the procedure. To keep me from hemorrhaging, they had to perform an emergency hysterectomy. I didn't know what to think at first. I never planned on having children, but I always assumed the option would be open to me until I reached a certain age. I couldn't think of a reason why this would happen to me. I was good to others and I didn't do any harm. At least that's what I thought.

“I joined an online support group for women who needed to talk to someone after an abortion. That was where I met Catherine. She was able to talk to me privately because she sensed that I regretted my abortion. She knew I wasn't safe to talk about that part with the others, so she arranged to speak with me away from them. Catherine opened my eyes to so much. She said it was okay to have regret and that I didn't have to live with that mistake alone. There would be others who were willing to help me if I would just admit the error of my ways. All would be forgiven.

“She connected me to a church leader here. After some counseling, I decided to come here to make a fresh start. I confessed before the congregation that I had sinned, but I no longer wanted to be that sinner. They welcomed me into their arms and brought me into the flock. Ever since then, they've been trying to get me ready to speak to others about how wrong it is to take an innocent life before it is born. I want to do it, but I'm just not ready yet. I'll get there someday.”

I listened to her. It was a compelling story. I almost didn't want to point out the inconsistency of her logic. Almost.

“So instead of blaming the doctor who may or may not have intentionally sterilized you, you decide that your current state is your fault because you at one time wanted to be your own person? Why don't you just admit you got tired of the lifestyle you were living and needed a change? You need to engage with your masochistic side, but admitting that would go against whatever ideology you thought you were using to challenge a more hegemonic one. Lots of women regret having to make that choice, but they live with it because they know why they had to do it. They just don't go running to a bunch of anti-choice hypocrites because they feel the need to prostrate themselves so that they can get pain from outside.”

That made her mad. She was expecting sympathy. I didn't have it. Sure, there were women who truly regretted the decision, but they didn't feel the need to engage in pain porn or don the scarlet

letter so that others could judge them while pretending to forgive them just because they had a come to Jesus moment.

"I'm going home. I need to have Smitty's dinner waiting when he gets home."

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I stopped giving her a hard time after that moment. In her own way, she was enjoying it. She wanted me to keep passing judgment on her so that she could revel in how right she was in her new life. After three years, she still had the zealotry of a recent convert. That was the scary type for me. Joanne needed that devotion because something in her deep down did not truly believe all the things she extolled. She still needed to convince herself that she had followed the right path. Changing a way of life was difficult enough. Finding out she was wrong would have been devastating.

So I decided to stop with the sarcastic questions and let her go ahead with her protests and street preaching. She could still hear whenever I had a derisive thought about something she said or did, but she didn't want to be the one to pick the fight. That would have been casting the first stone. That decision had nothing to do with her being sinless, just self-righteous.

"I'll be gone soon. You don't have to worry about me pointing out the obvious to you ever again."

"I just wish you would have listened to me. I know you aren't happy. I've been where you are. That life will leave you unfulfilled."

"You really want me to believe that you're happy every second of the day when I saw you practically melt down so that you could tell someone your sob story? You're married to a man you don't love and live a life that someone else thinks you should have. Yeah, that sounds like happiness to me. Then again, letting others do the thinking for you has to be an easier way to live. I just know better than to mistake easy for happy."

Joanne got down on her knees and clasped her hands.

"O Almighty and merciful God, who hast commissioned Thy angels to guide and protect us, command them to be our assiduous companions from our setting out until our return; to clothe us with their invisible protection; to keep from us all danger of collision, of fire, of explosion, of fall and bruises, and finally, having preserved us from all evil, and especially from sin, to guide us to our heavenly home. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I know you are on your way to a new destination, so you need to be kept safe."

"So tell me again why you offer your prayers to people who don't ask for them? Who are you really trying to make feel better? You know, Joanne, in a different time and place, you and I might have gotten along. After getting to know you a little better, I see now that you and I would never even be acquaintances. You have no tolerance for difference and I have no tolerance for bullshit."

She looked in the mirror as if she could actually see me. She looked small still in her kneeling position. She fixed her face in a sad pose that seemed perfected after many hours of rehearsal. She looked right at her reflection when she spoke.

