

Insidious Red Parasite

I turn the key in my studio apartment deadbolt and as the door reluctantly falls back, I consider how I will kill myself this time. The ceiling is not tall enough to hang by - last time I tried I could nearly walk across the floor. The burner I use to heat my cans of condensed soup is electric, not gas. Bringing the hair dryer into the bathtub with me only killed the dryer. I have no gun, I am not violent (they say the violent suicides are performed mostly by men anyway), I just want to die. After careful consideration of my life on the bus ride home again today, and close observance of its uninspiring nature for the last twenty-five years, I have calmly, rationally decided that it is no longer worth it. What is the point, really?

I pick up Angel, the gray arthritic cat that followed me home from the bus stop the week before, its red metal pawprint-shaped ID tags tinkling the entire way, and bury my face in her vibrating chest. I feed her the dregs at the bottom of the bag of cat food, amazed at the quantities she has managed to suck down in recent days, and turn on the water in the bathtub. I hate to do it because I hate the sight of blood, but this time I'm going to use a razor. It occurred to me only today, standing at my research station in the corner of the university library, that I hadn't yet tried the razor. How stupid of me.

I stick my foot into the clear, perfect square of water, but immediately pull it back with an inadvertent, ungraceful yelp. The water is too hot. Suddenly I laugh out loud at the irony. I want to die, yet I don't seem to want to get burned. I prop my leg up on the edge of the tub and blow on the pink singed skin. It's amazing what your instincts will keep you from doing, even until the end. Doesn't my body know that it doesn't matter, that I am going to kill myself anyway? Who cares if I burn a little bit on the way? Impatient, I suck in my breath and quickly sink my entire body into the hot, enervating water.

I lay fully submerged, the heat, like little insects, biting away at my scalp. Underneath the water I can hear things I couldn't before. The pipes in the wall behind me groan a complaint, the neighbor in the apartment next to mine opens his refrigerator, somebody somewhere is watching television and the sounds from the generated

laugh-track come at me in waves. I feel in on things, I feel in the know. I hate having to get up to take in a breath of air.

My toes are pink and ragged by the time I get up the interest to consider the razor. It rests nonchalantly on the corner of the bathtub nearest my right foot. I stare at it, it ignores me. Finally I pick the thing up and consider how I am going to use it to cut myself. I want to extract the metal part in the head and slide it across my wrist like they do in the movies, but after a bit of fumbling I find that I can not get it out. It's a damn disposable razor, the kind with the orange plastic handle and white plastic head that's all one piece. Nothing comes apart naturally. I try to pop its head off, but instead I lose control and the razor slips into the water and settles at the bottom of the tub, hidden behind my thigh like a naughty child. Frustrated, I pull it out and begin banging it on the side of the tub. Tears form at the edges of my vision and when I can no longer focus on the orange, hazard-colored handle, I give up and drop my head in my hands. I am a failure, even at this. When the water starts to chill my skin I pull myself out of the bathtub and, still wet and naked, slide into bed.

The phone rings a couple of hours later.

"Hey, where are you, aren't you coming over?" It's Steve, my boyfriend, a musician I met at a laundromat a few months back. I try to answer him, but all that comes out of my throat is an ugly, guttural cough. "Were you snoozing, sleepyhead? Awww."

"I'm coming," I finally scratch out.

Steve lives in a studio apartment like me, but his has a TV and after dinner we cuddle up close to watch the late night sit-com reruns. When my eyelids start falling forward like loose shutters in the wind, I get up to go to the bathroom and get ready for bed. In the hazy light of the small bathroom nightlight I take off all my clothes, fold them neatly on top of the toilet back, and brush my teeth while eyeing my naked body critically in the mirror. I am small, barely 5 feet tall, and the sink comes up as far as my belly button. I have pretty long brown hair, my best feature I think, but my breasts are tiny and my skin a pale, frightening white. I'm also thin, with very little muscle tone.

