



a bit of a tease

MONSTER SKIN
A SPOOKY BONSAI MYSTERY
MELANCTON HAWKS

LAST NIGHT ON EARTH 

PRELUDE

Electric Jesus Christ crucified by the Manhattan skyline. Electric Jesus Christ in S&M bliss, bleeding blue neon into the oceanic, singular cloud. Electric Jesus Christ miniaturized and multiplied in the dirty water filled fissures of downtown sidewalks absolving skinny, shivering dogs and dazed winos. Electric Jesus Christ buzzing a drone for the 24-hour church, for the Casio and for the drum machine. “He hath risen.” Electric Jesus with his naked abs, his well endowed loin cloth, his pulsing, thorny heart melting the plexi of a graff covered Times box. October 25, 2005. Rosa Parks is dead. American casualties in Iraq up to 2000. Too many head beatings in city jails. Pakistani Sterilization Scare. Cheney linked to Plame fingering. Virginal Arctic Wildlife Preserve opened for oil exploration. Shot of mud choked trumpet dredged up in New Orleans. Cartoon of Bush dressing as Utkel for Halloween, “Did I do that?” Number one box-office hit: the remake of *The Fog*. Yesterday’s news. Night crossed the arbitrary barrier into early morning. Electric Jesus Christ dazzled, stained the asphalt. Broken beer bottles glittered in the street like gems.

The secret is it’s all gems. Filth is an illusion. Praise the neon savior. We are his incandescent sheep.

It rained all morning and the windows were still slick. A miserable sloppy fuck of a night. Spooky Bonsai should have stayed home. All because she didn’t have Shoes. Of course she had *shoes*. Had a closet full. Rubbermaid boxes thereof. But Spooky didn’t have *the* Shoes and

without *the Shoes*, she might as well have been fucking barefoot.

Recently, she'd liberated the most incredible '50s Dior from its Upper West Side prison (See *Spooky Bonsai in Wasp's Nest*). Pale blue lace grew vine-like around the neck and shoulders becoming sheer silk from clavicle to cleavage and soaked into an embroidered taffeta bodice that exploded into a mid-thigh feathered petal skirt.

Yum.

Spooky choked out a cocker spaniel and spent five hours in a heating duct to get the gorgeous thing. It was perfect, but without the Shoes it was like ice cream without a cone. What was she supposed to do? Eat it out of a goddamn *bowl*?

Electric Jesus slid across the body of Gilbert's dad's red '89 Honda Prelude. Spooky took a long, last pull of her Duck. She liked the halo around the cherry in the mist, liked the way her Lady C's Mystic Green lipgloss was a signature on every butt. The final lung of smoke squeezed through the gap between her front teeth and spiraled up to Christ. A puddle of neon caught the flicked butt. Spooky yanked down the cat-eared hood of her matte-black Moun Tech Jacket and got in the car.

Gilbert pulled off the shoulder and cruised down Elizabeth. Sodium vapor lights yellowed his brown skin. Chinese storefront signs were neon cryptograms, hypnotically flickering sinister suggestions. Moist black plastic trash bags looked like used up sex objects. "Happy Birthday," he said.

Spooky Bonsai dropped the seat back horizontal. "You don't get to say that." She squeezed her eyes shut. "My birthday isn't until tomorrow. It's still yesterday."

"You're chirpy."

"My everything is tired," she said and pulled off the tight black gloves. "Especially my arms. Ever crawl 30 stories up the outside of a building?"

"Can't say for certain that I have."

"The rain made it harder. Suction cups didn't have as much stick. Every five feet I climbed I slipped a foot. Are you taking the tunnel?"

"I'm taking the bridge."

“It felt like you were heading for the tunnel. I was getting subterranean vibes.” Headlights and traffic lights were trapped in Gilbert’s thick glasses.

“I watched a nature documentary on the humble mole while waiting to come and pick you up. Maybe that’s it.”

“Tell me of the mole, Bertie.”

“He is proof that there is no God.”

Spooky righted herself. The mouth of the Manhattan Bridge. Back to Brooklyn from whence she came.

“How long has it been?”

“Since I’ve been home?” Her voice was warn thin. Strangled by razor wire. “Three weeks.” Three weeks of flopping in the Bowery next door to CBGB’s. Living in a cloud of nostalgia for a time that had never belonged to her. Didn’t matter. Spooky was a thief. Her touch transformed foreign objects and memories alike into possessions. “Usually after a mission I feel like I’ve set the town on fire. This car ride is supposed to be the finale to a trapeze act. I’ve just done 20 screaming backflips and you catch me by the ankles right before I drop into the shark tank. Those skyscrapers should be fleshy towers quivering in a post orgasmic droop. Now I just want to sleep in a proper bed.”

“You’re an old hag.”

“Sixteen,” she said. “It sounds terrible.”

“You were looking forward to it.”

“I’m looking forward to getting the fuck out of here. Sixteen is a reminder I’ve got two more years of shit to wade through before I can gallop.”

“Oh yeah, Spook, I keep forgetting you’re shooting for valedictorian.”

“Eat me. I swore to Paul I’d get my 5th Degree Black Belt. Then I’ll be ready.”

Gilbert said: “Nebraskan cultural revolution?” Spooky nodded. “No L.A., Milan, Vladivostok?”

