

Pressed Against the Veil

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Please note, this work includes content related to mentions of blood, death, violence.

Beige carpet and a worn couch. A room lit with a dull, fluorescent light. Low ceilings, short walls, one window. A one-bedroom apartment. Two pillows, one body. A brunette. Long limbs spread out across the mattress. A crimson pool, almost black, sits beneath them. Forearms are caked with blood. Torn flesh and protruding bone are the remnants of their wrists. The mortician said the patterns of the cuts indicated it wasn't a quick chop. A saw was used. The eyes are closed. Long eyelashes brush onto freckled cheeks, also freckled with spots of blood. Their charts said they had brown eyes. Hairs are draped across their pillowcases. The strands cradling the back of the neck are stuck together in sticky threads. Large gashes are cut through their esophagus. The darkness within, like an oil spill, flooded Lila's vision.

Lila squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She continued to shuffle the photos between her fingers, inspecting them between furrowed brows. Setting them down onto her desk, she used her flattened palm to smear them across the table like a stack of cards. As they slid past one another, Lila saw flashes of blood-stained sheets, slit throats, and caution tape webbed up across the hallways of shitty apartments. As she looked up, a sharp pain pricked at the back of her head. She suddenly realized how close her face had been to the desk, and how her shoulders hugged her ears as she dropped them down her back.

Lila's office building was abandoned by her co-

workers hours ago. Through the darkness, she could only see her workspace littered with folders full of coroner reports and witness statements. They piled up on her desk in the same spot she threw each new one down at the beginning of every day.

Every goddamn day.

A new body. A new brunette. A new bloody mattress. A new throat torn into. Two new hands severed from a body.

Lila's foot ached as she bounced it under her desk, she could feel herself starting to get a damn Charley Horse. She rolled the sleeve of her dress-shirt up and checked her watch—midnight. All she could hear was the buzzing of her nearly dead desk lamp and the hum of air conditioning units.

But if she listened close enough, she could always hear them.

Groaning. Gurgling. The straining of severed vocal cords.

Lila's eyes shifted across the walls of her office, and she saw them begin to emerge. As they arched their backs and reached their arms forward, they peeled out of the shadows like mice trying to free themselves from a trap. Their skin was gray, hues of green and purple pulsated beneath the surface. She looked into their eyes and was met with pure whiteness, glazed over and only tainted by bloody tears that welled up inside and poured down their cheeks. The red rain came not just from their eyes, but from the tears in their throats and open sockets

at the ends of their arms. Despite being figments of corpses, they poured fresh blood. Lila swore she could smell the heavy metallic stench. It dripped off their exposed bones and leaked down their chests, crept down their legs, and to their feet. Each stream or droplet only disappeared seconds before hitting the carpet as, like smoke, they wisped away into the air.

Lila recognized them. A woman with auburn curls that brushed her shoulders, she had a mole on her left cheekbone—the fifth victim, a grad student who hastily signed a shitty lease after moving out of her ex’s place.

A boy who had an undercut beneath his thin, brown hair, and a piercing on his right eyebrow—the third victim, a twenty-something year old who just moved into the city to ‘find himself.’

And directly in front of her, a girl whose choppy, chestnut bangs were glued to her forehead with blood—the first victim, an undergrad student who had just moved into her first college apartment. The same girl whose freshly dead silhouette hung over Lila’s bed weeks ago. And the same girl who started the slew of slit-throated, handless brunettes that haunted her every day.

Their eyebrows were scrunched together with anger and desperation. They tried to speak, but the threads of their slashed vocal cords tangled together and, out of their gaping mouths, only produced a clicking screech. The wounds in their necks bubbled, pushing out clots of blood with every noise. The spirits flailed their arms, shoving their stumps of torn flesh and bone towards the stacks of photos strewn across Lila’s desk. As they looked into her eyes, they swung their arms more frantically and the coarseness of their howls grew thicker—the only understandable implication was a primal urge to be heard.

“I don’t—I *can’t*—understand you, but I’m trying,” Lila barked. Their eyes, still boring into hers, bubbled with clots of bloody tears as their warped

screams morphed into sobbing moans.

“I need to think—I need time to think,” Lila jumped out of her seat towards the light switch at the corner of the room. The apparitions she passed through melded into the air, but the others followed her as they tried reaching for her arms and face.

“Leave me the fuck alone so I can figure this out!” She smashed her palm onto the switch. As soon as the light flicked on, they were gone.

Lila shoved the photos and folders into her bag, dropping some and picking them up with shaky hands. She marched out of her office, slamming the door behind her. The sounds of their cries still reverberated in the air around her as she left the building.



Lila was usually comfortable with the dead. She always had been. She kind of *had* to be.

Her childhood was defined by weekend afternoons spent at her grandfather’s funeral home—which, after a stroke killed him, later became her father’s. He started to usher Lila into the embalming room after that, in some desperate attempt to traumatize her with the corpses in a way that would force her to join the family business. But her earliest memories were of being sat in the corner of the office with handfuls of picture books and toys intended for children much younger than her. She didn’t really care for them though. She’d grown bored of them by the time she was six.

