

The Claustrophobic Impasse

by

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I used to be someone else entirely.

That was before I fixed it, of course, but it remains that a different person had this body before I did.

Pixie-cropped red hair, straight nose, calm brown eyes and freckled limbs, petite and pale, a perpetual half-smile on thin lips in a concise visage, nothing wasted but for her. Mademoiselle Nowhere, a girl of early autumn trees by mid-winter creeks. She liked to wear dark colors, practical jeans and tees.

I myself prefer to wear the rainbow, greens and oranges and yellows and ceruleans. I am the city in the spring, and I'm never going out into the countryside again. Let *her* rot there.

Sometimes it's difficult. It's hardest whenever I'm with *him*. He knows she's gone, but he doesn't see that as a good thing. He keeps trying to find her, even as he takes advantage of the things she'd never do.

I only ever see winter when he looks at me, wanting to see her, and I'm not sure if that's his fault for not searching well enough or my fault for wanting to make him smile. I don't understand it; I should just walk away.

I remember the first day after I fixed it. He came over to check on her, worry planted in the furrows of his brow. He blinked when I opened the door.

"What are you wearing?"

"A dress," I answered.

He stepped inside and sideways.

"Why?"

I smiled from beneath the lashes, the body objecting to the then unfamiliar contortion of muscle.

"Don't you like it?"

I saw him set her aside as he smiled with relief.

"As long as you're okay."

He had never asked.

Another time, he wanted to talk about how she was.

"Do you remember that one time we went hiking and came across a group of Wiccans in the nude? You were *so* embarrassed!"

I eyed him from the corners, knowing he wanted her reaction, her frozen creek-country mentality. I wanted him to want my sky-scraping sunshine. But neither of us would get it; the only thing either of us has is the body.

"In retrospect, those were some seriously sexy witches. I'd ride a few of those broomsticks." I cut at us.

He blushed with disgust, closing himself off.

I finished the thought for him and rolled out of bed. I didn't take the sheet.

The blush changed nature.

I watched him in the mirror as I pulled on a red miniskirt, turquoise leggings, and a purple cami. If his foot could reach his head, he might've tried kicking himself.

It is *never* so hard as when he looks at me.

I catch him staring at me all the time, lower lip caught between his teeth. The expression on his face always twists around my stomach, and I want to hide. Usually I stretch instead - slowly, purposefully. I pretend I don't see the way his breath catches and stops before shuddering back out.

I asked him what he was looking for once.

We were walking in the hallway, and we passed what used to be *her* locker, outside the Environmental Science classroom. His stride got off as his gaze went from the dented navy metal back to the face. I let it go for a moment or three.

"What are you hoping to see?" My tone pulled tight at the ends.

His eyes went wide as he realized he was staring and mentally chastised himself for the guilty act.

"N-nothing, really."

I didn't press for the truth. We didn't speak again until we got to my sunny yellow locker in the French department, and then only to say good-bye.

Now I make sure to stretch extra slowly, and to make the fabric of my dress fall so that it drapes every curve, determined to give him something that's *there* to see.

He won't see her after all. He *can't*.

But he keeps trying.

"Rhea-" he started.

"Myra," I corrected.

He exhaled through his teeth before he continued.

"*Myra*. What happened that night at Cara's party-"

"Ooh, look!" I squealed, "Miu Miu has a new line of shoes out!"

"*Rhea*." His hand caught the arm before I could even leave the tile walkway and I turned to look at him, feeling the jaw take an obstinate set. He would *not* make me feel guilty.

"My name is Myra."

We glared at each other, trapped in the same claustrophobic impasse. Tinny music that would have sounded full and dance-able anywhere else surrounded us, water flowing around rocks in a creek. His brow hung heavy with exasperation and determination and, despite my necessary defiance, I almost reached out the free hand to smooth away his scowl.

Fortunately, he gave in before I could, and I won.

His hand drifted off the arm and he looked away, having failed to see again.

"Why do you want to be called that now, anyway? You always loved your name before."

I blinked at the mention of *her*. Maybe I hadn't won as completely as I thought. But then, I don't think I can ever win completely.

"Myra's easier," I answered, starting to walk again, my heels drowning out the music. "People can accept it as it is, without trying to change it."

I could hear the frown in his footsteps, just a few paces behind me.