“It has to be someplace containable. Docile. I’ve told you. You’ll in-

vent a few machines that eliminate the labor of corn huskin and cattle rustlin, endear yourself in the hearts and minds of the townsfolk and get elected mayor. Meanwhile, I run an organized crime syndicate that pits husband against wife, cat against dog.”

“Chaos buckles the flatlands.”

“They turn to us for order. We enforce a strict dress code of all the hottest shit. Mandatory reading lists and record listening parties. Installations by major artists are commissioned. We’ll build a radio tower to broadcast our awesomeness, but no visitors will be permitted.”

“Freeway signs removed. Off-ramps paved over. We’ll bribe cartographers to remove us from the atlas.”

“Then one day we kidnap Annie Leibovitz, push her out of the van right in the middle of Main Street. Instead of opening up to tourists, for a considerable fee, the finest specimens of our citizenry will be dispatched to cities and towns all over the world as ambassadors of cool.”

“Culture as franchise.”

She slid open the ‘Lude’s moonroof but there was no moon, only an interminable cloud stained nicotine yellow by a billion light bulbs. Icebergs melt and we torch the sky. Night must be overcome. Darkness has no consideration for profit margins.

Micro-sleep was tugging at her with each long blink. Spooky Bonsai flipped down the sun visor and used the vanity mirror to apply another coat of Lady C’s Mystic Green. The cold wind from the climb had twisted her hair with damp fingers. Black bangs bleached to blue dripped over brown eyes big as haunted vowels, rimmed with black liner, elongated and curved up at each corner like Cleopatra. Gradations of green shadow filled the space between lash and unbearably bushy brows.

She looked better than she felt. Much. She felt anesthetized. Worse.

Boring.

“Did you use the EMP gun?”

“Tore that ADT system a new asshole.”

“And how was...” Gilbert licked his big, geeky lips. “...Ms. Honey DuBois?”

“Easy tiger.”

“I’m in love.”

“All you’ve seen of her was a photo in the DMV database.”

“Shows what you know, Spook. I’ve had hours with nothing better to do than learn about moles and cyberstalk Honey DuBois. She’s a model. I found tons of...Tasteful Photographs,” said Bertie, over pronouncing the words as his face twisted into what was obviously a jerk-off flashback. “I can promise you, Spooky Bonsai, I love this woman.”

“We are too young to be trusting any of our emotions, *especially* the whole ‘love’ thing. I’ve got enough adolescent hormones screaming in my body to fill a jacuzzi. How in hell am I supposed to know which ectoplasmic vibrations to take seriously and which are leftovers from the days when a woman my age was expected to have a baby hanging from each tit?”

“She’s a redhead, Spooky.”

“You’re telling me,” Spooky said, remembering.

“I’m a sucker for a redhead. High cheekbones do it for me, too. The red hair and the high, angular cheekbones. She’s a woman of great contrasts, Ms. DuBois. Formless in her archetypical womanhood and yet incredibly well defined. Green eyes. Five foot seven. Date of Birth: April 3rd, 1977. Aries. Year of the snake.”

“All I’m saying is the reason your little heart flutters so upon seeing her Tasteful Photographs is because it is pumping blood into your ding-dong.”

They got off the bridge. The reality of being close to home set in and the tether that prevented Spooky’s consciousness from completely dis-inheriting her body snapped tight. For the first time since she drifted out of Honey DuBois’s pad encased in her own personal cloud, she touched her backpack. Felt the bulk of her score.

“Come on, Spooky Bonsai. Spill it.”

HONEY

Spooky heard her before she saw her. After school, she went haunting in Park Slope. Dipping into boutiques and boosting bustiers to pair with a men's Paul Smith blazer (see *Spooky Bonsai in Mannequin Madness*) she'd stumbled upon. The combo would be smashing. Her headphones were jacked into a powerful directional mic sewn into her backpack. A sort of sixth sense for nosey clerks. The amplified sound of 7th Street was a pillow of white noise. Engines growling, tires slopping across the damp street, a thousand conversations punctuated by occasional laughter splattering and refracting against the brick walled canyon, crunchy footsteps in polyrhythm; Spooky barely heard it. It was a blank canvas for Honey.

There is a sturdiness to expensive footwear. A confidence that is infused from the designer into the wood, the leather, and the metal. If the creation retains its purity over the impossible voyage from vision to materiality, this confidence is soaked up through the sole and enters the body of the wearer.

Sharp

smart

staccato

stiletto.

It made her a little wet.

With every click, the heels were asserting more force on a dime-sized spot of pavement than the footstep of a rhino. But when Spooky looked

outside she saw nothing. No babe causing car accidents with her slow-mo hair. No legs carved out of pure sex. Just a frumpy formless thing in a headscarf and sunglasses. The Grey Gardens bit a couple decades too late. She looked slightly like a demented granny clutching the handle of a plain brown shopping bag with both hands. *But damn, was she clicking.* A sort of swing groove. Brushes on the snare, exclamation points on the high-hat, hips swinging like a grandfather clock under paisley curtain fabric. Her lips, succulent red gloss perfection, were slightly parted, straining to remain straight against a smile.

It was like witnessing a public orgasm.

