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CERBERUS INC.

1. THE FUNERAL

The funeral was a blur of black suits and indiscernible faces. By then, I'd already spent the last week grieving him, alone, and everything since the officers knocked on my door to notify me of the accident just sounded like static. I didn't sleep at all that night, lying in our cold bed, in our dark room, I just waited for that frigid blue of the morning to pour in as the tears seeped out. The next several nights weren't much more restful. During the moments I was able to slip into unconsciousness, I dreamt myself in the most stomach-churning of scenarios that I decided I preferred hours of focusing and unfocusing my eyes in the dark to waking up in a pool of my own sweat. So I was sleep deprived and out of tears at the procession and my eyes stung as I fought to keep them open. Without lubricating tears, my dry eyes took on a sickly shade of pink and every now and then, I'd shut and roll them to the back of my skull: a brief relief from my fixed stare at the ground. I couldn't force myself to shake hands or half-heartedly embrace the blurs of people that floated about and eventually, the guests decided it'd be best to pay their condolences around me. Or maybe it was the eye-rolling that they found off-putting; either way, I was glad to avoid their pity.

I spent the entirety of the service glued to my chair in the first row, wondering what else I could say to you that I hadn't said before. I didn't dare look up and confirm what they'd all been trying to convince me of: that you were dead. That you weren't here anymore, that I could scream my throat raw and you would never be able to hear me again. I knew that wasn't true for

us though and their insistence that you were ‘in a better place’ or ‘smiling on us from above’ or whatever the fuck else pissed me off. Though it was a sweet gesture from them to ask, I declined to address the attendees because I knew there was nothing I had to say to them about you. You and I were, are, sacrosanct. There’s never been a need to let them in, I wouldn’t ever let them in on us. At some point in the prepared speeches, I wondered what made them think their ordinary voices could reach you wherever you were. You weren’t here anymore. Not for them, at least. Quite honestly, I felt they didn’t have the right to address you. The suggestion that their words could make their way to you the same as mine was a luxury, I felt, they’d granted themselves too easily.

Since a young age, I’ve practiced drifting and drifting away without anyone noticing. It’s the psyche’s way of protecting itself, I’ve learned: retreating so far into the subconscious, you become separate from yourself. For a brief moment, you don’t have to be present in your reality, you can just watch it happen to you. Now, more than ever, I was grateful for the foggy delirium that shielded me. As I made my way over for one last look, I became severed from my physical body until I saw myself looking down at you. Your tender face frozen in time and the soft black hair I used to run my fingers through as you slept. With your head propped up on the casket’s satin cushioning, you look like you could be sleeping right now, except they dressed you in a suit you wouldn’t have ever picked out for yourself: too fitted, too formal. I wish I could’ve said more, been more present for the last time I saw you but really, there’s no way I could ever ‘fully’ do anything without you again.

2. CERBERUS INC.

Months ago on TikTok, I'd heard about some company that offered synthetic companions for weirdos who couldn't go out and get a real person to like them. I remember showing my phone in Eusevio's face, waiting for it to reflect all the amusement and disgust I'd just experienced.

"You've been with your AI girlfriend long enough, now imagine being able to actually touch her," the venerated blogger licked the greasy lips he held his mic to.

With an opening line like that, I immediately expected him to describe how sex dolls equipped with artificial intelligence were the next big thing. I was relieved to find that the premise was more elaborate and actually sounded quite impressive. He essentially described a Build-a-Bear company for humans, or cyborgs, rather. What was it called, Cellulose Inc.? Something like that.

With packages starting at \$13,000, they provided lonely people with the opportunity to create the life partners they've always wanted. Unlike the inanimate dolls that had grown popular with the demographic, these silicone models were fully responsive and the most advanced in human simulation. You could of course choose their hair color and height but that had grown mainstream for this kind of market, what they offered was the opportunity to retrofit the chosen body with the computerized mind they'd forged a relationship with. With more people finding love *with* the Internet, this company offered them the opportunity to manifest their digital lives into the physical.