Steve steps into the bathroom behind me and we look at each other silently through the mirror. I bend down to spit out the

toothpaste, but before I am done I feel his palm reaching around the curve of my belly. His other hand cups my breast. When I straighten up we look at each other again in the mirror for a moment until Steve's eyes finally break away. He watches a different part of my reflection while massaging my skin. "You should gain a little weight," I hear him whisper in my ear, "you could use more curves."

My skin flashes hot and red, but I don't say a thing. In defense I think about the unruly body hair that runs rampant over his back and shoulders, but still I don't say a thing. I continue to watch us in the mirror as Steve bends over further to kiss my neck, the hand on my belly groping further down. He's right, really, I think, I don't have much of a body.

The next morning I wake up before dawn, uncomfortable with a kink in my neck, my body hot and twisted in the musty sheets. I look over at Steve's snoring slumber and know that if I leave he won't even notice. I pull my clothes back on in the bathroom, but before leaving I decide to steal some time on the computer. His laptop is a luxury even bigger than the television set.

Within minutes I find myself sifting through all kinds of sites related to suicide: suicide information, suicide prevention, suicide methods, suicide statistics, and most engrossing, suicide confessions. I read about a young man who calls himself Tom. He was my age exactly when he tried to kill himself by slitting his throat with a razor. He had attempted other methods before, all unsuccessfully of course, but had brought death closest with the razor. It was a cold evening in December when he had taken off all his clothes (but then had put his pants back on out of consideration for whoever was going to find him), stalked into the bathroom, gripped the razor in his right hand, and stared in the mirror as he ran the blade across his skin from ear to ear. He fell to the ground and bled for hours until, tired and weak, he realized that the cut wasn't deep enough to kill him. Fumbling with the razor that was still nestled in his hand he tried again, but found that he had no strength left. He lay there quietly until his sister finally discovered him the next morning. Tom now lives with a seven-inch scar branded across his throat, like an insidious red parasite that has become an integral part of its host. Everywhere he goes people stare at it, though only a few find the gumption to ask what happened.

I learn that death by firearm is the most common way of committing suicide, comprising 57 per cent of all suicides in the United States. I read that suicide is the 9th, or on some sites the 8th, leading cause of death, that you can commit suicide through injection, by hanging, from such common household products as bleach, insecticide, rat poison, antifreeze, and even mercury from a thermometer. I am disappointed to discover that the famous Hemlock Society advertises and promotes suicide, but does little to practically help individuals get there. I grow lethargic and my eyes eventually turn heavy. I discover, essentially, that suicide is both common, and not that easy to perform with success, that there are twenty-five attempts for every completed act. Suicide takes effort, and effort implies strength - this realization makes me very tired. When I finally turn off the computer and leave the apartment, the image of the man with the permanent scar across his neck leaves with me.

On the car ride home I think how pathetic my own headline would be: "Girl in Prime of Life, Healthy, Young, with Beautiful Brown Hair and a Handsome Boyfriend in a Band, Cuts it All Short for No Apparent Reason Whatsoever," or, "Another Tragic Useless Death in Los Angeles." I would be embarrassed to be found half dead, with scars on my body, shadows across my past. What would it solve anyway? Killing myself would only make all my current failures permanent.

I pull into the parking lot next to my apartment, and on the walk towards my front door I stop to watch a pair of young girls playing house in the strip of grass outside my window. They have dolls set up, drinking tea from white plastic china. They are so pretty. They laugh so genuinely.

I turn the key in my studio apartment deadbolt, and at the sound of the scraping metal Angel runs to greet me. Before I can pick her up she is purring. I sit with her on the edge of the bed, looking out the window at the sun shining on the little girls' party, and just as calmly as I first decided to kill myself the day before, I decide on this day not to. What would be the point, really?

"It's a nice day outside." I tell Angel, and she squeezes her eyes shut in firm agreement. Her metal ID tags reflect the sun and I reach out to finger them thoughtfully. After a few moments I pick up the phone - it is about time Angel returned to her former home.