

Hunger: A Prayer

by Bosely Gravel

Prayer: Cold prayers in her throat, so far all unanswered. This thing grows steadily, unmistakably, cobbling counterfeit cells and flesh together into an unspeakable mass.

Treatments: Fat doughy nurses, spike in her vein, feels cold. The taste of garlic, onions and spoiled oysters in her mouth. They use this medication for treating horses. These drugs are not even legal for this. Last chance and it's costing a fortune. The cancer hates it, she can tell. *Dimethyl sulfoxide* is a by-product of the wood-pulping industry, the sulfur gets into her blood and makes her stink. She is beyond desperate, it is that simple. This thing on her chest won't be ignored, it broke through the skin yesterday. It happens, they tell her. She bandages it with gauze and tape, and stuffs the other side of her bra so her chest doesn't look lopsided.

Alone: She can't sleep; she tosses and turns. Upstairs there is a young couple, she listens to them fuck until the woman howls in orgasm. She can time it just right so the three of them will come together. But she is alone when the bed stops shaking. The woman upstairs has the smell of semen, wet sheets and sweat. *I've got the stink of rotting eggs and moldy tomatoes.* The woman upstairs goes to drain herself over the toilet. *I change the blood soaked bandage on my chest.* They say there are no atheists on their deathbeds. She used to think that was bullshit, but now she thinks: *Yes, there is a God, he is blackened blood vessels growing into my lymph nodes, splitting my tit open like a ripe melon. He is metastasized and found my ribs and spine, where he waits, biding his time.* She can't take it anymore. She needs a drink, hard liquor, something expensive. She gets in the shower, and scrubs herself with soap and hot water as she tries to talk herself out of leaving the apartment. *Save your money for the treatments, you don't need booze, you need rest.* She rinses with cold water. Drying off, she knows she still reeks of sulfur, and death. She doesn't care, she needs a drink.

Buzzing: Dark, layered in smoke, the music is almost too loud. She is thankful for the darkness that hides her disease, she is thankful for the smells of cheap beer and piss that hides her odor. The music hides nothing; she is thankful for that too. *I can be in the shadows here, and hide, and watch them, watching me.* She hates what she has become -- rotten fruit, a scab picked away from a cold sore, fungus under a toenail. She thinks of the couple upstairs and how she has never seen their faces. She thinks of how it was in her life before, she thinks of the black leather and the oils, being a slave to the beautiful degradation. *That was someone else, she thinks, not me.* She stands; she has to pee, and needs another drink. She remembers, suddenly, she hasn't cried in months.

Life-in-death: He's got devil eyes; he rolls a cigarette like a tight little joint. She hopes he hasn't mistaken the desperation that has painted her face. *He thinks she is an easy fuck. He's right. God, I take it back, I will believe, she thinks. Just one more time before this thing eats me alive.* Perhaps he is as alone as she is. She watches him as he attempts to distract himself spinning a quarter on the table. *But no, he's not distracting himself. He's toying with me. He knows about the bandages, about the tumor thumping against my chest like my heart on my sleeve. He knows I can't live another day, another night. He knows how bad it hurts. He wants to see me beg, and I want him to know I will.* He turns and shows her a dog-grin. She forgets for a moment that everyone is dying, some are just dying faster than the others.

Kisses: She trembles, she shakes. It was like this once before. She doesn't want to take off her shirt. She doesn't want him to see. Fear cold in her gut, ice in her bladder. There is some kind of magic in him. His jaw is rough, and his stubble is like a polluted snowfall on shanty rooftops. She stands in the dim light and let the tears roll down her face. She makes no excuse for these tears, and he certainly doesn't want one.

He throws his gray cowboy hat on the chair.

"Don't worry, I need this as bad as you do," he says.

"You'll hate me," she says. She knows it is true.

"No," he says, and swills from the bottle of cheap whiskey he had under his car seat.

She believes him, and that scares her more than she has been scared in months.

Jeans peel away; her underwear stay. She wonders if he can see the dampness.

"Your shirt too," he says.

And she takes it off.

He comes to her, warm whiskey and tobacco on his breath, stubble against her cheeks. He kisses her, again and again. *Doesn't he see the lump? Can't he smell my slow decay--*

Naked: He is rough with her bra, she can hear the seams tear, the elastic rip. She is shaking now, as he pulls her bra away: *thirty-five years old*, she thinks. *This is my last memory, the last of the pleasure my flesh will bring.* She expects him to recoil in horror at the sight of the bandage, instead he guides her to the couch.

Hunger: He is everywhere, and nowhere. He has a sculpture's hands, and she is his unfired clay. He is the cruel hunter and she is clumsy prey.

"You are my meat," he says. "And I am your prayer. Shhh---"

His lips are everywhere now, across her belly, across her shoulders, her knees. He doesn't fear the cancer, no, there is some kind of magic in him. His hand goes to her pretty breast, and then to the ugly one. She wants to tell him to stop, but she can't. He tears the bandage away, and presses his cold lips against the tumor's heat. It throbs in pleasure and pain, and then he nibbles ever so gently, kneading the sensations into the putrid flesh. She gasps thin air. He takes a bite, teeth like tiny cactus spines. The young couple upstairs does not know this intimacy, and never will. He is not easily satisfied. He snaps at the flesh again this time taking a quarter of it away. She only sees his face for a second; he is as innocent as an infant.

"Tender," he whispers. Each bite is an obscenity and he savors every nuance. She wonders if he will stop when he gets to healthy flesh, or just continue on eating until she is all gone. *I don't*

care, she thinks, It's worth it, I don't want him to ever stop. He takes another bite, and her knees shake, and her hand slides across the back of his head.

Morning: She aches everywhere. Her head is throbbing, everything hurts. She is alone. His empty bottle of whiskey still sits on the coffee table. She is naked; she has overslept. She has a treatment in half an hour. She runs her hand across a void, a pit where the *horror petite* had been. Now it's gone, only smooth raw meat where the corruption had once rooted. It hurts worse than the cancer ever did. She stands, trembling, and goes to find a mirror.

THE END

