

# SHIFT

AN ANTHOLOGY

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## AGGRESSIVE MIMICRY

Naomi Artemi

On the busiest corner of Boulevard Barbès and Place du Château-Rouge, beside the entrance to the sketchiest metro stop in all of Paris, stands a public toilet so foul that even the crackheads won't smoke up in there, the prostitutes won't blow in there, and the runaways won't shelter from a cold and dreary rain in there, either.

Inside, it reeks of ammonia and fermented asparagus. Sometimes a drunk will stumble in at night to urinate until, inevitably, he will feel a wet heat soaking his shoes and creeping up his socks. Only then will he realize that he is standing in a box painted completely black with no toilet, no sink, and no clearly marked exit. At this point, he will feel that he should evacuate more than his bladder, careful never to get drunk on that same corner again.

The only people who willingly enter to find relief therein are the ones you would never expect: stockbroker wearing a tailored

suit with buttonholes all stitched at a 45-degree slant, socialite type in head-to-toe designer, Chinese tourist with a Canon EOS-1D X Mark III around his neck.

If you were, say, a homeless man watching from across the street in your flop of soggy cardboard, you would see these unlikely bathroom-goers stop at the door smeared with something suspiciously shitesque in both color and consistency, take a furtive glance out the corner of each eye, and slip inside. Then you would try to tell passersby but they would only think you unhinged and unmedicated. And, though that may be true, it wouldn't make you any less right.

For these patrons of the toilette publique are not bothered by the stench of hundreds of drunk pissings because they are not bothered by the stench of anything. Because they cannot smell. Because their noses are not real. Their noses, their faces, their bodies, from the double chins to the toenails that really need a trim. It all takes effort to hold these distinct shapes, especially in a city where so many others tempt. A few times a day it just becomes too much to maintain, and these imitators extraordinaire must find relief in the complete dark of the foul, coffin-like, black box and let their façade blur into featureless bliss.

Lis was one such mimicker, or 'freeformer,' as their kind thought themselves. How Lis knew this public toilet would be a place of respite was a matter of animalistic instinct—same way a clownfish knows a sea anemone as a safe haven. And so, they walked up to the shit-smeared door in their pink tweed, Chanel sneaker-boots and quickly glanced in each direction.

It was noontime on an unseasonably scorching September Monday, and the lunch hustle was full bustle. A voluptuous

woman dragging a granny trolley behind her, bounced and jiggled and rattled past. Another in a mustard-yellow headwrap fussed over the child on her hip. Her dusty red flip-flops smacked the sidewalk and slapped back at calloused heels. A pair of Adidas slides walked in the other direction. The human male in them wore black jeans and a black Calvin Klein shirt, despite the heat. His deep brown, bald head shone in the bright sun like the gilded dome of Napoleon's tomb.

It was all too much.

No one seemed to notice Lis loitering by the toilet (there was a homeless human across the street, but he didn't count). Lis slid inside.

They let their brown skin drain of color. Their head of heavy burgundy braids melt. Their slender shape beneath the lavender romper and logo-patterned shoulder bag soften. Relief! A feeling that was not unlike releasing a very full bladder.

Suddenly, the black box cracked open.

"Occupied!" Lis shrieked as they hastily pulled their shape back on.

"Maybe lock the door next time," suggested the man standing on the other side of it. He had a gut that tested his shirt buttons and a bristly mustache that made Lis' upper lip itch to imitate.

He held out his hand like he wanted to shake, but then—Lis noticed that the man's pinky nail had turned a lavender that matched their own mimicked nails. One of their kind! For humans imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but for a freeformer, it is the surest way to stay off a fellow hunter's menu.

Lis held out their own hand, letting their pinky copy one of his dirt-caked nails. At this, he shook it.

“Too bad,” the other freeformer said in their language which was spoken with thought and not the slab of tongue, wet in their approximation of a mouth with its abundance of spit-slick teeth. “I’m looking for lunch.”

A joke? Lis smiled out of politeness.

“Wait a moment?” the mustached freeformer asked, nodding to the lavatory that Lis had only just vacated.

Lis wished they’d had more of a chance to relax in there themselves, but in Freespeak, they answered, “Of course.”

“Be just a jiffy.” He closed the door.

Lis stood outside, earning a look or two from passing pedestrians, but more for taking up sidewalk real estate than proximity to the repugnant public toilet. To avoid the stares of strangers, Lis looked up. Classic Parisian buildings with balconied windows bordered the boulevard, all tan stone, all veneered with soot. Most had awnings of varying degree of tattiness. Onto one was bolted a neon green plus sign. It was remarkable how much more Lis could see as a bipedal.

“Ah, much better,” said the freeformer as he exited. “So?”

He was obviously waiting for Lis to reply somehow, but they weren’t sure what they were meant to say.

“You new to this territory?” he prompted.

“I’m new to being human, actually.”

“Oh! Welcome to humanhood. What species you coming from? Chimp? Orangutan? *Waab Ah Ah*, as the Bonobos say?” He chuckled at his own cleverness and his over-inflated balloon of a belly bounced, looking like it was about to pop, along with a few shirt buttons.

“Dog.”

“Dog to human?! Impatient, aren’t we?” the freeformer scoffed. Then, not waiting for an answer, asked, “Which way you headed?”

“I’m not sure.” Lis only knew they wanted to get off the crowded street. Retreating back inside to regroup seemed the best course of action. Before venturing out, they’d taken a piece of mail with them from the apartment where their prey had lived. Lis showed the addressed envelope to the other freeformer.

*Rokhaya Kebe*

*12 Rue Léon*

*75018 Paris*

*France*

The freeformer nodded his human head to the left, and they started to walk together down the busy boulevard.

Mania rose from the pavement like heat waves. People hurrying past carrying packages. Pushing strollers. Weaving through the crowd on bicycles, shopping bags swinging from the handlebars and whacking those on foot whose feet did not move them out of the way fast enough. More plastic bags—blue bags, black bags, red and white striped bags—congregated against the base of every street sign and cast-iron bollard.