"I'll pray for you."

I began to feel myself preparing to leave her body. She must have felt a certain sensation during the biotransference as well because Joanne began to exaggerate convulsions as I found myself hovering over her. In the space it took me to blink, I found myself back in my own kitchen with my own things.

Joanne was probably still laid out on the floor waiting for a sign that would tell her that it was okay for her to get up because the performance was over. I somehow got the feeling that from then on, she would always live her life that way – as if I was watching. What was the point in performing pain porn if there was no one to watch?

I would have been flattered except it didn't make any difference that I was the one who was with Joanne. She needed someone – anyone – to know that she was paying daily and dearly for the one mistake she had made that cost her something precious to her, something she did not even know she wanted until it was gone. The folks who converted her did not give her the satisfaction of feeling sorry for her, so she didn't even realize she was seeking out that particular reaction from strangers who would hear her story. I knew then what would happen to Joanne. She would finally be ready. She was about to take her place by the side of a new messiah who would be allowed to use her body to warn the flock about the evils of taking the life of the innocent unborn. She would thank me for entering her life because my presence was a sign that she needed to go ahead with the plans of the ones who saved her and showed her a better way to live.

That was the downside of being a Walrus. Every person would react differently to the experience. Some thought we were sent from God while others thought we were a part of their own consciousness breaking down from just the demands of ordinary living. It was difficult to tell anyone otherwise when our presence represented the impossible. That was why I tried to take each biotransference as it came. That was why I needed to meet with the others and pretend for a little while that it was possible to make sense of what happened to us. I couldn't be like Grace and Charity who got attached in their own ways. Hope usually ended up trying to help her transcorporeans as well. I fought all instincts to get involved and kept them all as far away as possible.

#### Elizabeth's Trust

These were much fancier digs than what Charity was used to. The luxury was almost too much. So was the lack of awe in her transcorporean. This was everyday life for her. This body had never known a day without the four poster bed, the wooden desk located clear on the other side of the room or the windowsill that doubled as her own private storage space. She was running her bare feet along the plush white carpet in the oddly sterile white room. If there hadn't been so many personal pictures and other keepsakes in the place, Charity might have sworn she was in a hospital.

But the young woman was sitting at the desk in front of a computer. She flipped between her word processor with a nearly blank document and her Internet session. Charity didn't know the young man whose fan page stood in front of her – Andrew Garfield. She just assumed he was the girl's latest crush. She remembered what it was like. For her it was Foster Sylver.

"Great. Now I get to take a different medication for hearing voices in my head."

Charity tried to turn off her thoughts as she listened to the young woman practically go over a one-sided conversation in her own mind. She didn't know whether she should tell her that there was someone else there. She was afraid this girl might do harm to herself at any minute.

"Do you often hear someone else in your head?"

This seemed to startle the girl a moment when she recognized that the inquiry wasn't from her own rambling thoughts. She finally answered.

"Sometimes. Who are you?"

"My name is Charity. You don't have a split personality. I'm actually someone else. I have an ability to get into someone else's mind. I don't know why. It just happens. I'll be gone in four days and you'll be back to normal."

“Normal,” the girl scoffed. “What’s normal? I hope it’s not this. Things are so boring here. It’s like being in a prison cell.”

“Is someone keeping you here? Are you not allowed to leave?”

“Well, that’s not what I mean. I have everything I need right here, so my parents hope I won’t have a reason to go out. It looks nice, but it’s still a cage.”

Charity guessed this young woman had never seen the inside of a prison cell and never would.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t know what prison is like. I’ve read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* you know.”

Oh dear God, she’s one of those.

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Her name was Elizabeth Winston. Charity recognized the name as belonging to one of the prominent families about town. Of course, like everyone else, she had never had the privilege of being in the same vicinity as one of the mighty Winstons. Few people had. They were well protected and made sure they had no contact with anyone considered beneath them.

