

On his way out of the compound tonight, he found himself slowing down and pulling his car onto the gravel that lined the road home. He sat in the car, the queer maybe 50 feet behind him. He sat with his foot on the brake and his hand on the gearshift, still in drive, still in a position to gun it and flee, the reprimands of his commanding officer ringing loudly in his ears. He hadn't made any mistakes, he knew. But the officer had still dressed him down, brutally and publicly, trying to get the shit to start running downhill. He knew, as did everyone, that the clusterfuck had been the officer's fault entirely, and the public shaming was hollow theatrics. But the rant burned in his ears, and after his dismissal, this thing was still outside the gates, with its fucking sign and its weird smile and its secret knowledge. And now he was out of the car, the engine still running, the lights still on, and he was yelling, "Go home! Don't you ever fucking leave?" And the queer, calm and kneeling in the grass, said, "I have work to do here." And he said, "What, making me miserable?" And the queer said, "That's right," and offered him a cigarette. He eyed the thing, feeling disoriented and vaguely nauseous. He had a lot more that he'd planned on saying, in his short walk from the car: "Get fucked," "Don't you have dicks you should be sucking?" "I should get my boys out here to beat the crap out of you," "Unamerican." He was going to call it "tranny" and "faggot" and "traitor," but suddenly he just felt drained of all vitality. The air was cold. The stars were blazing. He was breathing fast, but the abuse he had planned to fling felt empty and pointless. The anger fading, replaced suddenly with a subtle despair. He grabbed the queer's cigarette, put it to his lips, took it out, said, "I don't have a lighter." And there it was with a lighter. Holding its hand around the flame to protect it from the wind. It raised the lighter almost to his lips, and in the light of the flame, he could see the ugly red wounds on the creature's right palm. The crusting of blood on its fingers. And in the lighter's flame he could see the queer's face. If only for a second. The features seemed distorted. The piercing false eyes. The ears stretched and sagging. Burgundy lips, too deep to be natural. Its stubble patchy, almost like the skin had been burned. And he was breathing in the queer's fire, and then the lighter was out, and it was silhouetted against the light of the air base again. The two of them smoked in the cold. "So, what," he said, "You just live here?" The queer shakes its head. "Feels like it sometimes. I'm needed here so often now." He laughs, "Dude, you're not needed here at all." "I am, unfortunately. Someone needs to remind you." "We're not idiots, man. We're doing what's necessary. We're fully aware that, you know..." The queer looked at him. "Know what?" "That... there are casualties. That's war." "What is a casualty?" "You

stupid? What's a casualty, Jesus." "What does it mean?" He shook his head, looked at the night. "It's a homicide, Patrick," the queer said quietly. "Or a maiming." He shook his head again. "No? Am I wrong?" "How did you find my name?" "The same way you find the people you kill. Intelligence. Research" He looked at the queer, trying to guess whether she was threatening to kill him. He pictured her surprising him with the razor she "cut" herself with. The motion of her hand instantaneous. Blood pouring in warm streams from his neck. The pain so intense it felt like nothing at all. He eyed the queer, but he couldn't see it. He looked away. It continued, "You have blood on your hands. I'm here to remind you. You might know, but I'm here to remind you." "Well," he said, "leave us alone." He dropped the butt to the ground, started to turn away. "Wait," said the queer. He turned back, and it was extending its hand to shake. "Janice." He takes the hand thoughtlessly, and it is wet and hot. He had not seen the razor move. But as he snatched his hand back, he saw dark stains in the glare of the facility's light. "What the fuck?" But she was just smiling. He held his hand up, almost wiping the blood off on his pants before catching himself, not waiting to explain to his superiors why his uniform is bloodied. He had no tissues. He bent to the earth, wiping his hand ineffectively on the grass. He walked away, muttering obscenities. Driving home, he realized he could just have asked Janice for one of her handkerchiefs. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

