



 rabbit, rabbit, rabbit  @therabbitdies

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## The Rabbit Died - Part Thirteen

**WARNING!** The Rabbit Died is a horror-fantasy story that contains depictions and mentions of abuse, ableism, body horror, cannibalism, death, gender dysphoria, gore, grooming, incest, parental abandonment, pregnancy, rape, and sexual assault.

CSA is REFERENCED but not depicted. Reader discretion is advised.

You fiddle with the cables connecting your Playstation to the old CRT in Rabbit's cabin. She needs a new television, the volume is dying on this one. To hear anything, you have to jack the sound up to ten, and even then, all you get are whispers. It sucks, Rabbit deserves better.

"What game did you bring?" Rabbit asks. She sits on her careworn sofa, nestled snugly in a pile of pillows and blankets. "Is it the zombie one or the weird one?"

You hold up your copy of Resident Evil 2.

"The zombie one, okay. Play the girl, I like her more than the cop."

Finished with the cables, you open the jewel case and remove the disc for Claire Redfield. You show it to Rabbit. She smiles, her new teeth bright in the dim lamp light, and nods with approval. "Yes, I like her," she says. "She's a good person."

You insert the memory card and disc and power on the Playstation. The television whispers on. You scoot back on the floor and rest your head on Rabbit's knee. She strokes the bandage on your cheek.

"You should let me heal that," she says.

The staples holding your cheek together itch. They throb. You suck at the wound, tasting steel and old blood. Lucy ripped out the intricate sutures Tsukiko stitched into your skin two nights ago and replaced them with her own crude work. No reason. Just felt like it, she said.

"She'll cut it back open." Drool leaks from the torn corner of your mouth and drips down your chin. Rabbit dabs at it with the hem of her shirt. "Don't waste your blood," you tell her.

"It's not a waste to me."

[Continue.]

Your hands jerk. "Doesn't it hurt?"

Rabbit pulls a box cutter from the depths between the couch cushions. She still hasn't told you how she managed to smuggle it into her cabin. Never will. She dies before she gets the chance.

"Only a little," she says.

You do not want to remember this.

She slices her thumb and squeezes the wound until the blood wells up in shining beads. Her blood smells ripe. Sweet. You press the heel of your palm to your mouth to staunch the new stream of drool.

"Here," she holds her thumb to your lips. You turn your face. "Cody, take it. I'm giving it to you."

Stop, stop, you are not like the others! You are different from Lucy and Uncle Bobby and the greedy monsters they feed. "No." You push her hand away. "She'll just cut me again."

Dissappointment crushes Rabbit's gentle expression. "And I would heal you again. I don't mind giving my blood to you. I love you."

I love you, too, you yearn to say, but your cowardice holds the words hostage.

A knock at the door startles you both. Rabbit scrambles to hide the box cutter while you jump to your feet. In your rush to answer, you trip on the controller cord and stumble. You catch yourself, and a wicked bastard of a splinter, on the frame.

The knocking grows insistent, fast. You check your watch, you still have three whole hours left of visiting time. Bobby promised you no one would fuck with you and Rabbit tonight. Surprise, the cowfucker lied. Act shocked, Cody.

"The fuck you want?" You slam open the door. Tsukiko steps back to avoid being struck, clutching her daughters close. "Fuck, sorry. Didn't--" You sigh. "What do you want?"

Tsukiko's eyes are wild in the porch light. Sweat coats every inch of her brown skin. Her face, her neck, her shoulders and bare arms, they sparkle with the stuff. One of her daughters sniffles.

"Cody," Tsukiko pants as she speaks, "can you watch Hrairoo for a bit?"

"What's up?" Rabbit peers around you, her soft breath prickling your skin. "The babies! Hi, babies!"

Your throat knots up.

[Continue.]

"Why only her?" you slur your words.

"Just take Hrairoo, please." Tsukiko forces the toddler into your arms. Hrairoo, Little Thousand, what a terrible name for a child. You grimace with disgust whenever you hear it spoken.

"Something's wrong," Rabbit states in that blunt way of hers. "What is it?"

Tsukiko hefts her other daughter, the human one, the favored one, up to her shoulder. You refuse to remember that kid's name out of spite. To you, she is but another member of your family, destined to rape and devour those around her. A monster in waiting.

"I can't deal with her tonight," says Tsukiko. "She keeps biting and rocking. I can't do that tonight."

You shift Hrairoo in your arms. She looks off at the TV with those big brown doe eyes, ones rimmed with long, fluttery black lashes. Little paintbrushes. You kiss her cheek.

"She might need a chewy." Rabbit taps her lips to get Hrairoo's attention. She holds up her fist, palm up, thumb out, and rubs the knuckles with of those of her other fist. "Chewy?" she asks, chewing on nothing. "Chewy?"

Hrairoo pushes her face into the hollow of your shoulder, the soft nubs of her budding antlers poke you. Her chewy, chewies, are silicone teething toys shaped like fruit. She has all her teeth, Rabbits grow them quick, but still bit and gnawed on everything within reach.

You bought her the toys yourself. To spare her the pain and grief of the near-daily pullings Lucy and Uncle Bobby implemented to correct the problem. You also are the one that started teaching Hrairoo sign when she didn't start talking. A worrying development, you admit.

Rabbits, if allowed to survive infancy, speak early.

"iMira, mira!" Tsukiko exclaims. "She's being difficult. I can't deal with that tonight."

"You're her fucking mother, learn to fucking cope," you snap.

Tsukiko is older than you by three years and tall, but you're taller. Your voice is deeper. You have the rangy build of a stray dog and the bite of one. She quails, lips trembling. "Cody, I can't deal with her tonight. Please. Look after her."

"Fuck you, seriously, just fuck you."

The human daughter starts to cry. Rabbit rubs soothing circles on the nape of your neck. "Let her go," she says. "We can take care of the baby."

Without even bothering to thank Rabbit, Tsukiko flees. You watch the night fold over her and then shut the door.

"Fucking bitch," you mutter.

[Continue has been pressed yet again. You enjoy hurting this man, don't you?]

"You shouldn't swear around the baby." Tutting, Rabbit takes Hrairoo from you. "You don't want her first words to be something awful. Bobby would flip."

