

about 1500 words

A Touching Tale of Sisterly Love

“Something’s different here,” Penny whispers, as she and Macy clamber onto the beach underneath the boardwalk. Macy frowns as she peels her skin off.

“How do you know?” she asks, slathering the flesh across her body, molding it as easily as oceanbank silt. Forms it into the same thing she wore last time—a copy of a lady she saw on a yacht, thin white blouse and pleated skirt, bamboo sunglasses perched upon her nose.

She smiles, remembering how the woman looked after they took her eyes and made her carve their names into her stomach. Their *real* ones. *Macy* and *Penny* would have been too easy.

Penny still hasn’t taken her skin off. Instead, she cranes her neck, peering up through the wooden slats—and, while Macy is loath to admit it, they do look a tad aged, coarse at the edges. Caked with algae and small, pulsating barnacles that expose their glossy, moist hearts to the briny air.

“There’s no noise. And nobody’s here.”

“You don’t know that. Put your clothes on,” she snaps, already impatient. They’ve had to wait *ages* for Dad’s business trip, after how much trouble they got into last time, and it’s been *so long* since she was able to have some *fun*.

“I don’t want to,” Penny replies, jaw set in that stubborn way that Macy hates. “Dad is gonna be so angry, and everything’s so *quiet*.”

“Dad won’t know!”

“He will! He *always* knows.”

“It’ll be *fun*. Look, remember last time—” Macy takes a moment, trying to grasp onto something that’ll convince her sister, “remember that *cute* boy, totally into you, and you let him paint you and they all killed each other to own it?”

“...Maybe.”

“And the man selling the fried dough; how good he tasted? And, and-” she’s getting her now, she knows, “and the carousel?”

Penny’d been enraptured with the horses, though she can’t say why, really. They’re no better than corpses; chunks of cracked plastic and flaking bronze spray paint. She’d forced Macy to ride it *five* times with her, hands tracing over the bob of their corrugated manes, the wild slant of their foam-tipped mouths.

With a heavy, dramatic-little-sister sigh, Penny rips off her skin, reshapes it hastily into blobby, twitching clothes. It can barely be called an outfit—it hangs unevenly, strips of cloth melting into each other, long swirls of nonsensical stitches and muddy colors. She didn’t even hide the pulsating of her real body. Then again, she probably doesn’t know how. Last time they went out, Penny hadn’t grown into her tentacles yet. Macy considers telling her that they’re totally undulating, but that’ll make her all insecure, and they’ve waited long enough already.

“Can we ride it first? The carousel?”

“Yeah, *fine*.”

Without waiting for Penny, Macy breaks into a sprint, racing to the edge of the boardwalk, where the beach slopes up. Her sister's pattering footsteps follow close behind, and they skid to a stop in unison, scanning the expanse of the beachfront.

Above, it's empty, a hollow cavity where life once wriggled. There is none of last time's bustle, no squalling children and ice-cream-stained adults. No longer do the blazing lights of the midway extinguish the stars. Worst of *all*, no cute boys to be found.

"See?" Penny accuses, "I was right!"

The nearest building, an old pizza parlor, has wood boarded over its windows, and the great Ferris wheel outlined against the night is dim, skeletal.

"...How long has it been?"

"Dad grounded us for a century," Penny muses, "and it's been, what, a decade? Two?"

"Humans don't die *that* quickly."

"Maybe it's because of us. Did they close because of us? Was it because you put that man's skin on his inside?"

"Doesn't matter," Macy declares, "the carousel's still here, I bet."

Penny grumbles something, but she ignores her, probing deeper into the dark.

Together, they navigate the wooden labyrinth, around boarded-up shops, cracked signs, crooked railings, all encrusted with salt. Macy squints at the horizon, trying to spot the squat, concrete buildings of the mall they took their flesh-names from, but either it's too dark, or it's gone as well.

"Look!" she crows, when they turn a final corner to find the machine, nestled in the center of a circular veranda. The victory fades, though, upon closer inspection—half the horses

are tearing off their poles, and the other half are ragged, missing limbs and eyes. Where the metal rods slot into the roof, they're dark with rust, and the entire structure keens leftwards.

Penny whimpers. Macy whirls around, already anticipating what's coming.

