

— They Will Never Learn —

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WilderHoney

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Lola practically blew the apartment door off its hinges. A few neighbours would be awake. If Tanya jumped any higher, she would meet the neighbour above. She put down the wooden spoon. Lola glared at the everything around her, face ringing up murder, collect-call. She dumped her handbag next to the door. It screamed, “Fuck everything, I need a drink!” Tanya opened the fridge.

Lola had a routine she went through every evening after work, a self-care ritual. A cup of tea, a sit down. She takes off her make-up, takes a long, a hot shower. By the time she’s out, Lola is ready to rejoin the world at large. Into some comfortable clothes and, depending how far off Tanya is with dinner, maybe a few pages of a book—Lola was riding that N.K Jemisin train (and loving it!). Dinner. More reading. Bed.

Tonight she didn’t bother. Her brain was still at work, seething. The book: an important, near priceless tome, older than anyone knew.

Lola stalked to her room, ripping off her skirt, vest, shirt and bra, threw on another top and stalked back out, wordlessly. She fell on the couch, pantyhose still on. Tanya handed her a beer. They’d ordered out twice after dinner: pizza, then curry. Lola glared at the TV. A cooking show was on. Lola hated it more than usual. A skinny man on the show slipped up with a knife and, in the most purple moment on TV, cut himself.

Maybe Jung had been onto something with synchronicity.

Tanya wasn't been in that day. Lola told her about the book over dinner. Lola brushed Tanya off when she brought the book up again. Lola gulped the last of her beer and went to bed. She was done with the day. It could, frankly, go get fucked. She fell asleep near immediately, buzzed and with a full belly.

Next morning, Lola was up early with the nagging feeling that she had forgotten something. She peeled the covers off her. She was still in her pantyhose. The night before hit her like a speeding wasp in the eye and she shot out of bed to the shower.

A thing about the **School** Lola assumed was the truth and then held onto like it was gospel: If you walk with purpose and a clear idea of where you wanted to go, you would get there. Eventually. She held fast to that idea even as Tanya and students told her it was a load. "Just have a little confidence," Lola told them. "Fake it 'til you make it, if you can'," she told them, like a frustrating, but well meaning aunt. Whenever she arrived at the library, such as now, Lola tallied another notch on her mental score card.

First thing she planned to do that morning, as her bag hit her desk in the library office —glorious sanctuary from noisy students: get to the bottom of the damaged book. She sat down. Her heart dropped. An origami pigeon was perched on the old banker's lamp on her desk, Lola's name written across the beak. Lola carefully unfolded the pigeon: **She** wanted to see Lola. Now! Right now! What are you still doing here, Librarian?

Lola gulped, stood. An ornate black and silver door appeared on the far wall of the office. It opened. Lola, shaking, slowly moved to it.

She reemerged from the door. Tanya was sorting returns, putting books onto the trolley

so they could be returned to their shelf homes according to the laws of Dewey. Tanya rushed over when she saw Lola's shaking hands and wet eyes. Lola felt raw. Her nerves, her mind. Her skin felt every part of her sweater like a cheese grater on her skin. She gritted her teeth when Tanya held her, the skin on her back screaming under Tanya's arms. "What happened?"

"**She...She,**" Lola choked into Tanya's chest. She cleared her throat, tried again, "**She** knows...the book."

Tanya let go. She took a step back, eyes wide. She bumped into the corner of Lola's desk. Lola grabbed her hand to stop her falling. "What do you mean '**She** knows'?" Tanya asked

Lola wiped her eyes. "Exactly that. **She** knows," Lola took a shaky sip of her third coffee of the day. "**She** would like me to find who did it and...punish them."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly that." A grin broke across Lola's face. **Her** words dawned on Lola. She didn't know the language, would never be able to wrap her tongue around it. But the meaning...the meaning was oh, so clear.

"**She** knows." Lola said.

—

< call them Mel, Sophie and...Clarissa >

Lola froze, book in hand. She blinked at it. The hell? Across the counter, a student stared, his eyes drifted from her face to her chest. Returning to the present, Lola eyed him.