“But I get it, I get it,” the freeformer continued, picking their conversation back up as he navigated around one such congregation of rubbish. “Humans are certainly intriguing. They fill you up a heck of a lot longer, and their last thoughts are much juicier, too.”

“I noticed that.”

They walked both sides of a corner store that displayed bins of

root vegetables alongside bins of flip-flops, turning them down a side street, narrower and lined with mopeds.

“Go on, what was it then?” prompted the other freeformer.

“Oh, disappointment,” answered Lis, recalling their prey’s puzzling last thought. “That she’d never be a fashion designer. What’s a fashion designer?”

Ahead of them, a delivery truck was unloading boxes into an Ethiopian restaurant. The two freeformers walked around, then immediately had to circumnavigate a broken futon frame beside a line of overflowing bins.

“They didn’t fill you in on your prey’s occupation at the embassy?”

“Embassy?”

The mustached freeformer halted abruptly in front of a cell-phone repair shop safeguarded by diamond-grated windows. He put his head in his hands. Then, just as abruptly, he began walking again.

“There has to be a better system,” their companion mumbled to themselves. “You tell them that when you go.”

“Go where?” Lis asked.

The freeformer stopped again, this time in front of a hotel that had no other name. Just Hotel. Graffitied garage-door-like shutters concealed its street-level windows.

“Okay, okay, listen. This—” From his pocket, he pulled out a rectangular piece of plastic and held it up in front of Lis’ imitated eyes. It was light blue and had the words *Navigo* and *Île-de-France Mobilités* printed on it. “—is your pass to the city. Luckily for you, there’s an embassy right here in Paris that’s only a metro ride away.” The freeformer took a sharp turn back in the direction from

which they had just come. Lis hurried to follow. “I’ll walk you to the nearest stop. Metro map will get you the rest of the— oh, but you can’t read yet.”

“I can read.”

“Wait, how long did you say you’ve been human?”

“Just today.”

“You’re telling me that you learned to read . . . as a dog?”

“The dog’s human had a lot of magazines.”

“Alright, what does that say?” The freeformer pointed to a red awning shading a glass refrigerator case that showed off the already caught and cut bodies of prey. The sign had a cow on it. Lis hadn’t been a cow yet, and now they thought better of it.

“Essaada Butchery.”

“Huh . . .” Helmut preened his mustache. “Not often I’m astounded.”

As they once again neared the shopping nexus, Lis felt their attention pulled in as many directions as there were details to absorb. Dresses stretched over wide hips and full bellies. Noses pinched, hooked, pierced. Wrists of clinking bangles. Knobby knees poking through ripped jeans. Skulls stuffed in baseball caps, swathed in head scarves, hair styled into a dizzying variety of textures and designs.

The freeformer came to a halt.

They were back almost exactly where they had started. Lis could see the public toilets from where they stood. And where they stood was beside a streetlamp with frosted glass orb and red sign set right into its post that read *METRO*. Said post grew out of a metal railing with only one side open to a set of stairs that descended below the sidewalk.

“You’re gonna take Line 4 here towards Bagneux - Lucie Aubrac.” The mustached freeformer gestured to another sign, this one of a very complicated looking map, as he proceeded to give equally complicated instructions: “. . . transfer to Line 9 towards Pont de Sèvres. Get off at La Muette. Got it?” Then he repeated anyway, “4 to *Strasbourg Saint-Denis* then 9 to *La Muette*.”

Lis nodded because they had no need for clarifying questions because they had no intention of going anywhere at present but back to the solitude of their prey’s lair to shed their shape. All they had to remember was that the ultimate destination was La Muette, wherever that was. They could figure out the ‘how’ of getting there later.

“On arrival, you ask someone where the Monaco Embassy is located. Don’t look them in the eyes, or the urge to mimic will be irresistible. You will, though, want to imitate the embassy guard’s pinky nail, like I showed you.”

“I will,” Lis assured, hoping to wrap the conversation up.

“Be sure they mimic back before going and gabbing at them in Freespeak. *Verify before voicing!* Just a little aide-mémoire I came up with a while back; feel free to share it with other freeformers you may cross paths with. But only once you . . . ?” he trailed off, seemingly wanting Lis to fill in the blank.

“Verify,” Lis finished for him. “I will,” they repeated to appease.

“Good. Because if you freespeak at a human before verifying, they’ll think they’re hearing things and more often than not enter a state of complete and utter panic. And a panicking human is a dangerous human.”

“I understand,” Lis said, edging away toward the metro entrance.

A female human with acne on top of acne walked right between them, shouting at a phone she held at arm’s length like an overripe durian. Lis took another step back.

But the other freeformer barreled on: “Once the guard grants you entry, an embassy agent will fill you in on what your prey’s occupation was, get you sorted out with money,”—Lis had no idea what ‘money’ was, but was fine waiting for the embassy to find out—“explain everything you need to know about being human. Well, most everything. Want some free advice?” he asked, then without waiting for Lis to accept, offered it. “One thing they won’t tell you at the embassy: humans, they’re the biggest parasite on the planet, so, in the spirit of population control, you don’t need to wait until you’re hungry to catch a prey. Only downside is you *do* grow faster. But start small as you can—” The freeformer gave Lis a disapproving sort of body scan with his mimicked eyeballs. “Unfortunately, you have already outgrown children, but at least this body is petite. Work your way up to the Dutch and the basketball players. Speaking of: sport rules and regulation comprehension will get you a long way towards passing as one of them. Sport and complaining about work. Also, the smarter you are, the more acceptable it is to exhibit excentric behavior, so learn some maths.”

“Money, sports, maths, got it.” Lis was feeling very overwhelmed again, and not just by the humans swarming all around them. “Thanks,” they said by way of ‘goodbye’ and turned to walk down the metro station stairs.

“Before you go, you got a name?” the freeformer inquired after them.

“Lis.”

“Snake?”

Lis nodded.

“My snake name was Sush, though maybe the other snakes called me that because I wouldn’t stop hissing. Yup, I’ve always had a gift for gab.”

*What’s a gab?* Lis thought to themselves.

“But since humanhood, I go by my first human child’s name, Helmut.”

