Post Modern Folktales

Blurb: The modern world makes its own kind of monsters.

She killed them all. Nothing personal really, but there was a job that needed to be done, so she did it.

She just wished the bodies wouldn't stack up so quickly.

Note: This is some of my earliest work and I haven't touched it in a while. Moreover, I didn't edit every bit of it to death. But if you're curious, this is where the story is headed:

Chapter Trigger Warnings: Ugh. PM me if you actually want to know. I'll update this later

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Introduction: Transylvania, 1892

When she approached, the vampire curled on his side, coughing up blood - great, wet hacking sounds that painted blood and phlegm across the snowy landscape. His mouth was filthy with it.

She pulled out a plain handkerchief, crouched, and waited. Finally his body calmed, and his eyes opened - great gray things they were.

She arched her brow and shook the cloth. A white claw snatched it and clasped it to his mouth and nose. Soon a new wracking cough passed through him and he shook again.

Camilla politely averted her eyes.

“Ma petite,” he rasped, the cough having momentarily passed. He had attempted to clean his face, but it was still smeared with blood, mostly his own. He managed an affectionate smile, but his eyes soon looked past her to the horizon beyond.

She didn’t smile back. “You look like shit. And, I’m older than you.”

“It never felt like it. Spending all that time inside your tower with your books and toys. You never came out to play.”

She nodded at his castle. “Pot, meet kettle.”

He chuckled.

The sky was lightening. Dawn was coming. In his eyes, she saw the reflection of a small red sun. It was brushing the canvas of the sky, casting pink and orange hues over the snow capped Carpathians. Despite this, the stones of the ancient fortress itself, sat gloomy, cold, and gray.

“It’s a good day to die.” He changed the subject. To the relevant, the obvious.

He was quite the picture. There was a jagged slash across his neck that cut past the bone and almost through the neck. The ribs of his chest had been yanked apart like a corpse in Paris’ autopsy theaters. In the middle, two great knives plunged in the dried up black organ that had been his heart.

At a distance of ten yards, she could smell the dark stale blood of that obnoxious Texan, dead from gunshot wounds. Five Slovaks, more dead than alive, blood seeping into the snow were conspicuously undisturbed, undrunk.

And then there was that bastard of a sun. She felt its prickling warmth on her hair and the nape of her neck.

She sighed. “If you say so.” Then a sharper, “You say so, right?” Her words rang like a funeral bell.

“Just get on with it, Camilla. Not like I’m going to tattle to your dear tătic about this. Now, take this damn handkerchief, it’s useless.” He threw the crumpled up, now ruddy cloth back at her.

She caught it easily enough and stuffed it back in her pocket. To business, then. “Do you want to be in your old box again? I could arrange a different location.”

“And deny these miserable peasants a chance to spit on my grave? They will need the amusement. No Put me in the old chapel. Cover me with a bit of earth, if the Slovaks left any behind.”

Sighing, she stood and turned to a long, thin valise, carried all the way from Bistrița. From it she drew a great iron broadsword, almost half her own height. “I had to borrow this from my father, you know. I hope you appreciate that. Because of course you had to make this,” and she waved at the blood, the knives, the dead American, and the sun “as theatrical as possible. Do you know how far the nearest train is from here? And how badly they can be delayed after Vienna?”

He smiled a grand wide smile, his fangs bared like daggers. “Yup.” And he laughed, a deep, genuine laugh that came from the gut. “Tell you what, if you want, I’ll stretch out my neck for you as far as you can. Give you a solid chance at a good *thwack*. That should make it easier.”

And with a groan, the vampire rolled from his half fetal position onto his back and stretched. At full height, he was a reed of a man, lightly muscled, hair long and iron gray. He clasped his hands primly to his chest, above the knives, in a grim mockery of a supplicant's prayer.

She rolled her eyes “Have it your way.”

And with a sudden whoosh, she finished the work the old doctor had started, severing the spinal cord, muscle, and skin.

That was the easy part. Now for the hard.

She was petite, and the vampire was much taller and broader than her. With one hand, she grabbed his head by a hank of hair, and with the other she grabbed the cuff of his coat, and started to drag the corpse towards the castle. Only 200 yards to go, she thought dimly.

And all was oddly quiet. Only the wind whistled through the cliffs nearby. If she strained her ears.

170 yards. The coat hadn't been a good idea, snagging on the rocks on the ground. She grabbed it's hand instead and was surprised when it squeezed back. The bastard was at least making this a little easier than it needed to be.

The sun was rising higher and cast its first direct blades of light on the castle, broken battlements somehow even older in the light of day. The silence was deafening.

At 120 yards, her resolve broke.

"Why?" Her voice was steady, almost monotone.

The head was silent.

"Why would you do this?" The words were almost a whimper this time.

Then the lips of the head started moving. "Petite," they whispered. "You are so young. Maybe you have a few centuries on you, but this killing thing? I'm not talking about eating. I'm talking about reaping, slashing with swords, hewing with hatchets, skewering corpses like shish kabobs. Listening to them weep. Rejoicing when they expire. Watching them with fascination as they rot and fester. *That* killing thing. You're very new to it. And I've done that all my life. Like your father. How long have you? A hundred years?"

"Ninety," she recited tonelessly.

"Ninety. And I'm sure it's been glorious. You can lie to me, but don't lie to yourself, I know how incandescent it can feel. But it weighs on you, destroys

your peace. And, living in the Balkans as I have, something is coming. Something nasty. Events are about to speed up, faster still if those English, German, and Russian dogs get involved…"

"Really, politics?"

The head still had the wherewithal to be embarrassed. Then it began again, quietly. "Sometimes, Camilla, when we do such things for so long…we lose ourselves. I am well acquainted with despair, madness, loneliness. We need genuine, dare I say, *human* connection. And those hags of modern womanhood don't count, before you mention it."

"I wasn't going to."

"I'm a dying man, I don't need another lecture on Christine de Pizan."

"I won't."

It continued. "When a chance for this happens, for the first time in an eon, you scramble for it like a man dying of thirst. And it can drive us as drunk, as ecstatic as any artery could. Do you understand this?"

She scoffed. "This is about…loneliness?! You were *lonely*?"

A baritone chuckle. "Yes."

"Loneliness, my closest companion for these nearly six hundred years. That loneliness?"

"Just so."

She let out an exasperated noise. "Let's get you to that chapel, you crazy monster."

They came to the spoiled churchyard. It had been gouged by holes and pockmarked by great mounds of earth, probably from the vampire's mad

attempts to take it with him to England. She stepped gingerly around three of the pits, filled with the carcasses of the women the vampire had kept as pets.

She made her way to the largest grave. On it, in worn, pitted letters, was the name Дрaцлa. There was nothing else.

She attempted some levity again. “It seems your servants took great care in preparing the ground for reburial. Should I leave a tip?”

The head didn’t respond at first. “No. They would have found the gold in the castle already.”

Other thoughts had distracted it.

“Alright.” Camilla bounded into the hole. First she dragged the body in, where it landed with an unceremonial thunk. With more care she turned it to face the ground, which was the custom of his people. Then she gently placed the head between the legs.

“You won’t get up again, right? If you do, I’ll have to fetch my aunt.”

“You wouldn’t dare. No, Camilla, I’m quite tired. I’ve been tired. And if there is a God I will sleep past Judgement Day.”

“Good.”

The head spoke no more. She jumped out of the hole and, with a shovel left behind by one of the Slovaks, started reburying him. The first pile hit his eyes, then his mouth.

When she finished, she said goodbye the only way she knew how.

“Good night, Vlad.”

Bucks County, 2017

Camilla sighed.

Her duties often carried her across oceans, mountains, and jungles. Now they had carried her into a parlor surrounded by a flock of women talking about something called “bronzer”.

The air was saturated with the stench of vanilla and almond candles. And in the middle of it all sat the Avon Lady, whose name was unimportant considering the fate that would befall her. She was the queen of the hens, smiling, pairing bronzer with foundation and skin tones and crowing innuendo wherever she could.

The Avon Lady had given Camilla the best seat in the house, next to her own, so the “poor dear” could observe the ceremony of brushes presented before her. Maybe, the fleshy, pretty older blonde had said, you can learn something. Meet friends. Feel confident in your own skin.

Camilla let the Avon Lady to first spot her when she was moving across the street. It always paid to have a base of operations, and the house itself - a sprawling, ramshackle 1970s ranch - while nothing to speak of, was pleasantly situated in back of the lot, shaded by a surrounding copse of trees.

While Camilla unloaded centuries of priceless journals from the car, the Avon Lady had appeared, cookies in tow. Taking in Camilla’s low ponytail, gray sweats, and sensible flats she murmured “oh, you dear”.

Camilla had been too stunned to respond.

She continued. “Avon Calling! Welcome to the neighborhood. You have lovely hair, dear. And gray eyes! With a little help from me, you can be stunning.”

So here Camilla was, in another vampire's den, in central Suburban Hell. Camilla would never forgive the Avon Lady for, a hundred and fifty years after the invention of the internal combustion engine, having to finally learn how to drive.

Avon Lady turned away from a brunette with wide lips and gave Camilla her undivided attention. "I've just the thing for you. Picked this out for you myself the day after we met!" She grabbed Camilla's arm, wrenched up her sleeve, and slashed an angry red gash of lipstick across her pale wrists.

She looked at Camilla expectantly.

"No."

"No? With that hair, those cheekbones and this color, you'd be a Marilyn Monroe. Or a Veronica Lake."

"No."

"Ok, fine." The Avon Lady patted her wrist. She had warm hands, Camilla registered numbly. "I have another idea." With a cleanser and cotton ball she washed the angry stain off. Then she produced another tube and rolled it delicately across the thin flesh of Camilla's arm. It was a gentle, dusty pink, like a kiss in the dark.

"It's not terrible," she allowed

"I'll call that a victory, from you!" the Avon Lady exclaimed. "Camilla, it's perfect. More subtle than something for myself, but subtle may be exactly what you need."

She clasped her face, and ever so gently brushed the tube over Camilla's thin lips. "Beautiful" she pronounced and handed her a mirror.

The Avon Lady had drawn her lips wider, which made her face seem fuller too. And maybe it did highlight her eyes a little.

“Fine, I’ll take the tube.” After all, buying something at one of these events was polite. The time hadn’t come to be impolite.

Eighty seven minutes later, Camilla was in a basement eerily similar to her own. Suburban subdevelopments often featured houses that were carbon copies of each other. It just so happened that the Avon Lady’s matched hers exactly.

It was much homier though, and perfectly set up for her MLM business. It was half office, half salon. On one end was a stylist’s chair and mirror, littered with cosmetics and cream. On the other stood boxes upon boxes of product, neatly stored and tabulated. A small oak desk sat, and opposite it was a thin lady’s bench topped with a plush pink cushion. The lighting was soft, and there was a diffuser producing more(!) vanilla and almond.

A plush oriental rug of muted red and pink, no doubt purchased from one of those big box stores, tied the room together.

The Avon Lady gestured to the bench opposite her desk. “Sit!”

Camilla complied silently, perching on the bench. She searched for words, finally settling on, “This is a nice space.”

The Avon Lady beamed, “It’s the one room in the house that is truly mine. The kids can’t come here, and Bertie avoids it. It’s just a basement, but it makes as much money as some of those corporate offices you see downtown!”

After Camilla’s purchase, the party had continued for another hour until several moms had to pick up their children from soccer practice - not the safest idea after two hours of tittering over sangria. Then again, it was watered down. The Avon Lady had asked Camilla to stay behind and ushered her into the basement office.

At her desk, the Avon Lady leaned forward. “Camilla, I have a feeling you know what I’m about to say, so I’ll just say it. I wanted to talk to you about Avon. About joining it.”

Camilla cocked a brow “Amber,” she started, using her real name, “you’re too kind, but this isn’t the right time. I just bought a house, the movers are a nightmare…”

“Let me stop you. I know you’re busy with the house, but I also know you paid cash. I also know you will live there alone. My cousin was the real estate agent, after all! What I’m approaching you about is an opportunity.“

“I am approaching you because I know you. You don’t need the money, like other girls. But you do need Avon in your life.”

Camilla’s eyes narrowed. “I am no beauty, and I have never been fashionable, but these insults need to stop.”

“Ugh, see? That’s what I mean. Camilla, you’re fine. Obviously. I mean, if you held a gun to my head, maybe I’d say you could use some form fitting clothes, maybe even a pop of color…but I digress.”

Camilla’s finger twitched a little.

“What you need is confidence. That’s all that makeup is - bottled confidence. Trust me, I know what it looks like when someone is uncomfortable in their own skin. I saw it enough in myself, growing up.”

Camilla felt the remark like a jolt to the gut. She fought to keep a calm facade, but her fingers twitched more. The surrounding air suddenly felt thick and hot. What could this chit possibly know…

“Quiet eh? That’s ok, I know I struck a nerve. I know you, Camilla, at least a little bit - because you were once me. Now, I was fatter than you. Teased, poked and

prodded - by kids, even by my mom. I was even bulimic for a while. I needed a lot of help, and I was lucky enough to get it from my older sister."

Camilla's eyes narrowed. As always, she had done her research before hunting her quarry. The sister's name had been Juliana. Juliana was dead now. The Avon Lady was not.

"My older sister - she was ten years older and she didn't have to pay attention to someone like me. She had her own life, but she was my lifesaver. And she was in Avon."

"Are you telling me Avon cured your bulimia?"

"No! No. Well, that's a line I use sometimes, but…no. It was my sister. She helped me with makeup and fashion, she'd invite me to parties with all her older friends. And they were so nice to me. She taught me all she knew and even helped me set up this venture in college to make some extra money. And that's how I made many friends. That's how I met my Bertie - he was a former client's brother. I was finally in a place where I could get help."

