

Warmth

by Eve Henley-Rayve

The shadows tell me where to look. I hold myself high up on the ceiling in the meantime, hoping not to bust a lightbulb, wondering when he'll finally get home from work. I could skip this part if I so desired, melt away into the dancing nothingness until it's time to resume.

I hear a whisper to my right; a little fly has joined me up here. I try to shoo him off, but nothing more than a cool breeze passes through his wings. I could go visit myself if I want to, for some extra motivation. I could see how far the rot has gotten or count the maggots in my skin, watch the dirt fill every cavity until I am more earth than girl.

There is movement downstairs, the shadows are disturbed. A new one appears in the figure of a man. He is tall, warm, and the hairs on his neck stand on end. He knows I'm here; He must know.

He takes a pause as he walks up the apartment stairs, wondering, perhaps, if it is wise to continue. I stand in the doorway now, anticipation clinging to the air around me. This is my favorite part, each day he takes longer and longer to open the door. I count the seconds as I imagine they would happen. Ten this time, yesterday it was only six.

The keys jangle, wood creaks, and then he is looking right at me. I brush myself against him real slow and feel the way he wants to jump from his skin. Today, I let him pass. I move from the doorway, and he feels safe for a moment. Sometimes I play the game for minutes at a time, trying to see which one of us will break. It's always me though, I get bored when he heeds my warnings.

I think he forgot a bag of groceries in the car. He counts them over and over, but I know he won't go back down for it. I hope it's filled with eggs and milk; I hope they sour and stink up the whole compartment until the smell sticks to his sweat. He sighs a little, the hairs on the top of his head move with the swaying of his arms. It's infuriating, the little idiosyncrasies of his body. The way his mouth moves when he drinks, his eyelids fluttering in time with the wind.

I shut off the heat again, and he doesn't move to turn it back on. Sometimes I think he likes to feel cold, like he runs so hot that to shiver is a relief. He sweats like a pig, no matter the temperature. He takes medication for it I think, I don't know what the label on the bottle means, so I just assume it's to tame his most undesirable qualities.

I don't hate what he did to me so much as I hate that he doesn't wash his dishes until the first Tuesday of the month, and that he likes the smell of vanilla candles. I hate how he always drags things instead of picking them up. I hate his stupid little mustache, and the fact that every morning he shaves his arms.

I hate how he makes little grunts in the night when I try to hold his nose closed. I can never do it for more than a few seconds at a time, so I make sure to sit on his chest until the air all falls out like a deflated mattress. He never gets a good night's sleep. Sometimes he thinks he sees me standing in the corner, but that's just his imagination. I like the ceiling much better; corners are too cliché.

Today he wears his favorite pants. I bet he walked the street up and down five times each like he tends to do before work. He probably wanted some little old lady to tell him how handsome he looked, or maybe her little dog to calm down at his touch.

I knock a can off the table. He makes it so easy sometimes, always setting things on the edge. I watch him jump and breathe heavy through his nose. He stands in the silence for a minute, maybe two, before picking up the can and setting it on a shelf in his cabinet. The way he does this makes me pause, I see no fear in the movement. Not like when I did it last week. No more cans off the table I guess, I'd hate to become too predictable.

He moves through the apartment at his usual, disgustingly slow pace. There's not much he's actually accomplishing; I think he just wants to be doing something. I crawl along the ceiling, tracking him like a lion. He stops in the middle of the hallway, crouching down to the floor. I've made him dizzy again, scratched his brain in the little place that puts him slightly off balance. I think for a moment that he is about to weep, but he shoots back up so fast it almost startles me.

I'm bored of this again. Showing up in every mirror and photograph only gets me so far. Eventually, there's nothing I can do but hold my hand over his eyelids. One day maybe he'll finally close them for good. A fair fight at last, I've known the shadows for longer, I'm sure I'd beat him there.

I go sit on his bed and watch him pace the apartment. I think I see his lips move, muttering something devious, I'm sure. I move closer, curiosity getting the best of me, and perch right on his shoulder. It's a prayer. Unsurprising I guess, but I always wonder why a man like him doesn't burn up as soon as he says it. He's never been afraid of the church. Right after it happened, he even brought a priest in to bless the apartment. Made a big show of it too. That night I scratched the walls, once for every time the priest coughed up bloody phlegm.