"Like fuck?" You put on a grin, the tip of your tongue poking out between your teeth. Rabbit rolls her eyes at you and heads over to the small kitchenette. "Or cunt?" You follow her. "Or what did that English dude call John Edwards at dinner? A cocking crackpot?"

"Cody." Rabbit sighs a warning as she pops open the freezer door. Hrairoo glares at you from over Rabbit's shoulder. That knot in your throat grows three sizes, and your heart grows ten sizes and presses hard against your ribs. "Stop it, He'll lose it if she starts swearing."

"He isn't even here! He's off fucking cows in Wisconsin or some shit."

"California."

"Whatever, I don't fucking care."

"Cody. Stop."

You should stop. Uncle Bobby does worse than pulling teeth when his good little soldiers swear. You suck at your wound. Hell of a lot worse. But stopping is pointless when the punishments come no matter what you do. When Lucy rips out stitches for fun and pretty girls get eaten.

"Hey, Hrairoo, say slut. Say bitch. Say cocksucking tits. Say Aunt Lucy's got a crusty twat."

"Cody!"

Rabbit gives Hrairoo her chewy, this one is a small, yellow banana, and shoves past you to the sofa. "Let's get back to the game. I want to see Claire and Sherry escape."

"Say Aunt Lucy's got fucking crabs!"

The anger you felt towards Tsukiko drains away when Rabbit snorts. "She does have crabs," she giggles. "Think she's given them to that Englishman?"

"Fucking Lousy Lucy, yeah. That guy's gonna be scratching his nutsack all the way back to England."

Unless it isn't Lucy that Englishman wants. You plunk down on the floor and grab the controller. You watch Rabbit settle in her nest with Hrairoo, watch them huddle to

each other, two bunnies in a hutch, warm and secure. Hrairoo is different. Defective, Lucy says. Bad stock.

Bad meat.

[You press the button to continue with less enthusiasm than before. What is happening? Why do you feel like you are suspended a thousand feet above the ground and god is sawing at the wire?]

Lucy finds a use for everything. Animals, objects, people, whatever comes in contact with the sticky strands of her web, she will find a purpose for it. Even bad meat like Inlé.

Wait? Inlé? Her name is Hrairoo.

You rub at your left eye. Pressure is building up behind it, mild but persistent enough to be annoying. You press start on the controller and pick your difficulty. Do not think about that shit, play your game. Hrairoo is good as dead no matter what, does it matter how it happens?

The opening scene plays. A girl rides her motorcycle into a quiet city. The quiet city is full of zombies. The girl meets a rookie cop. Things go wrong. Things go boom. The girl and the rookie are separated by fire and agree to meet at the police station.

You have watched this opening a hundred times before, so instead, you choose to watch Hrairoo. How her brown eyes grow wide with interest at the sight of the protagonist's motorcycle.

"Vroom!" Hrairoo points at the screen.

Rabbit gasps. You bark out a shocked laugh.

"She talked!" Rabbit exclaims. She cups Hrairoo's (Inlé's?) face in her hands and presses a kiss to her nose. "Yes, vroom! Vroom!"

Hrairoo scrunches her eyes at you, points at the television, and repeats, "Vroom!"

"Yeah." You smile wide and taste blood. The wound is bleeding. Your smile tore a staple loose. "Vroom."

The phone rings.

[ANSWER IT, the prompt says. You do not want to answer it. You do not want to ruin this sweet moment for Cody, even if it twists your guts to see him happy with Rabbit. His original Rabbit. The one he loves more than you.

You choose to answer the phone.]

No rest for the fucking wicked. You hand the controller over to Rabbit, instructing her to pause the game as you stand. You suck on your own blood as you grab Rabbit's cordless phone from the cradle. "Moshi Moshi," you answer.

tw// casual racism

"You say hello to me when you get the phone," snarls the voice of your uncle. "None of that Chinese nonsense, you're American."

"It's Japanese," you say.

"I don't care, it makes you sound wicked ignorant. Cut it out!"

You wander over into the kitchenette and spit excess blood into the sink. "What do you need, Uncle Bobby? You're interrupting my time with Rabbit. You promised me--"

"I called your aunt." The line crackles as he speaks. Fear prickles the fine fuzz covering your scalp. "And I heard footsteps, ones too light to be yours, but too heavy to be any of my bunnies, in the background. She got a man over?"

[Why don't you ask her, yes, or no. The choices, while simple, lodge an ice pick shaped spike of anxiety in the center of your chest. What would or rather what did Cody say in this situation? The first option seems the most Cody. But what if it's not? What if you're wrong?]

[You cycle through the dialogue choices. Close your eyes. Press X.]

"Why don't you ask her?" you ask.

"You think I didn't ask? She hung up on me before I could finish my sentence, that rude old sow." Uncle Bobby grunts and coughs. Your mouth fills with blood as you wait for him to continue. "And now she won't answer my calls."

Your uncle's voice reeks. Even over miles of distance, you can smell it through the line. Like milk left to spoil out under the sun. "Your aunt and I had a fight over financials before I left. She might do something nasty to get back at me while I'm gone."

Hrairoo whispers, "vroom!" to a delighted Rabbit. Rabbit whispers back, "Yes, vroom. One day, you're going to go vroom, just like her." She lays Hrairoo on her chest and touches her nose to hers. "You'll go vroom on your own bike, my Inléroo. And you'll save me."

"You paying attention, son?" Uncle Bobby shouts in your ear. You snap to and sputter an ayuh. "Then say something when I'm talking to you!"

["What do you think Cody would say?" you ask Blackavar.

He flails his hands. "I don't know! Vroom?" He looks at Lori as she enters the motel room. "Sorry or vroom?" he asks her.

She blinks. "Sorry or vroom? Vroom what?"

"He should apologize," says Holly.

You pick VROOM.]

"Vroom," you say.

Uncle Bobby scoffs. "Vroom? What do you mean vroom? Did you find another of your daddy's coke stashes? That man was a squirrel with 8 balls. Dead for five years and I'm still finding his poison."