The Avon Lady got up from her office chair and moved to where Camilla sat on the bench. "Come on, scooch."

Camilla scooched. The Avon Lady clasped her hand again, but it was different now that all the chaos of the party was gone. Her hands were warm, pink, and soft. What Camilla imagined a mother's hands to be like.

"Avon let me be the real me. It let me carve out my place in the world, where I had none before. My sister…she's gone now."

Juliana had died 9 months previously. Many called it cancer, but Camilla knew better.

"I want to pass on the favor. Pay it forward."

Many people around the Avon Lady were dying. In fact, the death rate doubling in the 18943 zip code had tipped Camilla off. After that, she spent days painstakingly rebuilding the victim's social networks, trying to find the common denominator. Facebook and Instagram had helped a lot, but confirmation only came when the Avon Lady had sought her out at her own front door. The woman produced a miasma of misery that was almost suffocating, even for her.

And yet.

"What makes you think I'm alone? Why do you think I hate myself?" Camilla sounded hoarse.

"Camilla." The Avon Lady grabbed her chin, "Don't you understand? Do I need to repeat myself? I know you. The feeling was there when I saw you first move in, but when I put that lipstick on you, never, I mean never, have I seen someone light up from their own reflection."

Camilla froze. Amber's eyes held her and dominated her vision. The warmth of her hands, the vanilla smell - it was all-encompassing.

"Let me help you. I see wonderful things for you, and you deserve all of them And every step of the way, I'll be there to help. This I promise."

Camilla closed her eyes. She swallowed and took a deep breath.

Suddenly her hand tightened around the woman's like a vice. The other, which had been resting on the plush velvet of the bench, slammed into her chest and knocked her to the floor. Before the Avon Lady had time to react, Camilla was on her again, first kneeing her stomach, then scrambling up, grabbing her lapels and forcing her into a stranglehold.

The Avon Lady could no longer speak.

"Congratulations, you're very good. I can see why people throw their money and hearts at you. I bet they even go into debt for you." Camilla spat.

“And you know what? I bet you genuinely think your bullshit is ambrosia. No…don’t talk. You’ll vomit pita chips and cheap sangria. Tell you what, I’ll say what you’re thinking, and you can blink if I’m correct.”

In a high-pitched voice, she began rattling off:

“You’re scaring me Camilla! What are you doing! Help! Bertie! Somebody save me!”

She chuckled, “Now is that right?”

The Avon Lady’s eyes didn’t blink, but they were pouring tears, her cheeks turning purple. Camilla lessened her grip a little. The woman gasped for breath.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you trying to feed on me there. How many women have you tried that on? Ten? Fifty? All of your downline? I doubt I’m as delicious.”

The Avon Lady used that breath to struggle, but it was no use. Camilla’s chokehold kept her firmly pinned.

“No, none of that. Or I’ll crack your pelvis, maybe puncture your liver. I haven’t decided. Now, where was I. Your victims? That wasn’t subtle. I noticed it. Others noticed it. Maybe eventually the police would have noticed it. It would have been more fortunate for you had they found you first, but I am faster.”

“Please Camilla,” The Avon Lady finally got a word out “I have a daughter. I don’t understand why you hate me but for her sake, let me go.”

“You don’t understand? This wonderland suburbia you’ve assembled is swimming in a miasma more noxious than a charnel pit. I could fill a church yard with your downline. But what I want to know is this. Did they taste delicious? Did that sister of yours go down like a fine sangria? Because, I bet she did.”

Camilla’s hand was getting wet from the tears sliding down The Avon Lady’s face, but she still kept her grip.

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

Camilla’s eyes narrowed. She lowered her head until she was only an inch from the Avon Lady’s eyes. She could smell her tears but resisted the urge to taste them. Instead, she forced herself to look into her eyes for a good five seconds.

Then she blinked. Her eyes turned stony.

Maybe, just maybe, the Avon Lady really didn’t understand the kind of monster she was.

Great, she thought to herself. *Another one of them.*

She released a huff of breath she didn’t even realize she was holding and let go. The Avon Lady tumbled to the ground, heaving and coughing. Then she righted the fallen bench and took a seat. Reaching into her hoodie, she pulled out a gun - a small thing, a .38 caliber, but good enough.

The Avon Lady was too busy trying to catch her breath, to even notice a gun cocking behind her head.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I’m sorry every time this happens.” Camilla murmured.

And then she shot.

Two hours and two blocks later

“Really, you couldn’t have brought a better rug?”

Camilla glanced at the blood stained, 6’x8’ pink and red oriental carpet and shrugged.

“And polyester!” With long, delicate fingers, Auntie gingerly inspected the rug’s care-for instructions. Normally a tall, spindly woman, her body was folded in an awkward criss-cross sitting fashion on the bare parquet, her black frizzy hair flying everywhere.

The Avon Lady’s corpse had required a hasty response. A shot to the back of her head had splattered blood, skull fragments, and brain viscera everywhere - the walls, the carpet, her face, and most regrettably of all, her hoodie. The body n

Camilla had acted quickly after shooting Avon Lady quite blank through the side of the head. Blood, skull fragments, and brain viscera had splattered everywhere in the basement, most unfortunately on her hoodie. More importantly, the husband and children would be back any moment, and Camilla and the corpse of the Avon Lady needed to be *out.*

The mess didn’t matter nearly as much. And maybe the stains would come out in the wash.

So, with a shove, the corpse of Avon Lady fell in an undignified heap on the carpet. Then Camilla simply rolled the body into the rug like a bloody pain au chocolat, and carried it out Cleopatra style. Camilla might have been in a hurry, but there was always time to reference Plutarch. Avon Lady might have even enjoyed having a Queen’s funeral.

Even a polyester one, as Auntie had already muttered peevishly.

“Do you really want the rug?” Camilla finally spoke.

Auntie unaccordioned herself from her position on the floor and rose to her full six and a half feet. She stood two full heads over Camilla. She pursed her thin lips. “...no. Although, maybe *you* could sell it my dear, if you could scrub the brain tissue out of it. Actually, I saw a very thorough youtube video on how to clean rugs. Maybe they can help.

“No, though I thank you for the thought, Aunt. As always.”

“Really? It *could* keep you busy in any case. It’s always good for creatures like you to have some busy work.”

“Again, I must decline -

“*Especially* if this is going to be a continuing habit.” She nudged the corpse with a grey slippered foot.

“Aunt, you know I haven’t had the time lately.” Camilla huffed. “Look, I know it’s been a lot lately - and I’ve always been grateful for your favors. Do you think you could take this one too?”

“My dear, you know you never even need to ask. Aunt Nancy is always happy to help. And my children are happy too.

Aunt Nancy, it was true, had many progeny, and even many more eyes than that. In fact, from the moment Camilla, disheveled, bedraggled, and one corpse heavier, had whispered to the golden orb weaver in the garden, to the time Auntie had shown up, only two minutes had passed.

It hadn’t given Camilla much time to change and reset her hair, but she managed.

“Oh, your lipstick dear! It suits you! You should really wear makeup more often.”

Camilla summoned a black handkerchief and rubbed off the offending stain. Auntie always found *something* to comment on.

Auntie frowned a little at this but quickly shook it off. Instead, she gestured to a heinously yellow sofa Camilla had procured in a bid to make the place seem normal. “Come, let’s sit, I had an idea I wanted to pitch to you.”

Camilla reluctantly sunk into the seat. Auntie joined. Listening, she knew was the easiest path forward. Aunt Nancy always came quickly when called, but was always loathe to leave, and *never* did so without a gift.

The light was starting to dim in the house. The house was equipped with cheap Venetian blinds - kept perpetually down, of course - which allowed some pale and sickly light into the room. Now, with the sun setting, this light turned orange, the room becoming more obscured in shadow.

The aunt's eyes glittered like jeweled beatles.

"If you're *so* busy my dear, why don't you get a helper?"

Camilla snorted mirthlessly. "Who but me would do this loathsome, tedious work, Aunt. Everyone else is too busy learning to clean rugs, or despoil virgins, or whatever it is my father does these days, to do what is absolutely *necessary*."

Auntie rolled her eyes. "No one? Well then, just make one."

Camilla tore from her seat. "*No.* I would *never* -" she bit out.

Auntie interrupted. "Fine, fine, don't get in a tizzy. So prudish about children, you lot are. *Sit down and listen, Camilla*."

Camilla sat again.

"I only meant - well, your task isn't *so* difficult, is it? And I'm not talking about the part with the swords, or the guns, or *me*, I'm talking about the other stuff. Compiling research, conducting interviews, collecting information. That's old hat for you."

Camilla was silent.

"There's just a lot of it."

Camilla narrowed her eyes. "May I talk now, *ma tante*?"

"Of course,"

"I think you're grossly oversimplifying, but I can't completely disagree with your description of - what do you call it? *My job*."

“Well, Camilla…this isn’t the 14th or 15th century anymore. There are many intelligent people! In this city alone, millions can read and write. There are four universities, and dozens of schools. And millions of books! And the internet! People use these things every day,” the aunt nodded sagely. She rose from the sofa and walked over to where the Avon Lady’s living dead corpse was.

Camilla knew better than to snort at Auntie, but she wanted to. Oh so very much. Instead, she reached back into many centuries of etiquette lessons, inscribed in her brain and back in blood, and managed a polite “So?”

“So! There is evidence that, potentially, at least one hundred people in this city are capable of thinking. So, pick one.”

The light had become even colder, smaller. The rays of the dying sun penetrated only a foot or so into the room. Even Camilla, who could easily see in the dark, had to squint to see Auntie. She was now brushing the healing cheek of the Avon Lady with a tapered finger.

Camilla looked away and coughed. “Pick one?”

“Yes! Find some young sap, bind them to you with money, and have them do some of this drudgery. That way you can focus on *everything* ” and Auntie smiled a toothsome smile that Camilla could see perfectly “which requires your *personal* attention.”

Camilla rose to her feet and started for the door. It was time to leave. Immediately. Only the Auntie’s beetle eyes shown now - everything else, including the Avon Lady, was draped in impenetrable black. She settled on one last remark.

“How would you suggest I find such a person?”

“The same way I learned how to clean blood out of a silk Persian rug - the internet. And I’m so glad you’re coming around to this idea, Camilla - we’re all so worried about you. Now, *get out*.”

Society Hill, 5 Days Later

Lily Coc Cuc checked her Boost mobile enabled Android, last year's model, given to her by her mother for Christmas. This was definitely 513 Cypress Street. She double checked facebook messenger - definitely the right address.

Lily had come in her school uniform - the neatest thing she owned besides church clothes - freshly laundered the night before. In her hand was a box of cookies from a shop she passed on the way. 6 different flavors. Maybe the interviewer would want one? At the very least, she'd have a souvenir.

Despite living in the city all her life, Lily rarely found her way downtown. But here, in a dusty corner of Society Hill, Lily learned something; the city could be *clean.* Look clean, smell clean - no trash to be seen since she got off the El on 5th street.

Sure, the small house on Cypress Street was a little rundown, with paint peeling here and there, but there were no empty lots, and no bright orange "condemned building" signs. There were even cobblestones.

It was like something out of a fairytale, or those commercials for suburban developments she sometimes saw on Maury.

This was her very first interview, and the 14 year old was pretty nervous. The kids she knew had gotten jobs through family, in construction sites like her mom, or in cleaning, or elder care. No one had done anything like *this*. But when she saw the ad her friend forwarded her with a "lol" and saw the words "social justice" and "make a difference" she figured it was worth a try. Her mom agreed. Lily *had* to work, but her mom did not care much where. And while no one they knew had ever heard of Camilla Dantès, the money and vocation was too good not give a try.

She was a little worried this was a scam, but it seemed real. She'd called and a polite, European sounding woman's voice had answered. Camila Dantès seemed real enough.

But maybe $20/hr for social justice work, no experience needed *was* too good to be true. She hoped not. She enjoyed the Social Justice club she had joined at school, and her teacher had taken her a few times to volunteer at the local community center, even. She liked the work. So, maybe she'd like this job. It had to be better than helping her mom with plumbing work, right?

Well, only one way to find out. And Ms Dantès hadn't answered her text so, she'd have to knock.

Hopefully no one on this street thought she was robbing the place.

After the third knock, the door almost instantly opened.

A short, white lady with a pinched face and beady eyes appeared behind a chain. "Yes?" There was that lilt.

"Hi, Ms Dantès?… You said you wanted to talk to me about the job?"

"Ah. Lily." The woman, unlike most white people in the US so far, had said her name right. Li-LY. Her tongue slid softly over the Ls. "Call me Camilla."

"Uh, ok." Lily had never known an authority figure to like being called by their first name before. Her teachers were all "Ms" or "Mr" or at least "Last Name". So was the minister at church. Even her mother referred to her *patrón* as Cruz.

The door closed again briefly, and Lily heard the jingling of the chain and the clicking of the door again. This time the door opened wider and she got a better look at the woman who might be her boss.

She *was* short. Lily always thought she was short, but Camilla was several inches smaller, maybe even under 5 feet. Her skin was so white it was almost translucent, and it was pulled back over the bone over her face like a drum. Her

eyes were gray - Lily didn't even know that was possible - and her yellow hair was pulled back in a severe bun that reminded Lily of the wizened math teacher that had retired the year before. Despite that, Ms Dantès didn't seem exactly old. But not young either. And her clothes matched this image - a green velvet blazer, a white shirt, a long black skirt. Nothing fashionable, maybe old, but clean. Her only concession to fashion was some light pink lipstick.

She was as still as a statue, holding the door open.

Lily realized she was staring, and clambered in. She found herself in the *smallest* living room. Now Lily wasn't exactly fat, in her opinion, but this was a doll house.

