Diner Melusina



by Deirdre Coyle

She was the fifth girl I'd picked up at the Cary Street Diner, but the first I'd seriously considered showing my body to—I mean, my actual body. After my shift, I caught her watching me from the corner booth while I ordered cheese fries. There was something pliable in her face—eyes soft and fresh as dryer sheets, her whole body like a bed—like a pillow-topped twin bunk. I knew I could sleep inside a girl like that.

I didn't know if I should tell her about me, but I wanted to. When I got my fries, I slid into the booth next to her, not across. She hadn't taken her eyes off me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Marie," she said.

"I'm Nicolette. Do you want some food?"

She did.

~

For days, I cushioned her in my apartment. When we slept—which wasn't often—I found myself very nearly inside her, and it was easy. We lay around on couches like sleep-deprived slugs, too lethargic from sex and pizza and beer to move much.

As the weekdays passed, I thought, maybe she'll be amenable. Maybe she'll get it. One night, I tilted her head onto my shoulder, I pulled her hair back just enough so that she looked up at me.

"Marie," I said, "Do you want to know a secret?" She nodded. Her eyes hadn't changed, kept that powdery fresh look. "Marie," I said, "I'm a monster."

"Okay," she said.

"No," I said, "you don't understand. I'm one of Melusina's daughters."

"Can we not talk about our parents?" she asked, shaking her hair out of my fingers.

I stared into the wall for a minute. She wasn't listening. I tugged her head back up from where it had gone. "*Marie*. Do you know the story of Melusina?"

She shrugged.

"Melusina was a monster. Half-serpent. Or dragon, but only on Saturdays, and the rest of the time she was human. It's gross, okay? I'm related to that. I'm part of her bloodline, so I have this curse-thing…*stop*."

Her face paused above the buttons of my skirt. "Stop?" she asked.

I ran a hand through my hair. "I mean, just—you just have to leave me alone on Saturdays, okay? You won't forget?"

I was running out of buttons. She murmured something that sounded like assent.

~

Friday night, I kicked Marie out of my apartment. I locked the door and slept easily, then woke up Saturday and shut myself in the bathroom. I lowered the blinds, ran the bathwater as hot as I could stand it, and climbed in.

I'd felt it endless Saturdays before, but I was always caught off guard by the pain: the cramping throughout my legs, the slow ache that began in my feet and climbed. My calves and knees drew together like magnets. Keratin slid out of my pores; interlocking scales closed the gap between my thighs.

I gritted my teeth, trying not to make noise—that was the challenge I gave myself, *try not to cry out*. No matter how quickly the change occurred, it was always too slow.

The scales weren't beautiful; they didn't glisten. They grew blackish and brown, a burnt-meat-color-palette covering my body below the waist. Finally, a thick gloss of mucus seeped up from somewhere inside me and coated my lower half. I slid downward in the tub, the slime making my tail swipe easily through the water. I splashed unhappily. I soaked.

I grabbed the argan oil shampoo from behind my head and washed my hair, slowly. I lowered my face beneath the bathwater, holding my breath, massaging my scalp and rinsing. I stayed down as long as I could. When the water cooled, I drained the tub and refilled it, the water scalding my hands but not my scales. I used the shampoo to lather my armpits and shave. I deep conditioned my hair for an hour. I drained the tub and refilled it. I repeated this process throughout the day and into the evening.

I waited for Sunday morning.

~

Sunday afternoon, Marie texted, *can I come over?* 😉

Despite the implied promise of a winking smiley face, I ignored the text. If I let her come over right away, she'd want to be here all the time. Then she'd forget about the Saturday rule.

Tuesday, I texted her back. *Come over*.

She showed up in a kelly green dress, carrying a six-pack. The fabric hugged her breasts and waist, floated out below her hips, exposed a wet stain where the bottles sweated against the lace. Clearly, she was in costume as my dream girl. My hands skimmed along her sweetheart neckline, reached for a still-dripping beer.

"Sorry I couldn't see you last weekend," I lied.

"It's okay," she said. "I was pretty busy."

"Thanks for being so…understanding."

"Yeah." She was staring at the kitchen counter, running her finger along the Formica. "Do you want to go to this party tonight?" she asked.

I squinted. "What party?"

"My friend's DJing at this—"

"God, no. I mean—not really."

“Okay. Maybe I won’t go either, then.”

I led Marie to the couch and took off her dress. I’d let her stay awhile.

~

Thursday, I had to go to work. I kissed Marie’s forehead and left her in my bed. I hoped she’d be gone by the time I got back—not that she’d done anything wrong, I just had shit to do.

I got to the diner five minutes late and clocked in. Carl made me deal with disgruntled customers, people pissed that their French fries were too soggy. *Who cares*, I wanted to tell them. *Get a life*.

On my break, I sat outside and smoked half a cigarette. I found myself thinking about Marie, which bothered me. Just because she could dress up like my dream girl didn’t mean I wanted to think about her when she wasn’t right in front of me. I had this insane urge to bring her home an extra plate of cheese fries. I tried to shake it off. I checked my phone to see if she’d texted me, but she hadn’t. I finished my cigarette and checked my phone again.