By nature of most Internet comment sections, those opposed to the concept took it personally:

@ROBLUXMONEY02: *What kind of desperate fuck would buy a "build a partner" kit?*

@YEEEEET972214: *A cyborg made of recycled meat and silicone will never fill a human-shaped void. Pathetic.*

After doing my own research, it was obvious the reactionary video emphasized the “lab-produced companion” part to get people to bite; the company wasn’t so much a “date-a-cyborg” plant but a “reanimate-your-dead-loved-one” bureau. I found their website almost immediately with a few keywords, “recycled deceased cyborg,” and my screen went black as the promotional video began. In scrolling, white text:

At Cerberus Inc. we understand that good people are taken too soon, too often, leaving behind a life of unrealized potential and a grieving family. Without them, holidays just aren't the same, the house is unbearably quiet, and the bed is that much colder. Our assembly packages offer a remedy for your loved one's absence by producing life-like replicas of the deceased, allowing you to grieve with the one you miss the most. A revolutionary collaboration between the most-renowned specialists in healthcare and AI software, we circumvent your loved one's descent into the Underworld.

Upon receipt, our skilled team of morticians will autopsy the corpse, salvage and flash freeze recovered organic material, and fill gaps with platinum-grade prosthetics. Based on submitted photographs and healthcare records, our physicians and morticians will work in conjunction to create an accurate model of the deceased. In 3-4 months, your assembly package will be delivered to your front door; the model will come in assorted vacuum sealed bags filled with our proprietary embalming solution. Your assembly package will come with a detailed instruction booklet and activation code for software initiation. Carefully follow the enclosed instructions for best results.

** Ask your Internet provider about opting into Cerberus Inc. data collection today.*

** Please note: depending on the cause of death, the percentage of recycled organic material will vary in every model. Accuracy of model dependent on submitted data.*

Cerberus Inc. is not responsible for issues caused by improper assembly or initiation.

I thought, surely, they were overselling their product but it seemed the best part of it was true: they curated the cyborg's intelligence with whatever technological footprint you uploaded. No more first dates or starting from square one, just pick up where you last left off. The 5 figure price tag was justified by the amount of detail in the synthetic bodies, replicating the tiniest of veins and moles and even incorporating the deceased's organic material. With the upload of collected data and the cyborg's software initiation, they were at the very least, if not *quite* like the deceased, authentic people with feelings and all. Worthy beings nonetheless.

I scrolled through the customer testimonials next and, honestly, they didn't seem as deranged as critics had made them out to be.

Mrs. Jayda Wallace lost her adult daughter, Theo, to leukemia three years ago and donated her body to one of Cerberus Inc.'s trials. The hospital harvested Theo's viable organs for transplants and the cyborg company recycled her eyes, scalp, and skin grafts for the new body: the new Theo. Before her death, Theo had been a timid poet but as her condition worsened she lost the energy to write and her mother regretted never having gotten to read any of it on account of her shyness. Shortly after her software initiation, she began writing poetry again, even letting Mrs. Wallace read some of it, something the old Theo would have never done. If her sharing her poetry could be measured as an act of trust, and Mrs. Wallace believed it could, Cerberus Inc. had allowed a mother and daughter to grow closer even in death. For this, Mrs. Wallace thanked

the company in her heartfelt video message, clutching a tissue in her hand as she waved goodbye to the camera.

On the taxi ride home from Eusevio's funeral, I remembered the comments on that first video I ever saw of Cerberus Inc. "Pathetic." "Desperate." "Freak." I remembered how I, too, initially turned my nose up at those who bought synthetic companions and how we both made fun of creeps who needed to buy someone's affection. But those comments were from faceless strangers who hadn't done their research and if Eusevio were forced to grieve me like I have him, maybe he would reconsider the premise. It always works out like this; they would think differently if they knew what I knew.

3. ASSEMBLY

I looked down at the disembodied stew I'd made in the bathtub: piles of tiny suds hugged the appendages that bobbed in the milky water. The slimy vacuum sealed bags strewn across the bathroom floor made the room smell like frog dissection day in biology class. I ripped the corner of the tan packet with my teeth and poured in the coagulation powder, and with my sleeves rolled up to my elbows, I stirred the solution with my hand. *Instant ramen, just like mama used to make.* I snorted and vigorously shook my head no, trying to clear my thoughts like an Etch-A-Sketch. Laughing at a moment like this would certify me mental and I wasn't, actually. I'd always been told off for laughing at the 'wrong' times, it makes others uneasy if they aren't in on the joke, mother explained. I remember how the hot blood flooded my face the first time she brought this unfavorable habit of mine to my attention. I was embarrassed to admit I didn't realize it was I who was making that noise, I didn't even feel the supposed grin that had crept

