

WE ARE ASH

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1 / THE DOLORES

DOLORES WAS USED to feeling watched. A six-foot-two girl never made it through life without feeling watched. People watched her like they would watch a hippopotamus wandering through a Walmart: with fascination, but also with distrust, since a hippo ought not be in a Walmart at all. Dolores had the shoulders and arms of a silverback gorilla, but the coordination of a drunk toddler, so typical tall-girl professions like modeling or the WNBA were out of the question. Dolores never had much inclination to do anything more athletic than carry large piles of books, but everyone insisted she was “wasting” her height, as if it were a resource to be used up

In her podunk, middle-of-nowhere high school, Dolores’s love of books put her in the race for valedictorian with an overachiever named Stephanie Watkins. Then Dolores had refused to do an assignment in biology comparing and contrasting the theory of evolution with intelligent design. It was Dolores’s first and only F. Stephanie was better at disguising her bookishness: she was athletic and short. Well, maybe not short, but average--and likable. When graduation came around it was Stephanie,

not the sarcastic gorilla-limbed, book-worm, gaming, manga-drawing, chemistry dork, who was chosen for valedictorian.

Dolores's feeling of being watched was normally confined to the time outside her home. A new paranoia had settled on her like a fine layer of ash the night before. She tossed and turned, feeling modest for the first time since she'd left home. She'd been sleeping nude ever since she moved out of her mother's home. She had left the exact minute after graduation. They handed Dolores her diploma and she walked across the stage and right out the gymnasium doors.

She drove thirteen hours headed west in nothing but her graduation gown after going naked underneath as a joke. The joke ended up being on her as she steamed like a dumpling in the breathless black polyester. Dolores's long black hair combined with the black graduation gown had given her a kind of giant nun look. She got even more than the usual gape-mouthed stares at every single gas station, and it made her think she should have gone more all-in on the nun thing. As it was, she arrived at her destination with the adult equivalent of diaper rash and ring of heat rash around her neck that made her look like she'd done a really bad job trying to hang herself.

That was how she'd greeted Bozeman, Montana. Bozeman was no big city to be sure but was damn sure better than the dusty North Dakota town of two thousand that she left behind. Her hometown had lost most of its adult men to the oil fields to the north. Her plan was to find a job in Bozeman, any job really, and save enough to enroll at Montana State to study biochemistry. Then maybe go to a real city and get a real job. She liked Bozeman, but she still believed that in a bigger city she'd find her people. If they were in Bozeman, she had not

found them. Though she wasn't sure anyone ever found their people while working long, unpredictable hours at a Starbucks and practically setting every dollar on fire to pay rent. She didn't get out much. Her version of socializing was attempting to flirt with one of the cute college boys who sometimes came in for coffee. Inevitably after she had thrown herself at said boy, the boy's tiny girlfriend would appear and Dolores would feel like a giant nun again.

The watched feeling kept burrowing around in her mind like an invasive species as she scratched at her naked skin. She considered getting up to put on a tank top and some underwear to fight the oddly watched feeling she had. She turned on her bedside lamp more than once to look at her naked skin to see if she had bed-bugs or something else on her flesh making her feel so crazy.

Dolores checked the clock: she had to be at work in four hours. Rather than fight it, she gave into insomnia and opened her Kindle. The Kindle was a gift from her brother Danny, god love him, and had come with a \$100 Amazon gift card that was long since gone. At least the library loaned ebooks for when she finished work in the wee hours. Today was the dreaded break shift: she'd worked until ten and had to be back by five in the morning to open. It should be illegal, and maybe it was, but what the hell kind of barista could tell her boss (a short little bastard who clearly hated her for being a Viking warrior) that he violated labor laws? No barista ever, because then she wouldn't be a barista. She'd be a bum, just like her mother thought she would be.

The social security and military benefits that her mom had gotten after her dad had been exploded in Iraq were standing

firmly in the way of Dolores getting financial aid for college. She just needed to survive at Starbucks long enough to get her Montana residency. Then she could apply for financial aid and in-state tuition. Then she could start her real life.

WE STARTED WATCHING the Dolores after things went badly with the previous bipeds. We must get it right this time.

We had observed our surroundings for weeks before deciding to become a squishy biped ourselves. The bipeds, we concluded, are clever and numerous. They spread in colonies over the surface of the land. There are enough that we can learn, can go unnoticed, unmarked. We would be just another one.

There had been a small herd of bipeds near the place of our genesis that we had decided to join. It was rugged, barren land, far from any of the massive heaps of structures that they build for the larger herds. We felt certain that they would not feel threatened by us in this empty place, with only a small copse of trees for cover. We made our new body. Our new body was immediately cold, courtesy of the bizarre lack of a pelt that must be honored as part of the bipeds' makeup.

We - in our new, cold, hairless body - came upon six of them. They crept toward one of the large, omnivorous, sometimes-bipedal beasts that populate this nearly empty land. We imag-

ined the hairless bipeds were jealous of its lush brown pelt. We were certain that the furry biped was not cold.

The six bipeds did wear a strange auxiliary skin, some substance they must have created and draped on themselves. This herd all wore the same type of drape in blotchy brown and green, in what we assume is a poor mimicry of the superb camouflage of the other creatures we've observed. Each squishy biped carried a long metallic stick with an oily, burnt smell emanating from it. One biped, the shortest and most hairless of all, raised the stick and extended it from its face like a long snout.

The stick made a noise that shattered the earth. We covered our ears. That was not a natural noise, so we were curious if we could make the noise. We could! We did!

The bipeds' faces snapped in our direction. We heard a bellow of pain and suffering. It came from the large, furry beast. We saw it fall, we heard one more long rasping groan, and the beast stopped breathing. The biped and its noisy stick unmade the beast. The biped that unmade the bear ran toward us. Another, with hair the color of dried grass and eyes like winter skies followed, but the other four fled, running away down the slope, back the way they came.

The hairless one still had its noisy unmaking stick poking out like a stiff trunk. We felt some new, hot, horrible thing fill our new squishy body. Rage is the mouth-noise we think the bipeds use for this feeling. We made a roaring mouth-noise like the furry beast, which the hairless biped so carelessly unmade.

The bipeds stumbled, stopped, stared. Then they resumed,

but the straw-haired one pushed down the hairless one's unmaking stick. The straw-haired one reached us first. It made many mouth-noises. "What are You doing out here? Where did You come from?"

We distrusted this You, whose actions we were being questioned about. But at least the straw-haired one didn't point its unmaking stick at us. We thought that the straw-haired biped must be their leader. We would make our face look like the straw-haired one to put them at ease. We felt our face slip and shift and our eyes lighten like the sunrise turning blue. We said, in the straw-haired biped's voice, "Who is the You? We are not the You!"

Our new face did not put them at ease.

Both bipeds screamed. We screamed with both their voices, assuming this was some dominance ritual. Then the unnatural crack of the hairless biped's unmaking stick sent us sprawling to the ground. Our chest exploded in a pink froth. It was suddenly impossible to use our lungs efficiently.

Then the straw-haired one shouted, "Damnit, Cody! What the fuck did you do?" It ran its hands through its hair, but it did not look at our face, so we were relieved that it hasn't mistaken us for a Damnitcody.

We struggled back to our feet, but we would have to unmake and remake elsewhere. Somewhere far from noisy unmaking sticks and hairless damnitcodies. Our multitudes began to separate and the straw-haired biped said, "We'll get You to a hospital."

The You again. The straw-haired one reached out and grabbed our right arm. We let it crumble into our multitudes and the bipeds shrieked again. The straw-haired one shouted, "Holy shit! It's turning to ash!"

Before it could make even more senseless mouth-noises, we pushed our face up to the straw-haired one, grabbing its lower jaw with our left hand, our remaining hand. Our multitudes poured out of our mouth in winding gray tendrils and the hairless one screamed, "Danny, don't breathe in that shit! Fuck!" But my multitudes pushed into the straw-haired one's mouth and nose and rode its breath into its lungs.

Our multitudes searched out its mind, even as it struggled. This biped called itself the Danny. The Danny's eyes bulged as it looks into the mirror image eyes we had made. We learned many things and places and mouth-noises the Danny knows.

The Danny wished for its mother-thing. We saw that the mother-thing lived in a large hive of bipeds, not like this place. We could go to the mother-thing when we wished to remake. Then the unnatural loud noise happened again and we felt the multitudes of our abdomen scatter, some were lost, burnt, destroyed, but most were able to move away from the noise and the heat and the hard projectile. We sucked our multitudes back out of the Danny.

It doubled over, coughing red life-juice all over us, all over itself. We did not fall this time, though our thorax was only a few pillars holding us up. We seized the hairless biped by its face, and breathed our multitudes into its lungs, not because we needed its learning - it looked like a stupid biped - but because

we hated that it used its unmaking stick on us. The gun. Shot. By the Cody. Our multitudes retreated from its useless mind.

We swirled into a cloud of our multitudes, even as the Cody and the Danny coughed and coughed and coughed red life-juice in vivid sprays on the dull ground. We let our body crumble as we swirled into the air. We hovered a moment, regretting this first mistake. We should not have tried to join such a small herd of bipeds. We made a mistake, but we learned. We now had a larger herd to try.

And the Danny gave us a name. We are Ash.

We liked this new identity that included having a name for ourselves. We shook off the mistake-feeling and went forward with our new information. Our name. Our next place to go. Our next attempt at interaction with the bipeds.

The Danny sent us to the mother-thing before the mother-thing sent us to the Dolores.

The mother-thing lived in a square, fake cave that sits above ground. We did not want to startle another biped with our remaking, even if they didn't pose much of a threat without their unmaking tools. Here in the forest of human-boxes we didn't see as many noisy unmaking sticks, but we were sure these humans have other things for unmaking. We had seen the squishy humans unmake a whole pack of hairy, sharp-toothed quadrupeds by putting a white powder called "strychnine" on a piece of meat. The animals suffered terribly, going rigid, foaming at the mouth, convulsing on the ground, and eventually they were unmade. The bipeds laughed about it. The bipeds seem to

enjoy pain—other creatures' pain, other bipeds' pain, maybe their own pain.

This incident informed our decision not to become one of the furry, hunter quadrupeds. They were competent, intriguing creatures, and we liked their social structure, but they were susceptible to the trickery of the squishy bipeds. We did not wish to be tricked, so we formed ourselves into a functioning squishy biped body. We had much to learn and we were relieved that breathing into the bipeds was so informative. We learned much from our multitudes after they returned from The Danny. Still we questioned whether taking on this squishy bipedal form was a good decision.

The sun had dropped below the barren, flat horizon and we became a body again. It is impractical that the bipeds are hairless. It is cold for a hairless creature. We supposed that humans must not be native to this climate; an invasive species. We tried to picture the Danny-face and we made our own face into the Danny-face to put the Danny mother-thing at ease. We know now that having the same face as the squishy biped we talk to makes them smell of fear. They seem to prefer to huddle in herds of similar looking bipeds, but not exact replicas. How much similarity is the right amount? We have much to learn.

We remade ourselves into a Danny-meat-sack again and were ready to talk to the mother-thing. We pressed our Danny-face to the nearest clear-hard panel and looked past the glare made by the fake, small suns that the bipeds so enjoy putting everywhere. They must have very bad night vision. We are glad we are not truly a squishy biped; we see quite well in the dark.

We twisted the metal thing on the wooden panel of ingress,

hoping maybe with enough twisting, it would give way. Then we saw the mother-thing. We were hoping from the Danny's memories that the mother-thing would be happy, but the mother-thing looked alarmed as it threw open the wooden cave protector. It grabbed our Danny hand and pulled us in hissing, "Danny! What are you doing? Why are you naked?"

The mother-thing was leaking now, but not the red-juice, but some salty-smelling clear juice from its eyeballs. Its nose was also leaking clear, goopier stuff. We glanced down at our body and realized that most of the bipeds cover themselves in various colored drapes as a type of artificial fur. The mother-thing was covered in a fluffy, pale purple single drape with a loop around its midsection. It covered most of its rather plump body. It continued to leak and ooze from its eyes and nose.

We made some Danny-mouth-noises that we saw when we breathed into the Danny. "We love you, Mom," we said, using the Danny's voice.

This made the mother-thing pause its less specific mouth-noises (specific mouth-noises were the main reason we chose to make ourselves into a squishy biped, so these seemingly meaningless mouth-noises are very confusing). Then it narrowed its eyes; they were a more silvery gray-blue than the Danny's eyeballs. The mother-thing appeared to be lumpier, softer, and smaller compared to Danny's much larger form. It also had a different pitch and tone to its mouth-noises and less hair even than the Danny. It appeared older than the Danny and we realized it must be the Danny's creator. It shouted, "Who is 'we'? Did you bring someone with you?" It looked out the clear-hard aperture where it first saw us.

We felt our face crumple up on its own when we did not understand this question. "We are we. Who is the You?" we said in a most perfect replication of the Danny mouth-noises. We began to feel that the mother-thing was looking at us with the same look that the Cody gave us before it shot us. There was that familiar smell of fear that we had before we were shot the last time. We are quite certain we will never learn to enjoy being shot.

"What the hell are you on? Did that shit-for-brains Cody give you something? Tell me what's going on? Danny, did... did the aliens get you?"

We were tired of the You. The Danny Mother Thing seemed to be completely focused on the You, and not focused on us at all. In frustration, we made a bear noise, a nice loud bear noise. The mother-thing scampered back away from us and fell down over a soft-looking nest of some sort. It appeared to have flowers, but they were just images of flowers. Truly, it is hard to stay mad at these bipeds with all their clever creations. The mother-thing was on the floor screaming and wailing a mix of make-sense noises and no-point noises. We bent over it with one last bear noise as we breathed into the mother-thing, gray tendrils swirling out of our mouth and into its mouth and nose.

Once our multitudes were inside the mother-thing's mind we found thoughts about Danny, but also many thoughts about another squishy. This other squishy had the Danny eyes and was structurally pleasant. Unlike the Danny and the mother-thing, this one had long, dark hair that was shiny and healthy-looking. The mother-thing was kicking at us while we learned more about this long-haired squishy in its mind. It is called the

Dolores. The mother-thing doesn't care for the Dolores as much as the Danny.

All the thoughts of the Dolores were tainted by a sense of confusion. The Dolores seemed to be in a place far from here, with big, beautiful mountains and a good-sized forest of human-lairs. We concentrated hard on the Dolores and its vivid, fathomless blue eyes. The Dolores's eyes were unsettling in the mind of the mother-thing, but enlivening for us. We inhaled our multitudes back out of the mother-thing. It coughed chunks of blood all over the front of its lavender not-fur. It made a whole screed of mouth-noises, wailing at last, "Not Dolores, anything but my Dolores! Dear God, not Dolores!"

We dissipated into our multitudes and were gone, wondering if there is a Not-Dolores, or only the Dolores, wondering if the mother-thing thought we are the god.

We are not the god. But we would find the Dolores.

3 / THE COFFEE SHOP

AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, Dolores gave up on *Moby Dick*. She wanted to read it, she really did, but she'd also found it to be a particularly potent sleep-aid. Not so much on this creepy-crawly, paranoid early morning. So she got up and headed to the shower. She sneezed and had the briefest, most unsettling image of her mother coughing blood all over the light purple, super-plush bathrobe that she wore every time she was at home for more than five damn minutes. A few drops of blood suddenly dripped out of Dolores's nose onto her upper lip. She brushed at it, thinking it was just snot, but the vivid red gave her a start. She stepped into her square shower stall and watched her blood swirl around the drain as she mentally prepared to face another day of caffeine-addicted yuppies.

The watched feeling followed her onto her bike, but then suddenly stopped once she pulled up to Starbucks. She didn't know why it stopped, but it felt like she could breathe freely again. As she walked the twenty feet from the bike rack to the door she kept expecting to see whoever had their eyes crawling all over her. But she was alone in the silent mountain air, cold now that fall had settled in for the season. T-minus two months

to ski bums. Maybe someday she'd have enough money to try skiing.

She greeted Lane, her fellow opener. He was already inside and stocking everything. She set about brewing coffee. She knew the other three early shift workers would roll in one minute before six and they'd have three hours of chaos, then some of them would leave, but not her. She worked until two-thirty. She sighed and at five minutes to six, she stepped outside with a cup of tea and immediately felt the watched feeling again on every inch of bare skin. A drop of blood fell from her nose into her tea. "Oh come on, fucking seriously?" she hissed to herself. But she drank it anyway and wondered idly if that was a form of cannibalism.

She mostly forgot about her watched feeling as the day wore on, but it accompanied her home and all through the next night. Dolores got ahead of it this time though and drank several shots of vodka (leftover from Danny's last visit) at nine to put herself down for the night. Then she had the sudden realization that drinking to unconsciousness might be the sort of thing some creepy stalker waited for. But she was warm and snoozy from exhaustion and vodka so she shrugged to herself. She curled up in her bed and let sleep take her, certain that the feeling did not go away, even while she slept.

Dolores endured this bizarre stalked and touched feeling for almost two weeks before she decided she should probably try to find a psychiatrist who would see her out of the goodness of their heart. The problem was making an appointment. She knew her shifts about ten minutes before they started, so planning a doctor's appointment that wasn't a trip to CVS Minute-Clinic for a flu shot was impossible. So she did her best to

ignore the feeling, though she considered mentioning it to her coworkers. Since she never felt it in Starbucks, this seemed pointless. And while Dolores would very much enjoy having a close friend (who the hell was she kidding, any ol' level of friend would do), she did not have one. At least no one who rose above the level of acquaintance enough that they wouldn't immediately call the men in white coats if she confessed that she felt covered in dust with eyes whenever she wasn't in Starbucks.

Then one exhausted Tuesday, the day before her weekend, which she now dreaded thanks to that unsettling feeling, she made a friend. Although lately the watchedness had also taken a disturbing turn of feeling almost familiar to the point of being... pleasant. If that wasn't a sign of severe loneliness, she didn't know what was.

Dolores had opened the coffee shop that day, and that fucking chode, Chance, had made a clitoris-Dolores joke. Everyone who had ever even heard of Seinfeld had made that joke to Dolores at some point, and she har-harred in the obligatory fashion. She took her place at the cash register: the most dreaded of all her rotating duties. So many people, so many comments on how goddamn tall she was, so many idiots unable to figure out a chip reader or how to scan a goddamn phone. She'd managed to avoid it for two solid weeks because Shauna had broken her ankle and liked standing in one place, but there was no more avoiding it; Shauna had been rotated to the other Starbucks. Dolores was stuck at the register.

The first customer that day was a woman Dolores had never seen. Dolores greeted her with a grimace that tried hard, but not hard enough, to be a smile. The woman mimicked the

grimace so perfectly that Dolores laughed. The woman, who had beautiful grass-green eyes with thick black eyelashes and high cheekbones, laughed too, and it sounded eerily similar to her brother Danny's laugh. Dolores said, "What can I get for you on this fine morning?"

"We would like the brown hot coffee liquid."

Dolores burst out laughing again and the woman laughed, but this time it didn't seem like she meant to laugh. "So black, then?" Dolores tried to stifle the next impending burst of laughter.

"Brown."

"Nobody orders brown coffee. What does that even mean?" Dolores said, trying not to get snippy now that a line was forming behind the woman.

The woman looked truly perplexed. Dolores felt sorry for her; she was obviously foreign or mentally ill or had taken too many blows to the head. Her voice was strange: it was like someone had stirred several voices together, all nice, to make something new and vaguely inhuman, but still somehow pleasant. "We will have the typical thing," the woman said firmly.

Dolores tried to control the snort that came out of her. "Okay, I'll get you a coffee. That'll be two-twenty-five."

The woman furrowed her brow. "We are tired of the You. Coffee juice is what we asked about. Two-twenty-five what?"

Dolores took one look at the line behind the crazy lady and

closed out the transaction. She could pull it from the tip jar later. She quickly poured a coffee for Miss Pretty-But-Crazy. She handed it to the woman and their fingers brushed. Dolores gasped at the sense of déjà-vu and familiarity the brief touch caused. The woman's green eyes bored into Dolores' and she felt seen for the first time in her life. Like this woman really knew her, cared for her, like they had known each other always. Dolores shook her head. She turned to her next customer and tried to forget the odd connection she'd had with a certifiably insane person.

It turned out to be easy to forget the woman for the next two hours of caffeine rush hour. Dolores thought that people treated her pretty poorly for being their friendly neighborhood caffeine pusher. Didn't they know that she was the gatekeeper to the only thing that got them through their mornings? That she controlled an entire line-item on their monthly budgets?

She often considered subbing various nut milks to fuck with people, but decided the risk of some random customer having an almond allergy but not a damn cashew allergy wasn't worth the potential anaphylactic murder. She did occasionally indulge in giving assholes decaf, gleefully imagining them slouching through their mornings without the caffeine boost. By nine the tide of caffeine-seeking zombies had slowed to a trickle and she skipped out from behind the counter for her break. As she headed towards the exit she saw the crazy lady with the green eyes was not only still there, but reading a dictionary. An actual, factual English dictionary, not a translation dictionary. Dolores thought, *what the hell, a person like that can't exactly have their pick of friends*, and waved at the woman.

The woman looked all around before she mimicked the

wave back at Dolores. Maybe she was from some cult and this was her first time out of an underground bunker where she'd been held since birth. Dolores decided that story alone would be worth sacrificing her break. The woman's clothes were an odd mix. She wore a man's dress shirt that was very tight, and girlish skinny jeans. She wore flip-flops, which was also bizarre given that it was October which was straight up surprise blizzard season in Montana. Dolores gathered that the woman wore no bra since she had headlights that were set to bright. The woman had no jacket. Dolores went over to the table in the corner and was again met with the unbearable intensity of the strange woman's eyes. "I'm gesturing for you to come outside. Come on. I don't smoke, but in a wild moment of equality, even non-smokers get a smoke break now."

The woman's face was pure bafflement. But she stood up and smiled a real, radiant smile, not the mimic grimace. It looked a little like her facial muscles had just decided to do their own thing since mission-face-control was manned by a lunatic. The effect was immediately shattered as she said, "We go with it? With the Dolores?"

"Who the fuck was your English teacher? You've got to stop talking like that. Get outside before someone hears you."

"We hate the YOU!" the woman practically shouted.

Dolores hastily guided the woman outside by her elbow, noting that the woman hadn't touched her coffee. The woman also stared at Dolores's hand where it touched her, like she'd never experienced human touch. Dolores towered over her, the woman was only five-three or five-four, about the size of Dolores's mother.

“Why do you hate me?” Dolores whispered once she’d safely sequestered the mental patient now in her custody around the alley side of the building.

Cray-Cray, as Dolores thought of her, answered, “Not the Dolores. The You. All the humans talk about the You. Who is the You?”

Dolores tried to take in this gibberish and get to the potentially sane nugget at its core. The juxtaposition of pure whack-jobese with seemingly sane countenance made her suspect that this wasn’t just a case of escaped mental patient. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay. I’m Dolores, yes?”

“Yes, the Dolores.”

“Nope, just nope. Nobody is ‘the’ Name. Just Dolores.”

“Just Dolores.”

“So, who are you?”

“We are not the You!”

“No, everyone is a you. Not just,” she touched Cray-Cray lightly on the shoulder, “When I talk to that guy,” Dolores pointed at a random guy, “I would call him ‘you’ because I don’t know his name. What name is...” When Dolores couldn’t come up with an alternative for you, she gestured to Cray-Cray’s whole body. Then she gestured again to herself, saying, “Dolores.”

Understanding rippled across Cray-Cray's face like sunlight bursting out from behind thunderheads and her radiant smile replaced the scowl. Cray-Cray seemed only able to smile involuntarily, whenever she tried to smile, she looked terrifying, like she might bite your fingers off. "Ash. We are Ash."

"Ash is the name... people... call this human?" Dolores asked and waved at Cray-Cray/Ash, feeling ridiculous and also thankful that she knew how to wield a goddamn pronoun.

"Yes. Ash. We are Ash."

"Where are you from? You should say, 'I am Ash.' Unless you're a god."

The woman canted her head so far to the side she looked like some sort of owl and Dolores began to fear that Ash would somehow snap her own neck. So Dolores continued, "Say it: 'I am Ash. My name is Ash.'"

"No, we *are* Ash! Yes."

"Come on, this isn't that hard. Everyone is a you when someone else talks to them."

"Then we do not wish to speak to the You. The Dolores can speak to the You when we are not present."

Dolores wanted so badly to reply to this in a sarcastic and unkind way. Instead she took a deep breath and said, "The you is not a specific... human. You is a way to refer to anybody. I'm a

you, Ash is a you, that person is a you. Also stop saying 'the' in front of everything."

The woman's face was deep in thought. Then she nodded very slowly. "We can see how that could be the case."

"No, it is the case. I'm telling you. I don't know where the hell you're from, but trust me, I speak better English than you."

Ash still appeared angry about the way Dolores was dropping you's left and right, but her nostrils and upper lip just trembled like an animal restraining a growl. Then she put her head back on like someone who actually had neck bones and said, "The English is what the Dolores calls the mouth-noises?"

"What the hell are mouth--" but Dolores trailed off then continued, "Yeah, yeah. That's right. But words. We are saying words, but they happen to be in English, some people say words in other languages."

"We only say the word-noises in English. And sometimes in bear."

Dolores's eyes widened and she said, "Did you just say you speak bear?"

"Not all the bear word-noises."

"No. Words. Word. Not word-noises. But could we get back to that, don't tell people you speak bear, or they will lock your ass up."

Ash's head rolled to the side again and Dolores could not

resist the urge to stop her from going any farther by laying her hand against Ash's temple. Ash rubbed on her hand like a cat and Dolores yanked her hand away, alarmed by the déjà-vu-pleasant feel and then she felt her nose running. When she swiped it with her sleeve, she cursed. It was blood. Again. A shiver rippled over her. Ash said, "The Dolores is losing the blood-juice. Do not lose more. The Dolores needs the blood-juice. What is the ass? And where do they lock it? And who?"

Dolores rolled up her sleeve and reached in her pocket for a tissue. Ash ran her finger along the bridge of Dolores's nose and Dolores considered screaming. Somehow she held it in, but she could feel that in a true display of the craziest cray-cray of all, Ash had just stopped her nosebleed. Dolores wiped her nose and eyed Ash. She felt a little like Ash's eyes were bioluminescent: that was insane but so was a magic-nose-bleed-cessation-touch. Dolores said, after looking around to see if there were other people nearby, "It was metaphorical. That means I don't mean that anybody will actually put your ass," she pointed to Ash's ass, "anywhere. They'd put all of you, your whole body, in a jail cell or a mental institution."

Ash considered this for a long time. "Bipeds are confusing. We like the Dolores. We know it has to go back to the line of demanding squishy bipeds. Can the Dolores meet us later?"

Dolores glanced at her watch. Ash was correct, almost to the second, that her break was over, and that was pretty fucking weird too. Despite all the myriad forms of insanity Ash had displayed, Dolores kind of liked the weirdo. And it felt good to talk to someone who didn't think Dolores was the weird one. Plus she was curious about what the hell had made Ash so off. "Sure. I'll be done at three, you want to--"

Ash's nose and lip trembled again and she let out a growl that sounded so—god help her—bearish, that Dolores almost screamed. “We do. We will be back for the Dolores. Do not let the demanding bipeds make the Dolores sad.”

Dolores nodded and returned to the cash register, stopping to wash her hands. She felt a silly smile on her face and she managed to work the rest of her shift without letting the demanding bipeds make her sad.

Because at 3pm she had a friend-date. Well, a weird, bear-growling, strange-talking, head-tilting, potential friend-date.

4 / THE LEARNING

WE SPENT MORE time preparing to meet the Dolores. It was apparent after our interaction with the mother-thing that trying to mimic the Danny was not effective. The mother-thing seemed to sense that we were not the original Danny and it upset the mother-thing, so we were sure it would upset the Dolores. We decided to return to the form that we were when we met the Danny. It was a good we.

When we came to the Dolores, we stayed unmade to see what the Dolores did, how the Dolores lived. But we remade ourselves several times and breathed into other bipeds to see what we could learn. We learned the word for the hot brown juice that the Dolores was in charge of making and doling out to the other bipeds. The squishies are very particular about this juice. There is a type of not-nice-to-the-Dolores humans who don't put any shiny disks or green flaps in the clear-hard container that is labeled with TIPS and three dots above a curved line. The Dolores smiles when humans put these things in the container.

We breathed into one of this type, the Brad, and learned the

hot brown juice is called "coffee." Mostly we have focused on learning the system of symbols they use to indicate things to one another. It is a simple system and we are intelligent. Reading is what they call the deciphering of the symbols. They turn the mouth-noises into symbols. Elaborate and clever; the humans never let us down with their systems.

We had to learn on our own how to better make our multitudes learn when we breathe them into the squishy bipeds. Every time we breathe into a biped, we grow better at learning from their minds. But the squishies are feisty about us pillaging their memories. They are stingy and we are so hungry for knowledge to help us understand the Dolores. We know that breathing into them is not healthy for them since they all seem to cough up a fair amount of their blood-juice afterwards. We also learned to make our face different as the humans are very good at recognizing faces and we didn't want the face we show the Dolores to be a face that had made a different squishy biped cough up blood-juice. We suspect that the Dolores would not like us breathing into the other squishies. We do not want to breathe into the Dolores, because we do not want to hurt the Dolores.

We learned that we have to be careful how closely we watch the Dolores when we are unmade. It is sharper than many of the bipeds. It could sense us and it was uneasy. Then the Dolores accidentally breathed us and lost some blood-juice. But we learned we could fix it. We learn, yes, we are always learning. Once the Dolores was more at ease with our watching, we decided we were ready to remake ourselves in the Starbucks and we would interact with the Dolores as a biped. We are drawn to the Dolores; it is important to us that the Dolores wants to have us as a companion. We have noticed that most bipeds have a

herd that they adhere to, and we feel lucky that the Dolores does not already have a herd.

Some bipeds appear to mate for life, which startled us. We thought the humans divided to make offspring. They mate like many of the other creatures we observed before we formed our body. There are just so many, we assumed they were more similar to bacteria or algae, and we have never witnessed them mating. We breathed into the not-nice-to-the-Dolores-squishy twice, curious what it thought about having us breathe into it and it thought we were a disease. It thought we were plague and we were very insulted. We are no plague. We feel confident that the others will recover from being breathed into.

The Dolores yells at us, but it is nice yelling. We successfully interacted with it without breathing into it. We learned many things, even without our multitudes going into its mind. We like the Dolores. The Dolores likes us too, though the Dolores also seemed confused by this which made us feel a little sad. But we think that maybe the Dolores is in a state of high stress from the Starbucks.

The Dolores teaches us that we are the You. It is also the You. We are still working on not being enraged at the You. The You seems unavoidable. We also learned that the Dolores is the just Dolores, which appears to be the truth; we have not seen it perpetrate any injustices. This is also more evidence that there is a Not Dolores as well as the Just Dolores. It is the Only Dolores for us though.

The Dolores agreed to see us again. We knew from our observations and from listening to the English of the other humans in Starbucks that if we stay too long and watch the

Dolores too closely, we are creepy. We looked this up in our dictionary and it is not-nice. We do not wish to be creepy. Therefore we have to leave the Starbucks, despite wishing to stay with the Dolores. We decide that it is fine, we will change our face and find another biped to breathe our multitudes into.

We do not go back into the Starbucks with the Dolores. Instead we walk down the street and observe the different ways bipeds interact. We stop to look at a newspaper that a biped has left carelessly on the ground. We like the newspapers for context. We have discovered that bipeds expect each other to have a certain set of facts at hand. We ingest these facts by reading newspapers.

That is when we see that breathing our multitudes into squishy bipeds has been noticed. There is a small batch of the English words that indicates several bipeds are in a place called a hospital. This is a place of healing, but also of unmaking and virulent disease; for all their cleverness, humans are very easily unmade.

The humans indicated were continually coughing up blood-juice and had required a transfusion (the helpful article indicates that this is when one human gets blood-juice from a different human). We use our smile face when we see that the Brad is the only casualty. The Brad had been unmade despite several transfusions. Perhaps when it remakes itself, it will not engage in not-nice-to-the-Dolores behavior and it will put the requisite items in the place of Tips.

We put the newspaper in the proper receptacle, which we wish to tell all the squishies is not difficult. There are things everywhere on the streets and grass that are not in the proper

receptacle. The worst of these things is the special goop the bipeds use to lubricate their mouths and keep them from smelling foul. This goop sticks to our foot and is very stretchy. We learned from the goop that using bear-mouth-noises is unacceptable in groups of squishy bipeds. We then learned to run. We like running in this body, it feels like the correct use of the body, even though most of the squishies use their bodies to watch small screens instead of running. We feel like we could run forever in this bipedal form, though not as fast as when we unmake into our multitudes and travel.

We decide now to do some running while we wait for the Dolores to be done at the Starbucks. So many of the bipeds watch us that we are concerned we have not understood some custom surrounding running. We have seen bipeds running about, so we know it is not the running itself. After a mile (that is what they use to measure distance) we begin to see that all the biped faces are pointed at my foot-protector-flaps. After concentrating, we remember that the other running bipeds had different foot coverings than these open ones. We only wear these because we were denied entry and given many strange looks when we didn't wear foot things. Shoes is how the squishies refer to them. Perhaps shoes are a cornerstone of human social communication and thus we have not properly indicated our intention to run.

We run until we are not amongst so many bipeds, then we duck into a hidden place and we unmake ourselves. We will have to come back for our drapes and shoes. It is more relaxing for us to be unmade after a long stretch of being surrounded by droves of squishies. We are certain that the Dolores alone would not make us so tired.

We particularly enjoyed touching the Dolores. The Dolores

seemed to find it pleasant as well, but it also made face and smell indications that this was somehow unexpected or not acceptable. This is a mystery we will have to try to solve without breathing into the Dolores.

We consider drifting to a place where we can acquire new shoes, but we would have to procure new body drapes as well and we are already incensed that the humans seem to wear different drapes all the time. Clothes. We must remember this word. These are the telltale signs that make the bipeds uneasy with use. The clothes and the shoes make us frustrated and we wish to use bear noises. We did not tell the Dolores, but we also have dog noises and cat noises. Our multitudes did not explore those creatures, but we were able to learn from them simply by listening and mimicking them. We happen to be an excellent mimic when it comes to sounds. We find the human voice we created to be quite pleasant, but unique. There are many nice voices to mimic, but we like having a voice that is just for us, just for Ash.

We decide to go to the hospital and observe. We think breathing into someone close to the hospital might be too risky despite how curious we are about what the blood-juice-coughers have revealed about us. We are sad we left our dictionary at the Starbucks, but we have often recovered the dictionary when we leave it places. The humans do not seem to value the dictionary and it is always in the same location as where we left it.

Perhaps the devices they often attach to their hands and connect to their faces have information similar to the dictionary. We can sense the waves of information flowing in and out of the devices, but we can't imagine any better form of information than a dictionary. We think we might like to inspect a device

and see whether it could be a useful tool for our assimilation. We do so love to learn.

The Dolores has taught us much already. Perhaps we can persuade her to teach us more. Perhaps we will stay near her a very long time.

DOLORES SPENT the rest of her shift taking orders while she tried to process whatever the fuck had just happened with Ash. Ash did not have an accent, so it was unlikely she was learning English, but then again, the woman did ask questions about the most basic phrases. Dolores was shamefully unilingual, so she had no sense of what errors one might make while learning a new language. She “spoke” high school level Spanish, but she could see herself using incorrect pronouns left and right and probably driving some poor Spanish speaker to madness. It was her mission to learn where Ash was from when they met this evening.

She couldn't quite figure out why she had agreed to hang out with Ash. The woman was weird beyond even Dolores standards, yet Dolores was oddly drawn to this stranger who couldn't even order a coffee. Ash was attractive with her long, shiny blond hair and those unsettling green eyes. Her face was beautiful, but in an odd, cobbled together sort of way that would probably not register with the average passer-by. Dolores (*the Dolores*, she thought with a chuckle) found the strange woman intriguing. Maybe Ash's entire appeal was that she

could be a cure for the crushing loneliness, which was one thing Dolores imagined they had in common. Dolores could not, for the life of her, figure out why Ash lacked the ability to use the word “you” without losing her shit and roaring like a damn bear. What the hell had that been? Maybe she should not get involved with someone who could sound that much like a real bear. Maybe Ash had been part of some crazy, fucked up cult circus and she’d been housed with the bears. Though Ash didn’t have a scar on all that lovely golden skin. Her skin looked airbrushed, it was so flawless.

What seemed like the shortest shift ever was suddenly over and Rachel nudged her out of the way saying, “Go home, you look tired. It’s lucky you’ve got tomorrow off.”

Dolores nodded and pulled her green apron off, slinging it over her shoulder. She hadn’t exchanged numbers with Ash, so she wasn’t sure how they would get together. Then she saw the aforementioned weirdo stepping in to Starbucks and scanning the whole place with her laser eyes before they alighted on her abandoned dictionary. Ash grinned her real smile, not the grimace, and picked it up greedily. Then her eyes fell on Dolores and they glowed; now Dolores was certain of it. She was equally certain, and even more unsettled, that Ash was now a couple inches taller than the last time Dolores had seen her. She glanced at Ash’s shoes and saw the same out of season flip-flops, not high-heels. Ash’s shirt was buttoned incorrectly. Now Dolores really wanted to know what she’d been up to in the few hours they had been apart. Had Ash taken human growth hormone and had hurried sex?

“Hello the Dolores.”

A few customers turned and regarded Ash with curiosity. Ash's voice had an unnameable strange quality and her odd phrasing made her seem even more off. Dolores shepherded Ash outside and away from the general public. Ash was definitely taller, not tall like Dolores, but closer to five-six. What the hell was going on with this crazy person?

"I told you, just Dolores."

"Hello Just Dolores."

Dolores face-palmed and sighed, wondering why she agreed to undertake this inevitably confusing, irritating, but possibly amusing outing. She unlocked her bike and began walking it as Ash walked beside her. Ash stared at the bike like it was the eighth wonder of the world, but managed to keep her mouth shut. How could a bike so enrapture an adult? Dolores found that she was a little jealous of the joy Ash seemed to take from simple things, like the dictionary. Then the girl (woman? Dolores couldn't peg her age either) looked very thoroughly at Dolores's shoes and said, "Are those the Starbucks foot co—shoes?"