Dinner time told Charity that the story with this family was an old one, one that had been told many times before. Elizabeth was going through her rebellious phase. The poor little rich girl had gotten bored with life and felt the need to differentiate herself from her wealthy upbringing. It was a tired cliché really, but Elizabeth thought she was the first to think of it. All teenagers thought they were first. Charity knew better. She knew telling this girl how naïve and immature she was would do no good. What she didn’t know was how this was going to ride out.

“I got a new friend today.” Elizabeth played with her mashed potatoes among the barely touched food on her plate as she looked at her mother. There was barely any resemblance between the two since Elizabeth was a brunette with dark brown eyes and rather pretty is plain face. Her mother had to have one of the most obvious dye jobs Charity had ever seen along with cornflower blue contacts. This woman even wore pearls to the dinner table. In her ripped jeans and worn Radiohead t-shirt, Elizabeth was very obviously trying to look like the very opposite of her mother.

“Is that right, dear,” her mother answered in a soft but patronizing tone. “Would you like to tell me about her – or him?”

“Sure.”

This got the mother’s full attention as she was apparently not used to her daughter opening up to her about anything important. She waited expectantly while Elizabeth took a bite of her potatoes and slowly swallowed them.

“Her name is Charity. She lives in my head.”

The mother rolled her eyes, thinking she had been had by her daughter again. She turned her attention back to her own plate, which barely consisted of a meager salad and side vegetables.

“I haven’t seen what she looks like, but I think she’s black. She sounds like it. I finally got a black friend and there’s nothing you can do about it now.”

“You said she lives in your head. Well, I think we just need to double your sessions with Dr. Thornton. He’ll probably need to put you on some new medication to get these silly notions out of your head. If you keep this up, I won’t have any objections to having you committed this time.”

Elizabeth was about to say something, but she stopped. Charity could see that Elizabeth may have been unhappy in her so-called gilded cage, but she feared being in a real one even more. So much for *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

“It’s not fair,” she said later as she sat in front of her computer again avoiding homework. “She’s always saying that she’ll let Thornton commit me. I don’t think she’ll really do it because she

wouldn't want the stigma of having a crazy child, but she just might do it and tell people I'm going to school abroad. She's always been selfish like that."

"How else has she been selfish? What did she do to you?"

"Oh, you know. I asked for a convertible for my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, but she said I could only have a Nissan."

"Oh, how horrible."

"I know, huh."

Elizabeth stopped a moment when the sarcasm in Charity's tone finally caught up with her. She seemed unfazed though. Deep down she knew her privilege and that she never had to listen to what anyone else thought of her.

"I showed her though. I still drive that Nissan and tell everyone just how cheap she is. They're all talking about her behind her back. We'll see how much her reputation is worth when they all find out her daughter's being treated for depression."

"So you're depressed."

"Who wouldn't be in this place?"

"Seriously, you and I are going to have to have a talk."

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Elizabeth was no better at school. She lived vicariously through a group of friends whose parents did not keep such a tight rein on them, so they got to live out her fantasy: they occasionally got to slum with the black kids they found so cool who lived nowhere near their private properties.

Charity had to admit she was somewhat shocked to hear how some of them prescribed to old beliefs that she thought had been dispelled in the information age. Elizabeth's friend Connie brought back her report from the other side to tell them what it was like to fuck a black guy. Her account came straight out of a *National Geographic* narrative of how she braved the jungle to get to her boyfriend, a basketball player on a rival team no less, and proceeded to satisfy her curiosity as to whether or not they had bigger dicks. According to her, they did. She knew this based on the one boy she managed to have sex with.

What got to Charity even more was that she could feel Elizabeth's envy. She was actually jealous that Connie was the first to fuck a black boy and not her.

"That would have made my mother so mad," Elizabeth mused later as she headed home. "Of course, I can still do it, but now everybody will say I just did it because Connie did. I've liked black guys longer than she has and she got the idea from me. Her parents just don't watch over her like a hawk the way mine do. Is she right though? Are those guys really hung or is she exaggerating?"

Charity's head hurt from the mental face palm she gave herself. This girl had just asked her about one of the oldest myths in the book with no shame or second thought about how problematic the question was. On top of that, she assumed Charity must have known. After all, she must have fucked quite a few black guys in her life.

