

Little Sister

by Thomas Pluck

"Hey, Ceecee."

Rodrigo squatted on our three step stoop every morning, flanked by pit bulls with wide black smiles puffing steam. I jogged down the steps, leaned against a parking sign. Warmed my hands with my breath. Tugged my crop top down.

"Girl, you gonna freeze." He peeled off his hoodie. Held the coat open.

I shook my head.

"C'mon, you can play with Salvador."

I sighed, let him wrap me in it. Smelled of cigars and dogs. "Thanks." I gathered the sleeves up by my elbows, and followed him down the piss-stained alley between brownstones, the dogs barrel bellies rattling past the trash cans. His crooked garage stood in dead yellow grass with newspaper-taped windows. Rodrigo whistled sharp, opened the door. Yips and barks rose to a song and a herd of brown and white huddled against our thighs.

Sallie sauntered up and I dragged my long bright nails through her tan fur. "How much for her, 'Drigo?"

"I usually get two hundred, but..."

My brother kicked a trash can in the alley. "Celia! Get your ass out here. Got a job."

Sallie barked, nose sighting on the sound. Rodrigo grabbed her scruff to hold her back, snapping. "She's got thing for you pobrecita," he said.

I got my strut on and hit the street. My brother Ray had his arm around a man in dirty jeans. I went and did the job in our room.

After I washed myself out, I got hell for the hoodie. Ray liked to pinch and twist. Make me cry. "Why you hiding your goods for? No wonder I gotta hunt down tricks."

"It's cold out there."

"You give him some for this?" Ray's face scrunched up. He tugged the hoodie off, tossed it in the tub. Took out his scarred thing and

pissed on it. His nails dug into my wrist. Dragged me to the toilet seat. "Show me why Daddy liked you better."

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Mommy slept on the couch, her special juice staining her robe. Cigarette dead between yellow fingers. That's when Daddy taught me the shower game. Said he had to wash his dirty little girl before bedtime. It was tingly. I didn't know better.

RayRay was older. He should've known. I woke with him sitting on my flat chest, telling me to do it for him too. Rubbing me through my jammies. "Do it, or I'll tell mommy and she'll hate you."

When I told Daddy about RayRay's games, he dragged him into the bathroom and clipped Mom's curling iron to his thing. Made me watch. Ray started wetting the bed, whimpering. Watching us through the steamed glass shower door.

Next thing I remember is the fire. Choking on the smoke. Ray dragging me out the door by my jammies. Foster homes after that. New Daddies, same shower game. Ray found new sisters to show his scars. At sixteen he dropped out and took me with him.

I knew the game was wrong. Not much I could do. Ray was bigger. Taught me how to work. Said I was no good for anything else.

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Had me a stash I kept in my tampon box. Ray wouldn't touch them, said they were nasty. My money for doing extra for my johns, the things I told Ray I'd never do. Things he wanted to do, that I told him made him queer for thinking about.

Rodrigo drove cabs at night, raised pit bulls in the day. Raised family dogs, who loved children and would die to protect you. On the porch, he held a brindle male by the scruff. "Salvador. She's for you. Protective."

I tucked my wad of bills into Rodrigo's hand, and brought her to my room. Poured her a bowl of water, and went back down, leaned on my street sign.

Big truck rumbled down our Ironbound street. Ray hung out the passenger side, snapped his fingers, gave me his dead-eye smile.

"Game time."

"Rodrigo, watch the truck." I walked up the stairs, rolling my hips.

RayRay and the trucker followed, the john whistling.

Time for them to meet my little sister.

