

## THE RABBIT DIED PART NINETEEN

The Rabbit Died is an NSFW horror fantasy CYOA about pregnancy, the effects of trauma, dreams, and meat. Shit's weird, my friends.

You can read past installments here: [tinyurl.com/rabbitdoc](https://tinyurl.com/rabbitdoc)

Content Warning: Ableism, abuse, (mental, physical & reproductive), body horror, cannibalism, CSA (mentioned only), death, gender dysphoria, gore, incest, pregnancy, racist microaggressions, rape (mentioned only), sexual assault, torture, & vomit.

LUCY ???

The scarlet dawn shines bright and wet. You fasten a pair of sunglasses to your face. The flesh behind your ears latches onto the temple tips and suckles. Adams appears deaf to the sounds your new orifices make, but you know better. He hears them.

"The sky's red," Adams says, setting a glass of iced tea on the table beside you. No sugar, you dislike sweet tea. He leans on the porch railing, his sharp nose upturned. "Isn't that a bad sign of some kind?"

"Are you a sailor now?"

The holes behind your ears seal. You taste plastic along with your tea, which is in need of lemon. Adams studies the red light breaking over the blossoming apple trees. His cheeks flush as dark as the clouds. "I feel sick," he says. "Did another piece of me die lately?"

Standing, you pour the dregs of your tea over the railing. A breeze drifts through the wine-stained boughs, perfumed with smoke and spice. Your stomach lurches. To calm it, you suck on the stub beside your ring finger. It is all that is left of your severed pinky.

"Miss Driscoll?" Adams expresses concern the same way he expresses all emotions, with a flat snideness. You could kill him. "You're pale."

A new wind blows hot from the south, pink, sea brine, and burning with a chemical tang. Nail polish. Your favorite brand.

Your pinky finger is coming home.

"Have you heard from my pedo creep of a husband?" you ask Adams. He shakes his head. "Shit." You bite your withered, old thumb - the one that had grown the crone, Nan. "What the hell has he done now?"

A green butterfly lands on the rim of your empty glass. You and Adams freeze stiff. The crotch of his pants darkens with urine that reeks sour, like vinegar. As a pair, the two of you stare at the sky.

The clouds spread apart like the folds of a vulva and the sun pulses. A hole dilates at the center, bigger, bigger until it eclipses the light. Amber liquid rains down on your family's orchard.

Something is being born.

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QUINTANA

The tunnel drags on outside of the train's windows. You sit on the bench, your vision unfocused, your thoughts tired. Pink light flashes through the black of the tunnel's walls. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. Repeat, repeat. You wonder if they mean anything.

Lucy - one of many, it seems - instructed you to stay on until the end of the line. You half-listen to the announcements. Next stop, the gall bladder. Next stop, the spleen. Both names drip bitter in your ears, while the name of the stop after, the heart, sloshes and thumps.

"The brain," the speakers announce in a young version of Lucy's voice, chirping with pep. "End of the line." You exit the train, shaken by the moist chill of the words, but undeterred. You are getting your body back.

The station here is little more but an open-air platform with a bench. Pink is the color of the sky, and an apple orchard awaits past the platform stairs. A wizened old woman sits on the bench.

You wave. "Hi."

"You're here to save yourself?" the old woman asks. She squints, the thin, crêpe paper skin around her eyes crimping. "You don't look brave."

"I was told to go to the end of the line." The cold iron of your father's scissors comforts you. You match the old woman's scowl with one of your own. She looks like Lucy, an old, wrinkled, Lucy, the flesh hanging from her bones like melted wax. "By the other Lucy."

The woman stands in stages, her joints squeak, and she groans. "Then follow me," she says, hobbling down the platform stairs, back bent. "I'll guide you through the trees."

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You could try to trek through the grove on your own. Would it be safe? The apple trees sway. They rattle their black branches in ire. There is your answer. You decide to follow the old woman.

You waddle up beside the old woman and offer your arm. "You're polite," she chuckles, "I don't need it. I can walk on my own." An accent bobs along the crooked brook of the old woman's words. It slips your ear as you try to grasp it.

Bristled caterpillars infest the canopy. Some drop in your way on strings of pink tinsel, hissing. The old woman bats them aside. "Piss off." She squishes one. "Twats."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but who are you?"

The old woman flicks her hands. "I'm Lucy Driscoll, the part of her that got sick of her shite and left. You can call me Nan."