Your father, the hypertumor clinging to the great cancerous mass that is the Driscoll family. You do not remember when and how he died. Probably would not recognize his name if you heard it. He was a parasite of a parasite. He did not matter.

"I'm not on drugs," you say.

"Then you're being smarty pants?" His stinking voice puffs through the receiver. "You and your aunt and these crunchy granola Californians have me right out straight. You need to take me seriously, Cody. You remember what she did last time?"

You check the time. Between Tsukiko and Uncle Bobby, you have lost forty minutes. Rabbit sings in gentle tones to Hrairoo while she waits for you to finish the call. Your precious minutes are bleeding away.

"You remember what she did last time she had a man over while I was gone?" Uncle Bobby shouts. "You remember what happened to your mother?"

[You do not bother with asking for input this time. You just hit the x button.]

Your mother, Xochitl. Lucy served her to some Eurotrash she invited over during one of your uncle's longer business trips. You close your eyes against the sight of her head, crowned with apple blossoms, set on a silver platter.

Lucy laughed when Rabbit screamed upon seeing her. Tsukiko, pregnant at the time, puked from shock. You stood there, awestruck, limbs made of stone, and stared at your mother's serene face. Her hair was arranged around her neck in a pool of black. Like she was emerging.

"I remember," you say.

Hrairoo screams then. You drop the phone into the sink. The casing cracks and you catch your uncle letting out a rare cry of concern. You look over to see Rabbit taking the Playstation controller from Hrairoo, who rocks and signs bad! Bad!

"It's okay, it's okay!" Rabbit nuzzles Hrairoo's hair.

"What happened?" you ask.

"She unpaused the game by accident and a zombie--"

Hrairoo wails and points to the screen. Zombies devour the prone body of a woman.

You died.

Sniffing, nose running, Hrairoo signs I'm bad! Bad bunny! Bad! Rabbit offers her the chewy, "It's okay! It's a game. It's not real."

Hrairoo bites her. Her small, white milk teeth sink deep into Rabbit's knuckle.

"Ow!" Rabbit pulls her hand away. "Now that was bad. Bad girl."

Bad girl. Bad meat. Lucy found a use for everything, even bad meat. Maybe Tsukiko had a real reason for dumping Hrairoo on you tonight.

You pick up the phone.

["Is there a man there?" Lori asks. "You should tell 'im if a man's there, Clover." When Lori says your name, she goes 'Clo-VAH.' You smile at that.

"He should call the police," Holly says. "Why isn't that an option?"]

[Lori and Blackavar share looks of disdain which they then turn on Holly. Holding down the down button, you cycle through the options as you wait for someone else to offer their advice.

"The cops are probably in on it," says Lori.

Holly crosses his arms. Goes silent.]

[You pick "I'LL DEAL WITH IT," and let the scene play.]

"Was that my Hrairoo?" Uncle Bobby blurts. "Why is she bawling like that? Is she okay?" His fatherly concern kicks up something ugly in your chest. "Cody? Answer me! Is it Lucy?"

"I'll deal with it," you say.

"Deal with what? Cody, be for real with me, what's going on over there?"

"I'll deal with it!" You slam the phone back on the cradle. "Fucking fuck."

"He's going to be super pissed at you for hanging up," Rabbit says.

He is going to be more than pissed at you and for once, you do not care. That ugly thing in your chest guides you over to the sofa and tells you to stick your hand between the cushions. You pull out the box cutter. Hrairoo whimpers when she sees it.

"Cody?" Rabbit asks.

"I'm going to deal with it."

"With what?"



You check the blade. Test it by nicking the pad of your finger. "Lucy," you say. "That English guy."

"How about you stay here and you play the game instead?"

[Time to consult the audience. You hold up the controller and point at the choices on the screen. "Stay with her?"

"Still think there should be an option to call the cops," says Holly.

"Cocking idiot. Still on that?" Blackavar asks.]

tw// for transphobic microaggressions and police intimidation

["Try dealing with it?" Lori smooths out her skirt. Holly's head follows the motion of her hands. "Something bad's going to happen to that baby girl if you don't." ]

["From what I understand, bad things are going to happen to that kid no matter what." Holly checks his hands, his head held at an incline. He then sniffs in Lori's direction, once, the nostrils of his strong nose flaring wide. "Huh." ]

["Huh what?" Lori scoots in closer to Blackavar. "Ain't that true? Ain't that girl in danger?"

Without a word, Blackavar puts an arm around Lori and lays a hand on your arm. He gives you both a protective squeeze. "Dick weasel," you mutter, shrugging him away.]

[Holly chuckles the way a dog growls. "From what I understand, it doesn't matter what Cody does. That girl? Hrairoo?"

"Inlé," Blackavar says.

"Like our Inlé?" Lori asks. "Is that her? She's such a cute little baby! That really her?"]

["All kittens are cute, but watching this, I must admit, Inlé was cuter than most." Blackavar rests his elbow on his knee and his chin on the heel of his hand. His soft expression makes you roll your eyes.

"Like little girls, Mr. Stoat?" Holly asks.]

["Inlé should have killed you, Officer Holly. We could have had a cookout, pulled pork sandwiches and a nice potato salad."

"I'm not a pig, limey."]

[Every colorless hair on your body stands on end at the bite in Holly's voice. Your nipples poke hard through the fabric of your romper. "Can we pick something?" You hate the way you whimper, "Please?"

"I vote to deal with it," Lori says.

"Stay with Rabbit," says Holly.]

[Blackavar shakes his head. "I abstain."

"No point in wasting the limited time you have with Rabbit," Holly says. "Stay with her and the kid. Let him enjoy being with them for a while longer."

You pick I'LL DEAL WITH IT.]

Rabbit holds out the Playstation controller. "How about you stay here and you play the game instead?"

Hrairoo nibbles on her banana chewy, her nose and eyes red from tears. She is as good as dead, right? Does it matter what you do now when her fate has already been decided?

Who the fuck came up with that fate, anyway? Your family? God? The Dream? Who decided that Rabbits must die? And why the fuck are you willing to stand by and let it happen? Your uncle is out of state. Your father is dead. That means Lucy is alone, you can stop this now.

"I'll deal with it." You head for the door.

