

## Biting Before Being Bit

The average person can swallow about two tablespoons of their own blood before they vomit. The iron-taste pooling in my mouth, accompanied by the old companion of rolling nausea, served to remind me of this fun little fact. The situation is different if a person just so happens to consume someone else's blood; their body is fine consuming other's, but disgusted by its own. How fitting.

Another sharp kick to the side recalled me to the present situation I was in. Getting my ass kicked in some dark alley, crimson spilling unwillingly from my lips. Again.

I raised my arms further in front of my face, knees tucked against my chest as I laid against the wet ground, asphalt digging into my skin. Three strangers surrounded me, kicking and beating, continuing their berating mantra:

"This is what you get for acting like a hero, you freak!"

"Look, he's crying!"

"Where's your white horse and armor, huh?"

"You should just kill yourself - save everyone that way."

The tears falling against my cheek felt red hot, or that's how I imagine they would if I felt anything right now. My body shook, not from fear, not from pain, not from the throat wrenching sobs, but from the frustration of being here once again. For having caused my own problems, and having to suffer the consequences. Why did I go this way? Why did I have to speak up and stop them from harassing that lady? I didn't have to save her, I can't even save myself. She didn't want my help. I can't do anything right -

You should know better, you have to look after yourself, *it* whispered.

It didn't so much as whisper, but I felt it's thoughts circling and intertwining with my own...again. I felt it crawling it's way through my skin, felt it itching it's way to come out. I felt it wanting, craving, protecting. Wanting to bite, to tear, to rend flesh from bone - in service of me. I repeated my name, my identity, to keep it at bay, to ground myself in reality: Rowan, Rowan, Rowan, My name is Rowan. I am here, I am fine, I said to it.

"C'mon, get up and fight, *hero*."

Shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I let it out?

You should. You have to protect yourself. Let *it* out to protect *you* - no!

No. What would happen? Could I come back? Do they deserve what will happen? Who am I to decide?

No, they're hurting *you*, you should stop them. Stand up for yourself.

They'll get hurt.

You've been hurt. They're breaking you.

Is it so bad to be broken? I don't want to decide. I don't want to know. *You're* overwhelming me. This is all too much. I don't want this. They don't deserve this. I don't deserve this - what are they to you, but also monsters?

Last time, I choked down this feeling. Settled myself to the broken bones and bruises for some sense of pride, that I was better than these people attacking me. But I'm fucking tired. Tired of being told what I am and who I should be and smiling when told and being walked all over, hurting for others benefit. I'm tired of being this person. Tired of me. I can't be a savior, a good person, a hero.

"You think helping people will make 'em love you?"

I don't need to be loved. The floodgates opened and I washed away. I let it consume me.

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I stood in my too small bathroom, under the blinking fluorescent light casting the off-white tile a sickly hue, washing the blood from my hands - not for the first time. First time it was a person's blood...I think. Hopefully. I can't remember. It doesn't matter. It does...will it be the last time? I don't want to think about that.

I looked in the mirror, staring at the unfamiliar person who looked back. The reflection had sunken eyes, a busted lip, and a bloody nose. I thought he looked tired. The person in the mirror smiled, not reaching his eyes, splitting the line across his lips further, my lips. He looked like me but he didn't look like me; I didn't - don't - want to accept him as me. He held the weak smile for a while, staring back, once shining eyes dulled like burnt out charcoal. He looked too young for his age and too old for his age. His face didn't match his body, his body didn't match him. I thought he deserved better.

I spat into the sink, watching the dark red swirl like ink in water. At least I didn't lose any teeth this time; bone takes forever to mend, to grow back. Bones - right. I lifted my shirt up, shoulders aching as I tossed it to the ground. I stared at the person in the mirror again, not wanting to look, but needing to.

I, he had bruised skin, as always. No open wounds besides minor scrapes on his elbows. I watched as he pressed my fingers against the seventh and eighth ribs; they moved slightly but not abnormally, with minimal pain all things considered. They were possibly fractured, but they'd heal quickly enough to not warrant anything special. I had a hard enough time finding a doctor who would keep quiet about me, either way. Twisting to look at the mirror person's back showed

deeper bruises cast in rigid odd shapes over a prominent spine and ribs. He should eat more. The bruises peaking out on his right scapula formed a dark purple nebulous cloud, broken up by the light white-pink of scar tissue, stars in a galaxy. It was the only scar I had still. The bite that never fully heals. The infectious origin site of *it*. I turned back around, the stranger in the mirror copying.