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The queer was back in the morning, and the line was long to get into the base. So the queer was showing its bloody hand to each car in turn, walking down the line like a vagrant asking for charity. He lowered his window and said, "Hey Janice!" And she turned to him and skipped a car on her way to join him. "Patrick," she said. She stood apart from him. She looked sallow. Her face was unshaven, and the juxtaposition of stubble and lipstick, and the juxtaposition of red lips and pale skin, and the juxtaposition of sagging eyes and shining blue irises, and the juxtaposition of Adam's apple and blouse, and the juxtaposition of pantsuit and ragged bloody hand, combined to paint a portrait so singularly disconcerting that he found himself recoiling from a woman he had been so eager to see only moments ago. He found himself losing the thread of what he'd meant to say, but found it again as he stumbled out, "I didn't see you last night." The queer glanced away from him, away from the air base, and said, "I know," in a voice that betrayed a deep feeling of failure. It looked back into his eyes and said, "Did you miss me?" It smirked again, but the effect was

wanting, like an unconvincing actor in a community theater. The earnest control he was so used to seeing in her was gone. He opened and closed his mouth like a fish. Then he said, "I didn't kill anyone yesterday." When she looked confused, he said, "Yesterday morning. You said not to kill anyone today. And I didn't. It was just drills and an inspection and meetings. I wanted to tell you." Janice looked at him, her blue eyes suddenly penetrating, her confidence restored. "I also didn't kill anyone yesterday, Patrick. I'm not bragging about it. If you're hoping for praise or gratitude, look somewhere else. Not killing, that's not an achievement. That is the barest moral minimum for humanity. And you didn't even choose to restrain. Just drills and meetings? If you had looked your commander in the eye and refused to blow up the hospital. If you sabotaged the drones so they could never be used for murder again. If you get out of your car now, join me here, and never enter that place again, but instead work to convince these pilots not to fly themselves. If you make a choice, soldier, then, maybe, I'll pat you on the head and say 'good job.' Maybe." He had nothing to say to that. He wanted to drive away, but the line wasn't moving, and there were cars behind him now, too. So he looked away from her and rolled up his window. But she stayed looking at him. So he rolled down his window and said, "I'm not the bad guy here. Look, the enemy-" But she just rolled her eyes and started walking away before he could even have his say. "I'm not the bad guy here," he said to his hands, which were gripping the brown stain of Janice's blood.

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At the ER, Ellen stayed in the car with Janice while he ran in to get help bringing her into the building. He said his friend had cut herself really bad and was unconscious in his car, and two paramedics came out with a gurney, and they maneuvered Janice into the gurney, and asked the siblings what his name was, and he said, "Janice" at the same moment as his sister said, "Marta," and the paramedics were confused and the siblings were confused and she repeated "Marta," so that's what the paramedics started calling her, looking into her face, yelling, "Marta, can you hear me?" as they wheeled her into the bright building. And then there was a period of confusion. He remembered a strained conversation with a receptionist, showing Janice's insurance card, hearing the receptionist call her Joaquin and trying to hide his confusion, deciding how much to lie about their relationship. Then with the doctor, trying to lie about how the cut occurred. He started to tell the fib about cooking, but his sister, cleverer than he was, said, "She's a performance artist. Part of her act is cutting herself, but she messed up tonight." And the doctor shaking his head. He