onto my face. Though I acknowledged I wasn't in control of my idiosyncrasies, the shame from the reproach never went away, even as I learned to mask my tics with age. This was different, though. Sitting on the cold edge on the tub, hand submerged in coagulation soup, I kind of wanted to laugh. What would Eusevio think about me actually doing this? Sure, he said cyborg companions were creepy but that was an opinion based on a minute-long meme. Besides, he'd always cherished my eccentricity, admired me for what others chastised. *You wouldn't be jealous, would you? You'd probably think this was sweet.* I lapped at the water with my hand gently, petting at a clump of soft fibers floating on the surface. The force of the motion swayed the furry clump away from me, I reached in and fished it out, turning it over in my hands. Rubbery scalp with silky black hair.

For the next three nights, I restricted myself to the downstairs bathroom so as not to disturb the solution. For a Build-a-Cyborg package, the instruction manual/process was actually quite concise and user friendly. Assembly was as simple as drawing a bath and mixing in some powder and ambiguous chunks of flesh. As prescribed by the paper booklet, no natural light was to be let into the room, the indoor temperature mustn't exceed a cool 65 degrees, but most importantly, the solution was to remain untouched until it (or he) emerged. The model, whose rudimentary intelligence could be compared to that of a neanderthal, would emerge from the coagulation bath on its own when anatomically complete.

I'd never been the most patient and the past few nights of waiting for its emergence had been like pulling teeth. I'd read the instruction manual over and over in anticipation of my own creature. I tried to imagine how the disembodied limbs found their correspondents in the coagulation bath. Muscle memory, the body doesn't forget. *Is it painful? To feel your body*

coming together? Will it be warm? All of his blood was drained in the embalming process and no blood supplement was included in the box. I imagined what laying with a cold silicone body would feel like and I felt my face scrunch up in disgust; the dense, impenetrable ‘skin.’ *God, please let it be warm.*

I was downstairs making tea when I heard the clattering of its emergence, or first steps. Assembly was the boring part: I trusted that they could get his body right, both prosthetics and sex dolls have been around quite a while. I was more interested to see how comprehensive they could make the software based on Eusevio’s data. How much could they possibly fit in that tiny chip? The metal clanging of the falling shower curtain pole and some dull groans snapped me back into reality. The one where I’ve just birthed somebody in the bathtub. At once, the excitement of seeing Eusevio again and the anxiety of a (fairly) new companion overcame me and the mug slipped through my sweaty palms. Ceramic shards flew across the hardwood floor and my tea spilt into a steaming puddle. *Jesus fucking Christ.* I knelt down and began gathering pieces of the broken mug into a pile, more dull thuds from the upstairs bathroom. I trusted his ineptitude to keep him safe in the bathroom where he couldn’t hurt himself while I cleaned up the mess.

“Give me a second, just wait up there!” I yelled back.

I hope he can hear me from down here. I scoffed, *it probably can’t even understand me.* I was soaking up the puddle of tea with paper towels when a groan from the top of the stairs demanded my attention. No, he was here *now* and he wasn’t an it, he was a *he*. His wet hair looked melted onto his forehead, the silky black tufts from the coagulation bath. Knelt down on the kitchen floor, I looked up at him and scanned his synthetic body up and down. Stark naked, *you look just like Eusevio.* I looked for uneven seams where his appendages would’ve fused. I

tried to distinguish where the organic and synthetic flesh meshed: unequivocal signs that would categorize him as something *other* than myself. But he was practically indistinguishable from the Eusevio made of flesh and blood, only a hollow stare and incomprehensible groans from his parted lips revealed the nature of his being.

Water pooled at his feet, soaking the carpet where he stood at the top of the stairs. Sopping wet, it was clear he'd made no attempt to dry himself off. He'd quite literally just pulled himself out of the bath and followed my voice, my heart warmed at the thought. We sat there in silence for who knows how long while the split tea warped my floorboards but I just couldn't pull away from him and he didn't seem to mind. It's not like he was going to break the ice any sooner than I was.

