

Waste

by Amelia Gray

Roger's assigned route had him picking up medical waste at most of the plastic surgery offices in town. He smelled it on his skin by the end of the day. The plastic surgery places were less of a hassle than the hospital and worlds away from the free clinic. After a day full of sharps and used lipo tubes and ruptured implants and the weight of discarded flesh, he tried not to think about the contents of the barrels. He sometimes wore his nose-plug at home.

The long shower he took after work helped a little, and it was good to finally smell the world around him as he dried himself off. From where he stood in his bedroom he could smell the dust in the carpet, the vinegar smell of his freshly washed windows, and the wooden bed frame. He detected the slightest hint of mold in the wall, which didn't surprise him, as the duplex was fifty years old at least and sagging. After a good rain, the mold smelled damp and sweet.

Roger enjoyed his evenings when Olive, his neighbor on the other side of the duplex, was cooking. Olive worked as a line cook at a vegetarian restaurant and spent her evenings frying meat. The smells slipped under the door connecting their apartments and seeped out of closed windows to surround the house. One night, Roger smelled something new and knocked on their connecting door.

"Hello, nose," Olive said. "It's chorizo." Behind her, a sauté pan sizzled with orange meat.

"My grandmother made that in the morning," Roger said.

Olive leaned against the doorjamb. She was still wearing her hairnet from work. "Probably with eggs," she said.

"And cheese, and corn chips sometimes."

"A fine breakfast." She gestured towards the pan with the spatula. "I'm making hamburgers. I mix it with ground chuck. I have enough for another one, if you want."

They sat on the floor to eat. The meat soaked orange fat into the bread. The two of them worked through a thick pile of napkins. Olive's apron was a cornflower blue hospital gown that Roger had picked up for her months ago. Her skin looked pale next to it.

"You have a lovely collarbone," Roger said.

She looked at him. "Lymph nodes," she said. "And salivary glands." She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "They make chorizo with the lymph nodes and salivary glands of the pig. Cheeks, sometimes."

He swallowed. "Cheeks."

"Pig to pork," Olive said. "When does the change happen? At death, it's a dead pig. At the market, it's a pork product. But when does the grand transformation take place? After the animal's last breath? When it's wrapped and packed?"

"It would be horrible to be wrapped and packed."

Olive shrugged. "Some might think so. The pig might think so, if it wasn't well on its way to becoming pork. But it's lucky, in a way. Not everything gets to transform." Her collarbone ducked in and out of the neck of her hospital gown as she talked.

Roger returned his sandwich to its plate. "I'm going to have the rest of this at work tomorrow," he said.

She unlocked her side of the connecting door for him. "Think about it," she said. "The pig gets to become pork. The rest of us simply go from live body to dead body."

