

I Am Not Myself These Days

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Extract

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Prologue

I'm freezing. The door to the balcony is wide open. The wind has blown the bedcovers completely off my feet, and the room is dark except for the faint orange glow from the skyline outside. I can't feel my toes. On the forty-second floor, the wind never stops blowing.

My boyfriend is standing over me with a knife. Two nights ago, after he had come home from a three-day crack binge, he decided that I could have the rest of the month to get my stuff together and move out of our, well *his*, penthouse. He then returned to his regularly scheduled cocaine programming and hadn't come home since. Until now.

"Why's the door open?" I ask.

"I was getting ready to kill you and then jump off the balcony," Jack says as calmly as if he were telling me what movie he was planning to see.

"With that?" I gesture toward the Wüsthof chef's knife in his hand.

"Yeah."

"But I just got that for Christmas."

It's a very expensive knife. I don't have many good things, but my parents send me one good knife each year for Christmas even though I've never used a single one for anything other than display. I think I mentioned that I wanted to take a cooking class to them once. "I haven't even used it yet."

"Sorry. It seemed like it would work best. The other ones are too small," he says, idly running his thumb over the blade.

He's right. All the other knives we have in the apartment are discount-store quality and mostly dulled from the dishwasher. They could probably do the job, but the Wüsthof would guarantee success in the first stab. Would likely go straight through and pin me to the mattress. *Wüsthof!* I imagine that's the sound it would have made as it arced through the air and then pierced my lungs, explosively releasing the air into my chest cavity. Or maybe it would have been more of a farting noise, like a balloon deflating.

"Anything holding you back now?" I ask. I doubt that he's going to go through with his plan now that I'm awake. He seems a little deflated, like I've spoiled the surprise. I'm not nervous at all. He'll do it fast if he decides to. I'm so com-

pletely exhausted after this last month we've had together that it's hard to muster up any sense of panic or impending doom.

"I just remembered which doorman is on tonight and I didn't want to scare Pedro," Jack says.

Pedro's a Puerto Rican guy in his early seventies. He's a little slow, so they put him on the late-night shift. Being a gay male escort, Jack sees him a lot on his way to and from clients. Jack likes to practice his Spanish with him.

Pedro would've been seriously upset if Jack came crashing down onto the circular drive in front of the building.

"Are we done? Can I go back to sleep?"

"Yeah. It wasn't a very elegant plan," he says. He says things like that. *Elegant plan*. This is why I still love him.

"Okay. Put the knife back in the holder. Don't leave it in the sink; the handle will rust."

"Okay." Jack starts walking back into the living room.

"Can you shut the door too, please?" I point toward the balcony. Jack's beeper goes off. Thursdays are the first busy night of the weekend. He shuts the door, grabs the cordless phone off the end table, and punches in the number on his beeper display.

"This is Aidan. You called me." Jack's voice drops an octave when he talks to a potential client. Personally I've always thought his normal voice is much sexier.

"What are you looking for?" Pause. "How long?" Pause. "Some toys are extra." Pause. "I can arrange that." Pause. "Do you need any party favors?" Pause. "Four hundred an hour."

Longer pause. "Look, you're a scum-sucking piece of shit who probably can't get it up. You're lucky I even have time to come kick the shit out of you. It's three hundred seventy-five dollars, or you can jerk off to cable porn." Pause. "I'll be over in ten minutes."

I fall back asleep while "Aidan" packs the proper dildos, restraints, lubes, toys, etc., into a backpack and heads out into the January night.

The last thing I notice before falling back asleep are the white Christmas lights strung across our balcony. From my vantage point on the bed, the little bulbs merge with the lights of the skyline behind them. They've been burning night and day for weeks and should have been taken down already. But like any chore not directly related to day-to-day survival, they'll probably stay up and lit long into spring. Things in New York City sparkle a lot longer than you'd expect before they burn out.

BOOK



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I've just dropped my vodka glass and am having that perennial, silly internal debate about whether I should order another one—since, let's face it, I have reached the state where I'm dropping full glasses of vodka. A silly debate because it's highly unlikely that I will be able to keep a firm clutch on the next one, and perennial because I'm going to order one regardless. And then one after that.

I deserve another one, really. I've just broken the record for number of weeks anyone has won the Amateur Drag Queen contest at Lucky Cheng's. True, I did reuse the same song and wore the same outfit as I did on the first winning Thursday, but, honestly, this is uncharted territory here. Six weeks run-

ning of being voted the most talented amateur drag queen in New York City. By the audience. Pour me another, the future is stunning.

Of course I'm not just in it for the accolades. There's the prize money to be considered. One hundred and fifty dollars plus whatever the audience tips. After setting aside a portion for retirement, I must decide whether to invest the rest in food or two months back rent. Or possibly to retire on the spot and use it all for shots of vodka. I've retired approximately eight rounds tonight alone, not including the one that just hit the floor.

Okay, okay, already. I'll have another.

My little secret from the audience is that I'm not really an amateur drag queen. I'm practically a veteran, having been through the boot camp of drag queen training—Atlanta. Where men are men, and women are cartoon characters.

Not that I would be excluded from the Lucky Cheng's competition if my professional status were public knowledge. Quite frankly, the host of the contest I'd just won, Miss Understood, has enough difficulty rounding up three reasonably sober, mildly entertaining contestants every week. She's not going to become a stickler for rules and risk losing a weekly gig that pays her one hundred dollars and a free portion of sweet and sour pork. Besides, I've only been in New York for less than two months, so I guess I technically qualify as an amateur *New York* drag queen. Luckily, I've been able to find club work four nights a week, in addition to my day job as a junior art director at a Soho ad agency.