“Yes?” She scanned the book, stamped the return date and gave it back to him. He smiled sheepishly, face red, turned and marched away stiffly. Tanya giggled. “One guess what he’s thinking about tonight.” Now Lola went red. He’d better just make sure he brings that book back, or the end of the year could get very interesting for him.

Tanya left early in the afternoon. It was one of those days: Hunting days. She waved to a jealous Lola as a study group was followed in by another study group, then a class of younger students. *Thanks Tanya*, Lola thought, readying for chaos.

They came five minutes later. The three. They entered together and began searching for a table. Lola watched them. Something about them, Lola had seen them before about the **Lchsoo**. She recognised them in the same way she recognised all the students. Vaguely.

Today, it felt different. Lola didn’t buy into preds having stronger senses, but those three—Mel, Sophie, Clarissa; Somehow Lola knew their names—they smelled guilty. They didn’t act it, but she smelled it on them.

Five o'clock. The Study groups quietly filed out. The younger class flew the library in a flurry of squeals and a mess of books on the floor. Lola saw the girls were still at their table as she started cleaning up. Good? A plan formulated.

“Working late, girls?” Lola asked, wheeling the trolley to the aisles of shelves behind them.

“Yeah,” one of them said—Lola didn't sure which girl was which. She had bright pink hair.

Lola had almost finished putting books away when she noticed one of the girls out the corner of her eye. She stood at the end of the aisle, looking at Lola. “Can I help you...Mel?—

< “Can you help me with...a thing. Over there.” Lola points at
some bushes >

—What the hell? What was that? Lola tried to keep herself level as she watched the girl. Somewhere far off, maybe on the other side of the library, Lola heard splashing, water slapping on concrete. Behind and above that, over-excited students. Looking around, Lola saw no source for the noise.

“Um...no-no. I'm good. Just needed...to get past, that's all.” Mel's smile was sweet, shy and small. She looked like she felt guilty for having to ask Lola to move. For Lola, it was a nice change of pace; most students go about it much, much more rudely. It was nice to not have to ‘move her fat ass’ for a change. Lola flattened up against the shelf so Mel could get past.

Exactly as She wanted. Exactly as Lola wanted.

Lola watched Mel out the corner of her eye as she worked. The way she treated the books! Lola and Tanya worked so damn hard to keep this library in order, to keep the books and students all safe. And Mel just...just threw them wherever! That doesn't go there! That's a natural science book, it doesn't go there! Mel! Why? How could you? Lola's frustration was indescribable. The betrayal was massive.

Yes, of course. Mel was to have been one of the monsters who destroyed the book. No doubt. **She** was right—**She** usually is. Lola placed the book she held back on the trolley, turned to Mel. Slowly, methodically, Lola slithered down the aisle. Mel intently studied the blurb of a book about bugs. The aisle they were in was a dead end. Wonderful! Lola licked her lips.

She pounced on Mel. Mel let out a sharp, shrill little noise, somewhere between a squeak and scream. *Fuuuck!* Back at the tables, Lola heard chairs shifting on carpet, then “Mel? Mel! You okay?”

Lola glared down at Mel. She touched her finger to her lips and shook her head. Mel gulped. Mel shook. Voice trembling, lips quivering, Mel called, “No n-no! I mean...yes! Yeah!

I'm okay! Just a...a..." Mel trailed off.

The other girls' voices grew louder, closer, questioning Mel. In hindsight, Lola had panicked. Her glare darkened. From the open end of the aisle, the others heard a gasp and loud wet gulps and slurps and glups and other sounds. The others saw their librarian, always so calm, so kind, eating Mel. Swallowing her like a snake. They saw Mel's legs slide down into the librarian's wide-open maw. Her belly pushed out, dragging the bottom of her sweater out from the waistband of her pants. The girls did what any sane person would.

They bolted.

Like startled cows by the side of the highway, they ran. They fled from the pred.

Lola would have sworn, but her mouth was full. She swallowed the last of Mel, taking a moment to enjoy Mel sliding down her throat and curling up inside her belly. The switch in her predator brain had flicked. The girls had thrown down the proverbial. Lola would've bent down to pick it up, but with her belly...She settled on giving chase.