"Wait!" Rabbit stands up. "What about the game? You were going to beat it tonight! I wanted to see the ending."

"Stay here and play."

"But what if I die?"

"Then you load from the last save and start again."

"What if you die?"

You shrug. "Then, fuck, I load from the last save and start again."

Rabbit's chest hitches.

["Give her a kiss," says Lori.

Holly grimaces the way an animal does when they smell something foul. His tongue scraping his teeth. His nose wrinkled. "They're related."

"You don't kiss your sister goodbye?" Lori asks, offended. "Please tell me you kiss your mama at least."]

["Mamita didn't like kisses."

Neither did your mother. She slapped you once for trying. She kissed Cody plenty around you and you, a thoughtless child, felt betrayed. Those were your kisses, you always cried. She is my mommy!]

[Lucy twisted off an antler once to silence your tantrum. She then egged Cody on to

give you kisses, special kisses, to make you stop crying. She wants a kissy-poo, Cody! Give her one, she laughed.

Cody slit his throat open with a letter opener.]

[You thought he did it because he hated you.

"Clover? You okay, honey? You're looking sick."

You consider passing the controller. You feel ill.]

["Clover?"

You hand the controller off to Lori. "Pick what you want," you hunch and hug your stomach, "I need a break."

"I'm gonna pick kiss her," Lori says.]

[Blackavar touches your hand. You snatch his and clutch it in yours, squeezing tight, tight. Your chest is a cavern. Stalactites hang from your heart and they drip with nauseous anger. You and Cody, neither of you ever had the chance to be healthy. Lucy robbed you of that.]

[Lori picks KISS HER GOODBYE and hits x.

Holly steps outside.]

Beats of time pass. You and Rabbit, Hrairoo and the game, even the moths pattering around the ceiling light, you hang in those quiet, airless moments. You close the distance and cup her jaw. You tilt up her face and press your bloodied lips between her antlers.

"I love you," you say.

She touches the red splotch adorning her forehead. "I love you, too."

You open the door and step into the night.

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INLÉ

There are clothes laid out on your bed. Black sports bra, jean shorts, a Mets jersey, a matching hat, and a pair of knee socks. Somehow, as if by magic, Lori conjured forth these clothes from the depths of her bright pink suitcase. She had more and offered them to you.

Cuter things, she said. Gotta show off that figure! You liked how she said the word 'figure.' The second syllable was a yah instead of a yure. It had character.

She hugged you when you politely declined the offer. Then she called you a nice girl before leaving you to shower and change.

You showered quick and now you stand, your hair up in the cheap motel towel, and stare at the clothes on your bed.

You should get dressed.

You towel dry your hair the best you can and shake it out. Your hair has grown. Not much, a quarter of an inch at most. You pull a lock straight. The blonde is losing ground to the warm black of your roots.

A Rabbit is a Rabbit is a Rabbit. You cannot escape who and what you are, the black seems to hiss at you. You grab the shorts and, jumping in place, pull and tug them up over your heavy bottom. As if you, of all Rabbits, need to be reminded of your place.

You look down at your breast. The scar aches, the tissue twisting as your nipple hardens from exposure. Your forehead hurts in two spots, right where antlers should be.

Hazel and Quintana are gone.

You could not fix the tear by yourself.

Count, it will calm you. You cannot afford to go tharn. One, two, three, four. You finish dressing, leaving the jersey open, and pull on your boots. Clean, clothed, bone-tired, you leave the motel room.

Holly sits on the curb outside, his back to you. The scent of him, the sound of his strong, even heartbeat, disarms you. You linger in the threshold, unsure of yourself.

"You smell good when you're not covered in blood," he says. Then, a rough laugh, "Who am I kidding? You smell good even then. Like fresh cream and -other- things."

"What other things?"

"I said cream already, right? Yeah, I did." He sets a book down beside him and leans back on his palms. "Though, smelling you now, it's more like sweetened condensed milk. You smell like La Lechera."

The book's dirty cover has your attention. White with dried gore, that is Hazel's book. You step closer to Holly. He growls, and you freeze, picking up a change in his posture. You hear the muscles tense in his arms and his scapula shift and scrape.

"La Lechera, cinnamon, sweet blood, and sex." He makes a fist with his trigger hand. "I can smell your privates, yours and Clover's, and it's distracting the hell out of me. You have a delicious smelling--you know."

You kick Holly. Lift your boot and slam your heel between his shoulder blades. He pitches and rolls forward, landing sprawled out on his back in the parking lot. You squat down to retrieve the book.

"Don't," you warn him. "Don't ever speak to me that way again."

Holly flips onto all fours and launches at you, hand outstretched. You tumble backward as he rips the book from your fingers. He barks at you, barks! Frothing at the mouth, he yells, "You didn't have to kick me!"

His muscles gurgle, writhe, and he groans.

"Holly."

"What's happened to me?" he asks as his flesh settles. He pulls off his glasses to rub at the knot at the center of his pain knit brows. His eyes have regrown. They are round, gold, not like a dog, but a wolf. "I'm not like this, I swear. I swear. I'm sorry."

You rise to your feet. "The Dream changed you. It still is changing you."

"Is there any way to go back?"

You count. One, the city drowned in a sea of tears. Two, the woman with the gnawed hand. Three, Hazel shoving you out of Clover's Dream. Four, Lucy escaping in Quintana's body. Your failures stack neatly one on top of the other like bricks. And like bricks, they weigh you down.

"I'm sorry," you say. "I don't know. I could try to undo the changes, but I couldn't even close the wound without assistance."

Holly then does something, some strange gesture. When you squint in confusion, he repeats it. "You know this, don't you?" he asks. "It's fine."

"Fine?"

He does it for the third time, taps his chest with his hand, fingers open, thumb under. The movement clicks in your memory. You know this. You tear up, you know this.

It's not fine! you sign. I keep making mistakes!

"Slow down, honey." Holly stills your hands. "I only know a few things in ASL, hello, my name, it's fine and where's the john." A milky tear rolls down his cheek. He wipes it away with his middle finger. "This again? Why is it happening again?"

"I'm being emotional."

He scoffs. "That all?"