"Well, haven't you? You guys start early. I heard about this one girl who got caught on camera giving head to her boyfriend and she was 14. The whole thing went viral, but it was pretty hard to find by the time I heard about it. How old were you when you first had sex?"

"How old were you?" Charity did not try to hide her annoyance or soften her tone. "Little girl, I hope you know it's people like you who cause the most problems for everyone else. Do you know what fetishization is?"

"I've never even heard that word."

"I'm not surprised, but you and your screwed up ideas about black people are the prime example. You think it's all fun and games being black because you think it's the opposite of your lily

white existence. Let me tell you something. We're not here for your entertainment, and our culture, pleasure and pain is not for your consumption. You live in protection and privilege and you complain all day about it and claim to have ailments that you don't have to add some spice to your life. Let me tell you something else. There are people who actually do have depression and they don't get to see a psychiatrist about it. They don't get the medication they need. They don't have anyone to support them because they know people will look at them in a different way and things could just get worse. You sit there in your spacious white room all you like, but if I ever hear you say some other foul shit about my culture or my people again, I will make my way back to this place when I am back in my body and beat your little ass."

Elizabeth was quiet. Charity could feel the young girl try to will herself to cry. It was all so contrived.

"Sit there and cry all you want. I care not. When you start shedding tears for all the people you use for your entertainment, then I might give you the benefit of the doubt. Until then, save your crocodile tears."

They had reached Elizabeth's home by then. After the security guard waved them in, she got out and began to head to her house. Her sad charade stopped when she noticed there were a few cars at her home. She parked and headed into the house.

"Dr. Thornton, what are you doing here?"

Thornton put on his brave face as he put his arm around Elizabeth. It crept out Charity.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Your mother was taken to the hospital earlier."

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Congestive heart failure. She had collapsed from congestion in the lungs and was unresponsive by the time Elizabeth arrived at her mother's private room. Charity could feel the ambivalence in Elizabeth's mood. She didn't want to care about her mother lying there in that bed, but the woman looked so fragile and weak. That was when Charity realized that her mother was the only parent Elizabeth had left.

"What was it like when your father died?"

Elizabeth sat down as she began to reminisce. "A couple of years ago, he just had a heart attack and died. No warning or nothing. He was here one day and gone the next. I didn't even have the chance to say goodbye. He just left me with her. She got everything because I was still a minor. I don't even get a trust fund until I'm 25. I had to stay here with her because she said she was so afraid something would happen to me. Look at her now. She stopped eating after he died and now her heart's too weak to go on. She can't even take care of herself and made sure I couldn't have any fun either."

"Okay, I want to feel sympathy for you right now, but your illogic is making my head spin."

"I don't need you to feel sorry for me. That's what she pays Thornton for."

"I think I'm starting to see the story here."

"What?"

"Honey, you are a cliché. You all are. I was with another girl around your age not too long ago. She thought she had problems, too. Both of you are just proving a theory of mine."

"What type of theory could you have?"

"One that would never cross that little closed mind of yours, young lady. Anyway, I think the problem with everything is that we all go through a teenage phase. We all get a little crazy around that time. We think life will never get any worse and that we already know everything we'll need to know. We think we're smarter than everyone else and everything we go through at the time is brand new. You think you're the first to learn something when you finally have your own critical thoughts. The problem

is there are only a few of us who actually grow out of it. Most people just stagnate at that phase and never move beyond that mentality. Unfortunately, those are the ones who end up running everything because that's who people relate to most."

Elizabeth was quiet a moment. She apparently paid no mind to the fact that Charity could hear her turning over her not-so-clever comebacks in her head. She just waited until Elizabeth settled for the best she could come up with.

"That's not really much of a theory. More like your personal opinion. That can't mean much."

"More than you would like it to, little girl."

There was a knock on the door. Thornton came in before Elizabeth could invite him. She gave him no acknowledgment as he sat down in a chair opposite her and waited for an ideal moment to speak.

"I've been speaking with the doctors. It doesn't look like she's going to make it through the night. She's just too weak and doesn't seem to be fighting to stay here. Would you like to talk about this?"