Spooky flipped her cat hood, snapped down the built-in shades and followed the clicking frump onto the subway. They tunneled together under the East River. Cloaked safely in Moun-land, Spooky permitted herself to gawk. The hem of Honey's frock undulating with the rickety train gave Spooky flickering views of the footwear. She was mesmerized. She knew she knew those pumps but she didn't know-know. Black leather, possibly lambskin. Metal ribs ran along the back of the heel, the vamp. But there was a vital piece missing. It was killing her. Spooky tilted her head, straining to see, willing a freak tornado with every fiber of her body, and a miracle occurred: Honey got a wedgie. No telling if it was ass or cooch but all of a sudden *something* was getting flossed. Oh, it was all very subtle. She didn't do so much as *pick* at it. But she wriggled. She leaned from side to side. She uncrossed and recrossed her legs.

In one great wave of fabric, time swooned. For a perfect, pure moment the string fringe rippled and Spooky Bonsai saw beyond the ankle into the Africa of Honey's dress.

These were no goddamn pumps. They were boots. They were boots from the future.

Total Spooky Boner.

It is well known that evil genius Alexander McQueen used Tarot cards to create an algorithm charting the ebb and flow of fashion trends. Spooky had Gilbert program it. Here's an interesting tidbit: in 2012, the chart reaches a *zero point*, sort of like the Mayan calendar only during

Fall Fashion Week. After that it will be anarchy. Stripes with polka-dots, leg-warmers with mini-skirts. Totally bonkers.

More importantly it predicts that in 2009, thigh-high boots are going to be HUGE.

Who was this chick? Either she was someone very important or she was poaching on Spooky's turf.

Honey DuBois was wearing Alexander McQueen's ultrasecret prototype future boots made from Zeus's fucking foreskin.

Also, they looked like Spooky's size.

No shit. She had a hard time believing it, too. In 2009 Spooky would be twenty. Ten fingers and ten toes. Twenty. No more teen anything. Old enough to never have to take anyone's bullshit ever again. It was the perfect birthday present. A memento from tomorrow.

As they approached Rector, Honey stood and grabbed the metal handrail for a moment to stabilize herself against the motion of the slowing train and got out at the station, the paper bag held tight to her chest. Spooky stayed aboard, pulled a perfect thumbprint off the rail and e-mailed it to Gilbert. Eight hours later she was stomping out a butt on a ledge 30 stories over downtown Manhattan. The noise of the city was tidal. So gigantic and unstoppable that it was easier simply to ignore. She fucked up the security system and cracked open Honey DuBois's living room window.

It was awesome, but eerie. There was no hint the flat had ever been lived in. Clean almost to the point of sterilization. Polished cement floors slathered with primary colored rugs of seriously unmowed shag. A legless couch, cushions tattooed in Gucci, feminine-shaped lamps molded in fiberglass, colorful rayon clouds suspended from the ceiling, the amoebic shape of a white-white coffee table. Ornately framed tubes of neon, xenon, argon, and bulbs with tungsten and copper filaments hung on a silver brick wall. The place looked like a set from some never-made porno movie.

At first she didn't think anyone was home. But then Spooky heard breathing. It was a pulse growing steadily louder until it broke into a

moan. She tiptoed past the colored lights and down a dark hallway toward the bedroom.

Honey was ensconced by a cloud-white mattress. A cotton sheet *almost* covered the goods. There was a break in the clouds and silvery moonlight licked Honey DuBois's naked skin. As Spooky slipped to the bedroom doorway she could see Honey's lids were shut tight. Spooky's mouth went dry. Her palms got damp. All the liquid in her body was seeping to the exterior. Spooky thought, *She has no idea I'm here. I could walk right up to her if I wanted, snap a picture or two.* Honey's lips were still parted, but this time without any self-restraint. Her tongue occasionally peeked out between her teeth, tasting the air like a snake. In her left hand was her right breast, the pink nipple firm in the crotch of her middle and ring finger.

A corona of orange hair popped against the white pillow and a corner of orange Brillo flashed in and out of the sheet as her hips hypnotically writhed and gnashed against her serpentine right hand, gracefully playing a sonata on her pussy. Honey's index and ring fingers stroked glistening pink lips as she penetrated herself deeply with her middle finger, removed it to circle her clitoris in a motion opposite to the roll of her hips, slipped the finger back inside. She sighed again, sped the tempo to her invisible hula-hoop routine.

Spooky was beginning to understand the ugly duckling disguise. Honey DuBois was a knockout. A milky, curvy Rita Hayworth with Brigitte Bardot va-voom. There is no way this city would allow her to walk its streets in peace. It made an odd kind of sense. Cruising around all day in unbelievable boots no one can see is a private, erotic thrill. Like wearing lingerie for nobody but yourself. Like driving around in a stolen Ferrari or walking around with a wad of hundreds in your pocket. Secret sexiness. The way a guy must feel after going out for a lunch-break fuck, returning to the office with spunk spackling his dick to his leg.

Spooky was looking forward to a point somewhere in the hopefully not-too-distant future where she'd be standing in front of her Shadow Man. She decked out in the Dior gown and McQueen's future boots.