It was one of those trinities she dimly remembered her history teacher telling her about. Three tiny squares stacked on one another, with a family crowded into each one. Meant for servants, not for comfort. But the room was definitely supposed to be a living room, although it looked like everything had been salvaged off the side of a road. There was a small loveseat across from the fireplace, a scuffed coffee table, and a faded oriental rug. The only concession it made to being an office space was a desk shoved against the wall opposite the door.. It was clean, but almost to a level of sterility - perhaps the *only* hint that this was a place of work.

And Camilla Dantès herself hardly looked like a "boss", as short and thin as she was. Her clothes - the green velvet blazer, the black skirt, the prim office shirt, all seemed slightly too large for her and out of style. Clean, but warn, maybe from a thrift shop. However, she had a "don't fuck with me" look on her face reminded Lily of one of her middle school assistant principals. Roughhousing boys entered the woman's office screaming obscenities, and left calm and cowed.

Ms Dantès had a similar look, and it was pinned on Lily. An awkward second turned into two, three.

Lily struggled to find something to say. Even though Ms Dantès had invited her, she certainly wasn't offering anything. Maybe this was her style of interviewing? Maybe it was a test of how Lily could cope under pressure?

Well, she'd give it a shot. "That's - well that's a nice jacket. You buy it at the vintage shop up the street?"

Ms Dantès blinked. And snorted, in an unladylike way, knocking her out of her stare. "Vintage? I suppose it would be now."

Lily reddenned. She'd already fucked this up. Did she accidentally call her old? It was hard to get a read on Ms Dantès age, but she couldn't be older than her mom. Shit.

"I can see you're worried. Don't be. I'm not upset - I just don't like throwing perfectly good things away. And I always liked this jacket. Now," and Camilla gestured to the sofa, "let's get started. Would you like a drink of water before we get into things? Or maybe coffee? Tea?"

Another test? "No thank you, I have something already" Lily pulled the soda out of the cookie bag and shook it. "I saw a cookie place by the El and got something. You try it yet?"

"No, I hadn't even noticed".

"Well, I heard good things about them. A cousin of mine works at one, they deliver until 4 in the morning, so you wake up craving one, Ms Dantès - I mean, Camilla - they can get them to you in 15 minutes or so. Actually," and Lily reddenned again. Don't be rude, Lily, offer your prospective boss a cookie. "Do you want one?"

"I wouldn't refuse."

“Ok!” Lily. And she pulled out the purple box from the bag and opened it up. She’d gotten one of each, even the weird sounding Pina Colada one. With a delicate hand, Camilla plucked one, the oatmeal raisin. She gave it a nibble.

“What do you think?”

“Sweet. Very sweet.”

“I mean, oatmeal raisin was never my favorite, so I’m happy you got that one. I’m excited for that red velvet one.”

Ms Dantès wrinkled her nose. “That looks too sweet.”

“I like sugar a lot.” she shook the soda a little again.

“Americans add so much sugar to things. I’m not used to it.”

“Yeah, you’re European, right?”

“I am from France.”

“Oh, so you’ve been to the Eiffel Tower? The Mona Lisa?”

“I personally always thought that tower was ugly. And the Mona Lisa is Italian.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well, did you like France? Why would you be *here*?”

Ms Dantès chuckled, “I like some French things. And, I like some American things.” She took another nibble on the cookie “I like the cinnamon in this. But I don’t want to waste your time.” She placed the cookie on the coffee table. “Now let’s get started.”

Sitting perched on the engineered wood, mid-mod sofa, Ms Dantès pulled out a slim notebook and an antique looking fountain pen. “First question,” she said, opening to a blank page, “Can you read and write?”

“Yes.” What kind of question was *that*?

“Can you do it well?”

“Yes.” she answered a little annoyed. The church school she had attended had done a good enough job at that.

“In English?” Camilla looked up, hearing her annoyed tone.

Lily huffed, but remembered herself. Interview. So politely she responded. “Yes. I finished primary school in Guatemala, and learned English with my 7th and 8th grade teachers here. They say I do a good job.”

“Ah, forgive me if I sounded impolite there. I’m rather blunt”

Camilla returned to her list. “Have you learned your arithmetic?”

“What’s that?” she drew a blank.

Ms Dantès frowned. “Basic Maths.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well I’m passing Algebra right now…do you want to see my report card?”

Ms Dantès blinked. “Do you have it with you?” “I printed it out at school.” Lily pulled out some folded pieces of paper from her plastic bag. “I also have a letter of recommendation from a teacher. They told me it might be a good idea to have that at a job.”

Ms Dantès nodded, bemused. “I’ll…look at these later.” She scratched something into her little notebook, slipped the papers beside it, and turned to the next page. “So, you’re enrolled in a local high school. Tell me about that.”

This she could talk about. “I’m in the Health Sciences Academy, but I’m enrolled in the global leadership program. I’m a member of the ambassador program, and sometimes I volunteer in community clean up after school.”

“Sometimes?”

“When my mom lets me. She doesn’t like me staying after, but she works a lot and can’t always pick me up on time.”

Ms Dantès looked at her pensively. “How does she feel about you getting a job then?”

“She wants me to work, and thinks the bus going to Center City is ok. And she can pick me up later that way.

Ms Dantès nodded and returned to the list. “What exactly do the courses in an American high school prepare you for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Work. How will they prepare you for work after you graduate?”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t understand what you meant. Um. Well, I’ve learned through my work with the ambassador’s program and the community clean up program about the different ways I can help my community. I mean, not going to lie Ms Dantès.”

“Camilla. I won’t correct you again.”

“*Puta*. Camilla, I won’t lie. Things are really screwed up where I live. All the schools and libraries, and even the post office, have bars on them. Razor wire. But then sometimes my mom takes me to the houses she works on, and they build these giant houses with huge windows and stainless steel appliances. They have yards and everything is completely safe. I asked my ambassador class coach, Ms Foster, why it's like that - in my area of Guatemala *everyone* was poor

you know? - and she taught us all this stuff about why. Things like Red Lining, and discrimination - I can't lie, am still learning about all this stuff, but it's a lot!"

Camilla nodded, "I'll have to look it up myself."

"Well, she also told us about how we can make our cities and neighborhoods a better place, less 'fucked up' - her words, not mine. By getting involved, by voting, by *changing the government*. And I think that's what I want to do."

"Ah, a revolutionary."

"No…no violence. Besides, men like George Washington? They barely changed *anything.* My history teacher said that.

"Well, this is all very altruistic of you, Lily. The desire to help your fellow man, to make your city safe for your friends…indeed, that's exactly what I want to do." Camilla's blasé eyes suddenly flashed a fervent glint, then faded again. She knocked her pen into the notebook, causing a few ink blots. Scratched something. Looked up.

"So, do your high school preparatory courses include Latin?"

"Why would I study that?"

"For university of course. Sounds like, given your interests, that's the direction you're headed."

"I hadn't thought of that. Not sure how I'd pay. But…no, I don't know Latin. They make us take Spanish, even though I already know it.

"Ah, usted hablas bien la idioma castellano?"

Lily blinked. *Usted? Castellano?* "Sí, lo aprendí en la escuela en casa. Aunque tu acento es difícil de entender."

"Verdaderamente?"

“Si.”

She switched back to English. It was easier to understand Camilla speak it. “Did you learn it in Spain? Maybe that’s why it’s so different.”

Camilla blinked. “Yes I did. For work mostly. I apologize for it, I thought maybe you might prefer if I spoke it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about. My English is very good.”

“I noticed. Do you speak any other languages?”

“Yeah, Q’eqchi. It’s a type of Mayan language?”

“Your mother tongue then.”

Lily beamed. “Exactly. But no one but family speaks it here. Spanish is the same as English to me in that way.”

Camilla sighed. “English will do I suppose. It seems everyone speaks it nowadays. It should help you with university as well. Let’s move on.”

EDIT FROM HERE

“Have you ever left this city?”

“No.”

“Your neighborhood?”

“Yes, of course I have.” Camilla either didn’t have a filter, or didn’t care. Probably the latter. “Look, I already told you that I like other countries. I’d love, like you_,_ to have traveled to Paris, or Dubai, or Tokyo, or wherever. But I thought, *maybe,* because I’m applying for a job with the title “HELP PHILADELPHIANS NOW”, we’d be talking more about helping Philly right now. Because that’s why I’m here. Why are you here?”

Shit. She shouldn't have said that. She could hear her mom' voice in her head. *Why the fuck would you say that, Lily. If you want a job, sometimes you need to just shut up your brain and make the sounds they want to hear.*

But if Lily had catastrophically fucked up, Camilla didn't show it. She might be sitting in a worn out house on an ikea sofa with a green blazer from the Clinton Administration, but she had the poker face of the therapist lady that, as a little girl, Lily's mother had dragged her to see.

She did scratch something else in her notebook, though.

"...one more question and you are free to leave, Lily," Camilla quietly hummed her name again. The woman rubbed her the wrong way, but Lily had to admit that she liked her accent. "What is your availability, given your school schedule? And if I moved forward with your application, when could you start?"

She and her mom had already figured this part out. "I could work Tuesdays and Fridays after school for a few hours. Longer on the weekends."

"Very good then. Well, I'd like to thank you for visiting…" Camilla started to rise.

"Wait Miss"

"Camilla"

"Yes. You didn't answer me before. Why are you even here? What would I even be doing for you?"

Camilla paused, and for a moment her calm mask broke. A smile, small and sharp crept across her face, and her eyes brightened. "Well, Lily, we'd be fighting the bad guys."

"Which ones?"

“Anyone. Everyone. If I hire you, I promise to tell you more. Now,” she said, her features and voice creeping back to bored and placid, “let’s get you out before sundown.”

She rose. Sensing this interview was over, Lily got up too, grabbing her cookies and rebagging them. It only took two steps in the small house to reach the front door. Camilla held it open again and when Lily stepped into the cold autumn air, it shut swiftly behind her.

Thirty minutes later, after her bus transfer, she got a text.

Would you like to start tomorrow? Kindly reply at your earliest convenience. - C

Tomorrow in Germantown, Philadelphia

Camilla was the type of woman who wrote text messages like they were formal writing assignments. People like that made Lily nervous, and she had wanted to take a moment to come up with something that sounded good. Her mother though, as soon as Lily had informed her about the strange woman, house, interview, and text, had taken her phone, hit talk to text, and rattled off the following message.

“Sure but we need to talk about money before I get started. Can my mom come? She wants to meet.”

Two minutes later, there was a response. Lily’s mom then scowled. “Oh *of course* she is — to *discuss compensation* but she *sadly* can only meet between 3 and 5pm

tomorrow and is *anxious* that this might *interfere* with my work schedule. Does she really talk like this?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's because she's from France.."

"That's shit. Your grandfather was Haitian French, learned English perfectly, and *never* sounded like that. She sounds like those historical dramas on HBO."

Lily had chosen to ignore that. She liked those dramas. "So, can I go mom? I know you're working then."

"Yeah, just call or text me when she makes her offer. I want to make sure you get what you're worth. People will want to take advantage of you, but I won't let 'em."

Which was how Lily found herself alone on the bus again, twenty-one hours later, on her way to Center City again. But she was still weirded out by this. Why did Camilla pick *her*? She obviously thought Lily was stupid and inexperienced, and then she snapped at the woman too! And she offered her a cookie!. Who does that, outside of elementary school? No wonder the woman barely touched the thing.

They weren't meeting at the narrow house on Cypress this time, but in Old City, by the 2nd Street Station exit. *That way you will not need to take a transfer to visit me, or to go home, correct?* Camilla had texted. Lily had googled it, and sure enough, there was a convenient bus that could take her back home.

When the subway arrived, she bounded up the stairs, and sure enough, there she was again. This time she wore a funny straw hat and a faded green dress. Like yesterday, everything was oversized, though Camilla imagined that a lot of things looked too big on a woman that small. She stood stiffly, lip pursed in a grimace. Her hand clutched a single serve of vanilla ice cream in a vice grip. Lily could tell she'd spotted her, though, because her eyes overall lightened, and the frown turned into a polite smile. She nodded at Lily.

Lily blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “You look like you’re ready for the beach,”

“No, I just prefer not to burn. Here,” and Camilla pressed the cone into her hands. “In return for the cookie.”

“Did you get any?”

“No, I’ll be eating later.”

Lily took a lick. It was sweet and cold, almost chewy. “Thanks. Where do you want to talk?”

“Those buildings,” and the thin woman pointed to a sign that said *To let, B. Franklin, inquire within*, “has an inner courtyard with benches. It's quiet and cool enough. Does that work for you?”

Lily agreed and they were soon in the courtyard, surrounded by worn out buildings. In the center stood the steel outline of a building. “That,” Camilla pronounced,” is Ben Franklin’s house. Or where it used to be in any case, before it was torn down. Let’s sit inside.”

When they sat, Camilla was initially quiet, letting Lily enjoy the ice cream. But after a pause, she continued. “I’m glad you decided to accept.”

“I don’t really understand, to be honest? Like it’s stupid for me to say this, but yesterday I, uhh, *messed up* a few times. Said some thoughts I shouldn’t have said to a boss.”

“Eh, the position does not require you to *talk* very much. And I enjoyed listening to what you had to say. Very passionate.”

“My mom just calls that being angry,” she chuckled. “She said I needed to work on it.”

“Nothing wrong with a little anger, Lily. Or even a lot of it, channeled appropriately.”

Another pause. “So what is this job going to look like, day to day?”

“Oh, depends. Mostly you’re just doing research for me while I go out and do field work. Organize data, tell me your conclusions. Maybe take a few phone calls. Have no worries, I will show you my methods.”

“Will you fire me if I get angry like that again?”

Camilla chuckled, “it doesn’t scare me. I just take it for what it is - honesty. Do you like honesty?”

