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Plush

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Plush

Abstract

I blame the Salvation Army, but I guess it's really Mom's fault. She's the one who donated my lion costume to them in the first place. She must have thought it was from some Halloween back when we were kids. I had been hiding it in a box in the garage to keep the whole thing under wraps, but Mom threw it in the garbage bag with the rest of the donations: scratched Teflon pans, an old domino set, Mavis's miniature glass pony collection, a pair of Winchester roller skates, a bunch of musty books (like they're going to get read) and clothing. Lots of clothing, including my fucking lion costume, a.k.a. my work uniform.

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BOOTH



A JOURNAL

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Plush

Fiction by Jennifer Caloyeras

I blame the Salvation Army, but I guess it's really Mom's fault. She's the one who donated my lion costume to them in the first place. She must have thought it was from some Halloween back when we were kids. I had been hiding it in a box in the garage to keep the whole thing under wraps, but Mom threw it in the garbage bag with the rest of the donations: scratched Teflon pans, an old domino set, Mavis's miniature glass pony collection, a pair of Winchester roller skates, a bunch of musty books (like they're going to get read) and clothing. Lots of clothing, including my fucking lion costume, a.k.a. my work uniform.

I can't tell her how pissed I am because she doesn't know what I do for work. Doesn't know that I am, well at least *was*, the top Cuddler at the CLUB. Ranked number one for four months straight. And it was all about the costume that is now probably at some sorting facility somewhere, being evaluated and distributed to a store where it will be bought for \$4.99 by some fool who smells like alcohol.

Just my fucking luck.

"I feel so good about myself today," Mom says, fox stole around her thick, dewlapped neck. The thing looks like it was road kill. She should have donated it with the rest of her shit.

I give her a fake smile. Two more months in this dump and then I'm out of here. I'll be a high school graduate with the beginnings of a savings account, ready to

face the world. If it were up to Mom, she'd have me live in this house forever. Dad has big plans for me to join the army. Not wanting me to get a job is their way of controlling my future.

Mavis, my twin sister, sits at the table with a bowl of Frosty-O's. I tell her all the sugar is bad for her acne, but she doesn't listen. She never eats what the rest of us are having, boiled turkey omelets this morning. Dad peels the skin away from the flesh with his fork, and it comes off it one piece. The limp flap looks like it could be a cape for an action figure. Super Turkey Skin: inflates his wattle to epic proportions before clawing evildoers in a single bound! Dad passes the skin to Mom who, making her way towards the kitchen, pretends first to offer it to the fox around her neck before dropping it in her own mouth. Mavis takes sugar from the pink and white box in front of her and sprinkles it on top of the contents of her bowl, like it's snowing.

"My drawing is one of the finalists for the school t-shirt." Mavis spoons the O's one at a time – her mild case of O.C.D. on display.

"Math quiz today. Gonna ace it," I say.

Dad merely nods at our offerings and stuffs egg in his mouth.

Mom is humming a tune and slow dancing with the fox down to her seat.

"Say something, my dears?"

Mavis and I look at one another. I shake my head and she murmurs, "Never mind." Dad was never really one to offer praise. I'd tell him I raised the most money in my class for our adopt-a-family, and he would say the school should be paying me for all my hard work.

Earlier this morning, before I'd realized that Mom donated my lion suit, I tore Mavis's room apart. Instead of the costume, there was something else hidden under her bed. Paperwork. For volunteer work in Ghana. To be an art teacher at a school for girls. She'd already filled out the application. I won't rat her out. I want to be there when she tells our folks she's leaving and the shit hits the fan.

"So what are you two doing after school?" It's Friday which means we don't have to rush straight home. Dad doesn't like us going out. It's not like he wants us to stay home and have game night or anything like that. He lets me out if I'm doing

something “respectable” like going to the library, and he allows Mavis go study with the girls once in a while. We get around his rules by combining our only two options: lying or sneaking out.

“I don’t know. Maybe study group with the girls.” Mavis slurps her milk, which makes Mom twitch.

“That’s nice,” Dad adds. “You and the girls. How’s Lonnie doing? Her father used to work at that bank that went belly up, poor guy.”

