

Parts of the Whole



Austen Tucker

COLOPHON

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by Austen Tucker



Parts of the Whole Originally published in “Different Worlds: Different Skins Volume 2.” In my other writing life I wrote for a LGBTQ political blog and spent a lot of time studying the ex-gay movement. This is what came of it.

When Audrey woke up – really woke up, with the fox yipping and everything – you could see faint whiskers on her cheekbones. We were just playing around with a little hypnosis, a quick relaxation and a “Who are you?” command added on for good measure, and before I knew it my best friend was a kitsune. She writhed and wriggled and screamed a new name to the heavens before waking up, eyes full of fire, looking at me with that sly, foxy smile. She propped herself up on a pillow stolen from my bedroom and I knew it wasn’t Audrey talking anymore. “Is this sinking in, Lance?” she asked, hands folded under her chin, head tilted to one side.

“No.” I laughed and shook my head. “It was just supposed to be hypnosis. You know, like my therapist uses. God. I’m breaking out the whiskey. Want some?”

“Yeah. Always loved that stuff.” She was always a looker, in that cute, mousey-nerd way. Even though she wasn’t my type I understood why guys went crazy for her. (Girls, too, but that’s because she would hang out in my neck of the woods more often than not.) But here she oozed raw sexuality, a kind of command that captivated anyone foolish enough to step into her midst.

“Look, Lance. It’s pretty simple. I told you three times already: Audrey’s soul is part of a kitsune. One tail. Consider yourself lucky to know her.”

“And you’re someone else, I take it?” I poured two large snifters halfway to the brim. Sure, it wasn’t exactly proper whiskey technique, but we could worry about proper when we were good and drunk, and this whole song-and-dance was just a memory.

“Not exactly. She is me. I’ve just been off doing things for her outside of this world. Watching over her, making sure she had good fortune, all that guardian angel kind of stuff, to put it in terms even a Catholic could understand.” She stared at my cross and gave a little chuckle. “Lighten up, buddy! Just because you’re gay and Catholic doesn’t mean you can’t laugh a little!”

Yep. This was definitely not my favorite, do-no-harm best friend Audrey talking anymore. “You always wanted to know who you were. I mean, Audrey, that is. Hard to see you as anything different.”

I put the whiskey in front of Audrey and she took dainty little sips. “We aren’t. We’re parts of a whole. Audrey and Hope.”

“So that’s your name.” I took a deep swig. “Hope.”

“That’s just the name my contractor gave to me. My real name stays a secret.” Another sip. “No offense to you, of course. Just one of those things that spirits don’t usually part with.”

“She always wanted to know who she was.” Another deep swig. “I guess. Who knew, right? You know any angels?”

“None that’d tell you to put a rubber band around your wrist,” she said, chuckling. She pointed to the rubber band sitting snug around my arm. There were a dozen and a half welt marks where I had snapped the thing, hard, onto my skin, just like my therapist suggested. “What did the doc tell you? ‘Snap this band whenever you think of another male in a sexual fashion?’ That seems to be popular lately.”

“None of your business.”

“You know, most of those doctors don’t even have a Psy-D diploma? They’re kooks. Snake oil salesmen.”

“And my mother’s paying for the whole kit and caboodle.” I drained my snifter and went back into the kitchen for more. “What’s it matter to you?”

“You’re my friend—” she paused, “Audrey’s friend, I mean. But I’m easy to get to know if you just let things happen. Tell me. Are you allergic to dogs?”

I poured another slug of whiskey and downed it. At least this way I could keep up conversation without wanting to pull out a Bible and some holy water. “Nope. Lived and breathed them for years.”

When I came back to the living room she had a long, slinky, brown foxtail strewn across the sofa. As she petted it I could see it writhing, slowly, each movement attached to her hip. She smiled a coy little grin and patted the cushion be-

side her. “I just didn’t want to ruin your day – that’s all. Surprises are better when you don’t start sneezing.”

What the hell, I thought to myself. I sat down in the little pocket she made for me with her tail and then it was around my midsection. It was nice and soft – reminded me of an old, comfortable stuffed animal, come to think of it – and when she wrapped it around me I could feel myself relaxing. “Old kitsune magic,” she said to me, matter-of-factly. “My favorite kind.”

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.” We shared a laugh. I melted into her arms. “That mean I’m going to hell now, or is that the next step in this process?”

“Don’t be so mean!” she said. Then she gave me a playful slap across the arm. “Come on. I’m only trying to help. Some kitsune actually enjoy helping, you know.”

“And being blasphemous at the same time.”

“Right. Right. That’s not why you woke me up, though. Tell me about Steve,” she asked, tracking lazy, gossip-hungry circles into my thigh, and I couldn’t keep myself from pouring every little sordid detail to that chuckling little fox-smile.

• • •

I saw Mister Jenkins in my dreams. He preferred being called Therapist Jenkins, or Doctor Jenkins, but the guy was never licensed and he sure as hell wasn’t a doctor. But for me, when I sat on his couch in that little strip-mall ministry-turned-therapy spot, it was Mister Jenkins, nothing more,

nothing less. Mister Jenkins' "#1 Dad" coffee mug. Mister Jenkins' matchbox cars in shadowbox display cases. Mister Jenkins' Ten Commandments. Mister Jenkins' "God Loves You For Your Fight" poster.

"I want you to wear this rubber band," he said. He always said this one. The band was always different; sometimes it was on fire, sometimes it had thorns sticking out of inappropriate (and painful) places, sometimes it was a pink garter made of lace and elastic. But I was never given an option to say no – he'd say the words and the thing just appeared on my wrist.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything, mind you; that was never part of the dream. Not that Mister Jenkins would listen; he never listened. My mother paid him two hundred dollars a session for results, not compassion. So I stared at the band on my wrist and twirled it around, feeling the slight, pinching pressure coming down onto my wrist.

All the while, Steve was there. He was wrapped around my waist and kissing at my neck, just the way he did in every dream: curly black hair, pudgy little love handles, bubble butt hanging out of just-right jeans. God! Was he ever a looker! He held a mimosa in his free hand and giggled as his other hand made itself useful.

All his work got me panting pretty quickly; Mister Jenkins watched with that distant, off-in-space look he used every time we tried this little activity, making notes on the inside cover of his study Bible. "Right," he said. I interrupted him

with a little squeal as Steve found my ticklish spot. “Now I want you to snap the rubber band as you’re thinking about him. Lance, it’s the only way. Snap that rubber band right down on your wrist.”