Elizabeth looked up at him with no expression. *He really thinks I'm sad about this.* Charity could feel her fight to suppress the smile forming in her eyes and lips. The girl knew better. She knew she had to play the role as she always had. Charity listened to her as she looked Thornton in the eye and lied about how much she loved her mom and refused to believe she would die. All the time, she was calculating the worth of her father's estate that would soon be hers with her mother out of the way. Charity could not wait to be out of this body.

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Elizabeth's mother didn't last through the night. Elizabeth was still asleep when the flat line announced the end of a beating heart. The doctor took her nonchalance at the situation as an innocent sign of fatigue, having been woken in the middle of the night. Only Charity knew that Elizabeth had been counting the minutes to her mother's death. The amount of unfeeling in this girl was scary. In a way, she began to understand from where Elizabeth's hatred stemmed. Her parents had obviously never bothered to teach her about human concepts like compassion and empathy. She was never taught what it was to care for others. Charity could feel on some level that Elizabeth knew this. However, she also felt since her own parents had never been the ones to instill it in her that she had no obligation to learn these things on her own. That was the real tragedy.

Elizabeth sat alone in her white room. She might have not cared that she had just lost both her parents, but she did realize that she was now an orphan not yet 18. Her concern was that she was now about to have relatives coming out the woodwork wanting to lay claim to that trust that she could not access until she was 25. That age seemed like a dream that would never come true.

"It's not fair. It's a long time before I'm 25. Didn't they think of what to do in case I was left here alone? I'll probably end up in court with a bunch of relatives I've never met all trying to get into my good graces so they can bilk me for as much as possible leaving me with nothing even by the time I can get the money. I bet they planned it that way. They just never tried to prepare me for anything."

"Actually, a lot of parents do have a plan in case something happens to them, especially the ones as wealthy as your parents. Thing is they believe their kids care for them and may be afraid to think of a life without them, so they don't tell you that they've made a will or other plans for the estate to keep you protected. They spent so much time trying to protect you from everything that they seem to have forgotten to make you trust them."

Elizabeth was trying to hold on to that anger, but Charity's words had clicked with her. She knew that Charity was probably right. Her parents had always been prepared for anything. There was already money set aside for college. There were attorneys to help her negotiate when she moved out

on her own and wanted to buy her own home. There were even deals with luxury car dealers to upgrade her vehicle every three years when she needed it. No doubt there was a will that would let her know how much of her parent's estate would belong to her.

She found out the next morning. Everything. With the exception of her trust, everything was to go to Elizabeth Winston in the event of both her parents' deaths. Of course, Dr. Thornton was right at her side when she found out. Charity saw the wheels in his head turning. She wondered how long it would be before she would hear about the wedding announcement then untimely death of Elizabeth Winston in the tabloids with her husband and former therapist James Thornton at her side. Elizabeth wasn't paying much attention to him and didn't seem to notice when he and the attorney finally left. She was too busy planning a celebration later that night.

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Only a couple of "friends" were supposed to come. However, Elizabeth couldn't resist making sure a few of the black football players who had never been allowed to her house when her parents were alive made it there. She thought they would be the ones to cause trouble. They weren't. The friends who already knew the layout of the house and were most familiar with it took advantage of the lack of adult supervision and proceeded to fulfill all their unchecked desires to do as much damage as possible to the Winston estate in honor of their friend who had practically been held hostage in the old house.

Charity couldn't help but notice the nervous side eyes of the black guests who knew better than to behave so abominably in someone else's home, much less show so much disrespect for the dead. A few of them left soon after the party began, fearful that they were to be the blame for whatever wretchedness that was about to go down. A few more stayed to be entertained because they knew whatever happened was about to be epic. Camera phones and mobile devices were readied to capture as much of the debauchery that was about to transpire.

Charity had never really been invited to any house parties when she was a teen, but she thought the scenes that were going on before her only happened in movies and television shows. Elizabeth was doing her best to drink her weight in alcohol, but Charity somehow found the will to hold some of it back despite Elizabeth's attempts to force it down her throat. Her mind was still clear enough to see kids far too young begin nothing short of an orgy in one of the rec rooms right out in the open in front of everyone. There was something shocking about it to Charity, not just because these were high school kids but also because none of them seemed to be bothered that they were being recorded and they would probably find themselves forever in the annals of cyberspace where it should have haunted them for the rest of their days.