Dad’s been a refrigerator repairman his whole life. It’s what his dad did . Before that, his grandfather was in the icebox business and his great-grandfather worked with dehydrators and crocks. Dad likes to lecture us about “work ethic.” Mom comes from old money that no longer exists. She was raised in some mansion with wait service. She likes to tell Dad how they had three refrigerators, one downstairs, and one upstairs and one by the pool. But Grandfather was apparently involved in some “shady business” and lost it all in “one fell swoop,” forcing the family to pack up whatever they could carry in one leather suitcase in the middle of the night and vacate the premises, the town, the entire east coast. Mom was wearing the fox the night they left.

She brings in a pile of zucchini pancakes stacked ten high. I growl at her fox stole as she lowers the plate to the table. The fox face flops uncomfortably close to mine. She never takes that thing off. She claims it’s because she has poor circulation, and don’t even try to sell her on scarves. She says they’re porous. Mom leans down and places one finger on my sister’s shoulder and closes her eyes as she speaks.

“My little girl. All grown up. You can vote. Be your own person.”

“Let’s not rush into things,” says Dad.

“You can make a porno,” I say, encouragingly.

“Oh, Tristan. Do you have to be so vulgar all the time?”

Apparently, it’s not vulgar when Dad tells me I should be a soldier. He says it’s the only decent job prospect I have. His fridge business has been dwindling. He says the only way I can afford to go to college is if I join the army. I get the idea, but fighting isn’t my thing. I don’t feel an obligation to defend my country. I can’t

walk down the school halls without getting the middle finger from someone. That's what I'm supposed to fight for?

Dad picks at his teeth with an orange toothpick. When he finds something stuck, he makes this grotesque sucking noise and then swallows.

We reach for the syrup at the same time. I inadvertently grasp his hand, which is wrapped around the neck of the plastic bottle. His skin is cold: what you'd expect from a man who spends all day placing them in sub zero temperatures. It's the first body contact we've had since I can remember. I quickly let go. He was there first.

#

After school, when I tell Captain Kevin my costume is no longer, he hangs his head and sighs. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You had a good run, Cuddler 82. I didn't want to see you go out like this."

It's true. The proof is on the leader board at company headquarters, a large basement warehouse under our town's mall. There's no sign anywhere advertising what we do, but every so often a wayward consumer will wander down the elevator, hopped up on a rush of shopping adrenalin, and ask what we sell. They're usually sent back to Kevin. He checks them out and decides if they seem like the type that would want to join. He looks for longing in their eyes. Otherwise he lies and says the basement floor is the maintenance team.

"But don't you think it's not only about the costume?" I say. I mean, I work hard to engage the people. It's all about having an affable attitude. About being open. It has to go beyond the plush.

Kevin puts his finger up and disappears into a back closet marked "Captains Only." He returns with a turkey suit on a hanger.

"It's all about the costume." Kevin pushes the suit towards me.

I take it. "Don't you have anything a little more, you know...loveable?"

He raises his eyebrows.

I take the suit.

#

So this is how it works. Kevin sends out an email to all those on the list of patrons interested in coming to a Cuddle Party. The list has been compiled from people who have attended before. Or else friends of friends email Kevin. Sometimes, he'll send scouts out into the mall to discreetly recruit customers.

A couple of days after the email goes out, Kevin puts together a list of the RSVPs. The day before the Cuddle Party, he sends another email with directions to the secret location. There have been Cuddle Crashers before, so it's important he doesn't reveal the party's location until the last minute. Of course, cuddlers find out a week ahead of time. Some participants make certain requests for which Cuddlers they want at the party. Just for the record, I was always requested. We'll see how much they like hugging a fucking turkey. "Come nuzzle in close with this North American patriotic bird that tastes good between two slices of bread and slathered in gravy. Oh and it can't even pull it together enough to fly!"

Dinner is a mealy pot of corned beef hash with fried eggs on top that look like eyes. Mavis noshes on Choco Puffs. Mom offers Mavis's uneaten portion to the fox stole, nestled as usual between her hair and neck.

"I'll just leave it on the table if you change your mind."

Guess the fox isn't hungry tonight.

