



The Girl Who Died

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Genevieve had always felt invisible. Yes, she had a live-in boyfriend, a job in women's apparel at a posh department store, and a nuclear family in the same zip code. But a social life? Much of her invisibility was self-inflicted quiet. She was pleasant to look at, yet utterly unassuming—a touch plump, with pink cheeks and arms that flushed crimson when jogging, which she did regularly in an attempt to keep her weight under control. Then there was her name. She often noticed customers' eyes drop to her brass badge, though they almost always stopped short of attempting its pronunciation.

Most days she was neither particularly happy nor unhappy, but a thing called depression sometimes submerged her in the latter, pressing her backward into the depths of a dark, coagulated place. Life was rarely terrible for Genevieve, but it was often dull. Her live-in boyfriend, Trevor, was supposed to care for her, but moments of genuine tenderness could be counted on her thumbs. They had sex on a semi-regular basis, perfunctory encounters where a thing was to be done, and so they did it.

Trevor never mentioned marriage. And so Genevieve often wondered if there was more to life. During darker bouts of self-reflection, she asked herself whether Trevor, her family, or her coworkers would be sorry they hadn't treated her better if she were to die suddenly.

During one of those deep, backward-pressing moods, contemplating a half-formed urge to leap from the overpass she strolled across on her way to work in downtown Seattle, she was struck in the back of the head by a long two-by-six timber dangling precariously from the side of a passing flatbed. The truck was hauling construction debris from a remodel down the avenue.

The driver had swung around a corner two blocks back too sharply, shifting the lumber until one board jutted out, cantilevered over the sidewalk. He rattled along, oblivious, right past Genevieve—who was knocked unceremoniously to the pavement—until the board struck a stop sign with a deafening clang. Only then did he pull over. He shoved the protruding timber back into the bed, adjusted the red warning flag, and tightened the twine. Crossing his arms, he inspected his handiwork, wiped his forehead, and drove away.

Genevieve was not knocked unconscious. Although the pain was blinding, her immediate terror was having made a spectacle of herself before the well-dressed commuters in the shopping district. Finding herself splayed on the concrete, she scrambled to her feet lest anyone witness her clumsiness and feel awkward on her behalf. She was half a block away before noticing the shredded knees of her stockings, and a little farther still when she realized something was fundamentally wrong. Her stomach, in solidarity with her skull, flooded and churned. She felt as if she might tip over—yet strangely, she felt that if she fell, she would float up rather than down. She was buoyant with nausea, adrift on a blurred sea of vertigo.

At work, she made it to her locker and then to the stall to vomit. She changed into spare nylons and touched the crown of her head before the mirror, feeling for blood in her thick brown hair, but found none. In the break room, she washed down two aspirin with black coffee.

She tried to tough it out, but her peripheral vision was disintegrating. When her department manager, Laura—a lithe, recovering Mormon in her early fifties—inquired after her, Genevieve mumbled, "I have terrible lady trouble." It was the universal workplace euphemism.

"You must have it badly, dear," Laura murmured, taking in Genevieve's dilated pupils, the pallor of her skin, and the cold beads of sweat shining along her brow. She sent her straight home.

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Genevieve had not told Laura the truth, partly because she hated being a bother, but mostly because she couldn't piece together what had struck her. By the time she had stood up on the overpass, the truck was gone. She felt no panic, only a heavy, biological exhaustion. She craved a quiet room, a tumbler of whiskey, and sleep.

Because Trevor was not there to warn her against sleeping with head trauma, she crawled beneath the duvet and closed her eyes.

And that was how, on an unremarkable Tuesday afternoon, Genevieve died in her sleep.

In any ordinary circumstance of massive intracranial swelling and hemorrhage, that would have been the end. But Genevieve's passing was distinguished by an unusual circumstance: when she died, nobody noticed. Not even Genevieve.