The going was slow. Lola followed her ears after the girls. The foolish girls, yelling "This way!" and "In here!" like they've never been chased by a hungry librarian before. Their loud steps echoing along the empty halls. Empty except for the cleaner. They stepped aside for Lola, singing their strange songs. Lola rounded a corner. She stopped, almost screamed in frustration. She was outside the library again, it's dark wood panel entrance mocking her. Lola stamped a foot, ready to throw a tantrum. Then, she heard the girls ins—

< struggle as she worked her way over Clarissa's giant gut. It
didn't stop her though, just slowed her down >

—A small glow appeared in front of Lola, at about head height. Lola started. The air was suddenly cold approaching freezing. Lola felt a tightness in her chest. Mel felt like she had begun to shiver in Lola's belly. The glow didn't seem to affect the walls and the floor

around it, didn't share any of it's glow with the world.

Lola raised a hand towards it. Light pooled between and around her fingers, reflecting off of her ring. Inside the glow, seemingly a million miles away, or at least that was the sense that Lola got from it, an inescapable distance that brought on vertigo. Though the distance could be described—easily—the sheer amount of it put a strange sadness in her. There was something there, across that distance. Someone.

Well. Alright then, Lola awkwardly shifted her feet before the glow, not sure what else she could do. The glow made her uneasy. Not wanting to be near it anymore, Lola entered the **Shcolo** library.

The library had rearranged itself since Lola had run off after the girls. It was helpful like that. Now, the service desk formed a ring in the centre with all the shelves fanning out from it, like flower petals or radiation off the sun. Wonderful. Lola took a seat at the desk and waited. Voices, footsteps, careless bumping into the heavy wooden shelves and knocking them over like dominoes, displaying good comedic timing. Anything that would give the girls away.

Movement, at the far end of the mythology section. Lola spun in her chair to face the sound. It was hard to make anything out in the late evening gloom, but Lola could just about see a silhouette. Someone's arm perhaps. Through the windows, orange reflected off low, dark clouds. Lola groaned, rubbed her temples.

This complicated things. Was it one of the girls or one of them? Inside her, Mel sobbed. Lola rubbed her belly, in an attempt to calm her. Others roamed the place after sundown. The library belonged to Them. Lola didn't need that company. And They didn't want company.

The air around the silhouette glowed a faint magical purple and pink. It put the silhouette in contrast. That yanked hold of Lola's attention. And her excitement. Glowing wasn't really Their thing. Neither was magic. But it was a similar colour to one of the girls' dye-job.

“Hello, Clarissa,” Lola called—stupid move—softly into the dark aisle. The silhouette disappeared, confirming Lola’s suspicion. However, the pink and purple glow remained, shifting across the shelves and books, its movement becoming more erratic as Lola stood and walked down the aisle, towards the source. Lola really hoped she was right. Terrible things would happen if she’d fucked up.

Frightened whimpers started as Lola approached the end of the aisle. Maybe it had something to do with Lola's heavy footsteps and the loud churning of her gut? Mel's muffled, terrified wailing certainly helped. “Clarissa?” Lola relished in the sound of the whimpering in a very schadenfreude-y way

The end of the aisle. The moment of truth. Behind her, the library door crashed open, footsteps sprinting. Lola swore under her breath. She'd deal with that later. But right now? Lola peeked her head 'round the edge of the shelving. There was Clarissa, hunkered down and cowering before Lola. Clarissa was frantically trying to cover up her hair with her arms. It didn't work. There was too much of it and all of it glowed. “Nononono,” she whispered.

Yesyesyes, Lola thought, mouth salivating. So close now. She leaned out from the aisle, holding her head right over Clarissa.

Lola waited.

Eventually, finally, Clarissa looked up. Their eyes met. Clarissa's lips trembled. Lola's pared back, baring her teeth. “Good evening,” Lola opened wide.

On her hands and knees, Lola's belly was squashed out to her sides. She smacked her lips, “Mmm, mmm, mmm.” Lola squeezed the side of her belly, traced a finger over a bulge (A hand? An elbow?) A faint glow throbbled through the skin of her belly. She suppressed a belch. One more to deal with.