Black and blue. His face just beyond sight as always in the dream. His strong body slipping in-between imagination and nothing. Slowly, she drags her fingers across the fabric of the bodice like record needles, draws down the zipper and drops the dress. See how far he leans out of the shadow when Spooky puts her foot up on his chair, watch his hidden eyes trace the line where boot becomes flesh.

But she had to find them first and Spooky was getting annoyed watching Ms. DuBois have all the fun. She was in dreamland, for sure. There was no telling how long it would take Honey to buzz, so Spooky stepped into the room.

The closet was full of gods. Cristóbal, Vera, Anna, Coco, Gianni, Narciso, Issey, Jean Paul, Carolina, Christian...not what she'd come for, but Honey's place could certainly become a bad habit. Near the back she found an ebony box with a pearl inset of a skull. She flipped the latch and there they were. Beautiful. Beautiful. A size too big, but Spooky was still growing. She slid the box into her pack and started to leave. After all, it was a school night.

But something else caught her eye. A Moun Tech Jacket glistened like fish scales in the moonlight. Honey's was nearly the same as the one Spooky was wearing, black with cat ears, only the redhead opted for the glossy finish instead of the matte. Matte was for people who wanted to be absorbed by night, glossy turned you into a walking disco ball. Spooky looked at dreaming, purring Honey with engorged respect. Girl had serious style. But that wasn't all. Tucked behind the Moun on a hook separate from the rack was a bomb-ass black leather jacket. Well, it *looked* like leather...but it felt like *silk*. Spooky must have spent five minutes molesting the coat, listening as Honey's moans bloomed into delighted howls. There was no tag. No hint about the creator. Her awe for Honey compounded. She wanted to climb on the bed and help finish her off. Spooky's pussy jitterbugged in harmonic resonance.

She shrugged off her Moun and slid into the jacket. A perfect fit. She could swear it conformed exactly to her body. It felt good. Warm and light. Almost weightless. A surging, intense tranquility swam through

her. And she was happy, powerfully and authentically happy.

Again the moon rolled into the clouds. Halloween lighting poisoned all slippery beauty.

Vacuum cleaners sucked ice water through her cells. An alien exhaustion took hold from the skin in. Her thoughts all went into soft focus. The mirror, her hands and feet stretched away from her, Spooky's vision was tossed to the far end of a long, dark hallway like a dirty sock. Honey was deep in the tunnel, the sheet now completely off, her vagina was the gummy mouth of an eyeless mole devouring her two fingers with a wet smacking sound. Orange pubic hair was matted together with sweat and sap. Her breasts rose and lungs released an animalistic roar.

Then there was cold silence.

Spooky peeled off and hung the jacket. Replacing the Moun and strapping on her heavy pack nearly exhausted her. She waded out of the closet, past naked, snoring Honey, down the hallway and toward a window drifting into a fog bank.

The mist lifted in Chinatown and there was Electric Jesus Christ crucified by the Manhattan skyline.

BONEYARD

Hills of tombstones filled the window. The ‘Lude slowed to a stop. 23rd and 7th, Spooky’s turd-green home stared endlessly at the cemetery where her father was buried.

“Gesundheit,” said Gilbert. Spooky sneezed.

It was well known that she suffered from a death allergy.

“Well, so long, Bertie.”

“See you at school, Spook.”

Spooky Bonsai didn’t budge. She had the distinct feeling that if she left Gilbert’s car she’d be ripping the flesh from the skull of the world. Green-Wood Cemetery gazed at her with hungry ravens for eyes. Wind blew over mausoleum doorways and made hellish jug band vowels, consonants were crackling fall leaves. A dead language, but the translation was clear:

Heeere, Spooky, Spooky, Spooky.

When she was a dumb little snot, she thought the place was a big, beautiful park. All those rolling hills and trees. Once she asked a man with a shovel if he was building a swing set. Then dad ordered the wrong end of a blowfish at a business lunch and mom had him planted in her playground, “To keep us safe.”

Her grassy hills turned out to be a veneer over mounds of rotting flesh and rats playing flutes of thigh bone. Lying in bed at night she could feel the cemetery’s digestive gyrations. Paul, her karate instructor-cum-stepfather-cum-legal-guardian after mom vanished, installed blackout

curtains after Spooky didn't sleep for about a month because Greenwood was looking at her.

Gilbert cleared his throat. "Hey, Spook?"

"Hey, wha?"

He reached behind the seat and produced a box, crappily wrapped in comic book pages. "Happy birthday."

"Poor Silver Surfer. You ripped his perfect silver ass right up the crack."

"Open it."

"I'll open it inside. I'll need time to prepare myself to lie to you and tell you how much I love it."

"Tell me now."

"I love it." She took a deep breath of the car's non-corpse polluted air and booked it to the house.

Vaulting the gate beside the garage, which Paul had converted into a dojo, she crept passed the Solano's windows and began scaling the drain-pipe. The retired sardine canners were half deaf (half dead too, renting from Paul until they bought across the street), so the creeping wasn't so much out of respect for them as fear of Paul who slept like a pony in a snake pit.

Paul was cool with Spooky's periodic vagrancy. Mostly because he didn't have any choice. He'd taken a vow to keep her safe, which was accomplished mainly by teaching her to kick ass. So long as she kept her grades up, never missed a karate class, and returned his phone calls, she could sleep wherever the fuck she liked.