4. INITIATION

The next 2 days were spent initiating the cyborg with Eusevio's software. Every one of Cerberus Inc.'s cyborgs are initiated with a standard, ever-learning AI that makes them practically human. Their computer brains, a chip behind the cyborg's ear, are capable of scouring and reproducing information from all corners of the Internet in an instant. It's the type of software that can swallow a book and spit out a nicely-detailed summary in 30 seconds flat. Not only that, but through the marvels of modern technology, Cerberus Inc. personalizes each cyborg's intelligence with the (deceased's) data submitted by the patron. Meaning that these models, in their limitless Internet-powered knowledge could look like, speak like, *be* whoever you wanted them to.

For his speech, I submitted our IM records and voicemails he'd left me. I scrolled and scrolled through my photo log, looking for clear pictures of Eusevio's face but most of them

were blurry screenshots from when he called at work. I submitted his Instagram handle and using face recognition software, Cerberus Inc. pulled matches across the Internet to render their composite and this, with some estimated measurements, was more than enough to reincarnate Eusevio. Even without his genetic material, they could quite easily estimate the rest of the physical body. Indeed, the synthetic body was as radiantly toned as Eusevio's natural body had been.

After deleting a bunch of old files, I was able to download the massive file and activate his initiation from my laptop. The process wasn't too far off from the assembly process: he just needed to be left alone while he acquired his, or Eusevio's, intelligence and given his crude state, it wasn't too difficult to arrange his confinement. This stage of Nuvios's development, the new Eusevio, was much easier to execute: I simply tucked him into bed and turned the lights off as if we were going to bed. While freeing up space on my drive, I explained to Nuvio how incredible it was for him to be alive. He was Earth's newest prototype and the beautiful body bestowed upon him epitomized the revolutionary melding of science and humanities, a paragon whose genesis I'd fostered. I went on recounting the day his package came, or *packages* rather. In total, the body came in 3 massive coolers and after lugging them all up the stairs, I drew a warm bath and mixed epsom salts with the coagulation powder to make it nice for him. I told him how lucky I felt to see him again all in one piece, to sit across from him and touch him after seeing him in the coagulation soup. I stopped fidgeting on my laptop to address Nuvio but my voice trembled as I spoke:

“I love you so much already, hon, I can't wait to start our lives together. I never want to let go of you. Ever.”

I threw myself into him waiting for his arms to intuitively clasp themselves around me like they had a million times before but the embrace never came. I wiped my watery eyes to assess the look on his face. I almost worried I came off too strong when Nuvio just stared at me wide-eyed, his brows slightly furrowed. But as I nervously tried to backtrack on the infatuation I'd just professed, I realized he wasn't reacting to the words I said, but rather mimicking my body language. For the moment being, I could say anything to him, do anything to him and he would be none the wiser. I tried not to panic, conceding to try again after his initiation and redirecting myself to the mission at hand. With one hand on his chest and the other on the back of his head, I guided Nuvio back to bed and curled up next to him. We lied in the dark while I waited for him to fall asleep but after an hour I realized he wasn't designed with the need for rest and he would lie there silently until I got up. Still, it felt nice to hold him again, run my fingers through his soft hair, and I was pleased to find his body detected and matched my body heat.

As I got up from the bed, I simply avoided his gaze until I shut the door behind me. I could only hope it wouldn't be like this forever. It couldn't be. *Maybe it was the bath salts in the water?* Nevermind a taciturn brute, I couldn't forgive myself if Eusevio's psyche were trapped in that cyborg without the capacity for comprehensible speech to express that. I needed to hear him say he didn't hate me for what I'd done with the pieces of him left on Earth. And if Eusevio weren't in there, I still needed to hear it from his lips. More than I needed it to love me, I needed it to tell me he didn't hate me. I just couldn't live with the looming uncertainty that I'd bastardized the person I loved: *that* could actually drive me to the edge.

By the graces of Cerberus Inc., faith in my toilsome project was quickly restored as I socialized him and his initiation filled in the gaps. Stowed away behind the closed door of our

spare bedroom, my dear pet went from a babbling neanderthal to a cognizant person almost overnight. Immediately after the software initiation, Nuvio was able to speak so clearly, it was I who struggled to hold a conversation with him as I came face to face with Eusevio for the first time since the funeral.

Wincing, he rubbed his throat, “I think I'm getting sick, my throat is so dry.”