As Lola pulled herself to her feet, one of the girls—probably Clarissa—kicked or punched. Hard. Lola almost came down again. She held onto the shelves for support and almost brought that down. “Hey!” In the dark library, Lola realised just what a mistake that

was. A section away, something slid a book back onto a shelf, murmuring, annoyed. Sounds, like a dragging, almost lurching movement started.

“Nice,” Lola muttered. “Yeah, thanks girls.” Time to go. Fast as one can when they’re approximately the size of a bus, Lola made her way to the entrance, using the shelves to support her, keeping an eye out for shapes in the aisles. Behind her, she was aware of a gathering.

Outside, once again back in the **Shoclo** proper, Lola held a hand to her chest. If she could still reach it, Lola would’ve played with her bellybutton. It was a stress reaction. Instead, she focused on the immediacies. The girls were restless. Lola stroked her stomach and made soothing noises. “Okay girls. It’s alright.” Next: her surroundings.

The hallways had shifted. Again. The direction Lola’d come was closed off, the usual stone wall and a notice board in its place. Lola noticed that the same pop punk band still needed a bassist. Behind her, They lurched around, looking for *things*.

So, really only one choice, then. Lola huffed and lugged herself down the cool hallway.

Twice, Lola heard panicked scabbling footsteps while she walked—no, prowled—searching for her final prey. Lola tried classroom doors. Most were locked, helpfully narrowing—

< enters the toilets, Lola calls out softly. “Soph! Are you in here?” >

—The glow again. It hovered, larger than before, in the centre of the hallway before Lola. The world grew cold as Lola approached it. There was still something inside it. Leaning in despite the cold, despite tears like icicles burning her cheeks, Lola looked in, through the glow.

She saw...herself. Distant, below her as though Lola watched from a far off tower or skyscraper or lookout point. Using a pair of coin operated binoculars, likely. The ceiling was cut away around this other Lola—younger looking than herself. Other Lola was approaching a locked toilet stall. Other Lola held her ear to the stall door. She knocked on it. Inside the stall, Lola felt the presence of unaware prey, felt the excitement well in Other Lola. Lola felt that selfish instinct that was inside all preds. Lola reached for this Other Lola, for the occupants of the stall, so blissfully unaware. They were *hers*. All hers...

Lola yanked her arm back. She jumped back from the glow, lost balance and fell on her backside. Rocking, holding her hand tightly to her chest. It felt like ice. Gasping, teeth chattering, Lola attempted to get herself under control. Deep breathing: in for a count of four. Out for a count of eight.

FourEightFourEight

Four...Eight...Four...Eight...Foour...Eiight...Foouurr...Eiiiggght...

Lola risked a glance at her hand. Her skin had turned blue. Her fingers were numb. She tried to flex them. They obeyed her, just barely. When she looked back up, the glow had disappeared. Lola was alone, shaking on the floor. In the distance, something crashed and shattered. A small, surprised yelp followed it.

Well then, Lola thought, blinking tears from her eyes. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her good hand.

For the first time ever, Lola caught the **Loochs** shifting. Lola stopped at the end of a hallway, her choices left or right. Suddenly, without fanfare, a wall was there. Right was the only choice now. Lola was incredibly disappointed. Tanya at least injected a little bit of fanfare into her magic.

So Lola went right. The halls twisted and turned. Some of the walls were just blank walls and notice boards advertising pop punk bands in need of bassists, the same as what Lola saw out front of the library. Maybe the **Slocob** was on Lola's side. The book belonged to

it. It only made sense that it wanted the perpetrators punished. Lola was happy to serve.

Lola was terrified of **Her**.

Lola turned a corner and found herself faced with a dead end, one door set into the wall. Female Toilets. Lola blinked. The glow. The toilets she'd seen other Lola in—

< pushes her way inside the cramped stall >

—Lola felt the air turn frigid. She knew the glow was behind her, refused to look at it again. Lola heard a muffled voice from the other side of the door. The heavy wood groaned as Lola pushed open the door. She heard the groan of another door opening, just out of sync with hers, like T.V's in separate rooms, tuned to the same channel.