It's Mavis's turn to be on duty – stay home and be on call to make an excuse for me in case our parents come looking while I sneak out. I'll take tomorrow. Thank God these parties are at night or I'd never get passed my folks. Outside the window of our Jack and Jill bathroom is a large ash tree, perfect for getting us safely down to the street. It's a system that's worked great over the last year, minus that one time I accidentally locked her out during a snowstorm. Part of the reason it works so well is that I don't always hold up my end of the bargain. If I know there's a Cuddle Party happening, I make it my business to be there. Every penny counts. I just have to be sure and get home before she does.

Mavis spent the afternoon with friends from school finishing up a knitting project that Mom got her started on weeks ago: soda cozies. Mom thinks it's going to be a

cash cow. I don't bother to ask her why anyone would want something that actually makes her soda warmer.

I've been doing laundry and resting up for my big coming out as a turkey at the Cuddle Party tonight. I finally get around to greasing the tracks on the window, too. It's been making this awful squeaking sound when either of us slides it open. Mavis hasn't said anything, but I'm pretty sure she has a boyfriend. She's been asking me to cover for her a lot more than usual lately, and at school, I sometimes see her eating with this Conor kid from her math class. Dad would hate him, always chewing gum and brandishing hair long enough to tuck behind his ears.

Dad sits at the table reading the paper.

"Anything interesting, Dear?" asks Mom.

"War moved." He grumbles. He's been obsessed with war news ever since this whole thing broke out years ago. Part of the reason he wants me to join the army, I'm sure. He'd join himself if he weren't so old, but since he can't, he's willing to sacrifice me.

"Where did it go?" Mom rearranges the dying white peonies in a vase on the table. They're starting to give off that sweet stench that makes our food taste like rotten flowers.

"North by northeast. Into jungle territory. It's a whole new game now. Says here the highlights will be on channel four tonight. Nine o'clock. Remind me."

After dinner, we help Mom clear the table. Dad is already planted on his rocker, waiting for nine o'clock to roll around. I think we both feel kind of guilty having to lie to Mom when we go out, so we try hard to help her out after meals. We form an assembly line. After the table is cleared, Mavis washes the dishes, I dry them, and Mom oversees the process, wicking away any overlooked droplets with the fox's tail.

Tonight, the Cuddle Party is at ten o'clock, at Gia Smith's house on Pine and 24th. I slide my crumpled bill in the slot and grab my change. It's my job to arrive there in uniform. But I don't like taking buses in full regalia. Taxis are hit and miss. One cabbie begged me to come to his daughter's third birthday party the next day. He said he'd let me have a beer and take a swing at the piñata. Most cabs drive right

by. I've changed in public park bathrooms, department store dressing rooms, and once behind an installation at the Modern Museum of Art entitled, "Disney on Crack." The docents thought I was part of the exhibit.

I couldn't stomach Mom's hash, so before changing I grab a bite to eat at Stellar Burger. The suit is heavy, stuffed inside one of Mom's donation garbage bags.

"I'll have one Busy Bee meal please." (Four buns alternating with three patties and lots of mustard.)

"Side of regular fries or garlic?"

"Garlic."

A kid with the beginnings of a moustache punches in my order.

"Actually, plain fries."

"Have a date?" he asks.

"Oh, yeah."

He lifts his hands and gives me two thumbs up with a side of crooked smile.

"Avoid halitosis," is Rule No.5 in the Cuddle Manual, a hand-stamped packet covered in a red, fuzzy binding.

After sliding the remains on my purple tray in the trash, I go to the restroom, dragging my bag behind me. I feel like Santa Claus. An old guy using the urinal looks at me when I enter the bathroom. His urine comes out in spurts, like he has something to hide. I change in the handicapped stall; it's the only one that will accommodate my big bag. The sporadic dribbles from the old man come to a halt as I take off my clothes and open the bag. It looks like the remnants of a turkey that shed its skin and waddled toward the nearest coop. I pick up the deflated animal and inspect it.

Shit.

The zipper is in the back. Major design flaw and something all Cuddlers complain about.

I leave my socks on. You never know what the A/C is going to be like at the places we go to. And it's not like you can ask them to change it. That's Rule No.2 in the Cuddle Manual. "The only thing Cuddlers can say at a Cuddle Party is 'Yes' in response to a client's cuddle request. (Please be sure and learn the sign for 'I have to go to the bathroom.')

" I've never been docked points for talking, but others have. And docked points equals docked pay. We work on commission. Cindee Carter was suspended for a week for asking a client where she got her shoes.