"Nan." This name warms the tongue. It has a springy give. "I'm Quintana."

Nan grunts in acknowledgment. Then, she mutters, "Once a god fell asleep and while slumbering, birthed a thousand sons. The god birthed a thousand more until finally, the god bore a daughter." She shushes you with a pinch. "The daughter was ungrateful. She yeaned to roam."

Above you, in the fruiting branches, a sour wind blows. It disturbs the apples and caterpillars. It kicks them from their perches. You rub where Nan pinched, the skin bruised royal blue. "What does this have to do with me?" you ask.

"The daughter asked the god to let her go outside of Heaven." Nan grimaces, her teeth are chips of stained bone. You expect them to snap as she grinds them. "The daughter wanted to be real, she said. Like the fine ladies of Earth." She grins. "God made her real alright!"

"Ma'am?" You press the handle of the scissors to your chin. "What are you talking about?"

Nan's eyes glaze. Her pupils dilate. "God told its daughter to be real, she must suffer, for suffering is what those real people you long to join do.

"'Then I shall suffer,' the daughter proclaimed, 'for I long to be real.' And God called upon its thousands of sons to show their sister suffering. They tore her to shreds, each stealing a piece of her flesh. All that was left of her, in the end, was her heart."

Biting down on the scissors, you walk faster. The story is disturbing your baby. She kicks inside you and beats your womb with her small fists. But Nan, somehow, matches your pace. "The daughter's heart turned into a brown rabbit," Nan says. "And she fled to Earth."

"And there," you say, unable to control your voice, "she met a real woman, with hair the color of flax, and skin pale as milk. The woman gave her a fine green ribbon--" You cover your mouth.

Nan blocks the path, her eyes white dots burning in the shade. "The woman promised to help the rabbit become real, like her. Until one day, a man showed, with eyes like blue glass, and the woman wanted him. She craved him."

You know what happens next. Move your hand and say it.

"Yes, yes." Nan wags her finger in your face. "She craved this man. The rabbit grew jealous. She wanted to be loved by this man the way real women are loved and sought to steal him."

You let your hand drop to your side. "No! That isn't what happened."

"Then what happened?"

You soothe your baby and with her, your racing heart. She whispers the rest of the story through your blood and you relay it: "The rabbit didn't understand why the woman needed the man. The woman explained that without a man, a woman is nothing. She might as well not exist.

"The rabbit didn't understand that. But she wanted to help her friend because she loved her friend, and she wanted her friend to be happy. She didn't want her friend to cease existing. She didn't want her friend to be fake--like her."

Nan chews at nothing. You take her hands in yours, her skin soft as baby powder. She refuses to meet your gaze. "The rabbit told the man how the woman felt for him," you say. "And that man, touched by the rabbit's concern for her friend, fell in love with her instead."

"She stole her only friend's one true love," says Nan. "For she wasn't the woman's real friend, she was a fake. A fraud. No respect for the woman's kindness."

"That's a lie."

Nan wheezes. "It's the truth, the rabbit seduced the man. She made love to him in his apple orchard, under his most prized tree." She jigs around you, cackling. "The woman arrived and saw and the rabbit didn't stop! How shameless is that?"

You stamp your foot. "That is a lie!"

The ground quakes and with it, a hush. All around you, the forest cowers, from the trees to the caterpillars. Nan's jaws work at her cud of nothing. Her lips smack.

"That's a lie," you say. "The rabbit enjoyed the idea of being loved by the man, it made her feel nice, and she loved him, but she loved her friend more. Her friend's happiness mattered more. In a way that made her feel real.

"The man lured the rabbit into his orchard with the intention of making her his wife. She wanted that, she wanted it so much, but--"

"But? But?" Nan leans towards you.

"She rejected him. When the man asked don't you love me, the rabbit lied and said no." You stare at your hands. Shadows pool in the creases, thick as blood, and while you know you are clean, you cannot shake the feeling of being sullied. "So the man raped her.

"She lied for the sake of her friend's heart and the man raped her. And he didn't stop when the woman showed up. And the woman, she stood there--she watched it happen."

"She was too afraid to stop it."

"Are you the woman?"

Nan slouches away from you and limps onward down the path, her head bobbing on her skinny neck. The longer you stare at her, the shabbier she becomes. "You regret what you did," you say. Nan only grunts.