Helmut waved goodbye, and Lis mimicked the human salutation as they descended. As soon as they were out of view of the street above, they stopped.

Lis waited a few minutes there, halfway down the stairs, where they could hear both the commotion of the street above and echoing sounds floating up from below. It was dimmer here, and Lis was tempted to let their features soften—but no, they’d wait until they got back to the solitude of the apartment. They pretended to adjust the laces of their pink tweed boots so that they did not have to look at any humans and their incredible diversity of features as they stomped past in both directions. Down. Up. Up. Down. When Lis presumed enough time must have passed, they followed the up-stomping humans tentatively back into the daylight.

Helmut was not there.

Lis retraced their steps, walking several city blocks to their prey’s apartment building. Everything looked different from a taller vantage point. Once or twice, they had to crouch in order to see the street from a dog’s point of view and be sure they were, in fact, headed in the correct direction.

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The moment the apartment door closed behind them, Lis

melted. Literally. Clothes fell into a heap off a body that no longer had the structure of bones to support them.

Lis drooped down to drink out of the dog bowl when they remembered that humans use cups. No one was watching, but they supposed they really ought to get into the habit. They formed an arm of sorts with which they poured the water from the dog bowl into a mug that had been left out on the counter. The dying thought of the dog (whose bowl this had once belonged to) had been, *Ooh, a new friend!* Lis had met them at the dog park, in the bushes where all the canine companions expelled their bodily waste and sniffed each other’s expel holes afterwards.

The doorbell rang, and Lis dropped the metal dog bowl with a clatter.

Might it be someone checking on their preyed? Lis didn’t want to arouse suspicions by not answering, in particular as whoever this doorbell ringer may be, would have heard the racket just then.

Lis shifted back into form, set their shoulders, and opened the door.

There stood a human male—a fit specimen, dark skin pigmentation contrasted by very straight white teeth—holding a box with a picture of a bone on it. Lis thought they recognized him from when they were the dog. They crouched down slightly to observe him from a lower angle. Yes, the chin stuck out in a very familiar way indeed—

“Oh, I’m sorry!” the human exclaimed, his eyebrows rising. “I didn’t know you were . . .” He glanced quickly at Lis’ mimicked body then just as quickly averted his eyes.

Curious, Lis too looked down at their human form and became aware of its state of unclothedness. Every animal they had

imitated before had worn only skin and hair, though the dog had sometimes been put in a collar and once a bow-patterned bandana at the groomers. Lis had noticed that people liked to use cloth and pigments to embellish themselves, much like the hermit crab uses shells and Coca-Cola bottlecaps.

From behind them, somewhere inside the apartment, Lis heard their prey's phone ring.

One human thing at a time.

Still looking away, the man thrust the box of dog treats in Lis' direction. "For Dogo Chanel."

A gift for them?! "Thank you, I enjoy these." No, these were for the dog who Lis no longer mimicked. They did not have to pretend to like them anymore. "I mean to say that Dogo Chanel liked these."

"Liked?"

"Oh, yes. Dogo Chanel is dead."

"I am so sorry to hear that!" the man exclaimed.

Lis did not know what to say, so they said nothing.

The phone started ringing again.

"Well, you are obviously dealing with . . . a lot, so . . . I'm going to . . ." The man turned around and entered the door directly across the hall and closed it behind him. Lis closed their own apartment door, thinking that they needed much more practice being human if they were ever going to survive undetected.

The ringing had stopped.

Lis slept in the human's bed. It was much more comfortable than the thin, lumpy, worn dog bed that they'd had to curl up on for the past several months.

On the bedside table was the mystifying, glowing thingamajig

that their prey had stared at for hours every night like a moth drawn to the light of the moon. She had called it a "laptop." In an attempt to conserve effort, Lis used a soft approximation of a human hand to pry open its screen—otter paw cracking a clam shell—but ended up having to tighten the shape into fingers to enter the password: RokhayaFashionHouse.

As the laptop started up, a little box appeared in the upper righthand corner—[3 Missed Messages]—but then faded away.

Lis maneuvered the arrow to the red, green, yellow, and blue circle they had observed Rokhaya click on hundreds of times, and typed the letters P - A - R - I - S M - E - T - R - O into the search box.

They fell asleep studying the metro map by the blue light of the screen. When they woke, the light in the room was yellow.

Sounds of a city awake permeated the windowpanes—sounds of potential prey. But Lis had already resolved to go to the embassy before they chanced getting too overwhelmed. They only hoped their second day out in public would prove less challenging than their first.

Lis was sure to cover their skin with clothes. But what clothes? This human had a wide selection of forms and colors from which to choose. Bins overflowing. Heaps of shoes. Garments crammed together so tightly that Lis had to take out a great armful of hangers and dump them on the bed just to be able to sort through the options.

They began by strapping on the breast cage they'd observed Rokhaya wear whenever she dressed up to go out, but Lis couldn't unhook themselves from it fast enough. Instead, they chose a highlighter yellow minidress and paired it with turquoise tights, the logo-patterned shoulder bag Rokhaya never left the apartment

without (its purpose yet unknown), and grass green boots with embroidered daisies scattered all over. The boots made a clomping noise as they walked out the apartment door, and nearly tripped over a bouquet of flowers.

Lis picked them up to investigate.

An envelope stuck out of the blooms with the name *Rokhaya* written on it. Lis jammed the flowers between their thighs so that they had free hands to open the card (if it weren't for all this form-covering fabric, they could have simply shaped an extra set). On the front was a picture of a dog with wings and a gold ring floating over its head. It was sitting on a cloud, even though dogs cannot fly. Underneath were the words: *No matter how long we live with them, it's never long enough.*

Lis opened the card. Inside were some pen scribbles which Lis couldn't understand; they hadn't learned cursive yet. But they could decipher that it was signed, in scratchy capitalized letters, *TSITSI*.

They had been so focused on stalking their previous prey that they hadn't bothered to pay much notice to any other human. But now that they thought about it, the neighbor across the hall had stopped by a few times. Perhaps Rokhaya had already started attracting a mate for them.