It was a hot band of steel this time. When I snapped it down it left a charred mark across my wrist. I didn’t scream. Steve didn’t stop his ministrations. “Again, Lance. Snap the rubber band. Every time you think of that man, you have to hurt yourself. It’s a reminder, Lance. Remind yourself of why you are here.”

I’d snap it down again. Steve stopped working on me. He sat by Mister Jenkins, with a half-smile, sipping his mimosa and eyeing the ever-increasing number of char marks on my wrist. “We didn’t make a safe word,” he said to Mister Jenkins, “Can’t have S&M without a safe word!”

Mister Jenkins shook his head. He always shook his head in these slow, pained swings, a stiff-handed way of saying “close, but no cigar.” Then he would take out his pad of paper and tear off the top sheet. “My friend,” he said, as if we went out every weekend for drinks and darts, “I think we need to move to the next level of treatment. You are terribly homosexual.”

One armband became two. They linked at my belt loop, holding me to the chair. When I struggled the burning began again, charring long scars down my veins. I cried and the tears sizzled on the floor. Mister Jenkins shredded trust certificates in his hands and stapled the Exodus International

order to the top of the sheets. Steve laughed. Mister Jenkins kept shaking his pooh-pooh head, as if scolding a child.

“The Security personnel at the door will take you to the camp. Please don’t fight, Lance. It’s for your own good. Your mother will be proud of you.” That was how the dream always went: same imagery, same people, same goddamn ending. It got to the point that I simply stood up and walked toward the door, paying little attention to the ache in my heart, visions of shock therapy and snapping rubber-bands dancing in my head.

Except this time, Hope was at the door. She carried Audrey’s face, but the ears, the tails, the paws, the stark white fur, the Hellfire-red glow in her eyes, it was all Hope. She raised herself off the ground, tail whirling up a small dervish on the carpet. The dervish became fire, fire became storm, and before I could blink the whole room was dancing in orange-yellow flame. Mister Jenkins kept shaking his head even as the fires licked away at the Exodus order, Mom’s trust fund certificates, the tip of his beard. Steve disappeared into the wall. The cheap decorations, motivational posters, and anti-gay rhetoric all perished in the fire, consumed by the living, breathing flames.

And Audrey, smiling a smile that split her lip in a canine grin, broke my bonds with the fire. “Let it burn,” she said to me, and the flames grew ever higher—

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The intercom buzzer almost scared me out of the bed. If it weren't for Audrey's new fox tail curling tightly around my waist I might have fallen straight to the floor. My clothes were soaked clean through with sweat and the covers lay on the floor in a heap. Audrey lay motionless on her side of the bed, a gentle smile crossing her face, fox ears licking this way and that in innocent slumber. Best to leave her be, I thought to myself, and I closed the bedroom door behind me.

The intercom was by the refrigerator and was ringing so much that I feared it'd fall off its screws. Only one person in my world would do such a thing. "Hi, Mom," I said, my finger leaning against the talk button like a crutch.

"You're sleeping away your Sunday again?" her voice screeched and crackled over the intercom line. "Church was two hours ago."

"Long night," I replied. "Place is a bit of a mess."

"Let me in," she responded. I looked to the ceiling, released the talk button, and let out a moan. The ceiling had nothing to say in reply. "Really," Mom insisted. "it's chilly out here."

I buzzed her in and threw on a tee-shirt just in time to greet her at the door. "What brings you to Indy?" I asked.

"Oh, bridal shopping. Same old routine." She didn't hug me; instead, she looked me from head to toe and sneered. "Rainbow tee-shirt and highlighted hair? You're expecting to find a woman looking like that?"

I snapped the rubber band on my wrist hard enough to leave a welt.

“Oh, my. Dear, I’m sorry. You just don’t look... well... accessible. You know what I mean.”

“I look gay,” I finished for her.

“Yes!” She laughed. She had the most horrible laugh: high-pitched and cackling, like a hyena. She pulled her permed-to-frizz hair and stepped further into the kitchen. “I’m paying good money to save you from homosexuality, and you still dress gay. You’re still making it to group therapy, right?”

“Every Monday,” I replied. “Right on schedule. Want a drink?” God, did I ever want a drink!

“Heavens no! It’s the Sabbath!”

“Church serves wine on the Sabbath – can’t be that bad.” I poured myself a small slug of whiskey and drank slowly. I poured water for my mother.

She pointed to my wrist. “And I see you’re doing your therapist’s rubber band thing. Is it helping?”

“Helping to develop calluses, and that’s about it.” She pulled out a compact and checked her makeup. Leave it to Mom to ignore the issue. “But I am trying.”

Mom grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. “I know, honey. You have to understand that I’m just trying to do what’s best for you. You’re an adult, yes, but you’re still young. You don’t know what you want. And let me tell you,

you most certainly don't want to choose homosexuality. Did you know that most gay people have AIDS?"

I had tried all the angles with her, from "it's not a choice" to "I'm happy this way" to "your facts suck balls and I can prove it". But anymore, the best offense was to just ignore the issue altogether. I looked to the table "I've heard the figures before, Mom. I'm trying."

"Gay people that give into their sin become sex-crazed, wishy-washy maniacs. Commitment means nothing to them. I don't want that for my son."

"Right."

"And besides, you still need a date for my wedding." She laughed. "Third time's a charm, right?"

"Right." I finished the drink.

"Why can't you be more like Ted Haggard?" she asked suddenly. "The guy's had homosexual desires for years and he still managed to raise a family! Now that's a true hero! God bless him."

"Mom, I'm a bit busy today. I can't sit and chat all day about this."

"I wanted to take you out shopping with me – Find you some nice polo shirts, flannels, that sort of thing. Make you into a real looker!" She pulled snippets from a GQ magazine from her purse. "I know the mag's a bit gay, but these looks are right up your alley."

They were something, all right. Jocks, prep-boys, working men. Nothing like me, but my mother could dream. "Maybe

some other time,” I told her.

“Yes. And then we can drop by the Exodus camp, just to take a tour.”

“Mom!”

She held up her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, honey. I just don’t think you can do this alone. It takes a village to save an idiot, after all. I hear it’s a nice place – they have chapel every night, and you have all your amenities paid for. And I’ll pay for everything – you just say the word and it’s done.”