The same discomfort you felt back on the train, when the other-other Lucy mentioned Tsukiko, returns. And as before, you do not know what to do with it. Your baby feeds you the rest of the story, and you relate the tale, "You watched that man hurt your friend. I get being afraid

But what you did next, that I don't understand. You killed her."

"I was humiliated," says Nan. "He wanted a rabbit instead of me, a good woman. A human woman. Don't you see how insulting that is?"

"She loved you."

"Love isn't enough."

Nan tugs at her left ring finger. Dull pink nails cut into the smooth band of white skin ringing her knuckle. You want to pivot away from her and her cold, withered form. She sickens you down to your marrow. Down to the root of your heart.

"I saw what he did to Rabbit," says Nan, "and I knew as much as I loved her, she wasn't a man." Her gaze flicks up to meet yours. "Could her love provide for me? Would it clothe and feed me? Would it give me shelter?"

You secure your hold on the scissors, readying to strike.

"Would it protect my children, my children's children? No, for love isn't enough. Love has never been enough." Nan grabs you by the arms. "Especially the love of a creature like a Rabbit!

"A man's ability to provide will always outweigh his ability to love. He may gnaw my bones, but at least my bones will have a place to rest!" Nan's eyes grow bloodshot with tears. "So when he asked me to kill her, I did it.

"I took that green ribbon I gave her and tied her up and I slit her throat, for I needed him. I needed him!"

"No, you didn't."

You leave Nan to fester in her ugly words, you heard enough. The trees part for you and the undergrowth scuttles back to make way. Your baby radiates within you. She is a soft ember, warming you, providing you with comfort. You could cry.

"Why don't you try to kill me?" Nan asks after you. "You should."

"My father believed there's a grain of kindness in every soul." You dab at your watering eye. Tears again, always tears. "Even ones like you."

"And I s'pose it's the size of a mustard seed?" Nan's scowl deepens. "Will my kindness move mountains?" She spits. "Kindness is as useful as love."

"Kill me, I deserve it. Cut me to ribbons as you did to Blackavar, you violent thing."

She thinks you violent? What you did to Blackavar was violent. It was cruel. You cup your nose and mouth and inhale until your lungs threaten to explode. That shaken soda panic from back at the cabin starts its slow return, distracting you from your baby's warmth.

"Are you going to do it?" Nan asks, bouncing on her feet. "I see it now, you're thinking about it. You're thinking of killing me."

You glance at the scissors. Weeping, you see Blackavar's blood on your palms. You see Cody's. Nan grabs your wrists. Her digits, with their boney knots for knuckles, are pink against your brown skin. They look like scars.

"Tsukiko," you say.

"Tsukiko?"

"Is this what you did to her?" asking that frees you. Nan hides her face. "Is this how you killed what was good in her? By messing with her head? By making her feel--" shameful, gross, violent-- "bad?"

Nan grimaces.

You shake your head. "I don't know if your kindness can move mountains or anything big like that, and it's not my job to find out. It's yours."

A beat.

"Now take me to the tongue," you say.

Nan stands straight. Her whole demeanor cracks, the smile grows kind, her skin rosy and warm, her hard edges wear down. The crooked old witch changes. It strikes you quiet.

"Good, don't take my shit," she says. "I was wrong, I'd thought you'd be a pushover. Test passed."

"That was a test?"

"Yes, yes," Nan yanks you along, "and you passed."

"But you still did those things," you say. "You still killed your best friend."

"I regret it."

"Do you, though?"

"Let me tell you the story proper," Nan says.

God had a daughter, the daughter wanted to be a real person, God, in jealous, protective fury, sicced their thousands of sons upon their daughter to punish her. She survived her fate by turning her tender heart into a rabbit and fleeing to the real world. There, she met a woman.

The Woman and the Rabbit became friends, close friends. Lesbians, maybe? You muse over the possibility, your cheeks cupped in your hands. The sting of Hazel's kiss revisits your lips and you shoo away your tragic, gay daydreams.

Nan crooks a wispy brow at you.

"Sorry," you say.

Around you, the grove grows darker, the path more tangled. Cauls of pink caterpillar silk drape the trees. The Man arrives in the story and the Woman wants him. Love, no, for safety, for land, for her family's reputation and hers. She wants him but the Man wants the Rabbit.