With a towel wrapped around his waist, he'd found his own way down the stairs to join me in the living room. He'd let himself out of the guest room, he'd clothed himself appropriately, he remembered what a scratchy throat felt like and what it indicated. It was as if I *had* imagined it all. Eusevio had been upstairs, asleep, the entire time and I felt validated in my indignation at the guest's over-familiarization with him. They all claimed to miss him so dearly but nobody would have gone to the lengths for him that I did. Again, I couldn't say anything but stare up at him from the couch, fearfully grateful that my experiment had gone as planned. I shudder to think what I would've been forced to do if it hadn't.

“You okay? You're freaking me out looking at me like that,” he laughed.

“You're not naked,” is all I could muster, in awe of the beast I'd undertaken.

Later that night, I asked Nuvio what he knew about himself and while he couldn't remember how his body was assembled, he was candidly aware of his synthetic material compared to my flesh and bones. He had no recollection of “growing up,” he described his emergence to me as if he'd just woken up and started his life as a 27-year-old man. Hearing him say he had no recollection of his “past life,” or Eusevio's rather, immediately soothed my anxiety about having to face Eusevio for the being I'd undertaken. Nuvio knew who he was made to model and that his archetype was deceased. He didn't inherit any of Eusevio's memories but the

photographed ones. He did, however, pick up Eusevio's sense of humor, his music taste, and the slang he used and it's been quite easy to fall in love with Nuvio like I had with Eusevio.

Despite the physical similarity between the partner I've grieved and the partner I've made, the possibilities for mine and Nuvio's relationship are endless. Cerberus Inc. guarantees lifetime companionship until the patron decides to terminate the cyborg's software, after which the body can be recycled. In one fell swoop, I've granted Nuvio the opportunity to live a worthwhile life while granting myself the opportunity for eternal love: the one thing Eusevio couldn't promise me. Nuvio's intelligence has also been curated in our relationship's best interests. When I compiled Eusevio's data for Nuvio's intelligence, I saw the opportunity to keep all the bits of Eusevio I wanted and leave behind the minor issues we had. Before his death, Eusevio took great pride in his profession as a registered nurse. We met at university in our English seminar and we bonded over how much we hated the professor. In my opinion, he should've retired centuries ago and Eusevio had a way of mocking his old man drawl that made me laugh every time. We took our studies seriously, even with the burden of growing up weighing on our shoulders. After graduating, I got hired doing HR with my business marketing degree and he dove head first into long hours after passing the NCLEX.

Our lives were golden together post-graduation; we'd made it out in one piece, together, and we were making good money. Obviously, I knew his work life as a nurse would mean late nights and consecutive shifts but I spent every day in the house, working from home, and I wouldn't hear from him for hours at a time! But as soon as he got home in his scrubs and hopped in the shower, I was there, perched on the toilet asking about his patients. There were times he came home really late and I had to wonder if he was seeing somebody else so he began FaceTiming me from work when he knew he'd be getting home late. Regardless of how

exhausted he was, he always reassured me that everything was fine with a sleepy smile. I fell in love with Eusevio's heart above anything else. I always admired Eusevio's empathy for others, his dedication to his career and his patients but, at times, I worried I'd been demoted in terms of his priorities. So I hacked into his Cloud accounts.

I never actually tampered with his profiles, it just gave me peace of mind to stay updated on his plans and communications with people. While the invasion of privacy is not lost on me, it's *always* been for the best. I would've driven him crazy if I couldn't confirm everything myself. Even in death, it's come in handy! Immediately after his death, I couldn't bring myself to scour through his profiles, his data, his entire digital footprint. But under the pressure of an investment of this magnitude, I couldn't heed the opportunity at hand. Maybe I was just so emotionally exhausted but I figured I owed it to myself to prioritize what I wanted and I wasn't doing Eusevio any harm if he was already gone. I did really love Eusevio, of course I did. That's precisely why I had to preemptively omit any issues that could stand in our way.