Dolores stopped and turned to Ash. "Dude, where are you from?"

Ash did her owl head cock and said, "Where are we from? Is that relevant to the Dolores's shoes?"

"No. But you act pretty weird. Like, super-duper special deluxe weird. If you keep talking like this, you're going to get yourself locked up or beat up and I don't want that to happen. How have you made it to adulthood like this?" Ash rotated her

head to the other side and Dolores continued, “And stop cocking your head to the side like that, you’re freaking me out.”

“Many mouth-noises still confuse us. We are learning.”

“Say, I am learning.”

“What is the I?”

“You are the I.”

“We still hate the You. We certainly don’t need the I.”

Dolores sighed and continued walking. “Just try to talk more like me, okay?”

Then she jumped away when Ash repeated the exact phrase in Dolores’s exact voice back to her. “What the fuck?” Dolores shrieked.

“What the fuck?” Ash shrieked back in Dolores’s voice with a giant, unabashed smile.

“Stop it! I didn’t mean in my voice. Say the words I say, but with your own voice. The Ash voice.” Dolores felt crazy that she thought she could translate things into gibberish. She felt more crazy that she had just heard her own voice come out of someone else’s mouth.

“The Dolores speaks a lot of this I. We do not wish to speak of the I and the You so much.”

“Fine. Come on, I’ll take you to my place where at least no one will hear you and your crazy talk and your mutant voice.”

“We have a mutant voice? Is our voice not-nice?”

Dolores felt her face contort in a facial rendition of *What the fuck?* “Ash, your voice is fine, it’s lovely. But it’s super freaky that you can mimic me so well. Most people can’t do that. It’s shocking.”

“We are excellent at mimicking sounds. We are perhaps better at mimicry than learning. We also enjoy mimicry.” Then the crazy-woman belted out a part of the song that had been on the radio before they had stepped out of Starbucks. She sounded exactly like Lady Gaga and Dolores felt her eyes grow wide. “Does the Dolores not like the mimicry all the time, or only when we make the Dolores sounds?”

“You can mimic stuff with me, but don’t do that around other people, you’ll get shot, or someone will call a priest.”

“We definitely do not enjoy being shot. What is a priest?”

Dolores chose to sail right past the fact that Ash seemed to have been shot at some point. “You know, guys in black with white collars that run the show in churches? The places with crosses on top. Not all of them, I guess priests are just Catholic. I think. My mom would know. But she’s evangelical, so priests are something she does not approve of. You never told me where you are from?”

“And the Dolores never told us if those are the Starbucks shoes.”

“You first.”

Ash growled a bearish growl. “Even if we sort of understand, we hate the You. We are from everywhere, but most recently we are from the cluster of human-boxes that they call the Bozeman.”

“Just Bozeman.”

“Just Bozeman. We are glad it is not unjust.” Ash grinned in a self-satisfied way. “Now tell us of the shoes.”

“Sure, yeah, these are Starbucks shoes,” Dolores answered with a glance down at her very worn Dr. Martens. At one point they had been covered in periwinkle velvet, but now the velvet was balding and the laces had broken off so many times that they were only laced up through the first four eyelets on each side. The boots were another ancient gift from Danny. Was there anything nice in her life that wasn't a gift from Danny?

Ash seemed pleased by this answer. “We like to run, but the other humans look at our foot clothes strangely. Does the Dolores know if these are not the foot items for running?”

Dolores wondered if she should be worried that she was getting pretty fluent in whack-job-gibberish. “Yeah, people are definitely going to look at you askance if you're running in flip-flops. Were you just out running? Is that why your shirt is messed up? Why are you wearing flip-flops when it's this cold out anyway? And do you have a jacket? Are you homeless?”

Ash started to rotate her head again but aborted midway,

making her look even stranger than her full horror-movie head cock. Dolores stopped and leaned her bike against herself to gently adjust Ash's head. Ash grimaced in such a way that Dolores assumed it was supposed to be a smile. Then Ash responded, "We did run. We love to run fast, it is refreshing. Can the Dolores show us the proper shoes for running? We are cold, we wish we had nice fur like the other animals. What is a jacket? What is a homeless?"

Dolores plucked at her own sweatshirt, not a true jacket, but she was used to cold weather. She was hoping her mom would send her money for Christmas because her zipper on her winter jacket tore off in such a way that the down had started to spill out of it. There was no mending it this time. "A jacket is another layer of clothes you wear to stay warm. You might be in Bozeman now, but you are not from here, anybody can see that. Homeless is kind of obvious, it means you don't have a home, you know a place to live, shelter."

Ash's bioluminescent eyes flashed as she turned to Dolores and said so happily it took Dolores a minute to process the actual words, "Yes! We are homeless! We are free to go where we please. We do not have a jacket, but we see the value in having a jacket. Does the Dolores have a shelter?"

Dolores nodded and answered, "I do have a home, but it's small and it's been weird there lately."

"Does the Dolores think the weird is not-nice?"

Dolores turned to her insane, but only, friend and said, "I don't know. I guess I can be honest with you because you don't seem to have a full deck anyway, and honestly, who would even

listen to anything you say. Lately, at my house I've felt like someone is watching me all the time. The only time it abates is when I'm at work, which is pretty lame, because I'd like to not feel that way at home."

Ash's eyes darted back and forth on the ground and her expression was one of deep contemplation and sorrow, as if she was torn about something existential. Then she spoke softly. "Maybe we can fix the watching. We do not wish for the Dolores to feel lame." She stared at Dolores to see what Dolores thought of this. She must've seen something on Dolores's face that made her continue, "Perhaps if the Dolores had another squishy biped in her lair, the watcher would go away. Does the Dolores have another squishy that could come to her human-box? Or does the Dolores only have us?"

"You mean a person? A human?"

"Yes, that is what we have heard the bipeds called."

Dolores almost burst into tears when her social life was framed in such a way. She truly didn't have another human, just Ash. Rather than spiral into that depressing cesspit, Dolores said, "Just Ash. Do you have another human, Ash? Or just me?"

"Just the Dolores. We tried to have other bipeds and they rejected us. It is fine, many squishy bipeds are not-nice." Dolores tried not to laugh at the way Ash made not nice into one fluid word: *notnice*.

Dolores knew personally that there were worse things than having just one human, so she said, "Well, Ash, even though

you're weird as fuck, you can come to my lair. I love how you say that without even a trace of irony or fear or whatever. You're a crazy bitch, but I guess you're my crazy bitch."

Ash's bright smile spread across her face and she said, in her own layered voice, "The Dolores is my crazy bitch as well." And they laughed together.

They walked the rest of the way to Dolores' house with Ash asking bizarre questions while Dolores corrected her equally bizarre syntax and phrasing. As she unlocked her door, Dolores briefly considered the fact that Ash might be dangerous.

6 / THE DOLORES'S LAIR

DOLORES COULDN'T ACTUALLY IMAGINE Ash hurting anyone (except maybe The You), or at least not without asking them a series of extremely obvious questions first: *Does the Dolores die when we put an axe in its head? Does the Dolores have the ability to metabolize the powder that the other humans use to kill the quadrupeds? Does the Dolores have any other humans?* Ash asked questions like those, but there was nothing menacing about the way Ash asked whether they were friends. It was sweet and vulnerable in a way that no one had ever been with Dolores.

Given Ash's strange curiosity about basic things, she expected her crazy new companion to walk through the house investigating everything and asking her a billion questions. But Ash went straight to Dolores's worn velvet couch as if she'd been in Dolores's lair a thousand times. Dolores had seen the couch in a thrift shop and it matched her boots so perfectly, she bought it despite the musty smell—plus you couldn't go wrong with a fifteen dollar couch. Dolores flopped next to Ash, kicked her boots off, and reclined. Ash's face was pure delight, like she'd never sat on a couch, let alone next to another person

before. The strange woman said, “This is a nice nesting item. It provides our squishiness with a nice feeling.”

Dolores chuckled, “Yeah, couches are great for squishiness. Home sweet home.”

Ash’s brilliant eyes blinked twice, and as with so many things about Ash, it wasn’t quite normal, it was an approximation of normal. “Is the Dolores’s home sweeter than other lairs? We have only seen the inside of a few box-shelters.” Ash sniffed dramatically and scrunched up her nose before continuing, “We smell many different things, but the only sweet comes from the clear-hard container filled with the colorful wax.”

“Do you mean a candle? Home sweet home is just a phrase. It just means that it’s my home and I guess it’s better than not having a home.”

“Do the bipeds not feel vulnerable to attack when they settle in the same shelters night after night? It is very predictable behavior.”

Dolores took a long breath and watched Ash as she unpacked that one. “No, not in a civilized society. People don’t run around attacking one another and most animals can’t get into houses. Most people feel secure in their houses. It’s like the only safe place.”

“Squishy bipeds do run around attacking each other. We see it in the newspapers and we saw it when we got shot.”

“You keep mentioning that you got shot. Who shot you? And where?”

“The Cody shot us. Twice. It was not-nice.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, did he go to jail?”

“We do not know what the jail is. We unmade ourselves and then remade ourselves, so we do not know what happened to the Cody. We do not like the Cody and we do not like being shot. But we are fine now, the Dolores does not need to feel sad.”

Dolores gaped at Ash and desperately wanted to see the scars. But she realized that might be overstepping the boundaries of such a new friendship, so she restrained to urge to press further. She imagined that it was a huge trauma, probably an abusive boyfriend, and that would explain why Ash was homeless if she'd fled after being shot and “remade” herself. Maybe a long series of concussions also explained her linguistic shortcomings. Or maybe she'd been shot in the head. Dolores said, “Well, that is some crazy shit. I hope you never get shot again. What do you want to do the rest of the afternoon? I'm basically broke, so it needs to be free.”

Ash's face crumpled a little and she furtively looked in her dictionary. Then she responded with jubilation, “We are free!”

Dolores cocked her own head at this and said, “How do you feel about MarioKart?” The blank look on Ash's face told Dolores all she needed to know. “You know what, never mind. I'm gonna show you how to play MarioKart. But first I'm going to see if I have any food left in my kitchen. You hungry?”

Ash smiled placidly and said, “We are never hungry.”

“I guess that’s good if you’re homeless.” As Dolores strolled into the kitchen, she realized that Ash had been right, she no longer had the watched feeling she’d had constantly in her house recently. She felt strangely at ease with her new weirdo, like they’d known each other in a past life or something. She felt like Ash really knew her, even though Ash didn’t seem to know even the most basic things about anything. Dolores peeled a couple clementines and put the sections in a bowl. Then she bent into her fridge for a Dr. Pepper (well, knock-off, cheaper Mr. Pizazz: she felt a strange kinship with this failure of a soda with no advanced degree).

She turned around, headed back toward her guest, and saw Ash sitting, again raptly scanning through the dictionary like it had the answers to the meaning of life. Dolores supposed if a person spoke like Ash, maybe the dictionary *did* have all the answers. Dolores shook her head and rejoined Ash on the couch and leaned forward to grab the controls for her Nintendo Switch.

“Let’s play some MarioKart, my weird friend. I’ll teach you how, though I hope you’re better at gaming than you are at pronouns.”

“Why would we be against nouns?”

Dolores burst out laughing and handed Ash the control, shaking her head. “Let’s see if you can learn the function of a couple buttons and a joystick.”

“We do like to learn. We like joy. And we like sticks. We will probably enjoy the MarioKart.”

Dolores found that playing MarioKart with Ash did bring her joy. She thought maybe four or five years earlier she might've been ashamed to be friends with someone so unabashedly different and strange. Now Dolores could see that Ash was just what she needed at this point in her life. The woman seemed equally delighted to have found Dolores, like all she ever wanted was what she already had: just Dolores. It was nice to be enough for someone.

Between levels, Dolores glanced at the control she held and the one Ash held. One control was very worn, the other had not been touched. This was another present from Danny and she suddenly missed him sharply. He'd been all she had for so long, until he'd left like everyone else to go north to the oil fields. He made good money, but the last time she'd talked to him, things were collapsing up there and the company he worked for was trying to hush up some minor environmental catastrophe. She looked at her phone and realized she hadn't heard from him in several weeks. That was unusual, so she shot him a quick text.

Ash leaned and rudely peered over Dolores's shoulder while she typed. Ash asked, with none of her typically effervescent curiosity, "Who is the Danny?"

"He's my older brother. I just realized that I haven't heard from him in weeks. We usually talk pretty often, at least once a week." Dolores was fixated on her phone, but when she looked up after sending the text, Ash's face was, well, ashen.

"Does the Dolores come from the same mother-thing the Danny came from?"

Dolores raised one eyebrow and nodded slowly, “Yeah, the Dolores does. We do have a different dad-thing though. Our mom was not particularly easy to live with.”

Ash’s eyes darted around and she was breathing faster. Dolores couldn’t even begin to fathom what part of this was confusing or upsetting for Ash. It was as if Ash were elsewhere, reliving some type of PTSD (Cody?), looking out for threats. Her chest rose and fell so heavily that Dolores reached out and put a hand on her arm. “Ash? Ash, it’s ok. You’re safe.”

But Ash seemed oblivious to her. Her green eyes were brighter than usual and seemed to be avoiding looking at Dolores. Maybe it had something to do with Ash’s own mother or father? Come to think of it, she never spoke of them.

Now Dolores was starting to feel panicky. She glanced at the door, as if whatever it was from Ash’s past might come smashing through it to attack them both.

7 / FIXING THE DANNY

WE DO NOT WISH for the Dolores to be sad. We underestimated the connection between bipeds that are very far apart and now we see that it might jeopardize our new connection with the Dolores.

The Dolores is very perceptive. She noticed our distress about this discovery and we had to work quickly to calm out multitudes and say calm ordinary things like, "We are sorry the Dolores misses the Danny. We hope the Dolores hears from him very soon."

We must fix this. And we will. The Dolores is the only biped we care about, but before we played with the sticks of joy and the MarioKart, we realized that the Danny, not us, is the most important thing to the Dolores. We could feel her distress about the Danny's absence and we fear that the Danny didn't remake itself. If the Danny is not remade, the Dolores might be very sad. After our encounter with the mother-thing, we wanted the Dolores all to ourselves and it seemed that we were well positioned since the Dolores hasn't aligned itself with a pack in the

Bozeman. But we were surprised by our own feelings of sorrow when the Dolores felt sad.

We grin to ourselves in the darkness; it is a thing that happens to our face when we feel joy. We laid on the couch thing after the Dolores suggested that we could “crash” in its lair. The Dolores is very concerned about the homeless. We are very concerned about the Dolores being in one place over and over. But we will stay with the Dolores. We will keep the Dolores safe. No one will unmake the Dolores. Just Dolores. Our Dolores.

After roaming around, guarding the Dolores for a couple hours, the Dolores yells at us, but is a nice yell. It tells us to knock it off and go to sleep. Since we don't know what to knock off or where the sleep is located, we settle onto the couch until the Dolores rises from her nest. We try not to be hurt that we were not invited into the obviously cozier and roomier nest that the Dolores uses in the other compartment of her shelter. We hear the Dolores rise and go into the smallest section of its lair and we hear noises that are different than mouth-noises. In our watching, we discovered something strange happens in this room, but now is our chance to have answers.

We open the door to the small place. The Dolores is not in its drapes. It is often naked after being in its boxy nest. It sits on a special seat filled with water. The Dolores also emits water, but nitrogen smelling water. Then it emits a long string of no-point noises, frantically waving one arm at us and covering its udders with the other. We ignore the Dolores. “What is the Dolores doing?”

“I was hoping to take a shit, until you scared me so much

that it probably crawled back into my small intestine! Get the fuck out, Ash! What is wrong with you?"

"We are fine. Is the Dolores fine? The Dolores does not smell healthy. What were the noises?"

"Get out of my bathroom, Ash! We're not ten-year-olds! We don't go to the damn bathroom together."

We note that the large white trough must be a bath if this is a bathroom. The bipeds must groom themselves with the silver part that spouts water. They have perfectly serviceable tongues and live in social groups, so we question why this structure is necessary, but we suspect this is another elaborate system that the bipeds have created to support their vast numbers. The Dolores is still shouting while we inspect the bathroom. We recall this smell happening when we breathed into some squishy bipeds. Foul smells were rare, but a sharp, eye-watering nitrogen smells, the waste-water smell, is common. We suddenly realize they are fear smells.

"Is the Dolores scared? We will protect the Dolores."

Then the Dolores is pushing us out of the bathroom. We like it when the Dolores touches us and we wish we were naked too so more of our flesh would be pressed against its flesh. We tell the Dolores again not to be afraid. The Dolores assures us it is not afraid but that it will kill us if we don't go away. We know that the killing is a kind of unmaking and we feel hurt that the Dolores would kill us for investigating her fear-stink-making. But we suppose the squishies have rules about how other humans must act in their lairs (like the no-Ash-in-the-nest rule)

and since we haven't had any opportunities to observe another biped in Dolores's lair, we may have miscalculated.

In our bathroom exile, we decide to go fix the Danny. We suspect from the newspaper that the coughing of the blood-juice is not sustainable long-term for the humans. Since we have breathed into the Danny, we can visit it instantly whenever we wish. We decide that going while the Dolores is still in the small room is the simplest; we suspect that the Dolores would yell about it if we unmade ourselves in front of it.

We swirl up and out of the human box and over the low skyline of human lairs that make up the Bozeman and we head toward the sun, over the high, jagged mountains and across wide swaths of land that remain mostly uninfested by bipeds, except the long, slender paths they create for their rolling exoskeletons. We make it to the Danny in seconds.

We find the Danny in its lair, not in the place where the Cody unmade the bear. The Danny coughs red-blood juice. We suspect it didn't go to a healing place. The healing places are far away from its shelter. The Danny looks like it doesn't know how to remake itself properly. The Danny is pale and much thinner than when we breathed our multitudes into it and learned about the mother-thing, which led us to the Dolores.

We almost remake in our Ash form, but we stop. The squishies are especially adept at identifying and remembering other human faces. We have not yet mastered this skill, but we also fear that the Danny might be able to describe us to the Dolores. We are sure this will make The Dolores feel upset, so we must not look like we do with Dolores.

We saw a picture of a healer in the newspaper. It wore a white body drape, but we do not feel like trying to find drapes. We will make our face like the healer. We swirl back into a mostly hairless bipedal form and watch the Danny. It has its eyes closed and it breathes in a ragged, wet way that is not typical of terrestrial animals. We want to touch our flesh to the Danny's, which would be easy since it wears only a small piece of cloth covering the small appendage that it keeps between its legs. We want to know if it would feel nice to touch it, like it feels nice to touch the Dolores, or whether it would feel not-nice.

The Danny is in his lair resting on its nest. It is surrounded by white items clotted with dried blood-juice. We know we were almost too late. We are afraid. The Dolores also only lost a tiny amount of itself when it inhaled and expelled us accidentally. When we first touched the Dolores, we wanted desperately to breathe into the Dolores, we wanted to know all of the Dolores, to be inside the Dolores, but we also did not want to hurt the Dolores, so we will never breathe into the Dolores. But we almost did. We were tempted.

We think about the way the Dolores feels about the Danny and now we will touch the Danny and try to fix it. We focus on how we fixed the Dolores after its snout leaked the blood-juice. Then we place our hand over the face of the Danny and it gasps. A great spray of blood-juice spatters our hand and face and we close our eyes and concentrate. We can feel the cough spiraling up into our hand and along our veins. It breathes deeply and drily for the first time since we breathed into it near the bear. We do not like this. We can feel a bit of learning slipping away, some part of what we took from it, it regains. We didn't lose the Dolores though, so even though we are tired and weak and

miserable, we are still have the Dolores. And it still has the Danny, so it won't be sad.

Its eyes fly open and when they meet our eyes, we suddenly remember to change them. Squishies fixate on eyes. We had our Ash eyes in the wrong face. Now we have different eyes. The Danny screams a no-point noise and swats our hand away in a not-nice way considering that we just saved it from imminent unmaking. Then it jumps to its feet and grabs us before shouting about the You again.

The You is everywhere, we cannot escape it. We feel relief that we are done here and we unmake ourselves in the Danny's grasp and watch it fall to its knees and stare at its hands, making horrible sob noises. We will return to the Bozeman. To the Dolores. It will not be sad about the Danny anymore. When we acquire the new drapes for the day, we will also acquire the running foot things. The running shoes.

8 / THE PILE OF DRAPES

DOLORES EMERGED SEETHING from the bathroom after taking the most high-strung shower anyone outside the Alien franchise had ever taken. Where the hell was that bathroom-barging idiot? What had Dolores been thinking letting a homeless person she just met stay in her house?

She didn't immediately see Ash, so she ducked into her bedroom to dress before doing a more thorough search. But when she came out riled up and ready to put that crazy woman in her place, there was no one. Just Dolores. The house was empty. Dolores noticed with relief that the watched-ness was also gone, so that was an improvement, and if Ash's voodoo psychosis scared it away, that was fine with Dolores.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and texted Danny again: *dude, i'm worried about you, would you please just text me that you're okay?*

She was about to go into her kitchen to make sure Ash wasn't bathing in the sink or something equally weird when she stopped short. There, next to the couch, was a small, deflated-

looking pile of clothes. It wasn't the way a person took clothes off and cast them aside. The flip-flops were there, the pants crumpled on top like they had fallen down Ash's legs, and the shirt emptied in the same manner on top.

Dolores looked around and then warily nudged the clothes with her toe, fearing that it would either pop-up like some kind of Ash bouncy-house or be covered in some cytoplasmic alien goo. But it was just an empty pile of clothes. Dolores wasn't sure why it surprised her that Ash would take her clothes off in a weird way. Everything about Ash was weird.

She proceeded into the kitchenette and boiled water for instant oatmeal and a cup of tea, the breakfast of bland British champions. Then she poked around the house more: if Ash's clothes were on the floor, Ash had either stolen some of Dolores's clothes, or she was galavanting around naked. Dolores felt fairly certain that the second option was the correct one. If Ash had gone in her bedroom it would have been with a series of oddly phrased, inscrutable questions.

She ate quickly and as she drank her tea, she finished checking the dank, tiny cellar and behind the lattice on the sides of her front steps. She had feared she would find Ash taking a dump in her tiny excuse for a yard, given that the woman seemed completely unfamiliar with the concept of a bathroom. Or privacy. Or sanity.

What the hell kind of houseguest just disappeared buck-ass naked from their host's house? Who left a pile of laundry as a thank you? It was infuriating. Dolores felt weird just leaving, but she felt equally weird waiting around for a homeless crazy

person to return for her abandoned clothes. What the actual fuck?

With a growl, Dolores threw on her heaviest hoodie, wrote a note with directions to the library on the front door, and moved the shed pile of Ash's clothes to the rickety porch swing. Then she pulled her bike out of her tiny entryway and headed to the library to do a little poking around on the internet. She thought if nothing else, she could look up some services to help Ash get back on her feet.

Her irritation had subsided by the time she arrived at the library. She'd just settled into a chair and was scanning a front page news article about some new disease that was making people cough up blood when her phone chimed. A woman old enough to live in a mausoleum shot Dolores a look and Dolores rolled her eyes and stepped outside. Once she was out in the cool, silent, pre-snow air, she looked at her phone.

It was Danny: *can you talk?*

Dolores immediately called him. She usually made fun of him for using a phone as an actual phone, but she was secretly grateful to hear his voice at least once a week. It took the edge off her loneliness. "Danny! What the hell? I haven't heard from you in weeks!"

He let out a barking cough and Dolores's mind flitted to the article about the blood-coughing sickness. "I know, I'm sorry. I got super sick and things have been weird as fuck up here. A guy that I work with did something super fucked up a couple weeks ago, and then I've been completely out of it until this morning. Then..." Dolores waited and fear filled her, though

she couldn't say why. "Then I just got better today. This morning. Weird, huh? But I'm sorry. How're things? You made any progress on the university stuff?"

"Not this year. Next fall. How's the job? Still in existence?"

"Yeah, thankfully I got sick on my weeks off. I did have to call in sick yesterday and today, but I can go back tomorrow, which is great, because they are axing everybody. But hey, I wanted to ask you if you've heard from Mom at all?"

"No, but I never fucking hear from Mom, not that I'm complaining."

"Don't be a douche; she's your mother. But seriously, I haven't heard anything from her since I got sick. I even tried to call her when I got sick to see if she was--" Danny hesitated and Dolores had the distinct impression that there was something Danny wasn't telling her. "To, uh, see if she'd come up and take care of me, you know?"

"I think you know I don't."

"Look, Lorri, I'm not trying to chap your hide, I'm just worried. She's supposed to be on oxygen all the time now, but she won't wear it because she says the Lord will provide her with oxygen if she needs it."

Dolores rolled her eyes so hard she thought they might get stuck. "Why don't you just head down there on your next break if you're so worried about her. Isn't she picking up her damn landline?"

She could almost hear Danny's smirk as he replied, "You could meet me there for a visit. I heard that Colt is back in town and freshly divorced, probably lonely, and I bet he's still the only boy you've ever liked that's been taller than you."

"You can just shove it, you bastard. I never should've told you about him. I'm over it and I don't care that he married that short little twit."

"Maybe if you hadn't run off without saying goodbye..."

"I better go, I'm at the library."

"Oh come on, don't be like that. I'm sorry, I'm sorry--"

She interrupted him, "And how's your little pet project? What was her name again? Brittany? The cute ones are always Brittanies."

"Nothing doing. Brianne, not Brittany. She hated it up here and I still have a job, so here I am, but she's gone."

"Are you just going to waste your entire life up there in that STD-filled, mining town? Are there even any women up there?"

"Maybe you should come up to the sausage festival and you'd be less lonely, huh?"

Dolores laughed and said, "Actually, hold on to your hat, because I think I made a friend."

"A special friend?"

“Nope, just the regular kind.”

“Well, I guess that’s something. Who’s this new friend?”

“Her name is Ash.” Danny started hacking and wheezing again. Dolores continued, “You sound like crap. But I guess I’ll take your word that you’re doing better. Anyway, she came into work yesterday and she’s on the run from an abusive boyfriend or something. He fucking shot her! Can you believe that? Anyway, she’s weird as fuck, but also pretty entertaining. I don’t know, we just kind of clicked. She hung out last night and played MarioKart with me. Then she bailed this morning, so maybe it was the friend equivalent of a one night stand, but it was nice to have someone. Especially since my brother abandoned me for weeks on end.”

“You do need more friends if a phone call with your old man brother is your social life. You said her name is Ash? That’s kind of a weird name.” Dolores thought Danny sounded unfairly suspicious of the first friend she’d made since... well, maybe ever. “What’s she look like? Is she from there?”

“She said she’s from all over. She’s in a rough patch right now--”

“What do you mean she bailed? Did you let some rando stay with you?”

“Well, yeah, but--”

“Jesus, Lorri, you can’t do shit like that! What if she slit your throat or did something even more fucked up?” Dolores

again felt her sibling-feeling-radar pinging with unsaid words. What the hell was really going on with Danny?

“She doesn’t have a place to crash right now, okay? And she’s a little socially challenged. But she wouldn’t hurt anyone. She’s sweet, in a lost cat kind of way.”

“Lost cats often have rabies.”

“She’s not *rabid*, you ass. Maybe brain-damaged, but not rabid.”

“Have you even taken her to a vet yet?” Danny said and Dolores was relieved to hear him chuckle as he asked this. “Look, though, I mean it, you need to be careful. I know you’ve been having a hard time down there in the banana belt and you’re super depressed, which I know will get worse as winter settles in—don’t interrupt me, I can sense it—but don’t let that make you stupid. Maybe I can come down for Thanksgiving. Is Ash hot?”

“She kinda is,” Dolores answered, chuckling, “I actually can’t wait for you to meet her. She’s a trip.”

With a little more chatter, they got off the phone, but Dolores could feel his reluctance. She hoped it was only his own loneliness that made him sound so forlorn, and not something worse. She called her mother’s landline, but there was no answer. Then she tried her cell, but it went straight to her voicemail, which was not unusual as her mother tended to keep it off to conserve the battery. Her mother only used her cell phone for long distance calls, and refused to text because somehow it had something to do with the devil. Or millennials

ruining everything. Dolores found it hard to keep track since millennials or the devil seemed to be to blame for nearly every ill that befell the world.

Then she ducked back into the library and finished reading the article about the terrible new blood-coughing pneumonia or whatever it was. The CDC had been notified, but there'd been twelve cases and only one death, so they hadn't declared any sort of emergency yet. Dolores thought again of Danny's cough and felt her skin prickle up into goosebumps.

Then she saw a picture of the man who had died and realized that it was a Starbucks' customer, one of her regulars. Her hand flew to her mouth. He came in every weekday morning, and he was a raging asshole, but he hadn't been in the previous two mornings. She assumed that he'd been traveling for work. She wanted to cry and, more selfishly, slather her entire body in hand sanitizer. She gave an experimental cough into her hand, looking for blood, finding none. She thought back to the strange bloody noses she had during her encounter with Ash. What if the new illness wasn't flu, but ebola? Or Andromeda Strain?

Her morbid curiosity got her thinking about real disease outbreaks, and she got on one of the library computers to research the CDC's protocols for dealing with new contagion. She dreamed of working at a place like the CDC. She suspected it wasn't nearly as exciting as it appeared in disease-porn oldies like *Outbreak* or *28 Days Later*, but she didn't care. They did have an internship program, but you had to be in college and working toward your degree. Which hopefully she would be soon.

After a furtive look around to make sure Ash wasn't

slinking around the library, she also started poking around to see if she could figure out what sort of disorder Ash had. Dolores researched stroke symptoms on language centers, schizophrenia, even how different people learned language, but she couldn't quite pin down what Ash's exact pathology was. The longer the day went on, the more Ash began to seem like a figment of Dolores's lonely imagination.

She wished she'd kept the molted clothes in the house as proof that Ash had been there at all. An Ash chrysalis. Maybe Ash was super weird because she was just a cobbled together creation of Dolores's own socially desperate mind. She could almost see her coworkers' sad head shakes as Dolores carried out an animated conversation with nothing in the alley.

Her fears were allayed when she arrived home to find both her note and the sad pile of clothing still very much on her steps, but no naked Ash anywhere inside or out. Dolores no longer felt angry or confused; she felt worried. Ash was her only human, her crazy bitch, and she had gotten attached in a very short period of time. Dolores was like an orphan duckling: she'd just imprinted on Ash, and there was no fixing it, no matter the level of crazy. She wished desperately that Ash had given her a phone number, but now that she thought about it, Ash hadn't had a phone, or a wallet, bulging in her pockets. And now Ash didn't even have the proverbial or literal shirt on her back. Dolores noticed that there were no underwear in the pile. She supposed clean undies would be the least of your worries if you were on the run from a guy who shot you. Twice.

She made herself a quick lunch of apple slices dipped in peanut butter before hopping back on her bike. She had sworn that she would never be one of those baristas that hung out in

their coffee shops on their days off, but all the people she knew, all her almost-but-not-quite friends, were fellow Starbucks drones. Today she wanted to see if Ash was there, awkwardly (and nakedly) trying her hand at ordering coffee again.

But Ash wasn't there. Dolores breathed a long sigh of relief that Lane and Rachel were the only two working at this sleepy afternoon hour. Lane and Rachel were both kind to Dolores and neither tried to hit on her, or constantly commented on her size, or made clitoris jokes. They were both enrolled part-time at MSU. Rachel was raising her brother's two-year-old while he did a stint in prison after nearly blowing himself up cooking meth in an abandoned trailer. Dolores babysat for Rachel occasionally and she had hoped that she and Rachel would become friends, but Rachel's life was bursting at the seams with no room for Dolores.

She sidled up to Rachel and said quietly, "Hey, did you happen to see the chick I left here with yesterday?" Rachel shook her head so Dolores continued, "She's about your height, well, maybe, but she has long straight blonde hair and really vivid green eyes."

Lane crept over and joined the conversation. He whispered dramatically, "I saw her. She was pretty hot, but weird. Like, really weird."

"That's an understatement. Have you seen her today?"

"Nah, I just saw you talking to her yesterday and saw you leave with her."

Dolores now found herself in the position of needing to

explain why she was asking about the strange woman. Both her coworkers stared at her, waiting for more information. She stumbled over her words, “We, uh, I just, oh. I was supposed to meet up with her today, but she wasn’t there and I thought maybe she came here. Anyway, if you see her, will you tell her to come by my place?”

“Can do,” Lane said with a lopsided grin. Dolores thought Lane was cute. He was about eight inches shorter than her, and while she didn’t particularly care, she knew from the way his eyes skimmed past her that Dolores had never even registered as a sexual prospect for Lane. The only Starbucks drone who was close to Dolores’s height was Chance, who she hated with a bright fury. He made comments constantly about his desire to explore and conquer the Amazon, always with a wink and a skin-crawling look up and down Dolores’s body.

She thanked Lane and Rachel and stepped outside into air that bit into her skin. The first tiny bits of snow were spitting out of the heavy layer of gray clouds that had settled on the valley, blocking the mountains and the sun.

Dolores felt sick with worry over her naked and unshod new friend, possibly lost and undoubtedly being weird enough that she might well end up in jail or on a psych hold at the ER. *Ash, where are you?*

9 / SKY ICE BITS

SNOW IS the mouth-noise the bipeds use for the sky ice bits. We unmade ourselves again after we discovered how they bite into our soft, pointless hide. We consider giving our squishy, clawless body a nice pelt like the bear, but we suspect this would make the other bipeds upset. For creatures that regularly do all manner of unnatural things, they are easy to distress when we improve on their suboptimal bodies.

It is nice that the Dolores is not so easy to distress and that it is mostly nice even then. Now we must acquire the special jacket thing that the Dolores spoke of for fighting the biting ice.

We remake ourselves in the lair of the Brad, the squishy that we breathed into twice and unmade. We prowl through the place. We learned that it doesn't have any companions of its own. It was All Alone in its mind. We are almost sorry for it when we see an image of a pleasant looking biped with this one hanging on the wall near its nest. There are many such images around the lair and we wonder if the companion was also unmade leaving the Brad All Alone.

We are not All Alone. We have the Dolores.

In its nesting chamber we find that it has a whole large subchamber filled with biped drapes. Many of the drapes are now in boxes, but we easily find a set that we can adjust ourselves to fit. We like these round-hard closures. Buttons? Yes. Buttons. We like the buttons. We find a set of the shoes that seem to approximate the running foot covers we have spied on other humans slogging around pretending to run. We put our feet in them but are perplexed by the long strings that criss-cross up the shoe and dangle on either side. We will ask the Dolores. Or maybe we will watch the running ones. We do not want the Dolores to think we are stupid. We are not stupid, but we have much to learn.

We put several layers of drapes on in addition to the shoes for running. We find no jacket in the drape chamber. We poke around the rest of the den and at last find a whole secret stash of the jackets behind a door. We feel the smile happen again: clever bipeds, hiding their valuable jackets. Perhaps their decision to stay in the same shelter again and again is not so dangerous. We shrug on a jacket and now we are oozing moisture from our entirely hairless hide. We do that when we run too. We hurry out into the swirling snows.

The snows are now clustered on the ground in tiny piles at the base of all the many things the bipeds construct everywhere. Now the Dolores will not have the sad, want-to-fix-it look on its face. It is nice that the Dolores wants to help its crazy bitch. But its crazy bitch does not need help.

Now that we have the correct foot covers, we run, but the other squishies stare at us still, even though most of the silly

bipeds have their heads down and burrowed into their jackets and hands stuffed into the side slits of the jackets. We hate the strings - they keep tripping us - but then we see the elaborate twisting the other bipeds have in their shoe strings (the Dolores must have cut off the dangling part of its shoe strings: our clever, crazy bitch). We practice the twisting after staring at several sets of covered bipedal feet. They tried to skitter away, but we were too fast, and they yelled some no-point noises and some make-sense noises, but we figured it out! We twist our strings just so and we do not trip! Now we can run fast. We run all over the Bozeman that day.

Later we will probably stash our jacket and breathe into a biped to learn some new things. We haven't learned much at all today. The last biped we learned from allowed us to go to a place with giant, brightly lit hives full of bipeds and the stench of so many squishies filled the air. We learned much in that place, the Las Vegas. We want to explore other hives like that.

We are not sure if we should go back to the Dolores yet. In our observations, some of the squishies require periods alone between times with their packs. The protocol of this pack-alone ratio escapes our discernment. We miss the Dolores, and we are eager to know if it is not-sad now that the Danny is fixed. We will go to the Dolores after dark. Bipeds are not nocturnal and they do not see well at night, so we get many looks when we are out after dark. But we do not know if the Dolores will invite us into its shelter again, so perhaps we will wait until daylight.

In the meantime, we consider who we would like to learn from this day. We realize that we could learn more about the Dolores if we breathed into one of its fellow green-drape-wearing, coffee-juice squishies. We smile and run to the Starbucks.

We shift our face; we do not want the Dolores's pack-mates to fear the Ash face that Dolores knows. We make our head pelt short and curly. We make our eyes dark and we make our skin pasty pink. We shrink our body until our clothes-things are long. We are a juvenile human now. We even push out some of the strange face red spots that many of the juvenile humans have. Then we wait outside the Starbucks.

We spot the Chance. We have seen and heard this one having not-nice interactions with the Dolores and we have seen the Dolores cringe away from its pawing. We have also seen it take shiny and flappy things from the TIPS container when the Dolores was not looking. We saw the Chance touching the Dolores's hindquarters. The Dolores did not like this touch. We consider a bear noise. Instead, we run in front of the Chance as it disembarks from its wheeled exoskeleton. Automobile. We learned that word from our dictionary, which we left at the Dolores's lair knowing it would be safe there.

We have learned that it is better not to speak to those we wish to learn from. They sometimes make very loud mouth-noises. They sometimes run away. But they are very slow and easy to catch. We intercept the Chance and when it says, "Hey, retard, what are you--" we cut it off and breathe tendrils of our multitudes deep into the Chance's lungs and we find all the things about Dolores in the Chance's mind.