The Rabbit fell in love with the Man but lied, sacrificing her chance at her own happiness for the sake of her friend, the Woman. For her selfless deed, she was raped by the Man and killed by the Woman. The Man and Woman married and no one was happy.

"We left her under the apple tree," says Nan. "For the animals to scavenge. They didn't touch her, and she didn't rot. Enough time passed for me to have a child, and she didn't rot. We buried her when we could no longer stand the sight of her.

"Then winter came..."

You grasp Nan's arm, the bones no thicker than sticks. A whimper leaves you, your baby's, you assume.

"A buck crashed and tore through our home. Rats raided our food. Wolves killed our animals." Nan gives a dry laugh. "It was like her brothers were trying to avenge their sister, those bastards. They hurt her as much as we did.

"When our son died, I was too tired to cry."

"What was his name?"

"I don't remember, but I remember the name of the daughter we had after we dug up and ate Rabbit, our Hazel. My husband named her that."

"Hazel?" The sticky, sweet kiss refuses to leave. You flap your hands in frustration. "Her name was Hazel?"

"My husband picked the name, but I knew who she was when I squirted her out." Your baby kicks. Nan leans away from you and your belly. "Rabbit. She had returned."

"And you killed her again."

"He would've raped and hurt her again, it was a mercy."

Kill the daughter to save her from the father. You wipe at your cheeks, your hands flapping after, this time with an insurmountable list of emotions. You taste the sad blue of tears. Some mucus from your running nose gets in your mouth, the flavor is off-white.

The woods start to thin. The trees stand bare. Nan halts in the shattered web of light, staring ahead, chewing. "That's what I thought it was, mercy. Then I got it in my head to kill my husband. Our daughters made great fertilizer for the orchard, our trees thrived. I didn't need

him. But in the scuffle, he cut me and I bled." She raises her brittle hands. "And she crawled out -- another me and another and another and another, like worms. I took Rabbit and fled. We went across the sea."

A tower pierces the far horizon, a red structure that dangled from the gray sky. The base of it is thin. It grazes the ground with its sharp tip. Frothy liquid runs down the tower's bumpy surface.

"We've arrived," Nan says. "The Tongue. I can go no further."

The Tongue beckons you forward, the massive structure pulsating. Between the bumps, taste buds, you think, run swollen channels stuffed full of crustaceous lice. They eat at the walls. You touch the tip of your tongue and wince in sympathy.

"That's my tongue?" You turn to ask Nan.

She left and took the forest, caterpillars and all, with her. You pat your belly. You and the baby now, and your papa's scissors.

There is one entrance into the Tongue, a jagged lipped, lice-eaten hole at the tip. It stinks of halitosis and rot. The lice pick at the edges. A pink coin protrudes from each of their heads - a nail. You poke one with the scissors and it cracks and bursts like a popcorn kernel.

Apologizing, you rush inside the hole.

The Tongue's floor squishes underfoot. Covered in raised, golfball-sized bumps, it rolls and dips. A light, thick as tallow, drips from the high ceiling. Whispering plip,



plip, plip, it slicks the walls wet with a coat of spoiled pink.

You miss Hazel.

Mean, brave Hazel. How would she handle this? You push past your revolution and cut a straight path across the heaving floor. Does she remember knowing you from before the Clinic? Does she remember kissing you? Is that why she avoided you before this all started?

The day Hazel came into Clinic was the day Nurse Lucy gave you the stuffed bunny. You used it in your introduction, talking through the toy like a puppet. She scoffed, her lip curled, and asked where's the fucking bathroom? Then, not a word after until the day Adams died.

You halt.

Is that what happened? Your head is in a fog.

The ceiling splits. A ladder made of silk lowers before you.

While you find the ladder suspect, you stick the scissors between your teeth and start to climb. The rungs stick to your hands like cotton candy and the ladder sways from your weight, but still, you climb. And climb, and climb, and climb.

What are the chances of you and Hazel meeting at the Clinic? With your weak math skills, there is no point in attempting a calculation. What if, worries a part of you, the girl who kissed you wasn't Hazel? What if you projected Hazel into that memory? Your head is a mess.

The scissors chill the lower part of your face, from nose to chin, numb. Light gets in your eyes, stinging them. You blink hard to clear them. A few more rungs, a little higher, a little higher. You can figure things out after you deal with Lucy.

You taste pink.

"Hello, mamacita."