I made the mistake of acknowledging my actual self; recognizing that it was me who was in the mirror and not some other entity. I couldn't stop fast enough to not notice the wispy patches of hair I considered a beard. Or the too-wide hips. The crooked teeth, the short slouching stature, and the frizzy hair that completed me. My gaze darted over the acne and shallow curve of my chest. The iron-taste resurfaced - nausea again. I fought the urge to punch the mirror, to scream. But I couldn't afford a replacement. I took a deep breath, turning into a deeper sigh, as I retrieved my shirt.

I looked one last time in the mirror at the fool, the freak, who stared back. I felt the familiar itch of it underneath, reacting to an unseen assailant. It was reacting to whatever was causing me to be upset and to make my heart race. To whatever was making me feel like I was shoved in a dark box, walls closing in an already claustrophobic space. But the assailant was seen, staring in the mirror.

I tried to calm myself, and eased the beast back into its cage. It was always there, trying to help me. Everyone tried to help me, but no one could - no, no one wanted to. Well *it* could, it wants to - it did today. It saved me from those men. Protected me from their beating, from their monstrosity unlike...Unlike my family did. They never tried to stop *her*. They didn't care about what happened to me. No one ever did anything to try and stop me from leaving and her from -  
Shit! A ringing sound came from the next room over. Work...

I was late again. I decided to skip my shift instead of being late. They'd be fine without me. Quitting, being fired, what's the difference at this point. I could get money elsewhere. I had options. I shouldn't have opted for the bus. I should have just layed in bed and let the day pass. I could have let my wounds heal. It was winter, the days were shorter either way, the day had almost passed and I could have gone to sleep. No, tried to sleep. Why did I decide to ride the bus? I could have just walked and everything would have been fine. I could have turned around and been back at my apartment by now. Now I'm stuck with everyone here. I feel like everyone's staring at me. They are. They know. They know what *you* did, what you are, they know

everything. They know about the They hate you. They're disgusted by you. You should jump out. You should claw yourself free. You should tear, rip, bite. Consume. You are Ro - I am Rowan.

I need to be careful. It's getting harder to differentiate my thoughts. It was getting smarter, more convincing. Harder to ignore. But I'm tired. I'm so fucking tired. I'm starting to think everything is easier if I just let it decide for me. If I just let it control me...Are these my own thoughts?

The bus lurched, swaying multiple passengers and myself against the metal poles and threaded hand holds. I nearly fell, having tripped over my own feet - but I managed to catch myself from fully faceplanting. I looked up and around, feeling my face burn with the deep heat of shame.

There was a girl, with straw colored hair and a nose ring, who quickly turned her face away. She had seen. It's fine, multiple people had tripped, had lost their grip, had swayed with the bus. It's fine. It's normal. I'm okay. It'll be fine, nothing happened. She doesn't know. Get me out of here. I am Rowan.

I tried breathing slowly, taking extra care to keep looking down, to pass time counting the rows of black rubber that created the center aisle floor.

1, 2, 3...

She's looking again. She's not, shut up.

...36, 37, 38...

I had to check.

I looked up again, trying to look as casual as I could, to survey the passengers in the bus. Slowly I passed over each one: some busy on their phones, or with a paper, and some day-dreaming out the window - none looking towards me. A slight movement caught my eye. She was staring again. As I turned my head to watch her, she looked away. I continued to look, feeling my stare harden to an accusatory glare.

She was pretty, with her hair pulled in a loose ponytail, headphones acting as a headband to keep the flyaway baby hairs away from her face. She was blonde, but her hair turned dramatically to a dull brown at the roots. Her nose was slightly red from the cold, and her eyeliner was drawn on too thick. You could see the lines and cracks from wearing it all day, could see the eyebags she was trying to hide. Her nail polish was chipped and cracking away from bitten nails. The foot that was bouncing in the air over her crossed legs had untied shoelaces, jumping rapidly as she fidgeted in her seat. She had so many flaws. Flaws that made her human. Flaws that made her prettier. I felt my heartbeat accelerate for a beat, unwillingly.

She looked back again, slowly at first, before catching my eye. The corners of her eyes crinkled before she smiled, biting her lip, and her face flushed as she looked away again.

My heart skipped again. She knows what you are.

She knows everything. You're an idiot. She doesn't know. She's being nice. Quit staring back, you're being creepy. If she did know she wouldn't be smiling. She would hate you. Fear you. You can't trust her. She'd turn on you. She'd be mean, and cruel. She knows about the men in the alley. The bodies. She knows that you're unwanted from your family. She knows you're a freak with a monster inside you. You can't trust her. I don't trust her. I can't trust her. I can't trust me. I can only trust you. You know she might not be nice. You know if she'll turn me over to authorities. To scientists to experiment on me. You know she could tell my family where I am. You know everything, and you're always right. You are Rowan. I am Rowan.