This was not one of the **School** bathrooms. There were no tiles, none of the bulky wooden stalls. No worked copper and porcelain central wash basin, rusty and stained from the years. No mirrors engraved with ornate borders, created in a state that only existed off to the side of history books.

Instead, Lola saw concrete floors, thin board stalls and basins just holding onto the wall. Vaguely reflective metal plates served for mirrors. Lola's reflection—distorted in the metal—looked around a metal-greyed room in the wall. Echoes of children and water filled the room.

The stalls were all open. Empty.

Lola turned, looked around. Again. Again. Up. Down. Inside each stall. Under the sinks. Nothing and no one.

Lola balled up her fists, held in a frustrated scream. It wasn't fair! The air around her seemed to vibrate. Rhythmic creaking around her like breathing. Giggling. A metal plate

mirror fogged over. An invisible finger drew a smiley face.

“Fuck you!” Lola snapped. And she was standing in the **Oschol** toilets again, pointing an accusing finger at a mirror.

Sophie literally ran into Lola. By Lola’s watch, it was almost eight when they bumped into each other again. A hallway spat Lola out onto the many levelled quad. As Lola made her way across it, a pale, brightly dressed shape shot down the stairs and charged Lola screaming a war cry. Lola stopped, surprised. This one was Soph. She had to be. “Oh.” Soph hit.

Soph hit hard. The impact knocked Lola to the ground, winded. In her belly, the girls screamed. Soph bounced off Lola and was launched back onto the concrete sprawling.

Hands attempted to climb back up her oesophagus. Lola dry-heaved. Lola sucked down air, fighting to keep them inside. Sophie lay on the ground not far away.

Lola winced. Grunting, she got to her knees and crawled to Sophie. The day was coming to a nice end.

Or, maybe not quite yet.

Lola knelt down beside Sophie and placed a hand on Soph's shoulder. Lola gently shook her, putting on a concerned smile. Sophie started to come to, her eyes fuzzy. “Sweetie,” Lola murmured, voice maternally gentle. “Sweetie, are you okay?”

Soph groaned. Slowly, she propped herself up on her elbows. “Oww. What happened?” She blinked, eye’s spaced out.

“You fell. Nasty landing. Are you alright? Do you need a drink? Some water?”

“N-no. No. I’m okay.”

Lola smiled and pushed herself to her feet. She held a hand down for Sophie. “Let’s get you back to your dorm, okay? You need a lie down, I think.”

Soph took Lola’s hand and let her pull her up. Unsteady, wobbling, Soph leaned on Lola. Lola put an arm around her. Soph leaned against Lola’s side.

They started for Soph’s dorm. Lola felt the slightest touch of warmth on her arm. On Soph’s other side, Lola swore that she saw someone, a ghost of an arm over Soph’s other shoulder. Lola couldn’t couldn’t make out who it was.

Soph didn't seem to notice the ghost arm. She glanced at Lola’s belly. “Di’n’t know you were pregnant,” She muttered.

“It...was very recent,” Lola said in sync with another person. The other voice sounded like Lola through a garbled radio, voice crackling and distant. “I guess you can't see it across the desk.” Mel and Clarissa screamed at Soph. She was too out of it to notice. Lola smacked the other side of her belly, a warning.

Soph nuzzled into Lola’s side. She tripped and stumbled every few steps. It must have been some spill for her. She barely spoke, instead pointing the way to her dorm room. They got lost twice. “Hopefully Mel and Clar’ll be there. I...haven't seen them since...since the library,” She glanced across at Lola's belly again. Lola felt her prey shift, felt Sophie pull away slightly. Lola loosened her grip on Sophie.