“I was never good at lying.”

“I’m not either, and I don’t think lying is very useful in any case. So many people around me lie, Lily. But it’s easy enough to see through it. Most mess up. Some just seem to do it out of habit. So Lily, my advice to you is to always tell me the truth.”

She decided to test that. “Well... I’m just going to say it then. Some things bother me about you, Camilla.”

“Hmm. Like what?” She didn’t seem perturbed in the least.

“I don’t like calling you by your first name. I barely know you and you’re my boss. It seems weird to pretend like you’re my friend.

Camilla chuckled. “You’re not wrong.” Her tone then grew serious. “But allow me to assert my authority in this one instance, as the one paying you. Lily, *continue using that name*. It’s the only one I’ll ever answer. It’s the one the contacts you may speak to will know. Now, does that clarify our employer/employee situation?”

“Fine. At least you gave me a reason. But let me tell you something else - *please* don’t get too Karen on me when you boss me around.. Some of my white lady teachers get like that, and I was hoping my first job wouldn’t have a boss like that.”

“Karen means an asshole. Is that correct?”

“Yeah. A white asshole. Though there are black Karens and boy Karens and all that.”

“My turn to be honest, Lily.I honestly never thought much about my race before. But I’ll try to learn more about it, so as not to be an asshole.”

“Well, just so we’re clear.”

Camilla still had a small smile.

“What now?”

“Oh, I’m just very happy I picked you. See, I’ve never been a *boss* before, just like you’ve never been a worker. So we’ll be figuring this out together. And I think all this honesty will really help.”

Whatever Lily thought a boss would be like, it wasn’t like this. It was unnerving.

She changed the subject. “My mom wanted me to talk about money.”

“Ok. How much seems fair to you?”

Chantal gaped. “Aren’t you supposed to figure that out?” “Like I said, I’ve never done this before, so I really don’t know.”

“Well, how much can you afford to pay?” Camilla looked at her very seriously. “A lot.”

Lily scrunched her eyes, “What? Ok, umm. Well, why don’t we call my mom? She’s had a lot of jobs so she knows about money. And she wanted input anyway.”

She called and soon enough, Mom answered, but she sounded busy. “ She sounds loaded so just see if she’ll do $20 an hour, ok?”

“You sure? That sounds like *a lot*. Do you even make that much?”

“Lily, just ask. She can bargain if she wants. You’re worth it anyways. Now, I gotta go.” she sounded peeved. “Wish I could have come.” Then she hung up.

Lily turned to Camilla. “Does $20 per hour work for you?”

Camilla blinked. “Sure. One second.” From the pocket of her dress she pulled out a worn wallet. She frowned. “I don’t have any bills with me. Would this be fine for now?” She drew out a gold coin and handed it to her.

On the coin was a worn head of a woman with a feathered hat. Around it was inscribed *The United States of America.* She turned it over. Within a wreath, it read *Three Dollars, 1854.*

Old coins were worth a lot though, right? At least $20. Maybe more. She snapped a picture and sent it to her mom. “Alright.”

“So, shall we begin Saturday?”

“That’s tomorrow!”

“My work is piling up, but I can wait..”

“No, I’m free. I can come.”

Camilla smiled broadly. Her teeth were showing. “Excellent. *A demain*.”

The Small House on Cypress Street, Saturday to Friday

The first week passed more or less the same.

When Chantalle arrived for her first shift Saturday, the living room had been transformed. The ikea sofa was still there, but the coffee table was gone. Instead, crammed against the other side of the small room was a desk with a laptop, a notepad, and an antique Bell telephone. Camilla had first started by serving tea, and then explained her duties. On the laptop, she had loaded dozens of video files containing ads for get rich schemes. They were all local. Lily's job was to type a short description of each video into an Excel sheet Camilla had prepared, along with the name of the company, product, and the people selling them. Google them to find their website. Link it. Then move on.

After that Camilla excused herself upstairs, only to reappear five hours later to see Lily out the door. Though she mentioned that, if Lily needed anything, she could yell.

This week Lily had only yelled four times. The first, to ask where the bathroom was, which Camilla sheepishly showed her. "It's the second level, this small room right here, " she gestured. "Next to my office" and she pointed to the other door. "Use it whenever you need to. But don't go upstairs - it's private."

The bathroom was old fashioned with pink tile. Very clean. Lily felt like she barely fit on the small toilet when she realized there was no toilet paper. So she yelled for a second time. A small hand passed her a roll, and, well, crisis averted.

Another day she yelled because she had brought leftovers and wanted to put them somewhere. Camilla had taken her downstairs to a postage stamp of a kitchen, with an old stone floor. The fridge was actually half sized and nearly empty. The food was soon stored away. But Camilla gave her a tour. Chantele could use the kitchen whenever she liked. There were plates and utensils and cups, and a kettle for hot water. Even a tiny table and two chairs. But no food.

“Do you eat here much?” Lily had asked.

“Hmm, no,” said Camilla, “I only really use this place as an office and base of operations, so no need to really keep much. But you can keep food here if you’d like.”

Lily had visited the kitchen a few times after that, but since then fruits, vegetables, breads, butter, and jams were always around. She helped herself a few times.

The work itself soon proved tedious and dull. Often her mind wandered. One day she yelled because she was bored and wanted to bug Camilla about something. The coin the woman had given her that afternoon in Penn’s Landing had turned out to be gold. She and her mother had visited the pawnbrokers, and the tight mouthed owner had promptly handed them $10,000 as soon as he eyed it under a loupe.

Her mother was grinning. They’d make rent that month, she said. No problem. This made Chantalle nervous though - maybe Camilla didn’t know how much it was worth? Or maybe it was an accident?

“We don’t look gift horses in the mouth in this family, Lily. So don’t tell her.”

Lily didn’t want to lie though, but the thought that Camilla would demand it back twisted her gut in knots. So after another boring video she had barely paid attention to because of her racing thoughts, she yelled. Camilla came running down the stairs, but chuckled when she brought up the value of the coin. “Oh, don’t worry about it. It wasn’t anything special to me. We’ll just deduct it if I forget to get cash on a particular day, hm?”

Camilla had never forgotten about cash again, though. Every day, without fail, five crisp 20s would appear. $100 for 5 hours of work.

She started keeping it in an old, dinged up pink piggy bank at home.

Tonight was Saturday, and Camilla had asked her to stay late. “I’m expecting a few calls, so I’ll be showing you how to handle that. They will be telephoning at 8pm.”

“I thought I was your only worker?”

“Yes - but I subcontract sometimes.”

“What will they be calling about”

“A list of names and addresses. That’s all. You will use the yellow notepad to write them down for me.”

Today was different though, because Camilla reappeared at 5pm. “Do you like roast chicken Lily?”

“Yeah”

“Good, because that’s all I can cook. Dinner will be ready in approximately 90 minutes.” And then Camilla rushed downstairs into the kitchen.

That night Lily could hear the dull cuts of knives, and soon enough, the delicious smell of roast pan juices. Then -

“Lily!” it was Camilla’s turn to shout “Stop your work and come downstairs.”

“Am I still getting paid for this?”

“Yes.”

Lily went downstairs. The small table had been folded out and set, complete with two crystal wine glasses, etched with flowers and vines. In the middle was a platter of roast chicken, the skin a lovely black and brown, with roast carrots as well. On the plates were a couple of slices of bread, generously buttered and dusted with a pinch of sea salt.

“Like I said, this is the only thing I know how to make. But you should be fed, if you are going to be working late. What do you want to drink?”

“Do you have coke?”

Camilla raised an eyebrow “I forgot how much of a sweet tooth you are. I forgot to get some. I have...wine, sparkling water, iced tea…”

“Iced tea would be good. With sugar though.”

“Sure you wouldn’t like to try a little wine? I could water it down.”

Lily thought this was strange. “No, I’m good.”

“Very well. I’ll get the drinks. Serve yourself.”

Lily cut into the chicken, which was juicier than the stuff she was used to her mother making. “What’s the sauce on it?”

“Paprika, salt, pepper, mixed in honey. Dipped and roasted.” Camilla said, placing the two glasses back on the table, along with the sugar bowl.

Lily filled her plate, but Camilla took only a small piece of breast to go with a glass of red wine. She took her first bite.

It was delicious.

“Is this French cooking?”

“...no, it’s a recipe a friend from another country taught me, once. Said everyone should be able to cook one thing really well. But I don’t cook very often, never needed to.”

“So you eat out a lot?”

“Yes, more or less. But I’m never that hungry,” she said, gesturing to her plate.

“Well, this is amazing. So juicy.”

“Thank you for your kind words.”

Lily continued to eat while Camilla herself mainly watched, taking a nibble of chicken now and then, but mostly quietly sipping wine.

“How is your first week going?”

“Fine, I think I’m getting the hang of it. But…is it always going to be like this?”

“Like what?”

“Writing data, watching stuff, googling things. Just seems…boring.”

“90 percent of what I do is very dull, Lily. Very dull indeed.”

“Is there a point to it though? Why am I looking at all these videos? Are we going to ask Philly government to stop letting people like this work?”

“...no, they would do nothing of the sort, unfortunately. At least, not fast enough for our purposes. Although, you *could* use this information to push them to take some kind of action. We’re looking for a person in particular, among those con artists.”

“How will we know?”

“Data mostly. Which you are working on.”

“And what are you doing?”

“Right now? Not much,” she chuckled. “I just finished a case and decided to do some separate work until the data piled up again. We’ll know more about what we’re looking at probably next week. Then I’ll show you the next steps. Now, would you like some dessert?”

Turned out, dessert was a frosty looking croissant that sat in a small pink box. “For you. You’re growing, while I finished a while ago.”

She took a bite. It was flakey and buttery, but inside was a sweet cherry-like paste.

"Croissant aux amands, if you're ever looking for that here. There is a French bakery nearby that makes a tolerable facsimile." She finished her wine. A little of it stained her lip ruby.

"How was it?"

"Oh, very nice. This" and she tapped the bottle, "I brought over myself. It's from a small vineyard near where I grew up."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Oh, who wants to remember. But it was this rural spot, very backwater. It's called La Vendée."

"Is it close to Paris?"

"It isn't close to anything, and it's not worth visiting." Camilla said, very shortly.

"But the wine is good?"

"It's - well it's the only good thing about La Vendée."

"Got it, so don't go to La Vendée."

"Just so."

"Not even to visit you? Get a cheap trip of France?"

Camilla chuckled. "I won't be very useful to you if you want to do that. I'm not there so much anymore. My old house is gone. If I go home, I stay in a hotel, or I bother family."

"I was born here. I guess I understand why people want to leave and never come back, but…"

“But?”

“I want to make things better, I guess. Things haven’t been all bad. My mom. My teachers. Some of my neighbors. I don’t want to leave yet.”

Camilla looked pensive for a moment, her eyes trained on the wine glass. “I can understand that.”

When they finished, Camilla sent Lily back upstairs, even though Lily offered to help. “No, I made the mess, I will clean up. It’s no trouble. Besides, the phone should ring soon. If you need assistance…”

“Yell, I know.”

“Good girl.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Don’t call me that. I’m not your girl, I’m your employee.”

“Fine, fine. Thank you Lily.”

Lily went back upstairs. While the whole house was still too small by far, she was getting used to it. When she first arrived, she tripped down the narrow, awkward steps a few times. But now she had gotten the hang of them.

There was a loud ring.

The phone.

Lily finished bounding the stairs and rushed to the desk. She picked up the worn bakelite handle of the antique phone and said, “Yeah?”

“Camilla?”

The headset was a little quiet, but Lily could make out the feminine voice, clear as a bell. It was smooth, low, and had no trace of accent whatsoever.

“Uh, sorry. This is Lily. I work for her?” she ended anxiously with a squeak.

A very short pause then, “Lily. You have a very lovely name. Your mother picked it well.”

“Thank you?” What a weird thing to say.

“Are you a musician, Lily?”

“No…but look, I think Camilla wanted me to talk to you ma’am. She said someone would be calling. So, uh what’s your name? I need to take notes.”

The voice breathed. “Angela.”

“Angela…and, what’s your last name?”

“Just Angela, dear - from the medical examiner’s office - I hope you understand why I might not share my other name. In any case” and Lily could almost hear a smile on the other end “I hope Camilla knows me. I’ve certainly known her all her life. A huge softie, that one. I hope you get along well.

Softie was the last word Lily would use for the sharp, small, and overly officious woman who was her boss. Even if she did make good chicken.

“Now,” the voice continued. “I have some names and addresses. Are you ready?”

Lily clicked her pen. “Yes.”

2 Months Later

The house on Cyprus Street was too small. The windows were too large. And The “wifi” was out.

So, Camilla went elsewhere - somewhere that felt more familiar. In this case, a moldering and dark basement study room of the city’s somewhat decrepit

central library. Barely perched on a metal chair, skin bleached like bone by a flickering halogen above, she considered the newest list of names. They were all Black, but that was where the similarities ended. Different ages, neighborhoods, education levels, countries of origin - reduced to cheap ballpoint pen ink on a post-it note.

Glaring at the dim screen displaying the database Lily had put together, Camilla saw rows after rows of charlatans, some from Philly, most not - nothing remarkable about them, and nothing connecting them to the names on her list. Just a bunch of hustlers trying to con money out of gullible idiots. It was all too human, and not what she was after.

She crumpled Angela's list in her hand.

If anyone had happened to spy on her at this moment - while escaping her notice, which was a *very* difficult task indeed - he would have seen a black-eyed wraith of a woman glaring at her computer screen as if trying to burn a hole through it. And if he had dared to stick around longer, considering what to do about some woman alone - an even more dangerous prospect - he would have eventually noticed that she had not moved an inch. Her mouth would have been twisted in a grimace, nose twisted in disgust - as if she had tasted something truly awful.