That is not all. You are tired and your only subsistence has been snacks from a broken vending machine. You focus on his hands instead of his golden eyes. Prominent veins and long, strong fingers.

"You did a good job repairing them," he says.

His compliment unsettles you. You are unsure what to do with praise, let alone earnest praise from a man. "Give me the book." You slip free of him. "Please, give me the book."

"Thank you, Officer Holly," he speaks in a funny voice, small and grainy. Is that supposed to be a mimicry of you? Do you sound like that? Like the ghost of a lonely child lost in the dark? "I'm glad you think so!"

He holds out the book. You grab it.

"No problem, Inlé," he switches to his normal voice and puts his hands upon his hips. "I like telling people when they've done a good job and you've done a good job."

You frown at him.

Holly holds his mouth, his nose set snug in the v between his index and middle fingers, and makes a thoughtful sound. Hmph. He hmphs, the corner of his lips still visible to you curling up, forming a deep dimple in his cheek. There is a shine in his eyes; he is smiling.

"This is going to sound moot coming from me after all that has happened tonight, but I don't want to hurt you, Inlé." He returns his hand to his hip. "Especially when you're dressed like that. Looking at you makes me want to take you out for a chop cheese and an Arizona."

"I am hungry--" You sign the words as well as speak them. The motions feel right. They feel good. You bite the tip of your thumb and smile. To think that Holly's simple gesture, an "I'm fine," would make part of the world snap into place for you.

"I wish I could take you for something to eat," Holly says. "But I doubt there are any bodegas even near here." He looks around. "I doubt there's anything around here. Where are we?"

"A motel."

"I know that." He faces the road and sniffs. The shape of his profile interests you. The broken bridge of his nose, the cut of his chin, the jut of his Adam's apple, you forgot that men, in spite of their flaws, could be appealing.

You want to bite him.

Holly grumbles, "Never seen a road this dead," and tilts back his head. He looks down his nose at the stretch of asphalt running alongside the parking lot. Trees stand on the other side, still in the darkness. "How do we know we're actually out of that place, the Dream?"

"It would speak to me," you say, holding the book to your belly. The cover cools your bare skin. "And, how do I explain this, everything around us would be more alive."

"Cronenberg fleshy-alive?"

"I don't know who that is."

"He directs movies. Scanners, Videodrome, The Fly?" Holly waits for you to answer. When you shake your head, he nods and, pocketing his hands, starts to rock on his heels. "How about the Brood? Shivers? Crash?"

"I don't know movies."

"What do you know?"

"Board games."

"Chess?"

"No." You press your thumb to the corner of the book's cover. "My father didn't think I could handle chess. He bought me games like Candy Land, and Uncle Wiggly, and Operation."

"Operation, my kids like that game. I was never any good at it." Holly slides his aviators back on. "I kept hitting the edges."

"You have children?"

You glance at his hands. There is no ring on his finger.

"Yeah," he says.

"How many?" You speak and sign. You are tired and your stomach is empty, but the signing keeps your head above water. "If you don't mind me asking."

Holly pulls his wallet out of his back pocket. Stepping back, he opens it and presents to you a picture of three children, a pair of twins and a toddler. The twins, girls, sit beside each other on a bench. They have their father's high cheekbones and thick brows. His olive skin.

"Cecily and Anaïs." He taps their faces as he names them. "Twelve and already freshmen in high school. They're smart, unlike me."

You incline your head. Freshmen in high school at age twelve. From the pride in Holly's voice, you deduct that is an impressive feat.

He taps the face of the toddler jammed between Cecily and Anaïs, a white, fair-haired cherub with round, pink cheeks. "That's their brother, George."

George holds a popsicle in his dimpled fist, his face clenched in a glare.

Cecily and Anaïs's brother. Not this is my son, George. You look back at Holly's naked ring finger.

"Are you a cuckold?" you ask him.

He lowers the wallet. "You don't know Cronenberg but you know cuckold?" The dimple makes its return. "You calling me a cuck for the vagina comment? You know I'm sorry about that."

"Shakespeare used cuckold. Othello." You take the wallet and hold it close to your face. "And I don't mean to insult you, I'm asking you an honest question."

He makes to grab the wallet. You stamp your foot and he backs away, tight-lipped.

"You called the boy your daughters' brother, not your son, and--" You tap your left ring finger.

His brows arch. The dimples deepen as he grins at his naked left hand. His smile grows wry. "Yeah, I'm a cuckold. My wife, she did some things."

You wait for Holly to say more, to lay past out on the table as Blackavar did back in the pet shop. Holly holds his hand and crooks his fingers in silent command. Give it over. You return the wallet and he pockets it.

"You know Shakespeare?" he asks.

You deflate. "I do."

"Your father wouldn't teach you chess but he let you read the Bard." He pokes the book you hold. "He let you read that, too?"

"Watership Down?" You shake your head. "I haven't but Rabbit has read most of it." Then, you ask, "What did your wife do?"

"Want to know the ending?" he asks.

tw// csa mention

"What did your wife do?"

"You don't want to know that." Holly reaches out to cup your cheek. He stops short when you turn your attention to it. His throat bobs. "Three counts of second-degree rape of a child. She took a plea bargain. I got the kids."

You stare at Holly's hand, it hovers an inch from your mouth like a hummingbird before a flower.

Your chest hurts.

"Georgie's the son of one of her victims. We don't know which."

You press your lips to the meaty part of Holly's palm, the thenar eminence. You squint your eyes shut and count. He was right. You did not want to know this. But now you do, you have a part of Holly's past laid out on the table. Just like you wanted.

The ghostly fingers of a second, larger hand caress your hip. They dance up your belly, waltzing along a phantom curve. Milk, you taste milk and salt. You taste your father and hear him whisper, I hope it's a boy. I would love to have a son.

Are you going tharn?

"Inlé?"



"Tell me about the book," you whisper against his palm.

Holly moves his hand to sweep back your hair from your smooth brow. "I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have dumped that on you without warning. When I'm near you, I just speak. It's a compulsion."

"Tell me about the book."

He mouths out a no. Shakes his head. "You don't need that right now. You're upset." And up he lifts you. Like a child, he carries you on his hip and takes you back inside the motel room.

