Why She Loved Autumn

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Nothing could change Laura’s mind about the pepperonis and sausages. Even the shreds of ham and triangles of Canadian bacon were tainted. She only ate veggie pizzas on her breaks, not because she was a vegetarian—although that’s what she told her boss—not because she was a health nut—her body wasn’t a priority anymore—but because someone she knew worked at the meat-processing plant outside of town. His hands had been on each piece, and he had a way of ruining everything he touched. She even hated the slimy feel of the stuff when she topped others’ pizzas, feeling that she was poisoning them with every strategic flick and that the poison was somehow seeping into her own hands. But she did it anyway. It was one of the only jobs a kid could have in her insignificant town, and it required late hours—hours she’d be awake for whether she was working or not.

It was almost eleven o’clock—two hours ‘til close—and a big rush of orders was almost finished. The phone had been dead for a while now, and the last of the pizzas were about ready to ship out. Laura checked the oven. Hot air raked down her face and neck and tore at her eyes. Cheese bubbled and toppings hissed. In a couple of minutes, Rick would send the orders out, send the new guy home, and play Pacman in the dining area while the last sluggish hours faded away.

It would be just her and P.J. in the kitchen then, and that was the way Laura liked it. He was a few years older than Laura—a high school dropout with no goals and nothing on his mind. Regardless, they’d bonded over the time she’d worked there, and they’d both shared dark secrets. P.J. was sad like Laura, and the scar around his neck proved it. Only he was sad about other things—abstract things, things that he couldn’t explain. The pills he took were helping. Laura wished she could change the chemicals in her brain and have her problems go away—or at least get less intense. But it wasn’t that easy for her, and it was okay; tonight she would smother the life out of her problems; tonight she would kill the man from the meat-processing plant who made her hate pizza toppings and her own smile and the warmness of home when she walked through the front door.

He had to die because she’d vowed that if he did it again, she would kill herself, and he had done it again. He always did. But Laura couldn’t follow through with her vow. She was too scared to die. One thing his rough,
slithering hands had taught her was to think pessimistically—to never count out a darker and more terrible future. She couldn’t afford hell, or purgatory, or the blackness of nothing that her beliefs were beginning to lean towards. She couldn’t risk it, even if the only thing at stake was the shit-hole, trap-of-a-life she was living. She couldn’t die, so he had to. It would be easy, after all, because she’d been planning it nearly her whole life and because there was no other way out.

He had to die because if she turned him in, her family would be ruined—because when Laura had hinted at her secret to her mom three years ago, she’d been rejected; “Don’t joke about things like that,” her mom said, maiming cucumbers in the kitchen with a dull knife. “If you want attention try losing some weight or dressing nicer. Buy some clothes with all that money you make working so late.” He had to die because she didn’t want attention; she wanted to be invisible—to be nothing and feel nothing, and she didn’t want clothes—they meant nothing to her; they were only makeshift barriers—flimsy walls that only lasted so long.

He had to die because the shower was where people went to get clean, but it was the place she felt her dirtiest—because each time he slid the glass door open and stepped in, no matter how hot the water was, she felt cold, deathly cold, like a corpse, and that was the way he treated her body—like an object, lifeless and feelingless; it was something to touch and probe and explore—a science experiment, a cadaver he felt he needed to wash before he touched, to scrub raw before he dug in.

He had to die because each time he was done prodding her he’d leave the shower and finish the job in the toilet, visible but blurry through the fogged glass and, after he was done seizing and grunting, he’d look at her through the fog and tell her she was beautiful and leave; he had to die because after he was gone, she’d vomit and watch it swirl down the dark hole at her feet and she’d wish that it was her twisting and dancing and disappearing into the dark.

He had to die because Laura hated her body, because she dreaded the touch of another male—feared it more than almost anything; she’d shake at night thinking about a date that would never be—about what would happen if the boy went for a kiss or to cop a feel; he would sense the hollowness of her; he would hear her guilt-soaked sighs and taste her sour lips and feel her damaged, rotten flesh, and he would surely turn away.

Above all, he had to die because she couldn’t wait another ten months; she couldn’t wait until her 18th birthday when she would be free of him and all the emptiness and bloatedness he made her feel; he had to die.
because her little sister was turning nine soon and, when Laura was ten, the shower visits had started; because she cringed when he tickled her little sister or put sunscreen on her back; because she really would kill herself if her little sister had to go through any of what she had; and she knew she would do it, too, despite all the deep and lonely nothing that awaited her.

* * *

The orders were gone and the new guy was taking off his apron. In the dining room Laura heard Pacman munching on dots and ghosts. She took her apron off, too, and walked toward P.J., kicking him in the heel.

“Huh?” he said. He was under the sneeze-guard wiping stains off empty metal trays. His head moved from side to side, searching for grime, his long neck twisting like the gut of a snake.

“Tonight’s the night,” Laura said.

P.J.’s head snapped up and hit the plastic, but he ignored the pain and embarrassment and turned to face her. His eyes were paler than usual. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

Laura thought about saying I was born ready, or as ready as I’ll ever be, but there was only one line that seemed appropriate. “He’s fucking dead meat,” she said, her voice weaker than she’d hoped.

P.J. twisted the rag in his hands and took a deep breath. “Remember,” he said, “no witnesses, no clues, no nothing.”

“I know,” she said.

“I know,” she said again, harder this time.

“Here,” he said, turning her around, “you’ve got flour all over you.” He brushed off her back and shoulders. “Jesus,” he said, still brushing. “It’s like they dusted you for prints.”

His hands shook as they moved up and down. She felt something deep inside her body, grasping, crawling, warming her stomach and wobbling her knees. Seconds later it was dead.

She was headed for the back door when Rick stopped her.

“Hey, Laura. Can you spot-vac the dining room?” he asked.