At this point this casual observer might have found themselves cast on the floor, gasping for breath, had not an intrusive thought had not suddenly whispered to *get the hell out*. Following this unsolicited advice, the observer might have found themselves questioning their sanity while staring into a bathroom mirror, wondering if slashing their wrists was the best way to escape. The wraith in the library would have been completely forgotten by then.

The lady herself remained at the desk as if very little had happened, for fifteen minutes, and willed for some connection to emerge.

Nothing. Nothing yet. But there was *something.* She could feel it.

Walking the streets and bullying the few contacts she had in this city had only turned up some truly wretched canaille - which she did swiftly dispatch. But there was something else. She could almost taste the shape of it on the palate of her tongue. And it needed to be dealt with. After all, someone might notice if she didn't.

Toggling a button, she tried to brighten the dimmed laptop screen, but to no avail. Instead, burned into leds, all she saw was her own reflection. No doubt taunting her.

"Well, damn it," she muttered to herself. "Not another one."

Lily had been working for an hour, when she heard Camilla unlocking the door to enter. Being left alone wasn't *too* unusual; her boss often came and went as she pleased - fact finding she called it. And, beyond the occasional email giving her more work - and the weekly roast chicken dinners - Lily was largely left to her own devices.

But this was the first time she had entered the house completely alone, with the lights off. It felt nice that Camilla felt like she could trust her like that, but she would have liked the company.

Rather than muttering a quick "hi" like she normally did, Lily got up to greet her.

The normally too pale woman's cheeks had a light blush to them.

"Hey - looks like you got some sun."

Camilla stared at her quizzically. A pregnant pause and then - "No."

Lily didn't know what to say to that. "Ok…look, I wanted to talk to you about my pay."

Camilla put down her bag and talk the one broad step it only took in such a small house to get from the door to the sofa. She collapsed in it as primly as Lily had ever seen managed it and rubbed her brow. "You want more." She said, turning to meet Lily's gaze.

It didn't sound like a question.

"No! I mean - not that I wouldn't mind more - I mean - look. I just wanted to see if I could get my pay through Venmo? Or maybe one of those payroll debit cards?"

Camilla blinked, then squinted for a few seconds. "I don't understand." She said rather slowly. It looked like it physically pained her to admit that.

Huh. Lily thought. It might be a language thing. When her friend Meiomi had first arrived in the US, she used to get a look like that all the time with their teachers. She used to help when she could. She tried again. "You know, instead of cash, it goes on a card, then you can use it?"

"So a bank." Camilla's look returned back to its normal impassiveness."

"Well sorta. You don't need a bank to use it, it's kinda like a gift card?"

Camilla arched her brow "So you don't like banks?"

"No, it's not that - I just don't have an account, and it'll be easier to save my money if I can put it in something. Sometimes people" *like her mother,* she thought "get into my stash when I don't want them to."

Camilla nodded. "I can understand that." Rising, she walked towards the desk Lily was using. Removing her keys again, she unlocked a drawer with a small bronze one and removed a black, laminated booklet and a slim wallet. From the wallet she drew what looked like a business card, the number of which she

dialed into the black bakelite phone. When she began speaking into the line, a soft, sibilant French slid out - very different from the French Meiomi had been trying to teach her lately. It was too rapid to understand in any case. Within two minutes of what she assumed was a brief back and forth, Camilla hung up.

“That’s all set up then - Lily, could you hand me a pen? No, the one with the red cap. Yes, thank you.” Then Camilla opened the booklet, briefly scrawled on a pad of paper, signed it, and handed it to her. It was a check for $1300.

“Tomorrow, instead of coming here, take this to the address printed on the check. If you have some form of ID, bring it with you. They’ll set you up with an account and a card.

“Camilla, this is like four months of pay though.”

“Two. I decided to give you a raise.”

Next part - Lily reacting to this

Lily and Camilla having convo about tiktok friend money scam thing lead.

Dinner Party

The laptop’s battery indicator was blinking ominously.

Lily cursed, realizing her mistake. The She was researching the “hold music” that played on telephones some- her bosses’ latest

Lily had left her charger in her dorm room. She realized this mistake while researching *hold music* of all things - the newest assignment her anal retentive boss had left her. She noticed the battery light blinking ominously.

She grabbed her phone to text Camilla, before tossing it down. She didn't need to bother the woman. After all, they both used macbooks. She might have one in her office.

She lept up the stairs. Over the years, the awkwardly narrow steps and low hanging ceiling had become familiar to her, the narrow building's only bathroom being up there but Camilla's office had remained a mystery.

Lily hesitated for a moment, then pushed open the door. Honestly, she was curious to see what Camilla's private world resembled.

Upon entering, Lily could not decide if she was surprised or not. The room was *small*. Surely even her petite boss felt cramped in a space like this. And it was full of furniture. An antique desk - one of those spindly things she saw in a thrift store once - was shoved against one side, underneath a small window. Wide bookcases were shoved on either side of it, books and journals virtually spilling out of the shelves. Some looked new, some were unbelievably old. It wasn't that different from the books in a forgotten corner of the college library. Opening one or two, she realized none of *these* were dusty, though. She kept browsing, curious, the charger momentarily forgotten. Few of the texts were in English. Many were typewritten. Some were merely scrapbooks of newspaper clippings.And whole shelves, paper yellowing with age, were handwritten with Camilla's careful loopy script. None were in English.

Figures, she thought.

Besides this there was only a simple wooden chair and a small tensor lamp.

No computer, no charger.

But Camilla kept a computer somewhere - Lily had seen it before, the few times the woman had taken it downstairs to work on the couch adjacent to here. Maybe she had taken it to her bedroom, to watch some netflix? Lily had done that from time to time.

Exiting the room, Lily looked up the stairs. Camilla had told her once, in her curt fashion, that it was just her bedroom and that she would prefer, *strongly,* that Lily never go there.

She checked her phone again. No response yet.

Sigh.

She climbed the narrow steps, nearly banging her head against the low overhang of the ceiling going upwards. At the very least, there was a handle here to help guide her safely upwards.

She was surprised to find that there wasn't a door. Instead it opened up into what she supposed was the top floor of the building.

Then she gasped.

This room wasn't unoccupied.

At the center wall rested a great bed, and on it lay a woman sleeping. She reminded Lily, in a way, of the colored statues of the Virgin her mother kept in the house. She had waves of curly brown hair, fanning across her pillow. Her skin is creamy and tinged seashell pink. Her mouth hung open a bit - with pink plush lips, Lily noticed. There she slept, on top of the bed's covers, still wearing boots.

A pang of guilt tugged at Lily, and she quickly realized she was intruding on someone's privacy. She was about to turn and leave when a hand shot up to grip her wrist, stopping her in her tracks.

The creature opened her eyes. They were bright blue. Blinked. And then she smiled a wide smile.

Lily tried to speak, but found her voice gone. She just stared at the woman. Whoever she was, she had a presence, something about her that was undeniable.

The woman blinked again and tilted her head to one side.

“Hi, I’m Sybil” she said. Her voice was clear as a bell.

Then she sat up.

Lily, remembering herself, backed from the bed.. “What are you doing here?” She eventually ventured. It sounded blunt to her ears. She wished she could take back the words the moment she said them.

Sybil looked surprised for a moment before laughing softly. It was a tinny sound, like a child playing with a music box.

She crossed her legs beneath her and smoothed out her skirt, a delicate gesture that seemed to flow seamlessly with her every movement.

Lily felt a bit self conscious in comparison.

“Oh, I’m Sybil. I just got back from a long trip, needed a nap.”

She wore a red cardigan with a sloping V neck, cut short to expose her abdomen. It was complimented by a pink skirt, clinging tight to her ass, and long brown boots reaching to her knees. Lily would later think back and realize that this was when she learned she was bisexual.

“Where’s Camilla?” Sybil asked, breaking Lily’s reverie.

“Oh…” she was slow to respond, still in a daze. “She went out. I don’t know where.”

“Ah, ok. Well, let’s go downstairs, shall we? I’m ravenous.”

As they descended, Lily was quick to notice that Sybil, despite being a whole head taller than her, gracefully avoided the low ceiling of the stairs. Soon they reached the sitting room. Sybil collapsed onto the settee. Lily gingerly took her customary seat and pulled out her phone. Her question about the charger was

still unanswered, unseen. She added to it quickly. "*There's somebody here. Says her name is Sybil*?"

As she hit enter, she looked up. Sybil had begun looking for something. "Where did I put it?" she murmured to herself. Then "Ah!"

She reached into her boot. From the right came a half used pack of cigarettes. From the left, a pack of matches.

"Smoke?" she offered. Lilly shook her head, too surprised to respond.

She chuckled. "More for me!" and lit up. She took a deep drag, and slowly exhaled a long puff of smoke.

This was going too far. Her stomach flipped at the thought of asking Sybil to leave, but she realized she had no choice.

"I don't know you know, and I don't know if Camilla knows you either. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." She tried to sound firm, not uncertain.

The woman laughed. "Oh, this is *my* house. I rent it. She was just watching it for me." Sybil didn't seem to notice the cough. She took another drag. They sat silently for a few minutes, Lily vainly checking her phone.

"What's your name?" Sybil asked.

The smoke made Lily dizzy. It was suffocating. "Lily. May I open a window?" She ventured.

Sybil smiled. "Yes, you may." She leaned back on the settee, eyes still closed. Lily stood up, feeling unsteady on her feet, and slowly made her way to the window. She pulled at it, but it was stuck. She tried again. And again.

The third time, a pair of arms slid around hers, helping her pry it open.

She turned to see Sybil standing behind her. "It's an old house," she proffered as an excuse.

The woman was way too close.

“So you know Camilla?”

Sybil peered at her playfully. “She’s my sister.”

Lily opened the window. Breathed the fresh cold air. She felt less dizzy now. “Oh, I didn’t know she had one.”

Sybil looked disappointed. But then she chuckled a bit and returned to the sofa, reclining. She picked up her cigarette - where had the ashtray come from? - and deeply inhaled.

Lily rushed back to the safety of her seat. With the window open, it was easier to breathe, but the temperature dropped significantly. She shivered. But it also made it easier to hear what was happening outside. She heard the clipped sound of heels on the sidewalk, and then the wrestling of keys. They were being jammed in the door. The lock finally clicked, the door was slammed open, and there was Camilla.

The woman was breathless, and for the first time in their years of acquaintance, she seemed ill at ease. A strand of hair hung out of her bun. She had a box of cookies in her hands.

Her eyes darted from Lily, to Sybil, and back to Lily again.

“I saw your text about the charger. I’m not sure where it went. I’ll buy another one.”

Then to her sister: “Sybil, you’re awake.”

As she walked to the couch, Sybil rose and threw the cigarette on the ground. “Camilla! It’s so good to see you. You look well. Enjoying Philly?”

Camilla only nodded, her back rigid. She stamped the cigarette out underfoot. She started to draw back when Sybil interrupted "What, no hug for me? I've been gone a long time." She opened her arms and took a step forward.

Camilla shoved the box of warm cookies in her arms. "Here! For you. I thought you'd be hungry. This should take care of you until dinner."

"Oh!" said Sybil, opening the box. "Cookies! Still hot! When did they open a bakery near here?"

"They haven't," Camilla replied. "Just a shop that sells cookies. Only you can buy them 24 hours a day, even get them delivered."

"The 21st century truly is grand, isn't it?" She took a chocolate chip cookie and gave it a bite.

Then sighed. "So sweet."

"Yes, too sweet."

"You're always so grumpy. But that's what I love about you." Sybil wrapped her in a hug. Camilla stiffly reciprocated, then drew away.

Smiling, Sybil returned to her seat and lit up another cigarette.

Lily watched the awkward display, having been forgotten. She felt like a third wheel in all this, and made a small cough.

Camilla noticed that. Then she turned to Sybil, eyes narrowing on the cigarette.

Sybil merely smiled.

Her sister huffed.

"Put it out."

"Why? It's my house."

“I said, *put it out*.”

“Well a rental, but it’s in *my* -”

“Sister, please?”

That stopped Sybil’s prattling. “Why?” she asked, slowly

Camilla gave her a small look. Gestured over to where Lily sat. “It’s not polite. Second hand smoke.” She finally replied.

Sybil blinked. “Ah.” Then, with a graceful throw, she tossed the thing out the window.

Then she turned her head to Lily, and in a chirpy voice added “I forgot all about that! It’s a bad habit of course.”

Lily took a deep breath. It was better now. But Sybil’s eyes, though warm and friendly, were still tracked on her like a bug on a microscope. The attention was making Lily very uncomfortable. Luckily she found another victim - Camilla. Her eyes wrinkled, her smile turned mischievous.

“Guess what.”

Camilla rolled her eyes. “What,” she said flatly.

“No, seriously, *guess.”*

“I don’t play that game,” she replied stonily.

“Fine. Killjoy. You know, _Daddy’_s coming to visit soon.”

Lily watched the expression on Camilla’s eyes widen. The woman inhaled sharply, and her back went ramrod straight again. Despite having the whitest skin Lily had ever seen, she somehow grew paler. Grey as bone.

Something wasn’t right.

“He is.” she managed in a strangled voice. It was probably meant to be a question, but it came out flat.

“Yes, he is.” Sybil sang. “I did just get back, after all. Did you think he wouldn’t stop by?” she asked.

Her sister turned away, looking at the ground. Then she took a deep breath.“Somehow I hadn’t stopped to consider it.

Sybil’s face flicked back to Lily. “I can guess why.”

Camilla looked like she might say something else, but all that came out was

“Dinner. You -” she pointed at Sybil. “Join me. Help me.”

Sybil rolled her eyes. “Oh, *alright.”*

Camilla pointed at Lily. “You, stay here. I’ll get you an Uber.”