You tuck your face to the hollow of his shoulder. "Put me down, please."

Rustling. Sheets. Holly pulls back the covers on the bed and does as you request, he sets you down. He bends down to meet you eye to eye, his hands propped on his knees.

"Don't do that again," you say.

"I'm sorry, it was a compulsion." He kneels and hangs his head. "It's strange, with Clover, I want to bite her by the neck and shake her, but you, I want to protect you. I sensed the panic in you out there and I just acted. No thought, only instinct."

You ball up where you sit and fit your chin in the small valley between your knees. Heat radiates from Holly's skin, Dog-smell from his pores. He changed due to your sloppy work back in Warren.

One, the city drowned in a sea of tears. Two, the woman with the gnawed hand. Three, Hazel shoving you out of Clover's Dream. Four, Lucy escaping in Quintana's body. Five, Holly has become one of the Thousand.

The weight grows ever larger.

"I just want to protect you," he says.

Protection? Protection, you? The mere suggestion rankles. You set your feet on the floor, your bosom heaving in anger. You do not want him, or any man, to be your guard dog or your nanny. Given time, he will start thinking he owns you. That is what men, what Dogs, do.

Holly then lays his head at your feet and he whimpers. Your toes scrunch in your boots at his show of supplication. What is he doing? And why are you humoring him?

The warmth mapping your veins might be why, or the color tinting your cheeks, but you are not prepared to face those parts of you. Those pieces are alien to you. Locked doors you avoid opening.

Bending down, you pet Holly's head. You play with the tight curls of his dark hair. "Stupid Dog. You're supposed to want to eat me, not protect me."

"Better a stupid dog than a pig, I guess," he says.

Both are terrible.

You look to the book. Watership Down, Rabbit's book. It pulses warm in your hands. You stroke the spine and fore edge, and then set it down on your lap.

Hazel delivered this book from the Dream. Her blood courses through the board and binding, the paper consists of her cells. You prop your feet up on Holly's back and open the book.

"Hey!" he snaps. "I'm not an ottoman!"

Ignoring him, you flip through the pages. They fall open, revealing a small card. You read it. Kehaar, and there is a number. Where did this come from?

Knocking your feet aside, Holly sits up. "What's that?"

"A business card." You flop back and hold the card above you. "It was in the book." You roll over and stretch across the bed for the motel phone. Holly joins you on the mattress. He rests his hand on the small of your back.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

The heat of his touch begs for your attention. You pout, jam the receiver between your ear and shoulder, and start punching numbers. 6-8-0. 5-5-5. Why must men smell so strong? You rub your thighs together and finish dialing, 1-3-0-1.

You hear a ring.

CHOOSE ONE:  
CODY OR QUINTANA.

CODY

Cows are out in the apple orchard. Your uncle them lets have the run of the estate. They can wander where ever undisturbed, even out here by Rabbit's cabin. Here they graze upon the windfall and pick ripe fruit straight from the laden branches.

They are a sweet bunch, these cows. With big curious eyes and long, long lashes, they are the third purist things on this farm. The first and second purist? Baby Hrairoo and Rabbit, of course.

["I wish he'd stop calling her that, her name's Inlé!"]

You thumb the box cutter's blade. Inlé, that name. That came from Watership Down. The Black Rabbit of Inlé, the bunny grim reaper.

["It's upsetting, I know, Lori. But you mustn't fault the lad for using it."]

"Well, I'm gonna."]

The chilling suspicion that you are being watched steals over you. Watched and judged. You throw a cautious glance over your shoulder. Nothing. Save for the cows

and the cabin, you are alone.

["And who the hell are you to tell me to not fault him?"]

"I was simply--"

"Nevermind, you're not gonna get it. And I'm not gonna waste my time explaining it to you, Richie."]

Then why do you feel like someone is watching you?

["Why is wait and listen an option? Do you think--? Do you think he knows we're here?"]

"Fuck me dead. Sure, why not? This game came from the Dream."]

You idle with the box cutter. One of the cows, a year old Jersey, noses at your hip. Her moist breath puffs against your hand. Her eyes are like Hrairoo's, dark and inquisitive, frilled with long lashes. She chews at an apple while she checks you over.

["I'm gonna pick pet the cows."]

"Pet the cows? Lori, please, be serious. You can't derail the tale to pet a heifer."

"Too late, I picked it."]

You switch the box cutter to your other hand and pet the cow. Satisfied, she leaves you be and goes to pluck low hanging apples. She tugs. The branch snaps and hangs by threads of bark from the bough.

The tree bleeds.

You go, "Oh, must be the trees."

You felt you were being watched because of the trees.

From a knothole, a brown eye stares at you. Curious. Rimmed with long lashes women like Lucy paid good money to wear. More of them watch from between the ribs of a Montbéliarde, lids heavy with suspicion.

["Richie, what the hell?"]

"It's the Dream. The Dream and Rabbit flesh. Hedgenettle runs his farms on Dreams and Rabbit flesh."]

The voices again, you lean on the trunk of a tree. The man's voice rings familiar.

["Wait and listen is an option again! He can hear us."]

"Don't pick it."

"I'm picking it. We'll keep quiet and he'll move on when he doesn't hear anything."

"Lori!"]

You listen. You wait.

The night is silent.

You give up and carry forward. Whatever it is you heard, it has gone quiet for now or it was never there in the first place. Does not matter which. You cannot waste any more time waiting to find out.

The trees track your progress as you travel down the orchard path. Eyes bulge from hollows, from roots and knotholes. The cows lift their heads when you pass and then go back to eating apples, their mouths soaked black.

Dreams and Rabbit flesh. The whole farm runs on Dreams and Rabbit flesh. Rabbits do not rot when they die. Their flesh stays fresh, supple, their bones stay solid.

They do not rot, they -radiate.- Everything around them grows, changes, becomes strange. Like the trees, and the cows. Each apple tree marks the grave of a Rabbit and those that have born them, and from their branches grow the sweetest fruits.

You stop at the youngest apple tree at the edge of the orchard. Your mother's tree. You make the sign of the cross and kiss the trunk.

The farmhouse looms ahead, patient.

"Here we go," you mutter.