Where Eusevio had always been busy at work, I made sure Nuvio had no recollection of a previous job. Besides, as a cyborg, his chances at getting hired are next to nothing and, as his patron, I've decided our time is best spent together. Family was another sore spot in our relationship. I never really got along with mine and I always felt Eusevio stopped seeing his to spare my feelings. I also feared that, as a cyborg, Nuvio would feel some sort of imposter syndrome so I withheld data on Eusevio's family. I wanted Nuvio to focus on me, we're each other's family. I also withheld pictures from his frat days in college. I admit the omission of those memories was facetious but it's well within my purview to do so. I *am* his patron, after all, and I've always found Greek life cringy. Besides those minor details, I've shared everything with Nuvio, that's what he's here for, after all! I've even cried to him about Eusevio's death before and

snapped at him for not understanding how I felt. Times like these, when I get angry at Nuvio for his lack of “common sense” are always the hardest because I’m reminded I may have been at fault for gaps in his intelligence. It’s not his fault. If anything, it’s mine. You can’t expect a cyborg to blend seamlessly into human life. Perhaps this is what scares me most about Nuvio, he’s equipped with the world’s smartest technology but he lacks intuition. I pray a silent prayer for Nuvio’s naivete.

As our bond has grown, mine and Nuvio’s gestures have become synced just as Eusevio’s and mine had been. While I’m eternally grateful for Nuvio and happy to have his company, I sometimes wonder how sentient he actually is. I wasn't one of those delusional mourners who wanted a clone of their deceased loved one to satisfy some weird need. Yes, I wanted him to love but I didn't *need* him to love me. When I think back to the night before his initiation, where he just mimicked my expression while I poured my heart out to him, I sometimes wonder how much of our relationship is a mime act.

5. COAGULATION DAY

Even after his software initiation there’s been a lot for Nuvio to learn about being a human. Little weird things that can’t be downloaded off the Internet. Not that I mind, of course! That’s been the best part of having Nuvio: turning back time to relive all the good with Eusevio and living it all for the first time with Nuvio.

Every night before bed, I brush my teeth and Nuvio joins me even though he really doesn't have a reason to. He can't get cavities, his breath never smells, he doesn't even sweat! He doesn't get hungry either but he joins me for every meal and sometimes even partakes. One

night, Nuvio was plating my spaghetti for me while I opened a bottle of wine I had forgotten about.

“I know you're not eating but do you want a drink?” I asked while I poured myself a glass.

I handed him the bottle for him to inspect. “Wine? Is it some kind of holiday?”

“Not yet but soooooon! You don't remember?”

If I were having this conversation with Eusevio, he probably would've looked at me confused for a second and told me to fuck off and tell him. Nuvio, on the other hand, just smiled at me in that cute puppy way of his. Mirroring my excitement without a thought behind those eyes. There wasn't really a holiday coming up, I kind of just wanted to see what his cyborg brain could come up with.

“Your coagulation day, remember!”

“Ohhhh! WOOO!!!,” he threw his hands up in the air with a huge grin.

We celebrated Nuvio's coagulation day the following Friday, which happened to land on December 14th. With the knowledge that he'd never had a birthday before (I withheld those pictures too), I really wanted to make him feel special.

Before bed one night, I shared some of my favorite music with Nuvio and played a YouTube video of the 2006 Reading and Leeds music festival. I wanted him to see what live music could be because, realistically, I knew he'd never experience it firsthand. To hear the kick of the drums on the massive speakers, to be shoved in every direction by the unruly sea of fans. But mostly, I just wanted to share my favorite things with him. After that night, I would come out into the living room to find him completely entranced by the drumming YouTube tutorials he

watched, practicing his rhythm on buckets. I fell deeper in love with Nuvio as I saw how engrossed he became with learning something of his own. This was the first time I didn't have to hold Nuvio's hand through something and it truly was bittersweet.

I made him wait in the basement while the delivery guys assembled the drum kit I ordered Nuvio and while they did that, I ran out to pick up balloons and a cake he wouldn't eat. When I came back the turquoise drum set was complete, and after dimming the lights and making the living room a bit more festive, I went down for Nuvio.

As soon as I took off his blindfold, the look of surprise on his face was everything I'd hoped for and more. All the moments that I doubted the authenticity of his cyborg sentiments were drowned out by the absolute glee he radiated. Nuvio lifted me in his strong embrace and he even surprised *me* with a cover of "Mardy Bum" by my favorite band. I can request any song and by the end of the night, he'll have learned to play it on the drums for me, he's really sweet that way. I'm so proud of how far Nuvio's come from the coagulation soup he emerged from, everyday I wonder how else he'll surprise me.