Three stories up and still holding her breath against the stale stench of death, Spooky swung from the drain pipe and landed perfectly on her narrow windowsill.

The 'Lude was waiting on the street below, its bitchin flip-up headlights flashed bright. She gave Bertie a thumbs-up and he cruised.

WD-40'd on the reg, the window slid open silent and smooth. Pushing the blackout curtain aside did little to improve the visibility within the bedroom. The darkness had a texture to it, thick and pulpy.

Spooky started thinking seriously about her new boots. Electricity traced an inverted V up the inside of her legs.

Dropping into the safety of her nest, she shut the window, replaced the curtain, shrugged out of the pack, and heard an exhale that wasn't hers.

Paul's rough fingers knitted the back of her neck. "D'ew know h'w'ried I bin?" he burgled in drunkenese.

Spooky's internal compass whirled away from true North until her face presented an obstacle to the rising floor. She swung her leg looking for his but her shin found the desk first. Blue bolts of pain shouted through her body but did nothing to illuminate the room. "I'm not in the mood for this, Paul. Sleep it off, big guy. We can spar in the morning."

"Y'were out w'that greasy faggot." Then he was on top of her, forearms against her chest, sweating Jagermeister. "Answer me," he bleched, "liddle whore." He always got so sentimental when he was drinking.

Spooky gave him a shot to the balls that made him yelp. The momentum carried her out from under him and as they rolled she threw out an open palm to break his nose. Whiffed instead. Paul caught her arm. Knee'd the wind right out of her diaphragm. Again she went flying.

Spooky hit a wall. Toggled the light switch with her eyebrow. Blood crawled down the side of her face. The china ball hanging from the ceiling washed Paul in red light. Tightly-whities and a sweat drenched white tee. He grunted like a bull with each heavy, open-mouthed breath. A day-long growth of stubble orbiting his usually finely polished head reminded Spooky of moldy leftovers.

"How'd your date go tonight?" she sneered. "Lemme guess. Real good?"

Paul oinked. He hadn't had a girlfriend since Spooky's mom did the 23 skidoo.

She should have run. The door was right next to her, the frame splintered around the lock where Paul kicked it in who knows how many hours before. This was unacceptable. Probably a pop-quiz in the liquor soaked pages of his playbook, but it was a serious violation of privacy. Spooky's lair was verboten. Sacred space. Home of the Stash.

Should have run. But she was pissed.

Paul snorted a laugh when she kipped up and leaned into kokutsu dachi. She wanted to make him stagger toward her, let her twist into a Jag-eblur. A big blue vein writhed on the side of his head. Bingo. A shot to the temple and lights out, baldy.

From Spooky's stance he'd be expecting something defensive. What Paul didn't know is that she'd recently perfected a devastating 360 spinning hook kick.

"Bin kickin yer lidde ass since y'wer s'ven, sweetie."

"Eat a dick, you illiterate, smegma-brained, shit-huffing, bald orangutan."

Paul lunged forward and punched the china ball. Darkness and bulb-glass rained. Spooky spun blind and leapt, flicked her hips to release massive torsion and sent the ball of her right foot flying. The smacking sound was too flabby for a headshot. She'd connected, but she couldn't disconnect. Her stepfather, a man her mother married for exactly the purpose of legally gluing him to her daughter just in time for her to disappear from their lives, screamed a glossolalia of curses and twisted her leg nearly out of the socket.

He dragged Spooky across the carpet. Burned bruises across her stomach as he pulled her over the lip of her bed. Positioned her body so only her legs hung off the edge.

Spooky heard breathing like a saw through wet wood. That was him.

She heard the high pitched whine of lungs too scared to scream. That was her.

Paul threaded each of Spooky's arms across her body, making her hug

herself as his fat, sweating palm pushed his entire weight between her shoulder blades into her spine.

Spooky Bonsai's brain flapped like a newly caged bird. A thousand thoughts bashed the shit out of themselves against the interior of her skull.

"Paul..." was all she managed to squeak. He just pressed harder until she had to fight the mattress for air. She was strong but he was stronger. She was a badass karate bitch, but he was a 240 pound 10th degree black belt.

His fingers were in her waistband, tugging. She kicked wildly without technique or aim, getting a couple heel shots into his kidneys. He punched her hard in each hamstring and her legs dropped dead.

Spooky's specialized black Prowler pants clawed her hips then dropped around her knees, his foot stomped them the rest of the way down, bolting her legs to the floor in a 40% Gore-Tex, 60% lycra prison.

When he tore off her panties she didn't start sobbing because she knew what was coming next, but because it was a pair Spooky had actually bought. Bright green ones with tiny black bows on the hips from Agent Provocateur. They were the product of a prolonged act of desire. She saw them and wanted them. They would have been easy to swipe—everything is easy to swipe—it was the *wanting* that she enjoyed most. She saved up, only fifty bucks or so, but every dollar she hid in her underwear drawer seemed heavier, crispier, transformed out of dreary dollardom by their destiny to fulfill her desire.

Wiry leg hair prickled her smooth legs. The panties drifted out of the air and onto Spooky's numbing hand.

Paul made sucking sounds with his fingers then mumbled something like, "Let's see 'f sh'bin fucked yet."

