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Naked Revival

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Naked Revival

Joslynn Howard

For Jessi

PART I

SHE STANDS BEYOND THE BLOOMING GREENBELT. I stare from a distance, admiring the foreboding notion of an approaching death. Her hair — the color and smell of honey and cinnamon — captures my undivided attention. I wish to wrap the curls around my fingers and tie her to me for safekeeping, but the drastic emerald of the greenbelt cuts all ties that could ever, and will ever, connect us.

Spinning in a circle, I am unable to pinpoint where the blue ends and where the treetops begin. My preferred sky is that dark night time being that merges with the trees without question of where one starts and the other ends. It drapes across the earth with solid assurance that it hides me from the monsters that come out to play when the sun goes down. Undeterred by the awareness of my own monstrosity, I embrace this harsh midnight with a sense of pride that I have mastered it. Until I come to understand that I am wrong, and it has only mastered me. The betrayal of this complex and unequal relationship haunts me when the blue becomes bright and I, too, must lighten up.

I focus my energy upon the young woman who is welcoming the brightness of day. I feel something close to envy. With her face turning upwards to the sky, her honeysuckle hair glints as it reflects the rays of the sun and her pale cream skin accepts warmth into her pores. My jealousy grows with every glance and I am determined to know what makes her so shamelessly fearless. I sit weak and timid on this bench beneath a tree on the edge of my own dying orchard.

My first step, tender and unsure, is that of a toddler's. The earth remains solid beneath my bare feet and I exhale.

I reach her and I realize that I am uncertain as to why I decided to go to her in the first place. She gazes at me, her lips turning upwards into a coy smile.

Having forgotten what I must know, I say, “Tell me.”

“I don’t know anything that you can’t learn for yourself.”

Her speech is so smooth; it falls from her mouth in a waterfall of perfect pitch. I want to tear at her beautiful throat with my painted blue claws. With a fading smile, she disappears into the surrounding trees and disperses with the wood that blackens as the sun sets.

PART II

THE WATER IS HOT. It burns, but I cannot bring myself to leave the womb of liquid in which I have submerged myself. I am the embryo that never hatched — never emerged from its porcelain shell. The water moves as I move, shaping itself to fit snugly around my soft body. I am covered with a distinct layer of clarity. It is magnifying my flaws. Suddenly, I feel overwhelmed. I push myself up and out of my incubator.

From the bathroom window, I stare out at my dying orchard. Each year, the harvest becomes a fading endeavor. Barefoot and naked beneath my towel, I make my way to the edge of the orchard, where I sat earlier that week admiring the unnamed young woman.

Without shame, I let the towel drop onto the dirt floor, shivering as the cold air envelops me. Taking firm steps across the soft dirt with bare feet, I lay my naked body across the damp soil and sigh. I melt into the earth and feed the trees with the water dripping from my skin. My soul dissolves and mixes with the soil. I have never felt more grounded.

A soft gasp and a rustle of leaves — these are the warning signs. I’m afraid that if I move, my existence might come to a halt.

“Dear God.”

I feel the earth shift beneath me.

She stands at the end of my feet and whispers, “He can’t hear you.”

“I know that.” This is a flimsy defense case. We both know it. “I was just saying it.”

“Why?” She stalks around me, and only then do I notice her nakedness. “Why do you say things just to say it?”

“Because that’s what people do.”

“Don’t be like people.” She sits beside me and her naked side brushes mine.

We fall in love in a way that is meant to be, and that angers me. It starts with a kiss in the orchard. It nearly kills me. My heart stutters and stops for a half a second. It has been trying to catch up for lost time ever since.

PART III

THE WAVES CRASH AND CURL, TIME AFTER TIME.

The sky stretches out before me, meeting the sea at a halfway point that does not exist. Infinity is terrifying when all I do is think about the end.

Crash. My soul winces. Curl. My toes dig deeper into the hot sand. Crash. I am alive. Curl. My heart syncs with the tides and I am one with the sea. Crash. This is what it feels like to just be. Curl. I am wishing that it was always this simple. Crash.

When the sun begins to set and the children leave the beach, we set out towards the cooling water. It prunes our naked skin and I struggle to keep my head just above the surface. It would be too easy to dive beneath the bluish green and never return. I could make friends with all the creatures that shimmer and glide. This is my chance, I think, but her legs brushing against mine bring me back to reality.