They stopped in front of a dorm room. Hand shaking, Soph unlocked it and stepped inside. She started closing the door. Lola held it with a hand. “I really think I should wait with you. Until the girls get back, don't you think? I wouldn't be doing my job very well if I let you stay alone in your state, would I?” Lola put her gentlest smile and voice behind it. They weren't untrue. She didn't want to see Sophie hurt. With the rare exception, Lola didn't

want to see any of—

< better than sex for her >

—Lola paused. What the fuck? What the actual fuck? The ghost sat at the edge of Lola's vision. Lola turned to it, to get a better look. It was too blurry, too out of focus. Lola felt them though, felt their presence. It felt ominous.

A parade of giddy glee marched through her stomach, making it do somersaults. Lola looked down at her belly, the outlines of the girls squirming inside it rippling over her skin. They felt so *good* there. *Oh, fuck me.*

Soph stepped aside and gestured for Lola to come in. She closed the door and dropped onto one of the beds as Lola took the room in. The girls had plastered the walls over their beds with pictures. Family, friends, pets back home. Mel had arranged hers in the shape of a heart, her name sitting centre.

Soph had her phone out, tapping. Soph held it to her ear, brought it down after a few seconds. Soph tapped again, put the phone to her ear, brought it down. Lola felt small vibrations in her belly. A ringing chime too. Ah. Game over, she guessed.

Soph jabbed the screen. Desperate. Soph backed up against the wall. Soph curled into a ball.

Lola took a step forward. She raised her hands in front of her. "Soph."

"Just stay away. Please."

"Soph." Lola was beside the bed now, her belly jutting halfway over the mattress. Lola felt the taut skin brush against Soph's shins.

Soph curled up tighter. A sharp sob escaped. Lola knelt on the bed. She loomed over

Soph, opened her mouth. Soph cried out. She dropped her phone.

Lola swallowed the last of Soph, scrawny legs sliding down her throat. Lola watched her belly grow with her newest passenger—tenant, guest, whatever. It was as though Soph had given up and gone limp. Admittedly, it was occasionally nice to have prey just accept their fate. It made things easier.

Lola sat on the edge of Soph's bed. She landed on something small and rectangular. She fished it out from under herself: Soph's phone. The screen lit up. Lola saw message notifications. From Clarissa: 'Run!', 'shes fucking eaten us HELP'. A little later: 'just run. please', 'SOPH DONT LET HER IN THE ROOM' Lola grinned, stroked a large-ish bump on her belly.

“Didn't quite work, Clarissa,” Lola smiled. She tried not to sound too smug.

“Fuck you!” Clarissa, Lola guessed, slammed a fist or a foot into the walls of Lola's stomach. Lola smacked back. It was Lola's loss. She just ended up hitting herself. She hissed in pain and frustration

“Now, now. Maybe it isn't the smartest idea to attack a woman if you're stuck in her tummy, hmm? I don't have to be nice.”

Clarissa started up again, but one of the other girls shushed her. They were wise, whichever one it was. Lola reached under her belly, undid the button of her pants. She kicked off her shoes and stretched out along the bed. Her belly smooshed out across her lap. The weight of the girls, The way her belly pressed Lola against the mattress. It threatened to send Lola into a food coma. She let her eyes all shut—

< The room was dark, night completely set in. The only light in the room was the vague orange glow of a far below streetlight. Lola stared around, confused. This wasn't her bedroom. As she woke up, things came back to her. This wasn't the pool

bathroom either. Lola sat up on the bed. Where was she?

This looked like a dorm room. Her eyes widened and she stared around frantically. She was alone. Teachers were forbidden to enter student dorms without reason. The consequences for doing so are..

severe.

Lola swallowed, a dry lump working it's way down her throat. Her belly was significantly smaller than it had just been. And she wasn't wearing her one piece anymore either. Instead, just a smart grey woollen sweater. Her legs were bare, her pants bunched up down at the end of the bed. Lola could also see her underwear. Her eyes widened even further. She felt someone else's fear. It felt so similar to her own but so alien.

Lola needed answers. Where exactly was she? Why was she there? And, most importantly, how could she get home again? Lola stood, feeling dizzy. Her head felt like it was a second out of sync with the rest of her body. Standing there, half-naked, in the pale orange light, Lola tried to get a better sense of her surroundings but the room was just a little too dark to make anything other than silhouettes out.