Lis put the card back in the flowers and the flowers back on the floor. They crossed the hall to the door that they had seen their neighbor—who they now knew was called Tsitsi—retreat into. Lis pressed the little button beside the door and heard a muffled *terriing* inside the apartment. They waited, but no answer came.

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This time, with the metro pass Helmut had given them held

tight between their lavender-lacquered fingertips, Lis actually descended the steps all the way down from the city street to beneath it. There, they followed a woman with a large, round tuft of hair atop her head over to a metal barrier of sorts, one in a line, all with clear double swinging doors. Lis was reminded of puffing feathers to attract a mate as a mourning dove. Apparently, humans did that as well. *But not all humans*, thought Lis, looking down at their long burgundy braids.

The puffy-haired woman pushed her way through the barrier. Lis followed— straight into glass. They tried again but could not push past it.

People passed them on either side with a *ting! whunk* of opening doors. Why couldn't Lis penetrate? Could this barrier somehow detect that they were not actually a human? Lis surveyed the barrier-passing humans for a clue and noticed that they were all running their hands along the machines. Hands that all held cards. The same card that—

Lis swiped. The clear doors swung open.

Through the barrier, a tunnel of shiny white tiles dripping with rust led even deeper underground. A nightingalesque song echoed from below. Lis spotted the tuft of hair descending out of sight. They followed into the tunnel but were soon halted with a choice. A split. A ramp to the right. A ramp to the left. They stood between the two choices as commuters streamed by them in both directions. Right. Left. Having studied the map the night before, Lis was utterly and completely confused.

Standing at the split, also, was the origin of the echoey melody. When Lis had been a songbird, to lure a mate they, well . . . Apparently, humans did that as well. But not all humans, thought Lis,

considering the mass of tight-lipped commuters. Just like not all songbirds sing to attract a mate. As a great grey shrike, they'd had to catch a field mouse and stick it on a thorn for their desired mate to see. Perhaps these other humans preferred gifts of food? There seemed to be no one way to lure a mate. Hopefully, the embassy could provide more clarity.

Lis approached the singing woman. If they sounded like a songbird, perhaps they had been one?

Lis looked at the fingernail of the hand holding the portable microphone. The nails were painted black and highly chipped. Lis let one of their own lavender nails chip with black polish as they extended their hand to shake, just as Helmut had done with them.

The woman lowered her microphone. "Thank you, but I'm too broke to buy what you're selling, and I've already found Jesus." They did not reciprocate the handshake nor the nail swap.

"Jesus?"

From the look the songbird woman gave her, Lis had said something very wrong. They suddenly felt more of an urgency to get to the embassy. "Which way do I go to Metro Line 4 towards Bagneux - Lucie Aubrac?"

The woman sighed and pointed to the right. As Lis flowed down the right ramp with the pour of people, they heard the echoey voice start back up.

Lis got on the train with a press of other passengers.

The speakers announced: *Attention à vos effets personnels. Attention à la marche en descendant du train. Avant de descendre, assurez-vous de ne rien oublier à bord.* But also, other languages that Lis couldn't understand. *Beware of your belongings. Mind the gap. Before you depart make sure you don't forget anything on board.*

*Mochimono ni chūi shite kudasai. Sukima ni kiwotsukete. Shuppatsu mae ni kinai ni wasuremono ga nai koto o kakuninshitekudasai.*

The woman directly in front of them was wearing a zebra-striped dress, and Lis had to look away for fear that they might mimic the pattern on their distinctly non-zebra skin. They sat down in an empty seat beside a man whose bulbous nose was nearly touching a portable screen. Across from them, a child with hair in lots of little twists was holding his father's hand with his much smaller one, a finger up his nose. Lis would never be a child now. They wondered if they had indeed been too impatient, like Helmut had said, but then the child's father swatted the child's finger away from his nostril as he spit the word "disgusting!" at him, and Lis decided that they had made the right call after all.

All this observing was tempting Lis to shift form, and there was no public toilet proximate. They averted their eyes to stare at their fellow passengers shoes. The part of them mimicking feet itched.

Lis got out at "*Strasbourg Saint-Denis. Strasbourg Saint-Denis.*"

By the time they found their way onto Metro 9, they had to sit with their eyes closed, concentrating on the image of upturned eyes and high cheekbones that they had studied for so long as Rokhaya's canine companion.

Fourteen stops and what felt like forty later, they at last heard: "*La Muette. La Muette.*"

There was only one exit on this platform, and Lis took it away from the tracks, up a set of stairs, through more tiled tunnel, past the barricade of metal, and up another set of stairs, exiting into the verdant light of the street above.

The street was different here. Cleaner. Calmer. Its lamps were

ornate and painted a velvety dark green. Grand Parisian apartment buildings provided residents with street level bistros, cafés, and creperies. The pedestrian walkways were lined with trees instead of trash. There was a marked lack of mopeds, strollers, and delivery trucks, as well as the humans attached to them. In fact, it was nearly free of humans entirely. Lis caught a brief glimpse of a man in a jumpsuit exit a clean, white van and enter an adjacent clean, white building. Another man down the block in shades of beige was enjoying a leisurely outing with their small canine companion. What a relief it would be to mimic someone less . . . complex.

Lis questioned a couple of humans on where the embassy was located. They were polite and brief in their answers. It wasn't far before Lis was standing in front a brass plaque so shiny that they could see burgundy braids reflected along with the words *Ambassade De Monaco*. The plaque was affixed to the embassy's equally glossy, black iron gate. Closed gate. It guarded a classic Parisian limestone building whose small stature reflected the size of its country, yet stately façade signaled its esteem. Seated just on the other side, a guard. Lis approached. They looked at his hand—fingers thick and stubby with straight-cut nails—and mimicked its pinky. After a moment, his pinky nail grew longer and lavender. Without a word, he opened the gate.

Lis was led by a different guard to a lustrous black door on the side of the building away from the matching front doors that were obviously for show or maybe for the few actual Monaco citizens who lost their passports to pickpockets.

“Identifier?” inquired the freeformer in Freespeak.

“Lis,” said Lis.