["You should have picked wait."

"I'm making up time for the cows!"]

You find Lucy in the kitchen.

["Jesus--"]

"Christ," you hiss.

Her guest, the Englishman, sits bound to a chair, naked with a pillowcase over his head. Lucy has her knives laid out on the countertop. She stands back to you, wearing only her white lace panties, gloves, and butcher's apron. A pistol sits beside her whetstone.

tw/ homophobia

"Make sense," she says, pushing her knife across the stone. "First new guy that I pick up in years, and he's a fucking fruit."

You adjust your grip on the box cutter. You expected Lucy to do something crazy, but not this. She kills Rabbits, she kills mothers, but not clients. Not men. You touch your wounded cheek. Men do not receive that mercy from her.

She halts to scratch at her scalp. "Not only a homo but a bleeding heart vegetarian. He came to rescue her!"

Lucy glances back at you. You hide your hands behind your back. The man pants, the pillowcase sucking in over his mouth and nose. Your own breathing grows rapid.

"Rescue who?" you ask.

Lucy shakes her head. "You didn't ask that."

"What?"

"You didn't ask that, you attacked me." Pink film gels over Lucy's eyes. Her jaw segments. Her skin changes to a brittle, glossy white. "You slashed me across the back of my neck and didn't ask me a fucking thing!"

You stutter, your throat clicking.

"What are you doing, Cody?"

THUMP.

You jerk your head towards the source of the sound. Rabbit stands in the kitchen entrance, nude. Milk pours from her hairline in sheets, coursing down her body. Moths perch on her antlers. She lifts her dripping foot and stomps, once, twice, and snap, the world resets.

Lucy is Lucy again, thin, flat-assed, her skin spray tanned. "Tsukiko," she answers as if nothing happened. That she had not turned insectile and strange seconds before. "He came to save her, would you believe it? I told Bobby not to let that bitch near a computer."

You check back to the entrance. A different Rabbit stands there, a girl child months shy of adolescence. She wrings at her green dress, pouting, chest fluttering like a bird's breast. "No fair," she whispers before running away. "No fair!"

"Fucking hell," you mutter.

"That's what I said." Lucy waggles her knife. "Fucking hell!"

"You didn't see that?"

"See what?"

["What was all that?"

"Rabbits. I recognize one of them."

"Recognize good? Recognize bad? Richie, you're worrying me. You look like you've seen the devil."

"Keep talking."

"Richie?"

"Pick keep talking."]

The voices are back. They bicker until they reach a consensus: keep talking. Lucy picks at her pink acrylics with the tip of the knife. "See what, Cody? Hello? Ground control to Major Tom."

"Nothing," you say. "I saw nothing. Keep talking."

She grins at you and scrapes her incisors over her pink bottom lip. "Did you find another stash of your daddy's booger sugar? Or are you pussy high?" She leans in to sniff your breath. "You don't smell like bunny pussy."

Lucy did a poor job blending her foundation down to her neck. Her face is a healthy bronze. Her body is orange. No gradient to ease the eye from one color to the other. She is like a doll with the wrong head attached. You want to pop her apart.

"You should indulge, Cody. Don't be like your father and don't be like this prick." Lucy gestures the knife in the Englishman's direction. He shifts in the chair, legs clamped together to hide his fear-shriveled cock. "Look where it gets you."

"He came to save Tsukiko?"

"Yeah, according to her, she contacted him through his website. She told me other shit, but she kept gagging and convulsing, so who knows how much of it is true."

"Only Tsukiko?"

Lucy returns to the whetstone. "Only her. She told me she planned on killing her spawn before she left. That she was going to kill us all." She chuckles low in her chest. "Which has to be bullshit."

The box cutter slides in your grip. You catch it in time and slip it into your pocket. Tsukiko said that? For real? Her own kids? Hrairoo?

"I see it in your face," Lucy says. "You don't believe it either."

Upstairs, Tsukiko's baby, the human one, starts to cry. You and Lucy turn your faces up to the ceiling. She fetches a cigarette from her apron and lights it. The child screeches.

"I could see her wanting to kill us, but not the kids," you say.

Lucy hums, amused. "I can't even see her doing that. She's too nice to kill anyone." She levels the blade of her knife at her captive's throat. "This fucker here, though. He was going to shoot me."

"Where's Tsukiko now? Did you kill her?"

"I tied her to her bed with some ribbon. That should hold her until your uncle comes

home." Lucy flips the knife and starts to sharpen the other side. "He can decide what to do with her."

She inspects the blade. Smoke leaks from the corners of her flat, plastic grin. "I'm going to butcher this asshole and send the cuts to his family."

Intervening right now might save them, Tsukiko and the Englishman. Then you can set this place ablaze and you all can run away together. Nevermind what Tsukiko said about killing you and the children, she said that to scare Lucy. No way she would murder her own kids.

Abandoning them, abandoning Hrairoo, on the other hand, is more in character for her. That had to be her real plan. Escape with this English guy and take her human child with them. That is why she left Hrairoo with you and Rabbit. She knew you would take care of her.

"Fucking cunt," you grumble.

"Excuse me, you fucking junkie? What did you just call me?"

Lucy gets in your face, smoke billowing from her plump, silicone lips. The kind of lips that Rabbit and your mother had naturally.

"Do you want me to cut the other side of your face?"

"I was talking about Tsukiko." You snarl, disgusted by Lucy and her fakeness. The segmented, insectile monster from moments before repulsed you less than the human woman before you now. "Not you, you great white skank."

"Now that is racist."

She slams the butt of the knife against your wounded cheek. The staples stab your gums. One rips free, scraping an erupting wisdom tooth. The pain, rich and tasting like new pennies, drops you to your knees.

"I've had a stressful day today, Cody. I don't need your negative energy." Lucy sighs. "Now help me hold this guy's legs apart. I want to make Rocky Mountain Oysters."

There is a thump above you. Hard, heavy, the sound of furniture being toppled. The baby's sobs rise to a shrill keen before being muffled. By what, a pillow, hands? No, you are not hearing this, you are not hearing this shit.

Lucy whispers, "No fucking way."

["Richie, where you going?"