Yet also, I think it makes perfect sense. One night I read the bible on his nightstand, my first time reading it through, and it all came together for me. I used to wonder how a man like him could pray to God, but God seems to be exactly who he is. Somewhere deep in his spine I think he knows himself to be old. I think he knows he was supposed to be born in the way back then, when a man like him was just another soldier kicking dust up on the streets.

Now he is nothing except the aching hand of fury which twitches through his hair. He pats the top of his head over and over, trying to get a grip on whatever thought he just let slip through his fingers. His mind is growing, his brain pushing against the boundaries of his skull. He is always most beautiful like this, when he stops pretending to be human at all. I never can hate him at these moments, when he lets himself shrink back to what he was with his hands around my throat. Then he is an animal, and I can forgive the spider for killing a fly. In a sick way, I wish he was like this all the time. It would make up for what he did if he just did it with reckless abandon.

I taste the sharp metal of shame, and there is an empty aching in the deep down place where I know that I am still the only one. If he did it again, I don't think I'd feel relieved. Sometimes it seems like he's only paused to get his bearings, but I'd like to think a part of it is because of the way I haunt him, the constant annoying reminders that I'm here, and I was once a human being.

He starts to stomp his feet like a toddler, counting the steps and snapping with the little pitter patter of the rain outside. I count with him, waiting for him to get to one hundred and twenty, when I know he'll stop and put on a record. This time it's jazz, the snapping having triggered some primal urge, something right up against his bones that screams at him to put on Pharoah Sanders and listen to the cool blue noises of the tenor saxophone.

He never dances, and I find that disconcerting. I always used to dance when I listened to music, my body moving of its own accord. He just stands still and absorbs it, sucking in the sounds around him and spitting them back out through the monotonous humming of his mouth.

Now, I just leak into every spore and cell of the apartment at one point or another. I ride the electricity through the stove, up the walls, and out into the bedside lamp. I scrape myself along the floor, feeling it change from carpet to smooth hardwood. I put myself right under his feet, and bite at his ankles with my imaginary teeth. He yelps each time, and I'm sure that he feels the sting of it. I'll make him dance.

We do this for hours, as usual. He stands still and I try to make him tick. I knock a photo off the wall, I increase the steady drip of a faucet. I blow into his ears and squeeze his spine as hard as I can.

"Demon," he whispers, and I shine my teeth to him in the reflection of each kitchen light.

His boots tracked mud into the apartment. He didn't notice it yet, but I know he'll blame me when he does. It smells moist, and I know exactly where it came from. That's the smell that fills my rotting nostrils every day, choking down my throat and burrowing into my skull with the gentle earthworms. It's always on the back of my tongue, and his footsteps seem to glow with the sheer familiarity. He's been back to the cool dirt patch where he buried me, probably leaving one white rose like he always does.

That's why he keeps the jazz on for so long. He's trying to drown me out again. I think my name plays in his head too often, and it irks him how he doesn't even know it. I slipped it to him in a dream months ago, and now it lives on the tip of his tongue. The syllables haunt him, never stringing together into coherency. Every time I'm near, I know it squeezes his hands until the bones feel brittle. He wishes he knew me better than just my screams and aching blood, better than just the watch still buried with my body, which marked my creeping time before he took it all away.

Now it is nighttime. We have been playing this game for hours. He wants to make dinner, but the groceries still aren't put away. He loathes the simple tasks, the small things that mean he is alive. I wonder if he'll go without eating again today. I hope he doesn't, the sound of his stomach in the nighttime is always comically annoying.

I retreat to the closet for a bit while he deliberates. He can't make choices very easily. Sometimes he'll even make a chart, a pros and cons list to decide what day this week is laundry day. I wonder if this cures the emptiness inside of him, but I think he only really felt full when his hand was in my stomach, grasping at things that should have only ever been mine.

That's something so curious about him. He brought a pair of pliers to break my ribs and stuck his hand straight through to my back. He liked to invade I guess, to poke and prod while my body was still warm. Even after all this time, I never could figure out why the stomach. The sensation was so strange, standing above, watching him work his fingers around my intestines. It

was curious enough that it didn't really matter at all. It was like watching a lizard cross in your path, just the laws of nature expanding and retracting with each steady breath.

I like to have my theories, the things I would write down if I still could. Usually, it's something about the softness of his mother, the longing for a womb that he can never have. He laid on my chest afterwards, as if some heartbeat still existed, scattered on the wind.