The Chance makes gagging and choking noises as well as other no-point noises while we explore the its mind. The Chance is indeed from a place of many, many hives. Giant hives. The Chicago. The Chance came to the Bozeman for the skiing. We see what the skiing is. We see a very large shelter and large exoskeletons and we see other things we wish we did not see. We

see the Chance doing something unpleasant to another biped, a thing involving the Chance's small appendage. We have seen this activity before, but not like this with a biped that is crying. We see that the Chance thinks about doing this thing to the Dolores and we roar a bear roar and push more of our multitudes into the Chance before we inhale it all back out, watching the sniveling, disgusting biped drop to the ground. He hacks blood-juice and even maybe some lung fragments onto the snow covered ground.

We make more bear noises until the Chance emits the foul fear smell. Then we smile and we leave the Chance and hope that we never have to breathe into the Chance again. The Chance was a not-nice mind to be in, it was full of hatred. We didn't know until the Chance how not-nice breathing into a biped could be.

The Chance gets up and leaps onto our small back. We stumble to a corner near the large receptacle for waste and while it wraps its surprisingly strong arms around our neck, we crumble to ash and unmake ourselves. The Chance emits terrified screams, wet with blood-juice that now covers his hands and the ground beneath him. We smile as we whirl away, happy to be done with the Chance.

10 / THE JACKET

ASH HAD BEEN GONE for three days. Dolores moved through the motions of her shift with her friend in the back of her mind. As she lugged the trash out to the dumpster behind Starbucks, there, in a blood-spattered, deflated heap, she saw a pile of clothes. She stifled a scream.

When she had spoken with Lane and Rachel days ago, they asked her to cover for Chance, of all people, because he'd called in sick. They didn't give any details, but Rachel said that he sounded terrible and had a wet, racking cough. Dolores didn't like the sound of that, especially remembering her previous customer. Had the Black Death - or, more aptly named, the Red Death - come to Bozeman?

Ash hadn't showed that night or the next day when Dolores covered opening shift for Chance, or the following day when she was just back working her own schedule. Dolores had heard that Chance was in the hospital. What in the world was going on here?

She considered whether she should call the cops, but what

would she say? Someone had dumped their bloody jacket and pants and oddly tied running shoes. The pile of clothes practically screamed “Ash!” at her. It was again an odd mash-up of men’s and women’s clothing and while that wasn’t strange in hippy-dippy-yuppy Bozeman, the running shoes with strangely tied laces made Dolores remember the odd shoe conversation she’d had with Ash. The shape of the pile, like a molted skin, was the same sort of laundry droppings she’d found on the floor of her house.

Dolores didn’t mention it to her coworkers or anyone else, but she did take the clothes home. Her little rental house wasn’t much, but it had its own stacked washer-dryer, and it was her favorite feature. Laundromats were Dolores’s definition of hell. She took the clothes home that evening of the third Ashless day and washed them with a healthy dousing of hydrogen peroxide to get the blood off. Blood she hoped did not belong to Ash, but that only begged the question of whose blood had gotten on Ash? A question Dolores might be content not to ask.

She and Danny were back to texting every day but he was increasingly worried about their mother, so he was planning the two hour trip back to Musketon to check on her, but he had to wait until his next off days.

i wish you’d meet me at mom’s, he texted.

Dolores snorted as she read the text. She pulled the almost bloodless clothes out of the tiny washer and poured a second round of hydrogen peroxide on them, watching it foam up even in places she couldn’t see the blood. She started the washer again, hoping that it would be useful, that Ash would return.

She replied, *I can't afford it right now. sorry.*

don't worry about \$\$, i'll pay for gas and junk food

She pondered whether being honest was the right strategy, but Danny had never fully understood, as the Golden Boy, how much it sucked to have her mother's palpable disapproval. *I guess I just don't care enough to drive 13 hrs. I'm sure she's fine.*

u r being a selfish brat.

I learned it from her, she replied with a smug smile, but she wished that she could see Danny, just not there. Not with her mother to make her feel like human garbage.

Snow had fallen on and off since the day Ash disappeared and it had gradually accumulated into a grainy layer about four inches thick. It was more like hail than snow, probably because it was so goddamn cold. Kill a naked, lost person cold. It had been twenty-below-zero the night before with winds that found every crack in Dolores's old kit-built house from the seventies. She would've called Ash in to cuddle just to ward off the cold if Ash had been there.

Dolores's furnace stood no chance against weather this cold, even if Dolores had the money to turn it up to make it warmer. She'd even texted her landlord to find out if it was okay to use the old wood fireplace. It was, but Dolores didn't have any wood. She knew where to scavenge firewood back home in Musketon, but she didn't know where to find free firewood in Bozeman. She saw handwritten signs for firewood cropping up on street corners, but she didn't have money for

that. Although the overtime she was getting by filling in for Chance would help.

Dolores checked her weather app; the cold-snap, unseasonable even for Montana, was due to break by Monday, but that was three brutal, cold, nights away. She decided to venture out in the morning in her car to try to find some firewood. She glanced out the living room window and shrieked.

Ash, her eyes glowing in the snowy darkness, stood on her porch in nothing but a button-down dress shirt and jeans. Ash shrieked back in a perfect imitation. Dolores flung open the door and dragged her blue-lipped, trembling friend inside.

11 / THE BATH

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE, Ash! You’ll kill yourself if you don’t get a jacket. I found one behind Starbucks, you can have that, or we can go to the thrift store tomorrow and get you one.”

“We meant to get a jacket, but we were running. We didn’t know the snows would hurt our hide so much.”

“Your hide? Where have you been? You shouldn’t just leave like that. I was worried about you.”

“We wish the Dolores would worry about us instead of the hateful You.”

Dolores sighed heavily. “I was worried about Ash.” She put her hand on Ash’s arm and the flesh was so cold that Dolores couldn’t help but rub it to try to warm it up, and she started doing the same on the other arm. Ash’s head cocked to the side, but she stopped the angle just shy of bonelessness, and stared into Dolores’s eyes. Dolores suspected Ash was hypothermic given the color of her skin. She didn’t feel quite to a level of friendship that she’d hop in bed naked with Ash, but she could

fill the tub with warm water and try to warm her that way. She took Ash's frosty hand and led her to the bathroom. She was certain Ash was not the same size she had been before, but she tried to brush this thought away as delusion. Maybe her own towering height made it hard for her to judge the height of smaller people.

"Come on, we've got to warm you up or you'll die."

"We are surprised how poorly squishy biped bodies handle the cold. We were not outside long. Is the Dolores mad at us?"

"Yes, you shit! Where did you even go? Why did you leave your clothes here? Did you just run off naked? You should at least leave me a note next time. And you need to stay here until this weather blows over. Where have you been staying? I thought you were dead, Ash. I thought I'd never see you again." Dolores's voice cracked as she said the last part, and she only then realized that it was true. She had been granted a friend, and she feared that the universe had taken her new friend away after such a short time.

"We were busy learning. We didn't know how cold it would be. We didn't know that the sky-ice-bits would keep happening. We didn't know that they would stay so long. We still have much to learn. We are sorry we made the Dolores sad; we did not mean to be not-nice. Are we still the Dolores's crazy bitch?"

Dolores softened then, despite her anger, and the ridiculous number of unanswered questions. Who else would ever take in this whacko? "Of course you're still my crazy bitch. Just don't do that. Stay here, okay? I mean, you can leave. But you

should spend the nights here, okay? You can just crash here until you get back on your feet now that you're remaking yourself or whatever after you got shot. I can help you find a job if you need."

"What is a job?"

"Jeez, did Cody keep you in a bunker?"

"No, the Cody just shot us. Twice. We do not like being shot."

The tub was almost full of steaming water. "Yeah, so you've said. I'm pretty sure nobody has ever liked being shot, dude. Okay, I'll leave you to it. Do you want me to wash your clothes? Do you have something warmer wherever you are keeping your clothes?"

"Tomorrow we will get better drapes for the snows."

Dolores tried not to let her face collapse into an exasperated scowl. "Well, strip and get in the tub, when the water cools you can drain part of it and put more warm water in, okay?"

Ash shucked her clothes and oddly tied running shoes before Dolores could even turn her back. "Ash, come on, have some modesty, or something."

"Doesn't the Dolores have a similar body? Is our body not pleasing?" Ash canted her head to a more normal angle. Dolores couldn't help but be a little proud that Ash was doing one thing in a slightly more normal way.

“Sure, your body is very pleasing, now put it in the tub.”

Ash stared at the water, her naked body distinctly lavender with cold and she put one foot into the water with widened, glowing eyes. A small smile played on her lips as she stepped into the tub and lowered herself into the water, and she began to laugh.

“We love squishy bipeds and their systems! We didn’t know they made the grooming tubs full of warm water. We do not like getting in cold water. No wonder the Dolores spends her time in the grooming tub, it is very pleasant.” She drew her legs up to her chest and splashed her hand in the now empty end of the tub. “Will it come join us?”

Dolores’s did not like being called “it.” All she could ever think of was, “*it puts the lotion on its skin,*” but there was no menace or even creepiness about Ash’s statement. She seemed like a little kid extending a slobbery, dirt-covered lollipop to share and being genuinely baffled that the recipient wouldn’t want to have a big old lick of the thing.

Dolores knew she should decline the tub invite. She knew that this would be deemed weird by her peers, but she supposed that had never stopped her before. And why was it weird? Warm baths were nice, and so was good company. She sighed and took off her own clothes a little shyly, curious what Ash would think of her broad, tall, flat body.

Ash beamed that genuine smile of delight at her and suddenly shifted to the end with the faucet. “The Dolores can have the end without the metal water spray stick.”

Dolores clambered in the tub with Ash. She laughed, despite herself, and said, “Ash, two grown-ass women don’t really fit in this tiny tub. And you aren’t going to warm up like this.”

“We do not care if the you warms up. We are warm with the Dolores near us. All we need is the Dolores.”

After the night of the bath, Ash stuck around. Although Dolores could never figure out where she went during the day, Ash never left overnight again.

Dolores also confronted her about the clothes, since Ash regularly appeared in different clothes, but never kept any of them at the house. Ash claimed that she found them and while Dolores was skeptical and suspected that “found” meant “stole,” she didn’t feel like chastising her only friend. Dolores felt that she too might be going crazy as Ash seemed to vary in size depending on the clothes she wore.

The only consistent thing was a pair of very bright coral Brooks running shoes that Ash would lovingly remove and leave by the front door whenever she went anywhere. Occasionally some other variety of footwear would show up, then disappear again, but the running shoes never disappeared.

Sometimes, Dolores closed her eyes and saw the jacket by the dumpster, covered in blood. The jacket Ash had worn. In the bath, there had been no apparent wounds on Ash’s body, no signs of a nose bleed or tuberculosis or any other distress that would have resulted in a jacket soaked in blood. Dolores felt her skin get tense whenever the image flashed through her mind.

It seemed Dolores was at a crossroads. She could fixate on the jacket and distrust Ash. Ask questions. Investigate further. Maybe even kick her out of the house? Or she could welcome Ash back in safe and sound, letting it go, at least for now.

She knew what she was going to do. But was it what she *should* do?

12 / THE LANE

ASH WAS GONE every morning (along with her running shoes) when Dolores woke up, even when she woke up before five for opening shift. But this morning, there was Ash, sweaty and oddly dressed in a man's suit jacket, buttoned, but with nothing underneath, and women's wool slacks.

"Did you just run in that?" Dolores gestured sleepily to the odd get-up. She began making her breakfast. "Want some oatmeal?"

"We do not eat the oatmeal." Despite weeks of living together, the use of I still eluded her new roommate. Dolores was so used to it that now she had to be careful not to adopt it herself, since Ash was the only person she talked to at any length.

"Are you ever hungry?" Dolores turned to watch Ash. Her strange friend was certainly slender, which made sense since she seemed to spend most of her time running and not-eating, but she didn't look anorexic or unhealthy. One of Dolores's more persistent curiosities was whether Ash was

stealing everything she needed or had resources frittered away somewhere. If she were stealing she must have been good at it because she never looked hungry. She never eyeballed food in the way Dolores knew a person did when they weren't sure where their next meal was coming from. Instead, Ash watched food like it was an interesting puzzle to be solved, like if she just stared at it enough, it would make sense to her.

Ash looked like Dolores had backed her into a corner with the hunger question. Her bioluminescent eyes gleamed brightly as they met Dolores's. "No. We are not hungry. The Dolores does not need to worry about us." Then she crumpled up her face and said, "Dolores. Dolores does not need to worry about us."

Dolores smiled at this tiny step toward syntactical progress. Ash had been infuriated and exasperated when Dolores tried to explain he and she, insisting that all humans looked the same and that it was arbitrary to assign hes and shes. Then she had grabbed her dictionary, found the word arbitrary, and shoved it into Dolores's face, saying, "Aaaarbitrary." So pronouns were still beyond comprehension for Ash, but Dolores felt okay about working on when to use articles. Whenever she probed Ash about where she was from and why she spoke the way she did, the odd woman would snap that she was still learning.

Dolores knew she should let the food thing drop. She was exhausted and still had her tenth day straight working ahead of her. Another coworker, Alicia, had fallen ill with the same bloody cough that took out Chance and also Kenny. Chance still wasn't out of the hospital and they had all begun to whisper that he was going to die. Whatever the new disease was,

Bozeman found itself as the epicenter of the plague, but all the coverage was irritatingly back page and local.

The CDC was finally acknowledging the disease now that cases had popped up in Las Vegas, Minneapolis, and Chicago. There was more public outcry and some panic now that cases had developed in San Francisco and, as of the day before, Seattle. The rumor, unconfirmed, was that the case in San Francisco died rapidly, fanning the fire of fear that the disease was mutating. While the outbreak worried Dolores, rent worried her more, and she was happy for the extra shifts.

“You should run in running clothes, Ash, or people are going to think you’re being chased. Or that you’re chasing them.”

“Sometimes we are.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Both.”

“How are you still this bad at communicating? Look, I have to work a long shift today. Why don’t you come hang out at the coffee shop today? Will you eat something there? Are you dumpster diving? Or stealing? You shouldn’t steal, Ash, it’s wrong. But I worry if you’re not eating and you’re running around in our crazy cold weather that you’ll get the disease everyone is getting in Bozeman. People are dying, Ash, it’s no joke, you need to take care of yourself.” Dolores found herself feeling choked up. “You can’t be my crazy bitch if you’re dead.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed. “Does the Dolores speak of the blood-

juice cough? The Dolores will never get the blood-juice cough.”

“That is the grossest description possible. They don’t know how it’s transmitted yet, so you can’t possibly know that. I’d feel better if you were at Starbucks with me.”

“We have things to do today. We will not go where the... disease... is.”

“Why do you say it like that? It’s not like I’m making this shit up, Ash. You’re not one of those crazy conspiracy theorists who thinks all news is made up by the government, are you? Please don’t be that kind of crazy.”

“We are only the Dolores’s crazy bitch kind of crazy. We can meet the Dolores and walk it home from work if it is afraid of the... disease.” Ash appeared to be barely containing a growl. *Bearly*, Dolores thought to herself with a small smile.

“You know that’s not how disease works, right? It’s not a mugger or a rapist--”

“What is the mugger and the rapist?” Ash said, with a half-owl head cock and then growling a full bear growl as she righted her head, clearly annoyed that the owl-head was on the Not Allowed list. Ash regularly had outbursts about the things that Dolores told her were Not Allowed, so Dolores posted them on the fridge to prevent arguments. Owl-head-turning was number two, below voice mimicking.

“Jeez, a mugger is a person who takes your shit and a rapist is a dude who fucks you against your will.”

Ash's brow furrowed and her eyes blazed brightly in the dim of the morning. Dolores wondered if anyone else saw that inner fire, or if it was her imagination. She wanted to take a picture of Ash, but Ash had swatted her phone away aggressively the only time she tried. Dolores desperately wanted to see what Ash would look like in a photo, and some part of her feared that maybe Ash wouldn't be there. That maybe Ash wasn't anywhere at all, except in Dolores's loneliness-addled mind. Then Ash said quietly, her face stony with anger, "We know of one of these the rapists. We do not know of the muggers, but we do not understand why anyone would want to collect the feces some bipeds produce."

Dolores snorted, "Some bipeds? Like you don't shit like everyone else." But as she said it, she realized she had never once seen or smelled or heard Dolores use the toilet. Dolores assumed she shit in the woods, getting in touch with her bearish roots, or her cult roots, or her held-captive-in-an-isolated-forest-cabin roots: her fucking crazy roots.

Ash didn't respond but narrowed her eyes again. "The blood-juice cough is not the rapist or the mugger, we understand that. We do not understand why the Dolores is concerned about the disease. The Dolores is not the mugger or the rapist either."

"I seriously have no sane response to that. What the hell does that have to do with anything? You know what, never mind, just, goddamnit, get yourself some running tights and a goddamn long-sleeved t-shirt and try not to look like an escaped mental patient. Okay? I think I would miss you if they lock you

up. Running tights, long-sleeved shirt, maybe even a pair of gloves; it's goddamn cold."

Ash rose from the table in her eerily silent way and said, "They will not lock us up. We will always come back to the Dolores so it doesn't worry or feel sad."

Dolores took a shower quickly and when she emerged, there was Ash's classic pile of clothes, rumped on the floor like a snake shedding its multicolored, multi-fiber skin. Dolores imagined what it would feel like to go out into the still sub-freezing, if not sub-zero, temperatures in only her birthday suit. It wasn't like Ash had a good layer of blubber like a walrus. Did she keep a stash of warmer clothes somewhere else? And why had she been so annoyed and testy about the plague?

Despite their morning fight, the minute Dolores was due to go on her break, Ash walked in the door of Starbucks. Lane came to take over Dolores's register and his eyes snapped up to look at Ash. His face was always conflicted whenever he looked at her. Dolores could see that he wanted her, but didn't quite know how to deal with her. Dolores had managed to keep Ash's interactions with her coworkers to a minimum, but once they realized that Ash lived with her, inevitable questions arose. In fact, that had been the first time Lane really seemed to see her as a woman.

He said, "So, hey, Dolores, is, uh, your friend, is she, like, into dudes? You know what I mean?"

Dolores looked from Lane to Ash and burst out laughing. Ash, from across the cafe also burst out laughing, and it was so similar to Dolores's laughter that Lane's eyes grew wide. "I have

no idea. That woman is like a walking, poorly written mystery novel. I have no idea what Ash wants or likes or even does most of the time. She likes to run, that much I know.”

He recovered his composure after the doppelganger laugh and grinned his knee-weakening, lopsided grin, the one with a big dimple, and said, “Hey, I like to run too. Can you give me an intro?”

Dolores found herself feeling oddly proprietary about Ash. She didn’t want to share Ash. She also didn’t want anyone to tease Ash. Ash was hers. Hers to mock. Hers to chide. Hers to teach. Ash was her crazy bitch. Ash sauntered toward them though, and Dolores knew it would be very weird not to introduce them. So she said quietly, “She talks in a pretty strange way, but don’t be mean. I don’t know if she’s foreign or what.”

“Maybe she’s a foreign exchange student?” he said helpfully. “Why don’t you just ask her?”

“Good luck with that.”

Then Ash was in front of Dolores and she awkwardly ordered a hot brown coffee liquid. Lane turned to Dolores with a huge, disbelieving grin and she muttered, “I told you. Hey, Ash, this is Lane. Lane, this is Ash.”

“Nice to meet you,” he foolishly responded, extending his hand over the counter.

Ash growled and threw her hands in the air, “The You returns! Always the You! Oh, how we hate the You.” Then she refocused on Lane and reluctantly crushed his hand in her

own. Dolores had only introduced Ash to one other person and afterward had tried to explain the purpose of hand-shaking. Ash could not see it as anything but an opportunity to check another human's bone strength and structure.

Lane laughed and withdrew his hand, snapping it back and forth. "That's a grip, girl."

Ash turned her radiant eyes on Dolores. "Is he the mugger or the rapist?"

Dolores squibbed around the counter as fast as she could making her best shut-the-fuck-up face at Ash. "No! Shit, no. Come on, come on, outside."

Lane waylaid her attempt to limit their interactions, seemingly oblivious to Ash's question about his criminality.

"Dude, Dolores, it's effing frigid out there and the girl isn't wearing a coat, why not take her in back for your break. It's dead in here, there's like two customers, so we can hang out. Come on back, Ash. We've only got one chair, and it's actually a bucket."

"The Dolores can have the bucket chair." Ash said as she strode into the back storage room like she owned the place.

"I hear you're crashing at Dolores's place these days. Where are you from?" Lane asked.

"We do not crash, we walk or run carefully and do not wreck anything. We are mindful of the Dolores's lair and items. Does the Lane crash into other lairs? How are we to know

where the You is from? Why are all the humans concerned with the You's original location?"

Lane was behind Ash but in front of Dolores and he spun around to face her and mouthed, *What the heck?* with a delighted smile. Dolores did not smile back. She felt her fists clenching and hissed, "Don't you dare be mean to her."

He shook his head, held up three fingers, and said in barely a whisper, "Scout's honor." Dolores found she liked him less and less as he was enjoying Ash's oddity. His approach was clearly designed so that it might advance his path into the normal-sized woman's bed. Or Dolores' couch, as the case was. If Ash even slept there, or at all - something Dolores was not certain about.

"So Ash, Dolores tells me that you're a runner. I am too, maybe we could run sometime?" he said boldly as Dolores sat on the upside down five gallon bucket that served as the barista break room.

Ash let her eyes climb all over Lane and then they snapped to Dolores's eyes. She said, "We run all the time."

"I meant together, silly."

"Who is the Silly?"

Lane chuckled. It felt surreal to watch someone else try to interact with Ash. Dolores felt like she'd slipped into her Ash interactions pretty naturally, being pretty weird herself. Lane, though, Lane was a natural born extrovert and charmer; he wasn't used to his charisma failing in the face of such oddness.

Ash showed no more interest in Lane than she showed for any other “squishy biped.”

“So, let’s say tomorrow at six in the morning if no more of our coworkers get the plague? I’m supposed to have tomorrow off. I can come by Dolores’s place to get you and take you to a great trail. You ever been up Hyalite Canyon? It’ll be cold, but I can handle it if you can.”

“We can meet the Lane there. We know the trail.” Ash looked him up and down again. “We do not think the Lane can run at the same speed as us.”

He gave Dolores a delighted smile and said, “You’ve been keeping her a secret on purpose, haven’t you?” He turned to Ash. “You’re on, Ash. I’ll wear my fastest shoes.”

Ash smirked and narrowed her eyes. “We will wear our running shoes.”

13 / ASH IN THE WIND

WE HAVE SHOWN the Lane that it cannot match our speed. It is still laying on the snows on the ground poking its digits at the beepy small device on its wrist. It is grinning, even though it only caught us after we had been done for a long time. It says, "Dude, you just ran ten miles like it was walking down the block, seriously, I wish you'd had my watch on, I just want to know your time on that trail. That is the fastest I've ever run that trail and I couldn't even see you! Who are you? Are you training for the Olympics or something?"

We try not to make a bear noise at the Lane. Bear noises are Not Allowed. The You is everywhere with the Lane. "We need to run home now. The Dolores is concerned about the disease and we don't want it to be worried."

The Lane pulls itself up onto its feet as it says, "You must be pretty close if you're that worried about her. Are you and Dolores a thing? I always got a straight vibe from her."

"We don't know what sort of thing the Dolores has with the You. And the Dolores is quite capable of bending as well as

remaining straight, both in upright and prone positions. Are there bipeds that aren't capable of staying straight? Do their bones not function properly?" we ask, but rather than answer, the Lane laughs.

"I mean, are you two sleeping together? Dating? I'm just curious. I thought she was into me for a while."

"The Dolores does not allow us in the nest where it sleeps. What does it want to put into the Lane? The Dolores doesn't have the appropriate small appendage to put in anyone as we have observed."

The Lane is laughing, so we laugh with the Lane, though we are uncertain what the Lane finds amusing. "Man, Ash, you are a trip, Dolores was not kidding. I wish you'd tell me where you're from." It rubs its arms and says, "It is seriously cold today."

It leaks the coolant like we do, but more and its running drapes are damp. The Lane was correct that it is unpleasantly cold. We wish again that we had a nice pelt. We suspect that the Dolores would say a pelt is Not Allowed. The Lane reaches out and runs a hand over our arm despite our lack of soft pelt, only our artificial pelt that is not-nice and also somewhat damp from our coolant. We watch the hand with interest, but since the Lane does not touch our actual flesh, we cannot tell if the Lane has the same effect as the Dolores.

We like touching the flesh of other bipeds. We are very pleased when the Dolores gets in the grooming tub with us. Then we get to touch a lot of the Dolores's flesh. Shins against shins, thighs to thighs, feet on tummies. Even though it told us cohabi-

tating the grooming tub is Not Allowed with other bipeds besides the Dolores, unless we check with it first.

Now the Lane's hand is touching our hand. It is not not-nice. But it is not exactly like the Dolores. The Lane touches our jawline and leans toward us before stopping, our breath mingling, but we do not breathe our multitudes into the Lane. The Lane's eyelids are lowering, but the Lane suddenly leans back and swipes at its nose, blood-juice streaking across the back of its hand and onto its sleeve.

“What the--?” it mutters and swipes again.

We were afraid this might happen, that we could hurt the squishies even without breathing into them. We do not wish to hurt the Lane. We try to fix Lane like we fixed the Dolores, even though we do not love it as we love our crazy bitch. We let our fingers trail down the Lane's nose.

It swipes again at its nose, but there is no more blood-juice leakage. We are pleased that the Lane is fixed. We are still curious what the Lane was attempting to do when it leaned so close to our face. We do not think that the humans can breathe into us or into other humans, but it seems like that is what the Lane planned.

We lean toward the Lane, concentrating our will on the fixing so we do not hurt the Lane and cause more blood-juice to ooze out of it. The Lane startles us. We almost jump away as its other hand slides up alongside our jaw, so it is clasping our face in its hands. But it doesn't breathe anything into us. It presses its mouth softly against our mouth. Then the mouth-noise-shaping organ slips inside our mouth and we so we slip our organ inside

the Lane's mouth in return. We feel the smooth, slick hardness of its teeth, we taste the wind on its breath, and we breathe the smell of its blood-juice. We do not know what the humans call the mouth-smashing, but we keep trying it, letting the Lane investigate our own mouth.

Then we taste the blood-juice and the Lane pulls back and says, "Jeez, I'm so sorry that I just bled on you. My nose must be all dry from the cold." The Lane runs its thumb along our lips and we pull its thumb into our mouth, curious if it will feel as nice as the other thing in our mouth. We can smell that the Lane likes that and the Lane's pupils expand as it looks into our eyes. It has brown eyes like the hot coffee liquid, so different from the Dolores eyes which look like the sky. We wonder what the Dolores would do if we did the mouth-smashing with it. We feel an odd drop in our pelvis at the thought.

We run our fingers along the Lane's nose again and its eyes flutter closed. We smash our lips against its lips one more time, then we feel its arms snake around our middle. We laugh, spin away out of its grasp, and we run away. We run back to the Dolores. We do not wish to hurt the Lane any more and we do not wish to hurt the Dolores if it hoped to put something into the Lane—we now understand that perhaps the Dolores hoped to put its own mouth against the Lane's and then slip its mouth-noise muscle into the Lane's mouth. We do not wish for the Lane to be into us if the Dolores wishes to be into Lane.

The Lane is calling after us, but we are like ash in the wind and we fly.

14 / THE RETURN HOME

DOLOROS TAPPED her fingers on the table, waiting for Ash to get back from her run-date with Lane.

She knew she shouldn't be jealous of either Ash or Lane, but she found that she was jealous of both of them. Lane was trying to snipe her only friend and Ash was maybe going to get some from her cute co-worker. If Ash even knew what getting some was.

Dolores supposed that if Cody had shot Ash, he probably hadn't had any compunctions about raping her. Dolores thought that was likely given the way Ash had responded to her explanation of what a rapist was. She wished Ash and Lane hadn't picked the first day off she'd had in a long time to go spend time together without her. Especially since Ash had been sulky about never seeing the Dolores.

Shit, it was spreading, just how long had she been thinking of herself as *the* Dolores? Maybe it was better to be alone today anyway, she could go to the library again. She wanted to

research mail-order brides, her latest hypothesis for explaining how weird Ash was.

She finished her tea and her oatmeal. She was annoyed that she'd slept in and missed the opportunity to see Ash off with some motherly advice. It still freaked her out that she very rarely heard Ash leave. The day after Ash had returned frozen, Ash had wanted to spend all day with Dolores, and she'd gotten huffy with her new friend, trying to convey that they could spend time together, but if they spent all their time together, they'd hate each other.

Dolores doubted that Ash could even begin to comprehend the complexities of a real relationship. Really, Dolores wasn't sure she should be galloping around on her lonely, lonely high horse. At best she had a miniature donkey to ride in the relationship how-to ring. Since she'd gone missing those first few days, Ash disappeared in the morning and returned in the evening or afternoon without fail, depending on when Dolores got off shift. She never ate with Dolores. Never asked for anything really, except Dolores's time, usually to play Mario-Kart or to take a bath, or lately Dolores had introduced her to the wide world of anime. She had taken Ash to library. Stepping into the library caused Ash's eyes to light up like fireflies.

So where was Ash now? It'd been two whole hours since their running date. Ugh, Dolores hated the very idea of the word "date" applying to Ash. Why couldn't Lane just date Rachel like normal coworkers in the incestuous world of Starbucks baristas? Rachel was cute and nice, and she understood pronouns, and she ate food like a normal person.

Dolores needed to get out of the house. She would go to the

library and check her email to see if the bursar's office could help her get out from under her mom and get financial aid. She could read up on the latest about the plague; it had finally made its way to the east coast, and oddly, to Mexico City. The CDC was working with all the major airlines and flight manifestos to try to track down Patient Zero.

The oddest thing was that there was never more than a few new cases per day. The day with the highest number of new cases had only taken down four people in Cincinnati. What the hell kind of contagion had such a vast but leisurely spread? It made Dolores want to scream that she couldn't apply for the CDC internship in the spring.

All the articles Dolores had read showed the CDC to be unconcerned about the whole thing, insisting that the low mortality rate made it a low priority. Yet no one had really gotten better either. Most of its victims were simply languishing in hospital isolation units, hacking up blood, receiving transfusions occasionally. The cynic in Dolores was sure it would only get real attention when politicians started dropping, or at least their donors.

Dolores heard Ash on the porch, her light footsteps springing quickly up the creaky stairs. Ash unlocked the door and stepped inside. She was beautifully flushed and her eyes glittered. Dolores raised an eyebrow, "You have a good run with your new boyfriend?" Her phone chimed from the kitchen, but she ignored it. It was probably Lane trying to get in touch with Ash.

"We did. Is the Dolores into the Lane? We do not want to be into anything that the Dolores wishes to be into." Ash said,

and just like that her breathing returned to normal. Just how much did this girl run? If Dolores had any spare income, she would buy some kind of step counter for her always-running friend.

Dolores felt ashamed of her jealousy. Ash was trying not to hurt her. “It doesn’t matter, he isn’t into me.”

“Ever?”

Now it was Dolores’s turn to cock her head to the side. “What do you mean by that? What do you think being into someone means?”

Ash’s face contorted as she considered this question. “The mouth-smashing puts this,” she stuck out her tongue and touched it lightly and then continued, “in the other human’s mouth? Then a human is into another human?”

Dolores raised her eyebrows. “Did he kiss you? Did Lane fucking kiss you while running at six in the morning? That dog!”

Ash shook her head. “No, we are certain the Lane is not a dog. It is a squishy biped like the Dolores, but not as elegant and nice and pleasant smelling as the Dolores.”

Dolores was ready to fire off a snide retort, but she was caught off guard by this unexpected compliment. “You think I’m elegant?”

Ash growled. “The You does not think so. *We* think so. We think the Dolores is pleasingly graceful and stylish in appear-

ance or manner.” Then Dolores was fairly certain Ash muttered some more insults at the You.

“Let’s dial back your attempts to distract me. Did Lane kiss you, Ash? Were you going to tell me? I’m your best friend, right? You’re supposed to tell me these things.”

“Is the kiss the mouth-smash?”

“Yes, it’s...” Dolores had the briefest thought of kissing Ash herself as a demonstration, but instead she pulled up a .gif on her phone and showed Ash.

Ash nodded sagely. “Yes. We thought that the Lane would just breathe into us and inhale itself back out, but the kiss is what the Lane did. The Lane is not as fast as we are. We are like the wind.”

“No shit. And just as hard to grasp. Wow, I can’t believe he kissed you on a morning running outing. I did not see him as that type of guy.”

“We won’t kiss the Lane again now that we know it upsets the Dolores.”

“I’m not upset!” Dolores shouted. But she was upset. Whether she was upset at Lane or Ash or both, she couldn’t pin down. She felt equally mad that Lane was taking Ash and that Ash was taking Lane, although Dolores had never really had either of them. She felt certain that no one could ever really have Ash.

“We made the Dolores angry and sad with the mouth-

smash. We are sorry. We were just curious. We won't do the mouth-smash or run with the Lane anymore." Dolores watched the light go out of Ash's eyes, like she had been excited to share this new discovery with her friend and Dolores had pissed in the poor girl's first-kiss Cheerios. She reached out for Ash, but Ash slithered out of her grasp. "We do not wish to hurt the Dolores. We are tired from fixing."

Before Dolores could respond, her phone began actually ringing. She skulked into the kitchen, Ash's eyes following her like the embers of a green fire. It was Danny. They had just talked two days before, so she instantly felt her heart rate skitter up with worry. "Hey, what's up? Why are you calling this early?"

"Shit, Dolores, you've gotta get out here. Mom's in the hospital."

"WHAT?" Dolores gripped the phone. "What happened?"

Danny's voice cracked. "She's been in the hospital for like a month but they didn't bother to notify her next of kin. I want her transferred to Fargo, or at least Bismark, but they say it's pointless with how bad her scans look."

"Scans? Danny, what's wrong with her?"

"She came in coughing up blood so they did a CT scan and her lungs are just covered in spots. They said it's metastasized into her liver and her brain. Stage four lung cancer. She's not conscious now, but when she is, they said she screams for you. She freaked out when she woke up and saw me. I guess she's very rarely lucid."

"She's still in Musketon? Don't you think she should at least go to a specialist in Fargo? Shouldn't the VA cover the transfer because of my dad? The VA is good, right?" Dolores's heart was thumping in her chest. Helplessness wrapped itself around her brain and muffled her thoughts.

She heard him take a deep shuddering breath. “Look, I’ll pay for your gas money, but can you just get here? If you leave now, you can make it tonight, right? I’ll cover your Wild Cherry Pepsi habit and gas, so you have no excuse.”

“Fuck, I’ve got to talk to my boss. I really don’t want to lose my job and every single Starbucks employee besides me is dying from this stupid plague. Are they sure Mom doesn’t just have Red Pneumonia or whatever they’re calling it?”

“Yeah, they said this is just straight up end-stage lung cancer. Apparently she’s been hacking up blood for months and never told a doctor.”

“Okay, I’ll get my shit together and head out now. I love you, Danny. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you when you said you were worried.”

“It’s not your fault, Lorri, I’m like six hours away, it’s way easier for me to get here. I should’ve come on my last break, but I was too lazy. It wore me down when I got sick last month.” The unspoken thing hovered on the line between them. Then he said, “Be careful, okay? You still got the mace in your car? You pull over if you get tired, okay? Don’t be a hero.”

They hung up and she turned back to Ash who looked oddly pale. “My mom is dying. I need to go home to my shitty little town in North Dakota. You can stay here, okay? I’ll be home in a week, probably. I don’t think I can take any more time off work than that. Do what you want with Lane.”

Ash surprised her by pulling their bodies together and

Dolores couldn't deny the crackle of electricity that was between them. She had that fuzzy sense of belonging, of peace, that she'd had the first time they touched. She wrapped her arms around Ash, and even though Ash was weird at this it brought Dolores some solace to have someone hold her when faced with her mother's mortality. She tried to tell herself that she didn't care that her mother had treated her like a changeling since Dolores's earliest memories, but she did care. She still wanted her mother to love her. To approve of her. To want her as a daughter.

Dolores was ever a realist and she knew that her homecoming would not bring that long wished for dream of maternal love. It would bring her the ugly experience of watching her mother eaten alive from the inside by cancer. She shivered in Ash's arms for a moment longer and then pushed back, realizing she'd have to call Lane and see if he'd cover for her for a few days.

Dolores was already on the road when she called Lane for work coverage. "Hey, Lane, it's Dolores. My brother just called and my mom is in the hospital. Could you cover my shifts this week?"

"Oh man, sorry about your mom. But yeah, I guess I can swing it. I'll probably fail all my classes, but--"

"Hey, I did introduce you to Ash, and from what I hear, that turned out pretty well for you."

He chuckled. "I have no idea what you're talking about. She ran off without even giving me her number. She was laughing though, so she seemed okay. What was that all about?"

“Hell if I know, ‘what was that all about?’ applies to everything Ash does. She doesn’t have a phone, so you can at least rest assured that she wasn’t snubbing you. But yeah, she’s inscrutable.”

“Good kisser, though. But maybe you already knew that?”

“No, I did not, and if I did, I would not let you kiss her without demanding satisfaction, good sir.”

Lane laughed, and Dolores felt a pang of sadness, thinking he was one of the few guys she knew who would get that joke and also not get all weird and creepy about it.

Once she was well into her drive, Dolores was surprised that she didn’t ever have to pull over to sleep. She didn’t even have to use her mace, although she thought about it at every gas station she stopped at. It felt like the only people left in North Dakota were desperate looking men who eyed her hungrily as she filled up the car.

It was “not-nice” to have boring hours to contemplate Lane sucking Ash’s face, and what else they might do now that they had Dolores’s house all to themselves. She should make Ash pay rent. But then Ash might choose to move in with Lane, since she seemed to have no income and no skills beyond running and being weird. She was exceptionally skilled at those two things, but neither were applicable to any jobs Dolores could imagine in Bozeman, Montana.