Instead, she would watch the two men across the room flip through paperwork: death certificates, receipts for custom casket orders, and handfuls of funeral program copies. Her grandfather always wore a sour expression. Lila liked old people’s wrinkles before her grandma died. She loved the feeling of fidgeting with the folds in her hands while curled up on her lap. But she thought the way his wrinkles contorted on his face made him look ugly. He always looked like that at her father, whose face was much

younger and not tainted with the scars of time, but his lips curled and eyes got angry in the same, ugly way.

When their arguments became too complicated for Lila to understand, she would pass the time inspecting the carpet. She'd start at the furthest corner of the room, watching how the beige stitching swirled into intricate flowers and shapes—all while trying to ignore the shadows that hung over her and reached their hands through her shoulders.

Lila had stopped crying over it at that point. She knew it never did anything. Her grandfather and father rarely 'entertained her theatrics,' continuing to argue over her sniffles and sobs, and when she cried, they would know she saw them and their yelling and grabbing would get worse. She was also smart enough to know not to tell her teachers. She knew anyone who caused a fuss got taken with the other kids who 'needed a little extra help.' Lila just ignored them until her grandfather died, when she was seventeen and her father became concerned with trapping her in the family business.

She'd watch her father poke needles into corpses' arms and powder their faces, but Lila only ever paid attention to the spirit that observed their own embalming. Sometimes they were torn into with small gashes or bullet holes—Lila remembered one that got shot in the head—but most just looked bony and withered. Those were the nice ones. They would tell Lila about their lives, full of world travel and grandchildren, and how they died, surrounded by gentle nurses and their hands held by countless others. They never got any closer than other spirits in resting their hands on her shoulders, but the sensation of them passing through felt more like an embrace than a strangling.

It made being around the young and mutilated ghosts more unbearable. Their sobs would fill the room, and as if she was God, they would beg Lila to give them their lives back. They'd scream so close to face that the visages of blood almost splashed

against her cheeks before vanishing, or rock back and forth, twitching, in the smallest corner of the room. They had so much left to live for, they told her, and didn't deserve to be shot or smashed up in that car accident or suffocated.

She watched her father, his eyes filled with a far-away look and fingers lazily injecting the embalming fluid into their veins, and she decided she didn't want to—couldn't—be the one who just got them ready to be buried in the earth. Maybe she was meant to be their God. Why else would she be burdened with sight between the veil of life and death? She was going to be the one to make sure they didn't end up on this table, in this cold room that reeked of chemicals with a man who saw them as the day's work. Or at least she'd make sure she caught the bastard responsible and send him to Hell.



Over the course of her career as a detective, Lila had dealt with a variety of different victims with a variety of life-ending traumas. She'd proven herself to her peers and risen to local fame ten years ago, after solving the Gwen Trinidad case. There were no leads to track the killer within the abandoned barn they found her body in, torn to shreds and stabbed at. Gwen was a sweet girl, as Lila remembered meeting her. She cried a lot. But like Lila, she craved justice. She told her about the last seconds of her life—laid bleeding out and watching through cracks in the barnwood as the man disappeared into a giant oak tree. Low and behold, he'd buried the knife deep in the soil, beneath the tangled roots.

Since then, Lila had been the primary investigator on everything homicide. She'd seen ghosts filled with bullet holes of every size and stabbings anywhere possible. Every single one of them she had been able to talk to—or at least have them point at pictures—to give her what she needed to catch the motherfuckers that killed them. Except for this series of brunettes—tied to their beds, hands

sawn away, and finished off with a swift blade to their throats—who now piled up every day and who grew increasingly more anguished that Lila couldn't understand their directionless gestures and incoherent screams.

The thought of them and the cool midnight air surrounding her made Lila shudder while she walked home. Only her head felt hot, her mind full of fiery anger that singed at the lining of her skull. As she climbed up the stairs of her apartment complex, the anger began to sizzle away, leaving an ashen pile of guilt that made her head feel too heavy for her neck. She let the metal stairwell door slam behind her. The sound of the crash melded into the chattering of spirits and the howling of wind outside of the concrete walls. The yellow lights lining the ceiling flickered, making the geometric shapes in the carpet look like they were moving alongside the spirits that lurked in Lila's shadow stretching behind her. Her vision was hazy, clouded behind heavy

eyelids, but she followed the shifting spirits and contortion in the carpet lining with her eyes. Her line of sight crept forward. All the way down the hallway. Right up to her apartment door.

Lila sucked a gulp of air down her throat. Dry and cold.

She inched her hand towards the small handgun inside her work bag. Her quivering fingers jumped on the grip as she grasped it. Lila held her breath in her chest. The spirits followed suit. Only the sounds of muffled, roaring wind filled the air. The lights seemed to flicker with the cadence of her pounding heart. The rush of blood thumped in her ears.

The spirits had all huddled together at the end of the hallway. Their glassy eyes, unbothered by the river of blood gushing out of them, bore into Lila's. They stood before her apartment. A sliver of pure darkness leaked out from the crack between her door and the frame.