“An idiot? Let’s talk about idiot—” I paused, breathed, and collected myself by pouring another shot of whiskey. “Look. I’m only a month into treatment. Give me some time. This doesn’t happen overnight.”

“But you can find a date for the wedding?” she asked. “I hate to nag, but people are... well... asking questions about you. I figured it’d be a good start to recovery.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

Her voice was soft, low, pleading. “I just want to see you happy.” Then open your eyes, I thought to myself. But before I could get the nerve to say anything Audrey came ambling out of the bedroom, yawning.

When I heard the door open my heart seized with shock; Mom would flip her lid if she saw a girl with fox ears and a tail! But when Audrey came to lean on the kitchen counter the ears and the tail were all gone, as if it were all a mirage cooked up within my own head.

Mom just laughed. “I see that you’re quite busy.” She picked up her purse and headed toward the door. “I’ll just leave you two be, all right?”

“All right,” I said.

“Nice to see you again,” Audrey said.

“And you too!” she hugged me tight – tighter than she had done in months. “Thanks for trying,” she said. “I love you.”

Just like that, she left smiling.

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Mass Ave was no Chicago neighborhood, but it was a nice place to live. As far as Indianapolis went it was about the most culturally active area in the city, a hovel tucked away between industrial warehouses, financial districts, and ghettos, far from the beaten tourist paths. Here, the ever-present influence of franchises, Simon Malls, and convention-goers-du-jour gave way to the avant garde, the independent shop-keep, the city boys and girls making believe that Indianapolis is a real city, not just some empty shell occasionally filled to the brim with the next great event.

Besides, most of the guys on Mass Ave were as cute as they were accessible. So much so, in fact, that I was making a nice red mess of my arm with all the rubber band snappings on my wrist. Audrey watched with distanced concern, as if any movement would cause me to reel back in terror. So I did the only thing I could think to do: I skirted the issue.

As we rounded a corner I looked to her hips. “You had a tail this morning. Really. Swear to God you did.”

“A tail. Right.” She took my hand and we walked together for a bit. To our left, a street performer handed out kazoos and encouraged us to join his little band, but we kept walking. “I mean, I remember the dream and all, but I’m not that crazy, and if I’d been that drunk I’d be hungover all to hell right now.” One thing was for sure: Hope didn’t play by simple rules. It was just Audrey out in public: same old, same old. Straightforward, nice, a little unsure of herself — but trying.

“Must have been me,” I offered. “Been stressed lately.”

“What with your mom trying to ruin you and all that,” Audrey said. “Come on. I’m hungry. How’s Old Point sound?”

It wasn’t so much a question as it was a default. The Old Point Tavern was just a part of our lives, like breathing or sleeping. I can’t tell you the number of nights I’ve spent under its red neon glow in the night, or the plethora of Sundays where I stopped by for chili and a beer. Once you’re known there, you’re there; the little triangle of a building that says “welcome” and never, ever turns you away.

We sat on the patio. It was a bit chilly out there, and most people were bundled for the occasion, but there was just no point spending such a lovely, early spring morning cooped up inside. Audrey leaned over to me while we waited. “You think your mom will see us?”

“Nah. She probably came into town just to talk to me. Happens all the time.” A crowd of bikers whizzed past the intersection amid honking cars. Feels good to get out and see the world go by.

“What’s her deal?”

I shrugged. “She wants grandkids.”

I could have sworn the whiskers came out as she pushed further. “And what’s your deal, letting her toss you around like that?”

I had no answer. Thankfully this didn’t mean much of anything, as my favorite waiter came to the table right on time. Steve. “Mornin, Lance,” he said to me. My gosh, was his voice ever wonderful! “How’s the day treating you?”

“I’ve had worse.” He touched me. We laughed together. He squeezed my collar and I could feel my heart quiver in my throat. “But I’m here, and that’s something. What’s on special?”

I don’t remember what I ordered – mostly I just wanted to hear his voice ramble through the soups and salads and beers-du-jour. When he walked away my eyes rested on his broad, muscled shoulders and perfectly-kempt hair just a moment longer than any straight guy would have – how could I not look – until I got myself back under control with a few snaps of the rubber band.

When I looked to Audrey the whiskers were definitely there.

“That’s Steve?”

“Yes,” I responded. Then I looked away.

“That’s heart-beating-in-chest Steve?”

He brought our beers; I waited until he left before I continued. “Yes. That’s the very one.”

She laughed. “You’re telling me you’ve been chasing that hunk of man all this time and you didn’t think to tell me? Get out! Is he gay?”

“He didn’t give you any glances, did he?”

“Get out of town!” Audrey laughed. She held up her hands and waved Steve over. Shit. I could certainly start to hate those fucking fox whiskers. As Steve came over I buried my face in my beer, hoping like hell he wouldn’t see me blushing. But Audrey was all smiles, all not-Audrey, patting the chair beside her. “Take a seat, hon!” she said to him, and it was as if she were the Pope Himself. Steve sat down, blue eyes trained on Audrey, like some little puppy dog waiting for his treat.

“I was just about to get your order. I do have other tables —”

“Nonsense. You’re just fine.” She wrapped her hands around his. I tried my best not to feel jealous. “Now, mind if I ask you a question or two? It’s about my friend Lance here.”

“Oh, yes. Cute boy you got there.” He chuckled and blushed. Blushed! I couldn’t believe it!

“Lance isn’t mine, silly. He’s single.” She leaned in close, and in doing so flashed me a look at her tail. Showoff. “See,

he's just not my type, if you get my meaning."

Steve's eyes jumped.

"Well, like I was saying. Lance is a bit nervous in public. Sort of new to batting for the rainbow team, y'know? I was wondering if you knew any cute singles around: calm, cute, sophisticated, the like."

"I know one," Steve said. He looked at me and gave me a wink that'd melted anyone – gay or straight. Then he spoke directly to me: "All you had to do was ask, dear. I always thought you were cute."

I chuckled and looked away. "Stop it!"

Steve pulled a card from his back pocket. He could have left it on the table, sure, but he took my hand and put the card right there, palm-to-palm, the touch warm.

"Call me tonight, hon. I get off at about five."

My tongue caught in my throat. "S-sure," I managed, and Audrey bit her tongue on a chuckle.

Steve laughed. "And one more thing, hon."

"What?"

"The rubber-band trick never works." Steve reached down, pulled back on my band, and snapped it against my wrist. I would have pulled away, but the slick bastard took my hand in his and gave it this lovely little peck, like a gentleman courting some goddamn Victorian lady. "See you tonight?"