This turkey cloth is itchier than my last costume. Cheap material. I'll have to buy a spandex suit to wear underneath. Stepping into the red tights, I slide the coarse fabric over my body. My arms enter the wings that are missing a noticeable amount of feathers. I put the turkey head on and exit the bathroom stall to take a look at my new persona.

Old guy is washing his hands. Just the tips of his fingers, really. He stops what he's doing and looks at me. I hope he isn't going to have a heart attack.

"Zip me up?" I turn so my back is facing him. After drying his fingers on his pants he walks over, fiddles with the zipper till it catches, then moves it up my back to the base of my neck.

"Want me to do the eye hook as well?"

I practice nodding like a turkey would nod. Small, but deliberate movements. He fastens the hook, then gives me a gentle pat on the back as though to say, "All done."

I thank him and wave good-bye, though my worn appendage won't rise as high as I'd like.

I look at myself in the mirror, head on, then profile. My beak isn't even made out of shiny plastic. It's felt. And it droops, like an elephant's trunk. Or a compass, pointing south.

#

Gia Smith's is only a few blocks away from the burger joint. I've strategically planned this. People stare at me on the street. I bet they assume I started the day with a stack full of colorful flyers in my hand for the latest sandwich shop special

or some Save the Environment campaign. As lion, people on the street would slap me five. They'd want to pose with me and take my picture. They'd try to usher me into the bar to buy me a beer. "Please arrive at all Cuddle Parties in costume, ready to begin work" and "Your real identity is to remain a secret at all times," are Rules No. 3 and 4. They want this to be an authentic experience for participants. Nothing kills a fantasy faster than the stinky, sweaty guy under the costume. Even though I think I clean up nice.

I was one of those wayward kids who wandered into the offices in the basement of the mall over a year ago. Maybe it was my habit of standing really close to the person I'm talking to that clued Captain Kevin in to the fact that I'd make an ideal Cuddler.

"You want a great way to make some extra cash?"

I nodded. Who wouldn't?

He invited me to spend that night at a Cuddle Party, not as an employee, but as a participant. At first I was self-conscious when I entered the host's apartment, but everyone was so kind. Monkey was there (who knew I'd be working with him a year later?) and gave me my first hug. I could have stayed there all night. Mikey, tonight's supervisor, later explained the biological reaction people have to hugging, the intense release of endorphins.

"It's better than any drug," he said.

I was hooked.

A husky bouncer at the new locale looks me up and down. He's there to deal with guests who drink too much. I tell the doorman tonight's passwords, "Phantom limb." He waves me in.

Inside I see Bunny, Monkey, and Chick standing around talking. Most Cuddlers use their real voice when in costume, but Chick masks hers with this high-pitched, fake baby voice. It's kinda cute. I don't know any of their real names or what they actually look like as we all strictly adhere to Rule No.4 and even show up to staff meetings in costume.

"You new?" asks Bunny.

I go to put both arms on my hips, but my wings won't budge. "Are you kidding? It's me!"

Monkey tries to peer through the mesh area hiding my face.

"Lion?" Monkey asks. "What happened to you?"

"Costume's disappeared."

"How the mighty have fallen," says Bunny. "Looks like I have a good chance of sweeping the leader board tonight!" He high fives Monkey.

Chick puts her wing on my shoulder. "Sorry."

She's always been nice to me.

"I hear we're going to have a full turnout tonight." Chick brushes her yellow leggings with her wings. She's one of the few who has any actual body shape exposed, although now, I've joined her with my turkey legs. The rest of the Cuddlers are all hidden in their oversized costumes. Her costume is made out of real feathers, unlike mine. The friction from all that hugging means she loses a lot of yellow feathers each night and she says she has to buy bags of new ones and glue them on after almost every party.

Mikey bounces into the room.

"Who do we have here! New Cuddler?" he asks me and comes over to shake my wing.

"It's Lion! Can you believe this shit?" Monkey says.

"Wow!" Mikey looks stunned. "I don't know what to say. Okay, Cuddlers, I want you all to gather in a circle. Our clients will start coming in a few minutes and I want to brief you on the situation."

A puppy and kangaroo I don't know join the circle.

"So, tonight we have mostly return clients, but we do have two new ones, so we're gonna have to go ahead with the Rules Circle."