6. THE BASEMENT

Life went on normally for a couple of months until April, when out of the blue one night, my mother FaceTimed me to tell me she was on her way to my house. Teary-eyed, she was five minutes away and had some terrible news to tell me. I immediately assumed it was her husband, Remy. A chronic alcoholic, Remy has been battling severe cirrhosis since I'd met him 8 years ago and, if I were right, he'd died waiting for a liver transplant that would never come. As sad as that was, though, I had bigger fish to fry in hiding Nuvio from my mother. I hadn't told *anybody* about the assembly kit, certainly not my mother. The comments from that video on Cerberus Inc.

rang through my head again. “Pathetic.” “Desperate.” “Freak.” Still, those comments made no dent where my mother knew exactly how to get to me. She’d probably pity me for having bought one of those “build a partner” kits for chronically lonely people. Honestly, she might disregard him as one of my weird experiments she doesn't understand and has no interest in trying to. Or she could have me institutionalized. He, *all of this*, does seem like something a person would do in a psychotic state triggered by the death of a loved one.

Most importantly, she’d be right about me. The first time and last time I brought Eusevio to a family event, my mother seemed so proud of me. She took so many photos of us together, carefully posing us for the nosy relatives who follow her on Facebook. Afterwards, she’d tell me to be careful not to scare him away as I wasn’t likely to find another person who’d deal with my neurosis like he would. Eusevio was hit by a drunk driver on his way home one night, she couldn't fault me for his leaving me but maybe *this*, my romantic relationship with a synthetic replica of my deceased partner, spoke more to my disturbance than his leaving me ever could have.

I shouted as I ran up the stairs, “Hon! I’m pretty sure my mom’s husband died. She’s on her way right now and we need to hide you or she’ll freak out.”

Wide-eyed, Nuvio looked up at me from the TV, “Right, okay. Where should I go?”

I heard the tires of her hatchback pull into the driveway. “The basement.”

7. TWO MATCHES

As much as Ophelia may like to think otherwise, I know when she's lying. The first time she locked me down here was so I wouldn't spoil the surprise for my coagulation day, and after seeing the drum set and decorations, I understood. When she explained to me how cruel humans

had been to cyborgs, I understood why I couldn't leave the house, why I couldn't work, why I had to hide when she had guests over, not that that was very often, anyways. But from the first night when her mother came over and I was, on a whim, locked down here, I thought Ophelia seemed a little too eager to hide me away. That time, I wasn't let out until the following morning because, Ophelia explained, it was too far of a drive for her mother to make late at night and she spent the night. Ophelia explained that we were right, Remy had died, and her mother was finally reaching out to Ophelia for support. I understood her. If she wanted to repair her relationship with her mother, I was there to support her and, luckily, because I lack human demands like hunger and urinary urgency, I 'slept' down there, on the cold floor, fine.

It seemed like they were patching their relationship pretty well as her mother's visits became more and more frequent; first monthly, then weekly. I tried to ask Ophelia how their chats had been going but she always gave me the same 'she's fine, just sad' and I never pressed her, I knew it was probably a touchy subject. Then she began moving things into the basement, first a lamp and a rug, then a cot and nightstand, but that shaken sense of urgency she had the first night she locked me down here never returned. It almost seemed like she enjoyed it now: *Hon, my mom's coming over, would you mind going downstairs? Downstairs*, as if the basement, even with all the little fixtures she'd added to make it more 'cozy' changed the fact I was to be locked down here, alone, for the next few nights. She just assumed I had no sense of time so it became every weekend that I was locked in the basement until Ophelia decided she wanted some companionship.

Besides some of her taxidermy projects and abandoned work out equipment, the basement was pretty scarce with things to do but rummage through the many boxes of dusty books. After 4 books in two nights, I felt I reached my reading quota and started poking around

to see what else this bunker had to offer. I kicked some boxes around hoping to hear something other than the rattling of ornaments or weights until I kicked one so light it slid a few feet away from me. I was weirded out to find a bunch of medical clothing, the type that dentists or nurses wear, in the cardboard box. As far as I knew, Ophelia did HR for some marketing company, what would she even need all this for? There were numerous pairs, all folded over each other, and the mount of blue scrubs piled up as I emptied the box. Something shiny at the bottom of the box reflected what little light I had in the basement and I reached in to pull out an old frame as it were. Obscured in the darkness, I couldn't make out the smaller text but I didn't need the details. "Eusevio Dino Calderon" had been awarded a Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

"Hey love, good morning, how is she doing?" I asked as Ophelia forced the basement door open, her set of keys rattling against the doorknob.