She flicked on the light >

—Lola stared at herself in the mirror. She was standing. She could've sworn she was just lying down. The light was on now. She touched her face. Mirror Lola touched hers. Lola slowly moved over to stand in front of the full length mirror next to Mel's bed...

Her belly! She wasn't this big before! Mirror Lola looked like she took up the whole room. Turning to her side, Lola found Mirror Lola's pants were gone. Same with her underwear. Oh shit! Lola looked down. She frowned. Her sweater was gone. A bright—way too bright for her—

< Lola blinked. She was in the pool bathroom again. She still wore the sweater. This wasn't her sweater >

—This wasn't her swimsuit. Something was off. She'd seen this swimsuit before. On the other Lola that she'd seen in the glow before, knocking on the toilet stall door. Her body felt off, wrong. It didn't feel like her own. She reached down and cupped a breast. They felt bigger in her hand. Reaching down, she squeezed her backside. That was definitely bigger, wider.

Lola watched Mirror Lola. She held herself the same way. Mirror Lola let her hands drop to her sides.

Quick, Lola checked her own hands. She still groped herself.

Mirror Lola looked down at her body again, then at Lola. Right at Lola. Mirror Lola frowned—

< She'd stolen Lola's body. She wore Lola's skin. Without thinking, Lola reached out to her. That wasn't hers. Lola wanted her damn skin back >

—No. No, Lola wasn't staying here. This wasn't right. Lola turned her back on the mirror. Her pants had fallen down the side of Soph's bed. Lola used a toe to scoop them from the floor and brought them to her hand.

Lola almost fell over trying to get them on. Nerves made her shake. After the fifth failed attempt, Lola just threw them to the ground. She contemplated just legging it from the room, but knew that she couldn't. Strange as this place was, a teacher walking around half-naked still resulted in being fired. Blacklisted too. Lola had student loans to pay.

Lola turned back to the mirror. Mirror Lola beat her fists on the surface of the mirror. Lola heard her fists hit the glass. Mirror Lola rammed her shoulder into the glass. A small thud, nothing more. She rammed it over and over, face contorting into something Lola didn't recognise as herself.

Lola found herself stifling a giggle. How pathetic this mirror version of her was! Her giggles became full-bore laughter.

Lola took hold of the mirror and lifted it off the floor. Mirror Lola wobbled on her feet, holding the edge of a basin to keep upright.

Lola shook the mirror. Mirror Lola fell to the floor. Lola laughed.

The world around Mirror Lola fell, like a sandcastle collapsing. The walls of the dorm room in the mirror gave way to the bathroom Lola had found herself in earlier.

Mirror Lola scuttled into a corner, holding the wall. Mirror Lola attempted to contort herself into a ball but couldn't. Mirror Lola's belly was in the way. Mirror Lola *squeezed* her belly between her legs. Mirror Lola began to shake.

Lola lifted the mirror over her head. She heard Mirror Lola scream as she pegged the mirror at the wall. She heard the thud as the corner embedded itself in the plaster—a long droning screech sounded all around Lola. The world shuddered. The mirror shattered. Shards rained on the carpet.

Lola leaned over the pieces. She caught glimpses of the bathroom, rearranged into jagged, confused shards. She caught a glimpse of Mirror Lola, contorting, skin torn on the edges of each shard.

Someone sobbed.

Lola backed away from the shattered mirror, heart pounding in her ears.

She fell back onto one of the beds. She sat there, catching her breath, trying to control her shaking hands.

She picked her pants up and tried pulling them on again. They slid up to her knees just

fine. Between her belly and her thighs apparently being fatter, they refused to come further. Lola tried to force them. She stopped at the first sound of fabric tearing. Groaning, frustrated; She was so done with the day. Just let her put on some clothes and go home already.

Lola's eyes fell upon a chest of drawers. *Of course*. She pushed herself up and teetered over to them. Lola found socks, underwear, bras, a spare pack of tampons in the top drawer.

Lola opened the drawer beneath. She rummaged through tops. "You girls wouldn't happen to have anything in a size...*Me?*" Lola caressed her massive gut. Somehow, this swimsuit hadn't torn. It held her belly in a snug cocoon of too-bright blue. Lola pulled out a lovely knit sweater dress. Tanya would like that. She put it to the side.

