

*On a well lit street, in a sleepy, snow covered town, is a house like any other. Attached to the brick house with a quaint porch and small fenced in yard, is a garage like any other. Behind the off-white garage door held shut with a tarnished, heavy padlock, is a car like any other. Inside the new, powder blue truck with the local college's parking decal on the windshield, is a corpse like any other.*

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The first cleaning is never enough; flecks of dried blood and gore always survive the initial scrub. The second wash is better, but inevitably, tiny pieces of meat and chunks of knotted hair end up lodged in the individual links of bracelet chains that spider up your forearm. It's the third lap that bothers you most, though. While the viscera is mostly gone, there's an extraordinary monotony that comes with a full body scrub, not to mention the way your skin burns from the scouring brush. Invariably, that same tedium leads to fatigue as you busy yourself with the fourth round. It's the fourth you'll have to be careful about tonight.

Reality is that your post-hunt routine requires more than a hot dinner towel. You still have clothes to wash, a truck to go over with a fine tooth comb, evidence to destroy, a body to dispose of, and multiple rounds of additional sterilization. It's a grisly, time consuming process, but it's preferable to the alternatives. Always better to risk falling asleep in class than being caught and going hungry.

One victim had asked what you were. Rather glibly you'd replied, "A survivor." Another morsel, once they'd given up on begging, had hoped common ground would sway you. It didn't, but it turned out you'd both had Mr. Harris for fourth grade home room. In a desperate bid to find meaning in their final moments, this evening's dinner had begged to know why you were doing this. Your answer was too quick and bitter with fear. "I can't go back." Thrown by the honesty of your response, you'd lashed out. The whispers hated when you merely used their powers instead of luxuriating in them.

You drop your brush in the sink, mind returning to the now. There's still so much to do. But...but maybe one night off would be alright? You let out a delightful yawn and sigh contentedly. One night off in two years would be fine. Two years meticulously, ritually, obsessively cleaning...one early night wouldn't kill anyone else...your eyes droop for a moment...

**NO!**

You jolt awake, having slouched over the still red sink. There was round four, tapping seductively at your window. Not tonight. Not any night. Being caught means going hungry and going hungry means reversion. The whispers had granted you beautiful gifts and made you into something...more. More than "normal." You finally had the power to be, to exist, to **matter**. In as much as you *couldn't* go back you also *refused* to. There was no redemption just around the corner. Whatever this boon you'd stumbled upon, you reveled in its damnation.

You would never be ordinary again.

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*Wedged behind the back seat, freshly fallen from a callused right fourth finger, is a ring like any other. Engraved on the inside of the gold, hammer-finished band are words like any others: "To Morgan, with love, Mom."*