“Camilla, I can just walk.”

“I’m getting you an Uber.”

For Lilly, this was the first time she’d ever seen Camilla as anything other than composed, bored, or just a little bit impatient. There was real alarm in her voice. Who was this man who would be visiting soon? Had he treated Camilla badly in the past?

Lilly thought of her teacher, back in Guatemala. How he used to thunder over her, make her feel small.

I’m staying, she thought.

“No you’re *not*.” Camilla pronounced. Her words were quiet, but lingered in the air.

Did I say that part out loud? Lilly thought.

Seemingly oblivious, Sybil chimed in. “Oh, but have you eaten dinner, Lily?”

Lily latched onto it. “No, I haven’t. I’m starving.”

“Then she must join us! After all, It wouldn’t be polite, sister, to let a guest leave without eating.”

“She’s not my *guest*, she’s my *employee.”* Camilla snapped.

Lily was a little hurt by this, but didn’t let this stop her from responding. “What, you make me dinner all the time!”

Sybil joined in, nodding. “Camilla, feed the poor thing.”

Ganged up on, Camilla exhaled sharply. “*Fine.* Now, sister. Join me in the kitchen. We’re having chicken.”

“Always the chicken.” And as the two descended, Sybil looked back and winked.

Lily couldn't help but smile. They were just being silly, she thought. Like sister. Might as well sit back and enjoy a cookie.

Lily could hear the sisters continuing to bicker, but their language shifted to French. Intrigued by the sudden intrusion of family in her boss’ seemingly lonely life, Lily did her best to understand. Now, Lily had been privately teaching herself French, hoping to surprise Camilla one day - but she found the dialect the sister’s used extremely difficult. It certainly wasn’t the Parisian French she was used to Duolinguo feeding her. Using her rudimentary skills - and her Spanish - she managed to piece some of it together, though.

Sybil was teasing her sister about her new…morsel? Lily assumed they were talking about her here - and kept bringing up stories from their past. Something about reading and poetry at their grandmother’s house? Camilla’s responses were short and subdued, though Lily caught a bit of her sardonic tone here and there.

But then her boss loudly cut back "*Arrestes - ille est ma servante, Sybille. Restes loing d'ille. Partes maintenant et cerches por le pan pour disner."*

Lily felt a pang of hurt. Servant. Servant. Is that what Camilla thought of her?

She was surprised by the quick steps and sudden reappearance of Sybil in the room.

"Hi!" she started.

"Hey…"Lily responded warily.

"Camilla wants me to do a bread run. Do you know anything open right now?"

"But…I think that fancy grocery store is still open? Maybe they still have something."

"Di Bruno's, you mean?

"Yeah."

"Oh! Perfect."

With that, she vanished out the door. She didn't even put on a coat.

Lily crept down the stairs to where Camilla was now working, alone.

A chicken was strewn on the corner. Camilla had a carving knife, and was working her way through the fine bones of the thigh, as Lily had seen her do many times before.

She apparently didn't notice Lily, so she coughed.

Camilla paused with the knife, but did not turn her head.

"She's gone now, Sybil. Can you tell me what's going on now?"

Camilla started carefully deboning the chicken again. “This is actually Sybil’s house. She’s been working abroad for an extended period, and asked me to house sit in Philadelphia for her until her return. I work at home, so I agreed.”

“She’s been away for five years though.”

“It’s been an extended work engagement, traveling to different places.”

She was a little surprised at her boss's explanation, but it seemed to make sense."You two seem close," Lily ventured. Camilla shrugged. "We have an unusual relationship, to be sure. But yes, we're family."

She began working on the other thigh.

“And this man who is visiting. Are you also close with him?”

She stiffened. “Somewhat. Look, I need to apologize. My sister arrived earlier, and it was quite a surprise. I didn’t have the chance to let you know.”

“You’re mad at her, aren’t you?”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Well, when you were talking to her early - I’ve been learning French, so I understood - ”

Crack.

Camilla had hewn the kitchen knife deep into the thigh, exposing the marrow.

Lily stopped.

The woman took a deep breath, and then pried the blade back out.

“Your hands are shaking. Here, give me the knife. I’ll cook.”

Camilla made to argue, then hung her head.

“I’ll be in my office.”

She handed Lily the knife, and then disappeared upstairs.

Lily, now alone, stared down at the chicken. She took a deep breath and then gently began to work.

Dinner came quickly together after Camilla departed. Lily decided to do her own spin on the chicken and made her grandmother’s kak’ik - a chicken stew simmering in tomatoes. spices and pepper, served with tortillas, or in this case, the baguette that Sybil was bringing back. She had been gone for a while. So was Camilla.

She was putting the finishing touches on the meal when she heard Camilla reemerge. Then there was the subtle rhythm of the creek of the steps, the movement of furniture. Her boss reappeared in the kitchen. She looked calmer. “We’ll be eating in the living room. I already set it up.

“Where did the table come from?”

“Upstairs. We have a folding one of sorts.

“And chairs?”

“That’s what I’m here for. We have your desk chair, and of course mine, then our normal dinner chairs. Unfortunately one of us will have to stand.”

“Is the table ready then?”

“Mostly.”

“Alright, let me bring the saucepan up.”

“One moment.”

Camilla ascended the stairs again and returned, a large tureen in hand. It looked antique, painted blue and white.

“Fancy.”

“Yes, well, we don’t often have an occasion for a dinner party.”

Lily ladled the soup into the tureen. Camilla plucked it from her hands and ascended. Lily followed close behind her. The room she entered had been transformed from an office into a formal dining room, Lily’s desk mysteriously disappeared. Curiously, the sofa had been stood on its end, blocking the window it had been placed beside. The table itself was laden with more of the blue and white china, with crystal goblets and silverware. Curiously Camilla had also lit two candles, whose light danced shadows on the table and rainbows in the crystal. to keep an eye on everything.

“Where did all this come from?” Lily found herself asking.

“Upstairs,” Camilla murmured. “She keeps this in a small cupboard. It should suffice.”

The sounds of the city streets outside were suddenly cut with singing. Lily was used to this - Philadelphians were never self conscious in public - but the difference was that this was *good.* It was a very high voice, and as it came closer, she could make out the lyrics

“I don’t mind the sun sometimes

The images it shows

I can taste you on my lips

And smell you in my clothes”

Camilla huffed. Lily was convinced she hated music.

The lyrics got closer, until they bounded up the steps and burst through the door.

Sybil was home. In her hands was a grocery bag, a baguette sticking out of the end. She danced in, lightly stepping around the obstacles of the small room. She continued.

"Cinnamon and sugary

And softly spoken lies

You never know just how to look

Through other people's eyes"

These words she belted at Camilla's face.

She groaned. "Sybil, *please*."

Sybil beamed. "No, this is *my* apartment."

She did relent

"I have the bread, the wine and the pastries." She pulled them out one by one and unceremoniously dumped them on the table. A candle went out.

"I already have wine and - ugh, here." Camilla grabbed a large plate she set aside for the cookies and placed the baguette on it. She opened the pastry box, which contained some sugared donuts, and placed them beside it.

Sybil only hummed merrily. Then she smiled. "Just on time, as always."

Just as Lily was about to ask what she meant, another sound rumbled up the street. Lily recognized it as a motorbike, a not uncommon sound in the city, but it was rare to hear it in the genteel streets of Washington Square West. It made a turn.

Sybil bounded out of the apartment. With a sigh, Camilla followed, as did Lily, who wanted to understand what the fuss was about.

A broad figure pulled up on one of those Japanese motorcycles. The man's face was completely covered by a helmet and visor, and he wore a leather jacket and denim jeans. His boots, which were long and leather, were spotted with mud. They had great rubber treads on them.

He put the bike into park, stepped off it, and pulled off the helmet.

Lily gasped. The man was *pretty.* He had curly hair the color of sand that was apparently long enough to pull into one of those man buns. He was almost as swarthy as her, and that, the five o'clock shadow - which on him managed to look dashing - and the boots made it look like he had been outside for a long time. His blue eyes sparkled with mirth and intelligence.

He smiled broadly when he saw Sybil, who had, as soon as he dismounted, embraced him. He gently kissed her. "*Princessa*" he murmured in a warm baritone. "I am overjoyed to see you again."

"Me too, Daddy."

They stayed like that for a bit, Sybil peppering him with kisses, before they remembered themselves and withdrew.

The man gave a solemn but warm nod. "Camilla"

"Jerome," she replied politely.

Jerome's eyes then slid to Lily, who still stood on the steps, unsure of what to do. His smile broadened.

"Who do we have here?"

"This is my assistant, Lily. She has been helping me with my work in the city."

That raised his eyebrows. "Ah, interesting." He nudged past Camilla and up the steps to Lily. He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "Lily, a charming name. I am Jerome. Where are you from, my dear?"

“Let’s go inside, dinner is waiting.” Camilla cut in.

“I forget myself, you must be hungry.” He looked pensively at Lily.

“I am! I cooked, actually. I hope you brought your appetite.”

“ I’m *starving*. I’m sure whatever you’ve prepared will be absolutely delicious.”

When all four stood in the room, it was terribly crowded. It seemed like no one but Lily noticed, though, shoved behind Camilla as she was.

Camilla passed her the plates and one by one, she ladeled the simmering, spicy tomato and chicken mixture in and passed them around. Jerome was passed the wine, which he pronounced as a fine bottle and uncorked with some ceremony. With a satisfying pop, he gave the bottle a sniff, smiled, and began to pour into proffered glasses. After three were filled he grabbed a forth, filled it to the brim, stood, and offered it to Lily. “To your health my friend,” he smiled. He reached for his cup from the table, and gently clinked it against Lily’s glass, which she still held stunned.

She wasn’t old enough to drink yet, not that that stopped her from trying it whenever Camilla poured. But she only ever poured a little. Her glass was completely full.

“Cheers” then he gave it some thought. “My dear. What do you say when you toast ?”

“Salud”

“Interesting accent. You are from somewhere in Central America, Í’m guessing?, I mean in *your* language.”

“Yes, Guatemala.”

“Guatemala!” he seemed to reexamine her closely. He seemed satisfied with whatever he looked for and added “An *indio?”*

“We prefer *Mayan.* Specifically I’m Q’eqchi’.”

“Oh, my apologies. I’ve met many indigenous peoples, but I’m not always sure which they are. Well, Lily, how do they toast in Q’eqchi’?”

“Oh. Well we don’t really drink wine? *Tzaluntaq*, I guess.”

“Say it again?”

“*Tzaluntaq*”

“*Tzaluntaq* Lily. May your cup runneth over.”

Lily was surprised that he pronounced the sounds perfectly.

“It sounds like you need to tell José to fuck off” Jerome added.

Lily wasn’t sure how Jerome had gotten her to talk about school drama, but here she was, talking about her “stalker.” Maybe it was the wine, which was starting to make her very warm.

Sure he followed her from class to class, but they shared three of them. And he hadn’t done anything bad.

“He makes you uncomfortable, that’s all he needs to do to make it not ok,” the man pronounced. “Tell him, in no certain terms, to fuck off. He’ll leave you alone. Right Camilla?”

Camilla, who had slid back into her typical preciseness during dinner, was caught off guard. She blinked. “Not in my experience. It needs more force than that.”

“See?” Lily exclaimed? “And if he gets angry?”

“Well, apply some force. A male friend. Police. Or Camilla, I’m sure she would take care of it.”

“Please don’t volunteer me for things.”

“But you will help her.” Jerome looked at her archly. Camilla looked away.

He turned to Lily. “See, I know her. She talks about never getting involved, but she will stick her nose into things she cares about. You have a rich and powerful *patron.* Use it.”

Lily decided to change the subject. “So, what have you two been up to?” she addressed Jerome and Sybil, who had been sipping delicately on wine. They had broken bread, tasted the soup, exclaimed how *excellent* it was, but had barely taken more than that. She had asked if everything was ok and they had just laughed and commented on the length of French meals. T_here was plenty of time, you see._

Nevermind that it was getting late. Half past 8.

Sybil jumped at the question first. “Oh, I’m a nurse. I travel around where I’m needed, basically.” She swirled her glass and took a sip. “I’ve been abroad these few years, working in Central Africa. Medecin sans Frontieres.

She had a mischievous glint in her eyes. “By the way, on the way back I met up with a certain someone.”

Camilla looked at her. Then started. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes. He gave me a letter for you.”

Jerome's eyes also lit up. "Oh, are we talking about Marcus?" He leaned to Lily. "Marcus is her *husband*" he fake whispered.

Lily's eyes expanded "You're *married*?"

Camilla's cheeks turned pink and she buried her head and her hands.

Sybil continued. "Would you like me to read the letter to you? It's hot stuff. "

"*No. Later."*

_"_Chère Camilla. J'étais content de recevoir votre lettre. Un jour, je vais vous visiter…"

"No." she spoke a little too loudly. _"_Jerome. You were going to tell us about what you were doing?"

"Oh, I've been doing the Appalachian Trail. Started in Maine, happened to be not so far when I heard from Sybil. And you should know, Lily, my princessa calls? I come. Hiked to a highway, rented a bike, and now here I am."

"Do you like hiking?"

"I like the walk. I like the solitude." He reached for a donut. "I like nature. And I like the culture. You are never too alone for long, and hikers are so warm with one another."

He reached for a donut. Took a bite, and strawberry jelly burst forth, staining his lips. He wiped it carefully with a napkin. Lily watched with great interest.

"Have you hiked, Lily?"

"Yes, but I didn't enjoy it very much."

"What trail did you take?"