You crawl through the slit and into a strange chamber. Sitting on your knees, you rub your eyes. When you look up, you scream.

A giant glares down at you from the ceiling of the chamber. The eyes, the face, the cascade of loose copper coils - it's you. Bloodied and raw, it's you. The scissors drop from your mouth as you shriek at the sight.

"No need to yell." Lousy Lucy, segmented and pale like a doll, drops and hangs upside down from the giant Quintana's mouth. Her mandibles click as she rubs her shivering body. "It got those scissors out of your yap at least. I was freezing."

She offers her hand. "Let's talk."

Let's talk? You pick up the scissors. Your thumb and forefinger poke through the wide rings. Frost eats away at your skin, and your knuckles creak. What will talk solve?

You might wilt if you speak and crumble into a thousand, useless tears.

Lucy retracts her hand.

You shove the blades in your mouth and seek out the root of your tongue. The tips snip the ridge of flesh connecting the underside of the organ to the floor of your mouth. Fluids, spit, ichor, and blood, fall from the giant's maw. Buckets of it dump down upon you. Lucy screams.

Nothing hurts. The cold has robbed you of all sensation. You chop out your tongue, cutting your palate, slicing your cheeks, breaking teeth, and you feel nothing. Lucy, on the other hand, appears to be awash in pain. She cracks open at the joints, crying, "I wanted to talk!"

You grasp our tongue and, roaring, tear it free. A waterfall of gore knocks you on your back.

Lucy falls.

"You stupid bitch." Lucy has no feet. Her legs end in gushing stumps of shorn roots flecked in silvers of muscle. She crawls towards you, her pink eyes warping. "Why?"

Holding your belly, you rise. The chamber fills around you with a swirling brew of reds, whites, and pinks. The stuff pours from your giant double's mouth in an endless flow. You shield your face.

"What did I ever do to you?" Lucy asks. She floats now on the rising flood. You float too, your feet lifting off the floor. "You little bitch! You're supposed to be the weak one."

You tread water to keep your head above the fluids and in your belly, your baby copies you. Lucy bobs across from you, a pale, miserable creature, her blue-on-pink eyes flashing in rage. Her rant drags on until it devolves into a cicada's scream of hate, hate, hate you! Hate you!

She begins to cry fat tears of milk. The sound of which attacks you with the need to apologize. Shutting your eyes, you fill your lungs to their fullest and accept that it is okay not to say sorry to Lucy.

Wake up.

Black hair rises from the center of the pool. Lucy yells at it to fuck off, splashing in its direction, her voice rising to inhuman octaves. You swim towards the hair. It calls to you, saying wake up.

As your fingers brush the strands, you dip under the waves. You sink. You wake.

A new space confines you. You regain awareness in the blood-flooded cabin of a car. Bubbles erupt from your mouth as you release a scream at the abrupt danger. Working with pure instinct, you grope for the car lock. It fights you, as do your fingers, but you manage to open it.

You squeeze the handle and the door rips open. You, along with leagues of blood and saltwater, spill out onto the chilly asphalt of a highway. Highbeams and starbursts of red and blue blind you. Sirens.

Someone shouts: "Freeze!"

Cops.

You heave up things you rather not identify, and shield your sore eyes. Two state troopers stand by their cruiser. Your vision crosses and focuses against the assault of lights. Where are you? Are those pines bordering the highway?

"What in god's name?" whispers one trooper, a white woman. A blonde. She speaks with a droopy, limp voice, like old celery left in the back of the crisper.

Her partner, a man, radios in the situation. "We have a--is that blood? What the hell is that?"

You sit on your ankles.

"What the shit is this?" the lady trooper asks. "You okay?"

Do not backtalk to a cop, they will hurt you. You go to say the meekest of no's, but instead of speaking, you puke. You puke up a writing mass. A segmented creature flops out of your mouth and onto the street.

It looks like a giant, white finger made of crab shells. At the head is a pink acrylic nail. Dozens of tiny legs kick in the open air.

Lucy.

She came back with you.

The lady trooper approaches you, gun leveled at Lucy. "What in fucking Christ is that?"

"Stop, please." A rush of vomit erupts from you, lice, silk, and chunks of apple. Your guts wring out all they can of Lucy's infection. "Stop, don't." You fall to all fours. Your stomach clenches. "Don't come closer, please, please."