"For a smoke, for a walk, for a drink, I don't need to see this."

"We can take a break."

You speak up, words thick with snot and tears. "We're not stopping. Pick go upstairs."]

TRY TO GO UPSTAIRS.

The command yanks you to your feet and off you go, headlong out the kitchen and run upstairs. Lucy ducks under your arm and passes you on the steps. Together you spill into the second-floor hallway.

Tsukiko steps out of the nursery, pillow in her tattered, degloved hands. She sniffs the pillow. Then she hugs it, whimpering, her lean body swaying in place.

You no longer hear the baby.

"What did you do?" you ask.

Tsukiko drops the pillow.

"What the fuck did you do?"

Your balls draw up close to your body and a sour taste burns your mouth. Tsukiko killed the baby, the baby you never bothered to know. The act is written in her wet stare and hunched stance, and in the blood pattering against the floorboards. She did it.

Lucy laughs. Leaning back, she claps her hands and then laces the fingers together. She jigs in place, giggling, squealing. "You bitch! Oh my god, you evil bitch, seriously? Seriously?"

Tsukiko hides her face in her hands.

"I've got to see this."

You gag on your horror, your pain, and your guts go cold. Lucy skips to the nursery, bouncing with uncontainable excitement, and peers inside.

"Wow."

You should have bothered with learning the kid's name.

"Cody, go get me a bag, we need to pop her in the fridge before she spoils."

That Lucy, never lets anything go to waste. That fucking cunt. That monster in Bardie Doll flesh. You ready the box cutter.

"Cody, what the fuck are you doing? Go get a bag!"

Tsukiko acts before you can, kicking Lucy over, howling, howling. Crazy and flailing, she stomps Lucy, ripping out hanks of her own hair. You curse and make to move, to join her or stop her, you are not sure. Things are happening too fast.

Fuck this.

You are getting the hell out of here.



You run.

Tsukiko, Lucy, the man tied to the chair, your uncle, you are leaving them all behind. You stumble down the stairs, crash, and rise. Your sneakers squeak on the waxed tile and wood as you beat feet out of this house.

Rabbit stands outside.

"I wish this was how it ended." She carries Hrairoo in her arms. Hrairoo's arms are crossed over her bleeding chest, her chewy grasped in her little hands. "I wish you got away. I wish we all got away."

The sound of a car backfiring startles you. Behind you, Lucy screams your name and then Tsukiko's. She pleads for you to be spared. She is the one in charge, not you, you are a useless junkie. You never hurt a Rabbit or a woman.

"Don't look behind you," says Rabbit. Milk spouts from her pores. Red jets from where you had kissed her. She holds out her hand, the green ribbon on her wrist the last dry thing on her melting body. "Please, Cody. You've lived that scene so many times, you don't need to again."

"What's happening?"

"You're reloading the save. You're starting again."

More bangs. That is not a car, that is a gun. The pistol in the kitchen.

"Cody."

[You wrest the controller from Lori. She leans away from you. "Clover?" she gasps, "What is it? What are you doing?"

You select the second option, CUT THE RIBBON.]

Cut the ribbon.

No one in your family has ever explained to you why Rabbits can be bound by a green ribbon. Around the throat, around the wrist, around any part of the body, really. Your uncle looped Hrairoo's ribbon around her finger like a promise ring. All worked.

You rub Rabbit's ribbon with numb fingers. Sensation fades from your body, the chaos behind you grows muted. You are starting again. You remember now, the times you died. The black spots where days, weeks, months, even years have been lost during your resurrection.

This is the first occurrence, after years of repeating this night, where you have considered removing Rabbit's ribbon. You usually attacked Lucy or stayed in the cabin. Sometimes you burned down the whole farm. But never the ribbon.

You slice open the ribbon with the box cutter. Rabbit releases a startled, "ah!" and falters. She shoves Hrairoo--Inlé!-- into your arms when you go to steady her. "You

finally did it. Thank you."

Her body dissolves into milk and splashes to the ground.

You sit down with Inlé, precious Inlé, the daughter you wish was yours. Shot. Tsukiko. You pull the knot holding the ribbon to her ring finger and she whines. Dirt falls from your lips when you try to speak words of comfort.

You hear praying.

You do not need anyone to enter a command to make you move. You rise and follow the sound of the prayer. The night grows heavy. It clogs your nose, your mouth, your left eye. It crawls inside your chest and gnaws at your decaying innards.

Inlé gutters in the dark. From moment to moment, she grows, she changes from child to young woman.

"Blackavar, make me a promise?" It's your voice, but older. Rustier. "Put that phone down and listen to me. I'm talking to you."

"I'm updating." Blackavar whines close behind you.

"Fuck off with that, Doc. This is important."

The prayer grows closer. The night solidifies into a blanket of dirt. You burp up worms, choke and spit up grubs. The earth crushes down on you.

"What is it, my boy?"

"Inlé."

"Yes?"

"If she ever finds Clover and I'm there at the time? Kill me."

A worm shoots up your nostril as you snort. You cannot see Blackavar, but you can see him, his lipless frown as he considers your request. "Why? You'll only come back."

"Inlé will kill me if we meet. She doesn't remember me. Her brain's as scrambled as mine, maybe worse."

"I'm not following."

"Clover will hate Inlé if she kills me. Won't matter if I come back, she'll hate her until the world ends. Can't have that."

"So it falls to me to play the villain in that hypothetical scenario. I can do that."

"Calm your dick, grandpa. Might not be that easy. I doubt I'm going to remember asking you this by the time it happens. I might fight back and you're fucked if I do."

Blackavar's laughter is as cold as the soil you claw through. "Never underestimate a

Stoat, Cody. We're a crafty bunch."

"Fuck off," past and current you say in unison.

You wonder when you asked this favor. When you had the time and clarity of mind to consider such a thing. Time and memory sift through your digging fingers. Inlé crumbles away from you, lost to the earth. The request, the night, they join her, leaving you with only the prayer.

"It is good to hope in silence." You do not recognize the speaker. A young woman-- Tsukiko? "For the saving help of the LORD."

Rocks block your way. You shove at them, grunting, "The word of the Lord.

"Amen."

END PART THIRTEEN.

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