In the diner, some cute girls sat at one of my tables. They were comparing notes on what cosmetic surgeries they wanted, their expressions coated with the dumb sheen of happiness. *Your body can change on its own*, I wanted to say. *Your body can shape you into a completely different animal, and you’ll have no say in the matter.* I thought about the luxury of deciding what transformations your body would undergo. Instead of my legs getting stuck together and covered in scales once a week, I could pay money for a stomach staple or an eyelid lift. I could negotiate complete autonomy over my appearance.

I realized the girls were staring at me. I’d been standing over their table with a pot of coffee. A redhead smiled up, clearly embarrassed on my behalf. I poured her coffee nonchalantly. Only one of them was cuter than Marie. *And still,* I thought, *she could never be my favorite.* It was too late. Marie had somehow become my favorite girl, and I didn’t even know why.

~

Wednesday, I found her in my kitchen, slumped against the counter, staring at the ink-and-paper news.

“Where did you even get that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “The dumpster.”

Her underwear was so ugly—I just wanted to take it off. I pressed the flat of my palm against her hipbone and turned her around. “What are you looking for?”

“Shows…in the paper?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re ridiculous. Remember the internet?” My eye caught a headline past the slope of her neck. “That band you like is playing tonight?”

She shrugged again, and I wondered if her dainty little shoulders could perform any other motion. I rolled her lingerie just beneath her hipbones. “Are you going?”

The edges of her mouth moved upward, the small angular motion illuminating the rest of her face. She shrugged, infuriatingly. “I don’t know, Nico. *Am* I going?”

I laughed.

~

Marie stayed away the next couple Saturdays, and she was good about it. She didn’t ask questions or appear interested at all.

One Thursday, she left her jacket in my room. I saw it on the floor that night, mixed up with my dress and tights, but didn’t say anything. I didn’t mention it Friday, either. Saturday rolled around and I texted her directly from my bath. *You left your jacket.*

Twenty minutes later, she wrote back. *It’s Saturday. I’ll get it tomorrow.*

I considered. *You can come over*, I wrote. *I’ll stay in the bathroom with the door shut.*

Half an hour passed. Then an hour. I deep conditioned my hair. It got dark. Around midnight, my scales started to retract.

She didn’t come.

~

Carl started scheduling my shifts from late afternoons to midnights. I was working nights; Marie had a day job—somewhere, doing something. I slept later, stayed up later, saw Marie less and less on weekdays.

I started texting her more often from the bathtub, balancing my phone above the waterline, trying not to splash. Sometimes she’d text me back, sometimes not. She never asked what I was doing.

~

The next Friday, I lifted Marie’s wallet from her purse and slipped it under my bed. I tucked it just beneath the bed skirt. Once she’d gone, I placed the wallet on the nightstand and texted her a picture.

How’d that get there? she asked.

Remember ordering pizza last night? You must have left it.

I prayed to the gods she wouldn't say she didn't need it. Those are the things everyone needs: money, credit, identity.

I considered going through the wallet, but wasn't that interested.

By the time the cramps in my legs started, I'd left every door unlocked. The windows, too. I didn't leave the bathroom door ajar—I left it wide open.

I hopped in the tub. It had been a lot of years since I'd let the transformation get this far without being in the safety of bathwater. The keratin was already seeping from my pores. I tried to relax into it, but could only grimace and twitch. Thoughts of Marie distracted me from the pain, but I wasn't sure if that psychic pain felt better or worse than the scales growing across my legs.

I wondered how visible the bathtub was from beyond the door. I flipped the end of my tail coyly over the edge of the tub, in plain view of the apartment.

~

Time passed, and I heard nothing. I gulped bathwater and swished it around my mouth. I considered my options; I considered my exposed tail.

I held my phone very close to my face. I typed, *Please come.*

Something about the black letters on the white screen looked pornographically self-aware. *Please come*: the money shot of asynchronous communication. I held the phone over the bathtub drain and almost let it drop, almost rinsed every number right out of it. I shut my eyes, exhaled. I moved the phone away from the water's edge. I stared, again, at the ugly line of letters: *Please come.* I hit send.

I lowered my face beneath the water and held my breath.

~

Two hours later, I heard the door open, heard Marie's light footfalls on the hardwood. "Nico?" she called.

I tried being quiet for a minute. Maybe she'd wonder where I was.

"You here, Nico?"

Finally, I responded. "I'm here."

"Got my wallet. See you soon!"

“Wait!” I said. Her footsteps stopped. I shouldn’t have left the wallet by the bed. I should have drowned it in the goddamn tub.

“Yeah?”

I waited for her to say something suggestive. I waited for *what are you doing in there?* Or, *can I come in with you?*

I craned my neck over the porcelain barrier, looked straight through the open door frame. I saw the back of Marie’s neck, saw the green triangle of her skirt disappearing down the hall.

I followed the rust black tail of my body down into the water. On to the next Saturday, the next girl, the next grip of obsession, the next holding period. I held my breath. Even below the waterline, I heard the door slam shut.

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Photo: detail of Melusine Triptych by Heinrich Vogeler, 1910

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