I think it might be years before he works up the courage to do it again. I was his first, as I'm always so aptly reminded when I see my worn old pale pink sweater. He keeps it pinned on the wall above his bed like some butterfly in a glass case, and he stares at it so hard sometimes I think that he's praying. For now, all he does is bring home fresh meats from the grocery store, sighing and groaning while he mixes his hands around in the soft pink flesh. He never cleans the mess on his bed afterwards, and I just sit there and watch the stains dry while he falls asleep, peaceful at last.

I want to be disgusted by the way he runs his hands across the light material, but after all this time it just feels like the way of nature now. I remember my sister clinging to those torn up sleeves, begging me to come home. Now he holds it just the same, begging for a different kind of relief, begging me to leave him in peace.

I'm watching from the back of the closet still, and am about to fade out for a moment until I hear the sudden, panicked pounding of footsteps headed towards me. He is holding a cross and throwing holy water at the walls. There are tears in his eyes, threatening to fall. I didn't do it this time, but he doesn't know that. Sometimes he feels the cold breeze from a window and works himself into a frenzy. It's usually amusing I guess, but at the moment I'm just annoyed.

He's muttering that prayer again, something about the archangel Michael. He knows I'm in here, and he pours out the bottle until it's gone. I sit there, quietly, contemplating the pores on his face. Pathetic, utterly pathetic. Of course he can't get rid of me, it would almost be a relief if he did. I try not to think about where I would go, if I would just float in the nothingness forever. I guess that wouldn't be too bad, I can never remember when I do that anyway. As always though, I stay because I'm hoping this way he'll be too scared to do it again, scared of what would happen if there were two of us here to deal with.

Once he's done, he goes and lays on the bed, arms outstretched and legs pinched together. His eyes roll back so he can stare at my sweater, and they twitch with the effort of staying in such a strenuous position. He breathes deep into his stomach, the way a newborn does, and chews his lip until it bleeds. Standing over him, it feels like I am miles away. Blood trickles down the side of his mouth, and he lets it fall like toothpaste. I remember how good it felt to bleed sometimes, and I want to be jealous, but I can only stand there and watch.

He hasn't changed the sheets on his bed in months, and every few feet there's a vestige of some bodily fluid or another. I wonder if it comforts him, to sleep like this, to be surrounded by proof that he is living.

I lay next to him, pretending to breathe in tandem. He is pathetic, I know, but right now he is so beautiful in all the wrong ways. I know him like no one else, and this is something I have come to resent. I see him in the mornings when he forgets for a single second who he is, and I walk with him each night as he picks paint off the walls before switching, inevitably, to picking off his own skin. I want him to hold me like he did that night, so loving and so hateful. I see how he is tired, and only I know why.

Where do we go from here, I wonder. What else is there left for me to do? Sit here for eternity, policing him like an angry mother? Right now I can just lay on this mattress, and I can pretend that we are old friends. I can imagine a clear blue sky above us, and hear the birds flitting through the trees. Maybe after this we'll see a movie, maybe he'll buy a diet coke from the corner store and let me finish it on the walk home.

If there were tears to shed, I have shed them. Now there is nothing but hollow rot and his steady, pounding heart spread out on the ocean of his body. I turn, and am startled to find him staring at me. His eyes are gleaming again, and the blood has dried around his mouth. I want to ask him questions, the ones that have been irking me every moment since that day.

"Am I stopping you? Will you do it again?"

My whisper fizzles out into the air around me. He raises his eyebrows slightly, and for a second I think he might actually answer. Instead, he lets one tear slip out from behind closed eyes, followed by another, and another after that.

I've never seen him actually cry, and to witness it is troubling. All these months he let the holy water stream down his walls, now that it is gone, does he mean to wash me away with his weeping?

I'm just so tired, and I know he is too. I wonder how we'll ever stop this dance, how we'll ever learn to rest in a way that isn't violent. Do I really owe this? It seems too high a price to pay, but every time I think of finally fading something about the memory of his hands inside me, the horrible ache of a last wheezing breath keeps me here, tasting the dirt on his hands every day to make sure they're still not tinged with blood.

His skin is cold and clammy, and he shivers slightly as I touch his cheek. There's a heat just below him though, the persistent echo of a life being lived. I want to suck it in, want to feel greedy for once as I take from him. This is the first time I've really touched him since his hands slid under my skin, and something about it feels good.

He starts to whisper again, this time exceedingly incoherent. It's fast though, the rhythm of it, and he pauses heavily with each heaving breath. I see him glance to the bible on his night stand, deciding something in the blank moment.