"Tonight," I echoed. That's all I could remember from the meal; everything else blurred into some mish-mash of beer,

nachos, and some dessert Audrey put on my tab. For me there was Steve: friendly smile, baby-blue eyes, butt that wouldn't quit.

By the time Audrey and I left I had broken my rubber band clean in two.

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I never asked Audrey to come to the Exodus meeting, but Hope found a way there anyway. I was just about to sit down when she put her hand on mine, nonchalant, as if she'd walked in with me. "Jesus!" I yelled, and half the room stared at me. Then I dropped my voice to a whisper. "I thought you had work."

"I do. It's you." She patted my hand. "I told the group leader that I'm your girlfriend. Some lie, huh? Bet Steve will get a kick out of it."

I smacked her hand. It was quiet in the room – too quiet to have this kind of conversation. Around me were effeminate men trying their best to look tough: scraggly beards, flannel shirts, tattoos of pin-up women – fifties style – revving up a motorcycle. They sat on old folding chairs in the Kingdom Hall basement and tried their best to look like they were happy to be there.

That's right: Kingdom Hall. One of the largest in the Midwest, even. The thing was a pimple on the face of 65, a huge, plain, formed concrete hall that bumped elbows with the highway so close that people in the basement could hear

and feel every semi-truck thundering over the overpass. The group was some joint-faith initiative – one of those four-letter acronyms that ended with X-Gay, as if people never learned to spell – and this was the only place people could agree to descend upon. The only other places downtown even remotely worth considering were the Masonic temple – dream on – or the Anglican church smack in the middle of downtown, and that was just right out.

Which left me making the walk of shame up to Kingdom Hall twice a month, enduring Watchtowers and WBC anti-fag propaganda all the while, to rub elbows with the sorriest men trying to eke the sorriest living from their sordid little lies. They even threw us into the dingy old basement, amidst rusted pipes that rattled whenever a toilet so much as thought about flushing. Joy.

Audrey picked up my hand in hers and let it fall onto my lap. “So, I have a question. And please pardon if it sounds direct – kitsune can be that way.”

“I noticed.”

“So, you’ve been dragged into this whole X-Gay thing. Did you ever think to, I don’t know, ask Him directly?”

I shrugged. “My mom follows the Good Book.”

“Which was written by humans, translated, and retranslated. Tell you what; I’ll put a contract for a couple of million dollars through BabelFish a couple of dozen times. Then you can sign it. Sound like a plan?”

“Not here, Audrey.” I looked around and tried my best not to sweat.

“Hope. Whatever. Just not here.”

“You know, sometimes God works one-on-one. One spirit sent to save one other spirit. Who knows? Maybe this is your lucky day.”

“Right.” I choked on a laugh.

“Someone’s gotta tell you that you’re crazy,” she continued. “You’re still listening to your mother and you’re what, twenty-five? Twenty-six next month?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re still a mama’s boy.” she laughed. “Come on. Doesn’t take a kitsune to figure that one out. Lance, if you’re so concerned about church and ‘faith,’ just close your eyes and talk to Him. He’s a reasonable Dude.”

“Whatever.”

Audrey shook her head. “Don’t make me do this.”

I shrugged. “As if I can stop you.”

It started innocently enough. Everyone tried to get into the manly spirit with a good ol’ pissing contest: who was the X-est of the X-Gays? One old Bear, clean-shaven for the occasion, showed a picture of his new girlfriend. Emphasis on the girl – best not to cross a Bear trying to be a Bob for some dame – and the crowd applauded. One pixie boy came forward to show his new beard – they applauded.

One stand-up guy admitted that he backslid that day. (No, he literally backslid, if you get my drift.) Support came from

everywhere. Apparently being heterosexual just wasn't as natural as the pamphlet said it was. Nothing like struggling against yourself to be yourself, I always said, but then again I was in no place to talk. Hard to get critical when you attend the same meetings and play the same games, right?

I thought about Steve as the meeting settled down. Audrey took notice right away. "Oh, come now. This is about beating your addiction, not feeding it." She patted my hand. "Besides, you'll get to feed later. Trust me. He's totally hot for you. And the package in those jeans... Mmm!"

"Audrey!"

"That's Hope talking, dear" she pointed to the door. "Now keep your yap shut: the MC's making his way into the room."

Horace Wilkins was a flimsy man, white shirt and thin, black tie. When he walked his hands were always full: Bible tucked under one arm, Watchtowers in his free hand, pens and prayer cards tucked into his shirt pocket behind a little plastic protector. But here he was not a Witness, nor was he a church-going man. He was an X-Gay, just like the rest of us. Our model, if you will. He spoke with a reedy voice, heavy on the lisp; if it weren't for the ring on his finger I'd have pegged him almost immediately as one of us – rather, one of what we used to be, I guess. So goddamn confusing.

He began with a quick prayer. Everyone bowed their heads and pretended to be serious. "Good evening, gentlemen. And lady – I see that Lance has made progress, yes?"

I nodded. Audrey just chuckled a girly little chuckle and squeezed my arm tight. Everyone applauded, but I knew deep down that this wasn't Audrey's work. The laugh was too jovial, the act too exuberant: something was up. And, sure enough, as Audrey guided my hands over her head, I could feel two nubs of fox-ears under my fingers.

Horace took a seat at the head of the group. He put his Bible neatly into his lap, the Watchtowers in a pile conveniently within reach of any member of the circle. "In any case, welcome back, friends, and bravo for your courage. Facing the homosexual problem is never easy."

Nods across the board. Audrey cracked a smile and laughed a bit.

"But we have the choice, friends. We can choose to live normal, healthy, heterosexual lives. We can be fathers, husbands, breadwinners. And we can do it together."

Now Audrey was just outright laughing. Everyone stopped to stare. She took her time to stop her laughter, letting it trail into giggles and little fits. Then, as if it were this simple: "You're fighting as if you couldn't be healthy before. What gives?"

Horace stared daggers through me. I just shied away. "If you must ask," Horace said, his tone milky and soft like a limp block of tofu, "we all have the choice to be heterosexual. Homosexuality is a sin, and is a behavior that leads to many health risks. So we're choosing the better path."

“Choice, right.” She laughed. I could feel her tail wriggling against the hem of her jeans – as if things couldn’t be crazy enough. “Wait. Horace, right? Now I remember you! Hard to see it through the horned-rim glasses and Jehovah Jacket, but yeah. Definitely there.”