At the next stop, I got off the bus.

Along the walk to the apartment, I kept watching behind my shoulder. I didn't see her get off my stop, but you never know. I took a wide berth of my usual route. I don't know if those men's bodies were still there, and I wasn't keen on finding out. Along this new path through the city, I passed by a store with a wall of televisions playing the local news. Reports of an animal attack, three victims. The reporter commented on the unlikelihood of a bear being here - maybe it was a rabid dog, a pet turned feral. The television theorized a wolf, or hungry coyote. Not a serial killer, but a possibility the police were actively and carefully pursuing, the reporter reassured. Either way, it was done by a ubiquitous villain, I thought. Something that viewers would fictionalize and exaggerate in warnings for loved-ones to be careful where they are walking. Nightmarish monsters built from worry out of love. How fitting.

I felt the familiar itch across my neck, a reminder of police searching for their villain. I rushed past the screens, nearly sprinting to get to the safety of my home.

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The outside of the apartment building looked alright for downtown. The brick tried to pass it off as housing industrial chic loft units, with unique furnishings and 1940's charm - but it was total bullshit. The inside's caked makeup was layers and layers of peeling white paint from the multitudes of landlords 'renovating' the place. The landlords were as crusty as the rust along each and every appliance and exposed plumbing. The residents were like the cockroaches: refusing to die and ever multiplying and evolving. The cockroaches were like the residents: waiting for the opportunity to shiv and rob you, taking refuge in your still warm corpse. The rats were pleasant enough though, they ignored you. Home, sweet, home.

As I walked up the rickety excuse for stairs - the elevator was nothing more than a bucket and string I believe - I was met with my punishment for skipping work. A woman was standing in front of my apartment door, looking at a sheet of paper and checking the number on my door. She was wearing a too heavy winter coat and a gigantic magenta knitted scarf that seemed to be trying to swallow her up as she stood silent. From here I could tell the scarf was old, but it seemed well loved due to - oh no. I know that scarf. The ginger hair poking out. Lydia, my half sister. Great.

All the memories I had with her came resurfacing back. The good ones, of us as children playing pretend with her mothering a toy doll while I was busy digging holes in the yard as the family dog. And others, of her with tear stained cheeks and a scraped knee, with me also crying while trying to place a bandage without looking at the wound. The bad memories came back as well. I'll never forget how silent she was, her emotionless face, as my mother threw my luggage out the door and how she just stood there. Talkative, abrasive, loud-moued Lydia - standing quiet. She didn't say anything, she didn't defend me. All those times in school, with bullies, she was always there to back me up and save me. She was always the one to hug me when I needed it, even if I didn't want it. But that day? The day I needed her? She didn't do anything to help. And now she's here?

I should move again. I thought about using the fire escape outside, but of course it was broken. Of course she would be standing in front of *my* door, and not possibly the entrance of the building. Of course this is happening. Of course. You need to know why she's here. What could she possibly want? How did she find me? You need to know so others don't follow. Maybe I shouldn't ask. I could just pretend not to see her, try to not talk to her. She can't be here with good intentions. Let's just see what happens. I can always shut her out.

I walked across the wooden landing, making sure to take loud steps to get Lydia's attention in my approach. She didn't notice. She was in motion to knock against the door when I was in conversation distance from her. I felt a little awkward; this wasn't going to plan. I stepped closer, putting my hand against the doorknob.

"Shit!"

Okay, that made me smile.

"Wh - Rowan! I -"

Lydia stood stiffly, moving her arms awkwardly in the air, a silent question of if she could hug me or not.

I didn't move. I didn't say anything. She doesn't deserve any kindness, not after how much time has passed, it said. I agreed.

She settled on not hugging, calming her awkward failing arms in front of her and picking at her fingernails instead. "Hey..."

"What do you want?"

"It's been awhile..."

I shook my head, raising an eyebrow, trying to get her to say more without me actually having to have a conversation. It was better this way.

"You look different."

"Thanks." I said, with not a shred of warmth in my tone.

She tucked her hair behind her ear, looking at the ground.

What are you trying to find words for? Why are you pretending we're still friends? Just spit it out. Just go inside, it said.

I raised my eyebrows, my mouth forming one of those awkward not really smiles as I inserted my key in the door, shoving harshly as these doors were prone to sticking. The door shrieked across the floor as I slid past Lydia, giving a weak wave of my hand as I began to close the door in her face.

"Hey! Wait!" Lydia reached out, nearly shoving herself in the doorframe.