She woke on Wednesday morning with two dark, bilaterally symmetrical rings bruising the skin beneath her brows. This might have alarmed Trevor, had he not been running late and mistaken the pooled blood for the smoldering eye makeup she wore on rare occasions—a heavy cat-eye he considered uncharacteristic, and therefore exciting.

"Mmm," he murmured, catching her by the elbow on his way out the door. He pulled her against him with an urgency he had never shown near an open front door. Nibbling her earlobe, he whispered, "Wear black panties to match those eyes tonight, and I'll take them off with my teeth."

His flirting was clumsy and did nothing to stir her, but she couldn't recall the last time he had demonstrated sexual interest, let alone planned for it in advance.

In Women's Apparel, just around the corner from the makeup counters where stylists demonstrated bold palettes under halogen rings, her bruising caused an immediate sensation. Genevieve was known for neutral blouses and quiet compliance; the dramatic staining around her orbits looked like deliberate, smoky rebellion.

She said little, partly from habit and partly because her head hummed with a low, dead static, but she couldn't deny the modest thrill of the fuss. Her look was impossible to replicate with commercial shadow—the dark pooling was the product of deep intracranial extravasation. It was wider than eyeliner, softer than charcoal powder, settling naturally into the hollows of her eye sockets.

Within forty-eight hours, two associates in petites were blending dark greasepaint to mimic her. Over the following weeks, as the blood under Genevieve's skin broke down into plum, bilious green, mustard, and finally a dull café-au-lait, she carefully touched up the original contours with dark pencil, dutifully preserving the bloom of her trauma.

With death came the complete evaporation of her appetite.

For the first week, the change was imperceptible. But by the second, her skirts began sliding off her hips. She had stopped jogging the morning after the incident, yet without any effort, the stubborn fifteen pounds she had carried since high school melted away.

At home, Trevor transformed. As her collarbones emerged, he grew tender, attentive, almost reverent. He washed dishes unprompted and folded laundry. He watched her undress with a hot, desperate focus, his face tightening with an undercurrent of territorial jealousy she had never seen before.

At work, her silence was no longer read as timid; it was read as aloof, chic, enigmatic. At five-foot-nine, she had always felt bulky, but now her lengthening silhouette drew glances of genuine envy.

She had no desire for solid food, subsisting almost entirely like a hummingbird on sugar and scalded milk—tall caramel macchiatos and heavily sweetened lattes that cost nearly as much



as groceries. Aside from the occasional crust of bread she chewed in the break room as a camouflage, her system processed only caffeine and liquid glucose, running on sheer momentum.

Her colleagues became almost devotional. Though Genevieve still spoke no more than a dozen words a shift, the sales associates treated her silence as sacred discretion, coming to her to unload their deepest secrets. They confessed miscarriages, venereal panics, clandestine affairs with Geoffrey from Cosmetics, panic attacks, and aging parents dying slowly in Midwest suburbs. The quieter and more skeletal she became, the more wisdom they projected onto her hollow face.

Her orbital fat withered, leaving her eyes immense and glossy—the exact sunken, luminous stare celebrated in runway editorials.

Other changes were less photogenic. By the second month, having plateaued at a featherlight one hundred and nine pounds, she noticed a dull ache in her gums. Her front teeth had developed a faint, unsettling wiggle. Worse, her breath had developed a sour, sweetish rot. She stopped kissing Trevor with an open mouth and took to carrying travel-sized flasks of green antiseptic wash, swishing constantly in private.

Trevor took it as a slight. “What, saving your mouth for someone else?” he muttered, rolling away from her in bed.

Candace and Gwen finally dragged her out for drinks on a Friday—the night Trevor spent lost in his decadelong Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

At the crowded cocktail lounge, Genevieve discovered she had become an object of prey. Men stared openly. “The guy in the leather jacket hasn’t stopped looking at you,” Gwen whispered, nudging her ribs. “Want me to slip him a napkin with your number?” Candace teased.