People were whispering. Horace cleared his throat and rearranged his tie. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah! Now I definitely see it. I remember your face! Talbott Street, right? That’s your favorite place. Two Crowns, a little chit-chat, and you’re up in the VIP lounge swapping spit with that drag queen. What’s her name, Donna?”

“That’s not important,” he said. Sweat burst onto his brow.

“I mean, it’s close and all that. But she’s a man, honey. Not planning on the surgery, not planning on full-time, nada.”

He looked to the ground. “I knew that going in,” he said, softly, as if under duress.

“That’s a case of ‘close, but no cigar’ if I ever heard one. So what’s the solution, Horace? I don’t see your rubber band. Where’s your rubber band?” I hid my face as best I could. Horace wiped his brow and tried to look dignified, but all eyes continued to rest on him.

“I had a moment of weakness,” he protested.

Audrey laughed. “Right. I bleed five days a month and you don’t see me complaining. You’re in there every Saturday.

Vivian even knows you by first name – the owner, you know.”

Horace stood up. He was shaky but he stood anyway. “I think we should table this meeting,” he said. “It’s just not a good day.”

“Never a good day to hate yourself,” Audrey offered. Then, to the rest of the group: “By the by, specials at Talbott tonight are well drinks and martinis. Knock ’em dead, boys.”

We didn’t stay any longer. Mind you, Audrey would have been happy to tear Horace a new asshole for the rest of the night, but before she could really get going I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out of Kingdom Hall. Everyone waved goodbye and gave their well-wishings. “Hope to see you soon!” they said to Audrey, and she blew kisses in return.

By the time we were on the street she was all ears-and-tail again, and her nose ended in a small, moist, black dot. “Wasn’t that fun?” she said. She did a quick twirl on the sidewalk and her tail wrapped around her knees like some feather boa. “Beats the hell out of self-loathing, I say. What the hell was with him, anyway? Watchtowers and Bibles. Give me a break!”

“You could have at least spared his dignity,” I snapped. I wanted to be mad at Audrey. I really did. But she said more in three minutes than I had managed to say in ten months of group “therapy” sessions. Frankly, I agreed with her. But still....

“That was rude as hell.”

“Rude of them to call you a sinner for being yourself.” She shrugged. “Turnabout’s fair play, I say. Pass me your phone.”

I did. Not that I could say no to Audrey when she was like this – something about the fox features just put the fear of God right into me. “Let’s get some real healing,” she said. As the phone rang her face took shape, two triangles on top of a teardrop muzzle. As the phone rang for Steve she let out a little yerfing cackle that reminded me of coyotes in cool summer nights. I should have been concerned. Really, I should have been terrified. But something about Audrey’s touch, her command of the situation, her gentle eyes... well, it all felt right.

• • •

We met Steve at The Metro before I took him home. It was Audrey’s idea, really. She didn’t even tell me Steve was going to be there until we walked in the door, even though she kept her nose buried in her cell phone the entire way, tacking out text messages as easily as breathing. But there we were, basking in the bluish glow of The Metro’s genteel bar, super-gay house music softly filling the room, and Steve was right there, smiling, wearing an impeccable button-up shirt and copper-washed jeans.

My God, was he ever attractive.

Steve wasted no time in waving us over. He gave us both hugs and pecks on the cheeks – a real European type, you

know – and invited us to a smaller booth. As he did so I found myself lost in his eyes: gorgeous things, soft and inviting. I would have felt bad if Steve wasn't busy doing the same.

This was wrong. I knew this from the start but Audrey kept right on pushing, smiling, giggling as we made awkward passes at one another, as our hands touched, as our compliments caught traction.

“I'm trying not to be gay anymore,” I said at last. It came out after about a half-dozen beers or so – I can't remember. I just know that we were having a great time until suddenly I remembered that I was supposed to feel guilty. It hit Audrey like a truck and Steve didn't exactly know what to do with it either. “I'm sorry,” I offered.

But suddenly Steve was all smiles. “Nah. It's one of those phases, hon. We all go through it. Believe me.”

And just like that we were taking him back to my place. On the way we kept singing and asking fun questions: birthdays, favorite superheroes, perfect dates. Audrey followed closely behind us, giving us room while simultaneously keeping me in check. That's what it felt like: being kept in check. Put on a leash and asked to act.

Yet I didn't mind it at all.

Steve asked a few questions of Audrey, of course. (Who wouldn't? It's rude to ignore your guests while you're flirting, after all.) But Audrey kept pawning off every question, waffling from every request. “I'm just Lance's roommate,”

she would say over and over again. “That’s all you need to know. I’m sure you’d rather talk with Lance anyway.”

And we did exactly that all the way home. Sure, it was more kissing and hugging than it was talking, but who was keeping score anymore? At home we collapsed onto the couch while Audrey poured wine. My hands explored the angles of his lovely body. His head rested on my chest. When he spoke I could feel it vibrating throughout my body.

Then the phone rang. Mom. How could I not answer? “Pardon me,” I said to Steve, and he sat up momentarily while I pulled the phone out of my pocket. Once it was out he collapsed back down on me just so; his new position left me blushing a bit.

Mom didn’t even wait for my answer. “How was therapy?” she asked.

“It was....” I paused for a moment to give Steve a playful little slap. “It was therapy, Mom. Nothing big.”

“I heard otherwise,” she replied. There was ice in her voice. “Are you taking this seriously?”

“Of course!” I said.

Steve played with my fly. “Yep. Certainly serious, right?” I breathed deep and tried to ignore his ministrations. Audrey stepped in to ask who was calling, but thankfully Steve was thoughtful enough to throw a blanket over his work.

“Mom?” Audrey mouthed at me, and I nodded.

“I need to know who you’re bringing to the wedding,” she said. “Now. Please tell me you found someone, Lance.”

I looked to Audrey and put a hand over the receiver.
“Help me out,” I asked her.

“Don’t push this,” she replied. I could see the whiskers forming on her cheeks.

“Please. I need this.”

Audrey’s face was cold. “I’m warning you.”

I felt a breeze around my fly and let out a yelp. Audrey just chuckled.

I went back to Mom. “Of course I found someone. Remember Audrey? Yeah. She’ll be happy to join me. We’ll go as a couple.”

That wasn’t enough. “Are you a couple?”