In middle school I was in a play once. I had what you'd call a supporting role, playing an organ grinder, but before each show, we'd get in a circle and our drama teacher, Mrs. Passomanik, would talk about what a great performance this was going to be and how much she appreciated us. Dad made me quit drama after that one show. He said the army wasn't looking to recruit thespians.

The Circle before Cuddle Parties are similar to Mrs. Passomanik's. Mikey lets us know if we have any returning clientele, and if they've made any special requests for specific Cuddlers. The energy in the room is electric. We are ready to begin our work.

Cuddlers begin the evening on the periphery, waiting to be approached by someone looking for a hug. Once we've given out our first hug, we can circulate. The only word we're allowed to say is "Yes," in response to a patron asking, "Cuddle me?" I lean against the wall and wait and watch.

#

The adrenalin has worn off considerably by the time my bus pulls to a stop. With my costume double-bagged and stuffed in my backpack, I get off the bus and walk the two blocks to my house. The rain has stopped, which means I'll need to be extra quiet sneaking back into my room.

My first night as a turkey was mediocre. It was at least forty-five minutes before anyone asked for a hug. As Lion, I was heavily pursued. Sometimes a small line would form and after receiving their hugs, my fans would go right to the back of the line again. Tonight, I wanted to pound my chest and shout out, "I'm really Lion! It's me!" Chick seems to have taken the lead. Probably because Easter is just around the corner.

I hoist myself up to the window and try to slide the cold glass up. It's locked. I'm going to fucking kill her. I'm exhausted. All I want to do is find a good hiding place for my costume and crawl into bed.

I knock lightly on the window.

Nothing.

I tap a little louder, using my fingernails to drum the William Tell Overture on the glass. My sister responds to rhythm. She opens the window.

“What the fuck?”

“Sorry, I fell asleep.”

She takes my bag as I climb through the window, the T.V. still blaring the war downstairs where Dad has, no doubt, fallen asleep.

#

In the morning, when Mom leans down to pour orange juice into my empty mug, the fox’s nose touches the inside of my ear.

“They lost a nuke.” Dad startles me, rattling his paper with fervor.

“Who did?” Mom brings in the boiled eggs as Mavis has a seat with a box of Choc-O’s and gives me the middle finger while no one is looking.

“We did. In the jungle. They have trained monkeys over there. It’s the new biological warfare.”

“The monkeys stole the bomb?” Mavis adds a handful of marshmallows to her cereal.

“Monkeys are smart,” I say. Trying to get in on the conversation.

“Yeah, smarter than you,” adds Mavis.

“Hey, I did so well I threw the entire curve off for the math test yesterday.” I look at my dad.

“Damn monkeys,” he says, his blue and white striped union suit unbuttoned at the top so that his scraggly, gray chest hair sits like an unmowed patch of grass.

“What are you two going to do today?” asks Mom.

“Study group.”

“Homework at the library.”

“That’s nice.”

#

The next week, we’re at a posh brownstone on Circle Road. It’s a nice neighborhood – a whole lot nicer than the one I live in. The owners, Frank and Gretchen, have hosted before. They make it a point to serve their own appetizers – things like fried calamari and chicken satay with peanut dipping sauce in addition to the usual veggies and dip. Even though last night wasn’t a shining moment in my cuddling career, I’m optimistic that I can transform my new status as a turkey into something desirable – after all – beneath all the fake feathers and polyester, it’s still just me.

It was my turn to stay at home tonight so that Mavis could go out, probably with that Conor joker. I let her have a ten minute lead, just in case she forgot something and had to come home, before checking that Mom was asleep and Dad was flaked out in front of the TV before making my own escape out the window and down the tree.

Mikey pulls me aside and says I have to do something with my limp beak before people show up. I ask him what I’m supposed to do, but he shrugs and says, “Get creative.” Doesn’t he know that turkeys aren’t right brain kind of creatures?

“I’ll be back,” I tell Chick and the gang. Chick shakes her hips back and forth. She gets all amped up before a party.

Outside, the cold seeps through the mesh fabric in front of my mouth. I breathe heavily and see the frigid air rise. Why couldn’t I have been a peacock or a penguin? How to fix my beak?

Two blocks from the house there’s a laundromat and a deli and, across the street, a liquor store. The rest of the businesses look closed. Evening commuters honk at me as I jaywalk towards the liquor store. I give them the middle finger under my wing.

