

flat hope

On Friday, I went and picked up Violet at her house for the party. I hoped that the party would cheer her up.

I was used to the route, now, and I liked seeing all the stuff I passed, the antennas and chutes and vents, and my feed told me their names as I looked at them—*Charming Lawn Observation Tower; Riverdale Exhaust Hood; Institute for the Study of Psychoeconomy; Bridgeton Playland and Compulsion Center*—and after a while, I knew them by sight, and with each one, I could feel like I was getting closer to Violet, which was like a present which I didn't know what was inside of.

While we flew to the party, she told me about weird things she'd read on the feed, while she was resisting it or whatev. She told me about the scales on butterflies, and the way animals lived in ducts, sometimes whole herds. People would hear the stampeding through their walls. There were new kinds of fungus, she said, that were making jungles where the cables ran. There were slugs so big a toddler could ride them sidesaddle. "The natural world is so adaptable," she said. "So adaptable you wonder what's natural."

When we got there, people were drinking already and it looked pretty fun. Someone was being a DJ and broadcasting tracks on the feed, so we tuned in, because otherwise you just hear the shuffling while people are moving around with no music on the floor. I have a pretty good auditory-nerve hookup with my feed, so the sound is real spink, and it's good to move to. So we got some drinks and drank them, and said hi to people, and then the feed was going, it was doing this song, *I got some feet, and those feet, they're gonna walk. Walk, feet, you walk, the ten toes, I walk with the feet*, that one, and so we danced to it. It's a kind of low-hips dance, with the draggy elbows, and we did it, it's good for that.

It was all going pretty good until Quendy arrived. When she got there, it was like—*silence . . . wwwwwwwwww (wind) . . . wwwwwwww . . . ping (pin dropping)*—because her whole skin was cut up with these artificial lesions. We were all just looking at her. They were all over her.

She raised her arms. The cuts were like eyes. They got bigger and redder when she moved. “Do you like them?” she said, laughing. “I got it yesterday.”

“You’re,” said Marty, “you’re covered with cuts.”

“They’re not ‘cuts,’” she said, smiling like he was an idiot. “First of all, it’s the big spit. And second, for your info, it’s called ‘birching,’ and they’re lenticels.”

Marty and Link were chatting me and each other.

Unit.

Unit.

Whoa, unit.

Violet had her face in her hands.

People were starting to dance again.

I could tell Calista and Loga were chatting up a storm. People were dancing, and the feed was going, *I walk these itty-bitty steps. Away from you. Just itty-bitty steps. I walk away*. Quendy went over to the table with the drinks and

poured herself some vodka and Tang. Some other girls were over talking to her.

Violet was standing next to me, like, *I can't believe she did it.*

I went, *It's all for Link. I guess she wanted to outdo Calista.*

Can you even think how much that cost?

I don't know.

Each one of those incisions has to be capped off in plastic.

Yeah. It was probably pretty pricey.

It's the end. It's the end of the civilization. We're going down.

No, it's sure not too attractive. Lenticels.

I just hope my kids don't live to see the last days. The things burning and people living in cellars.

Violet.

The only thing worse than the thought it may all come tumbling down is the thought that we may go on like this forever.

I looked at her. She wasn't joking. Her face was full of lines.

Violet, I said. I took her hands. I had an idea, and I was like, *Let me show you something.*

She didn't say or chat anything. We went away from all the people, up the stairs. The bedroom doors were closed. I took her up past the bedrooms, to the attic. I pulled down the attic, like, the pull, and this ladder folded out. I went up, and willed the light, but there wasn't any feedlink to the light. The light was worked by a string. You pulled it sometimes, and the light went on.

There was all kinds of old shit up there. She came up behind me. When we walked, our footsteps, they were clunky. The boards felt old.

We used to come up here, I said. We played sardines in the closet. You got to hide and then everyone looks for you.

and when they find you, they hide with you. This was this meg good place, because only Link's best friends, we were the only ones that knew about it. We would be up here, all together, and people who weren't his good friends, they'd be walking around downstairs, and we could hear them, and we'd be laughing our asses off.

I used to, when I was hiding here, I kept thinking of when I was littler, you know, younger, before I was good friends with Link. I kept thinking of the time when you're all racing around, and you pass people in the halls, like in cartoons where people go in one door and come out another one. And you're like passing them all and looking in all the laundry places and shit, and it's a big game, and people keep giggling, and then you don't see them again.