“No, but she’s helping me. I swear!”

“Not helping enough, from what I’ve heard.” There was a pregnant pause. “I have friends in the area, you know.”

Audrey let out a yell and tore at her hair. “You’re fucking shitting me.” Steve kept working on me. I kept squirming, trying my best to keep him away, but then he found the right spot.

I let out a yelp of a moan. Steve growled.

“That’s a man’s voice,” Mom said. Her voice could have jumped through the phone, it was so angry.

“It’s not!” I said.

“Lance, you better not be doing what I think you’re doing.”

“I’m not! Audrey... well, Audrey has a friend over. Right, Audrey?”

But that was the last straw for her. She let out an ear-piercing screech and the room flashed bright yellow. Her clothing melted away and made room for fur. Her face pointed into a muzzle, and her eyes glowed hot with anger. By the time Steve pulled himself from his work she was completely over: ears, tail, fur, muzzle. A fox by any other name, and Hope was far from jovial at that point.

Her words shook my heart. “You want a buffer and a cover? Fine. Find it somewhere else. How about you take Steve to that wedding? It’d be a hell of a lot easier, I say.”

“Who is Steve?” Mom asked, but I hung up the phone. Steve damn near fell off the couch.

Her tails flicked as she marched over to me. Then, with gorgeous, petite, sharp ebony claws, she took my chin in her hand and pulled my nose to hers. “You just don’t get it, do you? God sends a gift horse down to your doorstep and you keep looking down its throat. I swear, you are the dumbest man I have ever met!

“I’m going out,” she said suddenly, and then I was staring at her graceful tail. “Don’t wait up on me.”

She slammed the door.

It was at about this point that Steve found his vocal cords again. “Just so we’re straight, your roommate just turned into a fox, correct?”

“Correct,” I said.

“And you’re not the least bit concerned that this has occurred.” He looked up at me, then to the door, then to me

again. He shook his head. "Cause I may be drunk, but god-damn. That's not normal."

"I know. She's kitsune."

"Kitsune?"

"Fox spirit. Trust me, you don't want to know much more. It only ends in trouble."

Steve laughed. "At least she loves you."

"Right."

"No. She loves you the right way. She knows who you are." Steve patted my stomach a few times. "Like my dad, for example, he never got over my lifestyle. I tried for a long time – made him proud, all that. I mean he loves me, sure, but he doesn't love me."

"What'd you do?"

"I moved. We can talk, so long as there's space between us."

I sighed. "That sounds crazy."

"Sounds like growing up, to me." He laughed. "But then again, you're the one living with a fox and slapping rubber bands to your wrist. Who's the crazy one?"

We laughed together for a while.

Steve sat up. "I understand if you want me to go home. It's a rough time for you...."

"What do you want out of your life?" I asked Steve. Sudden question, sure, but at that point I was pretty much ready to ask anything. He was still there, after all, even when

my roommate turned into a fox in front of his eyes. That has to be good for something.

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

He turned it over in his head for a moment. As he did so he traced lazy circles on the top of my foot. “I want to live, to love, and to stop feeling guilty.”

“You too?”

He nodded. “You still go to the PFOX meetings?”

“Sometimes.”

He laughed. “Give it time; you’ll get over that. But yeah. I should probably go—”

“Nonsense,” I told him. Then I patted the space he had been warming with his face. “You’re here, and that’s something to be happy for. Gotta work on that guilt, after all.”

Our eyes met and then I just knew what had to happen next.

• • •

I knelt at the windowsill and started praying.

It was morning, and my head felt like it was ready to implode. The apartment smelled of Astroglide and sex. In my bed, Steve continued to snore, his naked body still curled around my imprint in the mattress. Torn condom wrappers littered the floor. Blankets and sheets laid in crumpled piles all across my apartment. In the kitchen, one could still see

smudge marks on the counter in a shape conspicuously similar to Steve's hips.

And there I was, hands folded on the sill, head bowed, eyes closed. "God, I don't understand."

Outside, a car laid on its horn. I was cold; the apartment was always drafty, and walking around in just a pair of shorts wasn't helping matters any. I should have been in that imprint Steve was keeping warm for me, but it just didn't settle.

"I want to make everyone happy," I said. "That's all I ever wanted to do. Help me, God. What should I do?"

From the heavens came a whisper of a reply: "Turn around."

A fox sat at my feet. When I stood she stood, and when I walked to the kitchen she shook dew from her fur. I made breakfast and she nosed at my ankles. "I'm sorry," I said to her.

In a flash of light Audrey came out of the fox pelt like a hatching egg. She lay on my floor, naked, brushing the fur from her chest with dainty fingers. There was no fear, no worry: only Audrey and I and the rising sun, with Steve snoring away in the back room. We said nothing while Audrey wrapped a blanket around her waist.

"I was awake for everything," she said to me. "The change. Running through the forest, hunting rabbit."

"How was it?"

Her breath caught in her throat. “Incredible. How was your night?”

“Same,” I replied, and shot a glance to the back room. “He’s great.”

“Then that’s all that matters. No reason to be sorry.” She poured herself cereal. “I figured you two would be a good match.”

“Why not an angel?” I blurted. “I mean, I think I’ve been a good sport about all this. But sending a fox? Why a fox? Why not one of those big-winged mobsters of God, halo and all that, guiding my every step of the path? Why not God himself speaking into my ear like some big religious experience? Why, Hope?”

“You wouldn’t have listened to one, dear.” She pointed the spoon at me. “God works in mysterious ways, y’know. Sure, He could reach down and tell you what you need to do. Sure, He could descend upon a church and make everyone see the light. But it doesn’t work that way, Lance. You and I both know that.”

“We’re parts of a whole,” I responded.

“little puzzle pieces in some mysterious big canvas. Hell if I know. I’m just a kitsune.”

I laughed at that one.

“Oh, and before I forget. Your mom’s staging an exorcism for you. I stopped by and heard her making all the calls last night. Gonna be a big ol’ revival, whole nine yards.”

My mind raced with a thousand bad movie scenes. Exorcism? I imagined shaking and frothing at the mouth among singing and screaming congregations, the sign of the cross burned into my head, mysterious tongues blathering from my lips. Mom was crazy, sure. But this... “And she thinks I’m going to come?”

“I’m going to take you,” she responded. “And you’re going to do it smiling.”

I looked to the ceiling and pushed on my temples. Hard. Spots filled my vision. “I don’t get it. All this time building me up and now you’re taking me to a breakdown.”