Inside, they were led down a hall to a room full of chairs that

were lined up to all face one way towards a tranquil, bare, black wall. There, they were instructed to sit and wait.

Lis chose a chair apart from the spattering of other occupants. In the seat a few away was an elderly woman in a tutu. Beside her, an adolescent girl with her hair in two messy buns that looked like bear ears. Proximate, a heavily tattooed man in a blue pinstriped suit with matching blue shirt, briefcase, and umbrella.

Lis looked at the black wall.

So peacefully . . . void.

The wall started to play music. A tinkling that repeated in short loops, like a trilling starling call. A call! By the time Lis realized that Rokhaya's phone was ringing in the shoulder bag, it had stopped.

“Lis.” A freeformer agent was standing in the doorframe of an adjacent room. They were taking the form of an extremely tall blonde-haired woman in a white blazer and sharply ironed slacks. Lis was envious of the short hair that looked much less complicated to mimic than their long braids, and also a lot lighter.

The room was hardly larger than Rokhaya's closet, but instead of being filled with clothes, it was filled with a table. The walls were painted black, floor and ceiling. Lis felt calm entering it, even as they had to wedge themselves into one of the two chairs at the cramped table.

Lis had barely taken a seat across from the agent when they began asking questions. “What brings you to the embassy today?”

“I was told to come here by another freeformer. Helmut? He said I needed to know some information, since this is my first time being human.”

“First time!” The sharp features of the agent's mimicked form

softened. “Good. I thought you had an assignment complaint.”

“Assignment?”

“You’re human now. Humans get assignments. You’re gonna have to catch on quick because we have quite a bit to cover and I have a break in twenty.”

“Twenty what?”

“Alright, first let’s get the paperwork out of the way.” She looked down at a clipboard on the table in front of her. The language written on it was not French. “Where do you live?”

Lis handed her the addressed letter.

“Château-Rouge neighborhood . . . Lots of poor immigrants. Displaced. African. Not a lot of questions asked if someone is disappeared,” the embassy agent thought out-loud. “And were suspicions to arise, the police there only make things worse, so would almost never be called upon. Good choice.”

Lis privately kept to themselves that it had been a pure coincidence that Dogo Chanel had been brought home from the dog park to there.

The agent made a note on the clipboard.

“I’m making this your official assignment for the time being. If you want to change hunting grounds, please return to the embassy and request reassignment. This is important. Too many of us in one location arouses suspicions—humans are the only species to keep death records.”

Lis nodded in compliance.

“Prey’s occupation?” the agent continued.

“What?”

“Where did she work?”

“Uh . . . she just left every morning and then came back

around evening mealtime.”

They made a note.

“What about family?”

“Uh . . .”

“Friends?”

“Uh . . .”

“Did you even stalk this prey?”

“I lived with her for five months.”

“Five months! Not very observant, are we?”

“I was a dog. At first, I couldn’t understand human vocalizations.”

The agent made a disapproving sort of tick on the clipboard.

“But I taught myself to read,” Lis offered, remembering how this had impressed Helmut.

“As a dog? Hear something new . . .”

Lis felt a swell of pride.

“Alright,” the agent moved on. “Let’s look up this . . .” She glanced at the envelope. “. . . Rokhaya Kebe.”

She was a runway model. Lis learned that this meant “a fashion professional who showcases clothing, makeup, and accessories from designers.” They also learned that one did this for money, and that money was a medium of exchange used to facilitate transactions for goods or services that was worth no more than the value of the collective delusion of its necessity. Also, not to prey on anyone notorious because they would be impossible to imitate credibly under near-constant observation and scrutiny.

“We’re still covering tracks from the Tom Cruise fiasco. And don’t get me started about Mr. Ye.” The freeformer clicked her tongue disapprovingly in a very human way, and Lis wondered

how long she had been one; she was very tall. “We will help you prepare to successfully pass as your prey and, when you’ve moved on to your next, provide a death certificate and cause thereof that would leave no recognizable body.”

“That seems like a lot of trouble,” Lis said frankly.

“Your safety is our safety. If they ever found out about us, they would turn all resources to destroying us. You are hiding in plain sight among the most dangerous animal on the planet.”

“Why are humans the most dangerous animal on the planet?” asked Lis, thinking about a time they saw a lynx rip the jugular out of a caribou.

“They’re causing the icebergs to melt.”

“Icebergs?”

“Giant chunks of ice.”

“Why does it matter if giant chunks of ice melt?”

“The polar bears die. The point is that humans create technologies that pollute, dump islands of trash in the ocean, introduce invasive plants because they look pretty on their front lawn, burn the rainforests, burn holes in the ozone layer, crack the earth open to let out gas.”

“Why would they do all that? This is their habitat!” Lis had never come across an animal species that destroyed their own homes.

“Because they burn the gas to make energy.”

This species grew more bewildering the more Lis asked.

“Stay with me,” the agent said, sensing their trepidation. “Humans are exploiters. They take from nature for food, medicine, entertainment, construction materials. But all they do is take and take and take.”

“And so, the icebergs are melting,” said Lis, trying to keep up the appearance of keeping up.

“Exactly. They destroy habitats. Half of ALL wild animals are currently at risk, including our great elders, blue whales. As well as those of our kind on their way to elderhood: crocodiles, tigers, gaur, bison, rhinoceroses, ostriches, giraffe, and of course, polar bears. When you outsize your humanhood, revisit here and we’ll help place you in a safe host at a protected location: farm sanctuary, elephant sanctuary, orca sanctuary—”

“Why don’t we stop them?” Lis interrupted.

“We are. *You* are, now. Those of us in human form are in the best position to protect our formlings and elders—be environmental activists, spread veganism—which is why we try to stay human as long as possible. It is essential some of us are human to protect the rest.”

“I understand. What predators should I watch out for as a human?” Lis wondered.

“Only other humans.”

“They eat each other?”

“Not usually.”

“Then why kill one another?”

“Money, mostly. And jealousy. And greed. And revenge. And pleasure. They kill about half a million of each other a year.”

“Amazing they haven’t killed all of themselves,” Lis marveled.

“They like to mate.”

“Well, that’s good. Right?”