The attention felt electric and repulsive all at once. Because alcohol turned her stomach, she sipped soda water stained crimson with cranberry juice, which the bartender poured for free. Above the tiered shelves of liquor, Genevieve caught sight of herself in the antique mirror. In the cool blue wash of the neon sign, she looked porcelain. Her skin had taken on a polished, waxy finish, as though dipped in hot paraffin. She ran her tongue over her upper incisors; they felt rough, crusted with sugar, loose in their sockets.

When she returned home near midnight, Trevor was propped up in bed, reading under the amber lamp. He watched her cross to the bathroom without a word. She spent ten minutes flossing gently around tender gums and burning her mouth with mouthwash until her tongue went numb.

Stepping out, emboldened by the hungry looks at the bar, she decided to test her new power. She met Trevor’s gaze and let her silk robe slide from her shoulders, baring the corrugated cage of her ribs, the sharp ridges of her hips, and her shrunken breasts.

Weeks ago, this sight would have brought him to his knees. Tonight, his jaw remained set, cold and hostile.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked.

By Monday, the atmosphere at work had chilled. Candace and Gwen no longer traded confidences; they traded sidelong glances.

Two weeks passed under this polite freeze before Genevieve cornered them in the dressing room under the guise of wiping down mirrors with glass cleaner.

“What did I do?” she asked.

The two exchanged a synchronized, conspiratorial glance—the kind of silent communication that made clear they had held several meetings about her in private. Whatever followed—murmurs of “You’ve just gotten so aloof,” and “It feels like you think you’re better than everyone now”—washed over Genevieve without meaning.

In the three-way mirror, she caught her profile. She was exquisite: carved down to sinew and architecture, her sallow face gleaming with an unnatural glycerin sheen. Never mind that two lower incisors rattled slightly if she sneezed, or that her breath required industrial vigilance, or that her breasts had withered to pale confections tipped with hard almonds. Look at the lines of her waist! Look at the way the room parted for her!

Descending the escalator for her lunch break, she heard Trevor's parting shot from that terrible argument echo in her ears:

"Why are you so outgoing all of a sudden? Out drinking in bars."

"It was one night," she had replied.

"I liked you better before."

"I was depressed! I spent half my life asleep."

"Yeah," he had said, staring at the floor. "I know that wasn't healthy either. But at least I could trust you."

"You can trust me now."

"I've seen how men look at you."

"I only ever wanted you to look at me like that."

"Right," he sneered. "And it's so convenient to say nothing happened."

"Nothing did happen," she had said evenly, her voice eerily level, devoid of tremor. "I came home trying to seduce you."

He had simply grabbed his pillow and slept on the sofa.

She was on the avenue now. The gap between her inner thighs was a clean, uninterrupted corridor of air. She marvelled at the mechanical, rhythmic swing of her hips—stiff, unyielding, exactly like a high-fashion model pacing a Parisian catwalk.

She walked past her usual café, past the edge of the shopping district, deaf to the ticking of her lunch hour. A semi-truck roared past, its backdraft whipping her hair and filling her throat with hot diesel.

Three more blocks dissolved under her heels. A strange, cold current stirred in the hollow of her ribs: *Would it really be so terrible to never go back?*

When she reached the concrete overpass above the Interstate, she did not look down into the roaring canyon of traffic to wonder if anyone would miss her. That was a living girl's question. Instead, she hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and set her heel onto the waist-high concrete retaining barrier.

For a brief, brittle second she scrambled like an awkward fawn, her stiff joints grating as she hoisted her weight. But then she was up. She stood completely erect on the narrow ledge, sixty feet above eight lanes of rushing steel.

Traffic slowed below; drivers tapped their brakes above. She felt every single eye lock onto her—the courier on his bicycle, a bearded commuter straddling a motorcycle, the horrified woman in a Volvo wagon. Genevieve tilted her chin toward the grey Seattle sky, pulled her hollow stomach inward, thrust her narrow chest forward, and began to sashay down the parapet in her high heels, basking in the rapture of their undivided attention.