“Uh,” she said, her knuckles white around the keys in her pocket.

“Can it wait ‘til I get out of the bathroom? I’m having some stomach issues.”

He nodded and disappeared into the dining room.

Rick was uptight and, like most guys his age Laura knew, hated the thought of girls taking shits—like they were all supposed to be some squeaky clean sex toy, their holes for nothing but men’s pleasure. She checked to make sure no one was in the bathroom, locked it, and bolted out the back door.

* * *
She parked in the alleyway behind her house and got out. It was a quiet, autumn night. The stillness in the air and the rasping of leaves at her feet were calming. Autumn was her favorite season.

The moon was full, bright and chalky against the smooth, charcoal sky. It lit up the darkness around it and snuffed out any stars that might have been trying to shine. She was fully visible under its glow, but it didn’t matter. There was no one out, and there were no lights on at any of the neighbors. Laura had counted on this—a boring, little town with yawning houses and dumpy shrubs, a town that never moved unless it had to, and when it did, moved slowly, staggering like a blind man.

She peeked through the living room window and there he was: asleep in his ass rut on the right side of the couch, an open beer in his hand and several crumpled ones by his feet. The can in his lap was tipped sideways where a big wet spot had formed. The light from the T.V. bounced off his face and made his eye sockets look dark and empty like a skull’s.

Laura had gotten the idea when he’d fallen asleep on the cat when she was younger. It had clawed his side up so bad he needed staples. The cat had escaped, though, and the drunk son of a bitch didn’t wake up until morning, his shirt soaked in blood. Laura hadn’t really liked the cat before that, but worshipped it after—until it went missing. It made Laura sad every time she thought of it, but if it hadn’t clawed him up, she would have never got the idea.

She walked through the house in her socks with gloved hands and her hairnet still wrapped around her head—no shoeprints, no fingerprints, no hair. When she got to the living room she peeked around the corner. An infomercial was blaring but she still heard his snores. Through the flashes of light she saw his nostrils quiver with each inhale. Next to him were a blanket and pillow—laid out for him in advance by Laura’s mother. Laura crept across the room. The closer she got to him, the more she smelled salted meat. She picked up the pillow, walked behind him—side-stepping into the space between the couch and the wall—and stood there frozen, hesitating. Laura was expecting this: a last-ditch effort by God or Jesus or her conscience. Or maybe it was the nothingness that stopped her. Maybe it was the thought of sending someone into it, turning them into it—into a vast, empty space of thoughts and memory.

After a few seconds, she bit her tongue, lowered the pillow, and pressed it against his face.

He had to die; he had to because she was running out of time; she was running out of ideas and opportunities and room to cut herself on her
upper arms; he had to die because he deserved nothing, because he was nothing, because she’d dreamed of this moment for so long.

The snores stopped and he didn’t move. Laura waited, her own lungs refusing to work. On TV, a man with plastered hair and perfect posture was selling weight-loss pills. A phony audience laughed. Then the screen switched to blue. Before-and-after pictures flipped up on the screen and disappeared. Laura could tell they weren’t the same people.

She felt movement under the pillow. His right shoulder twitched, then his left. Laura’s lungs started working again—working fast. She could feel his head trying to move, and she tightened her grip on the pillow and pushed back harder on the sides of it. His arms started to move in circles. His fingers twitched in the air, confused and searching. The beer can in his lap fell to the floor. He was making noises, low and long like a muffled cow. His hands found her arms and started ripping on the sleeves of her coat. When that didn’t work he swung his limp arms at hers, missing all swings but one. Laura pushed as hard as she could, her muscles burning and the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. His legs kicked and his pelvis jolted up-and-down a few times, then he was still. She kept the pillow there for another minute and then checked his pulse. He was dead.

She put the pillow on one side of the couch and laid him down face-first on top of it. It was over now. Hopefully his blood alcohol level would speak for itself—be its own judge and its own jury. Hopefully.

Laura smiled the whole way back to the restaurant, her arm out the window, picking paint chips off the side of her car. She realized why she loved autumn so much: the way the leaves crunched under her feet, the way they smelled after a rain—how in the wind the reds and oranges flickered like fire until it was their time and they let go and fell.

* * *

They stood facing each other in the kitchen, Laura still in her coat, P.J.’s mouth open and his face colorless. Laura could hear the vacuum sucking across duct-taped seats in the dining room. A long silence passed and then she nodded her head.

“Are you sure?” P.J. asked.

Laura nodded again, took off her coat, and slid on her apron.

“Your arm,” he said, pointing.

Halfway up Laura’s forearm was a splotch of bruises was beginning to from. “He fought,” she said.

P.J. hugged her, and then they separated and he looked into her eyes. “You need to cover that up, just in case.”
“How?” she asked.

P.J. looked at the oven. They both walked toward it and P.J. opened it up. “Better it look like it happened here,” he said.

Laura nodded and got closer. She could smell a sausage pizza cooking and the waves of heat seemed to drain all the moisture from her. She looked up at P.J., his hand still on the oven door, his eyes slits of faded blue. She made sure her sleeve was rolled up high enough, bit down again on her tongue, and pressed her arm to the metal interior. Her skin hissed and spat and the strange, sweet smell of melting skin overtook the scent of sausage. She pulled her arm out and checked the damage. She’d burnt herself before, but not like this.

P.J. ran some paper towels under the sink and held them on the burn. The bruise wasn’t noticeable anymore. It had worked. Everything had worked.

The vacuum hummed in the dining room, scooting over dust-caked tile. Laura could smell the sausage pizza again, and the bell to the front door rang. P.J. touched her puffed skin with his fingers, then leaned down and kissed her. She wasn’t expecting it, but she kissed him back, and all she could think of was how she felt nothing—absolutely nothing.