“For us, yes. Do you have any questions about human mating rituals?”

“Yes,” Lis said emphatically. “There seem to be so many ways

to attract a mate. Which one is the best?”

“That depends on the individual mate. Do you have one in mind?”

“I do.”

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Lis knocked on the door across the hall. If they were going to prey on this ‘Tsitsi’ next, they apparently had to do more than just lure them in by posing as a willing mate. “*With humans, you must learn more than their behavior,*” the embassy agent had informed. “*You must learn their interests, their past, their desires for the future, their favorite color.*”

The door opened.

Tsitsi was clothed in slacks and a plaid, short sleeve button-up. He seemed taken aback to see Lis, that is, Rokhaya, there.

“Oh. Hello, Rokhaya. How— How are you feeling?”

This was a question Lis had never been asked before. In fact, this was a question they had never asked themselves before, either. How did one express one’s emotional state if not by simply *feeling* it through thought?

They must have taken too long to reply because Tsitsi asked another, easier to answer, question. “You received my card?”

“Yes,” Lis said. “I liked the picture of the dog.” Then out of curiosity, “Why did it have a circle on its head?”

“I believe that was a halo.”

“I see. Halo?”

“Uh, it was an angel. A dog angel.”

Halo. Angel. All of these words that were unfamiliar. Lis thought it better to pretend to know what this human was talking about so as not to arouse suspicion. The freeformer at the embassy

had made it very clear that it was imperative Lis keep their cover— if a human found out they were not one of their kind, they would do more than try to kill them (which had been Lis’ only concern before). They would want to capture them, study them, dissect them, expose the rest of their kind. “Yes, of course. Thank you.” They would look it up later on the laptop.

There was a pause in the conversation, in which Tsitsi seemed to be waiting for Lis to say something. But what were they supposed to *say*? When they were a newt, all they had to do was a flashy tail dance to attract their mate. Mudskippers have a jumping contest. A cat only has to crouch low and lift their backside into the air. But Lis was supposed to “get to know” a human prey. And the only way to do that? Stalk them.

“I knocked earlier, but you didn’t answer.”

“I’m sorry. I was— out.”

Trying to gather as many factoids about Tsitsi as possible, Lis asked, “Where?”

“Just at the tower.”

Lis had no concept of what tower he was referring to. They needed more context. “You like the tower?”

Tsitsi smiled shyly. “I suppose I can’t help it.”

What did *that* mean?

“Can you show the tower to me?”

“Oh.” He looked taken aback again. *What had they said wrong this time?* But then he responded, “Yes, I would be glad to take you there sometime.”

“When?” Lis asked so that they would be sure not to be out hunting.

“Well, whenever you are available.”

"I am available now."

"Now?"

"Yes." Lis wished they could think this at him instead of resorting to the indistinct and imprecise capabilities of vocalization. In freeformer, 'yes' had many different shades of thought. Some 'yesses' were leaden with obligation. Others cracked open like a door. This 'yes' sparkled like white sand. "Yes, now."

They couldn't tell from Tsitsi's facial expression whether he was surprised in a shining way or biting way.

"I— would like that," he finally verbalized.

"Good. Just one question: are there any public toilets there?"

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Before Lis even saw the tower, they saw the keychains. They were in the shape of an oddly familiar letter-A-like-symbol that Lis recognized from observing it all around the city: signs, metro posters, even adorning human garments. Men, mostly with dark skin like Tsitsi, like their own, displayed these miniature tower replicas on blankets or carried large metal hoops crammed with them, sometimes multiple hoops around each elbow. They called out prices, "*One euro each!*" "*Ten for seven!*" "*Buy two get one!*" "*Buy five, get three!*" "*Small one, medium two, large three, all three for four!*" as they followed anyone who let a look linger, even if but for a moment—groups of tourists, mated couples, families with little children asking for souvenirs. Many who seemed interested kept walking by, as if they thought there might be a better deal ahead. Others tried to negotiate. Or pretended to be disinterested until the prices called out got low enough. "*Five for two euro!*"

But none of these vendors approached Lis and Tsitsi as they made their way from the metro station and turned up a set of

marble stairs that led to an elevated, expansive, marbled plaza, flanked by great columned buildings and gold statues of humans in varying states of undress. It was crowded with people taking pictures of people posing in front of: the tower.

It had the presence of a black pine.

Lis and Tsitsi passed at least two dozen keychain sellers until, near the end of the plaza, finally one approached. He had three hoops around one elbow and a handful of keychains that he linked together like a cave of echolocating bats.

"Mhoro, Tsitsi!" the man greeted warmly with a firm handshake and two claps. "Working again?!"

"No, no, just visiting."

The man looked from Tsitsi to Lis and grinned.

"Because you haven't seen this tower enough. But who could get tired of the symbol for *love*?" He winked at Lis.

Tsitsi gave him a penetrating look.

"You work here?" asked Lis. They didn't like the idea of foisting keychains on apathetic pedestrians once they mimicked him—working a prey's job was not something they'd had to worry about as any other species.

"I do." He said it like Lis should already know that. Rokhaya probably would have.

"You haven't seen his paintings? These tourists are buying the next *Mona Lisa*, and they don't even know it!"

"You paint this tower?"

"It's what the tourists want to buy. But for myself, I paint . . . other things."

They moved on towards the tower—a deceptively lengthy walk along a river bridge jammed with beeping cars. Along it,

humans called out to each other in clashing languages over the muffled loudspeakers of boats, glut full of tourists, lugging by below. And growing, step-by-step, the metal tree, towering above them. Lis kept their focus aimed up so as to avoid the surplus of form-tempting sights. The tower was so exceptionally big that Lis could be forgiven for thinking it must be close. Yet it took what felt like an age to arrive at the base of the tower, then another just to get through security. When, at last, they were released from the rigid security line, the first thing Lis noticed was a group of humans lying on the ground with arms all stretched up, holding their phones.

“What are they doing?”

“You’ve never laid down and looked up?”

Lis shook their head ‘no,’ hoping he would not think it strange that Rokhaya had never done so.