"Oooh, look! Jezebel bustiers! I simply can't have too many of these!"

I knew the way he was blushing and the way he was still frowning, even grimacing, without turning to see. It is a familiar scene.

It hurts nearly as much as it satisfies, victory in defeat, or defeat in victory - I'm not sure which. I'm considering naming Pyrrhus my patron saint, just for moments like those.

We were watching March Madness, he and I and a few friends. Our choice team was just barely winning, but he managed to tear himself away to go get more chips and soda. The girl who had become his best friend in *her* absence went with him.

I cheered as the point guard made a fantastic layup, jersey in white billows with his motion, and then groaned as he came down hard on his ankle with a lurid wince. The television cut to commercial as medics lead him off the court.

I pulled myself off the couch to go commiserate over the even with him. We probably had little chance of winning now, even if there was a relatively decent replacement for the player.

"I just don't know what to do, Ami!" His voice rang from the kitchen, shrill, not the man's tones I was accustomed to.

I should have just gone in then, broken up the conversation, or walked away; that would have been the smart thing to do. But instead I stopped, and I listened.

"But aren't you happy now?" I heard her ask, earnest, sincere. "You've been in love with her for I-don't-dare-say-*how*-long, and now you're dating her. She's yours now. *Yours*. You don't have to pretend to be happy being her best friend, watching her pine after that asshole."

"I know!" I could hear his hand gripping the back of his neck, fingers flexing, trying and failing to calm the emotions he did not fully comprehend. "I know, Ami. That's just it, though."

Something tightened in the chest, and I had to focus in order to breathe through a choking nausea. I should have just walked away.

"She's... different," he continued. "Everyone knows she is. Ever since-"

"Yes, ever since that party. But I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing."

I closed the eyes. No, it wasn't a bad thing. I had fixed it.

"She seems fine, and I think it helped her to realize what's important to her: you. Not him. Nothing happens without a reason, and I believe the reason for that awful night was to show her how much she cares about you."

I winced.

"But she doesn't care about me!"

I almost laughed at the vehemence in his voice, the bitter sound bubbling through the nausea in the throat like poisoned champagne. It would be so much easier if either of the two were right.

"She changed her *name*, Ami! She won't do anything she used to do anymore, none of the things that we loved! All she cares about is appearances and sex and pretending! I'm just her *toy*. Rhea, the *real* Rhea, wasn't like that! She loved people, loved the world!" His voice feathered out to a hoarse whisper. "She loved me, even if she loved him more. I miss Rhea, Ami. This *Myra* is just a body."

The eyes snapped open, the pulse roaring in the ears as adrenaline hit the system. Her memories overlaid with the echo of his words. I may have made a small sound, but neither he nor Ami heard it.

Just a body, his voice resounded in my head.

He thinks I'm just a body.

I wrapped my arms around the mid-section, trying to squeeze her out and keep myself in. I couldn't breathe and it took serious effort not to let tears spill over and ruin my makeup. I wouldn't let *him*, *him* and his *infernal* dissatisfaction with what I had fixed ruin my eyeliner.

Just a body.

The only thing worthwhile about you is that body of yours, "that asshole"'s voice taunted me from *her* recollection.

I burned, bile coating the tongue, the nails digging into the lower ribs.

I should have walked away, but I stood there as he and Ami kept talking, clinking bowls and crinkling bags as they moved around the kitchen.

Just a body.

That memory is like being dumped in a creek, feeling ice scraping over my soul, drawing blood that will not run until much later. No, that's not right. The knowledge that he loves *her* but will never love *me* is the ice slicing and abrading my skin - the memory of his words is the aforementioned later.

I went back and sat on the couch, smiling for our friends, and listened as the announcer discussed the second-string point guard with mingled disappointment and hope. A few minutes later, he and Ami returned, laden with popcorn and Baked Lays and Cheetos, and he sat down beside me, slinging one arm around the shoulders.

I held myself stiffly, only tolerating his touch as he only tolerates me.

By the end of the game, I'd melted into him, absorbing his body heat, taking comfort from him for the damage another had inflicted on *her*, but that's he'd all-too-eagerly shared with me.

It is a hard and bitter truth that, despite everything I want to be and everything he wants to see, the only thing either of us has is the body.