The trooper retreats from the expanding puddle, her weapon lowered. "Call an ambulance!" she shouts back to her partner. "We have a pregnant female, Hispanic, I think? Maybe Black? Can Hispanics be Black, Henry?"

"I think so," says Trooper Henry.

"Anyway, she's sick."

Afro-Latina, you want to shout. Where are you? The troopers share Woundwort's awful, ayuh-accent. Is this Maine? After coughing up a miniature subway car, you push up and plop down on your bottom. Your limbs throb, boneless.

"What about that thing?" Trooper Henry asks. The lady trooper points to Lucy, flopping on the road, and he confirms with a, "Yeah, that thing. What is it?"

"Please, get away from that." The acid and bile have burned your voice to cinders. "Don't, don't, please."

"I don't know, Henry," the lady trooper says, deaf to your pleas. She leans over Lucy. "Looks like a fucked up worm."

Lucy's head splits and blooms open. The pink nail spreads into five, twitching fingers. The trooper shrieks as Lucy jumps onto her face.

"Idiota." You fish through the muck for your father's scissors. Lucy crossed over with you, is it too much to hope that the scissors crossed as well?

Trooper Henry rushes to his partner's aid and grabs at Lucy's body. The lady trooper grabs with him, and together they pull. You glance down as you touch metal. When you glance back up, both troopers have lost their hands.

Blades of chitin jut from Lucy's body and the roots of her tail. She whips around, slicing at the air. Her grip on the lady trooper's face clamps tight. The bones crunch. Trooper Henry flees the scene, waving his gushing stumps above his head and screaming.

You pat down the ground, now desperate for the scissors. Your labored breathing clogs your ears. Lucy starts to peck at the lady trooper's sternum with her tail blade. She hacks a hole big enough to enter and crawls inside. The lady trooper collapses in a death drop.

Where are the scissors? They have to be here. You throw the miniature subway car over your shoulder. Lice bite at you. Acid burns you. Fear picks at your heartstrings like the cords of a guitar. You recognize the song, Soul Man.

Really, fuck the Blues Brothers.

The trooper snaps up, her spine bending further forward than should be possible. She tucks and rolls straight up onto her head. The weight of her slender body proves too great for her neck, it breaks, and she splats face down. Tremors wrack her.

You find the scissors.

The flesh seethes and bubbles under the trooper's shirt. A purple stain spreads from the center of her back down to her bottom. She twists around, legs spinning, and does a split. Scissors at the ready, you stare at the sight.

Lucy breaks the fragile shell of the trooper's body and hatches, her segmented body bright as a star in the high beams of the police cruiser. "Ta da!" She poses in the mound of rags and twitching offal, hands high, one leg bent. Her mouth parts dance. "Fuck you bitch, I live."

Screaming, that is all you have left. Screams and your father's scissors. You swipe at Lucy's merry, milk-white face, lopping off one of her mandibles. Pink and purple and

bugs, bugs, you see, and taste, and hear them in her outrage. She leaps away as you slash at her.

"Control that temper, Mexican!" she laughs. A front. Her eyes are wider than the headlights. She has to be scared. "Think of the baby. I need her."

"Leave my baby alone!" You roar at her, tears spilling forth. "Leave me, leave Hazel, leave Rabbit, leave everyone alone!"

The blade glances off of Lucy's plated breasts. You stumble and catch your balance before you can fall. Lucy is right, you need to think of the baby. You hold your belly.

Lucy stays at a distance. "We calm now, you little psycho?"

A car rams her before she can start her next speech.

Lucy smashes into the windshield, elbow first. Glass and metal and chitin crack. The car slams on its breaks and Lucy slides, exoskeleton leaking neon pink, off the hood. Smoke peels from the tires, choking with the noxious fumes of burnt rubber and fried blood.

You run to the vehicle, waving your hands, croaking, "Help! Help, please!"

Wait, selfish girl. They might need help. You grab the driver's side handle and check the window. The driver blinks at you from behind the spotted pane. He has a scar on his face, mouth to ear.

The back door opens. "What the fuck is that?" says Hazel Rey. A heavily pregnant Hazel Rey, dressed in stained silk.

"It's not dead, that's what." Cody Driscoll, somehow alive, gets out from behind the wheel. You stumble out of his way. He winks at you. "Hey, girly-girl."