“You just have to trust—”

“I never said I didn’t trust you,” I interrupted. “I just want to know what the hell I’m getting into.”

“That’d ruin the fun,” Hope said. She yipped twice and focused on the bowl. “You should go cuddle with your man. Sleep’s good before an exorcism. Studies show that well-rested people have the most entertaining exorcisms. Trust me! I saw it in Vogue once. Honest!”

Mom called and Audrey answered. I was shooed back to my imprint, and Steve was all too happy to take me into his arms.

• • •

It was a backwoods tent revival, all right. I recognized the beat-up old blue tent from the yearly town fish fry, and the Ex-Gay banner from the Third Methodist Church. (Another

one of those intra-faith things, I guess, but I wasn't exactly ready to ask questions.) They were feeding me badly fried fish soaked in too much tartar sauce and catching me up on town gossip – who knocked up who, how many drinks Mister Lawrence had, the like.

They asked Audrey how long we'd been together, naturally, and she was happy to blather on about our relationship. All the while, though, I could barely touch her for the heat she put off. The pastor, noticing this, stepped to the back of the room and had a few words with my mother.

Mister Jenkins was there to congratulate me, of course. Leave it to the reparative therapist to show up when victory's afoot, since he sure-as-hell wasn't around when things got tough. "The rubber band works every time," he said to me, laughing. We shook hands and Audrey shot him the dirtiest little look.

I wanted to wash my hands after that handshake, but it always seemed like someone was blocking my path, ready with a handshake and a "how the hell have things been?" conversation. Intentional? Definitely. But what was I going to do about it? So I sat in my chair and watched Mister Jenkins congratulate every aunt, uncle, and family friend at the table for "raising such a courageous young man".

The off-key sounds of a rusty gospel quartet rolled across the canvas ceiling. The men were far beyond their prime, and by the sound of their tired cassette player they'd been singing the same set for twenty years. Twenty-five, come to

think of it; they'd been around town for as long as I could remember. And they were just as lovely as hardtack, let me tell you.

Every well-meaning mom in town paraded their daughter in front of me, but paused when Audrey met their eyes. "I'm terribly sorry," each said in turn, and Audrey replied with, "You should be."

The crowd slowly shuffled toward their seats. I thought it'd be a good chance to slip right out, you know, pretend that none of this ever happened. I could move to a new city, block my mom's phone number, the whole nine. The tent flap was just steps away from my seat at the table. It'd be a simple thing: by the time anyone realized I was gone I'd be halfway to Chicago.

Audrey put a firm hand over mine, though, and that was the end of that. "Come on. It's going to be fine. You trust me?"

"Absolutely."

She nodded and gave my hand a squeeze. "I think this is what I'm here for."

The gospel quartet ambled the stage in a murmur of polite applause. Old Lady Bennigan sat down to her beat-up electric organ and began to play a hymnal. Everyone sat and was quiet. Pastor Hunt nodded to Mister Jenkins, who looked to me with a gentle, warm smile. "The Pastor would like you to join him on stage," he said to me, using that listen-to-your-elders voice he loved to throw around in therapy.

It was Audrey who got up first. She was smiling and nodding, and took my hand tightly into hers. I felt as if she had plugged me into a light socket! Every hair on my body crackled with static, and my head felt as if it had become a van-der-graff generator. She squeezed my hand tight as we processed to the front, among the smiling faces and the fervently praying old ladies. At the front of it all was my mother, sitting beside the cross, moved to tears by the outpouring of support for her poor, sick son.

“It’s Hope,” Audrey whispered to me. We were at the base of the altar, where grass gave way to plywood.

“God, do I ever hope it’s you!”

“I wouldn’t leave you hanging.” She stiffened her grip. “Whatever you do, don’t let go. I’m going to shield you. Just trust me. Do. Not. Let. Go.”

I squeezed. Hard. She squeezed right back.

Pastor Hunt shook my hand. He pointed to a single chair at the center of the plywood altar. Audrey shook her head and pulled a folding chair from the front row. “Moral support,” she insisted, and the pastor just shrugged as Audrey took a seat beside me.

They began with a prayer. I’d have loved to bow my head as well, but Pastor Hunt had his palm firmly attached to my forehead as he said the benediction, and refused to so much as let me look anywhere but up. Above me, the sign of the cross had been made in twine. Below me, a Bible. And Pastor

Hunt's body took up the rest of my vision, his black shirt and white collar shining in cheap spotlights.

"We are here to ask Lance's demon to leave," he said, and the congregation murmured its agreement. Mom just sniffled and sniffled. Audrey kept squeezing. The congregation took up the Lord's Prayer as if it were a drum beat, slow and methodical. Pastor Hunt closed his eyes and began to shake.

"Demon!" he screamed. "Leave this boy to his loving girlfriend!"

I tried not to laugh.

The congregation continued to pray. Cheap, electric organ hymnals continued to spout from Old Lady Bennigan's fingers. Audrey stared right at Pastor Hunt, and her hands felt like fire as they wrapped around mine.

The pastor's hand trembled. Suddenly the world became a tiny, tiny dot, and I felt like falling to my back. "Away, demon! Trouble this boy no more!" My eyes vibrated. I wanted to scream, to shout, to fight back, but the words pounded on my soul and found all the right cracks, tearing holes and taking residence. I felt as if a thousand rubber bands snapped all across my body.

Yet for as much damage as the pastor managed to perform he could never dig all the way in. He pushed and pushed, screaming higher and higher, and the prayer chorus doubled their efforts in response. Yet for all the praying, all the gesticulating, all the Holy Ghost he could muster, I still sat firm in my chair, still kept my wits.

Hope, of course, but I wasn't in much of a condition to tell the pastor that. His grip was starting to make me feel faint.

"Begone!" he screamed, as if it were some fantastic orgasm. Then he pushed on my forehead. Hard. The world spun and suddenly I felt plywood meet with the back of my head. I screamed. My grip went limp.

It was at that point that I became truly lost. The prayers reached an apex; Pastor Hunt looked to the Heavens and seemed to receive a reply. I felt a seizure coming on that I couldn't have fought even if I wanted to. A thousand different images blew through my head like dust shaking from a dry sandcastle. Sure was a good run, I thought to myself, and I let the memories and thoughts fall away from me.

Then everything stopped.