Dolores rolled into Musketon so late that nothing, not even the McDonald’s, was open. She desperately hoped that Danny

had gotten some real food because she was shaking from eating nothing but potato skins and drinking Wild Cherry Pepsi. She used her key, the one she'd never been able to remove from her keychain, and stepped inside her mother's home for the first time in a year and a half.

The first thing that hit her was the stale, cigarette filter smell and then the tangy smell of peroxide. She crept into the house and saw an ominous dark stain on the rug near her mother's well-indented spot on the couch. She flicked on the light and saw that it had been scrubbed to a dull brown, but it was obviously blood.

Danny was slumped on the couch, fast asleep in an old Metallica t-shirt and black sweats. Her heart ached to see him. He was pale and wasted looking. She wondered what hushed up spill or leak near the oil-fields might have made him look this way. But maybe it was just taking care of their mother that had worn him down. He hadn't told her how long he'd been here.

Danny was ten years older than Dolores and had been the closest thing she'd ever had to a father. Her biological father had been perpetually abroad or perpetually drunk. Her mother had never even bothered to move to his military base, since he was from Musketon and always wanted to come home to visit his parents while they were still alive. Dolores's mean, crabby grandfather had died the same year as her father, but via heart attack rather than IED. Her grandmother had lasted another two years before she died of a burst appendix after refusing to go to the doctor when she spiked a high fever.

Dolores hated it when people from the east coast or California talked about her home state as the wild, wild west or a

grim homestead. They weren't entirely wrong, but it pissed her off nonetheless.

She texted Lane to say she'd made it and would he please tell Ash so she wouldn't worry. He texted back, to her surprise given the hour, that he would if he saw her, but he wasn't sure that would happen. Now Dolores growled that he was going to drop her friend just when she'd come to terms with him being with her. What a piece of shit. But she couldn't cope with that while strung out on high-fructose corn syrup. She set her bag down with a thump and Danny sprang up off the couch like Bruce Lee. His eyes were wild when they landed on Dolores and she knew without a doubt that she'd been right that something was very wrong.

“Danny, what the fuck is going on with you?”

He sighed and plopped back on the couch. She beckoned him to follow her into the kitchen. She made herself a grilled cheese and a can of watery tomato soup. As she cooked, Dolores watched his haunted face. He said, after their long silence, “I don't even want to tell you; you'll think I'm fucking crazy. Even I think I'm fucking crazy.”

DOLORES SETTLED in with her food, having offered him some, but he shook his head and his face turned a pale shade of green.

She finished chewing a bite and said, “So, tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Danny sighed and said, “You promise you won’t think I’m crazy? That you’ll believe me?”

Dolores laughed and answered around a mouthful of grilled cheese, “Oh my god, crazy is like my oxygen these days. You have no idea. Go ahead, it’ll probably seem sane compared to the shit I’ve been dealing with.”

Danny looked unconvinced and his vivid blue eyes were rimmed in red as he scrubbed a rough hand over his scruffy face.

“So, a while ago, the day I got sick, I was out hunting with a group of guys where we really shouldn’t have been. We were up in the area that’s been closed down by the government

because of whatever disaster the mine caused, right? But one of the guys wanted to bag a bear.”

“That’s terrible. You guys are dicks. What did bears ever do to you? Do you think the disaster is what made you sick? Who knows what happened up there... What if it’s radiation poisoning? You should be in a hospital!”

He held up his hand. “No. Just shut up for like ten minutes. We spotted a bear and Cody shot it. Then we hear another gunshot. It scared the crap out of us, but when we looked at where it came from, we saw this buck-ass naked woman. It was not warm enough to be naked out there. My friend freaked out that she’d seen him poach the bear, so he started running toward her. The other guys left, but I followed to try to keep him from doing something stupid. But then... we got there, and it was so fucking freaky, she could roar and she sounded just like the bear. And she wasn’t... she wasn’t a chick, not really. She had dude parts too.” Danny shook his head a little.

Dolores’s mouth went completely dry. She took a long drink of water and rasped. “Did you say she made... bear... noises?” Dolores’s mind raced. “What did she look like?” But then she reminded herself that Ash did not have a dick. She’s seen Ash naked. No penis.

“What? Oh, well, that’s the most fucked up thing... she looked one way, like brownish hair, like the bear’s actually, and green eyes, but they were so bright, almost glowing, but then... then her face changed, and she had my face. She had my fucking face, Lorri. I can’t get that image out of my mind, watching her face morph into my face. I was trying to figure out

what her deal was, trying not to panic, but then my friend seriously freaked out and he... he shot her. I tried talking to her but she answered me in my voice. In my exact voice—how is that even possible? And it was weird, like English words, but they didn't make sense. It was the creepiest thing. Even creepier than the face. But then when I grabbed her to help her to our truck to take her to the hospital... her arm, it like... it... it disintegrated, like into ashes.”

Dolores choked on her soup. She'd been trying to continue eating normally, but this was too much. She coughed out tomato soup and had a horrifying moment of plague-fear as she sprayed red soup all over the white formica table.

“What? What did you say? She turned to... to... ash? Ash?”

“Well, she started to, but then it was like the ashes pushed into my lungs, like she exhaled them into me and I could feel it inside me, taking parts of me, *learning*, and I was so scared, Lorri, I thought I was gonna die. I didn't even know what would happen next, but then my buddy shot her again and she turned to him and I could feel her suck the ashy crap back out of me and she breathed it into Cody.”

Now Dolores leapt to her feet. “Oh hell no, your friend's name is Cody? And he shot a woman who turned to ash?”

Danny's brow scrunched up. “Could you just sit down and listen. Yeah, so as soon as she sucked back out of me, I started hacking and coughing up blood. Cody's screaming and clawing at his throat and she just turned those freaky glowing eyes on us and I could see ashes sucking back out of Cody and he starts hacking up blood too and then she just disintegrated into ash

and then she was just gone, like she'd never been there at all. We made our way back to our truck. Cody said we couldn't go to the hospital because we were poaching and he had shot that woman... I don't know why I listened to him."

"But you got better? You got better. So these other people that have the cough, they'll get better too."

"What? What are you even talking about?" He looked so tired she wondered if maybe he didn't know about the new disease – an outbreak for which he might be Typhoid Mary. Worse still, she thought with a shudder, a disease of which Ash might be the originator.

"It sounds exactly like you had the red pneumonia that people are getting all over the country. That woman must've given it to you and Cody and now she's spreading it."

"She wasn't coughing up blood, even after she got shot. She just... disintegrated. But Cody... Cody really freaked out and he'd already been to prison and he's small and kinda pretty and he didn't want to go back, so... so... I went to check on him the next day and he," Danny's voice broke and he choked back a sob, "Aw fuck, he'd hung himself. He's dead, Lorri. He's dead because he murdered an imaginary woman."

"You think she was imaginary?" Dolores wanted to believe this. She wanted to believe that her Ash was not this woman. Or whatever it was. How could it possible be her crazy bitch? Ash was weird, but she wasn't some plague-causing murder-ghost. And yet there were too many uncanny coincidences.

Danny shook his head and leaned closer to Dolores,

absently cleaning up the tomato soup spray with a paper napkin from McDonalds. “No. I don’t. But I can’t explain what happened either. And we poached that bear, so I can’t tell anyone anything to have them go check it out and I’m too chicken-shit to go back out there myself. I didn’t go to the hospital, so nobody except you knows that I was sick.”

“But you got better, right? That’s a good sign, that means the other victims will get better too right?”

“Well, that’s where shit gets even weirder. By the time I realized that if I didn’t go to the hospital, I was gonna die, I couldn’t even stand up. Then another freaky woman showed up at my house. But not the same woman and this one didn’t have a dick. This time she only changed her eyes, not her whole face. I thought she’d come to kill me, but she put her hand on my face and it was like some part of me came back to life, and I could feel the sickness syphoning out of me like she was charcoal sucking up poison. I felt better but I tried to grab her to ask her some questions and she disintegrated, just like the other one. Just like my weird doppelganger with tits. Since then I’ve basically been questioning my sanity and if my whole house wasn’t spattered in blood from my illness, I’m not sure I’d even believe it myself. And then... then when Mom came up sick, all I could think of was that... that... when it was inside me, I had the distinct sense that it had *seen* her. Like I’d led it to her. Like I caused this.”

“But you said that the doctors all said it’s cancer, right? And Mom has smoked two packs a day since she was a toddler. It was never a question of *if* she’d get lung cancer but *when* she’d get it. I don’t think they’re related, Danny.”

“Do you believe me, Lorri?”

Dolores looked into her brother’s haggard face and debated whether to tell him about Ash, but she was too scared that he would come after Ash. Too scared of losing the first friend she’d ever had, the first real friend. She desperately wished that Ash had a phone.

“Yeah, I do believe you, because some things are just too fucking weird to be made up. But are you really better? Like the woman healed you? Maybe she didn’t mean to make you sick? Maybe it was an accident?”

“Yeah, I guess. But they weren’t the same woman, so maybe the second one was just a hallucination I had from blood loss right before I turned the corner? I wish Cody was around. I can’t believe he just offed himself like that. Shit, and now Mom. I’m worn out, Lorri. I’m just fucking done, you know?”

“You cannot be done. Don’t talk like that in the same breath as talking about your friend who hung himself, please.”

“I won’t kill myself. What would you do without me?” He obviously meant this as a joke, but Dolores didn’t think it was funny at all.

She smacked his arm. “I wouldn’t know what to do without you, you’re half my friends.”

“Oh right, I almost forgot about your new roommate. I can’t believe you’re letting some weird homeless chick live with you.”

“She’s my only other friend, so be nice. Plus, karma. If I

ever become homeless hopefully I'll make a friend who will let me crash on their couch."

"I'm not going to let you be homeless. Although I guess if my job folds we might just be homeless together. I guess we could come live here, if you can call that living."

"Uck, let's not even contemplate that horror."

"I was serious about Colt though, his older brother works with me, you know. He's back in town and he asked about you."

"Dude, I'm over that guy."

"That's fine, but you should just go get a piece. I bet you haven't gotten laid in... ooooooh, ever?"

"Shut the fuck up! Like you're doing any better up here in Sausage Fest, North Dakota. Are you hitting the mobile brothels? There's nothing sexier than a dirty camper full of STD and crab-riddled whores."

"You are disgusting, you know that?" he said, but he laughed. "And no, I may not be a good Christian like Mom pretends, but I stay the fuck away from that trailer." Then he smirked and said, "Why didn't you bring your friend with you? I'd like to meet her. Is she hot?"

"Yeah she is actually. Or at least the cute guy I work with put the moves on her."

"Why isn't he putting the moves on you?"

“I assume he’s intimidated by my dazzling intellect and silverback shoulders?”

Danny chuckled a little and then became serious again.

“I mean it, though, I want to meet this Ash girl if she’s going to be living with you. It’s super weird that her name is Ash, especially given my recent experiences. You said she’s foreign or something?”

Dolores couldn’t find her voice, so she nodded weakly and hoped that her brother would forget about his desire to meet her odd roommate.

17 / *THE HIPPO IN A WALMART*

DOLORS REALIZED that the watchedness was back as she tossed and turned most of the night. It was different this time. She felt almost as if whatever was watching her was trying to respect her privacy. But she also felt a familiarity about the intrusion, like when your dog watched you shower. A dog in the bathroom is a little odd, but nothing to worry about.

She did worry about running into Colt while she was back in Muskoten. She knew it was unlikely, but not impossible. What Danny didn't know was that Dolores's last interaction with Colt had been sleeping with him. She had slept with him and then found out that he was engaged to Chelsea Hammersmark of all damn people. Chelsea's father was the mayor of Muskoten. Dolores had felt so stupid. It wasn't that she had a moral problem with being the other woman, but she did have a problem with being duped.

It was also disappointing because she thought that she and Colt had a real connection. And he was six-seven. And Dolores's mother deeply disapproved of him because Colt's mother was from the Crow tribe in Montana. And he was so

sweet to Dolores. And they could laugh together for hours. And he was never ashamed of her. Never ashamed, even though he was a jock and star of the basketball team. Not even her own mother was unashamed of her.

They had been in each other's orbits from second grade on, when he moved to Muskoten. They took many of the same classes in high school and he liked anime too. They shared missing fathers and disappointing mothers. She remembered one evening on the rugged butte that overlooked their town he had braided her hair with his long, strong, skilled fingers and that chaste act had left her breathless and aching to be with him. They had night-hiked up there as a sort of mutual dare when a large grizzly bear had been raiding trash bins all over town. Colt had assured her that the big boy lived up in a cave near the top of the bluff.

He had dated Chelsea on and off all of their senior year, but Dolores hadn't seen them together for a while. She remembered him asking her what her plans were that spring evening as his fingers trailed over her scalp. His own hair was in a sloppy man-bun over the shaved lower half. His hair was as long as hers and twice as thick, lusciously deep black, so black that it looked maroon in the right light, not blue the way some black hair did. She'd told him that she was leaving Muskoten and headed west. Her plan was to be a brilliant scientist once she got free of their dead-end town and her dead-end mother.

She had waited for him to kiss her after that, but he seemed to withdraw into himself after she proclaimed her desire to flee. Then, when they'd run into each other at a pre-graduation party the following night, she boldly told him that if he wanted

a farewell kiss, he better get it because she was leaving the next day right after graduation.

He had laced his long fingers with hers and driven her to his uncle's place. Colt sometimes stayed there in his uncle's camper when his mom was on a bender. He opened the door and they folded their long, strong, young bodies onto the flimsy bed with its thin, rubber-foam mattress, and she'd had her first everything all in one heated night. It wasn't exactly what she hoped it would be, but it was more tender and fulfilling than she'd heard other girls talk about. He held her face in his hands after the first time, kissing her everywhere, and he had whispered, "You shouldn't run away."

Dolores had laughed and said, "You could catch me if I ran away."

He had smiled sadly at that and they had sex again and then he said that she could stay if she wanted, that his uncle didn't mind and he would drive her home in the morning if she wouldn't get into too much trouble.

"What do I care if I get in trouble?" she had asked and curled her long body against his longer one.

Then, during the lead-up to graduation, she had wandered, ungainly and huge toward a gaggle of girls that were sometimes pleasant to her, but never nice, and sometimes most definitely not-nice. They were all cooing and clucking over Chelsea. Dolores saw the shitty, tiny diamond on her finger and if she could've pulled her body into an event horizon and destroyed the world, she would've right then. She didn't stay near the pack of happy girls long enough to find out how long that piece

of shit ring had been on Chelsea's manicured finger. She steeled herself to give Colt a look that would freeze the tropical Amazon and felt vindicated in her choice to flee wretched Muskoten.

Dolores snapped back to the present and felt the tears slipping out of the corners of her eyes. She wiped her face and got up to see if Danny was up and about. She saw the bathroom was unoccupied, so she hurried in to take a shower. She tried to push the memories of Muskoten from her mind. She was here for Danny. She was here to maybe bring some comfort to her mother, if it was true that the sick woman had been calling her. She was not here to wander down the *what-if* trail with Colt. Newly divorced Colt. Who got divorced after a year and a half? Men who fucked other women in camps while freshly engaged, she supposed.

Once she was showered and dressed (and not thinking about Colt), Dolores found Danny drinking coffee and staring out the large window in their kitchen. The landscape was a smear of gray, taupe, brown, and bits of white from the last snowstorm. The sky sat heavy on the little town, making it look eerily adrift, like there was nothing beyond its borders. Dolores felt her breath speeding up. Then the watchedness settled on her like warm hands and she felt an odd relief. Was she going crazy again? Had her body developed a sort of imaginary, invisible friend to cope with stress?

Danny turned his bright eyes to her and he grinned. "Hey, you lazy bum. You ready to go see Mom? I thought we'd swing by The Bakin' Barn on our way and grab some cinnamon rolls in case she's up to eating something."

“Sure, whatever. Why does she want me? You’re the one she likes.”

“Harsh, Lorri, she loves you.”

“Oh, come on, you know what I mean. She loves me in an obligatory fashion, as a partial genetic match, not as a person. You, on the other hand, she loves as the second coming of Christ.”

“Hey, it’s not like I like her weird infatuation with me. She keeps telling me I can always come back here and live with her forever if I can’t find a wife. It’s weird, Lorri, it’s not nice.” The phrase made Dolores stifle a laugh as she thought of some of Ash’s phrases. She was sure her mother would not be as excited to see *the* Dolores after a year and a half as Ash was to see her after just one shift at Starbucks.

“Where’d you go just now?” Danny asked.

“Huh?” Dolores said.

“You were way zoned out... Let’s go before you chicken out.”

“Why would I chicken out?”

“You’ll see.”

“She’s that bad?”

“Something like that.”

When they arrived at The Bakin' Barn Dolores felt good old-fashioned, small town eyes watching her the minute she unfurled her lanky frame from Danny's truck. She saw old Karen Wiggins, who she had waitressed with throughout high school. It amazed her that Karen wasn't dead from lung cancer. Karen had probably never had a breath of air that wasn't laced with smoke—she used to keep a cigarette burning in the staff bathroom at Circle the Wagons, taking a drag in between putting up tickets and taking orders.

Deep mauve lipstick spidered out across Karen's skin through the fine wrinkles that puckered her mouth as she said, "Hey, there, Dolores, about time you came back for a visit. We miss you and your ranch mixing arms. Never have had another girl that could mix that bucket of ranch like you."

Well, that was charming. Dolores thought she could die happy now, having permanently impressed the other waitresses at Circle the Wagons with her ability to whip a five gallon bucket of mayonnaise and ranch mix back and forth fast enough that no stirring was necessary. Danny stifled a laugh as Dolores exchanged a few pleasantries before they ducked into The Bakin' Barn. Dolores did love their cinnamon rolls, but she hated to admit she was excited for anything in Muskoten. She was about to say just that to Danny when she stopped in her tracks.

Standing back by the large ovens was a man even taller than her. Broader shouldered than her. His hair was still shaved below and the rest was tucked up in a Minnesota Timberwolves beanie, bulging at the crown of his head, and a few shiny black strands had broken free and trailed down his long neck. Dolores turned to flee and ran smack into Danny, who

she had forgotten was a solid five inches shorter than her, until she almost wiped him out. She always thought of him as her big brother, but he wasn't big. He was average. She was big. She was huge, by small town standards. Old men and women drinking their morning coffee while exchanging their meager gossip stared at the siblings openly.

Danny reeled back into the door, as Dolores ran into him. He said, "Jeez, you big galoot, what the hell--"

"You shut up!" she hissed, "You knew, didn't you? You planned this. You fucker. You fucking motherfucker piece of shit."

He chuckled and said, "Now, now, that's not very ladylike for a dainty little creature like yourself. Come on, don't be a wuss, Lorri. What would it hurt to say hello? Besides, you know you want one of those cinnamon rolls. You'd eat those by the dozen when your dad used to give us money."

Dolores was about to straight-arm Danny out of her way like a wide receiver after a great catch, but then she heard her name in a knee-weakening and familiar voice.

"Dolores? Holy shit! Come here!" Colt came loping out from behind the counter and Dolores had the briefest glimpse of how normal-sized girls must feel as he squeezed her into a hug and effortlessly lifted her off the ground. He swayed back and forth with her and whispered in her ear, "The fuck did you leave like that for? I didn't even have a phone number for you!"

She pushed back off of him and landed with a thud befit-

ting her size as she said, “Oh yeah, I left it with your fiance, she must not have passed it on.”

Colt’s smile died and his dark eyes, with their thick black lashes, looked so wounded that Dolores immediately regretted what she’d said. Then he stood up straight and the smile returned.

“Well, I know I have some ‘splainin’ to do, so how about I take you out to dinner up in Bismarck. I’ll drive. I can pick you up at five?” His smile was radiantly white in his darkly tanned face.

Danny stood a respectful distance away, pretending to peruse the baked goods with the scrutiny of a health inspector. She cocked her head, then straightened it, feeling a little too Ash-like. And she was suddenly aware of the humming, buzzing feeling of being watched again.

“What for, Colt? You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” she said.

“But I want to. I want to go out with you. I want to catch up.”

“I’m not moving back. I’m just here for a day or two.”

“Danny said a week.”

“That bastard! Either way. It’s just a temporary situation.”

“Isn’t every situation a temporary situation? Come on,

please? It'll be fun." Then he lowered his voice and stepped a little closer to her and said, "I could braid your hair again."

Dolores felt absurd, but all she wanted was for Ash to be there so she could ask Ash's advice, which would be nonsensical and have nothing to do with anything, but Dolores wished her only friend were there nonetheless.

"Look, I don't want to drive anywhere, I just drove all day and half the night, how about we just go for a night hike or something?"

"It's fucking December, you just going to knock me out and leave me to freeze to death?"

"Don't be a pussy. Come get me at five, we'll go early so you don't freeze your balls off."

He chuckled, but then his face fell into a frown. "I'm sorry about your mom, Lorri."

She almost winced at his use of her nickname. Nobody besides Danny had ever used the nickname and it sounded strange when anyone else tried, but coming from Colt it sounded so normal, so nice. She bowed her head a little and said, "Yeah, me too. Could we get three cinnamon rolls to go, we're headed over to see her at the hospital now."

"Yeah, of course. I just pulled a batch out of the oven, I'll give you those, even though I'm supposed to sell the cold ones first."

Dolores wanted to ask how he'd ended up back here after

getting a full ride to play basketball at Gonzaga, but that would have to wait for their night hike. Chelsea was also going to Gonzaga, but she didn't have a scholarship, didn't need a scholarship. Danny paid for the cinnamon rolls after a bit of banter about Colt's older brother, Stetson. But Colt's eyes kept darting to Dolores, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

Dolores still felt her crazy, watched, feeling, but it felt distant now, like whatever watched her had withdrawn.

18 / THE ALONE

THE DOLORES LEFT in her exoskeleton and we are sad that it didn't want us to accompany it to the Danny, but we realize that perhaps this is better. We are still unsure if the Danny saw our Ash eyes and we are afraid that the Danny would tell the Dolores we are not-nice, even though we didn't mean to be not-nice to the Danny. We are grateful for the Danny, because without breathing into the Danny, we might never have found the Dolores. Just Dolores. Our crazy, crazy bitch.

We wish to be with the Dolores now, but we are not and we do not like this feeling. It is not-nice. It is the alone. The lonesome, the lonely, the all alone.

We are sad that the Dolores left us here and left while it was angry about the mouth-smashing that we did with the Lane. We do not know now what is expected with the Lane. We are interested in trying more extensive mouth-smash-kissing, and perhaps more of the body-touching that the Lane instigated. The Dolores said we could do these things, but it said it in the way that we have learned means it is actually Not Allowed. We must

stay away from the Lane, because the Lane is now interested in being into various parts of us.

So we make a choice, and we may regret the choice, like we regretted getting shot. We go to the place of the Dolores's mother-thing because we do not want to be the alone anymore. The alone makes us want to breathe into every squishy biped we see so that we can at least be learning.

Our last breathing into a squishy taught us a whole new set of mouth-noises, the Spanish. We like the Spanish, but we are sure that this is like the bear and the cat and the dog mouth-noises, and it is Not Allowed except with the Dolores. We suspect the Dolores would yell at us if we used cat or dog or Spanish mouth-noises with it.

We find the Dolores and the Danny. We arrived when the Dolores parted ways with the Danny and slunk into a much smaller, less soft nest. We would like to remake ourselves next to the Dolores and soothe its worried face. Is the Dolores worried about the mother-thing, even though the mother-thing does not think the Dolores is as nice as the Danny?

We do not like the mother-thing. We also felt that the mother-thing was already very sick when we breathed into it. When we inhaled ourselves back, we thought that the mother-thing would be remaking itself very soon, but now we know that many of the squishy bipeds are terrible at remaking.

We watch the Dolores carefully, trying to be soft and silent. The Dolores is so clever, it is one of the things we love about the Dolores. But it also means that we cannot watch the Dolores as much as we want. When the Dolores is with the very large,

strong biped with nice dark eyes, we keep our distance, but then we see the Dolores is sad and we move in closer. We want to remake and make sure this new long biped is nice to the Dolores, Just Dolores. It must not be unjust to Just Dolores and the Dolores looks so sad that we know that the tall one did do something not-nice, even if we don't know what. But it also did the nice body squeeze. The squishies can be very confusing with their elaborate social customs.

We decide that we must watch over the Dolores when it goes with this biped at the five. This biped might be able to overpower the Dolores, possibly using the mugging or the raping, but we will keep the Dolores safe from the large one. If the large one tries to hurt the Dolores we will unmake the large one so that it can never remake itself again. We will take and learn all the things inside the Colt if it tries to hurt the Dolores.

We hear that the Danny and the Dolores are going to the mother-thing in the healing place and we know that we should not go there in case the mother-thing has gotten more clever as it nears its unmaking. We will go find one to breathe into to see if there is something to learn about the Dolores here in the Musketon. It seems that it spent its larval phase here. We wish we could just remake and be with the Dolores if it is sad. To wrap our arms around it and let it press our heads together while it leaks eye fluids of sadness. We like to comfort the Dolores. We would give it a nice body squeeze.

For now though, we seek a biped of similar maturity to the Dolores, suspecting that we should not breathe into the large one just yet since the Dolores smells like it smells around the Lane and we suspect this is some part of being into another biped. We drift over the Musketon and we eventually find one that we

think will provide some information about the Dolores. We go behind a lair, hoping to surprise it when it enters its exoskeleton—a very large exoskeleton with very large wheels and two big pipes sticking up.

We stroll around the corner and the biped says, “Oh!” and smiles.

We made ourselves a pleasant-looking biped like we see on the glowing entertainment box. We are cold, very cold, and we want to be done with the breathing because we don't want to bother trying to find the drapes. We suppose if the Dolores doesn't know we have a pelt sometimes, it can't say the pelt is Not Allowed.

We grow a nice pelt and the squishy screams, opening its mouth wide as we breathe into it. We see the things that it has seen, and then we suck ourselves back out and swirl into the sky. It falls to its knees, hacking blood onto the cracked gray carapace the bipeds grow all over the world.

We see all the places this biped has been, and are now able to travel to those places, but we don't want to travel. We will stay near the Dolores for now. We do not want to be the alone and we do not want to make Dolores sad by going back to the Lane.

We will wait for the Dolores near the healing place.

19 / *THE HEALING PLACE*

THE SMELL of the hospital made Dolores's skin crawl. It was like depression in olfactory form. The scent of mortality. She could practically see the grim reaper lurking in the hallways, his rusty scythe at the ready.

The watched feeling had evaporated as soon as Dolores stepped into the hospital, just as it had when she would step into Starbucks. She wasn't sure whether her suspicions about the reason for this made her more or less crazy. She looked around furtively, sure she would see Ash lurking nearby. But there was no Ash. Only Dolores's craziness.

Lane had texted her that he hadn't seen so much as a glimpse of Ash, but it wasn't like he was staking out Dolores's place. He assured her that if he saw their weird friend, he would let her know right away.

This did not comfort her. She knew from her experience living with Ash that it was unlikely Lane would ever come across Ash, especially after Dolores's jealous outburst right

before she left. Ash would probably never touch Lane again now for fear of upsetting Dolores. Some friend Dolores was; no wonder she always ended up alone.

Danny led her and the cinnamon rolls to their mother's room, nodding at the nurses, who greeted them both by name. Some were mothers of her high school classmates, some were the sisters, some stared blankly at her, their children too far on either side of Dolores to know who she was.

Then they were there, at the foot of the bed that held her hollowed out and faded mother, a husk of her former self, blood crusted around her mouth and nostrils. She was inside a plastic tent and dark red spots freckled everything around what was left of her mother. She turned to Danny as tears glazed her eyes and she said softly, "Shit, Danny, how long does she have?"

He shook his head slowly and said, "They say it could be any time now, she's barely getting any oxygen, that's why she's so--"

A blood-filled, gurgling scream interrupted them. "Get out of here! You ain't my boy! Get out!" Dolores's mother hacked until a huge clot landed on the side of the tent near Dolores. She burst into tears as her mother continued, "Dolores, run, run away from that... that... abomination!" She wheezed and blood came bubbling out her nostrils.

Danny began to back out of the room, tears streaking his face. Dolores said in a voice wet with snot, not blood, "Mom, calm down, it's Danny. It's the real Danny. Don't be afraid. We're here. Danny's here, don't be scared. We love you."

Her mother's eyes briefly cleared and she gasped, "Bring 'im closer, but don't let 'im in the tent, Dolores," and she began to blubber; a horrible, bloody affair. She looked like a vampire that had thrown up. But Dolores brought Danny forward and watched while her mother's chest heaved, a mist of blood erupting from her with every breath. Finally she nodded. "You're my boy. You're my actual boy. Why would you do that to me, Danny? Why would you give your mother a scare like that? Why would you do that, my baby boy?"

Danny's face darkened and he said, "What are you talking about, Mom?"

Her mother gasped and then her head flopped to the side.

Danny rang the call button for a nurse and then sprinted into the hallway, shouting for help. Dolores stood rooted to the spot. She hadn't really believed until this moment that her mother could be dying. Her mother wasn't that old: only fifty-one. Dolores had been annoyed the entire drive. She'd been frustrated that she was wasting her only time off to drive to her miserable little town rather than... well, rather than what? Hanging out with Ash? Had the mysterious whack-job become so important in such a short period of time?

With a pang of longing, Dolores realized that she had. She wanted Ash with her there. She wanted that awkward excuse for a hug. She wanted to fold their bodies into a tiny bathtub while Ash imitated MarioKart noises and animal sounds from Planet Earth and their legs pressed together like two overgrown toddler sisters.

Then her mother drew in a great, rattling breath and her

chest shuddered and more red mist flew into the air around her. The nurse and doctor came in and they donned what looked like clear welder's masks, and ducked inside the tent. The nurse did her best to mop up what was foaming out of their mother's mouth. Dolores wished that Ash were there to protect them all from this, from every part of this: the symptoms, the death, the witnessing.

Danny and Dolores stood listening quietly as the doctor explained that he had never experienced a case quite like this but that there was no obvious pathogen besides the lung cancer. Dolores suggested to the silver-haired doctor that her mother might have the plague that was spreading all over the country on top of the lung cancer.

The doctor gave her a patronizing smile, despite having to crane his head back to look up at her, and said, "Sweetheart, I understand that this is upsetting, but that disease you are talking about is just an especially virulent strain of pneumonia, not a plague. We have tested her and the pathology on everything we've tested has been clear of everything but aggressive cancer."

"It's clear on the plague victims too," Dolores said.

The doctor sighed dramatically and Dolores wanted to kick his legs out from underneath his stubby little body. He continued, "I understand losing your mother is painful, but there's nothing we can do except try to keep her comfortable. The cancer has consumed most of her lungs, and has spread to other parts of her body, including her brain. She will have less and less lucidity with the tumors in her brain. Enjoy what time you

have with her. I'm sorry that she's suffering this way. She's a good, God-fearing woman."

Dolores was fairly certain his eyes lingered malevolently on her when he said that last part. He went to their mother's church, but he had also refused to prescribe birth control for Dolores as a teenager.

Danny and Dolores returned back into their mother's hospital room where the weak winter light gave the dying woman a corpse-like pallor. Snow had started sifting down and they were about to sit down and wait for their mother to regain consciousness when they heard a cacophony out in the hall and a man cried out, "Some crazy bitch burned my lungs!" Danny sprang back up and his eyes jumped to Dolores's as they both ran out into the hall.

Stumbling into the hospital was a guy Dolores had gone to high school with, in the class below her. His flannel shirt and Carhartt jacket were spattered with blood and he had blood dripping off his chin and out his nose. His eyes were red with tears. The nurse that had been with their mother quickly re-donned her blood-spatter-protection mask and approached him. Ezra, that was his name. The nurse told him to calm down and she led him toward the ER as she called the doctor in what she obviously thought was a calm voice, but sounded more like the bleat of a panicked sheep.

Danny turned to Dolores with wide eyes. "Did you hear what he said? Did you hear it?" She nodded and he whispered, "What the fuck is happening, Lorri? What the fuck is this thing? What is it?"

Dolores began to fear that she knew the answer and it broke her heart. She could never tell Danny. He would never understand, and aside from sleeping with Colt, it would be the first thing she had ever kept from him. She couldn't lose him. And she couldn't lose Ash.

20 / *THE COLT*

DANNY DECLINED to leave the hospital when Dolores got ready to head home to meet Colt. He just shook his head. She groaned. “You’re making me feel like a real shit for leaving.”

“Nah, don’t. I don’t think she’ll wake up anymore, but if she does, I can call you. But you should go. I know you think I’m just ribbing you, but Colt’s a good guy, his brother’s a good guy too. You could do worse.”

She rolled her eyes. “Super glad that you think so highly of me.”

He laughed weakly. “That’s not what I mean. I just... you never had much fun growing up, Lorri. Go have some fun. I’ll take the night shift. You can come over in the morning. Just take my truck home. But beware of strange women, okay? I don’t want our family’s only non-smoker to end up like this.” Danny had only quit smoking a couple years before when their mother had gotten diagnosed with emphysema and been prescribed the devil’s oxygen. Dolores gave him a big hug.

“It’s really kind of a rip that you got all the height,” Danny said.

“No shit.”

“Go feel small for one evening.”

Dolores left that horrible place with a small smile. She drove Danny’s truck warily in the rapidly falling snow. As she stepped back into her mother’s home, the watched feeling came back and Dolores said softly, feeling distinctly insane, “Ash? I don’t know how, but I think you’re here. Go home, Ash. Go home.” The feeling weakened but didn’t go away. Dolores shook her head and screamed as she turned into a warm body.

“Who you talking to, Lorri?”

“Holy shit, Colt, it should be illegal for someone your size to be so light on your feet.”

He chuckled and shyly took her hand. “Looks like you got the place to yourself, you sure you want to go out hiking? Might be slick out there.”

She would be suspicious of his intentions, but he was bundled up and wearing heavy duty hiking boots, which she certainly hadn’t brought with her. Or owned. She did have a pair of sneakers, but those were back in Bozeman sitting next to Ash’s by the front door. She looked down at her worn out Dr. Martens and shrugged. “Let me layer up a bit. We don’t have to go far.”

Colt drove them outside of town to the gully where the

deer trail wound back and forth up the backside of the bluff. Dolores thought it would be awkward given how they had left things after graduation. She expected that he'd come up with a bunch of dumbass excuses for being a prick, but he didn't.

"I'm sorry, you know, about what I did. I know that doesn't mean much now, but I am. Chelsea scared me. Right after you and me, you know, after that night, I had a bunch of crazy texts from her and that morning, she told me she was knocked up. I didn't know how, because I swear, Lorri, I swear, I always bag it. My brother scared me so much about my dick rotting off that I don't even know if I'll ever be able to have kids. But I just felt like I had to take responsibility, but I wanted to talk to you, but then you just left. You just fucking left without so much as a slap across my face."

She laughed at that. "I wouldn't have slapped you. I should've known better. But I don't regret it. Not really. It was nice."

"That is not the way I'd hoped you'd describe our lovemaking."

"Lovemaking? Really? What are you, a Harlequin author in secret?" He looked at her so blankly that she laughed again. "Look, it doesn't matter, okay, it's all water under the bridge. So do you have a kid or did Chelsea have a miscarriage or what?"

"She was never pregnant. I got suspicious after we got hitched when I saw tampons in the trash. Then she fessed up that she'd never been preggo, but that Andrea had seen you and me leave the party and she wanted me back and she panicked."

“Wow. So how long did things last after that?”

“About as long as it takes to go through the pain in the ass paperwork of a divorce. Luckily we didn’t have a house or anything. We just lived in an apartment together, so I left.”

“And you left Gonzaga? You left a full ride? You stupid asshole. What I wouldn’t give for a full ride anywhere.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m just home for Christmas. I scraped by my first semester. I take it you never watched any of my games?” His teeth shone out in the darkness, the reflected light off the snow reflecting again off their whiteness.

“Nope. I don’t have cable, or however people watch sports.”

“You got a boyfriend?”

Dolores snorted a laugh. “No. No I do not.”

“I bet you could get financial aid to Gonzaga.”

“Whoa, Colt, slow your roll, buddy. I haven’t seen you in a year and a half, and before that, you took my virginity and got engaged to someone else within a twenty-four hour period, so forgive me if I’m just gonna keep on keeping on with my life in Bozeman.”

“You like Bozeman? I didn’t know it was your virginity. You were good.”

“Honestly, if it’s warm and wet, isn’t it always good for you guys?”

“Damn, so crass! No, it’s not. You were good. I liked fucking you more than I ever liked fucking Chelsea.”

“Well, that’s a real comfort.”

“Don’t be mad, Lorri.”

“Don’t call me that.”

They started walking up the trail and he walked behind her, touching her hip lightly whenever she had to maneuver over some obstacle in the dim moonlight. “I think this might be a terrible idea. We should go back.” She turned around and their bodies came together. Dolores thought of how good it felt when Ash held her and she suddenly ached for physical contact, something that had been missing for so much of her life.

Colt pulled her close and turned her face up to his. The snow whirled around them, biting into her knuckles where they peeked out of her sweatshirt sleeves. He wrapped his big muscular body around hers and kissed her forehead. He whispered, “You’re going to freeze to death in just a couple sweat-shirts. You lose all your sense in Bozeman, or just your winter coat?”

“Just my coat. And maybe some of my sense. Or all of it. I don’t know. It remains to be seen.”

“Danny coming home tonight?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m supposed to go relieve him in the morning.”

“You want some company?”

“Colt...” He interrupted her arguments by kissing her. *Mouth-smashing*, she thought, but the urge to smile was diminished by how much she enjoyed his mouth-smashing. She had forgotten how nice kissing was; it had been so long, and it had only been with him.

Then he suddenly pulled away from her and swiped at his nose. She felt crushed by the watched feeling. Colt looked around warily, like he felt it too. He rubbed his fingers together where he had taken his glove off to dab at his nose. She could see in the moonlight that it was bleeding and her stomach dropped. He looked up at her, “Fuck, I’m sorry, I seem to have sprung a leak. Let’s go back to my truck.” He kept glancing around as if he expected at any moment for someone to lurch out of the snow and attack them. He said, “Man, I suddenly got the heeby-jeebies like someone was watching us. That freaked me out.”