"Hazel!" You almost knock Cody off his feet as you rush to greet her. "Hazel, Hazel, is that you?"

"It's me," she says.

"You know her?" Cody asks.

"Yeah." Hazel places a hand on your shoulder. Hugging is impossible with such big bellies. "This is Quintana."

"Nice to meet you, Quintana." Cody opens his jacket. On his hip is a scar, threads of dry skin poke from the curled lips. You suck your thumb. What would it be like to lick that wound?

"You don't remember me?" you ask.

"It's a long, long ass story." Hazel buries her face in your hair and her body trembles as she suppresses a weak noise. "I'll tell you later. Right now, I don't know. I don't know."

You squeeze her wrist. "I'm happy to see you, too."

Lucy moans. Cody warns you, "shit's about to get loud," and Hazel covers your ears. You stand on tip-toe to do the same for her. He opens fire. Hazel tenses. Even muffled, the gunshots are startling.

A little boy hops out of the back of Cody's car and, chewing a candy bar, scuttles over to you. He hangs onto the pocket of Hazel's robe as he watches Cody kill Lucy, eating, his lips smeared with chocolate. He smells like Woundwort. "Can I shoot it?" he asks Cody.

"No," Cody says. He holsters his weapon in the wound on his hip. "Get back in the car."

"This is Champion," says Hazel. "He's one of that asshole's kids. He helped me escape."

Champion yanks at your sweater, which has grown stiff with dried blood. "You're a mama, too?"

"Yeah," you say. "I am."

Lucy, still alive, burps out insults at Cody. You glance back at her. Her head is a wedge with a tacked-on, gaudy smile.

You raise your father's scissors, intent on sinking them into the exposed gristle of her head. Hazel grabs you by the elbow. "Don't," she says. "Just don't. It'll fuck with you later."

"That's stupid," says Lucy.

Cody hushes her with a stomp of his boot.

Hazel gestures for the scissors and you, with some reluctance, give them over. She shepherds you and Champion to the car and nudges you inside. Sitting safe and sound in the back, the strength drains from you and you slump forward. "I thought you were gone," you say.

"I was," Hazel says. "But I'm back."

"I'm sorry for calling you mean."

She holds your hand in hers. "That's alright." You shut your eyes, exhaling days of pent-up fear and frustration. Hazel is back. Things are going to be okay.

Your nose bleeds.

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CODY

God had a daughter. God named her Rabbit. Rabbit, like all children, grew apart from

God and was punished for having the audacity of popping the tit out of her mouth and cutting the apron strings. You stroke the scar on your cheek. Very fucking relatable in your opinion.

You bust open Lucy's carapace with your heel, bringing your boot down hard, stomping as if you are trying to break up ice on your driveway. When you were sixteen, she cut your face. Gave you half a Glasgow smile and then grew bored. To be continued, she said.

The mamas and the kid wait in the car for you to get this over and done with. Jack the car, Hazel. Jack it and run me down. You pop what you think is a lung, juices spray out as you squash it flat. Lucy's spine ruptures.

You and Rabbit died by Lucy's hand but not really, your deaths, like your suffering, are to be continued.

It doesn't matter.

You grind Lucy's pink bug guts out on the blacktop. You pulp her down to mush. Bits of her, smatterings of viscera, coat your legs and boots. Your blue jeans are not blue anymore, her juices have stained them a ripe plum purple.

"Doesn't fucking matter," you say. "I'm alive now."

The pavement cracks - pine trees erupt from the road ahead of you. A black hole opens in the sun. The sky turns crimson and pelts you with wind and snow that throbs with bodily aromas. They come in multitudes. Too many to name.

In an instant, the membrane that separates the world from the Dream is broken. You howl, clutch your head, and buckle at the knees, the whiplash of the snap echoing through you. Hazel and Quintana scream.

"Hold yourself together, young man." A Rabbit calls from the pines, older sounding than yours. Her silver hair shines like dew or the morning star. Your cells squiggle apart as you reach for her.

You throw your head back, your spine arched, and howl, and howl, and howl. Your scar splits. The pain gives you clarity. Hold yourself together, you died before and you will die again. This moment is one link in a shit chain.

The Rabbit bounds towards you and you take hold of her outstretched hand. "It hurts," she says, "but the pain will pass."

It always does.

You and Rabbit, stuck in a cycle.