I shook my head, "What?"

"You're just gonna shove past me? No, 'oh how'd you find me, what are you doing here?' 'No, you look nice too Lydia, thanks for coming to see me - oh won't you come in Lydia -'"

No, it said.

"Nope." I said, popping the 'p' to really emphasize that I didn't want anything to do with her. I tried to shut the door again.

She huffed, putting her foot in the way, and glared back in return, "You're being a dick."

"And?" I couldn't tell if I smirked or it did at my brazen behavior.

She made a nasty face at me, "And!? And, I came here to talk to you! Let me in. I want you to actually try and hear me, okay? I think you owe me that much at least."

I rolled my eyes as far back in my head as I could, but I didn't slam the door. It didn't say anything. I'll give her a shot, I guess. I'll let her get some closure. She doesn't seem to be a threat...yet. I owed her the benefit of the doubt at least.

Lydia moved her head forward, a question on her face asking again if she was allowed in. I shook my head slightly, waiting for her to start speaking. Lydia rolled her eyes, moving her

scarf around so she could speak more freely. She stood taller, like she was preparing herself to say something major.

"Your - " She sighed in a frustrated tone, folding her hands in front of herself. "Okay. So. Your mom's dying. She wants you to come talk to her."

That made me freeze, my face falling from its impersonal expression. She's dying? I couldn't tell if I felt excitement or disgust. Fear? No. Relief?...Possibly.

"Okaaaay...is that it?"

"Wha - whatdoyoumeanisthat ! - " Lydia took a breath, placing a hand against her chest that eventually turned into a slight fist in the air. "Okay - Rowan, sweetie -" She moved her fist with each word, taking a moment to look in the air as she thought for a moment. I smiled, she really hasn't changed over the years. But, she bit back whatever she was going to originally say, waving her hand at imaginary floating words. Maybe she has changed, a little. She took a breath, calming herself before continuing. "Anyways. Okay. Sooo...?"

"Soo...?"

"Are you coming back to talk to her...?" She continued to talk with her hands.

"Nope."

"What, why not?!"

"There's nothing for me there."

"Rowan - come on. She's *dying*... She's changed, they've all changed, we've changed. It'll be fine. Listen, you can try and talk to everyone again - or at least let your mom make amends!" Lydia shook her head. She's floundering for more false words to convince you, it said.

"Look, it's better now, it's been years since you've been back - so much has changed. I've gotten my master's degree, Jordan's engaged, Mark's eight now - he wants to see you. I mean Joanna is gay for fuck's sake! It's - Things have changed. Dad's moved in with my mom, your mom is - was - in rehab. People don't care about anything anymore - I mean they care for each other but - listen. No one is going to kick you out again. Everything will be okay, we can try and be a family, be normal. Well, our normal."

Lydia's words washed over me. Some of them were effective, but how many of them could I believe? Jordan, Mark, Joanna. They've all changed. Mom is dying. Dad is, well he's Dad. I mean Lydia seems different. Maybe it's all different. But everything might all be surface level. But what if it's true? I could return home, I could be a family. I wouldn't have to struggle for money on my own, wouldn't have to live in this shit-hole apartment. I would finally be able to live

my life the way I wanted to. You should be careful. You can't believe her words, you don't deserve to be in that situation again, it whispered.

"I think I'm good. Bye." In a quick movement, I kicked Lydia's foot from the frame, shutting and locking the door in another swift motion. I spun around, leaning against the door, and I felt Lydia knock against the door, yelling something. After about thirty seconds, she calmed, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. A sharp pain rang through my head, a dull knife through my brain.

What of your dad? He could have become the new *her*. You remember how her hands felt. How long your sleeves had to be in summer. What of the cold shoulders you received when she threw you out? Or the looks of pity you received from when it attacked you? The way no one treated you the same because you were different. Even Lydia, she left you to fend for yourself on that day. The day it became just you and me.

I couldn't go back there, there's too many old memories, old wounds waiting to be reopened. And she might just be saying this to get me back in the same room with *that* woman. *She* doesn't deserve my forgiveness after all that she put me through. All the hate that you - that we've - become of her. The damage that her words have caused us - we still remember how hurt she looked, how disappointed she was in every waking moment of our life, of how powerless we felt as she called us horrible names.

Remember how you couldn't fight back, it said, so you decided to just play nice and be a young man, and be a polite son, and smile and say yes ma'am, I love you mother, I won't do that again mother, please stop hurting me mother.

The itching sensation rolled across my arms, I felt sharp teeth bite into the sides of my tongue. I remembered the bodies in the alley. You can protect yourself, but not without collateral damage. I shouldn't risk it. Shouldn't risk *it*. I am Rowan.