Dolores looked around and said, a little too loudly, “Yeah, me too. I hope it stops. It would make me sad if it kept happening.” Then she muttered under her breath, “It’s not allowed to watch while people kiss.” But the feeling only withdrew. Now Dolores felt certain that somehow, someday, Ash was here. And Ash didn’t like Dolores kissing Colt.

21 / THE NOT-NICE FEELING

WE KNOW NOW that the Dolores is too clever. The Dolores can sense us when we are not remade. This is upsetting. We very much liked being able to be with the Dolores and now the Dolores is indicating that we are Not Allowed. It doesn't yell at us because it is with the tall biped. We do not like the not-nice feeling we get when the tall one mouth-smashes the Dolores.

We know that the Dolores likes the Colt and the Colt is not hurting the Dolores or making the Dolores sad, so we also know that it is not-nice for us to feel this way toward the Colt. We wish that we had taken a form like the Colt, but now we cannot remake ourself like that biped since the bipeds are so good at identifying other bipeds. Clever, bald, troublesome, soft, squishies! It is our crazy bitch!

We are Not Allowed. We should not follow the exoskeleton back to the mother-thing's lair, but how can we let the Colt have all the touching of the Dolores? Will the Colt get to have the grooming tub time? Will it get to press its long dark shins against the Dolores's long pale shins? The glimmer we got without breathing into the Colt, we saw its fingers in the

Dolores's shiny black hair. We wish that we had thought to run our own fingers through the Dolores's long hair.

We are Not Allowed. We must not go into the lair. We must Go Away, like during the stink-making. We know that the Dolores yells when we do something that is Not Allowed. We remake in the small grassy pen behind the mother-thing's lair and we find that we are leaking the eye saltwater. The sad juice. We are sad. We came here to escape the alone, but now we feel the alone even more. It is worse to be in the alone when the Dolores is so near. We blink away the sad eye fluid and look through the clear-hards. We see that the Colt is still oozing blood-juice. We unmake and try to fix it without remaking. We swirl back outside and watch.

The Dolores cleans the Colt's face and then she is mouth-smashing again and we are so full of the not-nice feeling about the Colt that some bear words escape us. They stop mouth-smashing and we run, but not before we think the Dolores might have seen us. We will run for days. We will run until the not-nice feeling in our thorax goes away. We do not wish to make the Dolores sad, but the Dolores has made us sad. We are Not Allowed to mouth-smash the Lane, but the Dolores is mouth-smashing another biped. Maybe we are Not Allowed to mouth-smash at all? But the mouth-smashing seems like a cure for the alone.

It seems the Dolores now knows that we made the Danny blood cough. That we unmade the mother-thing. The Dolores might yell at us. The Dolores might tell us it is Not Allowed to unmake the squishies. We do not care - there are so many squishies - but we won't unmake any of the Dolores's other genetically similar bipeds or the ones she wishes to mouth-smash. If it

is not allowed at all, we will stop learning. We will stop knowing the other places that the humans congregate. We will not learn the other mouth-noises. But we like learning. We like seeing. We like being. It is not our fault that the bipeds are so unskilled at remaking. They must adapt. They must learn too.

We decide that we will run to the Lane. Maybe the Lane can explain the complex social interactions involving the mouth-smashing. Maybe the Lane will help us feel less of the not-nice feeling. We do not like the not-nice feeling we have about the Colt being into the Dolores. It is like being shot from the inside and we do not like being shot. Not from the inside or the outside. Both are not-nice.

We could unmake and get back to the Lane sooner, but the running is part of us. The Dolores doesn't understand the running. We do it to breathe, or maybe to eat, the way the squishies must always put other plant and animal and artificial matter in their mouths to stay alive. We are like the sharks that we saw when we visited the big water, the ocean, the squishies call it.

We explored the depths and we saw those sleek, perfectly designed predators, but we saw they cannot hold still. We feel like that. We can hold still, but we do not know for how long. Especially when there is so much to learn. So much surface to see, so much ocean to plumb, we cannot be still for too long. Only with the Dolores can we be still. If we did not have the Dolores, we would breathe into squishies all the time. But with the Dolores, we are at peace. With the Dolores we can breathe. With the Dolores it is okay that we are not learning, not seeing, not doing.

We are freezing, but in the dark and the wild and the uninhabited lands where the bipeds haven't built their artificial caves, we grow a nice plush pelt and we run, suddenly free from the horrible icy cold of the white snow. We drop into the snow every time an exoskeleton appears with its blazing eyes on the horizon. We save a raccoon from one of the exoskeletons and the exoskeleton brayed at us like a beast and then screeched to a halt, the biped inside it jumping out and running after us, but we were far too swift for it. The deer and other animals raise their noses and sniff at us because we are not a biped, we are not a bear, we are none of these other animals.

No, we are Ash and we are the alone.

22 / UNMAKING THE MOTHER-
THING

DOLORS WOKE up with snow-bright sun slanting in onto her tiny bed that overflowed with two tall, lean bodies. She blinked a few times to see if she was really sprawled with her legs entangled with Colt's. Yes, yes she was. And they were both naked.

The reason she awoke was the front door slamming. She sprang up and pulled on her jeans and shirt from the night before, not bothering with underwear. She closed the door quietly behind herself and walked out to the living room where Danny was kicking off his shoes. "I thought you were going to wait for me to..." she trailed off as she saw his bleary eyes, his snot-reddened nose. He shook his head, pressing his lips together so tightly they disappeared.

"She's gone, Lorri. She's dead. I wasn't even awake. I fell asleep in the chair, and when I woke up they were asking me if I wanted her resuscitated. I said no. She was covered in so much blood. It was like all her blood was on the outside and I knew she would never come back to us, not really. Fuck. Fuck!"

He crumpled onto the couch and Colt peeked out from her bedroom. She just waved him out and she slumped next to Danny, feeling ashamed at her lack of tears. She couldn't call them up. So she just held her smaller older brother while Colt nonchalantly came out of her room and sat beside her, wrapping his arms around them both. Danny didn't even look up. So they sat in silence for a long time.

Dolores noted that the watchedness had gone the night before (but had those been glowing green eyes in the window?) and hadn't been back. She felt a little guilty, like she'd banished her only friend. But she would explain the birds and the bees and why you didn't watch other people do them without permission once she was back in Bozeman.

The rest of the day, once Danny finally stopped crying, was a whirlwind of funeral arrangements. Luckily Danny could handle everything with the church. The good Christian ladies of Musketon did not approve of Dolores, no sir, they couldn't possibly approve of a heathen, but definitely not a giant, lanky heathen who was the daughter of a drunk. But Danny was there. Danny, who had always gone to church at his mother's side. Danny who had always looked like an angel. Danny, whose father had not been a drunk.

So casseroles and cookies and soups began pouring into their house until the fridge, freezer, and counter were full. Danny soberly and reverently carried excess dishes to the deep freeze as if anyone would be in the house to eat this largesse of mourning.

Dolores set to work trying to navigate the bureaucratic aspect of her mother's death. The drudgery of being put on

hold and filling out forms was so much more bearable than the endless stream of mourners. Danny greeted them and consoled them, accepting prayers and food in return. It took several days to sort everything out, and despite feeling both a vague shame and a brighter thrill, every night was spent in her bed with Colt, learning and luxuriating in each other's bodies. She felt comforted by Colt, but she still found herself missing Ash and fearing that she had hurt her only friend by making a new one.

The funeral passed at her mother's church and Dolores mumbled her way through hymn after hymn and tried not to fall asleep during the hour-long sermon that seemed to have very little to do with her mother or death. But Colt sat by her the whole time, Danny on her other side, and she was touched that Colt was so open about being with her, despite having recently divorced the mayor's daughter. Though she imagined people thought she and Colt deserved each other. On this point, she tended to agree.

Then her mother was in the ground and Dolores finally found tears. Heaving, gulping, sobbing tears as she stood by the finality of raw earth, gaping around the modest coffin that Danny had bought. Dolores thought about the fact that they had paid money for a box and put their dead mother into the box and put the box in the earth to rot. The thought nearly made Dolores throw up. Colt rubbed her back as she bent over and wept. Danny walked to the gates of the cemetery with the bulk of the mourners so she and Colt were alone.

Once she got ahold of herself, they walked back toward Colt's truck and he said quietly, almost tearfully, "I guess you'll go now."

“Yeah. I should. I’ll get fired if I’m not back by Sunday. Plus all my coworkers, or what’s left of them, will hate me.”

“Why will they hate you, Lorri? Your mom just died, it’s okay to need some time.”

Dolores let another sob shudder through her. “Yeah. Yeah. Time. No, it’s not that they wouldn’t want me to have time, but we’ve been really short-staffed. Four of my coworkers have that new horrible respiratory disease.” She found she couldn’t even mention the bloody cough without feeling like throwing up, remembering the last time she had seen her mother alive.

“That seems odd given how there’s so few cases but they’re all over the place. I guess they think Ezra has it. He’s still in the hospital from that night you saw him come in.”

Dolores nodded absently, suddenly realizing that he was right, it was odd that there were four cases from her Starbucks, plus another if you counted the customer who had died. Maybe Starbucks was the link, and not... not Ash. Dolores desperately wanted the link to be anything but Ash. And how could a person cause such violent illness without being sick themselves? Maybe it was like that first HIV patient, who spread it everywhere before he even knew he had it? Dolores itched to talk to Ash, and she wasn’t going to let that weirdo derail her with rants about the You or anything else. No, this time Ash would answer her.

She thought back on the fact that Ash had told her not to worry about the disease, that Ash would protect her. Maybe Ash wasn’t causing it, maybe she was some kind of secret spy scientist from another country, trying to track this new bio-

weapon. Though it was a pretty lame bio-weapon by all accounts. Only three deaths that she'd read about, and she supposed maybe Danny's friend Cody was an unknown casualty. And... did she even dare think that her mother was another casualty? No, the doctor had told her it was lung cancer.

Colt shepherded her through the reception. Danny mingled among the mourners, but Dolores hardly moved. She didn't eat anything, but she tried to be polite when people came by to express their condolences. The crowd began to dwindle and Danny quietly suggested she go home. Colt offered to drive her, and she followed him to his truck, feeling exhausted.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't even notice when Colt stopped in front of her house. He said, "You mind if I come in? If this is your last night, maybe this time you'll at least say goodbye?"

"Only if you promise not to propose to someone tomorrow morning."

Colt narrowed his eyes and said, "No one?"

23 / *THE RETURN OF THE
DOLORES*

DOLORES LAUGHED and turned to face Colt before they got out of the truck. “Tell me you didn’t just soft pedal a proposal after a few days?”

He grinned and shrugged, hopping out and loping around to open her door and help her down. He kissed her and walked her inside. Well then, Colt.

Dolores wasn’t sure why she was surprised that Ash wasn’t home when she arrived back in Bozeman late the next night. She’d been looking forward to telling her new friend about Colt, even if Ash maybe, impossibly, already knew about it. Had Dolores imagined those bioluminescent green eyes at the window of her mother’s house before she went to bed with Colt? She didn’t think so. Dolores crept through her house as though she were an invader rather than the actual rent-paying tenant of her home. But she was alone; the only evidence that Ash had been there at all was a molted set of clothing on the floor of the kitchen.

Dolores texted Colt that she’d made it and he sent her a

smoochie-face emoji. She stripped off her clothes and went into the bathroom. The silence in her house was unnerving after so long with a roommate here and in Musketon. She turned some music on her phone just to fill the void and then headed to bed after brushing her teeth. She screamed when she came out of the bathroom and Ash was standing in the living room wearing ski pants and a frilly ladies' blouse.

“Shit, Ash! You scared me! And what on earth are you wearing?”

Ash glanced down and back up with her guileless green eyes and said, “Drapes?”

“Clothes. We’ve talked about this. But, I mean, why that particular combination of things? Where do you even find these, uh, drapes?”

Ash narrowed her eyes. “They are not the Dolores’s drapes. We do not take the Dolores’s drapes. That is Not Allowed.”

“They would be too long anyway.”

“We could be longer.”

“Okay, look, I’m too tired to talk tonight, I’ve been driving for forever.”

“The Dolores is not old enough for forever. It is barely out of its larval form.”

“Ew, dude, just ew. Don’t ever talk about a human having a

larval form again. But will you stay... like in the morning? We need to talk.”

“Is the Dolores going to make us Go Away?”

“What? No, of course not, but we need to have a chat, so don’t scamper off silently like you normally do. And where were you anyway, in the fridge?”

“We think it would be unpleasantly cold in the fridge.”

“No doubt. Okay, goodnight, Ash. Get some sleep.”

“We are very glad the Dolores is home.” Ash moved toward her, but didn’t touch her. Her gleaming eyes looked wet. “We missed the Dolores. Are you still our crazy bitch?”

“Oh, Ash,” Dolores pulled Ash into a tight hug, “More and more every day, I think.”

Dolores pretended to go to bed, but then crept silently back up off her cheap mattress, hoping it wouldn’t give her away. She’d deliberately left her door open a crack so she could watch Ash without tipping off her exceptionally sneaky friend. What Dolores hadn’t told Ash was that she’d had three Wild Cherry Pepsis and a giant crappucino from a gas station, and there was no way she was sleeping anytime soon. She silently settled at an angle so she could watch Ash pacing around the living room, so silent on her bare feet that Dolores felt sure Ash could be a very successful ninja.

For a long time Ash just read. She was reading Dolores’s copy of *Brothers Karamazov*, her brow furrowed. She

frequently referred to her dictionary, but she never sat. Her pacing was more akin to most people's speed-walking. Dolores again wished for a pedometer to track her constantly moving friend's steps. Dolores was tempted to read on her Kindle while she spied on Ash, but she was afraid Ash would notice the pale glow of its screen.

After three hours, Ash set both books down without a sound and watched Dolores's door for a moment. Dolores held her breath, feeling a faint tickle of fear for the first time in her relationship with Ash. Could the strange woman sense her somehow? But then Ash paced a few more times and then she stopped and clicked off the lamp.

Now Dolores had confirmation that Ash's eyes did in fact glow. Then they glowed even brighter and Ash threw her head back like she was going to howl at the moon (which would not have surprised Dolores at all). Dolores squinted to see anything in the dim green light. Then, rising out of Ash's mouth came long fingers of what looked like dense smoke, or ashes.

Dolores clasped a hand over her mouth to keep herself quiet. Tendrils of ash swirled around and around out of Ash's mouth, glowing green from the light of her eyes, until suddenly, so suddenly it almost caused Dolores to scream, Ash's body collapsed in a heap on the floor. Dolores could restrain herself no more and she leapt to her feet, banging her hip on the knob and her cheek on the side of her door.

"Ash! Ash! What the ever-loving-fuck!" Dolores shrieked, reaching her friend's deflated body. Except that there was no body. There, where mere seconds before had been her very real, very tangible, very flesh and blood friend, there was now

only a pile of clothes. A sloughed off, artificial, horrifically mismatched pair of ski pants and fancy blouse.

Dolores whirled around, expecting Ash to be bent over, naked, and laughing at this neat trick. Dolores raced through the house for the second time since her return and this time she didn't skip the fridge or the kitchen cabinets or behind the ugly cloth skirt that someone had glued around her bathroom sink. She peered under her bed with her phone's flashlight. Then she raced out into the frigid night and checked all around the outside of her house.

Finally she shouted for Ash, inside and outside, until her neighbor opened a window and told her he would turn her into ash if she didn't shut the hell up and didn't she know it was three in the morning? She shut up and walked shakily back into her house. She nudged the latest shed pile of drapes around with her toe and growled loudly, wishing she could make a bear noise like her recently disintegrated friend. Would Ash reappear in the same manner? Would she reappear at all or had Dolores scared her off?

Dolores was exhausted as she dropped onto the couch with her head between her hands, but she knew she'd never be able to sleep with her friend in the wind, perhaps literally. She thought back to the weird experience Danny had described: hadn't he said that the woman had breathed ash into him? Could it be that Ash was some kind of alien and she traveled by turning into ash or dust or smoke or plasma or who-knew-what, but that she accidentally got into human lungs and caused the new disease? Maybe only people with compromised pulmonary health died because their lungs were already too damaged. Pack-a-day people like her mother.

Didn't Danny think that the thing that attacked him had seen their mother somehow? Did it go to her mother, and when her mother would've undoubtedly yelled at it, accidentally inhaled the substance? Had Ash inadvertently killed her mother and possibly others?

24 / THE NOT-NICE YELLING

WHEN WE RETURN to the Dolores, it is collapsed on the couch, doing the nest thing, but not in the nest. We still wish the Dolores wasn't so stingy with its nest. Especially now that we know the humans do a nice thing in the nest, an extended form of the mouth-smashing. What is it doing out here? Why does it hold our previous drapes? We were going to reuse those drapes today. Instead we quietly use the others that are still on the floor. The Dolores is always taking away our drapes and putting them in the strange machines that spins them and make them wet and then dry again.

Just as we complete the zipping, the Dolores begins to shout at us. It won't come near us, and it is not-nice yelling, waving the previous night's drapes at us. We do not know why the Dolores is making so much noise at us. Usually if we wear the drapes the squishies do not yell at us. We hold our hands up as we sometimes see squishies do as a sign of submissiveness in their entertainment on the glowing box.

"The Dolores is not happy? The Dolores is upset that we did

not stay? But we are back. We are back. Does it see that we are back?"

"What? Aren't you listening to me at all? I don't give a shit that you left, I care that you left by turning into some kind of weird smoke."

"Ash."

"Whatever. Wait—are you just admitting that you do some kind of crazy dissolving?"

"Does the Dolores mean the unmaking?"

The Dolores sits on the couch again, shaking its head. "What? What is unmaking?"

We cock our head to the side, forgetting that it is Not Allowed. "We go places sometimes by the unmaking, it is much faster than running. Did the Dolores watch us? We did not mean to wake the Dolores--"

"No! No. Stop. You didn't wake me. Were you in Musketon with me? Were you watching me?"

We straighten our head. We suspected that the Dolores could sense us. "We are sorry. We didn't know the Dolores would be sad about it. We were the alone. We felt sad. We only wanted to be with the Dolores."

"So you were there! What the fuck, Ash?"

"Is the fuck why it asked us to leave?"

"Where were you? I couldn't see you, but I could feel you."

"We were unmade. We were ash, as the Dolores saw."

The Dolores loses much of its facial coloration and covers its mouth with its paw. We did not realize that it would be so sad that we went to the Musketon. "We are sorry. Since we have had the Dolores, since we have been its crazy bitch, we do not like the alone. And we did not think the Dolores actually meant that we were Allowed to be with the Lane to fight the alone, the Dolores said it in the way that typically means something is Not Allowed. The Dolores said it in the sarcasm way. We are always the alone because of the Starbucks. Does the Dolores want us to Go Away?"

It is quiet for such a long time that we feel a new feeling: we think it is despair. We feel our body getting ready to unmake again, to go as far from the Dolores as we can, because otherwise we do not know how we will ever stay away from the Dolores. We say, fighting the sad eye-leak-juice, "We love the Dolores."

"Then no more watching me! No more of that! You hear me?"

"We hear the Dolores, but we cannot speak to whether the You hears."

"Ash, you're the you! Don't spy anymore. Don't freaking leave weird molted piles of clothing everywhere. Just don't do it. Just act like a human. Because I don't want you to go away, I don't want Ash to go away, but there are people who will defi-

nitely want you to go away if you keep doing those things. No more sci-fi shit, okay?"

We wish the Dolores would speak more plainly because we do not know what it is trying to convey. But we do understand that we do not have to Go Away, and we are happy. We do not care about the other things, but we know that we must say "okay" whenever another squishy says "okay," so we stroke the Dolores's hair and say, "Okay. Okay, the Dolores."

The Dolores sighs and trudges towards its nest compartment. It turns to us and says, "I'm really going to sleep this time."

We put on our trusty running shoes and we run. We are surprised that after so much watching the Dolores is only now upset about the watching. Perhaps it knows that we made the Colt bleed from its snout. The Colt is likely the source of its yelling. We do not like when the Dolores uses the not-nice yelling. It makes us want to go find the Lane and mouth-smash the Lane just so the Dolores can feel the abandoned, not-nice feeling, but we suspect that will only make it yell at us more.

Then again, will we mind very much if the Dolores yells at us more, if we know it is going to do it anyway? So many Not Allowed things. We feel a surge of hot anger over the injustice. We wonder where the Lane is now.

25 / *THE BREATHING INTO*

SUDDENLY DOLORES's life was a whirlwind of registering for classes, buying books, and trying to get her boss at Starbucks to acquiesce to a semi-regular schedule. The silver lining of her mother's passing was that she would be able to afford tuition for the coming semester. She was considered independent now and would receive her father's military benefits. College was finally happening!

She didn't have much time to think about Ash, her dissolving, or her shed clothes piles over the next two weeks. In addition to prepping for college, she was working her ass off since none of her sickened coworkers had recovered enough to come back to work. Two were at least out of the hospital, but it turned out that coughing up even a little bit of blood disqualified one from working in the food service industry.

Ash had been pressing Dolores for information about the hot brown coffee juice and its many permutations that Dolores created, so much so that Dolores had asked Ash if she intended to start picking up shifts. This inspired a nearly one-eighty

head cock (that was quickly corrected with a triumphant glance at the Not Allowed list on the fridge).

When Dolores explained what a shift was, Ash said maybe she should have some kind of job. When pressed on such niceties as Social Security numbers or even just a last name, Ash became belligerent. Dolores had teased Ash that she was a housewife since she stayed at home during the day when Dolores was working at Starbucks or at school. Ash inquired further on this matter and delightedly exclaimed that yes, she could be Dolores's housewife!

Since that declaration, Ash had been cleaning, and even more bizarrely since she still had never taken a bite in front of Dolores, cooking. While there had been a few mishaps, once Ash understood the principle of recipes, Dolores could leave her with a recipe and ingredients and she made real food for Dolores. It felt decadent. Even as a child she'd never had anything more elaborate for dinner than Shake 'n Bake chicken.

Dolores tried to ignore the conspicuous drop in new cases of plague since Ash had become employed as her maid, or indentured servant, or housewife, depending on how liberal your social views were. But there *had* been a drop, and Dolores thought that was good, even if it was unrelated to Ash's shockingly good green curry. Ash told Dolores proudly that she had talked to the proprietors of Sweet Chili, Bozeman's equally shockingly good Thai restaurant, and they had taught her how to make it. Dolores laughed out loud trying to imagine that interaction. But Dolores couldn't complain; she'd never gotten to eat at Sweet Chili since it was way out of her budget. This was as close as she would get.

One day before leaving for work, Dolores told Ash not to cook, since they had three different types of leftovers in the fridge. Since Ash didn't eat any of the food, Dolores was on her own to clear the fridge. Ash seemed grumpy about this directive and had very ostentatiously put on her running shoes and said that she would just have to run instead and that she hated the cold and that it was unjust that humans were bald and blubberless. Dolores tried not to laugh.

Ash's rant continued by pointing out that even the ones that had blubber still seemed to require the same amount of drapes. Then she opened the door and closed it, her glowing eyes never leaving Dolores. Dolores supposed this was an effort to point out what a burden it was to not dissolve or disintegrate or teleport, whatever the hell Ash did.

After surviving yet another shift, Dolores finished closing up on her own, having told her co-worker Marisol to head home. Now Dolores was dreading the wind, wishing she'd asked Marisol for a ride to escape the banshee wind that had blown curls of snow onto the rug with every new customer that had come in. Marisol had left moments before, so Dolores turned off the remaining lights, and locked the door behind herself, wondering if maybe she'd catch Marisol in time to hitch a ride.

The lock had just thudded into place when she heard some kind of struggle in the alley behind her. She spun around, keys between her fingers, ready to maul whoever had the gall to be out assaulting people in this weather.

But no one was about to attack her. Instead, someone appeared to be about to kiss Marisol. The person was bare-

armed, wearing only a thin tank top and ski pants. The tank top was frozen to Marisol's companion, obviously soaked with sweat. Then Dolores saw, to her great horror, Ash's most frequently used coat was tucked back behind the dumpster, only a few feet from Marisol.

Neither party saw Dolores so she froze. The unknown person held her face an inch from Marisol's. She reached up and grasped Marisol's jaw and then Dolores stifled a scream as the person exhaled tendrils of ashy looking smoke right into Marisol's mouth and nose while her coworker thrashed against the other woman. Marisol's back arched and her head flew back like her neck muscles had suddenly spasmed and her mouth remained so wide open that it couldn't possibly be voluntary. The strange woman wrapped her other arm around Marisol to keep her from flailing and then her eyes slid open and though they weren't Ash's green, they did glow.

The other woman saw Dolores and inhaled a great, sucking gasp. Dolores could see the stuff spiraling back out of Marisol's mouth. It seemed to go back into the assailant's mouth, but as it did, the woman began to disintegrate and blow away into the snow, just as she had seen Ash do.

Dolores finally regained her senses and ran over to Marisol, who had collapsed and was coughing up great gouts of blood and making horrible wet noises that Dolores assumed were screams. Dolores dropped her to her knees and rubbed Marisol's back while trying to dial nine-one-one with her other hand. She said, "What happened? Did you know that person?"

Marisol gasped in a few long breaths. Then she said, blood trickling down her chin, out her nostrils, "I don't know. She said

something about being cold, and since she was just wearing a tank top--" Marisol flew into another bout of hacking and now the snow surrounding the pile of abandoned clothes was almost entirely dark with blood, but it was so cold that it was freezing as it came out of her.

Dolores helped her stand and said, "We need to get you back inside. You'll freeze out here. Or do you have a car? I can drive you to the hospital."

Marisol seemed to realize for the first time that she was not simply coughing a normal cough. Then she began to cry and it was a horrible mix of wet, gloppy sobs and barking, spraying coughs. She clicked her keys and Dolores saw a car's lights flash weakly from under a thick layer of snow, only twenty feet down the alley. She waddled, bent to almost ninety degrees at the knees to be able to let Marisol (who was barely five feet tall) wrap her arm around Dolores's shoulders. Her petite coworker's arm didn't even fully reach across Dolores's broad shoulders.

By the time they reached the ER, Marisol felt better, but still had blood coming out of both mouth and nose, so Dolores insisted that they go in. Marisol shook her head that she didn't want to and after a short argument, she wheezed that she didn't have insurance. Dolores sat for a long moment before she said quietly, "I might know someone who can fix you... but it will be weird and you can't tell anyone."

"What do you--" another bloody coughing fit, as Marisol clasped the discarded tank top over her face. "What do you mean fix me?"

“I don’t know, but I have a weird friend, like super weird, that might be able to help. So it’s the ER or her, but you can’t go home. Look how much blood you’ve lost -- you’ll die if you go home like this.”

Marisol’s head fell back heavily against the headrest of the car and the way she was breathing sounded awful and made Dolores think of swamp monsters from bad eighties movies. Finally she choked out, “I don’t have enough money for an ER visit... so I guess... I guess... your... friend.” Then she seemed to fade away into unconsciousness.

DOLORES BEGAN the slow drive back to her house, Marisol's tiny, old Ford Escort fishtailing at every turn, no matter how slowly she drove. It seemed to take an eternity, but all she could think was that would give Ash time to get home. Ash would be home, she had to be home, she would have to help.

Even though her mind raced to make sense of it, she felt certain that Ash would be able to fix this. The woman who had attacked Marisol looked nothing like Ash. But there were the glowing eyes, the weird floofing away into the gale. If nothing else, Ash might know what to do about this other Ash-like-woman.

Dolores penguin-walked into her little house, only grateful for the ice because she could slide Marisol's feet along when the tiny woman forgot to pick them up. Now that panic's clarifying adrenaline had worn off, Dolores was trying not to freak out about seeing her coworker spraying blood like some sort of gory water gun. Marisol, for her part, was helping Dolores remain calm by staying mostly unconscious. Dolores knew she couldn't manage another person's hysteria at the moment. She

awkwardly fumbled with her keys in her thick mittens and finally managed to get her front door open.

Relief washed over Dolores when she felt the radiant warmth of a fire and saw Ash kneeling before the fireplace, stoking it up. Dolores could tell immediately that it hadn't been burning long. Ash sprang to her feet as soon as her gleaming eyes lit on Marisol. "What does the Dolores have? Why does the Dolores have it? What is it doing?" Ash said in her many-layered voice and Dolores suddenly thought she maybe understood a lot more about Ash now.

"You fix her."

"The You is useless."

"Ash! Heal her. Make her better. Fix her!"

Ash backed warily away from Dolores as she set the wheezing woman in the chair near the fireplace. "Did you, did Ash, do this? I saw, Ash. I saw what happened to Marisol and she didn't get a disease—she got attacked! Attacked by someone who turned to ash, just like you, and I'm not gonna lie, I'm having a hard time imagining that anybody else can do that besides you. So fix her!"

Ash's green eyes danced back and forth between Dolores's and she stood up taller, possibly even became taller. "We can't. It is not-nice to do the fixing. We didn't mean for the Dolores to see. We thought the Dolores had already left the Starbucks."

"The fuck is wrong with you! I don't care that I *saw* it—I care that you did it! This is wrong, Ash! This is not fucking

allowed! You can't do this and you will fucking fix it or you will get out of my goddamn house and never come back."

Then, to her surprise, Ash's glittering eyes filled with tears. "The Dolores is making us Go Away?"

"No, I don't want you to go away, but you need to fix Marisol. Fix her and you can stay."

Ash looked at Marisol with obvious distaste and glanced balefully back at Dolores before she said softly, "We will try. But the Dolores must know that we can't do this again. The fixing... it is unnatural. It hurts us. We love the Dolores, so we will try."

Ash squatted down in front of an unconscious Marisol and closed her eyes. She stretched her hand out and grasped the small woman's face and then Ash's head rolled back and her eyes flew open, glowing so obviously now that they cast light bright enough to read by and she trembled and her face twitched. Dolores covered her mouth to stifle a scream as blood red ash came spiraling out of Marisol's mouth and nose as if twisting in a fast breeze. The ash seemed to flow into Ash's hand, her veins turning black and her arm shaking more than the rest of her.

It was over in less than a minute, but Ash fell to the floor, gasping and a moment later was out the door, disappearing into the night without a coat, leaving Dolores to try to explain the crazy shit that had just happened to her suddenly awake coworker.

Marisol coughed experimentally into her hand and then

looked up and met Dolores's eyes. "Did you spike my drink with acid during our break? Because I have no idea what just happened."

Dolores slumped onto her couch and said, "I would love to explain it to you, but I have no idea what happened either. You can't tell anyone about this, okay? My friend, she... she can't help the others. I'm going to try to figure it out, but... but... you're okay, yeah? You're gonna be okay."

Marisol's face was blank. "What others? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind. I'm just tired. Are you cool to drive yourself home? Thanks for the ride, I guess. You can use my bathroom to clean up if you want." Marisol nodded and tottered unsteadily into the bathroom. Dolores supposed that Ash had cured the cough, but couldn't very well put all that lost blood back into Marisol. Or maybe she could? Who knew? Dolores realized that maybe she didn't know anything about anything.

She was exhausted, but now she was also terrified that she'd never see Ash again. And what if Ash just went out and did this to someone else? Dolores wondered if this was perhaps how Ash "ate" and she shuddered a little at the thought, finally slumping off the couch to sit a few inches away from the fire. She thought maybe she'd sleep out here on the floor in front of the fire like a dog.

She knew she shouldn't feel bad about saving Marisol, but she hadn't expected Ash to respond that way. She expected her odd friend to be compliant and confused, but she hadn't expected Marisol's suffering to transfer to Ash. It was clear that

in some way it had. And had Ash caused all the cases of the plague? Dolores had so many questions.

Marisol stood up. "I'm gonna go. I guess I'll see you at work in a couple days. You finally have a day off, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I do," Dolores said with a weak wave.

"And, you know, thanks for whatever your friend did with her voodoo. Do you think that woman just gassed me or something?"

Dolores nodded, trying to appear sincere and said, "Yeah, that makes sense, she must've been crazy, to be out dressed like that in the cold."

"Why don't you want me to tell anyone?"

Dolores opened her mouth and then closed it. After a pause she said, "Do you think they'd believe you? I just don't want people to think you're crazy. I'm not even full on crazy, but I'm weird, and it's pretty lonely. It seems like you have friends, you don't want to lose that."

Marisol appeared to think this was a reasonable explanation. "Yeah, yeah. Are you going to be okay? Where did she go? I was pretty out of it until she was leaving. Will you thank her for me?"

Dolores marveled at the human mind's ability to rationalize things. She got up to walk Marisol to the door and stared for a frigid moment out into the swirling snow, hoping to see glowing green eyes, just waiting to return, waiting for Dolores to be

alone again, but there was nothing but snow and darkness and cold like death.

Fear filled Dolores at the thought of her coatless, shoeless, lightly clad friend, out in that maelstrom, sad, sick, and alone. Once Marisol had driven away, Dolores called out to Ash, but there was nothing, not even the complaints of her neighbors, only the whining howl of the wind.

27 / *THE DOLORES FEELS THE
ALONE*

WHAT IF ASH was frozen and dead in a snowdrift somewhere? Dolores spent the next day with this image swirling around in her mind. The worst part was that Dolores might never know. Ash's death would go completely unnoticed except by Dolores (and maybe the proprietors of Sweet Chili).

It did seem likely that Ash could be sick or injured from helping Marisol the night before. Dolores didn't even know where to begin looking for her constantly running friend. She suddenly realized how much she depended on Ash just appearing when Dolores was lonely. Dolores had no way to contact her, no sense of where or how she spent her days (except the running, but that didn't exactly narrow down a location). At a loss, she went to Starbucks and saw that the coat behind the dumpster was still there.

She had two more shifts before Colt was coming into town for a few nights, but the prospect of passing these next few days not only alone, but worried and scared for her friend, was overwhelming.

She returned home with Ash's coat and went in to her bathroom to take a shower. She cursed as she saw that she was still half-covered in Marisol's crusted blood and lung tissue. A new layer of anger and confusion settled on top of her sadness and fear.

How many people had Ash made sick? Or killed? Dolores feared she had made it worse by trying to teach her to pass as a normal person. She wanted to exonerate herself, thinking of the cases that were identified before she'd ever met Ash, but then she remembered that Starbucks seemed to be the bloody epicenter. She realized that her friendship with Ash might be responsible for most of the local cases.

School started the next Tuesday, and then she would have even less time to keep tabs on Ash, and since untended Ash seemed to be some kind of plague-breathing monster, that was a worrisome prospect. But it wasn't as if casting Ash out would solve the problem. She just needed Ash to listen to her, to understand, because if she had learned nothing else in her months with her maybe-an-alien roommate, it was that Ash really didn't understand a great deal of human functioning. Maybe she didn't know that hacking up chunks of blood and lung was bad for "the squishies" in the same way she didn't seem to understand that eating was good for them, necessary, even.

Above and beyond any selfless desire to educate or save future victims, Dolores had simply grown accustomed to having an actual friend, a roommate who was also her own weird-ass bestie. She didn't know if she could go back to life without that friendship, strange and unique as their relationship was. Especially because she felt certain this would be the

last time that she and Colt were together until spring break. She hadn't meant to get attached to him, but much like her relationship with Ash, she found herself almost instantly attached; high on the feeling of belonging she found in his arms. Being with Colt had the added bonus of actual physical connection, something she and Ash had had in their own platonic bath routines and occasional cuddly evenings on the couch. Dolores knew that the squishies were not solo creatures, no matter how they liked to see themselves that way. Squishies liked squishing up against other squishies, sharing their squishy thoughts and doing their squishy things squishily together. But if Ash wasn't a squishy, what was she?

That was the biggest question hanging over Dolores as the day dragged on into evening, never getting light enough to feel like daytime during the ongoing blizzard. Still Ash didn't return. Colt texted that he was leaving early to give himself plenty of time on the shitty roads. At last she called Danny, trying to formulate a way to discuss her situation without outing Ash as... well... as whatever she was, but almost certainly as the cause and the relief of Danny's illness. Unfortunately he didn't pick up, so she was left all alone with her whirling thoughts.

She didn't even feel like trudging to the library despite the new winter gear that Danny had bought for her. He said it was her Christmas present, since Christmas had been obliterated by their mother's death.

She cleaned off her boots and her jacket, still crusty with Marisol's blood. Even once she was done with that, there was still no Ash. Nothing: no molted clothes; no sudden appearance to scare the shit out of Dolores; just the awful silence of her

house. As the evening wore on, she finally decided to don her new winter clothes and at least trudge around the neighborhood looking for Ash. Maybe she had holed-up in someone's shed or garage like a lost cat. Any tracks that might've been in the snow had been obliterated by the unceasing wind. Dolores traveled around her block and admitted defeat.

As she shed her own layers of clothing, she half expected that Ash would appear, as she often did when Dolores wasn't home. But the house remained unchanged. Dolores brought more wood in, hoping it would dry out enough to burn before she ran out of dry logs. She had never bothered to ask Ash where she had procured the wood, but Dolores thought, now that she had begun accepting impossible things, that Ash had been bringing logs home on her runs. Dolores assumed they were stolen from other people's woodpiles, since they were mostly (but not all) cut, but there were so many types of wood that she knew that any theft was fairly small and spread widely.

Dolores spent a second night all alone on the floor in front of a crackling fire, and as she drifted off, she let herself finally cry: for her mother, for Colt, and for somehow finding a friend who was maybe killing people, and who was now gone, maybe forever.

28 / THE PELT AND THE DEN

WE NO LONGER CARE THAT we are Not Allowed to have a nice, shaggy pelt like the bear. We finished fixing the Marisol, but then we were so angry at the Dolores that we went into the wretched cold with our weak, soft, hairless body, and we regretted that we ever became a squishy biped with their inability to handle the elements. We ran away into the night and as soon as we were in darkness, we grew a nice fur pelt.