I thought I died for a good thirty seconds. It was that drastic; without warning the music stopped, the praying stopped, the pastor stopped, and suddenly I was in a world of darkness that had no up, no down. It came back slowly: the sound of gasping breath, the 120-volt hum of a badly-connected amplifier, the wheeze of the gospel choir's oxygen tanks.

"Are you okay?" Audrey asked. Except it wasn't Audrey anymore: the voice was deeper, resonant, as if it vibrated on every molecule in my body. Wisps of breezes traced across my face and suddenly I felt myself coming back into focus.

I opened my eyes to healing light.

“Come here,” the voice demanded. I did exactly that and took the light by the hand. Suddenly the exorcism was all gone – I felt as if it were Christmas evening, and I was content with everything that had happened. “I told you not to let go.”

It was Audrey. It wasn’t Audrey. As the light faded I could see Hope in the haze: a tall, slinky figure, somewhere between fox, human, and waterfall. Where she looked the winds followed, and where she breathed became bathed in the brightest, cleanest water I had ever known. Her slanted, penetrating eyes and fox muzzle penetrated like X-rays.

I wanted to say she was beautiful. I wanted to say that I had stared into the eyes of God. I wanted to say that the Pearly Gates would be drab by comparison, and that this creature – this gorgeous, breathtaking creature – was in fact the spiritual secret for which our world had searched so hard. I wanted to tell the world to lay down their arms, the politicians to shake hands, the bigots to walk a mile in someone’s moccasins. But the feelings all caught in my throat, held there by Hope’s playful little giggle.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” she said. It sounded as angel bells must peal.

She turned to face the congregation, who was busy burying their heads into their laps. “May I have your attention?” she asked. People continued to pray. “No. Really. Please. Pay attention. I have a message for everyone.”

People stopped praying.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” she said. She patted me on the shoulder once before pulling me into her waterfall arms. I felt her muzzle on the top of my head as if it were a pointer. “Just... you got it terribly wrong. That’s all. That’s why I’m here. You’re doling out hate when you should be giving love.”

The congregation nodded. A shadow passed from the congregation to the ceiling in a whorl of wind and water.

Hope nodded.

Audrey gave me a big hug.

Then, as quickly as it all began, they were both gone.

• • •

When I showed Steve my past Audrey was everywhere. I had all the photo albums, all the home movies, all the relics from our life together. I could smell her conditioner, taste her favorite mixed drink, hear her screaming voice at the myriad clubs in the area. She was so goddamn real to me.

There’s a polaroid in the third album: the two of us outside Old Point, arms around each other, neither of us looking at the camera. I’m mid-laugh. Audrey’s got this look she always had when she thought she’d said something brilliant — chin up, one eyebrow raised, completely sure of herself. She’d been sure of me long before I was. That’s the thing about Audrey. She always got there first.

Scrapbook after scrapbook passed under our noses. Crappy digicam movies played over youtube. Yet every image, every movie, every perfect Audrey smile drew a blank in

Steve's eyes. "Whoever she was," he said to me, "she was a beautiful lady. Real fag hag, y'know?"

My face fell.

Steve hugged me tight. "But those are the best kind."

Hope, they remembered. The pictures ran in the papers. The revival spread like a shockwave, a new ministry of rainbows and foxtails. Even my mother, bent out of shape as she should have been, kept calling to ask what I saw, who she was, and when Steve was going to come over for lunch. "I'd like to get used to him," she said, and I laughed politely in return.

I hugged Steve close and snapped a picture with my camera. It was a cheap shot, sure, but Mom just wanted a look at his face. It'd do for the wedding, I told myself. "She got us together," I said. Steve cuddled close. "Remember? The bar? She pulled you over to the table to chat. Invited you over. Everything."

He looked into the distance for a moment. "Nope. Nothing. Drawing a blank."

As if she never existed, I thought to myself. That's some spiritual bullshit.

I wanted to explain. I tried — with the albums, with the movies, with all of it. But it was like showing someone a key and being told the door didn't exist. Everyone who'd been at the revival remembered Hope: the light, the fox, the wind through the tent. Nobody remembered the girl who'd dragged me out of my own apartment to walk in the sun on

Mass Ave. Nobody remembered the one who'd ordered me nachos and put them on my tab. The papers ran her picture and called her a miracle. I kept the photo albums and called her my best friend and didn't know what to do with the difference.

"Look," he said to me. Suddenly he was pushing away, standing in my kitchen in little more than his boxers, hands extended. "I'm sorry about all this. Let me make it up to you; ever go to the riverboat?"

"No," I said. My fingers traced over handwritten notes. She'd left them everywhere — tucked into books, folded under coffee mugs, stuck to the fridge with a frog magnet she'd picked up at some gas station in Ohio. "I support you," this one read, and then her signature in big looping letters, and then below that, underlined twice: *Always*.

I stood there with it for a while.

"It's a little geriatric, but I tell you what: drinks are cheap and the slots play loose. Let's get lost for a night, kay? My treat."

"I couldn't—"

"Nonsense. My parents have a little cabin out that way — we could stay there after we're gambled out. It's no big deal. Come on! Your mom just came around. We have to celebrate!"

"Celebrate." I nodded. Audrey'd have it no other way. "Okay."

“That’s my boy!” He ran over and gave me a little peck on the lips. “Now come on. Throw together a quick bag. We’re heading out right now.”

We packed, and we played, and we giggled, and we hugged. When he said “I love being with you” I let it wash over me like spring rain; it felt so good to be dating, let alone with such a cute guy. My hand reached for my wrist out of habit but there was nothing there.

There would never be anything there again.

With our bags packed Steve made a break for the door. I followed as quick as I could, but my eyes caught a glint by the sink as I turned out the lights. Usually I’d have passed it up for a splash of water, or some spot of food, but I approached it, slowly, carefully.

A small trinket – nothing special. But I didn’t keep trinkets. It sparkled with sterling silver-sheen: two fox-tails, wrapped in a braid, like a long, trailing waterfall. Cute, I thought to myself, and I picked it up.

I heard her voice, felt her hands, smelled her perfume. My hand felt as if it had been plugged into a socket.

“Always with the last laugh,” I said to the room. Steve was long gone. The lights were off. Yet from the kitchen table I heard Audrey giggling that stupid-gay-boy giggle she loved to hold over my head. And hell, this time I even laughed alongside her for a few moments, I put the trinket around my neck.

Steve honked the horn and the voice went quiet as I ran to him.



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