

by Nicolette Kittinger

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READ BY NICOLETTE KITTINGER

ART BY XERXES VERDAMMT

MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER



Kayla was one of my bosses at the video store where I worked the summer I was sixteen.

We were closing one night when I unloaded about my on-again off-again boyfriend Zach who had just been kicked out of his house for beating up his dad's girlfriend and was living in his Chevy Suburban. We'd had a fight.

"Don't be sad" she purred. Then she nuzzled her head against my shoulder.

Her hair smelled like sweat and cats.

"You should come over. We'll have a slumber party!" She batted her big blue bug-eyes and something inside my core twisted, but I agreed anyway.

I didn't find out until we were halfway to her place that she lived with her 32 year-old massage therapist boyfriend, Vern. She also told me that all of their friends called their apartment IHOH – International House of Hedonism.

Vern appeared in the middle of Kayla's explanation about the tiny, invisible fairies who also lived in the apartment and appeared as twinkles in your peripheral vision. She said they seemed to be taking a shine to me.

He entered the living room silently, holding a dinner plate. Not knowing what else to do I pointed at him and asked, "What's your tattoo? Is that a dog?"

He glowered and explained that his forearm tattoo was not of "a simple, domesticated, garden-variety dog," but his "totem creature," the wolf, and that wolves were protective of their packs and homes, and "Pardon me, but right now you're in my home bothering me while I'm trying to eat." He sat down across the room and began devouring a raw piece of steak. He hacked at it with a butterfly knife. He paused only to tie back his thinning, brown hair to keep it from falling in his mouth.

"Tell him about your boyfriend," Kayla said. "You won't believe how cruel this boy is, Vernon."

He grunted and stayed hunched over his meat.

I explained what I thought were typical boyfriend problems for a sixteen year-old: "He can't get it up after he does coke," "He won't share the Xanax he stole from my mom," "He won't say 'I love you'."

Vern didn't look at me until he ate his last piece of meat -- which he picked up between two fingers and dropped into his gaping maw and swallowed whole.

"Why don't you dump him and date us?" He picked meat from his teeth with a piece of mail. In my periphery I could see Kayla nodding excitedly and clapping her hands in tiny bursts of joy.



"What a wonderful idea!" She smiled so wide it looked like the corners of her mouth were trying to meet on the back of her head, and she was batting those big blue bug-eyes again.

Before I said anything Vern was sinking into the open space between Kayla and me on the couch.

"You wouldn't belong to just me." He put his hand on my knee. "You would be our girlfriend."

"I see. It sounds complicated."

Vern cocked his head to one side like a confused dog.

"It's just you two actually live together and-"

Vern held a finger to my lips. "We won't leave you out." He moved the hand on my knee in slow circles. "You'll get extra attention."

I wondered if wolves, in their packs, had several partners. There was either previous experience or spirit animal intuition at play because a list of rules began to form:

- No sex unless all three partners were present.
- Kissing on the mouth is allowed and encouraged (especially between the women).
- Being on one's period does not exclude one from participating.

Which meant we could begin immediately. It made too much sense to my sixteen year-old brain.

Vern leered at me and waited to "seal the deal" with a kiss, his face so close I felt his hot meat-breath on my eyeballs.

I kissed him. Kayla clapped and bounced and it felt like Vern was trying to swallow my whole face like that last piece of meat. And as he led me to the bedroom I thought, for a moment, that I'd seen a little glimmer on the periphery of my vision. Kayla noticed my expression and smiled. "They know you're one of us now."

So you're a sixteen year-old "Goth" girl with too much black eyeliner, metal, and attitude and you find yourself on your back in a waterbed with a wooden frame supporting an eight-foot-tall headboard, a mirror, and tchotchke shelves. Prominently displayed on one of these shelves, next to a flea market crystal ball and a ceramic wizard incense burner is a painting of a wolf. On black velvet.

Your boss and her boyfriend are tying you to the waterbed, stretching your arms so far that your shoulders feel like they'll unhinge, legs just slack enough to give you the impression that, if you really wanted to, you could free yourself.

Their hands seem to be multiplying, two then four then eight, and they're all over you. Your breasts, your midriff, your vulva. Sweeping and clawing and scraping and searching.

One pair of hands searches inside you. Large hands with calluses and nails that need clipping. It stings. It feels like sandpaper, like lemon juice, like too many fucking fingers are in there at once: stretching and twisting and tearing. You resist. You try to twist away from them because the fog has lifted and suddenly it's clear to you that there's nothing inside for them. That this was a mistake. A bad mistake.

But you're tied up.

"You're ours now," he says. He wipes blood on your chest and your stomach. Your blood. His girlfriend's eyes look sad and you think that maybe this is how things go for her when it's just the two of them.

She watches. Her hands sit folded in her lap, her body swaying with the water-filled mattress as the wolf looms over you, his long, thinning hair hanging in your face.

You feel him hard against your abdomen as his knees force themselves between your thighs. You feel him stab against your clit, your labia, trying to rush his way in. He grunts and gestures for his girlfriend.

Her mouth quivers. Her eyes plead. She does it anyway. She leans over you, reaches between your legs and spreads you open for her boyfriend, her fingers dry and sticking to your lips, your blood.

You know what my friends used to call me? Eleventeen, because I thought I knew it all.

I unloaded to my other boss, Mike, about the whole thing one night while we were closing the store.

Like it was nothing I said, "I was kind of in a thing with Kayla and her boyfriend," I said. I explained all about the two weeks I spent "dating" them, even though I could tell that it was making him uncomfortable.

"Thatthat was rape," he said. And then, "I wonder if that's why the last girl quit."

Was that my wake up call? The first day of the rest of my life?

It wasn't. Not even close.

I'd already moved on; I'd already started fucking someone else.

Nicolette Kittinger is the assistant editor of Avery: An Anthology of NewFiction, assistant producer of Windy City Story Slam, and a freelance copywriter of Google ads. Her work has appeared in institutional anthologies, nonfiction glossies, online lit mags that have since gone under, and at the tops of web searches everywhere. She lives in Chicago, where she is a creative writing MFA student at Columbia College.

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