It was sorrow that penetrated her first, eons before his fingers did. She crushed her wrecked undies in her fist. Attempted to channel her soul into them to escape the horror-show of her body.

It didn't work.

Fat worms wriggled inside of her. Spooky felt them in her soft tissue

and Spooky felt them slither across the back of her teeth. They were searching for some essential cord to tear out, but couldn't quite burrow deep enough.

She squeezed her destroyed green thong, and squeezed enough air through her throat to rattle her vocal chords.

The stillborn word Spooky Bonsai tried to shape was "No."

No. The fingers removed and there was more slurping and spitting. Saliva hotter than her skin went splat on her butt and rolled inward. Every cell had eyes. Every corner of her consciousness was rapt with Paul's fucking drool.

No. The once beautiful, once holy thing in her hand was transforming into a rag. No. Paul's Thing pressed into her, it inflated and pulsed with noxious warmth. No. A closet full of grace unraveled. No. Into a mountain of string. No. No. No.

His forearm dug into the nape of her neck. His wiry pubic hair exhaled stench. He bucked and oinked. His dangly old balls ping-ponged against her thighs.

Getting split open didn't hurt, it was everything that hurt.

She felt a seismic shift. The approach of a cave-in caused by sudden, inexplicable loss. He found the cord. Yanked it out and jammed it in. Out and in until it snapped.

"Shit." Paul trembled and quickly withdrew. There was a whimper followed by a sigh. The crushing bulk released her body. She drank her first deep breath and choked on it.

Wind whipped over the bone laced hills of Green-Wood Cemetery. The howl swept through the room devouring the confetti Paul had made of her personality.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him waddle out the door. Ankles shackled by underwear elastic, his outstretched hand cradling a pool of his luminescent sludge.

The glowing hands of the clock radio said 2:53.

HELL

Sometimes the vulture precedes the corpse.

Pants still around her ankles, afraid to touch anything he had and risk shattering a final, invisible shard of self, she rolled in her blanket until it was a cocoon. No telling what kind of new creature would hatch.

Lights down the hall flipped on and flipped off. Water ran down the drain. Slimy dying mackerel footsteps flopped along the carpet of Paul's room. All that separated them was a couple slabs of drywall and cotton candy insulation.

She felt herself petrifying. Bound in a downy-soft shell, she was treated to the pleasure of shock. A screamingly white land of not-quiet. Whiteness as the fusion of the entire spectrum, quiet as the totality of noise. Not with a microscope and tweezers could she grab a solitary strand of thought or emotion.

Paralysis should not be mistaken for relaxation.

The snoring snapped her out of it. Green-Wood skeletons have carpal bones jammed into the holes that used to be their ears because of Paul. Go ahead, dig them up.

The ice thawed a little and she rolled to grab her 15 gig iPod from beside the bed and blasted *Blank Generation* by Richard Hell and the Voidoids. She removed the Prowlers like a band-aid, never to be worn again. She put on pajamas and tried to ignore the stiffness in her legs, back and neck.

The gaping door wouldn't shut properly. She jammed her desk chair under the knob. Caught a piece of glass in her foot. Yanked it free as if it were a tack in a corkboard.

When she turned on the reading light and illuminated her disheveled realm for the first time, she knew it was one of the last times she'd ever see it.

She was leaving for good this time. Why she stayed so long in a house stained with bad memories would forever remain a black ghost haunting her mind. For a while, she actually thought that she was taking care of Paul. He'd been just as injured by her mother as Spooky. Rejection bonded them. They trained harder. Channeled their anger into muscle and confidence. Teacher and student. Honorable codependence. Yet in the last few years the knot began slipping. She toed the border of escape. Two nights away from the house. Three. A whole week. Evidently the covenant was long shattered. Paul and Spooky had entered into some serious animal kingdom shit.

What happened wasn't her fault, but it felt like it. Since Papa Bonsai died there'd been eleven years of nightly bad vibes that she willfully swept under the bed. *That* bed.

She was leaving, but until daybreak she was trapped. The room was anything but a sanctuary, but facing the cemetery and the chasm of Brooklyn beyond at this hour was an impossibility. She sat on the floor watching the TV show of cigarette after cigarette quaking in her distant fingers.

The backpack looked like an ancient artifact. It took entire lifetimes to work up the courage to unzip it. When she slid out the black box with the pearl skull her body resisted opening it with such a force she thought she was having a seizure. Spooky wasn't ready to accept the possibility that there would be no delighted beauty in the boots, that she would see only dead lambs, felled trees, and smelted metal pillaged from the heart of the world.

Paul had reduced her to a statistic. And statistics don't get to wear ultra-secret-prototype thigh highs or hot vintage designer dresses. They

sit in the black and white rectangles of spreadsheets to be compared to the past and projected into the future. She was there to be pointed to with a heartfelt shake of the head, to be used as evidence for more after-school programs, more cops, bigger prisons, free self-defense programs at the local Y, necklaces with whistles on them, demographics for pepper spray commercials, the justification for pulping millions of acres of rainforests and perpetuating the war for petroleum contracts just to have enough paper and ink to print stacks of pamphlets for waiting rooms of women's health centers.

The Silver Surfer half-mooned her. She ripped into Gilbert's gift. Opened the box and burst into tears.

Night vision lenses for Moun's cat-hood.