“It doesn’t have a name. When I came to the United States, sometimes I took the bus, sometimes I took the train, but mostly I walked. There were jungles, they were hot and humid. But I was used to it. There were cities - those were easy enough the navigate, I grew up in one. But the desert? We left town, me, some people, and the *coyotes*. Walked for 21 miles in the desert. By then, I only had socks, and my feet bled. We made it to the Rio Bravo, crossed very carefully - but not carefully enough, one of the men got washed away. Not sure what happened to him. Then we got out and the coyotes left us. If it weren’t for border patrol, we might have died. Not enough water. Unfortunately they sent most of us home. I only got to stay because I was a kid.”

Her head was spinning. Jerome looked at this silently and took her glass. “I think you’ve had enough. Here,” and he passed her some of the baguette, buttered. “This will soak it up. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I don’t regret it. I’m here now.” She took a bite. Crunchy. “I have my mom. I have university, I have a job helping people. Traveling here was something I needed to do.”

The table was quiet.

“Why don’t you lie down my dear? We’ll be together for a while longer, but you seem exhausted. A long day no doubt.”

“No, that’s fine.” She rose. “I need to get home anyways.”

“Are you sure we cannot get you an uber?” Camella asked.

“No, I need the cool air to clear my head. Don’t need my mom on my case, she already thinks college is a bad influence.”

“Very well then. Bon nuit.”

When Lily traveled home, she liked to take a shortcut on Panama Street. It shaved a few minutes off her commute. She had reason to hurry home, her head humming, the sky, with no moon in sight, unnaturally pitch black. The unfortunate problem with Panama Street was, unlike the main thoroughfares, there were very few street lights except for the ones guarding the odd townhouse.

Normally this was fine. The area was wealthy and the cobblestones were charming. She liked feeling like she was suddenly transported from the bustle of the city into colonial times.

But she heard a click clack of heels behind her.

At first she assumed that it was some homeowner, but they never slowed, and there was never the distinctive jingle of keys as they managed a door.

She sped up her space and the footsteps matched it. Feeling anxious She decided, if possible, to turn from Panama onto the larger, more peopled Walnut Street, and to take 12th instead to the subway. But the steps accelerated. Then came a humming sound, that Lily recognized in the back of her mind as the Sia song she liked.

She turned around.

“I have mace you know,” she blurted out. “I know how to fucking handle myself, so back off.”

“Excellent A girl like you can never be too careful, in the city.“You should definitely use that energy when you see José again.”

She knew that voice. She had talked lively with it just 15 minutes ago.

Jerome shifted a little to the left, standing near the doorway of a Georgian structure. The dim light of the incandescent bulb cast a grim shadow across his nose and cheekbones. His blue eyes glittered a little.

"I just wanted to make sure you made it to the station safely. And to offer you an Uber home. Last time I came through this part of town…it wasn't very nice, I'm afraid.

"Oh!" Lily was relieved. Camilla's family was a little strange, but they had been nothing but kind to her, especially Jerome.

She continued. "I'm fine, I actually like the walk. Gives me time to decompress from work before I get home."

Jerome nodded. "I had better head back then. I'm taking Sybil out clubbing. It's been so long since she's been."

He hesitated then added "I also wanted to thank you. My daughter is a lonely person, and well, we're oil and water. It's nice to see her find a kindred spirit to relate to."

Then he turned his heels and walked away.

Lily stood there for a while before mindlessly starting her journey again. *Daughter?*

Jerome looked for the world in his mid 20s at most. She couldn't make heads or tales of it.

But her mind slid automatically to the next bombshell he dropped. *We're kindred spirits?*

Two vampires are slouched against the wall in a dark alley behind a club in Chinatown. They're smoking. The smell of burning tar and paper mixed with the cold smells of stale urine and fish that has been left out too long. They don't notice it. It is uncertain if foul odors bothered creatures like them at all.

The older of them, broad, lithe, and muscular, is chuckling at something the other, a tall brunette beauty said.

"Where do you think she picked that girl up? Do you think they're fucking?"

"*Our* Camilla? *No.* Though that girl of hers wants to. Believe it or not, I genuinely do think she's working for her."

"Very messy. That's pretty unusual for Camilla. Do you think that girl knows what she's doing?"

"What, helping her murder junkies, housewives, and lawyers who flew just a little too close to our side of things? No."

"She can't be that clueless. A *vilana Maya* from the highlands, with a good head on her shoulders, *talking* to *Donsęl la Mǫrt* on a *rotary phone*, of all things…she must know *something*.

Sybilla - for that was technically her name, although her father preferred *princesa* - chuckled. "I'm not so sure. She's such a sweet young thing. When I woke up, I was pleasantly surprised that Camilla thought to leave me such a morsel. But then she was all "Nooooo don't eat her…you'll get bloooood on the carpetttt, Puuuut that cigarette out, it's not goooood for people."

She blew smoke out in the air. Then smiled. "I missed Camilla."

"Me too. Good to see she hasn't changed a bit. Plus she has a *friend* now. Isn't that exciting?"

"I heard that." A new voice, a third vampire, entered the alley. She wore the same drab green dress she had on at dinner, her hair still swept back into that

characteristic golden bun. The vampire known as Camilla was lucky to have any name at all.

She continued. “Should you really be chatting like this when there is a homeless man on the other side of the alley?”

“Oh he’s high as a kite.”

“You *need* to be more careful. Yes, he is just one man, but keep doing this and…”

“Camilla, we’ve heard this lecture before.”

The third vampire sighed. “Fine. Can I have a cigarette? I need something after the evening you put me through.”

Sybilla rolled her eyes but passed one, along with a lighter. “How kind of you to join us this evening.”

“You know I wouldn’t miss it. But I would appreciate a warning next time? It’s usually polite these days to telephone ahead.” Camilla lit up. “Which reminds me.” With her free hand, she fished a phone out of her pocket and tossed it towards her sister. She caught it easily.

“Ooo! I saw that girl of yours using something like this. It connects to the internet?”

“Yes. You can even use it to watch videos and listen to music. I took the trouble of setting up an account with a music service for you”

Sybilla’s eyes lit up. She lunged forward and hugged her sister.

“Erm.”

“I love you, you know that?”

“Yes…I love you too.”

Their father, an ancient thing known as Jeròni, was silent, but smiling through this whole affair.

Despite the suddenness of the embrace, both sisters managed to hold onto the cigarettes, and all three of them settled back against the wall, Camilla a little further away from the other two. They stood in companionable silence.

After a minute or two though, Sybilla and Jeròni finished their cigarettes. They nodded to Camilla. “We’re going back in. Want to grab a bite with us?”

“No. It’s too loud for me, you know that.”

“Fine, fine. We’ll see you soon then.”

Jeròni approached Camilla now and rested his hands on her shoulders. He smiled gently, and placed a kiss on her cheek. “I’m proud of you for trying new things. Getting out of your comfort zone.”

Camilla stiffened a little. Then nodded shortly.

He released her, and then joined Sybilla as she walked out of the dark alley.

Camilla stood there a little longer, finishing her cigarette too, in perfect silence and darkness. She no doubt was considering the eventful day.

Then she dropped the cigarette, mashing it with the boot of her heel. She silently crept towards the homeless man. He might indeed be “high off his kite” like Sybilla said, but his eyes were staring wide and clear straight at her now. He swallowed.

Camilla shook her head. “How unlucky for you.”

An unlucky garbage man heard the crunch of the homeless man's bones the next day when the trash compactor was running. He slammed the emergency button, stopping the machine at once. The corpse was already half devoured by its teeth.

He sighed. Corpses always gummed up the works, literally and figuratively. He'd have to call the cops, and his boss would have to get a cleaner in… He walked away to start the laborious process. And if he thought about it afterwards, he tried to brush it off. *Another OD gone wrong.* It was just one more unpleasant Kensington memory he refused to bring home with him.

Zombieland, 2019

2019 Allegheny Station

A zombie watched two women descend the steps at the station by Kensington and Allegheny. He briefly noted them, which was more than what his neighbors did, some huddled in the dirt under emergency blankets, others rolled over in pain from the withdrawal. He only noticed because of how stiffly they walked. They'd obviously never been here before.

The first woman was a small woman with blond hair tied back in a simple bun. She wore an oversized black coat, and in her hand she held one of those black *don't fuck with me* umbrellas with the metal tip. It *had* been raining, but it wasn't anymore, so it was a mystery why the woman had it.

The younger one was more typical for the neighborhood - hispanic teen, with straight black hair and a hoodie hanging tightly on her plump form.

He watched the latter step gingerly over a needle while the former paid little mind. His eyes wandered back to Kensington avenue though. He was expecting

Jerry any moment now - a crazy motherfucker who rode up and down the avenue on his bike, looking for people to sell to. Dealers weren't too hard to spot - they were the only people with bikes on the avenue save for the occasional confused hipster.

The Avenue itself wasn't flattering in the best of times, being a train-covered dump of houses, abandoned shops and the rows of tents in vacant lots. Rainy days were particularly miserable though. The scent of shit and piss hung low to the ground, and everyone, everyone huddled under the overpasses and shelters of the subway station for cover, himself included. Moreover the night had been a particularly cold one, so the campfires had been kept burning, using lumber and litter, bibles - anything he and his companions could find. The wet trash had finally burned, but it smoked heavily and kept low to the ground, making sleeping and breathing particularly tricky.

Besides Jerry, he kept an eye out for a woman with sunken cheeks and green eyes he had once hung with. He had thought Chrissie had died, going by the new grafitto on Lehigh he had passed "We miss you, Chrissie" - it had said. But he swore that he'd seen her last night, looking at him particularly keenly. It gave him a bad vibe so, even though he normally kept to himself in an alcove a kindly neighbor let him use, that night he bunked with company. Yeah, they'd steal his shit, but he had no idea what that crazy bitch had planned.

He was starting to feel the first spasms of withdrawal, in his gut. The pain was starting to get to him. Soon he'd be bent over like the others. He shook - either from the 40 degree weather or the withdrawal. Just in case, he put his hands closer to the trash fire.

He heard those women again. That was also how he could tell they were new - no one on the Avenue tried to stand out like that, talking. They were gawking out front the CVS parking lot, whose owner blasted organ music in a desperate attempt to keep junkies away. Jokes on them, he actually kinda liked classical. And so did Old Tom, a haggard old homeless man who lived on his own in the

parking lot, day and night. No one else was crazy enough to hang out there of course - in addition to a classical radio, the owner had a shotgun. But he never seemed to bother Old Tom

He was swaying too. But the zombie knew it wasn't from the withdrawal - just the music. Tom liked the music. Said it was Bach.

Weird shithead. Everyone stayed clear of him. Not that the Zombie had learned that lesson yet. Old Tom was just too fun to watch sometimes.

He heard the women talking again.

"Why are we here again?" The Hispanic looking teen's voice dripped with disgust. "I'm in college to get *away* from neighborhoods like this. Even Guatemala City wasn't this bad"

"I did tell you to bring a face mask," the older woman replied distractedly. Her eyes swept over the Avenue. Rh the Avenue cursory glance, seeing the zombies huddled. The zombie who had been perilously close to the road, tore himself back, to where the pillar was. This woman had cat-like eyes. They chilled him to the core.

"It is a lot, isn't it. The poverty, the desperation, basic biological functions like hunger and thirst overwritten by *want.* But these people I showed you. They prey on the weak and the forgotten. What's one more body in Kensington? No one cares when a few more zombies go missing, here or there."

Then she turned her head around. "Let's not stay long then, Lily. I'm only here to talk to an acquaintance…*ah*."

Without warning, the cat eyed lady strode into the parking lot towards Tom. The chubby teen chased her heels.

"Tom," the woman murmured.

Tom didn't respond, only swayed.

The zombie rolled his eyes. Typical Tom.

The woman nudged him with the tip of her umbrella. “Tom!” she said with a little more force.

He said nothing, didn’t even open his eyes. Instead he murmured something, probably that rhyme the Zombie had heard him utter over and over again:

From hag and hungry goblin That into rage would rend you The spirit who stands by the naked man In the book of moons defend you.”

It went something like that.

The woman paused at this, sighed and turned to the younger one. “This won’t be pretty,” she voiced blandly.

Then, before the girl could reply, she raised her umbrella, and with a whirlwind blow slammed it into Tom’s head. He crumpled to the ground.

She didn’t even pause at this. Instead she thundered “Tom Cucanan!” His eyes flew open, but he didn’t give the woman any satisfaction, the zombie could tell. Even from this distance he could see Old Tom was smiling.

Instead the woman stepped to his side and, with sharp black boots, she kicked him in the side. He coughed.

The girl was silent, eyes wide as lanterns, frozen. The zombie was silent too, but mostly because such occurrences were not uncommon in Zombieland. *Nothing* was unusual in Zombieland. In fact, the only strange thing about this was that such a blow had come from someone so small.

She must have seen the look in the teen’s eyes because then, in a softer tone she chuckled. “Oh Lily, he’s fine. This is just what it *takes”* she kicked him again for good measure” - to wake him up, sometimes.

Tom just continued to laugh, and then the next part of the rhyme came out. In the distance the train roared down tracks of the El, causing the whole neighborhood to shake.

That of your five sound senses You never be forsaken Nor wander by yourselves with Tom Abroad to beg your bacon!"

The girl shook herself out of it."Please stop," was all she managed, though. The older woman sighed and withdrew.

Tom's laugh became a chuckle and he sat up.

"See Lily, he's fine."

"Shut up. We shouldn't be the ones hurting people."

Tom shook his head. "Ne'er worry your head, poppet. But I thank you." These were the first words of sense the Zombie ever heard Tom utter since he had arrived in that CVS alley some five months ago.

The beggar then rose to his feet and nodded "Camilla,"

"Um, are you ok?" the girl named Lily asked.

Tom turned to Lily and smiled. "Yes, poppet. Old Tom will be alright."

He slid back into the poem

While I do sing, any food, any feeding, drink or clothing: Come fair maid, be not afraid Poor Tom will injure nothing.