Back on the beach, she wraps her hair in a towel and

exhales, “I love you.”

There is no hesitation or confusion in her words. Suddenly, I realize that this is an emergency. Life or death situations of “could be love” are what keep me up at night. I love in simple desperation to be loved in return, but this moment is so surreal that I worry it is all a ploy to break my flimsy heart.

“Thank you, Eve.”

Instantly, I regret it. I open my mouth, close it, open it again, and snap it shut once more.

Her laugh is surprising, but my body relaxes at the sound. Leaning forward, she places her lips on mine. “How could I expect anything else from you?”

“You can’t.”

She curls against my chest, and I kiss the top of her head. Our bodies melt together. We are one.

PART IV

ON HER BAD DAYS, I GO OUT AND PICK FLOWERS from the meadow where I first saw her. I tie them together with a blue ribbon and lay them by her side. The colors, she says, remind her of what it feels like to be happy. I hold her hand and read her stories until there is a smile upon her dazzling face once more. After I wash and braid her hair, we go out into the garden and plant flowers of our own.

We watch them grow: roses and irises and sunflowers and tulips. After they have bloomed, Eve and I wait for them to die in the winter. I fall in love with the rain and clouds and hail — the way I fell in love with her — over and over again. Winter is no longer a hateful being, but an act of cleaning the slate and starting anew. Eve is my winter; she is my new beginning.

PART V

EVE DOES NOTHING TO RID ME OF MY SADNESS, but she manages my loneliness. Together, we listen to Janis Joplin on vinyl in the heat of an impending summer, with popsicle juice dripping down our chins. In the company of another, my inner contempt wanes slightly, but on most days I still think about dying young.

This world is where we come to die, yet finding validation in death seems pathetic at my age. What does the world expect of me? I am sick and tired of expectations and conventional rules that dictate when I must be ecstatic or suicidal.

The first time she holds my hand is in the emergency room, and I am soaring. “You lost a lot of blood,” they say. “You don’t lose something on purpose,” I respond. They lock me away in a sterile room and make me talk about how I feel. I tell them that I feel like giving up. They don’t like to hear that.

Eve visits me day after day and I keep waiting for her to forget about me, but she never does. Eve tells me that I am her lifeblood and that if I leave, then she will too.

When they ask me again about how I’m feeling, I tell them what they want to hear, because that’s the only way to get these people to leave you alone. They release me from captivity.

For some reason, life loses its meaning on days like these. I truly hate my suicidal tendencies, but sometimes the pain in my chest is all that reminds me how to breathe. Except, there is still Eve. Many days I cannot force myself from my bed because it is soft and safe and everything the world is not. She sits beside the bed and holds my hand. Eve tells me to squeeze it whenever I have a bad thought. I squeeze it constantly.

After many protests, I allow her to brush and braid my hair. Eve protects me from thinking about the kitchen knives

hidden in the next room. I know she hides all the sharp objects in a shoebox under the couch. She knows that I could mark my skin with anything if I was determined enough. I am. She reminds me that I am breathing and smiling and loving. She reminds me that I am not alone.

PART VI

I STOPPED WEARING CLOTHES LAST WEEK. She told me that it will give me cancer, and I said that the only thing killing me is me. She thought that was clever. I know she knows I'm not joking. She said, "Strip to your birthday suit," and I did.

Eve and I are equals; she is not my god and I am not hers, yet we worship each other's bodies as if they are each something holy. I cup her breast and drink from it; each of her freckles is devoted a day of prayer. I pray that I can memorize the constellations on her skin before my time is up.

My nakedness has purity to it that I can neither pinpoint nor describe — it has something to do with the fact that I am going through life blindly. On the anniversary of my birth, I called for a firing squad, and my entire family showed up. Their words were just what I had hoped for, and when they left, I had a pain that spiraled through my entire body like a migraine resting in the center of my heart. Naked and brave, I paint my skin with the icing on the cake, and by the end of the night, I am not one of the people. I am a member of the sky. I am a scratch in the universe — a glimmer of could be, would be, light and love. Eve and I settle beneath a dead tree in the orchard and I pick the last fruit from its brittle bones. She licks the icing from my freckled skin. I whisper: "I am, I am, alive, I am." This is my revival. "You are," she whispers, "you are, alive, you are." I let a tear slip away and it falls upwards into the midnight sky, becoming another star to remind me that even the most painful things are beautiful.

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