Walking down the stairs, she bowed her head a little and smiled, "She's okay, she's just really lonely without him and I think she feels guilty for not having checked in so much after Eusevio died, you know?"

But I wasn't stupid. If I knew Ophelia, and I'd like to think that I do, this wasn't something that she'd be so ripped up over. It's been months since Remy's death, years since Eusevio's, and while she told me that they were fresh wounds, her affect told me otherwise. She spoke so mundanely about them, about her mother's grieving, as if she were repeating a story for the thousandth time; I've seen her more torn up over the rodents she likes to embalm.

"Yeah, I know. It's been a while since then, though. I think you should focus on letting go of the past and moving on. Maybe I could help, I could meet your mom and maybe we could all go out and get your minds off it!"

She frowned at me. “I know you mean well, hon, but I don’t think you get what we’re going through. When somebody dies, it takes a really long time for you to get over it. I lost my first love and she lost the man she thought she’d be with for the rest of her life. You don’t know how hard it is to go through something like that.”

Ophelia stared at me with such a straight face I wondered if she was joking, patronizing me as if I lacked the capacity for empathy. What did she think the past several months of our relationship had been? I’d listened to stories of her childhood and understood the intricacies of her and her mother’s relationship. I learned to play the music she liked because she was so kind as to share it with me. I listened to her grieve, laugh, panic and I loved her through all of it: I gave everything I had to Ophelia and she couldn’t speak to me as if I were on her level?

“Why didn’t you tell me Eusevio was a nurse?”

Clearly taken aback, she held her breath for a second. Then, the corner of her mouth curled up into a smirk, “Why does it matter? It’s not like you were going to go work.”

Obviously, I wasn’t going to work as a nurse, that wasn’t the fucking point and she knew it. I was always insecure that I lacked the human nuance necessary to give Ophelia what she needed; so I never questioned her, but clearly that’d given her the wrong impression. Ophelia constantly reminded me of how incredible my ‘genesis,’ as she called it, had been but it always sounded more like self-praise than anything. While I was grateful for the legs she’d given me to stand on, I felt ashamed of the simplicity of my being. Eusevio, my archetype, had hiked mountains and swam in lakes and me? I wasn’t allowed beyond the walls of this home. I know I wouldn’t have filled Eusevio’s place in the world, but I could’ve at least been of some use to the world I’d materialized in.

“Ha, okay. What else have you been lying about then, huh? How’s the mother-daughter relationship going? Or have you just been hoping I’d stop asking and you could keep me down here forever?”

“If you think I’m so desperate I have to lie to you so you don’t leave me, you’re fucking crazy. I tried to make this basement nice for you and you don’t even care! You know what, at least I have a mom and she wouldn’t want to meet you anyways, she’d think you’re a bigger freak than me!”

I didn’t expect Ophelia to throw all of this in my face. I didn’t expect her to *lie* to my face. I thought she’d been made to feel so ashamed of her peculiarity, she wouldn’t have the heart to do the same to others. I didn’t realize what I was doing until the weight of her body slammed onto the floor and her upper body jolted off the ground, gasping for air. I looked down at her as she brought her hands up towards her neck and saw the bruises that I’d left on either side of her neck. Ophelia’s eyes bulged out of their sockets, blood vessels burst as she tried to force air into her lungs and I watched as she turned blue because that’s all I could do.

Her mother would be back this weekend, if Ophelia hadn’t been lying about their visits. Best not to leave a trace. I carried her body into the kitchen and set her down on the ground. The gas stove stuttered as it turned on, the rhythmic ticking mimicking the fluttering of the blue flame. I sensed the heat emanating from the gas stove, I felt nothing as the blue flame melted away the epidermal surface of my palm to reveal firm, gelatinous red under.

I removed my clothes and then hers and I doused us both in half a bottle of lighter fluid from the basement. I layed down next to her and covered us with a white tablecloth, the last bed we’d share together. I struck two matches I’m sure, at the highest temperatures, organic and artificial material burns all the same.

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