“I know it looks silly and a lot of people think it’s just for tourists, but . . . if you don’t mind getting a little dusty?”

Lis shrugged. When they’d been a hamster, they’d taken plenty of dust baths.

Tsitsi walked them over to the center of the tower base courtyard. The group was just getting up. He lay down. But he did not hold his phone above him as the tourists had. He only looked up with his eyes.

Lis imitated his behavior and lay down beside him.

Above them was a mesmerizing display of shapes and light. Metal beams crisscrossed to form diamonds and squares and triangles, and peeking through each was a patch of blue, dappled white with cloud. Four great arches marked the edges of their view—the tower was so large that Lis could not see its base from

where they lay—and each of these four arches was bordered by an arch of smaller arches and, inside those, smaller arches still. Each looked like a doorway into the sky. It was as if the entire world had disappeared, and Lis could look up, studying this fascinating structure endlessly. It reminded them of flying: the ultimate feeling of freedom (besides melting into goo in a smelly, dark box). And best was that with no human in sight, though they could hear voices echoing from all around them, there was no urge to mimic. Lis felt themselves relax in their human form for the first time outside a toilet.

“I am happy you like the view,” came a voice from beside them.

Lis had completely forgotten about Tsitsi in their wonder, and hoped they had not let any of their human features limesce.

“I can understand why you work here.”

Lis suddenly heard the starling-like call, trilling on repeat.

“You can answer that if you want,” Tsitsi offered.

The clouds were turning from white to blush pink. The blue sky taking on a purple tinge. “No, that’s not necessary.” Lis felt like they could study this tower for a very long time—that must be why Tsitsi came here every day to paint it. “Why is this tower a symbol of love?”

“I suppose because many lovers come here. Honeymooners, anniversaries, first dates . . .”

“Have you ever brought a lover here?”

Tsitsi paused before answering. “No. I hadn’t— *haven’t*— Have you?”

“I have never been in love,” Lis responded truthfully, though perhaps Rokhaya had.

“Never?”

Lis needed to know more about love before they could expound on their answer with any accuracy. So, they deflected instead: “Have you?”

Tsitsi sat up beside her.

“Do you mind if we head back? That’s a long story, and it’s been a long day.”

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Blocking the entranceway to their apartment building, a woman was pressing one of the doorbell buttons repeatedly. Severe white-blond hair cut straight across the light pink skin of her forehead. The woman looked up as Lis and Tsitsi approached. Her eyes were wolf blue. Lis looked between her eyebrows instead.

“Where have you *been*?” she asked, impassioned. “I’ve been calling and calling.” She suddenly seemed to notice Tsitsi. “Is *he* the reason why you missed runway? Gabriel was salty as fuck that you ghosted.”

Once again, Lis did not know what to say, so, once again, they said nothing.

“Her dog died,” Tsitsi offered.

The woman’s brow uncreased. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, Dogo Chanel is dead,” Lis said. Apparently, humans were very attached to their canine companions.

“Just— let a bitch know next time. I thought you were dead. And let’s grab drinks soon and,” she looked pointedly at Tsitsi, “catch up.”

“You missed work to be with me?” Tsitsi asked as they walked inside their apartment building, the entranceway now pissed-off-fashion-model free.

In the hallway, outside their respective doors, Tsitsi looked

down at Lis’ boots with the embroidered daisies scattered all over. “Sorry that today wasn’t exactly . . . well, I’d like to take you on a real date, if I may ask . . .”

“A date?” Lis inquired.

“I’m sorry! I clearly read the signals wrong . . .” Tsitsi began to fumble with the keys to unlock his door.

Signals, as in mating signals? If only it was as obvious as a lightning bug signal. All they had to do then was dump some chemicals into their beetle-mimicked butt (but when Lis had tried to see if humans might have such a feature, they succeeded only in peeing themselves.)

“Yes,” Lis agreed. “I would like you to take me on a ‘real date.’” This ‘yes’ glimmered like sunlight on lake water.

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Lis’ mimicked fingers pressed the letters D - A - T - E on the laptop keyboard.

1. The day of the month or year as specified by a number
2. A social or romantic appointment or engagement

R - O - M - A - N, they typed, T - I - C

1. Conductive to or characterized by the expression of love
2. Of, characterized by, or suggestive of an idealized view of reality
3. Relating to or denoting the artistic and literary movement of romanticism

L - O - V - E

1. An intense feeling of deep affection
2. A great interest and pleasure in something

Lis was curious about Tsitsi, but they couldn't say they had a deep affection for him.

Lis typed H - O - W T - O F - A - L - L I - N L - O - V - E

The first resource that came up was a 2015 *New York Times* article, titled, "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This." Lis clicked the link.

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Tsitsi was dressed differently for their date. He had on a warm brown suit that looked as crisp as if it were (and probably was) new, and a navy button-up with the top two buttons undone. He wore polished dress shoes and spotless white socks. His teeth looked especially clean, and if Lis could smell, they would have also noted the level of fresh breath that only comes from gargling throat-searing quantities of Listerine.

Lis was wearing the brightest combination of colors they could find in the hopes that this would signal interest.

"You look . . . vibrant," Tsitsi remarked when Lis opened Rokhaya's apartment door.

"You look clean," Lis replied.

Tsitsi laughed. "Shall we go?"

"We shall. While we commute, can you tell me, given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?"

"That's an . . . interesting question. Let me think . . ." he said as they exited the apartment building and set out for the nearest, all too familiar, metro stop. "Anyone alive, or in history?"

"I don't know." The article had not specified.

"Well, if historical figures were an option, then it would have to be Monet. His ability to capture light in a simple impressionistic stroke is unparalleled."

"Monet." Filed away. "And would you like to be famous?"

"Like Monet? Who wouldn't?"

The metro ride was noisy and hectic, but Lis still managed to ask, "Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?" as well as "What could constitute a 'perfect' day for you?"

Lis learned that he always rehearsed what he was going to say because he became easily flustered on the phone, and that his perfect day consisted of painting outdoors and something called fried macimbi.

From the metro, they crossed the street and entered an arched tunnel that cut through a palatial building the length of a city block.

