

The Shredded Carcass of a Small, Helpless Animal

by Kyle Muntz

In one hand, I'm carrying a paper bag. Something inside shakes, as if it wants to escape, but I can't let it—or I won't, not yet. I'm vaguely worried it could break through the bottom, but that hasn't happened yet either.

It's still light outside, but the curtains are closed, so nothing makes it past them. Sometimes, when I'm inside my house, it feels like a fortress, but of course, I'm just imagining it that way. The windows are thin glass that could be broken in a second—they can't even keep out the light, so it's difficult to imagine them blocking anything else.

I throw my coat over the back of a chair, and kick off both shoes in some direction. The thing in the paper bag is still struggling, so I grab it through the bottom and squeeze. It shrieks, and seems to deflate a little, but still struggling.

In the front room, there is a woman tied to one of the walls. She hangs forward, pulling at her bonds. All I can see is her face: a beam of light illuminates a diagonal strip of it, tinted especially gray in the evening.

When she sees me, she smiles. I can't really explain how unnerving that feels. I grab onto something because my legs aren't as strong as they were before.

She makes me weak, in many different ways.

"What did you get?" she asks.

"I'll show you in a minute," I say. "How are you doing?"

"The same as always." Every day, her voice sounds less and less like I remember; there's a hint of a growl, of the tone coming gradually undone. "I'm sure you know, I'm not happy like this."

"It's for your own good," I say. "I love you, you know that."

"Right."

“This doesn't make me happy either. This isn't how I want to live.”

She arches towards me. The bonds keep her arms back, about four feet away. She's much stronger than me now, so there's no telling what might happen.

For one long moment, I think they're about to break—but they don't, and she falls back.

“You're lucky,” she says. “Even just a few weeks ago, I would have been able to untie these.”

“You haven't tried chewing through them?”

“I have. But it feels funny in my mouth. So I didn't.”

“Hmm. Well, that's good.”

She sits back against the wall. With the light like this, I can't make out the differences in her, and she still looks good—her features haven't deteriorated much yet, except her skin has the texture of marble now, and her eyes are red and yellow, with huge pools of darkness in them. When we spend the evenings talking like this, some of the times she seems familiar, but still, different every day.

“It feels strange to lose my coordination so quickly,” she says. “You looked up how to tie these, right?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I did my best, but I'm still not sure how long they'll hold.”

She moves her arms. “They're a little weaker now than they were before. If you don't fix them soon, I'll be able to get you.”

“That's fine,” I say. “I don't mind.”

“Are you sure?”

“When you asked me to tie you up, I wasn't even sure I wanted to. I don't want to keep going like this. It's not worth it.”

“I'll still be able to talk for about a month, I think. After that, I'm not sure.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Let me go. I'm hungry.”

I shake my head. “I can't. Not yet.”

“I don't love you anymore, you know. I only want the electricity in your brain.”

I sigh.

"You're still very good at hurting my feelings," I say.

"I suppose. It's not hard because you don't know what you want."

Briefly, I find myself stepping closer, but at the last second, I don't. There is a demon in us all, one so strong no one could ever control it, except we lie and tell ourselves we can. I don't know what it looks like, because it doesn't have a shape, but still: we have words for an impossible number of things that don't exist, and all that matters is whether we believe in them.

"Are you about done with that?" She points towards the bag. "I'm still hungry."

"Oh," I say, "yeah." I need to start paying better attention to things, or I won't survive any longer in this world. "Here. Sorry about that."

"What it is, anyway? You were gone for quite a while."

"A gerbil," I say. "I stole it from one of the houses down the street."

She makes a frightening sound, from somewhere deep in her throat. "That was very thoughtful of you," she says. "You really are very considerate, even now."

"Sure," I say. "Thanks."

The thing in the paper bag isn't moving anymore. For a second I think it's gone, but no—it's just hiding, or thinks it is. I don't find it with my eyes, but still, it's there.

I never turn on the lights because I can't stand to look at her. There's an image in my mind of the way she used to look, and superimposing this new thing over it hurts more than I can admit.

I pull the gerbil out of the bag and toss it towards her. It lets out a shriek, while flying, until the moment she reaches it—so quick I can hardly even follow, it's in her mouth, or half of it is, and there's another splotch of blood on the carpet.

The crunch of its bones is quiet, but still, I hear it.

She rips open the skull. Its brain is impossibly small, but she mashes it between her teeth, and seems to enjoy it anyway, in ways I can't possibly describe.

Afterwards: a moment of silence. She just sort of looks at me.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I've told you before, I don't like you seeing me like this."

"It's fine. I understand."

"I feel kind of guilty sometimes. You're doing so much work to keep me here."

"It's interesting to watch," I say. "Billions and billions of people died like this. Most of the world, really. I'm surprised there are any of us left here at all; that we even bothered to put the world back together. It doesn't seem worth it."

She shrugs. "Stranger things have happened."

Silence again. I don't ever remember our relationship coming under stress quite like this.

"I've decided," I say. "I'm going to take care of you until the bonds break, or the knots come untied, or whatever, and then I'll let you eat me. Is that alright?"

"Are you sure?" she asks. "Bad things could happen, if I get out. More people could be infected. Including you, if there's enough of you left—though I don't think there will be."

"Yeah," I say. "That's fine."

It's getting later now, so I can't even see her at all. It almost feels like I'm alone, except I can still hear her.

Everything about her is monstrous.

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"Could you come over here," she whispers, "just for a second? I want to give you a kiss."

"No," I tell her. "I'd like to, but I can't, right now."