We cannot decide if the Dolores will ever want us back - if we will ever want to go back. We will not fix any more squishies. The fixing is terrible for us. We lost everything that we had learned from the small-statured biped, and we are exhausted now, so exhausted that even to run is tiring us out. But we must run because we cannot stay out in the cold with the snow and the icy breath of the sky on us, even with our nice, dense, pelt, like the fat, floppy creatures that live both in water and on land.

Eventually we find ourselves back at the place of the bad squishy, the one who did not put green paper in the jar labeled Tips at the Starbucks. There are new squishies in its den, so we continue out into the forest, searching, searching, searching for a

cavern that we had seen long ago when were new and when we ran into the hills to fill all the times that we were the Alone.

Now the Dolores will be the Alone, but unlike us, the Dolores finds other squishies to love it, to hold it, to mouth-smash it. Other squishies to share its grooming tub time. We growl a deep bear growl at this thought, but no, no, we are mad at the Dolores. The Dolores is always making things Not Allowed. We never get to make anything Not Allowed, even the stink-making. We tried and we only got yelled at and asked the question, "And I suppose you don't shit, your majesty?" To which we responded that we didn't know about the ever-accursed You, its shit, or its majesty.

We find the deep cave. We leave only to run under the bright moon and star-speckled darkness. Many light cycles pass before we feel whole and well again. Then we run back toward the Bozeman. We let our fur fall away as we run, knowing that it is Not Allowed and that it will make the bipeds use the not-nice yell. We finally recovered from the horrible fixing. We are ready after staying away. We are ready to see the Dolores, to know if the Dolores will try to make us fix more squishies.

When we come into the Dolores's lair, the lair that we thought was our own housewife lair, we see that we have been replaced. The Colt squishy is smashing its mouth against the Dolores's udders and when we step inside the unsecured chamber, the Dolores shouts a no-point noise and the Colt springs to its very large feet and covers its rigid appendage with a blanket. It is shouting something at the Dolores and the Dolores looks happy but is still not-nice yelling and we are so confused that even though it is Not Allowed, we let a low bear roar rumble out of us and it makes us feel less angry when

they both immediately stop all their mouth-noises and gape at us.

“Ash! You’re back! I’m so glad you’re back, but you, can you, look, we’re just, we’ll be out in just a minute.” And it pulls the Colt with it. They are an odd and inconsistent lot, these bipeds. We thought by now we would understand.

We hear many mouth-noises, at first they are make-sense, but then they are mostly no-point noises and they sound like a mix of suffering and deep pleasure. Strange, stupid bipeds. We only hope the Dolores doesn’t think that we can fix whatever it is doing to the Colt to make it groan so. We go and climb in the grooming tub. We fill it with hot water to warm our sad, bald, peltless body. We are enjoying this nice warm place when we get yelled at again as the Dolores and the Colt invade the small grooming cubby. We stomp out of the grooming chamber, shaking our furless body as best we can, but we are still damp and annoyed. The shaking causes more yelling but we simply give the Dolores what it has told us is The Stink-Eye, even though it doesn’t make our eyes, or the Dolores’s eyes, smell any different.

We wait patiently on the floor in front of the fire, but then we remember the pointless, not-nearly-as-warm-as-fur drapes and we put the drapes on. We wait more and we consider another bear noise, but we are tired of being yelled at. Then at last the Dolores and the Colt emerge.

The Dolores, even though we have been gone for nearly as long as the Dolores left us for the unmaking of the mother-thing, does not say it missed us. It does not say it is sorry for making us do the fixing. It does not say that it was too hasty in proclaiming

the breathing into Not Allowed. No. The Dolores says, "Ash, this is Colt." As if we don't know what the tall one is. We nod, anxious for the Dolores to continue with something substantive. It says, "Colt, this is Ash, my quasi-roommate." We do not know what a Quasi is, or a Roommate. We wish very much to roar.

Instead we snort a squishy snort and say, "We are the Dolores's housewife," and cross our arms as we see the bipeds do when they are feeling surly.

The Colt's dark eye-fur patches shoot up toward its very nice, luxurious head hair, head hair we would like to run our paws through. It turns to the Dolores and starts laughing and says, "I didn't know you swung both ways."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Ash. No, not like that. She's a bum, she's got no job, so she's been cooking and cleaning for me."

We interject, "We are her crazy bitch, too."

"That is apparent," the Colt says and flops onto the couch.

The Dolores starts making noise before we can. "Look, Ash and I had a bit of a fight right before you got here. Ash, Colt is only here until tomorrow, can you wait to talk about it until then? Can you just promise you'll stay, that you won't run off or disappear again?"

We shout, "Fuck the YOU!" and throw our hands into the air. How can the Dolores not be happy to see us? How can it not care that we waited in a cold cave, that we did not know if the Dolores really wanted us to Go Away, and now all it wants to talk about is the bigger one. Are we too small? But the Lane is

smaller than this one. Smaller even than the Dolores. We swallow a bear-growl of frustration that we can't decipher the system that these creatures use to communicate and interact.

Dolores hugs us and whispers, "Will Ash stay? Please? Please don't Go Away. Tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll spend all day with y—with Ash."

We nod and lean into the hug, pulling the Dolores's long body against ours and even though we want to be angry, we feel only love for the Dolores, we feel only how much we missed the Dolores. We feel only relief that it does not really want us to Go Away, even though it replaced us while we were gone. We won't go anymore, and then it won't have to replace us ever again because we won't leave it in the Alone.

But what if the Colt comes back? Will the Dolores choose us, or the Colt?

29 / *MORE THINGS ARE NOT
ALLOWED*

DESPITE THE INTERRUPTION and the fact that Ash was lurking nearby, Dolores and Colt managed to have a spectacular night of goodbye sex. She felt relief every time he broke away from kissing her and there was no blood dripping out of his nose like an ominous warning.

She didn't even bother to try to have Colt and Ash get acquainted after her crazy roommate had returned and caught them fucking on the couch. Instead she trusted that Ash would at least reappear in the morning after Colt had continued on his journey to Spokane.

It was early when Dolores and Colt bid each other a passionate farewell. She threw on some clothes to walk him out to his truck. Ash was nowhere to be seen, but the latest pair of running shoes were absent from their spot by the door, the closest thing to a note that Ash could manage. The fierce darkness, lit only by stars, and the even fiercer cold gave a forced brevity to their farewell.

He whispered something to her that she didn't understand.

“What?” she said, wanting to flee, but also never wanting to say goodbye.

“I guess... just don’t forget me, okay? Maybe miss me?”

She grinned and kissed his mouth. “Hmmm... I doubt you’ll have much time to miss me out there in Spokane.”

His eyes held hers. She felt a little like crying, but also felt absurd crying over a week of good sex. She didn’t dare believe anything else could ever bloom out of their reunion. And she couldn’t stand the idea of him thinking that she hoped anything would; it felt too much like weakness. She kissed him a final time and ran back into her house, grateful for the fire and the firewood, even if it was ill-gotten. She watched Colt settle into his truck, mess with his phone, and finally pull away.

She let out a shuddering breath, barely conquering tears, when she felt strong arms snake around her waist and she screamed. The owner of the arms screamed too and as Dolores spun around her scream morphed into a shouting laugh. “Damnit, Ash! Don’t be so fucking sneaky all the time!”

“We are not sneaky! We were only trying to comfort the Dolores since it looked sad.”

“Yeah, well, thanks, I guess. Now, let’s sit by the fire, I only have a little bit before I have to go to work. Are you going to tell me where you’ve been? I’ve been so worried about you. Don’t you have a phone or any way for me to communicate with you?” Dolores presumed from the hastily corrected owlish head cock that the answer to this question was no.

“What are you, Ash? And what the hell did you do to Marisol? I thought you were just weird, but it’s more than that, isn’t it? Are you even human?”

“We never said we were human. No, not human. We are Ash. We have told the Dolores this many times. And we fixed the squishy, the Marisol. We fixed it because the Dolores asked us to fix it. Why was the Dolores so angry at us? Is the Dolores still angry?”

“I’m not mad anymore okay? But you need to stop the other thing. I know you—Ash—didn’t look like Ash when you did the thing to Marisol that broke her, that made her cough up blood, but it was you, right? Which raises so many other questions, but I just, I need to focus on the most important thing. Was that Ash? Did Ash do that?”

“We did. We do it to learn, to travel. We must breathe into the squishies.”

“Seriously? Fuck! Will you die if you don’t... um... breathe... into people?”

“We don’t know about the You. We will not die. But we will not learn if we don’t do it. We will not be able to discover new places, to travel to and explore. We would be very sad not to breathe into any more squishies. Does the Dolores mean all squishies? Or just the Marisol? And the Colt? And the Lane?”

“No, all humans, Ash. It’s Not Allowed, understand? It’s killing people, Ash. Killing them, then they aren’t humans or squishies or soft bipeds anymore, they’re just gone.”

“They can remake themselves. We realize that some squishies are not good at remaking, but most must be. There are so many squishies, how could they not be able to remake themselves?”

“Do you—does Ash think that’s how it works? Actually, I don’t care. No more. No more breathing into anyone. Nobody. Understand? It’s Not Allowed.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed to blazing green slits in the early morning gloom. Dolores held her breath, unsure what to do if Ash refused, if she intended to keep sickening and killing people. Then Ash glanced toward the kitchen and back at Dolores. “The Dolores says everything fun is Not Allowed! If we stop breathing into people, the Dolores can’t stop us from mouth-smashing. The Dolores gets to mouth-smash, and even smash whole bodies. We saw that it smashed its pelvis against the Colt. Take that Not Allowed away. And we are not happy. The Dolores is sometimes very not-nice to us for how nice we are to the Dolores. The Dolores was very not-nice after leaving us the Alone.” Ash crossed her arms and puffed her chest out, clearly preparing for defiance.

“Okay, you can mouth-smash, but not with Colt, okay? Lane is fine, but not Colt. And would you at least tell me about it so I can help you... navigate... other stuff? Do you... can you... I mean, do you even know what pelvis smashing is, Ash? Because you probably shouldn’t do it if you don’t understand it, okay? Maybe once you’re a little more... human.”

Ash scoffed and her eyes glinted. Dolores hoped that she could let the multiple “yous” slide and not go on a rant. She

said, “We will never be a squishy. We assume that some of the squishies have receptacles for the appendage? Then one biped smashes its weak little appendage into the receptacle to solidify a relationship?”

“I guess, sort of, but look, I don’t know if Ash can get knocked up, so don’t try that without some guidance. I don’t know if your... uh... receptacle is connected to a working uterus.”

Ash seemed to understand this or at least have more pressing questions. “The Dolores does not solidify our relationship because it has no appendage and we do not currently have an appendage. We had the appendage once. We found it bothersome. It was unpredictable. Should we have an appendage?” Dolores started laughing and Ash gave a responsive, grimace-faced laugh that in turn made Dolores want to scream.

“No, our relationship isn’t a sexual relationship, that’s different. We’re just friends. And I can’t even contemplate the fact that you think you can just have or not have a dick.”

“We have all the things that the squishy bipeds have. We remade a squishy body, but we are not a squishy. But we wish to do the nice things squishies do, since you keep making our nice things Not Allowed. And we do not wish to try the eating or the stink-making, which seem to be the other primary squishy activities.”

Dolores pricked at this remark and prepared to rebut it when she realized that Ash was correct. Humans did lots of things, but eating, sex, and using the bathroom were big ones. Hard to argue with facts. She took a long deep breath and took

Ash's hands in her hands. "I don't want to take away your nice things," Ash's face lit up so Dolores quickly continued, "but I have to, I can't let you continue hurting people. You really can't fix the others?"

Ash's face crumpled into some blend of horror and disgust. "We cannot do the fixing. We would no longer be us if we did that. We would lose everything, even the Dolores. We cannot fix them all, so the Dolores will have to figure out how to fix all the other ones. We can't. We won't. We will do almost anything for the Dolores, but not that. No more fixing. If breathing into the squishies is Not Allowed, then the fixing is Not Allowed. Does the Dolores agree to let us stay even if we do not fix the other ones?"

Dolores considered pushing harder to get Ash to help her other victims, but she also didn't want Ash to disappear and go on some kind of blood-cough-causing bender of "breathing into." No, she would keep her friend, her crazy bitch, and hopefully at least mitigate the damage. "Okay, fine. But you have to shake my hand, that's how squishies make agreements. And you can't do it anymore, not even once, or I will make you go away and you won't be my crazy bitch anymore, not my housewife, okay?" She held her hand out.

Ash clasped it in both of her hands and shook it so vigorously that Dolores had to yank it away. Then she saw the sadness still making her only friend's face droop. She pulled Ash to her feet. "You want to take a bath? Who would ever bathe with you if you leave me? Come on, you must be freezing after running around in this weather."

“The stupid You. Always the You getting involved. Can it be Allowed for us to grow a pelt while we are out running?”

“What? Ash, no, just wear some warm clothes. Someone will shoot you if you run around looking like a glowing-eyed yeti.”

“Everything is Not Allowed,” Ash said as she sulked towards the bathtub.

Dolores glanced at Ash a little worriedly. She knew Ash loved her, and as long as she loved her, she would follow the Not Allowed. But lately Dolores had been doing a good job at getting Ash upset. What happened if Ash decided she did not need or love the Dolores? Would she go on a rampage of all the Not Alloweds like a rebellious teenager?

Would the town of Bozeman suffer the consequences if Dolores made a misstep?

30 / *THE DOLORES GETS
ANOTHER FRIEND*

DOLORES FOUND that she was very grateful to have a housewife once school started. Ash stopped complaining about missing her once Dolores pointed out that she wouldn't work every minute she wasn't in class if Ash hadn't turned most of her coworkers into hemorrhaging public health hazards.

In all her non-Dolores time, Ash not only learned how to use the washer and dryer, but she also somehow discovered skiing, which she greatly enjoyed. When pressed on how she paid for it, though, she became very surly.

Dolores was delighted to be at college and have her brain get some work again. She didn't have enough time or money to take a full course load, but they were allowing her to audit a contagious diseases class since she hoped to work in that field. She had been checking out a cute guy who sat in the front row and was always there earlier than her. After a bit of sleuthing, she discovered that his name was Brook.

Brook. She'd never known a guy named Brook and she wondered if it was as miserable as being a Dolores. She'd only

seen him at a distance because he was always seated by the time she squeaked in seconds before class started. He also almost always stayed scribbling notes at the end, and she always had to run off to her chemistry class.

Dolores thought that fate had finally smiled on her when they physically ran into each other at the library. He bounced off her like she was a guardrail but she was able to snatch his arm and keep him upright. He laughed and apologized and then he gave her a little half smile, showing very white, but slightly crooked teeth.

“Aren't you in my contagious diseases class?” He had the scruffy beginnings of a beard on his strong jawline and golden eyes that looked luminous in his dark skin.

She felt her own ghostly pale skin flush. “Sort of. I'm auditing it. I didn't have all the pre-reqs and I, uh... nevermind. Yeah. You're the guy who always sits in the front row. I'm Dolores.” She realized she still had his arm in a death grip. She dropped it and then shook his hand.

He laughed and it made her smile. “Yeah, that's me. I'm Brook. Why are you auditing it? You must be down with the sickness.” His eyes glittered as he waited to see if she appreciated his lame reference.

“I guess it's just woken up the demon in me?”

He didn't just laugh, he guffawed at that and said, “And here I was worried you were judging me for being a bit of a weirdo.” He glanced at his watch and said, “You wanna walk with me? I've got another class.”

She took his arm, boldly, and looked at his watch. She nodded and they made their way out into the savage winter day together. She said, “Yeah, I’m actually auditing it because I’m intrigued, maybe a little bit obsessed, with the red pneumonia. I’ve known a bunch of people that have gotten it. One who died, even.”

He made a cross with his forefingers and said, “Back, ye harbinger of contagion!” But he was smiling. He continued, “That’s crazy though. I’m actually a little obsessed with it myself. I did an internship at the CDC last summer and I’m super bummed that I’m missing this. Hopefully I’m going back again this summer. And every summer, until I can just work there full time.” Dolores was delighted to find someone, anyone, who cared, and who would maybe be looking for treatment options besides transfusions and time to work on the disease.

Brook continued, “But I’m not convinced it’s a disease at all. It seems more like there’s some kind of chemical agent involved, that somehow all these people are getting poisoned, but I can’t for the life of me figure out any kind of coherent motivation. Or a toxin. Or anything, if I’m being honest. I’ve emailed the lady I worked with last summer and she said they just can’t expend that many resources on something that isn’t really killing people. So I’ve been trying to do a little armchair detective work. At first, I thought that maybe it was some kind of terrorist plot, but again, lamest terrorist ever since they’re not actually killing anybody. So maybe some kind of personal vendetta? I’m in the process of trying to Facebook connect some of the known victims, and I’ve had some success, at least four different cases were cousins, close cousins too, like actual

friends. Crap. This is me. It was nice to meet you. I'll see you next week!"

Dolores's heart was racing at how perilously close to the truth of the matter Brook was, but it was also racing as he looked at her with his earnest, honey-colored eyes. She nodded and then her mouth spoke without prefrontal cortex permission, "You want to get coffee sometime and do some armchair detecting? Or whatever the active verb for that would be."

"Sleuthing is the term you're looking for, I believe. Sure." He rummaged in his bag and then pulled her hand toward his and wrote his number down on the palm of her hand. He gave her another bright smile. "And although I must endorse and enthusiastically recommend frequent hand-washing as the best prevention of the spread of contagious disease, I hope you won't wash my number off until you put it in your phone."

Dolores was delighted to have his number, but also dismayed that he had so deftly put the ball back in her court. She had inadvertently made the first move, and then she had tried to force him into making the second, but he'd been too quick with his antiquated method of pen on flesh. She'd been busy digging in her bag for her phone to put him in directly. She looked up from her inked palm and saw that he was already gone. She smiled and set off back toward the library which she had left without a second thought in order to make what might be her second friend.

As the semester progressed, Dolores found a frantic rhythm to her life, balancing her shifts with her classes, spending time on problem sets and lab notebooks and reading instead of sleeping. She and Brook had commenced a lively texting relation-

ship, but they'd only managed to see each other when she was working at Starbucks. However, she was certain that these interactions had been flirtatious. She hoped. She wished.

Poor Ash had been mopey at first, sullen second, and finally resigned to her lack of the Dolores. Her cooking had gotten more adventurous. Dolores had introduced her to the library and how to use the computers to look up recipes and techniques.

The first trip to the library, Dolores had stayed as a chaperone the entire time that Ash looked for ideas and Dolores had to calm her down several times as she kept loudly whispering every time she found a video or pictures explaining things. "So elaborate! Clever squishies with your glowing boxes filled with information!"

Dolores thought that sometimes Ash had a mischievous gleam in her eye when Dolores arrived home, but no new cases of the plague had happened since "breathing into squishies" had been added in bold, red Sharpie to the Not Allowed list on the fridge. Ash had also added in her odd handwriting that looked like the written equivalent of a ransom note from clipped magazine letters: "the fixing." Then in smaller text, "Allowed: Mouth-smashing, not the Colt."

The constant work or companionship also kept Dolores from having to think too hard about her mother's death, or the fact that she was harboring a potential contagion in her house, or the thing that bothered her most—missing Colt. She felt that even admitting such a thing was weakness. They had kept up texting and he even occasionally called her, but she didn't know what they were, where the borders of their relationship were, or

what he expected of her. As she often did, she simply pushed him from her mind. But overall, she thought maybe the tide of her life had turned, that things were improving, and everything would get easier from here on out.

Of course, that was assuming Ash kept not-breathing-into. Suddenly Dolores wondered what Ash would think of Brook.

31 / THE RACCOON IN THE BATHROOM

WE ARE THE ALONE AGAIN, but not all the time. The Dolores says it is too busy to spend much time with us, and we try to make the face that the squishies make when they don't want a thing, but are supposed to accept the thing. We hoped that as the Dolores disappeared from the lair that it would make things Allowed again, but it has been emphatic that breathing into squishies is still Not Allowed.

The magical book place—the library—has made us less morose about the Alone. It is not learning and exploring the way that we can learn and explore when we breathe into the squishies, but it is learning. The library holds more learning than any silly biped could do in a lifetime, but we are no silly biped. We learn and learn and learn from the books and the glowing information boxes. We also travel to the places we have already been so we can run in those places. We do not mention this to the Dolores because we don't want unmaking to travel Not Allowed and we can never predict what the Dolores will make Not Allowed.

Lately the Dolores has been very attached to its tiny glowing

hand-face device. Its thumbs are always going going going and it's always having secret smiles and it forgets that it has its crazy bitch right there. We are not happy. We are sad.

We are the Alone when the Dolores just takes its body away to do the College, but now it takes its mind away even when its body is at home on the couch with us. It makes us want to crush the small device—the phone thing—down into a fine powder and watch it fly away in the wind. We wish that the Dolores lived in a place that did not have so much winter.

We have also had an unsettling tingling in each of us. We don't know exactly what it is yet, but we feel fear. We can almost hear something on the horizon, like the hollow howling before a tornado. Each of us vibrates and aches and each of our many, many senses reach out into the void, seeking what we can't see in the dark, ominous feeling that fills us more and more every day. At first we thought it was just the Alone combined with being Not Allowed to breathe into squishies, but it is more. We feel like a prey animal with our noses to the wind, tall grass hiding something or nothing. So we wait.

We have devised a method to both conserve firewood and to show the Not Allowed list that it is not always the boss. When we are at home doing the housewife things, we allow ourselves to have a nice pelt. It is much cozier to do everything in the lair with fur. We still respect the Not Allowed when we are outside the house because the Dolores said we might get shot again if we grow fur outside the den. We enjoy that the Dolores seems to have no means of discerning whether we break some of the rules. It calls us sneaky, so sneaky we will be.

We have also been practicing the other mouth-noise cate-

gories. We practice the Spanish. We practice the porcupine. Yesterday on our run in the dark early morning when we can have fur and no one sees, we met a group of creatures that the squishies call raccoons. The raccoons are clever creatures and they use their paws to perform complicated tasks, much like the squishies. We are briefly sad that we didn't decide to become a raccoon, but it is too late for that now; we didn't know about the raccoons when we decided to become we. We like the raccoon mouth-noises and we make them quite effectively, startling the whole lot of them.

Today we decided to clean the grooming room and we are cold because it is always cold in the winter, but especially in that room where everything is hard, cold, and shiny. We do not think the Dolores will be home for a long time, so we grow a nice raccoon fur. We clean with our raccoonish hands and we make raccoon noises, delighting in our chattering that is not no-point noise, but is also not quite make-sense noise, not in the way that humans use mouth-noises.

We are finishing cleaning the toilet when we hear a scream and something smacks into our side. We curl up and roll so we don't hurt too much of our soft, defenseless body. Then we spring to our feet and roar at our assailant, and not a raccoon roar, but a nice, big-bellied bear roar.

Then we see that we were hit with a broom and we let our fur retract and we make our best "sorry" face because it was the Dolores that hit us with a broom and it is looking at us with wild panic in its pretty face and its blue eyes are so bright. We think that it should make a sorry face too, but it doesn't; it makes the what-the-hell face.

As our fur disappears, the Dolores lowers the broom and says in a strange way, "Ash? What the ever-loving fuck was that? I thought there was a fucking gigantic raccoon in my bathroom." It sighs and looks at my side where it hit me; silly, sweet biped: the Dolores thinks it could hurt us. Even though it is a squishy body, it is our squishy body, and it is stronger, better.

We say nothing. We glare at the Dolores though because it shouldn't hit raccoons or us. We decide to press for this to be on the Not Allowed list. "The Dolores is Not Allowed to hit raccoons... or us... with brooms."

She nods and props the broom back in the corner where we had for sweeping. "Fine, fine, I didn't mean to hit you with the broom."

"It should not hit anything with the broom, even the You. We did not expect the Dolores to be home so soon."

"I have a day off, miraculously, so I thought you and I could hang out. But I mean it, what the hell was that? Did you have fur or was that some weird illusion?"

We cross our arms. Now it will say Not Allowed. Always Not Allowed. We can't even save firewood and be cozy without it being Not Allowed. We say nothing. We glare our very best Stink-Eye at the Dolores. We are cold now because we did not start a fire. We push past the Dolores and arrange the wood in the nice pyramid for burning. It follows us and makes the noise that indicates it wishes us to make noise.

"We save firewood and the Dolores hits us with a broom. The Dolores does not appreciate its housewife. It does not appre-

ciate that we mostly obey the Not Allowed list. Why is it Not Allowed to have a pelt? Why are the squishies bald? It is very unpleasant in winter with no fur! It is not-nice! Not-nice at all! The firewood comes from the cold and we carry it far for the Dolores who also will not grow a nice pelt, but we do not understand why we can't simply grow our fur. We do not like all the stupid squishy customs about drapes! Drapes are not so warm as a nice pelt!"

The Dolores watches us for a bit and then laughs a small laugh, but we hope that now it won't not-nice yell at us. It says, "Fine, in the house you may grow a pelt. I mean, can you? I don't even—holy shit!"

It screams as we regrow nice, thick fur. We can see in the Dolores's eager gaze that it wishes to pet us. We grew our best pelt - sleek, but dense, and very, very soft, pale to hide us in the snow like the great polar bears we have seen in images and moving around inside the glowing information boxes. It continues making noise, "You can just... change... grow... whatever? You can just do that?"

"We tell it everyday, we know nothing of what the You can do. We grow nice pelts. Why does the Dolores not grow a nice covering of fur?"

The Dolores shrugs and shakes its head dramatically. "What about the noises? What the hell was that?"

"Raccoon noises. We like them. They are nice noises."

The Dolores nods its head and folds its long body onto the

floor near the fire, near us. Then it slowly reaches out its hand. It says, "Can I touch it?"

We do the nodding thing that replaces the mouth-noises. The Dolores runs its hand over our back, lightly at first, but then it sends its fingers through the fur and rakes its nails lightly along our hide and we wish to use the delightful cat-happy noise, but we suspect we are Not Allowed, so we don't make the noise. We think about the cat-noise and the Dolores continues to pet us. It says, "Holy shit, I can't believe you just sprouted this in a nanosecond like it was blinking your eyes. I wish I knew what you were."

"We wish it knew what the You was too so that the Dolores would stop talking about the You. We did not know that the squishies were involuntarily furless. We thought it was a social custom since the Dolores removes hair with the small pink stick in the grooming tub. Does it only remove parts of your receptacle hair or does hair grow on other parts of the mostly bald bipeds?"

The Dolores laughs, and since we do not know why, we make its laugh noise. It makes a scared then a mad face. It explains the biped's hair growth system which seems arbitrary and stupid, like the things that are not clever about the squishies. We do not understand how they can have so many elaborate and clever systems, but also so many stupid, pointless systems. Even with all the learning we do at the library place, we still seem to know nothing about the bipeds.

But we know the Dolores is now leaning on our shoulder, continuing to pet us and telling us how soft and nice we feel. We clarify that we are Allowed to have our nice fur when we are

inside and it says it is Allowed. We feel victorious, since the Dolores almost never says things are Allowed.

Then the Dolores says, "Ash, the other things are still Not Allowed, okay? I know it's hard for Ash. Thanks for taking such good care of me."

We respond with our obligatory Okay and we snuggle closer to the Dolores. It has been a long time since it has cuddled with us and it is nice to not feel the Alone. It makes the darkness recede and we can breathe for a while.

Then the Dolores' device pings and we bristle. She picks it up and types something to a box called Brook. We have seen this box often. We do not like it. It wants too much attention from the Dolores. We wonder how to make it go away.

DOLORES HAD COME CLOSE to wetting her pants the day that she came home and heard the chittering of a raccoon *inside* her house. She assumed that Ash had brought the creature into the house in a misguided attempt at having a pet or, far worse, as livestock. Then she came cautiously to the door of the bathroom and saw an impossibly large raccoon wielding a toilet brush. The broom had been there, though she'd had no clue what she hoped to accomplish by assaulting an unknown large, wild animal.

But it had been only Ash, freaky, alien, yet sweet, Ash. Dolores felt a perverse pride that she hadn't completely lost her shit about Ash's ability to spontaneously grow and un-grow fur. It was a mind-fuck to watch and Dolores really didn't believe it until she felt the fur with her own hands, and then felt Ash's still very human body beneath her freshly grown, thick, soft, white fur. The green eyes glowing out of the shorter face fur made her look like some sort of fey yeti.

Dolores didn't like the nagging doubt that this transgression caused. What other rules was Ash violating when Dolores

wasn't around? She had put Pelts on the Not Allowed list, but she hadn't thought that Ash could actually grow fur. Dolores had envisioned Ash taking down a bear in hand-to-hand combat and ripping off its skin to wear. Dolores couldn't decide which scenario was more terrifying.

They'd spent the rest of the night cuddling, stoking up a big fire, and playing Super Smash Bros. Ash was confused that it wasn't some kind of pornographic kissing and fucking game. She kept asking if smashing was not the right word, and Dolores explained the correct terms, and Ash's face trembled with a fury that only English and the You seemed capable of causing, but let it drop with only a minor bear roar.

Dolores had noticed Ash tense up when she had grabbed her phone to respond to Brook, so for the rest of the evening she ignored her phone when it chimed. She still noticed Ash's face fill with hate at the noise. It had been a long time since they'd had spent much time together, and Dolores realized that this raccoon-flavored rebellion might have been a result of loneliness.

Dolores hoped that Lane would ask after Ash again, but he hadn't. When she brought up their run he happily chatted about how Ash had completely smoked him. When Dolores pressed further, he shrugged and said that she hadn't seemed that into him, since she ran away. Dolores tried to explain that Ash was unfamiliar with the culture, but Lane just said it was no big deal. It saddened Dolores that Lane's interest had been so entirely fleeting and insubstantial, not that she'd really expected much, but she wished someone besides herself would befriend Ash.

She rushed to get to her contagious diseases class in time to chat with Brook for a few minutes, but as she slid into the seat next to him, he didn't even look up from his phone. She glanced at what he was reading and saw that fifteen new cases of the new disease had cropped up in North Dakota. She gasped, "Oh, fuck."

Brook turned to her with an oddly bright expression. He said, "Right? I knew it, I knew it wasn't over. A few weeks of nothing and then escalation totally supports my terrorism theory! I'm gonna find the bastards!"

"Don't you think a cure is more important?"

"Yeah, sure, obviously we need to find treatment for the people who are already sick. But in the meantime, preventing new cases is like contagion protocol number one, right?" Had he winked at her? Dolores so desperately wanted Brook to be interested in her that she sometimes thought her mind invented flirtation where there was maybe nothing more than a twitch or common courtesy. "Isn't your brother up in that part of North Dakota? Is he okay?"

Dolores felt her mouth go dry and she quickly pulled out her phone. "I hadn't heard about it until just now. When did this happen?"

"They all started pouring into the hospital last night and none of them had a coherent story about what happened."

"Were they all at one location?" she asked absently while texting Danny.

“Yeah, they were, and they said it happened to them within minutes. They were all in what sounds like corporate barracks, and then they were all coughing blood. But check this out—they said that someone showed up, a stranger, right before they all got sick.”

“Did they say what she looked like?”

“She, seriously? When has a woman ever done anything this crazy? This has crazy, white supremacist man written all over it. It’s like the Unibomber, but Unipoisoner.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. But do they say what the person looked like? Do they describe... him?”

“None of them got much of a look at him. I guess the government is now considering looking into this as a bioterrorism agent, but they’re downplaying it. You can bet if this had happened anywhere on the East Coast, they wouldn’t be so placid about it. Nobody gives a crap about the boonies. There’s not enough of us for them to care about. With population densities approaching zero out here, we’re hardly the ideal habitat for a contagious disease. That’s why I think it’s not a disease but a person, but nobody listens to college students.”

Dolores’s heart was racing and she made a snap decision that she hoped she wouldn’t regret. If Ash did this, Dolores needed backup. She needed someone to understand that her friend didn’t mean to hurt people. Maybe Ash could help them figure out how to cure people. Dolores assumed Ash must’ve just come back in raccoon form after this latest incident.

The professor came in and Dolores hastily whispered,

“Look, do you have some time to come by my place later tonight? There’s somebody I think you need to meet.”

His eyebrows flew up in surprise and then lowered conspiratorially and he whispered, “Yeah, sure. About this? About the attacks?”

“If that’s what they are. Yeah. I’ll text you my address. I get off my shift at ten.”

He leaned close to her and said, “That’s past my bedtime, but I’ll make an exception.”

Dolores felt a thrill run through her at his breath on her ear, but when she turned to look at him, he was fixated on the professor. She wondered what this earnest nerd would think about Ash, whether he’d be like Lane and simply see that Ash was beautiful, that her guilelessness was magnetic, but that she was too weird to be worthy of any real attention. Or would he see that Ash was interesting and loving and bizarre and inhuman, while still being so very, very human with her jealousy and loneliness and her simple joy?

Late that night, Dolores got to her house with only a few minutes to prep Ash. Ash was cooking something that smelled amazing. She was also covered in a shiny, black fur that had the faint spots of a black leopard. Dolores screeched, having forgotten that fur was probably going to be a part of their lives until summer. “Holy crap Ash, drop the fur and go get some clothes on!”

“Drop it?” Ash shrugged, gave a dog-like shake, and the

entire coat of thick, luxurious fur fell off her in a soft, whiffing pile, molted like her clothes.

“Ah, damnit, that, fuck, never mind, go go go, go get some clothes on. Tell me you have some shed in a pile somewhere?”

Ash said nothing, but stalked out of the room, rubbing her now bare arms pointedly. “We are cold, we will start a fire and put on drapes if the Dolores doesn’t like our fur.”

“No, it’s not that. The fur is lovely, but I have a friend coming over to meet you. So you—Ash—Ash needs to act normal, okay?”

“We always act normal.”

“Clothes! Now!” Dolores shouted.

“It does not have to not-nice yell!”

Dolores ignored her and started frantically sweeping up the huge mountain of dark fur. The fur on the floor was somehow more startling and real than Ash having fur. On Ash, it seemed like an octopus changing its texture to blend in with coral or sand, but this... this implied she wasn’t just morphing, she was actually *growing* fur. Dolores dumped a load in the trash. Then she took a small clump and put it in a baggie to take in to the lab. She wanted to look at it under a microscope. She wondered if MSU had some leopard fur on a slide somewhere that she could compare it to.

A knock came at the door. Normally Dolores would’ve made Brook wait, but it was ten below zero and she intended to

reveal Ash in all her glory to him anyway. All her furry, dissolving, bad grammar glory. Dolores left her broom and walked to the front door. She opened it and beckoned him in. He stomped his feet from having to walk through her perpetual snow drift. He blew on his hands.

“Man, Mother Nature is not messing around this winter.” His eyes roamed around and landed on the pile of hair. “Did you shave a dog or blow one up?”

“Neither. It’s a long story. Let me just go see if--” but at that moment, Ash came out of Dolores’s bedroom where Ash kept her rotating stash of “drapes.” Dolores’s heart sank a little as Brook’s eyes widened and a helpless grin spread across his face. She rolled her eyes and said, “Ash, this is Brook. Brook, this is Ash.”

He extended his hand, his grin lighting up to its full, knee-weakening wattage. “Very nice to meet you.”

Ash cocked her head to the side, maybe not to the full Not Allowed rotation, but far enough that she looked again like a long-haired owl. Then she straightened suddenly and Dolores had to stifle a laugh at what she knew was coming. Ash’s eyes narrowed and she brought her face close to Brook’s and said, “We are not the You. We are Ash.”

Dolores found herself delighted to be sharing Ash’s weirdness with Brook. She prepared for the confused look Brook would have, and a smile crept across her face.

Ash turned to Dolores and said, “What does it want us to do about the Brook? Is it for mouth-smashing? Or pelvis-smash-

ing? Or does the Dolores want us to leave so it can pelvis-smash the Brook?”

And just like that, all her delight evaporated as she realized with horror that most people could probably decipher what “pelvis-smashing” was. Dolores paused and watched Brook, whose grin had taken on the lopsided aspect of a man who is unsure whether he is witnessing reality. Dolores quickly said, “No, Ash, nobody’s smashing anything. He’s here to meet y—Ash. He’s here because I think you made another mistake and broke another rule.”

Ash snorted and assessed Brook again. His mouth was agape with a smile and unspoken words hung in the air. Ash continued, “We only grew the pelt, we did not do any more things from the Not Allowed. Then the Dolores said that house-pelts were Allowed. The Dolores cannot take away the house-pelts!”

Brook finally bursted out laughing. “What the hell is a house-pelt? Is she German? Is she a queen? What’s with the divine ‘we?’”

Dolores wearily pointed at the pile of fur on the kitchen floor and said, “That is a house-pelt. One that she dropped. She is definitely not German and if she’s a queen, it’s of a different planet or something.”

His laughter trailed off, but his eyes turned back to Ash, his head ticking to the side as he tried to process what Dolores had said. She could almost hear his brain whirring to fit Ash into some kind of framework that made sense, to find some way to keep her human in his mind.

Brook started to speak, then paused, pressed his hands together and held his forefingers against his lips. He watched Ash, who had begun making a fire. His eyes traveled between Dolores and Ash and he finally said, “Are you guys fucking with me? And how does she do that with her voice? It sounds like... like... like lots of voices, all stirred together? And are her eyes—damn, this sounds serious crazy—do her eyes glow? Honestly, if you’d given me a drink, I might think you’d slipped me something.”

Dolores smiled. “Yeah, it’s funny, most people don’t notice the eyes. It took me a long time to accept it. It’s subtle, so I get it. I think they’re actually bioluminescent, so in the day, you can barely see. As for the voice, well, you don’t know the half of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Dolores squatted down next to Ash. “Hey, it’s okay about the Not Allowed. I know it’s not on purpose. I know the bloody cough isn’t intentional.”

“What is it talking about? We haven’t breathed into a squishy since the one we fixed. Is the Dolores changing its mind? Is it Allowed again? Like the house-pelt?”

“No, no, no, but I understand if it happened by accident. But look, my friend, Brook, don’t breathe into him, but for tonight, the other Not Allowed stuff is okay. Just for right now, okay?”

“Okay,” Ash responded without looking at Dolores.

Dolores glanced up at Brook who was unabashedly eavesdropping. She said, “Ash, say something like Brook.”