Then you're walking around alone. You know, there's this weird moment where you realize that you're alone, and no one else has been walking for a while. You realize that the moment, the exact moment, when you became alone is already over. You've been that way for a while. So you're walking around this empty house, and all the towels are folded up, and the soap is still wet on the soap dish. That's the creepy thing.

She sat down on an old thing.

I kept going. I was like, You're walking, and everything's empty, but the weirdest thing is that it's not empty at all. The weirdest thing is that you know that you're more alone than anyone, but that more people are thinking about you than ever before. They're all just there, holding their breath, following your, like your every move through the house, listening to your footsteps and the doors opening and closing. So you're more alone, but more watched. It can just go on and on for hours, you walking around, walking on the carpeting, picking up stuff and looking at it, alone, but thought about, until Link gets tired of it, and says the game is over.

That's exactly it, she chatted.

I didn't know what she meant, but I nodded.

She rubbed her eyes with her palms. I watched her. She stood up and brushed off the butt of her skirt.

She looked around, lifting things up. *What is this junk?*

Old shit, I said. *All this old shit.*

I walked over to one wall. *There are some old pictures.* I lifted them away from the inside of the roof. *Paintings.*

She came to my side. *Whoa.*

We looked at them. Ships at sea. Old-time faces, painted without smiles or anything, dressed in black, holding pieces of paper or big books. Link's dead relatives from long ago. They had old-time names, ones from the past: Abram. Jubilee. Noah. Ezekial. Hope.

Jubilee was frowning. Ezekial was covered with pockmarks.

Hope was this fat old woman with a little dog.

Hope was looking off to the side, as if someone she missed was calling her name.

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On the way down, we passed the bedrooms again. The party had picked up. The doors were open now, and on some beds, there were people making out, and on some others, people were in mal, their legs and arms all twitching and their heads rocking back and forth, and someone was puking in a roll-top desk and trying to roll the top down to hide it. Someone's arm was coming out from under a bed, moving like they were conducting a symphony orchestra. Violet walked closer to me, and I put my arm around her, but her shoulders weren't soft, like she didn't want to be touched, and we got to the landing, and heard some kind of smacking down below, and people cheering.

When we went downstairs, they were all playing spin-the-bottle like little kids, stretched out on the floor, swinging their legs. Violet's back was kind of sagging as she walked down the stairs in front of me. I was feeling kind of strange, like, I can't really explain it, like as if hypodermics were in the air again, but thrown all ways and still traveling.

Link said, "Hey, take yourselves a seat and play. It's fun."

"It's for kids," said Loga, "but it's kind of sexy?"

Calista was like, "Omigod, it's so uncomfortable sitting on the floor with my lesion. This is so wholly stupid."

Quendy said, "I've only spun once, but I think I did kind of good." She shifted on the floor. Marty's eyes were like meg riveted on her ass, and also on her shoulder blades, where you could see all the red fibers through the splits in the skin. They were shifting as she and this meathead named Ches Something kissed for a turn.

Violet and I sat down. I didn't need to chat her to tell she didn't want to play. We weren't next, which was good, but I really didn't want her to get spun to, because I thought she might get really pissed by the stupidity of the whole game. I was sitting cross-legged, and I put my fist in my cheek and just sat there, telling the bottle with my eyes to keep on going while it spun.

Quendy spun, and got Link, and I was like, *Oh, shit, bad news*. She was really glad. She went over to him, while everyone did this big whoop, and he started to kiss her on the cheek, really just friendly, but she put her palm against his cheek and turned his head so she was kissing him on the mouth, and then put her arms around him. Everyone was completely silent, like *Omigod*, and they kept on kissing, with Link kind of trying to pull back, but being afraid to push too hard, with her cuts everywhere, and Calista staring at them both with this big-hair hatred in her eyes.

Link like tripped and stumbled backward and sat back down next to Calista. Everyone was really uncomfortable, except Marty.

Hey, chatted Marty to the guys, *don't you think Quendy looks good?*

Link was like, *Just shut up and play.*

I was like, *I think it looks stupid.*

It's a good look, Marty chatted, and kind of fun.