He turns back to me, and closes his eyes. There is feeling in his face, unnamed and shadowy. It grips me like the rising screech of an orchestra, enraptured in some true religion. I set my hand on his stomach, feeling the breath fill him up. Waves of emotion crash into me when I finally work up the courage to sink myself into him, his living flesh pulsing at my invasion.

I snake my way up against his ribs, setting myself on a path to his heart. He doesn't move, stops crying, and is quiet in a way that I've never seen him. His breathing becomes clearer, like my hand swept away some great obstacle in his lungs. I don't know what I am doing, I feel nothing about where I am.

I reach the beating center of him, feel the way it shudders at my touch. There is power here, I know it, and I feel more like something living than I ever have. He is peaceful now, his heart slowing to a caged howl.

I trace the vessels, track each blood cell with my pinkie. They hum in unison, and it makes me think of water waiting on the ocean floor. The world stops at the outline of his body, and my own breath returns like a favored memory. I like this way of pretending, the illusion of filling my lungs, but never before has it felt so real.

I sink myself lower, crawling into the warmth of his living body. It is like a blanket on a winter day, returning to the great darkness of the second before sleep. Maybe I can learn to rest in here, it feels so nice to scrape my nails against his bones. I stroke his skin from the inside, trace the outline of tattoos that must be years old. Every creeping thing around me works to make him whole, and I count them as I settle myself back further behind his ribcage.

The lungs inflate, and I whistle inside them. The skin is so soft here, like the manta rays you can pet in the aquarium pool. A constant rhythm beats with him, everything jumping to and fro with the fiery electricity coming from his brain.

Within the skull things feel heavy, and I don't like the hard edges I'm forced to withstand. I take a look at all his thoughts lighting up the dark, each one crossing itself a million times a minute. There's nothing more to see here, and I return to the softness just below his throat.

His muscles are nice to rub against, they shrink from my touch like little flowers closing in on themselves. Each one bunches together, then breathes out with the rest of him.

I skim along the bloodstream, dancing in time with the incredible speed of it. I ride through the body until I'm right back where I started, curled up at the center of his heart.

I didn't know, I guess, how nice it was to stick myself deep inside where I don't belong. I can't imagine there is anywhere in the world warmer than the beating hollow of his chest, and I've always grown so weary in the cold.

Now he is just a body, somewhere to keep myself when the world moves too slow. I don't know how long it is until he gets up from the bed, nor do I care anymore. I know he feels me here, he tenses and relaxes with the patterns of each of my thoughts.

He moves stiffly, like a soldier marching off to battle, and suddenly I find that I can squeeze my phantom hand, and he will squeeze his in response. The action sends electricity pulsing through me, his brain in a panic, knowing that now it is losing control.

I smile slowly, cautiously, a creature creeping out of its cave. His lips tug upwards in response, though he fights it, and I can't help but send a malicious jolt into his cheeks.

Through his eyes, I watch him pick up the bible on the nightstand. I'm curious to see what he does, so I lay back right above his mouth and let his muscles tense up on their own again. He walks himself downstairs, to the alleyway behind the complex, and takes the matches out from his coat pocket.

I never thought it was particularly blasphemous to burn a bible, not that I ever did it myself. But right now, it feels like releasing something, and strangely I begin to care about the pages curling in on themselves, writhing in the contained heat of the dumpster.

While I dip low into a little corner of his lungs, I feel a sound vibrating up through his throat. It's in his same old monotonous tone, but there's no urgency to it anymore. I snake my way up to his ears, curious at last about what it is he has to say.

My name, I think, bleeds out through his whisper. He reaches his hands to the smoke, and warms them over the fire. All the while, every syllable disappears into the waiting flames.

I exit through his mouth, much smoother than I entered, and stare at his lonely body with new eyes. He is sweating like he always does, and small drops of it catch the light of the fire. I think of myself, skin sliding off my bones and gasses bloating in my stomach, and resent the fact that I can never glow like that again, never really.

"Warmth" by Eve Henley-Rayve

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Honorable Mention in the 2023 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest

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The weight of what I'm about to do sits heavily on me, despite who he is, so I just stand to his right, gripping his hand with all the strength of the wind. We watch it together, the fire spread out of control. It winds its way up higher and higher into the sky. I hear it then, a word in all the chaos.

"God" he says, a soft quiver in his voice.

"God" I agree, already inching my way back into his skin.