"I don't think they make clothes that big," Clarissa's muffled voice was bitter.

"Now now," Lola tutted, patting her belly.

"Clarissa's might fit," Mel said.

"No!" Clarissa shouted.

Lola picked out a silver sequin top. Another for Tanya. To the side. "Look, Clarissa, I can't exactly fit into my clothes anymore. Just be a dear and tell me what I'd look...less...*strange* going home in."

A muffled sigh from within Lola. "Just take whatever you want. I'll replace it later."

"Oh, you aren't getting out."

There was a renewed struggle. "What do you mean?" one cried. Shrill and shaking, another pleaded, "Please don't...don't digest us!" They all pleaded. They tripped and tumbled over each other begging.

"Who said anything about digesting? I know I didn't. No, I think I'll just keep you in

there a while. Maybe forever. I haven't quite made up my mind."

"But...but our studies. Our families. And...and...an—"

"Girls," Lola picked out another top and slipped it over her head. It wasn't meant to be one, but on Lola, it was a crop top. Another dress for Tanya. "After what you did to that book, I could care less. You're staying where you are until I decide otherwise. Maybe that's next week, maybe it's never."

"But that's not fair!"

"It wasn't fair for the book either!" Lola picked out a lovely skirt. Maybe Lola and Tanya could share that one. Lola looked around for a bag to carry the clothes in. She found—funnily enough—a library bag. Lola stashed the clothes. "And if you do want to see your families again—and that's only fair, I'm not a complete monster—then I'm sure I could make room. It could get cramped though.

"But—"

"No," Lola said gently. She was tired. She just wanted to take the clothes and go. Truth told: she didn't really have any desire to digest the girls. As she'd said: She wasn't a complete monster. Lola pulled out a pair of shiny black leggings. "Ooh!" Lola sat back down on the bed and pulled them on. They were tight and bending down was out of any question, but they were comfortable.

Lola rummaged around through the other drawers, but nothing jumped out and took her fancy.

She grabbed the library bag from the bed and turned to leave. The window frosted over. It was instant, clear one moment, opaque the next. Lola's breath fogged. Goosebumps pimples her arms. The room became so cold her skin burned.

"Oh no. Noo!"

Above the mirror shards, at about the height of the corner that got jammed into the plaster, was a small dot.

A bright dot.

A *glowing* dot.

The room burst into bright burning cold light. Lola snatched Soph's keys from the desk. *Don't look don't look don't look don't look!* Lola moved faster than a predator in her condition should be able to, backing through the door. Her belly wedged against the frame. Lola groaned, pushed against the wood.

Stuck.

Fuck.

A limb reached out of the dot. The growing, glowing dot. The limb was human. The limb was not human. The limb was familiar. Lola had never seen it before in her life.

The limb was Lola's.

Lola's arm did not look like that. Lola's arm did not bend like that. The skin was cracked. The skin oozed, dripped on the floor. An eye slithered down its length. If fixated on Lola

A body followed. Or maybe not a body. Lola cried. The girls screamed in her belly—

< They screamed inside of her >

—Lola strained. Muscles burning, threatened to tear. Body aching. Feet slipping on ice cold floors.

Ice formed across everything in the room. The window cracked. Lola's body came loose, she fell back. Her ass froze on the floor.

Wet black/blue/white shapes glared at Lola. An anguished/terrified/furious roar echoed out from the dot, distant, like at the far end of a long tunnel.

Getting closer.

Lola rolled on the floor. The girls groaned as she managed to roll onto her stomach. Lola scrambled to her knees. She slammed the door shut. The cold stopped. The sound stopped. The glow stopped.

Lola jammed the key in the lock, twisted it, snapped it. She rattled the handle: definitely locked.

Lola got the fuck away from that place.

Lola couldn't stop shaking. The girls sobbed. They said they didn't see it. They said they didn't hear it. But Mel and Clarissa swore they felt *something*. Soph changed the subject, trembling, tears in her eyes.

The room was gone next semester.