He cackled, as if he was making some cosmic joke.

Camilla tapped her umbrella to the ground, very close to Tom.

Lily snatched it out of her hands. "Stop *that*, I think he'll talk to us".

Camilla froze. Then the zombie heard the woman utter a muffled "*fine.* You've found yourself an advocate Tom. Mind your manners, and I'll leave you to this -" she gestured to people shambling out of the El, the addicts around the campfire ."This *empire* of yours."

"Yeah well - I'd rather say it to her, miss. She treated poor Tom alright."

She scowled. "Fine. Please, do us the honors, Lily. I would like to get out of here."

The girl addressed Tom. "Sir"

"It's Tom, mum. I'm no one's sir."

"Ok, Tom. I was doing some research in this area - I work a lot with death certificates with the coroner's office, see, and I think people are dying here."

Tom chuckled again.

"I mean *more* than they already are." Lily added hurriedly. I think someone is targeting the homeless here. The rate of ODs has just been way too high for the past few months. Someone might be lacing it with nasty shit, or even just grabbing them and injecting directly.

Were they talking about *Chrissie?*

"...and the police aren't listening to me. So, do you think you can help us? Camilla apparently thinks so."

Tom laughed. "Not I poppet, but that fellow behind the pillar over there? Yeah, the one right by the fire. He'd know."

The zombie's veins turned to ice. He took off.

And although he couldn't see it, so did the two women, leaving Tom to continue his merry hum.

Truth be told, the Zombie would have been able to outrun a chubby teenage girl and a middle aged woman in heels once upon a time. Even after he got on the sauce, even after hunger started eating away at his muscles, he should have been able to clear a block or two, and jump a few fences. Given the right incentive of course.

And creepy cat eyed women aside, there were generally plenty of good incentives to run in Kensington.

But ever since tranq hit the scene, the sores on his legs had gotten worse and worse. It had taken a golf sized chunk out of his calves. When he'd finally taken it to a nearby walk-in clinic, they had called it necrosis, and showed him how to carefully wrap and disinfect the wound himself.

Well, good luck with that on the avenue.

Point was, it wasn't going to get him very far, and he hadn't even made it a block before it collapsed on him, sending him careening into traffic.

Except something grabbed him back.

He turned back. It was that younger girl, Lily.

If running doesn't work, sometimes playing dumb does. He tried to brush her off, making for the sidewalk. The girl didn't let go though.

"Come on man, I don't need narcan, I don't need an ambulance, and I don't need a "crisis vehicle." Just leave me alone."

The girl, mindlessly trying to hold on, then tripped on the curb. They both sprawled on the ground. The Zombie, taking deep breaths, heard some slower steps clipping the concrete in the distance, and soon enough saw a nice pair of boots come into view by his head.. "Lily, you dropped my umbrella," Camilla announced boredly

The umbrella in question nudged him. “Ah, good catch. Now, *get up,* both of you.”

They both shambled to their feet.

“Now, my esteemed colleague asked you for help, I believe.”

The Zombie blinked. Shit was getting *weird.*

“You want help? You left Jerry back on Allegheny, he can hook you up. $20 per gram. I’m not holding.”

Camilla rolled her eyes. From the pocket of her coat she pulled a thin wallet, and from it she pulled two crisp $20s. She folded them up with a practiced finger and passed it to him.

“That is for you, not me. Before this one” she nods at Lily “tries to buy you coffee or something. Think about using it to help yourself. As for us, all you need to do to help us…is to tell us about Chrissie.”

—

Chrissie had been tried and pronounced an “ok sort” by the residents of Huntingdon St - the daughter of an old timer, more comfortable on the streets then off them, appropriately apologetic when she sat on someones stoop. They were so comfortable with her, that they would occasionally slip her a $5 to clean up the block, where trash, needles, and human shit would pollute the sidewalk. She’d even assist when larger lumps of trash emerged - human corpses, or ones soon to be one. She carried narcan, she called 911, she often even sat with them while somebody came to collect them.

She offered this service for free.

Her other services were more expensive, but not by much. Gentrifying Kensingon was full of construction workers with cash to spend, along with other

residents less willing to admit partaking. She wasn't pretty, and she was on the skinny side, but she was willing and kind, and that made her popular.

If there was one negative thing to be said about Chrissie (other than her addiction to heroin, a common struggle in Zombieland), it was her poor taste in men. When women walked the streets, they rarely stood alone. Often banded together for safety, sharing lists of "DO NOT SERVE" clients - ones who had sped off without payings, ones who had stole, ones who assaulted, ones who had raped, and even, on the rare occasion, the faces of those who were willing to take even more than that.

It had only been a few years since the Kensington Strangler roamed, after all, with boogie man tales told of the decapitated rape victim of Hazzard St still whispered. The streets had never been empty than those harrowing months, although the Zombie had heard more than one old timer wish they had the man on speed dial, to clean things up even more.

It was no wonder that so many like Chrissie took up with men, but man, she really knew how to pick them. The first had pimped her out at 16, the second beat her, the third beat her face, so that she couldn't sell for a week. She then hooked up with one who merely verbally abused her, and their screaming matches on the steps of the El had caused them to be removed multiple times. But he got locked up one day, and Chrissie had taken up with him.

The Zombie didn't want anything with her - he was a loner himself, better that way. But he didn't stop her from following him around, and they learned to crochet together at House of Hope. And, when a john had attacked her and stole their stash, well, The Zombie had ran his bicycle down and kicked him in the face. Hard. They didn't talk much.

The last time the Zombie saw her had been at the House of Hope when they were learning wound care. Tranq had made its way on the streets, and once the people only metaphorically referred to as zombies became real ones, with open rotting wounds, bounding with maggots and bloat flies, limbs falling off and

crippling them. The guy who manned the wheelchair gig on Frankford had lost a foot that way, causing him to really need the chair for the first time in his life. And with the wounds came the pain, and with the pain came more tranq.

With Chrissie the end came more mercifully. She was found dead on the steps of an abandonned carpet factory. Now, she had been resurrected by Narcan dozens of time by that point, sometimes even by the Zombie himself. This time there was no one there to share.

Chrissie's memorial service was a small affair, which made it infinitely larger than what the normal addict got. The Zombie had gotten word out to the the few dozen people she had saved that were still alive, got the House of Hope to give them some paint, and on a baren bit of highway wall wrote a tribute "We Love You Chrissie. You are Missed." The Zombie made some peace with it and moved on.

The problem started when he started seeing Chrissie again.

Things had gotten bad on the avenue again. The camp in the old rail yard (featured once upon in the great epic, Rocky) had been closed. Streets piled up with rotten tents, boxes, sleeping bags, and blankets. Tired of it all, the neighbor that let the Zombie sleep in his alcove during the night evicted him.

More people were dying now. ODs, gunshots, stabbings. More bodies for the city's crematoria. The Zombie moved street to street, avoiding it all he could.

But out of the corner of his eyes, nearly every week, he thought he would spot Chrissie.

The three of them sat in a shitty McDonalds on Aramingo, the Zombie wolfing down a big mac with fries and coffee, Lily too sick to drink her milkshake, and Camilla with a notebook and fountain pen, blandly scrawling in it now and then.

When the Zombie paused, she waited to see if he was finished, and nudged Lily. Lily just looked down at her milkshake.

She sighed. “Lily, the list?”

Lily stood, pulled a list that had been crumpled in her hoodie pocket, and wordlessly left for the restroom.

Camilla turned back to the Zombie. “I think she needs a moment. The girl has seen her share of death, but not so much of it.”

The Zombie nodded.

“I, however, have seen much more. I think you know this.”

Pausing, the Zombie nodded again. “You’re like Tom, aren’t you.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“Does she know that?”

“Oh a bit, but I don’t think the reality has set in yet. Now,” in a more businesslike tone, unrumpling the paper Lily left behind, Camilla began to read. “I have some names for you. Some descriptions and photos. Tell me if you know them.”

“Chad Heaven.”

He shook his head.

“White guy, mid 20s, arrived wearing a Nike baseball cap. Distinguishing marks, a spider web tattoo and an appendectomy scar. Also pock marked with needles, but I don’t think that needs to be said.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m not family.”

She continued. “Ryan Phelps. 30 years old. Ex computer programmer. His mouth was too big, big ears. Extensive dental work.”

“No. You get this from the coroner’s office?”

She ignored that.

“Look, I don’t know full names. Maybe first names. Stick to that and descriptions, maybe if you know their story.”

“Samantha. Preferred Sam, apparently. 23 years old. Wore heavy eyeliner, had a butterfly tattoo.”

“I didn’t know her, but I saw a missing flyer with her face on it a few times.”

It continued like this for a while. The Zombie only recognized two names.

“Josué Hidalgo. 43. His family fought back against the OD designation, apparently he had kicked a cocaine habit down a Mexico and wouldn’t go near it. Local construction worker.”

The man had a white scar above his eye.

“Oh, he’s on the “Don’t Serve” list.” He found it useful to avoid these people too.

Another name struck a more visceral response

“Jack Marotta.”

She handed him a photo. It was a headshot from an autospy, of a shaved, skinhead looking guy. But.

There was something about him. He had a cleft chin.

“That was one of Chrissie’s guys. Slapped her around a bit until he found another girl. Good riddance,” he spat.

Camilla looked at him thinly. “There we go.”

“Is Chrissie alive?”

“Do you really want an answer to that?”

The Zombie stopped. Camilla was had a poker face and her business-like mien had never dropped during the whole interview. And in a way, this did not change.

But the chill running up his spine, which had started when he first saw the woman for the first time somehow became colder. It curlicued up his neck andd became lodged in the nape of his school. He felt a flash of pain in his head.

Brain freeze, his inner thoughts helpfully supplied, looking down at his milkshake. It was almost gone Then the sensation began to numb. His other senses soon followed.

“I guess not. Look, I got to get out of here. I hate how the assholes at the registers eye me.”

“Is there a place Chrissie would go? Somewhere she could hide. Somewhere no one would bother her.”

“Check her old house. Old man died years ago, and no one ever bothered fixing it up. Kinda a flop house now.”

“And where is it?”

“Third on the left on Kensington and Tusculum, as you head northwest. I don’t know the number.”

“Thank you very much,” she murmured.

She slipped a one hundred dollar bill across the cheap plastic table towards him. It was five times the amount she had promised.

“Try not to use it all at once. Or don’t.”

———————

When Lily emerged from the bathroom, she found Camilla sitting primly at the table, scratching something in her notebook. She shook the pen. “Drat,” she hummed to herself. “Damn thing is out of ink.”

She turned to Lily. “Are you ok? I was worried about you, but I didn’t want to leave the gentleman. Stores can be so intolerant of his type.”

“Yeah, sorry. Between his smell and his story, I felt sick.”

“No worries, it happens to the best of us.”

“Did you get what you were looking for?”

Camilla smiled. “Yes I did.”

2020

Hunting becomes nearly impossible in Philadelphia as a pandemic goes forth. In fact, it's less impossible, more a feeding frenzy where no one can possibly be discovered feeding, so Camilla doesn't have her normal excuses. Sibylla works as a nurse in the health care system, Jeròni poses as a loving boyfriend that supports healthcare workers. Lily begins her first year of college and runs into difficulties choosing a major and making a transition to a very difficult field, and Camilla is going slowly insane from the pressures of family, keeping secrets from Lily, and the lack of stress relief from her job. Featuring a soliloquy from the Angel of Death.

There's a lady who lives in the telephone lines.

And she's good at what she does.

Sometimes - and it's always when you're stressed, at your wit's end, patience, mind, and body hanging on by a single strand of fraying gossamer - you make a phone call.

And she answers.

Most of the time, her voice is a pleasant melody. Something Mozart. Or Jazz. It speaks in thirty second tinned utterances, gasps out some canned platitude, and then begins again. You listen, heart pounding, eyes burning. You force yourself to calm. Then - a human pierces through.

The danger passes.

Sometimes her voice is absence. A dropped call. A message, a beep, then silence. You hang up. Small mercies. But ah. She knows you'll need to call again. And you will. You have to.

If you're very unlucky, it's her you hear. A voice, tin and nasal, or deep and brassy

But if you're very unlucky, *she* answers back, her voice one of a thousand accents. Muffled. Distant. Empathic.

Don't be fooled. That voice comes from a mouth, true enough. Red painted lips sound out every syllable, trill every tone, hum every verse.

But behind them is a maw.

And oh, it feeds.

She's very good at what she does.

"How do you kill such a thing?" Lily asked. She was sipping something cold, caffeinated and sweet from a Big Gulp cup. She couldn't be talked out of switching. Perspiration beaded from her hands.

Camilla raised an eyebrow. "You don't," she said at last. "The voice isn't hurting anyone. At least, no one that matters. Her corpses - when she leaves them, which is rare - aren't the purview of any law enforcement. At most a medical examiner might shrug. Unless."

She looked at Lily straight, eyes steel. "Is that a request?"

Germantown, 2021

Lily, working in college, volunteers in the high school she graduated from as a tutor. While working with a kid there, she sees the unmistakable signs of a vampire attack and starts doing an investigation herself. Turns out the kid is one of a small class that have become vampires because of the larger social systems that make being a kid in Philadelphia difficult. The teachers that go in to work with these kids are regularly "feeding" themselves to them, some handling it better than others. Lily turns it over to Camilla, who "handles" it by systematically murdering all the kids involved - some, a brother, sister, and cousin, are burned down in a house fire, others are victims of a mass shooting event, others die in a car accident. This causes a rift between the two characters, uneasily solved when Lily insists Camilla do more to solve the problem by using her vast financial resources. This leads to the first nonprofit, shadow funded by vampires. Lily is in charge of it, but there is now permanent distance between the two of them.