If she'd opened the present in the car she would have seen that pickled meathead slinking in the darkness before he had a chance to rape her.

Spooky wanted to scream. Instead she did nothing.

AMAZONIA, WE

Dawn crapped a stripe of pale blue on the floor below the blackout curtain. It was six in the morning.

She managed to change into a pair of black and white striped circus pants and a long sleeved black shirt that said “Iggy Pop” in puke green. She stomped her feet into black vegan Docs. The mountain of contraband couture hanging in her closet got shoved into her dad’s old Army trunk. She didn’t look, didn’t pet, didn’t feel. If it all had gone poof in the night, Spooky probably would not have really cared. She stashed it out of kindness to her future self, should she have one. May she thrill for pretty things.

Alexander McQueen’s box went in last, then she padlocked the trunk and hid the key in a secret pocket of her Moun.

She stuffed her backpack with socks, underwear, a couple pairs of pants, back up Prowlers, some shirts, the iPod, lock picking kit, EMP gun, rope, harness, suction cups, cordless Dremel, duct tape, \$690 in cash, brass knuckles and nunchucks.

Fragments of glass popped beneath her boots. She listened for Paul’s snores then moved the chair and left the room without saying goodbye.

In the bathroom she grabbed toothpaste and her toothbrush, saw her hand reaching to run the shower and paused. Spooky wanted to be clean even more than she wanted to feed Paul into a giant paper shredder, but there was no way she was taking off her clothes and trapping herself in a small room with slippery floors while the rapist turd-slug snoozed a

couple feet away.

A crust of blood, washed out and smeared make-up, swollen eyeballs looked back at her in the mirror. She wiped her face with a wet towel until all that was left behind was a bruised and fat brow.

Shampoo and soap went into her pack. She went downstairs to the kitchen and filled her pockets with Nutri-Grain bars. When she opened the fridge for a protein drink she found a chocolate cake with “Happy Birthday Spooky!” spelled out in peanut butter M&Ms.

Oh yeah, she thought. *I’m officially 16. Whoopdy-fucking-do.* So what? Paul gets home from work, bakes and ices a cake, goes on another disastrous date, comes home and gets sloshed enough to bash down Spooky’s door and waits in the darkness meditating on how royally fucked his life became ever since his precious ward and protégé blossomed into a delinquent teenage bitch.

Rumblings from the staircase.

“That you, Sweetie?”

The grime coating Spooky’s skin seemed to be drawn toward its source.

She backed away, cake in hand. He was moving slowly, supporting himself with the bannister. Probably sporting a ferocious hangover. She could pop his brain with a scream if he had a brain.

“What time did you get in last night? I must have passed out waiting for you.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Spooky stopped. She timed it perfectly. She flung the cake.

And ran.

At Duane-Reade she swiped a douche kit and bought a pack of Ducks with her fake. Bonnie Lake of Santa Fe, New Mexico, at your service.

Only the swim team got to school that early and they were already in the pool. The locker room was hers for an hour. Decades of sweat had pickled the concrete. The hollow sound of Spooky’s footsteps splashed back at her. In a toilet stall, vinegar water fountained forth and slopped in the bowl.

Paul must die.

She stood naked in a cavern of white tile and let scorching hot water run over her skin. She made a suit of suds. Washed and rewashed her ass and crack, tried not to think of spit and pepperoni fingers but thought of little else. Her hands spelled out the story of her flesh. She wanted to desperately to reclaim it in the name of Spooky Bonsai.

Spooky did not give a shit about girls seeing her naked. Her body was rad. She'd spent the last nine years learning to punch holes in cinder blocks. She was petite but strong as fuck and her bouncy boobs were absolutely Fibonacci in proportion, Modigliani in palette. Small and firm with creamy coffee-colored nipples that were quick to stand and salute, like good soldiers. If any of those aquatic bitches came in and messed with her, Spooky had no problem wringing the chlorine out of their cunts.

Spooky would not tell the police. She would not tell a teacher or school nurse or women's health care professional. All those routes would drag this thing on for months. For years. Court testimonies and therapy and relocation and endless repetition of a thing that needed to be buried, like, now.

Paul would die. Hell, this was Brooklyn. Between the Cosa Nostra, the Russian mob, Chinese gangsters, and Bed-Stuy gangstas, she was covered. She could call a round table meeting, tell her sob story and offer 690 big ones for the first to deliver Paul's shrunken head.

But this was making things overly complicated. When it came down to it, Spooky had no desire to let a man get involved with her intimate business again anytime in the foreseeable future.

She was going to do it herself.

Lady C's Mystic Green highlighted her snarl in the mirror of her locker.

"Spooky Bonsai?"

As always, Caitlyn Morcilla was poised for her close up. Her auburn hair and cleavage jiggled in synch. The press-on diamond mounted above her lip in a schmaltzy homage to Marilyn Monroe shot fluores-

cent beams into Spooky's retina. Caitlyn's make-up gave her face an air-brushed quality, too flawless to exist in three dimensions.

Spooky zipped the circus pants over Wonder Woman panties.

Caitlyn didn't walk, she strode. Moved toward Spooky as if everyone was watching her because sometimes they were. A million years ago when they were friends people thought Spooky and Cait were sisters. Both dark-skinned exotics from opposite corners of the globe. Caitlyn an insane Brazillian pure breed and Spooky a smoothie of Japanese and New York Jew.

