

## —WHAT WAS ONCE MAN

by Michele Lee

It's a moonless night, and three of us sit in the dark basement of an abandoned house. Meghan. Rick. And me. We found each other by chance, hiding in a boarded up grocery store not too far away. We stayed together after that, for what little protection an extra set of eyes on the lookout offered. The stairs were the first thing we destroyed when we found this safe spot. Some structure in the house above had collapsed when we did that, and whatever it was made the basement hatch impossible to move.

There are tiny windows set into the stained concrete walls that let in the light during the day. The street lamp outside helped us see at night until something out there broke it. None of us complained, because in a way it's better if you don't have to always see how trapped you are.

It's starting to stink down here. It's been three days, and with no bathroom.

Despite the stench, I'm hungry.

\* \* \*

*Meghan*

My dad started touching me when I was eleven. I'm not looking for pity. You said you wanted the brutal truth, so that's where it started; when my dad first touched me.

It went on for years. They train you, you know. To put up with it. They call it 'grooming'. Other predators can tell when you've been groomed. Around thirteen my uncle started giving me the same looks. On my fourteenth birthday my brother took a long grope while my mom wasn't looking, so I ran away.

I didn't think they'd care. But they did and it only took a few days for them to find me. It was in a public place, but that didn't thwart my father's temper.

A friendly, round woman in scrubs with a hospital ID tag that read 'Laura' was buying me a meal at a burger joint, and stayed with me while I ate. I was so hungry I didn't care. I figured she'd want to talk. Maybe she knew somewhere I could go, someplace where they'd understand why I'd left, and give me a way to get off the street.

Laura never got a chance. My mother came in, her keys dangling from one of her fingers. I'd always loved playing with the key chains she collected. Funny that I recognized her keys first. Our eyes met across the room and I begged her, silently, to let me go. *Pretend you didn't see me.*

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She ordered a soda, then turned her back on me, going to the machine to fill her cup. I thought I'd made it. I thought, stupid me, that she'd helped me. Less than two minutes later my father walked in the door, eyes fiercely scanning the dining room. He saw my mother, who pointed right at me. Laura was awfully startled when I burst into tears.

"Are you all right?" she asked. She reached out to me. I pulled away.

"No—"

And he was on us. His hand circled my arm, fingers tearing into my flesh. He jerked me out of my chair. I couldn't fight back or even land on my feet. He flung me to the floor, my drink and what was left of my burger and condiment-smear wrapper going down on top of me. I didn't get right back up. Hopelessness welled up in me and I couldn't get my body to do anything but go limp, give up. I wanted to fight, but I'd been groomed.

"Don't you dare lay your hands on her!"

Laura's voice was pure steel. I'll always remember, because I'd never seen anyone talk to my father like that. But Laura stood up, vastly outsized, not caring, her eyes blazing. She must have never experienced the intimidating influence of a fist or garden hose. She couldn't know and still stand there as she did.

"Butt out, you fat bitch. This is between my daughter and me. It's none of your business."

"Someone call the cops," Laura yelled. Her gaze darted to the teens working behind the counter, to the older couple eating two tables over. My father moved toward her like a rolling storm. Fury masked his face. I opened my mouth to scream.

"I am taking my daughter out of here."

I forced myself up, to my knees. "I don't want to go with you."

It should have been a scream. It should have had the force, Laura's open defiance. Instead it spilled out from my lips, weak and palsied. Laura bent over to me, her hand out.

My father stepped forward and kicked me hard. I wasn't looking his way; I was reaching out to Laura. I rolled backward until I hit the metal base of the table. Something gave. For a moment I just thought it was my resolve, crushed under the sheer violence of my father's heart. But it was my spine, right below where it met my skull.

Everything went silent. I was aware of something, I cannot remember what, but I was there, with thoughts and feelings beyond the darkness.

Then I woke up in the basement of my home. I was lying on my side, staring into the worried face of my father while someone else's hands moved up and down my bare back, checking my spine.

"Oh, thank God. You're okay."

"She'll be fine," a rich female voice said behind me. It sounded like hot, sugary coffee, rolling around me and through me, as if I'd swallowed it. "She'll be as good as new."

"Good." He turned to me, concern in his face and voice. "Meghan, I need your help. There's a cop, and you're going to tell him what really happened in the restaurant. How you slipped and fell. You're going to show him how you're all right now."

I found myself nodding. It confused me. I remembered wanting to defy him. I remember the crunch of my neck, the terrifying lack of pain, the darkness.