Ash’s bright, gleaming eyes snapped to hers. “Is it going to not-nice yell if I do the Brook voice?”

Dolores shook her head.

Ash stood up and she seemed to relish the opportunity to use her unique skills. She met his eyes and said, in his voice, “What is the German and why does it think the house-pelt is the German?”

Dolores had hoped to shock Brook and maybe scare him a little, but instead his eyes dropped to Ash’s mouth and he said, “Unbelievable. Simply uncanny. Can you do it for anyone?”

Ash growled a very bearish growl and said, this time in Dolores’s voice, “We suspect that the You is an idiot, and can’t do anything, but we can. We can make all the mouth-noises.” Ash glanced at Dolores and then repeated herself in Spanish. Dolores didn’t know that Ash had picked up Spanish, but she wasn’t entirely surprised. Brook’s hand rose up as though he intended to touch Ash’s face, but Dolores saw him stop himself.

He turned to Dolores. “Why did you want me to meet her? Not that this hasn’t been extremely interesting.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. Ash causes the plague. She doesn’t mean to.” He lurched back from her and covered his face. She continued, “Don’t worry, not like that. She doesn’t mean to cause it. She has to do something specific.”

“Why haven’t you gone to the police... or... I don’t know. I guess the police really aren’t the right... I could call my boss from the CDC?”

“No! That isn’t why I brought you here. They’ll take her away. You have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone. I think she can help us. I think we can figure it out. But she’s my best friend, and I’m not letting anyone take her away.”

Ash piped up, using Brook’s voice again, “We are her crazy bitch!”

Brook raised one eyebrow. Dolores just shrugged. “I only figured this out very, *very* recently. Look, before, before this crazy burst in North Dakota, she didn’t know that people were getting sick. So I told her to stop it, and she did for a couple weeks, but I think that she needs to do it.”

“The breathing into squishies is Not Allowed. We did not do anymore, even though we do not like not breathing into them. They are full of things we can learn like the Spanish, and they are so full of places for us to travel.” This she said in her own, many-layered voice, and both Brook and Dolores looked at her.

Dolores said, “Ash, grow fur.”

Ash obliged, this time sprouting a short, silky sable horse-hair coat that accentuated all her muscles and her high cheekbones. It blended seamlessly into her long blonde hair. Dolores was pleased that this at least startled Brook. He shouted, “Holy hell! What did she just do?” Then without asking, he reached out as if to run his hand along her now fur-covered arm, but she

swatted his hand away aggressively and he shook it with a grimace. “Jeez, you’re strong too!”

Ash growled, undoubtedly infuriated by the You. She turned to Dolores. “Does the Dolores want us to let it touch us?”

“Only if you want.” Ash mumbled hatred for the You. Dolores said, “Turn to ash, but come right back, okay?”

Ash looked warily at Brook. “What if it loses the shit? Will the Dolores keep it from not-nice yelling? Will the Dolores not-nice yell?”

Brook cut in, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, she can, what, incinerate herself? No, no. This is surreal. This is impossible, but I’m seeing it. What is she?” He stepped toward Ash again. “May I please touch your fur?”

“It is our fur, but yes. It is Allowed to touch our fur if the Dolores says it is Allowed.” Dolores was certain there was a snarky edge to Ash’s voice.

Brook’s eyes glittered in the now roaring fire as he turned to Dolores. “What do you say? Can I touch your crazy bitch’s fur?” He gave her a dazzling smile. Dolores nodded. He ran his fingers along Ash’s sable arm. Then he continued, softly, to Dolores, “It’s hard to believe she’s dangerous.”

“Ash, make a bear noise.”

Ash bellowed a good angry bear roar right in Brook’s face and he fell down and scrambled crabwise away from her with

wide eyes. Dolores walked over and squatted next to him. “You’ve seen just a tiny fraction of her weird shit. So don’t think you know what she’s capable of. But there’s no malice in her, though she does get angry. The next thing I’m going to show you is a true mind-fuck, okay? So if you need to take a piss, you probably should go do that.”

He shook his head, but accepted her help getting to his feet. He said, “I can’t believe it. It looks just like horse hair, and it feels like horse hair, but how can that be? It was instantaneous. Is that what’s on your kitchen floor? Does she always lose the entire coat?”

“Ash, ungrow the fur.”

Ash obliged, looking a little bored and then said crossly, “If it is going to make us Go Away, we are going to grow a warm pelt, that was a by-the-fire pelt.” Brook touched Ash’s arm again and her bright eyes sought out his. Then she said, “It is a nice toucher. It is not afraid? Not even of the Not Allowed things?”

He shook his head. “You surprised me. But I’m not afraid. Not afraid at all.”

“The You continues to surprise us as well. It is everywhere, we must always be on guard.”

Dolores tried not to laugh again, as Brook had clearly thought they were having a moment, when Ash was simply plotting against the ever present You.

Ok. Now for the real doozy. “Ash, do it, disappear. Turn to ash,” Dolores said.

Brook had not stopped running his fingers along her skin, touching her arm and jaw in an experimental, intrigued kind of way, as though he were reading Braille. Then he swiped at his nose and blood smeared across his wrist. He looked at it, dabbed with his fingertips, and looked up at Ash. “Did you do this?”

“We cannot be certain what the You does, as we keep telling the Brook and the Dolores. But touching us made the Brook’s blood-juice leak out of its snout.” She turned to Dolores. “Does the Dolores want us to fix it? Or let it leak? Can this one remake itself?”

“Just do your thing, fix him later.”

Ash stepped back from a bewildered, bleeding Brook and her eyes flew wide as her head rolled back and Dolores, who had intended to watch Brook’s reaction, could not keep her eyes off Ash’s dissolution. Her friend breathed out a long, rattling sigh and the first gray tendrils of ash came twining out of her mouth and nostrils, swirling up toward the ceiling and dispersing into a cloud as larger, wider columns of ash emerged from Ash, her eyes flared brighter, and then the clothes she’d put on for Brook fell the floor in a heap as the smoke disappeared as in a high wind.

Brook shouted, “Ash!” and raced to the deflated clothes.

Dolores watched Brook’s fruitless search and subsequent confusion as though it were a mirror. Even knowing how it would end, it was startling for Dolores to watch, but at least she knew that Ash was okay. Dolores could feel the tickling,

watched feeling on her skin and she knew that Ash hadn't gone anywhere; she was there with them, watching, waiting.

Dolores said, "Come on back. Remake, or whatever the word is." Dolores smirked, realizing she was speaking in a very imperative way with Ash to avoid saying "you" as much as possible.

Brook whirled on Dolores. "Where is she? How can she hear you? What the fuck is going on? The other stuff was bizarre, but what is this? What is this, Dolores?" His eyes were a little wild, somewhere between terror and rapture.

She gestured to the corner where she had noticed what she assumed was the beginning of Ash's return to the flesh. A gray cloud had begun to glow green and then it gradually coalesced into those ashy tendrils that caused so much damage. Brook moved as if he was going to touch it and Dolores grabbed his arm, "Don't. If you breathe that shit in, you'll regret it. Trust me." He stopped pulling and she reluctantly dropped his arm.

The tendrils quickly formed into what really did look like the burnt remnants of a body, like something you would've found at Hiroshima or Pompeii: an instantaneously incinerated, upright corpse. But this corpse gradually became a grisaille underpainting of Ash, then color glazes were added, and finally, those firefly eyes snapped open. Dolores had expected Ash to be looking at Brook, but her eyes burned into Dolores's and she again felt that intense connection that had made her determined to keep Ash, no matter what she'd done, no matter what she did.

"Is anyone going to explain to me what just happened?"

Holy shit, Dolores! Where did you find her? How is she your roommate? How does she even exist?” Brook’s nose was still bleeding a bit, but he just kept swiping at it like it was a fly, rather than his own bodily fluid.

“Ash, fix Brook before he bleeds on my floor.”

“It said that it would not make us fix again.”

“Please, just this once, it’s not big, right? It won’t hurt Ash too much?”

Ash made a series of noises that were distinctly not human, causing Brook to step back toward Dolores though his eyes roved over her naked friend. She sighed and said, “Oh, drapes first.”

Ash gave her the stink-eye but quickly pulled on her bizarre outfit: polyester granny pants in lavender and a western men’s shirt with pearlized snaps. Someday Dolores would love to know where Ash acquired her clothes, or how she picked her ensembles.

Brook turned to Dolores with a smirk, “Do the two of you... you know? She’s got a banging body.”

“I assume you mean fuck?” Dolores asked. He seemed startled by her crassness. “No, we do not. I’m not sure it would be ethical since I’m not sure she can properly consent since I don’t think she’s properly human.”

“We are Ash,” Ash added helpfully with a big smile. Then she finished her last snap and approached Brook. She said,

“Does it want to mouth-smash with us? Should we do that before we fix it? We only wish to do the fixing once.”

Dolores laughed at the bewildered look on Brook’s face. “No, Ash, I don’t think so.”

“What do you want?” Brook whispered to Ash.

Dolores hastily interjected as Ash’s You-fury burbled up to her face, “She wants to know if you’d like to kiss her before she makes your nosebleed stop because she doesn’t want to have to make it stop more than once and if you kiss her, it’ll make your nose bleed again. I told her you’re--”

“Yes. She can kiss me. Definitely. For science.”

Dolores felt deflated at this second strike by a guy she crushed on wanting to kiss her only friend. It felt like the kind of thing that should only happen to girls that had lots of friends, so you could at least temporarily shun the one. She looked to Ash, who seemed willing to oblige, a bit like a loyal dog would probably eat anything off the floor if its owner commanded it. Dolores sighed and said, “Ash, feel free to mouth-smash.”

Ash didn’t initiate anything, but she turned her gleaming eyes on Brook and he lunged forward, kissing her and pulling her against him. Ash paused briefly and said, “Its blood-juice tastes coppery, we knew it smelled that way, but we had not tasted it.” Brook seemed dazed, and about to go in for another attempt at seducing Ash when he also seemed to remember that they were not alone.

He put one more soft kiss on her lips, leaving them daubed

with blood. He didn't let go of her body, so Ash gently removed his arms from around her torso. Then she delicately ran her fingers down his nose, her eyes sliding shut as she did so and this time, unlike with Colt, Dolores saw a small spiraling swirl of crimson ash swirl up into Ash's arm, a black vein appearing on the back of her hand and disappearing about halfway up her forearm.

Then she stepped away from Brook and looked directly at Dolores. "Why does the Dolores not want to mouth-smash us for science?"

Dolores felt a little sad for her friend and for herself as she answered, "I don't think we should mouth-smash, Ash. It might hurt me."

Ash looked down, forlorn. "It is true that we do not wish to hurt the Dolores." If only her friend understood there were ways to hurt people that never shed any blood.

Dolores shook herself out of her pity-party and linked an arm through Ash's arm. It wasn't the first time a man had looked past her for Ash, anyway. But Ash loved her, Dolores, even sans the mouth-smashing. Dolores smiled. Ash was fiercely loyal. It was good to have this friend in her life.

She looked over and saw Brook staring at Ash with bright, infatuated eyes. He certainly seemed to like Ash. But - this was Brook. Who had interned for the CDC. Brook, who wanted to be a hero. Dolores felt a surge of fear run through her. Had she done the right thing?

BROOK SAT DOWN HEAVILY on Dolores's couch, swiping at his nose with his clean hand and he laughed and looked up at Dolores, but then stared at Ash and said, "So you're the person, or whatever you are, that I've been looking for."

"We are Ash, as we have mentioned, and which the Brook seems unable to process."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. But you—you're making people sick. Why? What does it do for you? Dolores says that you need to do it."

Ash sighed and rolled her head back and for a moment Dolores thought she was going to disintegrate again, but then she realized that Brook was about to get a full force You rant. Dolores touched Ash's arm and said, "Hey, calm down. He's asking how breathing into the squishies works. Why do it? Why did... Ash... do it in North Dakota yesterday?"

Brook interrupted, "Squishies? What are squishies? Is she a squishy?" He nodded at Ash.

“It doesn’t listen at all! We are Ash. ASH! Not a squishy; not a bald, weak, defenseless biped! We are only using a squishy body. We breathe into the squishies to learn, to travel, to see. We can’t learn all the things from the magic book place or the glowing boxes. But we did as the Dolores asked. We do not breathe into stupid squishies anymore. We now learn slowly like a squishy biped. Unlike the Brook biped, since it cannot even learn what we are. Even if it is a nice mouth-smasher. And cuddler. But not so nice as the Dolores.”

Brook raised his eyebrows and smirked at Dolores. She raised a finger to shut him up and said, “Squishies are humans. Do not call her a squishy, it pisses her off almost as much as referring to her as ‘you.’ And stop imagining us making out. We don’t. But yeah, I do hug my friend, and apparently I’m better at it than you are.”

Then Dolores turned to Ash and said, “Ash, more people got sick in North Dakota yesterday and I know you don’t obey all my rules. Like the pelt-growing? It’s okay, I know it wasn’t on purpose. I’m trying to understand so I can help you stop. You really can’t do that anymore, it kills people and they can’t remake themselves. I also thought that you might be able to help us fix people.”

Ash’s eyes filled with angry tears and she growled, “The Dolores said that fixing the Brook was the last time. It is trying to change the Not Allowed, but only for itself. It doesn’t Allow us more things, it just makes us do the fixing. We cannot! We will lose ourselves. We can’t do the fixing for the blood-juice cough. Why did it bring the Brook here? Did it think one mouth-smash would make us forget all the things the Dolores

has taken away from us? We follow the Dolores's Not Allowed list because we love the Dolores. We do not want the Dolores to be sad, but the Dolores cannot keep changing the list!"

Dolores realized with horror that Ash was beginning to gray out and that she had thrown her head back. Brook cut in before she could, "No! No, Ash, not what you did with me. That's not what Dolores means, right? Right? We mean a way without yo—without Ash. We want to fix them without Ash."

Ash's tears began to fall, but she seemed to become more solid. "Oh, we see. We see that once bipeds can do the fixing without the Ash, then the Dolores can be without us."

It was Dolores's turn to growl. "No, Ash. No. Ash will always be my crazy bitch, but we have to fix these people somehow. I thought if there was some way to teach me and Brook then you would never have to do the fixing again, right? Even if you mouth-smashed and broke someone, then you wouldn't have to fix them."

Ash flapped her hand and said, "The fixing the bloody snout is not so bad, it is a little fixing, we are strong enough that it is only a bit of work, but the blood-juice cough... we do not know if we could teach squishies."

Brook sighed. Then he said, "Before there were just a couple of cases, maybe one or two a week. Why did you go after so many people in North Dakota? Do you have to eat a certain number of squishies to survive?"

Dolores watched Ash with wide eyes to see what sort of wrath this insulting series of questions would evoke. Ash bent

low and put her face very close to Brook's, her eyes glowing brighter. "We do not eat the squishies! The eating is a disgusting squishy habit. We said it already, we say it again and again, we know it is Not Allowed, so we did not breathe into any bipeds, or any other creatures. We did not travel to North Dakota yesterday." Dolores noticed, and she thought Brook did too, that Ash had grown taller while she spoke, as if the anger inside her was expanding physically.

Brook held up his hands in submission. He said, "Look, I'm just trying to find a solution that doesn't involve you being executed or locked in some top-secret government facility. Is there some way you can show me on another animal? Like a mouse or rabbit or something so I can dissect it and see the mechanism by which you damage the lungs?"

"We do not breathe into mice or rabbits or any other animals! We learn all we need from other animals without having to breathe into them. Only the squishies make us breathe into them to understand, to learn! The Brook should not kill mice and rabbits." She turned in anguish to Dolores. "The Dolores must make it Not Allowed for the Brook to kill mice and rabbits."

Brook stood up and made a calming gesture to Ash. She backed away from him, but he took her hands. "Okay, okay, I won't kill anything. Calm down. I believe you. But Dolores said that you caused all the other cases of bloody coughing, so maybe it's out of your control?"

Ash watched his hands on hers, this simple human gesture, and then she looked up and saw that he was bleeding from his

nose again. He shrugged and wiped his nose on his sleeve and said softly, "Incredible. Just incredible."

Dolores watched her friend puzzling out what all these interactions meant, but then her blazing eyes swung to Dolores and she said in a choked voice. "The Dolores thinks that we did this? It thinks we breathed into many squishies in the North Dakota even though it is Not Allowed?"

"Come on, Ash, what else am I supposed to think? Who else could have..." but she couldn't finish as Ash erupted into a keening noise that was neither human nor that of any other animal. It was an Ash noise.

Then Ash ripped her hands away from Brook, gripped his face in her palm and as soon as the crimson ash had flowed into her, blackening the veins on the back of her hand briefly, but then she shoved both Dolores and Brook away from her so forcefully that the couch skidded across the floor with Brook on it. Then she let out another Ash-cry and swirled up into the fiery light and was gone.

34 / THE FINDING BEGINS

WE HAVE NEVER TRULY KNOWN the Alone, but now we do, now that the Dolores has forsaken us.

It believes that we betrayed it only because we grew some fur, but we knew that breathing into the squishies was a different kind of Not Allowed. We wonder if the Dolores would have decided we were bad without the Brook. Why can't the Dolores make up its mind? It looks at the Brook like it looked at the Lane and then the Colt. We were under the impression that the bald bipeds mate for life, but perhaps not all the bipeds.

We thought it brought the Brook so that we would not be the Alone so much, but now we see that it was for the Dolores. If we hadn't gotten caught with our pelt, maybe it would not have sought out a different crazy bitch. Now the Brook will be the Dolores's crazy bitch and we pour out the sad eye juice when we think about it.

We return to the place near where we first made our squishy body in the North Dakota. We look at the tattered remains of the bear that the stupid squishies unmade. The sun is rising and it is

terribly cold, but we keep our bare, pathetic hide, as penance for our own mistakes with the Dolores.

We are startled as something says, "Holy hell, girl, you'll die out here like that. Are you okay?"

We spin around to find ourselves face to face with the Danny and we are so shocked that it has found us that we almost unmake ourselves again. Then we remember it has never known us as we appear to the Dolores, as we appear now. It does not know us.

It walks slowly toward us, taking its heavy jacket off and it says, "Here, here. Take this at least. What are you doing out here?"

It is clear that the Danny remembers our last encounter, even if it does not know what we are. It throws the drapes at our feet, but keeps itself far away. We say, "We are lost. We are in the alone."

"What? Who else is with you?"

We can see from its face that it is remembering what happened when we had just formed our body, back when the Cody shot us. Perhaps it recognizes our voice.

"We just said, we are the Alone. The Danny is afraid, isn't it?"

"Oh fuck. You're--" it backs away from us, stumbling, but managing to stay on its bipedal feet.

“Do not be afraid. We do not wish to make it cough up the blood-juice. We are only sad. We came to see if we could remake differently. We came here, to where we became we. We can feel it in each of ourselves; we cannot go back to what we were. And we cannot change what we are now.”

It continues putting distance between us. “Look, I don’t know what you want--”

“No, squishies do not seem to know what the You wants or who the You is, yet they all talk about it all the time anyway.”

“Yeah... okay. I’m just... Keep the coat.”

“Wait. Does it know about the other bipeds that got the blood-juice cough in the North Dakota? Does it know about it?”

It pauses and nods its head with its almost-Dolores eyes. “Yeah. Yeah. Did you do that?”

“We suspect the You is nefarious. It was not us. We were with the Dolores the whole time, or at least in the Dolores’ lair, which we thought was our lair once we were its crazy bitch housewife, but it has replaced us. It found a different crazy bitch housewife that doesn’t grow pelts to save firewood.” We leak so much sad juice and now it is not just our eyes, but also our nose, and in a disgusting turn of squishy anatomy, somehow down the back of our throat. How much juice do these bodies have?

Now the Danny comes back very close to us, until it touches us, grabbing us by our naked, cold, furless shoulders, having left its jacket on the ground. It not-nice yells, “What about Dolores?”

What happened to Dolores? Is Dolores coughing up blood? What the hell are you talking about?"

"No, no, no! We would never hurt the Dolores. The Dolores is fine. It is with the Brook, probably pelvic-smashing and tearing the Not Allowed list off the fridge because it doesn't need to tell the Brook not to have a house-pelt." We leak and leak and ooze and ooze and we feel like our whole chest cavity is under something very heavy and we choke on our own air.

The Danny, foolishly, but kindly, we suppose, gently wraps us in its discarded jacket. "Okay. Okay. Look, I'm pretty confused right now. Come with me to my truck, but don't do your crazy ash-smoke-breath shit, okay? None of that."

"We know! It is Not Allowed!"

We follow the Danny to its exoskeleton and it turns a twisty thing and the small, mobile den fills with cozy, warm air, even though there is no visible fire. So clever, even if they are maddening, these bipeds. It asks us many questions about the Dolores and it seems to finally understand that we have been living with the Dolores, that we are what it calls the Dolores's roommate. It asks if we wish to call the Dolores, but we shake our head in the 'no' way, so that we do not have to sound so goopy and sloppy from all the leaking we are doing.

"Why are you here? I can't believe I ran into you again. I've been sneaking out here to... I don't know... be alone, to try to process that maybe I, or I guess maybe you, killed my mom. If I hadn't been out here helping my friend to poach a damn bear, none of this would have happened."

“We are sad the Cody shot the bear. And us. But the You didn't kill the mother-thing, we did, though we didn't mean to. We do not wish to make the Dolores sad, and we now know that the Danny's sadness makes the Dolores sad. We are sorry. We love the Dolores.”

“I don't even know what that means, or what is happening, but I guess I'm kinda glad I met you, because honestly, I've been pretty seriously contemplating some dark shit because I thought I'd lost my mind, and then when those guys got killed, I just had to come out here and see, you know? I had to know if it was back—or you, I guess.”

“We too came back to see what caused the other humans to have the blood juice cough. We must find what out what caused it so that the Dolores will know it wasn't us and let us be its crazy bitch again.”

The Danny watches us and says, “Are there more... like... this?” It gestures to us and our squishy form.

We think about the darkness, the fear, that has been in every single one of us lately and we sigh, finally having ceased leaking. Then we tell the Danny what the Dolores would not stop making noise long enough to hear.

35 / THE ANIMAL GRAVEYARD

“WE HAVE BEEN SCARED that there is another,” we tell the Danny. “We were the only Ash, the only we, before, but now we are not sure.

We see the baffled look on the Danny's face and we know that even though the writhing mass of squishies as a whole are clever, most of the individual squishies are not. This is the not-clever face that many of these defenseless, destructive bipeds make when they cannot follow our logic. We will try to help the Danny understand.

“We have felt it. We have felt something coming, some darkness. What if it is another like us that does not become Ash? What if it doesn't have the Dolores to help it know what is Allowed and Not Allowed? And it can't have the Dolores. It is ours! Even if the Brook thinks it has the Dolores, it does not! Not yet.”

We are glad we met the Danny, that it knows us. We are glad that it did not shoot us even though we see that it wears a small unmaking stick on its hip. We also hope that maybe it will

tell the Dolores on the small hand-face device. We hope that it will tell the Dolores that we will come back, that we will stop the blood-juice-cough thing, but that first we must discover if there is another one like us. We will leave the Dolores, but we will always come back.

We say to the Danny, "Has the Danny seen anything strange out here? This is not exactly where we became we. Not where we were born. We were made north of here. Does it know how to go north in its elaborate, noisy exoskeleton? Does it know the place where the earth is ruptured? Can the Danny take us there?"

"Shouldn't you get some clothes?"

"No," we say, and we grow a nice thick pelt like the mountain lion we saw once in the hills surrounding the Bozeman. The Danny squawks and then its hand is hovering over us, not touching us, but clearly wishing to touch us.

It says, "Can I? Will it hurt me?"

"It will. We are too tired to fix the Danny, so it must not touch our pelt."

It curls its battered fingers into a fist and withdraws its arm. Then the giant exoskeleton begins to rumble over the land. It says, "Is Dolores okay?"

"Yes."

"What's north of here?"

"It will know it when it arrives."

We travel in the exoskeleton. The Danny does not speak to us and we do not speak to it. We occasionally direct the Danny. There are no paths for the wheeled exoskeletons here, but the Danny's exoskeleton is high with large wheels. We come to the blasted, sick wound on the earth that smells like the fabric of reality has begun to rot.

It stops its exoskeleton and whispers, "Holy shit... so this is what they were hiding."

"Why would the Holy Shit try to hide this?" we ask.

The Danny turns to us, seemingly shocked that we are beside it. We return its nice jacket. It shakes its head, and doesn't put on the jacket. We walk even farther north with the Danny and it covers its mouth and nose with its gloved paw. We too cover our respiratory orifices. After picking our way across ground covered in skeletal plants that crumble under our feet, the Danny stops short, looking at the ridge in front of us.

We clamber over the ridge that makes our paws, all four of them, burn and ache and smell like sickness. Then we see it.

An even more ruined crater: not even plant remnants are here. Only sulfurous, acidic vapor rising over the corpses of hundreds of animals. We walk slowly, painfully, over to the enormous, dead carcass of a moose. We circle it and see that it has nearly all of its blood-juice and lungs on the ground in front of its mouth and giant nostrils.

We spin and begin to leak as we see that every poor creature in this wasteland has a mouth and nose garishly smeared with

bright red blood-juice and innards. Hundreds of dead animals, all innocent, all of which would have been willing to give up their learning, their places. No breathing into them was ever needed. That is what makes the squishies so maddening, yet so appealing: they keep their secrets. We must take them, extract them. But all the other animals, all these unmade beasts radiate learning in life. All they know we can know by looking into their eyes, sometimes stroking their fur, but never so much that they need fixing.

We squat down next to the head of the huge moose, marveling that something so large, so powerful, could still be so dependent on the ridiculous blood-juice. We place our hand deep into its warm winter pelt, on the crown of its head, between magnificent antlers large enough to serve as chairs for the squishies. We do not understand being sad for a generic squishy dying this way, because they are so prolific. But many of these creatures, dead in this forsaken place, are few in number and tread lightly on the land, leaving hardly a trace of their existence. Many of them are rare enough that we have not seen even one alive.

We clasp the moose's dead skull through its dead skin through its dead pelt and we reach inward, into the last memories in its dead brain. We see it. We see the Other. It is a being that was born as we were, and it could have become like us, but it didn't. It killed its own multitudes.

Then suddenly, sharply, as though the Other were still alive inside this dead moose, its eyes, pale and flat like stone, and just as gray, glow through the tissue left behind in the moose. We feel the malevolent gaze of the Other on ourselves, each of us, and we cringe away and scream, falling back from the moose.

We stumble into the Danny, who unbeknownst to us has followed and had crept up behind us. We spin around, seeing that our fur was not quite thick enough, and we felt the Danny's fingers plunge through and touch us enough that it is now leaking. Despite feeling overwhelmed and hunted by the horrible eyes of the Other, we run our fingers down the Danny's snout and pull out the hurt.

It not-nice yells as its eyes rove wildly over the many carcasses, "What the hell did you do? Why would you do this? Why?"

We feel that the Danny is being sickened by this place, by the oozing angry sores of the earth. We shout, "Run. The Danny must run away from here, back to its wheeled exoskeleton. It must flee. It must not come back here. This place will eat its body, but even if it survives that, the Other might come back. The Other might be coming here now and we do not know if it can travel as we travel. We do not know if it can remake itself since it destroyed its multitudes. The Danny must go away. The Danny must tell the Dolores we are okay. Tell the Dolores we will find the Other."

The Danny stands there, dumbfounded and looking around at the many, many dead creatures. And then it says, "You are a monster. You stay the fuck away from my sister." It has its hand on its gun thing, its gloved paw fumbling with the snap that attaches a strap over the end of it.

"We cannot even blame the You for this. It was the Other. Please, go. The Danny must save itself or the Dolores will be sad."

“Why can't you just fucking stop? Why do you have to keep killing? Why do you have to make everyone, and now everything, sick? Huh? Stay the fuck away from Dolores and if you come near her ever again, so help me God, I will kill you. Do you hear me? Stay away from her.”

We glare at the Danny and we make ourselves larger. We let our voice turn into its more natural state, where each of us speaks and we say, “We love the Dolores, and we will always come back to it, but not until we have found the Other. Not until we have a plan for the Other. The Danny must go now.”

When the Danny does not go, when it pulls the gun thing from its hip strap, we throw our head back and roar our best bear roar and we swipe the gun away.

It becomes terrified and we see the change in its almost-Dolores eyes. Then it begins to back away slowly, so we roar again and walk toward it, becoming larger still, until it makes a series of no-point noises and begins to run. It runs and we chase it until it is safely in its exoskeleton.

Then we focus on the terrible sense of the Other that we felt inside that innocent moose and we throw our head back and unmake.

36 / *THE SQUISHIES LEAVE THE
BOZEMAN*

BROOK RUSHED OVER to Dolores as she collapsed on the couch, sobbing. The noise Ash had made broke her heart and she began to question herself. What if Ash hadn't hurt the men in North Dakota? What if Dolores had just driven her away after treating her like some kind of dime sideshow at the circus? Brook's nose had stopped bleeding thanks to Ash, but he still had blood smeared on his face and the back of one hand and the shoulder of his shirt. Dolores stared at all the blood for a long moment before realizing that he was talking to her. She had a brief flash of fury, wanting to blame Brook and pretend that this was somehow his fault.

She let him wrap his arm around her and finally she calmed down enough to listen. "Where would she go, Dolores? Where does she go when she does this? Is she still here, like, in the room?"

Dolores shook her head. She snorked back some snot, not caring what he thought of her now. "No, she's gone, gone. I think she can go anywhere, literally anywhere! I'm not entirely sure, she's hard to comprehend sometimes. But she can travel

great distances. I don't know exactly how fast or how far, or what, but those attacks on the east coast, and even the one in Mexico City, she's always been home in the evening by the time I got home from work, so she can't have traveled by any normal means. And she can run too, so beyond her weird smoke-state, she can run forever, and like, inhumanly fast from what I understand. She went running with a friend of mine who's in really good shape and she just smoked him. She could be anywhere."

"Do you think she'd go back to North Dakota, to the place where she got those men?"

Dolores clasped her head tightly in between her hands, gripping her hair by the roots. "I don't know. Given her reaction, I'm beginning to doubt whether that was her at all. She was so upset that I suggested it. That's not like her. When I've caught her doing other things, she doesn't try to hide it. I don't even think she knows how to lie. She can be sneaky, but not when confronted directly. And she can be surly, but she's not... I don't know... there's no malice in her. Except maybe... maybe a little when it comes to me. She gets jealous and then sometimes she can be... petulant. But it's not mean-spirited. It's just jealousy."

"Why would she be jealous? Is there someone in North Dakota that she's jealous of? Did you know any of the victims up there?"

Dolores felt another wave of sadness as she realized that Brook had no feelings for her. He wasn't even aware that she had a crush on him. But Ash had been. "No, I don't think she's jealous of anyone in North Dakota. Just you, I think."

“Me? Why is she jealous of me? I just met her,” Brook said, and he looked truly bewildered.

“Don’t be obtuse. She thought I wanted some alone time with you. She thought I was replacing her with you.”

“But we’re just classmates. We’ve never even hung out until tonight.” But as he said it, his face changed as if he were looking back through his memories. “Oh. Right. Okay. Um, so, do you think she’ll come back? Do you want me to stay over in case she comes back? Do you think she’d hurt you?”

“No, you do not need to stay overnight. Ash would never hurt me, but she might decide to hurt you, or mouth-smash you until you bleed to death.”

“That doesn’t seem all bad. I bet it’s never boring with Ash around.”

Dolores hated the dreamy, distant look in his eyes. “No, not generally. I’ll see you next week in class, okay?”

“Really, you’re just going to drop this whole Scooby Doo mystery? You aren’t going to get in my mystery van and help me solve it?”

“How old are you, fifty? Who makes a Scooby Doo reference anymore?”

“Hey—you’re the one who’s living with a weird alien lady, and if that isn’t an eighties and early nineties premise, I don’t know what is!”

“I wasn’t even alive for either of those decades!”

“Still, though, come on, let’s get together tomorrow at least and talk once you’ve had time to ponder where she might’ve gone. Or maybe she’ll come back and you two can kiss and make up.”

“Get out of my house,” Dolores said, but she laughed.

He chuckled and put on his coat and as he ducked out into the still, cutting cold, he said, “I mean it, Dolores. Call me tomorrow? Please? You and I are the only ones who can figure this thing out and if you don’t want me to call in the CDC cavalry, you have to help me out, okay?”

Dolores closed the door quickly and stoked up the fire, hoping that Ash would come home and curl up in front of it like some beloved pet, returning after escaping outside.

MAYBE THAT WAS Dolores's whole problem: she thought of Ash as a little like a quirky pet that could speak. She didn't think about what Ash wanted or needed. Dolores walked into the kitchen and looked at the Not Allowed list, with its rebellious Allowed addendum at the bottom. What if she had just broken her only friend's heart with her accusation? Even if it were true, Dolores shouldn't have brought Brook here for the confrontation.

Brook was a separate problem now that he knew, really knew, about Ash. What if he changed his mind and did decide to tell someone in a position of authority? Would anyone even believe him?

Dolores doubted it. She felt safe in that regard, but that didn't mean he was an ally of Ash. What if he helped Dolores track Ash down and then simply tried to capture her in some disintegration-proof way, or what if he tried to hurt her? Dolores didn't get that vibe from Brook, but she didn't like how his eyes had lit up, almost greedily, every time Ash had performed some new reality-defying feat.

She supposed she might have to enlist his help anyway, if for no other reason than that he had a car, and he seemed to have some resources at his disposal. Dolores liked Brook, and she hated to use him that way, but she was desperate to find Ash again.

Early sunlight reflected off the snow and began to creep into her window when Dolores's phone began to buzz. It took her a moment to realize that she was asleep on the couch in front of the fireplace. Her adrenaline shot through the roof as she saw it was Danny calling even though it wasn't even fully dawn yet. She fumbled with her phone and answered, "Danny? Are you okay?"

"Lorri. Are you okay?"

"I asked you first. Why the hell are you calling me so early?"

"She isn't there? She didn't come for you?"

"What? What are you talking about? Who?"

"The... the thing. The thing you call your roommate. It, she, whatever, was here and I think she killed like, tons of animals and she roared at me like a bear and chased me and she grew fur and goddamnit... am I losing my mind Dolores? Have you been living with the thing that made me sick?"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down. Okay... so Ash came to visit you? What about dead animals?"

Dolores spent over an hour on the phone going through all the tiny details of his brief interaction with Ash. During the conversation, Dolores put him on speaker and hurriedly got dressed in warm clothes. She texted Brook to gas up his Scooby Doo van and get over to her place as soon as he could because she had found a clue. He replied with a gif of Scooby and Shaggy spinning out while trying to run.

“Okay, Danny, you have to stay calm. I’m heading your way today. My friend is driving with me, so we should be there in fourteen hours or so. I’m fine though. I’m okay. You’re okay.”

“What if that thing comes for you? It’s dangerous.”

“Ash would never hurt me. Trust me. Can you take me to the place you last saw her? Do you remember how to get there?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can.”

It was Friday and Dolores was supposed to work and go to class. She hated to fuck up her very first semester of college, but she had an ominous feeling that things were spiraling out of control. She needed to find Ash *now*. There could be no waiting for her to return. Either Ash had done this and was about to go on some kind of plague-spreading rampage, or she was out there alone, trying to figure it all out on her own. Given that Ash had difficulty figuring out pronouns, there was no hope of her solving this particular mystery without some squishy assistance.

When she tried to get off the phone Danny said reluctantly, “Be careful, Lorri. It said, right at the end, to make sure you knew that it would come back to you.”

“Ash said that? Like that exact phrase? She said ‘you’?”

“No, no, I can’t remember how she phrased it because it was super weird, but that was the gist of it. Sorry, I was pretty terrified at the time, I can’t remember exactly what she said.”

“We’ll be there late tonight barring terrible weather.”

“Please be careful.”

Within twenty minutes, Dolores found herself on an impromptu road trip with a happily babbling Brook. He seemed delighted to be skipping classes to save the world. Leave it to a twenty-year-old man to think he was saving the world just by taking a road trip. Dolores let him feel like a hero on a quest, even though she felt nothing but gloom and guilt for how things had gone with Ash. She responded if he asked her something directly, but otherwise, she just listened as he talked about himself. He spoke about his family, who lived in California, his coursework and his internship at the CDC. Then he piped up that she should start googling around to see if any other local papers had had an outbreak of Ash-fever as he called it.

Dolores didn’t like this new name; it seemed unjust if her friend had given up breathing into squishies. She said, “What if it isn’t her? What if the new cases aren’t her? She’s never done it like that before, never a cluster of people. It’s always been one or two a day, but far apart, struck down individually.”

“Maybe she’s learning to do it more efficiently, or like you said, she did take a break, so maybe she wanted to catch up. Didn’t you say she’d been off it for a couple weeks? And there were fifteen victims... maybe she just has, I don’t know, a quota. Maybe if she’s an alien, it’s her job.”

Dolores didn’t answer. She had found another google hit, this time from Fargo, that another seventeen people had been struck, this time at a party at the university there, and bizarrely, they were all young men too - not a single woman had been afflicted, though several young women said the room filled with a weird dust just before the bloody coughing had started. Several of the women were in quarantine, having been hit directly in the face by bloody spray. Dolores felt a little queasy, remembering the experience with Marisol.

She opened her mouth to tell Brook, but then she closed it. She didn’t want to listen to him rant about it the whole drive; she wanted to wait until they were with Danny, talk it out once, not over and over again. She could hardly imagine Ash doing this without something prompting it. Had this attack been prompted by their fight the night before. What about the original fifteen?

“Some spring break plan, huh? Going where it’s even colder than Bozeman and too flat to ski,” Brook said, breaking into her inner musings.

“What? Oh, is next week spring break?”

“No, but the week after, so if we just beg off this week, we

have two solid weeks of sleuthing we can do. It can't take us longer than that, can it?"

"To catch someone who can literally turn into smoke, and then disappear? Yeah, I'm sure that'll be quick and easy."

"Well you don't need to be such a pessimist."

"I prefer realist."