"No, don't—"

"You *told* me it would be fine! You're a liar!"

"Hey! I'm *not*, look—" she grabs Penny's wrist, yanking her towards the horses, "look, you can *literally* still ride—"

"No! I won't!"

"*Sit!* I swear—"

"Hey!"

Both stop, suddenly drowning in fluorescent light. Macy turns towards the entrance, squinting at the dull silhouette of two humans. Woman and man, both dressed in dark blue.

She remembers that uniform. That's what the humans who clean up messes look like. She saw a lot of them last time. So many racing through the screaming, writhing crowds, drawn like ants to a picnic. Trying their best to avoid the puddles of blood steaming under the remnants of afternoon sun, saliva boiling on their tongues.

Penny slinks into Macy's shadow—hiding, all that bravado bled out of her.

"Don't move! The hell d'you kids think you're doing?"

"We're trying to ride the carousel?"

"Ride the- *no*, you're not supposed to be in here. Where are your parents?"

"Our dad is out of town," Macy singsongs, finally enjoying herself. Why's Penny scared?

The two humans exchange a glance. Eventually, the man speaks again, voice hitched by just a bit.

“...We’re taking you down to the station. Breaking in is a crime, you know?”

“We didn’t break in.”

The woman mutters something, something like, *fucking teenagers*. Any fleshbag goodwill Macy harbored bleeds out in a second—they’re *not* teenagers—she is seventeen hundred years old!

“Macy,” Penny whispers, “can we leave? I don’t-”

“No,” she interrupts, grinning, struck by an idea. She pushes Penny back as she walks towards the humans. The man’s hand twitches towards his belt.

“Hey, stay back!”

She doesn’t. He pulls out a metal implement, and when she reaches for him, he shoots. Trivial to melt the sludge out of her body as she grabs his shoulder, twisting his arm out of its socket. Tags the woman when she tries to run, hauls her back by the wrist.

Macy’s not used to work like this—Dad hasn’t taught her the intricacies of the craft, yet—but she’s had enough practice. There’s a lot of bones in a human body, and a lot of meat, and a lot of handy little things like tendons and ligaments and intestines.

Penny watches raptly as Macy methodically interlocks bones, stretching and flattening them, tying arterial knots and padding makeshift ‘seats’ with thick slabs of skin. The finished product has only two horses, and it’s way smaller—still a little crooked, too—but it’s *enough*.

Enough to make her sister squeal in delight. Macy licks the blood off her hands as Penny excitedly leaps onto the man-horse. His eyes oscillate frantically, and he tries to scream, which, with his altered vocal cords, sounds remarkably like neighing.

“C’mon, c’mon!” Penny exclaims, beckoning Macy to sit upon the woman-horse. Slowly, agonizingly, the thing begins to spin.

“...There’s no music,” she mutters after a moment, “Macy, can you-“

She tuts, clicking her tongue. “There is. You have to *hear* it. Listen, there’s the grinding of the bone, and the breaths, and the pop of the joints. Just turn that into the calliope, right? The accordion?”

The rasping bone, the draw of the lungs as they compress and expand, squeaking out warbling, shrill melodies. Penny laughs.

“*Oh*, I hear it! I hear it!”

She’s already thinking of what she can do better. Maybe there’s a way to add *real* music, next time. Fix a few flaws in seat construction that mean blood is seeping into her white skirt, get a few more humans for more horses...

After a turnaround, however, even that doesn’t matter. For a handful of wonderful minutes, Penny is laughing, and Macy is finally satisfied with the night out, even if there *were* no cute boys involved.

Probably for the best. Dad’s been talking about getting her engaged to some guy from Carcosa, anyways.

When they finally return to the shore beneath the boardwalk, they smear their skin back on under the lightening of the dawn.

“You left the carousel there?” Penny asks, as her tentacles stretch luxuriously, true skin rippling with colors of no name and forming into ouroboros angles.

“Yeah,” Macy replies, “for the humans. Who knows? Maybe they’ll like it enough to reopen the place.”

“You *think*?”

“Mhm. And we can ride it again next time. Or make a new one!”

Penny wraps her in an excited embrace as they sink back into the depths. “You’re the *best*. I can’t wait.”