I was disgusted, like, *Huh? You can see her like muscles and tendons and ligaments and stuff through the lesions.*

Yeah, said Marty, which makes you kind of think about what's inside, huh? Which is sexy.

"You must be chatting about how Quendy looks really sexy," said Calista. It was like she was going to start something mean.

"Yeah," said Marty. "We were . . . just saying that the lesions look good."

"Oh," said Quendy. "You like the lesions?"

Link said, "Can we just play?"

"Well, I think they're a lot of fun," Calista said, as if she didn't mean it but meant the opposite.

Link spun again, and while he kissed this other girl, really hardly at all, Calista was still talking to Quendy, saying, in this really mean voice, "And don't let anyone tell you you look stupid."

"Nothing's stupid," said Marty.

"That's right, Quendy," said Calista, "because seeing what's inside of you, all your guts, is just so sexy."

"Calista," said Quendy, trying to stop her, "we're just having fun."

"That's good," said Calista.

The guy Ches Something spun and got Loga. He walked over to her and said, "Time to play."

"Quendy, you know what's fun about your lesions?"

Loga and the Ches guy started kissing, hard. They were playing up their kiss, maybe to like take attention away from the meanness Calista was having. Loga's hands were in Ches's hair, smearing through the hair, her fingers wet with gel.

Calista said, "About your lesions? What's fun is watching a girl who's so desperate for someone's boyfriend that she does something to herself which is really stupid."

There was a quiet part. Then Marty said, "Okay—just—let's—okay—let's—fuckin'—fuckin'—just let's play."

He spun the bottle, and it turned, with the neck flashing, and suddenly I could hear Quendy crying, and then I saw the bottle land on Violet. Marty got up and straightened his pants and walked over.

"Hey, there, sexy," he said. "Let's make this good."

He reached out his hand toward her. She flinched backward. He put his hand on the top of her head.

I said, "This isn't much fun."

"We'll show you fun," said Marty, winking.

"Stop it," said Violet, standing up. "Stop it all."

"What's wrong?" said Marty. He held out his hand toward her wrist. He took her wrist in his hand.

Violet was completely white. She was shaking. Her head, I mean, it was bobbing. She suddenly was yelling, "Can I tell you what I see? Can I tell you? We are hovering in the air while people are starving. This is obvious! Obvious! We're playing games, and our skin is falling off. We're losing it, and we're making out. And you're talking—you're starting to talk in a *fucking sestina!* Okay? A *sestina!* Okay? Stop it! Fuck you! We've got to all stop it!" She was screaming.

People were staring and chatting, and they weren't chatting with me, except Link, who gave me a single, *What's doing with this? Fix it, before cutting me off.*

Violet was screaming, "*Look at us! You don't have the feed! You are feed! You're feed! You're being eaten! You're raised for food! Look at what you've made yourselves!*" She pointed at Quendy, and went, "*She's a monster! A monster! Covered with cuts! She's a creature!*"

And now I was going, "Violet—Don't. Violet! She's not a—she's not a goddamn monster. She's—" but Violet screeched, "*You too! Fuck you too!*"—and she tried to slap me—I grabbed her by the arm—and she tried to scratch at my face, but her hand wasn't working.

She had broken somehow, and she was broken, and, oh fuck, she was sagging and I grabbed her to help her, and she was shaking, and her eyes were all white and rolling around, and she couldn't talk anymore—

—she was choking—

I grabbed her and tried to wrap my arms around her. There was a long line of spit coming out of her mouth. Her legs were pumping up and down. She was broken. She was completely broken.

I was crying and saying to call an ambulance, and people were like, *Fuck no, is she in mal? If she's in mal, no way, we'll get in trouble*, and I was like, *Call a fucking ambulance*, and I tried to do it on my feed, but things were too screwed up, and I could feel the signals going out, and she was breathing again, but she'd gone limp, and I lowered her to the ground, and I put her there, and Quendy was still yelling, "Fuck you!" at her body. "Fuck you!" And Violet was breathing now in heavy, big gasps, but her eyes were closed, and I was leaning next to her asleep body, and squeezing, and squeezing, and squeezing.

I don't know what the others did. There were noises, and women came.

I went with them. And the feed whispered to me about sales, and made all these suggestions about medical lawyers and malpractice, and something happened, and I was sitting beside her in an ambulance, and suddenly I realized, *The party is over.*

The fucking party is over.