Lucy's splattered carcass catches on the peak of a growing pine. She rises into the sky. Her guts deck the boughs. At least one part of the cycle has broken for now.

The newborn world settles.

"The girls and Campion," you sway, "I need to check on them."

The Rabbit props you up like a crutch. Her silver antlers prick your armpit as she drapes your arm over her shoulders. "My name is Primrose," she speaks with an accent. English. "And you're heavier than you look."

"Thank the Dream," you say.

Your sense of balance steadies as you pass the hood and you limp ahead of her to the backseat. The car changed, the surface is pored and thin like a shell. When you open the door, it cracks, and clear eggwhite spills out.

Hazel grabs you by the belt. "What--" she spits out clear glop, "what the fuck was that?"

"The worlds merged."

Hazel frowns as she processes this information. "Why the hell not?" She grumbles and nudges you away from the door with her foot, her long, brown leg glazed with egg white. "Why the fucking hell not?" Tugging at her nightgown, she sniffs.

"It's okay to cry," you say. "Everything is a lot right now."

She shoves you.

"What the--?" You spot Campion peering out at you. His noses twitches. "Heck," you say. "Heck."

"Who the hell are you?" Hazel asks Primrose. Primrose removes the pelt - red fur, what Dream monster did she skin - and rises on the balls of her bare feet to wrap it around Hazel's shoulders. Hazel withdraws. "You didn't answer me, who the hell are you?"

"Primrose," you say. "She's a Rabbit."

"I got eyes."

Primrose clicks her tongue. Without her cloak, you have a better look at her figure. She is stacked. More stacked than any of the other Rabbits you have seen. Must be her age - most Rabbits barely survive past young adult.

"He has eyes, too," Primrose says.

You immediately face away. Primrose introduces herself to the others - call me Prim - and gives a quick rundown: she was on her way to find a plane/giant gull that had crashed in the woods during the merger.

By chance, she bumped into you. "It's convenient," she says, "to find you, Hazel Rey, and you, Cody Driscoll, here at this time. The Maine woods are as vast as the ocean."

Quintana and Campion hang halfway out of the open backseat. Campion scratches at his twitchy nose. He bats at it. He snorts.



You squat down before Champion and squeeze his shoulder. "Nose bugging you, kiddo?" you ask.

"You're stinky," he says. "You smell gross. Real, real, real, real gross." He snorts, his eyes rolling. Black fur spreads his hairline.

"What's wrong with him?" Quintana asks.

"Get away!" Primrose shouts.

Champion chomps down on your arm as you withdraw your hand, his teeth punching through your leather sleeve and down between your radius and ulna. You push at his face. The fur infests his skin like black mold

He bounds from the car, taking you with him, dragging you along. Snow, pine needles, and dirt kick up around you. Your boots scrape the road. What the fuck got into the kid?

The women yell after you as they chase you and Champion into the woods.

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LUCY???

We will go with Lucy Prime. That is who you are, the original Lucy Driscoll, the real deal queen bitch. You are a harsh ecosystem where only spite and hate survive. The softer emotions, regret, love, kindness, you hunt those pussies down like rabbits.

"I'm fearless, I'm powerful." You whisper, eyes wide behind your sunglasses, as the pines rise around you. "I'm in charge. I'm in charge!"

You stand defiant against the melding of the worlds, Dream and Waking, screaming at the shifting sky. Adams melts. Dead again. Useless sack of shit, another of Woundwort's mistakes. You do not need him.

Your pinky-nub explodes in a spray of pretty pink gore. The piece of you that was returning, she died, too. You did not need her, either - she would have tried backstabbing you and you would have eaten her like the others.

"How is this happening?" you ask the puddle that was once Adams. Dramatic, cartoon villain, that is you right now. You laugh. "Who fucked up the membrane? Was it me?"

Was it you? Your bitch of a pinky? Sucking on the hole in your hand, you hop down the porch steps, lightheaded. Who, who, who--you land on the lawn with the final who. Tiny, curious Dream creatures crawl by your feet. You stomp them.

If Pinky did this before she died, the last stab to ruin the world for everyone, including you, you will be impressed. Angry, too, ripshit, but impressed.

A pitbull trots out onto your lawn, an ugly beast, you despise it for assaulting your eyes with its presence. Lunar moths flicker around it. It runs off into the trees,

kicking up snow in its wake.

You shake your head. "Tsukiko."

END PART NINETEEN