Then Charity remembered where she was and who she was with. This was the life of the privileged. Of course, these types of things happened all the time behind the closed gates of their fancy homes. She remembered the mansion when she inhabited the body of a woman named Annie who was making her first pornographic film. No one wanted to acknowledge that this was where these things always took place. Only these kids would never see the consequences of their actions. They had the right connections, the wealth and the privilege to make all these actions irrelevant. It would all be chalked up to youthful exploits.

Elizabeth had blocked out these thoughts as she reveled in the thought that her parents would die if only they knew what she was doing to their carefully constructed illusion. Oh wait. They were already dead. With the alcohol going to her head and the fast action going on around her, the thought didn't make her as happy as she wanted. Elizabeth was starting to feel sick. She could vaguely make out a few people jumping into the swimming pool with little or nothing on as she headed to her bedroom. The loud music was starting to pound in her head. She needed to get away.

The dizziness grew heavier. Fortunately, there was no one in Elizabeth's room, so she locked the door behind her and laid down on the bed. The last thing she remembered before passing out was the sound of the laughter coming from downstairs as the party raged on.

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There were still a few a few stragglers when Elizabeth woke up late the next morning. Charity immediately hated her for subjecting her to the hangover that was threatening to leave them both incapacitated for a week. In her own adult little mind, Elizabeth asked her housekeeper for coffee black thinking it was the cure for the unfamiliar affliction – no doubt because she had seen it in so many films before.

"It's not a cure you know. Caffeine can give you a headache too. You're trying to put out a fire with gasoline."

"Oh shut up!" Elizabeth realized she had yelled it aloud and tried to hide her embarrassment from the woman who had just delivered the coffee but knew better than to say anything to the young woman who was now her boss. She simply turned around and left Elizabeth on her own.

"I bet you recently 'discovered' a song called 'She's Leaving Home.' You have that life all romanticized in your head and you wanted to live it while your parents were alive. Now you'll never get to, so you call yourself trying to destroy everything they worked toward all their lives. You'll still never have the satisfaction of showing them. They're gone now. You'll never win."

"What do you know? I bet you spent this time of your life hanging out with your friends smoking weed and fucking the boys with really big dicks by now. At least if I had run away when I wanted to, I would have had some fun."

"It never ceases to amaze me the ignorance that come out of some folks. Little girl, let me tell you. You will never be happy no matter what you do because you are an entitled little princess. You know why you never ran away? Because you know you would never be able to survive without all the things your parents gave you including your name. You want to tell yourself that you're a rebel when you're just this scared little girl who's afraid of what the world is really like because you know if you ever took to it on your own it would eat you alive. You try to appropriate from others because that's a safe way for you to live out your fantasies, but you know it would kill you if you ever had to live in anyone else's shoes for even a day. Even this little soiree you threw – this is not going to make you the Notorious E-Li-Ze. It's still going to make you a pathetic little girl off her medication trying to be something she's not."

"Oh please, the society pages are going to have a field day with this one. Check this out."

Elizabeth pulled out her mobile device and pulled up a local gossip page Charity was sure she checked regularly. She was right about one thing – her all night party was a front page headline complete with censored pictures of participants in all their debauchery. However, there wasn't quite the reaction for which she had hoped. Instead of being heralded as a wild girl, a good girl gone wrong, she was given pity and sympathy. How could anyone blame her for lashing out so when she had just lost the only parent she had left? At least she was only throwing wild parties just hours after her mother's death and not on a quick downward spiral with drugs and alcohol.

"Disappointed? Face it. These privileges you have will always work for you. You didn't even get to experience a life in another's skin. I do that. Even if you could do it, you would be begging to be back here in your castle where everything is safe and cozy. Stay in your lane, girl. Otherwise, you'll just get rear ended and won't know where to go for help."

Charity felt herself feeling the sensation. She was about to leave. Apparently, Elizabeth knew it as well. She made sure she got one more lick in before Charity left her body and hovered over her a moment before leaving.