It dawns on me that in this roomier disguise I might be able to get away with breaking Rule No. 7: “No alcohol is to be consumed by employees while attending a Cuddle Party.” Maybe a few sips would take the edge off and help me get my groove back.

I don't know what I'm looking for to help fix my beak, but I'll know it when I see it. What would Mavis do in this situation? She's the artist in the family, after all. I picture her in Ghana with a bunch of kids sitting around and making batik t-shirts. She'd find a way to make this beak look good stuffed with grass or cotton balls.

A guy next to me holds out two bottles. "Which do you think? Cabernet or Chardonnay?"

"What are you having for dinner?" I ask. He looks surprised, like he thought I wouldn't talk.

"Chicken. Hope that doesn't offend you." He laughs and looks at his girlfriend.

"Cabernet," I say. That bottle looks more interesting, abstract statuesque bodies interwoven like they're participating in a Greek orgy.

The checker hears our conversation and decides to butt in.

"You're supposed to have white wine with bird," says the checker.

The guy holding the bottle shrugs. "I'm going with the turkey on this one."

Towards the front of the store is an assortment of mini liquor bottles. I pick out three: tequila, gin, and vodka and set them on the counter.

"Is that packaging?" I point to the pile of shredded paper behind the counter, hoping to distract the checker from remembering to check my ID.

"Sure is."

"Mind if I take some? For my beak?" I shake my head to emphasize my dilemma. The limp beak jiggles. "Oh, and I'll take these as well."

The checker rings me up and passes a handful of shredded paper.

If I don't get back for the ringing of the opening triangle, I'm out for the evening. It's in our contract.

Outside I take my head off and place two of the bottles down my left wing. I swig the tequila and then tightly stuff the paper in to my beak and voila.

Back inside Mikey is orienting first timers to the routine while a few guests stand around the food table, sipping wine and chewing on vegetable sticks. He's good at gathering people in circles and making them follow directions. He used to be a preschool teacher.

"Looking better, Turkey," Mikey puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. He unwraps a bell from a cloth bandana and strikes it with the metal rod three times. Tonight I'm brimming with optimism and tequila. I will play the part of confident, wingless bird. I will be desired.

Chick is approached quickly by a guy, probably in his mid-forties, wearing a polo shirt. He leans in for a hug and Chick embraces him. I can see she waits for him to release before she removes her wings from him. Soon, most Cuddlers are hard at work. In fact, everyone is, except for me.

Swaying back and forth, shifting my weight from one turkey foot to the next, I anxiously wait.

Mikey has his lifeguard whistle around his neck. He's never had to use that thing, but it's always there.

I feel invisible.

Heading towards the bathroom, I open the vodka, drink it, and return to my post.

A woman walks my way looking as though she might approach me. I raise a wing to entice her, but she turns away at the last minute and grabs a piece of jicama off the table. I've had it. I don't even bother to excuse myself as I remove and then screw the cap off of the third bottle. No one can see what I'm doing under my costume. I'm hoping I look like I'm just scratching an itch.

Chick is facing me from across the room. Maybe she's looking at me, but it's hard to say, since I can't see her eyes. I wave. She waves back, but we get interrupted by a large woman who asks her for a cuddle. The woman's shoulders are bobbing up and down. She's crying. She must have had some sort of release. It's not uncommon at these parties. (Mostly from people who haven't been touched lately.) The contact can be "emotionally awakening" as Mikey says. It's the same reason people get dogs, to have something to snuggle with. We never had any pets growing up. Dad said they demand too much affection.

Mavis swears that we used to have a pet fox that looked exactly like the one wrapped around our mother's neck, but I have no memory of this. Mavis says there used to be pictures in the photo album of us all around the Christmas tree, Dad drinking a Bloody Mary out of a coffee mug (Mavis assumed this because of the celery sticking out of it) and the fox, curled up in an empty present box, but when she went to show me the picture, it was gone.

As Chick wraps her wings around the woman, I watch her body swaying from side to side. Chick can be so maternal.

People have loosened up and are now moving away from us Cuddlers towards each other. It's the ultimate goal – transferring the safety and trust of a plushie to regular people so that casual smiles and “hellos” on the street to strangers can be replaced by much needed embraces. We've been at war for as long as I can remember; apparently monkeys are losing weapons of mass destruction. I mean, who doesn't need a hug?