remembered the doctor asking after her blood type, and when he obviously didn't know, the doctor said with obvious consternation, "she needs blood, but without knowing her type-" and he interrupted, saying, "I'm O-. If she needs a transfusion..." and he ended up in a phlebotomist's cubby with a needle in his arm, feeling increasingly loopy as the blood drained from his body. Back in Janice's, or Joaquin's, or Marta's room, sectioned from the other beds by a green curtain, he watched his own blood slowly drip into the body of this creature. He held his sister's hand and sucked on a lollipop. His body entered into the queer's veins. His sister rubbed his upper arm and said, "it was really good of you to do that." Pointing to the blood bag. He shrugged. Janice's voice in his memory, "That is the barest moral minimum for humanity..." He said, "it was nothing." And she leaned her head against his shoulder. They both listened to the whir of machinery and waited for Janice to wake up. His sister said, "I was watching the news today..." He said, "yeah." She asked, "were you a part of that?" And he nodded, even though he wasn't supposed to give out operational details. He was too tired to deny it. "All those children." And he said, "Children?" And she said, "The school that got hit, it was on all the stations-" And he said, "They didn't tell me about-" But then Janice, or Marta, was awake. She looked around herself, at her entubed hand, at the drop ceiling, at the two of them. She looked at Ellen with honest confusion, then at him with a deeper, more profound concern. The surgical blue of her eyes was haunting. She opened her eyes to speak, and then started to weep. Ellen stood, moved over, and embraced the queer awkwardly, standing over her bed. He sat in his chair, agitated and unsure, and found himself looking away from her when she opened her eyes to look at him. He instead studied the grey and white machines that hung to the wall like lichen. When she had gotten control of herself, she thanked Ellen and asked what they had told the doctors. Ellen told her about the performance art lie, which made Janice laugh, and said, "and they believed it?" And Ellen said yes, and Janice said, "I don't want to stay here," and Ellen said, "You're coming back with us." And Janice almost started crying again when she asked, "Are you sure," and he stood up and said, "Yeah, they're not keeping you. We'll make sure of it." And then the doctor returned, and pulled him aside, and said, "Thank you for your service," because he was still in uniform, and then said that he wanted to "keep-" then checked his chart, "Joaquin for a couple of days. To make sure he doesn't try anything like this again." And he said, "That won't be necessary. It was just an accident." And the doctor said, "There were other scars, under the cut, some of which were infected. He needs a referral to a psychiatrist. Self-harm is a very serious business." And he put on a smile and said, "It's not self-

harm. Just a performance. You know what artists are like. I saw the show a couple of times. It's very compelling, and I'm not the kind of person who goes for that sort of thing very often." He said the performance was over, he said that he understood what it looked like, he said that they'd take her home and make sure that she was ok. He stood with his best military posture. He tried to project the aura of confidence that he saw in his superiors. He said, "We're taking him home," in a voice that he hoped carried the full weight of the American military.

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In the early morning, they were released, and were driving back to his house as the sky lightened. The queer, they had learned, was staying in a punkhouse in Philly. When she described it, it sounded filthy and cruel, although she insisted that it was "fine." His sister had insisted that Marta come stay with her, at least for the night. "My apartment is clean and my bed is very comfy. Let me take care of you," and Marta had acquiesced after Ellen had badgered her into admitting that none of the punks who lived in her house knew how to cook a good chicken soup. He drove them to his sister's house, the two women in the backseat leaning on each other and closing their eyes. In the pre-dawn, he dwelled in silent, directionless jealousy. He didn't know which of the two women in his car he wished he were, watching them gently touching in his rearview mirror. He didn't know if he wanted to be either of them at all. He just knew that he didn't want to be himself right now. He drove with his knuckles white on the wheel and thought, in a repeating loop, "God, I need to fuck something," but somehow recognized that thought as not his own. As a thought belonging to a different consciousness, superimposing itself over his exhausted mind. He dropped the two of them at his sister's apartment building. His sister squeezed his hand as she got out of the car and said, "come over tonight after work," and he promised he would. The queer looked at him through the rearview mirror, and they sat in silence for a tense breath, the door open, the cold morning wind filling the space between them. Janice opened her mouth to say something. She looked like she was straining to think clearly. Then she looked away and shook her head, and followed his sister out without saying a word. He rolled down his window and said, "Take care of my blood. Don't go wasting it, you hear?" And the queer smiled and followed his sister up the concrete steps and into the brick box. He sat back in his seat and looked around at his car. The passenger seat was covered in the same bloodstains as his wheel, as was the handle, the armrest, and a corner of the

window. He looked in the rearview and saw blood in the backseat as well, across the grey fuzzy fabric. As he pulled out of the cul-de-sac and drove to war, he thought, “We traded. Blood for blood.” Twice on his way to the base, he drifted off the road, and was jolted rudely by the rumble strips on the side of the highway. He hadn’t slept a wink that night, and he wasn’t 18 anymore.