“At least I’m not black.”

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She was never more relieved to be on her couch than she was at that moment. No one but the other walruses would truly understand how completely nightmarish it was to be forced to share an existence with someone like Elizabeth Winston. It was actually frightening. She could see the kind of person Elizabeth was starting to be. It was dangerous. Her kind was always dangerous, but they were never taken seriously as a threat because of what they were always perceived to be. Yet Charity knew that it was the Elizabeth Winstons of the world who helped create the most chaos and misery when they finally realized exactly how much power they truly held in the world.

She knew that was how Elizabeth would turn out. She held a fascination for people she secretly despised. She didn’t want to be black. She wanted the essence of what she thought blackness was – that dark mystery that she thought gave her access to her inhibitions and strongest desires. At her age, she already understood that her body was not supposed to be the marker of those things that were unbecoming of a girl in her position destined to become a young woman of society. Yet, she already knew which body was the one that would give her access to everything she was never to be.

The Elizabeth Winstons were always dangerous because even if she grew out of her phase of fascination and fetishization, she would look back on that time as one of misguidance and blame her fascination on a lack of understanding what her parents had truly meant to give her throughout her life. That dark influence over her had led her to misjudge and not show her parents proper appreciation. That was what she would say.

And she would be forgiven. No one would blame her for thinking at one point in her life she was supposed to be someone else. That was what adolescence was for. No one would blame her for turning away from her true nature when she needed to find herself. When the pictures from her wild party resurfaced or followed her throughout her life, she would be given a free pass to let go of that part of her past since it obviously had to be a confusing and tough time in her life.

Charity laid back on her couch. She could not close her eyes. She knew Elizabeth Winston was still lurking back there somewhere. She tried to think of what she would tell the others at their next gathering. They would understand why she was so worried. They knew it was not simply paranoia. They all experienced the lives of others, so they all got to know their transcorporeans’ true nature no matter how many times the transcorporeans lied to themselves about who they really were. Those were the truly frightening ones. Charity began to go back to her normal life and to put the memory of Elizabeth Winston’s mind out of her own for the time being.

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“You really mean to tell me you started pretending to be her conscience!”

Grace laughed merrily with the others as they thought about how the scenario must have played out in the transcorporean’s head. They all knew better than to intentionally cause mental harm to a transcorporean, but they had all heard of Tammy Wilford by then because of the scandal. They all agreed she had it coming.

Faith said, “I can’t believe you’re the one who dropped a dime on her. I hope that guy does decide to testify against her. After that, I hope his wife leaves him and takes him for every dime he hasn’t even made yet. What do you want to bet he’ll still get a job after he’s helped someone embezzle money from a bank?”

“They always do,” Hope said before she turned to Charity. “You really shouldn’t feel bad about dismissing that girl. She’s going to do some real damage some day and you don’t want to be in the middle of it. I just wish I had something on her so I could turn in her ass, too.”

“I know right,” Grace chimed in. “These kids... everyone thinks they’re so progressive and they won’t make the same kinds of problems their parents did. Those privileged bastards know who they are. They aren’t fooling anyone.”

Charity said, “Yeah. We all tell ourselves that they’re innocent and they need to learn. She’s already learned. Hell, just the sight of her tears is enough to get her what she wants. We don’t have that privilege.... I’m sorry about Aileen, Grace. I wish we could tell you for sure if she was taken out of that house and given a proper burial.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference. She’s still gone. Can’t bring her back.”

“Wait!” Hope said suddenly. “Does this mean that we don’t die even if we’re in a transcorporean who does?”

The thought suddenly hit all of them. They had almost missed this crucial piece of information. They now had one less worry about their lives as Walruses. At least they would survive no matter what happened to the transcorporean.

“Yeah, well who got us this time?” Faith asked.

“That would be me,” Grace answered. “I guess it’s just my night.”

Grace settled the bill while the others extended their courtesies and headed out. She was left alone for a moment after the others left. She sat a moment and gently rubbed her arm in that area she remembered Aileen had pierced herself and gotten a few lovely moments of escape. She could use some of that release right about now.