"Did you have any plans for spring break? I'm fine cancelling mine, I hadn't bought a plane ticket anyway, but I saw super cheap tickets to New Orleans so I'd been thinking about going down there with some friends."

"Uh, no, just extra shifts at Starbucks, fun times."

"Seems like your surviving co-workers are pretty fun, right? It's not all bad?"

"No, not all bad, but still, it's not like making frappuccinos for eight hours a day is that much fun, no matter how good the company. They call it work for a reason."

Brook was silent and Dolores regretted her sulky, sarcastic tone, but Brook didn't even do a work-study job when school was in session. He got to do classes full time. Both his parents were alive. He was handsome. He could do unpaid internships. He was easygoing and mellow, though he did seem to be a bit of a loner, for reasons she had yet to discern.

But she didn't need to be snappy with him. It would not

make their impromptu road trip a fun adventure if she was going to be peevish and irritable the whole time.

“Sorry,” Dolores said. “I’m worried about her, whether she did this or not. I’m scared. She’s not great at being inconspicuous and I don’t know if she can get hurt or killed, and she doesn’t like getting shot, but with the way she acts, she’s liable to get shot again. I feel responsible for her, you know?”

“Why is that?” He glanced at her, taking his eyes from the road for a moment. Even though most of the snow had cleared off, bony fingers of snow were blowing across the road and the wind gripped the car every time it gusted. Slick patches of black ice were forming where the blowing snow could get a foothold in the shadow of hills.

Dolores considered this and found tears springing into her eyes. “She’s my friend. My weird, bizarre, but loyal friend. If she did this, I feel that I’m somehow at fault, and I’m definitely at fault for her leaving like that, for being so upset.”

Brook didn’t press her anymore and they drove in silence for a long time. Dolores dozed some, they listened to music, and she watched Montana’s endless miles tick by. At a gas station in Wibaux they switched and Dolores drove while Brook dozed. Snow was coming down steadily now and the gray, low sky bled into the gray, snow-caked plains in the distance, making her feel like she was driving into a void.

Dolores had only been to visit Danny once in his trailer, and that had been enough. She found his “town,” which was really a glorified mining camp, only distinguishable from the mining camps from a century earlier by the cell phones all the

dirty, gruff men carried in their vest pockets. Danny was at work when they arrived, but he'd hidden a key for Dolores. As they entered the dank chill of the trailer, she heard Brook's sharp intake of breath.

38 / *THE DANNY JOINS
THE GANG*

DOLORES WONDERED if part of the appeal of this trip for Brook was the curiosity of hanging out with white trash like her. She pressed her lips together and locked the door behind them.

Danny's trailer was barely furnished, with a double mattress on the floor in his bedroom. He'd put up a queen air mattress in the other bedroom. The bathroom had a single spare roll of toilet paper, a bottle of cheap, off-brand shampoo, a bar of Irish Spring, and a giant jug of Orange Goop with a pump. The living area had an extremely large TV, several gaming systems, and a very battered, fifth-hand couch. Dolores wanted to put a sheet on the couch before sitting down, it was so grimy looking. Other than the couch, the place was cleaner than her house had ever been.

They both went into the kitchen, where Danny had big Kirkland bottles of aspirin, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen on the counter. Dolores suddenly wondered what pain Danny had been hiding from her. She also felt relief that he hadn't yet

found his way to better painkillers that would end up killing him.

She opened the fridge. There was a loaf of bread, a quart of milk, and some cheese and cold cuts. A half-used jar of mayonnaise, mustard, and a case of PBR. One waxy Red Delicious apple sat on the counter.

She and Brook had eaten on the road, and he had insisted on buying her meals, saying that he felt bad about contributing to scaring Ash away. Dolores thought it more likely that he was feeling guilty for having money when she did not. She normally didn't accept this type of charity, but she didn't have the energy, or the cash, to fight him, so her only other option had been not to eat. So she ate, and Brook seemed satisfied by this.

Brook looked around her into the fridge and said, "Well, I imagine there aren't a lot of grocery options round these parts."

"Not so much. You hungry?"

"Nope, I'm good. When will Danny be back?"

"Dawn, probably. They work twelve hour shifts and he was on nights this go round. I think it's six to six, but I can't remember exactly."

"Jeez, that sounds killer. You should go get some rest. I may crash in my car because that couch is... uh... well. I'll just--"

"Oh come on, I won't attack you and I feel pretty confident you won't attack me. We can share the air mattress without being weird, right?"

“No, I mean, yes, of course we can, but I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Good, then no raping. That’s my main rule.”

Brook seemed unsure what to make of this comment, and his mouth hung open as he tried to form a response.

She rolled her eyes and said, “Brook, I’m joking. Of course I don’t think you’re rapey. It’s twelve degrees out. I know that’s balmy compared to most of this wretched winter, but you’ll freeze to death in your car. How about we just set aside any weirdness that normally arises from post-pubescent boys and girls sleeping in the same bed, and we just go to sleep.”

“I was trying to be... a gentleman.”

“Yeah, well, it’s gentlemanly not to freeze to death when you’re on a quest with a lady, right?”

“Okay, okay! I’ll keep my clothes on.”

“Sure, if that helps, whatever. But I’m beat, so I’m going to tuck in. If nothing else, some shared body heat might be nice.”

Brook nodded, and Dolores was once again positive that if he were fair skinned, he would be blushing. But he followed her down the narrow hall, which made her feel even more monstrously large, and into the nearly empty room. “Can I at least take my jeans off, or is that too weird for you?” she asked, desperately hoping for comfort more than lust that he wouldn’t mind.

“No, I mean yes. Please, just sleep however you’re used to sleeping.”

“Not gonna go that far, but the bra and the jeans have to go. You can turn your back if you’re going to be all Victorian about it.”

He seemed to crumple a little. “I feel like if I turn my back, you’re going to be mad that I didn’t want to look and if I look you’re gonna be mad that I looked.”

She kicked her jeans off. “Too tired to give any fucks.” She unhooked her bra and pulled it out through one sleeve, which he watched with wide eyes, and then she crawled under the covers and made herself as small as she could to leave him more room on the bed. Moments before she fell asleep, she felt the mattress shift as Brook climbed on the other side.

Dolores woke up when Danny came home the next morning. She carefully got off the bed and slid quietly into her jeans and sweatshirt. Brook remained asleep as she crept out to greet her brother. He met her with a big shit-eating grin and she whispered, “What?”

“You get laid? I only had the one mattress, I thought it might help you get there with this guy you’ve been chasing.”

“You ass, you did that on purpose. No, he was all weird and chivalrous and was going to sleep in his car. I had to basically force him to sleep in there with me. He’s got a boner for Ash anyway.”

“It can grow fur!”

“Doesn’t seem to bother him.”

“Weird. Anyway, this Ash thing freaks me out. I can’t believe you’ve been living with her. Or it. Or whatever. Anyway, you wanna go out to the place it evaporated from now, or wait until Prince Charming is up?”

Much to Dolores’s dismay, Brook answered from the dim of the hallway. “Prince Charming is up. He’ll be ready as soon as he takes a piss.”

Danny grinned and covered his mouth, as if he was glad that this slip up had happened. She hissed, “Damn it, Danny!” Then she turned to see Brook’s muscular, bare torso disappearing into the bathroom. Danny said he would need a quick shower whenever Prince Charming deigned to emerge. His hands, forearms, and face were all black with an oily slime. Brook emerged from the bathroom and Danny ducked in. Brook sauntered over to her with a big grin, and Dolores again felt that she couldn’t trust her read on him because she wanted him to want her so badly.

He had his shirt in his hand, but did not put it on. He watched her for a moment and she was sure he had a mischievous little smirk on his face. She felt her heart racing, suddenly wondering if she’d farted in her sleep, or talked in her sleep, or grabbed him. The possibilities were endless, but she couldn’t remember a thing.

“What?” she finally said, more irritably than she’d intended.

“You sleep okay?”

“Yes, fine, thank you. You?”

“Yeah, great, actually. I haven’t slept that well in a while.”

She was about to say something flirtatious that she would likely regret later when Danny came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. He shouted down the hall as he went into his bedroom, “There is a decent diner in town. We can go grab some breakfast, then head to where It disappeared.”

Brook never let his eyes stray from Dolores’s eyes. She stood up and scampered back to the shower. Brook changed while she showered and then they were all piling into Danny’s truck in the cold morning air. She was reminded of her mother as Danny said, “Dolores, you should’ve dried your hair, you’ll catch cold with all that wet on your head and neck and back. Are you trying to grow it longer than Colt’s?”

Brook’s face swung from Danny to Dolores and he said, a little too eagerly, Dolores thought, “Who’s Colt?”

Dolores said, before Danny could jump in, “A friend of mine from high school and his hair is super long. Well, mostly, he shaves it underneath because it’s also super thick, and if he doesn’t, then his man-bun gets out of control and he can only braid it to tame it.”

Danny snorted and looked Brook over. “Are you Dolores’ ‘friend’ too?”

“What’s that mean? Of course I’m her friend. I wouldn’t drive cross-country with a random acquaintance.”

Dolores shot Danny a look and he swallowed his laughter. They ate quickly and Brook looked for articles about Ash on his phone. He discovered the attack in Fargo from the day before. There had been another the previous afternoon, a whole banking boardroom had been taken down in Sioux Falls, but this time two men died before they even made it to the hospital. The whole building was on lockdown and they were searching for a chemical explosive of some kind. While the story filled her with horror, Brook seemed as excited as a labrador that had flushed a good flock of ducks.

After he finished reading aloud, Dolores said, “Brook, these people are dying. Could you try to tamp down your joy?”

“Yeah, but people were dying before and no one was paying attention, now people will pay attention, right?”

“If this is Ash, I just want her to stop, I don’t want her to get caught or hurt or... or anything. I just want to fix the situation. Stop being giddy, it’s weird.”

He looked chastened, but she could see it was only on the surface.

They left the diner and bellies full, headed out to the area Danny had told them about. They arrived at the base of the hill where Ash had left Danny behind. They were both horrified at the landscape, denuded and destroyed to no end: there was no mine, no construction in progress, no fields being planted, just barren wastelands, smoldering from whatever had happened.

They all clambered out of the truck and Danny beckoned them.

“Man, what is that smell? It’s like Satan’s sweaty butt-crack.” Brook said, holding his jacket sleeve over his nose and mouth.

Danny spoke through his collar, having pulled it up to cover his own nose and mouth. “I’m not sure how it smelled before she got here, but it smells worse today, so I think her handiwork has something to do with it.”

They crested the small rise and saw the cause of the stench. Radiating circles of dead animals: woodchucks, martins, badgers, rats, voles, mule deer, a fox, many more, including the moose Danny had caught Ash near. Dolores froze, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. Brook gagged into his sleeve.

Danny walked them over to the moose and Dolores felt her mind itching, the way it itched at the beginning, before she had ever known Ash, the way that she only retroactively pieced together had been Ash. But this feeling, this itch, it was not Ash, and it wasn’t exactly the watched feeling she felt before, but it was similar.

If Ash’s evaporated cloud-self watched her and gave her the feeling of unseen eyes looking at her, this new sensation was more akin to someone laying a wet eyeball on her and saying they were keeping their eye on her. She shivered and whispered, “Ash couldn’t have done this. She loves animals. She would never do this. Never.”

Brook, to her surprise, nodded. “Yeah, she was super mad

when I suggested she do her thing with a rabbit or a mouse. But maybe this is her way of showing us the error of our ways?"

Dolores considered the unpleasant feeling, the horrific smell that was not just hundreds of corpses rotting, but something deeper, something more terrible than that. Had she pushed Ash to this? If so, then there might be no saving Ash.

Danny and Brook spoke as one: "We've got to catch her, and soon."

WE FOLLOWED the Other and its trail of blood-juice and lung bits across the high plains and now we know that it has come here, to this very large colony of squishies. The Chicago.

While the squishies spread out just about everywhere we have been, creating their elaborate lairs in far-flung places, they mostly cluster in these enormous colonies, like the coral reefs we saw in the ocean. This reef, the Chicago, is filled with enormous numbers of the soft bipeds, and they are busier and more heedless than the bipeds that live in smaller reefs. They do not smell the horrible, decaying stink of the death of the Other's multitudes.

We smell it everywhere, but we do not understand how it can function when all of its multitudes are dead; somehow it is still alive in a singularity, made of death.

We were too slow, maybe too afraid, in the Fargo. Then we were in the Sioux Falls, but we found a place like the Fargo, a place filled with larval bipeds, but the Other chose mature

squishies that time. In the Chicago, there are so many places that the Other might unmake many squishies.

After we saw the desecration of the animals near our birthplace, we have been curious about how exactly it does it. We could not breathe into so many so quickly, even if it were Allowed. We find it even more perplexing because of its singular form.

We roam the Chicago, our snout to the wind, and we run and run. We find a place that has warmer drapes and we slip into them and run away, in a hurry to find the Other's decaying scent. We attract less attention now that we are not so bare and cold. Briefly a biped not-nice yells at us about the drapes but we easily outrun it; it is both exceptionally squishy and under-muscled for a mature creature. We run for a long time, exploring the many long lanes threading amongst the giant structures of the Chicago. We see more varieties of squishies than the smaller colonies have, just as in the ocean, the larger reefs have more diversity.

In certain areas, there is not-nice yelling at us even though we are unsure what Not Allowed thing we have done to attract such attention. But we run. Whenever we do not understand what the squishies are going on about, we run. They cannot catch us. Even though we run and run and run, we have not yet found the Other. We go toward the highest of the structures, the shelters for whole piles of squishies. Then we run along a giant lake, like an ocean with no salt, then along a river, and we loop around and around, spiraling in toward the center.

Finally we can tell that the stench of the Other is close at hand.

Now that we are so near the Other, we are afraid. We are afraid, because we do not know what it is, not really, it is like us and yet not like us. We do not know what it will do when we find it. We wonder whether it will attack us, whether it will try to breathe into us, whether it even can breathe into us...but mostly we are afraid that it will find the Dolores inside us. Now that the scent is so overwhelming we fight not to wretch. We pause and push every last bit of the Dolores to the very deepest, most hidden part of our mind.

There are squishies upon squishies upon squishies here. We had to stop running long ago for there was such a dense stream of the bipeds hurrying, but never running, this way and that, seemingly without purpose. They remind us of a tight school of fish, so we look for a shark.

We have our hand over our mouth now, and then, like a school of fish swerving all in one fluid motion, we see that the squishies seem to sense the death-rot smell, even if they cannot name what is bothering them. We grow to be the size of the Dolores so we can peer over the masses of bipedal bodies.

There, across a path for exoskeletons, right in the middle of the elevated gray paths for walking squishies, we suddenly see the pale, almost lavender, gray gleam of glowing eyes.

We see it first - it does not see us - and we shrink back down to more average size. We watch its movements. It flicks its hands out here and there, with long—too long—fingers and it grazes the bare flesh of squishies that without even noticing its spidery grasping veer away, but never enough. We see one biped after another swipe at their newly blood-juice-leaking snouts.

The Other's face would probably be classified as mate-worthy if the many images of attractive squishies on every surface are any indication. It has a sharp jawline and high cheekbones. It is well muscled and tall, though it has opted not to have udders, despite how nice and visually pleasing udders are. Its head pelt is longish, with silky curls, and so black it is almost blue. Both varieties of its eye-hair, the small ones designed to filter dust, and the expressive patches higher up, are dark and thick, the patches arch above its eyes, accenting the strange, unnatural gray. Gray like a hurricane. Gray that hides lightning and floods and devastation.

We spent too long assessing it, and now its eyes snap to ours and we are unshielded, briefly exposed across the wide path. All the exoskeletons seem to have halted and its terrifying, incandescent gray eyes lock on ours. A wide grin splits its face, showing bright white, straight teeth. Even though it is nice looking, the squishies skitter away from it because they can sense that it is not-nice. Very not-nice.

Then, without warning, the air fills with a sound like the tornados of the high plains make and we wish desperately, pointlessly, to warn all the many bipeds here. It gives us one more mirthless smirk and throws its head back and innumerable tendrils of the dead multitudes rocket out of its out mouth like black, grimy spiderwebs, stinking like nothing we have ever smelled, even the horrific smell at the place of our birth.

Each tendril finds the mouth and nostrils of an unsuspecting squishy and each squishy begins to writhe, easily twenty or thirty of them. They swat at their faces and their hands flow through the dead multitudes, coming away covered in an angry, purplish

rash. The crowd begins to panic as more and more bipeds make horrible gurgling, choking sounds and we are jostled and knocked around.

The Other is looking at us now, coils of dark lavender-gray death swirling out into so many squishies. We finally become brave, but as we push through the throng to try something, anything, to stop the Other, it makes a noise that we suspect is its laugh. Our skin prickles up into sharp, cold goosebumps; we feel our eyes leak the sad-juice, but now we know it is fear-juice, too. Then there is a great sucking roar of wind and we feel the tentacles withdraw back into its stinking maw. Its glistening, glowing purple-gray eyes are filled with pleasure at having made us watch the most Not Allowed thing we can imagine.

As we reach the side of the path where the Other stands, it gives us one last look, laughs its horrible, groaning laugh, and shatters into millions of dark, sharp pieces. We close our nostrils and mouth just in time, though all around us, there are squishies coughing, vomiting, hacking, spewing blood-juice and lung bits all over each other, the path, and the exoskeletons that have crashed into one another. There is so much noise and we cover our ears now that the Other and its dead, filthy multitudes are gone. The cry of the Other is too loud and we cannot help ourselves as we raise our own voice in the only cry that is uniquely Ash.

We have lost it again. But we managed to keep our Dolores safe. When the bipeds who were not struck by the Other begin to turn to us, we collapse into our multitudes and seek in our mind for the Dolores. The Dolores will know what to do.

40 / THE GANG'S QUEST FOR
THE OTHER

Dolores, Danny, and Brook drove back into town in silence. They walked into Danny's house and they leaned against the peeling formica of his countertops in stunned silence. After what seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes, Brook said, "We just follow the bodies, right? Follow the bodies, we can speak to the survivors, and if they're like Danny, they may have some sense of what Ash took away from her invasion of their bodies, right? Then we follow that. But we need to go. I checked the Fargo paper and another one of the victims died last night. It was just a small article, but this isn't like before where there were just a couple deaths and a lot of lingering illness. She's playing for keeps--"

"Stop saying it's fucking Ash! I don't think it's Ash," Dolores interrupted.

Danny held up his hands and said, "Dolores, you weren't here, you didn't see the way her face was all contorted while she was touching that moose—it was like she was *inside* it some-

how. It was terrifying. You can't let your feelings get in the way here."

"Danny, Dolores and I have already agreed we can make up our work or semester or whatever later. We are going after Ash. What about you? What about your job?"

"My job is about to be gone anyway. They're talking about another gigantic round of layoffs to try to cover the cost of whatever cleanup they're supposed to be doing out at that place."

Dolores was about to speak and then stopped. She thought for a moment. "Had you been out there before? How much of that is Ash or whatever and how much of that is your company's damage? You said the whole area's been closed since the summer when something happened, right? Some kind of botched experiment for a new extraction technique?"

Danny cracked open a can of PBR. "Yeah, they closed that and miles around after something happened in July, maybe? But it was hush-hush, need to know only. We were all simply told that there were OSHA issues and we wouldn't be starting extraction out that way for a long time. None of us believed their bullshit, really. They had armed guards on the place for a while, but then they kept getting sick, so the company expanded the perimeter and said it would be a felony if anyone was caught trespassing."

Dolores snorted, "And yet you and Cody went out there to go bear poaching. Good life choices, brother of mine."

Danny was about to say something back when Brook interrupted, "Look, we can talk or argue or whatever on the road,

but shouldn't we get going? Shouldn't we start driving to Fargo?"

Dolores grumbled her agreement and Danny did too and within half an hour they were all in Brook's car, headed to Fargo. Dolores felt guilty about how relieved she was to be out of Danny's depressing trailer. It broke her heart to think of her brother living there all alone in such a desolate place.

Danny and Brook spent the first hour or so arguing about who, if anyone, to tell. Danny thought they should be telling the Department of Homeland Security or at least the CDC so they could start working on treatment. Dolores couldn't be sure of Brook's motives, but she thought what he really wanted was to be the hero and that if Danny involved a giant government agency, he wouldn't get to play hero at all. Despite his potential ulterior motives, Dolores appreciated that he seemed genuinely concerned about Ash's wellbeing, and not just as some kind of alien to be probed for information, but as a fellow sentient creature.

Dolores mostly stared out the window, thinking if she just concentrated hard enough, she would feel Ash, wherever she was. She was so zoned out that when her phone buzzed, she jumped as if she had been shocked. She glanced at the screen, filled with hope that Ash had somehow texted her.

Instead it was Colt, texting to say that he was thinking about coming over to Bozeman for spring break the following week. Brook was staring at her, making her nervous every time he looked away from the road, and he said, "Who's that? What's going on? Is it Ash?"

“No, of course it’s not Ash. You really think she can text? She doesn’t have a phone.”

Danny reached over her shoulder from the back seat and plucked her phone out of her hands before she could reply. “Hey—you dick, give it back!” She turned and used her long silverback arms to grab him by the shirt front so he couldn’t evade her completely as she tried to get it back.

He chuckled. “Ooo-la-la, it’s Colt looking for a spring break piece.”

Brook turned to Dolores again with big eyes, and said, “That kind of ‘friend’ is he? Guess we better wrap this mystery in a hurry, huh, gang? We gotta get Lorri here back to her long-haired lover.”

“Danny, give me my damn phone back now. And no, we don’t need to rush, because it’s not like that. He’s a friend.” Dolores thought that Brook looked a little jealous, a little relieved that she was not eager to get back for spring break with Colt. In truth she was eager to do just that, but Dolores still wanted Brook to like her, to want her. When Danny tapped her shoulder with the phone, she gave him the dirtiest, smelliest stink-eye she could muster.

Brook thankfully seemed to sense that she was upset and changed the topic back to Ash. “So, suppose we track her down, what then? Are you just going to try to talk her down, Lorri?”

She felt her stomach flutter that he had slid right into calling her Lorri, like he really knew her. “Yeah, I guess so. Like

you said, it's not like we can trap her until we figure out how she manages to dissolve or whatever it is that she does."

Brook's brows drew together and he squinted as he drove and said, "Could we maybe, I dunno, vacuum her up when she's in the dusty, ashy phase of her dissipation?"

Danny sighed heavily and said, "It happens faster than I could vacuum anything. And I can also assure you that shooting it does nothing--"

Dolores scoffed. "Yeah, except hurt her and force her to dissolve so she can remake herself."

Danny pulled himself forward to talk to her. "You know what I meant."

Dolores ignored Danny and turned back to Brook. "What if we could rig up some kind of vacuum-pack thing like in Ghostbusters?" Both Danny and Brook started laughing hard. She crossed her arms over her chest and continued undeterred, "Well I don't see either of you assholes coming up with any better ideas, and it's not like we can really think within the parameters of normal shit, since we are chasing a distinctly abnormal organism."

Brook's face lit up again. "Do you think she's actually an organism? Or some kind of nanobot conglomeration? Or an alien? Maybe she's the first silicon-based life form..." he trailed off, his expression one of ecstatic reverie.

"Dude, you looked like you were willing to fuck her, so it's a little weird that you're suggesting she's not human." Dolores

meant to say it in a light-hearted way, but it came out sounding jealous and bitter.

“She’s obviously not human. But she is also obviously hot. Don’t be such a prude, Lorri. Don’t tell me it hasn’t crossed your mind,” Brook said.

“I know she’s pretty, but she can also be ugly. She can be anything, look like anything, that’s why it seems so pointless to interview these survivors. I mean, if she’s attacking people, she’s probably going to do it looking like someone else, right? She’s weird, super weird, but I don’t think she’s dumb.”

“But she might not feel the need to disguise herself, because by this point she knows how powerless we are compared to her, right? I mean, the way she can just clump in and out of existence is crazy. Can you even imagine? I don’t know how fast she can move like that, but it’s practically teleportation! The doppelganger stuff she did with Danny—just crazy. We still have no idea if she just floats around to wherever she feels like stopping, or if she can plan it. I just wish she hadn’t fled so I could’ve talked to her more. Can you imagine if we could replicate some of her capabilities? Can you even imagine?”

Dolores didn’t like the way Brook’s eyes lit up talking about Ash. The way his breathing got fast and shallow. She wasn’t sure whether his sexual interest or experimental interest made Dolores more upset.

Dolores glanced back at Danny and his face was a mask of disgust and he finally said, “Seriously, dude? You’ve got a beautiful woman, who’s actually a real flesh and blood human, right

beside you, and you're fantasizing about a pile of dust that gives people lung-ebola? Gross."

Brook scrutinized Danny in the rearview and Dolores wanted to crawl under a rock at Danny's suggestion that Brook should take more notice of her. Brook said, "The guy pimping his little sister thinks I'm gross?"

Danny lurched forward and Dolores thought for a moment he was going to punch Brook, which would likely get them all killed at seventy-five miles per hour. "I'm not pimping my sister. You should just watch yourself with Ash. You really have no idea what it's capable of, no idea at all, but I do. I've been to the brink of death and back because of it, so how about you just focus on driving?"

"I thought you wanted me to focus on Lorri, so which is it?"

Dolores rolled her eyes and said, "You guys want to just pull over and I'll close my eyes and you can have your little pissing contest? Or could we maybe get to Fargo before we start the contest?"

Both men were silent for a moment before laughing uneasily. They made it the rest of the way to Fargo in only a couple hours and Dolores was glad to have some food, this time purchased by Danny. While they ate, Brook made a phone call to the hospital where the majority of the surviving frat boys were. He said he was a field agent with the CDC and that he'd been sent to interview as many of the patients as could speak. He got their room numbers and wrote it all in a small notebook he pulled from his back pocket.

When he got off the phone he pulled out his wallet with a worried look on his face and then relief spread over it like a sunrise. He slipped a card out of one side and held it up for Dolores to look at. It was his CDC identification card from his internship. “Our ticket into those rooms.”

“I think you mean your ticket. Look at us, they aren’t going to let us in.” Dolores gestured to how scruffily she and Danny were dressed in ragged jeans and ratty t-shirts.

Brook nodded, “Yeah, we better make a side trip and get you some more professional attire. I’ll say you’re interns, learning the ropes, and that you don’t get your own ID’s until, I don’t know, you pass some qualifying exam or something. It’s not like they’re going to question us that closely, right?”

“Probably not, but I have no idea. I’ve never tried to visit someone in the hospital that wasn’t an immediate relative.”

As soon as they walked into the hospital Dolores knew that there would be no talking to any of the patients. The CDC wasn’t there, but some government agency was. Men were while strolling around the ward, trying and failing to blend in as civilians. Brook noticed too and muttered, “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Danny was oblivious and began to head for the nurses station. Dolores wanted to grab him, but she didn’t want to draw any more attention than he was already drawing. She said as calmly as she could manage, quickly pulling her phone out, “Oops, Danny, we’ll have to come back later. Mom just texted that Dad’s asleep. Let’s go get a bite to eat.” She hoped she’d said it loudly enough that others heard her, but not so loudly that it seemed like an act. Brook gave her a sly smile.

Danny turned to her bewildered and she widened her eyes and darted them toward one of the plainclothes officers. Danny still didn't seem to get it so she just took his arm and walked him back to the elevator. Once the three of them were alone in the elevator, they explained what they'd seen to Danny. He laughed, "Well, I guess I'm pretty oblivious. I didn't notice even after you were being all weird. What now?"

Brook's face was pensive. "I mean, we could head to Sioux Falls, maybe some part of the building is open so we could sneak into the scene of the crime." The elevator lurched to halt and they all left in silence, waiting until they were back in Brook's still warm car to continue planning. "I wonder which agency was there. Maybe they think it's some kind of terrorist group. Dolores, have you been checking headlines? Any new attacks?"

Dolores said, "I checked a while ago and there was nothing, but it's also weird that both of these have stayed just at the local level. Nothing on CNN, no Times or Post coverage. Can we grab some food and then I'll check again?"

Brook nodded and quickly found the nearest fast food place. As they munched in the car, Dolores scrolled on her phone. Then she shouted, her mouth full of fries, "Oh fuck me! Screw Sioux Falls. Head east. Straight east. We're going to Chicago."

Both men turned to look at her. She chewed, swallowed, went on: "Thirty-seven people in the financial district. National coverage—hey, what the fuck—it just disappeared. The article I was reading just disappeared."

Dolores frantically tapped at her phone. Danny in the back seat was on his too. She glared at the screen. “It’s gone. Are they trying to cover it up? What the hell does that even mean? There have to have been witnesses, right? Do you think they’ll try to shut up that many people--”

Danny began to emit a noise like someone very heavy was stepping on his chest. Brook said, “Stop it, man, you’re freaking me out.” Dolores saw Brook’s eyes get big and he said, “What the fuck is that? What the actual fuck is that feeling? Do you feel that?”

Dolores did feel it. But she wasn’t scared. It was a feeling she had grown accustomed to, and rather than feeling afraid, Dolores felt safe for the first time since seeing that minefield of dead animals. Before she could say anything though, the inside of the car began to fill with a slowly swirling cloud of ash that gradually coalesced. Ash solidified naked next to Danny in the back seat, an expression of terror on her face.

Both men screamed an octave higher than Dolores would’ve thought possible for men of their age. Ash mimicked their scream in their voices, layered one on top of the other.

Dolores shouted above them all, “Shut up!”

Danny was trying to clamber over Dolores into the front seat and she shoved him down into the back and before she could say any more, Ash’s glowing green eyes locked on hers and she whispered, “We found it, Dolores, we found the Other. And we do not know if we can keep the Dolores safe much longer.”

BROOK TRIED to keep the car from spinning out of control as he slammed on the brakes, grateful beyond all words that no one was on this lonely stretch of I-94. He had mostly kept his shit together, and he managed to guide the car to a stop in the gravel and grass mixture on the side of the highway. He spun in his seat, still unable to believe his eyes that yet again, this ethereal-looking, beautiful woman, had spun herself out of the air like cotton candy. Her firefly eyes might as well have never seen any other person for the way she was looking at Dolores, like Dolores was water and oxygen all rolled into one.

“What did you say?” Brook heard his mouth say, not having authorized it to speak. Brook wanted to grab her, restrain her, keep her from leaving again, but when her gaze finally did slowly turn toward him, he knew that nothing he could do would have any power against her. He vacillated between arousal and terror looking into those eyes and understanding how futile all his actions would be.

Ash narrowed her eyes at him and turned slowly back to

Dolores who said, “I believe you, now, Ash. I’m so sorry. I was wrong. I saw the animals. It was terrible.”

Ash nodded and to Brook’s utter astonishment, she began to weep. “We found it in the moose. We found it and we knew that we would have to find it to prove to the Dolores that we did not do the breathing into squishies once it was Not Allowed. But the Other, the Other will not care, it does not care about the Not Allowed. It does not care about anything. We don’t know what to do. Does the Dolores know what to do?”

Brook watched, bewildered at the tenderness between the two women. Dolores reached out and took Ash’s hands, and Brook waited for Dolores’s nose to begin bleeding. He held his breath. But even as Dolores rubbed her fingers along Ash’s knuckles and whispered, “I don’t know what to do, but I’m here. We’re together, Ash and Dolores. Tell me what happened, tell me everything.”

Ash dropped her head and said, looking utterly defeated, “We put the Dolores in the most hidden part of our mind. We hid the Dolores away, in case it breathed into us. But it didn’t. It didn’t. It can breathe into many, many squishies all at once, and it is not for learning, it is not like when we did it. No. No.”

Dolores squeezed Ash’s hands. “Go on.”

Ash took a shuddering breath. “It takes and takes and takes from the squishies and the animals. It even killed its multitudes. It smells like death and sickness. It is just beginning. We think - we cannot know - because we were too slow and too scared and because the Dolores made it Not Allowed, but we did not breathe into the Other. We are not sure we can breathe

into the Other. We think that we might never be able to remake ourselves after that breath, because the Other is filled with death. And once we learn everything about death, we will die.”

Brook gaped, trying to see if Dolores was as baffled by this gibbering sermon, but to his surprise she was not. Her eyes were wet, like she was about to cry and she said, her voice thick with tears, “I’m sorry, Ash. I’m sorry I didn’t listen. Are you okay? Did it hurt you?”

Ash pricked and took her hands away from Dolores. “Perhaps it did hurt the You. Is that all the Dolores ever cares about?”

Then Dolores laughed and Brook did too, glad to finally feel the tension in the invaded car dissipate a little. Danny was still pressed tight against the door as far from Ash as possible and scanning the area for possible escape routes. He hissed, “It’s lying, Lorri. I don’t know that I understood some of that nonsense. I saw it kill that moose.”

Ash looked wearily at Danny and then at Brook. “We did not kill the moose, we went into the moose to find out what did kill the moose. We were not killing. We were learning, the last learning the moose could give. We don’t expect the Danny to understand. It is still mad at us for us making it have the blood-juice-cough even though we didn’t know it was a squishy that the Dolores cares about.”

Danny made as if he was going to say more, but Dolores surprised Brook then by cutting him off. “I don’t want to hear it, Danny. I’m not losing her again. I don’t know why she chose me, and I don’t know why I feel the way I do, but she’s my

responsibility, and she's the only chance we have of figuring any of this out. She didn't do this. I know it in my heart. Please forgive her for making you sick, Danny, please? We need to be in this together."

"What about for killing our mother? Huh? What about that, Lorri? You just going to give it a pass on that one too? I'm the only family you have left and you're going to side with some alien-dust-monster that killed your mother?"

"She didn't--"

"We did," Ash piped up. "But we did not know it was the Dolores's mother-thing. We did not know until we learned that it had the bad cells in its lungs. It was too late once we learned it was not a healthy squishy. Even we cannot fix something like that."

Brook cut into the family drama, "What do you mean, even you can't fix it? Could we fix some things? Like, can squishies fix other squishies if they aren't too bad?"

Ash glanced at the Dolores, "Does it think we know anything about the You? Make it be quiet, we are trying to tell the Dolores that we must hurry. We must stay on the trail of the Other or it will unmake many, many squishies, whole colonies of squishies."

Brook sighed, sensing that in the glow of their reunion, he would be unable to actually talk with Ash. She was too fixated on Dolores, her eyes surging brighter whenever they turned back to her favorite squishy. Ash continued to Dolores, "We may have to go again, but we will always come back to the

Dolores. We also must say something that the Dolores will not want to hear.”

“What? Did you mouth-smash Colt? I swear, Ash--”

“No, no, no, we did not mouth-smash or pelvis-smash any of the Dolores’s squishies that it wishes to smash. But to go after the Other we cannot always abide by the Not Allowed. We will try not to do the Not Allowed things, but sometimes, if we are going to catch the Other, if we are going to help the Dolores stop the Other, we cannot follow squishy rules because the Other is no squishy. It is death. Does the Dolores understand? Does the Brook? Does the Danny? If the Other finds us - finds Ash - even if we are not close to the Brook, the Danny, or the Dolores, the Other finds them too. And we cannot save any of the squishies, not yet.”

Brook waited to see what Dolores would say. She nodded, almost imperceptibly, then she said, “Fine, okay, but I’ll only Allow the breathing into, and the other weird shit, if you promise to be careful. No taking unnecessary risks. But before Ash goes vaporizing off again, we need a plan. Tell us about the Other.”

Ash told them all about the Other and what she had seen, and Brook could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up as Dolores chimed in with her description of how she had felt in the wasted place, the animal massacre. Brook realized that he’d felt it too; he’d felt death tickling his neck and his nostrils, and he’d been too fixated on finding Ash to even pay attention.

Brook suddenly interrupted Ash, when she told them that the Other kept touching people, just to give them bloody noses.

As he spoke, he reached toward her and she withdrew. “Ash, why didn’t Dolores get a nosebleed when she held your hands?”

Ash and Dolores looked at one another. “We do not know exactly, but we...we shield the Dolores. But also, each of us *has* begun to know it, each of our multitudes.”

“Multitudes?”

“That is how we are different from the Other, even though we were once the same. We are many, more than even the squishies on this planet, but the Other...the Other murdered its own multitudes. Its multitudes are dead, yet it is alive, and that is what we do not understand. It is also why we think we can defeat it, because we are many, we are Ash.”

Brook’s mind began buzzing, trying to figure out what exactly this meant. Trying to place it into some kind of biological framework that made sense. He wanted to interrogate her more. He wanted her alone, away from Dolores, so that Ash could focus, because Ash was clearly infatuated with Dolores.

Before Brook could say anymore, Dolores said, “We’re in this together, Ash, we’re all going to help you. And you...Ash...Ash is free. The Not Allowed list doesn’t matter anymore. I, we, all of us, need your help too, so you have to be patient with us, help us understand, because I still don’t understand what you are, why you make people sick. But I think we need to figure it out. I think we need to track this Other, but we also need to try to figure out what Ash is, how Ash was born. Can you help us? Can you let us help you?”

Brook watched as a partial smile seemed to take Ash’s face

by surprise. Then she said, “Will we still be the Dolores’s only crazy bitch? Will the Dolores still be our crazy bitch? Even if these other crazy bitches are helping?”

Dolores laughed and Brook felt the laugh sneak into him too. Danny’s face fought the smile that threatened. Finally Dolores answered, “Yeah, Ash, no one else could ever really be my crazy bitch, and of course, I’ll be yours. Always. Let’s head for Chicago.” She turned to Brook and then looked hard at Danny, “What do you guys say, onward for the Other?”

Then Brook looked at Danny, expecting him to balk. Instead Danny said, “Fine. I’m in, but only if I get to sit shotgun. You can sit with your fur-growing friend.”

Ash growled and made a screed of raccoon noises before she said, “The You is not here. We are Ash!”

“Fine, Danny.” Dolores shook her head, annoyed at her brother but happy at the thought of being snug in the back with her best friend. She climbed over the console while Danny got out and ran around the front of the vehicle.

Brook met Dolores’ eyes in the rearview and said, “Ready, gang?”

Dolores nodded at him, and he pulled the car back onto the highway, headed across the wintry plains to Chicago.