"I was just hitting up the stash in my locker and I was all like, 'What? *Spooky?*'" Caitlyn giggled, bit her lip and cocked her head. "Spoo, your eye is all..." the ex-best friend pouted, sieved her vast vocabulary for the perfect word, "yucky."

"Yeah. Karate."

"Black and blues up your arms..."

"Again. Karate."

Caitlyn breathed deeply, fake lashes meshed and when she opened her eyes her face had transformed into an accurate simulacrum for sympathy. "Keep at it, girl." She paused to smile encouragement, to squeeze Spooky's shoulder with deliberate timing. "You're the best, I know it."

"Wow...thanks Caitlyn."

What a twat.

"This is the first time I've seen your boobs."

"We should celebrate this day, like, annually."

"They're adorable. What size cup do you wear? Like, lowercase a?"

Spooky's phone vibrated in the locker. Made machine gun noises against the sheet metal. Gilbert. She dropped the call.

When Spooky looked up, Caitlyn was shrugging out of her fake-fur-lined mini-coat. She peeled her tank down and slowly ran her hands over her breasts. "I'm totally stacked. It's not fair at all. I mean, I completely lucked out. Oh look! My nipples are happy to see your nipples, Spoo." She frowned. "But your nipples don't look happy to see mine." She was actually hurt.

The phone buzzed again.

“Spooooooky. Do you have a booooooyfriend?”

Spooky clicked the end button. “It’s just Gilbert,” and dug a black bra out of her bag.

“Whoever that is.” The Brazilian stowed her tits. Spooky focused on getting dressed. “You know I’m hooking up with Blake Hicks, right? He’s a *senior*.” Cait sat on the bench and dug in her purse for a compact mirror. “I’ve been playing a fun game with him. I tell him that when he wears khakis or light denim it makes my pussy really wet.” She flicked her head side to side with a twinge of paranoia and produced two blue pills. With the butt of a lipstick, she crushed them into powder on the mirror. “Then when we go to dinner, I let him finger me under the table while I rub his cock until he jizzes his pants. It’s fucking hysterical. He has to walk around the rest of the night all cummy. But he keeps buying me dinner and wearing light pants cuz the one time he rebelled and wore black jeans he didn’t get shit.” The blue powder was shaped into a single, fat line. Caitlyn looked deep into Spooky’s eyes. “He’s got a seriously big schlong, Spoo. And his cum smells like pancake batter. You have no idea the kind of self control it’s taking not to fuck him, but I can’t risk him losing interest. Not until he takes me to the Halloween dance on Saturday. I absolutely *have to* go with a senior. After that, I’m going to make him into my personal pogo stick. Want a bump? It’s Adderall.”

“I think I’ll just have a smoke before class.”

She snorked the powder in one gulp. “Cigarettes are for morons. You’re just a tool of gigantic vampire corporations that want to bleed you and leave you with nothing but a hideous, cancer-ridden corpse by the time you’re 30. I need my voice to be in pristine condition, like the engine of a Beemer. *Anything Goes* opens in three weeks. I’m playing Reno Sweeney, obviously.”

The phone buzzed. A text message from Gilbert.

Call me. It is important. HONEY.

“I bet you still eat meat, too?” she prattled on, as if there was someone actively giving a shit. “Did you know red meat rots in your colon for like a million years? Are you aware that chickens are genetically engineered monsters that are raised in tiny cubes, shitting all over themselves? I don’t even do dairy anymore. I’m 100% vegan. I love the Earth and therefore believe all animals are sacred. I don’t even eat honey. Know what honey is? Bee barf. Gross. This coat is synthetic fur, of course. Are those boots leather? Do you even realize you have the hide of a dead cow strapped to your feet? This is 2005, Spooky, the future. It isn’t the middle-fucking-ages, you no longer have to lash exotic pelts to your body as a symbol of status. We have rubber, vinyl, microfiber, Kydex, Birkibuc, fleece...Are you even paying attention? This is why we don’t hang out anymore. You turned into a self-obsessed little bitch.”

Spooky was definitely ready to kill, but she shoved her fists in the pockets of her jacket to make sure it wasn’t going to be Caitlyn. The face in the tiny locker mirror might as well have been a photograph. It was eerie to see herself looking like she always did—grungy hair with blue tipped bangs, Cleopatra eyes, green lip—but Spooky was miles from who she appeared to be.

“Yup,” Caitlyn said, “you’re like a complete train-wreck. Did you start partying early last night or something?” Spooky turned around, the bitch was licking blue power from inside her nostril with a long pink tongue. “Today’s your birthday, right? October 26th? I remember everything, Spooky. I’m an actor. A student of human behavior. I bet you have no clue when my birthday is.”

The phone buzzed again.

NOW.

Reality was a force designed to suffocate. Like a heavy black blanket with no end.

What Spooky needed was a very sharp knife.

The only proper goodbye was to be on the delivery end of a gut

punch. She brushed past the rabid slut and got the fuck out of there.

Caitlyn's voiced bashed after her through the labyrinth of concrete and metal. "I EVEN GOT YOU A PRESENT, CUNT!"