Lydia continued to speak at me... at us, it reminded. The pain in my skull continued to grow.

"Rowan please, I'm trying to be your friend here. I didn't come out all this way just for you to slam the door in my face. Listen. I know you hurt, I know you've been through alot, and I know you're trying to be all fucking macho and not talk about it - but that's not healthy. I'm here to listen. I want you to feel like you have someone to lean on, okay? I know you're hurt because I didn't say anything - but I did! I tried to convince everyone to let you back in. I tried to make her take you back. But, I should've said something on that day, and I didn't and I'm sorry! I've thought it over and over so many times, and if I just would've said *something* maybe things would be

different but... I've tried to reach you before, and...They all tried to forget what happened, they thought that it was best for you to stay away from her. Even Dad thought so, but that didn't make it any easier to not have you in our lives. I thought and worried about you everyday. And I can't make up for the lost time, but I want to change that. I'm trying - can't you at least try and give me a chance...? I want to understand, and I want to support you. Dad's always been supportive of you and everything, and I know it's taken a while for the rest of them to change but we have - I swear - please come home. We want to be a family again...And as shitty as it is, we all know who your mom was and all that bullshit - and like, I'm fine with you not seeing her okay - that's fine, I don't care - but...like she's gonna be gone soon, and she wants you to know she understands and accepts you. That she loves you, and wants you to be safe. And she's gonna be out of the picture soon...I don't know, maybe that'll be better for you - for everyone...I don't really trust her and you shouldn't have to either, but...I'm in your corner at least, okay?"

She is lying. I know she's lying. It says she's lying to us. I slide further down the door, squeezing my hands into tight balls, nails digging deep into the skin of my palms, trying to fight the residual echo of the beast and it's thoughts.

"Or - fine - don't talk to her - don't come home...Just don't disappear. No one deserves to be alone, and you have been, and I'm sorry we did that. I'm sorry that we hurt you. I'm sorry that you haven't had a friend, I'm sorry for everything. You deserve love, you deserve to be cared for. I'll leave you alone right now, but I'm not leaving your life again. I want to help you, okay? I'll catch up with you later..?" The shadow of her feet could be seen by the floor, as she waited for some reply back.

She'll go back home, she'll tell everyone where you are. They'll know. They'll come for you. They'll try and take you away, put you behind locked bars and experiment on you. They'll be disgusted by you. They'll hate and pity you. They'll betray you. It's better this way, you're better alone. I can care for me, I am my only friend, I won't betray me, I love me. I need to do something.

Send her away, it says.

I can't just ignore her, I say.

You'll be okay, it says.

I trust you, I say.

It will protect me, it says.

Let me in, I say - no - it says. It said that. I'm so tired.

Rest your eyes, let me in. I'm the only one who loves you. This is for you. For your protection.

...Okay.

It slowly opens the door again.

I slowly open the door again.

I am Rowan. It is Rowan.

Lydia smiled, a strange happy smile with tears in her eyes, a look of relief on her face. She took a step forward, continuing to speak, "You deserve a friend, and someone to look out for you - and if you don't want to be friends with me, I can accept that - but I'm not gonna stop looking out for you, and trying to do what's best for you."

She doesn't know what's best for me, it says.

I know what's best for you, I say. You're what's best for me. You, it. I, me. Us, we. We.

We are Rowan.

We returned her happy smile, tears in our eyes. We raise our arms slightly in a sign of a hug. She fully grinned, eye's sparkling with hope and acceptance. She returned our hug, squeezing hard against our shoulders, "I love you."

Lies. It's the only thing that loves me. It knows what is best for me. It's my only friend. It's what I should have let control me from that night in the woods. It knows what best to do here. It's the only one I can lean on. It's the only thing I can trust. I let it consume me.

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We stood in our too small bathroom, under the blinking fluorescent light casting the off-white tile a sickly hue, washing the blood from our hands, not for the first time. We looked at the stranger in the mirror, eyes lifting from a scarf stained by that girl's blood. The stranger in the mirror grinned. It felt safe and loved, happy because of the nightmare protecting it. It felt at ease with the only thing that could ever understand it, the only thing that could only ever do what's best for it. The one being that understood what people's intentions were. The only one that understood the anger of things not going it's way. It was the only one who saw and understood and loved it for what it was. The only one to not have a preconception about it, the only one not judging before it was known and listened to. The only one to never hurt it, and it made sure it wouldn't have to hurt further. It was the beast and the beast was it. It was Rowan, and Rowan was it. We are safe and loved because of it.