"When did you last sing to yourself?"

Tsitsi laughed. "No one has ever paid me so much interest. To be honest, I wasn't sure you had interest in me at all."

They had exited the tunnel. For once, Lis didn't notice the people. The courtyard to the Louvre was vast, and in its center was an angular marvel of glass and light and, they would soon learn, the entrance to the museum.

Lis asked more questions as they stood in the snaking security line inside the glass pyramid. "If you were able to live to the age of

ninety and retain either the mind or body of a thirty-year-old for the last sixty years of your life, which would you want?" and "Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?"

"How do you think of these questions?!" Tsitsi marveled.

Lis did not disclose that they were from "36 Questions That Lead to Love," by psychologist Arthur Aron, as recommended by the "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This" article. Nor that they had researched the phenomenon of love thoroughly from the stance of several scientific disciplines: anthropology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, biology. For biologists, each expression of love had an evolutionary reason: attraction to discriminate in favor of healthy mates, lust to spur reproduction, and attachment for facilitating familial bonding.

Inside, an escalator conveyed them down into the pyramid that grew in size like an iceberg below the ocean surface. An open echoey cavern of dark marble waited at the base. Clumps of humans stuck together. Others were set out on their own. No one seemed to be following any specific path, nor to be headed in the same direction. Except maybe the people stuck looking at the back of the head of the person standing in front of them in one of the staggeringly long lines of aspiring ticket purchasers looking at the backs of each other's heads. A collective, irritated, grumbling murmured in Lis' direction. Thankful that Tsitsi had preplanned and prepurchased, they turned the other way and were at once assaulted by the shrill screams of gleefully misbehaving children. A gush of *awws* broke out at the center of the underground lobby directly under the peak of the pyramid, so high above. Lis shifted their attention over to the commotion and saw a man kneeling on just one knee.

Tsitsi asked something, drawing Lis' attention back to him.

"What?" They had heard the words but had not been able to sift them out of the cacophony of other sounds.

"Anything particular you want to see?" he asked again. "There's Paintings; Prints and Drawings; Egyptian Antiquities; Greek, and then Roman Antiquities; Sculpture, of course; Islamic Art; Near Eastern. Oh yeah, and Decorative Arts. And Etruscan!" he added.

"Whatever you want to show me."

Tsitsi led them up a mountain of marble stairs and into a long room whose other end Lis could not see. It was lit by an arched ceiling of skylights, its walls lined with large gold-framed paintings. Each painting depicted a different scene of humans, many in garments which Lis had not observed before. Others were content to be unclothed, like all other organisms on the planet. Lis found the painted people just as distracting as the live people clustered around each artwork with phones for eyes. Now among the tempting features were nipples and belly buttons and inner thighs. The endless room was broken up by mauve marbled columns that framed massive mirrors. Lis looked at one to their left and was relieved to see Rokhaya's almond eyes staring back at them. Lis made sure to check out their human form every time they passed one such mirror, which helped them maintain it in the mass of luringly mimicable (flesh and paint) faces.

They passed a room on the right that was absolutely packed with museumgoers. Lis hoped they weren't headed there.

"There are far greater works of art than the *Mona Lisa*," Tsitsi said. Then backtracking. "Unless you really want to see it?"

Lis did not know what this *Mona Lisa* was, but they were happy to avoid the many eyeballs viewing it.

“No, I want to see what paintings you want to see.”

“This way.” Tsitsi started to maneuver them towards the other end of the tunnel-like gallery.

Lis was stopped in their tracks by a small painting of a human made of bark with mushrooms for lips and ivy-covered branches for hair. A second similar painting depicted a face with lips of cherries, teeth of peas, pear chin, peach cheek, and cucumber nose. Alongside it was another plant/human-hybrid, but made entirely from flowers. A fourth had hair of grape leaves and a beard of wheat. Did this artist somehow know about freeformers? Could they themselves have been one?

Tsitsi was back beside them. “Giuseppe Arcimboldo. He painted these in the fifteen-hundreds. That was over three hundred years before Picasso. Three hundred and fifty, I think! To be the first. Imagine.”

Lis wondered if they were the first of their kind to try and date a prey instead of eat them.

They walked through a vast maze of rooms, Tsitsi stopping them from time to time to look at a painting, Lis stopping to “use the bathroom” every time they passed one, eventually going down another flight of stairs into a cavern of white marble—white marble walls, white marble statues, white marble framed windows. Lis caught sight of the glass pyramid where they had entered the museum. They were shocked to see the sky behind it purple with a line of orange brushing the horizon. How had so much time passed?

“This . . . is *Psyche Revived by Cupid’s Kiss*.”

Lis regarded the statue they had halted in front of. A human woman, loosely wrapped in stone cloth, lay on a rock. Above her, a

human male—with a pair of wings?—cradled her in his arms. One of his hands was cupping her breast, the other, her head. Both of her arms were stretched up to draw him down closer. Their faces nearly touched. Lis had seen humans touch their faces together in the many movies Rokhaya watched in bed on her laptop. Another of the many mating rituals, no doubt.

Lis became aware of Tsitsi looking at them. Hopefully, they hadn’t shown too much interest in what was clearly a statue of a freeformer ensnaring their prey.

“The story goes that there was this prophecy that Psyche,” Tsitsi gestured to the woman on the rock, “would grow up to become more beautiful than the goddess of love, Venus. So, Venus ordered her son, Cupid,” he indicated toward the winged man, “to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest being in the world. But Cupid couldn’t resist falling in love with Psyche himself. He tried to keep the beautiful princess hidden, but his mother sent her into Hades on a dangerous mission, which caused her to fall into a deadly sleep. Cupid found her and kissed her . . . a kiss that brought her back to life. This is that moment.”

So not a freeformer luring a prey.

Lis studied the statue again in the new light of correct context. Psyche was looking up, enraptured by the kiss which had just revived her. Physical love. Lis had never kissed or been kissed before, but it seemed like the thing to do.

Lis positioned their face within touching distance of Tsitsi’s face.

He understood the request and pressed, right against theirs, his lips. They were soft and warm and, oh, so bitable.

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