Chick makes her way past a line of guests and ends up next to me. The feathers on her upper right shoulder look ruffled from the onslaught of that large woman's tears.

Maybe it's the alcohol warming me up from the inside, but I am hyper aware of Chick standing within close proximity. I want her closer.

“You smell nice,” I whisper.

“RULE NUMBER TWO.” she says back. She takes her job seriously. Another thing I like about her.

The drink goes to my head, and I look down to keep from getting dizzy.

I look down at Chick's round calves. “You also have nice legs.”

“Ew,” Chick says before backing away from me.

Have I disgusted her so much that she's willing to break the rules?

She leans in and sniffs me, then crosses one wing on top of the other, scolding me. I try to put my wing up to my beak, asking for her silence, but it doesn't reach. I'm too late and she walks away.

I stare at the grain in the hardwood floors and then contemplate my turkey feet.

“Cuddle me?”

Finally, the words I've been waiting to hear all night. I look up to survey the turkey-loving Cuddler. It's my father, still dressed in his refrigerator repairman suit, a newspaper wedged under his arm.

My body freezes as he comes in for a hug. The paper falls to the floor. His arms wrap around my shoulders and meet at the small of my back. He rests his head on my wattle and squeezes, mildly at first, and then he tightens his grip. I can hear a faint cooing sound coming out of his mouth, like a relieved baby.

It's the first hug he's given me in years.

I squeeze back, eager to make a connection. I want to shout, “Dad, it's me!” and make a big reveal. But then I grow resentful. He doesn't know who he is hugging. He'd rather embrace a stranger than his own son. In fact, he's willing to pay for it.

My grip tightens as he moves to let go. I am owed more than this—much more. I feel his back pulling against my arms.

The smell of coolant reaches my nose.

“Hey,” he says quietly at first and then louder so that people next to him stop their embracing to look over.

I lift my wings and engulf him. I spot chick rushing over from across the room. I squeeze even harder.

His legs start to do this vibrating thing that looks like an odd jig. He wiggles his shoulders trying to shake me off, but I am unflappable. I plant my feet on the ground and tighten.

“I think you're hurting him,” Monkey says.

Chick is at my side, trying to pry a wing between my father and I, but she lacks the strength to wedge us apart. She tries to penetrate her wing deeper, the friction causing yellow feathers to rise above us.

Why is she getting involved?

Dad is now making a gurgling sound.

Everyone's yelling things at me, but their words blur together into one inaudible buzz.

Mikey runs over and starts blowing his whistle. I squeeze harder.

“Abort, Cuddler 82. Abort immediately!”

A few participants try to pull my arms away, but that only makes me grip harder.

My fingers start cramping. I only want to focus on the strength of my squeeze.

Chick kicks me hard in the shins again and again until I can't hold on any longer.

The next thing I know Dad is on the floor. Someone brings him water. Mikey is apologizing profusely. Monkey and Bunny have their fuzzy paws on my chest in case I decide to stage another attack.

Chick is nowhere to be seen.

#

Dad doesn't want to press charges, but I'm still fired on the spot. The Cuddle Party ends early. Guests are shaken. As I'm escorted out in full costume, I hear Dad muttering to Mikey, “Your fucking turkey.”

I don't bother changing before I get home. Sure, the costume belongs to the Cuddle Corporation, but who the hell is going to want it? No one is ever going to want to cuddle with a turkey again.

It's raining, and there's nothing on this bird to wick the water away, which just gathers in damp clusters, weighing me down.

I had a good thing going with this cuddling business. I was the best of the best.

The army won't be so bad. There are critters there, too. Monkeys at least. Smart monkeys. Clever monkeys.

The street is hazy with damp fog and the streetlamps shine blurry halos of light. As I make my way to the base of the tree, yellow feathers float past me to the ground. I look up.

“Chick?”

She looks down at me, stooped over a branch of the ash. *Chick?*

“Shh! You'll wake Dad!” She waves me away, but loses her footing and slips down the rain-slickened trunk, landing on the grass on her butt.

“Your feathers are falling off,” I say to my sister while passing her a yellow clump.

“That is the least of our problems.”

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